

‘Mamas If Your Daughters Grow Up to Be Cowboys, So What?’: Women Refiguring Rurality and Class in Country Music

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Abstract

Drawing on the burgeoning fields of rural studies and working-class studies, this essay examines contemporary country music by female artists. Namely, it considers rurality and class in the music of artists Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves, and Mickey Guyton. While country music scholars have long attended to how rurality and class function in country music by men, country music scholarship has largely disregarded these concepts in the music of female country artists. Whereas male country artists typically reference rurality and the working-class as a means of identification, Lambert, Musgraves, and Guyton reference these social constructs to interrogate, destabilize, and refigure. In crafting multilayered responses to contemporary dialogues on rurality and the working-class, these women not only call attention to country music’s premises, but they also produce variations of rurality and class.

Keywords

Gender, rural, class, country music

Cowboy boots. Pickup trucks. Blue jeans. Beer. Fishing. Church. Dive bars. Dirt. Symbols of rural, working-class life such as these are synonymous with the genre of country music, particularly that of country superstar Morgan Wallen. From song titles like ‘Country A\$\$ Shit,’ ‘Something Country,’ and ‘Whatcha Think of Country Now,’ nearly every song on Wallen’s 30-track *Dangerous: The Double Album* (2021) invokes his rural, working-class roots. In the *New York Times*’ review of the album, Jon Pareles (2021, para.2) describes Wallen’s fixation on this lifestyle as ‘an idyllic fantasy, an escape to rural Neverland... a place of red-dirt roads and unlocked doors, a refuge from the pretensions and snobbery of cities, a home for simple pleasures like fishing, drinking, and sex.’ Indeed, Wallen’s first single after he gained national visibility as a contestant on *The Voice* in 2014 was ‘The Way I Talk’ (2016), which proclaims, ‘I ain’t ashamed, matter of fact I’m damn proud / of the way I talk, y’all.’¹ His single from *Dangerous* was ‘More Than My Hometown,’ an ode to Wallen’s hometown of Sneedville, Tennessee. Its cover shows a highway sign pointing toward Sneedville; its lyrics tell the girl he loves that he is letting her go because ‘I can’t love you more than my hometown.’²

While Wallen is the latest embodiment of the ‘bro-country’ sub-genre that has emerged in country music over the last decade, he is also part of a larger trend among male country artists of making

¹ Alexander, Hayslip, and McGill, 2018.

² Hardy, Smith, Vojtesak, Wallen, 2020.

much of their rural, (pseudo) working-class identities. Cenate Pruitt (2019) refers to these male artists who partake in this trend as ‘country boy archetypes.’ Pruitt explains that in their music, ‘country boys’ ‘refer specifically to farming and small towns and at least passively dismiss city life and city dwellers as weaker than or inferior to country life and country people’ and ‘express joy and relief at not having to stray far from their rural roots’ (p.6). Noting male country artist’s fixation on the rural is not novel in country music scholarship, and plenty of research on the genre has explored how rurality and class functions in relation to masculinity.³ However, country music scholarship has largely disregarded the role of the rural and class in the music of female country artists. While nearly all country music references rurality and class to some degree, in the music of contemporary female country artists, working-class rurality does not serve as an all-consuming identity. Scholarship must explore these artists’ unique approaches to rurality and class to fully discover ‘the critical possibilities of country music’ (Haynes, 2018, p.317). Indeed, refusing to acknowledge the ways female country artists engage with rurality and class overlooks the complexities of country music, gender, popular culture, rurality, and class.

In this essay, I foreground the music of a group of contemporary female country artists to fill this gap in country music scholarship. Whereas male country artists typically reference rurality and the working-class as a means of identification, country artists Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves, and Mickey Guyton reference these social constructs to interrogate, destabilize, and refigure. Unlike their male counterparts, these contemporary female country artists gesture to rurality and the working-class to criticize their gendered associations, address their limiting and disempowering elements, and examine their association with whiteness and racism. In producing multilayered responses to contemporary dialogues on rurality and class, these women not only call attention to country music’s premises, but they also produce deviations that undercut essentialisms of the rural and the working-class.

Women Refiguring Rurality and Class in Country Music Throughout History

Exploring the music of these contemporary female country artists first requires a historical overview of other songs by female country artists that have similarly refigured rurality and class. Perhaps the most famous is Kitty Wells’ 1952 ‘It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels.’ Wells’ song responds to Hank Thompson’s 1952 ‘The Wild Side of Life,’ which condemned so-called ‘honky tonk’ angels, fallen women who enjoy the nightlife and have multiple partners. Wells cites a signature marker of rural, working-class life—the honky tonk—to criticize men’s social and sexual irresponsibility. She responds to Thompson saying, ‘it’s a shame that all the blame is on us women’ and men cause ‘many a good girl to go wrong.’⁴ Despite country radio and the Grand Ole Opry broadcast censoring Wells because of the perceived radicalism of the song, ‘Honky Tonk Angels’ became Wells’ first No. 1 single, and the first million-selling record by a female solo artist (Hubbs, 2014, p. 245). Pamela Fox (2009) refers to ‘Honky Tonk Angels’ as an ‘answer song,’ a musical response to a song by men in which women of the 1950s:

³ See Hubbs, N. (2011). ‘Redneck Woman’ and the Gendered Politics of Class Rebellion. *Southern Cultures*, 17(4), 44-70; Neal, J. (2016). Why ‘Ladies Love Country Boys’: Gender, Class, and Economics in Contemporary Country Music. In D. Pecknold and K. McCusker (Eds.), *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music* (pp. 3-25). University Press of Mississippi; Pruitt, C. (2019). ‘Boys ‘Round Here’: Masculine Life-Course Narratives in Contemporary Country Music. *Social Sciences*, 8(176), 1-18.

⁴ Miller, 1952.

not only inserted themselves into the previously predictable formula in order to sell records—they reconfigured it. Rather than simply replicating a prior hit’s mood, melody, or basic lyrics, their new version of the answer song frequently had the potential to contest its very premise, functioning as a galvanizing countertext. (p.92)

I reference Fox’s theorizations of Wells’ song not only to better understand the track, but also to put forth the possibility that all the songs I focus on in this essay are ‘answer songs’ in that they all, to some degree, respond to songs by men that position working-class rurality as an identity or incessantly elevate rural, working-class life. Instead of simply inserting themselves in the ‘predictable formula’ embodied by the music of country artists such as Morgan Wallen, Kacey Musgraves, Miranda Lambert, and Mickey Guyton’s versions of the answer song ‘call attention to the ideological assumptions underlying the caricatures that they dramatize’ (Fox, 2009, p. 93).

Another more contemporary example of a female country artist refiguring rurality and class is Gretchen Wilson’s 2004 ‘Redneck Woman.’⁵ Wilson’s breakout single reworks the rural, white, working-class female identity ‘through language, sound, and images, and in relation to middle-class / working-class, male / female, and individual / communal affiliations’ (Hubbs, 2011, p. 45). Like Wells’ song, ‘Redneck Woman’ was highly successful, skyrocketing to No. 1 faster than any country track in the previous decade and winning Wilson a slew of awards (Hubbs, 2014, p. 231). However, while some scholarship notes the transgressive nature of Wilson’s track, Nadine Hubbs (2014) argues that although Wilson acknowledges her scorned status, she ‘frames it with neither poignancy nor righteous protest’ (p. 232). Instead, the song is ‘a defiant apologia for herself and her redneck sisters and their ‘trashy’ position’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 232). Indeed, Hubbs argues that the song and Wilson’s brand merely repositions her as ‘one of the boys’ in country music, ‘equating her ‘redneck’ womanhood with the same masculine bravado required in hard country male performance’ (2014, p. 205). Thus, although both ‘Honky Tonk Angels’ and ‘Redneck Woman’ invoke symbols of the rural and working-class in a way that refigure them (i.e., Wells’ honky tonk and Wilson’s female redneck), Wells’ song presents more of a challenge to the rural, working-class status quo. Wells references the honky tonk to criticize men and how they shape wayward women, and Wilson draws on cherished symbols of rural, white, working-class life to ‘make common cause with redneck men’ and ‘articulate [a redneck] manifesto’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 245). Thus, refiguring rurality and class in country music is not always already resistant to the rural, working-class status quo.

Queering Rural, Working-Class Life

Rural, working-class masculinity is often seen as the most authentic masculine ideal in the United States. Consider the two most celebrated images of rural, working-class masculinity in popular culture: the farmer and the cowboy.⁶ Figures like the fictional farmer Tom Joad and legendary actor John Wayne embody this ideal. Contemporary rural, working-class masculinity elevates

⁵ Rich and Wilson, 2004.

⁶ For a more thorough exploration of images of rural masculinity see Campbell, H., M. Mayerfeld Bell, and M. Finney (2006). *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*. Pennsylvania State University Press; Malone, B. and T. Laird. 2018. The Cowboy Image and the Growth of Western Music. In *Country Music USA* (pp. 160-207). University of Texas Press.

these images and coalesces around the patriarchs that structure small-town life, such as local mayors, chairs of chambers of commerce, and pillars of local churches (Campbell et al, 2006, p. 5). While these images of rural, working-class masculinity are less celebrated than the farmer or the cowboy, they are no less central to the sense many people have of the appropriate conduct for rural, working-class men. Thus, rural, working-class life is often highly patriarchal, perhaps even more so than urban, middle- and upper-class life, although such an assessment is difficult to measure precisely (Campbell et al, 2006, p. 5).

Just as rural, working-class life is associated with patriarchy, it is similarly linked to heteronormativity. Hubbs (2014) takes up this obfuscating association in *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, writing that country music and queers ‘are so remote from each other in the American cultural imaginary that putting them together is perceived not as a combination but as a juxtaposition’ (p. 4). Indeed, dominant cultural images of working-class gender and sexual bigotry suggest the implausibility of queer life among white working-class people in rural places. Hubbs points to the legendary murders of gay and trans people in rural places as illustrations of this implausibility, such as Matthew Shephard in Wyoming (1998); Brandon Teena in Nebraska (1993), remade in the Hollywood film, *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999); and a nameless gay man in Wyoming and possibly, depending on one’s interpretation, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) in Texas in *Brokeback Mountain* (2014, p.6). However, despite these real and fictional tragedies, queer folks live in rural, working-class spaces and indeed listen to country music, as demonstrated by Kacey Musgraves and Miranda Lambert.

In ‘Follow Your Arrow’ (2013), Kacey Musgraves upends working-class rurality’s association with heteronormativity. The song—co-written with Shane McAnally and Brandy Lynn Clark, both of whom are gay—references themes associated with rural, working-class life in its first verse, particularly the correlation between marriage and drinking. Part of the song’s refiguring of rurality and class lies in what Scott Herring refers to as ‘rural stylistics.’ Rural stylistics are a mode of ‘metro-subversion’ that use ‘rusticity, stylelessness, unfashionability, anti-urbanity, anti-sophistication and crudity to disarm the standardizing function of metronormative habitus’ (Herring, 2010, p. 23). Musgraves uses rural stylistics both lyrically and sonically through the track’s intentional simplicity, crudity, and rusticity. Through its simple mantra, the song’s lyrics call out the double standards of rural, working-class life: ‘You’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t / So you might as well just do whatever you want.’⁷ The song also makes use of crudity, such as in Musgraves’ enunciation of the first syllable in ‘horrible’ to make it sound like ‘whore-ible.’ Finally, sonically, the song invokes rusticity through its reliance on instruments such as the guitar, banjo, tambourine, as well as Musgrave’s heavy southern twang. By deploying these rural stylistics, the song, perhaps counterintuitively, disrupts traditional portrayals of the rural, working-class life in country music.

Furthermore, the lyrics of ‘Follow Your Arrow’ turn depictions of rural, working-class sexuality on their head. In the song’s chorus, Musgraves encourages listeners to kiss whomever they want regardless of gender. While country music has a handful of openly gay artists such as Ty Henderson, mainstream country music does not have many LGBTQ lyrics. Writing on sexuality, Beverly Skeggs (2012, p. 120) explains that ‘heterosexuality is continually given legitimacy through its repetition and through the silencing and delegitimization of any alternatives’ and thus

⁷ Clark et al., 2013.

‘sexuality becomes a matter of what can and cannot be said’. Country music journalist Dacey Orr (2017) explains that the power of Musgraves’ song lies beyond its cheerfully queer lyrics. Instead, she maintains that the song’s extraordinariness comes from its pairing of identities that are often considered contradictory: ‘Follow Your Arrow’ didn’t just make country a welcoming space for all kinds of people; it eliminated the need to be a particular kind of person at all. In Kacey’s world, you could be a gunslinging Texan who supported gay marriage, a virgin who cracked up at crude jokes, or a country singer who revered tradition’ (p.193). Framed in this way, Musgraves’ song fits into what Hubbs views as a ‘long-running discourse of protest and resistance in modern country music, albeit one that is not usually granted political status’ (2014, p. 137). Hubbs explains that protest in country music is not presented in the language of politics or activism, but rather in the stories of ordinary individual lives and is ‘sometimes funny, sometimes angry, frequently stylized and metaphorical and always focused on things other than revolution’ (2014, p. 138). Musgraves frames her protest through humor—for instance, telling listeners to ‘roll up a joint, or don’t’—and relying on the metaphor of the song’s title. Musgraves, then, by vocalizing an alternative to heteronormativity, brings queerness, rurality, and the working-class closer together in the American cultural imaginary.

Like ‘Follow Your Arrow,’ Miranda Lambert’s ‘Y’all Means All’ challenges the link between heteronormativity and rural, working-class life.⁸ However, it moves beyond ‘Follow Your Arrow’ to suggest that working-class rurality is hospitable and perhaps even conducive to queer life. Lambert wrote the spunky, joyful anthem with her brother, who is gay, and Shane McAnally for Season 6 of Netflix’s *Queer Eye*. While LGBTQ people are typically depicted as city and coastal dwellers, ‘Y’all Means All’ asserts the presence of queer folks in rural, working-class spaces by inserting gay colloquialisms in a country song, such as ‘Yes queen’ and ‘honey.’ ‘Yes queen,’ perhaps more accurately written ‘Yas queen,’ is a gesture to the rallying cry of encouragement used among Black women and queer people of color that originated from Black vogue and drag scenes (Vikander, 2019). Lambert also references ‘Chattahoochie,’ asking, ‘Where my Chattahoochie?’ The Chattahoochie is a river, but it is also the title of Allan Jackson’s 1992 hit in which he details a heterosexual coming of age in the south.⁹ Song titles and place names are used in country music as ‘evocative metonyms for complicated, socially located and affective dispositions’ (Fox, 2004, p. 244). Lambert’s citing of both the place and the song not only rhetorically locates queer folks in the south, but it also refashions and queers the prototypical southern male coming of age narrative. Furthermore, the song challenges fatalistic depictions of queer folks who live in rural, working-class America by emphasizing its predisposition to queer life: ‘Out in the country honey, y’all means all / Y’all means all.’

As mentioned above, the song was written for season 6 of *Queer Eye*, and its accompanying video features the show’s cast, The Fab Five. Throughout the video The Fab Five alternate between dressing ‘rural’ and ‘working-class’ i.e., in cowboy boots and hats, and wearing more ‘stylish’ clothing and doing activities associated with the two seemingly opposed identities. The men seamlessly alternate between their rural and urban personas, in one shot line dancing or doing yard work and voguing or twirling in the next. Together, the song and video call on the rural and working-class to challenge their association with heteronormativity and bigotry. Instead of

⁸ Dick, et al., 2021.

⁹ Jackson, et al., 1992.

portraying rural, working-class America as antithetical to queer life, Lambert depicts it as having a propensity to inclusivity and diversity.

Exploring the Disempowering Elements of Rural, Working-Class Life

Unlike her male counterparts who use country music to elevate working-class rurality, Kacey Musgraves addresses the stifling and uninspiring aspects of rural, working-class life through her song ‘Merry Go ‘Round’ (2012).¹⁰ The song evades traditional, romanticized symbols associated with working-class rurality and instead foreground the challenges of that lifestyle, especially its dangerously cyclical nature as evidenced by the track’s title. In the opening verse of ‘Merry Go ‘Round,’ Musgraves references the cycle of norms in rural, working-class communities, such as having children at a young age and attending church weekly. These norms reflect the realities of many rural, working-class communities. Casey Quinlan (2013), writing on the particular struggles of rural, working-class women in *The Atlantic*, rightly suggests that such women face a different set of challenges than educated, upper to middle class urban and suburban women. Quinlan points to a handful of studies that show that rural, working-class women are more likely to have sex and marry earlier than urban women and women with a high school diploma are more likely to be married by twenty-five years old compared with women with bachelor’s degrees. All of these issues lead to higher rates of poverty and domestic violence among rural, working-class women (Quinlan, 2013). Musgraves takes up these themes in the rest of the song. In the chorus, Musgraves frames her commentary on the interconnectedness of rural, working-class vices and poverty through clever wordplay by alternating between ‘Mary’ and ‘merry.’ The image of the ‘broken merry go ‘round’ symbolizes the cyclical nature of rural poverty and foregrounds its inescapability. By emphasizing the cycle of rural poverty, Musgraves refuses the ‘poverty pride’ narrative where the working-class is portrayed as more authentic and noble than the wealthy and that poverty is preferable to being rich (Agostinone-Wilson, 2017, p. 125). Faith Agostinone-Wilson (2017) explains this enduring theme in country music, writing that common sentiments of poverty pride include a deep minimizing of economic hardship and abusive households, such as “‘we were poor, but we had each other,’ ‘we didn’t realize we were poor,’ ‘we were beat [spanked], but we still turned out fine,’ or ‘folks don’t know how to be committed to each other anymore’” (p. 125). Rather than empowering the working-class, Agostinone-Wilson asserts that poverty pride in country music inadvertently reinforces the ruling class, deflects analysis away from capitalism and onto individuals and family, and erodes solidarity among the working class as a solution to ending oppression: ‘It is a complex and insidious form of false consciousness, wrapped in a homey and harmless guise of nostalgia’ (2017, p. 126). As Musgraves references rural, working-class people’s means of escape—alcohol, drugs, infidelity—she makes candid observations about the bleakness of rural, working-class life: ‘We’re so bored until we’re buried / And just like dust we settle in this town.’ In this way, ‘Merry Go ‘Round’ not only posits a response to the rural poverty pride narrative, but it also offers a counterimage to the rural, working-class idyll.

Examining the Rural Working-Class’s Association with Whiteness and Racism

Just as whiteness is not necessarily mandatory for country music, whiteness is not mandatory for rural, working-class life. Nevertheless, both country music and working-class rurality are marked by whiteness. The whiteness of country music has been taken up by a number of country music

¹⁰ McAnally, et al., 2013.

scholars, most notably Aaron Fox and Geoff Mann. Explaining the historical whiteness of country music, Fox (2004) writes that by the end of the civil rights era, country music was ‘widely understood to signify an explicit claim to whiteness... as a marked foregrounded claim of cultural identity’ thanks in large part to politicians like Richard Nixon who mobilized the music in an effort to ‘use the emotional issues of culture and race to achieve... a ‘positive polarization’ of American politics’ without resorting to overt racism (p. 44). In ‘Why Does Country Music Sound White: Race and the Voice of Nostalgia,’ Mann focuses on the sound of the genre to explore how country music ‘became white’ and ‘stays white’ (2008, p. 73). He explains that country music sounds white ‘because white people are hailed by, hear, and turn to its sounding... this ‘sounding’ works in both senses of ‘sound’: country music is a ‘sound of whiteness,’ and it ‘sounds’ whiteness, i.e., sounds its depths’ (Mann, 2008, p. 92). Mann concludes that American whiteness is not reflected in country music, but is, rather, *produced* by it (2008, p. 75). Thus, although country music and rural, working-class life are both associated with whiteness, these associations are not fixed, and there exists space for interpellation. With Fox and Mann in mind, let us now turn to country artist Mickey Guyton and her refiguring of rurality and class to examine their association with whiteness and racism.

While this essay focuses on the lyrical and video components of songs by contemporary female country artists, a brief detour into the circumstances of the release of Guyton’s ‘Black Like Me’ nuances our understanding of the track. On June 2, 2020, eight days after the murder of George Floyd by Minnesota police, Guyton took to Instagram and posted a twenty-second recording of a song about racial alienation and dwindling faith in the American Dream. In the caption, she wrote: ‘I wrote this song over a year ago because I was tired of seeing so much hate and oppression. And yet here we are in the exact same place! We must change that. I hope this song can give you a small glimpse into what my brothers and sisters have endured for 400+ years.’¹¹ After posting the track, Spotify reached out to Guyton’s label and featured her song on ‘Blackout Tuesday,’ a campaign aimed at protesting police violence and racism (Mamo, 2021, para.6). ‘Black Like Me’ went to No. 4 on Billboard’s Digital Country Song Sales chart and was later nominated for Best Country Solo Performance at the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards, at which Guyton performed the song (Grein, 2020, para.1).

Unlike the other female country music artists that are the focus of this essay, Guyton does not reference rurality or class through her use of musical or lyrical twang. Musical twang refers to ‘the short sustained and dynamic resonance of instruments like banjo, mandolin or dobro, the sounds of which are distinguished by an abrupt, relative sharp intonation when plucked, which is followed by quick, usually slightly ascending, muting’ (Mann, 2008, p.79). ‘Black Like Me’ evades instrumental twang, relying on piano, cello, drums, and very subtle steel guitar.¹² Furthermore, most country music is sung with the diction and inflection of the southern U.S., regardless of whether the performer is a southerner (Mann, 2008, p.79). Although Guyton hails from Texas, she voices little southern drawl. As Mann points out, country instrumentation and voiced southern drawl ‘are so consistently paired as to give the impression that twang is the direct musical expression of a white southern accent... they stand as virtually substitutable markers of ‘country’

¹¹ Guyton, 2020.

¹² Chapman, et al., 2020.

and ‘racial’ identification.’¹³ Thus, through sound alone, Guyton upends the genre’s association with whiteness.

Although Guyton does not invoke rurality and class through sound, she does so lyrically. In the opening line of ‘Black Like Me,’ she sings: ‘Little kid in a small town / Did my best just to fit in.’ However, she quickly dispels typical notions of nostalgia by recalling painful recognitions of racial difference she experienced as a young girl. While the song has very few direct references to rurality, its lyrics appeal to rural, working-class audiences. She questions the American Dream in a way that resonates with these listeners by describing her father taking on multiple jobs to support the family. Like Musgraves’ ‘Merry Go ‘Round,’ ‘Black Like Me’ refuses the nostalgia for the rural working-class that dominates so much of the country music genre. Instead of longing for ‘the good old days,’ Guyton maintains that ‘Now I’m all grown up and nothin’ has changed / Yeah, it’s still the same.’ Furthermore, Guyton hails rural, working-class America to stand in solidarity with people of color by addressing both nonwhite and white listeners. She questions working-class rurality’s association with whiteness by foregrounding the experiences of people of color, insisting and assuring the audience that ‘someday we’ll all be free.’ Yet she also speaks to white listeners, imploring, ‘If you think we live in the land of the free / You should try to be black like me.’ In doing so, Guyton challenges the assumption that the rural working-class is white by default.

Whereas ‘Black Like Me’ interrogates working-class rurality’s association with whiteness, Guyton’s ‘All American’ produces a complex commentary on the role of the rural, white, working-class in the American cultural imaginary.¹⁴ In ‘All American,’ Guyton asserts that *all Americans* are implicated in American social ills—not just those who are rural, white, and working-class. She references the rural in the song’s opening line, but fuses symbols of rurality with markers of urbanity by mentioning interstates, back roads, Friday night football games, and rock concerts. In merging the rural and urban, Guyton reframes racism and issues plaguing America as issues not solely created by rural, working-class Americans. In the chorus, she implores listeners, ‘Ain’t we all American?’ Explaining the ‘badness’ of country music, Hubbs writes: ‘the moral suspicion attaching to country music is the moral suspicion attaching to the white working class as (purported) ground zero for America’s most virulent social ills: racism, sexism, and homophobia’ (2014, p. 42). Indeed, rural, working-class people are often scapegoated in standard accounts of U.S. racism. John Hartigan Jr. (2003), asserts that this scapegoating is historically distorted, socially regressive, and instrumental in perpetuating racism. Writing on ‘rednecks,’ ‘hillbillies,’ and ‘white trash,’ he concludes:

This imagery [performs a] critical function in the maintenance of whiteness, for these are the figures whites use to delimit an attention to the subject of racism... News features, movies, novels, and editorials rely upon the images of poor, often rural whites to address the subject of racism... After all, poor whites are not the bank officers who deny mortgages and other loans to African Americans of all classes at rates two to three times that of their white counterparts; poor whites are not among the landlords who refuse housing to African Americans, nor are they the human resource managers who are racially influenced in their hiring and firing decisions (p. 111).

¹³ Mann, 2008, p. 80.

¹⁴ Banks, et al., 2021.

By moving attention away from rural, white working-class people and calling attention to all Americans, Guyton engages in the work of untangling rurality from these stereotypes and begins to ‘deconstruct whiteness’ (Hartogan, 2003, p 111).

In a 2022 article titled ‘The Morgan Wallen Conundrum,’ the *New York Times* calls Morgan Wallen ‘more or less, the most popular performer in country music’ (Caramanica, 2022, para.5). Indeed, for Wallen, taking on a rural, working-class identity has a payoff. Despite being briefly blacklisted by major award shows and country music radio after being caught on video using a racial slur, Wallen’s *Dangerous* was the most commercial successful release of 2021, with 3.2 million album equivalent units sold (Caramanica, 2022, para.5). Wallen’s album has placed in the Top 10 of the all-genre Billboard 200 Chart every week since its January 8, 2021, release, and he is currently on a 46-city arena tour that includes multi-night shows in Nashville, Atlanta, as well as New York and Los Angeles.

Yet the music of country artists Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves, and Mickey Guyton demonstrates ways to refer to the rural, working-class life beyond simply identifying with it. Rather than serving as an identity with which one does or does not associate, these women demonstrate that working-class rurality is instead a complex set of associations that must be deconstructed, interrogated, and examined. In doing so, they provide a counterimage of working-class rurality that responds not only to the performatively rural, working-class trappings of bro-country, but also to the upper-class urbanity, or ‘metronormativity,’ of the entire country music establishment.¹⁵ As Hubbs points out, ‘what we ‘know’ of working-class and rural communities... typically issues from middle-class and urban perspectives that regard these communities as the breeding grounds of homophobia and bigotry’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 161). Indeed, the rural and the working class have long been imagined as antithetical to non-heteronormative, non-male, and non-white life, but a closer look complicates and questions these prevailing assumptions. Those who wish to better understand the communities that country music claims to represent must pay close attention to which musicians leverage rurality and class and how they do so. Attending to rurality and class in country music allows one to see beyond the dominant, urban, middle and upper-class narratives that interpret, represent, and often misrepresent them.

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¹⁵ A term introduced by J. Halberstam, ‘metronormativity’ refers to a dominant ‘story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town,’ ‘a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution and secrecy’ and that imagines the metropolis as an urban mecca for queer people. Halberstam, 2005, p. 190.

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