

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Music is a Place: Oprys and the Rural Working-Class Constitution of Public Space

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Abstract

“Oprys” are public musicking events found in Appalachia and beyond. They facilitate regular embodied sociality between strangers and friends in a region often characterized by the social fallout of neoliberal economic trends. Drawing on ethnographic research in Tennessee and elsewhere, I show that oprys constitute rural working-class public space where participants negotiate a precarious cultural order through the affordances of live country music performance. But political discourse in these spaces is articulated primarily through embodied, performative, and aesthetic realms which are not captured in a delimited and classed notion of discourse as primarily text or talk. As such, oprys offer a corrective to our understanding of what counts as discursive contestation. I foreground two particular cultural imperatives that structure oprys: participation and accommodation. These imperatives produce a socio-cultural event that characteristically refuses the monetization of space and privileges dialogic sociality over the production of artistic sound. Approaching oprys through the frame of “counterpublic” reveals a different way of imagining public space, public music making and sociality, and the terrain of political discourse.

“Are you going to music tonight?”

This question, or some form of it, is one posed frequently on Thursdays in east Tennessee, close to its borders with North Carolina and Virginia. In the early days I would chuckle to myself, choosing to hear the question in a Christopher Smallian voice, “Are you going to *musick* tonight?”¹ Over time, however, as I learned the particularities of the ongoing country music event that was a destination for so many in the area, a new grammar emerged. The question became: “Are you going to Music tonight?,” as if Music was a place.

Perhaps surprisingly, the answer was almost always, “Yes.”

Across Appalachia and its US diaspora, amateur musicians and audiences gather weekly to play country songs, socialize, and dance. These events take place in the evening and draw a multi-generational (though most attendees are in their fifties and older), primarily white working-class crowd. Participants may drive an hour or more to attend—not an uncommon practice in rural communities where engaging in social life requires putting in some car miles. Many attendees are loyal and join every week, in the blazing summer months and on into winter when they brave icy roads for a few hours of music and merriment. Bring an instrument or don’t. All are welcome, admission is free, and it’s ok to park on the grass.

I call them “oprys,” a term I discuss in more detail below. Though I have attended these events across state lines, they lack a term that describes them as a unified category of amateur music making. This is striking considering their consistency of structure; attending an opry regularly for a few years in

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¹Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

Ohio gave me the cultural fluency to navigate with ease an opry in Virginia, and later in Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina.

This article theorizes the practices that produce oprys as a recognizable socio-musical form. I draw on modified Habermasian ideas about public discourse to argue that oprys constitute rural working-class public space. Their structure and social norms facilitate embodied sociality between strangers and friends in a region often characterized by the social fallout of neoliberal economic trends.² Without overdetermining oprys as sites of contestation, I draw on the feminist work of Nancy Fraser to theorize oprys as counterpublics in order to emphasize the degree to which these spaces show us a different way of imagining public space, public music-making and sociality, and the terrain of political discourse. At oprys, participants engage in the meaningful negotiation of a precarious cultural order, not through talk, but in and through the contours of country music.

After briefly outlining several historical precedents to oprys, I describe features that render oprys an enduring form of participatory and dialogic public space. I then draw on ethnographic data to foreground two particular cultural imperatives that structure oprys more broadly: participation and accommodation. These imperatives produce a socio-cultural event that consistently rejects the monetization of space and embraces a notion of music that centers—not the production of artistic sound—but a broadly dialogic social encounter where performers and audience freely circulate through porous boundaries. Taken as a whole, the preconditions of oprys voice implicit critiques of middle-class musical and social practices, several of which are reproduced in scholarly discourse in a taken-for-granted way.

A Nameless Genre of Musicking and Its Precedents

One of the reasons that it has taken me a long time to conceive of oprys as a genre—indeed, I went to my first opry twenty years ago—is that there isn't a name for them. Participants I have encountered over the years referred to their local opry by the name of the venue (e.g., “The Izaak Walton League” in Penfield, Ohio); by the name of the owner, in cases where the venue is private (e.g., “Ms. Nelia’s” in Asheville, North Carolina); or simply as “Music,” as noted above. Furthermore, I didn't contemplate the commonality between these events because I simply wasn't paying attention. For many years I attended oprys as a musician, more concerned with learning fiddle tunes than discerning the logics of overarching social organization. By the time I began participating in oprys as an ethnomusicologist, I was already fairly familiar with their practices and social ethos, but their historical origins remained mysterious. When I inquired, participants referred to the more spontaneous musical gatherings that earlier generations hosted on their front porches and in their living rooms. This kind of nostalgic rendering of Appalachian music making is simultaneously cliché and remarkably accurate in some areas, even today. Oprys, however, differ from neighborly musicking because they are public and regularly occurring. These two features emerge as fundamental in my discussion below.

Early nineteenth-century barn dances (also called hoedowns, picks, or hootenannies) are also important predecessors. These were public community gatherings of various kinds in the Appalachian region and elsewhere that featured music and dancing. However, if we are to imagine oprys as modern-day barn dances—which is a feasible hypothesis—then it's paramount to consider the legacy of radio as a mediating influence. Barn dance radio emerged in the 1920s, a time of immense social and cultural change for its target audience: southern rural listeners, many of whom migrated to urban areas looking for industrial jobs in the 1920s and 1930s, often leaving behind—among other things—their rich sociality-oriented musical traditions. These radio shows imitated the live performance atmosphere of rural community gatherings, barn dances, and traveling vaudeville shows.³ Performers played old favorites from southern music traditions popular in the late nineteenth and

²For example, see: Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont, eds., *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Ann E. Kingsolver, *Tobacco Town Futures: Global Encounters in Rural Kentucky* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011); Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll, eds. *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019).

³Curtis Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

early twentieth centuries: fiddle tunes, string band music, folk and pop songs, comedy skits, minstrel tunes, and square dance music (which sometimes even featured dance calls⁴). Barn dance radio, originating with Chicago's *National Barn Dance* and followed by other notable programs such as Shreveport's *Louisiana Hayride* and Wheeling's *Wheeling Jamboree*, was of course a commercial endeavor: companies sponsored segments, and in turn, musicians advertised their products. Performers also played new songs, forging an important connection between old-time community entertainment and the emerging commercial genre that became "country music." In summary, barn dance radio capitalized on the close relationship between public sociality and music in southern, white, working-class worlds. As Curtis Ellison notes, its performers cultivated a sense of informality and family-like connection with listeners, encouraging audience participation and deemphasizing the commercial success of stars.⁵ It was also a space where emergent boundaries of racialized cultural production were systematized.⁶ As pop cultural forms tend to do, barn dance radio entered the broader lexicon of romanticized images of southern rural life.

My choice of "opry" as a unifying term for the events where I did fieldwork draws on the legacy of the Grand Ole Opry, the most famous and enduring barn dance radio program. The Grand Ole Opry was founded in 1925, broadcasting out of Nashville on WSM-AM. Its name was coined by radio announcer George Hay whose use of "opry" was intended as an ironic self-critique: a performatively exaggerated southern pronunciation of "opera" that correlated country music with rural, southern listeners and directly contrasted with the "more sophisticated" opera-listening set.⁷ The Grand Ole Opry continues to this day with radio broadcasts performed before a live audience three nights a week. The oprys where I did fieldwork combine the do-it-yourself face-to-face social character of neighborhood barn dances with the explicit rearticulation of identity through commercial country music that is central to the Grand Ole Opry. They have the local grounding of a barn dance, yet they also foster an imagined community,⁸ which—similar to barn dance radio—makes them so important for participants whose cultural worlds are in flux.⁹ By disseminating country hits to rural audiences, the Grand Ole Opry and similar programs are in fact a de-localization and hyper-commodification of a kind of social event (barn dances) that were once local and face-to-face affairs. In this sense, the oprys I describe perform a kind of reverse process: a localizing and de-commodifying of hit country songs.

From this constellation of influences, I have chosen the word opry to describe the events that draw upon these historical traditions. Upon seeking some kind of approval from interlocutors for this word-choice, I found people to be amused, rather than offended or concerned (or, for that matter, interested). Further, there are precedents. My research into other existing uses of "opry" yielded a handful of results, such as the Kentucky Opry in Draffenville, Kentucky, the Delbarton Opry House in Delbarton, West Virginia, and the Virginia Opry in Clifton Forge, Virginia. Such events advertise themselves as local iterations of the Grand Ole Opry, and feature various assortments of live country music and comedy performed by a standing cast (plus guests) for a paying audience. Most famously, Lee Mace's Ozark Opry near Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri featured live country acts from 1952 to 2006, attracting tourists early on with their adamant embrace of hillbilly stereotypes at a time when a more sophisticated country image was emerging from Nashville.¹⁰

⁴"Dance calls" are dancing instructions semi-sung by a "caller" who guides dancers through the steps of a specific dance pattern (e.g., "swing your partner," "circle left," "promenade"). Callers line out dance steps in time with the music, often embellishing instructions for rhythmic and entertainment reasons (e.g., "Sow the wheat and mow the clover / Do it again and do it all over" instructs a pair of couples to pass under each other's bridged arms). Early barn dance radio often featured dance calls—not necessarily to encourage radio listeners to dance—but to imitate the sound and feel of an embodied barn dance.

⁵Ellison, *Country Music Culture*.

⁶Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷For an extensive exploration of the Grand Ole Opry, see Charles Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1999).

⁸Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

⁹Curtis Ellison, *Country Music Culture*.

¹⁰Howard Wight Marshall, *Fiddler's Dream: Old-Time, Swing, and Bluegrass Fiddling in Twentieth-Century Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017).

Locally speaking, I was pleased to learn that there was a long-standing and well-loved opry in Asheville called Mrs. Hyatt's Oprahouse, operated by Cornelia and Wayne Hyatt (beginning in the late 1940s and lasting until 2013 when the Hyatt home was sold and turned into a car dealership). Unlike the Ozark Opry and other Grand Ole Opry replications, this event *was* consistent with the oprys I describe in this article, though the Hyatts' use of the word "oprahouse" is clearly another playful reimagining of "opera" to describe a social and musical gathering for people with country proclivities, and is undoubtedly a reference to the Grand Ole Opry.

Structuring Oprys: Making Public Space Possible

Oprys are not Texas-style dance halls. They are not honky-tonks. They are not grange suppers with pick-up bands that materialize when the food is cleared away. Like these other kinds of musical events, they are discursively working-class, but their structure and prevailing social ethos lay the foundation for a distinct form of public space that, in turn, shows us some of the classed assumptions operative in other uses of this term—particularly ones that foreground textual or linguistic discourse as the *sine qua non* of political dialogue.

In order to outline the essential conditions of oprys, I now turn to "Roy's Opry" in northeastern Tennessee.¹¹ Roy's takes place on Thursday nights in Unicoi County, a small, primarily rural county with about 50 percent of its land lying within the boundaries of Cherokee National Forest. Everyone refers to the venue as a barn, but this structure wasn't built for milking cows; rather, it was a commercial garage in the slice of flat land between a highway and a near-vertically sloping mountainside. If you approach the barn after the sun goes down, the opry is a burst of light on an otherwise pitch-dark stretch of road. The lights bombard your senses first, and then the music.

Oprys are Public

There is a large illuminated sign outside which reads, "All are welcome." Roy's, like all oprys, are public. Despite often occurring on private property, their open access provides a space for gathering that is not work, school, or church, and yet brings people out of the more insular domain of home.¹² By "public," I mean (theoretically) accessible to all. Some oprys advertise on Facebook pages or local events listings; others rely on word-of-mouth. The public nature of oprys is not just a structuring detail. It is also integral to the manner in which my interlocutors spoke of what oprys *are*. Comments such as, "Everybody is welcome here," "It's family-friendly—we don't serve alcohol,"¹³ and "We have all kinds of people here," indicate the pride that people felt in participating in an inclusive event.

The meaning of "inclusivity" in a predominantly white rural county in the mountains obviously needs qualifying, however much people value it as a standard of social organization. The vast majority of attendees at oprys I have attended have been white. The non-Hispanic white population of the county where Roy's Opry takes place is currently about 97 percent. The county remains a place where narratives of rural Appalachia as largely white hold true for various reasons, including a history of Black dispossession and subsequent outmigration, as detailed by scholars such as bell hooks and John Inscoe.¹⁴

¹¹This and other names have been changed to respect the privacy of my interlocutors.

¹²To offer a few examples, Burl, the emcee of Roy's Opry, owns the building and land where the event takes place. An opry in Marshall, North Carolina, approximately thirty miles from Roy's, takes place in a building that was originally the small town's train depot, now converted into a performance space and owned by the city with financial support from state and federal tourism and transportation initiatives. An opry in Troy, Virginia, takes place at a church. An opry in Penfield, Ohio, takes place at the Lorain County chapter of the Isaac Walton League, a national conservation organization.

¹³While oprys are explicitly alcohol-free, some participants might discreetly imbibe now and then, sipping from whatever flask or bottle they might have stashed in an instrument case or pocket. The majority of my interlocutors in Tennessee didn't drink at all, citing their Evangelical Christian beliefs.

¹⁴bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009); John C. Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); John C. Inscoe, *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South From Slavery to Segregation* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

Others have noted the growth of Latinx communities in Appalachia in recent decades;¹⁵ this pattern is reflected in demographic data regarding the counties where I did fieldwork, but those who spoke to me about their Latinx heritage (my word, not theirs) had been in Tennessee for several generations.

Given the fraught complexity of rurality and poor or working-class whiteness as a particular racialized register,¹⁶ it remains an open question the extent to which oprys are governed by social norms that are better described as racialized than classed. This is a question worthy of further study, particularly via examinations of social norms in other nominally public spaces. In my own experience of opry attendance, the underrepresented people of color (Latinx, Black, Cherokee) that I chatted with or got to know well foregrounded their rural (or more specifically “mountain”) and working-class identities in their self-descriptions. This tendency resonates with Aaron Fox’s observation that class loyalties and markers were often a more determinative factor than ethnic identity in insider status in a honky-tonk scene in Lockhart, Texas, where he did fieldwork. “Regardless of ethnicity, the principle requirement for participation in the social life of these bars was a working-class biography. . . .”¹⁷ Indeed, the conversations I have had with people of color at Roy’s and other oprys reflect the identifying structures of class and Appalachian rurality.¹⁸ In short, racial identification was not often a conscious *public* focus or a topic of my private conversations, though I recognize that my white (middle-class, female) identity likely influenced how interlocutors responded to me.

All of the people I interviewed for this research were gender normative in presentation, and no one at the oprys I attended identified openly as LGBTQ+. This doesn’t mean participants didn’t identify as such privately. There were people whose embodied presence suggested different kinds of alterity (sex, gender), but the relatively tacit acceptance of this squared with the way that scholars have described the strategically unremarked issue of difference in rural spaces.¹⁹ This demographic pattern also stands in interesting relationship with scholarship that explores country music performance as a rich site of gender play and transgression.²⁰

On the other hand, oprys are quite striking in their inclusion across boundaries of age and dis/ability. The generous embrace of children and the elderly, as well as those dealing with ongoing health crises such as cancer, heart failure, and injuries of military service, was particularly notable in a space dedicated to music, dance, and sociality. Strangers, too, were persistently approached by regulars who initiated friendly conversation. The predominantly middle-class (and also almost exclusively white) music scenes that I frequented in nearby Asheville during this research offer a point of contrast. These spaces were largely homogenous along the lines of age, health, and ability, and while newcomers were certainly welcome, they rarely received warm greetings.

Oprys are Regularly Occurring

Though music events are common in the Appalachian regions I describe, it is important to emphasize that oprys are regularly occurring. Unlike other kinds of public social gatherings such as municipally sponsored special events or open-door house parties, all of the oprys that I have attended over the years have been weekly affairs. The amount of commitment and energy required to pull this off is remarkable, particularly when no money is exchanged. Regular occurrence depends on regular attendance; the new faces of today are the regulars of tomorrow. For this reason, the ritualistic farewells of “See you

¹⁵See, for example, Sophia M. Enriquez, “Pinned Against the Wall: Migration Narratives, Cultural Resonances, and Latinx Experiences in Appalachian Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 32, no. 2 (2020): 63–76; Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁶John Hartigan, *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); John Hartigan, *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁷Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 27.

¹⁸Hartigan, *Racial Situations*.

¹⁹Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

²⁰For example, see: Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); Fox, *Real Country*; Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*.

next time,” “Ya’ll come back, you hear?,” and “Don’t be a stranger” are not only friendly and pro-social, but also a habitual act of insuring the longevity of the event.

Oprys are “Free”

Attendance at oprys is free—or nearly free, as I will explain. This is extraordinarily rare in US public life, where embodied interaction, and thus public space, is most often organized around the imperatives of capital at institutions like bars, concerts, and so on (or, in the nominally egalitarian digital public spaces of our moment, through a vast ecosystem of the capitalization of private data as well as the physical infrastructure of digital access). Other jams and musical stages in the western North Carolina/eastern Tennessee region provide clarifying contrast: they take place at bars and restaurants where, though patrons may not technically be required to spend money, many participants feel obliged to support venues by purchasing food or drinks, and venue owners certainly host such events primarily in order to attract a paying audience. Other music events take place in city-owned spaces where organizers are motivated to draw in tourists and others who will spend money in local businesses (and this type of event is rarely regularly occurring). More commonly, musical events require purchasing tickets or paying a door fee.

The primary contrast with such spaces that I will emphasize below concerns not the monetization of musical performance, but rather the important but often subtle ways that this structuring fact ripples through relationships, sociality, and the possibility of public discourse. The participants at oprys I attended expressed the importance of not charging a door fee that would prevent some people from coming, and might also affect the character and feel of the event. The broad rejection of the consumption-oriented or transactional nature of mainstream public sociality—in which you pay for space and the chance at interaction—was a gesture toward inclusivity, as in, a tacit acknowledgement that some participants didn’t have spare cash in their pockets. It was also an expression of how social interaction “should be”—that is, not contingent upon getting your money’s worth. Pat Franklin, an organizer of an opra in Marshall, North Carolina, stated the following in a radio interview when discussing the benefits of free-admission: “The good thing is, if you don’t like it, I don’t have to give you your money back.”²¹ She was using a teasing tone of voice here, but her comment does suggest how monetary exchange renders a social experience contractual. In the case of music events, it requires musicians to fulfill an obligation of entertainment that is worth a specified amount of money; it also imposes major restrictions on what listeners can do. Oprys illustrate the social and musical possibilities that emerge in the absence of this structure.

One opra that was up and running during my fieldwork closed down because the organizer didn’t have the monthly \$30 required to pay the electric and water bills at the venue, and he was unwilling to require participants to pay. At an opra in Ohio, attendees were asked to give \$1 at the door to cover the utility bills, but anyone without a dollar was waved inside. Many oprys have fund-raising strategies such as “cakewalks” (made possible by donated cakes) and 50/50 raffles.²² Participants in these games pay to play (and maybe win a prize), rather than paying to hear music. Other oprys pass church-like donation plates. Because of these fund-raising strategies, and because necessities like food and sound equipment are donated by those who are able, oprys produce a social space that people felt to be outside of monetization.

Just as audiences don’t pay to attend, musicians don’t get paid. There are no tip jars. Recorded musicians don’t set up little signs in their instrument cases saying, “CDs for sale: \$15” (though I’ve been given CDs many times). Musicians of all skill levels perform. At Roy’s Opra this ranged from a mandolin player trying chords for the first time to a multi-instrumentalist who toured with Willie Nelson. Strikingly, while accomplished musicians are celebrated, there is no sense that they are

²¹Les Reker, “Interview with Pat Franklin,” *WART Radio*, July 17, 2015.

²²By “cakewalk,” I refer to a contest wherein participants pay an entry fee to circumnavigate a room wherein numbers have been pinned to the walls. Music plays; when the music stops people freeze in place. A facilitator spins a numbered wheel and whoever stands closest to the number that matches where the wheel lands wins a donated cake. In a 50/50 raffle, people buy tickets in hopes of winning cash; the winner takes 50 percent of the profit and the “house” takes the other 50 percent.

more welcomed than beginners and dilettantes. In fact, in my experience, more fuss is made over welcoming and encouraging beginners than congratulating experts. In addition to making space for musicians of all abilities, the absence of financial compensation prevents musicians from having outsized status.

Oprys are public, regularly occurring, and nominally free spaces of musical gathering. I bracket the term because even the descriptor “free”—with its connotation of something for nothing—doesn’t capture the complex negotiation of reciprocity and obligation that made these events possible. The obligations, of course, were not primarily monetary but were expressed in subtler and perhaps more binding registers. This structure alone is exceptional, as I have detailed. Furthermore, it is the requisite foundation from which oprys serve as important sites for the production of rural, working-class discourse—emergent in the context of performance. The following two sections illustrate several ethical imperatives that shape performance at oprys, rendering them places where country songs provide a scaffolding for public discussions about life in perilous times—particularly life in a rural working-class space that at times feels itself to be a combination of misunderstood, left behind, and scorned at large.

An Ethos of Participation: Keeping Cool in “I’d Love to Lay You Down”

The musical performance at Roy’s Opry is highly spontaneous: for the first hour, ad hoc groups of musicians take the stage to jam; later, bands perform, though sometimes the bands are assembled moments before playing a set. Even when more established bands play, their performances are only partially scripted, since audience members frequently call out requests or go onstage for impromptu guest appearances. In the rows where the audience sits, chit chat is not unwelcome, and people move around freely seeking food or fellowship.

Oprys demand participation: there are ample opportunities for musicians and non-musicians to contribute, and people strongly encourage each other to do so. At Roy’s, along with musicians and audience members, there is someone who greets and bids farewell, someone who emcees, someone who manages a table of donated snacks, someone who films the performance every week (and someone else who gives CD copies of the recordings to musicians and others), a few who can be counted on to dance, a few ringer harmony singers, and a few instrumentalists who could perform upon request when feeble bands show up and need reinforcement.

Oprys with dance floors notably entice dancers of all ages, from toddlers to great grandmothers. The centrality of dancing varies from opry to opry, and style of dance ranges from two-stepping to Lindy Hop to shapeless swaying and beyond. No one dances to gospel songs. At Roy’s, there isn’t a designated dancing area, but flat-footing to a fiddle tune can just as easily take place between the rows. Sometimes couples two-step the perimeter of the chairs, taking advantage of the pathway and undoubtedly enjoying the social possibilities of such an orbit.

The size of oprys is significant. I’ve never been to one with more than about eighty people coming and going throughout the night. While most attendees are regulars, there are always some strangers in the mix. When a small group meets weekly, new faces are easily noticed and, importantly, are not precluded from vigorous encouragement to participate—however they choose. Strangers become known through the embodied contributions that they make. I call these “knowable strangers”; unlike members of publics that might rely on media to “know” each other—as thoughtfully explored by scholars such as Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant²³—people at oprys do meet face-to-face, and the participatory mandates of each evening lure new attendees to become known.

It was early on a typical Thursday evening and the jam was underway. I call jams at oprys “performance jams” because they combine the improvisation, structural spontaneity, and aesthetic rawness of jamming, with the self-conscious intention of putting on a good show for an audience. The feeling emanating from the stage was relaxed, but even this calm was something of a performance. True to form, a man named Boyd leaned casually against the wall next to the stage waiting for an invitation to sing. When an onstage guitar player gave him a nod, he stepped onto the platform and took his

²³Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

place in front of the center stage microphone hanging from the ceiling. He told the musicians he was going to sing the 1982 Conway Twitty song, “I’d Love to Lay You Down,” key of D. After a few strums from the guitarist, he launched into the famously suggestive lyrics. The catcalls began almost immediately.

There’s a lot of ways of saying what I want to say to you
 There’s songs and poems and promises and dreams that might come true
 But I won’t talk of starry skies or moonlight on the ground
 I’ll come right out and tell you I’d just love to lay you down

“Wooooohoo.” Like an instrumental fill, a chorus of whistles, hoots, and shouts followed each iteration of the song’s hook, “I’d love to lay you down.” This loud and boisterous rhythmic reply came from a group of eight or so women sitting together in the second and third rows. Their fun grew in intensity and—rather than becoming a distraction from the show—soon *became* the show. The musicians realized this and shifted their attention, looking not at their instruments or each other, but at the women catcallers, who started fanning themselves in playful embarrassment.

This moment was a female mutiny, a claiming of the spotlight, a performance. It was not only participatory, but dialogic as well. The women “talked” and others talked back, though nothing was publicly spoken for the entirety of the exchange. There was singing, of course, as well as laughter and some embellished whispering. However, the primary mode of communication was musical and embodied, not linguistic. The men on stage shifting their gaze to the women communicated attention and a temporary ceding of their own authority as performers. Other audience members watched and laughed and shook their heads in amusement. Even the house videographer turned his camera to capture the disruption. The women fanning themselves communicated an emotion—embarrassment. But because it was exaggerated, highly public, and ultimately social, it became a performance about sexuality, a knowingly risky yet approving response to the male-voiced suggestions of “I’d Love to Lay You Down.”

Even Boyd began to chuckle between the vocal lines, smiling good-naturedly as his spotlight was stolen. Conway Twitty was a 1970s and 1980s-era country music superstar with a resonant, deep voice. Boyd’s imitation was compelling. He adeptly copied Twitty’s slight affective flatness, so common in mid-century country music. The effect was not coincidental. By containing the emotional amplitude of his singing style, Boyd left space for the women to add their own: in this case, a performance of simultaneous embarrassment, playfulness, and daring. Had his own performance been more emphatically emotive, an intrusion would have been inappropriate. However, excessively emotional delivery of canonical songs is not appreciated by audiences at Roy’s and other oprys, consistent with an aesthetic that exists in certain strands of country music, but that also is prosocial. Boyd’s competent yet understated performance allowed the women to take command of the show. While it certainly wasn’t his explicit intention to facilitate a feminist intervention, the general ethos of oprys demands that music be a dialogic encounter, and the demands of a dialogic encounter almost always forestall hyperemotive or self-referential musical performances (which are, in contrast, often seen as a mark of excellent musicianship or artistry in middle-class spaces).

The women’s interjection also relied on the inherent remove of performing cover songs—the vast majority of songs performed at oprys. Through collectively familiar songs, participants can “say” things that they might otherwise never be culturally allowed to say. They are buffered from the literal meaning of uncomfortable or lewd suggestions. Boyd was singing Conway Twitty’s words about male desire, not his own, which safeguarded him from straying outside the bounds of “appropriate” discourse in the family-friendly setting of the opry. The women enjoyed a double remove; it was through spontaneous dialogue with Boyd (channeling Conway) that they were able to reposition “I’d Love to Lay You Down” into a song about female sexual expression.

When Boyd arrived at the end of a verse, a pedal steel guitar player kicked into an instrumental break, but his sonic contribution was clearly just an accompaniment for the true solo taking place: the chortling women. Still fanning themselves and calling out “woos” and “hms,” they leaned toward

each other, stage-whispering in each other's ears and laughing in confidence—two acts of privacy that were intentionally on display, or, exaggeratedly public. The emcee of the event came over with his clipboard, stacked with a few sheets of paper where bands had signed up to play in the coming months. He started fanning the women too, reaching his arms out as if he couldn't get too close to the heat in the second and third rows.

Note that in this moment, all of the musicians onstage were men and all of the people cutting up in their seats were women. People often ask me about the relative absence of female musicians on the stages of oprys, where women are typically far outnumbered by men. This discrepancy is in part due to the median age of the attendees. Women born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were inculcated into a cultural world where men were more often the ones performing on country instruments, reflecting gender-based inequalities in access to leisure time and expectations of propriety. But times have changed. As gender roles have shifted in the current economic moment, particularly now with more and more women serving as breadwinners and thus acquiring more cultural capital in the public sphere, they want more of the spotlight and they have found ways to take it—like causing a scene at the opry. It might feel too late for some of these women to learn to play an instrument, but there are other ways to engage a song. Further, while many in my field sites had beliefs about gender that were more conservative or traditional than my own, it would be a mistake to assume that a dearth of women holding instruments on stage necessarily represents women's broader cultural marginalization or lack of agency. As this article begins to illustrate, the cherished "performances" at oprys were often elsewhere.²⁴

When Boyd's voice returned with the final verse, he had to make a concerted effort to deliver the lines. He shook his head at the wayward women and ended the song. Everyone clapped mightily as he returned to his seat. He offered a humble smile in response, knowing that his song was a hit, not because of him, but because of the women who participated in the performance. To reiterate, the notion of performance at oprys expands to the sphere of general sociality—a successful "performance" and a moment of broad conviviality are, generally speaking, indistinguishable for participants. This disruption of conventional notions of musical performance, to echo Thomas Turino, ultimately challenges political-economic histories that have constructed music as, primarily, the production of sound.²⁵ Here, the focus is on the production of relationships through and around musical sound.

Music is always explicitly interpretive: even the most banal of songs can serve as the basis for the airing and negotiation of ideas.²⁶ This performance of "I'd Love to Lay You Down" illustrates the ways that opinions and social commentary—in this case, regarding sexual expression—can be discussed or expressed in interaction with a song. When Boyd sang the thirty-year-old lyrics,

You've got a way of doing little things that turn me on
Like standing in the kitchen in your faded cotton gown
With your hair still up in curlers
I'd love to lay you down,

the women in the audience performed the feeling of being enjoyably hot and bothered, fanning themselves to keep cool. Through this gesture, they publicly endorsed, and in fact identified with, a female subject (not object) who is sexy in a house dress and curlers.

It is worth reemphasizing here that the musicians onstage were unpaid. At paying venues, the money that musicians receive from audiences is symbolic of a tacit agreement: you put on a show for me. Without this money exchange, the relevant actors at the event are not so clear-cut. Who is supposed to put on the show at the opry? It's clearly not just the musicians. Had Boyd been a

²⁴A full discussion of gender at oprys is beyond the scope of this article. My point here is to illustrate the ways that embodied performance at oprys can facilitate meaningful discussions of politically significant issues, and that these discussions are central to the distinction of oprys as public spaces.

²⁵Thomas Turino, *Music As Social Life: the Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

²⁶Barbara Ching, *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

professional musician, paid to perform, the show would have been “his.” A faction of an audience would have been unlikely to take over the show by giving his song an interpretive makeover.

An Ethos of Accommodation: Musical Genre and the Aesthetics of Public Sociality

Music at Roy’s and other oprys is country, but firm musical genre boundaries are rarely enforced and only reluctantly even recognized to exist. Thus, song choices at oprys include a broad range of Southern vernacular traditions like bluegrass, honky-tonk, and old-time, as well as countrified versions of rock, soul, and gospel songs. Naturally, as people pull from over one hundred years of “country” musical output, the resulting palate includes a great deal of aesthetic hybridity. The contours of song acceptability, rather than dependent on historicized or industry-produced genres, has more to do with the ability levels and musical knowledge of the musicians present. At Roy’s, for example, singers might stick to I–IV–V chord progressions for much of the evening, but if a regularly attending musician named Danny appeared, singers would have their pick of more complicated chord patterns found in the western swing tunes of artists like Bob Wills or Willie Nelson.

In fact, it was my stalling attempts to delineate the genre contours of music at oprys that first lead me to consider the social value of accommodation—a genial flexibility regarding idiosyncratic people, sounds, and circumstances. Accommodation, as an ethic of public sociality, emerges at oprys in numerous ways: dancers accommodate those dealing with disabilities of age or injury; musicians accommodate the desires of listeners and dancers; the audience accommodates the sometimes-limited musical abilities of those on stage. Broadly, participants accommodate the quirks of the characters who attend, including their sonic preferences—preferences which, incidentally, are often informed by attitudes that prioritize the social reproduction of oprys as public space. Those attitudes, in practice, become audible, constituting a public discourse that emerges through the realm of aesthetics.²⁷

On a summer night in 2014, I was at an otry in Leicester, North Carolina, an unincorporated community northwest of Asheville. Leicester Highway is the area’s commercial artery; once you leave it, you quickly enter into a patchwork of active and repurposed farmland, draped over the bumpy hills of western Buncombe County. Asheville is known as an affluent and extremely liberal city, but as you leave the city limits, the demographics quickly shift. Now, as more middle and upper-class residents push outward into the surrounding counties, contact between people with dramatically different class identities (and political inclination) is frequent. Leicester is such a place, but its otry remains a working-class space.

The otry takes place in a “music barn” built on private land for the sake of hosting a weekly musical event. That night, the owner and impresario asked me to play a few fiddle tunes for a clogging team. Clogging teams perform choreographed dances with highly stylized and predominantly synchronized footwork which is amplified by the tap shoes that they wear. I’m not a dance fiddler, but I wouldn’t have dreamed of refusing the request, and so there I was standing on the stage playing the nineteenth-century tune “Angelina Baker” as fast as I could, over and over again. Perhaps I should have been leading the dancers, but in fact they were leading me. I felt like I was chasing them, trying to keep up, as twenty or thirty pairs of feet made the music hall physically pulse. When the song ended, I left the stage with an aching bow arm and began chatting with someone in the audience while the dancers found seats and the next band tuned their instruments.

Soon, this fresh group of musicians kicked into a version of the 1971 Waylon Jennings/Willie Nelson collaboration, “Good Hearted Woman.” Outlaw country songs were popular at the Leicester otry, where the large dance floor was always packed and the attendees ranged from teenagers on parent-sanctioned dates to octogenarians who often clamored for “fast songs so we can dance!” Outlaw country is a 1970s-era rock-influenced subgenre that revived the stripped-down sounds of honky-tonk and emphasized themes such as independence, rugged emotionalism, and the Old West. It tends to have prominent drums that are foregrounded by the textural sparsity of the band as a whole.

²⁷To imply that genre is antisocial is not to claim that people don’t have general sonic and aesthetic preferences; it’s just that these are flexible and can accommodate the interpretation of a broad range of delimited commercial genres.

A new assortment of dancers emerged from the seats and made their way to the dance floor. Though focused on my conversation, I was aware of needing to talk louder as a young drummer joined in with his shuffling backbeat. Eventually, I noticed that some of the percussive sound I was hearing was not coming from the drum kit. I looked up to see many of the cloggers, still wearing their tap shoes, solo dancing in between two-stepping couples. Though there are no hard lines here, dancers referred to this type of dance as “flat footing,” a dance form similar to clogging, yet done solo and with lighter, quieter footwork and significantly more rhythmic sophistication and syncopation. In other words, the clogging team members were doing a traditional Appalachian solo dance style to a 1970s-era outlaw country song. The drummer onstage had taken over my job: he now chased the dancers, trying to keep the swinging rhythm of outlaw from running away without playing too loudly. The cloggers pushed, the drummer pulled—both subtly tugging at the rhythmic feel (and indeed, the tempo)—and the two-steppers continued making their circles.

It was an aesthetic mash-up, and the smiles on people’s faces and the crowded dance floor were clear indicators that people loved it. The embodied sonic components of the moment—a clogging team not ready to sit down, an inexperienced teenaged drummer, a favorite outlaw country song, a full circle of two-stepping couples, and twenty or so pairs of tap shoes—sounded good together in part because they indexed a successful effort at accommodation. This rendition of “Good Hearted Women” captured an aesthetic hybridity that I have frequently seen at oprys. People willingly adapt to each other’s musical choices, revealing a prevailing attitude toward music making and sociality more broadly: both are deeply dependent on notions of tradition, and yet also accommodating.

This simple fact is only striking in that it emphasizes the degree to which people creatively accommodated the circumstances at hand in a way that made musical genre boundaries relatively impossible to sustain. Opry participants implicitly reject the genre authenticity discourses that have mutated over a long history, emerging from the imperatives of monetizing music and from well-documented middle-class impulses toward lay and scholarly reification of particular genres as sacrosanct.²⁸ For instance, the middle-class amateur music scenes I frequented were extraordinarily doctrinaire about policing the aesthetic boundaries of the particular sub-genres they engaged, even to the extent of censoring people who did the wrong dance steps to particular tempos or genres. This focus on genre boundaries alienated any number of potential participants and audience members. In contrast, opry attendees by and large rejected this kind of partitioning. Rather, they actively (and even agonistically) tended to insist on the permeability and flexibility of those very cultural forms as part and parcel of this guiding ethic of accommodation, a trait that was fundamental to the possibility of sustaining public sociality.

This is not to say that genres are immaterial. Commonly known songs and genres facilitate cultural negotiation because they are simultaneously circumscribed *and* open to interpretation. For example, the swinging rhythm of an outlaw country song like “Good Hearted Woman” invites two-stepping, but when a group of flat-footing cloggers wanted to dance, the aesthetic dictates of outlaw country didn’t hinder them. They danced, and in doing so, their feet changed the rhythm of the song. This disregard for genre conventions in the context of public music making is striking enough to be a *de facto* form of contestation regardless of their intentions in the moment (which was likely, simply, to dance). Musical genres are functionally relevant because, not only do they allow groups of strangers to easily join each other in song, but their particular parameters provide a commonly known base against which individuals can push. Without the contours of genre, there are no boundaries to push against, and therefore no boundaries against which to *say* something. The cloggers in Leicester were implicitly rejecting a preconceived notion of genre authenticity that night (and in other instances this rejection was quite explicit). Indeed, many of the cloggers were familiar with that register of cultural boundary work;²⁹ others were just doing what they do (clog) and the result was read as aesthetically desirable.

²⁸Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

²⁹See the section called “Cross-class interaction and middle-class misbehavior” in David Flood and Julie Starr, “Situating Comparison: A Methodological Response to an Epistemological Dilemma,” *Ethos* 47, no. 2 (2019): 211–32.

The notion of country music as *the* genre at oprys, combined with an ethos of accommodation—seemingly conflicting impulses—is productive of public discourse. It arises from people’s sense that country music is rural working-class music and therefore a logical gravitational force at oprys. On the other hand, the tolerance and even celebration of genre fluidity—meaning, accommodating unexpected (non-country) song choices or genre-defying aesthetics—is a clear imperative for the possibility of participatory public space.

Oprys as Discourse: Music and Rural Working-Class Counterpublics

The sociomusical particularities of oprys leave space for participants to engage in purposeful non-linguistic discourse. While not striking in political overtone or musical innovation, oprys are thus public meeting grounds where ideas are shared through and within the interpretive lacunas inherent to music. This kind of embodied and aesthetic discourse—occurring in and through the fact of sociality—is in fact the heart and soul of oprys, and first led me to consider “counterpublic” as a heuristic for emphasizing their cultural specificity and importance. The term counterpublic has been used variously by scholars, but perhaps all are indebted to Nancy Fraser’s 1990 feminist article, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.”³⁰ There, Fraser critiques several of the assumptions that underlie Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. According to Habermas, a bourgeois public sphere emerged in Enlightenment-era Europe when public opinion, formerly cultivated by monarchical governments and imposed upon citizens, was newly participatory. With the rise of literacy and print media, as well as social spaces like salons and coffee houses, individuals could gather—either face-to-face or via common readership—to freely discuss ideas and thus participate in the forming of public opinion. The public sphere, then, was a kind of middle-ground between private life and the state. It was a potential location for political action and resistance.³¹

Drawing on feminist theory, Fraser emphasizes the multiplicity of public opinion, and argues that Habermas’s formulation is inherently exclusive of women and historically marginalized groups. She proposes an alternative term, “subaltern counterpublic,” where members of subordinated groups discuss and circulate counterdiscourses, thus constituting themselves as oppositional to a hegemonic social order. Fraser stresses the importance of counterpublics for expressing groupness and identifying shared interests.³²

Scholars have since duly located other social contexts where counterdiscourses are generated, thus validating or even producing group identities that lie outside the mainstream.³³ Examples include those specifically coalescing around music.³⁴ It is notable that most of this scholarship concerns social groups that rely on the production and consumption of media as constitutive of discourse (for example: Charles Hirschkind’s discussion of cassette tapes; Matthew Van Hoose and radio; Elisabeth Friedman and the internet).³⁵ Those rare instances when embodied encounters are theorized as

³⁰Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25, no. 26 (1990): 56–80.

³¹Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

³²Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”

³³See Sidra Lawrence, “Afropolitan Detroit: Counterpublics, Sound, and the African City,” *Africa Today* 65, no. 4 (2019): 19–37; Méadhbh McIvor, “Human Rights and Broken Cisterns: Counterpublic Christianity and Rights-Based Discourse in Contemporary England,” *Ethnos* 84, no. 2 (2019): 323–43; Elisabeth J. Friedman, *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Kendra Salois, “Make Some Noise, Drari: Embodied Listening and Counterpublic Formations in Moroccan Hip Hop,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2014): 1017–48.

³⁴For example, Tyler Bickford, “The New ‘Tween’ Music Industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop and an Emerging Childhood Counterpublic,” *Popular Music* 31, no. 3 (2012): 417–36; Byron Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries: Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Matthew J. Van Hoose, “On the Tropical Counterpublic: Infrastructure and Voice On Uruguayan FM Radio,” *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 3 (2016): 301–16.

³⁵Charles Hirschkind describes how cassette sermon listening in Cairo has created an Islamic counterpublic that debates ethical and pious self-fashioning. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*. Matthew Van Hoose examines the components of a counterpublic coalesced around Uruguay’s marginalized *música tropical*. Van Hoose, “On the Tropical Counterpublic.” Elisabeth

counterpublics, such as Kendra Salois's study of interactive speech acts and gesture in hip hop performance events in Morocco, offer a broadened understanding of how people forge and express opinions in nonlinguistic realms.³⁶ If we allow discourse to be more than just words, we not only open up new sites of understanding, but also move away from the gender and class-based blind spots Habermas has been critiqued for.³⁷

My use of the term counterpublic is complicated by the conflicting space of racial privilege and economic marginalization that characterizes white, rural, working-class lifeworlds in the United States. Despite the fact that vocabularies of postcolonialism have been applied (problematically) to discussions of Appalachia,³⁸ I do not follow Fraser in using "subaltern" nor do I apply postcolonial theoretical perspectives given Appalachia's settler colonial history. I do use the term "counter," in part because my interlocutors felt excluded and displaced in light of the political and economic history of the Appalachian region and the contemporary realities of rural working-class life more broadly. They had an explicit sense that the cultural milieu of oprys marked a space apart, antagonistic to what they saw as economic and cultural forces of social dissolution, and the specific forms of condescension they felt were often directed at poor rural Appalachian people.

The Counter in Counterpublic

The fleeting moments of music making described above illustrate how people's engagement at oprys allows for the expression of a rural, working-class lifeworld that is at once reverent of tradition and intensely dynamic. They show how regular public musicking can structure discourse that is constitutive of a shared cultural identity. In the first example, the embodied "discussion" of gendered sexuality emerged from a publicly performed dialogue with a country song. It "speaks" through a discursively working-class cultural form (country music) to claim female agency in a well-known (by participants) male-voiced storyline about male desire. In the second example, the hybrid aesthetic produced when the swing and dance style of an outlaw country song is rhythmically propelled forward by flatfooting dancers in tap shoes gives voice to a social norm vital at oprys: the imperative of accommodation. This constitutes a collective rejection of the kind of boundary policing that structures so many amateur music scenes (specifically, those that fail to accommodate, thus delimiting the bounds of possible sociality), and shows how aesthetic choices may be an important location for articulating social imperatives that exist in problematized relationship to normative ones. Both examples illustrate how the persistent exclusion of monetization from oprys deeply structures the possibility and character of discourse.

But why is this a counterpublic, as opposed to a public sphere? Some historical background will provide context. As I noted earlier, my first encounter with oprys was in fact in northern Ohio. This may seem surprising in a discussion of an Appalachian or southern cultural form, but millions of people from West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas migrated to northern factory towns post-World War II, looking for industrial jobs in the face of shrinking family farms, dwindling mining jobs, falling coal prices, and unsuccessful union battles. Some manufacturers actively recruited from Appalachia. The term "Hillbilly Highway" refers to this out-migration: "hillbilly," of course, signaling the ways that the new arrivals to the industrial north were seen as Others whose cultural landscape reflected backwards southern ways.³⁹

Fifty years later, I stumbled upon a thriving bluegrass scene in Lorain and Medina Counties in Ohio. Its epicenter was an opry, to which I began making weekly pilgrimages. The two musicians

Friedman explores how the internet facilitates the constitution of a counterpublic of feminists throughout Latin America. Friedman, *Interpreting the Internet*.

³⁶Salois, "Make Some Noise."

³⁷As examples, see Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Mary Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth Century America," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 259–88.

³⁸Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Donald Askins, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978).

³⁹Hartigan, *Racial Situations*.

that I got to know best had been young men when they left Calhoun County, West Virginia, to work in the area. In interviews, Junior McCumbers, who found work at Firestone Tire and Rubber, and Ray Cadle, who made boilers for the railroad, explained how disorienting the move had been, and told of gathering with other West Virginia out-migrants to play music. The relocation was oriented toward work opportunity; the new communities that formed, however, revolved around amateur music making.

Shifting about five hundred miles southward, I did the bulk of my fieldwork in eastern Tennessee in 2013 and 2014. The cultural dislocation that comes of migration—when people leave a place—is more easily visible than the opposite: when a “place” leaves a people. For instance: Elizabethton, Tennessee, is a classically post-industrial economic space. Its two rayon factories, which opened their doors during the 1920s, served as major employers in the county for most of the twentieth century. One closed in the 1970s, while the other limped along, employing fewer and fewer workers, until it too finally closed in 2000. While the latter was demolished to make way for a Super Walmart, the other abandoned and decaying factory remains as a striking component of the Elizabethton skyline.

Other important features of the area are its two reservoirs, built by the Tennessee Valley Authority (known in numerous folk songs as the TVA). The construction of the second reservoir, which dammed off the Watauga River following World War II, is still an important memory for older residents who once lived in areas now underwater. One interlocutor’s grandmother liked to tell a story about watching a barn float down the street with a chicken perched on the roof as her hometown receded into the drink.

The common theme in these snapshots is the destruction of previous lifeways. In northeast central Ohio, 1950s-era in-migrants—many of whom were raised in tightly knit agrarian communities—built new lives as hourly laborers in the industrial north. More disruption was in store for them; by the 1980s, the industrial sector that once lured Appalachian workers began its decline. Across the Rust Belt, urban decay continues today. In the case of Elizabethton, not only did the departure of the rayon factories cause a major downturn in the local economy which people are still struggling from, but the actual land changed with the damming of the river. Nor are northeast central Ohio and Elizabethton the only places on the Appalachian map experiencing economic and social loss. Neoliberal economic policies and centuries of extractive industries have left a post-industrial wasteland in many small communities where jobs have gone overseas or become automated, where coal or timber is played out, and where social safety nets have been eviscerated. My research suggests that music is, among other things, a space to contest, engage, or lament a degraded cultural and physical landscape, and to reimagine and recreate a vision of “good” public social interaction often thought to have more easily existed in the past. In many cases, the possibilities of public sociality—that is, social life independent of school, work, or church—often revolves around amateur music making. As one interlocutor who lived near Elizabethton told me jokingly, “Everybody [here] picks music, plays an instrument, and sings. Their livestock picks and sings and dances. The trees even have music in them when the wind blows.”

“Why is that, do you think?” I asked.

“Cause there ain’t nothing else here to do. There’s no industry, so I guess you sign up on a welfare check and get an instrument and go to play it to pass the day away. . . . You’ll live to be one hundred years old playing fiddles.” My follow-up question lacked nuance, but the conversation poignantly captured the mix of pride and cynicism I heard in people’s discussions of local community and identity. Music, it seemed, indexed both resilience and the circumstances that made resilience necessary.

As Michael Warner describes in detail, counterpublics understand themselves to exist in adverse relationship to normative social forms, and they offer a way to talk back.⁴⁰ The scenes I have described illustrate how oprys are always already a space for—not talking back—but dancing back, singing back, joking back, and playing back against the current social and economic order. By insisting on creating inclusive public space where an ethos of adamant but accommodating participation allows strangers to become known, people at oprys hold back the breakdown of social bonds widely understood to accompany our neoliberal moment.⁴¹ Their weekly pilgrimages serve as counter to the isolating,

⁴⁰Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

⁴¹For example, see Kingsolver, *Tobacco Town Futures*; Julie Wilson, *Neoliberalism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

individualizing, commodifying forces of their changing worlds by, in part, disallowing markets—including the music industry—to structure or dissolve their social relationships.

This situation, however particular in its local histories, is not unique to east Tennessee or western North Carolina, to Appalachia, or even to the rural United States. Amateur music making and public sociality at oprys directly contest the normative ways most of us in late capitalism experience these things. To borrow a concept valued by Habermas, they are truly in-between.⁴² They constitute a liminal space with rare characteristics: public, and yet not state-sponsored or structured by the demands of profit, and often taking place on private land. They attract an army of regulars each week, and yet newcomers are swept inside and quickly integrated into the participatory social matrix. They feature commercial country music, and yet participants at oprys are quick to disregard industry-produced boundaries of genre and aesthetics in order to preserve an ethic of accommodation. They feature designated spaces for musicians and audience members, and yet these boundaries are frequently crossed and re-crossed as participants move throughout the hosting venues. They are organized around music and explicitly reject “talking politics,” and yet participants use musical performance to comment on the precarious world they find themselves in.

I have not experienced music making with this particular set of features at events organized in predominantly middle-class social circles or communities. It is particularly noteworthy how deeply and yet invisibly structuring it is when music—even “public” jams—rely on physical space that is dedicated to profit. In other words, when music occurs in spaces of capitalism, there are unavoidable differences. Even state or municipally sponsored musical events are often a form of economic boosterism lightly disguised in musical garb. Other jams or performances I have attended are either private and unwelcoming to strangers, or if public, occur in commodified spaces like bars. In the few instances of jams taking place in civic spaces like community centers, participation is limited. For example, there are few if any ways for non-musicians to actively contribute. Most middle-class jams that I have attended over two decades are organized around a particular sub-genre of music, necessitating some kind of boundary-keeping in terms of musical form and aesthetics (for example, you can’t play the harmonica at a bluegrass jam).

What, then, is the *sine qua non* of oprys? What does the consistent recreation of these forms in the working-class rural south and beyond tell us? The framework of “counterpublics” reveals the essence of oprys to be public sociality and discourse. Their consistent recreation offers, among other things, insights into one set of conditions that allows for the enduring creation of public space.

Coda: Embodied Dialogue and a Cranial Hi-Hat

One night in late September, I arrived late at Roy’s Opry. The grass was already heavy with dew and night was coming fast. Electrified country music from inside the barn made its way out into the night air, clashing pleasantly with the sounds of a bluegrass jam underway in the parking lot. I stepped inside the garage in time to see a woman named Trina make her way from the audience to the stage. She gave a signal and the group of musicians behind her kicked off the gospel song, “Let’s All Go Down to the River.” As Trina sang, she cast challenging looks around the room, as if to say, “Are *you* ready for the judgement day?” In the moments when her eyes locked with someone in the audience, however, her performative jeer would transform into a warm smile.

Six or so instrumentalists crowded the tiny stage, occasionally trading solos. When the song ended, a fiddler took Trina’s place at the microphone, kicking off an instrumental version of “Old Friends Can’t Hold a Candle to You,” a song that Dolly Parton took to the top of the charts in 1980. In the sonic space between the songs, Trina visited each musician on stage. I could see her shake a disapproving finger at one guitar player in a playful scolding gesture that made its recipient grin. She gave a half-hug to the upright bass player, meaning, the bass itself got the other half of the hug in the cramped quarters of the stage. She waved at a fiddler and pinched the cheek of the banjo player. Having made her rounds, Trina went to stand behind a seated guitarist. By now the song was underway. Keeping in rhythm with the tune, she began to rub the guitar player’s head as if she was playing a hi-hat with two brushes.

⁴²Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

She was creative with her variations, sometime patting, sometimes scrubbing, but most often swirling around and around. “Old friends can’t hold a candle to you. Old friends can’t light up the night like you do.” Who needs an instrument when you can play a scalp? The guitar player tried his best to concentrate on his chord changes, but occasionally got mixed up due to the distraction of having his head scoured. The audience chuckled along with this act, but gently, lulled by the soothing sounds of the rich baritone voice that was singing, “Old friends, can’t hold a candle to you.”

The ritual encounter of public music making facilitates the transformation of imagined communities into what Byron Dueck, in his study of Manitoban aboriginal music, calls “embodied intimacies.”⁴³ At oprys, intimacy is heightened by ritualized, dialogic musical practices: a guitar player backing a singer; an audience member joking about a singer’s song; a dancer flat-footing to a drummer’s western swing rhythm; a woman playing a human hi-hat. When money is absented from a musical space, no one is compelled to perform. When no one is compelled to perform, everyone does. When everyone performs, the resulting social and sonic environment is deeply dialogic; through embodied social interaction a discourse of self and community emerges.

The possibility of intimacy at places like Roy’s is heightened in the context of adamant participation, which urges participants to become known, and thus culturally *emplaced*—the opposite of culturally displaced. At oprys, music *is* a place, dialogically reified week after week. I have framed oprys as counterpublics because the term captures several ambient features—particularly spatial and social features—which are politically salient, and that are not obvious to many middle-class observers. Delineating these features as definitive of oprys—and counter to other forms of amateur music making—helps us see the ways that opry participants contest their own precarious space in the world and how this contestation throws normative models of amateur musicking into sharp relief. They remind us to pay more attention to the ways that money-making venues and musicians affect the attendance, sounds, and social practices of musical encounters. They inspire interesting questions about middle-class amateur musicking: what boundaries of entry exist in such musical circles, and in these circles, who is allowed to perform and what kinds of performances are welcome?

As many public spheres have migrated online, oprys endure as embodied face-to-face encounters, articulating a rural working-class identification through songs and socio-musical forms that self-consciously contrast other ways of public social interaction. The features of oprys that I’ve described all run counter to the atomizing forces that characterize social life in neoliberal times. This is important to recognize because classed ideologies regarding the contours of participatory democracy are a central flash point in our divided moment. For those who seek dialogue for the sake of a progressive political agenda, we need to pay attention to how others might see themselves as dialogically “in opposition to” certain mainstays of US public life.

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⁴³Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries*.

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