



Good Ol' Boys and Beer: A Moral Framework for Understanding Republican Values in Country Music

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Abstract— *The narrative discourse of country music from 2016 to 2021 constructs a worldview clinging onto a nostalgic sense of community and moral values despite a world torn asunder by Covid 19, politics, race, gender, and religion. Country music during these tumultuous times offers listeners a moral community and a sense of unchanging place and shared meaning. In this article, I examine the construction of moral communities in contemporary country music by unpacking the structure of small-town values and sensibilities, including the vestigial Puritan religious attachments to the Judeo-Christian bible and loyal attachments to a poetic sense of place and community. I argue that a close narrative analysis of Top Billboard Country Music's lyrics reveals how these hometown values are framed to construct a world of collective effervescence.*



Keywords— *Country Music, American Values, American Life, American Families, Small town America, Christianity, American Politics, Rural America, American Polarization.*

I. INTRODUCTION

I am a closet country music listener. Let me explain. I live in Southern California in a progressive liberal neighborhood where any mention of attending church, praying, or maintaining any relationship with former President Trump supporters immediately raises arched brows and accusations of treason. This political divide mirrors what is happening in the rest of America. America is deeply divided, and I proffer that this polarization can be seen in those who like Country Music and those who don't.

I was first introduced to Country Music while getting my Ph.D. in 2015, when my friend Katie invited me to an outdoor barn barbecue that she and her family held every year for family and friends in a rural area outside of Indiana, Pennsylvania. All of Katie's family and friends are white hard-working Republicans earning less than \$30,000 and quite boastful of their children who serve in the military and are proud of their country. Katie's genuine kindness and generosity made me feel like a welcomed friend, but when the beer started flowing and everyone began singing along to cousin Jimmy D. belting out: "One two three," and something about "red solo cups" and "tailgates" and "testicles," I realized I was far from Los Angeles. As the

songs rolled out one by one, I noticed that I had not heard of any of the songs on the playlist and had no cultural reference to the songs. I've done a USC Football tailgate party in college, but I knew nothing about big, red jacked-up trucks, parking lot parties, and small-town throwdowns. I was an outsider without the cultural currency to understand and appreciate the cultural symbols of dirt roads, pick-up trucks, and disposable red solo cups brimming with beer. Since I prefer a four-lane freeway, an SUV, and a glass of Pinot Noir, the country imagery was foreign to me. I realized that the imagery within the lyrics provided a road map into the exploration of another American way of being, another reality, another political perspective, and morality.

According to social-psychologist Jonathan Haidt, we can understand how a community of people think about what is right and wrong by teasing out the moral factors on which people base their judgment. Referred to as "Moral Foundations Theory," Haidt (2012) asserts that liberals determine right and wrong based on two moral foundations he terms "Harm/Care" and "Fairness/Reciprocity." Interestingly, Katie considers me a "bleeding heart liberal" from "Hollyweird," who wants to lock away her guns and take away her hunting pastime. She jokes that I care more

about protecting immigrant rights than over-worked, underpaid, white Americans struggling to put food on the table. I suppose there might be some truth to this. Based on Haidt's theory, Katie, a "conservative," considers five moral dimensions, including the ones previously mentioned.

To discern right from wrong, Katie considers "Ingroup/Loyalty," Authority/Respect," and Purity/Sanctity." Under this moral platform, Katie's family and friends have a closer-knit community, are more likely to join the military, be loyal to their country, and show respect for America and all its traditional cultural symbols. If we unpack this a little further, many liberals live in heterogenous communities that are often more cosmopolitan, with different racial and ethnic groups occupying broader urban spaces. In these settings, it is difficult to establish a communal value system and a common core of musical taste and listening habits. On my street alone, there are Persians, Japanese, Chinese, African-Americans, Israelis, Italians, Brazilians, and Indians—whose musical tastes and cultural symbols run the gamut of global experience.

Yet, while I can identify their ethnicities from brief conversations, I couldn't tell you the names of many families who live on my street. I mostly see them as they swish by in their Teslas or BMWs before disappearing into their McMansions. As our local public school is a grounding center for community relationships, school choice is as diverse as the demographic makeup on my street, with 12 different schools represented. On the other hand, many conservative communities are more homogenous and tight-knit and can more easily develop collective solidarity through common communal spaces and shared social codes and values. In these communities, cultural symbols of "church," "God," and "old town friends" create a common lived experience of shared meaning. Children in rural America attend the same local school; families attend one of the local churches. People know each other, mow their own lawns, do their own shopping, and cook their own food. Country Music speaks to this other community with its cultural cache of shared values. Émile Durkheim (1912) refers to this as a moral community of intimate connections, shared beliefs, and simpler ways of being—a place called home.

The divide between the urban/rural, rich/poor, liberal/conservative world is growing and although Katie is right, and I am a self-proclaimed progressive "bleeding heart liberal," I love Country Music and, more importantly, my friends from rural America who introduced me to it. While I live in a concretized urban American landscape, I love the idea of the freedom one gets from being out on a

dirt road heading nowhere in particular; I love the thought of just "sitting here, drinking beer, talking God, amen" (Rice, 2021: track 15). So, why not pour a shot of whiskey or two and hum along?

Because of Covid, I've gone nowhere but around the mountain, again and again, trying to make sense of a nonsensical world suffocating in a mask as I've done so. Country Music offers me an open dirt road to chase these iconic open spaces in order to simply *breathe*. As a staunch defender of indigenous rights, I have begun to wonder if inhabitants of rural small towns should share the same rights to exist as other native peoples, even if I disagree with their moral values. I don't agree with polygamy, but its practice has enabled some indigenous tribes in Tanzania and other parts of Africa to maintain their traditional territorial lands. I don't agree with reproductive rights regulations, but I respect the beliefs in those countries I've visited that don't share my pro-choice values. I don't own a gun, but I respect my friends who enjoy hunting and clay pigeon shooting now and again. Like many country music singers, I believe in a woman's right to choose and gun regulation, and I respect all races and religions. Yet, country music is considered white trash, hillbilly, and redneck backward in some necks of the American woods. To some, country music is "just one more example, along with Ku Kluxism, Prohibition, sharecropping, racial violence, and religious bigotry, of the South's retarded and degenerate culture" (Malone, 1985: p. 14). While most country listeners are more likely to live in red states than blue ones, not all country music listeners are white trash, redneck, bigoted racists, and other interchangeable epithets often used to describe them. As Luke Combs and Billy Strings (2021) poignantly sing: "Sometimes it seems that our convictions/Side of the fence that we stand on/ Makes us all too damn different to get along." Yet, "we need to find a way across the great divide." I agree. In this essay, I proffer an alternative way to break down the empathetic walls of this great divide by providing a moral framework for understanding country music. In these songs, I examine the cultural symbols and metaphors to examine what Arlie Russel Hochschild (2016) refers to as the "deep story" of living and being in rural conservative America—a glimpse of a moral community of intimate connections, shared beliefs, and simpler ways of being—a place called home.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Country music derives its origins from the early twentieth century, primarily Southern and White rural working-class music influenced by traditions of the American West-rugged-cowboy experience, whose tropes include nostalgia for a rural way of life (Neal, 2013: p. xxi). On this socially

conservative frontier, personal relationships with family, friends, God, and country are central themes (Mallone & Neal, 2010). Fortune and luck are often displaced by hard luck and hard times—the narrative antidote is a shot of whiskey chased down with a sixer. The commercial foundation of Country Music is in Nashville, which contributes to Southern stereotypes and audience demographics:

Country music is populist music, plain and simple. And it's not just white music, Southern music, rural music, or hillbilly music. It's every day driving to work, drinking a beer after work with friends, dancing on the weekend kind of music. Forget red states vs. blue states kind of music: Good country music -- as ever -- is just about real life and how it applies to daily life. (Flippo, 2004: n.p.)

Country Music's narrative confessional style has clear-cut splices of life plot lines and relatable characters appealing to the pathos of its listeners. (Flippo, 2004; Van Dijck, 2006; Van Sickle, 2005). Most country storytelling is "set against a relatively simple musical background, [and] most songs tell a complete story, with considerable detail, from start to finish" (Ryan, Calhoun, & Wentworth: p. 26). These everyday stories transmit traditional Southern values and ideology and are not neutral but construct ideologies portending to be value-free categories.

The verisimilitude of real-life experiences contributes to the narrative structure of exposition, conflict, and resolution. Weaved within the narratives are often organic rural images of backwoods and pickup trucks, which illicit scorn as unsophisticated old-time or hillbilly tunes (Hanson, 2005). The images, tropes, and symbols reflect a "southern working-class culture, changing as that society has changed, but it is, at the same time, a dynamic element of American popular culture" (Wilson, 2008: p. 48). Embedded in the lyrics is a cultural storehouse of Southern tradition, cultural practices, spiritual understanding, and personal histories. The lyrical texts themselves are rhetorical discourses offering models for personal ways of living and being in the world—"for managing the meaning of ongoing everyday social struggles" (Matula, 2007 :p. 22). For the most part, the country music audience *embraces* both the good and the bad about "the music's—and their own—cultural identity and meaning, as a way of discovering and asserting what is valuable and good about their lives and their communities" (Fox, 2004: p. 52.)

After surveying 200 song lyrics during America's turbulent political transition between 2016 to 2021, I argue that while there is a construction of political ideologies throughout the music, it is subtle. Sometimes, however, it is forceful and contentious, going straight to the heart of the

matter, as witnessed when Natalie Maines from the Dixie Chicks (now, Chicks) spoke out against former President George W. Bush sharing that she was embarrassed that he was from her home state of Texas. As one of the first groups to experience *cancel culture*, the Chicks reemerged in 2020 with their album *Gaslighter* and the song "March, March." In this song, the Chicks comment on the "Underpaid teacher policin' the hallways, and a world of alternative facts where "Lies are truth and truth is fiction" (Maguire, Maines, Strayer, et al., 2020: track 6). Similar to the Chicks, the 2020 release of Eric Church's urgent "Stick That in Your Country Song," which was written by Jeffrey Steel and Davish Naiash before Covid and the George Floyd murder, highlights an imploding America at every social level with "factories empty," injured and "blind" veterans "coming back from war," and "underpaid" and "overworked" teachers who have to deal with students "climbing off the walls"(track 5). Not a pretty picture of America. These songs tend to arouse anger and division, which is why they exist—but are few and far between; certainly, it is not easy listening music when the objective is to escape the madness, not engage in it. Nonpolitical issues are easier to listen to, smoother to swallow, and more relatable to an audience trying to find solace amidst the chaos. Maren Morris concludes in her 2021 Country Music Award song of the year: "When the bones are good, the rest don't matter" (Morris, Robbins & Veltz, 2019: track 12).

At the same time, conservative Christian values pervade Country Music lyrics *and* influence political beliefs. In Tim McGraw and Tyler Hubbard's 2021 song "Undivided," they reimagine a world where black merges into white in a fuzzy blur of lyrics that tries to gloss over years of institutionalized racism and white supremacist beliefs. Suppose we keep the elephant locked in the closet. In that case, most country songs contrive a simple hometown right/wrong ideology, which captures the ordinary and natural rhythms of everyday God-fearing people. These values construct moral communities that share similar religious beliefs, heteronormative families, plain living, and individual constitutional rights, including the right to bear arms. The conservative rhetoric in Country Music has a white Christian Fundamentalist sensibility that has remained static in a changing world (Mann, 2008; Lewis, 1993). Drawing on a solid Southern agricultural tradition, men depicted in country songs still hold onto masculine attributes, drive tractors, hang out at the bar, drink beers, and get mud on their hands and dirt on their boots. Gender norms tend to cast women in traditionally conservative roles or, in some instances, rage against them (Click & Kramer, 2007; Newlyn, 2004; Wilson, 2000). For the most part, gender, racial, urban, and rural divisions are not spoken about but hidden in the discourse of an America that is still

trying to define itself and heal its wounds. Luke Combs and Bluegrass musician Billy Strings (2021) articulate an America on the precipice of “falling apart” if “we can’t reach the other side.” In their single “The Great Divide,” they depict a world where people are “striking matches on the TV,” “setting fires on our phones,” and “Bearing crosses we believe in dying on” yet, urgently admonishing us to find a bridge of understanding.

It's as deep as it is wide
We're about to fall apart now
If we can't reach the other side
We gotta find a way across the great divide
The great divide (Combs & Strings, 2021)

In all these songs from 2016-2021, some of which I will explore herein, we witness a form of meaning-making where objects of knowledge are constructed and disseminated for audience consumption. Foucault (1984) refers to this as the “archaeology of knowledge,” which establishes a “general politics” of what is true (p. 73). For Foucault, there is no neutral knowledge, as all knowledge carries power. The narrative rhetoric fashions “the sorts of assumptions songwriters, singers, and listeners will make and the standards they will use to distinguish between truth and falsehood” (Grossman, 2002: p. 86). What is real and the perceptions of reality often differ depending on the socio-cultural, racial, and geographic positioning. In the following analysis, I will examine the shared meaning and values within Country Music’s moral communities.

2.1 Narrative Framework

This analysis foregrounds itself in narrative theory as a framework for understanding and exposing meaning and values (Cohen, 1998; Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001). Most of the country music in this research follows an Aristotelean plot structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Characters have goals and desires, where obstacles are placed in the path of fulfillment—the conflict. Personal stories are embedded in the lyrics and help to organize the experience and feelings of listeners. Music, lyrics, and literature are part of culture and “shape knowledge and values, maintain social order, and influence action” (Cohen, 1988, p. 88). Narratives teach individuals how to collectively fit into a particular culture and push back against it. The musical narrative constructs messages/themes that can influence our perceptions of the past, present and future, creating stories, myths, and ideologies to live by (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001).

In most cases, the lyrical narrative hangs together with a logical resolution. Popular lyrical narratives create a co-authorship in which the listener desires the same outcome as the narrator (Griffin, 2006: p. 344). If the outcome is thwarted, the audience is led to feel the same sense of loss. If the outcome is realized, the audience is expected to share

in the emotional success, reinforcing a particular ideology and a roadmap for daily living (Brummett, 1999). Stories provide communicative associations and cathartic connections where “average people can put into perspective the problems of the world. Narratives also may produce identification, which in many cases leads to persuasion” (Rowland, 1987: p. 268). Each cultural production is a historical artifact that carries implicit socio-cultural values embedded within the discourse. As Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) suggest, “culture is reflected in or influenced by the content and form of the story” (p. 212).

Different media discourses narrate stories in different ways. This is undoubtedly true for Country Music, as the choruses generally repeat the thematic impression throughout the text and play an essential role in reinforcing the overall message. The repetition of a catchy musical and lyrical motif persuades consumers to buy into the psychological and ideological ramifications of the message (Huisman, Murphet, & Dunn, 2005). Narratives within musical lyrics often become part of the sociocultural fabric, providing a historical understanding of the time period and worldviews held at a certain point in time (Purnell, 2002; Grossman, 2002).

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study of the top 50 Billboard country music songs from 2016 to 2021, I adopt a qualitative framework using *Atlas TI* to identify some basic rhetorical frames within the music. After the frames were identified, I coded the lyrics for analysis to find repeated patterns, which enabled me to unpack and identify specific small-town values and sensibilities. Within this identification process, I was able “to step back from the details of a particular artifact to take a broader view of it and to draw some conclusions about what it suggests concerning its rhetorical influence (Foss, 2004: p. 8.) In the discovery process, I identify the following frames to code:

- Heartland and Puritan values of strong religious attachments to God.
- Female Mother Angel.
- Doing Good in a Common Ground.
- A Sense of Place: Beer, Blue Jeans, and Bonfires.

In this process, I discovered that Country Music captures and fashions rural town ideology perhaps more than any other contemporary media discourse by preserving a nostalgia for a shared understanding of place and a simple way of being in the world.

Because Country Singers speak *to* and often *for* their country listeners, an interlocking interdisciplinary analysis ensued to examine how moral communities are constructed and values promoted (Klumpp & Hollihan, 1989; Turner,

1987; Fairclough, 1992). Country music discourses intersect with a “larger social context in which it is produced and consumed,” and the values are “thus socially embedded” (Lindekilde, 2014: p. 204). The values within the song lyrics are articulated and rearticulated across different geographies and create moral communities of meaning and shared values (Lindekilde, 2014; Snow & Beford, 2014). In most cases, the musical orchestration of twanging steel guitars, Chicken Pickin’ tonalities, and chromatic movements add to the tonality and narrative tension. The musicality adds to the song's overall meaning and plays an integral role in shaping the message (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2007). However, this research will focus mainly on the narratives within the lyrics and the fashioning of shared ideologies and values.

IV. HEARTLAND VALUES

As neoliberal policies and ideologies begin to seep into every nook and cranny of the American landscape, we have witnessed a growing fear that rural communities and the mom-and-pop businesses that support them will be absorbed into a globalized monoculture of mores, values, and economic models. Rural communities fear that they are under siege by the alternative lifestyles and loose underpinnings that have many Americans worshipping in the aisles of Walmart instead of their neighborhood parish. The result is downright outrage that the traditional socio-cultural fabric of the “moral communities” in which people live is “being fundamentally fractured” and swept away by a Tsunami of competing values (Wuthnow, 2018: p. 6). Within the lyrical narratives of Country Music, the heartland values of America are revived in an imagined sense of community where people “uphold the local ways of being that govern their expectations about ordinary life and support their feelings of being at home and doing the right things” (Wuthnow, 2018: p. 4).

To better grasp the shared values within these communities, it is essential to understand the often explicit expression of God and submission to Christian biblical values within daily life. Many of the lyrics share strong fundamentalist beliefs that are “deeply embedded in country music” with lyrical repetition of motifs of “God,” “devil,” “church,” “suffering,” and “redemption” (Cusic, 2008: p. 165). Many of these songs adhere to a conventional three-verse and interwoven chorus structure—the chorus emphasizing a Christian moral.

A first verse sets the scene, a second verse expands or extends the narrative, and a third verse offers a reinterpretation of the narrative or a transformation of its basic message. In this model, the convention of the third-verse transformation provides the content for exactly the sort of religious message we

would expect to find in a country song: one in which emotional or spiritual connections, often combined with an element of sacrifice, provide for an individual change of state or identity. (Grossman, 2002: p. 89)

Perhaps, the most powerful song of the last six years that embraces both the musical narrative structure of a three-verse chorus structure is Blake Shelton’s 2019 hit “God’s Country,” written by Devin Dawson, Jordan Schmidt, and Hardy. “God’s Country” creates a desolate religious space of perseverance. Painted on this “one church town desolate landscape, “gold dirt roads” lead to “a whole lot of nothing,” and people pray for rain” to replenish the grain and get “a little bit of money” (Dawson, Schmidt & Hardy, 2019: track 1). Foreboding religious imagery in the chorus of “Gettin’ baptized in holy water and ‘shine” and being “saved by the sound of the been found” invokes images of a hometown Southern baptism that washes away the sin while “Dixie” whistles “in the wind” with enough force to send the Devil “down to Georgia” (Dawson, Schmidt & Hardy, 2019: track 1). Christian concepts of everything on earth belonging to God and the narrator’s acknowledgment that he is an instrument of a higher power that subordinates his will to that of God are articulated. God’s country is no paradise. The song captures the Old Testament beliefs, in which Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden for man’s disobedience to God. Because of this original sin, humanity must suffer life’s trials and tribulations; man must now work hard to “till the ground from whence he was taken”; women must suffer in childbirth, and both sexes must endure a life of hardship (King James, 2008: 3:24). In God’s country, forbearance and perseverance are valuable attributes for living a good life.

Tim McGraw’s 2016 song, “Humble and Kind,” written by Lori McKenna, expresses some of the prescriptive scriptures from the Old and New Testament—those that provide behavioral roadmaps on how to live a God-centered life. *Micah 6:8* lays out the Lord’s requisites on “what is good” behavior, writing: “The LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (King James, 2008). This message on what constitutes good behavior is taken up several times in the bible, offering morally authoritative guidelines on how people should be in the world. *Colossians 3:12-13* explicitly details a list of Christian attributes, including “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patienc[e]” (King James, 2008). These values are secularized in McKenna’s lyrics, in which the speaker /father advises his child by summarizing some of the 10 Commandments on moral behavior and repeating the key verse: “Always stay humble and kind.” The song combines Commandments Three and Five going to “church” and

listening to his “mother,” then adds Commandments Eight and Nine with the imperative that the child, “Don't steal, don't cheat, and don't lie.” Other admonishments include avoiding being too “proud,” “expecting a “free ride,” holding “a grudge,” and discerning the difference between sex and love—“between sleeping with someone/And sleeping with someone you love” (McKenna, 2016). These strong Judeo/Christian values transmitted with a local folksy authority resound in the music appealing to the moral community of its listeners.

4.1 Female Mother Angel

Thematic religious connections between God and the angelic self-sacrificing mother/woman are also quite prevalent in country music. In “God, Your Mama, and Me,” (2016) songwriters Josh Kear, Hillary Lindsey, and Gordie Sampson construct an abiding holy trinity, which the Florida Georgia Line and the Backstreet Boys bring to fruition. In this “choir calling” “hallelujah” tribute, “church doors open wide.” The speaker unconditionally describes his agape love to his partner, claiming, “No one's ever gonna love you more than God, your mama, and me” (Kear, Lindsey, & Sampson, 2016: track 11). The speaker's unconditional love is an infinite rising well where “angels” sing and the love overflows towards her, “praying with you every mile down any dead end road” (Kear, Lindsey, & Sampson, 2016: track 11). The outpouring of emotion is similar to the language in Thessalonians 3:12 “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love” (King James, 2008). The speaker urgently admonishes his partner to believe in the quality of love repeating, “You better believe it, you better believe it.” The speaker triangulates unconditional love attributing it to the speaker, God, and his mother—his love is spiritually omnipotent and able to be part of “wherever” his “baby” goes.

Kane Brown's “Worship You,” written by Brown, Izquierdo, McGinn, and Votjesak (2020), continues on this thematic comparison between the burning love for a female/mother angel and a Christian God. Brown compares his “divine” love, presumably his wife Katelyn Jae, who appears in the video, to a “higher power.” Describing his feeling as if he has “seen the light” and their sexual relationship being like “heaven,” he repents for elevating his female love over that of his feelings for God (Brown, Izquierdo, McGinn, & Votjesak, 2020: track 3). After all, he is a “God-fearing Christian man;” although, he has admittedly broken the First Commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (King James, 2008: Exodus, 20:3). Brown even goes as far as to concede that if she “were a religion, then damn I don't know what I do” and sin against God and worship her—violating Commandments One through Three. He will have to genuflect “praise” her and worship at the church of her body “night and day.”

Although Brown realizes she is not Jesus and cannot “walk on water” or “turn it into wine,” his mortal love is his new miraculous “hallelujah” religion (Brown, Izquierdo, McGinn, & Votjesak, 2020: track 3).

4.2 Doing Good on Common Ground

The secularization of Christian values is further demonstrated in the do-gooder, can't we just get along? songs, which became popular during the troublesome four years of Trump's divisive administration—a time laden with social unrest from almost every sector of the American population. From 2016 to 2020, more than 468 protests took place across the streets of America in which people protested *en masse* for women's rights, indigenous rights, immigrant rights, environmental rights, and Black rights (to name a few). Country Music responded to the political atmosphere by playing on the climate of a divided country in need of much healing. Songs such as Kane Brown's (2019) “Worldwide Beautiful,” Luke Bryan's (2019) “Most People are Good,” Kenny Chesney's 2018 top Billboard Song “Get along,” Tim McGraw and Tyler Hubbard's 2021 song “Undivided” all reveal a world grappling to find what Chesney refers to as “the common ground,” where a divisive America can get along (Casey, 2018). Listeners are called to heed a secular rewording of Romans 12:18: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (King James, 2008).

In a country deeply conflicted over race, culture, and politics, Kane Brown sings out against the institutional racism and socio-economic inequity in America with his song, “Worldwide Beautiful,” co-written by Shy Carter, Ryan Hurd, and Jordan Schmidt (2020) and recorded before the June 4, 2020 killing of George Floyd. A historical trajectory informs Brown's lyrics of black lives cut short at the hands of American policemen—a long list of fallen black people including Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, a list that seems to grow every day in America. Like other country singers trying to bridge the socio-political racial divide, Brown sings that whether churches are “white” or “black,” death is the great equalizer as all bodies end up in the “same hearses” and “in the ground, six under” unable to “fight with each other.” (Brown, Carter, Hurd & Schmidt, 2020). Calling on scriptures from both the Old and New Testament of “One love, one God, one family,” Kane calls on his audience to envision a “worldwide” multicolored “beautiful” world. Kane symbolically repeats 12 apostolic times, “Thank God.” The 12 “Thank God” phrases carry with them a figurative allusion to a religious and magical perfection and cosmic order that Brown asserts can be realized by surpassing boundaries and reaching out “hands” to “every shade, every heart” to come together in a Bob Marley *esque*

“One love, one God, one family” (Brown, Carter, Hurd & Schmidt, 2020). Although prosaic, the one family, one religion platitude is meant to quell America's growing socio-racial and emotional unease. As a black artist and one of the few black men in Country Music, Kane steps into a position of a local storyteller and moral authority. His music serves as a vehicle for spreading do-good beatitudes and mapping a shared cultural chart of the social order where unaccustomed events are positioned in recognizable symbolic frames and meaningful narratives. Brown's musical video “Worldwide Beautiful” won the 2021 American Country Music video of the Year award, and his lyrical discourses consistently top the Billboard Charts.

Luke Bryan's (2017) “Most People are Good,” written by David Frasier, Ed Hill, and Josh Kear, provides another example of how Country Music delivers an image of a sociocultural order endowed with positive moral meaning. In this song, Bryan strategizes a way for people to be good by adopting some essential beliefs. Employing first-person anaphoric “I believe” phrases, Bryan professes his belief that children should maintain their innocence by turning “off the screen, climbing “trees,” and getting dirty (Frasier, Hill, Kear, 2017: track 4). He similarly cautions adults to avoid “the nightly news,” which can precipitate a loss of faith in mankind. To maintain this nostalgic innocent lifestyle reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, people need to “forgive,” “make amends,” and work hard “for what you got” (Frasier, Hill, Kear, 2017: track 4). In an acknowledgment of accepting human love between sexes, Bryant concedes to the LGBTQ community “you love who you love” and “Ain't nothing you should ever be ashamed of” (Frasier, Hill, Kear, 2017: track 4). Underneath the political, racial, ethnic veneers, “most people are good.” The declaration reinforces the community norm to expect the best from its members. It encourages loyalty to this ideal of goodness where each member should expect the best intentions from each other. Whether it is a sense of fabricated polite tolerance or not, American hometowns are one of the last vestiges of personal communities and “continues to have a greater part than any other in shaping public sentiment giving character to American culture” (Wuthow, 2018: p. 5). Bryan's song vocalizes the conditions for members of society to recover their humanity and connection to each other.

Tim McGraw and Tyler Hubbard (from the *Georgia Florida Line* (2021) take another turn to refashion historical binaries between good and evil, us and them, white and black in their feel-good blur it-all together song, “Undivided” written by Hubbard and Chris Looke during Covid lockdown. After witnessing the January 6, 2021, deadly assault on the US Capitol, where 140 people were injured, and six people died, Hubbard sent the song to

McGraw to record. Corey Chowder and Byron Gallimore co-produced the track, which calls for the country to come together in unity despite deep-seated political differences. McGraw and Hubbard performed “Undivided” at the inauguration ceremony of 46th US President Joe Biden. In its straightforward narrative, three verse and chorus structure, McGraw and Hubbard call on people to accept and be friends to the awkward Billys in the world who “don't fit in” to the societal norm. They also challenge commonly held either/or Christian fallacies that if you don't “go to church or you gonna go to hell,” and if you don't work, “you gonna go to jail” (McGraw & Hubbard, 2020: track 17). They question why the “all white or all black” mentality and then allude to Mary T. Lathrap's (1895) poem “Judge Softly”: “And when we gon' learn to try on someone's shoes sometimes? (That's right) When we gon' start to see from someone else's eyes?”

Further sentiments explore man's equality in the eyes of God and urge the importance of looking up instead of at the exhaustive political differences between the “left” and “right. The chorus then repeats its hokey call to action to throw out the “hate,” “love somebody,” so that the “Good Lord” can “reunite us,” until America is “Undivided” (McGraw & Hubbard, 2020: track 17). Like the other songs in this section, we witness a moralizing discourse whose didactic purpose is to construct a moral universe.

4.3 A Sense of Place: Beer, Blue Jeans, and Bonfires

Country music inhabits a sense of place—each song produces, performs, and shares this sense of place with its listeners. A song like *Florida Georgia Line*'s “Long Live” (2021) invites listeners to collectively engage in its experiences, thereby co-creating and co-inhabiting a shared hometown sense of place (Hauge, 2007; Manzo, 2005; Morgan, 2010; Seamon, 2015; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). “Long Live” engages listeners to co-experience what Edward Relph (1976) refers to as an authentic sense of inside attachment. The song invites its listeners to “circle up” in their “pick-up trucks” on a “Friday night” with some “cold cans” and “Dixie cups” (Kelley, Crowder, Garcia, Miller & Hubbard, 2020: track 1). Paying homage to an old-school “Haggard and Hank” lifestyle of “small towners, sunup to sundowners,” *Florida Georgia Line* celebrates its “old dirt roads with no name” and “them country girls, long legs, and cut up jeans” (Kelley, Crowder, Garcia, Miller & Hubbard, 2020: track 1). In this world, we witness symbols of “hard-working” blue-collar place attachment with familiar gathering spaces like the “Walmart parking lot,” which transforms into a “midnight party spot” (Kelley, Crowder, Garcia, Miller & Hubbard, 2020: track 1). Here, emotional bonds are played out in a shared sense of familiarity and traditional leisure pastime (Manzo, 2003; Lewicka, 2011; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1977). *Florida*

Georgia Line salutes a mutual lifestyle of ritual performance of what they've been "doing" and what they've "always done." Whether those of us who listen to country music hang out at our local *Walmart* for a good time is irrelevant; as, nonetheless, we are collectively called on to participate in a constructed camaraderie of "longneck bottles and wide-open throttles and old dirt roads with no name" and a nostalgic reflection for "them glory days" (Kelley, Crowder, Garcia, Miller & Hubbard, 2020: track 1).

Humanistic geographers Buttimer (1980), Tuan (1974, 1977), Relph (1976), and Seamon (1980) refer to the interrelationship between geographical space and experience as "lifeworlds." In this *country-lifeworld*, morals, opinions, attitudes, values, and religious beliefs are deeply entwined with the geographical rural scape and experiences of its inhabitants. The evocation of a sense of place and the performance of the rituals, relationships, gatherings, and practices that transpire within the place create loci of meaning and shared commitment (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). The song becomes the constructive conduit to place-making.

This sense of place-making can be seen in Thomas Rhett's (2021) "What's Your Country Song?" in which community flows down the Chattahoochee River through Georgia, Alabama and Florida, but can also roll down any two-lane highway. Rhett creates a dynamic presence of rural place in America and questions:

Did you grow up on a tractor?
Did your daddy let you drive?
Are you whiskey-bent and hell bound
Even though your mama tried?
Did you cruise down a backroad?
With your Dixieland delight?
Are you on the Chattahoochee?
On a barefoot blue jean night? (Rhett, Gorley, Frasure, Welling, & Akins, 2021: track 3).

The referential arrangement of things—tractors, whiskey, backroads, and blue jeans—all intricately intertwines to bring the place into fruition. This recognizable framework of relatable things offers meaning and possibilities of "what is" and "what could be." Rhett sings that although life ain't easy, "everybody been through a little hell" (Rhett, Gorley, Frasure, Welling, & Akins, 2021: track 3). The inclusivity of "everybody" in a shared experience of having a "small town anthem" and some "story to tell" conceives a shared paradoxical encounter with both the "Halleluiah" and the "hell." The duality of human existence is brought into being. As pilgrims "rolling down a two-lane highway," we are asked to rhetorically question who we are, where we've been, and where we are going.

Figuratively and literally, country music is grounded in the topographical features of place. While the narrative is a crucial feature of every country song, the rural setting shapes the storyline. Songs like Luke Bryan's 2016 "Huntin', Fishin', & Lovin' Every Day," Dierks Bentley's 2019 single "Living," and Luke Combs' 2020 "Better Together" reaffirm simple country values that derive from the connection to its topography. Informed by the topography, these songs generate ways of being and living in the world. Bryan's music "Huntin' Fishin'" constructs a place-base imagination of chucking the workday grind and making a living from the earth. All we need to do "Y'all." is "close them eyes" and go "there in our minds" and imagine we are "huntin', fishin', and lovin' every day" (Bryan, Davidson, Atkins, & Hayslip, 2016: track 12). Bryan challenges the contemporary 9-5 existence that has separated humanity from simple sustainable livelihoods. He creates a counternarrative to the 9-5 subservient work script most Americans are expected to play. Bryan prays that if he "could make a living' walkin' in the woods" or "make a nickel off a turning 'em bass," he'd be "loving every day" and "getting red dirt rich and Flint River pay" (Bryan, Davidson, Atkins, & Hayslip, 2016: track 12). He communicates a rural subjectivity, articulating a longing for a simpler way of life rooted in hunting and fishing—a "prayer that a country boy prays." The rural descriptors of "farm pond buss," "sounds of gravel," "climbs in a tree," and "knee deep in the Muckalee" establish a romantic place that is special and different from other concrete urban segments of American society (Bryan, Davidson, Atkins, & Hayslip, 2016: track 12). Bryan goes so far as to sing "Thank God He made me this way" instead of the Cosmopolitan man with different desires, hopes, and dreams (Bryan, Davidson, Atkins, & Hayslip, 2016: track 12). This rural affinity not only constructs and performs a place-based identity, but it also echoes the values of what is held dear and important in life. Referred to by Lewicka (2011), Manzo (2003), Seamon (2014) and Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) as "place attachment," the topographical setting contributes to the personal narratives, activities, and political leanings that take place in these spaces.

Dierks Bentley's 2019 single "Living," co-written with Ross Copperman, Ashley Gorley, and Jon Nite, reaffirms what is held dear and celebrates the simple pleasures of nature with a "rising sun" and a nondescript tree he's "seen a thousand times." What hits him, however, is a "bird on a branch" he watches "fly away in the wind" (Bentley, Copperman, Gorley and Nite, 2019: track 3). In this *Aha* epiphany, Bentley recognizes that sometimes the simple beauty in the world is missed because of a lack of clarity of what is important. In the yin and yang of daily life cycles, "Some days you just breath" and "just try to break even"

(Bentley, Copperman, Gorley and Nite, 2019: track 3). Bentley distinguishes between “living” and simply being “alive.” On the days he’s “living,” he’s “Got a heart full of grateful” and feels immortal and “a little bluer up in the sky”—a sentiment sparked by the visual imagery of a bird on a branch” (Bentley, Copperman, Gorley and Nite, 2019: track 3).

Nature is often juxtaposed with rural human activity to capture the livelihood of rural life, as in Luke Combs's 2020 song “Better Together,” co-written by Dan Isbell and Randy Montana. In this song, the contrasting visual imagery of a flat bottom, “40 HP Johnson” fishing boat and the remnants of “Coke cans and BB guns, barbed wire and old fence posts” are contrasted against an eight-point antlered buck moving through “freshly cut cornfields,” and the singer breezing down a road his arm with “one arm out the window” (Combs, Isbell, Montana, 2020: track 17). Human activity and nature combine in what Wuthnow (2018) refers to as a “bounded, socially, and culturally” distinct community, which produces a performance of place and a sense of homestyle interrelationships (p. 15). Here, a relationship is compared to a “cup of coffee and a sunrise, Sunday drives and time to kill” –the daily rhythm of activities going “better together” as opposed to other empty pursuits with no emotional value. There’s no music in a guitar with no strings nor melody in the unsung song. This relationship, however, is an endearing metaphorical slice of “heaven” of “lipstick-stained coffee” mugs and the pattering of “rain on an old tin roof” (Combs, Isbell, Montana, 2020: track 17). This “better together” heaven-ordained love “match” is correlated to “good ol boys and beer,” suggesting a reverence for both the idealized love interest and hanging out and drinking with friends (Combs, Isbell, Montana, 2020: track 17). Beer, male companionship, and a woman who will take his last name are nostalgic performances that carry socio-cultural meanings about what is important to the Country Music community. Women’s place in country music materializes to a subordinate position where she will drop her name and deliver her driver’s license to his wallet for safe keeping as the male protector drives her downtown.

V. CONCLUSION

Country music shows listeners our place, how we coexist within our community, and conversely, its place inside us. It offers an alternative discourse into how people with perhaps different opinions and life experiences from our own negotiate their social realities. The interaction between the music and its audience creates a shared place of meaning-making. American Country singers are nothing without their country audience to develop shared meaning and communities. Listeners grant their singers the moral

authority to recall life experiences and the values and road maps that can direct humanity in times of trouble and behavioral glitches. Friends, alcohol, sweethearts, church, and long drives down open roads are the routine activities that make up part of what is considered *country*. Weaved within the Country Music lyrics exist a unique community space where ideology is fashioned. Country Music is a form of place creation, where the landscape, daily comings and goings, and the people and all their associative emotions come into being. A song lyric, like a verse in a poem, writes the “space into being” (Cresswell, 2017 p. 26). In these songs, we experience an affective sense of being and place that is awakened through visceral sensory imagery. While Country Music has a secularized Christian message, the Country Music Industry’s overt expressions of biblical discourse are cloaked in sing-along friendly universal truths and messages.

Beer, blue jeans, and bonfires concoct a comradery of co-affecting personal encounters. Place, home, and the individual interconnect to form a reciprocal relationship between the self, the other, and the larger community. “When the world’s gone crazy,” the Country Music community provides a welcoming respite for like-minded people to share similar beliefs and values. While there are indeed absences within the narratives that point to a history of socio-economic, racial, and gendered inequities, there is also a co-lived experience of trials, tribulations, courage, and redemption. Images of sitting, drinking beer, and living life with “some down-home friends,” generate Émile Durkheim’s (1938) “collective effervescence, which inspires its listeners and unites its community.

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