THE CREATION AND MEDIATION OF POLITICAL TEXTS IN VIRTUAL SPACES:
CYBERCOMMUNITIES, POSTMODERN AESTHETICS, AND POLITICAL MUSICKING OF MULTIMEDIA MASHUPS

M.A. THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

In the face of increasing consolidation of the radio market, a more conservative political climate, and growing sensitivity to public dissent in the wake of the Patriot Act, there has been a dearth of anti-war music in the mass music market since 2001. While country radio has provided a platform for the musical articulation of pro-war positions, YouTube, a video-sharing website, has become a place where the increasingly individual experience of listening to anti-war music can be supplemented with more communal listening. On YouTube, users on both sides of the war debate can create their own political mashups, a medium comprised of mixed audio samples and/or mixed video samples preserved for public consumption.

Observing the behavior as a silent participant on the message boards corresponding to mashups of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” and John Lennon’s “Imagine,” I demonstrate that political communities with specific communication and aesthetic values are being formed around these multimedia signs. Online communities offer a somewhat more democratic alternative for public articulation of political positions; however, the rhetoric of the online communities and of the larger musical-political climate post-9/11 is considerably parallel.
Examining mashups from an aesthetic perspective reveals postmodern principles at work on multiple levels. The lines that once separated creators, producers, and consumers are blurred as editing software becomes available to more people, and as the flow of information increases. Producers and consumers no longer negotiate the meanings of particular signifiers within the confines of hierarchical corporate structures: these signifiers are now easily resignified, and reappropriated to make new meanings in different contexts. The increasing flow of information and postmodern principles of fragmentation and multiplicity that characterize mashups position users differently than more coherent, narrative-driven media, resulting in decentered conceptions of time and new ways of relating to texts.

Virtual spaces offer different ways of interacting, creating, and using music to be political. Musicking (to borrow Christopher Small’s term) online affords new ways of relating to texts and to each other, and allows users to renegotiate the terms of cultural production. However, because users in the virtual world develop social skills in the offline world, pre-existing cultural paradigms inhibit the possibilities presented by new media. The potential of new media to radically democratize communication and cultural production has not yet been realized.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The sensitivity to anti-war political sentiments in the United States was heightened after the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in New York on September 11th, 2001. The landscape of the mass music market reflected the generally raised alertness of the U.S. public. Radio station programmers suddenly became very careful about what was played on the radio. Country radio consistently provided a platform for the musical articulation of pro-war positions, but artists expressing dissent were frequently left to find alternative routes to distribution. As a result of the closing off of the mass media market to anti-war and anti-Bush music, alternative media like indie labels, zines, college radio, and the Internet have become the new breeding ground for political music.

New media become important as sites for debates that are restricted or forbidden in other venues. Online spaces have become a place where the increasingly individual experience of listening to anti-war music can be reframed as a communal activity. For example, one likely cannot listen to Steve Earle’s song “John Walker’s Blues,” which sympathetically explores the motivation behind American John Walker Lindh’s decision to fight for the Taliban, on mainstream country radio at their favorite bar. As an
alternative, one could turn to YouTube, search for the song, and find not only the original but several covers. If a user desired, he or she could then participate in the conversations emerging on the YouTube message boards about Lindh’s motivations and Earle’s objective in writing and performing this song, thus restoring the communal aspect of listening to provocative music. This reframing is partial and contingent: whereas online spaces were originally appropriated primarily as a haven for dissenting voices, they have since become a format in which users representing all sorts of ideological orientations can create their own political art for public consumption. One could just as easily search for Aaron Tippin’s patriotic anthem “Where the Stars, Stripes, and the Eagle Fly” and find dozens of videos with their own message boards and corresponding conversations.

The Internet offers a considerably more democratic platform than radio for the articulation of political ideologies because it is accessible to many, and because gatekeeping on a large scale is difficult. Hierarchies of corporate control over all types of media resources have been destabilized to a degree by the growth in popularity of the Internet, “open[ing] up new possibilities for expression and representation and thus of imagining the self and belonging within and across space.”

Furthermore, web platforms such as YouTube, a video-sharing website that hosts user-generated content, have become places where the increasingly individual experience of listening to political music can be complemented with more communal listening. A user may be alone in his home or office when watching videos on YouTube, but he is instantly given access to a

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community of commentators who debate, discuss, and network on the message boards corresponding to each video.

THE MUSICAL-POLITICAL CLIMATE AFTER 9/11

By the early 21st century, media conglomerate Clear Channel had acquired more than 1,200 U.S. radio stations along with 700,000 billboards and 65 percent of the U.S. concert market. After the September 11th attacks, program directors at Clear Channel distributed to its radio stations a list of 156 songs that they deemed “questionable” or “inappropriate” for airplay. Along with more obvious choices like Metallica’s “Seek and Destroy,” the list also banned songs that could potentially have been comforting in a time of national distress; for example, Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World,” Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge over Troubled Water,” and John Lennon’s “Imagine” were on the list.2 Perhaps because “rock has generally been associated with a loud, aggressive stance pitted in opposition to the status quo…, [and] country music has always been coded as conservative and patriotic,”3 there is no country music on the list of suppressed songs. In fact, country radio was creating andreviving enough songs to create a new sub-genre of anti-terrorist, patriotic country music. Among the most popular of these songs were Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)?” Randy Travis’s “America Will Always Stand,” Brooks and Dunn’s “Only in America,” Aaron Tippin’s “Where the Stars, Stripes, and the Eagle Fly,” and Toby Keith’s “American

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3 Ibid., 9.
Soldier” and “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American),” which Reebee Garofalo claims “captured the new vengeful attitude more than any other song.”

One YouTube user, noticing this trend, wrote on the message board to a music-video mashup of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)”:

Toby Keith Is a true american patriot. I don't normally like country music but I am a soldier in the Army. The country bands like Lonstar and others that support us men and woman that are over there fighting are great. I found myself turning off the trash that is anti-american and turning on the music that supports the true heros of today.

The few country music performers in the mass music market who dared to criticize the war in Iraq or President Bush were chastised; in one of the most notorious examples, the Dixie Chicks faced demonstrations calling them traitors, death threats, and the withdrawal of their music from country music stations after stating that they were not proud that the President (like them) was from Texas. Likewise, Steve Earle’s album

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5 Garofalo, 11.

6 Throughout this paper, I have chosen to not edit the postings of YouTube users for grammar, spelling, or punctuation unless I thought the meaning might be unclear. I have also chosen to leave the profanity in its original form in the posts that I cite because it is reflective of the rhetorical landscape of online communication for these mashups. As Howard Rheingold points out, online communication is affected by the lack of corporeality, so there are attempts to make up for the loss of affective, bodily gesture in vitriolic language (The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier, rev. ed. [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000], 330).

7 Mattv03, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith,” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=seRPIJGcUs8A&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3Ds eRPIJGcUs8A.

8 Though not officially ordered by Clear Channel, according to their website, Cumulus Communications did effectively ban the Dixie Chicks from their radio stations and also hosted a CD smashing party outside their Atlanta, Georgia studios (Clear Channel, “Clear Channel Facts,” Clear Channel, http://www.clearchannel.com/Corporate/PressRelease.aspx?PressReleaseID=1167&p=hidden).
Jerusalem offered criticisms of Homeland Security policies as well as the U.S. War on Terror (most notably in the song “John Walker’s Blues,” which sympathetically explored the motivations behind the actions of U.S. Taliban member John Walker Lindh); the album inspired extensive criticism and outrage in popular media.9

Garofalo points out, “[i]n such an unfriendly political climate and with the absence of radio play, many artists interested in protesting the war turned to the Internet,” where they posted their protest songs for free download.10 Martin Scherzinger likewise argues that after Clear Channel’s 156-item list was released, the radio climate had become so closely policed that many artists turned to online platforms as a way to distribute left-leaning political music.11 For example, R.E.M., Sonic Youth, the Beastie Boys, and Lenny Kravitz have all turned to cyberspace as a new channel for distribution of their anti-war and anti-Bush music. More than six and a half years later, even as support for the war in Iraq has waned and criticism of the Bush administration’s international policies has increased, the mass radio market is generally still unwilling to promote anti-war and anti-Bush music. For example, even after winning five of the seven Grammy Awards for which their album Taking the Long Way was nominated between 2005 and 2006, the Dixie Chicks have still been unable to gain much airplay on

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10 Garofalo, 18.

mainstream country or pop radio stations. Similarly, artist Pink’s song “Dear Mr. President,” a sort of musical letter to President Bush that received considerable media attention, was not released on mainstream radio for fear that it would be misconstrued as a mere publicity stunt in the U.S. despite its commercial success in other countries.

With these chilling effects in mind, it is easy to see why web platforms held and still hold a certain appeal for dissenting voices.

YOUTUBE, POLITICS, AND MUSIC-VIDEO MASHUPS

In recent years, YouTube, a free video-sharing website that allows users to upload, view, and comment on videos, has become one of the most popular forums for content-sharing. Though it was initially created in February 2005 by former employees of PayPal, YouTube did not officially debut until November 2005. By summer 2006, it was one of the fastest-growing websites on the web. At that time, over 100 million videos were being watched per day, with 65,000 uploaded daily. As of February 25, 2008, a YouTube search for ”*”, a search engine wild card, returns about 74,200,000 videos, with 300,000 new videos uploaded daily. On May 31, 2008, that same search turned up results that are apparently no longer numerable: the results page only states that the search has turned up “millions.” As YouTube has grown in popularity, it has become a forum for

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many things, not the least of which is political debate. In late 2007, YouTube even worked with leading cable news outlet CNN to host a debate between democratic presidential candidates running in the primary: online users could submit questions to the candidates. In one sense, YouTube succeeded in offering the one of the most democratic presidential debates in history because anyone with access to the Internet could, in theory, participate.

While YouTube prides itself on being for you, as a user (its motto is “Broadcast yourself”), it does offer guidelines about video content and comment posting. YouTube does not allow pornography, depictions of animal abuse, drug abuse, or bomb-making, posting of copyrighted material, or videos of gratuitous violence. Feedback—both positive and negative—is encouraged in the following statement:

Feedback’s part of the experience, and when done with respect, can be a great way to make friends, share stories, and make your time on YouTube richer. So leave comments, rate videos, make your own responses to videos that affect you, enter contests of interest—there's a lot going on and a lot of ways to participate here.\[^{15}\]

The following guidelines for commentary are offered: “We encourage free speech and defend everyone's right to express unpopular points of view. But we don't permit hate speech (speech that attacks or demeans a group based on race or ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender, age, veteran status, and sexual orientation/gender identity).”\[^{16}\]

Although YouTube doesn’t permit hate speech, their commitment to free speech seemingly overrules any inclination to remove hateful commentary, for it is prevalent on the comment boards of most YouTube videos. Although individual users cannot remove


\[^{16}\] Ibid.
each other’s comments, in late 2006, YouTube added a new feature to its comment boards that allows users to rate individual comments as good or bad by clicking on either a thumbs-up or thumbs-down icon at the heading of each comment. Composite ratings for each individual comment are also visible in the heading of that comment. YouTube allows users to flag videos as inappropriate (after which they are reviewed by staff and removed if necessary), and also boasts a zero-tolerance policy for threats or for the disclosure of someone else’s personal information.

YouTube hosts seemingly innumerable types of videos, some of which are overtly political, and many of which are overtly banal. Some users take advantage of media-editing and -sharing technologies to create an aesthetically innovative form: the mashup. Mashups are media comprised of mixed audio samples and/or mixed video samples. For example, one mashup artist, Rx2008 has mashed together video and audio samples of President Bush speaking such that he recites the lyrics of R.E.M.’s “It’s the End of the World (As We Know It)” in time with R.E.M.’s accompanying instrumental track.17 Mashups have become increasingly popular in the Western art world as user-generated web platforms and in-home media production materials have become more widespread. There are many different types of mashups that involve any number of mixed samples from music videos, popular songs, speeches, television commercials, movies, historical audio and visual broadcasts, etc. Some individual mashups draw large audiences and support message boards in which identifiable patterns of user behavior emerge.

17 Rx2008, “the end of the world,” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3CmXGKXOmK.
If we consider mashups and their users from an ethnomusicological perspective that attempts to understand music in relation to varieties of human and non-human contexts, we can observe interacting patterns of social organization, aesthetic principles, and political behavior. Mashups, in combination with Web 2.0 technologies (which are characterized by user-generated content, file-sharing, increased interactivity, and social networking), are fostering new forms of political expression and coalition-building while reflecting and participating in shifting, postmodern styles of cultural production and participation.

In the next chapter, I focus primarily on two overtly political mashups and their message boards to demonstrate that communities with specific political and aesthetic values are being formed around these multimedia signs. Despite the temptation to regard the Internet as a utopian site for democratic communication, I argue that the rhetorical climate of the online communities parallels the larger musical-political climate after-9/11. I acknowledge nonetheless that online environments offer new, postmodern aesthetic and communication economies that allow for the imagination of a new cultural paradigm, although the possibilities are limited by the interdependence of online and offline experiences.

In the third chapter, I explore how the aesthetic economy of mashups reflects postmodern principles both on the level of form and on the level of reception and use. Benjamin Weil, curator of media arts at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, explains that this is due to the intensifying flow of information available in Western culture from which artists can take and reprocess fragments in order to recontextualize
The involvement of non-specialists and untrained amateurs in all facets of music production, distribution, and production provides a new sense of ownership and agency in the musical process, making music more easily personalized and appropriated as a political sign across boundaries (particularly class and national lines) that were previously difficult to traverse. Ultimately, I argue that postmodern signifying practices of making new art with old materials implies a sense of possibility: that it is possible to use impure materials to generate something new. However, because of the resistance of many users to leave behind their offline ideas and behaviors, these new signifying practices have limited effects.

While many popular music scholars have explored music’s role in social protest, few have ventured to argue why music has been so crucial in and emblematic of political coalition-building. In the final chapter, I explore what it means for music to be political, and how mashups hail a specific type of audience/listener/user. I rely heavily on Christopher Small’s theory of “musicking” to explain why it is music and not another medium that facilitates political coalition-building so effectively. I also explore what it means for musicking to be happening in virtual spaces where the hierarchies that structure our usual listening practices are dismantled, and new types of relationships are allowed to flourish.

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LIMITS OF THE VIRTUAL

When exploring the radical potential of the Internet and new media, it is important to remember both the limits of access and the limits faced by a researcher exploring human behavior in virtual spaces. To begin with, the Internet is not available to everyone: although it is widely available in industrial and post-industrial countries, global access to monetary resources needed to buy equipment and service is limited. Additionally, because technology changes so quickly, many individuals and economies with limited resources cannot keep pace with the rapid obsolescence of networking equipment and software. Furthermore, people also face less tangible barriers in trying to exploit the possibilities of the Internet. The Internet remains open and neutral, in that its content is not controlled or policed by Internet service providers, though individual hosting platforms can control the content which users post. However, as in China, state censorship of Internet content is a limiting factor in some instances. Corporations that own the rights to distribute music and video are taking legal action against copyright violators in order to restrict unauthorized re-use of music and video in mashups. Incidents of copyright violation are made more complex by the international flow of information. At this point, copyright law is difficult to enforce across national boundaries since prosecuting a user for copyright violation depends on determining the country of origin.


for the restricted material, as well as the location of the user—a complex and often impossible task given the relative anonymity afforded by the web.

Legal theorist Sonia K. Katyal argues that the overt refusal to abide by copyright laws is in itself an important facet of artistic expression. Borrowing from John Fiske’s notion of “semiotic democracy,” an information economy in which individuals are not passive spectators, but are empowered as creators, producers, and consumers of cultural materials that they can resignify to produce new meanings, Katyal offers the notion of “semiotic disobedience.” She defines semiotic disobedience as an act which “attempts to create an alternative system of meaning that both appropriates and interrupts the protected associations within the marketplace of ideas.”

Semiotic disobedience involves deliberately illegal forms of expression which not only call certain meanings into question through resignification of cultural materials, but also expose “the need for alternative political economics of information.” The mashing of cultural materials and their subsequent posting on YouTube demonstrate principles of both semiotic democracy and semiotic disobedience. On the one hand, YouTube allows users to resignify and recontextualize information in such a way that they become creators and producers as well as cultural consumers. On the other hand, users who mash copyrighted cultural materials may also participate in acts of semiotic disobedience, in which the act of willfully disobeying copyright regulations indicates dissatisfaction with the ways in which intellectual property laws protect certain privileged creators. Though it may bring

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22 Ibid., 493.
about legal sanctions, the intentional defiance of intellectual property laws is another way in which mashups can make political statements about access to and control over information.

In addition to the distribution of material resources, state censorship, and efforts at legal control over copyrighted content, usage of the Internet is also restricted in many cases by a language barrier. Most of the online content that I am focusing on is in English, so there exists a language barrier that undoubtedly marginalizes some users who might otherwise wish to participate. While national lines are not drawn as easily online as they are in “material reality” because of the geographically unspecific nature of online exchange, Eurocentric and racist behavior either through commentary or through visual signification still serves to keep some users linguistically and culturally on the outside of the virtual action and also serves to police production and participation in online activities.

When researching human behavior in virtual spaces, it is important to keep these limitations in mind. Similarly, it is imperative to remember that users of virtual technologies are free to, if they choose, invent their online personas in any way they please. They could be “true” to their offline selves, or they could create entirely new and unrelated virtual personae, concealed under several different pseudonyms. It is productive here to take a cue from postmodern theory and to approach identity as a process that happens in specific contexts, rather than as a material and essential truth that subjects carry with them in all of their endeavors—whether “real” or “virtual.”

Online interaction reflects postmodern principles of multiplicity and fragmentation, so it is hard to make any general claims about online identities as a whole. While this may seem problematic, it helps to remember that even when we interact with the people we study face to face, they may be performing a certain way as “subjects” because of our presence, they may be hiding certain information that is embarrassing to themselves or those around them, they may be trying to trick the researcher, or they may be flat-out lying. We can never really be sure that we know who we are really studying, nor can we be sure that we have properly identified the limits (regardless of how fluid they may be) of the communities and spaces in which they interact. In that sense, observing human behavior in online spaces simply lays bare research challenges that already exist in the “real” world. Throughout this study, the people and the interactions observed are given the benefit of the doubt—after all, online, you are you who you pretend to be, and it is important to respect the capacity to create (whether it be art, relationships, or identities) in virtual spaces.

This thesis is an exploration of the potential of virtual spaces to foster new types of community-building, different ways of creating, and alternative forms of relationships between and among music and its listeners; it is also an investigation of the reality of these practices among internet users today. I do not intend to argue that the Internet is utopian or that it will unseat oppressive political, artistic, or cultural paradigms. Similarly, I refuse denounce the Internet as simply a venue for unfettered cruelty that people are too well-mannered to enact offline, where they lack the protection of anonymity. As the following chapter demonstrates, the Internet is the site of potential
both realized and unrealized; online and offline worlds are not as distinct as we might imagine them to be, and they become mutually limiting and empowering when it comes to imagining new ways of being and creating in the musical world.
OVER THE LAST HALF-CENTURY OR SO, AMERICANS HAVE CONTINUED TO ISOLATE THEMSELVES: MOVIE THEATERS HAVE SEEN THEIR AUDIENCES BE SEDUCED AT LEAST IN PART BY TELEVISIONS IN THEIR OWN HOMES, URBAN LIVING GAVE WAY TO SUBURBS PACKED WITH INDIVIDUAL HOUSES ON DEAD-END CULS-DE-SAC, AND QUAD-TRAVING COLLEGE STUDENTS AND PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION PASSENGERS AURALLY ENCLOSE THEMSELVES INTO THEIR OWN SOUNDCAPSES BY PUTTING ON THEIR HEADPHONES AND TURNING ON THEIR MP3 PLAYERS. MANY HAVE LAMENTED THE LOSS OF PUBLIC SPACES AND THE CONSEQUENT LOSS OF HUMANITY THAT HAS RESULTED FROM THIS AGGRESSIVE INDIVIDUATION.¹ THERE IS ALSO A CONSTANT CRITICAL HUM THAT THE INTERNET HAS FACILITATED THIS LOSS, MAKING PUBLIC SPACES LIKE SHOPPING CENTERS, MOVIE THEATERS, AND EVEN POST OFFICES POTENTIALLY OBSOLETE.

THOUGH THEY ALL COME FROM DIFFERENT DISCIPLINARY BACKGROUNDS, CYBERSPACE SCHOLARS Sherry Turkle, Howard Rheingold, and Lawrence Lessig paint a very different, and much less fatalistic picture of what the Internet can do (and, in many cases, has already been doing) for creating human connections. Turkle explains that our decreasing

¹ For examples, see Tara Brabazon, Digital Hemlock: Internet Education and the Poisoning of Teaching. (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002) and Andrew Keen, The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today’s User-Generated Media Are Destroying our Economy, Our Culture, and Our Values (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
participation in shared public space has not yet sounded the death knell for human relationships. Rather, she sees the Internet as an efficient way to create new public spaces that are potentially more accessible:

[S]ocial beings that we are, we are trying (as Marshall McLuhan said) to retribalize. And the computer is playing the central role. We correspond with each other through electronic mail and groups whose participants include people from all over the world. Our rootedness to place has attenuated.²

Similarly, Rheingold argues that newsgroups, listservs, and comment boards can reconstruct local communities and create new groups consisting of those who share interests, but are spatially distant. He explains that virtual communities are emerging as a result of “the need for rebuilding community in the face of America’s loss of a sense of social commons,”³ and he encourages us to approach the Internet as “a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives [in a way that] might help revitalize the public sphere.”⁴ Lessig points out that virtual spaces are not only more accessible, but that formation of social groups has actually become easier because, just as space no longer has to be shared, neither does time. He explains that, in virtual space, “[g]roups form easily to discuss any issue imaginable; public debate is enabled by removing perhaps the most significant cost of human interaction—synchronicity. I can add to your conversation tonight; you can follow it up tomorrow; someone else, the day after.”⁵


⁴ Ibid., xxx.

According to Lessig, that social relationships can occur across spatial and temporal constraints has “a potential for making human life more, not less, human.”\footnote{Ibid.} And to those who fear that the Internet will be the final straw in an aggressive trend to individualize, Sherry Turkle reminds us, “[t]he virtual and the real may provide different things. Why make them compete?”\footnote{Turkle, 236.}

Both Turkle and Lessig agree that the possibilities inherent in online communication do not end at formulating social communities that closely model the ones that exist(ed) in real life, but that virtual environments may also lead to new ways of thinking. Turkle writes, “Today many are looking to computers and virtual reality to counter social fragmentation and atomization; to extend democracy; to break down divisions of gender, race, and class; and to lead to a renaissance of learning.”\footnote{Ibid., 245.}

Destabilizing the power dynamics of social relationships allows a more diverse contingent of people to participate in cultural production, and, as Lessig sees it, the Internet is a necessary platform for this process. Not only is the Internet currently a mostly open stage on which anyone can create and distribute—a virtual commons—but it is also a source of cultural materials that nearly anyone can use as a resource for their own creation, which Lessig sees as one of the defining and most prized characteristics of the web. Lessig argues,

Commons may be rare. They may evoke tragedies. They may be hard to sustain. And at times, they certainly may interfere with the efficient use of important

\footnote{6 Ibid.}
\footnote{7 Turkle, 236.}
\footnote{8 Ibid., 245.}
resources. But commons also produce something of value. They are a resource for decentralized innovation. They create the opportunity for individuals to draw upon resources without connections, permission, or access granted by others. They are environments that commit themselves to being open.\(^9\)

This is particularly salient when looking at the presence of political coalitions being built in virtual spaces.

Like Lessig’s campaign to preserve the current freedom of the Internet, Rheingold poses a sort of call to arms, arguing that we must grab hold of these technologies now before they have been colonized by the state or by corporate powers:

The technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost—intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage. But the technology will not in itself fulfill that potential; this latent technical power must be used intelligently and deliberately by an informed population. More people must learn about that leverage and learn to use it, while we still have the freedom to do so, if it is to live up to its potential.\(^{10}\)

Because there is a large crowd of spectators on the Internet, individuals can act out very publicly, but without any personal risk. Jay David Bolter argues that this may have radical potential to unseat hierarchical ideologies, explaining that “the abandonment of the ideal of high culture (literature, music, the fine arts) as a unifying force” will result in there being no single valorized culture, but “only a network of interest groups.”\(^{11}\) The hierarchies which delineate high culture from low culture become less rigid. Cultural participants are therefore allowed to create and valorize texts regardless of the texts’ relationship to high culture. Anyone can begin or participate in a network of interest

\(^9\) Lessig, 85.

\(^{10}\) Rheingold, xix.

groups based on or using the cultural materials which he or she finds most salient or useful. Thus, the Internet becomes an ideal alternative to the offline public sphere for creating political movement: there are many ways to participate that are not as limited as offline venues by aesthetic or class hierarchies. Furthermore, censorship is hard to maintain in virtual spaces, so political commentary and cultural production can take nearly any shape that users wish without the risk of being silenced.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND NEW PUBLIC SPACES

YouTube has become a place where communal listening is replacing or supplementing increasingly individualized listening practices, and where audiovisual cultural materials are freely being distributed, shared, and taken as resources for the production of new cultural materials seemingly without restraint. As a result, political cybercommunities are being formed through and around shared online cultural production and audiovisual mashups. It is productive to follow the lead of many other cyberculture scholars in using Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” to offer a theoretical framework for understanding how online communities are being formed.12 Anderson explains that communities are imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation [in this case, cybercommunity] will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the

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image of their communication.”¹³ While this needs to be modified slightly to account for the communication between Internet users on the mashup message boards, it still provides a basis for understanding how virtual community works. According to Anderson, imagined communities form as a result of shared agreement about the line between inclusion in and exclusion from the community, as well as a shared knowledge of and access to print culture. Anderson argues that capitalist entrepreneurs printed their books in media vernacular in order to increase circulation. Through the common print language, readers speaking regional dialects were able to understand each other. Fellow-readers who are connected through print formed “visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community”¹⁴—in other words, more democratic access to media facilitated the imagining of fellow citizens across time and space, a similar phenomenon to what we see happening with YouTube.

The Internet has not only facilitated broader access to media, but it has also allowed for the proliferation of communication about new types of media. Olga Bailey, Myria Georgiou, and Ramaswami Haridranath, taking cues from Rheingold’s notion of virtual communities as well as Jerrold Levinson’s broader definition of a medium as a set of practices, point out that, “in the media commonality is not only imagined, but also negotiated. The media participate in sustaining imagined commonality, but they also advance processes of critical and reflexive engagement with imagined communities.”¹⁵


¹⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵ Bailey, et al., 3.
Using Ferdinand Tönnies’s concept of *Gemeinschaft*, the idea that a community is based on shared space and values, Laura Gurak reminds us that a community is a “spontaneous relationship that develop[s] based on physicality [physical proximity] and customs and values” (italics in original). It is productive to use Tönnies’s insights to expand upon Anderson’s: taking the ideas of *Gemeinschaft* and “imagined communities” together allows the conceptualization of virtual communities not only in terms of shared place (however imagined the boundaries and span of virtual place might be), but also in terms of shared culture, shared symbols, shared aesthetics, and shared values. All of these can be embodied in the communities that form in response to mashups. Because message boards allow participation and conversation between users as well as the ability to rate the comments of other users, the aesthetics and shared values are negotiated between the users on the board. Every user can have a chance to voice an opinion. Furthermore, YouTube allows users to post their own video “responses” to other videos, thus fostering a network of videos in which aesthetic values are negotiated in community across even the virtual borders of a web page.

**RHETORICALLY DEFINING COMMUNITIES ONLINE**

Two mashups that have received considerable user attention on YouTube, entitled “Imagine This” and “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith,” exemplify the dynamics and limitations of these virtual imagined communities. In early 2006, John Callahan, a YouTube user located in Dublin, Ireland who works under the name Cal-TV,
created a music-video mashup of George W. Bush speaking the lyrics to the John Lennon classic, “Imagine” called “Imagine This.” By combining video of John Lennon and Yoko Ono singing “Give Peace a Chance,” the coda from “Strawberry Fields Forever,” and hundreds of clips of George W. Bush’s speeches arranged so that he recites the words to John Lennon’s “Imagine,” Cal-TV uses irony and subtle rhetorical associations that are legible to and appreciated by anti-war viewers. One YouTube user commented, “Too bad someone has to go through all that work to make Bush say anything that makes any sense at all.”

According to Cal-TV’s website, this mashup was featured on the front pages of two daily European newspapers and was shown on the Canadian television program The Hour. The video has won several independent film awards, and, as of August 13, 2008, has been viewed over 300,000 times since its posting on YouTube in March 2006.

Though there have been over 1,000 comments on this video, Cal-TV himself has only intervened in the conversation once to thank his audience and to encourage them to share the video with their friends and other users. Although it does not appear to be widely known or acknowledged that this video was produced outside the U.S., there is significant international participation on the comment board. The commentators for this video have responded in various languages, including Spanish, English, and French, and come from countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Colombia, Canada, Chile, England, France, Germany, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Japan, and

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17 Flipjack, comment on Cal-TVs, “Imagine This,” YouTube, http://youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=VafZic-UM_Q.

Russia, Spain, and Venezuela. Most international users are anti-Bush and anti-war, save for a few Germans, a few English, and one Israeli. All antagonistic comments otherwise came from U.S. users.

In March 2007, Matt5581, a self-proclaimed devout Christian and proud member of the National Rifle Association, posted a mashup of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” to YouTube that contains Toby Keith’s original audio with a slideshow of pictures of soldiers and their families. As of August 13, 2008, it has been seen by more than 600,000 viewers and received over 5,000 comments. Like “Imagine This,” this mashup also drew international commentators from world (whom were anti-war), though there were not as many countries represented. Comments were posted from Canada, England (from which most of the users were pro-war), France, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, and Turkey, in both French and English. Matt5581 has only stepped into the conversation on the message boards two times, during which he acted as a sort of moderator to the board, telling users, “I love you all exercising your right to free speech, but if we can let’s try to have some mature and intellectual debating on here. Not just calling people names, but talking sensibly to one another maturely.”

Based on the comments on both message boards, aesthetics and politics were not treated by users as easily separable features of the mashups; therefore, a shared

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19 Matt5581, comment on Matt5581, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith,” YouTube, http://youtube.com/watch?v=seRPJGcUs8A. Just prior to the completion of this thesis in August 2008, Matt5581 instituted a new “policy” for his message board. The description for his mashup now reads: “UPDATED: Anyone who is posting disgraceful or hateful comments will be blocked from the video completely. And stop hiding behind the First Amendment, if you're disgracing America you don't deserve her rights.”
commitment to both was required for membership in each of the virtual communities evolving on the message boards. Bolter explains that readers of the text help define what passes as “good” in a specific context: “communities of readers help to define the properties of the writing space by the demands they place on the text and the technology.”  With certain technologies and certain political agendas at hand, the users expect certain things of the mashups that they watch. Furthermore, their aesthetic expectations were not easily divisible into technical and ideological components. Most users were unable or unwilling to look past their disagreement with the political message in order to positively appreciate the mashup as a creative work.

One user on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” board tried to encourage users to quit arguing politics and to just listen to the music: “ENOUGH WITH FUCKING POLITICS we have that enough in a day enjoy the music.” Another user’s response this posting insisted that “the music is political you idiot.” The few users who were able to overlook their political disagreement with the message of the songs and mashups to articulate an appreciation of the aesthetic value were quickly criticized by other users. One commentator who wrote, “I am American. I hate America. I love this song” on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” message board had their comment rated -7 by other users. Another user responded, “then you are

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20 Bolter, 12.

21 JackSwift67, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

22 TALIBANBOYOREturns, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

23 Seneca333, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
NOT an American.”24 This comment was subsequently rated +4, showing general agreement with that position within the community. One user’s comment that “9/11 was an inside job -- but it's a great song to pump up the bravest and most dedicated americans as they wage war -- 5 stars” indicated support for the troops as well as appreciation of the song, but not support of the war: this comment received a -3 rating.25 This commentary and the ratings of the comments demonstrate that membership in these communities was predicated on several things: a certain degree of American-ness that was defined by one’s commitment to or against the War on Terror and the Bush administration (depending on which message board is under consideration), and a willingness to accept the aesthetics and the political significance of the mashup’s content as inseparable.

Responses to “Imagine This” were often combinations of laud for the amount of work and skill required to produce the mashup, and affective reactions ranging from amusement to rage to sadness. One user wrote, “It’s a fantastic video, its funny and at the same time completely galling. It is a stark contrast of the ideals and vision of John Lennon with the George W. Bush version of ‘peace’ and ‘freedom’. Amazing, brilliant, and at the same time, tragic, disturbing and rage inducing.”26 Another wrote, “this video is so beautiful...ever[y]time i watch it i get chills that run down my spine and i want to cry...its nice..only if it were true and he realy sa[i]d those things.”27 There was also a noticeable appreciation for the irony believed to be present in the pairing of George W.

24 Flamingvengeance, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

25 Sudokcd, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

26 Redbutterfly0, comment on “Imagine This.”

27 Bananacakes471, comment on “Imagine This.”
Bush’s speeches with a message of peace: “excelent vid, 4 mins, 38 seconds of irony. if only george bush had half the brain of this brilliant man.”

Throughout the discussion, an ability to perceive this irony became a sort of cultural literacy that users were required to have in order to be accepted into the community. There was consistent mocking of users who were not able to detect the rhetorical devices being employed. One confused user wrote,

I can't believe anyone would let G W taint a beautiful john lennon song, unless it's supposed to be funny because he does the opposite of everything this song says!! PEACE! is that a fucking joke, he started a pointless bloody war, it may have had a point at one time but there is none anymore. Those who support Bush support murder and their hands are covered in blood.

Another wrote, “From an American user who claims to hate corporate America as much as he hates liberal-leftist socialists, but loves the Bible: What a stupid video! Do you really believe that Bush is agree[ing] with peace? Thats a lie! Secondly bunch of dumb dreamers... it would be fun to live in reality.”

Another user responded by insulting the person who wrote this, saying, “no it's called satire you fuck rag!” Those who were unable to understand or appreciate the supposed irony of the “Imagine This” mashup were shamed for culturally illiterate attempts to gain status in the community.

There was also a visible effort to read certain visual images as having broader symbolic significance. One commentator reframed his/her own original reading of the song based on the overlapping domains of the lyrics and the war images used, writing,

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28 Marolia, comment on “Imagine This.”

29 Lunaanimus, comment on “Imagine This.”

30 Philistin, comment on “Imagine This.”

31 Kcwbar, comment on “Imagine This.”
Wow. I've just heard this song for the first time again -- but this time, the message is terrifying. Imagine all the people living side-by-side in peace... because they're dead. And they finally share all the world in this way. There are no possessions or countries, because we blew them up. Imagine there's no hunger, because the people are not alive to require nourishment. Isn't this peaceful now? I hope someday you'll join me. All I'm saying is give peace a chance.32

One user said this about the opening, “Did anybody notice that the drummer Animal from the Muppets isn't the only puppet in this video? Take heed America...no more puppets.”33

Finally, another interpreted the presence of Angus Young, guitarist for AC/DC, as a metonym for “Highway to Hell,” a popular AC/DC song and possibly also a comment on where exactly George W. Bush is taking the country.34 In addition to political agreement with the anti-war message of the video, attention to the rhetorical strategies created by overlapping musical, lyrical, and visual domains was a requirement for the attainment of respected status on the boards.

There were far fewer comments about aesthetics on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” message board, but those that were present included almost no indication of affective response. “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” was not understood as a platform for individual emotive response, but was rather most often read as a musical representation of what America is about, with accompanying images of those who were protecting the United States from perceived threats to foundational American values, such as national security and freedom.

32 Nachosfairy, comment on “Imagine This.”

33 Rabidgoldfish65, comment on “Imagine This.”

34 Joderijoderi, comment on “Imagine This.”
One user wrote, “this song sayes ever[y]thing that i want it to say. i love the USA.”

Another wrote, “This song really sums up what America is about. I love it. We don't take anything from anyone. Thank you to all of the men and women serving in the military!”

Similarly, if someone tried to criticize the song or the video based on aesthetics alone, they were assumed to be criticizing the United States. After being chastised for such a criticism, one user wrote,

i was refering to the song! it just shows the arrogance of some americans! "we'll put a boot in your ass, it’s the american way” that pretty much sums it all up. this has nothing to do with what you, or the rest of the american military have done, this is about the song!

This comment was subsequently rated a -6. Another user criticizing the lyrics wrote,

“‘My daddy served in the army/ But he lost his right eye/ But he flew a flag out in our yard/ Til the day that he died.’ I'm sorry, that is the most hilariously bad lyric I've ever heard” was greeted with the response “Eff off you fag.”

Attempts to read this video as satirical, symbolic, or propagandist were not well-received. The following comments were all extensively criticized by other users: "We'll put a boot in your ass; it's the American way.' I am now convinced that Toby Keith is actually a really good performance comedian mocking us all,”

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35 JDCountryGirl, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
36 Biscuit1240, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
37 Echo34, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
38 AlexisCapri, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
39 Kidjon, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
40 Pieboy3141592658971, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
disgusting. ‘We light up your world like the 4th of July’. He's comparing bombing a
country full of innocent people to a national America holiday.’ One comment was rated
a -6 after calling the video propagandist, and the user who wrote, “No wonder the
American government can do whatever they want, a redneck writes some crappy patriotic
song and all of a sudden everyone looks past all the corruption and thinks they live in the
greatest country in the world...get your heads out of you asses” was rated a -7.42

There is a clear difference in the type of cultural literacy required to gain access to
these two cybercommunities, although both communities take aesthetic and political
values to be almost entirely inseparable. The users on the “Imagine This” board
demonstrated more interpretive work, deconstructing the implications of the imagery in
relation to the lyrics, and relating the resulting irony and symbolism to political
convictions that they held. The users on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue”
board generally understood the mashup to be lyrically, visually, and musically
representative of a unified and strong United States, steeped in patriotism and
unwavering fidelity to the Bush administration and the War on Terror. Where anti-war
users parsed out multiple, conflicting meanings to trouble and criticize the current state of
the political landscape in the United States, the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue”
users employed aesthetic strategies to conflate symbols of patriotism, support for the
Bush administration, the September 11th attacks, and the War in Iraq to create and

41 BruceCampbell0886, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

42 Thetheootz, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
ideologically unified representation of an anti-terrorist (and also sometimes racist, homophobic, and Toby Keith-adoring) America.

PARALLELS TO THE POST-9/11 MUSICAL-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Although cybercommunities create new spaces for dialogue, these spaces are not entirely isolated from the spaces common in non-online experience. The participants bring to the virtual community subjectivities that are constructed in the material world, social skills honed in offline relationships, and concerns rooted in material reality. Therefore, material life and “cyberlife” should not be approached as independent loci for the construction of community or identity, but rather different modes of social engagement and expression. Anthony Fung argues that online communication leads to imagined community formation by bearing certain similarities to offline community building. He specifies that online consolidation leads to building rapport and alliance; rhetorical strategies and aesthetic values help verify the status of users in order to differentiate insiders and outsiders; and online consumption serves as an exchange of goods, reflecting virtual and real transactions. This last point should be modified for the YouTube case, because YouTube hosts user-generated content and is characterized by transactions in which no money is exchanged. Though exchanges are taking place, they are happening across complex networks in which the various parties are credited or acknowledged for their contributions only by their screen names, not by personal names. I now turn back to the message boards to trace how Fung’s connections are enacted in an actual online community.

43 Fung, 134-135.
Fung’s first point is that online communication leads to imagined community formation, which facilitates the imagination of unknown others. With respect to mashups discussed in this paper, this is evidenced by the references to larger, offline identity groups like United States and British troops and the families and friends who support them, and also in references to videos other than the one for which the message board was constructed. For example, on the “Imagine This” board, there were several instances of encouragement to watch similar videos, especially “Sunday Bloody Sunday” (a mashup that likewise features samples of President Bush’s speeches spliced together to recite U2’s lyrics) and there were indications that several users recognized each other from some of these other message boards. All of these videos and all of these communities were imagined as linked based primarily on political stance on the Iraq war and on investment in a certain sophistication of mashup aesthetics. The format of YouTube facilitates these cross-mashup communities, for YouTube posts links to “related videos” within the visual field of the video being watched. It is easy for a user to keep clicking around cyberspace, finding any number of similar mashups where they might find familiar users posting on the message boards.

As Fung noted, online consolidation of cybercommunities leads to building rapport and alliance, reflecting the need for tribalization online and offline. Efforts toward building or claiming an alliance are clearly evidenced in both the repetition of the refrains of “God bless America,” “We’ll put a boot in your ass,” and “Semper fi” on the “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue” board, and in the repetitions of “Imagine…” and “Give peace a chance” on the “Imagine This” board. Fung clarifies that “[a]lthough
online communities might break from geographical and racial, generational, and class boundaries, the cohesion of the group is stronger if it faces a common enemy and maintains the exclusivity of the group or tribe." In addition to using YouTube’s new comment rating system that allows users to anonymously rate others’ comments as good or bad, the boundaries of certain communities are aggressively maintained through verbal attacks on commentators who state a viewpoint that opposes the one assumed to be indicated by the video. At this point, it is useful to remember Daniel Fischlin’s point that “community is not so much defined through homogeneity and overlap as through its constructive, progressive ability to encounter differences and ‘contaminations’ that challenge homogeneity.” This often takes the form of racist and homophobic insults that are at best left uncriticized by users on the same side, and at worst are encouraged by other users.

On both the “Imagine This” board and the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” board, pro-war users frequently demonstrated their ideologies through racist and homophobic commentary that resulted in their coming across as grotesque caricatures of the political right wing. In multiple instances, they referred to people of the Middle East as “towel heads” and “sand niggers.” One user wrote, “Our military is sending sandniggers to hell by the gross, sonny...we're winning this war....and will achieve the inevitable victory...sandniggers, rot in hell.”

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44 Ibid., 135.


46 Runnerrk, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
homophobic remarks to police the anti-war presence on their boards and to assert their presence on the “Imagine This” board. These included, “Jihadests are fags, kill them all. They have no right to say what we should worship or let other races and genders have the same privileges as everyone,” and “it takes the ‘rednecks of America’ to stand up to tyranny, unlike the typical ‘rational pussy’ who will bend over and grab their ankles when someone attacks our country. Maybe we are more educated than you think.”

Though the anti-war users did not invoke racist rhetoric to police their borders, they did employ uncriticized homophobic commentary—particularly about George W. Bush. For example, one user wrote, “George Bush[…] I HOPE THE DEVIL R[APE] YOUR FUCKING ASSHOLE WITH HIS FUCKING TAIL, STUPID PIECE OF SHIT, IDIOT!!!!!!!!,” and was subsequently rated a +7. For the anti-war side, criticizing the U.S. government was acceptable, regardless of what form it took, even if at the cost of insulting another marginalized group.

Fung rightly describes how online confirmation verifies the status of users, often requiring the demonstration of real personal information for online territorialization. This is evidenced by the frequent mention of nationality in different posts on both boards; while international voices were encouraged on the “Imagine This” comment board, non-U.S. users were largely criticized for hailing from “weak” countries on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” board. On both boards, affiliation with the U.S. military

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47 182s, comment on “Imagine This.”

48 Jenrob5, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

49 Beatryxa, comment on “Imagine This.”
(particularly as having served in Iraq, but also as a member of the military, or as the family member of a soldier) was interpreted as a marker of authority. Those who had family serving in the military were met with great support from the majority of the community on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” message board. There were also several people who were under the age of 18, and who were using the message boards as a way to proclaim their support of the war as well as their intention to sign up for the army as soon as they were of age. Their comments were often validated with the military motto “Semper Fi.”

Thus, cybercommunities often reflect the rhetoric and values of the offline communities with which they are most closely aligned and with which the participants on the message boards identify themselves. For example, along with Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,” songs like Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten” and Pat Garrett’s “Saddam Stomp” make implicit and explicit connections between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, reinforcing the linkage between Iraq and the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings that was installed in popular consciousness despite the Bush Administration’s inability to demonstrate it in fact. This was a conflation that many users on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” message boards easily perpetuated. One user wrote, “maybe you should take the towel off your head and let your brain air out[.] the REAL terrorists in iraq crashed the planes and started the war.”

Criticism of “hippies,” “liberals,” and repeated conflation of these terms with “terrorists”

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51 180boombox, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
or “terrorist sympathizers” echoes the popular pro-war mantra, “You’re either with us, or you’re against us.”

On the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” board, this is further reflected in the insistence that one’s patriotism consist of all of the following: unwillingness to criticize the U.S., support for the troops, support for the war, support for the president, embrace of Christianity (God and Jesus were frequently characterized as the United States’ divine protectors, and Bible verses were frequently quoted in comments that supported the war), and fandom of Toby Keith. The soldiers were held responsible for the presence and protection of all good things in the world, and especially in the United States, not the least of which was YouTube and the Internet. One user wrote in response to a critic of the war, “Just shut up and maybe try and remember the soldiers who are dead to give you the right to post on youtube, to even have a computer and Internet or talk at all.”

Failing to agree with any one of these tenets relegates a user to outsider status. Defending any of these tenets, regardless how offensive or nonsensical the comment, was encouraged. For example, “your a sick little fuck! i bet your a 16 year old virgin that gets picked on in school! what? you are is full of envy, cause we are tall, strong, white,] and have good hair! and you are small, brown, and ugly! a hut dwelling sandmonkey!! and you smell like shit! cause you savages dont wear deodrant! why dont go suck Satans dick! sinse you like him so much? its called a crack pipe! your stupid to you spelled ‘women’ wrong! fucking retard!!” was rated a +7.

Furthermore, reflecting

52 Sexytiff, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

53 ICBM2007, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”
the simplest and most overwrought representations of the general political climate in the United States, groups of pro-war users posted multiple responses to individual anti-war commentators in order to silence them immediately. Frequently, one anti-war comment would generate criticism from at least three individual pro-war users.

Drawing parallels between the rhetoric and values of the anti-war movement offline and online is slightly more difficult because the conservative political climate stifled a great deal of public dissent, as explained in the introduction. However, the popular press sometimes lampooned Bush and the War on Terror (*Rolling Stone* has consistently featured a satirical political cartoon by David Rees called *Get Your War On* since the comic strip’s 2001 inception), and anti-war protesters formed small communities that gathered on Saturday mornings at popular intersections across the country inviting anti-war drivers to honk their car horns in solidarity. As in these real-life examples, on the “Imagine This” message board, there were frequent comparisons of George W. Bush to Adolf Hitler and to terrorists in general, a tendency to question the legitimacy (or even existence) of the Bush Administration’s motive for going into Iraq, a general adulation of John Lennon with accompanying idealized nostalgia for the progressive political climate of the 1960s, and constant calls for peace. Furthermore, perhaps because the anti-war movement was in a precarious position with respect to the national political environment, their efforts at policing pro-war voices were considerably less profane and less polemical than equal efforts on the anti-war board. If efforts to keep pro-war users off the message boards were too offensive, they were rated poorly. The following comment was rated a -5, even though it defended the anti-war position:
“RIP YOUR EYESBALLS FROM YOUR FUCKING UGLY SKULL YOU HATEFUL BIGGOT AND TAKE YOUR HOLY BOOK AND SHOVE IT UP YOUR STINKY RELIGIOUS ASSHOLE! YOU SOUND LIKE MICHAEL dog shit SAVAGE & ANN nazi kkkunt COULTER, ALL TERRORIST and made in usa…..”

However, simple phrases that represented the anti-war position were most common, and were often rated the highest; “Fuck Bush” was rated +8 and +11 in two instances, and “bush: the biggest terrorist” was rated a +7. Particularly salient lyrics like “Imagine” and “Give peace a chance” were also repeated responses from several different users over the duration of the board.

CONCLUSION

By looking at the message boards corresponding to Matt5581’s mashup of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” and to Cal-TV’s mashup of John Lennon’s “Imagine,” we can see that delineated political communities with their own specific aesthetic values and communication practices are being formed through a shared relationship to these music video mashups. Rhetorically, the pro-war side generally uses racist, homophobic, and sexist comments to discourage the participation of anti-war users on their message boards, while the anti-war side chastises users who are too offensive to pro-war users on their message boards. Looking at the message boards for a video mashup of Toby Keith’s “American Soldier” reveals that these rhetorical dynamics transcend individual message boards. In response to an anti-

54 B3boy, comment on “Imagine This.”

55 Joelle2006, comment on “Imagine This.”
war user, one pro-war user wrote, “time for that burqa, you are becoming shrill again.”

Another wrote, “hell yes man, fuck them liberal pussys!!!” Similarly, the message board for Rx2008’s mashup of U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday” shows anti-war users policing language that they find too offensive, regardless of whether or not the comment in question supports their political position. In response to a user who was confused about the genesis of the video, another wrote “you are a retard please leave the internet,” a comment which was subsequently rated a -3.

Though online communities offer a potentially more democratic forum for discussion and articulation of political positions (as is evidenced by some of the public and civil debates that occurred between users on opposite sides of the debate) they are not communicative utopias left unaffected by the political conversations occurring in offline life. Closer examination reveals that the values and rhetoric of the online communities ultimately reflect at least in part the larger musical-political climate post-9/11, and that, therefore, virtual communities should be understood as an extension of real-life community, rather than as a radical alternative.

Looking at these message boards demonstrates that Web 2.0 technologies are not necessarily fulfilling their potential to reconfigure community formation and communication: although they offer new forums for conversation, often those forums merely recapitulate arguments about political and social values that were already made.


57 Rdnkjock, comment on “American Soldier – Toby Keith (tribute).”

elsewhere, in the news media or the public square. Because YouTube is relatively new, it remains to be seen whether or not new aesthetic and communication economies can fully emerge in such a way that hierarchical political paradigms can be reimagined in more democratic ways. In chapter 3 I will explore the extent to which novel aesthetic experiences are emerging; in chapter 4 I investigate the ways in which new audiovisual media create and reinforce political and social relationships between individuals and their fellow audience members.
CHAPTER 3

POSTMODERN AESTHETICS AND MUSICAL MULTIMEDIA
IN CYBERSPACE

Mashups are comprised of samples of cultural material that are spliced together into a new piece of multimedia. In the increasing flow of cultural materials, the samples can come from anywhere: “Finding it can be its own fiasco,” DJ Rx explains. “Some of it is online, lots of it on TV, it’s about being vigilant and watching a lot of CSPAN and PBS.”¹ “Errata Erratum,” an extended web project employing mashup techniques was created by Paul D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, and presents “an online, user-modifiable remix of the cut-ups of Marchel Duchamp, as well as Rebirth of a Nation, an hour-long live digital re-edit of D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, which takes the film’s racist visual tropes and stands them on their heads.”² Miller explains the ultimate aesthetic goal of mashups in this way: “At the end of the day, it’s all about reprocessing the world around you.”³ In the context of mashups, the meanings of particular media are not fixed, because they can be so easily recontextualized, resignified, and reappropriated for different uses.


Why is the goal to reprocess what has already been processed before you? In his book *Capturing Sound*, musicologist Mark Katz argues that “sampling is most fundamentally an art of transformation. A sample changes the moment it is relocated,”⁴ and in the heightened flow of information, nothing stays in one place for long. In other words, the territory of representation is being deterritorialized before it can even be mapped. Detaching a sample (whether it be audio or visual) allows artists to mine bits of cultural material for their ideological signification or their expressive potential, rather than using them only for their naturalized, denotative functions. As Katz notes, “When composers sample existing works, they begin with expressions, transform them into ideas, and then again into new expressions.”⁵ In an interview with Russell Potter, audio-visual mashup artist Paul D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid stated that tactical sampling is forming a “global vernacular” in which every utterance is transferable, and “pastiche supplants the old ideologies of ‘pure’ originality.”⁶ Through the act of mashing, samples are effectively rehistoricized, and resignified while their original authoritative claims on truth are undermined.

Additionally, in the context of do-it-yourself mashups, meaning is not determined through producer-consumer negotiations limited by a hierarchical corporate structure. With editing and distribution technology available to the masses, not just the music industry elite, virtually anyone can become a composer, a producer, an audience member,

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⁵ Ibid., 156-7.

⁶ Potter, 71.
and a critic. Historical, aesthetic, and participatory hierarchies are breaking down in the postmodern economy of new multimedia.

POSTMODERN PARTICIPATION

Jerrold Levinson advises that we approach media studies from a broader perspective than textual analysis of the object. In Levinson’s definition, the meaning of a medium is comprised not only of its material components, but also of the practices that surround its production and reception. He defines a medium as “a developed way of using given materials or dimensions, with certain entrenched properties, practices, and possibilities.”  

It is important to remember that the meanings of a mashup lie not in the audiovisual material itself, but in the relationship between sociohistorically situated cultural materials (the video and sound samples which are already inscribed with cultural significance), and the people for whom these meanings actually mean (the participants on the message boards or the people who email or repost the mashups). Meanings of particular mashups are not inherent in the audiovisual object, but are negotiated through their use. Howard S. Becker also reminds us that any art work is always given meaning through the collective action of all participants in its production and consumption. He writes, “We can focus on any event (the more general term which encompasses the production of an art work as a special case) and look for the network of people, however large or extended, whose collective activity made it possible for the event to occur as it

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7 Levinson’s definition of a medium as something that extends beyond the material traces of an art is of use here because it harmonizes best with Christopher Small’s theory of musicking, on which the next chapter draws. (Jerrold Levinson, “Hybrid Art Forms,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 4 [Winter 1984], 7.)
did.”

All participants in the network shape the meaning of the object through the deployment of existing conventions that “simultaneously make coordinated action possible and limit the forms it can take.”

Considering the behavior on the YouTube message boards, we can see that it is imperative to consider what people are doing with this art, and what this reflects about them in order to understand how and what a medium can and does mean. No medium exists in a social, cultural, or political vacuum, nor do the practices of using it. For example, participating in a musical multimedia experience on YouTube by leaving comments on the comment board and then mining a YouTube video for bits of sound or images that can be reappropriated will affect the meaning of a musical multimedia object differently than, say, sitting alone on your couch and watching a music video on MTV. After all, what we do with art affects what we think it means and also affects what we will be able to do with art in the future. It is with this in mind that I turn to the ways in which listeners are positioned in relation to the media they use in the 21st century.

Throughout the relatively short existence of the mass music recording industry, participants in the music business (though not necessarily in less formal musical organizations) have been rather neatly divided into very few categories: producers, distributors, and consumers. Of course each of these categories has its own individual subcategories, but the point here is that these larger divisions are breaking down. One of the ways in which we are seeing 21st-century postmodernism manifest is in the breakdown of the barriers between performers and audiences that used to cleanly

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9 Ibid.
organize the possible positions within the music industry into tastemakers, commodities, and consumers. In the face of emerging web technologies, the boundaries between these various elements are no longer clear-cut, and in some cases, are entirely absent. Consequently, the old categories of producer, distributor, and consumer that structured various approaches in media studies in the past are no longer sufficient.

A new approach needs to be taken; therefore, I discard the roles of producer, distributor, consumer, and text in this study and approach mashups from a cultural studies point of view. I take the entire discourse surrounding mashups and the people who use them as interrelated factors that create meaning in multiple ways. The role of production companies in the determination of meaning of a piece of multimedia is being downplayed in the new technological economy. Meaning is perpetually negotiated in acts of production, distribution, consumption, reappropriation, and signification among many different constituents.

This breakdown of participatory categories is intimately intertwined with the changing economy of information in the current technological age. As Russell Potter notes, we are in an age of rapid information flow in which technological forces and the “nascent models of file-sharing, streaming, downloading and home mixing increasingly [blur] the boundaries between consumption and production.”¹⁰ Anyone can take any bit of visual or sonic cultural material and put it into any context they choose with very basic editing software. The production of distributable knowledge is in everyone’s hands. Potter specifies that “every act of consumption [and to that, I would add production and

¹⁰ Potter, 67.
distribution] opens up potentially endless acts of sharing, editing, remixing, and
resharing, almost all of which fall outside the traditional music markets so beloved of an
increasingly out-of-touch recording industry.”

The endless possibilities of recontextualizing and sharing characterize mashups and Web 2.0 technologies; mashups lay bare the act of editing and recombining to create new, homespun ways of producing cultural materials.

The transparency of the editing process facilitates an understanding of samples as representations, containing codes that can be de- and reconstructed to suit multiple purposes. The edited materials fail to abide by narrative conventions of expectation and resolution. Carol Vernallis explains, “The editing [maintains a sense of openness] in part simply through being noticed. By demanding attention, it prevents powerful images from acquiring too much weight and stopping the flow of information.”

What Vernallis terms “the disjunctive force of the edit” compels a viewer to make a choice about what a video means. Thus, the spectator is positioned in a space of agency, agency to determine meaning and also agency that allows viewers to take the same samples and recombine them to produce their own potential meanings. The spectator is invited to become the producer. Postmodern ideas of flow, decenteredness, and multiplicity are flourishing in the new aesthetic economy of multimedia that has been engendered by Web 2.0

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11 Ibid.


13 Ibid., 38.
technologies, and this is reflected by the production and use of mashups, as well as their aesthetic properties.

MUSICAL MULTIMEDIA AND THE BREAKDOWN OF TIME IN THE FACE OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

In one of the first book-length studies of the cultural impact of music videos, E. Ann Kaplan argues that music videos (particularly in the context of the music channel MTV) are an entirely postmodern phenomenon that reflects the postmodern viewing practices of 1980s youth in form, content, and use. She writes, “MTV produces a kind of decenteredness, often called ‘postmodernist,’ that increasingly reflects young people’s condition in the advanced stage of highly developed, technological capitalism evident in America.”¹⁴ The experience of decenteredness results from the sequence of non-narrative events that play out on television in front of the viewer, seemingly without end and without order. The music video materials progress endlessly whether the television is on and regardless of whether the viewer is tuned in. These observations extend to the current discussion of mashups and postmodernism: the spectator of mashups is accustomed to TV, music videos, and sampling and thus is able and willing to accept the disjointedness that characterizes mashups.

Mashups are troubling the conceptual hierarchies that usually inform our perception of musical multimedia. Nicholas Cook argues that, in the case of musical multimedia, it is often music that creates coherence across materials that have been

reorganized, broken down, and recombined, such as we see in the disjointed visuals of music videos. He explains that postmodern critics of musical multimedia (like music videos or mashups) see “nothing but fragmentation, discontinuity, and heteroglossia… because they don’t listen to the music; one might compare this with switching off the sound during the *Nine O’clock News* and then celebrating the manner in which its visual imagery subverts narrative models of coherence.”¹⁵ Both Cook and Carol Vernallis point out the common perception is that the image must be subservient to the sound in music videos because the sound is the original object. It is generally understood that music videos derive from songs because the music is produced before the video is conceived. In music videos, music fills the gaps in meaning left by the disjointed visuals.

In mashups, by contrast, both the music and the video can be equally disjointed. Take, for example, Cal-TV’s aforementioned mashup “Imagine This”: both the visual and audio components are spliced together samples from several different sources. There is no hierarchy of sound over image (or vice versa) in mashups when neither is identifiably original. The tendency to assume such hegemonic models of multimedia analysis resonates with sociopolitical ideologies deeply invested in hierarchical organization and reasoning. Cook points out that “analyzing multimedia requires a sensitivity to what might be termed degenerate or decayed hierarchies—hierarchies, in other words, whose internal connections have begun to unravel, resulting in flattened, network-like structures or associative chains.”¹⁶ Because of the dense and often

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¹⁶ Ibid., 145.
unpredictable, non-linear organization of audiovisual materials as well as the context added by modes of reception and production (recalling Levinson’s definition, in which the medium is defined by its uses) of mashups, approaching mashups as merely hierarchical organizations of multiple representational domains certainly does not make sense. A better approach disregards any sort of hierarchy between audio and visual elements and considers mashups in the cultural context in which they are endowed with meaning.

Kaplan offers four ways in which music videos reflect postmodern principles. Kaplan’s model is relevant here because each of the four reasons that she mentions are at least as applicable to mashups as to music videos. Much of what she has observed among music videos has since become more apparent as the possibilities for multimedia have blossomed with new technology, and as new technology has helped to facilitate new ways of thinking about and organizing musical multimedia.

First, Kaplan argues that music videos lack traditional, progressive, and cohesive narrative devices: “[c]ause-effect, time-space, and continuity relationships are often violated, along with the usual conception of ‘character.’”17 Postmodern principles of non-hierarchical arrangement, complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction are probably most evident in the material makeup of mashups themselves. The materials of mashups (fragmented, reappropriated, and remixed samples) facilitate the decentering of unified, hegemonic discourse by removing the bits of information from their original contexts and

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17 Kaplan, 33.
resituating them in ways that trouble or even erase the authority of their prior discursive positioning.

Like many music videos, mashups are generally antinarrative, “a kind of postmodern pastiche that actually gains energy from denying narrative conventions,”\(^\text{18}\) a stream of connotative associations juxtaposed to convey an ideological impression rather than a plot-driven story. For example, user Rx2008, who has posted several mashups of popular songs and George W. Bush’s speeches, posted a complex mashup of REM’s “It’s the End of the World (As We Know It)” that, like the earlier example of Cal-TV’s “Imagine This,” uses one- or two-word audio samples from George W. Bush’s speeches to recite the intricate, rapid lyrics of the song in time while, visually, the visuals are comprised of rapid and rhythmic shots of bullfighting, a rodeo, tap dancing, running pigs, oil rigs, newspaper headlines about the War on Terror, the World Trade Center bombings on September 11\(^{th}\), the statue of liberty, the bill of rights, political pundits like Keith Olbermann and Anderson Cooper, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a Jesus figurine, Barack Obama speaking, celebrities posing for MTV’s “Vote or Die” campaign, Iraq war footage of soldiers, bloody victims, and bombings, a still shot of Albert Einstein, clowns, teenagers dancing, violinists in an orchestra, and a sequence in which visual parity is drawn between a choreographed act performed by dancers and the marching of soldiers.\(^\text{19}\) Interestingly, the mashup sets up the viewer to expect a narrative (only to deny the fulfillment of the expectation) by opening with a title screen and closing with a

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traditional ending, a screen with “The End” written on it accompanied by clichéd orchestral movie music. However, between the bookends of the opening and ending screens, there is no narrative progression—only a stream of visual and sonic representations that are related only by association that often occurs on the metaphorical or satirical levels.

Second, music videos are often characterized by pastiche, or “ridicule of representations” that allows videos to self-reflexively indicate that they are aware of their status as representations in a way that the materials with which they play may not be, such that audiences will also recognize the constructedness of their representations. This is particularly true of mashups, which make their editing practices obvious through the cutting up of speeches or songs, and the obvious addition of visual effects such as displaying some shots as negatives or repeating certain visuals in rhythm with the sonic elements. These techniques bring the edits to the fore of the representational field. For example, Rx2008’s mashup of Bush speaking U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday” uses extremely jumpy visual editing of Bush speaking interspersed with shots of congressional representatives cheering him on by applause.21 Rx2008 has also made a similar video using Tony Blair’s speeches to piece together the lyrics to The Clash’s “Should I Stay or Should I Go.”22 In the ThePartyParty’s mashup of President Bush reciting the words to John Lennon’s “Imagine,” interspersed with video samples of Bush speaking are images

20 Kaplan, 34.


of other politicians (Laura Bush, the Clintons, Tony Blair, Condoleezza Rice) displayed as negatives with distinctively fast and obviously synthesized accompaniment to replace Lennon’s slower, acoustic original.\textsuperscript{23} Efforts to reflect a reality, even coded ones such as those used in dominant film practices, are generally absent in mashups. Kaplan further explains, “The sanctity of the image of illusionist texts is completely questioned by these [editing and representational] devices…, specific violation is done to the image so that no representation is stable or solid for very long.”\textsuperscript{24} Boundaries are disoriented or disintegrated: the mashups incorporate (rather than strictly quote) other texts in ways that resignify cultural artifacts. There is even a mashup posted by a user named cjweeks in which shots of Bush and Tony Blair’s speeches are spliced together to make it look like they are lip-synching to Lionel Richie and Diana Ross’s recording of “Endless Love.” Bush sings Richie’s part while Blair sings Ross’s.\textsuperscript{25} As Kaplan puts it, this sort of media making “refuses any clear recognition of previously sacred aesthetic boundaries”\textsuperscript{26} between what is authentic, and what is “merely” representation. Mashups undo some of the aesthetic hierarchies of authenticity that usually govern use and perception.

An extension of the videos’ self-reflexive acknowledgment of their status as representations constitutes the third way in which music videos exhibit postmodern principles: the videos represent a certain discursive position, rather than purporting to


\textsuperscript{24} Kaplan, 38.


\textsuperscript{26} Kaplan, 46.
capture the truth of an historical moment. As Kaplan puts it, they “foreground their sources of enunciation and comment on their process of production,” rather than trying to claim they are showing something real or true. In some ways, then, because the content becomes disentangled from its original discursive web, the form is the content; the medium (including all of its surrounding practices and technologies) is the message, as Marshall McLuhan so succinctly stated over forty years ago. Mashups are a logical extension of the possibilities presented through digital technologies to an audience of producers/consumers who developed their aesthetic sensibilities in the postmodern era of music videos and episodic television.

Finally, Kaplan argues that music videos tend to evoke a split identification for the viewer either through contradictory or multiple representations of characters within the video, or through such editing techniques as television screens pictured on the television screen. Music videos blur the distinction between subject and image to such a degree that a “new kind of story that reflects this changed relationship of image to self” can be produced. Representation becomes multiple and contradictory, so the subject’s relationship to the representation also becomes slippery and conflicted. Unified, linear, narrative images of the self do not dominate the aesthetic field of mashups.

Sherry Turkle argues that online environments, in particular, reveal a sort of breakdown of identity, a multiplicity of selves that has no center. One could approach

27 Ibid., 40.
29 Kaplan, 44.
30 Ibid.
mashups as an aesthetic reflection of this decentered, multiple subject. Turkle is careful to point out, “Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate. Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to a point of immobility.” What we have, then, are seemingly contradictory experiences of multiplicity and coherence at the same time. Bolter remarks that texts that employ a multiplicity of voices need not be “chaotic,” but may instead function “in a perpetual state of reorganization, forming patterns that are in constant danger of breaking down and recombining.” The goal is to have a self that is multiple but integrated, just as the objective of a mashup is to refashion seemingly discordant bits of cultural material to produce new coherences that do not necessarily abide by old aesthetic dictates. In the context of YouTube and Web 2.0 technologies, this happens both at the level of aesthetics and the level of participation. Participation in virtual communities can be as intermittent or consistent as one desires or imagines: one post on a message board does not necessarily beget another, but a user can repeatedly revisit a message board to participate as little or as much as the user desires. Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapter, community can be imagined as localized to just one message board, or as a network of message boards that are linked by YouTube’s recommendations, each of which may support or demand a different subjectivity from the user. The social networking as well as the aesthetic progression of mashups is unpredictable, intermittent, and unsteady.


32 Bolter, 12.
Furthermore, because the samples unfold in unpredictable ways, the experience of time becomes equally unpredictable. The notion of unified, linear, progressive time helps us order our lives by giving us a story with which to make sense of our experiences. Coherent subjectivity, then, is predicated on the conception of linear time. However, experiences of linear time are disturbed by the form that complex mashups take: although the music continues through time, it often does so in unpredictable ways. For example, in rx2008’s mashups, the accompanying instrumental tracks to “The End of the World (As We Know It),” and “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” and “Should I Stay or Should I Go” are presented mostly unedited with Bush’s or Blair’s speech-vocals and other sound effects laid over the familiar sonic material. In non-political mashups, such as “Toxic Love Shack,” which mashes Britney Spears’s hit “Toxic” with the B-52’s hit “Love Shack,” the sonic elements are a combination of instrumental hooks from Spears’s song and the vocals from the B-52’s song. With such popular cultural materials being spliced together, the expectations of a user who is familiar with the audio materials are constantly thwarted and renegotiated as previously established patterns fail to hold.

The accompanying images do not necessarily present any sort of narrative progression either. As noted above with respect to the political mashups, the visual are often astonishingly varied and they draw from such a variety of sources as archival war footage to bull-fighting. In “Toxic Love Shack,” the visuals switch back and forth between the videos for the two original songs in ways that do not line up with the mashed sonic elements. Just because a user hears “Toxic” does not mean that she sees a part of

the Britney Spears video. Thus, there are potentially asynchronous experiences coming from the visual and musical domains. There is not necessarily a sense of story that develops as the music video happens. Rather, there is a compounding of information that occurs not in a cause-and-effect temporal-logical scheme, but in an additive scheme. Kaplan argues that the constant return of the face of the star singer in a music video is what allows the spectator enough stasis to gain pleasure from the viewing experience. However, this figure is absent within mashups, which are comprised of many faces, many images, and often a fragmented voice that is either represented by a choppy edit of someone speaking/singing (thus indicating that the edits came from unconnected points in time), or is represented by spliced samples from multiple voices. Because the sense of time for the viewer is lost, as is the rooted signifier around which the spectator can construct meaning (such as a main narrative character), the result is a sort of perpetual present in which the spectator becomes somewhat disoriented. To borrow a term from Barthes, mashups are “writerly” texts in that the reader/user is invited to make meaning in a way that does not abide by traditional narrative practices.\(^\text{34}\)

The editor’s manipulation of time not only helps to create or destroy coherent subjectivity, but it also constructs the subject’s relationship to a community. Benedict Anderson argues that a sense of shared time is imperative in the creation of an imagined community, or, in this case, a virtual community.\(^\text{35}\) Because of the on-demand nature of YouTube, mashups are subject to endless repeating, partial viewings, and intermittent


plays—all of which allow a viewer to share in the community that develops on the
message boards without ever experiencing time in the same way as another member, and
without ever fully subjecting him- or herself to a temporal paradigm that is shared by
others. Time becomes contradictory, partial, and multiple at both the aesthetic and
participatory levels, adding to the ways in which mashups and the experiences of them
are postmodern. Because of the breakdown in temporal order, participants in a
community have to find new ways to relate that are not predicated on an investment in
shared time.

There is a tendency among some cultural theorists\textsuperscript{36} to cast postmodernism as a
desperate paradigm in which nothing has any value over any other thing, where
coherence does not exist for the subject, and where the division between such ordering
principles as good and evil, right and wrong, break down. By contrast, Kaplan eloquently
demonstrates how postmodernism can be productive rather than destructive, particularly
with respect to representational practices:

In its radical, Derridean form, postmodernism embodies an attack on bourgeois
signifying practices. As a critical theory, postmodernism exposes how these
practices, posing as speaking what is “natural” and “true,” in fact set up a
transcendental self as a point outside of articulation. But the practices conceal this
point of enunciation, which is that of bourgeois hegemony, so that the spectator is
unaware of being addressed from a particular position. The postmodernist critic
and artist use radically transgressive forms in an effort to avoid the false
illusionist position of a speaker outside of articulation. The “freeing” of the
signifiers is in this case a kind of strategy – a way of preventing their usual
linkage to mythic signifieds.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} For examples, see Frederic Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism} (New
York: Verso, 1991), Guy Debord, \textit{Society of the Spectacle} (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), and Jean
Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{37} Kaplan, 147.
In other words, Kaplan finds that postmodern principles can offer new ways of thinking, new ways of telling, and new ways of being that are able to cast off or at the very least subvert oppressive hierarchies of social and aesthetic organization. Brian Rotman explains that virtual technologies allow us to move past patterns of thought associated with linearity and scribal hierarchies “by promoting forms of thought, of art, of presence, movement, and agency that elude or nullify the effects of total ordering.” Virtual technologies, despite their potential downfalls and limitations, offer in theory the possibility for a new way of thinking and being in the world. Nevertheless, this possibility is not being realized in any widespread fashion: instead, as noted in chapter 1, the mashups and their commentary re-enact debates from other venues and other media rather than instigating a radical change in the social order.

CONCLUSION

Any shift in the flow or availability of information can potentially create a new way of thinking about the world and new solutions for existing problems. As Miller notes, “ Sampling is like sending a fax to yourself from the sonic debris of a possible future; the cultural permutations of tomorrow, heard today, beyond the corporeal limits of the imagination.” Even though a postmodern aesthetic engendered by new media technologies constructs a decentered, fragmented text, the result of which is the creation for new possibilities in the way we think and use the materials at hand, that does not

39 Miller, 76.
mean that existing ideological paradigms are not enforced in other ways (such as the behavior on the message boards, as explored in the previous chapter). Recalling again Levinson’s definition of a medium as something that is given meaning through its uses as well as through its materials, we must approach these hopeful ideals in light of the behavior surrounding the mashups. In spite of the potentially transformative aesthetics being employed by mashups, existing political and behavioral paradigms are still shaping their uses, effectively stunting the potential to foster new ways of thinking and being in the world.

While pre-existing and limiting social behaviors are inhibiting the potential of new aesthetic paradigms to reshape the ways in which we approach our world, mashups do reflect shifting levels of awareness concerning the constructedness of representations. This increasing awareness has made audiences more attune to such rhetorical devices as irony and pastiche, a trend that is evidenced beyond mashups in other arenas of popular culture such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, cable channel Comedy Central’s popular, satirical political news program, and its counterpart, *The Colbert Report*. Comedy Central advertises *The Daily Show* as its “fake news” program, but the show’s topics and material are drawn from actual current events that are satirized or exaggerated by Stewart and the show’s various news correspondents. *The Colbert Report*, a spin-off of *The Daily Show*, satirizes political pundit programs such as Fox News’s *The O’Reilly Factor* and MSNBC’s *Countdown With Keith Olbermann*. By satirizing news programming, both *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* call
attention to the ways in which media representations of current events are extremely contrived.

Like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, mashups also deconstruct naturalized notions of truth inherent in mainstream representations of political events. These television shows and mashups mine these representations for materials which, when placed in new contexts, no longer make sense in the same way that they once did or in the way that they were supposed to. For example, on a recent episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, several of the show’s correspondents were sent to cover the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. In a segment titled “The Best F#&king News Team Ever – Small Town Values,” several clips from Republican politicians’ speeches in which the party was lauded for its embrace of “small town values” are spliced together. The segment then shows *The Daily Show’s* correspondents interviewing attendees of the convention, inquiring what exactly constituted “small town values.” Not surprisingly, the answers the correspondents received ranged from humorous (one man said “fishing”) to vague to homophobic, highlighting the tendencies of politicians and mainstream news coverage to offer incomplete or uncritical portrayals of political events. In a similar move, Cal-TV’s mashup “Imagine This” places the lyrics “You may say I’m a dreamer” with images of President Bush exhibiting very little response when told about the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. At the end of the mashup, Cal-TV places an un-edited audio

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clip of Bush stating, “All of us want peace” before a visual punctuation comprised of rows of American soldiers’ caskets (thus questioning the notion of “peace” in this context) and young Iraqi children (thus questioning who is and is not meant by the phrase “all of us”). Both of these examples demonstrate the ways in which Cal-TV, like several other mashup artists discussed, juxtapose various bits of cultural material to show the ways in which political ideologies offered to the public through speeches and popular news representations are incomplete. As in the example from The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, the use of irony destabilizes the truth value that these representations may otherwise purport to hold and deconstructs the ideologies which certain political actors and actions aim to reinforce.

Though mashups and postmodern representational practices are not necessarily ushering in a new or even reformed political paradigm, they are, at the very least, fostering more careful and skeptical reading practices among viewers. Mashups (in parallel with other popular cultural materials such as satirical news programming) are calling attention to the constructedness of representation and are encouraging viewers to consume their news with more skeptical eyes and ears. Mashups not only offer alternative representations, but also foster more critical modes of interpretation, which in turn encourages the denaturalization of political representations. These aesthetic practices, together with the shift away from corporate production of media toward more democratic production practices, indicate a marked shift in the culture of political commentary.
CHAPTER 4

MUSICKING IN VIRTUAL SPACES

Many scholars who write about music from an ethnographic point of view agree that music is integral to community building, that it has the capacity to produce enthusiasm, solidarity, and affective response among participants in these communities.\(^1\) However, very few theorists have ever posited a convincing reason why it is music specifically that has this effect. In other words, music’s import is regularly acknowledged, but rarely explained. Christopher Small points out that, in Western discourse, at least, we tend to imagine music as a fixed, transcendental object, unrelated to and unaffected by the acts that actually constitute the musical experience such as creating, perceiving, and responding: “Whatever meaning art may have is thought to reside in the object, persisting independently of what the perceiver may bring to it. It is simply there, floating through history untouched by time and change, waiting for the ideal perceiver to draw it out.”\(^2\) Small encourages us to think of music differently, not as “a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing ‘music’ is a


\(^2\) Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 5.
figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely.” As Alfred Schutz explains, all experiences of music draw on “preknowledge” of music, formed through past, social experiences of music—such that the meanings of musical experience derive from the citation and subversion of convention based on “socially derived and socially approved knowledge.” In other words, we come to understand and use music as socially constructed subjects in particular sociohistorical moments using culturally situated materials to produce meaning in a specific discursive context that allows us to communicate in relationship to one another. If that description seems complex, that is because the experience of musicking is complex. For example, it is impossible to experience a mashup on YouTube without at least acknowledging the traces of others who have watched the video—traces such as play counts, comments, and response videos—all of which surround the visual field of the videos themselves. This interactive quality highlights the idea that a mashup is a profoundly social practice that begins when the video is posted and continues in conversation among users thereafter. According to Schutz, social communication through music is predicated on the mutual tuning-in relationship, “which originates in the possibility of living together simultaneously in specific dimensions of time.” Schutz argues that we are able to form relationships through musicking based on pluridimensional notions of shared time.

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3 Ibid., 2.


5 Ibid., 162.
Schutz differentiates inner time from outer time by explaining that inner time is the perception of musical events on an individual level, whereas outer time is the shared notion of time passing irrespective of what is happening musically. Schutz explains, “sharing of the other’s flux of experiences in inner time, this living through a vivid present in common, constitutes what we called… the mutual tuning-in relationship, the experience of the ‘We’ which is at the foundation of all possible communication.”

His postulate needs to be modified for online “tuning-in” relationships. First, as discussed in the previous chapter, the experience of time with respect to mashups is often non-linear, fragmented, and even contradictory because of the on-demand nature of YouTube and the piecemeal audio and visual elements of which mashups are comprised. Therefore, it is difficult to base a definition of online communication on the notion of a shared “flux of experience” in inner time. Because of the breakdown in temporal order, any sort of mutual tuning-in which allows us to feel connected to those with whom we are musicking in virtual spaces cannot be predicated on an investment in shared time. Second, Schutz highlights the importance of face-to-face relationships and bodily gesture in the unification of fluxes of inner time between individuals.

Musicking in imagined community (to return to Benedict Anderson’s paradigm for a moment) is not predicated on face-to-face contact, but on the notion of a shared relationship with others whose traces we find in our virtual spaces and with whom we share conceptions of affiliation, aesthetic values, and space.

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6 Ibid., 173.
7 Ibid., 177.
Music is a key to these shared relationships. There are hundreds of popular political mashups on YouTube, many of which do not have distinct musical elements. For example, there is a mashup of Hillary Clinton’s campaign speeches and the famous 1984 Apple “Think Different” ads that, as of August 13, 2008, has garnered over 38,000 comments and over 5.3 million views, and there is a mashup of one of John McCain’s speeches in which his words are edited to make him announce that he is running for President Bush’s third term. The musical mashups on political topics are distinctive in that, as demonstrated in the second chapter, the communities that form in response to them explicitly share both political and aesthetic values, which are to a great extent held to be inseparable. Because of these shared values, the musical act of consuming and responding to the mashups creates more complex relationships among users than do many of the other audio-visual mashups.

Small argues compellingly that we should approach music as a verb rather than as a noun: musicking. Musicking, rather than having any sort of self-contained meaning, establishes a set of relationships, in which the meanings of musicking as an action lie:

[Meanings] are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as those participating in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world.

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10 Small, 13.
In the context of the political mashups, musicking allows users to articulate their relationships to other users, to the larger political climate, to the material that is being “mashed,” and in some cases, to the world by sharing aesthetic and political experiences in an online environment wherein new relationships and new signifying practices are possible.

Particularly important for this project is the way that musicking not only reflects but can strengthen a sense of community by fostering and highlighting the relationships between participants in musical events. One of the ways that this is facilitated with respect to mashups is the addition of the comment boards attached to each piece. Talking about musicking is, according to Small’s definition, yet another way of musicking. The conversations that we have about musicking shape the way that we ascribe meaning to the musicking in which we partake; “talking about musicking and comparing musical experiences is not only an inexhaustible source of conversational literary topics but can enrich the relationships which taking part in performances has created.”

Musicking can create communities among certain groups of participants, who then become part of the musicking.

MUSICKING POLITICALLY

One might at first think that the political efficacy of mashups on YouTube could be measured by examining mashups of songs that are commonly considered “protest” music (for example, songs like John Lennon’s “Imagine,” Pink’s “Dear Mr. President,”

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11 Ibid., 210.
Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” or NWA’s “Fuck Da Police”). However, a quick exploration of George W. Bush-or Iraq-war-themed videos on YouTube reveals that political conversations are happening through and about videos that support the political status quo. In fact, as of August 13, 2008, Matt5581’s mashup of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)”\(^\text{12}\) has been viewed over 600,000 times—twice as many as Cal-TV’s “Imagine This,”\(^\text{13}\) which received considerably more public attention beyond YouTube. Similarly, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” has been commented on over 5,000 times, nearly five times the number that “Imagine This” has received. This is remarkable especially in light of many similar mashups of Keith’s song that vie for attention on YouTube. Both mashups are hosting similar, heated political debates about the United States, the War on Terror, President Bush, etc., though the rhetorical dynamics, as evidenced in the second chapter, are slightly different. It would be an oversight to consider only one of these videos, because of its history as a “protest song” and its inclusion of anti-war images, to be the locus of political debate and action when clearly they both are serving that function.

The discipline of popular music studies has not attended enough to the ways in which music supports the status quo. Popular music study does take the interaction between music and human relationships to be its primary focus,\(^\text{14}\) and often the central

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13 Cal-TV, “Imagine This,” YouTube, http://youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=VafZic-UM_Q.

concern is music’s role in politics. The study of protest music is not new—in fact, one
could easily argue that scholars of popular music have been too focused on music’s role
in political and social resistance. However, it is important to acknowledge that all acts of
musicking are political, whether or not they are resistant. Daniel Fischlin argues that
popular music becomes political

through the expression and consolidation of solidarity with rights initiatives,
through playing a key role in the pedagogy of rights culture in the dissemination
of pertinent information, through the activation of the emotive powers that are all
too often detached from the actual instruments of rights legislation, through the
raising of money for rights causes, and through participation in the development
of the kinds of critical consciousness without which rights discourses would be

However, this description is one-sided. Fischlin concedes that “[w]e generate sound and
ideas about sound as extensions (reflections) of our political cultures, but also as critiques
thereof” (Fischlin 11), but neglects music that allows users to express solidarity with
dominant ideologies or political regimes. To fight against rights initiatives is also
political: it reinforces the power of a certain group.

In a broader sense, all interactions between participants are embedded in power
relations, and thus have a political element. Because the idea of musicking encourages us
to approach a musical event by thinking about the involvement of individuals at every
level, we can consider many ways in which music is political. The responses posted to
each mashup are, in a sense, part of the text—and they are undeniably always political in
some way because, in any given response, someone’s ideologies are being communicated
to a broader audience. Even the way that mashups position users to listen/watch is political in that they are designed to appeal to some users more than others, and certainly some of the meaning of a musical event comes from how well the appeal works.

What are we to do with the notion of a protest song if all music is political? To begin with, it will be useful to define what is generally meant by the phrase “protest song.” Deena Weinstein defines a protest song as a song in which protest “means an opposition to a policy, an action against the people in power that is grounded in a sense of injustice.”\(^\text{16}\) Stephen A. King further explains, “protest songs often contrast that inherited evilness of its enemy with the movement’s virtues with the hope of drawing distinct lines between right and wrong.”\(^\text{17}\) Both Weinstein’s and King’s definitions are predicated on the lyrical content of a song. This approach is too limited when exploring the political capacity of music. We should be wary of placing certain musical acts too rigidly in the category of “protest music” (especially when the assignation is based primarily on lyrical content), for the meaning of a certain song will change over time with its reception and its use. Ian Peddie acknowledges that “if social protest is made up of collisions, then it is also formed by fissures and fractures, by the very kind of resulting ambiguities that make the changing faces of popular music so vexing and so appealing.”\(^\text{18}\) Because of these fissures and collisions, modes of social protest are constantly shifting as are the media


\(^\text{18}\) Peddie, xvii.
they employ. The relationships that are enacted and reflected by a particular piece of music, then, are also constantly changing based on any number of contextual factors in the constitutive acts of musicking. This is especially important to consider when dealing with new media because of the many ways in which audiovisual messages travel through cyberspace. Any given YouTube video can literally be embedded in thousands of different contexts where the social dynamics change. YouTube even offers all users the HTML codes to embed videos in other virtual spaces, such as on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, in emails, or on webpages. In fact, as demonstrated in chapter three, the notion that meanings of cultural materials can change based on context forms the basic aesthetic principle of mashups: it is possible to recontextualize something old in order to make it mean in a new way.

All music is political because it is produced out of political relationships, but there is nothing in sound that is inherently political or resistant. I do not mean to deny the impact of protest songs by acknowledging that the force of their effect may change over time as their contexts change, but here John Street’s point is paramount: “social movements create a context in which music assumes a political role.” For example, John Lennon’s “Imagine” is only a “protest” song when the sentiments it expresses and the connotations associated with John Lennon are in contradiction to those of the dominant political body. In a more obvious example, “Endless Love” becomes overtly political when it is reconfigured as a mashup duet between George W. Bush and his pro-

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19 This can be disabled if the poster of a video requests that it be.

war English ally, Tony Blair. “Endless Love” is not overtly political in the same way when it is played among a medley of love songs at a wedding reception. In different contexts, these songs have different meanings.

AUDIO-VISUAL INTERPELLATION

Because musicking is always embedded in power relations among socially conditioned individuals, “[w]e may be sure that somebody’s values are being explored, affirmed, and celebrated in every musical performance, at any time, anywhere.”\(^{21}\) The objective of producing any audiovisual objects is to communicate to certain audiences, or to interpellate subjects in a specific way. John Fiske explains,

> In communicating with people, our first job is to ‘hail’ them, almost as if hailing a cab. To answer, they have to recognize that it is to them and not to someone else, that we are talking. This recognition derives from signs, carried in our language, of whom we think they are. We will hail a child differently from an adult, a male differently from a female, someone whose status is lower than ours differently from someone in a higher social position. In responding to our hail, the addressees recognize social positions our language has constructed, and if their response is cooperative, they adopt this same position. Hailing is the process by which language identifies and constructs a social position for the addressee.\(^{22}\)

Interpellation is the process by which social relations are constructed between participants in an act of communication, and this happens in an already discursively constructed matrix of power relations.

Precisely because of the ways in which they interpellate specific audiences, Deena Weinstein points out that the songs that we identify as “protest songs” are limited in their

\(^{21}\) Small, 77.

effect; they tend to rally more than they recruit. She writes, “What protest songs do is preach to the choir and, perhaps, to the congregation…. Prayers, hymns, and sermons bolster our faith and reinforce our knowledge, if not our practice, of what our religion preaches.” Protest songs that are geared toward particular audiences reinforce beliefs and can encourage action. Thus, mashups (like any media form) work to both interpellate and alienate certain audience members based on their social locations. For example, Matt5581, who created the aforementioned mashup of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” also created a montage-style mashup of Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.,” the description for which reads: “I am aware of the message Bruce Springsteen is really giving in the song, I put that aside to show support for America regardless.” Matt5581 blatantly disregards the lyrics, which criticize the effects of the Vietnam War on the United States, to create another pro-war video populated by images of soldiers in Iraq; thus, the users who view this song may be ultimately either hailed by the anti-war lyrics or the pro-war images, or both. Depending on where a user is positioned politically and socially, the mashup will generate different experiences and different meanings. A pro-war user who found the mashup either by tracking down more of Matt5581’s videos might whole-heartedly embrace Matt5581’s pro-war stance and his (mis)appropriation of Springsteen’s anthem, whereas a user who found the mashup by searching for videos of “Born in the U.S.A.” might have a very different experience. The user may feel alienated by the images in the video, or may feel

23 Weinstein, 14.

a relationship with other users like omfgbbqsauce who criticized the dissonance between the generally accepted meaning of the song and the pro-war images.25

We use musicking as a modality for affirmation and celebration of our identities and our relationships. The function of political musicking, “especially in company with like-feeling people,” writes Small, “is to explore and celebrate our sense of who we are, to make us feel more fully ourselves. In a word, we feel good.”26 Mashups solicit a viewer’s identification with or rejection of the text by employing certain discursive codes or conventions that audiences will understand, and with which audiences will be able to place themselves in a relationship that represents their social position. In Cal-TV’s mashup “Imagine This,” samples of “Hail to the Chief,” “Imagine,” “Give Peace a Chance,” and “Strawberry Fields Forever” can all be heard such that “one or two notes in a distinctive musical style are sufficient to target a specific social and demographic group and to associate a whole nexus of social and cultural values with a product.”27 By using “Hail to the Chief,” Cal-TV invokes the idea of the American presidency. By focusing primarily on “Imagine” as the sound material for the rest of the video, Cal-TV draws on associations between John Lennon and peace movements (an association that is bolstered by the use of Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance” and the Beatles’ iconic “Strawberry Fields Forever”). By quoting several different genres either visually or sonically, the appeal of mashups is broadened and made more complex through the use of inside jokes coded

25 In a comment on “Born In The U.S.A. – Bruce Springsteen,” omfgbbqsauce quotes Matt5581’s description of the video followed by the word “Loser.”

26 Small, 142.

through irony (whether intended, as with having Bush speak the words to songs such as
“Imagin..." or unintended, such as Matt5581’s video of “Born In The U.S.A.”), pastiche
(as in jedreport’s mashup of a McCain campaign speech that, aside from obvious visual
edits, has John McCain announcing that he is running for President Bush’s third term),
and even camp (as in the mashup that places George W. Bush and Tony Blair in a duet of
“Endless Love”). However, because of their complex and disjointed signifying
practices, because they have viral lives in virtual spaces that are less easily policed by
legal forces than other venues for music distribution, mashups are perhaps more
amenable to interpelling broader audiences, and thus recruiting in addition to rallying.
This is particularly true because these mashups are easily portable across virtual spaces.
People re-post and send these mashups to others, bringing attention from audiences who
might not have found the mashups on YouTube themselves. At the same time, the
complex signifying practices and technological limitations can also alienate audiences
who are unable to make sense of or gain access to the media.

MUSICKING ONLINE

Political subjects are no longer tied to physical space, and the music that they use
can (as we have seen in the previous chapter) come from and go anywhere, interacting
with many other users on its path. Michael D. Ayers explains that, within the framework


of mashing that unseats traditional boundaries between past and present cultural activity, technology has allowed private creative spaces, “within the musical context at least, [to blur] activism and politics with musical fandom and creativity.” Communal political musicking is not localized in the way that it used to be, and the arbitrary division between political action, fandom, and creativity is no longer viable. Mashups allow users to be creatively political and politically creative with sounds and images that they admire or detest.

Small makes clear that the venue for musicking deeply affects the meaning of a musical event. According to Small, the modern concert hall, for example, is built on the assumption that a musical performance is a system of one-way communication, from composer to listener through the medium of the performers. That being so, it is natural that the auditorium should be designed in such a way as to project to the listeners as strongly and as clearly as possible the sounds that the performers are making.

While Small’s understanding of the concert hall may be a little simplified in that it doesn’t account for the ways in which audience members interact and participate, it is hard to deny that, in performance settings in which the stage is elevated above the surrounding audience, a hierarchy of sonic importance is implied. The relationships between listener and performer are highlighted and engendered by the space in which the musicking occurs before a single note of music has been played. Certain spaces position participants in certain ways.

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31 Small, 26.
What are we to make of musicking in virtual space? To begin with, it is fairly obvious that virtual spaces position users in completely different ways than do concert halls, stadiums, parlors, festival grounds, or even cars—all spaces in which users have limited control over how or when they musick. In virtual spaces, users are given considerably more agency: they choose when to begin the performance, where to experience it, how many times they want to hear it, and at what intervals. Users can sit by themselves, or they can share their experiences with an audience in their bedroom or office. The lights can be on or off, the musical experience can be the primary focus in the user’s life, or it can serve as background noise. None of these characteristics is unique to musical experiences in cyberspace, however. The advent of modern recording was the first step in dismantling some of the hierarchies inherent in public experiences of music, but virtual spaces take the potential engendered by sound recording one step further (while also sidestepping some of the corporate control over mass distribution of sound recording): virtual spaces allow users to simultaneously experience music individually and in community at their own choosing.

On message boards in virtual environments, anyone can be a published critic or philosopher of art, and anyone can shape the perception of a musical event by their own participation in the commentary. Anyone can act out (in a written context) and be as unruly a user as they choose (as evidenced in by the obscene commentary cited in the second chapter) by hiding behind the protective cloak of anonymity. Furthermore, if a user perceives a specific performance to be subpar, the availability of technology to recreate or resituate the materials of the performance makes it possible for the user to
present their own performance in a public venue. For example, Pink’s “Dear Mr. President” is one song that has been set many times to different images, though the music remains the same. There are several mashups of the song whose images focus on Hurricane Katrina victims, homelessness among people of color, victims of war, and families of soldiers, but there is also one created by a Dutch teenager, Sarina Meester, who has styled herself as the original artist Pink and interspersed videos of her lip-synching amid a slideshow of photos of Bush, the Bush daughters, victims of the AIDS crisis in Africa, mothers of victims of war, soldiers’ coffins, maquilladoras, Hurricane Katrina victims, and the homeless. Meester inserts herself into the mashup to reflect her agency over the expressive potential of the images, while also acknowledging that the sonic materials are not originally her own through her obvious lip-synching. The hierarchy of performer(s) above the audience is almost entirely neutralized in online spaces. Anyone (pending availability of technological resources, of course) can music in any capacity and is positioned with undeniable agency not available in other types of performance venues. This allows for new relationships to form in which individual users can feel empowered to act either on their own or in concert with the communities that have formed in their virtual spaces. In either case, users can now experience musicking relationships in which the agency is theirs.

32 Ferrisstateguy, “Dear Mr. President,” YouTube, http://youtube.com/watch?v=ITZZ6-qCYIE.


34 I would like to note here that it is possible to treat one’s computer as a virtual concert hall, but the important point is that passive listening is no longer the only option because of virtual technologies.
There are, of course, limits to virtual politics and virtual musicking. The limitation of virtual spaces is occasionally addressed among the various commentators on the message boards corresponding to the mashups examined here. There was some criticism of using the Internet as a site for political debate because it was not considered “active” enough. Comments like, “we need to go out and do somthing, and stop making these stupid Internet videos as a form of protest, it wont do any good” and “USA is a great country and you people sicken me arguing over the Internet. Give me your address if you dare” were fairly common on all of the message boards where political conversations were occurring.

Despite this criticism, the possibility of these message boards for fostering democratic models of debate was recognized, and civilized discussion was encouraged even among arguing parties. In response to being criticized for his extensive presence on the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” message board, one anti-war user who actually formed a friendship with a war supporter who had a boyfriend in Iraq, reminded his critics, “This is a forum for discussion.” After a long debate about religion on the “Imagine This” message board, one user commented, “It is always a breath of fresh air when reasonable people can debate ideas, without the usual ‘F’ bombs flying, insults fired off from the safety of their keyboards.” While the limits of online political action were acknowledged on the message boards, the users overwhelmingly

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35 Gihaddd, comment on “Imagine This.”

36 Geoff678, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

37 TALIBANBOYOReturns, comment on “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue – Toby Keith.”

38 Jstreets1, comment on “Imagine This.”
regarded the virtual space as a site for civilized debate, and also as a site for building communities based on similar political and aesthetic values.

YouTube, because it allows the ability to comment on the media that it hosts, has the potential to challenge (as can many other cyberspaces) “political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy”\(^39\) as well as the debate and contemplation citizen-based democracy can inspire. However, as the earlier chapter on cybercommunities shows, this potential is not always being realized. While participation is broader across time and space, the comment boards on mashups are still largely populated by rude and offensive commentary. There are productive political conversations in which both sides of contentious issues are civilly debated occurring between individuals who likely would not ever meet, and it is in these interactions that I see the democratizing potential of online spaces being realized, even if it occurs amid the clamor of virtual shouting.

CONCLUSION

Music mashups create community by drawing people with various political views together across spatial and temporal boundaries. Political music that invites contemplation, declaration, and participation through its lyric and sonic elements, in addition to the new communal order reflected by musicking in virtual spaces, inscribes a different set of relationships than music that is created and received within more traditional performance practices. However, the communicative economy is not radically

different from that observed in offline conversations. In fact, rather than offering a new modality political debate, the conversations that many users are having online are merely hyperbolic versions of the debates occurring on television, in newspapers, or in face-to-face conversations. The fact that YouTube users have social habits that are developed in offline spaces shapes their behavior in online spaces; this ultimately leaves much of the potential offered by online communication technologies unrealized.

Will Straw clarifies that the important processes of change across musical terrains are not necessarily located in transgressive or oppositional qualities of musical practice or consumption. The important processes neither affirm nor disrupt existing social divisions, but rather rearticulate social differences in many different ways along various lines through building coalitions around musical form and through musical actions.\(^{40}\) Musicking facilitates the reconceptualization and rearticulation of human relationships, but it does not necessarily transcend them as they are constructed in the extramusical, offline world. While Web 2.0 technologies have not necessarily revolutionized the way we communicate, they have allowed online users to challenge the hegemony that media companies hold over the dissemination of ideas and cultural materials and they have, as evidenced by YouTube, democratized political participation—even if that participation is largely shaped by offline paradigms.

Many theorists have argued that the potential for technology to spur political reform revolves around the new aesthetic possibilities embodied by mashups. Within cybercommunities specifically, musicking provides an activity through which we can, as

Andre Pinard and Sean Jacobs argue in their research on virtual hip-hop diasporas, “restructure or renegotiate the terms of cultural production”\footnote{Andre Pinard and Sean Jacobs, “Building a Virtual Diaspora: Hip-Hop in Cyberspace,” in Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture, ed. Michael D. Ayers (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 103.} while (possibly) creating new forms of social relationships. Because mashups deny narrative conventions and offer new ways to resignify and recontextualize cultural materials, it is often argued that they allow for the reimagination of political paradigms along with aesthetic paradigms.

Unfortunately, as noted above, this potential is not being entirely realized because of the limits imposed by deeply embedded communicative behaviors. Rather, by fostering more critical reading practices and more reflective consumption of popular cultural materials, mashups both reflect and cultivate an emerging aesthetic sense that supports the deconstruction of representations in such a way that inspires political reflection and conversation. In other words, mashups and other cultural materials that rely heavily on postmodern rhetorical devices such as irony and pastiche are encouraging viewers to take more analytical approaches to news media and political actions.

Ignoring the ways in which musicking that is not specifically related to “protest music” can have political ramifications would be a mistake. The various online mashups and the communities that develop in response to them examined in this study highlight the ways in which music can be used to both protest and support the status quo, thus participating in political acts that are not necessarily resistant or subversive. Depending on context, one musical example can serve both purposes (such as Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” which was appropriated for a pro-war mashup despite Springsteen’s lyrics, which are critical of the United States’ actions in Vietnam). It is desirable to
follow Small and Levinson by approaching the significance of media not as something that is based in materiality as if media were isolated, ahistorical objects, but as constituted by the interaction between culturally situated materials and practices. The significance of mashups lies not only in their aesthetic properties, but also in the uses to which they are and are not put. The medium and the practices shape, feed, and restrict each other’s potential.
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