

# Cape Breton Girl: Performing Cape Breton at Home and Away with Natalie MacMaster

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*Abstract: Normative gendered and ethnic Scottish Cape Bretoner identity is constructed through traditional music and dance performance and practice. This article examines how Natalie MacMaster constructs her gendered and ethnic identities as normative and quintessentially Cape Breton through her stage performances both on the island and internationally. The vision of Scottish Cape Bretonness she crafts shapes the perceptions and expectations of Cape Breton held by non-islander consumers of the island's Scottish culture. As an unofficial cultural ambassador, MacMaster's every performance, at home and away, becomes a tourism encounter that ties Cape Bretonness to ethnic whiteness, traditionalism, and heteronormativity.*

*Résumé : L'identité écossaise de Cap Breton, pour ce qui est de la normativité du genre et de l'ethnicité, se construit au moyen de la performance et de la pratique de la musique et de la danse traditionnelles. Cet article examine la façon dont Natalie MacMaster construit son identité de genre et son identité ethnique dans une normativité typique du Cap Breton par le biais de ses spectacles, tant sur l'île qu'au niveau international. La représentation qu'elle donne du caractère écossais de Cap Breton façonne les perceptions qu'ont de l'île les consommateurs non insulaires, et leurs attentes au sujet de la culture écossaise de l'île. En tant qu'ambassadrice culturelle non officielle, chaque performance de MacMaster, tant dans son île qu'à l'étranger, devient une rencontre touristique qui lie l'identité de Cap Breton à l'ethnicité blanche, au traditionalisme et à l'hétéro-normativité.*

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*“Have a listen.” The chatter and noodling in the California classroom tapered off as Natalie started into a medley of Cape Breton tunes. A deliberately paced march merged seamlessly into a crunchy strathspey that became more ornamented and textured as Natalie accelerated into two powerful reels that snapped horsehair and propelled her feet into a percussive frenzy of heel stomps and toe taps moving freely across the floor in front of where she sat. She landed squarely on the final droned note; the class' appreciative murmurs and applause quickly faded as Natalie announced that we'd learn all those tunes in the next few hours, and without sheet music. “Oh, I*

*can't learn by ear," someone said. "Can't you just give us the music?" But Natalie only smiled, plucked a broken hair from her bow without looking at us and said, "Well, here we learn the Cape Breton way. By ear. So have another listen."*

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Whether in classrooms or concert halls, homecomings such as these replace Natalie within Cape Breton Scottish culture. Through her own strategic embodiments of Scottish Cape Bretoner identity, and her narratives about the island, she brings her audiences home to Cape Breton by helping them create their own emplaced connections to the island. Articulating social place by linking individuals to community and geography is central to Scottish ethnic identity on the island,<sup>1</sup> and to Natalie's interactions with her audiences. In this article, I explore the *idea* of Cape Breton to which she connects her audiences through her embodied and discursive representations of the island and its Scottish cultural identity. I emphasize the "Scottishness" of Cape Breton Scottish culture both to acknowledge the very strong sense of its Scottish origins among its practitioners and to avoid using a universalizing term in order to recognize the diversity of the island's cultures and their musical expressions. At one time, Cape Breton fiddlers of Scottish descent typically referred to their music as "Scottish fiddling" or even "Scotch music," and later as "Cape Breton Scottish fiddling," but over the years, they came to refer to their music more generally as "Cape Breton music" (Doherty 1996: 50-7; see also Herdman 2008). The minimization of Scottishness in musical discourses on modern Cape Breton has implications for how Scottish ethnic identity is constructed through musical and dancing culture on Cape Breton, and helps Cape Breton emerge as a more generalizable Celtic touristic destination.

Natalie "comes home" in her performances through embodied socio-cultural identities that index an imagined ideal of Cape Breton Scottishness for Cape Bretoners and for non-islander consumers of the Cape Breton style. The "here" of her concert site always becomes Cape Breton, and whether at home or away (where "home" is Cape Breton and "away" is everywhere else) Natalie performs normative island Scottishness to emplace herself within Cape Breton's socio-cultural paradigm, and strategically authenticate herself for her audiences. Natalie's normative Cape Breton Scottishness, characterized by humility, whiteness, and heteronormativity, helps her access audience perceptions of Nova Scotia as home for an idealized antimodern "Folk," as theorized by historian Ian McKay (1994), and brings audiences home with her by matching her own Cape Breton experiences to

this expectation. Articulating a set of normative embodied identities that to audiences at home and away read as traditional and socially appropriate within Cape Breton's Scottish cultural communities, connects Natalie and her audiences to these communities. By suggesting that the seeming antimodernism of the folk identity is still a living cultural reality on Cape Breton, Natalie reinforces listeners' expectations of Cape Breton as home to a rural folk characterized by traditional gender roles, heteronormativity, and whiteness.

Natalie, as a representative of the island's community-based Scottish music, embodies a normative Cape Breton Scottishness through a performative construct I identify as the "Cape Breton Girl." Drawn from the title of Natalie's most recent album, the Cape Breton Girl indexes Natalie's cultural normativity by tying her to a social, geographic, and gendered place. Natalie becomes the Cape Breton Girl by successfully enacting the norms of Cape Breton Scottishness through onstage discourse and concert programming choices that localize and legitimate her within the island's Scottish frame. In this article, I trace the Cape Breton Girl's strategies for emplacing and defining her gender and ethnic identity with examples from a home performance for a mostly islander audience at the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site in 2013, and three concerts primarily for non-islanders from her December 2012 *Christmas in Cape Breton* (hereafter *Christmas*) concert tour of the eastern United States that I attended.<sup>2</sup> I'll show Natalie's constructions of heteronormativity as congruent with the gendered expectations of the Folk of Nova Scotia (see McKay 1994) and the gendered norms promoted by the Celtic music industry, and compare her to Ashley MacIsaac, another prominent and innovative Cape Breton fiddler, to help situate Natalie along a spectrum of acceptable Cape Breton gender performativity. I build on intersectional engagements with gender and ethnicity in ethnomusicology (for example, Hayes 2010) while breaking new ground by examining the convergence of heteronormativity<sup>3</sup> and ethnic whiteness in a community-based Celtic musical style as it moves between home and various transnational points away in the body of its foremost representative. Other studies on gender and sexuality in Celtic musics and dance have primarily examined these identity categories acting in formal, presentational settings (see Johnson 2006 and Gariess 2012) rather than in more participatory social settings (see Turino 2008). Some studies, including Slominski (2010) and Diamond (2000), have done important work to highlight the stories of women in Celtic music-making, but none have addressed the construction of heterosexuality as an unmarked, default identity category in Celtic communities and expressive cultural forms.

## Commodifying Cape Breton

Cape Breton's Scottish music and dance culture is distinct but legible within the aesthetic continuum of Celtic expressive cultures. Generated according to local norms on a transnational stage, it operates within a pan-Celtic soundscape that mines distinct regional and cultural musics to create a variety of transnational Celticized music genres (Stokes and Bohlman 2003). With locally generated Celtic musics forming the foundation of the global Celtic music industry, the "Celtic" appellation has currency within community-based traditional music communities that build reciprocally on the recognizability of "Celtic" to market themselves as living, rather than static, communities that can be visited (see Alexander 2014; McKay and Bates 2010). "Celtic" is a fraught identity category that has gradually expanded to encompass language communities, geography, and personal identification.<sup>4</sup> As cultural representative, Natalie creates Cape Breton through her sonic and embodied performances. She evokes a culturally invested, folk-inflected community as both product and Celtic imaginary (Stokes and Bohlman 2003: 15) that influence audience experiences of Cape Breton as island and cultural product. Hillhouse has argued that the emergent transnational festival circuit traveled by folk musicians paradoxically "generates a desire for community continuity" (2013: ii) even as it attempts to foster stable transcultural relationships and transnational networks. As she herself travels transnational circuits of folk and Celtic musics, Natalie works to foster community in her performances by continuously centralizing Cape Breton as an eternal emotional home to which she connects for cultural and (trans)local authenticity. By constantly re-emplacing herself within the island's Scottish traditional social sphere through performance, she creates legitimacy as a traditionally-rooted "Celtic" music performer within a transnational Celtic soundscape.

Cape Breton is a large, sparsely populated island of about 137,000 people separated from mainland Nova Scotia by a narrow sea channel. The island's rural western side is home to many descendants of settlers from Scotland's Highlands and Islands, and known for its high concentration of square dances and ceilidhs that knit communities together and draw a summer onslaught of cultural tourists eager to experience a Celtic community music in its "traditional" settings. While Cape Breton's unique Scottish sound has long been mediated beyond the island, the global Celtic cultural boom of the late 20th century forcefully located the Cape Breton style as a community rooted, traditional regional variant within a larger Celtic regional soundscape and industry (Hennessy 2015). As commodity, Celticness was marked as both "sound" (Thornton 2000: 28) and performance standards (Stokes and

Bohlman 2003: 11), privileging specific racialized and gendered performances of “Celtic” identity. Pervasive whiteness, gender normativity, and implied/overt/assumed heterosexuality characterized the Celtic product generally, and the Cape Breton style specifically. Natalie’s mass-marketability and status as an authentic cultural representative relies on her normative embodiment of Cape Breton Scottishness, and the expectations fueling her normativity appear at the confluence of an emerging post-industrial cultural tourism economy on Cape Breton and the transnational commodification of Celtic musics (see Lavengood 2008: iv). The Cape Breton Girl trades on audience expectations of Natalie as representative of a traditional “folk” community, and situates her as a recognizable gendered product by contextualizing Natalie within the framework of Celtic femininity portrayed by performers, such as the women of *Riverdance*, as I’ll discuss below.

In constructing herself and Cape Breton, Natalie builds on the island’s legacy as a well-established site of Celtic authenticity. Cape Breton becomes a site of special authenticity within the Celtic music and cultural industries because it is experienced and actively marketed as having a “living Celtic culture” (Celtic Heart 2013), that is, a site of ongoing, non-commodified, community-emplaced musical practice. As a commodity, the Cape Breton style is subject to the expectations of cultural tourists visiting the island, and those who consume it off-island. Tourists often hold romanticized notions of how a “living Celtic culture” like Cape Breton’s will look and sound in its “original” context, a context presumably unmediated by non-local influences, including tourists’ own expectations. Before ever arriving on the island, their “tourist ears,” following Urry (2002),<sup>5</sup> have been predetermined through transnational encounters with Cape Breton’s culture and other Celtic cultures in the form of recordings and concert tours. Cultural and heritage tourists in search of “authentic” culture and personally meaningful white ethnic identity (Basu 2005) exercise control over the tradition through their sonic expectations, which are transposed onto the island’s musical culture, and feed back to its local and transnational ambassadors. As a “Cape Breton Girl, born and raised,” as she informed her 2012 *Christmas* audiences, Natalie benefits from her connection to the living culture in the “Celtic Heart of North America” (Celtic Heart 2013), and it is in her interest to emphasize this connection at strategic moments in her performances. For her audiences, performing the Cape Breton Girl identity reinforces her credibility as a cultural representative by demonstrating her commitment to shared tradition, community, and home.

The expectations of Cape Bretoners both at home and away also influence the evolution of Cape Breton’s music and dance culture, but the dynamic livingness of the culture is paradoxically obscured by diasporic

Cape Bretoners who tend to encourage stasis rather than change (Delaney and Rivera 2012).<sup>6</sup> Returnees come back to participate in community cultural events, often with nostalgic expectations of finding “home” as they left it, unchanged by the tradition’s ongoing evolution (see Overton 1984). Using Overton’s suggestion that this nostalgia is part of a longing for home (Overton 1996: 49), Hiller defines a “myth of return” utilized by Atlantic Canadian islanders to rationalize, both to themselves and to those who stay behind, their quest to find economic opportunity beyond their place of origin (Hiller 2009). At the root of this myth is the belief that “[Atlantic Canadian] islanders share a common origin, a life marker, that is not replaceable by life on the mainland” (2009: 337). In 2012, I watched Natalie perform this narrative of island exceptionalism in her stage banter during her *Christmas* shows by locating herself as “from a small town on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada,” and continuously weaving the specialness of island life into the show. In her *Christmas* shows away, Natalie satisfies the desire for recognizable familiarity generated by other Cape Bretoners and cultivated by the Celtic music industry by presenting her nostalgic remembrances of home to her audiences through stories that evoke the simplicity of community life in her hometown of Troy. Every night, her onstage narratives of trudging out into the woods through deep, pure snow with her father and brothers to cut down a Christmas tree (she reported to us in the audience that her grand memories of helping actually involved watching them work), and of traveling with her family through quiet, snowy Christmas eves to church, drew us into a nostalgic vision of Natalie’s Cape Breton. Back home in Cape Breton in 2013, her script was no less nostalgic as she shared with the SuperFête audience her happiness about being back on “beautiful Cape Breton” to spend time with family and friends, a statement immediately confirmed with nodding and murmured assents from audience members near me. Her local remembrances evoke a narrative of connected community and family that engages an established islander narrative of return and exceptionalism, and feeds a touristic expectation of Cape Breton built through extensive promotional marketing and a long history of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia being constructed as home to a traditional Scottish folk.<sup>7</sup>

I want to linger for a moment on the whiteness of Natalie’s Cape Breton Christmas because her own whiteness, obvious yet overlooked because of its visibility on her body, is a critical aspect of her authenticity as a representative of the island’s Scottish community music and dance culture, and within the larger world of commodified Celtic music cultures. Consumers of Celtic musics and places expect whiteness of the people they find there, and Natalie’s whiteness and the whiteness of the community she represents hold far-

reaching social and commercial power. Taylor has argued that white hegemony in the United States has naturalized whiteness to the point where those who possess it feel that they lack an ethnic identity, and that in order to reclaim an ethnicity, Americans “tend to create identities through what they can buy” (2003: 267-277). The transnational nature of Celtic music consumers suggests that his argument can be expanded beyond the United States to the communities and places in which consumers encounter commodified Celtic musics. Taylor concludes that commodified Celtic musics allow consumers to “anchor themselves, to construct, however temporarily, a rooted sense of place” that is marked both by a racialized and ethnicized whiteness, and a sense of cultural belonging (Taylor 2003: 282).

Though it sits on a geographical fringe, Cape Breton exists in dynamic conversation with the rest of the Celtic Atlantic, the Celtic global soundscape, and a complex provincial history of racial and economic flows of power.<sup>8</sup> The island’s Scottish culture sits at a nexus of “local” cultural ideologies and transnational expectations generated by visitors and the commodification of Cape Breton’s Scottish culture. Ina and Rosaldo have noted that “people interpret ideologies and other cultural phenomena according to local conditions of reception” (2007: 28), but also take their own standards of reception with them when they travel, thus making their own sites of locality mobile and detaching “local” norms or conditions from their sites of origin, and opening a space for ideologies to become translocal.

Despite the island’s multi-ethnic reality, Cape Breton’s Scottish community maintains a cultural hegemony (Vance 2005) in which Scottish cultural institutions command the majority of development money and promotional space (Alexander 2014). This hegemony exists partly because of the privilege Cape Breton’s Scottish community enjoys as white, English-speaking people in Canada (see Lipsitz 2006; Wihak 2004),<sup>9</sup> a legacy of European colonialism, and economic migration now deeply embedded within Canada’s institutions. The nature of Scottish whiteness in North America, however, was actively cultivated over time by Gaelic cultural elites eager to integrate themselves into Anglo society and break free of their marginalized ethnic status within British society. In Cape Breton, though, Highland Gaelic whiteness was constructed in opposition to Canada’s dominant Anglo whiteness; islanders’ desire to maintain ethnic distinction stemmed in part from mistrust of the English as arbiters of Highland Gaels’ repression in Scotland’s Highland and Islands,<sup>10</sup> and from experiences of economic marginalization on the fringe of Anglo Canada (Conrad and Hiller 2006). While English-identification was not a goal, there were benefits to being white in North America, and the formerly othered identities of Highland Scottish migrants (Hechter 1998) were reformulated in

the Canadian context. As Michael Kennedy notes:

Within Canada's "two founding nations" model [of France and England], a cultural group once considered nearly antithetical to North American "English" culture has been redefined as somehow inherently English. As an ethnic group, Scottish Gaels quite simply do not exist within the context of Canadian cultural history. (Kennedy 2002: 28)

Scottish Highlanders became white in North America through the strategic efforts of elite Gaelic culture-brokers to racialize Gaelic culture by claiming affinity between the Highlanders and "Anglo-Saxon races" (Newton 2013: 284). Celtic scholar Michael Newton suggests that Highlander elites in North America created "distance from the peoples of Africa, Ireland and Indigenous America in an effort to clear the path to privilege for themselves" (Newton 2013: 284). Distancing themselves from other Celtic ethnic groups differentiated the Scots as possessing a valued whiteness that contributed positively to North American societies.<sup>11</sup> The valuing of Nova Scotia's ethnic (white) Scottishness increased dramatically in the 1930s with the introduction of an economic policy called "tartanism" (McKay and Bates 2010), which recognized the familiar whiteness of the province's culturally Scottish people while trading on their cultural differences from contemporary urban peoples in North America. The work of folklorists like Roy MacKenzie, and later Helen Creighton, helped establish Nova Scotia as a place where "the Folk" and their musical heritage were alive and well; during the period of tartanism, they were actively "constructing the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life" (McKay 1994: 4) in early 20th century Europe and North America, including the unraveling of community, increasing class conflict, and the destabilization of social roles. Tartanism imposed a highly refined ethnic identity on these Folk, and was designed to both develop Nova Scotia's tourism economy and create a unified provincial identity by privileging the Scottish history and imagined origins of the province over the complex, historically documented narrative of a multi-ethnic founding to which the Scots came late.<sup>12</sup> The Folk, and specifically the Scottish Folk, were articulated "as the key to understanding Nova Scotian culture and history" (McKay 1994: 4). Despite the strategic emphasis on the ethnic distinctiveness of Scottish Cape Bretoners, the whiteness of Cape Breton's Anglophone Gaels eases the tourist encounter even as their ethnic distinctiveness increases the touristic value of the island's Scottish communities. At the centre of this commodification is the ethnically



familiar yet exotic idea of Cape Breton Natalie represents and presents to her audiences.

Comprising government-sponsored, Scottish-themed tourism initiatives designed to enhance the province's Scottishness, tartanism centralized Cape Breton as a place of authentic Highland Scottish culture.<sup>13</sup> Scottish praxes within communities, including square dancing, fiddling, and step-dancing, however, were sublimated to an institutionalized, presentational version of Highland Scottishness that included iconic, and highly marketable, traditions like Highland dancing and tartan weaving,<sup>14</sup> sanctioned by the province and propagated at government-funded organizations on the island like the Gaelic College of St. Ann's (Sparling 2005: 87-88, 126).<sup>15</sup> A recent community-driven promotion and prioritization of Gaelic culture on the island now explicitly privileges the community-based practices that constitute the island's "living Celtic culture"; an example of this shift is the Gaelic-language rebranding of the Gaelic College as Colaisde na Gàidhlig. Similar to its predecessor, this Gaelicization centralizes living Scottish culture as the island's primary cultural commodity in order to capitalize on the global flow of Celtic musical and dancing culture (Alexander 2014). Unlike the era of tartanism, however, government-funded cultural institutions now represent many of the island's ethnocultural groups, and the centralized representation of only some aspects of Gaelic culture has given way to a diffuse network of institutions that present a more comprehensive image of Cape Breton's Scottish culture.

In her stage banter, Natalie does not overtly engage with the strategic commodification of Cape Breton's Scottish culture, nor the ethnic oppression experienced by Scottish Gaels in Scotland and their new home in North America. The continued life of community-based practice in Cape Breton, however, is always already political because it exists despite both British attempts to expunge Highland culture in Scotland, and the significant disruptions to families and communities caused by industrialization in Cape Breton. She instead emphasizes the difficulty and simplicity of life necessitated by the poverty many Gaels experienced upon migrating to Nova Scotia, indirectly making visible systematic hardship and oppression without identifying the cause. A key example from her *Christmas* shows is a story about her grandmother who, too poor to afford the fiddle she wanted, instead learned to "jig" tunes vocally; despite this hardship, Natalie told us, her grandmother still managed to teach all of her children to step dance along to her jigging. Keeping the political at bay through an island strategy of silence (Sparling 2005: 408, 450) that minimizes discourse on controversial subjects helps Natalie connect with off-island audiences by evoking the specificity of rural life in Cape Breton while also accessing a generalized picture of the

Celts as ahistorical (see Chapman 1992), and eternal (McKay 1994: 12). The depoliticized narrative of Natalie's *Christmas* shows supports broad audience identification with the rural, picturesque, beautiful, and culturally rich Scottish Cape Breton that reaches towards a conception of the Folk and their societies as having an "essential and unchanging solidarity" (McKay 1994: 12) that defies political and social ebbs and flows. Off-island audiences receive a picturesque view of a Christmas in Cape Breton's Scottish communities through a narrative marked by the nostalgia for home Natalie experiences as she reaches out to other Cape Bretoners to create connection based on imaginatively shared culture.

## Staging Home

Natalie directly celebrated shared culture with other Cape Bretoners at SuperFête, where she had organized a square dance exhibition as part of her concert. At Natalie's invitation, volunteers assembled in front of the raised stage on the Fortress of Louisbourg's waterfront, and once Natalie started playing, local square dancer Burton MacIntyre directed them through one figure of an Inverness square set.<sup>16</sup> "Promenade! Promenade!" he called out, and finally, "All the way!" as the dancers navigated the climactic reel figure to enthusiastic whoops from the audience. The dance was a clear crowd pleaser, but incorporating square dancing also strategically demonstrated Natalie's locally valued competency as a master dance fiddler, and showed her stepping out of the spotlight and into a supporting role for others. For the home audience familiar with Cape Breton and its Scottish culture, this engaged her island connection by explicitly performing a praxis of humility. Central to the Cape Breton Girl identity, humility as praxis encourages an ethos of community support and reciprocity in which performers act in musical support of others, in this case, by playing for a square dance. The dance, simultaneously presented for an audience but danced by participating locals, also suggested Natalie's constant work to ground herself in participatory local praxes while addressing the necessities of a staged, formal concert.

Holding a dance is a powerful local signifier of Cape Breton's Scottish community culture; there are few places beyond the island where Natalie could incorporate a dance into her show due to a lack of knowledgeable dancers in most of her tour stops away. Thus the SuperFête dance tied Natalie inextricably to the community-level tradition from which she is always emerging and to which she must return for her success and credibility to mean anything to her audience. By playing for a dance, she momentarily abandoned her position

as an international star and became a fiddler for a local dance, shifting the centre of attention to the community members who got up to dance, many of whom I recognized from my own numerous trips to island square dances. Natalie prioritized the dancers most noticeably by slowing down her usual concert tempo, where the goal is an exciting listening experience, to play at a speed appropriate for the percussive step dance steps and choreographies of the square dance.

Successfully playing for a dance, even a staged showcase, benefited Natalie by re-establishing her reputation as a strong player and master practitioner who can provide an enjoyable dance experience, and create an environment for social connection. This normalized her within the island's Scottish social and expressive cultural environment of modesty, humility, and a community ethos, even responsibility, in performance. As step dancer, fiddler, and pianist Margie Beaton described it to me:

This music, this culture is humble. It's born out of kitchens. It's taken on a concert title but it really is something about sharing. A fiddler's playing and a dancer will come up, dance a few steps, and then let someone else take the lead. That person won't get back up and kind of try and one-up them. That was their turn. And then they're done. (interview, 2013)

Humility also manifests as not standing out, seen in performances of social identities that fit within the island's more conservative socio-cultural frame. Heteronormativity is one such social identity that is assumed for participants in Cape Breton's Scottish traditional music and dance culture, as I experienced repeatedly during my fieldwork at square dances, ceilidhs, and pubs.<sup>17</sup> Heteronormativity, the normalization of heterosexuality, implies opposite sex attraction and a mutually exclusive, binary gender system in which both genders have corresponding socio-cultural roles and responsibilities. By implying that only heterosexuality is natural, alternative sexual orientations become unnatural and abject. It was only in the late 19th century, after the "homosexual" became an identity category rather than a set of behaviours (Foucault 1990: 43), that the "heterosexual" could emerge as an opposing identity with corresponding behaviours (Katz 1995: 51). Homosexual and heterosexual at that point became defined as stable categories within the medical and psychological fields, but it was only in the early 20th century that heterosexuality coalesced around individualized pursuit of physical pleasure and emotional intimacy rather than solely reproduction, as it had been defined previously. This version of heterosexuality became the normalized,

sanctioned, and hegemonic ideology and identity in North American and European societies (Katz 1995: 83; see also D’Emilio and Freedman 2012).

Early 20th century Nova Scotia was not isolated from discussions of gender identity and the “decline of the ‘reproductive matrix’” (McKay 1994: 251); in 1920s Nova Scotia, however, gender identities and sexuality were also deeply imbricated in the emerging idea of the Folk, who were imagined to live beyond the strictures and complications of contemporary urban sexual mores. As McKay notes, “folk was a gendered concept. Men and women . . . had certain inalienable and fundamental attributes that defined their essences” (1994: 252). Though implying that the “liberated” Folk were as interested in pleasure as newly sexually liberated urban inhabitants, the sexual and gender code of the Folk simultaneously relied on binary and essential gender categories locked into marital structures that prioritized reproduction over pleasure. This idea, McKay argues, still has currency for modern visitors looking for Nova Scotia’s Folk.

The notion that once upon a time men were men and women were women in the Maritimes, and that around the hearths of the simple folk gathered large and contented families, still makes the idea of the “Folk” deeply attractive to anyone with an interest in evading the twentieth century’s difficult politics of gender. (McKay 1994: 264)

As the Cape Breton Girl, Natalie’s seemingly heteronormative womanhood and her direct appeal to this exact, imagined social condition is telegraphed to audiences through her gender normative physical appearance, her onstage discourse about her husband and her family structure, and the fact that she travels with their children. These strategies showcase her monogamous and procreative marriage, established markers of heteronormative success for women (see Brancato 2007). I’ve shown elsewhere that a heteronormative frame enacted by a cast of almost exclusively white island representatives and touristic visitors directs the visual promotions Cape Breton Tourism uses for Scottish cultural communities, which both reflect and feed the perception of heteronormativity as implicit in Cape Breton Scottish identity (Alexander 2014). Natalie herself, along with other female Scottish Cape Breton-style fiddlers, feature prominently in these promotions as cultural representatives and hosts, as well as consumable cultural products, and support a sense of pervasive, consistent heteronormativity. When it intersects with the idea of Cape Breton as home to a traditional folk, the normalization of heterosexuality and whiteness becomes essential to Natalie’s self-presentation as an idealized representative of traditional simplicity in gender relations and identity.

## Celtic Femininity

Natalie's image of femininity connects her not only to expressions of heteronormative femininity embodied by Scottish Cape Bretoners on the island, but also to the hegemonic Celtic femininity portrayed in large-scale, touring stage shows like *Riverdance*. Since its premiere as an interlude act at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest, *Riverdance* has offered spectacularized and recognizable Irish music and dance (Flannery 2009; Scahill 2009) while simultaneously promoting a gendered and racialized identity for its "Irish" representatives. Other Celtic-inflected stage shows that followed on *Riverdance's* success, notably *Celtic Woman*, traded partly on *Riverdance's* lead female step dancer Jean Butler, an American who embodied a vision of normative Celtic femininity for thousands of *Riverdance* audiences worldwide from 1994 to 2010. This staged "Celtic" femininity, reified and rendered hegemonic through repetition, privileges a slim, athletic, dancing body; long, curly hair; whiteness; and heteronormativity that becomes recognizable to the audience as a gendered product and ethnic idealization that is produced for them by the industry, and reinforced by tourist Celtic cultural sites like Cape Breton. The press consistently found *Riverdance's* "Celtic" femininity and the onstage personalities accompanying it "sexy" (Wulff 2008: 117), and though show composer Bill Whelan disputes that *Riverdance's* appeal rests in any large measure on "a group of attractive young girls lined up in short skirts" (qtd. in Flannery 2009: 59), this iconic image of *Riverdance* has become powerfully embedded in consumers' perceptions of what Celtic step-dancing looks like, and helps direct consumers' expectations of the physicality of female step dancers. Natalie's feminine presentation links her visually to this pan-Celtic gender performativity, though her clothing represents a significant departure from the ideal: while *Riverdance* drew spectators' attention to legs revealed by short skirts in performances, Natalie rarely performs in anything but pants. Natalie's hair, often drawing the eye in publicity photos that tend to focus on her face instead of her body, becomes a central marker of her Celtic femininity. That Natalie MacMaster indexes this image at an individual level is not completely coincidental, and she brings the point home partly by step-dancing in her shows, though the Cape Breton style is visually and sonically distinct from Irish step-dancing.

Though it indexes community-based music and dance traditions, *Riverdance's* modern and syncretic interpretation of Irish tradition is disassociated from the reality of lived community musical practice, and ahistorical even as it portrays a nominally historical narrative. As Scahill notes, "in a global context, Ireland often is projected and perceived as a romantic

departure from the everyday ... where an antiquated and authentic culture is kept alive, and is easily accessible for the virtual cultural tourist” (2009: 75). Despite arguments that the show’s modernity reflects a hybrid, modern Ireland and Irish culture (Scahill 2009: 72), visions of gender within the show remain fixed, and the overwhelming heterosexuality of *Riverdance* accesses a familiar narrative of the Irish (Celtic?) Folk as traditional in their gendered and sexual relationships. The sensuality of the heterosexual interactions between male and female characters in the *Riverdance* narrative, with which the audience is no doubt meant to identify, become approximations in comparison to Natalie, who transcends mere image by presenting herself unequivocally to audiences as a wife and mother. The implied sexualization this image could convey, however, is muted by the “Girl” aspect of the Cape Breton Girl identity and her choice to minimize the exposure of her body by wearing pants, which work to desexualize Natalie by eliding the procreative nature of her roles. Natalie’s “girlhood” accesses the image of “virginal Folk women” ascribed by folklorists in Nova Scotia during the second quarter of the 20th century to young rural women (McKay 1994: 261), who were expected to embody chastity, purity, and subservience, in essence retaining the presumably stable category of young womanhood being unsettled in urban contexts. The use of the virginal young woman, an unattainable object of desire, also appears in tourism promotions and in the graphics used by the Celtic Colours International Festival. Though Natalie as successful career woman could threaten the believability of her performance as devoted wife and mother, her constant onstage demonstrations of her large hetero- and gender normative family reassure audiences at home and away of her commitment to traditional family structures. Natalie tours with her five children, one of whom was still nursing during the 2012 *Christmas* tour, and she shows them off to her audiences at most of her concerts when they join her onstage to fiddle and step dance in the second half of her show. Her children, as well as husband Donnell Leahy, also joined her at SuperFête; but even when they are not present, she discusses Leahy and their family onstage. Their presence shows audiences her adherence to maternal and spousal identities within a heterosexual frame, including her willingness to take the children with her on tour, and accept the additional labour of home-schooling and socializing them as she attempts to maintain the high degree of professional excellence upon which her career rests. As she ushered her children out on stage to fiddle and step dance in her *Christmas* shows, she explained to us in the audience how childcare works in her family: “I usually get the kids when we’re on tour.” Though her husband has his own professional touring career, the expectation that Natalie will do this additional labour arises from a heteronormative ideology that pervades

mainstream North American Anglo society as well as Cape Breton's Scottish communities. In these communities, defined spheres of gendered labour prevailed from the beginnings of Scottish emigration in the late 18th century (MacIsaac 2006), and continued into the mid-20th century (Chapin 1956: 12). Cape Breton's Scottish communities still operate under a patriarchal culture that expects heteronormativity and is characterized by male privilege, which I experienced repeatedly during my three years of fieldwork. This was visible in the persistence of binary gendered social dance practice, in gendered divisions of space, and in assumptions of male control over women's bodies in public spaces (see Alexander 2014).

Though her heteronormativity aligns her with mainstream expectations for women in Cape Breton's Scottish communities, Natalie's international prominence becomes subversive because it challenges the appearance of humility expected of her as a female Scottish Cape Bretoner. A culture of male privilege kept men dominant in public performance on the fiddle up until the Celtic Boom, which recentralized women as visible embodiments of Celtic musics in Cape Breton and beyond.<sup>18</sup> While both men and women were encouraged to develop musical and dance skill during much of the 20th century, men were more often given the opportunity to learn the fiddle and perform (Caplan 2006: 51). Allister MacGillivray, a songwriter, guitarist, and folklorist from Cape Breton, noted that "the girls were never relegated strictly to piano accompaniment, although some of them went in that direction all right, maybe because the men were more anxious to play the violin" (quoted in Caplan 2006: 97). This male eagerness lay in the fiddlers' societal status as arbiters of social connection, and fiddlers accrued social capital by fostering community cohesiveness at dances, house parties, and life cycle events. Since fiddling offered a valuable secondary income source from the middle of the 20th century, it is unsurprising that men wanted to capitalize on paid work that allowed them to travel, socialize away from home, and escape the expectations of their heteronormative roles as husbands and fathers, an opportunity that would have been more difficult for women expected to prioritize care of their families (MacIsaac 2006: 67, 106).

Natalie's consistent heteronormativity thus becomes fundamental to her constructed traditionalism. General societal assumptions of heterosexuality within North America, however, make it covert, yet hyper-visible onstage. Natalie's performance of heteronormative female identity and femininity, with its attendant gendered expectations of motherhood and monogamous heterosexual marriage, aligns her with community expectations and commits her to the systemic praxis of humility that precludes standing within Cape Breton's Scottish communities. Part of her authenticity as a cultural

representative lies in her ability to adhere to community social expectations at home even as she presents the Cape Breton style and social norms for audiences away.

Ashley MacIsaac, however, another famous Cape Breton fiddler of Natalie's generation—and her cousin—is famous for rejecting traditional expectations. Off-island, he became infamous in the late 1990s for performing his queer identity through his fashion choices and unorthodox interpretations of Cape Breton tunes, in apparent defiance of the island's praxis of humility that precludes standing out. Ashley's tartan kilt (not the Cape Breton tartan), rainbow sunglasses, and penchant for "flashing" his audiences were in no way subtle, nor was his very public outing in the press in 1997 (MacLeod 2002), but despite his behavioural and musical departures from the tradition, Ashley is still accepted within it because the identities disassociating him from it are less visible on-island. When performing in traditional island contexts, he presents as culturally normative by expertly playing the dance tune repertoire (Caplan 2006) and appearing conventionally masculine (MacLeod 2002), thus hiding the signs of queerness, which can include his at-times campy, overperformed masculinity, that he makes visible off-island. In a 1996 interview with *Cape Breton Magazine*, his parents emphasized his humility, his devotion to his home and family, and suggested his sexual normativity by mentioning the young women who often drove up to their house hoping Ashley was home (Caplan 2006). By performing humility through musical and social conformity, and through the strategic silences of others who aid him in not standing out, Ashley disappears as an embodiment of difference. During my fieldwork, my informants would readily discuss Ashley's musical talent and his positive contributions to the continued life of the tradition, but never mentioned his sexuality or the media controversy surrounding his outing (MacLeod 2002). As a queer participant in Cape Breton's Scottish cultural environments, my own gender variance was ignored as I danced, fiddled, and chatted my way through these heteronormative spaces: I was expected to perform a female role, the role assigned to match my body's anatomy, no matter how androgynous I appeared. My presumed heterosexuality and gender normativity was further enforced by persistent (politely declined) male flirtations that went beyond offers to dance; my questions about same-gender dancing were often evaded, though once reluctantly answered by a step dancer at a Gaelic College square dance who replied, "I suppose two men could dance together, but it just wouldn't happen, you know?" (anonymous interview 2013). Heteronormativity confers social acceptance, and as Ashley performs it to gain social capital at home, so Natalie does by embodying it in her journeys between home and away.

Standing out is discouraged within Cape Breton's Scottish social norms,



making Natalie's status as a concertizing star performer a fraught position within traditional practice. She must work to ground herself in the humble praxis of home, where it is more appropriate to contextualize oneself within the community rather than attract individualized attention. Repeated acts of emplacement demonstrate shared cultural knowledge, and performing these socially appropriate identities creates a hegemonic and ideologically driven social practice in which individuality always exists in reference to others. Though the tradition's evolution requires individual creativity, humility requires it be situated within performative and social normativities that constrain musical and social divergence from the tradition's core.<sup>19</sup>

Natalie's fundamental commitment to embodying normative traditionalism locates her at the heart of Scottish Cape Breton identity. As a Cape Breton Girl, she humbly balances her heteronormative duties with her professional career, proving she can "do it all" as a working wife, mother, and tradition bearer, an achievement on which many media profiles focus.<sup>20</sup> Though her status as a touring musician could subvert expectations that she prioritize her roles as wife and mother, her discursive work onstage to ground herself in a patriarchal gender system that still governs life in Cape Breton counters any appearance of nonconformity. At SuperFête, Natalie strategically performed humility by stepping into a supporting role for fellow local tradition bearers, while off-island she created inclusive narrative moments within her *Christmas in Cape Breton* shows that established her authentic and dynamic connection to Cape Breton's Scottish culture and its social norms as the site of her authenticity for audiences away. For her audiences, Natalie's locally valued and emplaced (hetero)normativity and commitment to a praxis of humility reminds her audiences that even as she performs away, she's constantly looking home, still and always a Cape Breton Girl. 🌸

## Notes

1. See Feintuch (2010); Melin (2012); Sparling (2005) and others for discussion of how individuals on Cape Breton engage a praxis of localization, including situating themselves within particular geographic locations, families, and musical lineages.

2. As part of my dissertation fieldwork, I attended three concerts in this 2012 concert tour and interviewed Natalie at one of her tour stops. I previously took fiddle lessons with Natalie from 1999 to 2003 at the Mark O'Connor Strings Conference in San Diego, California. While finishing my fieldwork in Cape Breton in August 2013, I attended Natalie's Fiddles for the Fête concert at The Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site, which held this concert as part of SuperFête,

an annual celebration of the saint's day of St. Louis. Fiddles for the Fête featured Natalie, two members of her band, her husband Donnell Leahy, and a performance by the Cape Breton Fiddlers' Association.

3. See Sugarman (1997) for analysis of the construction of heterosexuality through music performance, and Kaminsky (2011) for a discussion of heterosexuality and alternative gender pairings in Swedish social dance within urban settings.

4. See Chapman (1992) for detailed discussion of the constructions of the Celts. Hale and Payton (2000) present an analysis of the state of Celtic Studies at the end of the 20th century. See James (1999) on the identity of the Atlantic Celts.

5. I adapted Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" (2002) to account for the sonic expectations tourists bring to their reception of Cape Breton-style music. See Lavengood (2008) for discussion of the expectations tourists bring to their consumption of the Cape Breton style.

6. See Hiller (2009) for a detailed analysis of how economic migrants from within Canada conceptualize their place of origin as an eternal and wished-for home to which they will return, and the place to which they have moved as always temporary and inferior to their place of origin.

7. For a detailed history and analysis of the construction of a Folk identity for Nova Scotia, see McKay (1992, 1994). See McKay and Bates (2010) and Vance (2005) for discussions of the creation of a Scottish identity for the province.

8. For a general history of Atlantic Canada, see Conrad and Hiller (2006). Vance (2005) discusses intersections of Scottish identity with other ethnic groups in Nova Scotia, including Afro Nova Scotians. See McKay (1994) and McKay and Bates (2010) on the creation of a Highland Scottish identity for Nova Scotia, and Hornsby (1992) on 19th-century Cape Breton.

9. See also Newton (2013: 284) for a discussion of the privilege of white Scottishness in Canada. See Fleras and Elliott (2003) on the interaction of white Settlers with Aboriginals in Canada. Syed and Hill (2011) analyze the development of critical awareness of white privilege in Canada, arguing that awareness of such ethnic privilege is an ethical responsibility. Despite an official commitment to multiculturalism, Banting and Kymlicka (2010) have shown the lack of consistent effort by institutions within Canada in creating meaningful intercultural engagement.

10. Tensions surrounding British control over Scottish Highland culture re-emerged in March 2014 following the granting of a royal designation to Colaisde na Gàidhlig by Queen Elizabeth II; immediate outcry from citizens and politicians led the Board of Colaisde na Gàidhlig to reject utilizing the designation in day-to-day operations (Beaton 2014).

11. See Barrett and Roediger (1998) for a discussion of how immigrant workers from eastern and southern Europe gained a consciousness about racial identity and whiteness as a valued ethnic identity in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. See also Brodtkin (1998) for an analysis of the process by which Jewish immigrants were reconceptualized as white in the United States.

12. See McKay and Bates (2010), and Hornsby's history of 19th century Cape Breton (1992) for an analysis of the economic reasons for the Highland Clearances, the Scottish migration to Cape Breton, and the reasons for the 19th-century dominance of Scottish culture, including the Gaelic language, in Cape Breton.

13. Tartanism took inspiration from an earlier successful cultural tourism enterprise built around *Evangeline*, Longfellow's mythologizing poetic "account" of the 18th-century Acadian expulsion from Nova Scotia (see MacDonald 2005). For detailed discussions of tartanism, see McKay and Bates (2010) and Vance (2005).

14. For further discussion of invented Scottish traditions, see Hobsbawm (1983) and Trevor-Roper (1983).

15. See Sparling (2005) for a discussion of tensions between "tartanized" Highland Gaelic cultural practices and "authentic" community-based cultural practices.

16. See Turino (2008) for theorization of presentational and participatory music-making.

17. See Alexander (2014) for ethnographic description and analysis of the patriarchal frameworks within Cape Breton's Scottish cultural spaces, including pubs, square dances, and ceilidhs.

18. See Slominski (2010) for a discussion of gendered narratives of Irish traditional music history.

19. See Doherty's dissertation (1996) for a discussion of the evolution and features of the Cape Breton style, and J. MacDonald (2006) for additional analysis of genre transformation.

20. For examples, see Templeton (2011); Stanisci (2012); and McDiarmid (2013).

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