Bluegrass Nonsense Politics

Dissertation

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This project is an ethnographic critique of depoliticization as a mode of exclusion and silencing through vernacular cultural forms like bluegrass festivals. The argument builds a theory of the implication of concepts of honesty, nostalgia, and family in the experience of Central Ohio bluegrass festivals, claiming that broader sensibilities of the world bear on people’s understandings of bluegrass just as bluegrass festivals are themselves examples of the sorts of setting in which those sensibilities are formed and produced.
DEDICATION

For Roger and Ren, and complicated history.
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My argument in these essays is that bluegrass festivals can be instances of things that seem to be apolitical but which might more fruitfully be understood to be depoliticized. By “depoliticized,” this means that bluegrass’s latent political underpinnings are obscured through the practices of people in a culture where they shy away from overt senses of conflict and difference. These are people engaged (if implicitly) in making sense of their worlds and the other people that comprise them, engaged in practices of sense-making that can be understood as political. I have described these practices in terms of an underlying politics of politicization and depoliticization, where the activity of making of sense of the world is also an act of engaging in non-sense.

This underlying politics of depoliticization proceeds in an environment characterized by nonsense, a notion with two connected but distinguishable guises. The word nonsense is my attempt to engage with depoliticization by illuminating and focusing on non-sense, as the opposite of sense, my plea for broader recognition not just of the opposite of any particular sense but of the impossibility of any self-evident or universally valid sense, as recognition of the particular made-ness of any sense. Nonsense is also a characterization of my own (and I infer, others’) experiences of the opacity and nonsensical-seeming character of the sense other people seem to make of
their worlds, an empirical claim about the ability and need for people at bluegrass festivals to deny the impossibility of any definitively general or universal sense. I, from my semi-remove as a participating observer, at once recognize their sense as evidence of non-sense and yet contextualize it as nonsense, necessary and inevitable though it may be. Neither aspect of nonsense is separable from the other. Nonsense is a plea for recognition of the partiality and made-ness of sense, where I would hope more people might recognize the fact that others make different senses than they themselves do, and yet an acknowledgment that while despite recognizing the necessary partiality of their own sense they nonetheless construct apolitical-seeming practices like bluegrass to at least temporarily deny that their own experience and sensibility are indeed partial and particular. In fact, the denial of impossibility and the felt retreat from overt politics is what enables a person to engage the less obvious but more important underlying politics of nonsense and sense-making. Politics, which in its fundament is an engagement with people different from oneself, and as is apparent in the two aspects of nonsense, is always at once about experience, observation, and description, oneself and others, both particularity and generalization, and it is as much about recognizing nonsense as recognizing one’s own nonsense as making the sense.

I argue that it is a productively incomplete denial of impossibility, when these evasions of overt politics become engagements in depoliticized practices and result in reproductions and improvisations of what are recognizable as ideological and “political” categories like left, center, and right; liberal and conservative; or democratic, republican, and independent. A central theme of my argument is that these latter descriptions are
viable only as outcomes of processes and phenomena that should themselves receive attention. My argument, to this end, is that the avoidance of overtly conflictual and impolite politics in deference to an indulgence in depoliticized practices like bluegrass, at the intersection of politics and apparent apoliticalness, is evident in the perspective of bluegrass as a genre.

A genre like bluegrass is both a performed and contestedly emergent category and yet also a more statically descriptive label, in practice, referring to a category of people, performers, texts, and sounds. The politics of genre, in an instance like bluegrass, becomes a concrete materialization, and illustrative example, both of the artificiality and the comparative fixity of certain understandings and senses of how bluegrass works and what it means. Bluegrass-as-genre is as much a reminder of the nonsensical, political character of a label for something like music as it is a lesson in the mutability and nonsensical character of political labels and orientations and their indebtedness to something as seemingly apolitical as music. My own argument, specifically, is that some of the most apolitical-seeming components of bluegrass – a nostalgic rootedness in the past, a sense that the music speaks honestly of truer, broader things than whatever specific subject-matter it engages, and the aesthetic comfort that derives from virtuoso and child performers, as what makes the music good – are in fact loci around which people actively struggle with their need to make sense of themselves and their worlds. It is bluegrass’s depoliticization that produces the opening through which people use it – bluegrass – as a site in which to struggle with an actively ambivalent political existence.
Thinking about bluegrass as a genre makes it a case study in the merit of going beyond descriptive labels and inquiring about the production and contestation of the categories to which those labels ostensibly refer. This project is a demonstration of how apparently descriptive labels like left, right, center, disinterested, and disaffected are epiphenomenal to actual political dynamics of producing and contesting these categories themselves. My argument is that the conflicts and contestations that matter are those where, as in the nonsense and sense-making of bluegrass, people grapple with their political ambivalence by engaging with notions of nostalgia, music that is honest, and the purported virtue of children and highly-skilled performance. These are the apolitical-seeming conversations and practices, enabled by the visage of depoliticization, that produce labels that are confusable as mere political descriptors. This is in distinction to the idea that politics is characterized by contestation and misunderstanding insofar as the contestation and misunderstanding emerge among different categories of people and sensibilities, as if those latter categories were somehow pre-existingly true or self-evident. The misunderstandings and conflicts of politics do not flow from or follow distinctions that these labels describe; what bluegrass shows is that the more important politics precede, produce, and reproduce the categories of overt politics, not the other way around.
INTRODUCTION

The question of why it is that a person might stake some significant part of their claim to the status of a Political Scientist on the production of a text about bluegrass festivals may not bear within itself an obvious answer. This project is an argument that, in a world anyone shares with anyone else, there is nothing that is not at least potentially political, and that while the political aspect of something like bluegrass is generally implicit, that implicitness can be a way people are denied access to the political interactions that may be their only source of recognition or dignity. This project is a plea to recognize and engage those latent politics in otherwise apolitical-seeming things, in hopes of better protecting broader political access for otherwise excludable people.

There are a number of authors who are important to my own narrative of politicization and to my ability to narrate a relationship between bluegrass and politics. James Madison¹, John Stuart Mill², Karl Marx³, Friedrich Nietzsche⁴, Max Weber⁵, 

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Emma Goldman⁶, Walter Lippman⁷, Philip Converse⁸, Raymond Williams⁹, Sheldon Wolin¹⁰, Pierre Bourdieu¹¹, Michel Foucault¹² and Chantal Mouffe¹³ are all on that list of people without exposure to the writings of whom I don’t think I would be able to say what I’ve tried to say. Beginning this story on a point of esoteric and historical theoretical texts and moving toward articulating their connection to everyday experiences to which they may otherwise seem irrelevant is a metaphorically appropriate place, perhaps, to build a theory about the need to acknowledge potential political complexity in seemingly simple things. I am incredibly wary of deploying citational practices as mere adornments, though, or – even worse – as stepping stones masking shortcuts in my own thinking or articulations. Citations in texts such as these are important points of context for my narrative voice and situated credibility, sometimes serving as unavoidable conceptual shorthand but never, hopefully, displacing or obscuring my own obligation to give ideological space to the ideas and stories and arguments so generously lent to me during my research conversations. Citations are not arguments; citations, here, are really

only ever bits of my narrative, as narrator, and I hope they never masquerade as anything else. It is in the spirit of that dictate of contextualized brevity, then, that I should situate my own orientation, and the otherwise sometimes implicit basis on which I have “made” my own sense of any of this.

Theodor Adorno (working both in the 1920s and 30s and again in the 50s and 60s in Germany, and in the US during his intervening exile) constructed a series of arguments about the interrelation of the consumerism and entertainment of “popular culture”, the “art” of so-called higher culture, and citizenship and politics. Adorno constructed this triangulation on a basis of a relationship between economically-inflected interpersonal human relationships and people’s outlooks and orientations toward how they were governed and how power and hierarchies worked in society. Much of this logic (and I’m thinking particularly of several of his essays on music and his, with colleague Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) is a sort of claim of a historical narrative, with an apparent origin in a place before industrialized capitalistic private property norms had become so instantiated that they not only consolidated wealth and buttressed broad economic inequality but accustomed and attuned “consumers” to repetition and sameness among commodities they were buying – and did so beneath the chimera of variety and difference, the experience of which became a source and sign of consumer pleasure. To

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Adorno’s mind, substantively engaged and challenging music was vitiated by a more humbly consumable light music in the name of popularity, while people told themselves they were more free to discern the particularities between cinematic production strategies because they’d modernized their way past the strictures of draconianly organized religion. The problem either way was that people might be feeling and sensing themselves to be more free and yet might, in actuality, be engaging in process with precisely the opposite effect. People thought they were empowered decision makers in the market place, telling themselves they were free because they could choose within the confines of the consumer market. However, for Adorno, this displacement of freedom simultaneously reduced “freedom” to the idea of an ostensibly apolitical choice about known products and, as an extension of the same, negated even that truncatedly “free” choice as the markets punished variation amongst those products, building what were only the appearances of creativity, improvisation, and newness on a rigid fundament of repetition.

All of this is a gross reduction of sometimes impenetrably large and complex body of works, and much of it is of course contestable on its more crude empirical points. Its relevance here is the underlying and somewhat implicit thematic questions, in so much of Adorno’s work, about how the economic and “cultural” worlds all of us occupy are interrelated, how it is that distinctions and variations between, within, and among the two both are and aren’t discernible to particular people, and what the ability and opportunity to sense and make sense of those distinctions have to do with freedom – as much as with the sense anyone can make of freedom as with the extent to which anyone actually “has
Adorno matters here not because he’s “right” and not because he’s the only one saying any of this; he matters because my own attunement to the deep contingency of putatively “political” things like freedom and domination upon apparently ephemeral things like music or consumerism is due largely to my privilege of access to his arguments.

As important as that privilege is, in all this, it extends past Adorno’s critique to the access I’ve had to the works of Hannah Arendt, the social, philosophical, and political theorist who, not unlike Adorno, left an earlier professional-academic context in interwar Germany for the United States (but not, however, and unlike Adorno, returning to Europe after 1945). The part of Arendt that has been most striking to me – in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*\(^ {15}\), her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*\(^ {16}\), and her *Between Past and Future*\(^ {17}\) – is what I’m inclined (somewhat anachronistically) to call her critique of “normalcy”.

Her 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is an assessment of the Israeli “extradition” and trial of Adolph Eichmann for his role in the Nazi bureaucracy’s policies and actions against persons of Jewish identity under its purview. Arendt’s *Eichmann* is at least partly a critique of the implicit desire, of the legal system in question, for clear distinctions of blame, victimhood, and innocence, on the grounds that this drive to seemingly clear identifications of guilt would, at best, miss the point. What Arendt seemed to find interesting about the Eichmann story was how it was significant of a more endemic inability of people with various sorts of power to recognize their own implication and

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complicity in maintaining the sorts of cultural practices, structures, and institutions that made the so-called “evils” of people like Eichmann possible, if not inevitable. Arendt writes about being impressed, in one key passage, by the ostensibly sociopathic and unintelligent Eichmann’s ability to recount for the courtroom a more-than-passable account of what the late 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (key late-enlightenment thinker and, ostensibly, purveyor of such ethically and conceptually “good” ideas as to be a viable metonym for all that was the opposite of Eichmann) called a “Categorical Imperative.” This Kantian concept, for Arendt’s purposes, amounted in effect to ethical decision-making being identified by decisions taken, as guided by personal, individual judgment, in keeping with what could plausibly be made a “general principle”. Or in other words, ethical decisions were those made by persons acting as if the logic informing them could viably be used - in the judgment of the person deciding - by any other person and still count as “good.”

This tiny bit of Kantianism seemed to capture almost the entirety of what Arendt was watching and hearing in Jerusalem. Eichmann’s claim that his own role in “the final solution” had in any way been guided by Kantian principles seemed preposterous – particularly, Arendt was saying, to a smugly prosecutorial mindset overly enamored of the idea of the inherent goodness of the whole of “Enlightenment Principles” for which Kant had become a one-name signifier. Arendt, in some sense, believed Eichmann, at least insofar as she didn’t doubt his sincerity. The point she was making, rather, was that Eichmann (like the hundreds of thousands of other banal but not otherwise conventionally “evil” Germans for whom he stood as representative in situ) probably had
deferred in some sense to an idea of a general principle in deliberating and justifying his actions. Eichmann probably had thought about whether the world would be a better place (however he imagined that to look) if everyone else acted as he did.

Arendt wanted to point to the Kantian “principle” itself (again, as a signifier of broader things) as, in this context, a too-easily-misread part of the problem. Arendt was saying that these “Enlightenment Principles” that had their proximate locus in Kant were predicated for much of their viability on the ability of someone to conceive of what could universally be good or true for “everyone”, and Eichmann was an almost perfect example of what happens when a person tries to think universally but forgets, perhaps inevitably, that it is actually impossible to know what is definitively or finally good for everyone.

For Kant to “work” a person had to imagine what might be universally good in their own judgment and act as if it were a dictate of law; the personal, situated, and self-critical judgment are on the only possible checks on false universalism. The only difference between that and Eichmann, and the thing that was forgotten with increasing frequency in early 20th-Century Europe, was that the idea that acting as if the principle were a law is supposed to be both explicitly contingent and mediated by personal judgment, the latter of which is supposed to operate at least somewhat apart from the institutions of politics, government, culture, religion, etc. Germany, though, as what Arendt was by this time saying was not an exception to but a not-illogical outgrowth of Kant, became enamored of the idea of laws as instantiations of universal ethical principles. “Acting as if good principles were laws” became “acting on the assumption that laws manifested good principles”, and the role of judgment was elided and forgotten just as hypothetical “laws”
of self-governance were displaced by Governmental, State-centered, and sometimes
codified but almost always imposed-from-outside “Laws”. Europe’s and Germany’s
infatuation with conceptually orderly laws had come from Kant and the Enlightenment in
whatever their stunted but not nonsensical forms, just as it had made Eichmann possible.
Eichmann and his evil – this is the central point – were not exceptional. They had instead
come from precisely the same practical philosophical basis that seemed at once to be
justifying the sanctimonious abhorrence of him by the Israeli state and prosecutors in
their desire to wash their own hands of the matter. The Holocaust maybe hadn’t been so
much an exception to an otherwise peaceful, democratic, and inclusive narrative of
Enlightened human progress. Maybe the Holocaust had in some minute way been the
Enlightenment’s logical outgrowth.

The problem with notions of “normalcy” is their implicit supposition that
historical “events” like the Holocaust appear to be isolatedly nonsensical tragedies
attributable variously to bad people and ill fate when cast against the backdrop of an
assumption that reality is somehow naturally stable and “normal,” but that bad things
sometimes happen, tragically, but unavoidably. Whatever the cosmological or
ontological basis of a person’s orientation toward the workings of fate, connectedness,
karma, and malleability of our worlds, it is difficult to not recognize on at least some
basic level what Arendt is able to show of the dangers involved in failing to consider the
potential of one’s own complicity in the inertia of particular political problems. Arendt
wasn’t merely lodging a plea for recognitions of broader guilt, though. Her – my –
cconcern with an implicit valuation of normalcy (and the supposition of the innocence of
the powerful that it entails) is that it is a key mode through which people approach their engagements with each other as if reality were divisible into self-evident and abstractly ‘true’ categories and relationships, like perpetrator and victim, good and bad, public and private, economic and political.

My access to Arendt and her critiques of what passes for political order and how laws work has been integral to my own ability to articulate concerns about connections between how people understand the world to work (how people might assume there is a correct answer to a question about whom to blame for World War II), on the one hand and, on the other, concerns about how people might be denied the recognition and dignity they in some sense deserve. Arendt’s thesis might be captured in the claim that a somewhat-but-not-illogically bastardized form of so-called Enlightenment Principles had perpetrated and maintained a discourse of the supreme valuation of the idea of human life just as it was leading to the mass destruction of actual human lives. If that is a fair read, then the problem is that the concept of a human life became separated from the actuality and practice of human life, such that it was not incoherent but actually fully conceptually coherent for Eichmann to speak and write of saving people in precisely the same moments he was administering their death. As in the case of Adorno, I do not mean to imply that this is a notion unique to Arendt, but this dehumanizing effect of humanitarian language is, I think, one of the most important concepts – political or otherwise - I can imagine having encountered. Arendt’s response to much of this problem was to continue her critique of social conceptual certainty and its deviation from the actuality of human experience as a problem of non-recognition. Actual people could only expect to enjoy
substantive recognition and human dignity if they were able to participate in politics because only in actual Politics – the moments of engagement with people different from oneself, where they are acting without foreknowledge of their effects – can people hope to recognize both themselves and others as truly and genuinely human, tentative and not-all-knowing, but dignified human beings. It is only with Arendt that I expect I would here be able to articulate the need for engagement with people we sense to be different from ourselves as an imperative for any hope to avoid the sorts of “non-recognition” that people like Arendt describe.

The third major part of this initial self-narration is Jacques Rancière, the late-20th- and early-21st-century French art, aesthetic, social and political theorist whose work has dealt with what are generally translated as disagreement and dissensus, and is largely focused on questions of the relationships among art, aesthetics, governance and politics. His answer, in its crudest sense, is that much of what might have been recognizable as “art” by the end of the twentieth century was largely the outcome of historical processes (a particular “aesthetic regime”) that had rendered art somewhat artificially devoid of its more deeply affective and contestable potential, seemingly something ‘apart from’ and ‘above’ practical, everyday life. This had, for Rancière, deprived art of what might otherwise have been its role of helping people to remember the immensity and depth of the reality they experienced. Something truly aesthetic should have served as a signifier of the impossibility of full recognition among people, the impossibility of ever fully “knowing” another person, or even oneself, from one moment to the next, by being both

\[18\] Jacques Rancière, Disagreement
mysterious and somehow ‘unknowable’ and yet at the same time something made by humans and very much “of this world”. Rancière’s point, in this, was that these phenomena in art were both a signifier and a manifestation of a political process that denied more just or equitable recognition by pretending that there was a rigid and ‘natural’ distinction between what was political and what was not. The newly depoliticized art served as the generative obverse of a newly stunted notion of ‘politics’ rooted in an idea of consensus. “Consensus” for Rancière, though, to the extent that it is an ideal of universal inclusion and agreement about the difference between good and bad, was impossible on the grounds on the impossibility either of knowing what was good for other people who were excluded from the political process or of ever actually becoming universally inclusive (because - in the latter case – no one could ever conceivably know today, on the basis of their momentary and fleeting sense of how the world works, who might count as meriting recognition by tomorrow.) The impossibility of genuine consensus notwithstanding, and absent a more vibrantly political aesthetic regime, art had by the 20th century become the gold standard of depoliticization, that process by which the word “politics” came to refer only to formal and visible institutions of governmental and legal authority. All the injustices and exclusions of economic and social disparity were either silenced and hidden within so-called private spaces of religious, social, and ‘traditional’ institutions or, in seemingly opposite but effectively equivalent fashion, cast with the highest of visibility as somehow natural and preexisting, problems not to be solved but contexts and realities to be managed and accommodated. Either way,
Depoliticization took the injustice away from the politics, leaving what remained of “politics” either irrelevant or ineffective.

Depoliticization, for Rancière, was a mode of preventing the acknowledgment of the inevitable and logically necessary exclusions of any social order that should have come from the political processes of engagement with other people who did not make sense to one another. The point of Rancière, in short, is that a more fully developed sense of aesthetics would, or might, remind us that full recognition of ourselves and each other is impossible, and is all the less possible the more we drive toward some appearance of inclusivity and agreement, so in actuality everything that has anything to do with our relationships with other people (which is to say, everything) is, rightly understood, political. The more apolitical a thing might seem, the more depoliticized it has become, the more surely political it actually should be.

My position here is largely a reaction against the rather longer list of people who for various reasons have understood my interest to conjoin bluegrass and politics as a claim that bluegrass must somehow change the way people vote. This is not an argument that bluegrass makes people vote in a particular way, that there are affinities between bluegrass and particular positions on governance, policing, or public policy. Bluegrass is not a system to be decoded, to unearth its signification of the political orientation of the people making, reproducing, and consuming it. At least, that is, not in this project.

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19 It is as if I were going to say the sound of tradition were a force for supporting conservative policies, or if the hippies and the young people were evidence of the potential for a music-based reconciliation, or even that bluegrass is a language for articulating utopian alternatives... all minor variants of things I have been asked.
The connection of bluegrass and politics in this text is one aimed at a critique of depoliticization much like what might more suitably be articulated with a slightly different vantage on Rancière and his engagement with human rights. Rancière’s notion of human rights as an ostensibly political ideal is that it is evidence of the bankruptcy of actual substantive processes and practices of recognition and access in everyday life and governance. Rancière articulates his concern as one centering on an overwhelming drive, in the commonsense and conventional “politics” of policing and policy, toward an appearance of consensus about the public good and general will that is instead an instantiation of a particular, and thus exclusory, sensibility of ordering and managing (“counting”) the world. In Rancière’s argument, the problem here is that the so-called “political rights” from which governance and policy-making are imagined to be drawn are left unable to effect the actual recognition and access people need and deserve. Political rights are instantiated through governance practices that, by embracing only a single dominant sensibility of what counts and matters and calling it universal consensus, preclude even the possibility of people with variant sensibilities gaining recognition, let alone access. Rancière claims that what may vernacularly be called Human Rights is a distraction, useful for persons in positions of privilege, that gives cover and produces the appearance of hand-wringing about other people’s problems and the seemingly inevitable violation of their rights. Human Rights for “them”, by virtue of their mere existence as a concept and their usefulness in a discourse of depoliticization and consensus, serve for Rancière as a signifier of the inadequacy of political rights to ensure recognition and

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access for the rest of “us”. If actual policy and governance were better able to recognize
difference and protect access, Human Rights would be unnecessary. 21 The “problem” of
human rights is not that structures or people violate them; it is that many of those of us
who enjoy positions of social power fail to recognize our ongoing failure to engage the
questions of differential sensibility, recognition, and access that should inform both the
rest of everyday private life and the governance and policing we more vernacularly call
“politics”.

The crux of Rancière’s logic is that a conception of politics as “what governments
do” (in apparent ignorance of the non-recognition and denied access signified by Human
Rights) misses the political potential in both the private everyday life and in the policing
and policy of “politics” resigned to their own failures. The drive to consensus and the
predication of policy-making on the ostensible-but-false possibility of consensus of
inclusivity and equitability make vernacular concepts of politics a force for placing some
issues of injustice in a private sphere while constructing most of the rest of the issues of
injustice as immutable realities. In either case, whether the injustices are rendered private
or natural, the problem of denied recognition and precluded access fall outside the realm
of potential political redress. Conventionally-understood politics of governance and
policing (and reductive questions of how people vote) become a mechanism of
depoliticization, for Rancière; depoliticization is a practice of more or less actively
ignoring or forgetting social problems.

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21 Whether this is a rhetorical or empirical hypothetical – whether an alternative could conceivably be
possible – is unclear, including in Ranciere’s argument.
Depoliticization is a problem in a world where people might hope to exchange recognition with and try to help to grant access to others who may in some sense be different from themselves. It is a problem where the process of trying to build inclusive and accessible democratic institutions requires them to grapple with the likelihood that different people make different senses of how the world works, of what counts as important, and of how best to do things. These aren’t mere disagreements that can be reconciled in rationalizing conversation, but neither are they necessarily the sorts of conflicts people should not want to bother trying to manage, leaving some part of the people just to “win” preemptively. This is what is useful in Rancière: politics productively understood is the recognition and engagement of exactly this situation of struggling with difference on the basis of both its necessity as an attempt and its impossibility of conclusive success. Vernacular, truncated notions of politics, insofar as they promote and reproduce the sense that difference and diversity are things to be curated and collected in pursuit of a universally inclusive world, presumes in some sense that the goal of inclusion is already knowable, achievable, and mutually agreed.

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22 This is an unavoidable allusion to a much broader disciplinary Political Theory question that is engaged more broadly in this project overall but, for the sake of a précis: Democratic theory, as a subfield of Political Theory, is in some sense centered on questions of what it is that we call democracy and how does and should it work. To this, generally, German social theorist Jurgen Habermas is often promoted as a canonical articulator of deliberation, as a mode by which people might under ideal circumstances engage with one another and mutually, collectively learn themselves into existence as a “public”, with common interest and common will. Counter to this, as an opposing pole, is Carl Schmitt’s argument about the practical impossibility of any such “public” either establishing or maintaining a collective will in a context of politics where power differentials inevitably allow particular entities to make and enact decisions unavoidably rooted in their particular interests and sensibilities. It is within that spectrum that debate grapples with questions of whether politics can work with everyone trying to engage in open and honest conversation, whether the attempt to have an open conversation just invites someone to take advantage of others’ openness and is better avoided, or perhaps something in between.

23 Chantal Mouffe’s critique of John Rawls’s dictate that if we treat pluralism as fact we will anchor it as a reality – a popular Liberal conceit, of using fact as a way to secure some social good that might otherwise
depoliticizes life by making some things seem invisibly, privately off-limits to contestation, and other things visibly, immutably, naturally off-limits to contestation.

This, then, is my particular articulation of the problem, as outlined in more general terms by Rancière: processes of depoliticization threaten to render potentially important issues of denied access and non-recognition uncontestable, and an absence of contestation threatens always to deny particular persons and sensibilities the opportunity to even hope to gain recognition or access. My interest is to think about expanding those points of access by repoliticizing, and recognizing the latent politics within, an otherwise perfectly banal and apolitical seeming thing.

That, then, is the start of an answer, for me, to where bluegrass meets politics. To the potential relevance of consumerism to feelings and actualities of freedom, the necessity of political engagement for the avoidance of potentially horrifying non-recognitions of other people, and to the apparent wisdom of deep suspicion of any situation pretending not to be political, my own reaction and response has been to root my narrative in a summer of bluegrass festivals in Central Ohio, a place of a great many “differences” (or tradition and urbanism, North and South, East and West, black and white, river and plains – and perhaps Left and Right), looking for people talking to and about people and things they didn’t already know, looking for the least political-seeming things I could find.

be negotiated away – is that by doing so we lose sight of the processes by which pluralism is created and understood, which are for Mouffe necessary because ‘pluralism’ is an ideal, not a reality, and can be construed in various ways, not all of them necessarily ‘inclusive’. 
I wrote these essays about bluegrass because I was (and remain) concerned that talking about politics as if it were a subject that we could cordon off from the rest of our lives and shape within a preconceived categorical box - for a few to try to practice and for many to try to avoid - might actually exacerbate the problems of exclusion, alienation, inaccessibility, and all the rest of what “politics” is supposed to (in the minds of some) be solving. I wrote these essays about bluegrass because I think that the practice of discussing politics as if it were a pre-defined and fully abstractly understandable thing, a thing of “history”, logic, policy, and law, is sometimes inadequate to the task of providing accounts of why people feel as they do about politics – and of why that matters in the first place. I wrote these essays about bluegrass in some sense precisely because bluegrass is so far afield from the sorts of things many who write about politics would think worthy. I wrote these essays about bluegrass because bluegrass, in all the places I saw it and in all the people with whom I spoke (all of those who make it a thing worth thinking about) is such a perfect model of the sort of popular-cultural, aesthetic, traditional “thing” – a thing claiming silence on matters of contemporary politics, and a thing claiming apparently, naturally immutable historical-rootedness – which, together, comprise the visage of depoliticization that makes bluegrass an almost paradigmatically political object.
CHAPTER 1: ON AUDIENCE AND METHOD

There is a longer story behind this investment in the emergent politics of vernacular culture. My commitment – political, intellectual, and personal – is not to the idea that valid claims and arguments must have logical or conceptual basis in (and reference to) concrete, material practices, persons, and relationships. Mine is partly, but (crucially) not entirely an empirical argument. This is, functionally, a semi-empirical project; my engagement with the politics of bluegrass has proceeded on the basis both of ethnographic fieldwork and further-removed critique. My abbreviated explanation of this research approach is that I have found it very fruitful to think about bluegrass as a genre, with attendant questions not just of what genre “is” but also how it “works” and what it “does”. This is a notion of genre that goes beyond the descriptive labeling of categories of objects or practices, and recognize those categories as emerging continuously, having always been contested and produced by people in political situations, while still existing as descriptive labels in significant ways.

The use of genre as one of my central analytical approaches has allowed me to make a particular sense of my experience as both a participant and an observer in my researcher, and has allowed me to engage with those experiences while navigating – imperfectly, certainly, but productively – the challenges inherent to the scholarly representation of other people’s lives. James Clifford has characterized this challenge, of
a role like mine needing to construct representations out of fieldwork experiences comprised only of partial truths, where the search for a whole or impartial truth is a false one, because there is no correct answer other than what counts as such on the part of the particular practitioner or researcher. I have tried to take this seriously, and yet I have also worked to address what seems to me to be the experience of many people at bluegrass festivals of non-partial truth, in their practices, which I am calling political, of building and maintaining their communities and “groups”. Thinking about and through genre has been an opportunity for me to at least attempt to embrace both others’ claims of experience of a label like bluegrass as impartially descriptive, and my own critical assessment that this label is also the product or the index, of underlying contestations and politics. Dorothy Noyes has urged the use of a conception of “group” that incorporates a dynamic between both an empirically identifiable concept of community and an acknowledgment of the networks of practices and relationships that proceed in the shadow of that the imagery of that symbolic community, where the boundaries of the group itself are negotiated and policed. It is in that spirit that genre has been a useful mode in which to try to do justice to both, to avoid condemning practices of community at bluegrass festivals as false consciousness, while still trying to recognize them as more complicated than what their practitioners might acknowledge them to be.

Genre has been helpful to me, for dealing with the not-uncommon challenge of my having, in the course of fieldwork and in the writing that follows, to think my way

through, and beyond, the categories and conceptions I initially brought to the work. In my specific case, I had to reconceive of the (other people’s) Conservatism and faith in the possibility of authenticity I presumed to understand, the distaste for which had in fact prompted my articulation of this project almost from the start. It was with the idea of genre as the contestedness of categories that those things, which looked like ideological objects, became reconceivable as practices with labels and the appearance of self-evidence, yes, but also as manifestations of meaningful political interactions with narratives, complexities, and disconnects of their own. Genre, more broadly, has shown itself to be invaluable for addressing the political challenges of an ethnographic political critique, as a paradox of listening and speaking, as a feat of making sense in productive critique while not silencing, hopefully, alternative sensibilities with which the critique is, for good or ill, inevitably at odds.

The narrative of whom I’m addressing and how begins in my making explicit how the ideological superstructure I have had the privilege to employ in making whatever rudimentary sense I have made of bluegrass, and the basis on which I’ve been able to proclaim the value of bluegrass as a thing, is very much the product of access to the ideas and concepts of other people. Implicitly denying my privileged access to academic literacy would be disingenuous, but it would also be politically unhelpful. I want to be very clear about my fear that a practice of pretending that our understandings and feelings of knowledge somehow come after actuality presents us with its own truths hollows out the core of what good accessible, inclusive politics are meant to be. Academic “theory”
does not follow reality, but the risk I want to avoid is not captured in a pedantic claim about how it’s more “correct” to recognize the filtering of empiricism through the observer’s conceptual baggage, that observer’s always-partial gaze, or the complicity and implication of any observer in the realms and practices from which they might claim to be objectively distanced only within the confines of a transparent conceit of crude “positivism”. Those concerns are valid, but a larger danger lies in pretending that objective standards of truth or correctness about a thing like bluegrass precede our grasp of them, a pretension that can be a potent force for the exclusion, alienation, and non-recognition of anyone with whose personal experience those ostensibly singular truths are at odds. Treating bluegrass as an always pre-existent object, inert, truly and accurately describable with statements of fact, is exactly the sort of depoliticization that, quite possibly, poses the most serious threat to the access and recognition that so many hold dear.

The concept of genre can be useful for grappling with this seeming paradox of wanting to talk about a topic like bluegrass in a way that doesn’t do too much to retrench it in its “thingness” (i.e., to depoliticize it) but in a way that allows it to be at least enough of a sort of “thing” that someone else can as much as possible know what’s being talked about. Genre is all the more useful in this instance because bluegrass in its more commonsense guise is a genre. Bluegrass is a genre of music, or of popular music, or a subgenre of country or of traditional music, or something like that. All of these are


27 Etymology is interesting, here, in likeness to sense of being both generative and descriptive, as genus grouping of likeness containing difference, etc.
debatable (and debated) but each of them is in some minimally descriptive sense correct. The observation that neither are any of these generic labels is entirely correct is important too, though; the weight of genre does not have to be constrained to that of a mere descriptive category. Twentieth century Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin made what might be exemplary use of a notion of genre, as a concept useful for understanding the social and political context as well as the linguistic and literary contexts of something like language (meaning also that genre was good for more than just categories of cultural production like art, music, or novels). Bakhtin was interested in his “The Problem of Speech Genres”\textsuperscript{28} to argue that “individual concrete utterances”, as seemingly discrete pieces of language, be they written or spoken in various forms, were always inflected by fluid stylistic borrowing and hybridization as seemed appropriate and sensible to the utterer. What was at stake for Bakhtin was the question of whether the “high” language of literature was the core of the true “national language” or if, as he himself wanted to say, it was the speech and utterances of people constantly assessing appropriateness among multiple styles and genres who themselves drove changes and development in language, which “literature” would then be left to coopt and codify. Bakhtin’s perspective of genre was that of a loose constellation of norms governing the performance of language (or music, or whatever) providing performers (utterers) a range of seemingly constrained but still perhaps flexible options of ways of doing things.

Genre for Bakhtin was a way of referencing the hybridization of performance serving simultaneously as loose parameters of sensibility for performers but also, in some ways, always-evolving reflection of those hybridized stylistic performances, always at once both reflecting and informing utterances. Bakhtin’s genre is both descriptive and performative, both a label of correctness and a notion for people doing things of what informs (but never dictates) their judgment of what is appropriate or sensible in particular circumstances. In quasi-Scientific parlance, this is to say perhaps that Bakhtin’s “genre” is both objective and subjective at the same time. “Bluegrass is a genre” may be correct, but insofar as it is a mere label it is only a surface-level manifestation of multiple people’s engagements with processes of sensibility, style, and performative judgment that make genre an inherently political thing. Genre is helpful, then, as a conceptual means by which to recognize (from the vantage of scholarly privilege) vernacular understandings of genre as descriptive label, as part of recognizing the experience of bluegrass, for example, as an already-objectified reality. Genre is helpful because it acknowledges the experience of objectified reality while also engaging with it, and grappling with the interaction between the description-as-fact and the performance-as-politics.

Bakhtin’s articulation of the dynamic where generic description informs stylistic utterances which both acknowledge the descriptions that make them possible and inform future utterances by contributing to the always-ongoing shaping of the descriptive-

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seeming labels and stylistic fashions of “current” sensibility aligns well with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* and his “structuring, structured dispositions”. Bourdieu, the mid-late twentieth-century French sociologist and social theorist, argued in his *Logic of Practice* that almost the entirety of human life, from thought to speech to physical bodily movement, was continuously informed, but not dictated, by structures and patterns that were themselves made up of and continuously updated by the always-ongoing, fleeting, momentary actions of what had gone before. Bourdieu’s argument was that these patterns of social life, where distinctions among people and groups were mostly reproduced but always shaped into new forms, were mechanisms by which social hierarchies and power disparities were able to endure, not through conscious or intentional acts of the powerful but mostly through the unknowingly habituated performance of everyday life by almost everyone.

Bourdieu is helpful to illustrate the immensity of cultural reproductive forces that underlie enduring social hierarchies, and to help instantiate the thrust of genre beyond texts and the arts. He is particularly helpful for providing language that is perhaps more accessible, showing in his intersection with Bakhtin that genre may more productively be understood as a process of habituated acts of differentiation. Genre *is* the category, for many people, into which musics are differentiated, but it is dangerous not to recognize that those differentiations are informed by cultural habits beyond the control of actual individual people and invisible to most of them, just as it is dangerous not to recognize that they are still acts, of actual people, enacting the differentiations. These habituated

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acts of differentiation are particularly important, for being even more clear about how
genre matters in an argument about bluegrass and politics, operating as it is on several
levels.

Genre is a way of engaging with the understandings of others, as a legible
descriptor. I can know, to a certain extent, that people already know what bluegrass is.
Genre is also a language of politics that allows for an engagement with a person’s own
sensibility without having to tell them they’re wrong, though. That bluegrass may be
more than what people think it is does not make them wrong, per se. Genre is, too, just
as importantly, yet another way of addressing the role of particular pre-existing
sensibilities of what makes sense and what counts to a particular audience, whether it be
of a concert, an act of illocution, or an academic essay.

One of the more (if not the most) important questions I am inevitably raising by
insisting on the need to articulate and clarify the risks and costs of depoliticizing a
generic cultural practice like bluegrass is the issue of to and for whom I suspect it
matters. The answer here is in some sense quite simple: the sort of person I at this point
feel best suited to address is that class of person (most, though not all of them academics,
in their own ways) with what might be called social scientific inclinations, operating in
discourses and environments where their primary objective seems generally to be
“correct” about the world with little if any time left to ask how, why, and to whom what
is said might count as “correct”. And, more importantly: whose sensibility and self-
understanding is recognized and validated by that particular notion of what counts as
correct? Who might be benefited or privileged in a system where what counts as right or
good to them gets inflated into an imagined standard of what is good or right for
everyone?

I should take a moment to expand, briefly, on this category I’ve just now
constructed, and be clear that I do not want it to be understood as a reference, either
wholly or exclusively, to an over-general or reductive notion either of “Positivism” or
“Social Science.” Much of the work in a department of Political Science (to cite an
example with which I am most familiar) surely seems to ascribe to itself an interest to
explore questions not just of “reality” but also of how the ways reality is understood and
discussed might possibly help or hurt actual people. Some portion of Political Science
nonetheless operates in an environment where a perspective’s value or validity is
adjudicated by its ability to sound more correct than any of its rival explanations of
“reality”. There is no value but apparent correctness, nevermind the possibility that
“correctness” and exclusion and violence might very well go hand in hand, nevermind the
possibility that the particular standard of “correctness” in question might privilege some
people more than others, and nevermind the possibility that even a more flaccid breadth
of perspective might be valuable in a context where there is a huge difference between

20: 1, pp39-51.) International Political Economy [with Keohane] approach to international cooperation is
an often implicit argument that was is best avoided by maintaining economic ties among governments
and economies, the possibility of inherent tensions and implied violence of that sort of global capital
system notwithstanding. Jennifer Mitzen’s (“Ontological Security in World Politics; State Identity and
exploration of an idea of ontological security as a means by which countries seek to solidify and
regularize their notions of themselves by establishing patterns of interaction with one another is a rather
more explicit way of saying that part of what might cause violence is a conversation about the
unavoidability of violence. Ann Tickner (Tickner, Ann. Gender in International Relations. New York:
Columbia University Press, 1992.) has argued even more pointedly about how the categories and
language with which a some people discuss politics and frames its “problems” are so throughout
gendered that sometimes even participating in the conversation risks aggravating problems of exclusion.
being *mostly* correct and *actually* correct. The idea that validity is shown in withstanding falsification is Science, for many people. To that extent, all this is just a partial critique, on empirical terms, of Social Science, and an outlay of some of the risks to politics posed by studying it with too much Science.

This can be especially true of “textual” political science, and its most “theoretical” sub-genre International Relations (IR), where the canon is built on three pillars – Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism – that are contested only insofar as they disagree about whose account of the world best complies with a historical reality of wars, who caused them, and, (when forced to), how to win the next one. The penchant for being “right” is similarly present in the Public Opinion research of the American Politics sub-discipline, where debates seem often to revolve around questions about how people formulate and act on knowledge, awareness, and opinions. The goal, it appears, is to best explain how public sentiments, dispositions, and voting patterns have shifted and evolved historically, in hopes of knowing where it might go next.

None of these are not meant (to reiterate) to be holistic accounts of any of these sub-disciplines, and not even of their “mainstreams.” My own location is to some extent

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34 To cite another example, the Area Studies endeavors of Comparative Politics, though in a rather different fashion, likewise seem often to concern themselves with documenting the differences that bind different political systems, investing in broader appreciations of the cultural and historical factors that lend context to the specificities and peculiarities of particular political institutions, cultures, practices, ideologies, etc.
just in keeping with discourses of self-critique already extant within political science.\(^{35}\)

My desire is to secure at least a minimal recognition that an empirically-oriented concern with “valid” correspondences to “the truth” and “reality” is important but perhaps insufficient. Early twentieth-Century German Sociologist Max Weber’s pair of vocation essays spoke directly to this point.\(^{36}\) His “Politics as Vocation” is an argument that politics is necessarily an endeavor of judgment and his “Science as Vocation” an argument that science is an endeavor of specification and description. Science for Weber can only ever “clarify” the parameters and context of a decision but decision, at the heart of politics, cannot be made without judgment. Science cannot do politics correctly any more than politics can do science; neither can do as much without the other. Mid-twentieth century North American political theorist Sheldon Wolin seized on Weber’s argument with his “Political Theory as Vocation” essay, arguing that the encroachment of “Methodism” (the unthinking and blinding commitment to methods rather than content) on Political Science as an obsession with behaviorism and math were leading to a depoliticization of the study of politics, and an inability of its practitioners to engage with the differences that underlay the actuality of what they ostensibly were studying.\(^{37}\)

The consistency of a cross-cutting desire to be right about war, about The Public, and about difference is troubling. The danger of an all-encompassing pursuit of verifiable, irrefutable (or at least unrefuted) claims of reality may not be confined to

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insufficiency and unstated need, in keeping with Weber and Wolin, to be addended with questions of why, how, and for whom. My own critique is motivated more indeed, by the potential (likelihood) that a Science of politics concerned primarily to be correct does not just *obviate* questions of judgment and value as if those questions just need to be raised by someone who remembers to ask them. Worse than seeming to obviate, there is a risk that certain mode of Science *precludes* questions of who might be getting hurt by either the asking or answer of their questions about “reality” in the course of what self-proclaiming Scientists might call their more important “real” work.

It is important to remember here, too, that *textual* political science is only part of the Discipline, and that the *practical* Political Science, of departments, faculty conversations, classrooms, and professionalization strategies, are comparably integral components. One of the ways the depoliticizing valuation of “correctness” is reproduced, as much as it may be located in textual political science, is through its propagation by less-formally-set discourses and practices, where so much of the conversation proceeds through explicitly competitive forms of conversation where the only available justification, often, for a claim about the world is whether it “better explains” something than a text or theory “we” already have, and what it give us that is “new”. Between any two accounts that appear even comparably correct, the more familiar one is likely to have an edge in conversations where why, to whom, and to whose sensibility does this even count as correct don’t seem to matter.

This anxiety concerning others’ potentially unquestioned pursuit of what appears to them as “the truth” is not isolated to the Social Scientific interest in the explicit
verification, repeatability, and validity of what it says about the world. The approach may be partially exemplified by certain veins of Political Science willing to opt out of conversations about whose values and sensibilities get acknowledged and included in defining what counts as correct. It also appears in the sort of anthropological-folkloric work that seems satisfied merely to document the realities its participants observe and experience. This threatens to commit a parallel omission in its implicit valuing of the truth of its subject-matter. Recounting the history and practice of bluegrass music, a collection of folktales, or an account of building construction methods, for example, produce assemblies of facts that together manifest implicit claims of their own relevance. This is of course not categorically true of Folklore any more than of Political Science. The risk is cognate to the one with Political Science, however; there is in both instances an implication that one might not have to ask and discuss why a particular subject matter matters because it is already constructed as something we “know” to be valuable. The problem is that, ultimately, we may mean ultimately that we have little if any chance to consider and contest the possibility that we are silencing and ignoring other things that might conceivably be just as (if not more) important. Like, to wit, the possibility that talking at all about a small community somewhere far away is itself an act of privileged access to research, education, literacy, and wealth. Or that, depending on audience, a conversation about a group of Others can become a signal of homogeneity among an implicit “we” among whom (in the absence of conscientious explanation) concerns about disparities of power and social justice get ignored and silenced. How is a 20-year-old sitting in a central Ohio college classroom supposed to know what the political exclusion
of Kurds or Tuareg or Roma has to do with the fact they can’t pay their tuition of that they’ve become estranged from their family because they came out, unless someone helps them learn? What, after all, can a person with the incomplete mix of privileges and challenges we all carry say to a story about the structural similarities among Russian Fairy Tales or the history of the signing of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights without some opportunity to understand how at least someone (and hopefully, that someone is the scholar, their teacher, the person with the privilege and obligation to explain) thinks it matters?

It is true that the label of “discipline,” for something like Political Science or Folklore, signifies a more or less acceptedly broad agreement on the boundaries and substance of what count as legitimate points of inquiry and methods for their assessment. Against that backdrop, the issue of why an audience ought to care (and who that audience is) is not as much unanswered as it is specific and confined to and within the Discipline.38 There are compelling reasons (of internal transparency and consistent, legible loci as bases for reliable knowledge production) why disciplines might tend to function on a footing of mutually understood, accepted, and itinerantly uncontested parameters of relevance and method. The better way to contextualize my own argument, then, in light of this, is to say that I hope to respond to the risk attendant to disciplinary silence on the question of relevance, no matter how functional or necessary it might be. My wish has been to create a text that self-consciously asks why its own subject matter matters, and

38 Thomas Kuhn. (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 3d Ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.) used the term incommensurability to refer to the relationships among different “paradigms,” in the form of the inapplicability of the verification standards and structures of knowledge of different paradigms to one another.
hoping (naively, perhaps) to inhabit and perform some manner of a critique of depoliticization at the same time I articulate one on paper.

What may here be evident to some is that writing about bluegrass is somewhat the easy way out. The discipline of Folklore already generally presumes that “genres” such as bluegrass warrant scholarly attention, that they already matter. It is somewhat easier to question whether and how a thing matters when not having simultaneously to insist, from the ground up, that it does. This is a privilege I must acknowledge, just as I am obligated also to acknowledge the institutional and cultural privilege that allows me as a scholar to be aware and interested in the first place. As the North American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has pointed out on a similar issue, scholars are elites by definition, unavoidably, and while we share an obligation to recognize that privilege we have a concomitant obligation to employ the privilege and elite status in narrating the critiques of social injustice they enable us to produce.39

This significant matter of whom I think I am addressing with privileged narration of critique is a particularly important part of my argument to make explicit since my reasons for addressing this particular audience are so centered on my concerns that they ignore precisely these issues. I am in many ways writing both about and to a particular kind of academic person and can’t very well commit this omission in the service of trying to critique someone else for having done the same. The concern about others’ readiness to remain mostly silent on important questions is not limited to a desire to correct them, with an insistence that it would be better practice to more fully explicate otherwise-tacit

notions of why they bother to think, argue, speak, and write at all. Most IR scholars want to understand war as a means to prevent it; Public Opinion researchers want to identify ways to make “democracy” better; Comparativists, Anthropologists, and Folklorists want to promote understanding and recognition by illustrating how different people and groups can be from one another. I have no doubt that most scholars feel implicitly that their work is both relevant and socially good. My hope is that it might all become a bit less implicit, so that issues of whether any of it is actually socially good, bad, or relevant might be assessed and contested more accessibly. It is not the substance but its implicitness that is the depoliticization that is dangerous.

The import of addressing questions of relevance and interest is that they are important not as matters of fact but as subject, always, to questions. Questions of why, how, and to whom anything “matters” are significant of deeper differences and divergences of sensibility about how the worlds works and how it should be managed and governed. Recognizing these questions of importance and relevance is a way to acknowledge sometimes hidden yet always present political contestations, of whose understandings and accounts of the worlds will count as legitimate. Treating matters of relevance and importance as either self-evident or, at best, factually answerable “questions” mostly misses the point of trying to understand how the world works. At worst, it serves to maintain and reproduce the exclusion and silencing of non-normative sensibilities by almost-perpetually reinstating as merely “correct” what is in fact a culturally specific and particular notion of what matters for some people, masquerading instead as mattering for “everyone”.

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The reason I want to be a bit more obtusely diligent in explicating my sense of whom I am addressing in these essays is that this clarification serves more than just to contextualize the language and reference with which my argument is constructed and articulated. This audience clarification extends also, I hope, to an explication of how the risks I see in my audience’s practices (academic, intellectual, and ideological) are themselves an important part of my subject matter. I want to be extra clear about the question of whom I am addressing (and how and why), as something to be openly contested and not definitively answered, because how and why my argument might matter is not ancillary to what I “really” want to say but is instead, in many ways, very much at the center of the politics and political practices I want to explore by entering a conversation about bluegrass.

Much of the empirical content in this work, the observations and conversations I report here, came from my time, in 2011, attending all of the bluegrass and maybe-bluegrass-related festivals (it is sometimes difficult to know in advance, and ultimately useful for context) in Central Ohio. This includes the Central Ohio Folk Festival, Nelsonville Music Festival, the Central Ohio Bluegrass Association Annual Bluegrass Festival, Musicians Against Childhood Cancer Bluegrass Festival, and the Mohican

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40 Columbus, Batelle-Darby Metro Park, OH May 7-8, 2011.
41 Nelsonville, OH (Robbins Crossing / Hocking College Campus) May 13-5, 2011.
42 Croton, OH (Hartford Fairgrounds) July 7-10, 2011.
Bluegrass Festival. I also spent a certain amount of time at other sorts of performances, at farmers’ markets, concerts, and bars, most notably Byrne’s Pub and Woodland’s Tavern (both in Columbus, OH). (In addition to those performances, and in some sense primarily for my own contextualization, I spent rather large amounts of additional time hearing the Bluegrass Ramble, an every Saturday and Sunday evening all-bluegrass show on WOSU radio.)

Throughout, my concern was to talk to people, initially about how they were making sense of the music and why they were there, though I quickly learned that letting my “respondents” steer our conversations made them last a great deal longer and gave me a much better feel for what sorts of people “do” bluegrass. Which is to say, hearing about the people doing the bluegrass at least as much as about what it was they were doing, an artificial distinction indeed, was nonetheless as useful starting point.

As productive as that approach proved – to invest extra time hearing about dairy farming, motorcycles, industrial design, or whatever, and let the relevances of bluegrass bubble up as sporadically as necessary – it also posed another challenge. I was comfortable, in some sense, to do a project about the importance of listening by listening. For better or worse, I have also had to find ways to communicate something to people who weren’t there and/or who don’t “know” what I’ve had the privilege to experience.

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44 Mohican Wilderness, Glenmont, OH. September 16-7, 2011.
45 1248 W 3rd Ave, Columbus, OH 43212
46 1200 W 3rd Ave, Columbus, OH 43212
47 This is a methodological conceit; subjectivity, practices, experiences, and knowledge are each bound up with another, and the distinctions among them are always contingent, empirically and conceptually.
and learn. This of course isn’t the least bit new for a person doing ethnographic fieldwork (which is to say, several entire disciplines and huge swaths of others).

The uncertainty of how to express the ideas with which I came away from fieldwork stemmed from my inevitable and necessary ambivalence about needing to narrate the politics of uncertainty and nonsensicality I experienced as if I myself were somehow not uncertain, which I knew not to be the case. What I also knew to be the case was that I, in availing myself of the privileged status of academic, had obligated myself to perform the critique of political problems I had prepared myself to perform. There are of course great and deeply rooted traditions of how to deal with this dilemma of ethnography. Anthropologists, Cultural and Media Studies scholars and Folklorists have for a long time engaged with what some have called a “Crisis of Representation,” meant to capture the weight of decisions about how professional scholars are supposed to be speaking about and often on behalf of the people they were studying. The problem is that the scholarly “work” threatens harm to the people being studied by producing reductive and condescending concepts of them, which nonetheless gain currency among audiences of the ethnographic texts and propagate through various other intellectual, economic, governmental and cultural channels into modes of broader cultural condescension and harm. In its most idealized form, ethnographers trying to produce knowledge about different parts of the world for audiences otherwise unable to learn

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48 It is an experience seemingly not unlike having made a decision to try to leave Plato’s cave that later proves both unfulfillable and irreversible.  
49 A misnomer, perhaps, insofar as this notion of “crisis” is constructed as an exception to some state of resolved and unproblematic representation, while the ethical complexity of representation is not an exception to anything other than that so few were paying attention to the fact that there is no “normal” or apolitical representation.
about those other paces find themselves in the position of sole narrator, the only people capable of saying anything about the subject, and thus the people with tremendous power to dictate what everyone else “knows” about those places and peoples. This is a simplistic articulation better suited to a world where both the *sine qua non* and common practice of academic fieldwork was the researcher’s investment of multiple years in places remote enough that the world might not otherwise know anything about them. More generally though, there is still danger borne by a system where the academic is a half-willing choke point between on-the-ground complexities and the simplified, interpreted truths audiences might soon, with their aura of scholarly authority, count as fact.

Even around the turn to the twentieth century, the now canonical American Anthropologist Franz Boas was critiquing the way so much of his discipline seemed intent to insinuate its own imperialistic cultural-political snobbery into arguments about how the differences it was illustrating were evidence of racial hierarchies. Boas critiqued people for measuring skulls and assessing body hair (and other physical traits) as a means of reducing differences among peoples to mere biology (and ignoring what we now perhaps too easily call “culture”) and implying as a result that inequalities and maldistributions of wealth were justified by the seemingly natural physical/biological hierarchies.  

50 While the rest of Boas’s thinking is not, from the perspective of another

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Fifty Franz Boas. *The Mind of Primitive Man*. New York: Macmillan, 1938 [1911]. Boas, interestingly enough, refuted the physicalism on its own terms, merely showing various ostensibly civilized “nations” as having smaller skulls, hairier bodies, or whatever, than what had been imagined to be inferior peoples, thus undoing those traits ability to “explain” anything. He then, of course, proceeded with his logical and conceptual arguments.
hundred-plus years, without its problems, he is an important historical example of the struggle to overcome earlier notions of Other people as mere biological entities, as distinguished from the civilized and cultured. The use of culture as a mode by which scholars later spoke of different places and people in hierarchies of sophistication and advancement, though, was in some ways perhaps just as damaging as the biological/racial anthropology it might have superseded.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work in the third quarter of the twentieth century became a critique of that use of cultural hierarchy-making with arguments about the structures and connectedness with which those Other cultural systems could be shown to be as complex and sophisticated as any of the more “modernized” peoples. The Levi-Straussian structuralism was a way of pointing to connections in the ways groups seemed to order themselves, the way their stories were told, the ways their spaces were arranged (and other things), all of which could be understood as a method for distilling some sort of inner truth or reality. The American Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in the 1960s and 1970s, would later argue that ethnographers (“social scientists”, he actually said) were involved not just in describing other people but in interpreting them, suggesting that less thoughtful fieldworkers focused too much on describing “structures” were doing a disservice to the people they were studying by pretending they, as experts, knew the people’s truths better than the

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people themselves did. Geertz pointed directly to the role of the ethnographer as a position of unstable power, arguing that much of the doing of work about other people was in its writing, and the making rather than just the telling of sensible narratives.

Geertz’s argument about the need to recognize the role of writing as a mode of representation was joined later in the same decade by the Palestinian-born North American literary scholar Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, a longer-view historical argument about the material, concrete effects of precisely that sort of academic writing and knowledge production when left in less-responsible hands. Said’s claim was that a well-established and highly-regarded academic discipline dedicated to the production of knowledge about a particular region of the world had by its accumulation of expertise actually reshaped that area of the world. Said’s critique of Orientalism was that the institutional form of the Academy, in its bourgeois political-economic context, rendered a consequentially indelible reshaping of the region of which it purported merely to facilitate the study. The (British) Academy’s performance (and monopolization) of knowledge about “the Orient,” though not through scholarly malice, was so thorough that the actual voices, representations, and people actually existing in the places were crowded out in questions of economic and political practice, in deference to the presumptively more advanced knowledge of the Western scholars. As the people and leaders from those subject places were able to circulate throughout institutions inflected with the preferential expertise of the Orientalists, the actual self-conceptions in those


places began to align more and more closely with the “western” understandings of them. Those Western Orientalist notions were of little more than a historically valuable “culture” of some economic import, rather than the complex and contradictory places they might have been had the Orientalists not monopolized, consolidated, and redistributed their knowledge of themselves.

The North American Anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus were by the 1980s talking more explicitly not just about the necessity of anthropological interpretation but about the fact that the stakes were much higher than they might to less thoughtful ears have sounded in Geertz’s plea for recognizing that “social science” was in some ways “made up.” If for Geertz the concern was to recognize the role of the scholar in making sense of what they were studying, for Clifford and Marcus the concern was two-fold: they wanted to acknowledge that the scholars themselves were immersed in political contexts shaping their own sensibilities and interests, and they also wanted to acknowledge that what scholars were writing, even about ostensibly lower-stakes cultural patterns, would have significant political effects, and quite possibly deleterious ones.

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55 Geertz’s phrasing is to construct ethnographic writing as a genuine fiction, drawing from fictio, meaning “made.” Clifford’s reference is to focus on the “text making and rhetoric” of ethnographic writing, highlighting “the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts… Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned,’ the principal burden of the word’s Latin root, fingere. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real,” explaining ethnography as an endeavor to tell only partial truths, as a way to communicate the self-conscious partiality of the writer. James Clifford and George Marcus. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, pp2,6.

56 The political-economic contexts of the academic that got attention in Clifford and Marcus have important parallels, in what others have identified as problems of commodification and from a certain perspective, theft, of “cultural production” in cases like John and Alan Lomax’s, Paul Simon’s, or Herbie Hancock’s use of ‘folk’ music performers, or the British Museum’s, Smithsonian’s, or various Land Grant Universities’ collections (and, perhaps, legalistic hoarding) of cultural objects.
None of this history of potential and actual scholarly harm undoes what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has said about what might be rephrased as the scholarly obligation to narrate critique that comes from its position of elite privilege. The narrative of historical scholarly practice is an important lesson, though, where questions of sexual, regional, ethnic, racial, class, ideological, and any of the other identity constellations of contemporary scholarly interest are perhaps not so immune to implicit biologist, cultural snobbery, or uninvited, reductive or arrogant advocacy as would be hoped. Above all else, it is a reminder of the stakes involved in scholarship and the need always to remember that writing and narration (which is to say, representation) are never so much placid description as engaged and fraughtly political.

My own tortuous relationship with the idea of myself as narrator was already present, if in a more nascent form, when I first appeared at a bluegrass festival under the guise of “researcher”. I had satisfied the Ohio State University Institutional Review Board’s need to verify, as well as they could, my trustworthiness to act ethically toward the “human subjects” with whom I wanted to talk while researching under their auspices. That navigation had given me reason to produce a pre-emptive articulation, before venturing off campus and into “the field,” of why bluegrass mattered, why I needed to study it, and why studying it meant I needed to talk to people that weren’t my colleagues and students.

My contemporary understanding of what bluegrass was and how it might matter grew out of two rather distinct sets of experiences. One of these sets of experiences was what might seem to some to be the obvious one, of the reading, discussions, seminars,
and writing I had done as a graduate student. I also, though, already had a more cursory personal historical experience with bluegrass, the people who identified with it, and with what other people seemed to think of the people who identified with it. The important lesson (which I hope I’ve learned) is that with a concept of politics as a semi-nonsensical contestation over what can be thought to matter, there is an important parallel between two of my unrelated-seeming presumptions: that notions of authenticity in a cultural form like bluegrass were bad, and that people’s hostility to hearing, learning, or experiencing new things in their orientation toward each other (i.e., in “conservatism” in “politics”) was a bad thing. My uncritical contempt for both authenticity and conservatism is an important parallel because the underlying themes of both presumptions was my failure, in each case, to recognize someone else’s orientation to the world as a sensible-for-them political understanding. I failed in both cases, and for practically the same reason, to recognize narratives behind phenomena I thought (wrongly) that I understood. That, in some kernel of a sense, was the generative relationship for me between bluegrass and politics.

My feeling during my initial fieldwork was something along the lines of bluegrass being a realm of music that could sometimes seem sanctimoniously simple but could, in better hands, be an exciting experience of rhythms and sounds that were all the more impressive because they came from the same instruments and the same sorts of collections of people that sounded so frankly plain all the other times. It was a sound that felt a bit banally “authentic,” with all the overtones born by that label, of an unchanging history and “real” modes of production enacted by the right sorts of people. I can say
more in retrospect about how so much of that sound of authenticity was so deeply embedded with those notions of historical unchangingness and specially authorized cultural producers. Given the opportunity, I would like to think I would have realized that a big part of the answer to what makes a person seem authentically Appalachian, Southern, or (maybe depending on who’s asking) American is that they enjoy a particular sound, of fast banjos, rhythmic mandolins, screechy fiddles, and good-ol’-god-loving folk. A big part of what goes into a lot of people’s sense of the value ascribed bluegrass is an understanding, implicitly or explicitly, that its sounds come down unchanged from authoritative historic antecedents and are made and reproduced by particularly (competently, talentedly) authorized performers.\textsuperscript{57} You can’t locate the authenticity without the sound any more easily than you can find the- this - sound without the authenticity.

At some points it becomes nonsensical to talk about a sound ‘of’ authenticity, as if the idea of authenticity were the noun and its sound merely its modifier. I should perhaps have known better then\textsuperscript{58}, but can at least say now that there are times – and usually the really important ones – when it makes as little sense to speak of authenticity without asking about its sounds as it does to speak of specific sounds without posing questions about the subtexts of what we call authenticity that comprise the standard

\textsuperscript{57} Several people recycled the narrative for me of bluegrass’s Scots-Irish heritage, collapsing of people and the sounds they ‘made’
\textsuperscript{58} Music as rhythmic pattern with differentiation against mere sound as constituted in cultural particularity; all music differentiated against always pre-existing other sounds, per B. Shank.
against which mere noise can be differentiated into a particularly identifiable or meaningful sort of (in this case, bluegrass) sound.  

At the time, rather, I was a bit stuck inside my implicit image of “bluegrass people” as a range from old- and rural-identified people consuming the experience of reliving what (in my mind) was somehow their own better past years, to younger and more politically-, culturally-, and socially-attuned people who, it seemed to me, must have thought and learned enough about the world to now be appreciating this otherwise quaint artifact. It may not have occurred to me at the time that I myself, having enjoyed some of the music and spent some time at festivals and performances, should have been somewhere on that latter spectrum. Having been taken to an annual bluegrass festival for much of my childhood, sat at a few bars to hear bluegrass, bought a few records and CDs, and once wanted to learn to play the mandolin (or fiddle – I don’t remember), I had even declared myself, in moments of musical identification, a bluegrass person. I can at least say from my present vantage that I would probably have felt somewhat defensive in light of the implicit “knowledge” that most “other” people thought of bluegrass folk as a mix of backward rednecks, pretentious folk-revival hippies, and authenticity-seeking hipsters. It was against this, my perception of their perception of a group of which I was a part,


60 It seems over-determined that as a 17-year-old from a desolate Rockwellian backwater of a social panopticon, escaping to the idea of an American mega-city and seizing the opportunity to re-articulate oneself would fall back on an implicit reality of being a heterosexual lower-consumer-class white semi-rural person with the ability nonetheless to speak somewhat credibly of the “East Coast” and all of the sophisticatedly urbane aura of tradition and cultural awareness that, with the idea of Los Angeles as its foil, connoted.
that I would have been inclined to say (to no one in particular) that it’s more complicated than that. That not everyone, surely, is just an old racist or an inauthentic snob, that even if most of them are, there’s still a tiny bit of room for good - and it was my job to find, understand, articulate, and advocate for that good. To put that another way, my initial sense of bluegrass people was that they were a mix of people consuming a sad (to me) nostalgia, which I knew and could understand, and people consuming some sort of intellectually-rooted culture that might be politically or socially good in what it represented, which I didn’t understand and found perhaps a bit off-putting, though still intriguing and affective. They were either people I thought I understood and of whose outlook I did not approve, or they were people whose apparent disposition I found compelling and about which I declared myself ignorant yet intrigued.

I should at the time have seen the problematic homology that was evident in my earlier thinking, where the binarism joining what I thought I knew and what I thought I didn’t understand mapped so neatly onto the binarism of what I was calling “conservatively” bad and what I was willing to allow the possibility of being “good.” The conflation of the feeling of knowledge with a readiness to proclaim ethical judgment is a sensible seeming approach, in the context of 21st Century social scientific critique, to what may in the field look like aversions to learning or experiencing new things.

Indeed, the idea of a dominant Western Political Theory is in some sense a category of texts bound by this shared trait of presuming to know what it is that good politics is fighting. This is not a universal textual claim; it is a specific claim about what can seem sensible in particular, contextualized readings. Much if not all of these texts
can be understood, from a certain vantage, as addressing questions of how politics work and how to improve processes of making the most of those ‘realities’. The problem, in all this, is that the world is not necessarily a ‘reality’ to be described and managed. It is helpful, then, to try to understand how important something like Political Theory can be (depending on one’s role) in promulgating and reproducing the sense that, in effect, politics knows what it is fighting.

Plato, in his Republic, seems to be endeavoring to ask the question (via his Socrates character) of how best to secure justice through political institutions, with the implication that it was government that was needed to secure the possibility of justice. The insinuation of Plato’s argument is that injustice is the ill to which politics and government are remedies, implying in turn that politics at least can determine what injustice is, if it is not already known. Aristotle, only a generation later, argued even more explicitly in The Politics that the definition of good politics was practice centered in knowledge of how the world worked, which in inverse was a way of saying that good politics knew what it was fighting. Aristotle rooted his argument about politics in much broader questions about the physical and natural worlds, claiming still more concretely to know precisely what the violations of nature were that good politics were supposed to avoid.

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61 This betrays the fact of the (at least, “this”) canon’s definition being somewhat tautological, only counting as a part of political theory what seems to count as political theory.
Much later, the 17th-century English political operative and political writer Thomas Hobbes argued in his *Leviathan* that persons otherwise naturally free and individualized would in society without government suffer inevitable harm from one another’s mutual fear- and insecurity-driven preemptive attacks.\(^{64}\) Hobbes’s argument was that all people would by their nature become jealously aggressive and suffer from others doing the same, without the deterrence of a government to whom they each had ceded much of their ability for independent action. Government was necessary and legitimate insofar as it was recognized to be the key check on an otherwise inescapably universal penchant for anti-social behavior. Somewhat later, John Locke (also English) explored the premise of politics in the context of logically preexisting natural individual freedom similar to what had informed Hobbes’s critique.\(^{65}\) Locke substantiated that claim of freedom by arguing empirically about how the natural “property” that was one’s own physical body, coupled with one’s ability to sustain and reproduce themself (with labor) were the core components of that “liberty”. Government, rather than the outgrowth of a Hobbesian political bargain *between people* to disarm, was for Locke a necessary part of a political process where the bargains are *between people and government* in the interest of protecting property and labor. The political institutions are irreplaceable means by which to avoid the injustice-in-chaos that would likely if not certainly emerge in their absence.


Moving away from the justification and necessity of government generally, the so-called American “founders” Alexander Hamilton and James Madison argued in the late eighteenth century that politics in a society of any scale required particularly suited forms, different from what may have been preferable in historically smaller or simpler “political” situations. Larger-scale politics, they argued, would tend toward corruption along lines of pre-existing societal wealth and power disparities – which is to say, “democracy” would not simply just “work” to secure justice or security. Hamilton’s and Madison’s *Federalist* is an argument for establishing strong centralized political institutions rather than numerous diffuse ones (a federal government at least as, if not more, powerful than state governments) and structuring those institutions in ways that enable them to balance one another. Instead of a diffusion of government that would be susceptible to cooption by particular interests (if for no other reason than because it is easier to establish a majority in a smaller electorate than in a larger one), the *Federalist* was a hope for a more centralized, transparently coherent set of institutions that could moderate themselves rather than hope naively that by being “closer to the people” they were simply somehow “more democratic”. Hamilton and Madison center their arguments on the understanding that the stability of government was itself valuable, as much to better secure the country and buttress its economy as to prevent more ephemeral possibilities of injustices and personal freedoms. Though for Madison and Hamilton

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67 Of course, this was part of the argument, at the time and subsequently, where the *Federalist’s* pleas for institutional self-control and its attending focus is not on people but institutions was captured by a prevalent fear that the lack of regard for individual experience, institutional consolidation
the political problem may have shifted somewhat away from questions of government’s necessity toward its most efficacious structure, they remained quite certain of the rightful direction of that efficacy. Madison and Hamilton were confident that the political reality of the newly revolutionized United States would, without centralized institutions, devolve into weakened factiousness and deprive locally particular interests of their rightful acknowledgment and representation.

It was mid-way through the following (nineteenth) century that the British philosopher-parliamentarian John Stuart Mill argued, somewhat against the government of institutions and representation articulated by the Federalists, that government ought to be working to maximize its citizens’ individual liberties to the point where everyone had as much personal liberty as conceivably possible without infringing on anyone else’s.\(^{68}\) Mill’s fear (or acknowledgment, perhaps) was that a government insufficiently invested in maximizing personal freedoms – like being distracted in an effort to maximize some notion of collective well-being – might allow the entirety of society to suffer. That broader social detriment would come as the effect of compromised free engagement of ideas and speech, which would in its wake lead to the entrenchment of commonsense and vernacular ideas of how the world works, a loss of society’s ability to correct false notions and reinvigorate correct ones through their defense (the problem of conceptual neglect of Christianity, he said) and ultimately a damaging denial to society of the right, which Mill thought fundamental, to be evermore correct in its embrace of ideas and its

understanding of the world. For Mill, the collective good had to accommodate individual freedoms, the former served through the latter’s facilitation of sustaining a capacity for advancing knowledge.

Somewhat over a century later, American philosopher and political theorist John Rawls was respecifying the question yet again, away from the social value of embracing ideas and learning and onto the more precise notion of social value of understanding and acknowledging other people. Rawls’s argument was that in addition to giving everyone equal rights, government also had a sort of obligation to attempt to be substantively inclusive by construing those rights equitably, in actual policy-making and governance, for other people with whose experiences and sensibilities governing elites could at least try to imagine an ability to empathize. The sense of political reality in Rawls is one where a ruling elite might likely struggle to apply “rights” in genuinely equitable fashion, no matter how formally well articulated the rights or how well-intending the elites, without some way to include more experiences and identities in the deliberations about governance.

These are all drastically abbreviated readings of these works, and in some sense perhaps, in some cases, beside the points of their core arguments. Plato’s presumption of identifiable and achievable justice, Aristotle’s counterpart about human nature, Hobbes’s and Locke’s about the latent politics of social life, Hamilton’s and Madison’s, and also Mill’s thoughts about the relevance of personal liberties, and Rawls’s about elites and inclusion are all somewhat plausibly available understandings for their readers,

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nonetheless. One of the themes that binds these texts, and particularly in their post hoc assembly a unifiable category of “political theory,” is that they can each be understood to be advocating for a particular understanding of what politics is and how to deal with it. In fairness, each of them should be understood as having deep if particular experience with the concepts and practice of their subject matter, which is far different from having made up their definitions of politics from scratch. The reality of this history of political thought, however, is (here) somewhat less important than ways it can be read, and it can be quite easy in each instance (whether or not it is a correct reading) to identify strong connections between the problems being avoided or fought and the authors’ surety and certainty about the political dynamics giving rise to those problems. What is centrally important here is that even when knowledge of the problem being fought might appear in texts to be more an assumption than the outcome of serious attention, it is dangerous to neglect that need for serious contextual attention, and to forget the necessary attempt to understand why a the thing like conservatism exists – to understand it, even while trying to counter it - and why it seems like a thing warranting countering.

Or, to restate this: the risk of bringing Plato or Locke or Rawls (or anyone, really) into a bluegrass festival is the danger of unthinkingly reproducing the hierarchy of scholarly expertise and employing jargon-laced notions of what is good and bad, and of what is correct and false, with the use and reification of inapplicable categories. There is a definite and concrete risk of misrecognizing the political experience of other people that comes from insufficient attention to these questions, which are (once again, in another form) issues of what matters, why, and how.
The concern that I would now raise, about that sort of thinking, is not that conflating “I don’t know” with “this is good” is somehow faulty logic. I still in some sense think “I don’t know” is the necessary basis for whatever it is that would feel, seem, or be good. The concern, rather, is that it could be—and, frankly, was—easy to assume implicitly that “I understand how that works” was a prelude to and signifier of condemnation. Thinking only about the supposed political goodness what I “knew” I did not understand allowed me to forget to realize that I did not, in fact, either know or understand the logic of what I had been willing to condemn. The conservatism and exclusory tendency I wanted to condemn was part of the everything that I did not understand, or at least toward which I should have acted as if I lacked understanding, and which I most certainly should not have been condemning.

This inattention to a conservatism I presumed unthinkingly to understand in favor of a notion of progressivism I consciously imagined myself unable to understand, was also a problem of categories and conceptual categorization. It was easy to presume that both “conservative” and “progressive” meant something concrete and definite, at least in their potential, as things I’d know when I saw them. It is comparatively unproductive, though, to try to think about recognition and accessibility through a conceptualization of politics that is comprised primarily of a spectrum of “Conservative” (as an aversion or inability to listen for new knowledge, in whatever form) and “Progressive” (or whatever

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70 Particularly in light of the obligations that emerge from histories of anthropological politics and the difficulties of representation evident there, it is surely prudent to fear that the presumption that I do know something about another person might be tantamount to the sort of Decision in name of ‘democracy’ that worried Schmitt and Mouffe because it closed off that other person’s rightful access to the conversation about what might be recognized as good.
else it was that was supposed to be “not conservative”). Not thinking enough about that conservatism allowed me to miss this point, but when I thought the contest was between hippies and rednecks I assumed (wrongly) that those two points of political orientation were what mattered.\textsuperscript{71} I worried too much about which side of that contest could be made to win, while a more fruitful question would have been how important issues of recognition and access could more reliably become subjects of that political process. For issues of who was being excluded, who was getting marginalized, and whom privileged, it is surely better to think more about who can’t get into the process than about who is “winning” it.

My hope to explore alternatives to a conservatism I wrongly presumed to know needed fighting was almost necessarily going to be misplaced. I should, with a more sensitive reading of Rancière, have been focused more on how my actual concerns, about accessibility and recognition. I should have been focusing on how accessibility and recognition had been so stultifying confined in their rarity by this unproductive “contest” between conservatives and liberals, traditionalists, and progressives, democrats and republicans, etc. Presuming Conservatism to be a thing needing fighting was a political act not because “Conservatism” is a political thing but because treating it as a thing rather than a social phenomenon was an act of putting its definition outside the realm of contestation, misunderstanding, and contention. Pretending it is a self-evident thing that is not negotiable but just “is” takes it away from politics; to presume to know it is to depoliticize it. It is not the “polities” of how people vote and how they would run the

\textsuperscript{71} Chris Willman. \textit{Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music.}
country if they could but a politics of depoliticization, the politics of fighting over and about definitions of what might be changeable, that matters.

To try to act productively with the “politics” of policy and governing on its own terms, and to accept its parameters of conservative and progressive (or whatever) is almost inevitably to doom oneself to exacerbating inaccessibility because this vernacular “politics” of who-votes-how works by ending conversations about who belongs in the conversations as if that had all been settled (it is “everyone” after all, actuality notwithstanding).72 To enter the politics of governance and policy on the basis of one of its core conceits – that what matters is universal inclusion, that this is already universally agreed, and that we just argue about how to get there - is to preemptively accept the fate of inadequacy to the task of advocating for new recognitions and broader access. This is Chantal Mouffe’s brilliance, in her account of how practically impossible it can be to think and talk about the denial to certain people of their deserved dignity and recognition when their exclusion and denial are rationalized with reference to “their” ostensive rejection of what “we” have already accepted to define as “good”.73 The problem with believing in the possibility of a definitively inclusive and universally accessible governmental or policy arrangement is that people might think so strongly of themselves as the bearers of what is good that their notions of inclusion and access become justifications for, and compulsion of, exclusion and denial.74

74 This distinction between a vernacular “politics” of policy and governance and the notion used here, with debts to Arendt and Ranciere is not so rigid as it might seem. As Ian Shapiro (Democratic Justice. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.) and Lauren Berlant (*The Queen of America Goes to Washington*
Despite that, the logic of lending rigidity to concepts making them seem like categories is sensible within a particular kind of social scientific narrative, where a new researcher is asked to demonstrate that the thing they want to study (like bluegrass) matters, to more important things (like politics) as a precursive justification for studying whether the bluegrass does, in fact, matter to the politics. This is an important parallel between some politics and some veins of academe (and, perhaps, all genre): they are arguments about what matters that both occur within the bounds of presumptions of what already matters. It can seem like a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem, or at least a game of bluffing with claims of foreknowledge of what a person would know if only they had already been allowed to seek that knowledge, seemingly arranging things so that there is little hope other than that the “results” of the research might serve subsequently as justification and validation of the means by which they were obtained.

One of the most important lessons of the research training available from some places in higher education is that there are many ways in which writers can construct
narratives of compelling claims about the world and evidence to support them; one of the most important corollaries to that lesson is that what counts as “Compelling” depends a lot on who is being compelled. One of the safest forms of this narrative – and it is safe because when it works, it works quite well – is something along the lines of this: 1) the object about which many people can already be presumed to care exists, 2) object researcher wants to show “mattering” enters into relationship with thing about which others are presumed to care; 3) object about which others are presumed to care either changes, showing object of interest to matter, or doesn’t change, showing it not to matter. Politics preexists, bluegrass enters, and (hopefully) politics changes.

Such a narrative remains valid, so far as it goes, but it is limited in scope (though this form can certainly be particularized and specified a great deal, and to great effect) if for no reason other than because it invites an aura of fixity upon one’s sense not just of what the moving parts are but also of what routes they can travel. It was from that mold that it would have been easy to “know” what the music was, what “politics” was, and just watch to see them “interact”. It was that sort of argument that situated me to be saying to the IRB that I “expected” to find people experiencing their realities in more “open”[-minded] ways as a result of their experience with the music. I was at the time expecting I would use this evidence of people being changed by music (even as people were changing the music), as a “critique” of authenticity, and as the basis on which to stake a claim for the value of a musically-inflected and resultantlly more democratically equitable politics unadorned and unhindered by anachronistic ideas of authenticity.
It was the authenticity I wanted to undo because, as far as I could tell, I was going to find people too invested in a politics that lent too much authority to notions of what was “real”, bluegrass would be an example of something that could teach people how to see beyond their particular personal ideas of what was “real” and to take that authority back for themselves, and I wanted to advocate for more of whatever it was of which bluegrass was an example. Again, fair enough. But I would still have to presume in some sense to understand the conservatism that I defined by reference to that regressive deference to the authority of an imagined reality represented by ideas of unchanging historical, cultural, and narrative truths otherwise known as “authenticity”.

Fortuitously enough, authenticity didn’t seem to work that way once I started talking to people. It wasn’t anything I could just separate from the music I was listening to people hear, it had been sitting in as an uneasy metonym for the falsely depoliticized version of conservatism I was ignoring but needed instead to be interrogating, and my use of it was a central analytical category seemed sharply at odds with its predominant absence from actual narrative practice in bluegrass festivals. So I was, I think, completely wrong on at least 3 counts.

This presented me with yet another ethnographic challenge, in the form of how I needed to make use of my experience researching and talking with people, when I had begun many of those conversations under what I subsequently recognized were faulty pretenses. The challenge, in short, was to engage in my writing with an apparent

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75 The weight of normative connotation is large here, where of politics of labeling and the substantive gulf between “their” unthinking non-explicitly-normative words for historical and performative authoritativenss, and my unavoidably-condemnatory use of authenticity” is an important substantive distinction.
conservatism while I had been collecting evidence about what I had, at least at first, thought of as actual conservatism. This, ultimately, is where the idea of performative genre is most useful for articulating a political critique such as this, in circumventing and surpassing the capacity of a more rigidly empirical testing-and-verifying approach to engaging with politics. It would certainly have been possible to collect more broadly-ranging materials on the demographics of bluegrass in illustrating a wider context of the sorts of people performing, consuming, hearing, making and reproducing bluegrass. Surveys and questionnaires could have been distributed across different sizes of festivals and venues in different states and regions and types of places and spaces. That sort of scale could quite possibly become the basis on which to draw interesting inferences about how persons of different racial and gender identities, for example, make different uses of bluegrass, or of how the wealth or occupational status of a person maps affects how they engage with bluegrass. Those sorts of what a social scientist might call a “large-N” study would have currency in the sort of conversation where what counts as “valid” argumentation stems more or less directly from its ability to seem correct for the most people in the most contexts, and where the data are more verifiably concretized in the form of a single set of questions asked to everyone.

This project, however, is a critique of the political side-effects of precisely that sort of approach to the world. This project is a critique, in a specific sense, of the way social scientific standardization and aggregation in the name of validity and verification might tend to silence any one person’s experience as an outlier, irrelevant to and
implicitly wrong in the context of a broader homogeneous truth. This project is about a politics where what is most true for most people is beside the point of how important it should be for everyone to care about what sort of understanding, confusion, and knowledge any one person might be experiencing. This is not a plea for the radical disaggregation of politics into subjectivism; it is a claim that politics is an aggregation but that it is one that can be made more just by embracing the role of (among other things) nonsense and misunderstanding in how actual people experience it. From that perspective, the so-called outlier becomes the best example of what matters most centrally in politics.

There is good reason not to indulge much preliminary conceptual attention in the definition of this object, this genre of “bluegrass.” This is partly because bluegrass is to a certain extent a known entity, to certain readerships, in a sense similar to how odd it might seem to define other genres like “rock” or “classical”. There is a distinction, though, between the definitions of rock or classical (rhythmic guitar-and-drums music, and music orchestras play, as crude starting points, maybe) and specification (post-Zeppelin American blues rock, or pre-1917 Russians), the latter of which would be necessary. This distinction between familiar umbrella categories and the specification of constitutive elements points to the assumption that the audience in question likely already knows what the overarching category is and needs to know more specifically which part of it needs attending. Specifying that subcategory or subgenre, as a way of preemting

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likely questions about the constitutive elements of the genre itself, is a sign of the presumption that the genre itself is already known, in terms of its constitutive elements, which is the only way people would want or be able to make sense of the specification itself. As an illustrative counter-example, it is difficult merely to specify the use of 1980s Gangster Rap as an intervention in conversations about the genre of folk music without doing a great deal of work to redefine “Folk” to make its inclusion of gangster rap more plausible.

The fact that certain genres like bluegrass can pass with mere mention as self-evident labels (even if to a reader unsure of its content, its use as an ostensibly descriptive generic label argues that its content could be known) is a sign of the depoliticization this project is an attempt to illuminate and critique.

It would be possible simply to note (not incorrectly) that bluegrass is defined by the presence of particular instruments - almost always a banjo, sometimes (normatively: hopefully) a fiddle or three (but never a violin), usually a mandolin and a bass, often one or two guitars, a dobro (steel guitar), occasionally a harmonica, accordion, pedal steel, or drums, and (depending on the normative sensibility of the venue audience, hopefully) all of them “acoustic” (which is to say, none of them are plugged in to anything). It would also be possible to suggest that anything sounding like particular people or groups like Bill Monroe’s Bluegrass Boys, Flatt & Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, Seldom Scene, Doc Watson, Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver, the New Coon Creek Girls, Rhonda Vincent, Alison Krauss (unless with Robert Plant), Old Crow Medicine Show, Yonder Mountain String Band, etc. Likewise, it would not be incorrect that Bluegrass could be defined as
any music with a prevalent use of “tight harmonies” in the vocal performances and a use of string instruments to provide a syncopated rhythmic backdrop in place of “actual” percussion instruments. Historically, academically, bluegrass might be a product of Scots-Irish folk tradition, filtered through the 19th- and 20th-century experiences of Southern and midwestern wage labor, proximity to and mixing with slaves and freed slaves, and the radio industry. As one last example (this can never be a comprehensive list…), to a certain audience, bluegrass could convincingly be made out to be whatever sounds like the jingles and themes from Martha White, Deliverance, Bonnie and Clyde, HeeHaw or the Beverly Hillbillies.77

Comparably, there is also academic tradition to cite, here; bluegrass has been acknowledged, and made known (and knowable) by a number of authors. The scholarly attention to bluegrass, in North American folklorist Neil Rosenberg’s account in his Bluegrass: A History, is reasonably compact. Rosenberg cites L. Mayne Smith’s 1965 article “An Introduction to Bluegrass” in The Journal of American Folklore as a first nod of specific academic attention, an outgrowth of Smith’s graduate these at Indiana University’s folklore program. Smith’s argument was that bluegrass became itself as a combination of jazz influences and a southern sense of rural simplicity, as a reaction against and compromise with an encroaching mass national popular culture conflated

77 The Martha White (Self-Rising Flour) theme was written and performed by Flatt & Scruggs (both for advertising purposes and in concert); Bonnie and Clyde used as its theme a piece called Foggy Mountain Breakdown, written and produced by Flatt and Scruggs to showcase their “Scruggs-style” banjo; the Beverly Hillbillies commissioned Flatt and Scruggs to produce their theme, which they later included in their live performance repertoire.
with a sense of northern aggression. Rosenberg’s account is that Smith’s work was itself a reaction against IU Folklore Director Richard Dorson’s aversion to the study of commodified cultural forms (bluegrass was a business, after all) in geographic areas that were overstudied and touristy (Appalachia). Dorson wanted authenticity instead of “fakelore,” and Rosenberg’s claim is that Smith’s victory was in substantiating Bluegrass’s legitimate link to folk music. Bill Malone, the canonical documenter of country music, devoted a chapter of his 1968 Country Music, USA to bluegrass, which Rosenberg cites as another example of the tension between Smith and Dorson, as a case of the genre being historically connected with the more commercial “Country” music, while distinguished as being something different. Malone writes of bluegrass in the tension between folk and commercial music but points implicitly, through his use of the narrative trope of Bill Monroe’s biography, to its personified inventedness. This early theme of tension between folk and commercial musics reemerges in Rosenberg’s own work, first published in 1985, after a number of other accounts (notably Bob Artis’s 1975 Bluegrass) developed the idea of bluegrass as essentially reducible to a narrative of its most successful performers, and most particularly Bill Monroe and his “invention.” Rosenberg’s work, and Robert Cantwell’s 1984 Bluegrass Breakdown are impressive canonical articulations of what had gone into the making of bluegrass and what it had become almost 50 years after the Blue Grass Boys began performing at the Opry.

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All of this is true, to the extent that it is not false, but the supposition that these defining elements make up what a genre “is” misses the point that generic description is possible only as the manifestation of underlying politics. The fact that some categories seem self-evident to an audience sufficiently familiar with their constituent elements (which is to say, if the above-listed traits seem to define what bluegrass “is”), where mere specification becomes a sign of the category’s presumed self-evidence, the politics of why bluegrass “works” for some people, what it means to them, and what anyone might hope to learn from it all threaten to be lost.

It is those political dynamics that are what I think matter, in the confines of these essays here, which are about bluegrass not because of any presumption on my part of Bluegrass’s latent value as such but to the extent that it, whatever it is and to whomever, is a manifestation and example of depoliticization warranting critique. In that regard, this project is less about bluegrass than it is about depoliticization and politics. To reiterate the point of talking about genre as a theoretical tool: I would not deny that bluegrass is a definite, knowable, thing of certainty to particular people in specific contexts. My interest and hope has been to avoid the political mistake of denying anyone the validity of their sensibility but instead to embrace those situated sensibilities, recognizing them as definite things that are products of political processes - and working backward, in that sense, through the privilege of academic perspective from the concrete outcome to the politically-contextualized experience. It is because of this that I begin my articulation less with a concrete definition of what bluegrass is than with a negative hypothetical definition: if I am correct that bluegrass is an example of politics and depoliticization, its
relevance to politics will lie in something more than constituent elements, so what it is can be left more open, to in this case whatever might at least seem close to it, in particular spaces, where the people doing it and knowing it might show the social dynamics, and the politics, that go into constructing it.

Central Ohio became that particular space for this project just as this particular project took shape in Central Ohio, a politically interesting place of mediation among various different cultural-historical narratives and practices, and as a good place to see bluegrass in practice. To speak hypothetically, again: if genre’s inherently political character might be seeable in the lives of people in contexts of the uncertain and unknowable differences that make up politics, then the politics implicated in something like bluegrass would be potentially both more interesting and more visible in a place with as many differences and as much bluegrass as Central Ohio.

Central Ohio, with Columbus at its center, is less than 100 miles from the Ohio River, the 19th century’s the slave/free boundary (with Kentucky) as well as it’s Pittsburgh/Louisville/(New Orleans) economic corridor. The city of Columbus is split on both axes by major early 20th-century routes, north and south by US Route 40 and its historical marking of a de facto northern Mason Dixon line (as Broad Street), and east and west by US Route 23 (as High Street), connecting Kentucky (and Florida) to the Great Lakes. By the turn to the 21st Century, the urban portions of the region had long been benefiting from the impoverishment, deindustrialization of much of the rest of the state, enriching (and some would say, Liberalizing) the city of Columbus and surrounding suburbs with its service and education economies, just as it aggravated increasingly dense
urban poverty and de facto segregation in the city and resentment about ideological, economic, and actual sprawl in what had previously been its more rural periphery. Central Ohio is a space of numerous historical and political intersections, where the politics might seem to make little immediate sense and where they defy easy categorical explanation. If bluegrass were in fact an object, signifier, and mediator of political things, Central Ohio seemed the sort of context to be illustrating that.

Remembering the weight of my own privilege and experience with the texts of long traditions of politically-, musically-, and socially-oriented observers and writers, and remembering and always interrogating the ways that experience opens and shapes what I look for and what I see of the “actuality” I’ve decided is so important is a valuable means by which to preserve the possibility of multiple truths and contestable perspectives on which good, open politics rely. Or in short: good politics needs the possibility of different people to make their own different sense of their worlds, and remembering both the particularity and the immersedness of my own ability to present any of these senses or sensibilities is meant primarily, and more than anything, to serve that political good. Or, in other words, I wanted to write about bluegrass because I needed to be forced to listen to people making a different sense of things than I might imagine I would, and bluegrass seems like it might be just that sort of thing.
CHAPTER 2: SITUATED DISAGREEMENT, AND THE POLITICS OF NONSENSE

Bluegrass festivals were, for me, an opportunity to try to listen to people different from myself, people I expected to make different sense of the world than would I. I needed the juxtaposition because I was looking for material with which to make an argument about nonsense, as both a critical analytical frame and as a point of empirical research. With nonsense serving this dual role, as sense’s incommensurable constitutive outside and as a description of cultural practices of the denial of the impossibility of sense, I want to begin by clarifying the theoretical importance of a politics of nonsense, and to begin advancing an argument about the value of trying to separate recognition of other people from the need to make sense of them.

The idea of genre, as categories of cultural practice that can serve at once as merely descriptive labels and yet as symptoms of their complicatedly political production and reproduction (as both signifiers and referents, in other words) proved an apt means for articulating my way through that experience of listening to difference. Genre, in a way, became a tool for making sense of a seemingly paradoxical relationship of James Clifford’s partial truths⁸² (evident to my perspective as a distanced critic) to the whole

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truths of my interlocutors, which I’d obligated myself both ethically and conceptually to honor.

This was the feat of talking about other people making sense in a nonsensical situation, as an example of my argument about the politics of nonsense. My argument has also drawn heavily, on this point, from Jacques Rancière’s argument for a conception of politics distinguished from what he calls the “policing” practices of aggregating communities and legitimizing distributions, as a matter beyond even misconstrual or misunderstanding, of substantively impossible communication. Rancière’s distinction is between interactions that are opaque because of poor language use or insufficient information, but correctable, on the one hand, and the disagreement of politics, where the conflict is not “between one who says white and another who says black. The conflict is between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness.” 83 I have taken from this a wariness about the easy presumption that the conflicts that matter are the obvious and overt augments about government and ideology. I have tried to heed Rancière’s caution that the more pressing conflicts are those less evident ones often hiding beneath a glaze of agreement and non-conflict. The bluegrass I found was one constructed against overt conflict, as a refuge from it. It was Rancière who steered me back to bluegrass as a potential site of politics for this very reason. Rancière raises an important question about more than just where politics can happen, though, because the implication of conflict located within apparent agreement is

that there can be no position outside of politics from which to identify specifically irreconcilable conflict. Conflict inheres to politics, so the role of its critic-practitioner (me, the ethnographer) can only ever be one of recognizing its inescapability and trying to remain attuned – responsibly, self-consciously - to that reality.

My argument is about the importance of recognizing that non-sense is an important analytical reminder of the partiality and exclusionary effects of authoritative scholarly sense-making. It, equally, is about the importance of recognizing how people are able, in nonsensical-seeming situations, to deny the impossibility of sense, and to make particularly productive sense, as much of themselves as of others. What I would like to illustrate in more specificity is the situation of a politics of disagreement and misunderstanding and the role of knowledge in how this politics of sense-making happens in bluegrass. I want also to substantiate it as a matter of political interest theoretically, as additional context for what is in some ways a personal narrative of trying to access bluegrass from my own basis in multiple points of exclusion. Ultimately, all of this is with the intent of better clarifying an aesthetic theory, against a background of nonsense, of bluegrass politics.

One conversation from my fieldwork became a particularly appropriate illustration of this tension between knowledge and access in a situation of nonsense. It is a tension evident in a conversation that seemed to proceed on the basis of shared understanding but that, relatively soon afterward, proceeded to make less and less sense. I was talking to Walt, a very articulate late-middle-aged man who had approached me after overhearing another of my conversations at the Central Ohio Bluegrass Association
festival, a small regional gathering on the Northeast Fringe of the Columbus metro area, at about the point in my research where I was just beginning to convince myself that I know what I was doing as an ethnographer, just starting to feel like my role, at least, made sense to me.

When Walt availed himself of only two syllables - “big” and “word” – as he responded to my question, he used a punctuated sort of articulation that I suspected was an indicator of the fact that he didn’t think anything more needed to be said. I had just offered him the possibility of the word “syncopation?”, as a possibly-familiar label for how he’d tried to answer my earlier question about what he thought “serious fans” (my words) would like most about “bluegrass music” generally, what he thought made good bluegrass good. “Some bands will even get a twin fiddle… they’ll do twin fiddles and they’re somehow… off sync.” To which I asked, telling myself both that I was playing dumb and yet, also, that I didn’t really know what I was talking about, “you mean, intentionally”? “Yes on purpose. The same thing but one off sync with the other.”

It has seemed in retrospect that I may have been thinking I’d offer some sort of introduction of myself, as a maybe-knowledgeable ‘thinker,’ and, roughly, trying to make myself somehow legible, if even as a ‘type’ of outsider. Some part of me was, at that point trying also to maybe undo his voice as an ‘authentically’ ignorant insider, and get him to betray his ‘actual’ knowledge of what was really going on by getting him to recognize some sort of Other – neither mine nor his, nor “theirs” - expert knowledge. I “knew” already that I wouldn’t get very far with a belief that knowledge and ignorance somehow moved in tandem with, or as a corollary to insiderness and outsiderness. I
think I knew knowing things wasn’t going to get me “in” any more than “not knowing” would keep me out, that it had to be more complicated.

“You mean syncopation?” I repeated. He, though, smilingly, and chuckling silently, again: “Big word.”

Not sure whether he was one of the people in this fieldwork who wanted to play host to this visual urbanite who was clearly too young to be at a bluegrass festival, whose knowledge of bluegrass, whatever it was, had surely (I presumed they, all, were presuming) to be drawn more from books then real experience, I wondered if he was one of those fieldwork tour guides intent more on telling than hearing. He could, too, have also been one of the diplomats that seem to populate these places, who almost invariably approached me, for whatever reason of curiosity or nervousness, with some variant on the vaguely interrogative observation: ”so you’re writing a book on bluegrass…”

None of which is to deny that these were neither comprehensive nor exclusive types. The point that I adopted quickly in this project, though, was that if someone was going to talk to me at all, the more I talked the more they talked. And so in the midst of articulating my outsiderness as something as safe and unthreatening to possible interviewees, in the chaos of amplified live music and what seemed sometimes to be almost universal hearing impairment (my own included), two general structures of scripts was about all I could handle: one for the talkers and another for listeners. And I couldn’t tell where, from Walt’s sense of humor, he was supposed to be.

Gambling, then, with the disposition of what was a potentially important interviewee, I took his “big word” smile as a point of benevolence, or at least benignity,
and just kept going. “Like when the bass and the guitar take turns,” I say, snapping my fingers on alternate hands along with what was just then being played, pointing to the stage, trying to point out the alternate beats being chirped, thumped, slapped or whatevered, 200 feet away. I suggest maybe (I had, in fact, both experienced and read a bit about bluegrass, and was not exactly making this up) this “syncopation” is something a lot of people really seize on in the music – whether (I imply, unspokenly even to myself) they know the word or not.

I tried, I think, to addend an awkward sort of questionmark-lilt to the end of all this. I think I meant it to be an honest question, yes, but it was also more than just a little bit a cocky attempt at an authoritative footnote. “Syncopation…?” I repeated.

“I let the bands do that,” he said, after smiling pensively a silent moment. And then, trying again to launch his implicit punchline that had started all this, the one I was slowly recognizing to have thrown a big question-mark into the issue of which one of the two of us was in this circumstance more ill-suited and unqualified to be using the big word _syncopation_, he laughed. In retrospect, I am sure, as much at me as at anything else.

The coalescence in this conversation of so much of my project, so many of its themes and concepts and ways of thinking about things was not anything I recognized until much later. This does not mean that the endeavor has been a simple narrative of learning and realization of and about how “these people” work. What is truer, I think, is that later “recognition” was not so much of how the system works as of how rarely, if
ever, there is a correct answer to what’s “really” going on. And, more importantly, that in the absence of a universally correct answer the particular truth of any given context is significant of a much broader political question.

Before even thinking much about how to articulate how bluegrass was doing whatever it was doing, it is important to begin, perhaps, with a more particular illustration of what the things I’m describing as depoliticized disagreement look like, in actual practice, with unstable-seeming and not-always-apparent interplays of knowledge and belonging. The specific sorts of disagreement and misunderstanding in question here are of particular importance and interest because of the role the music plays in all of it. Music provides an available and proximate language for people to articulate their experience (as for example a metaphorical sense of honesty or familiality). Corollary to this, if the experience of music is implicated in people’s making of sense about the world and themselves, is there perhaps an important question to be asked about whether practices of listening somehow involve people more or less continually recentering themselves as standards of correctness in that process? Is it possible that in a context of a bluegrass festival, if people are indeed continually reformulating and reproducing their understandings of who they are, hearing is in some degree inherently narcissistic? This is surely the less answerable question, but if it is even plausible to ask it then is that not itself potential evidence of the weight and stakes of the topic?

All that is retrospect, of course. What I seemed to sense at the time was the importance, in navigating the confusion and misunderstanding of a bluegrass festival, of my demonstration of my own “knowledge” – of or about something like syncopation.
This was somewhat ironic to me. One of the things that most struck me, when I first started presenting myself as a person spending time thinking and writing about bluegrass to students, colleagues, stranger, and family, (that is, before I even began “researching”), was a prevalent assumption that I must therefore have been a musician myself, having presumably decided to spend my life as a bluegrass person only after having lived it from the inside. Neil Rosenberg himself, perhaps the canonical documenter of bluegrass, notes in his introduction that the predominance of musicians among its chroniclers and scholars is in fact one of bluegrass’s definingly unique traits. The falsity of the supposition about myself notwithstanding, this does seem to be the case for a great many people who’ve contributed to our broader cultural knowledge of music. Many writers and scholars of music have a remarkable depth of conventional knowledge and experience with the music that is their subject-matter. Many of them speak through music theory language and with incredible amounts of historical detail of forms, genres, stars, and industries. This sort of expertise is for many readers and audiences a qualification, and for good reason. My ability or authority to narrate is an important theme in this context, since my own musical ineptitude might make me uniquely disqualified to speak on the subject, depending on who’s allocating the authority. My reasons for caring about music, though, are rooted in exactly this implied necessity for authority in speaking, with the simple observation that music matters for a tremendous number of people whose “ignorance” of chord structures, time signatures, the music industry, acoustics and any number of other things does not in itself authorize a scholar or critic to narrate to them

My investment in hearing from other people how they make sense of music is my response, as much to my concern to undermine a monolithic self-legitimizing sense of “expertise” as a hope to illustrate the reality that “bluegrass” is contested and means different things to different people for reasons that go beyond “knowledge.”

The narratives and accounts of actual people’s lives in and around bluegrass show that it is different things at once to a lot of different people. The further-removed perspective implied in this claim about relationships among multiple people’s narratives is also a perspective on authority, of course. It is my authority (as the distanced observer) to proclaim it, but it is also a proclamation of the validity and authorization of each of those narratives, which is itself a rejection of a monolithic authority to narrate “the truth.” This is an example of the always important question of politics, about where the distinction is drawn between a person’s commitment to recognize the validity of others’ sense of the world and their obligations to recognize the fact that they can only hope to perform that recognition on the basis of and from within their own sensibility and understanding. Having enough of a sense of oneself, without letting that sense crowd out others’ ability to have their sensibilities recognized, is a feat of listening. It is also a

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85 It would be interesting to construct some sort of empirical work exploring the relevance of knowledge about different constructions of bluegrass and its history (as different ways of saying “what it is”) to the experience people might have of the bluegrass. There are psychological and cultural-critical questions about aesthetic experience, here, where the sense being made of the music seems likely to hinge on what the person knows beforehand, as whether listeners are told they’re situating themselves in historical narrative or by being told who is good/famous/etc.]

86 Knowledge, of course, is a complicated thing already existing in the field. It is important to remain critical of any our-v-their knowledge binary. One of the first things Sally, the organizer of the COBA festival did, when she first sat with me after having heard from a third party that I wanted to talk about bluegrass, was bring her copy of Neil Rosenberg’s Bluegrass. The interplay between knowledge in bluegrass and knowledge about bluegrass is fluid, to say the least.
question, though, of the extent to which making sense of ourselves as the necessary complement to making sense of other
involves unavoidable narcissism.

I am drawn to bluegrass because it appears such an apt example of a cultural ‘thing’ of which there is no core ‘truth.’ It is a referent that renders truths, differently and particularly, to the actual people who experience it, whereafter each with their own truths engage knowingly or not in irresolvable contestations among themselves as to what this ‘thing’ really is. Or not, of course – disagreement and contestation are not the same thing; a great many people spend very significant amounts of time at bluegrass festivals proceeding from within understandings of what they’re doing that differ radically from those of their audience mates, only rarely, if ever experiencing what could plausibly be called a contestation.

The distinction between implied, silent, unenacted disconnects of sensibility and the more openly argumentative disagreements people might readily recognize as conflicts became more complicatedly apparent to me my first night at the Central Ohio Bluegrass Association festival, the first festival I attended that called itself a bluegrass festival while I was myself, notebook in hand, doing my ethnography. I was of course only starting to think about how actually hard ethnography was, how difficult it was to try to go find a place where I could both participate and observe, and the extent to which I could not take for granted the possibility of any shared sense, between my “respondents” and myself, of what it was that were talking about. I was beginning at

88 As much as many people might be inclined to associate the idea of jamming and pick-up bands with the bluegrass festival, as what in some way might be their distinguishing characteristic, the reality of a lot of bluegrass is that people go watch the music, talk to the people they already know, quietly acknowledge the people they don’t, and go back to their campers.
least to recognize that all this was the difficulty in which I was obligating myself to actually make the sense of other people’s lives.

It is a helpful origin story (helpful for a political argument), to think of my arrival at that Thursday evening in Croton, OH, where I was soon going to be thinking more about how to deal with my own rather inopportune profoundly shyness, my desire not to be bothering anyone. The afternoon I arrived, not having been quite aware of when the music started (the posters said the festival started Thursday), I put my conspicuously fancy-looking tent in the farthest corner of the camping area I could justify finding without having it seem too much like I was hiding from the hundred or motorhomes, RVs and camp trailers, and thought a bit about how my ownership of a flashy, small tent was itself a good example of what felt like my particular ill-suitedness for all the because my love for and investment in camping was a manifestation of my general distaste for other people. The material circumstances of my presence at this festival were feeling like a sign of the opposite of what had brought all of these other people here. If my thinking had been correct, which I assumed it was because it was mine, all of these people were settling in for a weekend of extreme sociability, friend-making and re-making, jamming, and, perhaps, political learning. How could I go interfere with that? I had already been to two festivals in the preceding month. I had talked to people at the Central Ohio Folk Festival, but it didn’t seem like the conversations went anywhere, no matter how much I tried (transparently, awkwardly, artificially, I’m sure) to get people to say things about government or social power or aesthetic experience or anything I might have hoped to be able to plug into some sort of argument about “politics”. I had talked to plenty of people
at the Nelsonville Music Festival, trying to have learned my lesson about the dead-endedness of stiff interrogation from the Folk Festival. My take-away seemed comparably small, though from Nelsonville, perhaps because the balance had tipped more toward the “participant” end of my ethnographic performance and I maybe just enjoyed myself too much, maybe became too much the insider to have much perspective. By the time I was at COBA, on my third festival, I was realizing explicitly to myself that all through the Folk Festival and Nelsonville I had been telling myself it was okay that I wasn’t “getting enough stuff” for the project because they weren’t really bluegrass, or they weren’t really the right sort of festival, or whatever, and COBA would be where I finally got started. As I sat there on the edge of that mown area, next to the showy little tent whose non-invisibility was aggravating my nervous insecurity, trying to write notes in what was left of the tree line shade, I started writing about the possibility that all this had been a mistake, that I could never talk to these people, that I could never actually do what I’d spent years talking about wanting to do. The prospect of bothering a stranger, particularly after having unwittingly spent the last month setting this up as my last best chance, had me writing that I felt like an uncool middle-schooler at a high school dance, having deluded myself one more time that next time would be different, that it would all come together, just as soon as the context was right.

I did not quit, though. In honesty, it never entirely occurred to me to embrace the voice of an outsider that was right in front of me, to take the notes not just on the environment I was seeing but also on the reality of the social terror I was feeling, until my last night at the last festival I attended much later that summer (Perhaps too
narratively convenient, but true: an example of always finding things the last place we look). Instead I just wrote through it, like a journaling adolescent, drank the beers I’d packed (before the ice melted), smoked a few stale cigarettes (as a non-smoker, just something that happens, to help make puritanically sure that the idea of vacation is always more pleasurable than its reality) and took a nap until dinner.

Dinner, I’d been told at check-in, was at 6:30. The posters had indicated something about a free bean supper on Thursday night for all paid attendees. I recognized that the only way through this high school dance was going to be at least to go make myself visible, just in case one of the big kids wanted to talk to me. I made sure I arrived at just about 6:37, not knowing how prompt all of these people would be, wanting to be about squarely in the middle of the line, neither overeager nor lagging, and hopefully preserving some option for anonymity. Dinner, as it turned out, was in a pavilion (concrete floor, maybe 700 square feet, no walls, shed roof), and comprised of a service line of crockpots and hot dishes, with what I was later told were contributions from volunteer COBA members of a selection of bean soups, baked beans, and chicken noodle variations (served either into your own bowl or the Styrofoam coffee cups they’d provide), with cornbread on the side. There were 5 open picnic tables (three inside, two out), which with their 40 maximum seats clearly wouldn’t have accommodated enough people had not the 90-plus-degree air, which in Central Ohio seems simply never to move in the summer, been chasing people back to their air-conditioned campers. I managed not to retreat and sweat by myself, with my 6 ounces of chicken noodles that, given the options and that it was neither soup nor from a can (I assumed), seemed the exotic option.
Maybe the choice of the authentic local fare (which might frankly have been competitive in a least-appetizing-looking-foods contest) could have been overheard, and rendered me just one tiny bit less alien. I was, at that point, sitting at the end of an otherwise empty table within 20 feet of the food line, probably hoping someone might take some implicit pity and come talk to me who was trying to look cool, relaxed, and approachable.

As it happened, the man I later learned was the husband of the festival organizer, probably in his later 60s, ushered his 8- or 9-year-old grandson to the middle of the opposite bench, seeming to want to anchor a hyper child into a seat and not particularly aware of interested that I was there. Other old men followed somewhat soon thereafter, as the kid got up, had his seat taken, and ended up to my left as I tried, probably, to occupy as little of the bench, at its far right end, as I could. This incredibly hot weather and this sweaty, chubby kid and all these irritated-looking old men was, I thought, what their authenticity felt like to me, and I guess I had to start participating. The conversation at the other end of the table slowly built itself on observations of the weather, and people I didn’t know but who, presumably, were somewhere else at this “festive” celebration of what I thought was bluegrass music. I indulged the kid in an audience for his mostly failed quarter-spinning trick (which he’d just learned somewhere else), as much as anything for the chance to look at something other than the faces of adults who didn’t seem interested to acknowledge me, starting to think maybe they, too, were shy in the company of this foreigner. I even showed the kid another trick, of being able to predict whether a slapped-down spinning quarter would be heads or tails (it’s usually the side facing you when you start spinning it – I don’t know why), sensing that I’d be watched
interacting and maybe understood to be a little more human, even as I was worried that I’d passively articulate myself as just another kid.

His interest in the quarter eventually got lost, and as my tiny bites of chicken noodles proceed, at some point the conversation (at least at our end of the table) waned. Maybe out of dehydrated exhaustion, I somehow managed to take the leap of breaking that silence by asking the man across from me, who had been sharing a pint carton of buttermilk with the kid’s grandfather, drinking it straight: “does that (gesturing with my head) help with the heat?”

I might as well have been asking the tall girl to dance, with the semi-intelligible mumble I’d used in posing the question. He had heard me enough to grant some sort of signal that he – in the worst of all possible scenarios – needed me to repeat myself. He hadn’t heard what I said. “The Buttermilk”, I coughed, with my voice probably cracking, “does the buttermilk help with the heat”? … “No… we just drink it,” not sounding offended or annoyed or surprised or even like it was an unreasonable question, as the kid’s grandfather looked at him, not at me, listening.

That was it. I didn’t say another word that entire night, having surely embarrassed myself more than a little, and maybe having come across as the snob making fun of the country people and their weird folk practices, but feeling like I had maybe at least gotten the worst of it out of the way. I sat there at that picnic table for another hour more, listening as the conversation about what’s good to drink when it’s hot spread to the rest of the table. The consensus was that it was either raw milk out of the walk-in cooler from the dairy where one of the men worked as a kid, or the almost-frozen orange aid one
of the other men remembered tapping out of a jug at one of his friends’ parents’ store when he was a kid. I listened, though, at least a tiny bit less awkwardly, somehow satisfied I’d done something to show myself enough of an intelligible human being to not be completely unwelcome at the table. I was able to leave, back to my little tent at the other end of what now looked more like a grassy parking lots as more campers had filled in, feeling like I could if nothing else go back tomorrow a little more invisibly and not be seen as the invasive pretentious city person lurking around thinking and not talking.

This arrival narrative is an important political story: I had both been and felt so much an outsider that I had to work just to talk, and only then did I feel like I could hear what was going on. Even more than the weight of that, though, the reality is that I did talk, which would not likely have been true for just anyone. I, the person with the training and the education and the whiteness and the maleness and the life experience to follow along in a conversation about farming. Even I with all of that privilege was an outsider, which says more about how easy the exclusion was than it does about how I was able to “transcend” and get what little access that I did.

I was ultimately able, at the festival, to turn my nascent sense of non-exclusion into a great deal of contact and access, using that new self-understanding of a recognizable person to be more comfortable spending more time talking to the festival organizer herself, at or at least very near the top of the de facto social hierarchy in place at the festival. From there, too, once you’ve talked to her, seemingly everyone else just seems to come to you, newly curious about your presence, but reassured that you’ll talk to them.
It is too easy for me to take my scholarly remove from the experiences of these people, stepping back with my status and privilege from the specificities I claim to value as parts of a broader more sensible whole. What is harder is to grapple more deferentially with the reality of those particularities. The best example of this, I think, is the double significance of a retired farmer in an RV at a Thursday bluegrass festival opener – it is as much a sign of the wealth and privilege implied by seventy-five thousand dollar RV and the day not at work as it is a sign of the implicit embrace of imagery of hardship, simplicity, and traditional knowledge that come with the fact that this is a bluegrass festival. Even if I am to claim that the broader ‘sense’ which we can make of the entirety of multiple conflicting and exclusive notions of what seems ‘the same’ thing (‘bluegrass’) is in fact ‘nonsense,’ it takes a significant amount of scholarly arrogance for me to be able to declare that there is no truth to be had about bluegrass as a totality beyond particular experiences. I cannot with credibility say or imply that “this system” is complexly unknowable but that I, with my knowledge, have either the ability or right to proclaim that it “all makes sense” - let alone to specify how. My declaration of the impossibility of any definitive account of bluegrass is still a declaration of definitive truth, if perhaps of a different sort. My hope, in all this, is that this apparent intractability, this narrative paralysis, might become a productive sort of paradox. It would be good if it were possible to genuinely listen to people different from myself, opening myself to the possibility of the fallibility of my own knowledge but without completely abandoning the sensibilities with which I would have any hope of making sense of what I’m hearing.
This paradox, of using what we know as a basis on which, hopefully, to challenge what we “know” by listening to new people, even when we know there is no “correct” sense to be made of what they’re saying, might be just the right approach to a conceptualization of politics that is itself unstable and, sometimes, paradoxically both practically open and functionally closed.\(^89\)

The deeper “theoretical” counterpart to this narrative is built on the sense, that in many ways to call something political is to call it contested. This is not as a point of historical fact, as if people have fought over a known object, but contested as a part of its always ongoing character, where what at thing like bluegrass is and who belongs there will always be unsettled. This, in specific form, is Rancière’s white/white disagreement. Bluegrass may not be unsettled or unsettleable from the perspective of all of its practitioners, but is very much both contested and contestable from the (my) critical vantage that was situated to deem it political in the first place. The theme of contestability and always-unsettledness is embedded in a number of 20\(^{th}\)- and 21\(^{st}\)-century arguments, in the guise (to give just 3 examples) of “agonism” for Continental Political critic Chantal Mouffe in the 1990s and 2000s,\(^{90}\) “Parliamentarism” for inter-war German political-legal writer Carl Schmitt,\(^{91}\) and “contestation” for the late twentieth and early-21\(^{st}\) Century political theorist Bonnie Honig.\(^{92}\) Mouffe’s concern in her “The Democratic Paradox,” for example, aligns in some ways with Rancière’s, to critique the way

\(^{89}\) It is open in practice, with possibility of instability logically apparent, but closed overall, as function and usefulness, reproductive and static.


unquestioned fealty toward an idea that the entirety of any particular populace might ever agree on what was “good” or “correct” for itself, took form in consensus. Consensus bore upon itself the risk of implicitly legitimizing the exclusion of those members of the populace who would inevitably have been silenced from the start. Schmitt was concerned in somewhat parallel fashion, in his Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy, not so much with the exclusion of groups or people but with the ordering of governing institutions, arguing that conventional democratic legislative practices, and laws were unlikely ever to fully accommodate the unforeseeable circumstances of a political reality based in a society claiming to be either inclusive or pluralistic. Schmitt was particularly dubious about the ability of liberal institutions like parliaments to serve ideals of inclusion and recognition. He argued that parliamentarism, and the valuation of speaking in group decision-making, had by its nature to be open - both open to new perspectives and orientations, and also open-ended, reserving the ability of the conversation to move into new territory, producing not-already-determined ideas and approaches to governance. Democracy, though, proceeded on different terms, relying for its seeming viability on some pre-agreed bounds of what counts as the demos. Democracy needs a sense of whom it is that, imaginedly or not, is consenting to its rule of itself. As open-ended and open to new content as parliamentarism hoped to be, democracy had to be closed, lest it not know who legitimized it, and it had to be closed off to too much new content, lest is lose the substance of what defines the people that comprise it. Schmitt wanted to draw this distinction and point out these contradictions as a way of saying the forms of liberal democracy in place in 1920s Continental Europe were necessarily
unstable, and to warn that without sufficient attention and effort to maintain the balance, excessive faith in the openness of parliamentarism would be a distraction until it was too late to prevent the closed-off particularism of “democracy” from running rampant, closing in on itself, and ruining the whole system. (As it happens, he seems to have been mostly exactly correct.) One of Schmitt’s lessons is, even in its mildest form, that there is nothing inherently inclusive or accessible about “democracy;” depending on its particular cultural and institutional instantiation, it may actually be hostile to recognition and access. Without careful attention to the political struggles that underlie governance, it becomes too easy for some subgroup, party, or person to instantiate its own particular sensibility and understanding in a dominant position, to the exclusion and detriment of everyone else – but, all the while, in the name of universalism and democracy.

Honig, too, was concerned about exclusion in the name of universalism and democracy, although unlike Schmitt her focus was more on pointing out the falsity and negotiability of the origins of political communities. Honig argues that what counts as legitimate concern, and who counts as a legitimate speaker in democratic practice, get circumscribed by usually-unspoken conceits that persons subjected to governing authority have consented to their subjugation and that consent takes place historically when new governments are formed in revolution and in constitutional ‘moments’. The reality is that most people have enjoyed no such opportunity to give consent, let alone any opportunity to rescind it, even in its imagined form, when they find themselves unacknowledged and uncounted. Honig’s claim is that an acknowledgment of all this falsity of the myth of political origins and consent is a way not to discard but to
continually renegotiate, ideally, the provision of recognition and access on more fruitful terms. What binds Schmitt and Honig, on this question, is the extent to which politics is unstable and how, particularly in some of its democratic instantiations, it can go poorly as easily as it can go well. In both of their arguments the heart of the lesson is to not forget that politics was never settled in the first place, and to remember that an idea of an uncontested politics is an oxymoron. Whether by assuming that parliamentarism (as conversation, inclusion, deliberation, etc.) simply “works”, or by assuming both that consent always already happened and that it can be rescinded, the problem is that forgetting about politics’s latent instability invites outcomes that are inclined toward the denial to certain persons of the recognition and access they deserve.

In Mouffe’s aversion to a fetish of exclusory consensus, Schmitt’s fear of an overly rigid commitment to parliamentary governance with no backup plan in place for its inevitable breakdown, and Honig’s skepticism toward crudely simplistic attributions of political legitimacy to talk and debate in conversations that can never be as inclusive as they purport to be, the common theme is one of warnings about the dangers of putting into political practice what are, functionally, simplistic notions of what politics either is or ought to be.

The relevance of any of this to bluegrass is two-fold: in the first instance, if these arguments are at all valid then one important facet of a more inclusive and accessible society is the presence of reminders that the worlds we all inhabit, each in our particularity, are comprised in objects like bluegrass that do not necessarily “make sense”, or at least not the same sense, and are in some way objects of multiple
knowledges, potential reminders that our own experiences and sensibilities are not universal. This is the dynamic of me at a table of farmers, them narrating reminiscently as children of farmers, or me and Walt, an academic and a retired electrical engineer wondering together if it matters what syncopation means. This first lesson for bluegrass is that we should seek out contestation, in whatever form, as a sign not of a political problem but of the viability of a political scenario that is not silencing it. An important element of all these theories, too, is that they are not simply warnings, statically, against too-simple understandings and expectations of politics but are also claims “dynamically”, about the role of passing time, of memory, and of unpredictable, uncertain, and sometimes unstable futures. Thus the second relevance of bluegrass: the uncertainty of the future is far less a concern about who wins elections and about how wars start than whether and how any given “we” listens to and learns from persons and parties who may at any given point be denied full political inclusion; bluegrass is the necessary sort of lesson not just that we make a particular sense of our experiences of and with other people but that there is always more sense to be made.

That there is always more and other sense to be made is a practical lesson of something like bluegrass, but it also echoes what Hannah Arendt called “action.” 93 “Action” for Arendt was the defining mode of political participation, distinguished from other social performances by the fact that its effects, and others’ understandings and reactions, could not be known in advance. Political participation, to the extent it can rightfully be called political participation, is uncertain, unpredictable, and, at least to

some, nonsensical. Nonsense and unpredictability are not the same, of course; people can be predictably nonsensical. Nonsense and unpredictability are connected by the fact that prediction, as a conceit of foresight, is a sense-making strategy. Insofar as it may be a presumption of knowledge about other people, claims of predictability interfere with recognition of others. Even in its mildest form, action and its embrace of unpredictability defers that sort of violent sense-making, at least for now, and maybe leaves some small amount of space for remembering that the sense does just happen but is made – hopefully, ideally, in ways that minimize the misrecognition.

For Arendt, the politics of policy and governance is reducible variously first to factually reproductive “knowledge” (where there are correct answers) and second to broader bored, alienated disinterest, (where we assume someone knows the correct answers). The politics of Arendtian action emerge as the only basis on which anyone can hope to engage in the unending process of producing an evermore robust conceptualization of citizenship (recognized and accessible), which she says is the only hope for substantive, dignified life. As another way to put this: if bluegrass has political weight, it has to be the weight of a politics of nonsense and sense-making, with and among people different from each other rather than of a “politics” of presumptuous knowledge and predictability where people can’t hear (let alone listen to) people different from themselves.

The image of a picnic table at the Hartford fairground with 6 white men over 65, at least a few of them in their 80s, one with an oxygen tank, one of their 8-year-old grandsons, and me, a 30-something white man with an (I hope) clean shirt and thick
glasses frames is not the image of just learning about politics. My attempt to break the ice, to at least present myself as a person capable of speaking, and maybe a bit less creepily silent, was a far cry from an “introduction” of any depth. The awkwardness of that table is an apt illustration of at least one sort of politics that appear at a bluegrass festival, actually. The presence of an intelligible English language “conversation” was really just a surface-level glossing-over of the fact that none of us had much chance of coming away with a more viable answer of what the others were doing here. The awkwardness of that conversation is as much an example of the nonsense a person might expect to see as of the difficulty of making the sense. This is to the extent that I myself really never felt comfortable with any of the answers occurring to me of who these men were, why they were here, why bluegrass worked for them, and why we were talking about dairy farming (or why they were drinking buttermilk.) I knew I could have constructed some sort of narrative of rural masculine traditionalism, but I didn’t trust anything of the sort to be anything other than an elitist condemnation, being uneasy in risking a condemnation of people with whom I was sharing a table. I have no reason to believe any of them had any more luck in my direction than did I in theirs. Recognizing the openness was easy, at least in the shadow of the difficulty of actually trying to hear what was being meant. And the music, looming, hadn’t even started.

That embrace of an open politics cannot be the end of the theoretical story, because what is most important, practically, in all of this, is the conceptual dictate that a person situated to make claims of knowledge about the world - a person who can, more than just listen, narrate, such as I - must listen to persons different from and seemingly
nonsensical to themselves while preserving the thrust of the nonsense within the sense that they make. This, among other things, is the great strength of the discipline of Folklore, committed as it is to listening to other people on the basis of a presumption of the validity of other people’s experiences, sensibilities, and realities. My self-understanding as a Folklorist is that of an incessant inclination toward the aforementioned paradox, though, where my understanding of political possibility tends me toward such an investment in listening, the honoring of which threatens always to undo the notion of politics that got me started in the first place. Which is to say: I’m never quite clear what sense to make of situations where the person to whom I’ve obligated myself to listen is expressing their own fundamental rejection of “politics” as anything other than a realm of other people’s economic and social self-re-enrichment, either wholly irrelevant or even deleterious to more important concerns of dignity, recognition, and justice.

Maybe my idea of politics, no matter what it is, is still an unhelpfully superposed category that just makes a mess in the worlds of the people with whom I spoke. The word “politics” came up a lot in my work, mostly in discussion of what I was doing there (and in my halting attempts to explain it). A lot of people seem to use the word to refer to conniving and negotiating people, where the politics of a bluegrass festival is in their attempts to get better lawnchair spots and campsites than other people. Politics also comes up as a label for the sort of whining and deprivation (their words, all of these) that some people seem intent to express resentments for their own plight (which says something about the person who describes those other resentful people to me). Politics shows up just as much, too, in reference to a vernacular sort of materialism, where when
a person talks about miners, autoworkers, farmers and “businessmen” as a the sort of politics a person ‘has,’ their politics becomes a view of the world defined by their material political-economic circumstances.

Maybe it’s just another “big word”, a difference of labeling, of me trying awkwardly to reappropriate the word “politics” for something that person “has” and does and values but calls something else. If I’m right and political promise emerges from the engagements of different sensibilities of and about the world, in some sense maybe there is nothing but the words and labels with which politics actually happens. If that’s the case, sometimes words are all there are and words are just labels. This is the sometimes-paradoxical foundation, again, on which I end up using my own politics to try to listen to and learn about other people’s politics.

I have a great deal of optimism that this practical problem of the politics-of-politics might be bridged in some way, or transcended by a conception of aesthetics informed by the arguments of critics like Adorno and Rancière, both of whom deal with “aesthetics” not as a part of reality that is different or separate from politics where it would involve its own particular forms of judgment (which is a distinction that, certainly, might make sense for some purposes94), but instead as something that is deeply connected with politics. The conjunction of politics and aesthetics might in some way function pedagogically, not so much to produce illuminations of answers to questions of what is “more just” but to instill some degree of patience with nonsensical social experience.

Friedrich Schiller, the late 18th Century German Romantic writer, argued that an

“aesthetic education” might help enable recognitions by people that the world they shared with one another might not necessarily be representable with definitive knowledge, that it might not “make sense”, but – crucially – that this was not necessarily a bad thing.

That itself seems a productive starting point.95

The mutual relevance of politics and aesthetics, and the embeddedness of each in the other, has been a tenet of much social criticism spanning at least from Walter Benjamin's critique of “mechanical reproduction”96 through to Jacques Rancière's democratic “distribution of the sensible.” To the particular question of music, the connection is at its most clear in the work of Theodor Adorno, where art has one of only two possible functions: it either succeeds or fails in its potential evocation of the salience of the problem of politics and political order.97 Music that feigns ignorance of its potentially progressive and critical function leads invariably to its other, inverse function of conservative regress. Art speaks either of the rightness of its world (falsely so, and thus conservatively) with unproblematic claims to beauty, or it points to the contingencies and injustices of its social situation with refusals to comply with reductive norms of stylistic pleasure (and is thus critical and progressive). These are not the only two options, indeed, but they are mutually supportive poles, wherein many things - listeners' distraction, the relation of the sound to generic histories available to the listener, and performance context, among others - will mediate the specificity of effects. Yet this

leaves unchanged the point that art is always doing political work. What Adorno knew, and what it is imperative to remember, is that all political order is inevitably unjust for someone. If the interactions of people demonstrate divergences and pluralities of sensibilities, in the form of misunderstandings and disagreements in a context where any one of us claims to want to recognize all people as people, there can be no way to objectively arbitrate among different sensibilities as if from a vantage outside of any of the particular sensibilities in question. There is no such vantage, and so any sensibility claiming universality, a situation where disagreement is evident, can only be promulgated at the expense of silencing and excluding other sensibilities. Adorno’s argument, much like Rancière’s, is that political order and the notion it implies about “everyone” agreeing on what is good, proper, or wise (consensus in democracy) is always that sort of exclusionary universalized sensibility. Aesthetically, then, anything that says it's okay (the song with the familiar-feeling melody, the story whose happy ending we’ve already heard) is a lie by definition - "it" is never okay.

This particular juncture points toward an important distinction for Adorno: the comparatively subjective questions of taste and aesthetic quality are irrelevant to the further removed and more objective spectrum of political stasis and critique. Crudely, the labeling of art as "good" or "bad" does not need to correlate with its political situation as "progressive" or "conservative." To bypass taste altogether with the claim that it is inaccessibly subjective, though, threatens to dehistoricize it. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown so emphatically, taste often serves as both a signifier of social distinction and as a
mechanism of political domination.\textsuperscript{98} The point is not that taste judgments are irrelevant to questions of politics; on the contrary, taste is bound up deeply in the politics of music, but not in a transparent or mechanistic way. In Rancière’s conception, any located standard of beauty and good taste will be a product of a particular, and of course unjust, distribution of the sensible. For Adorno, the problem is a bit more complicated: a listener derives a 'truer' pleasure from the experience of being challenged by "falsely whole" and critical music, but a more immediate (if also vacuous) sense of pleasure from consuming music whose banally familiar sound forecloses questions of its political content. Taste and pleasure are of course important factors in music's reception, but they are also themselves political and historical products. Taste mediates and signifies politics in music, and is important in that regard, but questions of political efficacy remain distinct from, and more important than, judgments of beauty and pleasure.

All this is less to say that Adorno proclaims or assumes precisely how music produces these effects. It is, more gently, to suggest only that it does. Adorno himself says music is not representative, in the sense of denotative referencing. Steven Feld speaks of a representational capacity whereby music bears traces and significances of the material world of its own production (specifically, where special conceptions translate to formal and sonic constructions in Pygmy pop).\textsuperscript{99} Robert Cantwell has argued that the sound of Bill Monroe’s voice resonated and became the quintessential “high, lonesome” bluegrass style because it manifested a sense of alienated failed transcendence of a


working-class, post-war South. Imani Perry's focus is on music's complicity in signifying political themes (in her case, race and regionalism) from the “inside” of musical texts. Raymond Williams's assessment of the concept of aesthetic “determination” is that political-economic structures will only ever circumscribe a sphere of what always remain multiple possible aesthetic forms. Williams's critique of mechanistic materialism is an important reminder, not only to we critics but also to all of us that experience art, that we should be as sure that it matters as we are unsure of how. This is largely because a supposition of mechanistic determinism is precisely the sort of flattened and reductive representation toward which Adorno and Rancière urge such wariness in thinking about the social import of aesthetics.

What might be the centerpiece of my own infatuation with bluegrass as an intellectual object is how quickly it funnels me into this dilemma of my politics and my embrace of others’ aesthetic possibilities, and of this question about one’s own authority to narrate about any other human being’s behavior or sensibility or existence. Bluegrass music is for me an opportunity to engage with a very long list of vagaries and ambiguities and to think about how to do something that feels like good – as finding and sharing knowledge, as recognizing persons who feel unrecognized, as perhaps sharing my own privilege with others lacking it – in environments where, in practical terms, there seems to be no such thing as something that is truly good for everyone, and no immediately

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apparent way to know the difference. This is, largely, the political circumstance of the challenge of speaking without the authority to speak. How can a person believe, equitably, that everyone else has what is for them a valid narrative of social progress while still believing that they themselves have one as well, when the two diverge so sharply? How do I listen to, and let myself hear, the genuinely stupid sorts of hate to which I gave audience more than once in fieldwork\textsuperscript{103}, and still honor my commitment, much easier to form in the abstract, to try to acknowledge the potential humanity and contextual sensibility of every\textit{one}? Or, on the flip side: when a person can’t even know, when stuck at a picnic table wanting to learn and talk but mustering only a paltry ability to ask about buttermilk. If my own sense of how the world works and of what would be good for it is true, and if the only way I can proceed, politically, and engage with the world around me is to act as if it is true, how can I also honor my own commitment to listening to other people, as and where they are, as people whom I am obligated to recognize, people I ought to presume have very valid reasons for not sharing my own sensibility, people to whom I must give the chance to teach me something? How am I able to be right, to keep my own ethical orientation sufficiently stable to serve as my own basis for existence, but still recognize people different from myself, people who merit recognition precisely because they disagree with me? How do you work to maintain the

\textsuperscript{103} They were mercifully few, although of course I in my presence would have been the cause of much self-censorship. It is because of that, actually, that one particular story stands out so prominently: I listened, from within a conversation circle of fewer than 5 people, to a locally very important person narrating he a rather large name in international Bluegrass circles, a friend of his, had a duplicate drivers’ license made, accurate in every way except that the photo had been replaced with one of a monkey. The locally important man related how the famous man had told him about being embarrassed to have been pulled over by an African-American police officer (presumably a greater indignity; I did not ask), and the narrator of this story recalls for the rest of us how he told the famous person that the cop “was probably confused, ‘cause that picture was probably one of his relatives.”
speaking of someone who uses that speaking to silence (according to my own sensibility) others? How does that work?

After all, good politics begins with recognitions of the impossibility of definitive solutions, (to Mouffé, Schmitt, and Honig, Clarissa Rile Hayward's discussion of the need for self-critical democratic institutions could also be added104) and it is art that either produces or prevents these recognitions. There is no clear delineation between the production and prevention of recognition, and the difference is as much a product of particular listeners as of particular forms. The effects of aesthetic experience are not sortable into a binary between good and bad; they are, rather, divided between false pretensions of coherently whole effects and more genuine instances where questions of what is going on and what is meant are left open. Which is another way of saying that the art which defies knowledge is a lesson in the humility demanded by a politics that refuses knowledge.

I remained somewhat concerned that this was just a potential “lesson,” though, and that maybe I, the scholar, was at a bluegrass festival to illustrate that lesson of music, but maybe they weren’t hearing it. The conversation at the picnic table was political, but was it musical? The necessity of humility in the face of political problems ought not be mistaken as sufficient for good politics, not least because the actual practice of politics always involves pre-existing identities and requires decision-making. Abstractly, sense gets made of nonsense by people, on the basis of their senses of things and of themselves, preexisting senses which have themselves already been made.

This notion of subject-production is integral to questions of music's political implications. People are always subjects: they are as much the "subjects," as authors, of action as they are "subjected to" all of the institutions that render them legible and meaningful. Subjects have to learn about the relevant formal legal and governmental institutions just as much as the comparatively discursive institutions of sexuality, gender, art and nationhood. The learning of these institutions is, at once, a matter both of learning the limits and parameters of who a subject might actually be and, inseparably, of how much subjects have to “do” to continually reproduce the institutions. Subjects and institutions are each mutually implicated in the construction and continuity of one another. In the more specific case of aesthetics and politics, a person's experience of a given institution – a musical musical genre - is itself constitutive of a particular sort of person, a person whose particularity is defined in part by decisions as to what parts of their identity are and are not politically salient, and which parts, and how much of them, is willing and able to pay attention and think critically about the world. This, here, is both the hypothesis and the question in their abstract forms: music can produce a particular sort of audience member who is thus constructed as a particularly critical sort of citizen. If a person finds her- or himself attuned to a specific performance of music, however fleetingly, and whatever its form and context, then there is an opportunity for that listener to formulate the thought I don't know what's going on here; this is bigger than me, and if the hearer has this thought then there is a chance they also can formulate the thought this only makes sense when we make sense of it; 'sense' is an imposition of hierarchy; we
should be wary of sense that is given to us. That is how music might produce a better citizen.

*Who I am* is certainly important in its own right, as a point of justice in recognition, but it is also crucial to a broader political question. The question of who people are, collectively and individually, is what lends weight to the openness of politics because the answer is often (perhaps always) an act of exclusion. Chantal Mouffe's critique of John Rawls's phrase the "fact of pluralism" is important here, because she so rightly points out how it forecloses consideration of how pluralism is and has to continually be reproduced. This simultaneously distances her from Carl Schmitt as well, in the sense that the latter's Decisions, as sovereign exclusions, are facts of inevitability; for Mouffe they become potential exclusions that might be held in abeyance. As Bonnie Honig puts it, political contestation is often foremost the contestation of a community's constitution, which is exactly the same thing as the legitimacy of particular exclusions. Politics, and especially the sort in which art is complicit, is an eternal and unending competition among claims - narratives, images, utterances, practices, representative forms-as to where the community's boundaries ought to be drawn. All this is drawing on very much the same idea that led Adorno to speak of the injustice inhering to political order. I say all of this more simply to claim that the constitution of a *demos* is necessarily an act of violent exclusion, which means in turn that the only viable demos can be one that self-consciously renders its own "founding violence" contestable and mutable. The hope? That music, like bluegrass, already effecting a certain subject-making, might be
helping undo, or at least opening the undoing, of the exclusion, the subjugation, the miscount.
CHAPTER 3: MANAGING NOSTALGIA

I had learned to think of the word “syncopation” as something that, even if it was a potentially helpful jumping-off point for thinking about different sorts of expertise at a bluegrass festival, was the sort of label with which a person in my position had to be careful when talking to people I didn’t really know. I had certainly learned (as I should have earlier, perhaps) that even if I thought I had navigated myself through problems of analytic categories in situations where they might not really apply, merely using something that sounded like a label for something experts might use could get in the way. I had gotten through my conversation with Walt about the value of off-sync fiddles, but I would likely have constructed myself as a bad listener if I’d insisted on using words that suggested in any way that I was at a bluegrass festival trying to teach the locals about what they were “really” doing.

I felt mostly comfortable with my prospects for avoiding a repeat performance, since “syncopation” was a word I’d coopted not from any expertise even I thought I really had, but from music theory, and came away from that earlier conversation thinking, already, that I just needed to make sure to stay cautious in that territory. There was another big word looming, though, and I was fortunate to have another conversation before I let it get too much traction. As wary as I’d become of music-talk, that is, I’d
thought rather less about categories I might coopt from discourses with which I was both comfortable and (hopefully) competent – like, namely, critiquing what other people are doing.

One of the things people in Bluegrass can appear to be doing is indulging in nostalgia, seeming always to try to locate a previous state of being in the sounds and the people and the stories that seem so often to be so old, a previous state that might hold some promise for a purer future, a previous state that preceded, and which might replace an era of overt conflict and difference. In talking with people and listening to them talk about their understandings of the world, in the midst of what I am calling a depoliticized politics of nonsense, is a far more complicated thing. In practice, what looks to many – and certainly looked to me, initially - like romanticization, emerges as a productive sensibility in which people at bluegrass festivals were able to engage with a much deeper political ambivalence. Instead of mobilizing and reproducing romanticization, nostalgia channels people’s uncertainties and ignorances into more manageable forms. These are cultural performances, often the basis of what is evidently a felt awareness of one’s own fallibility, that produce opportunities for people’s recognition of others as – crucially - others who do not need to make sense. Nostalgia sustains ambivalence, not as ignorance of or disregard for the world but more as viable undecidedness.

The political claim within this argument is that nostalgia, as a self-narrative where people situate themselves in broader but ambivalent social historical contexts, becomes a response to Carl Schmitt’s argument about how politics inevitably reduces to decisions, by people situated in contexts of enabling power, about how society will be ordered.
Schmitt’s Decision distinctions, in concrete form, between who is in charge and who is not, and between who does and does not count as a legitimate part of the community. Schmitt’s argument about the inefficacy of laws and institutions to prevent powerful parties from imposing their will is an artifact of inter-war Germany. Chantal Mouffe’s rather more nuanced reading of Schmitt is that these distinctions, while they do in fact seem to get drawn despite the presence of pluralistic and inclusive legal institutions, are more the product of contestations among incompatible sensibilities about freedom and democracy and individualism and community, where various of these sensibilities can effect a hegemony over the others. For Mouffe, the Decision rendered by the hegemony of a particular sensibility excludes some rightful part of a political entity by defining the community in a particular way, where some parts of it “count” less than others, or not at all. Mouffe’s hope is that these hegemonies among incompatible sensibilities can be kept temporary and unstable, played off one against another, in hopes of perpetually deferring the definitive decision. This is the role of nostalgia, in mobilizing a productive ambivalence: by situating people in bluegrass to not know quite what it is that they want, and where they have been and where they are going, it helps defer those individual and collective decisions about which other people do and don’t count.

I would never have used the word “nostalgia” out loud, I don’t think, in a conversation during my fieldwork, knowing how difficult of a word it is to employ (as an

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105 Carl Schmitt. Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty. (George Schwab, Transl.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006[1922].
academic, at least) in uncritical tones. I could very easily have gone on thinking about the Conservatism I imagined myself to be attacking as something operating, in Bluegrass, through uncritical longings for simpler past realities that never existed but were conveniently mythologized foils for an uncomfortable, “political” present. That would have been what I meant by nostalgia, and while I didn’t want to tell anyone they were imagining a false reality I would likely still have meant it.

What instead needs to be argued is that nostalgia can be an important mode of self-understanding for people in Bluegrass, and that it can function both with and against collective, undifferentiated notions of “Bluegrass people.” Nostalgia is another helpful word, as it happens, not unlike syncopation, to the extent that while the latter is a ‘music’ term and the former is in some sense a critical one, both are words that get applied to bluegrass whether or not they seem, to the sensibility of any particular person, to actually apply. Nostalgia might be the condemnatory label for a thought we see other people indulging, in apparent rejection of the reality in front of them; it might also be a way people manage their relationship with their history and their experience of the reality in front of them, a tool to accommodate themselves to the open-endedness and nonsense of politics. Rather, that is, than just reject them, “conservatively”.

I had the good fortune of having sat for dinner, upon my arrival at the Central Ohio Bluegrass Association’s annual festival, next to the grandson of and across from the man married to Sally, the Association’s President. My introduction, such as it was, hadn’t amounted to much more than an awkward question to an old man with rather little
apparent interest to talk to anyone, and a game of quarter-spinning with the hyper pre-teen. I am certain, though, that between that presence at dinner and my few words with the front gate about being “a writer,” (a more easily escapable answer than “I’m writing my dissertation about politics”), I had made myself visible (and intriguing, perhaps) enough for Sally herself to come find me the next morning. In the midst of running a bluegrass festival, and maybe thankful for a reason to sit down, she gave me almost an hour of her morning, with her talking for most of it. And, importantly, we were sitting at a picnic table in the middle of the festival, in full view, with a number of people lingering and interrupting and waiting to talk to the woman in charge. When she finally left (for the moment), people somehow suddenly felt safer, maybe, approaching me, me the person who now seemed more safe and relevant after talking to Sally.

Bill, very tall, very wide-shouldered, with plaid shirt and very tall baseball cap, was somewhere in his 50s or 60s, somewhat on the young side for this festival where it seemed like there was one Rascal (an electric mobility scooter) for about every 12 people. This may have been at least part of why he was one of the first to approach me and actually sit down, maybe feeling a bit more ready to talk to the kid with the notebook.

“So you’re writing about bluegrass”? he said, as he was still walking toward the other side of my table. I answered him with an “I guess, or, I think so” sort of stammer, but smiling back, hoping he’d keep talking. I was already tired from the conversation with Sally and all the note-taking I was trying to do, and all the mental work of trying to remember the things I knew my pen wasn’t fast enough to record, but glad that my
insecurities about interrupting other people’s lives might prove themselves misplaced in this weird world where people come to you and, basically, interview themselves (good choice of dinner seat, I guess).

Bill seemed to appreciate what I’m guessing he took to be self-deprecation in my articulation of uncertainty about what I was doing at a bluegrass festival with a notebook. “You’re doing research?” he said, still standing, but across the table. I explained that I was at OSU (a vagary allowing, usually, for the avoidance of questions either about being a professor or a student, which you either can’t or don’t want to answer); “I’m working on this idea that bluegrass, a bluegrass festival, is a kind of place that matters for how people make sense of other things, including how they vote.” He raised his eyebrows and pulled in his bottom lip in what looked like surprise at his own feeling, just then, of sufficient intrigue to be sitting down.

“There’s a lot of acrimony, with people here. I’ve been to festivals where bands split up between sets.”

This had happened in a number of my conversations, where when I used the word “politics,” not having yet learned to code my language in more productive terms, the other person proceeded with the apparent understanding that one of the things this entailed was people not getting along with one another.

I acknowledged that I’d heard this, and that it made sense, but posited as a complicating element how it was interesting that the other times it came up I was hearing stories about promoters and bands being the ones that liked to fight, which was an interesting contrast with this idea that the audiences were invested in acting out the image
of all the celebratory communal togetherness suggested by the idea of a “festival”. He just laughed, saying “yeah, you’re probably right, that’s kinda funny”. I had pushed too hard again, asking too much of a question. It didn’t help in fieldwork to be right about something like this, at least not explicitly – as much because it made me into some sort of expert, which to my own sensibility wasn’t true, as because they would stop talking, seeming to think either that I already knew the answers or that I thought I already knew all the answers.

I instead asked him what he did (for a living), in hopes of finding safer territory where he’d maybe see a chance to teach me something. He was a part-time farmer, now, but had retired from teaching agriculture in high school FFA (Future Farmers of America) programs. He told me about how he used to travel to a big livestock show in Madison, Wisconsin every year, where he explained (evidently still processing the theme of what sorts of people do what sorts of things) how he never stayed inside the city, having found a motel a half-hour outside of it where he liked to stop.

“25 Square Miles Surrounded by Reality,” he remembered, what he called his favorite bumper sticker. Wisconsin had, that summer, been receiving a great deal of attention for its Governor’s (Scott Walker’s) fights with Unions as, among other things, the State Senate Democratic Caucus fled the state in an attempt to slow the legislative agenda as the Governor tried to send the Wisconsin State Police to force them back to Madison for an official vote.

“Yeah…” he started, to say something…, “people just acting like it’s easy, but not seeing we just can’t stay in the hole.” I knew by the end of the sentence that we were
back on “Politics,” as public finance. “That poor governor, trying to do a good job, trying to balance the budget...” I realized he was talking about Scott Walker, and was caught off guard. No one else at bluegrass festivals talked about “Politics”, at least not to me (most of whom may have just assumed I was a Socialist, the term then coming back into vernacular fashion for everyone and everything that was not explicitly devoted to deregulating big-Capital marketization.)

I had at least learned to let people like Bill run their own conversations, though, as much as possible, and he moved quickly to sharing a jokingly demeaning story about Wisconsin more generally, saying that when he taught he made a habit of collecting “weird news stories” to take to his class, and “more of them seemed to come from Wisconsin than anywhere else.” He cited that past week’s story of “two justices choking each other” in Milwaukee (by most accounts, actually, the Republican male judge attacked the Democratic female judge, who defended herself) as just more evidence, implicitly, of what happens with “those people” and “their politics.” This was a key example of the use of bluegrass as an avoidance of overt politics, a cue that talking about politics somewhere else could be a safe-seeming platform for engaging in the more implicit narration of politics right here.

We listened to the music, for a bit, not talking for a minute or two, and then talking about a few other things, like the magazine ad he’d just seen for Rhonda Vincent’s new album - he liked the dress, and that she was sitting on a pool table. It was another joke, about a sexy lady in a dress, as a sign that Bill’s thinking kept swing back and forth between the politics of other people and this non-political escape, where people
fool around and try to assure each other that they share sensibilities by making reference to a quasi-burlesqued album promotion that is titillating but, to the people who get it, just a joke.

He drifted quickly back to Ohio, wanting to tell me something important. “You know, a lot of these people [here, at this festival]… A lot of Route 23 [US rte 23, from Florida to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, connecting Western Virginia, Eastern Kentucky and Southern Ohio, bisecting Columbus via High Street, toward Toledo, Detroit, Flint, et al] is surrounded by post-war Southeast émigrés, looking for work on their way to Detroit. There was a big northern spread of people from Virginia, West Virginia. They have that joke down there in Kentucky about the three Rs: Readin’, Rightin’, and Route 23… [pausing, as if he was done, but adding] the ones here [as he gestured around us, at the campers] are the ones whose cars broke down.”

And still more: “you know, you couldn’t get biscuits and gravy on this side of the Ohio River until maybe 30 years ago. There was no traditional southern food, before Bob Evans… you know, the gravy tastes like meat, when you can’t afford much of it.”

There are several elements of this, which is in some sense a story about both Ohio’s proximity to and its distance other places, both to and from the South as well as to and from the North, and its separation from the past – but not by so much that it couldn’t still know how things used to be. Thematically, Bill was putting Ohio in the middle, between an imagined South of the romantic past and an imagined North of the politicized
present. Specifically, there are three ways in which I understand Bill’s story effecting this implicit construction of Ohio, *this* Ohio of Bluegrass, as an in-between.

One motif, here, which I raise first because even if it is more striking here it is representative of almost every single conversation I had, is that the narration of the important experiences are all in the third person. Bill, who was not alone in this regard, spoke of himself only insofar as he was in Wisconsin or Ohio to observe, and to give first-hand authority to his claims about who and what Wisconsinans and the Southern émigrés of Ohio were. I never find anyone, in fact, prepared to construct themselves as a real “bluegrass person”. No one, anywhere, seemed prepared to proclaim for themselves any more than a sort of outsider’s expertise, intent only on mediating for me what I can only infer is, in the context of Central Ohio, an imagined authentic real bluegrass person (or in Bill’s case, either that real bluegrass person or its opposite, the politicized and quarrelsome Northerner). An idea of a real, past South gets bound up with this idea of a real bluegrass person, both of them becoming objects of a romantic condescension that never needs to be reconciled with itself because no one ever needs to claim for themselves the mantle of authenticity. The people, the music and the place all seem to become memorialized artefacts, a seemingly coherent whole, immune to falsification by any ‘reality’ in the present.

Bill was slipping, here, between the third-person voice of authority about bluegrass people now and their more objective-seeming anchoring in the past. These are separate; Bill’s claim to knowledge of other people and of other times are distinct, but function together, seeming to share credibility.
I would also parse out of this as a distinct motif Bill’s use of different notions of politics, with the explicitly petty childishness of Wisconsin contrasted against his (ostensibly to him) more commonsensical perspective on Wisconsin and the obviousness of their need to “not stay in the hole forever.” Bill demonstrated an ability to distinguish between a politics of self-evident acrimony and a politics of implicit particular sensibility. I might be inclined to point to that as a particularly arbitrary distinction, but in the context, even though this, too, was representative of other conversations. It was perhaps more clear from Bill, though, with his skill with the 3rd-person narrative, possibly with lessons drawn as much from the experience as the self-understanding of having been a teacher. The willingness of a person I’d known for 20 minutes to intimate some of his own political sensibilities might not come from such a stark distinction in his mind between politics and commonsense, but might instead indicate something about me, as a safe-seeming outsider and documenter, someone whom he assumed to be “reasonable.” (This despite the fact that it was hard in the circumstances not to recognize that Scot Walker and an opinion about him was significant of a great many more things than just him specifically). Even if that is the case, though, there is still a distinction between the reasonableness of his politics and the unreasonableness of theirs. That distinction, whether between commonsense and politics or between good politics and bad, ultimately serves to magnify the possible effects of the third-person voicing and its claim, in Bill’s case, both to have expertise about and yet personal distance from those Other, real, people. This, here, is the third-person becoming a vehicle for pushing away overt politics, clearing a way to engage in a more implicit politics of quiet sense-making.
The third motif in Bill’s conversation is the tension between escape from and longing for the idea of the lost South of a poor Southern Appalachian history. This is the ambivalence evident in Bill’s missive cloaked first in a joke and then an observation about Route 23, the escape route from a Kentucky coalmine that might have taken people to the post-war modern wealth of the Great Lakes industrial jobs had they not gotten stuck “here”, just north of the Ohio River, celebrating the Bob Evans menu’s recognition of their virtuous wisdom in frugality.

Bill’s 3 Rs is actually a common joke (in Ohio, anyway) about the need to escape Kentucky, as much economically as geographically. It is important to note that how much easier it might be to romanticize the lost cultural home space of the South while not still there, in the ‘real’ poverty and isolation but are instead driving a $100,000 motorhome to camp at a fairgrounds during what, for a great many other people, would be workdays. Bill actually came back to me after our initial conversation, again seeming to anticipate where my thinking had gone, or maybe just to anchor the distinction between himself and these other people: “they talk about how this is a world where even the rich have to pretend to be poor. Look around at all these campers – a lot of these folks are doing alright.” Yet another joke from Bill, the teacher-trickster. It signaled at once an interest to share a sensibility by pointing out the common referents that allowed me to understand how it was funny to him. And yet it also signaled an opinion, a political orientation, about Wisconsin and the entitled public employees pretending to be so vulnerable as to need unions, shaking down the taxpayers in pursuit of their own wealth.
Bill’s story is, in sum, an account of nostalgia of Bluegrass, where in Central Ohio people like Bill seem to be thinking about their proximity to someone else’s relationship with bluegrass, imagining in the third person a fraught ambivalence and practical indecisiveness in the tension between a longing for a simpler, more poor past and the relief of having escaped it in the present. Which is to say, in effect: if I enjoy bluegrass it may be because I can think of it as a part not of my own experience but of someone else’s experience about which I have knowledge, particularly if that someone else is a myth. Musical nostalgia in this case becomes an available narrative of history, even when we recognize it as someone else’s history, and is all the more viable as a narrative when it does not need to square with anyone’s own experience.

Formally, in this broader context, the memorialized past can be located rather easily in the music itself. A style of suit drawn from the 1930s or 40s remains common stagewear, the Bill Monroe-style mandolin tremolos and high male vocals of the 1930s and Earl Scruggs-style banjo of the 1940s are still considered by many to be defining sounds of the genre, and electric instruments are still a little off-putting to many audiences. All of these traits could be anchored, by a historian, in the early middle of the 20th Century, when Bill Monroe’s band was wearing suits at the Opry to look more modern, when the rhythmic mandolin and 3-finger banjo were the exciting new sounds those bands were producing, and when the instruments were acoustic because the electrical ones hadn’t yet become widely available. All that notwithstanding, even if those traits might be attributable either to happenstance or other intentions by a historian, the actuality of a bluegrass festival seems to be that the formalwear and the sounds and
the images simply being stable enough, and old enough just to seem old, in a situation where even the oldest of the attendees would at this point have no experienced memory of anything ‘older’ than what they might see on stage.\footnote{As one woman explained to me, on this theme of a remembrance and history within the music itself, on poverty and independence: “that back and forth, that racing… these Scots-Irish, there’s 9 kids in the family, you’re last in line for dinner you’ve got to fight for yourself. That’s that independence, fighting streak you can hear.” And also on tradition and gender and sexuality: “you hear how tight, nice that harmony is? Look at those gals, [just then on stage] how close they get to each other when they sing that harmony? You’ll never see two men do that, put their faces that close to each other, never sound that good.”}

The key, it seems, is to be just-old-enough but not too old; someone trying to look like they were from the 18th or 19th centuries would surely look to some like a joke, either not taking things seriously enough or trying too hard. Someone just playing slower, older fiddle music, or maybe not singing in the right harmonies, would come across as boring. Gary Shiflett, a “national act” by bluegrass standards (which I saw twice that summer, in fact), stages their entire set like a radio-for-TV show, the entire 5-member band in their baggy suits circling around a single vintage-looking microphone. This is perhaps the best example of just-old-enough. It is possible that what works for someone like Gary Shiflett is an embedded sort of nostalgia, where these significations are not just of being old but of being somewhat accessibly, understandably, quasi-Historically “of the Depression era”, and a reliance not on the idea that the music is from the past but that the music is from a time when people knew the actual past and its truer and proper traditions, as a musical third-person.

My argument, about what appears as nostalgia both in and around the music, is that it can be a mode of ambivalence that helps people manage politics, where a longing for lost, imagined things can be matched with at least a tacit awareness of the fact not just
that they are imagined but that to the extent that those things remembered were ‘real’, they were not quite so ‘good’. Nostalgia in bluegrass is an opening for someone like Bill who, I would like to believe, is already aware in some ways of the complexities and nonsense of the world of politics, providing him a vehicle for the resignation and indecision that politics, and the attempts at inclusion and accessibility that it demands of him. Nostalgia does not have to be a simplistic longing for a more coherent and right-seeming world of the past. It may very well instead be exactly the sort of antidote to romanticization that bluegrass might need, helping to open the undoing of flat, simple memory just as it helps to undo homogenizing concepts of collective identity, maybe allowing space for people like Bill to articulate themselves both with and against the “group” with which they’ve been identified.

Nostalgia can have a communal function as well, as where in Dorothy Noyes’s notion of group the boundaries of groups are contested in a back and forth between images of “community” and the experience of practices, a sense of historical continuity is a bit part of the imagery of community, and the practice of nostalgia is an important mode by which people can access and update the imagery.

The presence in bluegrass of an ambivalent nostalgia is also a sign of an opportunity of unease, and maybe discomfort, with at least a tacit awareness of a problematic past, which itself might translate to the possibility of an awareness in people like Bill that they do not entirely ‘know’ the experiences of other people, now. It is important to recognize the political awareness signified by this nostalgia, in a musical

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108 Dorothy Noyes. *Group*. 
context of both imagined other people (in Wisconsin and the poor, old South) and the actual other people at a festival (imagined, too, in their own way, with those qualities Bill ascribed them when he made sense of them in his own narrative). There is a political reminder hiding inside this nostalgia, where a person like Bill doesn’t even know quite how he himself feels. That sort of discomfort and uncertainty are themselves, as Adorno would argue, perhaps better, politically, than any comfortable feeling of rectitude. Nostalgia opens space for a performance of ambivalence by escaping a different performance, of knowledge and “awareness” (of contemporary political issues), where outside the expectation of an overt political role a person might feel better placed just to consider, humbly, what they don’t know.

There is also a parallel sense of nostalgia - maybe less as a matter of fact than as an available reading – in some of the scholarship on bluegrass. There is a tone of lament that emerges from Bob Artis’s *Bluegrass*\(^\text{109}\) about the genre’s poor timing in coming to the fore just in time to be displaced by Rock ‘n’ Roll and Nashville Country. Neil Rosenberg, too, in the introduction to his *Bluegrass*\(^\text{110}\), speaks of the value of his scholarship being drawn from its efforts to recuperate and re-recognize the music as a legitimate folk product, against a previous generation’s aversion to the study of ‘fakelore’.\(^\text{111}\) The sadness of Bluegrass’s loss of popularity, and its neglect by scholars, are not monolithic romanticizations, though, because as both authors might acknowledge,


\(^{111}\)Rosenberg cites Richard Dorson, Chair of the Indiana University’s Folklore Department, as leading force in steering scholarship away from things like bluegrass as an overly-commodified, inauthentic form and as coming from an over-studied region, in favor of an interest to identify and elevate a particularly “American Folklore” of true, pre-commodified American identity.
they note at the same time how drawn they are, personally, to this niche form where they could maintain these feelings of participation and community. The meaning they drew from the music was made possible in part by its smallness, its relative unpopularity, and its relative ‘neglect’. This question of popularity perhaps deserves its own sub-narrative, here, as it emerges also in the form of more than few people having managed to mention to me the importance, for them, of the smallness and sense of intimacy of festivals.

Bluegrass has to be small enough for the festivals to be intimate, it seems, but it has to be big enough to make the festivals possible, so there are just enough other people coming. There is, too, the 5 or 6 people who mentioned to me that summer – eleven years after it came out – the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*[^112] and its very bluegrassy soundtrack, which included work by original bluegrass royalty Ralph Stanley[^113]. One man in particular told me he was nervous when he saw the movie, thinking about how “hard core” the bluegrass was, but about how “excited” he was when it got popular. This is telling, that it seemed possible for the record to have been “too much” bluegrass and put people off but that evidently, it was comparably possible that the record’s popularity served as a sort of recognition and validation, heretofore and thereafter more absent, of the correctness of at least that one man’s bluegrass sensibility. All this is nostalgia in yet another form, still ambivalent, with the desire for more of its former popularity and the recognition it signifies kept in check by realizations that bluegrass is valuable to them because it is not more popular, “successful,” or recognized *anymore*. Just as nostalgia for Bill might be a way to manage his political ambivalence productively, in recognizing the

nonsense of other people, this, too, is at least an opening. It is an opening for recognition that scholarly recuperation of the form, and the recapturing of a time when the form enjoyed popularity among more people, are perhaps not quite so simple as they seem, juggling these desires for recognition against the reality those recognitions might only ever be, in substance, tentative or fleeting.

What might look like nostalgia in bluegrass, in short, might possibly be a productive channel for what I am arguing is an already existing politicization. A broader cultural pattern, with its own established patterns and discourses, nostalgia could in fact be an important mechanism by which people in bluegrass satisfy their need to make sense of themselves within those cultural patterns (as habitus, perhaps) while also allowing at least some minimal space, perhaps, for recognizing the necessary misunderstanding and nonsense that intervene between themselves and those Other people. It is with third-person narration – not an unusual trope, in the accounts of bluegrass people in Ohio, where no one seems interested to take the label for themselves – that people are able not to commit themselves quite so strongly to particular sensibilities, which maybe both signifies and facilitates their ability to recognize the ambivalence and multiple narratives within a simpler romanticization. What looks like nostalgia in bluegrass may of course be a claim of historically unchanging authoritativeness, where knowing the history makes you the expert, and may as well be notions of concrete identification and stasis for some people seizing rigidly on simpler ideas of an authentic bluegrass person. What is clear, though, is that these are not true for everyone, and that for certain people, for enough people, what might look like nostalgia is actually a mode of ambiguity, disagreement, and
discomfort in their endeavors to make sense of who they are. Nostalgia, then and there, is a sign of the possibility of a more humble orientation to politics, and to the different people that are found there.
CHAPTER 4: HONEST MINSTRELSY

If I was right in my sense that the politics of bluegrass resided in those parts of it that looked a bit nonsensical against the foil of presumptions of their simplicity – like nostalgia, where what looks like naive romanticization might in actual practice be far less sensible than that – then surely I needed to ask what role the music was playing in that nonsense. This matter of what difference music made, and the question of what might have been the difference between a bluegrass festival and a regular campground or a different kind of music festival went beyond the stage practices, the performance and musical styles, the antiquated-seeming gender and political-economic structures evoked in all of it, or any of the other small things that seemed to play into the way nostalgia worked. If the politics of bluegrass were somehow a function of nonsense, I would need to ask what it was about bluegrass that not only went into making the nonsense but also into making it productive.

A central part of my claim in this work is that bluegrass can be heard narrating honestly, but in a way that draws distinctions between the honest form in and with which it narrates and the content of what it says, the latter of which becomes less significant with a dominant mode of joking and irony. The joking honesty is crucial to the success of bluegrass as a political narrator, in fact, because it allows the music to resonate with more people and their wider range of what would count, in each of their situated particularities, as honest. The lingering question of what the music narrates leaves more
room for more people to feel like they are at least somewhat “in” on the joke. There are vestigial elements in bluegrass of blackface minstrelsy, however, that show the stakes of a joking that can do material damage. My sense is that in more promising moments the presence of the joke opens (and keeps open) the question of who belongs, as a hearer of the joke, in the bluegrass, and in the community.

My underlying theoretical claim, in this, is that one of the key things that honesty does is shed interesting, and important light on the distaste for the appearance of repetition that is articulated in Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the “Culture Industry”. For Horkheimer and Adorno, it was repetition that, despite commonsense notions of the chaos ensuing from the end of mass religion, emerged as the product of mass capitalism and had displaced a truer political freedom with a falsely individualized and reductive consumerist notion of “freedom.” Within that logic, what counts as honesty in bluegrass would be a problem – if it seems to tell what purports to be the truth, and that truth cannot by definition change, an honest message is necessarily a repetitive one. A bluegrass claiming honesty thus becomes inherently dishonest, and dishonestly commodified in its peddling of familiar, comfortable, ‘truth’.

Bluegrass’s honesty, though, in its separation of the appearance of the message as honest from the plural specificities with which that message becomes sensible, is too semiotically complex to be reduced to that sort of repetition. My argument, in short, is

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that in bluegrass the feeling of consumable pleasure may not be as inherently regressive as some readings of Adorno would have it.

It was at a stage where I’d settled in to my role as a researcher, feeling more comfortable talking to people and struggling less to endure of a sense of insecurity about whether I was bothering everyone, that I - fortuitously enough, while walking around and trying to take a break – was tracked down by a person whom the festival organizer had evidently told to come talk to me. Pete, this man whom the organizer thought important enough to come share knowledge with me, or at least make himself visible to me, seemed quite aware of his importance. Coming up to me on his golf cart and un-scowling his I’m-busy face, he asked me if I was the guy writing about bluegrass. Our interaction was less a conversation and more a matter of me listening, entertained, as he talked about how we could talk later (either when I was qualified with better questions, which he had no way of knowing I didn’t have, or when he was less busy), as he said “I know everyone, who’s sleeping with who, who’s talking to who. I’ve seen Rhonda Vincent coming out of the shower with nothing but a towel here (motioning to his chest, and then, after a pause, intoning that the reference to her nudity and the sexuality it implied was just part of a joke) “Rhonda’s a good friend of mine,” he chuckled, before leaving on his golf cart.

I was stricken even then by how effectively he had communicated his own monologic importance by cloaking it an exchange that had, putatively, been about a dialogue that he and I might someday have had. I was stricken, too, but less so at the time, by the contrast between my exchange with Pete and what followed with Wayne.
(who perhaps also appreciated the preceding exchange), who had been standing nearby and asked, after Pete left, what I was doing.

I told him I was a writer, doing some research, and asked if he worked here (not an illogical question, since he’d been with Pete, and I thought maybe the important people were sticking together).

“No, don’t work here.” What followed came across as a sort of mysterious non sequitur, an evasion from what I thought was my question about what he did for a living, out there in the real world (since I thought I was just trying to get to know him). This was a good lesson in letting someone talk, though, since he seemed so intent on interviewing himself, and was in fact talking about what I would eventually have wanted to know, which was what he was doing at a bluegrass festival. “I’m sortof a matchmaker, an ambassador,” he said, not at all with the tone of Pete’s self-promotion, but with more the mood of contemplatively sharing an old story. “I make connections, put people together. I found this band from Westerville [a northeastern Columbus suburb], few kids and their father, I had to teach them some etiquette. They didn’t know how to climb [up a chord? up the ladder of prominence? I wasn’t sure], didn’t know how to jam….”

Yet another of bluegrass’s 3rd person narrators talking about the near distance between themselves and the real bluegrass people, he maybe sensed my general fatigue and read it as frustration, asking if I was getting anything good. He intimated that he’d be surprised if anyone wanted to say much about “politics,” asking if people were talking to me, and clearly suspecting not. “Yeah…” I answered, “but not really about politics so
much” (which was mostly true, at least to the extent that the other people probably didn’t think of it as politics).

He was clearly already thinking about politics and ‘these people’ so I asked him why he thought people maybe didn’t want to talk, or be reminded about politics. It wasn’t as if anyone had ignored me, and it wasn’t as if I’d asked anyone how they voted. From that perspective, it might have been misleading of me to say no one wanted to talk about politics, because “Politics” just hadn’t come up. *Wayne* brought it up, though, so it was his claim to defend, and I asked him why.

“*It’s an escape* [his emphasis]. You can talk politics but you’ll not get far. This is about being happy, feeling good. It doesn’t matter whose party you’re in you’re always gonna be griping about something. They don’t want to be reminded of that.” (Pause) “These people are all *honest* [his emphasis], and they don’t want to have to be honest about politics.”

There clearly was something here. I asked him what he thought the music did for that, how music was an escape, how it let them have fun, and why the “*them*” was, at this particular festival at least (but not unrepresentatively) so, old. Why was it even more a fun escape for old people?

“It takes a while for tastes to mature, and these folks are just ready for honest music. *Bluegrass* is really honest.”

“You mean the words?,” I responded, judging him in that moment, ‘knowing’ to myself how, theoretically, lyrics never actually seem to matter very much, or at least on
their own, as if they weren’t embedded in music. I wanted to be sure I was getting as close as possible to what he had meant.

“This [gesturing to the band playing on stage, 100 feet away; we were talking in the middle of their set] is amplified, but if you turn off those microphones and walk up there, it’ll sound just the same, maybe better. It’s not like some rock show with lights everywhere, or some electric guitar plugged into some box that comes out sounding like a drum. This is a real, honest sound.”

It would be easy to add Wayne’s notion of an honest sound as just another item on my growing list of simple nostalgias, speaking of some imaginary pre-commodified historical truth, something I saw people romanticizing as virtuous simply because it seemed authoritatively old. There was something different, here, though, because Wayne was talking about how people were actually interacting with the music, or more precisely how the idea of other people interacting with the music made him feel. Either way, this is an equation in which the music is doing something.

As I was thinking, and trying to figure out how to get all of this on paper so I could try to make sense of it later, he went on: “You know, there’s this old line: ‘people go to Country, use it as music to get drunk to; people listen to bluegrass… and drink a beer while they listen to the music.’ They’re not teetotalers or nothin’, and sometimes someone has a few too many, but really this is about honest music.”

“…but really this is about honest music” is a good bit of field note, I thought. After we listened a bit to the actual music, I tried to circle back around to his story, trying to get a more complete image of him as a narrator. I asked him how he’d gotten here,
how he’d come to bluegrass and found himself one of its ambassadors… (how he’d found
the honesty, I thought to myself). I asked him if he’d always been a bluegrass person, or
if it was a ‘later in life’ discovery.

I finally got my origin narrative, in its own form. He’d listened more to the
harder rock-country, he said, and stammered for a bit (trying, I think, to think of
examples that might work for this young person). “You mean like Merle Haggard,
Waylon Jennings?”

“You know the names,” he said, half as a statement-like, half-surprised that I did.
After another pause, “I was an industrial electrical engineer. Now… I just get in
everybody’s business, find talent, draw connections with promoters…. I wouldn’t do it
for the money. Only do it for the fun of being involved, and the self-fulfillment.”

I was by that point – in retrospect, unfortunately, as I would have liked to collect
more of his thoughts – increasingly in need of my break, and had to take my leave of
Wayne. It felt at the time like I had botched my part of our conversation, having
managed only to get him to end on what looked like the incoherent disconnect between
the bit about Merle and Waylon and the placid vignette about a retirement spent in the
genteel fulfillment of helping other people escape and have fun in bluegrass. I, however,
was completely wrong – if not about botching it, then at least about the incoherence.

It was in writing about Wayne that I recognized the juxtaposition of one grouping,
of the Merle and Waylon (to whom people get drunk) and the career (which even has
“industrial” in its name, and becomes all the more capitalistic when its opposite isn’t “for
the money”), against the other grouping, of honesty, listening, and fulfillment. It was perfectly coherent – which isn’t at all to say that Wayne structured his speech intentionally, or consciously. It just made good logical sense to him, I think, to be thinking about all of those contrasts in a narrative from drunken antisocial commodification toward the ostensive virtue of sober charitable value. He understood my question about how he got to bluegrass perfectly well, and did me the favor of answering it the way it should have been asked instead of how it actually was. What Wayne managed to say (even despite my interventions) was that it was an honest music which narrated for him, in honest form, an otherwise possibly-nonsensical-seeming narrative of how he got here. Once he got to bluegrass, perhaps, he knew how he got to bluegrass.

There are a number of very interesting things going on here, with the political-economic themes of labor and wealth, the difference in production and performance styles between Bluegrass and so-called Hard Country, and the relationships among alcohol, aggression, masculinity, social value, and “fulfillment.” All of those things, and probably others, merit attention of their own. I am particularly interested in the idea of music as narrator, though, as a narrator of honesty or as an honest narrator (or maybe both), as a mechanism for understanding something about how it matters that these politics, of nonsense, recognition, and access, are happening at a bluegrass festival.

With this question of whether and what it matters that this is a bluegrass festival rather than another music or a non-music festival, and the hint that the music emerges as something honest, one of the broader theoretical themes with which I am intersecting is
the matter of music acting as an agent, and the questions of whether and how there might be such a thing as musical agency. My concern is to clarify what sort of claim I am making by entertaining even the possibility that music narrates honesty. Hypothetically, abstractly, if music were to “matter” politically it might have to exist somehow outside the realm of crude “function” where it would only have ever been just a tool or unit of currency in the dealings of “human” actions, intentions, and agency. My own sense is that music “matters” in this way as a matter of common sense, in the form of social connotations of particular genres, with the blackness of early R & B or hip-hop, the urban queerness of disco, the suburban whiteness of grunge, or the hillbilly-ness and southerness of country or bluegrass. If music is an agent for purposes of an argument such as this, it includes the music itself (if ever that could be isolated, which is doubtful) and all of the trappings of racial, gendered, sexualized, regionalized, class-based and political images with which people are making sense of it.¹¹⁵

Importantly, these musics’ abilities to evoke connotations of particular identities cannot merely be dismissed as stereotypes. This is not because they are not reductive stereotypes, which they are, but because labeling something as a stereotype is a recognition of the connotation, which cannot be ignored out of existence. It is one of the ethical obligations attendant to the privilege of academic access, surely, to ask how these

¹¹⁵ I am cognizant of the risk that I might seem to imply, in a conventionally Romantic way, that what I mean is to distinguish between a ‘modern’ life of politics and a world of more authentic ‘folk’ operating less as intentional human beings than as ‘natural’ vehicles for a truer musical culture. I do not mean this. What I do mean is to claim that music exists as a social entity with social effects, neither as a mystical ‘subject’ with a crude sort of agency nor as an inert ‘object’ that is employed by intentional human actors, be they performers, composers, producers, censors, or whatever. Bluegrass is made by people, of course, but “bluegrass” as a thing, or concept, also constrains, enables, sublimates, lends sense to and in some ways might even be seen to “create” people as individuals and as groups. This is Bluegrass as a genre, but a Bakhtinian genre, complicit in producing its own subjects.
connotations emerge and are reproduced as a means of critiquing and perhaps undoing them.

Within that frame, with the at least theoretical possibility of music as agent, the question of what Bluegrass narrates is a glimpse of the political instability of bluegrass, because honesty is a quality, not a subject matter, and what it is that it says honestly is not self-evident. What happens if bluegrass, to someone like Wayne, is narrating exclusionary social hierarchies? Is there a difference between hearing an honest narrative and a correct one, a sincere one, or an authoritative one? What would a dishonest music sound like? Would a politically viable music need to sound dishonest? Are there other qualities, beyond honesty and its lack, with which music might narrate?

These are larger questions, but the fact that Wayne’s story does not answer all of them is somewhat the point. Honesty is not just a quality of narration; it is also a quality ascribed by listeners in the process of making sense of their experience with the music, which is to say that just because the music was honest to Wayne does not necessarily make it honest to me or to anyone else. My intention is not to say that bluegrass is honest only for Wayne – very much the opposite – but rather to claim that honesty is a flexible enough concept to allow for its differential application, to different things by different people.

Wayne’s notion of honesty can be seen capturing the sense that many people articulate about bluegrass, about how it is their music, about how it is a music that seems to speak to who they are. One of the things bluegrass seems best at narrating honestly is identity, speaking as it does to the pre-amplified and un-mediated (immediate) historical
experience of which bluegrass people might think as rightfully their own. This honest music is construed as such by its hearers on the basis of its apparent resonance with their senses of who they are, in what might largely be a reproductive cycle. That sort of reproductive musical honesty would not be unlike what nostalgia effects, at its worst, with the uncritical anchoring of current sensibilities upon the ostensive virtue of a wholly-imagined past experience. Just as a less stable nostalgia of lingering unease and ambivalence might leave some manner of space for broadened recognition of other people in the midst of nonsense, though, honesty might have within itself a comparable sort of opening. Bluegrass might indeed be honestly narrating the exclusion and denial of access to people not understood to already be the one-of-us about whom it is being honest. In practice, though, honesty’s virtue is in its potential role not as a substance of narratives but as a quality of them. The honesty is the rather more fixed part than the content, even as it is ascribed differently, and specifically, by situated particular hearers. It is because of those listeners’ particularity that honesty might as easily be ascribed to narratives of exclusion and denial as to narratives of humility, patience, recognition and access. Just because honesty seems a widespread attribute of bluegrass does not mean that it always narrates the same thing. Actually, that bluegrass might seem broadly honest is more likely evidence that it does not narrate the same thing, if so many feel it speaking in some sense to their own varied experiences. Honesty is the comparatively empty vessel, perhaps, through which numerous narratives might seem to convey themselves, emerging with the apparent shared quality of resonance with whomever people might think themselves to be.
The actual practice of bluegrass is of course not nearly that open-ended; people like Wayne are not able to simply to escape the reproductive force of resonant honesty, and the stereotype of bluegrass as an overwhelmingly white, rural, southern music holds a great deal of sway. It is surely much easier for one person to hear bluegrass being honest about the social value of segregation, for example, than for another person looking for an honest message about the evils of white supremacy. It is far harder to find bluegrass being honest about some things than others, and there are probably some messages that it would be virtually impossible to hear bluegrass narrating honestly. None of this, however, undoes the tiny but crucial point that Wayne illustrated about how what bluegrass says to whom is less relevant than that it says it honestly. The unlikelihood of bluegrass varying what it says, or of it saying anything ‘good’, is far less important than the more simple fact that it might and that, at least once in a while, it probably does.  

The signification by Wayne’s “honesty” of the possibility of different listeners hearing bluegrass narrate differently but with similar resonance is reminiscent, in a way, of what Neil Rosenberg argued was one of the traits that helped explain bluegrass’s success. One of the tenets of Rosenberg’s account of the genre is that much of it was delineated by Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys’ performances on the Grand Ole Opry starting in 1939. What later was differentiated as a distinct genre with the name of ‘bluegrass’ was initially only another act in the celebration of hillbilly music. As Rosenberg recounts it, the Opry had developed as an outgrowth of existing forms of

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116 Noel Ignatiev. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995., as theory of identity assignment, with race, but also beyond race; With an honest, and authoritative-sounding music; Genre, again, and recognizable form gets semi-reproduced within contested frames and on basis of hybridity.
“Barn Dance” radio showcases of country music and later embraced a role (made possible by better radio technology and increased popularity) of spreading and further popularizing a rural, southern counterpart to the opera broadcasts with which it abutted airtime.\textsuperscript{117} The Opry became a way of selling the virtues of a rural and more plain America, by way of its music, to the urban wealth that consumed it. Rosenberg’s argument about the Opry is that its founder George Hay made it a burlesque from the beginning, a show inhabiting existing and recognizable forms of stagecraft and performance that might appear to signify to an outsider an attempt at seriousness, with professional musicians dressed down in coveralls, comedians in blackface, and all the other markers with which Hay attempted to construct authentic performances. It was a show that might seem a failed attempt at seriousness from the outside, but a show with a wink to people who would know better, people who would ‘get’ that it wasn’t trying to be serious, and understand in some sense that this show was using the form to poke fun at other people’s pretension of seriousness. To George Hay’s (very profitable) joke, Rosenberg is arguing, Bill Monroe effected his own joke on George Hay and the Opry. After his arrival in 1939, Monroe dressed his bands in suits and crafted their stage presence as one of formal and attentive posture, as visual signifiers of a sort of urbane discipline that would set them apart from the rest of the show’s cast. That stage presence, with the fact that the band was playing music being described as faster, more ‘rhythmic,’

\textsuperscript{117} The name itself was first documented in the words of founder George Hay in 1927, in introducing the show: "For the past hour, we have been listening to music taken largely from Grand Opera. From now on, we will present the 'Grand Ole Opry.'" Interestingly enough, Hay made the comments as part of an introduction of Deford Bailey, an African-American harmonica player. ("Bailey, Deford", list of inductees, Country Music Hall of Fame. countrymusichalloffame.org/full-list-of-inductees/view/deford-bailey. Retrieved 7/21/2013)
and more exciting on the basis of seemingly rural and authentic southern sounds, together produced the sense that if George Hay was trying to sell hillbillies to the North and East Coast, Bill Monroe was out-hillbillying George Hay, seeming to violate some of the parameters of what he thought he was selling while at the same time placing themselves at the center of his product. Bluegrass became a joke, leaving an audience with the sense that they did not know quite what they were watching, questioning the music’s intentions, and wondering how serious these men in the suits really were about what they were doing.

In that regard, the possibility that bluegrass is a joke might not be contradicted in the least by what Wayne seemed to be saying about its honesty. Insofar as the attribute of honesty is more important than what is being said, a broader embrace of honesty might actually invite a person to question what the music is saying, as much to themselves as to other people, just as they ascribe to it a quality of honesty. There is no logical reason why bluegrass could not, if even in some small way, be either an honest joke or jokingly honest.

The concept of a joke might be even more politically helpful, in fact, in the sense that jokes themselves seem to presuppose an attempt at some sort of intimacy. Jokes must have been constructed, if they hope to work as a joke, in a ways that allow or compel another person to ‘get it’, which necessarily involves the sort of recognition and intimacy involved in the teller having tried, at least, to think about what will and won’t

118 Rosenberg, pp4-5.
make sense to the other person, and how the juxtaposition of the two could be presented in forms from which Others might derive some degree of pleasure or humor.

Just as with honesty, too, the rubric of a joke raises its own question, of among whom something counts as a joke, and the possibility that joking is another mechanism for reproducing exclusion from pre-shared sensibilities – in this case, shared senses of what is funny. This is not the only way bluegrass as a joke might work. One way to construe bluegrass as a joke is to reduce it to impersonation, where the man in a suit on stage, with the banjo, is just impersonating the ‘businessman’ with the suit, making fun of that urban, bourgeois lifestyle, while everyone knows that he’s just a hillbilly banjo player. Impersonation might of course move the other direction, where the man in the coveralls and the banjo is making a claim about how interesting it is that the sound of a banjo is more authentic when played by a real hillbilly, when everyone of course knows that he is in actuality just an entrepreneurial professional musician. These are, certainly, available and not uncommon interpretations, where the joke serves primarily as part of the knowledge that audiences produce about the performance, where there is little space for question of what is meant, of what the music is narrating.

Another possibility, one that is not unlikely, would be an awareness of the joke not coupled with presumptions about what the music is narrating. Rather than impersonation replacing one idea with another, joking may be more a matter just of displacing the notion of literalness, with no replacement. Joking, in my sense of how Wayne seemed to be describing honesty in bluegrass, seems something more along the lines of a realization that it’s precisely because the guy on stage is occupying the
character of a hillbilly-banjo-player, and always has, that people suspect he may mean something else. Whatever that “something else” could be needs to remain the open question.

Bluegrass, the broader joke, is embedded – defined, perhaps - with this sense of irony, not of switching between referents where inside listeners know what the music means, but a joke on seriousness. Bluegrass is in some sense a hoax, perhaps, maybe still aimed against the commodification of hillbillyness that it was in 1939, maybe a hoax on precisely those sorts of people who want to hear it as honest or nostalgic in the most crude forms, a hoax on people not ready to see its irony. Importantly, it is a hoax in which many of its listeners are half-complicit: they may not know what it intends, or what it is saying, and the line in bluegrass between kitsch and camp, sincerity and irony, is never easy to delineate. What so many of those listeners do seem to know, though, is that it is not always serious and that this music is narrating, honestly, about precisely that joking uncertainty and irony.

119 Barbara Ching, in her Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), has made a similar argument about the burlesqued masculinity of Hard Country as a manifestation of the experience of a failed American Dream of tradition and transcendence. Ching argues that the musics of Hank Williams, Jr., Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, etc., (the ‘before’ of Wayne’s narrative, incidentally) ought not be understood as literal accounts of the violent misogyny they seem to narrate, because upon deeper reading they can be understood as narrations of all the incoherencies of dominant tropes of meritocratic wealth accumulation and personal independence. Ching suggests these musics ought instead be understood as a critique of what they seem at first to be celebrating, not replacing them with anything but merely performing their inadequacies, and perhaps attuning listeners to the need for suspicion and caution in regard to inaccessible-seeming musical tropes. My naïve hope is that any music, like bluegrass, that pretends toward “transparency” and “knowability” will be the one most certain to be undoing its own labels and knowledge. I want, in less critical moments, for music not to “correct” social truth claims but, really, to show us how to reject the idea of knowledge themselves, and to leave people more humble, more attuned to the possibility that they don’t “know” things. I sometimes want to see Bluegrass working to undo things like class or race when listeners find themselves in an inside joke with the musicians (untrustworthy narrators intent to demonstrate their untrustworthiness) about the artificiality of a repetitive-seeming musical form.
Joking has another important historical context, relevant in its relation to bluegrass, in the form of blackface minstrelsy. This is a particularly important observation, too, in that blackface minstrelsy is also a potent illustration of how an unstable, ironic, or jocular narrative is not at all the same as a ‘good’ or ‘progressive’ narrative. If the political possibility of a thing like bluegrass resides in its potential role of producing and illuminating moments where people might recognize each other as nonsensical but deserving, they might just as easily not. In fact, in the case of bluegrass, it seems likely that those moments of exclusion and denial will continue to outnumber the moments even of the attempts at recognition and access. More than just as much as an illustration of how joking can effect violence, like by reproducing racial typing, my argument is that the joking of bluegrass is actually itself a material vestige of blackface minstrelsy.

Part of the argument that a history of blackface minstrelsy matters for contemporary bluegrass is that it still matters, even when the performers themselves are no longer wearing blackface. It still matters, because there was more to blackface minstrelsy than the blacked faces of [mostly] white performers, and if the other characteristics of the form were politically efficacious in 1850 or 1890 or 1930, and some or all of them endure (hybridized or not) in current practice, then would it not be important to at least know?

American Studies scholar Eric Lott argued, in his *Love and Theft*, that blackface minstrelsy was not simply a means by which white entertainers employed caricaturing
tropes of blackness, and performed for white audiences among whom the form became so popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as a manifestation of their shared contempt and hatred for the black population.\textsuperscript{120} Lott’s argument is that blackface was more an example of working-class immigrants trying to articulate their own cultural citizenship \textit{against} an exclusive upper class, partially in alignment with and partially also against African Americans. Blackface minstrelsy, in Lott’s account, became a staged variety show of comedy skits, music, story-telling, and stage-bosses (masters of ceremonies), possibly the dominant form of American popular culture by the late nineteenth century, before morphing into and being displaced by Vaudeville, not as a way to enact violence on the black population but as a way for Irish, Germans, and others to articulate themselves as legitimate citizens. The fact that it happened through the material form of black makeup and what claimed to be vernacular black speech patterns was hugely important to the effect all of this had, but does not in itself account for the entirety of what sense the performers and their audiences were making of it. Lott’s argument is that a broader understanding of Blackface Minstrelsy must account not just for the theft of black identity (be it real or imagined) but also the love, desire, admiration, and various other comparatively ‘good’ intentions involved in the 19th century United States working class’s management of its relationship with the black citizenry through minstrelsy. Neither Lott nor I am arguing that the intentions undo the effects; it is, rather, a deeper understanding of the intentions and the social work that blackface minstrelsy

did, that better shows how those effects were produced, and how people attempted to justify them.

The simplest historical answer to why a person ought to care about blackface is that it enacted violence on a particular group of human beings through each of two senses of the word “representation”. It legitimized insult and caricature of enormous numbers of people. It also literally displaced and devalued in the public sphere the “actual” experiences of persons of color. There is also the fear and wariness a person ought to experience at the prospect of enjoying as ‘beautiful’ and ‘comforting’ something that was actually a product of abhorrent acts of violence and social exclusion.

I am claiming here that bluegrass’s jokes are descended from this world of minstrelsy, and that the political potential of a genre that can be understood never to be entirely serious, even being honest about its ironic form, are minstrelsy in another form. Even without the blackface part, the lineage of bluegrass so faithfully back to the Blue Grass Boys of 1939, on an Opry stage made possible as a sensible place to spend entertainment money only against a popular culture history that included Vaudeville and Blackface, there are ways that bluegrass can be understood logically to bear trappings of minstrelsy.

My broader concern, though, is not to ask how or maybe even why bluegrass might appear as a sort of minstrel show. What matters more, in this instance, is the political relevance, the material effects, of bluegrass’s jokes. Eric Lott’s account of minstrelsy is one of how those material effects can stem from desire for the target of joking, and of how the ostensive target of the joking is sometimes just fodder for the
performers’ negotiation of relationships with third parties. The story of blackface minstrelsy, as much in its metaphorical as in its formal genealogical relationship to bluegrass, is a warning of the risks of joking. It raises the question of whether, in a specific sense, bluegrass is a minstrelsy effecting a harm on poor, rural, southern white that, while of course paling in comparison to the effects of 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century blackface, would still appear problematic.

There is another sense, though, that what recognizing bluegrass as minstrelsy does most fundamentally is raise the stakes of the honest joking. All minstrelsy may be joking, made possible by and at the expense of an identity that is not the performer’s own, but not all joking is minstrelsy. Even if the joking of bluegrass, both in its form and its content, is made more possible by its historical linkage to minstrelsy, this does not mean that the honest joking of bluegrass is the same as the violent joking of blackface, or that it need be understood as such. Perhaps, in fact, the vestigial minstrelsy that emerges in bluegrass might be recognized as much for the insecurity and exclusion that Lott said motivated much of its consumption as for its capacity for violence. Maybe bluegrass-as-minstrelsy might be understood as a sign of the sorts of uncertainties and incoherencies that in blackface minstrelsy became the source of violence, but that in bluegrass minstrelsy might more productively feed into the form’s honest joking and irony that are at the heart of its political potential.

Even if all that is true, however, there are other challenges posed by conjoining joking with politics. As much as a more general embrace of how irony and self-questioning narration might help undo the rigid categories of knowledge – \textit{this is politics},
that is art, this is a genre, you belong, you don’t – simply saying those categories are artificial or arbitrary does not unmake them. One particularly complicated way in which those categories get reproduced is through their critique, which is perhaps just one of the unavoidable traps involved in the privilege of being an academic. As important as it may be to understand minstrelsy, for example, and role of so-called “African American culture” in what we now recognize as bluegrass, the documentation of these histories can be problematic. As one example, Allen Farmelo’s “An Alternative History for Bluegrass” is an incredibly helpful plea for retelling the truth about Bluegrass’s multiracial and ‘miscigenated’ history (the Africanness of the banjo, Bill Monroe’s personal experience with black musicians, the adoption of Jazz stylings), seemingly with the implication that recovering an untold history might help allow us to undo the fact that so many bluegrass people might, currently, use the music as an object of identification based on historical purity claims. Farmelo’s admirable but unstated hope seems to be that if we clarify the historical narrative then perhaps we can re-write the future narrative. There is a risk in

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121 As Noel Ignatiev has articulated in terms of race and whiteness (How the Irish Became White. New York: Routledge, 1995.), Judith Butler (Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990 and Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”. New York: Routledge, 1993) and Michel Foucault (History of Sexuality, v.1: An Introduction. 2d Ed. (Robert Hurley, Transl.) Vintage Books, 1980.) with gender and sexuality, as just a few examples, it is often the categories of identity that preclude the sorts of substantive recognition that matter most, but the historical rootedness of those categories, and the ways they have evolved, make them particularly difficult simply to undo. The fact that they are artificial does not mean they are not real but rather that they are made, as artifice, and because people are assigned to categories is not itself evidence that they can be reassigned, as if centuries of laborious category-making could just be ignored. There is, however, the possibility of a connection between durable-but-artificial social categories and the political salience of music, in the form of better understanding what Bakhtin argued about genre and Bourdieu about practice (and all of the above authors as well), which is that one of the reasons categories (be they of people or music) are so durable is that they are continually reproduced as such by the practices of people who treat them as if they were natural or immutable.

underestimating the rigidity of bluegrass’s apparent vernacular history, though, and
forgetting that an honest bluegrass is for a great many people very honestly purely
white. Farmelo’s argument is just one example; Robert Cantwell’s *Bluegrass
Breakdown* constructs a particularly extensive documentation of bluegrass’s relationship
with minstrelsy specifically and race generally; Neil Rosenberg’s *Bluegrass* is
historically focused, though with rather little focus on race. There is no reason to fault or
undermine these endeavors to complicate historical narratives. It is important to recall,
though, in recognizing the challenges that are the context in which an honest, joking
bluegrass might hope to be something other than reductive and conservative, that
complicating historical narratives may not be sufficient for productive political critique.
The fact that various scholars have taken the time to recognize the “contribution” – most
of them passive and without consent – of slaves and former slaves to bluegrass, and really
to all dominant American vernacular musics can appear as an implicit argument that we
ought to “set the record straight”, perhaps to better recognize where our ever-unpayable
debts are due. At worst, we feel as if they are paid. Even if not, though, there is still a
political risk to this mode of argument-by-truth-telling, where the relevance and the
political claim are left implicit. It depoliticizes the matter of what counts as correct or
relevant by closing off contestation over the issue of *to whom*.

123 Many people shared notions of the Southernness of the music in my conversations with them, with no
apparent recognition of the slavery that lasted for almost a century more there than elsewhere. Some
contextualized that Southernness as an Appalachian, or more specifically Eastern Kentucky or West
Virginian Southernness, the latter state recognized as having by the end of the 19th century become
properly Southern. At least 4 people referred to the “Scots-Irish” identity of those southerners, as
something that more authoritatively and truly defined who those bluegrass people were, either now or
then. Not once did anyone even hint at any knowledge or acknowledgment of slavery, African folk
tradition, or borrowed or hybridized styles.
The potential political problem of unquestioningly valuing the correctness of “history”, and the reason why it is such a challenging context to an ironic, joking bluegrass, is that it seem part of a broader social infatuation with facts - particularly historical facts - as things super-ordinate to our political debates. This is just one side lesson of a jocular bluegrass, as a view to a manifestation of the problem of depoliticization, but it is worth noting here the similarities among implicitly valuing the correct history of bluegrass, the presumption that there is a “correct” way to manage an economy or to use a military. There are, of course, good or bad ways to do each of these things, judged as such from particular standpoints and perspectives. What is important, though, is not so much the answer to those questions but at least an attempt of access to, and inclusion in, a political process centered on the breadth of nonsensical-seeming standpoints and perspectives. All this is, more briefly, an example of the mutual complicity of broader political contexts and the practices used to critique them in the exclusions and denials of depoliticization.

These are profoundly important matters of context. In a bluegrass that matters – which is not to say all bluegrass, maybe, but the bluegrass that matters - what is being played matters less than how, where might be heard making an open claim to honesty, not to a substantive referent but, in a sense, to its own trustworthiness. The bluegrass that works, politically, is the hoax, a certain sort of bluegrass person half in on it, a formal

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124 This is an argument that much of what passes as “Politics” is strategic if unwitting diversion by powerful interests, away from more fundamental issues of who wins and loses in the imposed governing sensibility, where people are functionally excluded from the politics that is their only hope by the maintenance of a system that denies the possibility that there is ever any more than one sensibility that makes sense.
manifestation of a vestigial minstrelsy lending the music all the more instability in its irony. It an instability of sufficient gravity, of the lessons of blackface minstrelsy, but perhaps all the moreso with the possibility, at least, of a certain sort of listener being able to be ask the questions about quite what it is that counts as honest to everyone else, and hearing, maybe, the reality that what matters is their recognition that it doesn’t need to make sense.
CHAPTER 5: A FIGURE OF IMPOSSIBLE VIRTUE

The politics of bluegrass may very well be hidden somewhere in the music’s honest-seeming and jocular narrations, where everyone might recognize their own uncertainty and ignorance of what’s really going on and of what sense the other people around them are making of all of the nonsense – a questioning of what the music is saying, but with a recognition of the music’s broader honesty. Even in a context of incredibly resilient political-intellectual categories, that honest joking is sometimes (if rarely) buttressed in its capacity for political openness through a nostalgia that allows for recognition of others’ nonsense even as it allows people to manage their own understandings, as much of themselves as of their relative centrality and belonging to the groups of people around them. One of the most central ways this nostalgic joking seems to open the possibility of politics in bluegrass is through the form of an image, and an idea, of a bluegrass virtuoso that emerges from the maybe-nonsensical conjunctions of the senses of family and improvisation that appear in bluegrass.

A significant if not dominant element in the aesthetic of bluegrass (which is to say, what often feels right about it, to many people) in the festivals of Central Ohio is consolidated on the figure of the bluegrass virtuoso. This figure emerges from a cultural and political-economic environment where markers of “family” comprise key elements of bluegrass’ normalcy. A particular form of virtuosity, as an ideal, becomes sustainable
against this backdrop, not as a “true” virtuosity of great objectively-identifiable performative skill but as a particular sort of virtuosity conjoined with family, tradition, and childhood. This bluegrass virtuoso emerges and is sustained in the music as an apparent vehicle for stasis and conservative social value, with the appearance of virtue conjoined to the promise of skill, often on the person of the child or in the gimmickry of an adult good enough to fool around. In fact, the figure becomes more potent and valuable in its failure to materialize as a “true” virtuoso beyond the children and the gimmicks.

In its absence, the imagined possibility of the bluegrass virtuoso is marked by the ostensive presence of the true virtuoso, somewhere else, signifying always that the bluegrass virtuoso is possible but not “here.” It is an arrangement that endures because as long as no one believes the virtuoso is “here” its impossibility cannot be proved. Politically, the ability of the bluegrass virtuosos to suspend recognition of the impossibility of the “virtue” it might claim to represent allows for the sustained fealty to “tradition” as an exclusion.

Importantly, it may not always work. The trope of family can in interesting ways fall back and in on itself, where what are frequently valued as conservative ideals of normativity and homogeneity sometimes expand, in effect if not in name, into values of acceptance and inclusion. In the situation of perpetually deferred ideals of virtue, where the good person is always imagined to be somewhere else, never here, the sense that the people who are ‘here’ are somehow less-than might be undone. The same “family” imagery of conservative ‘family values’ and heteronormative reproductive policing of the
future might in some tiny way become a critique, asking if the imagined basis of purity and innocence of those conservative ideals really have any basis in experience.

It is in that way that the bluegrass virtuoso might become, among other things, a response to the theory of the implied innocence of the powerful in Hannah Arendt’s critique of normalcy. One of the key lessons of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* seems to be the implication that political power is often instantiated in what counts as normal. In her case, the dominant Western desire for ‘justice’ grounded in a clear determination and delineation between guilt and its obverse, innocence, after the Second World War and Germany’s “final solution”. Arendt’s implication is that the identification and labeling of political problems and evils is often a strategy used by entrenched interests to protect their own sense of innocence and victimhood by falsely constructing the problems and evils as exceptions to an otherwise normal state of affairs with which they themselves are identified. Arendt’s hope is to recognize the falsehood of normalcy and the culpability of broader structures in what are otherwise falsely isolable ‘problems.’

The hope of the bluegrass virtuoso, in its impossibility and its embeddedness with complicated notions of family, is that the presumed innocence of the powerful, in the form of a regressive sense of family values and heternormative exclusivity, might become aware of the impossibility of its own ideals and the violence of its own practices. In practice, as figured by the bluegrass virtuoso, the apparent tradition is itself exclusive insofar as it is a claimed fealty to family values, traditional marriage, quasi-official religiosity, and the reified publicity of a ‘private’ sphere; it’s the repetition of the experience of its impossibility that might undo it.
This bluegrass virtuoso is not, it is important to reiterate, ever an actual person, and nor *can* it be if it is to carry the weight of any politics. What has emerged from my conversations with so many people at bluegrass festivals - people constructing themselves perhaps not as “Researchers,” but certainly as people involved in thinking about what it means to be a bluegrass person - is a consistent theme of the need *not* to match those ideas about real bluegrass people against a reality that could falsify them. This is partly the same notion as the ubiquitous third-person narration about bluegrass people that allows for a nostalgic embrace of the imagined histories of Others that are immune to the possibility of being wrong. More broadly, though, my argument about the political efficacy of this bluegrass virtuoso is less a matter of that observation about nostalgia and more hypothetical: the idea of a bluegrass virtuoso emerges out of a constellation of conceptions of the value of family, performance norms, and performers, and if anyone were to proclaim too concretely that an actual bluegrass virtuoso had appeared then it likely could not be understood as a credible claim, because the standards are practically unattainable by design. My argument, because of this built-in unattainability, is that the bluegrass virtuoso is valuable, and does what political work it may, not despite its unattainability but because of it. If it were actually attainable, if it were to somehow materialize in any concrete form, that is, it would lose any of the political content that mattered in the first place.

The first piece of all this - my connection between the complexity of the imagery of family in bluegrass and the politics I was trying to find and to find a way to talk about,
started to assume at least a minimal degree of clarity in a conversation I had at the Musicians Against Childhood Cancer festival (“the MACC”, formerly the “Bluegrass Classic”, before it became a fundraiser for leukemia research) in the middle of July, now past half-way of my planned research. I was by that time very tired, physically, as much from the schedule of attending these festivals and performances so regularly as from the typical central Ohio summer weather, which is not generally an environment amenable to sitting outside casually waiting for things to happen. I had just arrived at this festival in suburban Columbus, having spent the morning at work but leaving in time to catch the start of the program, and gone directly to the stage area. Moving slowly, after the walk across the field that was the day-visitor parking area, I started immediately looking for shade, having learned that talking to strangers, even as it had become easier over the course of the summer, became more difficult when I was unable to open my eyes in the sun and when I could not move for fear of becoming so overheated that those strangers would be distracted by my apparent discomfort. The MACC is the largest of the Central Ohio Bluegrass Festivals, as much in terms of the number of ‘national acts’ who practically donate their time to contribute to its fundraising as for the audience that attends to see them. It is a relative size, for music performances; I never counted more than about 200 people in the audience at any given time, which was surely a figure depressed by the fact that so many people would, I’m sure, have been wary of putting their aged bodies in the exposed sun. Despite the overall numbers, though, there was definitely a broader age distribution here than there had been at other festivals, with a much higher representation of people between 15 and 60.
I was standing behind the large tent that is typical of festivals, constructed to the rear of the lawnchair area in front of the stage for shade and rain protection, trying to assess those demographic details and thinking about possible connections among the name recognition of big-for-bluegrass acts like James King and Doyle Lawson, proximity to an urban center, the idea of a for-charity festival, and questions of who attends. I was also, I’m sure, looking uncomfortable in the 105-degree heat and trying to feel better in the shade when a man walked up behind me and made a comment, maybe or maybe not to me, saying “Oh, they have shade this year – that’s great”. I was at that moment still thinking about whether ethnography was worthwhile in this heat, and the possibility I might kill an old person by trapping them in a conversation, and probably not particularly interested in having a conversation just then. I was, though, the one holding what was by then a well worn spiral notebook and still looking, even with the other younger people around, like I didn’t quite belong. Still wary of the likelihood that I was always close, at a bluegrass festival, to coming across as the snobbish elitist if I did not talk, and maybe recognizing the value of a conversation with a person who both initiates conversations with odd-looking strangers and tacitly identifies himself as someone who’s been here before, I responded “do they not usually do that?” “No, not since I’ve been coming”.

“They have fans, too” I pointed out, gesturing to the large fans arranged inside the tent (not yet turned on, but presumably) for some added cooling. I waited for a sort of signal of his openness to more conversation, while also staking (maybe unwisely) at least a bit of a claim to my own position as someone with a bit of experiential authority,
(having been standing there first by 10 minutes, using what I had), knowing I wanted to hear more about *his* experiential authority.

He did not leave, and did not seem inclined to go back into the sun, so I asked him if he’d been to this festival before, if he knew how big it would get, and other of the sorts of things I thought might give him some traction to talk about whatever interested him. He answered that “we” [presumably his family] had been coming for a long time, just from Marysville (about an hour north-northwest of this southern suburb, on the other side of Columbus) and, after talking for a while about camping and the weather, and about how I wasn’t going to be able to camp (another way to emphasize my relative outsidersness, and my need to be told about real bluegrass, I thought), and we ended up talking about how people come to bluegrass, how people learn to like it. He explained that they actually went to a lot of festivals around Ohio; we compared notes on people we knew in common from my visit to the COBA festival the previous month, a festival he’d missed this year.

He, at this point surely having noticed my notebook but not addressing it directly, asked what I was doing here, asking in a sense what I knew about bluegrass. I explained that I had been around bluegrass when I was younger, but had been away and was back doing work.

“On what?”, he asked, logically enough.

“I’m arguing that the things going on in a place like this, and the things that make a person come here and the things they’re doing after they’re gone all matter for the rest of the things that’re happening in how they’re making sense of the rest of their world...
away from there. So it’s a kinda vague, abstract argument, but I guess that’s why I get a few hundred pages to figure it out. But it’s really an argument against what I think is a commonsense notion, in some people’s minds, that your musical preferences and what you like is just in this little box over here [gesturing a sort of sphere with my hand, off to my side] and your politics and economics or whatever are over here [gesturing likewise, to the other side] completely separate, and they don’t have anything to do with one another. I think I’m trying to argue that all of it comes from the same pot.”

“Yeah,” he answered, with what I heard as a tone of skeptical interest, “I don’t think I’ve ever much thought about it but I don’t know how much politics there is here. I imagine there’s a lot of Union, lot of coal miner here. I’d guess there’s about 50% union.”

I answered him with an observation, that “it’s been funny, how almost everyone will say bluegrass isn’t political, and they’ll all acknowledge the ‘rules’ that it’s not polite, or it’s not ‘safe’ to talk politics, but they all still have a very good idea of what’s going on. They’ll talk about all the reasons why bluegrass doesn’t ‘belong’ with politics in it, as if to say they already know about all the inevitable disagreement. So it’s as if they find all sorts of ways to talk about it – the politics - without actually talking about it. He laughed.

“I think you’ll find they’re all hard-working people”, he said, and went on (perhaps unwittingly, seemingly in illustration of my point): in contrast to the “hippies we saw at [some other festival]. I didn’t even know hippies still existed. Anyway, none of ‘em probably worked. Probably all waiting for the government to give them something.”
He trailed off, not making it explicit but seeming clearly to draw a contrast between “those” hippies and the “real” bluegrass people. “I think they’ve [the real bluegrass people] been around long enough to know better than to be interested in simple solutions to problems.”

He elaborated: “Lots of these movements – the greens, the anti-wars – they just don’t seem to see that it’s just that not everyone’s gonna be a green, or whatever. These folks [here, in real bluegrass] know better than to think that. [pause] If you compare this with, say, folk or hip-hop, they [the folk and hip-hop] have politics right up on the surface. Compared to that this doesn’t have any politics.” I offer my sense that it’s just buried deeper here, saying something about the politics in the music being analogous to the politics of the people. “They still sing plenty about labor and class and religion, right.” This may not have been the best example I could have used, in retrospect. He laughs again, though this time in my maybe-paranoid ears it sounds more like a “yeah, you would think that” than an “oh, maybe you’re right.”

I struggled, in my heat-induced impatience, to hear what followed as anything other than a diatribe about what he was calling free-speachers and anti-wars, “standing in the middle of the road [him probably unaware of the pun] talking, acting like they don’t recognize how reliant they are on the military for their ability to be standing in the middle of that road talking.”

But then, directly: “It’s funny, I remember someone told me once, how if you can picture yourself walking through a modern art museum with the curator right behind you and you stop and say ‘geeze, that’s horrible,’ and you stop and the next one and say
‘geeze, who could think that was pretty?,’ and you stop at all of them, and you get to the other end and the guy behind you says ‘you know, those were all my paintings....’ The extended metaphor seemed rehearsed, as if he were telling me a story about a political aphorism rather than trying to use the aphorism to teach me something. But then, crucially, “If we could all just realize we’re all one big family. No god in the world would say ‘I’m gonna make these Jews, these Muslims (gesturing segmentations with his hands)... If they [presumably the Jews and Muslims, and the Greens and anti-wars and free-speachers] would just get together and recognize that it’s no god that would draw those lines; it’s us [his emphasis] that draws those lines.”

I knew this was important, this use of a sense of family to speak about what sounded very much like questions of inclusion and recognition in a conversation about politics – and all the more so from a person who seemed so comfortable identifying himself along the lines of what would in conventional terms be deemed Conservative. Not wanting to miss anything more, though, I just focused on listening, and on hoping my notes on this would be good enough, as he went on: “It’s like this bumper sticker I saw, says ‘we send people over there to kill people to show them that killing people is wrong.’ Obviously a Liberal bumper sticker [managing both to sneer and scoff] but still, I remember thinking ‘yeah...’”

There is something here in Steve’s use of the family imagery, where he seems to be negotiating between their good ideas and his own feeling of knowledge of “their” wrongness, a temporary reconciliation of a paradox outside the glare of overt conflict, as
maybe a seed for how ‘family’ could be a productive trope, a move that acknowledges
the nonsense just as it denies it as an impediment.

And, returning without my prompting, “But yeah, this music, I guess, I see a bit of
what you’re saying. People think it’s just dumb hillbilly music, say ‘you try and play
some of that stuff’. I might sound simple but yeah, it’s really complicated. People think
Deliverance, or whatever, but yeah, this is complicated [real?, I wondered,] stuff.” I
began to think about this as a sign of his insecurity, in this family of his, about not being
recognized, him with his music, as anything more than a simple hillbilly.

Steve covered a lot of territory in that conversation, and much of it on his own.
Two things are striking, here. Steve is yet another example of a bluegrass narrator
speaking in the third person, where “these people” know better than to believe in simple
solutions to political problems, while “it’s us who draws those lines” between groups of
people. Importantly, too (and even more strikingly at the time, with my less-developed
sense of how to make sense of these politics) was his ability to frame his “Conservative”
position as one of a pluralist inclusion of differences, circumscribing this embrace of
diversity saying (his words): “if we could all just realize we’re all one big family….”

It would be easy to dismiss Steve’s use of “family” as a hollow cliché, here, but
he was speaking in a context – bluegrass more generally – where kids on stage and family
bands are almost ubiquitous (one of the more interesting aspects of bluegrass, at least in
Ohio, is how consistently the performers are so much younger than the audiences).
Steve’s description would be amenable, I think, to a lot of bluegrass people; the imagery
of youth and family is hard to miss and, while this obviously parallels conventional
understandings of “family values” in American Conservatism, I would suggest that the durability of the “family” metaphor is a symptom of its depth, of a broader sensibility that holds normative family imagery very dear.

I once asked Sally, at the COBA festival, and without any real sense that the question had the context that I later saw in Steve’s narration, why she thought there were so many kids around, particularly in the bands and on stage. She had indicated that the COBA festival was somewhat peculiar in that so many people [grandparents, certainly] brought kids just to attend. She told me that people told her this was the only festival where they bring kids because it’s the only one with stuff for kids to do, which in this case included a fishing tournament at the nearby stock pond, a drawing contest, and the COBA festival kid’s band.

More to the point, though, of why the presence of youth seemed valuable at a bluegrass festival, and particularly on stage, (me thinking, at the time, that I was also asking a question of the value of the themes of family, domesticity, reproduction and the future that might be bound up in the appearance of children), she relayed an earlier story she had told about her sideline career showing dogs. “It’s like when I used to put a kid out there [in the show ring] to walk that dog around; it’s no contest, those judges just love to see a little kid. Everybody likes seeing a kid, plus it’s the future of the sport – you don’t want to discourage them.”

But then, seeming to think more, and perhaps trying to explain why everybody likes seeing a kid, (“for the future”), she continued: “Family is first. These people know kids draw [hedging around any critique of ‘these people’s’ intentions], and the music is
as much for extra money. Plus the music feels better – like kids showing puppies – people like watching kids. And it’s the next generation – you don’t want to discourage anyone.”

We were interrupted, briefly, but she circled back to the theme of children with another story she wanted to tell me. She had once overheard the gentleman that coordinated the COBA kids’ band counseling the kids about what “I’ll Fly Away” means and was lauding him for explaining how if they’re good “here” they’ll be even better in heaven, where there’s no bullying. “Then one girl,” she explained, “raised her hand, said she was bullied in school, had a big smile on her face [presumably about “god”]. “When they’re [the kids] all done dancing, later, he’ll walk over there to get ice cream and they’ll all get up and follow like a bunch of ducklings. Boy if you don’t like that you can just go somewhere else.” [We don’t talk about politics, I thought to myself, except for all the time.]

What is interesting about this is, in some sense, how disconnected this assembly of answers is, bound loosely by the fact that they were all responding to a question about why there were kids here. Youth appeared, in all this, as at once a competitive advantage, an economic necessity, a valuable commodity, a holder of authentic tradition, a maker of better-feeling sounds, and finally (crucially) a vehicle for social virtue. There are connections that might be drawn and articulated among all of these; this is not as much an agglomeration of non sequiturs as it might seem.

One of the most interesting elements here is the similarity between Steve’s and Sally’s accounts. In each instance, family and youth – both of them conventionally
understandable as tropes of domesticity – get employed in making sense of contested and political-seeming things like belonging, social difference, conflict, and economic necessity. Importantly, both instances use those tropes of domesticity to end on what might also be understood as a more simplistically Conservative notions of virtue, either in supporting the military and not protesting limits on speech, for Steve, or in seizing an opportunity to proselytize to a captive audience for Sally.

Within that structural similarity, and what I take to be a sensibility that extends beyond the particularity of either Steve’s or Sally’s comments, the way Sally discussed the value of family imagery seems indicative of the way family works more generally. She switches subjects more than once, from a blanket “they” for whom family is first, to the parents whose cynical calculation brings kids on stage to get more bookings, to the audiences who “feel” better hearing a child play than they would hearing a hypothetical adult making what could be precisely the same sounds. What I’m seeing in all this, between these two conversations, is the imagery of family serving as a signifier of other things (indeed, of conventional Conservative values), as a crude commodity (something that can be sold on stage), and as a referent, as an underlying value of which other things (like the image of youth) are merely signs. Perhaps most importantly of all, though, and Sally’s articulation of this makes it the most clear, “family” – an idea and an image of family – serves as a self-evidently “good” thing that just feels good to have in your bluegrass. Adorno’s concern about consumable pleasure in repetition is relevant to precisely this point, and the identification of pleasure with something so reductively
already-known and so familiar as the child, put on stage to meet the regressive audience’s demands for always more of the same as before, imagined into the future.

That political-economic perspective on family, though, is further complicated by another aspect of bluegrass, which is the role of performance and virtuosity that speaks directly to Adorno’s concern about repetition by opening a questions of what is being repeated, what that signifies in practice, and to what end. All of the imagery of family, as far as it extends beyond and below a more surface-level sense of simply being yet another facet of traditional, Conservative orientations to the world, happens in a musical context where virtuosic skill is elevated, in somewhat parallel fashion, to a position of value and importance. The idea of virtuosity, a matter of being better than just really good, as if in another category of skill, is in many accounts a defining characteristic of bluegrass. Multiple authors and many people, verbally to me, have referred in various ways to bluegrass as a “white jazz”, usually meaning that one of its core, defining traits is its performers’ ability to take turns deviating individually from the text of any given piece of music and improvise, in the moment, music that is at once different from but recognizably the same song as the “original” piece. Arguably, bluegrass compels this turn-taking deviation, where each individual improvises, by relying on texts that would otherwise be reductive and repetitive. The “text” itself has to be simple; it has to be recognizable, and it cannot take over the rest of the music, which is completed – ideally - in its virtuosic performance. In bluegrass especially, the text becomes self-consciously
simple, so simple as to more or less explicitly be signaling its own inadequacy, perhaps, without its necessary complement.125

My understanding of this bluegrass, of festivals in Central Ohio, is that the more complicatedly half-hidden presence and valuation of ideas of “family” provides the backdrop against which virtuosity can exist as an ideal, and imparts the political weight that virtuosity is sometimes able to bear. It is with family that virtuosity can work because ultimately, as the image of the bluegrass virtuoso emerges against the background of the broader valuing of familiality, what emerges is what I am calling the “figure” of the bluegrass virtuoso.

I am here taking a cue from the American Studies scholar Philip DeLoria, who talks about the figure of the American Indian126, and Ethnomusicologist Louisa Meintjes127, who talks about the figure of the Zulu, and in some sense Greil Marcus in his argument about the Nervous Man in the work of The Band.128 This concept of a figure is a way (not entirely unlike speaking about a Bakhtinian notion of genre, but with more focus on performance) of capturing the way particular actual performers inhabit roles, on stage and in music, in ways that play with the idea of the characters being performed as somehow plausible and implicitly believable but yet, at the same time, clearly not fully attainable, if for no other reason than because it – the role - is clearly being performed, by a performer. The tension between the reality of the performance and the appearance that

125 Excess/failed repetition also as joke; it is as if Adorno’s failure were predetermined, and instead of verifying this the music instead opts not to try, failing to fail.
it is “just” a role being played is sustainable (a sustainable instability, maybe) because the form proves to be aesthetically valuable and useful for some important constituency. For DeLoria, the Indian was a useful tool for Anglo-Americans distancing themselves from elitist Europeans, but also a useful antagonist to distance themselves from the “low” immigrants. Meintjes’s Zulu was useful in being coopted for producing the image of authentic South African music just as it was a foil for constructing music as modern and new. Marcus argued that the Nervous Man spoke to the tension of audiences’ uneasiness about the applicability to themselves of normative social narratives about individualism and masculine independence (just as it proved to be a sign of the unsustainability of that tension within the group). The blackface clown, perhaps, is just such a figure, where as Eric Lott argued it appeared to white working-class audiences as a plausible manifestation of black reality, just as it helped manage that white working class’s anxieties and desires regarding their fellow citizens by producing more manageable representations of them.

What is crucial about all of these examples is that these figures were made possible (and perhaps necessary) by contested situations, where the image of a particular sort of Other person had to be *made*, and continually remade, to navigate those irresolvable tensions. The figure works because it is a representation of what a dominant sensibility needs it to be, and they wouldn’t need to invent one if it actually existed. Actual Native Americans, Zulus, or African Americans were the ones whose political realities were sufficiently complex to give colonial Americans, a contemporary South Africans bourgeoisie, and the 19th Century American immigrant working class reason to
need to invent and maintain those figures. Politically, one of the most important things the figure does is not to replace a lost or inaccessible reality but to actively displace a threatening or inconvenient reality with a more palatably useful image of one. In bluegrass, the virtuoso works by rarely if ever seeming to actually materialize, to manage the desire for the sense of virtue captured in the imagery of family in a musical form that needs performers who are better than just “good”.

The conjunction of virtuosity and family in the image of the bluegrass virtuoso is anchored even further by the frequency with which the bluegrass virtuoso takes the more specific form of the child bluegrass virtuoso with the idea of child prodigy that might exist. Together with this, too, is the fine line between virtuosity and gimmickry, which in bluegrass is not an easy thing to separate. I watched two groups Appalachian Grass and Evan Lanier and the Bluegrass Express play back to back sets at a festival early in my research, and the contrast was illustrative of this apparent double distinction between child and adult and gimmickry and virtuosity.

Appalachian Grass (which I was told by someone near me in the audience has a “classically-trained violinist” on fiddle) has a song (and this is not unique) where they show off their fiddler’s skill by having the guitar player narrate how good she is (what is rare is that she is a she), having her play the same bit of music on loop, first with the bow, but subsequently behind her back, with the bow between her knees, with the bow on the ground, with a chopstick, with a toothpick, with a pocket comb, and with a pocket comb held by her hand in a Pepe Le Pew puppet. All of it sounds impressively repetitive, which makes it ‘good’ when it should have sounded bad, and everyone is duly impressed.
Evan Lanier is a chubby and unsmiling 12-year-old multi-instrumentalist for whom the band is named, who rotates among the banjo, mandolin and guitar for different pieces (I was told by a third party, whom I was asking why there were so few fiddles, that he’d asked Evan if he also played the fiddle, and the answer was that no, not even Evan; it’s too hard without the frets….). Everything sounds competent, which is impressive for a child, and people are comparably impressed. The difference between Appalachian Grass and Evan Lanier is hard to discern, between the adult female fiddler with the credibility of being ‘classically trained’ engaging in the gimmicky stagecraft and the stoically serious adolescent demonstrating the breadth of his talents. The contrast is illustrative of the range of what passes “beyond the text” in bluegrass, though, and is an important reminder that virtuosity as an abstract label is in practice separable neither from the possibility that it might be seen as “just gimmickry” nor from the question of who is enacting its performance.  

The particularity of the youth aspect of this bluegrass virtuoso makes the whole thing more palatable, I think, to persons with a more conventional socio-political sensibility, as Sami articulated. If it feels good to have kids in the music, it feels even better to think of them as really good kids. The youth is more important in another way, which is that it makes “virtuosity” easier to attain while also doing a lot to excuse the failure to attain it. Kids who sing flat or lose a beat (which is frequent) are just kids, but

129 The line between gimmickry and ‘actual’ virtuosity does not, in fact, exist – it is a non-distinction - from the perspective of bluegrass as a joke, where the gimmickry is part of the irony and its enactment is part of the honesty. In that sense, the ability to engage in the gimmickry is the virtuosity. There are other questions here, too, like what is the gimmick? Is the gimmick telling people she is classically trained? Having Evan switch instruments? Naming the band after a 7th grader to play to people 6 and 7 times his age?
kids who sound even okay are amazing and adorable and overwhelming and give us hope for the future. (Adults, meanwhile, make sense because they are “classically trained”). Bluegrass’s game of virtuosity would be far less sustainable if it didn’t have kids at its disposal, because it’s much easier to play beyond one’s apparent means when the means beyond which you’re playing are apparently so much more limited.

The lingering political question, in the background of this matter of a bluegrass virtuoso emerging as the conjoined signifier of family and performative virtuosity, is a matter of where this figure of the bluegrass virtuoso fits into (to take a step back) a question of how people without “real” music expertise – either in formal music theory or competence in performance – still manage to enjoy and make meaningful sense of the music, and how those things matter for their engagements with other people. One of the broader arguments in this project is that there are important political lessons being taught and practiced in any system where membership status is arrayed unequally along hierarchies of knowledge and access. A virtuosity construed as something that is a matter only of talent and giftedness it is exclusory by definition. Virtuosity is defined against even normal ability, which is to say nothing of what might look like sub-normal ability, and this is itself a political concern, if something like bluegrass relies for its very being on the value of something that is, by definition, inaccessible to and exclusive of so many.

130 The connection between repetition and the role of things – like performance virtuosity – not ‘in’ the text is relevant to the matter of bluegrass as a joke, too, where there seems a recurrently strong possibility that bluegrass is heard as a very repetitive music, with or without the virtuosity or gimmickry, in a way that has ‘the music’ actually become a signifier of its own vacuity, such that a repetitive-sounding music claiming on the surface to be a message of traditional virtue is itself a sign that nothing is truly that repetitive and that the performers are not, in fact, serious.
of “its” own people. Or: if bluegrass needs virtuosity, and virtuosity is necessarily exceptional, then bluegrass is a world defined centrally by exclusion.

It is the tension with gimmickry, though, that shows bluegrass virtuosity to be a less sensible thing than merely a materialization of simple exclusion. A child-based virtuosity that is confusabale sometimes with gimmickry, or that might itself be a gimmick, is in some sense just another of the jokes that reminds us of bluegrass’s possible lack of seriousness, and of the possibility that bluegrass maybe isn’t entirely sincere in its valuation of its performers. To put this in more conventional political-economic terms, bluegrass fetishizes its own performers. This Marxian term *fetishization* refers typically to a sense that an object with an imagined pre-existing functional value (like a fiddler being a “necessary” member of a band) is re-constructed and re-shaped in such a way that its original functional value is displaced and obscured by a newer, different, exchange value\(^{131}\). Marx himself may have rested his argument about exchange value on a problematic narrative of pre-existingly natural and pre-mediated ‘real’ value, but I think the fetish remains viable at as a tool of critique, insofar as I am less concerned about the imagined prior state from which the performer is thought to have changed than with the question of why the performer matters enough, and to whom, for the question of what the performer signifies to have become the subject of controversy. Or to rephrase it: why do people care about what it - “the performer” - signifies, means, represents, or “is”? Why is there a figure of an often-youthful bluegrass virtuoso?

\(^{131}\) Karl Marx. “The Commodity Fetish and the Secrets Thereof,” in *Capital, vol. 1*
One answer to why bluegrass values the image of a person it knows doesn’t exist is that the bluegrass virtuoso effects a double-Othering, in a system where it becomes increasingly easy to hear people saying, in effect: *I may not be as good as that kid on stage, either as competent musically or as virtuous, but at least I’m here* - and not, in Steve’s words, “one of those greens or anti-wars”. The figure of the bluegrass virtuoso is a vehicle for so many people’s concomitant desires to be reassured of the *possibility* of a virtuous person (and possibly an ‘individual’ one, because the performers seem to take turns improvising) who can move outside the strictures of a confined “reality,” while those same hearers can at the same time be reassured of the *impossibility* of any normal person (such as themselves) attaining any such virtue. Or in bluegrass – *I may not be a good Christian, but at least I go to Church, and at least I’m not some dumb freak-of-nature redneck.*

Part of the question of this project overall is about how bluegrass defines itself, and how its inclusion of its people on the basis of excluding them from the very start, along hierarchies of disparate talent and unequal musical education, matters for political conflict and contestation. The bluegrass virtuoso is a big part of the answer to those questions, serving as evidence for people in bluegrass of the two contradictory claims: of the supposed virtue of individual meritocratic transcendence as a governing ideology, and yet of the invalidity or non-applicability of that claim for oneself, as justification and legitimation of one’s own place somewhat further down that hierarchy. Or, in short, the bluegrass virtuoso may in many cases be, at its heart, a rationalization of and justification
for a necessarily unjust social order, where people not on the “inside” are nonetheless
doing their best to lend rigidity to a system in which they are, at least, not on the bottom.

It is possible – likely, I think - that the figure of the bluegrass virtuoso is a symptom of the experience of political nonsense, of an ambivalent nostalgia, and maybe even the mere possibility of an insincere music, where in the face of lingering and open-ended questions about meaning and reality the appearance of something concrete is comforting. I am wary of returning this project to a tone of condemnation and excessive criticism of what will sound like reductively labeled “Conservative” orientations to the world, and I fear that the image of the bluegrass virtuoso is not the one of optimism I wanted to find.

I do, however, see important space here for further movement: as much as the bluegrass virtuoso appears as a perhaps too-regressive tool for refusing to recognize other people or other experiences, there is something inherently critical about it. The bluegrass virtuoso, even as it dismisses the possibility of virtue it claims to uphold while distancing itself from Other people who were already explicitly rejecting those virtues, is a system where it remains possible to see people at least capable of recognizing and responding to the falsity of hierarchies and inherited wisdom. It may not be likely, but it is not impossible that the bluegrass virtuoso might in some very minutely subtle way become a vehicle for people questioning the basis for their failure to recognize or grant access to people different from themselves. Valuing the idea of a gifted child performer is a useful strategy in bluegrass, implicitly or otherwise, for obfuscating the fact that the figure of the bluegrass virtuoso exists primarily as a reassurance of the impossibility of what it
might once have been thought to represent. And that, in itself, is precisely the sort of visible semiotic failure that has to be at the heart of any hope for a productive politics of recognition, access, and nonsense.
CONCLUSION

I have tried to articulate my own sense of my experience, and my understanding of the interconnectedness among what are often understood as apolitical things, the way those things are discussed and understood, and politics. I have tried to articulate that sense by seizing on a few exemplary-seeming aspects of bluegrass. I have tried to engage with the appearances, of self-evidence in the genre, of the nostalgia that surrounds it, of the honest naïveté of its sound, and of the ways that what people enjoy about the music is bound up with imagery of family, traditional values, and good performance – all to critique them, to disagree with them, but to disagree supportively, and to try to make sense of how complicatedly all of these matters hinge on and inform their always-ongoing political relevance.

All that is articulation, though. I had approached the field, not a little reluctantly for all my guarded optimism, looking for Adorno in the dust and sodden filth of these festivals. I wanted to find that archetypical bluegrass citizen I’d constructed in my mind, in his or her or their perpetual state of becoming more open, continuously surprised and discomforted by their sense of the music as a repetitive gloss of sameness veiling only thinly over an essentially unknowable emptiness and non-meaning. I wanted to find those people who were so engaged with the back-and-forth between the music and their own identity, and with the perpetual joke of critical irony that I “knew” inhere
everywhere in this music that they not just knew but were forever relearning its inseparability from the world and politics and popular culture, forever re-rejecting the fixity of categories. I was afraid, though, that I was just looking for myself. I knew, of course, from Chantal Mouffe, that I should be afraid of naïve platitudes of consensus. That, in a sense, democracy doesn’t’ exist. Rancière had convinced me of this, too, and he had shown me, with Adorno closely in tow, how complicit something like a bluegrass festival would surely be in the exclusions and inclusions of our world.

It is important to remember where this started, and I have tried very hard to think about what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett seems to have said about the obligation of someone in my position to embrace and struggle with the privilege of becoming an academic. The form this has taken, in my articulation of the sense I have made of this research, is my desire for people to be better listeners, better able to understand the importance of being better listeners, not because they think they have to but because at least some of them want to do what listening helps them to do.

My own relationship to bluegrass has been productive, throughout this project, as it has given me occasion to think about question of access and inclusion from a very personal standpoint of having, I would say, half-successfully admitted myself to bluegrass. One of the many opportunities bluegrass presented me was the option to hear about my own exclusion, whether on the basis of me not being southern, not being old, not being “conservative,” or not being whatever else it was that might have mattered. The much more important opportunity bluegrass presented me, though, and hopefully the one I have taken in much greater depth, has been the opportunity to recognize how those
distinctions of inclusion and access were being drawn, even right in front of me in precisely the moments I was hearing about them. Those distinctions were what I thought mattered, and in that regard I had perhaps found what I was looking for.

Bluegrass in practice is a far too political thing, in fact, a thing far too nonsensical to be reduced definitively to any particular set of theoretical claims. There several key elements of this project that nonetheless echo, and in some cases reverberate against the political critiques that lead me to undertake in the first place. Jacques Rancière’s assessment of a politics characterized not by feints of distributing and counting but by the disagreement between one who says white and another who says white was fundamental to my decision to look for politics where politics seemed absent and where agreement seemed normal. My own political argument is that the politics of a place like bluegrass are characterized by nonsense, where people engage in cultural practices of denying the impossibility of sense, even when they themselves may know it is impossible, in fleeting attempts to negotiate what Rancière is saying in more abstract terms about the impossibility of ever truly knowing if white means white, if good means good, or if us means us. Rancière’s is not an empirical argument, to be sure. This apparent tension, of people in bluegrass seeming not to be debilitated by what he suggests is impossible, is similar to the tension between James Clifford’s partial truths and Dorothy Noyes’s groups’ need for partially-shared communities, masquerading in practice, for some people, as whole truths. These are tensions, and maybe paradoxes, but not necessarily contradictions.
The differences between Rancière’s critique of the appearance of agreement and Clifford’s critique of the representation truth, on the one hand, and of bluegrass’s nonsense and Noyes’s communities on the other are not simply matters of “critical” and “empirical” claims operating on different planes or with different rules. These are tensions that exist, in various forms, in the practice of politics in bluegrass. From the perspective of genre that becomes simultaneously both an acknowledgment of the reality of a descriptive label and a practice of producing and contesting that label, these tensions between possibility and impossibility, real and false, are precisely the substance that is juggled in the ongoing politics of nonsense that exists in bluegrass. These are not my questions, though I have chosen their phrasing and their grammar; these are questions that exist, in bluegrass and its politics. I am making sense of them, making fiction of them and constructing partial truths, but what is most central here is that these questions, these tensions and these politics are already, in their own way, in bluegrass.

The nostalgia that emerges in bluegrass, as a means by which so many people in bluegrass situate themselves into broader frames of identification, is an important example of this. As reactionary as the search for a more pure and innocent future in an imagined authentic past might at first seem, it is the contingency and uncertainty that come from exactly the tension felt by people unsure of what they imagine and what is real which makes nostalgia a vehicle for a very productive ambivalence. It is an ambivalence that speaks quite directly, in fact, to Carl Schmitt’s and Chantal Mouffe’s notions of the inadequacy of laws alone for the avoidance of violent exclusion in pluralistically-oriented societies. Nostalgia emerges as a promising site for the possibility
of destabilizing the hegemony of dominant sensibilities. Nostalgia, in the ambivalence that stems from the tension people experience situating themselves in partly imagined, partly real-seeming narratives, may very well be exactly the sort thing needed for deferring the Decision about who, in the end, doesn’t count.

Bluegrass of course speaks, apart from those narratives the people at its festivals construct in situating themselves, and it does so honestly. This is the same tension of nonsense and sense, where in the politics of bluegrass this honest music speaks, jokingly, in its burlesque – of something – leaving its listeners to make sense of the wink, and try to decide if they themselves are supposed to understand. Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s concern about the falsity of a freedom that was connoted by the feeling of pleasure in being in on the joke would not be misplaced, here. At its worst, indeed, there is a virulent minstrelsy, a cultural ventriloquism of both bodily and political-economic violence. At its best, though, the honest joke provides the respite of a safe place away from conflict and difference where they get on with the more important question, perhaps, of to whom the music winks, who is in on the joke - and ideally focusing more on the asking of the question than on answering it.

There is, too, the tension of genre and of nonsense in the bluegrass virtuoso, the figure of the virtuous, skilled, value-laden performer that is so often a vehicle for the reproduction of a heteronormative regressiveness, and all the moreso in its impossibility. Anchored so firmly in imagination, always thought to be somewhere else precisely because it is never ‘here’, wherever here may be, it is irrefutable. The bluegrass virtuoso suspends recognition of the impossibility of the virtue it claims to represent, and yet its
repetition as an impossibility is in practice an opening for the possibility that the exclusions peddled by the more regressive notions of family might turn into more dynamic, inclusive, and unsettled points of political access.

The politics of nonsense the emerge from bluegrass construed as a genre, and all the tensions that characterize it, are equivocal. The lesson of bluegrass is in some sense that it is *not* a political panacea, but that what makes it dangerous is also what makes it potentially politically helpful. There is one quotation from my fieldwork that resonated almost more than any other, a quote that was somehow both more socially specific than others and yet also much more broadly encompassing: “Black people ain’t never gonna like bluegrass.”

It was a locally very ‘important’ person who said this, a person whom I heard say other bigoted things over the course of the summer at various festivals, and a person with a much larger role in my conception of this project than in my articulation of it. It captures, I think, the breadth of the aesthetic, cultural, conceptual and musical senses of bluegrass as a particular and exclusory political object that are in some ways pervasive. There is, surely, a very long way to go. There is one other conversation that encapsulates the broader point, though, which is that while there is a long way to go, there is also movement.

At the last festival I attended for my research, the Mohican Bluegrass Festival, at the very end of the summer, when I was making more fieldnotes about my own impatience with the music than about my conversations with other people, I had a brief encounter with yet another of the people drawn by my notebook. I had in fact left the
stage area, to take a walk through the campground (as much to avoid the sound of a
music I no longer wanted to hear for an entire weekend straight as to ward off the fall
coldness), and I was stopped by Judy, who had seen me taking notes in the audience area,
and who asked me, with an apology for bothering me, if I was some kind of writer. I
explained what I was doing, with this project, saying I was at OSU and talking to people
at bluegrass festivals. She proceeded through a story, at that point, about how they (her
husband and she) were glad they could make it this year, having come from Toledo but
having put off planning in light of the financial situation they were sharing with much of
the country in 2011. To paraphrase: They were union people, she wanted to tell me, and
she had spent much of the trip talking to her husband about Wisconsin, and Scott Walker,
and how they had spent a lot of the summer resenting the public employees unions for
trying to cash in the good name and importance of private unions. On the drive to the
festival, though, they had talked, and seemed now to be feeling a bit more relaxed, happy
to get away, and were thinking a bit differently about Wisconsin, about how there might
be different reasons – reasons they didn’t know, but that they knew might exist - for why
those Wisconsin public employees might have a point.

This was a very specific conversation, and I was unsure at the time that it said
much I could use- to the extent, in fact, that my fieldnotes of it were actually not quite as
thorough as they might have been in June. And yet here in this 5-minute conversation,
which was really more Judy wanting to share an anecdote about how she, too, had just
been talking to her husband about politics (a frequent experience anyway, when people
hear that you study politics), is precisely the sort of politics that bluegrass enables. It was
bluegrass, and the trip taken with the idea of a respite from the economic distraction and overt conflict, that had provided not just the actual space but also the conceptual distance from those ‘realities’ for Judy and her husband to engage a bit more indulgently in the nonsense of politics. This is bluegrass starting to unmake the decision about who counts, bluegrass giving space for an ambivalence that recognizes the contingency of one’s own sensibility, bluegrass helping facilitate a recognition of the impossibility of austerely particular and sanctimonious sense of social value.

I hope that I have shown in at least some small way that politics can be less a matter of what people look like they are doing, when they vote or when they do ‘traditional, things, and more a matter of the sense they make of themselves and the people around them, articulating that sense as much to themselves as to anyone who might ask. In that regard, maybe the possibility that bluegrass might be recognized as a political object is a big step, where instead just of fighting against white masculine conservative spaces, this becomes a course change, looking within those categories for the nonsense, and listening for the possibility of more traction forward.
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