Introduction

"Run Over by a Unicorn"

“What if you could see your feelings, and they were chasing you?” says the child. “Which one would be fastest?” I ask. “Quickness,” he responds. “But is that a feeling?” I ask. “Of course. I feel quick this morning. Sometimes I feel slow.” And another morning, upon waking, he comments, “I feel like I’ve been run over by a unicorn.”
—Ezra, six years old

The scene in the therapist’s office goes something like this: she points to the chart on the wall with its rows of faces typifying different expressions—happy, sad, hopeful, angry, frustrated, scared; there are almost 50 faces represented. Then she asks the seven-year-old to point to which face best describes how he is feeling. The idea, she explains to the parent, is if children can “put a label on it, they can begin to manage their emotions.” Children often respond bodily when they are feeling out of control, she adds: they may hit or scream or run away. If they can name the feeling, they may be able to respond with their words rather than their bodies. The child, however, is not convinced. He studies the chart for a few minutes, then responds, “How I’m feeling is not there.” She asks what he is feeling. “Irritated,” he says, sighing. “Can I go now?”

The gap in expression between adult and child is at the heart of this book. My goal is not to close the gap but to let it remain, to perhaps even widen it, in the interest of allowing children a semi-autonomous space in which to express themselves. I do not dispute the importance of therapy for some children, nor the need for a language children can use to help them navigate the world. I am convinced, however, that this language, often taught by the most well-intended adults, fails to capture
children’s affective intensities even as it valorizes the realm of emotional expression. In fact, the very objective of “naming one’s emotions” in the interest of controlling one’s body almost certainly dampens the intensity and range of the feelings and their expression, especially their expression through the body. Self-regulation becomes “appropriate” bodily comportment. “Extreme” emotions should be subsumed, with happiness and “niceness” the goal. In the language of problem solving that has become central to television programming for young children, the “problem” that needs to be solved is the emotion that threatens social order. “Being run over by a unicorn” would not be considered a viable expression.

Media for children is one of the primary sites for the production of this therapeutic discourse. It is also one of the primary sites available to kids for creating alternatives to the management of emotions. This negotiation, this struggle, drives this book. On one side, the discourse of “emotional intelligence” across educational, therapeutic, and media sites aimed at young children valorizes the naming of certain emotions in the interest of containing affective expressions that don't conform to the normative notion of growing up. On the other side, kids, through the appropriation of these media texts and the production of their own culture, especially on the internet, resist these emotional categorizations, creating an “archive of feelings” that this book compiles and analyzes. This archive sheds light on the conditions that make it hard for children to be heard and understood, which has significant implications for a range of policy arenas. What does it feel like to be a kid? Why do so many policy makers, parents, and pedagogues treat feelings as something to be managed and translated?

The therapeutic influence on media produced for kids is sometimes derived directly from the private-sector counseling world; there exists what Stuart Hall would call an “articulation,” bringing together the sites of children’s television, therapy, parenting, and elementary education. For example, three Nickelodeon preschool shows—Ni Hao, Kai-Lan; Blue’s Clues; and Wonder Pets—used the consulting services of a therapist named Laura G. Brown to advise them in creating the characters and the stories. Nickelodeon’s 2007 press release announcing the premiere for Ni Hao, Kai-Lan, a show featuring a five-year-old Chinese American girl, described Kai-Lan as an “emotionally gifted child who is driven to
understand the world and how things are linked together both physically and emotionally” (quoted in Hayes 2008, 42). A recent article in *Psychology Today* is headlined “Can TV Promote Kids’ Social-Emotional Skills? Help Your Child or Student Learn Positive Social-Emotional Lessons from TV” (2014). Its authors, academics Claire Christensen and Kate Zinsser, draw on and quickly redirect the familiar concern that television causes kids to be violent: “As a parent or educator, you’ve heard it before: violent TV creates violent children. But, what about TV shows that depict getting along with others, solving problems, or handling emotions constructively? If kids can learn to fight from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, can they also learn to share from Daniel Striped Tiger?” Their answer is yes—if the shows feature characters with strong “socioemotional skills” such as sharing and if parents engage their children in conversation about what is being represented. They should ask questions such as “Did you see Dora cooperate with Boots? Why did she do that? How did it make Boots feel?” and “You look nervous. Do you want to try taking deep breaths like Rabbit did?”

The therapeutic approach puts a new spin on the title of Marie Winn’s influential 1977 *The Plug-In Drug*, in which she lamented television’s addictive effects on children and urged parents to regain control of the powerful medium. Television is still a drug, but now it’s a helpful drug, like the stimulants used to treat kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In fact, one executive in the children’s television industry, in response to the criticism that television can become addictive to children, said, “Everything is fine as long as the dosage is right. It’s prescription drugs being given without a prescription. If you take too much, you get a stomachache. If you take the right amount, your headache is gone” (quoted in Hayes 2008, 15). Receiving the right dosage makes children more, not less, socially adjusted.

And the television industry more profitable. The focus on feelings is beginning to overshadow the industry’s desire to show the educational value of television, a goal that has characterized research on television since PBS introduced *Sesame Street* in 1969. For example, when Disney launched its Disney Jr. channel in 2013, it told *The New York Times* that “its research indicated that mothers were less interested than they used to be in programs that promote academic goals. What matters more now . . . is emotion-based storytelling that captures attention long
enough to teach social values and good behavior” (Barnes and Chozick 2013). These values and skills, in turn, help the child to be a better learner and, ultimately, a successful adult.

Films for children have become similarly preoccupied in the last decade. Take, for example, the highly successful Inside Out, released by Pixar in 2015. Set inside the brain of an 11-year-old girl named Riley, the film tells the story of her family’s move from Minnesota to San Francisco as her father begins a new job. Although we sometimes get Riley’s point of view, we rely primarily on the five characters inside her brain, each of whom represents different emotions: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. As Riley begins to negotiate her new home and school and realizes how much she misses her old home, friends, and hockey team, the emotions jockey for position, with Joy desperately trying to maintain the control she enjoyed up to this point and politely trying to sideline Sadness, whose role nobody appreciates or even understands. Initially, Joy succeeds, and Riley pluckily makes the best of a difficult situation, with her parents thanking her for being such a good sport.

Gradually, though, it becomes clear that Riley is struggling. Despite Joy’s best efforts, Sadness creeps in, gradually touching Riley’s core memories—and because these memories reside deep in Riley’s brain, no one in the “real” world initially recognizes that Riley is not actually happy, least of all her parents, who seem completely clueless. Riley cries at school in front of her new classmates, gets angry when Skyping with her old friend as the latter recounts a hockey team victory and describes a girl who is seemingly taking Riley’s place, and storms off the hockey court during tryouts for a new team. Joy and Sadness later journey through Riley’s brain to try to recover some of the core happy memories that Sadness has “corrupted,” only to discover that it’s OK to be sad. In fact, Sadness transforms from a frumpy, absent-minded girl into a heroic, articulate figure, the emotion who needs to be acknowledged by both Riley and her parents in order for her to be happy in her new home, and, importantly, to avoid the excessive outbursts she experienced at school and the hockey arena.

Inside Out speaks to both children and the adults who care for them: for children, emotions are so real that they are like little people inside your brain, controlling how you feel and act even though you don’t realize it. By naming these emotions and emphasizing the complexity
of children’s lives, the film respects kids even as it reassures them that their emotions, while sometimes inexplicable, are really on their side. For adults, the film not so subtly tells them to recognize that children are complicated subjects, capable of a wide range of emotions, and that our job is to help them identify those feelings rather than demeaning or ignoring them. Ultimately, Riley and her parents happily resolve their differences and end the film as a peacefully contained nuclear family. The fact that the film ends with everyone getting along goes beyond the generic requirement for a happy ending; it also speaks to the assumption that kids, while they experience a range of emotions, should ultimately be cheerful. This goal is exactly what therapist/consultant Laura Brown expressed as her mission in designing kids’ programming: “In America, happiness is the goal. It’s in our Constitution. So we set out to create as many calm, happy moments as there are excited, happy moments” (quoted in Hayes 2008, 116).

I analyze these conditions through a two-pronged approach. First, how is the young child—roughly ages five to nine—constructed in U.S. media and school curriculum debates? What subject positions are made available? Drawing on work by scholars in the fields of cultural studies, media studies, and childhood studies—and locating their intersections—I reconstruct these subject positions insofar as they relate to emotions. Because cultural production is always shaped, even as it reshapes, economic and other policy realms, I begin the book by describing several relevant policy arenas and the manner in which they shape children’s lives. These include immigration policy regarding refugee children; the electoral victory of Donald Trump and kids’ responses to that; and educational policy, especially the debates around standardized curricula such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core. At each of these sites, I show how adults provide the language they deem suitable for kids to use in expressing their feelings, thus instantiating a powerful kind of conformity in the name of individual expression. I then situate kids’ television programming in relation to these policies, showing some overlap and also some divergence. In each of these arenas, I focus on the production of a kind of emotional intelligence that expects children to speak in the (rational) language of adults, even as it assumes they are not fully capable of doing so.

Second, what texts have kids produced that resist these efforts at emotional management, illustrating their affective intensities and range?
I analyze and include a variety of kinds of cultural production by kids: original drawings by Central American refugee children; letters written and pictures drawn by kids in response to the Trump victory; observations of a Montessori classroom; tweets from a Syrian child; Tumblr fanart; kids’ television reviews from Common Sense media; and kids’ dance moves and memes that circulate on YouTube. I also analyze the commentary of kids playing two popular video games, Minecraft and Roblox, as well as their YouTube tutorials. The second half of the book illustrates how kids communicate with each other across these media by cross-referencing memes, songs, and movements; in so doing, they construct a common vernacular that departs from normative conceptions of proper expression. This vernacular is less about the naming of emotions and more about moving through space, constructing homes, and caring for pets. Kids share these experiences with each other, illustrating the “spreadability” of internet texts, to use the phrasing of Henry Jenkins and Sam Ford, or the way users can “share content for their own purposes” (2013, 3). These purposes, I argue, involve the production of a kids’ community based on affect. Affect does not name an emotion; rather, it points to a movement, an inhabiting of the body that defies categorization. “Feelings” are much more akin to affect than are emotions because “feelings” capture the way a body actually feels, physically, when experiencing something; “emotions,” by contrast, tend to sublimate these bodily feelings to language. In the next chapter, I elaborate in detail, using Brian Massumi’s theory of affect, how affect differs from emotion. This affective realm is so important to archive because kids—especially younger ones—are not in a position to organize as a group for greater power, dependent as they are on adults for basic life necessities and mobility.

The first half of the book illustrates this affective range, even as it demonstrates how difficult it is for some kids to access the kinds of media, such as the internet, that allow them to connect with each other. The drawings of kids recently released from immigration detention centers, for example, testifies powerfully to a longing for home and a sense of belonging—feelings that are not captured in the language of the immigration system. Artwork by kids after Trump’s victory illustrates their justified anger and rejection of his definition of national belonging, in contrast to the lessons in civics and polite letter-writing that some
teachers were encouraging. Cumulatively, I hope that the many examples of kids’ texts in this book speak both to their heterogeneity and different levels of privilege as well as to their common situation as subjects whose various forms of expression are rarely taken seriously. Although I can make no definitive claims about the transformations that might occur if kids’ expressions were not dismissed, I feel confident asserting that we would no doubt live in a much different world than we do now.

Be Happy

The power of positive thinking defines a normative U.S. ideology, as Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) argues; she distinguishes between hope, which she says is considered an “emotion, a yearning, the experience of which is not entirely within our control,” and optimism, a “cognitive stance, a conscious expectation, which presumably anyone can develop through practice” (4). One must practice positive thinking, and not only will that make one feel happier, but it will—we are told by psychologists and others—improve “health, personal efficacy, confidence, and resilience” (5). This provides us with the illusion of control—though it is a powerful illusion—and the devaluation of hope as a less productive “feeling.”

This belief in the power of optimism as a cognitive realm that can be controlled (unlike the emotion of hope) also defines the discourse of emotional intelligence—seen as a specific set of skills that can be taught to children, much as math skills are, in order to build their resilience in the face of any one of a number of difficult situations, from bullying to poverty to learning difficulties. It also has entered schools; educational experts have developed “emotional literacy programs”—in the tens of thousands—across the country. As New York Times reporter Jennifer Kahn describes the concept in a September 11, 2013, article:

The theory that kids need to learn to manage their emotions in order to reach their potential grew out of the research of a pair of psychology professors—John Mayer, at the University of New Hampshire, and Peter Salovey, at Yale. In the 1980s, Mayer and Salovey became curious about the ways in which emotions communicate information, and why some people seem more able to take advantage of those messages than others. While outlining the set of skills that defined this “emotional intelligence,”
Salovsey realized that it might be even more influential than he had originally suspected, affecting everything from problem solving to job satisfaction: “It was like, this is predictive!”

The goal, thus, is to figure out how to measure emotional intelligence in much the same way as academic intelligence is measured, so as to maximize the potential for future successes.

Academic psychology departments have contributed to this push for measurement of emotions. A 2016 article in *Psychology Today* titled “The Most Important Thing We Can Teach Our Children” describes a lecture given by Marc Brackett, director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, on a program that center developed for schools called RULER. Says the article’s author, Lisa Firestone,

RULER is an acronym that stands for Recognizing emotions in self and others, Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, Labeling emotions accurately, Expressing emotions appropriately and Regulating emotions effectively. The program has been shown to boost student’s emotional intelligence and social skills, productivity, academic performance, leadership skills and attention, while reducing anxiety, depression and instances of bullying between students. RULER creates an all-around positive environment for both students and teachers, with less burnout on both ends.

Like a ruler, the program becomes a tool of measurement and precision, making ambiguous realms such as emotions more clear-cut.

Within the discourse of emotional intelligence, children’s self-determination is valorized, but this valorization occurs within regimes of governance that are highly managed for specific purposes. “Self-regulation” positions the self for success within a normative vision of what counts as success. As Nikolas Rose describes it, “Childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence. In different ways, at different times, and by many different routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children have been linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state” (1999, 121). This is not, to be clear, the suppression and subsumption of children’s identities as if they were important only in terms of what they represent;
rather, this is the encouragement of the expression of children’s rights, including their rights to emotional expression, in the interest of a more vital public body. “Health” includes emotional health, achieved by successfully managing emotions, in the interest of “normal” development and “successful” citizenship. For those children considered to be on the margins or outside of normative citizenship, such as the Central American children seeking refuge in the U.S. whom I discuss in chapter 2, the forms of governance are more intense and punitive, and less about incorporation.

Yet children resist. By “resist,” I don’t mean that kids actively oppose adult control (though that may happen), for this would entail seeing them only in relation to adults, which is exactly not my point. Rather, kids have their own ideas and forms of expression that are not easily managed. In this book, I argue that media for young children provides a space of both management and resistance, the latter both intentional and inadvertent. The world of the internet has spawned multiple and dispersed sites of creativity; even relatively young kids can quite easily produce their own fanart, memes, and YouTube videos as well as remixing other texts. In gaming, kids construct their own spaces, often connecting with other kids in communities defined through both mutuality and competition. All of these sites, individually and networked, are places of intensely affective experience, where kids deploy nonverbal modes of expression such as images/memes, music, and movements (such as the “dab”). Kids collaborate without adult intervention, in their own language—a language that is often dismissed as nonsense or immature but that actually constitutes a complex web of intertextual references that an adult would likely have a difficult time understanding.

Some kids more easily access the internet than others, and its mode of reproduction and circulation makes it an apt venue for appropriation and community. However, I am not positing the internet as the utopian alternative to more conventional forms of expression, such as drawing, coloring, Play-Doh, and Legos, since all of these media include a refusal (or simply a lack of desire) to name, pin down, and categorize one’s emotions. Drawings by Central American children just released from detention (chapter 2) and artwork by kids responding to the election of Donald Trump (chapter 3) reveal that it is too reductive to attempt to distill a range of feelings into a single emotion. These texts also illustrate
the manner in which well-meaning adults attempt to mediate kids’ expressions so as to manage them for certain purposes that may not be in the kids’ best interests. Some teachers and parents, for example, used the presidential election to teach kids a civics lesson, encouraging them to emphasize kindness and manners through letter writing rather than expressing outright anger and fear.

Adults are not always evil or misguided, however, and they play a necessary role for the age group that is my focus in this book—the five-to nine-year-olds who are in their early years of schooling and exposure to forces outside the home, while still heavily shaped by the domestic sphere. In each chapter on different cultural realms, I show how adults can best facilitate kids’ expressions when they provide the structures that allow for independence and autonomy, then step back and let kids take over. This happens, for example, with the Central American kids, as activists provided them the space in which to draw anything they wanted, and by some teachers and artists who provided spaces for kids reacting angrily to Trump’s victory.

Drawing on insights gleaned from disability studies, I argue here for a valorization of alternative forms of expression. Within disability studies, scholars writing specifically about autism and other diagnoses “on the spectrum” of neurological differences have been arguing for an acceptance of “neurodiversity” rather than a diagnosis and treatment. Is there a disorder here? Or, rather, is there a different way of thinking based on differences in the structure of the brain that should be valued rather than treated? E. Kay M. Tisdall notes the similarities between the fields of disability and childhood studies.

Like children versus adults, disabled people have been positioned theoretically as being non-able bodied, with the comparison continuously against a mythical gold standard of “normal”—failing to recognize, for example, that most people have impairments at some point in their lives and capacities vary widely. . . . Children and disabled people have been treated as “lesser” because they are positioned as dependents on adults or carers/able-bodied people respectively. This ignores the realities of people’s interdependencies and the different types of “work” done (whether paid or unpaid). It ignores contributions made by children and disabled people in their personal and more public lives. (2012, 183)
The assumption that only certain people are dependent, in other words, allows for certain norms to be produced and consolidated—norms such as the one that defines growing up as the gradual subsumption of feelings within rational communication.

My goal is not to demonize therapy or homogenize it; in fact, I speak to the potential of music therapy below. Clearly, I do not have enough evidence to claim that therapy does not help some kids, nor would I want to pursue that argument, because therapy should not be used as a scapegoat. It is part of the larger picture in which normative emotional expression is produced. I do want to ask: what is sacrificed via this cultivation of proper emotions? How might emotions be misunderstood as they are distilled into recognizable categories? The naming of Anger, Joy, Disgust, and Fear, for example, privileges certain emotions over others and assumes that these are distinct categories that exist somewhat independently from each other.

Furthermore, what is the realm of expression that cannot or should not be named in normative terms? What alternative kinds of expression are available? This is an especially important question for younger children, for whom adults are particularly prone to speak for/on behalf of because of their assumed immaturity. Their relationship to language is much less linear and direct; their expression of feelings lies more in different kinds of speech, or in music, drawing, running, jumping, and so forth. The question “What do you think that means?” or “How does that make you feel?” is met by a quizzical look. The directive to “use your words” may produce even more frustration. Because children’s bodies are different (and different from each other as well as from older kids and adults), their feelings will be different, and differently expressed.

The pleasure lies in the excessive. These excesses can be found as children navigate their way through other media forms, connected to but sometimes quite distinct from adult productions. I show in this book how children can produce their own “archives of feeling,” to use Ann Cvetkovich’s phrase, as they talk about television on social media, create their own fan fiction and fanart, and play video games such as Minecraft. Cvetkovich defines her project as “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (2003, 7). She uses this idea to explore queer
cultural production, a realm that she says has not been considered worthy of archiving because of its ephemerality, performativity, and affective engagement. Her materials, she says, “emerge out of cultural spaces—including activist groups, women’s music festivals, sex toy stores, and performance events—that are built around sex, feelings, and trauma. These publics are hard to archive because they are lived experiences, and the cultural traces that they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation” (9).

Young children—as much if not more than any other subculture—lack a “conventional archive” as well as the ability to organize, formally or informally. They belong, ostensibly, in the home, defined by their families. Perhaps this is one reason Cvetkovich does not think to even mention children in An Archive of Feelings; with no archive to recover, even in ephemeral terms, children seem not to count as archivable subjects, authors of cultural texts that can be recovered in the fashion that Cvetkovich does for her queer subjects and texts. Children’s culture is more likely to be truly ephemeral—clay sculptures, Lego trucks, chalk drawings on the sidewalk, angels in the snow. It is harder to analyze the emotional content of such ephemeral texts in part because they simply do not persist in any concrete, documentable way.

Yet kids’ culture is not unlike any other form of culture insofar as it is produced within specific, structural conditions—conditions that shape the culture, much as the culture will reshape the conditions. Raymond Williams’s (1977) notion of “structures of feeling” is a useful supplement to the “archive of feelings.” He critiques the binaries that Marxism relies on—structure/feeling, material/subjective, social/personal, past/present. Rather, says Williams, the weight and force of institutions is felt through the embodied, affective experiences of everyday life; these immaterial forces are, in turn, constitutive of the institutions. While we tend to describe social structures and institutions as if they are finished, says Williams, they are not; they are moving and in process—they are “structures of feeling.” As that phrase means to suggest, feelings—usually associated with amorphousness—do in fact have a structure:

We are talking about characteristic impulses, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought, practical
consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a “structure”: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. (132)

The structure of feeling is both spatial and temporal. The present, Williams says, is “not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products” (128). It is in the “inalienably physical” that we can discern these structures of feeling: what enables a child, within the conditions and routines of everyday life, to express herself in a way that has a shaping influence on those conditions and routines? The structures of feeling are shaped by and reshape both time and place; for instance, a cultural production such as a Minecraft world or the theme song to a favorite television show can create a temporary home, as an affective, embodied, felt place.

At one level, I am simply trying to record here some of the ways in which children express themselves; in fact, if this was not an academic book in which I was compelled to make an argument, I would be tempted to simply let these different texts speak for themselves. At moments, I do exactly that, letting kids’ monologues during gaming stand on their own for at least a short period of time, for example. I acknowledge that when I turn to analysis, I am contributing to the idea that kids need some kind of adult mediation in order to be heard and understood.

At another level, though, I believe that compiling an archive of feelings and analyzing it can shed light on the conditions that make it hard for children to be heard. What does it feel like to be a kid? Although I can no longer know what that feeling is, and there is no one, universal feeling, I can guess—from many years of mothering, volunteering in schools, and consuming hundreds of hours of kids’ media. I can guess: it is both intensely fun and intensely scary to inhabit fully one’s body and yet not ever to be fully in control of what happens next. Cvetkovich argues that trauma derives not just from catastrophic events such as the Holocaust or war but also from ongoing and everyday experiences—“insidious trauma,” as she calls it. These everyday events, these encounters with racism, sexism, and homophobia, are in the realm of “felt
experiences,” which, she says, should not be dismissed simply because they are not as identifiable or widely recognized as something like surviving a genocide is. She seeks to analyze the structural causes of these everyday feelings as an alternative to more individualized approaches such as therapy: “Once the causes of trauma become more diffuse, so too do the cures, opening up the need to change social structures more broadly rather than just fix individual people” (33).

One could argue, using this definition, that being a child is a traumatic experience, insofar as it involves everyday acts of being socialized into spheres that one might not understand, spoken to and directed in a language that only partially makes sense, and compelled to move one’s body in ways that make one feel out of place. Furthermore, the pressure to learn how to perform one’s gender and sexuality could be seen as traumatic; as Cvetkovich notes, referring to Judith Butler’s work, “Even though Butler doesn’t name it as such, the normalization of sex and gender identities can be seen as a form of insidious trauma, which is effective precisely because it often leaves no sign of a problem” (46). Some children, in addition, experience the physical and mental violence of war, migration, and deportation.

Lessons in socialization are perceived to be a necessary part of growing up; indeed, they are elements of “successful” maturation. Thus, they leave no trace in part because they are not articulated as problems. Says Cvetkovich, “Trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all” (7). When an event is experienced as traumatic, she adds, it often cannot be “articulated in a single coherent narrative” (2). It would seem that children, especially younger children, may experience events as traumatic without having the language to articulate them as such to adults who—precisely because they see the events as normal—are not looking for signs or asking the right questions. If children are “acting out” in various ways, their “problems” are likely to be seen as individual, at which point they may be sent to a therapist, who will attempt to identify the feelings that are getting in the way of the child’s happiness, successful performance, or sociability. Rarely are the problems seen as systemic and institutional, for this would require a serious questioning of the very structures that are supposed to be helping the child succeed.
At the point of naming, we encounter another dilemma: does the identification of children’s feelings become a form of archiving that in turn becomes institutionalized, and threatens to then become part of the problem? Cvetkovich seeks to create an archive of alternative realms of experience that does not become institutionalized but rather remains at a somewhat ephemeral level in order to retain its affective force. While, on the one hand, she wants to make visible these ephemeral productions, she also wants to “keep as open as possible the definition of what constitutes a public in order to remain alert to forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities” (9). Children—as much if not more than any other subculture—are not often perceived in terms of either publics or counterpublics; they are, frankly, not even perceived as potential political agents, as I show in part I of this book. The texts I analyze demonstrate, however, that kids are savvy and creative, able to discern politics such as Trump’s, and to form communities that function as alternative spaces when they have access to the technologies that enable communication.

“Growing Sideways”

The fields of education, child psychology, and therapy have combined over the years to produce a notion of normative development—roughly stated, the belief that children proceed through more or less similar stages based on a biological maturation process. While still influential today, the model has also been widely critiqued for its universalizing and essentializing notions of childhood as well as its propensity for reproducing norms such as heterosexuality that are implicit in the notion of stages of development. This model, when integrated into school curriculum, lends itself to the belief that children should “naturally” be ready to learn certain skills at certain ages, regardless of context, leading to problematic definitions of normalcy, as critics in the field of pedagogy such as Liselott Mariett Olsson have argued:

Learning processes are considered to be inherent, natural and biological phenomena that follow predetermined stages. Through scientific theories of developmental psychology, the child’s development is possible to predict, prepare, supervise, and evaluate according to predefined standards.
This is a child that learns in a completely de-contextualized way, its development is set from the very beginning and when the child does not develop according to the predefined schema there is something essentially wrong with the child. (2009, 34)

This model establishes the teacher and/or parent as the authority who is interested not in what the child desires but in what he or she lacks: “The pedagogical challenge lies in giving the right support at the right moment for the child to develop properly. The child’s response to this developmental help then indicates whether the child is following the normal curve of development or not. What the teacher is looking for is the lack of proper development; she/he is functioning as a detector of lack, an observer of error” (35). The child lacks, in other words, what the adult possesses, and what the adult assumes the child needs in order to “grow up.”

This notion of growing up relies on an adult concept of time, argues Kathryn Stockton in *The Queer Child* (2009); she proposes an alternative: “How, we should ask, are children depicted as conceiving their relation to the concept ‘growing up’? Are they shown as (un)wittingly making strange relations when they anticipate how they will participate in adult time?” (15). Why should growth be perceived in linear terms? Why not sideways, asks Stockton, explaining that growing sideways would likely be an apt phrase for what recent cognitive science recognizes as the brain’s growth (throughout a person’s lifetime) through the brain’s capacity to make neural networks through connection and extension. Hence, “growing up” may be a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved. By contrast, “growing sideways” suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas, their motives or motions, may pertain at any age. (11)

Here Stockton importantly notes the constructedness of the models of linear development that assume a steady progression of maturity as one’s body grows. This linear development is not in fact inherent but rather socialized as part of the normative conception of growing up—one which involves the channeling of what is actually a more naturally
occurring divergent thinking (the “brain’s capacity to make neural networks through connection and extension”).

Most importantly for my purposes, the normative model of development assumes a movement from affective responses to linguistic control to bodily “self-management.” The normative thus names the ability to regulate one’s emotions in a socially acceptable fashion. This is considered an important skill for young children to learn; however, it also requires varying degrees of conformity to a set of rules of conduct and adherence to authority, allowing for only a limited amount of questioning and creativity. It also assumes that language can accurately capture emotions, and that adults can provide the proper language for children to use. In doing so, however, these models do not merely describe but rather impose a way of thinking and feeling on children that shapes their sense of the world, often in normative ways—with the goal of “doing well,” “cooperating,” and “attaining one’s goals,” all of which feed into concepts of citizenship, consumerism, and national identity.

We arrive at the conundrum that poststructural theory identified: there is no outside to language. Affect studies offers some provisional escape routes, as I will argue in chapter 1, but we will always come back to language, especially in the context of a book such as this one. Still, it is worth the effort to identify the gaps and moments in which language, or at least a particular kind of language, is not the primary mode of bodily expression. A brief turn to the field of music therapy provides one such moment.

Music therapists build their practice on the recognition that the brain processes music differently than it does language. David Hussey (2003), a specialist in children’s mental health, explains that “music has the potential to bypass the defensive operations of the higher cortical functions of the brain and move directly to the limbic system where emotions are processed. Music is also thought to stimulate right-brain functioning, which is associated with imagination and feelings, especially feelings of sadness.” Music therapy is especially effective with children who are not verbally adept; this lagging in verbal skills could be due to an early trauma that occurred at the same time as verbal skills were developing, says Hussey. Lacking in language skills, some children are reluctant to try forms of talk therapy because it can just increase frustration and impede the relationship between therapist and child. As Hussey summarizes:
Research has found that early trauma affects the developing nervous system, causing chronic states of over-arousal in traumatized children. Music is an ideal way to help these children self-regulate and soothe as it creates a middle ground between over-arousal and numbness and helps the child to experience a state of stability (Montello, 1999). The immediate success that children experience in the music therapy setting can provide a boost to self-esteem and create a successful, nonthreatening environment in which the therapist can help the child to decrease symptoms of arousal or disinhibition.

Once the child feels more comfortable, he or she may be more demonstrative, indicating through his or her body what she is feeling. An observant therapist can read the body rather than listen to words:

During music therapy sessions the therapist uses deep reflective listening to try and understand the client's experiences. The therapist listens to and observes the client, the client's playing, and the music that the client and therapist co-create. This sensitive listening includes attention to the somatic experiences, or sensations in the body, of the therapist and to other thoughts and impressions that arise. These impressions are not censored in the way they might be in social interactions in everyday life but are allowed to be experienced and felt, coming into conscious awareness so they can be thought about and reflected upon in order to increase awareness of clients’ experiences. With many clients these experiences of the therapist are not able to be relayed back to them in words because they may not be able to comprehend language, or these experiences are not able to be discussed because the client may not be able to understand or reflect on these impressions. Therefore these experiences are discussed in supervision sessions, and are used by the therapist to deepen their awareness of the life world of the client, and the thoughts, impressions, and experiences of that world. (Hussey 2003)

The last stage of the process demonstrates the inevitable return to language, which also restores the hierarchy of therapist-client that ostensibly dissipated during the musical exchange. This return does not negate, however, the possibility that the client will have benefited from
a form of communication that did not rely on language but on affective exchanges that use a different part of the brain than does language.

Such an approach avoids the problem I described at the beginning of this chapter—the often awkward ascribing of a single word to a complex set of feelings. This effort artificially fixes emotions, as if they were static entities that can be identified and addressed. By contrast, music therapy calls upon the idea that music is constantly flowing, capturing affective responses that are also in movement. There are different schools of thought within music therapy, and here I am drawing on an approach called the Nordoff Robbins method, which is based on linking

the therapeutic potency of music to the congruence between the dynamic, kinetic qualities of musical form and the qualities of human emotions and physiological functions (Pavlicevic 1997). Ansdell (1995) describes the “pulses and tones, tensions and resolutions, phrasing of actions, bursts of intensity, repetitions and developments” that characterize physiological processes, coordinating the components of each of the body’s systems and coordinating these systems with each other (p. 8). Pavlicevic (1997) observes that “the ebb and flow, tensions and relaxations in music resemble the ebb and flow, tensions and relaxations of human feeling” (p. 32). Music does not capture emotions as static entities, but rather conveys the processes of their unfolding and transformation over time. (Guerrero, Marcus, and Turry 2015)

This emphasis on flows and intensities is similar to what I describe in chapter 7, on Minecraft, in which kids’ engagement with the game is characterized by “phrasing of actions, bursts of intensity, repetitions, and developments.” This stands in contrast to the attempt to match a physiological sensation, such as a racing heart, to a recognized emotion, such as anger, to a specific experience, and ultimately, to the “appropriate” response. This attempt invariably requires the child to distance herself from her own body; in order to understand better her feelings, she must see herself as others see her and provide a singular name for what then becomes a fixed moment in time. By contrast, music therapy attempts to dissolve the distinction between inner and outer, especially as clients and therapists improvise together: “Through the dynamic
form of an improvisation, qualities of expression are intimately linked with qualities of experience, rather than being ‘an external display of . . . internal, categorical emotional states such as joy, anger, sadness, and so on’” (Guerrero, Marcus, and Turry 2015).

While I have not focused on music in this book, I have chosen texts that demonstrate this idea of the “dynamic form of an improvisation,” which in their dynamism dissolve the distinction between inner and outer. This dynamism better captures how kids feel—their affective intensities—as I illustrate in texts including drawings, YouTube videos, fanart, memes (which often include music, as I discuss in chapter 8), and gaming. While it is not possible to avoid completely the linguistic naming of emotions, it is possible to identify cultural productions that rely on images (drawing or photographic) or different kinds of language, such as nonlinear narrations or “nonsense” words. These different forms of communication can become a common vernacular for a community. The more kids, especially younger kids, can form communities, albeit virtual ones, the more likely they will be to define the terms of their everyday lives. This control is enhanced because they are communicating laterally, with other kids, rather than mediating their expressions through adults. These venues of expression allow for passionate, engaged, affective responses that are also (usually) attentive to other kids’ feelings.

The Field of Childhood Studies

Historically, the study of young children has occurred primarily in the academic disciplines of education, social work, and psychology, where they are often considered objects of study rather than active subjects, lumped together in the universal category of “children.” Chris Jenks links this ongoing naturalization to “the ideology of development,” which, he says, “has remained relatively intact” (2005, 4), along with the attendant concepts of maturation and socialization—all of which “leave the actual child untheorized; they all contrive to gloss over the social experience that is childhood” (7). “Childhood,” says Jenks, “receives treatment as a stage, a structured process of becoming, but rarely as a course of action or a coherent social practice” (8). Children matter only insofar as they are seen as future adults, and their socialization is necessary in order to negate the threat of the child as disorder, argues Jenks.
Young children are not even considered as objects of study in many other disciplines and fields, including my primary field of cultural studies. The underlying assumption here is that children do not figure as interesting topics of academic work until they become teenagers and thus “resistant” cultural producers in their own right; hence, there is a fair amount of attention paid to “youth,” going back to the seminal work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the area of teens’ subcultures, but not to younger children. As David Buckingham notes in his cultural studies work on children, “children were almost entirely absent from the empirical research conducted at Birmingham” (2008, 220). Furthermore, research on media and children, says Buckingham, “continues to be dominated by conventional approaches drawn from developmental psychology, social psychology and communication studies” (221). “Conventional” refers to their empiricist approaches—the attempt to prove exactly what effects media is having on children, who are not seen as actual viewers but rather as abstract subjects, measured by universalist theories of how “normal” children develop (as in Jean Piaget’s influential work).

The relatively new interdisciplinary field of childhood studies offers important correctives to the academic elisions and assumptions about children. Perhaps most central to these correctives is the valorization of children as subjects, with different degrees of agency, shaped differently across time and space rather than adhering to a universal model of development. As three founders of the field—Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout—put it in their 1998 *Theorizing Childhood*, “the rise of childhood agency” signals the transition from “the child” as an instance of a category to the recognition of children as particular persons. . . . In sociology, this has been codified in the “new paradigm” (James and Prout 1990b), as a call for children to be understood as social actors shaping as well as shaped by their circumstances. This represents a definitive move away from the more or less inescapable implication of the concept of socialization: that children are to be seen as a defective form of adult, social only in their future potential but not in their present being. (6)

Recognizing children as social actors often leads researchers to incorporate their voices in the research project; presumably, these interviews
and direct engagement mean that the researchers are getting closer to “the truth” of kids’ experiences. However, as Allison James argues in a 2007 essay, while this incorporation of kids’ voices had become commonplace in anthropology, it did not necessarily mean that the work had led to any less mediated access:

Although children’s words quoted in research reports may be “authentic”—in that they are an accurate record of what children have said—it remains the case that the words and phrases have been chosen by the researcher and have been inserted into the text to illustrate an argument or underline a point of view. The point of view being presented is, therefore, the view of the author, not that of the child; furthermore, the author inevitably glosses the voices of children as part of the interpretive process. (265)

Using kids’ words to validate research as “authentic” and “child-centered” has become commonplace in policy analysis and within the NGO community, says James, but it can actually reinforce normative models rather than dismantle them. For example, in a study James and two colleagues did of family court advisers in England, they found that although the advisers’ specific duty was to represent children’s interests to the court by speaking to kids and finding out what they wanted, in fact the researchers imposed their own views of what was in the children’s best interests, using quotes or glosses of the quotes to support their views. James summarizes:

Besides mediating children’s voices as a form of protection, it was also the case that what children said might be translated by practitioners in accordance with what they, as adults, felt was “normal” and “acceptable” for children. And, in making such judgments, it was to traditional models of child development that scale children’s competence in relation to age that the practitioners turned. And this was despite their ready acknowledgment that such generalizations about “children” might not apply in individual cases. (267)

One alternative, says James, is to observe kids’ interactions and communications as they occur naturally in their everyday lives (268). This observation is in fact what I have attempted in this book, as I collect,
describe, and record kids’ cultural productions, both in the context of their “real,” everyday lives, and in the context of online artistic creations and gaming conversations. Of course, this does not erase my mediating influence, but it does allow some autonomy to the representations.

There is an additional reason to the ones James describes for not relying on interviews or direct questioning of kids, and that is in some sense the entire focus of this book: the inadequacy of language for capturing feelings. I do not, in other words, think children’s agency can be linked directly to their ability to represent themselves in a language that commands adults’ attention. “Voice” is a problematic concept, says the disability studies scholar Tisdall, pointing to another connection between disability and childhood studies:

The metaphor of “voice” may reproduce the very understandings that marginalize children: the voice as the property of a rational, articulate, knowledgeable individual, capable of speaking for herself (see Tisdall and others, 2009). Focusing on voice privileges comprehensible verbal utterances over other forms of communication, which risks excluding children and young people who communicate little or not at all through speech or who remain silent or laugh in response to a researcher’s questions. . . . It excludes other forms of communication from drawing to role play to observation, which are popular methods to engage with a diversity of children, but tend to be translated into text for analysis and presentation. This privileges text over other forms of communication. (185)

“Other forms of communication” include, for me, drawings, fanart, free-flowing narration of games, memes, and YouTube videos. These texts do not exist in isolation from each other but rather form a complex intertextual web of meaning—what I am calling a common vernacular—that connects kids even though they may not share the same physical location.

Why Tell Stories?

This kids’ vernacular is not driven by storytelling or narrative in the conventional sense; it defies the very notion of a “story time.” Why, after all, do we (adults and academics) automatically assume that stories matter to kids—both in the sense of telling them stories and of urging them
to tell us their stories? These stories are supposed to take the shape of a beginning-middle-and-end narrative; to return to Stockton, the narrative imposes an adult sense of time. This idea of mastery aims to help kids “make sense” of situations, to see things in a cause-and-effect kind of way. The child must learn the consequences of certain actions, and a narrative helps them piece together how scenarios play out. This goal is further enhanced through the construction of a protagonist with whom the child is assumed to identify (hence, for example, the concern with diversity in television programing—with creating characters for all children to identify with).

This paradigm was powerfully critiqued by Jacqueline Rose in her 1984 *The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Rose is often and favorably cited for her argument that adults mediate all forms of children’s fiction; as she puts it, “there is no child behind the category children’s fiction, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes” (10–11). However, what gets less attention is Rose’s critique of narrative. The genre of children’s fiction has been produced, she says, by a shift in the form of storytelling, from the “conspicuous narrating voice” of 18th-century fables and fairy tales, in which the adult motivation was blatant, to the absorption of “adult intention” into the story. “The ideal work lets the characters and events speak for themselves” (60), with the goal being to let the child immerse himself or herself in a pleasurable world, without thinking about the constructedness of the story. Says Rose,

> The development of narrative in children’s books has gone hand in hand with an apparent reduction in its pedagogic function and an increasing stress on the child’s own pleasure. However, given the way that this form of narrative is almost always described in terms of its ability to secure the identification of the child with the story . . . the idea that the narrative is progressive per se seems to me to be highly questionable. (62)

It is “questionable,” Rose goes on to argue, because “fiction becomes a central tool in the education of the child,” with the imperative that literature “be taught to the child according to a notion of competence or skill” (63). The “acquisition of fictional competence” is supposed to occur in a series of stages, what Rose calls “that march into rationality
that dominates one particular conception of the development of a child,” namely, she says, the Piagetian notion of development—the “gradual acquisition of motor and sensory development in the child” (64).

Narrative is not inherently conformist, then, but rather becomes so when it is linked to essentialized notions of child development, in which deviations from the norm are considered just that—deviations in need of correction. This unexamined linkage is exactly what happens in another important text on children’s cultural production, Marsha Kinder’s 1991 *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*. Kinder relies on narrative analysis; as she writes:

> Narrative maps the world and its inhabitants, including one’s own position within that grid. In acquiring the ability to understand stories, the child is situated as a perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting, speaking subject within a series of narrative fields—as a person in a family saga, as a spectator who tunes in to individual tales and identifies with their characters, and as a performer who repeats cultural myths and sometimes generates new transformations. Ever since television became pervasive in the American home, this mass medium has played a crucial role in the child’s entry into narrative. My study explores how television and its narrative conventions affect the construction of the subject. (2)

To her credit, Kinder recognizes that narrative shapes children as children—not as adults. To theorize this particularity, she turns, however, to Piaget, and does exactly what Rose cautions against, assuming a steady “march” from age 18 months through adolescence through four phases of cognitive growth related to their mastery of language, arriving ultimately at “formal thought” and the “completion of reflective intelligence” (quoted in Kinder 1991, 8). Kinder also uncritically deploys Piaget’s notion of “equilibration,” which, she says, “he defines as ‘a sequence of self-regulations whose retroactive processes finally result in operational reversibility’” (8). The goal is for the child to be able to perform an operation and then reverse it, to understand the logic of going forward and backward; as Piaget puts it,

> A mental operation is reversible when, starting from its result, one can find a symmetrically corresponding operation which will lead back to
the data of the first operation without these having been altered in the process. . . . If I divide a given collection of objects into four equal piles, I can recover the original whole by multiplying one of my quarters by four: the operation of multiplication is symmetrical to that of division. Thus every rational operation has a corresponding operation that is symmetrical to it and which enables one to return to one's starting point. (quoted in Kinder 1991, 8).

Clearly, this formulation relies on a linear growth model, in which divergent thinking (those wandering neural pathways of creativity) needs to be redirected into more efficient and straightforward ways of thinking. The model also relies on a universal child, who—no matter where or when—is expected to demonstrate proper growth in the same fashion as all other children.

If narrative is not inherently conformist, when is it deployed in critical fashion? I would argue this happens in situations like that described by Sarah Projansky in her work on girls as critical readers of media texts. After spending the bulk of her *Spectacular Girls* (2014) analyzing media representations of mainly adolescent girls, she turns to an ethnography of third graders. Her goal, she says, is to shift from “girl as media representation” to “girl as media critic” (182). She shows that girls often respond critically to the media panic assumptions about them, rejecting the idea, for example, that they automatically desire to look like celebrity girls. Projansky came to this conclusion by observing the third graders in her ethnographic sample, being careful, she says, to “speak to/with rather than co-opt” her subjects (185). She did not try to teach them how to read media critically—a common goal of media literacy projects—but rather took note of the ways they were already reading critically. She also let them refuse her requests for writing samples as proof of their analytical skills: “Even when I asked them to do so [write a media analysis essay] in a variety of different ways, they both implicitly and explicitly refused. Thus they made it impossible for me to simply ‘publish’ their work, and they asserted the specificity of their (non-writing) voices from day one” (185).

Projansky looks for “analytical skills the kids already had,” which she finds in their “ability to notice details, their thoughtful questions, their pleasure in creating their own stories and drawings, and their concerns about gender difference” (194). However, even with her respect for the
autonomy of the kids’ expressions, Projansky cannot help but look for aspects that she finds important to critical reading: “many students implicitly employed genre and/or narrative analysis when describing details, although they did not label it as such” (195). She notes how one student created her own “analytical vocabulary in order to express her ideas about narrative structure and tone” (194). She says in response to another student, “Right. It was a key narrative element that moved the story forward.” With this student, she is especially interested in how the girl did not find in the story the same moral that Projansky did but rather focused on the structure of the story, on how it was told. Yet it seems that Projansky still finds in the girl’s reading something that confirms her thesis—that girls read critically—and that this critical ability rests in the skills of narrative analysis. As Projansky observes, “she focused on her understanding of the narrative structure, which of course is a key aspect of scholarly media criticism” (196).

I do not want to argue that third graders are not in fact analytical; clearly, they are capable of critical insights that will overlap with academic insights. However, by valorizing this realm, Projansky downplays other reactions that are not predicated on criticism as articulated through narrative; she enters this study already having decided that she would look for analysis as proof of girls’ ability to think critically about media texts. Other reactions, more affective responses, are not considered within the realm of critical responses. She asks no questions (at least none that are mentioned) about feelings, emotions, or affective responses to the media. The cognitive is valued over the feeling realm, reifying a mind/body binary.

By contrast, I seek ways to avoid that binary, difficult as it is within a profession and, indeed, a society that value verbal acuity. What kinds of expressions emerge from kids’ everyday lives? I have incorporated some examples from my younger son’s life as well as numerous accounts of kids in classrooms, kids playing games online and making fanart, and kids loving memes and making YouTube videos. I have tried to be constantly aware of the gap between my thoughts, my language, my desires and those of the kids. I have not assumed that my sense of time and place are superior to theirs. I have tried to stop asking those predictable questions that impose an adult sense of time, such as “How was your day?” and “What do you want to be when you grow up?”
Even as I have incorporated the experiences and exchanges of individual children, I have put these individuals within a much broader social context. Thus, while my focus is media, media consumption never takes place in a vacuum. As Buckingham puts it, “people are never only audiences; and ‘audiencing’ is merely a part of their broader social experience” (224). The question becomes how to delineate which elements of the “broader social experience” are most relevant for understanding kids’ media consumption as it intersects with emotional expression. I answer that question in the first section of the book, where I analyze three policy arenas that affect kids: immigration policy, electoral politics, and educational policy. This section also demonstrates the different conditions that shape kids’ lives, showing both what kids in the U.S. have in common and how they differ across space given particular experiences with legal status, for example, or racialization (post-Trump, especially). While my focus is on the U.S., I recognize that some conditions cross borders, shaping kids’ emotional expressions in places ranging from Syria to Central America.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 establishes my theoretical framework, using Brian Massumi’s theory of affect to elaborate the differences between emotions and affect. This chapter also reviews some of the media studies literature on children to show how my argument is both indebted to and departs from this scholarship. I also argue here for attending to children’s physiological differences from adults, while at the same time not positing an essentialized category of children.

The remainder of the manuscript is divided into three sections, with two or three chapters in each part. Each section begins with a short preface explaining the chapters in that section. The first part, “Political Subjects,” argues that kids’ affective responses to political situations demonstrate their engagement in various political issues (despite the fact that kids are not often perceived to be capable of articulating political positions). I begin this section with the story of Bana al-Abed, a seven-year-old Syrian girl who gained international attention through her tweets in 2016 while her home in Aleppo was being bombed. Many of the tweets expressed her immediate, bodily reactions to the violence
while it was going on, like this one on September 24, 2016: “200 died yesterday and today whose next? I’m very afraid tonight.” She was both lauded and criticized, and much of the latter had to do with skepticism about her use of technology to take a political position.

The first full chapter in this section (chapter 2) analyzes the situation of Central American children seeking refuge in the U.S.; for them, the gap between adult impositions and their own experiences means that their feelings—namely, their fears of bodily harm—are not taken seriously as they proceed through the immigration system seeking relief from deportation to dangerous homelands. I present as well an exhibit of drawings by children just released from detention to illustrate an alternative range of feelings.

In chapter 3, I analyze the discourse of civility—which goes under the name of “niceness” in elementary schools—as it appears in kids’ letters to Trump during the presidential campaign and immediately following the election. In this version of the emotional intelligence paradigm, teachers and parents advocate writing letters as an exercise to help kids process and name their emotions in a manner that makes them feel like they can do something within the system. These “proper” modes of expression inevitably involve conforming to standards and rules, especially of bodily regulation. I then turn to examples of kids’ artwork from three locations in which teachers gave kids the opportunity to say and especially draw whatever they wanted; in these cultural productions, I find a much greater affective range, illustrating feelings of anger, fear, and hatred in a manner that does not adhere to the discourse of niceness.

Chapter 4 analyzes how the discourse of emotional intelligence intersects with national curriculum efforts such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core, as well as how these discourses play out in an actual kindergarten classroom. Emotional management dovetails with physical regulation to teach young children how to manage themselves for their own success; I show how this involves the expression rather than suppression of emotions and thus intersects with neoliberal notions of self-management. This chapter lays the groundwork for my argument about educational media, showing how kids’ television programming prepares kids for a successful school experience.

The second section, “Kids’ Television, from Problem Solving to Sideways Growth,” argues that much programming for younger children on
Nick Jr., Disney Jr., and PBS encourages them to manage their emotions and limit their affective, bodily responses through a focus on problem solving. These shows also advocate empathy and tolerance, teaching kids how to recognize and respond to others’ feelings. Many shows segue from emotional management to an appreciation of difference, thus contributing to the wider discourse of diversity management. In a stark shift from the years when television was seen as harmful to children’s development, many therapists now urge parents to use television to help their children learn prosocial behavior. However, television is far from homogenous, and I also present some exceptions to this emphasis on management. A genre of what I call “sideways growth” encourages kids to defy proper behavior, to revel in their bodies, and to occupy spaces of intensely affective pleasure. These shows interrupt the linear narratives that characterize problem-solving approaches and thus introduce the idea of alternative modes of communication.

The Cartoon Network series *Steven Universe* extends this genre in several ways, demonstrating that it is possible for television programming to valorize neurodiversity. In chapter 6, I argue that the show and its fandom speak to the creativity of kids who occupy precarious positions in the contemporary U.S. because they are members of blended, mixed-race, mixed-legal-status, and/or gender-nonconforming families. I analyze what kids say in their reviews of the show, many of which describe the range of feelings the program encourages. The show’s hero is a young boy whose superpowers are explicitly linked to his ability to express (rather than control) his emotions. Kids also say they love the show because it allows them to process mixed identity categories in complex ways, especially through the show’s notion of “fusion,” in which characters who are emotionally in accord with each other fuse into a hybrid identity. This fusion is illustrated in numerous examples of fanart that I present, focusing on Tumblr as a social media platform that has marketed itself as a safe space for young people (and here my focus is tweens) who are struggling with depression and loneliness.

The third section, “The Limits of Digital Literacy,” argues that the internet and gaming offer considerable potential for kids’ affective expression, a realm that has been largely ignored in the valorization of digital literacy and its focus on technological skills. In chapter 7, I argue that the popular game *Minecraft* exhibits a Deleuzian kind of becoming, in
which subjects are constantly maneuvering and experimenting as they construct their own worlds as well as collaborative spaces. Because the game has sprawled across technologies and led to the creation of so many spin-off products, it provides a unique space for seeing how children construct themselves through their relationship to this broadly defined “text.” In addition to the games and their products, I rely on commentary by children: my son Ezra, his friends, and YouTube users, all of whom contribute to the construction of an “archive of feelings” that is largely unregulated by adult efforts to name and govern. This archive is also part of the construction of a community of kids who, although often not physically in the same space, form social relationships. In chapter 8, I extend this analysis to another popular game, Roblox, which also serves as the basis for community building. However, in the Roblox world, kids’ movements through the various game spaces are frequently interrupted by images of the consumer world, such as fast-food signs and branded logos. While the movement is somewhat similar to the Minecraft world, consumerism shapes a different kind of space for kids’ expressions.

The reader will find an occasional story from my younger son, since he was between the ages of four and nine while I was beginning to think about and then writing this book. These observations are both the most mediated and the least mediated of all my sources—the former because they occur within the subjective space of my home, shaped by my ongoing research and ideas about “how kids feel.” They are less mediated, however, because they were most often written down almost in the moment they occurred, as direct observations of what Ezra said or did. I attempt to leave out the interpretation, though they acquire another level of meaning when I transfer them from my notes into this book. Still, I want to end this introduction with some of Ezra’s thoughts about being biracial to illustrate (and here is my mediation) the complexity of his feelings:

**Ezra:** I feel black. Black in my mind. Black in my body. Black in my soul. Not black as in bad, you know, but just black.

**Me:** That’s great. You’re proud to be African American. You should be.

**Ezra:** But I also feel scared.

**Me:** Why?
Ezra: (looking at me skeptically) Really? You don’t know?
Me: Trump?
Ezra: Don’t say his name! I told you to never say his name!
   (Silence.)
Ezra: Is he going to come to Ithaca and kill me?
Me: No, sweetie, he would never do that.
Ezra: Just get me my boxing gloves. I’m going to sleep with them on tonight.