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Pride and Prejudice: The White Working Class Tradition of American Country Music

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Every Sunday afternoon on AFKN Radio, you can hear "American Country Countdown," a syndicated radio program that counts down the top 40 country music hits of the week. Listening to the program, I was struck by how uniform most of the songs are, not only in their sound but in their content; except for sentimental love songs (which are common to every form of popular music), almost all of the hits either celebrate old-fashioned rural/small town lifestyles and values, or express patriotism and national pride. The prominent place of "American Country Countdown" in the programming of the American Forces Network is a reflection of the large proportion of white working class men (and women) in the U.S. military, and perhaps also an endorsement of the values and the particular sense of American identity that the music has come to represent. Indeed, many country musicians endorse the U.S. military as well,

both in promotional campaigns and in their songs; especially after 9/11, the country music chart seems to be dominated by songs that appeal for a return to traditional values (such as "Back When" by Tim McGraw) or that valorize patriotism and militarism (such as "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" by Toby Keith). Listening to these songs, I was also struck by how different they seem, in sound and content, from the classics of earlier country musicians like Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn and so on. Some music critics see contemporary country music as having little connection to the Southern and working class roots of the form; Tony Scherman, for example, writes that country music has been "severed from its working-class origins" and become "a refuge for culturally homeless Americans everywhere" (quoted in Peterson 222). This kind of argument, however, is rather simplistic. We need to look more carefully at the history of country music to see the implications of its Southern white working class origins, and to understand how we get from a Jimmie Rodgers to a Toby Keith.

From the Appalachian Mountains to Nashville

While the conventional history of country music posits that the form was created by musicians like Jimmie Rodgers out of folk music in the Appalachian mountains and the rural communities of the South, the term "country music" did not even exist in the 1920s, and Rodgers was recorded and marketed as a folk musician. There was a great interest in American folk music, especially Southern white folk music, at the time, and many of the earliest recordings in the U.S. were of so-called "folk" musicians like Rodgers. This interest can be traced back to the turn of the century and the quest to define what is American, which in the South in particular was inseparable from defining and preserving a white heritage. Remote rural areas like the Appalachian mountains

were thought to "[preserve] the genes, culture, and values of the nation's Anglo-Saxon pioneers" (Campbell 103), and the indigenous arts of these regions, including the music performed by local residents for generations, were extolled because they were the clearest and most effective representations of that culture. The so-called "hillbillies" of the Appalachian mountains were often depicted as ignorant and comical, but also as the most authentic bearers of a white American culture and tradition; indeed, their ignorance and odd behavior were signs of their geographic isolation and cultural purity. The systematic collection of Appalachian folk music in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the promotion of musicians like Rodgers as hillbillies who perform old-fashioned folk songs, can be seen as part of a "movement to preserve and propagate pure Anglo-Saxon musical forms" (Peterson 59), and thereby to define what is most authentically American. Hillbilly music was not something to merely laugh about; it served, as Gavin Campbell argues, to represent a vision shared by its promoters and admirers of "a common past, a common race, a common culture, and a common identity" (141).

This is the cultural context within which Rodgers became so popular that he would later be considered the first star, and perhaps even the founder, of country music. But while his fans may have expected and therefore heard cultural purity and folk authenticity in his songs, he was a professional musician who was more interested in finding and developing popular styles than in preserving a tradition. He began his musical career at the age of twelve in a traveling medicine show, singing and sometimes also performing blackface comedy routines; such medicine shows were one of the few venues available to musicians like Rodgers, and provided so little income that he had to take various "railroading jobs" to earn a living as he moved around the country (Peterson 43). The hardships that he experienced and the rambling, rootless life that he lived are reflected in songs like "The Brakeman's Blues."

Portland Maine is just the same as sunny Tennessee
Portland Maine is just the same as sunny Tennessee
Any old place I hang my hat is home sweet home to me

Went down to the depot and I looked up on the board
Went down to the depot and I looked up on the board
It read it's good times here but better on down the road

To any listener familiar with African-American music, it is quite obvious that "the dominant element in his sound is blues" (Peterson 48). As the song's title suggests, "The Brakeman's Blues" is more or less a conventional blues, with the typical AAB structure in each verse, and like many of his songs, the lyrics sound like a collection of verses that he sampled from several blues songs, which is in fact what he often did. The only element that marks the song as different from conventional blues, and thus as white rather than black music, is his peculiar style of yodeling between the verses. I suspect that he considered himself primarily a blues musician, or at least an imitator of the blues, but he was labeled and promoted as a white folk musician because of the "strategic decision" by record companies at the time "to market music by whites and African Americans separately" (Peterson 4), in effect segregating music that had always been the product of cultural miscegenation.

The lyrics of "The Brakeman's Blues" reflect the fatalism characteristic of many blues songs; while he imagines that there will be better times "on up the road," he finds himself "wishing to God I was dead." But more than merely an imitation of the blues, this fatalism also reflects the hard life that he shared with the black musicians who traveled the South to perform their music, sometimes even in the same medicine shows. He would eventually be found dead in a hotel room in 1933, with his lungs full of blood "due to the effects of advanced tuberculosis and compounded by years of hard living and heavy

drinking" (Peterson 50). "T.B. Blues" foreshadows his death and provides an even clearer example of that fatalism.

> I've been fighting like a lion, looks like I'm going to lose
> I've been fighting like a lion, looks like I'm going to lose
> Cause there ain't nobody ever beat the T.B. blues
> I've got the T.B. blues
>
> Gee but that graveyard is a lonesome place
> Lord but that graveyard is a lonesome place
> They put you on your back, throw that mud down in your face
> I've got the T.B. blues

It is one of the most personal of his songs as well as one of the most unaffectedly bluesy. Instead of yodeling between the verses, he more or less yodels the refrain "I've got the T.B. blues" in a way that is bluesy but also distinctively his. What this attests to is that he was not a mere imitator but a musician steeped in blues tradition; the blues was as much a part of his Southern working class heritage as hillbilly music. Thus, if Rodgers is the founder of country music, its roots are not simply in the white culture preserved for generations in the isolation of the Appalachian mountains but in the cultural miscegenation that has always characterized American popular music. Ironically, that process of crossfertilization and (for some whites, especially in the South) bastardization of American culture was precisely what the promotion of hillbilly music was supposed to counteract. His image as a hillbilly folk musician was a product of the combined forces of ideology and the market, not of his music itself. In his many promotional photographs, he clearly prefers to present himself as the professional musician that he was, but he was given nicknames like "The Singing Brakeman" and often presented in railroad uniforms and comical outfits supposedly worn by genuine Southern

rural folks. The "Singing Brakeman" image emphasizes his working class identity and suggests that he is an amateur musician, always presented with the carefree smile of a simple, hard-working man who rides the railroads with his guitar; in other words, it is a constructed image of authenticity.

The popularity of Southern "folk" music like that of Rodgers led to more opportunities for a growing number of professional musicians. Instead of medicine shows, they could play in roadhouse bars called honky tonks, and eventually work their way to one of the many radio barn dances, the most famous of which was the Grand Ole Opry, a live music and entertainment program on the radio station WSM. The popularity and influence of the Grand Ole Opry drew more and more musicians to Nashville, making it the center of country music performance, recording and song-publishing. For the first time, there was "a country mainstream" (Escott 74), and that mainstream has been based in Nashville ever since. But the music of Nashville still did not have a fixed label to define it; when Billboard magazine started charting the hits of this music in 1941, the chart was called "Top Hillbilly Hits" (Daley 29). The style of music that emerged from performing for the working class patrons of the honky tonks became known as honky tonk music, which Colin Escott calls "the white man's blues" (47): songs about hard living and hard drinking, full of broken hearts and regrets. The crossfertilization suggested by Escott's characterization of honky tonk music is also revealed by the number of blues songs that have "honky tonk" in their titles; in songs by both white and black musicians, we find signs of the culture(s) as well as economic conditions shared by the Southern working class in spite of racial segregation. However, the racialized and politically motivated promotion of the music performed by white musicians was continued in Nashville, and perhaps reinforced by the concentration of country music production in that city.

Hank Williams is the iconic figure of honky tonk music, and his songs have

come to define its style and sentiments, as we can see in an obvious example such as "Honky Tonk Blues."

> Well I left my home down on the rural route
> I told my pa I'm going stepping out
> And get the honky tonk blues, hey the honky tonk blues
> Oh Lord I got 'em, I got the honky tonk blues
>
> Well I went to a dance and I wore out my shoes
> Woke up this morning wishing I could lose
> Them jumping honky tonk blues, hey the honky tonk blues
> Oh Lord I got 'em, I got the honky tonk blues

This is a song to dance to, as patrons did in the honky tonks, but it is, like so much of country music, a song of dissatisfaction, restlessness and regret. The singer tries to escape from the boredom of his "home down on the rural route" but ends up with nothing but regrets, and eventually decides to "scat right back to my pappy's farm;" in honky tonk music, as befits "the white man's blues," there is no escape from hardship and no means of getting satisfaction except the music itself. If Rodgers was the first star of country music, Williams was its first superstar, a musician who crossed over into pop and whose records sold in numbers previously unimagined in country music. His musical achievement, however, was not so much originality (any more than Rodgers' was) but his ability to distill the various elements of the music down to their purest form, thus creating simple songs that are so classic that they continue to be covered by country, blues, rock and even jazz musicians. In "Ramblin' Man," the influence of the blues is filtered through the emerging conventions of country music, featuring riffs/leads on steel guitar and fiddle and a steady rhythm anchored by the chugging chords of Williams' guitar, and he also incorporates Rodgers' trademark yodeling in his singing.

I can settle down and be doing just fine
Till I hear an old train rolling down the line
Then I hurry straight home and pack
And if I didn't go, I believe I'd blow my stack
I love you baby, but you gotta understand
When the lord made me, he made a ramblin' man

Some folks might say that I'm no good
That I wouldn't settle down if I could
But when that open road starts to calling me
There's something over the hill that I gotta see
Sometimes it's hard, but you gotta understand
When the Lord made me, he made a ramblin' man

Like Rodgers' brakeman, the singer is a rootless drifter who keeps searching for that "something over the hill that I gotta see," and the song ends with the fatalism typical of both country music and the blues; he imagines himself in his grave, having been called by God to the only "home" that he will ever find. And like Rodgers, Williams also lived out what he sang, getting kicked off the Grand Ole Opry at the height of his popularity because of his unreliability and eventually drinking himself to death in 1952.

A year after his death, Billboard replaced "Hillbilly" with "Country" and devoted a special issue to the renamed music, valorizing it as "our native art [whose] inspiration springs from the heart of a nation" (quoted in Peterson 199). This echoes the call in the early decades of the twentieth century for an authentic representation of "a common culture" that preserves the values of white America, and Nashville sought to establish its music as the primary expression of this cultural heritage, as "the heart" of the nation. The Billboard special issue coincided with "a memorial celebration" of the twentieth anniversary of Rodgers' death, which "signaled the beginning of the formal

construction of roots for the newly designated country music field" (Peterson 200); Nashville in particular promoted "the idea of a country music heritage" (224) that would link it to the broader heritage of traditional American values. In the 1920s, "local chapters of the Ku Klux Klan sponsored fiddling contests" (Campbell 135) in an attempt to preserve the purity of Southern white culture and reinforce segregation, but new anxieties superceded such racial anxieties in the 1950s. In the context of McCarthy and the Cold War, country music came to represent "the voice of the plain folk" (Fontenot 143) whose values were fundamentally opposed to communism and the un-American values of communist sympathizers. The Korean War, for example, elicited country songs whose dominant themes were "patriotism and pain" and "the reaffirmation of religious faith" (Tribe 137). However, as we can see in the cases of Rodgers and Williams, the politics of country music often have little to do with the actual content of the songs. The fiddling contests sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan, after all, featured elderly fiddlers who did not even sing; while the music itself served no purpose except making the audience dance, the Klansmen used it to promote their political agenda. In other words, the politics of country music are determined by its political usage and the cultural/historical context within which the music is produced.

Hillbillies, Hippies and the Politics of Authenticity

If, as Aaron Fox argues, the popularity of country music has always rested on its "privileged claim to speak for the nation in the voice of (white) working-class experience" (172), then it is not surprising that its popularity peaks in times of national crisis or intensified cultural conflict. After it peaked with Hank Williams in the early 1950s, it declined steadily as popular music came to be dominated by rock and roll and a youth culture interested more in

the new and shocking than in the old-fashioned and conventional. Especially during the later years of the 1960s, with the growing visibility and influence of the counterculture, country music must have appeared irredeemably conservative, not to mention hopelessly un-hip. But of course, not every music listener was sympathetic to the counterculture, or young and hip, and for those listeners country music became an alternative; a new generation of country musicians became hugely successful by providing an outlet for those who "felt alienated within their own country" (Escott 129). The emergence of stars like Loretta Lynn and Merle Haggard can be understood better in the context of the resentment and increasingly reactionary political views of many working class whites, the so-called "silent majority" whom Nixon and the Republican Party claimed to speak for. The same working class whites have always been the core fan base of country music, so it regained its popularity by becoming "the rallying cry of the far right" (Escott 126).

Loretta Lynn grew up in the coal-mining area of Kentucky, married at age thirteen, and had four children by the time that she was eighteen. In other words, she knew first hand what it meant to be, and to be called, a hillbilly; her songs reflect the experiences and values of people in places like her hometown Butcher's Hollow, and none do so more clearly and directly than her classic from 1969, "Coal Miner's Daughter."

> Well I was born a coal miner's daughter
> In a cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler
> We were poor but we had love
> That's the one thing my daddy made sure of
> He shoveled coal to make a poor man's dollar
>
> My daddy worked all night in the Van Leer coal mines
> All day long in the field hoeing corn
> While mommy rocked the babies at night

And read the bible by the coal oil light
And everything would start all over come break of morn

The sound of "Coal Miner's Daughter" is as firmly rooted as its content, featuring instruments like banjo and steel guitar to echo both the honky tonk style and the much older tradition of Appalachian string bands. Lynn makes her working class roots explicit and also very specific, using local references such as "a cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler" and "the Van Leer coal mines;" these references have the effect of highlighting the authenticity of the song, both in expressing her lived experience and in representing rural/small town Southern society. Lynn's parents were so poor that their children "didn't have shoes to wear," but they worked hard day and night and "read the bible" to feed and properly educate their children, and no matter how hard their lives were, "to complain there was no need." While I do not believe that Lynn had any political intentions in writing this song, it clearly reflects the kind of working class sentiments that allowed country music to be appropriated for the promotion of reactionary politics. The residents of "Butcher Holler" (the hillbilly pronunciation is of course significant) are simple, hard-working folks who believe in God and traditional values, and they do not complain about their poverty or hardships; they are, in other words, the antithesis of the hipsters and hippies and revolutionaries of the counterculture.

Lynn sings the song with obvious but understated emotion, and her voice rises only once, when she sings, after detailing her family's hardships and her parents' determination to provide a good home for their eight children, "Yeah I'm proud to be a coal miner's daughter." That one burst of intense emotion expresses family pride, working class pride and Southern pride simultaneously. Her pride also has a sense of defiance; she refuses to feel sorry for herself or ashamed of where she is from, and wears her hillbilly heritage like a badge of

honor. The authenticity that Lynn strives for makes identity inseparable from class and place and validates the traditional family values of places like Butcher's Hollow, so that the song conveys what may be called a politics of authenticity. Pride and prejudice have always been inextricably linked to each other in the tradition of country music. In 1917, Martha Sawyer Gielow wrote (in an essay titled "The Call of the Race") that the Appalachian mountains were the last refuge of "an unadulterated Anglo-Saxon race" and also the soil containing the "very 'seed corn' of American patriotism" (quoted in Campbell 118); this combination of white supremacy and nationalism, or white nationalism, is the root of the great interest at the time in the folk music of the Appalachian mountains, and ultimately of the emergence and popularity of country music, which after all was labeled "Hillbilly" music until the 1950s. The claim that country music is the authentic music of the hillbilly was from the beginning a fabricated idea, and required the construction and maintenance of an extensive iconography of authenticity. By the 1960s, country music was clearly a music driven by nostalgia; in the last verse of "Coal Miner's Daughter," Lynn returns to Butcher's Hollow as an adult.

> Well a lot of things have changed since way back then
> And it's so good to be back home again
> Not much left but the floor
> Nothing lives here any more
> Except the memories of a coal miner's daughter

While she may look back on her childhood and her memories of her parents with longing, there is nothing left that she can return to. Indeed, it is because she is so far removed from the hardships of her past that she can romanticize them, and such romantic views of an idealized past are part of the politics of authenticity.

In the iconography of country music, no musician exemplifies its reactionary tendencies more clearly, or expresses its pride and prejudice more explicitly, than Merle Haggard. At the height of the countercultural and anti-Vietnam War movements, he recorded his trademark song "Okie from Muskogee."

> We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee
> And we don't take our trips on LSD
> We don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street
> We like living right, and being free
>
> We don't make no party out of loving
> We like holding hands and pitching woo
> We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy
> Like the hippies out in San Francisco do

He fuses "living right" with reactionary politics, just as Nixon's "silent majority" rhetoric did. The lifestyle and values of the good people of his archetypal small town are the antithesis of the decadence and radicalism of "the hippies out in San Francisco;" the people of Muskogee, Oklahoma, are as American as those hippies are un-American. And in this binary moral/political equation, hairstyle equals ideology and protesting the Vietnam War equals treason. "Being free" apparently does not include freedom of opinion or even of lifestyle. In the chorus of the song, he declares, as Lynn does in "Coal Miner's Daughter," that he is "proud to be an Okie from Muskogee." Unlike Lynn, however, his pride is explicitly political; Muskogee is a town that "still [waves] 'Old Glory' down at the courthouse," proudly defending a government and a way of life that are increasingly under attack. The parallels between "Okie from Muskogee" and "Coal Miner's Daughter" make it clear that this kind of reactionary nationalism is the other side of the working class pride so movingly expressed by Lynn. Both songs were recorded in 1969, the same

year in which the Woodstock Festival was held, and both reached the top of the Billboard country music chart, reflecting the values and anxieties of many Americans who felt besieged by the cultural and political turmoil around them.

In his better moments, Haggard is not as bluntly and stridently reactionary as he is in "Okie from Muskogee." Because of songs like "Workin' Man Blues," he was sometimes called "the poet of the common man."

> It's a big job getting by with nine kids and a wife
> But I been a workin' man dang near all my life
> Keep on working, long as my two hands are fit to use
> I drink my beer at a tavern, and I sing a little bit of these workin' man blues
>
> Well I keep my nose on the grindstone, work hard every day
> Get tired on the weekend after I draw my pay
> But I go back working, come Monday morning I'm right back with my crew
> I drink a little beer that evening, sing a little bit of these workin' man blues

He speaks for working class men whose only escape from the drudgery of their work and the burden of supporting their families is beer and country music, and he does it in their voice, without sounding affected or condescending. However, the last verse of the song includes a line that, like "Okie from Muskogee," combines pride and prejudice, although less bluntly: "Never been on welfare, and that's one place I'll never be." The working class pride displayed here is quite obvious, but the prejudice implicit in the reference to "welfare" is more ambiguous. It is also troubling, because it seems to reflect the racist sentiments that were part of the resentment felt by the "silent majority" of working class whites; welfare was, as it continues to be today, a racially

charged issue, and has always provided an effective way to mobilize working class resentment. While it may be unfair to say that country music became "the rallying cry of the far right" in the 1960s, its politics and expressions of white working class pride take on added significance in the context of reactionary politics engendered by the cultural turmoil at the time.

The Nashville Machine and "the American Way"

There are two constants in the history of country music. One is the pride and prejudice that have produced and sustained it. The politics of a Merle Haggard may seem quite far removed from the moral ambiguities of pre-1950s country music, in which many songs were peopled by drifters and honky tonk men, gamblers and cheaters, outlaws and convicts; however, regardless of the actual content of the songs, country music has its roots in the racial segregation and anxieties of the South, and has maintained a sense of working class pride, combined with a valorization of rural/small town lifestyles and values. The other constant is Nashville, which is responsible for constructing the tradition of country music. As is evident to anyone who has listened to the songs of the musicians that I have already discussed as well as to the songs on "American Country Countdown," the sound of country music has changed so much over the years that much of what is played on country radio stations today bears little resemblance to the style of music originally labeled hillbilly/country music. But then again, Rodgers was more or less a blues musician, and Williams, who more than any other musician epitomizes the classic country style, has influenced almost every form of American popular music. However, while Toby Keith may not sound much like Rodgers or Williams, the music produced in Nashville at any given period tends to have the uniform sound of the factory product that it is.

The engine of the country music industry is the Nashville machine. The first Country Music Disk Jockey Convention was organized by WSM and held in Nashville in 1953, and eventually led to the formation of the Country Music Association in 1959. The CMA has maintained the Nashville machine's control over country music radio, even though country music is now an industry with two billion dollars in annual record sales and more than 2,600 radio stations devoted exclusively to the form (Daley 13, 293). Nashville is now dominated by media conglomerates (with control over record production, radio, video, and networks like Country Music Television), but the Nashville divisions of those conglomerates are still run much as they were in the 1950s, and often by the same individuals or their "apprentices" (Daley 25). A small number of session musicians (known by insiders as "the A Team") still play on most records produced in Nashville (Daley 82), and each division has a roster of staff writers who write or co-write most of the songs. The resulting creative process is "an assembly line where many parts are right out of a standard inventory" (Daley 226). And the control that the Nashville machine has over country music is not only aesthetic but also ideological; in other words, the values and politics of the songs produced in Nashville are as regulated and delimited as their sound. This does not mean that Nashville is the only place where country music is performed and produced, nor does it mean that all country music is musically conventional and politically reactionary. There are many musicians whose music is more eclectic and experimental than the factory product that comes out of Nashville, and there are also some politically progressive musicians like Steve Earle, who became notorious for his song "John Walker's Blues," written from the perspective of the young American who was captured by the U.S. military while fighting for the Taliban regime of Afghanistan. But unless a song is produced by the Nashville machine it does not get played on country music radio stations or CMT and therefore does not

appear on the Billboard country chart. The definition of a country song has little to do with what it sounds like; it is country if and because it is produced in Nashville, and something un-definable like "alternative country" if produced anywhere else.

The political usage and appropriation of the working class pride and traditional values of country music can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of its history, but the consolidation of the country music industry has made such political manipulation easier. At a concert in 2003, Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks stated, "Just so you know, we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas" (quoted in Rudder). This statement caused a virulent backlash; they were branded as traitors on talk shows and even by other country musicians, and country radio stations banned their songs and organized pro-war rallies at which the main attraction was the ritual smashing of their CDs. These rallies, billed as "Rally for America," were organized by country radio stations owned by Clear Channel Communications, the largest radio conglomerate in the U.S. Many Clear Channel executives are known to have close ties to George Bush; for example, Vice Chairman Tom Hicks "purchased the Texas Rangers [in 1998] in a deal that made Mr. Bush a multimillionaire" (Krugman). While this does not prove that Clear Channel executives were trying to manipulate public opinion before the Presidential election by using their control over country music radio, what happened to the Dixie Chicks is a disturbing illustration of the remarkable concentration of power in Nashville and the country music industry. On the other hand, many country musicians did not need corporate pressure to support the war effort. As part of the "Spirit of America" tour, Keith and Darryl Worley (who recorded "Have You Forgotten?", another pro-war country song) performed at a rally at MacDill Airbase in Florida, and when the video for "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" was chosen as video of the year at the

CMT Video Music Awards, Keith stated, "I dedicate this great award to Mr. Rumsfeld and Tommy Franks, and all the people over there putting it down for us tonight" (quoted in MacDougall). That video features a montage of Keith performing at various military bases and having his picture taken with American soldiers, and even riding in a tank; while Keith may represent the far right fringe of the political spectrum of country music, Nashville's close ties to the U.S. military and the Republican Party are abundantly clear.

Fox argues that the "national crisis of identity" (180) caused by 9/11 led to "the obvious outburst of nationalism and cultural nostalgia that followed the attack" (172). If Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" is the epitome of such nationalism in country music, Tim McGraw's "Back When" is the epitome of "cultural nostalgia."

> Don't you remember the fizz in a pepper
> Peanuts in the bottle at ten two and four
> A fried bologna sandwich with mayo and tomatoes
> Sitting at the table don't happen much no more
> We've gotten too complicated
> It's way overrated
> I love the old and outdated way of life
>
> Back when a hoe was a hoe
> Coke was a coke
> Crack's what you were doing when you were cracking jokes
> Back when a screw was a screw
> The wind was all that blew
> When you said "I'm down with that" it meant you had the flu
> I miss back when

McGraw yearns for "the old and outdated way of life" because modern life has become "too complicated," and because he feels alienated in an increasingly

vulgar and hedonistic culture. And the words chosen to illustrate this vulgarity and hedonism ("hoe," "coke," "crack," "screw," and so on) are a thinly veiled indication that the mainstream of American culture is being degraded by black popular culture, especially the kind of street (or "thug") culture that rap music has come to represent for many white Americans. The phrase "I'm down with that" is quoted almost as if it a foreign language; as McGraw sings later in the song, he has to "[read] street slang for dummies" because modern, street-influenced English has, like everything else, become too complicated for him. In actuality, such phrases have become so commonplace that almost everyone understands their meaning, which paradoxically is the point that McGraw is making. What has become complicated is not communication but the boundaries between races and cultures; thus, he appeals for a return to simpler times, symbolized by all the simple things that he loves. Unlike Lynn's Butcher's Hollow or even Haggard's Muskogee, the place that he imagines is unreal, an almost cartoon-like fantasy of childish innocence. But that helps us to see what has always been true of the nostalgia in country music: that it is a nostalgia for an idealized past that has never existed.

After Bush's re-election in 2004, the same year that "Back When" was recorded, Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* received belated attention as an accurate analysis of the reason for Bush's victory, as if Frank had written the book to predict it. In actuality, the book is an investigation of sociopolitical changes that go back at least to the late 1960s and the emergence of Nixon's "silent majority." Frank illustrates the way in which conservatives have established themselves as "the true representatives of the common man" (119) while marking liberals as intellectuals and elitists out of touch with, and contemptuous of the values of, "the masses of ordinary people" (115). What makes this possible, he argues, is a “repackaging of class" (114) in which class differences are based not on economics but on culture. Shared lifestyles,

"tastes and consumer preferences" (16), values and beliefs, not wealth or occupation, constitute this new class identity. By presenting socioeconomic problems as the result of moral decay and cultural degradation, and by perpetuating a cultural war that channels working class discontent into symbolic battles over values and cultural identity, conservatives promote "a way of thinking about class that both encourages class hostility...and simultaneously denies the economic basis of the grievance" (113). Thus, the Kansas Republican Party platform in 1998 railed against abortion, homosexuality, gun control and teaching evolution in public schools, and bemoaned the pervasive "signs of a degenerating society" (75). Working class "hostility" also takes the form of "anti-intellectualism" (191), and an issue like evolution allows conservatives to re-constitute class antagonism as a cultural struggle between the moral and Christian values of plain folks and the amoral, atheistic, un-American intellectualism of the liberal elites. Writing about the evolution debate in the New Republic, Gregg Easterbrook expresses this conservative anti-intellectualism succinctly, stating that "once you weren't supposed to question God. Now you're not supposed to question the head of the biology department" (quoted in Frank 211).

Frank uses the example of Kansas in his book because it is his home state, and also because it provides an extreme case of what he calls "carefully cultivated derangement" (10) in which working class Americans blame all of their problems on imagined assaults on traditional values or even on God and put almost religious faith in politicians who promise to fight the forces of cultural degradation and Godless immorality. This "derangement" can be seen in the continuing battle over the teaching of evolution. In 1999, the Kansas Board of Education voted to remove almost all mention of evolution from the science textbooks used in the state's public schools; that vote was overturned in 2001, but in 2005, the board voted to mandate the questioning of the validity

of Darwin's theory of evolution and the teaching of alternative theories (Wilgoren). This may indeed seem deranged to us, especially considering the fact that the state has to deal with severe unemployment and budget deficits, but similar battles are going on in more than 20 states. Clearly, then, this holy crusade against a scientific theory is not the product of a few deranged Christian fundamentalists but of wider cultural forces, which is what Frank attempts to explain in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* If the notion of class has been repackaged in such a way that shared values and beliefs - and correspondingly, the sense of your difference from others who do not share your values and beliefs and of being besieged and persecuted by them - are what constitute working class identity, then the alienation and resentment expressed in "Back When" reflect the sentiments of the new American working class. But lifestyles, values and politics have always been linked to the image of "a common identity" promoted by country music. That is, after all, the meaning of its nostalgia; part of the tradition of country music is its nostalgic tendency to look back at an idealized past and its own romanticized tradition to give coherence to the present and to represent what is authentically American.

Just as "Okie from Muskogee" is the other side of "Coal Miner's Daughter," the self-righteous patriotism of "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" is the other side of the nostalgia and class discontent reflected in "Back When."

> American girls and American guys
> Will always stand up and salute, will always recognize
> When we see old glory flying, there's a lot of men dead
> So we can sleep at night when we lay down our head
>
> My daddy served in the army where he lost his right eye
> But he flew a flag out in our yard 'till the day that he died
> He wanted by mother, my brother, my sister and me
> To grow up and live happy in the land of the free

Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack
A mighty sucker punch came flying in from somewhere in the back
Soon as we could see clearly through our big black eye
Man we lit up your world like the Fourth of July

Keith wrote "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" in response to 9/11 and in honor of his father who had died earlier in the year that the song was recorded, and it became his biggest hit. The first thing that stands out about the song is that it does not sound much like country music at all; while most country songs are characterized by simple arrangements and understated playing, "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" has the kind of dense arrangement (with a big beat and loud electric guitars) more common in rock music and is characterized by melodramatic excess, including the sound of bells that start ringing out above the dense noise when he sings the line "When you hear Mother Freedom start ringing her bell." And the musical excesses are matched by the melodramatic nationalism and almost rabid militarism of the lyrics, which includes lines like "Hey Uncle Sam put your name at the top of his list," "This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage," and "We'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American way." There is almost nothing of the subtle art of a song like "Coal Miner's Daughter" in this song, which sounds like what it is intended to be: a battle cry and a warning to any nation "somewhere in the back" that tries to attack the U.S., "brought to you courtesy of the Red, White and Blue." And yet, there are many parallels between "Coal Miner's Daughter" and "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" as well. Both songs are obviously declarations of pride, and in both cases, this pride is rooted in family heritage; Keith's patriotism is inherited from his father who "served in the army" and "flew a flag out in our yard 'till the day that he died." And like Lynn's parents, Keith's father was determined to educate his children properly, although apparently not by reading the bible to them. Lynn lays claim to country

authenticity by detailing her Southern working class roots; Keith, on the other hand, claims to speak for real Americans, the "American girls and American guys" who know the meaning of "old glory" and the value and cost of freedom. And he can speak for them and for the meaning of the flag because his childhood home seems to have been a patriotic outpost of the U.S. military, like a Muskogee in the heart. If songs like "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" are merely reviving the "traditional working-class patriotic nationalism" (Fox 173) of country music, then we can see more clearly how Lynn and Keith are working in the same tradition, not of sound but of values and politics. The patriotic Americans whom Keith speaks for are more or less akin to the simple, hard-working folks of Butcher's Hollow and also to the proud, hippie-bashing traditionalists of Muskogee. And I suspect that many listeners of AFKN Radio would react to all three songs in the same way: with identification and pride.

From the beginning, country music was driven by a politics of authenticity in which the hillbilly authenticity of its performers was constructed in order to promote a romanticized vision of a common white identity and culture, a vision of white nationalism. And that vision was always to be found in an idealized past of racial/cultural purity that had never existed. One major difference between early country music and contemporary country music is the scale of the business and the rigid control that the Nashville machine has over it. Hank Williams was able to create so many classic country songs not just because of his obvious talent but also because he did not have to labor under the same pressures and expectations, both economic and political, that are imposed on today's country musicians by the Nashville machine. And because the form (which was still labeled "hillbilly" music at the time) did not enjoy the level of sales and respect that it does today, Williams had fewer limitations in writing and performing his songs; he had more artistic freedom because the

country music business was less driven by the ideology of the marketplace than the multinational media conglomerates that run the industry in today's Nashville. When Keith performs as part of the "Sprit of America" tour or at U.S. military bases around the world, he is demonstrating his support of "the American way" (which to him apparently means nothing more or less than Uncle Sam's right to kick the whole world's ass to protect "the land of the free"), but he is also simply being a good employee, promoting his product and the corporate image. He is, as he has to be (and as Williams obviously was incapable of being), a company man. Stephen Betts, the editor of *Country Music Today*, says that country musicians are "more vocal" in their support of the U.S. military "because [their music] is looked at as America's music....They feel they represent the voice of America" (quoted in Donaldson-Evans). If country music has become "America's music," that is because it has gained corporate and political credibility, and because more and more Americans feel besieged by cultural wars and yearn for nostalgic visions of a simpler, whiter, prouder America.

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Pride and Prejudice: The White Working Class Tradition of American Country Music

Abstract Jae H. Roe

This essay surveys the history of American country music, analyzes the songs of some of its representative performers, and discusses the cultural significance and politics of the music. Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams serve as representatives of early country music, which had roots in the so-called "hillbilly" music of the Appalachian mountains as well as the blues. Loretta Lynn and Merle Haggard serve as representatives of 1960s country music, which reacted against the cultural turmoil of the countercultural and anti-Vietnam War movements with nostalgia for a simpler past and expressions of traditional American values. And Tim McGraw and Toby Keith serve as representatives of contemporary country music. I argue that while contemporary country music does not sound much like early country music or even the country music of the 1960s, it comes out of a tradition in which the values that the music represents and the politics that it promotes have often been more important than the music itself. From the beginning, country music was driven by a politics of authenticity in which the hillbilly authenticity of its performers was constructed in order to promote a romanticized vision of a common white identity and culture. And that vision was always to be found in an idealized past of racial/cultural purity that had never existed.

Key Words: Country music, hillbilly, working class, Nashville, 9/11, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, Tim McGraw, Toby Keith

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