



Music on the edge: Busking at the Cliffs of Moher and the commodification of a musical landscape

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Abstract

The Cliffs of Moher is one of the most popular tourist sites in all of Ireland, and buskers have been playing traditional music there for generations. The site and traditional music have each become powerful metonyms for Irish identity. In this article, I explore the complex and changing relationship between Irish identity, music, and tourism at the cliffs. In particular, I analyze recent conflicts that have erupted between musicians and the local tourism authorities which opened a €32 million award-winning interpretive center there in 2007.

Keywords

busking, commodification, governmentality, identity, traditional Irish music, tourism

Introduction

The Cliffs of Moher is a stunningly beautiful, elemental landscape of sea, stone, and sky. The Cliffs, located in County Clare in the West of Ireland, extend 8 km from the village of Doolin in the north, rising to a height of 214 m before descending again to sea-level in the fishing village of Liscannor on its southern edge. It is probably no wonder that people have been traveling there for centuries, long before there was anything we might call a “tourist industry.” As early as 1835, the regional landlord, Corneliuss O’Brien, built a tower at the Cliffs’ highest point to accommodate all of the visitors. As tourism expanded and democratized in the latter half of the twentieth century, the site became a prominent waypoint on tourist routes. By the 1980s and 1990s when true “mass tourism” took off, throngs of

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visitors flocked to the Cliffs, crystallizing the site's reputation as one of the country's most premiere tourist destinations. Local villages like Liscannor, Lahinch, and Doolin benefited greatly from this expanding tourist trade, and for nearby communities like Doolin, where I have spent the last decade conducting ethnographic research, tourism has all but supplanted the traditional farming and fishing economies. Indeed, according to the director of the site, recent estimates indicate that close to a million tourists visit the Cliffs annually, although visitor numbers dipped during the worst years of the global recession.

Traditional Irish musicians have been busking for tips from tourists at the Cliffs of Moher for generations. Some of the current musicians have been playing at the site regularly for 20 years or more. But in late 2006, just over a month before the grand opening of a lavish new interpretive center there, it was announced that the local circuit court granted an order preventing unlicensed busking and commercial trading. Instead, it was announced that a new licensing scheme would allow a smaller number of buskers to play at the site, but under strict new regulations (Deegan, 2007a: 2). As reported in the national newspaper, *The Irish Times* ("Cliff Buskers May Face Audition," 2006), at one point, the County Council suggested that they would hold auditions to vet musicians. Although this did not end up taking place, it was never made clear just how the county bureaucrats were going to assess the quality of the players' musicianship. While it was within the County Council's legal right to do so, the musicians and the public objected vociferously to these moves, deeply offended that access to the site, which had been open to public right-of-way for generations, was now going to be restricted. The public outcry on behalf of the musicians was widespread. At best, musicians' activities would be severely regulated under the new rules; at worst, they might be barred from the site altogether. The conflict between buskers and the developers of the new center quickly spun out of control. In fact, the announcement about the court injunction and the licensing scheme in late 2006 was really just the culmination of a conflict between the new tourism venture and musicians that had been brewing for quite some time. The Cliffs of Moher Centre, Ltd, which is a subsidiary company set up by the local government authority, the Clare County Council, had been seeking such an injunction for nearly 2 years against buskers and other commercial traders selling souvenirs and crafts (Deegan, 2005: 2). During that time, several musicians who regularly played music at the site were even handed trespass notices and asked to vacate the premises. Some complied, but others called the Council's bluff and simply played on. One local resident who knows several of the buskers told me,

The buskers—to their credit—I mean, I'm so pleased they did this—it was only maybe three or four of them, they just said, "No, we're not moving. We're going to carry on." They were treated appallingly.

Meanwhile, a letter signed by dozens of famous Irish musicians including Mary Black, Luka Bloom, Donal Lunny, Christy Moore, and others was sent to the Clare County Council pleading with them to open a dialogue with the buskers. A highly charged narrative quickly took hold that placed local musicians in stark opposition to the economic interests of the tourism industry. Accusations and counter-accusations were made, some through the press and some privately. Local and national media outlets fanned the flames with dramatic headlines, and the conflict quickly entered into the public discourse.

For me, a number of questions emerge about this situation. What exactly led to the conflict in the first place, and how did it so quickly become part of the national conversation? What is the proper balance between music-making and money-making? And what can this case tell us about the ways in which tourism enterprises have come to increasingly manage the activities of people who work at tourist sites? While very real disagreements exist between buskers and the managers who run the interpretive center, I suggest that there is an underlying identity crisis that is fueling the public discourse. Both traditional Irish music and the Cliffs of Moher have emerged as symbolic markers of Irish identity, and in an atmosphere of tighter regulations, overdevelopment of tourism ventures, and a severe economic recession in Ireland since the recent crash of the economy, the conflict between the music and tourism at the Cliffs of Moher touched a raw nerve. In the following article, I utilize several intersecting frames of analysis to explain the multifaceted tensions that manifested at the nexus between tourism and music at the Cliffs. First, a political economy approach to the neoliberal commodification of the site and various actors' activities there is warranted. In that regard, Foucault's notion of "governmentality" is useful (Foucault, 1997). Second, the site's importance as a national symbol (Healy et al., 2012: 11) and the similarly heady significance of music's place as a marker of Irish identity (Kaul, 2007, 2009) naturally lend itself to an analysis of changing notions of Irishness in a post-Celtic Tiger, post-crash era. At the core of this case study is an analysis of the inherent tension between commerce and culture. Finally, since there is a paucity of ethnographic accounts of street performers at tourist sites,¹ I also hope that this article can fill in a gap in the literature.

The commodification of an Irish landscape

The ownership of the property where the new interpretive center is situated is complicated. Originally, 35 separate farming families owned various sections of the Cliffs, but significantly, there has always been a public right-of-way along the cliff edge as well. In the 1970s, as tourism began to intensify, a regional tourism body called Shannon Development secured a "compulsory purchase order" of one section near the highest portion of the Cliffs where a car park, toilets, and tearooms were built. In the 1970s, when Shannon Development originally developed the site, independent local vendors began to set up souvenir shops. Although buskers might have been playing music there before that time, the new modest developments solidified the relationship between the landscape and music at the Cliffs.

Discussions to develop more elaborate facilities began as early as the 1980s. This followed a larger pattern across Ireland as the government began to actively promote tourism development to stimulate a flagging economy (Healy and McDonagh, 2009: 383–84), but as annual tourist numbers increased into the hundreds of thousands, legitimate concerns were being raised at the Cliffs as well, including an increase in litter, rapid erosion of the natural landscape, severe pressure on the modest public facilities, and a serious threat to public safety. Signage and fencing were obviously not effective deterrents for the public who felt compelled to cross (and even destroy) barriers so that they could approach the cliff edge² (Figure 1). During the initial planning stages, disagreements between the Clare County Council and Shannon Development led the County Council to



Figure 1. Signage and fencing at the Cliffs.

pursue the project on their own (Healy and McDonagh, 2009: 385–86). Subsequently, in order to avoid a perception of conflict of interest with its own Planning Department, the Council set up a subsidiary corporation called The Cliffs of Moher Center, Ltd, to move forward with the development and eventual operation of the facilities.³ Despite the attempt to create an independent entity, the local government authority and the subsidiary corporation have always worked very closely with one another, and the general perception is that the County Council more or less granted itself planning permission for the project (Healy and McDonagh, 2009: 385–86), developed it, and now runs it. The final result of the planning process was an extravagant interpretive center called *The Cliffs of Moher Experience* that cost just under €32 million and was opened by the Irish Prime Minister in 2007 with a great deal of fanfare. In many ways, the project has been a fantastic success. Unfortunately though, the national economy began to falter and then buckle completely almost immediately thereafter, leaving the Council with a massive bill to pay in a crippled economy.

The new structure is an example *par excellence* of what Negra (2010) has labeled the “new Irishness.” The impetus for the new center emerged out of the Celtic Tiger era of the 1990s and early 2000s that was often celebrated, too soon it now seems, as “an economic miracle.” Setting arguments about economic transformation aside, Negra (2010) argues that the Celtic Tiger era also ushered in a new set of cultural and personal values that displaced “sentimentality, pathos, nostalgia, volatility and vitality” (p. 839). “The New Irishness,” she writes, “is more austere, more profit-minded, and more efficient than pre-Celtic Tiger models of selfhood. It centralizes makeover strategies in which both the self and the landscape are to be relentlessly improved upon and developed for maximum efficiency” (Negra, 2010: 850). She also notes that part of this transformation

was to replace the “traditional” representative symbols of Irishness (shamrocks, rainbows, and rural “folk”) with modern architectural aesthetics that symbolized Ireland’s new identity as cosmopolitan and globalized (Negra, 2010: 839). The main building at *The Cliffs of Moher Experience* exhibits exactly the kind of austere, hypermodern, fluid architectural design that she describes. The building is set completely into the hillside near the original car park with expanded trails and viewing platforms along the cliffs’ edge. Inside, there is a large gift shop,⁴ two restaurants, and a cavernous exhibit hall. It is a truly impressive facility that has won many awards,⁵ and the developers proudly advertise its low impact on the environment.

The facility may be the perfect symbol of this successful, wealthy, “New Irishness,” but the planning process for the new development and its subsequent management have also sparked numerous and ongoing controversies. Some point out that the County Council pursued the most elaborate, most expensive plan on offer and is now heavily indebted. In fact, only 2 years before its official opening, the project leaders had to revise their cost estimates upward eightfold from the original projections (Deegan, 2005: 2). Much of the local population in the area also resent the fact that they are now actively discouraged from entering the site without paying the newly implemented parking fees. They are even more resentful that a counter-proposal by Shannon Development was rejected to build the main tourist infrastructure in local communities and implement park-and-ride schemes to bus tourists to the Cliffs (Healy et al., 2012: 12–13). That proposal would have brought tourists in more direct contact with local communities where they would spend money in local restaurants and shops, and it would have had a much more minimal environmental impact on the site itself (Healy and McDonagh, 2009: 386). Now, the complaint goes, the County Council has sequestered all of the tourist trade within the new interpretive center instead of spreading the wealth around the region. Several coach-tour operators temporarily boycotted the site too, when they were told that they would be charged eight times as much in parking fees (Healy et al., 2012: 13). And then, there was the very public dispute between the developers and buskers. One local told me,

On a weekly basis, I’m not kidding ... almost week-by-week ... it was a guaranteed [newspaper] story, although to be honest, the local people were fed up with reading about it ... It got to the point if you talk to local people—if you just say “The Cliffs”—a lot of people will say, “Oh, don’t talk to me about the Cliffs”!

To some extent, it could be argued that these points of conflict are the natural result of a major new development in the region; however, it is also clear that the developers’ aggressive moves to rapidly take managerial and economic control of the site to the detriment of local communities, and their attempt to exclude all other vendors and the musicians, initiated an adversarial posture that demanded a total ownership and appropriation of the Cliffs of Moher.

While “ownership” is commonly understood to be a fairly simple legal matter, in fact, it is often far more complicated. “Ownership,” write Busse and Strang (2011), can be perceived “as a set of processes through which people assert and contest rights rather than a static bundle or structure of rights” (p. 4). Despite the fact that the County Council

legally owns the site, there are several operational definitions of “ownership” in the public discourse about the Cliffs of Moher. In Ireland, there is a long-standing tradition that the public has access to the coastline, which was formalized into law under the 1993 Roads Act. Under the Act, the local authority, in this case the Clare County Council, is required to protect such rights-of-way, but it also has the authority to extinguish them. Having a right-of-way through the County Council’s property does not automatically allow people to engage in commercial trading there though, whether it takes the form of selling souvenirs or playing music for tips. The protection of this right-of-way by the tourism authorities has been mixed. For example, on the one hand, the authorities recently secured permission from the local landowners to develop a more secure walking path along the whole 8-km length of the cliffs’ edge from Doolin in the north to Liscannor in the south, complete with permanent fencing and pavements. This would effectively instantiate the tradition of open-access into a physical structure. On the other hand, the developers of the new center have made active attempts to limit access as well. Parking along the road leading to the Cliffs has been banned, so visitors are no longer able to use their right-of-way unless they hike uphill many kilometers to the main site. Instead, they are now funneled into the center’s car park, which currently charges €6 per adult passenger. Even though it might be argued that the parking charge is reasonable given that it also effectively acts as an entrance fee to the site, it is often cited by locals as an indicator that the site has been “taken over” and “ruined” by the County Council and the subsidiary corporation, The Cliffs of Moher Ltd. Why should this be so? More is at work here than an arguably modest increase in parking fees.

At least part of the public’s unease in this case is the seemingly porous administrative (and conceptual) relationship between the governmental and private sectors, and the complicated (and often confused) understanding of “ownership” of the site. As Bramwell (2011) has argued, more attention needs to be paid to the relationship between the governance of tourism and sustainable development. Echoing Foucault’s (1997) notion of “governmentality” (p. 300), Bramwell (2011) notes that “governance” does not simply include state power, although the power of the state is typically the dominant force; instead, an understanding of the governance of tourist sites must also include diverse economic stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, and local communities who attempt to influence policy (p. 460). An analysis of the “governmentality” of tourist sites necessarily includes an examination of “micro-scale agency, macro-scale structures and, most importantly, the dialectical relations between them” (Bramwell, 2011: 469). An important part of what motivates people at the micro-scale is of course cultural rather than simply political or economic. There is a widespread perception that the Cliffs of Moher is being turned into what Edensor (2001) has called a “tourist enclave,” a space around which borders—both figurative and literal—are erected. Visitors are shepherded into the enclave where they are encouraged to spend money. For locals, the increasing regulation instituted by the subsidiary corporation and the Clare County Council are figurative boundaries that they perceive to be appropriating the bulk of the tourist trade such that the corporation reaps most of the profits, and also unintentionally discourages the local populace from visiting the site. If ownership is, as Busse and Strang (2011: 4) suggest, a process of asserting one’s rights, then it is clear that the County Council and its subsidiary corporation “own” the Cliffs of Moher significantly more now than they used to.

I would suggest that the issue with the increased charges at the car park along with other actions taken by the developers have become emblematic of the larger concern with the neoliberal privatization of public resources in general, too. As McKenna et al. (2007) have pointed out in their analysis of management strategies of Irish “common-age” resources in Donegal, Ireland,

[I]n rural areas major national and regional scale concerns (e.g., conservation of habitat) are usually secondary to local issues (e.g., the need for a playing field) ... Local people are extremely sensitive about any action that could be construed as an attempt to claim individual ownership of the jointly owned commonage. (p. 163)

While their case study was looking at a true “commons” area as opposed to a state-owned landscape with a public right-of-way as in the case of the Cliffs of Moher, the same public sensitivity holds true in both cases.

To return to my central thesis, the relationship between cultural values and commercial development is fraught with tension. In other words, one way the public has conceptualized the growing conflicts at the Cliffs of Moher is that they are symptomatic of a shift in the site’s categorization from a highly symbolic, publicly owned “commons” to a privately owned and operated business; in other words, the simplified public discourse contends that what was once a national resource is now a commodified tourist product. The Cliffs are not in fact a commons, but in a broader sense, they are widely perceived to be a national natural resource, owned by all. People are understandably uncomfortable when a landscape so pregnant with cultural and national meaning is developed and privatized by macro-scale institutions that have garnered so much distrust due to the economic crash in Ireland.

The Cliffs of Moher is more than just a destination for international tourists, or a point of economic and political contention for locals. It is a *quintessential* Irish landscape, and in that sense, it is a highly charged symbolic space. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to claim that the Cliffs have become one of a collection of metonyms for Irishness as a whole. Examples from popular culture that use the Cliffs of Moher to represent Irish cultural and national identity are extensive. To cite just a few examples, they are ubiquitously featured in tourist brochures and websites; Guinness, Irish Mist, Cadbury Chocolate, and many other companies have used depictions of the Cliffs in advertisements; there’s a famous image of Bono from U2 at the site; and *Riverdance* recently did a huge dance production there as well.⁶ This last example in particular is emblematic of how seemingly unrelated national and cultural symbols like landscapes, dance, and traditional music intersect in the public consciousness. On their own, each is a marker of Irish identity, but together, they form a *zeitgeist*, a metonym for Irishness. In a discussion about how landscapes often evoke national ideologies, Edensor (2002) writes,

It is difficult to mention a nation without conjuring up a particular rural landscape (often with particular people carrying out certain actions). [For example,] Ireland has become synonymous with its West Coast ... These landscapes are selective shorthand for these nations, synecdoches through which they are recognised globally. (pp. 39–40)

In this sense, the Cliffs of Moher fit into the collective national consciousness in Ireland, and are promoted as a visual representation of Irishness for international tourists. To be sure, the Cliffs are not the only rural, West Coast symbol of Irish identity, but they are indeed a powerful and prominent one. Edensor's claim that nationalized rural landscapes are also commonly imbricated with nationalized cultural practices, in this case with traditional Irish music, is also apropos. Tourist expectations contribute to this conflation of the landscape with Irish music as well. One busker at the site, a harpist, told me,

I sing a lot of folk music, so lots of Irish ballads, you know, because that's what tourists like to hear. Personally, I like rock-and-roll, but you can't really play that with a harp! Yeah, so, it goes down better here—more traditional kind of stuff.

Later in the same interview, she told me,

People come here—they love the music. They love the atmosphere it creates ... I think the music makes it more Irish—makes it more County Clare. You know, because music is such a big part of County Clare.

In an interview with another local musician in which I asked about the basic features of the “west County Clare style” of fiddle playing, she described aspects of the local landscape and failed to mention a single musicological technique. She explained that her playing is the direct result of the gentle rolling pastureland in that part of the county, the rough seas along the coast, and the soaring Cliffs of Moher. She also claimed that the cave systems that undercut the parish gave her playing a “deep energy” (Kaul, 2011: 243).

This synthesis of Irishness, Irish music, and the landscape is nothing new, and it goes well beyond this one locale. There has been a long-standing fetishization of the land in Ireland, which has led to a romantic notion that Irish culture, traditions, and even kinship, are derived directly from the land itself (Kaul, 2011: 241). As far back as the 1930s, Conrad Arensberg (1959), who conducted ethnography for a short time near the Cliffs of Moher, wrote, “A particular ancestral line is inseparable from a particular plot of earth. All others are ‘strangers to the land’” (p. 83). So, describing the Cliffs of Moher not just as an Irish landscape but also as a “musical landscape” has real resonance. For many musicians, tourists, and local residents, there is a romantic and evocative union of land, music, and identity at the Cliffs.

Making money, making music

Just as the relationship between commerce and culture has created tension at the Cliffs of Moher, a similarly awkward relationship occurs at the nexus between money-making and traditional Irish music-making in Irish pubs. As tourism developed into a major part of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s in the West of Ireland, publicans who owned establishments on the more heavily trafficked “tourist routes” began to pay musicians a set amount at the end of the evening if they agreed to play sessions to draw tourists into the pub (Kaul,

2007: 707–08; 2009: 116–17). It was a system that evolved slowly, institutionalizing an older set of values in which musicians' contributions to the social milieu were rewarded with gifts of food, drink, and occasional monetary payments. Despite the more formal monetary arrangements in place today, musicians maintain a significant degree of control over their relationship with pub owners. Furthermore, tourists do not directly pay for musicians' services. In this way, the fee system sublimates the supposedly "polluting" effects of tourism commerce and thereby helps maintain an aura of purity and authenticity for both tourists and musicians. On the surface, it appears that musicians are spontaneously playing music for the fun of it, although behind the scenes, in the backstage areas of the tourist–host relationship, things are more complex. Money generated from the tourists passes through the pub, which is then turned into a kind of "gift" given to the musicians at the end of the night (Kaul, 2007: 709–10). The point I want to make here is that in the session context musicians have largely been able to strike a balance between making money and maintaining a significant level of control over the production of their music.

At the Cliffs, like in the session context in pubs, a system evolved slowly over time between the musicians who played there. Buskers necessarily had to spread out over the site so that the music would not sonically overlap. Out of this necessity evolved an informal number of regular spots, called "pitches," where musicians would stake out a musical territory. A hierarchy developed based on seniority and how regularly one played there. Musicians who depended on busking at the Cliffs, and/or had been playing there for 20 years or more, garnered higher status among the buskers and were therefore paid due deference because of their achieved status. Buskers new to the site had to learn these informal rules. One musician I know who started busking there in the early 2000s told me about how he was inculcated into this system:

I didn't know anyone at the time or whatever, but one day there was a [good spot] ... And one morning I came in, and there was no one there. So, I didn't know the politics—the rules—or whatever. So I just put myself there and played for an hour before someone else sat like ten or fifteen meters away from me and started playing the accordion. And then I went to see him and said "that's not cool, you could put yourself a bit further from me." And he said, "Yeah, fuck off, you! That's my spot, I mean, I've been playing here for the last twenty-five years" ... So then it kind of kicked in that it was—OK, there are spots around ... [for] "regulars" ... Well, fair enough. If a man is here twenty years, it's *his spot*. And everyone knows it and you come in there, you don't know what's going on. You have to learn that stuff. So, I never took his spot again, or if he was there in the morning, I'd probably play for awhile checking out if he would come, and as soon as he comes, like—*whiff!*—I go away.

The new licensing scheme formalized what was an egalitarian relationship between musicians based on achieved status. Now, there are five official pitches where musicians can play, all marked with a numbered sign (Figures 2 and 3), and only 10 musicians may obtain a license to reserve one of them at any given time. Seniority still plays a role. A harpist who has been playing at the Cliffs for several decades told me that "it's kind of an understanding between us four or five that are here on a regular basis that we kind of stake out our own pitches." Buskers prioritize some pitches over others because some are



Figure 2. Area with a numbered sign, one of the official pitches, where musicians can play.



Figure 3. A musician playing a harp at the Cliffs.

clearly more lucrative. A newer busker at the site described how the informal system of seniority calcified into a more formal arrangement:

When I came along in 2006, we all got the licenses together, but obviously recognized the fact that these people were already there, and that's fine ... three of the pitches were pretty much claimed, if you like, from day one.

Many buskers only play for a morning or an afternoon, so some pitches are shared among several musicians. All of these arrangements about who gets what pitch are worked out among the musicians themselves.

Interestingly, unlike the session context in which the commercial exchanges are hidden from view, busking collapses the act of music-making and money-making. In fact, the commercial exchange between the musician and passersby is a central characteristic of the collective performance. Buskers put out a hat, a basket, or a music case into which tourists deposit Euros. The commercial relationship is there for anyone to see, but this too is seen as an exchange of gifts since no fee or payment is required and because it is clear that musicians are in complete control of the arrangement. For musicians, it is a far riskier enterprise than the pub sessions because unlike playing a weekly gig in a pub that guarantees payment, busking cannot compel anyone to offer up a monetary gift in exchange for music. Some days can be awful, and other days are quite lucrative. One musician I have known for a decade made most of his income for several years by busking at the Cliffs before he was asked to play a few weekly pub sessions. He told me that the flow of money while busking is quite variable due to the seasonality of tourism:

Well, in the wintertime you can stay there three hours to make fifteen quid, but in the summertime you can stay ten minutes and make fifteen quid quickly.

But he also explained how unpredictable it can be by comparing a "bad day" to a "good day" busking at the Cliffs:

The smallest [amount I made] was probably €3 after two hours. I kept hoping that something good would come, but after two hours I still only had €3.50 or something like that in the basket. So I thought, "I just better stay home today. There's no need to push myself too much because nothing's going to come today," you know?

And [another] day, I made 70 quid. I was just putting my stool there and sat on it. I opened my bag, took out the basket, took off my flute case and my whistles and all, and I've already got money falling in the basket! I was just taking my flute out of the bag, you know, and this money is coming in like €2 and you're like, "I haven't started playing yet!" And already after a couple of minutes, you've got a fiver in there [and] you're just putting your flute together!

All of the buskers at the Cliffs who I interviewed talked at length about the difficulty of playing outdoors in a landscape with strong winds, and salty sea air that quickly corrodes their instruments. Some musicians have had instruments custom-made for rigorous outdoor environments. Others have had to regularly buy new ones. Even in sunny weather in Ireland, the temperatures are often frigid. Cold fingers and hands make for

difficult playing. Another musician who plays at the site also said that tourists often drastically overestimate how much buskers make in a day:

I declare every cent to my accountant, and I'll tell you, when I took my stuff to my accountant to have the annual books done the last time, he looked at the figures and he said, "I can't believe how little you make." [He burst into laughter.] Just to squash any rumors!

However, according to the buskers, tourists are increasingly confused about their relationship to the corporation that runs the site, wrongly assuming that the musicians are paid employees. "We're not employed," one of the buskers emphatically pointed out to me. "You know, a lot of people think we are, but we're not." As a result of this confusion though, musicians told me that tips have declined dramatically since the opening of the new center. "It's not easy to make money up here," one of the buskers told me, "and it's not as easy to make money as it was [before the new licensing system]."

More importantly, unlike the pub session context, buskers' activities at the Cliffs are now heavily regulated and controlled. The contract that musicians are now required to sign mostly limits what musicians *cannot* do. One of the primary concerns for musicians is that they are not allowed to sell their own CDs directly to the public. Instead, they must now sell them in the official gift shop, but since tourists typically purchase a CD impulsively on the spot, musicians report a drastic decline in sales. What's more, the management takes a significant cut now, about one-third of the total price, from the CD sales for the value added tax (VAT) and for something they are calling a "handling charge." There are also a number of rather absurd rules in the contract, including a restriction against consuming "significant amounts" of food or drink. The contract does not make musicians employees of the center, and it certainly offers them no remuneration for their services. So, not only has the management attempted to take almost absolute control over the activities of buskers at the Cliffs (including whether one eats or drinks), they have also negatively impacted their income. To say the least, musicians are not satisfied with their new contract, and in fact, a number of musicians have simply abandoned the site altogether rather than submit to it.

I would argue that, unlike the session context in which musicians have been able to remain independent while simultaneously increasing their income, this is a classic case of touristic commodification. Moreover, it is a clear example of what Foucault (1984) calls "bio-power" (pp. 262–63) or "governmentality," which might simply be defined as the increasing control that governing bodies have over individuals' lives. Foucault argues that "governmentality" is at the heart of the capitalist project, and is therefore a useful framework for the analysis of tourism developments. Often, this concept is understood to constitute a wide range of institutional power structures from state government to private enterprises. Foucault (1997) goes further, though, and describes governmentality as "the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (p. 300). Of course, Foucault is interested not only in the processes by which raw power is used to discipline individuals but also the processes in which disciplining becomes internalized; raw force transforms into self-policing. Despite the fact that buskers now subject themselves to the regulatory control of the new licensing

scheme, this internalization of governmentality has not yet fully taken place, and so the tension remains.

“Busk Off If You’re Rubbish”

One other aspect of all of this that interests me is the partial disconnect between the overly inflammatory public discourse about the conflict and the actual grievances of the musicians at the site. The conflicts are very real, but the narrative that quickly took hold in the press during the months before the new center’s opening was by all accounts blown out of proportion. The shrillness of the debate seems symptomatic of the identity crisis caused by a rapid culture change wrought by the Celtic Tiger era, and in the wake of the more recent economic crash, anxieties about what it means to be Irish in the modern world seem even more pressing.

Some of the claims made on both sides of the debate at the Cliffs were hyperbolic, misleading, and personal. For example, one of the project leaders at the Clare County Council in charge of developing the new center claimed in several news stories that “one [busker] had a dog that attacked passing tourists” (Hogan, 2007: 11). In one inflammatory news article in England’s tabloid *The Sun*, the same official disparages the buskers’ musicianship in addition to repeating the biting dog story: “It had become an easy way to make money—you go up there with a tin whistle and whether you can play or not, probably some people will throw you some money in hopes you might stop playing” (“Busk Off If You’re Rubbish,” 2007). One of the other administrators at the site told me in an interview that music can interfere with the reproductive cycles of the puffins that come to breed every summer at the Cliffs. Given the overwhelming sounds of howling winds and pounding surf, not to mention the noise and activity generated from hundreds or thousands of tourists per day, this claim seems rather far-fetched. Still, this administrator told me,

The decibel level that [musicians] can generate is too high in the bird-nesting season. There are certain noise restrictions because it’s a protected area for sea birds, and the bird nesting season which starts in the beginning of April continues right through the summer, and that decibel restriction is there to avoid negatively impacting the sea bird species. Now, all of the, sort of—you know—the Celtic harp, the banjo, the tin whistle, the concert flute, the fiddle, the guitar, most of them are played unamplified. Or, anything that is played amplified, it’s a very low level of amplification. But again—you know—you’d see guys setting up there with their—sort of—bass guitar and blasting out AC/DC.

Another high-level employee at the interpretive center told me that it was the musicians themselves who wanted the regulations and the contract in the first place. This was flatly denied by all of the musicians I interviewed. On the other side of the debate, conspiratorial rumors circulated that the county officials were submitting the musicians’ names to the Irish Tax & Customs Department because they assumed musicians weren’t paying taxes on their earnings. And as mentioned earlier, a now-famous open letter expressing concern about the future of the buskers at the Cliffs was signed by 43 famous Irish musicians like Christy Moore, Mary Black, Donal Lunny, Martin Hayes, and others

(Kelly, 2006: 10). One of the buskers I interviewed was very grateful for the public support, but he was also quite equivocating about its impact:

Once that [letter] happened, then that got in the public media, but again it was taken out of context and exaggerated. And it was like, "We've now got a national movement!" ... as though saying it was a human rights issue. And this petition became legendary. In fact, when I eventually tracked it down I was so disappointed ... It was like a polite letter ... That's the irony, which often happens I suppose with situations of conflict, is that the real conflict is actually underground or hidden.

Despite all of this public attention, even the musicians who busk at the Cliffs feel that the whole issue has been spun out of control. In fact, musicians feel that the simplistic "David and Goliath" narrative pitting them against the tourism developers misses some very real problems that are more mundane. Most musicians at the Cliffs do not mind the fact that *some* new regulations have been put into place or that they need to obtain a license; in fact, it is beneficial to be one of the official buskers at the site because it reduces the informal competition that took place before. One musician even told me that he didn't mind the suggestion that musicians would have to audition before being granted a contract. He said,

This is the biggest misinformation, that we were—you know—insulted ... We were *told* we objected to it. Not a single busker objected to it ... On the contrary, we said "Fine. We are confident. We are musicians. We could play for hours ... We don't have a problem with that," but the media made a big thing about it ... Other people were offended *on our behalf*.

Indeed, the conflict made for good headlines like these that reduced the complexities of the story down into an easily digested narrative: "Buskers Banned" (*The Birmingham Evening Mail*, 2007) "Battle for the Buskers" (*The News of the World*, 2006), "Buskers Face the Music" (Kelly, 2006: 10), "No Moher Buskers" (Deegan, 2007b: 23), and of course "Busk Off If You're Rubbish" (*The Sun*, 2007).

There seem to be at least two significant but slightly different understandings at work about the appropriate relationship between music-making and money-making in this situation. While some of the more hostile actions taken against musicians at the Cliffs of Moher were obviously aggressive and adversarial, clearly more is going on here for the general public than the livelihoods of a small handful of musicians. For buskers at the Cliffs, very practical concerns about their contractual relationship with the Interpretive Center are at the heart of the matter. They are trying to make a living by playing music, so their concern is at least in part about how to *intensify* the commercialization of the music for *individual* profits, while for the public, it seems to me that there is a broader concern with commercializing and regulating the site and musicians' activities there *at all*. What is at work here in the demonization of the tourism authorities, and the valorization of the musicians is at least in part the new Celtic Tiger version of Irishness colliding headlong into older narratives of Irishness. Bringing this to the fore even more is the fact that all of this is occurring in a new post-Celtic Tiger era. It should come as no surprise that this kind of confusion resulting from rapid social and economic change causes a crisis of identity.

Conclusion

What then is the proper balance between music-making and money-making at tourist sites? The debates about “authenticity” and touristic commodification have been problematized in the literature for the reason that these notions *are* problematic (to cite just a few: Bruner, 2005; Cohen, 1988; Connell and Gibson, 2003; Greenwood, 1989 [1977]; MacCannell, 1989 [1976], 1992; Smith, 1989 [1977]; Trilling, 1972; Wang, 2000), but they resurface time and again for the very reason that they are key issues for the people we study. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kaul, 2007), an increase in commercial exchanges (i.e. “commercialization”) in relation to the production of an art-form in-and-of-itself is not necessarily the problem. It is beneficial to the artists, and even necessary for their survival. The comparison with pub sessions is a case in point. On the other hand, I have argued that commodification in its pure form occurs (and “authenticity” is eroded) when artists lose *control* over their art-form’s production, regardless of the proximal relationship of commercial exchange to the production of the art-form, the method of the transaction, or its intensity. In other words, commercialization can occur without the loss of control that creates commodification. This is an important distinction to make if we truly wish to advocate for the livelihoods of musicians who have been able to commercialize their musical practice for their own benefit while maintaining a high degree of control and a sense of “authenticity.” Buskers at the Cliffs of Moher are very interested in commercializing their activities further (e.g. by increasing their profits from the sale of CDs) precisely because it makes up part, or all, of their livelihood. What is worrisome is that the new relationship between the tourism authorities and the musicians has nothing to do with commercialization itself, but instead, the appropriation of the production of the music and a reduction in the benefits of the commercial exchange for the musicians. To put a finer point on it, the internal debate at the Cliffs is not about *whether* to commercialize the music, but instead how to do so and who benefits.

Symbolic sites of national identity are “usually claimed by competing groups, who invest them with meanings which are attuned to their political project or identity” (Edensor, 2002: 46). Given their multivocality, these landscapes often become what Pile has called “geographies of resistance” (Pile, 1997: 2). Moreover, nationalized cultural *spaces* and nationalized cultural *practices* are difficult to disentangle, as the developers of the new interpretive center at the Cliffs of Moher discovered. The Cliffs have come to be conceptualized as a musical landscape, and the attempt to separate the music from the place was probably always doomed to failure. Although perhaps unintentional, I find it striking that in the administrator’s remarks about the decibel levels of various instruments, quoted earlier, makes a clear distinction between traditional Irish music, which is deemed acceptable and in harmony with the natural landscape, and other genres like rock-and-roll that are not. Perhaps ironically, one result of the conflict over the new regulations has been to “purify” a sense of Irishness at the Cliffs of Moher, consolidating the notion that the *Irish* musical tradition is part and parcel of this *Irish* landscape. Moreover, the new licensing scheme is seen as a way for the tourism authorities to seize almost complete control over the music, including what genres of music are acceptable and whether or not they eat or drink. The new licensing scheme should not

be seen as a capitulation to public pressure and an effort to fully cooperate with buskers at the site; rather, it seems to me that the tourism authorities have in fact appropriated the processes of musical production and consumption for their own purposes, dramatically reducing the amount of control musicians have over their art-form to the bare minimum. As a result, instead of an inclusive, multivocal, sonically cacophonous musical landscape, the tourism authorities have made every effort to create a site that speaks with their singular voice, what Bruner and Gorfain (1984) have called “monologic certitude.” And what was once a landscape imbued with a multitude of meanings, a “palimpsest” in Barbara Bender’s (1998) sense of the term (p. 6), is now a landscape with one authoritative interpretation.

Thinking even more broadly about this moment in Irish history, the crisis at the Cliffs of Moher is a reflection of a larger identity crisis. “The Irish countryside,” writes Adrian Peace (2005), “has become in effect a perennial site of struggle” (p. 496), and I agree with Peace that the contestation over the Irish landscape in recent decades is not simply an economic or political struggle, but a cultural one as well. In the wake of a massive economic collapse in 2008 that was largely caused by overdevelopment, overemphasis on privatization, and general greed, the heavy-handed actions of the Clare County Council against a small group of traditional musicians set off a firestorm because there is a sense that commonly held identity markers like the Cliffs of Moher and traditional music have been transformed into profitable tourism products. As Fintan O’Toole (2007) wrote, “The Cliffs of Moher have now become *The Cliffs of Moher Experience*” (p. 16), implying that all meaning has been drained out of the place. If Negra is correct that the Celtic Tiger reconfigured not only the Irish economy, but also Irish identity, then a more fundamental question remains about what it means to be Irish in the *post*-Celtic Tiger era.

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Notes

1. One notable exception is the work that has been done on performers at Washington Square Park in New York City. See, for example, Prato (1984) and Harrison-Pepper (1990).
2. In fact, despite concerted efforts, this is still a problem.
3. This was done in large part because of a previous tourism development at another local site called Mullaghmore that pitted the County Council against local activists for a full decade. The conflict eventually wound up in the Supreme Court of Ireland, which ruled that governmental

- bodies must submit to the same planning processes as private developers (Peace, 2005: 508).
4. Interestingly, while the design of the building itself makes a strong modernist statement, the gift shop is filled with the standard tourist souvenirs that one might find in any tourist-oriented shop in the region, including many products that make strong references to the tropes of "old Ireland": recordings of traditional Irish music, Aran Island sweaters, stuffed-animal sheep, family crests, and the like.
 5. Awards include the "Excellence in Interpretation" from The Association of Heritage Interpretation, 2007; "Best Public Interior" from the International Federation of Interior Architects; "Best Irish Visitor Attraction" from the Irish Consumer Travel Awards, 2009; and "Best Innovation Award" and "Green Technology Award" from the Planning Department of the Clare County Council, 2011.
 6. They've been featured in several movies including the film *The Princess Bride* as "the Cliffs of Insanity," and in scenes from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. The site was also recently nominated for (but did not win) a spot on the new list of the Seven Wonders of the Natural World, and the directors of the site have been pushing to get World Heritage Site status from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

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