

# Classed Cultural Ethics: Understanding Class Difference in the Contemporary US through Traditional Musical Performance and Radical Leftism

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**Abstract:**

Based on over two years of research in and around Asheville, North Carolina, this dissertation is a comparative ethnography of class difference in the contemporary US, focused on three distinct groups: working-class musicians, middle-class revivalists, and anarchist ‘punks.’ Through fine-grained analysis of interactions and practices in the space of ‘traditional’ music-making, where regular cross-class interactions made class differences particularly salient for participants, I develop a theoretical conception of classed ethics. This approach to the ethnography of class improves on existing frameworks in its ability to account for striking contrasts between middle-class and working-class stances towards ethical sociality, which I show to be based on reflexive notions of ‘the good.’ This dissertation provides a comparative and relational account of these differing class-cultural ethics as they are brought to bear in practices associated with space, temporality, hierarchy, and social categorization.

Traditional music scenes around Asheville provided an unusually rich setting for the study of class in the contemporary US. In particular, a long history of white middle-class revivalism; the valorization and objectification of ‘local’ expressive culture; and a vital white working-class musical tradition all contributed to a social space where ideas about the everyday interaction of class and culture were explicit (even as race was largely absent from conscious reflection). The politics of class in Asheville music scenes were given clearer focus by the arrival in the mid-2000s of a large population of transitory musicians (‘punks’), committed to learning traditional music as a central practice in an anarchist project aimed at realizing an anti-capitalist and anti-hierarchical mode of sociality. As I describe, punks imagined the possibility of developing or acquiring ‘new’ everyday ethics—and the distinct kinds of sociality and collectivity they engender—as a utopic vision aimed at re-making middle-class selves in the mold of an imagined, politically virtuous, working-class subject. In effect, the familiar *musical-aesthetic* valorization of ‘working-class culture’ by middle-class revivalists, was thrown into stark relief by the *political* idealization of ‘working-class cultural ethics’ by punks, resulting in a situation where normative moral evaluations of class were inverted: where (aspects of) ‘working-class culture’ were imagined to be a space of ‘the good.’ As these three groups—middle-class revivalists, working-class musicians, and punk musicians—interacted, the deep entanglement of class and ethics of sociality came to the fore in the form of misunderstandings, differing evaluations, and revealing contradictions, which I explore in the dissertation.

Beyond an exploration of classed ethics in the particular space of music, this work develops two broader conclusions. The first is a reflexive critique of the subtle but pervasive universalization of middle-class cultural assumptions in academic theories of class. Interpretive frameworks that rely on registers like performance, tastes, competencies, or structural reproduction tend to import a middle-class version of selfhood or subjectivity as the default basis of how class ‘works,’ marginalizing working-class perspectives on what class ‘is.’ A deeper comparative understanding of the classed ethical stances of the academy can help to correct blind spots in class theory. The second conclusion is that ‘classed cultural ethics’ have a de facto politics: there are meaningfully different outcomes that result from particular classed ethical stances in realms like

collectivity, solidarity, and sociality. An awareness of the politics of classed cultural ethics helps illuminate the assumptions, contradictions, and promises of radical leftism in the US.

*To my family*

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: Reconciling Class and Culture.....</b>	<b>1</b>
0.1: Goals and Context.....	1
Chapter Overview.....	3
A Note to Readers.....	4
0.2: (Re)Introducing Class and Culture.....	8
The Stakes of Class and Culture:.....	12
Class Theory: Starting from the Start .....	19
Class and Culture: What it Is, Scale and Scope, What it Isn't .....	27
The Boundaries of Difference in 'The West' .....	36
0.3: Methodology .....	48
0.4 Overview of Informants .....	55
0.5 Researcher Context .....	64
0.6 Class and Intersectionality .....	65
Racialization, Whiteness, and Class .....	67
Trajectories in the Whiteness Literature.....	71
Privilege and Abjection in White Appalachia .....	75
<b>Chapter 1: History and Context: Situating Revivalism and Anarchism.....</b>	<b>80</b>
1.1: Introduction .....	80
1.2: The History of Revivalism as a Middle-Class Cultural Impulse .....	81
European Antecedents .....	85
Discovering the Folk in Appalachia .....	91
Sharp, Lunsford, and the Birth of the Folk Festival .....	100
1.3 Appalachia: Locating a Place, an Idea, and a People.....	109
Appalachian Myth-Making.....	114
Situating Asheville in the Region .....	126
1.4 Conclusion: Revivalism, Traditional Music, Class .....	136
1.5 An Introduction to Anarchism .....	141
1.6 Punks and Contemporary Anarchism.....	152
Locating the Punk Scene in the Rural South: Red and Jamie .....	157
Touring with a Punk Honky-Tonk Band .....	172
<b>Chapter 2: Ethics of Sociality and Space.....</b>	<b>182</b>
2.1: Introduction: Dilemmas of Public Space and Social Ethics.....	182

2.2: Working-Class Moral Geographies .....	186
Allen’s Barn Dance .....	186
Exchange and Space .....	192
An Ethic of Mutual Obligation .....	201
Legible Subjects .....	209
2.3: I’m a Friend of a Friend of the Working Class .....	222
Red Gets an Idea.....	225
Recreating Allen’s at the Night Owl .....	230
2.4: Crooked Wood .....	242
Punk House Shows .....	244
Theorizing Solidarity and Obligation .....	255
<b>Chapter 3: Socio-Temporal Ethics .....</b>	<b>262</b>
3.1: Introduction: Present Persons, Future Selves .....	262
3.2: The Devil May Care.....	271
Stranger Danger.....	272
Conspicuous Destruction.....	276
3.3: Tastes, Acquired and Required .....	286
Don’t Postpone Joy.....	286
Expressing Selfhood Through Music .....	294
Classed Personhood and Musical Practice .....	305
3.4: Self-Making and Transgressions of Class.....	309
Anti-Wellness .....	311
Classed Reactions to Punk Bodies.....	323
3.5: Conclusion: “Doing Community” .....	333
<b>Chapter 4: Class and Practices of Categorization and Hierarchy .....</b>	<b>355</b>
4.1: Introduction .....	355
Middle-Class Dilemmas of Classification.....	355
One Inversion, One Paradox.....	360
4.2: Old-time Music as Middle-Class Culture .....	365
“This Is a Closed Jam” .....	366
Cultural Ethics in Musical Practice .....	373
4.3: Working-Class Bluegrass.....	388
Not all Hierarchies are Created Equal .....	394
Contemporary Old-time by Another Name .....	398

4.4: Rigidly-Enforced Autonomy.....	412
“An Exercise in Futility” .....	414
4.5 Conclusion.....	422
<b>Conclusion: The Politics of Class Cultures.....</b>	<b>430</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>435</b>

# Introduction: Reconciling Class and Culture

## **0.1: Goals and Context:**

Based on over two years of research in and around Asheville, North Carolina, this dissertation is aimed at three related ethnographic tasks:

1. Outlining a working-class ethics of personhood and sociality.
2. In a comparative fashion, showing contrasting middle-class ethics of selfhood and sociality.
3. Showing some of the dilemmas of a radical political project that views ‘self-making’ as a space of political action, and class as encoding differing kinds of selves.

The research for this project took place in and around ‘traditional’ music scenes, where music-making structured a space of cross-class interaction, and where ‘punks’ (inheritors of anarchism, the political project I mention above) were enthusiastic participants for reasons I outline later. As I began the project, the iconic image in my head was a sight that had become relatively commonplace in parts of the Southeast in the early 2000s: the spectacle of pierced, tattooed, black-clothed punks and work-booted, blue-collar Locals hunched together in a tight jam circle, lost in performing an ancient fiddle tune. Inevitably, the situation was even more complicated than it looked at first glance. The musical world that punks found, arriving in Asheville from various west-coast and northeastern cities, was one resulting from a long and complex history of

middle-class revivalism, local cultural boosterism, and a vital and historic working-class musical tradition in western North Carolina.

As I played music in the various scenes I mention, it became clear that different ideas about how music should ideally be played, listened to, or taught were instances where underlying classed cultural assumptions, often articulated in ethical registers, bubbled up to the surface through very distinct kinds of practices. Although I began the project focused on punks, my first priority in this work is articulating a vision of the cultural logic of the working-class musical worlds they gravitated to, in direct comparison to what was ‘normal’ in middle-class musical scenes. This comparison enables me to articulate a reflexive perspective on both contemporary dilemmas of leftism, and on social science approaches to class. In this complex chain of reasoning, the two main terms—a comparative reading of the entanglement of class and culture, and a theorization of classed dilemmas of self-making in radical leftism—inform each other in significant ways. On the one hand, punks provided an impetus and a lens through which to consider the politics of ‘middle-class (or ‘capitalist’) selfhood’ that they were so intent on avoiding or replacing, and to articulate a richer vision of the cultural politics of working-class worlds that seemed so desirable to them. Conversely, a deeper understanding of class and cultural ethics of sociality helped to understand some of the hang-ups, misunderstandings, and dilemmas of left activism, and the entanglement of academic theory with middle-class cultural worlds.

While much of the data is drawn from spaces of cross-class interaction, the ethnographic chapters are all structured into three discrete sections: one on working-class spaces; one on middle-class spaces; and one on the mediating third term of the punks, a

space of complex class entanglements. Through this framing, which focuses attention in a given space on the particular cultural logics at work, I hope to approximate the experience of circulating back and forth that I had during fieldwork, and to emphasize the value of a comparative perspective in the ethnography of class.

### **Chapter Overview:**

**Introduction:** The rest of the introduction situates the theoretical framing of my work through the lens of ‘class and culture.’ I give an overview of these complex terms, and of how they interact as I use particular versions of them. While this section does not explicitly frame the arguments I make in the individual chapters, it is a necessary preamble because it provides a broad warrant for the approach I take to class and culture. I also briefly outline the comparative methodological strategy I use to study class; I give a demographic outline of the three groups I reference throughout; I briefly situate my own relationship to my fieldsite; and finally, I discuss my reasons for a relatively narrow theoretical and ethnographic focus on class with particular reference to race.

**Chapter 1:** This chapter is split into two sections. The first section situates Asheville music scenes with reference to the cultural history of revivalism and folklore, and situates Asheville proper in a broader cultural, political-economic, and representational history. The second section outlines a very brief history of anarchism, shows ‘punks’ as the contemporary articulation of anarchist organizing in the US, and gives biographical introductions to two of my main punk informants. Finally, it gives a brief ethnographic picture of touring with a punk honky-tonk band.

**Chapter 2:** This chapter introduces the idea of classed cultural ethics of sociality. It does so through a focus throughout on the creation and maintenance of public spaces of sociality, and the classed ethical codes through which those spaces operate and are reproduced.

**Chapter 3:** This chapter considers differing versions of personhood/selfhood in working-class and middle-class worlds, with a particular emphasis on temporality. Through a focus on embodiment, self-care, and self-expression in musical practice, it shows how class parallels very different cultural regimes. Finally, a conclusion ties together the different shapes that the idea of ‘community’ takes in the three spaces I consider.

**Chapter 4:** This chapter considers classed regimes of categorization and hierarchy through a detailed consideration of how two different genres of music are played and imagined. Showing how these two musical genres are microcosms of broader classed practices, it considers categorization and hierarchy as explicit ethical orientations.

**Conclusion:** The conclusion suggests how a detailed look at the politics of class cultures, arrived at through the particular approach I outline, can be of use in a richer and more nuanced understanding of class as it is lived in the contemporary US, and of the possibilities and dangers of radical politics.

## A Note to Readers

Middle-class readers will quickly notice that some of the material is overtly critical of middle-class practices, or that it points out internal contradictions in middle-class cultural logics. My aim in doing so is not to suggest that middle-class culture, as

such, is ‘bad.’ Indeed, it is the naturalized cultural terrain that I as an anthropologist exist in, and through which I find meaning and pleasure in daily life. Additionally, some of the best times of my life, and my best friends, have come through (mostly middle-class) ‘traditional’ music and dance scenes, which I have been involved in for almost two decades. The impetus for a critical look at middle-class culture as such is simply that, for most of my readers its assumptions will represent relatively naturalized ethical stances which are all explicitly and implicitly valorized and reproduced in everyday life, and which often inform critiques of working-class people or ways. My critical stance does not stem from a view that working-class alternatives to these practices are de facto political ‘goods’ or themselves internally consistent, or even because I think punk attempts to enact alternatives are necessarily successful or well thought-out. It is simply because I think that the deontological certitude of both anthropology and of middle-class cultural politics more generally need unsettling or reflexive revision.

There are a number of distinct sub-genres of music that circulate in the local musical, aesthetic, and commercial economy of ‘traditional’ or ‘Americana’ genres. I focus on three (old-time, bluegrass, and country), all of which receive substantial examination in the chapters that follow. Because I circulated through these different musical spaces in a variety of roles, I found myself often navigating a bewildering maze of informants, potential informants, collaborators, friends, acquaintances, bandmates, performers, audiences, and so on. It was often difficult to tell where any of these roles ended and where others began; what exactly demarcated an ‘informant’ from a ‘collaborator’ from ‘a friend who I talked about my project with.’ To the best of my ability, I was as open and honest as I could be with all who asked about what I was doing;

I also proactively told many people about my study and my conflicted feelings about it. Many of them told other people such that my intentions and project got around in a second-hand way in sometimes convenient and sometimes unfortunate fashions.

There are doubtless people in the music scenes I mention who would be surprised to hear about my project; surprised that I didn't tell them about it; and potentially hostile to or annoyed by my conclusions. There are others—namely in overtly public spaces of performance, where it was impossible or impractical to inform everyone of my project—who might be surprised to find (hopefully unidentifiable versions of) themselves in this text. And it is worth noting that, as is doubtless true for most anthropological fieldwork, many informants had amused, hostile, or curious reactions to the idea of being ‘studied’ as such. For middle-class old-time musicians, ideas of authenticity and appropriation were already so much in the air that many of them worried that I might present yet another critical view of oblivious or doctrinaire views of class difference. For punks, anarchist principles and lives lived largely under the radar made them extremely suspicious of surveillance and of aggressively bourgeois practices like graduate school. And for working-class people, the interpersonal consequences entailed in such a solipsistic and self-focused process as graduate study, and the idea of getting up in other peoples’ business as somehow a paid job, was often somewhere between amusing and annoying.

Despite all of these caveats, I have tried to the best of my ability—and with a keen awareness of my own debts and obligations—to give as honest a portrait of what I saw in fieldwork as possible, while respecting people’s anonymity and internal motivations. Towards this goal, I have made certain compromises between journalistic

representation and the demands of anonymity, respect, and condensation that ethnography demands. I have given most informants pseudonyms and have altered certain demographic facts; I have in a few instances created composite characters. Some scenes have been condensed or transposed in location and/or time to aid in anonymizing informants, or for the sake of clarity or argumentation. And finally, transcriptions of interviews have been lightly edited for clarity and length; other transcriptions of conversation are reproductions from fieldnotes and are accurate to the best of my ability to recreate conversation soon after the fact.

In all cases, I have largely preserved dialect and the informal register of conversation, while standardizing spelling. The politics of language ideology in transcribing southern dialects was never far from my mind, and it was often on my informants' minds too, particularly in the few instances when they spoke into a recorder. Despite the risks posed by the jarring juxtaposition of academic prose with southern rural working-class dialect, the idea of standardizing or sanitizing my informants' speech seemed distasteful for a number of reasons. Like other 'enclassing' semiotic material, dialects were a complex point of pride and embarrassment, wholesale embrace and ironic distancing for my working-class informants. And finally, from the long potential list of terms, I have chosen to uniformly call the people in this work 'informants' for the sake of simplicity and because it seems realistic. Many of them are also valued friends, deeply-knowledgeable interlocutors, and interested collaborators asking the same questions.

## 0.2: (Re)Introducing Class and Culture

This overview is oriented primarily towards class theory as used by ethnographers, and my goal is to theorize what it means to think of class through a cultural lens. As a particular theoretical orientation to class that is well-suited to anthropological strengths and methodologies, I will argue that ‘culture’ offers the potential in practice to deepen our understanding of what class ‘is.’ Any outline of ‘class culture,’ however, has to necessarily deal with what it is not, and, given the extensive use of this term particularly in sociology, I address how an anthropological version might differ—and why it faces significant areas of critique.

Most theoretically-sophisticated contemporary ethnographies *oriented to class as a primary analytical object* (as opposed to a great deal of work that assumes it as a given term of analysis in one form or another, or to a smaller body of work that develops an analysis of its intersectional nature with other identity categories in the everyday) posit a synthetic analysis of class as, in short, a structuring structure. That is, class is approached as an entrenched set of institutions, systems, and relationships that are constantly in a mutually-constituting dialectical interaction with the intangible cultural existence of everyday people. Contemporary work often examines in detailed fashion the micro-level interactions between structures and agents, people and systems, performances and categories. It is a given in this work that the structures of class influence the material realities of people’s everyday lives, and that these embodied experiences influence personal histories and worldviews. At the same time, people, in all their confused and multiple identities, in their conscious and unconscious actions, and in the polysemic nature of their material existence, interact with structures and systems in more and less

agentive and reflexive ways. The end result that scholars often point to is that people ironically and often unintentionally end up reproducing the very structures and relationships they seem to be agentively engaging with. The primary goal of contemporary class theory can be understood as an attempt to salvage a methodological vantage point--amenable to ethnographic work--that accounts for the paradoxical simultaneous existence of agency and structure.

I broadly take for granted this argument about what class ‘is’ and the valuable work it has enabled. However, I argue that it produces a necessary but not sufficient account of class. Namely, ‘class’ as a broad and complex reality of modernity in the US parallels non-trivial cultural difference in ways and registers that are not captured by ‘reproduction theory.’ Ironically, however, the socially-structuring nature of class itself, which this model captures with great subtlety—the way that it is entwined with dispositions and practices—means that the very cultural difference which would be so useful to understand is rendered largely invisible, inaccessible, and at times implicitly distasteful for middle-class academics, for very specific reasons:

1. It becomes most apparent through comparative, cross-class ethnographic work which, as I will argue, is extremely difficult to undertake in non-institutional spaces, for various reasons that have to do with the relative social isolation of people of different classes; with academic professional trajectories; and with class animosities and prejudices in everyday life.

2. More generally, the fact that professional academics are by definition middle-class kinds of people, and ethnography is a particularly classed endeavor, has powerful structuring effects on the kinds of data available to researchers of class, and the lenses

they are inclined to use to theorize it—particularly in spaces where working-class people are de facto oppressed or marginalized.

3. Part of being a middle-class person as an embodied disposition is an extraordinarily pervasive moral evaluation of some aspects of class culture that I will argue imports uncritically certain elements of middle-class personhood into class theory (for well-developed arguments concerning the moral normativity of class in everyday life, see Sayer 2005; Sennett and Cobb 1973; Skeggs 2004; Skeggs 1997).

This work traces persistent differences, broadly paralleling the fault lines of socio-economic class, in fundamental ideas about what constitutes ethical intersocial being. These realms of difference, even when present in ethnographies, strike me as largely unaccounted for in existing theoretical approaches to class, even though they are, in my view, the interesting questions and the exact realm of data that ethnographic fieldwork is perfectly positioned to engage. It is therefore ‘class culture,’ particularly in the sense that is not captured by reproduction theorists, and approached through a comparative lens, that this overview is aimed at elaborating. The ‘culture’ part of this term is intended to point in a direction where anthropology’s natural strengths as a discipline lie: in a rich understanding of the everyday as a space where people, in creative, reflexive, unpredictable and interesting ways, deal with the circumstances in which they find themselves. Perhaps most fundamentally, it signals an orientation to class that, while informed by critical accounts, adopts an epistemological approach which is *non-deterministic*: in which the actual outcome of what people do is not presumed in advance as a precondition of understanding the object of study. I describe other limitations of a reproduction-focused orientation to class in more detail below, but in short it relies on an

arguably functionalist account of culture, in which it is preemptively circumscribed in a mechanistic way—the outcome of ‘what people do’ is already presumed in advance as a precondition of understanding ‘what people do’ as an object of study. In other words, if you go into the field already knowing what you’re going to find (aka, practices that unintentionally reproduce class structures), you will very likely find what you already know.

‘Class culture’ is therefore an attempt to at once know *and* not know what one might find in the ethnography of class, in the sense that the reproduction of class injury and inequality is so far a historic fact, but that an approach structured by that observation can obscure some of the complex and interesting cultural difference that exists in parallel to class. Fundamentally, it is this productive tension—one that holds in simultaneous view the synthetic and critical views of class reproduction and structural oppression, and yet retains an openness to nuances of personhood and culture that are, in a way, only visible by partially abandoning this *a priori* determinism—that I try to adopt in this dissertation. A corollary assumption is that working-class people have ‘ways of being’ that are as rich, densely-elaborated, and reflexive as middle-class people—and as worthy of detailed understanding on their own terms. At the same time, I strive to avoid a naive romanticism about my informants and about working-class positionality in general, which is undeniably directly linked to profound injustice, injury, oppression, and suffering. It is this difficult balancing act—one that some readers may find too contradictory, poorly done, or simply impossible—that I believe can render class a productive lens for anthropology, and simultaneously a powerful tool of reflexive critique.

## **The Stakes of Class and Culture:**

What this project aims to do, at least partially, is to decenter the unacknowledged moral framework underwriting much contemporary work on class and culture. That moral framework, quite simply, is capitalism. In mid-December of 2015, as I was writing this introduction, a front-page article in the New York Times lamented a set of metrics (Miller 2015) that showed or explained widening disparities between middle- and low-income families which resulted in economic inequality. Primarily in the realm of child-rearing, these differences included things like reading aloud, vocabulary attainment, scheduled extra-curricular activities, and other aspects of child-rearing that, as the article put it, lead to a particular set of outcomes later in life: “more affluent children end up in college and en route to the middle class, while working-class children tend to struggle. Children from higher-income families are likely to have the skills to navigate bureaucracies and succeed in schools and workplaces...” whereas poorer children are comparatively disadvantaged (Miller 2015). While carefully maintaining a morally agnostic tone about child raising practices (which “both have benefits”), the ultimate message was clear: ‘low-income’ ways (which the article gestures to as both a set of economic limitations and cultural attitudes) are a problem in need of correction, *because they result in economic inequality.*

The article both cites and quotes Annette Lareau, a sociologist who studies class: “Do all parents want the most success for their children? Absolutely. Do some strategies give children more advantages than others in institutions? Probably they do... ” Ending on a hopeful note, the author concludes that “there are recent signs that the gap could be

starting to shrink. In the past decade, *even as income inequality has grown, some of the socioeconomic differences in parenting, like reading to children and going to libraries, have narrowed...*”, potentially resulting in a situation where low-income families will by and large begin to act more like middle-class ones, whether or not they thereby succeed economically (italics mine). In its odd conclusion (even if it produces no economic benefits, it is still hopeful that poor families are beginning to act more like middle-class ones) and careful hedging (“both approaches have benefits...”), the article embodied the paradox of Bourdieusian ethnography: a critique of class inequality that is subordinated to a mechanistic evaluation of how culture and capitalist institutions interact. The end result boils down to behavioralism stripped of its moral censure of the poor.

Because the article both draws heavily on and cites Lareau, her influential work on child-rearing practices is worth examining more closely as an instantiation of my critique (Lareau c2003.). In many ways, her work is the exception that proves the rule. Lareau’s collaborative project with a team of graduate students—exceptionally rigorous, thoughtful, and balanced—investigated twelve families from different racial and class backgrounds as they raised their children, finding that class divisions corresponded with very distinct stances towards child-rearing. In short, middle-class parents saw their children as pre-adults in need of constant cultivation and attention, where working-class families tended to accord children a separate ontological category and a great deal more autonomy—a philosophy Lareau described as “the accomplishment of natural growth.” Her work is extremely careful not to adopt a morally normative viewpoint towards these stances, describing benefits to both and recognizing that it is only later, through interaction with structures, that they come to be determinative. If anything, she and her

assistants often come across as tacitly annoyed by the middle-class children and more taken with working class modes of childcare (see, for instance, Lareau 2003b; see also, her second edition in 2011 which glancingly articulates a critique of the politics of middle-class culture in a section on follow-up research).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the research was comparative across lines of class (although the families themselves don't interact across class lines); that it focuses on what she calls 'cultural logics' and class culture; and that it mostly takes place outside of institutional spaces. For all of these reasons, it is relatively unique in the field of reproduction-oriented work on class, and its conclusions are powerful and interesting. And yet it is worth considering the title of her book: "Unequal Childhoods." Despite the often tantalizing hints of cultural difference that the field reports regularly turn up, these data—cultural attitudes about what a child ontologically is, or why authoritarian vs. dialogic parenting might be preferable and what that reveals about normative attitudes regarding personhood, hierarchy, and social roles within classes—are not elaborated or theorized. Instead, at the end of most sections in the book, the findings are instead assessed in light of the advantage they give or deny children as actors who will interact with structures—schools, workplaces, the medical system, and so on. In her explicitly Bourdieusian framework, the unifying interpretive logic is the reproduction of class structures. It is with reference to the fields of practice she outlines, that the bold-faced first word of her title—"Unequal"—makes sense, and it is through this evaluation that the book gains its implicit moral force. This is not to argue that the book's conclusions are either unconvincing or unimportant. Rather, it is to point out that even this powerful work

of scholarship elides important domains of ‘class culture’ precisely through its structuring theoretical approach.

The stakes of articulating a different version of class culture seem to be high to me. My argument is simple: if the view that comes out of (necessary and brilliant) work like Lareau’s is the extent of social scientific understandings of class culture, then not only do we lose a great deal of subtlety, accuracy, and realism in our view of the internal cultural logics at work in differently-classed positions, but we are left with a vision of profoundly ‘cultural’ affairs like child-raising as purely instrumental in evaluation. In Lareau’s work, as in so many others, we see the tantalizing edges of ‘cultural logics’ that must have a full and rich elaboration—but that are mostly ignored in favor of a view that implicitly (I emphasize that word because Lareau is clearly thoughtful in her brief section on policy prescriptions about this issue) normalizes upward mobility as the totalizing lens of class evaluation. This stance does a few things:

—It results in an impoverished view of working-class lives which doesn’t hold up to ethnographic or even lay scrutiny. This is a particular problem because the internal workings—the animating cultural logics—that inform the working-class attitudes captured in rough outline are rendered unimportant or invisible, and the result is a shell that lacks any sense of an internal moral framework which would explain the choices depicted at least partly *as choices* based on a set of reflexive and normative or ethical attitudes.

—Even in careful and reflexive work like Lareau’s, the focus on understanding ‘reproduction’ as an *a priori* result of the cultural realm implicitly renders capitalism, and the adaptability of cultural practices to its demands and institutions, as the

unacknowledged moral arbiter of class cultures, and as an elemental and transcendent ‘given’—an attitude that I suggest below comes from a Weberian tradition.

—Despite abundant caution about culture-of-poverty problems, the only practical solution this model of class suggests is for working-class people to become more like middle-class people, culturally. This solipsistic view not only ignores real cultural difference and the actual implications of a notion of the habitus; it also depends on a utopian vision wherein everyone who can learn to act a certain way can achieve success. This view—analogous to the suggestion that universal college attendance will resolve income inequality—ignores both the fluid and adaptive nature of practices of exclusion (see, for instance Khan 2011), as well as the material realities of commodity production, service work, and necessary trades like construction, which demand the continued existence of working-class bodies. The working-class people of America are not going to educate and read themselves en masse into middle-class status, as the article seems to suggest as an ideal outcome.

— It implicitly normalizes the self-focused, self-maximizing, hyper-individualistic practices of middle-class families as the sine qua non of ‘success,’ ultimately hobbling the possibility of a critical view of aspects of middle-class culture as politically (and interpersonally) negative; it simultaneously inscribes working-class culture as mostly a space of defeat, failure, accommodation, and oppression. As in the article, the metric for whether a behavior or cultural trait is adaptive and functional is precisely its applicability to a life aimed at being or becoming middle-class.

As I hope to demonstrate, there are compelling reasons for studying class culture through a different lens. These include not only the possibility of a more accurate and nuanced vision of class in everyday life, but also the ability to articulate a political vision that exceeds the normative bounds of middle-class personhood—and universalized notions like “success” and “achievement,” above—as a limiting frame.

### *Clarifying Terms and Goals*

Throughout this dissertation, I rely on a non-deterministic view of the entanglement of class and culture as a theoretical position that responds to ethnographic data—particularly data which emphasize the ways that differing reflexive ethical stances are implied by class positionality. Perhaps confusingly, throughout the dissertation I often refer unproblematically to my informants as ‘working-class’ or ‘middle-class.’ In my usage of these terms as identifying labels, I rely primarily on biography: demographic and structural factors like employment, income, education, and family of origin. In broad strokes, I use these terms in a way that most academics would recognize as a consensus view on the socioeconomic class positions of my interlocutors. However, I deploy these socioeconomic labels in an a priori way to allow a focus on a realm of data that largely coincides with them, but that is more difficult to quantify and describe, which I signal with the terms I outline above. While this may seem potentially tautological, another way of understanding this confusing overlap of terms is to recognize that I’m not suggesting ‘class cultures’ to exist as bounded cohesive entities that exist in ideal types in a one-to-one ratio to economic positionality. However, as a necessary if troubling correlate of ‘culture’ as a lens, this work relies on a certain amount of strategic reductionism and

overt categorization—recognizing that it is artificial in some sense and may obscure important processes, flows and disjunctions—as a tool for understanding clusters of traits in broad outline. My rationale is simple: for real-world political and social reasons, the stakes are high for having a better understanding of the way that class and culture—both working- and middle—interact. This can only be apprehended at a level of remove that necessitates a certain amount of categorization (an ethically-fraught topic I take up at length in chapter four).

This analysis posits a binary class structure (middle-class and working-class) as a tool of simplification. This is not intended to function as an actual oppositional binary or to imply a complete cultural disjunction between middle- and working-class people, or the non-existence of other classed positionalities (for an example of this, as well as a view of the challenges of studying inaccessible ‘elites,’ see Khan 2011 and Lamont 1992). I use these terms as inclusive of ‘downward’ class strata for the term working-class, and inclusive ‘upward’ for middle-class, but with the understanding that numerically, working-class people—defined solely through the criteria of college education, constitute the majority of the US population (Bageant 2007); for another perspective: Zweig 2012), and that ‘middle-class’ people comprise most of the rest, depending on where the line between middle-class and the vaguely-defined upper class strata lie (Lareau 2003, as above, adopts a similar binary view of class cultures in her work on child-rearing, for essentially identical reasons: those divisions of socioeconomic life broadly parallel distinct cultural attitudes, even across lines of race and gender). Despite the obvious and necessary overlap in a number of cultural areas that unite working- and middle-class people in America —based on things like a shared nationalist

identity and mythology and a powerful and encompassing culture industry—it would be a mistake to ignore significant and regular cultural differences.

### **Class Theory: Starting from the Start**

This survey builds on a number of works that have analyzed class theory from an ethnographic or culturalist viewpoint, and to which I am indebted (Walley 2013, 2015; Liechty 2003; Fox 2004; Bettie 2003.; Lindquist 2002; Gewertz 1999; Heiman 2015; Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012; Ortner 1991, 1998, 2003, 2006; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Devine 2005, among others). In their theoretical framing, many of these works propose a version of the Marx vs. Weber divide that I also elaborate below; this analysis of class theory has become something of an article of faith for literature reviews on class. While broadly in agreement, I hope to offer something additional both through a systematic consideration of class culture as a theoretical lens, and through a viewpoint on class and cultural ethics that I believe offers the potential for further insight.

Regardless, class is a semantically overloaded concept in social science with a tremendous amount of redundancy across disciplines in argumentation and theorization, and attempting any comprehensive overview of the literature, let alone a coherent definition, is simply not possible. The scope of this introduction therefore is quite limited—it is not a radical attempt to re-define the content of what ‘class’ means, or to propose a grand theory of how class works. Instead, I survey in broad strokes certain trajectories of thought on class, with the goal of situating my own use of the term in existing approaches, and in making very explicit what I propose, and what I do not. Namely, I have yet to encounter a systematic theorization of how these two complex and

overdetermined theoretical signifiers—‘class’ and ‘culture’—fit together in a way that takes maximal advantage of anthropology’s particular disciplinary strengths. This is an attempt to work through the liabilities and benefits of such a thing.

It bears repeating what others have said (Carrier and Kalb 2015; Gewertz 1999; Ortner 2003; Roseberry 1997): class is an analytical concept, a set of theories that allow some sort of purchase on the actually-existing world. It is not, as some work would suggest, an easily definable external reality with neat parameters: there is nothing given, inherent, or necessary about what exact range of phenomena ‘class’ encompasses. Like all theoretical lenses, the various perspectives on class simplify, compress, and distort actually-existing realities in order to allow a greater focus on one set of phenomena. At the very least, a cursory reading of social science of the last two centuries should demonstrate that scholars, politicians, activists, workers, revolutionaries, and laypeople have deployed various understandings of the term, some quite well-developed and yet radically different from each other. Additionally, class is perhaps uniquely balkanized in the academy as a set of theories described by one word. The range of ideas that rely on the signifier ‘class’ have different fundamental assumptions, different methodological practices, and different political understandings of what the world should look like. Therefore, to approach ‘class’ with any degree of theoretical sophistication is to attempt to reconcile bodies of theory that are inherently antagonistic, or to pick and choose among them as to which best suits both the data and the researcher’s own inevitable assumptions about how the world is and should be—an ethical normativity in theoretical reasoning that often goes unexamined. As a result, scholars who use the same word--‘class’--often seem to be describing completely different facets of social life, and to reach

diametrically opposed understandings—sometimes in the same text. And yet, frustrating and unwieldy as the concept may be, there's something out there in the world—or more specifically, in the way that capitalism as a mode of production, a structuring structure, and a social history, intersects with human lives as lived in the realm of the everyday—that makes the idea of class powerful, durable, necessary.

As Eric Wolf noted some time ago, anthropology and the social sciences in general have been engaged in a long dialogue “with the ghost of Marx” (1982: 20). It is important to outline some of the default assumptions that inform Marxian analysis, since its continuing influence is quite powerful. Fundamentally, Marx provides the original ‘what’ of class: a structural relationship to the means of production—one of two locations in binary opposition, characterized by inherent antagonism and unequal power. In other words, rather than a sustained object of analysis, class in Marx is a feature of a mode of production that is inherently exploitative; but paradoxically one that offers the tools to begin to dismantle that system. Class is, in other words, a problem to be fixed. This is not a trivial distinction—Marx’s political orientation (which involves an explicitly normative stance towards capitalism and class) deeply inflects his approach to the object of study, and as I note below, this remains largely true of contemporary Marxian anthropologists as well as of the vast amount of work in the past century examining, synthesizing, extending, and sometimes contorting itself to rescue, Marxian theory (e.g. Wright 2005).

A Marxian approach acknowledges the owning classes as possessing superiority in resources, but assumes the working-classes, or at least the proletariat, as potentially morally superior by definition to the exploitative upper classes or their collaborators; the proletariat represents a political force that once ‘conscious’ will remake the world (Marx

in Scott 1996; Williams 2005; Althusser in Elliott 1994). Consciousness (and its associated explanatory term, ideology), therefore, is a paramount concept for Marxian work—class consciousness being the reflexive process through which the working class would come to know itself as a group of people with common interests and therefore solidarity. This view, of course, suffered a number of historical defeats in practice, but there are some points here worth underlining that still inflect contemporary views of class.

1. The notion that class ‘is’ primarily an *external* structural relationship enacted between similar *kinds* of people by histories of dispossession and injustice;
2. That class implies two distinctly opposed hierarchies, which run in opposite directions: one dealing with ‘power,’ which is clearly concentrated at the top of class structures, and the second, less clearly stated but equally important one, in which virtue qua revolutionary potential is concentrated near the bottom, in the figure of the industrial proletariat.

These opposing hierarchies of virtue and power have been central to Marxist thought, and I argue that understanding them as polarities is an important step in making sense of the history of leftist thought more broadly. Indeed, the problematic of the ‘virtue’ or lack thereof (in various registers) of the working-class vis a vis its oppressed delusion or false consciousness is central to contemporary American political understandings (see Frank 2004; Cowie 2010; Perlstein 2008; Hale 2011). Although Marx himself does not propose the notion of ‘false consciousness,’ this trope’s central explanatory importance for contemporary left political theory of the ‘working class’ is in my view a troubling, condescending, and facile explanation (see also, Hubbs, 2015).

Weber is often cited as the historical counterpoint to Marx as a theorist of class, with the primary distinction that he saw class as one among multiple forms of hierarchy, and as responding to, reflecting, and working upon cultural factors, including most famously religion. For latter-day interpreters of Weber, class is often conceived of as one metric on a scale of relational privilege, power, or ‘status’ that individuals strive to maximize (Breen 2005, Wright 2005). In contrast to Marx, while Weber articulated a critique of rational bureaucratic modernity and implicated capitalism as a factor, he was not primarily focused on a critical analysis of (the injustice of) capitalism—instead, he posited the forces of the market as a given, interrogating how attitudes and behaviors affected ‘life chances’ as they interacted with a capitalist labor market (Weber 1904, 1978; Wright 2005). For my purposes, it is important to point out that Weberian analyses of class situate it as one among many processes that imply a hierarchy of power, concentrated at the top. While this Weberian hierarchy does not explicitly regard ‘success’ as ethically normative, it is important to point out that it discards both the Marxian sense of inherent political virtue or revolutionary potential in the people at the bottom, and an explicitly ethical stance towards capitalism per se. It is, in effect, morally agnostic but *mechanistically* normative: as Weber put it, “whoever does not adapt his manner of life to the conditions of capitalistic success must go under, or at least cannot rise” (2003 (1904): 78). It also presumes as a matter of course that individuals are constantly jockeying for ‘status’ vis a vis their fellows—a self-maximizing view of sociality that, as I note, is echoed by Bourdieu’s extension of the notion of ‘capital’ to non-monetary elements of social life. More specifically, Weber’s ideas on class are less

an ontological proposition—a ‘what’—than they are an epistemic warrant for a particular methodology: a ‘how.’ Weber provides for contemporary understandings of class primarily the idea that it can be understood through a consideration of social or cultural processes.

In this simplified tale of the origins of class theory, I propose two primary ways of looking at class: one in which it is an (unjust) external structure which positions people in particular ways and influences their consciousness, and the other in which it is an (ethically neutral) contested realm or social process that people negotiate. The synthesis of these two views-- seeing class as an ongoing dialectic in which cultural processes and agentive actions reproduce external structures and vice versa—is articulated with distinct emphases in different bodies of theory. I examine the two traditions which have focused most explicitly on class briefly below.

In the Marxian tradition, this trajectory of work comes mostly from the British ‘cultural Marxists,’ primarily associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies but also including the noted labor historian E.P. Thompson and the cultural critic Raymond Williams. Scholars working in this vein, particularly Williams and Stuart Hall, developed the insights of Antonio Gramsci on the nature of hegemony into a reworked vision of how domination is enacted and contested, in realms like class and beyond. As with Williams on the nature of hegemony in the cultural processes that make up everyday life (Williams 1977; 2005), Hall’s theorization of ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ analyzed the way that normal people, doing ‘active readership,’ participate agentively in the creation of and resistance to political-economic regimes, which inevitably play out in the field of ‘the cultural’ (Hall 1973, 1978). As the work of the

cultural Marxists was formalized into the field of Cultural Studies (often conceived of as in opposition to the earlier Marxism of the Frankfurt School), concerns about hegemony and agency came to be a central premise and arguably helped inspire a large part of the scholarly fixation of the eighties and nineties on recuperating ‘resistance’ (or the lack thereof) on the part of normal people in everyday life; it was also of a piece with the nascent realization within anthropology and other disciplines that ‘culture’ had to be regarded as a contested realm, suffused with power relations in the everyday. Paul Willis’ (1977) pioneering book on working-class students is perhaps the most well-realized ethnographic application of this vision to class as a particular construct, and his insight that the traits and attitudes that the ‘Lads’ experience as ‘resistance to overt domination’ are ironically the exact ones that end up recreating them as working-class subjects stands not only as a cautionary tale about the ‘romance of resistance’ but also has strong resonances with Bourdieu’s vision of class reproduction. Unlike Bourdieu, however, Willis and others working in this vein tend to retain a normative orientation to class as an exploitative structure with clearly defined ethico-moral implications.

Bourdieu’s elaboration of practice theory is the synthesis of structure and agency which has been most influential in contemporary studies of class—particularly ethnographic ones—largely because of the brilliance of his analysis of the invisible social workings of class, and the range of theoretical tools (and associated specialized jargon) he provides—in contrast to the cultural Marxists, whose theoretical toolkit, mostly revolving around reworked versions of hegemony, was less elaborated and less promising for ethnographers. Bourdieu’s account, based largely on correspondence and survey data, focuses on an analysis of the reproduction of the external structures of class through the

internal workings of cultural processes—which he analyzes through a theory of the habitus, or embodied dispositions that are enculturated into individuals from an early age by the circumstances of their life experiences as structured by class (Bourdieu 1984, 1977). The habitus in turn affects the practices through which people interact with the structured ‘fields’ of social life—like education or artistic production—which demarcate and reproduce class boundaries. Bourdieu’s extension of the idea of capital to realms outside strictly economic ones, and his focus on ‘taste’ and other processes of distinction as the embodied corporeal results of personal histories deeply tied to regimes of exclusion and entitlement, has been highly influential for contemporary scholars who have added significant ethnographic grounding to his theories. In general, it is fair to say that almost all contemporary ethnographies of class grapple in some way with Bourdieu’s powerful tools for understanding class as an analytic object. It is worth, however, pointing out two common critiques here (e.g. Ortner 2003; Sayer 2005; Bettie 2003). The first is that notions of the habitus are insufficiently attentive to the reality of agentive action arrived at through reflexive consideration on the part of individuals; and the second is that Bourdieusian class theory doesn’t have a well-elaborated account of the way that class and ethical stances interact either in academic theory or in everyday life.

In an interesting way, Bourdieu’s theories of class—which as above synthesize Marxian and Weberian strands of inquiry, at once import elements of a Marxian view of external structures which account for gross inequality, without adopting Marx’s normative moral orientation to capitalism (despite what Sayer calls Bourdieu’s “suppressed but obvious moral-political rage at the injustice of class” 2005: 23). Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus is rather an extraordinarily well-developed way of

incorporating a particular sense of personal agency into an understanding of boundary-keeping in the cultural realm that serve to keep classes *relatively* stable over time—a position which implicitly normalizes upward mobility as a universal given ( perhaps unsurprisingly for the child of a working-class (civil service) rural family who rose to the pinnacles of elite French academia: see Callinicos 2007: 314-315 for Bourdieu on his own 'cloven habitus'). As I have argued, what this body of theory does not do is allow for sustained inquiry into the reflexive ethical orientations of working-class life, where the culturally-located assumptions that underwrite Bourdieusian theories of the social self (self-maximizing, upward striving, largely unreflexive) don't provide a satisfying account.

### **Class and Culture: What it Is, Scale and Scope, What it Isn't**

**What it is:** Culture as an analytical lens is arguably implicit in the epistemological premises of anthropological ethnography, and no discipline has done more to understand and critique this intertwined methodology/epistemology. Unfortunately, no social science has paid as little analytical attention to class ( Ortner 1998; Liechty 2003; Roseberry 1997; Smith 1984; there has however been a spate of recent class-focused work that is beginning to correct this imbalance: Ortner 2003; Gewertz 1999; Liechty 2003; Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012; Heiman 2015; Fox 2004; Walley 2013; Hartigan 1999; 2005). The idea that culture and class are intertwined is not a novel observation, but in the sense I elaborate here and in which it is approached to some extent by the above ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic texts, it can be thought of as a way of looking at class that is complementary to Bourdieusian and Marxian approaches, and which takes advantage of anthropology's development of both

methodological and theoretical insights (ENDNOTE: Anthropology on Class). In the sense in which I use it here, class culture means something discrete, and it is worth distinguishing my usage from other possibilities. First, by ‘culture’ I mean to signal an anthropological culture concept altered by the significant and necessary disciplinary critique of representation, methodology, and epistemology of the last three decades (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Abu-Lughod 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997). I rely on what some have called a ‘Neo-Boasian’ vision of culture (e.g. Bashkow 2004; Bunzl 2004; Rosenblatt 2004; Ortner 2006; Handler 2005; Graeber 2007) articulated in an ongoing way in response to these powerful critiques. This version of ‘culture’ recognizes power, historic trajectories, and the existence of porous, overlapping boundaries, but preserves the idea of culture(s) as an object of study that points towards the richness and agentive creativity of lived experience: towards “emplacement, embodiment, the organization of temporal experience and memory, and normative local understandings of emotion, subjectivity, and proper sociality” (Fox 2004: 21). As Ortner and others have also asserted, I do not view ‘culture’ as a totalizing force that merely reproduces inequality and determines subjectivities; it is also a creative space not fully explained by theories of power and resistance (Graeber 2007, 2009; Robbins 2013; S. Ortner 2006; Bettie c2003.) It is this difference—an orientation to the reflexive processes of everyday life; to the possibility and reality of cultural change; and to the idea that class encompasses a set of ethical understandings of personhood, including deeply reflexive evaluations of other classes and prescriptive orientations about how to behave particularly towards others but also oneself—that most distinguishes ‘class cultures’ from the idea of the habitus as Bourdieu elaborates it (1984, 1977). As others have remarked

(Sayer 2005; Kusserow 2004), practice or reproduction theory has been incredibly productive for ethnographic studies of class, but often with modifications of the kind that I point to here. In my view, these modified stances towards the idea of ‘the habitus’ tend to transform it from into something that looks remarkably like a post-critique idea of ‘culture,’ a promising development that is largely rendered moot by the retained focus on ‘reproduction.’

Adopting the lens of ‘culture’ to consider the aspects of class I describe above has the following particular strengths:

1. Culture in its post-critique anthropological formulation is the best-developed synthesis of structure and agency available for ethnographic research—one that has been honed as such, with explicit consideration not only of its epistemological implications but also of its interaction with history, power, and representation. To me this is far preferable to a post-hoc reworking of ‘subjectivity,’ ‘habitus,’ ‘conscious and unconscious performativity,’ ‘ideology,’ ‘hegemony,’ or any of the other potentially available lenses that attempt to reconcile the possibility and fact of social change with the persistence and durability of existing categories and structures. It is worth noting that in contrast to ‘culture,’ which is the product of a deep disciplinary history and an associated methodology, the bodies of theory I signpost above were largely developed apart from any program of ethnographic research, and have comparatively shallow disciplinary histories (and are also, ironically, mostly the products of cult-of-personality theorists or authors).

2. Culture is perhaps uniquely powerful as a rubric for understanding class as entwined with differing and reflexive considerations of the social good, and

corresponding differences in normative attitudes towards personhood and ethical sociality.

3. Culture was developed analytically through a comparative framework, and it is this implicit orientation to realms of difference that are most explicitly apparent in dialogic juxtaposition that renders anthropological work on class potentially unique.

4. In its insistence on a particular kind of relativism, culture as a lens can potentially help to address the ‘capitalocentrism’ (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000) of extant class theory—an epistemological stance particularly apparent in reproduction theory. Capitalocentrism, as I use it here, refers to the ways that assumptions about the centrality or primacy of capitalistic exchange suffuse accounts of every domain of social life—a critique that has been levelled at Bourdieu’s extension of ‘capital’ to various social or cultural realms, for instance.

5. It has the potential to deepen our understanding of aspects of working-classness that people experience as ‘good’—a problematic but understudied realm of the social life of class, and one which could provide a deeply necessary viewpoint on everyday life in working-class spaces not afforded by a focus on abjection or oppression (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016; Laidlaw 2016).

**Scale and Scope:** Class culture does not imply a simplistically bounded, static, unitary, or timeless working-class or middle-class culture. To the extent that I deploy these universalizing terms, they are meant as a version of the strategic essentialism that is more or less unavoidable in politically-motivated knowledge production (a term, of course, in some senses redundant). In reality, I remain cognizant of the ways that a

particular regional history, the oddity of the encounter I describe, and the constant intersection of class with multiple other categories of identity make the question of scale a very fraught one. In particular, the history of Fordist labor in the US in the post-war era, and the temporary stability of a mostly-white, mostly-male, often-unionized industrial working-class through the 1970s, has tended to overdetermine our usage of the term ‘working-class’ itself such that it is implicitly gendered and raced (see, for instance, Cowie 2010; Harvey 2005; Weis 2004; for relatively unproblematised examples, see Halle 1984; Thompson 1998). It is also unclear, despite numerous works that parse nearly infinite gradations of class based not only on occupation but sometimes on culture, where exactly the boundaries lie between ‘poor,’ ‘working-poor,’ ‘working-class,’ and so on. As I note in the section describing my different groups of informants, I adopt a broad definition of both ‘middle-class’ and ‘working-class,’ encompassing a range of minor differences in economic positionality that other theorists would assign different categories to, and recognizing that it is a problematic label with a particular history that nevertheless remains useful. However important this caveat is, it is also worth noting that a large body of work looks at, for instance, the notion of middle-class or capitalist culture all over the world (and even in historical focus), and finds strikingly similar kinds of cultural processes of distinction and associated notions of subjectivity, selfhood, and personhood (e.g. Rofel 2007; Khan 2011; Demerath 2009; Lamont 1992; Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012; Gewertz 1999; Liechty 2003; Frykman 1987). Similarly, work dealing with working-class people across national borders finds similarly striking ideas about proper notions of relationality and solidarity, among other striking features—although these ideas often bubble to the surface of ethnographies in an unremarked

and/or untheorized way (Foley 1990; Lamont 2000; Lindquist 2002; Skeggs 1997; MacLeod 1995).

Finally, I situate my research firmly in a context of globalized capitalism and what anthropology has tended to refer to as neoliberalism (e.g. Pollin 2003; Harvey 2005) in its political, cultural, and economic aspects. This project is historically situated in an era of increasingly precarious and affective labor for both working- and traditionally middle-class employment sectors; as well as the retreat of the state from historic social welfare obligations. In this sense, as Walley argues (2013, 2015), the ‘working class’ which a generation ago was primarily stable industrial workers now finds itself increasingly dependent on precarious service-worker jobs, or on manual-labor jobs that demand contract work instead of stable employment, thus not only devolving responsibility for all labor overhead onto workers, but emancipating businesses from any obligation of steady pay—a fact that was largely true of my working-class informants. This is an ongoing economic and cultural process, and understanding how it has affected working-class people in deindustrializing communities (Kingsolver 2011, 2001; Benson 2012) is a long-term and necessarily diachronic process, and necessitates particular attention to gender as an intersectional category with class.

**What it isn’t: Consciousness, Tactics, Reproduction:** First, class culture is not a synonym for ‘class consciousness.’ As I deploy the term, it is not predicated on a coming-to-consciousness on the part of working people wherein they perceive themselves as part of an organic whole of like-minded people with similar structural interests (a

question that Foley 1990 and Bettie 2003 also confront in the realm of class culture). This project, enacted in numerous labor studies, inevitably finds that American workers have no such class consciousness or revolutionary potential—a fact for which the scholar then inevitably has to account, usually through some reliance on a version of hegemony theory, intellectual oppression, or false consciousness (Gaventa 1980; Durrenberger 2012; Cowie 2010). This doesn't mean the 'class culture' I point to is unreflexive about the nature of difference as it pertains to class—simply that my informants don't presume 'class-as-economic-positionality' as the primary basis for an understanding of that difference. In a sense, it is not at all surprising that lay people don't have a universal and intuitive understanding of the outlines of one particular academic theory, but this is the striking thing that anthropologies of labor keep finding. In any event, Marxist theorists are completely right on one count: American working-class people are not in any sense about to start a class war on the basis of class consciousness as such (ENDNOTE: Anthropology's Lingering Marx Hangover). However, they *are* often acutely and reflexively aware of classed differences in various realms of everyday life and interaction, and as I hope to show, often comment on these differences in registers that are quite clearly meant as critiques of class privilege and oppression. However, they *also* perceive other, perhaps more fundamental, differences in personhood that are also worth understanding.

**Tactics:** Class culture as I use it does not mean some version of 'the things that poor or working-class people do explicitly to respond to or cope with the material effects of class oppression.' This version of class culture—variants of which are found abundantly in ethnographies of the American inner city in particular—points out the ways

that people living under oppressive circumstances respond directly, agentively, and ‘logically’ to those circumstances—a materialist dialectic in which causality primarily travels in one direction, from poverty to behavior (Bourgois 1995; MacLeod 1995; Goffman 2015; from a rural perspective: Anglin 2002; Fisher 1993;). These ethnographies primarily spring from a long and noble sociological tradition that is arguably a domestic version of classical anthropology: making the strange familiar and the familiar strange (a project with its own contradictions, controversies, and problems: see the Goffman affair: Lewis-Kraus 2016; Manning, Jammal, and Shimola 2016).

Despite their invaluable contribution to an understanding of the everyday lives of the American subaltern (black, inner-city, working-class, poor, etc.), the version of class culture they tend to work with is in the ‘strategies and tactics’ arena—and although aspects of what I’m calling ‘class culture’ often appear, they are typically not an analytic focus. While this vein of work is perhaps closest to what I propose in the sense that it uses a similar methodology in non-institutional spaces, its analytic concerns are primarily related to an understanding, as above, of tactics for dealing with poverty and oppression—a determinism that renders both its epistemological footing and its analytical conclusions of a different vein. Finally and importantly, this body of work is almost never comparative, in the sense that it doesn’t tend to look at natural interactions between people across class lines, except in situations of extreme imbalances of power or of coercion (or with the middle-class ethnographer).

**Reproduction:** Finally, as above, I am not proposing an examination of ‘class culture’ as the agentive things people do that inevitably end up reproducing the structural positionalities they started with as they interact with various fields or institutions—a

version of the insights that Bourdieu developed in practice theory. Versions of this notion of class culture are extremely well-developed in the sociology of education, where numerous ethnographic studies find that the embodied tastes and dispositions of students result in them experiencing as agentive or unique the very actions and habits that most prominently define and reproduce them as working-class or, occasionally, upper- or middle-class (e.g. Weis 2004; Bettie 2003; Pugh 2009; Demerath 2009; Khan 2011; Lareau 2003; see Kusserow 2004 for an anthropological examination that relies on but extends Bourdieu). These great ethnographies, in a sense, investigate the ‘how’ of class reproduction, asking: what are the micro-social processes or practices by which class as a structure is socially reproduced in the interactions between institutions and people? While many of these works are indeed comparative, for a variety of reasons they almost inevitably compare working-class and middle-class people in an environment that is inherently hostile to working-class personhood (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). This is the nature of ethnographic research in institutional spaces, and in my view it both results from and feeds into the focus on class reproduction—a process which is most ethnographically visible, of course, through an examination of discrete structures.

Another issue with this body of work on class is that it compares the interactions of children (and the treatment of children by adults) as metonymic of entire class cultures or classed practices (although the growing genre of ‘follow-up’ studies ameliorates this in unfortunately limited ways, mostly through one-off interviews with adult children from the original study: see Weis 2004, Lareau 2011). Comparative work on other age groups would seem warranted, as would cross-class comparative work outside of institutional spaces.

## The Boundaries of Difference in ‘The West’

What does it mean to claim that ‘cultural difference’ exists in the (post)modern, post-industrial ‘west?’ This important question strikes me as having at least two particular components: 1. The problematic project of asserting boundaries of difference such that ‘modernity’ and the modern subject—always entwined with ‘the west’—need some degree of reevaluation as theoretical totalities and 2. The broader question of structure and agency, or the ability and extent of regimes of power to determine subjectivities. Have two or three centuries of capitalism and modernity rendered everyone who has experienced them fundamentally the same kinds of people? Another way of understanding the question is to ask whether within a given regime of power, whether conceived of in cultural, economic, or statist terms, can people act agentively, reflexively, and in ways that somehow exceed the boundaries which define their contexts? As I have repeatedly gestured to above, in abstract form this is one of the animating questions of modern social science—indeed, perhaps *the* animating theoretical question of at least the last sixty years or so. In one articulation or another, it has been approached relentlessly from a variety of different structure/agency angles, including but not limited to Gramscian and neo-Gramscian ideas of hegemony and culture; Bourdieusian ideas of the habitus and of practice theory in general; Althusserian notions of ideology and the state; Foucauldian approaches to genealogy, discourse, and subjectivity; Latour’s insights on the constitution of the modern subject, Butler’s work on performativity and gender; Wallersteinian world systems theory and reactions to it; recent anthropological work on agency, modernity and subjectivity ( Keane 1997, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008; Engelke

2007; Ortner 2006) and so on. In most of these cases, the problem seems to have been fought to a mostly-stable draw, despite obvious resonances in anthropology's current dualistic embrace of both genealogical and ontological approaches to culture.

It is also worth noting that it is a central problematic for anarchist theory and praxis, not least because the conditions of possibility for the existence of any actual program of political resistance presume the exact sort of agentive wiggle room that has bedeviled on-the-ground articulations of these various theoretical programs. It would be absurd to presume that the idea of culture however construed can resolve these intractable questions, but it is easier to venture an answer for my part: 'cultural difference,' in the sense of politically meaningful distinctions in things like social solidarities, boundaries of self and group, and notions of self-interest, does exist in contemporary America, despite being relatively invisible to the academy for reasons I mention elsewhere. In short, I answer as do the anarchists in my fieldwork (e.g. Graeber 2004, 2009; Juris 2008; Shantz 2010). This is not only a politically normative statement, in that it is based on a particular evaluation of the possibilities of reflexive political action for human beings (and if you answer in the negative, why do anything at all? In some ways, it is a question whose answer is either nihilistic or utopian). It is also a statement about what constitutes difference, and an assertion that cultural histories matter—not only in the sense of their influence on the present in the realm of difference, but also in the anarchist sense that they can be reclaimed, remembered, revitalized.

In the particular case of anthropology, the question of difference in the modern west has notable importance partly because, both in common language use and also in less-visible theoretical ways, 'the west' as a cultural, political and historic entity stands in

as a coherent object of attack, point of social or cultural comparison, or normative and self-evident kind of subject-position—a monolith in our postmodern world of apparent fracture (for our informants as well as for ourselves: e.g. Bashkow 2006; this is also a problem that native or ‘halfie’ anthropology has confronted in interesting ways). Moreover, ‘the west’ is part of a lexicon that includes other vague catch-alls like modernity, Liberalism, and individualism, which often stand in broad strokes for various undifferentiated versions of selfhood or personhood. Despite the relative normalization of domestic ethnography, there remains a long disciplinary bias towards the exoticism of other places and other people particularly in reference to this lexicon, as opposed to the fundamental cultural sameness of the west (with some exceptions, notably in ethnographies of race (e.g. Hartigan 1999; Jackson 2001; 2005; Ralph 2015; Stack 1996) indigenous peoples (e.g. Nadasdy 2003), and transnational, migrant, or diasporic communities in the west (e.g. Holmes 2013).

If class culture points to the existence of ‘difference’ in the west along lines of socioeconomic status, it’s worth asking why and how this could be. Given the long history of extractive capitalism and punishing labor regimes which characterize working-class history in my fieldsite, it is unclear whether or not working-class informants in my project or elsewhere can in any sense be thought to have any aspects of their subjectivities or culture which aren’t historically ‘determined’ by capitalism as such. In other words, isn’t working-class culture just a different version of capitalist culture? This is a valid and important question and there are a number of ways to begin to answer it.

One approach would be E.P. Thompson’s work on the historical process by which classes as such came into being. While his avowedly Marxian approach ascribes

central importance to the deterministic nature of economic structures on lives, his insight is that class per se is a relational process in which working-class people participate—that they were present at the moment(s) of their creation. As Thompson puts it, capitalism is not to be viewed as “an external force...working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a “fresh race of beings”...the factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions. The working class made itself as much as it was made” (Thompson 1998: 194). As Thompson’s corpus suggests, class, to the extent that class structures are relatively stable over time, also encodes the possibility of the persistence over time of certain kinds of cultural difference in the modern world—that class is a process in which cultural histories (which are inherently multiple) have weight. This is an observation that is also central to the culturalist thesis present in Frykman and Lofgren’s anthropological history of the development of middle-class culture in Sweden, and of the persistent differences that lines of culture overlaid on lines of class point to (1987).

Another partial answer to the question of class and culture is J.K. Gibson Graham’s work on capitalism and identity, which is a sustained argument against a priori theoretical determinism, and can be read as a call to disentangle culture from structure. Gibson-Graham posits the possibility of people occupying multiple and processual class positionalities as one example of the ways that class as such is less than totalizing (2000, 2006). While it has limitations as a practical model of personhood (as my focus on distinctly working-class culture should signal), it suggests the possibility that people and even practices of production and distribution in ‘capitalist spaces’ can or do subscribe to

cultural logics that exceed or avoid the totalizing reach of the labor market and/or of class and capitalism: or in other words, even within capitalism, there are non-capitalist modes of production and distribution, and non-capitalist kinds of relations—both extant and those that could be called into being. Regardless of certain shortcomings of this theoretical vision, their analysis of capitalism as less-than-determinative of any and all aspects of culture, personhood, and sociality is both representative of a much larger literature within anarchist theory and a welcome observation when thinking through class and culture (Hardt 2000, 2004). At the very least, Gibson-Graham call us to pay attention to possibilities ‘on the ground’ that may exceed or confound existing theoretical lenses. As a methodological precept, this is a welcome call in the endless re-arguing of structure/agency debates in which class, culture, and capitalism are inevitably deeply enmeshed, as well as a reminder that using capitalism as a fulcrum on which practices are weighed is to assign a deterministic logic where none may exist—to engage in ‘capitalocentrism,’ as they call it.

Another provisional answer to this question is to be found in cultural forms like music as it exists for people in my fieldsite, where it encodes certain kinds of practices—relational and otherwise—that are explicitly understood as rejecting both self-maximizing personhood and a normative orientation to the market as an arbiter of social logics. I explore this question at length in the dissertation that follows. While it is impossible to know historically exactly how music was structured as a social practice (particularly given the focus of musical and cultural histories on music as a commercial object rather than a practice of everyday life, e.g. Miller 2010), my informants explicitly understand music as they play it to preserve distinct and morally correct ideas about how people are

to be treated in everyday life—ideas that they explicitly understand to be under attack in everyday life by realities of life in late capitalism, and that they view, in so many words, as old ('traditional').

Finally, as ethnographers like Fox (2004) and Kusserow (2004) point out, the issue is not whether there is absolute cultural difference—working-class people are undoubtedly in many respects 'modern liberal individuals.' But, as both note, there are different kinds of individualism, different ways of relating to people, different normative orientations to time, and so on, within the same historical and political worlds. The task of differentiating 'the modern west' is in some ways a search for neo-Boasian boundaries we can live with; ideas of difference that are politically and analytically useful; and a necessary respect for the possibilities of other cultural histories in anthropology's nominal backyard.

### *Section Endnotes:*

**Performance and Performativity:** The idea that class is ‘performative’ has made halting appearances throughout the literature. The term, however, has at least two distinct meanings which I briefly describe here—Goffman’s articulation being primarily a methodological precept and Butler’s an ontological one (Bettie 2003 articulates a similar taxonomy in her work).

1. Goffman’s work on the presentation of the self in everyday life has been an influential methodological referent for work on microsocial aspects of social life (E. Goffman 1959, 1974). This notion of performance focuses on the frames, registers, genre conventions, and categories that generate social contexts and define appropriate social action; it privileges a sense of ‘performance’ as a conscious activity which people engage in with reference to socially-understood norms and by imagining themselves through the eyes of others. Goffman uses the notion of dramaturgy to explain the ways that social performances (or presentations of self) constitute mutually understood and agreed-upon conventions existing between audience and performer, and proposes the idea of a restaurant, in which a waitress acts one way to the customer but very differently in the kitchen, to demonstrate his notion of ‘front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ performances. Despite the ongoing influence of symbolic interactionism, Goffman has been critiqued for his untroubled notion of the conscious and agentive subject behind the performance—which can elide the ways that performance can be both unconscious and in dialogue with powerful structures and norms, and can offer a picture of social life in which individuals appear to have carte blanche to choose identities and statuses at will.

2. Butler’s work (Butler 1990; 1993) draws on Austin (Austin 1962) to propose a radically different and constructionist version of performativity. Austin’s work, otherwise mostly influential in linguistics, elaborates kinds of speech that are constitutive of a named reality, or that performatively call into being certain relationships, objects, or statuses—the famous “I do” of the marriage ceremony. For Austin, these constitutive utterances—distinct from speech that simply reports on events—fail or succeed with reference to a constraining set of norms and rules, as well as with respect to the intention of the speaker. Butler also draws on Derrida’s theories of meaning, to suggest that the very messiness of the relationship of signification—the fact that utterances can be resignified or ‘re-cited’ beyond their original intentions—is not only part of performativity, but part of language and the sign system in general—an observation that Butler uses to suggest the possibility of transgressive resignification in the field of gender, or a space in which subjects have agency in the system of constructed identities that circulate as political-cultural realities. As Butler defines performativity, it refers to social practice “that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects” while processually constructing seemingly-given and naturalized characteristics of identity like gender—which themselves are not stable categories but rather cease to exist outside of their ongoing performative re-creation (1990: 144). As Butler notes, “such acts, gestures, and enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1990: 136)—an insight that she extends to race and other categories of identity in her 1993 work. Thus, she

describes gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts...constitut[ing] the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” (1990: 140-141). For class purposes, Butler’s theory of performativity has a couple of features worth pointing out: first, it posits actions that people at times find agentive but which are primarily unconscious, and that often end up recreating the same system of signs and identities which appear as naturalized facts; and the possibilities of reflexive or critical action are somewhat fraught or not entirely clear within the terms of the theoretical apparatus. In short, it is strikingly similar in some ways to Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus in practice theory—a similarity that Butler herself acknowledges later in her career, while pointing out that she hadn’t read Bourdieu when she wrote the two works I reference here (2003; and of course, there is a large feminist literature critiquing or extending Bourdieu on issues of gender: see Adkins and Skeggs 2004).

While Butler’s notion of performativity has distinct emphases from Bourdieusian theory in that it focuses largely on a theorization of the semiotics of the body as a central problematic, it does not to me add notably to a Bourdieusian theory of class, given that both essentially posit a version of the habitus as the mechanism through which people mostly unconsciously reproduce external categories. As I note above, I find ‘culture’ to be a much more richly-elaborated synonym for ‘unconscious performance,’ and one that isn’t riven with as many problematic assumptions about agency. Goffmanian versions of performance are perhaps more useful as a methodological tool, but again, in the way performance is used in class theory, it typically refers to the agentive things people do to ‘perform upward,’ a position that imputes a troubling normativity to certain accounts of class desire and that functions primarily in, as Bettie uses it, fields of consumption and institutional structures where people try to ‘pass’ upwards in various ways (2003). In short, I don’t use either sense of performance explicitly, because in my view the Butlerian view as applied to class is nearly identical to Bourdieusian structure/agency questions and their associated problems; and the Goffmanian approach is best regarded as a thoroughly-elaborated methodological prescription for approaching a certain aspect of everyday life mostly concerned with status. This is not to say that Goffman isn’t useful or that people don’t consciously ‘perform’ aspects of class semiotics upward (and downward) in different situations—simply that any contribution to class from his work is primarily methodological rather than theoretical, and the methodological insight he proposes seems largely normalized in anthropological fieldwork.

Other anthropologists, however, have used it to good effect. John Jackson’s work on race and class in inner-city New York (2001, 2005) shows a kind of performativity at the level of the body, as people ‘do’ race and class at a semiotic level both consciously and unconsciously through movement, clothing, affect, speech, and in other ways. Jackson’s rich work is notable as well for the nuanced way that he approaches ideas of status, showing how in certain situations, people often ‘perform downward’ or try for the covert prestige of lower-class identities. Jackson also points theoretically towards the rich work to be done on the aesthetic and kinesthetic aspects of bodily practice—gesture, gait, movement and so on—but as in much other work, shies away from actually attempting this extremely difficult task in writing, focusing instead on talk. Finally, Bettie’s (2003) book is premised on the idea that a conscious performing intentionality underlies her informant’s attempts to navigate the challenges of race, gender, and class in schoolgirl culture; she asserts that the idea of class performance is a necessary addition to

Bourdieuian notions of class because it allows her to account for reflexive actions on the part of informants (and is perhaps better suited to an intersectional theory of class). However, she also endorses Butler's notion of the (unconscious) performative in the field of class, since it points for her to the way that class exceeds individual agency in many instances. Bettie, however, never explicitly addresses the intersection of Butler and Bourdieu on this matter.

### **Anthropology on Class Culture**

One of the few works that adopts a similar orientation towards 'class culture' is Aaron Fox's brilliant ethnography of country music and working-class culture in Texas honky-tonks. Fox's work, which draws explicitly on the trajectory of British cultural Marxism, has another important precedent in Hoggart's (1970) study: as Handler shows (2005), this insightful text came to be a foundational piece for the nascent disciplinary formation of cultural studies. It is perhaps not surprising that Fox's class culture concept, which relies so heavily on the intellectual founders of cultural studies, accomplishes similar things. Like some of the other very good anthropological work on class (Hartigan 1999 in particular), Fox does not in any way draw on Bourdieuian frameworks or language. I would argue that the Marxian normative orientation which has been retained in some quarters of cultural studies scholarship, and the explicit focus on agency in daily life on the part of a working-class who this body of theory predisposes scholars to see as in some sense virtuous or at least potentially virtuous, has generated a very different theoretical focus which is much closer to what I'm proposing.

Fox's basic premise is that country music "is an authentic working-class art of enormous value to its blue-collar constituency;" one that dialectically inflects and is reflective of norms of speech and sociality, and that partakes of and legitimizes orality as a primary mode of sociality (1). Fox's assertion that "for working-class Texans, the voice is a privileged medium for the construction of meaning and identity, and thus for the production of a distinctive 'class culture,'" is supported by his sophisticated linguistic framework and vast archive of fieldwork data (20). For him, country music and the community it supports and gives shape and voice to, are in part a response to the disenfranchisement of the American working-class in the Reagan/Thatcher revolution and the years afterwards, which saw the dismantling of Fordist employment practices, the decline of real wages, and the offshoring of manufacturing centers. It is in this material environment, one in which "poverty and the risk of poverty are institutionalized at many levels, in which life is dominated by alienated, body-wrecking, and mind-numbing manual labor," that Fox situates his analysis of country music as a defining source of identity and community for working-class Texans. Throughout, Fox maintains an explicit awareness of the hardships of economic oppression, and he is clear about the way that class orders certain parts of his informants' lives for the worse. And yet his nuanced and rich examination of the speaking and singing voice in working-class culture, and of the general nature of working-class sociality in his fieldsite, is not predicated on explaining or examining any kind of causal or deterministic link between the culture he examines and class as an external structure. Fox doesn't deny this reality—he calls culture "an ideological mystification of actual social relations" and a contested space of hegemony, but also "a system of accommodation, resistance, catharsis, compensation, and....partial penetration of dominant ideology" (2004: 32). Doubtless, he could point to many

instances where talking a certain way, for instance, disadvantaged his informants in a given middle-class labor market or school; it simply isn't the overriding concern of the text, and it doesn't structure his conclusions or his methodology in an *a priori* fashion.

It is worth singling Fox out because it is hard to overstate the degree to which his book differs from other work on working-class culture, in the sense that he approaches it as an autonomous cultural realm, worthy on its own terms of respectful and careful investigation outside of an understanding of it as simply an expression of, or reaction to, oppression and/or labor and work more generally (John Hartigan's 1999 work also comes to mind, along with John Jackson's rich ethnographies of race and class, above. In a work of historical anthropology, Frykman and Lofgren 1977 is striking for this same vision and Walley 2012 arguably adopts something similar in her autoethnography, although it is mostly focused on the personal trauma of class dislocation). Indeed, the complexity Fox reveals in working-class practices of speaking and singing are an utter revelation for someone accustomed to reading ethnographies or studies of working-class life that almost monolithically deal with hardship, despair, work, school, and class reproduction, rather than considering everyday working-class cultural life as a rich space worthy of nuanced examination. In the vast realm of ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic Americanist work on class, it is also one of the very few works that was at all helpful to me in actually *doing* fieldwork, in the sense of anticipating or confirming nuances of social practice or understandings of proper kinds of personhood—in short, in terms of navigating the deep underlying cultural assumptions of my fieldsite as a researcher and embodied person. And this is not because Fox isn't critical of or doesn't have a normative political vision at odds with some of his informants in profound ways—it is simply that he allows the possibility in his work of actual cultural difference that parallels class structures without reducing the interaction to determinism—even dialectical determinism. Finally, it is one of the few works explicitly on class that deals with working-class people in a space that 1. Isn't institutional; 2. Isn't arguably pathological or illegal and 3. Focuses on a space of complex art and sociality which is both the subject of complex lay theory and is experienced as both valorized and rewarding—a space of ‘the good,’ in short. For these and other reasons, his approach to ethnography of class resulted in strikingly different data, which points to the very real and very desirable benefits to be gained from moving away from the various kinds of determinism and *a priori* conclusions that inflect work focusing on class reproduction.

It would be irresponsible to conclude this section without further mention of Sherry Ortner, as someone who has perhaps done the most visible work in anthropology to reconcile ‘culture’ with Bourdieu’s insights via practice theory (as opposed to the trajectory above which seeks to combine ‘culture’ with cultural Marxism). As Ortner has consistently pointed to (1999; 2003; 2006), she relies on a synthesis of Bourdieusian notions of practice, habitus, and reproduction combined with the focus on individual agency afforded by culture theory: “...I depart from Bourdieu and others in emphasizing the degree to which the imagination, at both the level of individual and the level of public culture, can always exceed the limits of any given position... [E]ven staying within the system one can always, as the saying goes, dream...” (2003, 13). In a number of articles through the nineties, and in two substantial books—one interview-based work and one work of theoretically-oriented essays, Ortner has laid out a consistent vision of how culture and Bourdieu can be mutually beneficial. This orientation has yielded significant

insights into class: she emphasizes subjective anxieties and longings attached to class as a constitutive part of both the concept, and the materiality of class in the world. That is, unlike Bourdieu, who tends to treat his subjects largely as the enactors of “logics” (even if essential to that en-action), Ortner frames the subjective aspect of class in terms of experience, sincere feeling, and invested, often purposeful, interaction: “If class is always an object of desire (or repulsion), whether historically or in the present, then it seems more useful to think of people, groups, policy makers, and so on, as engaged in “class projects” rather than, or in addition to, being occupants of particular classes-as-locations... We may think of class as something people are or have or possess, or as a place in which people find themselves or are assigned, but we may also think of it as a project, as something that is always being made or kept or defended, feared or desired” (2003, 13-14).

However, Ortner’s vision of what class ‘is’ in everyday life is limited by a lack of any kind of comparative fieldwork or consideration of non-middle-class cultural spaces or people. Her ethnographic text on class (2003), which consisted of her interviewing members of her high school graduating class decades after their graduation, revealed that class mobility is tied to emotional processes of longing, dreaming, and desire (where, of course, everyone is desperately trying to be or pass as middle-class). As with her earlier articles on class, where middle-class children are theorized to rebel by threatening their parents with the idea of downward class mobility, ‘working-classness’ in her oeuvre chiefly stands for a cultural space of fear, anxiety, and failure. There is very little sense in any of her work that working-class cultural worlds are worthy themselves of investigation apart from the anxieties of middle-class people, or as providing significant comparative insight into the naturalized middle-class cultural worlds she acknowledges herself to be a part of.

This trend or stance— theorizing ‘middle-class culture’ as an isolated and non-relational cultural logic, or one which is related in an overtly valorized way to a cultural space of failure—is common in contemporary anthropology. In general, contemporary anthropological ethnographies focused on class largely center on understanding middle-classness as an emergent cultural category or repertoire (Gewertz 1999; Liechty 2003; Rofel 2007; Farquhar 2002) or as an extant category in flux (Ortner 2003; Heiman 2015). A collection of anthropological essays published by three prominent contemporary anthropologists who study class exemplifies this trend, which arguably prevents anthropologists from having to make the much-more difficult and thorny argument of ‘class culture’ (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). Despite being an interesting and worthwhile book, the entire theoretical framing takes ‘middle-classness’ as a narrow theoretical focus, completely eliding ‘class’ as a structure which is much more broadly entangled with personhood and culture. As such, much like Ortner’s work, it theorizes a simplified version of class in which it is limited to a given cultural space, leaving aside thorny questions of determinism, difference, and comparative insight that accounting for class’ broader cultural existence would compel.

**Anthropology’s Lingering Marx Hangover:** A culturalist viewpoint on class, and on anthropology’s potential contribution to the study of class, is very nearly diametrically opposed to certain lingering Marxian approaches mostly visible in the

anthropology of labor—and to any approach which relies on either a notion of false consciousness or on the putatively unique enlightenment of middle-class scholars. It is also opposed to the idea that historical or dialectical materialism is an adequate theorization of culture, even if it remains an important viewpoint. As Durrenberger puts it in his edited collection, “the way people understand life is determined by their daily experiences, which are in turn determined by their class positions in their political-economic systems...thus, what Americans think, if anything at all, about class is not relevant” (2012, 3-5). For Durrenberger, the only way to escape the false consciousness of the layperson is through what he calls “conscious empirical and theoretical work” (2012:5) Putting aside for a moment the deeply problematic epistemic privilege this claims wholeheartedly only for middle-class intellectual elites, it is worth asking: can academics truly escape the determinism that Durrenberger imputes to class and consciousness simply by reading and thinking? I answer in precisely the opposite terms, although I might argue that I am simultaneously actually respecting the terms of the Marxist argument more faithfully. Class cultures deeply influence the way that people think about the world, and that includes the way people think about class—both academics and laypeople (although, of course, I also argue that those viewpoints are subject to reflexive consideration for everyone, not just academics). That is to say, what laypeople think about class (particularly working-class laypeople) is deeply important, both because working-class people are in my experience attuned to *different* class differences than middle-class people; and because it can reveal a great deal about the implicit and normative assumptions of class culture that academics as much as anyone else are susceptible to. In fact, as so many works attest, with few and notable exceptions the academy is a space so thoroughly immersed in a homogenous and hermetic middle-class cultural world that it consistently strikes me as more hostile to, and ignorant of, working-class people and working-class ways of being than any other structured space I have ever been in contact with (for a generous and moving account of this, see Walley 2012; there is also a whole genre of autobiographical essay from ‘working-class academics’).

Regardless, in many ways, it’s not surprising that a focus on class consciousness, despite being a prominent approach in ethnographies of working-class life, has not produced many insights into the actual nature of everyday life for working-class people, besides a number of competing theories of how exactly the ‘capitalist system’ or electoral politics dupes people into acting against their own self-interest. One particular problem is that works in this category typically have a fairly narrow definition of ‘self-interest,’ leaving that ethnocentric idea completely unexamined. Ironically, self-interest, arguably the linchpin of arguments that find false consciousness on the part of working-class people (e.g., Frank 2004), is also the central trait of ‘rational actor’ theories that underlie Liberal ideas of the functioning of the free market. Another way of understanding this problem is to point out that the same self-interested, return-maximizing, possessive individual that, in Liberal philosophy, makes the free market such a wonderful engine for the furthering of human flourishing, and which has been roundly critiqued as culture-free and exceedingly reductive, is presumed as a universal subject in false consciousness arguments. What if the cultural construction of ‘self-interest’ isn’t the same across lines of class? Recognizing this possibility might go a long way towards discarding the completely unproductive idea of false consciousness.

### **0.3: Methodology**

There are four primary features of my fieldsite and research design that allow me to contribute to the substantial existing literatures on class. They are, in no particular order, 1. The availability of sustained cross-class interaction; 2. The uncommon prestige afforded aspects of working-class culture; 3. A reflexivity about class and culture on the part of my informants; 4. A particular comparative stance on my part as a researcher which was made possible largely by these external factors, and which is uniquely suited to the ethnography of class. I examine these factors in more detail below.

**Cross-class Interaction:** To an extent that is difficult to overstate, people in America are socially segregated by class (a fact that is true across lines of race, but in different ways and with different outcomes: Coates 2016; Coates 2014), in marriage patterns (Cherlin, 2014); workspaces (Halle 1984; Newman 1999; Ehrenreich 1989), neighborhoods (McDermott 2006), and social spaces more generally. Outside of spaces with compulsory attendance, it is extremely rare to find sustained natural interaction between people of different classes—one of the key reasons for the rich sociological literature on class and education.

In Asheville, traditional music scenes have a long history of revivalism and associated folkloric conceptualizations of class and racial difference, the product of a cultural history I take up at length later. This history informs an ongoing middle-class music scene that exists alongside of, and sometimes overlaps with, the musical worlds of working-class locals, who are thought of as the authentic practitioners of these genres. In these spaces, working- and middle-class people have sustained and intimate interactions and relationships, based around music-making.

**Inversion:** Partly as a result of the cultural history I describe above, the musical and social space I describe is relatively unique in that some aspects of ‘working-class culture’ are overtly prestigious, and working-class people are often thought of as ‘cultural mentors’ by middle-class people. It is, additionally, a space which participants of all class backgrounds often find enjoyable, agentive, challenging, and perhaps most importantly, deeply socially fulfilling. In short, it is for the most part a space of ‘the good’ (which is not to say that it is unmarked by disputes, anger, alienation, and class animosity) and moreover, it is a space where notions of ‘the good’ are explicitly linked to ideas about working-class identity, culture, and practices—by both middle and working-class people. This makes it relatively unique as a space to study class—a fact that some readers will object to, both because it is exceptional and because it largely ignores the reality of class injury and oppression (e.g., Sennett and Cobb 1977).

The first objection is relatively easy to respond to. Compulsory attendance at institutional spaces—whether at work, at school, in courts, in jails, and so on—remains the primary distinguishing feature of working-class ethnographic studies, but working-class life contains more than just work. Unfortunately, the areas of working-class life that are primarily accessible to ethnographic researchers who, after all, typically have a scant year or so to do the research that the entire beginning of their career is expected to be based on (or perhaps a sabbatical year for a second, more easily accessed domestic project based on life experiences: see Ortner 2003, Walley 2012), is precisely the portion of life that is about work and oppression. Middle-class people mostly study working-class people in spaces where middle-class people are, crudely put, typically class

oppressors at worst and awkward and unexplainable presences at best. To make matters even more difficult, class differences combine to make a researcher in social spaces—non-compulsory spaces—extremely suspect.

The second potential objection is hesitatingly beginning to be dealt with in anthropological literature, as I mention above: the question of our ability or inclination as a discipline to describe good things in bad places (or good things at all). This is a complex topic that addresses questions of disciplinarity, politics, and the nature of anthropological inquiry across eras. In essence, our default contemporary orientation is towards suffering, disadvantage, accommodation, dispossession, and oppression. As above, I believe this understandable political project tends to result in one-sided portraits which could be enriched.

**Reflexivity:** In the mid-2000s, large numbers of punks, primarily from the west coast and often well-schooled in traditional music themselves, began to arrive in Asheville and the Southeast with the explicit goal of engaging with an idealized vision of ‘working-class culture’ through music-making (or, as some might put it, gaining competence in an idealized notion of ‘old-time music’ through familiarity with working-class culture). This addition to the local musical ecosystem brought class into very sharp focus for my informants, and led to a significant reflexive focus on ideas and debates concerning cultural difference, class, appropriation, exploitation, and privilege. Additionally, some of these topics have been (sometimes bitterly) debated since at least the time of the folk boom of the 60s, which saw a large number of musicians from the northeast relocate to the area in a relatively analogous process, and with similar concerns and debates that played out in different ways. In this rich ethnographic space, the

reflexivity of my collaborators aided my own reflexivity about the theoretical biases of middle-class academia significantly.

**Seeing “Different Differences”:** Throughout this work, in seeking to understand the politics of class cultures at the level of the social, I have tried to retain a commitment to approaching classed differences much as anthropologists approach any other cultural difference: ideally, on its own terms, but with an eye towards, as we say, ‘power and history.’ It is primarily through the tool of comparative ethnography, which takes ‘lay’ theory seriously, that this project is possible as one which reveals something unique about class. Most of the ethnography that follows is an attempt to understand *class difference* from *different class perspectives*, or, in other words, to understand the ‘different differences’ that people perceive between each other. In a given encounter, middle-class people tended to perceive a particular set of differences as of primary salience or importance, and, consistently, working-class people perceived another set. Understanding why, exactly, these particular sets of different differences were important tells us something profound about class and personhood.

There is a well-known riddle that I like to imagine is about fieldwork. It goes like this:

A traveler in a strange land approached a fork in the road. In a little house at the fork lived a pair of twins. The wayfarer knew from legend that one of the roads led to paradise, and the other to perdition. She also knew that one of the twins always lied, and the other always told the truth, and that they only allowed travelers one question. What’s the one question?

At the risk of overextending, I think this encapsulates an anthropological dilemma. At heart, it is a riddle about *how to ask*, when you know that someone knows things that are worth knowing but hard to get at. In this tale, it is important to respect that some factor—history, tradition, an outside force—produces limitations such that people can only tell you certain things. On the other hand, you want to respect their knowledge because, after all, it's all you've got to lead you on your way. The problem is, if you take seriously their limitations, you can't believe what they say. And if you want to believe what they say, you have to ignore their limitations.

Like all good riddles, the answer is simple and elegant, and relies on the twins' knowledge of each other and of themselves and of the road, rather than your knowledge of the twins:

You ask one of the twins, “Which road would your twin tell me leads to paradise?” And then you take the opposite road.

This formulation of *how to ask* partly removes the traveler and her knowledge from the equation. In more formal terms, when you're trying to reconcile your own epistemological positioning with an ongoing need to figure out and characterize what different kinds of people know, one productive methodology is quite simple: you ask them about each other. Or, more accurately, you defer some of the important work of categorizing and framing differences away from your own located and specific knowledge, and onto a broader encounter where multiple knowledges can be compared on roughly equal footing. This move—which entails simultaneously recognizing that informants have ‘worlds’ which are valid, naturalized, and coherent, and that those worlds interact with other ‘worlds’ with similar limitations, including your own—is what I called in the introduction ‘intimate comparison.’ In moving the focus away from the

ethnographer, as an embodied foil to the cultural strangeness of informants, it suggests that categorical differences *between informants*, as understood by informants, can be extremely productive if approached in the right way. In fact, as I will argue, they have the potential to reveal important facts not only about the fieldsite, but also to train a reflexive lens on the fieldworker and their own culturally-located knowledge, which is, of course, structured by its own limitations.

**Music as an Ethnographic Space:** Public music-making is one of the rare social spaces in America where people from different classes regularly and routinely publicly navigate class-cultural differences, and where a great deal of developed lay theory on these differences exists. Music structured regular and frequent social gatherings that I gained access to both as a member of working bands, and as a musician more generally with significant experience in the musical worlds I studied. While I attempt to give an overview of the sonic and semiotic aspects of music in my fieldsite, I am not primarily focused on music per se as an object of study. Instead, I focus on the social interactions that unfold in the spaces around and within music-making. Particularly with respect to country music, perhaps a majority of the extant research fundamentally treats music as a text or commodity to be consumed, read and interpreted (Peterson 1997; Ching 2001; Fox and Ching 2008; Miller 2010). I instead draw on an emergent body of literature to focus on music as a productive activity that structures certain kinds of social relationships—although I also recognize that it is simultaneously semiotically-charged and contested cultural terrain (Abbate 2004; Meintjes 2003; Small 1998; Turino 2008). Within the social space of music making, doing research as a musician had some particular features.

Notable among these were the unexpected social obligations that I found it to engender, particularly in working-class spaces, where playing music was regarded less as a matter of self-expression and more as an obligation to the broader social gathering—an imperative that demanded significant time spent on stage (and sadly, away from interactions and conversations). This in turn rendered me in some places a public figure of sorts, known or at least recognizable to a number of people that I did not know. This presented challenges and opportunities—it meant that I was always playing catch-up, but it also opened up possibilities for conversation that might not have existed for me as an unknown quantity.

The other primary feature of doing fieldwork as an experienced musician is the way that music can operate as a kind of cultural password into worlds that might otherwise be inaccessible. Musicianship, or expertise in a given genre, prominently indexes a number of things: familiarity with a canon, an internalized set of sonic, bodily, and kinesthetic idioms, idiomatic melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic conventions, and of course a large amount of time spent practicing—both in the sense of technique and in the sense of having spent time with other people who play the music—an indexical link to time spent with a particular kind of people. Or at least, this is the common assumption, true or not, of many informants—a fact that makes it something of an unfair advantage in the difficult ethnographic realm of becoming a known and legible social subject for informants and collaborators (Fox 2004 comments on this exact dynamic when he began playing music in his fieldsite—which for him marked a complete shift in the kinds of access he had to interesting situations).

## 0.4 Overview of Informants

I refer throughout this dissertation to three separate groups as distinct entities, and as being differentiated by ‘class,’ a contention that receives significant explanation in the literature review. Below, I provide a brief outline of the three groups of people that I use in comparative relief. This should serve as a basic introduction to some of the demographic factors that flesh out the social divisions that this dissertation centers around. As I hope I make clear, the characters in here are not one dimensional people whose class identity trumps all else; they are, like all people, complex and multiple, and their interactions are multivocal and likewise complex. My goal is to show how, within the categories of people I describe, there exist important shared cultural assumptions that make it useful in my eyes to label them as such. I also note here that the terms of my categorization are not commensurate—I label two groups of people by class status, and one by ‘subcultural affiliation,’ for lack of a better term. As will become clear, the ‘punks’ I describe below mediate between the two classed categories in interesting and productive ways.

**1. “Middle-Class People”:** I use a number of related terms to describe people who, in my fieldwork, were affiliated with a music scene centered on Asheville’s downtown at venues like pubs, wine-and-cheese shops, and upscale listening rooms, as well as jams at private residences and a regular annual festival circuit. The musicians that frequented these venues, which predominantly feature either old-time or classic country music, tend to be white, college-educated, politically liberal, and from out-of-state; I alternately refer to this scene as ‘middle-class’ or ‘revivalist.’ The middle-class people I

describe are almost all musicians who play some variety of ‘traditional’ music (a label that belongs to a lexicon that includes ‘heritage,’ ‘authenticity,’ ‘roots,’ and other related terms with a shared cultural history that I take up in the second chapter). Most of these people did not grow up playing this kind of music or even perhaps listening to it, but often came to it later in life through some variety of conversion experience. When middle-class people use the word ‘traditional’ as a term of approbation in reference to cultural practices, they are obliquely referring to a very particular cultural lens, which I trace in chapter two through a long history of interest in ‘the folk’ as a particular cultural object, and through periodic (sometimes ethnonationalistic) revivals of various ‘folk’ cultural forms by middle-class people.

Needless to say, perhaps, the vast majority of middle-class people who understand and practice ‘traditional’ music through this set of understandings are, in a word, ‘liberal.’ Liberal here means subscribing to the broad outlines of the existing ‘progressive’ ideological formations largely associated with the democratic political party, including associated understandings of issues like race, gender, sexuality, the environment, the cultivation of the self, and, perhaps most importantly, a set of (contradictory and conflicted) anti-modern or counter-modern impulses that are themselves locatable within the long cultural tradition of folklore I point to above. Most of the middle-class people I describe understand themselves to be involved in a set of culturally and politically virtuous practices that run counter to prevailing social trends they associate with late capitalism, and they enact these impulses partly through musical practice. This is not to convey an attitude of undue cynicism towards or dislike of these people; indeed, I count myself and many of my good friends uneasily among their

number, and some of the finest times of my life have been, in fact, playing ‘traditional’ music as such. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the outlines of the encounter I describe in this work are predicated on the dynamic of middle-class people actively learning, imitating, and re-making practices and competencies that have their mythic origin in working-class life. And furthermore, these middle-class scenes often have existing parallel (and occasionally overlapping) working-class musical scenes and communities, which are a rich source of imitation and consternation.

In demographic terms, middle-class informants were about equally divided between men and women, and ranged in age from early 20s to late 60s. There were very few children present at any social or musical functions, although recent retirees were very well-represented. It was rare to see people much above 70 or anyone who required assistance in moving or traveling due to age, with the occasional exception of venerated ‘tradition-bearers,’ most often elderly working-class men. Most were college-educated, and many had graduate degrees of some kind (including an astonishing number who had graduate degrees in Appalachian Studies). While some had professional careers like architecture, law, or had started small businesses, younger musicians were likely to work in one of the area’s many boutique service profession, like barista, sound tech, or in the burgeoning craft beer scene. Some worked more traditional ‘working-class’ jobs like landscaping or construction, at least in the short term. Regardless of occupation, most of these people I describe had not only the positive economic privileges of middle-class life like family financial cushions, educational privilege, and leisure time; they also had various kinds of invisible privilege, or a lack of certain kinds of economic disadvantage. Some of the more common economic and social constraints on working-class

informants—bad health or bodily injury and lack of health care; extensive networks of obligation and reciprocity which functioned to both dilute hardship and forestall accumulation; immediate family who required extensive care and support—the very fact of not having these kinds of disadvantages characterized most middle-class people in the scenes I describe. These invisible privileges, or lack of common disadvantages, however, were just that: invisible to them by and large. Thus, there was significant misidentification (to my eyes) with working-class people on the basis of temporary employment in manual labor trades, for instance, or based on the simple fact of low income jobs.

Almost none of the middle-class people I describe were from the immediate area, and relatively few were from North Carolina or surrounding states. Instead, the biggest areas of geographic representation in the middle-class music scene I describe were the major population centers of the northeast, and to a lesser extent the Pacific Northwest and northern California.

**2.”Working-Class People”** : In addition to ‘working-class,’ I also use synonyms like ‘Local’ or ‘country’—all of which designate different cultural schemas for locating working-classness as an identity, but refer to white, rural, multi-generational residents who largely work service and manual labor jobs, and mostly don’t have formal college-level education. The working-class people I write about were also mostly musicians, although this fact means a different thing compared with middle-class informants. First of all, most working-class informants had grown up with ‘traditional’ music as an unremarkable presence in daily life, as part of a broader musical ecosystem that included perhaps bluegrass, pop country, classic country, southern rock, classic rock, and other

forms of popular music largely anathema to middle-class traditional musicians. In working-class contexts, being ‘a musician’ is also less of an avocation or a distinguishing individual passion; for working-class people, playing music is often a normal part of social life rather than an overriding social identity to be cultivated. This is also partly due to the typical lack of formal training in contrast to middle-class musicians, many of whom came from classical backgrounds of some kind. Regardless, many working-class informants had broad repertoires encompassing songs from a number of the genres I name above, even while being solidly grounded in the instrumental style, social practices, and canon of an existing local scene (bluegrass, for instance).

Most working-class informants worked precarious and low-paying manual labor or service jobs, and access to health care was often either through emergency-room visits, Medicaid or Medicare, or simply absent—although the ACA, which was implemented during my fieldwork, is sure to change this dynamic to some extent. Military service or the possibility of military service was not uncommon. Most working-class informants resided in the farming communities, unincorporated small towns, and rural regions that surround Asheville. Working-class informants also typically had extensive kin and friend networks, with whom they maintained not only complex and ongoing social ties, but also networks of reciprocity and obligation whose demands and benefits were not insignificant.

One of the corollaries of what I describe above as characterizing working-class informants—rurality, extensive social networks-- is the question of geographic mobility, and all the questions and issues accompanying that question--from labor markets, to attitudes about family and travel, to social capital, and so on. Like the word ‘native,’

'local' has a long ideological trajectory. While recognizing that it implies a certain kind of condescending reification of marginalized people, the term itself is one of approbation among many who are from the area, particularly if they have long family histories; this operates as a kind of covert prestige in the locale to which Locals belong. I address this polarity further in the conclusion to chapter three.

Working-class musical scenes typically had a far greater diversity of age at given events, from very young children and teenagers all the way to the very elderly, and often including individuals who needed large amounts of assistance and care to attend at all, or special accommodations to be able to make music. Working-class musical spaces were in general much more accommodating of a wide range of physical ability levels and tended to be more inclusive in terms of music-making, as I explain later. Contrary to the widely-held stereotypes by middle-class musicians of testosterone-riddled patriarchal competition as characterizing working-class music-making, I found most working-class musical spaces to include large proportions of women as both musicians and community stalwarts, although it is also true that portions of the canon and some norms of social practices were determinedly masculine, and female musician were at times marginalized. In middle-class scenes, however, similar outcomes existed through different dynamics (e.g., the prevalence of women musicians playing less-prestigious rhythm instruments like bass and guitar, the overall preponderance of male lead players, and competitive aspects that were obviously present but unspoken).

The racial make-up of the rural working-class musical spaces I visited, as one would expect from demographic figures for the rural counties of western North Carolina (where Black populations were often less than 3%), was almost entirely white, although

many of the spaces I frequented had a small number of African-American regulars who danced or played music. In contrast, I did not see one conspicuously non-white musician at any middle-class musical event in over ten years of playing—with the rare exception of punk scenes (see more below). However, due to the presence of a sizable but marginalized Black population in Asheville (which hovers around 14% according to the US Census Bureau), the lack of racial diversity at middle-class events was more of an object of public comment—particularly with the existence, during my fieldwork, of a small-scale revival of black North Carolina stringband traditions.

**3. “Punks”:** The binary I describe above is moderated in my work by a group of people I call ‘punks’ after their own practice. Punk in my usage refers to a group of people defined through voluntary participation in something between the boundaries of a ‘subculture,’ a social movement, a ‘scene,’ a community, and a set of political beliefs and practices. The punks in this work came from a variety of different class backgrounds, and included individuals with good relationships to stable, middle-class families all the way to working-class runaways estranged from families or from dysfunctional and abusive backgrounds, including the foster care system. While it is an article of faith for some observers of the punk scene that it is a place where alienated rich or middle-class kids go to play at being poor or to get some slumming out of their systems before settling down to a respectable and productive life, I found this to be the exception rather than the norm. Instead, the punk scene was one where class cultures collided, where differing backgrounds and assumptions fed into an ongoing praxis that centered on politicizing ways of ‘being in the world.’ As I describe more fully in chapter two, I regard the punk scene as most importantly a self-making project that is premised fundamentally on a

critique of hierarchy and coercion, understood as arising most notably from the oppressive nature of late capitalism and the inequalities it engenders in the realms of race, gender, sexuality, class, and so on. It is inherently anti-statist and anti-government. Because punks and anarchism are for all intents and purposes co-terminous in the contemporary American political landscape, it is impossible to fully describe who and what punks are without engaging Anarchism both as a political philosophy and as an imperfectly lived practice (again, see chapter 2).

Demographically, punks ranged in age from late teens to mid-forties, with most active punk musicians in their late twenties and early thirties. Predictably, there is attrition in the hard-core punk scene with age, although some older punks, including those with families, maintain an admirable commitment to their politics. The vast majority of punks were white, with probably slightly more women than men (and a notable minority of trans or gender-queer punks who rejected a gender binary). While a core group of punks had established permanent or semi-permanent lives in the area, many others cycled in and out, some because of seasonal migrant routes based on work or weather, some simply on whims of travel and vagrancy. Most, as above, worked temporary jobs, made a living as musicians, or patched together various kinds of part-time work, often at bars and music venues and through the well-developed local agriculture scene and associated markets.

Punks tend to look a certain way: stereotypically, they have lots of tattoos; they dress outrageously and often in black layers or other dark colors; they are not known for bathing; they like to do wild things with their hair. While personal styles are not a focus here or in this dissertation in particular, I mention them both because punks as such were

a visually striking group and identifiable as such; because these aesthetics tended to influence their interactions with other groups in predictable ways, and because punks did not typically adjust their modes of dress to anticipated social events the way middle-class people often did. Punks ended up in Asheville for complex reasons, including but not limited to the political project I describe above. A number of my informants were practicing punk musicians when they heard old-time music for the first time, and something about its rawness and its energy simply struck them as right. Along the way, they decided that to really play it, they had to experience life in the mountains themselves to be better players. For others, they sought a southern town that nevertheless made room for people with non-conforming gender identities or far-left politics; some were just there because there was a well-known punk scene and it seemed like a good time.

## 0.5 Researcher Context

There are conflicting ways to outline my own engagement with my fieldsite. I grew up in a small wood-heated log cabin at the end of a dirt road fifteen miles outside the nearest small town—a deindustrializing former furniture town in a very rural county in western North Carolina. Raised with familiar features of rural southern life like fishing, guns, trucks, chainsaws, gardens, animals, and so on, I graduated from the local public high school and went to a state university, on a combination of Pell grants, loans, scholarships, inherited education savings from my grandparents, and contributions from my parents, as well as my own employment.

On the other hand, I grew up where I did because my parents moved there for professional work at a non-profit. My parents, incredibly supportive and loving without fail, raised my siblings and me with the expectation that we would attend college. Thus, although we were raised in a thoroughly working-class rural place and with some of the elements of rural working-class life and child-rearing practices (and with a deeply southern working-class family legacy on one side), we were primarily liberal middle-class kinds of people, as I would now say.

In college, I attended some of the massive anti-globalization protests of the early 2000s. My familiarity (and ongoing work in grad school) with anarchist or consensus-based organizing, and with the politics of the broader movement, probably made life a little easier for me in punk circles.

My spouse and I did fieldwork at the same time by design. Liza, who is an inspired ethnomusicologist and fiddler, was studying gender and working-class country music performance, mostly in a nearby town. Her insight, and the additional comparative

perspective on working-class musical worlds that her simultaneous fieldwork afforded us, were invaluable for me in understanding and articulating this project. As with all fieldwork, the interaction of my own embodied history and identity with the social realities of my fieldsite resulted in the ‘situated knowledge’ of this work, and generated both my own blind spots and points of insight.

It is finally worth mentioning that being a long-time player of the various musical genres in my fieldsite was an important element in my ability to do the fieldwork I did, which would otherwise have been impossible. Although I grew up going to bluegrass festivals and played guitar since my teenage years (partly based on my dad’s wonderful Travis-style picking), I started on southern rock and only seriously began to play bluegrass and old-time after a banjo-obsessed college roommate loaned me one of his instruments. In old-time scenes, I was primarily a banjo player, and I had been playing music in both old-time and bluegrass scenes for some fifteen years when I started fieldwork. When I played bluegrass, I played guitar (lead and rhythm), a discipline which was my primary musical focus in the years before fieldwork and in which I felt most comfortable. In the honky-tonk band I played in, I circulated between bass, rhythm guitar, and lead electric guitar, a discipline that I mostly learned during fieldwork but which my background in bluegrass lead playing made easier.

## **0.6 Class and Intersectionality**

This dissertation sustains a relatively narrow theoretical focus throughout on class. This is not because I regard the social life of class as actually separable from its intersection with other categories of identity or subjectivity like race and gender. Indeed,

it is an article of faith that class is complexly entwined and often mutually constitutive with these and other social categories (and there exists significant work theorizing it as such: e.g. Bettie 2003, Jackson 2005, Sapir Flood 2017).

Rather, I largely abstract classed notions of personhood and cultural ethics from other factors because, as Lareau also argues (2003), I believe that there are important but subtle aspects of what it is to be ‘of’ a certain class that largely transcend barriers of gender and race (much as there are aspects of racial identity that transcend class and gender, and aspects of gender that transcend class and race). While the lens of intersectionality has produced important insights into the composition and maintenance of identity categories, I believe that there is also valuable work to be offered through reflexive ‘strategic reductionism.’ Regardless, the realms of personhood I focus on applied in significant ways across lines of gender—an opinion reinforced through many conversations with one of my primary informants and best friends, who was a working-class woman. And while I did fieldwork in a mostly white space, there is also significant ethnographic evidence to suggest that many of the aspects of class I focus on also transcend lines of race (and even nationality—see the introduction section on scale and scope).

As Sapir Flood demonstrates (2017), gender is classed. That is to say, across lines of class, what it means to be ‘a woman,’ for instance, and how that identity intersects with feminist concerns like agency, autonomy, and oppression, is quite different. As she argues, this is partly because of different cultural logics that inhere in classed spaces like the ones we both examined. Sapir Flood’s research--as a female musician playing country music with working-class women—offers a sensitive and accurate account of the ways

that those differences played out, and I defer to her important work on gender in working-class cultural worlds, and the broader intersection of class and gender. It is important to note that, as with all collaborations, our ideas were developed in conversation and as such, this work should be viewed as complementary rather than antagonistic to the project of understanding the particular interaction of class and gender.

### **Racialization, Whiteness, and Class:**

How do you approach a space where almost everyone is a white ‘traditional’ musician and yet divided into two marked, self-identified, and durably-composed categories of people? What if one of those groups is privileged, educated, literate in urban culture, sophisticated in taste, fluent in the registers of consumption that circulate in a globalized knowledge economy, and socially unmarked in urban middle-class life; and the other is comparatively poor, unhealthy, marginalized, marked as different in urban middle-class spaces in accent, speech, body, dress, affect, and gesture, proudly provincial in taste, without formal higher education, and largely generationally static both geographically and in class mobility? Are they both the same kind of white people? If not, is the proper way to understand their differences through the lens of race or of class?

Although this began as a project on whiteness and racialization, the parameters of my fieldwork highlighted the limits of this as a theoretical approach. In short, in a space of white racial sameness differentiated by class, the lines separating racializing from classing practices or outcomes are unclear. Are classes raced or are races classed? How does one distinguish between a practice that inscribes working-classness on a white body, from one that inscribes a particularized lower-class kind of whiteness on a white body?

Are obesity, diabetes, early heart disease, or bodily injury racial markers or class markers in this space? Do registers of distinction and taste mark the boundaries between white races or white classes? It is a question that is impossible to answer with any degree of proof; or, perhaps more accurately, it seems to me that to the answer will depend largely on the point one wants to make. In effect, to deploy race as a critical lens through which to make sense of the encounter I describe would require me to posit a white racial identity that is privileged by class, and a white racial identity that is oppressed by class—and to understand the differentiating factors in both instances as inherently ‘racial’—a category of analysis that is stretched to the point of disappearing in this instance, particularly because the aspects of class culture I focus on cross lines of race in significant ways.

Alternately, despite the fact that a large plurality of poor and working-class people in this country are white, it would require the presumption that ‘middle-classness’ as such *is* a cultural repertoire of whiteness. It is unclear where this approach would leave either middle-class Blacks or poor and working-class whites.

These questions also raise an unresolved issue of important consequences: how to understand ‘whiteness’ as a coherent racial identity or analytic object when it itself has to encompass such distinct poles of privilege and abjection, as pervasive cultural imaginaries, political-economic histories, and the continued relevance of the category of ‘white trash’ point out. I have chosen to foreground class as an analytic framing device for a number of reasons, but chief among them is that I believe that, instead of serving as another instance where whiteness’s internal heterogeneity is examined at the level of practices (a project that has been done, and done well, by others: Hartigan 1999, 2005; Wray 2006; Hubbs 2015), it actually served as a way to productively if artificially

separate class out from the intersectionality that characterizes its study in so many other situations.

As I note below, literatures on whiteness have done vital work in defining whiteness as a racially-motivated identity defined by privilege; likewise, an important corrective literature sprang up addressing internal differentiations of privilege within whiteness, and the field remains relatively stuck between these two poles. Because Appalachia has historically been an important location for American imaginaries of degraded whiteness, debates on whiteness have played out in particular ways in Appalachian studies—a fact I take up at length in chapter one. Regardless, it is relatively indisputable that the idea of poor, disadvantaged or abject whiteness as a durable cultural category is a controversial subject. This is related to many factors, including the fact that class oppression in America is an odd beast. For specific historical and contemporary reasons, it disproportionately affects minority racial groups, particularly Black people, in grievous ways. But numerically, class oppression is overwhelmingly a white problem: for instance, recent census numbers estimate that about 25.7 million whites live under the federal poverty line, compared with around 9.4 million Blacks (US Census Bureau: Macartney, 2013). The fact that whiteness is differentiated by class—in ways that disadvantage certain groups of white people in durable, generational, and nigh-unescapable ways—is indisputable, but it is not a fact that weakens the critical force of arguments for racial justice or against white supremacist policies, laws, institutions, and traditions. Rather, it is an observation that should add nuance to the ways that we understand oppression to work, and underline the vital importance of contextualized understandings of class.

It bears saying that liberal, overwhelming urban, overwhelmingly middle-class and white academic social science has a longstanding suspicion of the internal otherness that working-class whites represent (for a brilliant analysis of this, see Hubbs 2015). The liberal association of working-class white people with the prevailing moral panic of the day is likewise quite long. In the 1920s, when social Darwinists were panicked about miscegenation, racial dilution, and intermarriage, poor whites (as well as minorities) were the target of enforced sterilization advocated by ‘progressive’ reformers, including Oliver Wendell Holmes and Margaret Sanger (Wray 2004) for their imagined racial inferiority and miscegeny. When moral panics about homosexuality came to the fore midcentury, particularly in the context of the armed forces, the blasé attitude of working-class people to homosexual practices was a chief point of demonization again (Hubbs 2015). Now, with racial justice and gay rights prominent progressive foci, poor and working-class whites are imagined to be a problem for exactly the opposite reasons that they were throughout the past century: they are imagined to disproportionately be racist and homophobic. Have the cultural attitudes of working-class people completely inverted in the last 100 years? As Hubbs shows, this is not a sufficient explanation. Instead, class, and the divisions of privilege and influence it structures, combined with the cultural differences it entails, tend to set the stage for a convenient scapegoat for the projection of whatever problematic attribute white middle-class liberals—the narrating class—fear in themselves. This dynamic is particularly problematic for the ways that it insulates middle-class liberal whites from confronting their own complicity with structures of racial and class privilege and oppression, even when they may think of themselves as indeed ‘anti-racist.’

### **Trajectories in the Whiteness Literature:**

As many scholars have noted, whiteness studies proper commenced sometime in the early nineties with the publication of a few seminal works (including Omi and Winant 1986; Roediger 1991; Frankenberg 1993; for brief scholarly histories, see McDermott and Samson 2005; Hartigan 2010.; Hartigan 2004; Smith 2004; Wray 2006). As an extension of critical race theory, whiteness studies emerged from the “growing realization that one cannot fully understand the existence of racism and racial inequality without paying close attention to the formation and maintenance of white racial identity” (McDermott and Samson, 2005: 246). In its early guises, as in Roediger’s early work, the task of the emergent discipline was to make clear the racially motivated character of whiteness and white actions: to recognize, as it were, that white privilege was predicated on the maintenance of the exclusivity of whiteness. For this reason, it was initially proposed mostly as an undifferentiated sort of privilege. Roediger’s seminal work examines the historical development of the white working class as a racially motivated group, proposing a psychological-social framework for understanding the fact that the beleaguered working class would accept as a suitable benefit the fact of their whiteness and free citizenship in the face of class oppression (1991). Although his assumptions (that the working class is exclusively white; that all white working class people are racially privileged and racist) are at times dubious, his work stands as an important investigation of how whiteness and class may interact at times. Frankenburg (1993) investigates the dilemmas that second-wave white feminism encountered in its attempt to

build coalitions with black feminists; she notes that the relative blindness of white women to their own racial privilege destroyed the possibility of solidarity with black women who were very clearly aware of the intersectional nature of their own oppression (a theme that Appalachian-raised black feminist bell hooks has also explored in many places). Thus, for Frankenburg, a chief salient feature of whiteness is its relative invisibility: as an unmarked category, not only are white people typically not aware of their race privilege, for her they are also basically unaware of their own racialized whiteness.

Other scholars have approached the notion of whiteness as a form of property or possessive investment (e.g. Harris 1993). Bonilla Silva (2001; 2005) has argued forcefully that racism in contemporary America has undergone fundamental changes since the era of the civil rights movement. Laying out a detailed case that Black and white Americans still are subject to markedly different life chances based exclusively on color, Bonilla Silva notes that racialized access to privilege is concealed by a ‘colorblind’ discourse of race-talk that pretends to be value-neutral. In actuality, colorblind racism ironically appropriates the discourses of King and other black activists to insinuate that people’s life situations are ultimately their responsibility and fault; in this sense, structural and historical facts are obscured in a discourse of personal responsibility. This allows white people to make racist statements in a coded register that avoids any mention of race by displacing responsibility for historical and structural disadvantage squarely onto the shoulders of the people who are disadvantaged. It also simultaneously posits a version of whiteness that is emptied of its privileged status by the logic of individualistic striving. It is worth noting that Bonilla-Silva’s structural interpretation of racial privilege

and colorblind racism, while powerful and productive, also ultimately relies on an undifferentiated idea of whiteness and white privilege to operate.

As McDermott and Samson note, “the scholarship on whiteness in the United States has highlighted several important characteristics of white racial identity: It is often invisible or taken for granted, it is rooted in social and economic privilege, and its meaning and import are highly situational” (2005: 247). I now turn to the last part of their triad, an assertion that would seem to critique or contradict the first two aspects of whiteness studies. And indeed, the authors I briefly review in the following section frame their work as an intervention in the literature, although in slightly different ways. Wray and Newitz in their anthology take on the task of explicating a heterogeneous version of whiteness, selecting as their ‘test object’ the idea of ‘white trash’ ( 1997). For them, white trash is productive to think with because it delimits the boundaries of normative white identity, presenting an ontological contradiction to common notions of whiteness as invisible privilege. Noting that ‘white’ is a racial term and ‘trash’ is a class term, they posit that the combination identifies a racialized version of whiteness that is matter out of place for normative whiteness, in that it is racially marked and classed at the same time.

John Hartigan’s 1999 work is notable for the ethnographic detail of poor whites and class in Detroit. Intentionally set in a city where, as Hartigan argues, blackness is in certain ways an unmarked and powerful category, his work argues for an intensely particularist and local understanding of race that privileges the processual and ongoing interpretation of racial categories. His most powerful section focuses on ‘Briggs,’ a downwardly-mobile and formerly white neighborhood with high historic Appalachian in-

migration and a current ‘hillbilly’ population coexisting with a majority black population. Hartigan demonstrates that intensely local meanings and histories come into play as residents decide when and how a situation becomes racial, and how they will react to it. In general, Hartigan’s argument is that race at the actual everyday level is not an overarching and fixed ideological construct but a processual interaction. For this reason, he is reluctant to offer any sort of fixed definition of whiteness; instead, he shows ethnographically how, among other things, class has a large role in determining racial situations and the content of whiteness in general. Hartigan uses this exposition to ultimately argue for specificity rather than generality in racial theorizations.

Hartigan’s 2005 work builds on his ethnographic insights to generate a historical and theoretical account of poor whiteness. In framing the book, Hartigan takes aim squarely at whiteness studies when he asserts that “social scientists and cultural critics appear completely disinterested in what the social predicament of poor whites, who constitute the majority of the poor population in the United States, reveals about how and why race matters in this country” (4). Hartigan also notes that Bonilla Silva’s elaboration of ‘new racism,’ while useful, narrows the terms of analysis of oppression to almost exclusively race, finding racial dynamics in every situation. Hartigan advocates a more intersectional approach; he also doubts the pragmatic efficacy of telling all white people that they are racist even when they don’t talk about race. Arguing against the idea of ‘otherness’ as an intellectual model, Hartigan advocates a focus on boundary work—the task of delimiting categories—as central to a cultural analysis of racism, one which must always be local and particular.

Wray's 2006 work has many parallels with Hartigan's but is more historically focused and less theoretically developed. Noting that the category of white trash "brings together into a single ontological category that which must be kept apart in order to establish a meaningful and stable symbolic order," namely, abjection and whiteness, Wray proceeds from the assumption that poor whiteness as a destabilizing category is by itself a productive object of study (2). To investigate the historic boundaries and delineation of white trash, Wray traces a historic trajectory from the border communities of pre-revolutionary colonial America, to the creation of the term in the antebellum south to describe whites outside the land-and-capital owning classes, and then to the discourses circulated by abolitionists and secessionists in pre-civil war conflicts. Finally, he gives an historical account of the American eugenics movement, lasting from the post-reconstruction south until the late 1930s, and focused partly on 'imbecilic whites' who were legally sterilized under the Supreme Court Ruling in *Buck v. Bell* (a process that only ended in the 1970s).

### **Privilege and Abjection in White Appalachia**

This section characterizes one particular debate within the context of Appalachia and whiteness which I found helpful. Appalachian scholarship, though always cognizant of inside/outside differentiations in structural class relations, has paid relatively little attention to the idea of racial (or for that matter class) diversity within the boundaries. Prominent historian John Inscoe terms this the persistent 'myth of racial innocence' common in depictions of Appalachia, which appears as a notable historic elision of the presence of black and other racially marked subjects in Appalachia, and a tendency to

suggest that the (mythical) uniform whiteness of Appalachia makes analyses of white privilege and white supremacy therefore unimportant to scholarship of the region (Inscoe 2001). The confines of the notion of ‘race’ to non-white people has been a marked feature of the limited literature on race in Appalachia, apart from the political-economic analyses of degraded whiteness and the refutations and analyses of ‘hillbilly’ and other stereotypic tropes as they appear in American popular culture throughout the years (Williamson 1995). Although many of these works recognize an explicitly racialized component to the class-based stereotypes, they do not engage outside literatures on processes of racialization or whiteness, and so for the most part remain somewhat myopic in their focus. Inscoe himself has traced the ways that white supremacy in Appalachia has historically served to exclude, oppress, and disenfranchise black residents, while actively creating the ‘mostly-white’ spaces that the region is known for through discriminatory policies that among other things served to evict black landowners from their property (2001).

In a journal issue devoted to race in Appalachia, Barbara Smith argues that although Appalachian history has been “a profoundly racial process,” Appalachian scholarship has largely ignored race apart from fairly recent works on the historic presence of black people (Smith 2004: 38). She ascribes this fact to three primary issues within the literature: an assumption that “race is viewed as operative only in settings where people of color are present;” a perspective privileging class over race as a mode of understanding oppression; and “a failure to situate pejorative stereotypes of white, working-class Appalachians within a larger critique of racism and white supremacy” (38). In contrast, reviewing the literature on whiteness through an Appalachian prism,

Smith views racial processes as “structural relationships of inequality” that are socially inescapable, arguing that “race often provides the discursive framework through which class domination is represented and resisted” (40). However, in contrast to theorists like Hartigan, Smith does not view race primarily as a local phenomenon taking place interactively; instead, she advocates a structural perspective that recognizes that race is a “deep and systematic phenomenon” whether or not people are experiencing racial situations in their everyday lives (41). In fact, situations where racial homogeneity means a lack of racialized tension in everyday life have often become so because of systematic and structural prior exclusion. Smith argues that, despite the ‘racialized logic’ of the stereotypes that circulate concerning the white working class or poor, it is a different thing to suffer class oppression with racial overtones than to be racially marginalized. She notes that “race-driven repudiations make a particularly problematic analytical leap: from superficially observing the racialist content of hillbilly stereotypes to concluding that white mountaineers are an oppressed minority and presumably experience none of the advantages of whiteness” (48). Indeed, as she notes, these same analyses tend to employ discourses of racial justice harkening to the civil rights movement; for her, these arguments “are at best confused, and at worst, resonate unintentionally with neo-conservative and even white supremacist positions on racial victimization” of white ethnicities (48). For Smith, despite the racializing content of stereotypes of white trash, ‘whiteness’ per se is largely an unmarked and undifferentiated space of privilege.

Hartigan’s response notes Smith’s objections to a particularist understanding of race, fully conceding that “race is an overwhelming fact of life in the United States,

shaping discrepant life chances and access to social resources;” in this sense, the question of whether Appalachia’s distinctiveness makes it different from the rest of the nation is easy to answer with a ‘no’ (Hartigan 2004: 58). However, he says that Appalachia might be distinctive in ways that make racial operations “somewhat different from the racial dynamics that operate across the nation at large” (58). Further, Hartigan notes that “the relative status of [poor] whites in the region, as well as their susceptibility to degrading stereotypes, qualifies or erases their participation in whiteness as a form of domination” (59). At the same time, Hartigan agrees that assertions about the oppressed race of Hillbillies suspiciously echo the ‘oppressed white ethnicity’ arguments so common as a white supremacist antidote to charges of privilege; however, for him this is not the same as a call to ignore the stereotype of the hillbilly. Instead, he is interested in refining the way we talk about and theorize race so as to be able to note the ways that hillbillies (or white trash) do and do not fall victim to processes of racial discrimination, and do or do not participate in structures of white dominance. This entails countering the “prevailing assumption...that [whiteness] is uniformly associated with domination and power...that whites are generic homogenous racial subjects shaped by a common ideological orientation” (65). Instead of focusing on racism as a lens, Hartigan instead advocates a focus on racialization—which encompasses not only oppression but privilege as an object of investigation; however, he notes that this orientation to some extent makes racism per se evasive, because “its conceptual focus is on social relations rather than on ideological orders” (66). While he notes that Smith’s focus on the connections between national and local processes and ideologies of race is indeed important, for Hartigan it serves as an initial assumption better than as a conclusion.

Noting the confusion that Smith (and also Roediger in his later work as well as Bonilla-Silva) displays in her normative definition of whiteness, he quotes historian Eric Arnesen on scholarly uses of whiteness: “Whiteness is, variously, a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for ‘white supremacy’, an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial ‘Others’ and oneself that can be rejected through ‘treason’ to a racial category” (61). Because of the confusion of defining whiteness as such, he notes, arguments using whiteness as a heuristic are inevitably tautological, never arriving at a conclusion that they didn’t start with as a premise (“whiteness is a racial identity, therefore white people have a racial identity. Whiteness entails material benefits; therefore, the material benefits white people receive are a reward for whiteness” and so on—Fields in Hartigan 2004: 61). In the context of Appalachia and whiteness, Hartigan asks: “how [can we] sort out and equate the intertwined dimensions of class and race...and how do we make sense of the position of disadvantaged whites in an overarching social system defined by white dominance?” (64).

# Chapter 1: History and Context: Situating Revivalism and Anarchism

## 1.1: Introduction

This chapter has two major sections. The first outlines a brief cultural history of revivalism as a particular practice, and suggests how Asheville's music scenes fit into the broader cultural and political-economic history of 'Appalachia,' with particular attention to the late 19th and early 20th century. It aims to describe why there existed an intriguingly cross-class traditional music scene during my fieldwork, and on what historical trajectories, terms, and understandings it was predicated.

The second section begins to explain why punks appeared in the Asheville traditional music scene in the early 21st century. It suggests a very brief outline of anarchism as a political philosophy and as a praxis, and engages the idea of 'punk' as a particular instantiation of anarchism in the contemporary US. Relying on the biographies of two primary informants, it shows how punk praxis structured a particular kind of engagement with traditional music, for reasons at times distinct from and at times related to the history of revivalism. It closes with a brief ethnographic introduction to touring the southeast with a honky-tonk band staffed by punks.

As I note below in more detail, this chapter mainly interrogates the cultural histories and logics of the people—middle-class revivalists and punks alike—who came to the area and in various ways involved themselves in extant working-class or mixed-class musical scenes. In a comparative fashion, the rest of the dissertation examines the differing cultural logics of working-class, middle-class, and punk informants as they

emerged in shared encounters and by comparison. In a way, the rest of this work is intended as an examination of opposing working-class cultural logics as they are highlighted by interlopers.

## **1.2: The History of Revivalism as a Middle-Class Cultural Impulse**

This section aims to provide a cultural history of the ongoing encounter between working-class and middle-class people that this ethnography draws on in a comparative way. Asheville, North Carolina has a long regional history related to ‘traditional’ genres of music like Appalachian old-time and Bluegrass—musical forms which in various ways have been the subject of revivalism and associated folkloric/academic and lay conceptualizations of culture, authenticity, and class and racial difference. As the cultural practice of revivalism tends to do, this history has impelled into interaction people from very different backgrounds—in this case, giving rise to an ongoing middle-class music scene that exists alongside of, and sometimes overlaps with, the musical worlds of working-class ‘locals,’ who are thought of as the authentic practitioners of these genres (ENDNOTE: Working-Class Cultural History).

In order to understand how this situation came to be, I pursue several historical goals in this chapter. First, I provide a brief overview of the European origins of folklore/revivalism, showing how it has been an inherently middle-class and largely academic phenomenon related to concerns about social and cultural dislocations inherent to industrial modernity. Revivalism has also historically shown a deep engagement with socioeconomic class as a field of fetishized and romanticized difference.

I show how the European cultural legacy of folklore and revivalism, already present in the US in significant ways, arrived in the Asheville area in the early twentieth

century in the figure of folklorist Cecil Sharp, himself already the initiator of a folkdance revival in England. His presence in the US, and the particular lens through which he approached ballad collecting and the ethnonationalist implications of ‘folksong,’ had significant influence not only on the nascent and newly-professionalized field of folklore but also on the burgeoning field of pop-cultural portrayals of Appalachia (ENDNOTE: Anthropology and Revivalism). I note how Sharp’s legacy draws not only on the Herderian legacy of European revivalism, but also drew from the vital strains of Fabian socialism in England in his day, a political attitude that reached US shores in various ways.

I trace Sharp’s legacy in North Carolina through the twentieth century and to the contemporary moment through the figure of Bascom Lamar Lunsford. Lunsford was a mountain-raised lawyer who became a preeminent folklorist and in many ways pioneered the form of the folk-festival, a particular cultural artifact which endures today (including a prominent Asheville festival that he himself founded and ran for decades). Lunsford’s understanding of folk music drew heavily on Sharp’s legacy, and has created an almost century-long milieu in Asheville where ‘traditional music,’ viewed and deployed in very particular ways, has served a function of regional boosterism. This long history has created particular kinds of music scenes in the area.

Narrowing in scope, I focus on a brief regional history of Asheville proper, situating the city geographically within the broader region of Appalachian Western North Carolina, and showing how it has historically been a crossroads of trade goods; a bohemian utopia imagined and re-made by the industrial tycoons of the turn of the century; a center of middle-class leisure, health, and recreation; and ultimately, a boom-

and-bust town where cycles of massive outside capital investment in land and construction have structured the local economy.

Finally, I situate Asheville within a regional representational history. I suggest its place in the reconstruction-era south, and detail how the history I gesture to above, and in particular the work of Sharp in Asheville, influenced the scholarly and popular depictions of a region—Appalachia—that became synonymous in the early century with American ideas of the ‘folk.’

#### ENDNOTES TO SECTION

**Working-Class Cultural History:** In the explicit context of my project, what these ideas do not describe in any meaningful way is working-class cultural history; rather, it is a sampling of the ideas through which middle-class people have imagined and interacted with working-class people (and, of course, various other categories of difference). To focus on such a thing is not to imply that the history of ideas through which working-class people or communities (or indeed, any given group that has been the subject of this set of understandings and associated processes) have thought of their interlocutors is not important or equally rich and complex. However, such a history--qua ‘history’ --is much harder to recover (although it is consistently present in ethnographies, where anthropologists often note that their informants have a well-developed anthropology of anthropologists), simply because of the nature of archives, literacy, and representation, as these things interact with class. It is also fair to say that, in the same way that the encounter in this ethnography was *initiated* primarily by middle-class people, it is often historically middle-class people who are out meddling in the ways I point to. In this respect, the ethnography that follows is as much about understanding working-class responses to, and evaluations of, culture workers and activists as it is about evaluating activism per se.

Regardless, a cultural history of working-class people in Appalachia or even Asheville, or a history of class and political economic processes in the region, are not the main goals of this chapter. Cultural histories of Appalachia as such have been a hotly contested terrain since the late 19th century, and have come in for extensive and warranted critique in the last thirty years. There is simply no way to gesture to a transparent ‘cultural history’ of any aspect of Appalachia without wading into a large number of ongoing debates in the region, involving versions of strategic essentialism; discourses of abjection, poverty, labor exploitation, and dispossession; salvage histories of agency and resistance; romanticized depictions of a noble agrarian past, and intellectual historiographies of all of this. Additionally, the social and political-economic history of the region as a set of (putatively) objective facts is exhaustively and authoritatively addressed in many other places, through research that is more detailed and

thorough than anything I could hope to accomplish here. Instead, I outline some of the salient aspects for my project of regional history, historiography, and representational conventions.

**Anthropology and Revivalism:** The overlap of the histories I trace here with the history of anthropology (the lens through which I approach them) is a cause for concern. In his introduction to “Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec” (1988), Handler notes some of the difficulties involved in studying the politics of culture as they play out in daily life, through the lens of a discipline that itself depends on a particular kind of “cultural objectification” of its own. The effect is something like an echo chamber, where versions of the debates and stances that anthropology has worked out or relied on in its own intellectual trajectory are apparent, in altered form and with distinct mutations, in lay practice. This is perhaps most apparent in the widespread lay use of ‘culture’ as a particular concept, but occurs with particular frequency in realms like lay revivalism, where ideas of tradition, authenticity, appropriation, and heritage all draw confusingly on academic legacies that are intertwined with anthropology’s history. Anthropological fieldwork on revivalism therefore confronts the parallel universe of the conceptual underpinnings that informed its own early disciplinary history, elaborated in distinct ways over the course of a century or more in lay practice. And in important ways, much as I am describing revivalism as a ‘middle-class project,’ much the same could be argued of anthropology—a subject that I address throughout this work. This situation is only exacerbated by the particular kind of anarchist politics I detail in the next chapter, which, even more confusingly, both explicitly derive from and share many common assumptions with anthropological insights of even the last thirty years. Without losing sight of this confusion of the map and the terrain, my goal here is to engage these important issues while keeping in mind the effects of this ongoing echo chamber, which also was apparent during fieldwork.

## **European Antecedents: Locating the Prehistory of American Ideas of *The Folk***

“It was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries... that the 'people' or the 'folk' became a subject of interest to European intellectuals. Craftsmen and peasants were no doubt surprised to find their homes invaded by men and women with middle-class clothes and accents who insisted they sing traditional songs or tell traditional stories” -Burke (2009: 23)

The history of European folk revivalism—and associated movements like romantic nationalism—is an important precursor to events in the US from at least the time of reconstruction. Indeed, while I focus mostly on the early 20th century here, it is clear that 19th century Americans were quite conversant with the idea of ‘the folk’ and of cultural ‘collecting.’ see, for instance, the massive 19th century work of Harvard folklorist Francis James Child on ballad variants (1994). This is not surprising given the nearly universal appeal of these ideas in Europe during the preceding century and a half (M. Campbell and Perraudin 2012). These ideas tend to be first attributed to Herder and the German romantic or counter-enlightenment tradition, which articulated a project somewhat at odds with aspects of classic modernist thought; tended to focus on the idea of essentialized characteristics or the particular ‘genius’ of folk traditions; and which came over time to stand for an idea that often defined ‘folk’ groups in nationalistic and racialized terms. As Burke puts it, “This movement was...a reaction against the Enlightenment, as typified by Voltaire; against its elitism, against its rejection of tradition, against its stress on reason. [It] prized tradition above reason, what grew naturally over what was consciously planned, the instincts of the people over the arguments of intellectuals” (Burke 11)” (2009: 34).

Following in particular Herder's 1778 essay on poetic form, as Burke argues, along with the immense vogue for the Ossian poems published by the Scottish poet James MacPherson in 1760 (ostensibly a transcribed form of an ancient Celtic bardic song cycle; later revealed to be at least in part MacPherson's own verse) there was an explosion of intellectual interest across Europe in 'folk' traditions—particularly as conceived of in a nationalistic sense. Who 'the folk' was seemed fairly clear: agricultural or pre-industrial rural peasants. Much of the collecting followed a familiar pattern: members of the cultural elite, armed with a nascent understanding of the folk and folklore, both collected artifacts from and published volumes of poetry, lyrics, and music portraying noble if archaic peoples whose favorable qualities were often diametrically opposed to worrying aspects of modernism (in art) or modernity (as a cultural or political-economic fact). These volumes often contained highly edited and curated works which omitted anything 'popular'—that is, recently composed—and completely elided the often ribald bricolage of 'folk' culture in favor of a purified and sanitized counter-modernism.

As Burke details, the late 18th century saw upper-class intellectuals across Europe begin to conceive of peasants as possessing all the traits that the elite feared they themselves were losing in the transition to modernity (Burke 2009, 8-12); these sentiments followed closely the philosophizing of Herder on both the cultural output of 'the folk' as somehow possessing an authentic genius or essence. Importantly, one of the primary understandings of the early theorists of 'the folk'—from at least the time of Herder--was the trope of endangerment: the idea that 'true' folk culture, as in the culture of agrarian peasants, was quickly dying under the onslaught of industrial modernity.

Collectors of the day, like Sir Walter Scott, explicitly lamented the homogenization of culture they saw as inevitable (Burke 2009: 40), and rushed to collect and preserve what could be salvaged. However, perhaps the most notable contribution of Herder to the trajectory of thought he in some ways inspired was a deceptively simple one: his writings completely reversed the polarity of the moral evaluations of ‘peasants’ common to his day (if only for a selected chunk of the peasantry; namely, the ones not crowding into the burgeoning urban centers). Regardless, this simple and compellingly-argued reversal had significant ramifications.

The original articulation of the idea of folklore was in large part an aesthetic endeavor—particularly in the sense of a reaction against the perceived sterility of elite or commercialized artistic forms. From Herder on, artists and writers who found the rationality and teleological organization of modernist thought soulless, hollow, or lacking some sort of vital essential energy, turned to folksong or dance for inspiration and authenticity. This sense of the artistic vitality inherent to folk culture was an integral element in Herderian thought from his earliest writings (Campbell and Perraudin 2012), and found form in the revival in a variety of ways: through the incorporation of folk melodies, rhythms, and linguistic conventions into elite art and literature; through the appropriation of folk storytelling conventions; and through the imitation of agrarian crafts and skills—aspects of which were subject to middle-class revival in various forms in nearly every European nation-state in this time period (see Burke, 5-8, 123-4 2009). These sentiments also were expressed in classical music through the works of art-music composers like Bartok and Dvorak and others around the turn of the 20th century, and by Powell in early 20th century America, among many others. The echoes here are

particularly striking when compared with iterations of folk revivalism in 20th century America, where participants in the postwar folk revival described the differences between folk expressive culture and the soulless pop music of the day in nearly identical terms, and for identical reasons ( see, for instance, Cantwell 1996; Scully 2008). Strikingly, even some of the adjectives are similar, two hundred years on: Herder describes folk art as ‘sensuous,’ ‘raw,’ ‘vivid,’ and so on—largely of a piece with the reaction of American collectors like John Cohen to the music of the rural miners of 1950s America (Campbell et al 2012: 13; see also Cantwell 1996).

Besides the parallel trajectory of the early discipline of American anthropology (ENDNOTE: Anthropology and Herder), the most direct antecedent to the culture work of American folklorists in the early 20th century came in the form of what Lears describes as ‘antimodernism’—a particular reaction on the part of cultural elites to the alienating effects of industrial modernity which showed the same romanticization of laborers and peasants (or, at least, their imagined practices). As Lears (1981) argues, anti-modernism and Herderian notions of the folk went hand in hand: “Yearning to reintegrate selfhood by resurrecting the authentic experience of manual labor, a number of Americans looked hopefully toward the figure of the premodern artisan. His work was necessary and demanding: it was rooted in a genuine community; it was a model of hardness and wholeness, or so it seemed.” (Lears, 1981: 60). At least as early as the mid-1800s in Britain, anti-modernists like Morris and Ruskin were agitating for a romanticized notion of labor; in the case of Ruskin, from an overtly Marxist perspective that emphasized the right of all people to dignified, joyful, productive labor. Ruskin in particular hated factory work and industrialization, and “exhorted affluent Britons to

boycott machine-made goods, and sought to spread enthusiasm for manual labor by leading Oxford undergraduates on road-mending expeditions..." (Lears 1981: 262). Ruskin's student Morris was less optimistic about the role of the state—he hated modernity generally, and later in life included socialism in that category—but equally romantic about the nature of life and labor in a halcyon moment before folk life had turned to modern life. The overt focus of these ideas was the agrarian peasant, who stood in for the kind of unalienated laboring subject that adherents of the arts and crafts movement imagined to exist in preindustrial times; as Morris put it, "The leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization" (in Lears 1981: 62). Importantly for the history of this work, as Waite (2012) argues, William Morris' antimodernism was both a direct influence on Cecil Sharp and thus on the history of folklore in the Appalachians, and itself bore large traces of Herderian thought. As Lears shows, however, the antimodernism that underwrote Sharp's work also manifested in American cultural fads like the turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts movement (the original DIY movement).

In short, the European history of revivalism was at heart an intellectual project that was both explicitly academic in expression, even when it diffused into the popular sphere; and overtly middle-class in both its genesis and its abiding concerns. As I will argue, although it was other things too, this cultural impulse in its many iterations has largely been a phenomenon of middle-class people doing cultural work on themselves through an imaginatively-conceived otherness found largely in the realm of class difference. This statement, as I show, remains largely true today in revivalist musical forms like old-time, as I argue in chapter four.

## SECTION ENDNOTES

**Anthropology and Herder:** Herder's own conception of folklore was complex in ways that are not fully captured by later interpreters, and aspects of it deeply informed Boasian anthropology and American Folklore. As Schellenberg argues, his ideas about the interaction of Volk cultures and the emergent category of the nation-state were less deterministic than often represented: "the essence of Herder's understanding of the Volk was...a conscious and knowing co-existence of cultures...it was the recognition of the dynamic interplay of differences and similarities that enabled one to discern one's own specific values and traits" (2012: 11). Thus, for Herder, Volk cultures existed in comparatively-defined and pluralist ways, and stood in relation to his conception of a broader humanity rather than the political unit of the nation. Furthermore, while they had an ethnic component that was magnified in troubling ways in later iterations by other thinkers (and Volk itself, as a word-concept, was flexible and powerful enough to become a key concept both for Nazi Germany's race unity propaganda, and for later East Germany's state socialism, as Perraudin notes: 2012: 103), Herder's own conception of Volk cultures was largely morally relativistic—he was unwilling to declare any given folk culture superior (Schellenberg 2012: 12; Perraudin 2012: 104-5).

The resonances of this conception to Boas' own elucidation of the culture concept should be obvious; Boas was deeply influenced by his training in an intellectual environment in which Herder's ideas had become in some ways common sense (Stocking 1966). As Bunzl notes, Wilhelm von Humboldt, himself deeply influenced by the thought of Herder, was responsible for major interventions in German scholarship—particularly the fields of history, 'volkerpsychologie,' and comparative language study (emphasizing language and personality or language and thought) which contributed to Boas' own projects of delineating anthropology as a discipline (Bunzl in Stocking 1996). Additionally, Humboldt de-emphasized certain troubling racial implications in his own use of some of Herder's concepts; Boas, of course, was often in direct conflict in his early career with extant American strands of anthropology and ethnology, which, in large part due to Morgan, were explicitly evolutionist (Stocking 1968: 116-7 (1982)). As Bunzl argues in incredible detail, the German social and natural science traditions—particularly as formulated by both Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt—provided Boas with a set of perspectives that transcended the teleological formulations of culture proposed by contemporaries. In a sense, he took Herder's concept of Volksgeist and adapted it into the foundation of a new discipline (Bunzl 1996: 73). However, as Stocking notes, he did this through a series of shifts and small rebellions—moving gradually from a roughly evolutionist perspective in his earliest writings, to the period of intense work that underlay his critique of racial formalism and the 1911 publication of 'The Mind of Primitive Man' (Stocking 1968: 203)—by which time a more or less fully Boasian notion of 'cultures' in the relativistic and pluralistic sense had arrived. However, as Stocking puts it, "[Boas'] problem as a critic of racial thought was in a sense to define "the genius of a people" in other terms than racial heredity. His answer, ultimately, was the anthropological idea of culture" (*ibid* 214). Thus, ironically, the same branch of thought that informed the fascist racism and ethnonationalism of Nazi Germany was simultaneously instrumental to the development of Boas' explicitly anti-racist science.)

## **Discovering the Folk in Appalachia: Anti-Modernism and the Translation of the European Tradition**

“The hobby of song-collecting is a fascinating one. It leads to an intimate knowledge of old peasant men and women, which is not only pleasurable but much more beside. It leads, moreover, to the recovery of many melodies of rare beauty; melodies which have sprung from the hearts of our own country men and women, and which express the national character more clearly and with, perhaps, closer fidelity than any other form or art.” -(Sharp 1907: 18)

In 1916, an Englishman named Cecil Sharp arrived in Appalachia. Idled by World War I in his largely successful efforts to nurture a nationalistic revival of British folkdance in his own country, he intended to collect what ballads he could in the Southern Appalachians. Sharp, as I show in the following section on the development of folklore and American conceptions of Appalachia, had an important impact on the trajectory of both lay revivalism and academic folklore in the US. This section traces how Sharp’s work in North Carolina influenced not only the area itself but a much broader swath of US intellectual and cultural history. I suggest that Sharp’s legacy, in the person of an Asheville local named Bascom Lunsford, was a direct influence on the way that figures like Pete Seeger and other luminaries of the mid-century left conceived of and deployed the idea of folk culture. This was true not only in the sense of conceiving of it as an object of study and revival, but also in the sense of a romantic assessment of its political potential. To contextualize the twentieth century embrace of Sharp’s legacy, it is necessary to understand some of the differences that Sharp’s vision of collecting, popularization, and revivalism presented to American folklore as it existed at the turn of

the century. I suggest that part of Sharp's vision depended on tentative ties to late-century British radicalism. For a more complete picture of Sharp's effect on American folklore, the next section turns to a brief survey of lay and academic folklore work before and after Sharp.

Without a doubt, Sharp's work in the Appalachians was a direct continuation of a distinctly European project focused on national character, racial heritage, and anti-modern, anti-industrial sentiments that had tentative ties with strands of leftist radicalism. Sharp arguably represented the convergence of two particular European responses to modernity, and the way that he merged them both in his political orientation and in his approach to 'culture' and 'the folk' prefigures a great deal of 20th century American cultural work. In Sharp, the Herderian tradition, which also in important ways informed the emergent academic disciplines of Folklore and Anthropology in the US, was overtly nationalistic and racial—he consistently identifies the folk heritage he is interested in through these terms. However, the Herderian tradition he absorbed also influenced lay approaches to 'culture,' and particularly expressive culture, in less-troubling ways, arguably providing Sharp with a lens through which to appreciate folk culture as worthy, admirable, and the product of 'good' people—a romanticism that, however disturbingly arrived at, made him a good fieldworker and a sympathetic interpreter of the people he encountered and the folk culture he found. This attitude, which stood in distinct contrast to most (but not all) of the collectors working in his day, extends to our time in durable and still-resonant ways.

The second important influence on Sharp's particular approach to 'folksong' and to the people he thought to be the rightful creators and keepers of it, was the branch of

Fabian socialism extant in England in the late-19th century, particularly as expressed in the thought of William Morris (Walkowitz 2013). Sharp was conversant with the socialist thought of the British left of the 1800s in a variety of ways: he himself heard Morris lecture at Cambridge in his time as a student there and later read his works (Bustin 1982); his sister Evelyn was a socialist radical and noted suffragette with whom he had a close relationship and who worked with him on English folk dance councils (John 2009). Although a cautious and generally politically moderate man himself, he was on occasion in dialogue with people who saw leftist political potential in folk music: for instance, he corresponded with the famous anarchist Russian prince Peter Kropotkin off and on. Kropotkin to Sharp in 1906, then in exile in England: "...the work of collecting songs from the people....seems to me the very best way for creating someday a national music in this country. Without that preliminary work—under the present separation between town and country—the growth of national composers would not be possible" (Kropotkin in Karpeles, Karpeles 1967: 67). As Lears notes, Kropotkin and his vision of communalist agrarianism, already in dialogue with the socialism of late-century England, was an influential figure in the anti-modernist imaginings that constituted the milieu in which Sharp's sensibilities were formed, particularly through anti-modernists like Ruskin and Morris (1981).

It is important to note that, in diluted form, the radicalism of Morris and Ruskin that Sharp was conversant with had arrived in America through other means as well—primarily the short-lived 'Arts and Crafts' movement of the early century, which nevertheless expressed a certain kind of anti-modernism that itself has also proved quite durable in the American cultural repertoire. As various authors detail, however, the arts

and crafts movement in America was a largely depoliticized version of Morris' original and explicitly socialist vision, adopted primarily by urban elites who were concerned with their own incipient moral and cultural decay. This impulse was acted out both in the form of a romanticization of manual labor and of craftsmanship in the face of alienated industrial labor; in the institutionalization of various kinds of 'folk schools' aimed at imbuing the nascent proletariat with craftsmanly virtues (and in keeping them from dangerous agitation); and in revivalism efforts focused on folksong and folkdance as a healthy outlet for the otherwise dangerous energies of immigrants and working-class people generally (Walkowitz 2013, Lears 1981, Whisnant 1983). The arts and crafts movement, as Lears argues, also functioned as a part of a "therapeutic worldview" for the northern elite of the gilded age, who feared their own moral, physical, and cultural degeneracy and reacted with a romantic anti-modernism that idealized the nobility of physical labor and the notion of self-sufficiency (1981; echoing, of course, what Tocqueville wrote about extensively some time earlier).

The combination of these two sets of ideas—Herderian ethnonationalism and romantic anti-modernism—was engaged in separate but related ways in academic and lay theory and through various kinds of 'collection,' categorization, revivalism, and commercialization of music; and also has important implications for an understanding of middle-class American leftism. It is important to note that while this section and the next focus on Sharp's legacy, Sharp functions as an exemplar with particular resonance to my own fieldsite, rather than as a culture hero. Much of the 'new' that Sharp exemplified in collecting was also in the air in various other forms and through other important figures.

### *Sharp Brings a Newfound Populism to Academic Folklore in America*

Cecil Sharp was born in Denmark Hill, England, in 1859 to moderately well-to-do parents (Karpeles, 1967: Except where noted, biographical information comes from this source. Maude Karpeles, an Englishwoman who had been active in both English settlement house charity work and folk dance revivalism, accompanied Sharp on two collecting expeditions in the Appalachians, took over his dance organizations in New York after their initial collecting trips, and was the executor of his will following his death. She authored the only extensive biography of him towards the end of her own life). Educated in mathematics and music at Cambridge, he circulated through various minor appointments at preparatory schools for a number of years. In a seminal moment of awakening in 1899, he witnessed a Morris dance troop (the putatively traditional ‘sword dance’ of the British Isles) performing during the Christmas season, and realized he had found his calling in documenting and publicizing what he came to consider the essentially English folk tradition of balladry and dance—the revelatory conversion moment common to so many narratives of revivalism. Sharp was not alone in this sentiment; the notion of collecting the disappearing cultural patrimony of English peasants was very much an ongoing concern in England, with organized societies promoting its study (Gregory in Campbell and Perraudin 2012).

The years 1903 to 1914 saw Sharp collecting and lecturing on traditional song and dance in England with great success; by all accounts, there was a genuine revival of folk music and dance in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks in large part to Sharp’s work (Gregory 2012). Universities and preparatory schools founded Morris Dance groups and traditional balladry enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in printed broadside

and performance (Karpeles, 41-60). Sharp's take on folk music was consistent with ethnonationalist strands of Herderian thought common at the time; as he put it, "Art can only be built from below; the instinct of music cannot suddenly appear for the first time when civilization has attained the flowering stage; it must be innate in the nation and be present, therefore, in some form or other in all the earlier periods of its development" (Sharp in Karpeles, 67). He brought this attitude to America: in his introduction to the leadingly titled *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, he argues for a 'cultural' education for the mountaineers that values the traits emerging from the essence of national character: "..This national type is always to be found in its purest, as well as in its most stable and permanent form, in the folk-arts of a nation" (Sharp 1932 (1917): xxxv). For Sharp, America drew its essential character from its racialized English roots—a point he drives home again and again in his descriptions of the mountain people. In a particular cultural resonance, America in Sharp's moment was in the midst of an immigrant panic, stoked by fears of a fifth column of radical proletarian immigrants from eastern and southern Europe during WWI. Sharp's ethnonationalist vision therefore, as Batteau argues, (1990) accorded well with much popular sentiment of the times.

One of Sharp's unique contribution was to take rather dry academic salvage work, which mostly sought to collect and document dying traditions (as in the Child Ballads collection), and to popularize it as a relevant and vital pastime (primarily of middle-class people). He did this partly by collecting songs with an eye towards their popular performance, much as he had done with folkdance in England. The idea that folklore and collecting activities should aim to revive the traditions in question was not completely unique to Sharp, but it did put him at distinct odds with the majority of the folklorists of

the time, both in England and in America (a history I examine later in this chapter). One of the more interesting effects of this attitude for Sharp is that instead of simply documenting lyrics and relating them to the established Child ballad version, he actually attempted to note the melody of the tune as sung without reharmonizing it—one of the very few early collectors to do this. As has been true of almost all revivalists and collectors from the day of Herder to the present day, of course, Sharp “had a strong antipathy to the music to which the ‘common people’ of his day actually listened” and was completely scornful of both commercial music and folk adaptations to and of it (Filene 2000: 22).

Sharp was aided in his quest by a chance encounter in New York with a wealthy northeasterner, Olive Dame Campbell, who had previously canvassed the region for folk music and collected a substantial amount herself while aiding the research of her husband, who led the Southern Highlands Division of the Russell Sage Foundation (located in Asheville, North Carolina at the time, having moved from Charlottesville, VA earlier). Sharp himself, with his life-long assistant Maude Karpeles, had been teaching folkdance in New York off and on since 1914—an interesting history in its own right that Walkowitz (2013) examines in detail. In theory, Sharp and Campbell sought the most isolated and pristine Anglo-Saxon balladeers in their quest; in practice, they mostly collected songs on the peripheries of tourist destinations, resort towns, and university towns. Despite having collected a substantial volume herself with an eye towards publication, Campbell was extremely generous with Sharp, taking him to sources she had cultivated and claiming little credit for her work. Thanks to Campbell, Sharp’s time in the

Appalachian mountains of North Carolina, mostly around Asheville, was very productive: in all, he, Campbell, and Karpeles collected some 1600 new ballads.

Sharp was taken by the people of the southern mountains and was arguably one of their most sympathetic representatives in print at the time (Whisnant 1983—Whisnant also notes his ‘radical sympathies’). I quote at length his impression of the people around Asheville, North Carolina because of the contrast it invites with a large portion of American collectors I show in the next section:

“They have an easy unaffected bearing and the unselfconscious manners of the well-bred. I have received salutations upon introduction or on bidding farewell, dignified and restrained, such as a courtier might make to his sovereign. Our work naturally led to the making of many acquaintances, and in not a few cases, to the formation of friendships of a more intimate nature, but on no single occasion did we receive anything but courteous and friendly treatment” (Sharp, 1917: xx).

In general, the situation through Sharp’s eyes was less “a case of arrested development...than of arrested degeneration”—a classically anti-modern view that had as much in common with Morris’ vision of agrarian socialism as Herderian ideas (Sharp in Karpeles 1967: 146). While he acknowledges the monetary poverty of his subjects, he assigns them a natural dignity and intelligence that seems to spring directly from his own disgust with industrial civilization—a trait he shared with both the agrarian socialists and the romantic nationalists. In fact, Sharp and his co-collectors conspicuously and intentionally avoided those few mountain towns that had industry of any sort: coal camps, lumber mills, and so on. Sharp felt that the contact with so-called modern civilization tended both to eradicate the songs he was after, as well as debase and denigrate the

inhabitants who had previously been largely self-sufficient on their mountain holdings.

As Sharp writes:

“That the illiterate may nevertheless reach a high level of culture will surprise only those who imagine that education and cultivation are convertible terms. The reason, I take it, why these mountain people, albeit unlettered, have acquired so many of the essentials of culture is partly to be attributed to the large amount of leisure they enjoy, without which, of course, no cultural development is possible, but chiefly to the fact that they have one and all entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial heritage. Their language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually acquired and accumulated in past centuries and handed down... It must be remembered, also, that in their daily lives they are immune from that continuous grinding, mental pressure, due to the attempt to ‘make a living,’ from which nearly all of us in the modern world suffer. In this respect, at any rate, they have the advantage over those who habitually spend the greater part of every day in preparing to live, in acquiring the technique of life, rather than in its enjoyment”  
(Sharp, 1917: 24).

Sharp died of various ailments some six years after his last trip to America, but he left in his wake an enthusiasm for ballad collecting, and a particular interpretation of the people in Appalachia, that would bring a wave of academic and amateur folklorists to the mountains. It seems clear in retrospect that Sharp made at least three important contributions to the extant practice of collecting in the US. First, he established a framework of documentation that emphasized the importance of the individual performance and performer, including melody. Secondly, his collecting was very much an effort towards the possibility of the popular revitalization of folk traditions, which he saw as offering a much-needed infusion of authentic artistry to the abject popular music of the day. Finally, underlying both of these positions, he argued forcefully, and from a relatively prestigious position, for a largely positive representation of ‘the folk’ as such.

Sharp's influence was also substantial on the region in which he collected. The next section traces the influence of Sharp through one of the most well-known balladeers of the early century, a native of Asheville who went on to found in important ways the American tradition of 'folk festivals' —a development that echoed through the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and which continues today. In an important history which I don't trace here, his partner in ballad collecting, Olive Dame Campbell, went on to found a 'folk school' aimed at the uplift of mountain people, which also continues to this day, albeit as a middle-class arts and crafts school. Whisnant (1983) extensively traces the history of this institution, from Campbell's founding of it on politically moderate Danish models, through its early troubled history teaching local working-class people Danish folk traditions. As he notes, in later years, "...it is more or less ignored by local people and frequented mostly by culturally dislocated middle-class visitors from other parts of the country" (1983: 266). In my own fieldwork, this evaluation of the John C. Campbell Folk School (still extant) was true; it was also true of local music camps and college programs aimed at traditional music education; and it was in most ways true of the folk festivals in the area, with some notable exceptions.

### **Sharp, Lunsford, and the Birth of the Folk Festival**

In this section, I trace the influence of Sharp and his vision of folklore through an Asheville local who I argue had a wide impact on the broader field of folklore and popular culture. While the ideas of Sharp and other versions of folklore and romantic nationalism were certainly in the air in this time, Lunsford represents a direct connection from Sharp's legacy to contemporary American ideas of how folk music (and culture)

should be appreciated and presented. Lunsford brought this vision to life in Asheville first and foremost. As I show in the section dealing particularly with Asheville history, there are good reasons why Asheville was a fertile location for Lunsford's vision.

Bascom Lamar Lunsford was born in 1882 near the town of Mars Hill, in a county to the north of Asheville. Although he had a relatively unremarkable rural and agricultural childhood, in many ways, Lunsford was privileged for the time—his mother's family had been important landowners in the county, and had been instrumental in the founding of Mars Hill College (Jones 1984: biographical details largely taken from this work, his only extant biography). Lunsford himself graduated from Rutherford College, taught English there as a professor, and eventually took a degree in law from what would become Duke University. Lunsford was notoriously peripatetic throughout his life and worked an immense variety of jobs, including some in his youth that amounted to a kind of informal fieldwork, and enabled him to collect an immense number of ballads while traipsing about selling fruit trees. Lunsford was in many ways the classic culture broker or translator—a liminal figure, largely from the mountains but in important ways, not of them. By inclination or through his formal education, he developed into a recognizable collector for the day, treating the songs as treasures to be extracted from their owners. However, in many ways, Lunsford's vision of folklore, while indebted to the conventions of the day, had much more in common with Sharp's ideas than with the general thrust of the nascent folklore societies—which were springing up in southern states at a rapid clip in the first decades of the 20th century, and with which Lunsford was deeply involved.

As a native anthropologist of sorts, Lunsford was himself intimately familiar with the conventions and habits of rural Appalachian life at the time, and this sensitivity made him a formidable fieldworker. As he put it,

“Here in the Appalachian region the people are sturdy and they are fine, and they have held on to their traditions. Knowing the proper approach has helped me a lot, knowing how the other man thinks and what to depend on...when you go to see a man about playing, you take your hat off. You don’t just go in and say “Josie, get your banjo, I want to hear you play.” You just can’t do that...Just because they are limited in some ways doesn’t mean that their morals are low. Their morals are high. You go in there and treat them like ladies and gentlemen”  
(Lunsford in Jones, 1984: 28).

As Jones details, Lunsford’s undying passion was music, and while he himself played and sang, his primary gift, as it turned out, was as a sort of talent buyer-a facility that made him a natural at organizing festivals. However, Lunsford himself was a noted musician, and his collecting mostly took the form of building for his own pleasure a vast repertoire of songs and tunes, which he would perform throughout his life. In interesting ways, Lunsford’s influence as a culture broker—his lectures, performances, and festival organization earned him the moniker ‘Minstrel of the Appalachians’—also thrust him into the historical record as a seminal source musician for the early days of recorded stringband music. He knew noted recording executive Ralph Peer personally and as Jones notes, either offered or was solicited to record during one of Peer’s first forays into commercial recording in Atlanta in 1924; Lunsford recorded a few tunes there including one that eventually made it into the sonic bible of folk revivalism, the Harry Smith-recorded Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music (and thence on into the canon that singers like Bob Dylan drew on explicitly). Thus, Lunsford himself was implicated in odd ways into the divide between collectors and performers—at once a noted and

established culture-worker, but also bearing some of the traces of folk authenticity—at least to the extent that some of his output is canonical in contemporary revivalist circles.

In the early 1920s, following work as a professor and lawyer among other things, Lunsford was traveling frequently, giving folklore lectures and working as a booster for Asheville tourism across the nation. He had previously met Maud Karpeles during her time in the Asheville area with Sharp in the nineteen-teens; he does not appear to have met Sharp himself however. When work took Lunsford to New York City, Karpeles, then living there after having taken over Sharp's English Dance Society organization, introduced Lunsford to other culture workers influenced by Sharp, including "Dr. Duncan Emerick, curator of the Archive of American Folk Song of the Library of Congress beginning in the 1940's. She also introduced him to Dr. Robert Gordon, Harvard scholar and folklorist, who became the first head of the Archive of American Folk Song 1928" as well as Lyman Kittredge and other foundational figures in American Folklore (Cohen 2008)(Lunsford Papers at Mars Hill College: 27). Lunsford's outlook on collecting, already naturally sympathetic to Sharp's perspectives, was further informed by this contact with the larger and emergent field of academic and public folklore which itself had been heavily influenced by Sharp's model (as I show in the next section).

In 1928, Asheville was suffering from the effects of a real estate bust that ushered in the depression early (and followed a massive promotional effort in Florida intended to bring in tourist money). City commissioners decided that a festival was in order as an effort towards economic boosterism, and Lunsford's connections with the Democratic Party machinery got him a job as the talent buyer and organizer for the musical portion. The following year, his festival separated completely, and was renamed the Mountain

Dance and Folk Festival. Arguably one of the first of its kind in American history but quickly followed by a great number of events organized under similar premises (see Whisnant 1983), Lunsford was the primary organizer of this festival, as well as the default emcee, from this time until shortly before his death in 1973.

It was in this capacity that Lunsford made his primary mark on both the region and the broader musical scene. Lunsford's own vision for the festival was arguably a kind of strategic essentialism: well-aware of the massive amount of pejorative cultural material circulating at this point that denigrated the white trash of Appalachia (see the next section on Appalachian myth-making), Lunsford organized and curated a show that emphasized the wholesome folk traditions of a civil but vital people. His own standards for the festival were well-known and rigorously enforced, sometimes physically. Lunsford had little patience with outsiders of any kind, and even less for hippies and other people whom he viewed as either play-acting a country identity, or pursuing a vision of folk music for liberal political reasons (Jones 1984). In various instances, he would physically throw performers off the stage for violating his rules. He also, despite the large African-American population in Asheville, did not permit black performers (see the section on ethnonationalism in folklore); instead, he tended to rely on a stable of local favorites interspersed with various acts who would show up wanting to perform.

Lunsford was a prolific organizer in the thirties and forties, going far afield to organize or help organize folk festivals like the Ohio Valley Folk Festival, the predecessor to the Renfro Valley Folk Festival in Kentucky, a state festival in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and various others over the years. He was the direct inspiration for the National Folk Festival model, and festival organizers would travel from afar

explicitly to seek his counsel and see how he organized the Asheville festival. For instance, as Jones notes (1984: 49, 66), Sarah Gertrude Knott visited Lunsford's festival in the early 1930's (the exact date is in dispute), specifically for inspiration and counsel on organizing the National Folk Festival, which was first staged in 1934 and remains active. During the 1930s, Lunsford was briefly employed by Charles Seeger under the auspices of the WPA as a music organizer; in 1936, a young Pete Seeger, just out of boarding school and about to set off for Harvard, took up the banjo but, untutored, struggled considerably. His father, Charles, took him to see Lunsford at the Asheville festival. Lunsford showed the Seegers around, gave Pete his first proper banjo and some lessons, and sent him on his way (Filene 2000: 188). The later history of Seeger's work with the folk revival, the popular front, and the liberal engagement with music is well-known and not worth telling here, but it is worth noting that Lunsford's Sharp-inspired vision of the folk-festival (and his banjo playing) was a direct influence on Pete Seeger from his earliest interest in music. Seeger's own work with the Newport Folk Festival—in some ways the spiritual center of a portion of the 1960s brand of leftist activism—was directly descended both logically and philosophically from Lunsford's own vision, with certain obvious changes (Filene 2000).

Lunsford's legacy is complex and hard to parse from available sources, but as Filene (2000), Whisnant (1983), Jones (1982) and others suggest, there are some lessons to be learned. First, his own conflicted biography positioned him as a quasi-native culture broker, who developed a philosophy of the Folk that was remarkably consistent with (and directly influenced by) Sharp's vision, minus elements of romantic nationalism and Sharp's own radical sympathies (see Whisnant 1983). Secondly, Lunsford invented or

pioneered one of the most enduring expressions of that exact philosophy of the Folk through his creation and stewardship of the Mountain Song and Dance Festival. As Cohen (2008) notes, the music festival was not a new invention—in particular, the south was home to numerous annual fiddle contests, some quite popular; the form itself dates back to the 1700s. These festivals, interestingly, are still around and are notably different from ‘folk’ festivals to this day. As well, the 1800’s onward saw various ethnic revivalist celebrations wax and wane as festival-type experiences. However, there is very good reason to argue that the folk festival, as Lunsford gave form to it, was indeed something new. In many ways, what Lunsford created was a fortuitous and timely mix of commercial, lay, and academic notions of the folk, which fit the demands of a time when the rampant commercialization of ‘folk’ music left cultural space for a more naturalistic (but scholarly) presentation of what people were beginning to understand as an authentically American form.

The Folk Festival as Lunsford created it was explicitly about staging a performance of a certain kind of essentialized cultural otherness. As Whisnant notes, the years following Lunsford’s first festivals saw the creation of numerous short-lived versions of the same idea; they are not all traceable to Lunsford. Clearly, the ideas that Lunsford gave expression to were in the air at the time. However, Asheville, which received widespread media attention throughout the post-war years due to Lunsford’s festival, is in many ways a central node in at least two important American cultural processes: first, it was one of the central staging points from which folklorists both lay and academic went forth to collect folklore in the early twentieth century; the absence of coal from North Carolina in general meant that it was fertile terrain for industrialization-

averse collectors. Although the strands through which a coherent national imaginary of Appalachia as a place and ‘hillbillies’ as a people were varied, Asheville is one of the central points from which middle-class culture workers went forth to collect material and articulate their stories. As Cantwell notes (1996) this was equally true in the 1960s, when a generation of leftist revivalists like John Cohen and Mike Seeger began a second wave of collecting, often in exactly the same places Sharp had visited almost 50 years earlier. Secondly, Asheville is arguably home to the American folk festival as an enduring and particular kind of presentation of cultural difference. The folk festival as such, and Lunsford’s own festival in particular, both continue to this day as vital cultural forms, infused with the legacy that Sharp and others brought to America, and filtered in particular through a kind of strategic essentialism tied to regional boosterism that was particular to Lunsford’s own biography.

Finally, Lunsford’s festival enshrined Asheville in the American imagination as one of the central nodes of ‘authentic’ Appalachian music in the 20th and 21st century. The pervasiveness of his vision of a reservoir of authentic country people playing Appalachian music, and the local market his work generated, gave rise to a steady local musical ecosystem, an ongoing market for touristic consumption of the same, and further made Asheville ground zero for the invasion of a particular kind of revivalist in the 1960s. A great number of contemporary ‘Appalachian old-time Musicians’ arrived in Asheville in large part due to the combination of the particular history of Asheville as a historic crossroads of bohemian and arts culture, immense outside wealth and second homes, and local cultural boosterism. When the first wave arrived in Asheville in the 1960s, they found an extant community of local musical talent, nurtured by the vision of

Lunsford as enacted in his festival, and primed to continue the preservationist work that was one of his central tenets as an article of faith in the local scene. Thus, the revivalists of 1960s Asheville, encountering the musical heroes they list in interviews as the authentic ‘country-born’ players of the time (and, inevitably, the last of a dying tradition), were in fact encountering home-grown revivalists in a tradition of native (and nativist) strategic essentialism at least a couple of generations old, and arguably dating back to the turn of the century. Interestingly, the creation of local traditional music camps and schools resulted directly from the encounter of 1960s revivalists with Lunsford’s musical ecosystem. Thus, in important ways, the folk music workshop or folk music college program descends in very direct lines from the Herderian and quasi-radicalist vision I outline above. In some ways, the further institutionalization of this kind of cultural work isn’t surprising, and the college environment is in many ways its natural and original home—from Herder to Morris to Sharp to Lunsford to today.

### **1.3 Appalachia: Locating a Place, an Idea, and a People**

This section primarily addresses the post-Civil War history of the mountain south, and particularly the early years of the twentieth century. As I show, this was the time when American understandings of Appalachia as a region, and ‘the folk’ as a particular cultural object, begin to take coherent shape. This history is deeply entwined with the development of Folklore as a discipline, and, as I show below, with both Sharp and Lunsford’s work. I begin with a broad examination of the Appalachian South from early reconstruction, before considering the political-economic and cultural processes that gave rise to ‘Appalachia’ as a particular place, and established the poor and working-class whites of Appalachia (and their music) as the subjects of a set of durable discourses. This section situates western North Carolina in broad outline as a southern region at the turn of the century; it examines the immense amount of cultural work of various kinds that was in process at the time, and finally, it situates Asheville as a particular place within the broader region.

**Appalachia in Late Reconstruction:** As Lears (2009) argues, the era of late reconstruction was a tumultuous time, marked by a fervent desire for a kind of nationalist ‘rebirth,’ particularly realized through the reunification of white America. Lears points to the way that the Civil War in these years was reimagined as a tragic space of martial transcendence (the ‘lost cause’ narrative), which generated the cultural space necessary for the north and south to begin a tentative rapprochement. Meantime, however, the compromise of 1877 provided for the complete removal of federal troops from the south, and enabled the gradual reassertion of white supremacist policies across the south. The

reconsolidation of white rule took place through an active process of the political disenfranchisement and intimidation of black people through means like the spectacular and symbolically charged violence of lynching, as well as more pedestrian and pervasive techniques of dispossession and oppression enacted through legal means (Lears 2009, Ayers 2007). As Hale (1999) argues, this was also a time when ‘whiteness’ as a racial identity was actively being consolidated as in opposition to an essentialized and biologically inferior idea of blackness—a particular understanding of racial orders that also encompassed, as I note below, the explicit development of ideas of white ethnicity and a biologically inferior white underclass. Ayers (2007) describes reconstruction in the south as a time when political and economic realities had been radically upended, and cultural responses were being actively worked out in durable ways, even as some of the “new south” ended up looking much like the old south, with certain important changes. Notably, both Lears (2009) and Ayers (2007) characterize this time as one of massive industrialization in what they described as a largely ‘colonial’ southern economy. In many respects, North Carolina was no different from the rest of the south, even if portions of the western counties had been marked by tension and violence between union sympathizers and slaveholding secessionists. As Bradley notes (2009), “by the mid-1870s, the Redeemer Democrats—or former Confederate leaders—had established “home rule” in the Tar Heel State”—partly a function of Jackson’s lenient reconstruction policies and the general disinclination of federal troops to wage a serious occupation on behalf of freedmen (6). As in much of the rest of the south, North Carolina’s Democratic Party regained political dominance and reestablished white rule fairly quickly, despite significant lingering anti-confederate sentiment in parts of the state.

These processes—industrialization, racialization, and cultural upheaval, played out in particular ways both within Appalachia as a region, and through the broader circulation of the idea of Appalachia as a kind of *tabula rasa* where ideas about race, national character, culture, whiteness, and ‘the folk’ were engaged and worked out. As Batteau (1990) argues, Darwinian science provided the racial thinking of the day a (spurious) scientific basis on which to articulate claims of superior evolutionary fitness (Stocking 1968 points out that, in fact, Darwin’s reading of E.B. Tylor prompted him to use an explicitly racial hierarchy in his views of human evolution—making the science bad, but not an inaccurate application of Darwinian theory as such). American understandings of race and ethnicity at the time encompassed a far greater range of categories; as Jacobsen (1998: 2) argues, various white ethnicities at the time were thought of in what contemporary Americans would consider racial terms, or as he put it, “entire races have disappeared from view, from public discussion, though their flesh and blood members still walk the earth.” This meant that, at least in Appalachia, the ‘poor whites’ of the region were often understood through an explicitly racial lens. However, in contrast to the racialization that Hale describes with Blacks (which was part of the broader process of oppression and disenfranchisement), poor whites in this moment were the subjects of radically divergent racial views. In some instances, particularly in the context of folksong and ballad collecting, they were viewed as racially pure ‘Anglo-Saxon’ peoples who were simply frozen in time. This evaluation of the racial purity of mountaineers was also characteristic of writers who assessed them against the influx of immigrant labor arriving in America in great numbers, a reaction that Batteau (1990) and many others describe as an early American ethnonationalism. These allegedly Anglo-

Saxon mountaineers were often spoken of explicitly as a bulwark against the tide of restive immigrants and their suspect racial character. However, other racializing descriptions were much crueler. As Wray (2006) notes, there was a well-entrenched discourse about ‘poor whites’ that depicted them as degenerate, backwards, deviant, and stupid, and they were accompanied by policies that resulted in, for instance, decades of legally enforced sterilization. These discourses of white working-class racial inferiority were also often invoked as part of the process of Appalachian industrialization, as part of a paternalistic justification for the dispossession of people from their land, and particularly in the context of the exploitative labor practices of early mill towns, which ‘reformers’ described as a kind of economic uplift of the shiftless mountaineers.

Around the same time, following an immediate post-war period of charity work among freed slaves, northern Christian denominations in the 1880s began a massive missionizing effort in the southern mountains, in an effort to uplift the allegedly backwards and unchurched whites of the region (see in particular Shapiro 1978 and Whisnant 1983). As Lears (1981 and 2009) argues, this project was tied to a particular structure of feeling in the post-war North, particularly among elites; and to a set of durable understandings of the white people in Appalachia—understandings which had become well-entrenched as a set of conventions by the late 19th century. The establishment of northern missions in the upland south was followed in the early 20th century by the opening of settlement or folk schools throughout Appalachia—a corollary process not only to the conflicting visions of black uplift playing out between adherents of W.E.B. DuBois (and his ‘talented tenth’) and Booker T. Washington (and vocational institutions like Tuskegee Institute), but also of a piece with institutions like Jane

Addams' Hull House, aimed at educating and ennobling the immigrant industrial labor force arriving in the US in great numbers around the turn of the century. As Whisnant (1981; see also Cantwell 1996) argues in great detail, the formation of discursive understandings of populations in need of rescue followed a predictable pattern, in which certain peoples were presumed to be in need of a particular kind of moral uplift and paternalistic care—a cultural process that was often accompanied by, and sometimes served explicitly to enable, both the exploitation of labor and the dispossession of valuable resources. The terms of these paternalistic discourses were remarkably similar, whether they dealt with poor whites, freed blacks, or Native Americans.

Reconstruction in the south broadly and particularly in the mountain south saw a massive influx of northeastern capital, as the extension of railroads into new territory opened up extractive possibilities (Eller, 1982). From at least the time of the late 1870s, the mountain south underwent a rapid and extremely destructive period of industrialization, which in North Carolina saw the clearcutting of nearly every acre of forest in the state. As elsewhere, the massive extraction of raw resources from the region was enabled at a level previously unimaginable by the extension of railroad infrastructure into the region, which in North Carolina occurred in the 1880s, and which made the shipment of lumber, derivative products, and minerals extremely profitable. As Ayers notes, this process of industrialization was in large part aided by southern elites, who themselves were concerned to maintain or reconsolidate economic and political power particularly through strategic boosterism through which they could control or influence the influx of northern capital in a system of patronage (2007; see also Ready 2005: 266-280). In the mountain south in particular, massive amounts of timber and coal rights were

purchased by speculators in this time, with a concomitant process of dispossession of poor and working-class communities and smallholders—a process that Eller (1982) examines in detail and which was often accomplished by coercion and violence. At the same time, in North Carolina, textile and furniture industries began to establish industrial infrastructure, building massive plants and associated quarters for the non-unionized and cheap labor that was abundant in the upland and piedmont south. Largely without coal, North Carolina in this time saw an unprecedented timber boom, shipping massive quantities of lumber, particularly the ancient tulip poplars that rich cove forests were known for, across the southeast and as far afield as Chicago. As Ayers notes, (2007: 125), the south went from exporting virtually no timber to providing 45% of total national output by 1910. Asheville in this moment, following the construction of the Swannanoa Tunnel and the arrival of railroad infrastructure in 1880, became a major rail hub for the shipment of coal and timber, and associated products, to points north and south.

### **Appalachian Myth-Making**

Several interrelated processes were occurring in Appalachia in the decades around the turn of the century. First, a massive amount of material was produced by novelists, journalists, filmmakers, and collectors. This work relied on a fairly established set of representational tropes to depict the region as deeply different. Secondly, people were actively doing things based on these impressions, perhaps most notably the various kinds of charity work and educational outreach epitomized by religious missions and settlement schools. Finally, industrialists were seizing vast chunks of the region's mineral, timber, and labor resources. In the process of dispossessing the landowners of the region, they often relied on the stereotypes of a benighted and backwards people to justify their

actions. As Billings and Blee note (1999), “between 1904 and 1927, at least 476 silent films depicted life in the southern Appalachians to American moviegoers; 145 of these films featured moonshining and 92 featured feuds along with countless assaults and homicides” (15). At times, as Lewis points out, the same people who were writing popular novels depicting the backwards residents of Appalachia--such as wildly popular turn-of-the-century novelist John Fox—were actively engaged in land acquisition campaigns for coal interests (Lewis In Billings, et al 1999, 22-23). Simultaneously, as Eller notes (1982), parts of Appalachia went from southern backwater to nationally important producer of coal and timber in a scant two or three decades; the process of resource extraction was explicitly tied up with the popular depictions of Appalachia.

*Popular Depictions of Appalachia:* Historic popular literature on Appalachia can be grouped into roughly three categories: 'local color' writing, such as was commonly found in Harper's, Atlantic, and other literate magazines aimed at urban northeastern readerships beginning in the postwar years; novelistic portrayals involving either Appalachia or Appalachian characters; and finally a genre best described as a combination travelogue and community study. Local color writers typically wrote short pieces that emphasized odd folkways, cultural 'survivals,' adventure travel, and so on--often based on surprisingly short or non-existent stints of 'research' in the actual southern mountains. The conclusions of the articles were generally of a piece, and in line with the broader thrust of Appalachia in popular imagination: a place apart, a people stuck in time, clannish, musical, poor, and backwards (e.g. Thornborough 1928; Woolson 1875). As Batteau notes, many of these articles propose a vision of the “triumph of mechanist

civilization over backwoods ignorance”—part of a paternalistic discourse about how mining towns and milltowns civilize the ignorant mountaineers (1990: 81-90).

The second genre of popular fiction has been a focus of many late twentieth-century writers on Appalachia as a foundational moment in Appalachian myth-making; reasons for this include the relative popularity and accessibility of at least two turn-of-the-century authors, and the absolute coherence and consistency of their depictions (Fox and Murfree: see below). Although the twenty years from 1870 to 1890 saw the publication of over two hundred literary pieces dealing with Southern Appalachia, much scholarly work has focused on a set of popular novelists who pursued similar themes (Eller in Lewis 1978: 35). The two most commonly cited exemplars, Mary N. Murfree and John J. Fox, both wrote numerous bestselling works that consistently depicted Appalachia as a geographic and cultural isolate full of violent, ignorant, and anti-modern people who were retrogressive both culturally and racially (Murfree 1884; Fox 1897; Fox 1908). In both instances, the authors had only a passing familiarity with Appalachia; Fox in fact was a would-be coal investor who was actively pursuing land rights for commercial interests, and Murfree was an upper-class Kentuckian from the Bluegrass whose family summered at a resort in the mountains when she was young. Many later authors have pointed out the numerous instances in which discourses like those put forward by Fox and Murfree have served as an ad hoc justification for dispossessing people in the name of some spurious paternalistic motive (see for instance, Waller in Billings, 1999, Shapiro 1979, Batteau 1990, Eller in Lewis 1978). Both Fox and Murfree commonly employed as plot devices the forbidden romance between the civilized, sophisticated lowlander man, and the untamed, unsophisticated, primeval mountain

woman (Fox, 1897, Murfree 1884). The structuralist implications of these kinds of myths are many; among others Shapiro and Batteau engage extensive analyses of the broad cultural tensions that were being worked out in the 'Appalachia as premodern/America as Modern' binary that many of these texts establish.

Finally, there are a series of travelogues and character studies published in the early twentieth century that were instrumental in shaping American perceptions of Appalachia (e.g. Kephart 1913; J. C. Campbell 1921; Frost 1899; Sheppard 1935; Raine 1924). John C. Campbell was intimately involved in promoting both federal and religious programs doing various kinds of assistance and charity work in Appalachia; his depiction was accordingly of a virtuous people in a state of improvable cultural stasis; his wife Olive Dame Campbell (Sharp's ballad-collecting companion) would later go on to found the Brasstown folk school that is the subject of Whisnant's critique in *All That is Native and Fine* (1983). Frost, likewise, was an activist of sorts in his role as president of Berea College, a historically working-class Appalachian institution founded as a religious missionizing effort. In his consistent quest to secure funding from Northeastern sources interested in improving the mountain people through education, Frost sought to circulate a discourse of Appalachia similar to Campbell's portrayal, which emphasized the mountaineers as 'our contemporary ancestors;' frozen in time perhaps but ultimately salvageable (see 1899 in particular). Kephart, Raine, and Shepherd, on the other hand were itinerant journalists--Kephart lived in the Smoky Mountain region of North Carolina for a period of three years; Shepherd in northwestern North Carolina, and Raine in a variety of locations, mostly in Kentucky. All three produced, over the course of some thirty years, narratives which consciously emphasized the noble but primitive

mountaineer, isolated in his moonshining, bear hunting, handicrafting, and poverty.

Despite the fact that the process of industrialization had been underway in western North Carolina for a solid forty to sixty years at the times of their respective writings, both Kephart and Shepherd portrayed nearly identical situations, complete with unattributed pictures featuring posed mountaineers.

As Batteau notes, the foundational myths of Appalachia dovetailed in arresting ways with a broader economy of cultural concerns, such as the integrity of the domestic sphere in a time of capitalist expansion; Anglo-Saxon race purity in the midst of waves of immigration; and democracy vs. fascism in the European and American political context. As he argues, however, until about 1850, accounts of Appalachia didn't recognize anything particularly distinctive about the region. He identifies the genesis of "Appalachian exceptionalism" as a national need for an 'othered' region due to sectional conflicts at the national level—specifically, secessionist impulses and the debates over slaveholding (1990: 39). The literature on 'mountain whites' that began to emerge in this period, as well, also partook of the popular diffusion of social Darwinian theories and the corresponding racial typologies of the day.

*Folklore Finds Appalachia: Sampling the Early Field of Academic Production:* In roughly parallel fashion to popular portrayals, the burgeoning field of folklore was churning out texts. As Whisnant notes, the publication of Child's authoritative and magisterial book of ballads, and the notion that Appalachia was rife with Folk, began to draw collectors soon after the Civil War: "the *Journal of American Folklore* published its first scholarly article on music in the Appalachians near the turn of the century; the first

state folklore societies (North Carolina and Kentucky in 1912; Virginia in 1913; and West Virginia in 1915) were established primarily to collect ballads..."(1981: 54). These societies were organized primarily by professors, often of English, and they presaged a general call in the nineteen-teens to collect American ballads (understood, of course, as endangered) that was answered by the academy in particular. However, the early folkloristic depictions of Appalachian people are notable more for their schizophrenic nature and general condescension than for any kind of disciplinary coherence. The samples that follow are all taken from *The Journal of American Folklore*.

Smithsonian Institute Bureau of Ethnology researcher James Mooney, in the course of his research on the Cherokee and other American Indian tribes around the turn of the century, wrote:

The mountaineer of western North Carolina belongs to a peculiar type which has been developed by environment and isolation into something distinctively American, and yet unlike anything to be found outside of the southern Alleghenies. Ever since his ancestors wrested this region from the aboriginal lords of the soil a century ago, and established themselves along the beautiful streams which pay tribute to the broad rolling Tennessee, his life has been a continual struggle with adverse circumstances...Under such a load of discouragements it is not to be wondered at that the mountain "Tarheel" gradually drifted into a condition of dreary indifference to all things sublunary but hog and hominy, or the delights of a bear hunt and barbecue...The folk-lore notes here given were picked up incidentally while engaged in other work, and are but stray leaves of the volume which the industrious collector may yet gather among this primitive people, as yet unchanged by immigration and uncontaminated by the modern civilization (Mooney 1889: 95-97).

In 1907, Haywood Parker wrote:

The conditions that have prevailed in the Southern Appalachian mountains for so many generations have come nearer producing, or perhaps I should say preserving, a folk-lore than those of any other

section of our country.... It is no disgrace to these people, isolated as they have been, that they have preserved the traditions and beliefs of their Anglo-Saxon ancestors of two hundred years ago. These things are the “proofs patent” of their good descent, the “markings” of the purest strain of Anglo-Saxon blood and character to be found in America to-day. A study of their folk-lore is specially interesting, as it gives us a glimpse of our ancestors—indeed, these mountaineers have aptly been called “our contemporary ancestors (Parker 1907: 242).

Louise Rand Bascom, playwright and regular journalist for Harpers, writing from her mountain vacation destination of Highlands (a resort town accessible to the plantation owners of lowland South Carolina and Georgia) in 1909 had this to say:

The process of collecting the songs common to the mountain section of western North Carolina is a difficult one, for the mountaineers suspiciously evade direct questions, and vanish entirely if too closely pressed...[in naming sources for their ballads], other illiterate mountaineers delight in talking of the “ref’rence books in their trunks.” They certainly own no trunks, and probably the daily papers pasted on the walls to keep out the cold are the nearest things they own to “ref’rence books,” and these, of course, have been given them” (Bascom, 1909: 239). [referring to the provenance of a ballad] the latter is obviously not a ballad of the mountains, for no highlander was ever sufficiently hard-working to die with anything in his hand except possibly a plug of borrowed “terbac.” (Bascom 1909: 250).

The wild swings of tone present in early writings in JAF, as above, became less noticeable as academic folklorists standardized the field and collection practices, drawing on Sharp’s work in particular. English professor Mellinger E. Henry, in his extensive book of ballads published in 1938, references Campbell, Lunsford, and Sharp as primary influences (Henry 1938). While Henry clearly thought of himself as an academic collector, cross-referencing every ballad and tale with its appropriate Child variant number and speculating on its provenance, he is also notable for his vivid travel-journal style of representation, which relies extensively on Kephart’s work for reference. His

thirty page introduction details his adventures in the pristine, beautiful Appalachians with rugged, self-sufficient Anglo-Saxon mountaineers who are lost in a bucolic past that is testament to their racial purity:

Stopping at the home of a weaver, you find her singing to a flaxen-haired, blue-eyed child of two or three, playing at her knees. You pause to catch the words of the song. It is an old English ballad:

Is this your bride? I think she's miserable brown;  
And you could have married as fair a skinned girl  
As ever the sun shined on,  
As ever the sun shined on. (*ibid*, 11).

Ralph Steele Boggs, a prominent folklorist and professor at the University of North Carolina writing in the 1930's, exemplifies the trend of American collectors in this period. Using both archival sources, informants, and 'friends who collect folktales,' Boggs gives a collection of folktales, written entirely in southern vernacular (a practice that became more common: instead of caustically citing random archaic or backwards pronunciations, folklorists began to write entirely in colloquial voice, although most of them, without the benefit of recording equipment, acknowledged that this was merely their reproduction of mountain dialect and not a faithful transcription—as in Boggs' case) and numbered according to Thompson's 1928 *Types of the Folktale*, a book which sought to categorize the entirety of known folktales—European and American—by a number system, which allowed for comparative study. Boggs uses the term 'the folk' throughout the article in a peculiarly modern kind of way, which to my ears suggests an ongoing process of systematization of definitions, as well as professionalization of collectors (Boggs 1934b). In a separate article in the same volume, he details his difficulties

collecting folktales thanks to the superstitions and backwards ways of the ignorant mountaineers. Of his collecting, he says:

I made an extended trip through the extreme southwestern section of North Carolina, which is inhabited chiefly by White settlers of English, Scotch, Irish, and German extraction, who work by themselves their tiny farms between the mountains. Negroes are very rarely seen.

While working in Cherokee and Clay counties, I made my headquarters at Mrs. Campbell's Folkschool, where I was able to work quickly and effectively...In Madison and Buncombe counties Mr. Bascom Lamar Lunsford was my guide, and, as it later turned out, my best subject in that region. Although a well-educated lawyer, Mr. Lunsford is a true native of the region and has always lived there, and knew the tales well (Boggs 1934a: 289).

In general, the early years of American folklore scholarship on the Appalachians produced an extremely mixed portrait, ranging from Sharpe and other ballad collector's work, which tended to describe the mountaineers as virtuous agrarians; to the degrading and condescending portrayals of ignorant, superstitious, backwards savages commonly found not only in pop fiction, but also in local color writing and a fair portion of the folklore literature. Prevailing understandings of ethnicity at the time meant, as well, that the cultural traits of Appalachians were racialized in the accounts of many authors. As the excerpts above demonstrate, there was a process of consolidation at work in the early decades of the twentieth century, as collectors, professors, journalists, and culture workers began to cite each other in an increasingly coherent fashion; and as the field of Folklore began to gain institutional legitimacy. The institutionalization of folklore in the mid-century is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth noting that Stith Thompson, a student of Child at Harvard and one of Sharp and Lunsford's acquaintances, would go on to found Indiana's folklore department, producing PhDs in the early 1950s;

Alan Lomax and Charles Seeger took posts in ethnomusicology or anthropology departments at Columbia and UCLA respectively (Filene 2000: 173-175).

By the mid-century, Folklore as a discipline had largely rejected both evolutionism and diffusionism in favor of an explicitly functionalist vision of culture and ‘the folk process,’ drawing on British Anthropology with a vaguely Marxian bent (Filene 2000: 139). In this revised vision of folk culture, the things that people did to cope with or adjust to modernity in all its forms became the essential subject of the discipline, which implied both a less essentialized and compartmentalized vision of what ‘the folk’ were, and a new acceptance of contemporary popular culture as part of folklore (impulses that, eventually, broadened the definition of ‘folk’ past all previous bound until it became everything and therefore nothing). However, particularly in lay folklore and collecting (as epitomized by latter-day revivalists like Mike Seeger and John Cohen), the preservationist impulse present since the early days was alive and well (see Scully, 2008, Cantwell 1996).

***Ethnonationalism, Race, and Folklore:*** As both Whisnant (1983) and Filene (2000) examine extensively, the origins of folklore and ‘the folk’ as such were explicitly racialized. This was true not only in the sense that some folk festivals were explicitly racist and aimed at promoting a white supremacist view of folk culture, purified of black influence and demonstrating the vitality of ‘Anglo-Saxon stock’ (see Whisnant on Whitetop Mountain Festival, and the role of the nativist and white supremacist composer Powell; see also the ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ of social Darwinist contemporaries like Henry Cabot Lodge: 1983; see Jones 1983 on Lunsford’s exclusion of black musicians; see

Cohen 2008 and Cantwell 1993 on Henry Ford's racist and anti-Semitic fiddle festivals of the '20s). It was also true, however, in the sense that ideas about the folk that had been derived from the Herderian legacy fit uneasily with contemporary America's blatantly evolutionist racism; and in the sense that early folklorists had almost nothing to do with Black people. As in the case of Lunsford, who was a southern democrat and therefore a segregationist, early folklore simply excluded Black people and their cultural production from the ethnonationalist vision of the time. This is not to say that Americans hadn't been fascinated, in a vaguely folkloristic way, with the cultural production of Black people—a fact that has received extensive academic attention (Lott 1993). In essence, the appropriation or imitation of Black culture was nothing new: despite both the long-term existence of blackface minstrelsy as a widespread practice, and later instances of black music circulating broadly in other ways, like the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the late 1800s, the 'Folk' were white, at least until the 1930s. Filene argues convincingly that the work of John and Alan Lomax, their connections to the Library of Congress, and their influence on the folklore and ethnomusicology establishments, provided the institutional legitimacy that American collectors and gatekeepers needed to view black music as 'folk music.'

The Lomax's role in this can hardly be overstated. As Szwed details (2010), they traveled extensively across the country and particularly in the Jim Crow south in the early decades of the twentieth century, often explicitly looking for black musicians to record, and often using maximum security prisons as handy settings for recording music from convicts who were both conveniently located in one place, didn't have much to do, and hadn't had much contact with the outside world for some time. Filene details in particular

their ‘discovery’ in the Angola maximum security prison in Louisiana of Huddie Ledbetter, later known as Leadbelly—and the often manipulative and demeaning way that the Lomaxes treated him in public billings and business dealings as they acted as booking agents and promoters. Regardless, the Lomaxes recorded and distributed a vast archive of black music (and much other music) in their travels, paving the way in some respects for a nascent white fascination with the cultural products of African-Americans as fundamentally ‘folk’ in a sense that it had not been previously—and thus worthy of both serious scholarly attention, and as ready-to-hand sources of authenticity for events like folk festivals—particularly folk festivals, like the Newport Folk Festival, with leftist politics. As Filene puts it, the Lomaxes extended the ‘cult of authenticity’ to Black people (2000). In the 30s and beyond, Black people arguably became ‘the Folk’ par excellence, at least for a particular portion of leftist white America (a history that intersects in interesting ways with the Civil Rights Movement). The way that this portion of the history of folklore was enabled not only by Jim Crow practices, but also by the beginnings of the carceral state, is a subject that deserves more attention.

However, another aspect of the racialization of early folklore and collecting was the conspicuous creation of a particular kind of degraded whiteness. As I outlined in the section on race and whiteness in the introduction, the American understanding of classed whiteness as a particular racial order is traceable in large part to Appalachia, and to the early discursive renderings of the white inhabitants therein. The terms of this racializing discourse don’t translate particularly well to modern ears—as Jacobson (1998) notes, American understandings of race and ethnicity as separate and separable processes or categories have undergone significant revision in the course of the 20th century—

particularly following the general refutation of specifically evolutionist racism, and the general collation under the banner of ‘whiteness’ of multiple white immigrant ethnicities which were previously thought of as something approaching our contemporary lay understanding of race(s). However, it is difficult to overstate the importance of race/ethnicity as a heuristic through which contemporary middle-class whites viewed Appalachia, and it is likewise difficult to overstate the confusingly bifurcated nature of this racialized lens. As I note in the next section, the early literary history of Appalachia was extremely fraught, and represented the consolidation of the region in the American cultural imaginary as a place of tantalizing cultural otherness—a place where, depending on your outlook, you could find the odd pre-modern cultural survivals of a noble but unimproved race of agrarian whites, or evidence of cultural and racial degeneracy related to isolation, poverty, and inferior racial strains.

### **Situating Asheville in the Region**

As I described in the previous section, the broader region of Appalachia is deeply entangled with the development of American ideas about revivalism and folklore. I have suggested that Asheville, through the figure of Lunsford, represents an important node in this process, both as a point from which collectors and culture workers staged forays into the surrounding communities, and as a place where a particular vision of folk representation was worked out. These historical facts are both linked to Asheville’s broader history as a crossroads in the region for things both material (like trade goods and outside capital) and immaterial (like ‘folk culture,’ various kinds of wellness-oriented practices, and a bohemian and artsy character). I now turn to a brief overview of

Asheville's history by way of situating it in the broader political-economic and cultural processes I have pointed to above.

The western third or so of North Carolina is made up of mountain chains primarily running north to south, divided by river valleys and bounded on either side by massive and extensive chains: the Blue Ridge to the east, and the Unaka range between North Carolina and Tennessee. While North Carolina has a number of peaks that top 6,000 feet and contains the highest mountains of the Appalachian chain, the plateau that makes up most of the western portion averages 2,600 feet above sea level (Van Noppen 1973: 1) with high plateaus reaching 3,500 to 4,000 feet in the high country. In the mid-18th century, the mountains served as a relatively impassable geologic barrier to westward expansion of the colonies at the time; as well, the British Crown had forbidden westward expansion due to treaties negotiated with the Cherokee and other American Indian tribes extant at the time and historically controlling the mountain region (*ibid*, 4-9). After the Revolutionary War, Scots-Irish, English, and German settlers poured into the Blue Ridge territory from Pennsylvania, primarily via the piedmont town of Salisbury, beginning in earnest the process of land commodification and culminating in the forced displacement in the late 1830s of the Cherokee to Oklahoma by Andrew Jackson's administration, save for a few settlements under the aegis of William Holland Thomas (Ehle 1988). As Ehle notes, the Cherokee had sided with the British in the Revolutionary War; this fact served as one justification among many in the process of dispossession and genocide. The net result by the time of the American Civil War was a relatively sparsely settled region with imposing geographic barriers to commerce and communication, but nevertheless significant inflows and outflows of goods and people.

Mountain counties also had ties to the lowlands via religious institutions, in the form of circuit-riding preachers and religious revivals, as well as by circuit judges, political representation, and commerce with piedmont merchants (Van Noppen 1973: 68-85). By the late 1880s, however, rail lines had connected western North Carolina with east Tennessee and the cities of the Cumberland Plateau, as well as with upstate South Carolina and Georgia (Van Noppen 1973: 260-275). With the railroads came a massive boom in associated industrial extraction, previously largely limited to crop cultivation and small-scale logging to clear land for pastureage: logging concerns, mica mines, tanneries (relying on tannic acid extracted from the bark of the American Chestnut tree, then a dominant species in eastern woodlands; now functionally extinct), and tourism quickly became the economic underpinnings of the mountain region, as the booming urban center of Asheville attracted the industrialists and robber-barons of the gilded age. By the turn of the century, nearly the entirety of the southern Appalachian forest, one of the great expanses of mixed hardwood forest in the world, had fallen to logging or to smallholder clearing save a few remote and inaccessible spots (*ibid*, 298).

Asheville has been a central node of transportation, commerce, property speculation, and tourism since very near its inception in the late 1700s. This history is due in large part to its geographic situation within the region. Sitting on a plateau in a bowl of mountains, it has good overland routes to nearly all compass points through natural gaps in surrounding mountain ranges, and particularly through its situation on the French Broad River, one of the major waterways in North Carolina west of the continental divide. From its headwaters South of Asheville in Transylvania County, the French Broad runs largely north-northwest until it joins the Tennessee River and flows

from there into the Ohio and then the Mississippi. While the river is not passable as a waterway, the major river valley of the French Broad, which leads directly north to the resort town of Hot Springs, formerly known as Warm Springs, and then on towards Greenville, Tennessee, provided a natural thoroughfare for travelers, and was improved into a major wagon road known as the Buncombe Turnpike in the years of the 1820s. From its earliest days as a trade crossroads (first named Morristown after a revolutionary war financier, it was changed to Asheville in 1795 after the popular governor Samuel Ashe (Chase, 2007: 12)), Asheville functioned as the principal trade hub connecting the stock, produce, and raw goods produced as far afield as Kentucky and Tennessee, and much of the western part of North Carolina more generally, to the markets of the Carolina piedmont and especially to the ports of Charleston and points further south. The region, particularly following a time of massive land grants and property speculation after the newly formed legislature paid revolutionary war veterans in land rather than scrip, was hotly contested terrain. In its earliest history in the 1800s, the major trade through the region consisted of livestock driven on the hoof: pigs, mules, geese, turkeys, horses, cattle, and so on. The numbers were vast. Chase describes contemporary accounts in the early 1800s that estimate that “in the months of December and November, the heaviest for droves, nearly 200,000 hogs alone might pass through town” (2007: 16). From points North and West, the majority of these livestock were bound for Greenville, South Carolina and points South, via the Saluda Gap; or to Charlotte and points southeast through Hickory Nut Gap and down through Rutherford (Chase, 2007: 20). Drovers and stock were fed and watered for the night at stock outposts or road houses established at regular intervals along the principal routes; these structures, which were capable of

housing thousands of animals at a time, often became early peripheral settlements themselves. Asheville from its earliest days therefore catered to the itinerant and mercantile; it quickly became established as the seat of Buncombe county, which was for a time the main county in western North Carolina and encompassed much of the land west to what is now Tennessee; it began as and has remained the primary urban center of Western North Carolina at least since the days when Morganton, the seat of Burke County, was the governing center of all lands west in the late 1700s.

The trade routes connecting producers to markets began to bring a different kind of commodity into town in the mid-1800s: tourism, drawn both by the supposedly healthful mountain air and the stunning mountain scenery, which was marketed as “Land of the Sky” since at least the early 1800s. As both Chase and Van Noppen describe (2007 and 1973, from distinct source materials); major stagecoach lines sprung up in these decades, connecting particularly the eastern part of the state through Swannanoa Gap to Asheville (and also Tennessee to South Carolina with Asheville as the principal waystation) and bringing a huge influx of money—although probably not as much as the continued presence of major livestock trade. Like the more southerly resort town of Highlands North Carolina, Asheville became a major destination for the planter aristocracies of South Carolina and Georgia, who came to escape the summer heat and rampant malaria, and to stay in luxurious hotels. By the time of the Civil War, Asheville was a relatively prosperous town with a large slave population—by some estimates up to half of the city was slave labor (Chase 2007: 27; see also Bradley 2009); a proportion that remained quite high even after the war relative to the rest of the mountain counties—estimates range from 20 to 25%. As both authors describe, Asheville was a confederate

democrat hotbed amid a number of neighboring counties with divided loyalties, some of which had sent significant numbers to Unionist regiments in Tennessee (Bradley 2009: 78-81). Unlike other mountain counties including Madison County to its north, which saw a significant amount of conflict between unionists and secessionists particularly after the war's end, Buncombe County was firmly pro-slavery and pro-confederacy. Asheville sent two regiments to the confederate war effort; had an arms manufacturing base; and was an important garrison point for Confederate troops (Chase 2007: 27). The town was finally sacked in May of 1865 during the last days of the war. Early reconstruction was marked by poverty and desperation in the city, particularly because the rail lines that were expanding quickly in the rest of the south largely passed western North Carolina by for at least two decades, for reasons including rough terrain, incompetent management, and overwhelming levels of graft in the disorganized state government. A devastating drought in the late 1870s which emphasized the need for greater transit capabilities, provided political impetus for additional railroad construction. Using black convict labor, the major geographic barrier to rail infrastructure (a natural passage from the East through the Blue Ridge called Swannanoa Gap) was surmounted in 1879 with the railroad reaching Asheville in 1880. The Swannanoa Tunnel, which eliminated the last major land barrier, claimed some 400 convict lives in its construction and was one of the first uses of dynamite in tunnel construction (Chase 29).

Reconstruction in Asheville was also marked by, as the euphemism goes, 'bad race relations'—hardly surprising given the staunchly confederate nature of the town (Bradley 2009). Through the boom years, Asheville's Black population was limited within the city to a small geographic area around Eagle Street; almost all black-owned

businesses and civic institutions were in this space. In various ways, the early twentieth century saw Black community institutions and civic engagement plummet as Blacks were systematically disenfranchised; as Jim Crow policies were put into place following Plessy in 1896; and as skyrocketing real estate values made Black neighborhoods the subject of white land grabs and speculation. As Chase notes, many Black people simply left for the urban centers of the northeast, aided by railroads; the Black population of Asheville went from 40% or more prior to the Civil War to around 20% in the early decades of the 20th century. Even into the middle of the 20th century there was little in the way of medical care for Blacks available in the segregated city; public schools remained segregated until significant agitation on the part of Black students in the late 1960s and early 1970s compelled civic change (Chase 2007: 156-160).

With the arrival of the railroad came Asheville's first major economic boom, which was to last around 50 years. As Chase puts it, the boom eventually "added nearly 50,000 souls to the population, making Asheville one of the most opulent, sophisticated, and architecturally exciting locations in the country" (2007:30). The coming of rail infrastructure meant many things for Asheville and the region in general. First, raw materials and finished products could move in and out at astronomically higher rates and for significantly less freight cost; people, particularly tourists, could travel in relative speed and luxury; and land, already a subject of intense investment speculation, became a subject of frenzy.

However, people arrived in great numbers in Asheville for a variety of reasons; one primary draw for more than a century and a half has been a particular understanding of Asheville as a uniquely healthy place, or a place where one could re-make oneself into

a healthier person. Beginning in the 1770s, the area became known for housing tuberculosis sufferers in sanitariums; the allegedly healthful mountain air and climate were billed as a cure for all kinds of ills. In a less speculative fashion, ‘summer people’ arrived in great droves in the hot months to escape malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases. People also understood the land in general—some combination of geography, geology, and water—to offer curative effects to the ill. Amidst the focus on health or an earlier iteration of ‘wellness,’ industries providing the fashionable cures of the day sprung up in the town: “massage, physical culture, electricity, high frequency, x-ray, mechanical massage, hydrotherapy, diets, and other physiological methods” were all on offer, promising to treat dread diseases (Chase 2007:34).

Finally, the arrival of the railroad roughly coincided with the establishment of Asheville as an outpost of the gilded age. As Chase notes, at least four industrial magnates made Asheville their home or the focus of their attentions in this period: lumber magnate George Willis Pack; railroad and lumber baron Franklin Coxe; Edwin Wiley Grove, who made his fortune in pharmaceuticals, and finally and most importantly, George Washington Vanderbilt of the Vanderbilt shipping and railroad fortune. All of these wealthy outsiders, some arriving for health reasons and some simply for the potential of the boom town, made lasting marks on the economic and architectural history of the city, but perhaps none more so than Vanderbilt. His construction of the Biltmore Estate in 1895 was a major event that received national attention; his presence likely legitimized Asheville significantly in the eyes of the elite economic circles of the northeast. As Vanderbilt and his contemporaries built developments and planned elite neighborhoods, the city itself underwent one of the most ill-considered building sprees of

any municipality in the country; as the roaring twenties built to a climax, Asheville, heavily promoting itself nationally and particularly in Florida as a retirement, second-home, and resort town, was leveraged to the hilt with municipal debt for an astonishing amount of construction. This era of rapacious development is chronicled in Thomas Wolfe's lightly fictionalized town of Altamont, which detail the feverish real estate speculation of the day and describe the incredible capital flowing into the city.

The great depression came early to Asheville: in 1926, as Jones notes (1984), the real estate bubble burst and credit got tight; however, propped up by local banks, the economy limped along until the depression hit with full force in 1929. As I detail in the section on Lunsford above, the primary impetus for the music festival he created was this exact economic downturn: city officials had decided that a huge municipally-sanctioned festival would serve as a booster to the local economy, and would bring in further tourist and land investment capital. This, of course, didn't happen, and the municipal festival soon collapsed while Lunsford's festival endured. Following the crash of 1929, Chase (2007) details an essentially forty-year period where Asheville, crippled by massive municipal debt and with an insubstantial tax base, limped along. For a further twenty years after the debt was finally paid off, the downtown, with its massive art deco buildings from the early century boom, was a relative ghost town. Finally, in the 90s, Asheville started its second major boom as a tourist, second home, and health and wellness hotbed—a process that is still underway, and that is seeing similar effects in the real estate market, the influx of outside capital, and massive in-migration.

Thus, historically, there are a set of characteristics that has distinguished Asheville as a particular kind of town within the broader region. First, it has always been

a major point of in-migration from outside the mountain south; it is an ‘outsiders’ town’ in many ways and as such culturally distinct from the rest of Western North Carolina. As Chase notes, by 1900, fully a third of the population was from the northeast; Florida has also been a historic point of exchange. It has historically been a bohemian enclave and a town on the make; in various ways (including the interesting history of both a number of local small colleges and the short lived avant garde institution of the mid-twentieth century Black Mountain College), Asheville has for almost two centuries welcomed the disaffected wealthy, artists, health seekers, tourists, and speculators. It has historically been a node through which the rest of the western part of the state sold things: farm products, timber, labor, and in important ways since at least the late 1800s, ‘culture.’ It has almost always billed itself and thought of itself as a resort town—a place where people come to escape things in the rest of the country. And finally, it has always been a town where people have come into extensive contact across lines of class, particularly around the organizing framework of expressive culture and the particular set of ideas about folk culture that I examine above, but also through the process of commerce and through the service economy that has historically provided employment opportunities for locals.

## **1.4 Conclusion: Revivalism, Traditional Music, Class**

The preceding chapter has outlined a cultural and regional history that inflects the encounters I describe in this ethnography. For instance, the local music scenes I circulated in for years (old-time, bluegrass, and lately classic country) all owe their existence in significant ways to the cultural history I detail. The music workshop I detail in chapter three, and a number of others like it, as well as college programs, were founded by revivalists who arrived in the sixties and encountered the fortunate convergence of local colleges and a vital traditional music scene sustained in part by Lunsford's festival. Allen, whose weekly musical gathering I introduce in the next chapter and which is important throughout this dissertation, was the direct descendant of people who were field-recorded by revivalists like John Cohen, following in the footsteps of Cecil Sharp. The old-time scene I detail in chapter four is the explicit product of the complex and centuries-long history of revivalism and folkloric approaches to working-class cultural products; its contradictions and assumptions are very much of a piece with the history above, as are the festivals at which it is reproduced. The wellness practices I show in chapter two as integral to the self-making of middle-class revivalist scenes are in line with what outsiders have come to Asheville seeking since the 1800s. And in important ways, even the existence of vibrant working-class music scenes, like the ones surrounding Asheville, owe some portion of their existence to the explicit valuation of 'heritage and patrimony' through Lunsford's and other culture workers' vision. For instance, the ongoing existence of 'heritage communities' like the ballad singers of Madison County, who have been the ongoing subjects of folkloristic veneration for a century or so, obviously depends to some extent on the reification of a particular era of

working-class vernacular music by folklorists. This fascinating dialectic is explored in Martha King's 2006 master's thesis. It is important to note, however, that working-class vernacular music *as a practice* was in no way in danger of disappearing without the revivalists. It just changed, except in places like Madison County where locals absorbed parts of the folkloristic vision of endangerment and heritage (and consequently became figures of middle-class renown). I take this subject up at length in Chapter four.

The foundational ideas and epistemological stances that characterized folklore and revivalism and assumed new importance in the cultural ferment of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the US arise from multiple and complex trajectories, but are characterized by a few consistent markers. I abstract them here as a way of thinking through a portion of the intellectual history of modernity, particularly as regards culture workers:

1. The categorization or objectification of groups of people (in some way 'other' than white middle-class western modernity), as evidenced by their cultural practices or repertoires which contain evidence of (sometimes desirable) alterity.
2. The idea that these practices—particularly 'expressive culture'—can be abstracted, intact, from the contextualized social, cultural, and political-economic circumstances of their origin; and thus abstracted, circulate as objects of scholarship, revival, preservation, documentation, imitation, commercialization, and as 'practices of resistance.'
3. Efforts to delineate, schematize, and/or canonize the realms of cultural production in consideration and/or the people themselves through a set of ordering tropes

(like authenticity) which evaluate and judge the production and reproduction of cultural forms, and which are fundamental to the canonization process; and finally,

4. A deeply ambiguous relationship to the categories of people who are the subjects of these understandings—typically conceived of as simultaneously virtuous and debased; noble and savage; virtuously archaic and degradingly modernized—who are often seen as in need of various kinds of advocacy, uplift, or redemption despite their authentic cultural practice.

These markers, such as they are, are modernist in the sense of an epistemological orientation towards categorization, temporality, and teleology; and modernist as in a reactionary response to the perceived destructive, isolating, atomizing effects of modernity. In outlining a working-class poetics of culture that is in many ways opposed to these stances, I do not mean to suggest that working-class people are not ‘modern’ (or to put it another way, are ‘antimodern’), or don’t face many of the same dilemmas of modernity. Rather, I mean to suggest that the cultural frameworks through which we understand what modernity encompasses need to be broadened. In significant ways, I hope to provide a presentist counterpoint which shows counterposed working-class cultural attitudes towards music, categorization, abstraction, and other markers I note above.

Finally, I want to suggest that the antagonistic poles of functionalism and endangerment structure competing notions of lay revivalism. By functionalism, I mean the attitude which regards ‘folk music’ as a living and ongoing cultural process which anyone can take part in and which responds organically to the demands and contradictions of everyday life. In other words, it is an activity that serves a function, and

the function is helping people cope with change and hardship, regardless of who they are. Functionalism underlies the contemporary articulation of, for instance, ‘old-time’ music, as a living tradition in which middle-class people from the northeast are understood to be natural and untroubled participants (a topic I revisit in chapter four). Endangerment structures the sense that revivalists have, which dates back to the 1700s, that the contemporary moment is always the last chance to salvage the dying gasp of an authentic tradition by documenting old people and what they do. This attitude also underwrites much of the genre-purity endemic to old-time, whereby people delimit what is ‘real’ to a very specific re-creation of a very specific canon, and dismiss everything else as contamination which dilutes the essence of what the music really ‘is.’

In the next section, I turn to another brief intellectual history which should be regarded as an analogue to this section. In it, I examine how and why anarchism as a political philosophy embodied mostly by punks in the contemporary US underwrites another, and arguably distinct, rationale for engaging with alternate cultural traditions. Although I suggest that anarchism and revivalism motivate people to play traditional music for distinct reasons, it is also true that, in some fundamental ways, the projects of radical leftism and the history of folklore share significant overlap (for instance, the way that Fabian socialism both drew on Kropotkin’s agrarian cooperativism and inflected Sharp’s vision of folk culture). Thus, part of what the next chapter does is suggest some of the ways that anarchism differs from and overlaps with revivalism in theory and practice. Because the following ethnography counterposes punk and revivalist scenes, it is important to understand their engagements with traditional music as coming from distinct but related histories. In part, the next section begins to answer the question I

heard so many times in describing my project: “But, aren’t the punks just doing what the hippies did fifty years ago?” This was a question that my punk informants had explicitly considered, and the answer, as I note, is “yes and no.”

## **1.5 An Introduction to Anarchism**

This section provides a very brief overview of the history of anarchism, a brief historiography of recent academic work, and an introduction to the kind of anarchism currently extant in the US. While ‘anarchism’ as such is not a particularly visible organized political presence in America, it has for the last few decades arguably been the bellwether of American leftism, its primary or only radical political vision, and a reservoir of tactics that have filtered out to more issue-focused movements (ENDNOTE: Reformist Movements). In defining the salient aspects of ‘anarchism’ as it has existed in the US such that it is even an identifiable thing across eras and in the present day, the definition borrowed by Cornell (Cornell, 2016) for his exhaustive history seems as good as any: “1. A view of an ideal, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society; 2. A criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this antiauthoritarian ideal; 3. A view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress towards the ideal; 4. A strategy for change, involving institutions of noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives.” (Clark, 1978 in Cornell 2016: 210). In other words, anarchism approaches human nature through a lens that is optimistic, imagining a utopic future (partially possible in the present) in which humans organize autonomous, non-hierarchical, voluntary, collectives in which people support each other through mutual aid, and make decisions through direct democracy or consensus.

Having thus defined my terms, I should note here that this section is not intended to be a history of anarchism per se. This history, or presentist versions of it, is written in various places, with different foci and different periodizations (Graeber 2004, 2009;

Gilbert 2008; Lynd and Grubacic 2008; Day 2005; Shantz 2010; Juris 2008; Purkis and Bowen 2004; Cornell 2016). Most of these works acknowledge a classical period of Anarchism from the late 1800s through the first two or three decades of the 1900's; this period saw the first systematized writings from what might be considered the classic anarchist theorists—including but not limited to Proudhon, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and on through Goldman. Many of these early author-figures in anarchist thought were writing against or in the shadow of Marxism; as has been noted extensively in other places, anarchism emerged as the left counterpoint to the statist, revolutionary, and arguably authoritarian impulses of Marxian political visions. As such, as Graeber argues, while Marxism “has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy, anarchism [is] an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice” (2009: 211). Anarchism in this first period, as Cornell argues, was deeply tied in the US to labor organizing, most notably through unions like the IWW and other anarcho-syndicalist groups. In the US, anarchist groups were almost entirely made up of Southern and Eastern European immigrant workers, located in industrial centers, and focused on issues of class. Following massive repression and anti-immigration legislation after domestic anarchists opposed World War I, later compounded by the tragedy of the Spanish anarchists in the civil war of the late 30's, this version of anarchism largely disappeared along with the Wobblies.

Most historians consider the post-World War II years through the end of the 60s to be the second major era of anarchist organizing, culminating in the breakup of the new left. As both Tracy (1996) and Cornell (2016) note, anarchist influences in this time emerged in uneasy alliance with Black Freedom Movement organizations like SNCC

prior to 1964; organizations like SDS (prior to its dissolution) and later insurrectionist groups like the Yippies and Diggers. In different ways, all were influenced by anarchist concerns with anti-hierarchy, direct democracy, and consensus-based decision-making. More generally, as Cornell (2016) argues, a continuous and vibrant anarchist intellectual tradition informed US leftist organizing throughout the entirety of the twentieth century, even when the word itself in all its conflicted associations wasn't used as an identifying label. Arguing for a richer anarchist history of the 70's and 80's, Graeber makes a similar point with regard to the influences of anarchist theory on feminist, anti-nuclear, and radical environmental movements, all of which experimented with, refined, and preserved the tactical insights of anarchist organizing in these years (2009).

Finally, as an explosion of literature attests, the early 1990s saw the massive growth of global networks of activism informed by anarchist principles, facilitated by new communication and information technologies in the form of the early internet, cell phones, and eventually social media, and inspired by the incredibly savvy self-promotion of the Zapatista uprising (Nash 2005; Harvey 1998; Collier and Quaratiello 1994). This era—from the 90's to the contemporary day, is often thought to have been most prominently initiated in the US by the ‘Battle of Seattle’—the massive 1999 protest organized by anarchist networks against the WTO meetings, which both successfully shut them down and, through spectacular media coverage, introduced the ‘anti-globalization’ movement to the country more generally, albeit in often-unfavorable terms. However, this era of organizing has to be understood historically, with particular attention to the ways that immediate predecessors contributed particular understandings of anarchism and organizing (ENDNOTE: Anthropology of Social Movements).

This era of anarchist organizing is the one in which this ethnography is historically situated, and it is notable for a few characteristics. First, it is very nearly co-terminous with the ‘punk’ scene, a term I examine in the next section. Second, it relies heavily on an understanding of anarchist praxis that, in its late-twentieth century iteration, was oriented towards anti-consumerism, anti-capitalism, and ecological concerns. While anarchist organizing in the late nineties and early 2000s certainly grappled with concerns about intersectionality, privilege, and the ways that race, gender, and sexuality complicated both the theoretical project of anarchism and specific tactics of organizing, the overt focus of much anarchist organizing in these years was, as Graeber details exhaustively (2009), anti- or alter-globalization efforts with an environmentalist bent. These in practice were often massive, spectacular protests aimed primarily at the annual meetings of Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank or the IMF. In the years since 9/11/2001, and following a period of massive repression, the movement, such as it is, has focused much more intently on privilege and intersectionality as a defining problematic—with notable foci on issues of queer and racial justice movements. The brief eruption of Occupy movements in the early teens also re-injected a language of class into both anarchist and national politics.

As many authors note, anarchist organizing in this era is also notable for its racial and class politics: to wit, it is largely white. The reasons for this are both simple and complex, ranging from the abject bodily practices of punks (which are understandable partly as race privilege, although this is certainly not all they are), to the class and race privilege of ‘activism’ more generally, to the increased likelihood of police oppression of

people of color in activist scenes, and so on. Because anarchist punks typically consider themselves explicitly anti-racist, this fact is one that causes (and indeed, as many historians argue, has long caused) deep divisions, intense angst, and a constant level of distrust between white activists and people of color who are engaged in shared projects. This is not to say that they are never one and the same—particularly in larger US cities, there are often APOC-inspired (Anarchist People Of Color), Afropunk, and other non-white anarchist collectives or scenes. But generally, despite the impossibility of demographic surveys, most observers agree that the scene is largely white. As I will argue, the issue of class privilege in the anarchist/punk scene is a complex one, despite the overwhelming popular narrative of ‘crust punks with trust funds.’ However, an undeniable and interesting aspect of anarchism in the last 15 years has been its enthusiastic embrace by academics within the social sciences and humanities (or, perhaps, the embrace of academia by former anarchists), many of whom are concerned to point out the striking resonances between anarchist principles and post-structuralist or postmodern high theory. This rather odd (to my eyes) juxtaposition is now established enough such that an ‘anarchist turn’ can be anthologized (Amster et al 2009; Blumenfeld et al 2013; see also Graeber 2004; ENDNOTE: Anthropology and anarchism). The reasons for this embrace, and the contradictions of practice (as well as career-making identities) it has generated, are complex and beyond the scope of this work.

One of the primary characteristics of contemporary (that is to say, post-9/11) anarchism is an embrace of the idea of prefiguration, a doctrine which asserts that the way to achieve revolutionary social change is simply to act as though it had already happened—to, in effect, build and organize the exact alternatives to statist authority or

capitalist economies that are envisioned as a future utopia. In this vision, the means are effectively the ends: as with Occupy, the revolution is not what organizing accomplishes, but rather the actual practice of organizing in anti-hierarchical modes. Anarchists tend to believe that worthy ends cannot be accomplished through means that replicate current injustices—or, to use a concrete example, that a stateless, egalitarian society could be achieved through Robert's Rules-style organizing or top-down bureaucratic endeavors.

Within the realm of prefiguration, contemporary anarchism sees the various evils attending the nation state, global capitalism, and so on, as primarily expressed in the register of 'hierarchy,' and consequently the main cultural battleground as the many nefarious and subtle interpersonal and institutional forms of 'hierarchy.' This focus is often expressed through a variety of 'anti-' orientations that many anarchists adopt: anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-ableist, anti-capitalist, anti-statist, anti-heteronormative, and so on. Accordingly, anarchists are often concerned with 'selves' whose relational practices, cultural repertoires, and notions of ethical behavior are thought to inherently reproduce the hierarchies, inequalities, uncreativity, and anti-solidarity they see as endemic social components of statist capitalism. As such, one of the main concerns of anarchism per se is the discovery, recovery, or cultivation of alternatives to white middle-class selfhood. Ironically, the ways that people have of 'changing' themselves into different kinds of social subjects often look suspiciously like the varieties of 'self-making' so common to middle-class life: in contrast to the Latinate roots and popular interpretation of the word as indicating nihilistic lawlessness, actually-existing anarchism envisions an intensely-internalized and highly-structured set of rules governing social relations and decision-making. One interesting corollary of this is that, far from assuming that human

subjectivity is inherently the product of regimes of power, anarchist practice looks at ‘culture’ as a creative realm that can be actively repurposed to create or learn new ways of being (ENDNOTE: Ethnography of anarchism). This set of attitudes is particularly important in understanding why punks are cultural magpies, an observation that serves to frame the next section.

#### ENDNOTES TO SECTION:

**Reformist activism:** This is not to deny the vital and compelling activism that has recently surrounded issues like the Dream Act, Occupy, and, recently, Black Lives Matter—all of which draw on the longer traditions of leftist organizing in various ways, but are necessarily limited to specific issues. The ‘radical leftism’ that I address here articulates a more-or-less coherent vision for societal organization which entirely reimagines economic and social organization; this sense of an overarching utopic political vision—and particularly a stateless one—is relatively absent from issue-based organizing, primarily because the focus of such organizing is typically reformist. Again, this is not a critique of issue-based organizing, but rather an acknowledgement that, in the field of extant political philosophies, most issue-based movements, even while drawing on radical political philosophies, do not themselves pursue a radical political vision in this sense, but typically are oriented to the reform of extant institutions toward greater justice.

**Anthropology of Social Movements:** Anthropology remained largely absent from systematic Social Movements theorization for many decades, for a number of reasons. As Edelman notes, the traditional disciplinary focus on “peasants, the urban (especially third-world) poor, ethnic minorities, and millenarian or syncretic religious sects” meant that for the most part, ‘social movements’ (which, in most theoretical contexts prior to 2000 excluded these groups from participation) didn’t lend themselves to application in Anthropological research situations (Edelman 2001: 286). However, beginning in the late eighties, anthropologists—especially scholars of Latin America—began following in the footsteps of New Social Movements theorists like Touraine and Melucci in investigating cohesive politicized groups, with an especial focus on Latin America. Since the late 1990s, there has been a veritable explosion of work within a large number of disciplines on transnational, horizontal, networked social movements. NSM perspectives, as opposed to the American political sociology paradigms like Resource Mobilization, have proved more fruitful for anthropologists—at least in part because of the tendency of NSM work to focus more on meaning, identity, and collectivity, instead of external structural limitations or possibilities. In general, as Edelman notes, “the RM paradigm tended to disregard situations in which social movements...emerged with few resources or where overt organization—in contexts of extreme inequality, severe repression, and hopeless odds—endangered participants...” (290). Thus, there has been

little RM work on social movements in non-western contexts. RM theories have also been critiqued for their general inability to deal with the affective dimensions of movement participation; for their narrow focus on policy results; and for their tendency to ignore the dialectical interaction of movement goals with cultural categories of identity, among other things (Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

New Social Movements theory posited a broad shift in the nature of social movement participation, motivations and goals, within a general assertion that the gradual mid-century change from an industrial to a post-industrial economy in much of the west had produced fundamental shifts in both the nature of state techniques of control, as well as strategies of resistance (Touraine 1983; 1988; Pichardo 1997). In comparison to older labor movements, NSMs in post-industrial society accordingly are less concerned with immediate political goals; tend to be diverse in their constituency; and often actively work towards cultural and lifestyle goals focused on changing the nature of state or capitalist involvement with a general “way of life” (Touraine, 1988). Melucci followed this assertion, suggesting in his (1989) work that the intrusion of state and market logics into the intimate sphere of everyday sociality generates concerns and grievances that render NSMs fundamentally different from older, class-based movements: the focus shifts from the terrain of ‘work’ to that of everyday life, with lifestyle understood as a mode of resistance; thus, participation in a social movement in and of itself becomes a form of political action. This work and others in the 1980’s specifically built on Habermas’ (1981) theorization of the penetration of the public sphere by statist and capitalist logics—taking up the question of “whether contemporary movements are reacting to the changing nature of domination necessitated by the emergence of the postindustrial era” (Pichardo, 1997: 426).

Work by anthropologists and sociologists in this time began to trace the emergence of a new paradigm within social movements—anti-neoliberalism as a defining rubric or master frame—as well as the rise of transnational, largely-autonomous, movements that relied largely on internet and digital media to network. These movements, which theorists drew heavily on NSM-based paradigms to define (at least at first—although Escobar (1992), was already discarding the label as inappropriate), were marked primarily by two broad, universal features: the rise of horizontal (rhizomatic, parallel, flat, etc), non-hierarchical leadership models which emphasized consensus-based decision making processes; and a canny utilization of the internet as a primary tool of recruitment, propaganda, and movement solidarity on an international scale (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Nash 2005).

**Anthropology and Anarchism:** Anthropology has also historically had a minor engagement with explicitly anarchist ideas. The earliest work with this explicit focus is Clastres (1987), although even some founding figures (such as A.R. “anarchy” Radcliffe-Browne: Graeber, 2004) dabbled in anarchist politics. Building on his ethnographic fieldwork and on extensive literatures, Clastres makes two key assertions: first, that the vast majority of Amerindian societies did not take the form of hierarchically-arranged power structures with a monopoly on coercive force. Second, since this is the de facto western understanding of ‘state development,’ anthropologists and others have often judged the ‘development’ of a particular society based on whether or not it possesses state-like apparatuses. In fact, he argues, there exist many examples wherein societies are

organized intentionally around precisely the opposite principle: the absence of personally-held coercive power. This is not to say that there is no power, per se—for Clastres, power is immanent to all social relations; the difference he notes is between coercive and non-coercive power. In Clastres' examples, political offices as such ('chieftainships') are in fact positions of moderation, in which the alleged leader is actually a servant of the broader social group, in effect, and rhetorical persuasion is a high art. He also posits that torture via rituals forms the mark on the body that itself is a living reminder of the law against personal power. Finally, he notes, following Sahlins (1972), that 'primitive' societies are actually leisure societies, at heart averse to work in favor of social interaction. Only through the constitution of coercive power, in his estimation, can alienated labor also come into being. His main assertion—that certain societies are organized in the conscious avoidance of state power—has been influential in the anarchist genealogy, but has also been critiqued for both romanticism and a certain sleight of hand in ideas of causation and historical provenance (i.e., how could societies be organized around resisting that which they have never experienced?). Sahlins, noted above, is by no means anarchic in intellectual identity, but his examination of labor and leisure in so-called primitive societies has been very influential not only within the anthropology of anarchism, but also within the broader movement literature, especially so for so-called 'anarcho-primitivists' such as John Zerzan, who typically advocate for the destruction of industrial society and a return to subsistence-level societies.

James C. Scott's work over the years has often focused on the nature of the state and of 'resistance from below,' his most famous being (2009 (1989)) *Weapons of the Weak*, which is an ethnographic examination of peasant resistance strategies in Malaysia. Building on his fieldwork, he mounts an attack on Gramscian notions of hegemony, and neo-Marxist uses of the ideas of both ideology and especially false consciousness. Scott argues that in reality, ideologies are never adopted wholesale; the appearance of peasant or lower-class quiescence is generally a strategy; and most underclasses have highly evolved strategies of quotidian resistance based on a canny evaluation of the actual possibilities and consequences of dissent. He notes that historically, peasant revolutions have not come from a radical ideological change, but rather from a change in the structural possibilities of rebellion; in effect, subaltern classes always have a trenchant critique of their own oppression. Hegemony is therefore bunk, because in lived reality, it is never possible to convince people of the validity of their own oppression. Abu-Lughod (1990), among others, offers critiques of the romanticism of this view, but it has nevertheless been highly productive for a generation of anthropologists. Following Clastres' work, anthropologists have been inspired by similar accounts of 'domination-resistant' societies in Amazonia.

In 2004, Graeber published a small Prickly Paradigms text that constituted a call for the development of an anarchist anthropology, an exploration of why such a thing doesn't already exist, and a preliminary statement of why the combination could be fruitful. Noting that Marxism and anarchism have historically been competing ideologies, he posits that Marxism and the academy have been a natural fit over the last 150 years because "1. Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy. 2. Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice" (6). Noting that he is dealing in broad terms and caricatures (and the wildly loose parameters of the term 'anarchist' to begin with), he notes that one

reason for the paucity of academic anarchism has to do with the nature of anarchist praxis and the nature of the academy and tenure as institutions. However, as he notes, “most actually-existing self-governing communities, and actually-existing non-market economies in the world have been investigated by anthropologists rather than sociologists or historians,” and this positions anthropology as a discipline as uniquely suited to aid in one of the central foci of anarchist praxis: namely, imagining and bringing into being alternative ways of organizing social relations (alternative to global capitalism and state domination (11). More broadly, Graeber argues that what is known formally as ‘anarchism’ has actually been a default mode of social organization in many places and times—or that anarchism as a political philosophy didn’t invent anything new, but rather systematized existing insights. Graeber’s two 2007 publications take up questions addressed in *Fragments* from different angles. *Lost People* (his dissertation) details a region of Madagascar essentially abandoned by the state apparatus; Graeber’s ethnographic account examines the legacy of slavery and the absence of the state in the entrenched social relations of the region. In particular, he details a consensus-based community organization and relative personal autonomy characteristic in the region. *Possibilities* is a set of essays on subjects ranging from the place of manners in capitalist social relations to the nature of giant puppets as revolutionary theater; all are aimed at assessing the multiple ways of being human that anthropology as a discipline chronicles. The possibilities suggested by alternative cultural practices function for Graeber as suggestions for conceivable rebellious praxis from an anarchist standpoint.

Besides Graeber’s 2009 ‘Direct Action,’ which I mention in the body of this chapter, there is one other major published anthropological ethnographic monograph dealing with contemporary anarchist organizing. Juris’ 2008 work is based on participant-observation in a radical organizing group in Barcelona. Noting that his activist group was one of a great number of similar projects, Juris’ main concern is to examine the logic of networks themselves—the putatively unique element of social movements since the Zapatistas first made extensive use of emerging internet technologies. Juris notes that these emergent network forms are “both instrumental and prefigurative, facilitating concrete political interventions while reflecting activists’ emergent utopian ideals” (9). He notes that although much theorizing has been done on networks as a phenomenon, very little work has been done which examines the concrete everyday practices underlying the new network forms. Juris approaches the definition of networks from three possible intersecting angles: “networks as computer-supported infrastructure (technology), networks as organizational structure (form), and networks as political model (norm)” (11). The ‘form’ element of this triad is perhaps the most thoroughly-explored; Juris notes the emergent forms of decision-making and power distribution within movements as classically anarchist in that they are decentralized, horizontal, consensus-based, and so on. In positing a form emerging from this, he builds on Escobar’s (2004) work, which argues that “the actions of multiple agents interacting dynamically and following local rules rather than top-down commands result in visible macro-behavior or structures” (Escobar, 2004: 222 in Juris 2007: 16). This emergent structure out of anti-structure is the phenomenon that Juris notes time and again in protests and other actions, as well as in the spaces of planning and gathering like the World Social Forum.

**Ethnography of Anarchism:** Shantz' (2010) work, sociological in nature, is one of the few scholarly works on anti-neoliberal social movements to engage explicitly with anything besides NSM-oriented theory, or the post-Zapatista iterations of it. Shantz takes as his problematic the idea that movements of resistance must also develop visions for pragmatic alternatives. Building upon a body of theory derived from Resource Mobilization paradigms, he investigates the idea of 'infrastructures of resistance,' extending the RM paradigm, which focused on physical resources, to a broader and more immaterial meaning that delves into the realm of culture. Detailing the infrastructures that anarchists put into place, he surveys the ways that anarchism is busy 'building a new world in the shell of the old,' via homeless shelters, self-governing communities, food banks, prisoner outreach, and other practices intended to begin to manifest the non-hierarchical, collectivist, organizational forms that anarchy is predicated on. In so doing, Shantz explicitly notes the transition that anarchist tactics have undergone since 2001: instead of spectacular public demonstrations and protests, anarchist groups have instead imagined the space of 'the local' as a specific focus, building durable infrastructures within wider communities. This is accompanied by a specific rejection, in many instances, of movement exclusivity, as anarchists responded to critiques of clannishness and recognize the need to incorporate themselves as 'local' citizens. Critiquing works like Graeber (2009) and Day (2005) for giving little attention to ongoing actual anarchist projects besides protests, Shantz suggests that anarchism is and should be more than a code-word for anti-globalization demonstrations. In his estimation, many recent works on anarchism offer either "heavy theoretical analysis, often pursuing an engagement between anarchy and recent developments in philosophy, especially various expressions of post-structuralism" or "a focus on dramatic, symbolic, or ephemeral aspects of anarchist practice" (16). Shantz' important work focuses on the quotidian, in contrast, expressing "a striving for autonomy and self-determination rather than a politics of dissent or demand" (16).

## **1.6 Punks and Contemporary Anarchism**

This section introduces ‘punks’ and the punk scene more generally. As I note, anarchism as a set of practices is actually enacted in contemporary American life primarily by people who are associated in some way with the punk scene (ENDNOTE: Academics on punks). The two terms—punk and anarchist—are not synonymous, but they have significant overlap. It is through this specific lens that I view much of what I show punks doing in the ethnography that follows—a fact which requires explanation, since there is only glancing mention of overt political organizing (even though some of my punk informants were actively involved in political organizing, mostly centered around issues of gender and sexuality during my time in the field). Drawing on interviews and fieldwork data in an effort to show how playing music could be part of anarchist praxis, I argue that the domestic political reactions to 9/11 over the first few years of the 2000s coincided with a sea change in punk and anarchist political organizing. I situate some of my primary informants within that context, showing how they arrived in Asheville and became interested in traditional music as a theorized part of their political outlook. Finally, I give a brief overview of the version of the punk scene that I talk about throughout this work, as an introduction to my use of punk informants as a foil for understanding the entanglement of class cultures and leftist activism.

As I explore in the ethnography and interviews below, the tenets of ‘punk’ praxis to a large extent derive from or articulate principles from the generalized body of anarchist thought that is reproduced and transmitted person-to-person, in encounters like informal classes and ‘skills-shares’ (a particularly anarchist-punk kind of encounter), and through websites, zines, books, blogs, and other digital ephemera. But the most easily

definable element of American punk is, of course, the genre of music that bears the same name. The trajectory of punk music as such, building on the complexities of the British scene and its transmission and adaptation to American contexts, is well beyond the scope of this dissertation. While punk music doesn't appear in this dissertation, it provides an important backstory. For many of my informants, punk music had in many cases originally drawn them to the scene, organized a complex social world (much as 'traditional' music does for middle-class people in this dissertation), taught them about punk politics through lyrics, and given elegant expression to the poetics of punk culture. However, most but not all of the punks I knew in the years I did fieldwork were post-punk punks—that is, they no longer actively listened to the music much or went to shows, and although one or two played in punk bands, it was not a major organizing factor in their day-to-day lives. In this sense, 'punk' in the mode that I use it mostly refers to the broader cultural formation of which punk music per se is one rich expression, but which also encompasses an ideological vision, an aesthetics, a set of ethical dispositions, a complex social and bodily praxis, and so on.

I understand the 'self-making project' I describe punks as engaging in as not most importantly about aesthetics, style, fashion, music, or a facile reading of outwardly-projected 'identity' (a lens other theorists have adopted that I don't find particularly helpful). While these aspects are certainly part of what makes a 'scene'—particularly one like the punk scene that regards a rather doctrinaire aesthetics as an index of participation—I don't think of them as most fundamentally what punks 'are.' Instead, being a punk (generously speaking), fundamentally involves an attempt to explore different ways of doing things in an ongoing and everyday way, structured by intuition

and theorization about the ways assumptions of late modern personhood (rabid individualism, consumerism, ambition, future-oriented perspectives, etc) both rely on and generate certain traits and habits of the mind and heart. This romantic-sounding project is actualized by different punks in different ways, but many placed an emphasis on only engaging in non-alienated labor; on cultivating theorized networks of exchange and barter; on an extreme reluctance to perform wage labor; on a commitment to scavenged, stolen, or otherwise free material necessities; and on a deep commitment to the ongoing daily practice of art—however defined—as itself a political practice that rejects the construction of humans as simply receptacles or consumers of mass-mediated entertainment. It is this last portion of the ideological project I describe that both finds its richest elaboration in some of the anthropological works on anarchism, and that seems most directly relevant to the question of why, exactly, young-ish anarchists from urban centers across the country were often found homesteading and playing acoustic country music in western North Carolina.

Needless to say, I don't pretend to capture the punk experience in any degree of completeness. My own peripheral engagement with punks began in the early 2000s, when I attended several of the major east-coast alter-globalization protests, loosely affiliated with two separate activist organizations from North Carolina that I worked with at the time. Through periodic bursts of organizing over the years, I have remained something of an allied observer of more explicitly political punks in a couple of states; however, the day-to-day aspects of punk life that I look at here are relatively far removed from that kind of political organizing—and in any case, Graeber (2009) writes a very serviceable and to my eyes accurate account of the way that early 2000s organizing felt in US

anarchist circles. The kind of punk everyday that I consider here is a space that I have never occupied as a participant, except through the musical world that I detail. I don't dress like, act like, live with, or share a coherent political vision with punks, although it is fair to say that I find myself in broad agreement with many of their ethical stances and even some of their proposed solutions (although, like one of my primary informants, I would never call myself 'an anarchist,' although for different reasons—chief among them that I believe my job, being 'an academic,' completely precludes that as a potential reality). I am not even a particular fan of punk music as such, although I have been to my fair share of ear-shattering house concerts over the years.

Rather than a coherent portrait of what 'punk' is, this work offers a sense of how, in the decade and a half following 9/11, aspects of punk practice have developed in particular directions—including the odd juxtaposition of punk fiddlers in the rural south.

#### SECTION ENDNOTES:

**Academics on punks:** The punk scene is a complex assemblage of aesthetics, practices, and ideologies which maintains itself in various ways as a cultural formation, and of which I necessarily only capture a small part. In academic literatures, it has typically occupied the uneasy space between 'subculture' (a trajectory mostly pursued by scholars working in the British Cultural Studies tradition and following Hebdige's (1988) work); 'scene' (a label that tends to foreground aesthetic, semiotic, or identity aspects: for iterations of this interpretation, see Rosenblatt 1997; Haenfler 2006; Wood 2006; Kuhn 2010); and social movement (a frame that I detailed in the footnotes to the section on anarchism, and which most anthropologist observers have adopted). To my knowledge, there has not been a major published anthropological ethnographic monograph on American 'punks' as such, although works like Graeber's touch on them extensively through a focus on organizing protests (there are a large number of master's theses, journal articles, sociological studies, and so on—none of which I have found to provide a particularly in-depth look at everyday punk life). As a final note, in my organizing experience on college campuses, there are a very large number of academics or grad students who call themselves anarchists. I have largely excluded them from consideration because to my eyes, they conspicuously don't satisfy the basic

requirements of a practice-oriented philosophy. However, a reflexive evaluation of why this stance is so appealing to academics in a neoliberal cultural moment would be of great interest.

## **Locating the Punk Scene in the Rural South: Red and Jamie**

A substantial portion of my fieldwork was done in two bands, the primary one being a honky-tonk band fronted by the singer I call Red throughout this work; in this band I rotated around on bass, rhythm guitar, and lead guitar as well as singing duties. Besides Red, the other core member was a musician I call Jamie, who was also the fiddler for the other band I was in. That band, which was a traditionalist old-time stringband in which I played banjo, mostly circulated around in the old-time scene, including at festivals. Red and Jamie were both long-time members of the punk scene with years of history and phenomenal insight into how it worked; they were also both welcoming and generous bandmates. Besides them, the honky-tonk band was staffed by a rotating cast of players mostly drawn from the punk scene in Asheville; in my tenure there were more than twenty fill-in musicians who we trained for various gigs and tours. It is indisputably odd to most observers to see a traditionalist honky-tonk band staffed by punks, and the band itself is a vehicle for understanding both Red and Jamie's biographies—both of which in different ways encapsulate important aspects of the American punk scene of the last two decades. Red and Jamie, who were both in their late 30s and early 40s during my fieldwork, had been friends for years, lived in the same collective housing situation, and had recently founded the country band I mention throughout this work. However, they had come to Asheville and traditional music through very different paths, and from distinct backgrounds. The divergence of their origins and the similarity of their current lives, however, suggest something about the ultimate coherence of the punk scene as a whole, despite its regional particularities.

*Full Circle from Country to Punk to Country:* Red grew up a military brat on bases throughout the southeast, but her family's deep roots in her birthplace in the Kentucky bluegrass provided her with a solid landing place throughout a mobile childhood. Her early years were marked by a fundamental sense of social hierarchy that military life made her explicitly aware of. As she puts it, military bases "are just all about class tensions. They're very structured around class and differences in privileges between enlisted and officers, and you knew where you stood in the pecking order all the time, even the families." She describes a rebellious childhood where she clashed with teachers over her nascent opposition to the first Iraq war, even with a parent in combat. Despite a deep connection to her parents and extended rural family, she felt a wanderlust come over her. Hitting the road at 19, she spent about five years hitchhiking around the country, landing in various cities across the country and relying on networks of punk and anarchist friends for places to live, tips on squats to live in, and occasionally rides. As she puts it, she was initially attracted to the punk scene through music, and learned a lot about punk politics through it:

"I think the politics all come out of the music. Not hearing it at a show, but reading and talking about them later, thinking about them. The music draws people in, and then they're living in these communal situations where they're having to deal with all kinds of different people. And I think it keeps branching out from that. And some people take it deeper, dig deeper into the politics of it, and some don't."

In her initial period of traveling, she worked at a number of grassroots anarchist organizations in the major cities she lived in, like Food Not Bombs and others. She also worked an amazing collection of odd jobs in those years: ice cream truck driver, carnival barker, childcare worker, puppeteer, graphic artist. However, as she puts it, she was always torn because, unlike many punks, she maintained strong family connections, and a

deep love of her home state of Kentucky. She also enjoyed her work as an artist, a calling that conflicted in some ways with the hypermobility of the punk lifestyle. After five years of life mostly on the road, she settled on the west coast for a few years, building a strong network of activist and punk friends there.

"For me, I almost always felt like I was in two worlds at once. When I was in California, I made a living painting murals and teaching kids art and stuff like that, and I really loved it. But at the same time, I had been traveling for a good while, and squatting, and some things had happened in the squats that made me feel like that wasn't where I should be anymore. A girl had passed away after I left a squat...there was a lot of heavy drug use that I couldn't handle being around, and I started feeling like people were using the lifestyle as a way to make it okay to do shitty things. So then I decided I was going to stop traveling and put myself on probation for two years and see what would happen to me if I didn't travel—cause that's all I was doing, was *traveling*. And I started doing art like crazy, and I started this workshop with my friend at Gilman Street in Berkeley: We started this mask and puppet making workshop for free, and people could come and make stuff, and we got all these places to donate clay and materials and all this stuff. So I had all that going on, I was paying rent and living in these places."

But she eventually felt the lure of traveling again, and had also met her future partner Jim, who was learning to ride freight trains. Together, they developed a routine of travel which almost completely freed them from any direct involvement in cash economies, and provided them with immense mobility and great adventures:

"I was *really* getting restless in Oakland, and I wanted to start traveling again...it had probably been like five years. I traveled before I met Jim, but I always hitchhiked—I didn't start riding trains until me and Jim started together. That was one of the most *fun* things I had ever done—it was just so damn fun and so beautiful, and I kind of fell in love with traveling again, and Jim didn't and doesn't drink or do drugs, so it was a different crowd of people I was around that time, intermingled with the same old stuff... But, I guess I got very caught up in the romance of it, and..probably for like five years straight, we rode trains constantly, all year round, and then in the wintertime we'd take off and build a shack somewhere, and then we'd keep riding for the rest of the time.

Every once in a while we would work some funny odd job. We would go to Minneapolis every year to do the Halloween puppet show out there, and I would, for a couple of years, work at this preschool, Montessori day school kind of place. And I would be living in some shack, and the kids would be like, [Red does a high-pitched innocent child voice] “*You smell like fire and hot dogs!!!*” cause we cooked everything on the fire. Jim would do some construction stuff. We would do a little bit of odd jobs here and there, but mainly, we wouldn’t use money almost ever. Cause our transportation was the trains, we almost never even took a city bus to the trainyard, we’d just walk the five miles. And we dumpstered most of our food, and also did Food Not Bombs in all the big cities we went to, so we got food that way. We just had the clothes we had in our pack, and we’d switch ‘em out when we needed to, get ‘em from free boxes in people’s houses, stay with all our friends across the country. So we never really had to worry about a place to stay. We pretty much didn’t use money almost at all.”

For Red, the five years or so she spent riding trains with her partner Jim was one of the high points of her life—a time when she was forced to develop a wide range of skills, learn to improvise, and foster immense self-reliance through a practice that is in many ways a microcosm of punk politics. However, unlike many punks, her working-class background provided her with an alternative potential vision of social solidarity, and she always felt torn between the two—never fully embracing the ideological purity she found both admirable and off-putting in other punks.

Although they adjusted their routes seasonally, Red also describes a winter strategy they employed more than once: they would pick a city they liked, and arrive in the late fall. Relying on both fellow travelers and the informal punk networks that connect people across the country, they would find abandoned or unused commercial land, and build a small house with mostly found materials. All of the structures they built, after they left in the spring, would then become community property, passed around the punk scene as squats, visitor housing, or community spaces. Occasionally they were

simply taken over by a friend as a primary residence, and Red took pride in the fact that they never charged anyone anything; they just handed over the keys and hit the rails:

“It was fun as hell, and it was kind of empowering to not have to use money for things. And you have this whole huge support crew of people, and there were still a lot of avenues to do creative things, we were doing a lot of puppet shows, and making art.... But for me it was also still a struggle, because I didn’t firmly believe that that was the only way to live, and the *right* way, and I’m very tied to my family. And I was still trying to balance out doing all these things but staying connected to my family and to people who weren’t in the punk scene and weren’t twenty five, cause that was all very important to me. And eventually, that’s why I decided that I didn’t want to travel anymore too, cause I felt like my world got too small. But my motivation was partly just the thrill of riding trains, it was super fun. And I was totally enamored with Jim, and that was a big motivation for me, and pushing myself to do things that I hadn’t done, and having to get different skills like building things. I had never built things when I was a kid. It was cool: I was like, ‘I need a house, I’m gonna build myself a damn house.’ So we just built these little bitty shacks, but they were ours, and they were awesome. It’s a really wonderful thing to feel like you’re able to take care of yourself no matter what. We were on a train one time and all we had was a bag of hard candy and water for two days—I was like, “*this is great!*” Later, I got really hungry. But at the time, it was being in the mindset of you can do without a lot of things and still be happy and that’s fine.”

After some five years of this cycle, she got pregnant. Having visited a number of times, she and Jim were attracted to Asheville as a place to settle more permanently, for a number of reasons. First, there has long been a significant traditional music scene; Asheville has also long been known as a relatively bohemian enclave in the generally conservative rural atmosphere of western North Carolina, a fact that made it appealing to a lot of punk in-migrants looking to familiarize themselves with the area in a welcoming environment with community support. With a little work, Red and her partner found a community of people on a parcel of undeveloped land outside the city limits, but close enough to be practical for biking purposes. Over the next three years, they built a

beautiful timber-framed cabin, although they had no electricity or running water for years after their child was born. In that time, a number of other people also built houses on the land. Red described the scene as tightly-knit and stimulating, but eventually claustrophobic. She and her partner split up, maintaining joint custody, and she moved into a communal living situation in another small community near the city, along the river and the railroad tracks.

Red worked incredibly hard to support her child, holding down four part-time jobs including managing a farmer's market and cleaning vacation rental houses. A year before I met her, she had taken advantage of her newfound freedom and heartache to follow a long-time dream: singing her original songs in a country band. A devoted fan of country music since her childhood, she had grown up on the music of legends like Loretta Lynn, George Jones, and Merle Haggard, and more contemporary-but-traditional artists like Dwight Yoakam and Alan Jackson. In some ways, she saw country music as a rebellion against the standard punk genre-snobbism around old-time music; to her, country remained a working-class art played and appreciated mostly by working-class people, in contrast to the middle-class revivalist ethos of old-time music that she found infuriating at times. As she described it,

“When I was really into punk, I still loved country. Like, when I was a teenager and everything else was stupid, somehow country was still good, you know? And it was funny, cause when I moved to the west coast, people used to make fun of me all the time for liking country music. But they grew up with stuff like the Beach Boys. People have gone back and forth loving country and hating it, but all of a sudden, it’s become like the hot shit all over again.”

Red was amused by the recent embrace of country music by punks, but not entirely surprised: to her, the resonances between punks and working-class country

people, like some members of her family, was quite obvious. Whether they realized it or not, she suggested, punks were drawn by these cultural similarities:

"I think there's a lot of things that cross between redneck culture and punk culture and are very similar, in a lot of ways, but punks would never admit it. Like, I have some cousins who are hard-core country, they brew their own beer, they raise tobacco, they want to learn like all the homesteader ways of doing things; they're all into solar power, but they're not coming from a protect-the-earth viewpoint—I mean, they do really love the land, but they're more like survivalists, 'take care of our own, we don't need *shit*.' And they're very anti-government, and they're very proud. But it's funny, because they have so much in common with a lot of the punk kids I know. But if they saw each other, passing on the street, half of the punk kids would be like, "Fuckin' racists! Blah blah blah." But if they sat down and just talked, they would have so much in common."

However, despite her long-term engagement with and deep affection for the punk scene, Red is wary of labels like 'anarchist.' When I asked her if she would describe herself as such, she replied:

"Nooooo, I don't think I would [laughter]. I feel like a lot of my interactions with people who called themselves anarchists, felt like people who were very *exclusionary*, I don't know if that's even a word. I felt like they were very into the ideology and they were very into the anger of it, and fighting cops, and all that, but when it came down to actual *community*, they were crap. And that always killed me because, the way I was raised, is, you know, 'nobody's better than anybody else.' And you just take care of each other and other people's needs are important too. A lot of times when I did stuff in anarchist groups, there wasn't really a people element to it, it was all like, *theory*, and you know, it was like military planning or something. So I don't really care to call myself an anarchist. I mean, there's a lot of ideas that I think are great that are from that, but yeah, I don't have a good taste in my mouth with that word. But I feel like a lot of the work I did, too, was 'anarchist'—Food Not Bombs, or the community centers, and so on, where I felt like they had an actual immediate effect on people, and where I felt connections with people, and so on."

As Red and others noted, the anarchist theory scene tended to attract people who were given to doctrinaire ideological extremes. This trait, as Red explained, often meant that the most militant or dogmatic anarchists weren't anarchists for very long: instead, they tend to cycle through various extreme philosophies and jettison their previous dogmas along the way:

"Yeah, it's usually the people who are the most extreme, the most judgmental, the most hardcore calling-people-out for their sins, those are the people who usually end up doing that. There was this one guy, I lived in this big communal house in Oakland, and he would come through there and stay periodically, and one year he was like crazy Earth First dude, and he had his little forest name and all: "*I am Earth First!!*," and then he came back through and the next phase was riding trains...that was a short one. And then he came back through and he was all into meditation. He turned into, kind of an aggro-hippie, so into being laid back that they're not laid back at all, pushing their agenda on everybody around.

When he came back through that time, he was drawing 'om' symbols on my fridge, I was like, 'What the hell are you doing??' He was always having to meditate, putting little om symbols everywhere, tagging everything in our house, I was like 'godddammit!! The *salt shaker*'s been tagged!!' And then the next time he came through he was like sport dude, and then, oh, extreme outdoor sports guy, and in between he had been a huge shoplifter--*huge shoplifter*--and then he started working at REI, and he is the guy who hunts down the shoplifters now. Cause he knows all their tricks. And he gets a big huge bonus."

Red also had a different attitude towards money than some of the more doctrinaire anarchists, who she noted were ironically themselves quite restricted in their lives by a fixation centered on money. She pointed as well towards the ways that the covert prestige of poverty works in the anarchist scene:

"There are a lot of people who decide to live on the least amount of money possible. And some people, that's where their pride is: how little money they have. Sometimes it's not how little money they have and

*how well they can do with that, but it's just, how little money they have and how little they care, even when they could remedy that really fast. Money is definitely a weird thing in the punk scene. Some people fixate on it, the same way someone who wants a lot of money fixates on it. They fixate on *not* spending it and *not* having it, and figuring out how to live without *having* to have it. But it's a fixation still on money. And very restrictive on what you can and can't do, and not doing things because they cost money, and not because you don't have it, but because it simply costs money.”*

However, as I show in the next chapters, her search for an ethical and comfortable model of sociality, and for people who “feel like home and family” led her to country music and explicitly working-class spaces. It was my good luck to meet Red just as half her band quit for various reasons. A charismatic performer on stage, her powerful voice and heartfelt songwriting propelled the band, and her infectious laugh always drew people into whatever she was doing. We also realized that her presence as frontwoman—she was extensively tattooed, sported an energetic head of dyed-red curls, and always, always dressed in cowboy boots and vintage dresses—lent the band an aura that set us apart from other local country bands. The band was a crew of friends and acquaintances from the punk scene, and we struggled to find regular gigs in the hyper-competitive music scene of Asheville. However, no matter how much we struggled, we always had a gig on Saturday nights—one that functioned as a rite of passage into the band as well as a constant reminder of how Red thought the band should both act and sound. That gig was at a weekly country dance at which Red had become a beloved performer and regular attendee, and which I detail in the next chapter.

*Learning “Dead Music from Dead People from Far Away”:* As Jamie took the microphone and looked around the floor at the group of musicians and dancers, he assumed a contemplative tone:

“You know, Brad is one of the few people to figure out what I really do. The other day he said to me: you’re really an organizer! And it’s true. I am a Community Organizer, and square dance is simply the mode through which I connect people. That’s why it’s so important when I say, “turn to your partner and exchange names”. That’s a connection! That’s an important instance in which people might make a connection that they use later. That’s what I’m thinking about the whole time that I’m calling, is trying to connect people”.

At one of the many square dance workshops I saw him teach—aimed at teaching people how to effectively call or lead dances—Jamie was totally in his element as a teacher and organizer, a role that he cherished and at which he had become very good. A lanky, dark-haired figure usually dressed in camo cargo pants and a t-shirt with cut-off sleeves, he was an integral figure in the Asheville old-time scene when I met him: a talented fiddler and a teacher of various aspects of old-time practice, as well as an artisan and amateur naturalist. Jamie, as he liked to put it, had a lot to offer his community, and he had devoted a lot of thought to what, exactly, community was and how to foster it. However, his authoritative teaching wasn’t from a life spent in the southern backwoods: rather, he was the son of South American immigrant parents, raised in Chico, California, and an anarchist since the early nineties. Like many, he had found the scene in high school. As he described it,

“Chico High was a high school of two thousand people, so there were a lot of groups and cliques. There was a definite subset, an amalgamation of punks, anarchists, skaters, hippies, stoners, metalheads, all of the societal misfits that all hung out together. And there were a handful of punk kids who were really into anarchism. And through that group and

MaximumRockNRoll magazine out of the bay area, I started going to shows, and then eventually that led to reading the autobiography of Emma Goldman, and that was my first real delving into actual anarchist politics rather than just surface politics. I graduated high school in '90, and by the late '80s, punk and anarchist were pretty synonymous where I was."

After high school and two years of college, he dropped out—"I was fuckin' done with that!" as he put it, and moved to Portland, where he opened a record store and eventually got involved with a community space:

"The record space was a community hangout, a very social space. But it was small. After I had left the record store, I became involved with an anarchist community center called liberty hall. When I took over, it was a failing community center with a loose dysfunctional conglomeration of labor activists and anarchists that couldn't get along. It wasn't working, so I took over the lease of the building, and started a new collective of more like-minded groups. And I was the director of that community center for a year, and I was part of the core collective for another two years after that—three years in total. It was just a community space, a secular, political activist community space center that hosted everything you can think of, from political organizing meetings to puppet shows to square dances to punk shows to weddings, you name it.

While excited by the possibilities of organizing, however, Jamie remained critical of the class politics he saw in Portland, including his own role:

"When it comes to class and Portland in the 2000s, I always joked about writing a fake thesis paper called "Bamboo: Gentrification's Flag of Conquest." Cause in Portland, all of these people are opening up these fucking boutiques and putting bamboo planters in front of the store in these formerly poor neighborhoods—just like planting your bamboo flag, you know like, "okay, new class coming in!" And it would be garish to put a real flag, so you just put bamboo—who's gonna complain about bamboo?"

Which is in no way to say that I'm not part of this system and process...I mean, who's buying records and turntables and shit?

Certainly not poor people. So I had my own role in that, my own bit part in the drama of gentrification, like many urban punks do.”

Jamie had struggled with feelings of loneliness and isolation, and like many punks, he felt like middle-class social life was essentially hypocritical and sterile. Thus the punk scene was a revelation, and one he pursued wholeheartedly:

“When I was in the punk scene, one of the qualities, characteristics that defined the punk scene as a community was that you could travel around the country, go to someplace you’ve never been before, find people who don’t know you, and because of your affiliation in this scene, they would put you up and feed you and take care of you. Just because you’re part of this tribe, community, scene, whatever you want to call it. And I remember that being, especially as a young traveler, super liberating and desirable, and welcoming, and in a way--not a term that punks would ever use--but *cradling*, just takes you in and holds you in this way that society doesn’t and in a way that a lot of our families don’t even do. And so all of a sudden, here’s these people that you identify with, connect with, align with, that want to hang out with you, want to take care of you—most of our families are not like that anymore.

I was never able to get in a punk band, but I did all the other stereotypical punk things—rode freight trains, wrote zines, wore all black, went to punk shows, but I was never actually in a punk band.”

An acute observer, Jamie was realistic about the political literacy of punks—a trait which he himself valued highly, but which he found unevenly distributed in the punk scene more broadly. He notes,

“There was tons and tons of people putting out all level of leftist writings and rantings in those days. As far as how many people in the punk scene were reading that stuff, if I had to guess, I’d say less than fifty percent. A lot of people in the punk scene were like fashion punks, not that they were against the ideas, they just weren’t pursuing the ideas. It was like, a social sphere, a social group, you dress a certain way, you hang out with people who dress the same way, you play music to fit the archetype, more social than political.”

He continued, pointing to the ways that class structures some of the divisions even within the punk community:

“My friend Tony put it very succinctly. When we were living in this community that evolved into an ecovillage—well, before it was an ecovillage it was just this urban farm in Portland, and we lived with this older couple from LA—an IBM executive and lawyer, raised four kids, decided their life in southern California was unsustainable, moved to Oregon, bought a sheep farm, got into permaculture, started a permaculture school, and then got offered this chunk of farmland in the middle of the city that they bought and started turning into a permaculture oasis, that I and my friend Tony ended up moving on to. And so we shared this house with this older couple, who were really curious about everything, really interested, wanted to know about anarchism. So we were slowly trying to educate them on various leftist ideas like anarchism, and one day Pam, the wife, came into the kitchen, and she said, “Tony, how do you tell the difference between anarchists that are in it for the philosophy and the ideas and the politics, and anarchists that are just like in it for the fashion?” And Tony says “That’s a great question: *cast iron*.” He said, “Real anarchists use cast iron, and fashion punk anarchists use teflon.” It’s a funny story but it’s totally true. When you go into those squalid punk houses where people’s main concern is getting drunk and getting laid, you go into their kitchen and it’s like an electric stove, with like, super dented and scratched-up teflon pans. And then you go hang out with the super nerdy intellectual anarchist punks, and they have a gas burning stove and a whole wall of seasoned cast iron pans on the wall that have never seen soap.”

As I found, and as Jamie mentioned further, the phenomenon of wealthy benefactors enabling parts of the punk scene, like the permaculture farm or various kinds of music venues, was not uncommon. In fact, many of the performance spaces and flop houses we ended up in as a band were in some way enabled by this kind of benefactor arrangement—an odd if pervasive part of punk life.

Eventually, through the record store, Jamie met and began playing with musicians in Portland who were into southern traditional music. Through them, he eventually found

a dedicated group of west-coast old-time players, who all attended yearly festivals and sometime hosted large music parties. As he puts it,

“I got into the Old time scene, and all of a sudden, here was an even more intimate community of people that will take me in, put me up, and their food is better!! [Laughter]. Their houses are nicer and cleaner, their food is better... consistently cast iron! When I started playing with my first old-time band in Portland, our understanding of the music was, we were learning it off of County LPs, reissues of 78s, the music of people who were long dead. My understanding was that we were playing *dead music* from *dead people* who were from *far away*. Everybody starts out on some level of ignorance, and that’s where I started from. And quickly educated myself about the music, you know, but in the beginning I didn’t know jack shit, so quickly I had to learn, cause people were asking me these questions. I remember the first time someone asked me about Charlie Poole, and I was like, Charlie who? But I learned quick, and soon I was listening to recordings of old time music, and answering people’s questions.”

As I detail further in the chapter on old-time, Jamie’s immersion in the old-time scene eventually led him to co-found an enduring Portland old-time festival, which helped kick start the contemporary and vital Portland scene, and introduced many punk kids to old-time in roundabout ways. After running this festival for a few years, it grew into a large event, and he himself tired of the west-coast scene, eventually moving to Bloomington, Illinois both to study in the old-time archives and for the musical possibilities there, and from there to Asheville, where he had settled a couple of years before I met him through playing old-time music. In Asheville, Jamie was living in a tiny house he had built himself, and he made the very small amount of money he needed to live primarily through teaching a variety of skills at workshops and private lessons. However, his interest in teaching and in community-building didn’t end at music—he had also recently gotten involved with a ‘teaching community’ that was largely focused on ‘primitive skills’ (such as fire-drills, flint knapping, tracking, bird calls, and so on) and

which organized workshops and skills-shares around the southeast. Jamie periodically attended these week-long events, as well as those of an organization that does what he describes as cultural teaching:

“They have these seven to ten day workshops where you basically live together tribally—you learn to live together and act as a community in the way that primitive tribes do. These people who teach it have spent a lot of time studying how tribal communities pass along cultural knowledge—how they train the next generation. And that’s what they teach—these methods of culturally passing on knowledge. A lot of it is very invisible—very hard to learn.”

When I met Jamie, he was consciously stepping into a mentorship role in his sense of where he fit into his communities, a fact that was both rewarding and at times frustrating both for him and for his friends. He had helped Red co-found the honky-tonk band as the rhythm guitarist and occasional vocalist, even though it was a genre he was not completely familiar with. However, he recognized Red’s passion, and part of his goal was to help her with her dream of singing country music.

## Touring with a Punk Honky-Tonk Band

The tour I briefly describe below was a roughly typical example of what it was like to be on the road with Red and Jamie, and introduced me to the ongoing oddity of playing in a punk honky-tonk band. As I show, the particular biographies of Red and Jamie, combined with their punk sensibilities, landed us in gigs that ran the gamut from working-class dance halls and honky tonks, to punk bars and illegal speakeasies in rundown squats. Playing mostly around Asheville but as far afield as Louisiana and Alabama, we also ended up in any number of random restaurants, college bars, biker bars, and the various lodges that enable a part of small-town social life. For me, it was both a dizzying introduction to immersive fieldwork, and a chance to witness the extreme (class and political if not racial) differences of the venues we played due to Red's punk-inspired booking practices, where very distinct modes of sociality and stage presence were required for a successful night. While the class cultural differences I saw in these distinct places were replicated to a large extent across the US southeast during multiple band tours, in this section, I largely forgo analysis and simply provide a brief portrait of daily life on the road—the endless hustle, the weird venues, the late nights, the new friends, the collisions of class cultures and punk praxis. Although the rest of this ethnography is largely focused on other spaces, the experience of playing regularly with Red's band provided a default introduction to the basic issues that came to define my focus.

On the day before we were to leave for my first tour with Red and Jamie's band, the main order of business was to teach our fill-in drummer some of the songs. He was a punk acquaintance known to all of us in various ways, and Red had gotten him to replace

our regular drummer, who was unexpectedly, but not uncommonly, marooned on a freight train somewhere in Wisconsin with a dead cell phone. I arrived at Red's house at the appointed hour only to find no one there except the drummer, who had a mangy white Australian cattle dog running around that he kept whacking on the head by way of petting it. Since neither of us really knew the songs, we sat around talking while we waited for an hour for the rest of the band to trickle in from their day jobs.

After the rest of the band arrived, we eventually got everyone in the living room and plugged in, and played a few songs. The drummer indeed had good basic rhythm, but was inconsistent on transitions and we broke down whenever he tried to do fills in a country style. Our rhythm guitar player, Jamie, kept giving him instructions on how to play drums: do rim shots like this, hit the snare harder, mute the snare, and so on. Annoyed by the inconsistency during one of his vocal numbers, Jamie finally snapped: "This is going to have to get better before Saturday. Way better." The drummer, equally annoyed, snapped back: "Can you tell me something useful? I know it needs to get better, that's why I'm going to practice tonight—but it's not helpful just to say that!" With that, practice was over, and the drummer asked Red, who rented the house, if he could take a shower so that he didn't gross out his masseuse—"my sweetie got me a massage for my birthday"—with his dirty body. Practice ended on that note, everyone drove away, and I was left wondering what I'd gotten myself into.

We left (late) the next day for Kentucky, where our first gig was at a Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in a mid-sized city. Our fiddle player turned up sick with food poisoning or a stomach flu, and he and Red rode together in a car with most of our sound gear while the rest of us crammed into another small car to avoid him. We stood around

in the driveway for an hour and a half while the bass player looked for his sleeping bag, and everyone was annoyed at his lack of regard for our schedule, but no one really says anything, partly because he had proudly cooked breakfast for everyone. When we finally got on the road, it was me, Jamie the rhythm guitarist, the fill-in drummer, and a recently-acquired bass player in a car together. Jamie and I had been playing in a casual old-time band together, and we're both interested in anarchist theory stuff, which we start talking about. The conversation drifted towards the branches of anarchist theory we're conversant with or curious about, and the different kinds of punks that adhere to their various tenets—the primitivists, the gutter punks, the urban hicksters. The bass player, listening in the back, chimed in that he's also into anarchism, which he said he thinks of as "saying fuck you to the man, just, you know, living with no rules or whatever." Jamie, a sophisticated interpreter of anarchism, was quiet for a bit, not knowing quite what to say. Finally, he commented, "Well, actually, anarchism has lots and lots of rules, some acknowledged, some invisible," and went on to explain some of his work with anarchist organizing, trying to flesh out the bass player's conception.

After a harried all-day drive, we arrive late at our venue, a dark building in a marginal section of town that doubles as a thrift store, a bar, a pizza joint, and a dance hall. Everyone is exhausted, cranky, and hungry, and we're late as usual. The band, tattooed, scruffy, and mostly dressed in black, draws open stares from the older veterans lingering around the back entrance, smoking Camel cigarettes and talking about the upcoming Kentucky basketball game. The hall itself is a curious affair, with racks of secondhand clothing for sale, tables of used cds by the wall, and a restaurant area where a harried waitress is delivering pizza to customers seated around plastic tables. It smells of

old cigarettes, thrift store clothing, and stale beer. We hurry to load in our sound equipment, clearing off bingo paraphernalia and clothes from the stage, and I bend down to dial in my amp when I notice the smell of shit:

Bass Player: (looks at me with a grimace) “Watch out man, that’s right where the pile of shit was.”

DF: “Pile of shit?”

BP: “Yeah, there was a giant pile of shit right there. Don’t worry, I threw it outside.”

DF: “Disgusting. Can you hand me that tarp? I wanna cover the spot up.”

BP: “Naw, that’s covered in piss.”

I’m taken aback but everyone else seems to take it in stride. The sound guy, a younger man with a ponytail whose job has already produced hearing loss, moves around on stage micing the amps and setting up monitors and vocal mics. He eventually goes back to his booth at the back of the room, and there’s the standard back-and-forth with the band while he adjusts volume levels and equalizers for the on-stage monitors which let us hear ourselves, and the speakers which will later blast the audience. Figuring out how to make us audible to ourselves without generating mic feedback can be a daunting task, and one that typically involves multiple ear-shattering moments of monitor feedback while the journeyman sound guy gets it right. “Can I hear some rhythm guitar?” “Ok, yeah can you put a little more of that in my monitor?” “Great, thanks”. “I’m getting some ring in the acoustic. Can you cut some of the highs? Sounds a little boomy too”. “OK, that’s better, thanks.” And so on around the stage.

After the sound check, the kitchen gives us two leftover pizzas and a pitcher of beer; we quickly shovel it down and the drummer and bass player order more beer. A couple of the VFW members wander over and chat with Jamie, asking which Kentucky team he's rooting for in the NCAA tournament. He gives a blank look, unaware which sport they're referring to. They shake their heads and mutter a variation of 'not from around here' as they stalk off. We finish dinner and play two sets of honky-tonk; the fiddle player, seated, has a bucket to his right to spit dip in, and a bucket to his left to throw up in as he struggles through his stomach issues. At one point, he sprints off the stage in the middle of a song to run to the bathroom, but is back in time to play the outro. In between honky-tonk sets, Jamie calls three square dances while I play banjo and the fiddle player keeps fiddling. This novelty act is something we've come up with to enhance our appeal to various venues, taking advantage of the fact that three of us also play old-time together in another band. Jamie's expert calling goes over well and gets the seated crowd up and dancing together, even though it's an odd mix of hicksters (an internal designation implying a hipster with a fascination with the aesthetics or lifestyles of the rural poor), veterans, and friends and family of the band who've come to support us.

After the show, a friend of a friend gives us directions and a key to an empty apartment nearby; it's a designated musician flophouse owned by a wealthy benefactor and filled with random junk, with mattresses all over the floor. We arrive at 2am, unload again, and begin the process of negotiating for bed space vs. floor space (which, given punk aversions to explicit hierarchy, can take a while) while planning the next day's

drive to the next show. As usual, Red has already been on the phone with friends and acquaintances, scoping us out another place to crash.

After another long day's drive across state lines, we finally arrive about the time we're supposed to take the stage. Tonight's show is a working-class country dance hall in a modular warehouse space off a two lane rural road in Alabama; the building appears to be a prefab church that went bust. The parking lot is filled with old trucks and Camaros; inside the spacious hall, there's an elevated stage, some rows of plastic folding chairs, and a makeshift kitchen in the back, churning out plates of spaghetti with red sauce, two bucks a pop. Despite being run down, it's brightly lit and clean, with a scrubbed linoleum floor in front of the stage for couples to dance on.

A woman at the door greets everyone by name as she collects the cover. We set up the soundstage as fast as we can; the man who booked us hovers around awkwardly, clearly wanting us to start playing, but unsure of how to communicate that we're breaching etiquette badly. After 30 minutes, we're tuned up and ready to go, and Red signals to the preacher to give the traditional starting prayer. A very old man in a button-down shirt and suspenders, he delivers his benediction with the polish of long practice, but with great sincerity and dignity. He mentions the soldiers in uniform and health updates on friends not present; then he prays to god for good weather for the crops. Finally, he pauses to thank the people hard at work in the kitchen for feeding us, and he thanks by name the women who clean the hall every week so that we may enjoy this clean space. As we take the stage, the booker checks out our lead singer: bombastic and covered in tattoos, she is clearly an object of concern. "Y'all play *country* music, right?" he whispers nervously, visibly realizing that he may have committed a grievous error in

booking us. We reassure him but it's not until we launch into a classic Merle Haggard song to kick off the night that he truly looks relieved; by the third song, the crowd is two-stepping to the music. It's a testament to Red's generosity as a performer and person that, at nearly every venue we play, the audience is smitten with her by the end of the show, and tonight is no different. She tends to wear her heart on her sleeve, and audiences respect that, recognizing her vulnerability and guilelessness.

We chat up the audience at the break—they talk to us about our instruments, about the songs they used to play or dance to when they were younger, about where they first heard the cover we played that they liked best. One older man tells me of his love for Martin guitars, but says he “can’t play any more on account of this arthritis,” showing me his work-gnarled hands, swollen and red. Other people come over, show us their injuries, and explain why they, too, can’t play music anymore, but always end with a version of “but thank y’all for playing *for* us!” We get back on stage for a shorter second set as it’s gotten late, and finally play a gospel song to close. The preacher repeats his same prayer. The kitchen ladies are out of food when the band wanders back beseechingly, but feel so bad they offer to fire up the kitchen and cook all over again. We demur out of guilt, and the manager goes and gets some boxes of rice crispie treats because she feels bad, even though it was our fault for being late. As we leave, the booker offers his house for us to stay in, invites us to come back, and mentions that he enjoyed the music, but that the regulars are going to yell at him tomorrow because some of the songs “were too fast to dance to—they just like to do that ol’ two-step.” He says anytime we come through to call him and we can stay at his house.

The next day, we're booked to play a show in New Orleans but the venue cancels on us, and we end up at a punk bar, opening for a burlesque troop from Savannah. We pull up about 8pm for load-in, and we're greeted inside by the sound guy/bartender/talent buyer, a gigantic bearded punk with a hipster mullet dressed all in black. The place is a dark, ramshackle low building, with random circus paraphernalia lining the walls and a couple of pool tables in the main room where a crowd of punk women in short black skirts and fishnet stockings shoot pool and talk animatedly. Prominently ignored by everyone, we begin the main task of once again lugging our backline in and setting it up. Red excuses herself while we set up the stage, and returns from the bathroom looking even more striking than usual—eye makeup, a feather in her hair, a black and red vintage dress with mesh fishnets. This bar obviously feels like her home terrain, and she's decided to go all-out for her punk friends who booked us here. She seems nervous and quickly takes advantage of the two free drink tickets, ordering her standard pre-show whiskey fizzes. A friend who Red has invited to sit in with us for the show ambles in—a small wiry woman with a high-wattage smile dressed in red and black plaid and combat boots. She hellos everyone and sets up her piano in a corner on stage.

Before starting the show, everyone wanders off again to get tall boys of PBR for the stage. The place is charging an \$8 cover, and there's probably 100 or more people there, so they're doing pretty good combined with the bar take. The owner tells us to wait as long as we can before starting since the burlesque troop has yet to arrive, but half of the music room is already full and the crowd is getting impatient-- a combination of guys in drag for the occasion of the burlesque show, along with a number of very serious-looking punks with shaved heads, mohawks, piercings, and so on. In deference to the

environment, the whole band has every instrument cranked way up, and standing right in front of an amp, even my earplugs don't do much to cut the sound. Red introduces us in a very offhand way, and we launch into some originals. I can't hear anything besides the bass amp and the drunk drummer, and neither can anyone else—it's not our tightest night and the audience, eager for the burlesque troop, isn't all that into it. After half an hour we get word the troop has arrived, and we quickly break down the stage to muted applause, and flee to the parking lot to load gear.

As the tour wears on, the routines of load-in, load-out, and finding a place to crash with punk friends gets easier, but the dates don't get any less weird. Two nights after the country dance hall in Alabama, we end up on the floor of a formerly flooded house in the lower ninth ward of New Orleans, which some musician friends who live in a loose cluster of punk houses have loaned us floor space in. Thirty feet from the levy, we're in terrain that the punks who live there are scared of, advising us to stay in after dark. That night, we play a show at two side-by-side shotgun shacks that an enterprising group of punks has turned into a collective art and performance space. They've torn out the walls facing each other and roofed it over, and although the interior of the house is completely gutted, with insulation, raw plywood, and graffiti everywhere, there's something welcoming about it. For Red, though, the post-apocalyptic chaos of the place brings to mind the dangerous squats of her youth, and she has a hard time that night. The crowd is pure punk and by the end of the night, it's mostly drunk guys running into things as they dance with each other in front of the improvised stage. The cigarette smoke and the massive intake fan piping in straight dust and insulation debris by way of air flow has made all our throats raw enough that we can't sing for the night, so we head back to the

lower ninth ward where Jamie and the fiddler stay up all night playing old-time music on the levy with the punks who live in the neighborhood.

# Chapter 2: Ethics of Sociality and Space

## 2.1: Introduction: Dilemmas of Public Space and Social Ethics

This chapter is animated by a set of concerns relating class to contrasting, durable, and reflexive ethics of sociality. I present a comparative look at instantiations of a particular spatial dilemma in contemporary American life: the collision of the political economy of maintaining or creating regular, ongoing public social spaces, vs. idealized notions of how—under what ethical logics, that is—public sociality should unfold. I show particular ways of negotiating these dilemmas as a broader window onto the ways that cultural ethics of sociality are imagined and enacted differently across lines of class.

Section 2.1 introduces a working-class ‘barn dance,’ showing how patrons and the host of the event consciously enact an ethics of sociality that they see as both explicitly opposed to middle-class norms, and as itself tenuous in space and time. This space, properly regarded as an idealized working-class cultural imaginary, rather than a space of the everyday, is based on relationships and practices that are consciously cultivated. These practices both rely on and create idealized notions of sociality, obligation, and temporality. As such, it provides a relatively rare glimpse into a kind of working-class ‘worldmaking’ not often ethnographically visible, and shows working-class temporal logics of obligation as a fundamental aspect. Section 2.2 describes what happens when Red, a primary informant, friend, and bandleader, attempts to recreate the ethos of the barn dance in a downtown Asheville music venue—a distinctly middle-class space defined by social logics common to the commercial establishments that are the basis of

middle-class American public sociality. At an event inspired by both her mixed-class background and punk political ideals, I show how practices she explicitly adopts from the barn dance end up being re-enacted through very different social logics that mostly reflect a middle-class ethics of sociality. Finally, section 2.3 describes a typical show at a punk house, examining how house shows function as a microcosm of punk practice where a theorized praxis of ‘gift economies’ and barter inflects the social relationships that enable such affairs, and differentiates them from both the previous spaces. While section 2.3 provides a brief conclusion, further concluding arguments to this chapter are integrated into the conclusion of chapter three, “Doing Community.” Finally, it is worth noting that this chapter fundamentally shows utopian spaces: that is, spaces that are consciously created and enacted through the imagination of what constitutes good social interaction. As I show, these spaces look quite different across class lines, despite the fact that, in this instance, they were all ‘honky-tonk dances.’

*Situating Cultural Ethics as a Subset of Culture:* Ethics, as I use the term here, draws on a robust anthropological literature which has outlined an approach to aspects of culture that are at once deeply involved in lived everyday worlds and yet point to transcendent concerns and values. Rather than a critical engagement with ongoing arguments in this literature, my primary concern here is to use an anthropological concept of ethics as a methodological and theoretical vantage point which can help to move beyond a fairly established set of approaches to the ethnography of class. As Zigon (2014) and Keane (2016) outline, I approach ethics as something less than the entirety of

‘culture’ but exceeding a delimited philosophical framework and lexicon—a debate that others have engaged in various ways (e.g. Lambek et al 2010; Robbins et al 2016).

To the extent that this work contributes to ethics as an emergent disciplinary concern, its primary goal is to show three things: first, one of the domains of social being that ethical regimes correspond to is class (as a counterpoint to the personal/institutional origin of ethics proposed in work on assemblages; e.g Zigon 2010). Second, insofar as a significant amount of recent work has focused on the agentive nature of individual engagement with ethics through ‘choosing’ or ‘self-making’ (e.g. Das 2010, 2016, 2017; Scherz 2013, 2014.; Zigon 2007, 2013) I argue that aspects of culturally-embedded ethics, even when the subject of reflexive and comparative focus, are quite durably embodied. Finally, in a methodological vein, scholars have noted that ethics are often most apparent in moments of comparison, ‘breakdown,’ or contradiction (Lambek 2010; Keane 2016; Zigon 2007). Instead of personal moments of ethical crisis, however, I focus a comparative lens on misunderstandings and disagreements between people across class lines, emergent in a cultural space where working-class values were normative, and where disagreements about matters like time and proper social being provided a window into ‘working-class culture’ (which here indicates, among other things, a coherent and densely-figured set of stances towards time, bodies, sociality, and conceptions of appropriate solidarity, reflected in what Fox (2004) calls a cultural poetics). Throughout, as I note in the theoretical introduction on class culture, I make a concerted effort here to avoid causal determinism—aka either materialist or behavioral determinisms—in approaching the interrelationship of cultural ethics and class positionality. While this may be troubling in some aspects, as I argue, there are real theoretical benefits to doing so—

not least an epistemological humility and a reduced deontological certainty of my own, that I believe opens up the possibility of actually considering other systems of cultural ethics as possible futures or viable presents (e.g. Robbins 2007).

There have been various conflicting attempts to refine and differentiate ethics and morals as separate concepts. This has so far not been convincingly done. Therefore, I use the terms interchangeably and sometimes together to refer to a culturally-located and constituted set of ideas of ‘the good.’

## **2.2: Working-Class Moral Geographies: Sociality, Obligation, and Legible Subjects**

### **Allen's Barn Dance:**

Saturday night at Hillbilly Allen's Music Barn starts at about 7pm, although people from the surrounding community of Leicester—a rural farming enclave north of Asheville—always begin to arrive a couple of hours earlier to talk, visit, and play in small acoustic jams out front of the structure that houses the main event. Like countless other working-class gathering points, Allen's is a multi-purpose building, housing a space for small engine repair and other machinery he needs to run his small business. Like many such spaces, the distinctions between when it's a place of business and when it's re-purposed as an ad hoc community gathering point are mostly oriented to the workaday schedule; at Allen's, however, in contrast to some of the back-of-the-gas-station kinds of places where music is often played, it's fairly clear that this is a space purpose-built towards a working-class cultural imaginary of appropriate sociality and music-making.

Allen himself is a big, friendly, garrulous man with a booming laugh and a funny and charismatic presence on stage. Although primarily an electric guitar player, he's a talented and versatile musician on a number of instruments, singing with a rich baritone that he's cultivated into a dead-on homage to Waylon Jennings. Always the charismatic host of the weekly event, he was raised in one of the more isolated sections of the western North Carolina mountains, in a small community called Spillcorn (named for the corn that would fall off of wagons on the bumpy road leading to the grist mill that used to be located there). The name he settled on for his venue is a complex reflection of that isolated rural heritage—one that Allen deals with through a mix of ironic distancing and

partial proud embrace not uncommon with other rural stereotypes, and which his patrons engage similarly, usually calling him Allen but sometimes, jokingly, ‘Hillbilly’ or ‘Ol’ Hillbilly.’ This naming references the extreme rural isolation of Allen’s upbringing, even relative to other ‘country’ areas. However, he moved around a bit before landing north of Asheville:

I and Fancy [Allen’s wife] lived down in Mobile for a while where she was from—she’s an Alabama girl. She wanted to move there, wanted to take care of her mother there. But it was an odd time. We got there and within six months her mother had passed. And we got the opportunity to buy this property and we moved back up.

She knew I was lost without the mountains anyway...

Shortly after moving to the property, Allen built the ‘barn’ behind his house specifically to create a music venue that fit his idealized vision of the musical and social world he wanted to create for his community. As he explains it:

Yeah, years ago, where I was raised, people would meet at people’s houses, out on the front porches, and I member going as a young boy, and I mean, somebody’d come walking up the road or something, they’d come right in—it’d attract everybody. And all of a sudden, the whole of the house would be full of people pickin’ and singing—just mainly neighbors back then.

Then, when I got older, Jerry Adams—he was from over in Sodom Laurel, and he had a place at Marshall, at the pharmacy there in Marshall, and he’d start having pickin’s and stuff, and people would gather there on Thursdays—they done it for years, every Thursday.

And even ‘fore that, they had in Marshall there at the old barbershop, And I loved to go to them, cause you got to pick, and fellowship, and all o’ that.

So when we got this place, I just missed it so bad, me and the boys one year, we just decided to build this little place to have a pickin’, have people out on Saturday night and have a good jam session.

A long and low building about 30 feet by 50 feet, Allen's hall opens onto a small vestibule which houses machinery, a motorcycle, some long tables, and a space to buy refreshments. This is partitioned off from the main inside space, which is a darkened hall with walls of rustic wood and two sections of ten rows of old movie-theater seats that he bought secondhand, plus benches lining the walls—overall, seating for about 150. The windows are lined with fans in the summer; a giant potbellied woodstove puts out heat in the winter. Old farm implements from the family land and tributes to departed family and friends also line the walls—like an old crosscut saw his father painted and inscribed with a tribute to his grandfather. The main space, about 800 feet square, is oriented towards a dance floor and a stage, about twenty feet long and three feet high, covered with amps, guitars, a drum kit, a pedal steel guitar, basses, music stands, and four vocal mics on stands. The stage is lit by a couple of haphazard klieg lights that get extremely hot as the night goes on. The instruments on stage all stay set up and ready for anyone who needs something to play; a couple of stage monitors hang from the ceiling providing rudimentary and unmixed sound to the musicians who are playing. Allen has a sound and light booth at the back of the house that nominally allows for adjusting both the stage mix that the musicians hear and the house mix that the audience hears, but no one ever really fools around with the levels, and consequently, loud singers are extremely loud, and quiet singers are very quiet.

A normal night at Allen's features four or five bands playing thirty minute sets over three or four hours, interspersed with two or three cake walks and perhaps a clogging performance if the resident team is there for the night. However, the main event of the evening is the ongoing interaction of dancers, audience, and musicians—a dialogic

exchange that tends to unfold organically with significant help from Allen, and in which there is always, ideally, danceable music being played by a rotating cast of regulars mostly from the surrounding community. Although the nights always unfold in a relaxed and ad hoc manner, Allen is constantly on his feet doing the background work to make everything run smoothly—circulating among the crowd to schedule the improvised thirty minute sets most groups play; dictating the timing of the social dances and square dances, making sure that any cakes and pies the audience brings are auctioned off at the cake walks, preventing or resolving disputes or hurt feelings over who gets to play, and so on. Throughout the night, couples dance to the country, bluegrass, and classic rock that tends to make up the repertoire; people enjoy the spectacle of the cake walks and the special dances that are part of the ritual, and everyone circulates throughout the place to visit with friends. Usually, by about 10:30, Allen gets up on stage to apologize: “Welllll, thanks for coming out tonight. Let’s have one more gospel song now—our neighbors have always been good to us, and we need to be respectful and shut this thing down!” Of course, if the band is really cooking or the dance floor is full, he might delay a little while to let people enjoy it. But without fail, the mass exodus of pick-ups from the gravel-and-mud lot is finished by about 11pm.

Allen clearly regards the place partly as a duty he owes the regulars. One night, when Little Red and the Hots arrived about 6:30, Allen rushed out to the parking lot: “Oh man, am I ever glad to see you’uns. I was just so worried we’d have no one to play! Louise can’t make it ‘til later, Josh isn’t here, Chris can’t play tonight, my hand’s all tore up...I didn’t know what to do. I need to get your phone number!” As we rushed in and began to set up, Allen walked over with palpable relief and with a giant bandage on his

hand—he had cut it loading a trailer: “cut it real deep—but it doesn’t feel hot.” I asked if he had gotten stitches, and he said, “No way—too expensive. Man, it’s *five hundred dollars* just to walk in the door of the ER!” His wife Fancy walked by and scolded him in passing: “He keeps tearing it open because he won’t stop *working*.”

Soon, a downcast middle-aged man sat down across from us and watched us set up, and Allen introduced him as his brother. Later that evening, after Red and the band had finished her set, Allen got on stage and asked his brother to come up. His brother sang with a beautiful tenor voice, picking mostly old bluegrass standards. He began one classic—a song of mourning describing the inevitability of loss and the possibility of redemption through Jesus, with the chorus advising the listener to “Hold on a little longer, help is on the way.” But halfway through, he broke down and stopped singing. He said to the crowd: “Sorry y’all—it’s just hard to sing these songs. My wife and I always sang them together and she passed a month ago”. At that point, a woman in the audience came up to sing the rest of the song with him and the crowd got very quiet and respectful, noting how aptly the lyrics fit the situation, and how meaningful they were to Allen’s brother. As Red and the band watched, it was a palpable demonstration that the songs that count as standards at Allen’s *matter* to the crowd in a visceral and literal way—that they expressed for many of the singers not allegorical thought experiments or ironic sentiments, but that they captured the literal truth of lives in a way that was both striking and foreign to the middle-class use and performance of country music. This fact was something that musicians at Allen’s described as the primary logic of what they played: music that reflected, described, and sympathized with the life experiences of the audience. Unlike for middle-class country purists, however, this logic specifically

admitted a decent portion of the contemporary country music hit charts, although there was a marked preference for ‘traditional’ contemporary artists like Alan Jackson.

The audience at Allen’s is made up of an extended network of families, neighbors, and acquaintances, mostly drawn from the immediate valley, but extending over a small mountain range that borders the valley to the north and west, and divides this portion of the county from a neighboring factory town. Although a relatively long-standing event, the weekly dance, which features primarily classic and some contemporary country, is almost entirely unknown within the downtown Asheville music scene, even by bluegrass players. The only people who tend to know about it are punks, who themselves have to some extent begun to move into the area around Allen’s, and some of whom have sporadically attended over the years, to the amusement and occasional consternation of the crowd who tend to remember them as interesting outsiders. With the exception of our band, however, the contemporary crowd featured no Asheville musicians of any kind—which is to say, no middle-class musicians.

As I show below, the format of the evening at Allen’s is flexible, but has some rigidly-defined boundaries that provide a loose structure to the evening. As musicians unused to working-class barn dances (themselves a fairly well-defined if variable cultural form, based loosely on the idea of the Grand Ol’ Opry) find, it is a space where reciprocal social interactions are the name of the game—rather than a more broadly-recognizable middle-class idea of music, wherein rigid performer-audience distinctions pertain, and musicians are celebrated for the artistic genius they display. Rather, in the way that music is played, listened to, danced to, and ultimately funded, a distinct set of working-class cultural codes structure the entire evening.

## **Exchange and Space**

The exchange of money in a space of public sociality—particularly when money provided access to the possibility of sociality—was a topic of extensive theorization by the regulars there (not just with respect to Allen’s), and it was clear that monetary exchange, or the lack thereof, was not only a conscious decision on Allen’s part, but one that regulars felt set the tone for his dance hall. Allen’s practices around money both indexed and inscribed a very explicit moral geography related to exchange and sociality. As Allen described it, he aimed to create a ‘family-style’ place, where everyone ‘treats each other like kin, like you’re meant to.’ The register of kinship, often deployed by regulars to describe the ethos of the place, seems apt. In Allen’s barn, the delineation of the space of sociality is partly created through the explicit exclusion of market-based logics of exchange and interaction—in other words, norms of sociality explicitly rely on logics of obligation, long-term reciprocity, communal ownership, and kinship (of course, as I show later, these feelings of communal ownership towards Allen’s private property aren’t always easily reconciled).

This moral geography extends outward, based in gradations of ethical questionability—from the dance hall to the vestibule to the parking lot, the rural road, eventually a highway, and then, somewhere beyond, the city—a space where social relations are imagined to rely on a morally suspicious logic of quid pro quo exchange and a complete lack of meaningful long-term obligation; where the very possibility of sociality, reciprocity, and good feeling were assumed or experienced as predicated on money changing hands (the term ‘moral geography’ comes from Sicoli 2016, and I use

the term in a similar manner). The cover charge at the bar; the obligation to buy drinks even if there's no cover; paying money for a ticket to see the band; ten bucks at the door of a commercial dance hall; Allen's patrons identified and objected to the sense that 'community events'—that is, any event outside of a private home—had to occur primarily under the aegis of the exchange of capital for services. In a word, it polluted the possibility of sociality with an instrumental logic that Allen's crowd found rude and distasteful. Of course, 'The City' isn't foreign terrain in the sense that regulars are afraid, ignorant of, or hesitant to engage with; indeed, many regulars find themselves involved in the burgeoning tourist-related economy of Asheville in one way or another on a daily basis. Rather, the social logics at work in the city are in direct contradiction to both a contemporary sense that people have of what constitutes ethical sociality in an economic time that Allen's community perceives to be particularly economically precarious. They are also, importantly, in direct violation of the halcyon evaluation of the better times that lay in the medium-term past—a nostalgia-tinged attitude that Fox (2004) describes powerfully as the prevailing temporal direction of an idealized rural, working-class cultural imaginary. The past, mainly, is a place where people were imagined to have had 'good' relationships with their immediate communities.

A very old man, relaxing on the covered porch in front of the dance hall one early spring evening, expressed this sentiment in a poetic and wandering soliloquy that was ostensibly directed at me but in fact seemed more like closing remarks. Leaning on his back against a porch post and watching the early dusk collect into darkness, he said:

I moved to East Asheville in 1940 from Grovemont—drove a cow all the way from Swannanoa. That weren't nothing but a wagon road then! A little ol wagon road, Imagine that. My daddy was a sharecropper—we moved to farms all over Buncombe, from Swannanoa to Fairview to

Weaverville and back to Swannanoa. I started elementary school in Swannanoa, went to five other different schools, and then ended up back there for high school. A big circle. Then came the war—lost my brother in the war but I didn't have to fight cause I was the last one left. Life: life is a vapor. *A vapor.* It just goes and you don't even notice it. One day you're twenty one and the next day you're an old man, you wake up and you're old. You can't wait to hit twenty-one when you're young and then it all just starts running downhill faster and faster. Yessir, life is like a vapor...

Who are you? Who are your people? Do you know the Henry house is for sale? I owned the whole piece of land that house sits on before I sold it to the Henrys many years ago. You know, the most important thing is to have good neighbors. I have great neighbors—I'm an old man, I don't even know why the lord keeps me around anymore, when you get to be as old as I am, you're more of a burden than anything. But I do like to walk around.

Down at the church they think it strange, an old man walking along the road. But I tell 'em—it's never crowded walking on the road. I used to grow a big ol' garden, til two years ago. Grew beans, corn, tomatoes, big ol' garden. Retired in '85, but I worked more after I retired than I did before! You get old, your priorities change. I turned ninety years old on Saturday. Twenty-nine people came to my birthday party! Twenty-nine! I got more friends than I thought. “

I like people—good people. But anymore, you just can't even know people. There's so many in this county now, it's hard to even know them. All people, some are bad, some are good, some are medium. But the most important thing is to have good neighbors and good friends, help each other out. This area—western North Carolina, east Tennessee, this is the heart of this country. No place better.

For Allen and for many regulars, the implicit or explicit instrumentalization of social encounters or exchanges is perhaps the broader umbrella under which the explicit problem of paying money for sociality falls. This broader moral orientation was expressed in many ways, from something as simple as the expectation of a ritualized and standardized greeting, which always involves inquiries into health and family—particularly before any subject related to money, work, or favors was broached. Such a greeting (more or less typical in the rural south) subordinates the instrumental logic of a

direct question or favor to the compelling obligation to acknowledge the humanity and social location of the interlocutor. As the old man noted, this logic is related in important ways both to the spatial (rather than ideological) experience of being ‘a community’ or good neighbors (a theme I elaborate in the section on ‘community’); as well as to the content of what ‘good’ means in the phrase ‘good neighbor.’ In this context, part of what makes a good neighbor is not a good fence, but rather a good, ongoing, relationship of mutual obligation, where people recognize each other as legible social subjects, and “help each other out,” whether they’re good, bad, or medium. And, as I show later, the logic of working-class sociality explicitly accommodates both good, bad, and medium people in various ways.

In Allen’s context, this ethic of sociality and exchange is mapped explicitly onto the space of the dance hall. The inner space of the hall, where the music and dance actually happens, is a place where nothing is ever sold. In the outer hall, Allen’s family sells refreshments at a small mark-up and attendees can also buy tickets for a nightly fifty-fifty auction (half the proceeds go to the winner of the drawing, half to the hall); this concession to commodity exchange, however, was explicitly located outside in a vestibule that was kept closed off from the music hall. Inside, money changes hands in only three ways: first, Allen or his family will occasionally pass around a collection bowl for donations towards maintenance and upkeep of the hall (usually for some specific project, like re-gravelling the always-muddy drive or repairing the roof). Second, there are frequently collections for people in need—medical bills, primarily heart attacks, diabetes, and cancer, though occasionally legal bills or educational expenses like field trips. In both of these instances, the social logic of collecting money explicitly relies on a

religious register—that of collection or tithing—and is entirely voluntary (though not without a certain amount of social pressure and co-monitoring). Very often, people not able to donate money will instead bring a cake to donate, or otherwise help out around the dance hall.

Finally, there is the cake walk, a ritualized game of chance where twenty or thirty people pay a dollar for the chance to win one of the several cakes that are donated randomly every evening. A few times throughout the evening, Allen turns up the lights and puts a cake on the front of the stage for everyone to see. The musician of the moment takes a gander and describes the cake into the mic: “Well, what we have here appears to be a white cake with some coconut...” As people begin to file by, a woman stands on the dance floor, collecting dollar bills from everyone who wants a chance. The band quickly and frantically confers, trying to decide on an instrumental; however, whether or not the band starts playing, people start marching around in a circle on the perimeter of the dance hall, where Allen has placed numbers corresponding to seats on the outside of rows. The number of contestants depends on the cake: doughnuts always get a lot of hopefule; store-bought pie seems to be at the bottom of the list. Eventually, the music stops, the walkers stop, and everyone looks expectantly at the left corner of the stage, where someone spins a circle with numbered pegs on it, which clatters to a stop after ten seconds or so. The spinner shouts, “36!” and the musician on stage steps to the mic and croaks “NUMBER 36”. Whoever was lucky enough to be at seat number 36 when the music stopped guiltily and quickly comes forward to claim the prize. The cake walk is by far the biggest money exchange of the night, and is repeated however many times necessary to dispose of all the cakes that regulars have brought to donate.

The net effect is that money to maintain the structure and pay for electricity is contributed by the audience primarily through communal donation and ritualized and voluntary games of chance rather than through a direct quid pro quo exchange: those who can't pay are still free to come and enjoy the music. This elegant solution mostly resolves the working-class problem created by the collision of the economic facts of running and maintaining a communal space with the desire for sociality not enabled or mediated by buying and selling.

One older regular musician, a retired public works employee named Jake, described the appeal of Allen's as such:

Nice thing about Allen's is he doesn't charge. Some of the dance halls, they'll charge 7, 8 dollars at the door. Now, a man brings his family every week, that'll get into real money pretty soon. Allen knows a lot can't afford that kind of money, so he don't charge. We'll walk the cake walk to help him out, and sometimes you buy into the fifty-fifty, and ever so often he'll pass a collection plate. But you never have to pay. Places that charge like that, it creates an unfriendly atmosphere.

This refusal to allow commercial exchange into the inner sanctum struck me as the symbolic enactment of the ideal of working-class sociality: consciously set apart from the vulgarities of social interaction based on monetary exchange, and the social logics that such exchange inevitably foments. Instead, Allen's stance on money simultaneously created, drew on, and depended on an ethos of sociality predicated on solidarity and obligation. Of course, this stance also reflected the relative cash poverty of the regulars, and Allen explicitly described his choice as one that accommodated his desire to create a welcoming space for people who didn't make much money:

That's something that I've thought about. They are the ones who come who really can't afford, if you charge five or eight dollars at the door.

And the way I do it—I hope I’m not wrong by the way I’m doing it—but it does help me keep it going, helps me pay the light bills, and all that. But uh, reason I pass the hat—that way if someone hasn’t got anything, they’re not obligated. And they can still come, enjoy the music, bring their family.

Well too, not charging gives it a feel that’s different.

Indeed, one of the differentiating features of working-class sociality is the constant, tactical negotiation of public spaces that are symbolically free from the disturbing ethical implications of pay-for-sociality—a topic I take up further in a later chapter (even if the spaces themselves are often, as above, multi-purpose). And again, this is not simply a question of economic determinism related to poverty; instead, many of my informants framed it in an explicitly ethical register. As I mentioned above, however, this set of attitudes and strategies related to money didn’t always work smoothly.

On an evening after a long band tour on the gulf coast had taken Red and company away for a few weeks, I showed up at Allen’s around seven pm to find a completely empty parking lot and a dark building. Concerned, I started calling around. I finally reached Pat, a retiree who was a regular and a friend, and who had some choice words:

*Well, let me tell you.* Allen, bless his heart, has decided that he’s only going to do *his show* one night a month for the summer. Says it’s just because of the *heat*, but I don’t think that’s it atall. Matter of fact, just last year, we all gave for a fundraiser to put fans in all the windows—but only a couple of them fans ever showed up! I think Allen’s just tired of putting on his show.

Eventually, reaching the point of tears, she described how sad she was not to have the weekly night at Allen’s to look forward to. “You know, some of these older folks, it’s

all they really look forward to! ‘Bout the only time they get out of the house, and you know, the fellowship, they don’t have it anywhere else. It’s our *family*. And Allen done broke up our family!”

After Pat had her say, she conceded that Allen and *his* family had been working overtime for years to put on a big show every weekend, and that, since summer was his busiest time at work, maybe he deserved a bit of a break. Still, she said, there were a lot of people “very disappointed—maybe won’t come back!” As I spoke to others, similar themes emerged, and multiple people mentioned various fundraisers that hadn’t resulted in exactly the result they expected—including money towards more gravel for the parking lot, or a new roof people had contributed to. Several people detailed the amounts they had given or how much food they had contributed to fundraisers very explicitly, and clearly had expected Allen to treat the barn, as they did, as community property. Thus, it felt like a betrayal of sorts when Allen exercised his prerogatives as the actual owner of the place—a move that pointed out the inherent conflict that Allen’s stance on money was intended to reconcile.

When I spoke with Allen, he sounded like a man overwhelmed. He and his wife worked all week and much of the weekend during summers running a small business, and the previous eight or nine years of hosting his music hall without a break, through family crises, injury, and illness, had clearly taken a toll. Doing the jam every Saturday was a lot of work. He and his family needed a break for the summer, and he had decided to take one, although he was well aware of the discontent and disappointment his actions were sure to cause—particularly because his reasons were primarily about prioritizing work rather than an understandable medical crisis or similar situation. Sure enough, at the next

monthly session, the first of the new regime, Allen was the subject of explicit and pointed comments. As Allen was sitting at a table near the entrance, an older woman walked by, stopped, fixed him with a gaze, and said with great enunciation: “Well *HI*, Allen!” She then marched off to the dance hall, stopping a few feet away. Her daughter walked by and told Allen, “Allen, she’s *mad* at you! She just can’t believe it’s not every week anymore!” Allen looked at the old woman and said, not unkindly, “Now, you been coming here a long time!” and she replied, “Yep, *long* time.” He said, “I know, and just as soon as fall comes, we’ll get right back to every week—we just can’t deal with this heat!” She nodded and concluded their encounter with the obligatory rhetorical form, “ok, well, you been okay? And your family too?” Allen nodded and said, “Yep, been doing fine” as she walked off.

Later, in the dance hall, the crowd is subdued, and few people are out dancing. The musician on stage, a talented guitarist specializing in classic rock, has brought his entire band and is working hard to get people out moving, but to no avail. Eventually, annoyed, he peers out into the darkness at the audience, squinting in the stage lights: “Damn, y’all just seem *tired* tonight. What is it, something in the water?! What’s going on?” Spotting Pat, he calls her out by name: “Pat, what’s wrong with you?! Why ain’t you *dancing*?” Pat, ever witty, shouts in a loud voice, “It’s been so long since I been here, I forgot how to *act!*”, a joking censure of Allen’s new schedule. The musician shouts back, “Well, we thought that about you beforehand!” Glancing at his band, he continues, “Pat, here’s one you can dance to. Here’s a dance tune. Now, get on out there and wiggle your middle—just keep your shirt on!!” Laughing, Pat grabs a partner and heads to the dance floor, and soon enough, more dancers follow. The exchange between Pat and the

musician, clearly, had given vent to some collective frustration that, once expressed, could be discarded in favor of making the best of the night. Her joking off-the-cuff commentary, however, underscored a subtle and important point: ‘how to act’ at Allen’s is a set of behaviors that’s enacted through mutual agreement and reinforcement, and susceptible to damage by breach of contract. Although the crowd remained smaller than normal throughout that summer, when fall came, Allen resumed his weekly schedule and most everyone returned, satisfied that he was once again respecting his ongoing obligations to the ethic of communal ownership—even if some people remained troubled by the demonstration that what seemed deeply communal was in fact privately-owned, for better or worse.

### **An Ethic of Mutual Obligation**

The social logic that undergirds this stance towards money shows up in a number of other aspects of socializing at Allen’s, however, including the way that music is played. At 7pm precisely on one particular evening, he introduces the first band: “This is Little Red and the Hots, here to play some dance music for us!” At that, five musicians rise from the benches and walk up to the low stage in front of the plywood dance floor. The crowd—a mix of ages from teenagers to retirees, applauds politely. The band, however, inspires a double take. They’re all thirty-something, and they’re obviously not country people, and some are dressed like punks—the multiple tattoos, dark homemade clothing, hair dye and so on makes them stand out conspicuously; there are some whispers and chuckles in the crowd but they’re obviously a known entity. Red quickly steps to the mic and tells the crowd in a southern accent how happy they are to be there,

and people begin to shout welcomes. Without any further preamble, the band immediately launches into an almost note-for-note rendition of a Merle Haggard classic: “Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down,” and couples start to wander to the dance floor to two-step as soon as the pedal steel player kicks off the iconic opening solo. Little Red, as the crowd calls the lead singer after her punkish hair-dye, tells the crowd again how much she loves the music hall and how glad she is to play there, thanking Allen by name three times. The bass player, a new addition to the band, steps to the mic after the song ends and in tried and true fashion, addresses the crowd to introduce the frontwoman: “singing for you tonight, and writing our original songs as well: Little Red!” The well-delivered line is a stock element in stage shows, and the rhetorical form establishes a framing device for the audience to fulfill its ritual obligation to the performer: appreciation, homage, recognition of individual artistry. Allen’s crowd wasn’t having it, though: one or two people clap in the prescribed manner, but the other sixty people just stare. Finally, someone shouts: “We know!” to general laughter. Someone else shouts: “Play us that slow Waylon number!” The bass player, looking chagrined, steps back into the shadows as they launch into the next song. Red, who had begun to look uncomfortable the moment the bass player started talking, gives him an apologetic glance as she steps to the mic to begin the next song.

As the bass player learned the hard way, the ethos at Allen’s is defined by a general economy of reciprocal obligation that includes music-making. This takes a number of forms, but inevitably starts with an overt reckoning that the community at large engages in (and discusses extensively) with people who show up more than once and show signs of understanding proper etiquette. The difference involved in becoming a

regular at Allen's vs. becoming a regular at one of the downtown venues where a revivalist ethos reigns can be bewildering for middle-class musicians. For instance, as in the scene above, musicians at Allen's were not thought of as celebrity figures; in fact, it was very clear that they were involved in a relationship of obligation and dialogic interaction with the audience---in the sense that it was their recognized obligation to play music, and to play it in such a way as to facilitate the dancing, cake walks, and other forms of ritualized social interaction that were clearly the real focal point of the music hall. For their part, audience members would shout encouragement, harangue the musicians who moved too slow between songs, demand particular songs or tempos, and congratulate musicians on good work when they left the stage to rejoin the crowd after their set. Although audience members were certainly aware of outside discourses about deference to artists, there was almost none of the performer-audience dualism apparent in conventional musical performance, wherein one group observes a specialist performing a manifestation of their unique identity (of course, this was partly because of the ubiquity of musical competence in the crowd, and the fact that a significant number of people regularly rotated from the audience to the stage and back again).

Instead, the focus was on musicians fulfilling the social forms—forms that were tied not only to community memory but also to the ongoing re-creation of the right kinds of feelings and interactions on a given night. This is not to say the audience wasn't grateful to musicians—in fact, the audience at Allen's were kinder to musicians, and more tolerant of sincere but ineffective attempts at music, than anywhere else we played. It often seemed that the worse the music was, the more appreciative and thankful the audience was to the musician as they walked off stage. Without a doubt, this particular

quality of Allen's—the willingness of regulars to roll with the punches, and to invest considerable energy as a crowd in making the encounter work for everyone—was related to the way he handled money. Not only were people more inclined to treat the evening as an informal get-together instead of a performance where they expected to ‘get their money’s worth,’ but the way they did contribute money led them to feel an obvious sense of community ownership and thus responsibility for a good evening, which included a charitable attitude toward all musical endeavors. This set of attitudes in particular was a fundamental if subtle difference for musicians accustomed to playing the bar and restaurant circuit in Asheville.

However, this tolerance had its limits. The limits, however, were not obvious to middle-class musicians steeped in both a sense of their own virtuosity and trained to think that music-making is primarily about the production of sound per se. Two specific anecdotes illustrate this fact. First, a virtuosic pedal steel player—young, talented, and recently arrived in the south from a wealthy Vermont family--sometimes sat in with Little Red and the Hots and was known to come and play on certain evenings. Typically, even after his band cycled off stage, he would stay set up behind the pedal steel guitar and be invited to join the following acts, often staying on stage all evening and playing a large number of solos in all the songs (footnote: music). His playing, while extremely nimble, creative, and musical, often rubbed people the wrong way, particularly musicians. As Jake, a regular musician, commented after one evening:

“Well, he’s real good but he kind of does his own thing. I don’t even know when to start singing again!” He followed this with a set of complaints about the pedal steel player’s general kind of antisocial demeanor, and continued failure to call Jake back after

repeated offers of (low-paying) pick-up gigs. Eventually, the talented steel player simply ceased to be offered spots on stage and didn't come back.

In contrast, there was almost always a spot on the schedule reserved for a husband and wife duo, despite the fact that his hearing loss from lifelong work in a sawmill rendered him effectively tone-deaf, and his singing consequently completely devoid of discernable melody. Whenever it was time for this couple to get up on stage, all the pick-up musicians of the evening would somehow disappear out behind the building for a smoke break or an ice cream. Inevitably, some unlucky souls would be compelled to back a set of very a-melodic music, which the audience would applaud heartily. This was not because audience members didn't recognize some musical deficits—the songs were often accompanied by winced mutterings of 'bless his heart!' after a particularly caterwauling phrase, and of course, many of the regular performers were immensely talented vocalists, so the bar was not low. Rather, the unending welcome this act got was explicitly born out of a sense that they were valued, participating members of the community; that it was deeply meaningful to him to sing despite his disability; and that the important consideration wasn't necessarily the music being played but the social relationships being fostered. Of course, this logic too had its limits, and on some nights when a sparse crowd seemed in danger of thinning out even further, Allen would tend to stick to the tried-and-true performers who knew how to work a dance floor crowd.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of dancing at Allen's as metonymic of the entire social encounter. Not only was it the ostensible spatial focal point of the evening, with the dance floor standing directly in front of the audience seating and often obscuring any view of the band, but an empty dance floor was very explicitly a statement

that a band was not doing very well at their job. Allen tended to get very nervous if the dance floor was empty for more than one or two songs, although at times, with faster tempo music or really good singers, people did like to sit and watch rather than dance. However, dancing, a social form in which ideally people circulate through multiple dance partners and thereby have the chance to visit with a number of people, was really the accomplishment of the evening. Additionally, as Red noted many times, being asked to dance by regulars was something of an accomplishment: it meant you were ‘in’ in some fashion, and she was very excited when she began to be asked regularly. This, of course, was a social negotiation with very explicitly gendered parameters, and these were heightened by the statuses of the respective dancers, with both conspicuously-married and older people having relatively greater freedom to jokingly dance with whomever they wanted, to a point.

Dancing at Allen’s took two very specific forms: it was either variations on clogging (a solo percussive step dance exclusively done with faster-tempo songs and instrumental numbers) performed by people in groups of two to four, clustered around the floor, or couples-dancing. Couples-dancing meant a slow, simple dance step done with a traditional closed-form dance frame (picture waltzing) that was either a one-step (as in, couples would alternate lead feet on every other beat), or a two-step (two steps per lead foot for a measure of two beats). People doing turns (where the ‘follow’ partner passes under the arm of the ‘lead’ partner) or any kind of fancy spins, dips, swing-outs, or other elaborate or particularly studied partner dance technique was almost unheard-of, except by the irregular middle-class visitors mostly brought in by Red’s bands. Regulars were very clear that ‘fancy-dancing’ wasn’t very highly thought of, and couples who indulged

their penchant for extremely self-focused, atomistic ‘expressive’ fancy dance draw a lot of dirty looks and comments. In one instance, some out-of-town visitors were so persistent in their oblivious swing-dancing that Allen stepped in to intervene during a particular dance:

During and after Red’s performance, the young couple from Portland who recently moved to Asheville and had come to cheer for Little Red spent most of an hour dancing to the band off in a corner by themselves, gracefully pulling off complex swing moves. During one song, Allen had moseyed onto the dance floor with a broom and begun to dance with it, which everyone recognized as signaling a ‘broom dance.’ As the couple in the corner executed a flashy side-by-side swing dance step, there was a loud crash as the broom hit the floor, and they looked up, confused, to see everyone switching partners at top speed. Baffled, they eventually just continued dancing. Allen nonchalantly wandered over and tapped the guy on the shoulder: “Excuse me, I need to cut in!” he said with an impish grin, as the dancer looked at him in puzzlement, which graded to momentary hostility before he shrugged and stepped away from his partner, who also shrugged and began dancing with Allen. The guy from Portland was then quickly and seamlessly swept up by Allen’s ex-partner, and both of them then circulated to new partners with every crash of the broom being slammed to the floor by the next unlucky dancer who was caught, odd man out, without a partner. In a symbolic demonstration of the pain of social alienation, the broom dance relies on the symbolically powerful sight of a person having to pretend to dance with a broom when caught without a partner- a humorously embarrassing reminder of the ridiculousness and consequences of asocial or anti-social behavior in this context. In general, the broom rests in the corner,

available to anyone who wants to liven up a given slow dance, or who can't find a partner, but in practice, mostly Allen gets to call them. In this instance, he had clearly been watching this couple off in their atomistic dance bubble, and had grown annoyed enough that he decided censure was in order. The censure, though, was delivered with good humor and simply served to integrate the couple better into the dance floor.

Predictably, though, they were both immediately forced to rein in their complex dance steps as they circulated from partner to partner, in deference to the reigning and comparatively simple step that enabled everyone to dance with everyone else.

Allen was relatively unsparing in his insistence that everyone participate, but he almost always played his role with a great deal of sympathy and humor. One evening, after a long set on stage, one of the regular female musicians who was notably pregnant at the time had taken a seat a few rows back to rest her weary feet and stay out of the limelight. Allen noticed this, and, after his first few songs on stage, began a well-known song with the common country songwriting element of a spoken-word interlude. In this eminently recognizable aesthetic form, the singer typically drops dramatically in pitch to casually narrate a few sentences of spoken reflections, often imparting a didactic lesson or describing an epilogue to a dramatic narrative. Allen sang his song all the way through, and then, when he reached the spoken interlude, he prepared by taking off his hat, resting it on his chest, ceasing his guitar playing, and staring out into the darkness with a sincere and imploring look towards where he knew the pregnant musician to be sitting. Right on cue, as the band played a mellow shuffle through the chord changes, he intoned in a resonant voice: "You know, we all know that *babies* like to dance *too...*" Amid laughter from the crowd, he continued to describe how good it was for babies to

dance in a deadpan delivery that riffed on the interlude format. At the end of his soliloquy, he once again burst full-voiced into the chorus of the song as prescribed, and the musician, chuckling, dutifully marched to the dance floor for one last go-round.

### **Legible Subjects**

As an outsider encountering the social world of Allen's, it was soon apparent that exchange, mediated through a very specific notion of long-term reciprocal obligation, was one of the primary ways that unknown people became legible subjects for interaction at Allen's. To walk through the door was to enter a social space where it was assumed that you would be both offered and asked favors. These favors not only served practical purposes (I lived near an out-of-the-way auto parts store that carried hard-to-find parts, for instance), but also indexed newcomers' ability to conduct themselves in a respectful manner. The manner in which you responded to 'favors' and to the endless and more subtle iterations of exchange were something of a litmus test for literacy in one of the most fundamental aspects of working-class culture: mutual aid and the intricate and densely-figured complex of cultural meanings that orbit around relationships of obligation. In the course of becoming a regular, the kinds of sustained and ongoing questioning (about biographical matters, for instance) and invitations (it was not uncommon to leave with two dinner invitations in a given week) that musicians received at Allen's stood in stark contrast to downtown jams. Despite an overwhelming rhetorical focus on the idea of 'community' in the revivalist scene, there was usually little extra-musical interaction, whereas to enter the door at Allen's meant a continual kind of accounting-for-oneself.

I detail one such early encounter which began to involve Red and me in broader networks of obligation and sociality, by viscerally confirming for the community that we were interested in establishing significant relationships. One evening, as we walked off the stage, a woman in her early 60s with a raspy voice and smoker's cough approached Red and me. Pat was a long-time regular at Allen's, and she and Red had struck up a friendship: Pat, a well-known character, in fact first nicknamed her 'Little Red,' an event that established Red as a notable character at Allen's. This was nothing unusual; Pat was both outgoing and well-known for her brash verbal wit which was often directed at the unsuspecting among the crowd. During one evening, as I two-stepped with an older woman named Jane, Pat declared in a loud voice: "WATCH OUT JANE!! [a pause as she gained the attention of nearby couples] You be *careful* dancing with him—you seen what he done to his *wife*!! My spouse, also a musician, was notably pregnant at the time, and Jane threw her head back and laughed. In her late sixties and somewhat stooped, Jane straightened up and said, "Well, I may not win the race on looks, but I'm a great conversationalist!! I hope your young wife ain't the *jealous* type." Pat's remark was appreciatively passed around the dance hall that night whenever I got up to dance ("Watch out dancing with him, you *seen* what he done to his *wife*!! Ahahahahah").

Tonight though, Pat approached Red as we exit the stage to see if she would be willing to come out and play music for Pat's sister, who was dying of a kidney disorder and was bedridden at her house: Pat said, "It'd mean so much to her—she really loves those old songs." Although she was clearly mostly interested in Red, I, being the designated rhythm player, was suddenly implicated in this encounter (this was early in my career at

Allen's and I was as-yet unknown, and therefore a questionable subject for direct solicitation in such an intimate matter of exchange). I was hesitant but Red immediately recognized the moment's importance and answered for us both: "Well, we'd be *glad* to, but I wouldn't know what to play for her. I guess we'd need to think of some gospel songs we do? Would she like that?" Pat looked surprised for a second then cackled loudly: "Hell, I said that she's *dyin'*, not that she's *dead!* Just do some of them whore 'n' barroom songs you do. She'll like that just fine. I'll take you'uns out for dinner afterward."

We agree and arrange a date. Two days later, Red and I drive out a two lane that runs along a row of derelict factories on the city's periphery. We pass through the zoned industrial section that used to be close enough to be of commercial value and eventually come to the struggling businesses—hair salons, auto shops—that dot the peri-urban landscape. After the Hot Dog King, we turn onto a circle that leads around a hilly trailer park, with instructions to look for the grey double-wide with the nice Tundra parked in front. We park and Pat secures an agitated dog before she comes out to greet us, thanking us profusely again: "Wellll, she's in there. She's not doing good, but she's not doing too bad today either. Nurse is just leaving so we can go on in."

We walk up the disability ramp to the front door, the odor of stale cigarette smoke greeting us as we wave hello to a home health care nurse who steps outside for a smoke herself. Pat leads us back to her sister's room, where we find Ellen waiting inside, weak and bedridden but bright-eyed at our arrival. Besides Pat and Ellen, there are four other people in the small bedroom that I recognize from Allen's, all obviously there for a visit on the occasion of the music. Pat introduces us to the man lounging on the couch, an

older Trinidadian man with white hair: “This is Ellen’s ex-husband, up here from south Georgia to take care of her! Isn’t that something? Been divorced ten years but he come up here six months ago and has just been helping ever since. [She then whispers to us as a joking aside he’s clearly meant to hear] *Ellen says he’s just here for her old van—wants her to put him in the will.* But he ain’t gettin’ that van—it’s going straight to the medical bills!”

We laugh and talk some with Ellen, who is weak but lucid enough to request a George Jones song. Red sings and I play guitar on a couple of classic songs about cheating and heartbreak. Then we do a Buck Owens song that Pat requests, and a Merle Haggard number—“If We Make it Through December”—that brings tears to Ellen’s eyes. The rest of the crowd alternately listens, sings along, or chats frankly about germane topics like bad health and the process of dying. After six songs, however, Ellen is drooping and her eyes are starting to close. Pat leans over her hospital cot and bellows into the external microphone for her hearing aid: “*ELLEN!! You falling asleep?! You tired??*”

Ellen startles and then nods yes and we exchange goodbyes with the ex-husband and the brother, who are profusely grateful. They promise to come see our band play later. Pat walks us out to our car. Outside, she lights up another cigarette and describes her sister’s struggle with her own impending death:

Well, the doctor told her six months and that’s been eight months ago now. So she’s had time to settle accounts. She’s scared some days, but we’re put on this earth to die. The body breaks down, you get old...about the best you can hope for is what she’s got, which is time to make *peace* with life, tell your family you love them, and try to make sure you’re right with God. She just has to be okay with it, I tell her that. She’ll call me crying sometimes, of a night, just scared to go...I tell her, Ellen, it’s your time. Don’t fear it!

I nod along as she talks, unsure if condolences are called for, and she eventually thanks us again, pressing the unexpectedly generous amount of thirty dollars into my hand: “I promised I’d take you all out to eat, but I have to get back to work now! You can go right down the road to the Hot Dog King and get some supper.”

In the coming months, I found that this favor involved Red and me immediately in a broader network of exchange. Very quickly, the ramifications of saying ‘yes’ echoed around Allen’s through an expanding web of obligations that led variously to gigs, jobs, baby showers, and so on. In short, in combination with our regular service there as musicians, it began to render us legible as appropriate social subjects, who could be counted on to understand the nature and conduct of relationships of obligation and exchange. In contrast, the musicians in our band who played there from time to time but either refused requests or failed to solicit favors in turn, ended up as liminal subjects—still appreciated by the audience, but essentially left alone or ignored when off-stage. The experience we had playing music for Ellen was revealing not only through the extensive networks of exchange it involved (involving kinship networks, musical acquaintances, and neighbors), but also for what it hinted at about time and resources. Indeed, as with the four hours we spent between driving, socializing, and playing music in the middle of a workday, it underscored the deceptively demanding nature of the simple requirement of *presence* that defines belonging in working-class communities. People at Allen’s expected of each other that they be regularly present, as a precondition of creating the possibility of intense sociality and solidarity that defined the ethos there. I found it a difficult requirement to fulfill, even as a full-time fieldworker: it simply took a lot of time

to participate enough to even be on the outskirts of the community. The encounter is also notable for the way that it underlined Red's status as a valued member of Allen's musical community at the time—a status that demonstrated the complex interplay of required and acquired tastes in Red's experience, one that drew on both her political education as a punk familiar with cosmopolitan liberalism, and on her working-class family background.

A couple of months after we played for Pat's sister, Jake, a regular musician from Allen's, called Red to get my number. Talking by phone, he asked me if I would back him up at a last-minute gig at a VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) Hall in the factory town adjacent to Allen's. The gig was a birthday party for a friend of his, and he mentioned the man's dire straits: "Well, if we can't do it, he's going to have to do karaoke for his birthday party. And he's a pretty good ol' boy, and he's getting old, so I'd hate for him to have to do karaoke. *I hate* that stuff. So that's the main reason I'm calling." Plus, Jake added, if we do this gig now it'll mean more gigs later that might pay better. He mentioned that he'd got a drummer and a good bass player, and that maybe his son would play rhythm guitar, but that he's unreliable. Anyway, he said, they needed a lead player and plus they wanted me to sing too to take some of the load. I agreed, and he mentioned that he'd pay me for the gig, and then described the plate of food I would get for free, describing each item and telling how good it would be—"we'll take good care of you out here!"

I arrived a little late after another gig, and parked outside an unmarked building on the outskirts of a Lowes Home Improvement Warehouse on the strip leading out of town. The VFW hall was in a nondescript and weathered old building, and the parking lot and outside were dark. Someone buzzed me in the locked door, and I walked in to a

standard set-up: a full bar with NASCAR on the television, the muted buzz of drinking conversation, and the bartender a standoffish guy. Off to one side were some old tables and folding chairs where a few couples sit finishing up dinner on paper plates; in front of them in a corner of the room was a battered old PA set up under some beer banners. The room was smoky and had an old-diner smell of aerosolized grease and cigarette smoke cooked into the walls themselves. The bar was about half full of older men and women, smoking, drinking, and talking. People looked my way when I arrived and nodded, satisfied I was there for good reason when they saw the guitar case and amp.

Jake and his band had already eaten and started a set, so I hustled to set up my gear as they finished a Merle Haggard song. The second I had my guitar plugged in, Jake winked at me and introduced me to the crowd, saying I was there to be the guitar man and that I sang, too! “And he’s gonna sing one for you now!” I hadn’t had time to even tune, but the band stared at me and the jukebox was off, so I stepped up and introduced another Merle song to sparse clapping, turning to outline the tempo and the chord changes to the bass player and drummer. Unfortunately, the rhythm guitar player had brought no amp, so his playing was largely for visual effect and moral support, and when I stopped playing rhythm to play lead or fills, the band was very sparse-sounding. The rhythm guitar player, Jerry, stood in the background singing tenor harmony off the mic, and giving encouragement to any nice guitar work in the formalized and ritualized mode of bluegrass jams: “aw, *son!*” and “tell it!”

Jake stepped in to take over vocal duties after my song, saying, “That’s our friend David, let’s give him a nice hand! Can’t he sing, folks?” He was being kind but I appreciated it anyway. Jake guzzled lemon juice concentrate from a yellow lemon-shaped

bottle in between sips of water, complaining of the cold that had turned him phlegmy. His powerful and hard-edged baritone voice, well-suited to the Ernest Tubb-style singing he preferred, was indeed a little husky, but it sounded great regardless, and the audience appreciated his direct and straightforward delivery. Feeling fatigued after a couple more songs, he asked me to take over again, and I filled in with some Dwight Yoakam songs. Without warning, inspired by something he had heard, Jerry the rhythm player stepped to the mic and launched into “He Stopped Loving Her Today”— perhaps the most famous of George Jones’ songs, an incredibly difficult vocal tune, and a candidate for most iconic country song of all time. Jerry the rhythm player just killed it. As soon as he opened his mouth, out flowed a powerful, nuanced, old tenor voice with immense character, beautiful delivery and intonation, and rich feeling and intensity. Jerry had the vocal quality that was perhaps most mystifying and impressive about Jones’ own singing—a rich, full, and resonant lower register that somehow intensified into a more focused, clearer version of itself as he ascended in pitch and shifted across vocal registers. He finished with a crescendo that marks the denouement of the song, nailing the pharyngealized tone that Jones uses as a timbral feature to highlight his upper-register delivery, as well as the demanding range of stylized ornamentation that marks Jones’ approach to individual notes. In all, it was a virtuoso performance, and Jerry finished and looked at me with an expression of humble satisfaction. He stepped away from the mic a bit and said that being older and being through a lot in life had taken some of his vocal ability, but added character to his singing, which was his way of humbly acknowledging his vocal mastery. Indeed, he sounded to me like the epitome of what a classic country

voice should sound like: a voice that had somehow achieved a kind of distillation through age and use.

After Jerry sang, Jake called a break and took me to their table, where true to his word, they had a plate of food covered with a paper towel to keep the flies off. They gave it to me along with a Miller Lite and settled in to smoke and watch me eat. The food was good—crisp sweet creamed corn, pinto beans cooked with fatback with slices of raw white onion, a yeast roll, some pan-fried potato wedges, three big slabs of fried ham covered with fried red peppers, and incongruously, a few random slices of raw tomato and cucumber on top of everything. The plate weighed probably two pounds. As I worked my way through it, Jake's wife Geri told me, "Honey, you're about to blow away. You best finish all that! This here is *homemade*. It's just hard to get real good food anymore, but this is it." Geri seemed pleased that I scarfed it down, starving from a long day, although I shamed myself by cutting the fat off the ham, which Geri's friend looked at disapprovingly. Soon enough, with some small talk out of the way, they began to get into the kind of evaluative back-and-forth by which people begin to categorize each other and make sense of life histories and current trajectories. Jake asked me about my life, where I came from and why my family was over two hours away and I was here. I mentioned that I had built houses for a while before injuring my back and going back to school; satisfied with my answers, Jake and Jerry began to reminisce some about their own injuries from working, and what was paining them at the moment, yelling across the tables to ask questions of nearby friends. They'd all done manual labor—water main repair and so forth, some farmers, some mechanics. One fellow who joined the conversation talked about shutting off the water of people who didn't pay their bills, and

of carrying a pistol because of all the violence he put up with. Jake and a co-worker of his discussed retirement, and how glad they were to have lived this long and gotten out of their jobs alive. Ending the conversation on that melancholy note, we played one more set before we finished, had a last beer at the bar, and loaded sound gear into trucks, lit up in the reflected glare from the Burger King across the strip.

This section has argued that working-class culture privileges a notion of the social subject as one who is ideally involved in multiple, ongoing, and long-term networks of reciprocal obligation. As I showed, the cultivation and maintenance of public sociality depended explicitly on these ethical stances. Indeed, it was only through the cultivation of these kinds of reciprocal obligations that I and my bandmates began to make sense to regulars at the dance as subjects worthy of social interaction. As I show, the process of becoming a legible subject at the country barn dance was explicitly linked to, among other things, the process of incurring and fulfilling social obligations. This kind of intersubjective obligation in fact functioned as one of the brightest lines dividing people from different classes—in the sense that working-class people were extremely reluctant to incur social debts or obligations to middle-class people, and middle-class people tended to be relatively oblivious to the extensive social obligations characterizing working-class social worlds. I argue for understanding working-class culture in broad outline not as a collectivist model (it is inarguable that, in many ways, working-class people are, like all ‘liberal, modern westerners,’ fully individualist), but rather as encompassing different modes of individualism. Indeed, as the next chapter on personhood examines, working-class culture is deeply interested in the interplay of

unique and often bizarre ‘characters,’ and often has a more complex notion of social differentiation at work than liberal middle-class culture—one sometimes, but not always, expressed in hierarchical modes. However, I will argue that the legibility of working class people as individuals arises precisely from a network of obligations and exchanges that, among other things, provide iterative possibilities for interactions. These interactions at a basic level create and re-create regular possibilities for sociality; but more importantly perhaps they establish the reality of the social as a framework for comparatively locating individuals in a way that gives them social meaning. This ideological privileging of ‘the social’ as a primary reality which makes individuals legible as such is in contrast to middle-class culture, which I will argue tends to presuppose the individual as the condition of possibility of the social.

#### SECTION ENDNOTES:

**Music:** The structure of actual musical practice on stage at Allen’s followed many of the norms of amateur or semi-professional country music-making that other scholars describe (see in particular Fox 2004). Some of the elements that musicians at Allen’s felt strongly about included an absolute focus on the singer and the vocal delivery of the song, with a very strong rhythm section the second most important element, and lead playing as an appreciated but supporting role. Rhythm sections consisted typically of the singer playing amplified acoustic or electric rhythm guitar, along with an electric bass and a simple drum kit consisting of often just a snare and a high hat, with some players adding a tom and rarely a kick drum (which interferes to some extent with the ideal duties of the bass player). Lead duties are typically divided between any guitar approximating the sound of a Fender Telecaster (an iconic instrument whose brand name is more-or-less synonymous with a particular style of country playing); the pedal steel guitar; and to a lesser extent, the fiddle. Tele-style playing is an era- and region-specific thing, with its iconic tonal, stylistic, and technical referents often being some combination of Don Rich, Buck Owens’ brilliant lead guitarist; the Merle Haggard recordings of James Burton; and perhaps for younger players, Pete Anderson’s work with Dwight Yoakam. In all cases, the sound is a muscular, crisp, clean sound, mostly free of overdrive distortion or ‘dirt,’ with an emphasis of the twangy, thin, high frequency response of the non-humbucking bridge pickup on a Telecaster. Except for the occasional addition of a compression pedal (the effects of which are beyond the scope of this footnote), tele-style playing tends to use

the natural sound of a Fender-style tube amp with enough headroom (wattage) to produce significant volume without distorting. The stylistic and technical aspects of tele-style playing are beyond the scope of this footnote.

Pedal steel guitars, on the other hand, although technically a ‘guitar,’ are in most respects a completely different instrument, both in terms of technique and to some extent typical role in a band. The pedal steel looks like a small end-table with strings on top and numerous pedals beneath, and the player sits behind it, often appearing to move little in comparison to the cascade of sustaining notes produced. This is due to a few facts: first, the pedal steel is played, like a bluegrass banjo, with three fingerpicks rather than a flatpick, which allows for an economy of motion in the picking hand denied the guitar player. Second, although set-ups and string numbers and tunings vary by instrument, many of the strings on a pedal steel are controlled by a number of available pedals, played with the feet and knees, and used in combination with a hunk of steel, a ‘slide,’ that the player moves on the strings to control pitch by hand. In effect, the pedal steel player has multiple ways of controlling pitch on a given string, and is hence able to play sustaining chords while simultaneously altering various notes within the chord, by a step or a half-step. In addition, a volume pedal gives the ability to control sustain to a great extent, and to approximate the volume effects that a string player can produce with bow intensity. In short, the pedal steel is an immensely complex instrument, difficult to learn, specialized in production to the individual player based on height and length of limb; odd and completely non-intuitive without extensive lessons; and capable of an extraordinary range of sonic expressiveness. Naturally, good pedal steel players are very hard to come by and are highly prized when available due to the iconic role of the pedal steel sound in classic country. The sound itself is often characterized as ‘crying’—in the hands of a good player, it can produce cascading single-note runs of immense complexity, ambient shimmering chordal fills, and immediately-recognizable licks, or iconic musical phrases that often play with the resolved tension of a flat third to major third (or seven) scale degree in a given chord to produce complex bluesy melodic riffs.

In an ideal-typical classic country sound, at least at Allen’s, the lead players have two roles: fills and solos. ‘Fills’ consist of the notes played by a lead instrumentalist between and sometimes within vocal phrases, serving to highlight or anticipate chordal movement, restate a melody or a counterpoint, or simply add atmospheric effect to a given moment. Their effect is that of a second voice during vocal pauses, ideally one that complements and enhances rather than duets. Fills are difficult to do well, since they are by nature extremely short phrases requiring the player to condense musical ideas into tasteful and spontaneously improvised bits, and since, if poorly done, they not only sound bad like all bad playing, but they also run the risk of either stepping on the toes of the singer, implying erroneous chordal movement, or of throwing the singer off if not properly phrased. Since singing is of paramount importance to the expressiveness of classic country, this is a major sin, and one that can be accomplished in a number of ways, even by very good players, particularly if the singer isn’t used to singing accompanied by extensive fill work, which is a skill in and of itself. The rule, of course, is ‘less is more.’ Solos, on the other hand, are lower-risk but higher-visibility, in that the audience expects them to state or interpret the melody in a compelling way, and often looks forward to them as displays of virtuosity, but given their longer nature and circumscribed moment, they don’t risk derailing the vocalist. Between the Telecaster and

the pedal steel, the pedal steel is often expected to play an ornate, sustained, and ornamented version of the melody, along with expressive fills; the telecaster is often relied on for a ‘hook’ or a restatement of the opening melodic or rhythmic motif. Of course, there are wide variations between individual players, but in general, the telecaster guitar tends to rely more on minor pentatonic modes and blues riffs as a foundational tonal element of lead playing—it is often simpler and more raw-sounding playing. Of course, there is a whole school of telecaster technique aimed at approximating the sound of the pedal steel guitar through complex and difficult string bending and hybrid picking techniques, but that is beyond the scope of this footnote. Suffice it to point out that the virtuoso player I mention would be invited to ‘sit in’ with whoever was on stage as a matter of course, since pedal steel players are rare, he was good, and the sound is iconic. And his playing was within the bounds of acceptable contemporary taste in many venues—just not at Allen’s, particularly when viewed as a further symptom of his refusal to acknowledge proper social roles, and his tendency to play elaborate and prominent fills that many singers found disorienting.)

## **2.3: I'm a Friend of a Friend of the Working Class**

You get up in the morning to join the common herd

Your lot is a hard one, or so I have heard

I know how hard it is to bust one's ass

'Cause I'm a Friend of a Friend of the Working Class

I'm a Friend of a Friend yeah,

I'm a Friend of a Friend of your class

-"Friend of a Friend of the Working Class," The  
Upper Crust ("Let Them Eat Rock," Upstart 1995)

The house where both Little Red and the Hots, as well as the Dukes of Woodfin (a subsidiary old-time dance band made up of myself and two other members) both hold practices, is a ramshackle affair fifteen minutes out of downtown. It also happens to also be home base to half the band, as well as a couple of other permanent residents and a large number of rotating characters who stay while they're passing through, or barter work for accommodations, or otherwise end up couch-surfing for a while. Located in a long-dead industrial corridor outside the city, it is hemmed in on one side by the city sewage treatment plant (when the wind is blowing the wrong way, one resident quips, "well, that's the average smell of shit in Asheville!"), on the other by a county dump a couple of miles away, on the front by the French Broad River and a railroad, and behind by a steep mountainside. In addition to the dump and sewage treatment plant, there are a number of factories and shipping and receiving depots scattered along the narrow strip of flat land and road that runs beside the river, headed north towards Tennessee.

The house is set on a small bit of flat carved out of steep hillside land, and is a warren of additions, odd rooms, and extensions built over the years. The steep driveway up from the river road terminates in a small gravel lot, which is always filled to capacity with five or six beaters and a couple of newer cars. There's a couple of old tool sheds delimiting the other side of the lot, one filled with old, busted tools and appliances, and some newer working stuff that gets sporadically used. The other is half-filled with dead motorcycles, and half emptied-out and retrofitted as a workshop where one of the residents, Jamie, does artisanal crafts as part of his money-making. Both are hemmed in by dead vehicles, including motorcycles, an old Ford F-150 still painted bright yellow from when it was a DOT vehicle, and a VW bus from the eighties that was converted to biodiesel at some point and painted with slogans from Otto Von Diesel, inventor of the diesel engine, extolling alternate fuels. It is long-since defunct and now serves as one side to a shed. The front porch is covered with stuff too—couches, boxes of possessions, an old freezer, spare wood for projects, and trays of cigarette butts.

Inside, the house is heated in winter by two wood stoves, which are always cranking out massive amounts of heat, but which never quite manage to adequately heat all of the ten or more subdivided bedrooms and living rooms, art spaces, and so on. The place is filled with old, musty couches, mismatched chairs, shelves full of knick-knacks, an old record player with an extensive collection of classic country, and a kitchen filled with the balkanized collections of food, seasonings, and implements from at least four people's households. The walls—still covered in peeling wallpaper from mid-century at the latest, are home to a large number of anarchist posters advertising events, protests,

skills-shares, political mottos, and so on. It's a chaotic place, and the house itself was not many steps from derelict when originally purchased by the erratic landlord, who works for an anarchist press and is in and out but generally completely unreliable as a source of fixes. The current residents have collectively put a great deal of work into making it livable, including knocking out walls, patching roofs, sanding floors, repairing holes in walls, and so on. Its ultimate feel, when I arrive, is of a kind of gritty staging area for all of the various projects that the members of the household are engaged in—which include bands, political organizing on issues of gender and sexuality, an anarchist community space, various side-projects to make money, small engine repair, art projects and some artisanal crafts, and various other ventures.

Hacked out of the undergrowth on the steep hillside directly above the house is a narrow path covered in mulch, which leads up to a ‘tiny house’ perched on a hillside—the handiwork of Jamie, a founding band member and long-time insider in the punk and old-time scenes. Jamie’s handmade shack is about 7 feet by 14 feet, and has no electricity or running water—it’s just a sleeping space and a music space, with a folding cot, a propane heater for winter, and an extension cord powering a laptop or a fan as needs dictate. Jamie, a committed anti-wage-labor kind of punk, has also constructed a covered platform on which to cook and sleep in summer months, but mostly cooks and eats with the crowd down at the house, although, somewhat introverted and moody by nature, he prioritizes the ability to escape to his own private space when necessary. The shack itself is stout and well-made, using a modular design that Jamie drew out and built with the help of friends. The process of building and erecting it—no mean feat considering the pitch of the hillside and the huge weight of the 10 major panels—was accomplished by a

barn-raising type of event that Jamie speaks fondly of as a high point when his community came together to help him in a moment of mutual aid.

### **Red Gets an Idea**

While the entire country band practices in one of the rooms of the big house, the old-time band, a subsidiary endeavor with only three people, tends to cram into Jamie's shack up the hill—an intimate environment more suited to the acoustic fiddle tunes the band plays. Tonight, the evening is one part band practice, and one part potluck dinner in honor of some out-of-town guests who are also musicians. Currently living on the west coast, Andy and Sarah are passing through on a tour of the southeast, with the thought of moving here after Sarah finishes her residency in medical school. The night before, Red and part of the band had played at Allen's, and Andy and Sarah had gone along with them to take in the scene (incidentally, they are described in the previous section swing-dancing at Allen's). Tonight, though, the name of the game is vegetarian stir-fry and kimchi, so everyone is at ease. After some dinner chat about kimchi and other fermented foods, and the various things that everyone at the table is doing to boost their gut flora, the talk turns to Allen's the night before. Sarah notes that she had been reluctant to go, but had ultimately loved it because it "was so, so different!" as she put it, and Andy says: "Yeah! That's why I made you go to that Krispy Kreme today: you gotta get out of the bubble. You have to get away from the people who do yoga and eat extra virgin olive oil and worry about their diet all the time and just get around plain ol' people. It's really different out there, and you have to see how other people live!"

Red, who often expressed dismay at her middle-class friends' tendency to exoticize the conveniently different aspects of working-class people like diet, while

ignoring what she sees as the real differences in how they treat each other, is watching this exchange with a look of concern. She says: “Yeah, that’s why I love Allen’s. The people there are just so sweet and so down to earth. You go there and dance and most all of them just know each other so it’s really rare they’ll dance with you. My friends who I bring get jealous when some of the regulars dance with me: like, they won’t even talk to my friends. They just all know each other.” We laugh about when Allen himself cut in on Andy dancing with Sarah during the broom dance, and how Andy didn’t know what was going on and initially got hostile with Allen. Red mentions how the same kinds of things used to happen when some of the punks who live in the rural county to the north used to make a practice of going to Allen’s every Saturday for a time. As the talk turns to how much fun it is to play music for the crowd at Allen’s, Red begins to muse about starting her own version somewhere in town—a country night modeled on Allen’s but a little easier to get to, and a little less intimidating for her punk friends. She leaves the table determined to make a go of it, building on her already-extensive list of contacts with venue owners from booking shows for her country band.

Red was something of an evangelist in the punk scene, and her cause was that of getting middle-class punks out into rural working-class spaces, to experience firsthand what they often had only heard about or imagined through practices like country music performance that explicitly relied on working-class cultural fetishism. Red’s own working-class background and her shared membership in punk and working-class cultural worlds had sensitized her to the hypocrisies endemic to both punk and middle-class revivalist scenes, and she often was left extremely frustrated or hurt by people who, while playing country or old-time music, dressing in workingman’s clothes, and even at times

speaking in assumed southern accents, would simultaneously engage in blatantly classist statements about the stupidity, ignorance, racism, or otherwise backwardness of rural working-class people. Red saw this dynamic—that of highly selective cultural romanticization—as a key problem with ideological punk politics, and one which revealed a surface-level understanding of what it actually meant to pursue things like ‘gift economies,’ or other trendy theoretical interventions with which she tended to have little patience. As she put it, “Those people fucking piss me off. Middle-class college-educated people, who make a living teaching ‘Appalachian arts and crafts,’ who pretend to love the south, and yet they make fun of southerners at every turn. Like, they love quilting or old-time but everyone who lives down here is a redneck and a hick. They just pick and choose the traditions they adopt.” Red noted that revivalists in particular tended to look down upon the majority of rural southerners—typically only sparing from scorn those who were themselves involved in teaching middle-class people some version of handicrafts or music.

A lifelong anarchist, Red was not blind to the problems, faults, and political flaws in the working-class places and people she loved, particularly with regard to gender and race, but she fundamentally believed these problems, while real, to be severely overestimated by middle-class liberals, because they misunderstood working-class worlds. When I asked her why her punk friends didn’t often venture out to Allen’s, she said,

I think they think it’s a room of rednecks, and they’re gonna get beat up or something. I never understand, where does that come from? Has that *happened* to you? You know? There’s a couple—and I understand that—people that are transgender, and they get really nervous. But, I don’t know if they realize. There’s an interesting mix of people at Allen’s, ladies with dude mullets, ladies dancing with ladies and what

not... there's some wiggle room for that stuff, but I can understand the nervousness. I guess it's a little tricky for me too cause my aunt is openly gay and lives with her wife in Kentucky. And that's some crazy shit. My family's catholic and my Gramma's just like, 'family is family.' So there was no having her being ostracized at all. So a lot of times, I think, it's not uncommon—it's partly because they're ladies, my family can say some homophobic things about guys—But one time I was talking with my aunts back when I was riding trains, and they were like, "*Damn*, we're just lesbians in Kentucky! You're riding trains." I was like, "You're way more bold and crazy than I am!" In my mind, I thought, you're way more brave and bold to do this. Than just sneaking around jumping on a train. My great uncle, him and his husband Bob lived together, but it was his "roommate," and they would go on trips together and everything. It was one of those old-school arrangements, everyone knew, they were fine with it, but it was "just roommates." Lots of southern families have ways of dealing.

Regardless of the flaws and problems she saw, Red also had a deeply sympathetic evaluation of the things that working class people do that she found to be completely in line with anarchist ideals, and with the leanings of her own childhood. Ideally, Red wanted to introduce as many of her friends as possible into the social world of Allen's primarily because she herself loved it so much and found the fellowship there so redeeming, and so fundamentally different from what most of her middle-class friends would recognize as legible personhood. In effect, she simply wanted others to have the privilege of those kinds of social relationships. But, as she readily acknowledged, she also hoped to introduce more people to the actual lived world of the people that they so painstakingly imitated, or whose practices they pedantically instructed others on, with little or no actual knowledge of the people. She was very clear that this objective was partly about making people confront their own biases, and partly about helping them to see the deep entanglement of cultural forms like country or old-time music with particular social and cultural practices. As she put it,

It's totally different worlds. Part of it is just, at Allen's everyone is really appreciative of the slightest good thing. Whenever we play, they're just so happy about it, and Allen's worked really hard to make that a place where anyone is welcome. But I guess, Allen's just reminds me so much of my family in Kentucky. Just real unassuming, real sweet, kind of rough, but in the most endearing way. You know how Pat is like sometimes, just so crude, but it's all in good fun. Too, there's no putting-on, nobody is putting on airs, they just are who they are. And I guess, there's something about the feeling there that's like church, when I went to church as a kid. Not all the heavy weird stuff, but just the sweet community part of it.

However, she was also sanguine about the possibility of getting masses of people out to Allen's on a regular basis, and realistic as to what the actual effects would be of introducing a large number of socially ignorant leftists into the complex social world of Allen's. Mass misunderstanding would result. Therefore, to her, the idea of country night was at least partly that, if she couldn't bring the people to Allen's, she would bring Allen's (or at least, some of the things that she loved about Allen's) to the people. It was also, of course, a way to tap into the growing cachet of classic country on the Asheville scene in a way that gave the band a regular chance to gig, make money, and build an audience. Over the next few weeks, the band got periodic updates as Red tried to set up the show as a regular affair. Finally, she settled on a newish venue called the Night Owl in a trendy part of town—she was friendly with the owners, who were themselves searching for an identity for their new venture in the crowded Asheville market. For Red, it was an ideal location and well-suited to her vision with a great dance floor just in front of a stage; for the owners, it's a chance to get on the radar of a crowd of people who are often the leading edge of aesthetic trends in Asheville: punks. It's a fortuitous time, since classic country cover bands, staffed by revivalists and punks both, have been on the rise

in Asheville for at least five years, as cyclical trends in nostalgia-based musical consumption swung away from bluegrass and old-time to some extent, and landed on a version of country located a safe temporal and aesthetic distance from contemporary pop country.

### **Recreating Allen's at the Night Owl**

Red and the owners of the Night Owl settle on a given Saturday night, with the understanding that if the place does well, it'll become a regular thing. Red is therefore highly motivated, and spends the weeks beforehand making and posting promotional posters, emailing and calling her extensive friend list, and booking two other bands in addition to hers to have a full bill. The week before the show, she spends her evenings baking beautiful homemade pies to auction off during the cake walks; she also hires a dancing teacher to do a half-hour lesson on two-step dancing, the preferred country music couples step, before the show starts.

The night of the first inaugural Country Night is a sultry early summer evening, and the front of the bar is open to the busy street, letting in the pungent smell from a coffee roastery three doors down, and the sounds of traffic and the people walking to and from bars, shops, and restaurants. We arrive a few hours early, waiting for the other bands to get there so we can all decide on the order of performance, the stage set-up, and how to do sound-check. As usual, most of the musicians are late by at least an hour, so there is a scramble to sound-check and our band completely misses our chance as the other two bands figure out how to share a backline. As the doorman takes his place and starts charging 6 bucks a person for entry, we sit by the bar drinking our three free drinks

on the house. An odd mix of people arrive early for the dance lesson, and the band jokes to each other as the dance instructor gets a number of earnest couples stiffly marching around the floor to some classic Willie Nelson—many have come during weekend visits to the city, thinking it would be a lark to see some authentic country dancing in this southern town. With a mic, the dance teacher is piped into the house PA and her amplified voice floats over Willie’s nasal singing: “and LEFT and two and RIGHT and two.” Eventually, she has everyone up to speed enough that they’re deemed ready to go. As the first band gets up on stage, Red’s friends start to arrive, and the bar soon fills with tatted-up punks in dusky-colored clothing, belt knives, and work boots, as well as a mix of Asheville hipsters, tourists, and people drawn to the curiosity of a country show in a hip neighborhood. Red gets up on stage to introduce the show:

Hi y’all—HI Y’ALL—welcome to the first Country Night at the Night Owl! If we do good tonight, this’ll be a regular thing, so be sure to treat the bartenders right. We’ve got a great line-up here tonight, and we’re gonna do a Cake Walk, a joke contest, and a lot of good dancin’!! Stay tuned, but first up, here’s our good friends, the Short Timers, here to play some fine honky tonk for your dancing pleasure!

As Red had mentioned to me a number of times, she was nervous about the night, and not only because she wanted it to be a success financially. She was perhaps even more nervous that her vision of recreating the things she found so compelling about Allen’s—the down-home practicality, the social sensibility that privileged the crowd rather than individuals, the sweet way that people encouraged each other and the musicians to participate—would fail in the very distinct environment of a chic bar and music venue, amongst people with tenuous and passing connections to each other. Despite her fears though, she was hopeful that her friends in the punk scene, who she

believed to have some experience operating with different social codes, would come through and make the event one of fellowship and good feeling.

In short order, the Short Timers kick off their first number. Red was right in her choice—the Night Owl is an ideal space for dancing, with a beautiful open hardwood dance floor in front of a three-foot high stage, and a talented sound guy with a good set-up. The high-ceilinged warehouse-chic space has a few spare tables towards the back away from the stage, and a long bar at which people are loitering, but most of the crowd is funneled by the space towards the dance floor and the band, which is lit up in the dark space by overhead lights. The Short Timers are a young four-piece band out of Tennessee, and most of them have put in shifts at a nearby college's country music studies program, although only one of them finished. Consequently, they're highly aware of their canonic responsibilities, and they play folk-tinged country songs at a good dance tempo. They're dressed in flannel and cowboy hats and boots, and they're good at performing. What performing means in this context is a few things: first, they have a practiced stage show where they go back and forth with witty patter between songs, which allows the guitarist time to retune, among other things. They have a set routine where they introduce the band one by one during a song, and allow the members to take a solo as they're introduced; they also, like most good bands, have mastered the art of looking like they're working really hard to hit a high note or play a solo, with artful grimaces and emphatic body language in the recognizable physical register of pop music performance. Their stage show clearly delineates them as 'performers' at all times—a category of people whose roles set them completely apart from the audience in this social encounter. As a frame for structuring the social encounter of a musical performance, this

set of attitudes is both transparent and completely unremarkable in a middle-class context, and puts the audience at ease. In fact, the only time this set of codes is remarkable at all in a place like this is when a performer does it badly, by breaking frame or simply through an awkward or unpracticed stage presence. But the Short Timers are good, and the audience admires their songwriting, their musicianship, their emotive playing, their virtuosity. When they finish their set, they'll be casually approached by fans, groupies, friends, and people looking to talk music or take one of them home; the more-or-less standard social agreement of the temporary exaltation of artists by a crowd at a hip place, through mutual agreement and enactment.

For now though, the couples who took the dance lesson are meandering their way across the floor in slow circles, and they're joined by a crowd of swing dancers who've showed up thanks to a dance listserv, as we find out later. Mostly dancing complex Lindyhop-style swing thanks to a prolific local swing scene with active teachers, the swing couples carve out little circles of their own space with syncopated swing-outs and various elaborate turns and other flashy moves. In turn, a crowd gathers to watch the dancers, and to applaud both them and the band after every song. The dance couples are mostly paired off for the evening—the beginners mostly too shy to circulate, and the experienced swing dancers focusing on practicing and refining their moves, or unwilling to dance with beginners during what was clearly a kind of performance. Around the tables, groups of friends take up residence, yelling in conversation over the drums and guitars.

After five or so songs, Red gets back on stage and asks the band to get ready to do a cake walk, which for them means playing a snippet of song over and over again for varying lengths of time. They roll their eyes a little but huddle together to comply. She has two friends put twelve chairs in a circle facing outwards, and she tells the crowd to get ready for a cake-walk, with the prize being two homemade cherry pies. Everyone is a little baffled, until she makes it plain that it's basically musical chairs. Soon enough, she has 13 people marching around 12 chairs, and when the music stops, there's a wild scramble. This goes on for a while, until it's down to four people—three young women and one lone guy who's been brave enough to be physically competitive in a space of punk gender politics. As they circle like vultures around the three chairs, the music stops and a full-on wrestling match breaks out between two of the women over the remaining free chair, which gets physically intense to the point of spectator discomfort before one gives up and lays on the ground panting as the other triumphantly claims her chair. With two chairs left, the guy eliminates the non-wrestling woman on the next round, and it's down to him and the victorious wrestler, who powerfully boxes him out when the music ends and then shoves him in the back, away from the chair. He doesn't contest it, and she sits down triumphantly, quickly jumping to her feet with her hands raised to loud applause. She claims her prize pies and retreats to a corner with some friends, where they immediately dig into the homemade pies with bare hands, shoveling down large bites. Red, watching from the shadows, looks a little alarmed and a little sad. As I approach, she comments that she had hoped they would share the pies she made with the whole place.

Midway through the next set, Red somewhat hesitantly invites up volunteers for the joke contest, the winner of which will receive the other homemade pie. She's rethinking her strategies at this point, because, as she notes, the people here aren't really crowd-oriented, they're just competitive. However, she promised a joke contest, and the crowd's ready to judge it. The audience is hesitant for a minute, and then the first half-drunk bar-goer jumps on stage: one of Red's punk friends.

He steps to the mic and bellows comically: "HEY EVERYBODY!!! HOW DO YOU WHACK OFF A DINOSAUR?????" The crowd shouts back versions of "I DON'T KNOW!!!" and he jumps off stage onto the dance floor, makes a giant circle with both of his arms held out to the side of his body as if wrapped around a massive dinosaur penis, and sprints like that thirty feet down the floor. He reaches the far wall, turns, re-clamps his arms, and gleefully sprints all the way back as everyone claps and laughs. Someone behind me comments loudly, "Total dino-phallocentrism! What about the women dinosaurs—they need to be pleasured too!" as her friends laugh and harangue the joke-teller for being sexist.

The drummer from the first band gets up next, wearing dark glasses: "What's Michelle Obama's favorite vegetable?" "I DON'T KNOW!!" Says the crowd.

"Barackoli!!"

The crowd appreciates this too.

As soon as he's done, a woman in her early 20s jumps on stage, obviously drunk, dressed in filthy black clothes, head shaved at sides and dreads on top, open sores all over her legs. She begins a joke about a cucumber, a dick, and a pickle, who are sitting in a bar together, enjoying a drink while comparing their respective trials and hardships. The joke

is going pretty well, but about halfway through, she seems to realize she's telling a joke about a dick to a bar full of strangers. Her consternation is charming, but she sucks it up and brings down the house with her punchline. When she finishes, she mentions that she wants to fight sexism every day, so she's not sure it's okay to tell a dick joke, but that she was drunk so she did it anyway. The crowd loves it, and awards her the pie by applause level at the end. She shares it with everyone around.

As I describe in the chapter on punk praxis, the overt political focus on making 'art' or performance in general the province of everyone rather than that of elite specialists, echoes through the everyday lives of punks in various ways. For Red, it was part of her inspiration to start a band with no musical experience or training besides singing along to records; it also informed her side job as a graphic artist. It was the explicit logic behind the community art space her roommates ran, which I describe more explicitly in the chapter below on punk exchange practices. Most evidently here, in the context of Country Night, the moments at which Red got on stage and in effect asked the audience to break frame—to participate in the night as active co-creators of a musical and social experience, rather than as passive audience members—were marked by a lot of hesitation. In fact, in at least the two most obvious moments, that of the cake walk and the joke contest, the majority of participants were her friends or acquaintances from the punk scene. This fact was significant primarily for the way that it pointed to the way that punk praxis in fact suggested alternate ways of conceptualizing sociality at a place like the Night Owl, which people could in fact operationalize. For the majority of the other attendees, however, the idea that they should stand in as active participants was clearly foreign and uncomfortable—in fact, the only other participatory role, dancing, was for

the majority of attendees something they attempted following a sort of recognizable classroom-style instruction for the beginners; or as part of their own expert performance practice for the swing dancers. In this respect, it was clear that Red's attempt to introduce some of the practices that made Allen's a distinct kind of social encounter were successful only insofar as her punk friends went along with the spirit of the evening. By and large, however, it was very clear that the things she was asking the audience to do entailed a significant revisioning of the social logic of the evening that most people in the audience weren't equipped or ready to perform. In effect, the middle-class crowd simply approached the event through a very different set of cultural logics, which presumed different kinds of social actors, different ethical obligations, and different understandings of the nature of a musical performance.

Tellingly, even those activities that Red based explicitly on the model that Allen's provided—the cake walk and the joke contest—were reimagined either before or during the evening as competitive events, wherein Red herself provided the ‘donation’ and where the audience-performer banter that happened spontaneously at Allen's (see, for instance, the exchange between Pat and the musician on stage) was approximated through a solicited joke contest that was judged competitively. In the case of the cake walk, not only was it stripped of the explicit sense it had at Allen's of something that people did at least in part as a mutual obligation to fund the place; it also ended up as a hyper-competitive spectacle in which the winner took all the spoils. While it would be unwise to overload these alterations with symbolic meaning, it was striking during the evening to see the ways that the *forms* of the events—cakewalks, joking, dancing—more or less approximated their working-class equivalents at Allen's, the actual social logic

underlying the way the events unfolded underwent a profound, significant, and consistent transformation. That transformation, in large part, resulted in a consistent reimaging of formulas that at Allen's were highly social and predicated on the imagining of social bonds between a coherent whole unfolding over long durations of time and without explicit payback. Rather, the events were reimaged as spaces where individuals competed against one another for prizes, or, as in dancing, where they learned a specific skill through classroom instruction (for the newcomers) or performed a kind of virtuosic self-expression (for the experienced swing dancers); in either case, the dancing was of course generally characterized by little bubbles of atomistic striving as couples largely stayed together rather than circulating around. Much like with the music, which was largely about the performative production of sounds, the focus was on the actual skill of dancing—the cultivated talent of rhythmic and artistic movement—than on the social encounter that dancing (or music) could theoretically enable and to some extent depended on. In other words, not unlike a number of other instances where middle-class people consciously sought to imitate working-class practices, the letter of the law was preserved while the spirit was not.

These minor reimaginings of specific events, however, were perhaps entirely predictable or at least relatively unsurprising manifestations of a broader cultural logic that stood at odds with the prevailing codes at Allen's. It is worth mentioning here that the idea of approaching a more-or-less standard night at a middle-class music venue in the American south through an ethnographic lens is really only interesting in a comparative framework. In other words, just as nothing notable in the sense of out-of-the-ordinary often happened at Allen's to the patrons there, nothing particularly notable

happened on that first Country Night at the Night Owl. The bands were good, people hung out at tables with their friends, people met new people at the bar, people danced. It was a little odd, but not that odd, to have some contests. In general, though, it was a standard night: any given audience member paid six bucks at the door as an expected part of purchasing the possibility of social interaction, entered expecting to get their money's worth through a musical show, expected to buy drinks and perhaps food, and mostly assumed that they would hang out with their group of friends in the general proximity of other groups of friends. All of this happened. For the bands, the evening was predicated on the sense that they would occupy the role of performer, and would be compensated for the task; this also happened (although at a level below, of course, what the musicians would have found ideal). In many ways, it was like countless other bar gigs that we as a band played in Asheville, which is to say that it was predictably structured by considerations of buying and selling: the venue buying the band's time and fan base, and selling an experience and beer to the audience; the audience buying the space within an event at which they could be around other people as well as the enjoyment of listening to live music; the band selling a few hours of immediate labor and countless hours of adjacent labor for decent pay and minor celebrity. Ideally, for all parties, the exchange would be a fair one, with a satisfying evening for patrons, an enjoyable and compensated night playing for the band, and a profitable evening for the establishment. In other words, everyone would get 'their money's worth.' Furthermore, in an ideal encounter, all obligations would be satisfied in the immediate short term through quid pro quo exchange that left no debts outstanding (no unpaid bands, no unpaid bar tabs, no declined credit cards, no sets of music that don't last long enough, no dissatisfied customers, no

empty bars). In other words, the event relies on and creates an ethic of sociality in which immediately-satisfied quid pro quo exchange—both of money and of social obligations—is the operant logic, and autonomous, debt-free individuals the default social actor.

However, in another sense, it was a night with social logics and expectations so radically different from the scene at Allen's as to be whiplash-inducing, a fact that was proven repeatedly on evenings when we would play an early set at Allen's and say quick goodbyes before rushing off to a bar gig in downtown Asheville. The transition from the atmosphere at Allen's to the tasks of load-in and set-up at a bar: dealing with the underpaid sound guy, the surly bartender who can't be bothered to give the band their promised free drinks, the talent buyer who is always looking for an angle to pay less than promised; the manager who wants another set for free; the swing dancers who demand that the band move tables out of the way so they can perform for the crowd in front of the stage; the often-indifferent and drunk crowd that may treat a band like employees, or, even worse from the band's perspective, simply ignore them because they can, because they paid good money to be there and have the right to interact or ignore as they see fit. These nights often resulted in dejection for the band, as we moved from a warm and welcoming space where we were known and appreciated, to one where a feeling of alienation was common.

On the other hand, the benefits of middle-class social logics were also apparent at times: the easy negotiation of clear expectations, the preservation of the individual right to leave or not show up without major repercussions (barring the band, of course); the minor thrill for the local band as temporary groupies congregate around temporary celebrities after the bar set; the freedom from obligation and entanglement after the fact.

These differences mark the boundary between a social world that prioritizes mutual obligations and the mutual recognition of personhood (and all the messy entanglement that implies), and one that prioritizes an autonomous self that is relatively free of attachments and obligations to others, or can manage those obligations politely through money (and all the atomistic alienation that implies). Likewise, middle-class culture relies on an interactional ethics that tends to prioritize a polite deference to the expected self-interest of other selves. This logic is at work in conversational norms, for instance, that prioritize direct, instrumentalized communication which quickly and efficiently accomplishes its purpose and frees each party to proceed. Indeed, one significant critique launched by middle-class people towards working-class people in general in musical spaces was their disrespectful circumlocution, and insistence on conversational formulas that wasted a lot of time talking around the point. For many middle-class people, it is simply a deontological given that respecting another person partly means ‘respecting their time’ by not burdening them with unwanted and unnecessary communication. As these chapters show, both approaches have their own drawbacks and benefits, but more importantly, they each evidence a specific and considered ethical outlook on personhood.

## 2.4: Crooked Wood

In this section, I describe a show at a typical punk house concert, an organizational format common to many punk co-op houses in which an informal performance area is essentially always available for traveling musicians to schedule shows. Usually, the promotion of such shows is accomplished through an established network of friends in the punk community who maintain ties through social media and rely on house concerts to connect in person in the context of the migratory and unpredictable nature of punk life. As I show, the uneasy collision of class backgrounds in the punk scene was mirrored by a set of tensions and contradictions inherent to punk spaces, which were simultaneously often highly intentional cooperative houses lived in by middle-class punks, and spaces where physical abjection and a devil-may-care approach to bodies and possessions reigned. Not unlike at Allen's, punks struggled to negotiate an ideological stance which deplored capitalist commodity exchange as a structuring social logic, and at the same time reconcile that with the economics of maintaining a community space, which demanded community monetary input.

Additionally, punk co-ops and performance spaces were characterized, as I show below, by a relative lack of reverence for performers, or by the explicit sense that the audience was itself also part of the performance. They were also, to an extent unmatched in any other social space, characterized by a complete respect for the autonomy of individual action and initiative; in this sense, punk spaces had a live-and-let-live ethic that was remarkable for the way that it managed to coexist with an explicit focus on organizing people to do things in collectives. This tension—between collective solidarity and individual autonomy—tended to complicate and bedevil social relationships in punk

world in an interesting and noteworthy way. However, it is also worth underlining the relatively unique ways that punks had devised of maintaining and structuring spaces for public sociality.

The major difference between both of the previous spaces I describe and the majority of the punk spaces was quite simple: punks were working in the realm of theory and praxis. That is to say, things like exchange practices weren't transparent and normative, but were the subject of explicit theorization. This is not to claim that the social practices at Allen's weren't reflexive—conscious, in various ways, of their effects, their norms, and particularly of their ethical opposition towards the main 'other,' middle-class ethics of sociality. Likewise, in some ways, the ethics of sociality in practice at a downtown venue were also reflexive in particular ways, although the ethical 'other' was a much more vaguely-defined or imagined set of boogeymen, some drawing on a culture-of-poverty set of ideas about disdained obligations or unpaid debts, some drawing on an imagined working-class kind of political retrogression. In this sense, the ethics of sociality at the Night Owl were self-consciously 'liberal,' friendly, and efficient about obligations. However, at both of these spaces, both the patrons/regulars and owners/MCs were working, in effect, with a set of normative cultural ethics that described both explicit social roles and ways of managing the dilemmas of autonomy vs. organization, selfness vs. groupness, obligation vs. freedom. For instance, as I show in later chapters, working class cultural codes provided Allen a role he could jokingly inhabit as the boss, as it were, of his space—free to cajole, harangue, jokingly compel, and otherwise manage people's behavior in a way that was acceptable as a not-too-overt imposition on personal autonomy. Likewise, at the Night Owl, other sets of codes, including municipal codes,

legal codes, and established codes of bar-going and music-listening provided an agreed-upon framework for realizing the evening's affairs. Punks, as I show below, were going for something more *sui generis*, which had its advantages and perils. Operating from a long-established critique of capitalist exchange, exploitation, and a general hatred of hierarchy, they were, in effect, making it up as they went along.

### **Punk House Shows**

I begin this chapter with a description of a house show featuring country music, an occurrence that was more common at punk house shows than I expected. Not unlike old-time, however, the overriding themes of heartache, hardship, and abjection present in much of the country canon tended to fit fairly well with punk attitudes; likewise, their political sympathies towards working-class people, as well as the mixed class backgrounds of the punk scene, made country a natural fit. Typically, even punks who were dedicated listeners of actual punk music as a genre were able to appreciate classic country, although they were rarely familiar with it except as one of the few genres of music whose political ethos they appreciated.

*Crooked by Nature:* Midsummer, we get word through the grapevine that a good friend from Tennessee is playing a country set at an upcoming house show at a local punk venue. She's on a three-week summer tour of the southeast, and has strung together a series of house concerts up and down the coast that are designed to earn her enough gas money to coax her dilapidated old Buick on to the next city. Excited to see her, I go with a friend to the co-op house that hosts these regular events. We're greeted by a pall of bitter smoke in the street, and are immediately concerned that the house is on fire, but

there are no signs of panic. However, neither are there any signs of life at the house where the show allegedly takes place. On a dark street in a marginally safe area of town, we're a little concerned, but we tentatively knock on the door. It bursts open and two thin pit bulls rush out in an excited frenzy, jumping all over us. One is wearing a black bandanna, and we know we're at the right place. A girl with a half-shaved head emerges halfway, and we tell her we're looking for our friend Kristen, who's playing the show. She says, immediately, "Downstairs! Basement! Where the bar is!" and disappears back into the house. Unsure, we enter and proceed through the house alone—a place very similar to Red's house, with political posters everywhere and so on, but much nicer—copper cookware, tasteful decorations, nice furniture, the feel of an upscale kind of college dwelling inhabited by leftists. We find the stairs at the back of the kitchen and walk down three flights of unlit unfinished basement stairs, emerging into a dimly lit and large space thirty feet below the large upstairs living room. We're immediately greeted by a looming cadre of dreadlocked punk guys in black, who politely nod hello and resume an ongoing conversation about gender and capitalism. The basement is a cavernous, dank space, with incredibly tall ceilings, exposed fiberglass insulation falling down, and little light. The grimy concrete floor is coated with ancient dust from an old brick coal chute, which leads to an ancient looking furnace labeled American Standard.

In one corner is a makeshift bar selling 2 dollar drafts of home-brewed beer, and 2 dollar shots of Old Crow—a cheap and wretched bourbon. The bartender is another dreadlocked guy in black. "It's bad but it's cheap!" says the sign on the front of the raw plywood that serves as the bar. On the other side of the stairwell is a plywood stage with a tattered couch against the wall, facing and the only piece of drywall in the place, which

reads, “Thank a thief, compliment a crook, dote on a drug dealer” and below “write on drywall”. There is a giant wooden plank above with “The Crooked Wood”—the official name of the house’s performance space—spelled out with a mixture of old rusty railroad spikes and bike parts to very cool effect. The name is a riff on the Kant quote (“Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made”), and obliquely references both Berlin’s book by the same name and the lefty blog that a lot of committed anarchists glance at from time to time. But more to the point, it’s a commentary on the spirit of the place, and it captures an abiding truth about the punk scene: everyone’s a little crooked. Not in the sense of dishonest, but rather in the sense of flawed, damaged, imperfect in various ways—some intentionally abject, some the product of hard lives and bad breaks. Most importantly, though, it pays homage to an overriding theme of punk life: shit is hard, and the world results in broken people. Places like this, though, celebrate the attempt to make something beautiful—but dirty, patched together, homemade, last-minute, out of crooked timber. As Red put it to me, when I asked her the common denominator of the punk scene:

Well, it kind of seems like it’s damage, to tell you the truth. It was a lot of damaged people, who had a lot of crazy shit happen to them, and they lost faith in the regular way of doing things, cause they got hurt pretty bad or something, so they needed a place where they felt safe or where they felt like they had other people who understood that the way things were working wasn’t right. I feel like that’s where a lot of the fight comes from too. And that’s why, I think, there’s a lot of substance abuse and things like that too: It also creates a space where, if people choose to, they can avoid all kinds of things and do whatever they want, and not have consequences in some ways.

Outside the basement, ten or fifteen people are milling about around a firepit—the source of the rank smoke billowing up into the street. They’re burning old plywood

and dimensional lumber, all of it treated with the mix of preservatives, anti-fungals, and formaldehyde glue that gives it a sickly-sweet smell when new and a bitter, acrid smell when burning. No one cares and people stand around in the smoke. Three or four out-of-control mutts, all of them looking vaguely pit bull-ish, careen around the fire, getting into mock fights and knocking into people. Everyone looks on with bemusement or ignores them. Punk wear is the style: black, dirty, stained, ripped, big work boots, patches and zippers, half-shaved heads, smells. Many of the attendees are rank to the point of disgusting, skin brown with dirt and arms and legs covered with scabs and sores—telltale signs of hoboing and the difficulties of keeping clean and healthy while hitching rides on freight trains and strangers' cars. Many of the people here tonight are either passing through town or stopping over to rest or save up some money while couch-surfing. A wildly tattooed girl with a number of face piercings walks out into the crowd and blows a giant snot rocket on her way to the fire, which accidentally lands directly on a careening dog's head—everyone laughs and she corrals the dog and wipes it off with her sweatshirt, which sports a large white patch sewn on the back that says in tall block letters: "punks for Pits" (bulls, that is), and below, "Punish the deed, not the breed". A guy walks ten feet away from the fire and pisses directly against the side of the house. Standing by the fire, I'm greeted by a pungent and rich smell of old body odor when the wind blows one direction, and acrid smoke when it shifts.

Striking up a conversation with a guy named Alex from LA, I ask where he's from and he says: 'I've been traveling for five years or so—cars, trains, whatever. Lived in Missoula for a while, Baton Rouge, Golden Colorado, and now Asheville for a year.' I ask, "You staying?" and he replies, "Just signed a lease for six more months, so I guess

so! That's as long as I can stand. I like to travel around and play music. I keep to the borders of states—you don't want to travel across states if you can help it.” I ask why and he explains that it has to do with jurisdictions and warrants. He says, “I got lots of warrants out in various states—vagrancy mostly, sometimes trespassing. If you jump the state line, they can't get you usually! Or they won't take the trouble. Gotta travel smart.” Reinforcing the point, on the other side of the fire, the tattooed girl loudly tells a story about being harassed by border guards and not let into Canada.

Finally we find Kristen, who is wandering back towards the fire from an adjoining yard. She runs up and gives us both a hug, and then apologizes: “Damn, I've been pissing in the bushes for three hours. I'm already drunk and my panties smell like piss, sorry about that! No way I'm getting laid tonight, I smell like a pissy baby. Unless I find someone with a piss fetish! That could be perfect: ‘Damn, girl, you smell *gooooood*.’” I tell her I'll keep my eye out.

The crowd gets a little restless after an hour or so, and there's a sense that music should be played, but no one is officially in charge. Finally, a band takes the stage spontaneously, and someone shouts at the fire crowd to get inside. The stage is a tiny platform shoved under a bend in the staircase, with barely room for the five-piece band who starts their set. There's no amplification, so they have to play loud, and the guitarist in particular really lays into his acoustic, making the strings rattle and buzz. The lead singer is a burly, hairy guy, and he plays foursquare rhythm and sings a classic blues--‘Mama Don't ‘low’-- in a Tom Waits growl while around him, a banjo player, an accordionist, an atmospheric saw player and another rhythm guitarist bang away. Everyone on stage is mostly drunk and playing at top volume, and the sound is a

cacophony that isn't doing it for the crowd. They mercifully stop after three songs when everyone casually wanders outside, one by one, back to the fire pit. No one even bothers to pass around the beat-up cut-off milk jug with 'BAND' written on it.

Kristen, watching from the corner, takes the stage quickly, as the evening is already getting late. She's dressed in a jean jacket, polka dot dress, and stout work boots, her attire a clear nod to the women country singers she idolizes, and part of a professional stage presence that she takes very seriously as a touring musician. On stage, Kristen introduces herself and reminds the audience that their donations are all that is going to fund her next tank of gas, which she needs to get her all the way to Athens, Georgia, where the next punk house show is. She immediately proceeds to belt out three classic country standards in quick succession, mostly from the repertoire of Loretta Lynn, while accompanying herself on acoustic rhythm guitar. At particularly insistent parts or emotional climaxes, she stomps her booted feet in rhythm. She then follows it with one she wrote herself called "When I'm Feeling Weak I Pour Myself a Strong Drink."

Although everyone is enjoying her music, no one is particularly familiar with the country canon, so her original song gets the most applause simply by virtue of being an original. She introduces her fifth song as another original song about growing up working-class outside a small town in East Tennessee. Everyone quiets down some and pays attention. Kristen has a huge voice—she's singing loud enough to dominate a giant basement with forty or more people with just her voice and a guitar, but the effort and the strain is apparent: she's sung herself to raspiness in three songs from sheer volume. She has a naturally brassy voice and she ornaments her singing heavily with frequent cry breaks—brief, marked shifts from a chest to head vocal register, usually from a descending high

note, which are part of standard country ornamentation, but are more typically employed by male singers due to the greater difference between vocal registers characteristic of male voices. Kristen, however, has mastered the technique and uses it to good effect.

Her biographic song tells the story of being on food stamps, of the shame of being at the grocery store with no money, of wanting to ‘be with men’ at the age of ten. She sings about her absent father, her mother drinking with other women and of walking the railroad tracks for fun. It’s not an upbeat song, but it gets by far the loudest applause of the night: the audience respects her willingness to share and chronicle her pain, her flaws, and her desires in an unashamed and straightforward way. It’s blood from the vein, as it were, pointing to the crooked ways that led Kristen to the punk scene. Alex gets up and says: “Kristen is traveling around playing music for people, and you’re here tonight to listen to music—it’s a symbiotic relationship! Help her get on down the road to the next show, so the next crowd can enjoy her singing!” He passes around the milk jug and everyone puts in a dollar or two, happy to help prolong her tour. Kristen, happy with the warm reception, thanks the crowd, sings one more about lost love that she wrote, and exits stage left, her voice almost gone from the effort of singing unamplified.

As the next act starts setting up, walking around on stage, the guy standing in front of me—filthy dirty and covered with tats, slides to the floor, his head between his knees. One tattoo the length of his forearm says “not dead yet—lone wolf”. Eventually, Lone Wolf ends up lying flat on his back, and then curls up on his side in the filth, spilled beer, and trash of the floor, and goes to sleep right in front of the stage. There are some amused chuckles but no one minds. The mood of the place is recognizable: no one is too friendly, no one is suspiciously happy. Everyone has a studied world-weariness and

cynicism, and no one's too outgoing or inquisitive about others; conversely, no one is getting up in other people's business or telling them what to do: it's a live and let live scene. No one has too much energy, no one talks politics, and everyone is guzzling PBR. People are friendly, but reserved. On the other hand, everyone is welcoming, no one is policing anyone, and everyone is there with the more or less explicit idea that they want to support Kristen and her fellow artists as they do their thing.

The next act, Jimmy, is a dedicated local troubadour known for his pedantic country purism, and he takes the stage drunk and high, trying to find the strings on his guitar and looking at his fingers to remember chord shapes. Jimmy is a tall, lanky guy in a snap button shirt, bolo tie, and jeans and boots. He plays a nice Martin d-18 in a vintage blue case that has a sticker that says "I did time with David Allen Coe." Sure enough it turns out he did—in what capacity we don't know, but he opens by noting that he played in Coe's band, and sings an original song excoriating Coe for dropping lots of names but never Jamie's, despite the fact that Coe sings some of Jamie's original songs. Jimmy ends the song and jokingly laments that he's just not country enough. He runs through some other numbers, giving folkloristic histories of obscure country and western songs, and of the hobo terms they reference. One describes the "Chessy, coming around a curve," and he gives a charming description of how a particular railroad used a cute Cheshire cat to advertise how comfortable a ride it was—as in, the cat was happy and you would be too. So hobos took to calling the train a Chessy, he says. 'Look out Red, here comes the Chessy—around a curve,' goes the song, in an imagined conversation between two hobos about to jump a train for its alleged comfort. His stage banter is good and he interrupts almost every song in the middle with "shit and fuck, goddam, I forgot the

lyrics! What's the next verse? This is what happens when you're an amateur!" before eventually remembering the next verse or simply ending the song half-done. After five songs he looks at the audience and says, "have I played enough now?" and everyone says, "No!" So he describes for a while how he hoboed around for five years or more, riding the rails and singing songs. He had a traveling guitar, he says, and he'd write in big duct tape letters on the back of it, "THANKS," and flip it over to face the crowd whenever he was done busking or when someone made a donation. He notes, chuckling, "Later, I saw a friend who wrote "SORRY" on the back of his cause he was so bad. He'd show that to the crowd after every song." Ten minutes of amusing commentary later, he has repeatedly criticized the chair he's sitting in for being inauthentic despite the fact that it's broken and listing to the left. Regardless, he's depressed to be sitting in a chair and not on a bucket: "I'm not a hobo anymore, so I don't sit on a bucket anymore. But I wish I had a bucket here, this chair sucks". Finally, despite his stage chops, his bass player gets annoyed with all the chatter and walks off to stand around the fire. He stares after her and then realizes both that he's too drunk to play anymore, and that most of the crowd is outside anyway. He calls it a night, and wanders over to Alex to divide up the donations with Kristen, who is also staggering drunk at this point. Alex gets up on stage and announces that everyone should come out in two nights for a square dance at a local anarchist community art space called Circus Tent.

*Circus Tent:* Circus Tent is a converted mechanic's garage in a former industrial area of the city, down by the river with the railroad running through the back lot. Initially set up by three friends, it's a rental space that they use or loan out for a variety of purposes: dances, music, comedy nights, burlesque shows, travelling mini-circuses,

activist forums, and benefit shows for a variety of causes. In a way, it's the more-organized version of Crooked Wood, but many of the principles are the same—the casual shows, the feeling that no one's in charge and that no one should be in charge; the self-organized nature of the shows and classes there. As an added bonus, the rental also came with the previous owner's failed bar's liquor license, a fact that made the former music venue a very attractive place for music and dances and saved the trouble of worrying about a speakeasy like Crooked Wood had. The space itself was a cavernous one-room affair, with a high ceiling and various lights, decorations, and circus equipment hanging from the exposed rafters. The large wooden dance that comprised the main space faced a low stage at the back of the hall, with random scattered chairs and tables and a sound booth with a giant mixing board facing the stage. The bar was adjacent to the door: a slapdash counter with two taps, it was occasionally possible to get the volunteer bartender to pour a beer when she wasn't out dancing.

For a while, Little Red and the Hots were a regular band for country shows at the Circus Tent; these tended to happen once a month and attracted a diverse crowd. For the most part, the regulars at the venue were from the punk scene. However, because the country nights also tended to feature square dancing, it drew an interesting mix of old-time purists and local dancers simply out to try square dancing or two-stepping. Depending on the wildness of the night, however, non-punks didn't necessarily stay long unless they were already familiar with the place. One night, Red booked us for a shared bill with a group of traveling players called the Rural Academy Puppet Show. This turns out to be a bunch of punk kids who were traveling around the state in a horse-drawn wagon, doing vaudeville performances and puppet shows. The highlight of their set is the

projection of a Buster Keaton short—a silent film they project against a white sheet draped on the side of their wagon, parked out in the back lot with some rows of chairs facing. The horses, however, have been parked in a friend's back yard for the afternoon due to the noise and commotion. To go with the film, they've organized themselves into a 12 piece brass band, and one of them has written a score that goes with the silent film. It's a little ragged, but the musicians all play with infectious joy, and the overall effect is highly entertaining. The second the film fades to black and the band plays the last note, a freight train barrels by with a deafening roar on the track thirty feet away, and everyone cheers at the great timing. The traveling troop wanders over to man a table selling anti-capitalist patches for your black carharrts and various pamphlets and radical organizing tracts; they're trying to fund the next leg of their trip up to a nearby mountain town and they ask everyone to help support their organizing/performing by buying something.

In a bit of incongruous mixing not uncommon to Circus Tent (where we occasionally played sets of straight-ahead country music after punk burlesque shows), next up is Little Red, a honky-tonk band to follow up some silent film; later that night, there'll be a square dance played by a local fiddler. Playing a country show like this at an anarchist community center isn't completely like Allen's, and it isn't completely like the Night Owl. For this show, the owners and Red have agreed that they'll charge money the way they normally do for dances—they put out a donation station and encourage everyone to put in 50 cents per dance. But of course, no one is monitoring or enforcing, and people tend to contribute as they please—sometimes in wads of dollar bills, sometimes with pocket change. The bar has agreed to chip in 75 bucks for all the bands to split. Onstage, Red plays all of her original songs, many of which deal with heartbreak

and hardship, and some of which assert her independence and worth. The crowd loves her, and they clap heartily for every song. The dance floor is filled with couples careening around—no one knows how to partner-dance, and there's been no lesson, but everyone just makes it up as they go along. Sometimes a large group will form and grasp hands in a circle, spinning each other around until everyone is dizzy; other times someone leads a chain of people through the dancers, encircling and snaring people into an ad hoc conga line where the rotating leaders passes down ridiculous moves that everyone behind has to imitate. On the peripheries, various couples enthusiastically fling each other about in a bombastic imitation of swing dancing; occasionally someone will go flying off into the dance floor from the sheer centrifugal force and crash into other dancers.

At the end of the night, the sound guy sweeps and gives each band and the traveling troop 32 bucks to share amongst themselves; but no one really minds—making money obviously isn't the point of the place.

### **Theorizing Solidarity and Obligation**

Not unlike Crooked Wood, Circus Tent is a confused place, marked by the conflicting class tastes (microbrews on tap, canned seltzer water in the fridge, PBR in the cooler) and bodily abjection (piss-covered bathroom, graffiti, unwashed and ragged crowd) so common to the punk scene. The physical structure of Crooked Wood struck me as an apt metaphor: a well-appointed upstairs with all the accoutrements of healthy middle-class living (nice cookware, health food and supplements in the pantry, novels on the bookshelf), on top of a dilapidated and completely untended basement space filled

with coal dust and spilled cheap beer. The dichotomy was suggestive to me of the conflicted loyalties of the punk scene: one characterized by an educated and middle-class critique of capitalism, which often lead people to consciously and intentionally reject and transgress their middle-class values through cultivated dirt, injury, and ‘body-slumming’ in run-down places. This dynamic coexisted, however, with punk kids from poor backgrounds, who themselves had found in punk praxis a lifeline to a sense of meaning and political agency, and who found the abjection tolerable but unfortunate. As I mention in the chapter introducing punk history and praxis, the social codes that prevailed at punk shows, houses, co-ops, and in bands were a curious mixture of theorized solidarity, self-interested autonomous individualism, extreme tolerance of difference, suspicion of outsiders, and a complete disregard for wage labor, accumulation, and general care-taking of selves and possessions. These attitudes were suggestive of both a conscious attempt on the part of punks to imitate working-class ways, for better and for worse, and of their own political beliefs, which ironically relied on middle-class notions of intellectual critique to frame a theorized rejection of middle-class cultural codes. This conflict—a reliance on class-specific cultural logics like intellectual critique and theory/praxis, aimed at expounding alternatives to the same cultural logics that gave rise to them, resulted in numerous contradictions for punks. However, as above, contradictions were not deal-breakers—after all, when you start with crooked wood, you’re gonna make some mistakes.

Allen’s, the Night Owl, and the Crooked Wood/Circus Tent as distinct spaces all had particular approaches to the framing issue of the political economy of public social space, vs. cultural ethics of sociality. I have suggested that this collision was resolved in

particular ways and according to differing moral stances: at Allen's, the strategy relied on a strong sense of community ownership aided by an ethical stance privileging unspecified and temporally indeterminate obligations—the kind of obligations that imply an ongoing relationship of reciprocity in which accounts can never be fully squared because exchanges are not of like kind. On the other hand, middle-class social spaces and practices relied on exchanges which were typically time-limited, satisfied short-term reciprocal obligations, and presumed a logic of market exchange in which items exchanged were of like or comparable value between autonomous and independent people. As I suggest above, and as I mention in the chapter introducing punks more generally, the punk response was easier to articulate: they mostly wanted to remove money from the situation entirely. This attitude, of course, was not limited to house shows but was much more broadly theorized, and included a large and imaginative range of tactics, which I mention in more detail in the introductory punk chapter, designed to avoid any participation in a wage economy, including things like dumpster diving, collective living, ‘squatting’ in abandoned buildings, creative re-use and repurposing, theft, and so on.

“Gift economies” and their imagined consonant form of exchange —barter—were one conspicuous instance in which punks relied on a theorized notion of anti-capitalist social practices. With varying degrees of theoretical literacy, punks drew on theorized cultural forms to enact ways of mediating exchange that avoided cash economies (I mention one below, the Really Really Free Market; there were many others, including Food Not Bombs, Skills Shares, collective living situations, and so on). Drawing at times explicitly on Mauss’ foundational text, many punks imagined a utopic ideal wherein

people simply and mutually ‘gave’ each other the things they needed to live, or that an idealized form of barter would serve to distance exchange from more politically-problematic forms of compensation (as Graeber notes, an ironic affinity with historians of debt and capital, who uniformly imagine ‘barter’ to be the predecessor to cash in economies that relied on artisanal production (2011)). For punks, the idea of barter often applied, in fact, to artisanally-produced things like shoes, knives, instruments, or other handicrafts (often a source of income for artistically-inclined punks). It also applied to the exchange of skilled services, like flooring, roofing, instrument lessons, graphic design, and so on. In certain situations, it could order the exchange of labor for accommodations, work for food, or other arrangements, but typically, with the exception of house-sitting or caretaking, necessities like food and shelter were procured in other ways. However, punks of course had needs that couldn’t be met through these tactics, and wage work was inevitable for most at times.

Within punk communities, however, the socially prestigious form of exchange was ‘barter.’ This played out in multiple ways. One social form that circulates relatively widely in the US is something called a “Really Really Free Market.” This humorous repurposing of free market discourse invokes a space which people collectively designate as not bound by the rules of capitalist exchange. In effect, everyone is encouraged to bring things they don’t want or don’t need, or things they’d like to barter (like music lessons, etc), which are to be given away with zero return obligation. In return, they are free to circulate through the crowd, claiming items or services they themselves would find useful. In effect, it relies on a sense of obligation to a collective whole—a ‘community’—rather than to specific individuals, such that people don’t simply come

empty-handed and take what they want, but instead bring a certain amount of stuff or services, and leave with a roughly equivalent amount.

This particular deferral of ethical obligation—from specific obligations to individuals to a broader sense of obligation to an abstract, imagined, diffuse ‘community,’ was characteristic of punk ethics of sociality more broadly. The way, for instance, that Alex solicited money for Kristen from the crowd at the Crooked Wood was telling: instead of invoking an obligation to *her* in particular—an obligation that would mark the music-making and listening of the evening as a distasteful kind of quid pro quo exchange—he instead re-imagined the opportunity to donate money to her as an obligation to her *next* audience: “help her get down the road so the next audience can enjoy her music!” Like the Really Free Market, this obligation was to an imagined group of people with shared political sensibilities in some other place, rather than to Kristen herself. There are multiple reasons for this, it would appear to me. First, punks are notoriously and wildly transitory; sustaining ongoing and indeterminate personal obligations is in effect often impossible for given individuals. Secondly, given the lack of owned infrastructure in general in the punk scene, there is usually little chance to contribute ‘communally’ to any kind of owned space or structure, since most everything is borrowed, rented, or appropriated. Re-imagining obligations as towards a broad, de-spatialized punk community—the ‘pay it forward’ ethic that Alex invoked—is an elegant solution that inflected not only Crooked Wood, but also structured touring life on the road as a band for Red and the Hots, as I show below. As Jamie put it to a bandmate, “The culture Red and I come out of, we really try to support the travelling musicians.”

They're on the road and they have to get down the road, so we give them most of the take."

Red was widely known as a particularly generous person, and her shared house was home to a wide and motley assortment of travelers. Punk bands with a broken-down vehicle, people passing through on various errands, castaways stranded in Asheville for a few days or even weeks: people just seemed to find their way to her house, and she would take care of them, loan them her car, and cook them delicious vegetarian pho. She was particularly noted for taking in bands on tour, and always enjoyed the all-night music that inevitably accompanied—indeed, was expected of—a band who would pass through and stay. On the road during tours, she expected and freely solicited such treatment from relative strangers, people she had never seen before and was unlikely to see again. As such, we spent many nights on the couches and floors of strangers, sleeping for a few hours after playing music most of the night, and often waking to a huge breakfast at the hands of a new friend. After these nights, Red felt no particular obligation—in her view, these people, potential touring musicians themselves or at the very least often punk friends or friends of friends, were involved in a generalized relationship of obligation to ‘punks’ broadly construed, as was she. They were, in effect, paying it forward to the next band who would stay at Red’s house. As Red explained it,

That’s something that I did really love about the punk scene. I mean, I rode trains for pretty much straight for five years. And I *always* had a place to stay, everywhere across the country. And even when we went to Europe, we always had a place to stay. We never stayed in hotels, we just stayed with people who had never met us, and just instantly took us into their house.

I was never in any punk bands, but I ran around with a lot of em, and that’s totally how it was, everybody just took care of each other, and it wasn’t about the money, it was just making sure everybody was able to

get to the next place. That was something that attracted me to it, when I started traveling.

Sometimes, however, barter got more personal and long-term. Early one spring, a friend of a friend of a friend showed up on Red's doorstep: a young woman, Sarah, who seemed lost or at least wayward. Red immediately took her in, and she quickly was involved in the day-to-day life of the house. She borrowed Red's bike to get around, in return doing dishes every night. She got daily fiddle lessons from Jamie, in return doing trim work on his cabin, mulching the path up the hill, oiling his floor with tongue oil, and so on. When we went on tour, Sarah stayed in Jamie's house, and eventually joined a local band after sufficient fiddle lessons. However, interpersonal barter arrangements like this one were always conducted with the understanding that they were short-term and limited, and as such, ideally involved the exchange of unlike things of equal value. As I detail further in the conclusion "Defining Community," punk practices were, like this example, often hybrid affairs, partaking of social logics native to middle-class people but modified through theory to resemble in form aspects of working-class practice.

# Chapter 3: Socio-Temporal Ethics

## 3.1: Introduction: Present Persons, Future Selves

This chapter extends the idea of classed cultural ethics of relationality by presenting data which suggest differing orientations to what a social subject ideally looks like or indeed ‘is.’ In other words, I suggest the outlines of differing ontologies of the relational human being: baseline understandings from which cultural ethics of relationality, like those outlined in the previous chapter, can be understandably articulated and legibly read. In suggesting that class divisions parallel different ontologies of the subject, I draw here primarily on data related to embodiment and self-care, engagements with the material world more generally, and ethics of self-expression and self-cultivation particularly as relating to music. As the neologisms in the title suggest, I understand these engagements as having particular reference to different temporalities.

First though, I offer a brief overview of how I deploy the oppositional terms ‘person’ and ‘self.’ As a very extensive anthropological literature indicates, these terms and the debates they reference—which point to a long disciplinary history of theorizing different conceptions of the nature of the human being in relation to other human beings—get at the heart of important aspects of the anthropological project. Although I reference in passing some of these debates to situate my use of these terms, I do not attempt here a significant literature review or a radical redefinition of these ideas.

“The human being in relation to other human beings:” this awkward phrase should signal first that there is no neutral way to label the referent. Subjects, persons, identities individuals/individuals, monads, selves: these and other terms and a host of

modifiers (possessive, buffered, atomistic, modern, traditional, egalitarian, hierarchical and so on) have been deployed to articulate culturally different versions of the social human, understandings fundamental to how sociality itself would or could possibly unfold in a given space and time, and undeniably frustratingly hard to pin down in even one place and time, let alone in comparative relief. In anthropology, concerns about differing conceptions of persons gained traction in the late-mid-20th century with Dumont's powerful comparison of hierarchical persons in India with egalitarian western individuals (1980), and perhaps culminated in a series of debates structured by comparisons of personhood in Melanesia vs 'the west' (e.g. Strathern 1988). A rich secondary literature critiquing these oppositional comparisons and conclusions followed (see, for instance, Smith 2012). Some of these concerns centered on the troubling comparison of actual ethnographic data with abstract ideas or philosophical ideals (like 'the west'); this critique is one that I believe the intimately comparative data of my fieldsite is particularly well-suited to address (see, again, the introduction section on methodology). Other critiques argued for the internal differentiation of non-western or non-modern persons; finally, there have been calls to recognize the multiple kinds of relationality inherent to every time and place such that theoretical oppositions are impossible to sustain.

Additionally, as I argued earlier in the section on punks and anarchist politics, the divide between individualistic selves vs socially-oriented persons have been read as both a fundamentally structuring aspect of the divide between 'modern' societies and 'traditional' ones, and as a way to imagine or enact alternatives or articulate critiques. In particular, the stark divisions between individuals imagined to inhere in the modern

‘west,’ vs the diffuse and porous boundaries between persons described in various ways in spaces other to the west, have been described as both a symptom of modernity (Touraine 1988), a fiction of theories of modernity, and a fundamental cognitive component of modern or western thought, usually contradicted by actual practice.

Almost inevitably, though, the terms in this ongoing and diffuse debate have centered on a durable opposition: that of humans who imagine themselves as mostly separate and those who imagine themselves more collectively. I do not intend to relitigate that complex debate or to suggest that working-class people are fundamentally collectivist, non-modern ‘internal others’ to a recognizable western individualism. Instead, I will argue that within ways of doing personhood that are more on the individualistic side of the spectrum, there remains the possibility of markedly different ways of ‘doing’ individualism or of situating the individual within social contexts or matrices. In short, ‘the west,’ as does modernity itself, contains multiple ways of doing personhood. One of the most influential facets of social being that western versions of personhood interact with, I argue, is class. This concern—the articulation of class with personhood(s), is something that Kusserow (2004) also addresses ethnographically. Her project of differentiating classed ways of doing individualism is an example that I follow in this chapter, although with different foci and conclusions.

The two terms of art I use here have specific meanings in this argument, which I elaborate below. It is important to note that they are represented here in maximal comparative relief. Nevertheless, I believe these articulations of classed versions of social being capture aspects of the differences that were so striking in my fieldsite; and that

understanding the realities they point to is worth the inelegance of a certain amount of strategic essentialism.

The ‘future self’ describes a social subjectivity that I found broadly correlated with middle-classness. Importantly, the ‘future self’ in my usage doesn’t point to an atomistic, asocial being—instead, it describes an approach to constituting particular kinds of relationality, where norms of sociality are oriented towards the (often difficult) task of allowing multiple people to cultivate and give voice to their interiority and uniqueness in a shared social encounter. This term, in my usage, assumes interactive ‘selves’ that are largely oriented towards interiority and futurity, or to the way that social encounters offer a chance to express or develop aspects of the inward-looking: emotions, feelings, reactions, opinions. Its contours and implications are at some level conscious for middle-class people: is a version of the self that shows up as a point of anxiety within contemporary imaginings of solipsistic and dystopian sociality. The idea of the future self draws on multiple theorists: it is cultivated, made, largely conscious, sometimes even theorized—it is a self whose logic Foucault describes in his work on self-making

(Footnote: Technologies of the Self; e.g. Foucault et al. 1988; Foucault and Rabinow 1998; Taylor and Vintges 2004); it is a self that Goffman recognizes as the native logic of western middle-class people: a self that consciously performs itself in imagined relation to other selves. The future self, significantly, is a self that must be carefully and consciously brought into being. It is a tenuous self, a self that looks towards possible futures as a horizon in which it can be more fully expressed. The social logics of the ‘future self’ recognize and respect the fact that the social needs of the present moment are often subordinated to considerations of the future. Perhaps most fundamentally, *the future*

*self is an understanding of social being which regards self-expression and self-cultivation as explicit deontological goods, regardless of outcome.* This is distinct from ‘self-maximization,’ or ‘possessive individualisms’—both terms that powerfully critique the imagined self of capitalism’s cultural logic, but fail to capture the subtlety of the ethical stances of middle-class personhood. Instead of a focus on accumulating or maximizing economic value in cultural realms, the future self views activities like music, education, physical self-care, artistic expression, and so on as explicit ethical goods not because they necessarily produce economic value, but because they will in the future lead to a fuller, more richly expressed, and more ‘lived-in’ interiority: a more developed ‘self.’ Importantly, to the extent that immediate sociality or social obligations impede the realization of this self, they are often (but of course not always) relatively de-prioritized (one only has to think of the alienating effects of graduate education for an object example). Finally, the future self is almost always imagined to be a ‘unique’ self—not part of recognizable categories, but the product of a transcendent interior journey which results in a social entity that is largely incommensurate with other selves (even when that ascribed uniqueness itself suggests a categorical function at work: I take up this important topic at length in the next chapter).

The ‘present person,’ in contrast, describes a kind of social being that prevailed in working-class spaces. Importantly, I am not arguing here for a ‘collectivist’ or relational model of working-class individualism. As Kusserow (2004), Fox (2004), and Hubbs (2015) argue, ‘differing styles of individualism’ better encapsulates classed social being, than does a facile distinction between individual versus collective selves. Largely

agreeing with this logic, I instead point here to the way that ‘present persons’ differ from future selves in two very important ways: first, in their different temporal orientation; and second, in the sense that working-class individuality is expressed primarily *within and because of* a relational social matrix in which categorical differences between persons are mutually constitutive. Present personhood prioritizes ongoing and dialogic interactions between persons, but views those persons as fundamentally ‘different’ from each other—a comparatively notable focus on categories and roles as they come together at the jagged edges of histories and personalities. Present persons exist in a space where categorical differences (like age, gender, race, talent, looks, and so on) provide fodder for conversation, comparison, interrogation, mutuality, and perhaps most importantly, humor. Present personhood as a social modality demands a fluency in particular kinds of social repair, and a finely attuned sense of the complex ways that the different persons sharing the social space all exist in relation to each other. It is a space where pithy exchanges which encapsulate truths about the relationality of the moment are appreciated (see, for instance, Pat’s comments at Allen’s in the previous chapter). It is a space where the virtuosic expression of interiority (as in, the vocal mastery deployed in expressing emotions in country music performance) is indeed valued, but primarily insofar as its expression captures commonly-felt truths or relatable sentiments in a particularly resonant way. In other words, the ethics of self-expression are viewed through a consequentialist lens, where their value depends on their ability to point up categorically shared experiences which serve to further the space of social exchange.

The two most insightful ethnographers of working-class personhood (as I describe in the introduction, what I mean here is primarily ethnography that, in not purporting to account for the cultural aspects of class reproduction, is somewhat freed to focus on broader realms of ‘culture’) describe this ephemeral social reality in similar terms: Hartigan (1999, 2005) talks about ‘figuration’ as a characteristically working-class way of playfully engaging cultural ‘figures’ (for instance ‘hillbilly’) in a way that allows individuals to deploy, repurpose and jokingly inhabit them. Figuration, in Hartigan’s usage, depends on a complex kind of co-recognition among people who realize themselves as categorically referred to by particular tropes--“the potent imaginaries that circulate within a culture,”--and who can dialogically interact with their playful deployment in social spaces (2005:16). Fox (2004) develops a richly-supported ethnographic account of what he calls “characters.” acknowledged and familiar social roles, articulated in the interactions of everyday life as organizing frameworks for intersociality. In his account, the way that ‘characters’ make sense in sociality draws on the extensive emotional lexicon of the classic country canon, which itself draws on and inflects the rich orality of working-class culture. This modality plays an outsize role in musical spaces: the playful inhabitance of social roles allow people to communicate, to establish or subvert social expectations, to communicate requests and norms without an unseemly and instrumentalized reliance on direct forms of address or orders; and to repair social damage via an appeal to acknowledged tropes. For instance, the overly-aggressive and loud bandmate who’s creating a scene at a jam might be both explained to strangers and also gently publicly censured via an appeal to the ‘heartbroken drunk’ figure; a maneuver that simultaneously creates a certain social license for the rudeness and

communicates to the bandmate that he or she is out of line without direct confrontation. As at Allen's, part of meeting and becoming known as an intelligible and relatable social subject in working class spaces is exactly the process of signaling which kinds of social figure you might be expected to embody, and where you might creatively deviate. People at Allen's were often quite forward about establishing these facts with probing questions, jokes that functioned as litmus tests, and so. Being a 'present person' in these situations depends on two things: a willingness to acknowledge a limited range of social characters that one might possibly be, and a sense that they are not equal social beings. In short, it depends on a willingness to recognize oneself as 'categorizable'—as very much like other people in predictable but interesting ways.

The most fundamental characteristic of present persons is a deontological stance which regards ongoing, contemporary sociality, and its attendant imperatives, as an explicit good. This ethical orientation, as I show, explicitly condemns actions which prioritize the future self to the detriment of ongoing sociality.

As I show in the following sections, these ontologies of the subject inflect realms of social practice as broad as bodily self-care, self-expression in music making, choices about careers vs communities, and transgressions of middle-class bodily norms. Section 3.1 details a working-class music festival, showing how a complex that I call 'present persons' animates working-class approaches to bodies and the material world. Section 3.2 addresses the ways that cultural competencies of self-expression and self-cultivation are tied up with future-oriented perspectives in middle-class life. Section 3.3 examines complex practices of bodily abjection characteristic of punks, describing how their

theorized rejection of middle-class norms of self-care are part of a self-making process that relies on specific kinds of class transgressions. I also examine classed reactions to conspicuously abject punk bodies. Finally, the conclusion to the second and third chapters considers comparative enactments of the word-idea ‘community’ that I show are complexly entangled with spatial, ideological, and political-economic factors.

#### SECTION ENDNOTES:

**Technologies of the Self:** Foucault in his later work (e.g. “The Final Foucault” 2016; Foucault and Rabinow 1998; Rabinow 1984; Foucault et al. 1988) transitioned from previous projects focused on the way that power brings subjects into being, the ways that knowledge is produced and ordered, and the ways that contingent cultural facts and historic moments become naturalized, to a very different project: an examination of the historic modes through which interior ‘selves’ come to be imagined, and the practices and ‘techniques’ or ‘technologies’ through which individuals cultivate and work on themselves, with particular reference to the idea of the ‘desiring subject’ and the relationship of ethics to practices. This project in many ways seemed a counterpoint to the various ways that he had investigated the structuring and productive imposition of regimes of power upon ‘subjects,’ rather than the conscious and reflexive making of selves. His central thesis in this project is that the articulation of the modern ‘self’ is genealogically related to both Hellenistic antiquity, particularly as expressed in Greco-Roman philosophy, and later from early Christian monasticism. He sees these eras as being in a particular kind of historical continuity with the ‘modern west,’ in the sense of deontological stances towards particular modes of self-cultivation of the body, the ‘spirit,’ and the mind. This version of Foucauldian theory stands in notable opposition to earlier ideas of the subject, which have been widely critiqued (or misunderstood, as some have argued, including Foucault himself: 1988) as overly deterministic or incompatible with reflexive, conscious, agentive political action. Late-career Foucault has been particularly engaged by third-wave feminist scholars, who have both embraced the potential of theories of self-making to understand and envision political action, and questioned some of the implications (e.g. McNay 1993). Feminist theory has been particularly interested because of the explicitly theorized need for strategic essentialisms inherent to a liberatory political project (and called into radical question by Foucault’s earlier works), as well as the necessarily culturally-located deontological basis of a reflexive politics in the first place (again, a theoretical position that Foucault’s earlier work was highly critical of, in the sense that he was concerned to point out in many different ways how the intentions of practices and authors, even those perceived to be ‘emancipatory,’ are often subverted into further techniques of power and subjection). These concerns, and the way that ideas of self-making, deontological stances of self-hood, and emancipatory political projects all coincide, are obviously highly relevant to not only middle-class leftists, but also particularly to the anarchist project such as it is.

### **3.2: The Devil May Care**

This chapter argues for class-specific ethical stances towards temporality and sociality, which I call “socio-temporal ethics.” This concept is intended to focus attention on the interaction of ethics of personhood—what it means to be a ‘good’ social being in a given cultural space—with the field of temporality, and to highlight the constant interjection of culturally-situated temporal frames into ongoing social interactions. As Guyer (2007) argues, and as more recent work has engaged (Scherz 2013, 2014) ethnographic attention to the entanglement of temporality and ethics can illuminate how religious, economic, and geo-political factors inflect personhood or subjectivity. In this chapter, I examine a working-class socio-temporal ethics through the specific terrain of embodiment. Embodiment and self-care are cultural areas where disagreements and misunderstandings emerge frequently between people of different class backgrounds, and where middle-class observers are frequently baffled by working-class behavior (Charlesworth 2001; Skeggs 1997). As much work has shown, working-class bodies are not the same as middle-class bodies (e.g., Walley 2013 on embodied class). Working-class practices and beliefs about embodiment, though, have to be understood as part of a more expansive, richly elaborated cultural logic that includes ethics of sociality and time.

This section on bodies and health does not analyze causal connections between health outcomes and class oppression. Much research has demonstrated the causal links between poverty and particular disease processes (e.g. Krieger et al 1997; Cherlin 2016). These outcomes are due to complex political-economic factors and to the intersectionality of class with other identities. But health and class are not purely a deterministic relationship—they also interact with and exist alongside differing conceptions of what

the body is, what it does, and what a normal regime of self-care entails. It is the more-ephemeral factors above that I approach in this section.

Significantly, I also leave aside arguments about working-class embodiment that rely on explanations wherein cultural logics are read through a deterministic political-economic lens. As I explain in depth in the introduction, it is undoubtedly true that certain cultural logics are linked to economic regimes; much sociological work on inner city poverty, for instance interrogates this connection to show how apparently-pathological (to middle-class eyes) cultural practices make good sense in a given context. I am here more interested in how cultural logics of personhood—'deep' attitudes that index reflexive ethical stances—come to inflect bodies and the material world more broadly. One of the markers through which attitudes about self vs person were most clearly made visible, of course, had to do with how one cared for or treated the physical body (as opposed to various other kinds of self-cultivation like artistic expression), a realm of practice which showed very clear class differences. I highlight some of these differences in the space of a yearly festival called the 'Madison Bash,' which provided a context where ideas and attitudes about sociality were foregrounded by the explicitly communal atmosphere of group camping and the experiences of sharing food, drink, music, and camaraderie.

### **Stranger Danger**

The Madison Bash is an annual social event put on by a well-known local family on about 50 acres of farm and timber in western North Carolina. Located 25 miles out a

rural route from the nearest city, the piece of land isn't easy to find, but for the working-class community centered in this area, the Bash is not to be missed. It takes place on a Sunday in May, but everyone arrives Friday night to play music, set up in campers and giant tents, and drink and cook in a large field that lies fallow near the main house. The focus of the bash, besides music and socializing with friends and family, is 4-wheelers and other off-road vehicles: specifically, festivalgoers enjoy the chance to drive around off-road on the course the host family has set up on some of the acreage, which includes mud pits and other obstacles like hill climbs.

T.R. was the fellow my friend Tom and I were looking for when we arrived Saturday afternoon; although a relatively young man, T.R and his wife Mindy were the hub of a social group that consisted of a bluegrass band and its friends, family, and hangers-on. As Tom and I pulled up in my older Toyota, T.R. gave me the look he always did: "I see your truck made it across the field!" Despite my defense of Toyota trucks and their reliability, he never quite believed my choice was respectable. Nevertheless, he suffered us to park beside him and we began to set up camp, putting some cooking gear under the group tent and setting up our sleeping tents. Mindy emerged from the camper's front screen door, having just put their children down for a nap, and saw us setting up camp. She waved hi, and then yelled over to a friend camping on the other side: "HEY, LOOK OUT JAKE!! STRANGER DANGER!!" Jake popped out from his canopy where he had been playing music, looked in my direction and started laughing at Mindy's remark. The last time I had seen Jake, a few weeks back, he had very generously offered me the chance to come over to his house and play a couple of vintage guitars that his father had left him. He treasured the guitars, and they were very

valuable—the offer was a significant gesture of trust and warmth that he didn’t extend to many people, even those he had known for years. At the time, I had gladly agreed, but then, instead of showing up at the jam where we were supposed to meet, I flew to Chicago for a presentation at a professional conference that I had forgotten to mention (aimed, of course, at furthering my academic career, a thing that was practically guaranteed to force a socially unethical geographic rootlessness that was nigh-disgusting to many of my informants).

Jake had been offended not only by my failure to accept his offer, but also by the extremely poor reason I had for blowing him off—a prioritization of some imaginary future over the chance to deepen our friendship. He was wary of me in a way that he hadn’t been before, and Mindy was well-aware of the situation and of Jake’s feelings about my offensive gesture. Jake burst out laughing at her pithy comment, which played on a register of child-rearing advice which itself didn’t make tremendous sense to working-class people, given the extensive social networks and kinship-based resources which often helped to make child-rearing workable. The idea--‘stranger danger’-- encapsulated the sense that perilous and unknown outsiders might come and violate the most sacred and treasured of social bonds, that of parent and child. By re-framing it with me as the stranger and Jake’s offer of friendship as that which was endangered, she captured the ethical violation I was guilty of in a way that at once censured me, vindicated Jake, and allowed the humorous possibility of social repair. Jake’s appreciation of the remark endured through that entire evening, and whenever he and I were in the same place with people I hadn’t seen yet at the festival, he would repeat it

humorously—it never failed to get a chuckle from our group of acquaintances, who were largely aware of the ethical compromises entailed in my apparent choice of profession.

As Tom pulled out a cooler and offered everyone a cold beer, T.R. ambled over and took a look in the ice, knowing exactly what he'd find based on his assessment of Tom and me. Tom, a friend from Asheville who was an active player in the bluegrass revivalist scene, was committed to the idea of connoisseurship in matters of food, and beer was no exception. He had selected a variety of very hoppy microbrews from the vast array of local Asheville options, anticipating that his choices would be appropriate for the summer heat. T.R. fished out three different bottles, eyeing them skeptically and finally looking at me with one raised eyebrow. "Got anything good or is it all tree-bark beer?" he asked. Tom looked up from tuning an instrument: "huh?" T.R. elaborated with a grin: "This beer, they take good beer, like Miller or something, and they put all kinds of tree bark and shit in it. Completely ruins the taste!" Tom offered up a weak defense of hops and their bitter flavor, but T.R. was already laughing as he ambled over to get a Miller Lite from his cooler, having known all along our cooler would be filled with tree-bark beer and therefore undrinkable to him and everyone else present. He regarded tree-bark beer with amusement, having tried various kinds and found them all unacceptable to his palate, and he liked to harass drinkers of tree-bark beer at any chance. Eventually, he conveyed through these subtle means that arriving at festivals with food and drink that was unsuitable for sharing (because it depended on different kinds of embodied tastes that T.R. intuitively recognized as matters of classed practice) was an explicit rejection of the kinds of casual exchange and reciprocity that characterized the festival environment for T.R. and others. Tree-bark beer was frankly rude, because no one liked it, and it

therefore removed Tom and me from even the possibility of sharing our beer with others in a ritualized and reciprocal way.

However, there were many other activities on hand besides drinking. Soon enough, Russ pulled up on one of T.R.'s 4-wheelers. Russ was the banjo player in T.R.'s band, and distinguished himself by his sky-high bluegrass tenor singing and his heartfelt and elegant songwriting. However, he was also the hard-luck character of the group, having been stabbed, jailed, divorced, repossessed, arrested, booked, and taken ill more times than anyone could keep track of. Although still vigorous, at 42 he looked a decade older and breathed with difficulty from a lifetime of smoking and working with raw fiberglass insulation. When everyone gave him shit about smoking with his breathing so bad he'd say: "Wasn't even smoking that done it—just bad luck and genetics. Doctor said I had a year to live, that was five years ago! I just figure I'll get all the pleasure out of life that I can."

### **Conspicuous Destruction**

As I was setting up my tent against the possibility of rain, Russ shouted at me: "Grab that Honda and let's go riding!" T.R. nodded that it was okay, and I jumped on the four-wheeler, riding across the field towards the hill beyond, which was bisected by a muddy two-track leading into some woods. Before we arrived, however, we passed the mud pit. In its most common form, a mud pit is a trench in a field filled with a few feet of mud and/or water, typically anywhere from 4 to 8 feet deep and 10 to 15 feet wide, and 20 to 50 feet long. The dimensions are such that a large vehicle on oversize tires and with a significant lift (aftermarket suspension components added to raise the body off the frame or the frame off the suspension) has sufficient room to make a full-throttle run

beginning at one end and ending at the other if luck and skill prevail, with room to maneuver between the walls and without the risk of overturning on spectators. A mud pit is typically dug with earth-moving equipment and then filled with a hose; in various iterations, they're not uncommon weekend affairs in the rural south.

The basic symbolic premise of the mud pit is conspicuous (and often self-effacing) destruction in the service of sociality and spectacle. Thus, the expectation of a mud-pit is that anyone present with an appropriate vehicle (basically, one with four-wheel drive) is obligated to risk life, limb, and possession for the amusement of the assembled masses: a humorous and spectacular subordination of the self in favor of affective solidarity—‘good feeling’—in the broader group. While many people build spare-part vehicles as ‘beaters’ specifically for mud-pit competitions, most mud-pit affairs are simply people taking what they have ready to hand and seeing what it’s capable of. At the mud pit in the field that day, it was mostly a collection of ATVs, farm utility vehicles (like Gators), and hunting vehicles like Polarises that men and women were gunning from one end to the other. As a driver would line up for a run, the assembled crowd would gleefully evaluate the driver for nerve and technique based on past knowledge, and would judge the capabilities of the vehicle with a keen eye. No one emerged unscathed—at best, if successful, you and your vehicle were completely coated with mud, and a number of attempts ended in pure failure, requiring a winch to pull out a stalled vehicle. Of course, the most acclaimed runs through the course were the ones which either demonstrated the most brazen disregard for health and safety, courted the most ridiculous odds, or most masterfully sent up the whole affair.

The biggest cheers that day went to three attempts: first, four women boarded a two-person ATV and, laughing, hung on for dear life as the driver floored it through the mud pit. Two went flying haphazardly into the mud; the other two made it and were roundly applauded. Later, a young guy drove his lifted Ford Ranger through at about 30 mph—not only exponentially faster than the ATVs, but also a much bigger risk of property damage to a nicer vehicle, and hence, in the terms of the spectacle, quite prestigious. His successful run was met with cheers. Immediately after, an extremely drunk older woman with a very bad sunburn and a floppy straw hat drove up on a beat-up old riding lawnmower. As she approached the pit, everyone began laughing and debating whether or not she'd try. Sure enough, she shifted into top gear and trundled down the slope into the pit, the mower backfiring through the carburetor and blowing blue smoke. She made ten feet of headway before hitting a rut, whereupon she and the mower came to a complete halt, stalled out, and then slowly toppled over sideways into the mud. She theatrically lay there for ten seconds before leaping to her feet and throwing her hands over her head, fists raised, in the universal sign of victory. The crowd loved it—understanding it as overt mockery of the entire spectacle, and particularly of the testosterone-laden heroism of the Ford driver who had immediately preceded her.

As important as the master trope of conspicuous destruction is to an affair like the mud pit, it's also important to understand that the kinds of ritualistic destruction that a mud-pit involves—of a large portion of a field; of vehicles and vehicle components that seem very expensive; of capital and labor—are not only viewed through a different ethical framework by working-class people, they are in fact involved in different regimes of material competencies. That is to say, the stakes of breaking an axle or ruining a rear

differential are quite different for a shade-tree mechanic (who can pull a replacement from a parts car or a junkyard for little money, and easily re-install it) than for, say, an academic who assumes that a ruined differential on a Volvo spells a hefty repair bill at best, or a new car at worst, either of which means a significant investment of time and capital that could be better invested in other future-oriented self-improvement activities (like a child's instrument lessons, for instance). The material competencies that rural working-class life demands and teaches—to say nothing of the tactics of barter, exchange, and obligation by which people procure and utilize both necessary and unnecessary goods—are quite different from middle-class life and are necessary to understand in order to make sense of ritualistic spectacles like a mud pit (as well as to understand the cultural background of related working-class spectacle like NASCAR, demolition derbies, and monster trucks—which also feature spectacular destruction or wrecks that are not accidents). Come Monday, the mud pit itself will be filled back in by the same backhoe or dozer that dug it; it'll be covered in grass in two weeks. The vehicles will be sprayed off; the clogged parts blasted out to functionality again; the busted parts fixed or ignored. The destruction, while symbolically significant, is less irreparable and dire than it looks from outside.

Events like the mud pit form a spectacular and symbolically powerful re-creation of an ordinary attitude. In the context of a festival, it serves as a commentary on the demands of ethical sociality and its relation to bodies and the material world more generally: a devil-may-care attitude that prioritizes the virtue of immediately-present sociality, and the re-creation of affective connections between people. This attitude stands in implicit contrast to a future-oriented perspective that values, at least

ideologically, the idea that bodies and possessions should be cared for and treated in a way that maximizes their future value in an asocial temporality. To middle-class eyes, the mud pit at best seems a giant waste and at worst an intentionally negligent bit of destruction. In reality, in addition to being a raucously amusing affair, it is a theatric mode of public sociality that foregrounds a set of ethical attitudes which are naturalized in everyday working-class life. The imperative of the mud pit is the rejection of self-oriented futurity in favor of the demands of the social present. The social present—whether the ritualistic expectations of the crowd at the mudpit waiting for the conspicuous destruction of a shabby old vehicle, or simply the imperative to stay at the jam for another ten songs with friends rather than going home for a full night of sleep so as to be rested at work the next day—is often the arbiter of what counts as decent social behavior in most scenarios, particularly ones like a festival where sociality and reciprocity are already symbolically foregrounded.

Although I describe the social present as the moral horizon that inflects working-class spectacles like a mud pit, a range of social meanings connected to ‘conspicuous destruction’ is another aspect. The logic that many middle-class observers impute to iterations of this cultural complex is often some version of the “I’ll never make it anyway, so why save for the future”—a conscious, logical, and understandable rejection of the middle-class moral injunction to take up properly capitalist self-disciplines. These two attitudes—“why be sober and responsible when the odds are stacked against ‘success’” and “obligations to prioritize extant sociality over future self-improvement”—are flip sides of a devil-may-care sentiment that represents one of the major stumbling blocks middle-class people have to understanding working-class sociality and

personhood. Inevitably, this misunderstanding is framed in moral terms framed by temporality: “they don’t take care of themselves; of course they get diseases like diabetes” or “what do you expect when you spend all your money modifying a truck and then get on welfare?” Working-class people are intimately aware of middle-class judgments regarding this ethical disjuncture, and it is important to note that another set of meanings connected to conspicuous destruction emerges when, as frequently happens, working-class people deploy such practices as proudly oppositional counterpoints to middle-class ways.

After Russ and I watched the mud pit for a while, he beckoned me to follow him on the ATV and we took off up the mountain, hell bent for leather. He knew the place well and we wound back through some trails that lead to a higher meadow, with a long straightaway and an oval course worn in the grass. Leaving me at one end, he launched himself on the machine, going full throttle across the field, approaching the sharp turn at the end almost flat out. With consummate skill, however, he managed his braking and leaning and rounded it upright, approaching again with a roar. As he shot by, he bellowed: “KEEP UP!!” On a slightly faster ATV, I caught him on the straightaway, but began braking far in advance of him, which he noticed, gesturing at me to speed up. Consequently, he went around the turn on two wheels, fighting his machine to avoid a roll, which would have been extremely dangerous. I lost my nerve and let off the gas—I simply had too much built-in caution to overcome, although I was still going far faster than I was comfortable with. Russ, on the other hand, continued to roar around the course, going fast enough that a spill, which he was courting at every turn, would have resulted in serious injury or death. I eventually pulled off the track and just watched,

baffled. He had his fill after a few minutes, driving over with a whoop and a big grin, exclaiming what a blast that was. “Why didn’t you keep up, man?! I was waiting on you the whole time to come out and play!” I answered, “I was just scared, Russ. Too fast for me to keep up.” He shook his head, disappointed, and we drove back to the campers where he eventually coaxed another friend out.

Russ represented one aspect of working-class embodiment, characterized (at times) by physical abandon and an apparent lack of concern with ‘wellness’ as conceived by middle-class people. This attitude was most prominent at times of intense sociality like a festival, where, as above, the meanings of sociality are especially freighted with ideas of collectivity, but the attitudes towards embodiment that Russ demonstrated were far from uncommon. Russ and his drinking, smoking, and reckless and exuberant riding showed a transposition of working-class attitudes towards the material world more generally—witness the mud pit—towards the specific terrain of embodiment. My own caution on the four-wheeler, which Russ explicitly called me out for more than once, was taken as evidence not only of my undue concern for my own well-being but also a sort of rejection of the appropriately masculine sociality that Russ was offering.

Rural white southerners are reflexively aware of their own valuation of spectacular destruction (or at least conspicuous recklessness) as a symbolic gesture, particularly of bodies in the context of sociality. There’s a running joke that is inevitably told at some point during any outdoor social gathering: Q: “What are a redneck’s last words?” A: (shouted exuberantly in a performative accent) “WATCH ‘IS, Y’ALL!!” (Or alternately, “Here, hold my beer!”). This joke, and the commentary that follows, is a

deceptively simple and self-deprecating acknowledgment of a reflexive awareness about bodies and class.

Russ and I eventually rode back to the campsite, where grills were going and periodic jams unfolded and then concluded as friends and strangers wandered through the camp in the cool summer darkness, drawn by music or laughter or the delicious smell of a grilled hot dog. Later that night, Tom was talking with a group of people at T.R's campsite about mountain biking. Although he was an accomplished rider, he hadn't been able to pursue his passion lately due to a bad bike wreck and a diagnosis of a concussion—his second one. The ATVs reminded him of his love of trail riding, however, and he reminisced to Russ: "Man, I can't wait to get back on my bike—this time off is killing me! But they say, you know, every concussion makes the next one worse...guess I need to wait it out." Tom's observation sent Russ off on a flight of reminiscing that unspooled over a couple of minutes:

*"Oh, I don't think I've ever really had a concussion, but I've been knocked unconscious a bunch of times. Once, I was fighting my cousin in the ring—we used to work out in a crappy ol' boxing gym. He knocked me down, and I was on all fours, so he told me he'd let me get up. Then he blindsided me, kicked me right in the temple. I was out cold. They just dragged me to the side of the ring and lay me there 'til I woke up.*

*Another time, I was on my way to my job—I was a Winn-Dixie cashier at the time. Drove a Geo Metro right off the bank into the river, sank the whole car and had to crawl out after whacking my head on the steering wheel. Another time a guy rear-ended me at the crest of a hill. I got out to look and saw another guy hauling ass up behind. Just had time to jump back in the car before he hit us both, threw me right out through my front*

*windshield head first. An old lady who lived there came down, just cussin' him out—she thought he'd killed me. I just lay there on the ground and laughed. Another time I tried snowboarding and knocked myself out stone cold. Next thing I remember, I'm sitting at a table down at the bottom of the hill. All my stuff was gone—no snowboard, no boots, no nothing. I figured it had been stolen, so I went in and explained what happened to the staff, they said: you already turned it all in! I had no memory of it at all.*

*But I don't think I've ever had a concussion.*

Tom: "Wow, maybe you need to be more careful in the future!"

With the group on the topic of health and recklessness that night, Daniel, an older fiddler seated in a lawn chair on the periphery, started tapping on his chest with his bow.

*"I got out here late tonight cause they let me out of the hospital just this afternoon—had another episode where my heart started to go crazy on me—ventral fib, they call it—and I have one of those shockers implanted in there now, it shocks me to where my heart's supposed to get back to the normal rhythm. But I felt terrible so they kept me in for a day or two—it's ok, my cousin Charley was there so I had company. They let me out this evening and I passed my wife going in! They admitted her for another round of dialysis. Gotta drive back in the morning to check on her!"*

A couple of people shake their heads and mutter something in sympathy, and Daniel continued:

*"I'm supposed to be in range for my cell phone because it talks to this implant, and just automatically calls EMS if it has to shock me—let me tell you, it hurts like hell and always knocks me unconscious—but I don't have a single damn bar out here! I don't care though—I've been coming for years and I wouldn't miss this for anything."*

Russ, a little drunk by this point and caught up in the good feelings of the group, yelled “damn right!” with a big smile on his face, and offered Daniel a cold Miller Lite, which he accepted. Russ concluded the conversation by making Daniel’s logic explicit: “Man, this is just our family here! You’d do anything to be with your family, I don’t care if you’re sick or what. That’s what this is all about—bluegrass family.”

### **3.3: Tastes, Acquired and Required**

#### **Don't Postpone Joy**

The Friday before the Madison Bash, T.R. and Mindy, who lived in a working-class rural community north of Asheville, made a rare pilgrimage into the touristy downtown area. Although they normally avoided downtown as much as possible, they wanted to meet for a meal and play some music before the festival. As we walked from their parking space towards a restaurant, we passed a Subaru covered in bumper stickers expressing leftist sentiments. One of them was one of the more ubiquitous bumper stickers in the area, and expressed a sentiment of complex meaning: “Don’t Postpone Joy.” This bumper sticker happened to catch the eye of Mindy, who found it both hilarious and nonsensical. “Don’t postpone joy? What the hell does that even mean?!” she laughed. “Alright, here I am, not postponing joy. Do I look joyful yet?” T.R. jokingly retorted, “Nah, you look about the same: like you postponed getting some sleep.” She laughed and said, “Well, guess I better postpone your tongue-lashing til later!” T.R. said, “Yeah, wish I could postpone next week’s work too, and the damn bill for that new air conditioner.” As we walked to the restaurant, they continued to joke about postponing joy, and all the other things they wished they could postpone instead. The moment crystallized class differences in temporal orientations, and the extent to which they underwrite everyday understandings of virtue, obligation, and personhood.

‘Don’t Postpone Joy’ is a self-directed injunction that makes intuitive sense only in a cultural context where futurity is invisible—naturalized—as a broadly-transposable temporal orientation. ‘The future’ is a middle-class lodestar: it suggests the correct

ethical-temporal orientation for decisions ranging from affect (as the bumper sticker suggests), to self-care, to social obligation, to the cultivation and education of children. Like all virtues, however, there are limits: the virtue of ‘postponing’ something in deference to other, more pressing concerns is a middle-class ethical mandate of such force that it itself becomes reflexively problematic. The premise of the bumper sticker expresses a persistent middle-class fear: that ‘joy’ in all of its manifestations is distressingly in conflict with an otherwise laudable future-oriented temporality. Or in other words, one suspects that ‘the future’ as a naturalized temporal orientation might have certain consequences which are less desirable. To Mindy, the unironic expression of this complex sentiment, particularly in the mildly preachy register of a bumper sticker, simply seemed bizarre: it expressed a temporal orientation that in some aspects is already naturalized in working-class worlds (although not in the register of ‘joy’). More accurately, as her joking censure of me (“stranger danger!”) indicated, working-class people saw consequentialist problems with a future-oriented temporal outlook. All too frequently, it caused unethical or undesirable interpersonal consequences, and resulted in the breakdown or impossibility of relationships of appropriate solidarity—as my postponing a visit with Jake (in favor of my potential future career) had done. In other words, it had important consequences for an ethics of sociality.

‘Wellness’ is a framing device for understanding and ordering bodily practice in middle-class American life, and it gathers much of its meaning and ethical force through an implicit entanglement with the field of temporality. Wellness largely stands in for a suspect and utilitarian notion like ‘health’—with its instrumental connotations indicating a basic fitness for production or reproduction. Whereas ‘healthy’ is what the doctor tells

you you are when you're no longer sick; 'well' is what you are after significant investments in the cultivation of the body. Wellness is a register of self-making that emerges in conversation with lifestyle industries and entails the idea that optimal care of the body requires extracurricular disciplines explicitly aimed at cultivating something beyond 'health.' Wellness indexes a logic of consuming and investing, and presupposes a bodily self that will reward the conscientious disciple in the future. In cynical terms, 'wellness' is health filtered through the pastiche of cosmopolitan new-age practices of the consuming self, like yoga, supplements, exercise, and meditation. In many ways, wellness functioned less as an embodied quality than as a kind of bodily substance—one that could be depleted by certain activities (partying, drinking, not sleeping, too much work or stress, 'bad' diets) but fortunately restored by others (yoga, certain (consumption rather than labor-related) kinds of exercise, a large variety of supplements, certain kinds of diets, the locality of food). Wellness, in other words, is actually an investment one can make in the container that is the body—a kind of bodily capital that, like other investments, nominally pays dividends at some time in the future, and it reflects the sense that self-cultivation is ethically correct.

Talk about bodies is a common social register in contemporary American life. In general, as in the previous section, working-class bodily discourse centered on the resigned elaboration of dire problems, of the self or of immediate friends. Punks, as I show in the next chapter, tended to focus on the transgressive qualities of their bodies in comparison with middle-class ideals. Middle-class musicians, on the other hand, when they talked about bodies, most frequently discussed the things that they were actively doing to promote their wellness. One evening at a public jam where players rotated in

and out, I ran into a friend I hadn't seen in some time, who happened to show up in the darkened bar on that night. I asked how he was doing and, sipping a glass of red wine, he answered enthusiastically: "Never better, man! I've got this new lifestyle I'm practicing." He proceeded to outline his self-improvement practice: regular exercise in classes at the gym he had joined; spirulina shakes every morning; fish oil every evening, and yoga twice a week. In addition, he said, he had a whole new way of eating: no alcohol or carbs all week, but anything he wanted all weekend. It being Wednesday, I stared at his wine glass; he grinned a little and said "well, all things in moderation, including moderation! I like to celebrate the middle of the week at the bar." He outlined how great he felt—extra energy, no crash at work in the afternoon, great sleep, lost weight: all things pointing to serious levels of wellness in his body. As we talked, sitting at a table in front of the jam, musicians coming and going circulated in and out of our conversation, adding bits here and there about their congruent practices. It turns out my friend's wellness routine was something of a fad in the middle-class old-time scene; a funny thing since this jam was popular at least in part because the bar provided free craft beer to all musicians—as much as you could drink, all night. At least to some extent, the wellness that the beer subtracted from the body was undoubtedly both mitigated by the fact that it was locally-produced, and regenerated by the 'community'-ness that existed there that night.

Music for many people in the Asheville Old Time scene is not only a past-time, but part of a coherent regime of self-cultivation which includes artistic self-expression—a value that is explicitly celebrated in not only everyday talk, but expressed prominently in band biography statements, jam invitations, lay histories of the music, and so on. The interrelation of practices of self-cultivation (including wellness) and self-expression are

evident not only in their consonant social logics, however: they also have notable overlaps of practice. Old-time music, for instance, as a physical practice, entails a lot of repetitive motion, often for long durations and at high speed during fast tunes. As such, many players at some point in their playing struggle with repetitive injuries like tendinitis—perhaps particularly because many old-time players don't have the kind of formal background that in some disciplines emphasizes sustainable physical technique. As a result, a number of players learn specific body techniques aimed at promoting healthy practice, including body-movement practices like Alexander Technique and a host of other formalized or accredited wellness practices. Yoga in all its forms is a notable component of self-care that many in the old-time scene use.

At a weekend retreat aimed at promoting old-time music and associated dance forms by training people to ‘call’ or lead dancers through standard square dance sets, I watched one particular example of this overlap. Organizers had brought in a folklorist to talk about local dance traditions in the working-class communities that surrounded the urban center where the retreat was being held; he detailed the ways that early ‘local color’ writers had preserved records of the working-class cultural distinctiveness of the area. He mentioned that he had been in contact with a number of older, rural callers—some of them who had learned the old, traditional ways, but that they were all too sick to come speak to the group. As the folklorist—an older heavyset man with a thick southern accent, who grew up in the area—spoke about these sick older people, the audience, which consisted of mostly attendees in their twenties and thirties from Asheville who played old-time, sat arrayed three or four deep on chairs and on the floor around the folklorist. After about twenty minutes, a shoeless young man in capri pants and a tank top

got up, walked three or four feet into the open space to the side of the audience and the speaker, and sank down into a yoga pose. The folklorist paused, disconcerted, and stared over as the young man stretched his back. He continued speaking, obviously distracted by the stretching, and two more people rose and began stretching. Soon enough, a friend of the first stretcher crawled over and began to do partner yoga with the young guy; with now four or five people stretching as the speaker grew more and more distracted. Eventually, more or less in the middle of his presentation, he conspicuously decided that he had lost the crowd, and trailed off to weak applause as the crowd dispersed to cook a vegan dinner. The folklorist's distraction resulted from the collision of his expectations of the social encounter (a group appreciation of his accumulated wisdom from years of experience) with the social norms of the middle-class crowd: groupness as a space where individuals tend to themselves.

Bodily practices like yoga weren't limited to young-ish and hip old-time adherents, however. At the summer Music Workshops that I detail below and mention in the introductory chapter, the day-long schedule features not only a class schedule emphasizing musical and cultural instruction, but also various bodily practices throughout the day aimed at wellness. For instance, many participants start their day with a group Tai Chi session, led as part of the country and old-time music week by one of the regular instructors. There are also classes on ergonomics, stretching, and healthy musical techniques; there are regular chances for paid massage for musicians by the on-campus masseuse who has a chair set up in a semi-private space. Some of the classes focusing on square dance, in fact, are taught in an outdoor pavilion directly adjacent to a shaded space covered in gauzy shrouds where the outlines of a massage table, and a musician getting

‘body work’ are vaguely visible. While the practices aimed at cultivating the wellness of the body are perhaps more visible (and capitalized) at these particular workshops than they are at the average middle-class old-time festival, the ethic is very much of a kind. In rather stunning contrast to the bodily praxis very much on display at a working-class festival like the Burke Bash, even the relatively open festivals like Clifftop (detailed in the next cluster) feature regular opportunities for group classes on yoga and other bodywork. Although they are undoubtedly also bacchanalian or carnivalesque spaces where middle-class people drink to excess, miss sleep, and eat ‘bad’ food, they also preserve the sense that wellness as a substance must be periodically refreshed or tended to, even in spaces of social inversion.

More generally, it is important to note the complete and ongoing integration within middle-class musical practice of bodily cultivation. Comparing either the workshops or festivals where middle-class people predominated to spaces like the Burke Bash, the disjuncture in bodily praxis is shocking, given the nominally identical framing device of ‘music festival.’ Practices like yoga fit so well at middle-class festivals because their social logic—the cultivation and expression of the self—was already explicitly present in the very idea of ‘music,’ as I show in the section below called ‘Musical Self-Expression.’

Wellness practices in Asheville in particular often run towards the occult. As I drove two friends back from the square dance retreat above, one of them, Sarah, mentioned a lake we would pass by on the interstate. This lake, she had found out through a healing-oriented website, was notable as a place to find ‘healing crystals.’ Sarah, a masseuse who practiced various other healing modalities, was interested in

crystals (naturally-occurring quartz) as one of the various substances that new-age health practices thought to have powerful healing properties; because this lake was typically drained during winter months as it was used to generate hydroelectric power, much shoreline was exposed with the possibility of finding crystals. It was winter, and Sarah had a map of where she wanted to go. The other passenger and I were reluctant, but she was emphatic, so we made a detour off the interstate and onto a series of increasingly-smaller secondary roads, until we finally reached the lakeshore. It was indeed drained, but the only way to get to the actual lake bed was across rural homesteads and associated cow pastureage, all prominently fenced off with ‘no trespassing’ signs everywhere. I was frankly nervous; rural imperatives towards the sanctity of private property were foremost in my mind. Having grown up in a very rural place, I was also aware of the propensity for property owners to react poorly to slights like willful trespass. Finally, we passed one parcel of pasturage with ‘for sale’ signs along with ‘no trespass’ signs, and I pulled over there for a strategic advantage. Sarah immediately set off cross-country for the lake, hopping fences and dragging along our friend with her. I went at a slower pace, anticipating being hailed by the property owner. I could see at least one neighbor on high ground a few hundred yards away watching us; I was sure he was calling the owner. I finally covered the two hundred yards to the lake’s edge; Sarah was already well out into the exposed mud, foraging for healing crystals. By this point, I knew it was simply a waiting game, and I hoped the outcome wasn’t bad. Soon enough, I heard shouting voices, and I saw two big men in camo striding towards us across the field. Seeking to head off a bad confrontation, I shouted for my friends to come in from the lake, and I went to meet the property owners, who were irate that we had parked illegally and were

on their land. Lying and saying we were interested in looking at lakefront land for sale, I asked about the winter conditions and we talked mosquitoes, the TVA, and regulations from the government's imminent domain takeover of the land that lay under the lake. Sarah and our companion stood by silently. Placated, the landowner looked over at Sarah, who was covered in mud but had found no crystals. "What were you looking for out there anyway?" he asked, bemused. Sarah, somewhat appreciating the mismatch in cultural worlds, stuttered something about being a rock collector. We all walked back to the road as Sarah continued to talk about wanting to find rocks and eventually about being a healer. The two men exchanged annoyed glances and left on an ATV they had parked at the fenceline. At the time, I was relieved to be gone. The encounter was one in which Sarah's willful and single-minded pursuit of mystical objects intended to help her health or business had butted up against a particular place with a complex history of land ownership and dispossession, community relations, insider/outsider distinctions, and in particular, established norms which included a high level of respect for other's privacy and property. Sarah, oblivious of this, thought of land as land—ideologically in her mind open to anyone, and free of complex social entanglements. I thought of it as a troubling collision of class cultures.

### **Expressing Selfhood Through Music**

It's a humid North Carolina summer night, and the four people I'm sitting in a circle with are doing their level best to drown out the cicadas with acoustic instruments. We're on a walkway on a small college campus outside Asheville, clustered together in folding chairs: a bass player, a guitar player, and two fiddlers. R.D., the fiddler calling the

tunes, is in his early fifties and is dressed in jeans and boots, a trucker hat, and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. His accent, speech, and stories proclaim his working-class roots; he mentions having grown up poor in southwest Virginia several times over a couple of hours. Although he is clearly fluent in middle-class notions of musical practice, he relishes his role as something of a gadfly in the revivalist scene, poking fun at people's invisible biases and dressing and talking in ways that knowingly emphasize his rural upbringing, despite his higher education credentials.

The other fiddler, Carolyn, is a young woman in her mid-twenties from Massachusetts. Fashionably attired and charismatic, she is a well-known touring musician herself and is thought of as something of a prodigy in the old-time scene, having gone from a background of childhood classical music training to an impressive mastery of southern fiddle styles in a short number of years. Although she did not go to college, by inclination and devotion she has become, as many serious old-time fiddlers do, something of an amateur ethnographer in her quest to learn from older musicians. This process included moving to a rural part of Virginia in her early twenties. Initially, she spent many hours at the knees of an older fiddler, and when she is employed at festivals and workshops as the acknowledged transmitter of her late mentor's musical legacy, she frequently references the time spent with him as a way of contextualizing her performances of the music. At the moment, Carolyn is finishing up a low-budget documentary film focusing on older women musicians from eastern Tennessee. As she describes them, they are all older women from the hollers that she has spent weeks getting to know before filming, and her documentary focuses on their pioneering musical legacies, presenting them through an overtly feminist lens. Unlike an older generation of

documentarians like John Cohen (whom she calls ‘an asshole’), she says she’d never film without a relationship.

Both R.D. and Carolyn are in Asheville for the week as music instructors at the college. We’re in the midst of a sort of residential musical summer camp for adults aimed at teaching students (mostly retirees from elsewhere) various kinds of traditional music, via week-long sessions of classroom-based instruction with pros like Carolyn. Right now, the flavor of the week is old-time music and Old Country. As we rip through a set of uncommon fiddle tunes, the transcendent musicality of both Carolyn and R.D. attract a crowd and our circle is intermittently the center of attention for groups of students strolling the main jam areas in the evening hours after class. Someone asks Carolyn a question about her documentary and she begins a funny story:

Carolyn: So, last week I finally took my mom to meet Ruby [an older rural musician in East Tennessee Carolyn has been filming]. And you know, it meant so much to me because this old woman is so special. She has a huge place in my film. I’ve spent so much time there visiting with her...she’s a really good friend. But, my mom, she’s all Vermont—you know, organic garden, drives a VOLVO, won’t eat anything not from Whole Foods...

R.D.: [interrupts] basically your classic Vermont hippie-yuppie!

Carolyn: [pauses, looking slightly annoyed] Yeah...anyway, so I took her to East Tennessee to meet Ruby. And you know how it is there—biscuits and pinto beans, lard and greens all day every day...

(A pause, Carolyn responds to a question about the last tune from an audience member)

Carolyn: WELL anyway, my MOM...I was just so embarrassed. She couldn't deal. She was like...disgusted...she didn't eat much the whole trip. She couldn't wait to get back to Vermont and eat some wild-caught salmon or whatever.

R.D.: [absentmindedly, trying to think of a tune] Yup, it can take some getting used to...

Carolyn: Actually, I've gotten to where I really love that food—I mean in East Tennessee—I even fix it at home now. But she just couldn't take it. I was like, ‘damn mom, you’re so bourgie!’ .....(pause) I guess it’s really an acquired taste.

R.D.: [suddenly very attentive] Well....If you’re poor, it’s a RE-quired taste! [here, R.D. intentionally stresses the initial syllable of ‘required,’ in a conscious performative imitation of southern dialect that at once indexes his own acquaintance with rural poverty and also serves to emphasize the playful assonance of the word he chose to reframe Carolyn’s analysis of class and taste] ...Man, many’s the time my family got by on squirrel with white gravy when I was growing up! It’s not the greatest thing to eat, but it’ll get you through. (A pause while R.D. retunes his fiddle) --You know... I worked on a road crew when I was younger, bunch of old rednecks and me. I was a young man, you know how it is. They told me: “Son, you’re full of piss and vinegar now but soon enough you’ll just be dribbling piss on your boot-tops like the rest of us!” It ain’t easy being poor, trust me.

This exchange, and R.D.’s brilliant improvisational riff—which pointed up the tension he felt between required and acquired tastes and their relationship to class and

hardship—was a pithy encapsulation of some of the class tensions that occurred not only in music, but also in broader realms where middle-class people would conspicuously re-purpose working-class practices according to a very different cultural logic.

The music camp I mention above represents a particular model of engagement with the regional musical genres that index working-classness: it takes place in a classroom setting and draws on familiar registers of interpersonal sociality (teacher/student and consumer/service-worker registers, for instance) to order the experience of learning ‘working-class culture,’ an outcome participants and instructors alike emphasize as a main goal. The camp essentially sells a kind of privileged access to mostly-middle-class instructors who learned from mostly working-class musicians, and is purchased by almost exclusively middle-class students whose goal is to learn working-class musical forms. I came to think of this dynamic as one of the more convoluted ways that class culture was manifested in the Asheville music scene: a not-uncommon scenario where the aspects of working-class culture that are symbolically foregrounded (dress, music, dance) are actually limited to controlled or stylized forms that are overlaid on or embedded within cultural, moral, and economic relations (like pay-for-instruction, connoisseurship, self-expression and academic study) that are familiar and comfortable to the middle-class students.

However, it’s worth noting the ubiquitous stories the instructors tell of how they learned the music from working-class people: through reciprocal relationships of presence, where money was conspicuously absent. I came to understand these ‘visits’ as a concept in lay ethnomusicology that refers to an arrangement wherein a fieldworker would spend a quantity of time—an hour, a few afternoons—with a culture-bearer,

usually recording the encounter, with the idea of absorbing into their person musical or cultural knowledge from an ‘authentic’ source. In the archetypal model of these visits, older country people would impart knowledge of both music and life alike, and the visitor would osmotically absorb something of their musical and personal essence which could in turn be passed along to their students. Students at the camp were engaged in the same endeavor of cultural acquisition, but they didn’t engage in reciprocal exchange relationships; instead, they paid for classes.

One thing that the summer Musical Workshops are notable for is structured ‘jams.’ In an effort to recognize that classroom musical instruction itself only covers certain aspects of actually making music in public with strangers, there are a variety of organized sessions where instructors help to facilitate informal jams, where students are expected to participate as if they were not at a workshop, but simply out ‘in the community,’ as the saying goes. Although the ‘rules’ that instructors institute for the jams they facilitate differ by person, genre, and moment, there are often a few key elements that students learn. The first is that, at a typical jam session, participants go around in a circle as they take turns deciding which song to play. Even in genres like old-time, where fiddles tend to be the acknowledged leaders of tunes, this rule often applies. Clearly, there is an imperative at work in pay-for-instruction wherein customers want to feel catered to and instructors are motivated to get good reviews, thus ensuring their continued employment. This is one factor in the prevalence at these workshops of individualistic turn-taking that implies a cohort of egalitarian people expressing themselves in sequence.

However, another and perhaps more important factor is simply the social logic of emotive self-expression through which true musical skill is read in middle-class spaces. This attitude follows quite naturally from what I have characterized as a deontological stance in middle-class culture that regards self-expression and self-cultivation as a default good. As students go around the circle choosing tunes or songs, they by default explain to the group the way that they learned the tune, and what it means to them. This can include naming the archival recording sources that they learned from, or, even better, the ‘source musician’ that they learned it from, or even an entire lineage involving a revivalist fieldworker and *their* source musician. Regardless, after detailing the provenance of the song, the leader-of-the-moment will then often express their emotional connection to the tune, or examine what they feel it helps them express, before leading it. Depending on the genre of traditional music, and on whether there is singing involved, other participants may congratulate the leader after the song for a particularly sincere, moving, or emotionally expressive performance. This version of musical practice, where individual expression is catered to with a high level of attention, and where participants think of themselves as ‘equals’ in important respects, tends to be what participants at these camps leave thinking of as normal, respectful, and ethically preferable. In middle-class public jams (again, depending on the genre), this reality or versions of it may well be the default set of practices. This is not the case, however, in typical working-class jams.

The cultural knowledge imparted to students at these workshops, of course, doesn’t remain in the classroom. Not only does it circulate widely as an authentic version of working-class music, but more ambitious students often take advantage of instructors’ knowledge of local scenes to seek out ‘jams’ where a very different version of social

practice structures the encounter. The following section follows a student from a musical workshop as he attends a local bluegrass jam run by a working-class family. I introduce some of the common disjunctions that I observed more generally as middle-class students attempted to act upon their newfound cultural knowledge in working-class spaces, and I highlight the ‘different differences’ that middle- and working-class musicians noticed in these interactions. These differences were not only notable to me as a fieldworker, they were the explicit topic of much lay commentary.

Nellie’s jam, held in a garage by a rural highway for some forty years, is a sacred space to a certain faction of the traditional music scene around town. Its ethos is distinctly working-class, and most of the regulars have known each other for years. In the ecosystem of local jams, it tends to be old-school in its canonical leanings, with solid but not flashy musicianship and players who have a vast knowledge of country, bluegrass, and assorted other genres from a lifetime of playing and listening. While it is a self-consciously welcoming space, it’s also clear that it operates on a principle of musical hierarchy based on age, experience, knowledge, and talent. Newcomers and beginners sit on the outside of the jam circle and aren’t often offered solos when a ‘break’ is passed around during a tune; the inner circle selects the songs and leads the jam through a combination of musical cues, meaningful glances, and, when newcomers occasionally breach decorum, a gentle and indirect form of censure (an older master-fiddler and regular attendee named Burl, with a wink, to over-enthusiastic beginner: “You know, that tune took me years to learn--I really had to lay back a little until I got more comfortable on it!”). These subtle cues, at times consisting only of a glance or a raised eyebrow, serve

to distribute solos among the musicians, cue concluding phrases to end the song, or even serve to communicate dynamics during the song.

Regulars identify this hierarchical arrangement very explicitly as facilitating a kind of cultural apprenticeship--one that allows newcomers (particularly middle-class newcomers, who are often referred to as ‘hippies’) to learn ‘their ways,’ and to begin to be able to participate in music-making in a respectful manner, by starting as apprentices with limited privileges, and ideally, eventually over many years progressing to the position of jam leaders. In the meantime, of course, the important function of these musical and social ‘hierarchies’ (see the next section on hierarchy), is to prevent novices from ruining the jam by contributing beyond their ability levels and thus making it unenjoyable for experienced players. As in most working-class social spaces, these rules are based on established codes involving a social order predicated on different ‘kinds’ of people, distinctions, as above, based on a number of factors like seniority or simply personality. Everyone present, however, retains a certain kind of devil-may-care autonomy to reject these same social strictures in prescribed ways that are legible as acceptable rebellion.

At one point in the evening, as the elder statespeople in the middle of the circle called yet another classic but downtempo song about a deceased mother, a young woman who was noted as an up-and-coming virtuoso fiddler called out: “Jeez, Burl, y’all are gonna put me to SLEEP with another of these weepers!! Let’s play some REAL bluegrass. Amidst general laughter and agreement, she kicked off a blazing Bill Monroe-penned fiddle tune that woke everyone up.

On a warm midsummer Saturday night, one of the newcomers was a young man with a long beard and shaggy hair poking from beneath a trucker's cap. Dressed in a standard urban impression of country garb, 'Eli' wore a recognizable uniform involving plaid shirt, stained Carhartt pants with a belt knife, and some kind of leather workboot; he had just graduated from a local college and attended a summer music workshop, and he played banjo with a bludgeoning enthusiasm characteristic of many new acolytes of the discipline. Arriving later than the usual start time, he missed the parking lot conversation and general settling-in, but talked openly about himself throughout the evening. As he noted at one point, he hailed from the West Coast but had 'put down roots' in North Carolina over the past four years and was hoping to start a small farm with an eye towards selling (local) produce at one of the many open-air markets around town. He had found out about the jam through instructors at the workshop, and thought of it, as he put it, as a chance to "develop his musical skills."

Upon arriving, he unpacked his banjo, set the case down, and went straight to an empty chair in the inner circle, thereby displacing a guitarist who had gone to the bathroom and also jumping line in front of some outer-circle attendees who had been coming for months or years of apprenticeship. The guitar player, after dropping some hints that Eli ignored, simply moved out to the periphery to avoid a direct confrontation. This was not uncharted territory for the displaced musician: the unintentionally offensive behaviors that Eli displayed were a very recognizable genre of middle-class misbehavior, often commented upon, that the normal structure of the jam (and the indirect appeals or joking asides of regulars that function as tutelage to those unaware of the rules of working-class jams) is somewhat equipped to deal with; unfortunately, Eli blatantly

ignored all such cues. At one point he asked a banjo player and Burl, the fiddle player who was a phenomenal musician and acknowledged leader of the jam, to change seats in the interest of better acoustics: “Hey, would you mind switching so that I can hear the fiddle better?! Thanks!”

They politely ignored his preemptive thanks, content where they were, so he asked again: “Hey guys, I’d love it if you switched seats!” At this point, Burl looked at him and said, not unkindly, amid a general hush, “Noooo... I’m fine where I am.”

As one tune ended, the standard few minutes of banter ensued before the next one was selected by request or consensus. As sometimes happens, Burl and a banjo player, looking at each other across the circle, began a playful exchange of iconic musical phrases from well-known songs in a sort of conversational musical intertextuality (Monson 1996); eventually one would catch on and the group would coalesce around the de facto lead player who quoted the musical phrase. For the more experienced players, this recognizable dynamic was a musical conversation that used humor, musical chops, a deep knowledge of the canon, and a well-developed sense of group-oriented sociality to involve multiple people in a conversation about what tune comes next. In this moment, however, Eli cut through the ongoing exchange in a loud voice:

“Hey y’all, how about Red Clay Halo?”

Since the person immediately to his left had chosen and initiated the previous tune, Eli had assumed that it was his turn next, assuming a spatial order. He repeated himself three times above the banter, but no one acknowledged his intrusion until, assuming it was his turn, he confidently launched into a loud and slow rendition of the tune, playing an introduction and then closing his eyes, throwing his head back, and

beginning an overly-sincere rendition of the lyric, complete with a comically exaggerated southern accent that had not been present in his speech. He had picked a recent song by a well-known revivalist singer-songwriter —one, however, that the musicians present had no interest in. As it became clear that he had no intention of stopping and had instead begun to look around expectantly as he played the first solo, a hush fell over the group. The fiddle players began to squirm as two of the less experienced rhythm players joined in behind Eli in ragged fashion. Burl, looking increasingly annoyed, finally launched into a parodic rendition of the tune, his uncharacteristically martial bowing, strident tone, and utter lack of syncopation a clear rebuke to Eli's misbehavior. Another musician got up and left the jam mid-tune on the pretext of going out for a smoke. The song ended quickly as the Burl's biting musical mockery began to sink in around the circle, and eventually, with little farewell, the majority of the group simply drifted towards their instrument cases and then towards the exit, having decided en masse that the sociality of the evening was damaged beyond repair from Eli's self-confident misunderstanding of intersocial norms. As the song ended, Eli looked confused and disappointed, and wondered aloud why the jam was ending so early.

### **Classed Personhood and Musical Practice**

Ad-hoc public jams involving acquaintances and strangers are complex and delicate social negotiations, playing out in the intimate space of artistic and social co-creation. Musicians face numerous dilemmas whose resolution often depends on shared understandings of matters like musical hierarchy, aesthetics, canons, and acceptable ways of regulating or repairing social breaches (e.g. Turino 2008). To working-class

musicians, one of the most troubling differences with middle-class musicians, and the subject of very explicit analysis, was highlighted by Eli: a disjuncture in basic ideas of proper personhood such that the complexities of social practice at jams can become impossible. It was clear to working-class informants that this disjuncture largely followed lines of socio-economic class, and although the academic register of ‘socio-economic class’ was rarely deployed, regulars were well-aware of categorical socio-economic difference as part of the equation.

In the broadest terms, working-class sociality in musical spaces assumed a kind of personhood *oriented to the importance of the social matrix within which individuals are inextricably located, and through which they have relational social ‘meaning.’* As with Burl, the proper social functioning of a jam often depended on categorical differences between people—including differences expressed in the register of hierarchy, which tended to allow jams to incorporate musicians at very different levels. In other words, working-class spaces, in practice, envisioned a social matrix involving ‘different’ kinds of people to be socially generative. These preferences also tended to mitigate against ideas of indulgent ‘self-expression,’ particularly by beginners.

Middle-class norms of sociality in music-making, particularly as taught in professionalized musical instruction, imagined egalitarian individuals negotiating a social encounter of secondary importance to individual prerogatives. In practice, this meant approaching ‘traditional’ music as ideally an anti-hierarchical, inclusive cultural space where universal participation between social equals was fostered. Cultural preferences related to egalitarian individualism and self-expression often translated in practice as conventions like structured turn-taking, a social flattening which allowed people to

sequentially perform their individual emotional states through music. As Eli did, middle-class musicians in working-class spaces often found unwritten codes of musical and social hierarchy to be both stifling to their creative expression, and offensive to their sense of their own expertise and agency. In this sense, it's important to point out that Eli was not simply socially oblivious—in fact, he was doing his best to participate considerably, which to him meant that everyone present was not only entitled to call tunes, but that it was his prerogative to play music in a way that accorded with how he 'felt.' In fact, it was typically self-evident to middle-class musicians that music as such is primarily about an artistic expression of 'the self' or of feelings related to an internal emotional state. This set of assumptions tended to encourage a kind of maximalist participation.

As did Eli, middle-class musicians in working-class spaces tended to focus on the realm of the 'performative self' (Goffman 1959)—the self that can be consciously worked-on—as the most significant arena of difference, and one in which they could respectfully show competence. As above, micro-level semiotic markers of class--accent, bodily dispositions, clothing, and conscious affect—were often a realm of considerable and studied mimetic romanticism on the part of middle-class musicians, as were expressive-cultural practices like music. In essence, middle-class revivalists had an understanding of class differences that presumed an identical kind of social subject, with different 'tastes,' which were thought to be deterministically related to the experience of classed hardship and rural life, and amenable to re-creation through a kind of sincere imitation (e.g., Jackson 2001). Thus, 'class culture,' as it were, could be taught in the classroom as a set of performative competencies—skills, aesthetics, and so on—that

could transcend class barriers. This understanding of class resulted in a disinclination or inability, however, to consider or cope with distinct ideas of personhood.

On the other hand, working-class musicians perceived normative relational practices as a fundamental element of class difference. This reflexive perception of different kinds of personhood is apparent in the strategies regulars developed at Nellie's to deal with the routine ways that even well-intentioned middle-class visitors would unintentionally misbehave. While it is certainly true that differences in aesthetics mattered at some level, things like accent, dress, and musical skill were typically not the subject of extensive analysis or even close attention by working-class regulars. Instead, the salient question was: "are you (or can you learn to be) the right kind of person?" The answer depended, to a large extent, on an ability to recognize a different social logic at work rather than on a particular aesthetic sensibility or skill set.

The resonances of middle-class 'class theory' with academic class theory are fairly obvious: there are significant overlaps with both Bourdieusian approaches (focused on the idea of habitus and embodied tastes), as well as contemporary theorists of performativity (Bettie 2003, Jackson 2001, 2005). That middle-class academics should generate middle-class theories of class is neither surprising nor original (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). On the other hand, working-class 'class theory' presents a productive challenge: a different, reflexive, cultural ethics of sociality and interactive norms. I take this subject up at length in the next chapter.

### **3.4: Self-Making and Transgressions of Class**

Punk bodily practices have the curious feature of being at once conscious regimes of self-cultivation, and simultaneously predicated on an idea of bodily abjection. Punk embodiment is a complex and complexly imagined political practice, often very self-consciously aimed at spectacular practices that gain force through their transgressive nature. One of the sets of ethics-laden norms they transgress most notably are bodily practices that I argue are a component of middle-class self-making. However, not unlike the social practices I detail in the previous chapter at Crooked Wood, punk bodies are conflicted. Like broader punk praxis, they often rely on middle-class registers, ideas, or norms (like self-cultivation or academic theory), but repurposed to contrary ends: with bodies, the self that they intend to cultivate is imagined to be a direct refutation of middle-class cultural logics. However, as I mention in the introductory section on punks, people in the scene sometimes struggled with the tension between overt political activism, and the kind of activism imagined in ‘prefiguration,’ which tended to center around lifestyles rather than direct political projects. This anxiety, as I show below, is also apparent in punk anxieties about nihilistic abjection (as with ‘drunk punks’) vs politicized abjection (where bodies indexed prefigurative lifestyles).

Furthermore, the punk scene, as I detail in the introduction section on punks, is characterized by mixed class backgrounds. Thus, for some punks, bodily abjection was a feature of life they found at times regrettable but also predictable and familiar, and for some it was a rather thrilling kind of transgression. The bodily practices I detail below ranged from the relatively reversible or surface-level (like extraordinary filth and particular clothing), to those with longer-term or irreversible impacts (like piercing,

tattoos (including facial tattoos), and even accidental bodily mutilation or other extreme health impacts from punk lifestyles). While punks were not any more desirous of getting severe injuries than anyone else, particular kinds of injuries, when they occurred, were nevertheless widely recognized as a (at times admirable) side-effect of a deep devotion to the kinds of lifestyle choices encouraged by punk political imaginings. What all these practices or indexical entailments largely had in common was that they gained referential meaning through an implicit or explicit comparison in two directions: first, towards the middle-class bodies and selves that punks saw themselves as critiquing, rejecting, and defying; and the working-class bodies that they saw as, in some ways, exemplars. Working-class embodiment served as an explicit resource both in terms of the devil-may-care attitude I detail in the previous chapter, and in more aesthetic terms, including styles of dress, comportment, physical and gestural rhetorics, and things like diet.

Finally, punk bodily practice acted as, to an extent perhaps unique in the spaces I did fieldwork in, a marker of belonging and group boundary. This fact, though, had as much to do with the practices and habits that bodies indexed (off-the-grid living, riding freight trains, never buying anything, etc) as with the aesthetic attitudes they drew from. In other words, although punk bodies were inscribed with a particular and cultivated aesthetics, the semiotic aspects of bodies-as-boundaries shouldn't be confused with a shallow or easily imitated sense of 'fashion'—instead, they pointed to the ways that punks tended to fashion lives out of the margins, peripheries, and borders of post-industrial economies and their inevitable waste and refuse. These lives, marked by foraging, creative re-use, and other tactics, had particular and regular effects on bodies

and possessions, and it was primarily these indexes that were most powerful as markers of punk belonging.

### **Anti-Wellness**

Punk aesthetics—the consciously cultivated set of indexes I mention above—are at once immediately recognizable yet difficult to convincingly capture. Punks were often recognizable from afar first by their color scheme. Approaching a punk encampment, for instance, you first notice a kind of smudgy brown-grey-black quality to the scene, as if the air around punks itself had a noticeable lack of transparency. This color palette—faded blacks, earth-tone browns, and occasional splashes of red from tattoos or accessories—is itself not only an aesthetic but also an index. The clothing that punks tend to wear is inevitably extremely dirty, and as such has a patina of wear and dirt that eventually renders all colors down to the essence of dirty cotton—greyish brown. Additionally, punks at many camping-style music festivals often camp in designated party zones, picking or creating spaces where mud, dust, and dirt are endemic, churned up by dogs and people into a haze that covers everything. Dogs are a constant. Inevitably, a few of the traveler kids will have pit-bull mixes, often adorned with black bandannas or other punkish accessories. The dogs usually rampage around untrained and uncontained, running around in packs on the peripheries of campsites, occasionally getting in fights, and generally creating havoc. The vehicles parked around the encampment, if there are any, tend to be old beater cars packed with junk and detritus, or studiously old dodge diesel pickup trucks, which tend to be a particular favorite of punks for their legendary durability and for their ease of conversion to various kinds of biodiesel. Tents are in the same aesthetic—haphazardly-pitched Walmart tarps in shades of dirty green or blue; old

army surplus tents, and a number of people simply bedding down in the dirt on top of a ratty sleeping bag. Punks are not friendly. Passersby are ignored at large; anyone who displays any undue interest is met by cold stares, despite the fact of the obviously spectacular quality of the encampment. Usually, there is some central space demarcated by a ring of buckets and chairs on which music-making happens. While old-time purism is always in fashion, punks are also notably the originators of various trends within the old-time scene—drawing on various genres like old country duets, Cajun music, jug band and blues, and even early swing repertoires. The middle of the circle is as likely to have a washboard and spoons going—totally verboten in old-time genres more generally—as it is to have a fiddle and banjo.

In the camp, one of the first things you notice is the smell—a rich mélange of unwashed human, unwashed dog, metabolized alcohol, dirty cotton cloth, mildewed tarp, and so on. The scene is, in a word, postapocalyptic at least to appearances. At one of these encampments, I had arranged to meet a friend, Jamie, to play some music. I wandered up with a banjo, and since Jamie was late, sat around talking with some acquaintances and strangers. One of the punk campers introduced himself as Doggy, and I reached out to shake hands, but he demurred. He asked about my instrument, and I said that I was mostly a banjo player but also fooled around with guitar. He held up his hands, and said, “I used to play guitar a lot, but a train ran over my hands. I can’t really hit any licks anymore...now I just mostly play washtub bass and washboard [a percussive instrument]. Only been playing washboard a couple of weeks, but I already got picked up by a band, so I guess I’m doing something right!” Showing me his hands, Doggy pointed to where the train had severed almost all of the fingers on his left hand, leaving stumps.

His right hand had been carved almost in half lengthwise, and was a mass of scar tissue and three surgically reconstructed fingers. Doggy was dressed in classic punk traveler wear with a lot of tattoos, including a dog paw tat beneath his left eye. His right arm said “HATRED” in block letters and he had a cut off jacket-vest with a giant patch on the back that says “black bloc” with a pic of punks and then the legend: “still strong, still solid, still in love” beneath. We talked further about old-time music in the area, and he mentioned wanting to get up to another music convention in Boone, but that he wasn’t sure he would make it there:

I’m going to stop over for a while in Asheville—I know a good squat down near the river that still exists, even though that whole area is getting pretty fucked now. They even renamed it: the “River Arts District.” Used to just be the “Shitty Abandoned Factory District.” Sometimes, I like to get out to the swing dances in town. I love showing up all grungy and dirty, totally fucks with all the bourgeoisie dancers. They have no fucking idea what to make of me, but I’m a pretty good swing dancer—picked up a lot of moves in New Orleans over the years.

He wandered off from our conversation, circulating around the camp and talking with various people in an animated way. As he shifted from conversation to conversation, his accent at times swung towards a markedly distinct and thick southern drawl, particularly when talking to southerners, and he also began to adopt at times exaggerated southern physical mannerisms, pulling on the brim of his hat in deferential greeting and hooking his fingers behind his belt buckle as he leaned backward against a tree with one foot propped up in classic cowboy pose. His exaggerated performance eventually put people in the camp ill at ease, and he exhausted his conversational welcome, wandering off. Despite the fact that Doggy was not particularly adept at it, his imitation of rural working-class postures, accents, and gestural rhetorics was extremely common in the

punk scene—particularly among the guys. A number of punks from the Pacific Northwest were well-known as avatars of hickster fashion, and spoke and acted so convincingly that even some close acquaintances believed them to be from the rural south. For punks who were actually from the south however, particularly the rural south, these personas could grate extensively when deployed as markers of covert prestige by people who had grown up wealthy in west-coast cities.

Doggy's pleased evaluation of his impact on middle-class dancers was not incorrect, a fact I saw demonstrated time and again. Later that week, a number of punk musicians from the encampment Jamie and I had been playing at came out to see Little Red and the Hots play a show at a downtown beer, wine, and cheese shop with an associated bar. This odd choice of venue was the result of the owner being a long-time and prominent member of the Asheville old-time music and dance community: he drew on his extensive musical connections to stage regular shows and dances in the small space set aside in his streetfront shop, always drawing in a sizeable tourist crowd by virtue of the musicians, who tended to play for tips and beer. The only reason most of the punks were there, of course, was to support their friends Red, Jamie, and a recent addition to the band named Alex, who always managed to solicit significant audience support from the punk scene. As we played a short set of honky-tonk music to a small crowd of dancers, two of Alex's punk friends sat at the bar, drinking beer and loudly arguing punk politics. We finished our set and Alex and I wandered over to join them. It was almost last call and they were drunk by this point, loudly mocking the irony of a punk honky tonk band playing for free so that a tourist-oriented wine and cheese shop could make money. This conversation was making the owner, who was bartending, fairly

uncomfortable. He kept eyeing them conspicuously, and they kept ignoring him conspicuously. One of them, a musician named Jen, was joking about wanting to start a country band called “Andy Rooney’s Eyebrows,” that she imagined would “exclusively play bourgie-ass places like this wine shop where people sit outside enthusing about Birkenstock sales.” As she envisioned it, the band could be her ticket to the big time, which would allow her to avoid bushes. Curious, I asked, “bushes?” She said, “Yeah, you missed the conversation. We were talking about our strategies for bumming in different towns. In Seattle, there’s this dude who hides in a bush and jumps out and scares people as they walk by, and he always has a crowd watching and laughing. Makes a shit-ton of money that way!” Her drinking buddy chimed in, “Yeah, I spent a lot of time in bushes myself over the years. Once, I was getting drunk in a bush in Portland, and some girls walked by, and I asked them for a cigarette—they were like, ‘OMG, that bush is talking to me!’” Jen interrupted with her best valley girl accent, imitating the girls: “Like, that *bush* just *talked!*” Finally, the owner of the shop explained very directly that he had to close down, and so we had to leave, and everyone wandered out into the night. Jen said under her breath by way of goodbye, “Fuckin’ glad to leave anyway! Country show in a goddamn wine bar...I feel like I need to go exfoliate or some shit.” Alex glanced over at her scabbed-over legs and dirty dreadlocks and started laughing: “Yeah, a little exfoliation might not be a bad idea.” “Fuck you, Alex” she smilingly replied.

It was late, so everyone headed to the house where Jen and her buddy were staying at the moment, with the idea of playing more music. They were crashing with a friend who had rented a badly trashed house in a poor and mostly-black neighborhood months before, going so far as to sign a lease and pay rent for a couple of months.

However, things kept breaking and the landlord appeared to have skipped town, so they collectively stopped paying rent and started treating it as a flophouse. Consequently, it was filled with random piles of clothes, dirty sleeping bags, and lots of semi-functioning musical instruments. On the way there we stopped at a gas station, and Jen and her buddy get a 12-pack of PBR and some frozen burritos and cheese sticks for dinner. At the house, I went into the kitchen to get a glass of water, but Jen shouted at me from the front porch: “No water! Drink beer!” A recent cold snap had frozen a pipe, and now sewage flowed into the sink whenever they flushed their toilet too much. So the kitchen wasn’t functional, and there were no showers either. Jen, Alex, and I sat out on the porch while they smoked and ate and drank, and Jen started talking about punks living in bad neighborhoods:

It’s actually pretty fucked up. Look around, all the neighbors are black, most of ‘em families. Then we come in, fuck shit up, and leave. It’s really terrible race politics, and almost all punks think of themselves as anti-racist! Same thing happens in rural places, only there, punks are taking advantage of working-class people, and if you go down to New Orleans, it’s really really bad. Shit, I don’t know...I had a big crush on this guy here, and I liked to imagine that he was an insurrectionist punk. But that was just a fantasy, he had no politics at all, just wanted to get drunk and fuck.

When I first got into the punk scene for the politics—I was always an activist--I thought it was the best thing ever, a bunch of people who were anti-racist, anti-capitalist, trying to fight sexism every day. But lately I just feel like there’s so much fucked-up shit that happens, I don’t even know anymore. There’s a lot of cool things in the punk scene in Asheville—people doing race and housing activism, people organizing to fight fracking and mountain-top removal, lots of good music... but lately I just feel like I’m getting drunk and not doing *shit*!

Alex nods sympathetically: “Yeah, especially in winter when living is rougher, it’s hard to keep up the fight. I’m thinking of hopping a train down to New Orleans, I

have a friend there who's doing a cool thing, trying to renovate houses and get people back into their neighborhoods."

However much punk bodily care tended to feature abjection and transgression as guiding principles, many punks also tried to combine their political stances towards off-the-grid living with certain aspects of 'wellness,' as I detail in the previous section. In fact, techniques of wellness—particularly ones related to diet and supplements or 'detoxing'—were fairly commonly combined with other punk practices, and often seemed to be one of the first middle-class cultural markers in which working-class punks quickly gained some expertise in. In some cases, as I show below, punks cultivated a bodily practice in which they alternated various kinds of practiced un-care or abjection with other practices, like yoga or supplements, designed to replenish adequate levels of wellness—to atone, in some ways, for the damage they knew they were inflicting. This kind of body-slumming is not unique to punk scenes, appearing in various ways in middle-class cosmopolitan practice, particularly with 'foodies.' However, not all punks subscribed to the body-slumming/detox cycle. Instead, many tried to combine their freegan practices with a sustained focus on wellness.

In preparation for one of our band tours, Jamie arranged with a bandmate who worked at a health food store to save up all the recently out-of-date food and throw it out back on a designated day, so that he could come pick it up for the trip. We met at 5am at Red's house to leave for the tour, since we needed to be in Tennessee by noon for the first show of the day—a live radio broadcast that served as a common stopover for touring bands. As always, organizing punk musicians to hit the road at a certain hour turned into an exercise in desperation. The drummer, Ted, had encountered an old

girlfriend at a house party the night before, and she had dropped him off at 4am at the wrong house—an entirely empty and run-down place that Red had moved out of some time before. Ted had simply gone to sleep on the floor. When he failed to show up at 5am, Red called and ascertained his whereabouts from the ex-girlfriend, and had to make an emergency trip across town to pick him up. Complicating matters further, the bass player had failed to procure a borrowed electric bass from a friend, and the car had no room for his upright bass. Red, therefore, had spent the previous afternoon driving a couple of hours to borrow a hard case from another touring bassist friend. The bass player and the pedal steel player, arriving hungover late the night before, had never attempted to tie a full-size upright bass in a hard case onto the top of a vehicle; hilarity and calamity ensued before they were satisfied with the knots holding the bass to the roof rack. When someone mentioned rain in the forecast, the bass had to be removed and a tarp sought. Ted the drummer generously provided the camo tarp from his train-ready hobo backpack. After some leftover pizza from the night before, we loaded everything and hit the road at seven, guaranteeing a hell-bent-for-leather trip across state lines to make our date.

As we pulled out, Jamie threw in a giant box he had retrieved from the health food store's dumpster: hummus, yogurt, chicken, bread, and a variety of other food that had all just expired. He exclaimed, "Look at this haul! We have to eat this stuff quick today because it won't last til tomorrow." Sure enough, he and Ted quickly put away an astonishing amount of questionable hummus and yogurt—a skill acquired from boom-and-bust style freeganism, which, as they said, meant eating like a starving wolf some days, and going hungry on others. Jamie explained that he only really liked to dumpster

healthy food these days, although in his younger days, he “did what all the punks do—go find 40 boxes of stale expired cereal in a dumpster and just eat that for a month straight.” Dumpstering, as he and Red explained, had subtleties beyond just finding food. Red described one friend who had lived on only dumpstered bagels for so long, that she had been diagnosed with an actual case of scurvy after her teeth and hair started falling out. As they all noted, it was important not only to eat a varied diet, but to try to prioritize good local organic food, which was often readily available because the people who worked at those stores were less suspicious of dumpster divers in the first place. Ted, nodding at the good dumpstering advice, also mentioned his supplements: “I always make sure to have vitamin c, fish oil, and some others too—keeps you healthy on the road. You don’t wanna fuck around with vitamin deficiencies.”

Ted had brought his hobo backpack ready to go because he wanted to hop a train after we had completed all our gigs a couple of states away. In many ways, he exemplified the immense resourcefulness of post-industrial American punk life—wherever we landed on our tour, he was immediately comfortable, and quite happy to fend for himself, sleep outside, figure out ways to get free food, and generally live as if the random places we landed were home turf. Like many in the punk scene, he privileged an immense sense of personal freedom, which tended to rank mobility and autonomy well above health. Ted, despite being an excellent guitar player and a truly gifted country singer with a deep knowledge of the canon, had signed on as the drummer of the tour. As he explained during the car ride, he was flexible because had been on the road for years, bouncing around the south, sometimes with his band, sometimes on trains, sometimes hitching rides, living off and on in a circuit of musical towns like Asheville. His

upbringing, he said, had been country and relatively poor. As he detailed, “my train name is Punkin’ Bread, cause I’m inbred—seriously, my family married each other—and punk. Get it? punk-inbred.” He talked some with Red and Jamie about his train strategies, the things he carried, and how to eat healthy on the road: “One good meal I always like to make is something I call hobo spring rolls. You take a tortilla, cut up some fresh cabbage in it, and put you some peanut butter on it. Then you add cayenne and cumin. Man, it’s good! And all the ingredients, you can just chuck ‘em in your hobo bucket and go, don’t have to worry about them spoiling in the heat or getting crushed.” Later in the tour, after all the dates were done and we were ready to head for home, Ted got restless. He took his tarp back from the bass player, folded it into his pack and announced “I believe I’d like to go ride a train.” After some parting words, he walked off to hitch a ride to the nearest freight yard. We saw him back in Asheville some weeks later.

On the way back to Asheville, we stopped off to pick up a friend of Jamie’s who he had heard was looking to bum a ride, since Ted’s departure for the train yard had freed up a space. Pulling into a small town north of Asheville, we found her living quarters: an old RV parked behind a communal housing situation where she showered and occasionally cooked. Saro, as she called herself, had moved there because she had heard about the welcoming spaces of community for punks, and she was commuting to Asheville to finish her massage certification, through which she mostly supported herself. As we pull up, Saro emerged from her RV in patched filthy jeans and a tie-dye shirt. She jumped in the car and made some quip about masturbating in the back seat all the way to town. Jamie, who was driving, said, “Actually, that might be distracting!” Saro replied, “I’ll just give you a massage instead,” and began to work on his tense neck from the

backseat. Jamie moaned in appreciation, having chronic neck pain from his fiddling: “Oh man, how do I get more of this!” Saro, knowing he gave music lessons, thought for a second: “Well, I’m really excited to exchange my skills for things that will help me grow personally, or help my health! So maybe we could work out a barter system where we can trade fiddle lessons for massage.” Detailing her efforts to avoid wage labor, Saro talked about how she also primarily dumpstered her food, but only at organic health food stores: “I try to dumpster in the day cause I mostly do it alone and I don’t want to be out back of some store in the dark if someone rolls up on me. I do pretty good though.” She noted, however, that her friends “who don’t care what they eat” also have lots of success behind Grocery Outlet and other conventional grocery stores. I asked if she could make a living in Asheville doing massage given all the competition; she replied, “Well, when you live like I do it doesn’t take much—probably 200 bucks a month all told. I don’t pay rent since I bought that RV, I barely buy food, I get around on a scooter and a bike... I don’t need much money. Now, other people, I don’t know how they make as a masseuse. Ideally for me, I’d like to give three massages a week.” Warming up to the subject, she talks more about her politics, which were inspired partly by her college major: she studied mostly cultural anthropology, because, as she put it, “that’s where all the activist kids were” at her college. Since college, however, she’s lived off the grid, having proudly avoided any kind of wage labor for six years now.

The paradoxical nature of wellness in the punk scene was driven home to me one afternoon on the highway during a two-week band tour. Having recruited a roadie with a van from her vast network of punk acquaintances, our lead singer Red enticed him to lend us his driving talents and vehicle for free by promising a two-week party during our

tour—and a chance for him to buy vinyl for his side business as a DJ, at a variety of record stores across the southeast. Jeremy the driver, however, came with a few downsides—namely that he was enchanted by drugs, alcohol, and altered states of consciousness. In the live-and-let-live ethos of punk World, where it is extremely frowned-upon to attempt to control another person, particularly for reasons of your own fears, I was reluctant to speak out when his love affair with drugs coincided with his driving. Unfortunately, he was as enchanted with the idea of being the only driver on a two-week tour as he was with drugs.

One afternoon, the motion of the van on the highway was even more erratic than its usual gyrations, which were caused by a number of worn-out front end suspension components combined with Jeremy's favorite highway speed of 85 mph, resulting in constant weaving and rolling. I looked up in alarm from the unbolted rear bench on which we slept to see Jeremy, red-eyed and shaky, trying to remove a child safety cap from an aspirin bottle with both hands while steering with his knees. Throwing ethnographic sensibilities to the wind, I scampered to the front of the van to encourage him to drive better. Just as I arrived, however, he succeeded at unfastening the bottle cap, simultaneously throwing all the pills all over the front of the van. It was a colorful assortment of gel caps, large green caplets, white pills, red pills, and so on. He bent down with one hand on the wheel, picking through the mess to find the precise numbers of each pill that he required. As he did, annoyed that I had doubted his driving skill, he mentioned that the pills were part of his wellness regime—he had simply combined them into one bottle before the tour in the interest of space, thanks for my concern. As he

washed handfuls of them down with a bottle of kombucha, he outlined their properties: fish oil, something containing plant phytosterols, vitamin C, vitamin A, a multivitamin, a probiotic pill, and various others. Completely bemused at this point, I asked him: if you're so worried about wellness, why are you knee-driving a 1989 Dodge with a bad front end and an exhaust leak down the highway for free in rural Louisiana at 85 mph while smoking weed with a raging hangover after not sleeping for a week? He responded succinctly: "Fuck off, college boy." But then, he lit up his one-hitter and explained how his exercise regimen and supplements allowed him to live pretty hard and still maintain his energy. "I've been goin' at it for some time now—I'm 40! But I can still party like a teenager." As I came to find out, Jeremy had grown up a military brat from a broken family, and in many ways had experienced a typically working-class childhood. It was through exposure to the punk scene, he outlined, that he had learned about wellness and how his diet could help him stay healthy.

### **Classed Reactions to Punk Bodies**

Middle-class and working-class people had complex and different reactions to the provocative things that punk bodies represented; as I show below, punk bodily praxis tended to intimidate or anger middle-class people. Working-class people were more tolerant in general of the spectacular kinds of abjection punks favored, likely to at least tolerate if not react with outright sympathy or solidarity to punk bodily practices.

*Solidarity and Sympathy:* On a sunny day in mid-summer, two punks—a young man and a young woman—sat on buckets on the idyllic college campus during a music instruction week devoted to old-time. With their battered travelling bags beside them,

they were conspicuously itinerant; with their filthy black and grey clothes, unwashed hair, and dirty bodies, they were conspicuously out of place on the well-tended campus. They had situated themselves with the aplomb of experienced buskers: in a comfortable shady spot by a well-travelled walkway, and with a wall behind them that focused and projected the sound of their fiddle and banjo into the bug-noisy summer day, they were well-nigh unavoidable for the students walking from class to class. To even a novice's ear, they were phenomenal old-time musicians, clearly well-versed in middle-class revivalist traditions and able to detail source recordings and to play in regional styles with drive and rhythm. All in all, it was quite a paradox for many of the onlookers who clustered around and then moved on as they cycled through songs. The young woman, in particular, looked rough. Her bare legs, poking out of cut-off overalls stopping at mid-thigh, were covered in weeping sores, some of them scabbed-over and some looking mildly infected. Eventually, an older woman—Kathy—ambled by on her way to teach a class. A well-respected local singer of traditional songs, she had been raised in a rural, working-class family, and was thus revered as an authentic representative of the genre. As Kathy walked by, the couple caught her eye. She greeted them and listened politely for a minute, after the young woman explained that they had met at an earlier festival. As they played, her eyes roved over their bodies and ensemble; her smile turned to a frown, and her hands rose to her hips. When they finished their tune and lowered their instruments. Kathy laid into them in a kindly but commanding way.

“Honey, that was a great tune, but your legs look *awful*. My goodness, those cuts all look *infected*, and there’s just dirt... everywhere!”

The young woman nodded nonchalantly and drawled:

“Yeahhhhh, we just got off a train—rode all the way from Portland the last few weeks. It’s been rough on the ol’ legs.”

Kathy was unappeased.

“Look here. Y’all need to get cleaned up. I teach here until six, but then I’m taking you home, cleaning you up, and treating those legs! You look like you’re just fit to *die* the way those cuts look!

The musician smiled, but demurred:

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you to offer! But we’re camping up in the woods above campus—we have a whole set-up with tents and a stove and everything—”

Kathy was not to be put off:

“Well, that’s brave of you, but tonight you’re coming home with me.”

Although the young woman and her partner were pleased at Kathy’s attention, they eventually won the argument and remained in their ridge-top camp. However, they had made friends with Kathy, and the three of them appeared around campus that week together, playing music and chatting. This dynamic—wherein people from working-class backgrounds reacted with sympathy to punk bodily spectacle—was familiar from a number of venues. Whether the older crowd at Allen’s not making a fuss over Red’s many tattoos and wild hair styles, or many other instances where punks in working-class spaces were offered help or solidarity or simply acceptance, bodies simply weren’t subjected to the same disciplinary ideals or evaluative gazes. Working-class norms of embodiment, which I characterize as having a ‘devil-may-care’ aspect, didn’t exactly dovetail with punk spectacle, but they existed in a cultural space where ‘deviant’ bodies were a fact of life, and where injuries, tattoos, and other kinds of intentional and

unintentional markers of bodily difference were relatively common and unremarkable.

Thus, the bodily transgressions that were so apparent and distasteful to middle-class people simply didn't translate the same in working-class spaces. As above, they even at times marked punks as worthy of charitable intervention.

*Middle-Class People Hate and Fear Punks:* Our country band, Little Red and the Hots, was subject to extraordinary amounts of personnel turnover. This was due to numerous reasons, but one of the main ones was that Red, a lifelong punk with deep ties to the punk community, almost always preferred to hire punk friends as musicians. This presented ongoing dilemmas: first, most of them couldn't afford or didn't want to own performance-quality instruments that they would then have to take care of, so equipping the newest punk bandmate with gear was inevitably a project that led Red to ask favors of other musician friends. Often, however, the new bandmate, once equipped with a borrowed bass amp or a simple drum kit, would simply decide to move on, or alternately would get stuck somewhere two states away with no way to make a gig. Thus, there was a constant cycling effect. In time, this began to wear on the one or two more stable band personnel, including in particular one musician, Jeff, who was trying to cultivate a professional career. Jeff had developed, along with his roommate, a bitter hatred of 'crusties'—a term, as I mention earlier, that comes from 'crust punk' and which punks themselves use to designate particular kinds of dirt-embracing punk lifestyles. Jeff in particular was offended by what he viewed as disgusting crusties, and disliked having them in the band.

A brilliant country fiddler from the Midwest, Jeff had grown up with academic parents who encouraged him to attend graphic design college. However, early on, he determined to build a career as a country fiddler, although he was proficient on multiple instruments. Fiddle was simply his calling. Jeff, in addition to years of dedicated skype lessons on fiddle with Nashville professionals, had honed his country music chops through a studied devotion to other working-class arts like hunting and fishing, two activities completely foreign to his parents, who tolerated it with bemusement. His devotion to the genre was complete, and he had moved to Asheville recently to launch his career. He maintained ongoing memberships in multiple performing bands, a fact which caused considerable friction. Often, he would commit to gigs well in advance, only to decline and leave us in the lurch when offered a better-paying or more prestigious gig somewhere else; this tendency, combined with his oft-stated demands for pay guarantees (which tended to steal pay from bandmates), led him into direct conflict with both Red and Jamie, who approached the idea of a band from a different perspective. During one of the frequent band arguments, Jeff objected to Red directing most of the pay from a gig to a travelling band who we had shared the bill with. This practice, one of Red's habits cultivated out of an explicit sense of solidarity with other touring musicians, became a major issue since we would often end up playing gigs for free after she helped out a band. Since she was our booker, the bands we shared the stage with were often staffed by punk friends. Jeff finally had enough, declaring angrily, "Man, I'm sick of giving all our money to crusties. Fuckin' crusties, always mooching everything, smell like shit...I'm not playing any more free gigs. Either we get paid, or basically, I'm done with this band!" Red looked hurt: "You know, Jeff, I used to be one of those crusties too!" Jeff,

realizing his mistake, said, “Yeah, but you weren’t one of the crusties with credit cards!”

Red, mollified somewhat, said, “Yeah, true. Those kids annoy the shit out of me.”

Although offended and annoyed by his diva behavior, she agreed tentatively to Jeff’s terms, even though she found them in direct contradiction to her sense of what playing music was actually about.

Later that night, at Jeff’s house, he and his roommate and I were playing music and drinking. Jeff and his roommate started repurposing old country songs into didactic tales about crusties. At one point, Jeff picked up an acoustic guitar and launched into a parodic version of “Country Roads” by John Denver: “Crusty Rooooaaadds, take me hooooome, to a train, that I jumped oonnnn...Crust Virginia, mountain hippie, crusty rooaaaadss, take me home....” He bellowed at the top of his lungs drunkenly. His roommate burst out laughing, and proposed a plan to rid Asheville of the infestation of crusties: terming it the “Empty Boxcar Project,” they imagined how nice an Asheville music scene devoid of annoying crust punks would be. The Empty Boxcar Project would rely, in their imagination, on two primary new local ordinances: “Get a fuckin’ job, Crusty, principle number one, and second, mandatory showers every day! Crusties would flee the city immediately.” Jeff lamented, “It’s so nice here, but these goddamn crust punks and their stench! They fucking show up to parties, drink all the beer, make a huge mess, pass out on the floor, and then they leave. They’re nasty, and they never bring anything good.” His roommate chimed in: “How do you know if a crusty’s been sleeping on your couch? He’s still there!” Jeff laughed, and countered: “How many crusties does it take to screw in a light bulb? None, dumbass! Crusties screw in boxcars!” After a while, they get on the subject of our newest punk bandmate, a guy named Justin who they dub

“Crustin.” Crustin bounces around between New Orleans and Asheville, and is a notorious drunk punk who plays what he terms ‘dirty swing.’ His two gigs with the band have been disasters, since he didn’t bother to learn the songs and showed up drunk to practice, and Jeff is incensed at him. Eventually, after the night of drunken critique has emboldened him, he tells Red that she either has to kick out Crustin or he’s going to quit the band. Heartbroken, Red, who has been friends with Crustin for years, defers to Jeff’s demand since his talented lead playing is a central element of the band’s sound.

Jeff’s reaction to punks was not uncommon—many people in the middle class music scene tended to criticize punks on both the subject of bodily transgressions, including primarily dirtiness and smelliness, and on their tendency to ignore the middle-class practices of immediate quid pro quo exchange, like not bringing a dish to potlucks or constantly bumming rides. Crusties, in short, were ‘takers,’ people who were competent or able to do wage labor and take care of themselves, but for perverse reasons chose not to. This was, in effect, the primary middle-class critique of punks: that they were lazy, non-working, mooching, parasites who were primarily interested in getting drunk and being dirty. And in point of fact, this wasn’t always incorrect—as internal punk self-critique points to. But often, what looked like ‘taking free stuff’ to outside eyes was actually a theorized kind of solidarity, and what looked like lazy standards of self-care was a theorized rejection of ‘bourgeois’ norms of cleanliness or simple accession to the demands of living on the peripheries of cash economies. The mistaken critique of punks as moochers was particularly the case with the issue above of paying touring bands, a practice that Jeff objected to as charity, but which Red viewed as a very specific kind of solidarity which would in fact be returned to us by other local bands when we

ourselves toured. And in point of fact, Jeff was happy to accept the same in return when bands in other cities helped us get down the road by arranging, promoting, and playing at shows where we would get most of the door take.

Of course, not all middle-class observers reacted to punks in the same fashion. The flip side of middle-class reactions had to do with particular kinds of intimidation that people felt when comparing themselves with punks as avatars of a particularly committed kind of leftist activist. Late one night at a music festival, I sat playing tunes with two friends, one of whom was a long-time itinerant punk musician, and the other an incisive middle-class observer of the punk music scene and herself a phenomenally gifted musician. As the evening wore on, the punk, Jason, asked me about my academic project, and I explained my interest in class differences, music, and activism. I said that I was interested in learning about people who were themselves trying to learn political lessons from working-class culture, and he immediately understood. Jason replied, “That’s the story of my days. I grew up working class—my dad is an appliance repairman—and class is definitely a cultural thing from my perspective. But we’re all trying to learn how to live---how to live and avoid being in a suburb driving three cars. I think we’re all looking for a way to figure out how to do that.” Rachel, our musical companion, joined in: “No, I think of it more as we’re all looking for a home, we’ve all found this music and culture that feels so much like *home*. We’re looking for a place that *feels* right.” I said, “Yes, that’s pretty much what I meant. Most people in this scene are looking for something, a way to live, that fits their ideals better.” Jason chimed in, “Well, too, everyone’s also a little worried about not really having a right to play this music, about being from the wrong class, and being, like, a class appropriator.” Rachel is a little

uncomfortable with this idea, and mentions somewhat guiltily but very openly that she had grown up in a privileged middle-class household and come to the music through classes in New England, where she was from. Jason responds, “Nah, don’t worry too much about it, everyone here kind of feels bad about their privilege—it’s weird like that. Most scenes, people are more or less proud of that kind of thing, but in old-time land, a lot of people try to lie about it, hide it. Basically, especially with punks, the better you can ditch your privilege the more legit you are. Coming from a working-class background, it can be weird to see, so really, it’s refreshing when people are honest about it.” Rachel notes, “Yeah, I think that’s why I and a lot of other people are kind of intimidated by punks—they really stick together in their little clumps, and particularly the train-riding ones that scare everybody and seem so defensive a lot of the time! I guess it’s because they tend to get judged by other people so hard for looking down and out and dirty—that has to get to you.” Jason replied, “Yeah, I don’t know. I guess for some that’s true—some of ‘em are angry at the world and a lot of what they’re doing is a giant ‘Fuck You’ to everybody who grew up privileged. But a lot, too, are looking and acting like that on purpose, kind of to be in solidarity or because they think it’s good politics. It’s a weird dynamic, like I said...”

The general reaction to punks that Rachel described—a kind of intimidation springing from a collectively-felt guilt about privilege, was not an uncommon one. As so much academic work describes, revivalist scenes often have a great deal of class anxiety, a fact that comes out in many different registers, including concerted attempts to cultivate working-class personas and aesthetics, particularly in the realm of dress (as with Eli in the previous section). And yet, this was such a common dynamic that few middle-class

revivalists were surprised when the banjo player at the next campsite over in stained work pants, a flannel shirt, and speaking in a southern accent was actually a New-York-raised ethnomusicologist. In fact, it was kind of expected—as my old-time bandmates joked, they never left home in Asheville for a gig without a flannel shirt and trucker hat.

Beginning at least with the Popular Front of the 30s, middle-class revivalists have been imitating working-class rural people in various registers, and it is thus now the subject of its own reflexive critique and jokes. Interestingly, punks didn't typically look like impoverished rural farmers—instead, they were suggesting poverty in a semiotic register that was relatively new to the revivalist scene, and one that read much more convincingly as ‘authentically’ downtrodden, whatever the reality. And even if they didn’t look like rural southerners, the apparent authenticity of their poverty rendered them confusing subjects to middle-class musicians, who at times resented them for this very quality. As one friend who taught music at a local college commented when he was excluded from a hot punk jam despite his talent: “Man, if you want to play music around here, just make damn sure you put on some clothes that look like you found ‘em lying in a boxcar corner first!”

### **3.5: Conclusion: “Doing Community”**

The word ‘community’ (ENDNOTE: Community) was ubiquitous during my fieldwork with all three groups of informants, and yet it meant extremely different things. As a framing device for a particularized notion of social ethics, the different things that ‘community’ meant in the three contexts provide a convenient way of encapsulating some of the spatial logics, ethical orientations, and normative attitudes of the differently-classed groups. I examine below the way that this complex word-concept was used in different spaces.

*Middle-Class Notions of Community:* The idea of ‘community’ in middle-class left discourse is at once so ubiquitous as to be essentially meaningless, and at the same time profoundly important as an organizing master trope. Not unlike wellness, another frame which has both ethical and temporal implications, community functions as a tabula rasa for all that is good and proper in middle-class life—master tropes of a deontological stance that takes into account time, space/place, and selves/persons. The word, as I began to catalogue its many appearances, served a variety of functions.

In one important Andersonian sense, it denoted a vaguely imagined horizontal collective whose continued existence compelled individuals to act a certain way. This sense of the word was often invoked in appeals to ethical behavior. In one mundane instance that persistently stuck in my mind, people at one of the residential music camps started taking a shortcut through some landscaping, trampling a path. Quickly, a large sign in bold print, tacked to a stick in the middle of the path, popped up. In large font, it bore the legend “Please don’t walk here—when you do, you destroy *the community’s*

plants.” As an overt appeal, it struck the ears oddly. “The community’s plants”? Which community? The community of plant-lovers? Plant-planters? The Landscaping community? The community of people who pay the landscapers? The community of absent college students? The community of strangers taking music lessons together for a week? I realized it didn’t matter—’the community’ didn’t really mean anyone in particular, although to some extent it meant all of the above. Instead, it referenced the platonic ideal of a community, as a way to structure the ethical consequences of walking on plants: ‘it hurts the social collective to walk on these plants.’ Or even more direly, it may even have hurt ‘social collectivity’ as a principle to walk on them, in the terms of the cleverly deployed ethical appeal. As this example shows, community is a deceptively simple word which in its seeming innocence conceals some of the most sacred longings of the leftist imagination—a primary component of the utopic and nostalgic imagination, if a vague and all-purpose one. When it was used in this ethical register, it functioned as the idea that ‘the social’ —that is, the imagined matrix of embodied and ongoing relationships which might be described as predicated on a kind of solidarity—is or ought to be the primary result or focus of activities like traditional music which are understood to be politically emancipatory. ‘Community’ in this usage stands for everything good that middle-class people fear they lack, indexing a longing for human connectedness and mutual responsibility, and serving as a disembodied referent for proscriptive ethico-moral discourse.

However, it also had much more specific usages. For instance, emails to the various music listervs in town never failed to mention ‘the old-time community,’ ‘the dance community,’ or the ‘classic country community.’ Sometimes it was even broader:

‘the Asheville community’ or ‘the musical community.’ Or just ‘our community,’ as if that term was self-evident. People at events like dances and concerts would always reference their community in opening or closing remarks on stage, usually to thank or praise the community. In these instances, the word tended to point to a disparate group of people united by activities (usually, the kind of activities that Bourdieu might term ‘practices of distinction,’ in that they functioned as particularized markers of taste in a broader economy of similar practices) like a particular music genre or a particular kind of traditional or neo-traditional dance. For these ‘communities,’ these activities not only structured regular spaces where the activities occurred, but also functioned as a set of defined aesthetic preferences, social practices, and ideologies. For instance, one regularly occurring musical event was advertised over email:

Hello folks!

I'll be hosting a Community Sing next Wednesday in West Asheville! The theme is Songs of Emergence: As spring surrounds us, what are you emerging towards? What are you emerging away from? Bring songs of all kinds of emergence- leaving a bad relationship, freedom or emancipation, floating down a river, becoming something new. Snacks and drinks are welcome. Community sings are always free but donations are never refused!

The Asheville Community Sing is a community of folks who meet each month to share songs together. Using our voices, we teach and learn from many traditions including gospel, Americana, Appalachian folk songs, hymns, English传统s, African-American church musics, sea shanties and more.

Another organizer closed her appeal for an audience at an upcoming event in this fashion:

We really do miss YOU when you don't show up, so please trust me when I say we need everyone's support to make this work every time we have zydeco, especially Louisiana bands. Asheville is not a big

city, so we really do need the strong, consistent support of our very special community. Thank you for that.

At other times, ‘community’ had something closer to a religious meaning, as in ‘fellow traveler’—a register which pointed to the affective sense of social belonging that particular genres of music both create and draw from. For instance, the fellow travelers for the ‘old-time community’ tended to be people who saw themselves as rejecting elements of ‘modernity’ or commercialism or passive spectatorship; they embraced a self-consciously different political vision of the good and thus thought of themselves as embattled in some way by the broader world in which they inevitably participated in through labor and housing and other kinds of structured spaces. An example of this usage that I found common was during events like square dance workshops, aimed at teaching people how to call square dances, the various teachers would often introduce themselves as ‘community organizers.’ In the sense, however, not of doing explicit political organizing towards a goal, but rather in the sense of ‘organizing’ opportunities for ‘community,’ which was itself the political goal. When this notion of community was deployed, it took on an overtly political register, mostly found in the most staunchly-purist revivalist spaces. I detail two instances of this below that are emblematic.

Of course, sometimes ‘community’ simply meant ‘people thinking (or doing) the same things at the same time.’ This is the operant definition which results from a stripping of the moral valences that ‘community’ typically has, and explains what we mean when we say things like ‘the intelligence community’ or ‘the online gaming community’ or ‘the corporate community.’ This de-moralized sense of community, however, is itself revealing for the way that it points to the pervasive power of the

concept as a framework for organizing middle-class notions of collectivity or group agency.

*Revivalism and Politicized Notions of ‘Community’*: One thing that middle-class uses of ‘community’ seldom if ever meant was “a group of people united in a particular geographic space by origin or residence, and conducting ongoing social interaction and obligation.” This, however, seemed to me to be the actual cultural imaginary that the idea most specifically proceeded from. More generally, the utopic idea of ‘community’ is difficult to disentangle from spatial or geographic concerns, and indeed, one of the main ethically-loaded descriptors most closely associated with ‘community’ in middle-class discourse is ‘local’ (or ‘localism,’ a movement that Hess (2009; 2010) and Schor (2010) offer a sincere and optimistic portrait of). The word ‘local’ has undergone a radical shift in connotation in the last two decades in American public life; or perhaps more accurately, it has metastasized into a schizoid term which is freighted with opposing moral evaluations. An easy way to disambiguate the meaning of ‘local’ as currently used in middle-class discourse is to determine whether it is being used to refer to an object or a subject. If it describes a subject, than it almost inevitably connotes an older meaning: a set of ideas relating to parochialism, banality, or geographic ‘stuckness.’ As Appadurai notes, locals (or ‘natives’) “are not only persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places, but they are also those who are somehow incarcerated, or confined, in those places” (1988). People who are ‘local’ and/or yokel are limited, provincial, and likely politically retrogressive in the middle-class imagination. On the other hand, objects, goods, services, businesses, products, and arts which are ‘local’ are virtuous.

Middle-class people love to shop local, buy local, support local business, support local agriculture, support local music (and bands), and so on. They like to own locally-made objects, eat locally-grown food, and generally keep their money ‘local.’ They just don’t, typically, like ‘locals,’ who ironically tend to ‘shop global.’

This divergent evaluation of the idea of geographic or spatial fixity (as a quality of persons versus a quality of objects or services) is primarily related to two things: first, the overwhelming geographical mobility of middle-class Americans, who find it unremarkable to move multiple times over the course of a career or simply for reasons of pleasure or convenience. As such, the experience of geographic mobility (which also, inevitably, structures particular relationships to people, family, and place) is a class-specific marker, which encodes certain highly figured and ethically loaded class values (for instance, Khan 2011 talks about the sense of ‘ease’ or a self-consciously cultivated cosmopolitan omnivorousness as a primary marker of class status). This geographic regime, and the cultural values it coincides with, do in actuality stand in distinct contrast to working class ideas of community and geography, as I detail below. But in short, anyone who doesn’t approach the idea of geographic mobility in this fashion is assumed to be mired in poverty, stuck in a provincial mindset, or too lazy to chase the dream. It is, in other words, normative or even ‘good’ to move around or to be from somewhere else, even if revivalists often devote large amounts of energy towards a kind of ‘local’ self-making, as I detail. This ‘local’ self-making, however always appears underwritten by a slightly ironic edge, or by the adoption of practices or aesthetics that, while nominally ‘local,’ always in fact generate temporal or other kinds of distance from what actual contemporary locals are doing at the moment. This is why revivalists love country music

from sixty years ago, but loathe contemporary country. Part of the danger is, doubtless, actually being legitimately mistaken for ‘a (contemporary) local’, which would be undesirable to most middle-class revivalists on a daily basis (but not necessarily to punks).

The second major factor in the divergence of ‘local’ as an idea is related to a leftist evaluation of global commodity chains and their social and environmental impacts. “Think Globally, Act Locally” is the bumper-sticker slogan which sums up a deontological stance which inflects leftist ideas of community and space: an allegiance to an imaginary, horizontal (global) collective as the primary ethical responsibility (which, of course, replaces the moral primacy of distinct personal relationships in the broad ethical sphere, if not the practical one); combined with an imagined locus of political action, which, as ‘shop local’ demonstrates, is primarily imagined to happen in the realm of everyday, ‘local’ acts of consumption. Thus, as with the Night Owl, the ethics of social relationality are mediated through money: it is virtuous to support a local band, support a local bar, drink the local beer, help the local economy. And as an added benefit, you can get to see cosmopolitan consumers pretend to be ‘locals.’

As I mentioned in the section on Allen’s barn dance, one of the times when the contradictions in working-class practice became most apparent was when Allen exercised his prerogatives as an owner of private property in defiance of the ‘community’s’ wishes and against the explicit ethical understandings of how money, people, and places should interact. A version of this happened during my fieldwork with two of the premier middle-class spaces of musical performance for old-time music: one a local bar with a long-standing weekly jam night, and the other the evening gatherings at a local college campus

during residential musical instruction camps. These instances showed what happens when a politicized idea of “‘community’ as that which happens during music-making,” collides with the actual economic logic of how middle-class people maintain and enable the public sociality that doing ‘community’ requires.

In the case of the bar, the old-time jam, a tradition which in the past had brought a regular crowd to drink and listen, became less of a money-maker as the tourist demographics of the downtown area began to shift and the venue ceased to be a hangout for Asheville residents. Eventually, the talent buyer at the bar simply booked a country band to play in that spot, without telling the ‘old-time community.’ When people showed up as always to find the stage occupied by an electrified country band, a number of furious emails flew over the music listserv. Musicians there to jam harassed the band, yelled at them, and yelled at the bar crew. But the deal had already been struck: the bar was losing money on jam nights, and the band was there to make money for the bar by bringing in more tourists. The commercial logic of the space had jarringly intruded on the sense that musicians had that it was a space of ‘community,’ whose primary logic was to nurture their particular passion. People adapted, however, and an earlier jam was scheduled during the less-busy evening hours. One night, however, even this earlier jam was precluded. Calls and emails went to the bar manager, who finally wrote to the entire listserv:

Hi Everyone,

I'm sorry for the screw-up with the Jam last Wednesday. We had been doing an event on Tuesdays, with one of the local breweries for the last few weeks. In a quick meet, one of the managers mentioned that the brewery wanted to move the event to Wednesday. At this point, I don't know why they switched. My responsibility is to make sure that one

event doesn't conflict with another. A couple weeks went by and it was off my radar.

Some amazing musicians and many sessions have played here over the years, but few have been as close to my heart and the soul of this bar, as the Wednesday Jam. It is with regret and sadness that the night slipped through the crack. My job as a manager is to guide others who may not know the protocol. I need to write myself an employee warning or something! There was no intention to insult or disrespect anyone, or the Jam. It honestly and unfortunately slipped through.

And to Bill Norman, who has motivated, nurtured, and organized the Jam, I have my deepest regrets. I'm sorry for the disrespect Bill! You have been the Mainstay from the beginning. You mean a great deal to me and the session. I promise to not let this mess happen again. I'm Sorry Brother.

Sincerely,

Ed

Bill, who was a cranky local celebrity in the old-time music scene and had presided over the jam for many years, wrote back publicly:

Ed,

Thanks for the letter. Its best to telephone me since I don't have email at home and only check it at the library occasionally.

I'd like to meet with you and the people (Booker, manager, bartender, whoever) responsible for bumping us. I'd also like a written contract for the Wednesday Jam, spelling out the understanding between us. We can come up with the terms at a meeting. I think this would be enough reassurance for us to continue as its been in the past. We just have to get past this uncertainty.

When there is a personnel change (managers, bartenders, bookers) there has to be some orientation to let them know to keep their hands off Wednesday night..

I don't think we can survive another screw up.

So give me a call and let's have a meeting.

## Bill

Interestingly, the bar manager attempted to defuse the situation by acknowledging the spiritual role of the music at his bar, rather than attempting to explain that his bar had to make money. Bill, on the other hand, responded in an explicitly commercial register, demanding the formality of a contract for an ad-hoc money-losing event. The final result satisfied no one.

At a local college, a similar email went out to the same listserv before the summer music workshops started up one year. These workshops are in many ways the culmination and purest expression of middle-class traditional music, as I detail in particular in the next chapter. This is true not only in the sense that the way the learning is structured (by classroom-based pay-for-instruction), but also in the historically resonant embrace of a folkloristic view of music and class, and perhaps most importantly, in the explicit, oft-expressed sense that the most important aspect of the weeks is the experience and formation of ‘community.’ Everyone understands themselves to be there, in a word, ‘doing’ community. And although they are all comfortable with the idea of paying for music instruction, they are not as comfortable with the idea of paying for community: it is, in effect, an uncomfortable boundary crossing which amounts to pollution.

Thus, when this email circulated to the ‘local folk community’ (which is, of course, not really made up of ‘locals’), it caused great outrage:

To the Asheville area folk music community,  
The Workshop Series is coming soon and I know many of you are  
excited by the prospect of being a part of the evening jams.

We have had a long-standing policy that those in the local folk community who wish to come out during the evenings for the jams need only phone the Director personally to ask permission. This allows us to know who and how many locals to expect, which has become increasingly important for purposes of security as our programs have grown. We have never refused any member of the local folk community who has asked permission.

On the other hand, if someone chooses to come to the jams without contacting us first, we ask them to keep in mind that the Music Workshops are a private event, and that our attendees have paid a not-inconsiderable sum to be here. That person may be asked if they are part of our group, and if not, informed that our evening activities are closed to the public and be asked to leave.

We have public concerts during many of the Instruction Weeks, and of course, the square dance every Thursday night is always open to the public (these events have admission fees). On every other day, however, our activities are reserved for our attendees only, unless one has received permission from our office to join us.

Please help us by spreading the word about our policies to any who might be planning to come to our evening activities.

Thanks, and we hope you all have a wonderful, music-filled summer.

---

Director,  
Summer Music Workshops

This email figured in a number of conversations between old-time musicians; in fact, it was the first thing many people talked about when they saw each other. They found it outrageous that the Director would seek to curtail what they saw as their right to the community access of old time, and particularly objected to the bald statement of economic fact: access to the music and its players and instructors had specifically been monetized. It violated, as it were, the fourth wall between middle-class understandings of community and middle-class ethics of exchange (which, as I note above, were most often compatible if uneasy bedfellows). It was particularly striking, given the welcoming

speech at the beginning of the workshop series, delivered every week: “This place, this event, is all about community—about people coming together and sharing and making music. Welcome.”

There are a few things to point out in this set of disruptions, particularly as compared with what happened at Allen’s. First, the way that the discussions and debates played out in the disembodied format of email, with direct, instrumentalized demands and edicts from both sides is striking in the context of the negotiation of ‘community space.’ Second, the major objection of the middle-class musical community was essentially the acknowledgment by owners or managers of commercial, profit-oriented events or spaces that the spaces, and everything therefore that occurred in and because of them, was subordinated to, or even worse predicated on, the logic of monetized exchange. Despite the fact that ‘localized’ monetary exchange is an explicit ethical good, the collision of the notion of ‘community’ with even that space of buying and selling provoked outrage. For the old-time musicians, who were operating with an overtly politicized leftist idea of community, there was a complete ideological separation between the idea of playing music at a bar, and the idea that the bar is a commercial space which has to turn a profit, and that music is one of the ways that a bar turns a profit. The outrage directed at both the camp and the bar was vehement because of the ideological pollution of the imagined space of ‘community’ with the profane demands of the market. This stark ideological boundary is in distinct contrast to the way that the ‘community’ at Allen’s realized the complex and necessary interplay of economic facts with the maintenance and possibility of community space. In short, as I detail in the next section, middle-class people saw a profound and meaningful categorical division of practices (buying/selling and ‘doing’

public community), whereas working-class people saw a social space where certain ethical codes underwrote a very particular engagement between money and sociality in the ordering of public space.

*Working-Class Community: The Maintenance of Boundaries:* One of the virtues of politicized middle-class notions of community is the combination of the relative porousness of their boundaries, and the deeply meaningful relationships, emotions, experiences, and self-making or re-making they enable. The broader chapter has argued that there are inherent contradictions within middle-class notions of public space, community, and the entanglement of cultural and economic logics, while pointing to some of the benefits of working-class or punk instantiations of these same concepts. This is not to suggest that a. punk and working-class notions of community escape their own contradictions or b. That middle-class notions are ‘wrong’ or worthless. Indeed, as a middle-class person, some of the best times of my life have come while experiencing the profound feelings of fellowship and common purpose with the people around me as we played a transcendent tune or joyously spun around during a square dance. And indeed, these experiences and the good feelings they generate are generally democratically available, at least to people familiar and comfortable with middle-class culture. You don’t have to look a certain way, act a certain way, become deeply entangled with people, dress differently, or radically change your life—in other words, the boundaries of these ‘communities’ are largely self-determined by the people who find their defining activities (dance, music, etc) compelling enough to devote study or practice to. By the same token, however, these ‘communities’ by and large disappear when that activity isn’t present.

This is not to say that middle-class musicians and dancers don't have friendships, romantic relationships, pot-luck suppers, benefit concerts, and so on, all enabled by the gathering space of their activities. It is to say, however, that, comparatively, middle-class 'communities' organized by these activities are orders of magnitude more ephemeral than their working-class counterparts, defined as they are by itinerant, mobile, cosmopolitan people who live and work in far-flung and ever-changing locations, and who have less need, desire, or expectation for reciprocal mutual aid and ongoing interaction from their communities.

Defining a working-class notion of 'community' is relatively easy by comparison, but not because the cultural logics of working-class community-ness are in any way simplistic, as I show in the chapter on Allen's. Instead, it is easier largely for three reasons: First, there is no equivalent cultural history of a folkloric idea of an imagined agrarian utopia and its ways (see the history chapter); absent as well is the de-spatialized notion of a global humanity to which an emancipatory politics should primarily be oriented. Second, prevailing working-class moral orientations towards space and place, as well as the political-economic facets of geographic mobility, mean that working-class people often have the opportunity to develop social ties that have a time-depth and reliance on registers of kinship that are both rare in middle-class spaces. And finally, as I show in the section on bodies and persons/selves, the working-class socio-temporal horizon is oriented to the social present which looks to an imagined past, rather than an imagined future self that must be cultivated into being.

These factors all translate into a particular idea and practice of community in working-class spaces. The word itself, 'community,' is by comparison sparsely used,

although it is deployed from time to time. It is never used, however, in the abstract and despatialized ways that Anderson's work imagines (although nationalism is a powerful register in other ways); nor is it used to refer to collectivities defined by practices (the 'country music community,' for instance). It is also never used to refer to a disembodied collective to which moral obligations are owed. Instead, when it is used, it refers to a specific, geographically-defined group of people who collectively embrace particular social logics which demand both extensive intersocial contact and long-term relationships of obligation. Community, in other words, is here and now. Thus, people at Allen's would at times refer to 'this community,' as meaning the people present then and there; Allen would, on stage, thank "the musicians who are here to lend their talents to the community." In the case of benefits for health problems, a public prayer might be said: "Lord, we just ask you to heal Jim's foot and to help him adapt to his prosthesis, and we thank you for Jim's supportive community in his time of need."

As I hope this chapter has shown, this idea of community stands in very distinct contrast to middle-class ideals of community, and I have suggested that in some ways, it realizes with less overt contradiction some of the actual political ideals as imagined in leftist discourse. But there are drawbacks: like the moral geography I describe at Allen's, the boundaries of 'community' are imagined in very sharp gradients, both spatial and temporal. If the immediate referent on a given night at Allen's is the group of people there, it certainly extends into the past to encompass deceased regulars, family members, and so on; it also extends spatially into the immediate surrounding landscape and the people who inhabit it and are related by blood or social ties to the particular node that is Allen's. However, the specific obligations, warmth, and respect offered to people who

‘act right’ at Allen’s don’t extend very far spatially, and they don’t extend particularly far into the future. In effect, the socio-temporal ethics of community in working-class spaces don’t do abstraction particularly well, focusing instead on temporally and spatially present people. This was driven home to me one night leaving Allen’s, when, miles down the dark rural road, a car driven by one of the regulars there that I was friendly with roared through a stop sign, joyriding, spinning tires, and missing me by inches as I slammed on my brakes. The driver didn’t recognize me, and didn’t care that he had nearly killed someone; I was just a stranger at that point. The respectful sociality offered in the sanctuary of Allen’s had disappeared as we progressed towards the space of the city and its atomized sociality. In other words, the idea of ‘community’ in working-class practice has very delimited boundaries that are primarily defined by the entanglement of time, space and cultural ethics (as in, you have to be in the same space consistently and long-term with other people to enact the ethically-correct requirements of sociality that define ‘community’). It is, in effect, a register that prioritizes ethical obligations to a much smaller number of people, and in very specific (and demanding) ways. It is this quality of working-class social ethics that, I believe, accounts for some of the political frustrations liberals experience in their encounters with working-class people, particularly in the context of abstract issues (like global warming, coal mining, or gun control), which imply an ethical obligation to a community so broad, and a future so distant, as to be ethically unrecognizable.

In a larger sense, I want to suggest, as many others have (Coates 2014a), that cultural practices that work particularly well in a given space have their limitations

outside of that space. However, I add, this is as true of middle-class practices as it is of working-class practices.

*Punk Ideas and Practices of Community:* As I also address in the introductory section on punks, the idea of ‘community’ in punk practice is theorized and politicized, and partakes of some aspects of both working-class and middle-class conceptualizations and practices. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the idea of collectives to punk praxis: in many ways, the creation of collectives is in fact both the means and the ends to a pre-figurative politics that imagines the eradication of statist authority and capitalist exploitation. However, the mere existence of collectives as such isn’t the point—rather, the means by which they constitute themselves (i.e., voluntarily or by ‘free association’), comport themselves (ideally, through consensus or other non-hierarchical means), support themselves (through ‘solidarity,’ barter, salvage, and gifts), amuse themselves (through participatory art and music that ideally transgress boundaries), and look (see the section on punk aesthetics), define the methods of anarchist praxis.

As an email from Jamie shows, however, the rubric of ‘community’ was a powerful motivator towards a particular sense of ethical obligation. Jamie had built a ‘tiny house,’ as I mentioned, and due to unforeseen circumstances, was faced with the difficult task of disassembling it on a steep hillside and transporting and reassembling it on another steep hillside twenty miles away. He had neither truck nor sufficient tools, and some of the panels weighed as much as 300 pounds. Thus, he sent a mass email appealing for help:

As you can imagine, there is no way I can do this project alone so I am reaching out far and wide to my communities for support. I will need

help carrying cabin parts, setting them up, problem solving, keeping people fed, and dealing with the unexpected. Impact drivers and 4x4 trucks will be highly useful.

If you are excited and available to help me out for any portion, large or small, of this project let me know and I will add you to my texting list. I will be sending out text messages to inform folks of the progress and where we are at with the project.

If you are really committed to helping with the project and you want to trade for shoe making classes, let me know and we can start that conversation as well.

I am so grateful to have such an amazing community, I wouldn't even consider taking on this project if I wasn't so confident in my community.

-Jamie

This email encapsulated in many ways the defining features of community for punks: based on a theorized notion of solidarity, oriented towards political goals like off-the-grid living, entirely voluntary, based on notions of barter and trade, and requiring no financial input. Jamie's email generated sufficient help that he was able to move his house, a process I mention in the next chapter. In this sense, when punks like Jamie used the phrase "I'm a community organizer," they didn't mean 'someone who organizes an extant community to accomplish a limited and explicit political goal', but conversely, 'someone who organizes, or organizes opportunities for, the idea or practice of 'community' as itself the political goal.'"

As I note in the introduction on punks, Red and Jamie often encapsulated very differing engagements with the political ideals that circulated in punk scenes, although they fundamentally agreed on more than they disagreed. For Jamie, the idea of community was very explicit and very important, and was a primary metric through which he evaluated the 'scenes' he circulated in. As he put it,

This is something I've thought about a lot, this question of community. Before the punk scene I existed with zero community. Well, I had

family, so you could call that some level of community. So before the punk scene my community was my family. And then all of a sudden here was the punk scene, and it was like this whole community that was there for me *to a certain extent*. And I'm wanting more, in terms of characteristics that define community.

Jamie was explicit about what those characteristics are:

Regularity, that's the big one. Seeing people regularly. This is a thought that I've been having for years now, in conversation with a good friend. He believes that to truly have a sustained community looking out for each other's needs, you need to see each other once a week. *Minimum* once a week. Whereas this whole seeing people every now and then, that's not community! Seeing people a couple of times a summer, a couple of times at a festival here or there: "How you doin', what's up, good to see you, oh let's share some food"—and then going back to your life, and you know, not having that on a regular basis. That no longer feels like community to me. That's no longer meeting my definitions of *community*. It did meet my definitions of community, you know, ten years ago. So now I'm looking for people who are really willing to support each other, really willing to commit to each other, and willing to see each other on a regular basis, and help each other out when they need it. I'm not really seeing that on small levels on a regular day-to-day basis. Maybe other people in the Asheville scene have that level of community, but I personally don't.

Jamie also located the idea of community specifically with reference to some of the 'primitivist' ideas that circulate in the punk scene:

Off the top of my head, I'm going to say that community is a spectrum in between loneliness and isolation, and tribe. What people are striving for, in the end result, is, like, a tribe that holds you from cradle to grave, where you totally belong, and you're supported and you have a role in that tribe. Community to me, means that in the absence of 'tribe,' what can you have? People are constantly trying to figure out, 'what is community, what is community?' Well, with every benchmark, you realize, there's potential for more. In my years of community organizing, I'm constantly looking to the next level, the next step, of where we could be. Because I'm perpetually dissatisfied. I'm always looking like, 'well, we're here but we could be over there.' And some people are way back, not even to where I'm at yet.

Red, on the other hand, was relatively suspicious of the term ‘community,’ but not because she didn’t like the concept as such. Indeed, as chapter two argued, the idea deeply informed her attempts to reconcile the social logics of Allen’s with a middle-class performance space, as well as her approach to the ethics of exchange with other touring bands. Rather, her discomfort was with code words that to her signaled an incipient dogma or an elitist theoretical register. As she put it,

The only time I use that word is, basically, talking about my circle of friends. Like, when I moved from Asheville to Canada, I realized what a supportive *community* I had in Asheville. Otherwise, it makes me think of the talking stick or whatever, and I turn into a surly 13 year old girl [Laughter] [Red is referring to a practice sometimes used in dogmatic consensus processes (and children’s summer camps) where the privilege of speaking in a group setting is determined by passing around an object: ‘the talking stick’].

Most of the time I feel like it’s a kind of language that I don’t use because I try really hard to interact with all people, just trying to be on the level, keeping my world open. Cause I feel like... the times when I felt the most limited was when the circle of the people I interacted with on a daily basis was the smallest, and a specific portion of the world. I just try to not use code words. That’s part of a whole type of communication that I’ve never been comfortable with— sounds like a *textbook* or something.

Despite their differences, what Red and Jamie both agreed on wholeheartedly (as I detail in Red’s biographical introduction and the section on Crooked Wood), was the sense that punks had a kind of cherished solidarity as a matter of course with other punks, whether they knew them or not. In fact, it was this broadly-imagined community of punks ‘down the road’ that functioned to make legible the obligation, for instance, to give money to a band at a house show, or to take in a crowd of road-weary musicians and give them food and floor space.

Thus, for punks, the idea of ‘community’ had the dual and conflicting qualities of at once being, like middle-class notions of community, ideally a broad horizontal collective, de-spatialized and imagined (inasmuch as mobility was a treasured virtue and the scene quite large). However, like working-class notions, that broad horizontal collective was very sharply delimited by practices, and its boundaries relatively impenetrable—elements that emerge in the details of the last two chapters. As at Allen’s, the boundaries of punk ‘community’ were maintained partially through an insistence on ‘acting right,’ which meant an embrace of practices of collective living, bodily abjection, punk aesthetics, and so on, and the politicized rejection of wage labor, upward striving, and future-oriented perspectives native to middle-class culture. As I have suggested, punk ideas of community also confronted significant ideological contradictions in the realm of autonomy vs. collectivity, a conflict which played out in various ways.

However, it is indisputable that punk communities, as such, were distinctly bounded in ways that tended to offend and scare middle-class people who might otherwise be sympathetic to their political goals. This was true not only in the sense that punks were very identifiable by appearance typically, but also in the ways that that appearance indexed a political stance towards bodies, self-care, and so on. It was also true in the sense that punks don’t tend to be friendly or open towards non-punks, a complex attitude with multiple factors.

#### SECTION ENDNOTES:

**Community:** The idea of ‘community,’ as Shelemay (2011) suggests, is a historically particular rubric in academic language for approaching the idea of collectiveness or collectivities. The history of the term in anthropology would have to include the genre of ‘community studies’—the typically mono-cultural and place-based monographs of an earlier era. As Shelemay notes with regard to ethnomusicology, this genre all but disappeared by the early 1990s—a fact that is largely true of anthropology as well. Instead, anthropologists began to think about the ways that communities, plural,

constituted themselves. These social logics, and the semiotic and ideological bonds that created or made possible fragmentary, transnational, diasporic, and imaginary communities, became the object of study. In short, anthropology's own 'politics of community' changed in significant ways after the reflexive turn, and the sense that, as Hobsbawm and Ranger put it, the things that make communities think they are historic and coherent are often 'invented' and contemporary (1983). Doubtless, the lasting influence of both Anderson's (1983) work, which theorized the entanglement of nationalisms and the imagination of 'deep horizontal community,' and Barth's (1969) work, which sought to account for the maintenance of boundaries in situations of social change, had significant influence on this trajectory.

Thus, in critical academic writing, the term 'community' is no longer transparently meaningful. Instead, various idioms have taken its place, including collectives, scenes, subcultures, multitudes, horizontal organizations, and so on. The most fundamental aspect of this shift, of course, is spatial or geographic: communities no longer have anything in particular to do with a given, delimited locale (for instance, Shelemyai proposes three 'types' or bases for musical community: 'descent,' 'dissent,' and 'affinity.' These processes all point to a relatively de-spatialized logic of community formation. This was certainly true of the middle-class people in my fieldsite, who, as I point out in other places, often have discursive understandings that parallel more explicitly academic understandings.)

# Chapter 4: Class and Practices of Categorization and Hierarchy

## 4.1: Introduction

### Middle-Class Dilemmas of Classification: Multiplying Superfluous Gestures

It would hardly behove me, of all people, to claim that my discourse is independent of conditions and rules of which I am very largely unaware, and which determine other work that is being done today.  
Michel Foucault. Preface: *The Order of Things*: XIV (1994)

Foucault begins his work on knowledge and categorization with a quote from Borges:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing Things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.’ In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is

demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.

For Foucault, the provocative brilliance of Borges suggested the way that epistemic regimes ('epistemes') are culturally-located, historic, and contingent; but simultaneously naturalized to the point of invisibility. This paradox—that ways of knowing or classifying which appear deeply naturalized are in fact always contingent—underwrites the critical force of the political project, such as it is, that Foucault's work embodies and that has been widely adopted in the humanities and social sciences in the past thirty or so years. The project of historicizing or denaturalizing categories and discourses—that is, revealing how things that seem natural or normal or 'given,' like definitions of mental health, or sexuality and gender, or ideas about nationalism, authenticity, or tradition, are in fact 'constructed'—is one which is explicitly understood as politically liberatory. As the idea goes, with our extant unjust and oppressive categories of classification (or, in reflexive critiques, disciplinary ways of knowing) denaturalized, our discourses and given understandings of the world unsettled and revealed to be malleable, we are then free to seek or invent or construct new (more just or less oppressive) ones. Or, conversely, even to abandon categories wholesale (at least, in particular and specific realms like gender or sexuality). While Foucault will serve as shorthand and exemplar of this particular intellectual move, as a broad trajectory it of course has many antecedents and many contemporary practitioners. For instance, Butler's now-common-sense notion of gender as performative has been extraordinarily influential, revealing what seem to be natural or transcendent categories as the product of ongoing and power-inflected reproduction in the realm of everyday practice.

My goal in this section is not to offer a critique of this trajectory in general or of Foucault in particular, recognizing implicitly how these insights have in fact helped bring into being developments in aspects of academic, political, and popular discourse which are, in a word, ‘good.’ Rather, my goal is to consider how this particular intellectual trajectory, diffuse as it may be, is entangled with a culturally-located ethical stance which views the elimination, transgression, or refiguring of categories—particularly categories of personhood or social being—as a deontological good. More specifically, I will argue that this particular ethico-moral orientation often presumes an atomistic and supra-social individualism that it is deeply intertwined with a middle-class cultural ethic of self-making, futurity, and individualism. In his later work where he proposes an ‘ethics of the self’ for post-enlightenment modernity, Foucault draws on Hellenistic practices of individual liberty and autonomy—the idea of the transcendence of outwardly-imposed codes and categories or what he calls ‘forms of subjection’—to suggest a fundamental practice of liberation. As he put it, “The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality...” (Foucault, 1982: 216, in McNay 1993: 86).

I will suggest that, as with other consonances that I have examined between ‘middle-class culture’ and academic theory, there is a broad resonance between the ethico-moral stance that underwrites the Foucauldian project, and the ethics of everyday middle-class selfhood I have examined in previous chapters. Finally, I will argue that this

particular cluster of intellectual/ethical stances, in its broad adoption and deployment in everyday middle-class (liberal) life, depends on the reification or elision of other categories, particularly of class. In other words, the ethico-moral certitude through which anthropology (as one example) approaches this project needs some unsettling of its own.

This chapter articulates a counterpoint inspired by another Borges parable. In his short story "Funes the Memorious," Borges describes a man who, through injury, had acquired an unmatched memory which indelibly recorded every minute detail of every moment. This quality—the ability to perceive and record the unique and unrepeatable qualities of every object, person, idea, or event—is not a blessing. Instead, it renders Funes a kind of savant whose mind, perceiving only uniqueness, becomes incapable of generalization:

[Funes] told me that toward 1886 he had devised a new system of enumeration and that in a very few days he had gone beyond twenty-four thousand...The first stimulus to his work, I believe, had been his discontent with the fact that "thirty-three Uruguayans" required two symbols and three words, rather than a single word and a single symbol. Later he applied his extravagant principle to the other numbers. In place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) *Maximo Perez*; in place of seven thousand fourteen, *The Train*; other numbers were *Luis Melion Lafinur*, *Olimar*, *Brimstone*, *Clubs*, *The Whale*, *Gas*, *The Cauldron*, *Napoleon*, *Agustin de Vedia*...I attempted to explain that this rhapsody of unconnected terms was precisely the contrary of a system of enumeration. I said that to say three hundred and sixty-five was to say three hundreds, six tens, five units: an analysis which does not exist in such numbers as *The Negro Timoteo* or *The Flesh Blanket*. Funes did not understand me, or did not wish to understand me...

Locke, in the seventeenth century, postulated (and rejected) an impossible idiom in which each individual object, each stone, each bird and branch had an individual name; Funes had once projected an analogous idiom, but he had renounced it as being too general, too ambiguous...

The two projects I have indicated (an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, and a usable mental catalogue of all the images of memory) are lacking in sense, but they reveal a certain stammering greatness. They allow us to make out dimly, or to infer, the dizzying world of Funes. He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term *dog* embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front). Without effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details (1998)

Like an inverse Chinese Encyclopedia, Funes reveals something about the nature of categorization. In a world of utter uniqueness, where categories aren't possible and abstraction distasteful, reality becomes a dizzying proliferation of unrelated forms. The unrepeatable selfness of those forms defies the possibility of internal relationships, and of interactions between categories. In Funes' presence, Borges the narrator becomes "benumbed by the fear of multiplying superfluous gestures," worrying that his every banal action will live forever in memory. I suggest that this turn of phrase describes some of the social pathos of contemporary middle-class life in America, where, at its worst, the un-relatability or incommensurability of unique selves renders gestures, practices, habits, and desires so many 'multiplying superfluous gestures,' signifying nothing because of the emptying out of any lexicon of paradigmatic relationality. In plainer terms, the middle-class person at 3:14 in profile at a farmer's market, and the middle-class person seen head-on on a fixie at 3:15 lose all abstractable relationality as 'kinds of people,' diffusing into a multiplicity of practices ostensibly creating unique selves.

## **One Inversion, One Paradox**

This chapter deals with the interlinked subjects of categorization and hierarchy, and their different existence in classed cultural worlds. This focus was inspired by one ethical inversion and one paradox that I noticed during fieldwork.

The ethical inversion is that working-class cultural ethics regard the categorization of persons as socially generative, whereas the categorization of practices is routinely avoided; on the other hand, middle-class cultural ethics frown on the categorization of persons but rely on the categorization of practices as useful indices of distinction between persons.

The paradox is that middle-class (and particularly liberal) cultural ethics condemn overt hierarchies of persons qua persons (outside of certain institutional roles) as a central social problem, but middle-class social practices constantly generate obvious but implicit hierarchies whose existence is problematic because unacknowledged. Working-class culture on the other hand explicitly values (certain kinds of) hierarchies as contributing to an orderly social world, but in practice tends to produce ‘soft’ hierarchy which, acknowledged by all, both requires little policing and allows for significant personal autonomy in social encounters.

I provide additional contextualization and ethnographic detail in the following sections, relying primarily on music as a social spaces which crystallizes these ethical stances through concrete social practice. I briefly flesh out these two primary ideas here, as a way of introducing the rest of the chapter:

*Persons vs. Practices:* As I have mentioned in the past chapters and will focus on in this one, working-class people readily categorize themselves and others as certain kinds of people—a cultural attitude that informs figuration, hierarchy, solidarity, and other themes I have examined. This attitude emerges in a number of ways, some subtle, some quite jarring to middle-class observers. Importantly, these categorizations are assumed to say something profound, true, and revealing of the people they describe, and to provide clues to others as to appropriate modes of relationality with given kinds of people. Working-class comfort with the categorization of others and of the self also implicitly recognizes the unavoidable fact of existence in a broader social matrix with other, different kinds of people. Importantly, categorization demands a recognition of the relative non-uniqueness of the self: that one is, inevitably, much like other people in predictable and important ways. Part of the process of meeting and becoming acquainted in working-class contexts often includes questions that establish a broad categorical overview of people, particularly questions about geographic origin (a complex topic I have mentioned extensively in previous chapters, and one that middle-class people typically find unimportant or annoying). Working-class people not only expect these questions, but typically have concrete, rehearsed answers, which is part of a corollary attitude that indexes a comfort not only with categorizing others, but with categorizing oneself, and being categorized by others, as a particular kind of person.

In contrast, working-class people are typically extremely reluctant to categorize minutiae of ‘practices’ in the same way as they might people. The easiest example of this in my research concerned genres of music, a realm where incredibly fine-grained taxonomic divisions—and all that they imply for performance, consumption, taste, social

location, and so on--circulate very widely. Working-class people by and large actively resist the rigid labeling practices imposed by middle-class understandings of music, even as they often recognize and are fluent in them. However, this attitude extended well beyond the paradigmatic example of musical genre. Working-class informants had far less rigidly-categorized notions of, for instance, ‘nature’ as a place of purity, apart from human interference and symbolic pollution, as detailed in the first chapter on the Burke Bash—particularly compared to liberal middle-class ideas about the rigid categorical divisions, and accompanying appropriate activities, assumed to exist between natural or wilderness spaces and the built environment. Working-class people, as I have detailed, tended not to devote extensive time and attention to micro-distinctions of consumption (like craft beer) or to the particular distinctions of regimes of self-care (like yoga or supplements). In these and many other realms of everyday practice, the Bourdieusian idea of ‘distinction,’ as a universal feature of boundary making, was simply not as relevant.

On the other hand, middle-class people with liberal politics tend to be extremely reluctant to categorize themselves or others as ‘kinds’ of people—even as they sometimes recognize that categories of personhood circulate and that they are susceptible to such categorization (an argument that Bonilla-Silva 2003 makes in the register of race in particular). As I outline in the previous section on ‘future selves,’ one of the defining ethical stances of selfhood in middle-class life is the idea that selves are or should be unique. One primary potential affront to uniqueness in middle-class life is ‘categorization,’ understood as where people are imagined to be sorted, confined, and ultimately de-individualized by broad typologies that make predictive or overarching statements about their lives or individual personalities. These categories come to have

meaning, like all categories, in a comparative way, agonistically defined against other categories, a fact that adds further elements of angst since middle-class people also frown upon the juxtaposition of differences between categories of people in a comparative fashion. Middle-class people are often uncomfortable asking broad categorical questions of new acquaintances or of making such statements about themselves; there is little sense that people embody or recognize known social characters as an integral part of sociality. Instead, they prefer to emphasize the irreducible uniqueness and complexity of individual selves. Importantly, this ideological stance has the effect in middle-class social life of removing these ‘selves’ from circulation in a broader economy of comparable ‘selves—’, a denial of what anthropologists might call ‘the social.’

And yet, middle-class people enthusiastically categorize their own practices—particularly kinds of social practice that exist in broader economies of other practices, and which serve to differentiate people by taste or ideological orientation. In my research, one overriding fact was a persistent and nearly universal middle-class preoccupation with musical genre boundaries (whether they were being rigidly policed by purists or gleefully and smugly transgressed by innovators), exemplified by the utter contempt most of the middle-class old-time players, and ‘traditional musicians’ more generally, feel for both bluegrass and any country music played after 1950 or so, and by the extraordinary level of dogma I detail below in traditionalist scenes like old-time. While music served in my fieldwork as an easy example, it certainly wasn’t the only realm in which this categorization of practices occurred. In fact, the arenas in which this dynamic played out are innumerable and will be familiar to any middle-class person. If you play old-time music, which region, style, era, instrument, or canon do you embrace? Do you also play

some version of Classic (not ‘pop’) Country, Classic (not modern) Bluegrass, Honky Tonk, or Americana? From what era? What about regimes of self-care, artisanal production, or recreation? Perhaps you enjoy Yoga (Hot? Bikram? Hatha? Kundalini?), Home-Brewing (Wine? Beer? Mead? What style of beer? Ale? Wild-fermented? Distilling?), Biking (Road Bike? Mountain Bike? Fixie? Commuter? Downhill? Cross Country?), Hiking (Day hiker? Backpacker?), Running (Roads? Trails? Barefoot? Racing?), Boating (Flatwater? Whitewater? Canoeing? Kayaking? Sailing?) And so on and so forth, with a million different subdistinctions to each activity, all of which signal particular kinds of things about individuals who practice them. In short, middle-class people tend to defer their categorizing practices a step away from the individual, preferring to place it at the level of practices—a place where it is at more of a safe remove from the danger of suggesting that one might be part of a broader category of similar people, or even worse, inherently involved in any kind of categorical personal hierarchy

As this chapter will argue, categories and hierarchies--or more accurately categorization and hierarchy as abstract ideas—are deontological propositions that not only are related to class as a social reality, but have particular resonances and contradictions within classed regimes.

## **4.2: Old-time Music as Middle-Class Culture**

In support of my argument about categorizing practices in middle-class life, this section argues that revivalist old-time music is a quintessentially middle-class cultural form, and it demonstrates what this assertion entails. First, it is associated with a discourse that prioritizes communal participation and egalitarianism, and which enables constant individual participation from all participants without the need for group-oriented musical dynamics. Second, it is the subject of rigidly policed genre boundaries delimiting it from other related traditional musics and their social practices, which are imagined to be oppressive, competitive, or commercially-oriented. Third, it categorizes players according to their instruments, which encode a rigidly-defined and avidly-enforced hierarchy through which musical spaces are regulated (thus deferring the categorization and hierarchical ranking of persons onto practices, and creating a situation in which resulting hierarchies of persons can't be acknowledged or easily dealt with). Fourth and finally, its cultural existence owes almost entirely to more than a century of revivalist culture work by middle-class people, and it is currently played almost entirely by middle-class people. By way of fleshing out these points, this section provides an in-depth examination of what, exactly, 'old-time' music is, and details the space of middle-class music festivals as a primary site for the re-creation and maintenance of genres like old-time as specific and elaborated practices. It also introduces some of the ways that middle-class people playing traditional music end up re-purposing what they imagine to be working-class arts through social practices that re-create middle-class cultural norms.

### **“This Is a Closed Jam”**

The square dance caller at the Clifftop dance hall shouts into the mic for dancers to find partners and form sets, but then pauses before teaching the next dance. He calls out to the assembled dancers, perhaps about 200 strong in a crowded and rustic dance hall:

“Hey everyone, I like to play a little game every year with the crowd’s help!” He then runs down a list of attributes, starting with age: “Who’s the oldest dancer in the hall?” A wizened 90-year old man raises his hand to great applause. “The youngest?” Seven kids raise their hands simultaneously; it turns out to be a four-year old to more applause. He runs down the list of questions until he gets to home. “Where’s home? Who came the farthest?” A Swedish family and a couple of Australians raise their hands; the Swedes win since they came specifically for Clifftop. “Now, who’s closest? Who lives right around here?” For the first time in the night, there’s dead silence. Everyone looks around: no hands. Finally, someone from two hours away raises their hand. The caller is not impressed. “What about Summersville? Can I get 30 miles?” No takers. “Charleston?” Dead silence. Finally, the 2 hour dancer wins. Everyone is a little chagrined.

Clifftop’s location in a West Virginia state park is surrounded on all sides by working-class communities, and these communities don’t lack for musicians. The festival itself is sponsored by the state, nominally celebrating West Virginia’s rich tradition of string-band music, and it attracts some four thousand people in an average year, all coming to play old-time, so why are there no locals? It’s an uncomfortable question for

everyone there, because, as at many old-time events and in the mythology and ideology of the genre itself, the idea of class and its relation to appropriation and authenticity looms like a specter. What is it about old-time music that leads thousands of college-educated middle-class people to descend upon rural, working-class West Virginia for a week of social inversion (where they freely share, eat communal meals, and live in close proximity to each other), a space where they all are intensely concerned to reproduce the genre conventions of a musical culture just as they imagine working-class and poor Appalachians have for centuries, and yet find themselves somehow excluding or marginalizing almost entirely the exact people who created the music?

For the four thousand people here for this year's week-long music festival, Clifftop is arguably the most important week of the year for contemporary old-time music. Many people come from hundreds or thousands of miles away to participate in days and nights of revelry, jamming, and socializing. For many it's a yearly tradition that marks the high point of the summer and a chance to enact the idealized forms of music-making, sociality and exchange that are integral to how old-time music is thought of. Saturday night, however, is when the gathered old-time devotees perform their yearly coronation of contest winners. As with other genres of traditional music, instrumental contests have a long history dating back to the 1800s in the southern US. Unlike in other genres, contests are the only time at Clifftop when there's any kind of structured 'performance' besides one hour-long set from last year's winners. In particular, along with perhaps the main fiddle contest, the 'traditional band contest' is often the most watched, since it tends to reward those whose chops and aesthetics most closely parallel what the revivalist community deems to be 'real' old-time. Winning this contest is

essentially equivalent to winning the world championship of old-time, and it requires not only phenomenal musicianship, but also all the other immaterial expressions of old-time devotion, such as apprenticeship, scholarship, social connections in the revivalist community, and other indices of a folkloric and scholarly devotion to the music as a historical form. It is almost inevitably won by bands led by a small circle of prestigious fiddlers who are integral to the old-time scene at its highest levels, and it functions as a sort of community-sanctioned bestowal of master status to the winners, who often at some point also win or have won the fiddle contest.

Saturday night is always the finals of the band contest, and it marks an event that hundreds of people turn out to watch. On this particular year, it's raining, so the finals have been moved inside to the large dance hall. The hall is completely packed, with some 200 chairs arranged in rows and a standing room only crowd packing the entire dance hall. The bands all sit down on stage except for the punkified band who has made the finals; they stand and make a huge ruckus when it's their turn. The parameters of the contest mean they all play one rambunctious fiddle tune and one song that's typically either a waltz or features singing. This year is the battle of the (relative) youngsters: one band is made up of an early-twenties west-coast fiddler and a Chicagoan in his early forties; one band is led by a folklorist Tennessee fiddler in his early 30s, and one is a group of guys in their twenties and thirties who are emissaries of the punk presence in the world of old-time. The Tennessee folklorist fiddler's band immediately wins first place in the finals, but the judges have trouble determining second and third—they can't decide between the competing aesthetics of the young dudes' band—a punkified string band playing a million miles an hour, and the prettier, more precise 'modern' old-time of the

Chicago-Portland fusion band. The crowd is in a tizzy. Whispers go through the crowd that the judges (most of whom are revivalist players from somewhere else) are biased; people whisper that they should have some actual West Virginians on the panel. Partisans of the two competing aesthetics advance theories as to why their chosen style will inevitably be looked down upon by the judges. Finally, the judges confer and decide: the modern-sounding, virtuosic band has won. Everyone debates the significance of this development (for the direction of old-time music; for the aesthetic preferences it implies; for the trajectory of scholarship in old-time music, and so on. Is the punk old-time vibe officially over?) as they exit the building.

Outside during the contest, in a grassy area 30 yards from the contest building, it's dark and rainy but there's a group of people under a large canopy with water dripping from the eaves. From under the tent, unamplified bluegrass music drifts out into the damp night; a few musicians have gathered for an impromptu session before bed and I drift back and forth between the hall and the tent. The small crowd huddled under the tent is working-class locals, some of the few at the festival: a mix of family, friends, and passers-by, and they're quietly appreciative of the beautiful playing of the gathered musicians, some of whom are in a local band. They run through some bluegrass standards and are joined by a bass player and a guitarist they don't know, drawn by the sounds of the jam. The newcomers are quietly welcomed. Someone calls out a request to the mandolin player: "Do that Alan Bibey song you like to sing!" The mandolin player outlines a set of chord changes to the bass player, and the banjo player, a big middle-aged woman, kicks the song with a driving and bluesy lead. The mandolin player sings in a crystal-clear tenor voice, outlining a haunting lyric about hardship and loss with

enigmatic reference to a blue rocking chair that's witnessed "the joy and the misery" of hardscrabble family life over many years. On the chorus, the song moves to a dark modal feel, and the mandolin player jumps to a high baritone harmony, a fifth above the guitarist who comes in on lead vocals. "And it rocks/my children are gone/all my dear children are gone." Combined with the musical excellence of the players and singers, the effect is hair-raising, and it accords so well with the quiet, dark, and rain that there's a moment of silence when they end the song with an austere and searing verse of only banjo and voice. As one the listeners nod quietly: it's one of those rare moments when everything is so perfectly right: the feel of the night itself, the small crowd shoved together under the tarp by a soft rain, the haunting and evocative lyrics of the song, and the transcendent musicianship. As the song ends, though, the crowd from the old-time fiddle contest starts pouring out of the nearby dance hall, arguing and talking loudly about the results and what they might mean. As they stream by the dark tent on their way back to campgrounds and tents, in search of the next hot jam, many glance inside the tent briefly to see who's playing. As soon as they notice the bluegrass instrumentation, they lose interest, and I hear one or two snide comments about 'competitive jamming,' which is the standard middle-class critique of working-class bluegrass. Annoyed by the crowd, the jam itself breaks up and everyone wanders off.

Later that night, a scene transpired that crystallized some of the differences between middle-class old-time and working-class musical practices, and that struck me as an extension of the exact social ethic at work in the indoor, scholarly fiddle contest, and thus one of the reasons there are almost no locals or working-class people at Clifftop. At one of the late-night 'professional' old-time jams that happen via behind-the-scenes

connections among elite players, a number of musicians from among the contest-winning bands earlier in the night congregated in a tent. It was still drizzling off and on, but the tent was largely symbolic, blocked off on all sides with transparent mosquito netting that formed a barrier between the musicians and the audience, which was sizeable, given that the tent was unsubtly located immediately beside a well-used road and walking path, despite numerous less-public options. It was, in short, clearly intended to be a plausibly-deniable performance. The jams itself was hot: incredibly tight, fast, exciting musicianship and interesting tunes played by five people including two fiddlers, a banjo player, a guitarist, and a bass player, all of whom were contest winners of some kind.

As the musicians in the well-lit tent regaled the audience gathered around outside in the dark and rain with tune after tune, a late-middle-aged man wandered up and, after watching for one tune with visible excitement, burst into the tent. He was a local musician who had been employed by the festival for years in various capacities, and, speaking with a southern accent, he immediately took a seat and addressed one of the players: “Oh man, I’m so excited to play with y’all after seeing you at the contest all these years! It’s really great to finally make some music!” With that, he pulled out a harmonica (a completely verboten instrument in old-time) and got ready to jam, to the visible dismay of the musicians and the shock of the onlookers. The group awkwardly launched into a tune, and he played along the entire time. At its truncated conclusion, one of the group looked away from him and awkwardly announced to no one in particular in scolding and nasal tones: “I’d like to request that there be no harmonica playing. I think that we have everything we need here, and this is really just a closed jam.”

Confused and aghast, the harmonica player looked at his putative friend, who threw up his hands and said, “I’m not saying anything on either side!” Completely blindsided and obviously offended, the harmonica player looked around for support but was only met with downcast gazes and silence. He realized, eventually, that he was pissed off, and started dressing the group down: “I can’t believe this. I come out here to play music with you and you just kick me out? You know, I want to thank you, because really, I don’t want to play music in a place like this. I want to thank you for making me go to bed now, which is what I should do anyway.” He went on, obviously searching in register for how to address this insult, which was clearly wildly offensive to him and his understanding of sociality and music, but also obviously de riguer for the musicians and the audience. He soon departed, leaving behind a notable sense of chagrin at such an unpleasant encounter, but more relief that the harmonica player was gone. The group was soon playing again, undisturbed by outsiders.

As I wandered around the festival for the next few days, considering the events of the contest evening, I realized further: despite being mostly a traditionalist old-time festival, the musicians present have catholic tastes (in that they like multiple genres, not, of course, that they want to mix genres). There are conspicuous and popular jams dedicated to various genres, which, despite the fact that they’re often organized primarily for novelty value, are widely enjoyed. I saw, variously, klezmer, classical music, swing, early jazz, and other revivalist genres, with musicians in circles outside campsites and crowds gathered around. The genres that are almost completely absent, however, are the ones most clearly related to old-time in genealogical descent: the contemporary versions of bluegrass and country music. In fact, the only times I see people playing bluegrass

tends to be the very few local attendees, some of whom are festival employees, mostly older people sitting in twos and threes with guitars, actively ignored or scorned by the mass of attendees. Indeed, one of the most outwardly confusing aspects of the scenes I detail is how one group of musicians (old-time), can largely remain so hostile to another musical tradition (bluegrass) that is virtually indistinguishable to non-practiced ears. While this seems to be a trivial question, it actually gets to the heart of some of the arguments this dissertation makes about class cultures, practices, and aesthetics, and is hinted at by the contrasting scenes above. Thus, the next sections aim to introduce, in broad strokes, some of the history and contemporary practices that define these genres as distinct entities.

### **Cultural Ethics in Musical Practice**

This section seeks to explain and contextualize what exactly ‘old-time’ music is for the purposes of this dissertation. It is not intended to be a history of the genre, a history of the commercial recording practices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or a detailed musicological examination of form. It doesn’t make any original arguments about how the genre evolved in historical context. Instead, I aim to explain old-time as it is played and heard in the present day, based on 15 years of musical observation.

First of all, ‘old-time’ is a troublesome label for a variety of reasons. One is that the generic temporal descriptor is applied to various genres of music in the US. For instance, the “National old-time Fiddle Championship” held every year in Weiser, Idaho, features a kind of music that is not at all what ‘old-time’ players in Asheville would recognize as old-time, but rather a version of what they would call ‘Texas swing.’

Additionally, there are a number of ‘old-time’ festivals and jams around the country that feature aspects of stringband and jugband music that likewise fall mostly outside the tradition I’m referring to. However, the largest group of people who use this label (‘old-time’ from now on), mean one very particular thing.

Old-time music, as I am characterizing it, is a coherent set of aesthetics, social and musical practices, and ideological stances (including understandings of canonicity) most broadly practiced in the southeast, and recreated as a broad set of understandings through jams, house parties, yearly events like contests and festivals, as well as through popular and semi-scholarly blogs, online musical archives, and journals. Although recordings and concerts are important in different ways, most old-time music is played at jams, parties, festivals, and dances. In this sense, and as most players would affirm, it’s not understood or treated as ‘performance’ music—although professional touring bands do exist in a limited kind of way. Instead, it is mostly homemade, non-profitable, and relatively non-commercialized. Even the best-known touring bands don’t tend to make enough money to support themselves through music; they also often end up playing music that wouldn’t be recognized by purists as ‘real’ old-time in order to maintain some commercial appeal; and they typically don’t last long as touring bands. The performing bands that do play ‘purist’ old-time tend to play for heritage festivals, folkloric teach-ins, dances, and private parties where hosts have some kind of connection to old-time music. It is not a music with broad listening appeal; in fact, even old-time players readily acknowledge that it’s usually boring to listen to, even to practiced ears. As one informant put it, “I’d walk ten miles to play, but I wouldn’t walk across the street to listen!” A popular bumper sticker has the legend: “Old-Time Music: Better Than it Sounds.”

However, it's important to point out the incredibly rich musical world that lies inside the boundaries, rigid as they are, of contemporary old-time music. Like jazz, it's a musician's music, and the subtleties and complexities of its form are not readily apparent to casual listeners. This is partly an effect of old-time aesthetics, described in more detail below, and partly simply the result of a musical tradition which in many ways rejects the idea of performance as primary reason for existence. Regardless, it is not the case that anything flies in terms of musicianship in old-time land. Experts, virtuosos, and talented players are easily identified and there tends to be consensus on who does what well. It is simply that the contours of virtuosity look different in old-time than in almost any other music.

Old-time music is understood to be, ideally, egalitarian and 'participatory' (for a whole work considering this idea, see Turino 2008). What devotees mean by this is that everyone plays at the same time, and that there are no soloists—no 'excessive focus on individual virtuosity' at the expense of the group, which is how they view musics like bluegrass that feature interludes where one instrumentalist will take a solo while the rest of the band plays rhythm. In contrast, for old-time players, it is always understood to be a 'community' endeavor in which ideally everyone participates all the time. Secondly, it is thought to be at heart a participatory music that 'anyone can play,' in the sense that no formal musical training is required. This feature of the music is also understood to mean that it is a music that encourages universal self-expression by eliminating performer-audience divides and turning everyone into an empowered participant (a kind of musical analogue to democracy, as it were). This article of faith very quickly runs into a great deal of cognitive dissonance in the old-time scene, for while it is true that it is relatively

easy to attain enough proficiency on an instrument to participate in a jam, it is also true that the possibilities for expertise and virtuosity are essentially limitless, as in most musics. Indeed, both jams and festivals feature a constant kind of jockeying for status between musicians, and being welcomed at a jam is never guaranteed, particularly if the jam is composed of advanced players. Old-time music is cliquish, and most players are incredibly aware of the always-shifting hierarchies of musicianship within the scene. As I describe later on, this feature of the old-time scene is particularly frustrating to the few working-class bluegrass players who circulate in it. However, within the scene, it is quite clear who is welcome at which jams, and hierarchies and genre boundaries are rather rigidly enforced, as above with the harmonica player.

Instrumentally, old-time makes use primarily of fiddle, banjo, guitar, and bass. At times, in limited ways, mandolins and ukuleles will make an appearance, and more rarely, washboards, autoharps, and harmonicas can be found. However, the majority of jams (and bands) rely on the first four instruments I mention above, and most purists actively scorn any additional instruments. Furthermore, old-time practice delineates a clear hierarchy of instruments (exactly the order I list them in above); this hierarchy is understood to be a result of a number of features. First, it indexes the relative difficulty of attaining competence on a given instrument; second, it indexes the understood semiotic potential of the instrument: the amount of information that a given instrument, in its prescribed role in the music, is understood to convey; third, the hierarchy is understood to extend to the player of the instrument in terms of acceptable behavior within the musical encounter; and finally, the hierarchy is understood to proceed from the historical importance of the various instruments to the organic historical development of old-time

music per se. It is important to note for my purposes that social practices within a given old-time jam are almost always structured (quite rigidly) by ranking people according to the relative status of their instruments. Thus, the privileges of deciding a tune, beginning a tune, and ending a tune, as well as tempo and key decisions, are almost always reserved for the fiddler(s). It is difficult to overstate in this respect the rigidity and consistency of these instrumental hierarchies in ‘purist’ old-time circles, but it is also important to point out that this is because the fiddle is an irreplaceable lead instrument.

Fiddles and fiddlers sit at the top of musical and social hierarchies because old-time always features the fiddle (or fiddles) as the lead instrument. However, it’s important to qualify what that means. One of the primary features of old-time, and one that practitioners tend to emphasize to the exclusion of other features, is that all instruments play the same role all the time. That is, there are no individual solos, and there are typically no dynamics (in the sense of coordinated variations of volume, intensity, or tempo). Instead, the lead fiddler will begin and end the tune; in between everyone plays their instrument at the same tempo and volume the entire time. However, fiddlers are the ‘lead’ instrument in a number of senses. First, in terms of volume and sustain, the fiddle is essentially unmatched among acoustic stringed instruments; its range and timbre make it doubly apparent as the primary sonic component of old-time jams. Secondly, most old-time tunes take advantage of the unique properties of the fiddle as a bowed stringed instrument. This means that many of the iconic features of a given tune can only truly be reproduced on the fiddle; although they can be hinted at by other melody instruments (primarily banjo), it is almost always the fiddle that states the tune in its fullest aspect. For this reason, it is a truism that banjo players can and do learn tunes

on the fly from fiddlers at jams; however, it would be nearly impossible for a fiddle player to accurately learn a tune on the fly from a banjo player: there are simply too many intangible things a fiddle does in old-time that other instruments can't reproduce (as the other primary melody instrument, 'clawhammer' style banjo, by far the most common technique on the instrument in its old-time guise, typically plays a syncopated and simplified version of the melody at the same time as the fiddle.) Some of these things include bowing patterns; length of sustain; the micro-tonal slides possible on a fretless instrument that comprise much of the idiomatic sounds of old-time music; and a variety of other micro-sonic elements of the genre that are unique to the instrument (ENDNOTE: Musical Features of old-time).

In the contemporary rural south, old-time music as described above is not played by working-class communities or people, with very few exceptions. Some of those exceptions are individual musicians who grew up in working-class communities and came to the music at a later age; it is almost inevitably true that they also had extensive contact with revivalist old-time musicians at some point in their musical career and are very familiar with revivalist discourses concerning old-time music as a heritage object or endangered cultural practice. The small set of working-class southern musicians (who aren't the extremely elderly last surviving musicians regarded as having learned from aural tradition) who play old-time music circulate as fetish objects among revivalist players; their presence at workshops and festivals always an uneasy reminder of the issues of class and culture that pervade the genre. Where old-time does exist as a 'living tradition' in a few isolated working-class enclaves, most old-time players tend to at once fetishize its existence and critique its form. Because working-class approaches to

musical practice tend to be distinctly different (for instance, the sort of academic fascination with archival texts is completely lacking; music is passed around in a much less genre-bound way from person to person), revivalist players encountering old-time music in working-class contexts tend to think of it as ‘bad’ old-time music: adulterated by contemporary aesthetics or repertoires, not indicating a profound engagement with historical texts and techniques, and so on. In short, they think of it as in some ways ‘inauthentic’—an attitude that emerges most notably, and perhaps most disturbingly, in the few old-time contests at festivals that are actually judged by ‘locals’ as they’re typically referred to. Inevitably, the prizes also go to locals, who play a form of old-time music that revivalist players tend to find worthless.

The history of old-time music as an object of folkloric interest encompasses not only the dynamics of the early 20th century recording industry, but also much broader cultural processes related to ideas about ‘the folk,’ nationalism and race, a uniquely middle-class romanticization of ‘anti-modern’ practices, preservationist and endangerment discourses, and inflected by academic approaches to musical study. These attitudes have underwritten cyclical revivals of various kinds throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, as I show in the history chapter (ENDNOTE: Revivalism). Most players imagine old-time music to have come from a relatively isolated mountain region of the American south, to have evolved in the 18th and 19th centuries, and to be the product of some combination of fiddling and ballad-singing traditions brought over by immigrants from the British Isles, and banjo playing transmitted from African slaves and white minstrels. Contemporary players articulate a sense of old-time as a quintessentially American music—the result of border Scots settling in the Appalachians and living in

relative isolation while they adapted the banjo and its associated syncopation and blues tonalities into their own melodic fiddling and dance traditions, coming up with a synthetic cultural form that expresses not only the loneliness, ruggedness, and isolation of the southern mountains but also a kind of primeval freshness—the sounds of a young nation, coming to terms with itself and its odd, complex racial and economic history. The cultural imaginary of old-time music is pervaded by a sense of the music as inherently and quintessentially southern, rural, and Appalachian; and of course, white and working-class (ENDNOTE: Conversion Experiences).

The canonic old-time repertoire is primarily derived from archival recordings: some made by field collectors from various eras and with various aims; some produced and released commercially, primarily in the 1920s and 30s; some the product of revivalist bands from the 60s and 70s; some the product of ‘source musicians’ that the revivalist generation of the ‘60s ‘discovered’ and popularized as ‘tradition bearers;’ and some as tunes passed from player to player. This vast catalog of recorded material is archived in university libraries, curated in online collections, collected on vinyl, CD, and in digital format, and passed around from hand to hand and computer to computer. It is re-recorded, memorized, analyzed, taught, and quoted intramusically. It exists as the sine qua non of what defines a ‘serious’ old-time musician: have they done their archival homework? Do they understand the economy of historical merit that defines who is cutting edge, who is passé, who is valued, who is too commercial, what regional styles they fit into, and so on? Have they studied the tunes in-depth, learning to reproduce the nuances of tone, bow phrasing, intonation, syncopation, the boundaries of acceptable improvisation, the fundamentally raw energy that is often thought to define good old-time

music? Do they understand the lineages of musicians? Who studied with whom? Who recorded whom? Which revivalists put in the most time at the knees of the most prominent dying fiddlers?

However, at the same time that the canon is mostly frozen, middle-class players of the music see themselves as tradition-bearers through their very study of the music, and they almost universally describe it as a ‘living tradition’ in which they are participating. This is an odd contemporary twist on the endangerment and preservationist impulses that have historically underwritten revivalism. Because acknowledged proficiency in old-time music typically indexes an extraordinary amount of time spent studying dead fiddlers and archaic tunes, as well as sitting in jams and going to festivals, many players confidently assert that they are carrying forward a tradition that was once described as ‘endangered’ (primarily during the folk revival of the 60s, when the last of the ‘authentic’ source musicians were dying out) but is now thought of as ‘living’ (perhaps because their extinction frees old-time in some fundamental way from the organic (working-class) cultural matrix where it was once practiced). Further, beginning in the sixties, successive generations of musicians, primarily from the northeast, began making pilgrimages to southern Appalachia to ‘visit’ with elderly musicians—a euphemism for the type of musical and cultural apprenticeship that was thought to convey not only the musical essence of the aged fiddler, but something of their life essence, to the revivalist in question. Many of those folk revivalists—people who started playing in college when they heard the Weavers or Flatt and Scruggs—are now themselves becoming elderly, and although the majority of them have followed conventional middle-class career paths, are thought of as ‘source musicians’ that a

current generation of young old-time players now seek out to perform the same ritualistic apprenticeships. In this way, revivalist musicians perform a curious kind of alchemy that tends to take about thirty or forty years: all of a sudden, an architect who grew up in New York and spent some months or years playing music in North Carolina becomes a ‘source musician’ for authentic Appalachian heritage. Adding to the confusion, their children become ‘second generation Appalachian musicians’ and prominently advertise the fact that they grew up ‘in the tradition.’

The revivalist periodization of old-time means that the only surviving record of the genre’s form in that time is a set of commercial and field recordings made beginning in the 1920s, as above. This results in an interesting aesthetic consequence. In modern old-time, the aesthetics of sound are informed at least in part by the diffuse presence of ‘technological artifacts—’ that is, sonic indices of the early state of recording technologies used to capture source musicians. Some of these recordings were made early in the century, and some are from very old fiddlers in the mid- and late-century US south. Importantly, however, a feature of almost all of these recordings is 1. Poor recording quality due to field conditions and early technological limitations and 2. The often very advanced age of many of the recorded fiddlers. This results in a canon that sounds, in short, raw and rough. Many of the canonical recordings as a result are scratchy, overemphasize mid-range frequencies in recorded instruments, and tend to warp pitch and speed to some extent. With varying degrees of reflexivity, contemporary musicians tend to both reproduce and privilege as the default aesthetic of old-time music, the technological artifacts present in sound that reflect the recording process that I mention above. Thus, contemporary players often want particular kinds of instruments that in live

playing reproduce typically mid-range-centric tone; they often prefer physical instrumental technique that produces dark, buzzy, muffled, or ‘woody’ timbral effects; and they tend to be blasé about intonation (or to privilege ‘wide intonational bands’ as part of an aesthetic, as Turino 2008 puts it). In short, they define as integral to the genre a lot of musical features that other musical traditions would simply consider ‘bad musicianship.’ It is debatable to what extent the recordings sound the way they do as a result of technology versus the inevitable effects of age on the recorded musician—factors that in some instances can result in similar sonic effects. Regardless, within the old-time scene, players who play too ‘clean’ or ‘pretty’ actually face a lot of censure as inauthentic—a particular problem for touring bands, who, as performing musicians, face more pressure to conform to a more standard version of musicality that often is at odds with old-time aesthetics as understood in the revivalist community. As a player at a jam once approvingly related, “One time I went to see Mike Seeger, and he tuned up his guitar onstage, put it in perfect tune. Then he said, “I’m going to play this Dock Boggs song,” and he took his guitar and put two strings just a little out of tune, said, “This is perfect. I don’t want the guitar in tune. It doesn’t sound right. I want it just a little out of tune, a little ragged—ragged but right.”” This particular phrase—“ragged but right”—functions as an often-quoted internal evaluation of old-time aesthetics by practitioners.

#### SECTION ENDNOTES:

**Musical Features of old-time.** The formal musical structure of contemporary old-time is often articulated by practitioners as deriving from its history as dance music. Specifically, old-time is understood as having evolved alongside and with a square dance tradition in the rural south. Among other things, this means that ‘tunes’ (distinct from

‘songs,’ which are fewer in number and feature singing) archetypically have a predictable and regular structure, which consists of a melody time that lasts for 4 phrases of 8 bars each, for a total of 32 bars, before repeating in a given song. Within those 32 bars, the melody will have an AABB structure, with two identical ‘A’ sections played back to back, followed by two identical ‘B’ sections. It’s important to note, however, that a significant portion of the old-time canon doesn’t exactly follow these rules. Many tunes are ‘crooked,’ and have phrases with an odd number of beats or have melodies that are interspersed with extra-rhythmic ellipses of one or two beats. Additionally, many tunes have three or four-part melodies or differ in some other significant way from the basic formula above. Old-time players understand particular regions as giving rise to particular kinds of tunes: for instance, many old-time players will say that ‘West Virginia tunes’ (that is, archival tunes recorded from a set of well-known West Virginia fiddlers in the early and mid-twentieth century and subsequently collected, learned, and distributed by revivalists) tend to be both crooked and mixolydian.

However, the most salient aspect of old-time music to non-old-time musicians is that it seems incredibly repetitive (it is incredibly repetitive, but less so than it seems to non-old-time players). This is due to a few factors. First, the structure of the tunes and the tempo of the music (often quite fast—averages at jams, depending on the skill level of participants, may range from 80-110 bpm for a slower song, to 150 bpm for the fastest breakdowns) means that the tunes repeat quickly and often—perhaps an average of 10 to 20 repetitions, or about 6 to 10 minutes, per tune. Second, old-time practices mean that the texture is homophonic: no instrumentalist significantly alters what they’re doing with respect to either volume, tempo, or intensity. Third, while skillful old-time musicians are master improvisers, the improvisation that is characteristic of old-time is extremely subtle relative to other improvisational musics like bluegrass or jazz. Essentially, it tends to consist of complex but subtle syncopated restatement of established musical phrases; subtle melodic variation within those phrases; occasional harmony playing in thirds and fifths, restatement of the melody in a different octave, and the addition or subtraction of drone notes or double stops on adjacent strings. Harmonic improvisation or improvisation that dramatically alters the melodic or rhythmic elements that define the tune is uncommon and typically thought of as outside the boundaries of the genre (or ‘tasteless’). Finally, old-time tunes themselves can be hard to distinguish from one another to non-old-time-musicians because they’re often solely instrumental and of the same length, of similar tempos, in one of three common keys, and partake of a limited range of melodic and harmonic devices relative to the broader world of popular music. It is not uncommon to have listeners in a bar come away from an hour or two of old-time music and not realize they’ve heard more than one or two tunes, when in fact they may have heard ten. Melodically, old-time tends to feature melodically and rhythmically intricate major-scale or modal (when modal primarily mixolydian) melodies, primarily consisting of linked eighth notes, within a relatively narrow and well-defined harmonic palette. For instance, a common stumbling block to old-time guitarists and bassists is the process of choosing chords for a tune that fiddlers often emphasize was composed before chordal instruments were in wide distribution in the southeast US. As many players note, the addition of chordal instruments (most practitioners understand the introduction of the guitar to have occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century via Sears-Roebuck catalogues) took what were in fact

modal melodies and defined the harmonic environment in a way that damages the original feel of the tune.

In a common scenario confronted in jams, a number of old-time tunes in the feature a flattened seventh as a prominent melodic note. Within the harmonic palette of ‘traditional American music,’ this would often suggest a flattened 7<sup>th</sup> chord as the most correct chordal back-up. However, the majority of old-time players regard a flat 7<sup>th</sup> chord as aesthetically inimical to the sound they perceive as traditional, characterizing it as ‘too modern’ or ‘too hippie.’ Instead, many fiddlers will insist on a 5 major chord, which has a natural 7 of the original key as its third scale degree. The dissonance created by the juxtaposition of the flattened 7 melody note with the natural 7 note in the backing chord (notes a half-step apart) would seem out of place except for the fact that old-time players by and large describe a raw, scratchy, occasionally-dissonant sound as in fact what they’re going for. For many old-time players, the incredible amount of subtle melodic and rhythmic variation that the fiddle is capable of with the intricate bowing patterns that characterize skillful old-time fiddling represent the true genius of the music; chordal backup is essentially a distraction or a problem to music that finds much of its emotional resonance to skilled ears in the very fact that tunes float in some ethereal realm between major and minor, never quite defined.

**Revivalism:** Revivalism as a doctrine and set of understandings is related to a process of temporal reification, wherein what is inevitably a processual cultural object is frozen at a given point in time as ideally and quintessentially itself, and where its temporal distance from the present is itself an icon of authenticity. This temporal freezing is typically accomplished with reference to some imaginary kind of pollution occurring at a given time (in the case of old-time, the advent of commercial recording, for instance), from the perspective of a particular group. Musical revivals, in particular, have the feature of being what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls objects of ‘metacultural production:’ it is only through the cultural heuristic of ‘endangerment’ and ‘revival’ that processes become objects—and, perhaps as importantly, complex cultural forms like musics become detached from their social context and essentially become free-floating signifiers which refer back to an essentialized version of their original signified—they become, as she puts it, “re-enactments of themselves” (2004). As with strands of Jazz, so with old-time: a particular moment in the history of southern vernacular music was transmuted into an object of ‘heritage’ and study, frozen in time and played by a small set of middle-class people whose personal politics predispose them to find the structural features of the music politically emancipatory in some fashion.)

**Conversion Experiences:** The most common way that middle-class people come to revivalist cultural forms like old-time music is through a personal revelation that takes the form of a quasi-religious conversion experience. The commonality of these experiences is such that almost every middle-class old-time player I’ve ever talked to has a version; likewise, in published works, almost all of the major revivalist figures (like Pete Seeger: see Filene 2000, or Cantwell 1996 on his own experience) attest to such a moment. The experiences are uncannily similar, and they take two forms: in the first form, the convert has been living their own normal life when suddenly, they hear an iconic recording of some particular (usually working-class or rural) musician. “There, in

the college bookstore, the music of Earl Scruggs' banjo flowed out of the speakers and hit me like a ton of bricks..." The convert is always inspired by this sonic revelation to pursue the music down deep and dark paths to its source, and they find they were originally attracted to it because of the beautiful social relationships enabling its creation that it mystically evinced in its very sound. In the second form, an indifferent musician experiences a quasi-ecstatic moment when they, for the first time, experience the commonality of purpose and group togetherness—a kind of transcendental *communitas* experience—of traditional music or dance forms where a lot of people are joyfully doing the same thing together.

What I find interesting about these experiences is not only their ubiquity, but the fact that they always point to, in some ways, a middle-class loss of 'self'—particularly a loss of the sense of the 'future self' that I detail in the previous chapter. Conversion experiences always take place in areas of social practice where people are forced, at least momentarily, to adopt a partial focus on 'present persons'—to think, in other words, about 'groupness.' Practices that generate conversion experiences also have the interesting feature of being modes of sociality—entered into willingly, that is with agency—where structures and rules prevail, and where those structures and rules act to facilitate group sociality and serve to convey significant information about how people should act with each other, a feature of both group dance forms like square dance and contradance, and of old-time music. In short, they are social spaces that share elements of working-class cultural ethics and social practice. As I have argued, of course, these rules and roles ultimately are structured by a middle-class cultural ethics. But it is very important to note that, even if that is true, the 'groupness' of musical forms like old-time is not a common experience in contemporary middle-class life.

My old-time playing friend Jamie details his own conversion experience, which humorously had a complete false start when he, a punk fan at the time, unwittingly sold a prized record by one of the canonical artists of old-time through the store he ran:

"Somewhere around '97 some record came into my store—Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers. And I put it on and....I shrugged my shoulders: 'eh, this is just okay.' And I sold the record. Five bucks. Didn't really think much about it."

Soon after, however, his co-renter abandoned ship in the middle of the night, and he turned to hosting acoustic music in his store to fill up space and make some money. One of the bands he hosted invited him to play washboard with them, and he agreed:

"Never practiced, just showed up to a band gig and started playing. I saw some other guy playing washboard, and he was playing with banjo picks, so I went out and bought ten banjo picks, and I just started doing this basic strum, and I was in. So anyway, they invited me to join the band, and we played this music I'd never heard of called 'old-time', which for the record I think is the stupidest name for a genre of music ever. I think it's like a big reason old time music isn't more popular. Maybe that's why the folk revival didn't pan out so great. You need a good name like reggae."

Anyway, I spent that winter playing with the band. And then that summer I kept hearing talk about Weiser: "Going to Weiser?" And I was like, "What's a Weiser? I don't even like that band!" We jump in a van and drive up to Weiser, Idaho and show up in the dark in this dry field full of sticker grass, and we stop at a McDonalds along the way and take mushrooms, psychedelic mushrooms, and we show up at this place, and there is one active jam session going. So we pile out of the van and we join this jam session. I was

playing mandolin at this point: the fiddler in the band loaned me a mandolin and showed me some chords, and up to that point I was just chording along. And it was at this moment at Weiser, when it got dark and there were no lights, and everybody was jamming in the dark and all of a sudden, I couldn't see the guitar player's hands in the dark to know what chords he was playing, and I was on mushrooms, and panic struck. And then all of a sudden I was like, 'What are my options? I guess I can try to play the melody.' So at that point I transitioned to being a melody player because of the dark and the mushrooms and having no choice and I wasn't good enough to just hear the chord changes on my own. So I started picking out the melody and I was totally addicted: Done. I'm a melody man. Anyway, I spent the next five or six days in this field, camped out with all these old time musicians, and I just had the time of my life and met a ton of people, and engaged with people in a way that I had NEVER done before. There were some old time jams in Portland that I went to, but they were stiff and awkward, and this was just like fun, and drunken and wild, and really welcoming, and it was a conversion experience, an epiphany, I bowed down to the altar of old-time music.

At the end of my five or six days of Weiser, people were saying goodbye to each other, and I remember being like, "WHAT, I have to wait a whole year to do this again, are you fucking crazy?!" I went home and felt the grief of the loss of community, going back to the place that wasn't what I had just left behind, and fortunately, I had shared that experience--a temporary autonomous zone where you actually have a community of people, that you don't really experience in everyday life--with some key people. And so, that was the genesis of the Portland Old Time Gathering."

In significant ways, I believe, revivalism is at heart inspired by an affective response to the temporary cessation of feelings of alienation common to middle-class life. It is joyful to lose sight of the future self, even if only for a while.)

### **4.3: Working-Class Bluegrass**

This section briefly introduces bluegrass as a contemporary practice of old-time, and as a counterpoint to its classed cultural dynamics. Like the previous section, it is not a musical, social, or scholarly history of the genre (versions of which are widely available, e.g. Cantwell 1984). Rather, it shows how some of the musical practices of bluegrass exist as analogous but distinct counterexamples to how old-time is played and imagined... The comparison between old-time and bluegrass is suggestive for a number of reasons: first, bluegrass is a vital working-class art played by working-class communities (more on this below). Second, in many important ways, it is the genre of music that, in the twentieth century, largely *replaced* old-time in rural southern working-class communities, along with iterations of country music (a complex social and commercial process that is examined in some of the histories above, and which I approach through the figure of Allen, below). Third, the way that it is played and imagined as a musical form relies on social practices of categorization and hierarchy that are almost the complete inverse of old-time music. Finally, the comparison is interesting because to laypeople' ears, the two genres are largely indistinguishable; or perhaps more accurately, people unfamiliar with the complex differences tend to hear old-time and think of it as rough-sounding bluegrass without much singing. Yet, despite that, working-class bluegrass players and middle-class old-time players largely can't stand each other's music and musical practices.

Bluegrass as a musical form circulates widely in the US (and globally: see Bidgood 2012), and it is in no way the exclusive province of working-class people. Both in the south and in extensive scenes in cities like Boston, New York, the Bay Area, and

other urban centers, it is played by middle-class people, many of whom come at it from a revivalist mindset in various ways. In addition, a number of touring bands are staffed by middle-class musicians; the bands that get the most press attention as ‘challenging’ or innovative (like the Punch Brothers) are inevitably made up of middle-class musicians. In recent years, this has become even more apparent through the increasing institutionalization of bluegrass within conservatories like Berklee in Boston, and elsewhere. Needless to say, many festivals draw crowds from a wide class spectrum, and many bands and musicians hold wide crossover appeal across class lines. I largely leave the internal class differentiation of bluegrass, as well as middle-class scenes or players—and resulting consequences in realms like aesthetics, canons, practices, and so on—aside to focus on working-class versions of bluegrass.

Thus, when I claim that bluegrass is largely a working-class art played by working-class people, this needs qualification. First, as with the chapter section on Nelly’s Jam in chapter three, I am talking about the numerous, thriving, and widespread instantiations of bluegrass in working-class lifeworlds, where it is practiced at regular jams, home parties, weekly gatherings at public and semi-public spaces, and innumerable festivals. Indeed, it is rare in western North Carolina to find anything bigger than a tiny town that doesn’t have at least one thriving weekly public jam and often a summer festival devoted to the music, always accompanied by numerous smaller private jams and local bands. And while middle-class people certainly show up to these kinds of events and are unremarkable presences, and while working-class people make regular appearances even at downtown Asheville bluegrass jams, it is fair to say that the scenes are still largely separate (if more integrated in class terms than old-time). For obvious

reasons, it would be impossible to say with any certainty what the demographic facts of bluegrass musicianship are with regard to class; my claim that it is a working-class art echoes Fox's (2004) assertion about country music: bluegrass as an aesthetics and musical and social practice largely draws on, and also comes to inflect, rural working-class cultural repertoires. Its obvious semiotic content in the American cultural imaginary is exactly that, and its existence in public realms is always inflected by ideas about class, whiteness, rurality, and southernness, even when played by middle-class college students in a conservatory in a large northeastern city.

Like country, bluegrass is explicitly geared towards public performance and is primarily vocally-oriented, although, even more than country, it privileges instrumental virtuosity particularly in the realm of melodic improvisation. In a standard bluegrass song, which tends to be between three and five minutes long, an instrumental intro or 'kick' will lead to a verse-chorus structure; different instrumentalists take turns playing short melodic solos throughout the song, typically following a chorus. Bluegrass instrumentation is acoustic with the occasional exception of the bass, and typically consists of some combination of bass, guitar, mandolin, banjo, fiddle, and Dobro (a species of resonator guitar). Other instruments are very rare. Unlike in old-time, all bluegrass instruments (except bass, which is only a rhythm instrument with very few exceptions) are legitimate solo or lead instruments in modern playing, although they have different rhythm-section responsibilities when not playing lead: bass, guitar, and mandolin, and to some extent banjo, are expected to constantly perform different aspects of rhythmic back-up, which are different from their complementary roles as solo instruments. Thus, in distinction to old-time, there are no clearly-defined instrumental

hierarchies which correspond to respective social hierarchies. Instead, as at Nelly's, working-class jams typically feature acknowledged interpersonal hierarchies or roles, wherein age, experience, ability, and other factors designate jam leaders, rather than instruments. Bluegrass songs within the canon (which is, also in contrast to old-time music, quite open to ongoing contemporary contributions, although ideologically anchored in the idea of a classic canon which all contemporary players should know) are often understood to 'feature' different instruments in particular places, or, in other words, to contain motifs, passages, or sounds which favor the unique sonic and technical capabilities of the different instruments (a subject beyond the scope of this section, but which has to do with things like string intervals, timbre, sustain, range, volume, and a host of other material aspects of construction and technique).

Despite their similarities, there are a number of different features that distinguish old-time and bluegrass as played. Bluegrass, apart from its focus on vocal performance, privileges a musical dynamic in which players in turn (usually by appointment of the jam leader) contribute an individual solo, but for the rest of the song are required to play with great attention to musical dynamics, including adjusting intensity, volume, and even technique to properly support the unique strengths and limitations of the individual instruments or the vocalist. Established jams are usually organized according to an acknowledged social structure that often preexists the musical encounter rather than according to who shows up with what instrument; because players are typically aware of this and perceive it to be an integral element of the functioning of the jam, there is very little policing necessary. In fact, not only is overt hierarchical behavior—like issuing stated demands of other musicians regarding technique or style—almost unheard of, but

participants have broad leeway within the structure of the jam to indulge in minor insurrections or humorous send-ups of the extant structure. There is also a degree of flexibility related to genre that is not present in old-time: bluegrass players often cover songs from genres like country or even early rock, albeit in bluegrass style. Furthermore, the premier aspect of any given song is almost always the vocal lead, which is supported by close two or three-part harmonic accompaniment on choruses. Any given participant, even an inexperienced musician, might be offered the chance to be featured vocally throughout a given jam, and thus briefly take ‘center stage’ as it were.

In short, bluegrass structures a social encounter in which individual players function within a matrix of other, unlike players; where the considerable individual expressiveness they have is both momentary and depends on a willingness to sublimate their own playing to the needs of the group the rest of the time, and on the willingness of other players to return the favor. It also depends on a deep appreciation of the categorical differences—the individual strengths and weaknesses—between the instruments and between the players of the instruments, but simultaneously is characterized by a canon where different songs highlight different instrumental and personal capabilities.

Old-time on the other hand structures a musical encounter where all instruments function in the exact same role at all times; where undifferentiated *individuals* play radically differentiated *instruments*; where the canon is composed entirely of songs which feature the same lead instrument, and where musical dynamics are almost entirely absent and every participant plays a maximalist role on their given instrument at all times. Old-time jams depend on hierarchies that are deflected away from individuals and projected

onto instrumental roles; of course, given the nature of the music, instrumental roles typically index corresponding levels of study or expertise.

There is no love lost between practitioners of the two genres. Although regional scenes, and the degree to which old-time and bluegrass are at odds vary quite extensively based largely on class dynamics, there are some common and predictable critiques that circulate in places where *middle-class* old-time players and *working-class* bluegrass players regularly encounter each other, as in Asheville, or at certain summer festivals like the Mt. Airy, North Carolina fiddler's convention.

Old-time musicians generally speaking loathe contemporary bluegrass, both as a musical form and as a social practice. The reasons are many: musically, they find it too ‘pretty,’ clean, or refined (and intimidatingly technically difficult); they find the singing unexpressive and rote but the lyrics contrived, overly sentimental, and maudlin; they find the soloing obnoxious and tasteless. Socially, they find the overt personal hierarchies distasteful, the practice of ‘soloing’ to be too individualistic and flashy, the interpersonal dynamics overtly competitive and hyper-masculine, and the people who play it generally politically regressive, consumeristic, and dull.

Working-class bluegrass players who encounter old-time in its purist guise often find the music repetitive, the approving focus on a ragged aesthetics incomprehensible, the technique bizarre in its willful badness, and the utter lack of dynamics or soloing evidence of a herd mentality and of musical inexperience. Socially, they find the typical old-time jam to be disorganized, chaotic, atomized, and simultaneously authoritarian. In effect, working-class players who circulate in old-time land find the odd effect of a

rigidly enforced disorder, and a set of accomplished musicians who intentionally play like beginners: that is to say, with little awareness of group dynamics or the musicality of a given tune or song, or of how a jam might accommodate players at different levels of expertise on instruments beside the fiddle.

### **Not all Hierarchies are Created Equal**

One of the most striking differences for working-class bluegrass players, when they occasionally played old-time, came in the form of severely differing conceptions of musical and personal autonomy on stage. At middle-class jams it was relatively commonplace for fiddlers and experienced musicians to directly censure others: as in, “Excuse me, but please don’t play a seven chord there—we’re playing Eddon Hammons’ version of this tune and it was recorded with a major five there.” Working-class notions of autonomy, as well as the de-emphasis on rigid genre policing, make this equivalent interaction almost unthinkable.

As my friend Mark discovered, though, the same rules don’t apply. Mark was raised in southwest Virginia in a working-class family, and he learned to play bluegrass at an early age from numerous relatives who taught him guitar, mandolin, and banjo. However, his main instrument was guitar, and he was a truly gifted musician—a virtuosic and tasteful improvisational player with a phenomenal ear, he could often learn complex fiddle tunes note-for-note on the fly at high tempos. He was also a gifted rhythm player, and deeply knowledgeable about the music he loved, but versatile enough to step in to a jam in any given genre and contribute. At the many bluegrass jams we played at together, he was a welcoming and humble presence, always encouraging beginners to take a break

even when it meant skipping his own, and always happy to share his extensive knowledge of bluegrass guitar with me and with anyone else who was interested. He was also an extremely gentle and funny guy. I had never seen him deeply angry until the aftermath of a jam at a summer festival, where he had, through curiosity and accident, been convinced to play old-time rhythm guitar at a jam where I was playing banjo.

Seated to the left-hand side of a young old-time fiddler from Boston who had taken up the music with an evangelical zeal some three years before, Mark caught my eye a couple of times on the first two tunes, as he listened closely to the group to figure out how he best fit in musically. Before beginning the third tune, the fiddle player looked at him and said, “Hey man, we’re gonna play Poplar Bluff—it’s a West Virginia tune from the playing of Ed Haley, and it’s got some weird chords. I’ll help you run through them.” Mark was taken aback, both because he was obviously capable of figuring out the chords, and because the pedantic tone of the fiddler was strikingly inappropriate, particularly given his shaky playing and questionable musicianship. Nevertheless, Mark listened to the lecture on chord changes, nodded politely, and played the tune as the fiddler requested. During the tune, he particularly emphasized the backbeat during one complex melodic passage where the fiddler was having difficulty and consequently slowing down, and he also decided on an inversion of one of the chords (that is, he played the same chord in a slightly different shape, emphasizing different octaves of the same set of notes) that he thought fit the group’s playing better.

When the tune ended, the fiddler accepted the admiration of some of the other players for playing ‘such a cool tune! And a super-difficult one on the fiddle!’ and then

turned to Mark. Reaching out, he took Mark's Martin guitar: "Here, let me see your guitar—I want to show you how that tune goes." Sounding extremely ragged on an instrument he was clearly unfamiliar with, he ran through the chord changes repeatedly and awkwardly, making frequent mistakes but staring at Mark as he gestured with an extravagant head nod every time he cycled through the chord that Mark had played an inversion of, which the fiddler hadn't recognized. "*This* is the chord I was talking about," he said, and added, "and, in traditional southern music, the guitar really plays the role of timekeeper, so it's really great if you can hold a very steady kind of rhythm feel."

Turning slightly red, Mark quietly said, "Well, actually, I *was* playing that chord—just a different version of it." The fiddler responded, "Well, I don't know what you were playing, but to your bluegrass ears, maybe that chord sounds really good. To my old-time ears, it just sounds cheesy. I just don't like that kind of chord—they're not really a part of this music for me." At his limit of tolerance, and with the jam circle watching, Mark simply took his guitar back, walked to his case, packed it up, and walked off without saying a word. There was a moment of silence when he left, but the ensuing discomfort around the circle was not with the fiddler's reproach but with Mark's apparent unwillingness to respect old-time 'traditions,' which in this case would have entailed ceding his musical and personal autonomy to an inferior musician who happened to be playing the 'lead instrument.' As Mark walked off, one of the other fiddlers started muttering about "Bluegrassers who show up at this festival in giant campers and just sit around in air conditioning all day, poor-ass people spending thousands of dollars on high-priced guitars, thinking they know what old-time is." The bass player, getting in the spirit of it, started joking about what bluegrass song the group should play next in honor of

Mark's departure. "How about the ol' Chicken Choker Rag?" he shouted, flailing around the fingers of his left hand up and down the neck of the bass in a caricature of a guitarist playing a fast and difficult tune (or a man frantically masturbating), to the general laughter of the group.

When I found Mark later at our campsite, he was still angry, but not because he had been embarrassed. Rather, he was astounded at the unmitigated gall of a Bostonian who had been playing old-time for three years telling him, a guy who had lived all the goods and bads of the rural southern working-class experience, how the guitar worked in "traditional southern music," particularly when the fiddler could hardly play guitar, and wasn't even that great on fiddle. However, the dynamic that Mark saw, where old-time players would overtly censure other musicians' playing at public jams, was not uncommon at all. In fact, telling other musicians how to play in a more 'authentic' style is something of a sport for particularly dogmatic old-time fiddlers, who are often prepared to cite an obscure recording as the justification for their correction. These censures can include anything from pedantic lectures about a tune's regional history and the chords a given guitar player might have played on a particular archival recording, to a demonstration of how the fiddler wanted it done, to, at the extreme, a request to leave the jam or stop playing. As with the harmonica player in the section above, old-time players tended to have few recourses to social repair beyond direct reproach, a strategy that rarely ended well. The joke the bass player made was also predictable, building off of the standard critique that middle-class players direct at working-class bluegrass jams: that they are a hyper-masculine dick contest where hick men see who can play the loudest and fastest. Ironically, as Mark could have said, negotiations like this at bluegrass jams are

uncommon because, not only are pedantic newcomers a rarity in a world of lifelong familiarity and extended apprenticeship in a given genre, but because the overt nature of musical experience and group leadership means that players typically understand their role and the role of their instrument well before they are the primary instrumentalist at a jam. When conflicts or problems do occur, instances of social repair are often conducted with reference to a set of figures or culturally understood tropes that allow people to indirectly address a particular person, ideally playfully, with what is essentially a request or a suggestion. Thus, the autonomy of individuals can be respected while social order is maintained, as I detail in the earlier section on Nelly's.

### **Contemporary Old-time by Another Name**

One of the more striking coincidences of my fieldwork, which traversed old-time, bluegrass and country scenes, was the fact that Allen, whose omnivorous weekly music gathering I detail in the third chapter, was a direct descendant of a family from Madison County, North Carolina, which had been extensively recorded by multiple folklorists including John Cohen. He himself, as he detailed in chapter one, grew up in rural Madison County playing the music his family listened to and taught him, which included bluegrass, country, and rock. Despite the family's legacy as authentic source musicians in the revivalist old-time canon, Allen neither grew up with old-time music nor played it himself, although he was a versatile and open-minded musician. Rather, he and his family played versions of the various genres of music which drew on old-time (and its associated vocal practice, unaccompanied ballad singing) as one particular influence. When I realized this, I asked Allen about his musical ancestors, and about whether he played or

was familiar with ‘old-time’ music. Allen noted about his ancestors, “Yeah, they put ‘em on a couple of records back in the day. They all sang, really, but my great-uncle was a great singer and they recorded him the most. But I never learned those old love songs, those ballads. Mostly, I just loved guitar picking.” Although he was aware of his family’s broader musical history and of the fact that they had been recorded, he was not versed in the particular parameters of modern old-time, despite the fact that, by all rights, he constituted what a linguist might call ‘the heritage community.’ This odd coincidence illustrates the nature of revivalism and its tendency to abstract aesthetics from practices. It would be a relatively easy project to identify an alternate history of old-time music that privileges the relationship of particular communities to evolving forms of particular vernacular musics: instead of freezing the canon of old-time music in the early 20th century and then identifying middle-class revivals of both old-time and bluegrass as pure genres, one could trace the changing ways that working-class rural people actually played and listened to music in those years. Indeed, it is relatively indisputable that the same ‘kinds’ of people, as my working-class informants might say, who played old-time music a century ago eventually replaced it with country and bluegrass as primary and relevant genres, while maintaining, as Allen does, a relatively conscious recreation of the social practices of music as he knew them from his childhood. Ironically and unfortunately, the same revivalists who painstakingly learn the songs that his (uncompensated) forebears sang and played into a fieldworker’s microphone are largely and explicitly scornful of the kinds of music that Allen himself plays.

On stage at Allen’s one night, I invited Mark, the bluegrass guitarist I mention in the previous section, to play lead guitar for a few songs. Allen, noticing Mark’s musical

chops as we ran through a few country songs, ran back to his house to get out his old Martin acoustic guitar, which he almost never used, favoring instead a late-model Fender Stratocaster run through a small modeling amp. Excited to play some bluegrass, Allen jumped onstage, grinned at Mark, and kicked off a blazing version of Doc Watson's Black Mountain Rag, adding a tasteful up-the-neck break which highlighted his precise picking and the sweet upper register of his old D-28. As cloggers flooded the dance floor, the elderly banjo player who had joined us began his solo. Not quite able to match Allen's tempo, he faltered and the song's rhythm became unsteady, leading to chaos on the dance floor. Immediately, the fiddler, a young woman who played with phenomenal energy, stepped to the mic and began a relatively quiet but tasteful accompaniment that re-oriented the banjo player to the melody and stabilized the tempo. Grinning at her, he found his place and finished his solo. Having graciously rescued him, she immediately launched into her lead at full volume. Finally, Mark closed the song out as the dancers tired, nailing the intricate melody and then humorously and intentionally failing in his attempt to replicate Allen's up-the-neck solo, instead playing a quarter-note version that he ended with an intentionally-botched 'shave-and-a-haircut, two-bits' motif to the laughter of the crowd. As everyone instinctively appreciated, Mark's complex musical statement gestured to the stereotype of competitive soloing, but turned it on its head through a cleverly-executed 'failure' which left him playing an extremely rudimentary version of the song. The solo managed to encapsulate both an implicit mockery of musical competition with a sincere homage to Allen and his technical mastery. As the song ended, the banjo player thanked the fiddler, explaining that "When you get to be an old man like me, you lose a step or two! I used to could play as fast as anyone, but now

I'm doing good just to keep up. Course, an old man hears things in the music too that a young person doesn't—it gets richer."

This was relatively early in my fieldwork at Allen's, and, deeply immersed in both the revivalist old-time ethos of Asheville and the many commercial spaces where I had played bluegrass, I failed to appreciate the particular attitude at Allen's towards genre. Understanding that it was a country barn dance (where most of the songs were country standards), I assumed that the crowd likewise thought of it as a 'classic country' performance and probably didn't like other genres. Accordingly, I worried that our bluegrass interlude would be met with annoyance by people expecting to hear *Country*. But Allen wanted to play bluegrass, so I introduced the next song cautiously: "Well, I know y'all want to hear Country Music, but Allen here is the boss, so we're going to play a few bluegrass numbers. I hope you won't mind!" As usual in those early days, my pronouncement was met with characteristic silence by the audience, and I noticed Allen watching me with a bemused expression from across the stage. "It's all right, David, the BLUEGRASS POLICE aren't even here tonight!" he intoned into the microphone. There was a momentary pause while everyone appreciated his comment, and then laughter broke out. Allen, as an off-mic aside that I was meant to hear, then commented to Mark, "He's a little gun-shy, isn't he?! Been playing too long in the city, but he'll learn quick enough that we don't bite."

Allen's comment encapsulated a primary working-class attitude towards music: while people prefer to remain within the boundaries of a particular sonic aesthetics, and tend to insist on a particular set of musical and social practices, the boundaries of genre are relatively wide open. No one at Allen's much cared if the musicians played country,

bluegrass, Dire Straits, Allen’s favorite Chuck Berry song, or Eric Clapton. Much like the iconic revivalist hero Doc Watson, a country-raised musician who never really adopted revivalist standards, musicians at Allen’s played what they liked, and the audience liked what they played for the most part. This attitude at Allen’s mirrored the many working-class jams at which I played music over more than a decade: people preferred a particular aesthetics, but were quite happy to cover songs from nearly any genre or time period. The rigid boundaries that tended to characterize old-time scenes, and even middle-class bluegrass scenes, simply didn’t exist. Of course, as Allen’s joke and its appreciative reception indicate, the crowd wasn’t unfamiliar with the idea of rigidly-policed genre boundaries. In fact, they were well-versed in an idea that circulated widely as shared cultural knowledge: middle-class people have a consistently different approach to categorizing certain things about working-class culture, but those things often aren’t the things that working-class people like to categorize. However, this reflexive awareness of classed approaches to categorizing enables certain approaches to the political economy of revivalism as a cultural phenomenon.

A musician named Ted (described in a previous chapter) who joined Little Red and the Hots very briefly—like Red, one of the few musicians to cycle through the band who actually came from a rural southern working-class background—captured this kind of working-class cultural wisdom with a pithy story he told during a band tour. As we swerved and sped through the Pigeon River gorge, talk turned to the idea of tradition, authenticity, and who plays what music and why, a matter that Ted had strong opinions on. By way of making his point, he described a friend who had grown up ‘country’ and poor, and whose grandfather had been a prominent fiddler. As he told it, his friend had

grown up steeped in the musical tradition, but himself had preferred contemporary country music, finding fiddle tunes relatively uninteresting although he was a very good player. One day his grandfather, who after retiring from factory work had made decent money touring middle-class venues and camps catering to musical revivalists, who regarded him as an authentic ‘source musician,’ took him aside. Speaking sternly, the grandfather told him that he needed to devote himself to the fiddle tunes that he had learned, and quit playing all that modern shit. “But,” his friend protested, “I don’t even like those old tunes. I mean, they’re fine, but I’m a *country* guitar player.” At this point in the story, I assumed that the grandfather would impart a didactic tale about the importance of keeping alive old traditions, and that this would be the point of Ted’s story: old people like tradition and want to see it carried on. Instead, Ted’s voice dropped a half-octave and assumed an impression of an old-school southern accent as he channeled the grandfather, dressing his friend down: “Don’t like the music?! Don’t LIKE it? Hell, you don’t *have* to like it! You just have to PLAY it. Let someone ELSE *like* it. You wanna work in a GOT-Damn factory for the rest of your miserable life?!” Ted burst out laughing as he finished his story, concluding that his friend was too stubborn and stupid to take his grandfather’s advice, but that he probably could have made good money selling himself as the authentic living exemplar of the fiddling tradition passed down through his family.

In short, as Jake and Ted illustrate, working-class people were often broadly aware of the particular cultural lens through which middle-class people approached music, and furthermore had a canny evaluation of the political economic considerations of revivalist mentalities as they related to musical practice and the social dynamics

surrounding ‘who gets to play what.’ In other words, the rigid and minute categorization of practices that genre-policing as a particular example embodies was not simply absent because people didn’t know better. Instead they were intimately familiar with the concept, such that an example of it was easy pickings for mockery. They simply rejected it as part of a legible approach to cultural life, although they were happy to indulge it in others (at times). This particular awareness on the part of working-class musicians of cultural differences corresponding to class was echoed in various ways, and was articulated through the device categorizing middle-class people as particular kinds of subjects (although, of course, rarely with that label: synonyms included ‘city people,’ ‘hippies,’ and other colorful descriptors). Because working-class people viewed middle-class people as a particular category of person with certain notable traits and features, they were often better able to anticipate and prevent the kinds of social breakdowns that I have detailed throughout this work, which often arise from a corresponding failure on the part of middle-class people to understand that they belong to an identifiable category of person but are around different kinds of people. ,

This dynamic was particularly noticeable in spaces where working-class social encounters received regular middle-class attention, like bluegrass jams. In these spaces, as with the jam at Nelly’s in the previous chapter, regular attendees were reflexively conscious not only of the cultural differences they perceived with middle-class people, but they were also aware, that for the most part, middle-class people were either unaware of these differences or, perhaps more accurately, unwilling to recognize them for what they were: categorical differences that were socially important. This fact revealed itself in numerous and subtle ways. With Little Red and the Hots, it was almost guaranteed that

whenever our band played somewhere new in a working-class space, some culture-broker or translator would make an effort to talk to us about the kind of place we were in, to advise us of norms of behavior that might be foreign to us, and to let us know conversely what behaviors might be expected of us. Recall, of course, that our band looked for the most part ‘punk’ and as such well outside the bounds of working-class bodily and aesthetic practice.

For instance, at Allen’s, Allen himself was at first very concerned that we understood what kind of place he was running, and what the nature of the social encounter fundamentally was. The first few times our band showed up to play, he would corral one or two of us with an apologetic smile, and explain the facts of the place that he suspected we didn’t understand. However, after Red and I became familiar faces and it was clear that we understood the nature of the place to some extent, Allen was content to defer his duties as class translator for our band (and at times other unknown bands) onto us. While he never explicitly said as much, he was clear in the hints he would drop (particularly about unfamiliar stage practices that facilitated the social nature of the evenings) that we should let inexperienced newcomers know what to expect, how to react, and most importantly, how to behave respectfully and considerately. On one of the first nights we played there, Allen cornered Red and me before we went on stage: “Well, we’re glad y’all are here to play tonight! You know, this is really a family-style kind of place. We’re all mostly just country people, you know, crazy hillbillies some of ‘em in the audience. But everyone here treats each other like family—we don’t allow any drinking or fighting, but sometimes people’ll get a little excited, shout along with you, let you know what they want to hear and so on. Don’t worry—that’s just the way we do

here. We like to keep things moving along on stage, make sure the audience is happy and they get to dance, cause that's mostly what we're here for."

We heard a version of Allen's introduction so often at the various places we played that I was eventually able to systematize what the culture-broker figure was charged with conveying:

—This is not a middle-class venue, and people are going to look and act different from you and your normal audience.

—Middle-class ideas of performance conventions, genre boundaries, and audience/performer distinctions aren't in effect the way you think they are, so don't be offended when people in the audience make demands and generally act as if you're simply doing what you ought to be doing rather than celebrating your artistry.

—You have nothing to fear from the people here, who, even if they look and act differently from what you expect, and might seem a little wild, are not dangerous.

—You are expected to treat this place and encounter with a degree of reverence conveyed by the almost-constant use of kinship registers.

As these instances demonstrated to me, the role of cultural translation between working- and middle-class social worlds was one that required a deep and reflexive awareness not only of the naturalized behaviors and norms of one's own space, but also, perhaps as importantly, an evaluation of the level of reflexive awareness of the outsider in question as to their own norms and of the differences between the two worlds. In this complex calculus, it always seemed to me that middle-class musicians were acutely

aware that the working-class crowds they played with or for were ‘different,’ but that they lacked an understanding of their own inclusion in broad categorical kinds of norms—an understanding that working-class people were better able to articulate or even grasp because of a willingness to deploy categories of personhood.

As I have argued, working-class people readily categorized other people and themselves in broad schemas, and found such categorization to enable amusing, insightful, or pointed social interaction. The categories that were important in working-class life were many—they included things like parenthood, marital status, geographic origin, and other biographical details in addition to categories that tended to be socially obvious like gender, race, or age. For instance, when Jake—who I introduced in chapter three—learned that I was soon to be a father, he was not only excited and congratulatory, but made it clear that it would make me a different kind of person: “Being a daddy is something that changes you—you’ll never look at anything the same again! And I don’t just mean with your family—all of life just changes and you’ll learn that you relate to people differently. And David, you’ll have to figure out how to relate to your son, and that’s not always easy, I know from experience.” He broke into song, quoting a verse from the well-known and well-loved country song called “Between Fathers and Sons,” made famous by Waylon Jennings. The song considers the different ways that mothers and fathers relate to sons, and encapsulates the idea that while mothers often assume the role of protector and caretaker, the job of a father is to “do all you can” before “you gotta let go” and watch as your son finds his own way in the world.

Like many songs in the country canon, the song proceeds from the idea that people inhabiting a certain delimited role or category—mother, father, husband, son—are

going to face certain predictable dilemmas that, despite (or perhaps because of) their commonality, remain difficult, poignant, or meaningful. It's extremely important to note that the social categorization that I detail in working-class lifeworlds here and throughout the previous chapters—as when Jake, for instance, quizzed me on my geographic origin as a way of understanding who I was—isn't limited to categories of personhood like race or gender that middle-class people find particularly politically problematic as essentialized identities. However, neither does it exclude those categories of identification—as, for instance, the many songs, aphorisms, and cultural tropes about the differences suspected to inhere between men and women point to. And likewise, working-class people in everyday conversation were likely to identify particular people by race as a notable categorical label (as in, “Reggie, the black guy who comes down from Tennessee sometimes to play with that Waylon cover band at Allen’s—you know him, rides a motorcycle, great country drummer...”). Rather, categories like race and gender coexist with other important identifying feature like age, geographic origin, marital status, child-rearing status, and so on, with different categorical aspects of a given person emerging as salient or interesting depending on the encounter. What this paradigmatic set of terms almost never included, however, were ‘practice-based identities’ like ‘musician.’ For instance, even though many of the players at Allen’s were phenomenal musicians, I never heard anyone refer to themselves, or be referred to, as “a musician.” While people would sometimes characterize their roles in the music (as in, “Burl’s the guitar man—he’ll play lead for you on this song.”) as a practical thing, it was clear that, unlike in middle-class spaces, voluntary or hobby-like activities like music (or even more-necessary activities like occupation) weren’t understood to constitute socially-

important categories of identity except in rare instances. In other words, working-class categorization is concerned with what you *are* rather than what you *do*.

However, despite the ways that various categorical identifiers fade in and out of view, it is fair to say that in the rural south, one of the first questions asked of newcomers concerns geographic origin—a question that, in its deceptive simplicity reveals a lot about class-specific attitudes towards mobility, kinship, place, and other factors in addition to the basic surface-level fact it interrogates. The complexities of this question, and why it is so revealing, became clearer through comparison. At one festival, I was sitting with a group of Asheville old-time friends and acquaintances when a newcomer approached. One of my friends in the circle, Dan, had grown up in a rural working-class community but had attended college, making him a bit of a native ethnographer of class culture. As the stranger introduced himself to the circle, Dan shook his hand, introduced himself, and asked the newcomer where he was from. “Well, what do you mean? Like, now? Or, like, where I grew up?” Dan said, “Well, I don’t know—whatever you think the answer is, is fine!” with a laugh. The young man thought for a minute and said, “Well, I live in Asheville now—I moved there about five years ago. I was born in Minnesota, but we moved some when I was a kid...so, I guess I’m from Asheville!” Dan nodded, satisfied with the answer as it stood, but other people in the circle felt curious not about the answer but about the question. Someone asked Dan, “Why do you ask? I mean, I’m not sure where I’m from, really—probably a lot of us wouldn’t really know what to say to that.” Dan glanced over at me and said, “Well, it’s kind of a southern thing—back me up David—but we say hi by asking where you’re from. And what you say back tells me

everything I need to know.” There was a murmur from the group, and he clarified his stance, noting that he wasn’t judging, or trying to make people feel like they didn’t belong—just that he was curious about not only where people grew up, but how they think about what it is to ‘be from’ somewhere. But he repeated, “Still, the main thing a southerner wants to know is where you’re from.” This statement in its blunt honesty was unexpectedly upsetting to the festival crowd, who were almost all ‘from somewhere else,’ as they put it, and were clearly uncomfortable with the idea that this was a shared characteristic and that it might say something categorical about them all as a particular kind of people. One person articulated it thus: “Yeah, me too—I don’t really know where to say I’m from, cause I don’t really feel like I’m *from* anywhere in particular. So I want to say that I’m from Asheville because that’s where I feel most at home—but I *hate* being the New Yorker who says they’re from North Carolina because they think the south is so cool!” As the group continued to discuss the matter of origins and appropriation, it seemed clear that Dan’s basic stance—that he was seeking categorical information early on to understand who he was dealing with—was exactly the thing that was causing discomfort. As with the New Yorker, it brought on the uncomfortable dilemma for the assembled group of emphasizing a number of shared common features (that they didn’t particularly enjoy sharing), as well as underlining that, at least to Dan, those shared features were meaningful and obvious.

As I discussed in the section on ‘community’ and its varying class referents, the spatial registers of mobility, origin, and desire all have strong correlations with class, and thus, in many ways, the ‘where are you from’ question is best understood as a question about class, understood through the way that class inflects both places and the specific

ways that people inhabit them and imagine them. In other words, one of the first and most important things that working-class people want to establish as a social fact about interlocutors is class origin, because such a thing is presumed to convey perhaps the most important set of characteristics on which the particularities of social interaction could be based, and to encode a set of ethical stances relating to how sociality should ideally unfold.

Later during the night at Allen's that this section began with, a bluegrass-playing policeman did make an actual appearance, much to my amusement following Allen's comment. He was well-known to the regulars as a kind of hard-charging, alpha-male law enforcement guy, and despite the audience's varying levels of discomfort with state authority given the regularity of run-ins with the law, he was appreciated for his oratorical skills. He got up on stage with his band to play a few songs as a last act, but he couldn't resist a rehearsed biography by way of introduction. Resting his hand on his guitar, he launched into his speech: "I'm just a redneck country boy, born and raised here in Madison County. Law enforcement has taken me all around the world and I've seen it all, and you know, it's *bad* everywhere. Not many places where things are as good as they are here, where people treat each other right. I just like the people here best—I think they're the best folks anywhere, mountain people. And I think of this as a region—Madison, Haywood county, Canton, Sandy Mush...I just love all those folks. I'll take it any day over LA or Miami or Chicago." The audience applauded, and he immediately launched into a Willie Nelson song about cowboys.

#### **4.4: Rigidly-Enforced Autonomy**

In the last section, I showed how my friend Dan made a group of middle-class people extremely uncomfortable with a simple biographical question followed by an explanation of why he thought it was important. In many ways, this instance demonstrated a curious fact of fieldwork: despite my greater comfort in middle-class cultural spaces, it was much easier in some ways to initiate fieldwork in working-class spaces, since part of the process of getting to know potential informants is exactly that—a process of basic categorization where, ideally, you end up with a demographic overview of ‘what’ they are. As I quickly noticed, however, asking (even carefully-framed) questions like Dan’s is a great way to make middle-class people uncomfortable—perhaps even more so with punks. Clearly, middle-class life in actual practice involves incredible amounts of very fine-grained kinds of categorization; however, as a process, this kind of social differentiation takes place mostly in the realm of practices rather than at the level of ontology. Middle-class people emphasize what they *do*, rather than what they *are*. As such, to get a sense of the biographical outlines of punk and middle-class informants, I had to develop creative sets of questions. One of the most common formulations I settled on was some version of, “What do you like to do when you’re not doing x?” where x is whatever we were doing at the moment. As I found, this question gave people a chance to talk about themselves through the things they did—music, work, hobbies, passions, art—and to illustrate what ‘kind’ of a person they were without ever confining themselves to a particular formula.

As I outlined in the introduction, this ethical orientation towards fluidity, relatively ubiquitous in middle-class life, is further echoed in not only the broad social

sciences but in particular in anthropology. The fluidity of categories of identity or cultural boundaries (often in the face of ‘regressive’ efforts to reinforce them) is a complex thing to understand, but the basic stance can be characterized as such: first, it is a transcendental given that they are ‘constructed’ (with all that that entails); second it is also a given that they serve to enable hierarchies and therefore underwrite oppressive regimes of gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and so on; and finally, it is assumed to be a defining feature of the political progress of modernity that these two attitudes (comprising a ‘realistic’ stance towards categories) are diffusing out of the academy and into popular discourses and practices. I would argue, rather, that the ethical stance is present already in middle-class academics, and that it is almost as accurate to say that the academy, as a middle-class space, is suffused with middle-class cultural logics (Jameson 1991 and Harvey 1990 of course, make very similar arguments about ‘postmodernism’ from a Marxist standpoint).

As I showed in the introduction on anarchism and punk praxis, the idea of hierarchy and how to prevent it has also assumed paramount importance for leftist activist thought. It is understood that hierarchy is a commonplace but unnecessary social convention, reliant on rigidly-defined ‘kinds’ of people, and ideally can be avoided by very careful arrangements particularly in the realm of group decision-making. However, it is also clearly understood that another prime way of preventing hierarchies is by rendering categorical identities unstable or by avoiding them altogether. This is most clearly apparent in the realm of gender and sexuality in our contemporary moment, where transgressing or rejecting categories is typically seen as a moment of liberation, when a constricting external identity is shed for an inner essence that more truly expresses the

authentic nature of the person. However, as I show below, this attitude towards categorization as an undesirable attack on an inner core of authentic selfhood extended well beyond realms of political activism like gender, and came to inflect everyday life in significant ways.

### **“An Exercise in Futility”**

Jamie had a good run of about three years living where he had built his hillside shack, but eventually, the landlord decided it was time to settle down in his house, and he kicked out Red, Jamie, and everyone else who lived there. Because the landlord was ostensibly an anarchist, he was very reluctant to kick out his tenants forcefully because this represented a kind of coercion and an unseemly and selfish attachment to his personal property. Accordingly, the way he did it was extremely passive-aggressive and unclear, and many questions were unanswered or left hanging. He suggested wildly different move-out dates; he offered a discount in rent if they moved out sooner; and finally, he notified everyone that rent would promptly double as of next month. At one point, after his passive-aggressive tactics had eventually driven out Red and the others who lived in the house itself, he had simply informed Jamie that he was free to remain in his shack on the hill above the house, and Jamie took him at his word. However, when the landlord moved in, he quickly made it clear that Jamie was completely unwelcome to use the kitchen, bathroom, or any other space, a fact that made his continued tenure in the shack impossible. Foreseeing this eventuality, Jamie had designed his shack to be modular, disassemble-able into about twelve large structural sections for transport. The sections, however, weighed hundreds of pounds each and were assembled into a shack

some fifty feet up a very steep hillside. This was a dilemma that only a community could solve, and Jamie reached out far and wide to his friends, students, and acquaintances for help (as I mention in the section on community). On the main work day, I showed up to help and joined a group of about ten people from Jamie's various communities. As we worked to disassemble the complex and dangerous roof sections, one of the volunteers, Charlie, had rigged an elaborate rope-and-pulley assembly using specialized tools to help lower the heavy sections without killing us. When I tried to lend a hand as he struggled to loop his rope over a high branch, he brushed me off and devised a slingshot device which accomplished the task. Intrigued, I asked him where he had learned to do that, and he mentioned that he worked as an arborist. "Oh, cool, a tree guy! That seems like interesting work" I said, forgetting myself in the heat and sweat of the work. Charlie instantly paused, considered me for a second, and said, "Well, tree work is one of the many things that I like to do, but I'm not sure if I'm a '*tree guy*'." Mentally kicking myself, I said: "I see. What else do you like to do?" "Oh, it depends on the day," He answered. "I do a lot of home-brewing, mostly meads, and I also enjoy bee-keeping. And, of course, I'm a musician. But I love to do tree work because it allows me to be meticulous and present." His friend Tim, who had been listening, chimed in: "Yes, you're very present! I can see how tree work would be great for you—it's like music in that way. You have to be very present in the moment."

Charlie, Tim, Jamie, and the rest of us worked until evening, when we knocked off to go to a potluck outside town, organized in honor of Jamie's transition. The potluck was being staged at a place Karen, a friend of Jamie's, had just bought, a derelict old farmhouse near what was turning into a burgeoning 'intentional community' of (largely

primitivist) punks living outside a small country town. Jamie intended to move his shack to some adjoining land, where he would have access not only to the community, but also to some vital amenities like a kitchen, shower, and heated indoor space during the winter.

As we approached the house via a rural two-lane highway, we passed into the largely abandoned farmland that post-industrial economic changes had rendered relatively worthless—land far enough from Asheville that it was not yet valuable as second-home or commuter homes. Other derelict farmhouses began to appear more frequently on the roadside. We arrived at a grassy patch on the roadside in front of Karen’s new house, a 120-year old heap that had once been an elegant structure but now was moldering and falling down, with many broken windows, no electricity or water, and much of the structure at a notable slant. It was surrounded by overgrown fields and a backslope choked with invasive plants, with a few crude spaces hacked out into the jungly late August growth and planted with tomatoes or housing a mobile chicken coop. The chickens and tomatoes looked dispirited.

Arriving as a group, we meandered up to a badly listing screened-in porch, where six or seven people had already congregated for the evening. People wandered in and out of the house with flashlights, inspecting the work that Karen had done stripping it down to the studs. As it began to get dark, the smell and dusky light of a kerosene lamp in the corner drifted over the group. On a propane burner in the corner of the porch, Charlie began to sauté some deer meat (in a cast-iron pan) that he proudly announced had come from a roadkill deer he had found a couple of weeks back, and its gamy odor combined with the kerosene. Someone else started boiling a pot of greens pulled from the weedy back hillside, and Charlie passed around a bottle of his mead—honey mead from his

bees—for the group to sample, everyone conspicuously drinking out of the same bottle. When I declined to drink, stares were directed my way until I pulled out a bottle of bad whiskey I had brought and proffered that around. Jamie and I had also brought instruments, and we played fiddle and banjo duets for half an hour in the humid darkness, the sound muffled by cicadas and by the low murmur of tired people talking. Jamie grew tired of the porch and wandered off for some solitude, and I chatted for a while with Tim.

As it turned out, Tim was passing through Asheville on his way to a primitive skills workshop in Massachusetts, where he hoped to further his outdoor skills and mentoring abilities. He and Jamie talked about it with some concern, since Tim had just learned that some of the people coming to teach were getting paid. As they talked about the contradiction between paying people and creating community, Tim grew agitated, finally bursting out, “Fuck that! Paying people creates hierarchy, and you can’t have hierarchy when you’re trying to have community. Paying five people out of the seventy to teach, when we’re all there to teach and learn, creates a financial hierarchy, and that just totally destroys the point.”

When I asked what he did to make money, he said his regular work was as a manager for a nature retreat center in Georgia—a place where, as he put it, he was deeply satisfied (for the moment) because his work there seemed to him to be “the highest expression of the gifts that I came to bring.” He talked for a while about the difficulties of being a manager, and of how that role—which often involves telling people what to do—was one he struggled with greatly, because he felt conflicted about the dual imperatives of keeping the place running and respecting the other employees’ autonomy. He concluded, “I often find that if I simply suggest to people the things that they need to do

or the ways they need to improve, we're both happy—I'm not coercing them into doing anything, but I'm communicating what needs to be done, and they can make their own decision about whether to do it or not!” “And what happens if they decide not to do it?” I ask. “Well, to be sure, that happens. We often have people move on and seek other opportunities to grow and learn, and sometimes that's for the best for everyone. It's a very transitory place, where people often find what they need and then move on.” Still unclear, I asked about the other people who work there, trying to get a sense of what the place actually does, which seemed very vague. Tim explained patiently to me that most of the people who are “called to work there”—the work being connecting people to nature, among other things—were “exceptional.” Somewhat amused, I asked him: “Exceptional good or exceptional bad?” He answered, “Well, I don't want to put a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ label on it. The nature of the place is change; to try to categorize it in any way would really be an exercise in futility.” I asked a few more questions about his work, but he was extremely reluctant to generalize about the people or the place, and eventually we trailed off at a bit of an impasse, him frustrated at my attempts to pigeonhole what he did and me frustrated by his refusal to characterize with any clarity.

Luckily, dinner was ready as we finished, and Charlie called everyone to attention, saying “Hey folks! Let's gather around over here in a circle.” Everyone put down cups and instruments and assembled, holding hands in a circle of ten or twelve. Charlie led the group in a campfire song, and then looked down and closed his eyes. Following along, the rest of the group did the same. Charlie intoned, “I'm thankful for the community of people who have come together today to help Jamie, and for the good work we did.” The next person in the circle, her eyes tightly closed, gave thanks “for the

season and the abundance of the earth.” Tim, to her left, thanked the deer “for giving its life for our sustenance, and the bees for this awesome honey mead!” The previous speaker gently corrected him: “And Charlie, of course.” “Right, and Charlie! Sorry!” When the chain of thanksgiving reached the next person in the circle, there was silence. A quiet guy in his twenties, dressed in black pants and a dirty white tank top, he hadn’t said much all evening and didn’t seem very interested in the circle. As the silence lengthened, people became uncomfortable and started peeking out of squinted and half-opened eyes, not wanting to disturb the unspoken understanding of the moment but wanting the quiet guy to do what he was supposed to do. After extensive throat-clearing had failed, Tim finally nudged him with his elbow gently and whispered, “Your turn!” Surprised out of his trance, the young man opened his eyes, looked around, and stammered something about being grateful for the food. Satisfied, the circle continued on until everyone had spoken, but no one quite knew how to conclude: the available ritual conclusion to a sacred event, ‘Amen,’ being clearly inappropriate for the context. Tim finally grabbed his neighbors’ hands and semi-ironically put them in the middle of the circle like a sports team about to take the field. Everyone else followed suit and someone shouted “Go Team!!” as everyone threw their hands down and made the ritual “Huh!” noise to conclude the oddly-juxtaposed rituals. People wandered over and looked at the meal, which was greasy venison medallions, boiled greens, and some quinoa, and served themselves portions.

As at many such gatherings, the sense I had was not of an autonomous collective of egalitarian individuals, but rather one where an ideology of individuality or

egalitarianism rendered extant differences unacknowledgable or hard to deal with. One of the most revealing aspects concerned Tim in particular and the conflict he felt between his political beliefs about hierarchy and autonomy, and his role as a manager who had to ensure that certain tasks were carried out. As he outlined, his strategy was simply ‘to suggest,’ leaving the decision about what to do up to the employee—a stance that imaginatively produced a relationship of equality out of what looked suspiciously like hierarchy. Of course, as he acknowledged, the consequences of refusing could include ‘moving on for other growth opportunities,’ a euphemistic register for ‘do what I tell you or you’ll get fired.’ This interaction resonated with old-time music, where structural hierarchies are ideologically avoided in favor of an ‘egalitarianism’ which in practice simply serves to obscure what are actually quite rigid hierarchical rules concerning not only what is played, how it is learned, and how it sounds, but who gets to decide. In this sense, the characteristic feature of middle-class liberal sociality is the compulsion to a particular kind of individualism, emptied of differentiating features and enforced by structural rules that defer the actual character of one’s relationship to other people onto a relationship between practices. Much like with the quiet guy in the circle, understandings of spontaneous and improvised scripts where everyone freely contributes can quickly morph into a compulsion to perform one’s individual expression of self: ‘give thanks or else.’ Like Tim’s employees or the harmonica player at the old-time jam, you can either pretend that your autonomous decision happily accords with what other egalitarian people expect you to do, or you can face the consequences of having the structural hierarchies that existed all along, deferred onto practices, come crashing down on you: “please leave the jam.”

There are two major results in the entanglement of a political project (that I have described in broad outlines as ‘Foucauldian’) and an unreflexive and class-specific ethical stance which imagines categorization as a default ‘bad.’ The first is that attitudes towards categorization which might have ‘good’ political effects unforeseen by the liberal project tend to be regarded by default as politically regressive, a topic I take up in the conclusion to this section. The second is that, when a deontological stance becomes imbued with the fervor of a political project, it often spills its bounds and comes to inflect domains where it can have contradictory effects, as above. In this sense, for both middle-class liberals and some punks, a utopic vision of sociality-absent-coercion might be said to assume a flattened, individualistic social subject that is largely abstractable from particularized social matrices, and homogenously interchangeable in various contexts. In essence, extended to its logical extreme, it presumes to eradicate categorical difference of all kinds and in the process ends up reinforcing certain predictable differences through hierarchies by another name.

## 4.5 Conclusion

Class was an important predictor of how my different groups of informants approached the inevitable social process of assigning people to categories—a task that, despite leftist utopias, is joyfully and thoroughly engaged by people of all political persuasions. Part of what differentiated people across class lines in my fieldwork, as they decoded what ‘kinds’ of people they were interacting with in a given space, was not only how categories were assigned but what was understood to fill them.

As I have argued, middle-class people tended to project the realm of social differentiation onto a richly-elaborated set of practices which are understood to signal micro-distinctions between persons. This realm is also known as ‘taste,’ and is itself the subject of much theorization in terms of how it serves a bounding function both within and between classes—to the extent that it comes to represent in practice a viable model of what class ‘is’ (including of course Bourdieu 1984, among others). As I have suggested, this focus is one of the many ways that academic theory of class is better understood as the ethnoscience of middle-class culture, a project that largely ignores equivalent aspects of working-class culture. This is a complex point but it is important to make: understanding middle-class culture in comparative relief uniquely outlines some of the naturalized ethical stances towards selfhood and relationality that are reproduced in a relatively untroubled way in (middle-class) academic class theory. Even Bourdieusian theory, which encodes a very high degree of reflexivity about the ways that class structures things like morals, tastes, and common sense, has this feature. In essence, the problem lies in proposing middle-class notions of boundary-making or ethical personhood, and transposing them into theoretical formulations as unquestioned

universals. One arena of Bourdieusian theory that has been explicitly criticized for this move, of course, is his extension of the logic of ‘capital’ into various social realms. This theoretical move, while obviously providing an extremely productive model of middle-class social logic, simply doesn’t square with counterposed working-class (or non-western) cultural logics.

Interestingly, one of the implications of this stance in middle-class culture is that it tends to imagine or project a core of selfhood that is expressed through practices but ultimately remains inviolate, and always retains the potential to be more fully expressed through better practices. There is, in other words, a ‘doer outside the deed’ lurking in middle-class selfhood. This aspect of classed categorization is deeply tied up with the future-oriented perspectives I detail in chapter four. When this mechanism of social differentiation is highlighted theoretically, certain things result. Namely, in the realm of practices, working-class people find middle-class people snobbish and concerned with inconsequential minutiae; middle-class people find working-class people tasteless muddlers. As a theory of class, it adequately explains how and why middle-class people are able to read and project important differences among themselves, and it certainly explains the maintenance of inter-class boundaries in the cultural realm.

But it doesn’t particularly help us to understand how and why working-class people tend to understand differences between people. Rather, all it reveals about working-class people is the various ways they are excluded from upward mobility. It is knowledge about an absence rather than a presence: ‘Working-class people lack a sense of the game in the realm of taste.’ Fine, but what do they have instead? If middle-class people encode categorical distinctions between people through the way that tastes index

life trajectories, how do working-class people do it? Surely they're not an undifferentiated mass to each other, the way they are to middle-class people. Academic theories of class, in other words, often highlight aspects of class difference that are salient to the middle-class people who articulate them, and then confuse the map with the terrain (ENDNOTE: Working-class academics).

In the realm of the categorization of persons as such, I have pointed to the way that middle-class ethical dispositions and contemporary intellectual trajectories in the left-leaning social sciences and humanities share a remarkable set of assumptions: that categorization is bad for a number of reasons, including that it enables or produces hierarchy (which is also understood to be bad). The moral force which attaches to this ethical stance, I argue, has clouded not only a more accurate theorization of working-class culture as such, but also deeply inflects the contemporary political landscape of America.

In working-class spaces during my fieldwork, categorical differences between people were often thought of as socially generative: that is, people deployed and relied on widely-applicable categories to understand themselves and each other as particular kinds of people, and to imagine what the differences between those kinds of people might be. These categories, like age, gender, geographic origin, class, and so on, came from biographical fact rather than voluntary practice and were largely thought to represent meaningful and truthful information. While there was ample appreciation for 'characters,' individual quirks, idiosyncrasies, and big personalities, it is fair to say that, in profound opposition to middle-class understandings, working-class people were typically uninterested in the deeply unique and profoundly internal experience of others'

‘selfhood’—the inviolable core of subjectivity that middle-class people imagined to exist in a space beyond socially-meaningful categories (For instance, Tim’s appreciation of Charlie’s internal experience of being ‘present’ is unimaginable to me in a working-class context). Further, although they privileged a personal sense of autonomy, there was also broad agreement that certain kinds of hierarchies both naturally resulted from and indeed made possible rich social encounters that would otherwise fall into chaos (as with the jams I have described).

The combination of the above facts leads to certain conclusions that I have also attempted to illustrate. First, ‘hierarchies’ in working-class life are understood to inhere between persons due to inherent categorical factors like age or experience, as in the musical examples I have shown. As such, they are both seldom-policed and malleable because they tend to be the result of explicit understandings and broad agreement, and also because working-class social mores are, simply put, less dogmatic about practices and more tolerant of personal idiosyncrasy for the most part. Another factor is the existence of elaborated social codes that allow certain kinds of rebellion in cases where hierarchies, musical or otherwise, are too rigidly enforced. On the other hand, hierarchies in middle-class life, even outside of institutional contexts, tend to be removed from the level of relationships between persons and projected onto ‘roles’ that are the result of practices. Hierarchies are understood to be ‘bad’ when they exist as a social fact between people *because of fundamental differences between those people*.

These opposing values result in two notable political consequences: first, middle-class people, viewing the categorization of persons as a de facto problem, tend to massively overestimate in working-class life the incidence of racism, sexism, and other

social injustices imagined to be accurately signaled by overt categorization, simply because, as I have argued, working-class people often use categorical descriptors as a matter of both convenience and considered ethical evaluation. While it is undeniably true that, at times, overt categorization in working-class discourse does represent an instance of sexism or racism, it is also true that non-malign uses of identifying categories like gender or race are also common. The problem is that the presence of overt categorization *at all*, and particularly of sensitive socio-cultural identities, often appears politically problematic to middle-class eyes. On the other hand, middle-class people in working-class evaluation seem obsessed with their own uniqueness, and overly committed to a politics of language that seeks to elide difference entirely, or cherry-pick the kinds of differences that can be talked about. The sensationalized and surface-level version of this deeper conflict is, of course, the debate over ‘PC’ language, newly revived as I write this by the Trump campaign of 2016. As a recent article in the New York Times (the middle-class liberal paper of record) summarized it:

“Social media is rich with talk of microaggressions, privilege, trigger warnings and safe spaces. These buzzwords can serve as a helpful shorthand for discussing complicated dynamics of identity, history and power, but the smugness that ’80s liberals detected in their ranks can be spied here, too. The more pedantic forms of language scolding on Twitter can come across as coastal Ivy League whites trying to absolve themselves of their privilege by wielding it against poorer, less worldly and less educated white people. And the standards shift so quickly that it’s hard to keep up...For people who have never actually set foot in a college classroom, this can all feel like a bad dream where you’re handed the final exam for a class you never attended” (Hess 2016).

From the perspective of a left political project, are there meaningful critiques to be made of the anti-hierarchy, anti-categorization stance, proceeding from a realistic understanding of these phenomena in working-class culture? This is a tricky question because of the undeniable violence and oppression that these phenomena have historically underwritten, and because of the way that even innocent-seeming hierarchies (like musical talent) often index race, class, or gender privilege in their origins. However, it seems clear that the strategic and symbolic deconstruction of certain kinds of categories, as politically powerful as that has been for not only academic disciplines but various social justice movements, has often relied, invisibly, on the reinforcement of others, particularly categories of class. One of the ways that this happens is when the cultural capital, linguistic mastery, and theoretical knowledge needed to articulate a category-spanning identity or deconstructive project are available (and, arguably, palatable) largely to the economic and educational elite; another way this happens is through class cultural differences in ideas of what constitutes an ethical acting subject. When you combine a middle-class deconstructive project (for instance, of gender) with a working-class cultural context in which meaningful understandings of personhood—one's own and that of others—are inscribed much more deeply with the importance of categories, misunderstandings result.

Finally, it is clear that, in a variety of middle-class social contexts, the elision of actually-existing hierarchies may accord with ethical stances, but it often results in social rupture that admits of little possibility of repair or prevention, and causes much frustration. Of course, as I showed in the last chapter, it doesn't even take hierarchy to have coercion, an extremely slippery category of phenomena which can include anything

from force enacted by a structural superior to the subtle coercive force of social expectations. Ironically, one of the principal challenges of horizontal organizing techniques is dealing effectively with the fact that individuals come to political campaigns with differences in experience, skill, expertise, and level of commitment. Because anarchist organizing, for instance, rejects outright the idea of hierarchical leadership structures, elaborate mechanisms aimed at preventing the exercise of coercive power but maximizing individual talents have been developed over many years. And yet, these techniques themselves are often immensely frustrating to activists, and are frequently themselves the cause of group breakdown and infighting (as Graeber 2009 details extensively). Given the frequency with which expertise or aptitude coincide with extant hierarchies of class, race, gender, and so on, this is likely, to many anarchist organizers, a worthwhile devil's bargain. However, in cases where this isn't true (that is, for instance, where people from oppressed social categories have greater experience or insight), there exists little remedy in situations of ideological social flattening. And in a further irony, the social flattening that anti-hierarchy entails also flattens out differences by largely driving away people from working-class backgrounds.

#### SECTION ENDNOTES:

**Working-Class Academics:** It is probably worth noting here the amount of insightful class theory that has been produced by academics from working-class backgrounds, including Bourdieu, Skeggs, Hoggart, and others. One thing this suggests is that, in the process of 'learning' middle-class culture, the things that are most comparatively apparent to people from working-class backgrounds in deeply middle-class environments like the academy are likely to be the indecipherable and complex codes of exclusion and boundary-making—because those are exactly the points of inflection and difficulty for people who are 'culturally' upwardly mobile. This is a theme

explored at length in a number of books about the difficulties of working-class academics, one good example of the genre being Walley 2012).

# Conclusion: The Politics of Class Cultures

*Limitation as Strength:* This ethnography has argued that lines of socio-economic class broadly parallel important differences that are best understood as cultural. The differences that I have focused on have often taken the form of reflexive ethical stances towards fundamental matters like, “what counts as ethical social interaction?”, “what does a legible social subject look like?”, “how are differences between people to be negotiated and understood?” and “according to what norms is public space reproduced and made possible?” I have largely approached these differences by seeking to understand them in the terms of their internal logics.

As I outline in the introduction, the approach I argue for avoids:

1. Approaching class cultures as fundamentally arising from or responding to a set of economic and material circumstances. For instance, I am not interested in characterizing working-class cultural logics like self-care as any more or less inherently ‘logical’ in response to material circumstances than middle-class culture (a determinist stance).
2. Approaching class differences through a lens that seeks to understand how cultural logics paradoxically both reproduce and are structured by class structures, even while ‘feeling’ agentive to actors (a ‘reproductionist’ stance).

A non-determinist, non-reproductionist stance towards class culture has some features that are at once strengths and weaknesses. One of these dual features is that it produces what could be read as a de-politicized account of culture, where its relationship to power is elided or ignored. As I have suggested, this is also a prominent peril of works

that, like this one, focus on cultural spaces of ‘the good.’ However, I would argue that this weakness is also a strength because, while appearing to be ‘apolitical’ about culture and structures, it paradoxically allows other political questions to come to the fore. It is largely by abandoning determinism, behavioralism, and reproductionism as frameworks that the different cultural logics I describe become visible as comparable ethical stances that produce certain kinds of social beings, and certain kinds of collectives. In other words, only through a strategic agnosticism about the relationship of culture to structural aspects of class, do the outlines of class cultures emerge as a domain of knowledge that could serve a politicized function: a reflexive look at the politics of class cultures, at the level of ‘the social.’

It is at this level of remove—that of ‘the social’ or ‘the collective’—that the cultural politics of class interact most clearly with the political focus of various radical left projects, including what I have described as the punk project. Through this lens, I have approached the cultural politics of class differences, asking: What kinds of social interactions or relationships are enabled or proscribed by these ethical stances? What distinct kinds of ‘communities’ or collectives, imagined or real, result from different cultural logics? What ‘kinds’ of people are assumed or fostered? What kinds of public spaces are possible, and what are impossible? How do these resulting social configurations square with the ideological stances of their class of origin? And perhaps most importantly, is it possible to envision a way of ‘doing’ sociality that reconciles some of the stated beliefs of the progressive project with the contradictions of naturalized

middle-class cultural practices? This is a question that comes directly from the suggestive lens of punk praxis.

It is a truism that leftist politics are mostly about change. This change is imagined with reference to a set of cultural attitudes defining ‘the good,’ and to actions that are envisioned to bring about progress towards conditions of ‘the good.’ These conditions are largely imagined to look like contexts where people are less constrained or less oppressed by ‘bad’ external factors, and can thereby enact a utopia that is currently available but prevented. This results in political projects largely envisioned as instances where people refashion or remove *external* limitations to their own flourishing: laws, institutions, traditions, structures, modes of governance or economic production, cultural categories, hierarchies. Of course, what this strategy tends not to focus on is the level of ‘the social’ and how it might look different (or the same) once external constraints are removed or altered. Do better structures, institutions or laws create ‘better’ and different people? Better relationships? Better solidarity? These are important questions that various left political projects over the last two centuries have struggled to find answers for, particularly in cases where the projects as such have been ‘successful’ but the imagined utopia has not emerged.

As I have suggested, punk politics imagine an inverse process, where people envision refashioning *themselves* and thereby explicitly, the terrain of ‘the social,’ in terms of fundamental composition and ethical orientations. Different visions of ‘the social,’ once enacted, are then imagined to largely replace or render unnecessary or

inapplicable outside structures. This project, therefore, is less about removing or confronting external factors that limit the good (although that may at times constitute part of it), and more about imposing difficult and complex *internal* codes or ethical stances on persons and on sociality, often with explicit reference to imagined outside alternatives (for instance, in this project, working-class people). This political project, romantic and imperfectly fumbled towards, offers an implicit critique of the inherent determinism of leftist politics, and suggests that at a fundamental level it is not sufficient to imagine that better or fewer ‘extra-social’ structures or constraints will inherently go on to create better versions of ‘the social.’ Rather, this critique suggests, it is extremely important to understand how different iterations of ‘the social’ are brought about by different ethical stances towards sociality in everyday life. The example of class helps us understand what exactly this statement might mean in practice.

It is for these reasons and others that this project has been concerned to articulate a richer sense of that which is ‘good’ about working-class culture, and to point out the opposed cultural politics of naturalized middle-class attitudes—particularly ones that underwrite leftism as a political practice. In many instances, the very things that in the terms of a progressive politics seem ‘good’ in working-class life (solidarity, extensive social ties, ‘communal’ or ‘participatory’ cultural forms like music) result at least in part from the exact attitudes that form the basis of durable and widely-articulated middle-class critiques (the corresponding orientation to an ‘irresponsible’ presentist socio-temporality, a willingness to categorize people, hierarchies). This is not a coincidence. As Richard Handler put it, ‘community’ is precisely the way people who don’t believe in society talk

about it as if it were a good thing (personal communication). At its worst, middle-class leftism, in its drive to eradicate or alter external constraints on individual selves, completely denies the reality of the social as a structuring force to dictate what individuals *should* do, creating a dystopia where everyone's individuality is an imposition on everyone else.

This set of beliefs, and a corresponding naturalized lack of awareness of 'the social,' are all factors that allow middle-class people to imagine that their own political beliefs exist in a domain that can ignore the cultural politics of everyday sociality (witness, for instance, the recent explosion of academics who are 'anarchists'). As this work has suggested, changing these attitudes, even with the best of intentions, is extremely hard (but not completely impossible). Often, the very things that make (parts of) working-class culture appealing to a left political project make any real engagement with it nearly inimical to that very project *qua* activism, because fundamentally, the requirements of personhood are incompatible. The same qualities that drive leftists to a radical project of self-making often make things like 'community' difficult to enact. Although this project has relied on a set of circumstances brought about by the relatively unique project of punk anarchism, there is nothing unique about the ability of punks to focus on understanding the way that classed cultural politics of sociality articulate with political visions of 'the good.' Indeed, despite its uncomfortable messages, this is a topic that deserves significantly more attention than it receives, because it offers significant insight into common misunderstandings of class difference.

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