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Professional Resource Review:
***The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* (2015)**

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The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies (2015) by Navas, Eduardo, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (eds.). New York: Routledge.

In the last decade, a growing number of media scholars and educators have sought to understand how remix—its histories, theories and practices—correlate with media literacy. Jenkins et al.'s 2009 "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century" identifies *appropriation*, including "the ability to meaningful sample and remix media content," as one of the eleven "new media literacies" needed for participation in contemporary media culture (4). In a media culture in which political memes and mash-up videos are just as ubiquitous as crime procedurals and superhero franchises, active audiences are increasingly expected to both creatively produce and critically analyze remixed media messages.

The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies (2015) provides a comprehensive introduction to the field, and for readers interested in media literacy education, some potentially productive connections between the two areas of study as well as the practices of *access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act, and cut, copy, paste, rip, remix, and repeat*. The volume contains a collection of entries from a number of different perspectives, drawing upon a variety of traditions and forwarding a diverse range of conceptions of remix. The editors note that remix studies are inherently multi-/interdisciplinary. They write:

Such fields include art education, art history and theory, communication studies, composition and rhetoric studies, critical theory, design, digital humanities, media and cultural studies, musicology, new media studies, studio art practice, visual culture, and among many others in diverse fields in the humanities and social sciences. (2)

As a result, the volume's entries provide an ambitious, if not eclectic, introduction to remix, drawing upon voices of historians and theoreticians, social scientists and artists. In order to help the reader navigate this assemblage of voices, the volume is organized into five sections, exploring the history, aesthetics, ethics, politics and practice of remix.

In the volume's first section, each selection traces remix back to various historical traditions of cultural appropriation, recycling, and resistance. A popular perspective locates remix's origins in the late 20th century—particularly coinciding with the rise of poststructuralist theory and postmodern culture as well as the development of digital and networked media technologies. Kembrew McLeod's chapter makes an effective

argument along these lines. In “An Oral History of Sampling,” he weaves quotations from prominent figures within the hip-hop and mash-up music scenes into a narrative explanation of remix that is bound to these contemporary cultures. However, the section includes equally compelling explanations of remix that locate it in much earlier, even ancient, traditions. Margie Borschke asserts, “Remix is neither new nor digital” (110), and this counter-argument is supported by another group of authors who trace the concept of remix to origins that range from the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin to the classical rhetoric of Isocrates.

This engagement with remix’s histories might prove interesting to media literacy scholars and educators for a few reasons. It explores the history of media, which is an element of media education often eclipsed by more popular issues of representation, effects, institutions, and aesthetics. Also, the debate over remix’s beginnings recalls conversations concerned with media literacy’s own varied origins.¹

The Aesthetics and Ethics sections include a mix of chapters that include analyses of particular remixes, accounts of aesthetic trends and ethical issues in contemporary remix culture, as well as meta-reflections on the relationship between remix, art, and commerce. Among these selections are chapters from prominent scholars such as Lev Manovich (on remix practice within social media) and Patricia Aufderheide (on fair use) whose perspectives have influenced the field of media education for years. But just as significant are the selections from voices perhaps less familiar to the community, and more unconventional in their approach.

Notable in this regard is Mark Amerika’s chapter “remixthecontext (A Theoretical Fiction)” in which the author uses a type of personal narrative—combining Amerika’s anecdotal experiences and conversations with imagined (or re-imagined) characters, contexts and scenarios. The author employs this type of remix to discuss his artistic practice and teaching philosophy, and to reflect on larger issues of identity, creativity, intellectual property, and the academy. Selections like Amerika’s provide some of the more accessible, interesting, and potentially most practically applicable, perspectives in the volume. And they demonstrate how creative production and critical analysis can be combined—a synthesis emphasized, but less often achieved, by media literacy educators.

Perhaps because of my own interest in the connections between remix, media literacy, and civic engagement, I find the section on Politics to include a particularly strong selection of scholarship. The often-articulated argument that remix is inherently counter-hegemonic, even anti-capitalist, is represented in this section (and throughout the volume). And this perspective is not without justification, as many of the selections demonstrate. Though, arguably more effective are the efforts of certain authors to go beyond this simple celebration of ‘remix as revolutionary’ and to explore the complicated and often contradictory relationships between cultural industries, audiences and remixers.

For example, Rachel O’Dwyer and Eduardo Navas both cite the ways in which the cultural industries have successfully co-opted so-called ‘critical’ remix. In response to this re-appropriation of remix’s resistance, Navas stresses that scholars and practitioners must “remain critically conscious” and “develop a critical position...within the very system being critiqued and challenged” from which they might continue to explore remix’s subversive political potential (128-129). This debate over the critical political potential of remix and the emphasis of critical self-reflection, analysis and expression echo similar conversations among the media literacy community.²

The final section includes contributions from artists whose creations have helped shape contemporary understandings and practices of remix. I think that it is significant that a volume from as prestigious a publisher as Routledge would privilege the voices of YouTubers like Elisa Kreisinger and Diran Lyons. This effort to include DIY (do-it yourself) practitioners in the conversation is important in that it demonstrates the democratic potential of remix culture—allowing folks making mash-ups on their laptops to participate in conversations traditionally limited to an intellectual elite. And this is a lesson that the field of media literacy,

¹ See, for example, Bordac (2014) and the rest of *JMLE* volume 6, issue 2 on “Media Literacy History.”

² See for example, Hobbs (1998, 2008); Kellner and Share (2007); Lewis and Jhally (1998).

² See for example, Hobbs (1998, 2008); Kellner and Share (2007); Lewis and Jhally (1998).

and *JMLE* in particular, is learning as well—creating a space where “voices from the field” can contribute to scholarly discourse, and more than that, ensure that theory is informed by practice.

All this being said, the volume does have its limitations. For example, while the diverse range of perspectives, fields, objectives, theories, histories and methodologies included in the book provides access points to “anyone...[with] a basic interest in remix—as an activity, as a discourse, or both” (2), from section to section, chapter to chapter, the volume reads a bit unevenly. However, a redemptive reading of the volume might see this as a deliberate imitation of the aesthetic of the ‘mash-up.’ For good or for bad, the book juxtaposes dramatically different perspectives to demonstrate the open, and necessarily contested, nature of the discourse.

And honestly, I find that messiness rather refreshing—especially coming from the field of media literacy, which is comprised of some similarly disparate voices. In the first paragraph on the first page, the editors acknowledge the primary challenge facing studies of remix, stating explicitly “while remix, as an activity and a scholarly pursuit, enjoys much international attention, *it has no concrete paradigm of reference*” (1, emphasis added). And from then on, the volume resists the tendency to root remix studies in a fixed history, theory, or discipline, thereby opening up a space in which a variety of interesting conversations and explorations may take place.

However, the volume’s inclusion of so many different perspectives makes its exclusions more apparent. For example, notably absent from the book are contributions from individuals like Henry Jenkins, Lawrence Lessig, and Paul Miller (DJ Spooky) whose work³ has played a significant part in the development of remix studies. Though their scholarship is cited throughout the book, the absence of their names on the long roster of authors to the volume is conspicuous. The book’s introduction attempts to explain that, as champions of free culture, open-access, and the Creative Commons, scholars like these may have found Routledge’s copyright agreements too restrictive, and in part because of this, the editors “were unable to include the work of some contributors [they] initially approached” (2).

The fact that the predominant perspective within the remix community on intellectual property is at odds with that of the book’s publisher highlights an important issue within scholarly conversations on contemporary media culture (and one that is just as applicable within the field of media literacy as it is in remix studies). Namely, that often there is an unanticipated incompatibility—and perhaps even an inevitable conflict—between the traditional, institutional, academic means of conducting/disseminating research (peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, institutional review boards, etc.), and elements within contemporary media culture that challenge institutional authority, challenge traditional conceptions of authorship and ownership, and problematize divisions between high and low culture, as well as institutional and common knowledge, and professional and amateur practice.

The fact that this volume—dedicated to the discursive, ‘anti-disciplinary’ (to use Amerika’s term), sometimes delinquent, always dynamic practice of remix—is a book bound and printed on paper pages, with mostly words, few images, and no video nor audio, further demonstrates this issue. While the book’s postmodern mix of perspectives is a nod to remix’s discursivity, it is still a book. The editors—themselves practitioners of remix—acknowledge this limitation. But even as they envision the volume as a means of “produc[ing] ongoing discussions and resources online to encourage users to engage with the content in an interactive way,” the companion website (www.remixstudies.com) is not a particularly helpful resource, let alone the “central hub” that the editors desire it to be (3). Other than including Twitter and RSS feeds to the personal profiles and websites of the book’s authors, the site is static. And this is unfortunate, because while the book provides an interesting place for conversations regarding remix to begin, it would make sense for such a project to provide a way for readers to respond to the book’s content, to discuss applications in their own studies and practice, and to share their own creative and scholarly work, etc.

³ See Lessig (2004, 2008); Miller (2004, 2008); Jenkins (1997, 2006, 2012, 2013, 2015); Jenkins, Ford & Green (2013); Jenkins et al. (2009); Jenkins et al. (2013).

But I suppose that is the challenge that both media literacy and remix present us with—to take a message, deconstruct it, interact with it, draw our own conclusions, make our own creations, and start our own conversations. ‘

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