Collages of Identity: Popular Culture, Emotion, and Online Literacies

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There is nothing new in the role popular culture plays in issues of young people and identity. Few people reading this chapter did not, at some point, present their identities or claim their affiliations through displays of popular culture content or preferences. Beatles or Rolling Stones? Tupac or Biggie? *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*? *Halo* or *World of Warcraft*? *Sex in the City* or *Grey's Anatomy*? We have all argued, shared, reminisced, disdained, or delighted in performing our identities through popular culture and using it to gauge potential friends or possible adversaries.

As is no secret to any of us who lived through it, adolescence is a crucial period of identity development. The cognitive development that takes place during adolescence involves an increasing move toward a construction of identity that is more independent of the instructions and preferences of parents. At the same time, adolescence involves the experimentation with and formation of social allegiances, allegiances that shape and reinforce certain performances of identity, as well as attitudes toward and achievements in school (Veronneau & Vitaro, 2007). Young people often explore belonging to several different social groups during adolescence, and these explorations are shaped by combinations of individual desire, peer pressure, cultural narratives, and responses to adult authority (Garner, Bootcheck, Lorr, & Rauch, 2006). During the same period of adolescence, young people become more independent consumers of popular culture, choosing their own texts and developing what they consider their own tastes, apart from, and often in opposition to, the popular culture choices of their parents (Livingstone, 2002; Steele &

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Brown, 1995). Popular culture, then, becomes a means both of establishing identities separate from parents and, just as important, performing identities among peers with an eye toward forming and maintaining social groups (Freedman, 2006; Williams, 2003).

Throughout all of the creation and re-creation of identities that occur during high school and college, popular culture serves as a resource for performing identities and building communities. Students today often perform their identities or form groups in the same ways as their predecessors of the last 50 years, through clothing choices or conversations in coffee shops or browsing through a new acquaintance's bookshelves. What has changed, however, is the capacity for students to both perform, and judge, the identities of others online. Consider the comments of these first-year university students about the attention they pay to the construction and interpretation of identities online:

> Allison: I like to see how other people are rating movies, which ones they have at the tops of their [Facebook] list. I love movies and what other people like is something I'm interested in, even if I don't know them that much.
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> Brianna: On Facebook, people have blogs or notes; basically, they bring up a topic, and they invite people to be in on that topic. I've been invited to a lot of those type(s) of debates, who's the best rapper, who's the best group and stuff. It's another way to hang out with people and sometimes get to know people better.
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> Mitchell: If I didn't want people to see who I am, why would I have a page in the first place?

These students are negotiating and performing identities online. What is also significant, however, is that they are all drawing on popular culture in these negotiations and performances. As online technologies have blurred the boundaries between media and between producer and audience, composition and literacy scholars have noted that a significant amount of the participation of individuals, in what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls "the convergence culture," occurs through reading and writing. What has drawn less attention in the field of literacy studies, however, is the powerful role popular culture plays in the online literacy practices that are central to media convergence. Whether as content or rhetorical strategies, popular culture often shapes the content and form of current online reading and writing, particularly when it comes to the

performance and interpretation of identity. Students often turn to popular culture when mediating between their embodied selves and their online performances of identity.

In this chapter, I address how online multimodal literacy practices are both filtered through and use popular culture. Using a combination of textual analysis and interviews with first-year university students, I illustrate how the intersections of multimodal literacies and popular culture are shaping the ways that identities are constructed and performed in and out of the literacy classroom. I focus on two ways these intersections take place. First, I examine how the construction and representations of identities in forms of popular culture such as television or film can shape ways of reading identity and differences in the images and videos of students' multimodal texts. I then analyze how individuals employ new technologies to create multimedia performances of identities online. In particular, I discuss how emotion in popular culture shapes online texts and identity performances. These texts both reproduce and resist the dominant cultural constructions of identity that pervade popular culture.

I gathered the information for this research in several ways. First, I read and analyzed a wide range of online material—from content published by popular culture producers such as television and movie studios, bands, and video game companies, to student-produced texts published online, such as personal Web pages on social-networking sites, blogs, fan forums, and fan fictions. I also, over the course of an academic year, conducted a series of lengthy face-to-face interviews and observations with 21 first-year university students—thirteen men and eight women—about their online literacy practices and their engagement with popular culture. Eight of the students were first-generation university students from less-affluent families, eight considered themselves economically middle-class, and five considered themselves somewhat affluent. Four of the students were African American, one was Chinese American, one was Latina, and fifteen were European American. All the students owned their own computers, had online access, and spent a minimum of two hours online each day, with most reporting spending between three to four hours online each day. The university is a state research institution with an undergraduate enrollment of about 15,000 students, and is located in a midsized metropolitan area (with a population of about 800,000, it is in the middle of the United States). I spent at least two hours—and often as many as eight hours—with each student. I began with an initial interview about their popular culture interests and online literacy practices and then observed them as they engaged in their online literacy practices. Although I had a set of initial interview questions to get a sense of the students' experiences with online technology and popular culture, the

conversations, both during the interview and, even more so, during the observations, were not formally structured. I let the students' interests guide these conversations.

POPULAR CULTURE AND NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY

Popular culture is central to much of the reading and writing students engage in online. Even a cursory glance at personal pages on social networking sites such as Myspace and Facebook, for example, shows that people use popular culture lists, images, video, and quotations as their primary ways of composing identities, rather than extended written personal statements. Many students visit sites with movie, music, or game reviews, or they read and contribute comments to fan forums for movies, television, music, or games. Other students read and write fan fiction or comment on fan films and parodies they find on YouTube. These activities, and others like them that are evolving daily, illustrate Jenkins's (2006) conception of convergence culture as a space marked by participation by the audience and the flow of information across multiple media platforms. These elements foster an interactive and "migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (p. 2). Jenkins argues that convergence culture involves social as well as technological changes: "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (p. 3). The social aspect of convergence culture is an essential motivation for many students' activities with popular culture, as they move from being a member of the audience watching mass-produced texts to being a participant in an online community of texts they can sample from and rewrite.

Such online reading and writing simultaneously connects and conflicts with other forms of literacy, yet also creates new ways of performing identity through the appropriation, juxtaposition, and parody of popular culture texts. Consequently, if we, as literacy researchers and teachers, intend to pay attention to how multimodal texts offer new possibilities for composing identities, it is important that we consider how the engagement with popular culture may influence how such texts are both constructed and interpreted.

As the concept of identity as a social construction dependent on shifting cultural contexts has become broadly accepted, the question of the role of popular culture in identity creation and performance has quickly become part of the discussion. We generally accept that there are distinctions between a somewhat stable internal sense of self and an external, contingent, and performative sense of identity. This is the difference

between a sense of identity that is psychological and cognitive and "Identity," which is social and communal, a distinction that Abrams and Rowsell (this volume) address. Yet, as they point out, these internal and external concepts of I/identity are not always discrete, but instead, operate both in concert and in conflict with each other. Even as we have become comfortable with a concept of Identity that is negotiated and adjusted, depending on the surrounding social context and the social script an individual is expected to follow, we also know that social contexts result in internal and embodied responses, and in reshaping our sense of "little I" identity (Abrams & Rowsell, this volume). Identities may change from one context to the next, in ways both conscious and so deeply internalized as to seem innate.

The concept of socially contingent identities then raises the question of the role of culture in shaping the identities we perform. Mass popular culture, because of its broad patterns of distribution and consumption, is one of the most pervasive ways that cultural representations of identity take place, from film to television to advertisements to video games. The producers of mass popular culture, in search of the largest possible audiences, draw on conventional and familiar representations of identity in order to be able to construct characters and meet genre expectations quickly (Williams & Zenger, 2007). A person with glasses and a book in a movie is an educated, upper-class character. A person in a suit is an authority figure, while one with darker skin and a combat jacket may be a villain. Of course, there are variations on these representations, and they change as the culture changes, but they are common enough to be revealing windows into a culture's conventional and dominant conceptions of identity.

Yet representation, by image or word or narrative, is not simply a copy of reality with a stable meaning. Instead, meaning is created within the process of representation. Mass popular culture, though producing and reproducing dominant conceptions of identity, is not an irresistible force. Even as television programs and movies and video games churn out pervasive images and narratives about dominant ideas of class or gender or race, individuals still interpret those texts in the contexts of their own experiences. The response to a given popular culture text may vary from ironic distance to sentimental embrace, from identification to revulsion and resistance, depending on the person and context. Instead of regarding individuals as cultural dupes, who are helpless before the images and words they encounter, we should, as John Trimbur (1993) argues, "see how individuals and groups engage in self-formation not as an autonomous activity, but as a practice of everyday life, or poaching on

the dominant culture to create popular spaces of resistance, evasion, and making do" (pp. 130–131). Popular culture texts, then, provide representations of identity that individuals use both to reinforce and to resist their identification with dominant cultural models in a dynamic process of continually becoming, rather than a static matter of simply being.

The appropriation of popular culture content to perform identity certainly predates online technology. It is easy to remember examples of how people wore t-shirts of their favorite bands, put photos of actors up in their high school lockers, or put particular books out on coffee tables. Goffman's (1959) concept of a socially constructed and performed sense of identity is particularly useful here. The metaphors of theatre that Goffman (1959) applies to the social performance of identity—the actor choosing props and performing with fellow actors for a particular audience and context—are particularly resonant when considering how individuals appropriate and reuse popular culture content to display public identities or allegiances to particular social groups. Mass popular culture has always been used by audience members to connect their identities to those represented by celebrity images. A college student who puts a poster of Bob Marley on a dorm-room wall may expect it to reflect an image of a rebellious artist, while a student putting up a poster of Mariah Carey expects it to reflect a different perception. Yet in any instance, there is always a question of whether the popular culture content is being appropriated and displayed ironically. The performance of identity is always a social phenomenon, and popular culture has not only been an element of identity construction, but has also been essential to creating and connecting to social groups. Part of the appeal of mass popular culture is that it also creates shared cultural references that extend beyond immediate acquaintances, so that the t-shirt with a photo of Albert Einstein is part of an identity performance different from the one with a photo of Insane Clown Posse.

Participatory popular culture complicates these conceptions of how "big I" Identity is constructed, performed, and received with popular culture content. The way an individual perceives of and performs for an audience online is different from how such interactions happen face-to-face. Not only is it often not clear online who exactly the audience might be, but also the variety of embodied and immediate responses available in face-to-face interactions is not always available online. What's more, the blurring of public and private spaces online also makes performances of Identity, and the stakes of those performances for embodied individuals sitting before a computer screen, potentially more intimate. A position of such intimacy online can lead to unlikely and gratifying responses

of support for an individual that are significant to the "little i" identity of the embodied individual. It can also create opportunities to be more vulnerable, or at least misread and misunderstood.

SAMPLING AND COMPOSING IDENTITIES

Online technologies have extended the ability of individuals to use popular culture to compose identities. Rather than simply buy a t-shirt or put up a poster, people can now actually create and distribute texts that use the popular culture content in the same medium as the original content. Or, rather than rely on the image that a t-shirt vendor chooses, people can compose documents representing their identities on personal pages with multiple images, video, and music sampled directly from popular culture content. Given the ways that people have traditionally used popular culture in their performances of identity, it should not be surprising that the convergence culture made possible by new media technologies has encouraged people to turn to the ubiquitous popular culture content to compose and perform their identities online. The ease with which an individual can sample, reshape, and reuse such content would make it far more surprising if the person did not turn to these resources when composing texts.

The students I talked with were quick to point out how and why they had appropriated popular culture on their social networking pages. Mitchell, for example, said that while he did not necessarily browse the Web looking for content to put on his Facebook and Myspace pages, if he came across material that he thought would say something about him, he would appropriate it immediately:

> I mean, if I see something from a movie or TV show I like, I'm going to put it on my page. If I enjoy it, someone else will, and it can tell that person something about me, what I like, my tastes and all that.

Sandy pointed out the popular culture content on her Myspace page that she said represented her to others:

> I put the general stuff up here, the music, hobbies, films I like. I don't do much TV, but as you see, South Park is above normal for me. The books, fantasy stories about love and adventure. I don't really have a hero yet, still waiting for that.

As the comments from Mitchell and Sandy make clear, students use

popular culture content on their personal pages on social networking sites as a means of composing collages of identity (Williams, 2008, 2009). In the same way that people look over a person's bookshelf or record collection, or ask about favorite movies to get a sense of that person's preferences and explore any shared interests, students now construct their pages in order to provide others with these cultural touchstones that illuminate their identities. At the same time, they read other students' pages with an eye toward finding common popular culture ground or discovering differences that might cause them to approach a potential friendship with more caution. Sarah said that she paid particular attention to the lists of popular culture references of male friends' Facebook pages. "You can really learn a lot about someone just by looking at their Facebook page. If I see things there that I like, movies I like or music, then that's what we might have in common." But she also said that a person's popular culture references might make her less likely to pursue a face-to-face relationship. "I think you can learn a lot. At least more than you could if I just met you, you know? If I read your Facebook page, I could know more about you than just meeting you."

Popular culture representations from the dominant culture play a substantial role in students' constructions of identities on social networking sites, as well as on the judgments that students make about one another when reading the pages. For example, there were some popular culture references and content that appeared on the pages of both men and women, such as the *Lord of the Rings* films or television series such as *Lost* or *The Family Guy*. Yet it is little surprise that the movies men listed and sampled from on their pages tended more toward genres such as action and horror, while women had less from those genres and more from romance and romantic comedy. Similarly, the male students I observed and interviewed had more music listed from hip-hop and heavy metal than did female students, while the latter had more from singer-songwriters and pop artists. Also, men posted more explicitly ironic and comic material, while women's pages were more likely to contain a mixture of irony and sentimentality. Another example would be that some of the African American students listed films, such as *Barbershop*, which focused on African American culture, while none of the other students listed these films.

When I asked students about these choices—why men seemed to reference certain genres of film and women others—they shrugged off the question in ways that illustrated the degree to which these dominant conceptions of identity are normalized and reproduced in the culture at large. "Those are the kinds of movies guys like. What else would you expect me to list?" Greg said. "Guys are going to go to movies that are

more intense. Gore and explosions. I can't get my girlfriend to go to that kind of movie." And Amy said, "There's a reason they call them 'chick flicks,' you know. I wouldn't think a guy and a girl would have the same tastes." The response from students demonstrated that they regarded their choices as obvious to themselves and assumed they would be obvious to others reading their pages. In a similar way, the students said that the images of actors, musicians, and athletes they posted on their pages were meant only to reflect personal preferences. Yet, as Weber and Mitchell (2008) point out, the relationship between the author of the pages and the image of celebrities may be more complex: "The choice of photographs of their idols can also be viewed as an extension or projection of their bodies, a desiring of coveting another's appearance" (p. 31). It was not unusual, then, to see a female student's personal page with an image of an actress such as Kate Winslet, or a male's page with a photograph of basketball star LeBron James that simultaneously represented an appreciation of the team or actor and illustrated a conception of physical attractiveness that appealed to the authors of the pages.

At the same time, however, it was clear from the comments of many of the same students that their reading of the pages of other people, including their friends', was often shaped by popular culture references in ways that might very well have surprised the authors. Many students talked about being surprised by the popular culture content and references on pages. Francesca said:

> If someone (on Facebook) says they're a fan of a band I hate or an actor I hate, or just even maybe don't like, that really colors my mood about them. They're telling me who they are with that which makes me not so interested in knowing them.

Even the content on pages of people students considered close friends could surprise and dismay students. Mitchell said he was surprised by a friend who put John Mayer at the top of her list of music preferences. "You think you know someone and then you see 'John Mayer.' We're still friends; it's not like part of me died when I saw that, but, dude, I look at her differently now."

Clearly, the context in which the page was read—whether the author was a friend or the identity of the author—also influenced students' readings. Genevieve noted that, while a set of photos of actresses in swimsuits would make her more cautious and disappointed about the author's view of women if the author of a page were male, it would make her more concerned about the author's conception of her sense of self if the author was female. In a similar comment, Catherine said:

> If a guy has a lot of [pictures of] hot, half-naked women, then obviously they're not going to be my friend. But if a guy has a picture of puppies that might also worry me—so it's not all just one thing. And it wouldn't bother me at all if it was on a girl's page.

Comments such as these reveal some of the conflicts between the ways students use popular culture to perform identities online, but then resist regarding such performances as fully connected to their offline, embodied identities.

On the one hand, when individuals use popular culture content to compose their identities on personal pages, they connect their identities to the original popular culture texts in ways far different from the connections made by personal photos. An image of Edward Cullen from *Twilight* or Eric Cartman from *South Park* draws the reader of a personal page, in varying degrees, to the original popular culture text and further from the embodied author of the page. Using popular culture content always makes an intertextual connection to the original text and can encourage the reader to focus on or remember the content in the context of the original text, rather than focusing on the way it is being redeployed on the personal page. So, for example, if I love or hate the character of Edward Cullen, or *Twilight* in general, my reading of a personal page may be diverted to the popular culture text and my interpretation of it, rather than the way in which the person has used the image. In fact, when students did not know the author of a page well, they often focused their reading of a page on their memories of and reactions to the original popular culture texts sampled and referenced, rather than thinking about the person who composed the material on a page (Williams, 2009). On the other hand, when students did know the author well, they interpreted the popular culture content through their relationship with the person they knew face-to-face.

INTENTION AND IRONY

When students knew the author of a page well, the connections between their knowledge of the embodied person and their knowledge of the popular culture content on the page often created several tensions. Not only did students find it difficult at times to reconcile the person they knew with the content on that person's page, but also their relationship to the popular culture content could be influenced by their relationship to the author of the page. Sometimes the students could not read the popular culture content independent of their relationship to the author, particularly if they did not have as strong an attachment to the popular

culture material. They might be disappointed that a person for whom they did not care as much liked the same music they loved, but they were more likely to use their face-to-face relationships to shape preferences for popular culture about which they had not made up their minds. For example, Ashley said if she saw a book based on a movie she did not know well listed on a friend's page, "it would make me more likely to try it out. It's like getting a recommendation from a friend without having to ask for it."

Such readings are complicated, however, by the question of intent, particularly when it comes to questions of irony. Irony is a powerful rhetorical device in contemporary popular culture, used from advertising to sitcoms to talk shows. Yet the double meaning of any material meant to be read ironically depends on the reader understanding that the author does not intend for the material to be read in a straightforward way. As with all online writing, irony is easy to misread when a person is not physically present to cue the reading with facial expressions or tone of voice, or to fill in the appropriate context of the moment. On social networking pages, the intent of an author may always be difficult to determine, but it becomes particularly clouded with the popular culture material and references students make on their pages, because that content is so often displayed without comment. Most of the students said they assumed that the content was familiar enough that their intent in using it would be clear to their readers. If the image on the page is of June Cleaver, the ironic intent may indeed be clear to readers. Other images or material may be less obvious to interpret. Is an image of Eric Cartman from *South Park* displayed ironically or sincerely? What about Chuck Norris? Or Britney Spears? The potential for misreadings is increased by the juxtapositions that often exist on pages between the ironic and the sentimental. Natalie, for example, had both images of fairies and images from *The Family Guy* on her Myspace page. She said the former were sincere representations of her emotions, and the latter were there "to lighten up the mood and let people know I'm not too serious." A reader, however, might mistake the fairies as ironic content as well, and misread the identity Natalie was composing. Students often questioned the intent of popular culture content on the pages they read, or talked of getting questions from friends about some content. Yet at the same time, they continued to sample and display content without comment, generally confident that they would be read accurately.

Pages such as Natalie's, with their collages of images, references, video, and music, are the norm, not the exception. Also, on many pages such as Natalie's, the content ranges across genres and interests. The juxtaposition of disparate elements on such pages can pose a particular challenge

for people reading the pages. On Natalie's page, a fan of *The Family Guy* might dislike fairies and fantasy images. On Ashley's page, a fan of Johnny Depp or Orlando Bloom might have a negative reaction to her images of American flags and messages of support for the Bush administration. The latter response can be illustrated by Shannon, who said,

> I had a friend who had a countdown to the end of the Bush administration on her Facebook page, and I have to admit that really soured me when I looked at it. I left pretty quickly after seeing that.

Students tended to respond to potentially conflicting content in two ways. Sometimes students read the pages to create narratives about the authors that elided the tensions so they could maintain good relationships. They would focus on the content that created positive associations and areas of agreement and dismiss as unimportant the material that caused them problems. "You'll never agree with someone all the time," Sarah said. "Nobody's perfect, and I'm not going to mess up a friendship over a *Facebook* page." Students reported this response, in particular, to content on the pages of already-close friends, mirroring the ways in which, in our face-to-face lives, we all often overlook or forgive close friends over areas of disagreement. The other way of reading the jarring juxtapositions on some pages was to focus on the element that caused discomfort and to minimize areas of common interest. The comments of Francesca and Mitchell, noted above, that the content had made them see friends in new and not always positive ways, are representative of these kinds of readings. Again, this kind or response is not unusual in face-to-face relationships, where we can often reconsider a relationship that has been good because of a single incident or comment. What is interesting about such responses to personal Web pages, however, is how much of the response about the person occurs because of the popular culture content the author has employed on the page. What may, to the author, be an offhand moment of cutting and pasting on a Web site, may result in real consequences for the embodied relationships that person has with readers of the page who make interpretations based on intertextual connections not under the control of the author.

EMOTIONS AND POPULAR CULTURE ONLINE

Angela Thomas (2007) argues that, rather than disconnecting the embodied from the virtual, online literacy and textual practices can reflect the body through a range of practices with words and images,

some directly representing the author and others, as with popular culture, working primarily though metaphor and allusion. She points out that, when she is involved in an online virtual world, "I am involved in a dialectic process of being—my identity is both shaped by and shaped through the semiotic resources I am engaged in: text, image, and sound. I am authoring myself through the multimodal texts I produce" (p. 8). Thomas maintains that the social and discursive practices people engage in online in a "close editing of the self" connect the virtual to the embodied through the powerful emotions evoked by the online interactions and performances of identity. Online spaces do not necessarily remove people from emotional responses. Emotion in online spaces is not unusual and can often be powerful, as exemplified in the real emotional trauma that attends incidents of flaming.

At the same time, emotion is a powerful component of popular culture. The appeal of popular culture, for many, includes the uses of irony, sentimentality, and other rhetorical approaches to evoke emotions in an audience. When we draw from and use popular culture in our lives, we often do so because of the emotional shorthand it provides us, for example, songs at weddings or songs we listen to after a breakup, or movies to mobilize feelings about social issues or movies to make us laugh. Popular culture can elicit immediate and visceral emotional responses through its use of visual and auditory stimuli, but it also works on emotions through the way it references specific incidents and memories in our lives. There are songs, movies, and books that remind us of the emotions surrounding our relationships with people and places or of specific events. We often share this popular culture material with others as a way of communicating our emotions to others. In conversations, we recap scenes and talk of how we laughed or cried, or we hear a song on the radio and remind a companion of the emotions connected to it.

When students employ popular culture, either on their personal pages or through multimedia, the emotions the images and video evoke are also part of their appeal. When students post quotes from films or television program or lyrics from songs on their personal pages, it is often with the same intention of sharing or reliving the emotional experience as they might in face-to-face conversations. It is not merely that they are celebrating the popular culture text when they post such material; they are also demonstrating their embodied emotions for others who visit their pages. Sandy said there were many times "when what I put on my page is just so people know how I'm feeling, and that includes songs I like, just as a way of keeping in touch." The intimacy of emotions students can reveal on their pages through popular culture content and references is often surprising. Yet there is clearly an expectation that others will

respond with empathy, rather than with scorn. Such expectations are often fulfilled in comments from readers, such as "I love that song. I know exactly how you feel," or in response to one quote on a page, "Why so sad? Listening to sad, sad songs? Call me." Catherine said:

> If I see that they've ended a relationship and they've posted a link to a sad video, I'll usually just put something like "I know you remember what happened last time and I'll help you get through this too." I'll just show support or whatever.

Obviously personal pages on social networking sites, where students now more routinely restrict access to their "friends" to whom they have given permission, provide students with an audience they feel they can trust. Sandy said she trusted her friends to respond to what she posted in supportive ways, and would never be as personally revealing on unrestricted Web sites, such as open fan forums, given the often much-rougher and even abusive discourse that can take place.

The display of emotion through popular culture content, then, is not only a personal act, but reflects the students' desire to perform their identities through finding common emotional bonds with others. We all create and strengthen our identities through our affiliations with social groups. Such social groups can be organized, either formally or informally, around popular culture preferences (Williams, 2002). An explicit social group, such as a fan club, is an obvious identity-building affiliation. But less formal groups, such as the people talking about a movie at a party where we join in on the conversation, can also create social bonds. Online, such affiliations are, again, easier and quicker to establish. A visit to a fan forum on a site such as *Television Without Pity* to read the comments is a less formal activity, but joining the forum and posting comments reveals a more explicit commitment to the community. College students, like all of us, value belonging to communities, but the more fluid nature of their social experience means that they are often more actively seeking social groups to which they can belong.

Social networking sites work both to allow individuals to find new social groups and also to strengthen existing social bonds (Boyd, 2007). A function of both Myspace and Facebook are the groups to which people can belong. These groups range from national political subjects to small in-jokes among a few friends, with a large number of them referring to popular culture. On Facebook, there are also pages one can join as a "fan" of anyone from Buddha to Elvis Presley to Miley Cyrus. The popular culture groups often have more specific and descriptive names, such as "I Can Quote Every Word of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail,*" or "Heath Ledger

Deserves a Posthumous Oscar for his [*sic*] Performance as the 'Joker.'" When a person joins a group or becomes a fan on Facebook, that information is listed on the person's personal page. The listings of group and fan affiliations are ways not only of declaring popular culture preferences, but also of demonstrating the social groups to which one belongs. The implication, as Ashley says, is that these are social groups you would belong to in your face-to-face life as well:

> I hang out with *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* fans in real life, and those are the people and places I go to online too. And that's how I've made online friends from around the world, from the interests we share.

Once a member of a group, it is possible to join in discussions on the group page and post events; however, student after student said that after joining most groups, they rarely returned to the group's page. As Greg put it:

> I usually look at a group, see if I know anyone there, which I usually do or I wouldn't have found out about it in the first place. But after I join the group, I don't go back there much. It's just for other people to see on my page.

Just as often, however, the participatory nature of convergence culture creates in students an expectation of response to the things they post on their pages. As other research into blogs, fan fiction, and fan forums has indicated, material that reveals the author's emotions is common and often written with an expectation of responses (Black, 2008; Davies, 2006; Scheidt, 2006). The audience responses, though occasionally critical on blogs and forums, tend more toward comments of support or simply serving as a witness to the experiences and emotions of the author on personal Web pages where the texts are more closely tied to personal performances of identity. The limited nature of the audiences of personal Web pages, as more and more users set their viewing preferences to some level of privacy, reduces the level of anonymous flaming that takes place on such pages. The privacy settings also increase the sense of intimacy and community that can be built through the sharing of material, including popular culture material, which serves as a marker of common experiences.

Personal Web pages on social networking sites can use popular culture material to create and sustain communities in the same way. People post popular culture content to perform an emotion (the lyrics to a sad song

or a video montage of car crashes from movies labeled, "This has been my day!"), to perform arguments through emotion (a political satire video of George W. Bush or a quotation from a movie such as "We are not sheep" from Edward Scissorhands, which reflects a political philosophy), to display a sense of identity through an accumulation of references (such as lists of romantic comedies or horror films), or to explain their emotional responses to popular culture ("Love all movies … cannot get enough of them!!! Well except scary ones … ask anyone, I am a wimp when it comes to scary movies, oh and ones that dismember people. Hell no!!"). Students use these popular culture references and material as representations of their feelings, and use their pages' content—from status updates to new material—as an ongoing log of how their embodied selves are feeling.

POPULAR CULTURE AND RHETORICS OF EMOTION

The use of popular culture on personal pages to perform emotions and engage in social communities reflects the uses of emotion as a socially constructed rhetorical practice. Laura Micciche (2007) argues that the rhetorics of emotion, as opposed to simply emoting, are performative and enacted in the social world.

> Emotion resides in neither persons/objects nor the social world exclusively. Rather, emotion is dynamic and relational, taking form through collisions of contact, between people as well as between people and the objects, narratives, beliefs … that we encounter in the world. (p. 28)

This is to say that emotions students want to convey on their personal pages, and that are read by others, are not simply the result of innate feelings, but are as much a matter of negotiated social meanings as the meanings created from language. As Micciche notes,

> Performing emotions suggests that emotions are not already in us or others, waiting to be externalized. It means that they take form, become recognizable, and enter the realm of rhetoric when they are bodily enacted and lived, which always entails some degree of performance. (p. 62)

Popular culture is often a useful and important part of the social rhetoric of emotion because of the way it creates conventions of emotions through the presentation and repetition of particular texts. Among the

more recognizable appeals of popular culture is its capacity for evoking a range of emotions. Emotional responses help to keep audience members connected to popular culture texts, which is the primary goal of popular culture producers. A song or movie that can make us happy or fearful or sad is one we are less likely to turn from, and substantial research in psychology illustrates how much easier it is to retain memories or ideas that evoke emotions. In order to keep us tuned in, mass popular culture producers rely on a number of rhetorical strategies to connect to emotions, from adapting and reusing familiar narratives that tap into common myths or beliefs to using images and icons that act as shortcuts to cultural concepts and values (Hill, 2004). Stories, synecdoche, and metaphor often target our emotional responses rather than our analytical processes.

Students, in sampling and reusing popular culture content, adopt similar uses of popular culture to perform emotions for their readers. They understand that the images, video, and music they post on their pages carry emotional connections in the larger culture, and hope that readers of the page will both understand the emotions and connect them to their own experiences. Shannon said:

> I know a lot of girls who will put a song up or a video when they don't want to be having to explain everything about how they are feeling but they want people to know how they feel. You link to the song and when you hear it you know they're talking about this. It's kind of like a little hint and then like your friends will send you a message.

In Greg's words, "If I'm in a good mood, having a good day, I'm more likely to put some funny stuff on my page; that's a way I let my friends know." Composing and responding to such texts, including the use of popular culture content, is an effort by students to construct bridges between the materiality of their embodied experiences and their attempts to construct identities and group affiliations online.

CONCLUSION

To think separately about online literacy practices and about how individuals respond to and use popular culture reveals that both activities involve issues of identity. The performance of identity in virtual spaces has been one of the ongoing questions and attractions of reading and writing online. At the same time, we accept and often worry about how representations of identity in popular culture influence our embodied

performances of self. It is not a difficult leap, then, to see that the online literacy practices and performances of identity that are central to the lives of many students are intertwined with their engagement with participatory popular culture.

As we learn more about how we read and respond to identities, created by word, image, and sound combined, we need to help students think more carefully and critically about how this influences the way they create multimodal texts. Such attention does not necessarily mean directly importing new media such as social networking sites into the literacy classroom. Indeed, sometimes such efforts can backfire because students both resent the encroachment of the classroom on the literacy and identity spaces they call their own and because students are often more facile with such sites than their instructors, and resist being taught how to use what they already know. As I have argued in the past, it is not a matter of us, as teachers, "bringing" popular culture into the classroom; popular culture is already there when we and our students walk through the door (Williams, 2002, 2003, 2009).

Instead, we should approach questions of participatory popular culture and identity by engaging students in extended conversations about what they do with online media outside the classroom and what they have learned about reading and writing through their activities. Such conversations, when respectful of student knowledge and not tied to assessing their online literacy practices, can help students reflect on such practices in ways that are critical and productive. Given the chance to explain what they do online and why they do it, the students I interviewed—as well as the students I teach—are able to articulate a great deal of what they have already learned about audience, authorship, identity, and interpreting and composing texts. I am then able to add my voice, my knowledge, and my critical vocabulary to their insights with the goal of helping them not only have a richer understanding of reading and writing in the classroom, but also enhance their experiences as readers and writers when they step outside the school doors. Such an approach requires an ongoing conversation, not just a one-time assignment, and a sincere respect for students' knowledge and the rhetorical complexity of the work they engage in with popular culture online.

Rather than imagine that students turn to print texts as their influences for what they read and write online, we must pay attention to the popular culture that they spend most of their time with outside the classroom. The more we understand about how students read popular culture texts and how and why they sample and compose with them, the more we will understand how they connect their embodied lives with their virtual performances of identity. This requires a conversation with students that

respects what they think of and do with popular culture. As we learn from them, we can find new ways to help them think more critically and creatively about the genres and conventions they adapt to connect their daily embodied lives with their lives on their screens.

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