Rites of Spontaneity

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Communality and Subjectivity in Traditional Irish Music Sessions

By

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Larry Reynolds.
Many musicians have built their music in his shadow.
He was a good man.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I do not believe that writing a book is purely the effort of a singular individual. Instead, it involves an impressive net of contributions, support, responsibilities, debates, and dialectical confrontations. A text, therefore, looks more like a collective enterprise, in my eyes. Of course, it is possible to identify the main actor of this particular performance, but without the complexity of the other voices, no text, or at least not one of my texts, would be possible.

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As I said, the list is endless, and I do apologize for the multitude of people I have not mentioned.

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INTRODUCTION

The Boston Celtics' point guard attempts a 3-point, last second, winning shot against Philadelphia. YES! *John Harvard's Brew House* explodes, watching the TV, at the beloved team overcoming a lousy performance. The musicians abruptly stop their music to cheer this unexpected victory. Several patrons toast the Celtics, clashing and almost breaking their glasses, drinking even more avidly their stouts and ales. Dave almost throws his tin whistle on the table, while Emerald, evidently too involved in the music, looks at us, not completely understanding what the hell is going on. I have just left my tipper[1] up in the air, unpleasantly skipping a beat.

It is a Tuesday night, a cold night of a very cold winter here in Cambridge, MA. The severe weather is probably the reason only five people showed up for the session. Usually, the attendance is much larger, about ten to twenty players. This is a "young" session in two senses. First, because this group started a few months ago, and second, because the musicians gathering here are, in general, very young. I am the only exception. As a bodhrán[2] player, I am used to being an outcast barely tolerated during a session… No, this is not really true. This attitude belongs to the mythology of the sessions, as the many jokes about bodhrán, box (accordion), and banjo (the infamous *three B's* of Irish music) clearly demonstrate. I have never had any problem; I have always, always been welcomed at performances, even when I could hardly stay on the beat or when my accent was so heavy that I could scarcely be understood. And here I am tonight smiling at my young companions, cheering the Celtics with my ritual Guinness, chatting, and playing music.

To have an idea of what a session is, therefore, I suggest picturing in your mind a room in a pub, or, less frequently, in a house (which seems to be the original pattern), with some musicians facing each other. In the pub, if you look at the dedicated music area, you will see several people sitting

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[1] A tipper is a small wooden stick, used to beat the drum. It is also called a cipin or beater. Musicians like Colm Murphy and Junior Davey also play the bodhrán bare-handed, in the old-fashioned way.

[2] The bodhrán is an Irish frame drum, usually held vertically on the player's knee and played in a seated position.

closely, each of them with their instrument: flutes, tin whistles, fiddles, button accordions, concertinas, bodhráns, banjos… Musicians play well-known traditional Irish tunes. Some musicians are just listening; others are cracking jokes with people sitting nearby. Every musician will interpret the melodic line adding her/his variations and grace notes, producing what is called *heterophony*, a particular dynamic between group rendition and solo performance. What seems to be a unison, on a first hearing, is enriched by the differing contributions of individual performers: communality and subjectivity come into play while performing music.

On the table, there are a few, well… sometimes more than a few… canonical beers.

The crowd nearby is composed of friends, occasional patrons, regular audience members, and curious tourists. Some take pictures; some seem not to care; some come closer to listen or, perhaps, even participate. Noise, TV, beer, and music are not unusual during a session. If you are looking for a sort of silent, educated atmosphere, to respect and "appreciate" the music, a session's not the right place to go. The audience is outside of the musicians' circle and, differently from a staged performance, is not required (except maybe by the publican, selling other commodities through the music). Analyzing the peculiarity of the borders between performers and audience, in terms of instability, permeability, and negotiability, can shed light on the construction of a social space where, again, the dialectic between subjectivity and communality takes place.

A scene like this can be found the world over: from Dublin to Boston, to Rome, to Tokyo. At the time of my writing, the newest venues on this endless list were Saint Lo, in Normandy, and Minsk, Belarus.[3] During the last forty years the practices and the appreciation of this particular music, and the specific setting of the session, have moved decisively from local arenas into the global marketplace.

To be clear from the beginning, *Rites of Spontaneity* is not a book on traditional Irish music. Instead, it is about a specific performative setting called the "session," (Gaelic transliteration: *seisiún*) where traditional Irish music is played. A session is not only *ceol* (music), it is also *craic* (fun, talk): what happens between tunes is important as well. Breathnach (1971) and Glassie (1982) connected the playing of traditional music with the theme of sharing food, drink, talk, music, and stories. They both produce a "meaning of reciprocity and bonding (that) goes far beyond the commodity form that we associate with it" (Reiss, 2003: 143) and also a particular construction of Irishness. In other terms, the dynamics between the social group, subjects, and cultural items suggest a level of homology

[3] http://thesession.org/sessions/new, accessed February 28th, 2014.

involving group values around national/ethnic identity. From my perspective, the tension between the practice of heterophony and an idealized polyphony, as well as the discursive practice in sessions, suggests the contrast between the imagined community and the asymmetry of contingent power relationships. The informality of a session at first suggests a sort of egalitarian space and relationship. However, if analyzed closely the sessions appear to be clearly hierarchical, with an evident manifestation of power-relationships between players, and between players and audiences. Signals of an egalitarian ethos in informal traditional sessions are displayed (for instance, the players sit in a circle round a table), and the players are supposed to be equally important, and like everybody else in the pub. Despite these signals, there are in fact negotiations about power differentials going on. Therefore, using O'Shea's (2008: 120) terminology, my analysis will concentrate on romancing the session, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, on looking for disharmonic aspects. My focus on music, talk, and narratives will have, therefore, the primary target of highlighting the peculiar dynamics of the session, and, more specifically, the dimensions, exercise, and negotiability of power, dynamics suggesting not only communality and group identity but also asymmetry, resistance, confrontation, and, of course, subjectivity.

I have chosen a transnational perspective in my study. As I said, similar performances can be seen in every part of the world, with a clear epicenter in Ireland. Diasporas and migration can explain (albeit only partially) why this happens, as in the cases of the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. But not only in such likely locations: Sean Williams studied a particular case of diaspora and Irish music highlighting as much. Focusing on Japanese consumers of Irish music, Williams (2006: 101) acknowledges the diasporic communities across the globe:

> Staying in contact with each other by means of the internet, posters, and performances, Japan's Irish music enthusiasts have ample opportunities to experience a type of Irish culture in diasporic relocation. Consumers of Irish music and those interested in Irish culture generally might be surprised to find Irish music in Japan, or – in particular – to find Japanese people deeply drawn toward Irish music, culture, and notions of identity. Yet the rules of citizenship for the Irish are so generous, compared to many nations, that anyone – including a Japanese person – may be an Irish citizen provided that one grandparent was born in Ireland. This would extend citizenship to the likes of Che Guevara, Muhammad Ali, Tony Blair, Alex Haley, or Alfred Hitchcock.

Other variables that support the diffusion of Irish music must be taken into consideration: a folk music revival and, lately, the popularity of world music. Visions (and business) and globalization as expressed by *Riverdance*, for instance, are also influential factors for the diffusion of traditional Irish music and sessions. In Italy, sessions started as an outcome of the folk music revival of the 1970s, with minimal influence from diasporic movements. A similar situation can be seen in other parts of Europe (France, Germany, Russia, Spain, and so on). In any case and in every part of the world, folk music's revival has been the ideological turmoil that has created the theoretical frame for the worldwide diffusion of traditional music and the specific setting of the session. Again, this change raises questions about identity, homology, and Irishness.

Finally, it is essential to analyze the establishment of an idea of a pan-Celtic culture, above all in Europe – an idea which is ambiguously linked to political movements and nationalist ideas – as well as the boom in music tourism, sustained at its peak by the global image of the Celtic Tiger. For instance, the role of music is extensively recognized in the construction of a modern Celticism, a term that Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman (2003) preferred to Gaelicism because it is framed by a secular, modernist internationalism, instead of a localized and religiously expressed nationalism. According to the authors, the term Celticism

> has the distinct advantage of situating us firmly in a world of structured and structuring relativities, in which "centers" and "peripheries" are not separated social and cultural facts, whose violent coming together is to be understood not simply as a collision of abstracted political and cultural entities driven together by colonialism, or nation-states formation, but interwoven and mutually constituting processes. "Celtic" meanings can thus never be reduced to matters of ethnic property and aboriginal meaning, or to the simple functionalism of domination or subversion, hegemony, or counterhegemony. (Stokes and Bohlman, 2003: 3)

It is important to note that, according to Reiss (2003: 158), the term Celtic has "no existence outside its commodity form" and "the community in which [it] resides is the virtual community." Ethnographic support for this perspective can be heard, quite often, in the Irish music community in Boston, denying Celticism: "the only Celtic thing in Boston is the basketball team."[4]

[4] The Boston Celtics are a professional basketball team, a member of the National Basketball Association, founded in 1946. The original logo shows a leprechaun (named Lucky, also the mascot's name). The shamrock, another Irish symbol, can be seen in an alternative logo.

In sum, Irish music, and its related social spaces and symbolic forms, have become a commodity available worldwide. Matters of identity, essentialism, diaspora, imagined communities, the production and re-production of power, discursive practices, and dynamics between tradition, and modernity– to name a few – are to be found in the musical practice itself, where meanings are rendered, enacted, and actualized through the performance of the session.

Note on Methodology

This book is based on years of intensive fieldwork during which I collected material from three sources: participant observation, interviews (both formal and informal), and through participation in various blogs, mailing lists, and discussions on the web. My research began in the summer of 2009, when I started intensive interviewing and observation to learn about the communities in general. The interviewees ranged from third generation Irish-Americans to recent immigrants, and from Irish-born and residents to entirely non-Irish individuals. They included people from many walks of life, from business-people to retired elders, to students, and professional musicians. I spoke with them about music, sessions, and football games, beers, and holidays. In sum, about everything. I did not use any structured questionnaire, trying to catch whatever would come into the discussions. The only exception is the questionnaire at the end of chapter one, concerning what musicians think about Irishness, ethnic identity, and music. I proposed just a simple question: "How 'important' is to be Irish to play traditional Irish music in a session?"

As my work progressed, I became increasingly friendly with the musicians and audience members of the performances whom I would often interview. While these interviews were very informative, I also learned a great deal from participant observation in many sessions as a bodhrán and concertina player. So, I thus gained a unique perspective as both an insider and an outsider in my research. I have direct knowledge of the conventions from being a participant as well as from observing them.

I have attended sessions in many parts of the world. In Ireland, I was in the audience in Belfast (especially at *Maddens Pub*); in Ennis, County Clare, on the session trail during the *Trad Feast*; in Cork, at the *An Spailpín Fánac*; and in several pubs in Dublin. I had the pleasure of attending the *Fleadh Cheoil* in Derry, in 2013, and the *Willie Clancy Festival* in Miltwon Malbay, County Clare, in 2014. I participated as a musician only a few times in Ireland. Perhaps I still have a reverence toward what I consider, evidently, a mythical place.

As a musician, I was initially trained in the United States, under the great bodhrán player Mance Grady, from Cumberland, RI. For a long time, I was a regular at *Patrick's Pub*, in Providence, RI, and several other sessions in the area. When I moved to Boston, I met Larry Reynolds, a pivotal figure in Irish music in the area, who introduced me to *The Green Briar's* sessions and then to *The Skellig*, in Waltham, MA. In the United States, I have attended sessions almost every day and almost everywhere, at least on the East Coast, from Boston to Baltimore, to Washington, to Savannah, and New York City. I have also attended the annual *Mid-Atlantic Regional Fleadh*, in Parsippany, NJ, for several years.

In Italy, the epicenter of my participant observation was Rome, home of the liveliest scene. However, I am aware that other places, such as Milan and Genoa, are important as well, as I found out through interviews and discussions. I also met many of the protagonists of the Italian community during festivals, such as the *Festival di Bondeno (FE)*, organized by Umberto Bisi with the artistic direction of Tommaso Tornielli; the *Festival di San Benedetto in Alpe (FO)*, run by Alessandro Capanni and Rosy Brondi; and the *Roma Fleadh*, organized by Marzio Venuti Mazzi, Marco Fabbri, and myself.

My musical training itself has transnational characteristics: Seamus O'Kane, from Dungiven, County Derry, whom I met in Italy, Junior Davy, from County Sligo, whom I met in New York City and Bondeno (FE), and Eamon Murray, from County Antrim, whom I met… on the Internet, taught me bodhrán techniques. Junior Stevens, from Portland, ME, and Dan Accardi, from Boston, MA, were my first teachers on concertina. Later, my teachers were Caitlin Nic Gabhann, from County Meath, Jack Talty, from County Clare, Mairéad Hurley, from County Sligo, and Jason O'Rourke, from Belfast. It is not easy for me to identify the music I play as being in a specific regional style. I think that my repertoire is more connected with music from County Clare and Sliabh Luahcra, but I guess I am myself a victim of globalization.

This all allows me to talk about one of my main regrets writing this book: I could not analyze in depth the critical issues of regional styles in Irish music, how they have changed in the global perspective, and how these issues may reflect on sessions. I can only refer to the vast bibliography on the specific topic, with particular consideration given to Sommers Smith (2001), Keegan (2010), Motherway (2013), Cooper (2009), and, above all, O'Shea (2008).

Another important source for my ethnography was the Internet. For years, I have actively participated in websites such as *thesession.org* and

IRTRAD-L,[5] in what can be called an *ethnography of electronic space*, but that requires an explicit theoretical frame. thesession.org is a "community website dedicated to Irish traditional music. You can find tunes to play, find sessions to play them in, and join in discussions about the music. You can also find events (like concerts and festivals) or explore the track listings of recordings. You can contribute too. If you're already a member, you can log in. If you're not yet a member, membership is free and it only takes a moment to sign up."[6]

The IRTRAD-L

> is a computerized (LISTSERV-based) mailing list on the subject of Irish traditional music. It is pretty much a group of "insiders," most are at least involved in making music, either amateur or pro, or somehow related to the music world. So the discussions usually go a bit further than what you usually see on rec.music.celtic, the Internet newsgroup on Celtic music. Also, the music that is considered suitable for discussing is narrowed down to Irish/Irish-American music that sticks close to the traditional form. And it's not just CDs that are being discussed, but also concerts, musicians, styles, instruments, history & backgrounds. Membership is currently about 400, who generate about 40–50 messages per day (usually more over the weekend). A digest form of the list, with summaries of the most important messages, comes out every month. Responsible person for this list: Peter Flynn (pflynn@curia.ucc.ie) An archive of all the past mails to the list used to be kept at http://listserv.hea.ie/lists/irtrad-l.html (Last modified: 11/29/2011. 22:00:26.)[7]

Williams (2010: 244) summarized the positive and negative aspects of these discussion groups in the following way:

> Assume that any discussion group has its preference and internal quarrels. Like attending a live session of Irish traditional music, just remember that it's appropriate to listen (or lurk) before announcing your presence (musically or otherwise), and that the long-standing relationships between the musicians or – in this case – the discussion group posters predate your arrival. The discussions on www.irtral-l are serious and generally strive for accuracy. Both http://www.mustrad.org.uk and http://www.thesession.org feature a core group of insiders, and both can offer comments that can be helpful, accurate, and sometimes dead wrong! www.mustrad.org includes discussions about recordings, artists, songs, and tunes, while www.the

[5] Sean O Cuinn offered a general overview of *Traditional Music and the Internet*, available at http://www.ceolas.org/ref/treoir.html, accessed July 2nd, 2018.
[6] https://thesession.org, accessed May 1st, 2013.
[7] https://hspeek.home.xs4all.nl/bouzouki/irtrad.html, accessed May 1st, 2013.

session.org features transcriptions of many instrumental tunes in both standard and abc notations.

From my point of view, I find thesession.org more dynamic and reliable, and with less tendency to slagging, despite Williams' personal preference. IRTRAD-L did not keep up with expectations: on June 5th, 2016, Peter Flynn posted a request for new ownership of the mailing list, because he would soon retire (https://listserv.heanet.ie/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind1806&L=IRTRAD-L&P=250, accessed July 9th, 2018).[8] In the last few years, the activity of the mailing list has slowed down to reach only six posts in 2018. Nowadays, several innovative avenues of knowledge, discussion, and shared information seem possible on the Internet. I find particularly interesting the ontological perspective suggested by *LITMUS: Linked Irish Traditional Music*, a project connected with the *Irish Traditional Music Archive* (*ITMA*). LITMUS "aims to develop an ontology to better express what occurs within oral transmission."[9]

Nowadays, ethnographic investigation of the Internet is an established practice, moving from "virtual ethnographies" (see, for instance, Rheingold, 1993, Mason, 1996, and Hine, 2000) to "netnography" (Kozinets, 2010), "cyberethnography" (Ward, 1999), "digital anthropology" (Horst and Miller, 2012) or "digital ethnography" (Murthy, 2011), and "ethnography for the Internet," as suggested by Hine (2015). While the multitude of definitions suggests the wide range of possible methodological and theoretical perspectives, the epistemology is rooted in the crisis of the ethnographic object. "This involved reconsiderations of the nature of representation, description, subjectivity, objectivity, even of the notions 'society' and 'culture' themselves, as well as how scholars materialized objects of study and data about them to constitute the 'real' to which their work had been addressed" (Marcus, 1997: 399). For instance, ethnographers have interacted in their studies with the subjects of their research in face-to-face relationships, implying physical travels to a place. Travel and encounters have been "an important part of the ethnographic authority" (Hine, 2000: 44), a position strongly undermined since the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Nevertheless, "being there" – and being involved in the process of participant observation – is still the signature of an ethnographic project.

[8] https://listserv.heanet.ie/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind1806&L=IRTRAD-L&P=250, accessed July 9th, 2018).
[9] http://litmus.itma.ic/about/, accessed July 7th, 2018.

> From these observations a sense of ethnographic presence begins to emerge in which "being there" is unique to the ethnographer. The ethnographer who really went there is set up as the one with the authority to interpret, over and above the reader who might wish to interpret but does not have access to a claim of having been there. Readers are thus always dependent on the second-hand account of the ethnographer. The ethnographic authority is not a transferable one: it resides always and only with the ethnographer who was there. The authority of the ethnographer is also not transferable, within this model, to the subjects of the study whom we might naively assume were also there. The research subject lacks the analytic vision of the ethnographer, and thus cannot coexist in the analytic space of the ethnography. Ethnography acts to construct an analytic space in which only the ethnographer is really there. Ethnographers exist alone in an analytic space which preserves their authority claim. (Hine, 2000: 46)

Interactions on the Internet are different, raising questions of visibility/invisibility and, above all, authenticity. In the traditional field the researcher is exposed to whatever their physical involvement may bring, from the reflexive process, the learning process, to a supposed authenticity (and symmetry) of the relationship with the observed. On the Internet, the researcher can be what Hine (2000: 48) called a "cultural lurker," which can be seen as a sort of return to Malinowski's "fly on the wall" approach. The physical visibility of the face-to-face relationship can be replaced by the invisibility of the Internet observer, in totally changed social spaces and social practices.

> The question remains then whether interactions in electronic space should be viewed as authentic, since the ethnographer cannot readily confirm details that informants tell them about their offline selves. Posing the problem in this way, however, assumes a particular idea of what a person is (and what authenticity is). Authenticity, in this formulation, means correspondence between the identity performed in interactions with the ethnographer and that performed elsewhere both online and offline. This presupposes a singular notion of an identity, linked to a similarly singular physical body. As Wynn and Katz (1997) point out, critiques of this singular notion of identity are well established and in no way rely upon the new technologies. The person might be better thought of as a convenient shorthand for a more or less coherent set of identity performances with reference to a singular body and biography. We might usefully turn our attention, rather than seeking correspondence and coherence ourselves, to looking at the ways in which new media might alter the conditions of identity performance (Meyrowitz, 1985). Standards of authenticity should not be seen as absolute but are situationally negotiated and sustained. Authenticity, then, is another manifestation of the "phenomenon always

> escapes" rule (Silverman, 1993: 201). A search for truly authentic knowledge about people or phenomena is doomed to be ultimately irresolvable. The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity. This also entails accepting that "the informant" is a partial performance rather than a whole identity. (Hine, 2000: 48)

Thus, questions of authenticity are at the core of ethnography at large, not limited to virtual spaces.

To explain a possible approach for an ethnography of computer-mediated contexts (CMCs), Teli, Pisanu, and Hakken (2007) suggest the metaphor *library-of-people*.

> The Internet can be seen, from the point of view of a researcher, as like a library where the books represent people. In the shelves we will have people, not only text. Approaching the shelves, we need to interact in a skilled fashion in order to understand. When we look for data in a CMC context, we are in front of people using the web like a stage, people who are more aware of their privacy. So, unless we are studying explicitly published material – e.g., an online newspaper – we probably need to start an interaction with the web page maintainer and with the group involved. Whether to do so or not is a very situated choice. The analogy of the library-of-people should make us remember that the situatedness of research means it cannot be faced with a "recipe" or rigid model. The potential for hybridization and unfinished discourse of the cyborg is fully deployed in this metaphor.

A consequence of this hybridization and unfinished discourse is the possibility for the researcher to combine the "virtual" and the "real." According to Teli, Pisanu, and Hakken (2007: 2),

> the ethnography of online groups should not be strictly the ethnography of the groups online (or the online ethnography of groups), but it could be the ethnography of both online and related off-line situations, the ethnography of humans and non-human actors in both types of fields. It should be hybrid, like a cyborg. In a word, it should be a cyberethnography.

Not secondarily, this perspective acknowledges that CMCs shape contemporary identities and communities. In Hine's terms (2015: 31), the Internet should be considered "not as some free-floating sphere of social interaction apart from everyday life, but as an embedded part of the everyday lives of the people who use it." Also,

> rather than being a transcendent cyberspatial site of experience, the Internet has increasingly become a part of us. Often we do not think of "going online" as a discrete form of experience, but we find ourselves being online in an extension of other embodied ways of being and acting in the world […] The Internet can, in fact, disappear as a remarkable facet of everyday life, as it becomes simply an infrastructure which offers a means to do other things. (Hine, 2015:14)

In conclusion, in the course of my ethnographic project, I felt like Hallett and Barber (2014: 314-315):

> our initial ethnographic designs involved standard methodological tools, including observations and informal interviews. However, as our studies unfolded, we found ourselves pulled into online spaces because that was where our participants were. The individuals and businesses in these studies posted information (and had information posted about them) on websites, and therefore digital spaces became an essential aspect of data collection.[10]

How the Book is Organized

In *chapter one*, I trace the history of sessions in different areas of the world, and their social and cultural causes, from rural to urban landscapes, from dance music to entertainment music. What we can now perceive as the typical pattern of a session, performed in a pub where musicians informally gather together to play a repertoire of tunes from a collective encyclopedia and to share jokes, chat, and a bit of slagging,[11] looking for music and fun, in front of a more or less interested crew of patrons, is actually a historical product. Even if "pub culture" seems to have a significant and long history in the Anglo-Saxon world, the connection between Irish traditional music and this specific kind of "third place"

[10] In my data gathering online I did follow what Bruckman (2002) suggests in terms of ethically permissible lurking: "if the [online community] is perceived [as] public, researchers can freely quote and analyze online information if the following four criteria are met: 1) it is officially and publicly archived, 2) no password is required for archive access, 3) no site policy prohibits it, and 4) the topic is not highly sensitive" (cited in James and Busher 2009, 123).

[11] In Irish contexts, slagging mostly means making fun of someone, from light mockery to a less or more gentle roasting, to very harsh comments. The boundaries between slagging and insulting is sometimes very blurred. In https://thesession.org/discussions/13543, accessed July 3rd, 2018, several members of thesession.org define the term and discuss how it may be used in the context of a session.

(Oldenburg, 1998), as non-workplace and non-domestic place, started in London, at the end of the 1940s, as a consequence of the peculiar Postwar economics, as well documented by Hall (1994, 2016). The phenomenon of Irish music sessions developed fast, and later on it was also established in diasporic situations and in connection with the folk music revival of the 1960s. I claim a transnational perspective to cast a better light on what nowadays can be considered a global phenomenon, where ethnicity can become an ambiguous variable.

The aim of *chapter two* is to describe the phenomenon, following a quasi-holistic approach. I take into consideration many variables, starting with the peculiar relationship between musicians and audience. The session is not just the music as musicians play, but the sounds themselves of the pub, such as background conversations between musicians, or the audience's, waiters', and patrons' interactions, TV noises, and related comments. Thus, the performance in its complexity should be seen as a form of virtual and physical *discrete location*, characterized by unstable borders continuously negotiated and permeated, and not as a bracketed "time out of time." Here I suggest the idea of the session as a multisensorial phenomenon that goes beyond the music itself. I introduce the importance of proximity and the concept of intersensorial scape, where the sensual environment is central.

In *chapter three*, I discuss "craic" and the related discursive aspects. Small talk, music talk, politeness and slagging, that is, conversational games as expressed during the entire performance, allow me to introduce the concept of the session as a rite of spontaneity. The fundamental feature of the rite is a declared symmetry, where every possible disparity between components of the session's group is counteracted. At the same time, the session engenders asymmetry, with clear hierarchies and unbalanced power dimensions. The complexity of the session lies in these dynamics.

In *chapter four*, I focus on what I consider the central feature of the Irish traditional music performed in sessions: the melodic line of tunes played simultaneously by several instruments. The apparent polyphony is an "imperfect" unison, called *heterophony*. However, these imperfections are not casual; they follow specific rules and conventions. I suggest that in traditional Irish music performed in a session there is a profound connection between the dimension of heterophony and subjectivity. The idea of ritual spontaneity can be applied to this aspect of the performance as well: beside the structural aspects of the music, with its high level of formalization and the standardization of its traditional forms, it is possible to find space for the subject, implying an idea of freedom, while allowing spaces for personal variations. From this perspective, I criticize the

concept of *pseudo-individualization*, suggested by Adorno (1941: 1:21). Instead, I propose the dynamics between what I call an *aesthetic of change* (actualized by individual modifications) and an *aesthetic of continuity* (perpetuating the structure of the music itself). Again, like talks and narratives, music as well displays the dimensions, exercise, and negotiability of power, suggesting not only symmetry, communality, and group identity but also asymmetry, resistance, confrontation, and subjectivity.

Finally, in *chapter five* I provide analytic reflections on these rituals of spontaneity, focusing on subjectivity and communality. Also, I analyze what kind of subject is involved in the performance of the session, and what type of community is imagined and declared through the session. Here, I suggest the idea of *heterophonic communities*, implying a cultural homology between the musical and social/cultural dimensions, where strategic essentialism may play an important role in the construction of an idealized Irishness.

This will be my narrative, my story about the sessions. My challenge is to try to describe my own experience of being pleasantly immersed in an extraordinary world, made by extraordinary people, with its laughs and tensions, engagements and conflicts, rivalries and emulations. And music, good music. I will consider my task accomplished if somehow I can raise further questions and debates about these fascinating performances.

Kind friends and companions, come join me in rhyme
Come lift up your voices in chorus with mine
Come lift up your voices, all grief to refrain
For we may or might never all meet here again.[12]

[12] From *Here's a Health to the Company*, traditional song performed by Kevin Conneff and recorded in *A Chieftains Celebration*, by *The Chieftains*, 1989, RCA Victor, B008OZJNDS.

CHAPTER 1

THE HAUNTED HOUSE:[1] GENEALOGY OF SESSIONS

There are several contexts for the musicians and audiences of traditional Irish music. The session is just one such context, albeit arguably the most interesting for the social dynamics that it reveals. Nowadays Irish music sessions take place above all in pubs and, less frequently, in private houses, which may have been the original pattern. Since it is unstaged, a session differs from a concert in its ostensible informality. Furthermore, though the concert and session alike reinforce boundaries between musicians and the audience, it is a specific idea of these boundaries, in which peculiar social dynamics arise, that are manifested in the session.

What, then, is a session? Definitions vary according to the specific musical venue, the kind of musicians involved, and, occasionally, the context of the performance.

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[1] *The Haunted House* is a jig composed by Galway flute player Vincent Broderick (1920–2008), nowadays very popular in sessions. According to *ceolachan*, a member of thesession.org: "Some of the tunes ascribed to Vincent may have actually been the work of his brother Peter, but Vincent was the better known and the one most travelled… This might be one. There is a tale behind it, what I can remember of it as told to me by both men I'll try to recount. I claim no gifts here ~ Young lads, Vincent & Peter were out on the bicycle one late night, returning from playing out, when they heard music. Naturally they came to a stop. They were attracted to the sound and searched for it, coming to a large house all lit up and folks could be seen dancing through the windows, all gussied up and in their finery. The two of them paused for a while to listen and watch the goings on, but they were tired and eventually made their way home. The next day, curious, and not remembering such a place on the way before, a road well travelled by them, they returned. All they could find were ruins, a grand house long gone to ruin. This tune came on them, so really, there's almost no claim to it except by those ghosts…" (https://thesession.org/tunes/1098, accessed May 12th, 2011). **Please note that all quotations from oral material or websites are presented precisely as they were given without regard for orthographic or grammatical vagaries**.

In the "jazz world," a session (more precisely a "jam session" or simply a "jam") is a performance where musicians gather together without rigidly structured preparation. The repertoire and act are impromptu, improvised, sometimes organized only around chord progressions or standard tunes picked up from the many fake books, most ubiquitous among them the several volumes of *The Real Book*,[2] used by every jazz musician. Soloists' acts and improvisation skills seem to be the core value of the jam session in jazz music, but the social gathering is also important.

At a bluegrass session, according to Williams (2010: 9),

> [m]any tunes start off with one or two repetitions of the entire tune. After that, players can take turns soloing while the others play chords or offer subtle background texturing through the use of filler patterns or instrumental flourishes. Collective shifts in body language (especially in performance) indicate to the audience that attention should be paid to the mandolin player, for example, followed by the guitarist. By the end of the tune, everyone is playing the tune together again. You might see this same arrangement in a jazz ensemble, or in a rock band just before the breakdown, when the guitarist and drummer improvise dramatically prior to the song's conclusion. The essential contrast in these bands, then, is between soloists and ensemble, with a clear indication – through body language, spoken words, and musical signals – as to whose turn it is to solo, and when the tune is coming to an end. This structure of sequential solos is not common in Irish traditional music, but it is essential to bluegrass.

An Irish traditional music session, according to Vallely (1999: 345), is

> a loose association of musicians who meet […] to play an unpredetermined selection, mainly of dance music, but sometime with solo pieces such as slow airs and songs. There will be one or more "core" musicians, and others who are less regular. It has become such an all pervasive form of traditional music performance that it has led to beliefs that it has a much longer pedigree than is actually the case. Musicians tend to sit in a circle, around a table, each in an informally "reserved" seat, very much connected

[2] *The Real Book* is a multi-volume collection of jazz tunes, a more thorough response to earlier "fake books," illicitly published transcriptions of head compositions. It seems that initially *The Real Book's* tunes were collected by students from the Berklee College of Music in Boston in the 1970s. In Volume I of this somewhat illegal and certainly underground production were many of the compositions of pianist Paul Bley and bass player Steve Swallow. This generated the belief that the two musicians were actually the authors of the book. Subsequently, new and legal *Real Books* were published by the Hal Leonard Corporation.

> with inner hierarchies, facing one another, and focusing on other musician's play. Changes are rarely welcome. Within this setting, according to McCann (2001: 92), a "complex system of codes and etiquettes, humiliations and value reinforcements" is displayed. [3]

The audience remains outside the circle, separated by the symbolic boundaries of the music and the physical boundaries of the musicians' bodies. I argue that the construction of the space and boundaries of a session and the instability, permeability, and negotiability of these boundaries, as well as the resulting continuous definition and re-definition of space, are fundamental characteristics. The geography of the sessions, then, means the session itself assumes the quality of a non-representational area. The concept of a non-representational area was first suggested at the end of the 1990s by cultural geographer Nigel Thrift, interested in what he called "the geography of what happens" (2007: 2). Furthermore, Hayden Lorimer (2005: 84) describes interest in these areas concerning the way "focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions." Performance in a session is conceived as a set of creative, sensory, and affective acts that take place in the present. Consequently, this approach allows me to describe another important element: the session's sensescape, which is much more complex than the music alone. For instance, the pub has a sound itself: background conversations, waiters' and customers' interactions, TV noises and related comments, and even the talk among musicians during the tunes. But lights, scent, proxemics – in other words, everything that can stimulate a human sense – are also involved in defining the session. Audience and musicians also often interact during the performances with shouts, applause, and other signals of appreciation or disapproval. What happens between tunes is essential as well, as suggested by a widespread definition, often used by insiders themselves: "seisiún" (Gaelic transliteration for sessions) are *ceoil agus craic*, that is, music and fun.[4] According to Breathnach (1971) the theme of sharing food, drink,

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[3] Foy and Adams (1999) nicely summarize the peculiar codes and etiquettes. O'Shea (2008: 119–140) describes the complexity of sessions, also analyzing the rules of reserved seats.

[4] "Craic" (Gaelic transliteration from English, pronounced *krœk*) may have various meanings: conversation, gossip, and entertainment. The most usual translation is "fun." A session, and by extension Irish nightlife, can be defined as *ceol agus craic* (music and fun).

talk, music, and stories is intimately connected with playing traditional music (and also with a particular construction of Irishness). Glassie (1982) suggested that exchanging gifts (collectively referred to as entertainment) carries a "meaning of reciprocity and bonding [that] goes far beyond the commodity form that we associate with it" (Reiss, 2003: 143). A session is a place of exchanging chat and gossip, which is the first level of Glassie's hierarchy of gifts. In this perspective I would agree with Kaul (2007: 705): "The session, then, is not simply a musical environment; it is what Mauss would call a 'total social phenomenon' (1954 [1924]: 303), or what McCarthy calls 'music as community' (1999: 186, 189). So what often looks to be an incredibly casual affair is in fact incredibly complex." I argue that the set of social interactions expressed *in* (as well as *through* and *beyond*) a session can be analyzed as characteristics of a *community of practice* (see, for instance, Lave and Wenger, 1991). The peculiar group cohesiveness of a community of practice is not only based on the shared competence that makes the performance possible but is also fostered by shared symbolic elements and fantasies. In this perspective, fantasy should be understood as a creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need. According to Griffin (2008: 28),

> in a small-group setting, this definition includes any reference to events in the group's past, speculation about what might happen in the future, and any talk about the world outside the group. The term does not cover comments about actions taking place "here and now" within the group. Fantasies are expressed in the form of stories, jokes, metaphors, and other imaginative language that interprets or places a spin on familiar events. Voiced fantasies become vehicles to share common experiences and invest them with an emotional tone.

I argue that this analytical perspective may become a useful heuristic tool for a comprehensive interpretation.

These are just a few elements that need to be explored to understand the extensive complexity and the intense dynamics of a traditional Irish music session, and many others are yet to come.

From Rural to Urban Landscape

Surprisingly, although thought to be ancient, what we now perceive as the typical pattern of a session (the informal gathering of musicians in a pub) is a recent phenomenon, arguably beginning at the end of the 1940s and becoming popular during the folk music revival of the 1960s. In those years, the function and the venues of traditional Irish music changed

radically: from dance music to entertainment music, from cottages to pubs. Even if a sort of "pub culture" has a long history in the Anglo-Saxon world, pubs were not, until recently, the places where one could find and play Irish music, at least not in the way we are accustomed to nowadays. Of course, an association between pubs and music can be found earlier in time. Worrall (2009: 203) reports this story, called "Music and Refreshments," from *The Freeman's Journal*, a Dublin newspaper, on the August 16th, 1877 edition, page 7:

> Mary Brown was summoned by Inspector Darcy for keeping drink for sale on her unlicensed premises, at 51 Grattan-court. Inspector Darcy stated that about 1:30 pm on Sunday, the 15th of last month, he entered Mrs. Brown's house, he saw her throw something into a tub of water, and he saw a man, whom he believed to be her son, put a bottle of porter under his arm; there were seven bottles of porter behind a trunk, and two men were in the shop under the influence of drink. The defendant said she had the porter in the house for her son. Her son was the proprietor of a concertina, and he was acquainted with a few boys who came to hear him play. Fined 10s.[5]

The transition from different places, in particular from farmhouses, crossroads, private kitchens (which seems to be the original pattern), and dance halls (hosting the so-called *céili*[6]), to pubs took place over the last century. Consequently, definitions of social gatherings as well as the rules of musicians and the music itself changed over time, demonstrating the mutual influences of context, social actors, and performance.

Even the term itself deserves at least a brief discussion. According to Nicholsen (2007: 71),

> in the nineteenth century, musicians described any informal musical gathering as a "session." The session was a relaxed and spontaneous performance of tunes for the sole entertainment benefit of the musicians themselves, and perhaps a small audience of family and friends.

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[5] It would be hard to believe, as another example, that in *Crotty's Pub*, in Market Square in Kilrush, County Clare, owned from 1920 by Micho and Elizabeth Crotty, perhaps the greatest concertina player of her age, music was never played.

[6] *Cèilì* is an Irish Gaelic term indicating in origin a social gathering. Only in recent times has the term become connected with dancing, and, above all, with codified dances such as set and couple dances. Even if this book is not about dance, I will analyze in its section a few *cèilithe* to explore codifying processes of traditional music.

The term session often occurs in chronicles about "bardic sessions." As an example, *The Gentleman Magazine*, in 1820, quoted that

> [t]here were ten competitors for the honours of the Silver Harp, which, after a spirited contest, was awarded by the King's Bard to R. Roberts, a blind man from Caernarvon. The Meeting was then addressed in Poetic strains by the Rev. Water Davies; and Charles W. Wynn, esq. being loudly called for, that Gentleman addressed the Meeting in an energetic manner to the objects of the Institution. Thus closed the Bardic Session at Wrexham.

Also, in Grattan Flood (1905: 246) Irish bardic sessions are referred to:

> [t]he "bardic sessions" held at Charleville, Whitechurch, and other places, at intervals, between the years 1725–1775, resulted in much native poetry and songs. In order to rouse the feelings of the masses in favour of the Stuarts, the poets sang of "Moirin ni Chuillenain," "Roisin dubh," "Graine Maol," "Sighile ni Ghadharadh" (Sheela O'Gara), "Caitilin ni h-Uallachain," "An Londubh," "Druimfhionn Donn dilis," etc., all allegorical names for Ireland. The Rev. Charles Bunworth, Rector of Buttevant, County Cork, was chosen five times to act as adjudicator at the bardic sessions held at Bruree, County Limerick, every three years from 1730 to 1750. He was not only a patron, but a skilled performer, of Irish music. His house was ever open for the wandering harper or bard, and his favourite harp was expressly made for him by John Kelly in 1734.

Francis O'Neill (1910: 19)[7] did not use the term session, preferring a definition such as "impromptu concert." O'Neill held in his home may impromptu concerts, and others in the Police Station in Deering Street, in Chicago. Police stations were common venues for Irish musicians, many of them policemen: "In the year 1874, official duties brought me in contact with George Gubbins, one of the superannuated officers detailed as lockup keeper at the famous Harrison Street Police Station. He was a native of County Limerick and amused himself during the night-watches in playing the fiddle" (O'Neill, 1910: 80). Another example (O'Neill, 1910: 212–213) suggests the idea of *ceol agus craic* as a constituent of the gathering first in the police station, then in a private house:

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[7] Francis "Captain" O'Neill (1848–1936) is a legendary scholar, collector, and preserver of Irish music in the United States. Author of several books, like *Music of Ireland* (1903) and *Irish Folk Music* (1910), and funder of the Irish Music Club, he also recorded several wax cylinders, some of which can be found at http://archives.irishfest.com/dunn-family-collection/Music.htm (accessed June 2nd, 2014).