



War and the Musical Grotesque in Crumb's "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" *

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KEYWORDS: Crumb, war, musical memorials, grotesque, irony, American folk song

ABSTRACT: This analysis interprets Crumb's setting of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" as a musical memorial. I situate this song within larger memorial culture, Civil War memory, and musical memorials to show how it commemorates and criticizes official narratives of the Civil War. While the first three verses present an earnest version of the song that celebrates military power, the fourth quotes Mahler to transform the song into an ironic funeral march. I draw on scholarship on the musical grotesque to show how this grotesque funeral march critiques conventional perceptions of the Civil War, and how Crumb extends this critique to more recent American wars.

DOI: 10.30535/mto.27.2.0

Received October 2020

Volume 27, Number 2, June 2021
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[1.1] On June 10, 2011, soprano Dawn Upshaw performed a newly imagined version of George Crumb's *Winds of Destiny: A Cycle of Civil War Songs, Folk Songs, and Spirituals* (2004) at the Ojai Music Festival. Retaining the original scoring for soprano, piano, and percussion, Upshaw and director Peter Sellars transformed the Civil War cycle into a commentary on twenty-first-century war. She wore fatigues and the stage setting included a bed in order to portray a veteran of the American war in Afghanistan. In the show, the soldier experiences an episode of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while trying to fall asleep. During the second song, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again," she springs to attention at the sound of the military drums and acts out what one critic called a "mini-drama" of the song's narrative (Swed 2011). Her tone shifts from celebratory to funereal by the end of the song, adding what Crumb called "an ironic twist" to its typical patriotic message (Wein 2011).⁽¹⁾

[1.2] Upshaw's contemporary staging illustrates how Crumb's setting of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" acutely addresses both historical and contemporary concerns about the carnage of war and its emotional and psychological consequences. The initial three verses of the piece feature traditional images and sounds of Civil War narratives: imitations of military parade sounds, snare drum *topoi*, and an earnest presentation of the original song's melody and lyrics. In this way, the piece seems to conform to conventional Civil War myth and memory that focus on

heroic acts in a just war to end the nation's "original sin" of slavery. In the last verse, however, the tone changes to one of sarcasm. Crumb quotes a funeral march from Mahler to invoke the musical grotesque and uses other semiotic techniques to signal that the ultimate meaning of the song is not an expression of heroic triumph but instead a public display of mourning and regret (Edwards 2017; Everett 2009; Meindl 1996; Sheinberg 2000).⁽²⁾

[1.3] Crumb's ironic setting of "When Johnny" changes its original meaning and suggests that traditional collective memory of the Civil War no longer holds. Through his setting, Crumb both memorializes and criticizes the Civil War. In his critical setting, the Civil War serves as a metonym for the legacy of American wars in a broad sense. As a material remembrance of the Civil War that "claims a particular historical narrative" (Doss 2010, 9), I argue that *Winds of Destiny* and specifically "When Johnny" function as artifacts of Civil War memory and broader American collective memory of wars in general. I situate this individual song in the context of American memorialization and monument culture, including Civil War monuments and material tributes to more recent conflicts. Following Erika Doss, I show how this piece can be understood as a material manifestation of public memory while also contesting certain elements of American war remembrance. Though musical memorials differ from statues, Crumb's piece nevertheless manifests images of collective public memory of the Civil War through its sonic material and conveys the same types of narrative content Doss identifies in monuments around the country.

[1.4] In discussing the piece's initial celebratory verses, I adapt J. Martin Daughtry's concept of belliphonic sounds, or sounds that encompass the sonic experience and violence of war (Daughtry 2015, 161). For Daughtry, the belliphonic encompasses all sounds of war, including propagandistic messages that frequently accompany it and occur when celebrating it. While many of Daughtry's examples of the belliphonic focus on weapons, electricity generators, or vehicle sounds, he recognizes musical expressions as well, such as the Muslim *adhan* that features prominently in Iraq's belliphonic soundscape. In this case, I expand the belliphonic to apply to post-war celebration, in particular how it may be used to justify previous and future acts of war. Aesthetic responses to war form an indirect but integral part of the belliphonic. Various settings of "When Johnny" serve utilitarian, patriotic, and legitimizing purposes. In the Civil War, men could sing the song to provide a consistent marching tempo as army units moved. In victory celebrations, the song is sung or played to convey a sense of military power and accompanying notions of justice used to rationalize wartime actions. Crumb's first three verses employ the song to evoke such commemorations, tacitly invoking the belliphonic music of the Civil War. Commemorative music like Crumb's act as "discursive structures" that Daughtry cites as enabling violent acts of war (Daughtry 2015, 11). In Crumb's setting, the initial verses display a more conventionally optimistic response to war, celebrating soldiers and their sacrifices. However, Crumb's fourth verse distorts any attempt to stir up patriotic sentiment by replacing notions of martial justice with expressions of mourning. Daughtry poses the question: "What kinds of victims, what kinds of survivors, do belliphonic sounds create?" (Daughtry 2015, 5). The fourth verse provides an answer. In this case, it creates mourners whose grief distorts patriotic expressions of the belliphonic. Crumb's "When Johnny," brought to life in part by its celebratory drums and whistling, is a sonic remembrance of all those who died in the Civil War.

[1.5] In the following sections, I analyze the semiotics of Crumb's victorious military parade sounds in the initial verses. Crumb portrays the glory of war, as demonstrated in such a parade, through unpredictable, loud, fast, and unevenly timed sounds. Marching cadences and snare drums suggest military drill formations or parade marching; weapon sounds suggest the ceremonial firing of guns and cannons, though the battle has ceased. The piece's timbres, pitch organization, and rhythms create an affect that displays military might and glorifies the army's power in ways that support traditional notions of heroism, militarism, and masculinity (Doss 2010, 24). These verses connect images of martial strength with the triumphant lyrics that reference a peaceful, merry time when Johnny and the other soldiers return from war. Ultimately, I next show how the grotesque affect of the final verse, which depicts a funeral procession for "Johnny," mocks both the Civil War era's cultural values as well as expressions of more recent American patriotism. Third, I discuss how Crumb's quotation of Mahler prompts reflection on who is commemorated through this march, and who accompanies "Johnny" to the grave.

[1.6] In a manner analogous to visual memorials, this song relies on musical affect, or expressed emotions or feelings, to convey a point of view on American war culture (Doss 2010, 15). I use “affect” because memorials and monuments aim to produce certain emotional responses in their visitors, and musical memorials function likewise.⁽³⁾ Musical affect may be conveyed by cues such as quotations, schemata, and tropes. Hearing the work allude to a celebratory military march that conveys parade sounds and displays power can elicit a specific range of emotional response from listeners, as can hearing its contrasting affect in the fourth verse. That abrupt shift implies that the heroism, masculinity, and militarism of the initial sections are artifices fabricated to justify the death and destruction of war. Memorials effectively reconstruct the past in light of contemporary social need. As such, Crumb’s piece responds to his need to re-examine American militarism (Doss 2010, 46). Just as monuments strongly convey aspects of how Americans view themselves today, in Crumb’s commentary, the Civil War stands in for the idea of violent military conflict in general (Doss 2010, 15). This theme is consistent with social criticisms of recent American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, helping to illuminate why Upshaw was compelled to perform Crumb’s piece in this manner.

[1.7] It is important to remember that “When Johnny” functioned as a musical memorial long before Crumb’s setting. The song was written in 1863 by Patrick S. Gilmore (1829–1892), a well-known Irish bandleader in the Union army, and has been steadily popular since then.⁽⁴⁾ The tune of “When Johnny” appears prominently in Morton Gould’s *American Salute* (1942), which is often performed by military bands such as The President’s Own and by high school bands across the country. It is also regularly performed by the Navy Band and the Air Force Band at ceremonies, memorials, and commemorations. “When Johnny” also appears with other patriotic tunes in the *Civil War Fantasy* (1961) by Jerry Bilik, a frequently played symphonic band piece. Doss (2010, 25) writes that physical memorials, especially statues, have served to champion “collective national ideas, as did a widespread public culture of national anthems, holidays, festivals, and fairs.” Arrangements of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” are well suited musical accompaniments to such events because the song traditionally expresses enthusiasm for patriotic narratives of men’s heroic deeds and successful return from war.

[1.8] At the same time, the song itself has served as a vehicle for critique (Library of Congress 2002). As with other army songs, soldiers were known to change the lyrics of “When Johnny” to reflect the events of recent battles, to lampoon certain commanders, or for other similar reasons. After a Union defeat, troops often changed the lyrics of “When Johnny” to criticize army leadership (McWhirter 2014, 124). Such a change is notable in that the song was already considered malleable and served as a potential vehicle for criticism. Crumb’s use of the song to ironically criticize notions of American patriotism preserves this complicated status.

Collective Civil War Memory

[2.1] To understand Crumb’s piece as a memorial, it is necessary to situate it within larger trends in collective memory, Civil War memorial culture, and musical memorialization in general. Musical commemoration may take many different forms, including pieces written for specific anniversaries or ceremonies, musical epitaphs, or pieces that memorialize specific individuals.⁽⁵⁾ In unpacking the role of music in post-World War II commemoration, Martha Sprigge has articulated consistent features of musical memorials. She writes,

Musicologists are in broad agreement about the markers of mourning music from the common practice era, which includes modes (typically minor), figures (sighing motifs, the lament bass, funeral march rhythms), melodies and harmonic progressions (the *dies irae* chant, descending tetrachord ground bass), genres (requiems, epitaphs, funeral marches), and instruments (bass trombones, muted trumpets) (Sprigge 2013, 15–16).

She further notes that these markers are more consistent in common practice music and less uniform in post-tonal music (Sprigge 2013, 15). Importantly, though, Sprigge’s list serves my analysis because in this piece Crumb combines tonal and atonal musical structures. Throughout

Winds of Destiny, Crumb tends to manipulate or alter tonal structures and place them alongside atonal configurations. We can hear, for example, how Crumb's setting of the minor-key folk song, re-imagined as a funeral march, conforms to typical features of musical memorials. The overarching effect in Crumb's piece of quoted material being combined with new material is to aesthetically convey the irony and tragedy of war, as memorials often do.

[2.2] *Winds of Destiny* is one among many post-tonal memorial works that can be understood as part of a larger wave of memorialization in the early 2000s. John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls* from 2002 and Steve Reich's *WTC 9/11* from 2010 stand out as lauded examples of musical memorials for the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City, Washington, DC, and Shanksville, PA. Doss names this phenomenon "memorial mania," and identifies its increase especially following 9/11. Memorials to past events, like wars or terrorist attacks, reflect a desire to control narratives "about the nation and its publics" (Doss 2010, 2). Musical memorials likewise respond to collective memory, either affirming like Adams' does or critiquing them as Crumb attempts to do.

[2.3] When understood in the context of these cultural phenomena, *Winds of Destiny* and "When Johnny" come into view as a musical memorial that both commemorates and criticizes. As an artifact of memorial culture, Crumb's *Winds of Destiny* can be understood as what Alexander Etkind (2004, 39–40) calls "soft memory."⁽⁶⁾ Etkind theorizes collective or cultural memory as having two distinct types that work together for preservation. Hard memory is congealed in objects like statues or physical monuments; soft memory may comprise arts, literature, and narratives such as Crumb's. The two types of memory overlap and cannot exist without each other (Etkind 2004, 39–40). For example, statues lose their meaning if the explanations and discourse surrounding them cease, but discussion without a material manifestation of collective memory is less powerful. Like a physical memorial statue, Crumb's music comments on history rather than faithfully reproducing a particular historical reality.

[2.4] Crumb's *Winds of Destiny* stands alongside myriad other musical works, historical accounts, cultural products, and events that comprise Civil War cultural memory.⁽⁷⁾ His piece shares sonic features with Civil War reenactments that have been popular for decades (Ozment 2014, 56–58). Crumb's use of iconic sounds and songs from the Civil War align the piece with reenactment culture. For listeners, sounds of the Civil War, such as the marching drum cadence in Crumb's setting and the folk song "When Johnny" itself, provide a sense of historical authenticity, just as they do in reenactment events.⁽⁸⁾ Such sounds may conjure images and soundtracks from popular Civil War movies or TV series, which represent a large source of Americans' knowledge about the Civil War (Ozment 2014, 48).

[2.5] Twentieth-century Americans have drawn on Civil War memory for many different purposes. For example, veterans of World War II identified with accounts of Civil War soldiers' experiences that seemed to affirm their beliefs about honor and chivalry in the military (Ambrose 1959). The Ojai staging of *Winds of Destiny* effectively combined themes from the Civil War with images of more recent wars to create a sense of continuity and irony in American history. The collective memory of the Civil War is often romanticized, as demonstrated in reenactment culture (Ozment 2014, 153–76). This romanticization afforded Crumb and Upshaw space to re-imagine this music as pertaining to American wars in the early 2000s. As Elizabeth Whittenburg Ozment has argued, reenactments are about more than remembering a historical war; reenactment participants map their experience onto an understanding of the present (Ozment 2014, 276). The Ojai staging in some ways remained consistent with broader Civil War memory but worked to enrich it by folding in contemporary notions of war and patriotism.

[2.6] Further evidence for "When Johnny's" memorializing function may be observed in its tension between collective celebration and individual grief. The first three verses convey the scene of a victory parade with marching soldiers confidently whistling the original upbeat tune. These musical signs suggest values traditionally associated with the U.S. military, such as strength, prowess, or masculinity. These values are reinforced by official narratives about the war. During the 1860s, the federal government promoted notions of heroic military sacrifice to galvanize support for the ongoing war and justify its continuation, despite its costs (Faust 2009; Laderman 1996). Crumb's setting of the fourth verse criticizes those official notions. The narrator here appears

as a person whose loved one is not going to return from war, someone whose grief overcomes their patriotism. In the broader context, this verse critiques a culture that avoids attention to individual deaths resulting from recent wars while lauding mass combat deaths as a heroic sacrifice made in service of advancing U.S. national security. This tension between the official narrative and the individual's grief is common in war memorials that seek to promote official national narratives while maintaining some level of personal meaning. While memorials often present as uncomplicatedly patriotic, they allow room for irony through the tension of individual loss versus communal celebration.

[2.7] The first song in *Winds of Destiny*, "Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory," may also be interpreted as an ironic memorial to the Civil War. The score is marked "Eerie, uncanny spectral; like a deserted battlefield under full moonlight," and the piece projects a ghostly affect through dark metallic timbres and the stated nighttime setting. It opens with circular motions on an "Australian Aboriginal thunder stick" that sounds like strongly blowing wind, a tam-tam strike, and other non-pitched percussion sounds. A percussionist hoots briefly like an owl. The singer, entering much later, performs the Battle Hymn melody and lyrics without alteration, but the new uncanny context changes the meaning of the song. Instead of a patriotic march, the song is slow, quiet, and—according to the performance instructions—"disembodied." The original markers of a traditional memorial are present in this song, including statements about truth and glory, and God's apparent approval of the United States. The darkly haunting context, however, seems to mock those sentiments and to suggest that they are false.

[2.8] The memorial qualities of "Mine Eyes Have Seen" become ironic in this context as it takes on a mournful quality. The somber atmosphere transforms the traditionally march-like tune into a solemn procession. Other instruments are enlisted to provide coloristic rather than tonal support. The low vibraphone and the low range of the piano provide dark timbres that metaphorically stand for actual darkness, a theme that is supported by the moonlit battlefield in Crumb's marking. This movement sets the stage for what follows. The piece, in its very first moments, makes clear that it will comment on conventional narratives of American history by re-casting familiar tunes, their associated images, and their affects in new and disturbing contexts.

Victorious Belliphonic

[3.1] Crumb's imitations of military parade sounds, including ceremonial weapons, call to mind the belliphonic as they evoke an affect of military celebration. Evincing this soundscape, the "cannon drum,"⁽⁹⁾ bass drums, and tenor (tom-tom) drum combine with the pianist scraping the low internal strings of the piano with a metal ruler. Each instrument mimics the chaotically loud sonic experience of a military parade via unpredictable entrances, with rests and tuplets interspersed throughout the texture so as to disrupt metric regularity (see **Example 1**). In this victorious, celebratory context, the belliphonic conveys both excitement and intimidation. Just before measure 10, the other instruments drop out and the tenor drum plays triplets, providing a metric pulse while invoking a military topic to create cultural context. This establishes a fairly fast tempo before the singer's entrance. This combination of sounds is iconic of military drums that one might hear along a parade route as the army marches past or guns fired as part of a military observance. The initial verses of "When Johnny" sound energetic, daring, and optimistic. Its activity and sounds project power, while also communicating that the army—and implicitly, war—are good. Crumb heightens this sense with the performance indication "almost arrogant," imbuing the imagined scene with naïve optimism. These images of the military are glorious and exciting, far removed from the colloquialism that "war is hell." Instead, the first three verses of the song take a position like that of the helicopter colonel in *Apocalypse Now*, when he laments that "Someday this war's gonna end," with premature nostalgia (Coppola 1979). Belliphonic sounds in this case project victory rather than mourning and demonstrate the power of militaristic images to generate support for official narratives and cultural memory.

[3.2] In verse 1, accompanying timbres and percussion immediately display the belliphonic through an affect of martial prowess as displayed in a march with unpitched percussion. The Brazilian reco-reco, made of metal instead of wood, produces a ratchet-like sound. Crumb indicates

that it should be scraped and tapped with a light metal rod to produce a sound resembling a pitch-less harpsichord: the resultant noise makes the whole scene sound antiquated, further invoking the past. Adding to the dense percussive atmosphere, Crumb includes conga, claves, tenor drum with drumsticks, and calling for bass rim strikes. The pianist silently depresses the octave from A3 to A4, then glissandos over the strings “with a piece of rubber (e.g., an eraser)” from low to high; the implement changes with each verse.

[3.3] Eventually the pianist plays sonorities on beats 2 and 4 accompanying the words, “The Men will cheer/the boys will shout;” these are identified in Example 1 as set-classes [0167] (or with the grace notes, [01267]). Crumb voices these pitches as tritones in each of the pianist’s hands. Each vertical [0167] moves down by a whole step, creating a T10 relationship between each and mimicking the typical harmonic progression that accompanies these lyrics. In this way, the pianist hints at the familiar harmonic progression without supporting the melody in a tonal sense. Movement by T10 gives this moment a whole-tone sensibility, suggesting narrative distortion well before the ironic fourth verse appears. The same descending series of [0167] sets appear in verse 2 with the same pitches but a different voicing and in verse 3 as they did originally. Near the end of verse 1, the singer shouts “when Johnny comes marching home!” becoming more frantic with each restatement. Later, at the end of the third verse, she yells “When Johnny comes marching, Johnny comes marching, Johnny comes marching home!” in a rhythmic shriek, as if overcome with excitement.

[3.4] By means of the percussion accompaniment and dense chromaticism, Crumb creates a belliphonic soundscape that avoids the comfort of a metaphorical tonal home. Crumb includes a few chromatic alterations to the otherwise traditional melody in A minor in verses 1–3. Inserting A \flat and B \flat in the phrase “the ladies/they will all turn out” in place of A \natural and B \natural suggests a new, whole-tone setting for the song (see **Examples 2a** and **2b**). Further reinforcement of the whole-tone collection can be seen in mm. 13–15. Here, the soprano sings the words “Johnny comes marching home!”, while the pianist plays two complementary whole-tone hexachords ([02368T]) a semitone apart. This gesture results in the aggregate sounding at this significant moment in the text (see **Example 3**). Following this, Crumb indicates that all four percussionists, the pianist, and the conductor should whistle the final fragment of the main “When Johnny” melody near the end of each of the first three verses. Even as they whistle in the same key, their relatively unpolished whistling will likely fail to reinforce a sense of A minor as the harmonic center. As the singer finishes the lyrics of the verse, the tam-tam is struck, blanketing all of the present sounds with a flash of timbral cacophony.

[3.5] Verses 2 and 3 match verse 1 in their orchestration, with the notable exception of tubular bells that newly enter upon verse 2’s mention of church bells. Such bells, of course, play many roles in belliphonic soundscapes.⁽¹⁰⁾ Churches have long used bells to call for religious gathering; to warn of attack, fire, or other threats; and to mark important events in nineteenth-century American life (Siegert 2013, 108). The sounds of church bells have acquired connotations of nationhood, religiosity, and nostalgia for a supposedly innocent and rural past (Kieffer 2017, 437).⁽¹¹⁾ They also serve to alert people to joyous news, such as wartime victories. Additional descriptions of church bells during the Civil War appear in the diary of Caroline Cowles Richards (1842–1913), a young woman whose detailed accounts of the Civil War mention bells. On April 10, 1865, the day of General Lee’s surrender, she writes:

Bells are ringing, boys and girls, men and women are running through the streets with excitement; the flags are all flying, one from the top of our church, and such a ‘hurrah boys’ generally, I never dreamed of. We were quietly eating our breakfast this morning about 7 o’clock, when our church bell commenced to ring, then the Methodist bell, and now all the bells in town are ringing.⁽¹²⁾ (Richards 1913, 180)

Just a few days later she recounts, “The bells have been tolling this afternoon,” announcing President Lincoln’s assassination (Richards 1913, 182–83). Her descriptions show the varied roles church bells played in belliphonic soundscapes and suggest ways to interpret them in Crumb’s setting. The church bells in “When Johnny” appear in the second verse, still part of the postwar

celebration. Though the lyrics in Crumb's fourth verse (in fact: a repetition of verse 1) make explicit mention of bells ringing out, the tubular bells disappear from the orchestration after verse 2.

[3.6] "When Johnny" features transitions between each verse that serve to provide brief respite from the belliphonic sounds. The first two transitions are further notable in presenting some of the only pitched material in the song outside of the source melody. In mm. 22–23, glockenspiel, marimba, vibraphone, and bells enter and play melodic fragments that are highly unified in terms of set-class content (see **Example 4**). Several instruments present set class [01256], shown here in Transition 1, in staggered entrances on A^b and B^b , related again by whole-step motion (T_2 instead of T_{10}). In the second transition, the same set class, gestures, and rhythms appear but the melodic figures have been transposed. While the T_2 relationship is preserved in the second transition, the two starting pitches for each entrance are E^b and D^b . In each case, Crumb chooses dissonant set classes that further obscure any sense of a tonal context, while again hinting at the whole-tone collection as before.

[3.7] The third and final transition breaks from the precedent and sets the stage for the grotesque final verse. Here the "cannon drum" trills for approximately fifteen seconds, suggesting a blur of celebratory belliphonic sounds as the parade fades into the distance. Crumb's use of the flexitone, a flexible metal instrument with an inherently comic sensibility, lends this moment an especially bizarre sound, perhaps pointing to the absurdity of war. Harsh dissonance begins to dominate the harmonic landscape as the marimba and piano share similar gestures and set classes with some overlapping intervals. The piano's [0156] and the marimba's [01268] contain a whole-tone subset: both feature two semitones and a major third, though they are not operationally related. In general, many of the four- and five-note set classes in this transition feature at least one semitone or tritone, further destabilizing any lingering tonality in the song. As the piece continues in mm. 62–72 and the last transition fades out, set-class [016] comes to dominate the texture. The pianist weakly states [0156] as the percussion diminishes, and then restates [016] two additional times before the end of this section. While a specific cultural association with the tritone in Crumb's music is debatable, the sound of this interval class reinforces the overall harmonic dissonance of this section that immediately precedes the grotesque (see **Example 5**).⁽¹³⁾

[3.8] Verse 4 establishes a new setting and affect for the remainder of the piece. It commences with a short introductory section labeled "Senza Misura (ancora calmando)." Contrasting with the earlier whistling, mournful whistling enters here. The source melody in this setting is both whistled and played on the vibraphone, and its pitch content is suggestive of an A minor blues. Unlike the previous whistling, this instance does not call to mind soldiers marching home from victory. The new bluesy inflection prepares the mournful quality of the fourth verse, suggesting a shift away from the militarism and power from before. The focus moves from the thrill of the victory parade to the war's aftermath; in spite of military success, the dead needed to be disposed of. Burying bodies after a Civil War battle was a grisly and daunting task. In the early years of the war, most men were buried, if at all, on the battlefield and enemy soldiers were left in mass graves (Faust 2009, 61–74). Soldiers on the winning side of a particular battle were sometimes buried with whatever identification existed, while some Union families paid for the remains of their loved ones to be recovered, embalmed, and shipped northward (Faust 2009, 94–97).

[3.9] The final verse creates a new context for the familiar song that centers on the war dead. Crumb's musical memorial in this verse blurs the past and present by setting the familiar melody with a new, grotesque affect. In this scene, the presence of dead men who should be marching (according to the lyrics) rather than carried in hearses, creates a sense of the grotesque. The musical grotesque in verse 4 expresses Crumb's desired affect, marked "Grotesquely, bitterly ironical." This verse's instrumentation and timbres differ slightly from preceding sections. Crumb calls for a heavy metal chain to be lowered onto the floor of the stage, creating a harsh metallic timbre. Quick decays of the xylophone and vibraphone, along with the chains, create a sense of starkness that contrasts with the energetic overlapping textures of the initial verses. The overall effect indicates a somber march at odds with the celebratory military parade that preceded it.

[3.10] The novel affect in the final verse dramatically changes the meaning of the song. While the initial verses depict militarism as something to celebrate, in verse 4 the grotesque affect emerges as it becomes clear that Johnny will only be “marching home” as a corpse. The incongruent tone of the funeral march with the original heroic lyrics produces this sense of sarcasm: “the men will cheer, and the boys will shout” originally referred to celebrating the end of the war. The narrator reminds us that only *some* men will cheer.” In singing, “When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah,” her exaggerated “hurrah” conveys her knowledge that *her* Johnny will not be returning. Ultimately, the last verse bucks the collective celebration of the rest of the song by focusing in on her loss and grief. The victory of the nation pales against her anguish (see **Example 6**).

Creating the Grotesque: Mahler’s Funeral March

[4.1] Amidst the eerie sounds of the passage beginning at m. 73, the xylophone and vibraphone play a quotation from the third movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 1, entitled “Funeral March” (see Example 6). Crumb’s fondness for quoting Mahler is widely known, and it aligns this piece with his larger compositional output. Steven M. Bruns has argued that Crumb’s quotation of Mahler serves multiple purposes, including echoing or responding to older tonal music (Bruns 1993, 10). Crumb himself explains the role that musical quotation plays in evoking a sense of history:

Well it’s intuitive, but trying to articulate it, I would say that quotation can produce different effects: nostalgia for a past world, or a strange spanning of time—by juxtaposing something that was written two centuries earlier with something new. (Strickland 1991, 165; Bruns 1993, 9)

In this way, his use of quotation in “When Johnny” further extends the reach of this movement’s critique of war in general by allowing it to span multiple historical eras.

[4.2] In verse 4, the accompaniment changes to reflect the grotesque context surrounding the Mahler quotation and the original folk song. The vibraphone and the xylophone share the same melody, separated by a tritone. The timpani, played with wood mallets, and conga drum create a marching cadence in alternating quintuplets. Accompanying this, the pianist is instructed to strum glissandos directly on the internal strings in its middle and low ranges; Crumb does not specify the striking object. As the pianist executes each, they hold down certain keys with the *sostenuto* pedal; these pitches form set class [0167], with the same pitch classes that accompanied the verse 1 text, “The men will cheer/the boys will shout.” In this way, verse 4 manifests as a distorted version of verse 1. After the voice enters, the Brazilian reco-reco accompanies her; the pianist shifts to a sustained fifth between E \flat 2 and B \flat 1 with a sheet of paper between the strings, creating a distorted, buzzing pitch.

[4.3] Funeral processions were a common feature of nineteenth-century American life: the family and other mourners accompanied the body to the church and then to the cemetery (if it was not immediately adjacent to the church). Over the course of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of people were buried in cemeteries farther from church, necessitating the use of carriages or other transports for body transfer that also involved more people. Processions like these have since been ritualized, as in the case of President John F. Kennedy’s funeral procession through the streets of Washington, D.C. (Laderman 2005).⁽¹⁴⁾ In the last verse of this song, Crumb juxtaposes the happy parade of men marching home from war with an image of men’s bodies being shipped home and returned to their families for funerals. The use of marches for both celebrations and funerals allows the Mahler quotation to function in a musically logical way by supporting the song’s simple duple meter while also supplying an appropriate accompaniment to a funereal scene.

[4.4] Crumb quotes Mahler in the service of portraying this American funeral march. Mahler himself based his funeral march melody from the French folk song “Frère Jacques.” Quoting a movement that already references a funeral march clarifies the dramatic setting for the last verse and makes explicit the ironic meaning of the song. Much scholarship has addressed the use of

quotation in music, particularly in how the quoted material ceases to exist in its original form when placed in a new setting.⁽¹⁵⁾ Paul Griffiths has said, “Bach in Zimmerman, or Bach in Berg, is not the same as Bach in Bach: something has happened, and it is the later composer who, responding to his musical situation, has made it happen” (Griffiths 2011, 182; Edwards 2017, 129). The same holds in this case: Mahler in Crumb is not the same as Mahler in Mahler. Instead, by quoting Mahler, Crumb memorializes him, filtering his music through the lens of time and canon to invoke the past via the present. Beyond changes in instrumentation, the meaning of Mahler’s march tune changes because of the historical setting of Crumb’s music. Mahler’s original use of a folk song does not relate to the Civil War, slavery, or other elements of American social unrest. In this new context, however, Mahler’s music becomes part of a larger critique of these issues.

[4.5] Mahler and Crumb share many thematic affinities. Crumb’s music displays the same sense of “immanent tragedy” that Morten Solvik finds in Mahler’s music, at least in his pieces that are self-consciously about death (Solvik 2007, 34). Musical signifiers of sadness in both composers’ oeuvres relate to fear for what may occur, like a musical premonition of some terrible future event. In addition to their mutual interests in the foreboding, both composers frequently incorporated folk music into their work, though their methods differ. Alienation, both from nature and from humankind, also serves as a prominent theme for both composers: for Mahler this manifests in his symphonies and sometimes resolves in the final movement (Franklin 2007, 8). Crumb’s pieces, on the other hand, are generally more concerned with humankind’s postmodern relationship with the natural world (R. Cook 2017). One may note that the natural-mimetic sounds heard in so many of his other works are conspicuously absent from “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” perhaps implying that war is an unnatural and uniquely human phenomenon. This mechanized death seems inevitable and violent. Crumb’s tendency for musical quotation in general extends back decades and is well studied.⁽¹⁶⁾ Blair Johnston has described the newly composed music in other pieces by Crumb as representing the “reality” against which we hear the quoted material (Johnston 2012, 14). In this case, “When Johnny” lays bare the layers of that reality. The newly composed accompaniment frames (or incorporates) the Mahler quotation, and together they form a new setting for an American folk song.

[4.6] Crumb’s use of this particular quotation allows for further interpretation. Regarding his inspiration for the symphony, Mahler stated that he connected the folk song to a popular woodcut by Moritz von Schwind, *Des Jägers Leichenbegängnis*, itself a parody of funereal art (Floros 1985, 38–39). In the woodcut scene, a hunter is carried to his grave by forest animals such as deer and bears —the very animals he hunted. Crumb was likely drawn to the irony already embedded in Mahler’s quotation. Though typically a “humorous” folk song, Mahler recast it in a minor mode and solemn processional tone (Floros 1985, 39).⁽¹⁷⁾ With the irony of the woodcut’s forest procession in mind, one is prompted to wonder who accompanies Johnny’s funeral procession in Crumb’s fourth verse. In a Civil War context, perhaps Southern whites or confederate soldiers march alongside Johnny’s Northern body. When taken as a broader critique of American wars, Johnny’s potential funeral attendees widen to include foreign combatants such as the North Vietnamese, the inhabitants in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the American civilians who continue to send family members off to war. Their presence mocks American military actions beyond the nineteenth century.

[4.7] Even as the specific impact of Crumb’s quotations vary, moment to moment and listener to listener, they serve as musical remembrances that summon a particular version of the past and memorialize it (Bruns 1993, 26). Through the act of quoting Mahler, “When Johnny” suggests a sentimental and grief-stricken combination of nineteenth-century America and Europe. Together they portray a narrative subject who is overcome with feeling and disillusioned about the future. In this way, the Mahler quotation reveals how Crumb’s “Civil War” narrative subject is actually one imagined by a postmodern person like Crumb who experienced the Vietnam War and Civil Rights eras. The past and present swirl together in this piece through the combination of older and more recently composed musics. But instead of a peaceful or dreamlike fusion of past and present, Crumb creates a grotesque affect that shapes the meaning of the entire song.

Musical Grotesque

[5.1] Crumb's quotation of Mahler is but one element contributing to the macabre and grotesque exaggeration of the fourth verse. A number of other compositional elements enhance the idea of this verse as grotesque and of the piece as a whole as an ironic Civil War memorial. The lyrics inform us that soldiers are returning from war, but from Crumb's setting we know they are dead. The grotesque, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, derives from folk humor in the middle ages, and includes a process of "lowering all that is high, spiritual, ideal, [and] abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 1984, 19–20; Everett 2009, 28). As the grotesque transforms its target object, its exaggeration "lowers" concepts that previously enjoyed a kind of high or holy cultural status. In Crumb's setting of "When Johnny", the typically revered notion of soldiers' patriotic sacrifice is "lowered" and replaced by coarser emotional responses: anger and grief at their deaths.

[5.2] By casting "When Johnny" in a darkly grotesque context, Crumb mocks the established meaning of the song in this manner. His setting thus produces what Yayoi Uno Everett (2009, 32) calls the "illogical context [that] can produce a sense of mockery." Specifically, the grotesque context mocks the source tune's patriotism, and possibly the audience's, too. The exaggerated nature of Crumb's slow funeral march partially "negates" (to use Everett's word) its original message of triumph and patriotism (2009, 32). In the process of doing so, the song takes on a dual significance. It obtains a new, macabre meaning, while also maintaining some aspect of its negated original message. Negation has the effect of turning a character or observer into a fool, satirizing the song's original meaning (Everett 2009, 32). In negated settings like Crumb's, interaction of two incongruous levels of meaning results in one negating the other and creating irony (Sheinberg 2000, 57–58). In this case, Crumb's grotesquely negated patriotic march-turned-funeral-march becomes a message about foolishness: we are fools for going to war, for believing war will be quick and winnable (as so many often claim about war at the outset⁽¹⁸⁾), for thinking war will provide lasting solutions to our problems, and, last, for remembering war as a glorious endeavor.

[5.3] Notions of embodiment in Crumb's fourth verse further reveal this piece to be a grotesque memorial. Sheinberg explains that marches, like Crumb's, frequently express the satirical and bodily grotesque, in part because they have immediate physical corollaries, e.g., marching or dancing. These physical connections enable audiences to relate their listening to their own bodily experiences (Sheinberg 2000, 231). This kind of listening experience "turns the ridiculing finger" toward us, revealing that it is we who are the grotesque subjects (238). Upon hearing the march at the end of Crumb's piece, we may intuitively tap our feet. After a moment, though, we may realize we have been tapping our feet to a funeral procession and feel embarrassed. Sheinberg (2000, 215) describes this moment as a play on our sensibilities, our automatic physical empathy for music. A similar reaction may be provoked upon taking in Crumb's "When Johnny." One may initially feel swept up in the excitement of the battle scene, and even relate to the patriotism it expresses. That sentiment will shift, however, when the battle setting is revealed to be grotesque near the end.

[5.4] The grotesque in the last verse ultimately hinges on the image of the soldiers' bodies. Signs of physical trauma uniquely convey the bodily grotesque because of our collectively embodied empathy. In visual media such as horror films, the grotesque often depicts bloody or physically abused bodies (Edwards 2017, 125). The more horrifically the body is treated, the more we relate and the less we want to believe in the possibility of a reality in which such trauma exists. In this way, bodily relatability adds to the horror of the final verse of "When Johnny." We all have loved ones and can empathetically imagine the horror or sadness of accompanying them on a funeral march, even if we as individuals have never participated in such an event. In the greater context of war, we are repulsed by images and notions of death as the result of violence, even as we may viscerally relate to them (Edwards 2017, 125). As a grotesque memorial, "When Johnny" forces listeners to confront a host of repulsive images.

[5.5] Crumb's musical grotesque displays characteristics that align it with physical wounds or trauma in the visual grotesque. The slower tempo and previously unheard instruments, like xylophone, banish the parade march. The brittle timbres created by harder mallets and the heavy metal chain signal the sounds of prison, captivity, and punishment. All of these musical symbols and referents combine to communicate a new, wounded affect for this verse that relates to physical

and psychological injuries of the narrative subject. Sonic expressions of injury or wounds, per Sheinberg (2000, 277), stand in for spiritual or behavioral trauma. In this case, the notion of moral injury is inextricably bound up with the willingness to go to war, the misguided celebration of war, and the ethical and economic dilemmas surrounding slavery that brought the war about in the first place. We can also read physical injury in the corpse of the soldier at the center of this funeral procession, thus acknowledging death as part of the trauma of war. While some trauma may be seen to require healing or reconciliation, death cannot be corrected. The spiritual and physical injuries depicted in Crumb's music are permanent.

A Grotesque Musical Memorial

[6.1] Memorials that critique or that commemorate contested subjects tend to elicit ire from the public. For example, a horseback statue of Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate in Alcalde, New Mexico has been a source of local controversy because of the legacy of colonialism and brutality toward indigenous people in the region (Doss 2010, 313–15).⁽¹⁹⁾ As a grotesque memorial, Crumb's *Winds of Destiny* has not caused the same level of contention, though some took issue with its presentation. While many gave positive reviews to Upshaw and Sellars's staging, others found fault in the dramatization of the veteran's experience. Writing for the *San Francisco Gate*, Joshua Kosman argued that the staging and the piece relied on "sensationalism, titillating listeners with spooky sound effects and haranguing us to sign on to something that most of us (I hope) already believe" (Kosman 2011).⁽²⁰⁾ Criticizing only the piece, not the staging, he wrote,

It's not that the moral atrocities of war—both on the battlefield and in the subsequent lives of its traumatized participants—can or should be minimized. But as an esthetic experience, "The *Winds of Destiny*" does next to nothing to help its audience feel or understand the war's barbarity. (Kosman 2011)

Kosman, in other words, was unconvinced by Crumb's effects and by the premise that an American audience in 2011 still needed a critique of war. (Events following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 and the potential war with Iran may yet contradict this (Baker et al. 2020)).

[6.2] One reason critics found the piece impersonal is because Upshaw did not portray a specific, historical person. Kosman observes: "as generations of war movies demonstrate, we care about [hypothetical] Pvt. Kowalski's death in battle only if we already know at least something about his gray-haired mother and best girl waiting for him back in Brooklyn" (2011). Setting aside potential issues of gender in Kosman's critique of a woman portraying a soldier, his criticism aligns with naming practices in memorial culture. Many monuments to American wars and atrocities (including Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*) list individual names of the dead as a way to communicate the gravitas of mass death and collective mourning while maintaining personal intimacy (Doss 2010, 26–27). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall is perhaps the best-known example of this practice. "When Johnny" might seem to contradict this, by centering on the grief of an anonymous individual for a single, unknown soldier. But "Johnny" is *every* soldier, any soldier. Johnny's anonymity is key to the song's expressive power, because it can apply broadly. As a memorial, it is similar to the single "standing soldier" or the "fighting doughboy" of WWI, or the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Doss 2010, 24). Kosman was further unconvinced by the haunting sounds of *Winds of Destiny*, comparing it to "the musical equivalent of singing the songs with a flashlight under one's chin" (Kosman 2011). *Los Angeles Opus* critic Rodney Punt (2011) echoed this criticism: "As a theatrical experience, and without any prior acquaintance with its main character, *Winds of Destiny* plays as if one were attending a funeral of a stranger. There is no specific personality on which to hang our empathy." Punt attended a pre-concert talk at Ojai that included journalist Mark Danner and Sellars discussing recent American military engagements. Danner spoke persuasively of war's toll on soldiers and related the story of one who struggled with his experiences in Iraq and who was later killed by a roadside bomb. More moved by this than the Crumb piece, Punt wrote:

Danner's real-life soldier had dug deeper into our hearts than would the theatrical unknown soldier, and his story shed every bit as much light on war's cultural significance as would the stage performance later that evening.

[6.3] These reviewers may be reacting to the gender expression of Upshaw's character, since most memorials of any American war focus on male subjects, reinforcing traditional ideals of masculinity and heroism. Many standing war memorials recognize service members according to gender, including the Women in Military Service Memorial outside Arlington National Cemetery and the Vietnam Women's Memorial on the National Mall, whose presence implies a lack of full recognition by other monuments. What's more, remembrances typically focus on the patriotic sacrifice of fallen soldiers (Doss 2010, 164–65); by contrast, the last verse of "When Johnny" depicts a lament scene rather than celebrating the supposed valor of those who died. A soprano portraying an Afghanistan war veteran who is experiencing PTSD through a performance of Civil War and folk songs may have presented more semiotic layers than some listeners were willing to sift through. Critics' negative reactions, however, are in keeping with responses to American war memorials that display even mild criticism of war in general.

[6.4] The significance of this piece as a commentary on war reflects Crumb's position as a twenty-first-century citizen commenting on the Civil War from a temporally removed perspective. Crumb witnessed the negative treatment Vietnam War veterans received upon coming home and lived through the still-active period of American history in which war is nearly constant but physically removed from most Americans' daily lives. People in the twenty-first century certainly appreciate the potentially positive outcomes of the Civil War—the preservation of the union and, more importantly, the official, if not actual, end of slavery. But also, Americans in 2020 have the benefit of historical distance, which affords them greater awareness of the number and types of casualties that resulted from that conflict (Faust 2009, 250–264).⁽²¹⁾ Crumb does not position these soldiers in the lineage of patriotic sacrifice that would make their deaths more meaningful; his historical perspective diverges from the official, propagandistic one. Crumb's interpretation of this folk song and his setting do not uphold patriotic images likely in part because his historical situation, having lived through the Vietnam War era, does not compel him to do so. Based on his piece and the Upshaw/Sellars staging (which he seems to have supported), Crumb's image of post-Civil War America is not a positive one. Here Crumb's historical position comes through; his lack of faith in a message of patriotic unity is in keeping with his having written this piece in 2004. Crumb's Civil War soldier, a stand-in for all modern American soldiers, did not die for some higher cause, so the meaning of their death wanes in twenty-first-century American culture, as Crumb seeks to musically and grotesquely draw attention to them.

Conclusion

[7.1] In the postmodern era that engendered Crumb's critique of war, the grotesque may be so ubiquitous as to be unrecognizable (Edwards 2017, 129). Sellars echoes this sentiment, explaining that, "You sense that the Civil War is still going on. You sense the violence and virulence of our public atmosphere today, of the country tearing itself apart" (Berger 2011a). Yet by repositioning wartime sounds, images, and images as newly critical and linking them across centuries, Crumb renders the grotesque on contemporary terms. His setting of a Civil War-era song finds new resonance in 2020 because of (at the time of this writing) the current reckoning with systemic racism and white supremacy as seen in the police killing of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests.

[7.2] In an interview he gave two years before completing *Winds of Destiny*, Crumb (2004) commented that the beginning of the Iraq War and the invasion of Afghanistan signaled the beginning of "a very dark period for America." The parallels he draws between the Vietnam era, Iraq, and Afghanistan signal how Crumb imagines history in cyclical terms:

[I'm] struck with the haunting sense that here we go again. . . It's surprisingly reminiscent of so many things that worried us about the Vietnam time. . . We get

ourselves into these awful, abysmal messes. We can't seem to avoid that every so often in our history.

For Crumb, the cyclical nature of history means that a piece about the Civil War can comment effectively on Iraq or Afghanistan; artistic responses to previous wars can find new relevance each time America goes to war, as it inevitably seems to. While these comments refer more specifically to connections between his work *Black Angels* (1970) and the Vietnam War, his expressed frustration with American militarism supports viewing his music as expressing anti-war sentiments in general.

[7.3] The ostensible inevitability of war, a hallmark of postmodern American life, informs many of the memorials constructed in the new millennium.⁽²²⁾ Memorials that perpetuate ideas of glory, masculine power, and necessary violence can be understood as what Doss (2010, 220) calls "war porn":

War is the great American distraction: mythologized as a patriotic project, articulated as an economic linchpin, desired for its explicit, stimulating, visceral, and authenticating capacities. And war porn is the great American cultural expression, not as a form of sexual fantasy and social transgression, but as an instrument of national consensus, conformity, and normalcy.

In response, Crumb, Sellars, and Upshaw's grotesque spectacle resists normalizing war by exposing its long-term physical and psychological impacts. Sellars points to unemotional responses to current wars and Americans' apparent apathy about their involvement overseas (Berger 2011b). While not uniformly praised, their staging aimed at producing just such an emotional response from audiences, similarly to how memorials attempt to provoke strong reactions from viewers. "When Johnny" may yet need to be repurposed the next time the U.S. takes on a mission of preserving its ideals abroad.

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Footnotes

* I wish to thank the journal's anonymous reviewers and John Pippin for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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1. Crumb describes previously having witnessed Upshaw perform a different arrangement of this song and giving it the same "ironic twist," and that this performance inspired his setting.

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2. My definition of the grotesque draws on recent scholarship in various media, including literary studies and music-theoretical analyses to be cited throughout the article.

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3. For more on music affect theory, see [Grimley 2016](#); [Thompson and Biddle 2013](#); [Wallrup 2015](#); and [Seigworth and Gregg 2010](#).

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4. Gilmore's military success led to his celebrity status during the war ([McWhirter 2014](#), 128).

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5. For further discussion of musical memorials, see [Marx 2012](#). Marx explains it is common for requiems to serve as anti-war statements or general social critiques. See also [Rehding 2009](#) and [Wiebe 2012](#).

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6. In addition to Etkind, sources on war and cultural memory include [Huysen 2003](#); [Winter 1996](#); [Assman 1995](#); [Blight 1994](#); [Blight 2002](#); and [Bodner 1992](#).

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7. For more on the vast topic of Civil War memory in general, see [Blight 2001](#) and [Blight 2011](#); [Gallagher 2019](#); [McPherson 1988](#); [Brown 2011](#); [Bodner 1992](#); [Simpson 2011](#).

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8. For more on the role of music in preserving Civil War memory, see [Kernan 2014](#).

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9. The cannon drum Crumb asks for is: “a bass drum membrane fitted to a section of industrial heating duct about 12 feet long and 30 inches in diameter” (Valdes 2009).

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10. Aside from this verse’s lyrics, bells have carried associations with war for centuries, in part because of the old European practice of melting down church bells and using the metal for cannons. See Siegert 2013, 206.

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11. For more on how bell sounds have become a musical topic of medievalism, see K. Cook 2019 and Haines 2013. The definitive source on church bells and cultural significance is Corbin 1998.

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12. An open-access e-book version of this diary is available at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33756/33756-h/33756-h.htm#page_176.

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13. For more on numerology in Crumb’s music, see Kinsella (2005, 318).

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14. At the time of this writing, a similar procession was recently held as part of the funeral ceremony for Congressman John Lewis (1940–2020), lifelong civil rights activist.

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15. See, for example, Burkholder 2004; Everett 2009; and Sheinberg 2000.

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16. On this point see Bruns 1993; Johnston 2012; and Losada 2009.

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17. On this point see also Hefling 1997.

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18. See Reuters 2008 for a list of quotes of American leaders stating ca. 2002–2003 that the Iraq War would only last a few months.

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19. A statue of Juan de Oñate in Albuquerque, NM was recently torn down in the summer of 2020 during a series of protests provoked by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis demanding racial justice around the country (Burnett 2020).

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20. In his reference to “spooky sound effects,” Kosman, perhaps unknowingly, echoes previous criticisms of Crumb’s music. Richard Bass summarizes and responds directly to this criticism in his article (1991, 1). Bass cites Robert Moevs who describes Crumb’s work as “an assemblage of spooky effects and symbols chosen to evoke a particular mood,” and states that his work lacks substance (Moevs 1976, 302).

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21. The total number of Civil War dead was not known (if it is fully known today) until the twentieth century.

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22. On this point see Hardt and Negri 2000; Scherzinger 2005; and Cohen 2015.

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