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This Country Ain't Low—The Country Music of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash as a Form of Redistributive Politics

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Abstract: This article examines how the country music styles of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash serve as a form of redistributive politics in which ideological struggles are engaged in ways that dissolve low/high culture distinctions and instead offer a mass-accessible avenue through which cultural recognition is conferred to marginalized identities. This ranges from class-based social critique in Dolly Parton's song "9 to 5" to the condemnations of the carceral state in Johnny Cash's work. Engaging country music as an arsenal for social progressivism is not only an underexplored topic in pop cultural studies, but it also provides fertile ground for illuminating how perceptions of the genre are impacted by stereotypical images drawn from the "culture wars" and how these images interrelate with implicit low/high distinctions. For instance, what does the commercial success of Parton's and Cash's works say about the low/high distinction? In what ways do their songs, lyrics, aesthetics, and public personae offer a distinctive space for a type of discourse that affords recognition to oppressed communities? Through addressing these questions, I seek to illustrate how prominent segments of country music are resistant to the mere reproduction of cultural hegemony. In doing so, they actively disrupt widespread conceptions of low culture as reactionary.

Keywords: country music; progressive; protest music; culture wars; popular music; popular culture



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1. Introduction

Within the larger landscape of what can be termed “popular culture”¹ in the United States, the country music genre occupies a prominent place, with a number of artists counting among the bestselling musicians in the nation. However, scholars and journalists have continuously observed that, at least since the 1970s (Martinez 2020, pp. 128–41), the genre has been frequently subjected to clichéd characterizations that often mirror the concept of “low culture” as postulated by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 94–137).

These two-dimensional understandings appear to reflect the biases of a “bourgeoisie subjectivity” (Štrajn 2015, pp. 5–6; Montgomery 2020, p. 113) in that they conceive of country music—including its origins, content, artists, and listeners—as the exclusive domain of a socially conservative, white, rural, and blue-collar cultural sphere. In this framework, the high sales figures of certain country music records would appear to affirm Horkheimer and Adorno's contention that popular culture reinforces social hegemonies and serves to keep mass audiences complacent and politically resigned.

Numerous scholarly analyses have already engaged the aforementioned prejudices by highlighting the works of country music artists who have either challenged or critiqued established hierarchies pertaining to class, gender, race, space, and heteronormativity. What is still missing from broader discussions on this subject is an exploration of how country music with anti-oppressive themes also dissolves the low/high distinction and instead offers a symbolic politics through which recognition and agency are conferred to oppressed groups. This calls for an exploration of the output of commercially successful and culturally

resonant country music artists who reallocate cultural value to marginalized segments of society and call established power structures into question (“redistributive politics”), thereby disrupting widespread conceptions of low culture as conservative and/or reactionary.

In my analysis, I will discuss the works, aesthetics, and public personae of two highly influential country music artists: Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash. Their status as two of the bestselling country musicians in the United States offers fertile ground for painting a more heterogenic picture of country music as a pop cultural phenomenon. Especially in the context of the increasingly polarized “culture wars” and amplified social fissures between the college- and non-college educated, it is vital to reflect on “bourgeoisie subjectivities” and illuminate how popular music can serve as a mass-accessible vehicle through which poignant and subversive commentary is articulated.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Contexts

2.1. Cultural Dimensions of Country Music within the Broader Landscape of U.S. Popular Culture

The term “country music” serves as an umbrella for a range of musical styles, arrangements, and topoi that have evolved in different parts of North America since the first half of the twentieth century. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed genre theory on the constituent characteristics of the style and content of country music. However, what is relevant in the analysis of the symbolic politics and low/high qualities of country music is the socio-cultural location of the genre in the wider landscape of U.S. popular culture.

Nowadays, country music represents a multi-faceted phenomenon in which numerous sub-genres display the tremendous impact which gender, race, space, class, and regional distinction have exerted on this potpourri of styles. This diversity is manifested in sub-categories such as indie folk, bluegrass, country-pop, cow-punk, and hick hop. Country music thereby resides at the core of critical developments within larger U.S. society that heavily impact popular understandings about the origins, trajectory, and contemporary outlook of the genre. The question of who creates country music and who listens to it plays an important role in dissecting larger narratives on where to locate this style of music within the context of U.S. popular culture (Rehm 2015, p. 15).² The analysis of country music as a multi-dimensional phenomenon offers gateways toward a clearer delineation of how popular culture and identity-building interrelate and how the “culture wars” (Jackson 2017, np) express themselves through mass-accessible products in which contradictory meanings are often submerged in questions of socio-cultural affect.

Continuous scholarship indicates that widespread prejudices and simplistic categorizations of country music prevail in the United States. Very often, these categorizations mirror the discursive contours of spatial, racial, gendered, and socio-economic divides (Martinez 2020, pp. 128–31). The main tropes of these clichéd understandings include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Viewing country music as the exclusive domain of a white, heteronormative, patriarchal, and mainly rural, non-college-educated constituency; both artists and audience are often drafted into this imaginary (DellaPosta and Shi 2015, np; Long and Eveland 2021, pp. 479–500; Shi and Mast 2017, pp. 231–14);
- Stylistically, the music of the genre is imagined as static and monolithic; there is a widespread perception that it sounds “white” (Mann 2008, pp. 78–82) and is inaccessible to hybridity, fluidity, or ethnomusicological heterogeneity (Le Vacon 2018, p. 11);
- The lyrical content and ideological subtext of country music largely reifies established social hierarchies and cements a reactionary worldview (Meier 2018, pp. 3–4).

These “middle-class overwritings” of country music (Hubbs 2018, p. 170; Montgomery 2020, p. 113) overlap with key elements of the low/high culture distinction (Feiler 1996, np; Mann 2008, pp. 73–100; Drew 2011, p. 50). While a number of scholarly works have rightly staked out that many country music songs and artists have critiqued established social hierarchies (Geary 2013, pp. 64–72; Hubbs 2014), no precise explorations into the workings of the redistributive politics of country music in conjunction with the high–low distinction have been undertaken.

This is, however, of critical importance, as clichéd understandings of country music are frequently nurtured and structured by a “low culture” discourse evocative of the notions articulated by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 94–137). With the recent rise of “credentialism” as a bourgeois form of moral prejudice against the non-college-educated in the United States (Sandel 2020, pp. 81–11), there is an implicit danger that country music might even further fall prey to two-dimensional characterizations in which country artists and listeners are imagined as lacking a specific type of academically inflected cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987, p. 29)³, thereby also lacking the capacity for perceived moral fortitude or improvement (Sandel 2020, pp. 95–96). Pierre Bourdieu explains how bourgeois cultural power is self-perpetuating through steering paradigms on morality and social value:

“The privilege of the dominant classes is that they possess social legitimation which is based on the power of the dominant to impose, by their very existence, a definition of what is valued and authorized which is nothing other than their own way of existing—they are at ease in the social world because they determine the legitimated way of existing in it—it is a self-affirming power.” (Hubbs 2016, p. 246, in Pecknold and McCusker)

Bourdieu’s words, in this context, point to questions about who can confer recognition to whom and how. According to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry sustains existing social structures, which can barely be subverted, as virtually all culture is effectively commodified. However, numerous scholars have pointed out over the decades that Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception rests on a “bourgeois subjectivity” that idealizes a recipient of a “high-brow” art (Štrajn 2015, pp. 5–6). The implied connection between cultural refinement and morality in the low/high distinction indeed obfuscates the subversive potential of alternative cultural practices. A more heterogenic picture of the country music genre is, therefore, warranted.

2.2. Redistributive Politics

As part of my analytical framework, I intend to furnish two combined arguments: (a) that the works of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash disrupt clichéd understandings of the genre and engage in the redistribution of social recognition toward oppressed groups; and (b) that, in doing so, they disconfirm the “low/high” culture distinction through disseminating egalitarian and/or subversive messaging in a mass-accessible way. A principal concept for this examination will be “redistributive politics.” Kenneth J. Meier writes in an essay on country music and the politics of identity that

“country music can be considered a form of symbolic politics [. . .] seeking to define what is ‘America’ and what it means to be a true American. It is an effort to proclaim and endorse a set of values that are reflected in country music. As such it should be considered a form of redistributive politics—the effort to establish that these values are the important American values.” (Meier 2018, p. 2)

Meier describes country music as a cultural mode through which meanings regarding national, collective, and personal identity are conveyed and negotiated. The argument that “it is an effort to proclaim and endorse a set of values” implies that these values are not necessarily self-evident but need to be constructed as central. The question of what exactly constitutes “American values” lends itself to different (competing) ontologies, a consideration of which goes beyond the scope of this paper. This is why I seek to sharpen the concept of “redistributive politics” for the purpose of my analysis. The primary anchor for my usage of this term resides in questions of socio-cultural recognition for marginalized communities rather than a more abstract conceptualization of “American-ness.”

In line with Nancy Fraser’s distinction between “misrecognition” and “maldistribution”, I intend to expand Meier’s notion with an anti-oppressive layer built around notions of conferring dignity, respect, and social affirmation through certain elements in the country music styles of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash. Fraser writes that while

“misrecognition can assume a variety of forms [. . .], the core of the injustice remains the same: in each case, an institutionalized pattern of cultural value constitutes some social actors as less than full members of society and prevents them from participating as peers.” (Fraser 2000, p. 114)

The aforementioned stereotypes concerning country music imply a refusal to extend cultural value to its audiences and subjects. This might stem, e.g., from cultural disdain for the perceived constituency of country music or from thought patterns operating on the premises of the low/high culture distinction. In either case, presenting a more nuanced picture of the genre requires disassembling notions that country music only “distributes upward” (e.g., by centering white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and toxic masculinity). As Fraser notes, “misrecognition” can and should not be divorced from “maldistribution” (Fraser 2000, pp. 116–19), which is why I seek to identify tendencies in Parton’s and Cash’s works that address larger socio-economic causes. Admittedly, my analysis does not offer a prescription through which country music can engage in actual economic redistribution, but it will highlight that Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash were/are cognizant of the systemic character of oppressive mechanisms in the United States.

In this sense, Parton’s and Cash’s country music can serve as a platform through which knowledge and consciousness surrounding the social order can be conveyed and disseminated. This echoes Walter Benjamin’s take on the potentially progressive dimensions of mass media, as postulated in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1969, pp. 13–14). In this book, Benjamin posits that the rise of mass media signals an epochal shift, which also entails an opportunity to cultivate a greater number of individuals than ever before. While still steeped in “bourgeois subjectivity”, Benjamin’s point offers a perspective on how the distribution of knowledge, respect, and cultural centrality can work toward social change. From this angle, the works of Parton and Cash serve as an example for how the “popular” can be understood as both a hegemonic as well as redistributive force; a force that is always conversant with shifting social trends in the United States.

However, this does not mean that I claim that no “conservative country” exists or that country artists with known right-wing leanings do not find commercial success or large audiences (Schmidt 2016, pp. 147–67). Historical and contemporary examples abound, such as the early works of Merle Haggard or the chart-topping post-9/11 output by Toby Keith and Darryl Worley.⁴ However, the scope of this paper is unsuitable for making vast claims on the totality of country music and its societal impact. The point is not to argue that this genre overwhelmingly reproduces one specific ideology or another, but rather to explore explicit or subtle pockets of resistance, which the low/high distinction would seduce potential audiences into overlooking. Building on this angle of the “popular” as a multi-layered and multi-directional type of mass-accessible discourse (O’Brien and Szeman 2004, pp. 95–97, 125), the works of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash can be examined as prisms for a larger collective sub-consciousness in which cultural negotiations are subject to fluidity and epistemic shifts. A specific focal point will be the lyrics of selected songs, which I will read through various socio-political lenses. As the country music genre encompasses sonic, aesthetic, and performative layers, I will flank my readings with forays into the role of sound, music videos, gendered performativity, and also public self-stylization.

2.3. *The Popular, the Progressive, and the Populist*

Throughout my analysis, I will utilize the terms “progressive”, “populist”, and “popular.” The term “progressive” is to be understood as a political and ideological moniker, denoting “opposition to systemic forms of oppression, exploitation and environmental degradation” (Moran and Littler 2020, pp. 858–67).⁵ This understanding of progressivism can also be linked to what Nancy Fraser terms “progressive populism”, which privileges equality over meritocracy and combines the emancipation of marginalized groups with an emphasis on social protection (Fraser 2017, np). This informs my use of the word “populism”, which is, therefore, not fully congruent with the usage of the term in much of

contemporary political science, which seeks to explain the rise of a particular style of political communication built on an “us versus them” dichotomy (De la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019, pp. 79–95). A principal caveat to the use of “progressive” and “populist” is that these terms need to be read within the specific historical context in which the respective analysis part operates (largely the late 1960s to the 1980s). Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed that certain progressive impetuses articulated in Parton’s and Cash’s works still reverberate today. The meaning of “Jacksonian populism” will be briefly sketched in the analysis part below.

With regard to the term “popular”, it is acknowledged that the term has been subject to much conceptual drift and debate in the sphere of cultural studies. As my inquiry rests heavily on the parameters staked out by the low/high distinction, I largely approach the “popular” from a positivist perspective, i.e., focusing “on the quantitative aspects and view[ing] popularity as high degree of dissemination measurable for example in air play statistics or sales figures” (Heuger 1997, np). However, I will consciously acknowledge the limitations of this approach by not losing sight of questions on the acceptance of widely disseminated cultural products and the underlying mechanisms that “effect the popularity of artists and records rather than express it” (Heuger 1997, np).

3. The Redistributive Politics in Dolly Parton’s and Johnny Cash’s Works

Both Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash can aptly be described as ranking among the bestselling and most influential country music artists of the past decades. Undoubtedly, the output of both can be termed “popular” in the sense that it was commercially very successfully and reached millions of listeners across the country and beyond. According to a listing in the magazine *Work + Money*, Johnny Cash ranks as the 18th bestselling country musician of all time, while Dolly Parton ranks almost tied for first place with Garth Brooks (Gillespie 2019, np). Moreover, Parton and Cash are known for their larger-than-life public personae, which became fixtures of television, film, and music for decades. What is particularly interesting in the composition of these personae is that they are undergirded by a combination of numerous, sometimes divergent, identities, often merging established rural imagery with a decidedly individualistic and avant-garde streak (Edwards 2009, pp. 1–26). Dolly Parton’s longstanding career, which stretches from the 1960s until the early 21st century, exemplifies the semiotic and ideological flexibility of country music stardom (Wilson 1995, pp. 3–12). Pamela Wilson writes in her essay on Parton that

“[she] has fashioned her star image visually to accentuate a voluptuous, ample, overflowing body, with particularly large breasts, which she has embellished with showy, garish costumes and an exaggerated sculptured blond wig. This persona is a caricature of both the most outlandish country singer (in a predominantly male tradition of gaudy costuming) juxtaposed with the stereotypical ‘painted woman’ or prostitute whose sexuality is on display. In ironic contradiction to the parodic nature of her visual style, the articulate Parton has perpetuated and maintained a respected image as a wholesome, sincere person with traditional rural values.” (Wilson 1995, p. 2)

This postmodern pastiche illustrates how a conscious play with gendered signifiers can be used to subvert established heterosexist beauty standards. Through over-performing within the constraints of Southern beauty culture, the singer’s image amplifies the workings of discursive power relations, thereby exposing “the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality”, as Judith Butler writes in the book *Gender Trouble* (Butler 2002, p. 173). Societal conventions surrounding feminized beauty are, therefore, driven to a visible extreme that disrupts the patriarchic objectification of the female body, while simultaneously allowing Parton to perform within a tongue-in-cheek framework. At all times, she can claim that her portrayal of the so-called “country doll” is simply the result of her dedication to her Appalachian and working-class roots. Judith Butler writes in this respect that

“parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization.” (Butler 2002, p. 176)

Butler’s observation points to the potential for subversive discourse on gendered identities to be articulated even within the paradigms of a hegemonic culture industry. The economic imperative for the culture industry to entertain—and, e.g., produce humorous diversion—makes it susceptible to the multi-layered semiotics of innuendo, satire, and parody. The fabricated nature of the sexual order serves as a backdrop through which pleasure can be generated in deconstructing the gendered performances that undergird this very order. This can serve to expose the mechanisms through which key pillars of social hierarchies are maintained. The role that parody inhabits in Parton’s persona illustrates a key element through which the low/high distinction achieves its limits. Parodistic exaggeration can put key aspects of hegemonic culture into such an extreme spotlight that inherent contradictions and instabilities of the constructed social order become impossible to overlook.

This points to a critical insight for the study of pop culture in that Parton’s example of over-performativity allows for an understanding of parody as a destabilizing agent within the social structure and, concurrently, as a form of self-immunization. Reigning cultural hegemonies can be immunized against critique by incorporating their own subversion into popular culture. And artists with an implicit or explicit oppositional tendency can immunize themselves by claiming fealty to the socio-cultural status quo while chipping away from it. This observation also has ramifications for the aspect of redistributive politics, as parody offers distinctive tools for decentering hegemonic practices associated with more affluent and culturally dominant classes. Pierre Bourdieu writes in this respect that

“[t]he sense of the value of one’s own linguistic products is a fundamental dimension of the sense of knowing the place which one occupies in the social space. One’s original relation with different markets and the experience of the sanctions applied to one’s own productions, together with the experience of the price attributed to one’s own body, are doubtless some of the mediations which help to constitute that sense of one’s own social worth which governs the practical relation to different markets.” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 82)

Parody can thereby open up spaces through which sanctions can be circumvented and self-worth reaffirmed when the symbolic order is disrupted. In this sense, Parton broke ranks with the very-often top-down nature of a male-led country music industry, not by venturing out of traditional gender performativity, but precisely by banking on it in a most flamboyant way. This echoes the potential for country music to act as redistributive discourse, as she came to exemplify a type of pop cultural practice through which the symbols and motifs of perceived low culture could be recast as a form of subversive confidence. For instance, Parton herself commented on the artificiality of her buxom, ultra-blonde and make-up-heavy physical appearance, saying that “it takes a lot of money to look this cheap.”⁶ This quip also exemplifies how linguistic markers play an important role in maintaining a rapport with the larger country music audience. The juxtaposition of the words “a lot of money” and “cheap” in this context illuminates how the workings of self-constructed identities within the linguistic regime of the bourgeoisie can imbue pejorative language with new meanings. In this sense, Parton performs from a position that semiotically embeds her in the dominant conceptions of Southern femininity (O’Connor 2017, pp. 54–75), while simultaneously redistributing meanings within this framework. This is critical for understanding the progressive layers in her persona, as her disruption of gendered oppression does not stem from open rebellion but from the parodic effects nested within her apparent fealty to hegemonic concepts.

The impact of Parton’s visibility in the national country music scene over decades has taken on many dimensions. However, her physical attributes are often foregrounded,

as evidenced by the fact that the first cloned sheep “Dolly” was named after the country singer in reference to the mammary glands of the original sheep from which the stem cells were taken (Kevles 2002, p. 205). This example underscores how her body is viewed in transgressive terms. Maigen Sullivan writes in this context that, in the world of phallogocentric heteronormativity, “[n]ormal, valuable, able bodies do not leak, they do not fluctuate, they do not spill over corporeal limits. Women’s and disabled bodies defy all of these forms” (Sullivan 2011, p. 71). Another example of Parton’s socially progressive image is the theme park Dollywood, which opened in 1986 and attracts up to 3 million visitors per year. Leigh H. Edwards writes in the book *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music* that

“press coverage of the park has emphasized the progressive affiliations and gay camp Parton brings to Dollywood. In reporter Kim Severson’s New York Times travel article, Dollywood: A Little Bit Country, a Little Bit Gay she describes as ‘the place on a Venn diagram where gay camp and Southern camp overlap.’” (Edwards 2018, p. 233)

Parton’s type of stardom also brings LGBTQ+ fans under her umbrella, a fact that clashes with the clichéd conception of country music as a cultural sphere dominated by heteronormativity (Barker 2022, pp. 143–53). Parton’s support for gays is further demonstrated in her 1991 song “Family” from the album *Eagle When She Flies* in which she sings: “Some are preachers, some are gay, Some are addicts, drunks and strays, But not a one is turned away, when it’s family.” While these lyrics could be read as a form of “conditional acceptance” dependent on belonging to a family, James Barker points out that “[f]amily, one of the most recognizable and stereotypical themes of country music, is represented as a place of belonging and compassion. For Dolly, the family is not about conformity, in fact the role of the family is to provide a radical space for inclusion” (CountryQueer n.d., np). From the vantage point of redistributive politics, Parton does gesture to a sense of cultural parity, and she does so in an accessible way, using a metaphor recognizable to millions of country fans.

Johnny Cash expresses a different type of country progressivism. His performance as a hardened and traditionally masculine “outlaw” connected his public image with mythologies of “frontier individualism” (Zehelein 2007, np), which Cash directed toward social issues surrounding inequality, minority rights, and mass incarceration. His deliberately crafted image as the “Man in Black” showcases his concern for the marginalized, both lamenting and lambasting racial discrimination as well as society’s treatment of the poor. In his 1971 protest song “Man in Black”, Cash stated his reasons for donning this type of dark outfit, which stood in contrast to the rhinestone suits and cowboy boots worn by many major country acts in the 1960s and 1970s:

“I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down
Living in the hopeless, hungry side of town
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime
But is there because he’s a victim of the times
[...]
I wear it for the sick and lonely old
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold
I wear the black in mourning for the lives that could have been
[...]
But ‘til we start to make a move to make a few things right
You’ll never see me wear a suit of white.”

These straight-forward lyrics reflect a form of political consciousness that is tied in with a visible activism on behalf of marginalized groups (Huss 2011, p. 187). In the song, Cash not only calls out society’s disregard for the downtrodden, but he also voices a larger diagnostic critique in which he disentangles the fate of the poor from capitalist/conservative

mythologies of “personal responsibility” (“But is there because he’s a victim of the times”). The repeated use of the lyrical I underscores that this message is personal. Yet each line in the first few stanzas effectively centers the experiences of people who do not share the same fate as Cash. The singer oscillates between societal observations and a personal response, evoking a sense of solidarity and self-reflection. By referring to structural causes for incarceration, the singer opens the door for a class-conscious reading of this song in which the coercive mechanisms of the prison-industrial complex illustrate the exploitation of the working poor—most notably African Americans (Chomsky 2018, p. 34).⁷ When put into historical context, these lines constitute a clear rebuke of some of the coded racism implicit in Richard Nixon’s “law-and-order” campaign (Geary 2013, p. 67; McCoy 2021, np).

In tandem with left-wing protest movements of the time, Cash thereby linked questions of poverty and social inequality with racism at home and militarism abroad (i.e., the Vietnam War). Cash’s lyrical statement is semiotically interwoven with his choice of wearing black, which leaves room for symbolical interpretations associated with color metaphors for race in the United States. Cash was acutely aware of the highly disproportionate numbers of African Americans among the poor and incarcerated (Geary 2013, pp. 70–71). It can, therefore, be safely ascertained that race forms an important element in Cash’s fashioning as a contrarian who refused to celebrate the status quo. By wearing black and making this a centerpiece of his stage persona, Cash turned around the coded racism of white supremacists in a subtle but unmistakable manner. Parallel to Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Ros Markus’s notion of “doing race”, Cash’s outfit exposes how “whiteness is consistently associated with privilege and represented by positive images while blackness is associated with disadvantage and represented by negative images” (Moya and Markus 2010, p. 88). This affords a subversive quality to Cash’s image in that it merges subtle solidarity with the civil rights and anti-war movements with an aesthetic “country counterculture feel.” The music indicts and mourns, and the outfit indicts and mourns. Redistribution, in this case, takes the form of acknowledgement and empathy, conveying “a left-oriented Southern politics” (Hubbs 2014, p. 67). Cash symbolically reshuffles the status-quo allocation of cultural centrality and dignity by joining those whose voices generally are not amplified in societal discourse.

The song proved to be a hit on the country music charts, reaching No. 3 on the Billboard Hot Country Songs in 1971 (Billboard n.d.). The large-scale resonance of the song exemplifies the accessibility and resonance of Cash’s unrelenting advocacy for the poor. This disconfirms one of the key axioms of the high/low distinction in that the underlying message of this song activates public consciousness with regard to social issues, despite its relatively simple composition with minimal instrumentation.

Unlike Parton, Cash could operate within the mainstream parameters of heteronormative rural masculinity to make his point by wearing a simple black suit instead of having to resort to flamboyancy. In this sense, the popularity of Cash’s protest on behalf of the oppressed intersects with notions of a “rugged masculinity.” His straight-forward “blue-collar talk” is intricately tied to performances of “white rustic masculinity”, which are conversant with traditionally heterosexist notions of “hillbilly and honky-tonk” that arose in the 1940s (Fox 2009, p. 73). The popularity of Cash’s oeuvre, therefore, is informed by his ability to furnish mythical images of the Southern/rural “hard man” without disrupting or calling them into question. This echoes the notions articulated by subcultures scholar Dick Hebdige, who writes that the folk music of poor whites in the United States often displays “a disposition toward revelation and strategic concealment” and a subaltern “strategy for having your say while remaining out of range” (Hebdige 2007, pp. 98–99). Expressing frustration, pain, and discontent comes from a certain distance, combining direct confrontation and a desire to avoid pain. In this context, Michael Stewart Foley posits that this “walking contradiction” myth, which was often applied to Cash, in fact opens up new epistemic spaces for conceiving political struggle: “The difficulty in discerning Cash’s politics, then, is similar in that the framework of accepted political intelligibility has, so far, been applied to his work only in terms of partisan politics and ideological world-view” (Foley 2014, p. 340).

While this line of argument makes a very salient point, it is important to acknowledge that questions of popularity also concern questions of mass readability and mass accessibility. As Tim Delaney states, popular culture includes pathways through which “prevailing sentiments and norms of behavior” can be changed (Delaney 2007, np). It is critical for popular culture to impart some sense of participation and thereby tangibility. From this angle, the “Man in Black” image at least partially connects with dominant concepts of a traditional Southern white masculinity (McCusker 2017, p. 2021).

A different observation can be made about the line “You’ll never see me wear a suit of white.” In the context of “doing race”, Cash reveals the workings of racial privilege by vocally and visually declining to perform within racial color metaphors. From the vantage point of country music as a form of redistributive discourse, Cash’s effort to disrupt coded racism acquires a distinctly instructive quality. “The Man in Black” image, therefore, not only teaches audiences about U.S. values, but it also serves as a reminder how these efforts remain unfulfilled. It should also not go unmentioned that Cash dedicated himself to highlighting the plight of Native Americans and embedding it in a broader review of national mythologies. For example, John Edward Huss offers a reading of the song “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” from Cash’s 1964 concept album *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian*—a work inspired by the experiences of Indigenous communities. Huss notes that the song’s subtexts address ideological juxtapositions between individual justice versus social justice (along the lines of John Rawls’s concept of distributive justice) and that capitalist mythologies are insufficient to resolve these (Huss 2011, pp. 189–92). While Cash’s populism might have “emphasized class injustices at the expense of racial ones” (Geary 2013, p. 70), it should be acknowledged that his works, which explicitly addressed themes of racial injustice, did reach a large audience. For instance, *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* reached number 2 on the Billboard country charts. Cash’s social positioning as a hardened, white, rural Southerner might explain why his brand of social advocacy for the oppressed managed to storm the charts at a time when Richard Nixon and George Wallace were among the most popular politicians in the country.

Nevertheless, Cash’s audiences were not necessarily defined along racial lines, as his performances in Folsom Prison and San Quentin evidence. In the essay “The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin: Johnny Cash & the Politics of Country Music”, Daniel Geary notes:

“Cash implicitly rejected the racial politics of white backlash, especially in his prison albums. His rock and roots influences more openly displayed their debt to African American musical traditions than did most country music. At Folsom and San Quentin, Cash performed before prisoners of all races. One scholar estimates that when Cash played San Quentin in 1969, 30 percent of prisoners were African American and 18 percent were Hispanic. Photographs of the audience included with the LPs advertised this fact by showing faces of many colors.” (Geary 2013, p. 70)

Coupled with Cash’s own advocacy for prison reform, it becomes clear that his country-jeremiads not only spoke to large parts of the nation but constituted an accessible arsenal for rethinking questions of social justice and the common good. David Kyle Johnson writes in analysis of Cash’s commitment to prison reform that “[he] detested the fact that San Quentin doesn’t change the inhabitants in a positive way. What it should be doing is *benefiting its inhabitants* and in turn society” (Johnson 2008, p. 7). A sub-textual layer in terms of redistributive politics comes to the surface, with rehabilitation forming a key part of a shared communal dignity.

With regard to the low/high distinction, this type of country music activism rattles notions that anti-hegemonic critique must be nested within bourgeois sensitivities. Cash’s indictments could not easily be cast aside as the outgrowths of what Nixon and his acolytes decried as a “liberal cultural elite” (Cowie 2010, p. 127). This observation offers fertile ground for dissecting Cash’s stylization as a rural underdog in terms of an indebtedness to the populist roots of country music. Andrew Boulton refers to Walter Russell Mead in

this context, who suggests that “country music is the quintessential ‘product of Jacksonian culture’ (Jacksonianism being a populist, patriotic, and self-reliant political tradition)—a product that, rather like this ‘Jacksonian populism,’ has expanded significantly beyond its original spatial limits” (Boulton 2008, p. 376; Mead 1999, pp. 5–30). Whereas Sadie Rehm traces the roots of country music back to the failed “modest Jeffersonian ideal”, which was not attainable for most people in either ante- or post-bellum South but later became romanticized by the country music industry in the twentieth century (Rehm 2015, pp. 6–7).

What both of these historical trajectories have in common is the underlying intertwinement of class and race issues in an industrializing United States. Rehm notes that “prominent industrialists sought to encourage the identification of poor white workers with racial, rather than class-based consciousness” (Rehm 2015, p. 9). Johnny Cash’s implicit endorsement of racial equality not only reinvigorated a sense of universal class-consciousness, but also reconnected his style of music with its multi-racial origins. In this sense, Cash’s prison albums were also engaged in a form of redistribution of historical narratives by reinscribing his style of country music in an origin story that had been largely overwritten by “broader ideological projects” serving capitalist and right-wing interests (Citations Needed 2020).⁸

But also in stylistic terms did Cash break new ground with these LPs. Cash and his fellow musicians promoted and successfully implemented the idea of performing live in a prison. In a 1968 interview, after performing live in Folsom, Cash stated:

“[T]he first time I played a prison I said this is the only place to record an album live, because I never heard a reaction to the songs like the prisoners gave. They weren’t ashamed to show their appreciation or their enthusiasm for anything that we did.” (Azpiri 2019, np)

A subtext of catharsis permeates his words, as he outlines that a prison offers a unique space for reinvention, free from implicit societal inhibitions (“they weren’t ashamed”). By performing in front of those who have nothing left to lose, Cash not only contributed to a cathartic experience for the incarcerated, but also underlined the widespread appeal of his sound and delivery. He showcased that his music is indeed heard everywhere and not just the prerogative of a white, Southern, conservative constituency. Redistribution acquires a near-universal quality in that the emotive need for a socio-cultural valve overrides boundaries of class, race, and space. The effects generated by the perceived passion and dedication in Cash’s prison performance provides a discursive framework in which opposition to social hegemonies cannot be adequately mapped by the low/high distinction. Instead, questions surrounding perceived “authenticity” and “credibility” come to the forefront. In this paradigm, resistance to the reigning powers is also subject to communication strategies that convincingly transmit an emotionally reverberant image of the “inner self.” Arguably, this image also had a liberating effect on Cash, who felt inspired and encouraged by the reaction of this audience. The Folsom Prison album received an overwhelmingly positive reaction from audiences and critics alike, with Richard Goldstein writing that the album was “filled with the kind of emotionalism you seldom find in rock” (Streissguth 2007, p. 151) and Country Music Television (CMT) naming it the third greatest album in country music in 2006 (Rateyourmusic).

A more clear-cut country music statement with class-based undertones is Dolly Parton’s highly popular 1980 single “9 to 5.” The song accompanied the release of the comedy film *9 to 5*, in which Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin portray three working women who rise up against their sexist and exploitative male boss. Aside from the film’s progressive messaging on sexism in the workplace, the eponymous song has acquired notable cult status among the socialist left in the United States for its explicit embrace of class-conscious rhetoric. In an article for the leftwing magazine *Jacobin*, journalist Marianela D’Aprile writes:

“I love ‘9 to 5.’ I’ve sung it at karaoke countless times, despite its basic incompatibility with my voice. I’ve put it on at Democratic Socialists of America

meetings. It's one of the greatest musical odes to class struggle in American history." (D'Aprile 2021, np)

The song lyrics provide easy access to D'Aprile's interpretation. In the chorus, Parton castigates the repetitiveness and exploitative nature of modern work life:

"Workin' 9 to 5
What a way to make a livin'
Barely gettin' by
It's all takin' and no givin.'"

Parton then doubles down by describing how common ground can be found among workers and that upheaval is imminent:

"In the same boat
With a lot of your friends
Waitin' for the day
Your ship'll come in
And the tide's gonna turn
And it's all gonna roll you away."

And in the final stanza, she issues an unmitigated and uncompromising verdict on the system, specifying the capital class as the antagonist and linking it with a feminist consciousness:

"It's a rich man's game
No matter what they call it
And you spend your life
Putting money in his wallet."

What these lyrics have in common is that they ground class-consciousness in the experience of working people. Much of this is evocative of orthodox Marxism. The exploitative system, based on wage labor ("barely gettin' by") and the extraction of surplus value through capital ("Putting money in his wallet"), creates a social dialectic. This inevitably leads to class-consciousness among the proletarians ("in the same boat with a lot of your friends") and the eventual overthrow of the social order ("And the tide's gonna turn").

Of course, viewing these lyrics solely through the lens of orthodox Marxism eclipses other contextual layers that can place this work in the realms of redistributive politics. When it comes to the music itself, it is notable that this song somewhat departs from Parton's usual fare. "9 to 5" is an upbeat, fast-paced composition; "[t]he finished melody borrows from the East Tennessee folk traditions of Parton's childhood and highlights her understanding of poetic meter" (Dowling 2020, np). Clearly written as a promotional device for an easily digestible Hollywood comedy, the song makes use of dance-pop elements, such as seawind horns, which are reminiscent of the sounds of Quincy Jones-produced Michael Jackson albums of the time (Dowling 2020, np). This showcases the interfaces between country music, which is often seen as exclusively "white", and other music genres that are conventionally coded as Black. The pop-oriented sonic layers of this song envelope the lyrics in a rather ironic and playful mood, allowing the listeners to hear this song as more of a tongue-in-cheek jab rather than a purposeful, radical statement. Moreover, the music video appears to frame the song's lyrical content in rather playful terms, with Parton smiling brightly while performing with her band in a studio. Interspersed clips from the film *9 to 5* add to the entertainment feel of the video, where stressful office situations in a high-rise office building are seemingly played for laughs. The song and its video clearly oscillate between condemning the capitalist system and simultaneously "enticing its audience to participate in the culture of capitalist consumption" (Wilson 1995, p. 18).

However, it is precisely this hybrid between a country singer image and a more pop-oriented instrumentation that illustrates the fluid and mutually permeable connection between the different types of popular music that dominated the Billboard charts in the late 1970s (e.g., dance-oriented disco tracks, funk, and country music). Parton's inscription in this canon points to a conscious play with genre expectations. Yet she remains on-brand by employing her characteristic Southern twang and intonation throughout the song and using her long acrylic fingernails (part of her country woman image) to produce a clacking beat during some of the live performances of the song (Liptak 2021, np).

Parton may have well intended for this song to be accessible to a larger, urban and non-Southern audience. Yet, certain key themes that speak to the travails of blue-collar communities are cleverly maintained within this song's urban-inflected setting—showcasing how it is possible to connect the experiences of the rural working class to a more professional city-based setting. In interviews, Parton emphasized how her working-class upbringing was somewhat remote from, but still distinctly connected to, the industrial big city:

"I can think like a workingman because I know what a workingman goes through Where I came from, people never dreamed of venturing out. They just lived and died there. Grew up with families and a few of them went to Detroit and Ohio to work in the graveyards and car factories. But I'm talking about venturing out into areas that we didn't understand." (Wilson 1995, p. 16)

The experiences described by Parton offer insights into a larger pattern of a "socio-cultural commute" between rural and urban spaces in the second half of the twentieth century. Parton's appearance in the *9 to 5* film and her accompanying song shed light on how spatial interrelationships for rural whites were affected by deindustrialization and professionalization. A continuous back-and-forth between rural and urban spheres opened up possibilities through which new types of cultural transfers were effectuated. In an essay on rural–urban return migration, Jill Ann Harrison underscores the importance of this "boomerang migration" for "boosting or buoying populations in places struggling with population loss, especially in rural and deindustrialized areas" (Harrison 2017, p. 2). By injecting the plain-spoken experience of the working class into a wider pop cultural sensibility, Parton offers an avenue through which recognition and relatability can be redistributed to the rural poor, who often find themselves to be the target of derision and ridicule from the professional–managerial class.⁹ This indicates that one part of the redistributive politics in Parton's country music is the reframing of socio-cultural hierarchies, which have exacerbated an antagonism between a college-educated, coastal, professional–managerial class and a non-college-educated, rural population. In the pop-country parameters of "9 to 5", both social strata constitute the "working poor" who are putting money into the wallet of "the man." Coupled with a feminist reading, Dolly Parton's anthem provides a gateway toward directing the rural and urban poor against a patriarchal capitalism that not only undergirded the country music industry in which she operated, but also shaped the wider world of popular culture. Parton's oeuvre, therefore, remains daring and biting in an entertaining manner.

4. Conclusions

It is noteworthy that the progressive layers of Parton's and Cash's output and self-stylization broadened the scope of country audiences and showcased the genre's wider potential as a form of counter-cultural discourse. This does not necessarily imply that these musicians made conscious attempts at abandoning their class or spatial origins in favor of a glossy mainstream appeal. To differing degrees, Parton and Cash organically weaved progressive undercurrents and messaging into their work without drastically converting from one type of habitus or socio-cultural affect to another.

For instance, Dolly Parton's subversion of dominant gendered beauty conventions was shown to be closely linked to her self-understanding as an Appalachian, Southern, working-class woman. Overperforming within these parameters exposes the liminalities

and instabilities of white heterosexism in a Butlerian sense and thereby opens up spaces for a form of “progressive kitsch” that uses parody to undercut and denaturalize hegemonic gender meanings. The underlying mechanisms of (self-)parody offer a promising avenue for diving deeper into how popular music can actively deconstruct oppressive hegemonies.

Johnny Cash’s reappropriation of rugged masculinity to fashion a “Man in Black” image, through which he highlighted the plight of the poor and the incarcerated, provided insights into the confluences between counter-cultural movements and mythologies of the “Western/rural outcast.” This public persona demonstrates how certain tropes associated with the rural working class can serve as a semiotic vehicle for a transformative message that resonates across racial, spatial, and class boundaries. In particular, Cash’s plain-spoken style underlined that “progressive populism” could reach audiences that were often beyond the purview of more academically inflected liberal discourse.

This also ties in with observations pertaining to the role of social class in building alliances through popular music. Dolly Parton’s song “9 to 5” serves as an illuminating example of how the experiences of working people encapsulate a narrative terrain, which can connect the experience of urban professionals with those of the blue-collar rust belt (Edwards 2019, p. 181). The upbeat sound delivers key tenets of socialist philosophy in an infective and poignant manner. Nevertheless, the interplay between sound and lyrics and the immersion of this song in a Hollywood merchandise/soundtrack does not fully absolve this work of art from associations with commodity consumerism. This illustrates the necessity for further research into the political economy of cross-media works of arts that display different levels of intertextuality.

Overall, it can be surmised that the redistributive quality of Parton’s and Cash’s works is strongly shaped by accessibility and relatability. Horkheimer and Adorno’s contention of an obfuscating culture industry bent on “defrauding the masses” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 106) does not hold up in this analysis. Neither does the widespread myth that country music is a cultural expression exclusive to reactionary, lower-class, rural whiteness. Instead, this multi-faceted genre contains a diverse mosaic that illuminates and mirrors many of the contradictions of contemporary U.S. society.

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Notes

- ¹ In this article, the term “popular culture” rests on the definition given by Tim Delaney, who writes that popular culture presents “the products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time [. . .]. Further, popular culture, unlike folk or high culture, provides individuals with a chance to change the prevailing sentiments and norms of behavior [. . .]. So popular culture appeals to people because it provides opportunities for both individual happiness and communal bonding” (Delaney 2007, np).
- ² Sadie Rehm notes in the article “Country Music and the Construction of the Southern White Working Class” that “[t]he construction of country music as the music of the southern white working class obscures its diverse origins and influences, serving to legitimize the history and privilege of white racial identification. The appropriation of country music as ‘white’ defines it against ‘black’ music, naturalizing racial distinctions by assuming that genre labels arise spontaneously out of the separate musical traditions of different racial and ethnic categories” (Rehm 2015, p. 15).
- ³ My usage of the term “class” is largely informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s writing on social class, i.e., a social category impacted by access to economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987, pp. 1–17).
- ⁴ Geoff Mann suggests that nostalgia in country songs, for instance, generally revolves around the valorization of “simplicity”, social stability, and cohesion: “with its musical and vocal qualities, the temporal orientation is thoroughly conservative: there is nothing of Benjamin’s messianism or his openness to revolutionary immanence, merely the adopted pose of rustics resigned to the march of time” (Mann 2008, p. 87). In my analysis, I will illustrate how Johnny Cash’s work engages in a form redistributive politics in terms of historical narratives, keeping the door open for Benjamin’s revolutionary immanence.
- ⁵ Simultaneously, the term “conservative” in this analysis refers to the tendency to naturalize and defend status-quo social hierarchies in regard to class, race, gender, space and to view these hierarchies as integral to personal and collective identity.

The term reactionary is used to denote a particular form of conservatism characterized by a retrospective gaze (Capelos and Katsanidou 2018, p. 1273) and much more virulent opposition to social change.

- 6 In the dissertation *From Countrypolitan to Neotraditional: Gender, Race, Class, Region in Female Country Music, 1980–1989*, Dana C. Wiggins offers a different take, writing that “Parton’s emphasis on virtue combined with a more mature look provided a nonthreatening and passive way to appear sexual but simultaneously powerless. In this time period, country music women constructed both sexual and wholesome images; they manipulated social standards to gain sexual power and still seemed submissive” (Wiggins 2009, p. 62). This observation demonstrates how conflicting social ideologies can be combined into and projected Parton’s stardom.
- 7 Aviva Chomsky writes in “Histories of Class and the Carceral State: A Response to Paul Durrenberger and Dimitra Doukas” that “[g]iven its disproportionate impact on the poor and people of color, virtually all studies of the carceral state see the intersections of race and class as central to its nature” (Chomsky 2018, p. 34). In other words: Talking about the prison system and its incarcerated is a way of talking about race and class in the United States.
- 8 In the podcast *Citations Needed*, Nima Shirzai and Adam Johnson point out that “country music [is] a descendant of the blues, folk, Tejano, and other genres, with connections to labor organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World” and mention that later “popular conceptions of country music have long been deliberately shaped by a series of broader ideological projects. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, conservative politicians and other right-wing forces have exploited the genre to promote illiberalism, racism, revanchist white grievance identity politics, and runaway anti-intellectualism.”
- 9 Nadine Hubbs comments on this social dynamic in the book *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music*: “Country is a rarity on the American media landscape inasmuch as it addresses working people and their lives, and not for laughs or in an objectifying frame. As a cultural symbol, country music not only sonically evoked a certain type of social persona—usually figured as working-class, white, and provincial—but often stands as proxy for that persona” (Hubbs 2014, p. 13).

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