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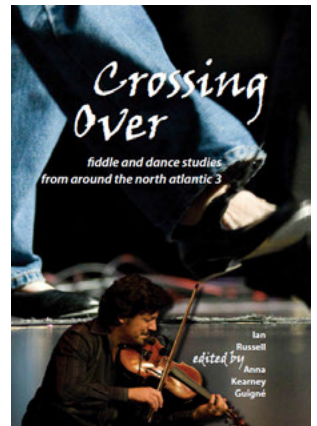
Crossing Over

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GREGORY J. DORCHAK

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate why the ideas of ‘understanding’, ‘agency’, and related concepts are important for researching folk communities. The hermeneutical concept of understanding is strongly tied to the rhetorical notion of agency. Both understanding and agency allow insight into the structure of a community that exists apart from its practices. In the case of Cape Breton fiddle music, looking at how those who call themselves ‘Cape Breton musicians’, might take part in the same practice, yet their understanding of that practice, and of their own role within the community, might be drastically different. This essay shows how multiple communities of Cape Breton musicians exist, each understanding the music quite differently. Comparing the Cape Breton fiddle music communities that exist on both Cape Breton Island and Boston, Massachusetts, this essay shows that the rhetorical notion of agency, and how musicians understand their own roles within a community, is of vital importance to the overall sustainability of the community.

Hermeneutics

Firstly, it is important to explain my own notion of hermeneutics as agency and my own notion of understanding. There are several competing meanings for the term hermeneutics. These differences arise from the many theorists who approach the discussion, including Heidegger, Husserl, Ricoeur, and Dilthey. I approach hermeneutics theoretically rooted in Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology, which analyzes the question ‘What does it mean to be?’.¹ Heidegger lays out the possibility of hermeneutics, and of the question of ‘Being’ in general, however, it is Gadamer’s work within *Truth and Method* that critically examines the ramifications of Heidegger’s ontology upon the human sciences.²

From a hermeneutic perspective, all experience exists through our understanding of it. A being ‘understands itself’ – and that means also its being in the world – ontologically in terms of those being and their being, which it itself is not, but which it encounters within its world.³ As humans, we have an understanding of everything that surrounds us. It is important to make a distinction between the terms ‘understanding’ and ‘comprehension’. Everything we experience within the

world, we understand in a certain way. You may have no knowledge of calculus, yet when you look at a calculus problem you still understand it. You might perceive it as a jumble of strange, confounding numbers. You might not comprehend it, but despite this lack of comprehension, understanding still occurs. For Heidegger, this means that understanding is 'Being' itself. As beings, we can only exist in a state of understanding. How we understand the world determines how we conceive of our possibilities for what it means to be within the world.

Simply stated, we can only exist in the world as opposed to a 'vacuum' independent of any world. Therefore our possibilities are always understood from the fact that we are being – in the world. The world we exist in contains paradigms of traditions that precede us. These traditions give us the tools we use to judge our surroundings. When we understand an object, we do so based on how our traditions tell us to use that object. This gives the object meaning for us. To understand an object is to understand the object's meaning. Traditions are the only means we possess that allow us to understand something and make it meaningful.⁴

For example, a television news reporter may be watching the news. He is watching the same feed as his non-reporter friend. They see the same stories and hear the same words; empirically they experience the same entity, but they interpret the object very differently, because it has disparate uses for each of them. The news means something completely different for these two individuals because they belong to contrasting traditions, and possess distinct tools of understanding this object. The traditions we are born into are created prior to our existence. Understanding is therefore a historical process unfolding and reconstituting itself as praxis over time for both a being and a community. This distinction illustrates the phenomena of understanding that the hermeneutical question seeks to discover.

With tradition as the lens through which we gain understanding, then that understanding exists on a horizon in front of us. Our horizon is the range of possible significances gained through the tradition.⁵ Therefore, the horizon of understanding exists in a state of flux, since both tradition, and our understanding of it changes over time. This state of flux means that the understanding of possibilities changes for the being in question, and so too does the understanding of the moment. The horizon is limited to what tradition presents us, yet it is always open. There is always something that can appear upon the horizon that did not previously exist there – a new possibility that time presents to us. The more we test our prejudices to the events of time, the more chances for the horizon to move.⁶ It is hermeneutics' task to discover the edges of the horizon and the possibilities that it provides.⁷

How this applies to my own project is as follows: when looking at Cape Breton fiddle music, rather than having concern for stylistic nuances that distinguish musicians, my hermeneutic approach is concerned with how musicians understand the performance of their music. From this perspective, two musicians could sound exactly alike in every way, yet their understanding of the performance of that music could differ greatly. This difference, and the implications it has upon community, is what I wish to investigate.

Cape Breton understanding of music

An article I have written in a previous volume of this series sets out to demonstrate the elements of how Cape Bretoners understand their music;⁸ to sum up, Cape Bretoners understand their music's primary function as dance music. As Burt Feintuch has eloquently stated, the music is a 'dance music, first and foremost'.⁹ The dance is at the heart of the everydayness of the music – and while in Cape Breton, you might encounter Cape Breton fiddle music in a more formal concert setting; this formal setting of the music is not perceived as the 'everyday'. For example, every night during the summer months, square dances take place on the island. This is the everyday encounter with the music, and informs it. The dance is the driving force behind the rhythm of the music. The stylistic elements that make Cape Breton music unique are a result of the need to perform for dances. As a result, for the most part, each note will require its own bow stroke. Embellishments that would disrupt the rhythm, such as slides and rolls, are not found in the music.

This is also a tradition that, on a whole, values an individual sense of style, rather than judging the music by a homogenized standard. Many fiddlers, in conversation, cite this as the reason that fiddle competitions on the island are actually devalued. Although such events have been attempted in the past, they were not popular simply because competitions forced a standardized sense of judgement to which the locals simply did not respond. This value of individualization has allowed the community to respond and adapt to an element of newness introduced over the years. This can be seen in the innovations that fiddlers such as Winston 'Scotty' Fitzgerald introduced into the community, as well as the success of many innovative accompanists, such as the impact that John Morris Rankin had on the piano style of the island. Many within the community take pride in their ability to close their eyes, and through hearing only the fiddle and piano, identify who is performing. This individualized sense of style has been the driving force behind the evolution of a Cape Breton fiddle style.

Boston understanding of Cape Breton music

To show how understanding within a community can differ within a tradition, one has to look no further than the community centred around Cape Breton music within Boston. There is a strong link between Cape Breton and Boston. During the 1920s and 1930s, many Cape Bretoners migrated to 'The Boston States' looking for work. These migrated Cape Bretoners kept many of their traditions with them, and maintained a strong relationship to the island. Often they would return to the island during the summer months, and it was commonplace for the youth to be at home in both locations. This relationship between Boston and Cape Breton helped to foster the popularity of Cape Breton music within Boston.

There are two very different demographics of people who identify themselves as Cape Breton fiddle players within Boston. The first kind of musician has no family ties or relationship to the island itself. Rather, they have learned of the style through recordings, the internet, or through attending concert halls, or festivals. Cape Breton

musicians such as Natalie MacMaster are popular within Boston, performing with the Boston Pops, and selling out large capacity venues. This popularity of the music makes it easily accessible for the musician who enjoys the music but has no knowledge of the community.

The Boston-born Cape Breton fiddler who has no direct ties to the island understands the music simply from the aspects of performance. Essentially, this strips the music from any form of understanding tied to community. There is no sense of 'everydayness' related to the music. In Cape Breton, lessons supplement only the technical aspects of learning the instrument, the music is already understood by the Cape Breton-born musician in the context of the dances and the community. For this Boston-born Cape Breton musician, the technical notion of performing the instrument is the totality of understanding. There is no equivalent communal aspect for this musician that supplements the performance aspects. The most important distinction in understanding, which reveals the differences lying below stylistic elements, is in the context of the music: that is, music as performance as opposed to music as part of everyday community.

In this situation, where understanding of the tradition is limited to stylistic elements, all historical contexts are also stripped away. Therefore the presentation of tradition is immediately reduced to that of a static product, rather than as a dynamic process. To put this into perspective, understanding Cape Breton music from a historical perspective means that a person understands the impact of individuals who have shaped the music. Ashley MacIsaac, Winston 'Scotty' Fitzgerald, John Morris Rankin, Buddy MacMaster, and Donald Angus Beaton are all examples of musicians who have had a significant impact in shaping the current state of Cape Breton music.¹⁰ Each is known for their own unique elements contributed to the music. Buddy MacMaster sounds nothing like Donald Angus Beaton who sounds nothing like Winston Fitzgerald and so on. A Cape Breton-born fiddler would not be able to separate these tradition bearers from their understanding of the music. To the Boston-born Cape Breton fiddle player who only understands the music from recordings, the more commercially successful musicians, such as Natalie MacMaster or Ashley MacIsaac, become the sole face of Cape Breton music. The non-commercial fiddlers, such as Willie Kennedy and Alex Francis MacKay, who stylistically are very influential on Cape Breton, would largely be ignored off the island.¹¹ On the island, community members understand the many varieties of styles within Cape Breton music; such as Mabou Coal Mines style, or the Washabuck style. These nuances are not understood outside of the island; instead the music is seen more as a homogenised static Cape Breton style.

The second type of Boston-born Cape Breton fiddler has family ties to Cape Breton island, and still maintains a relationship to the community there. This kind of musician understands the importance of the dance and its tie to the music. However, in Boston, the Cape Breton square dance is not an everyday occurrence. More likely, it is an event that might occur once a month at most. Therefore, rather

than experiencing the music as part of the everyday, it is understood as a special occurrence.

One other phenomenological occurrence of this 'family-tied-Boston-Cape Breton Fiddler' (for lack of a better term) that distinguishes them from the Cape Breton-born musician is an exiled sense of self. By this I mean that this musician finds their tradition rooted in a place where they do not live, and so they are stuck in a liminal situation of not necessarily feeling home in either location. The music that they perform is rooted elsewhere. It is not rooted in their own Boston homes, but on Cape Breton. This geo-existential sense of always being away from their home is not experienced by the Cape Breton fiddler living on Cape Breton. There is little need for a Cape Breton fiddler living in Cape Breton to emphasize their 'Cape Breton-ness'.

Looking at this, the notion of agency becomes an important factor within how the two musicians (Boston and Cape Breton) understand themselves. A Boston-born Cape Breton fiddle player, because he or she is not from the island, does not feel that within this exiled role, he or she can impact or influence Cape Breton music. This is an important distinction of understanding. It points to a current one-way relationship to the Boston-born musician. They are to learn the Cape Breton style, rather than impact it. It is a mimetic notion of understanding. It points to the individual being a product of a tradition, rather than an active member within a traditional community.

However, when you consider that one of the most influential composers and innovators of Cape Breton music, Jerry Holland, was born in the Boston area, you can see that this development within the understanding of Boston-born Cape Breton musicians is relatively recent.¹² One factor that influenced this change of understanding of agency lies within access to the venue itself. While Jerry Holland lived in Boston, Cape Breton dances were relatively frequent. When Jerry was young, he performed at these dances, as did such local fiddlers as Bill Lamey, Angus Chisholm, and John Campbell. Cape Breton piano players living in Boston such as Doug MacPhee were also common place at these dances. However, the frequency of the dances dwindled dramatically in the last thirty years, and eventually the only musicians, who would be asked to perform at the two remaining venues, Watertown's Canadian American Club, and Waltham's French American Victory Club, were Cape Breton born. The migration of musicians from Cape Breton to Boston dwindled, and Boston was not producing many Cape Breton fiddlers. However, the ones they did produce, such as Doug Lamey (grandson of Bill Lamey), while strong musicians, were not asked to perform for the dances.¹³ There was not a lack of Boston based Cape Breton musicians required to conduct a dance, as both accompanist such as Janine Randall, and fiddlers were present. However, in order for the event to be held, a Cape Breton musician visiting from the island was a pre-requisite.

This notion of agency can also be seen in how workshop courses in Cape Breton style fiddling are conducted. A Boston-born Cape Breton fiddler, when teaching a lesson, might explain 'this is how a Cape Bretoner would play this'. A Cape Breton-born fiddler, possessing agency and a confident sense of their own

individual style and its place within the larger community, when teaching, might explain, 'this is how I would play this'. It is a subtle distinction that exhibits the teacher's perception of self within the context of the tradition. The Cape Breton-born player is more apt to place themselves as a member of the community whose own individual style actually matters.

Taking regional fiddle styles into consideration, the Boston-born Cape Breton players are also seen as the 'Celtic' minority of the area. In Boston, the Irish music scene is a dominating presence, with Irish sessions held every night within the area, at multiple venues. Since venues for Cape Breton performers are at a minimum, the Irish music scene is the closest available alternative. It is not unlikely to see a Boston-born Cape Breton fiddle player sitting in on a local Irish session. However, this friendship comes with some caveats – most notably in the tune selection that a Cape Breton musician would perform within the session. There are many shared tunes that Cape Bretoners have absorbed from the Irish tradition, and vice versa. A Cape Breton performer sitting in these Boston Irish sessions would be limited to these tunes. This excludes almost all strathspeys, as well as some of the more recent Cape Breton compositions. Therefore, within this setting, the Cape Bretoner would always perceive themselves as the 'guest'. They might feel welcome, yet they are always 'other'.

Contingency and agency

In 1972, a CBC documentary, *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, caused much controversy within the music community on the island.¹⁴ The thesis of the film was that the youth were not taking up the fiddle. Therefore, if the youth stop learning the music, eventually no one will play the music. Most of the controversy over this film came from the idea that it was overly critical of the Cape Breton music tradition as a whole. In response, the community formed a festival to prove that the tradition was alive and strong. The goal was to put a concert together with over 100 Cape Breton fiddlers on the stage. Within a few months, they achieved this goal, to them, proving that the tradition was not vanishing. However, of the 100 fiddlers on the stage, only a small group were under the age of twenty-five, in a way, proving the true thesis of the film, that the youth were not actively engaging with the tradition.¹⁵

Despite disagreeing with the film's premise in words, the community's actions in response acknowledged the need for a push to integrate the youth. Where once the music was learned informally, usually from a family member, formalized group classes began. The island's dances, becoming more and more scarce, were rekindled. In a short time, during the 1970s and 1980s, the island's youth took up the instrument in droves. The actions of the Cape Bretoners addressed the need to re-integrate the youth into the community, and succeeded in adopting change.

Although these changes have been readily adopted in Cape Breton, the Boston Cape Breton scene has not adapted as successfully, such that the youth in the community have not been as well integrated. One only has to look at the demographics of the attendance of Cape Breton dances at the Canadian American

Club to see that a person in their forties might be amongst the youngest in attendance. The youth who do attend the dances generally self-identify more as members of the Boston Scottish fiddle community who appreciate Cape Breton music, as opposed to the Boston Cape Breton community. A central problem to this inability to adapt is the limited access to venues. Since there are only two realistic venues for the Cape Breton community in the Boston area, the Canadian American Club and the French American Victory Club, the community as a whole is at the mercy of the venues' management. There has been very little turnover of the leadership at the Canadian American Club in the past thirty years. Any proposed event that attempts to cater to the youth requires approval from their board of directors. The foremost concern for the board, however, is economic viability and catering to their current clientele. The members of the board are not concerned about recruiting a younger clientele in the interest of sustaining community. Hence, the occasional dance performed by a visiting Cape Breton fiddler is seen as drawing a larger crowd. In turn this kind of event provides more economic incentive than a regular dance by the Boston-born fiddlers, who would tend to draw less of a crowd, but cater to the youth as opposed to the established older members.

The lack of change within the Boston Cape Breton community is tied to the rhetorical notion of agency. Two central topics of importance within rhetorical studies are the notion of an individual's power within society and the development of epistemology within a community. Foremost of these conceptions is the notion that an individual can have influence within the community to which he or she belongs. The self-perception of this power to influence others is this person's rhetorical agency. Here, the self-perception of this power exists within the 'horizon of possibilities' that hermeneutic research seeks to unveil. Rhetorician Michael Leff has commented on the link between tradition and agency:

In place of the isolated self of modernity (or the alienated self of some versions of post-modernity), tradition constitutes the self through social interaction and as part of an ongoing historical development. Both the individual agent and the tradition achieve and change identity through a reciprocal circulation of influence. Inclusion within a tradition shapes the individual self but also, and as a direct result of submitting to the mores and practices of the community, the individual gains the power to shape tradition. Moreover, the agents who succeed in effecting change in tradition also change their self-conception since individual and affiliative identities never lose connection with one another.¹⁶

Here Leff points to the notion that traditional communities are essentially shaped by individuals who exercise agency. Cape Breton Island's musical history can be read as a long list of such individuals who demonstrate the power of agency. In contrast, the Boston Cape Breton community has stopped facilitating the development of this agency.

An argument about a chicken and egg comes to mind when discussing agency and its relation to a sustainable community. Fostering agency within community

members is essential in order to maintain a sustainable community. Yet, only a sustainable community seems to produce agency within its members. However, a theme overarching both agency and tradition is the notion of a physical place. A healthy public sphere requires a place for the community members to gather and act as a community. Venue access is essential. The Boston Cape Breton community is restricted to only the two venues. Any argument that access is not restricted at the Canadian American Club overlooks the fact that local musicians are essentially restricted to the role of audience member, rather than musician. A healthy traditional music community is predicated on the fact that its members who are musicians develop a sense of agency. The musicians within the Boston community, without the access to a venue where they can perform as musicians, are prevented from developing this sense of influence within the community.

Implications

The Cape Breton musical community responded to the contingency of the crisis of the lack of youth in the 1970s. The pedagogy of the tradition drastically changed. Formal classes became the foundation of learning the music. Venues sprung up all over the island, from dances in halls to performances in pubs, concerts, and festivals. These changes opened access of the community to the youth. The plethora of venues, as well as participation within them, developed and fostered agency amongst the youth in the community. They saw themselves as members of a community, rather than products of it. These changes occurred, but they might not have. One only needs to look at the Boston Cape Breton community to see the affects of what could have happened in Cape Breton. Without a push to integrate the youth into the Boston Cape Breton community, membership of the community has changed relatively little over the past thirty years. The restricted nature of one venue, and, in turn its own restricted notion of roles for community members, does little to develop a sense of agency for those within the community.

Implicit in this, the notion of understanding can be seen as a further distinction between Cape Breton-born fiddlers and the Boston-born Cape Breton musicians. Although these two categories of musician are stylistically the same, how they understand tradition itself is quite different. The innovation that has occurred, and is still occurring in Cape Breton over the years, through, for example, Winston Fitzgerald, John Morris Rankin, Dan R. MacDonald, and Mary Jessie Gillis, shows that the Cape Breton-born musician is able to adapt to newness within the community, and that the community fosters agency within the individual. The community as a whole has the ability to embrace certain changes within it. This points to a conception of tradition as something that is participated in. The Boston-born Cape Breton community does not hold this same notion of adaptability – instead conceiving of the tradition as a mimetic reproduction of what occurs on Cape Breton. This paradigm of thought conceives of tradition in a materialistic manner, rather than with focus on sustainable community.

It is important for studies of tradition to see ‘understanding’ itself as an object of study separate from the history of events or topical elements of style. What the practice of tradition means to the participant reveals more about the community as a whole than simply looking at the practice would not reveal. Within Cape Breton music, understanding reveals the musician’s relationship with tradition and community that solely looking at stylistic elements would not reveal. Understanding the ‘understanding’ of members of the Boston-born Cape Breton community reveals explanations as to the current state of the community. It also reveals how the notion of agency, as a concept of understanding, directly relates to the health and sustainability of a community. Communities that worry about sustainability should examine how agency is being fostered within the youth. Aspects such as venue access, can be modified in order to encourage this sense of agency.

Postscript

It is important to note the living history that is currently occurring within the Boston Cape Breton community. Recently, Cape Breton fiddler/piano player Kimberley Fraser moved to Boston in order to study at Berklee College of Music. This could have perhaps sparked a catalyst to reinvigorate the local activities of the Boston-based Cape Breton community. Fraser and local born Doug Lamey, along with local community support, are in the process of attempting to begin a monthly winter dance using Boston based talent. At the time of this writing, only two dances have taken place. However, their goal is to stress the consistency of the dance, rather than the necessity of the Cape Breton-born players. Therefore, the musicians at the dances will be predominantly from the local Boston community. It will be interesting to see how this change will affect the Boston Cape Breton community at large; however it takes a critical step in opening the venue to address the role of the local as a musician. This first step is a key to addressing the notion of fostering agency within the community.

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1989).

³ Heidegger, p. 55.

⁴ See Gadamer, pp. 265–306.

⁵ Gadamer, p. 112.

⁶ Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 143–44.

⁷ See Gadamer, pp. 438–91.

⁸ Gregory J. Dorchak, ‘The Formation of Authenticity within Folk Tradition: A Case Study of Cape Breton Fiddling’, in *Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 2*, ed. by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2008), pp. 153–65.

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⁹ Burt Feintuch, 'Revivals on the Edge: Northumbrian and Cape Breton – A Keynote', *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 38 (2006), 1–17 (p. 11).

¹⁰ Ashley MacIsaac, *Close to the Floor*, RCA B000007QX6, 1992; Winston Fitzgerald, *Classic Cuts*, Breton Books FWCC-cd, 1993; The Rankin Family, *North Country*, Angel Records B000002UK5, 1995; Buddy MacMaster, *Cape Breton Tradition*, Rounder Select B00008L3T5, 2003; Donald Angus Beaton, *A Musical Legacy*, Independent Production DAB4, 1985.

¹¹ While recordings exist of both Kennedy and MacKay, these musicians never produced their own albums, nor toured to promote their music. Recordings of these musicians represent the efforts made by others to collect and preserve the sound of some regionally influential fiddlers on the island, who might be more obscure off the island.

¹² A short biography of Holland's early life in Boston can be found in Allister MacGillivray, *The Cape Breton Fiddler* (Marion Bridge, Cape Breton Island: College of Cape Breton Press, 1981).

¹³ Doug Lamey's website can be found at www.douglamey.com.

¹⁴ Ron MacInnis, *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, film (Halifax: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1971). For more on the *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* controversy, see Marie Thompson, 'The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler: 1955–1982' (unpublished master's thesis, Saint Mary's University, Nova Scotia, 2003).

¹⁵ The first Glendale Festival took place 8 July 1973 and has been held annually thereafter.

¹⁶ Michael Leff, 'Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 36, no. 2 (2003), 135–47 (p. 140).