Fox, Aaron. 2004. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reviewed by David Sanjek

One of the principal tools for acquiring and maintaining cachet in the social commonwealth of the barroom or roadhouse springs from a person's capacity to tell a story, and the more humorous or idiosyncratic the better. Ethnographic efforts to convey the ethos of just such an environment and means of communication often, sadly, sap the life out of this kind of informal discourse and render routine what would otherwise be irregular and idiosyncratic. Aaron Fox's *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* constitutes one of those rare occasions when conjuring up a world most readers, certainly those from the academic domain, rarely encounter does not compromise either its citizens or their self-determined means of communication.

Even the form into which Fox lays out his transcriptions of their conversations toys purposefully with the conventions of the written record. He employs typographical tools and spacing on the blank page in order to convey stresses, pauses, elisions, and overlaps so as not to lose that "high-involvement style" that gives this dialogue its funkiness and flavor (xiv). In the following passage, Miss Ann Roose—a divorced military wife, mother of three, committed country music fan, and legendary saloonkeeper in the outskirts of Austin, Texas—recounts the familiar trope of the rural naïf colliding with the complexities of urban sophistication:

> You heard the story 'bout this guy
> this hilly that went
> up north you know
> and went into this HIGH CLASS restaurant . . .
> and he was
> boy he was puttin' on the DOG thing
> he was REALLY rich
> [confidentially]
> – course he was just a country picker
> didn't know too much –
> and he was TALKIN' 'bout how good he was
> and how honest he was
> as he was walkin' out of the RESTaurant
> he picked up the toothpick
> picked his teeth

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> and put it back in there
> and he says,
> "*Y'know, I'll bet there's a lot of people stealin' these things*!" (102)

To this, the book's author responds affirmatively, "Old country!," as a means of conveying how a wealth of social practice and cultural praxis lies embedded in what superficially comes across as the absentmindedness of a down home dimwit.

The comic trope of the rural rube alienated from the customs and concepts of urban life litters the repertoire of several generations of country comedians. Whether groundbreaking figures like Rod Brasfield and Minnie Pearl, who shook the rafters of the Ryman Auditorium, or more contemporary sketch artists like Archie Campbell or Junior Samples featured on *Hee Haw*, their punchlines pivoted on the collision between naïve protagonists and worldly-wise interlocutors. Miss Ann's anecdote, however, amounts to much more than another cornpone kneeslapper. What resonates throughout this exchange is how it epitomizes the manner in which abstract concepts can come in many packages, sometimes disguised as colloquial chit-chat. Moreover, the vehicle of the joke permits the participants to debate about behavior and beliefs they hold close to their hearts, while the author's rejoinder reinforces how the central expressive medium in their lives, country music, can separate the real from the ersatz.

That conundrum of what distinguishes the true-to-life and the artificial has plagued the scholarship, as well as the informal social discourse, attached to country music—if not popular music altogether—for quite some time. In the recent collection *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, I contributed an introductory essay that attempts to draw attention to the fact that "whenever we overlook the complexity and contradiction in country music, we simply encourage the desire Joli Jensen eloquently dubs 'purity by proxy'—the insistence that 'other people and forms manifest and maintain virtue for us'" (2005:xv). We do not clarify anything about the subject when we attempt to make sense of it by demonizing that which we dislike, or by conveniently overlooking considerations that do not yield easy answers. What distinguishes Aaron Fox's challenging and commandingly constructed *Real County* is that he tackles this disorienting state of affairs by tackling head-on the very consumers of country music, examining the way in which a particular subgroup of fans use the genre to make sense not only of what is "true" and "false," but also to make sense of their lives.

Aaron Fox's intellectually engaging and elegantly composed study of this environment and its habitués possesses a profoundly humanistic dimension in that it grants dignity and complexity to a body of overlooked individuals too often tarnished with the denigrating stereotype of "white-

trash." Academic literature that investigates everyday behavior of ordinary individuals typically loses something of the human pulse in the process, despite the best intentions of the author. By contrast, Fox never denies his subjects their full range of expression. He may concentrate on transcribing empirical evidence yet, at same time, Fox successfully manages to incorporate all the messy drama of daily life so as not to suffocate the activity under examination or discourage its productive agitation. As a consequence, *Real Country* pulses with the dense detail and narrative momentum of a well-paced novel. We turn its pages as much anticipating the revelation of another aspect of its characters' consciousnesses as much as we anticipate the theoretical implications that can be drawn from that evidence.

Fox's organization of the rich body of observation and assessment contained in *Real Country* guides the reader in a clear and thoughtful manner. After introducing his setting, cast of characters, and set of theoretical questions in the first two chapters, he tackles the modes through which this community articulates space, subjectivity, and the stereotype of the country rube in his third and fourth chapters: "Out the Country" and "The Fool in the Mirror." The fifth chapter, "'Feeling' and 'Relating,'" takes up the tricky matter of affectivity, how the "feeling" embodied in a country song conveys significant matters through allusions to memory, emotionalism, and the groove created by a collection of musicians. As Fox observes,

> 'Feeling' infuses sociable relationships between musicians and listeners, and among listeners themselves, refining intense affects of nostalgia and loss. 'Feeling' is, ultimately, essential for the production and curating of social memory. In this sense, 'feeling' is a quality that transcends lexicalization and abstract recognition. (188)

Subsequently, in "Bring Me Up in a Beer Joint," the author tackles with greater specificity the actual repertoire performed by these individuals and how the textures of speech and song interfuse and intersect. The next chapter, "The Women Take Care of That," addresses the gender dynamics of both the country genre and its fans, how the material often allows for critique in what is customarily assumed to be a thoroughly misogynistic arena. "The Art of Singing" focuses on the performative dimension of this setting, the ways in which country performers "routinely produce intonationally heightened 'speech' that is metrically closer to the rhythm of 'ordinary' talk, with in the boundaries of song performances" (274). He concludes with "I Hang My Head and Cry," emphasizing that the more a musical performance embodies the social complexity of its performer, the more "authentic" it will be. In other words, "Knowing all the words did not mean knowing a song. The right words had to be saturated with the sweat and specificity of a par-

ticular body, a particular life, and a particular voice" (315).

Throughout this compelling and often superbly written commentary, *Real Country* stretches our intellectual muscles, staking out a body of innovative tools for making sense of some crucial, and often fuzzy, concepts, like "authenticity" or "community" that get tossed about willy-nilly by fans of country music in particular (though the notions preoccupy aficionados of virtually all forms of popular culture). Fox accomplishes this act of conceptual resuscitation in part by examining how seemingly random and unconsidered banter conveys a significant quotient of sophistication. At its core, *Real Country* endeavors therefore to unpack the extensive and allusive meanings of "voice," and all that notion conveys whether sung, spoken, or spit out without aiming to convey any particular meaning whatsoever. He writes,

> for working-class Texans, the voice is a privileged medium for the construction of meaning and identity and thus for the production of a distinction "class culture." Song and singing comprise the expressive apotheosis of this valued vocality, and song, in turn, is locally understood as a consciously elaborated discourse *about* (the) voice. (20)

What Fox therefore attaches his considerable powers of compassion and intellect upon is "the cultural life of sound" as the active agent generating "voice" (x). The members of Miss Ann's extended community are not passive consumers of culture. Songs matter to them not only as telling commentaries upon their lives but also as elements in an ever-expanding repertoire that they perform with and for one another. That repertoire comes to life and continues to bear resonance among his subjects for "speaking and singing artfully, improvisationally, and with minimal reference to exchange value have remained essential to the social construction of history, identity and sociability for these Texans" (20).

The principal locale for Fox's investigations is the town of Lockhart, Texas, located on the outskirts of Austin, where he did his graduate studies. Over the course of his research, Lockhart was slowly becoming assimilated by the suburbanization of the capital city, for the area's population growth at the time ranked amongst the fastest-growing in the country. In the 1990s, when Fox established his alliances, Lockhart was losing many of its rural associations while its working-class constituency increasingly gave way to an influx of the middle-class. Its surrounding county, Caldwell, possessed a deceptively low population density—roughly 25,000 residents in 544 square miles—for more than 50 percent resided in just two towns, Lockhart and Luling. Roughly three-quarters of the county was classified as farmland, with average individual residences ranging between 200 and 300 acres and earning less than $20,000 a year. As a consequence, few residents survived

on that income alone, one of an array of factors eroding the region's pastoral veneer. Nearly 30% of all persons and 38% of all children barely survived below the federal poverty line. During the time of Fox's involvement, crime increased, educational standing tenuously held its own, and more than a quarter of the county's residents lacked health insurance. Roughly two-thirds of the population was dubbed "white," the remaining individuals being predominantly Hispanic. Racial violence remained sporadic or inconsequential, though the small number of local African Americans possessed the least political power and the greatest degree of poverty of any single segment of the region (65–73).

The locus of community identity and the focal point of the residents' "tightly valued, deeply personal sociality" for many years had been Miss Ann's place, formerly called the Little Bottle; when she retired in 1994, the moveable feast transferred to the garage and show place run by Larry "Hoppy" Hopkins (73). Becoming a valued member and active participant in these spheres permitted Fox to ground his investigations in a determined locale with a more or less consistent population. That group was unified by an indefatigable allegiance to what Barbara Ching has dubbed "hard country": the repertoire performed by such icons as George Jones, Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton, and Loretta Lynn (Ching 2000). What marked the population of these two establishments was also the fact that they remained active, not passive consumers of commercial culture—learning their material of choice by heart and performing it with and for one another. Many of the dialogues Fox transposes take place as guitars are strummed, harmonies ironed out, and precious lyrics recalled from memory as, once again, this circle of peers, parents, and progeny take up the music that amplifies their lives. By choosing this kind of performance-centered social sample, Fox separates himself from the ample literature that focuses on the articulation of identity through consumption alone (Fiske 1989; Lewis 1992) and allies himself instead with works such as Ruth Finnegan's study of British amateur and part-time professional musicians (1989) and Barry Shank's analysis of the professional music community of Austin, Texas (1994).

Fox immerses himself within the social sphere of Lockhart and the extended family that established a collective residence at Miss Ann's and Hoppy's. His goal was to address important questions about the social practices surrounding country music:

> How were working-class fandom, musical consumption, and local appropriation actually socially practiced? What creative possibilities for subjective identification and agency emerged from the mediated encounter between song and social practice? What roles were played in this encounter

> by the voice, by conventions of musical and verbal and danced performance and by musical metadiscourse—discourse *about* music? (48)

What particularly impresses me about the manner in which Fox answers these and other inquiries comes down to the degree to which he trusts that the answers would come cloaked in language and assumptions that others could consider vacuous or incoherent and enunciated by individuals that could be dismissed as inarticulate or insufficiently self-conscious. Instead, he remained convinced that "You lived for people in stories of the crazy and the idiosyncratic and artful things you did which carried the reciprocal obligation to tell stories of the crazy and idiosyncratic and artful things that other people did" (11). He recognizes as well the necessary and inevitable oscillations between proximity and distance, articulation and incoherence that mediate their lives.

These shifts arise not only because of Fox's contrary roles of participant and analyst, but also because of the way his subjects convey and withhold emotion and understandings. He writes,

> This shifting between depth and distance was the rhythm of so many of my relationships with country people, but I was coming to understand that it was a working-class way of managing 'feeling' that was sublimely and adoptively rooted in a cultural dialectic of intensity and commitment. (14)

Fox's willingness to understand and bridge gaps that could prove lethal for anyone who adopts a condescending posture remind one that, at a moment in our social history when citizens divide themselves on the basis of ideological commitments so razor sharp that even simple encounters amount to bleeding, the emotional openness Fox strove to embody illustrates a kind of empathetic democracy that our society sorely requires.

The other compelling dynamic at work in Fox's analysis reflects his complex comprehension of the phenomenon of music as a commercial commodity and the fraught relationship between the marketed artifact and the consumer's hankering about authenticity. At first, one gets the uncomfortable impression that Fox wants to erect an indissoluble boundary between "genres of popular music as fields of production and consumption" and "genres of popular music as fields of popular practice mediated primarily by ritualized forms of intimate social interaction" (30). However, as he engages his subjects in dialogue, he recognizes that when they deliberately and energetically distinguish between performers (particularly denigrating most slick contemporary country artists), they emotionally and conceptually transfer their engagement in the cash nexus into an exchange between fel-

low citizens. Recordings they admire validate an "intense personalization of the performer/audience relationship in memory" so that they can conceive "the figure of the singer or a metaphoric old friend or lover" (174). This leads inevitably to a social dynamic of emotional and aesthetic exchange that lies at the heart of their "vision of perfection: a live performance in a timeless utopian beer joint" (150). An "authentic" performance and a genuine interpersonal encounter therefore occurs when someone outside their customary sphere of reference, such as Fox himself when he first entered the doors of these establishments, validates their role in this universe by "talkin' shit" during their performance of a country song, allowing the creative exchange of musical performance to solidify their incorporation in a complex, and initially inhibiting, arena.

Some theoretically-inclined individuals may denigrate this formulation as an overly personalized and, therefore, facile approach to creative exchange. Yet the dynamic gets to the heart of Fox's very project: the effort to locate the affective investment that motivates much everyday speech and the consumption of popular culture. The pursuit of the genuine possesses for Fox and his subjects both a formal dynamics as well as an interpersonal penetration of the barriers of race, class and creed. "'Real' country," Fox writes, "had to face both inward towards conventions of musical style and outward toward the deep relationships that music constructed, and to face both ways in the same artful moment" (17). That said, it should be added that Fox chooses not to focus as much on the element of race in that definition as some would wish. He neither ignores nor dismisses the presence of Hispanic individuals at Miss Ann's or Hoppy's, but as their role in the social spheres he examines was marginal, so too is their part in the definitions laid out in *Real Country.*

Nonetheless, Fox's valuable, eminently readable book opens up avenues of inquiry and observation that potentially can take the academic study of popular music into novel and productive directions. Those committed to country as a genre, authenticity as an issue, ethnography as a practice or "voice' as a conundrum will benefit from Fox's "coronary intervention"—a lovely phrase—into the lives and points of view of the citizens of Miss Ann's and Hoppy's establishments (157). These simple but far from simple-minded citizens of the working class possess skill at "talkin' shit" and constructing home-grown theories that illuminate some of the most vexing and important themes in the study of popular music and the people whose lives are enriched by it.

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