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"PULL UP A CHAIR!": ACCOMMODATION, PARTICIPATION, AND DISABILITY IN OLD TIME AND BLUEGRASS JAM SESSIONS

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Emily Elaine Williams entitled "'PULL UP A CHAIR!': ACCOMMODATION, PARTICIPATION, AND DISABILITY IN OLD TIME AND BLUEGRASS JAM SESSIONS." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music, with a major in Music.

Leslie C. Gay Jr., Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**“PULL UP A CHAIR!”:
ACCOMMODATION, PARTICIPATION, AND
DISABILITY IN OLD-TIME AND BLUEGRASS JAM
SESSIONS**

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Music
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Emily Elaine Williams
May 2020

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Like every ethnography, this document is a work of collaboration. The people I have met and stories I have heard over the last several months, along with in my upbringing, have shaped both this document and myself. For that, I am forever grateful. I cannot begin to name all of the mentors, teachers, and friends that have helped to shape me throughout my education. The thanks written here, then, are not exhaustive. There are so many more individuals to whom I owe my gratefulness.

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ABSTRACT

Bluegrass and old-time are genres founded on Appalachian music traditions, as mediated through the early recording industry. While initially considered performance genres, the styles have become the foundation for jam sessions across the United States. These jam sessions are participatory, inclusive spaces, in which anyone with a basic knowledge of the style and the proper instrumentation can, in theory, join in the musicking (as defined by Christopher Small, 1998).

For the musician with a disability, these informal jam sessions, founded on musical sociability, demonstrate an alternative value structure, as they are mostly unregulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), an economic-based antidiscrimination law. As this leaves accommodation up to the discretion of the participants, the accommodations found within these settings portray a different perspective of disability—one which allows for possibility and participation. I term this as a participatory model of accommodation and, through ethnography and autoethnography, illustrate how this peer-based model promotes inclusion within the social model of disability.

Drawing on Thomas Turino's (2008) definitions of participatory music and Tom Shakespeare's (2006, 2010) articulation of the social model of disability, I analyze the musical and social dynamics of the jam session, drawing on my own experience as a fiddle player with a hearing impairment. Further, using ethnographic research—specifically, interviews and participant-observation—of musicians with disabilities in these sessions in Tennessee, Washington, and Illinois, I illustrate the importance of interpersonal relationships, rather than power dynamics, in the jam session. Moreover, I demonstrate how the aging population of these jam sessions impacts ideas of disability, impairment, and mortality. Finally, I argue that this

narrative of inclusion and practices of accommodation in jam sessions can change individual perspectives on disability.

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CHAPTER ONE

LESSONS UNDER THE OLD SHADE TREES: AN INTRODUCTION

So, get out the fiddle and rosin up the bow,

Look at ol' Will a-pattin' his toe.

We'll make music till the rafters ring,

All that pickin' and a sawin' on the strings. (Krauss, 2007)

Looking Back

Summer mornings are hot in Texas, and this one was no exception. Musicians from across the region had begun to form circles under the hundred-year-old trees surrounding the historic courthouse in Athens, Texas. While the other side of the building had a stage where a fiddle contest would be held later that afternoon, this laid back jam area was where I would stay for most of the day. This side of the courthouse was why I looked forward to coming back year after year.

Most of the fiddlers would arrive after lunch, just before the fiddle contest. The chance to play on the stage and show off your skills was an attractive draw, as was the cash prize, but it was the prestige of potentially winning the Athens Old Fiddlers Contest and Reunion—the longest-running fiddle contest in Texas—that brought fiddlers from up to 3 to 4 hours away. They would arrive with enough time to find a guitar player to accompany them, rehearse their songs, compete, and then leave. I, personally, thought they were missing out. The contest was not why I was here—I was here to jam with

musicians that I had not played with since last year, as well as some I had never played with, and others I saw every week. That was why I stayed on this side of the courthouse.

Scanning my side of the courthouse, I got out my fiddle and listened for a group that sounded like they played my style. I mostly played bluegrass, though I also enjoyed playing old country songs. I knew that I would play several genres over the course of the day, from old-time fiddle tunes to covers of Jean Ritchie songs, but I wanted to start somewhere I was comfortable. Some of the groups already had too many fiddlers—while two fiddles made for a good time, three or more fiddles made a jam difficult. I wandered, listening, for a few minutes before I found a group of older men, none of whom I knew, but that only had one fiddle player in the circle. I tapped my foot to the rhythm of the upright bass and enjoyed their music for a moment. Courtesy dictated that I stand just outside the circle while the group finished the song, and wait for their acknowledgment. No one had taught me this; it was one of the many social expectations I had observed and imitated.

“You play that fiddle?” One of the musicians asked, having wrapped up the tune with a repeat of the chorus. The group turned to look at me.

“Yessir,” I replied.

They looked doubtful. I did not blame them—a 13-year-old female was an odd demographic on this side of the courthouse. There was no one else my age over here; my peers would mostly stay over near the stage. They may play some tunes together, but they would be there for the competition, not to make friends. Besides, even if we struck up a conversation, I wouldn’t be able to hear them well enough to keep up with their words. My hearing impairment meant that the noise of the live music, the food vendors, and the

carnival rides a block away would prevent my participation from any social chatter.

Whether I enjoyed the jams for their own sake, or as a welcomed mode of participation that wasn't accompanied by the feeling of drowning in auditory stimuli, I may never know. I simply knew my preference, and didn't mind being the anomaly.

I knew what the musicians I just met expected: I was either a contest fiddler that knew how to play her three prepared songs or a classical violinist who had no idea how to fiddle. They did not know that I went to a bluegrass jam at a local country club in my hometown of Noonday, Texas on Monday nights, a country and honky-tonk jam at a local restaurant on Tuesday nights, and drove an hour away for fiddle lessons in a "haunted" hotel on Thursday afternoons. There were no tell-tale signs of my performances at the local Saturday night bluegrass shows at the community center or one of the several small-town opries in the region. I was not offended by their doubt; I enjoyed proving I was someone who did not fit their assumptions.

"Well, then, pull up a chair," they offered. "What do you want to play?"

"How 'bout a little 'Faded Love'? Key of D." I suggested, purposefully choosing a piece by Bob Wills (1950). While not bluegrass, I knew this would imply that I was not the musician they expected. The genre, western swing, acted as a statement that I was not a contest fiddler, there to show off and practice my tunes before the contest. I knew they would know the tune—it was so popular that musicians often joked that it was the unofficial state anthem of Texas.

"Did you say D? Or G?"

"D." I clarified. "D like dog." They nodded their acknowledgment to my request, so I kicked off the tune with two confident chords on my fiddle.

I played through the tune once, embellished with double stops, turns, and slides, then passed the melody on by nodding to the musician next to me. I kept my eyes active as the song passed around the musicians, keeping careful track of whose turn it was to show off their playing skills, using my eyes rather than my ears. Our circular set-up of the small group made following the solos easy. The guitar switched from strumming chords to flatpicking the melody for his turn, as did the mandolin. The other fiddler played his version of the tune—one very different than mine—before it came back to me. I wrapped up the melody, trying to add some of the musical tricks the other fiddler had used—a sign of respect—and noted a change of their demeanor. I was a part of the circle now. For all my many differences—my age, gender, and, unknown to them at this point, hearing impairment¹—they fully included me. The many subtle accommodations I made or asked for were accepted without question.

The jam sessions of my youth stood in stark contrast to my involvement in formal western art music ensembles. During this same season of life, I found myself desperately searching for advice on how to handle my disability amid the growing expectations in my

¹ I use the term “hearing impaired” (as used by both myself and my research collaborators) to reference a form of partial deafness that, while causing challenges and obstacles to hearing in “normal” environments, generally does not prevent the person from being broadly considered “hearing” or “mostly hearing” by the general population. These individuals also are not actively involved in Deaf culture, do not use American Sign Language as a primary language (though some may have some experience signing), and generally do not identify as d/Deaf. I do not consider this a “one size fits all” phrase, and recognize the debates surrounding the use of this term, especially when used as a form of erasure of Deaf culture. I further understand that many would use the phrase “hard of hearing” to describe this population. While I cannot speak for my informants who use the term, I personally describe myself as “hearing impaired” as a subversive statement against the ableist expectation that I should desire to pass as “hearing” by claiming that my ability to do so is “impaired.”

youth orchestra. I had moved from the middle school ensemble to the one for high school students. As the number of musicians in the ensemble doubled, I struggled to pick out my own instrument's sound from the whole. I played by muscle memory and feel. From my assigned chair, I could only see half of the conductor's face. The student in front of me kept moving his chair and blocking that line of sight. While I loved playing in the youth orchestra, I found myself looking for advice on how to manage the challenges. My orchestra directors, while encouraging and supportive, had no experience or knowledge to offer concerning my situation, so I turned to the internet.

The advice I found angered me. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) legally held these music education settings to a standard of accommodation, the depersonalized suggestions anticipated mediocrity at best. They portrayed me as a challenging student that should be allowed the opportunity to *attempt* to play the violin. I, apparently, would be better off playing the piano, or at the very least, only considering solo literature. The suggestions I found took my disability as a deficiency and assumed that either I would need enhancement or lowered expectations. My stack of music for my upcoming performance at Carnegie Hall—which I had been chosen for by video audition—confirmed that these assumptions about me, a hearing impaired musician, were untrue.

Looking back on these moments from early high school, I realize how much of an impact my musical life had on my understanding of inclusion. As I analyze my past experiences, I recognize that I did not initially see the broader significance of such highly personal defining moments; thus, I attempt to step outside of myself to see what an outsider would consider noteworthy. My insider status within the informal jam session

tradition from a young age hid me from seeing the radically inclusive nature of the social context of the jam session. Yet, in retrospect, I realize that these musical experiences shaped my view of myself; they impacted my perspective of musicality and disability into a pattern contrary to the formalized systems I experienced in western art music ensembles. These jams instilled in me an understanding of the multifaceted, often imperfect, identities of us all; one element of identity, then, cannot disqualify an individual as a whole.

I now recognize my privilege in these experiences, and I understand that I had opportunities that may not have been standard. I was able to take classical violin lessons starting at age four and began studying with a professional fiddler at age ten. I recall these memories not to imply that my experiences were “normal,” but rather to demonstrate that the jam session sits in distinct contradiction to the formal system of accommodation generally observed in the United States. As such, the jam session context portrays a different perspective of disability, one that allows for possibility and participation, and one that can teach us more broadly applicable lessons.

Social Values and Difference

My narrative illustrates that social value systems exist outside of the formal, economic-based infrastructure of society. These informal jam sessions, founded on musical sociability, demonstrate alternative value structures, which form the basis for my research. Such musical events, mostly unregulated by the ADA—an economic-based antidiscrimination law—leave accommodation up to the discretion of the participants. In these private spaces, social values, rather than the law, prevent exclusion and

discrimination for individuals with disabilities. Without the legal infrastructure of the ADA, this accommodation happens solely within the context of relationships. As I found throughout the many jam sessions I attended, these are personalized, exist outside of power-based hierarchies, and often occur in a very natural fashion. No “proof” of disability is required, nor is there a line between need and desire. As the social values of such settings become actions, the understanding of disability shifts from deficiency to difference.

Jam sessions, as one of these social spaces, fall within a value system termed as participatory music cultures, which through their nature make the inclusion of those with disabilities possible. Broadly, Thomas Turino (2008) defines the term as

a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role (p. 26).

Participatory music cultures contrast with the presentational model, in which a musician or group of musicians strive to entertain an audience. Additionally, presentational music portrays sound as an object for sale or consumption, rather than a shared action. Further, Turino states that participatory music cultures

differ fundamentally in that anyone and everyone is welcomed to perform.

The inclusion of people with a wide range of musical investment and abilities within the same performance creates a unique dynamic as well as a series of constraints on what can or should be done musically (p. 30).

By changing the emphasis from success to involvement, the value system within such groups shifts, and a culture forms where discrimination or exclusion would undermine the foundation of the group. This theory does not claim that all participatory cultures fully act out this ideal; there are many reasons one may be “rejected” from a participatory setting, but I will confront this notion in later chapters.

These jam sessions also emphasize *musicking*, a term coined by Christopher Small (1998). Defined as “to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (p. 9), musicking is the foundational component of these jams, rather than the music. Musicking, as a verb, implies action rather than an object, as seen in these jam sessions. Songs and tunes are platforms that create an opportunity for social gatherings and interactions.

While potentially held within a public place of social infrastructure (such as a bar, restaurant, or community center), the old-time or bluegrass jam session itself exists outside of the location’s regular operation, indicating that while the building may be ADA accessible, no regulated “reasonable modifications” in processes or procedure exist for the jam session itself. However, despite the lack of formalized requirements, I have observed through personal experiences and additional ethnographic study that the needed accommodations are often provided to musicians with disabilities with little to no hesitation.

From my research and experiences, I see that participatory music cultures, built around principles of inclusion, should in many cases be welcoming places for those who require accommodations and differentiation. By differentiation, I refer to an educational

concept where students are taught or assessed at various levels depending on their skills, based on observations of variance between students (see Marshall, 2016; Tomlinson, 2000). In education, differentiation refers to employing multiple forms of instruction or engagement to provide all students with the optimal chance of success without compromising outcomes. However, differentiation occurs in any situation where various degrees of involvement are possible without disrupting the overall goal, as discussed by Don Adams and Joseph Farrell (1969). Allowing for difference without changing the outcome is, perhaps, a hallmark of participatory music settings.

Since participatory settings create accommodations based on a system of interpersonal relationships, rather than economic value, they are personalized by time and place per the musicians' needs. I do not imply that all jam sessions will fit into this model, nor that all musicians with disabilities will find the accommodations sufficient. However, in this shift of value, I argue that a relationship-based system of accommodation can provide us with a new perspective on disability that focuses on respect, personhood, and humanity rather than remediation.

Scope and Methodology

My research within old-time and bluegrass jam communities began officially in August 2019, though many of my observations come from my experiences within these types of musical cultures as a middle and high school student with a hearing impairment. During my formal research period, I attended jam sessions throughout the Knoxville, Tennessee area and engaged in ethnographic interviews with musicians with disabilities both in person and through virtual interactions.

I began finding other musicians with disabilities within these musical settings by networking among local jams at area restaurants and bars. As an active fiddler, as well as a clogger, I was able to find acceptance from these groups quickly. I used the connections I made with musicians and dancers at these jams, as well as contacts through other scholars of Appalachian music, to meet other musicians with disabilities. These musicians each had a link to the East Tennessee region, though some had moved away for work or school-related reasons. Thus, my ethnography focuses on musicians located in three cities in the United States (Knoxville, Tennessee, Chicago, Illinois, and Seattle, Washington), and on their musical environments.

I present my work as both a reflexive ethnography and an autoethnography, as described by Heewon Chang (2008) and Kim Etherington (2004), and demonstrated by scholars such as Mellonee Burnim (1985). As a hearing impaired violinist and fiddler, I recognize that my insider status in the community impacts my understanding; therefore, I place myself as part of the narrative. I use autoethnography as a method of representing my fieldwork reflexively within what Jeff Todd Titon (2008) calls “an ongoing dialogue with my friends” (p. 32). I do not intend merely to share my own voice; instead, I place my experiences in dialogue with those within the jam communities I attempt to portray, as well as my colleagues in academia.

The Nature of Jam Sessions

All or most members of the bluegrass or old-time jam, typically, play simultaneously, with the differentiation between roles dictated by tradition. Musicians sit in a circle-like figure, with no members blocking the sight of another. This arrangement

allows equality among musicians, regardless of skill. Within reason, anyone may join the circle, though instruments outside the implied standard set of instruments—fiddle, guitar, mandolin, banjo, bass, and sometimes dulcimer—may be rejected. While I have witnessed beginner guitar players accepted fully, I have also watched the rejection of an accomplished jazz flutist from a group. In this social context, acceptance occurs when one aligns their sound with the others in the jam. Additionally, skill matters less than the understanding of the social and sonic dynamics of the given group.

Participatory music settings, including both bluegrass and old-time jams, do not expect equal levels of contribution; however, they consider all contributions necessary. There must be several foundational musicians to keep the group together, who often look to one member to lead them. To quote Turino (2008), these leaders are not “stars”; they are “more like workmen with the special responsibility to provide a firm musical foundation that allows and in fact inspires others to participate” (p. 33). In other words, this leadership role does not claim authority or stardom; instead, they serve the rest of the group by facilitating inclusion. Within the jam sessions in which I have participated, older, accomplished musicians, often well known in the community, lead the jam. Most of these musicians have been singing guitar players, but I have also met some leaders who played the fiddle.

From this point of leadership, participants of all backgrounds may join. New or less skilled musicians take roles appropriate for their current level – they may “just” play chords or “just” sing on the few songs they know, but the group’s musicking would not be the same without their contribution. All contributions are encouraged and have their place, as Turino (2008) states that these settings “will have a variety of roles that differ in

difficulty and degrees of specialization required.... The inclusion of people with a wide range of abilities within the same performance is important for inspiring participation” (p. 31). Even when executed imperfectly, as I have often witnessed, this concept of natural, participation-based differentiation within these jam sessions can be strikingly different from formalized differentiation.

Both old-time and bluegrass jam sessions follow participatory values, as discussed, though they express these values in different ways. Bluegrass jams take little outside preparation but higher levels of skill; they also pre-assign expected roles by instrument (see Flood, 2017). Lead players, for example, should have the ability to improvise a solo within the style in a variety of keys at a moment’s notice. Rhythm players, such as the guitars and bass, must provide a stable musical structure of chordal rhythms. Bluegrass jams also include vocalists, usually missing from the old-time jam. Beyond learning the lyrics for songs one plans to sing, preparation for the bluegrass jam involves understanding the style and how musical lines interact.

Contrastingly to the exposed nature of individual musicianship within bluegrass jams, the old-time jam allows the musician to blend into a crowd, giving a new musician time to learn tunes. The old-time jam, then, provides a time for playing favorite tunes and enjoying the sociability of the group. The number of tunes a musician knows, however, gives them a form of prestige, encouraging outside practice and independent learning from recordings. These recordings range from early vinyl records of the likes of Fiddlin’ John Carson to contemporary artists like Bruce Molsky, as well as the extensive homemade “field recordings” of past sessions shared online among members of the group (see Rohs, 2018). Ease of participation in these jams falls along a spectrum, with some

groups wanting to play songs with more complex forms or unpredictable patterns that are difficult to pick up in the moment; other groups stick to tunes that everyone knows while actively avoiding tunes that will exclude new players.

In both bluegrass and old-time jams, musicians carefully balance ideas of inclusion and enjoyment, as the most enjoyable jam sessions occur when the majority of the musicians can play around the same skill level. A beginner to the jam may find the breakneck speeds of an advanced bluegrass jam overwhelming, while an advanced player may consider a “slow jam” dull. For this reason, groups of jammers often segregate themselves by skill and style. However, most of these jam sessions welcome new players, allowing the musician to choose their level of involvement.

Understanding Disability and Accommodation

My disability—a profound unilateral hearing impairment in my left ear—was diagnosed at the age of 3, surprisingly young for this specific form of hearing impairment. As I was homeschooled, I had few reasons to request formal accommodations until I began taking classes at the local junior college in high school. My musical experiences, then, had already greatly influenced my understanding of accommodation before I stepped into a disability services office.

While the word “accommodation” can refer to many things, it is, to a person with disabilities, the word at the top of the form we must fill out to get special permission to receive the services we need to succeed in an ableist culture. Thanks to the ADA, I can file paperwork with disability services to receive permission to use solutions that help manage some of the challenges of hearing impairment in the classroom. I can request to

take audio notes, have a notetaker, or even use an FM system to have the sound from a lapel microphone on my professor sent directly to my headset. All it takes is a once-a-semester meeting: I discuss my need with a complete stranger, sometimes having to provide documentation from an audiologist, and they fill out a form to send to my professors, informing them what they legally have to offer me.

While I have experienced the ADA's effect primarily on my education, the antidiscrimination law covers all areas of public life for any disability that "substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual" ("Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990," 1990, para. 1A). It applies to a wide range of disabilities and dictates not only a minimum standard of appropriate accommodation to the environment but also reasonable modifications to processes and procedures. It functions primarily as a system of protection against discrimination in educational and workplace settings. As such, the ADA's concern is not a social reduction of discrimination, but rather equal rights within places of economic function, including employment. The successes and failures of this system have been written about extensively, debating if the law has been, in fact, economically effective; I leave these arguments over data and statistics to economists (see Acemoglu & Angrist, 2001; Baldwin, Zeager, & Flacco, 1994; Donahue, Stein, Griffin Jr., & Becker, 2011; Maroto, 2015). I focus instead on the social dynamics that the legislation cannot affect. To be sure, infrastructures must be in place to reduce workplace and educational discrimination. However, locating inclusion within a capitalist economic model comes with disadvantages.

The disability rights movement and the acts that it produced, including the ADA, developed as a response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as the antidiscrimination laws

passed at that time did not prevent discrimination of those with disabilities. Michelle Maroto (2015) states that “proponents of the ADA believed attitudinal changes would come with its passage.... Although disability may have faced unique challenges, all antidiscrimination laws struggle to change attitudes” (para. 56). Since legislation cannot change thoughts, essentialisms, or motivations, there are many gray areas within this system of rules. Placing the responsibility for accommodation on a faceless infrastructure does not, in general, look first after the needs of the person. Instead, it looks at the needs of the larger organization, usually from an economic standpoint. One could argue that this system values humanity only so far as it needs the human body for labor, thus implying a deficient, disabled body in need of enhancement to complete specified tasks.

This economic model of accommodation also relies on a pattern of meritocracy – the assumption that one can earn success through hard work. Meritocracy in disability creates a dichotomy between the disabled body that can “pass” as abled with minimal assistance and the disabled body that cannot. Assuming that hard work causes this divide, rather than the system, creates an “inspirational other” as I term it, a phenomenon often described by other scholars, including William Cheng (2016), who states that “activists and scholars have coined the term ‘supercrip’ to describe the glorification of high achievers with disabilities. Colloquially, we might call it ‘inspiration porn’” (para. 2). This glorification of the inspirational, “passing” disabled body relies on a foundation of ableism, as it places the value of the disabled body on the work it can produce rather than valuing and recognizing the disabled body’s humanity.

Further, this economic model does a poor job of handling situations in which provided accommodations for one need occurs at the expense of another. Specifically,

social components are sacrificed for convenience, as it is far easier to change one person's task than an entire system. For example, to accommodate for young students with food allergies through a safe, allergen-free eating area, I have observed that these students are often segregated from their peers in the cafeteria. In this case, the provided accommodation comes at the expense of social exclusion and the risk of bullying (see Rocheleau & Rocheleau, 2019; Szechtman, 2006). The accommodation has allowed the core goal to remain in place (eating lunch) at the price of a side value, which may, in the eyes of a young student, be just as important as the external force's core value of the situation.

Lastly, formal accommodations require a divide between needs and desires. The determination of this line, generally, falls on the faceless infrastructure, rather than the person with disabilities. The system often requires medical documentation or other forms of proof of need, which may be costly to obtain and creates an economic weight on the part of the person with disabilities. It also risks compromising privacy, as the level of disclosure to the infrastructure may involve more exposure than what the person desires. Additionally, the need to disclose the "reason" behind accommodations risks interpersonal discrimination, such as uncooperative colleagues, undesired pressure for disclosure, and stigma (see Bassler, 2009; Grimes, Southgate, Scevak, & Buchanan, 2019).

While sometimes useful in my general education classes at the beginning of my undergraduate education, I realized as I entered my upper-level coursework that the mandated accommodations my undergraduate university could provide were not ideal for me. I did not need my body enhanced through microphones and recording devices; I

needed and wanted understanding. The blanket solutions offered to me did not take into account my learning style, the course material, or the architecture of the room itself. Perhaps naively, I found myself scheduling meetings not with disability services, but directly with my professors. My understanding of inclusion, founded on years of openly welcomed self-advocacy in the jam circles, placed accommodation as a matter of relationship and communication. Fortunately, my professors were more than willing to accept my eclectic view of accommodation.

To emphasize, I speak of accommodation, rather than accessibility. Accessibility refers to a state in which an object or location is available for the disabled body to use without modification (see Job Accommodation Network, 2018). Accessible architecture, for example, offers a wheelchair user access to an elevator and doorways large enough for easy entry. Once established, accessibility becomes passive. Accommodation, then, calls for an active modification within a pre-established context. Accommodation can lead to accessibility if the accommodations modify the structure or event in a way that makes the accommodations passive, but this does not always occur. Observing when the person with disabilities enters the situation provides another perspective on these terms. An accessible location or event would have all needed modifications in place before the person with disabilities enters, while an environment with accommodations would indicate that something has changed in response to the person's presence. Some situations blur this line, as accommodations can be pre-planned, but not in use until the need for them arises, such as the availability of microphones for classroom lecturers.

In my opening narrative, I observed how the jam session provided accommodations without disturbing the nature or overall goal of the musicking. First, the

group sat in a circle, which, for me, acted as an accessible seating arrangement. The circle allowed me to use visual cues, including body language and eye contact, rather than relying on locational hearing. Second, the musicians responded to my use of body language. While body language occurs as a critical component of the musicking in most jam sessions, the musicians matched the amount and type of non-verbal communication I initiated. Because I passed the melody on to the next musician by nodding, it returned to me in the same fashion. My subtle request became unknowing accommodation by their actions. Finally, accommodation occurred through the repetition of information—the key of the tune. In this case, I provided accommodation for someone else in the circle. The practice of repeating song titles and keys, often with clarification using a phonetic alphabet, is a common occurrence in jam sessions and usually aids me as much as it supports the musicians affected by age-related hearing loss.

Disability and Language

As a scholar working within disability studies, I recognize that language surrounding disability has undergone extensive debate. One of the primary arguments exists within the context of syntax. Language models, such as person-first language and identity-first language, exist to counter the medical model, which, to quote Michael Bakan, takes a “deficit-centric” approach—the need to “*change* the... person” (2016, p. 20). Person-first language results from the opinion that words should reflect the personhood of an individual first and foremost, rather than identifying the individual by their disability. Person-first language uses patterns such as a “person with a disability” versus a “disabled person.” The identity-first model, contrastingly, reclaims words such

as “disabled,” “autistic,” or “blind,” indicating that impairment is not a source of shame or deficiency. Rather, impairment is a part of one’s identity. Using identity-first language also serves as a statement of pride in one’s place within a disability’s community (see Sinclair, 2012; Shakesphere, 2010).

However, language can imply an underlying structure. Meaning and definition come not from words themselves, but from the traditionally upheld product of culture we call language (see Saussure, 1916, pp. 67-68). Syntax can give us insight into the relationship of one word with its surrounding words, as the grammatical patterns speakers have created to make sense of sound patterns indicate word importance. When words exhibit respect, we assume that the person they refer to deserve that same respect; therefore, words can demonstrate how speakers align themselves in viewing disability. Opinions on the social vs. medical view of disability exist regardless of the language used to present it; words only clarify our ability to communicate the constructs.

Because of this relationship between syntax and meaning, I choose to align my language after an ethnographic model of disability. I use my words to respect the personhood of the musicians; to recognize their disability in the same terms that they employ themselves, whether it be from the person-first model, as I view my own disability (see Bakan et al., 2008; Kitwood, 1997), or the identity-first model. I choose the term disability, rather than an alternative term such as “differently-abled,” in recognition of the unique limitations or obstacles created by physical or intellectual difference. I do so while embracing the simultaneous reality that these challenges do not affect our humanity. My use of the term “disability” also acts as a contradiction to “inspirational” other-ness, which measures a person’s value through meritocracy.

Disability cannot solely define a person, nor can disability be separated from experience. Disability is a portion of an individual's perspective—a way of viewing the world that can affect the sensory understanding of or physical access to an environment. Existing as only one facet of identity, disability cannot take into account one's background, personality, experiences, tastes, class, ethnicity, or anything else that comprises who we are. As a hearing impaired individual, I know that I have different sensory experiences that, at times, restrict my ability to participate. My hearing impairment makes social situations difficult; understanding speech without locational hearing, amid a room full of noise, adds challenge to everyday situations. This perspective reflects how I understand myself in relationship to others – my worldview. It is a part of who I am, but it is not who I am. From this perspective, I analyze disability as an element of personhood that directly impacts experience without assuming that it has the power to define the individual.

I also recognize disability as a spectrum and thus emphasize that no one solution for a specific issue will create an accessible environment for all. Therefore, I advocate for accommodation as a method of reducing and eliminating ableist discrimination and ideals to cultivate a society where accommodation, understanding, and consideration occur as standard choices, rather than extraordinary acts.

By studying the experiences of musicians with disabilities who participate in old-time and bluegrass jam sessions, I examine the lived experience of these musicians. Further, I observe what methods of accommodation are used to include these musicians. In doing so, I explore a different approach to accommodation—one which seeks to provide resources in a manner reflexive to the situation, person, and musical context.

Other Literature

I recognize the large quantity of scholarship in Appalachian studies that have analyzed the complex history of this region. Specifically, I reference Cecelia Conway (1995) and outspoken musicians like Rhiannon Giddens (2017) in their confrontation of racial erasure in the narratives of Appalachia. I also acknowledge recent ethnographic works by scholars like Sophia Enriquez (2019) toward bringing awareness to the racial tensions that persist within the Appalachian region, despite the ever-growing diversity of the area. While I demonstrate an inclusive culture within my writing, I recognize that these racial tensions have a long history and still exist within the same jam sessions.

My work draws upon the documentation of these types of jam sessions, as researched by Michelle Kisliuk (1988), Liza Sapir Flood (2017), Esther Morgan-Ellis (2019), and Steve Rohs (2018). I also draw upon Aaron Fox (2004) and his writing on the language and social dynamics of Texas country music performances and jams. Further, as I have indicated, I am indebted to the work of Turino (2008) and Small (1998) in shaping my understanding of and giving words to my lived experiences.

This ethnography falls within the growing field of music and disability studies. While the Society for Disability Studies was founded in 1982, writings concerned with music and disability were not published until 2006, with seminal works by Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (2006). I focus my critical attention on ethnographies within this sub-discipline, including those by Michael Bakan (2016), Alexandria Carrico (2014, 2019), and Katelyn Best (2019).

I refer to such ethnographies as a subsection of applied ethnomusicology. Defined by Titon (2015), applied ethnomusicology is a “music-centered intervention in a particular community... [that] above all... is people-centered” (p. 4). Music and disability scholars do not aim, as music therapy does, to provide medical or therapeutic interventions. Instead, as Bakan (2015) states in discussing his work with the Artism Ensemble, music and disability scholars use ethnomusicology and ethnography to change the “misguided ways that... people and institutions imagine, think about, and respond to” disability and people who ‘have’ it (p. 281). I also take inspiration from Deborah Wong’s (2004) engagement of practical action and social change in the public spheres of Asian American musicians through ethnography of the interactions of performance, race, ethnicity, and gender. As she states, “music (and the arts generally) have the potential to compel social change by blurring the lines between political and intellectual response” (Wong, 2004, p. 4); I thus align myself with the sharing of stories that have the power to lead to societal changes.

Chapter Outline

Building upon my opening discussion of accommodation as a social value, through the understanding of accommodation in old-time and bluegrass jam sessions, the remaining chapters address the shift from deficiency to difference through social values. I accomplish this through the narrative of both my own experiences and those of other musicians with disabilities.

In Chapter Two, I focus on my experiences in bluegrass jams through autoethnography, both current and past, as a musician with disabilities in the jam circle. I

examine ideas of role, personhood, and identity created through relationships with other musicians. I use this idea, as well as the notion of musical dialogue, to introduce my concept of participatory accommodation.

In Chapter Three, I examine the stories and experiences of my colleagues with disabilities who participate in old-time jam circles. I explore three individuals' unique stories and experiences, including their involvement in jamming, continued commitment, and challenges as musicians with disabilities. Through these histories, I explore how the relational dynamic of the jam session demonstrates participatory accommodation through the rejection of hierarchy.

Chapter Four examines age-related disability in the jam session. Older adults comprise many of these jam sessions, which leads to a large percentage of the participants being affected by age-related hearing loss, vision loss, and mobility challenges. I separate their narratives from those who entered the jam with a disability at a younger age, as these musicians have a different experience of “knowing” ableness in the jam session. Their experiences confront the acknowledgment of disability, bring up ideas of mortality and dignity, and challenge notions of what it means to have difference.

I conclude with a vignette of a jam I regularly attended as a young musician. I use this to illustrate the implications of what I term the participatory model of accommodation—the power of listening to the diverse voices of disability. I hypothesize how the narrative of inclusion and practices of accommodation in jam sessions can change not only individual perspectives on disability but, further, the possible effects of this perspective.

Finding our own Shade Trees

At the end of the long day of jamming on the courthouse lawn in Athens, Texas, now many years ago, I put my violin back in its case. I was sunburned, exhausted, a bit dehydrated, and very hungry. My parents put our lawn chairs into our car, and we prepared for the hour drive home. My heart was full: I felt known, seen, and included. I did not understand the extraordinary implications of what I had just experienced, nor would I for many years. I am beginning to understand now.

The spirit of inclusion found under those old shade trees offer us a challenge – to look for ways of providing accommodation within the framework of understanding and respect. It asks us to look at the personhood of the people around us and offer relationships without needing to change the person. The moments of musicking under the old shade trees push us to find our own ways to say, “Pull up a chair!” and offer inclusion wherever our spheres of influence lie.

CHAPTER TWO

“WHAT’S YOUR NAME, FIDDLER?”: IDENTITY, ROLE, AND DISABILITY IN THE BLUEGRASS JAM SESSION

A life of bluegrass music,

With friends and family.

I’m an all American bluegrass girl,

And I’m proud as I can be. (Vincent, 2006)

Into the Jam Circle

Having explored most of the jam sessions in Knoxville proper, I took an evening to drive out to Kingston—one of the small towns on the outskirts of the city. The community center was just a few miles off the interstate, yet felt deeply country. I do not mean to evoke the image of the Appalachian hillbilly by this statement; neither do I mean to imply a likeness to Fox’s description of working-class, central Texas (2004, pp. 74-77). Rather, I intend to impart a sense of space, yet closeness. Houses in the country are spread apart, driveways long, yet neighbors only a moment away. In the scheduling and centralization of everyday life, distance mandates intentionality in relationships, social life, and even just getting groceries.

I parked my car behind the older, brick building, avoiding the crowded parking lot. I realized the garage-like outbuilding I was parked near served as the town fire station. The building itself reminded me of the community center not far from my childhood home—an old schoolhouse turned government building, library, and gathering

place. I wondered about the history of the building as I got out of the car, navigating the puddles and mud caused by the recent rain. I considered leaving my fiddle in the car for a bit so I could establish myself as a researcher first, but decided not to. I needed to get into the jam circle itself, not sit on the outskirts, and I knew my ticket in was my fiddle.

Growing up in jam sessions had taught me many things that I would otherwise need much more time to learn and observe. Understanding the unspoken rules of jam etiquette could be, and has been, a research project in itself (see Kisliuk, 1988). My years participating in jams in small-town churches, restaurants, community centers, and parks had taught me that jam sessions contained the quality of having both deeply rooted traditional roles and a sense of irreplaceable personhood. As a musician with a hearing impairment, my disability was always known, acknowledged, and accommodated, but never considered something that needed fixing. Despite this knowledge from my middle and high school years, I realized as I began my research that I could not explain how all these elements coexisted within the same musical setting.

Over the several months leading up to this particular evening, I had attended jam sessions around Knoxville and, further, spent time reflecting on both these and my high school experiences. Gradually, I realized that the interactions of the participants create the jam session itself—of, rather than for, the participants. The flexibility of form implies that every musician in attendance impacts the behavior and actions of the musicking. I recognized that this flexibility relied on the specific realization of social and musical roles. These roles are predetermined and come with set expectations and musical responsibilities. The individual performs their abilities and limitations, likes and dislikes, through the fulfillment of their role. In light of this, individualized roles are emphasized,

which leads to a social climate where the individual is primarily seen as a musician, with all other identities following as secondary. Because of this, all musicians have an equal right to participation.

In saying this, I consider role as proposed by Erving Goffman (1959): that we experience the interactions of everyday life in terms of a framework of societal roles. Goffman compares social life to a theater, in which interactions take place within set, expected roles or characters. These characters inform, then, how we interpret our surroundings. For example, Goffman explains that we understand how to behave in a restaurant based on our understanding of the roles: the waiter versus the patron, the cook versus the host, or the manager versus the trainee. These roles enact differing behaviors, and have distinct standards of what is and is not acceptable.

These roles are created by the society containing them; things learned, rather than things inherent. Without this knowledge, an outsider may miss important subtleties that drastically affect the meaning of the observed experience. To quote Clifford Geertz (1973), “most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined” (p. 9). Because of this, understanding role is a critical facet to societal acceptance.

The idea of role, in these sessions, refers to the specific musical part indicated by the traditional performance of an instrument/voice (rather than ability). These are not specific melodic lines, but rather a parameter of a musical style, outlined by the recorded legacies of musicians like Bill Monroe and the Stanley Brothers. The realization of role occurs at the discretion of the individual participants. Because each member arrives with

a unique background and specialty, they musically bring a distinct contribution to the sound of the jam, such as stylistic and improvisatory elements, or timbre of their instrument or voice. Further, virtuosity is not expected; the individual contributes according to their abilities.

Amid this understanding of myself, my instrument, and the upcoming evening of music, I walked up the steps to the old community center in Kingston, past the sign informing me that they held jams on Tuesdays and shows on Saturdays. I paid my dollar admission and wandered around. Different rooms hosted various styles of jams. One was a bit slower-paced, while another seemed to focus on gospel songs. Another group was playing mostly country music, and yet another was simply chatting and holding their instruments. I found myself observing both the age and gender of the participants, as I knew those elements greatly impacted the sound and social quality of the jam. Younger musicians generally focused on virtuosity, while older musicians emphasized cooperation. Females frequently led gospel songs, as much of the bluegrass repertoire is blatantly written for a male singer.

I walked into one of the larger rooms, where a group of older men sat in a circle picking a bluegrass tune. I could not help but smile at the familiar sounds. Of all the jams I had attended for my research, this was the most like the circles I had grown up in around northeast Texas. Despite never having met these musicians, I immediately got a sense of home. I sat to the side as they began a new song. While each played their own individual part in the overarching and interrelated musical and social texture, I knew from my personal experience in these circles that they were emphasizing the musical whole. Theoretically, each individual's role was viewed as a contribution, rather than a pre-

defined “job” to perform. Perhaps more importantly, though, I knew that they were not thinking of it that way—they were just jamming, and this is how jamming was.

Ideals and Expectations

The older musicians were each skilled in their musical abilities and had a clearly defined idea of what they were “supposed” to do. In bluegrass, the instrument a musician plays comes with an ideal of how one will play the instrument, according to the standards of performative bluegrass. The actualized playing, though, is content with the ability level of the individual. The genre creates a parameter of acceptable style, but it is how the individual contributes to the musicking of the jam, rather than skill, that defines acceptable playing. The musicians emphasize the interaction of musical lines, rather than virtuosity. The music itself, then, creates a mostly improvised conversation between the sounds.

The vocalist for this song projected his voice over the other five or six musicians, who each backed off their instruments—guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, and bass—to allow his voice to project. The vocalist also held a mandolin, accompanying himself with chords as he sang the verse of a bluegrass standard. He sang a tune I was not familiar with, but it sounded like it could be a Monroe tune. Due to the highly formulaic nature of the genre, I could tell how the song would musically progress from my seat toward the side of the room, where I sat among the spouses and friends. As I expected, three or four musicians leaned forward, including the vocalist, as they transitioned into the chorus, engaging in the tight harmonies that characterize the “‘high lonesome’ singing style” (McCollough, 2010). Many bluegrass musicians learned to sing through church music

traditions, leading to a strong sense of western harmony regardless of “formal” training. As occasional fiddle lines cut through between the lines of text, the instrumental fills, vocals, and accompaniments wove themselves into a musical texture that brought back nostalgia for my jam circles in Texas.

As the song came to an end, the bass player motioned for me to get out my fiddle and come over. I hesitated, then unpacked my instrument and walked over.

“You want a stool?” one of the guitar players offered. I accepted and situated myself in the circle.

“Do you sing?” Another asked.

“Not really, sir. I’ll sing some harmony vocals, but I mostly just play fiddle.” I responded, already hearing a bit of a country twang slipping into my voice.

“What she say? I can’t hear.” Someone called out.

A moment later, before our conversation had a chance to continue, someone started a song, and I carefully played along. I tried as much as I could to blend in—to navigate the jam so I, the researcher, did not overtake the social dynamic. In many ways, the jam session is a musical dialogue: a spontaneous conversation between instruments, parts, and textures. As one of my friends and colleagues expounded,

You always have to be listening. A good musician knows how to fill in the gaps that are not already being filled; you’re always willing to fill in the need. You can’t be prideful in a jam session; you have to be able to be a part of the whole (S. Bowman, personal communication, Feb. 18th, 2020).

In other words, the parts have to talk to each other, each independent yet interconnected. The reflexive listening and contributing create the musical object—the goal of our social activity.

After the second chorus, the mandolin player nodded to me, offering me the break. I hesitated but realized that, in their eyes, I had the role of “fiddler” to perform. I had stepped into a place where there was a set expectation. If I wanted acceptance in this jam, it was my responsibility to fulfill the musical role as closely to the ideal as my technical skill allowed. I took half the break before nodding it off to the other fiddle player, trying to avoid the spotlight.

It did not work. The anomaly of myself, the young female fiddler that knew how to jam and understood the expectation of my role, was enough to disturb their everyday practice, regardless of my efforts. Breaks came more and more often. The other fiddler switched to his primary instrument, banjo, leaving me to hold the fiddle lines and increasing my responsibility in the jam (see Flood, 2007). This seemed to go against everything I knew about conducting fieldwork, as my presence was drastically changing what I had come to observe. I felt that I was having far too great of an impact and compromising the natural jam dynamics. And yet, the individual will always change the jam, and that is precisely what makes these jams welcoming to those of us with disabilities.

Social Histories

Between the songs, musicians caught up on each other’s lives. One man spoke of his recent surgery; another man was absent because “Can’t get him to come down off that

mountain these days. He had that there operation on his hand, you know, and he just can't play banjo since. He don't like to come if he can't play, he said." The conversation stuck to the present: what they had done this week, the results of a doctor's appointment, and their plans for the upcoming few days. As I listened to the group talk between songs, I was struck by what I can only term as social history. Their knowledge of each other's lives had not come overnight; rather, these musicians had played music together with consistent involvement over many years. There was no need to tell each other their past, as they had lived their lives together. Despite my near-instant inclusion as a fiddle player, I knew that this was a type of social relationship that takes years to develop.

Within my jam circles in Texas, I had this type of social history. I knew how one man had begun learning banjo in his retirement, fulfilling a lifelong goal, and watched him slowly make progress on the instrument. I knew that he sang in the church choir with the man next to him, who played guitar. Another couple I played with were also retired and were spending their retirement years traveling. They had picked up bluegrass instruments within the few years prior and were constantly on weekend trips to various bluegrass festivals around the country. The wives of several musicians would sit in the back and exchange stories from the week, often over a game of dominos or cards. Before I could drive, my mom would join them. Over the years, we heard about life cycle events, ranging from grandchildren being born, to health issues, to members of our jam passing away. Life was lived together over a period of time, not all in one evening.

As a child when I began attending jams, I knew that my jam circles had watched me grow up. They celebrated my accomplishments; they sent me flowers for my 8th grade graduation, helped me pay for the expenses of my musical journey, and came to my high

school graduation. As my grandparents had died when I was in elementary school, my jam session family filled the role of grandparents in my life. While several of these musicians have passed away now, many of them still keep up with my life through social media, and I keep up with theirs.

As we started another song, I was pulled back into the present. I was not at one of the jams of my high school years. This was a new circle, with new musicians, histories, and experiences. However, my own background gave me the tools to recognize that the tight harmonies and concise non-verbal communication were more than mere signs of excellent musicianship. These skills were the result of a long history of playing together and knowing how each other played. Despite the many hearing aids, health issues, and building arthritis, the group played with ease. The musicians repeated keys and song names, passing them around the circle. Better ears were “leaned in” to catch these details, and the jam went on. There were few requests for accommodation made, but I saw the effects of previous requests in place. The musicians already knew how to communicate with and accommodate each other, as they knew each other on a personal level that took into account years of friendship. In doing so, my hearing impairment was seamlessly accommodated—after all, they were already accommodating for each other.

I re-adjusted my stool, settling in for another hour or so of playing. I may have been a social outsider, but by offering me a stool, they had extended relationship and belonging. Accepting the stool indicated that I recognized my role as a contributor to the musical dialogue. There was more meaning in the green vinyl stool than merely a place to sit.

Locating the Self

Between songs, the other fiddle player, now playing banjo, turned to me, including me in the lively conversation.

“What type of fiddle do you play?” he asked, a common question in these settings. Many musicians played instruments that were made by people they knew or ones that friends or relatives had given them, so the instruments themselves were often related to memories.

“It’s a German fiddle, ‘bout 100 years old,” I told them, holding it and turning it over to show off the grain of the wood. “Someone found it in a closet, and it hadn’t been played in years. I spent a few hundred fixing it up, and I’ve been playin’ it since high school. Working on my master’s now, but it’s still serving me well. Want to play it?” He politely declined the invitation, as another song was about to begin. Trading instruments was a bonding experience between jammers, and I had hoped the offer would result in relationship.

Throughout the evening, I desperately tried to re-locate myself as an ethnographer, but it was too late. My identity was already “musician.” Despite my clarifications throughout the evening that I was there for research, my fellow musicians had defined my social role. My mentions of my hearing impairment were dismissed; there were no concerns about how or when to “help.” They had seen me, heard me play, and without any qualms about my hearing impairment or my requests for repeated keys or song titles, gave me the title of “fiddler” and decided that I belonged.

I felt uncomfortable with this. In Wong's words, "The ethnographer is always an outsider" (2008, p. 83). I was observing this jam session. The musicians were teaching me, and I was learning from them. They were the active participants of a music and musicking that I was researching as an academic. They certainly did not seem to care or acknowledge my statements that I was there as a researcher; I could fiddle. Further, I was a young person who had grown up in the style, shaped by hours in these types of circles. They could hear that in the way I listened. However, was it not my responsibility to position myself as the outsider; to see my "shadow in the field," as Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley (2008) so termed it? Was it abusing my background as an insider to take up such an active role in the circle? Could I identify what I was observing now, and separate it from my memories?

"Sing something, fiddler." One of them told me as more of an order than a request, interrupting my musings. "What do you know?"

I hesitated. Unlike many jams I have attended, this group did not pick songs by going around in a circle. Instead, someone would call out a song, or request another musician to pick one. I had purposefully avoided speaking up and kept my contribution to breaks and a few requested fiddle tunes. Being told to choose a song was not something I anticipated; in hindsight, I should have expected it. I wanted to pick a song they knew, as that would keep the musicking going. I had a few gospel songs prepared, but that did not seem to fit the aesthetic of this group.

"Y'all know 'Cumberland River'?" I asked, hoping but not expecting an affirmative answer. I felt relief as they all nodded and prepared to play. I had tried the song at a different jam a week or so prior, and that group had not been familiar with it. I

kicked off the melody on my fiddle, introducing the tempo and speed. I lowered my instrument as I started to sing the agreed-upon 1986 Dailey and Vincent song. I do not consider myself a vocalist, but I do love the thrill of singing in a jam and hearing the other voices join with mine. As I leaned forward for the chorus, four or five voices came together in the familiar harmonies. For that moment, the theoretical issues of insider versus outsider and researcher versus participant seemed to fade. Inclusion had started the moment my instrument and voice had found their place in the harmonies.

As the night came to a close, after a few hours of picking, singing, and navigating the reality that most of us could not hear voices all that well, several of the wives of the musicians came over to talk to me. They were uninterested in my research project and my attempts to re-locate myself as a researcher rather than a fiddler. They were far more curious about how I, a young adult, had learned how to play the style I do. “Young folks” who know the style and etiquette are rare in these specific types of bluegrass jams and are seen as a treasure—something to be cherished, nurtured, and featured.

I learned of one other young man that sometimes attended the session. An older woman expounded on this musician she just so wished I could meet, as he was “about my age,” and could play almost any instrument. She waxed on about the talents of the young man, and if she had not explicitly said that they were not relatives, I would have assumed that he was her grandson. I desperately resisted her attempts to set me up with him. She then mentioned, after telling me all his many accomplishments and high levels of

musicianship, that he was visually impaired.² I was intrigued, not by the young man himself, but by how long it had taken her to mention his impairment. It seemed almost irrelevant to her; what mattered was his musicianship. All other identities followed.

As I was about to put my violin back in its case, next to my microphone, consent forms, and notebook, one of the men I had played with most of the night came up to me, having set down his mandolin in its case.

“You play some good fiddle. What’s your name?”

I laughed to myself and told him the basic biographical information. While some of the musicians had caught my name, it just was not an important fact to spread, especially since most of us struggled to hear each other’s words. I was a fiddler, and that was enough. As we talked, he took the fiddle out of my hand and played a tune on it; I was accepted.

Social and Musical Role

As I drove back toward my home, I explored the questions I had spent so much of my fieldwork contemplating, finding new answers in light of the evening’s musicking. The deeply rooted traditional roles and sense of irreplaceable personhood were unmistakable. For example, while the jam circle handed me full responsibility for the fiddle line—a role dictated by stylistic tradition—my presence in no way negated the

² This term was used to describe the young man in our conversation. As I have not met him myself to ask what terminology he prefers, I hesitantly use the term given to me, while recognizing the strong possibility that he would prefer for me to use the term “blind.”

social role of the other fiddler, nor could it ever. A jam without him would have been a different jam. The old was not better than the new, or vice versa; instead, the interchange of musicians created a different jam session than what came before.

It would be erroneous to assume that no hierarchy exists in these types of sessions; specific musicians do take on leadership roles. However, these leadership roles are not power roles. Each member of the jam holds equal authority, and no musician can control another. In this egalitarian state of participation, the musician's experiences, abilities, skills, challenges, and ideas create a composite view of the individual (see Bagga-Gupta, 1990, as cited in Grushkin, 2003). In other words, by eliminating a power structure between musicians, the group becomes made of individuals, each with a unique offering to the musicking.

This reduction of power hierarchies occurs in tandem with the deemphasizing of the binary between identity categories. In the case of disability, the relevance of creating a specific line between disabled and abled ceases, as impairment simply becomes another element of the composite, individual identity. To assume binary categories, with a spectrum of diverse places between two points, compares the degree to which an individual aligns with one identity or the other. In terms of disability, "severity" of impairment says little about the individual and implies a power hierarchy. Simultaneously, the elimination of comparison within a binary scale reduces the ability to place a specific musician as the "other."

From this place—the creation of the individual with a composite, multifaceted identity—the jam session can begin to form. To clarify, the jam does not exist until the members of the jam, quite literally, pull up their chairs. Because of the internal diversity

of the individuals, the specific combination of musicians who fill the set, traditional musical roles dictated by the genre can dramatically change the jam session.

In speaking of identity, I do not mean to imply what Turino (2008) refers to as the “self”: “the composite of the total number of habits that determine the tendencies for everything we think, feel, experience, and do” (p. 101). Instead, I refer to the active image we use to represent ourselves in a specific moment, as Turino also refers to identity. While some elements of my identity, such as my race, gender, and disability, are unchangingly present, the identity I portray at the university contrasts starkly with who I am at the jam session. It is not that one identity is more accurate of myself, nor that one is my true self, and the other is fake. By choice, I present only the parts of my identity relevant to the setting. In the same way, the musicians in the jam bring with them multifaceted identities, just as we all do; one element of revealed identity, such as disability, does not disqualify the overall self. As written by Fox (2004), “the closeness of all this embodied and spoken sociality... defines the local idea of an ‘ordinary’ person as *ideally imperfect* [emphasis in original]” (p. 109).

From this perspective, we can understand the dialogue of musical lines that create the sonic object. In the music itself, the coming together of individual experiences takes audible form, with each layer of sound filling in gaps in another line. Brandon LaBelle (2010) refers to this in terms of the sonic body: “the effective dislocation and reconfiguration of the body under the mediating spell of a sonic event” (p. 107). In this case, it is the interaction of the sonic bodies—filled with experiences, histories, and skills—that creates the music. Put differently, the musical object that emerges is the result of the coming together of the individuals.

Creating Participatory Accommodation

This simple yet complex notion of identity, individuality, and group musical creation grounds what I have termed participatory accommodation. Traditionally, accommodation is presented in terms of something “provided” or “given.” Further, this economic, medicalized system of accommodation relies on a hierarchy, assuming the subordination of the disabled body to the abled one. While this standard model of accommodation may be appropriate in particular times and places, adopting this as the preeminent model perpetuates marginalizing essentialisms of disability.

Within the context of the jam session, accommodation has no set power structure in which it must operate. Instead, the musicians must locate their behaviors within the interactions of individuals, echoing the musicking itself. Just as claiming one musician as subordinate to another would disturb the musicking, claiming one body as subordinate to another would disrupt the social elements of the jam. As such, accommodation itself becomes participatory, distributing the responsibility of inclusion to all in the circle.

Participatory accommodation relies on the interaction of peers. No one musician can take on full responsibility for accommodating another. As all in the circle have equal rights, and all play a critical role in the creation of the musical object, willingly allowing one person to struggle brings the whole circle down. Further, on an ethical level, intentionally excluding another musician from participation undermines the foundational social ethics that govern the jam session.

Limits to Participatory Accommodation

I state this knowing fully that there are limits to acceptance in these jam circles. Inclusion in the group requires specific skills, which act as a prerequisite to having a role. Perhaps most obviously is musical ability; while the jam session does not ask musicians to reach a certain level of skill as a prerequisite for participation, the musician should know their instrument well enough not to cause the music to become disjointed. While these musicians often dismiss ideas about “correct” technique, the ability to learn an instrument may be affected by factors outside of the jam session itself, such as finding an accommodating teacher or holding a particular instrument.

Less obviously, a musician’s ability to engage in the musical dialogue impacts social inclusion. The jam requires an understanding of when to show off, and when to pull back and allow someone else to have a highlighted moment. The musician who does not know how to listen—and further, will not accept instruction—will find themselves rejected. I have most often observed this with musicians who come into the jam with a mindset of superiority, often stemming from presentational accomplishment. However, some intellectual disabilities may make this understanding of underlying structure difficult. Likewise, some physical disabilities, such as vision loss, may create difficulties in participating in the mostly non-verbal interaction.

These criteria of acceptance, of course, apply to any musician who tries to enter the jam, not just those with disabilities. As a high schooler, I knew a young mandolin player who, to my knowledge, was nondisabled. While a good musician, he struggled with social intelligence, excelling instead in creative and mathematical intelligence. He

was under the impression that, if he just became a “good enough” mandolin player, the other musicians participating in the pick-up jam sessions at festivals would accept him. However, when he would approach the jam, his behavior was domineering and self-centered; his goal was to prove that he was good—or superior—rather than to participate in the social event. Time and time again, I watched the musicians give him a chance before ultimately dismissing him as a bratty teenager who did not know how to work with others.

Musicians in the jam circle may have limits to how far they can accommodate for social understanding. Inclusion and musicking are both foundational goals; compromising one for the sake of the other would risk the enjoyment of the event. To provide an accommodation that requires compromising the social framework would jeopardize the nature of the jam session. As the person with a disability is an equal potential participant to all others, the singular individual does not have the power to undermine the fundamental goals of the jam. Therefore, the sake of the entire group holds more importance than the one, regardless of musical ability.

These potential participants may still find a way to contribute to the music-making, though it may require a level of accommodation that the musicians of the jam cannot provide themselves. For example, I recall a young man, likely in his 20s, who had a moderately-severe intellectual disability and would occasionally join his father at jam sessions. The father, understanding the complexity of the jam as a social event, acted as a social guide, making sure his son navigated the unspoken social “rules” required to participate musically. In doing so, the father was unable to engage with the jam fully;

instead, he spent the evening cueing his son how and when to play. The father, therefore, acted as the accommodation that the group would not have been able to provide.

Designing Equal Rights

As I pulled up at my house, I was thankful for the time I spent not just in the jam circle that evening, but over the many years leading up to tonight's jam in Kingston. While some of the groups I played with as a teen still meet, they have changed since I was last there. In many ways, those jams are forever in the past. However, the tradition of the jam session was alive and well in that little community center. My role there was fiddler and musician, followed by researcher and person with a hearing impairment. Further, these roles did not exist on their own, but in relation with others. As Goffman (1959) explains, social roles require interaction—the “reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence” (p. 15). This relationship between roles makes the jam session a space where participants see and simultaneously accept differences.

The jam session offers an alternative perspective on disability and accommodation by focusing on the idea of an equal right to participation through the reduction of power dynamics. The musician—a complex, composite identity—who enters the jam with a disability engages with a form of accommodation based on social ideas of inclusion rather than pretenses of subordination. Simultaneously, these individual identities offer contributions to the creation of a musical dialogue that forms a sonic object within the genre's parameters.

In a broader sense, this idea of role and participation calls into question our concept of what it means for an individual with an impairment to have accommodation and accessibility. Perhaps it challenges us to ask who designs a society and who it is designed for; to question our mindset of creating access “if” someone with a disability needs the service. Further, it points to the directionality of the accommodations we see in economically-charged portions of society.

The musical dialogue of the jam session creates an active space, that, in its existence, offers an alternative way of interacting with the world. As such, it pushes us to view ourselves and the individuals around us in a new way. Just as my green vinyl stool in the community center represented something much larger than a place to sit, the jam session represents a way of interacting that goes far beyond the circle. It challenges us to recognize and support the contributions of the diverse individuals we interact with in our everyday lives.

CHAPTER THREE

TOGETHER AS EQUALS: INTENTIONAL TIME, INCLUSION, AND THE OLD-TIME JAM SESSION

Well, he played an old tune they called the “Soldier’s Joy,”

And he played the one they called the “Boston Boy.”

Greatest of all was the “Jennie Lynn,”

To me, that’s where the fiddlin’ begins. (Monroe, ~1950)

A New Form of Circle

The majority of the jam sessions I had access to as a teenager followed a performative form—musicians “take breaks” and play fills around a vocal line. Most of these jams either were bluegrass or country jams. I assumed that this was just how jams ran and thought nothing more. Further, it was the very act of spontaneous, non-verbal, musical dialogue, as discussed in chapter two, that both drew me to the style and made me feel socially welcome. As understanding words can be challenging for me in the noisy social places where jams are located (such as bars and restaurants), this musical dialogue was a relief and my path to inclusion.

When I began my research in Knoxville, I found out about a jam that met on the main street of downtown. The group met every other week in the front corner of Blackhorse Pub and Brewery, next to the windows overlooking the busy street. I arrived with my fiddle and found a seat in the large circle. The 20 or so musicians had their beers carefully tucked under chairs to prevent spills, while instrument cases sat on the side of

the room. Most held fiddles, though some had banjos, mandolins, and guitars. In the corner was a bass player, tuning and preparing for the afternoon of musicking.

More fiddles than average, I thought to myself. It will be hard to pass breaks here. The leading musician called out a fiddle tune. I had time for a brief thought at the oddness of beginning with an instrumental tune before what, initially, felt like a cacophony of sound hit me. I could tell there was a melody, but perhaps it would be better to say that I could tell there were many melodies, all almost the same.

I quickly realized that this was unfamiliar territory. This jam had no breaks, no vocal lines, and no solos. There was no dialogue between parts, created through careful listening. I felt like I was expected to know the tunes and play within some resemblance of the melody. This jam was nothing like I had expected, and lacked all the elements I found valuable. I desperately tried to pick up the tune as it went on, basing my melody on the mixture of musical motifs I could pick out, my knowledge of music theory, and some improvisation.

Over the Sunday afternoon, I found out this was called an “old-time” jam, and while based in the same musical origins as bluegrass, these jams emphasized inclusion in a different format than the bluegrass jam. The old-time jam expects the musician to come in knowing tunes to play with the group, or at the very least, have a good ear for picking up the melodies quickly. The number of tunes you can jump in on demonstrates your abilities as a musician.

It did not take long to pick up on the style; I knew many of the standard fiddle tunes already, and as long as there was a strong player on the side of my “good” ear, I could quickly learn new tunes. Additionally, the jam kept an audio database of the

sessions, allowing musicians like myself to learn songs at home between meetings. I slowly came to realize that the actual learning curve of the style was figuring out the relational dynamics of the jam—both socially and musically—as a musician with a disability.

My questions regarding these ideas of relationality led me to three musicians with ties to the East Tennessee old-time jam scene. As bluegrass jams typically have an older age demographic, I was surprised that these old-time musicians were relatively young (between the ages of 25-42, as I came to learn through our conversations). Through our discourse, I came to realize that, despite the drastic differences between the presentation of bluegrass and old-time jam sessions, both types of jams emphasize relationship building as a means to facilitate accommodation. More importantly, the old-time jam builds these peer relationships through intentional time, rather than musical interaction.

Tom: Created Relationships

Everyone seems to know everyone in the old-time jam scene in Knoxville, so it only took a few conversations with pickers before I was offered an email address for a musician that fell within the broad definition of “having a disability.” Tom and I started talking over email, our schedules of when we were free to go to jams never quite aligning. One afternoon, after several weeks of attending the jam at Blackhorse, I noticed that the young banjo player sitting next to me was using hearing aids; this visual cue served as an introduction, and I was excited to talk to him in person. Ironically, Tom was sitting on my “deaf side,” so our conversation was awkward; I learned that Tom, like

myself, can hear musical tones much easier than voices, and thus we agreed to wait and talk another day.

The coffee shop Tom suggested was acoustically slightly better than the bar, if only for the lack of fiddles and banjos. While we found the setting favorable, I was amused, as I transcribed the interview, how often we asked each other for clarification or restatement, as I genuinely do not remember those interactions happening. In talking to Tom, I quickly came to realize that he generally does not see his hearing impairment as a part of his identity, primarily because it has not led to many situations where his hearing has resulted in discrimination or exclusion.

Tom began playing music in middle school, through his school band program here in Knoxville. He played percussion and drumset, eventually pursuing a degree in Music and Culture at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. It was in this context that Tom brought up some of the obstacles he has encountered with his disability. Specifically, Tom noted that his hearing caused some difficulties in the more audiocentric elements of being a music major, such as ear training. He explained to me that, while he first viewed his hearing as a “disadvantage,” he realized that the university did not have a plan in place to accommodate his specific needs.

Tom determined that the problems were manageable by merely sitting in the front and putting extra time in, as his specific hearing loss affects volume. I found it intriguing that, similarly to my own experience in my undergraduate studies, the simplest solution, and thus the one we took, was to take the barriers our impairments presented and deal with them ourselves by changing our behavior. This solution technically “fixed” our

difficulties, but simultaneously reified the “overcoming” trope of disability (see Straus, 2008, p. 16).

Tom discovered old-time through a Music of Appalachia class, through which he interviewed Charlie Acuff—cousin of Roy Acuff. Charlie was a left-handed fiddle player with a “deeper mastery of old-time fiddling” (Tennessee Folklife Program). While Tom continues to perform as a drummer, the experience led him to pick up the banjo as an adult. He decided to learn banjo in an attempt to impress a girl, he told me, but he has continued playing the instrument for his own enjoyment of the genre. Further, he was one of the founding members of the jam at Blackhorse Brewery.

As I got to know Tom, I realized that his continued engagement in the jam sessions relies on both musical and social elements. As Tom explained, and other sources later echoed, the old-time jam session serves as a space in which a group of peers come together and, in essence, practice together. In this way, the sound of each instrument remains entirely independent; musical lines layer upon themselves, rather than interact in a turn-based texture. From this point of understanding, it becomes easy to see the draw of the old-time jam—the individual has room to hide and learn among the thick, complex musical fabric. Because individual voices of the music are hard to pick out, the musician has the freedom to experiment and learn, as well as play with other musicians, without worries of facing judgment.

In some ways, this heterophonic texture creates very intentional relationships. As the individual is “hidden” in the music itself, relationships become spatial: who you sit next to defines who you talk to and get to know. These relationships then feed into ones that exist outside the jam. In Tom’s words,

I've created relationships with these people who go to these jams who are 70 years old and whatever. One because they complimented me on how I play and, depending on if he's there or not, there's one fiddle player who comes a lot who says, "Hey Tom! Sit next to me, I want to hear you play. I like the way you play." So he encourages me to come back and play more, to practice. He's asked me to play a square dance with him before. So I've gotten to meet people and get gigs out of this. And I found that most people who go to the jams are... even though they're 70, they're very similar to me. They listen to the same kind of music, they go to the same kind of concerts, they probably got kids who are my age that are into the same things I am. I've met some of their kids—I flyfished with the son of that fiddle player I was talking about; he plays fiddle too. But I keep going back because I love it. I look forward to playing with Ken or Frank, you know, and then Sean stops in every now and then. Sometimes, it's like you never know who's going to be there; there's an element of surprise. Like, I wonder if so and so is going to be there (T. Wetherington, personal communication, Nov. 22nd, 2019).

The intentionality of relationship, actively placed both inside and outside the jam circle, provides a critical backdrop for accommodation.

Tom proposed two primary challenges of having a disability in the old-time jam session. First, Tom stated that his hearing aids themselves cause difficulties picking out specific sounds in the crowded bar, as the technology "funnels" sound indiscriminately. He explained that,

When I'm meeting these musicians and I'm asking a question or whatever... "What song was that?"... I may have to ask twice. But that's just because I didn't hear, and it's hard to hear... And my hearing aids just make it more difficult. So Blackhorse, it's not really that they have to accommodate... like, to write s*** out for me, but I'm sure if I made that comment, "Hey, I'm having trouble hearing what the name of the songs are. Would you mind writing it out?" they would (T. Wetherington, personal communication, Nov. 22nd, 2019).

Further, Tom feels that his hearing aids are the only cue that he has a disability, perhaps informing others that he has a hearing impairment against his will. While deafness in itself is invisible, the use of hearing aids moves hearing impairment into a type of visual disability (see Samuels, 2013; Brueggemann, 2013). Reflecting on his experiences, he told me that,

I think most people may notice it, my hearing aids, and they might ask as they get to know me. I mean, in elementary school, it used to, well, I wasn't afraid of wearing my hearing aids but, I wouldn't want to wear my hearing aids because these little kids would be like, "Oh what's that thing in your ear?" and I got tired of saying, "It's a hearing aid." It's not that they made fun of me, I just didn't like the attention. Now, I mean, I've grown up. I'm almost kind of proud to say what it is, and the fact that I'm able to be a musician. It's not affecting me, it's not keeping me from playing. Most people respect it and they're like, "That's really f***ing

cool.” But yeah, most people notice it (T. Wetherington, personal communication, Nov. 22nd, 2019).

As I do not wear hearing aids, I found it interesting that Tom responded to my questions regarding how musicians saw his disability with statements about the technology he uses. He feels this visual element of disability is where his experience with others seeing and noticing his disability begins and ends. This focus on his hearing aids seems to indicate that Tom’s identity as a person with a disability rests more on the types of accommodations he employs than on the physical impairment itself.

This perspective calls into question the self-defined boundaries of the body. Scholars like Nancy Eiesland (1994) have proposed that prosthetics (such as wheelchairs, glasses, or hearing aids) that provide a self-definition of “a healthy, mobile, and intact” body become part of how one views themselves (p. 38). From this perspective, Tom’s hearing aids could be defined as an extension of his body, as his comments would seem to imply. Further, this cyborg-esque view of the self is not unprecedented in musical settings; for example, Leslie Gay (1998) explains that rock musicians demonstrate “authority over the technology by making it less an extension to one’s body than part of the body itself” (p. 85). Just as these musicians control technology within a presentational image, so does the disabled body control technology as a participatory statement of identity.

However, Tom’s statements also seem to reinforce the external view of the prosthetic as a symbol of deficiency; to quote Jennifer Iverson (2016), “the prosthesis renormalizes and minimizes bodily differences at the same time as it points to the inherent lack in the prostheticized body” (p. 159). In other words, while Tom views his

hearing aids as part of himself, the surrounding musicians take the same hearing aids as a visual symbol of impairment, despite their presence creating “normalized” abilities. In this way, Tom’s response, blurring the line between his disability and his hearing aids, reflects both internal and external views of the supplemented body.

On a broader, environmental level, the acoustics of the room holds potential hearing difficulties for Tom. The room at Blackhorse has large windows on two sides and hard surfaces on the others; additionally, the ceilings are quite high. As such, the space is highly resonant, yet specific sounds seem to disperse. While this would likely be fine in a performative setting, it creates challenges for the participatory nature of the jam session. The resonance of 15-25 musicians playing heterophonically can cause the sound to become muddy, while the high ceilings prevent listening across the large circle.

While Richard Rath (2003) has implied that resonant spaces allow for notions of egalitarianism, his statement assumes a controlled, purposeful acoustic design with short decay time. As this is not the case at Blackhorse, many of the musicians I asked expressed that they dislike the resonant acoustics of the space. As discussed earlier, the old-time jam exists as an interaction of personal and group sounds, thus implying the importance of hearing this interaction. Adding a hearing impairment to this already challenging auditory space displays physical limitations more readily.

Talking to Tom gave me a better perspective on the purpose of these jams; rather than a dialogue, old-time jams exist as a place to play alongside other musicians. The emphasis is not on the interaction of musical lines, but the coexistence of multiple musicians in the same space. By decentralizing the individual, everyone plays as an equal; the individual simultaneously becomes one’s focus, as each musician concerns

themselves primarily with their own sound. This interaction of introverted and extroverted sound creates, to quote LaBelle (2010), “shared spaces that belong to no single public and yet which impart a feeling for intimacy: sound is always already mine and not mine” (p. xvii). Old-time musicians, then, use the space to share what they have considered “ours.” Further, musicians have to intentionally seat themselves near those with whom they want to interact, forging an awareness of space through interpersonal relationships.

Melody: Utilizing Peripheral Space

Over the course of several months, attending old-time jams around Knoxville, I connected with Melody, a fiddle player who had been an active part of the Knoxville old-time jam scene before moving away. As I was unable to fly to Seattle to meet Melody in person, we sat down over a video call; as both of us are hearing impaired, we were thankful for a technological platform that allowed for a visual element. Prior to the call, I had the opportunity to meet Melody’s mother and sister at a private jam session and pig roast, held at a local Christmas tree farm. I had also attended the session she had formerly participated in while living in Knoxville. Thus, while I did not get to jam with her directly, I understood the context of her statements.

Like many old-time musicians, Melody began playing her first instrument—guitar—through her family. As an adult, she started attending the jam sessions at the local Scottish pub, Boyd’s Jig and Reel. Her experience made her recognize that she wanted to learn to play a melody instrument. Since then, Melody has taught herself to play the

fiddle, and now attends jam sessions in genres including old-time, bluegrass, Scottish, Irish, and Québécois (French Canadian).

After being involved in the jam at Boyd's, Melody moved to Indiana; around the same time of this locational shift, Melody began noticing a change in her hearing. Hearing loss is genetic to her family, and her mother and sister both have cochlear implants. Thus, when she started noticing signs that she, too, was having issues hearing, she immediately got hearing aids. While many adults delay pursuing an evaluation for hearing aids due to stigma and misconceptions surrounding the devices (see Berkey, 2003; Davis et al, 2007), Melody had no such hesitations and, thus, did not pause to consider if she “actually” needed them. Because her hearing loss occurred during this transitional stage, she experienced her jams in Knoxville as abled, and her jams in Indiana as disabled. Since then, she has moved to Seattle, where she has engaged with new sessions.

Like Tom, Melody also finds that her hearing aids are problematic in the jam session. Melody has what is considered a “cookie bite” hearing loss, meaning that she has a dip within a specific portion of her hearing range. She says that, practically,

Low ranges are fine, I usually can hear okay. But right about where the TV is, and right about where my husband speaks... and a lot of guys unfortunately... it comes down. And then comes back up, so most female voices and such are fine. And then I have a high range dip, like almost everybody does (M. Gonzalez, personal communication, Jan. 22nd, 2020).

Her hearing aids are programmed to amplify the range she can't hear well; however, some instruments, including her own fiddle, cause her hearing aids to feedback, meaning

that she cannot wear her hearing aids in the jam session. Further, because Melody has an increased risk of further hearing loss, she wears earplugs while in loud environments, such as at jams.

Some instruments and voices land in the frequency range Melody struggles to hear. She has learned that the pitch and timbre of the instruments significantly impact her listening abilities. For example, in old-time, she has issues hearing the mandolin. As she also attends Irish and Scottish sessions, the flutes and bagpipes pose a challenge to her participation, despite their drastic differences in volume. Instrumentation, then, impacts who she can sit next to, as being able to hear and quickly learn tunes by ear is a critical element of the old-time jam (as well as other genres). Melody places herself next to a strong fiddle player—a timbre she finds less burdensome to hear. Further, she finds that she has trouble picking out voices to hear song names. Subsequently, this leads to her not knowing specific names of songs, even if she knows how to play them.

Melody works around these obstacles by utilizing the spaces around the jam session. For example, since many of the jam sessions occur at restaurants, she will arrive early to have dinner with other musicians before the jam begins—a participatory action in itself. This social time allows her to develop relationships with the other musicians in a space where she can use her hearing aids. This purposeful act of creating accessible space around the jam leads to a social network within the jam itself, resulting in increased accommodation.

Moreover, the jam itself includes virtual space, created by texting Melody information or posting song lists on their Facebook group. Because Melody's hearing loss is known, she has a line of communication that allows her to make requests for

accommodation without having to re-explain her disability. This visual, technological addition to the traditional jam session, combined with the friendships within the jam, has become an established system, which Melody can activate if and when a communication issue arises. While the other musicians often forget to initiate these actions, Melody experiences little to no resistance to her requests.

While these jam sessions focus on acoustic music and typically reject any connection to electric instruments, Melody's use and view of technology counters the traditional ideas held against technology in the jam. Further, the acceptance of these technological adaptations leads to the recognition of the other instances of "electrifying" the acoustic session that often go unnoticed. While old-time and bluegrass jams generally reject electric guitars and drumsets for the sake of tradition, they often still use technology to enhance the experience—be that through miking singers and softer instruments to ensure they are heard, using hearing aids to amplify personal experience, or using social media to distribute song lists and recordings. Toward the end of my conversation with Melody, we hypothesized a system of using an instrument pickup and bone conduction headphones to act as a personal "monitor" in the jam session. As the sound would not change for the other musicians, this private system of electrification would likely be accepted and would allow Melody to hear herself play her instruments—especially guitar—clearly. While we have not tried it, the very recognition of the idea serves to reinforce the concept of relationship as accommodation; as Melody stated, "I've never really talked with anybody about hearing impairment and music like this, so now that I'm talking with someone, it's kind of like, 'Oh, this thing might help'" (M. Gonzalez, personal communication, Jan. 22nd, 2020).

Unlike Tom, Melody does have issues with hearing in her everyday life. Additionally, due to her family history of hearing impairment, Melody sees her hearing as an essential part of her identity, and one that affects how she interacts with and, further, how she participates in the world. Melody explained to me that she makes a deliberate effort to self-advocate for herself, as she witnessed the isolation her sister experienced as a hearing impaired individual within hearing contexts. Melody thus purposefully makes an effort to engage with the hearing world, but on her terms.

Rejecting the Hierarchy

Both Tom and Melody, in their distinct ways, manage their disabilities in the jam sessions through a method in which their social networks engage with them as peers to provide support. This support is not provided within a top-down structure, but rather through a group effort to make sure everyone stays involved. This system works due to the egalitarian jam dynamics discussed in chapter two.

While Tom and Melody taught me a lot about old-time music and the differences between my tradition and theirs, their stories reinforced a similarity—the critical state of having a system of relationships able and willing to provide accommodations without holding that provision as power over the disabled body. This accommodation system rejects hierarchy, as introducing concepts of being superior or subordinate to another would skew the balance of equal participation by indicating that some contributions have more value than others.

This concept, reinforced by the identity system previously discussed, creates the foundation for what I have come to term as a participatory model of accommodation.

This system sits in direct opposition to the idea of a top-down, economic model. The top-down model—generally seen within education systems and workplaces—involves an abled power figure (a boss, teacher, etc.) providing a service to a subordinate, disabled body. Such accommodation is foundational for inclusion in classrooms and workplaces. However, assuming this as the only viable model of accommodation implies the inadequacy of the disabled body and justifies the control of a dominant, abled figure. Further, the top-down model has no provisions for peer accommodation, such as between colleagues or classmates. In other words, top-down accommodation cannot conceive of an equal body.

The participatory model rests on the assumption of equality. It assumes that all bodies have differences, and places the responsibility for accommodation on all that would consider themselves part of the community. It provides accommodation through facing obstacles as a group, rather than attempting to eliminate potential challenges, or equipping the disabled body with resources to “make up for” a deficiency. Perhaps most critically, it sees the disabled person as that—a person. Because the individual’s contributions to the whole are valued and desired, accommodation becomes the natural reaction. To quote Melody,

Everybody is there to play music with other people, and I think that they want to foster that. So I think, if someone showed up in a wheelchair, they would move a table to make sure there was a space for them.... I don’t know if it’s just the music or the session or the fact that I’m with these people a lot and we share that connection. I’m more likely to be like, “Dude, I totally can’t hear you. Could you write that down?” Whereas

with any other place, I pretty much don't do that (M. Gonzalez, personal communication, Jan. 22nd, 2020).

This connection Melody speaks of holds great value; as I came to learn through Ashley, relationships are, perhaps, the most important factor for inclusion in these jams.

Ashley: The Impact of Hierarchy

When I sat down with Ashley over a phone call, I assumed that I would hear a familiar narrative, reinforcing my concept of the participatory model. She received her degree in Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies at East Tennessee State University and now attends a different college for a degree in Music Therapy. As such, we spoke a similar vocabulary, employing craft terms from bluegrass, old-time, and disability studies (see Clifford Geertz, 1976).

I knew there would be differences in the practical elements of her experiences. Ashley is blind rather than hearing impaired. She plays music professionally, instead of as an amateur. Her experience has focused on stage performances over social jamming. I expected her to tell me about issues with non-verbal communication, and further, how that impacted her musical inclusion. While that was part of her narrative, she ended up offering a broader narrative that showed that not all jam sessions are structured in the same ways. More importantly, when social settings remove the peer-based model, reinstating hierarchy, the participatory system of accommodation falters.

Ashley grew up in Chicago and began making music as a songwriter. As a teenager, she found herself isolated due to her inability to drive. Music became a source of both entertainment and creative inspiration. Listening to bluegrass and older country

albums prompted her to learn to play the fiddle. While in high school, she attended jams hosted by Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music and a local fiddle club. However, as her goal was performance, these jams were supplementary to her experience, rather than central. As such, she did not regularly participate in the jams; thus, she did not build the same kind of network of relationships that Tom and Melody did.

Ashley's blindness affects her ability to participate in the non-verbal elements of jamming. Jam sessions rely on visual communication for details like ending a tune or requesting for someone to take a break (solo). She explained to me that sometimes the other musicians will purposefully use verbal communication to indicate these same ideas (e.g., saying "Last time!" instead of signaling by lifting a foot). However, because of the size of the jams she has attended and her inconsistent participation, this has backfired. She illustrated this by telling me that,

It's just a lot of fiddles and a lot of banjos... and it's so loud. So even if someone does call out, "We're doing one more!" I might not have heard you, because the dude next to me is whacking away on a banjo, and doesn't really know any chords, and it's really distracting. So that's another hard thing... because you can't say it out loud, because jam etiquette. You should let anyone in a jam, of any ability, but when I try to follow along with the chords but, like, that person isn't playing it right? I'm, like, "Oh, okay, I'm going to listen for the person over there." So that's an interesting thing, trying to pick up tunes and trying to hear when it's really loud. I feel like people assume that I can localize sound really well, because I have to use my hearing—it's a necessity. But when there's

a lot going on at once, it's still hard to pick out, because I don't also have the ability to match it up with what I'm looking at. (A. Griggs, personal communication, Jan. 9th, 2020)

In a situation like this, having pre-established relationships may have provided a different angle of support within the chaotic environment.

Further, she explained that the large group made it difficult to individualize accommodation. For example, as many members of her jams did not regularly interact, basic information, such as names, may not be known. She explains that this can be problematic:

This guy at [the Old Town School of Folk Music]... it's a big jam, there's a bunch of people. Very confidently, he says, "Take one, Elizabeth!" And I didn't do anything because *that's not my name*. So, everyone's dropping down, playing quiet, to hear this phantom Elizabeth he speaks of, and the woman next to me says to me, "He means you..." So I'm like, "Oh god, oh god." I hurry up and try to jump in and play something, and then like an hour later, he's like, "Hey... what's your name?" So, that's been a really interesting one. I've been called Allison, Elizabeth, Amanda, so like... It's been fascinating to see people try to be accommodating, but it's like, I feel like at least you should learn my name. I don't know you're looking at me! If someone called you not your name, but they're looking at you, you'd be like, "Oh, they mean me," and let it slide and tell them your name in a minute, but I don't know! (A. Griggs, personal communication, Jan. 9th, 2020)

While I have also experienced this concept of musicianship being more important than individual identity, as seen in chapter two, my sighted, hearing impaired perspective views this blurring between personal identity and “musician” as a positive trait of the jams. Ashley demonstrates that this can be a negative trait, especially for her, and thus illustrates the perils of viewing accommodation as static rather than personalized to time, place, and individual. Without built relationships, there is no reference on which to base participatory accommodations.

Ashley has also navigated many tropes surrounding blindness, including comments perpetuating both an overcoming narrative and the concept of the blind genius (see Rowden, 2009, p. 11; Straus, 2008, p. 18). While Ashley proudly claims identity-first language as an act of self-empowerment, she also recognizes the difference in identifying as “blind” and being considered “blind”; as she explained:

I’ve had situations where I’m introduced as “That blind girl;” that’s a tough thing, because people try to say, with a disability, or with a race, or whatever, “No, no, I’m just trying to describe you so they know who I’m talking about! And that’s why I said the blind girl... that’s why I said the fat guy... that’s why I said the Mexican guy.” People justify that to various marginalized groups all the time. (A. Griggs, personal communication, Jan. 9th, 2020)

This recognition of the difference in word usage illustrates Ashley’s awareness of how people perceive both her and her disability.

As I analyzed my conversation with Ashley, I noticed some points that seemed to contradict my notion as to how a jam runs. She mentioned the use of songbooks, teachers

writing chord progressions on chalkboards, and other traits I had neither seen nor heard of existing in a standard jam. I initially analyzed these differences as things that I would perhaps have experienced if my disability affected a sense other than my hearing; I also questioned if the geographical location of the jam could create these differences. However, I realized that neither of these interpretations explained what I heard adequately.

It was at this point in my research that I recognized that Ashley's jam experiences centered around the intersection of the jam session (a social event) and educational experience. There was a pedagogical outcome of having the jam located within the environment of the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, as opposed to a bar, restaurant, or community center. Further, as a non-profit, educational organization, Old Town has a legal obligation to provide access for students with disabilities.

In a fortuitous turn of events, I had the opportunity to spend a weekend in Chicago while writing my thesis. Unfortunately, the only jam occurring at Old Town while I was there was the one primarily aimed at children. As it turned out, there were only three children in attendance that morning, as it was the first "warm" weekend of the spring. The children were around kindergarten age, though the jam was open to all ages. As such, the time was spent playing songs they had learned in their music classes, such as "Hop Old Squirrel" (Scarborough and Gullidge, 1925), led by two teachers, two assistants, and myself. I spent the hour playing upright bass, observing, and thinking. I knew that this was not what I had come to watch, nor a proper representation of the jam sessions Ashley had attended.

I came away with several contacts and a huge blister from holding down the bass line, as well as a realization of how defined the roles appeared in the space. I was a visitor, and they were teachers and students. We were on a stage that also served as a classroom. There were chalkboards and music stands. While I have no objective way to say that other jams at Old Town feel the same way, I found myself wondering what it would be like if my own teacher from middle or high school had sat in a jam with me. Further, it called to mind a few times where role obscured feelings of equality.

I thought of an orchestra job I held while in my undergraduate degree; while I was hired as a professional musician, my violin teacher held the concertmaster chair. Despite that we were, in that space, colleagues, it was nearly impossible for me to see her as anything but my teacher and superior. In my senior year, this same teacher invited me to a private Irish session held in celebration of St. Patrick's Day. While I had more experience playing Irish music than she, I found myself deferring to her. These were not conscious actions, nor was I ever made to feel inferior. These feelings were the result of cognitive dissonance between the roles we held in different locations. I infer that this same dissonance of role changes the model of accommodations provided at the Old Town School by introducing a power hierarchy.

Over time, Ashley found herself drawn toward performative country music, as the rehearsal process allows her time to learn in her own style. For example, she has the ability and obligation to know when songs begin and end, without the spontaneity of the jam session. This more controlled space also allows for a consistent membership, allowing for the construction of relationships needed for accommodations. As Ashley told me,

I feel like people have been tentative sometimes playing with me, because who knows... they don't know if I'm good or not? That sounds bad... I don't mean that in an egotistical way. But, like, when people just kind of let go and play a little more, and know that if I know the tune I'll jump in... like, I feel like sometimes there's a tendency at jams for people to worry about me. Am I grabbing the tune? And I'm like, if I know it, I know it; if I don't, sometimes I'll just stop playing so that I can listen and grab it. I've had people try to like teach me the tune while the tune is going on, and I'm like, "No, no, that makes it harder, it's fine!" Once someone knows you as a person, they don't know you as a person with a disability... because people can't fathom... our normal is not their normal, so many people cannot fathom disability. (A. Griggs, personal communication, Jan. 9th, 2020)

The rehearsal space and the stage, in other words, allows Ashley more control over her environment and participation. While she has still dealt with discriminatory comments and behaviors in performance settings, Ashley has more agency over the process. In this sense, Ashley's decision to pursue presentational music, as opposed to the jam session, was not due to rejection from the jam, but a choice to engage with the music she enjoys through the means that best suit her. In a sense, the rehearsal space and the stage, and the order that comes with these environments, are the accommodations Ashley requests to engage with the music fully.

What Changes?

On a practical level, I can write about how the four of us use accommodations in the jam circle. I can illustrate how Tom and I position ourselves within the session, keeping in mind instrumental roles and technical capability when picking our chairs. I can provide details on Melody's use of technology in working around spoken conversation in the jam. However, this pragmatic approach only perpetuates the idea that specific steps can lead to an inclusive environment. Rather than providing an instructional guide to accommodation, the jam session points out that the interaction of the musicians, rather than the accommodations themselves, create solutions that challenge our epistemology of disability.

Within traditional models of old-time jamming, musicians treat the learning process of the jam session as an egalitarian process; accommodations thus reflect this equality. Because the mindset focuses on the idea of learning, practicing, and participating together, accommodation concentrates not on making up for a deficiency, but rather on removing the societal barriers that make the jam inaccessible. Ashley's experience, however, demonstrates that the music-making itself holds no power outside of the relationships built through it.

Located outside of a hierarchical system, the leadership system in a traditional jam becomes contextualized within the framework of a peer group. While some musicians have more experience, and thus can lead, they are not exercising a separate category of participation. As a result of this, responsibility for accommodating difference becomes a group activity. This results in three shifts in the implementation of these

accommodations. First, the social interaction combines the initiation and application of accommodation. Second, the musical goals blur the line between need and want, as the ability to participate is both a desire and demand. Finally, the jam shifts the purpose of accommodation from “making up for” a deficiency to making the environment open to all in attendance.

Returning to the Circle

I have been back to Blackhorse several times since I first ran into Tom. I have not gone consistently enough to develop relationships, as a bluegrass jam that I attend meets at the same time on Sunday afternoons. While I have come to appreciate the old-time jam, I still prefer the music I grew up playing. When I find myself at the brewery with my instrument, I do not know who to sit with, talk to, or listen for. I know, however, that this is due to my own priorities and my schedule; I know confidently that I could forge those relationships, as the musicians are incredibly friendly and welcoming.

Without these interpersonal bonds, I have found myself in uncomfortable positions as a disabled musician. The loud environment has been too loud, the fiddle next to me has been out of tune, and the songs selected have been out of my repertoire. I have sat and listened, wondering how I could ask to trade seats with someone without being rude. These moments, when I find myself with no network of accommodation, help me appreciate the impact of relationships, especially within a participatory setting.

It never fails that just as I start getting discouraged, frustrated by a style so familiar yet so different to my own, they call out the name of a standard fiddle tune that crosses between the two genres, such as “Soldier’s Joy.” With the familiar melody, I feel

a switch in how I interact with the music. My fingers dart over the strings as my bow arm gently kicks the backbeat in my noticeably Texas bowing style—muscle memory is a powerful thing, despite my attempts to blend in. I try variations, experimenting with new ornaments and melodic changes. More than that, my version of the tune bounces along the contours of the overall melody, in rhythm with the many other musicians. For the moment, I understand what brings the musicians back week after week.

When someone finally raises their foot to bring the music to a halt, I smile to myself. I suppose staying for a few more songs would be fun.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I KNEW A BANJO PLAYER ONCE”: IDENTITY AND DISABILITY AMONG AGING BLUEGRASS MUSICIANS

*This old body is getting tired and feeble,
And I just can't get around like I did when I was young and fair.
But through the eyes of faith I see a brand new body waiting for me,
I'll be young again when I get over there. (P. Williams, 2008)*

“We’re All Deaf Here”

Somewhere between playing “Tennessee 1949” (Goble, Drumm, & Emerson, 1987) and “Blue Ridge Cabin Home” (Certain, L. & Stacey, G., 1957 [Recorded by L. Flatt & E. Scruggs]), I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to look at the old man who had been listening to our jam.

“Do you play ‘Kentucky Waltz’?” he asked me.

I nodded. He smiled. He waved his hand at the men leading the jam to get their attention.

“She’s going to play ‘Kentucky Waltz’ for me.”

The circle of older men turned to me, accepting the request gladly. I was the only fiddle player at the jam that night, and they liked the way I played.

“What key do you play that in?” The man leading the jam asked me.

I thought for a second, having not played the tune since I competed with it several months ago at MaupinFest. “I believe I play it in D.”

“B?”

“No, D.”

“G?”

“No, D as in dog.”

He strummed the chord and nodded.

“What’d she say? G?” A man across the circle called out.

The lead guitar player answered by calling out “D Dog!” and strumming the chord. The other musicians followed suit, adjusting their instruments for the upcoming song.

The banjo player made eye contact with me and, over the sound of capos moving and strings being re-tuned, stated, “You probably don’t know it, but most of us are just about deaf here.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry; I am too.”

I thought about the interaction as I played the Bill Monroe tune. My time attending the jam sessions had brought me in contact with many aging musicians who were experiencing the loss of senses and mobility. As being “abled” is an inherently temporary self-designation (see Linton, 1998, p. viii), aging is one of the inevitable causes of disability. As such, the majority of older adults, both in the jam circle and elsewhere, could be considered to have some form of disability. While these impairments could be labeled mild or severe and may affect a variety of functions, the aging body changes, impacting the lived experience of the formerly abled musician.

However, many of these musicians do not self-identify as having disabilities, despite their active acknowledgment of their impairments. As musicians within jam

sessions age and acquire disabilities, both the social and musical dynamics of the jam accommodate these needs, pushing for the full enjoyment of the social event by all. Despite these practical changes, there is a dissonance between their actions and words, as few of the musicians will accept the label of “disability.” Accommodation, then, occurs through the belief that all have the right to enjoyment and the self-preservation of one’s dignity. By examining how these aging musicians view and define disability, I argue that the participatory model of accommodation preserves the individual’s sense of self-dignity, denies one’s inevitable mortality, and disrupts the idea of disability as an absolute state.

Social Model Actions

As the musicians in the jam session age and their bodies change, they often find that they must make accommodations for their newly acquired needs. As the accommodations created are relational, as seen in chapter three, the jam provides support through a group effort to make sure everyone stays involved. Further, these shifts focus on adapting the environment, rather than the person. In doing so, the jam session embodies the social model of disability. Coming out of the British disability rights movement of the 1970s, the social model specifies impairment and disability as separate functions. The model began as a reactionary view that fought against the medicalization of disability and the marginalization that stemmed from that view, as well as the cultural discourse and meaning society assigns to bodily variations (see Shakespeare, 2010, p. 197; Linton, 1998, p. 2).

The social model defines impairment as the physical, emotional, intellectual, or psychological difference found in the body—the corporal element often called a disability. Within this model, it is not the body itself that causes disability, but the obstacles to full participation created and perpetuated by society. From a social model view, disability occurs when the design of a society expects only the normative body, limiting who it accepts and effectively creating segregation. For example, a wheelchair user would find a society without ramps or elevators extremely disabling. The social model indicates that installing ramps and elevators remediates this disability, not finding a cure that allows the individual to walk. As the social model definition of disability rests in the environment, this model shifts the responsibility for change away from the disabled body. Instead, it requests the environment to make adaptations that allow for diverse needs.

Critics of the social model often point out that it seems to devalue the impact of impairment itself. For example, Liz Crow (2010) states that impairment and disability cannot be seen as entirely separate entities, as “one cannot be fully understood without attention to the other” (p. 134). Because the two elements are inherently intertwined, disability will always reflect specific impairments. Further, the paradigm seems to devalue the impact of impairment on the body itself, such as pain and discomfort, and implies a rejection of medical prevention, rehabilitation, or cures.

In recognizing these critiques, I also acknowledge that the model provides a useful framework for analyzing accommodation, including those found within social gatherings such as the jam session. As the social model locates change in either the environment or the individual, it serves as a tool to pinpoint what is being considered

deficient. While a perfect, barrier-free utopia may be an unrealistic goal, the social model of disability reveals that the jammers often adapt their environment, such as by repeating information or moving chairs. This suggests that they use accommodation to change the inaccessible society, rather than the impaired body of their fellow musician.

Further, in identifying the separation between impairment and disability in the actions of the musicians, the social nature of the jam session comes to the forefront. Because one of the fundamental goals of the jam session is participation, differentiating between want and need as a qualifier to providing accommodation is illogical. Can one claim inclusion in a conversation as a want? Is the verbal banter of calling out keys based on a need? To participate is to enjoy; in this sense, all wants that impact the enjoyment of the jam are also the needs that impact if someone may participate.

In a broader sense, this idea of accommodating for pleasure is radical; it directly challenges the concept of “making up” for deficiency. The simple idea that the individual with a disability has an equal right to enjoyment, and not just participation, is disappointingly unusual. According to Simi Linton (1998),

Society’s choice, and I see it as a choice, to exclude disabled people from social and cultural events that afford pleasure... are indications of the belief that pleasure is less consequential to disabled people than to nondisabled people... How dare we crippled, blind, and crazy folks ask for parity? Shouldn’t we be satisfied with the provision of medical care and sustenance, and leave the luxuries for those who are thought to drain fewer resources from society? (p. 111)

The idea that we, the disability community, could engage with music solely for our enjoyment, and not for therapeutic reasons or to express our ability to “overcome our disability,” demonstrates this belief. The inclusion of the disabled body within the enjoyment of the jam session confronts the notion of passive existence and claims that all, including disabled individuals, have the right to thrive.

Defining Disability

Over my time attending jams for my research, I had brought up the idea of disability with many of the older musicians I came in contact with. Despite their frequent actions to make sure the jam session was accessible, I found they were quick to pass off the identity category of “disability” to others, often those born with disabilities or acquired through traumatic accidents. The term, to them, seemed to apply to those within working age who are unable to work and thus receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), more commonly referred to as disability benefits. As many of the musicians I’ve met through these jams are veterans or worked a job where workplace injuries occurred with relative frequency, it’s common for these musicians to know someone they consider “disabled.” I have heard quite a few stories that began with “I know a banjo player who...” or “I used to jam with this guitar player that...,” even as the musician telling me the story adjusted the volume on their own hearing aid. Most of the musicians viewed their own impairments—mobility challenges, hearing loss, and vision loss—as merely part of growing old.

I reached out to a musician, Gale, who I played with when I was a teenager. I knew he had challenges with hearing changes back when we jammed together almost a

decade ago. He surprised me by reinforcing this narrative, even as he stated that the jam was welcoming to all:

I've jammed with young and old, some with experience, some without experience, at all levels. And I've particularly jammed with a lady that was legally blind; she played the dobro. And she was very good with the dobro. The great thing about bluegrass is they don't discriminate against folks who want to jam. The way I feel about it is they should be included, because you have to start somewhere, because we all have to start somewhere.... If you've got an instrument, and you walk up to a jam somewhere, you fit in right away. This is what makes it great (G. Baugh, personal communication, Feb. 21st, 2020).

In some ways, this narrative seems to enforce a divide between abled and disabled, as Gale uses the term "they" in reference to musicians with disabilities, rather than including himself in the category. When contextualized in light of the individual making the claim, his statement and the many similar accounts I've heard prompts us to ask how and why aging musicians remove themselves from the identity of disability.

When discussing disability, the musicians in these jams seem to define the word through the medical definition of disability, which considers disability an ultimate state that occurs at a culturally defined point of dysfunction. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (1997) defines this as the "clinically disabled category," in which an individual is "excluded from economic opportunities and therefore [is] without free agency, self-determinism, and self-possession" (p. 50). In other words, the medical view of "disability" refers to a binary: something one either is or is not. Disability equates to

dysfunctionality, thereby creating a category the individual desires to reject. Since the physical realities of aging are difficult, if not impossible, to overlook, placing oneself in a separate category apart from “disability” allows the self to reject stigmatizing essentialisms.

Preserving Dignity and Denying Mortality

The internalized, medical definition of disability is rejected due to stigma surrounding disability. Goffman (1963) describes stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (p. i). Further, he states that stigma occurs when an individual is associated with a socially discrediting attribute, leading to their rejection. While stigma is typically considered an external force, not an internalized belief of self, stigma does not remain extrinsic. If one believes that another’s disability equals dysfunctionality, one must also view one’s own disability as such. This belief often leads the individual with a disability to attempt to “pass”—defined by Goffman as “the management of undisclosed discrediting information about the self” (p. 42). In other words, the impaired individual will attempt to limit their association with the stigma of “disability” as an act of demonstrating their functionality.

This is not a rejection of personal limitations, but a linguistic evasion of dependency and loss of agency. According to Iris Young (1990), “Dependency in our society thus implies, as it has in all liberal societies, a sufficient warrant to suspend basic rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice” (p. 54). Accepting disability, for this group, indicates losing one’s freedom and independence, such as living in one’s own home. By minimizing one’s impairments, through both linguistic means and physical actions, the aging individual can attempt to maintain their image, and with that, their right

to autonomy. Recognizing this, we can understand the logic in this linguistic avoidance of disabled identity—change of action, then, is not based on epistemology, but the preservation of self-dignity.

While the aging individual's desires to maintain their autonomy, the desire to pass off the term "disability" and its connection to dependency goes beyond the preservation of one's self-image. Rather, a sense of mortality connects the ideas of disability and lost autonomy within this population. To lose one's independence is to be closer to death. While not something often talked about in these jam sessions, death is a subject that lies just on the border of conversation. As a young teen, this was startling. I remember sitting in the fellowship hall of the church we met at every Monday night; we played through "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" (Dorsey, 1938), my fiddle break depicting the melody as a fiddle waltz and showcasing my classical tone and vibrato. As we came to a close, the banjo player smiled at me and said, "I want you to play that at my funeral." I sat silent, not quite knowing what to do. I eventually just nodded, unsure what to make of the casual reference to expecting one's death. As years passed, I realized that this was an underlying theme of conversation, often manifesting itself in the unspoken worry if a member would come home from the hospital after surgery.

Unfortunately, as years go by, these fears become a reality. As I worked on this project, I had a moment where I thought, "Oh, I can't wait to tell Carl about my research!" only to remember that he had passed on a few months prior. While I do not have a long enough social history with the groups here in Knoxville to experience this reality, one of the walls at the community center in Kingston holds a bulletin board with photos of participants who have passed away—a tribute to their memory. The board

hangs next to one with fliers pinned to it, one of which advertised the Disabled American Veterans meetings.

The association of loss of functionality, agency, disability, and mortality displays what Young (1990) terms as “the border anxiety of the abject” (p. 147), elaborating on Julia Kristeva (1977) by stating that “in confronting old or disabled people I confront my own death” (Young, 1990, p. 147). In other words, to formally acknowledge their body’s impairments without naming them disabilities, the musicians in these jam sessions allow themselves to temporarily deny their mortality, even as they know and express that it is inescapable.

Erasing Binaries

Within these jam sessions, accommodation becomes focused on the specific individual’s wants and needs. This separation leads to accommodations that reflect changes in the environment rather than the body. By removing an individual’s impairment from broad categories, there arises an awareness of individual differences. What I need, based on my specific body, may not be the same as the guitar player sitting next to me, despite our similar impairments. I, as one participant, cannot take what I can do for granted, nor can I hold my abilities over the abilities of another. Instead, each participant must see each other as individuals.

This sense of individualism leads to a culture in which accommodation provides for difference, rather than deficiency. The individualistic perspective calls into question the very idea of deficiency, as the person exists outside of comparison to others. Further, while the musician may see their body as deficient compared to their past self, it is the

present self who makes music. The other musicians in the circle approach accommodation in this non-comparative, present manner—what is needed by who, in this moment of music-making. Though rarely pre-determined, regular requests may become part of the routine.

This concept stands in blunt opposition to the binary system of disability and ability, normality and abnormality. This opposition occurs not by the creation of an in-between space between absolute identities, but by the elimination of those absolutes. Judith Butler (1990) argues that the individual outside the binary perpetuates and reinforces the existence of the binary. In her words, the individual in contradiction to the binary embodies it in “an enacted testimony to the law’s uncanny capacity to produce only those rebellions that it can guarantee will... have no choice but to reiterate the law of their genesis” (p. 106). Positioning the impaired body between traditional notions of disability and ability serves to reinforce the existence of these absolutes.

Instead, the jam session pushes against the idea of the binary by asserting the abnormality of even the most normal body. The body with an impairment is made abnormal by its physiology, but normalized by the demographic of the jam. The abled body, often the exception, defies the expected state of impairment. In this way, the concept of “normal” is erased; the normal body is the one holding an instrument. Further, the musical contributions, while falling within the boundaries of the style, contest notions of “good” or “bad” playing with the recognition that all parts are vital. As the abnormal becomes normal and the normal becomes abnormal, the binary between the two fails to maintain its power.

Filling in Gaps

The man sitting to my right leaned over to me, his physical action catching my attention so I could hear what he was about to say.

“Grab the high tenor line for the chorus.” He told me as we were about to wrap up the verse. “I can’t sing that high anymore.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know the song, or the lyrics,” I replied. While I was happy to take the high tenor line when I knew the song, I had never heard this tune before. It was too late; my words were lost in the sound, and he was expecting my harmony vocals.

I took a breath and found the starting pitch for the tenor line. The melody was standard enough, making the harmony easy to find. The words did not matter, I realized, as I mostly sang vowels and the occasional words I remembered from the first time we had played through the chorus. What mattered was that something was missing, and my presence that evening—both as the only fiddler in the circle and only vocalist who could hit the high tenor line—was the solution.

If I had not been there, the music would have gone on. The same songs would be sung, the same way they were all the times before I walked in with my fiddle, audio recorder, and consent forms, and as they will be played many times going forward. In those sessions, the songs are complete as they are, with the musicians contributing to the participatory creation of the music, according to preconceived ideals. But for that moment, my body, in all its unique characteristics, provided an element—an accommodation—we felt would benefit our music. In other words, the song was whole without my addition, but we knew, based on standards of performative bluegrass, that the

song would be fuller and more satisfying with that third harmony line. In this way, our accommodations made an already complete music reach a fuller potential. The sounded realization of our ideal music was created by our participation, presence, and careful listening to the “needs” of the music we were creating together.

In the same way, our social behavior reflected the music. While, linguistically, the musicians I spent time jamming with may have denied the identity of “disability,” the awareness of need shaped the jam session. We listened for needs and wants, and responded in turn. We paid attention to where limitations were shown and stepped in to fill in the gaps. The jam was not an us versus them situation, but a participatory social event that directly reflected the music we created. In other words, my use of the term “participatory” to refer to this model of accommodation is not incidental. The jam session, then, is a radical space not because it tries to exist as a barrier-free utopia, but because the participants navigate the obstacles together. Denying a disabled self-identify, along with its accompanying associations with stigma, dependency, and mortality, does not prohibit these musicians from emphasizing the importance that all should be offered participation.

While most of the musicians I have played music with likely would never call attention to this interaction, many of them recognize that it exists. However, within the jam session, this concept is not something unique or unusual; it is being in relationship with one another, being kind, and loving your neighbor. It is metaphorically picking up the high tenor line, the fiddle break, or holding the rhythm steady in the music of our social lives. And to quote many of the musicians I have played with over the years, “That harmony sure sounds nice.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“OH, THAT MUSIC NEVER ENDS”: A CONCLUSION

“Come On Up and Join”

Big John would end our jams, now many years ago, by putting the microphone we used into the center of the circle. We mainly used the microphone to highlight the vocalist, so they would not have to sing over the other ten or more of us, but it also served as a symbol of responsibility and leadership—the musician who held the microphone picked and led a song before passing it on to the next musician. I was always a bit disappointed when the microphone was pulled out into the middle of our circle, signaling the close of the jam. I also felt relief; the jams went late, and it was a long drive home.

He raised the microphone so he could address the restaurant diners, who came to the restaurant in Edom, Texas on Tuesday nights to hear live music, though the good southern chicken fried steak and homemade pies added to the experience. As he began to talk, some of the musicians who had taken a break moved back to the circle, setting their own slices of pie and conversations aside.

“Well, folks. We’re just about done for the night. Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise, we’ll be right back here next week. We sure hope you’ll come back and listen again. We’re not here to perform; we’re just all here to make music together. We’ve been havin’ fun, and if you haven’t, that’s *your* fault. We’re going to finish up the way we always do. If you’ve got a verse and chorus of a gospel song you want to sing, come on up and join. Key of G!”

He motioned for someone to come up and start the medley. Someone counted us off, and we took off on a lively rendition of “I Saw the Light” (H. Williams, 1948).

This ending round-robin of gospel songs and hymns was an underlying thread of my high school jam sessions. It was a chance for everyone to participate and, potentially, have a highlighted moment. Whoever stepped up to the microphone to lead the song sang the verse alone, and we would all—jamming musicians and diners alike—join in on the chorus. We were all incredibly different. The only thing we truly had in common was a passion for the style of music we were playing. Our age, gender, experience, and technical ability varied, along with our instruments and playing styles. Most of us were religious, but not all, and those who of us who were had varying backgrounds.

The loosely drawn identity lines disturbed the very definition of difference. After all, what is difference in a setting where each musician brings a unique set of experiences, skills, abilities, and obstacles? The jam session was a meeting point of our diverse histories. For this moment, we were here, together, to create something bigger than ourselves. Each musician was critical in their own right, and our musicking that night would not have been the same without each of us.

I slipped out of my seat, moving up to the microphone. My difference in gender and age was evident as I pulled the microphone to my instrument. My hearing impairment was perhaps invisible, but I knew the other musicians were aware of it. However, at that moment, all that was heard was my arrangement of “I’ll Fly Away” (Brumley, 1932); each double-stop articulated my position in the circle as a fiddle player. I was accepted and included; this was my music as much as any other participant’s. I had an equal right to my chair in the circle and this moment at the microphone.

As I slipped back to my seat, my turn ending and another musician's turn beginning, Tom nodded at me approvingly. I smiled my response. While I had an incredible fiddle teacher outside the session, Tom had been my guide through the jams themselves over the several years prior to this particular night. We both played fiddle, and I had picked up many of his tunes, breaks, and tricks, but there was no confusing our musical sound. Even if we played the same notes, our sounds were noticeably distinct. His role was his, and mine was mine.

A diner slipped past us, taking their turn at the microphone. As this audience member sang, their timing and pitch were off, but we kept playing, following the best we could. The jam circle was not a place for perfection; this was our space to make music together, and this individual had their own role to play in the jam. We nodded and smiled our encouragement, singing softly along under their vocal line to help guide their timing and pitch. They were accepted too, and we would all contribute to make sure the musicking kept going.

Radical Musicking

At the time, I did not realize the radical inclusion this space offered. There were no thoughts about binaries, spectrums, models of disability, discrimination, oppression, or marginalization. I knew my place in the jam. I knew the brown vinyl of the dated restaurant chairs and the particular shade of red of the trim along the wall. I knew how far I, the "child" in the circle of adults, could take my banter before I was "rude." I knew where the other musicians preferred to sit, and that one of the ladies would always bring her own stool (as she was relatively short, her stool gave her the height to keep up with

the visual communication). Perhaps more importantly, I knew where my line fit into the musical creation we had assembled over the evening. According to Big John, my unique contribution was how I phrased lyrical passages; “Make it sing, sweetheart!” he would call out encouragingly. No, there was no theoretical analysis of this space; this was just us, doing what we did.

I was a teenager, figuring out who I was as a person. I was learning to embrace my differences while respecting others, expecting others to respect me, and that separating people based on our differences did not make the music better—instead, it kept away a potential friend and mentor. I did not know how critical these jams were in developing my view of myself, a person with a disability, until now, almost a decade later. These jams shaped my perspective of myself as a multi-faceted, complex individual, with many composite identities, who not only had an equal right to my place in the jam circle, but also to the classroom and workplace. I could only be myself, with my unique abilities and disabilities, and no one else. The jam session was an empowering space where my difference was seen, acknowledged, and placed into music with those around me. In that season, I understood only that this was jamming, and this is how jamming was.

This is participatory accommodation: a powerful model of listening, responding, and interacting. This model accepts diverse voices as a natural part of the musical texture, as well as the social experience. Accommodations exist not to make all bodies measure up to the same standard. Instead, each participant has an equal opportunity to contribute to the whole through their unique set of skills and sounds, regardless of disability status. The disability community has fought for many rights; the right to public transit,

employment, education, privacy, agency, and autonomy, among other things. I believe it is time for us to push for the right to be a peer.

My fieldwork itself does not, and has not, changed accommodation. This document has been a presentation of stories and experiences that existed before I sat down to write them, and theories that only begin to explain what I have observed. The mantra of the disability rights movement has been “Nothing about us without us”—a phrase which James Charlton (1998) states

requires people with disabilities to recognize their need to control and take responsibility for their own lives. It also forces political-economic and cultural systems to incorporate people with disabilities into the decision-making process and to recognize that the experiential knowledge of these people is pivotal in making decisions that affect their lives (p. 17).

In this, I recognize, to quote Wong (2004), that music “‘speaks’ with considerable power and subtlety as a discourse of difference” (p. 3). From this belief, I have amplified a few voices of difference, in a limited way, through the platform and medium of academic writing.

I maintain that this is applied ethnomusicology through what Titon (2015) has called “ethnomusicology based in social responsibility” (p. 5). As Bruno Nettl (2015) wrote,

There are ways in which virtually all ethnomusicology has an ‘applied’ component.... We should all, many of us believe, do much more, take a position of engagement; we should be active as advocates in behalf of our

belief; we should do things about situations that require rectifying and that are intolerable (p. 427).

In this way, I advocate for a new way of looking at disability and accommodation, an intolerable situation I believe requires rectifying. Reflecting on the jam session forces us to reconsider our idea of an “accommodating” environment.

However, this document cannot be where these ideas end. My narrative does not exist for you, the reader, to enjoy a pleasant thought of a more inclusive space. Advocacy must turn into activism, and that occurs when my words change the actions of those who engage with them. In other words, this document becomes activist when it causes you, the reader, to question the accommodations in your workplace or school environment, be that from your role as an employee or boss, teacher or student. Activism, then, begins not on these pages, but when you stop reading and begin bringing elements of participatory accommodation to your circles of influence.

Before the Chairs Are Put Away

Big John stepped to the microphone once it seemed that everyone who wanted to lead a song had taken their turn. He strummed his guitar slowly, leading us into the last song of the night. The tempo slowed as he began to sing his rendition of a Gaither Vocal Band (1997) song:

They pushed back from the table, just to listen to His words,

His secret plan before He had to go.

It's not complicated, don't need a lot of rules,

This is all you'll ever need to know.

...

But we always make it harder, we build steeples out of stone,

Fill books with explanations of The Way.

But if we'd stop and listen, and break a little bread,

Then I know we would hear our Master say:

Loving God, loving each other,

Making music with my friends.

Loving God, loving each other,

And the story never ends.

The song is forever engrained in my heart as the essence of the jam session. While I know not everyone there was religious, we all understood why he sang the song every week. It was his way of reminding everyone why we were there and why we all had value. At the end of the night, we were friends who loved each other as we were, despite, or because of, our many differences. The jam session undermined societal definitions of difference, including disability, and offered all of us a chair in the circle. That was the point of this music, and Big John made sure we remembered that.

Before the song came to a close, just before our instruments went back in their cases and we moved our chairs back around the tables, Big John took a breath. He had one more line, one I have only ever heard him sing.

Oh, that music never ends.

POSTSCRIPT

I am finishing this document amid the COVID-19 pandemic, highly aware of the extreme effects this crisis could potentially have over the upcoming several weeks. While it temporarily disrupts the everyday routine of myself and many others, I have found myself pondering the long-term effects of this virus on the individuals I have documented in my ethnography. Many of the jams I attended over my research have wisely paused their gatherings, using email and social media to call off weekly sessions and reminding us to “take good care of yourselves and keep working on those tunes, we'll be playing 'em together again before you know it” (J. Mahaffy, electronic mailing list message, March 14th, 2020). Some of the more rural sessions do not use social media or email lists; since I do not want to risk accidentally bringing illness to the sessions by driving out to them, I do not know if they are continuing to meet at this time.

While many of these sessions will resume in a few weeks, I fear that this pandemic will potentially bring an end to many of the jam sessions I have attended, specifically those made up almost entirely of adults in their 70s and 80s. I would be naive not to recognize that some of the musicians I have learned so much from are extremely vulnerable to this virus, and are more likely to have severe complications or die from COVID-19. I hope that when the pandemic ends and life returns to normal, the music and musicians I have documented in these pages are still playing. However, I recognize this may not be the case.

Traditions, like these jam sessions, rest on the passing of music and experience from one generation to the next. In that, there are many younger musicians, like myself,

who will carry on the music and culture of the jam, passing it along to yet another generation of musicians. However, the idea of irreplaceable personhood means that this community may forever change over the next several weeks and months; to what degree is yet to become known.

I state this broadly, but also personally. I wonder who I have played music with for the last time. I do not mean for this to come across as morbid, but to encourage us—as researchers, musicians, and people—to lean into and recognize the importance of the moments we have. We never know what tomorrow will bring, so let us boldly make relationships—and make relationships into music—while we have the opportunity.

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VITA

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Emily's research interests include disability and deaf studies, applied ethnomusicology, participatory music, perception, and American fiddle musics. Further, as a performing musician, she has performed extensively as a classical violinist and fiddler, with performances taking her to Carnegie Hall, the Grand Old Opry, the Bluegrass Underground, and the Country Music Hall of Fame. In addition, Emily has enjoyed broadening her perspectives through performing with Sawt Al-Wadi Middle East Ensemble and the University of Tennessee Balinese Gamelan Ensemble.

Emily is also passionate about sharing knowledge through education. While in her undergraduate studies, she founded the Piney Woods Fiddlers—a community ensemble for local students—that provided both cultural and performative understanding of multiple genres of fiddle musics. Currently, in addition to working as a teaching assistant within the musicology department at UTK, Emily teaches private violin, fiddle, and piano lessons. She has also coached traditional Appalachian clogging and taught fiddle ensembles at the Annie Moses Summer Music Festival in Nashville, TN.