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## CULTURE & MEDIA



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### The Space of the New Ethnic Neighborhood: Polka Festival as Imagined Community

**Abstract.** Following the spatial turn in cultural studies, ethnic space is understood as a cultural category, constructed by discourse and determined by capital, within which people create their own narratives. This essay explores the construction of ethnic space and identity in the phenomenon of the Polish American polka music festival. Framed by the attention to the process of “production of space” (Lefebvre 1991), the essay presumes that new conceptualizations of spatiality assume space is no longer treated as something given, a pre-existing territory, or locale. The case study of the ethnic music festival is an ideal place for examining the invention of place, because it is not located in a fixed space, but in a movable community traveling from festival to festival. The polka festival circuit is attended by a core community of polka boosters, many of whom travel from event to event in vacation motor homes, with attendees setting up “neighborhoods” of motor homes that include front lawns, outdoor kitchens, and “streets.” Most bring lawn signs, street signs, flags and other public signs of Polish American identity, recreating—this essay argues—the urban ethnic neighborhood of previous immigrant generations. Polish American ethnic identity for this group of participants is located and recreated in an imagined community that it creates, dismantles, moves and recreates in a mobile spatiality of ethnic belonging. The paper explores the moveable and mutable production of ethnic space arguing that the traditional aspects of nineteenth century village, reimagined in the twentieth century Polonian neighborhood are now recreated anew in twenty-first century polka festival culture: the village, the church, the parochial school, the tavern, the neighborhood economy and the kitchen are creatively refashioned in this mobile ethnic community.

Recent scholarship on Polish American polka has argued that contrary to popular stereotype, polka is innovative hybrid alternative music and, furthermore, that preserving polka’s history is an important, but often overlooked, part of preserving American multicultural history (Gunkel 2006, 5–8). This project continues that research by providing this spatially-framed study of the phenomenon of the seasonal polka festival. Over a period of five years, I visited polka festivals in North America as a participant observer, documenting the social and cultural landscape of these gatherings of polka people. This essay

traces the nature of imagined community in Polish American polka festivals—understood as a diasporic ethnoscape—exploring the construction of ethnic space in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** ethnic space, ethnospace, ethnicity, spatiality, imagined communities, identity, polka, Polonia, Polish-American, festivals, neighborhoods

Following the spatial turn in cultural studies, ethnic space is understood as a cultural category, constructed by discourse and determined by capital, within which people create their own narratives. This essay explores the construction of ethnic space and identity in the phenomenon of the Polish American polka music festival. Framed by the attention to the process of “production of space” (Lefebvre 1991), the essay presumes that new conceptualizations of spatiality assume space is no longer treated as something given, a pre-existing territory, or locale. The case study of the ethnic music festival is an ideal place for examining the invention of place, because it is not located in a fixed space, but in a movable community traveling from festival to festival. The polka festival circuit is attended by a core community of polka boosters, many of whom travel from event to event in vacation motor homes, with attendees setting up “neighborhoods” of motor homes that include front lawns, outdoor kitchens, and “streets.” Most bring lawn signs, street signs, flags and other public signs of Polish American identity, recreating—this essay argues—the urban ethnic neighborhood of previous immigrant generations. Polish American ethnic identity for this group of participants is located and recreated in an imagined community that it creates, dismantles, moves and recreates in a mobile spatiality of ethnic belonging.

Revisiting Benedict Anderson’s (1991) seminal notion of imagined community in examining the polka festival produces the question: How is Polishness and, more specifically, Polish-American ethnic identity and space imagined through polka culture which is largely comprised of non-Polish speaking ethnics, who nonetheless experience this ethnic space as a meaningful component of identity? The occupants of this ethnic space are largely second through fifth generation descendants of the late nineteenth century Polish immigrants who once occupied the so-called “old neighborhoods” of Polonian North American urban enclaves, for most, now a nostalgic construct. For this particular group of ethnics, a third Polish space has emerged, a reconstruction of the *okolica* of their Polish American grandparents and great-grandparents. Polonian scholarship has long claimed that the space of the urban Polish America neighborhood was itself a recreation of the Polish rural village (Pula 1995, Lopata 1994). It is difficult to overstate the role of the parish neighborhood in twentieth century Polonian culture. As many scholars have documented, the urban ethnic parish community was the center of Polish American life. This value hasn’t been lost on the descendants of that immigration. Families who long ago left the urban “old neighborhoods” of Polonia and most likely live in suburban homes symbolically recreate the ethnic village and neighborhood in the setting of the polka festival.

The paper explores the moveable and mutable production of ethnic space arguing that the traditional aspects of nineteenth century village, reimagined in the twentieth century Polonian neighborhood are now recreated anew in twenty-first century polka festival culture: the village, the church, the parochial school, the tavern, the neighborhood economy and the kitchen are creatively refashioned in this mobile ethnic community.

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Figure 1. Entering the “neighborhood” at Pulaski Polka Days, 2004.

### Conceptualizing Polonian *Okolica* in the Twenty-First Century

Scholars have established and described how polka music--known not as a Polish, but rather, a Czech dance in Poland itself--became a salient symbol of Polish American identity in Polonian diaspora (See Keil, Keil and Blau 1992, Walser 1992, Gunkel 2004, Jackson 2014). In particular, early- to mid- twentieth century North American Polish ethnics descended from Polish immigrants identified this hybrid urban music as belonging essentially to their Polishness. "Polka performs an increasingly important role in the self-definition of one segment of Polish-American society whose ethnic identity is not constructed around a prior Polish citizenship" (Savaglio 1997, 42.) The vast majority of polka performers and fans are the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants from the early waves of Polish rural movement to American industrial centers; most of them were working-class. Sociological studies of American Polonia have noted the cultural differences between these second-through-fifth-generation Polish-Americans and post-World War II, Post-Solidarity, and European Union émigrés. The descendants of this immigration cohort are precisely that Polonian group who experienced what is now nostalgically called "the old neighborhood" of urban Polonia.

A host of nostalgic literature has spring up mourning the loss of the old neighborhood. From pop/scholarly tomes such as Ehrenhalt's *The Lost City* (1995) to the columns of polka newspapers, a theme of loss emerges. The good old days of the old neighborhood are a source of nostalgic longing. As Ray Suarez (1999) has powerfully documented, if you "talk with people about how they once lived, how they grew up, and how they live today," many have performed "a fascinating sleight of mind. They say life was better 'back then,' as many remember their own urban past" (22-3). Whether accurate or not, there is a persistent and powerful belief that some important form of ethnic community has disappeared. Suarez's research documents the loss of a sense of place tied to block, school and neighborhood church. His important study offers a "dry-eyed accounting of white flight and the hollowing out of the American city," exploring how this group helped create the rootlessness they now mourn" (22-3). This essay moves in another direction toward examining how that group is re-creating those values in a new context and fluid spatial locations.

This group of American ethnics, raised in the Polish neighborhoods well-documented by Polonian scholarship, may have moved away from the old neighborhood in the white flight of the latter twentieth century and may have reorganized their families in suburban kitchens and carports. But there is no reason to believe that the significant values forged in those "old neighborhoods" have disappeared. It is my contention that those formulations of community have not been forgotten, but rather creatively transformed into a national network of ethnic consent rather than a local Polish American parish of descent. To examine this change, scholarship needs to move from modernist conceptions of ethnic identity to postmodern examinations of the construction of ethnic selfhood and ethnic space.

Polka culture is a site well-suited for the study of postmodern ethnicity, not only because of its hybrid musical nature but, as Paula Savaglio (1997) has explained,

In a study of the musical self-representation of Polish-Americans, the issue of dual identity -- Polish and American -- is central. The hyphenated ethnic label is as much a description of the way the group perceives itself as it is an indication of the community's national origins (35–48).

The Polish-American polka is, then, a cultural practice continually negotiated across the hyphen of ethnic identity. Within Polonia, polka is a Polonian -- not a Polish -- symbol. That is not to say, however, that polka is somehow a fallen or inauthentic manifestation of Polish-American identity.

As Mary Erdmans (2004) so effectively documents, ethnic culture is in a constant state of construction, a process in which ethnic rituals are reconfigured. "Like soil and recipes, ethnicity gets reworked..." (73). Polka culture is part of that reworking process. As the old ethnic enclaves disperse, "the act of defining the ethnic group's music becomes increasingly necessary as the ethnic group itself can no longer be defined merely by reference to geography or language" (Savaglio 1997, 42). On this point, I would want to affirm Di Leonardo's critique of the dominant discourse of white ethnic life in the United States, which postulates, among other notions, a quasi-essentialist, class- and regionally-normative, homogenous ethnic "community" irrespective of lived and fluid ethnic identities. She points out that "professional narratives" of ethnic identity are often mobilized both to obfuscate ethnic identity as lived and understood by members of the groups in question as well as to deploy highly reactionary social values by imagining them as privileged in "unchanging" pre-industrial-ethos ethnic enclaves (133–5). It behooves us, therefore, to revalue polka as a Polish-American practice as it is lived and experienced by its participants.

With this methodological caution guiding my research at Pulaski Polka Days over a period of five years, I approached the polka festival and its community of attendees as an ethnic formulation of consent. As I have argued in other work (2004), we must reexamine polka not in light of "externally imposed preconceptions of [ethnic] meaning," but, rather, as Turner and Seriff (1993) argue, "from the strategic way in which the participants themselves organize and reorganize the meaning of this [practice] according to what they consider to be valuable" (93). In this way, one sees a clear valuing of polka on the part of its practitioners and participants, as a powerful, emotive, and significant cultural expression of ethnicity.

In producing something uniquely American within a Polish immigrant context, polka has, in fact, created a valid expression of lived ethnic identity. This observation comes with a caution, however. It necessitates affirming polka's legitimacy as one cultural voice which landmarks a particular version of Polish-American memory without reifying it through the lens of nostalgic desire for the "imagined" communities of the mythic "old neighborhood" Polonias. As Dominic Pacyga (1995) notes, Chicago's eth-

nic neighborhoods are often imagined mythically as constant and homogenous, despite their documented multi-ethnic and fluid character (64). Attention to the fluid character of ethnicity allows us to examine new formulations of Polish American identity.

As ethnic scholars, we need to challenge any notion of subjectivity grounded in a view of history as unchanging, monolithic, or static. Identities are always subject, as Stuart Hall points out, to the play of history, culture, and power. Consequently, identities undergo constant transformations (quoted in Giroux 88). We must learn to recognize these new formulations that haven't appeared on our scholarly radar. If we keep looking for Polish American factory workers gathered at the tavern or parish hall of the nineteen forties we will miss the creation of ethnicity in the twenty-first century. The participation in ethnicity via polka festival has morphed into a new form of Polish Americanness for one cohort of Polonia.

To this end, we can use the theoretical tools of cultural studies, in particular, Benedict Anderson's (1991) seminal work wherein he proposes the definition of the nation as an imagined political community. Anderson brought forth the concept of the "imagined community" to make sense of the nationalist sentiments shared by those who, though they may never have met one another, identified with the nation-state because of their common reading language (5–7). When we revisit and retool this notion of imagined community in examining the polka festival, another question presses to the fore. How is Polishness and, more specifically, Polish-American identity imagined through polka culture which is largely comprised of non-Polish speaking ethnics?

Polish Americanness is imagined differently by different Polonian cohorts. As Benedict Anderson has described national identity, "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (5–7). Thus, communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

### **The Polka Festival in Twenty-First Century North America**

Over the past thirty-five years, a circuit of well attended polka festivals has established itself throughout North America. In support of my thesis, this phenomenon has expanded in the time period commencing with the revival of the nineteen seventies "new ethnicity" as well as in the cultural space opened by the exodus of white ethnics from urban America. These festivals are held in urban hotels, rural farm communities, mountain resorts, casinos, and seaside vacation towns.

One could argue that the mother of all polka festivals is The Seven Springs Polka Fireworks, hosted by the late Joe "Zip" Lubovinsky and Eddie Blazonczyk, Sr., held for fortyfive years (as of this writing) at the Seven Springs Resort in the mountains of Champion, PA. The massive event includes fireworks, bon-fire polka parties, polka golf tournaments, polka Mass, polka pool parties, late night polka jam sessions includ-

ing the famous concertina jam hosted by Steve and Adele Litwin, and of course polka music. The 2005 festival involved 26 live bands (Fireworks). The six day festival is mirrored by a Fall version of the event as well. The topic for my research, Pulaski Polka Days, is a mainstay on the polka circuit, a four day festival that transforms a small Polish American farming town in central Wisconsin into a polka hot spot with over 25,000 attendees each year. A Wisconsin Dells Polish Fest includes polka, Polish folk, disco and pop music. There are countless other events on the festival circuit including the United Polka Association (UPA) festival, Polka Explosion (Alpena, Michigan), Bel-Aire Days (Chicago Suburbs), Frankenmuth Music Fest (Michigan), Polka Spree by the Sea (Wildwood, New Jersey), Polkamotion by the Ocean (Rehobeth Beach, DE), and the International Polka Association Festival (IPA). While such events are held year round, the real concentration of events takes place in the summer months, allowing for outdoor music and dance and vacation travel for the participants.

To summarize the goings-on at these festivals, I concentrate on Pulaski Polka Days, approximately thirty miles west of Green Bay, Wisconsin. The festival in Pulaski takes place at festival grounds on the edge of town. Under two giant tents operating simultaneously from late morning to the wee hours, constant polka music is proffered. Under each tent are a large wooden dance floor, beer concessions, and a long stage, which houses two separate bands. While one band plays, another sets up, allowing for live music with no breaks or down time. While this event stretches over four days, some, like Seven Springs, last almost a week.

The polka festival circuit is attended by a core community of polka boosters, many of whom travel from event to event in vacation motor homes. There is a clear sense of camaraderie and belonging, with attendees setting up “neighborhoods” of motor homes that include front lawns, outdoor kitchens, and “streets.” Most bring lawn signs, street signs, flags and other public signs of polka fandom and Polish American identity.

One of the strengths of Polish American Studies has been the historical and sociological documentation of the roles of neighborhood and parish life in the ethnic community’s identity formation. While the shape of community has changed over the course of a century, I maintain that we can use this scholarship as an effective tool for addressing a changing Polonia. We cannot expect to find the *Okolica* unchanged one hundred years later. However, we can use the well-documented nature of Polish American community, such as the parish church, the neighborhood structure, and ethnic foodways to analyze new phenomena. There is continuity in the evolution of Polonian identity. Thus, in examining the creative formulation of ethnicity found in polka festivals, I will focus on very traditional aspects of Polonian *okolica* which I argue, are recreated anew in polka festival culture: the village, the church, the parochial school, the tavern, the neighborhood economy and the kitchen.

### The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: The Village

Polonian scholarship has long claimed that the urban Polish America neighborhood was a recreation of the Polish rural village (Pula 1995, 20–29; Lopata 1994, 179–212). Sociological analysis has explored the role of the *okolica* – social rather than territorial circles of companionate relations--in which peers of the same ethclass felt comfortable in interaction, and among whom reputation and status were circulated. While this is not an unproblematic concept, I would argue that the *okolica* of early twentieth century Polonia takes on new forms in the consent-based polka community.

It is difficult to overstate the role of the parish neighborhood in twentieth century Polonian culture. As many scholars have documented, the urban ethnic parish community was the center of Polish American life. The topic of home and neighborhood points to one of the best known examples of the transplantation of turn-of-the-century Polish cultural values to America. “In peasant Poland, there was a direct relationship between status and land ownership” that carried over to the urban American setting via exceptionally high rates of home ownership, even compared to native-born whites (Pula, 27). This value hasn’t been lost on the descendants of that immigration. While they most likely live in suburban homes (which they own), I would argue that they also symbolically recreate the ethnic village and neighborhood in the setting of the polka festival.

A fascinating component of the festival is this makeshift “village” created by the motor homes of polka people. Parked in orderly rows that approximate city blocks, the motor homes create a temporary reenactment of ethnic city neighborhoods. An ethnography of city space could be applied to this polka village. There are lawn signs, neighbors, barbeques, and outdoor “living rooms” approximating the porch and patio of urban life. The lace curtains and other ethnic symbols traced by scholars such as Silverman (2000) and Krase (1998, 9–10; 1997, 9–31) appear in the windows of these mobile Polish American homes as well. [See Figure Two] In the boulevards of motor homes, a host of public symbols are deployed to mark ethnic identity. One finds Polish and American flags, Polonian slogans such as “Polish Pride,” family nameplates with Slavic surnames, actual street signs marking the American city, state or streets of the motor home’s origin and polka memorabilia.

This sense of mobile ethnic community is expressed in Crusade’s polka anthem, “Til We Meet Again,” which documents feelings of camaraderie on the polka festival circuit (1998) on their aptly named CD *Utopia*. From all over North America, these various polka people create a temporary but earnest community of ethnic and social solidarity.



Figure 2. A motor home “village” at Pulaski Polka Days, 2004.

### **The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: The Parish Church**

The old neighborhood was typified by a Catholic urban experience

"so thoroughly articulated to place that Catholics identified their neighborhoods by the names of their churches... [and...] celebrated this Catholic ecology in an annual round of processions, carnivals, and block parties" (Orsi, 50).

This Catholic ecology appears again in polka festival culture. One of its most interesting facets is the Polka Mass, a Roman Catholic liturgy sung entirely to polka tunes and rhythms. This is a very popular component of the many national polka festivals. In attempting to articulate a Polish-American-Catholic-polka religious sensibility, the polka Mass is a fascinating development.

This is quite in keeping with the core of Polish Catholic urban experience because, as has been well documented, “during the nineteenth century the bond between Polish patriotism and the Roman Catholic religion became so complete that to many being Polish became synonymous with being Catholic” (Pula, 2). A powerful “sense of religious attachment, both spiritual and secular...formed the central focus of Polish community life in the United States, where, in the immigrant generation, the parish became the center of community life and a lasting influence on succeeding generations” (2). It is not surprising, then, that virtually every polka festival carves out ritual space for the

“parish church.” On Saturday evening or Sunday morning, festival admission fees are temporarily suspended to usher in the Polka Mass, so that the Sunday Mass obligation, once de rigueur with American Catholics, can be fulfilled by polka people.

As Mary Cygan (1983) has noted, “The Polish Catholic would realize his or her potential only as a participating member of not just any parish, but only of Polish Catholic community.” Cygan uncovered a 1921 document in which a Polish priest wrote, “The Polish Catholic who does not belong to any parish is homeless – without any support, religious or national, he is a social bankrupt, a bandit on the open highway...” (Misicki quoted in Cygan 83). Amidst the dancehalls and highways of mobile polka culture, this value is preserved almost a century later. A distinctly Polish-American polka-specific space is carved out for this critical facet of Polonian identity. As Robert Walser (1992) notes, “The polka mass is one of those forms of contemporary popular culture that seem completely natural to insiders and utterly bizarre to most others” (84). The tension between secular ethnic culture and sacred ritual typify the fusion common to postmodern ethnicity. Some folks within and outside of Polonia regard the polka Mass as crude or even scandalous (Day 194). In the Archdiocese of Hartford, polka worship was banned in 2001.

Invoking Rome’s Congregation of Divine Worship, the bulletin announced that music performed in churches “must be sacred music” in a style and with instrumentation that raises “the mind and heart to God and the mystery of salvation.” Thus “musical innovations” like polka and jazz are “not permitted in the Archdiocese of Hartford” (Blejwas 2001).

The late Polish American Historical Association President, Prof. Stanislaus Blejwas, responded to the ban of vernacular music in church in a Hartford Courant editorial by asking, “Why are popular, authentic expressions of human creativity and feelings not valid in worship? Does the Bible say that jazz and polka do not “raise the mind and heart to God and the mystery of salvation?” (Courant 2001). What some Catholics perceive as blasphemy, others perceive as a joyous integration of fragmented components of identity. Fr. Frank Perkovich, a Minnesota priest who celebrated a polka Mass at the Vatican for Pope John Paul II, rejects the conventional distinction of sacred and secular. “What is sacred music? Its anything that raises your mind to God. It’s anything that unites a congregation...” (Paschke quoted in Walser 187).

Walser’s (1992) study of the Polka Mass argues convincingly “that however distant the polka mass may seem from the debates of academics, it exemplifies and helps illuminate many of the strategies of what is typically called postmodern culture” (184) especially the hybrid nature of ethnic identity formation. Depending on collective memories of the past, the polka Mass brings

together parts of people’s lives that had been separate: the sacred rituals of the Church, and the secular rituals of the ballroom. But it also represents an important articulation of historical memory, in dialogue with formations and disruptions of ethnic identities that have been in flux throughout the twentieth century (196).



Figure 3. Priestly vestments at the International Polka Association's Polka Mass, 1983.

Photo courtesy of Dick Blau.

The carefully embroidered priestly vestments [See Figure 3] worn by the celebrant at polka Mass visually reflect this postmodern pastiche of ethnic identity. One vestment photographed by Dick Blau is beautifully adorned with The Black Madonna of Czestochowa, the most revered icon of Polish religious life. The Blessed Mother is depicted alongside a crucifix,—the instrument of salvation—musical notes, and an accordion—the instrument of ethnic dancehalls and taverns; tracing, in effect, that path from Polish Catholicism to polka-based Polish American ethnicity.

Polka music, even outside the polka Mass, engages in frequent and seemingly unproblematic crossing of the sacred/profane border. Rather than separating the religious from the everyday, as is the custom in the dominant American Protestant culture which stresses religion as a private matter, polka music has included religious motifs throughout its songs. Many polka lyrics include spiritual appeals. It is not unusual for a polka band to perform one of these religious songs sandwiched unapologetically between a bawdy polka tune and a romantic waltz. Interesting images emerged from my documentation of the polka Mass [see Figure 4], where the faithful gathered for Mass in the tent under giant Miller Lite beer bottles hanging overhead in the place of a cathedral's chandeliers. Similarly, the polka stage transformed into an altar housed the Celebrant Priest and acolytes silhouetted against a prominent banner for Budweiser beer [see Figure 5].



Figure 4. The Sacred and Profane merge at the Polka Mass, Pulaski Polka Days, 2004.



Figure 5. The Priest and Acolytes at Polka Mass, Pulaski Polka Days, 2004.

This shamelessness about Catholic Polish identity is a signal of great confidence in ethnic identity formation, if we recall that for more than a century “immigrant Catholicism or “ghetto Catholicism” was seen as “an obscurantist form of cult worship

that stood in the way of Catholics being fully accepted in the American cultural mainstream” (Ehrenhalt 118) The polka Mass points to the “resourcefulness of ethnic communities” in creating “rhetorical and historical fusions that articulate communal identities, continually reinventing ethnicity in powerful, sophisticated ways” (Walser 199).

### The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: The Neighborhood Economy

This resilience is also seen in the polka community’s ability to sustain an independent polka economy, a community-based business alternative to the mainstream of corporate music production (Gunkel 2004, 414). [See Figure 6] In addition to the festivals and conventions, this economy includes polka recording studios, production and distribution, record and CD labels, polka record stores, polka Radio shows polka cruises and travel, polka internet sites, polka associations such as the IPA (International Polka Association) and UPA (United Polka Association), and polka publications. [See Figure7]



Figure 6. Souvenir Tent at Pulaski Polka Days, 2004.

This economy operates as one component of the festivals which include souvenir stands selling polka t-shirts and novelties and recorded music stands set up by individual bands alongside the stages. Such an artist controlled and distributed musical genre is a radical alternative to the global conglomerates of pop music. The polka festival economy is protected by the provision “no carry ins” which insures that patron-brought beer and snacks don’t take away from the economic viability of the event.



Figure 7. Admission Ticket to Pulaski Polka Days, 2000.

### **The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: Kuchnia Polska [The Polish Kitchen]**

As ethnic scholars have demonstrated, cuisine and foodways play a special role in the work of ethnic memory (Gunkel, 2004, 407 – 427). Polka festivals play a key role in the preservation of ethnic foodways for folks who don't live in "the old Polish neighborhood," for those who may be five generations removed from the immigrant kitchen. Most polka events make available for sale "typically" Polish foods such as *pierogi*, *kielbasa*, *goląbki* [cabbage rolls], and *pączki* ["donuts"]. These cultural performances bring together music, dance, and foodways in powerful and emotionally charged ways that "accomplish...physical autobiography and landmarking memory (416).

At Pulaski Polka Days, concessions within the festival grounds offer a mix of American and Polish fare. One could break down the list of offerings into three cultural categories: Polish, American and Wisconsin. [See Figure 8] Wisconsin offerings include the ubiquitous Brat [Wisconsin Bratwurst]; American standards include Hot Dog, Hamburger, Dog-Gone Chick'n, French Fries, Cheese Nuggets, Onion Rings, and Soda. The Polish offerings include Polish Sausage, Cabbage Rolls, and Pierogies [sic]. Even the "Polish" specialties, spelled inconsistently from placard to placard, reflect the historical specificities of immigration. Available to fest-goers is "Czarnia [sic] Soup," [*Czarnina*,

Duck's Blood Soup], a dish virtually unknown in contemporary Poland (even absent from Polish dictionaries) but a classic for late nineteenth century émigrés from the Prussian partition of Poland. Five generations later, Polishness means *Czarnina*.



Figure 8. Food Concessions at Pulaski Polka Days, 2004.

Further study warrants evidence that these foods have little to do with sustenance and everything to do with ethnic self-presentation. When researching the historical role of *Czarnina*, one finds that it marks Western Poles, with variations appearing in Śląsk and Podlasie. The “black soup” is made with the addition of animal blood, usually geese and duck blood, collected at the slaughter for market at season’s end (Knab 71–72) served as a Fall soup. *Czarnina* is a thick rich fruit soup, soured with vinegar with prunes or raisins being the most common ingredient. In fourth generation Polish Chicago, it is served at New Year’s for its warmth as well as its symbolic richness. In nineteenth century Poland, it was a rural harvest dish. At Pulaski we find bowls of steaming *Czarnina*, decontextualized at a stand up bar in the ninety degree (F) heat of a Midwestern Wisconsin summer. Clearly, the function of *Czarnina* in this contextual deployment is to signal Polishness.

At the other end of town, Polka parade crowds are fed by parish sponsored booths on the church grounds or concessions at Smurawa’s Country Bakery, a Polish American establishment on Main Street. As the proprietor of Smurawa’s comments, “Pierogi are a staple at any polka festival.” He goes on to explain how *paczki* and *pierogi* are made at Smurawa’s and adds, “We may not have mastered the Polish language but we have mastered the *pierogi* and *paczek*.” (Quoted in *Polka Passion*).

Interestingly the hybrid experience of Polish American polka people appears in the combination of “typically” Polish foods along with traditions of the mid-twentieth century Catholic American. For example, at Pulaski Polka Days immediately following Sunday morning’s polka Mass, the ethnic kitchen is temporarily replaced by a “Pancake and Porkie Breakfast” modeled after mid-century American Catholic pancake fundraisers. At Pulaski, the proceeds are donated to charity.

### **The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: The Corner Tavern**

Victor Greene (1992) has explained that

“[E]thnomusicologists and music historians have generally ignored or even deliberately avoided a genre that has also been referred to as “people’s” music.... It was charged that ethnic old-time music was the musical entertainment of America’s lumpen proletariat, that uncultured -- according to its critics -- blue-collar working class who frequented the corner saloons and taverns of Midwestern industrial cities” (3).

The saloon and the tavern are still a part of polka community’s formation. Polka festivals always sell beer and other liquors. The now class-specific practice of cigarette smoking is also in evidence in polka culture. This is not to say that polka culture celebrates drunkenness. While drink is present, the social politics of polka don’t condone inebriation or brawling. In my years of polka attendance, I’ve never seen a single altercation, although liquor is always present. This might best be explained by Charlie Keil and Dick Blau’s (1992) description of polka as a space of ritual happiness and excess (5–10). From an anthropological point of view,

A common feature of festivity is to overindulge, to eat, drink, or spend to excess, lavishly to use up resources otherwise diligently saved. [Such rituals give] expression to a kind of festal excess that is often fundamental to celebrations...[The critique of such practices is often an attack on] festival itself, a repudiation of celebratory indulgence and dissipation out of adherence to puritanical or republican values emphasizing hard work, self-control, frugality, and simplicity (Schmidt 8).

The Puritanical disdain for festive excess explains why historically, non-Catholic and non-Polish neighbors have remarked on the “unacceptably festive” nature of Polonian urban social life. Mary Erdmans (2004) notes the scandalous image of Polonia held by Detroit’s Dutch Calvinists who kept the Sabbath through austere prayer while their Polonian counterparts set up stages in Richmond Park for polka bands and kegs of beer (29–39). The unproblematic and un-Protestant mixture of drink and festival, excess and worship, sacred and profane which characterizes the Polish Catholic world view is also reproduced in the polka festival space.

Children are, of course, present at the polka festival although alcohol is served. This is seen as neither scandalous nor sinister. To prohibit underage drinking, an identification bracelet is distributed at the festival entry gate to indicate who is of legal drinking age. This is consonant with the familial nature of many twentieth century ethnic taverns, where children accompanied dad to the corner bar and partook in orange soda. The topic of children's place and role in Polonian culture brings us to the question of education.

### **The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: The Parochial School**

The centrality of parish schools for educating immigrant Polonian children has been widely discussed in Polonian history (Pula; Coleman 27–39). This crucial cultural phenomenon has also found expression in the polka festival. The function of educating the new generation of community members has been explicitly addressed in recent festivals. In 2004, Eddie Blazonczyk's Polka Fireworks introduced Children's Polka Workshops. Their press release described the workshops as follows,

Polka musicians from various bands will gather with children of all ages to discuss, demonstrate, and teach all aspects of playing and learning their instruments. From practice to live performance, from blowing a note to bowing a string. Children are encouraged to bring along their instruments for these free fun afternoon workshops.

In a less formal way, the new generation of polka people is socialized into polka culture through multigenerational participation in polka events. I have argued that the social landscape of a polka dance is countercultural because all ages participate (2006). In an increasingly age-segregated mainstream culture, the polka party is a rare intergenerational space. Parents with babies, groups of young children, middle age couples, and the elderly all share social and cultural space on the polka dance floor.

### **The Polish Neighborhood Recreated: Polish American Public Space**

Finally, I want to address the notion of cultural space more explicitly. In a ritual that names ownership of civic public space, Pulaski Polka Days is known for its centerpiece, the polka parade. This cortege of polka-specific celebration travels down the Main Street of Pulaski from the outskirts of "downtown", past the church and taverns, and out to the festival grounds. In a wonderful collage of civic Americana, rural spectacle ala Soviet realism, and polka pride, the parade includes veterans groups, displays of farm machinery bedecked with polka signage, and the signature touch: flat-bed trucks bearing live polka bands and dancers who by-pass the spectators. A combination of generic Polish folk costumes, American war veterans, Polish American vernacular signage and polka music marks the event as "Polish American."

The Pulaski polka parade is a virtual feast of hybrid ethnic symbolism. [See Figure 9] In a stunning moment of visual pastiche, an antiquated American tractor was driven by a farmer in a *Górale* [Polish mountaineer] hat, pulling a wagon that carried polka musicians. The wagon was decorated by American flags and a hand-written sign claiming “polka music evolves in Pulaski.”



Figure 9. A postmodern pastiche of ethnic symbolism in Pulaski’s Polka Parade, 2004.

In Pulaski, the influx of Polish immigration ended in the early twentieth century, and thus the connection to contemporary Polish culture and language is minimal. However, the parade also creates a space for sharing linguistic capital of ethnic belonging. In a vulgar but humorous gesture aimed at those of Polish descent, a pickup truck pulled an advertisement for Woodmaster, a parade sponsor which runs a heating concern, which claimed, “Keep your *dupa* warm with Woodmaster.” [See Figure Nine] As chuckles moved through the crowd, the ability to laugh and to “get the joke” depended on having familiarity with the Polish word for posterior. This linguistic sign offered a way for spectators to mark their belonging to “Polishness.” It might be noted that most crowd members ranged from third to fifth generation Polish Americans, most of whom had no fluency in Polish language. But clearly, some linguistic markers remain behind. As Mary Erdmans (2004) explains, class provides cultural capital as well as material capital, encoded in linguistic and cultural practices (16). The largely Polish and working class character of the polka community’s founders remains marked in this linguistic gesture, one that would be unthinkable boorish in a contemporary Polish community of recent immigrants.



Figure 10. Polish American linguistic capital on display in the Pulaski Polka Parade, 2004.

This image is most stunning for its juxtaposition of ethnic vulgarity in front of the parish church of Pulaski. But this juxtaposition also reveals one of the driving forces of my research, that is, the reclaiming of what Mary Erdmans calls American-grown Polishness. Her sociological study, *The Grasinski Girls* (2004), notes that her subjects “posit Poland as the source of real Polishness, and in doing so they minimize their American-grown Polishness” (63). They question their own Polish American ethnicity in the language of realness, noting that they are not “that Polish.” One way to challenge the persistent discourse of inauthenticity in Polonian experience is to recognize variety within Polish American identity formation, which while varying greatly, is equally “authentic.”

### **Conclusion: Polka Festival as Diasporic Ethnoscape**

Scholarly study of polka’s use of vernacular—perhaps even vulgar--language is consonant with the exploration of the multi ethnic literatures of the United States in which polka is studied not as an expression of Polishness—but as an articulation of one version of Polish-American-ness (Gunkel 2006, 37–53). It is crucial to see polka culture as a valid, lived expression of Polish American ethnic identity while allowing for the fact that it is neither representative of all Polish American experience nor normative for all Polish American subjectivity. This allows us to consider a postmodern, post-urban, post-emigration form of ethnic identity formation without discounting it as fallen or suspect. [See Figure 11]



Figure 11. Mobile Home in the Ethnic “Neighborhood” displaying Polish American symbols.

In his critical work on cultural dimensions of globalization, Arjun Appadurai (1996) distinguishes between culture and the cultural. While culture is associated with a static conception of a people associated with specific traits, the cultural refers to situated differences, contrasts, and comparisons “that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities” (13). Appadurai’s distinction expresses the fluidity of identity associated with diasporic movements. Describing complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes, he notes that ethnic images are diasporic. Appadurai recognizes the synergistic and serendipitous nature of the flow of representations. I would argue that this is the nature of the symbolic landscape from which Polish American polka people draw to fashion their group identity. In this landscape, symbols of farm prosperity, twentieth century nationalisms, hybrid music, Polish folk culture, and American ethnic urbanism all emerge as a field from which polka people craft their sense of identity and belonging. This sense of Polish American identity is formed in the space of a mobile community of polka music fans who recreate a movable Polish American “neighborhood” on the festival circuit.

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