

Country Music and the Problem of Authenticity

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To appear in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* – please cite published version.

Abstract. In the small but growing literature on the philosophy of country music, the question of how we ought to understand the genre's notion of authenticity has emerged as one of the central questions. Many country music scholars argue that authenticity claims track attributions of cultural standing or artistic self-expression. However, careful attention to the history of the genre reveals that these claims are simply factually wrong. On the basis of this, we have grounds for dismissing these attributions. Here, I argue for an alternative model of authenticity in which we take claims about the relative authenticity of country music to be evidence of 'country' being a dual character concept in the same way that it has been suggested of punk rock and hip-hop. Authentic country music is country music that embodies the core value commitments of the genre. These values form the basis of country artists' and audiences' practical identities. Part of country music's aesthetic practice is that audiences reconnect with, reify, and revise this common practical identity through identification with artists and works that manifest these values. We should then think of authenticity discourse within country music as a kind of game within the genre's practice of shaping and maintaining this practical identity.

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1. Introduction:

While philosophers have so far not paid much attention to country music, there is now a small but growing body of work dealing with the unique aesthetic features of the genre (Shusterman 1999; Dyck 2018; Bernhardt 2018; Dyck 2021). Surveying this literature, the question of how we ought to understand the genre's notion of authenticity has emerged as one of the central questions. Here, theorists are substantially divided. Some argue that authentic country music is a matter of the artist having a biography that supports the rural and working-class identity of country protagonists (Bernhardt 2018) and others argue that

authenticity in country music is merely a matter of the music manifesting a rural American mythology that carries a certain emotional resonance (Shusterman 1999).¹ Indeed, questions about the legitimacy of certain country artists and kinds of country music mark a dividing line in an evergreen debate within the community between progressives and traditionalists. Given the way in which some country audiences and artists use the distinction between mere country music and so-called ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ country music, we might worry that the notion of authenticity employed in discussions of the genre is nothing but a cudgel used for a problematic kind of gatekeeping. However, even if we think that authenticity is merely a coded term that some in the community use to police the boundaries of the genre, we might still ask what conditions must be met for an artist or a song to survive this gatekeeping.

In this paper, I will argue that we should take claims about the relative authenticity of country music to be evidence of ‘country’ being a dual character concept in the same way that it has been suggested of punk rock and hip-hop (Liao, Meskin, Knobe 2020). That is, we should read someone saying that a given song is ‘authentic country music’ as equivalent to them saying that, beyond realizing the “set of concrete features” which make a work a work of country music, the song or artist also realizes “the abstract values that these features serve to realize.” (Knobe, Prasada, Newman 2013). This model has been argued to make sense of the distinction between ‘punk’ and ‘real punk’ in that the conditions to qualify as punk tend to be descriptive, but an artist and their work must embody the values of punk to qualify as ‘real punk’ (Liao, Meskin, Knobe 2020).

My view is that, given that country music is a dual-character concept, then we could understand the distinction between ‘country’ and ‘authentic country’ in the same way that we understand the distinction between ‘punk’ and ‘real punk’. Authentic country music isn’t a matter of an artist having a particular background or a particular intent in producing a work

¹ Importantly, Shusterman’s account attempts to explain what gives country music an air of authenticity in general, not explaining what distinguishes authentic country music from its non-authentic counterpart (Shusterman 1999). Equally importantly, these projects can be related. If country music, as a genre, is characteristically authentic in this broad sense, then authentic country music might be whatever subset of the genre preserves this authenticity. Something like this view is defended by Joli Jenson, who argues that complaints about the ‘Nashville Sound’ being inauthentic were (at least in part) complaints about those artists and works failing to maintain the genre’s image because they didn’t allow for the perceived continuation of the genre’s “Imagined origins in live, communal performance.” (Jenson 1998, 64).

but is, instead, a matter of demonstrating and embodying the core value commitments of the genre. This avoids the problems associated with alternative accounts while still allowing attributions of authenticity to be substantive (contra its sceptics). These values form the basis of country artists' and audiences' practical identities. Part of country music's aesthetic practice is that audiences reconnect with, reify, and revise this common practical identity through identification with artists and works that manifest these values. We should then think of authenticity discourse within country music as a kind of game within the genre's practice of shaping and maintaining this practical identity. If this is right, and there are legitimate uses for authenticity attributions, then we have a more sympathetic account of what traditionalists are doing when they make these attributions and, in doing so, draw attention to an underutilized space for progressive country music fans and artists to make inroads.

In the second section of this paper, I will characterize the traditionalist and progressive camps within country music and briefly summarize the debate between the two (along with its relationship to authenticity discourse). In the third section, I will survey the existing accounts of authenticity and their various deficiencies. In the fourth section, I will discuss the literature on dual character concepts and explain how thinking of country music as a dual character concept can make sense of a notion of 'authentic country' (along with providing a model for how these attributions relate to country music practical identity). Finally, in the fifth section, I will say something about the values I take to be central to the genre.

2. Traditionalists & Progressives:

The history of country music is characterized by a kind of dialectic between so-called 'traditionalists' and 'progressives'.² Country music fans, critics, and artists divide up artists, works, or subgenres of country music into either category. For instance, Chet Atkins' 'countrypolitan' style (also known as 'the Nashville sound') was considered progressive when

² These two camps are sometimes referred to as 'hard core' and 'soft shell' respectively (Dyck 2021).

it was introduced in the 1950's. Atkins brought lush string arrangements and choral backing vocals into country music from popular music and R&B. The Nashville sound includes the works of artists like Jim Reeves, Tammy Wynette, and Glen Campbell. Traditionalists in the 1960's and 1970's reacted against this trend by leaving Nashville to establish independent country music recording scenes and sounds in California ("the Bakersfield sound") and Texas ("outlaw country"). Bakersfield artists like Buck Owens and Merle Haggard recorded tracks which utilized less polished production and incorporated strongly defined backbeats from rock music, while outlaw country artists like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and David Allan Coe drew on Texas' western swing and blues traditions (while still preferring a less polished production).

Conflict of this kind forms a dialectic because it continuously reoccurs within the community and, with each reoccurrence, traditionalists tend to take on board the progressives of the past while reacting against the progressives of the present (Peterson 1998; Morris 2013). Despite the breakup between the Nashville and Bakersfield sounds, they were eventually able to reconcile. For instance, Bakersfield mainstay Merle Haggard recorded *Back to the Barrooms* in Nashville in 1980 with producer Jimmy Bowen, and critics praised its "progressive country style" which "[utilizes] horns and strings in ways not necessarily in concert with traditional country music." (Jurek n.d.). This reconciliation did not stop the next generation of country traditionalists (this time 'neo-traditionalists' like George Strait, Alan Jackson, and John Anderson) from reacting against the Nashville music industry in the era of *Urban Cowboy*. Strait performed an analogous move to his Texas outlaw country predecessor Waylon Jennings (who declared that, in Texas, western swing artist Bob Wills was "still the king") by drawing heavily on the western swing tradition in songs like 1985's "Dance Time in Texas".

In its current form, the dialectic between traditionalists and progressives is a conflict between 'Americana' and pop country. Both of these camps can be subdivided further. Americana includes the bluegrass-inspired Appalachian scene (featuring artists like Tyler Childers and Sturgill Simpson), a developing western swing revival (including Colter Wall), and soul and blues inflected neotraditionalists like Charley Crockett. Meanwhile, mainstream

pop country includes artists more influenced by hip-hop, pop, and contemporary rock and R&B, like Luke Bryan, Florida Georgia Line, Kane Brown and Dan + Shay.

Notice, however, that while I have characterized these sub-genres in terms of musical features, each camp (traditionalist and progressive) is made up of multiple subgenres. This means that these camps aren't purely characterizable in terms of musical features. Likewise, the disagreement between progressives and traditionalists is not merely one of traditionalists being reluctant to incorporate outside influences and progressives innovating by drawing on works outside of the tradition. Traditionalists are more than willing to draw on elements of blues, soul, and rock music (in addition to traditional country-adjacent genres like bluegrass and western swing) and do so in innovative ways. Finally, this divide is also not only a musical dispute. Traditionalists and progressives also differ with regards to lyrical content and public image.³ If this isn't just a musical dispute, then what is the basis of this disagreement?

Beyond this, two general trends are worth mentioning. First, in each generation, progressive country is the predominant sound in mainstream country music. It represents what is most likely to be playing on country music radio and which artists are most likely to win awards and sign major label deals in Nashville. Of course, traditionalists can become successful despite this, and some use that success to transition into mainstream status. However, country music traditionalism is, almost by definition, a reaction against what is mainstream in country music. The second thing worth noting is that, within each generation, the divide between progressives and traditionalists takes the shape of a debate about what is or isn't authentic country music. Typically, this debate amounts to traditionalists insisting that progressive country music isn't authentic.

While progressive country fans form the majority of the country music community, they and the artists who make that music are often derided by country music critics and older country artists (who tend towards traditionalism). Thus, while progressives hold most

³ See Table 1 in (Peterson 1998) for a side-by-side comparison of hard-core (traditional) and soft-shell (progressive) country on issues ranging from lyrical composition, stage presentation and costuming, and artist biographies.

of the keys to power in the industry, authenticity discourse often serves to deny them a full sense of recognition within the community. In this way, progressive fans and artists may view authenticity discourse as a kind of insidious gatekeeping which works to denigrate their preferences at the expense of those of veteran artists and purists. The task of providing an account of authenticity in country music is, then, a task of determining what the traditionalists are on about. The task of denying authenticity is seen as one of pushing the country community to recognize that progressives are legitimate heirs to the country music tradition.

3. Accounts of Authenticity:

In his discussion of authenticity, John Dyck draws on and (helpfully) expands on the common kinds of musical authenticity employed in the broader philosophy of music literature. Following Dyck, country music might have a kind of sourced-focused authenticity, folkloric authenticity, or music-focused authenticity. Here, source-focused authenticity might be best understood as something like standing. That is, the question of whether a given track is authentic country music (if country authenticity is source-focused) is a question of to what extent the artist occupies the right kind of social position to perform and write works of country music in a non-defective way. Meanwhile, folkloric authenticity is a matter of the artist's intention. In this case, an attribution of authenticity should be understood as a recognition that the music does (or at least seems to) issue from a place of pure self-expression rather than from commercial interests. Finally, if country music has a kind of music-focused authenticity, then a work or artist being called 'authentic country' is a matter of the degree to which it manifests the musical features typical of the genre. I will now briefly survey a variety of ways in which each of these could explain the notion of authenticity at work in country music discourse and also argue that each is, in its own way, deficient.

First, one might be tempted to explain authenticity in terms of source-focused considerations because we already have reason to think that some musical genres might

require that artists have a kind of standing in order to participate in a non-defective way. For instance, a similar debate occurs in philosophical discussions of hip-hop (Taylor 2005) and blues (Rudinow 1994; Young 1994; Taylor 1995; Langston & Langston 2012). It may be that the notion of authenticity at play is genre specific. Often, however, these discussions revolve around appropriation in the context of race and the traditional practices of a marginalized culture. As such, our first worry might be that there is no deep and proprietary connection between any given culture and country music because country music's establishment as a genre distinct from folk music was merely an artifact of commercial partitioning of the recording industry market (Malone 1968). We might, then, be sceptical that there is a sufficiently substantive connection between any particular culture and the music to justify concerns about standing. Nevertheless, country music commentators and artists do appear to articulate concerns about standing. For instance, Richard A. Peterson quotes Hank Williams as saying that "you have to plow a lot of ground and look at the back side of a mule for a lot of years to sing a country song." (Peterson 1997, 217) Similarly, in his song "Some Days", Sturgill Simpson bemoans artists "playing dress up and trying to sing them old country songs". Something like this is echoed by Bernhardt, who argues that authenticity is about singing from a "rural and working-class" identity rather than merely about it (Bernhardt 2018). Defenders of source-focused authenticity want to capture intuitions like these, that biographical facts are relevant in assessing country music works and artists. The motivation for providing a source focused account is that, as the above quotes suggest, country music fans and artists often see themselves as in a musical tradition that is historically continuous with a folk music tradition. The project of providing an account of authenticity is (for advocates of source-focused authenticity) one of clarifying what conditions should be met in order for an artist to count as one of those kinds of folks. However, actually making sense of the kind of authentic standing that Williams, Simpson, and Bernhardt are talking about may prove tricky.

For one, gaining the standing to perform country music is not obviously a matter of socioeconomics. While it would hurt one's credibility as a rapper or punk artist if they were the offspring of a rich and famous rapper or punk rocker, it does the opposite for country musicians. If country music authenticity is a matter of the degree to which the performer

hails from a working-class background, then we should expect to find that the sons and daughter of famous country artists are treated with the same scepticism that Jay-Z's daughter might face if she pursued a gangster rap career, or that the son of Minor Threat's Ian MacKaye might face from the punk community. Instead, Hank Williams Jr. and Hank Williams III have heightened credibility in virtue of their being the son and grandson of a rich and successful country artist (that is, Hank Williams). The same could be said for Justin Townes Earle, the son of country star Steve Earle.

With regards to the idea that country artists should hail from, and live in, rural areas, few would argue that Steve Goodman and John Prine lack credibility as country artists in virtue of their being from Chicago. There also doesn't seem to be a principled reason for requiring a rural biography. Bill Malone's expansive history of country music, *Country Music USA*, argues that "the farther Americans became removed from the cowboy past, the more intense their interest in cowboy songs and lore." (Malone 1968, 163) On this account, country music rose to popularity in post-war America because it served to reconnect increasingly urbanized Americans with their rural roots. If this is right, then who would be better positioned to understand this predicament than a fellow city-dweller. Indeed, many iconic and representative country songs gesture at this story implicitly. After all, in "Luckenbach Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)", Waylon Jennings tells us that we should "go to Luckenbach, Texas" (that is, not stay in Luckenbach, Texas). Likewise, Merle Haggard asks for the bright lights of his 'dirty old city' to "turn [him] loose and set [him] free." Finally, in "Country Is", Tom T. Hall tells us that "country is living in the city... country is all in your mind". If an artist has an entirely rural autobiography, it is hard to see how they would be well-positioned to connect with the target audience of country music and their experience as nostalgic city-dwellers. If authenticity in country music is about having standing in a shared community with country listeners, then an entirely rural autobiography might actually hurt one's credibility.

Another alternative source-focused account of authenticity might argue that country music is the music reflective of the culture of Scotch-Irish settlers to the American south, and the relevant standing is that which comes with membership in this community. This

story, of country music's origins in the American south, is often attributed to Bill Malone's *Country Music, USA* and is the subject of significant historical controversy (Malone 1968; Cohen 2014; Mather 2017; Peterson 1997). First, as we have already seen, John Prine and Steve Goodman both had considerable standing in the country music community while also hailing from Chicago, and Jerry Jeff Walker did not face controversy on the basis of his being from Oneonta, New York. It is not just that these are or were successful country artists, but that they would be widely recognized as falling on the authentic side of the genre by those in the community. Further, beyond erasing the contributions of black southerners (Miller 2010) and Tejano artists (Lewis 2008), grounding country music in the culture of Scotch-Irish settlers to the American south also ignores the significant country music traditions in Canada, Australia, and Africa. Indeed, the divide between mere country music and authentic country music exists between artists within the Japanese country music scene (Furmanovsky 2008). We shouldn't expect to find authentic and non-authentic Japanese country music if authenticity is a matter of descending from Scotch-Irish settlers to the American south.

Likewise, the notion of a common culture across the American south pays insufficient attention to the differences in experience, settlement patterns, environment, and economics between places like Texas, Louisiana, and Kentucky. Indeed, country music practices reflect this diversity of settlement patterns. For instance, Texas country musicians often write polkas and incorporate accordions to reflect the influence of central European settlers to the region. The abundance of waltz and polka country standards (along with the ubiquity of the African-derived banjo) suggests that the genre is not merely reflective of Scotch-Irish identity. Indeed, Buck Owens, an authentic Bakersfield mainstay, even released a song called "Tokyo Polka" on his 1967 album *In Japan!* without losing any credibility with his authenticity-valuing audience. It is difficult to see how the song might be understood as an expression of Scotch-Irish cultural identity.

The last form of source-focused authenticity that we will discuss is one grounded in biographical fidelity. On this account, an authentic country artist would be singing from their own experience. However, this does not square well with standard country music practices.

Historically, the norm of country music recording has been one of distinct singers and songwriters. No one would deny that Buck Owens and Dwight Yoakam have the standing to sing country music (both fall on the more ‘authentic’ traditionalist side of the genre), and they don’t seem to be violating any norms by singing “Streets of Bakersfield” despite it focusing on events and sentiments from the life of the songwriter, Homer Joy. Likewise, country music is no stranger to murder ballads (Marty Robbin’s “El Paso”, Colter Wall’s “Kate McCannon”, Chris Knight’s “Down the River”) and no one’s enjoyment of these is contingent on thinking that the artist is the narrator (or did the things that the narrator did). For the same reason, the standing that allows Steve Earle to perform as a country artist licenses him to write songs like “The Mountain”, in which he describes (from the first-person perspective) the life an Appalachian coal miner, even though Earle is from Houston, Texas (notoriously devoid of mountains and Appalachian coal miners).

This brings us to folkloric authenticity. Remember that, on this account, authenticity is a matter of an artist writing from a place of pure self-expression and divorced from commercial considerations. However, country musicians (even those held up as the paradigm of authenticity) often do let commercial interests influence their creative process (Peterson 1997). For instance, Willie Nelson’s 1992 album *The IRS Tapes: Who’ll Buy My Memories?* was released in order for Nelson to raise enough money to pay off his tax debt. Yet, few would deny that Nelson is an authentic country artist. Country music is (and always has been) full of pageantry and pandering, and attributions of authenticity do no track distinction in the degree of these things. On top of this, as mentioned above, country music (as a genre) exists as a result of decisions made on the basis of commercial interests.⁴

As we have seen, we can find exceptions to each account of country music’s supposed source-focused authenticity and the inherently commercial nature of the genre (along with a true accounting of its history) should make us sceptical of folkloric accounts of country music authenticity. Considerations like these have led to John Dyck arguing that “country music scholars have debunked the idea that country authenticity gets at anything

⁴ For further reading on country music’s development as a popular music genre, and the role of market segmentation in that development, see (Miller 2010).

real.” (Dyck 2021, 1) The challenge is, then, in providing an account of authenticity which avoids the problems that Dyck rightfully points out. The case for being sceptical of authenticity rests on the recognition that none of these accounts gives us anything close to sufficient conditions for securing authenticity. Existing accounts of authenticity depend on a model in which contemporary work are in line with the practices of that genre at its origins (whether that is with regards to what kind of people are writing and performing works or to what those artists’ intentions are). Sceptics debunk this idea by showing that all of these origin stories are false. What I am offering is an account of authenticity that isn’t rooted in the origins of country music or in needing to satisfy them.

4. ‘Real Country’ & ‘Real Punk’:

The view that I am defending is that the modifier ‘authentic’ functions in the same way for country music that ‘real’ does for punk rock or hip-hop. This is to say that country music is a dual character concept. These are concepts like ‘friend’ where one could reasonably say something like ‘x is a friend, but they’re not a *true* friend’ (Knobe, Prasada & Newman 2013). When people distinguish friends from real friends, they distinguish those who merely satisfy the descriptive conditions necessary for being a friend from those who also embody the values of friendship. Contrast this with ‘bus driver’. People tend not to think that being a *real* bus driver requires embodying a unique set of values beyond satisfying the descriptive features necessary to count as a bus driver (Knobe, Prasada & Newman 2013). Of course, linguistic practices allow for us to distinguish between an *x* and a ‘real *x*’ for functional kinds, in the way that there is a sense in which an umbrella past a certain point of disrepair could be said to be an umbrella but, failing to fulfill its intended purpose, isn’t really an umbrella. However, dual character concepts are not intended to capture every instance of the *x/real x* linguistic practice, but to pick out instances where these kinds of attributions are intelligible and for the reasons described above. This is the sense in which country music should be thought of as a dual character concept, in that it allows for this

linguistic practice and attributions of real country come down to a matter of those works and artists embodying a particular set of values.⁵

As mentioned, some have already suggested that musical genres could be dual character concepts, as people might question whether a given band is *really* punk or whether an artist's work is *really* hip-hop (Liao, Meskin & Knobe 2020). Indeed, the phrase 'real country' is not absent from country music discourse (there is even a country movie musical titled *Real Country*), and there is no substantive reason, looking at country artist's and fan's attributions of authenticity, to think that 'authentic country' and 'real country' pick out different things.⁶ This equivocation is not lost on Dyck, who tells us that "authenticity is a standard for judging 'real' country songs and artists." (Dyck 2021, 1)

Thus, on my account, when country artists and audiences say that a song is authentic or real, they are telling us that they think that the song should be considered as part of the canon of songs which make up the community's statement of values. When country fans say that an artist does real country, they are saying that that artist's work embodies country music's values, not necessarily making a claim about the artist's background or intent in creating it. By debating whether a work is or isn't authentic (or real country), the community refines, revises, or preserves the character of their shared practical identity (and the values which embody it). This is to say that that we can distinguish the problematic gatekeeping around what is or isn't country music from the legitimate aesthetic practice of maintaining that authentic country music is that which satisfies the values and practical identity which characterize it as a dual-character concept. Country music need not be authentic in order to be country music, but it must embody the non-formal values of the genre in order to be seen as authentic.

There are at least two potential responses to this view that are worth considering. First, defenders of one of the accounts of authenticity mentioned above might argue that

⁵ What descriptive features count towards genre membership is a task best left to musicologists. More work is needed in this field. However, for an analysis of formal musical features characteristic of the genre, see (Neal 1998).

⁶ Kembrew McLeod argues that 'authenticity' and 'real' co-refer in hip-hop discourse, so we might expect this in country music discourse as well (McLeod 1999).

their account is not incompatible with country music being a dual character concept if those views about authenticity can be cashed out in terms of values. For instance, on a folkloric account, authentic country music simply embodies the value of artistic expression over commercial interests. It is right that this is a version of a dual character account. The problem is that it gets the values wrong. Attributions of authenticity don't track embodying this value (as the Willie Nelson case shows). Likewise, it is harder to see how accounts of source-focused authenticity could be converted neatly into stories about values (though I will ultimately argue that they are related and explain how). One version of this might be arguing that authentic country music values the community of the American South (for instance). However, claims about standing (like when Hank Williams tells us that you need to plow a lot of dirt to sing country music) aren't about embodying that value, but satisfying a requirement. Williams doesn't tell us that the song should be about someone or reflect the life of someone who has plowed a lot of dirt, the song should be performed by someone who has done that. Dual character art concepts are a matter of an artist and audiences' values being in alignment, not merely having an artist do things that audiences value.

The second response worth addressing is that the defenders of a music-focused account of authenticity might ask why we should think that 'real' is tracking a difference in values rather than merely tracking the degree to which a song participates in the cluster of descriptive features which pick out the genre. Here, the more features typical of the genre that a song employs, the 'more real' it is. However, we do have some reason to think that this story isn't quite right. For instance, while attributions of authenticity in country music tend to track the traditionalist/progressive divide, this divide is not always musical. Country artist Sturgill Simpson is commonly regarded as authentic and, as we have already seen, has positioned himself in contrast to those he perceives as inauthentic. This is despite his incorporating horns (which were banned from the Grand Ole Opry for much of country music history), drawing on influences in hip-hop and psychedelic rock, and covering Nirvana's "In Bloom". This seems to depart significantly from the traditional cluster of musical features associated with country as a genre. Likewise, a cluster account is a characterization of what is typical of things of that kind. However, it is precisely what is typical and popular that is commonly denied authenticity. A music-focused account of

authenticity can't make sense of why the authentic country music is the unpopular kind, but the values of country music might be unpopular even among those who are fans of the descriptive features of the genre.

Besides mapping onto country music discourse, thinking about country music as a dual character concept can also accommodate the intuitions of those who were sympathetic to various accounts of source-focused authenticity. It is not that the artist must satisfy some specific biographical conditions in order to be accepted as authentic but, rather, that these biographical markers can provide audiences with evidence that artists might share their values. Authenticity attributions are invitations for identification issued by and to people with a common practical identity, not declarations about the correlation between biographical and historical facts. Those facts merely serve as reasons to motivate this invitation. For instance, we feel safe in assuming that a person who chooses to continue living the life of rodeo champion (in the case of Chris LeDoux) or who continues to live on a ranch in Pearsall, Texas despite their enormous wealth and fame (in the case of George Strait) really endorses the lifestyle of rodeo champions and ranchers that they manifest in their songs. It is the responsibility of the country artist (insofar as they want to be recognized as authentic) to communicate this practical identity to us in whatever way they can, whether by playing music that directly embodies country music's values, or by having a biography or lifestyle that lends credibility to their endorsing those values. This avoids the problems associated with source-focused authenticity because, unlike on the source-focused account, these biographical facts aren't the necessary and sufficient basis for attributing authenticity but are points of *prima facie* evidence in favor of attributing the values that authenticity attributions track.

In this way, we should think about authenticity discourse as the linguistic field of a larger aesthetic game (with its own set of moves, rules, and officers) in which the country music community negotiates the genre's values and their common practical identity.⁷ This is a kind of conceptual negotiation in which we should understand these claims as kinds of

⁷ Thinking of practices in terms of games (along with the terminology of offices, moves, and rules) follows the account of practices that Rawls developed (Rawls 1955). Robbie Kubala has extended this model to aesthetic practices as well (Kubala 2020).

moves (reifying or revising moves) in a game of tug-a-war in which traditionalists and progressives wrestle to develop and maintain their common practical identity (Cantalamesa 2020). Which kinds of things count as value signifiers (whether they are source-focused facts about artists, musical properties of songs, or thematic features of lyrics) are the basis of rules which are constantly in flux as they are negotiated by parties. At any moment, there is a prevailing view of which things count as acceptable signifiers, and this serves as the comparison class against which we can understand authenticity claims.

For instance, when a traditionalist tells us that George Strait is *authentic* country, they are performing a reifying move, because they reinforce the prevailing practical identity. When they say that Strait is authentic country because of reasons y , and z , they reinforce those signifiers as signifiers of the practical identity. When a progressive country music fan tells us that, actually, Florida Georgia Line is authentic country music, they are performing a revising move, because they are looking to expand or otherwise alter the prevailing practical identity. When they say that Florida Georgia Line is authentic because they, like the great country artists of the past, push the boundaries of the genre in new and interesting ways, they are making a move in the discourse so as to introduce new signifiers or otherwise revise the list. Likewise, to deny any of these claims is to perform an equivalent defensive move.

The mistake that the extant literature on country music authenticity makes is that it assumes that authenticity attributions are answerable to one correct and fixed criteria which directly determine what counts as authentic. Advocates of source-focused and folkloric authenticity think that being authentic is a matter of a work lining up with facts out in the world and about the past. Authentic works are by the same group of people who made works like this in the beginning (or are made with the same intentions that those people had). As we have seen, however, all of these stories are simply factually wrong (Dyck 2021). One way of avoiding these problems is by avoiding the model which tells us that authenticity is fixed. Here, the origin story of a genre (whatever it may be) is set at the beginning of the genre, so the criteria for authenticity are fixed at that point in time. This model fails to capture how the criteria for authenticity can and does change over time.

The notion, which forms the boundary of the genre's practical identity, is forever being negotiated and this will mean that there are always exceptions and revisions. However, this should not give us reason to deny the reality of authenticity all together. Country music fans aren't wrong in arguing that x is authentic for reason y , they are electing to stake out a particular space, defend it with moves that the community recognizes as legitimate, and hoping to sway others to their side. The reality of country music authenticity is just its use within the genre's practical identity game. Claims of authenticity can be more or less justified because, despite this ongoing negotiation, there is still considerable agreement on much of what makes up country music practical identity and what things count as signifiers for it. Likewise, even in the fringe cases which form the basis of the disagreement between the two camps, which side is justified is fixed by whether the community, as a whole and at any given moment, is won over by that side's moves. A central component of country music appreciative practice is the value of sharing a common practical identity and participating in the negotiation of this practical identity by playing in the authenticity game is a valuable feature of country music appreciation. That is, rather than providing us with reason to not attribute authenticity in country music, that there isn't a fixed definition of authenticity is precisely the reason why people value attributing it in the first place.

It is worth pointing out a few things about the authenticity game. First, audience members are not the only players. For instance, when artists who are considered authentic make claims of authenticity, we might think that these moves are worth more points than if the same move was performed by an audience-member. The same goes for other officers within the practice, like the Grand Ole Opry, which often serves a kingmaker in these discussions. Second, the unique office that artists inhabit allows for a variety of moves which aren't available to audience members. Established artists can lend their reputation to less established artists as either a reifying or revising move. When George Jones endorses and collaborates with neo-traditionalist Randy Travis, he is performing a reifying move, and Billy Ray Cyrus' collaborations with Brazilian country artists Chitãozinho & Xororó or rapper/country artist Lil Nas X might count as revising moves. In the same way, covering a traditional song could count as reifying the canon of standards in the same way that covering a new song with the same signifiers will reinforce the existing canon. On the other hand,

progressives could revise the canon or revise the list of musical signifiers by either covering a non-country song (such as Johnny Cash's cover of Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt") or by covering a country song in a new style (as was the case with Ray Charles' classic album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*). Importantly, teams need not be entirely fixed. Players can form alliances to advance particular signifiers or accept a reifying move in one area but stick to revising moves in others.

The lesson we should take from all of this is that authenticity claims are just one aspect of the larger game in which the country community negotiates its common practical identity, but they are an important aspect. Attributors of authenticity are not applying fixed rules but, in inviting identification with some work or artist, suggesting rules which are either accepted or rejected by the community. These suggested rules allow the invited party to consider whether they also recognize something of themselves in the signifiers which form the justificatory base.

However, there is another important structural point that can be made about the authenticity game. That is that progressives tend not to deny the authenticity claims of traditionalists, only that their justificatory base is necessary. That is, we tend not to see progressives deny that George Strait is authentic, but they might deny that an artist needs to satisfy any given rule or signifier which is marshalled out as justification for his authenticity. Thus, the reifying moves of traditionalists are more often reminding progressives of their extant commitments rather than telling progressives to commit themselves to something new. This should not surprise us as, (as I will argue in a later section), valuing tradition has been a constant component of country music's practical identity since its conception. Negotiation on this matter is only ever a negotiation of the extent to which we should value tradition and over which combinations of signifiers are sufficient to establish it.

The traditionalist position is a conservative one which asks progressives to proceed with caution so as to safely guard the practical identity that the community has found valuable, and which connects listeners to country music's past. If country music stops playing the authenticity game and doesn't preserve its identity, then it runs the risk of simply becoming something else. However, if it fails to adapt to different social circumstances, it

will fail to connect with younger artists who are interested in the latest trends. The progressive position is that the flame of country music can only be kept alive by keeping the genre relevant to new listeners. The strategy which unifies progressive movements in country is one of meeting new audiences where they are, by combining musical features characteristic of country music with those characteristic of more contemporary and popular genres. As new audiences enter the community, they might only be attracted to the descriptive features of the genre at a given time, so traditionalism encourages artists to preserve the values and practical identity of the genre as well. The larger the community is, the more difficult it is to maintain a common practical identity that satisfies everyone while still setting the genre apart from the larger musical community. The tension between these two forces, the authenticity game, is what has allowed country music to thrive across generations where other popular music genres burned out. That is, it manages to stay relevant but also stay the same.

Finally, I take this account of authenticity to be a defense of the traditionalist position only incidentally. For entirely contingent reasons, progressive strategy within the larger practical identity game has shifted away from attributing authenticity. We often don't see revising moves within the authenticity discourse along the lines of those defending Florida Georgia Line above. Progressives still participate in the larger game by covering and collaborating with artists and by appealing to signifiers and to the values of country music's practical identity, but they aren't typically attributing authenticity directly to songs or artists. This has left those defending authenticity discourse as de facto defenders of the traditionalist position because they are defending a field of play in which only the traditionalists are currently making moves. My point in defending an account of authenticity is that traditionalists are not wrong to make these moves and, in doing so, I also gesture towards a space of play within the genre's aesthetic practice in which progressives could make moves like those above. This is not to say that no progressives make authenticity claims directly, but that this is an underutilized space and that traditionalists are wise to use it as they do (and progressives may be wise to do the same).

If, however, country music is a dual character concept, and authentic country music is that which embodies the genre's values, then we might wonder what those values are.

After all, we can offer accounts of the values of other supposed dual character genres like punk (Prinz 2014). Since these values are subject to constant negotiation and revision, what binds the signifiers of county music practical identity at any given time may be contingent and unrepresentative of its history.⁸ Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, it is my contention that the importance of tradition has been consistent throughout country music history and is endorsed (at least to some degree and in some respects) by both sides of the debate. Note that this is a commitment to tradition as such as much as it is a commitment to the country music tradition. Tradition, here, consists in a shared sense that the way things were is something worth either preserving or getting back. While it can take on many forms, this romanticism about the past (in various forms) is central to the web of identity for country music. It is potentially subject to revision, but it is deeply interwoven into country music's aesthetic practices.

5. The Values of Country Music:

As mentioned above, the emergence of country music as a commercial genre, distinct from folk and traditional music, historically follows the movement of Americans from rural to city living in post-war America. Country music served a functional role of connecting people to the traditional way of life, the family, and the places that they left behind. In this way, the romanticization of the past (personal or historical), of traditional values, and of rural life runs fairly deep. In terms of reflecting on an idyllic childhood in a pristine rural environment, we find songs like Sturgill Simpson's "Pan Bowl", John Prine's "Paradise", and Steve Earle's "The Mountain" Likewise, these rose-colored reflections on the past can also extend to one's love life. George Jones' "If Drinking Don't Kill Me (Her Memory Will)", "The Grand Tour", and "He Stopped Loving Her Today" are all entries into a longstanding tradition of songs featuring a protagonist who can't stop dwelling on a relationship that has long since come to pass. Also included in this tradition are songs like

⁸ In this way, authenticity in country music may be thought of as a 'floating signifier' along the same lines as McLeod has argued in hip-hop (McLeod 1999).

George Strait's "Fool Hearted Memory" and "You Look So Good in Love", and Bobby Helms' "Fraulein". Importantly, country music breakup songs often go out of their way to signal that the breakup is not a fresh wound, but something that has been dwelled on for years.

Finally, this importance of connecting to the past also includes the self-referential value that country artists and listeners place on the country music tradition. This is to say that the idyllic rural childhood of the archetypal country song also includes the time one spent listening to traditional country music. In this way, country artists can serve the reconnecting function of country music by referencing country music history in the same way that they can by referencing the rural environment. Songs like Dillon Carmichael's "Old Songs Like That", George Jones' "Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes", and Randy Travis' "A Few Ole Country Boys" all feature the artists' attempts to appreciate or situate themselves within the musical tradition that has served them throughout their lives. What is interesting about this phenomenon is that it can make sense of why traditionalists ultimately relent to the influence of outside musical influences in the end. The Bakersfield scene can reject Chet Atkins' 'countryopolitan' sound for being inauthentic because it wasn't the music of *their* past, but (decades later) Sturgill Simpson can name his authentic country album *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music* as an homage to Ray Charles' countryopolitan classic *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* because it was the country of *his* past.

While the story above sounds conservative (and it is in a way), progressives also often appeal to tradition in their revising moves. For instance, Hank Williams Jr. makes a revising move in "Family Tradition" by framing his shift away from a more traditional sound and towards a sound more rock and blues inspired as in keeping with the tradition that his father established. Likewise, when Kacey Musgraves' album *Star-Crossed* was denied consideration in the 2022 Grammys' country music category on the grounds that it was a pop album, Musgraves didn't appeal to musical or sonic facts to defend her claim to having made a country album. Instead, she appealed to country music's self-conception as a 'family tradition' by posting pictures of herself on Instagram with authentic country artists like Loretta Lynn, George Strait, and Alan Jackson (among others) (Aswad & Willman 2021).

This should be understood as a revising move which assumes a shared commitment to tradition.

Beyond this, we can see tradition pop up in the justificatory base of other progressive country songs (even if they are not progressive sonically). In addition to the intersectional feminist message of Loretta Lynn's "The Pill" and "One on the Way" (which examine the ways in which the feminist movement at the time failed to make inroads for rural and working-class women), Margo Price's "Pay Gap" stands as another feminist country song which appeals to the traditional value of work ethic in order to advocate for women's equality. Similarly, within the small but significant tradition of LGBTQ country artists, Patrick Haggerty's 1973 album *Lavender Country* makes a revising move by utilizing the imagery of isolated rural life to tie the freedom from social and financial pressures that country music fans want and expect from life on the range to the freedom of sexual expression.⁹

Tradition is also acknowledged by progressives when it comes to race. Stoney Edwards' classic "Blackbird (Hold Your Head High)" appeals to wisdom of the family of the narrator's youth in recounting the racism that he faced. Meanwhile, otherwise traditionalist artist Tyler Childers' "Long Violent History" connects protests over racist police brutality in the present to Appalachian union coal miner's history of resistance (such as in the Battle of Matewan) in order to make progressive moves in the practical identity game. A similar phenomenon occurs in indigenous Australian country artist Harry Williams' song "Streets of Old Fitzroy", where he appeals to his traditional Koori upbringing, environment, and values as part of an anti-colonial statement. Finally, Merle Haggard appeals to traditional values about work ethic when he criticizes the American ranching industry's treatment of migrant workers in "The Immigrant".

This is not all to say that country music is, on average, progressive, but just that its valuing of tradition need not be politically conservative. Rather, as seen in Margo Price's "Pay Gap" or Merle Haggard's "The Immigrant", country artists who advocate for

⁹ For further reading on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and country music, see (Hubbs 2014).

progressive social and political causes (and progressives with regards to country music) do so by appealing to the same traditional values (like the importance of hard honest work and rugged individualism) that conservatives (or country music traditionalists) might. Progressive songs and artists, in this sense, appeal to tradition as a way of situating new signifiers within a context of identification for country music listeners. I take this as some evidence that considerations of tradition are central to the common practical identity of the country music community (whether one is generally a traditionalist or progressive). This is the sense in which the reifying moves of traditionalists are reminders meant to enforce an established commitment rather than novel recommendations alien to the practical identity of progressive country music fans.

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