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# Opening Up Ownership: Community Belonging, Belongings, and the Productive Life of Property

Davina Cooper

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**Abstract:** Drawing on empirical data and property theory, this article explores the property structure of a “free school” and the work property performs there. At Summerhill, we can see a tension between two property registers. On the one hand, the founder and present members stress the importance of individual ownership; at the same time the school’s property ownership regime involves property-limitation rules, a dispersal of right, collective forms of property, and cross-cutting, pluralized sites of institutional recognition. In exploring how this tension is manifested through property’s work, the article focuses on property’s contribution to a variegated social life at the school, analyzed in terms of personal, civic and boundary relations. With belonging treated as the central component of property rather than exclusion or control, ways of understanding what constitutes property and how it works shifts.

**Keywords:** property, belonging, free school, boundaries, legal pluralism, community, public, private

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## INTRODUCTION

I . . . have day dreamed of a school where every child could have a private and public life. (Neill 1948, 33)

Failure and disappointment are recurrent narratives within the Utopian, commune, and community literature when property and money are discussed.

**Davina Cooper** is Professor of Law and Political Theory at the University of Kent, and Director of the AHRC Research Centre for Law, Gender, and Sexuality. She can be contacted at [d.s.cooper@kent.ac.uk](mailto:d.s.cooper@kent.ac.uk). The research for this article was funded by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust. The author is grateful to Rosemary Auchmuty, Nicholas Blomley, Margaret Davies, Jon Goldberg-Hiller, Emily Grabham, Didi Herman, Lucy Sargisson, and the anonymous referees of *Law & Social Inquiry* for feedback and comments on earlier drafts. She is also indebted to Lucy Barnes, Jenny Smith, and Suhraiya Jivraj for excellent research assistance. Her thanks also to Zoe Readhead, Michael Newman, Jason Preater, and the children and adults of Summerhill School for their help and generosity with this project.

Communities that start with high ideals—where belongings, income, land, and homes (sometimes even bodies) are shared and jointly owned—find themselves struggling with the challenges an absence of private ownership generates (Cosgel, Murray, and Miceli 1997; Kuhlmann 2000, 162–65; Metcalf 1995). Then it is told problems and difficulties set in. Members become lazy and fail to contribute their share absent personal benefit; they hoard the products of their labor; they treat collective goods with disregard, and things become damaged or lost. Finally, fierce and frequent conflicts ensue as onefriends compete over what fairness in the use and control of spaces and things should mean.

This narrative of anxiety, demoralization, and loss sits behind the story of property told in this article. For this is a story of a stable, if evolving, property regime, combining elements of both private and more communal systems. It concerns Summerhill School, established by the influential educationalist A. S. Neill in the early 1920s, and which is still flourishing at the turn of the twenty-first century as a predominantly residential, fee-paying school, located on the outskirts of a small Suffolk town (Appleton 2003; Croall 1983; Gribble 1998; Neill 1937, 1968a, 1968b).<sup>1</sup> With between eighty and ninety children usually attending at any one time,<sup>2</sup> many from overseas, Summerhill has achieved renown on two primary counts. First, classes are optional, and decisions whether or not to attend rest entirely with the child. Second, community rulemaking and dispute resolution involve the school body as a whole. Underpinning these two foundational principles lies a commitment to democratic self-government and to children's freedom (Neill 1948; see also Darling 1992), commitments that have generated considerable interest and debate among educationalists since the school's founding (e.g., see Hemmings 1972). Summerhill's eminence as an innovative space does not come just from the way it functions as a school. It lies also in the example Summerhill poses as a successful, intergenerational, residential community, one that has endured for over eighty years. Other intentional communities might find much that is instructive in Summerhill's approach to rulemaking and rulebreaking—its use of ombudsmen, annual law reviews, hearings, fines, and

1. This article draws on data funded by a research grant from the Leverhulme Trust. Primary material comes from semistructured interviews with nine teachers, nineteen children, and Zoe Readhead, the school's headteacher. Interviews varied in formality, length, and style. Some were conducted with teachers between classes or when no one had shown for a scheduled lesson. Discussions with children ranged from intensive one-on-one conversations in a secluded space to group discussions that children joined and left as their interest waxed or waned, or other needs and preferences became pressing. In addition, this article draws on A. S. Neill's own writing, the recorded experiences of Summerhill by other visitors, school documents, and is supplemented by recorded observations over a series of five visits (comprising ten days in total) during 2002 and 2005.

2. See school Web site at <http://www.summerhill.co.uk/pages/basics.html> (accessed March 27, 2007).

the explicitly nonmoralistic approach it adopts toward infractions. They might also find considerable value in Summerhill's approach to property. On the surface, Summerhill's approach echoes the impetus toward private property and individual control, described above. One teacher I spoke with commented, "It's very gratifying and nice to know this [classroom] is my space and I have a say over how it's used and by whom. Some very public spaces get disrespected because they're nobody's."<sup>3</sup> Neill (1968a) makes a similar point, describing his difficulty getting students to treat tools carefully. I concluded that what was wrong was that the tools were used communally.

"Now", I said to myself, "if we introduce the possessive element . . . things will be different." . . . I brought it up at a meeting, and the idea was well received. Next term, some of the older pupils brought their own kits of tools from home. They kept them in excellent condition and used them far more carefully than before. (133)

Yet, the rhetoric of private ownership at Summerhill belies a more complex tapestry, one that resonates strikingly with other scholars' discussion of informal and unofficial common property practices (e.g., Blomley 2004b, 2005). In exploring this tapestry, my aim is twofold. First, I want to use this study to refract a broader conception of property organized around relations of belonging rather than control, where rights are fragmented and institutional authority dispersed. Second, and following from this, I want to explore the work performed by property practices within a community. While much of the communal literature emphasizes property's dysfunctionality, I want to address its practical and symbolic productivity and do so by focusing on property's role in creating, managing, and sustaining what I will call a "variegated" social.

As a botanical term, variegated describes distinct, adjoining differences, principally of color. My intention is to use the term "variegated social" to underscore how, at Summerhill, different but *complementary* practices and relations come together to form a richly textured and multifaceted social life. In other words, Summerhill is not organized around a rigid, fixed notion of how to live communally—that all practices and relations, for instance, should be public, visible, and accountable (see Kanter 1972). Nor does it go to the other extreme and assert the primacy of solitude, partiality, or individualism. Rather, Summerhill manifests a spectrum of relations, norms, and practices. This spectrum is one of complex interconnections as public and private interlock to form chains of spatialized and normative practices. In this article, I prise apart the links to focus on the character of the individual parts.

*Why* Summerhill sustains a variegated social lies outside this article's scope. What I am more interested in pursuing here is the contribution property

3. Field notes, October 7, 2005.

relations make to it, that is to producing and maintaining, but also to challenging and complicating, a patterned kind of social life. I do so by focusing on three dimensions of school practice: personal, civic, and boundary. These provide a basis for exploring not just what property *means* but also the work property does.<sup>4</sup> My analysis takes as its terrain two important sets of distinctions, although, as I explore, these distinctions are far less clear-cut than they might at first glance seem. The first concerns property as either a subject-object or part-whole relation, that is, as organized around a person's mastery of a thing, or as characteristics of a larger entity that are authoritatively recognized and that produce external as well as internal effects. The second distinction deals with the question of *how* property works. Here, my analysis centers on the difference between constitutive and mediated effects, a framework I use to explore whether property's achievements inevitably and necessarily unfold, or whether they depend upon, and are shaped by, other social action.

### THINKING ABOUT PROPERTY

Property theorists have expended considerable energy arguing over conceptions of property: Is property an open-ended and unlimited form of ownership or a bundle of discrete (severable) legal relations? And if a bundle, what relation, if any, provides property's core to which all others relate? Several writers have treated the right and ability to exclude as central (Eleftheriadis 1996, 48–49; Gray 1991; Penner 1997). Others, particularly those coming from more sociological traditions, have described property first and foremost as a social practice of routine and iteration; understanding property then depends on exploring the multiple, everyday ways in which it is imagined, discussed, inhabited, and fought over (Blomley 1997, 1998, 2004b).

My aim here is to craft a way of thinking about property that helps illuminate Summerhill life. I therefore draw on school members' perceptions as well as my own observations. Together, they suggest a broad conception of property, one that encompasses unofficial as well as official law, informal (*de facto*) as well as formal (*de jure*) practices, and intangible as well as tangible things. More specifically, property practices at Summerhill involve five intersecting dimensions: (1) belonging, (2) codification, (3) definition, (4) recognition, and (5) power. These five dimensions can be found in property practices within other organized, communal environments; however, my focus is their application to Summerhill.

4. I have chosen these terms rather than the more familiar private and public for two reasons: First, interviews and observations suggest public and private were not key discursive terms. Second, the gendered connotations of public and private, particularly in the way they frame relations between distinct gendered spheres (home/workplace, intimate personal space/public domain), are only weakly apparent at the school.

## Five Dimensions to Property

### *Belonging*

The first, and most important, aspect of property practice is belonging. While belonging is conventionally seen as descriptive of the *already* propertied relationship—“my shoes belong to me”—or as metonymic substitute in the form of “belongings,” I want to consider belonging as the core element of property at both a definitional and normative level. While control is popularly figured as property’s crux, it does not help in differentiating between governmental and propertied practices once the distinction between self-interest and other or collective-interest or between private and public rights no longer anchors the property/government divide. Belonging, by contrast, as I discuss below, provides one way of delineating property from governance, since governance, importantly, can operate when no particular or distinctive relationship of belonging with that which is governed exists.

In her discussion of autonomy and interdependency, Jennifer Nedelsky (1990) explores the case for interrogating and replacing masculine metaphors of separation with feminist ones based on connection. Although I do not pursue the gendered character of these metaphors, my analysis of belonging explores a similar distinction. This article considers two kinds of belonging, which work in different, though often overlapping and hybrid, ways. The first identifies a relationship whereby an object, space, or rights and freedoms over it, are held by the property-holder. This subject-object relationship provides the standard legal definition of ownership or property, centered on fungibility, mastery, and commodification. Severability is thus also emphasized in that the thing owned or possessed can be separated—legally, physically, and emotionally—from the one who possesses it (see also Penner 1997). In this sense, fungibility works in two ways: the thing is replaceable but so is the owner. I shall refer to this first orientation as that of subject-object to highlight the centrality of an instrumental, hierarchical relationship between the agent and a severable thing or space.

Belonging’s second orientation is not usually understood as propertied in the legal sense. However, my broad reading of both property and law allows, indeed requires, it to count. It concerns belonging as a relationship of connection, of part to whole. By this I mean something broader than Margaret Radin’s (1993) property for personhood, which tends to focus on items already in the category of potential property—that is, things that can be bounded off from the self (41). My starting point, rather, is with social *relations* of belonging—child/family, collective identity/community, language/cultural groups (Maurer 2003). While both orientations treat belonging as implicating and involving wider social relations and networks (see also Singer 2000)—whether a child belongs to a family or a chair belongs to a householder implicitly (and often explicitly) is about relations to others—this second orientation

concerns a particularly *constitutive* relationship between part and whole. As such, it draws on a quite different understanding of property as the attributes, qualities, or characteristics of a thing.

### **Codification**

My second aspect of property practice is codification—how a thing comes to condense or represent a far more complex set of relationships. Despite the oft-made assertion that property is a relation between people rather than a thing (Davies 1999, 342), it is usually *things* that become read as property (although, in making this point, I take on board the counterassertion that the *process* of being read as property causes phenomena to appear as things (see Strathern 2004)). Property is a coding that does leave a mark. In this sense it has a material quality. Property is not just what someone *imagines* a thing to be but a form of coding that locates relations to a thing within wider regulatory and epistemic structures. How this works varies according to the kind of belonging in question. While a severable form of belonging may encode the thing as commodity—defined, made meaningful, and valued by its market relationship—a relational form of belonging may encode the thing “as an embodiment of one particular relationship” with something defined as its “whole ” (Strathern 2004, 214). In many cases, layers of coding overlap each other. So, for instance, at Summerhill, the school grounds function as a potentially severable, commodifiable thing (and, as such, as alienable) for the school’s owners as well as a core attribute of what Summerhill *is* (that is, as constitutive of the school).

### **Definition**

Integral to the abstracted objectification of the thing, located within its diverse, materially significant systems of meaning, is a third aspect: definition. I use definition to mean both the process of bringing something into focus and the establishment of a thing’s contours and boundaries (see also Underkuffler 2003, 21–23). Pursuit of definition encompasses attempts to fix legal boundaries around the thing (Heller 1998) as well as around relationships to it (Blomley 2004a).<sup>5</sup> Being encoded as property requires certainty and clarity, even as encoding things as property invariably illuminates the limits of both. But property also involves a less abstract knowing, inciting rights-holders to bring the interiority of the thing—its dimensions and characteristics—into sharper focus (see also Moran et al. 2001, 411). Property relations thus signify a

5. That is, whether this *kind* of relationship or thing can be propertied (Blomley 2004c, 45) as well as whether this *particular* version is.

process of familiarization (Cooper 1998). In conventional legal terms, such familiarization is articulated to mastery—an asymmetrical relationship of control that impresses and subordinates that which is owned to the other's will (see also Davies 1994, 1999). This asymmetry frames subject-object relations of belonging. However, definition does not have to take this form. Stewardship is one model of a different, if still asymmetrical, approach in which mastery and understanding are oriented toward preservation rather than exploitation of the propertied thing.<sup>6</sup>

### **Recognition**

Fourth, property depends on authoritative practices—formal and informal, collective and individual, singular and routine—that bestow recognition and entitlement upon particular relations of belonging while ignoring, discounting, or rejecting others (Alexander 1998, 688; Radin 1986). Bestowal of recognition has both a formative and entrenching character. It includes practices that encode things, relations, and claims as propertied *ab initio*. At the same time, authoritative practices cement, reiterate, or mirror a prior recognition, or *produce* such recognition as is already in existence through citing prevailing norms. In the Summerhill context, state and community fora provide overlapping and sometimes competing sites of recognition. However, Summerhill also demonstrates how recognition of property relations does not *depend* on institutional authority, which may only come into play when informal *communal* processes break down.

### **Power**

The final aspect of property practice concerns power and is the reason why I have underscored the importance of *authoritative* recognition. In other words, the coding property entails as either object or part depends on the capacity for coding to make a difference. Recognition that carries no weight, that is, in a sense, a “failed performative” (Butler 1997, 16), cannot effectively encode relations of belonging as property. The deliberate outcomes or effects of property relationships operate at two levels. First, they include particular acts in relation to the thing, by both self and others. In the case of belonging as a subject-object orientation, this tends to involve rights (positive entitlements)

6. While stewarding or guardianship suggest a more co-constitutive form of belonging, the assumed physical and legal (if not affective) severability of the thing cared for (and often guided) configures stewardship as more hybrid, as when constitutive relations are superimposed to direct and circumscribe a particular variant of the commodity structure (such as through environmental safeguards on land owned).

and freedoms and powers (capacities) regarding the use, transformation, exclusion, and alienation of the thing or space. For belonging as a part-whole orientation, effects upon the part are more complicated. Where the attribute or entity belonging is human, as in the case of Summerhill students, a common exercise of power involves “property limitation rules” (Harris 1996a, 1996b). Here, the part’s exercise of agency is limited and structured by relations of governance underpinned and rationalized through the part’s belonging to the whole. By contrast, when the attribute or part lacks human agency, power exercised upon it tends to involve a form of husbandry, rationalized in the name of stewardship.

The second level of effects addresses the impact of property practices on relations and norms beyond the parameters of the subject-object or partwhole form. In the discussion that follows, I explore property practices’ power in promoting personal, civic, and boundary norms. This can be understood without too much difficulty in the context of a subject-object property relationship, even though the ability to use belongings effectively as tools to achieve particular results may fail (see generally Harris 1995; Waldron 1988, 312). However, the dynamic, noninstrumental quality of the part-whole relationship is conceptually more complex. Here, the generation of effects depends less on the deliberate manipulation of the part than on the embedded, contextualized ongoing interrelationship of part and whole, as illustrated at Summerhill in the relationship between the school’s reputation and history, on the one hand, and the enduring corporate presence to which it belongs, on the other.

In the article’s second half, I explore the contribution of school property practices to personal, civic, and boundary life. Before doing so, however, I want to take the conceptualization of property just elaborated and locate it at the regime level of the school. My focus is the organization of subject-object relations (part-whole relations of belonging provide a context, less tangible parallel and complicating feature as I explore below). In so doing, I highlight the plural character of recognition, the dispersal of property rights, and the constraints on property’s power.

### **Summerhill’s Property Regime**

Legal centralism is like monotheism in that it posits one all-powerful god. Pluralism replaces one god with a pantheon, but there is nothing atheistic about it. (Manderson 1996, 1060)

While Summerhill defers absolutely to certain state laws, such as those involving drugs and under-age sex (see Segefjord 1971, 64), its property practices are constituted and take shape through a legally *pluralist* regime of asymmetric institutional recognition (see generally Griffiths 1986; Kleinhans and

Macdonald 1997; Merry 1988; Tamanaha 1993). Institutions involved include official state practices, unofficial but still formal declaratory acts by the school meeting or headteacher, and the informal, iterative, intersubjective sayings, doings, and expectancies that express and sustain the school's property ethos and culture. The relationship between different authorities in producing and sanctioning school norms can be seen in the following two examples. Both exemplify the local cultural significance given to declarations of possession and ownership. The first concerns the case of labor and the ability of actors to create new property.

In many schools, children casually acquire property rights to the things they create, such as paintings, essays, or sculptures. At Summerhill, this Lockean (1988, 287–88) mode of property creation is taken further (see generally Blomley 2004b; Macpherson 1964; Waldron 1988, 171–77). By moving something from a state of nature and mixing it with their labor, children gain control, and in some cases even powers of disposal,<sup>7</sup> over spaces and physical structures within the school grounds, like treehouses and burrows (see also Macpherson 1964). At the same time, these rights are justiciable. Claims to space can be “brought up”—a Summerhill term for the process where one person brings a case against another at a school meeting—if they appear excessive. One teacher described a case where a boy claimed possession of a part of the school grounds that he had cleared of nettles.<sup>8</sup> He was brought up at a school meeting on the basis that the space he had recoded as “settled” was too large, its boundaries too expansive (see also Locke 1988, 288–91). However, after discussion, the school meeting recognized his rights of possession: the boy's labor conjoined with his property assertion transformed and redefined the space—what had previously been “vacant” was now of value thanks to the labor he had vested in it.

This labor case illustrates how school norms both preexist but are also brought into being and given effect through recognition by the school meeting (see also Underkuffler 2003, 19). In other cases, state law underpins school norms or is *produced* as foundational in the context of a dispute. Neill (1968a, 25) nicely illustrates the authority of official property rights (as well as their contestation), telling of a time when the school government had resigned and a child came to him to say he had broken some school windows in protest of Neill declaring himself Dictator.

“Gee,” he cried, “I don't have to pay for them at all.”  
“But what about the private property rule?” I asked. “The windows are my private property.”

7. Research visit, June 11, 2002: One teacher described a tree house that had been built for some kids who then bequeathed it to others when they left. He described this power of disposal as a recognized right held by those in possession of the built structure.

8. See informal conversation with teacher, November 21, 2002.

“I know but there isn’t any private property rule now. There isn’t any government, and the government makes the rules.”

Yet, as Neill narrates, the boy offered to pay.

The complex interrelationship between different sources of authority contests a reading of legal pluralism as the presence of distinct, discrete institutional mandates (see Manderson 1996). At the same time, how authority is viewed depends on where one is standing. From the state’s perspective, property interests at Summerhill are simply forged out of the owner’s rights through a combination of leases and licenses. However, from inside, something else is going on. Not only are state-mandated property rights glazed over through the operation of school rights but, from the school’s perspective, these latter ones have independent authority. So long as Summerhill continues, its owners, for the most part, act as if they too are subject to its democratic control and rules, at least in relation to rights allocated away.

Neill (1968a, 24) describes his recognition of the unofficial property rights of others: “When Billy, aged five, told me to get out of his birthday party because I hadn’t been invited, I went at once without hesitation—just as Billy gets out of my room when I don’t want his company.”

This may sound like a standard residential lease: the freeholder cannot enter at will just because she or he has residual or prior title. However, at Summerhill, adults’ respect for children’s spaces does not derive from official state law; it comes from the authority the community bestows upon informal school norms, its formal rules, and democratic structures.<sup>9</sup> This authority can also clash with state law, as took place in relation to defining access to the school lavatories. Summerhill, as Neill (1948, 84–85) describes, is committed to boys, girls, and adults sharing the same toilets on the grounds that the school is like a family.<sup>10</sup> However, public officials have strongly disapproved of such open access rights implying such rights encode a risk of abuse rather than benign family life.<sup>11</sup>

The second key characteristic of Summerhill’s property regime is its extensive dispersal of rights, permissions, and freedoms. While some belongings belong, other things and spaces are less exclusively possessed. Although a stickiness and tenacity to ownership claims is apparent, particularly in relation to individual possessions, which children acquire and hold

9. The headteacher controls allocations of children’s bedrooms; however, once allocated, the head (like anyone else) can be brought up at a meeting for breaching rules relating to conditions of entry.

10. See Summerhill General Policy Statement, June 11, 2002. Interestingly, the toilets by the front door had become gender-differentiated by my visit in 2005. When I inquired why, a teacher told me the girls had proposed it, fed up with the state of shared toilets.

11. Report from Ofsted Inspection (OFSTED Report 1999, para. 12). OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) is a nonministerial government department charged with carrying out inspections of schools.

unequally,<sup>12</sup> property relations, for the most part, are not structured according to liberal, territorial norms of a protected sphere of indefinite and undefined activity in which the owner is king and few uses prohibited (Penner 1997, 72; see also Chesterman 1994, 15). Rather, legal relations are fragmented (see also Alexander 1988; Singer and Beerman 1993), and delimited by substantial exclusions and prohibitions. In part, this follows from the hollowing out of property rights just described. The school's owners reallocate access and management rights in varying, though usually small-sized, parcels to school members, both collectively and as individuals (although rights of alienation tend to be held back). As one teacher described in relation to a kid who damaged his bedroom with a machete knife: "It's his to use but *not* to wreck." However, to read property rights purely as a "scooping out" misses their complexity. First, the *same* rights may be held by different people in a context where a right to exclude granted by state law meets a right to exclude granted by the school meeting. Second, different rights, created and granted by distinct and different actors, such as the headteacher or school meeting, produce intricate chains of entitlements, powers, and freedoms. The third dimension of Summerhill's property regime concerns both systemic and ad hoc constraints placed upon the exercise of power—*in* relation to particular things and spaces as well as *through* relations to things and spaces. The limited capacity of property practices to produce deliberate effects is not due solely to an institutional inability to code relations of belonging effectively whether by state or school. It also derives from several other factors that significantly explain the particular, distinctive character of Summerhill's property regime. One systemic factor is the interplay of propertied and nonproperty practices—those competing as well as those forming the synchronic and diachronic context within which any given property practice occurs (see also Underkuffler 2003, 44).

Systemic constraints also intersect deliberate acts of agency that work to curtail property's scope. One such at Summerhill involves the exercise of institutional authority in refusing to stand behind particular interests or by undermining their property status. An example of this, discussed in more detail below, concerns children's transmission of confidences; a second concerns the relationship between parents and children (which, whether as a subject-object or part-whole relation of belonging, Summerhill explicitly seeks to de-propertize). Deliberate acts of agency also work to prohibit particular property manipulations (Harris 1996a, 90; 1995, 427). Sometimes these involve the school's exercise of "trumping" ownership: bedroom windows,

12. Research notes, October 7, 2005: One instance observed during a field visit concerned an older boy skateboarding while a younger boy called out after him, "It's mine!" A third boy went after the older one saying the skateboard belonged to the young child. The older boy replied that it had been lying around since the previous term and everyone used it, but he gave it up to the boy making the initial claim.

for instance, as Neill (1968a, 25) suggests, belong to the school's proprietors, not the rooms' incumbents. Most prohibitions or conditions, however, are anchored in collective membership and emerge as acts of governmental authority rather than the exercise of a foundational property-holder. In other words, they are not framed through discourses of "it's mine," but rather through discourses of "fairness," "necessity," and "right." So, several age-based restrictions are placed on children's ability to sell, loan, or give away their possessions, a strategy that protects but also limits use rights. Concern that children would be pressured to give away or transfer their things below value also led to the establishment of a "swindling committee" to mediate transactions involving younger children for property worth over a defined amount: £5.00 (about \$8.00 U.S.) in 2003.<sup>13</sup> And when I revisited the school in October 2005, severe restrictions were placed on borrowing the belongings of younger children.<sup>14</sup> In this discussion, I have focused on belonging as a subject-object relationship in order to show how Summerhill differs from more conventional property regimes. In so doing, I have stressed three central aspects: the school's commitment toward recognizing a pluralist framework of authority, its dispersal and fragmentation of property interests, and its structured, if largely delimited, organization of property's power. But where does this take us? I want to suggest Summerhill offers a lens onto a different form of propertied practice. First, it draws us toward thinking about property as a set of networked relations in which the subject is embedded, rather than as simply exercising mastery or control over an object (Reich 1964, 771). Decentering (or reversing) the subject's mastery and dominion comes in part from having multiple enacting and recognizing authorities; it also comes from the limits placed upon propertization, particularly in relation to alienation, as well as from the dispersal of propertied interests. Such dispersal not only significantly dilutes any single actor's will but also renders his or her exercise of property interests contingent on the propertied exercise of others (Bell and Parchomovsky 2005, 564; Heller 1998). Although in a combined or joined-up form, such rights may constitute a substantial manipulation or exploitation of the thing or space, disaggregated their power is limited in both weight and scope (see also Chesterman 1994, 29).

Second, overlapping authorities, dispersed rights, and limited power mean property relations do not stand out sharply from other nonpropertied relations to things and spaces. This lack of clarity and definition is a centrally important feature of property relations at Summerhill. At the school, extensive talk

13. School Laws, no. 73, January 2003.

14. Summerhill also forbids children selling clothes to each other (Neill 1968a, 57; Segefjord 1971, 84–85). This law was "passed on the ground that such practices were unfair to the parents who buy the clothes and unfair as well to the school, because when children go home minus certain wearing apparel, the parents blame the school for carelessness" (Neill 1968a, 57–58).

about individual ownership and control of things and spaces abounds; Neill, in his writings, repeatedly underscores the importance of individual ownership (e.g., 1968a, 23, 132–33), and the school routinely gives individuals, such as teachers, extensive formal control over spaces and things, such as classrooms and equipment. Indeed, it was this striking (and for me unexpected) feature of Summerhill practice that precipitated this article. Yet, rhetoric of ownership and property respect intersects a social system within the school in which rights are disaggregated, institutional recognition dispersed, and where the productive capacity of spaces and things is structured and largely determined by agenda of governance—by belonging rather than belongings. To this extent, property interests blur into nonpropertied ones, that is, into relations of belonging that may be recognized but not formally protected, protected but scarcely empowered, or where rights and permissions over spaces and things are based on relations of membership rather than prior possession.

In the second portion of the article, I turn to consider routine and one-off property practices, building upon my discussion of Summerhill's distinctiveness as a property regime that is simultaneously fragmented, plural, and fuzzy. Property practices are not separate from the property regime; they are underpinned and constituted by it, as they, in turn, help to produce, secure, and enable it to evolve. Here, my discussion centers on the work that property practices do, focusing on how propertied acts in both constitutive and mediated ways facilitate, shape, and guide the production of a variegated social life within the school. I draw upon the five aspects of property identified earlier, but particularly the first—belonging—in both its subject-object and part-whole form.

## **THE PRODUCTIVE LIFE OF PROPERTY**

Summerhill's practical articulation of property often seems in tension with its talk (given the latter's emphasis on individual ownership and possession); nevertheless, together, they do a lot of community work. They provide a communicative mechanism that children and newcomers easily understand and a recognized basis for organizational decisions. Neill (1968a, 132–33) also, as I suggested earlier, saw private property as promoting commitment and care for personal and collective things. In this discussion, I want to consider property's social function from a different perspective, focusing on its facilitation of a spectrum of doings, beings, and interactions, as framed by the umbrella terms personal, civic, and boundary. These terms, or the more common phrasing of public and private onto which they largely—if not entirely—map, have been extensively explored (e.g., Gear 2003; Sheller and Urry 2003; Squires 1994). I will therefore bracket what has become a large and well-rehearsed debate, with its varied and complex negotiation of

the different meanings, applications, and relationships the terms public and private can have. Instead, let me just say that my exploration of personal life focuses on the individual exercise of choice and preference; in relation to civic life, I focus on collective forms of identification, activity, and governance, and I utilize the metaphor of boundaries to explore crossings between the school's inside and outside.

For intentional residential communities, the management and entitlement to seclusion, intimacy, and autonomy, on the one hand, and visibility, impartiality, and accountability, on the other, have oft proven central and sometimes very difficult matters. While a few communities have prioritized autonomy and privacy, more common has been the championing of public norms (Kanter 1973). Yet, as with the decline in communally owned and managed property, the attempt to live publicly also created community strain. The kibbutz is one of several instances in which the balance of living reverted over time toward more private organizing principles (see generally Cooper 2004). Spiro (1963, 210) writes, "The desire to drink tea with one's own friends in the privacy of one's own room has become the symbol of [the] seeming dissolution of the camaraderie and family spirit that characterized the kibbutz in the past."

Yet even where residential communities desire to sustain simultaneously both private and civic norms, doing so can prove challenging, particularly where people live, sleep, work, and play in the same contained space. How can "the intimate inner world of the individual" (Sheller and Urry 2003, 112) be protected and enhanced when those surrounding her know everything about her daily life? How can differential relationships be sustained when disliked others are always present and when spaces and things are controlled by the community as a whole and allocated "impartially"?

In discussing Summerhill's management of these challenges, I want to begin by addressing the kind of sociality the school seeks to present. In many respects, despite its regular turnover of members, Summerhill resembles a large, untidy familial domain. As with other communities (Kanter 1972), this analogy is repeatedly drawn on in interviews and policy statements, as the example of the shared toilets, described above, attests. Ex-teacher Matthew Appleton (2000, 90) writes, "The sense of being part of a huge family is a very strong one. For some kids it will be the place they have felt most at home in life. I have often heard older kids talking about their friends as being like brothers and sisters." Zoe Readhead, Neill's daughter and Summerhill's headteacher, makes a similar point, "It runs a bit like being at home. . . . It's like a home, it's like a tribe, it's like a family."<sup>15</sup>

Summerhill's familial ethos informs the way it governs by combining civic and personal norms; it also permeates and structures its response to

15. Zoe Readhead in conversation with Jerry Mintz, *The Education Revolution* [American taped radio show, no date].

property. My reading of the school suggests it combines two models of sibling life: what we might roughly call the extended family and the modern home (see also Neill 1948, 31–33). In narratives of the former, older siblings manage and steward spaces and things on behalf of others and on behalf of the longterm collective interest. Seclusion depends on spatial opportunities rather than exclusive property rights, and use and possession of things is far from tightly drawn. By contrast, tales of modern families treat seclusion, partiality, and devolved, if unofficial, property rights as essential to the formation of the autonomous self (see also Kumar 1997).

These two versions of family life meet at Summerhill; indeed, many property conflicts at the school concern the tensions arising between them. Cases brought up at school meetings deal with personal possessions or parts of school property routinely borrowed without permission or damaged. While the modern family is modeled on the requirement that permissions are asked for and given between children in recognition of their severable ownership, and while Summerhill discursively asserts the importance of respecting others' possessions and spaces, it has not entirely overcome the difficulty of achieving "practical excludability" in a context where children often lay claim to the things around them (see also Gray 1991). Ex-teacher Appleton (2000, 40) writes, "Here I was in probably the freest school in the world, carrying around a bunch of keys that would be the envy of the average prison officer" (see also Neill 1968a, 132). But, as cases brought up attest, even locks and keys fail.<sup>16</sup>

## **Supporting a Personal Life**

### *Seclusion*

"Summerhill is a place where children can be left alone."<sup>17</sup>

Seclusion or privacy, the right to *feel* unwatched or unmonitored, tends to equate in Western societies with privilege or regard—only those stigmatized or distrusted need to be kept under surveillance. Yet, this perspective receives its counterpoint in the acknowledged marginalizing effects of forced invisibility, as lesbian and gay activists, for instance, have argued. Such invisibility can be achieved through several governmental techniques, including the imposition of property limitation rules that structure and curtail who

16. Research visit, June 6, 2002: In making this point, it is worth noting school cycles in attitudes to property. During my visit in 2005, in contrast to previous visits three years earlier, I was struck by how many rooms were left open despite housing valuable equipment. As one teacher remarked, artwork could now be left up on the school walls without risking vandalism. Thus, on this visit, the emergence of stronger norms of property respect, however fragile or temporary they might subsequently prove to be, seemed to be doing some of the work previously performed by keys and locks.

17. Summerhill General Policy Statement, June 11, 2002.

can do what where. So, at Summerhill cigarette smoking, while permitted, must take place away from younger children to avoid tempting them to smoke. Toilet activities, likewise, are restricted to private cubicles (the school does not have urinals). At the same time, rights, freedoms, and powers, in relation to spaces, can be deployed to achieve *voluntary* rather than compulsory seclusion (Williams 1990, 84). One example at Summerhill, for older children and adults, is their right to a nonshared bedroom—a place that others can be excluded from. For younger kids, obliged to share, seclusion depends on creating microspaces, for instance by curtaining one's bed or by asking roommates to temporarily withdraw. But seclusion is not just a solitary activity. Groups of friends will find spaces in the grounds and buildings to get away from others. Other groups, defined by identity or position (rather than affective ties), also use freedoms and rights over space to be apart, usually from particular designated others. So, older girls appeared, from my observations, to linger around their dorm. Although the outdoor space was not officially acknowledged or protected as theirs, it was little used by others, and importantly, was set back from the domain visitors tended to cross. Using property rights to achieve a status-based seclusion is also often contested. So, a teacher's proposal to make the staff room adult-only was rejected on the grounds children would feel excluded, although it was agreed teachers could lock the door when carrying out "private" work.<sup>18</sup>

Property practices' relationship to seclusion highlights the tension outlined earlier between my two readings of belonging: as subject-object and part-whole in form. According to the first reading, school members use their rights and freedoms *over* space to achieve privacy and solitude. However, the efficacy of rights cannot be guaranteed. While school members I spoke with in 2005 commented on the level of respect for each other's privacy, earlier visits in 2002 witnessed several occasions in which children brought each other up at school meetings for disregarding their spatial rights. Rights-holders' adjudicative success, on such occasions, worked to entrench the codification of the space as *already* theirs. At the same time, to the extent challenges proved frequent, rights-holders' *practical* ability to use the space exclusively was limited.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, even where breaches do not occur, control over individual spaces is not necessarily the best way of ensuring seclusion. Several teachers interviewed in 2005 suggested if they wanted time alone, they would go into town—a space of strangers promising more seclusion than the ostensible privacy of their bedroom, given the demands for attention and feelings of responsibility living at Summerhill engendered.

18. Research visit, June 11, 2002: Interview with teacher.

19. Legal decisions by the school meeting may prove insufficient to bring seclusion into being: on performative speech (see Butler 1997; Schwartzman 2002).

If seclusion cannot be achieved through property rights, might it be more productively read as something that belongs as a property (or attribute) of particular spaces rather than as a belonging? For instance, one teacher described how the physical landscape of the school allowed for solitude and a private dream-space. “You can walk in the woods and imagine being lost . . . the landscape allows being alone.”<sup>20</sup>

Here, seclusion becomes a constitutive element of the landscape; this does not deny the *crafted* character of the space—the ways in which the grounds have been consciously produced to ensure seclusion. Nevertheless, an important aspect of this second reading is recognizing the extent to which the relationship is a dynamic one: seclusion is not just *produced*, but as a property of the grounds, it shapes their character and how they are experienced. Indeed, seclusion goes further, as a property of the grounds, to shape also the social, institutional, and symbolic entity that is Summerhill School.

Addressing seclusion in this way decenters agency: people do not use property rights and freedoms, beyond bare access, to achieve particular outcomes, for these outcomes are there regardless. Seeing seclusion as a property of a space means that it exists, at least potentially, for all users. Yet, in the case of Summerhill’s grounds, this claim was disputed by one teacher who remarked that, for him, solitude was hard to come by in the school’s woods precisely because it offered a secluded space for groups of “wild” children playing there (a claim echoed by many Summerhillians, e.g., Neill 1968a, 29). Seclusion may therefore prove a failed or uneven property of particular spaces. While failure can occur for several reasons, one reason concerns the way the instrumental exercise of property rights can work to undermine more constitutive effects. In other words, while most Summerhillians have insufficient (practical) dominion to achieve seclusion through mastery of particular spaces, the school’s bestowal upon them of wide-ranging and relatively unconstrained *access* rights has the effect of constricting the school’s coexisting objective of achieving seclusion as a fundamental characteristic or property of the school.

### ***Differentiation***

One standard dimension of property practices is their ability to create and signify partiality or affective distinctions. So, property becomes a mechanism for variously producing and performing relations of strangers, enemies, acquaintances, friends, institutionalized hierarchies, and intimates. This is a conventional attribute or function of property within capitalist societies and relates to property as a relationship of mastery and control, where rights

20. Research visit, June 11, 2002: Interview.

over things and spaces are deployed for their particular effect upon relations with others.

As a residential school community, members' ability to license others' entry into their bedrooms, and to share and alienate things, reveals not only distinctions between relationships but as well their ebb and flow. While interviews at Summerhill underscore the unconditional right of members to deny access to their personal spaces and things, a norm of inclusion appears to coexist. This is exemplified by the extent to which people allow others into their spaces. Moreover, when they do not, some reason is commonly provided. This tends to be weaker than the reasons given for ejecting people from the school's civic spaces; nevertheless, it still represents a form of personal account. Thus, in the claims "You're pissing me off," "It's too late," "I'm tired," "She was too noisy," we see reasons less rooted in property status than in the conditions of belonging and community entitlement of both rights-holder and evictee.

The tension between the right to exclude and the norm of inclusion highlights the tension between a subject-object and part-whole orientation to belonging. While the right depicts things and spaces as properties that can be utilized to achieve affective effects, the norm represents the space as property, in the sense of being constitutive of community life. These two features do not simply pull against each other but provide instructive insights into Summerhill life. First, their combination suggests that property rights are not substantially deployed at Summerhill to differentiate between affective relationships.<sup>21</sup> This may be because the spectrum of affective relationships at the school is narrower than beyond, causing the differentiation work commonly performed by property to be less pronounced.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, it may be that mechanisms other than property are used to perform this role. From interviews with adults and children, choices about who to play or spend leisure time with seem to operate as more finely tuned devices for performing and displaying affective distinctions.

Using property to signal and sustain differentiated relations is secondly bounded by the treatment or property limitation rules different kinds of things receive. Some things cannot be used with some kinds of people to denote attachment or trust, such as giving younger kids cigarettes or pornography. In other cases, the school fails to codify a thing as belonging in ways that will be institutionally protected (and therefore generate repercussions on breach). One instance of this concerns the school's unwillingness to treat as property information circulating among children. While eavesdropping

21. Research visit, October 6–7, 2005: Interviews.

22. Research notes, October 6, 2005: One girl remarked that in a small community you needed to get on with people and that living closely you saw different sides of other school members so you didn't usually dislike them.

might be brought up,<sup>23</sup> the passing on of secrets between children—a further way of signaling relationship differentiations—appears to be treated differently.<sup>24</sup> Re-circulating other people’s confidences is not uncommon; indeed, one teenage girl remarked, “it’s very difficult to keep a secret because everyone knows everyone, so news travels fast.”<sup>25</sup> However, when I asked adults and children during my 2005 research visit, nobody could recall a meeting dealing with this kind of breach. A couple of interviewees remarked that bringing someone up for disclosing a confidence was pointless, since it would then mean everyone knew about it. Others suggested an ombudsman might be asked to intervene. However, children also said that members should not—indeed, one teenager remarked, it was their responsibility not to—disclose information to those known to be untrustworthy.

Codifying confidences as a form of protected belonging is not the only way of securing the selective and controlled communication of information. At Summerhill, in common with other residential communities, access to places where private exchanges can take place is perhaps more crucial. It is also possible that the *refusal* to propertize children’s confidential information can be seen as having affective consequences. I asked school members whether failure to provide relief led to fewer confidences being communicated, a suggestion that was denied. Indeed, while circumspection may be required in deciding *whom* to tell, the refusal to propertize confidential information also works, at least in theory, to *enhance* the ongoing capacity of circulating secrets to constitute and reveal intimacies of friendship.

### *Selfhood*

The third aspect of personal life I want to consider is selfhood. By selfhood, I mean a sense of one’s own individuality or distinctiveness—the growing realization of one’s preferences, desires, and wants, combined with the shaping, honing, management, and “advancement” of one’s self. Selfhood is thus the product of both imaginary and practical iterations. And one component of both is property.

For conservative and liberal property theorists, the contribution of ownership or possessions to the production and expression of self is a major basis for valorizing property. This is particularly apparent in Margaret Radin’s

23. *Report of an Inquiry into Summerhill School—Leiston, Suffolk* (2000), in which the school expressed criticism of government education inspectors for eavesdropping on two girls chatting in the school woods: “If a Summerhillian had eavesdropped on their conversation like that they would have brought them up at a meeting” (19–20).

24. Confidential information held by adults about children or about each other appeared to be treated with more care; it also seemed unlikely an adult would bring up another adult for a breach of confidence at a school meeting.

25. Research visit, June 11, 2002: Interview with older student.

work on property for personhood. Radin (1993) argues that it is through the ongoing relationship with particular, meaningful spaces and things—through the control and the self that is vested in them—that people become full persons (see also Radin 1996). Radin’s work has been critiqued for its culturally particular and, some have argued, overly narrow conception of the constitutive role played by property (see Penner 1997, 206; Schnably 1993). Other writers have stressed the harms caused by commodification and alienation to selfhood, arguing instead for the importance of *collective* and common rights, and interpersonal relationships to developing a sense of self and personal autonomy (see Nedelsky 1990).

At Summerhill, community is important to this project of selfhood as are the things children bring with them, from momentos of their family and home to clothes, bicycles, and tools. Nevertheless, in the way adult school members, in particular, talk about being and becoming a person, liberal conceptions of the possessive individual as proprietor of *his* person and capacities play a particularly important part (Macpherson 1964; see also Davies 1994). According to Neill (1968a, 27), “The function of the child is to live *his* own life”;<sup>26</sup> the “individual’s conception of his [sic] good life [should not] . . . be sacrificed in some overall social plan” (Grunebaum 1987, 144).

Similarly, current headteacher, Zoe Readhead, declared, “When you’re not in class, you’re your own person.”<sup>27</sup> Children are not only to be protected from the imposition of a corporate school agenda, their right to a private life secures them from their parents’ impositions too. Summerhill does not send reports home: “children’s lives at school are considered their own business.”<sup>28</sup> But what or who is this “self” possessed and to what extent is such a possessed self embodied? Judith Squires (1994, 399) writes, “Control over one’s own body is crucial to the maintenance of a sense of self and hence the ability to interact openly with others.” Nevertheless, whether this control should be read through a property framework has been subjected to considerable debate as opposing scholars draw property’s conceptual boundaries in ways designed to include or exclude the body and personhood entirely or in part (Davies and Naffine 2001; Harris 1996b; Mason and Laurie 2001; Munzer 1990; Penner 1997; Radin 1995; Strathern 2004; Williams 1990). While I am sympathetic to the motivations of those who refuse to codify the body as property, I see this as a *normative* stance—one, unfortunately, that does not reflect practice in many contexts (see also Radin 1996).

At Summerhill, the propertied character of children’s relationship to their self and their bodies is evident from a reading of the school’s rules and policies.<sup>29</sup> It can also be seen from the claims recognized and protected by the

26. Italics added.

27. Zoe Readhead in conversation with Jerry Mintz, *The Education Revolution* [American taped radio show, no date].

28. Summerhill General Policy Statement, June 11, 2002.

29. E.g., see Summerhill General Policy Statement, June 11, 2002.

norms and institutional authority of the school, which give children far greater control over where their bodies can go than exists in other schools. Indeed, to the extent such control includes not attending classes, the freedoms bestowed by Summerhill have at times outstripped the perception of many state officials about what practical embodied autonomy for children should entail.<sup>30</sup>

At Summerhill, bodies and personhood are explicitly encoded in both legal and other ways as belonging to the self. So, alongside children's formal (though unofficial) rights to determine what their bodies will do and where they will go, including to partake of "risky pastimes . . . the sort of games which other children participate in outside school hours,"<sup>31</sup> they also have control over *others'* ability to make physical contact with them. The entitlement of children to deny access to their bodies, whether to educators or to other children, is no longer socially unusual. What stands out at Summerhill is the *democratic* enforcement of these rights, including bringing others up at school meetings for nonconsensual physical touching.<sup>32</sup> What also stands out at Summerhill is the right to *allow* touch; indeed, the school operates from the premise that some nonsexual physical contact will be granted and initiated between adults and children, at appropriate times. According to a school policy statement, "Hugging, sitting on laps and other physical displays of affection are an accepted and much valued part of community life."<sup>33</sup> This does not mean Summerhillians *must* permit physical contact. Interviewees suggested adults and children could always say no, and there is no expectation people should be into hugs and cuddles. One teacher, arguing physical contact was *for* the child and should be led by the child, claimed teachers were wrong to initiate nonsexual touching to meet their own needs, for instance the need felt particularly by new teachers for acceptance and inclusion.<sup>34</sup> Children and adults' rights over what their bodies can do and where they can go are thus subject to continually redefined property limitation rules. Classes may not be compulsory, but rights over other aspects of one's own body's movements are restricted. These rights do not represent the operation of some foundational property rights-holder, but are imposed on members for pastoral reasons of safety, security, and community interest. So, rules restrict and regulate adults and children leaving the grounds, staying in bed, or watching television. Other rules regulate the kinds of touch, particularly sexual touch, which can be made available to others. These latter contact limits, influenced by the wider regulatory and cultural context, are particularly

30. See OFSTED Report (1999, paras. 10–12). Para 11: "The school has drifted into confusing educational freedom with the negative right not to be taught. As a result, many pupils have been allowed to mistake the pursuit of idleness for the exercise of personal liberty."

31. Summerhill General Policy Statement, June 11, 2002.

32. Research visit, June 11, 2002: One teacher described a case where a boy was brought up for physically touching a girl nonconsensually.

33. Summerhill General Policy Statement, June 11, 2002.

34. Research visit, October 6, 2005: Interview.

marked between adults and children.<sup>35</sup> So, the staff handbook states that staff visited by pupils at night must ensure their door is open or that someone else is in the room. The commentary to the policy declares this may feel intrusive of relationships with children, but advises that behaving otherwise would put the school and individual at risk if an incident occurred.<sup>36</sup> If Summerhill's discursive and practical propertizing of the body contributes to selfhood, *how* does it achieve these effects? On the one hand, Summerhill recognizes the body as partially commodified to the extent the school sees bodily autonomy and control as something children *need* to possess in order to enhance their personhood (but as something other schools conventionally withdraw—and *can* withdraw). In other words, achieving personhood is not unconditional but needs to be nurtured by giving children greater control over their bodies. At the same time, Summerhill's ethos, rules, and genealogy construct the body through a relational matrix of belonging; it is not *a* belonging but something constitutively ours. As such, personhood becomes both the effect of a dynamic relationship between self and body and the terrain upon which it is played out.

However, one limitation of this approach is that it can fail to see the extent to which the co-constitutive relationship between body and self is socially (and interpersonally) mediated. This can be seen in relation to gender. With its firm opposition to proactive gender equality policies, Summerhill has operated from the premise that in an environment where children's bodies are free from overt gender conditioning, children can form less narrowly gendered identities.<sup>37</sup> My observations of the school cohere with Readhead's and others' claims that gendered performances are *less* polarized than might otherwise be expected. Nevertheless, watching children play, interact with each other, use tools, and manage their self-presentation, circuits of gender are present that trouble any simple model in which the activities of selfpossessed bodies bring unmediated forms of personhood into being (see also Butler 1997; Naffine 1998; Nedelsky 1990). I develop an account of property's more mediated effects at Summerhill in the discussion that follows.

## **Producing Civic Life**

### ***A Collective Identity***

In conducting research at Summerhill, one particularly striking quality was the extent of members' collective identity. In many ways this is unsurprising.

35. For instance, in 1999 education inspectors reported that "Some of the physical contact between staff and pupils could be misconstrued and as such is ill-advised" (OFSTED Report 1999, para. 31).

36. Summerhill School Handbook, Child Protection Policy, June 13, 2000.

37. See, for instance, interview with Zoe Readhead, November 22, 2002.

Members of residential communities tend to have a strong, collective sense of self, and in the case of a historically enduring, periodically threatened school with few peers, a strong sense of and commitment to its identity and values is to be expected. However, two aspects were less anticipated. First, school members were reluctant to agree that a common identity existed, despite considerable evidence of its apparent presence to me as an outsider. Rather, those I spoke with highlighted the *range* of meanings the school held for members.<sup>38</sup> Second, I did not anticipate the complicated relationship between collective identity and layered discourses of belonging. In exploring this latter point, I want to explore two ways in which property contributes to a collective identity. The first, which I shall tackle briefly, concerns the work of property breaches and, in particular, their subsequent adjudication. Ownership provides both the means and terrain through which mischievous behavior can take place, and offending, as thieving or vandalism by small temporary groupings, works to generate alternative, unauthorized identifications (see Neill 1968a, 243; Popenoe 1970). In turn, the school's response to property breaches, and the reassertion of rights that happens in the process, (re)produces a hegemonic, collective self. This is the "we" who recognize the grievance and deal with the malefactor. While in conventional schools the responsibility placed on staff to deal with infractions works to reproduce hierarchies of authority and control, at Summerhill responsibility falls to the school collectively to find solutions. This shared responsibility, alongside the collective frustration felt toward those who repeatedly or seriously offend, constitutively reproduces the school's identity as a democratic, self-governing community. The identity generated through adjudicating property infractions also extends beyond this bare democratic shell. As several students explained, adjudication works through a series of premises: that accusers rarely lie; that people tend to acknowledge culpability; and that the aim is not to shame (or even to rehabilitate), but to mark the annoyance or harm caused by imposing warnings or "fines" (Neill 1937, 48–49)—whether as monetary penalties or compulsory acts (Appleton 2000, 104). In this way, property "trials" work constitutively (in the absence of any counterchallenge) to denote the presence of a community of free, reasonable, and fair individuals. This is a community that is utilitarian, nonpunitive, and inclusive, where members, importantly, recognize everyone at some point will break the law and where, through acknowledgment of wrong-doing and acceptance of a fine, members are immediately reincorporated back into the polity (see also Popenoe 1970, 33–36; Segefjord 1971).<sup>39</sup>

A second way in which collective identity is produced concerns the shared property held by school members in Summerhill's name and reputation. While government inspectors and others refer to Zoe Readhead, the owner

38. Research visit, October 6–7, 2005: Interviews.

39. Members can also ask a subsequent meeting for fines to be revisited and reduced.

and headteacher, as the guardian of Summerhill's founding principles,<sup>40</sup> the school has sought—at least to some degree—to *collectivize* this stewardship.<sup>41</sup> Collective ownership of Summerhill's identity was something Neill himself publicly defended; he wrote (1948, 35), "Summerhill is not mine: it belongs to a collective movement that embraces many" (cf. Segefjord 1971, 12). This kind of stewardship suggests a hybrid form of property. It constructs Summerhill's reputation, its self-reflexive narrative, as a thing of value, encoded through relations of knowledge, mastery, and belonging, in ways that have institutionally authorized effects. The strength of, and responsibility attributed to, school members' stewardship was evident in various ways during my research visits. On one occasion, a boy came up to me while I was outside chatting to a new, younger school member and said, "This may sound kind of rude, but can I ask *who* you are?"<sup>42</sup> On another occasion, I asked an older girl if she would explain the school's ombudsman process to me. She said that she would while she made herself a cup of tea, and I followed her back to her dorm. There she asked another teenage girl—who happened to be chairing school meetings that week—whether it was okay to talk to me. The chair asked if I would "trash the school," and on hearing my denial, said there was, in any event, nothing much currently going on to worry about.<sup>43</sup> A further example, which highlights the importance of institutional recognition to establishing collective property in Summerhill's reputation, including in its future, took place during the school's appeal against the Education Secretary's "notice of complaint" that threatened to lead to Summerhill's removal from the private schools register. This chain of events followed concerns raised by the 1999 education inspection. In the course of the court hearing, the government proposed a compromise settlement.<sup>44</sup> The school asked for time to consider it. They took over a courtroom and held a school meeting to determine collectively whether the settlement should be accepted. Matthew Appleton (2000, 266) writes, "There really is something extraordinary about this case in which High Court proceedings are stopped and government officials are forced to wait, while a meeting of children decide whether or not to accept their proposals." While the decision to allow the meeting to play this role was, arguably, in the hands of the

40. E.g., OFSTED Report (1999, para. 58).

41. Research visit, October 7, 2005, interview with teacher. While children I spoke with in 2005 characterized Summerhill as belonging to the whole community, I was struck during my visit that year by the way teachers, on being asked, immediately identified the school as *belonging* to Zoe Readhead. This seemed more marked than during my visits in 2002 and to have been provoked by an article in the *Daily Telegraph* (June 18, 2005), referred to by several teachers, that erroneously called the school a "workers' co-operative." However, claims of Readhead's ownership were also defined largely in stewardship terms. "Ultimately, Zoe stands up and says it's my school—you can be with me or against me, but I believe in it; it's my dad's idea."

42. Research visit, October 6, 2005.

43. Research visit, diary notes, June 11, 2002.

44. See *The Guardian* (2000).

school's owners, it cannot be simply dismissed as such. Aside from the unusualness of adopting this course of action within the wider educational sector, it reflects a relationship of trust in which the school community, guardianlike, hold property in, and the property of, Summerhill's future.

The intersections between Summerhill as a business concern and as a democratic self-governing community are evident in the different forms of belonging brought here into play. Summerhill's name and reputation belongs to the community in a constitutive sense, comprising who and what they are; it belongs to the owners in a proprietary form as something of commercial value. However, this dichotomy is too simple, as the metaphor of stewardship reveals. On the one hand, the community as guardians of the school's reputation treat it as an object worthy of nurturing in order, at least in part, to protect Summerhill's long-term financial viability. On the other, the school's owners see Summerhill's name and reputation as nonfungible—a form of property that is constitutive of their own familial identity as descendents and kin to Neill. Relationships of stewardship, then, highlight the complex character of belonging. Stewardship also reveals the importance of *institutional* recognition to *constitutive* property relations. While more *mediated* effects can be generated even when propertied interests fail to be subsequently recognized or are then withdrawn, constitutive outcomes, such as collective identity, often emerge through the very process of institutionally bestowing recognition here upon school members as guardians. In this context, the authoritative assertion that the school belongs to the community can be seen as bringing a collective identity into effect—an echo of much property scholarship that implicitly or explicitly assumes the performative power of legal judgment. At the same time, while the generation of a self-reflexive sense of “who we are” may invariably follow authoritative assertions of collective stewardship, as occurred at the High Court, the shape and texture of such identities do not directly follow. I indicated above that one site for the production of a thicker identity was the way cases were dealt with at school meetings, a far more routinized occurrence than the High Court hearing, and one—as I return to below—central to Summerhill's rhetoric about itself. Yet even here, the filling in of what a collective identity actually consists of proved subject to competing practices. In other words, the content of the school's collective identity is far more mediated than the simple process of its production. It is also subject to alternate property practices conveying different norms and values, as well as to the intervening effects of other aspects of Summerhill life, including the changing composition and character of its members.

### ***The Social Commons***

Elsewhere, I have considered the social commons as a space that constitutes, recognizes, and permits multiple, overlapping uses (Cooper 2006).

At Summerhill, the social commons as a physical domain is produced out of shared, collectively used indoor and outdoor spaces. While some “public” spaces have prosaic primary functions, such as the computer or dining rooms, others have a more expressive, communal orientation. Zoe Readhead, when interviewed, stressed the importance of civic spaces, such as the Café—a cozy room away from the main building used for serving snacks, playing games, and rehearsing plays. “The Café is a warm, nice space . . . it’s become a sociable space where there are things to do. . . . You need to have spaces for people who don’t want to go to classes and be somewhere else.”<sup>45</sup>

While such spaces are coded as belonging to the school as a whole, the *material* work of producing a social commons depends on two particular property practices. For reasons that will become clearer, these practices combine aspects of a subject-object and part-whole property form. On the one hand, they concern a shared sense of reciprocal belonging between members and school; on the other, access, control, and use rights are treated as severable (with members in a largely fungible, or mutually interchangeable, position in relation to them). First, and at the most basic level, school members exercise shared access rights to *use* particular spaces. While access is often restricted or circumscribed through timetabling activities—the dining room, for instance, is also used for individual piano lessons—the premise is that civic spaces offer and thrive upon shared use. Indeed, even when piano classes take place in the dining room, other people can quietly read or sit in the room as well.<sup>46</sup> For civic spaces, unlike personal ones, require rule-based exclusions to be justified through the application of impartial or, at least, *fair* principles, even if these work, as they often do at Summerhill, to exclude particular activities by particular children (Appleton 2000, 108).

The second way property practices contribute to a social commons is through the rights and powers bestowed upon assigned individuals or groups of school members to manage or govern particular things or spaces for the benefit of the wider community. Harris (1996b, 61) refers to this as a form of quasi-ownership because rights-holders are not authorized to use their rights in a self-seeking manner (see also Harris 1995, 434). I want to treat this also as a form of quasi-ownership but for a different reason—namely that the rights generated are *not* linked to a special relationship of belonging. The space *belongs* to committee members, just as it belongs to other Summerhillians. But this does not mean committee members’ relationship to the space is not coded differently; it is, for the period of time that their charge lasts, but it is a special relationship of responsibility rather than of belonging. For Summerhill, sustaining its identity as a democratic, self-governing

45. Interview, research visit, November 22, 2002.

46. Research visit, October 6–7, 2005.

community depends upon groups of children playing a governing role.<sup>47</sup> While some spaces and things are under the purview of particular adults—teachers, for instance, have dominion over children’s presence and conduct in their classrooms—civic spaces and things tend to be governed by individuals or groups of children. So, committees, such as the Gram Committee, exist to manage and use sensitive equipment, because “not everyone can play the expensive and delicate equipment, which would otherwise quickly get wrecked” (Appleton 2000, 70).

The role played by school committees is somewhat akin to that of government officials. Although committee members may well benefit from the activities organized, their rights and powers of control are given to promote community events, such as socials, parties, and plays. So, for instance, the End of Term (EOT) committee is entitled to enter and transform the space used for the EOT party, while temporarily excluding everyone else (see also Popenoe 1970, 46–56). The power flowing from these rights of management, like the rules governing use of civic spaces, is circumscribed by the requirement to act fairly and, to some extent, impartially. Committee members should not let different levels of affectivity or intimacy influence their decisions, although shared civic knowledge of fellow members—whether they are, for instance, careful, diligent, or trustworthy—can produce institutionally sanctioned differential treatment.

To the extent property practices contribute to the production of a social commons, how mediated is this process? It is often assumed that shared access constitutively produces a social commons, in the sense that a space used by all depends on everyone having access to it. But this seems both tautological and thin; it also avoids the nagging concern that open access is often not enough to ensure widespread use. A thicker reading of the commons suggests a place not only of shared access entitlements but also one in which diverse uses by diverse members take place. This thicker reading suggests open access is insufficient in itself to create a social commons, which is dependent upon (and vulnerable to) far more mediated and informal processes to ensure spaces do not become de facto private places dominated by a single grouping. The character of the property regime can have an impact here. While Summerhill’s fragmented rights and complex chains of property interests are likely to facilitate a social commons, since many school members have rights or freedoms that abut or traverse particular spaces, authoritative decisionmaking structures, such as the school meeting, also play an important role. Not only do they help to sustain a social commons by reflecting and responding to changing interests and practices so that use of spaces remains relevant

47. During periods where groups of responsible children have not existed in sufficient numbers, Summerhill has encountered difficulties sustaining its ethos and principles of operation (see Appleton 2000, 73; Segefjord 1973, 127–28).

and productive, but they also help to deal with the conflicts of use a thick social commons tends to generate.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Being Visible and Managed***

The final aspect of civic life I wish to discuss relates to the school's visible, open spaces and activities that cross and sit alongside its hidden, secluded ones. I suggested at the start that seclusion does not necessarily indicate privilege; likewise, visibility does not necessarily imply surveillance and oppression. Here, I want to discuss two kinds of visibility produced by property practices largely organized around a subject-object form of belonging; the first concerns the visibility of voluntary spatial capture, the second addresses the observation, mediation, and role modeling of one group by another.

During research visits in 2002 and 2005, I was struck by the continuously visible presence of a cluster of younger boys at the front of the school as a result of their informal monopolization of the forecourt. Combining collective use rights to the space, with their individual rights to manipulate owned bicycles and skateboards, their activities structured the social economy of this domain (though see Neill 1968a, 29). Indeed, the boys' de facto, if unintentional, territoriality was strengthened by the school's decision to place two ramps directly outside its front door. Without this, cyclists' and skateboarders' dominance would have been constantly up for grabs in the light of competing uses.

In this instance, the boys' use of things coded, recognized, and protected as unequivocally theirs, allowed them to dominate a particular space and, as a result, to produce their voluntary visibility. When I asked why these younger boys wished to be seen, one teacher suggested that they felt more secure being near adults.<sup>49</sup> While a kind of protective custodianship may have been the boys' unconscious intention in consciously deploying their possessions to master the space, their territorialization of the school's entrance also articulated a more relational, co-constitutive form of belonging. Echoing tendencies in Neill's (1968a) writings, we can see the boys' visibility and activity as working to construct, at least for many of those visiting, a certain

48. See School Laws, updated by Laws Committee and Meeting, July 2005. Several addressed questions of prioritization when wishes of members conflicted, for instance, over television or computer use. This was also apparent during my last visit in 2005. I arrived as Summerhill was in the course of a series of school meetings to resolve how to manage the multiple uses of the computer room—particularly the competing demands to use the computers as noisy, crowded game stations, and simultaneously as quiet, personal e-mail systems. This dispute also raised questions about how to deal with the fact children were in an unequal situation, as some had their own computers and so could play on them when they liked.

49. Research visit, October 6, 2005: Interview with teacher.

sociocultural association of Summerhill with preadolescent masculinity. In other words, the boys belonged to a school whose identity was dominated by their presence.

The deployment of things and space to achieve protection interfaces with the second practice of visibility I want briefly to discuss: visibility as a governmental technique. Visibility can work as such in a number of ways. Some methods, such as CCTV cameras, medical operations, and architectural panopticons construct the visible subject as passive and worked upon; others, such as examination and auditing, depend upon mobilizing the subject to contribute to producing and shaping their own (interior) visibility.

While Summerhill's governmental deployment of visibility largely relies upon the active, broadly willing subject, it draws on both direct and indirect forms of governing, underpinned by differential access rights. The former is apparent in the use of health and safety committees, ombudsmen, and "beddies" officers, collectively charged with maintaining community norms through checking, scrutinizing, and mediating place-based conduct. More interesting, perhaps, are the ways visibility is also generated through indirect forms of governing at a distance (Rose 1999; see also Cooper 1998). Echoing June Jacobs's (1961) work on informal surveillance, Summerhill deploys property rights to bring older children into other children's spaces. Yet, the circulation of older children through different areas, so they can act as a moderating force, requires more than simply formal rights of access. It is, for instance, not enough for older teenagers to feel common spaces *belong* to them (as part of the collectivity), if other spaces belong to them more particularly. Zoe Readhead also referred to the dilemma of making older children's spaces too nice: "Does it mean younger kids are getting less input from older kids who might spend longer in their own area"?<sup>50</sup>

More generally, and this lies at the heart of Summerhill's ethos and contiguous approach to normative diversity, using property rights and practices to create visible subjects is mediated by subjects' *willingness* to be visible (for instance, as I described in relation to cycling and skate-boarding younger boys). This does not mean only, or even primarily, creating an environment within which members *choose* to comply—a Foucauldian conception of governing through the agency of subjects. What it means, in the context of Summerhill, is giving members options, for the terms of students' belonging is that constant scrutiny is not required. So, against the logic of untrustworthy subjects necessitating visible, governable spaces, Summerhill *offers* members access to spaces where secluded disorder can take place, as well as to spaces of managed publicity. Property freedoms, in particular, are used to make both possible. While they are structured and limited by the challenge of sustaining a residential, intergenerational community, property freedoms nevertheless provide crucial elements in children's ability to access

50. November 22, 2002: Interview with Zoe Readhead.

a diverse repertoire of normative options. At the same time, formal political rights and informal (sometimes seized) property powers are used to challenge and thwart these regulated options. This takes place “lawfully” when democratic decisions are taken, as they periodically are, to (temporarily) abolish all school rules, less “lawfully” when children, performing and replenishing local narratives of what belonging to Summerhill means, utilize rights over, or simple access to, things to breach temporal, space-based rules, such as through escapades involving torches, clothes, and implements late at night.

## **Boundary Relations**

### *Strangers as Visitors*

Summerhill is not a hermetically sealed space (Cooper 2004; generally Kanter 1972). It offers an environment that outsiders frequently enter. While a few come without any form of license, causing the school to invest in security measures to protect its spaces, things, and people,<sup>51</sup> most enter with permission. Inspectors, other officials, tradespeople, and prospective parents regularly arrive. However, the group I want to focus on are those who come purely out of a social, political, or educational interest in the school. The presence of curious or committed outsiders is an issue many intentional communities confront (see Sargisson 2000; Skinner 1976). And communities have used different means of managing this interest. At one extreme are those rare communities who deny an insider/outsider distinction. Kanter (1972) describes the stance of such communities: they “wish to be open to all comers . . . where anyone can automatically ‘belong’ . . . some of these communities do not even make a member/non-member distinction; whoever is there at the time belongs”(402). This approach, however, has become relatively uncommon in more recent years as prefigurative and Utopian communities insist on demarcating visitors as such. Nevertheless, many remain keen to model their spaces, practices, and structures to outsiders. Some do so by incorporating visitors into their work schedules—thereby procuring a collective resource while simultaneously enabling people to experience community life. A less committed mechanism involves scheduled open days. Educationalists, academics, and other progressives from all over the world visit Summerhill, keen to witness its educational innovation firsthand. “One-time” visitors are formally welcomed on designated open days and looked after by Visitors’ Committee members. However, in ways that echo “limited common property regimes,” described by Rose (1998b, 139) as a commons within and a property regime without, a host of property rules

51. Security measures were upgraded after problems identified during Ofsted Inspection (OFSTED Report 1999, para. 53).

work to mark, maintain, and communicate community boundaries (see also Blomley 2004a). I want to highlight this aspect of Summerhill's property practice despite the reluctance of many interviewees to acknowledge the community-forging role property boundaries play.

Observations during my visits suggest that the treatment of visitors through Summerhill's collective property rules and members' practices—their spatial pathways and use of things—contribute to reproducing Summerhill as a defined and bounded community (see also Cooper 2004). Visitors' usefreedoms are particularly curtailed (indicative, perhaps, of previous problems arising from visitors' overwhelming desire to be part of the school for the duration of their stay). At the time of my research visits in 2002, a large notice at the entrance informed visitors they could not have meals at the school, swing on the Big Beech, or use the swimming pool. Similarly, school laws listed in January 2003 prohibited visitors from remaining after 5:00 p.m., going upstairs in the main building, or entering people's rooms without permission. These rules and prohibitions have several material objectives: to protect scarce resources, facilitate planning, enhance security, and ensure that things belonging to the school are available for members to use.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, the rules work symbolically. This is exemplified by the ban on outsiders entering the school meeting—the democratic and emblematic heart of the school—until a vote has been taken. Through temporary banishment, a boundary between belonging and outsider is asserted: the visitor leaves the meeting room to stand outside in the front hallway, waiting for readmittance to be granted. Discussion of symbolic effects tends to produce a kind of constitutive analysis, so that the limits of rights are seen as *inevitably* producing, at least in this context, boundaries between inside and out (see also Sarat and Kearns 1993). In this sense, a kind of illocutionary power is evident: authoritative property assertions produce, in the moment of their assertion, their intended consequences. Yet, while such assertions *may* have these kinds of symbolic effects, they break down at another level, since they cannot ensure the practical excludability they depend upon (see also Gray 1991). Once visitors are allowed into the school, spatial and temporal prohibitions can only partially cordon off sights and sounds. As a consequence, a reversal of belonging takes place; visitors shift from being the excluded to becoming the subjects of the property relationship, with Summerhillians as the objects. As one older student described, “We’re fucking zoo animals . . . some visitors were good . . . like kids from an alternative college and they know what it was like . . . *but sometimes we have groups of people with cameras*” (see also Popenoe 1970, 43).<sup>53</sup> Other children echoed these comments when I returned in 2005.

52. There is also, no doubt, a legal and insurance dimension to banning visitors from engaging in potentially dangerous activities.

53. Research visit, June 11, 2002: Interview with student, italics added to reflect spoken emphasis.

This reversal, anchored in the permeability of boundaries (as well as in their production), reveals how subject-object and part-whole forms of belonging can overlap as well as blend. On the one hand, echoing Neill, the school can be seen as belonging to a progressive educational community of which it forms the central attribute or property. This is a community that does not exercise power *through* the school, but seeks to play a supportive guardianship role, coming to Summerhill's defense as and when needed. Unsurprisingly, in its weak form, this is a form of belonging recognized and authorized by the school. Yet, the presence of actual outsiders within the school's gates threatens to yield a different version of belonging, as permissions granted to visitors to look, listen, and ask questions turn the school into an object of scrutiny and, for some, of marketable value. This form of objectified belonging is not authorized by the school. Nevertheless, this does not mean visitor practices are without effect, even if the effects on Summerhill itself are relatively mediated. Alongside the negative impact of visitors' constant flow on many members (particularly children), filmmakers and other reporters invited to present Summerhill to outsiders—to master the school's meanings and practices and to recode them as a narrative object—can substantially, if temporarily, shape wider perceptions and public discourse, often in ways that significantly collide with school interests.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Leaving the School***

While asymmetries of access and use between school members and outsiders can identify *who* belongs in the course of determining *what* belongs and is available to them, equally central to the marking of boundaries are the property relations that come into play when Summerhill members leave the school grounds. I want to focus here on the work performed by the property Summerhill holds in its members; however, boundaries are also reinforced and given substance by the conventional property transactions engaged in beyond the school grounds. In relation to the latter, conversations with Summerhillians revealed a range of exchanges—from shopping, eating, and attending the cinema to using public transport and taxis. For the most part, these external transactions are relatively formal, individualized, and self-interested, highlighting, as one might expect, the normative boundary members cross on leaving the school.

Describing children as belonging to Summerhill in some kind of propertied form, even if only during term-time, is, by contrast, more contentious. When interviewed, members balked at the idea of seeing themselves as belonging

54. See for instance the controversy following the screening of the provocative Channel 4 documentary *Summerhill at 70* broadcast in March 1992 and the account of it by teacher Matthew Appleton (1993).

to the school, except at the most ideational level. However, in practice, several instances were evident. I will briefly illustrate three: members' presence downtown as representatives (attributes or properties of the school that work metonymically to stand in for the school as a whole); the imposition of "property-limitation rules" (Harris 1996a, 90) limiting self-government or property in the self; and the construction of members as possessed parts of the school.

Harassment of Summerhillians in the local town of Leiston illustrates how with relational forms of belonging the part can condense or stand in for the whole. Echoing a long siege mentality history (Croall 1983, 187–88), during my visits in 2002 students talked about the hostility they received in town because they were *marked* as Summerhillians and therefore as objects of jealousy. Zoe Readhead said, "We're very separated off from the environment . . . people downtown roughed up the kids . . . they want to get down and back, spending their POC [pocket-money], before other kids get out [of school]." <sup>55</sup> My second example concerns the property-limitation rules requiring children to conform to particular behavioral standards when in town. Matthew Appleton (2000, 165) describes the work of distinction-drawing in the case of a new boy brought up for swearing downtown. "It was explained again that although he could swear in Summerhill, when he went out he had to remember that many people took offense to swearing." <sup>56</sup>

The third example exemplifies the way boundaries come into play as both the means and effect of internal community work. It concerns responsibilities that come from being a member: by belonging relationally to a community, expectations emerge. However, it can also be read, more provocatively, through a subject-object framework in which the school places demands upon those it possesses. Yet, to the extent that the school in this example *is* the community, this becomes a collective reiteration of the possessive self. In other words, the community as a collective subject possesses itself as a severable, though not clearly *fungible* <sup>57</sup> object. One illustration of this process is the prohibition on residential students leaving the school for more than a limited number of weekends a term. Moreover, when going away for the weekend, students must obtain not only their parents' permission, but—as an expression

55. Research visit, November 22, 2002: Interview.

56. See also School Laws, January 2003. This rule is not uncommon; many British schools are concerned with the image pupils present to the wider community. The difference is that in most schools "downtown" behavior represents a held, if unachieved, aspiration for conduct within the school itself. At Summerhill, by contrast, the "down-town" rule is a pragmatic one, based on the assumption that local people are insufficiently at ease or progressive enough to cope with internally *shared* school customs.

57. The school's possession of children as members inevitably means a degree of interchangeability, since it does not depend on particular individuals being members. However, several people, when interviewed, stressed that what Summerhill was like—its ethos, interests, and activities—depended on who its members were at any given time, and varied as different children and adults came and went.

of their belonging and commitment to the wider community—that of the school meeting.

In these three examples, children’s mode of belonging to the school—as both members of a community and resources of a family business<sup>58</sup>—provides the medium through which the boundaries between inside and out are drawn and mobilized. While it is tempting to read this process as constitutive, in the sense that the construction of a boundary inevitably follows the fact that children “belong,” the data implies more mediated processes—especially in how inside and out are understood and in the agency exercised around the boundary’s materialization. One student illustrated this by describing how she would rather shop in town than in the “shops” established at school,<sup>59</sup> because the prices in town were lower. In other words, she saw no reason to contribute to Summerhill’s youthful shopkeepers’ profits. Her comments remind us that normative conduct is not rigidly bounded and polarized. While we can posit two spheres of contrasting practice—the largely informal transactions, sharing and permissions evidenced in the school against the commodified, self-interested stranger relations within the spaces beyond—there are numerous exceptions. But the girl’s remarks also underscore the potential disjuncture between the community boundary effects of property relations and the propertied choices made around such boundary relations.

## CONCLUSION

My study of community property relations at Summerhill is, at its core, a response to three pervasive claims. First, it offers a counterillustration to the logic of intensified privatization depicted within some of the intentional community literature in which collective ownership becomes read as largely unsustainable over any length of time within democratic residential communities. Using Summerhill as my case study, this article demonstrates how community property practices that integrate individual and collective rights can prove relatively stable and enduring.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the article shows how the prevailing and reified dichotomy between public and private ownership can be misleading, particularly when property interests are disaggregated and different “sticks” are held or exercised by different actors (see also Rose 1998a, 631). Nicholas Blomley (2004b, 2005), in his work on public gardening, has

58. See also Neill (1937, 51) where he refers to a putative loss of income from students swearing in front of prospective parents.

59. During my visit in 2005, three clusters of children had set up shops in their respective bedrooms (these were advertised all over the school), selling marked-up produce, such as crisps and sweets bought in town.

60. Although some details of Summerhill’s practices have changed over time, the textual observations of visitors and school members from decades before my own research reveal many similarities, as do Neill’s own writings.

similarly explored how collective and individual rights come together in a chain of permissions, freedoms, entitlements, and powers. My aim here has been to tie this argument to the work property performs in ways that recognize the complex relationship between individual and collective property interests, on the one hand, and personal and civic norms, on the other.

In so doing, I also seek, secondly, to complicate conventional legal property analysis's exclusive focus on state enforceable claims (Macpherson 1978, 3) by opening up the black box of unofficial property interests. State law is not unimportant nor is there a level playing field; in many contexts, state law will prove the dominant normative structure determining practices and outcomes. However, in contexts where other institutional authorities have significant effects, where property interests are fragmented, and the power ensuing from such interests is limited, fluid, and contested, a broader and more open approach to what counts as propertied things and relations, which can look beyond the kinds of property forms recognized by state law, is important. An analysis that *only* sees Readhead's property interests not only misses, but also *mis*recognizes, what is taking place. While as the business owner, she has the residual power to pull out the bottom card that would cause it all to collapse, so long as she refrains from doing so, her property interests, from the school's perspective, are a combination of residual rights retained (for instance, over room allocations) and individual community membership. She may seek to exert an influence through arguments based on superior "knowing" of the school, but like everyone else, when decisions are made at the school meeting, she has only one vote.<sup>61</sup>

Third, and from a different angle, this article undercuts a branch of social theory that reads community as invoking sameness and homogeneity. It may seem empirically unremarkable that communities, such as Summerhill, embrace a range of diversities. However, theoretical work often treats community as synonymous with unity. I have sought to trouble this premise by focusing on variation at the level of norms, practices, and relations as they take shape in the terms of personal, civic, and boundary life. My aim has not been to set these terms against each other or to assume they exhibit a fundamental contradiction; while conflicts are often framed as a pitting of individual against community needs, research at Summerhill reveals their far more entwined character. I have not focused on this latter dimension here because my priority has been to map the extent and character of the school's social repertoire. Spatial proximity, demographic density, and Summerhill's *in loco parentis* status undoubtedly contain the personal, civic, and boundary norms displayed; yet a spectrum of variegated social norms and practices continue to be consciously produced, exemplified in Summerhill's

61. On some occasions, Readhead has overridden decisions made by others drawing, explicitly or implicitly, upon her official owner-status, but her sporadic need to do so highlights the fact that other people at the school routinely exercise formal, if unofficial, property rights.

deliberate spatial (and temporal) placing of wildness and disorder up against the spaces of disciplined visibility.

In exploring how this diversity is generated and sustained, I have focused on the work performed by property. In doing so, I have not suggested that property is determinative, nor that its contribution is isolated and apart from other social practices. On the contrary, I have highlighted its complex embedding and entwining with other social norms and structures. In the process, I have sought to unfold and understand the apparent disjuncture between Neill's and Summerhill's repeated discursive emphasis on individual sovereign property rights (the modern home approach) and the limited, interdependent, and often indistinct manifestation of property interests (the extended family form) in practice. We can think about this tension in two, quite different ways. First, as doing particular work: property utterances facilitate a readily accepted rights-based, spatially oriented mode of governing, while the fuzzy materialization of property practices allows the school to exercise a plastic and extensive form of self-regulation, in which official state property rights can be accepted, bracketed, or remade as circumstances require. Second, we can see the tension between utterances and other practices as accentuating the mediated, contextualized character of property's effects. Even property utterances cannot be seen as fully illocutionary when the claim "It's hers" is not enough to practically render it hers.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, and importantly, the chains of mediated effects need to be *followed* to see how property's productivity is challenged, negotiated, disrupted, augmented, and adjusted.

Tensions in how property interests are organized (as sovereign or fragmented) and in how property works (as mediated or constitutive) overlap a third distinction I have explored: between subject-object and part-whole conceptions of belonging. There are no simple alignments between these three organizing axes, as my analysis in this article demonstrates. At first glance, it might seem as if subjects' fragmented rights in objects are more likely to generate mediated effects than other configurations. However, even with part-whole property relationships, such as between Summerhill and its secluded grounds, what seems like (mutually) constitutive processes of re-creation are open to being disrupted. Likewise, while cultural and symbolic meanings, such as an organization's identity or boundary between inside and out, are often "read off" propertied practices as if constituted by them, to the extent such meanings are *materially* produced, they depend not only upon the wider contexts within which they are embedded but on the presence (and absence) of competing acts and processes.

Studying an alternative, residential community calls for new conceptualizations, in this instance of property, to help illuminate and make sense

62. At the same time, *utterances* of belonging can operate in more illocutionary or constitutive ways. The practical refusal to recognize and defer to a single regulatory system allows alternative and unofficial property claims to exercise a performative power, for instance, that the school's reputation and future *belongs* to the community.

of the data generated. Starting with two polarized conceptions of belonging as mastery, on the one hand, and membership, on the other, I have explored how at Summerhill they overlap, combine, and reform, and how as a result they provide the context, limits, and conditions of each other's existence. I have also argued that property is more than belonging (however understood) and needs to be analyzed in relation to its other dimensions of codification, definition, recognition, and power. In this way, thinking about property relations in an alternative community allows us to look at conventional property concerns from a different angle and to ask new and different questions. Studying Summerhill sheds light upon the character, interconnections, and effects of different kinds of belonging; it enables us to explore how belongings and the properties of belonging generate effects, to consider what counts as the property *act* whose effects we are following, how individual and collective property interests cohere, and how the *embeddedness* of property—its lack of practical distinctness—impacts upon the work property does.

Yet, as important as these conceptual questions are, studying Summerhill allows us to consider property from a different, *normative* angle. On the one hand, Summerhill may seem a trivial case with its apparent (if only partial) bracketing of exploitation, accumulation, and alienation. At the same time, Summerhill's emphasis on use-value<sup>63</sup> is productive in refocusing attention, at least within organized spaces, on who gets to *enjoy*—to access, use, choose, control, and take pleasure in—spaces and things and on the role that unofficial as well as official, informal as well as formal, and intangible as well as tangible property can play in managing and structuring community relationships. Paralleling the claims of other writers who have argued for the importance of looking beyond formal legal rights to the property interests of those without legal status (see Blomley 1997; Brigham and Gordon 1996), this approach has fundamental implications for rethinking and revisiting property practices, and the work such property practices perform, in currently underresearched contexts—from hospitals to prisons and from homes to workplaces.

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63. This is not to deny the presence of productive relations and markets *within* Summerhill as well as within the wider educational context within which Summerhill is embedded. However, it is not these qualities that make Summerhill distinctive.

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