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“Disinclined to Politicize”? Music and Canadian Politics 2.0

REBECCA DRAISEY-COLLISHAW AND KIP PEGLEY

Abstract

Musicians, scholars, and even reference materials are surprisingly united in the contention that music and politics occupy separate spheres in Canada. However, we suggest that denying the intersection of music and politics in Canada potentially blinds us to the complex ways in which artists, mediators, and audiences—that is, *producers*—participate in projects that are undeniably ideological. Indeed, we suggest that appreciating the entwined relationship of music, politics, people, and contexts for circulation is particularly important at a moment when the participatory culture that prevails on social media platforms is increasingly normalised and the authority of established knowledge sources breaks down in the face of “controlless” circulations of content that radically challenge our capacities to communicate across partisan lines. Our analysis takes the form of three case studies: Tony Turner’s “Harperman” (2015), Adrian Sutherland’s “Politician Man” (2019), and Brock Tyler’s “Speaking Moistly” (2020). Our analysis interprets each example according to musical form, lyrics, creator intentions, and genre affiliations but, critically, also addresses how contexts for circulation, curation by producers, and the affect of musicking illuminates kaleidoscopic meanings that accrue through the complex interactions of music and politics—meanings, notably, that cannot be discerned through a focus on the musical object or political landscape alone.

What do a folksy Anglo-American come-all-ye, an award-winning music video provoked by a Twitter storm, and a viral meme song about the COVID-19 pandemic have in common? Each performance counters a common trope about the absence of intersections and overlaps between Canadian music and politics. Communications scholar Richard Sutherland, for instance, contends that Canadians rarely use music for political ends: “Canada,” he writes, “does not have a particularly strong tradition of political song. Just as we have been reluctant to aestheticize our politics, so too have we been disinclined to politicize our music.”¹ Sutherland doesn’t limit his comments to particular genres, but argues that Canadians generally use music for entertainment purposes.² Political scientist David J. Jackson similarly points to a lack of evidence when it comes to music’s capacity to shape political dispositions or change attitudes.³ Even the “Political Songs” entry in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* maintains that “for much of the 20th-century songwriters in Canada have remained of the persuasion that music and politics inhabit separate spheres of life” and that the “English-speaking majority . . . has not been prone to strong political sentiment.”⁴ The problem with commentary about the lack of politics in Canadian music (and vice versa) is a tendency to neglect the complex entanglements of not just music(s) and politics, but the people, technologies, and ideologies at stake in their circulation.

¹ Richard Sutherland, “Intimate Strangers: The Formal Distance Between Music and Politics in Canada,” in *How Canadians Communicate IV: Media and Politics*, ed. David Taras and Christopher Waddell (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 357.

² Sutherland, “Intimate Strangers,” 352.

³ David J. Jackson, “Peace, Order and Good Songs: Popular Music and English-Canadian Culture,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 35 (2005): 29, as cited in Sutherland, “Intimate Strangers,” 356.

⁴ *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, s.v. “Political Songs,” accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/political-songs-emc>.

In this article, we follow musicologist James Garratt's invocation to study the "and" in "music and politics." He stresses that,

Rather than being stable objects, the fields of "music" and "politics" are mutating and expanding constantly as a result of their evolving exchanges. And rather than being locked into fixed modes of interaction, music and politics can come together in contingent, temporary alliances.⁵

Garratt's approach to this relationship involves analysis that moves beyond narrow study of familiar categories of political music (e.g., protest and praise songs, anthems, campaign music, and propaganda), overtly political texts, and the proclaimed intentions of creators; instead, he endeavors to account for the multiplicity of meanings that arise through participation in performances and subsequent mediation(s). He cautions against compartmentalizing politics into a narrow field of human activity and, likewise, is wary of assertions that music might "help in verifying facts or assessing the truth of one position over another."⁶ Indeed, "music is far from being a simple tool for transmitting and implanting messages and affects. Rather, its signifying and affective power, like all forms of power, can have consequences wholly unintended by those wielding it."⁷ Our research endeavors to understand these unintended consequences. We suggest that appreciating the entanglements of music, politics, and people is particularly important in an era that is increasingly defined by the norms of the participatory culture(s) that prevails in Web 2.0 contexts. Indeed, as distinctions between creators and audiences shrink, the authority of established knowledge sources breaks down in the face of "controlless" circulations of content that radically challenge our capacities to communicate across partisan lines.

Through case studies of three songs that provide clear challenges to assertions that music and politics occupy separate spheres in Canada, we propose to further Garratt's work by demonstrating how focusing on the context, curation, and affect of musicking illuminates kaleidoscopic meanings that accrue through the complex interaction of music and politics—meanings, notably, that cannot be discerned by focusing on musical objects or political landscapes in isolation. Tony Turner's "Harperman" (2015), Adrian Sutherland's "Politician Man" (2019), and Brock Tyler's "Speaking Moistly" (2020) originated in varied social and political contexts—namely, the 2015 and 2019 Canadian federal elections, and the first Canadian wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. "Harperman" began as a protest of Prime Minister (PM) Stephen Harper's Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) Government and became an unofficial campaign anthem for groups opposing his re-election in 2015. Released in the run-up to the 2019 federal election, "Politician Man" draws attention to the failures of successive Canadian governments to actualize promises to Indigenous groups in Canada. "Speaking Moistly," meanwhile, draws specific attention to PM Justin Trudeau, highlighting his government's approach to pandemic management. Modes of dissemination and reception vary from live performances to circulation via broadcast media and from release via the traditional structures of the music industry to DIY "produsage." Each example was born out of different circumstances, conceptualized by performers working in different parts of Canada through varied media (and levels of mediation), and configured to appeal to distinct audience demographics.

In each case, the subject matter is narrowly political—that is, performances directly reference Canadian politicians or political institutions—and, especially in the case of "Harperman," can be understood in terms of well-theorized genres of political music. But while scholars such as Serge

⁵ James Garratt, *Music and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5.

⁶ Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

Denisoff⁸ and Dario Martinelli⁹ provide us with robust typologies and theoretical frameworks for analyzing genres of political songs and their affects, these approaches are limited by their narrow focus on lyric content, function in relation to social movements, musical structure, and authorial intention.¹⁰ Studies like these that focus narrowly on forms, texts, and intended meanings risk missing how music interacts with social movements and events, ideologies, or technologies. Rather than simple insistence that music and politics intersect in Canadian contexts, these case studies help us explore the consequences of new media platforms for how we consume content and make meaning of our world(s) through our on- and offline engagements.

As we explore the junctures between music and politics in Canada, it is tempting to cast our eyes to the United States where the two regularly are conjoined. Over the last two decades, for instance, music increasingly has been ascribed a central role in all facets of American political campaigns from advertising to rallies, both on- and offline. With superstars from Bruce Springsteen, Jay-Z, and Barbra Streisand to Ted Nugent, Kid Rock, and Gene Simmons lending their support to Democratic and Republican candidates, it’s hard to ignore the plethora of musicians wading into the American political fray. As music—including original compositions, pre-existing songs, and playlists—has increasingly been deployed as a tool to sway voters, so too has academic attention turned to the topic, resulting in an explosion of scholarly publications.¹¹ As the relationship between—and the study of—music and politics within the United States has intensified, scholars north of the forty-ninth parallel might feel compelled when discussing Canada to draw comparisons; indeed, this could even appear unavoidable. As Jody Berland writes, “To represent or reflect on Canada is to write to, about, and across the border. . . . Canadians live and write as though the border is everywhere, shadowing everything we contemplate and fear, while Americans live and act as though there is no border there at all.”¹² The Canadian vantage point, as Berland articulates here, is not one of a mutual horizon, but of a “one-way mirror” that allows Canada to look south but prohibits “America” from seeing north of the forty-ninth parallel.¹³ Indeed, if we compare the relationship between music and politics within the United States with that in Canada, there does—at face value—seem to be a reluctance on the part of musicians and scholars north of the border to conjoin music and politics. We argue, however, that a fuller understanding of how politics are ensounded in Canada necessitates an end to this compulsive drive to compare our cultural output with that of the United States.

⁸ R. Serge Denisoff, *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).

⁹ Dario Martinelli, *Give Peace a Chant: Popular Music, Politics and Social Protest* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2017).

¹⁰ Denisoff, for example, outlines six categories of protest song, all of which focus on the function of the song rather than the strictly musical elements. The songs might attempt to produce feelings of support or sympathy for a movement, or they might be intended to reflect the values of the participants of the movement. In other words, Denisoff prioritizes and subsequently defines a protest song based on lyrical content rather than musical components and argues that the song must be linked to a movement from the outset, further narrowing the repertoire of songs that easily fit into this category. In contrast, Martinelli endeavors to define protest music through a typology of songs based on lyric content and musical structure that attempts to account for authorial intention and affect. See Denisoff, *Sing a Song*, 1972; Martinelli, *Give Peace a Chant*, 2017.

¹¹ The volume of scholarship on campaign music within the United States is substantial, but a few key resources include Dana Gorzelany-Mostak and James Deaville, “On the Campaign Trail(er): Deconstructing the Soundscape of the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election,” special issue, *Music & Politics* 9, no. 2 (2015); Dana Gorzelany-Mostak and Sally Bick, eds., “Music and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign,” special issue, *American Music* 35, no. 4 (2018); and Eric T. Kasper and Benjamin S. Schoening, *You Shook Me All Campaign Long: Music in the 2016 Presidential Election and Beyond* (Denton: University of North Texas, 2018). For a more comprehensive bibliography on music in American political elections, see Trax on the Trail: A Scholarly Resource for Music in Political Campaigns, at <http://www.traxonthetrail.com/>.

¹² Jody Berland, *North of Empire: Essays on the Cultural Technologies of Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 32.

¹³ Berland, *North of Empire*, 3.

Instead, we pay closer attention to alternative forms of opinion, storytelling, and parody that we argue are integral to these case studies from Canada's political landscape.

Our approach is influenced by studies of reception and political affect, particularly within the Canadian context. In a study of narrative tropes adopted by Canada's three main political parties during the 2011, 2015, and 2019 federal elections, Borins and Herst analyze the genre, structure, and content of political advertisements and find that the general character of campaign soundtracks (e.g., upbeat, ominous, humorous, calm) reinforces and amplifies overall party messaging.¹⁴ While their research addresses overall campaign messaging instead of specifically musical objects, their observations about how music participates in political discourses more generally are notable and, indeed, build on previous research about music's influence on election campaigns. Political scientist Ted Brader's controlled experiments, for example, demonstrate that manipulating musical and visual cues in political ads has a measurable effect on voter emotions.¹⁵ This research underscores that music need not have specifically political content to have political affect. These findings are congruent with ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond's observation that songs performed at live protests do not need political lyrics to have political consequences.¹⁶ Take the musical response to the 1992 Canadian cod moratorium: on July 2, the federal government halted cod fishing on the east coast because overfishing had depleted the stocks. Fishing was critical to the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador, and to the culture of those who lived there. Musicians predictably responded with songs that directly targeted the moratorium (e.g., Wayne Bartlett's "She's Gone Boys, She's Gone" (1992), or Jim Fidler's "Loss of the Fishery" (1995)).¹⁷ Other musical responses included the formation of choirs, including Folk of the Sea and Singers for Fishermen, but their recordings featured traditional Anglo-Irish-Newfoundland favorites—not explicit protests of the cod moratorium. Live performances of a traditional song like "Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's" (1947), likewise, may have held shared meanings when heard in 1991 that were different to those when it appeared on the post-moratorium 1995 Folk of the Sea album.¹⁸ In other words, what made these songs political was not their lyrical content, but the *contexts* through which they circulated.

Music, context, and meaning are inseparable in our three examples. In the case of "Harperman," the backdrop of an ethics inquiry and songwriter Tony Turner's suspension from work were entwined with the song's reception. But as we demonstrate through our second case study, "Politician Man," even reading context is complex and contingent. Indeed, the affective qualities of the performance may also be entwined with listener positionality—the cultural context that shapes reception—giving rise to a range of interpretive stances. Attention to context is especially important in an age of communications driven by social media: meaning can morph to express a range of emotions, from a neutral stance to a complimentary or critical one within a short time—a phenomenon we'll examine in greater detail in our third case study of Brock Tyler's "Speaking Moistly." Context and curation take on new significance as content circulates and is reinterpreted in ways that may diverge radically from sources. Though conceived long before digital spaces were ubiquitous, Stuart Hall's description of communication in terms of circulation loops that are

¹⁴ Sandford Borins and Beth Herst, "It's the Way You Tell It: Conflicting Narratives in the 2011, 2015, and 2019 Canadian Federal Elections," in *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities: Blurring Genres*, ed. R. A. W. Rhodes and Susan Hodgett (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021).

¹⁵ Ted Brader, "Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005): 388–405.

¹⁶ Beverley Diamond, *On Record: Audio Recording, Mediation and Citizenship in Newfoundland and Labrador* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 232–33.

¹⁷ For a lengthier list of songs written in response to the cod moratorium, see <https://www.library.mun.ca/cns/cod/songs/>.

¹⁸ Diamond, *On Record*, 233.

“produced and sustained through articulation of linked but distinctive moments” remains relevant.¹⁹ In the example of television broadcasting that Hall provides, the broadcaster takes on the role of encoder, converting information according to dominant semiotic codes that the audience must then decode. The positionality of audience members means that interpretation may or may not occur according to the same set of codes used by the encoder, making impossible the ideal of perfectly transparent communication. New modes of communication that blur the lines between real and virtual worlds and that depend on audiences simultaneously functioning as content creators (i.e., re-encoders), furthers the potential for radical departures between intended and ascribed meanings as content is separated from originating context and redeployed to sometimes differing ends. Indeed, in the case of “Speaking Moistly,” the proliferation of shares, remixes, and commentary in both on- and offline spaces begins to suggest the “controllessness” of communication in the digital era.²⁰

While this study addresses the intersection(s) of music (broadly defined) and politics in the Canadian context, the concept of genre remains analytically relevant as it conditions expectations of form, style, function, and reception for performers, audiences, and analysts alike. Our understanding of genre is influenced by anthropologists Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, who suggest that genre is inherently intertextual, simultaneously offering categorical organization and invoking a fragmented, open-ended discourse. Invoking genre, they claim, “creates indexical connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production or reception, thereby linking a particular act to other times, places, and persons.”²¹ Genre, in other words, is contextual, emergent, but also rooted in history, networks of circulation, and the imagination. While we draw attention to how particular genres have been defined in specific moments, our broad approach builds on Briggs and Bauman’s characterization of genre by heeding the entanglements with the past, present, and future. Each song, each musical performance, and each act of sharing, in other words, participates in an open-ended discourse that references genre expectations, but also performance histories and curatorial actions. Genres order discourse, so paying attention to their entanglements is relevant to unpacking how music and politics intersect. If we understand reality as a social and symbolic construction “formed through interaction with, and positive selection of, meanings shared with others,”²² then thinking about music, politics, and political music only in terms of oppositional intentions or formal characteristics is inadequate. Music has a capacity to participate in wider political discourses—projects that are broadly ideological—to widely divergent ends.

Participatory Musicking 2.0

Before turning to the specifics of our case studies, there’s another important commonality that our “folky Anglo-American come-all-ye, music video provoked by a Twitter storm, and viral meme song” share: each is a digital artifact that is a product of the participatory culture that increasingly prevails in online spaces. That is, each song/performance/video circulates in—and to varying degrees depends on—a

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: University of Birmingham, 1980): 117.

²⁰ Martin A. Parlett, “Barack Obama, the American Uprising and Politics 2.0,” in *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*, ed. Ralph Berenger (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2013), 145.

²¹ Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman, “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (1992): 147–48.

²² Parlett, “Barack Obama,” 147; cf. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966).

Web 2.0 information economy.

Web 2.0 is an umbrella term that signals a shift that dates to the turn of the twenty-first century. Rather than signposting the emergence of new technologies, this label refers to ways of interacting and generating content in online spaces. While Web 1.0 mirrored traditional commercial economies organized around the transfer of goods, information, or services from a supplier to a consumer,²³ the logics of Web 2.0 see participants interacting across a variety of online platforms to collaboratively develop, evaluate, and refine content ranging from software and algorithms to information sources and creative works. Such encounters are contingent, unplanned, and radically decentered to enable participation regardless of qualification or experience.²⁴ User-led content creation is the norm on Web 2.0 platforms, with users simultaneously assuming roles as producers and consumers. While this characteristic of social media (and other Web 2.0 platforms) was initially theorized as “prosumption”—a concept that emerged in the 1980s to describe production models that involved customers at the design stage to facilitate customizable consumer experience—media scholar Axel Bruns argues that “produsage”—a neologism combining production + usage—better explains the networked interactions and supporting conditions that define new information economies.²⁵

At first blush, each of our examples appears at odds with theories of produsage: that is, there is an identifiable creator with a clear intellectual property claim. Tony Turner composed “Harperman” for a songwriting competition. Adrian Sutherland released “Politician Man” on his own record label. And Brock Tyler made the conscious decision to donate 50 percent of his Spotify royalties from “Speaking Moistly” to the Edmonton Foodbank.²⁶ But this is where shifting our gazes from musical objects and musicians to contexts for (re)circulation becomes important: understanding each performance through the lens of produsage enables interpretation of how content circulates through on- and offline spaces with seeming controllessness, open to intervention, remixing, and curation by other users and their networks. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino defines participatory music as a “type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles.”²⁷ He goes on to explain that the quality of such performances are gauged by the level of participation achieved and the affective experience of participants.²⁸ While Turino’s theorization of participatory music accounts only for the individuals who take an active role in making music—the dancers, musicians, singers, and individuals who clap along—sociologist Christopher Small’s definition of musicking is more inclusive. Small defines musicking as participation of any sort in a performance and suggests that through musicking “we bring into existence a set of relationships that model the relationships of our world . . . we affirm them to ourselves and anyone else who may be paying attention.”²⁹ What produsage and participatory musicking, then, have in common, is the formation of networks around a creative process that is temporary but affective; networks and meanings are reconfigured through each

²³ Claudia K. Grinnell, “From Consumer to Prosumer to Producer: Who Keeps Shifting My Paradigm? (We Do!),” *Public Culture* 21, no. 3 (2009): 577–98.

²⁴ Axel Bruns and Jan-Hinrik Schmidt, “Produsage: A Closer Look at Continuing Developments,” *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 17, no. 1 (2011): 3–7; Axel Bruns, “Prosumption, Produsage,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 1620–25.

²⁵ Bruns, “Prosumption, Produsage,” 1622.

²⁶ Brock Tyler, interview with the authors, September 23, 2020.

²⁷ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.

²⁸ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 29.

²⁹ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 50.

performance, share, or remix—musicking in service to producer identity formation and rhetorical world making.

McKelvey et al. provide useful guidance on the varied expertise of producers, while also suggesting how digital artifacts participate in broader political discourses. They define “social media elites” as “non-professional expert users of digital platforms as well as partisans.”³⁰ Social media elites are non-professional only in the sense that they remain outside of professional politics and act through informal communications and platforms; they contribute “expertly crafted” content that increasingly fills the news feeds of internet users and “primes” how their audience(s)—other less-expert producers—access and interpret information.³¹ McKelvey et al.’s analysis of the influence of bloggers during the 2015 Canadian federal election campaign acknowledges that social media elites have roles as information sources and gatekeepers—a role that is increasingly significant given the growing influence of social media platforms as news aggregators. As of 2016, 46 percent of Canadians accessed news via Facebook, 17 percent via YouTube, and 12 percent via Twitter, with higher rates evident among under 35s.³² McKelvey et al. delve further into the informational value of “politainment” in their analysis of how partisan Facebook groups used memes during Canada’s 2019 federal election.³³ The authors liken these groups to music scenes,³⁴ explaining “partisan scenes perpetuate partisan attachments, settle differences and help citizens feel political. These scenes exist separate from the political parties themselves . . . [but] they maintain party loyalty while translating the daily events of the campaign into jokes and common reactions.”³⁵ While McKelvey et al. don’t name music among the tools used by social media elites to participate in the “political information cycle”—a concept that replaces “traditional news cycle” and acknowledges changing power dynamics between old and new media platforms³⁶—their analysis makes evident that information, comedy, and art are complexly entwined and accrue meaning as they circulate among partisan producers. Our case studies, each focusing on a shareable object that circulates across a variety of social media platforms, extends the concepts of “social media elites” and producers to account for digitally savvy musicians (and/or their supporters) and sheds light on how music participates in the political information cycle.

Tony Turner, “Harperman,” and Accidental Politicking

In February 2015, part-time musician Tony Turner won a songwriting competition with “Harperman,” a song that echoes the sound and form of classic Anglo-American folk protest music. Organized in memory of Canadian labor activist Gil Levine (1924–2009), the song competition required that entrants compose and perform either a protest song or song of hope. Turner opted for protest and created a composition that itemized the ways that PM Stephen Harper undermined Canadian democracy

³⁰ Fenwick McKelvey, Marianne Cote, and Vincent Raynauld, “Scandals and Screenshots: Social Media Elites in Canadian Politics,” in *Political Elites in Canada: Power and Influence in Instantaneous Times*, eds. Alex Marland, Thierry Giasson, and Andrea Lawlor (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 204.

³¹ McKelvey et al., “Scandals and Screenshots,” 208.

³² Colette Brin, “Canada,” in *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, ed. Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, David AL Levy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2016), 80–81.

³³ Fenwick McKelvey, Scott DeJong, and Janna Frenzel, ‘Memes, Scenes and #ELXN2019s: How Partisans Make Memes during Elections’, *New Media & Society* (2021); cf. Fenwick et al., “Scandals and Screenshots,” 216.

³⁴ Cf. Will Straw, “Scenes and Sensibilities,” *Public* 22–23 (2001), 361.

³⁵ McKelvey et al., “Memes, Scenes,” 2.

³⁶ McKelvey et al., “Scandals and Screenshots,” 208.

during his years in office. He drew much of his lyric content from a list published in *JUSTnews*, the newsletter of the Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice,³⁷ but also added his own references—like the Mike Duffy scandal³⁸ and cuts imposed on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC, Canada’s independent public broadcaster)—to complete his nine-verse song (see Figure 1). From niche success in a local folk music scene, the song went on to capture national attention when it went viral on YouTube, became the center of debates in traditional media about political interference and free speech, and eventually was taken up as a campaign song by Canada’s Green Party.

	Soloist (call)	Chorus (response)
Verse 1 (A)	Who controls our parliament?	
		Harperman, Harperman
	Who squashes all dissent?	
		Harperman, Harperman
Chorus (B)	The Duffy handout incident, No respect for the environment	
		Harperman, it’s time for you to go
		We want you gone (gone, gone) You and your pawn (pawn, pawns) No more con (con, cons) Time to move on (on, on) Get out of town (town, town) Don’t want you round (round, round) Harperman, it’s time for you to go



Figure 1: Tony Turner, “Harperman” (2015).³⁹

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4571>

³⁷ Wikipedia, “Harperman,” last modified December 10, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harperman>; “JUSTnews,” Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice, last modified 2023, <https://cusj.org/justnews/>.

³⁸ In 2012, the Senate accused Canadian Senator Mike Duffy of filing false living expenses. The prime minister’s Chief of Staff then quietly wrote Duffy a check to cover past expenses and forced him to accept it. An Ontario Court judge subsequently accused the Prime Minister’s Office of implementing “threatening efforts” against Duffy, forcing him to capitulate to save the Harper government from embarrassment. For more, see Althia Raj, “Mike Duffy’s Trial Reveals the Real Deceit Came from Harper’s Office,” *HuffPost*, April 22, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/mike-duffy-trial_b_9761506.

³⁹ Tony Turner, “Harperman,” YouTube video, June 22, 2025, 5:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei50IM6ab1c>.

This case study begins with a formal analysis of “Harperman” before turning to the social life of the song. While it is tempting to interpret “Harperman” as a protest song—it neatly fits expectations of a US-Civil-Rights-era protest song, not to mention Martinelli’s typology of protest music—only considering the song from this perspective neglects the broader context in which the song eventually circulated. Indeed, the social and political context that formed the backdrop for “Harperman,” not to mention curation by traditional media sources (e.g., newspapers, broadcast reports), had a political affect that cannot be discerned through focus on the musical object alone.

Martinelli characterizes North American English-language “protest” repertoire as falling into four types based on lyrics and lyric structure: analytical, spiritual, universalistic, and satirical.⁴⁰ Our focus is the most common form of protest song in the Anglo-American tradition: *Analytic* protest songs tend to follow a strophic-refrain lyric structure with a description of the infractions in the strophes and a “prescription” in the refrain. Songs in this style, Martinelli argues, demand “the listener to ‘know’ and to ‘act’”⁴¹—and, of course, the repetitious structure invites participation (and buy-in) from a crowd.⁴² “Harperman” neatly follows this ABABABA form, with some variances at the end of the song (see Figure 1). The A sections, or verses, spell out the “problems” with a refrain at the end of each verse (“Harperman, it’s time for you to go”) providing a solution. The B sections, or choruses, elaborate the prescribed plan of action. Each verse also includes a call-and-response to maximize participation.

Martinelli also considers melody in his analysis of Anglo-American protest repertoire. His categories include:

- “Simple”: “catchy” melodies with “folk”-sounding characteristics.
- “Solemn”: chart friendly with more elaborate production and pop qualities.
- “Aggressive”: alternative/underground musical styles (punk, hip-hop, etc.) with an “angrier” attitude.
- “Manneristic”: features music that is reminiscent of earlier styles central to social protest.
- “X” type: does not neatly fit any of the preceding categorizations.⁴³

“Harperman” falls quite neatly into the “simple” type: the “classic” musical style with minimal instrumentation, easy rhythmic patterns, and catchy rhythms.⁴⁴ “Harperman” was penned with accessibility in mind: Turner wrote it in such a way that it could be quickly learned by a crowd without lyric sheets (thus the chorus includes the words “gone, gone, gone, pawn, pawn, pawn, con, con, con” and so on, with the tag “Harperman, it’s time for you to go” at the end).⁴⁵ The song also features simple chords, no vocal harmonies, only one guitar and singers, and is not commercially produced. When combined with “analytical” lyrics, “Harperman” is recognizable as a “song of social protest” in the Anglo-American folk tradition.

If not for the intervention of two friends from the Ottawa folk scene, the “Harperman” story likely would have ended at the song competition. Instead, project manager Chris White and videographer Andrew Hall valued the song as a potential rallying cry for Canadians dissatisfied with the political status

⁴⁰ Martinelli, *Give Peace a Chant*, 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴² Cf. Turino, *Music as Social Life*.

⁴³ Martinelli, *Give Peace a Chant*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 54–57.

⁴⁵ Tony Turner, interview with the authors, September 18, 2020.

quo—a typical function for protest music. White and Hall organized a recording session with performers from the local folk music scene, made a website, and started promoting the song with the goal of having “a singalong all across Canada.”⁴⁶ From this point, in Turner’s words, “it just sort of steamrolled. And all I did was write the song and perform it.”⁴⁷ Plays on YouTube went up by 1000 per day. Turner was elated, but his excitement focused on the unusual level of recognition he was receiving as a folk singer and the potential to broaden his following—not on how he might influence the political information cycle.⁴⁸ Martinelli’s framework is a useful tool for interpreting the lyric intentions behind “Harperman,” its lyric affect, and work by Turner’s colleagues to turn the song into a rallying cry for anti-Harper sentiment in Canada. However, this approach tells us little of how Turner’s song circulated once it was uploaded to YouTube, how producers created meaning(s), or the circumstances that gave rise to its viral popularity. These details come into relief if we switch our focus from the musical form and our expectations of what a protest song *should* sound like and how it *should* function to what *meanings accrued* through circulation.

The viral uptake of “Harperman” meant Turner had a problem. He had a day job as a scientist with Environment Canada (a department of the federal government). Public servants in Canada are bound by the terms of the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector*, strict guidelines that stipulate employees act impartially. While he recognized that lyrics like “Harperman, it’s time for you to go” left little doubt about his opinions, Turner did not see the song as a violation of the code. In his view, his life as a folk singer and his work for Environment Canada were separate. He did not advocate his political opinions or share information about his songwriting activities in the office. By the same token, he did not identify himself as a public servant in the folk music world or in any of the promotional activities associated with “Harperman.” But as Christopher A. Cooper points out, “[a]ctions online are easily visible to colleagues, employers, and the general public, thus making it difficult to separate professional and personal selves.”⁴⁹ That Turner was both the creator of “Harperman” *and* a government scientist were inexorably linked in the public eye—especially after his employers named the connection by suspending Turner (with pay).

When news of Turner’s suspension appeared in the press, “Harperman” went viral overnight, propelled, in Turner’s words, “into the stratosphere” with millions of YouTube views. The song became a virtual rallying point in the lead up to the contentious 2015 federal election: #Harperman was the second most searched hashtag during the six-week campaign and the song’s oppositional message reached millions of Canadians through social media networks. But online interest also begat real-world action. The song became so popular among “anti-Harper” campaigners that by the end of the summer, on September 17, 2015, a singalong across Canada became a reality. People gathered in dozens of cities across the country to sing “Harperman” in solidarity against the incumbent federal leader.

McKelvey et al. point out that political affect isn’t just a matter of voting or direct political action, but also can be read in influence on the political information cycle. They point out, “The success of elites new and old can be evaluated through their ability to ‘prime’ news reception, increase the accessibility of certain stories, and set the agenda of the information cycle.”⁵⁰ They continue, “Since online audiences tend to select and rely on information sources corresponding to their beliefs . . . , social media elites increase the accessibility of information by passing on, commenting on, or echoing certain stories to their sympathetic

⁴⁶ Turner, interview, September 18, 2020.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ McKelvey et al., “Scandals and Screenshots.”

⁴⁹ Christopher Cooper, “Public servants, anonymity, and political activity online: bureaucratic neutrality in peril?” *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 86, no. 3 (2020): 497.

⁵⁰ McKelvey et al., “Scandals and Screenshots,” 208.

followers.”⁵¹ Media coverage of the disciplinary actions taken against Turner added layers of meaning to “Harperman,” and the song became emblematic of wider debates about political interference and free speech. Throughout his tenure in office, reports of PM Harper and his government interfering in democratic processes were widespread. Canadian scientists, for example, complained of being muzzled by Harper’s CPC Government—complaints later deemed “well-founded” by Canada’s Information Commissioner.⁵² Similar accusations were leveled about inappropriate government interference in decision making at the CBC/Radio Canada, and in government departments including the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Nuclear Safety Commission, the Military Police Complaints Commission, and the Federal Judiciary.⁵³ The fact that Turner was a government scientist struck an especially strong chord given reports that the Prime Minister’s Office were censoring its scientists.⁵⁴ That Turner was suspended without warning or disciplinary process—actions that he and his union formally grieved—added weight to the messaging surrounding his song: he wasn’t just singing a litany of complaints against a political figure, but was, himself, a victim of a government disdainful to due process. His prohibition from singing “Harperman” was key to its viral appeal, “producing” Turner as an unwitting symbol of a struggle for free speech and democratic processes.

Turner ultimately opted for early retirement, just two weeks before the 2015 federal election. His ongoing case meant that he could not participate in performances of “Harperman” or speak about his situation, nor would his employers consider his requests to return to work—he was effectively muzzled, with no end in sight. Freed from his obligations to the civil service, Turner boarded a plane to Victoria and, upon arrival, participated in a Green-Party-supported performance of his song. Throughout the debacle, Elizabeth May, the then-leader of the Green Party, provided ongoing support for Turner and, in turn, he allowed his song to be used at Green Party events.

The adoption of “Harperman” as a quasi-campaign song speaks to the song’s resonance with the narratives that dominated the 2015 federal election. This contentious election was sharply ideological, seeing incumbent Stephen Harper’s Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) face off against the more progressive platforms of the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), New Democratic Party (NDP), and other Left-leaning candidates. With Canada’s first-past-the-post electoral system and growing frustration among progressives that the CPC had won a solid majority of seats in the House of Commons with just 39.6 percent of the popular vote,⁵⁵ strategic voting initiatives were characteristic of “Anyone But Conservative”

⁵¹ McKelvey et al., “Scandals and Screenshots,” 208.

⁵² Emily Chung, “Federal scientists to be protected against muzzling, political interference,” *CBC News*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/scientific-integrity-1.4767227>.

⁵³ Justin Brake, “Media watchdog says CBC at risk of being turned into a ‘state broadcaster,’” *The Independent*, July 31, 2013, <https://theindependent.ca/news/media-watchdog-says-cbc-at-risk-of-being-turned-into-a-state-broadcaster/>; Nick Davies, “Stephen Harper: master manipulator,” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/stephen-harper-master-manipulator>.

⁵⁴ Post Media News, “Information commissioner to investigate Harper government’s ‘muzzling’ of federal scientists,” *National Post*, April 1, 2013, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/information-commissioner-to-investigate-harper-governments-muzzling-of-federal-scientists>; Stephen Buranyi, “Stephen Harper Needs to Stop Gagging Canadian Scientists,” *Vice*, March 14, 2013, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w5qjj/stephen-harper-needs-to-stop-gagging-canadian-scientists>; Joshua Rapp Learn, “Canadian Scientists Explain Exactly How Their Government Silenced Science,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/canadian-scientists-open-about-how-their-government-silenced-science-180961942/>; Wendy Palen, “When Canadian Scientists Were Muzzled by Their Government,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/opinion/when-canadian-scientists-were-muzzled-by-their-government.html>.

⁵⁵ Elections Canada, “General Election—May 2, 2011,” *Elections: Current & Past Elections*, <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&document=index&dir=pas/41ge&lang=e>.

campaigns.⁵⁶ Borins and Herst's analysis of official campaign ads run by Canada's three main parties highlights a growing tendency for campaigning to focus on party leaders rather than platforms, as well as the prevalence of attack ads aimed at discrediting opponents (70 percent of CPC ads, 21 percent of LPC ads, and 32 percent of NDP ads).⁵⁷ Ads in this category deploy "Knave," "Fool," and "Mistaken policy" narratives that inform citizens of why they should not vote for opponents. Knave narratives, adopted in 25 percent of NDP ads, position an opponent as tainted or corrupt, motivated by personal ambition, implicated in scandals, or "in thrall to special interests."⁵⁸ While political campaign songs typically convey inspirational messages, invoke key campaign messages, and energize rally crowds while drowning out potential hecklers,⁵⁹ negative campaigning was a typical feature of the 2015 election. "Harperman," with its viral appeal online, signifying power for producers, demonstrated capacity for rallying offline sing-alongs-cum-political-rallies, and congruence with campaign metanarratives, was an apt choice for a progressive political party anthem—even if it tells us little about the (Green) party's platform.⁶⁰

"Harperman" is an exemplar of participatory music in the strictest sense of the definition: it is a "song of social protest" and its call-and-response structure invites the participation of anyone co-present with the performance leader.⁶¹ But considering "Harperman" only in these terms misses the meanings that emerged when Turner's recording was uploaded to YouTube: it accrued signifying power as it circulated on- and offline, extended the political information cycle, and primed audience reception of wider debates about Canada's future. More simply, a focus on the musical object misses the structures of meaning realized through participatory musicking 2.0.

While "Harperman" started its life in analogue form and depended on the interventions of third parties to enable its viral spread, we now turn to a "born-digital" example that was created in the wake of a direct exchange on Twitter between a politician and their public. Social media elites are "experts at crafting tactical messages with the appropriate styles and genres for social media platforms."⁶² Adrian Sutherland's "Politician Man," has subsequently received critical acclaim through the established structures of the music industry, but its genesis and usage of multimedia forms is why we've included it in this article. As online audiences "tend to select and rely on information sources corresponding to their beliefs," information is shared and experienced in different ways by increasingly fragmented networks.⁶³ As these online platforms gain influence as standard tools of communication and politicking, Sutherland's song provides a portal through which we explore the crucial relationship between cultural learning and political affect. As a case study, "Politician Man" also raises crucial questions surrounding listener positionality that problematize commonly held yet increasingly outdated understandings of genre in the Web 2.0 era.

Adrian Sutherland, "Politician Man," and an Invitation to Dialogue

PM Stephen Harper and his CPC Government started the 2015 federal election campaign with

⁵⁶ E.g., Julie Gordon, "Canada PM faces 'Anyone But Harper' strategic voting in election," *Reuters* (September 24, 2015). <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-canada-election-strategic-idUKKCN0RO2II20150924>.

⁵⁷ Borins and Herst, "It's the Way You Tell It," 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁹ Chris Rands, "The pandemic has changed the soundtrack of this election campaign," *CBC News*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/pandemic-campaign-songs-1.6157082>.

⁶⁰ Cf. McKelvey et al., "Screenshots and Scandals."

⁶¹ Cf. Martinelli, *Give Peace a Chant*; Turino, *Music as Social Life*.

⁶² McKelvey et al., "Scandals and Screenshots," 205.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 208.

almost ten years in office, a history of election victories, and an apparent edge in the polls. From May through July, 2015, the Liberal Party—historically, the CPC’s main competition for votes—polled at a mere 26 percent. The party to challenge was the official opposition, Thomas Mulcair’s New Democrats (NDP).⁶⁴ Despite Conservative campaigning that depicted Liberal leader Justin Trudeau as a lightweight who was utterly unprepared to lead the country—the “Fool” narrative featured in 40 percent of CPC campaign ads⁶⁵—the election results represented a sea change in federal politics: the Liberals swept the election with 184 seats, while the Conservatives finished with 99, the New Democratic Party with 44, the Bloc Québécois with 10, and the Green Party with 1. Notably, though PM Harper’s defeat is sometimes attributed to an increase in strategic voting, political scientist Paul Kellogg argues that the 2015 election also was shaped by Idle No More, an Indigenous-led protest movement opposing the Harper Government’s attempt to gut environmental protection laws, and, ultimately, benefited the Liberal Party.⁶⁶ Trudeau’s successful 2015 campaign promised positive politics and a brighter future—in his victory speech he even quoted past prime minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, forecasting “Sunny ways, my friends, sunny ways!”

The new government’s first budget appeared to hold the course—and keep promises to Indigenous allies—by promising nearly CDN\$8.4 billion over five years to improve the lives of Indigenous Peoples. Canada seemingly was on an unprecedented path towards meaningful reconciliation. But the process was painstakingly slow. Promises to build “nation to nation” relationships with Indigenous groups and implement all ninety-four of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) recommendations were still in nascent stages when a new federal election was called in 2019.⁶⁷ Worse still, the Liberals appeared to be stepping back from key promises. A 2019 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, for example, accused the Government of “wilful and reckless” discrimination against First Nations children and ordered the government to pay billions of dollars in compensation. The Liberals instead spent millions of dollars on lawyer fees trying to overturn the decision. Another report, this time by the United Nations special rapporteur on housing, found that Indigenous people in Canada continued to face greater barriers to secure housing than non-Indigenous Canadians.⁶⁸ If “sunny ways” had arrived, little light was reaching Indigenous communities.

Then, on July 4, 2019, Liberal MP and Minister of the Environment and Climate Change Catherine McKenna tweeted:

There’s a lot to love about Ottawa—including our tap water! Did you know it’s rated among the best in the world? I’m always carrying reusable water bottles around to reduce plastic waste, so it’s good to know I can use Ottawa’s tap water when I need a refill. [#10000Changes](#)

Though well intentioned, McKenna’s lack of sensitivity to the evolving unsafe water crisis on Indigenous lands across Canada raised the ire of Indigenous people and allies. In July 2019, Attawapiskat First Nation,

⁶⁴ Paul Kellogg, “The Defeat of Stephen Harper: A Case Study in Social Movement Electoralism,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 52, no. 3 (2018): 592.

⁶⁵ Borins and Herst, “It’s the Way You Tell It,” 67.

⁶⁶ Kellogg, “The Defeat of Stephen Harper,” 617. For more information about Idle No More, see <https://idlenomore.ca/about-the-movement/>.

⁶⁷ The TRC, active 2007 and 2015, was an outcome of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement that provided Indigenous survivors of an abusive system with opportunities to share their experiences. The TRC concluded their work with a series of recommendations about how Canadians might begin working to decolonize the state, address systemic discrimination, and heal long-standing disputes. See University of Manitoba, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, last modified 2023, <https://nctr.ca/>.

⁶⁸ Joanna Smith, “Trudeau defends record on Indigenous issues, as stump speech mentions are brief,” *CBC News*, October 20, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/justin-trudeau-indigenous-winnipeg-1.5328086>.

a community of about 2000 people living on the western shore of James Bay, became the epicenter of a water crisis. The community declared a state of emergency when they discovered harmful levels of trihalomethanes (THMs) and haloacetic acids (HAAs)—both of which increase the risk of cancer—in the tap water and separate drinking water systems. The problem went beyond access to potable water; THMs and HAAs can enter the body through open skin pores so residents of Attawapiskat were also advised not to spend too much time showering or bathing. And, because these compounds can become airborne, residents needed to open windows to ventilate a room when even running a tap.⁶⁹

Musician Adrian Sutherland, a resident of Attawapiskat, was one of the people who called McKenna out for her poorly timed comment. He tweeted, “Must be nice to have clean drinking water—thousands of indigenous people don’t even have clean water to bathe in never-mind drink. I don’t think is something to be proud of!” (@ataboyadrian, July 7, 2019). That same day, he posted image of himself in a gas mask alongside another tweet:

So I hear Ottawa’s real proud of having the cleanest drinking water in the world! Meanwhile in Attawapiskat the water is contaminated. #attawapiskat #contaminatedwater #northernproblems #indigenous #canada #cdnpoli @JustinTrudeau @thejagmeetsingh @andrewscheer @cathmckenna (@ataboyadrian, July 7, 2019)

McKenna clarified her comments on July 8 in follow-up tweets that acknowledged the unacceptable lack of access to clean water and celebrated ongoing work to lift long-term drinking water advisories by March 2021, promising “We’re committed to doing that work together” (@cathmckenna, July 8, 2019).

Sutherland followed up with a song that calls out false promises and decades of political neglect towards First Nations peoples. Written by Sutherland, Chris Gormley (The Trews, Daylight for Deadeyes), and Matt Gormley (Daylight for Deadeyes),⁷⁰ “Politician Man” was released on Sutherland’s own label, Midnight Shine Music, on October 17, 2019, just a week before a federal election that saw Justin Trudeau re-elected as prime minister in a Liberal minority government. The song reached number one on the Indigenous Music Countdown in May 2020, and the music video took home awards at the Indie Shorts Awards Buenos Aires (2020), Indie Shorts Awards Miami (2020), Moving Parts Film Festival (2020), and Yorkton Film Festival (2020), London Music Video Festival (2021), and the Phoenix International Short Film Festival (2021). It was also an official selection for screening at the ProxyAct Film Festival, Germany (2020), and the Weengushk International Film Festival (2021). Despite critical acclaim for “Politician Man” and Sutherland’s facile use of forms that are imminently shareable, this video has not achieved the viral popularity of “Harperman” or “Speaking Moistly”; as of April 2023, the video has received just over 66,700 views on YouTube. Nevertheless, critical reception and posted comments point to this song’s efficacy in extending the political information cycle across two election cycles, offering commentary on a general lack of progress toward reconciliation.

“Politician Man” follows many of the conventions of a mainstream North American roots-rock song, incorporating a prominent blues harmonica, rhythms, and conventional harmonies. But “Politician Man” also defies Martinelli’s protest song typology. Though closely related to “analytical” type songs, which are characterized by “a thorough description in the strophes and a ‘tagline’-styled prescription in the

⁶⁹ Jorge Barrera, “Attawapiskat declares state of emergency over water quality,” *CBC News*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/attawapiskat-water-hope-1.5224371>.

⁷⁰ The song was produced and engineered by Carl Jennings (Westmoreland Recording, Hamilton), and mastered by João Carvalho (Toronto).

refrain,”⁷¹ Sutherland’s song includes significant distinctions in form. Instead of itemizing infractions in the verses and prescribing actions in the choruses, Sutherland expresses his concerns more generally and urges reconciliation on the bridge (see Figure 2). The song invites collective participation in dialogue and advocates for meaningful change.

Verse 1	I get tired sometimes I can’t take no more You steal half my heart and you You still want more.
Verse 2	There’s no getting round There’s no hiding, friends Once they cut your soul they’ll Come back and do it again.
Chorus:	Hey Mr. Politician Man What you done for me lately? Woh-oh Hey Mr. Politician Man Won’t you break me off a piece someday? Woh-oh
Verse 3:	You try to lay the blame You’re like a do-no-action fool You try to garner fame for your Your next election duel
Bridge	We need to listen We need to change We’re sick and tired of the same old games (X2)
Chorus	
Bridge’	Lying to my face Lying to yourself Lying to the people You said that you would help Mr. Politician Man What about the ones you forgot
Chorus:	X2

⁷¹ Martinelli, *Give Peace a Chant*, 36.



Figure 2: Adrian Sutherland, “Politician Man” (2019).⁷²

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4571>

Unlike the protest songs in Martinelli’s typology that propose a way to put an end to injustice, “Politician Man” is the beginning of a conversation. As Sutherland explains:

The relationship between Canada and First Nations has been difficult for a long time, and in many ways it still is. Politician Man is about this relationship, and the need for all of us—politicians, chiefs, Indigenous people, all Canadians—to start listening to each other, and take steps together. Let’s move past the blaming and do something. We all need to do our part. That’s what reconciliation is, and the message behind “Politician Man.”⁷³

Sutherland and entertainment industry commentators describe “Politician Man” as a protest song.⁷⁴ But listening to “Politician Man” as a protest from the margins—as evincing an oppositional worldview—undermines core messaging, musical function, and political affect. That is, listening with the genre expectations of a protest song may get in the way of hearing the range of meanings that emerge when Indigenous ways of knowing are considered, visual dimensions of this born-digital performance are explored, or the dialogues modeled in user comments are contemplated. Indigenous scholar Dylan Robinson writes that “we each carry listening privilege [and] listening biases. . . [and] by becoming aware

⁷² Adrian Sutherland, “Politician Man (Official Music Video),” YouTube video, October 17, 2019, 3:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Zd-N19k09Y>.

⁷³ Spill New Music, “Adrian Sutherland,” <http://spillmagazine.com/spill-new-music-adrian-sutherland-politician-man/>.

⁷⁴ See <https://adriansutherlandmusic.com/album/1783289/politician-man>; CBC News, “Adrian Sutherland welcomes film award for protest music video ‘Politician Man,’” *CBC News*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/sutherland-midnight-shine-golden-sheaf-politician-man-1.5624099>; Spill New Music, “Adrian Sutherland.”

of normative listening habits and abilities, we are better able to listen otherwise.”⁷⁵ Critical listening positionality, he points out, is important when we analyze and label any music, but it is especially crucial when the listener and the listened-to interact within asymmetrical power relations.⁷⁶ As settler scholars listening to a Cree musician, Robinson’s point is an essential consideration that underscores the complexities at stake when it comes to both intercultural musicking and politicking.

How then might we recognize our own positionality and begin to listen in step with Indigenous logics? Robinson again provides some guidance:

Western music is largely though not exclusively oriented toward aesthetic contemplation and for the affordances it provides: getting through our work days, setting and focusing moods, and creating a sense of home (DeNora, 2000). Indigenous song, in contrast, serves strikingly different functions, including that of law and primary historical documentation.⁷⁷

This is perhaps an appropriate moment to reflect on who benefits from a refusal to recognize the overlaps between music and politics. Garratt points out that Western liberal democracies (like Canada) tend to fence politics into a “narrow sphere of human activity” concerned with the management of public affairs through structures of government.⁷⁸ But, as critics of liberal democratic systems have been consistent in pointing out, such boundaries favor those already in power while obscuring our capacity to comprehend the exercise of power and ideology in social relations.⁷⁹ Imposing such boundaries when listening to Indigenous musics does more than obscure, instead negating the very logic that is central to musical function. Indeed, the music video for “Politician Man” makes these functions difficult to ignore. The song received video treatment from filmmaker and moving image designer Justin Stephenson (*The Secret Path*), who combined video footage of Sutherland in the studio with carefully selected song texts and illustrations derived from Cree floral patterns. He also incorporated images from Canadian Geographic’s *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*—mappings that represent Indigenous communities and territories without imposition of provincial boundaries.⁸⁰ These are cultural references and historical documents that visually clarify and amplify what is at stake in Sutherland’s message.

When “Politician Man” is heard—or interactively experienced—as a mechanism for dialogue, it becomes an effective gambit. Sutherland reflects:

I believe the song was received the way I hoped it would be. It got people talking about the issues we have as indigenous people in this country, it gave me a platform to create more awareness and continue to keep important issues in the forefront of people[’s] minds.⁸¹

The comments posted to YouTube about “Politician Man” themselves read as an echo to Sutherland’s invitation. They feature a remarkable lack of trolling, instead offering positive encouragement (e.g., “Perfect song, Perfect Message, I love it!!”), endorsements of messaging (e.g., “As an Ojibwe I can say I feel the same way. Chi Miigwetch for this song”), or drawing connections to historical and contemporary failures in the political representation of Indigenous communities. Sutherland responds to each comment,

⁷⁵ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 10–11.

⁷⁶ Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁸ Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 6.

⁷⁹ For more on boundary keeping and power imbalances within the Canadian context, see Himani Bannerji, “On the dark side of the nation: politics of multiculturalism in Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1996): 103–28; and Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁰ Spill New Music, “Adrian Sutherland.”

⁸¹ Adrian Sutherland, email with the authors, December 14, 2020.

offering appreciation of positive feedback as well as gentle clarifications (see Figure 3).⁸² The comments that curate “Politician Man” model Sutherland’s invitation to dialogue and refusal to play the “blame game.”



Figure 3: YouTube comments in response to “Politician Man (Official Music Video).” These comments were posted in 2021.

By “listening otherwise”—by listening with awareness of cultural context, attention to extramusical discourses evoked through curatorial actions, and acknowledging musical function—the strength of Sutherland’s demand for equitable dialogue between sovereign partners is evident. In his article on the *nahenahe* (soft, sweet, melodious) aesthetic in Indigenous Hawai‘ian music, ethnomusicologist Kevin Fellezs points to a parallel example of political music. Its affect, similarly, can only be heard by listening otherwise. Fellezs contends that “soft and gentle” music in this style “can signal defiance rather than acquiescence.”⁸³ In the Hawai‘ian context, he argues that *nahenahe* “is oppositional precisely because it offers an alternative to modernity’s penchant for hyperactivity and overwrought tension. . . . [It is] a refusal to link ‘disturbance, opposition, resistance’ to ‘noise’ and to, instead, announce a Hawaiian call for strategies of beauty and gentleness, promoting *nahenahe* as the sound of decolonization and the political empowerment of Kanaka Maoli regardless of the overwhelmingly long odds.”⁸⁴ *Nahenahe*, in other words, is the sound of politics, of social empowerment, in an Indigenous Hawai‘ian context. In both cases, approaching the music through analysis of context and affect draws attention to how the song circulates, who hears it, and how it’s heard. This approach prompts us to hear the music not as protests from the margins, but as ensoundments of politics that place Indigenous logics and decolonization at their centers.

Each of the first two case studies presented in this article illuminate the limitations of established categories of political music. “Harperman” most closely follows expectations of a classic “protest song,” and yet its political affect comes not from the original performance/recording of the song, but subsequent

⁸² Sutherland’s publicist at *Inspirement Magazine* offers a fuller explanation in their reply to a comment on YouTube in 2020: “Trudeau might like to know that while much of the media about Politician Man has mentioned Trudeau, the song is not actually directed at him. That’s the spin put on it by media. The song is meant for all leaders, all politicians, all Canadians. It’s a good song, too, maybe Trudeau will check it out one day simply as a music fan. Adrian is a great musician from Attawapiskat with an important voice and perspective. Trudeau might want to pay attention.”

⁸³ Kevin Fellezs, “Nahenahe (Soft, Sweet, Melodious): Sounding Out Native Hawaiian Self-Determination,” *Journal for the Society for American Music* 13, no. 4 (2019): 425.

⁸⁴ Fellezs, “Nahenahe,” 426.

on- and offline participatory musicking. “Politician Man,” meanwhile, defies structural expectations, switching out a clear demand to end injustices with a call for dialogue. When combined with the video’s visual references to Indigenous culture and history, “Politician Man” challenges commonly understood settler understandings of “protest music” and invites us to “listen otherwise.” Sutherland’s subsequent online engagement with listeners reflects the cooperative spirit of the song, producing equitable exchanges and dialogues. The final case study, while obviously political, defies Martinelli’s typology instead highlighting the role of social media elites in the political information cycle and the intersection of art, comedy, and partisanship.

Brock Tyler, “Speaking Moistly,” and Building National Consensus

During the first 110 days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau provided almost daily updates from the steps of his home at Rideau Cottage in Ottawa.⁸⁵ On April 7, while describing measures individuals should take to hinder the spread of the virus, he uttered the now-infamous—and infinitely cringe-worthy—advice that we should avoid “speaking moistly” on each other. Trudeau’s announcement had a massive audience: during this period of the pandemic CBC’s English-language services reported an average reach of 4.4 million television viewers and 1.9 million radio listeners for the PM’s morning updates. And those numbers only include people who tuned in via CBC; actual audience numbers more than double when the accounting includes other broadcasters and coverage in both official languages.⁸⁶ It was a verbal gaffe with legs of its own that evoked laughter from audiences, comment from pundits, and elaboration by artists.

One of those artists gave Trudeau’s utterance wings when he transformed the speech into a music video with danceable beats. On April 8, 2020, Brock Tyler (known by the username anonymotif) released his version of “Speaking Moistly” on YouTube. It was a runaway success that defied his expectations and went viral overnight. Tyler’s version of Trudeau’s speech takes the form of a “meme song,” a composition that involves creatively combining and remixing memorable video and audio. Meme songs exist and circulate exclusively via social media, usually with the purpose of offering commentary on a person, moment, or concept. Tyler’s “Speaking Moistly” is an autotuned manipulation of the prime minister’s address, and uses techniques like zoom, delay, slow motion, and quick cuts to splice together a music video (see Figure 4).

⁸⁵ Learn more about Trudeau’s almost-daily COVID-19 updates at Rachel Aiello, “110 days. 81 addresses to the nation. What PM Trudeau’s Covid-19 messaging reveals,” *CTV News*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/110-days-81-addresses-to-the-nation-what-pm-trudeau-s-covid-19-messaging-reveals-1.5019550>.

⁸⁶ Eric Grenier, “Why the PM’s daily briefings have worked—and why we might see fewer of them soon,” *CBC News*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/grenier-pm-press-conferences-1.5587214>.

Verse 1: Wash our hands
Cough into our elbows
These are the things
The things we know (we know)

Chorus: That prevent you from speaking moistly
Speaking moistly
Keep two meters apart
Speaking moistly, speaking moistly
Keep two meters apart
Speaking moistly



Figure 4: anonymotif, “Speaking Moistly” (2020).⁸⁷

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4571>

Within 24 hours, the music video received more than a million views. And by April 28, 2020, Twitter users had shared the video throughout most of the world, albeit with a North American concentration (see Figure 5). Traditional media covered the viral popularity of “Speaking Moistly,” with the effect that Trudeau’s words hung around in the political information cycle, reaching an ever-expanding audience and inviting buy-in to Trudeau’s vision of pandemic management. But Tyler’s intervention was just a starting point for other producers, whose subsequent interventions—shares, commentary, remixes, and performances across a variety of digital platforms—maintained, elaborated, and contested the politics of pandemic managements. As Tyler later reflected:

⁸⁷ anonymotif, “Justin Trudeau Sings ‘Speaking Moistly,’” YouTube video, April 8, 2020, 1:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eySDeBdqxGY>.

I think that the statement itself had enough behind it in terms of comedy that we probably would have seen a fair bit of that [. . .] in terms of the slogan living on t-shirts. But I think the song just made it kind of hang around in people’s consciousness a bit longer.⁸⁸

In other words, what Tyler’s meme did was promote spreadability of a message via social media platforms (like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, etc.) and, after initial successes, via a licensed audio-only version of the song available from Spotify and iTunes. The relationship between audiences, memes, and Web 2.0 technologies is at the heart of that spreadability—and the meanings that emerged as messages traversed on- and offline spaces.



Figure 5: Geographic origins of 1,393 Twitter messages with a #SpeakingMoistly caption. These messages were posted between April 18 and by April 28, 2020.

Tyler’s “Speaking Moistly” invites participation in a project of political world making, in this case relying on the community building capacity of comedy—specifically memes—in online spaces that personalize experiences of politics by sharing content. McKelvey et al. note that:

modern politicians have curated supporters who run large online fandoms around them. These fandoms typically exist online where they share an array of content, including memes about politics. . . . Fan communities personalize politics and becomes the ‘unofficial parties who shape the flow of messages through their community’.⁸⁹

There are numerous types of political humor, but two are important here: the first, political satire, is a humorous gesture that simultaneously casts judgment⁹⁰; the second, parody, does not cast judgment but

⁸⁸ Brock Tyler, interview with the authors, September 23, 2020.

⁸⁹ McKelvey et al., “Memes, scenes,” 5.

⁹⁰ Dannagal G. Young, “Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2014).

instead exaggerates familiar aspects of an original text, including caricatures of a person's looks or their comments.⁹¹ A political parody can be a powerful rhetorical device, inviting viewers to sympathize with or distance themselves from political actors, but its success is reliant on many contextual factors, especially in a high-anxiety moment like the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tyler recognized that Trudeau's verbal gaffe provided a unique opportunity to engage a much wider audience: "If there was ever going to be a moment that was already plugged into the collective consciousness of people and had some built-in comedy," he stated, "this was going to be it."⁹² In other words, he was drawn to this clip because of its parodic potential, an opportunity for anxious listeners to be, even for a moment, light. Tyler's intentions focused on capturing the comedy of the moment and its potential for artistic elaboration—not on passing partisan political comment. But, as we've already established, intended and ascribed meanings often (and increasingly) diverge.

In the early weeks of the pandemic, Tyler explained, "Everybody was in this zone of not knowing anything . . . [with] fear around what was happening."⁹³ Anxiety and uncertainty quickly escalated as the virus spread and the Canadian government began to enforce extreme public safety measures. In such moments, as communications scholar Dannagal G. Young argues, humor can be conceptualized as a "safety valve" that expels excess energy, energy that otherwise might transform into aggression.⁹⁴ It's possible that evoking laughter in the face of restrictive protocols may have helped reduce counter-argumentation. But more than evoking laughter, as anthropologist and linguist Tanja Petrović argues,

The ambiguity of political parody, its reflexivity, and its capacity to build or reconfigure affective communities are workings of political humor that enable individuals to embrace their own involvement and vulnerability and the ambiguous and unpredictable moral consequences of the complex positioning as an authentic and potentially productive form of engaging with political reality.⁹⁵

In other words, audiences were able to engage with their own vulnerability and externalize those pressures in an unprecedented and uncertain time.

Humor also has a mnemonic function: as Aurélie Denat contends, humor has a tremendous ability to help people remember information.⁹⁶ This was most certainly the case with Turner's "Harperman"—it includes lists of past infractions, from the scandal surrounding Senator Mike Duffy to muzzling Canadian scientists—all delivered in a playful rhyming pattern that consolidates memories as a means of provoking present action. In "Speaking Moistly," messaging focused on sneezing etiquette, mask wearing, and physical distancing delivered with catchy beats and an ear-wormish melody arguably transforms a parodic meme into a public service announcement. Take, for instance, these comments posted on YouTube:

"Love it for sooo many reasons! It is respectful of Trudeau and a cute, catchy song (should be a summer hit!) The points are soooo important for keeping ourselves and others safe. . ."

"This remix taught me more about this message from the PM and social distancing than any news article. . ."

"a certified bop, AND it saves lives at the same time, increasing its bop power."

⁹¹ Young, "Theories and Effects."

⁹² Tyler, interview with the authors, September 23, 2020.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Young, "Theories and Effects," 5.

⁹⁵ Tanja Petrović, "Political Parody and the Politics of Ambivalence," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018): 204.

⁹⁶ Aurélie Denat, "Political satire and music: Humorous (and political) songs in Donald Trump's America," *Miranda* 18 (2019): 4.

“this is the best version of his speech and my kid loves this and is learning important information.”⁹⁷

This PSA side effect was noted by Trudeau and his team: the prime minister shared Tyler’s meme on Twitter when it was first released, and more than a year later, when he appeared on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*,⁹⁸ a political analysis sketch show produced by the CBC, he was questioned about his regrets, including whether he regretted his infamous advice about speaking moistly. Trudeau declared that he had none on that front and by going viral his gaffe helped keep Canadians safe.

For some users, the humor of “Speaking Moistly” evoked a patriotic response. As one YouTube viewer summed up, “This video is a Canadian Heritage Moment” (i.e., a short film that celebrates a moment in Canadian history).⁹⁹ Others on the site echoed similar sentiments:

“This is why I love Canada.”

“Start a petition this should be our national anthem.”

“Never in my life have I loved being a Canadian more.”

“My teacher asking me what I think of when I see the Canadian flag:
Me: This.”¹⁰⁰

Comment after comment speaks to the conflation of Tyler’s meme with Canadian culture. As an object of political humor, “Speaking Moistly” had cultural utility: by evoking patriotic sentiment it was a rallying point that brought listeners together behind a shared project of safeguarding the nation. It also humanized the politician voicing those demands. Indeed, as Jeffrey Jones argues, political parodies can be “affirming” to candidates because they are humanizing.¹⁰¹ Trudeau had a 43 percent approval rating in January 2020 but was polling at 60 percent by May.¹⁰² There were many reasons for his rise in popularity, but videos like this one certainly may have helped.

“Speaking Moistly” was politically effective because of its capacity to voice mounting anxieties and tensions, to convey information needed for safety and well-being, and to bridge divides by humanizing a sometimes-controversial political figure—all important functions during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. More broadly, the meme served as an invitation to audiences of all political stripes to engage with dialogues around pandemic management. Notably, engagement can take many forms, ranging from replication and elaboration to contestation. Consider, for example, this YouTube viewer’s comment about the viral popularity of “Speaking Moistly”:

The views on this are doubling every hour. Please only share this with at most one person, and

⁹⁷ anonymotif, “Justin Trudeau Sings ‘Speaking Moistly,’” YouTube video, April 8, 2020, 1:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eySDeBdqxGY>.

⁹⁸ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Travel through time with Justin Trudeau!” September 17, 2021, 3:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnjazaChzcg> (c. 0:02:00).

⁹⁹ This is a reference to a series of 60-second short films that depict significant people, events, and stories from Canada’s history. They are produced by Historica Canada and broadcast widely on Canadian television networks, including the CBC (<https://www.historicacanada.ca/heritageminutes>).

¹⁰⁰ anonymotif, “Justin Trudeau Sings ‘Speaking Moistly,’” YouTube video, April 8, 2020, 1:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eySDeBdqxGY>.

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Jones, “With All Due Respect: Satirizing Presidents from *Saturday Night Live* to *Lil’ Bush*,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 44.

¹⁰² Jim Vibert, “COVID-19 crisis boosts support for most Canadian leaders,” *The Chronicle Herald*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/local-perspectives/jim-vibert-covid-19-crisis-boosts-support-for-most-canadian-leaders-448185/>.

only people within your home. Only watch it when it is absolutely necessary. Together we can flatten the curve.¹⁰³

This user draws a sophisticated comparison between the viral spread of “Speaking Moistly” and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as expressing understanding of the guidelines for controlling spread. It’s clearly comedic, but is it parody or satire? There’s an ambiguity in the messaging that makes determining intention problematic. Has the user bought into governmental guidelines? Or are they contesting them? This ambiguity underscores the participatory, user-driven, and controlless nature of communication and meaning making in digital spaces.

Politics in an Age of Controllessness

Social media spaces bring the capacity for conversation, pushback, and elaboration to the fore. A participatory culture not only prevails on social media but is presumed as the norm. Audiences are also creators: consumption begets new content and popularity involves more than a high rate of views. In other words, the flow of information is multidirectional with almost limitless potential for engaging and reinterpreting source content. Speaking to the unexpected popularity of “Speaking Moistly,” Tyler explained:

When I was working on it, I really had no expectations at all. And to see it sort of slowly build momentum and then [. . .] it just sort of takes off and it’s out of your control now and you see the sharing happening in real time and its sort of like this avalanche of social media activity and it’s addictive at first because it’s so fun to see people enjoy something you made. [. . .] I think what was neatest about it, and one thing I certainly didn’t expect [was] for people to do covers of it. [. . .] I had to keep the song really simple because I was doing it so quickly. And I really didn’t think through how I was going to do it. I basically went with every first idea I had. And it ended up being a song that was simple enough, melodically and chord wise, that people could cover it. And so to see that first cover come out, which was [. . .] an acoustic cover and there were a few that kind of came out at the same time, like ‘oh that’s so cool.’ I just had no expectation that people would want to embody the song and make their own version of it.¹⁰⁴

He went on to explain that when he creates meme songs he is concerned with the fidelity of his representation; he’s interested in highlighting the humor of the moment, but he doesn’t want to put words into anyone’s mouth by splicing and reordering original statements. And yet, consider Tyler’s words: “it just sort of takes off and it’s out of your control.” The meme, the image, the music, and the message have the capacity to move, reinforce, and reinvent meaning almost infinitely.

Memes are sometimes compared to icebergs: on the surface they have a deceptive simplicity, combining very basic templates, texts, images, and musical tropes, but moving below the surface reveals deep connections to “meme families” and networks that create the cultural contexts that give memes their meanings.¹⁰⁵ In their analysis of meme sharing in partisan Facebook groups, McKelvey et al. found that “Partisans used memes to develop affective bonds between themselves and the party.”¹⁰⁶ Creating and sharing memes was a way of hanging out with other likeminded users and laughing along with “inside

¹⁰³ anonymotif, “Justin Trudeau Sings ‘Speaking Moistly.’” YouTube video, April 8, 2020, 1:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eySDeBdqxGY>.

¹⁰⁴ Tyler, interview, September 23, 2020.

¹⁰⁵ McKelvey et al., “Memes, Scenes,” 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

jokes” that made the stress of the election manageable.¹⁰⁷ Their analysis highlights that memes—and the dialogues they evoke—produce partisan vernaculars, establish group norms, and construct “cultures of expression.”¹⁰⁸ As Bruns explains, produsage projects are “communally evaluated by community members themselves, who use a range of formal and informal mechanisms developed by the community for highlighting constructive contributions while discarding inappropriate contributions.”¹⁰⁹ When it comes to memes, that might mean that a particular version is deemed inappropriate (or not funny) by some groups, but that version will continue to circulate in other partisan networks. The capacity to appreciate the humor of a meme and decode its connotations, in other words, is influenced by user positionality. Responses and subsequent reinterpretations of “Speaking Moistly” reflect the partisan responses that increasingly emerged in Canada over the course of the pandemic.

Audiences didn’t just watch, share, and comment on “Speaking Moistly.” Like Tyler, they were producers who participated in making meaning by using his meme as a source for their own shareable creations. The resulting profusion of TikToks, YouTube videos, Instagram shares, and tweets is so vast as to defy categorization. They include:

- TikTok of children dancing to Tyler’s original beats with PSA themes. Similar videos also feature adults miming actions like washing hands, standing two meters apart, and wearing masks.

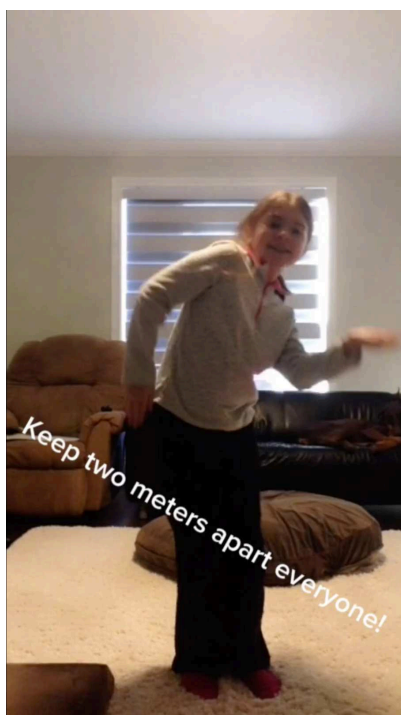


Figure 6: TikTok of child dancing to “Speaking Moistly”¹¹⁰

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4571>

¹⁰⁷ McKelvey et al., “Memes, Scenes,” 10.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁹ Bruns, “Prosumption, Produsage,” 1622–23.

¹¹⁰ MaRia (@undertale_fan19), “##two-meters,” TikTok, May 8, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@undertale_fan19/video/6824616870138645765.

- Professional covers of Tyler’s music. Among the many musicians who covered anonymotif’s song are David Usher (of Moist) and the Odin Quartet. These covers include Trudeau’s text, but his voice and image are removed, effectively divorcing the message from its origins and changing the function of Tyler’s music from parody to musical PSA with celebrity endorsement.



Figure 7: Cover of “Speaking Moistly” by David Usher and the Odin Quartet¹¹¹

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4571>

- Remixes that voice oppositional messaging. While much of the original text is included in versions such as this one, slight changes appear to question the science behind the advice and advocate an anti-mask agenda.



Figure 8: Cherry Tateland, “Keep Speaking Moistly”¹¹²

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4571>

¹¹¹ Moist Online, “Speaking Moistly (Hit Subscribe!),” YouTube video, July 1, 2020, 2:16, <https://youtu.be/9JMEo3DFORE>.

¹¹² Cherry Tateland, “Keep Speaking Moistly,” YouTube video, April 11, 2020, 2:43, <https://youtu.be/En8whefyRMs>.

Taken together, these and other creative engagements with “Speaking Moistly” elaborate a complex range of political messaging, the implications of which are only starting to emerge in increasingly partisan understandings of the pandemic.

Tyler’s “Speaking Moistly” is unique in this series of case studies in that it was created for circulation via social media and crafted with awareness of the controllessness of meaning in these spaces. While Turner’s song began as a classic folk come-all-ye intended for live performance and Sutherland’s “Politician Man” was produced through the more formal structures of Canada’s independent music industry for distribution across a variety of platforms, all three fluidly circulate through on- and offline spaces, accruing meaning, listeners, and begetting actions through that circulation. Indeed, for communications scholar Martin Parlett, who analyzes US President Barack Obama’s novel use of social media to mobilize youth votes, online activism only becomes politically affective when it begets offline engagements, with prosumers fluidly moving between domains of engagement, fueling opportunities for further participation, and provoking real-world consequences.¹¹³ In Turner’s case, “Harperman” took on a life of its own as a rallying point for a bipartisan campaign to unseat the incumbent prime minister in the 2015 election. Sutherland’s “Politician Man” began on Twitter, with an exchange of tweets prompting him to pen a song that continues to garner critical acclaim at international festivals. It has also contributed to the discourses surrounding two federal elections, demanding accountability from federal politicians and awareness of the unfinished project of reconciliation in Canada. Musically, socially, and politically, these three songs have had important on- and offline repercussions, some predictable and others unforeseen.

Participatory Politicking 2.0

We began this article by voicing our unease with commentary that suggests politics and music rarely intersect in Canada. Our case studies—examples that received national attention between 2015 and 2020 through viral spread over social media, protracted coverage in traditional media, and industry awards—overtly challenge assertions that music and politics occupy separate domains. But the significance of these case studies is not simply that they give Canadian politics a musical treatment. Rather, our analysis looks beyond the musical object to explore the complex intersections between music and politics—the overlaps that in James Garratt’s words, create “contingent, temporary alliances.”¹¹⁴ Instead of focusing our analysis on aspects of style and form, we contemplate how music circulates and accrues meaning through consideration of the contexts for creation and performance, approaches to curation by musicians, mediators, and audiences alike, and the affective qualities of the performance. This approach, we suggest, is particularly important in an era that is increasingly dominated by social media, where the space between source materials and reception is increasingly vast. That distance, moreover, is often masked through intimate acts of sharing information between “friends” in social networks, sometimes skewing our capacity for untangling the layers of meaning that have accrued through circulation. Audiences are increasingly also creators, who interpret and share content to divergent ends that may bear little resemblance to the intentions of sources.

¹¹³ Parlett, “Barack Obama,” 134–35.

¹¹⁴ Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 5.

Writing from the vantage point of 2023, when partisan divisions seem increasingly insurmountable and communication fluidly crosses between social media spaces and real-world settings, we suggest that denying the intersection of music and politics in Canada potentially blinds us to the complex ways in which artists, mediators, and audiences—producers all—participate in projects that are undeniably ideological. Moreover, focusing too closely on articulations of musical protest as exemplars of political music not only risks relegating opposition to a marginal position, but fails to account for the ways that musicking can shore up the status quo or help to normalize more radical ideas. Finally, in a country that celebrates diversity as a cornerstone of its identity, it would be foolhardy to think that musical politicking takes a singular form. Relying too closely on musical style or form as indicative of expressions of political agency risks missing important contributions to dialogues about our collective futures. Instead, paying attention to context, curation, and affect opens our ears to better hearing each other. Returning to Briggs and Baumann’s definition of “genre,”¹¹⁵ we must begin to recognize the contextual nature of performance and the permeability of the categories we imagine.

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¹¹⁵ Cf. Briggs and Bauman, “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power.”

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