

Chapter 4. The Sonic Collage Assignment: Aesthetics, Affect, and Critique in Audio Sampling

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I developed the sonic collage assignment in the fall of 2015 while teaching a first-year composition course called Writing about Popular Music. The course asked students to create, brand, and maintain independent music blogs where they would critique albums, artists, and tracks using a variety of analytical frames. I encouraged students to develop their own voices, styles, topics, and approaches within the parameters of each task I gave them, and each assignment attempted to provide students with an opportunity to express their ideas about culture and art in ways that felt authentic and important to them. However, since neither music nor writing are exclusively personal, I also encouraged students to collectively act as a subpublic that cocreates new ideas and knowledges through composing, distributing, circulating, reading, remixing, and responding to each other's texts. The class blog I created helped to facilitate these kinds of interactions by acting as a hub that linked all of the students' individual blogs together, while also functioning as a space for me to post articles, instructions, and videos to which students could directly respond.

Despite the emphasis on music, creativity, and collaboration, I had not thought to develop any assignments that asked students to create original sonic compositions until the class read Mark Katz's (2010) *Capturing Sound*. Katz's book focused on phonograph effects—how a culture's musical practices (writing, performance, distribution, circulation, etc.) are influenced by its recording technologies. In the seventh chapter, Katz explained that for millennia composers have quoted each other within their original compositions, and he argued that digital sampling is a continuation of this practice. As far as Katz was concerned, the primary difference between notated allusions and digital samples is the specificity enabled by the latter. While composers working with musical notation are limited in how specific they can be in recreating another composer's work, composers working with digitized musical samples can almost exactly recreate any specific recorded performance of whatever work they want. In both cases, musicians are bringing the works of others into their original compositions; one method is simply more exact.

My students and I were intrigued by the comparison between quoting, a practice with which we were all familiar, and sampling, a practice none of us had tried before; we realized that in order to truly understand the similarities and differences between these two practices, we would need to go beyond discussion and engage in what Mark Amerika has referred to as “practice-based research” (CU Boulder

Libraries, 2014). We would need to make our own compositions out of sampled sounds. Since the course was already underway, I offered the sonic collage assignment as extra credit. There were very few parameters: Students were simply asked to create a 3-minute audio track using ten samples and four audio effects. They were instructed to use one of the three compositions Katz (2010) critiqued in chapter seven of *Capturing Sound* (Paul Lansky's *Notjustmoreidlechatter*, Fatboy Slim's "Praise You," and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power") as a model for their own work. Following these models was largely arbitrary, but they each asked students to focus on a different way sound can be used—aesthetically, affectively, or critically. For technical instruction, I decided only to help students if they came to see me. Otherwise, I let them learn to use sound-editing tools by engaging with the tutorials created by the sound-editing community itself because this community is the type of subpublic after which I had been modelling the class.

In the end, I was glad the assignment was not required and that I took a hands-off approach to teaching digital sampling because the ad hoc nature of the whole experience emboldened students to experiment and take risks, which led to compositions that were not only interesting but also prompted productive class conversations about the ethics surrounding appropriation, citation, creation, culture, identity, homage, manipulation, originality, ownership, sampling, and the inherently personal, social, and material nature of both sonic and written composition. My students and I never established definitive stances on these topics, but we did learn to ask better questions through our engagement with soundwriting.

The next academic year, I remixed the sonic collage assignment for another first-year composition course focused on writing blogs about popular music. For this iteration, I asked students to create audio histories of musical genres—to sample performances that were instrumental to fashioning a particular genre and put them into conversation with one another so that listeners could hear the evolution of a musical tradition. The class discussed how historical narratives are creative compositions that demand their authors make rhetorical choices, but despite these discussions, the assignment fell flat and felt lifeless. It was clear that the students were not engaging in playful practiced-based research about a method of sonic composition; rather, they were composing linear histories for a grade. The compositions were still interesting, but they were more reserved and less experimental.

When I assign this project in the future, I will be going back to the original structure, asking students to create digitally sampled sonic collages based on loosely constructed categories in which they can experiment and play with bringing other voices into their original compositions, but I want to make some modifications. Since first assigning this project, I have read work by Jean Bessette (2016), Jared Sterling Colton (2016), Dylan Robinson (2016), and Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (2016) that highlights the risks of appropriation, colonial violence, and misunderstanding that accompany remix, and I want my students to be aware of these issues. When they sample and remix, I want students to be thinking about community (Banks, 2011), and I want them to be thinking about care (Persaud, 2018). I want my cours-

es to be subpublics that cocreate knowledge through play and invention, and that requires students to think about their compositional practices and how these practices affect others.

Assignment Prompt (2015)

For this assignment, you will create a 3-minute audio track in the style of either Paul Lansky's *Notjustmoreidlechatter*, which mixes up voices to create concept art; Fatboy Slim's "Praise You," which samples and manipulates music to create a dance track; or Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," the introduction to which functions as a sonic collage expressing the group's political beliefs and shared cultural background. After you have created the piece, post it online (using Google Drive or a similar cloud storage platform) and comment on the class blog with both a link to the audio file (either MP3 or OGG) and a link to an MLA works cited page of the samples you used. To receive full credit for this assignment, you must use at least ten samples and four audio manipulation effects.

Some resources you might find useful for completing this assignment:

- Audio-Editing Software
- A YouTube-to-MP3 Converter

Assignment Prompt (2017)

This assignment asks you to research a musical genre and create an audio history that describes how it has changed through time by creating an audio track composed of short samples from different iconic, important, interesting, or essential songs from within that genre. You can add more depth to your audio history by layering tracks, looping tracks, applying effects, or adding non-musical audio samples that are evocative of the various time periods and important figures associated with the history you are creating.

To successfully complete this assignment, you must use at least 15 different audio samples and three different effects. You can create your audio history manually or digitally, but I must be able to access the final product via computer. Feel free to use whatever sound-editing technology you are comfortable with.

To submit the audio history, please save it to a cloud storage platform (I suggest Google Drive), make the file accessible to the public, and post a shareable link to the class blog in two weeks.

Sample Student Projects

1. "Trump Trap Mix" by Abby: In this mix, Abby provides a critique of Donald Trump and his then current Republican primary campaign. As a traditional conservative who also values diversity and inclusivity, Abby was baffled and upset by how Trump's hateful rhetoric was bringing him success in the polls. This anger and confusion are most clearly present in Abby's use of the Blind

Witness sample that screams, “What the fuck is going on?” Overall, Abby’s critique is much more nuanced and subtle than this lyric. The track begins with *The Twilight Zone* theme song and ends with applause and game show music that express the ways in which the campaign capitalized on entertainment. The use of screaming fans, Kanye West lyrics, and Lil Wayne hooks are juxtaposed to quotes demonstrating Trump’s ignorance and vitriol in order to elucidate how Trump uses American society’s infatuation with celebrity culture and excess in order to compensate for his deficiencies as a politician. What emerges from this remix is a portrait of Trump as a showman who uses fanfare, excitement, and humor to deflect from his ignorance and bigotry.¹

2. “Sonic Collage” by Anthony: The background of Anthony’s “Sonic Collage” is Gary Jules and Michael Andrews’s soft and melancholy song “Mad World,” and the foreground is a series of quotes responding to the increasing influence of evangelical Christianity within United States law and policy. Each of the speakers advocates for secular governance grounded in data-based science, implying that decisions based on biblical teachings are not only misinformed but also cruel in that they lead to policies that are homophobic, misogynistic, oppressive, regressive, and reactionary. The highly emotional music and logical quotations work well together, with the former adding affect to the latter by highlighting the emotion in each speaker’s embodied voice and the latter providing a sense of justification for the ennui of the former. This track invited important classroom discussion about both inclusivity (because the composition critiqued masculine power but failed to include women’s voices) and audience interpretation (because several conservative students thought the composition was a lamentation on how liberal values in education were leading to the creation of ungodly governance in the United States rather than a critique of religion in government).
3. “Beyoncé Mess” by Logan: “Beyoncé Mess” was an appropriate track for Logan, whose work all semester had focused on Queen Bey’s discography. This is a dance track composed solely of Beyoncé songs cut up, spliced, layered on top of one another, distorted, reworked, and remixed. The track lacks the type of consistent beat that generally defines the dance genre, but the author does an excellent job using backbeats to connect the different sections of the episodic to create some sense of cohesion. Similarly, Logan manages to create a few genuinely danceable moments where she briefly captures a groove, though whether those moments were created by Logan, the samples she was using, or the interactions between the two was actively debated in class. Surprisingly, this track opened up very little discussion about appropriation and citation because the class unequivocally agreed that it was a respectful homage to an artist Logan clearly admired.

1. Five student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book’s companion website.

4. “Enlgish [sic] Assignment” by Megan: Megan’s “Enlgish [sic] Assignment” begins simply as a series of samples from contemporary pop and dance songs lined up one behind the other, only really notable because of the rapidity of its transitions. However, the track soon becomes much more interesting as individual samples interrupt, layer over, and compete with one another for attention. Sound effects add to the maelstrom to create a disorienting experience that is only partially counteracted by the recurrence of several samples. Despite some musical motifs, the most coherent aspect of the track is its lyrical theme, with all the vocalists expressing cynical views of romantic love as they tepidly enter into new relationships. Students responded positively to Megan’s track but were unable to express why, providing us with an opportunity to discuss the importance of affective and bodily responses to sound even if those responses are not “danceable” in the conventional sense of the term.
5. “English E. C.” by Rachel: Rachel’s “English E. C.” plays the music of Ellie Goulding underneath quotes taken from interviews with Payton Head, the University of Missouri student body president who led protests leading to the resignation of University System President Tim Wolf in 2015, and Jonathan Butler, the student activist whose hunger strike initially sparked the protests that would unite students across the Mizzou campus, including the university’s football team. Goulding’s feminine voice is mournful, supportive, and uplifting under the voices of the two young Black men who are discussing the issues of systematic racism on their campus, the lack of institutional leadership, and their own actions to bring about a more equitable and just future. Several of my students who had been paying attention to the story on the news found this depiction of events illuminating because it invited them to empathize with the students in a way traditional media stories did not; however, the use of a white British female musician whose songs focus on romantic relationships combined with the heavy-handed editing of Black male voices did invite questions of appropriation and cultural stereotyping for some students already invested in the unfolding events.

Reflection



Figure 4.1. Visual collage created by the author, in the spirit of the soundwriting assignment discussed in this chapter.

[A funky electronic beat composed of *The Avalanches'* (2009) "Frontier Psychiatry"; *I Monster's* "Daydream in Blue" (Dharma Records, 2013); *GRiZ's* "Hard Times" (HeadyTunes.co, 2013); and *Girl Talk's* "Smash Your Head" (Negyxo, 2007).]

Ben Harley: I originally developed the digitally sampled audio assignment as part of a Writing about Popular Music class in which students created music blogs where they wrote reviews of albums that they chose based on their own personal branding.² Developing these music blogs invoked a rich rhetorical ecology that asked students to continually consider their voices, their topics, the voices and topics of other reviewers, the genre of the review, and the needs of their intended audiences in order to create new and impactful writing.

To help students with this work, the class read album reviews, rhetorical analyses of music, and cultural studies articles that served as models for student writing. In addition to these texts, the class read Mark Katz's (2010) book *Capturing Sound*, which explains the ways in which recording technologies throughout history have influenced the ways in which music is composed, performed, distributed, circulated, and listened to. I had hoped that Katz's book would provide students with a basic introduction to musicology, a few in-depth genre histories, and a way of considering music-making as a rhetorical act. I was not, however, expecting the book to change how students thought about their own writing by making direct connections between their compositional practices and those Katz ascribes to musicians. Ultimately, it was this connection between the composing practices of musicians and those of alphabetic writers that became the primary value of Katz's book within the class. This was particularly true in regards to our discussion of engaging and integrating source material.

In Chapter Seven of the book, Katz claims,

Mark Katz: "the roots of digital sampling reach back more than a millennium" (2010, p. 148)

[*Josquin Des Prez's* "Missa L'Homme Armé Sexti Toni 5. Agnus Dei" (*micrologus2*, 2009), an ecclesiastic chant.]

Ben: —and he cites medieval chants, Renaissance masses, and the allusive practices of classical composers to demonstrate a long tradition of what he refers to as musical quoting. Katz claims that digital musical quoting is an extension of its analog predecessors with the primary difference being that the notational method of analog quoting cites a musical work whereas the splicing method of digital quoting cites a particular performance of a musical work.

[*Clyde Stubblefield* "Funky Drummer;" a funky drum solo, plays over the chanting (*Armando Drum Breaks*, 2016).]

2. The audio version of Ben Harley's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

Despite this important difference, both quoting practices involve taking aspects of previous compositions and manipulating them to create something new.

To explain what kinds of new things can be generated from the assembled fragments of digitized musical samples, Katz provides four examples:

1. The art piece that [*Paul Lansky Notjustmoreidlechatter, a disorienting jumble of speaking voices (Romański, 2013)*] **Katz:** “transforms the ordinary into the precious” (2010, p. 153) **Ben:** —and questions the border between sound, technology, and music in the example of Paul Lansky’s *Notjustmoreidlechatter*;
2. the dance song with [*Fatboy Slim’s (2010) “Praise You,” a peppy dance song*] **Katz:** “a subtlety that rewards close listening” (2010, p. 156), **Ben:** while also opening up issues of creativity, identity, appropriation, and power in the example of Fatboy Slim’s “Praise You”;
3. the political hip-hop track that is [*Public Enemy “Fight the Power,” a hip-hop song composed of densely layered samples (Channel ZERO, 2020)*] **Katz:** “dizzying, exhilarating, and tantalizing” (2010, p. 161), **Ben:** as it quotes, loops, celebrates, and participates in Black traditions of rhetoric, politics, and music in the example of Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power”; and finally,
4. the music of hobbyists that [*The Freelance Hellraiser’s “Stroke of Genius,” a pop rock combination of Christina Aguilera’s “Genie in Bottle” and The Strokes’ “Hard to Explain” (Mazzarella, 2007)*] **Katz:** “exists outside the traditions, practices, and institutions we typically associate with composition” (2010, p. 172), **Ben:** while opening up questions of musicianship, participation, and community in the example of mashup artists such as The Freelance Hellraiser.

In his book, Katz provides generous readings of art objects within these four groups, but he does not shy away from the difficult questions they raise about appropriation, meaning, community, identity, creativity, and the responsibilities of composition. Each analysis demonstrates that sampling is both a valid form of engagement and a problematic practice.

The chapter ends with a discussion of how sampling is the art of transformation:

Katz: “a rich and complex practice, one that challenges our notions of originality, of borrowing, of craft, and even of composition itself” (2010, p. 176).

Ben: Based on this statement, I asked students, who had already connected the quoting they did with the musical quoting Katz writes about, to discuss how sampling invites them to rethink how the composer should engage her sources; I received a wide variety of answers:

Paraphrase performed by Austin Davis: Source material needs to be attributed out of respect for the original author.

Paraphrase performed by Sandra Kolder: Source material is merely raw data to be manipulated to the whims of those who sample and quote it.

Paraphrase performed by Joe Eckman: Sampling is okay as long as the aggregated samples make something original.

Paraphrase performed by Elizabeth Harley: The concept of originality is itself a myth.

Paraphrase performed by Regina Wilkerson: Anything an author makes will inherently be original because no two people are the same.

Paraphrase performed by Emma Harley: Quotes need to build to something beyond the source material in order to be useful.

Paraphrase performed by Patricia Harley: Ethical sampling is not appropriation if it creates a conversation between the author, the sources, and the audience.

Ben: It was clear that investigating the similarities between sampling and quoting was helping students reconsider how they interact with sources, and I wondered if having hands-on practice with musical quoting might help them to think further about how they choose their sources, how sources can be manipulated, and the ways in which those manipulations have ramifications for the source, the source author, the quoting composer, the quoting composer's composition, and other external audiences. In other words, I wondered if providing students with an opportunity to engage in what Mark Amerika refers to as

Mark Amerika: "practice-based research"

Ben: would enable students to understand the subtleties of source engagement and the inherently social aspects of composition (quoted in CU Boulder Libraries, 2014). I hoped that digital audio sampling would help to teach how authors engage others socially through their writing practices. I hoped this experience would make clear the ways in which all writers are always relying on others to help them generate the perhaps-not-so-original ideas they coproduce.

[The Avalanches' (2009) "Frontier Psychiatry," a haunting, horn-heavy electronic song.]

By the time I had this idea, the course was underway. I had already outlined all the assignments, and it would have been unfair of me to require a new one. In response to this problem, I decided to offer students the opportunity to create a digitally sampled audio composition as extra credit. Because I wanted to see what students would produce, I offered a lot of extra credit. The instructions were vague:

Paraphrase performed by Marc Walls: Create a 3-minute audio track that includes ten digital samples and four sound effects.

Ben: I assumed students might want an example, so I followed Katz's lead and instructed them to either create an art piece like Paul Lansky's *Notjustmoreidlechatter*,

[Paul Lansky's Notjustmoreidlechatter, a disorienting jumble of speaking voices (Romański, 2013).]

a dance song like Fatboy Slim's "Praise You,"

[Fatboy Slim's (2010) "Praise You," a peppy dance song.]

or a densely packed sonic collage like the first forty-five seconds of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power."

[Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," a hip-hop song composed of densely layered samples (Channel ZERO, 2020).]

Students were quick to point out that the distinctions between the genres were blurry because each of the models were simultaneously art, music, and collage, and though I agreed with the critique, I kept the arbitrary taxonomy as a way to help students focus their energies towards aesthetics, affect, or critique.

Aside from the assignment prompt, I didn't provide much guidance on how to create these tracks and instead encouraged students to download the free sound-editing software Audacity and learn to use it through online instructions, tutorials, and message boards created either by the production team or by its community of users. I chose such a lax method of instruction not only because this was an extra-credit assignment that not everyone was doing but also because moving the onus of expertise from myself as the instructor to the organic intellectuals within Audacity's sound-editing community demonstrated another social aspect of writing: the creation, distribution, and circulation of instructional tools. Students not only found and used these kinds of resources, but they also shared them among each other, creating their own social learning community that extended beyond the borders of the physical and digital classroom environment I had designed for them.

On the day the assignment was due, I blocked off the entire 50-minute class for sharing and discussing the compositions. Though students were initially reticent to share their experiments with a new medium, presenting work in progress had become a regular part of the course, and I soon had volunteers. Some students shared social critiques—like Abby . . .

[Abby's "Trump Trap Mix," a combination a Lil Wayne's bass heavy rap track "A Milli" with Donald Trump saying, "I'm really rich," once normally and once with deep distortion.]

. . . Anthony . . .

[Anthony's "Sonic Collage," which combines Gary Jules's melancholy song "Mad World" with the celebrity scientist Bill Nye saying, "just a reflection of a deep scientific lack of understanding."]

. . . and Rachel.

[Rachel's "English E. C.," which combines Ellie Goulding's soft, pop-electronic track "Burn" with John Butler, the University of Missouri student who went on a hunger strike to protest the university's failure to handle racial harassment on campus, saying, "I had someone write the N-word on my wall."]

Some students shared dance tracks—like Megan . . .

[Megan's "English [Sic.] Assignment," a rather cut-up and aggressive electronic song.]

. . . and Logan.

[Logan's "Beyoncé Mess," which combines Beyoncé angrily saying, "Where the hell you at?" from "Jealous" with the soft and melodic music from "Pretty Hurts."]

No one created something they were comfortable referring to as art, but many had expanded beyond the prompt to create narratives, hype tracks, and experiments.

All of the compositions my students produced sparked conversations between authors and listeners about the composing process, the affective dimension of sound, the politics of citation, and how to ethically create something using borrowed material. Overall, the assignment went well. Students gained nuanced understandings of source engagement through practice, they raised important questions about appropriation and subjectivity, they felt empowered by having taught themselves to compose in a new medium and genre, they came to understand writing as a social process that affects other humans in specific ways, and they had a lot of fun doing it.

The next year, I tried adding more structure to the assignment and giving it to another Writing about Popular Music class that had not read the Katz book. Specifically, I asked these new students to gather samples and create audio histories of a genre they were planning on writing about. In hindsight, I think the combination of the strict parameters and the grading encouraged students to take less risks than the previous group. For instance, I asked students to learn Audacity for themselves again, but they asked me to give a lecture. I asked students to remix and reimagine genre histories, but they chose to organize their tracks linearly.

These second-generation compositions pale in comparison to their first-generation counterparts, and when I give this assignment again, I will make sure to

include the Mark Katz reading, abandon any rigid guidelines, and keep the emphasis on creative source use.

Thank you.

[Goblins from Mars's (2017) "Super Mario—Overworld Theme (GFM Remix)."]

Copyright Statement

In “The Sonic Collage Assignment: Aesthetics, Affect, and Critique in Audio Sampling,” I use clips from 14 audio works and eight visual images that are protected by U.S. copyright law. However, I believe I have a fair use defense to use all of these works without permission for these reasons:

1. The purpose and character of my use is for these clips to be part of my scholarly project, which transforms their character from the purpose for which their creator originally made them. Six of the audio files and all of images are used to give voice to works that are alluded to either explicitly or implicitly in texts from which I have taught and on which my assignment is based. The other eight samples are famous examples of remix culture that explain the types of composition practices I am discussing. Further, I intentionally pulled all of the audio samples from YouTube, many of which were posted by someone other than the copyright holder in order to demonstrate the ease with which remixes can be made and to inhabit the composition practices I am discussing. Similarly, I pulled all of the images directly from Google image searches, pulling images from sites that mostly also did not own the original copyright. This practice, made salient by the messy citations, makes clear the regularity with which works are incorporated and remixed into new compositions.
2. The nature of the copyrighted pieces is musical and visual.
3. I only used a small amount of each clip, usually played softly in the background. Further, when possible in the context of my argument, I used clips that did not represent the core, most substantial part of the original copyrighted work. Similarly, I never used the whole of any visual image. Instead of privileging any image, my header demonstrates the variety of the texts being remixed and the ways in which they both enhance and obscure one another.
4. As an audio clip repurposed for purposes of teaching and scholarship, there is no chance that my use will infringe on the potential market for these copyrighted works. To encourage others to understand the networks in which these samples exist, I include full citation information that others can follow if they want to hear the full works that I sample.

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