

THE SOUNDS OF RED AND BLUE AMERICA: DISSECTING MUSICAL  
REFERENCES TO “RED STATE” AND “BLUE STATE” IDENTITY IN PRINT  
MEDIA DURING THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN.

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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# Introduction

## The Red-Blue Lexicon

Red and blue, of course, have become more than just the conveniently contrasting colors of TV graphics. They've become shorthand for an entire sociopolitical worldview. A “red state” bespeaks not just a Republican majority but an entire geography (rectangular borders in the country's midsection), an iconography (Bush in a cowboy hat), and a series of cultural clichés (churches and NASCAR). “Blue states” suggest something on, and of, the coastal extremes, urban and latte-drinking. Red states – to reduce the stereotypes to an even more vulgar level – are a little bit country, blues are a little more rock-and-roll.

— Paul Farhi, writing for the *Washington Post* on Election Day 2004<sup>1</sup>

A late 1930s promotional photo for the Coon Creek Girls shows the four women wearing calico print dresses and carrying their instruments while wading barefoot in a creek. The first all-female string band on the radio, the Coon Creek Girls was a group imagined and created by radio producer John Lair. The women played “hillbilly” music on a live radio program called the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*. Contrary to their visual and sonic radio identity, they were not all Southerners and did not dress in calico dresses offstage.

Visual representations of performers on barn dance radio programs in the 1920s and 1930s were created in accordance with cultural conceptions of the hillbilly. The term “hillbilly” gained currency as country music in the South was commercially recorded and marketed as a genre. Although hillbilly musicians came from all over the country and from various class backgrounds, they were transformed into regional stereotypes the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Farhi, “Elephants Are Red, Donkeys Are Blue; Color Is Sweet, So Their States We Hue,” *The Washington Post*, 2 November 2004, C1, in LexisNexis [database on-line], accessed April 18, 2006.

radio listening audience could easily visualize. The Coon Creek Girls' old-time musical performance became a space where hillbilly lyrics, costumes and stage names were constructed. The group's sound came first, and visual representation followed (dictated by their manager). Listeners connected the sound of hillbilly to images of calico-clad, rural folk. As hillbilly became a musical style, its sound came to connote a certain type of person. The word "hillbilly" circulated as a reference to regional identity.

During the United States 2004 presidential campaign, music was similarly used to connote voter identity. To describe "red state" and "blue state" regional cultures, the campaigns and the media employed references to sounds such as country music and rock and roll. Newspapers and magazines ran photographs of musicians with candidates or musicians playing at rallies and conventions. The Republican and Democratic conventions chose their musical program carefully, employing specific styles to represent values. While "red state" and "blue state" circulated as nationally understood descriptors of people and places, references to sound became part of the red-blue discussion in print media.

The use of red and blue to represent cultural divisions has gained particular power in the last decade, but the practice began nearly three decades ago with the media's use of colors to represent states' electoral votes. Originally, the color red marked states that had gone to the Democrats and blue marked those that went to Republicans. In the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan's landslide win was called "Lake Reagan." In 2000, the

television networks reversed the colors, and *The New York Times* published its first color presidential election map, following the lead of the networks.<sup>2</sup>

In a 2004 *Times* article, Tom Zeller wrote about how the two colors gained representative power: “Whatever the subliminal debris, the 2000 election, which kept the nation staring at tinted maps for weeks as the outcome remained uncertain, appears to have cemented a decision that once could be safely governed by whimsy.”<sup>3</sup> In the *Times*’ map of red and blue, James Ceaser and Andrew Busch observe, “what the viewer saw was a vast sea of red surrounding a few beleaguered islands of blue.”<sup>4</sup> The map began to signify the state of American culture and the direction of American politics. “Republicans seized on this image and circulated these maps on the Internet with great enthusiasm. Democrats dismissed these pictures as wholly misleading, reminding everyone that what counts is the number of inhabitants in a district, not the expanse of its territory.”<sup>5</sup> Still, “red state” and “blue state” became standard components of the country’s lexicon. As Ceaser and Busch explain,

The terms “red” and “blue” have come to be used not just politically, to designate partisan leanings, but anthropologically, to describe cultural proclivities. This expansion of the metaphor, though it is suggestive in some ways, has had the unfortunate effect of conflating these two realms and of equating political divisions entirely with “cultural” divisions...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Zeller, “One State, Two State, Red State, Blue State,” *New York Times*, 8 February 2004, sec. 4, in LexisNexis [database on-line], accessed April 18, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch, *Red Over Blue: The 2004 Elections and American Politics* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

Robert J. Vanderbei, a professor at Princeton University, sought to complicate this dichotomous marking of cultural territory. After the 2000 and 2004 elections, he created “purple America” maps, which clarified voting patterns using county-by-county election return data instead of Electoral College results.<sup>7</sup> The decidedly purple result was an apt illustration for Thomas Frank’s 2004 book *What’s the Matter With Kansas?*, which explores the complexities of the country’s apparently simple cultural divide.<sup>8</sup> In his investigation of Middle America, Frank begins the book by highlighting cultural proclamations made by pundits in reference to the electoral map. Frank claims,

Just by looking at the map, they reasoned, we could easily tell the George W. Bush was the choice of the plain people, the grassroots Americans who inhabited the place we know as the “heartland,” a region of humility, guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman *righteousness*. The Democrats, on the other hand, were the part of the elite. Just by looking at the map we could see that liberals were sophisticated, wealthy, and materialistic.<sup>9</sup>

Frank claims the red-state/blue-state idea was an easy method of explanation for the media, and the divide was blown up into a looming, unanswerable question of who Americans truly were. He writes, “The ‘two Americas’ idea became a hook for all manner of local think pieces...it provided an easy tool for contextualizing the small stories ...or for spinning the big stories.”<sup>10</sup>

In today’s post-election landscape, politicians, political parties, activist groups and media continue to use the red-blue lexicon to explain regional loyalties and political

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Vanderbei, “Election 2004 Results”; available from <http://www.princeton.edu/~rvdb/JAVA/election2004/>; Internet; accessed 18 April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Frank. *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* (New York: Metropolitan, 2004), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17.



leanings. According to media reports and political analysts, there is still deep polarization in America between “red states” and “blue states.” More specifically, the values of the two “types” of states are generally opposing values.

However, the media also have questioned and problematized this divide. In a November 7, 2004, article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Sean Wilentz claimed the idea of “liberal coasts against the Real America” played into the conventional wisdom of right-wing Republicans.<sup>11</sup> He argued that red states have their own blue areas, usually urban areas, and claimed the real divide was between cities and the rest of the country. Admittedly, Wilentz’s claims posited another kind of cultural divide.

In a November 13, 2004, editorial in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Matt Nickerson wrote, “What exists is a map. That map has helped turn what was just an election, fiercely fought but still just an election, into the War Between the Blue and the Red.”<sup>12</sup> Nickerson goes on to discuss how the map is more than a map. Instead, it is a symbol that positions people as extensions of colors. He admits, “When you live in a blue state, it’s easy to forget that the shoe shopper next to you might be a red security mom. When you live in a red state, it’s easy to forget that the SUV driver with the IU plates might be one of Bloomington’s blue voters.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sean Wilentz, “Hicks Nixed Slicks’ Pick,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 November 2004, sec. M. Wilentz opened with the following paragraph: “‘It’s the secular coasts versus the religious heartland,’ CNN’s Tucker Carlson says of this year’s election results. That sums up the conventional wisdom that right-wing Republicans would prefer that you believe and that too many of the rest of us do believe. The effete liberal coasts against the Real America. Situational morality against real morality. Relativism against Standards. Metrosexuals against the God-fearing.”

<sup>12</sup> Matt Nickerson, “Red-and-blue map too black and white; There is no Blue America or Red America, but blends of those colors in every state, county and city,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 November 2004, 16, in LexisNexis [database on-line], accessed April 18, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

On Election Day 2004, Paul Farhi wrote in the *Washington Post*, “How has it come to this? What cosmic decorator did the states’ colors, reducing a continental nation’s complicated political and cultural realities to a two-tone palette?”<sup>14</sup> Farhi outlines the history of the red and blue map and notes that in the 2000 election, the *Washington Post* still used blue for Republicans and red for Democrats in its election graphics. Farhi observes,

As the 2000 election became a 36-day recount debacle, the commentariat magically reached consensus on the proper colors. Newspapers began discussing the race in the larger, abstract context of red vs. blue. The deal may have been sealed when [David] Letterman suggested a week after the vote that a compromise would “make George W. Bush president of the red states and Al Gore head of the blue ones.”<sup>15</sup>

One author, Morris Fiorina, has set out to prove the cultural divide wrong. In his 2005 book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina claims the culture war is a myth perpetuated by a small group of elites and activists.<sup>16</sup> According to Fiorina’s data, the general public is not nearly as polarized as has been reported. In fact, Fiorina claims that basic “values” in the red and blue states are actually quite similar. He cites a national survey done by the Pew Research Center in 2000, in which “red state” and “blue state” responses to questions about “beliefs and perceptions” were very similar. For example, 64 percent of blue-state respondents and 62 percent of red-state respondents agreed that there is “too much power concentrated in large companies.”<sup>17</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>14</sup> Farhi, “Elephants are Red.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Morris P. Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 18.

25 percent of blue-state respondents and 21 percent of red-state respondents agreed that discrimination is the main reason blacks cannot get ahead. Other categories in which “red state” and “blue state” responses were similar are “Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient” and “Corporations make too much profit.” In the survey portion on religion and morals, 46 percent of blue-state respondents and 43 percent of red-state respondents agreed, “Churches should keep out of politics.”<sup>18</sup> Fiorina concludes,

Given the surprisingly small differences between red and blue states that are apparent in survey data, what underlies all this discussion about the clash of cultures? The most plausible explanation is that culture wars, two nations, and similar exaggerations make an excellent story line for the media...<sup>19</sup>

One way the media signified the red and blue divide was through music.

Newspaper and magazine articles used references to types of music to describe “red state” and “blue state” culture and people. Part of this was a response to the campaigns’ effort to align candidates with specific musical artists, such as Bruce Springsteen. In his book *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music*, Chris Willman discusses how the country genre became wrapped up in the “cultural divide.”<sup>20</sup> For Willman, the history of country music in some ways parallels America’s cultural-political history. In reference to 2004 politics and Music Row in Nashville, Willman claims,

Some of this culture-war stuff was bound to find its way into country music, which, though hardly unilateral as a genre, typically gravitates more toward expressing the fears, beliefs, and hopes of conservatives, who

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 8.

occupy a majority of the artist roster as well as fan base at this point in the music's evolution.<sup>21</sup>

In the media, country music usually stood for conservative, red-state values. In some instances, it was a symbol of the common, working people with whom John Kerry could not connect. However, Chet Flippo, Country Music Television's editorial director, remains skeptical of the conflation of country-music listener and conservative values. Willman quotes Flippo: "The notion that all country fans are totally conservative is rubbish, and it's a result of cable news groupthink. These days everything must be easily labeled, pigeon-holed, and categorized, or it's dismissed as nonexistent. If something isn't red state or blue state, it can't be computed."<sup>22</sup>

George W. Bush and John Kerry's campaigns worked hard to compute the right match of music and values. The campaigns reflected and reinforced national consciousness about musical genres and politics. Rocker Springsteen became Kerry's musical representative and country stars such as Tim McGraw and Brooks & Dunn became Bush's.

This thesis explores how the media used references to sound, specifically music and musical genres, to represent "red state" and "blue state" identity. It investigates how textual representations of sound, in ways similar to images, work as subtle enforcers of the red-blue divide.

Bringing together cultural theory, sound theory and visual theory, this thesis investigates how sonic representations work to shape and reflect cultural ideologies. The primary investigation is how *references to sound in print media* work to construct and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

reconstitute identity. Specifically, this research looks at the media's employment of musical references to the "cultural divide." It explores how relationships between sounds, images, and the written word work in print media by looking at references to "red state" and "blue state" music in print media during the year 2004.

A secondary element of this research—and part of the theoretical basis—is to investigate the relationship of visual and sonic representations. While visual theories have been widely applied to theories of media and culture, theories of sound have been mostly relegated to music criticism and semantics. In addition, the relationship of visual and sonic representations in media has rarely been explored. But as Jeff Titon notes, disciplines that study sound are changing their methods of inquiry. The movement toward looking at sound as a cultural symbol brings sound into the same arenas where visual culture is discussed:

Today, the cultural study of music asks different questions, ones that bear on the relation of music to region, race, class, gender, politics, ethnicity, belief, identity, money, power, and the production of knowledge. Our questions concern music as lived experience, as commodity, as social practice, and as cultural symbol.<sup>23</sup>

The literature used in this thesis focuses more on the politics of representation, or cultural symbolism, than the physical or psychological aspects of seeing and hearing. The thesis discusses but does not rely heavily on semiology's systematic analysis of cultural codes. Instead, it focuses on the production of meaning and the social contexts of representation.

In the fields of cultural and media studies, little has been written about the representational power of the "red state" and "blue state" concepts or how such

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<sup>23</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, "Textual Analysis or Thick Description?," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, eds. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 171.

representations operate. The mainstream media have been more likely to enforce than problematize this divide. Academic work on the last two presidential elections has focused more on political outcomes than the hegemonic power guiding representation of this divide. There has been little theoretical study of how the media has reflected and shaped red and blue cultural concepts. Over all, there has been no large-scale investigation of the power of “red state” and “blue state” symbolism beyond the fact that it exists and is either truth or myth. Such research has relied more on political discussion, polls, and quantitative research. This research begins the work of investigating what form “red state” and “blue state” concepts have taken and how they are signified. It assumes that the media have been a space in which “red” and “blue” representations have circulated and where ideology is continuously constructed. It looks at how sound has become an explanatory device—a means by which representations of “red state” and “blue state” regional cultures have been reflected and reconstituted.

Using a theoretical framework of cultural studies, this research investigates how sound, similar to images, can function as a representation in print media. It analyzes the representation of red and blue identity in national print media during the year 2004. First, this thesis surveys theories of media in culture, visual theory and sound theory. The sources referenced in the literature review focus mostly on production, or the politics of representation, rather consumption, or the physical or psychological aspects of seeing and hearing. To investigate how readers use these media representations would require a second body of research.

This research has several basic aims. First, in the tradition of cultural studies, to

expose as constructed that which has been understood as natural, true or inherent. Second, to provide a space for discussing the red-blue divide that goes beyond political analysis. It aims to look beyond political and social analysis of the red-blue divide to analyses of how such a divide is constructed and represented. Third, it aims to apply sound theory in a new way and to extend the power of visual and lingual texts to sonic texts. In this research, the sonic texts analyzed are representations of sound—or references to music—in printed text.

The research objectives of this thesis are: 1) To provide a framework for understanding how sound can be employed in printed texts to make meaning—in this case, music; 2) To provide a new analysis of media representation of the “red state” and “blue state” divide and regional identities; 3) To explore how representations of sound became part of print media’s discussion of “red state” and “blue state” identity.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review: The Media Reflect and Construct Identities

#### Media and Culture

Media are a space in which cultural realities and unrealities are constructed and reflected. Media forms are arenas for representation in which society explains and understands itself. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explains how these representations gain power as cultural myths. Barthes claims that "...myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things."<sup>24</sup> Barthes describes myth as a second-order semiological system, in which signs (or symbols) have meaning already built into them by history. In mythic symbols, meaning is already complete.<sup>25</sup>

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language...which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first.<sup>26</sup>

Barthes' definitions are useful for exploring how "red state" and "blue state" representations might function as mythical speech, where myth has taken over language and meaning of these otherwise random terms is made "already complete." Ruth Wodak and Brigitta Busch, referencing Barthes, similarly describe a cultural studies approach to

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<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Visual Culture: the Reader*, Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds. (London: Sage, 1999), 52.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 53-55.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 53.



media texts; it is research that “focuses on the mythical elements on which ideological significations have been built.”<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the study of “red state” and “blue state” cannot be undertaken without dissecting the language, images, and sounds on which these ideological significations have been built.

Barthes’ contends that myth (or second-level signification) is *employed* by history. That is, culture adopts certain meanings as fixed, ahistorical truths: “myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification.”<sup>28</sup> Barthes terms this “depoliticized speech.” In many ways, the media’s employment of red and blue representations cast the cultural divide as ahistorical and depoliticized. A majority of the discussion of red and blue state differences was framed not as a political move, but as presentation of a widely understood truth about American culture. The divide itself was not up for question. Various forms of representation were subsequently built on this assumption.

Barthes notes that myth functions in a public arena, such as the media. Stuart Hall’s conception of media as sites in which knowledge is constructed—not necessarily reflective of social reality—further highlights the media’s ideological function in culture.<sup>29</sup> Hall argues the media can make certain groups’ interests legitimate as the “general interest” of society. He reflects on the breakdown of a pre-1960s pluralist conception of culture that assumed the media represented everyone’s reality (or a

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<sup>27</sup> Ruth Wodak and Brigitta Busch, “Approaches to Media Texts,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies*, ed. John D.H. Downing (London: Sage, 2004), 114.

<sup>28</sup> Barthes, “Myth Today,” 57.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” *Culture, Society, and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1982), 87.

consensus of cultural ideals) and explains how a more critical model of media research sought to understand media not simply as an effect or reflection of culture, but a player in hegemonic processes.<sup>30</sup> Hall sketches a critical framework for reading media and claims “in any theory which seeks to explain both the monopoly of power and the diffusion of consent, the question of the place and role of ideology becomes absolutely pivotal.”<sup>31</sup>

Media reflect society but also construct knowledge about social reality, contends Hall. Ideology always hides beneath popular knowledges, and Hall argues that by representing and producing structures of power in society “the media become part and parcel of that dialectical process of the ‘production of consent’—shaping the consensus while reflecting it.”<sup>32</sup> For this reason, media also can be a site of struggle for meaning, such as what it means to be of a certain race, or, in this case, what it means to be from a “red state” or “blue state.” The starting point for investigating media’s musical references to red or blue identity is this assumption that media is shaping a consensus but also reflecting it. Therefore it is important also to consider the work of campaigns to shape this consensus—and, subsequently, the media’s coverage of this work.

Essential to this inquiry in a larger sense, though not the specific focus of this research, is how the red-blue story emerges from real human experience and self-identification. James Carey echoes Barthes’ explication of the power of myth and Hall’s theory about the media’s production of consent with the following question: “How, in

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 62. See also Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 108. Williams says “ ‘Hegemony’ goes beyond ‘culture,’ as previously defined, in its insistence on relating the ‘whole social process’ to specific distributions of power and influence.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 87.

modern times, is experience cast up, interpreted, and congealed into knowledge and understanding?”<sup>33</sup> Carey’s project is to connection the study of mass communication to the inquiries of cultural studies. He considers historical views of communications: first transmission, where power is exercised over recipients, and second as ritual, where communication aids social bonding and creation of community. Carey’s own definition of mass communication incorporates both views: “communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.”<sup>34</sup> Certainly musical references to red and blue identity gain power from musicians’ and listeners’ conscious effort to create or appropriate something that is indeed representative.

A basic consideration of visual representation is useful for understanding how representations of sound might work. In Hall’s theory of media and “popular knowledge,” he declares that images are particularly dangerous representations because they appear as unmediated reality. Beneath this “naturalistic illusion” is a complex system of verbal and visual communication.<sup>35</sup> Susan Gubar similarly approaches race as a “naturalistic illusion” and traces how racial identity has been performed through such systems of verbal and visual communication. She argues that concepts of “black” and “white” have been constructed through different forms of media.<sup>36</sup> Gubar contends that while racial impersonations, or “racechanges,” have been part of a cultural obsession with keeping “black” and “white” separate, these performances also evidence a more secret

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<sup>33</sup> James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology,’” 76.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Gubar, *Racechanges* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xv.

desire to transgress boundaries of race. Gubar uses fine arts, photography, and written texts to “illuminate the powerful attraction of black people and their culture within the white imagination as well as the imaginative centrality of the color line for African-American artists.”<sup>37</sup> Gubar challenges both the stability of identity and the cultural forms used to signify identity.

Gubar references Harlem Renaissance artist Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Drawings for Mulattoes” as visual representations of “racechanges” that explore the possibility of mutuality and undercut stable definitions of race.<sup>38</sup> Nugent’s black and white drawings evoke both Africa and Western modernism. They picture figures in motion, performing both black and white, male and female. But Gubar suggests recent media events prove cultural concerns about “racechanges” are not relegated to past eras. For example, the continued hype over Michael Jackson’s lightened skin and plastic surgery and the claims that O.J. Simpson became “darker” as his trial progressed suggest that performances (visual and behavioral) and the way we represent performances to ourselves (in the media) show a cultural obsession with definitions of race. Gubar shows how cultural obsessions with identity reside in media forms but also how the dual nature of representations can complicate meanings made in media. Gubar’s “black” and “white” bear resemblance to a current national preoccupation with “red” and “blue.”

Performances such as blackface minstrelsy, argues Gubar, are long-running cultural performances that both define and mystify race in America. Lisa Flores contends that print media representations of immigrants have also played a historic role in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 107-112.

constructing American national identity by racially marking immigrants.<sup>39</sup> Like Gubar, Flores identifies a constructed racial subjectivity in media reports of Mexican immigration in the 1920s and 1930s. She identifies a “public vocabulary,” still employed today, in which “immigration and criminality are so closely connected rhetorically that the slippage from immigrant to criminal seems almost natural.”<sup>40</sup> Flores argues that newspapers constructed Mexican immigrant identities on concepts of race and nation to play on American fears about cultural mixing and keep immigrants “outside” American values.<sup>41</sup> She contends that Mexican immigrant bodies were used by media as “rhetorical [spaces] for national discussion of race and nation” and connects the mediated discussions of Mexican immigrants to the deportation drive of 1931, concentrated in Los Angeles.<sup>42</sup>

By looking at newspaper articles from the period, Flores finds that the drive was more about rhetoric and media-produced fear than it was about actual deportation. State involvement in the drive was limited, but media coverage scared immigrants into repatriating. Echoing Hall’s description of media as producer of consent, Flores argues that the media, as a rhetorical force, worked together with the state to “create the ideological climate in which governments can achieve their desired ends.”<sup>43</sup> She argues that narratives such as one representing Mexicans as “peon laborers” worked to construct

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<sup>39</sup> Lisa A. Flores, “Constructing Rhetorical Borders: Peons, Illegal Aliens, and Competing Narratives of Immigration,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20, no. 4 (2003): 363.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 364.

a rhetorical border of Mexican/American that is still active today. Flores's "rhetorical border" (and the slippage between these borders) provides another reading of how identity functions in print media, and her description of bodies as "rhetorical spaces" is relevant to the contemporary portrayal of people from either side of the American "cultural divide."

Diana George and Diane Shoos address another political division. They examine the role of visual images in ongoing public debate over the death penalty. They argue that in the visual representation of execution in this debate, images can begin to deflect rather than illuminate political realities.<sup>44</sup>

...the visual can deflect—even undercut—the political...Michael Bernard-Donals, in writing of Holocaust photographs, posits a dual role for images of atrocity. Old photographs of horror-executions, torture, imprisonment, starvation are the kinds of images, he suggests, that construct a collective history at the same time that they manage a kind of shared forgetting. ... Historic photographs, in particular, propose to the viewer an act already completed, a history already understood, a politics no longer up for question. ... In the case of images of execution, for example, the visual performs a markedly tricky function. Is it evidence that the guilty party has been brought to justice, or is it morbid curiosity at best, voyeurism at its most base? ...How do varying modes of visual communication—TV news coverage, Hollywood film, posters, flyers, photo collections—work to construct collective history and deflect political realities at the same time?<sup>45</sup>

George and Shoos's description of images as an "already completed" act, or a politics not up for question, resonates with Barthes' understanding of how myth works. The idea that images can construct reality even while deflecting it reveals the possible duality of representation. For example, is it possible that the "red state" and "blue state"

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<sup>44</sup> George, Diana and Diane Shoos. "Deflecting the Political in the Visual Images of Execution and the Death Penalty Debate." *College English* 67 (2005): 588.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

representations are necessary to public discussions but also work as “closed” meanings that appear “natural” and undebatable—that is, they act as myth? George and Shoos examine how, “In the case of visual representations of execution and the death penalty...the viewer's attention can easily be redirected from crucial issues of race and class to the less threatening/less-‘political’ binary of whether or not the condemned is guilty or innocent.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the red-blue discussion deflects conversation about deeper structural issues about inequality, the political system, or even the way red and blue states are more similar than different.

These oft-deflected, deeper political realities complicate a culture’s self-understanding and shape its media. Paul Gilroy, in his project to reinterpret the cultural core of England’s “supposedly authentic national life,” challenges concepts of borders and cultural origins.<sup>47</sup> Gilroy explores the fluid nature of expressive cultural forms, and defines these forms—particularly music—as hybrid products of circulation within a black diaspora. In Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” a metaphor for the diaspora, identity is made by “routes” instead of “roots.” He suggests the power of black music sounds comes not from essentialist concepts of race and nation, but from “their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodize modernity.”<sup>48</sup>

Gilroy provides a way to begin understanding sonic forms as spaces where identity is negotiated and essentialist concepts are challenged. Music, like Hall’s

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 589.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 73.

conception of media, Gubar's description of "racechanges" and Flores' reading of immigrant bodies, becomes a site of contestation which, Gilroy argues, "becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves."<sup>49</sup> This semantic indeterminacy is central to the study of visual and sonic media, particularly where "red state" and "blue state" music or sound is presented as a space that reflects fixed cultural truths.

## Visual Media

In politics, as in other forms of salesmanship, the road to success is paved with good impressions.

The power of images to impress is the reason why the Pentagon went to the trouble of arranging the Gulf War as a photospectacle, shooin reporters away from B-52 bases and plying them with whiz-bang smart-bomb videos so that after endless reruns even a skeptical viewer could not begin to grasp that, according to Pentagon sources, as many as 95 percent of all the bombs dropped on Iraq were of the old-fashioned dumb, indiscriminate variety.<sup>50</sup>

—Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*

Visual media can be both a site of contested, indeterminate meaning and a powerful reinforcement of ideological power. As Gilroy's description of music suggests, the processes of representation are thick with competing voices and power relationships. He argues that musical expression can accommodate this polyphony of voices and ideologies. Polyphony, a musical term referring to compositions with more than one melody in which no melody is dominant, is similar to Barthes' description of "the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>50</sup> Todd Gitlin. *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan, 2001), 127.



structure of the photograph.”<sup>51</sup> Here, it becomes evident how sounds and images can do the same kinds of work. The purpose of reviewing the literature of visual theory is to explore this similarity and use visual theories to understand how sound references might work.

Barthes argues that the photographic structure is not an isolated one, but communicates with at least one other structure—the written text. In the popular press, messages are thus carried by these two separate but cooperative structures. However, what distinguishes the photograph from the written text, and gives it power, is its “continuous message” or continuous denotation.<sup>52</sup> Barthes argues that a photograph is constituted and occupied by this denoted message, which is derived from a “common sense” understanding that the photograph is a perfect analogy of reality. The connotative message, a secondary meaning that can be made by the “culture” of the society receiving the message, is thus weakened. Todd Gitlin describes the veracity of images correspondingly: “...each image is not only itself but a prologue and a sequel, where *now* is always about to recede into *then*, we don’t care to make images stand still. We don’t fix them like fully developed photographs or inspect them for their multiple meanings. We dwell in them, not on them.”<sup>53</sup>

One kind of identity that visual culture can subtly denote is race. Richard Dyer analyzes how whiteness has been denoted by images and argues that the invisibility of whiteness is part of a continuous process by Western culture to designate white people as

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<sup>51</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>53</sup> Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*, 126.

white—not racially marked, but “ordinary.”<sup>54</sup> Dyer approaches whiteness the way other scholars have approached blackness—as a “race,” constructed through representation. He connects representations of white bodies in Western visual culture to Christianity, “race” and enterprise/imperialism.<sup>55</sup> These three concepts center on cultural understandings of the body:

...bodies containing different spiritual qualities, or of some having such qualities and others not having them (a trope of white racism), or bodies containing that which controls them and then extends beyond them to the control of others and the environment (a trope of enterprise and imperialism).<sup>56</sup>

Dyer contends that the representational power of whiteness depends on its paradoxical qualities. He argues that “white identity is founded on compelling paradoxes,” including the idea that white is a certain race but also the human race.<sup>57</sup> Dyer also identifies a white commitment to heterosexuality, which necessitates that men fight sexual desire and women have none. Dyer shows how representation is polysemic, even self-conflicted. Whiteness represents more than one identity—white and not white—as do Gubar’s “racechanges.” The apparent absence of identity (or representation of what is “marked”) may be a site of denotative power.

In addition to film and television, Dyer uses the history of photography to explore a ‘culture of light,’ in which white people became the privileged subject. He references Jacob Riis’ 1889 photo essay on immigrants, “How the Other Half Live,” and argues that

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

while Riis' project worked to dispel notions that poverty was a product of character, it also used race to explain why people remain poor, linking race to work ethic.<sup>58</sup> Riis' use of "light and dark, blur and sharpness to underline the difference among the poor" is also connected to representations of class and gender. Dyer argues that murky images are associated with poverty, immigrants, and criminality, while aristocratic faces are whiter and more sharply focused. Such visual tactics might be identifiable in representations of another form: the media's work to keep separate "red state" and "blue state" by using sound references. As with Riis' visual distinctions, sound representations worked to preserve a red and blue dichotomy.

The rhetorical slippage between identities, such as the slippage from "immigrant" to "criminal" that Lisa Flores identifies, or perhaps the slippage from "blue-stater" to "elite" or "red-stater" to "twang" also can occur visually. Erving Goffman identifies "slippage" between meanings in his study of how gender is represented in advertising.<sup>59</sup> He argues that social and psychological activity is made "readable" in advertising spaces, replacing actual behavior with how culture *thinks* people behave.<sup>60</sup> Goffman defines gender as the "culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning)" and thus defines "gender display" as "conventionalized portrayals of these correlates."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>59</sup> Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1.

Once a display becomes established in society through behaviors (ritualized), Goffman contends, it can be lifted out of original contexts and used in make-believe scenes to portray that which is “natural.” Again, Barthes’ description of myth resonates here. Exploring the line between natural and artificial, Goffman analyzes photographs from newspapers and magazines and finds that power and authority are indicated in images through, for example, relative size. Men are always taller than women in advertisements, unless the man is in a position of subordinate class.<sup>62</sup> Goffman also finds the “feminine touch” is portrayed in images as a gentle caress or cradling, while the male touch grasps in more utilitarian manner.<sup>63</sup> He identifies subordination in images of people who defer by lowering themselves physically, and discovers that children and women are pictured on floors and beds more often than men.<sup>64</sup>

For Goffman, the advertising image both reflects culturally-constructed relationships and reconstructs social relations for a more readable (or symbolic) form.

The image acts as an explanatory device:

...the job the advertiser has of dramatizing the value of his product is not unlike the job a society has of infusing its social situations with ceremonial and with ritual signs facilitating the orientation of participants to one another. Both must use the limited “visual” resources available in social situations to tell a story; both must transform otherwise opaque goings-on into easily readable form.<sup>65</sup>

Certainly the media’s use of “red state” and “blue state”—and corresponding traits—to identify voters and regions is an example of such an explanatory device. Such devices are

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 27.

employed regularly in media and other types of communication. This research specifically addresses how the media has made the complexities of a “red state” and “blue state” divide into easily readable forms.

## Sonic Media

In modern life, sound becomes a problem: an object to be contemplated, reconstructed, and manipulated, something that can be fragmented, industrialized, and bought and sold.<sup>66</sup>

Sound is an artifact of the messy and political human sphere.<sup>67</sup>

—Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*

The relationship of images and written text is a complicated relationship of intertextual meaning-making. This relationship—and the role of images in media—is well-documented. The relationship of sound (or symbols of sound) to print media, and the broader role of sound in culture, is less documented and theorized. Perhaps this is because it is difficult to conceive sound in terms of a “seen” text. For example, Barthes suggests a cultural difficulty with using language to interpret music and argues that music is “Is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective.”<sup>68</sup> He contends there is an aspect of music, specifically the “grain of the voice,” that language is thus far unequipped to understand. In the experience of listening, “There is an imaginary

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<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>68</sup> Barthes, *Image/Music/Text*, 179.

in music whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject hearing it...and this imaginary immediately comes to language via the adjective.”<sup>69</sup>

Barthes is concerned about how language, in a sense, “decodes” music. However, the larger question of this paper is how print media employs sound *representations*, which may come in the form of Barthes’ adjective. If sound concepts can make subjects “readable,” like visual texts, they may also work to constitute subjects—such as women, immigrants, races, or regional identity. Representations of sound in print, such as references to music or descriptions of the sound of regional speech, can make meaning much like (and in relation to) images in print. The problem in media and culture studies is how to evaluate what occurs at intersections of sound, language and also visual culture. One place to begin is surveying the role and history of sound in culture.

Nabeel Zuberi provides a historical gloss of the study of music in musicology and cultural studies disciplines. Zuberi’s explanation of music technologies reinforces the basis of this research: to recognize the presence and power of sound in a variety of media forms. Zuberi writes,

The meaning of music has been produced across the technological ‘sites’ of print, photography, radio, film, television, video, records, cassettes, CDs, MP3 files, and so on, as well as amplified concert performances ‘mediated in the flesh.’ For most of its life as media, music has circulated in various commodity forms across related media industries. Music cultures develop as *assemblages* of old and new technologies.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Nabeel Zuberi, “Sound Exchange: Media and Music Cultures,” In *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies*, eds. John D.H. Downing, Denis McQuail, Philip Schlesinger, Elen Wartell (London: Sage, 2004), 434.

Zuberi also discusses the visual economy of music and suggests that the visual can even supplant the authentic, sonic performance. Zuberi's work is helpful for conceptualizing how music can form a relationship with images or exists in forms other than sound.

Concerned with the sites where sound lives, Gitlin outlines how the spaces in our lives have been "soundtracked" and connects these soundtracks to power and politics. He describes how industrial spaces were first soundtracked in 1937:

...industrial psychologists in Great Britain proposed (in a report to the British Industrial Health Research Board titled *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work*) that music had charms to soothe the savage worker at his repetitive job when he might otherwise be absent, or going home early, or goofing off, or otherwise heeding an unorchestrated drummer.<sup>71</sup>

Gitlin discusses how institutions use sound to "brand" space and create a collective mood, and argues that these soundscapes are "administered" by those in dominant social positions and by communities who collectively create a soundscape.<sup>72</sup> Sounds are spaces in which power is exercised and specific intersections of time and space are signified.

Tia Denora, a music sociologist, also describes how music originates from a particular space, defines new spaces, and offers a place in which action takes place:

Music—its production and its reception—is inevitably located somewhere. That 'somewhere'—musically configured space—is where we can begin to situate music as a technology of 'control.' ... As cultural geographers and others concerned with space have helped to remind us in recent years, space plays an important role in the production of identity. Space can be understood as providing materials through which action—and agency, understood as capacities for action—is produced. If this is so, then it is possible to speak of space in terms of how it may inform or structure action, as affording actors with possibilities for action, types and styles of action.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*, 61.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>73</sup> Tia Denora. *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120.

Music has the power to “control,” recognizes Denora, in part by offering a space and materials through which to produce identity. Sound is both the place where this production occurs and the medium by which meaning is made.

Sound gains representative meaning through its use. Steve Jones explains the representative power of country music and its relationship with the press, noting “from the 1950s to the 1990s, a key theme in journalistic accounts is whether the current popular style of country music is ‘really’ country.”<sup>74</sup> He explains how country music depends specifically on the concept of “tradition.” The music’s production of identity revolves around representing this concept:

Country music’s generic boundaries have been a concern for as long as country music was a category, whether it was called old-time, folk, hillbilly, or country and western. The center of country music’s identity is its authenticity—country must remain more “real” and more “traditional” than other forms of music if it is to “stay country.” This generic identity is institutionalized in charts based on record sales, in radio station formats, in recording-company “arms,” and in performance venues. It is connected to particular musical sounds, clothing styles, performance practices...<sup>75</sup>

Jones observes that the authenticity of the sound and style of country music is of foremost importance to fans and performers. Authenticity is also of central concern to country music criticism, in part because the country music industry relies on production and “institutionalization” of this authentic identity.

Jonathan Sterne suggests we approach sound as a space where ideologies have been “grafted,” particularly in practices of sound recording and preservation.<sup>76</sup> He

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<sup>74</sup> Steve Jones. *Pop Music and the Press* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 184.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 8.



investigates the cultural meaning of sound by tracing the history of sound recording, and he connects the development of sound reproduction to an “ethos of preservation” that operated in Victorian culture.<sup>77</sup> Sterne argues that the cultural context in which sound was a signifier became secondary to the recorded sound product—reproductions, in effect, became valued over “original” sounds in culture.<sup>78</sup> Recording technology such as the phonograph thus reduced the life of sound while exercising power over a larger cultural concern: the processes of death.

Sterne investigates how cultural concerns, images, and concepts of sound intersected in RCA print advertisements for the gramophone. In an image from around 1900, Nipper the RCA dog sits in front of the gramophone horn with his ear cocked.<sup>79</sup> The advertisement, entitled *His Master's Voice*, presumably shows the dog listening to a recording of his dead master's voice. There is debate about whether the surface Nipper sits on, particularly in early versions of the image, is a coffin.

Without the more common frameworks of music or lyrics, Sterne's work situates the meaning and use of sound in a cultural context. He argues that the history of sound is about “wishes that people grafted onto sound-reproduction technologies—wishes that became programs for innovation and use.”<sup>80</sup> For Sterne, sound becomes evidence, “artifact” or representation of relations and conflict in culture: sound is an idea, not simply an occurrence. Sterne's contention that sound has meaning beyond its original

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 218-219.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 8.

sonic context provides a base for this paper's investigation of how and where this "secondary" meaning (or representation) is employed.

Sound-reproduction technologies, contends Sterne, do not function as neutral conduits of sound, but rather as substantive parts of social relationships.<sup>81</sup> Sound-reproduction technologies are not ontologically separate from a "source," but are part of mediated process of making meaning of sounds. As such, sound representations present the same problem of "truth" as photographs. Both are cultural forms that gain meaning from their historical contexts and the media in which they are employed. Although Sterne references technologies such as the phonograph and radio, his argument is applicable to a more general notion of the function of media as "part and parcel of ...shaping the consensus while reflecting it."<sup>82</sup>

Karen Bijsterveld's research on the symbolism of sound in noise abatement campaigns uses concepts similar to Sterne's "grafting." She argues that "sound has been highly controversial and deeply invested with symbolic significance."<sup>83</sup> She focuses on the sound of technology and how technology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped the soundscape of Western society. For Bijsterveld, sound is a symbol of technological change. The subsequent changes made to the soundscape—to address the noise problems created by technology—are examples of cultural reactions to social processes. Sound takes on representative power and signifies social relations.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>82</sup> Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology,'" 87.

<sup>83</sup> Karen Bijsterveld, "The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age: Technology and Symbolism of Sound in European and North American Noise Abatement Campaigns, 1900-40," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 165.

John Shepherd, who has researched popular music consumption among young people in Montreal, similarly refuses a separation between music and social process and argues for a cultural theory of music.<sup>84</sup> Shepherd's is a Marxist framework without distinctions between processes, in which "People, music and society permeate one another."<sup>85</sup> He argues that music processes are sites of confrontation and struggle.<sup>86</sup> However, in the activity of *representing* musical process, Shepherd explains the difficulty of approaching sound both as a site of social process and a physical phenomenon. (These are the abstract structures with which semiologists like Barthes are concerned, as expressed in his discussion of the "grain" of the voice and its significance as a "sign.") Shepherd notes that little work has been done to investigate how the quality (or timbre) of sound can articulate social and cultural messages. His aim, however, is to look at how music is used to make identity and "to take individual pieces of music as mediated in concrete social and historical circumstances and being to get a firm idea of how they provide sites for the textual mediation of power."<sup>87</sup>

Shepherd identifies a gap that this research will attempt to address. Much has been written on the cultural power of sound, but less has been done to investigate how sound is represented, and how such representations might function in other mediums such as print. Certainly the study of sound representations depends first on researching "original" sound's power in culture. Sounds, like images, are sites of social processes as

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<sup>84</sup> John Shepherd, "Music Consumption and Cultural Self-Identities: Some Theoretical and Methodological Reflection," *Media, Culture and Society* 20, (1986): 312

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 328.

well as representations of how we understand culture and individuals. However, because sound cannot actually be heard in print, just as the scene in an image is not really occurring, sounds and images might be approached as similar (but not identical) types of representations. Additionally, these are representations that can work together to make messages and reflect social processes.

The focus of this research is musical sound, which necessitates an explanation of sound vs. music. This research assumes that music is one part of a larger sound world. Although music's political meaning is often located in lyrics, this research assumes ideologies also can be located in the sound of the music. Certainly the sounds of country, punk and hip-hop have all come to express a politics, not because of some inherent meaning present in the sound, but because of how the music has been used. Forms gain meaning through practice: the practice of making music and the practice of listening.

The connection between music and politics is complicated. John Street notes that popular music has always both represented and produced political ideals, specific to time and space.<sup>88</sup> Popular music has always been granted a certain cultural power. Street writes,

...each new wave in pop history has been greeted by the outcry of those who fear for its consequences. In the West, the political right has been terrified that it will undermine capitalism, family life and traditional values. Racists have seen it as a threat to 'white purity.' Communists have seen it as subverting the socialist dream. These enemies have warned of its extraordinary power to influence the way people think and act.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> John Street, "Rock, pop and politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 243.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Those who have embraced and defended popular music, on the other hand, “have never been quite so sure about the music’s politics.”<sup>90</sup> Street attributes this to the shaky relationship between aesthetics and ideology when it comes to identifying music’s political power.

Any attempt to make sense of the politics of pop and rock must, therefore, try to understand the ways in which these conflicting and contradictory needs are negotiated; it must navigate between the fears of the outsiders and the opportunism of the insiders, between utopian rhetoric and authoritarian disgust. It must, ultimately, recognise the different views taken of pop’s power. On the one side stand those who see music as a way of representing political ideas and promoting political causes, who see it as a form of political expression. From this point of view, music has symbolic force, it deploys the power of language to create visions, articulate ideals and to form bonds. On the other side stand those who fear for music’s effects, for whom the politics lie in its ability to exercise power over its listeners, to shape and influence thoughts and actions. These two dimensions of pop’s power—the power to represent and the power to effect—establish the broad boundaries of pop’s politics.<sup>91</sup>

Street reiterates that musical experience is about production and consumption, and the power from musical meaning exists at both ends of the process. The focus of this thesis is to investigate how musical sound’s symbolic force has been employed. In effect, media coverage of the “music of politics” (or culture) during the 2004 campaign participated in popular music’s power to represent while assuming its power to effect. For both campaigns and media, the “effect” of types of music was presumed—it was *a priori*. Because certain types of (some) people ascribed to certain types of music, the force of the music was assumed and the connection between people-politics-sound was naturalized. The line between effect and representation became blurred as music was employed by

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 244-245.

both campaigns and media to “reconstitute” identity: party identity, “red state” identity and “blue state” identity.

### **Approaches to Reading Sounds and Images**

Street’s approach to understanding meanings in musical sound does not rely solely on musical form or social context. Street claims, “Music’s politics cannot be read straight from its context because music-making is not just journalism with a backbeat.”<sup>92</sup> Instead, “The music is the result of the interplay of commercial, aesthetic, institutional and political processes.” He warns about approaches that search for textual meaning on the assumption that music has certain essential qualities. In this warning, Street specifically highlights the investigation at hand—to understand music’s symbolic power in textual form: “The music establishes a context through which politics is viewed and judged. But in seeing the relationship like this, attention inevitably shifts from the social to the musical—to the sounds, images and words. It locates the politics in the text rather than the context. Here pop’s symbolic power becomes most explicit.”<sup>93</sup> Because no stable, singular meaning can be pulled from musical texts outside social contexts, Street argues that “a more productive route lies in seeing how particular songs or performances engage with particular political moments and issues.”<sup>94</sup>

However, the argument of this research is that print media took the “productive approach” to music less often than it relied on essential textual meanings. Yet the power

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 249.

of the essential meanings was not produced wholly by the press, but by the interplay between these representations and the actual social practices of making music and listening. Textual meaning played on socially constructed concepts of political and musical identity. As Street says, these textual representations relied on “imagined communities.” He calls for “tracing more closely the ways in which political meanings are derived from cultural consumption, to see how memories and myths are contained within popular music, and how each tells a different version of the imagined communities which animate people’s lives.”<sup>95</sup>

By examining the relationship of sound to religiously identified communities, Paul Moore similarly investigates sounds in Northern Ireland culture. He argues, for example, that the specific parade drum sounds represent Catholic and Protestant communities. Moore explains:

...if one is growing up in a divided society such as Northern Ireland, the making of meaning through sound attains a duality whereby some sounds connote one’s own people and some connote the ‘other.’ Through this process sounds are believed by those involved in the conflict to make sectarian statements.<sup>96</sup>

Moore compares visual perception to sonic perception—both are linked with labels, names, and general “knowledge bases embedded in our cultural repertoire.”<sup>97</sup> Sound can act as a symbolic boundary, for example when Protestant marching bands play their tunes “right up to the limit of their perceived territory—a symbolic boundary cemented by a

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Moore, “Sectarian Sound and Cultural Identity in Northern Ireland,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 267.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

sound event.”<sup>98</sup> Moore looks at how ways of speaking mark Catholics and Protestants and how industrial sounds historically mark Protestant communities. He shows how sound can be read as a marker of identity and cultural division. For sound to work in this way, it must be collectively understood by society.

There are a variety of methodologies for reading visual representation that can help with approaches to reading sound. Gillian Rose argues for approaches that “[think] about the power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by, ways of seeing and imagining.”<sup>99</sup> She proposes an intertextual approach for investigating the meaning of images, an approach that recognizes the interdependence of written texts, images, and cultural context.<sup>100</sup> One method Rose suggests is iconography, which is concerned with the historical context of art more than its form.<sup>101</sup> The iconography approach takes into account meanings the image might acquire from contemporary society and asks how this affects viewer interpretation. Icons are understood as socially-produced, intertextual representations.

Martin Lister and Liz Wells use social conventions as one mode of visual analysis in a cultural studies framework.<sup>102</sup> In addition to contexts and conventions of production, Lister and Wells argue that “we should recognize that photographs also work by utilizing or borrowing...many of the visual codes that are employed in ‘lived’ rather than textual

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2001), 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Lister and Liz Wells, “Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual,” in *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, ed. Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt (London: Sage, 2001), 76.



forms of communication.”<sup>103</sup> They look at a photograph of British schoolboys in uniform to show how a photograph can depict (or re-present) social conventions of dress. One boy in the photograph wears his tie loose and the top button of his shirt open. Lister and Wells argue the power (or meaning) of the photograph comes from a viewer’s recognition of how this boy is subverting convention.

Lister and Wells also explore power and photographic conventions as modes of analysis for newspaper and magazine photos. They discuss how Africa has been constructed in the Western mind by photojournalists’ images of African famine in the 1980s.<sup>104</sup> Noting how these photographs often depicted Africans as helpless victims without a dynamic culture of their own, Lister and Wells argue that photographic conventions must be read for “ideological weight” even as they act as objective reports of events.

Convention and ideology also can be located in sound. Theo van Leeuwen’s analysis of sound, although more a semiotic study of sound as communication than a study of cultural contexts, points to some cultural conventions of sound use.<sup>105</sup> For example, van Leeuwen maps the conventional rhythm and tempo used by newscasters and suggests that sound is conventionalized to sound neutral. Listeners expect news to have this neutral, official quality and sound a certain way. Van Leeuwen proposes new ways of listening by “[doing] on a *theoretical* level what many contemporary musicians, poets, film-makers, multimedia designers and so on, already do in practice (and what

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>105</sup> Theo Van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 44.

children have always done): *integrate* speech, music and other sound.”<sup>106</sup> The intersection of these elements, which are all representations themselves, results in intertextual meaning-making. Van Leeuwen discusses how sounds and images similarly construct relationships between viewers or listeners and the representation:

Both [sound and image] can create relations between the subject they represent and the receiver they address, and in both this is related to distance, in two ways. The first is the way of *perspective*, which hierarchizes elements of what is represented by placing some in the foreground, some in the middle ground and some in the background... The second is the way of *social distance*, which creates relations of different degrees of formality between what is represented and the viewer or listener, such as intimacy ... informality ... formality.<sup>107</sup>

For Robert Walser, the sounds of heavy metal music are sites of social practice. Walser contends that meaning is made in the practice of making sounds, and while there can be no essential meaning to musical structures, he reads heavy metal sounds as “musical activities that produce texts and styles and make them socially significant.”<sup>108</sup> He argues that social contestation can be located not only in lyrics, but in musical structure, and that a musical genre’s sound can have social significance. Walser claims, “Heavy metal musicians’ appropriations from classical music have already changed popular music; they may yet change classical music and perhaps even our understanding of how the cultural labor of popular musicians can blur the distance between the two.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), xiii.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 107.

Walser's work provides a bridge from meanings of musical practice to meanings made by musical representations in print, arguing for readings that investigate "what real listeners hear and how they think about their activities."<sup>110</sup> Listeners' understanding of musical genre is of primary importance. By investigating "music as a verb," Walser's approach shows how social activity can be used and reproduced in representational sound structures, and how representations themselves continue to make meaning as people reuse them. Representations do not occur "after the fact," but are continually active as "verbs." Spaces are made as they are "practiced."

Country music, explains Charles Conrad, is one such practiced space. Conrad argues that country songs are sites of working-class identity.<sup>111</sup> He suggests that even as people use country songs to celebrate their work and identity, hegemony also is active in "references to the futility of resisting hierarchy, and an articulation of the inevitability and inescapability of toil."<sup>112</sup> Conrad reads songs like Merle Haggard's "Working Man Blues" and Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons" for concrete images of work that, through an intertextual relationship of music, language and social contexts, enact and represent a working community.

Conrad's work posits a relationship between music, experience and identity that is "transmitted" by music as a mass cultural form.<sup>113</sup> He argues that people embrace in songs the symbolism of work, love, loss and individualism (a powerful American ideal)

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Conrad, "Work Songs, Hegemony, and Illusions of Self," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988): 180.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 179-180.

to gain a stable identity of self, while “country work songs naturalize a repressive and regressive identity, one that is constructed in and through music.” Conrad’s analysis of country music contexts is a first step in understanding the meanings that representations of sound might have in print media. Of particular importance is the idea that identity is “transmitted” through sound to mass culture, which in turn requires mass culture to reconstitute the meaning of, for instance, the country music genre.

Examining the historical blackface minstrel show, Eric Lott outlines a similar relationship between performance and mass culture. He argues blackface performance was about borrowing and commodifying black culture.<sup>114</sup> Racial desire was central to blackface performance and the show performed both “love and theft,” simultaneously constructing blackness and a white working class. Lott locates “panic, anxiety, terror and pleasure” in productions of power, and argues that blackface served as a marker or sign of cultural interaction even as it reinforced social and racial hierarchy.<sup>115</sup>

Blackface performances reproduced power by performing race, but dominance also was enacted through the mass circulation of a “borrowed” culture in other media forms. Blackness and its performances were represented in printed images and texts, including songbooks. In reference to mid-1800s Jacksonian American, Lott claims,

The vast quantity of black dialect, habit, and mannerism regularly reported in almanacs and newspapers evinces the variety and frequency of interracial contact, and not doubt provided a readily imitable outline of white fantasies about black behavior; its material extension was indeed the massive output of dime minstrel songbooks that buttressed the theatrical popularity of minstrelsy. Print caricature was probably a necessary but not

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<sup>114</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 41-49.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 6.

a sufficient condition for racial burlesque, for it lacked the crucial presence of the body.<sup>116</sup>

That print caricatures were part of a *process* of constructing race shows how we can read different forms of media, particularly print representations and live performances, as part of larger social systems of representation. As Lott notes, these sometimes predatory processes of representation can be evidence of both desire and dominance. In terms of “red state” and “blue state” America, Lott shows how “borrowed” and commodified identity markers can permeate a variety of cultural media and simultaneously construct the “other.”

As Lott notes in his description of dime minstrel songbooks, sounds can have a visual representation. A sound can correspond to an image, and an image can have a sound, as discussed in the introductory example of “hillbilly” music. Exploring how the visual-sonic connection is produced in print, and how the two forms work together to identify groups and individuals, will be one part of the following chapters. This analysis takes an intertextual approach to meaning, and while it privileges sound as the main form of study, it acknowledges the cooperative work of sound representations and images in print. For this reason, photographs and other images that accompany sound references in print media articles will also be analyzed. As mentioned previously, no signifying form stands on its own.

### **Considering Readers, Listeners and Viewers**

Reading media as sites of representative processes and identifying the intertextual possibilities of representation also necessitates asking how representations are reused and

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

gain import through time. As Goffman and Lott illustrate, images constitute popular knowledge of human behavior by posing as that which is “natural.” Stuart Hall argues that the media shapes this popular knowledge, producing the mirage of a “consensus.” Quoting Antonio Gramsci, Hall illustrates how knowledges become tradition: “Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself...Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time.”<sup>117</sup> This is similar to Raymond Williams’ idea of the “selective tradition,” the process by which those in power select history and develop a traditional culture that corresponds to a contemporary value system.<sup>118</sup> Williams says the cultural tradition—of which media is a part—is a “continual selection and re-selection of ancestors.”<sup>119</sup>

This thesis’s research is contemporary, but it acknowledges the historical roots and future possibilities of the “red state” and “blue state” representations. It acknowledges that social conventions are embedded in visual and sonic spaces but also in viewing. Lister and Wells argue that “‘looking’ is always embodied and undertaken by someone with an identity” and the intersection of one’s own conception of identity with social conventions is present in the viewing process.<sup>120</sup>

When analyzing visual and sonic representations in print, it is important to consider where power is located in systems of production and consumption. Cultural and

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<sup>117</sup> Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology,’” 73.

<sup>118</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Ontario: Broadview, 2001), 67.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>120</sup> Lister and Wells, “Seeing Beyond Belief,” 65.

media theorists have asked when and whether the hegemonic processes of media that Hall describes ends and the secondary meaning Barthes describes (meaning constructed by the reader or readers) might begin. This is not to say that hegemonic processes do not extend into this secondary meaning or that readers do not continually reinterpret the media they receive.

Even while media representations work to reproduce relations of power, Michel de Certeau suggests, cultural spaces also “[occur] as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.”<sup>121</sup> In short, spaces are constituted by the practices of viewers, listeners and readers. De Certeau argues that although products may be imposed by a dominant economic order, the way the products are used by those who consume them is significant. He claims, “The presence and circulation of a representation...tells us nothing about what it is for its users.”<sup>122</sup> Concerned that “we gauge the difference of similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization” de Certeau argues we should assume that “users make...innumerable...transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy.”<sup>123</sup>

The purpose of referencing de Certeau’s work here is to bear in mind the fluid nature of representation, the variety ways to read representations, and the probability that representations do the work of contesting ideologies. Although de Certeau echoes the

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<sup>121</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

claim that media fabricate and simulate social realities, he also suggests that the reader inhabits the space of the text with their own experience. This thesis is invested more in production than reception. Still, it is necessary to consider individual readings when investigating how identity is reflected and produced by media representations.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology: Reading the Cultural Divide Through Music**

This thesis uses textual analysis and a cultural studies framework to analyze the article sample. It assumes that texts—visual, written, and sonic—are places where meaning is made and where overt and latent reflections of culture exist. The textual analyses in this research consider textual meaning in terms of publication and intertextual contexts. The analyses also focus on how pieces of text function symbolically. Accordingly, this research focuses in part on the semiotics of the chosen texts: how sound representations act as signs. It examines how signs in visual, sonic and lingual text work together to construct ideas. This research looks at how texts reinforce the red/blue dichotomy but also at how texts negotiate or problematize this dichotomy.

Because the primary interest of this research is how the “red state” and “blue state” concepts operated in the national consciousness, articles were chosen primarily from widely circulated national magazines and larger newspapers. The textual analysis looks at how the national media employed references to the red/blue dichotomy to represent and constitute concepts of regional identity. More specifically, because this research focuses on the power of sound references in print media, it focuses on how music became part of the red-blue conversation. The assumption is that this discussion was both reflected and reinforced in the media. Of course, campaigns set their own “musical agendas,” but the media covered this agenda and presented it in certain ways.

This research focuses on the year 2004 because the parameter allowed exploration

of the lead-up to the election and also some post-election fallout. Additionally, this parameter allows analysis of how red-blue references were employed to both predict and explain election results in terms of voter identity.

Because this thesis looks at the connection between music and “red state” and “blue state” regional identities, it is important also to look at how the music media portrayed the divide. For this reason, the national mainstream music magazine *Rolling Stone* and the entertainment magazine *Variety* were included in the text sample.

This research used the LexisNexis database full-text search and the Music Index keyword search to collect articles for the sample. The Music Index is a separate, non-full-text index that includes more than 40 music periodicals that cover a wide scope of genres.

In the Music Index search, the following keywords were used to get results: “red state,” “blue state” and “politics.” The Index’s following subject list titles were also used: “Country Music and Politics,” “Popular Music and Politics,” “Folk Music and Politics,” “Politicians” and “Political Songs.” The Music Index searches resulted in a sample of more than 80 articles.

The LexisNexis search focused on the “General News” category for both “Major Papers” and “Magazines and Journals.” The keywords “presidential,” “election,” “music,” “blue state,” “red state,” “purple state,” and “sound” were used to search the full text of articles.<sup>124</sup> The LexisNexis searches turned up a total of 266 results.

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<sup>124</sup> The following keyword combinations were used to obtain full text results in the LexisNexis database: Presidential AND election, music, red state; Presidential AND election, music, blue state; Presidential AND election, music, purple state; Presidential AND election, sound, red state; Presidential AND election, sound, blue state; Presidential AND election, sound, purple state.

Because the LexisNexis database does not include all publications that might offer articles suitable for this analysis, the main search was supplemented with a search of the 2004 issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine* and *Mother Jones*. These magazines were chosen on the basis of their content and history: all are established high-circulation national magazine that cover culture and politics. Additionally, these magazines are similar (in subjects covered, not necessarily political leaning) to *The American Spectator*, *The American Prospect*, *The Economist*, and *The New Republic*, which are included in LexisNexis. *Atlantic*, *Harper's* and *Mother Jones* also tend to offer cultural analysis that might not be found in other "news" magazines, analysis that could be of interest to this research. This supplemental magazine search and the Music Index searches relied on the TDnet electronic journals database for the full text of these publications. In the end, only *Atlantic Monthly* turned up supplemental results suitable for this research.

To explore the flip side of the mainstream media's music coverage and provide some perspective on the representative power of mainstream music genres, the sample also was supplemented with alternative, more niche, print media. Because the primary sample began to evidence multiple references to country music, this research also explores several articles from the text of *No Depression*, a magazine that covers alternative country music. This offered a perspective markedly different than that of mainstream news media and even *Rolling Stone*.<sup>125</sup>

The total sample of more than 300 articles obtained through searches was pared down to a sample of 34 articles that reflect the different uses of sound references to the

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<sup>125</sup> See Appendix 2 for a brief description of each publication.

“cultural divide” in 2004. Articles were chosen on the basis that they specifically connected music, or sound, to cultural identity, particularly using the terms “red state” and “blue state.” Articles also were included that either framed the discussion in terms of “red” and “blue” or used specific musical references (to genres or sounds) to indicate voter identity or cultural divides. Some of the articles chosen were explicit reports about music. In other articles chosen, music is embedded in the text as one component in a larger conversation or subject. To summarize, articles were chosen from 2004 that discuss the supposed cultural divide or political stances in terms of music.

The sample also includes a few articles that discussed the power of music in the election campaigns. Some of the most interesting articles were those not specifically about music but that used musical references to indicate identity—all of these articles were retained. Articles from music magazines were retained if they did more than simply report on the music and instead referenced politics specifically. Additionally, articles that included photographs were privileged so that this research could incorporate visual theory and intertextual analysis. The sample also tried to balance publications that are widely considered left-leaning with those considered right-leaning. However, selections were based on relevance to the research interests of this thesis. Ultimately, the concern was with articles that utilized music’s representative power.

Articles that came up in the search but turned out not to be about the cultural divide or music were eliminated. Articles about music in which politics were mentioned, such as interviews with musicians, but which did not connect political comments to larger issues of the “cultural divide,” were thrown out. Additionally, straight news coverage of

concerts or conventions was thrown out if they did not seem to be culturally situated in the 2004 landscaped or lacked any cultural context. The numerous articles on campaigns' music and the Vote for Change campaign were cut down by throwing out those that simply repeated other articles or offered little to connect the music to voters or regions.

There are some limitations to this research and the analysis of this sample. The research focuses mainly on two genres: rock (or pop) and country music. This focus has primarily to do with the fact that these two genres were the most used by media and campaigns as representative sounds. However, other genres, particularly hip-hop, were also connected to political action during the 2004 campaign. Another set of research on the role and place of hip-hop in 2004 politics would be a useful addition to this research.

This thesis surveys the national media landscape. However, further work could be done to investigate how local and national media portrayed the red-blue divide (and musical involvement) in different ways. Such research could provide an understanding of how national "knowledge" differed from how people and regions understood themselves locally.

Finally, as noted previously, a logical extension of this research would be to investigate how readers, viewers and listeners received media representations of the red-blue divide. Certainly research of the meaning made by consumers of media—not simply the musical-political meanings made by producers—would provide a more complete picture of the relationship between music, politics and the media during the 2004 campaign.

The goal of this research, through textual analysis of the 34 articles, is to provide

ways for understanding how sound representations intersect with social and historical contexts—and images—in the space of print media. By analyzing print articles, this research works to dissect the representations of red and blue America with which we have become so familiar.

## Chapter 4

### Tuning Values: Matching Sounds to Ideologies

#### Campaigns, Conventions and Celebrities

Most Americans who paid attention to the 1992 election will remember Bill Clinton's inaugural dance to Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop." Since the beginning of the nation, political campaigns have harnessed the power of music to represent themselves to voters, celebrate and rile up crowds. In the past, many songs were written specifically for candidates, or popular contemporary tunes were re-lyricized for campaigns. However, as Jenny Asarnow noted in a 2004 National Public Radio piece about campaign music, the trend has moved away from music that is explicitly about politics.<sup>126</sup> Instead, candidates tread the more subtle semantic ground of the political middle and choose musical genres that seem to represent a voter base. The 2004 presidential campaigns relied on the power of generalizations—myths, or “readable” activities—when choosing their music. John Kerry and the Democrats used mostly rock music and some hip-hop. George W. Bush and the Republicans stuck mostly to country.

The campaign's use of certain sounds to represent certain politics bled into the media discussion of America's cultural divide. Music, as a representation of voter identity and values, became part of the red-blue conversation.

The connection between rock and Democrats and country and Republicans was rarely questioned and mostly reconstituted in print media accounts. A reference to

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<sup>126</sup> Jenny Asarnow, “Political Songs & Satire,” *All Songs Considered*, National Public Radio, [on-line archive] [http://www.npr.org/programs/asc/archives/political\\_satire04/](http://www.npr.org/programs/asc/archives/political_satire04/), accessed April 1, 2006.

musical taste became a reference to political beliefs and, further, a reference to the cultural values of a region. That the campaigns' choice of songs did not include explicitly political works highlights the representative power of genre. During the campaign, genre sounds were politicized. In print, musical references reproduced that political representation. As Robert Walser explains, musical activity can "produce texts and styles and make [the activity] socially significant."<sup>127</sup>

The two presidential campaigns constructed markedly different soundtracks. John Kerry used Bruce Springsteen's "No Surrender" as a primary theme song, and the rest of his campaign soundtrack included U2's "Beautiful Day," Tina Turner's "Simply the Best," Billy Joel's "My Life," Chuck Berry's "Johnny B Goode," and an array of more Springsteen tunes.<sup>128</sup> George W. Bush's campaign used Brooks & Dunn's "Only in America" as a theme song, and the rest of their soundtrack included "Heartland" by George Strait, "Born to Fly" by Sara Evans, "Wave on Wave" by Pat Green, and Aaron Tippin's "Where the Stars and Stripes and Eagle Fly."<sup>129</sup> The meaning of these musical forms was produced at the intersection of cultural conceptions of genre, campaign efforts at representation, and media accounts of musical usage. Together, these forces helped connect musical sounds to each side of the red-blue "divide."

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<sup>127</sup> Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil*, xiii.

<sup>128</sup> Asarnow, "Political Songs & Satire."

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



“Political rally, rock concert...these days, it can hard to tell the two apart,” begins a February 29, 2004, *San Diego Union-Tribune* article.<sup>130</sup> The article further frames its topic—the music-politics relationship—by noting that candidates recruit musical icons and appropriate music for campaign theme songs. The article outlines the musical image of each candidate, from John Kerry’s membership in a band called the Electras to Al Sharpton’s friendship with James Brown. The article consists mostly of sets of lists: which musical act backs which candidate, candidates’ favorite musicians, other politicians with musical pasts, musicians who became politicians, songs that became politicized in campaigns, “famous moments when music collided with politics,” and “music stars most likely to vie for office.”<sup>131</sup>

The article does recognize the media’s role in reproducing musical representations of candidates and campaigns, when it claims, “You can learn a lot about a candidate by what he or she listens to,” and then qualifies, “(Or claims to listen to).”<sup>132</sup> The parentheses acknowledge the power of campaigns to use the media to reinforce representations. Still, there is no explanation beyond this—what this media account has asserted is true. The source of information for the lists is identified: surveys of candidates by media such as the Associated Press.

The article first addresses voter identity (beyond the implicit meaning of which artists are aligned with which candidates) in the “music stars most likely to vie for office” list. Here, “red states” appears with Ted Nugent: “This red-blooded, bow-huntin’,

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<sup>130</sup> James Hebert, “Dem-rockracy; Hellllllo, San Diego voters! Are you ready to party?,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 29 February 2004, E1, in LexisNexis [database on-line], accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

carnivorous cookbook-writin' rocker would seem to have natural appeal to voters in the "red" states. Put him on a ticket with the former bat-biting Ozzy Osbourne, and they might defeat the Democrats the way they smite animals."<sup>133</sup>

That red-state voters would find Ted Nugent's actions and politics appealing is presented here as common sense. Nugent is positioned in Barthes' second-order semiological system, in which meaning is already built into the symbols of Nugent and voters in the "red states." The story features a large photograph of Nugent, which dominates the article, although other smaller images (Bill Clinton on saxophone, Sonny Bono and Cher singing) also illustrate the listings.<sup>134</sup> But while the other images signify past occurrences, Nugent's performance seems quite present. He rocks hard on his guitar while an American flag drapes his shoulders, and his fierce, open-mouthed expression becomes an illustration for the textually constructed blood-thirsty red-stater. As Barthes argues, the photographic structure is not an isolated one, but communicates with at least one other structure. Here, the textual reference to sound and the image carry what Barthes calls a "continuous message," in which Nugent's performance represents red-state culture. The image frames Nugent alone, void of surrounding context, except for a few faceless fans silhouetted in front of the stage light with their fists in the air toward Nugent. The fists in the air seem to be the non-descript, perhaps red-state, audience rallying behind their icon. The absence of more bodies is significant.

Symbols of "red state" and "blue state" sometimes worked as sites that both contested and constituted what Hall would call "popular knowledge" of the cultural

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

divide. In the article, “Ohio seen as decisive battleground in a close 2004 race,” (*Plain Dealer*, January 11, 2004), the lead focuses on Ohio’s power to decide the “slugfest between the red and the blue.”<sup>135</sup> It also acknowledges that the terms “red state,” “blue state,” and “purple state” are coined by pundits in Washington. The acknowledgement works to distance the media—specifically this article—from the process of cultural representation. Despite the headline, the article is more a hodge-podge of news briefs related to the “cultural divide” (this term is not used explicitly). The article reprints part of an ad running in Iowa that attacks Howard Dean’s tax policy. The ad, paid for by the conservative group The Club for Growth, is presented as a humorous exercise in stereotyping: “The husband says, ‘I think Howard Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading...’... At which point his wife completes the thought: ‘...body piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.’”<sup>136</sup>

Closely following this excerpt is a brief on Willie Nelson’s anti-war protest song, which he debuted at a Kucinich benefit concert. The news that Nelson is not going to record “Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth” or perform it frequently becomes political—not simply musical—news in the article (followed by news on the Iowa primary). The article employs a quote from Nelson that brings listeners and voters into the same space.

Although [Nelson] anticipates that some of his fans won’t like the song’s message, he said, “This is still America, and these are my thoughts and I’m entitled to them. I don’t feel like I have to shut up and not say what

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<sup>135</sup> Steve Koff, “Ohio seen as decisive battleground in a close 2004 race,” *Plain Dealer*, 11 January 2004, A16, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

I'm thinking because this is the land of the free and we intend to keep it that way."

Presumably, some of Nelson's fans won't like the song because they have different politics. Specifically, music works in this text a space for myth, where meaning is solidified to appear "natural." The idea that music is an extension of political values is not in question here. As Barthes explains, sound references work as *metalanguage*, because they are a second language that speaks about or "co-opts" a first language—the language of news, facts and reporting. The survey of articles in this thesis shows that the connection between "red state" and country music is a frequently used metalanguage.

In July 2004, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* ran a story about how candidates are "harnessing the power of music" to appeal to voters.<sup>137</sup> The article claims, "The senator from Massachusetts says Bruce Springsteen's 'No Surrender' is his favorite song." George W. Bush's musical tastes are set in opposition to this: "[Bush], meanwhile, is a known ZZ Top lover and a fan of country-music acts with a red-state following, such as Brooks & Dunn and Tim McGraw, who have eagerly waved the flag for the war on terror."<sup>138</sup> The effortless semiological move from "country music" to "red-state following" to "war on terror" is evident here. These terms are not problematized, nor is the connection between them explained. The words are already pregnant with myth. In this case, evidence of Barthes' myth is not simply about the truth of representation. Myth is also present in the way representations are employed as "closed" signs or symbols, regardless of how "true" the representation is.

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<sup>137</sup> Dan DeLuca, "In tune: Candidates go for POP; Presidential hopefuls harness the power of music for voter appeal," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 20 July 2004, 8B, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

However, the *Sentinel* article does discuss sound in terms of time and space, suggesting that musical meaning is related to context. By relating candidate's music choices to the fact that they "are no spring chickens—they're over-50 white guys," the text situates music in somewhat of a historical context. After mentioning the "graying" of voters, the article concludes: "don't expect anything incendiary to show up on the campaign trail. Political campaigns are like radio playlists: The idea is to stay focused, sell the product, and not offend anybody."<sup>139</sup> This is an admission of how musical meaning is considered when politicians construct a "playlist."

A July 29, 2004, *New York Times* article on the Democratic National Convention similarly references the age of musicians: "Peter, Paul and Mary—older, grayer and in the case of Mary Travers clutching a cane—urged the audience to join them in the Bob Dylan anthem that many of them sang when it was new, asking 'How many deaths will it take till we know that too many people have died?'"<sup>140</sup> An explicit "selective tradition" is evident in this text, as in the *Journal Sentinel* text; the articles select particular pieces of baby boomer music culture to illustrate a contemporary political landscape. However, the most interesting relationship here is between the campaign's "selection" and the media's coverage of this. How much did the Democratic campaign intend to connect their identity with 1960s New Left ideals, and how much did this representation get produced by the media? In either instance, it is clear that music from the era, as Goffman says, makes past

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Robin Toner and Todd S. Purdam, "On 2<sup>nd</sup> Night, Unity Is Theme for Democrats," *The New York Times*, 28 July 2004, A1, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

social activity readable in a contemporary space. In this text, such representation aids the rhetorical slippage from 1960s elite radicalism to blue-stater or Democrat.

As previously asserted in this paper, print media acted as a space for the red-blue discussion during 2004. However, media also reinforced Barthes' "continuous message," or denotation. An August 25, 2004, *New York Times* article titled "G.O.P.'s Southern Strategy? Crank Up Lynyrd Skynyrd" references a type of sound to make meaning of the G.O.P. soundtrack.<sup>141</sup> "Lynyrd Skynyrd" is conventionalized (to use Goffman's term) and used as an explanatory device for both region and political party. There is, indeed, a degree of rhetorical slippage (or what could be called representational slippage, to account for all symbolic forms) here between "Southern," "political right" and "Republican." In the photograph of Skynyrd members Rickey Medlocke and Gary Rossington, it appears that the two are in the act of playing for the G.O.P.<sup>142</sup> That the two are closely cropped, offering little context for the image, only increases the images "representative" authority. Here, we see the sound of Skynyrd playing Southern Republican fare. The conflation of politics and music is communicated both by the textual references to sound and the image of sound.

The article begins, "If the political right has a soundtrack, perhaps it used to be Bach's 'Brandenburg' Concerto No. 2, the piece that introduced William F. Buckley Jr. on his program 'Firing Line.' But in 2004? Two words: 'Free Bird.'"<sup>143</sup> Describing Lynyrd Skynyrd, the text continues, "There are only two original members left in the

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<sup>141</sup> Campbell Robertson, "G.O.P.'s Southern Strategy? Cranking Up Lynyrd Skynyrd," *The New York Times*, B3, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 20, 2006.

<sup>142</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

<sup>143</sup> Robertson, "G.O.P.'s Southern Strategy?"

band, but, as the song goes, ‘a bird you cannot change,’ and the band is still touring and still quite popular in the red states.” It goes on to situate the group as part of a “Southern rock delegation” that includes ZZ Top, Charlie Daniels Band, 38 Special, and the Marshall Tucker Band. That the article quotes a party organizer, who says, “These are just great throwback bands and I think everybody enjoys them,” which again attributes historical significance to party identity. As with Peter, Paul and Mary, the bands here indicate a tradition, and the music they play is comes from cultural roots that extend to politics. In this article there is no mention of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s popularity among Democrats or outside the South. Instead, values made explicit by the Southern rock genre are highlighted here:

Charlie Daniels recently angered some Arab-Americans with a song that included the lyrics “This ain’t no rag, it’s a flag, and we don’t wear it on our heads.” And Lynyrd Skynyrd is known for waving a giant Confederate flag during their rendition of “Sweet Home Alabama.”... It is not all going to be Nascar rock, of course. Otis Day and the Knights, the rhythm and blues band of “Animal House” fame, will be sharing the bill with Charlie Daniels.<sup>144</sup>

Additionally, there is no discussion here about why a black group might be part of a “delegation” that could include Confederate flag-waving. The *Times* article is devoted solely to GOP convention music and includes no other news about the convention or political updates. Why run such an article? Goffman’s theory may be a clue here. The assumption might be that readers, as music listeners, will connect to the subject matter. As Goffman notes, music and performance are “readable” activities, much less murky than national politics.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

Another campaign that garnered substantial media attention was the Vote for Change tour, which encouraged people to vote for a change in the White House. At the helm of this effort—and Kerry’s campaign—was Bruce Springsteen. An August 5, 2004, *Washington Post* article made the political and cultural affinity (red vs. blue) of the Vote for Change musicians clear with the headline “Singing for the Blues; Musicians Tour to Defeat George Bush.”<sup>145</sup> The article spends time early on discussing Springsteen’s move to become the Democrats’ star, noting that the tour, which traveled to swing states,

marks the boldest foray into politics yet by Springsteen, one of the most widely admired pop stars in the world. The Boss famously objected to the use of “Born in the U.S.A.” by Ronald Reagan during the 1984 presidential election. But at the recent Democratic convention in Boston, the democratic nominee entered the FleetCenter with “No Surrender,” a track from the very same album, blasting over the loudspeakers.<sup>146</sup>

Springsteen and his music appear to be a natural manifestation of Democratic values. That The Boss would object to Reagan using his music is unsurprising, but his reason for offering “No Surrender” to the Democrats’ soundtrack is left unexplained. As Dyer indicates in his study of whiteness, the absence of identity—or the absence of explanation between signifier and signified, which is the essence of representation—can be the site of denotative power. Meaning is assumed and reified. Similarly, further down in the article is the sentence “Citizens of solidly blue or solidly red states are out of luck.”<sup>147</sup> The assumption is that such solid states exist in the first place.

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<sup>145</sup> David Segal, “Singing for the Blues; Musicians Tour to Defeat George Bush,” *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2004, C1, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



In a pre-GOP convention article from the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, the soundscape works again as a political explanatory device. The article concludes, “As the Republicans prepare to gather in Manhattan, it is telling to compare their musical tastes with those exhibited in Boston by the Democrats, who tended to lean toward the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Black-Eyed Peas, with some James Taylor and Carole King mixed in.”<sup>148</sup> Is it telling? The statement sounds exactly like the response campaigns hoped to produce when they chose music. Here, the article text takes for truth the representational power of musical genre and celebrity. No words are given to the campaign’s work to construct its identity for the media—or, as Stuart Hall says, to produce “popular knowledge.” The article underscores the crucial, if hidden, relationship between media and campaigns in the production of red and blue identities.

The article continues, “Republicans intend to import a considerable variety of red-state country talent for the flurry of events.”<sup>149</sup> Of note is the word choice: the music in Boston reflected Democrats’ “musical tastes,” while the country music Republicans plan to use simply *is* “red state.” This is the music of Faith Hill, Jerry Jeff Walker and Martina McBride.

However, a *Plain Dealer* article about the Vote for Change concert in Cleveland included a more problematizing reference to music-politics representation. The article notes, “But some people went for the music, not the politics. ‘I’m here for Bruce, not for his political beliefs,’ said Brett Sim, a 19-year-old Army cadet who drove from Buffalo to

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<sup>148</sup> Bob von Sternberg and Dennis J. McGrath, “The Latest Buzz; A political roundup; Money talks in the battle for voters; The candidates and independent groups are spending big in the state,” *Star Tribune*, 13A, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 20, 2006.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

see Springsteen in concert. ‘I feel out of place because 90 percent of the crowd is pro-Kerry.’”<sup>150</sup> However, the idea that one’s music and politics can be divergent is offered as more of an exception than a regular pattern. Of course, this also assumes that listeners don’t engage with more than one genre.

An article titled, “Diverse Tactics on the Stump; As Bush Pumps Up His Base, Kerry Aims for Middle,” published October 12 in *The Washington Post*, connects each candidate’s music to the themes on which they’re campaigning: Bush is celebrating his conservative base and Kerry is going after swing voters.<sup>151</sup> This means Bush is pushing the conservative values agenda while Kerry is speaking about economics and job loss, and the campaign music represents these themes. The article claims,

The theme even comes through in the music that greets each candidate’s arrival; Bush enters to the Brooks & Dunn tune “Only in America.” The other country music tune to introduce Bush is George Strait’s “Heartland.” Both appeal to the country music lovers in pro-GOP “red states.” Kerry’s introductory song is working-class hero Bruce Springsteen’s “No Surrender.”<sup>152</sup>

The article goes on to produce an extended account of Bush and Kerry rallies and the content of each candidate’s stump speeches. The musical dichotomy is extended to the candidate’s speech: “If Bush’s speech blends an appeal to his economic and religious base with a heavy emphasis on the dangers of terrorism, Kerry repeatedly contends that Bush’s ‘wrong choices’ have harmed the middle class, and he proposed a populist-

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<sup>150</sup> Scott Hiaasen, “Rockin’ Cleveland for votes; Bush, celebrities for Kerry descend on area as campaign heats up; Stars sing Democrat’s praises in Ohio concerts, appearances,” *Plain Dealer*, A1, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 20, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> Dana Milbank, “Diverse Tactics on the Stump; As Bush Pumps Up His Base, Kerry Aims for Middle,” *The Washington Post*, 12 October 2004, A1, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 20, 2006.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

sounding ‘new direction.’”<sup>153</sup> Musical sound, as Sterne explains, works here as artifact or evidence of political ideology, setting the stage for political analysis.

In a post-election opinion piece in *The Washington Post* on November 9, 2004, Harold Meyerson wrote about what went wrong for the Democrats.<sup>154</sup> The title of the article is “How About a Little Country Twang?” and the closing two sentences are “‘Paris is worth a Mass,’ Henry of Havarre is reputed to have said when he converted to Catholicism in order to assume the throne of France. The White House, Democrats may similarly conclude, is worth a drawl.”<sup>155</sup> Meyerson uses the sound of “twang,” commonly associated with country music and the South, to represent a sensibility—a sensibility the Democrats didn’t have. Meyerson explains, “In the end, says Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg, just enough of those voters failed to see how Kerry would champion them economically and opted instead for Bush, whom they knew would champion them culturally.”<sup>156</sup> In this article, “twang” is the sound of these cultural values. But Meyerson acknowledges that cultural polarization—and the meaning transmitted by its representative forms—is a product of concerted effort. Polarization is not simply “natural,” but has been, in part, produced by those with the means to do so:

Republicans have been framing and winning the war of cultural polarization since the Nixon presidency, save only when the Democrats put forth Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton as their standard-bearers. That’s why Hillary Clinton’s stock has been falling since Election Day, and why

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Harold Meyerson, “How About a Little Country Twang?” *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2004, A27, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 28, 2006.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

that of Virginia Gov. Mark Warner and other red-state Democrats has been rising.<sup>157</sup>

Similar to Lisa Flores's explanation about the racial marking of immigrants in media, Meyerson acknowledges that a public vocabulary has been established to serve a particular, powerful group. Campaigns have used music to further this agenda, and media spaces have served as an extension of this representation. Campaigns, conventions and celebrities harnessed the power of sonic, visual and print media forms to make messages.

### **Reports from the Field**

The media also covered politics and the cultural divide from out in the "field." These types of articles position reporters as narrators in the middle of culture. They surveyed the cultural landscape and described broadly the contexts of the red-blue divide in America. One location from which to speak about the divide was the concert—a musical space made into a political space.

*Rolling Stone*, a magazine that has regularly devoted space to political coverage and analysis that leans left, published numerous reports on the Vote for Change concert tour. A report on the final Vote for Change concert, held October 11, 2004, in Washington, D.C., began, "In a black shirt glued to his back with sweat, prowling the stage with the steam-engine roll of the E Street Band behind him, Bruce Springsteen raised his voice in the last hour of the grand finale of the Vote for Change Tour like a tent-show preacher hitting the peak of his sermon."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> David Fricke and Austin Scaggs, "Showdown in D.C.," *Rolling Stone*, 11 November 2004, 19, in Academic Search Premier [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

This wasn't the first time the magazine had reconstituted Springsteen as a central figure in the political landscape. It ran an interview with him in September 2004, and also ran an editorial by The Boss himself, originally published in *The New York Times*, in which he said the government had strayed too far from real American values.<sup>159</sup>

In the Vote for Change article, the music is primary, and the artists are the celebrity vessels providing this powerful force of sound. The focus of the tour was converting swing voters who existed between "red" and "blue" convictions. In the article, the conflation of sound and lyric becomes more politically powerful than explicit political talk:

At the Washington show, the rhetoric was kept to a minimum. Springsteen expressed his support for...John Kerry in a pep talk near the end of his set. Natalie Maines of Dixie Chicks couldn't resist a crack about the roasting she got last year after publicly criticizing the president on the eve of the Iraq war....Otherwise, the music did the talking, and there was a spike in cheers and outrage from the crowd whenever a pointed lyric hit home. "You don't have to speak much," [Jackson] Browne explained backstage. "The songs do the work for you."<sup>160</sup>

The assumption employed here is that music can singularly do the work of representing ideology. As discussed, this is possible in part because music is already bound up in meaning that the public has attached to it. This article works to further the musical (political) message and creates a relationship between the event (music), representation of the event in print, and the larger media world. Certainly the Vote for Change tour relied not only on the immediate power of its music, but also the media's coverage of the tour to get the word out. Media representation of this musical event was in fact necessary to its

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<sup>159</sup> Bruce Springsteen, "Chords for Change," *The New York Times*, 5 August 2004, A23, in LexisNexis [database on-line], accessed April 13, 2006.

<sup>160</sup> Frick, "Showdown in D.C."

success. As Hall says, print media became “part and parcel of that dialectical process of the ‘production of consent’—shaping the consensus while reflecting it.”<sup>161</sup>

The visual aspect of the *Rolling Stone* three-page story is all about the musicians.<sup>162</sup> There are no images of audience, only close-ups of musicians’ performances. These images are enough to convey the import of the event, because musicians have become (and are reified here as) political symbols. An oversized Michael Stipe, Springsteen, John Fogerty and R.E.M. bassist Mike Mills stand above the story text. Stipe’s fist is in the air, and the group appears to be ending their evening of making music for change, against George Bush. By this date, the small “Campaign 2004” marker below the image is not necessary—these artists are already known publicly as political activists. Still, the “Rock & Roll” heading above the figures makes it clear that the article is first about the music and second about the “Showdown in D.C.,” which appears in smaller letters below and the article title. Yet it is almost as if the “Rock & Roll” heading shifts naturally into a story about political activism, and between these, providing the link, are the stars with representative power. The image of the four icons is “easily readable” for political significance.

In narrative surveys of the cultural-political landscape—particularly regarding how democrats were or were not connecting with “red” voters—musical references often helped characterize regional values. In a May 2004 *Washington Post* editorial titled “Kerry Could Do Worse,” George Grayson wrote that Kerry should look at Virginia’s

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<sup>161</sup> Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology,’” 87.

<sup>162</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

governor Mark Warner as a running mate.<sup>163</sup> Why? Because Warner could relate to people in his region of the country. In addition to Warner's previous work to bridge the "digital divide" in Appalachia, says Grayson,

The savvy that Warner displayed in sponsoring a NASCAR team, playing down gun control and embracing bluegrass music demonstrates his ability to connect with older white males too—a constituency that has lurched toward the GOP recently, turning a number of traditionally blue states into red splotches on the electoral college maps.<sup>164</sup>

Worth noting in Grayson's article is the recognition that red and blue are products of an electoral college map, not representation of cultural "essence" in each side of a dichotomy. However, the article also assumes there is a need for Democrats to bridge a divide between regions. And "bluegrass music" here is clear evidence that Warner has embraced Southernness. Bluegrass is a regional product, and it is representative of a voter group that is becoming more "red." Music, NASCAR and guns are markers of culture, or, in the words of Goffman, they are used to make a cultural field "readable" to the nation. As Lister and Wells point out, the power of these representations has to do with their existence as "codes" of lived, not textual, culture. The meaning of such representations is shaped and reconstituted in media.

After the election, *The Washington Post* ran another article on Warner, an editorial titled "A Winning Southern Model; Learn from a NASCAR-loving, hunter-friendly Democrat."<sup>165</sup> Written by a Kerry campaign aide, the article asserted,

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<sup>163</sup> George W. Grayson, "Kerry Could Do Worse," *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2004, B8, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Michael Signer, "A Winning Southern Model; Learn From a NASCAR-Loving, Hunter-Friendly Democrat," *The Washington Post*, 21 November 2004, B4, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 27, 2006.

“Democrats lost Virginia for the same reason we lost the country: We couldn’t convince culturally conservative Americans that we were on their side.”<sup>166</sup> At one point, the article notes that Kerry and Edwards “only rarely visited any of the reddest states during the campaign.” Here, “reddest states” is employed to denote more than “Republican.” The rhetorical slippage between “reddest” regions and “culturally conservative Americans” is swift.

However, the article’s explanation for why Warner succeeded in such conservative areas suggests the cultural divide may be less entrenched than commonly thought: Warner “actually went to red Virginia, introduced himself, and showed the voters there respect. And won.” Is this all it takes to cross the cultural divide? The editorial continues, describing Warner’s high approval rating and the recent increase in Democrat seats in Virginia’s congress. Evidently, “These accomplishments belie the conventional wisdom that a red state Democrat must either be as folksy as Dr. Phil or as religious as, well, George W. Bush to succeed.” However, the article presents a clear picture of the culture that Warner so expertly grasped in his political campaigns: “Across swaths of Virginia, Dale Earnhardt Jr. is a hero, hunting is an honored tradition and country music is gospel.”<sup>167</sup> In conclusion, “Culture and values will open the door to red American, but they won’t close the deal.” Exactly what these semantically slippery terms “culture” and “values” *are* is where the relationship between media, politics, power and representative forms like music intersect. This is where meaning is made and

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.



reconstituted in easily readable forms such as NASCAR, country music, latte-drinking and Howard Dean's Volvo.

During the campaign, the *Rocky Mountain News* published lengthy field reports from writer Mike Littwin as he traveled from swing state to swing state. The reports were intended to explore the red-blue divide and utilize citizen voices from various communities. One dispatch was from Missouri:

Among the nation's swing states, Missouri can claim one thing no other can. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only once did Missouri vote for a losing presidential candidate—Adlai Stevenson in 1956. That's why we've come here. In red-blue parlance, this is a purple state, one of the swing states that the pollsters and the pols tell us will determine the election. In blue Seattle and red Virginia Beach, Va., we found certainty. Here we find complexity.<sup>168</sup>

In this purple state, Littwin talks with people in Cape Girardeau, St. Louis, Kansas City, Webster Groves (St. Louis), Farmington, Parkville (Kansas City), and Columbia. The Parkville dispatch is punctuated by Merle Haggard lyrics, because Littwin meets Haggard's sound man and bus driver, Greg McGill, who lives in Farmington. Part of Haggard's "Fightin' Side of Me"<sup>169</sup> introduces the report: "If you don't love it, leave it:/ Let this song I'm singin' be a warnin'/ If you're runnin' down my country, man/ You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me."<sup>170</sup> Littwin explains that Haggard's lyrics on the current war have a different bent, and that McGill and his wife, who live in "dark-red country," have not shifted opinion in the same way. Apparently, McGill tries to stay

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<sup>168</sup> Mike Littwin, "RED BLUE/ Rollin' on the River: You Have to Cross Missouri to get to the White House," *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 July 2004, 1S, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>169</sup> Merle Haggard, "Fightin' Side of Me," 1970.

<sup>170</sup> Littwin, "Rollin'."

away from Haggard's political bus conversations. Littwin writes, "Maybe you know about Haggard and Iraq. Haggard sits in the back of the bus that McGill drives, and, in between stories of the early days on the road, he rails on about Iraq and Bush—this from the man who gave us, in Vietnam days, 'Fightin' Side of Me,' a pro-war anthem."<sup>171</sup>

The article includes the lyrics to illustrate Haggard's new political intonation: "Suddenly the cost of war is somethin' out of sight/ Lost a lotta heroes in the fight/ Politicians do all the talkin': soldiers pay the dues/ Suddenly the war is over, that's the news."<sup>172</sup> Haggard no longer represents people like the McGills. Because Haggard is a country music veteran, a product of a genre characterized heavily as "red" during the campaign, this has particular significance. If Pete Seeger had written the song, it would perhaps be less noteworthy. Haggard's musical change is used to represent the cultural-political complexity of Missouri.

The images in the *Rocky Mountain News* "red/blue" series are mostly of people in the midst of everyday life.<sup>173</sup> There is one image of a woman singing at a tent revival in South St. Louis. Littwin interviews the pastor running the revival. The images in this story are noteworthy for the "connotative message" they allow. That is, they are less stuck in the territory of denotation and myth, as Barthes describes, and more open to a secondary meaning that can be made by the "culture" of the society receiving the message. These images, instead of posing as symbols always and already filled with specific meaning, allow more open interpretation than many media images meant to

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. Haggard's new song was "That's the News," 2003.

<sup>173</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

represent the red-blue divide in 2004. For example, the image of the woman singing is meant to signify both individual and corporate practice specific to a time and place. It is not a decontextualized representation, nor does it reinforce claims about the meaning of musical genre. All of the images are of small groups of people—unknown figures.

Littwin's text works with the images to keep meaning open. While in St. Louis, he writes, "I did find a black woman in the Salad Bowl who says that her Christian values have led her to vote for Bush. She just isn't sure she should tell anyone."<sup>174</sup> He describes his conversation with pastor Maurice Jones: "He tells me he'll vote for Kerry this fall, but he'll do so reluctantly, looking around and seeing that this neighborhood looks much the same no matter who's in office. He knows that most of the people here will vote Democratic, too."<sup>175</sup> Later, Jones explains how voting and political belief is shaped by one's culture, or where one grows up: "You take [a] kid and bring him down here—he's gonna have gold chains and gold teeth. You know, he's gonna have some live music....And he's gonna vote Democrat."<sup>176</sup>

When it comes to cultures of political influence, there are worlds within worlds. A *Washington Post* article about how the arts world responds to cultural and political conflict states, "In Washington, where the local industry is all about conflict, art is almost exclusively a form of escape."<sup>177</sup> The article makes a direct connection between the

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<sup>174</sup> Littwin, "Rollin'."

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Philip Kennicott, "Divided They Stand; In a Quarreling Country in an Election Year, The Arts Cleave Us in the Lurch," *The Washington Post*, 12 September 2004, N1, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 20, 2006.

“country bitterly divided” and a festival at the Kennedy Center “devoted to the art of the 1940s,” which are “America’s safe years.”<sup>178</sup> These are days of “unifying nostalgia” and “moral clarity.” However, outside Washington, claims the article, the arts are more politicized than ever. Musical references illustrate this point. The first reference is also self-referential—it recognizes the media’s focus on the music-politics relationship: “And then there’s the Boss, Bruce Springsteen, eminence grise and moral authority of a cross-country tour of rockers opposed to Bush’s reelection. That, too, has garnered a lot of ink.”<sup>179</sup>

The text also recognizes that certain forces have power over what art is made to represent. For example, classical music has “evolved as the quintessential apolitical cultural space” in part because of “a vast bureaucratic class that runs” this art form. The tension between partisan arts and arts for the general public is highlighted:

So the natural conclusion is that the arts are politicized as never before, and for the most part, politicized in favor of the Democratic Party. But the arts world is made up not just of artists and arts lovers, but of the people who fund arts organizations...And they are not monolithic in their political beliefs. Liberal curators must cater to moderate audiences, and conservative donors often pay the bills of liberal artists.<sup>180</sup>

The case of the San Francisco Opera music director, who is also guest conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, is used as an example. Donald Runnicles spoke out against Bush while talking to a reporter. The Atlanta Symphony reprimanded him through a public statement and distanced the symphony organization from his individual statement. Eventually, Runnicles publicly apologized. The article spends much time discussing this

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

event—clearly, the event is deemed representative of the country’s complicated contemporary politics. However, the same discussion is not offered for the following generalization: “In other artistic milieus—the world of Christian apocalyptic fiction, new schools of realist painting, mainstream country music, or the galleries of pop nostalgists such as Thomas Kinkade—the political rhetoric is decidedly more conservative.”<sup>181</sup> As in the articles about Warner, in which country music is linked to NASCAR and hunting, this group of symbols have “closed” meaning. The representations are already complete.

In 2004, popular culture as a whole was understood to be divided along red and blue lines. Arguably, this happened before the campaigns and continues still. For example, a December *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* “year in review” article about arts and media seemed to shore up Newt Gingrich’s claim that Mel Gibson and Michael Moore clearly represented the culture divide: “The two controversial moviemakers were emblematic of the whole red vs. blue, retro vs. metro divide that dominated our airwaves and brain waves nearly all year.”<sup>182</sup> The article is dominated by a large illustration of Gibson and Michael Moore duking it out with boxing gloves, each fighting for their side of the “cultural divide” under the text “Pop Culture War 2004.”<sup>183</sup> The fighters’ names are “The Passion” and “Fahrenheit Fighter,” and their cartoon-like, larger-than-life look is indicative of their symbolic power in written text. Below them are images of other icons who walked the culture line: Janet Jackson, Jon Stewart, Ashlee Simpson and Ray Charles.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Phil Kloer, “Year in Review: Commentary: There was much to forget...,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 26 December 2004, 1K, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 28, 2006.

<sup>183</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

The article goes on to divide the year's pop culture into two camps, conflating states' colors with specific cultural markers:

You could look to the right and see what a red-state country we really are in our culture. God was everywhere in our entertainment, not only at the multiplexes selling out Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" but at bookstores—at one point "The Da Vinci Code," "The Five People You Meet in Heaven" and the apocalyptic "Glorious Awakening" were 1-2-3 on the best-seller list.

Or you could lean to the left and see the blue-state emphasis. The biggest new TV show of the fall season was the sexually supercharged "Desperate Housewives," and two of the best-selling books were Bill Clinton's "My Life" and "The Daily Show's" satirical "America." Green Day's punk-rock opera "American Idiot" was one of the most talked-about albums of the year (and got six Grammy nominations), and lead singer Billy Joe Armstrong performed some songs in concert wearing a George W. Bush mask with the word "Idiot" writ large on the forehead. Now that's blue-state.<sup>184</sup>

Just when it appears the article has reached a conclusion, it shifts into tongue-and-cheek perspective and admits, "The problem with the either/or dichotomy is that while it is a part of the Electoral College system, it doesn't work perfectly for popular culture—red vs. blue isn't so black and white."<sup>185</sup> Here, the article admits there is no reliable relationship between art forms and political culture, nor is there a reliable dichotomy of red and blue. However, even as it claims that consumption patterns, as a whole, are more "purple," it also seems to indict music and movies for polarizing the country. The article claims one antithesis of cultural polarization was "the near universal recognition that the passing of Ray Charles meant that we had lost an important voice. Whether they swore by Fox News Channel or gave money to moveon.org, everyone could agree that Ray

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

Charles singing ‘America’ was just plain beautiful.” Ray Charles, deceased and once an advocate for racial equality when much of the country didn’t agree with him, had become a unifying voice. The article supposes this is specifically because of his music (singing ‘America’), not his extra-music activities.

As previously noted, history informed contemporary interpretations of the political landscape. Reflecting on the country’s increasing polarization, an August 16 *Variety* article framed the political landscape in terms of the 1960s.<sup>186</sup> Author Peter Bart lamented, “The entry of Bruce Springsteen and fellow rockers into the political fray this month—all of it shrewdly stage managed—was a reminder that this is becoming a ‘60s style ‘us-vs.-them’ race.”<sup>187</sup> Here, music—rock music—is both constitutive and representative of cultural polarization. Comparing the Vote for Change tour to large-scale cultural shifts of the 1960s, Bart notes, “Not since the Nixon campaigns of ’68 and ’72 have the forces of pop culture so massed against a candidate.”<sup>188</sup> The article notes that anti-Bush messages may equal big bucks and better record contracts for musicians. Bart mentions punk band Anti-Flag’s song “Their System Doesn’t Work for You” and Green Day’s “American Idiot.” In this article, songs are employed as signs of the times.

Bart concludes the article saying, “All of which vaguely reminds me of Bob Dylan’s immortal ‘60s admonition: ‘You don’t need a weather man to know which way the wind blows.’” And the culprit, for Bart, is media like Rush Limbaugh and Fox News and Michael Moore films. This media is at fault for exacerbating a divide. Interestingly,

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<sup>186</sup> Peter Bart, “Must politics be ‘us-vs.-them’?” *Variety*, 16 August 2004, 3, in Academic Search Premier [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

this puts music and sound forms in a certain position. Because, in Bart's analysis, they are not part of the (kind of) media at fault, they are not participants, but reflections. In this article, the anti-Bush music mentioned is a reaction—a representation—of reality. It is a reflection more than constitutive force.

### **Listening to Voter Identity**

The media also focused the red-blue divide more specifically on voter identity, sometimes connecting identity to region. In a December 27 *National Review* book review, the red-blue divide becomes central to the explanation of James Webb's *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*.<sup>189</sup> The review begins, "Without really intending to do so, James Webb may have written the most important political book of 2004. *Born Fighting* helps explain why George W. Bush won reelection by a margin statement by referencing red-blue politics. First, it paraphrases Webb's description of the Scots-Irish in our country. They are people of "insistent individualism" and "They don't go for group-identity politics any more than they like to join a union." The Scots-Irish's ancestors—and their values—are a product of tradition: "Two hundred years ago the mountains built a fierce and uncomplaining self-reliance into an already hardened people."<sup>190</sup>

From here, the article moves swiftly to present-day politics, claiming "These are the 'red state' voters. They are family-oriented, take morality seriously, go to church, join

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<sup>189</sup> Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Heart of Valor," *National Review*, 27 December 2004, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.



the military, and listen to country music.”<sup>191</sup> Not mentioned is the fact that this could, in theory, describe any voter or ethnic group in America. But in this text, these people are the Dixie Democrats who are now supporters of the G.O.P. Here, history and tradition drive contemporary culture, in which religion, politics, work—and music—are not separate. The review, framed by 2004 politics, uses Webb’s work as a “selective tradition.” In this media space, his work becomes an explanation for contemporary culture—certain pieces of history are “selected” as evidence of the 2004 cultural divide.

Webb “describes the migration of a stubborn, individualistic people from the mists of Northern Scotland thorough Ulster to the highlands of America, and thence—by the “hillbilly highways”—to the Midwest and Far West.” The reference to “hillbilly highways” here is interesting. First, because country music lefty Steve Earle wrote a song by exactly that name. Second, because the term “hillbilly” specifically arose from the music industry in the 1920s, as a way to market the sounds of Appalachia. “Hillbilly” has always been a constructed term—a representation of region and people born of a need to explain and sell specific culture to larger culture. And, of course, the term worked to homogenize peoples’ identity.

Additionally, the article asserts that Scots-Irish culture today is “liable to be ridiculed by the coastal elites, who view them as violent rednecks or trailer-part trash.”<sup>192</sup> It quotes novelist Jane Smiley to represent this apparently widespread elite view. Smiley said,

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

‘the election results reflect the decision of the right wing to cultivate and exploit ignorance in the citizenry....Ignorance and bloodlust have a long tradition in the United States, especially in the red states....Listen to what the red state citizens say about themselves, the songs they write, and the sermons they flock to. They know who they are—they are full of original sin and they have a taste for violence.’

The employment of extreme stereotypes (myths) in the Smiley quote makes it easy fodder for the article. However, the article does recognize the power of stereotyping on both sides of the “divide.” It states, “Unfortunately, the Left does not have a monopoly on this attitude. Commenting on a statement that Howard Dean made during the Democratic primaries, Charles Krauthammer opined that Dean was campaigning for the ‘white trash’ vote by pandering to the ‘rebel-yelling racist redneck.’”<sup>193</sup> Webb took issue with this statement in the *Wall Street Journal*, calling Krauthammer’s comment “the most vicious ethnic slur of the presidential campaign.”<sup>194</sup>

The book review’s description of “red state voters” who “listen to country music” uses musical genre to make voter identity readable. Country music becomes part of a set of textual representations that mark voter identity, including church and the military. A sound denoted by country and “hillbilly” becomes an extension of “red” voting. Here, the sound of certain music brands a space, much like Paul Moore’s description of Catholic and Protestant marching band sounds in Ireland. It also reflects Steve Jones’s claim that both the country music genre and the press that covers it are obsessed with concepts of authenticity and tradition. Like a photograph, concepts of “hillbilly” and country music relay what Barthes calls a “continuous message” or continuous denotation. There is a

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

“common sense” understanding that the sound (and subject matter) of this music is a good analogy for red-state realities.

An article in *The New York Times* on November 7, 2004, used a similar reference to Scots-Irish culture while discussing “The Real Divide: Waterside Voters Versus Inlanders.”<sup>195</sup> The article claims, “while political analysts have been busy dividing the electorate by race and religion and age, perhaps the United State electorate is divided by something more elemental: location, between those who live on the water and those who do not.”<sup>196</sup> New areas of growth are inland. The article also quotes James Webb here about how Scots-Irish are historically opposed to centralized power.<sup>197</sup> Country music again comes into textual play. The article reports,

...the Republicans have been courting the middle classes in the interior, a region with a very different culture because of both geography and history. Much of it was settled by clans of Scots-Irish fundamentalists whose values and traditions, like country music, spread from Appalachia throughout the heartland.<sup>198</sup>

To represent the history of the “blue,” *Insight on the News* returned again the 1960s and ran an article with the headline “Kerry Embodies New Left Ideal.”<sup>199</sup> The article claims that Kerry’s attitude toward cultural issues—such as his silence about the Janet Jackson Super Bowl halftime show—show he is a “son of the sixties.” The New Left, like “hillbilly,” is a term that has great signifying power beyond its “origins.” The

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<sup>195</sup> John Tierney, “The Real Divide: Waterside Voters Versus Inlanders,” *The New York Times*, 7 November 2004, sec. 4, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 27, 2006.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> John Berlau, “Kerry Embodies New Left Ideals,” *Insight on the News*, 15 March 2004, 18, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

*Insight* article laments the “growing vulgarity and coarsening of popular culture” and claims that voters are more attracted these to non-vulgar arts. Norah Jones is one of the examples here:

And recent evidence suggests that Americans are rewarding artists who do hold themselves to that higher standard. Norah Jones, a singer and pianist who beautifully mixes the sounds of country, jazz and soul, has sold 8 million copies of her album *Come Away With Me*, even though it doesn’t contain one dirty word or explicit description of a sex act.<sup>200</sup>

For John Berlau, the article’s author, Kerry represents “the moral outlook of the sixties generation,” which is vulgar and not very Norah Jones-ish. Preceding the Jones example is the statement, “Reflecting its blue-states base, coarseness in language increasingly is common at Democratic Party events.”<sup>201</sup>

Much of the article is about FCC regulations for radio and TV networks and Kerry’s position, says the article, to bring back the 1960s Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters (radio and television) to give equal time to “liberal” and “conservative” viewpoints. The text claims Kerry is pushing a liberal 1960s agenda all over again: “With the country divided politically and culturally, some on the right are calling the 2004 election the ‘sixties’ last stand,’ featuring John Kerry [in the role of Gen. George Custer] leading the blue troops, and George W. Bush [as Sitting Bull] leading the red troops.” The obvious lack of sensitivity for this tragic historical moment aside, not to mention the strange parallels it attempts to draw, the analogy evidences the importance of the past in constructing the present. It also makes clear that the “fall” of the 1960s would

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

be not simply a political event, but a cultural event. Perhaps this is where music re-enters the picture.

Months before the election, *Insight on the News* published an article about the Iraq war titled “The United State of America’s Allies.”<sup>202</sup> The article discusses who has stood by the U.S. decision to go to war and why. In Australia, it explains, politics are similar to those in the U.S., and Australia has its own “red states.”<sup>203</sup> The article explains further,

In Australia, just as in America, the 1960s opened up divisions between cities and the country side that continue today over the war and other issues, such as the “politically correct” rewriting of Australian history. The elections looming in the two countries, in which both Bush and Howard must defend their records on Iraq and terrorism, remind observers that the inhabitants of the “red states” of both nations share a common core culture and traditional values. Both, in turn, appear under attack from those with the same countercultural point of view.<sup>204</sup>

To underscore this political reality and take in further into the realm of “culture,” the article continues, asking “So is it really about culture?” Apparently yes, because the following music reference follows:

Americans might be surprised to learn that since the 1950s their counterparts in “the bush” of the Aussie countryside have produced a vibrant country-music scene similar to their own. The late Slim Dusty, a balladeer from the outback who played guitar and sang about the traditional country subjects of beer, friendship, loneliness, patriotism and God, was one of Australia’s biggest-selling artists. At his state funeral last September... “Sydney’s St. Andrew’s Cathedral became a hand-clapping hillbilly heaven,” according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The dean led the thousands of mourners in singing the chorus of Dusty’s 1958 hit, “A Pub With No Beer.” From Prime Minister Howard on down, Dusty’s

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<sup>202</sup> John Berlau, “The United State of America’s Allies,” *Insight on the News*, 26 April 2004, 21, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

admirers sang his song and looked at the coffin draped in the Australian flag: “There’s nothing so lonesome, so morbid or drear/ Than to stand in the bar of a pub with no beer.”<sup>205</sup>

The next and final line of the article is “Take that, Osama!” Suddenly, Dusty’s country music lyrics, a marker of universal “red state” culture, are representative of a whole Western political sphere dedicated to fighting terrorists like Osama Bin Laden. The “continuous” message of the country genre is upheld and expanded. Interestingly, the lyrics that precede “take that” aren’t explicitly political, which suggests that the genre does the talking. The mere indication of country sound is a political stance, a representation that inhabits one side of a cultural dichotomy.

However, a January 2004 *Atlantic* article is notable for its avoidance of red-blue speak when it explores the possible “divide” in America. The article, “In Search of the Elusive Swing Voter,” shows that it is possible to discuss voter identity and the cultural landscape without employing representations of “red” and “blue.”<sup>206</sup> That polarization exists is clear, but the description of it is decidedly focused on the individual political nuances of each region. The article begins,

During the primary season we are accustomed to focusing on the drama and intrigue in a few important states such as New Hampshire and Iowa. ...Because so many candidates are running, and because the contests are not winner-take-all, formerly inconsequential states such as Oklahoma, New Mexico, and even Delaware could be critical in determining who finally emerges as the next Democratic nominee. In contrast, we tend to view the general election as wide open, when in fact fewer and fewer states have determined the outcome in recent presidential elections. The reason for this is the growing polarization of the American electorate.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Joshua Green, “In Search of the Elusive Swing Voter,” *Atlantic*, January-February 2004, 102, in Academic Search Premier [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

The article goes on to summarize recent regional political history—the Northwest, the South, the Southwest, Florida, the Upper Midwest. The summary has mostly to do with the last election’s results, economic changes, the Latino voting bloc and political strategies. Then, the article describes the “elusive swing voter,” constructed from data. These swing voters are,

...mainly white and also younger, less likely to vote, and more likely than self-identified Democrats or Republicans to characterize themselves as “workaholics.” They are most heavily concentrated in suburbs and small cities, and though they disapprove of many Bush Administration policies, they tend to be more religious and admire military service more than most Democrats do.

According to the article, the centrist New Democratic Network, which published the data, also offers tactical advice: “Buried in the report’s ‘tactical recommendations’ is information that both sides in the next campaign may find useful: independents listen to a disproportionate amount of country radio, and they watch SportsCenter more often than other Americans.”<sup>208</sup>

Here, for campaign purposes and to make media more “easily readable,” swing voters are country radio listeners. However, in this article, country music listeners are not “red,” but independent, and it is likely these voters reside in a purple swing state. Still, the article acknowledges that many of these independents are former Democrats and “white working-class voters.”<sup>209</sup> To reach these voters, the Democrats will have to talk more about traditional “values.” For many, the road to this authenticity was paved with country music.

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 5

### Conservative Twang and Rock Rallies: Reading Genre

During the 2004 presidential campaign, country music became representative of an authenticity the Democrats could not achieve. This representation perhaps gained even more power after George W. Bush was elected to a second term. The identity crisis that seemed to be plaguing the Democratic Party was the antithesis of the mainstream country community's staunch, clear-cut values.

In a post-election editorial in *U.S. News & World Report*, Gloria Borger presented the cultural divide musically—a more telling description, she claimed, than the mythical red-blue divide.<sup>210</sup> The title of the article is “Democrats need a twang,” and Borger begins the article reflecting on how red values and blue values aren't really that different.

Instead, it's a matter of articulation:

So I'm driving to work the other day in Washington (D.C.—very blue), listening to my favorite country music singer, Martina McBride (Tennessee—very red), and suddenly I'm thinking about the election. About Martina the Mom singing “Blessed” about her children; about the Lonestar ballad “My Front Porch Looking In” honoring family; about Toby Keith's “American Soldier.” (Oh, and I don't want to die for you/ But if dyin's asked of me/ I'll bear that cross with an honor,/ 'Cause freedom don't come free.)<sup>211</sup>

Borger continues,

What does this have to do with the election? Maybe nothing but possibly everything. As journalists and academics and politicians dissect the

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<sup>210</sup> Gloria Borger, “Democrats need a twang,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 22 November 2004, 30, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 28, 2006.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.



importance of the so-called values vote, one thing is clear: The Democrats need a little more country in their voice. And this isn't about the red state/blue state divide, which is overrated anyway. It's about authenticity and family and national pride. Everybody shares those values; the Democrats just haven't spent enough time singing about them lately.<sup>212</sup>

Borger implies that the "twang" of country music embodies authentic values of family and national pride. In this sound is the authentic identity that the Democrats missed.

Bruce Springsteen, widely understood as a symbol of working-class culture, wasn't enough. Interestingly, country and rock genres have traded and treaded in similar themes.

Chris Willman, in his discussion of the politics of country music, notes that the country genre historically made explicit references to working class culture.<sup>213</sup> The early years of country, beginning in the 1920s, were full of songs about the poor and downtrodden. This music sympathized with people down on their luck and refers to widespread economic poverty. But by the late 1960s, notes Willman,

the emphasis has shifted radically when economic issues are raised; poverty is rarely the focus, except in the occasional Merle Haggard song like 'They're Tearing the Labor Camps Down.' Eyes are now trained on the bootstraps everyone is pulling themselves up by, and woe to those who milk the government for milk money.<sup>214</sup>

Around this time is when Republicans began to court country, or perhaps the other way around. In the 1968 election, many country stars came out supporting Nixon and George Wallace but none came out for Hubert Humphrey. This was after country musician Lawton Williams had "what was certainly the last national hit single ever to support a Democratic president, with 'Everything's OK on the LBJ,' which reached No.40 in

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks*, 158.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

1964.”<sup>215</sup> Willman claims, “Carter won back the genre, only to have the Democrats lose it in a big way thereafter.” In 1988, Loretta Lynn helped campaign for Reagan, even though she’d supported Democrats in the past. With much of Nashville’s Music Row at the G.O.P. convention in 1992, some media outlets had fun pointing out how the stars’ personal lifestyles didn’t match the G.O.P.’s traditional family values.

When Willman asked Ronnie Dunn of Brooks & Dunn (who played and the G.O.P. convention and whose music Bush used during the campaign) whether country should be seen as “the genre of moral values,” Dunn laughed. He said,

“I don’t see it as that...I always see it as as hell-raising good times. It’s always been a good outlet for the blue-collar working-man to go out and punch the jukebox on a Friday night and come up with a song that says what he needs to hear. I don’t look at my audience and see a lot of Sunday morning devout churchgoers. If there are, they’re in drag!”<sup>216</sup>

Lee Ann Womack had a similar response, and said it was funny how people made country out to be so moral.

“I grew up listening to George Jones and Merle Haggard and stuff like that, so I didn’t necessarily think of country as being wholesome. I thought of it as being very real and very representative and not afraid to talk about subjects that affected people. I do know that, stylistically, country has been influenced by gospel music...But when you’re talking about people like Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash—great, great men who eventually, especially Cash, came around to Christianity and spirituality—I don’t necessarily think of ‘wholesome.’”<sup>217</sup>

The recognition that musical genre may not have a direct relationship with particular morals or values echoes Street’s idea that meaning lies in “how particular songs or

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 102.

performances engage with particular political moments and issues.”<sup>218</sup> This is where music’s representative power lies. This is how sound becomes infused with meaning. Regardless of whether Republican politics actually championed Dunn’s “blue-collar working man,” they courted its symbolic power—and its audience.

Undoubtedly, politicians have been well aware of the representative power of country. Willman references the history of presidents cultivating a relationship with country music. Nixon was the first president to invite country musicians to the White House.<sup>219</sup> He also visited the opening of Opryland in 1973, where he even played the piano on stage. Jimmy and Rosalind Carter were on a first-name basis with Loretta Lynn. Both Bush White Houses maintained a relationship with the country music world. Willman posits that Bill Clinton didn’t have to show he cared much about country because “he *was* country,” and that “Gore’s inability to connect with the main industry of his campaign base in Nashville...seemed to signal the true extinguishing of whatever embers might have been left over from the late and lamented alliance between hillbilly music and the Democratic party.”<sup>220</sup>

The unstable meaning produced and represented by country music through the years is noteworthy. At base, it points to how the music is situated in cultural context. By 2004, Borger is identifying the values synonymous with country as authenticity, family and national pride, which, considering the genre’s history of cheating and drinking, calls in to question the very idea of country music’s own “authenticity.” But Borger recognizes

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 161.

that the concept of musically articulated values has power when she suggests that country music is an accurate articulation of American values.

The reality is that the roots of country, rock, and any other genre are more complicated. The meaning of both rock and country—the primary genres utilized by campaigns and the media—have roots in both African American and Anglo forms. These genres have become more socially “readable” as primarily “white” music. During the campaign, the genres were made readable through a relationship with particular politics. Evidencing how the essence of country has been socially constructed, Willman quotes country music historian Bill C. Malone:

“You found a lot of class consciousness in older country music, and a lot of resentment against the rich and privileged...And occasionally those older songs will comment upon exploitation of workers, particularly in the textile mills. On the other hand, you also find some social conservatism in songs like ‘Why Do You Bob Your Hair, Girls’ and ‘Saved,’ which comment on certain moral positions that were considered to be wrong. But politically, before the 1960s, there wasn’t any explicit posture of Republicanism or *political* conservatism in the music. That’s all pretty recent—if you consider the last thirty or forty years to be recent.”<sup>221</sup>

In her article, Borger asks, “When did the party of the little guy, the middle class, and working moms become the party of the intelligentsia, of Hollywood moguls, of left-wing billionaires?”<sup>222</sup> Besides echoing a common Republican description of the left, Borger’s question also posits that country music might represent the Democrat “little guy” and “working mom.” Here, region enters Borger’s explanation. She quotes former Bill Clinton advisor Doug Sosnick, who says “You look at the swing voters out there,

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>222</sup> Borger, “Democrats need a twang.”

what their sporting events are, the music they listen to, the celebrities, the television programs, it's just not what the East Coast leadership [watches].”<sup>223</sup>

If Borger is intending to break down the red-blue dichotomy, she ends up with a mid-America and East Coast dichotomy. Borger suggests “we” don’t look down on the swing voters and their non-East coast tastes, which implicitly positions the media as part of this East coast or Democrat “we.” She suggests that this “we” buy a country music CD, “Like Tim McGraw’s new hit ‘Live Like You Were Dying,’ in which he sings, I finally read the Good Book/ And I took a good long hard look/ At what I’d do if I could do it all again.’ Democrats, sing along. No lip-syncing allowed.”<sup>224</sup>

While country took its position as a natural extension of the Republican Party, other genres’ affinity for Bush seemed questionable. When *The New York Times* ran a story about right-wing punk rockers, it highlighted an apparent anomaly in the world of musical-political relations. The March 21, 2004, article, titled “A Bush Surprise: Fright-Wing Support,” begins with Nick Rizzuto, a 22-year-old punk who started the Web site Conservative Punk.<sup>225</sup> According to the article, the site is,

One of a handful of Web sites and blogs that have sprung up recently as evidence of a heretofore latent political entity: Republican punks. With names like GOPunk, Anti-Anti-Flag and Punkvoter Lies, the sites are a curious blend of Karl Rove and Johnny Rotten, preaching personal responsibility and reflexive patriotism with the in-your-face zeal of a mosh pit.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Warren St. John, “A Bush Surprise; Fright-Wing Support,” *The New York Times*, 21 March 2004, sec. 9, in LexisNexis [database on-line]; accessed February 19, 2006.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

The article notes this political faction is quite small compared to its more left-wing counterpart, Punkvoter, a coalition of punk bands that rallied around the goal of getting fans to vote against President Bush. The article focuses on how, for the punk genre, a musical movement with more explicit, if convoluted, ideology (or non-ideology, some would argue) than most, the action against Bush seems more in line with punk's history than does conservatism. It paraphrases Michale Graves, former singer for the Misfits and columnist for *Conservative Punk*: "He allows that he doesn't fit the profile of your average red-state Republican."<sup>227</sup> First, this assumes that an average red-state Republican exists, and second, it highlights how this conservative action is a challenge to our socially constructed concept of punk. Which means the article has to first represent the punk genre:

Traditionally a subculture of anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian leanings, the punk world has never been monolithic in its politics. The Sex Pistols preached nihilism and anarchy, while bands like the Clash, which headlined Rock Against Racism events in London and New York in the late 1970's, espoused leftist views....At the same time, punk came out of a frustration with what many urban youths saw as the ineffectualness of hippie-style liberalism, and embraced an inflammatory iconography—like swastikas and military leathers—as a statement against the peace movement, and everything else mainstream for that matter.<sup>228</sup>

The convention, says the article, is for punks to embrace individualist, left-leaning values. It notes the biggest exception—Johnny Ramone. But the article also acknowledges that right-wing punk might be in line with the ideas of punk, like rebelling and disruption. In this case, being right-wing is against the commonly held assumptions about punk. As the

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

article makes clear that the punk genre, generally, is decidedly not red-state, the punk sound becomes a place, as Sterne says, where ideologies have been grafted.

The first image around which the story is wrapped is a portrait of Rizzuto, squatting in front of a tree with a staunch look on his face.<sup>229</sup> On his arms is written (or tattooed), “Fight Terror” and “Vote Bush.” The portrait style offers no context in its frame. Instead, it focuses on Rizzuto’s punk look, including a short mohawk. Image in this story is central because it is central to the punk ideology. The text begins by describing Rizzuto’s look and how it is “the very picture of counterculture alienation,” not Republicanism.<sup>230</sup> With punk, image connotes genre, which connotes sound, which, in this “surprising” case, connotes young conservative voters. This first image reinforces the individualism inherent in both punk and capitalist ideology. Interestingly, individualism is also central to the country music image.

A *Rolling Stone* article about Punkvoter and its effort to mobilize young voters reiterates that any kind of mainstream political participation is somewhat un-punk. As Fat Mike Burkett, founder of Punkvoter, says in the article, “Instead of just saying, ‘Fuck the government,’ we’re saying, ‘No, this government sucks and let’s do something about it.’”<sup>231</sup> The article situates Punkvoter with the array of other multi-genre youth voter campaigns, such as The Hip-hop Summit Action Network. However, the article suggests it is more natural to have such actions be the work of Democrats. Author Damien Cave writes, “Even the Republicans are tapping into music: On March 25<sup>th</sup>, the GOP’s

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<sup>229</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Damien Cave, “Punks Mosh for Votes,” *Rolling Stone*, 13 May 2004, 9, in Academic Search Premier [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

eighteen-wheeler 'Reggie the Registration Rig,' rolled up to MTV's Total Request Live."<sup>232</sup>

Of course, the *Rolling Stone* media outlet has always worked to foster a connection between popular music and progressive politics. An article in the magazine about Patti Smith, titled "The Happy Warrior; Patti Smith wants to put an end to bad rock & roll and George Bush's presidency,"<sup>233</sup> aptly illustrates Street's description of music's symbolic power—both in textual form and in its engagement with certain "political moments and issues."<sup>234</sup> The article is framed by politics, and although Smith is vocal about her political views, there seems to be no explicit political message in her new record, which is central to the interview.

Instead, the assumption is that music has political significance, in part because of the time it is situated in. The article begins with an account of a Smith concert, which included "two hours of rock and righteousness: readings from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*; calls to register, vote and oust George W. Bush; and anthems old and new..."<sup>235</sup> It goes on to claim, "*Trampin'* is Smith's first album for Columbia and a magnificent state-of-the-nation address." The album is about surviving and optimism, says Smith, who explains,

This is an American record. The American plains are in it. The mother figure is strong. Because I oppose the Bush administration, people think I am anti-American. I love American history. I love the language of our

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> David Fricke, "The Happy Warrior," *Rolling Stone*, 27 May 2004, 39, in Academic Search Premier [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

<sup>234</sup> Street, "Rock, pop and politics," 249.

<sup>235</sup> Fricke, "The Happy Warrior."



organic law and the spacious skies. True patriotism is not blindly following whoever is president. There are troubling issues in our country. But it is worth fighting for, worth tearing apart so we can rebuild it. All of those things are on this record.<sup>236</sup>

Smith's claim that certain relations and issues can be "on" a record is an interesting connection to Sterne's idea of "grafted" ideology. Here, Smith's record is positioned, in Shepherd's words, as an "individual [piece] of music [mediated] in concrete historical circumstances."<sup>237</sup> The interview also quotes Smith saying that "Each generation has to translate for itself" and reclaim poetry, rock and roll, and political activism. This suggests that all of these are forms to be infused with meaning, forms that change meaning, and forms that are intimately connected. As Gilroy says, sonic forms can be sites of semantic indeterminacy.

Despite this musical indeterminacy, Bruce Springsteen aimed to focus his symbolic power for campaign for Kerry. In this case, both Springsteen's star power and his music itself had representative powers. And, Springsteen was everywhere in the media. Tom Waldman suggests why the rock star was a good ally for the Democratic campaign:

Springsteen is the quintessential figure in what could be regarded as the golden era of rock and politics. On the basis of column inches, television and radio interviews, and his own output, Springsteen would win the award for the rock star that has expressed more political opinions than any other in history. His views are indicative of a staunch Democrat, including support for affirmative action, sympathy for the working class in urban and rural America, and skepticism about big business.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Shepherd, "Music Consumption," 328.

<sup>238</sup> Tom Waldman, *We All Want to Change the World; Rock and Politics from Elvis to Eminem* (London: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), 245.

Springsteen's popularity likely also made him and his music easy for the media to employ. He was already a public figure, and thus what he "stood for" had already been partially constructed in the public sphere. Still, Springsteen was never explicitly partisan in his politics before the 2004 election, although he did object to Reagan's use of "Born in the U.S.A."

As Waldman notes, although rock has traditionally stood in opposition to conservatism, Springsteen was not always culturally understood to be a blue-state anti-Republican.

By one measure, anyway, the gap between politics and rock narrowed in the 1980s. During the 1984 election, it was noted that a sizable percentage of Bruce Springsteen fans were also backers of Ronald Reagan, which reportedly bothered the musician but delighted the president. Springsteen had made himself out to be a kind of working-class hero and friend of the common man—the rock star as one of us. Reagan was no working-class hero—although he often tried to sound a populist theme—and to liberals such as Springsteen, was no friend to the common man.<sup>239</sup>

During 2004, the campaign, the media, the public and Springsteen himself constructed a more specific representation that brought the rock genre into the sphere of Democratic affiliation.

In a September 2004 interview in *Rolling Stone*, Springsteen talked about how he situated himself, as an artist, in politics prior to 2004:

... I wanted to remain an independent voice for the audience that came to my shows. We've tried to build up a lot of credibility over the years, so that if we took a stand on something, people would receive it with an open mind. Part of not being particularly partisan was just an effort to remain a very thoughtful voice in my fans' lives. ... I always liked being involved actively more at a grass-roots level, to act as a partisan for a set of ideals:

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 9.

civil rights, economic justice, a sane foreign policy, democracy. That was the position I felt comfortable coming from.<sup>240</sup>

He also acknowledged that audiences build their own identities from music when he said, “There is nothing more personal, in some ways, than the music people listen to.”<sup>241</sup> And he recognized the power of audiences (which can be read broadly to include media) to infuse musicians and their music with symbolic power: “Pop musicians live in the world of symbology. You live and die by the symbol in many ways. You serve at the behest of your audience's imagination. It's a complicated relationship.”<sup>242</sup>

Springsteen's opinion piece that appeared in *The New York Times*, and later in *Rolling Stone*, suggested artists have to explain their politics if they want control over what their music represents. In the article, Springsteen indicates he is ready to be aligned with the Democrats when he says:

Personally, for the last 25 years I have always stayed one step away from partisan politics. Instead, I have been partisan about a set of ideals: economic justice, civil rights, a humane foreign policy, freedom and a decent life for all of our citizens. This year, however, for many of us the stakes have risen too high to sit this election out.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Jann S. Wenner, “We’ve Been Mislead: Springsteen talks about his conscience, and the nature of an artist and his audience,” *Rolling Stone*, 22 September 2004; available from [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6477832/weve\\_been\\_misled](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6477832/weve_been_misled); accessed 5 April 2005.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

He continues with a list of things that are going wrong, from the war in Iraq to cutting social programs to tax cuts for the rich. He calls for a return to “one nation indivisible,” claiming, “Our American government has strayed too far from American values.”<sup>244</sup>

In some ways, it might seem out of character for a rock musician to call for a return to “American values.” Historically, despite its reflection of American music forms, rock music was seen as the downfall of civilization and the moral corruption of young people. But in its beginning, Waldman notes, it was not explicitly political outside its power to challenge the status quo. It was not a genre of political action:

There was no “We Are the World” in the 1950s, and no Farm-Aid, Live-Aid, or Rock the Vote either. In the 1950s, rock and roll stars didn’t tell their fans how to vote or what causes to embrace. They didn’t offer opinions on the Issues of the Day, nor were they asked. They had no choice. Rock and roll didn’t have much breathing space in the 1950s, not when ministers, parents, and local authorities around the country wanted it banned for life.<sup>245</sup>

The explicit politics came in the 1960s, as they did to almost every part of culture, but even then rock wasn’t always political, nor were the rock stars. The political alignment of music depended on the social contexts of production (and producers) and consumption (and consumers). But political campaigns have money and public relations power to craft music as a political representation, which involves bypassing context to constitute myth. The media reproduced the myth when it claimed that Democrats “tended to lean toward the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Black-Eyed Peas, with some James Taylor and Carole King mixed in.” According to this account, new rock, older rock and hip-hop represent the Democrats and their party’s voters.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Waldman, *We All Want to Change the World*, 58.

And for Republicans, country was the natural sound. For *Rolling Stone*, a magazine that rarely puts country on the cover, this country-politics identity was worth looking in to during an election year. Mark Binelli interviewed Toby Keith, known widely for his support of President Bush and the war and his explicit lyrics about September 11. This is one artist Gloria Borger talked about when she encouraged the Democrats to get more “twang.” She referenced Keith’s “American Soldier” as an example of national (not partisan) values. (Which is, of course, also debatable.)

Titled “The Battle Hymn of Toby Keith; The Dixie Chicks don’t like him, but that’s all right: Several million record buyers do,” the *Rolling Stone* story began by discussing how Keith’s hit “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” propelled him to popularity.<sup>246</sup> Binelli wrote that the song “[gave] a man who’d been largely unknown outside the world of country a brand-new title: America’s favorite redneck.” In the article, Keith’s politics are of central interest. For example, “Keith went on to perform for the president, feud with the Dixie Chicks and duet with Willie Nelson.” Binelli also describes Keith’s hometown, adding cultural context to Keith’s work:

Keith grew up about four miles from here, and he doesn’t envision himself ever living elsewhere. Locals follow rodeo and college football, and they fish for sand bass every spring in a river that runs through Keith’s property. Keith did all of that while growing up. He also got his first guitar (from his maternal grandmother) when he was eight, for Christmas. His paternal grandfather, who played music in church, taught him a few chords...<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Mark Binelli, “The Battle Hymn of Toby Keith,” *Rolling Stone*, 22 January 2004, 43, in Academic Search Premier [database on-line]; accessed March 20, 2006.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

The article comes back to the song and how Keith was conflicted about putting it on his record. It quotes him saying “I’m very prayer-driven” and how he took the troops’ response to the song as a sign. But “I had to weigh the two sides. Are you willing to fuss and fight with people so other people who need to hear the song can hear it?”<sup>248</sup> The article also clarifies Keith’s position on the war. Apparently, Keith told the *Los Angeles Times* “he thought ‘the math hasn’t worked out for me’ for the Iraq invasion, but now he insists the quote was taken out of context.” Keith’s response to this in the *Rolling Stone* article contains a jab at Michael Moore, another symbolic artist of the campaign year, and a larger reference to Hollywood. If Music Row gained a reputation as a Republican stronghold, Hollywood was the Democratic version:

“I’m 150 percent protroop. I said the math doesn’t add up for me, but the people in charge are smarter than me, they’re not gonna call me up and tell me certain things. I’m not gonna trust the guy on the corner off Hollywood and Vine holding a ‘Peace, Not War’ sign. He don’t know more than I do. I’m gonna trust Condoleezza Rice or Donald Rumsfeld more than somebody who just made a movie.”<sup>249</sup>

In the article, Keith also refers back to a “canon” of pro-war country music. He responds to a question about the Dixie Chicks by saying, “It used to be taboo to talk about other artists in Nashville. You didn’t hear Willie Nelson or Johnny Cash talk about Merle haggard when he did ‘Fightin’ Side of Me’ or ‘Okie From Muskogee.’”

In addition to a portrait of Keith sitting on a barstool in front of a bar, eyeing the camera from under his black leather cowboy hat while his bulldog sits below, the article

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

employs old photos of Keith's life.<sup>250</sup> Under the banner of "Born in the U.S.A.," these images convey the authenticity of the star, which, as noted, is a marker of the country genre itself. These images also position Keith's values as natural and home-grown: an image of Keith at age 2, an image of Keith with his mother in 1989, and an image of Keith with his newborn son in 1997. Such intimate photographs are less often the stuff of profiles on young indie rockers. Here, the images work to illustrate the ideology Keith performs in his songs and his persona. It is the sound of, as the text notes, a good ol' boy.

To be sure, most of the country music referenced in 2004 print media representations of national politics was mainstream country, the Music Row of Nashville. And while there were Music Row Democrats, there are also country music listeners and media that kept a distance from the mainstream music itself—and the mainstreaming of country music politics in media. *No Depression* magazine, which began as a bible of the alt-country genre, entered the political discussion with an editorial endorsement of John Kerry in the September-October 2004 issue. But first, in the editor's note, the editors recognized that their listeners and readers were not a homogenous group, and that music is not necessarily naturally aligned with a politics: "We are well aware that few of you come to these pages seeking a dialogue on politics, that we are one of the rare publications fortunate enough to have an audience which holds passionately to diverse views."<sup>251</sup> But, the editors explain, "we live in an extraordinary time," and essentially, the editors are following the lead of musicians:

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<sup>250</sup> See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

<sup>251</sup> Grant Alden, Peter Blackstock and Kyla Fairchild, "Hello Stranger," *No Depression*, September-October 2004, 2.

Running through much of this issue is a dialogue about the state of our union. In almost all cases, the subject came up because the artists profiled have made an effort to express their feeling and concerns in the music they're making right now. This is as it should be: There is a long history in America of intertwined relationships between art and politics.<sup>252</sup>

The editors go on to describe the artist features in the issue, and how each artist—Willie Nelson, Mavis Staples, Buddy Miller, Jason Ringenberg, Camper Van Beethoven—expresses ideas significant to the current political climate. Of course, this is in part a matter of interpretation by the writers. But they reference the slippery nature of interpretation and representation when they write, “We can only hope that [the election] will not be decided by the endlessly divisive culture wars, which serve principally as fund-raising tools for both sides.”<sup>253</sup>

The editors’ message brought a slew of letters in the next issue. Most of the readers who wrote asked that the magazine “explicitly refrain from expressing political views in these pages.”<sup>254</sup> Editor Peter Blackstock responded, “That seems to us not only unrealistic, as it discounts the inherent relationship between politics and art, but also unhealthy, as it suggests an aversion to the kind of dialogue that helps us understand each other better.”<sup>255</sup> Clearly, the purpose of the magazine was in debate, but also the purpose—or signifying power—of musical forms. Editor Grant Alden wrote that music ought to be read for politics:

...we have to be able to talk about our differences, and preaching to the converted only weighs down the collection plate. They may rarely be so

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Peter Blackstock, “Hello Stranger,” *No Depression*, November-December 2004, 2.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.



explicit, but politics have always been—and will always be—among the textures of these pages. Great songs (and good writing) come from hard thinking, and surely we wish our best artists to grapple with the most difficult and important subjects they encounter.<sup>256</sup>

Blackstock reiterates, “The opinion expressed by many artists we featured in *ND* #53...lean counter to the direction George Bush would lead America.”<sup>257</sup> And he concedes, “There are artists on the other side of the tracks too, of course. Toby Keith and Darryl Worley have sold millions with songs that defend Bush’s actions.” Then, Blackstock posits an innate relationship between musical genre and specific politics. He writes, “Yet if you’ve chosen to pick up this magazine, it’s almost certainly because you prefer the artists we cover in that first batch above to those in the second. And it’s hard to believe that the political differences between these artists are pure coincidence.”

The editor’s note recognizes some sort of underlying ideology in all art forms when it claims, “if you’ve found their [Vote for Change musicians] music to be worth your time over the years, then perhaps there is some logic in listening to what they have to say about America, too.”<sup>258</sup> The idea here is not that music is tied to a specific politics, but that politics and other cultural forces inform the making of music. That is understood. At the beginning of 2004, the *No Depression* critics’ poll, which rated the 40 best albums of 2003, included cultural explanations for the direction of music in general. Alden said that many artists did not release their best album in 2003, in part, because of the “powerful divisions and uncertainties that run throughout society.” He indicates that music and the public are similarly affected by cultural division (or the idea of it):

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

For artists, it is increasingly difficult to imagine how one might make a living in the music business, much less what that business might look like in two, five, ten, or twenty years. For citizens, regardless of political persuasion, it is increasingly difficult to imagine how we fit together into a collective body politic that makes sense. We seem to have forgotten, even, how to disagree with each other politely. And that those disagreements are an essential part of our social compact as participants in this ongoing democratic experiment....Here's the thing: We live in the richest, most powerful nation in the world, and we are all scared. Worse, I fear, we have good reason....That is a terrible context in which to create lasting art.<sup>259</sup>

However, in addition to the artist efforts Alden references, the representative power of music comes from who uses it and how. In his book, Willman talks with Dave “Mudcat” Sanders, “a rural statagist—or “Bubba coordinator,” as he’s been known to call himself,” for the Democratic Party.<sup>260</sup> Sanders helped Warner win election, and as Willman notes, Sanders “may be the only credible political operative in the nation who’s advising candidates to hire bluegrass bands and sponsor NASCAR teams.”<sup>261</sup> Saunders tells Willman, “Music’s influence on things—I don’t think you can beat it.”<sup>262</sup> Saunders has worked on more than one political soundtrack: “When he consulted on Edwards’s winning senatorial campaign, the house band was the Lonesome River Band. For Bob Graham, Saunders enlisted Dr. Ralph Stanley’s group as the official campaign band. (Presumably, ‘O Death’ wasn’t the theme song.)”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Grant Alden, “The First Annual No Depression Critics’ Poll,” *No Depression*, January-February 2004, 39.

<sup>260</sup> Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks*, 68.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

What music meant in the 2004 political arena had much to do with how campaigns—and media—shaped the message. However, musical meanings were also built upon decades of musical history and cultural specificity in which regions and individuals negotiated ownership of musical genres.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Media Promoted Popular Knowledge of Musical Identity**

During and after the Presidential campaign of 2004, the media participated in the construction and representation of “red state” and “blue state” identities. In print media, musical references came into textual play to signify each side of the cultural divide. How did the concepts “red states” and “blue states” start as network T.V. voting records and end up as cultural markers? For one, by attaching themselves to the cultural form of music—a process was facilitated in the pages of print media. Music helped tell the red-blue story.

As Stuart Hall explains, media are sites in which knowledge is constructed. In the case of 2004’s political sounds, the media helped form “popular knowledge” of which musical sounds and genres corresponded to “red,” “blue,” Republican or Democratic. The link between musical forms and these labels was the muddled waters of cultural values. Instead of clarifying what these values were, the media more often facilitated a semantic slide from a sound to closed individual or regional identity. “Values” were assumed to be inherent in music and in “red” or “blue” regions, and thus were often left unquestioned. In this way, references to sound helped perpetuate myths that were widely circulated as “easily readable” explanations of an American cultural divide. Admittedly, references to music were part of a much larger process of representation and negotiation that utilized forms other than music.

In print media coverage during the campaign, sounds (and images) carried what

Barthes calls “continuous messages,” or closed meaning. These sound references perpetuated popular knowledge about genres. In an article about Lynyrd Skynyrd playing the G.O.P. Convention, Skynyrd’s music became an explanatory device for region (the South) and political party. Other articles asserted that the political themes of the candidate’s campaigns “came out” in the music to which each candidate entered. The sound of “twang” conveyed a certain authenticity and conveyed specific values. *Rolling Stone* repeatedly relied on the connection between rock and Democrats, and also the assumption that music expressed a progressive politics. Several articles attributed Virginia Governor Mark Warner’s success (as a Democrat in a “red state”) to the fact that he embraced bluegrass and country music. The *Rocky Mountain News* used Merle Haggard’s “old” and “new” lyrics to indicate the kind of cultural shifts that contributed to the “divide,” and a *National Review* review of a book about the Scots-Irish history in America claimed that the Scots-Irish today were red-state voters who were family oriented, took morality seriously, went to church, joined the military and listened to country music.

Both rock and country’s relationship with politics is more complicated than portrayed in the media. The genres have become aligned with certain politics depending on historical and political moments and issues. This alignment has depended also on the social and market contexts of production and consumption. Historically, country music spoke about people who were poor, down on their luck, and needed some help—not the bootstraps they were supposed to be pulling themselves up by. Country music is also historically about less-than-pristine lifestyles, far from the “family values” touted by

some Republicans. Rock music, historically, was not explicitly political or about “issues.” Bruce Springsteen, before the 2004 election, tried to keep out of partisan politics to maintain a relationship with a broad fan base. However, political campaigns have money and public relations power to craft music as a political representation, and this can help align sounds and musical industries with certain political groups.

But beneath the (representative) power of mainstream country or rock, there are many subgenres that embrace a more complicated (perhaps less myth-driven) politics. Not surprisingly, these subgenres are those that are less a part of the national media conversation, appearing instead in magazines like *No Depression*, which provided some cultural-political analysis much more complex than most media during 2004.

When an idea or representation becomes popular knowledge, or becomes conventionalized, it begins to operate as a myth. This myth pervades cultural forms such as music and media. Unrecognized, it situates itself in the stories we tell about ourselves. It becomes irrefutable truth, independent from the push and pull of time and space. It is the nature of representation itself to narrow semantic possibilities. In part, representation’s power in the media owed much to the popular cultural conception that media was a reflection of 2004’s cultural realities.

Even while media, politicians and citizens called for the breakdown of cultural divisions, the carriers of myth—such as campaigns, media, musical forms—worked to keep “red” and “blue” culture semantically separate and ultimately incompatible. Embedded in the social and historical moment, music “[engaged] with particular political

moments and issues.”<sup>264</sup> To guide this engagement, the Kerry campaign chose mostly rock and some hip-hop, while the Bush campaign stuck with country music.

A popular knowledge emerged in mainstream media outlets that ascribed values to genres and musicians. Sound was referenced as a sort of semantic code, in which a reference to country music provided representation of a much wider arena of culture and “values.” Media employed references to music to make ideas more easily readable, ostensibly both for readers and writers. Sound representations worked with visual representations and written textual representations to uphold simplistic explanations, or myths. The media represented and constituted a “continuous message” by employing music as a representation of identities.

Simultaneously, the musical activity of campaign soundtracks and the political concerts remade musical sounds and texts into, as Walser says, socially significant forms. Musical activity and media coverage of this activity helped conceive music as an extension of political values. Red-blue speak became a metalanguage of the media, or more specifically, a language used to talk about (or layered on top of) the language of politics. As Barthes says, this metalanguage “got ahold of” the language of news. A subset of that metalanguage was the textual use of music to explain the red-blue divide. Both the representation of music and musical performance itself became a symbolic system used to describe or analyze political discussion and election coverage. Most often, this metalanguage operated under the surface, and it must be assumed that it operated along with a variety of other signifying systems.

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<sup>264</sup> Street, “Rock, pop and politics,” 249.

Campaigns, the media, and even musicians themselves took advantage of the semantic indeterminacy of musical forms. Music was infused with meaning and became, in print, an artifact or evidence of political ideology and the cultural landscape. The media incorporated lived culture (musical activity) into a symbolic system of explanation, or an “easily readable” code. Country music and NASCAR were code for red state. Rock and lattes were code for blue state.

Such codes are not a new thing. Revisiting the era of the Coon Creek Girl’s “hillbilly” musical activity, and the subsequent scholarship on old-time music, provides some clues about how the symbolic codes of 2004 may eventually be understood. Folklorist Archie Green’s famous 1965 article “Hillbilly music: source and symbol” investigates how the term “hillbilly,” a term for musical genre, gained meaning in the 1920s. Green cites a December 29, 1926, *Variety* article that described hillbillies:

The “hillbilly” is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the Chautauqua, and the phonograph...illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons, the sing-song, nasal-twanging vocalizing of a Vernon Dalhart or a Carson Robison on the disks, reciting the banal lyrics of a “Prisoner’s Song” or “The Death of Floyd Collins” (biggest hillbilly song-hit to date), intrigues their interest.<sup>265</sup>

In this print media description is the intersection of both lived reality and a vast lack of understanding between regional cultures. It evidences a disconnect between media and complex cultural realities. And, it shows how the *sound* of a musical genre evoked a much wider (mythical) representation of regional life.

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<sup>265</sup> Archie Green, “Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol,” *Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (1965): 221.



In 2004, much of the “easily readable” code also was far from reflecting the actual complexities of culture. This is not to say the media was entirely complicit with perpetuating a simplistic two-color view of the country. Some in the media (and academia, and the citizenry) continue to assert there is no real culture war. Others are convinced that our country remains bitterly divided.

Might we consider another reality, a reality that circulates in the media we consume and produce? The extent of divisions in our culture must be investigated through media forms meant to serve and inform the public. The *Star Tribune* article claimed, “As the Republicans prepare to gather in Manhattan, it is telling to compare their musical tastes with those exhibited in Boston by the Democrats, who tended to lean toward the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Black-Eyed Peas, with some James Taylor and Carole King mixed in.”<sup>266</sup> The important question here is how musical tastes became “telling,” and what such tastes do indeed tell. We must continue to consider who benefits when cultural divisions became popular truths. If we assume that hegemonic forces are always at play, we must ask to whose advantage it was to make claims about “red states” and “blue states.” Answering this question will mean investigating more than one source of power. It will begin in the middle of a web woven by media, the market, politicians, and readers, viewers and listeners.

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<sup>266</sup> Von Sternberg, “The Latest Buzz; A political roundup; Money talks in the battle for voters; The candidates and independent groups are spending big in the state.”

## **Appendix 1: Illustrations Cited**

Due to University of Missouri-Columbia copyright restrictions on work copyrighted by another party, and in observance of copyright law's doctrine of "fair use," newspaper and magazine images cited in this thesis could not be included. To access these images, refer to article citations in the Works Cited.

## Appendix 2: List of Periodicals

### Newspapers

***Milwaukee Journal Sentinel***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 642,418.<sup>267</sup>

***Rocky Mountain News***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 899,399 (includes *Denver Post*).

***Star Tribune (Minneapolis)***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 990,527.

***The Atlanta Journal-Constitution***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 1,001,120.

***The New York Times***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 5,065,303.

***The Plain Dealer (Cleveland)***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 845,206.

***The San Diego Union-Tribune***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 766,768.

***The Washington Post***

Daily newspaper with a readership of 1,750,865.

### Weekly and Bi-Weekly Magazines

***Insight on the News***

Bi-weekly magazine published by the Washington Times Corporation, reports on and analyzes news from a conservative viewpoint. Paid circulation is 80,000.<sup>268</sup>

***National Review***

Bi-weekly magazine that discusses national and international issues from a conservative viewpoint; includes books and arts. Paid circulation is 270,000.

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<sup>267</sup> Source for newspaper readership numbers: Newspaper Association of America, 2006.

<sup>268</sup> Source for magazine information: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, 2006.

***Rolling Stone***

Bi-weekly magazine with articles, interviews and reviews on the pop-rock music industry; includes features on politics, film and fashion. Paid circulation is 1,200,00.

***U.S. News & World Report***

Weekly magazine of reports and analysis of national and international current events and issues; includes business and financial news as well as social and technological trends. Paid circulation is 2,351,313.

***Variety***

Weekly magazine covering the entertainment business: film, television, theater, music and fashion. Paid circulation is 33,007.

**Monthly and Bi-Monthly Magazines**

***No Depression***

Bi-monthly magazine covering alt-country and a broad range of American roots music. Includes reviews and features. Circulation is 21,000 unspecified (per issue).

***The Atlantic Monthly***

Monthly magazine containing insight and commentary on current social and political issues. Paid circulation is 459,600.

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