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“Nobody’s More Country”: Identity in Country-Rap Crossover Music

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Music

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Amanda Mai T. Becker

Lewiston, Maine

March 30, 2022

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## **Abstract**

Country and hip-hop music often are positioned as opposites, creating and reinforcing distinct identities that may oppose each other. Yet, there are several underlying narratives of identity that are similar between the two genres. This project examines the mutual constitution of country and hip-hop through the lens of country-rap crossover music, focusing on the American identities that come together with the crossing over of music genres and the development of identities that lie beyond the bounds of the individual genres. It considers how the interactions between such identities within music mirror contemporary societal discourse on social issues including race, gender, sexuality, and class. In this way, country-rap crossover has the capacity to promote understanding across differences. Crossover can be about reconciling what it means to be American, the music attempting to resolve the ambiguities and contradictions between rural and urban American identities. Country-rap and crossover broadly lend themselves to this purpose as dialogues between identity groups occur within it and are intrinsic to it. This thesis offers a critical analysis of such conversations through close readings of country-rap crossover songs like “Old Town Road” (2019), “My Truck” (2020), and “Nobody’s More Country” (2021).

## **Introduction**

When I was young, music and my world were one. Coming home from pit orchestra rehearsals late in the evening, I found myself surrounded by the sweet sonorities of the local jazz clubs and the guitar riffs of indie bands playing sets at the neighborhood restaurants. I passed buskers in the parks and break-dancers headed to the train cars. Boomboxes blared salsa 24/7 on subway platforms and men sold their hip-hop mixtapes on street corners for ten dollars apiece, eight if you were extra special and got a discount. Even shopping was a musical experience, whether it be Top 40 overhead as I searched for a new pair of shoes at Macy's or traditional Chinese tunes pattering out of corner speakers as I hunted the supermarket aisles for lemongrass. Out and about in New York City, I heard (almost) everything except the most disliked music in the five boroughs: country music.

Detesting country music is in your blood if you are a city kid. To like it was seen as more embarrassing and a greater social slight than having to pull out your phone for directions when you emerge from the subway station. And, if you did enjoy the Southern anthems, you could kiss your title as a true city kid goodbye. Thankfully, my love for country did not cost me my friends because I kept it a secret for the longest time. How did this affinity develop? I asked myself that question often.

Pennsylvania was the site of my 'country awakening'. Driving miles and miles on Route 80 with nothing but Keith Urban to keep me company, to long hot days at gymnastics camp with Hunter Hayes droning on in the background, I listened to country music. Such prolonged exposure to country and the association of it with positive experiences at camp might offer a sufficient explanation as to why I like the music. However, the identities and ideologies to which I was introduced through country music fascinated me the most.

I engaged more with country music to explore identities unfamiliar to me. Country music creates imaginary identities that I may inhabit, allowing me to draw connections between myself and the constructed identities by leaning into, latching onto, and exploiting the notions of idealism and nostalgia. Occupying these roles expands my consciousness of diverse perspectives and increases my empathy for others. I maintain a desire to understand people and their attitudes, not to impart judgment but rather to paint a lush picture of the world in which I operate. This yearning drives my study of country and crossover music.

Listening to country music challenged my notion of who the genre was for and reshaped my deeply rooted views about its audiences and the communities to which they belong. For some people, listening offers a transformative experience in which their notions of identity are altered. For others, music reinforces existing ideas of identity which may be reflective of, if not born from, longstanding stereotypes and tropes. This dichotomy raises a question regarding the extent to which empathy can be fostered through music. One must consider what narratives are provided by the music and how they interact with an individual's existing schema and epistemologies. What power dynamics are at play when one attempts to assume, or at the very least engage with, the identity of another through music? This paper ponders this question among others with the hope of engaging casual music listeners in a conversation about the capacity of popular music to serve as a vehicle for understanding across differences. I use crossover music as the space for this discussion because of the dialogue between identity groups that occurs within it and that is intrinsic to it. Conversations in crossover mirror societal discourse on identity while also acting as a site for novel engagements of identity and social and cultural politics.

Just as I, a fan that consumes urban pop genres, reach out to radically different musical spaces – and by extension cultural spaces – so too do the artists I follow. Artists realize, by way

of creative praxis, the same process of ‘reaching out’ to new genre spaces that I have embodied in my own listening practices. I will use country and hip-hop music, and interactions between the two to explore representations of identity in crossover music. Country and hip-hop crossover is the subject of this study because of its ability to show how crossover can be about reconciling what it means to be American, the music attempting to resolve the ambiguities and contradictions between rural and urban American identities.

It is important to note that this project takes on a subjective vantage point as it assumes a dominant lens of country music. This is predominately based on my own relationship with country and rap music explicated earlier in this introduction. Given the scope of this work and the breadth of the topic it engages, it is not feasible to provide an even-handed assessment of country music and hip-hop in the context of culture, politics, and the various identities that must be taken up to understand country-rap crossover music. Close-readings of country and country-rap songs exclusively represent the works of Black artists as part of a larger effort to use Black cultural productions to evaluate whiteness in country music. An analysis of white appropriations of hip-hop in country-rap crossover (among many other aspects of this project) necessitates its own body of work.

## **Genre Markers**

Though people from New York City tend to dislike country music, some without ever having heard it, they are remarkably skilled at identifying it. Just as they can pick out a hip-hop tune in a split second, they can categorize a country song. How is this possible, especially for those who have not spent a single second of their life listening to country? The key is genre

markers, identifiable thematic and stylistic elements common amongst the music of a particular genre. In country music, thematic genre markers include but are not limited to the idea of the common man, family values, patriotism, race, religion, and nostalgia (Meier 2018, 89). A Southern accent, steel guitar, and banjo are examples of stylistic indicators of the genre. Dolly Parton's "In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)" (1969) and Luke Combs' "Refrigerator Door" (2019) contain many of these markers. Most obvious in the two songs are the artists' distinct accents which indicate Southern identity and thus align them with country music with every word they utter. The instrumentation of the pieces further points to the genre. Parton's song is driven by steel guitar and banjo parts. While Combs' number does not include any notable instances of steel guitar, it evokes the character of one through the use of vibrato, slides, and other ornamentations of the electric guitar parts. Additionally, the subtle underlying mandolin line gives the guitar-driven song into a stronger country "feel".

Combs' and Parton's works also feature the genre markers of their shared cultural themes. Their songs emphasize nostalgia as providing comfort in life. Combs describes reflecting fondly on life through the preservation of memories on a refrigerator door. The imagery of one's life depicted in pieces that are stuck together on the refrigerator door – the fridge an object one encounters multiple times every day – suggests that though the past is behind him, it is a comfort that he keeps close. Parton is more intense in her portrayal of the importance of nostalgia asserting that it is a saving grace in tumultuous times: "No amount of money could buy from me/The memories that I have of then/No amount of money could pay me/To go back and live through it again/In the good old days when times were bad". At the center of Combs' and Parton's commentary on nostalgia is a narrative about strong familial ties. Combs opens "Refrigerator Door" (2019) with "There's daddy on his John Deere, brand new in '96/Beside me

and Bandit playing fetch when I was a kid”, while Parton sings about watching parents struggle: “I’ve seen daddy’s hands break open and bleed/And I’ve seen him work till he’s stiff as a board/An’ I’ve seen momma layin’ in suffer and sickness/In need of a doctor we couldn’t afford”. Both songs also touch on the theme of the working-class experience.

Just as country music has distinct genre markers, so too does hip-hop. Hip-hop, as the quintessential urban genre, highlights aspects of metropolitan life including the parallel existence of the very rich and the very impoverished. Themes of hypermasculinity, fame, materialism, violence, substance abuse, trauma, and racism are prevalent in mainstream and hard-core hip-hop.<sup>1</sup> Both “No Church in the Wild” (2011) by JAY-Z and Kanye West, featuring Frank Ocean and The-Dream, and Kendrick Lamar’s “King Kunta” (2015) engage with several of the listed themes.

“No Church in the Wild” (2011) explores how those who have faced trauma in their lives come to rely on themselves as they have lost faith in others. The song critiques organized religion, specifically Christianity. The artists tend to interweave many of the genre markers of hip-hop into a single verse such as when JAY-Z raps:

Rolling in the Rolls-Royce Corniche/Only the doctors got this, I’m hiding from  
police/Cocaine seats/All white like I got the whole thing bleached/Drug dealer  
chic/I’m wondering if a thug’s prayers reach

This passage highlights materialism in the Rolls-Royce Corniche and the Cocaine seats. The seats refer to the cocaine white upholstery color that was once offered in luxury cars, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Other types of hip-hop music engage different and even opposing themes like social justice. Mainstream and hard-core hip-hop are of relevance here because the focus is on popular and mainstream music, rather than underground or other less prevalent forms of genres.

supports a narrative about substance abuse, as does the comment about such a look being “drug dealer chic”. A line of the verse that appears earlier also ties in themes of violence.

Through a cautionary tale about the dark sides of fame and fortune, Kendrick Lamar’s “King Kunta” (2015) engages with themes of fame, violence, trauma, and race. The theme of violence in Lamar’s track is clear as he claims he “was gonna kill a couple rappers” and talks about “shoot[ing] at your identity”. Wrapped up in these statements and the line “Twenty million walkin' out the court buildin', woo-woo!/Aw, yeah, fuck the judge/I made it past twenty-five, and there I was/A little nappy-headed n— with the world behind him” are references to gang violence – and the associated trauma – which was prevalent in Lamar’s hometown of Compton, California. The latter line also highlights the theme of race, specifically the experience of impoverished Black men, many of whom either end up in jail or dead before they reach 25 years of age.

In addition to thematic genre markers of hip-hop music, there are also stylistic markers which include but are not limited to rapping, vamps, and sampling. Rapping, also referred to as MCing, is a type of vocal delivery characterized by stylized rhythm and rhyme. The pairing of rhythm and rhyme is more commonly known as flow. Rapping is the main way lyrics are delivered in hip-hop as is evident in “No Church in the Wild” (2011) and “King Kunta” (2015).

Hip-hop is structurally centered on vamps: short, repeating, rhythmically and harmonically simple phrases. The vamp in “No Church in the Wild” (2011) (Figure 1) repeats throughout the entire song, mostly in full voicing. However, when playing under Frank Ocean’s lines “What's a god to a non-believer/Who don't believe in anything?” and “Your love is my scripture/Let me in through your encryption” in the bridge of the song, only the percussive beat

is sustained. The vamp in “King Kunta” (2015) (Figure 2) is sustained throughout, except under the line “By the time you hear the next pop/The funk shall be within you—\*Gunshot\*/Now I run the game, got the whole world talkin’” for which all other sounds drop out.

One way vamping is achieved in hip-hop music is through sampling or the reuse of a section of a sound recording in a new composition. The sampled recording is often manipulated in pitch, rhythm, or otherwise when incorporated into the new recording.<sup>2</sup> “No Church in the Wild” (2011) samples four tracks: “Sunshine Help Me” (1968) by Spooky Tooth, “K-Scope” (1978) by Phil Manzanera, James Brown’s “Don’t Tell a Lie About Me and I Won’t Tell the Truth on You” (1974), and “Tristessa” (1979) by Orchestra Njervudarov. Some of these songs were sampled for the vocals and/or lyrics like the James Brown piece, others for the percussion like that of Spooky Tooth.

“King Kunta” (2015) sampled six tracks, most for the vocals/lyrics. Lamar raps “Screamin’, ‘Annie, are you okay? Annie, are you okay?’”. Part of the line is plucked straight from Michael Jackson’s hit “Smooth Criminal” (1987). Lyrics and/or vocals from James Brown’s “The Payback” (1973), Ahmad’s “We Want the Funk” (1994), and JAY-Z’s “Thank You” (2009) are also featured. Bass and drum samples are from “Get Nekkid” (2000) by Mausberg featuring DJ Quick and “Kung Fu” (1974) by Curtis Mayfield, respectively.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that hip-hop music production has shifted away from digital sampling, instead using synthesizer and drum machine textures. Such a change is the result of a crackdown on copyright infringement.

FIGURE 1: "NO CHURCH IN THE WILD" (2011) VAMP

FIGURE 2: "KING KUNTA" (2015) VAMP

While thematic and stylistic markers of country music and hip-hop may seem to function exclusively as unwavering points of reference against which to judge new musical productions in the respective genres, they also serve as tools for artists to reimagine genre and reconfigure genre’s pre-existing notions of sound and identity. Artists can for example superimpose instruments from two genres to create a sound that disorients the listener and then reground them in an entirely new context by attributing the sound to a particular theme that lies within or beyond the boundaries of the genres from which the instruments were pulled. In this way, crossover music can act as a vehicle for transgressing the boundaries that genre markers establish.

## Understanding Genre

What is a musical genre? One might describe it as a categorization meant to define, even confine, music according to a set of shared compositional and cultural attributes. Asking what constitutes a musical genre raises more questions than it yields answers. In a 1980 publication, philosopher Stephen Neale defined genres as “systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject” (Neale 1980, 19). Musicologist Franco Fabbri offers a different definition: “A musical genre is a set of musical events, real or possible, whose course is regulated by a definite arrangement of socially acceptable rules” (Fabbri and Chambers 1982, 136). In both definitions, the claims about genre may be relatively simple: genre is social and cultural, susceptible to change within music and beyond. However, I argue that the concept of genre is much more nuanced. Genres “emerge, evolve, and disappear” (Lena and Peterson 2008, 698). In their development, reinforcement, and reconstruction, genres take on a host of meanings.

Fabbri separates genre meanings into two categories, denotative meanings – what a genre indicates – and connotative meanings – what it implies to individuals and groups. What a genre denotes may be agreed upon, while what it connotes may be highly subjective. Fabbri also expresses that the meanings of genres can be denoted or connoted by other signs which may or may not contribute to the definition of the genre (Fabbri and Chambers 1982).

To parse the relationship Fabbri lays out, one can apply philosopher Charles Peirce’s theory of semiotics to music. According to Peirce, there are three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons resemble what they signify. These signs are direct representations of the signified. An example of iconicity in a country song is the vocal imitation of car wheels laying down rubber in Breland’s aptly named hit about trucks called “My Truck” (2020). Icons are not

only reinforced in music, but they also shape how music is categorized because they are stable. Genre requires stable reference points to function. ‘Index’ describes signifiers that are not arbitrary, rather they are “directly connected in some way... to the signified” (Chandler 2004, 37). Revisiting the genre markers in Dolly Parton’s “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)” (1969) and Luke Combs’ “Refrigerator Door” (2019) can help apply ‘index’ sign theory directly to music and genre. As previously mentioned, country music is recognizable in part because of the deep, twangy timbre of the singers in the genre. The accented voice is indexical of an American Southern identity. The prevalence of such accents in country music links the genre to that identity since the vocal quality is an attribute of individuals raised in the Southern region of the United States. People are quick to identify country music when they hear a Southern-accented voice because indexes of identity establish connections to a signifier even when the signifier is not obvious or even present. Peirce’s icons and indexes are themselves denotative but also more generally contribute to the denotative meaning of a genre.

A Peircean ‘symbol’ is defined by the signifier’s lack of resemblance to the signified, The relationship is “fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional... agreed upon and learned” (Chandler 2004, 36). In this way, symbols are akin to connotative meanings. They also form the connotative meaning of a genre. Genre is complicated by the fact that its markers can function as icons, indexes, and symbols, interacting with one another in ways that redefine their meaning and the meaning of the genre to which they belong.

Chandler’s definition of symbol further applies to genre as it reflects Fabbri’s notion that a musical genre is moderated by social conventions. Genre is inherently subjected to “rules emanating from semiotic, behavioural, social, ideological, economic and juridical spheres” (Moore 2001, 433). According to this understanding, genres act as more than aesthetic or

stylistic boundaries. The music within a given genre upholds the numerous social constructs and ideologies defined by the genre. Thus, a self-perpetuating cycle arises where genre boundaries beget music that reinforces such boundaries.

Ideas of authenticity that play out in genre often solidify genre boundaries. How a genre defines authenticity affects the flexibility of genre boundaries. Authenticity in country music is best understood through the genre's emphasis on nostalgia portrayed through narratives of patriotism and blue-collar, Southern living (Mann 2008; Leap 2019). The comfort often associated with nostalgia is a result of knowing that past experiences are concrete and unalterable. They give an individual a positive baseline against which new experiences and ideas may be compared, and thus, an idea of what is right and/or genuine. Country music then has a clear picture of what (and even who) is authentic that the genre reinforces to further fortify existing genre boundaries. Hip-hop's relationship to authenticity is markedly different, one in which ideas of authenticity are considerably more flexible than in country.

Hip-hop historically engages in a unique exchange of cultural practices. It does so through what Black literary scholars call "Signifyin(g)" (to be differentiated from the Standard English meaning of the word 'signifying'). Musical Signifyin(g) plays on associative rhetorical and semantic relations in its reproduction and reimagination of cultural productions. It is not,

the borrowing and restating of pre-existing material, or the performing of variations on pre-existing material, or even the simple reworking of pre-existing material. While it is all of these, what makes it different... is its transformation of such material by using it rhetorically or figuratively—through troping, in other words—by trifling with, teasing, or censoring it in some way... demonstrating respect for, goading, or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone- or word-play, the illusions of speech or narration, and other troping mechanisms... Signifyin(g) shows, among other things, either reverence or irreverence toward previously stated musical statements and values. (Floyd 1991, 271)

In the context of Black musical practices, particularly cultural borrowing, playful quotation or parody is an integral aesthetic component. The material brought into the genre space takes on new meaning as hip-hop lays claim to them. Such conditions provide the genre ample opportunity to reevaluate its notions of authenticity, ultimately locating them in a dynamic space. The prevalence of technology-driven practices in hip-hop also encourages the genre to examine its ideas of authenticity. Technology offers an opportunity for novel creative practices. Hip-hop's interest in new aesthetics and sound worlds (unrelated to cultural exchange) lends to a willingness to engage with concepts that may reshape genre boundaries. Authenticity then influences hip-hop's genre boundaries by increasing their permeability.

Music is controlled by and perpetuates the discreteness of genre as demonstrated by the ways in which genre interacts with authenticity (Brackett 1994, 777). Crossover music must reckon with the resulting boundaries, calling into question the discreteness of genre. How discrete is genre? Just as socially acceptable concepts and behaviors are constantly redefined, genres and their boundaries fluctuate. The reassessment of what makes a genre is frequently catalyzed by the diversification of the musical works within it. When musicians compose, they make aesthetic, stylistic, and other such choices not singularly based on genre conventions but also personal preferences (Lena and Peterson 2008, 698). Regardless of the composer's intentions, their music will be categorized and bound by genre as is necessary for commercialization. Thus, and for many other reasons to be discussed in depth later, a genre formation that might predominantly be defined by stylistic attributes becomes progressively less representative of the music that composes it (Brackett 2014, 76). A change is forced – superficial or profound – in the genre and how it is received.

Genre is often mobilized to provide stability in dynamic and complex musical landscapes; yet, in doing so, it promotes its instability. The discreteness of genre is difficult if not impossible to maintain, as genre is built upon social constructs, ideologies, and cultural practices that are all variable (Moore 2001, 440). Crossover music uses and feeds into this conflict as it simultaneously challenges and reinforces genre boundaries (Brackett 2012, 171). Try as it may to flee from the restrictiveness of genre, crossover music is subject to the socially constructed conventions of musical categorization that help people conceptualize and engage with music. What, then, is so fascinating about crossover? It capitalizes on the volatile nature of social constructs, furthering the instability of genre by altering or producing novel identities that undermine the existing narratives associated with a particular type of music. The repercussions of such identity formation yield implications for social theory beyond the scope of music.

### **Defining Crossover Music**

Crossover music can be defined according to several terms. Some explanations are grounded in radio and industry conceptualizations, others in audience reception, and others in stylistic attributes. Musicologist David Brackett has offered several definitions of crossover that speak to the nuance of the term. In a piece on Michael Jackson, Brackett writes about crossover as related to audience and artist appeal, particularly the question of “how an artist’s appeal transcends an audience associated with one type of music to include another, with some reference often made to the role of musical and visual factors in this process” (Brackett 2012, 169). He also defines crossover in terms of a song’s relationship to popularity charts outlining that a song ‘crosses over’ when it moves from “one of the ‘marginal’ (race or hillbilly) charts to the mainstream” (Brackett 1994, 777). My research into crossover yielded very few distinct

definitions of the term. While the small range of definitions may be limiting, it invites consideration as to how and why Brackett's (and others') understanding of crossover has evolved and presents an opportunity to apply theory belonging to disciplines outside of music to parse ideas of genre and crossover that have become centralized.

### **Technology and Crossover Music: Technological Advancements Between the 1990s and 2010s**

Popular music studies' understanding of crossover changed drastically over the nearly two-decade-long period between Brackett's two definitions as scholars attempted to respond to shifting audiences, technological innovations, developments in identity theory, and the greater acceptance of diverse social identities among other transformations. Perhaps the most drastic changes during this period were technological advancements that altered not only how music was made but also the commodification and social meaning of music and musical activities (Purcell and Randall 2016, 5). Brackett's 1994 definition reflects the prominence of radio as a distribution platform for music and aligns with the inception of Crossover – a radio format featuring dance, R&B, and pop music – that occurred in the late 1980s (Coddington 2021). In 2012, when Brackett published his audience-centered definition, radio was still an important platform for music; however, the rise of streaming platforms had already started to reshape how music was marketed and received.

#### ***The Rise of Streaming Platforms***

Any change in the way music is consumed is especially important to country and hip-hop crossover because consumption is inextricably linked to audience demographics. The shift from radio to streaming platforms transformed the relationship between music and its listeners. So,

how exactly did the move from radio to streaming occur? It began with the wide circulation of the MP3 in the late 1990s. MP3s were game-changing because of their ability to be shared on the web via early file-sharing services like Napster. Listeners around the globe with an internet connection could almost instantly access a massive database of songs new and old, familiar and unfamiliar. Such capabilities, paired with a growing number of websites dedicated to reviewing and buying music, altered listening and purchasing habits (Peters 2001, 24). A new type of demand for music was created; one that was rooted not in item sales, like that of records or CDs, but file downloads and subscription sales.

MP3s redefined music ownership and collection. It was no longer important to own music; rather, the desire was to “have access to any music anytime and anywhere” (Lerch 2018, 906). Why have a library with a size limited by physical space and one’s finances when one could download hundreds and thousands of songs at low prices that could be stored on a hard drive? Napster, a website for peer-to-peer file sharing that allowed its users to upload, share, and download music for free was the precursor to streaming services. Napster was an online marketplace for music that was followed by Apple’s popular platform iTunes in 2003. Originally, iTunes provided a digital space for artists to sell their music – albums, EPs, or singles – in the form of audio files to be downloaded and played on the computer or iPod. Pandora Radio (2005) was the next major step toward streaming services. A radio-style streaming site, Pandora sought to provide an experience tailored to the unique listener, one that “ignores the crowd” as “the idea is to figure out what *you* like, not what a market might like” (Walker 2009). This customized listening experience set the stage for Spotify’s launch in 2008, and the debuts of other streaming services.

The diversification of ways to listen is integral to the survival of crossover music because it offers a space in which such music can be shared and consumed. Crossover music traverses genre boundaries, a practice that often leaves it without a home in any distinct genre. It cannot rely on radio plays and popular charts to reach audiences in the same way music that is easily categorized does. Thus, it likely ceases to exist if there is no space for it to grow. Additionally, many country-rap songs are viral hits. They found success in digital spaces because they tapped into a market that was not readily available to them (whether due to geographic or other constraints) except through the internet. Another argument for the importance of new listening platforms to crossover music is that they expose listeners to genres and styles of which they are either unaware or know little about. They become more open to new sounds and thus are primed to be more receptive to crossover music that combines what they know and love with what is new and less familiar. It also works in a different direction where the primary exposure is to crossover music that exists adjacent to music they enjoy. This primary exposure then influences the listener to engage the genre they know, its crossover form, and the other genre that is crossing over. Spotify is an example of a streaming service that can introduce listeners to new sounds, styles, and genres in ways that other platforms cannot, or at least struggle to do.

While each streaming service has left important marks on the music industry, none have done so quite like Spotify. With 365m monthly active users across 178 markets, and over 70m tracks available to some 165m subscribers, Spotify is the most popular audio streaming subscription service in the world (Spotify). It connects listeners with artists they know and love, allows them to find new artists based on their shown preferences, and offers the option for listening in spheres completely different from what one might normally consume. (My love for country music would likely not have developed without Spotify.)

The platform introduces its subscribers to new genre spaces through three main types of playlists: editorial playlists, algorithmic playlists, and listener playlists (Playlist Radar 2022).<sup>3</sup> Editorial and algorithmic playlists create space for crossover music in different ways. Editorial playlists are hand-crafted by Spotify’s Shows & Editorial team. Many are genre-specific which can exclude crossover music; however, many tend to be oriented toward a particular vibe (e.g. “Relax & Unwind”, “park hangs”, “Chillin’ on a Dirt Road) or event (“Tailgate Party”, “Songs to Sing in the Car”). Those curated to a vibe or event may be centered around a single genre but often spill over into adjacent musical spaces. This is conducive to crossover music and offers a way in which such music can reach broad audiences. The playlist “Songs to Sing in the Car” is a great example of a space for crossover music as it tends to feature a mix of throwback songs, guilty pleasures, Top 40 hits, and folk-Americana and has nearly 10m likes on Spotify. Any variety of genre crossovers could be included on the playlist. Additionally, the playlists get updated relatively frequently: the most popular ones can change every week (Spotify for Artists 2020). There are even editorial playlists almost exclusively composed of crossover music (“I Love Rap ‘n’ Roll”, “Not Quite Classical”, “Country Soul”, “Wild Country”).<sup>4</sup>

Crossover music can also find a place in Spotify’s algorithmic playlists. These playlists are automatically generated for each subscriber using Spotify’s algorithms that track the user’s listening habits. They can reach a “highly targeted audience of listeners who are almost certain to love your music. This can result in a surprisingly large number of streams, particularly for talented artists in less popular genres... These listeners, while fewer in number, are much more

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<sup>3</sup> Listener playlists are perhaps the format that is least relevant to the current discussion as they are crafted by the subscriber; however, notably, Spotify now offers refreshable song recommendations based on the contents of the playlist at the bottom of the playlist’s page.

<sup>4</sup> Crossover music is not the only entity to benefit from its inclusion on playlists. Arguably, Spotify can benefit from including crossover music in its playlists because it can be used to direct listeners toward different musical spaces. Spotify can strategically add crossover music to playlists to shepherd audiences from one genre or artist to another.

likely to turn into loyal fans” (Playlist Radar 2022). Algorithmic playlists speak individually to their listeners, a quality on which crossover music hinges: crossover music aims to converse with and about people whose identities are not present or inaccurately represented in dominant musical genres.

Spotify and platforms like it have also altered the economics of the music industry. When the industry took major financial losses between the turn of the century and 2010 as a result of diminishing record sales – the industry brought in \$14.9b in 1999 and only a mere \$6.3b in 2009 – subscription services helped keep it afloat (Wolfson 2018). Though streaming proved harmful to album-based distribution behavior (Lerch 2018, 907), it provided the industry with regular monthly revenue (Ovide 2021). The economic impact of streaming is not experienced equally across stakeholders in the industry. What role one occupies within the industry has a great bearing on the benefits one receives from music streaming platforms. Artists lose out financially in the streaming system relative to the older music industry built on record sales in which artists were able to make a living from royalties.

While streaming yields negative financial impacts for artists, it allows them to grow their audience. The web is particularly transformative in this regard as it augments existing physical spaces and creates novel imagined communities, providing sites for discourse and socialities, and a “medium through which such practices and relations are enacted...and as an archive...of those same practices and relations” (Born and Haworth 2017, 603, 605, 611). The internet engages audiences with the music and artists they listen to in new ways, making it easier for artists to connect authentically with fans.

The integration of the internet and streaming into the modes of music consumption also bestowed greater freedom of choice upon listeners. They can micromanage what they consume, creating individualized radio stations and playlists packed with songs by unique artists. No longer are listeners bound to the music on albums in their physical collection; they can play whatever they want whenever they want so long as they have a compatible device. With such user autonomy comes a loss of control: “in the case of digital technology, listening often has the *appearance* of increased choice and empowerment, but at the cost of increased mediation” (Purcell and Randall 2016, 4). That is, where buying a CD is the ownership of a physical object with an immutable copy of the music, streaming platforms allow users contingent, sometimes temporary access to the content on their platforms. Listeners feel like they have greater freedom, even though they are restricted in many ways including not being able to download or playback the files on specific platforms or devices. The ever-popular subscription format provides consumers the illusion of autonomy when what they are purchasing is only temporary access to a given media collection. This duality is reflected in two phenomena that coincide with the rise of streaming: “a kind of musical subjectivity” is created, “one that is an aggregate of all our musiking and listening data” (Purcell and Randall 2016, 4); and increased passive listening which leads to a lower engagement of listeners with individual artists and their brands (Wolfson 2018). These phenomena seem to directly contradict the argument that streaming provides listeners with greater autonomy over their music consumption and that authentic connections between artists and fans can be facilitated by the digital age.

### ***Examining the Influence of New Recording and Production Tools***

Technological advancements in music between the 1990s and 2010s were not limited to storage and distribution methods; rather, there were also developments in recording and

production that are integral to how identity is formed and maintained by genre. These new tools made it possible for artists to simultaneously engage different genre identities by superimposing genre markers. That is, technology like the Musical Digital Interface (MIDI) fostered sonic crossover between genres. The evolution of MIDI was one of the most transformative changes in recording and production technology. Introduced in 1983, MIDI has become a key part of music-making today. MIDI was novel because it offered cross-platform compatibility that did not exist previously. Electronic instruments from different manufacturers were not designed to be synchronized with one another. MIDI standardized this process and made it more accessible, later allowing artists to compose, produce, and perform multi-track music inside and outside of the studio, even recording and playing back tracks live in concert. This is especially important for crossover artists who draw on an array of musical sources, some of which may not exist within their physical music-making spaces.

Artists and producers across genres take advantage of the multifunctionality of MIDI. The original MIDI led to the TASCAM DA-88 (1993), a digital multi-track recording device that supported up to eight simultaneous tracks, and the digital audio workstation (DAW) that could later manage an unlimited number of tracks. These types of tools are especially prevalent in hip-hop because of their sampling capabilities, sampling one of the genre markers of hip-hop discussed earlier. Crossover music relies heavily on the sampling capabilities of MIDI and MIDI-like tools to sonically incorporate markers and themes of multiple genres into a single track.

DA-88 and DAW also facilitate the creation of crossover music, for they improved post-production processes, offering extended and better options for producers. Often, examples of genre crossover occur beyond the lyrics and instrumentation. Production and post-production

styles native to a genre can be combined with those of another genre. The ease of workflow on DAW helps build nuance into the aesthetics of crossover music. In doing so, digital audio workstations also altered artist-artist and artist-audience relationships because these devices eliminated the restrictions imposed on music-making by physical and temporal space (Lerch 2018, 901). No longer did musicians have to gather in a studio to make music. Now, they could record their parts separately and send them to a producer who would put them together into a final product. This process is utilized in the making of crossover music (and the creation of recorded music generally) because such music often relies on collaborations between artists, songwriters, or producers of different genres who do not or cannot work synchronously and in-person with one another to make music.

The development of DAW and multi-track recording tools also had repercussions on the production of live music. It allowed for layered vocal and instrumental parts typically found on studio tracks to be reproduced in a live setting without the need for extra singers or instrumentalists. This practice is essential in the performance of crossover music which necessitates the integration of complex, digitally produced, superimposed markers of genre into live settings.

While technological innovations have offered many benefits to the music-making and performance processes, they also raise questions about the authenticity of a performance, a song, and even an artist. The impact of MIDI and DAW on the live music experience is not unique to those technologies. Auto-tune is perhaps the most contentious of post-production tools, and one of the most used. Not to be confused with pitch correction which refers to adjustments made to maintain the naturalness of the voice; auto-tune is the use of software to alter vocal pitch (Provenzano 2019, 65). The effect of auto-tune may or may not sound natural – just listen to

The-Dream's robotic singing in the bridge of "No Church in the Wild" (2011). The use of auto-tune is pervasive in music today. While sometimes an agreed-upon stylistic choice like in "No Church in the Wild" (2011), other times a singer's voice is autotuned by producers and sound engineers without the singer's consent. In the industry today, auto-tune is the expectation, not the exception. And, it is happening not just at the studio or stadium but also in home studios, allowing music production to further transcend spatial and temporal boundaries (Hajdu 2012, 29).

Auto-tune is contentious depending on how it is used. It is an innovative technological tool that can be used for creativity such as when artists drastically shift the pitch of a voice to make it artificial and robotic sounding – just as how T-Pain used it in his song "I'm Sprung" (2005) and Kanye West did on "Love Lockdown" (2008). However, auto-tune is also a pitch-correction software. When used in cases like the latter where the intention is to maintain a level of naturalness in the voice, artists may find themselves under scrutiny if the auto-tuning is too noticeable because it threatens the authenticity of the performance and performer.

The implications of auto-tune on the authenticity of performance and performer in country music are distinct from that of hip-hop, and even country-rap crossover music. Throughout its history, country music has wavered in its acceptance of music technology. Early notions of authenticity in country music stressed the importance of live productions of music whether for recordings or radio broadcasts (Wilgus 1970). At that moment, the use of electronically produced sounds would have violated the genre's conception of authentic 'sound'. Yet, when country began to seriously seek out positions on popular music charts, its penchant for live performance dwindled because of the increasingly dominant role of the executive and the producer in music-making, ultimately causing a reconfiguration of country music's idea of

authentic ‘sound’ (Wilgus 1970). Since then, country music has moved back towards and then away from its initial understanding of authenticity as it relates to performance. Now more than ever, country artists are experimenting with the vast capabilities of digital technology. The use of technology in country music is becoming more accepted as it becomes the norm across genres, but questions remain about its authenticity depending on who uses it and how it is used.

Unlike country, hip-hop historically embraces technologies like auto-tune. The genre sees such programs as tools to expand its production of music. It is precisely auto-tune’s violation of the rules of singing that attracted hip-hop to it. 2010s rap was saturated with unnaturally auto-tuned vocals. Despite maintaining an attitude towards technology generally in opposition to that of country music, some hip-hop artists criticized the use of auto-tune during a larger movement against the practice as depersonalized and even a dehumanizing deception of the public (Reynolds 2018). One anti-auto-tune voice was Jay-Z. His song “D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)” “accused his hip-hop contemporaries” like T-Pain of “going pop and soft” (Reynolds 2018). Observing the increasingly hostile attitudes towards auto-tune, T-Pain tried to play into the critical narratives while also maintaining his claim as a pioneer of the technology. The period in which hip-hop rejected auto-tune was relatively short-lived. It is auto-tune that often allows hip-hop artists to move seamlessly between rapping and singing (Reynolds 2018). Country-rap crossover music uses auto-tune to exactly this end, but also to create a style that nods at country and hip-hop respectively while also creating a distinct sound in which the voice is a complex artifact. The authenticity of the performance and performer in crossover music styles is not threatened by technology because of the extent to which crossover relies on technology to create its sound. Crossover music offers a space in which artists can experiment with and reimagine taboo practices.

The perception of auto-tune by listeners and audiences can be dictated not only by the circumstance in which the auto-tune is used but also by the person using it. Auto-tune is more likely to be seen as a negative attribute of a performance or recording when the singer is female-identifying than when they are male-identifying (Provenzano 2019, 65). When males use auto-tune, they are “afforded ‘artistic’, ‘creative,’ and ‘emotional’ authenticity”; whereas, when females use it, it is considered a fix for a flawed voice – to “perfect and naturalize female voices” (Provenzano 2019, 65). The authenticity of the artist is further called into question because of auto-tune use.

Sampling is another technology-driven practice that challenges notions of authenticity in genres as it is a means through which ideas and materials from outside of the genre can be brought into it. Sampling’s perceived threat to the authenticity of country music versus hip-hop is not the same. In hip-hop, sampling is not nearly so mediated. That is not to say that there are no rules for the practice. For example, sampled recordings already used by another must be substantially altered to be reused (Schloss 2014). Upholding or violating the rules of sampling in hip-hop can lead to a conversation about authenticity framed in a context of ethics and purism as for the purist, “the ethics are one of the major tools for preserving the essence of hip-hop, even to the degree that producers in search of greater purity will actually create new rules for themselves” (Schloss 2014, 104). For those who do not identify strongly with purism, the rules exist less to preserve authenticity and more as a challenge to prove their skill of being able to create quality music according to a slew of conventions that make doing so more difficult (Schloss 2014).

In country, sampling is less common and more frequently penalized as it infringes on the values of authenticity and purism that are at the core of the genre (rather than disregarding the

values of an arguably small subsection of the genre as is true in hip-hop). This is because authenticity in country music largely comes from sounds, particularly those of live and acoustic instruments like the steel guitar. Some electronic instruments are frequently used and accepted in the genre like electric guitars (specifically Fender Telecasters) and electric basses, but the use of drum kits and synthesizers are less common and more often questioned in the context of the authenticity of sound. While technological practices in music further muddle the relationship between authenticity, performance, and audience, they are increasingly relevant to an understanding of how the music within a genre and crossover music that spans more than one genre can reinforce, undermine, and create identity.

### **Crossover Music's Engagement of Identity Theory**

A notable difference between Brackett's 1994 and 2012 definitions of crossover music is their engagements with identity as it relates to music. In the earlier definition, references to identity are only implicated through chart titles. Brackett writes about songs that move from a marginal chart to the mainstream, offering race and hillbilly, the precursors to hip-hop and country respectively, as examples of marginal charts. While Brackett's 2012 definition does not clearly outline the role identity plays in crossover music, it considers how artists and audiences are involved in defining genre and crossover. In particular, he references how crossover deals with the transcendence of an artist's appeal from audiences of one type of music to another and involves "some reference... to the role of musical and visual factors in this process" (Brackett 2012). The musical factors of which Brackett talks are inherently involved with the identities of the genres involved in the crossover and the identity of the artist. Therefore, identity is inextricably linked to the formation of crossover music.

The growing appreciation for the role of identity in genre theory as is displayed in Brackett's definitions mirrors changes to identity theory occurring in academia and beyond. Before the 1990s, much of identity theory was based on the belief that "society shapes self shapes social behavior" – society was "characterized as social structures comprising patterned behavior and interactions" – and focused on how people act in accordance with the meanings reflected in their identities (J. Stets and Burke 2014, 58, 600). In 1991, Peter J. Burke offered a new perspective on the process of seeking alignment between meanings and identities. He wrote that people may behave in such a way that counters their perceptions of their identities and that they weigh internal and external feedback in their attempts to understand the meanings of their exhibited behaviors (Burke 1991). It is in an individual's attempts at maintaining congruence between one's perception of self and the identity standard that one's identity changes (Burke 1991).

Burke's ideas are encapsulated in the concepts of identity verification and identity non-verification which describe the degree to which perceived and standard meanings of identity align. Identity is viewed as a control system with four components including 'identity standard' and 'perceptions' ('comparator' and 'error'/'discrepancy' are not necessary to understand within the context of the current discussion) (Burke 1991). 'Identity standard' refers to the set of self-defining meanings associated with a given identity, whereas 'perceived' meanings are those that are relevant to one's identity and which often are the result of feedback from others about one's behavior and how the behavior is received by others (Burke 2007). Identity verification occurs when reflected appraisals align with the relevant identity standard; thus, non-verification is when the two meanings are conflict (J.E. Stets and Cast 2007; J.E. Stets and Harrod 2004). Identity verification research revealed that the verification process is self-reinforcing and facilitated by

personal, interpersonal, and structural resources (J.E. Stets and Cast 2007). Individuals' responses to identity verification and non-verification are influenced by their emotional state: people are better at regulating the negative responses that arise because of identity non-verification if they can access positive emotions (J. Stets and Osborn 2008). This finding bolsters Burke's claim that social stress impacts identity processes (Burke 1991).

Other advancements in identity theory included research on the impact of multiple identities on one another and the self. Before the 1990s, it was thought that multiple identities could not exist simultaneously, rather, they were maintained by an individual in a salience-based hierarchy (Stryker and Burke 2000, 286). However, further research revealed that multiple identities could not only exist simultaneously and at different levels of the hierarchy but also the same level (J. Stets and Burke 2014, 72). It is in the varied configurations of such identities that individuals' unique concepts of self are created, and distinct behaviors and other outputs are yielded. These findings informed how identity theory considered identity change: identity change is ongoing and gradual and can be categorized, but it may also arise as a product of the existence and configuration of multiple identities, a conflict between standard meanings and behavior meanings, and shifts in the salience of identities (Burke 2006).

In 2000, traditional identity theory began to integrate social identity theory. The basis of social identity theory is rooted in the relationships between the self and social categories or groups, and how they inform people's actions and relations to structured society. Important to this theory is the difference between social identity and role identity, where the former means uniformity with others in a group, and the latter highlights differences in perceptions as one acts to fulfill the expectations of a specific role (J.E. Stets and Burke 2000, 226). One key cognitive

outcome of social identities is social stereotyping which impacts in-group and out-group perceptions and dynamics, ultimately affecting the homogeneity of a group (Haslam et al. 1996).

Social identification theory helped introduce more nuanced understandings of identity to popular discourse. Originally integrated into non-academic spaces through social movements – social identification is proven to be a strong contributor to individuals’ participation in social movements (Simon et al. 1998) – conversations about identity can be found amongst families at the dinner table, between co-workers on the subway to work, and in discussions on television and radio. Who can engage with the concept of identity and where and when these discourses are occurring shifted because of the increased importance of identities in self-conceptualization and individuals’ relationships with others and their environment. As a result, the average person understands identity through a distilled version of identity theory scholarship that they then apply to their lives. People forget that the ideas are rooted in scholarship and thus, they spread through society not as academic concepts but as some form of common sense. In this way, casual listeners of music can converse more deeply about how (and why) they relate to a song, beyond how it makes them feel.

Social movements and online media are largely responsible for the public’s engagement with a more sophisticated understanding of identity. Familiarization with, and hence a greater degree of comfort discussing, identity categories like race, gender, and sexuality make it possible for public discourse to discern meaning from theoretical terms like intersectionality without exposure to the relevant academic theory. The term intersectionality finds itself embedded into everyday conversation because of its adoption by popular social movements like the 2017 Women’s March on Washington (Stamper 2018). What began as a legal term coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to “describe how race, class, gender, and other individual

characteristics ‘intersect’ with one another and overlap” used predominantly in academic spaces has taken on its own meaning in the public sphere (Coaston 2019). It is important to note that such understandings of the term are influenced by and inextricable from political rhetoric. With the popularity of intersectionality comes great controversy. The term is controversial not because of the theory behind it that Crenshaw describes, but rather because of its “implications, uses, and more importantly, its consequences” in common political discourse (Coaston 2019) – the “connotative force of the word is outstripping the academic meaning of the word” (Stamper 2018). The term is strongly associated with left-leaning social movements, so the concern that some maintain about its connotation is that it furthers an agenda to upend social, particularly racial, hierarchies that ultimately lower the status of white, straight, cisgender men. Understanding the nuanced conversations around intersectionality, social identity theory, and identity theory is necessary because crossover is oriented at the intersections of different genres and thus different identities.

The connections between identity theory and genre theory can be difficult to decipher. When thinking about genre and identity formation, one must understand that music engages identity on several distinct levels. Music, because of its semiotic density, portrays existing identities and creates new ones (Turino 2008). Included in this process is the performance of identity by musicians through icons and indexes of identity. Genres, because they are characterized by stylistic and thematic similarities, uplift select identities that align with or reinforce dominant narratives in the given genre.

Performance, portrayals, and creations of identities in music can be conscious or unconscious. Just as any individual can pick specific identities they want to present to others, so too can artists to their audiences. What identities an artist chooses to put forth and how they

represent them are influenced by several factors including identity verification and non-verification, and obligatory and voluntary identities.<sup>5</sup> The former pair, explored earlier, can shape the selection of identities because an artist might want to promote their identities which are verified by a genre to which they belong – those identities that align with the dominant ones of the genre. If an artist experiences instances of identity non-verification (what occurs when the set of self-defining meanings associated with a given identity conflict with meanings relevant to one's identity which often result from feedback from others about one's behavior and how that behavior is received by others (Burke 2007)), they may actively repress the unaccepted identity.

Obligatory and voluntary identities are also influential. The concept of obligatory identities describes identities that are high-involvement, affectively intense, and long-term (Thoits 2003); these would include familial and other similar identities. Voluntary identities are categorized as short-term and casual. They require fewer responsibilities to role partners: individuals maintain greater flexibility in how they define and maintain such identities (Thoits 2003). There is a level of agency involved in acquiring and abandoning obligatory and voluntary identities; however, there is less choice when dealing with the former (Gallagher 2016, 312). Obligatory and voluntary identities may overlap and can be invoked simultaneously. While the identities that artists choose to share with their audience are unique to the individual, societal expectations and values mediate an individual's relationship with voluntary and obligatory identities. Since obligatory identities are harder to shed and often more strongly defining of an individual, an artist may be held back or bound to an image because of the difficulties associated with changing an obligatory identity. At the same time, they may quickly take on or leave behind

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<sup>5</sup> The reception and interpretation of these ideas are likely more important than the artist's intention given that what is denoted often does not align with what is heard by audiences. Conversations regarding this discrepancy are taken up in later chapters of this work.

voluntary identities such as those associated with interests depending on what will be verified by their audience or genre.

Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino's concept of strategic essentialism encapsulates the nuanced relationship between an artist and voluntary identities. Turino's work raises the question of whether one selects certain habits to form their identity based on a desire to differentiate themselves from or unite themselves with others. He uses the concept of strategic essentialism to get at the question. Strategic essentialism describes how groups and individuals can consciously choose habits and identities to unite or divide people to reach a political or social end (Turino 2008). The concept draws on the notion of essentialism which assumes that "groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 73). Strategic essentialism employs this reductionist vision of identity in that it downplays in-group differences or centers the group around one or more defining features to effectively achieve unity amongst members. It is important to note that the reductive, essentialist stance on an individual's cultural identity that is employed is a tactical decision, driven to a degree by conviction but also the goal of positioning one in relation to the cultural debate they are engaging. While strategic essentialism is focused on group dynamics, it also affects individuals by shaping one's self-representation. The acquisition and abandonment of voluntary (and even obligatory) identities are calculated: it is often done in the search for identity verification. Turino deals with similar ideas when discussing how individuals select identities to bring to the foreground that are considered important to those around them (Turino 2008).

Turino, Thoits, Gallagher, and Stets and Harrod all argue that the processes of identity development, maintenance, and performance involve a level of individual autonomy even when

social expectations and responses are highly influential. Identity theory also offers that there are some parts of behavior and identity that an individual does not control (J. Stets and Burke 2014, 62). In music, how do a genre and its associated identities impact artists' audience-facing identities and vice versa? Where does the autonomy exist, and where does the mediation occur? How might a country/hip-hop crossover space provide a form of identity verification for those identities that are not verified in country or hip-hop? Forthcoming case studies of country/hip-hop crossover songs offer a way to engage ideas these questions raise.

### **Crossover Music's Engagement of Poststructuralism**

Thus far, Brackett's two definitions of crossover music have been explored in the context of technology and identity theory, but also relevant is the rise of poststructuralism as a mode of interpreting culture. The framework of poststructuralism may be applied here to characterize changes in understandings of identity and genre formation. Poststructuralism arose in response to and critique of structuralism, a theory of culture that argues "individual units of any system have meaning only by virtue of their relations to one another" (Eagleton 2008, 82). Structuralism attempts to identify the procedures of cultural practices, delineating theories from the phenomena they are meant to describe, whereas poststructuralism approaches the two as entangled (Culler 2011). In other words, poststructuralism sees units of a system as having substantial and relational meanings, and that both are necessary to conceptualize the units and the system to which they belong. It challenges the structuralist perspective that social structures are concrete by dismantling the assumed forms of a given cultural work.

Crossover music engages poststructuralism as it deconstructs genre boundaries by relocating genre markers in distinctly different musical spaces, compromising rather than consolidating a song's genre identity. Philosopher Jacques Derrida frames the interactions between genre and ideas of poststructuralism well when he writes that "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres,... yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida and Ronell 1980, 65). Derrida problematizes what it means for a text to belong to a genre. The statement that every text participates in a genre asserts that there are intrinsic properties to texts that maintain their stable and permanent relationship to a given genre. Yet, according to Derrida, these same intrinsic qualities that make it such that even those texts that are assumed to be firmly situated in one genre or another simultaneously undermine the stability of their relationship to that genre and challenging their belonging. Poststructuralism "recognize[s] the impossibility of describing a complete or coherent signifying system" like a genre and the social constructs at its foundation since "systems are always changing" (Culler 2011, 125). Music is categorized because musical texts enter the symbolic order and genres are the framework through which we think about and organize music. Yet, there will always be instability in these categorizations as they are constructed upon and around identities and markers of identities that cultural theorists have shown to be volatile.

One way to unpack the notions of instability captured in Derrida's comment as they relate to crossover music is through sociologist and cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy's suggestive metaphor of 'roots' and 'routes' from his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Though a framework from a scholarly area relatively distant from music, the 'roots'/'routes' metaphor can serve as a useful point of departure for understanding crossover

and its relation to genre. Oriented in a discussion of the African diaspora where cultural practices become increasingly at home in mobility, Gilroy indicts the tendency to affix the African American literary canon onto the ‘roots’ of a New World identity tied to West African ancestry, rather than onto the ‘routes’, that is the routes of transmission between old and new cultural sites as a space where diasporic identities are formed (Gilroy 1993). While Gilroy’s concept of routes evokes images of physical movement, it also implies a movement across imaginary spaces. In this framework, artists located in this transient space – whether they be writers or musicians – exist and are at home in mobility. The space created by crossover music is akin to that of Gilroy’s “routes” where the perpetual motion and ephemerality of genres, and hence their instability, beget new cultural production including unique identities. This thesis will engage poststructuralism and the other theories of genre and identity presented in this introduction to better understand identity formation in crossover music, particularly country/hip-hop crossover, and its implications within and beyond popular music studies.

## **Looking Forward**

In the following chapters, I explore how country-rap crossover music engages the diverse identities found in country music and hip-hop, respectively, and creates a space in which identities rejected by said genres can exist. The next chapter, “(Not A)Lone Ranger: Country and Hip-Hop Cowboys’ Journeys Through the West” critically examines the mythology of the West. It considers historical and popular culture representations of cowboys (white and Black) and their enduring impact on country and hip-hop music and culture. “Country Roads Take Me to Country-Rap” looks at the intersection of locale and class in country music and its implications for country-rap crossover. It traces the rise of country music in America and the history of the

working-class white identity that is invoked in the genre. Close-readings of Blanco Brown's songs "The Git Up" (2019) and "Nobody's More Country" (2021), and Breland's "My Truck" allow for an in-depth look at the various ways in which country-rap crossover uses regional and class identities among other identities to converse with country music and hip-hop.

Themes of masculinity and queerness in country music and hip-hop are unpacked in "A New Take on an 'Old Town Road': Queerness in Country and Country-Rap Crossover Music". Through an analysis of Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" (2018), I argue how country-rap crossover music can exploit hypermasculine tropes to push back against sexist, homophobic, and racist narratives in country and rap music.

"'Daddy Lessons': Politics, Culture, and Race in Country Music" features a close reading of Beyoncé's contentious hit "Daddy Lessons" (2016) which is oriented in country music's relationship to race and politics. While the song in question is not categorized as country-rap, it speaks to the various possible functions of country-rap.

The discussions taken up in these chapters contribute to a larger commentary on country-rap's connection to American identity. A crucial part of my work involves how Black cultural productions (i.e., country-rap) can be used to evaluate whiteness in country music. In doing so, this project also suggests that country-rap crossover music can be about reconciling what it means to be American.

## **(Not A)Lone Ranger: Country and Hip-Hop Cowboys’ Journeys Through the West**

In the contemporary popular music landscape, it can be difficult to distill the relationship between country music and hip-hop given the stark musical and cultural differences between the two. Where there may seem to be no clear intersection, one does exist, otherwise country-rap crossover would fail to exist. Much of the early country-rap crossover music, especially that which leans predominantly into hip-hop, centers around cowboy imagery (“Rappin’ Duke” (1985), “Wild Wild West” (1987), “Ghetto Cowboy” (1998)).

### **Cowboys, Country, and Media**

Why cowboys? Hip-hop’s fascination with film might be a reason. Take the influence of gangster movies like *The Godfather*, *GoodFellas*, and *Casino* on hip-hop for example. Rappers saw “within these dramatic renderings of mob life... dramatic arcs that reflected the very real dynamics of street stories that were experienced, observed, or passed on down through the generations” (Drake 2020). The influences of gangster movies appeared in hip-hop in a multitude of ways from the prevalence of fedoras in hip-hop fashion to the sampling of mob movies in rap songs like the clip of *Mobsters* (1991) that appears at the start of AZ’s track “Mo Money Mo Murder (Homicide)” (1995).

Kung Fu was another popular cinematic theme that found itself the inspiration for many rap songs like Wu-Tang Clan’s “Shame on a N—” (1993). The visual aesthetics, mainly the choreography, was unparalleled in film and attracted a diverse viewership. The characters – characters of color – were strong, heroic figures. Similar to gangster movies, Kung Fu films

“spoke to the experiences and allegories of American minorities” and offered a “narrative lens of decolonisation that fostered a cinematic alliance between American people of colour and Kung Fu heroes, bonded by a colonial past, but more importantly, enlightened by a hero’s liberation” (Extended Play 2018). Kung Fu movies are analogous in the hip hop imaginary to cowboys and the Wild West in that they offer a thrilling world beyond one’s perceived reality in which strong masculine figures fight for justice, protecting their communities from threats. Kung Fu films and Westerns inspire rappers by balancing reality with imagined worlds. The films speak to one’s identity and experiences while re-contextualizing such qualities in a dreamscape that allows the individual’s notion of self to transcend the bounds of their humanity.

Western films are a defining facet of cinema and culture in the United States, in large part because they instill nationalism and promote American exceptionalism amongst the population. They “[draw] from a well of cultural symbols meant to capture the essence of America” including self-determination and individualism to construct and disseminate a narrative of American history that bends historical facts and muddles Americans’ understanding of their nation’s past (L. Williams 2016). The myth of the West that is created has been fed continuously for over 200 years, long before Hollywood had a stake in the vision. As a young nation, early white American settlers were afforded the opportunity to create a future and ultimately a history for themselves (CBC Radio 2020). Writing and rewriting history according to a white supremacist vision became ingrained in American culture and prevails today, long after the sun had set on the Wild West. Western films are one way in which American society continues to contribute to the distortion of the past and the erasure of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). The racialized, settler-colonialist ethos of Westerns runs deeper than their white-dominated casts. The storylines are steeped in racism, built upon the triumph of white people

over non-white communities in the name of defining and defending white America. The box office hits profit from narratives of extreme violence towards BIPOC communities because blatant or not, the Western heroine's riveting conquests are of such people.

The common conflicts in Westerns are between the white cowboys and the Native American populations that call the Western lands their home. This combative relationship communicates more to audiences than a simple binary of good and bad. Racism and white supremacy are performed on the big screen and immortalized on tape. Films like John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) that launched John Wayne's career capitalize on a plethora of racist tropes of native people, harping most on the stereotype of them being "uncivilized" and "savage". From start to finish, *Stagecoach* (1939) conveys the settler-colonialist ethos of the Wild West: "The film flatly—and unambiguously—declared that white civilization had no room for American Indians. The opening titles warn of the Indians' 'savage struggle' to oust innocent settlers, and the final attack upon the stage suggests that America will be safe only when its hostile Natives vanish forever" (Aleiss 2005, 60). Even in Westerns where Native Americans are not the key antagonists and instead occupy the role of the witty sidekick to a white cowboy, the portrayal of Indigenous people is rooted in and reduced to a racist trope. A *Daily Utah Chronicle* article cites the character Tonto from the *Lone Ranger* stories as an example of the disservice Westerns do to Native Americans. The author asserts that despite the objectively positive character traits given to Tonto, he is "reduced to the 'Noble Savage' trope" which ultimately "taught white audience members that there were 'good minorities' and 'bad minorities,' with the distinction between

them being their subservience to whites” (Emery 2020).<sup>6</sup> In this way, many Westerns serve as a form of white nationalist propaganda.

Given the extent to which Westerns are vehicles for racism, white supremacy, and settler-colonialism, a question arises as to why they were (and in essence continue to be) so popular amongst diverse demographics. Most Westerns maintain two characteristics that are critical to their appeal: action and simplicity (Elkin 1950, 73). They are easy to follow and predictable, distilling the complexities of life into a stark dichotomy of “good versus evil”. In conflict, the cause and solution are always clear. In Westerns, “problems do not have social or economic causes, but result from the machinations of evil men. Were there no such evil men, the West would develop naturally and democratically” (Elkin 1950, 74). The story of the Western hero also lacks depth: he is one who “struggles against odds, and achieves victory because he is more fit” (Elkin 1950, 74). The blunt simplicity of Westerns contributes to the perceived timelessness and universality of the films, as well as the dreamscape of the West.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The “noble savage” trope originated in literature. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, it is “an idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization” (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2019).

<sup>7</sup> An article in *The Atlantic* about how the Western was lost and why it matters offers a somewhat competing view of the film genre, arguing that “Westerns have earned their place at the heart of the national culture and American iconography abroad because they’ve provided a reliable vehicle for filmmakers to explore thorny issues of American history and character. In the enduring examples of the genre, the real threat to the homestead, we learn, is an economic system that is being rigged for the wealthy, or the search for the bad guy becomes a search for meaning in a culture of violent retribution, or the treasure of the Sierra Madre is a diabolical mirage of the American dream” (Agresta 2013). While I understand the author’s assertion, I question to what extent the average viewer is uncovering and decoding such messages.

A quote from a work about the contribution of the cowboy to the Western mythology sparks a conversation about what happens when one offers a reduced story about a complex culture to the culture in question. The statement is in regards to the thread that binds together the stories from writers in the Western genre (film and literature): “adventure–action by men on horseback, external stories which are concerned with doing and not thinking, stories which perpetuate a simple hero myth for a highly complex culture” (Fishwick 1952, 86). The author does not explore the direct implications of perpetuating a simple story for a “highly complex culture”, but such a topic might warrant a further conversation, particularly about what is lost, what is gained, and what is distorted when a society sees itself reflected at it (if it is even aware of its reflection at all, which harkens back to the comment in *The Atlantic* article).

The characteristics of the hero also capture American audiences. The freedom, bravery, and rugged individualism that define such figures align with the core values espoused by the country and thus resonate with all kinds of Americans. It is necessary to note that these qualities are inextricably linked to constructions of masculinity in the public imagination. Women are rarely represented in Westerns, and even more uncommonly fit the descriptions of the typical hero. They also are not the target audience. The tropes of masculinity in Westerns speak to both country and rap music, as masculinity has traditionally been a defining characteristic of the identities of the two genres. The Western hero who “struggles against odds, and achieves victory because he is more fit” is loosely replicated in the narratives of country and rap music (Elkin 1950, 74). While these realizations of hypermasculinity offer points of intersection between Westerns, country music, and rap, the convergence of white and Black culture and history that occurred during westward expansion offers a more nuanced explanation for the mutual constitution of country and hip-hop music that makes country-rap crossover not only possible but a site for teasing out the contradictions between the distinct identities of each genre.

### **The Mythology of the West and Frontier Justice**

The mythology of the West is a pillar of the ideology of the United States. Definitions of what it means to be American often harken back to the American identity that arose during westward expansion. The narratives – fictional or otherwise – that have endured are those of conflicts between groups: “cowboys versus Indians”, outlaws versus people of the law. Fueling such disputes is the pursuit of a kind of justice. The idealism of the West uplifts the cowboys and outlaws whose ideas of justice deviate from the traditional understanding that centers around the judge and jury. The frontier that cowboys and outlaws encountered was largely lawless. Any

semblance of law was often corrupt. Thus, as they sought to expand territory and defend their communities, both groups engaged in extrajudicial punishment where they occupied the roles of judge, jury, and executioner. Such behavior is considered “frontier justice”. The term “has been applied to everything from racially motivated lynchings to urban vigilantes” (Gonzales-Day 2006, 11). While it “still invoke[s] images of cattle rustlers and stagecoach robbers meeting justice on a lawless frontier”, it “mask[s] a history of racial violence in a region that was not only culturally diverse but still is” (Gonzales-Day 2006, 10). The extrajudicial killings of frontier justice, particularly lynching, were the same practices of racialized terror used during the Jim Crow era but were distanced from those in the South through the narrative of Western vigilantism.

The majority of lynchings in the West were of BIPOC individuals.<sup>8</sup> The Tuskegee institute’s 1959 definition of lynching highlights the racialized nature of the act stating, “There must be legal evidence that a person was killed. That person must have met death illegally. A group of three or more persons must have participated in the killing. The group must have acted under the pretext of service to justice, race or tradition”. The lynchings in the West also tended to be more violent than those documented in the South (Gonzales-Day 2006, 49). Lynching was one way in which white people attempted to “tame” the Wild West, a process which entailed the slow conversions of territories in legal limbo and those of organized chaos – those inhabited predominately by BIPOC individuals – into “domesticated” communities centered on adherence to conventional laws. The desires to restore “law and order” and homogenize the population that are bound up in lynching and held by vigilantes echo far beyond the West: “lynching was far more deeply ingrained in the national consciousness than has been previously acknowledged”

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<sup>8</sup> Lynchings of white people were also recorded and counted in national statistics on lynching (Gonzales-Day 2006, 12).

(Gonzales-Day 2006, 13). The racialized violence of the frontier ingrained racism in the enduring mythology of the West and by extension the character of the country.

The racism perpetuated by frontier justice can be seen beyond the historical accounts of lynchings. It is rampant in fictional narratives of the Wild West too. With cowboys and outlaws painted as the heroes – always depicted as white men despite the racial diversity amongst the cowboy population – two lasting phenomena arise: the perceived danger of a racialized threat to whiteness and the veneration of nostalgic white masculinity. The two are inextricable from one another as it is the white man's valorization and his autonomy in ruggedness that is considered threatened. The way in which frontier justice is bound up in the imagined West only exacerbates its problematic narratives and ensures that they remain part and parcel of American culture.

## **Cowboys in Music**

One sees the impact of the mythology of the West in country music, the identities such music has begotten, and the identities that are associated with it. The cowboy image is perhaps the most common and well-known product of the mythology of the West. Cowboys emblemize the Wild West. A passage from the article *The Cowboy: America's Contribution to the World's Mythology* provides an apt description of the classic cowboy character:

Physically our Cowboy is tall, tanned, sinewy, a man quite at home in the great outdoors. Weather-beaten and rough, this child of nature is innately handsome, despite eyes squinted from work in the glaring sun and legs bowed from a life in the saddle. Never far away is his horse, Old Paint, who has almost human intelligence. The two of them form the most enduring team in American mythology... On his head is a broad-brimmed felt hat, white if he's a good guy, black if he is shady. Tied around his neck is a bright-colored silk handkerchief, to be pulled over his face during a dust storm, and to attract cowgirls when things are quiet... On his feet are tight-fitting, high-heeled boots which fit into the

stirrups, and make him out of place when walking like the lowly pedestrian. To these boots are attached spurs, which guide his horse while his hands are occupied with lasso or revolver. (Fishwick 1952)

In most Western films and novels, the cowboy does not deviate from such description. Yet, the first cowboys in America did not fit this image at all: Hollywood white-washed the American cowboy (The Guardian 2020). Cattle farming in America grew out of the influence of the Spanish colonial era in what are now the southwestern and western parts of the country. The men who tended to the cattle were called *vaqueros*. The term “cowboy” was not used yet: it came with the westward migration of white Americans in search of “cheap land – and sometimes evading debt” (Nodjimbadem 2017). They brought with them enslaved Black and African Americans from the South and East who would pick up the trade of ranching over time. When the Civil War came about and the white men of the West – particularly Texas – went to fight for the Confederacy, they left their enslaved people to oversee their ranches (Nodjimbadem 2017). These enslaved predominantly Black men were called cowboys (The Guardian 2020). The Black cowboy population continued to grow after the Emancipation Proclamation as the freed were hired by ranchers as paid cowhands and when ranchers needed skilled workers to move cattle up north to be sold (Nodjimbadem 2017). It is estimated that a quarter or more of cowboys were Black.

Not only does the stereotypical image of a cowboy crafted by the white supremacist narrative of westward expansion fail to encompass the multiethnic population of riders but it also inaccurately portrays their lifestyles. In written and visual media, their lives are ones of freedom, adventure, and a degree of glamor. Historically accurate accounts say otherwise: they worked and lived in poor conditions (Library of Congress n.d.-a). Black cowboys in particular “herded

cattle, had the main responsibility of breaking horses, and generally ensured that the ranch was functional. They were expert trackers, having to transport cattle long distances, they endured raids from Native Americans protecting their lands, and had many tales of their own” (Yawson 2021). The misleading characterization of these cowboys discredits their skill and buries their extensive contributions to the development of America. Unfortunately, most cultural representations of cowboys failed to depict them in their true image.

The Hollywood-generated, mythical cowboy image consistently won out in popular culture compared to more accurate portrayals of cowboys. The constructed cowboy proved pervasive in all types of art: film, literature, and even music. This mythical figure entered music around the 1930s. Cowboys (those whose occupation was that of a cowboy) were represented in hillbilly music as artists, but it was their image rather than their musical productions that left a lasting mark: “the cowboy contribution, in addition to a relatively few tradition songs, was more image than actuality... the cowboy ‘myth’ was as influential on hillbilly music as on American mass culture” (Wilgus 1970, 166). The popularity of the cowboy only grew over time: “The farther Americans became removed from the cowboy past, the more intense became their interest in cowboy songs and lore” (Malone and Laird 2018). This was seen in the imagery and style of a genre called “country and western”.

Into the 1960s, a genre existed called “country and western”. *Billboard* charts and the music industry as a whole were largely responsible for the formation (and arguably the disintegration) of the genre (Wilgus 1970, 170). The genre melded together two styles. Western tells stories of the region through music with folk and popular song forms, reflecting the diverse heritages of its inhabitants in the lyrics and instrumentation (Library of Congress n.d.-b). Cowboys and their stories of hardship and struggle, love and loss, and lives on the range were

often the subjects of the music. Country's take on the cowboy story contrasts Western depictions of the cowboy. Country's cowboy was an idealized one that avoids the moving personal narratives on the cowboy profession, opting instead for the cowboy narratives of popular culture that center on whiteness, hypermasculinity, and "us versus them" perspectives. In his article entitled *Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly*, American folksong scholar D.K. Wilgus expands on these nuances of country and western (referring to the former as hillbilly music and the latter as cowboy music):

Although cowboy and hillbilly music were and are often bracketed, there is a connotative difference. The cowboy's image was almost the reverse of the hillbilly's. Furthermore, the culture that gave birth to hillbilly music shared the general regard for the image of the cowboy as representing values that were being lost in the urbanization of America. After all, the hillbilly "uniform" is more humorous than romantic. So the hillbilly musician adopted the songs and the image of the cowboy; he composed ersatz cowboy songs, and assumed the ersatz dress of the movie cowboy. In style there was little to adopt. (Wilgus 1970, 166)

It was in relation to these details that country and western was bisected into distinct genres despite a similar sound. Don Cusic, author of *The Cowboy in Country Music: A Historical Survey with Artist Profiles* (McFarland), attributes the bifurcation of country and western to a defining attitude of country as a genre: "Country's not loyal to a sound – its loyal to the market", and that market is predominately white (June-Friesen 2011). This sentiment is echoed in Wilgus' comment about there being little actual style from hillbilly music to adopt. Wilgus implies that country music adopted the cowboy for its significance in the greater popular culture landscape rather than for the cowboy's music because the image of the cowboy appealed more to audiences than the music.

It must be noted how the "cowboy uniform", as Wilgus puts it, became such a defining feature in hillbilly music. It was Orvon Gene Autry's role as a singing movie cowboy that

elevated hillbilly music in the American cultural scene. Autry had already established success on radio stations as a hillbilly singer, so when he broke onto the film scene in several cowboy movies, he married the musical genre with the cowboy image on the big screen. Autry “created the stereotype of the heroic cowboy who was equally adept with gun and guitar”, “[institutionalizing] the phenomenon” and giving hillbilly music “a new medium through which to popularize itself” (Malone and Laird 2018). In doing so, he perpetuated the mythology of the West.

The growing popularity of the country and western genre initiated by Gene Autry shifted the focus of country performers looking for fame. They set their sights on “the current, the immediate” which proved highly profitable, as did changing their style and making other “necessary compromises in order to make the pop charts as performers” (Wilgus 1970, 170, 173). Don Cusic’s comment about country music’s loyalties rings true: they lie clearly with the market rather than a sound.

In addition to the country-western divide, Southern music had also been split along racial lines since the 1920s. There were “two very general categories, with black performances being issued on ‘race’ records and white performances as ‘hillbilly’ series, no matter how inept and inaccurate such a racial labeling and bifurcation of the music itself was” (Lewis 2001, 109). Race records included blues, jazz, and gospel items, while hillbilly records encompassed ballads and fiddle and string-band tunes. While the music of the two genres differed, the divide was market-driven. That is, the music industry presumed that listeners would purchase music according to their race. This conclusion was based not on market research but rather on racism. The industry split America’s genre into two, ignoring the truth that country music is inextricable from Black culture: “that, just like in rock, jazz and pop, every facet of country – from its instrumentation to

repertoire to vocal and instrumental techniques – is indebted to African and African-American traditions” (Chow 2019). The manufactured division resulted in the further marginalization of Black country artists and erasure of such artists from the image of country, leaving the nation with a white conception of a genre so deeply rooted in the sounds and labors of Black people.

It must be acknowledged that Black country artists remained very active in the genre, releasing their own tracks, and collaborating with white artists: the image of country crafted by the industry was far more exclusionary of Black artists than the music-making processes. Some of these early artists include DeFord Bailey (1920-1941), an early country music and blues musician who was the first performer on the Grand Ole Opry radio station; the guitarist and founding member of the band the Carter Family, Lesley Riddle (1928-1945); Rufus “Tee Tot” Payne, a blues musician and mentor to Hank Williams; and more widely popular figures like Ray Charles (1947-2004) and Charley Pride (1952-2020).

What happened to the Western part of country-western? Literature on country-western points to two hypotheses. One suggests that Western was absorbed into country while another suggests that it was integrated into folk music (Wilgus 1970). I might also suggest that what remained of Western in country music was buried by the 1990s explosion of country. The market may have unknowingly eclipsed Western during its expansion.

## **Contemporary Cowboys**

In the last decade or so, there has been a movement to undo the mythology of the West and recenter the narratives such that they accurately represent the history. Musicologist Beth Levy expresses in her book *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the*

*American West* that each new iteration of the Western is a new possibility for reframing the fixed image of the West: any new fictional text about the West is alternately going to reinforce or subvert expectations about the frontier and the cultural categories that exist (Levy 2012, 145). Recent revisionist Westerns – a sub-genre and post-classical variation of the Western film – include *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Revenant* (2015), and *The Magnificent Seven* (2016). *The Harder They Fall* (2021), though not explicitly a revisionist Western, is also worth noting as it is a Western that features an all-Black principal cast, its characters loosely based on a range of historical figures from the American West. Each of these films reminds its audiences that the West as it is commonly conceived is a cultural construction: it is not naturalized.

The reframing of cowboy culture and the western frontier also is occurring outside of media in ways that are less obvious than in Western films. During Black Lives Matter protests in California and Texas, Black cowboys and cowgirls belonging to Black riding organizations like Compton Cowboys (California), Mulatto Meadows (California), and Nonstop Riders (Texas) took to the streets (Thompson-Hernández 2020). Their presence at protests is “a reclaiming of the traditional role of mounted riders in demonstrations in urban communities”, for “[h]istorically, horses have been used by elite military units and law enforcement as a way to show authority, their visibility, height and commanding nature a symbol of power” (Thompson-Hernández 2020). A line can be drawn from the policing of urban BIPOC communities by white, mounted law enforcement officers to the settler colonialist ethos and enclosure of the West that were facets of westward expansion. Mounted patrols became a staple of police forces in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because of reform that centralized U.S. police. The practice was inspired by America’s imperial-military regime abroad that sought to colonize foreign communities (Go

2020). The regime was driven by the same philosophies that motivated white Americans in their conquest of the western United States: white supremacy and American exceptionalism.

When mounted police became popular amongst law enforcement agencies around the country, much of their deployment was in BIPOC neighborhoods. The chief of police of Savannah, Georgia, William G. Austin, who assumed his position in 1907 followed in the footsteps of his equals in Berkeley and Philadelphia as he:

focused much of his attention on racial minorities. The ‘outlying areas of the city’ to which he directed his mounted force were African-American districts—the very districts that had grown due to recent migration from the country. He spoke of these districts in a way similar to the way in which colonial spaces were conceptualized, referring to them as populated by the ‘lawless element,’ and so declared that he would use his mounted units to ‘keep down disorder’ in those districts. (Go 2020, 1218)

The language Chief Austin used could have been taken straight from the mouth of a cowboy from a John Ford film. His sentiments toward BIPOC communities and his direction of the mounted units mirrored that of other chiefs of police around the country. In Los Angeles, mounted forces were staples of the police force beginning in the 1800s (Los Angeles Police Museum n.d.). Today, these forces are known as the full-time Mounted Platoon, established in 1987. The platoon includes 35 full-time sworn police personnel that maintain 40 horses. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) explicitly states that their Mounted Platoon is “used regularly at the scene of demonstrations and unruly assemblies” and “deployed frequently in crowd management situations where large groups have gathered” (Los Angeles Police Department n.d.). While the LAPD no longer uses mounted units for patrolling purposes, they remain a key force at demonstrations in urban BIPOC communities. The current condition of mounted units in the United States exemplifies how even as the mythology of the West loses

footing in American popular culture, the racism and misogyny that it reinforced and reproduced remains today.

## **Country Roads Take Me to Country-Rap**

### **“Go where there is no path and leave a trail”: Naming the Space Between Country and Rap**

Country-rap crossover music’s lack of a concrete definition allows it to absorb a variety of traditions belonging to both country music and hip-hop. Unlike in genre spaces that are heavily mediated by the related industry (like country music), artists that contribute to this space make their own meaning of it. While the music industry uses country-rap to refer to a slew of music with country and hip-hop influences, some of the biggest names in country-rap crossover offer unique names for the kind of music they make: the producer of Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” (2018) identified the song as country-trap; Blanco Brown describes his music as “blurring the lines between Country and hip-hop music”, creating a “southern sound” affectionately termed ‘TrailerTrap’ (Brown n.d.); while Breland calls his music ‘cross-country’ (Houghton 2021). The diversity of terms exemplifies how country-rap crossover can be what its contributors want it to be. The title country-rap then functions only to describe the imagined place between country music and hip-hop that is created when elements of the two genres are intertwined.

Of the many country-rap crossover artists, Blanco Brown is particularly interesting as he aims to be a pioneer in the space. He considers his music as belonging to a genre of his creation, one that is “boundary-breaking” and “multicolored”, inspired by Johnny Cash and Outkast (Brown n.d.). Brown’s music covers an array of country-rap styles including campy dance numbers (“The Git Up” (2019) and “Do Si Do” (2020) with Diplo), declarations of love (“Just the Way” (2019) by Parmalee and Blanco Brown), and proclamations of ‘country’ identity (“Nobody’s More Country” (2021)). In doing so, he stretches the concept of country-rap

crossover in numerous directions, pushing the boundaries of country music, hip-hop, trap, and the other genre styles he takes advantage of when crafting his sound.

Brown is uniquely positioned in relation to the country music space as he is one of the few Black country-rap crossover music artists whose work has been fully recognized by the country music industry. Artists like Lil Nas X and Breland struggle to gain acceptance within the country music community: Breland's "My Truck" (2020) fared poorly on traditional country music stations (Mosely and Paris 2020) and "Old Town Road" was removed from the *Billboard* country chart (Yoo 2019). Perhaps Brown's longstanding engagement with variations of country music allows him to move seamlessly between country music and the country-rap crossover space. Regardless, his first big solo country hit came in 2019 with "The Git Up", a hip-hop-infused line dance song "The Git Up" gives Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achy Breaky Heart" a run for its money. Riding the country-rap wave of Lil Nas X's release of "Old Town Road", Brown decided to release his own country-rap hit that he had been sitting on for some time. The light-hearted, dance hit is built on lap steel guitar, 808s, and beatboxing. "The Git Up" is a line dancing song for the 2010s country music landscape in which country crossover music fit for radio reigns.

"The Git Up" is a dance song. Brown instructs listeners to "get real loose/Get comfortable/Grab your loved ones or grab your love partner/And if you're by yourself no worries/Just follow after me". Then he proceeds to sing out a series of dance steps to perform from the 2-step to the "cowboy boogie" and the "hoedown". There is little nuance to the lyrical content of the song as they explain the steps of the song; however, the texture of the music is surprisingly intricate. Brown uses vocal and instrumental layering to embellish the base of the song that relies on steel guitar, 808s, and beatboxing. He takes advantage of advanced production technology, manipulating the timbre of the vocals on the response lines in the call-and-response

parts of the song. These parts are often utterances rather than exact imitations of the sung lyrics. At one point he even draws out the response into a drone under the lyrics. Brown also brings in unconventional sounds like tambourines and the spoons which both play a major role in filling out the texture of the chorus midway through the song. It is through these elements that Brown unites other genres – hip-hop included – into the very country-inspired hit.

Like other country-rap songs, “The Git Up” is campy. It walks the line between being a joke and being part of a commentary on who contributes to and defines who and what country music is. About the song, Brown said, ““You couldn’t take [it] seriously, but then you can’t make the song a joke either, because it was a smash”” (Dowling 2021). Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road”, Breland’s “My Truck” (2020), and Lil Tracy and Lil Uzi Vert’s “Like a Farmer (remix)” (2018) also exist in such a space. The catchiness of these songs propels them to cross-chart popularity and it is with that visibility that conversations about the exclusiveness of country music ensue. What began as a joke or as an honest expression of one’s identity becomes a talking point for political discourse on the racial inequities in country music.<sup>9</sup>

Blanco Brown is unique in his ability, especially as a Black artist, to not only create music that lives comfortably in country and country-rap but also that finds substantial popularity in both spaces. “The Git Up” peaked in the top 50 on five different US *Billboard* charts including number one on the Hot Country Songs chart. Brown’s collaboration with the band Parmalee on “Just the Way” debuted at number 59 on the *Billboard* Country Airplay, reaching number one there. It also peaked at number three on the Hot Country Songs chart and number 31 on the Hot 100. Recently, Brown released a solo song called “Nobody’s More Country” about his enduring

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<sup>9</sup> I engage in a discussion on the nuances of this statement in the chapters “A New Take on an ‘Old Town Road’: Queer Claims in Country and Country-Rap Crossover Music” and “‘Daddy Lessons’: Politics, Culture, and Race in Country Music”.

love for “the country”. It has yet to gain significant traction; however, if or when it does, it will surely initiate an engaging conversation about who can lay claim to country music.

On its surface, “Nobody’s More Country” is very much a country tune. Lyrically, it highlights all the facets of rural life that Brown and many other country artists and people from rural areas hold dear. From pickup trucks to Tim McGraw, and long tan legs to dirt-covered boots, Brown touches on it all:

Well pickup trucks and four-wheel drive  
Have been my thing since ‘99  
When Tim McGraw was all we ever sang  
Long tan legs and Daisy Dukes  
Them cut-off shirts and dirt on boots  
No matter where I’m at it’s still my thing

Sonically, the song is also strongly rooted in country. It blends classic and contemporary country styles with its 1960s inspired lap steel guitar licks, banjo and fiddle features, mix of electric and acoustic rhythm guitar parts, and clapping. It also alludes to a range of country hits. The opening acoustic guitar chords and sections of the electric guitar part are highly evocative of Alabama’s hit “Dixieland Delight” (1983). Additionally, at least parts of two of the lines in the second verse can be found in country hits of the 2010s. Brown sings:

I’ll drive a dirt road over paved  
I’ll slow it down I like the pace  
That simple life’s just simply hard to beat (yep)  
And I love them open acre fields of gold  
That paradise that I call home

I'll park it here no better place to be, that's right

The third line – “that simple life's just simply hard to beat” – is likely an ode to Florida Georgia Line’s 2018 song of the summer called “Simple”. While the exact lyric is not found in the Florida Georgia Line song, the sentiment is the same and the pitches are very similar. Further evidence of such a connection is that Tyler Hubbard, a songwriter on “Simple”, was a writer on Brown’s song. The fourth line of the second verse that says, “And I love them open acre fields of gold” sounds eerily like the line “With them fields of gold and cotton rows” that appears in Rodney Atkin’s “Caught Up In The Country” (2019). Again, the lyrics are not a perfect match, but the imagery and pitches are similar.

While “Nobody’s More Country” is filled with strong genre markers of country music, it also folds in the hip-hop beats and production style that define Brown’s work as country crossover. Just as in “The Git Up”, Brown uses electronic drum kit beats, sound samples, beatboxing-like utterances, and vocal filters to add hip-hop and trap qualities to the song and create a multidimensional texture. If the song suddenly goes viral, it will likely maintain a solid footing in country music not only because of its inclusion of solid genre markers of country but also the production techniques that used that are drawn from hip-hop have been incorporated in similar ways by white country artists like Sam Hunt. Hunt employs similar styles in both his debut album *Montevallo* (2014) and his most recent one, *Southside* (2020). The song “Hard to Forget” from *Southside* has a similar sound and production style to “Nobody’s More Country”.

## **“Semi in the Hemi”: Riding the Line Between Country Music and Hip-Hop**

Of several recent country-rap releases, one of the most notable is Atlanta-based artist Breland’s viral hit, “My Truck” (2020). For audiences who listen closely, the song offers more than just a catchy anthem about trucker pride. “My Truck” lyrically and sonically invokes markers of country music and hip-hop to facilitate a conversation on class and regional identity. To fully engage with the piece, one must understand the class and geography of country music, and their social implications.

## **Country Music and the Working-Class White (Man)**

Country music is predominately the genre of the provincial white working-class as musicologist Nadine Hubbs would put it (Hubbs 2014). Nods to and manifestations of class identity are ubiquitous in country music – Merle Haggard’s “Workin’ Man Blues” (1969), Dolly Parton’s “9 to 5” (1980), Kasey Musgraves’ “Blowin’ Smoke” (2013), and “Angels Workin’ Overtime” (2019) by Luke Combs are just a few such references. The genre is “deeply embedded in the textures of working-class life”, functioning not only as the dominant musical taste but also as a “vital cultural tradition, and a specific kind of intellectual property...an essential resource for the preservation of community and the expression of white (but not only white...) working-class identity” (Fox 2004, 21). Country music is rooted in storytelling – a “three chords and the truth” mentality – which speaks to listeners in a way that is universal but staggeringly intimate such that the lines between lived and imagined experiences are blurred. As such, the music functions as a public declaration of its listeners’ personal stories, giving a voice to a group of people who are too often overlooked in popular culture narratives among other spaces. The genre takes on a larger role in a community’s group identity and the identities of its members: it becomes more than a musical taste and a part of one’s self-expression. By implicating itself so

deeply in the lives and identities of provincial white working-class individuals, country music assumes the critiques and stereotypes of the group of people it represents.

The anti-working-class sentiments that are pervasive in non-musical aspects of society carry over to country music. One only needs to look to the “anything but country” phenomenon for evidence. When asked what music people enjoy, people often responded with, “anything but country”. Country music is so deeply embedded in identities criticized by the dominant middle class that individuals of a range of backgrounds tend to distance themselves from the genre, whether consciously or not. Such distance not only positions one as separate from working-class culture and identity but also as an individual who is defined by oneself rather than the group(s) to which they belong (Hubbs 2014). Members of the working-class tend to be viewed and treated as a collective rather than as individual people with unique experiences. Hubbs speaks to the underlying issue at play writing that there exists an “unchecked bias whereby white working-class people and worlds are judged according to the values and assumptions of the dominant middle class and thus found lacking, appalling, and blameworthy” (Hubbs 2014, 5). A rejection of country music by the mainstream culture is inherently a rejection of working-class identity and culture (Hubbs 2014, 13). This relationship speaks to the country music’s relatively strong genre boundaries and its resistance to change. Such defensive behavior is a reaction formation to a perceived threat to one’s identity and is symbolic of a greater movement to protect cultural, class, and racial identities in music and in American society.

‘Country’ exists as much as a cultural identity as it does a musical taste, influencing how those who consider themselves to be ‘country’ perceive the interactions of class identity with culture and music. In his book *Real Country*, Aaron A. Fox found that such people consider class as existing in the “implicit phenomenological depths” of culture as opposed to the “explicit level

of theorized ‘ideology’” (Fox 2004, 28). That is, class identity is seen not as a theoretical idea that can exist separately from culture but rather as a facet of culture that is invoked in tandem with culture itself. This notion speaks to both the extent to which class is inextricably linked to ‘country’ identity and the nuances of the relationship. The dual functionality of country music in culture contributes to the complexity of its involvement with class: “on the one hand, country music functions in dominant-culture representations as a projected symbol, often antagonistic and derisive, of the white working class. And it details, on the other hand, how the music functions *within* the white working class in a two-way cultural relation, both reflecting and shaping the tastes and values of its working-class audience” (Hubbs 2014, 17). This duality is possible because class involves more than economic capital. Cultural, social, and symbolic capital contribute to the formation of class identity.

The multifaceted definition of class makes class identity and its relationship to country music difficult to parse; however, country music’s most explicit engagement of class is through its function as a celebration of working-class identity.<sup>10</sup> From Loretta Lynn’s “Coal Miner’s Daughter” (1971) to Craig Morgan’s “International Harvester” (2006) and Chris Stapleton’s 2020 release “Hillbilly Blood”, country music consistently narrates a people’s pride in their “lifestyle that people had felt was looked down upon by the cultural elites, by the counterculture, by anti-war protesters as a way of resisting that” (“The Conservative Evolution of Country Music” 2007). The songs of Lynn, Morgan, and Stapleton represent the diverse contexts in which

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<sup>10</sup> Antithetical to its celebration of working-class identity, country music in the 1950s (then referred to as country-western) tried to distance itself from its rural working-class identity to become a cultural production of the urban middle-class. However, the urban folk revival prevented country music from dominating in such spaces as “urban ‘folk musicians’ assimilated the folk music to urban tastes and eventually saturated the very pop market country-western was seeking” (Wilgus 1970, 174). As a result, country music did not gain substantial footing in the popular music space until several years later.

class can be understood, not only as an economic concept but also one that is cultural, social, and political.

### **Locating Country Music**

Country music is widely regarded as a Southern genre, a consideration that describes the geographic and cultural space of production and consumption as well as the identities of the music makers and listeners. In such a statement, the distinct regional influences – Southeastern, Southwestern, Appalachian, among others – that have shaped the genre are grouped and homogenized. Their coalescence occurs around cultural values that have persisted amongst these unique communities and been realized in their cultural productions (like music) since the nineteenth century: independence, self-sufficiency, honor, loyalty to family, religion, devotion to work, particularly in an agriculture-based economy, among others (Wilgus 1970, 158). These values remain stable in contemporary country music. While such stability can lend itself to a kind of cultural conservatism in which novel ideas that arise with changing conditions are entirely rejected unless they are rooted in and align with the fundamental values of the defining society, it can also result in a form of cultural conservatism that is reliant on cultural borrowing, one that is resistant to but also depends on novel ideas and thus adapts and integrates the material into existing structures and claims them as their own. Contrary to country music’s assumed historical practice of the former brand of cultural conservatism, the genre has and clearly continues to (as evident by the dominance of country-pop and the mere existence of country-rap) engage in extensive cultural borrowing. When country music was still considered “hillbilly”, the “hillbilly” culture cherrypicked songs from outside of culture to include in its repertoire. However, such music had to work with its existing practice and image. It “select[ed] and assimilate[ed] what it could, in ways least destructive of folk values; thus, from nineteenth-

century popular song it selected those with themes that did not in essence differ from its older songs” (Wilgus 1970, 163). It is necessary to acknowledge the history of cultural borrowing by country music because it is precisely the interactions of different regional influences (in and beyond the American South) with country music and with one another within the country music space that makes the rural-oriented genre conducive to the integration of urban sensibilities.

The transmission of early country music and its associated values was mainly a result of war. Wilgus names the Civil War, World War I, and World War II as catalysts for contact between rural and urban cultures (Wilgus 1970). However, he and historian Bill C. Malone attribute the major proliferation of country music to World War II (Malone 1968). By the 1940s, country music – referred to as “hillbilly” music – was enjoyed by rural and urban populations across the United States (Peterson and Di Maggio 1975). While it was both popular and profitable, it had yet to be fully embraced by the music industry as it lacked mass market appeal. The genre maintained an overpowering image as the music of the provincial white working class from which middle- and upper-class individuals sought to distance themselves and as such, its growth in the market was hindered (Hubbs 2014).

When World War II broke out, economic and social conditions in America created a moment fit for the rise of country music. Population shifts and industrial expansion redistributed individuals and families such that rural residents moved into urban areas and southerners moved North and West bringing their culture and music tastes with them. Even within the armed forces, such unions occurred as men from diverse regions of the country were brought together. Peterson and Di Maggio suggest that southern out-migrants (like servicemen) not only contributed to the populations of country music consumers outside of the South but also served as culture bearers responsible for spreading such listening practices to non-southerners (Peterson and Di Maggio

1975, 501). By the 1970s, country music audiences were no longer starkly defined according to regional boundaries, their mutual constitution instead hinging on shared age, class, and racial identities (Hubbs 2014, 11).<sup>11</sup> Post-war events including the rise of the Sun Belt, suburbanization, and ‘white flight’ increased the number southern out-migrants that disseminated country music to new demographics of listeners.<sup>12</sup>

Country music resonated with southerners and non-southerners alike for reasons beyond the “melodic and singable” quality of the music: it spoke with ease and sincerity to the nature of the times and was thus the right music for the moment. The music “on the one hand,... reinforced the fundamental values of all American society” and “on the other hand,... [dealt] with the gin mills, the B-girls, the broken romances and marriages under the stresses of urbanization in general and the war boom in particular” (Wilgus 1970, 170). Country music of the era claimed to tell narratives general enough to be applicable no matter who one was or where in the United States they were located, but also with enough specificity as to speak to each person as an individual. Such a feat was achieved by invoking the feeling of place without defining concrete locations.

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<sup>11</sup> Fans’ relationships to country music remain predominately rooted in the non-geographic qualities. The country-rap artist Breland expressed how country resonates with him stating, “my origin story is not inherently country, but it is inherently country in the sense that I come from a small town and I have overcome a lot of obstacles and the odds to be in the position that I’m in. That is kind of inherently country and hip-hop, which is why me being able to blend those things together with my ‘cross country’ fusion... is really cool” (Houghton 2021). As the demographics of country music audiences and the nature of their relationships to the genre changed, so too did those of the artists who produce such music.

<sup>12</sup> The country music industry also played an active role in furthering the genre’s success beyond the South. Instances of interregional interactions within country music were (and arguably still are) heavily mediated by the recording industry. Early attempts by the recording industry to manage regional traditions and audiences grappled with the marketing challenges of catering to diverse demographics. It tried creating and promoting a range of products that catered to individual audiences, as well as manufacturing a single product that would be consumed by the masses. The latter strategy proved more successful, at least in comparison to the former, contributing to the homogenization of the “sound” and audiences of country music (Wilgus 1970).

Country music understands and reproduces place as real and imagined. As Aaron A. Fox writes about the ‘Country’ community’s relationship to ‘country identity’:

‘Country’ simultaneously named the real and imagined place in which they lived and their most highly valued genre of artistic expression, a genre that celebrates both intense sociability and intense abject depression, often in a tense and mutually constitutive dialectic. ‘Country’ mediates between the felt depths of culture and the explicit polemics of political ideology, and it foregrounds the centrality of ‘place’ among the cultural categories I consider here. (Fox 2004, 28-29)

Since place in country music is not necessarily concretely defined, the culturally borrowed material that the genre relies on is easily folded into preexisting archetypes of the music. The inclusion of country music in the popular music landscape can be largely attributed to the industry’s strategic adaptation of its music to the sensibilities of the given market by means of cultural borrowing (Wilgus 1970).

As shown, engagement in cultural borrowing has been part and parcel of country music throughout its history. However, country music is also quite resistant to the adoption of new ideas and practices (a point which will be further examined later in this work). How has country music managed both realities? I stipulate that it is due to an intense mediation of the culturally borrowed material by the industry, its artists, and even its fans. Wilgus argues that the difficulties country music faced during the urban folk revival brought the genre and industry back to their roots from which they had deviated substantially (Wilgus 1970, 175). It is suggested that the post-folk-revival country music that found success in the popular music landscape was even more selective about the material it borrowed.

## **Class, Geography, and Country-Rap Crossover Music**

The practice of cultural borrowing and the spread of country music from rural to urban and suburban communities prime country music for the integration of urban sensibilities whether it is open to it or not. Contemporary cosmopolitanism has reframed the understanding of geographic delineations such that the line between urban and rural spaces is now muddled. Country-rap crossover music reflects contemporary cosmopolitanism as it blends urban and rural (and to an extent suburban) sensibilities. The music brings together these two identities not only through its union of country music and hip-hop, genres that maintain strong and distinct geographic ties but also through the combination of icons and indices of these genres in a manner that points simultaneously to both musical spheres. Country-rap artist Breland does so in his song “My Truck”. The song portrays an icon of country music and rural identity – the pickup truck – through rhetoric that mirrors the language used by rappers to describe the automobiles of hip-hop: Mercedes Benz, Bentley, and Rolls Royce. At the same time, Breland alludes to the intersections of class and geographic identity because of the automobile’s function as a status symbol across country music and hip-hop communities.

Country music loved the open road, as did much of America. From “Highway to Hell” (1979) to “Runnin’ Down a Dream” (1989), allusions to the road were prevalent in the musical productions of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Highways and dirt roads were represented. While the two types of roads are nods to distinct ideas, the highway “variously evoked as a symbol of both opportunity and postmodern isolation”, the dirt road “evocative of a ‘wholesome,’ traditional way of life”, their general function in country music is similar: the road in popular culture “serves as a component of the myths and images that ‘update’ the imagery of the frontier for a contemporary American audience” (Shay 2017). Since the 1990s, notions of

mobility and freedom in country music have waned as domestic suburban lifestyles have gained popularity (Neil 2004). Country music narratives became increasingly rooted in the family and home. Country-rap artist Breland revives the open road mythology with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century allusion to the road in his song “My Truck” (2020) as the cowboy ties up his horse and hoists himself into the cab of a pickup truck.

In 2020, money.co.uk released the findings of a survey that analyzed over 16,000 country songs, across five decades for their references to trucks. 4.16 percent or approximately 660 of those songs featured trucks. Eight percent of all surveyed songs from the 2010s had such references. Of the top ten “biggest trucking anthems” identified by the survey, number eight is a particularly interesting tune, as it is the only one by an artist of color and the only crossover song on the list. Number eight is Breland’s debut, country-rap, viral hit “My Truck”.

Admittedly, when I first heard “My Truck” (2020) by Breland on a Spotify mix curated just for me, I thought the song was a joke. This sentiment was only strengthened when I found it on TikTok backing a range of silly videos like one by user [blake\\_thompson14](#)<sup>13</sup> in which a tiny toy John Deere tractor sits atop an absurdly long flatbed trailer being hauled by a Dodge Ram 3500 Heavy Duty down a highway, I was sure the track was made for TikTok. Yet, upon further research, I was proven wrong.<sup>14</sup> Breland’s release has a much deeper message than the strong assertion that one should not touch his truck. Inspired by earlier country-rap hits like Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” (2019) and Blanco Brown’s “The Git Up” (2019), as well as Breland’s upbringing that melded country and hip-hop identities, “My Truck” brings together the racially, socio-economically, and geographically diverse audiences of country music (Houghton 2021).

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<sup>13</sup> A link to the original video can be found in the references ([blake.thompson14](#) 2020).

<sup>14</sup> One could say I was partially correct in my original assessment that the song is joke as “My Truck” (2020) was written and released by Breland as a quasi-dare from his friends (Mosely and Paris 2020).

Breland is quoted as saying that the music video for the song is ““a celebration of truck culture, but also a celebration of diversity... We have a really diverse cast and a diverse group of truck owners. It’s a collision of two cultures that don’t often intersect, and I wanted the video to represent that, because sonically that’s what the record represents” (Hissong 2020). Breland’s motivations for “My Truck” address two questions central to this thesis: who belongs in country music and who belongs in America (Mosely and Paris 2020)?

It is in the subject matter, lyrics, and instrumentals of the song and the visual content of the video that Breland’s viral hit attempts to reconcile what it means to be American. “My Truck” marries country and rap and in doing so challenges hard and fast boundaries between urban and rural identities. Breland unites these two communities around the hard-earned, deeply loved automobile. Automobiles are a popular trope in both genres whether one is cruising along narrow city streets with the radio up or winding back roads, windows down, beneath blue skies. In country music, it is the truck that is the area of focus: Chevy, Ford, Dodge, Toyota. In rap music, cars are dominant: Rolls-Royce has long been the choice of rappers (DiNardo 2022).<sup>15</sup> Mercedes-Benz and Cadillac references are also common. In the past five years, artists have started to rap about Teslas (Pearce 2018).<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the type of car referenced, the message tends to be the same: it is a status symbol that signals to people that the owner made something of themselves from nothing. It can also represent a desire for success. While cars are part of a

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<sup>15</sup> Some of the rap songs that mention Rolls-Royce over the years include Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five’s “Superappin” (1979), “Starboy” (2016) by The Weeknd, and “Tunnel Vision” (2017) by Kodak Black. An *Insider* article narrator stated they had found “at least 338 studio-released hip-hop songs from 1979 to 2017 that mentioned Rolls-Royce or its popular models” (DiNardo 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Some of the rap songs that mention Teslas include “911/Mr. Lonely” (2017) by Tyler, The Creator; Aminé’s 2017 hit “Beach Boy”; “Big Bank” (2018) by YG featuring 2 Chainz, Big Sean, and Nicki Minaj; and “Best Friend” (2021) by Saweetie.

larger theme of materialism in hip-hop (a theme that is not nearly as prevalent in country) the meaning of the automobile is essentially the same in both genres.

### **Under the Hood of “My Truck”**

Subverting the expectations of who creates and consumes country music and what country sounds like is at the heart of Breland’s work, especially his debut hit “My Truck”. The lyrics, instrumentation, and overall sonic composition of the piece marry country and rap in such a way that its constituent elements function in manners that they would not ordinarily. The song does so sonically and lyrically. “My Truck” relies heavily on sampling and MIDI-generated instrumental parts, both qualities that are prevalent in hip-hop.<sup>17</sup> Breland uses these practices to incorporate elements that are directly or indirectly evocative of country music. For example, in the main beat, he samples sounds of truck doors closing and the clicking of horses’ hooves (1:04-1:07). At 00:07, Breland also includes a motif inspired by the scores accompanying showdowns in Western films. He further builds the country feel with the bass guitar part: it consists of three chords and a simple quarter and eighth note slightly swung rhythm. Perhaps most obviously “country” is the banjo.

While “My Truck” contains notable markers of country, the symbols simultaneously point to hip-hop and its associated identities, and in doing so, reframes the song’s relationship to both genres. Returning to the use of sampling, particularly of the horses’ hooves, Breland pairs the sound with the lyrics “Scuff these Jordans”. The sonic cue roots the listener in country music, but the lyrics conjure a sight commonly found in urban spaces and on the feet of rappers: shiny, uncreased Nike Air Jordans. Breland connects the sound of white rural America to a visual

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<sup>17</sup> MIDI instruments are increasingly utilized in popular country music but in a manner that attempts to closely mimic a live studio recording. In hip-hop, the practice tends to maintain and even emphasize the digital-sounding qualities of the electronic instruments.

associated with Black urban America. He does this, albeit less blatantly, throughout the song in the instrumentation and distribution of the beat between instruments. The rhythmic base that he creates is built upon country chord progressions and rhythms and utilizes typical country instruments like the banjo, yet he uses these qualities in the way a rapper does: to establish a repeating underlying beat that drives the song and provides a rhythm to which an artist can rap.

Further dissonance between country music and hip-hop music and their respective identities exists in the vocal articulations of “My Truck”. Breland mixes rapping and singing within lines of verses and within individual lines by juxtaposing a simple rapped melody with an embellished harmony. A great example of this is the second iteration of the pre-chorus. Breland says:

Tell them boys come and get me (get me)

I be ridin’ through the city (woo)

Young, rich, and I’m pretty (yeah)

Homie, don’t get it twisted (yeah)

Keep a semi in the Hemi (in the Hemi)

Red cup full of Henny (yeah, we drinkin’)

My hitters come in plenties, for real

The first half of the pre-chorus is rapped in Breland’s lower range. Because of this, the section sounds more rapped than sung despite the more melodic delivery of the lines. When he reaches the lyric “Keep a semi in the hemi (in the hemi)”, he goes into falsetto which immediately changes its perception from a rapped line to a sung line. He continues in this way until the end of the pre-chorus. The perceived transition between rapping and singing that occurs aligns with a

shift in the tone and subject of the pre-chorus. The first four lines of the verse describe an urban lifestyle. They call out the experience of driving through a city with friends when one is young, rich, and good-looking. In contrast, the end of the pre-chorus speaks more of a rural culture with mentions of a “Hemi” – the nickname for a Chrysler or Dodge V8 engine Breland Breland– and a red solo cup filled with Hennessy. The two lines in the middle of the verse subtly unite the urban and rural identities. “Homie, don’t get it twisted” that follows Breland’s comments about the life of a young person in the city is an emphatic assertion to the audience that who he is encompasses more than his Atlanta identity: he maintains connections to a rural identity too. The two often conflicting identities come together despite their differences in the lyric “Keep a semi in the hemi”. “Semi”, short for semi-automatic pistol, is a phrase commonly found in hip-hop. Breland juxtaposes it with rural slang. His choice to switch from his lower range to falsetto with the change of subject reinforces the difference between the two identities invoked. On the song’s terms, rapping as Breland does in his lower range points to hip-hop, whereas rapping in his falsetto points to country because it is perceived as closer to singing.<sup>18</sup> The vocal run he adds to the end of the pre-chorus on the phrase “for real” draws the listener more deeply into the imagined space of country music.

There are other areas in which sonic elements of country and hip-hop are intertwined in “My Truck”. Breland will switch seamlessly between rap-centered onomatopoeias like “skrrt, skrrt” and “brrp”, a rapped melody, and country components like an embellished harmony, displacing the listener from a discrete imagined genre space. At the same time, he recalls motifs established earlier in the song that orient the listener in a kind of genre space in which Breland sets the markers. In the final chorus, he articulates:

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<sup>18</sup> Singing can also be a part of hip-hop, but in the case of this song, it points to country music aesthetics.

You can drink my liquor, you can call my lady  
You can take my money, you can smoke my blunt  
Scuff these Jordans, you can say you hate me  
You can call me crazy, but  
Don't touch my truck (ooh)  
Skrrt (ah), skrrt  
Don't touch my truck (don't)  
Skrrt (touch), skrrt  
Don't touch my truck

Woo, ooh, woo, ooh, woo, ooh  
Don't touch my truck (woo, ooh)  
Don't touch my truck

“Don't touch my truck” is rapped, “skrrt” is an elongated utterance, and the oohs, ahs, and “don't” are sung with ornamentation. The oohs and ahs are embellished versions of the same phrases that appear in previous choruses and pre-choruses. The pull that is created between the different styles of vocal delivery by weaving them together highlights the distinctness of country and hip-hop vocal styles but also demonstrates how they can interact to produce a new and unique sound. In mixing styles, Breland leaves his listeners in an indistinct genre space lacking clear sonic markers of country or hip-hop. He further complicates the audience's notions of the genre to which the song belongs by performing the last line – “Don't touch my truck” – as an intricate 22-note run. Such an articulation fails to point at country or hip-hop. Instead, Breland defines his own creative world that exists in the crossover space between the two genres.

The ambiguity that is fostered by the interactions between markers of country and hip-hop in “My Truck” blurs notions not only of who the song is about but also who the song is for and who it is by. The identity formed and put forth is relatively non-descript. There is no assigned nor assumed race, gender, or class. Any suggestions of a particular racial identity exist only as a point of reference that can then be subverted. For example, the music video for the song capitalizes on the stereotypes of country music artists and fans as white, rural, working-class people (typically men) and the racial ambiguity of country-rap artists. It opens with a shot of a stereotypical country artist (white, bearded, masculine, cowboy hat, jean jacket) riding in the bed of a pickup truck. This man begins mouthing the lyrics giving the appearance that he is the artist on the song until about 25 seconds into the song when Breland pushes the imposter out of the way and reveals himself as the true artist. Breland knew country audiences would be surprised by his identity and in the spirit of the song, he played into their preconceived ideas. People who heard the song but did not know who Breland was debated whether he was Black or white suggesting that the song itself does not assert one dominant racial identity. By putting forth an ambiguous identity, Breland’s song reimagines what identities in country and hip-hop music can look like.

## **A New Take on an “Old Town Road”: Queerness in Country and Country-Rap Crossover Music**

Lil Nas X’s country-rap hit “Old Town Road” (2018) (or country-trap hit, depending on how one categorizes it) is a defining work in the genre. The song tells the story of the singer-rapper’s path to success – defined by wealth, fortune, and opportunity – through a 21<sup>st</sup> century, popular culture take on the (Black) American cowboy. In his construction of such an image, Lil Nas X draws on hypermasculine, stereotyped tropes from country music and hip-hop.

### **Masculinity and Queerness in Country Music and Hip-Hop**

Masculinity proves to be a defining theme in country music from the cowboy songs dating back to the late 1800s, to the Outlaw movement in the 1970s and 1980s, to the 2010s bro-country craze. Such movements and their musical productions are manifestations of ideas of authenticity in country music that are grounded in white, working-class masculinity (Stimeling 2013). Modern concepts in hard and soft country also “align with gendered meanings of masculine and feminine” (Hubbs 2014, 10). Masculine concepts and masculinity in country music depict men in dualities: as breadwinners and heads of households but also as hypersexual, non-committal bachelors; as down-and-out, jobless alcoholics but also good Christian, moral, family men working overtime to provide for their wives and children (Leap 2019). Perhaps surprisingly, regardless of which type of man is portrayed – one that is “striving for the good life” or one that “violate[s] the standards of American dreaming” – the message of masculinity endures (Ching 2003, 33). This is possible due to one of the dominant representations of masculinity in country music captured by the notion of the ‘burlesque abjection of the white male’ in which “hard country singers unabashedly portray themselves and their listeners as the ‘low other’ of American culture” (Ching 2003, 33). I posit country music can maintain this self-

deprecating, in some ways emasculating position, without compromising its claim to masculinity because of its orientation in whiteness, a privilege not afforded to hip-hop.

Masculinity in hip-hop often relies on hypermasculine portrayals to assert manhood. This practice is in part driven by rappers' desire to exploit stereotypical representations of Black men and masculinity for profit by "playing into the gaze of the White mainstream imagination" but it is also the result of a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy that influences the formation of Black male selfhood, and therefore the performance of such identity, in the image of an unemotional and aggressive person (Belle 2014, 289). In mainstream hip-hop (particularly that of the 1990s and 2000s), masculinity is defined in 'rags to riches', 'real man', and 'bad guy'/'thug'/'gangsta' narratives where often "one has to prove his manhood by committing violent acts in order to maintain his 'street credibility'. You gain 'street credibility' by being hyperviolent, homophobic, and heteronormative, while degrading women" (Belle 2014, 296). Men who project as non-masculine (which could be putting forth a false bravado) are emasculated by their peers to maintain a clear delineation between who and what is and is not masculine (Belle 2014).

Representations of masculinity offer a point of intersection between the distinct genres of country music and hip-hop<sup>19</sup> that can be exploited by country-rap crossover music to undermine the two genres. The masculinities at play in country music and hip-hop differ in that one is coded as white and the other as Black; however, given the dominant white culture in America, both are bound up in white supremacy. The country music industry and mainstream hip-hop play for white audiences (Belle 2014); therefore, racialized narratives of masculinity in both spaces tend

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<sup>19</sup> The hypermasculine bro-country movement in country music is strongly linked to hip-hop music as its sound drew on Black cultural productions. Jewly Hight for *NPR* describes bro-country as a moment in which "male acts at every tier of the industry were incorporating sometimes dated hip-hop flourishes into feel-good hybrids and cocksure, youthful displays of masculinity" (Hight 2018).

to transcend their intended racial audiences and often reinforce one another because of the pervasive Black-white dichotomy in the United States.

Heteronormative and anti-queer messages are often evoked in tandem with masculinity. In country music, not only are the representations of masculinity that appear in stories of the family and love heteronormative, but they also maintain connotations of anti-queerness since there is an established association between the provincial white working-class and homophobia (Hubbs 2014). Very little of country music, new or old and especially that which finds success on popular music charts, addresses queerness.<sup>20</sup> Kacey Musgrave's 2013 hit "Follow Your Arrow" is one of the most well-known contemporary country songs<sup>21</sup> that makes a direct nod to queerness with the line "So, make lots of noise/Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls/If that's something you're into". A 1992 release by Garth Brooks called "We Shall Be Free" made a similar statement – "When we're free to love anyone we chose.../Then we shall be free" – but his song found significantly less popularity because it was banned by some country music stations. Even as the population of out queer artists in the genre increases, the number of songs that speak to the identity remains low.

Queer representation in hip-hop and the genre's acceptance of it is growing, but hip-hop's ties to anti-queerness are difficult to shake. Queer artists and fans have expressed their lack of acceptance in the genre space. Lil Nas X, presumably speaking not only about country music

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<sup>20</sup> David Allan Coe's song "Fuck Aneta Briant" (1978) (a purposeful misspelling on Coe's part) is taken up by various scholars in the country music field who examine gender and queerness in the genre such that it seems unnecessary to incorporate into the current discussion. Pieces like *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* by Nadine Hubbs and Braden Leap's "A New Type of (White) Provider: Shifting Masculinities in Mainstream Country Music from the 1980s to the 2010s" discuss the song to various extents.

<sup>21</sup> Other popular country songs that represent queer identity to some extent include Brooke Eden's "Got No Choice" (2021), "Younger Me" by Brothers Osborne (2020), and Mickey Guyton's "What Are You Gonna Tell Her?" (2021). A slew of lesser-known country songs engage queerness more blatantly, some of which can be found in the article "10 Positively Gay-Ass Country Songs" by James Barker, a staff writer for the website Country Queer.

fans but also hip-hop listeners stated, “I know the people who listen to this the most, and they’re not accepting of homosexuality” (Real 2019). On being a hip-hop fan, Craig Jenkins for the *New York Magazine* website Vulture writes: “To be a rap fan that identifies as anything other than male and straight is to wade against a current pushing back at your very being, to be constantly driven by your heart to decisions your mind ought to reject. Artists accept your patronage, but twist the knife by peppering music with insults and slurs, and interviews with attempts to distance from hate and discrimination even as they flirt with the very linguistics of the stuff” (Jenkins 2017). Few well-known Black, male, rap artists are openly queer. Frank Ocean, Tyler, the Creator, and Kevin Abstract have all spoken publicly on their sexuality and how it relates to their work in the hip-hop space.

Country-rap crossover offers a space in which identities rejected from country music and hip-hop respectively can exist. It is in this area that a Black, queer, country identity can be constructed and interact with the genres from which it has been rejected. Lil Nas X and his viral hit “Old Town Road” offer a strong example of how artists can take advantage of the loosely defined space of country-rap crossover. In the lyrics of and video for “Old Town Road”, Lil Nas X saturates audiences with icons and indices of masculinity that point to ‘country’ and hip-hop identities. His simultaneous exaggeration, integration, and juxtaposition of stereotyped tropes of country music and hip-hop contribute to a gleeful celebration in which ideas of authenticity in the respective genres are undermined. I suggest that in this way, Lil Nas X engages in the queer practice of camp. While scholars of camp argue the term is difficult to define, one author offers that “camp resists compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia, forges distinctly queer culture, and speaks with a queer accent” (Jones 2016, 425). Camp “has produced in [gay people] a heightened awareness of the discrepancies that lie between appearance and reality, expression

and meaning” (Babuscio 1999, 118). The country-rap crossover music space is acutely aware of the differences between “appearance and reality, expression and meaning” that Babuscio discusses and actively takes advantage of the discrepancies. Queerness in country-rap crossover (and beyond) deconstructs country music and hip-hop boundaries and challenges the ideas of authenticity related to conceptions of identity that the respective genres hold.

The union of ‘country’ identity and queer identity in country music may seem dissonant. However, they overlap in the sense that “Rednecks and queers and, unquestionably, country music are tender, potentially volatile subjects. Each term represents something sacred in the eye of certain beholders and profane for certain others, and these beholders are frequently seen as occupying very different positions on the social and ideological spectrum” (Hubbs 2014, 4). They exist as opposites because they are oriented as such.

### **Reading Identity in “Old Town Road”**

A close reading of “Old Town Road” illuminates how masculinity, queerness, and race interact in country-rap crossover music to ultimately push back against the boundaries of country music and hip-hop. In “Old Town Road”, Lil Nas X attributes his accomplishments to his talent, emphasizing that he does not need anything extra to make it in music:

Riding on a horse (ha)  
You can whip your Porsche  
I been in the valley  
You ain’t been up off the porch, now  
  
Can’t nobody tell me nothing

You can't tell me nothing  
Can't nobody tell me nothing  
You can't tell me nothing

Lil Nas X uses the horse as a parallel to making the most of what one has: in his case that is talent. Juxtaposed with the imagery of the Porsche, the horse is an antiquated mode of transportation and an outdated symbol of strength and glamor. He contrasts the Porsche and the horse to make the point that he can do just as well with the basic tools as someone who has the latest technologies and the most up-to-date understanding of the market. He even critiques the latter group of people by implying they do not put in work: “You ain’t been up off the porch, now”. “Can’t nobody tell me nothing/You can’t tell me nothing” is him standing by his choices even when people disagree or disapprove. He will keep persevering regardless: “Yeah, I’m gonna take my horse/To the old town road/I’m gonna ride ‘til I can’t no more”. The verse following the chorus speaks to the success Lil Nas X has found because of his hard work, specifically the fame and movie-like lifestyle he has achieved:

Riding on a tractor  
Lean all in my bladder  
Cheated on my baby  
You can go and ask her  
My life is a movie  
Bull riding and boobies  
Cowboy hat from Gucci  
Wrangler on my booty

Lil Nas X upgrades from a “horse” to a “tractor”. This lifestyle change is marked by partying, promiscuity, and displays of material wealth.

Lil Nas X delivers his story through the lens of American western and hip-hop imagery and sounds. While the old west take may seem like an odd choice, in many ways it is fitting. The evolution of the cowboy mythology mirrors Lil Nas X’s path to fame. Cowboys were defined by their grueling work to build a life for themselves and others until their image found success in Hollywood. Once (and even a bit before) cowboys became a hit on the big screen, their legacy was altered, becoming an aesthetic marked by independence, stubbornness, and cockiness. Lil Nas X’s lyrics chart a similar path from a past in which he worked with what little he had in pursuit of success until he found it and suddenly the tropes associated with Hollywood celebrities became his lived experiences. The framing of the tropes is evocative of hip-hop and the rapper lifestyle (beyond the fact that the lyrics are rapped). Lean, cheating on one’s significant other, women’s bodies, masculinity (in bull riding), and materialism are all connected to stereotypical themes in rap music, yet Lil Nas X repositions them in a country space lyrically and sonically. He pairs “boobies” and “bull riding”, “Gucci” and a “cowboy hat”, and dedicates a line to the popular blue-collar fashion brand Wrangler. Even lean can be oriented in the country space: it originated in Houston, Texas, the heart of cowboy country. Sonically, the song simultaneously points to country and hip-hop. Lil Nas X’s rapping is inflected with a Southern twang. The instrumentation of the piece relies on a combination of banjos, trap-style 808 drums and bass, and a sample of Nine Inch Nails’ “34 Ghosts IV” (2008).

Despite the clear presence of genre markers of country in “Old Town Road”, the song failed to gain a strong footing in the commercial country space. Soon after Lil Nas X dropped the song on SoundCloud and it gained success on TikTok through a trend called the “Yeehaw

Challenge” that highlighted the cowboy aesthetic through fashion and dance, “Old Town Road” reached the *Billboard* Hot 100, Hot Country Songs chart, and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart simultaneously. While it maintained the number one position on the *Billboard* Hot 100 for nineteen consecutive weeks, *Billboard* quietly removed the tune from the Hot Country Songs chart (where it peaked at number 19) early on in its success. According to a statement *Billboard* gave to *Rolling Stone*:

Upon further review, it was determined that ‘Old Town Road’ by Lil Nas X does not currently merit inclusion on *Billboard*’s country charts. When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is musical composition. While ‘Old Town Road’ incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version. (Leight 2019)

*Billboard* made their judgment regarding the song’s belonging in country on genre markers that are inextricable from race. Despite a statement from a representative for the company that stated Lin Nas X’s race was not a factor in *Billboard*’s decision, it is impossible to ignore the implications of their actions given the extent to which country music has been gatekept (Leight 2019; Yoo 2019). Black artists strongly rooted in the country space like Jimmie Allen, Kane Brown, Mickey Guyton, and Darius Rucker have all faced criticism regarding their belonging in country. Black artists crossing over into country music from other genres, mainly hip-hop, have found it even more difficult. One needs only to look at the responses to Beyoncé’s “Daddy Lessons” (2016) and Breland’s “My Truck” (2020). “Old Town Road”, “Daddy Lessons, and “My Truck” all faced accusations of inauthenticity and in each case, a response to such criticism included the recording of a remix or other rendition of the song featuring an established white country artist. Breland and Sam Hunt collaborated, Beyoncé and The Chicks, and Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus. Such collaborations allowed the Black artists to carve out a larger space for

themselves in country music and gain at least some recognition from the industry as legitimate contributors to the genre.

## **“Daddy Lessons”: Politics, Culture, and Race in Country Music**

Beyoncé’s song “Daddy Lessons” (2016) from the album *Lemonade* takes advantage of the qualities of country music that lend the genre to storytelling. The piece reflects on the lessons Beyoncé’s father taught her about life and love. Specifically, it focuses on how through a kind of tough love, he instilled tenacity and independence in her so that she could stand up for herself and others. Lines like, “And daddy made a soldier out of me (ooh)/Daddy made me dance and Daddy held my hand (ooh)”, “Tough girl is what I had to be/He said, ‘Take care of your mother/Watch out for your sister’”, and “Daddy made me fight, it wasn’t always right/But he said, ‘Girl, it’s your second amendment’” speak to the complicated relationship Beyoncé had with her father and the understandings she took from his lessons.

The sonic components of the song only enhance the narrative. The New Orleans brass accompanied by rhythmic clapping that opens “Daddy Lessons” sets a tone of celebrating the past. The transition to an acoustic guitar-driven verse and chorus underscores the intimacy of the story Beyoncé is telling. Additionally, the articulation of the lyrics here brings her story to life. The duration of the notes and how they align with particular words of the verse mimics the flow of an expressive telling of oral history. Beyoncé elongates and ornaments poignant ends of phrases and important words within a line. By employing these techniques, Beyoncé conveys both the content and emotion of the story. Country music (and jazz) are known for such vocal and narrative delivery.

It is important to note that “Daddy Lessons” is not explicitly country-rap; the song is better described as country-R&B. However, it is essential to include in a conversation on country-rap because of the way in which Beyoncé’s orientation in spaces beyond country music, including hip-hop, and her identity as a Black, politically outspoken woman impacted country

audiences' perception and reception of the song. Upon its release, the song was highly contentious amongst the country music community. The controversy stemmed from its perceived lack of authenticity: country fans saw it as not "country" enough. A short piece published on the Country Music Television (CMT) website by a contributor highlights the authenticity debate and the gatekeeping of country music. Responding to the question "What's so country about Beyoncé", the author states:

Sure, Beyoncé's new album *Lemonade* has a song with some yee-haws, a little harmonica and mentions of classic vinyl, rifles and whiskey. But all of the sudden, everyone's acting like she's moved to Nashville and announced that she's country now... The song does have a message that might be considered country — almost like Miranda Lambert's "Gunpowder & Lead" or "Kerosene" — so that much I get. But that's it. It doesn't sound like a country song to me, she didn't cut it at a studio in Tennessee, and it certainly wasn't written by a group of Nashville songwriters. (Bonaguro 2016)

Bonaguro asserts that while the message of the song contains genre markers of country, it lacks sufficient sonic markers to be defined as such. However, the author fails to offer examples of such markers. The argument that remains is the conflation of the idea that the song does not sound like country, and it does not sound like country because it was not "cut... at a studio in Tennessee" and "written by a group of Nashville songwriters". A kind of metaphysics of presence occurs as the author fetishizes the idea that music is not authentic if it is not a direct reproduction of some set of original conditions. This aspect of Bonaguro's claim is particularly notable when it is viewed in parallel to the evolution of the country "sound".

The country "sound" used to come from the practice of live studio recordings; however, after World War II, a change occurred in the way in which the country "sound" was produced because of the growing role of the recording executive in the creation of country music: "No

longer did the country musician unpack his song bag in the studio and perform as he did elsewhere. Material began to be ‘placed’ with executives and performers. And the ‘sound’ as well as the musician began to be programmed. So one... cannot judge completely the character of country-western music by the material that reached the top ten of *Billboard’s* popularity charts” (Wilgus 1970, 171-172). In essence, Bonaguro is doing what Wilgus tells his readers not to do by defining “Daddy Lessons” in relation to a narrow subsection of an incredibly rich genre. Bonaguro’s claim that the song lacks the country “sound” is easily disputed by simply referring to the history of the genre. Country music history tells a story of a “sound” in flux, one that was never stagnant like Bonaguro implies. Musicologist Nadine Hubbs captures this idea well stating that, “much of the music now regarded as classic, or exemplary of ‘real’ country, was criticized in its own time as being outside country tradition” (Hubbs 2014, 8). For example, the Nashville sound which Bonaguro alludes to was accused of being a watered-down, corporatized version of country; “outlaw country” and the 1980s neotraditionalist country movement each rebelled against it. “Daddy Lessons” may not reflect the dominant styles in contemporary commercial country music, but that does not mean it does not nor cannot exist within the genre.

At the heart of the controversy regarding “Daddy Lessons” is a question of what country music sounds like, who defines the sound, and how such definitions and boundaries interact with race. The song draws on the Black musical influences from which country music was born, particularly blues and jazz sounds. While the inclusion of such sounds may be found in country music from a variety of regions, they are particularly prominent in that of Texas and Louisiana: “Whereas in the Southeast the frolic pieces, the blues, and the sentimental songs coexisted in the repertory, usually with stylistic differences in performance, they tended to coalesce in southwestern tradition, dominated by a blues-jazz influence” (Wilgus 1970, 167). In this way,

“Daddy Lessons” harkens back to Beyoncé’s Texan and Louisianan heritage. The singer also calls out this background in another song on *Lemonade*, “Formation”, which is a declaration of Beyoncé’s multifaceted identity. She raps “My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana/You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama”.

Orienting “Daddy Lessons” within the context of *Lemonade* and juxtaposing the song with the other titles on the album reveals much about the critiques offered by country music fans aimed at Beyoncé. *Lemonade* is an exploration of and reflection on the experiences of Black women, particularly southern Black women. These content areas are realized through sonically distinct songs that use elements from a range of genres to create a sound unique to the artist. The originality of the work is only enhanced by the vulnerability Beyoncé brings to the project with her vocal performance and lyrical genius. She defines the music on her terms and redefines the terms of the music industry. Beyoncé’s demonstration of her virtuosity on the album is arguably an indictment of the oppressive structures (like genre and the music industry) that attempt to regulate her self-expression. What critiques of “Daddy Lessons” like that of Bonaguro are missing is Beyoncé’s unparalleled ability to move into different genre spaces and lay claim to them. “Daddy Lessons” illustrates Beyoncé’s mastery of this genre fluidity as it contrasts starkly with the rest of the album. Negative responses to the song highlight and reinforce the oppressive confines of genre, for if there were not such concrete boundaries, people (especially those on the internet) would not emerge from the woodwork to criticize her.

## Beyoncé and the CMAs

Bonaguro's statement on "Daddy Lessons" is rather extreme, when viewed in comparison to other critiques of the song, but it is exemplary of a trend in music criticism of people scrutinizing songs, not for their intrinsic components or elements but for non-musical factors. Political, racial, and other identities invoked in musical production and performance weigh heavily on how music is heard. Beyoncé's 2016 CMA Awards performance of "Daddy Lessons" featuring The Chicks made a significant impression on the country music community. What began as an effort by the association to "demonstrate its pop-world openness" turned into a much greater political statement regarding the composition and values of the country music industry (Coscarelli 2016b). One *New York Times* article described the performance as "improbable", a fitting term to describe the union of two socially and politically outspoken artists from starkly different musical backgrounds on the stage of the coveted albeit conservative CMA Awards (Coscarelli 2016a). The riveting display of artistry was not the only talking point of the evening. Despite an overwhelmingly positive response to the performance from the crowd in Nashville, voices across the nation expressed their discontent with Beyoncé's crossover to country. Similar appearances featuring pop stars from disparate genres at the CMAs were not nearly as contentious. Justin Timberlake and Chris Stapleton's collaboration<sup>22</sup> at the 2015 CMAs was generally well-received (Rogers 2015).

Just as Alison Bonaguro's statements about "Daddy Lessons" were rooted in extra-musical critiques so too were those of internet commenters. A *New York Times* article found responses to Beyoncé and The Chicks' performance that highlight how their political positions

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that even Chris Stapleton was aware there may be a backlash to the collaboration with Justin Timberlake. In a conversation with *Rolling Stone Country*, Stapleton expressed that "some people might want to burn me at the stake for it, or burn him at the stake for it" (Moss 2015).

and Beyoncé's race were the main points of contention, not the song itself: "Why are you showing Beyoncé & Dixie Chicks? One doesn't believe in America & our police force while the other didn't support our President & veterans during war" (Coscarelli 2016a). The difference between the Timberlake-Stapleton and the Beyoncé-Chicks collaborations boils down to race and gender. Two white men sharing the stage of the CMAs fits the image country crafted for itself. Whether both of those men are country artists matters little to the industry and audiences, especially when a hallmark figure of country accompanies the outsider. Conversely, the decision to feature two women and the crossover artist (who is Black) whose presence beyond the stage is perceived as threatening not only to country music but also to the conservative white identities that are bound up in it creates tension that transcends the musical space.

### **Country and Politics at the CMA Awards**

The CMA awards performance illuminates country music's nuanced relationship with politics. The genre's associations with patriotism, individualism, gun rights, and other staples of conservative politics have promoted a direct connection between the genre and the political sphere. This relationship is only compounded by conservative politicians who, since the rise of the New Right, have "sought to enlist country music in their struggle" (Geary 2013, 65-66). Many of the campaign songs for Republican candidates have been country songs: George W. Bush used "We the People" (2000) by Billy Ray Cyrus, "Only in America" (2001) by Brooks & Dunn, and "Wave on Wave" (2003) by Pat Green; John McCain used John Mellencamp's "Our Country" (2007); Mitt Romney's campaign featured Rodney Atkins' "It's America" (2009); Donald Trump's 2016 campaign used Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" (1984); and Ted Cruz picked "Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly" (2001) by Aaron Tippin. Country

artists have played at a range of events for politicians. The most notable artist in this sphere is Toby Keith who has performed for George W. Bush and Donald Trump (while also having been outwardly supportive of Barack Obama and other democratic politicians).

Politicians exploit country music's affiliations with conservative politics without much thought given to the actual content of country music. In a *U.S. News & World Report* article, Ethnomusicologist Kendra Salois captures the sentiment well, stating that "conservatives can claim country music represents them, but it doesn't necessarily make it true": "there's a difference between how musicians identify politically and how fans hear their music... It's easier to hear what you believe...rather than taking the time to deconstruct the words" (J.P. Williams 2015). Ted Cruz offers a strong example of such conservatives. In an interview with CBS, Cruz stated that following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, he transitioned from a classic rock fan to a country music fan because he did not approve of how the genre of rock responded to the event (CBS News 2015). It appears that the difference in response to which Cruz is referencing is rock's lack of pro-America rhetoric, at least in comparison to country music's unabashed displays of patriotism that only became more intense following 9/11 (Schwarz 2015).

It is worth noting that country music has not always been affiliated with conservative politics and is arguably more liberal than it often appears. Country music's ties to conservative ideologies were largely manufactured: the idea that "country music has always been conservative and is necessarily conservative, isn't true. It's something that happened over time and people had to work on it actively in order to make it happen" ("The Conservative Evolution of Country Music" 2007). Up until the late 1960s, country music was the "musical language" of a Democratic, white, working-class (Geary 2013). The genre was not necessarily political – conservative-leaning or liberal-leaning – but pockets of it did engage in political conversations.

In an article on Johnny Cash and the politics of country music, historian Daniel Geary posits that the genre is not as politically homogeneous as it seems, looking to Cash's prison albums as exemplary works in the genre that introduced political diversity by countering conservative views on law and order, human and civil rights, and the role of government in the lives of Americans and speaking to audiences across political, racial, and economic lines.

Both Geary and music historian Lester Feder cite the Merle Haggard song "Okie from Muskogee" – which digs at the hippie culture of the 1960s with lines like "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee", "We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street", and "We don't make a party out of lovin'" – as an early and popular work that positioned country music and the new wave of conservatism in parallel (Geary 2013; "The Conservative Evolution of Country Music" 2007).<sup>23</sup> Feder mentions the Merle Haggard song in the larger context of former president Richard Nixon's role in popularizing and politicizing country music. In an interview with NPR, Feder describes how Nixon employed country music in his campaign and presidency to capture and mobilize lower-middle-class white Americans in and beyond the South. Nixon's use of such music for political ends was inspired by the similar actions of his Democratic opponent George Wallace who successfully garnered the support of the target community using country music (and threatened Nixon's path to the presidency). At the same time, the Country Music Association was also interested in joining together country music and politics. Not only did a foray into politics benefit the industry – Nixon promoted country music on a national scale

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<sup>23</sup> While Feder and Geary mention "Okie from Muskogee" as a song that marked a turning point in the politics of country music, both historians emphasize that the politicization of the song comes mainly from fan perception: country music fans *heard* the song as very political. Feder states that "Merle Haggard had created this character, he says in parody, but this character lashed out at hippies, at the counterculture, at the anti-war movement, and it got a very earnest reception on the part of country music fans... What Merle Haggard did was crystallize the values contained in the song and for the community that was listening to it and put a political point on it" ("The Conservative Evolution of Country Music" 2007). Geary echoes the sentiment on fan perception writing, "'Okie from Muskogee' was more complicated than it seemed. Many fans may have interpreted it as supportive of conservative backlash, but Haggard meant his song to be tongue-in-cheek" (Geary 2013, 65).

– but also the political beliefs of many country artists aligned with those of either Nixon or Wallace. Feder notes that “it was revealed that there [was] a giant market among people from all parts of the country for a kind of entertainment that gave voice to the conservative sentiments that were not heard in the marketplace of ideas at the time” (“The Conservative Evolution of Country Music” 2007). The representation of conservative views in country music remained strong into the early 2000s, especially following September 11, 2001. Country artists and the industry doubled down on messages of patriotism and American imperialism leading up to the Iraq War.

Country music of the late 2000s and early 2010s is not known for its political narratives, so where did all the gusto for conservatism go? In 2003, The Chicks stated that they were “ashamed” that George W. Bush was from Texas which sparked outrage across the industry and amongst country music fans. They were quickly excommunicated from country music. Their music was removed from country music stations, television stations refused to promote their documentary, and there were even anti-Dixie Chicks demonstrations that were held. The entire country music industry watched the immediate blacklisting of a household name over a single political comment. Following the incident, artists became “skittish about directly addressing politics in their music” (Meacham and McGraw 2019). The political conversations that occurred through the lyrics of country songs, resonating in themes of patriotism, nostalgia, and the common man dissipated, or at the very least became shrouded by the whiskey-drinking, truck-driving, girl-chasing narratives of bro-country that dominated the country charts in the mid-to-late 2000s and early 2010s.

While the image of country music as a politically conservative genre endures, the views of its artists continue to diversify. Expressions of liberalism within country music are often

behind closed doors as artists and executives remain pressured by their largely conservative base, but they are present, nonetheless. An event most exemplary of this was former Arkansas governor and National Rifle Association (NRA) supporter Mike Huckabee's appointment to and almost immediate resignation from the CMA Foundation board. The appointment was announced five months after a shooting at the Route 91 Harvest festival in Las Vegas that (at least briefly) altered the country music community's conversation around gun rights (Moss 2018). Unnamed figures in the country music industry wrote complaints to the Country Music Association expressing their dissatisfaction with Huckabee's appointment, and days later he stepped down. A *Billboard* article on liberalism in the country music industry quotes industry insiders who speak to the political shift in the community. One person stated that they witnessed "what has felt like a shift from conservative Music Row-slash-country music to seeing artists speak out more on issues that resonate with the left side... Artists and the industry realize things have changed... It's less of a country music thing than it is a generational shift", while another commented that "the community as a whole is talking, they might just not be talking publicly... There is a lot of inner-industry communication and bonding in the wake of all these optically mishandled situations" (Moss 2018). The calculated approach to politics on display in Nashville points to an industry that is still reckoning with a societal image it has grown into and profited from, that deviates from the dominant socio-political narratives in popular culture.

The CMA's decision to feature Beyoncé and The Chicks was a surprisingly political move for an organization that tries to avoid politically motivated drama. A question is raised as to why they chose such a pairing. Economic incentives offer one answer. A strong argument can be made that the CMAs chose to program such a contentious pairing in their award show because it would boost their viewership and ratings. Emily Yahr for *The Washington Post* posits that the

decision was in part an attempt to compete with the World Series Game 7 that was scheduled to air on primetime television at the same time as the awards show (Yahr 2016a). Such explanations are highly plausible given the country music industry's demonstrated loyalty to its market (June-Friesen 2011). Regardless of the CMA's intention, many viewers perceived the duo's performance as a political statement and criticized the performers rather than the institution that uplifted them. It is worth noting that the Country Music Association was accused of erasing all content of Beyoncé and The Chicks from its website and social media accounts following the controversy over the singers' performance. The organization denies the accusations, claiming that they only removed a 5-second promotional clip before the award show was broadcast on television that was not authorized for airing (Yahr 2016b).

### **Navigating the Sound of Whiteness**

One cannot overlook how race is implicated in the criticism of Beyoncé's "Daddy Lessons". Whiteness is a pillar of authenticity in country music. Definitions of country music audiences and artists explicitly highlight the whiteness of the industry, a descriptor that is not often so blatantly assigned to other genres of popular music. Hubbs, Fox, Wilgus, Geary, and many other scholars are quick to involve race in their discussions of country music, and rightly so. While the constituencies that country music represents are not entirely white (as Fox makes a point of mentioning in *Real Country*),<sup>24</sup> the genre and industry promote, produce, and perform whiteness.

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<sup>24</sup> See page 21 of Aaron A. Fox' *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*.

Scholar Geoff Mann argues that country music's engagement with white identity is active. It does not simply reflect the whiteness of the space in which it exists, but rather it produces a white identity. The sound of country music is the sound of whiteness: "country music not only 'talks white', but it is 'whites' who hear it, and whose whiteness is produced and reproduced by what they hear. The songs of a racialized and mythic 'used to' sound a present in which whiteness makes sense retroactively, calling white people to their whiteness" (Mann 2008, 76). To an extent, country music functions as a "defensive articulation of whiteness" (Fox 2004, 25). While Fox uses the said phrase to describe the use of the term 'redneck', an argument can be made that country music is utilized similarly. Its 'calling' of 'white people to their whiteness' occurs for reasons beyond cultural, class, and racial pride: narratives of nostalgia appeal to these individuals because they feel increasingly distanced from what they know and what is comfortable. There is a perceived threat to what they value; therefore, they seek to reaffirm their social and cultural positioning, country music serving as one medium through which they can achieve such a goal. Gatekeeping the genre and policing its boundaries allows these individuals (who function more as a collective in this regard) to maintain a firm hold on their identities in a world that increasingly challenges who they are and questions what they value.

Beyoncé's identity as a Black woman, in addition to her affiliation with musical spaces that seemingly represent the antithesis of country (hip-hop and to a degree pop), in the eyes of the hardened country fan frames her as a figure who should not and cannot exist within their construction of country music. The white listener hears the space between their identity and that of Beyoncé in the music of "Daddy Lessons" and responds by imposing a formal delineation between country music made by and for white people and music that is, by most standards,

country music but is made by (and possibly for) non-white people and therefore is not conceivable in their schema of country music.

Music, especially country music is not just “notes and words and chords”, it is perceived as “color” too (Haring 2020). Early in artist Darius Rucker’s career in country music, (following his departure from the band Hootie & The Blowfish), it was made evident to him that sound was not the defining feature of country music, race was. Rucker says that he “wasn’t really thinking about the Black country singer thing” when he walked into his first country radio station to share his music; rather, he ““wanted people to play [his] music for [his] music””, but when he shared his tracks, ““nobody said they wouldn’t play it. What was said was... ‘I love the song. I think it’s country. Love it. I’m going to play it tomorrow, but I don’t think my audience will accept a Black country singer”” (Haring 2020). While this event was quite early in Rucker’s career, it speaks to an enduring reality regarding the country music industry: country music is blatantly aware of its racialization of sound and has not only normalized the practice but also the exclusion of BIPOC individuals as part of the process. The engagement of politics in country music, as has been shown, is largely avoided. And to be non-white is political, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>25</sup>

The controversy accompanying the CMAs performance of “Daddy Lessons” raises important questions about what it means to make and be a fan of country music. To what extent does gatekeeping country music reinforce racist and prejudiced structures? In such a climate, is it truly possible for non-white identities to exist in country music? How does the rejection of artists and their music from the country music space strengthen country-crossover genres and weaken country music as country-crossover pushes back against the genres it combines? Investigations

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that here, country music’s politics become implicit – it becomes less about what is said than what is not said. The absence of speech, too, becomes a political statement.

into the ideas raised by these questions shape country-rap crossover music as they help identify what the crossover genre space can be, and how it can serve as a space in which identities that are rebuffed by mainstream genre categorizations (particularly those of country and hip-hop) can exist.

While “Daddy Lessons” would not be categorized as country-rap crossover music, it is worth considering in a discussion of crossover because it exemplifies the nuances of working in and around the country music space as an outsider, whether that be because of differences in race, political ideologies, or otherwise. Criticism of country-rap crossover music, like that of “Daddy Lessons”, is largely attributed to the inauthenticity of its “sound”. “Sound” is coded language for race; thus, it is racial diversity that country music’s gatekeepers are truly rejecting. “Sound” is at the heart of authenticity in country music, and as Mann states, the sound of country is the sound of whiteness (Mann 2008).

## Conclusion

Country music and hip-hop speak directly to American self-definition. They grapple with the nuanced history and reality of race, class, gender, sexual, and regional identity in a white supremacist society in often contrasting ways. The contradictions in the identities associated with country music and hip-hop, respectively, can be teased out through country-rap crossover music as it offers a venue in which these identities can interact in ways that are often prohibited in the genre spaces to which they predominately belong. Country-rap is rooted entirely in an imagined place, and it is precisely this quality that allows it to respond readily to the desires of the artists contributing to it. Genres rooted in time and place are much less able to do this because they implicate more concrete genre markers that are deeply embroiled in ideas of authenticity.

As I conducted this project, a couple of thoughts lingered. The first is regarding the transitory nature of the country-rap crossover space. In the introduction, I suggest that the space created by crossover music is akin to that of Paul Gilroy's concept of 'routes' – 'routes' being the routes of transmission between old and new cultural sites that function as a space where diasporic identities are formed (Gilroy 1993) – in the sense that both render spaces where cultural productions are born from the deconstruction of theoretical structures. In the case of country-rap crossover music, new identities are formed from the deconstruction of genre markers of country music and hip-hop. These identities put pressure on the genres that birthed them. A question arises as to whether the pressure is great enough to cause a reconfiguration of their parent genres. This question in turn generates uncertainty about the survival of country-rap as a musical space. Currently, I would argue that country-rap crossover functions as a waystation for identities rejected by country music and hip-hop. Some artists continue to make music in the country-rap space (e.g., Blanco Brown and Breland) while others (like Lil Nas X and debatably

Beyoncé) only pass through on their way to a different domain. Will country-rap continue to serve this purpose until country music becomes responsive to its pressures, or will country-rap codify into its own genre that is unique from both country music and hip-hop? Given how cultural and identity politics have been largely predictive of changes in the identities within musical genres, I posit that one can look to such politics for indicators as to whether country-rap will exist ephemerally or plant its own roots.

Similarly, it is worth considering what happens to genre in the face of postmodernism. This reflection stems from Nadine Hubb's statement that "in some regions of the United States country music is less a distinct cultural object than something woven through the fabric of everyday life" (Hubbs 2014, 11). Genre as a post-modern sensibility is objectified such that audiences and artists try on genres much like they would clothes. Will 21<sup>st</sup>-century country-rap crossover take on postmodernism like "Wild Wild West" (1999) by Will Smith featuring Dru Hill and Kool Moe Dee, where it starts as a fad but then solidifies as a style, or will it be preserved as a single moment in time? Will country music take advantage of the country-rap craze as though it's a trend or will it make a long-term investment in the musical space? I would argue that the fate of country-rap crossover music lies in the hands of country music; however, the self-definition of the crossover space by country-rap artists seems to indicate that forms of country-rap will endure whether country music opens to it or not.

The cultural climate of the United States at present and the direction in which it trends suggests that cultural productions that cross over boundaries of identity will continue to gain popularity. Sensibilities in many areas of culture increasingly restrain themselves from immediately categorizing new cultural productions, instead, letting the productions speak for and define themselves. This phenomenon, in conjunction with the decreasing influence of genre

distinctions in the formation of musical taste and the consumption of music, points to the potential of crossover music to become the dominant musical style of America.

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