

Vassar College

## Digital Window @ Vassar

---

Senior Capstone Projects

---

2019

### Gendered conceptions of the American dream in country music from 1994 to 2018: how the belief in the myth maintains the status quo

Hailey Marchand-Nazzaro  
*Vassar College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone](https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Marchand-Nazzaro, Hailey, "Gendered conceptions of the American dream in country music from 1994 to 2018: how the belief in the myth maintains the status quo" (2019). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 959.  
[https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone/959](https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/959)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact [library\\_thesis@vassar.edu](mailto:library_thesis@vassar.edu).

Vassar College

Gendered Conceptions of the American Dream in Country Music from 1994 to 2018: How the  
Belief in the Myth Maintains the Status Quo

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

Hailey Marchand-Nazzaro

Thesis Advisors:  
Professor Leonard Nevarez  
Professor Justin Patch

April 2019

## Gendered Conceptions of the American Dream in Country Music from 1994 to 2018: How the Belief in the Myth Maintains the Status Quo

Music both influences and is reflective of the values and perceptions of those who produce and listen to it. People who belong to groups which experience oppression have different perspectives than people who belong to dominant identities. This reality is reflected in the narratives that these groups present in their music. Those narratives which are promoted, and thus more influential on the public imaginary, are those which maintain the status quo. The narratives which are both more critical of society and more likely to be excluded from the mainstream (i.e. the radio) are disproportionately written and performed by women. I content analyzed country music lyrics from my lifetime which evidence varying conceptions of the American Dream, using the recession as a lens through which to explore changes in the perceptions over time. I categorize these conceptions into five major groups: 1) Homeownership & Marriage, 2) Freedom, 3) Love & Simplicity, 4) Upward Mobility, and 5) Equality. Within each of these conceptions, I discuss how the dominant narratives are utilized to maintain oppressions, but argue that the critical perspectives have the potential to lead to social change because of music's power to shape the American imaginary.

## Dedication

“This one’s for the girls... who dream with everything they have” - Martina McBride

For all the women and girls who feel like their voice will never be heard or that their opinion doesn’t matter. It is my dream that one day the world will listen to what you have to say and value your voices like I do.

This one’s for the girls and for all the women (and the few men) who have helped make me the person I am today. Thank you for always believing in me, supporting me, and inspiring me. I appreciate all that you do.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	vi
List of Tables and Figures	viii
Preface	ix
A. Why This Matters to Me: How My Conception of the American Dream was Shaped by My Consumption of Specific Country Music Growing Up	
II. Introduction	1
A. Comparison of Two Songs with Apparently Different Views on the American Dream (to Show What I Will Be Doing)	
B. Theory: Views on the American Dream of the Past are Converging, Where They Differ is Their Views of the Present: There is variance	
C. Method: Justification and Explanation of Purpose	
III. Chapter 1: The Dream as Lifelong Love in One House	23
A. The Male Conception: Homeownership and Marriage - “Love Like Crazy”	
a. Think Women Want the Same - “I Can Love You Like That”	
b. Some Women Want This Too - “The House That Built Me”	
B. Female Conceptions - Tradition is Holding Us Back - “Merry Go ‘Round”	
a. Recognize Men Want What Their Grandparents Had (Nostalgic)	
IV. Chapter 2: The Dream as Freedom	43
A. The Male Conception: We are Free - “It’s America”	
a. Looking to the Past	
B. Female Conceptions: Wanting “Something More”	

a.	Looking to the Future	
V.	Chapter 3: The Dream as Love and Simplicity	52
A.	True Love is All that's Needed - "The Rest of Our Life"	
a.	Pre-Recession	
b.	Post-Recession	
B.	Simple Life: No Need for Money - "Millionaire"	
a.	Pre-Recession	
b.	Post-Recession	
VI.	Chapter 4: The Dream as Upward Mobility - "Buy Me a Boat"/"Baby Girl"	70
A.	Pre-Recession - Rags to Riches	
B.	Post-Recession - Rags to Riches	
VII.	Chapter 5: The Dream as Equality	82
A.	Equality of Opportunity Exists - "Only in America"	
B.	Injustice is the Reality: Past and/or Present - "White Man's World"	
1.	Pre-Recession	
a)	Hope versus Despair	
2.	Post-Recession	
a)	Hope versus Despair	
VIII.	Conclusion: Why It Matters	114
A.	The Role the Perpetuation of the Myth Has Played in Social Division	
B.	The Role Facing the Realities of the Myth Could Play in Social Change	
	References	119
	Songs Cited	132

Appendices

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who showed enthusiasm for this project.

I would like to thank all the Sociology professors who have taught and inspired me over the years and played a crucial role in the development of this project. Your passion for what you do is infectious and appreciated, don't ever apologize for it. I am thankful to Leonard Nevarez for his invaluable advising and suggestions from the early stages of the project through the final draft. Thank you for encouraging me to think more complexly about the methods and for sharing my appreciation of music which led to fruitful conversations. I am grateful to Eileen Leonard and Bill Hoynes for their guidance and support throughout this process as well as for playing key roles in my journey to this point. Thank you both for encouraging me to pursue the major in Sociology. Without you, this project never would have been possible.

I would like to thank my family who have always believed in and supported me and my dreams. Thank you for always assuring me that I can do anything, even and especially when I am not so sure myself. In particular, I would like to thank my grandma for her interest in this project. Your listening to my passionate rants on the topic are greatly appreciated and your reflections on early drafts were extremely helpful. Thank you for influencing the playlist which is the heart of this project. I also need to thank my mom for making this project possible, not only by bringing me into this world and raising me, but raising me on country music, nurturing in me a love and appreciation for the genre without which this project would not have been possible. Every car ride when I'd ask for the radio to be turned up, every quarter in the jukebox, every album, every concert ticket, it was all leading up to this point, and it was all worth the investment. In addition to this, I need to thank you for providing an amazing example of what a strong, independent



woman can accomplish and showing me that hard work and persistence aren't always enough, but when you need to, you keep going and you do your best. I also need to thank my sister, not only for her unwavering support and belief in me for her entire life, but specifically for her invaluable assistance with this project. From your input on early drafts and ideas, to your editing of final drafts, all the time that you put in is extremely appreciated. I am particularly grateful for all the long hours on the phone and conversations we've had in person that helped me to flesh out my ideas, understand what exactly it is that I am arguing here, why I am so invested in it, and think about the many connections that I make with various aspects of life. Thank you.

I am especially grateful to Justin Patch without whom this thesis would not have been possible. You had the most significant influence on this project, playing a vital role in shaping what it is today. Your interest in my work from the very beginning and continued excitement for what I am doing is more appreciated than you know. Knowing that my voice is valued has been the most amazing experience. Thank you for being the person with whom I could think things through. Your understanding of and appreciation for the music I am discussing that has shaped me has been invaluable. Your persuading me to also focus on aspects of the music other than just the text, such as the sound and participatory aspects, was revelatory. Your feedback on drafts always made me think more deeply about the topics I am addressing and to make much broader connections than I otherwise would. I cannot overemphasize your influence on my thinking or my appreciation for that influence. Thank you for wanting to hear what I think and have to say and for really listening to it. Thank you for, throughout the whole process, always working to ensure that my project is what I want it to be. Your valuing of my opinions while also asking the tough questions that got me to think about the connections more complexly have been invaluable. Thank you for everything you've done for me.

## List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Country Music Consumption by Gender and Age Group	143
Table 2: Varying Viewpoints within Five Major Conceptions of the American Dream	144

## PREFACE

### *My American Dream*

“I was born in ‘9[7]... / I was raised on radio waves where the ladies dominated / Sometimes I close my eyes and just replay it / I just wanna feel like ladies in the ‘90s... / My heart will always be stuck in the ‘90s.” - Lauren Alaina, “Ladies in the ‘90s.”<sup>1</sup>

I grew up listening to country music.<sup>2</sup> Though my musical tastes are quite eclectic now, the foundation upon which my earliest beliefs were built was the soundscape that is country music. The values espoused in these songs influenced the way that I see the world. The lyrics of country music taught me how to think about life and love and what I should aspire to in these realms. In this way, country music shaped my American Dream.

The American Dream is a myth which is central to the American imaginary and American identity. The fact that it can vary according to what any given individual believes is a significant part of why it is such an enduring myth. There are some constants to the various conceptions of the American Dream, the foremost of which being a positive association and an association with exceptionalism. My conception of the American Dream was shaped by my consumption of specific country music growing up, ‘90s and early 2000’s women especially: other than those included on my playlist or otherwise referenced throughout this project, this (in no way exhaustively) includes, Gretchen Wilson, Lee Ann Womack, Sara Evans, Deana Carter, LeAnn Rimes, and Kellie Pickler.<sup>3</sup> Many men (and male duos or groups) who were popular

---

<sup>1</sup> Wadge, A., Frasure, J., & Alaina, L. (2018). Ladies in the ‘90s [Recorded by Lauren Alaina]. New York, NY: 19 Recordings, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Personal lived experiences and observations are equally as valid as scholarly sources, and in some cases, such as this one, they are more valid in that the personal element adds a level of analysis unachievable without years of experience and a deep understanding of the context from which the cultural archives one is discussing originate.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.

when I was growing up, such as Tim McGraw, Keith Urban, Toby Keith, Brad Paisley, Alan Jackson, and Rascal Flatts, also played a significant role in shaping my conception of the American Dream.

To me, the American Dream invokes an ideal of freedom, wherein all have an equal opportunity, when they put in enough hard work, to accomplish whatever it is that they dream to. In many cases, this means building a better life for one's children than one had growing up, whether one is native born or not. All wrapped up in this portion of the dream are many other aspects of it. One of these being the American Dream as having children and raising a family. Another vital aspect is the belief in the real possibility of upward mobility.<sup>4</sup> This, of course, is thought to be attained through adherence to the Protestant work ethic.<sup>5</sup> Hard work is an essential component of the American Dream. Though, in theory, anyone can achieve the dream, since we are all free after all, that does not mean that we do not have to work for it. Another central component of the American Dream is homeownership, but this does not come at the cost of happiness which can be attained by simply being with one's love, regardless of the material possessions that one has. This picture of the American Dream is a complex one, one which contains many components, all of which are depicted frequently in the lyrics of country music songs, which is how they became a part of my imaginary.

Though this is what I perceive the American Dream to be in the public imaginary, that does not necessarily mean that I subscribe to a belief in the dream, nor does it mean that my dream aligns with this one. Though the typical elements of American life of course influence

---

<sup>4</sup> Fraser, Steve. 2018. *Class Matters: The Strange Career of an American Delusion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. - Even though, as this source discusses, Americans ignore the existence of the class structure.

<sup>5</sup> Weber, Max. 1904. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. New York: Charles Scribner's Son.

what I think I am “supposed to desire,” and in some ways do influence my aspirations, other factors apart from these optimistic visions have shaped my dream, which aligns more with the vision that the ‘90s women I grew up listening to laid out for me.<sup>6</sup> Above all, I want to be happy. I want to do what I love and love what I do, regardless of the path it leads me down or if it lines up with the traditional views in which this society raised me to believe. I want my perspective to be reflected in the narratives I am presented with and my voice to be valued and respected.

### *Why This Matters*

I am just one individual in a much larger community. My experience of this music, in many ways, is not unique. This music influences a huge population in significant ways. The country music listenership has been growing and diversifying in recent years. According to a 2017 report by the Country Music Association, it includes 42 percent of the United States population and is popular among a wide range of demographics. Across age groups, genders, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and geographic regions, country music has been gaining popularity. A particularly notable statistic is the fact that the average household income of country music consumers is higher than average with 30 percent of country music consumers having an annual household income of \$100k or more.<sup>7</sup> This fact is in stark contrast to the stereotypical country music listener who belongs to the working class, or is at least of a working class background, which is statistically extremely unlikely if they do not belong to the working class now.<sup>8</sup> Most significantly for this analysis is the fact that across all generations, more women than men listen to country music, but that the difference is most striking in the youngest age group of 12-17

---

<sup>6</sup> I lay out, in depth, this vision in the ensuing chapters of this work.

<sup>7</sup> CMA. 2017. “The Rise of Country Music: A detailed look at today’s Country Music Audience.” Retrieved March 13, 2019 (<https://www.cmaworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Public-Web-Consumer-Deck-2017.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> Opportunity Insights. 2019. “The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility.” Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://opportunityinsights.org/>).

where there is a 14 percentage point difference between female and male listenership.

Interestingly, the percentage of female listeners for this age group is 41, which is consistent with the other age groups (40, 41, and 40 percent, respectively). The difference comes in because the male listenership is lower: in the youngest age group represented, it consists of 27 percent of the generation whereas the others makeup 38, 39, and 39 percent respectively.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this is consistent with research on intergenerational continuity of music preference which found that girls may be more likely to share their parents musical tastes than boys are, in some cases.<sup>10</sup>

Children's first exposure to music is through their parents, whether it be by listening to records at home, the radio in the car on the way to school, or whatever form it may take. Through both mere exposure and years of exposure that lead to an increased appreciation, as well as an association with happy memories, this music becomes that which an individual enjoys.<sup>11</sup>

This significant drop in listenership is especially interesting when considered in conjunction with the decreasing representation of women in the format. This is a complex story because although boys should be more likely than girls to relate to the male perspective which is overwhelmingly dominant in the present mainstream musical landscape of the genre, they do not appear to be swayed to listen by that fact. This could, in part, be due to the array of other male-dominated genres, such as hip-hop and rock, to which males also have the option to listen. The lower percentage of male listeners in the younger age group is also interesting given the frequency of partying themes in the genre today, which theoretically should be more relatable to

---

<sup>9</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." See Appendix C: Table 1.

<sup>10</sup> ter Bogt, Tom F.M., Marc J.M.H. Delsing, Maarten van Zalk, Peter G. Christenson, and Wim H.J. Meeus. 2011. "Intergenerational continuity of taste: parental and adolescent music preferences." *Social Forces* 90(1):297-320.

<sup>11</sup> Bornstein, Robert F., and Paul R. D'Agostino. 1992. "Stimulus recognition and the mere exposure effect." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63:545-552. - The mere exposure effect, more colloquially known as "familiarity breeds liking," is the phenomenon wherein people have a preference for things to which they have been previously exposed.

a younger audience.<sup>12</sup> Women who listen to a male-dominated genre have a complex relationship with the music to which they are listening: often, they were raised on the genre and, as a result, enjoy its sound and are invested in many of its artists. At the same time, many of these artists are producing sexist messages and these women's support of the current structure means continuing the worsening oppression of female voices. This is a painful relationship to have with the music to which one listens and, even more so, with which one identifies.<sup>13</sup> Due to the cognitive dissonance which is likely to result from a recognition of this reality, many women in this situation may try to ignore the sexist aspects of the music in favor of a focus on the sound and the general aesthetic instead.<sup>14</sup> Inadvertently maintaining their own oppression by continuing to listen to this music is detrimental to women's psyches.

The music that a person listens to when they are growing up has profound effects on shaping the way that they think and the way that they see themselves and the world. Because of this, the current musical landscape's extreme sexism is particularly detrimental to young girls *and boys*. The toxic masculinity and objectification of women present in "bro-country,"<sup>15</sup> which

---

<sup>12</sup> Guarino, "Where have country music's women gone?" - This source quotes a female artist, Kalie Shorr, who "says that women don't necessarily want to write party anthems, which has become the staple for male artists on country radio. If women had more of a shot, the quality of the songs would finally deepen. "That's what people love about women in country.""

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. - This source quotes Beverly Keel, a co-founder of Change the Conversation, "an activist group for female artists in country music," who says, "The problem of having so few females on country radio is fewer women can hear songs they can relate to and speak to their own lives. And what does that say to our daughters?"

<sup>14</sup> Allahyani, Mariam Hameed Ahmed. 2012. "The Relationship between Cognitive Dissonance and Decision-Making Styles in a Sample of Female Students at the University of Umm Al Qura." *Education* 132(3):641-663. - Cognitive Dissonance is when a person's actions do not align with their beliefs, or they have conflicting beliefs, which result in psychological discomfort.

<sup>15</sup> Johnston, Maura. 2019. "Bro Country Is Here To Stay. Just Ask Florida Georgia Line." *Time*, February 7. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<http://time.com/5523763/florida-georgia-line-cant-say-i-aint-country-album-review-music/>).

Guarino, "Where have country music's women gone?" - "As "bro country" has dominated the charts in recent years... women have largely been relegated to the sidelines. Indeed, according to industry publication Country Aircheck, only seven artists in the top 50 of those being spun this week on country radio are women"

Rasmussen, Eric E., and Rebecca L. Densley. 2017. "Girl in a Country Song: Gender Roles and Objectification of Women in Popular Country Music across 1990 to 2014." *Sex Roles* 76:188-201.

currently dominates the soundscape of country music,<sup>16</sup> will have profound effects on how this generation of individuals views themselves and each other. The way that they will approach life when they are older is being shaped by gendered messages which do not benefit anyone. The female perspective this generation is being exposed to is not nearly as varied, prevalent, or liberated as that which I was raised on.<sup>17</sup> There was a clear shift in the soundscape of the genre after the controversy over anti-Bush remarks made by the Dixie Chicks resulted in their being exiled from the genre. The resultant overwhelming message to artists, especially women, to “shut up and sing” sends a clear message as to the role artists are currently expected to fulfill.<sup>18</sup> Young girls today, if not exposed to views coming from people like them, will be the worse for it. This reality deserves recognition because it not only affects individual psyches, but also social and cultural values and, as a result, broader social patterns

It is the responsibility of academia to critique popular music because it has profound effects on society.<sup>19</sup> Overlooking the impact which these songs have on a large percentage of the population is foolish.<sup>20</sup> The narratives which are prominent in the music a group consumes

---

<sup>16</sup> Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. 2019. “No Country for Female Artists: Artist & Songwriter Gender on Popular Country Charts from 2014 to 2018.” *University of Southern California*, 1-5, 1. - “Only 16% of all artists were female across 500 of the top country songs from 2014-2018. This translates into 5.2 male country artists to every 1 female country artist. While 2018 (19%) was higher than 2014 (13%) and 2017 (12%), it did not differ from 2016 (19%)... females held a smaller proportion of the top charts in country music than across the Billboard Hot 100 Year End Charts for four of the five years sampled. Thus, the “bro culture” is still alive and well in country music and things are not getting better.”

<sup>17</sup> Rasmussen, and Densley, “Girl in a Country Song,” 188. - This study “content analyzed the lyrics of 750 country songs popular in the United States across almost three decades (1990–2014) for their portrayal of female gender roles and objectification of women.” It found that “country songs from 2010 to 2014 were less likely to portray women in traditional roles, non-traditional roles, family roles, and *as empowered* than songs that were popular in the first half of one or both prior decades. Songs from 2010 to 2014 were also more likely to refer to a woman’s appearance, to women in tight or revealing clothing, to women as objects, and to women via slang than songs in one or both prior decades. Furthermore, *results indicate that the changes in the portrayal of women appear to be driven by changes in lyrics in songs sung by male artists, but not by those in songs sung by female artists*” (emphasis mine).

<sup>18</sup> Kopple, Barbara, and Cecilia Peck. 2006. *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*. DVD. New York: Cabin Creek Films.

<sup>19</sup> Holt, Fabian. 2007. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>20</sup> Tichi, Cecelia, ed. 1998. *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky-Tonk Bars*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. - This source talks about the fact that country music is an extremely popular musical genre, which means that it impacts the imaginaries of many individuals.



become embedded in their culture. These viewpoints inform central beliefs, which affect people's daily lived experiences, voting patterns, and support for particular policies. In this way, changing people's beliefs has the potential to change their societal realities.

Though sociomusicologists tend to believe that popular music has no potential for producing social change, I argue otherwise. Adorno argues that all popular music has the same message because all popular songs are love songs.<sup>21</sup> The view that popular forms of music serve to uphold hegemonic discourses leaves no room for the possibility of music being used to make a difference in people's lives. Because country music is supposed to tell a story that people can relate to,<sup>22</sup> if the people are suffering and want to see change, their music should reflect this and in turn lead them to make the changes they want to see in their lives. An important example of this is escape narratives, which are fairly prevalent in country music, inspiring women to leave their men when they are in abusive situations.<sup>23</sup>

It is no less important for women to feel understood and validated and for them to be empowered by the music to which they are listening. Since orthodox culture lays out the sphere of what is even possible in alternative culture, when there is virtually no representation of empowering female narratives, young girls may not even see this reality as a possible one.<sup>24</sup> The '90s women that I grew up listening to inspired me and gave me a taste of what society could look like when women are allowed to shine. Knowing my lived experiences were shared with a larger community instilled in me a sense of belonging and solidarity. The impact that hearing

---

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, Theodor. 1991. *The Culture Industry*. London: Routledge.

<sup>22</sup> Pecknold, Diane. 2007. *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Hodak, Brittany. 2016. "Carrie Underwood Takes Another Domestic Violence Song To Number 1." *Forbes*, July 18. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brittanyhodak/2016/07/18/carrie-underwood-takes-another-domestic-violence-song-to-number-1/#69842b4c29ac>).

<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. [1977] 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Translated by Richard Nice, Reprint, London: SAGE Publications.

these women's perspectives had on my understanding of myself in relation to the society in which I live is invaluable.

## INTRODUCTION

Before I go any further in this project, I would like to recognize the fact that the American Dream is first and foremost predicated on the genocide and erasure of Native American peoples. Due to this fact, Native peoples are one group which, by definition, could never be included in or achieve the American Dream, though the American Dream could not exist without them. As Philip J. Deloria lays out in his book, *Playing Indian*, American identity is defined by its relationship to Native identities: white America sees itself as all that which Native America is not.<sup>25</sup> Thus, though it is claimed that anyone can achieve the American Dream, from the beginning, it was never truly this inclusive.

### *Defining the American Dream*

First, it is necessary to define what I mean by the American Dream. The definition I am working with is a loose one, framed by Ernesto Laclau's concept of the empty signifier.<sup>26</sup> Laclau defines an empty signifier as a concept which can be filled with the values of whomever is defining the term. Utilizing this definition, the American Dream is in the mind of the beholder. In other words, it means something different to each individual. This very fact regarding the nature of the concept is what makes it such an enduring myth in the American imaginary, while the fact that it is a concept which is overwhelmingly believed in by the majority of Americans is important to the maintenance of the current oppressive system which is this country. The American Dream is a concept which can be filled with the preconceived notions and beliefs of any individual, making it flexible enough to ensure its endurance, while also being rooted

---

<sup>25</sup> Deloria, Philip J.. 1998. *Playing Indian*. Chelsea, Michigan: BookCrafters, Inc.

<sup>26</sup> Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. New York: Verso.

strongly in several notions which have established it as a central component of American identity and guarantee that it remains as such.

### *Song Comparison*

I am using song lyrics as a lens through which to analyze variations in conceptions of the American Dream in country music. At this point, I provide a short analysis of two songs with contrasting views. This comparison of two apparently different views of the American Dream demonstrates the type of exploration I am doing throughout the analysis chapters which constitute the bulk of this work.

“Love Like Crazy” by Lee Brice exemplifies the American Dream as a desire for homeownership and marriage. In this male-centered view, it is desirable to fall in love young, get married, buy a house, have children, and raise them in that same house which you live in for the rest of your life. Wrapped up in this dream is the ability to make enough money to be able to support your dream, which is said to be accomplished through hard work, loyalty, and faith (i.e. “just ask him how he made it / he’ll tell you faith and sweat / and the heart of a faithful woman”).<sup>27</sup> This song sees the present as a time wherein this dream can still be accomplished as it was in the past. It is framed by a conversation between an older man and a younger man; the former of which has “made it” and is passing down the wisdom he has gained, having been successful at achieving the American Dream, to the latter of which who is much earlier in the process. It is presumed that the strategies that worked for this older man will be applicable to the younger man’s journey in present American society. Implicit in this view is the assumption that society is fundamentally unchanged from the way it was during this older man’s younger years: a time which was allegedly good.

---

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, D., & James, T. (2010). Love like crazy [Recorded by Lee Brice]. On *Love like crazy* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.

“American Bad Dream” by Kane Brown exemplifies the American Dream as living in a nation where we are all free to do as we please and we have equal opportunities to do so. The lyrics to this song demonstrate an overwhelming disillusionment with the present. This narrative sees the past as a time where this level of freedom was present, but the present as a time wherein people have been corrupted by bad influences and the good society that we had is falling apart without warning. This song does not recognize the long history of oppressions (i.e. sexism, racism, etc.) on which this country was established; however, it does recognize the subsequent present realities as problematic.<sup>28</sup>

Both “Love Like Crazy” and “American Bad Dream” have an ideal of the American Dream embedded in them which makes them appealing to audiences. The versions of the American Dream which are found in these two songs are not identical; they are not focused on the same aspects. Whereas Brice’s conception revolves around homeownership and marriage, Brown’s is centered on personal freedoms. They also disagree when it comes to their assessment of the present: Brice views it in a more positive light while Brown sees it from a negative point of view; however, they both seem to agree that the past is a time that should be emulated. While there are many complexities trying to reconcile these two versions of the American Dream, there are many more existing views upon the addition of which understandings are increasingly complicated.<sup>29</sup>

This analysis examines various conceptions of the American Dream which are present in country music lyrics of the past two decades. There are many versions: ones which are classed and gendered, some of which are compatible, others of which are irreconcilable. The views

---

<sup>28</sup> McGill, C., Hoge, J., Brown, K., & Ellis, S. (2018). American bad dream [Recorded by Kane Brown]. On *Experiment* [MP3 File]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson & James, Love like crazy.  
McGill, Hoge, Brown, & Ellis, American bad dream.

which are presented on the radio differ considerably from those which are relegated to the outskirts of the genre. Those which are constructed by women often vary significantly from those constructed by men. These generalizations only begin to scratch the surface of the many multiply layered complexities that are these conceptions of the American Dream which are present in this small subset of country music lyrics of roughly the past 20 years.

### *Theory*

Overwhelmingly, views on the American Dream of the past are converging, where they differ is their views of the present. There is variance in conceptions of the American Dream of the past. Women, for instance, have a much greater tendency to question the legitimacy of the claim that there was once a time when society was a great place in which to live; however, the dominant narrative in mainstream country music is one of the idealized past. There are much more varied perceptions of the present which range from believing it is a great time to recognizing the oppressions which are the painful realities of so many groups. Within the latter of these two views, there is also variation in the level of hope or despair which individuals have. Some views recognize the harsh realities within which we live, but still maintain hope that things can change, whereas others see that the system is broken and has been for so long that there is no hope of our situation getting better. There are certain groups which, because of their lived experiences, are more likely to recognize the irreparable conditions of our society.

Societal inequalities experienced by particular groups - in this case, I am focusing on women - lead these groups to be more likely to call out the mythical nature of the American Dream. The oppression of women has lead to particular gendered variations in conceptions of the American Dream which are evidenced in country music. There is a general lack of recognition of any societal struggle on the radio if it is framed in a way that is perceived to be the least bit

negative.<sup>30</sup> This fact is especially true when it comes to narratives surrounding the core of how American society defines itself (i.e. the American Dream). This aligns with broader tendencies of hegemonic discourse in mainstream media, which is largely composed of propaganda designed to support an undemocratic status quo which privileges the powerful few at the expense of the majority.<sup>31</sup> In order to maintain the status quo, those in power need the masses to believe that everything is going well, because if they do not, there could be unrest. Those in power do all they can to suppress a revolution like the one Marx predicted.<sup>32</sup> The suppression of class consciousness functions through the denial that this country was built on and is maintained by a hierarchical class structure which sustains the oppressive system by continuing to suppress the majority while it increasingly benefits the few. A powerful way in which challenges to power are avoided is by the maintenance of the belief in the thriving life of the American Dream in the public imaginary. Music is a significant tool which is used to accomplish this end and there is no genre more historically rooted in class struggle (not complicated by other factors) than country music.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Significance of Music*

---

<sup>30</sup> Bufwack, Mary A., and Robert K. Oermann. [2003] 2017. *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000*. Reprint, Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 490. - "Because of the Federal Communication Commission's deregulation of the radio industry in 1996, radio stations are now owned by a handful of giant corporations... increasingly "happy," and increasingly less interested in the realities of everyday life... Radio programmers generally rejected songs that were "controversial" or even downbeat in any way."

<sup>31</sup> DiMaggio, Anthony. 2009. *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1848. *The Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Samuel Moore. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

<sup>33</sup> Fox, Aaron A. 2004. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

In modern society, we are constantly surrounded by music.<sup>34</sup> Music is a significant medium through which people both express and come to define themselves.<sup>35</sup> Song lyrics serve as a unique cultural archive: they preserve the feelings and experiences of people in a way that no other medium does. Music documents the lives of those who produce and identify with it.<sup>36</sup> The country genre, in particular, prides itself on telling a story, which is why I chose to focus on the lyrics of these songs.<sup>37</sup> As the songs' most central aspect, the lyrics are the main way that the story is told and that artists connect to fans' emotions, leading to their identifying with the songs.<sup>38</sup> Those messages which are dominant are the ones which will be absorbed into individual and collective identities. This is simply due to the fact that they are more common, which both communicates that they are - and also results in their being deemed to be - more central to identity.<sup>39</sup> The American Dream is the ultimate expression of our collective identity as a nation. Wrapped up in it is all of our hopes, aspirations, values, and fears as a society. Conceptions of the dream are not static and at any given moment they may be multitudinous and vary greatly even within a seemingly homogenous group. This is a consequence of the fact that the American Dream is an empty signifier.<sup>40</sup> All this being so, there are certain views which are louder than

---

<sup>34</sup> Callahan, Mat. 2005. *The Trouble with Music*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

<sup>35</sup> Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *Why Music Matters*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 94.

Rosenthal, Rob, and Richard Flacks. 2011. *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. - "What something means to us is closely tied to who we think we are. Musicking may express a preestablished identity...Musicking here serves as away of identifying ourselves, to ourselves and others."

<sup>36</sup> Bufwack, and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*.

<sup>37</sup> Strecker, Erin. 2015. "Miranda Lambert Takes Down Sexist Country Radio Exec: 'Biggest Bunch of BULL I Have Ever Heard'." *Billboard*, May 29. Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-615/6582917/miranda-lambert-sexist-country-radio-exec>). - Martina McBride, in a Facebook post responding to the article and reaching out asking for female fans' views on the matter, said, "to me, country music is about relating. Someone relating to what you are really going through on a day to day basis in your life."

Lawler, Jennifer. 1996. *Songs of Life: The Meaning of Country Music*. St. Paul, MN: Pogo Press Inc.

<sup>38</sup> Fox, Pamela. 2009. *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, Stuart. 1993. "Encoding, decoding." Pp. 90-103 in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by S. During. New York: Routledge. - Hall discusses the process of media messages' production, dissemination, and interpretation.

<sup>40</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.



others, due to a number of controlling factors and not by accident. Those views, the ones which are more accessible, because they are promoted so aggressively, are the ones being heard the most frequently and by the greatest number of individuals. Because they are drowning out the other voices, these songs are the ones which are the most well-known and thus have come to constitute the version of the American Dream which has become dominant.

### *Exclusion Of Women*

Because those in power do not welcome messages which challenge the belief in the American Dream, this necessarily means both the exclusion of individuals who present these messages, which are disproportionately women, and the inclusion of voices of members of groups which are suppressed who share dominant ideologies. This includes not only female artists, but female songwriters as well. The men in control of the major forms of dissemination of music (i.e. country radio and music labels) create other narratives to “mansplain”<sup>41</sup> away the lack of female representation on the radio.

A major narrative that these men try to advance is one wherein people, including women, do not want to hear women (one can read in to this what women have to say/women’s opinions as well). In 2015, in an interview with Country Aircheck, a radio consultant (who is allegedly known as “the world’s leading authority on music scheduling”) compared women to the tomatoes in a salad and men to the lettuce, saying that women should only be sprinkled in, with

---

<sup>41</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. 2014. *Men Explain Things to Me*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. - Though Solnit did not use the term “mansplain” in her book, she essentially laid out its definition: “Being told that, categorically, he knows what he’s talking about and she doesn’t, however minor a part of any given conversation, perpetuates the ugliness of this world and holds back its light... being bullied out of [her] own perceptions and interpretations... object[ing] to the behavior of a man, only to be told that the incidents hadn’t happened at all as [she] said, that [she] was subjective, delusional, overwrought, dishonest—in a nutshell, female.”

men making up the majority of what is being played.<sup>42</sup> These comments are presented in a section of the article titled, “This One’s Not For The Girls”:

Finally, Hill cautions against playing too many females. And playing them back to back, he says, is a no-no. “If you want to make ratings in Country radio, *take females out*,” he asserts. “The reason is mainstream Country radio generates more quarter hours from female listeners at the rate of 70 to 75%, and *women like male artists*. I’m basing that not only on music tests from over the years, but more than 300 client radio stations. *The expectation is we’re principally a male format with a smaller female component*. I’ve got about 40 music databases in front of me and the percentage of females in the one with the most is 19%. Trust me, I play great female records and we’ve got some right now; *they’re just not the lettuce in our salad*. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. *The tomatoes of our salad are the females*.<sup>43</sup>

This led to quite a bit of backlash from women and this incident became known as “Tomato-gate” or “SaladGate.”<sup>44</sup> This is not one offhand comment by one man in Nashville who has this opinion; this is reflective of more general attitudes which seriously impact the gender makeup of country radio for the past half decade in particular.<sup>45</sup> The problem is getting increasingly worse

---

<sup>42</sup> Penuell, Russ. 2015. “On Music and Scheduling.” *Country Aircheck*, May 26, pp. 1, 8. Retrieved March 4, 2019 ([https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdf\\_publication/Issue\\_449%20-%20May%2026,%202015.pdf](https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdf_publication/Issue_449%20-%20May%2026,%202015.pdf)).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, Jess, Russ Penuell, and Chuck Aly. 2015. “Addressing SaladGate.” *Country Aircheck*, June 1, pp. 1, 8, 11. Retrieved March 4, 2019 (<https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdfs/current060115.pdf>).

Keel, Beverly. 2015. “Sexist ‘tomato’ barb launches food fight on Music Row.” *Tennessean*, May 27. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2015/05/27/sexist-tomato-barb-launches-food-fight-music-row/28036657/>). - This source cites a number of well-known female country artists’ responses to the tomato comparison, including Martina McBride, who said, “I was taken aback by the comments in the article. I felt them to be sexist and condescending toward female artists. But putting all that aside, the response from my followers on Facebook and Twitter has been overwhelmingly full of comments that disagree wholeheartedly with what was said in the article and how they, as the core audience, feel misrepresented.”

Jennifer Nettles’ Twitter page, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jennifernettles/status/603390344722395136?lang=en>. - “Don’t worry babe. I see an opportunity here. [A] big ole vagina shaped opportunity. #yesisaidvagina #trynottofaint.”

<sup>45</sup> Aly, Chuck. 2015. “Keith Hill on Keith Hill.” *Country Aircheck*, June 1, pp. 1, 4. Retrieved March 4, 2019 (<https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdfs/current060115.pdf>), 4. - “they think we [as an industry] are sexist. And you know what, we are... God populated the planet with just as many women as men... We live in America and we want equality – certainly in opportunity even if we don’t expect it in the outcomes... Unfortunately, Country radio and the record business appears to be the most sexist business on planet earth, but it’s not by willful, malicious intent... it is bias based on consumer behavior and it’s very strong.”

Keel, “Sexist ‘tomato’ barb.” - “Only 20 percent — 10 of the Top 50 hits — are sung by female leads (whether solo or groups). Of the Top 50 songs that are 18 months or older, only 12 are sung by women — and nine of the 12 songs are by only three women.”

and it applies to songwriters just as much as artists whose work has been being played with decreasing frequency.<sup>46</sup>

The problem has been worsening as the decades go by. The percentage of women who are reaching the highest positions on the charts has been declining steadily with time.<sup>47</sup>

Research conducted, which analyzed gendered trends on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart over a 20 year period (1996-2016), found that:

Male artists outperform women every year of the study period by an average of 63.8% (or 61.3% when evaluating results by the number of unique artists charting); (2) Men's worst showings on the overall chart for the two-decade period (2010 and 2011) are still higher than women's best showings (1997 and 1999) by an average of 21.5%; (3) Male artists have more extreme highs in the #1 position than female artists: with the exception of 1996–1999, men outperform women by an average of 73%; (4) Men's worst showings in the #1 position for the two-decade period (2013 and 2016) are still well over double that of women in those same years; (5) The percentage of songs by male artists increases from the

---

<sup>46</sup> Watts, Cindy. 2018. "3 years after 'Tomato-gate,' there are even fewer women on country radio." *Tennessean*, June 10. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2018/06/10/women-country-radio-tomatogate-music-row-kelsea-ballerini-maren-morris/675471002/>). - "The percentage of purely female country songs charted by Country Aircheck dropped to 10.4 percent last year [2017], down from 13 percent in 2016."

<sup>47</sup> Moss, Marissa R.. 2019. "Women on Country Radio: CRS 2019 Sends Mixed Messages: Annual gathering of country radio gatekeepers can't seem to explain gender imbalance on the airwaves." *Rolling Stone*, February 27. Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/women-country-music-kacey-musgraves-crs-800797/>). - By June of "2018, only two women had reached the Number One spot on Billboard's Country Airplay chart."

Guarino, "Where have country music's women gone?" - "Research commissioned this year by Change the Conversation, an activist group for female artists in country music, found that starting in 2008, country music radio and the labels that service them have largely turned away from female performers at an alarming rate. Stanford University researcher Devarati Ghosh used Billboard's Country Airplay chart to segment findings into three time clusters: 1992-1999, 2000-2007, and 2008-2015. Her findings showed the presence of women on the charts diminished over the years... With the popularity of Faith Hill, Sara Evans, Shania Twain and others, the 1990s were the glory years for women in country music. Major labels brought 41 new solo female artists and 67 new male artists to radio. Despite lower numbers, women actually had more hits – 44% to 42% of men in the top 20. The early to mid-00s show a reversal: labels introduced 43 and 56 new female and male artists, respectively. Yet only 40% of those women had a top 20 single compared with 55% of men... The most recent period, coinciding with the Obama presidency, has been even worse for women. At the height of "bro country", labels introduced just 31 female artists compared with 51 new men. The result: 32% of women appeared in the top 20, compared with 57% of men. While country radio has made room for fewer and fewer women, the data also shows that not one of the 10 women who had a top 20 hit ever landed a second one... Ghosh said: "The proportion of solo females being brought to country radio remained pretty steady over the three ... blocks, but [their] success rate ... has declined significantly." ... "On Facebook, Miranda Lambert called Hill's comments "the biggest bunch of bullshit I have ever heard" and vowed to vigorously "promote female singer-songwriters in country music – always"." Yet these days, a song from a woman's perspective – Loretta Lynn's 1975 breakthrough single comes to mind – would probably never make it on country radio."

complete chart analysis, to the Top 10 and the #1 position, just as the percentage of songs by female artists decreases – the difference between their activity thus increasing at the same time.<sup>48</sup>

It's a vicious cycle: women aren't played on the radio, so labels aren't willing to sign women because they don't think it will be worth their investment, since it would not make them as much money as it would if they had signed a man. As a result, there are fewer women to be played on the radio. Martina McBride, one of the many popular female country artists of the '90s, put it perfectly when she said it was a "self-fulfilling prophecy."<sup>49</sup> This discrimination extends to female songwriters as well. If the narrative is that people don't want to hear women, then it makes sense that this would not only apply to women as artists, but also to women as songwriters.<sup>50</sup> When it comes to the creation and production of music, women's voices, both on paper and through a sonic medium, are increasingly being silenced.

At the Country Radio Seminar this year, a narrative used to explain away the inequality in gender representation on the radio was that it is all about the song.<sup>51</sup> This echoes the statement of a female Program Director, Jules Riley, in response to SaladGate, "The best song wins, and some weeks that's going to be tomatoes and some weeks it's going [to] be lettuce."<sup>52</sup> In this

---

<sup>48</sup> Watson, Jada. 2018. "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016." *Popular Music and Society*. doi:10.1080/03007766.2018.1512070.

<sup>49</sup> Guarino, "Where have country music's women gone?." - "You have record companies that don't invest in female artists or sign female artists as much, thinking they're not going to get the return in investment or get played on the radio." - Martina McBride

<sup>50</sup> Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. 2019. "No Country for Female Artists: Artist & Songwriter Gender on Popular Country Charts from 2014 to 2018." University of Southern California, 1-5, 2. - "Overall, 12% of all writers were women across 200 songs... Just over one tenth of the songwriters were women in 2014 (11%) and 13% in 2018. These findings are consistent with the percentage of female writers (14%) across the top 500 songs on the Hot 100 *Billboard* Popular Year End Charts from 2014 and 2018. Across the songs in 2014 and 2018, female artists were more likely to work with female songwriters than male songwriters. Thus, one key to increasing the number of female writers in the music business is to increase the number of women artists."

<sup>51</sup> Moss, "Women on Country Radio." - This source discusses that the "programmers insist[ed] that it's "the song itself" that reigns, not the gender, and that they are reluctant to play songs from artists who don't "play ball" with the format. "I don't care if it's male or female, a good song is a good song," said one programmer. "The responsibility is on the creators." Many echoed the sentiment that, yes, women aren't getting played as often as they should, but insisted that it's reflective of the song."

<sup>52</sup> Wright, Penuell, and Aly. "Addressing SaladGate," 1.

argument, it has nothing to do with the gender of the artist, it is purely about the quality of the song and how it fits in with the format.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, if women wrote and sang songs that aligned with the values and style of the format, then they would be played more.<sup>54</sup> The fact that there is a gender imbalance is allegedly simply due to this poor fit.<sup>55</sup> This is another tired excuse for the systemic problems in the industry. If the format is almost entirely male, then how can women possibly fit in?<sup>56</sup>

A factor that furthers the gender discrimination in representation is a gendered ageism which means the exclusion of women over 40; whereas “the mean age for top performing male solo artists [is] 42[,],... the mean age for top performing female solo artists [is] 29.”<sup>57</sup> This translates to established female artists’ exclusion on top of the near impossibility of new artists breaking through. The explanations that are offered for this gender discrimination, on top of being inaccurate, are also contradictory. Despite this, there are women who still maintain hope; Riley, one of the women consulted in Country Aircheck’s follow-up to the original article said, “There are salads made completely of tomatoes, you know.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Weisbart, Eric. 2014. *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. - Weisbart defines formats as mainstream categories that are purposefully constructed to appeal to certain populations (along gender, class, race, and regional lines). Listeners of a particular format know that they can rely on this format to portray American life from their perspective.

<sup>54</sup> Penuell, “On Music and Scheduling,” 8. - This is contradictory to the discussion of coding songs so that two songs of the same texture are not played back to back (i.e. slow, twang, bro-country) in which they categorize “female” as a texture to justify the spacing of songs by female artists.

<sup>55</sup> Wright, Penuell, and Aly, “Addressing SaladGate,” 11. - This source interviewed female radio professionals for their response to Tomato-gate. WQDR/Raleigh PD Lisa McKay said, “It’s interesting because Keith talks about it being a female-driven format, but so is Top 40... Our pop station easily plays two to three females back to back on a very regular basis. I’m looking at research for both and ‘QDR has three females in our top 35 right now; my pop station has 11.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 11. - “consumers have come to accept the current mix and are naturally resistant to change.”  
Marchand, Roland. 1985. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. - Advertisers observed greater resistance to change on the part of rural folks.

<sup>57</sup> Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, “No Country for Female Artists,” 2.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, Penuell, and Aly, “Addressing SaladGate,” 11.  
Stark, Phyllis. 2015. “Nashville Group Looks to Change the Conversation Around Women in Country.” *Billboard*, June 25. Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/6612617/nashville-group-looks-to-change-the-conversation-around-women-in-country>). - One of this group’s co-founders, Tracy Gershon says that

### *The Significance of Radio*<sup>59</sup>

The significance of terrestrial radio to country music cannot be overstated.<sup>60</sup> The culture that surrounds engagement with local radio stations (i.e. investment in radio personalities, contests, and local events) keeps fans listening in a time where streaming services are widely available. The influence that country radio has over the broader listening trends of the listenership is enormous. Not only is the radio still a significant go-to for country music listeners,<sup>61</sup> “with 89 [percent] of country fans reporting they use AM/FM radio weekly, and 55 [percent] tuning to the airwaves daily,”<sup>62</sup> but the radio has a far-reaching influence on a number of other important aspects of the music industry.<sup>63</sup> The artists who are being played on the radio are more well-known, which has several important implications. These artists will be in higher demand and will thus be bigger sellers in general. Their albums and singles, their actual music, will sell more. These familiar artists are also the ones that will have better promoted tours,

---

they “want to make it... so people walk out feeling informed and empowered, and like they can actually make a change.”

<sup>59</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 88-89. - The radio started out as a unique way to reach individuals in more private settings in which they could feel that they were being spoken to directly.

<sup>60</sup> Peterson, Richard A. 1997. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>61</sup> Kurtzman, Warren. 2019. “What Shapes Our Music Tastes.” *Coleman Insights Media Research*, April 16. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://colemaninsights.com/coleman-insights-blog/what-shapes-our-music-tastes>). - The Contemporary Music SuperStudy found that while hip-hop fans are more likely to stream music, be younger, male, live in an urban area, and be daily streaming users, country fans are more likely to listen to the radio, are comparably older, more likely to be female, live in rural areas, and be daily radio users.

<sup>62</sup> Inside Radio. 2018. “Country Music Fans Tune In Longer, Digging AM/FM.” March 8. Retrieved on April 18, 2019 ([http://www.insideradio.com/free/country-music-fans-tune-in-longer-digging-am-fm/article\\_eff34ce6-229b-11e8-af81-8788ad63d375.html](http://www.insideradio.com/free/country-music-fans-tune-in-longer-digging-am-fm/article_eff34ce6-229b-11e8-af81-8788ad63d375.html)). - This source cites research conducted by the Country Music Association.

<sup>63</sup> Nielsen. 2014. “Walk the Blurred Lines: Country Music’s Cross-Over Popularity.” October 30. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/walk-the-blurred-lines-country-musics-cross-over-popularity.html>). - “It’s the top national format among Millennials (aged 18-34) and Generation X’ers (aged 35-49). And audience share has grown 17% with teens (12-17 year-olds) over the last two years. Still, country music has mass appeal. Among Boomers (aged 50-64), it’s the second most popular national format after News/Talk radio. As a result, the cross-over appeal of country and pop music extends the music beyond the typical audience. With an increasingly young audience, country music’s popularity is growing. Country is the No. 1 format radio genre in the U.S., and its audience has increased by 17% since 2006. With a 15.2% share of all listening as of Spring 2014, that means 69.7 million listeners tune to country radio in the U.S. each week.”

resulting in increased sales due to the broader awareness of them. Familiarity breeds liking,<sup>64</sup> but even so, one cannot like something that one does not know; therefore, it is less likely that people will hear the work of artists that they have not been exposed to through the massive promotional force that is country radio. Big Machine Label Group CEO, Scott Borchetta, is said, “[Fans’ and artists’] relationship with country radio, it’s still the Number One source of discovery in country music” and R.J. Curtis, editor of All Access Music Group country and veteran radio programmer shares this view, “From every piece of research that I’ve seen and reported on, it’s still the most important methodology for an artist to get mass appeal... Country fans rely on radio to discover new music.”<sup>65</sup> Consequently, the messages that people hear will most likely be the ones promoted on the radio, whether they are listening to the radio or not. These are the messages which are most accessible without having to put in the effort to search for them; they can be attained with ease.

Also important, is the authority that the radio has; without being validated by airtime, music is not taken as seriously or given a chance nearly as often.<sup>66</sup> Related to this is the factor of exposure to wider audiences which comes with nominations for awards and performance slots at major awards shows such as the Academy of Country Music awards, which are often dictated today by country radio. The trend of underrepresentation is evident in this realm as well:

“only 15% of the ACM nominees across 4 categories measured were women.  
Less than a sixth of all nominees (11%, n=3) were women in the Entertainer of

---

<sup>64</sup> Bornstein, and D’Agostino, “Stimulus recognition,” 545-552.

<sup>65</sup> Gold, Adam. 2015. “Why Country Radio Still Matters: In this age of on-demand listening, terrestrial and satellite radio remain the key power players in making or breaking a star.” *Rolling Stone*, February 24. Retrieved on April 18, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/why-country-radio-still-matters-90999/>). - This source uses Luke Bryan’s 2014 hit, “Play It Again” to frame a discussion of the fact that, despite outsiders’ lack of understanding of how the radio could still be a significant form of music consumption with the availability of streaming services, for country fans, it still is.

<sup>66</sup> Edison Research. 2014. “The Infinite Dial.” Triton Digital. Retrieved on April 18, 2019 (<http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Infinite-Dial-2014-from-Edison-Research-and-Triton-Digital.pdf>). - This study found that 75 percent of listeners discover new music on terrestrial radio, compared to 20 percent on SiriusXM and 18 percent on Spotify.

the Year category. In reality that figure reflects only 2 women who were nominated across the sample time frame: Carrie Underwood (1 nomination) and Miranda Lambert (2 nominations).<sup>67</sup>

Artists who receive some form of radio attention are much more likely to establish a geographically widespread loyal fanbase which will continue to support them even if they are no longer finding consistent success on the radio. If the artist's work is popular and people go out of their way to listen to their albums, non-dominant messages can creep into the public imaginary. This opportunity for finding loyal listeners is denied to those who have not enjoyed any airtime. These artist's messages are the ones which are much less likely to be heard; they are also the ones which are more likely to contain dissenting messages, which are more likely to come from women. The problem of representation is not one which is limited to country music radio; it is a widespread issue which is especially prominent in positions of power, particularly in areas where country music is most popular.

#### *Lack of Representation in Other Realms*

Representation of women in positions of power is an important metric for understanding the roles women are both perceived as occupying and expected to take on. It is also a good signal of the ways in which women are, or are not, valued. This can vary regionally. A lack of women in positions of power in realms other than music in geographical locations where country music is popular demonstrates the broader sexism that is influencing the music industry and people's valuations of this discrimination as being justified. Federal and state government is one area which is particularly relevant.<sup>68</sup> Representation in realms that are perhaps more visible to the

---

<sup>67</sup> Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, "No Country for Female Artists, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Zirpoli, Tom. 2018. "Zirpoli: Female representation lacking in Congress." *Carroll County Times*, April 24. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.carrollcountytimes.com/opinion/columnists/cc-op-zirpoli-20180424-story.html>). - "According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 51 percent of Americans are female. Yet, according to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University, of the 535 members of the United States Congress in 2018, women make up only 106 or 20 percent of its members... On the House side there are 83 voting women (19 percent) with an additional five women delegates representing American Samoa, the District of



average individual on an everyday basis, local roles such as school superintendents, are also important.<sup>69</sup> In all of these realms, women are underrepresented. When women are rarely found in positions of power in general in a society, their voices aren't being heard, and this becomes the standard to which people are accustomed. Some of the states with the lowest rates of female representation in positions of power are those in geographical regions with the highest percentages of country music consumers.<sup>70</sup> Because music is certainly not immune to these biases, but rather reflective of them, this leads to a vicious cycle of decreasing representation of women in general and the justification of this lack of perspectives on the radio due to its reflection of the broader power structures operating in society.

Worsening the situation further is a nostalgia for a time when the American Dream was more attainable for certain groups (i.e. white men).<sup>71</sup> In "an era of... perceived loss of power and promise," there is a tendency to look backward.<sup>72</sup> The fondness for this time period leads to a positive association with other aspects of this time period as well, which includes increased

---

Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands... On the Senate side there are 23 women out of 100 members... Women are not doing much better in state legislatures. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, only about 25 percent of state legislatures in 2017 were women. Women make up about 40 percent of Arizona's legislature, followed closely by Nevada and Vermont at 39 percent, and Colorado and Washington at 38 percent... women in Wyoming, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Mississippi make up less than 15 percent of their state legislatures.... Does it make a difference that only 23 percent of our Senators are women? Consider that the Senate approves federal appointments to our federal courts and that, according to *Americas Quarterly*, only "three of the nine justices sitting on the Supreme Court are women. About 33 percent of state and federal court judges in the U.S. are women." The ripple effect is real."

<sup>69</sup> Skrla, Linda. 1999. "Femininity/Masculinity: Hegemonic Normalizations in the Public School Superintendency." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April, Montreal, Canada. - In the United States, the executive position most stratified by gender is school superintendency, with men being 20 times more likely to climb the ladder from teaching to this position.

Skrla, Linda, Pedro Reyes, and James Joseph Scheurich. 2000. "Sexism, Silence and Solutions: Women Superintendents Speak Up and Speak Out." *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 36(1):44-75. - Despite a greater public awareness of this gender imbalance, the highest level positions in education continue to be dominated by men.

<sup>70</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." - These include regions in the Midwest and the South with as much as 55 percent of the population being country music consumers.

<sup>71</sup> Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.

<sup>72</sup> Fox, *Real Country*, 270.

discrimination against women. This leads to an exclusion of women who represent a threat to this idealized vision of a return to the past when white men, of any class, had more power relative to others than they do now. All this being so, it follows that perceptions of the American Dream would also be affected by these realities.

### *Method*

#### *Approach.*

In theory, there are multiple ways in which I could have approached collecting my sample. There are many reasons why the method which I chose was the one most appropriate for this project. A common method in sociology, content analysis, would typically be done by systematically collecting a random sample of hits from any given set of years, but this method would not have worked for my purposes. As a result, I am still using content analysis, but I am limited in my ability to make broader generalizations about the musical landscape in general due to a lack of a random sample.<sup>73</sup> Though this is the case, the benefits of using the method that I chose outweighed the drawbacks. There are several reasons why it was important for me to approach this project in the way that I did. Due to discrimination on the radio, there is a serious lack of female representation in the mainstream of the genre which has been steadily worsening over the past few years. During a two and a half year period, “From late 2012 to mid-2015, no female solo artist reached [number one] on the Country Airplay chart, and women remain a minority on major festival lineups and on popular streaming playlists.”<sup>74</sup> In December of last

---

<sup>73</sup> Berg, Bruce L. 2000. “An Introduction to Content Analysis.” Pp. 238-267 in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>74</sup> Dukes, Billy. 2018. “There Are More Lukes Than Women In The Billboard Country Airplay Top 20.” *Taste of Country*, December 5. Retrieved February 9, 2019 (<http://tasteofcountry.com/women-on-the-radio-billboard-country-airplay-top-20-2018/>). - “Over the last three years, the percentage of songs from women on the radio has declined, according to Country Aircheck. The Boot points out that the first woman as a primary vocalist listed on the year-end list of country music’s most played songs of 2018 sits at No. 35. That’s Maren Morris and her song “Rich.””

year, there were no women in the top 20 on Billboard's Country Airplay chart.<sup>75</sup> My main focus of doing a gendered analysis of conceptions of the American Dream in country music would be severely hampered by a serious lack of female voices which make up slightly over half of my playlist with which I am working whereas they make up only a small fraction of the radio's soundscape recently.<sup>76</sup>

Since one of my goals was to understand how this music has shaped my conception of the American Dream, it was important for me to use songs which I am not only familiar with, but that I also was influenced by and recognized as relevant. Most importantly, I needed to use a method that I felt would be fitting for what I was trying to do and what I needed to get out of this project. I needed a method that would work for *me*. I needed to approach this work in a way that makes sense to me, rather than one that was imposed upon me. In addition to these elements, the songs also had to be representative of the various major conceptions of the American Dream which existed in the country music genre during roughly the past two decades. If I had collected a random sample, it could have missed many major narratives, on top of being predominantly male. Although there are ways to get around this, such as the use of disproportionate weighting, which would makeup for the underrepresentation of women, the method still would have felt contrived, rather than natural. Since, I am attempting to liberate myself from the oppressive forces that I am subjected to in society, this includes the methods that I utilize in my work. As a result, a more systematic method, not coming naturally to me, was not an option that would have ever been a fit for this project. I needed to choose songs which have a personal meaning to me,

---

<sup>75</sup> Asker, Jim. 2018. "Country Airplay Chart Lacks Any Female Artists in Top 20 For First Time." *Billboard*, December 5. Retrieved December 21, 2018 (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8488730/no-women-country-airplay-chart-top-20>).

<sup>76</sup> Casey, Jim. 2017. "40 Solo Males, 5 Solo Females Have a Single on This Week's Billboard Country Airplay Chart: 10 Years Ago, There Were a Lot More Ladies." *Nash*, June 28. Retrieved February 9, 2019 (<http://www.nashfmwisconsin.com/2017/06/28/40-solo-males-5-solo-females-have-a-single-on-this-weeks-billboard-country-airplay-chart-10-years-ago-there-were-a-lot-more/>). - See Appendix A.

those which I find to be significantly adding to the discussion of the American Dream. I needed this work to be relevant to me and fulfilling for me and for the value of my personal perspective in this analysis to be recognized. The way my life has been influenced by particular narratives was important to capture and doing so necessitated this approach.

Not only is it important to include lyrics which address varying conceptions of the American Dream, but specifically those which address both sides of each theme (i.e. belief and disbelief). This is essential to gaining a solid grasp on what the landscape of the belief in the American Dream looks like in country music. Implicit in the need for voices on multiple sides of each major theme is the importance of the inclusion of dissenting voices. Any given theme has a dominant view associated with it, one which is widely accepted in the public imaginary. This is the view which is predominantly found in the mainstream, meaning that it is the prevailing perspective. The opposite opinion exists as well; it is just not represented in those songs which make up the hits on the radio for numerous reasons I address in a later section.

Keeping all this in mind, I chose the songs which, according to my judgement, fit these criteria the best. Within the playlist of 61 songs which I narrowed my focus to, I then had to select several songs to center my analysis on.<sup>77</sup> I chose the songs I wanted to spend the most time on for the analysis by recognizing those songs which had the most I could talk about, in terms of their lyrics as well as any relevant aspects of the songs in general. The songs I chose are ones which are representative of the variation in views which exists in terms of each of the major thematic areas, which I identified through inductive content analysis.<sup>78</sup> I made sure to address both female and male perspectives for each theme, because I am doing a gendered analysis. I also made sure to include views which fell on opposite ends of the spectrum for each area. Since

---

<sup>77</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>78</sup> Berg, "An Introduction to Content Analysis," 255-256.

I only have enough space to focus in more depth on a limited number of songs per chapter, I utilize lyrics from other songs to support the analysis of the songs which are the focus whenever there are relevant connections to be made. These more selective elements of songs are utilized as evidence of a message's prevalence, to demonstrate that the opposite opinion is out there, and to recognize when a particular conception is believed in by females as well as males.

*Sample.*

I obtained my sample by selecting songs that were released during my lifetime, or shortly before I was born in 1997, which say something important about the conceptions of the American Dream that existed during this time and reflect both how they have remained constant as well as how they have changed, particularly in relation to the recession (December 2007 - June 2009). The recession is a useful lens through which to analyze potential shifts in ideology surrounding the American Dream because the significant economic impact that it had on society resulted in an increase in inequality which, in turn, should influence perceptions of the American Dream.<sup>79</sup> In addition to this, the recession took place roughly in the middle of the time period at which I am looking, so it provides a split of the years which is fairly even. Perhaps most significantly, I am focusing on how these conceptions vary according to gender, which I discuss in terms of the gender binary in which country music currently operates. I look at both the gender of the artist(s) and the gender of the songwriter(s), which complicates a simple categorization of a song as coming from either a male or a female perspective, particularly when it is performed by a mixed-gender group or duo. In these cases, I take into consideration the proportion of the writers of each gender as well as the gender of the lead singer and how these influence the

---

<sup>79</sup> Lowrey, Annie. 2017. "The Great Recession Is Still With Us: The downturn left the country poorer and more unequal than it would have been otherwise." *The Atlantic*, December 1. Retrieved October 2, 2018 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/great-recession-still-with-us/547268/>).

gendered perspective from which the lyrics are written. If the primary vocalist is female, I consider the song to come from a female perspective. If all, or at least the majority, of the writers are female, this strengthens the authenticity of the song's female voice. Those songs which were released before I was born are included because, though they were released sooner, I still grew up listening to them and they played a significant role in shaping my imaginary. Their presence in the mainstream for years after their release means that they influenced many other people as well and that their message aligns in important ways with the dominant conceptions of the American Dream.

*Metrics.*

The metrics I am using to complete this analysis are Billboard's Country Airplay chart rankings, weeks at peak, and weeks on the chart for each song that appeared on the charts.<sup>80</sup> For those songs that either were not released as singles or did not rank on the Airplay chart, I utilize the Top Country Albums chart to demonstrate the song's exposure instead.<sup>81</sup> These are all indicators of popularity in different ways. Some songs were extremely successful, but not at the top of the charts for very long, while others enjoyed moderate success in terms of peak performance, but had longevity. Some number-one songs are not played anymore whereas songs with moderate success but a beloved message are played frequently. This is significant. Those songs which are still in relatively high rotation are those which contain narratives which are still popular and central to the American imaginary. Another important factor to consider in regard to the chart success in terms of peak position, weeks at peak, and weeks on the chart is the

---

<sup>80</sup> Billboard. 2019a. "Country Airplay." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-airplay>).

<sup>81</sup> Billboard. 2019b. "Top Country Albums." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-albums>).

popularity of the artist, which also plays a role in a song's continued inclusion on current playlists.

*Brief overview of findings.*

At this point, I briefly describe what I found. I go into more detail regarding each of the aspects as I flesh them out in each of their respective chapters. The view of the American Dream which is presented in 2010 in Brice's "Love Like Crazy" - that which believes the past was good and so too is the present - is simultaneously in line with and at odds with the view presented eight years later, in 2018, in Brown's "American Bad Dream" - that which believes the past was good but that the present is not. These two basic blueprints for conceptions of the American Dream which are evidenced in country music lyrics: 1) a positive view of the past and the present and 2) a positive view of the past and a negative view of the present, are two of many combinations that exist in viewpoints which are a part of the musical landscape. Beyond these basic categorizations of the past and present as either aligning or not with the picture of the American Dream which the individual holds in mind, there are much more nuanced thematic differences in various conceptions of the American Dream.<sup>82</sup>

I focus on five major thematic conceptions which I have identified: 1) Homeownership & Marriage, 2) Freedom, 3) Love & Simplicity, 4) Upward Mobility, and 5) Equality. Even within these broad groupings of conceptions, there is much variation in both ideals and perceptions of reality. Importantly, there are views which fall on each end of the spectrum and everywhere in between within any given conception. Briefly, what I mean by this is that each conception can be broken down further into dichotomies which account for many views, but that, by nature, leave out those views which are more complicated and fall somewhere in the middle. For each of the

---

<sup>82</sup> Johnson & James, Love like crazy.  
McGill, Hoge, Brown, & Ellis, American bad dream.

five major conceptions, this is what the next level breakdown looks like: 1) Homeownership & Marriage - the individual desires this or does not desire it, 2) Freedom - the individual says they have it or that they do not and so desire it, 3) Love & Simplicity - this is all the individual needs, they don't need money- this conception is antithetical to 4) Upward Mobility - the individual believes that upward mobility is not only possible, but the goal, or they view it as an impossibility and 5) Equality - the individual believes that it exists or that we don't have it, but we need it.<sup>83</sup> There are so many connections that can be made between these varying conceptions and aspects of society.

The type of analysis that I am doing is connecting lyrics to bigger commonly held American ideologies. The more common the sentiment across songs, the more likely that it is a central belief to the American imagination. The privileging of and the fact that room is made for particular messages on the radio and in the mainstream, while others are relegated to the outskirts where they have to be searched for and discovered, says something important about which messages those in power want promoted and those which they want quelled. This is in an attempt, in a significant realm of influence, to maintain the status quo in society.

---

<sup>83</sup> See Appendix C: Table 2.



## CHAPTER 1: THE DREAM AS LIFELONG LOVE IN ONE HOUSE

“Same old scenario / One guy’s young and one guy’s old / One’s in love and sittin’ on dough / And one’s already walked that road / One’s on year number 33 / And one just bought that diamond ring / One says, “Dad, so how’d you do it?” / The other just laughs and says, “There ain’t nothin’ to it”” Cody Johnson, “Ain’t Nothin’ to It”<sup>84</sup>

“I never dreamed of wantin’ more than a small-town simple life / A little money in our pockets / You’re my husband, I’m your wife” - Reba McEntire, “Stronger Than The Truth”<sup>85</sup>

In this chapter, I lay out the various views that exist within this broad conception of the American Dream. To do this, I look in depth at several songs which represent the wide range of perspectives that exists in this realm. Because conceptions of the American Dream are gendered, I provide both a female and a male perspective that talk about this theme. Since there is greater variation in female perspectives, particularly according to the gender of the songwriters, as they are the ones constructing the narratives, I provide an example of a song which was both written by a female and is performed by a female to show the contrast in this perspective from that of a song which is performed by a female artist, but which was written solely by males. Another way in which I am looking at songs is in their relationship to the recession and so it is particularly interesting to see the gendered views which are presented both pre- and post-recession and how these messages are received. Regarding the songs’ reception, which, as I have discussed, is a vital component to the life of the song, I look at each of their chart success. In order to supplement the in-depth discussions of the select songs, I provide relevant lyrics from other songs which discuss the same major themes as evidence that these narratives have been prevalent. I use these supporting lyrics to further demonstrate how viewpoints have either

---

<sup>84</sup> Lee, D. & Satcher, L. (2019). Ain’t nothin’ to it [Recorded by Cody Johnson]. On *Ain’t Nothin’ To It* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Warner Music Nashville.

<sup>85</sup> McEntire, A. & Blaylock, H. (2019). Stronger than the truth [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *Stronger Than The Truth* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.

remained constant or changed in relation to the recession as well as to provide evidence of their gendered nature.

#### *Arbitrary Nature of Categorization*

My categorization of these songs into chapters according to thematic conceptions is somewhat arbitrary because there is substantial overlap between these conceptions of the American Dream. That being said, “The House That Built Me” could just as easily be included in Chapter 3: The Dream as Love and Simplicity, but it adds something significant to the conversation in this chapter and thus warrants inclusion in the discussion of the American Dream in regard to homeownership and marriage. This is just one example; many songs included in this analysis could be discussed in multiple chapters.

#### *Chart Longevity*

Songs which view the American Dream in terms of this conception, wherein homeownership and marriage are central, don’t always reach the number-one position on the charts, though they tend to reach relatively high positions on the charts, but they do remain on the charts for much longer than average. The average run of a song on the charts was about 20 weeks. Presumably, a song would climb the charts to the peak position, and then decline until it was not played very often, if at all anymore. Many number-one songs follow this bell curve pattern. They are played very often for a relatively short period of time and then some of them are not played again. This is very different from the reality of songs such as “Love Like Crazy” which did not reach number one, but reached a respectable number three on the chart; however, it remained on the chart in its initial run for a rather incredible 56 weeks.<sup>86</sup> That is over a year. This is almost three times longer than the typical chart run of a song on the Country Airplay

---

<sup>86</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

chart. This, coupled with the fact that the song is still played rather frequently, almost 10 years later, when very few songs that are not in the current top 40 rarely get played at all, especially if they are older and/or did not reach the number one position on the charts, says something about the powerful hold that the American Dream, which is so central in the song, has over the public imaginary. It is especially interesting that this song is played so consistently throughout the year, not just around Valentine's Day and peak wedding season when it would be more likely to be requested on people's anniversaries. This fact speaks to the incredible staying power that this song has, in large part due to the centrality of the views presented in the lyrics to the American Dream to which people are still so desperately clinging. The number of songs in rotation at any given time which are not currently in the top 40 is very small.

*Looking to the Past - A Male Perspective*

Lee Brice's "Love Like Crazy" is the title track off of his debut studio album that was released June 8, 2010. The song was subsequently released to country radio where it spent over a year - 56 weeks - and peaked at number three on the Country Airplay chart.<sup>87</sup> This success on the charts tells an important story regarding the audience's reception of the song. The fact that the song attained the number three position means both that it reached a wide audience and that it was received well. This signifies that the message is important to the listeners. Since it is still in relatively high rotation nine years later, the narrative is clearly a central one to the American imaginary. The fact that this song came out shortly following the recession indicates that these views are still being clung to even when the reality does not align.

"Love Like Crazy" perfectly encapsulates the conception of the American Dream as lifelong love in one house. The lyrics of this song address buying a home, getting married, and

---

<sup>87</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

having children. All these themes are addressed through the story of one couple who got married when they were 17 and “[have] been together 58 years now.” As the story unfolds, the listener witnesses the couple “[buy] a little two bedroom house on Maple Street” and the woman “[bless the man] with six more mouths to feed.” The lyrics of this song are written from a male perspective which results in an objectification of the woman in the story who doesn’t have a voice. She serves the aesthetic function of fulfilling a necessary role in the perfect picture of the American Dream.<sup>88</sup> She plays the role of the wife, an aspect of identity defined by her relationship to a man.<sup>89</sup> The only details the listener learns about her are those which are relevant to her relationship with the man. Every time she is mentioned, it is in relation to her role in the man’s life (i.e. giving birth to their children, loving him, and being faithful). The listener gets no sense whatsoever of her having autonomy, which contrasts strongly with the depiction of the man as a hard-working entrepreneur who takes intelligent risks in his work.<sup>90</sup> “They called him crazy when he quit his job / said them home computers boy, they’ll never take off / well he sold his one-man shop to Microsoft / and they paid like crazy.”<sup>91</sup> Unsurprisingly, since they are reflective of broader gendered social dynamics, the power dynamics in this conception of the American Dream are the standard of the genre.

---

<sup>88</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 185. - Early modern advertising portrayed women as a part of the overall aesthetic of a room with “the status of “decorative object” as one of her natural and appropriate roles.”

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 175. - This follows from a long history of sexism, which was strengthened in the public imaginary through early modern advertising wherein everything was framed as women’s relationship to men (i.e. wives, mothers).

<sup>90</sup> Gray, Marion W. 2000. *Productive Men and Reproductive Women: The Agrarian Household and the Emergence of Separate Spheres during the German Enlightenment*. New York: Berghahn Books. - This source argues that the modern notion of separate spheres for men and women originated in the era of the Enlightenment. The development of the financial market, which was deemed a male realm, left women with few options other than marriage and motherhood.

Dyke, Lorraine S., and Steven A. Murphy. 2006. “How We Define Success: A Qualitative Study of What Matters Most to Women and Men.” *Sex Roles* 55:357-371. - This source examines how women and men “define success and how their definition of success affects their career progress.” They found that while “[w]omen highlight the importance of balance and relationships[, m]en focus more on material success.”

McCusker, Kristine M., and Diane Pecknold, eds. 2004. *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. - Gender conventions have dictated the production and promotion of country.

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, & James, Love like crazy.

An important aspect of this conception of the American Dream is the religious component. The couple in this story successfully achieves their American Dream centered on homeownership and marriage in no small part due to a dedication to their faith. Lyrics such as “never let your praying knees get lazy” evidence this. The other half of the Protestant work ethic, hard work, combined with this faith, is how this couple allegedly achieved their dream. When asked how he made it, the man in this song says: “faith and sweat,”<sup>92</sup> a response which perfectly encapsulates the Protestant work ethic.<sup>93</sup>

### *Male Conception of the Female Conception*

Men appear to believe that women want the same thing as they do.<sup>94</sup> In other words, men don't view women's conceptions of the American Dream as differing from theirs. Pre-recession, this is evidenced in John Michael Montgomery's song “I Can Love You Like That.” This song spent three weeks at number one and 20 weeks overall on the Country Airplay charts in 1995.<sup>95</sup> The lyrics of this song presuppose that women want what they have been said to in archaic fairy tales (i.e. marrying a man and devoting her life to him). Obviously very heteronormative, as well as being sexist, these ideals do not ascribe any autonomy to women, linking their happiness with a reliance on men. This is shown in lyrics such as “They read you Cinderella / you hoped it would come true / that one day your Prince Charming / would come rescue you,” which also demonstrate a savior complex. The lyrics of this song also evidence an ideal of ownership within all the otherwise romantic concepts because they state that the man would take care of the

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Weber, Max. 1904. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. New York: Charles Scribner's Son.

Johnson & James, Love like crazy.

<sup>94</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1932. *The German Ideology*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. - Dominant groups tend to believe that their worldviews are shared by everyone.

<sup>95</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

woman and “be all that [she] need[s]... if [she] were [his] girl.” This song holds the values of lifelong and passionate love at its center, not only by referencing *Cinderella*<sup>96</sup> and *Romeo and Juliet*,<sup>97</sup> but also in the lyrics, “so when I say forever, forever’s what I mean” and “you dream of love that’s everlasting.”<sup>98</sup> In this view, a woman’s American Dream is so centrally dependent upon a man that she cannot achieve it without him. Female conceptions of the American Dream being multitudinous and fluid, contradict this view in some cases, but align with it in others. Now, I discuss a female conception of the American Dream which does not refute this view. *Looking to the Past - A Female Perspective: “It all just seems so good the way we had it”*<sup>99</sup>

“The House That Built Me” by Miranda Lambert is arguably the most important country song of the past decade. No song so perfectly sums up the American Dream as this song does. It also has a significant impact on listeners because it not only reached number one on the Billboard Country Airplay charts in June of 2010, stayed there for three weeks, and spent 21 weeks on the chart overall, but was also rated as the top song of the century with one of the most successful songwriters in the genre calling it the perfect country song.<sup>100</sup> Significantly, this song was on the charts at the same time as “Love Like Crazy,” with which it shares a common theme of a fondness for the past.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> This fairytale tells a story of a young woman who unjustly experiences oppression, but is liberated from it when a prince rescues her.

<sup>97</sup> These star-crossed lovers are the classic example of passionate love.

<sup>98</sup> Kimball, J., Derry, M., & Diamond, S. (1995). I can love you like that [Recorded by John Michael Montgomery]. On *Love Songs* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

<sup>99</sup> Lambert, M., Hemby, N., & Galyon, N. (2014). Automatic [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Platinum* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

<sup>100</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

Dukes, Billy. 2016. “No. 1: Miranda Lambert, ‘The House That Built Me’ – Top Country Songs Of The Century.” *Taste of Country*, August 31. Retrieved February 10, 2019 (<http://tasteofcountry.com/miranda-lambert-the-house-that-built-me-top-songs-of-the-century/>).

<sup>101</sup> Johnson & James, Love like crazy.

Central to the conception of the American Dream which makes up this song are the values of homeownership, having children, marriage, and working hard for what one has: building from scratch the dream that one envisions. All wrapped up in this conception of the dream are a complex set of gender dynamics. When the house “that built” the narrator is being built, it is their father who “nail by nail, board by board... gave life to mama’s dream.” The man is pictured as the one who is working hard to make all the woman’s dreams come true. He is portrayed as her savior. Implicit in this story are all the gender dynamics which go along with this type of relationship wherein the man would have control over all aspects of this couple’s life.

The lyrics of this song look fondly toward the past, using the house as a lens through which to remember a time when the narrator felt happy. The individual in this song is hoping that “maybe [she] could find [herself]” by returning to the place which houses all her childhood memories. This is problematic if her childhood was characterized by unhealthy and troublesome gender relations which would negatively impact the way in which she views herself. An attachment to and preoccupation with the past is harmful to women today on many levels, serving to perpetuate their oppression by continuing to silence their voices. Even worse, it justifies this oppression by couching it in good memories and feelings which imply comfort due to an alleged closeness with one’s true identity.<sup>102</sup> This song represents a female perspective on this version of the American Dream which was written by males. I now discuss a female perspective on this conception of the American Dream which had the input of a female songwriter.

---

<sup>102</sup> See Appendix B.

Shamblin, A. & Douglas, T. (2009). The house that built me [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Revolution* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

*The Past Is Holding Us Back - A Female Perspective on Vicious Cycles*

“Merry Go ‘Round” by Kacey Musgraves spent 28 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number 10 on March 16, 2013.<sup>103</sup> This was long enough after the recession for the lyrics to have been influenced by its effects. Wrapped up in the lyrics of this song are various aspects of the American Dream. The idea of the dream of the past not lining up with that of the present, especially along generational lines, is central.<sup>104</sup> Both the consumerist nature of society and its relationship to the human need to escape reality<sup>105</sup> are major themes embedded within the lyrics of this song: “the same checks are always cashin’ / to buy a little more distraction.” This problem is addressed further in the chorus which lays out the various ways individuals use material things as a form of escapism from their realities: “Mama’s hooked on Mary Kay / Brother’s hooked on Mary Jane / and Daddy’s hooked on Mary two doors down.” There is a recognition of the dream as homeownership and living an average, cookie-cutter life: “tiny little boxes in a row,” marriage at a young age: “we get bored so we get married” and “we think the first time’s good enough / so we hold on to high school love,” having two children: “if you don’t have two kids by 21 / you’re probably gonna die alone,” and religion: “and it don’t matter if you don’t believe / come Sunday mornin’ you best be / there on the front row, like you’re supposed to.”<sup>106</sup> These elements of the dream are framed as being those of the past, but not those which this individual desires (i.e. “say we won’t end up like our parents”). This is evidenced in the

---

<sup>103</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>104</sup> Clark, B., Musgraves, K., & McAnally, S. (2011). Mama’s broken heart [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Four The Record* [CD]. New York: Sony Music Entertainment. - This connects to the argument in this song’s lyrics that there are important generational differences in approaches to life.

<sup>105</sup> James, B. & Chesney, K. (2010). Reality [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *Hemingway’s Whiskey* [CD]. New York: Sony Music Entertainment. - This song explicitly addresses this need to escape reality because “sometimes life ain’t all that it’s cracked up to be.”

<sup>106</sup> See Appendix B.

Pew Research Center. 2009. “Is a Bad Economy Good for Church Attendance?.” March 12. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2009/03/12/is-a-bad-economy-good-for-church-attendance/>). - At least weekly worship attendance hovers around 40%.



lyrics, “at least that’s what tradition told you” and “ain’t what you want, it’s what you know.” An important aspect of the reality that is seen in this song is the fact that the people in this small town are trapped in this vicious cycle, they cannot escape the systems which keep them stuck in these limited patterns: “just like dust we settle in this town / on this broken merry go ‘round.” The dust calls to mind old things from the past which have been forgotten and left behind, as the narrator in this song believes these archaic social norms should be. The “broken merry go ‘round” symbolizes the fact that the current system isn’t working and there are discontented people who want to get off because they don’t want to participate in it anymore. Sonically, this vicious cycle is represented by the song’s cyclical melody. The lyrics, “where it stops nobody knows / and it ain’t slowin’ down / this merry go ‘round” demonstrate a pessimism concerning the prospects of society ever becoming a more hospitable place to live.<sup>107</sup>

In contrast, Miranda Lambert’s “Babies Makin’ Babies” views this cycle as just the way it is, apparently neither necessarily good nor bad. This song was written by two women and a man and is a track on her 2014 album *Platinum*. The song starts out by recognizing the youth and inexperience of the individuals: “no pill and barely old enough to drink.” The chorus describes the cycle in which so many people become trapped:

The American dream on a shoestring / First you grow it, then you show it / Give a good push just like a Brady / Say you’ll love them until your 80 / Too soon to be a mother and father / But too late for the alma mater / Yeah, it’s always in the water / Babies makin’ babies.

The classed nature of these realities is confronted, both in relation to how people get in these situations to begin with as well as the positions it results in their being: “Between diplomas and

---

<sup>107</sup> Musgraves, K., Laird, L., & McAnally, S. (2013). Merry go ‘round [Recorded by Kacey Musgraves]. On *Same Trailer Different Park* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.

Marx, Karl. [1867] 2009. *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*. Washington, DC: Reprint, Regnery Publishing. - This is a critique of social reproduction.

the diapers / they become couch quarter finders / savin' up for a Maytag microwave.” Religion is also a central component to this conception: “Oh, but all has been forgiven / on the day the water christened / the best thing that could have happened by mistake.” The role that religion plays in keeping people going in these tough situations is vital to their wellbeing. The fact that this cycle has been going on for generations is emphasized in the lines: “Well it’s a tried and true equation / maintains a small town population / that turns us all into a family.” These lines give the impression that these realities are a positive force in working class communities. One could read into these lyrics however, that not only is the small town population maintained by reproduction, but by ensuring that the generation who has the kids stays in the area because they lack the resources and opportunities to leave.<sup>108</sup>

#### *Female Conception of the Male Conception*

Carrie Underwood’s “All-American Girl,” which spent 20 weeks on the Airplay chart and peaked at number one where it stayed for two weeks in March of 2008, lays out the male version of the American Dream from a female perspective.<sup>109</sup> These lyrics tell the story of a woman through the eyes of her father, and subsequently, her husband, emphasizing both their ownership of her and the importance of their ever-present gaze.<sup>110</sup> By framing the story through a look at multiple generations, the perpetuation of these realities is emphasized. The lyrics recognize that men are often “praying for a little baby boy” with whom they can engage in certain activities, such as sports, which according to archaic gender roles girls cannot. The two generations of couples in this song get married and have or are planning on having children. The woman who was initially not what her father wanted, asks her husband at the end of the song

---

<sup>108</sup> Robbins, J., Hemby, N., & Galyon, N. (2014). *Babies makin' babies* [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Platinum* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

<sup>109</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>110</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*.

what he wants, which turns out to be a girl: a “sweet, little, beautiful / one just like [her].” This vision of what a female should be is centered on her physical appearance and her ability to ensure that she is agreeable to others.<sup>111</sup> This song was co-written by two men and a woman, so the focus on the male perspective is unsurprising and likely, coupled with Underwood’s popularity, the reason the song reached the number-one position.<sup>112</sup>

Brandy Clark’s “Girl Next Door” spent 21 weeks on the Airplay chart and peaked at number 39 in May of 2016.<sup>113</sup> A little over eight years after Underwood’s song and far removed from the recession, the female conception of the male version of the dream is relatively the same. Clark recognizes that many men want “some Virgin Mary metaphor / your cardboard cutout on the wall, your paper or your Barbie doll / with perfect hair and a perfect dress” someone reminiscent of Marcia Brady. But she says to the men who think this way that “if [they] want the girl next door... then [they should] go next door” because they’re not “the first to think [they could]... fix” and “change” her so that she fits this mold. She lets them know that she is “not some Debbie debutante standing in an apron, frying up [their] bacon.” Clark co-wrote this song with another woman and a man and the female presence is evident in the resulting perspective. The difference between these two songs, in regard to their chart success, besides the fact that Clark is not nearly as well-known, is that unlike Underwood’s song, Clark’s lyrics fight back against archaic gender roles rather than playing into them.<sup>114</sup>

### *Lifelong Love - A Male Perspective*

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. - This aligns with visions solidified in the public imaginary in early modern advertising.

<sup>112</sup> Gorley, A., Underwood, C., & Lovelace, K. (2007). All-American girl [Recorded by Carrie Underwood]. On *Carnival Ride* [CD]. New York, NY: 19 Recordings.

<sup>113</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>114</sup> Clark, B. (2016). Girl next door [Recorded by Brandy Clark]. On *Big Day in a Small Town* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

There are many songs which exemplify this central theme of the American Dream as lifelong marriage<sup>115</sup> beginning at a young age.<sup>116</sup> In early 1995, George Strait's "Check Yes Or No" spent four weeks at number one and 20 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart.<sup>117</sup> This song tells the story of a couple who met at a very young age and are still together, holding onto their youth as the years fly by, which is evidenced in the lyrics, "it started way back in third grade" and "now we're grown up and she's my wife."<sup>118</sup> Nine years later, in early 2004, Alan Jackson's "Remember When" spent two weeks at number one and 25 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart.<sup>119</sup> This song follows the journey of a couple as they walk through the stages of life together, reminiscing along the way and dreaming about how they'll still be together, thinking fondly back on the past in the future: "Remember when I was young and so were you... You were the first, so was I," "Remember when we vowed the vows and walked the walk," "Remember when the sound of little feet / was the music we danced to week to week," "Remember when we said when we turn gray / when the children grow up and move away." Both of these songs not only construct the dream as being with one person for all of one's life,

---

<sup>115</sup> Hackett, "New Statistics About Country Music Fans." - Interestingly, "[26] percent [of country music fans] are singles who have never married."

CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." - 56 percent of country music consumers are married.

When put in conversation with this previous statistic, the implication is that 18 percent of this group is divorced. Parker, Kim, and Renee Stepler. 2017. "As U.S. marriage rate hovers at 50%, education gap in marital status widens." *Pew Research Center*, September 14. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/14/as-u-s-marriage-rate-hovers-at-50-education-gap-in-marital-status-widens/>). - There has been a fairly steady decrease in marriage rates of U.S. adults since 1960. In 1960, 72% of adults were married, whereas today only 50% are married.

<sup>116</sup> Stepler, Renee. 2017. "Led by Baby Boomers, divorce rates climb for America's 50+ population." *Pew Research Center*, March 9. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>). - These recent divorce statistics put into context how reasonable this ideal of lifelong marriage is. The divorce rates for those 50 and older has roughly doubled in the past 25 years. From 1990 to 2015, the number of persons who divorced per 1,000 married persons: increased 109% (from 5 to 10) for the 50+ age group, increased 14% (from 18 to 21) for the 40-49 age group, and decreased 21% (from 30 to 24) for the 25-39 age group.

<sup>117</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>118</sup> Hunt Oglesby, D. & Wells, D. (1995). Check yes or no [Recorded by George Strait]. On *Strait Out Of The Box* [CD]. Nashville, TN: MCA Records.

<sup>119</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

but being married to them. In addition to this, having children, another typical component to this iteration of the dream, is central to the latter song.<sup>120</sup>

Using the past as a lens through which to see one's dream for the future continues to be a focus of male conceptions post-recession as well. Dan + Shay's "From the Ground Up" spent one week at number one in late 2016 and 30 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart.<sup>121</sup> This song lays out the narrator's vision for his life through the telling of the story of his grandparents' love: "Grandma and grandpa painted a picture of 65 years and one little house."<sup>122</sup> The blueprint that they followed in their life is one which he not only still views as valid, but sees as desirable, which is obvious in the lyrics, "Me and you baby, walk in the footsteps<sup>123</sup> / build our own family... and we'll build this love from the ground up" and "Someday we'll wake up / with thousands of pictures / of 65 years in this little house / I won't trade for nothing, the life that we built / I'll kiss you goodnight and say I love you still." Evidenced in this song's lyrics as well are the ideals of lifelong monogamous marriage ("saying I do... now 'til forever"), having children ("10 little toes, a painted pink room / our beautiful baby looks just like you"), and patriarchy and the man-as-protector ("I'll be the man your dad hoped that I'd be" and "I'll be your shelter"). The iteration of the dream in this song is gendered and strongly rooted in the past.<sup>124</sup>

All three of these songs reached number one on the charts, at very different points in time. The first two peaked nine years apart (1995 - 2004) and then the third 12 years later in

---

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, A. (2003). Remember when [Recorded by Alan Jackson]. On *Greatest Hits: Volume II* [CD]. Berlin, Germany: BMG.

Hackett, "New Statistics About Country Music Fans." - "Country music fans are... passionate about their family... 90 percent spend time with their family, and 81 percent have dinner with them every night compared to a national average of 43 percent. [79] percent of the country fans wish they had more time to spend with their families."

<sup>121</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>122</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." - 71% of country music consumers own a home.

<sup>123</sup> This is a religious reference to walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

<sup>124</sup> DeStefano, C., Smyers, D., & Mooney, S. (2016). From the ground up [Record by Dan + Shay]. On *Obsessed* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Warner Music Nashville.

2016, which demonstrates both the centrality of this view to the American imaginary as well as its longevity. The first song was co-written by a female and a male, the second was written by a male, and the third was co-written by three men, following the pattern of the declining presence of female songwriters on the radio. These versions of the American Dream are all from the male perspective and they all remain fairly consistent across time.

*A male conception: one artist's view across time.*

Kenny Chesney's "The Good Stuff" was written by two men and spent 31 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart. It reached number one on the chart in July of 2002 and spent a significant seven weeks at the top.<sup>125</sup> The premise of this song is that a newly married couple has a fight and the man goes to a bar, meets the old bartender, and gets advice from him. The younger man is looking to drown his feelings in alcohol and asks for "the good stuff" to which the older man responds:

You can't find that here / 'Cause it's the first long kiss on a second date /  
 Momma's all worried when you get home late / And droppin' the ring in the  
 spaghetti plate / 'Cause your hands are shakin' so much / And it's the way that  
 she looks with the rice in her hair / eatin' burnt suppers the whole first year / And  
 askin' for seconds to keep her from tearin' up / Yeah man, that's the good stuff.

The fact that the individual's mom is worried when he isn't home at night implies that he's still in high school. In the same vein, the fact that his wife is burning everything she cooked alludes to the fact that she has never left home and been on her own prior to their marriage. In this way, this song, like so many others in the genre, portrays the dream as a lifelong love, specifically a lifelong marriage. The lyrics walk the listener through each stage of the older couple's relationship beginning with the early stages of their love when they were young, to when they got married, had children, saw their children get married, and on to the man's loss of his wife:

---

<sup>125</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

He said, “I spent five years in the bar / when the cancer took her from me / But I’ve been sober three years now / ‘Cause the one thing stronger than the whiskey / was the sight of her holdin’ our baby girl / The way she adored that string of pearls / I gave her the day that our youngest boy Earl / married his high school love<sup>126</sup> / And it’s a new t-shirt sayin’: “I’m a grandpa” / Bein’ right there as our time got small / And holdin’ her hand when the good Lord called her up / Yeah man, that’s the good stuff.”

Not only did the older man apparently marry his high school sweetheart, but he said that his son “married his high school love” as well. In this way, this song discusses multiple generations of love which began at a young age, underlining the centrality of this aspect of the man’s story to his notion of the dream. The older man had a wife, children and then grandchildren and tells the younger man that he should treasure the small moments with them because they are what he should value most in life. Essentially, the song centers on the older man relating to the younger man his idea of the American Dream.<sup>127</sup>

Five years later, in late 2007, Chesney’s “Don’t Blink,” which was also written by two men, spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and four weeks at number one.<sup>128</sup> This song maintains the focus on lifelong love which was evidenced in his earlier hit discussed above.

Each phase of a couple’s relationship is laid out:

Don’t blink / ‘Cause just like that you’re six years old and you take a nap and you / wake up and you’re 25 then your high school sweetheart becomes your wife / Don’t blink / You just might miss your babies growing like mine did / Turning into moms and dads, next thing you know your “better half” / Of 50 years is there in bed / and you’re praying God takes you instead / Trust me friend, a hundred years goes faster than you think / so don’t blink.

The theme of appreciating the small things is expanded in this song, whose lyrics say, “best start putting first things first” and “take every breath God gives you for what it’s worth.” The premise

---

<sup>126</sup> It was traditional to give the mother of the bride a string of pearls on her daughter’s wedding day in the ‘50s.

<sup>127</sup> Wiseman, C., & Collins, J. (2002). *The Good Stuff* [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *No Shoes, No Shirt, No Problems* [CD]. Berlin, Germany: BMG.

This song, in contrast to Lambert’s “Babies Makin’ Babies,” takes for granted the youth of these individuals.

<sup>128</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

of this song is that a younger man sees a man who is turning 102 being interviewed on the news and the young man starts rethinking his approach to life in accordance with the wisdom which the more-lived man has imparted: after hearing this advice, the younger man says that he has “been trying to slow it down” and “to take it in.”<sup>129</sup>

*A male conception: a consistent view across time.*

Brad Paisley’s “Waitin’ On A Woman” provides another example of a song that idealizes lifelong marriage. Written by two men and released several years prior to the recession, it spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and reached number one in September of 2008.<sup>130</sup> Structured like many other country songs (i.e. “The Good Stuff” and “Don’t Blink,” among countless others), this song finds an older man imparting life advice upon a younger man. In the process of telling his story, the older man says, “Son, since 1952, I’ve been waitin’ on a woman.” He tells the younger man the couple’s story from when they met to when they got married and even envisions what the end of their lives together will look like, bringing in religion when he talks about getting “to the other side.” The entire time, a focus is maintained on how this man is always having to wait for his wife. By the end of the song, the mentee is clearly deeply affected by his mentor’s wisdom.<sup>131</sup>

Keith Urban and Eric Church’s “Raise ‘Em Up” was written by three men. It spent 19 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart and one week at number one where it peaked on May 23, 2015.<sup>132</sup> These lyrics demonstrate an ideal of love, land, and raising a family: “So, you meet someone / the only one / you take her by the hand / make a stand / buy some land / make some

---

<sup>129</sup> Beathard, C. & Wallin, C. (2007). Don’t blink [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *Just Who I Am: Poets & Pirates* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

<sup>130</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>131</sup> Sampson, D. & Varble, W. (2005). Waitin’ on a woman [Recorded by Brad Paisley]. On *Time Well Wasted* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

<sup>132</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”



love / and then babies come / raise ‘em up.” A bit more time is spent on raising the children in these lyrics; instilling the proper values in the next generation and religion are addressed: “Raise ‘em up right from wrong / Raise ‘em up so damn high they can hear God singing along.”<sup>133</sup>

Kip Moore’s “More Girls Like You” was written by four men. Though it was not a number-one hit, it reached number four in November of 2017 and spent 37 weeks on the Airplay chart overall.<sup>134</sup> Though its success was more moderate, this song followed the same pattern as that of “Love Like Crazy” in that it neared the top of the charts, didn’t reach the top position, but spent a relatively long period of time on the charts. Weeks on the chart constitute perhaps just as significant a metric as peak position with regard to top ten hits because it provides vital information regarding listeners’ exposure to any given song. This song tells the story of a man who has found the woman with whom he wants to spend the rest of his life. The lyrics of this song also construct the dream as getting married, buying a piece of property, and having children: “Wanna reach for the brightest star, set it on a ring / put it on your hand, grab a piece of land / and raise a few / more girls like you.”<sup>135</sup>

Blake Shelton’s “I’ll Name The Dogs” was written by three men. It spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number one on December 30, 2017.<sup>136</sup> This song also exhibits the desire to get married and own a home: “I’m talkin’ you and me with the same street name / same last name, same everything,” as well as to have children: “You name the babies and I’ll name the dogs.” This classic message is wrapped in traditional gender roles, evidenced in each line of the chorus which are all constructed to contain a gendered dichotomy. The man says

---

<sup>133</sup> Johnston, J., Steele, J., & Douglas, T. (2013). Raise ‘em up [Recorded by Keith Urban and Eric Church]. On *Fuse* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.

<sup>134</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>135</sup> Garcia, D., Miller, J. O., Moore, K., & Olsen, S. L. (2017). More girls like you [Recorded by Kip Moore]. On *SLOWHEART* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.

<sup>136</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

he'll "find the money" and will do all the construction tasks around the house and that the woman can make aesthetic decisions and "be the pretty"<sup>137</sup> while he is "the funny." While all these songs by male artists present one perspective on the dream, female conceptions do not always align.<sup>138</sup>

*Lifelong Love - A Female Perspective*

"If you think you're the only one she'll want in this world / then you don't know nothin' 'bout girls." Clearly, women don't always agree that lifelong monogamy is the dream, as is evidenced by these lyrics from Miranda Lambert's "Girls," a track off her fifth studio album *Platinum* which was released June 3, 2014 and reached number one on the Top Country Albums chart on June 21, 2014.<sup>139</sup> This song, which was co-written by two females and a male and shows the woman's side of the story, was not released as a single because it would not fit in with the dominant narratives on the radio and therefore would not be successful. Archaic gender dynamics are present in this song as well, however (i.e. "still loves her daddy, but changes her name"). Even as these lyrics are fighting against the patriarchy, they are still playing into the patriarchal ideal of ownership inherent in this marriage-as-transaction concept. These lyrics reference the view that she belongs to her father until she is married and is supposed to seek his approval to do so. When she gets married, she then belongs to her husband, who symbolically owns her through her taking of his name. Female conceptions of the American Dream are never simple; they are complex and multilayered.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 191. - "a women's modernity was primarily decorative" while "a man's was primarily functional."

<sup>138</sup> Hayslip, B., Thompson, J., & Dragstrem, M. (2017). I'll name the dogs [Recorded by Blake Shelton]. On *Texoma Sky* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

<sup>139</sup> Billboard. 2019b. "Top Country Albums." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-albums>).

<sup>140</sup> Robbins, J., Hemby, N., & Galyon, N. (2014). Girls [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Platinum* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

Terri Clark's "I Wanna Do It All," which spent 30 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number three 10 years prior, in early 2004, has a more complicated view on this matter.<sup>141</sup> The lyrics of this song say that "[she wants to] get [her] heart broke once or twice" and then "settle down with the love of [her] life[ and] rock little babies to sleep at night." This dream is antithetical to the dream as lifelong monogamous marriage. She eventually wants to find one person to spend her life with, but only after being in a number of other relationships first. This view aligns with Lambert's: though she wants to explore her options, she'd eventually like to end up with one person. The writers of Clark's song were all men, which likely had something to do with its success on the charts.<sup>142</sup>

A song which has a straightforward view on this matter, one which aligns perfectly with the typical male perspective, is Taylor Swift's "Mary's Song (Oh My My My)" which was released in 2006, when she was 16 years old. This is a song, that she co-wrote, on her self-titled debut album with another female and a male songwriter. The lyrics walk through each significant step in a couple's love story which began when she "was seven, and [he was] nine." The listener hears about their adolescence, sees them get married and finally hears her saying, "Take me home where we met so many years before / We'll rock our babies on that very front porch / after all this time, you and I" and her fantasizing about how "[she'll] be 87[ and he'll] be 89" and they'll still be together. This song not only focuses on lifelong love, but also sees this love as being tied to one house and the couple's story not being complete without children.<sup>143</sup>

### *Love Songs and Individualism*

---

<sup>141</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>142</sup> Goddard, G., Giles, R., & Nichols, T. (2003). I wanna do it all [Recorded by Terri Clark]. On *Pain To Kill* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.

<sup>143</sup> Swift, T., Rose, L., & Maher, B. (2006). Mary's song (oh my my my) [Recorded by Taylor Swift]. On *Taylor Swift* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Records.

Both “Love Like Crazy” and “The House That Built Me” are love songs, as most songs on the radio tend to be, or as all popular songs are according to Adorno.<sup>144</sup> Most significantly, this means that they focus on the relationship between two individuals. This focus on an individual story means a narrowed view that tends to disregard the bigger picture. Ignoring structural realities in order to focus on singular cases is a key way in which exceptionalism is upheld.<sup>145</sup> The thought that following the template of one American-Dream-achieving couple can allow anyone to be successful denies any recognition of the systemic oppressions in place to prevent this dream from becoming a widespread reality. These stories that provide an example of what is possible are powerful tools used to keep the oppressed from rising up. The widespread belief in their plausibility presents a threat to the class consciousness necessary for a revolution.<sup>146</sup> A focus on individualism perpetuates an ignorance of structural oppressions. I return to this issue in further depth in Chapter 4.

---

<sup>144</sup> Adorno, *The Culture Industry*. - Adorno argues that all popular music is essentially saying the same thing and that it has no potential for leading to social change.

<sup>145</sup> Wright Mills, Charles. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

<sup>146</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

## CHAPTER 2: THE DREAM AS FREEDOM

“She’s always lived for tomorrow / She’s never learned how to live for today” - Reba, “Is There Life Out There”<sup>147</sup>

“Freedom, nothin’ feels like freedom.” - Reba, “Freedom”<sup>148</sup>

This conception of the American Dream, by traditional understandings of the concept of freedom, would be rather straightforward. By a more standard vision of what “freedom” means, it would seem that there would be little variation within this particular conception of the American Dream; however, in this chapter, in line with my gendered analysis of conceptions of the American Dream, I argue that the idea of the American Dream in terms of freedom varies significantly according to gender. To demonstrate this, I provide several examples of what freedom looks like from the male perspective: pre-recession, during the recession, and post-recession. Since this view has remained rather static, I do not spend as much time on it. I provide three female perspectives from many years apart to demonstrate the ways in which female conceptions of the American Dream have both evolved and remained constant. I discuss this in terms of women’s voices as artists and songwriters as well as looking at the ways in which the reception of their messages have changed using the recession as a lens through which to understand these differences. Again, I use evidence from the charts as well as lyrics from songs with similar themes to support my analysis.

### *The Male Conception*

#### *Recession.*

---

<sup>147</sup> Giles, R. & Longacre, S. (1991). Is there life out there [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *For My Broken Heart* [CD]. Chicago, IL: MCA Records.

<sup>148</sup> Dreyer, J., Brunswick, J., Pierce, J., & Cecil, T. (2019). Freedom [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *Stronger Than The Truth* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.

A song which exemplifies this perspective is “It’s America” by Rodney Atkins which spent 26 weeks on the Country Airplay chart on which it reached and spent two weeks at number one in May of 2009.<sup>149</sup> The lyrics of this song paint the picture of an America in which everybody has a great life because they all share in activities which are quintessentially American. These components to an American life are listed out to an uptempo, positive instrumental, which gives the impression that everybody is having a happy life. From activities which are done in childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood, the actions that individuals take are always voluntary and, as far as they are discussed, result in enjoyment. Though there is a line which says that “we don’t always get it all right” it is quickly followed up with the statement, “there’s no place else I’d rather build my life,” which reduces its impact by diminishing its apparent significance. This song tries to lead the listener to believe that America can be represented by “a kid with a chance,” something which freedom gives a person. The lyrics also state that “it’s a big flag flyin’ in the summer wind over a fallen hero’s grave.” These references to the American flag and soldiers bring to the forefront of one’s mind the idea of freedom like nothing else does. These symbols are so ingrained in our collective imaginary that there is an instant association which happens each time we hear them and country music is known for not shying away from these patriotic references which conjure to mind thoughts of freedom as well as blatantly claiming it outright. This song’s release around the time of the recession was likely an attempt to hold onto the illusion of America as a nearly perfect nation in which people still wanted to believe.<sup>150</sup>

*Pre-recession.*

---

<sup>149</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>150</sup> Petraglia, A., & James, B. (2009). It’s America [Recorded by Rodney Atkins]. On *It’s America* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.

Despite there being “hard times in the neighborhood,” Travis Tritt, in his 2001 number-two song which was written by a male and spent 38 weeks on the Airplay chart overall, would want us to believe that “It’s A Great Day To Be Alive.”<sup>151</sup> By focusing on the small things, personal aspects of a life which are relevant to the individual in the moment, this story maintains a positive outlook on life. The man in this song says he “might... take [his] old Harley for a three-day cruise,” an image which cannot help but conjure up thoughts of freedom. This is also a very individual act. Focusing on the bright side during tough times is very important on an individual level in the short term in order to maintain mental health and wellbeing. If we focus too much on all the major issues plaguing our society, only seeing the bad, we will easily get overwhelmed, which isn’t helpful in working toward change. The problem comes in because this ignorance of social realities is harmful at a societal level. It is extremely difficult to balance the psychological wellbeing of the individual in the moment with the overall health of a society because each requires an opposing approach. Songs which focus on the immediate mental health of an individual who needs to remember that there are positive aspects of the world when they are having a really rough time, such as the fact that “the sun’s still shining when [they] close [their] eyes” serve a purpose. They are also abundant recently. This means that there is a lack of the alternative perspective, which is necessary to rouse people to action, in solidarity, to address social issues. Even worse, the preoccupation with the individual shifts and holds the focus away from these issues more generally, not only because the opposite messages, those about the systems, are less prevalent, but because when they are heard, people don’t want to pay attention to them as much since the realities are painful.<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>152</sup> Scott, D. (2000). It’s a great day to be alive [Recorded by Travis Tritt]. On *Down The Road I Go* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony BMG Music Entertainment.

*Post-recession.*

Dierks Bentley's "Home" spent 26 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and reached number one, where it spent one week, in March of 2012.<sup>153</sup> This song was written by three men, so it makes sense that much of it is focused on the past, when men felt more in control, and thus likely more free. The lyrics, "Free, nothing feels like free / though it sometimes means we don't get along / 'cause same, no we're not the same / but that's what makes us strong" demonstrate the high value that is placed on freedom and recognize the fact that groups have differing interests, but they fail to acknowledge the fact that the various groups don't have the same access to this freedom; however, the chorus does seem to admit that this nation is not perfect, that its history is blemished and that there is still work to be done: "There's a way to find better days I know / It's been a long hard ride, got a ways to go / but this is still the place, that we all call home." While there are moments where these lyrics allow that this country is flawed, a sense of hope is still maintained throughout the entirety of the song, both lyrically and sonically, especially in the chorus. This admission of imperfection is significant, signaling the fact that oppressive realities are not necessarily invisible to those who do not face them but rather that they are viewed as insignificant, a theory which is supported by the way in which they are mentioned in passing without having much time or thought devoted to them in many songs.<sup>154</sup>

This male conception of freedom is based upon constitutional rights which are guaranteed on paper as well as on historical and present realities of this group of individuals. Men, especially the white men who are singing these songs, are free to a large extent in this country. Even those who are struggling financially due to class oppressions still have many opportunities.

---

<sup>153</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>154</sup> Beavers, B., Wilson, D., & Bentley, D. (2012). Home [Recorded by Dierks Bentley]. On *Home* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.



This is not the case for women who have been oppressed in this nation since before its beginning, or as Margo Price says in her song “Pay Gap,” “women do work and get treated like slaves since 1776.”<sup>155</sup> Men have every reason to feel free in this country, whereas women do not enjoy this same privilege. This female reality, in stark contrast to that of men’s, is precisely what has resulted in the gendered gap in conceptions of the American Dream as freedom.

*A Female Conception Centered on Work - Pre-Recession*

Sugarland’s “Something More” spent 25 weeks on the Airplay chart and peaked at number two in August of 2005.<sup>156</sup> This song tackles a number of aspects of American society which leave the narrator with more to be desired in regard to freedom. These lyrics take issue with the constricting conditions of alienated labor in the United States:<sup>157</sup>

Monday, hard to wake up / fill my coffee cup, I’m out the door / Yeah the  
freeway, standing still today / is gonna make me late, and that’s for sure / I’m  
running out of gas and out of time / never gonna make it there by nine.<sup>158</sup>

This sentiment is one which is echoed in many country songs, which tend to focus on working class life. As one example, Terri Clark’s “I Wanna Do It All,” which was at the top of the charts the previous year, begins with the lines “I was sitting in traffic for the fifth year in a row / wasting my time just to get where I don’t even want to go.” She then goes on to dream about what she wishes she could be doing instead: “I started jotting things down on a Krispy Kreme sack / everything I’d do if I could leave this place and never look back / I wanna do it all.” What follows is a list of things she would like to do, all of which involve her having a strong sense of

---

<sup>155</sup> Price, M. (2017). Pay gap [Recorded by Margo Price]. On *All American Made* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Third Man Records.

I discuss this quote more in-depth in Chapter 5.

<sup>156</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>157</sup> McLellan, David. 1977. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

<sup>158</sup> Nettles, J., Hall, K., & Bush, K. (2004). Something more [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Twice The Speed Of Life* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.

freedom instead of the subjugated feeling which her current reality maintains in her. Lyrics such as, “I wanna spend a day every now and then just doin' what I wanna do / When I wanna do it (I wanna do it all) / Anytime I wanna do it (I wanna do it all)” implicitly state that her present reality is not a free one. People who are free do what they want to do all the time; they do not have to hope that they will be lucky enough to occasionally, eventually do that which brings them joy. This aspect of the song centers on the pursuit of happiness.<sup>159</sup>

The everyday grind which is standard for many Americans<sup>160</sup> is not the idea of freedom which this individual has and they are not going to put up with this reality. This is evidenced in the song's chorus:

There's gotta be something more / gotta be more than this / I need a little less hard time / I need a little more bliss / I'm gonna take my chances / Taking a chance I might / find what I'm looking for / There's gotta be something more.

This quest for “something more” blatantly demonstrates a dissatisfaction with the way that things are. This individual does not plan on continuing to be stuck in this broken system, opting, rather, to take things into her own hands:

Five years and there's no doubt / That I'm burnt out, I've had enough / So now boss man, here's my two weeks / I'll make it short and sweet, so listen up / Well I could work my life away, but why? / I got things to do before I die.

Instead of continuing to suffer within the system that oppresses her day in and day out, she is taking her freedom into her own hands. This is made obvious in the lyrics, “Some believe in destiny, and some believe in fate / but I believe that happiness is something we create / You best believe that I'm not gonna wait / 'cause there's gotta be something more.” Taking the opposite stance of the majority of songs which seem to believe in the philosophy that “if it's meant to be, it'll be,” these lyrics recognize and capitalize on the autonomy of the individual to take actions

---

<sup>159</sup> Goddard, Giles, & Nichols, I wanna do it all.

<sup>160</sup> This - the idea of work as a ball and chain - is a common theme in country music (i.e. Dolly Parton's “9 To 5”).

which will help shape her future into what she wants it to be. Rather than resigning herself to the fact that things will eternally be the way they currently are, she believes in her capability to make a difference in her life. This song was co-written by two women and a man and provides a pre-recession female viewpoint on freedom. It was released at a time when female voices were much more prevalent on the radio and female perspectives were not stifled.<sup>161</sup>

*Female Conceptions Centered on the Home - Post-Recession*

Sunny Sweeney's "Bottle by My Bed" provides a complex post-recession viewpoint on freedom. This song was released in 2017 as a track on Sweeney's fourth studio album. Being that she co-wrote it with another female singer-songwriter and released it during a time when there were virtually no females on the radio it is not surprising that it did not appear on the charts.<sup>162</sup> The fact that this is the case even while the ideals expressed in this song are extremely traditional shows how strong this bias against women really is; even when women are not challenging the status quo, they still are not supported because the simple fact that they are women is seen as threatening enough. There are multiple female conceptions of what the American Dream looks like contained in this song. The protagonist in the lyrics idealizes a life entirely antithetical to that which her friends do.

The main focus of these lyrics are on the story of a woman who has a husband and a house, but longs to have a child. As is evidenced in the chorus:

It's an empty room at the top of the stairs / Watching the evening news with a  
couple of beers / I only call my husband baby cause I love the word / Never  
wanted something so bad that it hurts / Even give up these damned ol' cigarettes /  
If I could have a bottle by my bed.

---

<sup>161</sup> Nettles, Hall, & Bush, *Something more*.  
Bufwack, and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*.

The '90s was a unique time period in between wars in which there was a much more easygoing attitude in the U.S.

<sup>162</sup> This song was released as a single.

While this view is not as centered on freedom, it is the basis for that of her friends antithetical conception. It is true that this particular woman wants a family, but many women who do have these more traditional lives want the opposite. They often feel trapped and want nothing more than to be freed from the exact reality that the woman in this song wishes upon herself. The friends in these lyrics are all “raising babies” while the narrator is “still raising cane.” She thinks that “they must think because [she’s] waited that [she doesn’t] want the same” and that “their days are spent changing diapers” and so “they think [hers] are so exciting / running off to where the lights are so much brighter.” Her friends who do have children want to be free to do things for themselves. They want to be able to move freely and do things which bring them enjoyment, rather than being tied down by the overwhelming and monotonous responsibilities of the home and raising children.<sup>163</sup> If women are theoretically free to participate in certain activities because they are legally given the right to, this does not translate to this being the case in reality. If women cannot engage in that which they feel would make them wholly free citizens due to gendered roles and responsibilities, then the law is useless. If what is said to be guaranteed on paper is not truly guaranteed in practice, then many women are still left wanting for freedom. This feeling of being tied down to this way of life is related to the feeling of being tied down to a place that Musgraves expresses in “Merry Go ‘Round.”

*A Female Conception Centered on Space - Pre-Recession*

Dixie Chicks’ “Wide Open Spaces” spent 27 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart and four weeks at number one in late 1998.<sup>164</sup> This song was written by a female, which is evident in the perspective it takes. The fact that it reached number one on country radio is no

---

<sup>163</sup> Sweeney, S. (2017). Bottle by my bed [Recorded by Sunny Sweeney]. On *Trophy* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Aunt Daddy Records.

<sup>164</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

surprise given both the popularity of the Dixie Chicks during this time and the prevalence of number-one songs by female artists during the '90s. These lyrics talk about leaving home “to find a dream and a life of [one’s] own.” She needs to feel independent and responsible for her own actions; “She needs wide open spaces / room to make her big mistakes / She needs new faces / She knows the high stakes.” She cannot have all her actions controlled and monitored. She needs to experience new things, instead of being held down by being stuck in the same area, with limited possibilities forever. Even though it may be a risk, she cannot keep living feeling caged. She’s been dreaming about becoming free since she was a little girl and now she is finally able to realize that dream: “A young girl’s dreams no longer hollow.” The fact that she has only been able to wish for it up until this point is proof that freedom does not belong to everyone. It has been like this for women generation after generation. As the woman in this song is leaving home to pursue her dreams, her mother reminisces on her journey out on her own in an attempt to gain freedom. “Mom stares out the window and says, “I’m leaving my girl” / She said, “It didn’t seem like that long ago” / when she stood there and let her own folks know...;” she goes on to communicate the same desires that her daughter is presently expressing. This reflection on how her parents must have felt when she left home demonstrates the mother’s perception of striking out on one’s own as a tradition.<sup>165</sup> This contrasts with the views that Musgraves and Lambert lay out in which women stay close to home. While the male conception of the American Dream as freedom is one in which we are all free and have always been, the female conception of the dream is and has been one in which the dream of freedom is aspirational.<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Marx, Karl. [1867] 2009. *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*. Washington, DC: Reprint, Regnery Publishing. - This evidences an awareness of social production.

<sup>166</sup> Gibson, S. (1998). *Wide open spaces* [Recorded by Dixie Chicks]. On *Wide Open Spaces* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

### CHAPTER 3: THE DREAM AS LOVE AND SIMPLICITY

“I’m above the below and below the upper / I’m stuck in the middle where money gets tight / but I guess I’m doing alright.” - Jo Dee Messina, “I’m Alright”<sup>167</sup>

“Two young people, without a thing / say some vows and spread their wings / and settle down just what they need / ... Livin’ on love, buyin’ on time / without somebody nothin’ ain’t worth a dime / ... It sounds simple, that’s what you’re thinkin’ ” - “Alan Jackson, “Livin’ On Love”<sup>168</sup>

“There’s more to life than what I got” - Reba McEntire, “Little Rock”<sup>169</sup>

This conception of the American Dream is similar to the one I lay out in chapter one, but it is distinct in several important ways. This version of the dream does not necessarily center on the home or the other aspects of the dream which are linked to traditional views of the nuclear family such as getting married and having children. There are two significant components of this conception of the dream: 1) love as all that one needs to be happy and 2) the lack of need for money or material things as long as one has someone to love. Both are related and usually go hand in hand, though the focus on money is not always present in every iteration of this version of the dream. In this chapter, I provide examples for each of the two main aspects of this conception of the American Dream from both a male and a female perspective whenever possible. I also call attention to how this conception has developed over time. To begin, I provide multiple songs from one artist who has remained popular over the years to demonstrate this relative consistency across time.

#### *A Male Conception Centered on Love - One Artist’s View Across Time*

---

<sup>167</sup> Petraglia, Angelo T., Lawrence B. Gottlieb, and Kim Richey. (1998). I’m Alright [Recorded by Jo Dee Messina]. On *I’m alright* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.

<sup>168</sup> Jackson, A. (1994). Livin’ on love [Recorded by Alan Jackson]. On *Who I Am* [CD]. New York, NY: Arista Records.

<sup>169</sup> DiPiero, B., House, G., & McManus, P. (1987). Little rock [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *Reba McEntire’s Greatest Hits* [CD]. Chicago, IL: MCA Records.

Tim McGraw became one of the most popular artists in country music in the '90s and has continued to be extremely successful since. Looking at several of his songs over the years, both from his solo career as well as a duet with his wife, Faith Hill, another artist who found significant success in the '90s, gives a good idea of the ideals which the country listenership is both being exposed to and invested in over the years. When an artist is as well-liked as McGraw is, regardless of the chart success of a song, their song is going to have a high rate of exposure.

Tim McGraw's "Where The Green Grass Grows" is a single off of his 1997 album *Everywhere*. This song, which was co-written by a female and a male, spent 32 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number one in late 1998, where it spent four weeks.<sup>170</sup> This song starts out similarly to Clark's "I Wanna Do It All," which expresses a desire to escape the everyday grind of modern-day life in American society, and has a similar general structure overall in that it uses the discussion of that which the individual is trying to escape to frame the dream that they want to pursue and achieve. Rather than wanting to do it all, in this case, the individual has a very specific view of what he wants to do with his life and that is to live very simply. This is made obvious in the chorus of the song:

I'm gonna live where the green grass grows / Watch my corn pop up in rows /  
 Every night be tucked in close to you / Raise our kids where the good Lord's  
 blessed / Point our rockin' chairs towards the west / And plant our dreams where  
 the peaceful river flows / Where the green grass grows.

This individual wants only to spend his time with the one he loves in a laid-back setting. He does not need, or want, all the distractions of the modern world to fill his days. He wants to enjoy the simple pleasures in life. The message in this song is clearly still important to country music consumers because not only is this song still played on the

---

<sup>170</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

radio relatively frequently, especially for its age, but there are also many current songs which are communicating essentially the same message as this one is.<sup>171</sup>

Seventeen years later, in 2015, Tim McGraw's "Top Of The World" spent 23 weeks on the chart overall and peaked at number five in late December.<sup>172</sup> It was written by three men, reflecting the gender makeup of country radio at that time as the writers of his previous song did as well. These lyrics communicate a lack of interest in specificity in all realms of the individual's life other than being with his love. He does not need to have a fancy house and couldn't care less where he lived: "We could have a little double wide planted in an empty field / We could have a big old white picket wrap around on a hill." He is at home as long as he is with her; he has everything he needs. This is evidenced in the lines: "Don't make a difference to me baby, where the wind takes me, long as I'm with you girl / We could have something or nothing, still be sitting on top of the world." The chorus blatantly communicates this ideal of love as the end-all and be-all:

'Cause when you got love, like we got love / I'm holding on to heaven, holding on to you / When you got one, like I got one / any way you looking, it's a hell of a view / Don't know where we're gonna be / but I know we're gonna be / sitting on top of the world / so keep hanging on to me / Yeah, don't you wanna be / sitting on top of the world / Top of the world.<sup>173</sup>

The version of the American Dream that is presented in this song is virtually unchanged from that which was evident in McGraw's former hit.

Tim McGraw and Faith Hill's "The Rest of Our Life" is the title track off of their 2017 collaborative album which was released following years of previous duets they've recorded on

---

<sup>171</sup> Leary, J. & Wiseman, C. (1997). Where the green grass grows [Recorded by Tim McGraw]. On *Everywhere* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.

<sup>172</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>173</sup> Robbins, J., Nite, J., & Osborne, J. (2015). Top of the world [Recorded by Tim McGraw]. On *Damn Country Music* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.



one another's albums. It spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number 25, where it spent two nonconsecutive weeks.<sup>174</sup> Though the song was written by three men, since Hill's voice is just as prominent in this song as McGraw's, a female perspective is also evident. This song provides a rare chance to discuss both a male and a female perspective in one song.

The chorus of this song repeats: "There's one thing I should be killing off and giving up now / and that's worryin' about life / Oh, I'll be fine" and goes on to say how they will be unaffected by the ravages of time as long as they are together. In other words, they'll be fine for the rest of their lives. The chorus is sung from both the female and the male perspective. The first verse, which paints the picture of a marriage proposal, is told from the male perspective: "So I take your hand and ask you / Have you made plans for the rest of your life?" The second verse, which talks about wanting to have children, is told from the female perspective: "I've been making plans for children / Since I've been looking in your eyes." In these ways, this depiction of the dream is gendered and is similar to that presented in Sweeney's "Bottle By My Bed." The portions of the song which are sung from a joint perspective talk about how neither of them cares about any struggles they may have to face, as long as the other one is there by their side. The only aspect of their lives that truly matters to them is their love for one another. This shared existence is what constitutes the entirety of their version of the dream.<sup>175</sup>

Across time, both in his solo work, as well as in his duets with Hill, McGraw's iteration of the dream is fairly consistently one in which simplicity and love rule and material things do not play a role. While there are small moments of a female perspective, either from the writer

---

<sup>174</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>175</sup> Wadge, A., Sheeran, E., McDaid, J., & Mac, S. (2017). The rest of our life [Recorded by Faith Hill and Tim McGraw]. On *The Rest of Our Life* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

standpoint or the artist standpoint, it is overwhelming from the male perspective. I now discuss several wholly female perspectives on this version of the dream centered on love.

*A Female Conception Centered on Love: What A Woman Wants - Pre-recession*

*Any man of mine.*

In the '90s, few artists were as popular and had as much influence as Shania Twain.<sup>176</sup> This being so, the messages of her songs were ones which both were reflective of the values of her listeners and impactful on the ideals held by those same listeners. Twain co-wrote her song "Any Man Of Mine" with a male songwriter. It spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and peaked at number one in July of 1995 where it spent two weeks.<sup>177</sup> This song lays out "what a woman wants." The construction of the American Dream which is created in this song centers on unconditional love. Regardless of how the woman looks, what she does, or how she feels, she expects her man to treat her with respect and support her. If she ever feels negatively about herself, does something that others would criticize, or says that "another woman's lookin' better than [her]," he should do and say whatever will make her feel better. He would never put her down or make her feel less than. He should only elevate her by boosting her self-confidence and recognizing the amazing woman that she is.<sup>178</sup>

Because Shania was extremely well-loved, her positive messages about female empowerment significantly influenced female listeners' imaginary. Her songs encouraged women to not put up with mistreatment or anything less than they were worth. This song in particular, being a line dance, asked individuals to physically participate in the lyrics. Engaging

---

<sup>176</sup> McCusker, Kristine M., and Diane Pecknold, eds. 2004. *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

<sup>177</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>178</sup> Lange, R. J. & Twain, S. (1995). Any man of mine [Recorded by Shania Twain]. On *The Woman In Me* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.

with the message in this way invited women, through embodiment, to become more invested in it by identifying with it. This is due to cognitive dissonance.<sup>179</sup> If one is not only listening to and singing along with a song, but also physically interacting with it, especially with and in front of others, one has to be able to justify this relationship with the song by realizing that what the lyrics are saying is important to them. This should lead these women to try to align their everyday lives with these values which the song holds because if they don't they will feel discomfort at their beliefs not being reflected in their actions. In this way, music has a powerful influence on individuals.

*Stand beside me.*

Continuing on this theme of the ideal of being treated properly in a relationship, it is relevant to discuss Jo Dee Messina's 1998 hit "Stand Beside Me." Though this song speaks from a female perspective, it was written by a male, a fact that has many interesting implications in and of itself. Men's assumption that they can possibly understand what it feels like to be a woman and thus can effectively write from a female perspective without any input from a woman, is extremely ignorant of the fact that women face many realities on a day to day basis that men in a patriarchal society could never understand. All that being said, this song provides an important female perspective of what the dream is to the mix.

"Stand Beside Me" spent 32 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number one on January 30, 1999.<sup>180</sup> It spent three weeks at the top, so it was both well-known and reflective of existing values in women's imaginary. The song is framed at the beginning as a story about lost love. The man treats the woman poorly, walking out on her, and she goes out on

---

<sup>179</sup> Allahyani, Mariam Hameed Ahmed. 2012. "The Relationship between Cognitive Dissonance and Decision-Making Styles in a Sample of Female Students at the University of Umm Al Qura." *Education* 132(3):641-663.

<sup>180</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

her own, working multiple jobs to support herself. Though she is going through a tough time, she comes to realize that she doesn't miss what she had because she wants a relationship in which she is treated with respect. The chorus lays out her view of a romantic reality that, for her, constitutes the dream:

I want a man that stands beside me / not in front of or behind me / Give me two arms that want to hold me, *not own me* / and I'll give all the love in my heart / Stand beside me / Be true, don't tell lies to me / I'm not lookin' for a fantasy / I want a man who stands beside me. (emphasis mine)

This construction of what a heterosexual relationship should be like fights back against the notion of ownership that is inherent in the traditional patriarchal construction of a relationship between a woman and a man. The man in the story eventually comes back, trying to win her over again. And she stands her ground and tells him what she wants, knowing that he cannot fill those shoes. In this way, this song depicts a strong woman who knows what she wants and works toward it. Since Messina was also widely popular during the '90s and early 2000s, this means that her work was important to the country music listenership, women, whom her messages were targeted at, in particular.<sup>181</sup>

*Now that I found you.*

Once one finds the perfect person, the dream is to keep them. Other than the maintenance of what one already has, there is no desire for more in this view because one already has all that one needs. Terri Clark's "Now That I Found You" perfectly encapsulates this perspective. This song, which was co-written by two men and woman, spent 26 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number two in July of 1998.<sup>182</sup> The lyrics of this song discuss the feeling that this individual has now that she has found the person who treats her and makes her feel how

---

<sup>181</sup> Davis, S. (1998). Stand beside me [Recorded by Jo Dee Messina]. On *I'm Alright* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.

<sup>182</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

she's always wanted. She feels comfortable enough to be who she truly is around them: "Made me feel safe to share my truth." She clearly expresses how this is what she always wished for and that she cannot believe that she finally has this kind of love. Now that she's found the person who makes her feel this way, she says that "A lifetime just ain't enough to love [them] true," demonstrating her desire to have met them sooner. This view is consistent with the dream as lifelong love.

These lyrics also evidence a desire to be healed with love so that one can be one's true self: "a heart that once was broken, is holding nothing back." It is natural to want to live honestly and not have to hide behind a facade. In a society wherein people all too often have to suppress their dreams and constantly work at jobs that they hate in order to survive, this sentiment is extremely relatable. An important reason that so many people do not pursue their dreams is a lack of belief, both in themselves and from others. Women, especially can feel discouraged because of a lack of support from society, which is why it is so meaningful to the woman in the song that her love "believe[s] in [her]." This goes back to the struggle of balancing the need for a recognition of the ways in which people are limited by discriminatory societal realities, in this case, sexism, with the equally as valid need of the individuals experiencing the oppression to have some form of hope in order to strive toward and accomplish their goals. Without a healthy amount of optimism, it is all too likely that people will give up all together, seeing the fight as futile, and fall victim to the systems which are oppressing them.<sup>183</sup>

*Cowboy take me away.*

Sometimes the harsh realities of present day society can be too much and one just needs to escape them altogether. The Dixie Chicks' 1999 hit "Cowboy Take Me Away" embodies this

---

<sup>183</sup> Martin, J. D., Begaud, P., & Corish, V. (1998). Now that I found you [Recorded by Terri Clark]. On *How I Feel* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.

idea. This song was co-written by a female and a male songwriter. It spent 41 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and in February of 2000, it ultimately reached number one where it spent three weeks.<sup>184</sup> This is a relatively long time for a song to be on the charts and a run of three weeks at number one is not insignificant either. This song's message was obviously relevant to its audience.

The lyrics of this song paint the picture of a woman who is happy with having nothing but that which nature provides other than the company of the one she loves. When discussing the notion of it, she says, "Oh, it sounds good to me." She wants to escape the shackles of fast-paced modern life and slow down, "I wanna walk and not run" and to take chances and succeed "I wanna skip and not fall." She just wants to be by herself. She doesn't need anybody else to be happy: "I wanna be the only one for miles and miles." She then adds, "except for maybe you and your simple smile," but this is an afterthought and a mere possibility that she seems to not be too invested in either way. In this version of the dream, the woman could have another individual with her to keep her company, but she does not *need* them there to bring her joy. She could be perfectly content on her own. This view contrasts sharply with that presented in Montgomery's "I Can Love You Like That" which presumes that women want to be with a man and that they cannot truly be happy without having this relationship.<sup>185</sup>

The woman in this story wants to be "set free." Religion is brought into the equation when she says, "oh, I pray" and that her being set free would entail her being brought "closer to heaven above and closer to [her love]." There is much religious symbolism and mention of ideas tied to Christianity in country music in general. In this case, understanding the concept of heaven

---

<sup>184</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>185</sup> Kimball, Derry, & Diamond, I can love you like that.

Hummon, M. & Eleanor, M. (1999). Cowboy take me away [Recorded by Dixie Chicks]. On *Fly* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

allows the listener to fully grasp the meaning of this relationship to the woman in the story. Using a referent of which everyone will comprehend the significance, serves the purpose of helping the listener to understand that for this woman, complete bliss would be to be alone with her love. This is a perfect example of how imagery and values of significance to a society can be utilized in music lyrics to help consumers grasp a song's true meaning. Clarity of intentions is realized through references to notable cultural concepts.<sup>186</sup>

*Refusal to settle.*

Sugarland's "Settlin'" presents a view which seemingly contradicts the overwhelming opinion that one should not require much to be happy. Though Jennifer Nettles and Kristian Bush co-wrote this song with another male writer, meaning that there were more male writers contributing to its composition than females, Nettles is the lead singer and so it still exhibits a distinctly female voice. This song spent 21 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and peaked at number one on May 19, 2007.<sup>187</sup> This is a story of a woman who keeps going on dates that lead nowhere. She is tired of wasting her time "for mister right now, not mister forever." She says how she's "been leaving it up to fate," but now she is going to take her destiny into her own hands. She does not want to squander her life away, never knowing what true love feels like. The chorus, which constitutes a large portion of the song, drives home her conviction:

I ain't settling for just getting by / I've had enough so-so for the rest of my life /  
Tired of shooting too low, so raise the bar high / Just enough ain't enough this  
time / I ain't settling for anything less than everything.

Similar to Clark's "I Wanna Do It All," the individual in this song wants everything.

Another way to look at this story is that she wants the best that there is to have in one particular area, which is her love life. Either way, she wants more than she has

---

<sup>186</sup> Hummon & Eleanor, Cowboy take me away.

<sup>187</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

experienced thus far and she has set her sights on this goal, realizing that one can only achieve as much as one aspires to, so setting low expectations does not give her much to work toward.<sup>188</sup>

Keeping all this in mind, this conception is really not all that different from the majority of others. Those who say they are content having little, or nothing, other than their love, aren't necessarily settling. Quite the contrary. These individuals feel this way because they did not settle and they found the one for which this song is describing the quest.

All of these songs represent various female conceptions of the American Dream prior to the recession. Following is the discussion about a song which was released after the recession and whether the view of the dream appears to differ in its construction or not.

#### *A Female Conception Centered on Love - Post-recession*

The Band Perry's "All Your Life" was released in 2010 as a track on the band's debut studio album. The song had both male and female influence in the writing process, but was written and is sung from the female perspective. It spent 31 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart and two weeks at number one where it peaked in February of 2012.<sup>189</sup> The narrative presented in these lyrics is one wherein the woman does not want anything but simply to be the only one who her man loves for the entirety of his life. This is made obvious in the chorus: "I don't want the whole world / the sun, the moon and all their light / I just wanna be the only girl / you love all your life." She doesn't want any material things, she simply longs for the feelings associated with being in love. She inquires whether the man would do things for her to express his love for her and assures him that she doesn't desire anything more than his lifelong

---

<sup>188</sup> Nettles, J., Bush, K., & Owens, T. (2006). Settlin' [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Enjoy The Ride* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.

<sup>189</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."



devotion to her. This version of the dream, much like the others in this section do not express an idealization of, or even a reference to, the other typical aspects of the American Dream when it is conceived of as being associated with the nuclear family (i.e. homeownership, marriage, and having children). This is, in large part, what makes this conception distinct from that presented in Chapter 1.<sup>190</sup>

All of these constructions of the dream are not asking for much. Just like the male conceptions of the American Dream which fall into this broader theme, they are focused on love and simplicity. These characteristics may take on a different form when presented in female conceptions, but essentially the only change is from ones rooted in tradition, a tradition which is often sexist, to those which work for women as well, those which respect them as human beings and recognize their needs.

*A Male Conception Centered on a Lack of Need for Money - A View Over Time*

*I'm alright.*

A song which evidences this conception of an absence of a need for excess, which was released during the recession, is Darius Rucker's "Alright." It spent 21 weeks on the Billboard Country Airplay chart and peaked at number one on August 15, 2009.<sup>191</sup> This song, which Rucker co-wrote with another male songwriter, talks about how this particular individual has the basic necessities in life and does not feel like he is missing out on anything by not having the flashier things that people often get excited about. He may not have the expensive versions of things, but he has the basic level in many areas, which is all he needs.<sup>192</sup> In regard to the his apparent lack in comparison to others, he says:

---

<sup>190</sup> Henningson, B. & Henningson, C. (2010). All your life [Recorded by The Band Perry]. On *The Band Perry* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.

<sup>191</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>192</sup> See Appendix B.

But as far as I can see, I've got everything I want / cause I got a roof over my head / the woman I love laying in my bed / and it's alright, alright / I got shoes under my feet / forever in the eyes staring back at me / and it's alright, alright / Yeah, I got all I need / and it's alright by me.

He appreciates what he does have and does not long for that which he does not have. An important component to this version of the dream is having someone to love forever. He says that he not only has all that he needs, but also all that he wants. When comparing the more lavish dreams that others may have to his realities, he says, “may be a simple life, but that’s okay, yeah / If you ask me baby, I think I’ve got it made” because “it’s all the same to [him] as long as [he’s] with [her].” Religion is brought in with the lyrics, “When I lay down at night I thank the Lord above / for giving me everything I ever could dream of”. This relates the importance of faith to many people who are living this simplistic lifestyle, often not necessarily by choice. Though the man states that he already has achieved his dream and is living it, and this may be the case, he may also tell himself this is so, and truly believe it, because it would be too painful to believe otherwise. Constantly striving for what one knows to be unachievable can be incredibly draining and constructing that type of mood lyrically, or sonically, would not fit the format of current chart-topping country songs, unlike this one, which is, both lyrically and sonically, upbeat and positive.<sup>193</sup>

It is no coincidence that this type of view was being championed at this time in the nation’s history. With many people losing so much, monetarily, it is wise to promote a focus on that which one still has in order to make people feel as though they are being ungrateful for allegedly not appreciating these aspects of their lives enough if they want or express a desire for anything more. The inclusion of the line “I’ve got a roof over my head” in this song is interesting

---

<sup>193</sup> Rucker, D. & Rogers, F. (2008). Alright [Recorded by Darius Rucker]. On *Learn To Live* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.

since millions of people lost their homes during this time period.<sup>194</sup> It is especially poignant because the majority of these affected individuals - many of whom are still significantly impacted and will continue to be - are Black, as is Rucker.<sup>195</sup> This song is one of many which continue the tradition of extolling working class (and in this case, racial) pride.<sup>196</sup>

*A picture of America.*

Keith Urban's "John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16," which was released as a single in 2015, was co-written by three men. It spent 18 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and peaked at number two on September 26, 2015.<sup>197</sup> This song tells a story in a different way than most country songs do. The lyrics are largely a list of central aspects of American life. This song addresses three major themes: love and simplicity, music, and religion. All of them are presented in the form of iconic American images which speak to the values that this society holds. Contained within the song is a reference to the painting *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*.<sup>198</sup> Just using the phrase "broken dreams" within the lyrics alludes to the fact that many of the people who live the lives described in the song dreamt of achieving more, but that their circumstances did not allow them to. The fact that nearly any American should be able to identify with at least

---

<sup>194</sup> Rucker, & Rogers, Alright.

Samuels, Alana. 2017. "The Never-Ending Foreclosure: How can the country survive the next economic crash if millions of families still haven't recovered from the last one?." *The Atlantic*, December 1. Retrieved March 23, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/the-never-ending-foreclosure/547181/>).

<sup>195</sup> White, Gillian B.. 2015. "The Recession's Racial Slant: By 2031, the downturn will have decreased the wealth of the median black household by almost \$100,000." *The Atlantic*, June 24. Retrieved March 23, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/black-recession-housing-race/396725/>).

<sup>196</sup> Charley Pride (also a Black man) was the most successful country artist until Garth Brooks.

<sup>197</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>198</sup> Gottfried Helnwein's *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (1984) is a reinterpretation of Edward Hopper's famous painting of economic hardship, *Nighthawks* (1934), which replaces the three patrons and the attendant of the establishment pictured with American pop culture icons (i.e. Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Elvis Presley, respectively).

one small piece of this song is telling as to the percentage of the population for which this is likely the reality.<sup>199</sup>

*Nothing to worry about.*

Keith Urban's "Worry 'Bout Nothin'" is a track on his 2016 album *Ripcord* which, like the previous song off of the same album, was written by three men. The message of this song is that if this individual has his love "beside [him], it's all the same" to him. Whether he owns a piece of property, or has any money, he doesn't care, because if she is with him, he's "never gonna worry 'bout nothin' again." In this conception of the American Dream, love is all that the man needs. In regard to money, he says that he's "tryin' to make the money but the money ain't gonna make [him] / Do nothin', [he doesn't] really want to / ... nothin' but spend a little time on [her]." Regardless of where the two of them are, it's fine as long as long as they are together.<sup>200</sup> This message presented in this view is similar to that in McGraw and Hill's "The Rest of Our Life".<sup>201</sup> This song, however, has a much more optimistic vibe, sonically, leading people to associate it with positive feelings. Though it was not released as a single, Urban's popularity means that it has reached a large audience nonetheless.

Drake White's "Livin' The Dream" was also written by a trio of male songwriters. This song spent a rather incredible 49 weeks (almost an entire year) on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number 12 on November 26, 2016.<sup>202</sup> The title is a play on words on a phrase which is usually utilized in a sarcastic manner. In this case, when the individual says he's "livin' the dream," he really means it. He discusses all the simple things in his life that he loves and he truly

---

<sup>199</sup> Osborne, J., McAnally, S., & Copperman, R. (2015). John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16 [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Ripcord* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Hit Red Records.

<sup>200</sup> Tompkins, C., Kear, J., & Clawson, R. (2016). Worry 'bout nothin' [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Ripcord* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Hit Red Records.

<sup>201</sup> Wadge, Sheeran, McDaid, & Mac, The rest of our life.

<sup>202</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

sees the life he is living as the dream life. This feeling is reinforced by the uptempo sound of the song.

Eight years after “Alright” topping the charts during the recession, these lyrics also champion love, which, in this case, made it against the odds. They also discuss how “times are hard and hearts break like the bank” just as they clearly were back then, even if it was not explicitly pointed out. This individual recognizes that there are “lots of reasons just to give it on up / leave your soul on the shelf, collectin’ dust” since we’re “livin’ in a world of broken promises and empty tanks,” but he also does not fail to look on the bright side. A fact which is evident in the chorus:

Look at us with a picket fence / Don’t got a lot of money but we’re making a dent  
/ Old Ford truck with a dog in the back / Now ain’t we livin’ the dream? / Big  
blue sky, green, green grass / Ain’t doin’ half bad for a half full glass / Kiss me  
baby yeah just like that now / Now ain’t we livin’ the dream?

This version of the dream does involve owning a home as well as other material things, but it maintains the focus on the fact that the extent of their material wealth is marginal. The extensive utilization of classic optimistic platitudes in these lines serves to make the use of the typically sarcastic phrase all the more ironic.

This version of the dream also includes having children as an important component to the couple’s happiness. There are several references which bring to mind the concept of freedom, implying that this is something for which this man is grateful. The lyrics go on to list some activities which the couple can engage in which don’t cost any money in a lead up to the question “why the hell do we complain?” This type of attitude is incredibly helpful in maintaining a person’s mental health on an individual basis; however, on the societal scale on which these songs also operate, this type of

attitude can lead to complacency. When people believe that they have nothing to complain about, then they won't, and as a result of this, nothing will change.<sup>203</sup>

*Millionaire.*

Chris Stapleton's "Millionaire" was written by one male songwriter. It was released in 2017 and was on the Country Airplay chart for 50 weeks overall (almost an entire year) and had reached number two on March 16, 2019, where it spent three weeks.<sup>204</sup> The essence of this song is that because the man in the story has "love enough to spare," he's "a millionaire." The premise is that "love is more precious than gold" and since this man is with the love of his life, he is rich. Their love is more valuable to him than money could ever be. He not only views himself this way personally, but perceives other people as doing so as well, "people look at her and they look at me / and say, "That boy is sure living in luxury" / Sweet luxury." Even when he literally has no money and almost nothing material to his name, he "still feel[s] like a millionaire."<sup>205</sup> Though it is healthy to have this kind of non-obsession with money, the opposite being all too common in our capitalistic society (a fact which becomes especially obvious in Chapter 4), this view can lead to an ignorance of the fact that problems such as poverty and starvation are widespread, systemic issues. This ignorance results in nothing being done to address these problems.

The message that one should be happy with and appreciative of that which one has because one needs no more than these essentials is one which has been promoted in country music for years. This is a strategic move to keep the working class content so they will not become upset enough with the circumstances which they are in due to intentional systemic

---

<sup>203</sup> Johnston, J., Laird, L., & Douglas, T. (2016). *Livin' the dream* [Recorded by Drake White]. On *Spark* [CD]. Gallatin, TN: Dot Records.

<sup>204</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>205</sup> See Appendix B.

Welch, K. (2017). *Millionaire* [Recorded by Chris Stapleton]. On *From A Room: Volume 2* [CD] Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.

injustices to work together to do something about them. This theme of not needing for the money that one does not have contrasts sharply with the version of the American Dream I present in the next chapter which revolves around the myth of upward mobility.

## CHAPTER 4: THE DREAM AS UPWARD MOBILITY

“Dreams come true.” - Sugarland, “Baby Girl”<sup>206</sup>

“We’re gonna have it all.” - Keith Urban, “Better Life”<sup>207</sup>

This version of the dream is probably one that most people think of when they hear the words “American Dream.”<sup>208</sup> The concept of “climbing the ladder” is a common one in the American imaginary. The myth of this possibility directly contradicts the reality which is the fairly rigid class structure in this country. Whichever social class a person is born into, that is the one in which they will most likely stay.<sup>209</sup> Songs which continue to perpetuate the idea that people can realistically ascend and reach higher rungs on the ladder are a vital component to the maintenance of the deep roots of this ideology in the American imaginary. Music is a unique form of media; people consume the same piece time and again. This helps ensure the message becomes ingrained in their minds and remains a significant influence on their beliefs. This is true of music more than any other form in which narratives come that people consume. The more a person listens to a message, especially when packaged in a particular song, the more attached to it they become. When they also have strong emotions regarding the artist, the effect the message has on them is even more profound.

---

<sup>206</sup> Nettles, J., Hall, K., Bush, K., Simonton, L. K., Hartley, R. B., & Bieser, T. (2004). Baby girl [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Twice The Speed Of Life* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.

<sup>207</sup> Urban, K. & Marx, R. (2004). Better life [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Be Here* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.

<sup>208</sup> Opportunity Insights. 2019. “The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility.” Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://opportunityinsights.org/>). - This source provides research that “shows that children’s chances of earning more than their parents have been declining. 90% of children born in 1940 grew up to earn more than their parents. Today, only half of all children earn more than their parents did.” Due to this, they are attempting to “revive the American Dream” which has been “fading” increasingly each decade.

<sup>209</sup> Chetty, Raj, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter. 2018. “The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility.” Retrieved April 16, 2019 ([https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/atlas\\_paper.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/atlas_paper.pdf)).



*A Female Perspective: Pre-recession - Dreams Come True*

Sugarland's "Baby Girl" perfectly encapsulates the American Dream. It is this particular conception in sonic form. This song was written by three female and three male writers. It spent 46 weeks on the Country Airplay chart, which is approaching an entire year, and peaked at number two on April 2, 2005.<sup>210</sup> The centrality of the message of this song to a version of the American Dream which is so deeply ingrained in the American imaginary is a large part of the reason that this song, which shockingly did not reach number one, is still played fairly frequently on country radio today. The percentage of songs that are in rotation at any given point which are not presently in the top 40 is very small, as I established in Chapter 1. The percentage of songs outside of the group that is played which are not former number ones either is even smaller. Often, the reason the songs in this category are still played despite these ways that they don't fit in with the larger patterns of typical tracks people are hearing is that they are fundamentally tied to the concept of the American Dream.

*Hope.*

This song tells the story of a woman who has moved from her small town to a big city in order to pursue her dreams. She is struggling to survive because as she is learning, it is not everything that people said it would be to live there.<sup>211</sup> It is much harder than anticipated to follow one's passions in this society. Due to the difficulties she's facing, she sends her parents a letter that says:

Dear Mom and Dad,  
 Please send money: I'm so broke that it ain't funny.  
 Well, I don't need much just enough to get me through.  
 Please don't worry 'cause I'm alright;  
 See, I'm playing here at the bar tonight.  
 Well, this time I'm gonna make our dreams come true.

---

<sup>210</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>211</sup> See Appendix B.

Well, I love you more than anything in the world.  
 Love,  
 Your baby girl.

Even as she has to write home asking for money because she is having such a tough time, she still maintains hope that she is going to achieve her family's dreams. This optimism is further reflected in the lines: "I know that I'm on my way / Well, I can tell every time I play / and I know it's worth all the dues I pay / when I can write to you and say...." To her, all these difficult days will be worth it when she finally makes it and there is no doubt in her mind that she will do so. Following these lines is a letter that she hopes to someday write to her parents. One that triumphantly announces that she is now going to take care of her parents, financially, because she has finally made it big:

Dear Mom and Dad,  
 I'll send money: I'm so rich that it ain't funny  
 Well, it ought to be more than enough to get you through.  
 Please don't worry 'cause I'm alright;  
 See, I'm staying here at the Ritz tonight.  
 Whad'ya know we made our dreams come true!  
 And there are fancy cars and diamond rings,  
 But you know that they don't mean a thing  
 Well, they all add up to nothing compared to you.  
 Well, remember me in ribbons and curls.  
 I still love you more than anything in the world.  
 Love,  
 Your baby girl.

On her climb to the top, she says that it was hard to know who she could trust. People tried to tempt her with material possessions, and they still do, but she won't fall for it: she knows what truly has value in this world.<sup>212</sup> She knows that her family is worth far more than all the money, which is ironic since the dream was to obtain more money: this is an interesting contradiction

---

<sup>212</sup> Fox, *Real Country*, 250. - "Country... has repeatedly and critically attacked the inauthenticity and emptiness of elite culture." This individual is resisting the norm of conspicuous consumption and addressing not only the comfort of wealth, but also the status trappings that come along with it. She will not value this culture just because society tells her to.

that is built into this song. It can better be understood when considering the significance of her signing her letters with “Your Baby Girl,” which both signifies her remaining true to her country roots even when she has made it and demonstrates the characteristic infantilization of women (and Black individuals). In order to maintain her focus on the aspects of life which truly matter, she says she’ll “remember what [her] knees are for.” This line’s allusion to praying demonstrates how her faith clearly plays a large role in her ability to achieve her dream. The lyric, “dreams come true”, which is the line the listener is left with at the conclusion of the piece sums up the message of this song.<sup>213</sup>

*A Female Perspective: Post-recession*

*A contrasting opinion: dreams don’t come true.*

In contrast to this view is Angaleena Presley’s “Dreams Don’t Come True,” the main message of which is the opposite of that of Sugarland’s “Baby Girl”. Rather than preaching the upbeat, optimistic message that “dreams come true,” Presley’s song wakes people up to the cold reality that “dreams don’t come true.” This is a track on her 2017 album *Wrangled*. She co-wrote this song with Miranda Lambert and Ashley Monroe, the other two members of the group Pistol Annies. She is relatively unknown besides her association with the group and it is no surprise that this song was not released as a single for this reason alone, along with the fact that both the writers and artist are all female as well of course. On top of this, the mood is extremely pessimistic, the tempo is slow, and both lyrically and sonically, the song is rather depressing. The chorus starts with the statement, “dreams don’t come true / they’ll make a mess out of you.” It goes on to paint a picture of how dreams only serve to haunt people and break their hearts. In response to any optimism that others might attempt to instill in the listener, she warns, “don’t let

---

<sup>213</sup> Nettles, Hall, Bush, Simonton, Hartley, & Bieser, Baby girl.

anyone tell you they do / dreams don't come true." She says that she "hate[s] to put a damper / on the fairytale you pictured" and that she "shoulda known all along that / glass slippers give you blisters."<sup>214</sup> This reference to fairytales is one that is fairly common in music, as I discussed earlier in regard to Montgomery's "I Can Love You Like That;" however, this case is antithetical to that one because, while Presley is alluding to the same fairytale, *Cinderella*, she is using it for a very different purpose.<sup>215</sup> Instead of portraying it as the vision of love to which one should aspire, she focuses on the woman's unfortunate circumstances at the beginning of the story and realizes that she would likely still be there at the end; in this way, she is showing what that dream looks like when it is played out in reality.

*Continuing the tradition of optimism.*

Brooke Eden's "Daddy's Money" is a song whose message aligns better with that presented prior to the recession. This song was co-written by two females and a male. It spent 11 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number 50 on May 7, 2016.<sup>216</sup> Much like Dixie Chicks "Wide Open Spaces," this song tells the story of a woman who leaves home to start her own life. This song's lyrics are a direct response to Ricochet's 1996 song of the same name, which primarily values women for their looks and any money they may have inherited, while saying they don't work for what they have.<sup>217</sup> In contrast to that sexist view of women, this song talks about how this woman has always worked for what she has. She says she "didn't come from the land of milk and honey / everything [she] got, [she] got workin' to the bone." If she is going to achieve the dream, it is going to be because she earned it, not because it was handed to

---

<sup>214</sup> Monroe, A., Lambert, M., & Presley, A. (2017). Dreams don't come true [Recorded by Angaleena Presley]. On *Wrangled* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Mining Light Records.

<sup>215</sup> Kimball, Derry, & Diamond, I can love you like that.

<sup>216</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>217</sup> DiPiero, B., Sanders, M. D., & Seskin, S. (1994). Daddy's money [Recorded by Ricochet]. On *Ricochet* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony BMG Music Entertainment. - "She's got her daddy's money / Her mama's good looks"

her. She says for those who grew up in working class families, not to let their lack of money hold them back from trying to achieve their dreams. Though she has never had much money to live on, she has always had the “hope of the American Dream” to keep her going.<sup>218</sup>

*Luck and religion.*

Brandy Clark’s “Pray To Jesus” is a song on her 2013 album *12 Stories*. She co-wrote this song with a prominent male songwriter. This story is about working class people whose only apparent hope for changing their circumstances comes from God and the lottery: “we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto / ‘cause there ain’t but two ways / we can change tomorrow.” It is made evident how the conditions of their lives are not new, they are part of larger patterns of working class struggle that have existed for generations.<sup>219</sup> The lyrics, “we tell our kids how hard it was back when / same way our parents did to us back then / Thought we’d be different but we’re just like them” demonstrate the vicious cycle in which this class is, and has been perpetually, stuck. In this way, this song’s message is related to that presented in Lambert’s “Babies Makin’ Babies” and Musgraves’ “Merry Go ‘Round.” These lines also show a degree of optimism or at least a wish that things would change. These individuals turn to their faith and the “six little numbers that could change it all” because they have nowhere else to turn and they need something to keep them going in their rather bleak environments. As long as “times are tough and time is borrowed” they will continue to “pray to Jesus” and “play the lotto.” By leaving their lives up to chance and God, people who don’t feel like they have control over their lives, gain hope that perhaps something could go their way.<sup>220</sup>

---

<sup>218</sup> Eden, B. (2015). Daddy’s money [Recorded by Brooke Eden]. [MP3 File]. Nashville, TN: Red Bow Records.

<sup>219</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>220</sup> Clark, B. & McAnally, S. (2013). Pray to Jesus [Recorded by Brandy Clark]. On *12 Stories* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

“The song is saying that people do not have the power to actively change anything for themselves, but just have to passively hope, by praying and buying into the capitalism of the lottery, for change to happen to them not because of

*A Male Perspective - A Little Is Not Enough: Pre-recession*

*Hope.*

Keith Urban's "Better Life" demonstrates a perspective which is entirely antithetical to those presented in the previous chapter. Urban co-wrote this song with another male songwriter. It spent 22 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and reached number one on October 22, 2005, a position it maintained for six weeks.<sup>221</sup> Spending this length of time at the top of the charts is significant, meaning that the song's message is important to its listeners. This is a love story in which the man recognizes that the couple does not have much currently, but he is certain that the future looks bright: "and I promise you you're gonna have / more than just the things that you need / We ain't got much now; we're just startin' out / but I know somehow Paradise is coming". He isn't exactly sure as to how this is going to happen, but he assures her that "someday... good luck's gonna shine... so, hold on, we're headed for a better life." Viewing the life they have as not good enough, though they have love, because they don't have much materially, means that in this version of the dream, money plays a significant role.

He says that although the road is long, they can "dream as big as" they want to because his "faith is strong" and that's "all that really matters." Religion clearly plays an important role in the version of the dream presented in this story. It is possible for this couple to have big dreams and consider them attainable because, although it may not seem realistic given their present circumstances, maintaining faith in God will ensure that they get where they want to go (both in this life and the afterlife, which is alluded to with the use of the word "Paradise" along with the reference to faith). More than this, a continued belief in the American Dream is also

---

them. This song is uplifting for those who feel helpless, but is discouraging to those who believe they can try to change their lives and situations for the better." (C. Marchand-Nazzaro, personal communication, April 15, 2019).

<sup>221</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

what is required to ascend. Truly believing that one can make it is a powerful motivator; however, the assertion in these lyrics is even stronger than that because they are saying that the odds being against them is completely irrelevant. Ignoring the power of the system gives people unrealistic expectations:

Hey, we're gonna leave this all behind us, baby, wait and see / We're headed for a better life, you and me / We're gonna break the chains that bind and finally we'll be free / We're gonna be the ones that have it all, you and me.

The unwavering optimism of this song (i.e. “we’re gonna have it all”) shows a level of confidence unaffected by the fact that evidence found in reality would seriously disagree that this is a probable possibility.<sup>222</sup>

*A Male Perspective: Post-recession*

*A money-positive view.*

Chris Janson’s “Buy Me A Boat” has a very similar message to that of “Pray To Jesus,” but unlike Clark’s song, it is extremely well-known. Janson co-wrote this song with another male songwriter and released it just two years after the release of “Pray To Jesus.” It spent 22 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and peaked at number three on September 26, 2015.<sup>223</sup> Though it did not reach number one, most people would be surprised to learn this given the frequency with which it was played, for several years, how invested in the song fans are, and the centrality of the message to the working class imaginary. This song received about as much exposure as a song is going to get.<sup>224</sup>

---

<sup>222</sup> Urban, K. & Marx, R. (2004). Better life [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Be Here* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.

<sup>223</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

<sup>224</sup> Clark & McAnally, Pray to Jesus.

DuBois, C. & Janson, C. (2015). Buy me a boat [Recorded by Chris Janson]. On *Buy Me A Boat* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Warner Music Nashville.

Personal observation of the frequency with which it was played on the radio, for a long period of time, and performed on major award shows, coupled with how strongly people identify with its message.

Much like in Clark's song, religion also plays a role in Janson's. Though it does not have a recurring appearance in this song, he makes a reference which brings attention to the significance that faith plays for the people in this narrative. The line, "you can't fit a camel through the eye of a needle" is a reference to the New Testament in which Jesus says that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." This idealization - or necessity, depending on how strong one's beliefs are - of living a modest life, plays a vital role in both the working class and American imaginaries. The influence of Christianity leads people to be more content with not having much because they believe that this way of living is the way that God wants them to live. This also means that, in accordance with the prosperity gospel, financial blessings that they receive are also the will of God. Tying wealth to piety in this way has had a profound effect on how Christianity appears in its North American form.

"I ain't rich, but I damn sure wanna be / working like a dog all day,<sup>225</sup> ain't working for me," the opening lines of the song, sum up its main message. Quite the opposite of Eden's message, this individual is tired of constantly working and wishes that he could just inherit a large sum of money so that he wouldn't have to toil away anymore.<sup>226</sup> Though this individual hears people saying, "money can't buy happiness" and "that money is the root of all evil," he still thinks it would be preferable to have copious amounts of money rather than the extremely small amount of which he is currently in possession. The way that he is currently required to live is something that he could "change... if [he] had a couple million dollars" and he says, "[he] hear[s] the Powerball lotto is a-sittin' on a hundred mill'." This is extremely similar to a few lines in "Pray To Jesus:" "Behind the counter up there on the wall / it reads 200 million on the

---

<sup>225</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." - 51% of country music consumers work full time.

<sup>226</sup> See Appendix B.



Powerball.” Placing hope in the lottery is common in the working class community.<sup>227</sup> When people work tirelessly day in and day out only to keep struggling to survive, they have to place their faith in the chance that luck could be on their side in order to maintain their will to keep going. This hope is reflected in the music to which this group listens. Although it is true that “money can’t buy everything,” when a person has very little to begin with, it can make an enormous difference in their lives.<sup>228</sup>

*A money-negative view.*

Kenny Chesney’s “Rich and Miserable” provides the opposing perspective. Though this song was co-written by three males and is sung by a man, a consistently popular one who is very successful on the charts, the fact that the message is anti-American Dream meant that it never had a chance on the charts. This is a track on Chesney’s 2016 album *Cosmic Hallelujah*. It carries on his tradition of recording songs which critique society (i.e. “Noise,” “Reality,” and “Welcome To The Fishbowl”) and follows the pattern of many of his previous songs of this type that are not nearly as successful as his songs that play into the dominant messages. After critiquing various aspects of present-day society, the chorus addresses our insatiable obsession with upward mobility:

We don’t know what we want / but we want it and we want it all right now /  
 We’re too young until we’re too old / We’re all lost on the yellow brick road<sup>229</sup> /  
 We climb the ladder but the ladder just grows / We’re born, we work, we die, it’s  
 spiritual / Enough is never enough / American Dream never wakes up / Too much  
 is never too much / We won’t be happy till we’re rich and miserable.

These lyrics compare this obsession with a religion. Being that people are so devoted to these ideals and have a set of habits, or rituals, which they perform throughout their lives

---

<sup>227</sup> Personal observation.

<sup>228</sup> Clark & McAnally, Pray to Jesus.  
 DuBois, & Janson, Buy me a boat.

<sup>229</sup> This is a common allusion to the upward mobility of immigrants coming into the United States.

in the name of this cause, it is reasonable to view it as a religion-like phenomenon.

People practically worship money, there is a community of believers in that each member of society has bought into both capitalism and the American Dream, which provide the set of beliefs, and the workplace could be considered the place of worship. Many of the criteria for what constitutes a religion are fulfilled here.<sup>230</sup>

There is also an obvious rejection of the belief that money would solve all of our problems evident in these lyrics. Rather than making us happy, it is said that obtaining more money will make us miserable. It is not only the final result of the acquisition of wealth that will take an emotional toll on people, but the journey to get there as well because of the way in which it changes our psyche. Linking the idea of happiness with the gaining of more money leads us to never be satisfied, always striving for more instead of enjoying what we have. Being upset that we do not have even greater wealth than we do, regardless of how much we have, is not the dream. In this way, this conception of the dream aligns with those that call for a simple life.

When he says, “American Dream never wakes up,” it implies that the American Dream is unachievable, because there is no endpoint to the goal. Also, people will never realize this fact since they are so wrapped up in always striving for more. This striving is predicated by the fact that the dream is worth the endeavor, in other words, that it is even possible. This belief is especially evident in the lines: “and maybe we’ll get it (maybe we’ll get it) / maybe we won’t (maybe we won’t) / But even when we get it (but even when we get it) / Really we don’t.” Despite this condemnation of the dominant way of

---

<sup>230</sup> Durkheim, Emile. 1971. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin.  
 Frasure, J., Osborne, J., & McAnally, S. (2016). Rich and miserable [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *Cosmic Hallelujah* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Sony Music Nashville.

life in America, the narrator knows that things are not going to change, so at the end of the song he invites the listeners to continue on this self-destructive path: “Come on, get rich and miserable / Come on, get rich and miserable.”<sup>231</sup>

There are many variations of this conception of the American Dream. Some of them align, while others directly contradict each other. The views in this chapter are generally oppositional to those found in Chapter 3, which instead of wanting for more (money), are content with that which they have. In the next chapter, I talk about the American Dream in terms of the notion of equality.

---

<sup>231</sup> Frasure, Osborne, & McAnally, Rich and miserable.

## CHAPTER 5: THE DREAM AS EQUALITY

“All my life I’ve been pleasing everyone but me / Living someone else’s dream” - Faith Hill, “Someone Else’s Dream”<sup>232</sup>

“You don’t belong to me, but I belong to you” - Patty Loveless, “Chains”<sup>233</sup>

“She’d tell him ‘bout her dreams / he’d just shoot ‘em down” - Martina McBride, “A Broken Wing”<sup>234</sup>

This conception of the American Dream centers on the myth of equality of opportunity for all people in this country. There is quite a bit of variation in this idea. The view that this idealized version of America aligns with reality is rather straightforward, so I will not spend as much time on it. Within the wide range that constitutes the opposing view, that this country is not built upon equality and that people do not experience it in reality, there is disagreement as to whether this will always be the case. Some narratives tell the story of a nation that was founded on inequality, and thus will always be unequal. There are other perspectives that see the widespread injustice, but maintain hope that this reality could someday change. Those songs which maintain hope in the possibility of a brighter future are overwhelmingly those written and/or performed by male artists: this varies in interesting ways post- and pre-recession. Narratives produced by women are more likely to recognize the deep roots of these inequalities and thus be pessimistic regarding their ability to be changed.<sup>235</sup> This is in no small part due to the

---

<sup>232</sup> Wiseman, C. & Bruce, T. (1995). Someone else’s dream [Recorded by Faith Hill]. On *It Matters To Me* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

<sup>233</sup> Reneau, B. & Bynum, H. (1988). Chains [Recorded by Patty Loveless]. On *Honky Tonk Angel* [CD]. Chicago, IL: MCA Records.

<sup>234</sup> House, J., Barnhart, P., & Hogin, S. (1997). A broken wing [Recorded by Martin McBride]. On *Evolution* [CD]. Berlin, Germany: BMG Entertainment.

<sup>235</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. 2016. Intersectionality (*italicize*). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. - Factors such as race, class, and sexuality all affect this perception of society as well, and it is important to look at the areas in which these aspects of identity intersect because people at these intersections have unique experiences in society that cannot be accounted for by any one aspect of their identity.

ways in which women's labor has never been valued in the same way that men's labor has. One of the key parts of the American Dream, homeownership and lifelong companionship, looks different in terms of equality. I begin this chapter with a song which exemplifies women's tendency to be more critical of a view of equality and follow it up with a song which demonstrates a pessimistic male perspective. I organize this chapter so that the pre-recession views of male and female artists are discussed at the beginning, followed by a perspective found during the recession. The chapter ends with post-recession views on the issue of equality and where our country currently stands. This structure is important because the recession played a profound role in increasing the wealth gap and inequality in the United States.<sup>236</sup>

### *A Woman's Story*

Brandy Clark's "Three Kids No Husband" was co-written by Clark and another female singer-songwriter (2016). This gender makeup alone, before even getting into the actual content of the song, not to mention the fact that it is sung by a female artist, meant that it had almost no chance at country radio.<sup>237</sup> Sonically, this song's singer-songwriter vibe reduced its odds even further, not fitting in with the typically pop-influenced upbeat sound of the format today. On top of this, considering the fact that the lyrics address the day-to-day realities of the life of a single mother of three makes very clear why this song never saw any air time.<sup>238</sup> Country radio is not going to play any messages which do not conform to and support the status quo. An implication of this is the fact that certain issues are not allowed even if they are extremely common and thus relatable to a wide audience, which is traditionally the main goal of country music.

---

<sup>236</sup> Lowrey, "The Great Recession Is Still With Us."

<sup>237</sup> Moss, "Women on Country Radio."

<sup>238</sup> See Appendix B.

This song shows how many women are stretched too thin, being responsible for far more than any person should reasonably be asked to if they also want to maintain their own wellbeing: “It’s been a 40-hour week and it’s only Tuesday.” Without any assistance, this woman has to go to work, pay the bills, clean the house, cook the meals, help with homework, care for the kids - emotionally, physically, and socially - and anything else that comes up. This song lays out a very different reality than the ones alleged in many mainstream hits: “There’s how you plan it out and how it turns out to be / and a broken home it ain’t no fairytale.” Each one of her children is pulling her in a different direction at any given moment, needing something unique: “And there’s homework and dinner to make / Somebody wants a lullaby / Somebody wants a different channel / Somebody’s dealin’ with their first heartbreak / and the dishes in the sink ain’t gonna wash themselves.” She has to take care of all these needs while also keeping the house running. It’s impossible to make enough money to cover everything when you have “three kids, no husband / and a hairnet job at a diner on Main” where the “lunch tickets ain’t gonna tip themselves.” Given this reality, along with the fact that “she’s waitin’ on the child support / and he keeps swearin’ that it’s comin’ / but if she knows him, she knows where it went,” it’s not surprising that “she’s two weeks late on last month’s rent / ... And that pile of bills ain’t gonna pay themselves.” In this type of a situation, it would not be unrealistic for this family to lose their house, or at least to go without much of what most people take for granted.<sup>239</sup>

---

<sup>239</sup> Parker, Kim. 2015. “Women more than men adjust their careers for family life” *Pew Research Center*. October 12. Retrieved April 19, 2019 ([https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/?fbclid=IwAR0XSoJWXzmZXnaFf0dUx7H2lQk\\_Ldf-7zNCLlgazdZPtTal26UWjfrLAd4](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/?fbclid=IwAR0XSoJWXzmZXnaFf0dUx7H2lQk_Ldf-7zNCLlgazdZPtTal26UWjfrLAd4)). - Very few Americans say that a full-time working mom is ideal for young children, whereas the majority say that a full-time working dad is ideal for young children. Mothers experience career interruptions - such as reduced work hours, taking significant time off, quitting their job, and turning down a promotion - than fathers.

Bufwack, and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 490. - “the number of female headed households climbed to 18 percent in 1999. There are nearly 10 million single mothers in America. Approximately 41 percent of these women live in poverty. And women may be working for more, but they return to homes where they bear the primary responsibilities for children and household chores.”

When she already has all of this on her plate, it becomes beyond impossible to take care of her own needs. She rarely has any time to do something for herself, and likely wouldn't use the resources she has for selfish purposes even if she did get the chance. Because she faces such a high level of stress, "she lights a cigarette out on the balcony / when she gets a couple minutes to herself." This is how she copes in the moment, but in the long-run, it's only hurting her health even more. When she has a moment at work, "she smokes a cigarette out by the loading dock / ... she thinks about a guy who's been coming in a lot," because she doesn't want to be stuck in her current situation forever and she wants a loving, supportive relationship. Her desire for a relationship in this case serves both as a diversion in something exciting and a more pragmatic need for the increased financial stability that comes with two incomes. There is both a financial and temporal benefit of having a partner. Unsurprisingly, being that this song doesn't sugarcoat the reality that many women face daily, it not only does not support the notion that everybody is living the dream, but also contradicts the idea that women have the time to dream, or even that it is a realistic option for them. This is obvious when, in regard to the man who frequents the diner, "she starts to dream and then she stops herself" when she remembers her reality: "She's got three kids, no husband / so she's a mom and a dad and a taxi driver / When the baby's sick, she's an up-all-nighter / a hand and a shoulder and a referee / a real-life hero if you ask me / 'cause those kids ain't gonna raise themselves." This song turns the typical gendered narrative on its head: No man waltzes in to rescue her. As the storyteller sees it, this woman is not only her children's hero, but her own as well.<sup>240</sup>

### *Hard Times Hit White Men*

---

<sup>240</sup> Clark, B. & McKenna, L. (2016). Three kids no husband [Recorded by Brandy Clark]. On *Big Day In A Small Town* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

Ronnie Dunn's "Cost of Livin'" spent 23 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and peaked at number 19 on October 29, 2011.<sup>241</sup> It was also nominated for two Grammy's the following year in 2012.<sup>242</sup> Dunn co-wrote this song with another male songwriter and the male perspective is evident in its lyrics which tell the story of a man who is trying to get a job during a time when work is hard to come by while it is simultaneously very expensive to live.

This man is portrayed in a way that stays true to traditional notions of masculinity: "I got a strong back, steel toes / I rarely call in sick, a good truck / What I don't know, I catch on real quick / I work weekends, if I have to, nights and holidays / Give you 40 and then some / Whatever it takes" and in the last chorus, "I'm handy with a wrench / There's nothin' I can't drive, nothin' I can't fix / I work sunup to sundown / Ain't too proud to sweep the floors." He tries any angle he can think of to try to get this job that he needs to survive and support his family in these times wherein "the cost of livin's high and goin' up," including mentioning that "[he's] never been convicted of a crime," "[he] could start this job at any time," and that "the bank has started callin' and the wolves are at [his] door." Traditional gender roles are obvious in these lyrics in which this family's struggle to survive is evident, but there is no mention of any work this man's wife is doing to help support them. Though the systemic nature of this suffering is implied when he mentions that "[his] folks offered to help, but they're barely gettin' by themselves" and that "[he's] sure a hundred others have applied / Rumor has it [they]'re only takin' five," it is never explicitly stated what the cause of this widespread suffering is or who it is exactly that is affected by the rise in the already high cost of living.<sup>243</sup>

---

<sup>241</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>242</sup> Recording Academy. 2019. "Awards." *Grammy Awards*. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards>).

<sup>243</sup> Dunn, R. & Coleman, P. (2011). Cost of livin' [Recorded by Ronnie Dunn]. On *Ronnie Dunn* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.



The emasculation many men have felt due to the recession means a loss of a former dream.<sup>244</sup> Recently, Trump has attempted to remedy this situation for white men by masculinizing the handout by framing it as entitlement:

... Trump solves a white male problem of pride[:] Benefits... He masculinizes it. You can be “high energy” macho—and yet may need to apply for a government benefit... “If you have a young dad who’s working full time but can’t make it, if you’re an American-born worker, can’t make it, and not having a slew of kids, okay.” But in another stroke, Trump adds a key proviso: restrict government help to real Americans. White men are counted in, but undocumented Mexicans and Muslims and Syrian refugees are out. Thus, Trump offers the blue-collar white men relief from a taker’s shame: If you make America great again, how can you not be proud? ... he speak[s] to the white working class’ grievances<sup>245</sup>

At the same time, “[h]e has shamed virtually every” other identity group: “women, people of color, the disabled, immigrants, refugees.”<sup>246</sup> In this way, this version of the dream, rather than being rooted in equality, is rooted in a desire for the privileging of one group over all others.

*A Male Perspective - Equality of Opportunity Exists: Pre-recession*

Brooks & Dunn’s “Only In America” provides the perfect example of the view that America is the land of opportunity, equality, and freedom. Unsurprisingly, this song was written by three male songwriters. It spent 33 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and reached number one in October of 2001.<sup>247</sup> This song lays out classic dreams of Americans in order to illustrate how anything is possible here because we are all free to do whatever we want to. It does so in three distinct sections. It begins with a group of children, looking at their potential for becoming whomever they want to become. Interestingly, even within this discussion of alleged equal

---

<sup>244</sup> Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

<sup>245</sup> Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. “I Spent 5 Years With Some of Trump's Biggest Fans. Here’s What They Won’t Tell You: How Donald Trump took a narrative of unfairness and twisted it to his advantage.” *Mother Jones*, September/October. Retrieved April 11, 2019 (<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters/>).

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

opportunity, the descriptions of the children make evident the inequality that exists even among this group: “One kid dreams of fame and fortune / One kid helps pay the rent / One could end up going to prison / One just might be president.” A number of factors distract from these realities: the fact that this is just mentioned in passing while much more time is devoted to the positive side, the tone of this song being overwhelmingly optimistic, and the framing of these differences as evidence of the many opportunities that exist which we all have equal access to. There is no recognition of social factors (i.e. race, class, gender) that affect these children’s chances of success in this country. This framing of an issue as something positive in order to maintain belief in the myth is something I return to later in this chapter.

A major theme of this song is American exceptionalism, which is evidenced even in the song’s title. The equality of opportunity component is most evident in the chorus: “Only in America / where we dream as big as we want to / We all get a chance.” The dream is framed in multiple ways in this song. There is the dream as “fame and fortune:” one individual wants “to be an actress” while another is “a singer in a band.” In this version of the dream, “all they want is everything.” Within this dream can be found the dream as love. This story of “a welder’s son and a banker’s daughter” is also the dream as upward mobility. Though the song does not overtly discuss class, there are many lines which make its presence known, such as this one which discusses inter-class marriage, which is statistically uncommon.<sup>248</sup> The approach to the story of this couple, as well as that of the children, is telling because although they can “*dream* as big as [they] want to” that doesn’t necessarily translate to their lived experiences aligning with these aspirations (emphasis mine). The children may aspire to be any number of things, but that doesn’t lift them out of poverty or change their odds of success based on their race or gender.

---

<sup>248</sup> This idea of a forbidden union is rooted in the story of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The couple “just might go back to Oklahoma and talk about the stars they could have been” not because they choose not to live a life of luxury, but because the odds of making it in Los Angeles are low, they can’t afford to live there and keep trying anymore, and they need to be able to survive, but they will keep on dreaming. The fact that Americans are able to dream does not mean that it is realistic, or helpful, for them to do so within society’s current structure.

Religion plays a role in this understanding of America as well. The story of America as the “Promised Land”<sup>249</sup> where we all can dream because we are all free is framed by the image at the opening of the song being that of the sun rising over New York City, on the east coast, and later the sun setting over Los Angeles, on the west coast. This imagery sends the message that coast to coast, we are one nation that is united by our shared experiences as Americans.<sup>250</sup> The fact that Brooks & Dunn are the top selling duo in country music history means that the messages they promote are received well by their listenership as well as influential on this large number of people.<sup>251</sup> It also means that their overall aesthetic is appealing to their audience, which underlies these individual’s identification with this ideology.

*A Female Perspective - Inequality is Real: Pre-recession*

*Optimistic.*

---

<sup>249</sup> Springsteen, B. (1978). The promised land [Recorded by Bruce Springsteen]. On *Darkness On the Edge of Town* [CD]. New York, NY: Columbia Records. - This is a common trope in Springsteen’s songs (i.e. “Racing in the Street” and “The Ghost of Tom Joad”). The reference to Springsteen’s song, with his being a cultural icon of the working class, strengthens the narrative presented in this song.

Since this is also Biblical language, this reference is doubly as impactful.

<sup>250</sup> Rogers, R., Brooks, K., & Cook, D. (2001). Only in America [Recorded by Brooks & Dunn]. On *Steers & Stripes* [CD]. Nashville, TN: BMG Entertainment.

<sup>251</sup> Billboard. 2016. “Greatest of All Time Top Country Artists.” Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/greatest-country-artists>).

Fox, *Real Country*.

Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*.

Trisha Yearwood's "XXX's and OOO's (An American Girl)" demonstrates an awareness of gender inequality even if the positive mood of the song distracts from this truth.<sup>252</sup> This song, in addition to being sung by a female artist, was written by two women, meaning that it truly comes from a female perspective. It spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and reached number one where it spent two weeks in September of 1994.<sup>253</sup> The success of this entirely female song is typical for the time it was released: In the '90s, women found tremendous chart success in country music, having more number-ones than men.<sup>254</sup>

On the surface, this song may seem lighthearted, but upon a deeper analysis of the lyrics, it is obvious that there are painful realities operating in the awareness of this storyteller. The idea of suffering in this song is framed as a natural American reality that this woman is a part of and will overcome. The song paints a picture of what it looks like to be an "American girl," including raising children, playing the part of the doting wife, and dealing with body image issues: "phone rings, baby cries, T.V. diet, guru lies, good morning honey." The first lines of the song show her working hard through the chaos to keep everything running: "go to work, make up, try to keep the balance up between love and money." On top of all these responsibilities, she has a job as society defines them, since her multitudinous other duties are often not viewed as such.<sup>255</sup> The influence of her mother on her expectations for what her life should look like is evident, shaping her image of the idealized woman, but she also recognizes the struggle she has in trying to

---

<sup>252</sup> Pecknold, Diane, and Kristine M. McCusker, eds. 2016. *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Bufwack, and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 490. - In the interest of mass appeal, songs' tones became more "happy."

<sup>253</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

<sup>254</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart."

<sup>255</sup> Parker, Kim. 2015. "Despite progress, women still bear heavier load than men in balancing work and family" *Pew Research Center*. March 10. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/10/women-still-bear-heavier-load-than-men-balancing-work-family/?fbclid=IwAR2CmCKg9qqZoxfkLuW9iLivCJeYpKdh6UqF-Mu3ZryvnRqNG88QOLd1FkQ>). - It's much harder for working mothers to advance in their careers than working fathers.

pursue her goals in a patriarchal society: “Got a picture of her Momma in heels and pearls / She’s tryin’ to make it in her daddy’s world.”<sup>256</sup> While her mother is thought of in terms of appearance, represented by a static photograph, her father is brought up in terms of the actions he takes and the opportunities he has in a world which essentially belongs to him. This is consistent with the way in which women were portrayed in advertising during the time period in between the two world wars. While men were often depicted working behind a desk, women were seen as part of the overall aesthetic, just another element in the decor.<sup>257</sup> This gendered pattern of thinking is so ingrained in the American imaginary, it continues to have a strong influence today.

The unique struggles that women face, being expected to raise their children and take care of the household while also having a career is highlighted in the lyrics: “Momma needs romance / and a live-in maid / Fix the sink, mow the yard, really isn’t all that hard / if you get paid.” The fact that much of the labor that women do is unpaid and underappreciated is reflected in these lines. It is evident that men do not have these expectations placed on them, meaning that in terms of these aspects of life, there are obvious gendered inequalities. In order to cope with and meet this level of demand which is placed upon her, she uses faith, alcohol, and music - specifically that of strong women who were extremely successful and influential - “well, she’s got her God and she’s got good wine, Aretha Franklin, and Patsy Cline.”<sup>258</sup> This reference to Aretha Franklin cannot help but bring to mind her probably most well-known song, “Respect,” something the listener cannot help but assume that the woman in the story would appreciate.<sup>259</sup>

---

<sup>256</sup> Randall, A. & Berg, M. (1994). XXX’s and OOO’s (an American girl) [Recorded by Trisha Yearwood]. On *Thinkin’ About You* [CD]. Nashville, TN: MCA Nashville.

<sup>257</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 185, 191. - “the status of “decorative object” as one of her natural and appropriate roles ... a women’s modernity was primarily decorative”

<sup>258</sup> Randall & Berg, XXX’s and OOO’s (an American girl).

Nelson, W. (1988). Crazy [Recorded by Patsy Cline]. On *Showcase* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings. “Crazy,” being Cline’s most famous song, is most likely the song being referred to here.

<sup>259</sup> Redding, O. (1965). Respect [Recorded by Aretha Franklin]. On *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* [CD]. New York, NY: Atlantic Records. (1967).

Despite the recognition of these harsh realities, the song still ends on an optimistic note. Besides maintaining the optimistic tone, sonically, which it does throughout its entirety, lyrically, it shifts from an apparent struggle to a determined statement of what she will accomplish. The line in the chorus that started out as, “she’s tryin’ to make it in her daddy’s world” has shifted to, “she’s *gonna* make it in her daddy’s world” (emphasis mine). For individual women listening to this song, this can be an important motivator; however, it also tends to individualize the problem to an extent, putting the onus on the woman to work harder to make it in a system that is structured to work against her, rather than aiming to change that system so that it works for her.<sup>260</sup>

*Everyday America.*

Sugarland’s “Everyday America” is the perfect example of a song which has the potential for bringing awareness to the systemic nature of people’s realities by helping individuals recognize that a majority are struggling with them, but because it pairs these lyrics with an upbeat instrumental and is delivered with a smile (like Yearwood’s song), the gravity of the message is lost. It is useful to think about the sound separately from the text in these cases: the sound is what makes these songs sell, but they speak to people because of the message in the lyrics. These elements of the song are intentional, serving to make it more marketable on the radio where dissenting messages are not welcomed. The mission was successful because this song spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart and reached number one on September 1, 2007.<sup>261</sup> This song was co-written by two women and a man, a gender ratio it was not uncommon to find on the radio during this time period.

---

<sup>260</sup> Randall & Berg, XXX’s and OOO’s (an American girl).

<sup>261</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

The lyrics of this song talk about how “everybody’s dreaming big” and “everybody’s just getting by” and says, “that’s how it goes in everyday America.” Normalizing the struggle to survive, the fact that many people have to live paycheck to paycheck, makes it seem like an acceptable reality, rather than something that people should be striving to fix. It is dangerous to discuss such serious problems with this kind of levity because it undermines people’s painful experiences. Not knowing where one’s next meal is going to come from on a day to day basis, constantly worrying if one is going to have enough to make it, is not something to be proud of or cheerful about; it takes a serious toll, both physically and mentally on the individuals who are facing it.<sup>262</sup> While it is true that for many individuals, this is the reality, that is not the case for all people, nor does it have to be for a vast majority. Viewing it as just the way it is, and even worse, mistakenly seeing it as the way that all Americans live, is only holding people back from seeing the true nature of class inequality and working to do something about it.<sup>263</sup> So too is the notion of beautiful poverty, romanticizing other people’s poverty rather than seeing it as needing some sort of remedy, which is evident in this song.

*A Male Perspective - We Have Achieved Equality: Recession*

Brad Paisley’s “Welcome to the Future” was written by two men. This song spent 20 weeks overall on the Country Airplay chart and reached number two on November 7, 2009.<sup>264</sup> The position that the song reached on the charts, paired with the fact that Paisley is a popular artist and has been for some time means that the message was well-received. The lyrics of this song discuss things we, as a society, thought were never possible just a few decades ago and demonstrates how much has changed in such a relatively short time period. This concept is used

---

<sup>262</sup> This statement is based on personal experience and observation.

<sup>263</sup> Carver, L., Nettles, J., & Bush, K. (2006). *Everyday America* [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Enjoy the Ride* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Mercury Records.

<sup>264</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

to claim that racial equality has been achieved and that all that which those were fighting for in the civil rights movement has been reached, so when people look back, they should be impressed with and proud of how far we've come.

The idea which is presented in this song, that everybody is now treated equally in this country, is not only completely inaccurate, but also could mislead people into believing that we have already reached the limits of the development of this nation. When people hear lyrics that say, "They burned a cross in his front yard / for asking out the homecoming queen / I thought about him today / and everybody who'd seen what he'd seen / From a woman on a bus / to a man with a dream," followed by the line, "Hey, wake up Martin Luther / welcome to the future," they will get the impression that society was seriously unequal, but that that is a thing of the past now.<sup>265</sup> This is simply not the case; racial inequality still very much exists. Those who are forced to confront this reality on a daily basis know this, as do some conscious others, but for those who do not recognize this truth, this narrative can be dangerous, serving to strengthen their delusions.

The line, "wherever we were going, well, we're here" is especially problematic because it gives the impression that there is no more progress to be made. The standards which we have reached are the extent of what is available to us. In terms of equality, that means that we are as equal as we will ever be, in this view. As the individual in this song sees it, they have achieved the American Dream: All the things they wanted as a child, they now have. All the things that their grandparents didn't have, they now have; what was fought for, it is now possible to have. In this view, each American is living the dream, because unlike what was the case in the past, they are now equally able to.<sup>266</sup>

---

<sup>265</sup> Brad Paisley explicitly addresses racism in a number of his songs (i.e. "Accidental Racist" featuring LL Cool J).

<sup>266</sup> Paisley, B. & DuBois, C. (2009). Welcome to the future [Recorded by Brad Paisley]. On *American Saturday Night* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.



The reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. in these lyrics alludes to his famous “I Have a Dream ...” Speech which he delivered on August 28, 1963 during the March on Washington. In this speech, King calls for racial and economic equality. Along with his more famous argument for the eradication of racism: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” he addresses poverty and calls attention to the need to amend this social ill: “lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” Most significantly for this discussion, King explicitly defines what the American Dream means to him:

I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all *men* are created equal.” (emphasis mine)

Importantly, King does not address gender inequality in his call for justice.<sup>267</sup>

#### *A Female Perspective: Post-recession*

##### *Despair.*

It is no surprise, for a number of reasons that I get into in more depth, that the songs in this section are the least likely to be played on country radio. From the gender of the singer, to the gender of the writers, the perspective the song takes, the sonic mood created, and the lyrical content, the songs in this section are largely the most controversial. Overall, these dissenting narratives question the status quo more than any others I discuss as a group.

##### *Blowin’ smoke.*

Kacey Musgraves co-wrote “Blowin’ Smoke” with two prominent male songwriters. This song spent 20 weeks on the Country Airplay chart where it reached number 23 on June 29,

---

<sup>267</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1963. “I Have a Dream ....” Delivered at the March on Washington.

2013.<sup>268</sup> The lyrics of this song tell the story of a group of waitresses who keep talking about how they're going to leave and make something of themselves: "we all say that we'll quit someday" and who console each other when they are having a tough time, telling the others that it will get better: "it'll be okay." In each of these cases, these women are "just blowin' smoke;" they know that they are going to continue working this soul-sucking job and barely making ends meet and that their lives will all continue to be difficult because there are no options in this small town. They know, deep down, that they are stuck. The use of smoking is a metaphor for the fact that living this life is a slow death and you're killing yourself, which is what smoking does.

In this portrayal, much like that provided in Clark's "I Wanna Do It All" and Sugarland's "Settlin'," working day in and day out at a meaningless job is an unwelcome fetter which women dream of escaping. One of the women in this story has left this town. She has finally done what each of these women always dream and talk about doing. Even though they say they are just "blowin' smoke," she actually made her dream happen by taking her fate into her own hands. The story begins, "between the lunch and dinner rush, Kelly caught that outbound bus for Vegas / ... She always thought she was too good to be a waitress;" following this occurrence, according to the storyteller, "[they]'re all out here talkin' trash, makin' bets, lips wrapped 'round [their] cigarettes." These women are envious of the one who did finally escape because most of them will only continue to dream about it for the rest of their lives: "We all say that we'll quit someday / when our ship comes in we'll just sail away / We're just blowin' smoke." The use of the idiom "when one's ship comes in" to mean when they make their fortune, similarly to the use of boat imagery in Janson's "Buy Me A Boat," is a powerful allusion to the escapism that these vessels represent, not only metaphorically, but physically, getting away from it all. Saying that

---

<sup>268</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

they'll quit someday has the double meaning of quitting smoking and quitting their jobs. There is a kind of morality in this song, much as there is in Paisley's song. The message of these lyrics conforms to a very Protestant way of looking at the world where if you don't get out of poverty, then it's your own fault.

One of these women has a child she is trying to support: "Brenda's trading smokes for cakes / still hasn't lost that baby weight / and that baby's 'bout to graduate from college." The fact that her child was able to attend college, since it is unlikely that they would be able to afford a college degree on a waitress's salary, demonstrates the importance that is placed on education.<sup>269</sup> It is seen as an essential component to the American Dream, and so it was obviously prioritized, sacrifices likely being made elsewhere in order to make it happen. It is clear that this woman put her child's needs and dreams ahead of her own, as is often the case. Another one of the women's ex-husbands is in prison: "well, Janie got divorced again / Her ex-husband's in the pen / for two to five, but five to ten longer." In an attempt to console her coworkers, the narrator says, "I just flick an ash into the tray / tell 'em both it'll be okay / but I'm just blowin' smoke... I'm out here goin' broke." She knows that it is unlikely that any of their situations will improve and although at the end of the day she "swear[s she's] never comin' back again," she knows "[she's] just blowin' smoke" and she'll be back for her next shift.<sup>270</sup>

Each of these women has a unique story, but there are certain aspects of their lives that they have in common in that they are all working a dead-end job just to try to survive. The woman who is telling the story tries to comfort the other women as they need it. This sometimes includes what she knows to be lies because telling them helps both parties - the one speaking

---

<sup>269</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." - 57% of country music consumers have attended college.

<sup>270</sup> Musgraves, K., Laird, L., & McAnally, S. (2013). Blowin' smoke [Recorded by Kacey Musgraves]. On *Same Trailer Different Park* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.

them and the one hearing them - to hold onto the hope that perhaps these falsehoods could become their realities, even though they know this is an unrealistic dream.

*Smoke break.*

Carrie Underwood's "Smoke Break" spent 26 weeks on the Country Airplay chart overall and peaked at number two on December 5, 2015.<sup>271</sup> This song was written by two women and one man, a gender makeup of the songwriters which is more unusual to find on country radio during this post-recession time period. This song's lyrics lay out the stark contrast between those who are served "on a silver platter" and those who work for everything that they get in life. There are multiple stories told within these lyrics. In each case, the individual struggles with all the various expectations placed on them and has to use distractions in order to escape their daily lives. Those who are living the dream don't need to turn to alcohol and cigarettes to "let the world fade away." The fact that this song, like Musgraves', uses smoking is interesting.

The story about the woman describes her largely in terms of the many roles which she fulfills and acknowledges the difficulty of meeting all these expectations: "She's a small-town, hard-workin' woman just tryin' to make a livin' / workin' three jobs, feedin' four little mouths in a run-down kitchen / When you're never takin' nothin' and doin' nothin' but givin' / it's hard to be a good wife and a good mom and a good Christian." The unique struggles which women face in being expected to put everyone else before themselves is overshadowed by the inclusion of an allegedly comparable story about a man. The storyteller says that this man has worked for everything that he has and his story perfectly illustrates the obsession with upward mobility: "He's a big-city, hard-workin' man just tryin' to climb the ladder / first generation to go to college instead of drivin' a tractor / Never had nothin' handed to him on a silver platter / It's hard

---

<sup>271</sup> Billboard, "Country Airplay."

to be a good man, good son, do somethin' good that matters." Though this man very well may have struggled to put himself through school, he clearly is not facing the same level of responsibility that the woman in the previous story is. In his case, his life may have been difficult for a while, but he has achieved some level of success and is doing fairly well at this point.

In either case, the storyteller says, "go ahead, I understand if you wanna take a load off... let it all go" demonstrating both how it is not always easy and that this is something which many people can relate to. The juxtaposition in these lyrics between the female struggle, which is material, as well as partially moral, and the male struggle, which is moral shows how these burdens are gendered.<sup>272</sup> The fact that there is an entire section devoted to a male perspective is a large part of the reason, other than Underwood's popularity, that this song was so successful on mainstream radio. Songs which only focus on the female perspective, which is paid some attention in this song, come nowhere close to receiving any air time (i.e. Clark's "Three Kids No Husband").<sup>273</sup>

#### *Gendered inequality.*

Margo Price's "Pay Gap" is a song, that she wrote herself, on her most recent album, *All American Made*. Though this song was not a charting single, Price did choose to perform it when she appeared on *Conan*, meaning that people, who are not necessarily country music listeners, were exposed to it.<sup>274</sup> Even though *Conan*'s ratings are not as high as other late night talk shows, he still has a respectable viewership and has been a late night television staple for over two

---

<sup>272</sup> Parker, "Despite progress, women still bear heavier load than men in balancing work and family." - It's much harder for working mothers to advance in their careers than working fathers.

<sup>273</sup> Underwood, C., DeStefano, C., & Lindsey, H. (2015). Smoke break [Recorded by Carrie Underwood]. On *Storyteller* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Sony Music Nashville.

<sup>274</sup> Moss, Marissa R.. 2018. "See Margo Price's Call for Equality With 'Pay Gap' on 'Conan'." *Rolling Stone*, March 8. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/see-margo-prices-call-for-equality-with-pay-gap-on-conan-127239/>).

decades.<sup>275</sup> It is also important to recognize that someone thought that it was worth programming. In the case of this song, the fact that a female composed and performs it comes in second to the fact that it is about deep-rooted, serious, structured gender inequality, in determining its not having a chance at being accepted in the mainstream. Price's singer-songwriter style also plays a lesser role to the lyrical content of this song, though the two aspects are related. Though all women can theoretically relate to this song, it is not in the way in which those in power want people to be relating to the music that they are consuming. Those in power want the messages to be lighthearted and carefree, in order to distract from the painful realities of life in this society, if not to convince individuals that they do not exist at all.

Similarly to previous songs in this chapter, these lyrics address the multitudinous roles which women are expected to fill and the fact that men are not held to the same standards. This individual discusses the frustration she feels in continuously trying to work within a system which strategically oppresses her and thus, is one in which she cannot win:

Honey, I work so hard for my money / and I leave my babies at home / Breakin' my back tryin' to bring home a check / and workin' my fingers to the bone / That the end of the day feels like a game / one I was born to lose / In this institution and dead revolution / it's givin' young women abuse / Pay gap / Pay gap / Why don't you do the math? / Pay gap / Pay gap / Rippin' my dollars in half.

She makes clear the fact that she has no desire for special treatment, nor does she believe that she is exceptional. She simply wants the platitudes that people keep insisting upon, that this is a "free country" to actually be somewhat true. She recognizes that this nation was set up from the beginning to work against her and all other women despite the fact

---

<sup>275</sup> Sims, David. 2017. "What Conan O'Brien Means to Late-Night's Future." *The Atlantic*, January 10. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/01/what-conan-obrien-means-to-late-nights-future/512633/>).

that people try to claim otherwise. The reality is that women have never been truly free, whereas certain groups of men (i.e. “rich white men”) have been since the outset:

It's not that I'm asking for more than I'm owed / and I don't think I'm better than you / They say that we live in the land of the free / but sometimes that bell don't ring true / It's been that way with no equal pay / and I wanna know when it will be fixed / Women do work and get treated like slaves since 1776 / Pay gap / Pay gap / Don't give me that feminism crap / Pay gap / Pay gap / Rippin' my dollars in half.

She doesn't want to hear the tired, uninformed accusations that feminists hate men and think that they are better than them and thus want special treatment. She reinforces the point that there is and always has been much labor in which women engage that goes unrecognized, unpaid, and unappreciated. Because of this, as well as their being controlled by men in this patriarchal society, women have never felt the freedom that men have always claimed that all people have in this country.

Religion is brought into this narrative as a way to demonstrate how we were all “created equal” and should be viewed and treated as such. This idealistic vision is contrasted with the way that we are actually treated differently depending upon our gender.

No matter your religion / No matter your race / No matter your orientation / No matter your creed / and no matter your taste / No matter your denomination / We're all the same in the eyes of God / but in the eyes of rich white men / you're more than a maid / to be owned like a dog / second class citizen / Pay gap / Pay gap / Why don't you do the math? / Pay gap / Pay gap / Rippin' my dollars in half.<sup>276</sup>

She is making direct connections between the way in which men view women and the resulting lack of adequate compensation that women receive for the work that they do. Mental categorizations are telling as to what people truly believe about a group as well as

---

<sup>276</sup> Price, Pay gap.

how they understand individuals in that group.<sup>277</sup> This, in turn, leads to this group's being treated in specific ways in accordance with these views, which is not consistent with the equality which is characteristic of the American Dream.

Margo Price's "All American Made" is the title track on her most recent album, and another one which she penned. This song is about many of the darker truths of America, those that people don't like to talk about and would rather sweep under the rug. While some have the privilege to do so, others do not have a choice and must constantly be aware of these realities. Price discusses both present and recent historical events and alludes to many broader cultural themes that are important to the American identity. The lyrics touch on consumerism and the spirit of going west to follow one's dreams.<sup>278</sup> At the heart of these lyrics is a discontent with the way the country is run and a desire to do something about it now that the narrator is old enough to be aware of what is going on: "I was just a child, unaware of the effects." Nowhere is this more evident than in the play on the phrase "Made in America," which is usually touted as something positive. She turns this idea on its head and calls out many things that are "all American made" of which Americans should not be proud. She talks about the way she is perpetually treated in this country ("Well, everywhere I go somebody puts me in the dirt") and the way that this unrelenting treatment makes her feel ("I can't help feeling stuck" and "the part of me that hurts the worst / is the one I just can't spot / and it's all American made"). In this way, she discusses how she is deeply affected at the core by the injustices she both sees going on around her and is experiencing herself. She recognizes that this is a vicious cycle of oppressions, one that will continue until something is finally done about it: "But it won't be the first time,

---

<sup>277</sup> Lakoff, George. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>278</sup> See Appendix B.



baby, and it won't be the end." She brings up some of the typical cultural elements that people are surrounded by which play a significant role in perpetuating this cycle, stating that she was "raised on sports and Jesus and all the usual suspects" and questions the direction this country is moving in, recognizing society's part in either affecting this change or maintaining the status quo by saying, "So, tell me Mr. Petty, what do you think will happen next? It's all American made." By addressing Tom Petty, she is specifically acknowledging the importance of musical cultural icons in shaping the American imaginary.<sup>279</sup>

In the songs opening, interlude, and closing, there is a cacophony of politicians speaking in the background, making promises and statements as to what will benefit the nation and how the people should act. These segments are overlapped so that they all sound like they are talking over one another, their messages becoming obscured by the main text of the song and the instrumentals, which are louder and can be discerned with much more clarity. The song ends with the listener hearing a segment of Nixon's first inaugural address: "we find that they celebrate the simple things, the basic things--such as goodness, decency, love, kindness. Greatness comes in simple trappings. The simple things are the ones most needed today if we are to surmount what divides us, and cement what unites us."<sup>280</sup> This statement is apparently calling for Americans to see the humanity in one another in order to strengthen as a nation. Price uses this, along with the other political moments she samples, as a way to point out the hypocrisy of those in power talking about bringing everyone together while they are the ones who are both doing the harm and have intentionally created and maintained divisions in society in order to

---

<sup>279</sup> Price, M. (2017). All American made [Recorded by Margo Price]. On *All American Made* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Third Man Records.

This reference brings to mind "American Girl" and "Free Fallin'," which are two of Tom Petty's most well-known songs. He is an important American musical and cultural icon.

<sup>280</sup> Yale Law School. [1969] 2008. "First Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon." *The Avalon Project*. Retrieved March 29, 2019 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/nixon1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/nixon1.asp)).

sustain their own power. She explicitly calls out the inequality in this nation in the lines: “And I wonder if the President gets much sleep at night / and if folks on welfare are making it alright.” In this way, Price questions how those utilizing the power structures in place to their advantage can live with themselves and how everyone else is doing in this system which is upheld by the oppression of this vast majority.<sup>281</sup> Much like Price’s “Pay Gap,” the view presented in this song does not align with the vision that the equality promised in the American Dream is a reality.

*Hope.*

Carrie Underwood’s “Love Wins” is, at the time of this writing, still climbing, but has spent 31 weeks on the chart so far. Currently, the peak position it has reached on the Country Airplay chart, a feat which occurred on February 16, 2019, is number 11, where it spent 2 nonconsecutive weeks.<sup>282</sup> Underwood co-wrote this song with two male songwriters. Like Price’s “All American Made,” this one recognizes negative aspects of American society, but in contrast to the previous song, this one is extremely optimistic, both sonically and lyrically. It is about maintaining hope in the face of things that challenge this unwavering faith. The song starts out by constructing a scene of an accidental death, one of many tragedies we hear about on television: “A stray bullet and a momma cries / Her baby won’t be coming home tonight / Sirens screaming down the avenue / Just another story on the evening news;” it then uses this frame to state how despite the frequency of these occurrences, the narrator continues to believe that things can improve. Even in the lines that are critical of society, this song is not really addressing the structural inequalities, instead, it makes these happenings appear coincidental.

This attitude that these things happen out of nowhere and that there was no way to predict them, is what makes elements that may seem to be critiques in these lyrics not as scathing as they

---

<sup>281</sup> Price, All American made.

<sup>282</sup> Billboard, “Country Airplay.”

may otherwise be. This is evident when she says, “Politics and prejudice / How the hell did it ever come to this? / When everybody’s gotta pick a side / It don’t matter if you’re wrong or right, no / and so it goes.” In response to this, she asserts, “but I hold onto hope and I won’t let go ‘cause / I, I believe you and me are sisters and brothers / and I, I believe we’re made to be here for each other / and we’ll never fall if we walk hand in hand / Put a world that *seems* broken together again / Yeah, I, I believe in the end love wins” (emphasis mine). This blind optimism that things will get better if we just work together ignores the structural inequalities that this nation is built on which intentionally lead to these realities. People’s situations will not get better simply because they want them to; an active struggle for rights is needed for there to be any justice. The idea that the oppressors will work with the oppressed to fix society’s problems is extremely naive.

The role that Underwood’s religion plays in her evaluation of the situation is very clear. Maintaining faith that someday, things will be better is what allows her to keep going: “Sometimes it takes a lot of faith / to keep believing there will come a day / when the tears and the sadness, the pain and the hate / the struggle, this madness, will all fade away.” Though she recognizes that this is hard to do, she doesn’t see fault in continuing to follow this path. She truly believes that love is more powerful than all the hatred in the world and that things will simply work out for the best at some point, whenever the time is right (i.e., “love is the answer”). This passive approach toward a desire for change is equally as harmful as those actively working to maintain the status quo. As a result, these kinds of messages, ones which allege a general desire for things to improve, recognizing people are facing some struggles, but while still clinging to the belief that everything is going to be alright, are also allowed on the radio. This general tendency toward safer messages (i.e. “All-American Girl”), along with her being used as a token

to support claims of inclusivity in the genre - she is the only female who is consistently played on country radio - is, in large part, the cause for Underwood's commercial success. She plays an important part in promoting the narrative that there is equality, both through the messages of her songs as well as simply through her physical presence. She is a case of the exception proving the rule.<sup>283</sup>

*A Male Perspective - Injustice is the Reality: Post-recession*

*Inequality is widespread and has deep roots.*

Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit's "White Man's World" is a song, that Isbell penned himself, on their most recent album, *The Nashville Sound*.<sup>284</sup> The album peaked at number one on the Top Country Albums chart, was nominated for "Album of the Year" at the Country Music Association awards and won a Grammy for "Best Americana Album."<sup>285</sup> This song recognizes the privilege that this individual has being "a white man livin' in a white man's world;" it's an anomaly in that it addresses many inequalities which are present in society today, recognizing their existence and the need for there to be compassion by those who may not feel that they are directly affected because, as he says, "There's no such thing as someone else's war / Your creature comforts aren't the only things worth fighting for." He observes that even if certain

---

<sup>283</sup> James, B., Underwood, C., & Garcia, D. (2018). Love wins [Recorded by Carrie Underwood]. On *Cry pretty* [MP3 File]. Nashville, TN: Sony Music Nashville.

<sup>284</sup> McKenna, Brittney. 2017. "Sara Evans Talks bro Country Dominance, New Album and Jason Isbell." *Rolling Stone*, July 24. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/sara-evans-talks-bro-country-dominance-new-album-and-jason-isbell-195186/>). - "She insists that, radio play be damned, Isbell is country through and through. "That's the kind of country record that we are in love with," she says, leaning forward in her seat. "*Jason Isbell is country*. He has that one song 'Anxiety,' and I'm like, that's it right there! He doesn't have one song on his album about his woman getting in the pickup truck. That's what we did when we were teenagers. We rode around on the dirt roads and drank beer. But now that we're adults with children, there's so much else to life'" (emphasis mine).

<sup>285</sup> Billboard, "Top Country Albums." Country Music Association. 2018. "Past Winners And Nominees." *CMA*. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://cmaawards.com/past-winners-and-nominees/>). Recording Academy, "Awards."

hardships only appear to be experienced by particular groups of individuals, any type of systemic mistreatment affects the health of the entire society in which it occurs and thus every individual within that society, regardless of whether they were specifically targeted.

This song talks about inequality in general, but it also grapples with some of the ways in which this white man is affected by various oppressions experienced by identity groups to which he does not belong. Sexism and gender inequality are acknowledged in the lines: “under our roof is a baby girl / I thought the world could be hers one day / but her Mama knew better” and “Mama wants to change that Nashville sound / but they’re never gonna let her.” The lyrics address racism, colonialism and genocide as well, both in relation to Black individuals and Native peoples: “I’m a white man living on a white man’s street / I got the bones of the red man under my feet / The highway runs through their burial grounds / past the oceans of cotton” and “I’m a white man lookin’ in a Black man’s eyes / wishin’ I’d never been one of the guys / who pretended not to hear another white man’s joke / old times ain’t forgotten.” He is conscious of both historical and contemporary incarnations of racial oppression as well as the relationship of the legacy of past injustices to the present-day instances he witnesses. This man is obviously experiencing negative psychological effects due to his role in the continued oppression of other peoples and he wants to do something to change the way things are: “Still breathing, it’s not too late / We’re all carrying one great burden, sharing one fate.” This relates to the call for reparations for Black individuals in the United States for the long history of their oppression since before the nation’s founding - beginning with slavery and continuing with its various transformations, from Jim Crow to mass incarceration, different names for the same oppression -

as well as the call for reparations to Native American peoples for the colonialism and genocide which this country was founded upon and by which it is sustained.<sup>286</sup>

As is frequently the case, religion is central to this narrative. Although this narrator has doubts about whether a god could possibly exist with all the systemic inequality that society is built upon, the song still ends on an optimistic note. Despite the fact that he says, “I think the man upstairs must of took a vacation,” he adds, “I still have faith, but I don’t know why / Maybe it’s the fire in my little girl’s eyes.” The fact that he repeats the last line, emphasizes the importance, in his eyes, of women, specifically the next generation of women, in the fight for justice. He sees that there is increasingly little toleration of the repression that groups have been subjected to and an ever-growing desire for liberation from the bonds which have been holding them back.<sup>287</sup>

*Distracting from painful realities.*

Eric Church’s “Drowning Man” is the final song on his most recent studio album, *Desperate Man*, which was released in the autumn of 2018. It spent two weeks at number one on the Top Country Albums chart in October of 2018 and was nominated for “Album of the Year” by the Academy of Country Music.<sup>288</sup> This song tells the story of a man who uses various methods, from alcohol, to music, to women, to distract himself from the fact that he is barely making it by.<sup>289</sup> Though these lyrics are talking about an individual man’s story, he demonstrates an awareness of the structural nature of the problems which he faces. This is obvious in the

---

<sup>286</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. “The Case for Reparations.” *The Atlantic*, June. Retrieved April 6, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>).

Corlett, J. Angelo. 2003. *Race, Racism, and Reparations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>287</sup> Isbell, J. (2017). White man’s world [Recorded by Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit]. On *The Nashville Sound* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Southeastern Records.

<sup>288</sup> Billboard, “Top Country Albums.”

Academy of Country Music. 2017. “54th ACM Awards Nominees.” Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.acmcountry.com/noms>).

<sup>289</sup> See Appendix B.

lyrics, “We put the smoke in the stack / put the seed in the ground / while lady liberty turns her back / and Uncle Sam just turns around.” Recognizing that these are the realities which he faces, he says, “Bartender, here’s a fifty / Pour some whiskey on this drowning man” and later, asking for this individual’s solidarity, “Bartender, if you’re with me / Pour some whiskey on this drowning man.”<sup>290</sup>

There are many layers to the metaphor of drowning utilized in this song. The most obvious being that this man is struggling, financially. Another interpretation, being especially relevant to his residency in a bar, is that he is drunk. A third way to look at this metaphor is in terms of heartache (i.e. “don’t leave me drowning here in my tears”). Finally, when someone’s house is under water, it means that that individual owes more than it is worth. The use of this multiply layered metaphor adds complexity to this seemingly straightforward plight of a man who is suffering in this time of harsh economic inequality, while those he views as having the responsibility to help leave him to drown.

It’s important that he recognizes the intention on the part of the government, acknowledging that they are actively ignoring the plight of everyday working people. Though this is a significant step, he could go further and call the government out on being the ones who created and maintain the system in which the majority suffer while a small minority profit from their pain, as he does in the first song on this album, “The Snake:” “We stay hungry; They get fed / and don’t pass the plate around / Lie by lie, cheat by cheat / Venom in smiling teeth / They just run, those forked tongues / and the whole world’s burning down.” While the opener is decidedly angry in tone, this closer to the album is clearly more of a defeated lament. By this

---

<sup>290</sup> Beathard, C. & Church, E. (2018). Drowning man [Recorded by Eric Church]. On *Desperate Man* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: Universal Music Group.

point the narrator has resigned himself to the fact that this is the way things are and that it appears unlikely that they will ever change.<sup>291</sup>

The narrator clearly wants to ignore this reality which he shares with so many others in his country, preferring to use an array of forms of escapism so that he doesn't have to dwell on the pain. The song opens and closes with a plea for relief from the constant reminder of the wealth gap of which he, along with the vast majority, is on the less than favorable side: "Don't tell me about no beach / Don't wanna hear about your mountain / How the good life is a peach / You drink your sunsets from a fountain / No I don't wanna think about it / Save your breath, I don't wanna hear about it." This kind of attitude is understandable, serving to protect the individual's sanity, but at a societal level, it will not lead to the change this individual longs for.<sup>292</sup> It is obvious that this person does not believe in the American Dream as equality.

*An American nightmare.*

Kane Brown's "American Bad Dream" is a track on his most recent album, *Experiment*, which was released in November of 2018 and reached number one on the Top Country Albums chart that same month.<sup>293</sup> This song describes this individual's view on American society and how it is currently more like a nightmare than a dream. The way he sees it, in the past, living in this country was like a dream, but recently the nation has taken a turn for the worse, leading him to ask to be woken up from this "American bad dream." He looks at a number of aspects of society and contrasts how they were during a time when he perceives America's reality as having been reflective of the American Dream to the ways in which they are now, a time that he views as being comparable to an American nightmare.

---

<sup>291</sup> Church, E., Spillman, J., & Meadows, T. (2018). The snake [Recorded by Eric Church]. On *Desperate Man* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: Universal Music Group.

<sup>292</sup> Beathard & Church, Drowning man.

<sup>293</sup> Billboard, "Top Country Albums."



These lyrics address multiple forms of systemic violence. The first of which is mass shootings, which the narrator looks at in the form of school shootings. He considers the impact that this constant fear has on children today and contrasts it with the carefree experience he had: “Remember when ninth grade was about getting laid / skipping class trying not to get caught / Now you gotta take a test in a bulletproof vest / scared to death that you might get shot.” These are two drastically different realities that he lays out: One, he sees as reflective of society’s broader dream-like nature at the time, while the other is indicative of society’s current frightening reality.

The second type of violence that he looks at is police brutality. He says, “I remember doing ten over the limit would just get you a ticket / just an inconvenience getting stopped / Bad cops played the jury, made the good ones worry ‘bout showing up and doing their job.” Though these references to police brutality may not be explicit in the lyrics, they are evident nonetheless, and when discussing the song, Brown does openly acknowledge that this is what he is talking about.<sup>294</sup> Despite the fact that there is no discussion of the racial elements of this reality in the lyrics, this song is still viewed as questioning American superiority and thus being unpatriotic, which resulted in its instantly receiving backlash. The fact that Brown, a Black man, has been viewed as an outsider in country music since the beginning of his career, in part due to his race,<sup>295</sup> makes the inclusion of an apparently anti-gun song on his second studio album even more potentially risky.<sup>296</sup> Though the claims made in these lyrics aren’t particularly strong compared to the extremely harsh nature of these realities, this song would never be released as a

---

<sup>294</sup> Taste of Country. 2018. “Kane Brown Defends ‘American Bad Dream, His Most Controversial Song.” YouTube Web site. Retrieved November 9, 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCx7MAqInuw>).

<sup>295</sup> Hughes, Charles L. 2015. *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>296</sup> Taste of Country, “Kane Brown Defends ‘American Bad Dream.”

single because it would never be played on the radio, since the message questions the exceptional nature of the United States. This kind of uncertainty in, or even worse, outright condemnation of this country, has the potential for putting just enough doubt in other's minds that perhaps they are not living in the greatest nation on the planet. This is not a notion which those in power can afford the people to believe.

However, this song is not an outright condemnation of present society because central to the song's narrative is a desire to go back to a time in the nation's past which this individual views as being preferable to the country's present reality. For him, it's as though these changes came out of nowhere, that there was no history of inequality and oppression which could have predicted these present violences: "It's like I just closed my eyes / Everybody started falling for the devil's disguise / that hide behind the lies that hide the truth / and I just can't take it no more." He questions whether it is truly "this messed up? / or is it really reality?" and is begging for assistance: "so wake me up from this American bad dream" because "[he's] becoming numb to all of this tragedy." This man does not believe that society has always been this way and he would like to return to a time when, in his eyes, it wasn't this bad. By using the analogy of sleep and dreaming, he is emphasizing the ephemerality of this stage in America's story. The impermanence of this "bad dream" in the life of this nation is highlighted by his invocation of someone to wake him up. Neither does he believe that what is going on is real, nor that it will last. This mindset will not foster concerted action toward correcting what this individual perceives as wrong, since it will lead people to believe that it is just a phase that will naturally pass on its own. When people do not see themselves as being able to solve a problem, they do

not put in the effort that's required to do so. If it is futile anyway, then why should they bother?<sup>297</sup>

The power and influence everyday people have over the way society runs, simply due to their numbers, is enormous. Currently, this group of individuals is holding themselves back by playing into the system, but there is potential for a very different story to be told. If the people harnessed the sheer power of their numbers, they would be able to make profound change in the world, change which could make society work more in their favor. This is why it is so important that the power of popular forms of music to control the masses not be underestimated. The influence that popular music has on American society is profound. Though it is currently working to maintain the power structures, popular music forms, of which country is one, have the potential to significantly impact American culture in ways that work for the majority. Music is neutral. It is inherently neither a force for maintaining the status quo nor for questioning it; its power lies in its potential to do both harm and good for the people. Though it is presently used to maintain the status quo via a continued belief in the American Dream, country music has the potential to be a driving force in making this country one which works for the working class, and though there are obvious obstacles put in place by the machine that is the country music industry, as well as the broader system of capitalism, country music can and should be used to aid in this change.

---

<sup>297</sup> McGill, Hoge, Brown, & Ellis, American bad dream.

## CONCLUSION

Conceptions of the American Dream vary by gender. Within the five major conceptions I identify (i.e. 1) Homeownership & Marriage, 2) Freedom, 3) Love & Simplicity, 4) Upward Mobility, and 5) Equality), there are evident differences according to gender regarding who is more likely to present messages which are critical of society. Alone, none of these conceptions wholly captures the entirety of what the American Dream means (to both Americans and those hoping to become Americans), but together, they form a cohesive picture of all that the American Dream entails. Women are more likely to dissent whereas men are more likely to uphold the status quo. Perspectives presented in the lyrics of country music which come from females and those which dissent from hegemonic discourses are the ones more likely to be relegated to the outskirts of the genre whereas those which present a belief in the myth of the real possibility of the attainment of the American Dream are promoted in the mainstream in order to maintain the oppressive systems which are in place. As a result, the genre, which has always had an unequal gender representation, has increasingly underrepresented women,<sup>298</sup> with the years following the recession having a particularly egregious imbalance<sup>299</sup> due to a desire for a return to when things were apparently more in the favor of those in power.<sup>300</sup> The recession is a useful lens through which to understand these narratives because major shifts in both women's roles in men's conceptions of the American Dream and the frequency with which women's conceptions of the American Dream have been represented in the mainstream center around this major economic event.

---

<sup>298</sup> Watts, "3 years after 'Tomato-gate,'" - "The percentage of purely female country songs charted by Country Aircheck dropped to 10.4 percent last year, down from 13 percent in 2016."

<sup>299</sup> Stefano, Angela. 2018. "2018 Billboard Year-End Charts Show Just How Tough It Is For Women In Country Music." *The Boot*, December 5. Retrieved February 9, 2019 (<http://theboot.com/billboard-country-americana-year-end-charts-2018/>).

<sup>300</sup> Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

This lack of female perspectives has a detrimental effect on those listening to the music, particularly women and girls. Not hearing one's perspective represented in the cultural expressions one is consuming, especially in an art form with which people spend a large portion of their time<sup>301</sup> and with which they come to identify, is harmful. Constructing one's identity around sexist ideals furthers the oppression girls experience by internalizing it at an irreversible foundational level.<sup>302</sup> It does not have to be this way. In the '90s, women had a rare moment when their perspectives were allowed to be heard, which allowed them to express the wide array of things they have to say, and for people to hear these messages. The resulting empowerment of a generation who grew up thinking of this level of representation as the standard, is significant.

Oppressive structures in society are so deeply ingrained in public and individual imaginaries, as they have been intentionally constructed to, that it is unlikely that change for the better will ever come about. That being said, there are tools which, if utilized properly, could result in the equal and free society which so many have only been dreaming of for years. While popular music is currently used to uphold the status quo, it does not have to be used in this way because the music itself is neutral. Country music, if allowed to be more inclusive, has the potential to make the difference for which so many are looking.<sup>303</sup>

One way in which I see the potential for music to lead to change, as it has in various movements throughout history,<sup>304</sup> is through country trap (also known as hick-hop) which is a

---

<sup>301</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music."

<sup>302</sup> Watts, "3 years after 'Tomato-gate,'" - "Cassetty created Song Suffragettes to give talented, up-and-coming female country singers and songwriters a place to perform... The disparity means that there's an absence of female points of view in music. Cassetty wants his daughters to hear empowering songs delivered from a voice that sounds like their own, not just thin lines about women wearing cutoffs and riding in trucks."

<sup>303</sup> CMA, "The Rise of Country Music." -

On average, country music consumers listen nearly one more hour per day than fans of other genres (4h:49m vs. 3h:51m), meaning that these messages both have more time to impact these individual's imaginaries and that they are a more central aspect of their existence, thus reflective of their perspectives.

<sup>304</sup> Denisoff, R. Serge. 1983. *Sing a Song of Social Significance*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press.

fusion genre that combines country and hip-hop. If I were to expand this analysis further, I would look at how country trap could bring together groups across differences, differences which have been socially constructed to maintain the class structure,<sup>305</sup> in order to realize that unity is in their interest.<sup>306</sup> “Music and group identity may become so intertwined as to be synonymous in the minds of group members and outsiders, often through reference to a collective,”<sup>307</sup> which can enforce imposed divisions.<sup>308</sup> Racial distinctions were created to pit people against each other in the service of the capitalist interest of maintaining social divisions that uphold the power structures. In America today, race serves as the major social factor used to divide groups<sup>309</sup> as class did in Marx’s time.<sup>310</sup> People are willing to give up their freedom in favor of inclusion in the nation.<sup>311</sup> A preoccupation with one’s self interests leads to a blindness of the broader societal problems affecting various groups, problems which are all connected and have the same roots: Sexism, racism, and classism, along with all other forms of discrimination based upon social categories are rooted in capitalism. Groups’ realizing their shared interests by recognizing

---

Eyerman, Ron, and Andrew Jamison. 1998. *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Roy, William G. 2010. *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>305</sup> Edwards, Leigh H. 2009. *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Hubbs, Nadine. 2014. *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>306</sup> Rosenthal, Rob, and Richard Flacks. 2011. *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>308</sup> Hagstrom Miller, Carl. 2010. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hughes, *Country Soul*.

Pecknold, Diane, ed. 2013. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*.

<sup>309</sup> Hall, Stuart. 2017. *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>310</sup> Marx, Karl. 1852. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Translated by Daniel De Leon. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.

<sup>311</sup> Fromm, Erich. 1941. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

their shared class identities<sup>312</sup> has the potential to liberate them from the oppressions which they face. If, rather than continuing to buy into the narratives which divide groups based upon race in the service of maintaining the class structure, people recognized that it is in the interest of all working class individuals to work together for their liberation from the oppressive class structures, change could happen.<sup>313</sup>

A recent controversy over the country trap song “Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X has revived the classic debate over what is country and who is allowed to make country music.<sup>314</sup> Billy Ray Cyrus joined him on a remix of the song, in an attempt to make the argument for it’s being country even stronger. This goes back to the division in music genres which was initiated from the beginning<sup>315</sup> in order to reinforce racial divisions which maintain the class structure.<sup>316</sup> Through this song, I saw the potential for bringing groups which are usually divided along genre lines coming to life. Both individuals who typically listen to hip-hop and those who traditionally listen to country are listening to this song and enjoying it. These individuals, through the enjoyment of the same music, can potentially bond over this shared enjoyment and come to realize that they both identify with the music because they have many shared experiences. This is particularly the case within Southern culture,<sup>317</sup> where both of these genres (country and hip-hop)

---

<sup>312</sup> Fraser, *Class Matters*.

<sup>313</sup> CMA, “The Rise of Country Music.” -

The percentage of Black individuals (over 18) who are country music consumers has increased by 33% since 2005.

<sup>314</sup> Yahr, Emily. 2019. “Billboard said Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ wasn’t country enough. Then Billy Ray Cyrus stepped in.” *The Washington Post*, April 5. Retrieved on April 19, 2019 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/03/29/billboard-pulled-lil-nas-xs-viral-old-town-road-country-chart-it-ignited-controversy/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.250089d1ed3a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/03/29/billboard-pulled-lil-nas-xs-viral-old-town-road-country-chart-it-ignited-controversy/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.250089d1ed3a)).

Ross, A. M., Cyrus, B. R., Donald, J., Reznor, M. T., & Hill, M. L. (2019) Old town road (remix) [Recorded by Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus]. [MP3 File]. New York, NY: Columbia Records.

<sup>315</sup> Hughes, *Country Soul*.

Malone, Bill C. [1968] 1985. *Country Music, U.S.A.*. Reprint, Austin: University of Texas Press.

<sup>316</sup> After having its country status questioned, Beyoncé’s “Daddy Lessons” (2016) was covered by Dixie Chicks, who then declared it as country. Beyoncé and Dixie Chicks performed it on the CMAs, marking the return of Dixie Chicks since their political exile from the country scene.

<sup>317</sup> Malone, Bill C. 2002. *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

are popular, but their audiences are divided along racial lines, even though the lyrics of the songs in both genres tend to be rooted in similar lived experiences.<sup>318</sup> Country and hip-hop both come from working-class roots and in the South, they have both always influenced each other, but strict genre lines have kept them separated.<sup>319</sup> This recognition of shared experiences can lead to a deepened understanding of complex social structures resulting in a realization by these groups that they should be working together, rather than against each other.

Though my analysis in this work is largely pessimistic, characterized by a lack of hope in the potential for change in current social structures. I do see a potential for positive change to occur given the right circumstances. While most people's critiques of popular music argue that we need to produce better music in order to produce change, this strategy will not work. People will continue to listen to what they want to listen to. In a capitalistic society, wherein the market will always be both driven by what the consumer wants and interested in maintaining structures that result in profit, this means that the narratives will likely never be as critical as they need to be in order to result in change. Because of this, the potential for change, rather than lying in the production of better music, lies in the creation of better listeners.

---

<sup>318</sup> Hughes, *Country Soul*.

<sup>319</sup> Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*.



## REFERENCES

- Academy of Country Music. 2017. "54th ACM Awards Nominees." Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.acmcountry.com/noms>).
- Adorno, Theodor. 1991. *The Culture Industry*. London: Routledge.
- Allahyani, Mariam Hameed Ahmed. 2012. "The Relationship between Cognitive Dissonance and Decision-Making Styles in a Sample of Female Students at the University of Umm Al Qura." *Education* 132(3):641-663.
- Aly, Chuck. 2015. "Keith Hill on Keith Hill." *Country Aircheck*, June 1, pp. 1, 4. Retrieved March 4, 2019 (<https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdfs/current060115.pdf>).
- Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. 2019. "No Country for Female Artists: Artist & Songwriter Gender on Popular Country Charts from 2014 to 2018." *University of Southern California*, 1-5.
- Asker, Jim. 2018. "Country Airplay Chart Lacks Any Female Artists in Top 20 For First Time." *Billboard*, December 5. Retrieved December 21, 2018 (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8488730/no-women-country-airplay-chart-top-20>).
- Berg, Bruce L. 2000. "An Introduction to Content Analysis." Pp. 238-267 in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Billboard. 2016. "Greatest of All Time Top Country Artists." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/greatest-country-artists>).
- Billboard. 2019a. "Country Airplay." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-airplay>).
- Billboard. 2019b. "Top Country Albums." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-albums>).

- Bornstein, Robert F., and Paul R. D'Agostino. 1992. "Stimulus recognition and the mere exposure effect." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63:545-552.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. [1977] 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Translated by Richard Nice, Reprint, London: SAGE Publications.
- Bufwack, Mary A., and Robert K. Oermann. [2003] 2017. *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000*. Reprint, Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press.
- Callahan, Mat. 2005. *The Trouble with Music*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Casey, Jim. 2017. "40 Solo Males, 5 Solo Females Have a Single on This Week's Billboard Country Airplay Chart: 10 Years Ago, There Were a Lot More Ladies." *Nash*, June 28. Retrieved February 9, 2019 (<http://www.nashfmwisconsin.com/2017/06/28/40-solo-males-5-solo-females-have-a-single-on-this-weeks-billboard-country-airplay-chart-10-years-ago-there-were-a-lot-more/>).
- Chetty, Raj, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter. 2018. "The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility." Retrieved April 16, 2019 ([https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/atlas\\_paper.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/atlas_paper.pdf)).
- CMA. 2017. "The Rise of Country Music: A detailed look at today's Country Music Audience." Retrieved March 13, 2019 (<https://www.cmaworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Public-Web-Consumer-Deck-2017.pdf>).
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*, June. Retrieved April 6, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>).

- Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. 2016. *Intersectionality* (italicize). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Corlett, J. Angelo. 2003. *Race, Racism, and Reparations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Country Music Association. 2018. "Past Winners And Nominees." *CMA*. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://cmaawards.com/past-winners-and-nominees/>).
- Country Music Association. 2019. "CMA Research and Insights." *CMA*. Retrieved March 13, 2019 (<https://www.cmaworld.com/research/>).
- Deloria, Philip J.. 1998. *Playing Indian*. Chelsea, Michigan: BookCrafters, Inc.
- Denisoff, R. Serge. 1983. *Sing a Song of Social Significance*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- DiMaggio, Anthony. 2009. *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Dukes, Billy. 2016. "No. 1: Miranda Lambert, 'The House That Built Me' – Top Country Songs Of The Century." *Taste of Country*, August 31. Retrieved February 10, 2019 (<http://tasteofcountry.com/miranda-lambert-the-house-that-built-me-top-songs-of-the-century/>).
- Dukes, Billy. 2018. "There Are More Lukes Than Women In The Billboard Country Airplay Top 20." *Taste of Country*, December 5. Retrieved February 9, 2019 (<http://tasteofcountry.com/women-on-the-radio-billboard -country-airplay-top-20-2018/>).
- Durkheim, Emile. 1971. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Dyke, Lorraine S., and Steven A. Murphy. 2006. "How We Define Success: A Qualitative Study of What Matters Most to Women and Men." *Sex Roles* 55:357-371.

- Edison Research. 2014. "The Infinite Dial." Triton Digital. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Infinite-Dial-2014-from-Edison-Research-and-Triton-Digital.pdf>).
- Edwards, Leigh H. 2009. *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Eyerman, Ron, and Andrew Jamison. 1998. *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fischer, Claude S.. 2010. *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fraser, Steve. 2018. *Class Matters: The Strange Career of an American Delusion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fromm, Erich. 1941. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Fox, Aaron A.. 2004. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fox, Pamela. 2009. *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Gold, Adam. 2015. "Why Country Radio Still Matters: In this age of on-demand listening, terrestrial and satellite radio remain the key power players in making or breaking a star." *Rolling Stone*, February 24. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/why-country-radio-still-matters-90999/>).
- Gray, Marion W. 2000. *Productive Men and Reproductive Women: The Agrarian Household and the Emergence of Separate Spheres during the German Enlightenment*. New York: Berghahn Books.

- Guarino, Mark. 2016. "Where have country music's women gone?." *The Guardian*, August 4. Retrieved February 12, 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/aug/04/female-country-singers-country-music-radio>).
- Hackett, Vernell. 2011. "New Statistics About Country Music Fans Revealed at Billboard Country Summit." *Billboard*, June 8. Retrieved April 17, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/country/1177554/new-statistics-about-country-music-fans-revealed-at-billboard-country>).
- Hagstrom Miller, Carl. 2010. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1993. "Encoding, decoding." Pp. 90-103 in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by S. During. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart. 2017. *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *Why Music Matters*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. "I Spent 5 Years With Some of Trump's Biggest Fans. Here's What They Won't Tell You: How Donald Trump took a narrative of unfairness and twisted it to his advantage." *Mother Jones*, September/October. Retrieved April 11, 2019 (<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters/>).
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.
- Hodak, Brittany. 2016. "Carrie Underwood Takes Another Domestic Violence Song To Number 1." *Forbes*, July 18. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/>

brittanyhodak/2016/07/18/carrie-underwood-takes-another-domestic-violence-song-to-number-1/#69842b4c29ac).

Holt, Fabian. 2007. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hubbs, Nadine. 2014. *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Hughes, Charles L. 2015. *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Inside Radio. 2018. "Country Music Fans Tune In Longer, Digging AM/FM." March 8.

Retrieved April 18, 2019 ([http://www.insideradio.com/free/country-music-fans-tune-in-longer-digging-am-fm/article\\_eff34ce6-229b-11e8-af81-8788ad63d375.html](http://www.insideradio.com/free/country-music-fans-tune-in-longer-digging-am-fm/article_eff34ce6-229b-11e8-af81-8788ad63d375.html)).

Johnston, Maura. 2019. "Bro Country Is Here To Stay. Just Ask Florida Georgia Line." *Time*, February 7. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<http://time.com/5523763/floria-georgia-line-cant-say-i-aint-country-album-review-music/>).

Keel, Beverly. 2015. "Sexist 'tomato' barb launches food fight on Music Row." *Tennessean*, May 27. Retrieved April 18, 2019

(<https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2015/05/27/sexist-tomato-barb-launches-food-fight-music-row/28036657/>).

King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1963. "I Have a Dream ...." Delivered at the March on Washington.

Kopple, Barbara, and Cecilia Peck. 2006. *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*. DVD. New York: Cabin Creek Films.

Kurtzman, Warren. 2019. "What Shapes Our Music Tastes." *Coleman Insights Media Research*, April 16. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://colemaninsights.com/coleman-insights-blog/what-shapes-our-music-tastes>).

- Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. New York: Verso.
- Lakoff, George. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lawler, Jennifer. 1996. *Songs of Life: The Meaning of Country Music*. St. Paul, MN: Pogo Press Inc.
- Lowrey, Annie. 2017. "The Great Recession Is Still With Us: The downturn left the country poorer and more unequal than it would have been otherwise." *The Atlantic*, December 1. Retrieved October 2, 2018 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/great-recession-still-with-us/547268/>).
- Malone, Bill C. [1968] 1985. *Country Music, U.S.A.*. Reprint, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Malone, Bill C. 2002. *Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Marchand, Roland. 1985. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Marx, Karl. [1867] 2009. *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*. Washington, DC: Reprint, Regnery Publishing.
- Marx, Karl. 1852. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Translated by Daniel De Leon. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1848. *The Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Samuel Moore. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1932. *The German Ideology*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- McCusker, Kristine M., and Diane Pecknold, eds. 2004. *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

- McKenna, Brittney. 2017. "Sara Evans Talks bro Country Dominance, New Album and Jason Isbell." *Rolling Stone*, July 24. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/sara-evans-talks-bro-country-dominance-new-album-and-jason-isbell-195186/>).
- McLellan, David. 1977. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Moss, Marissa R.. 2018. "See Margo Price's Call for Equality With 'Pay Gap' on 'Conan'." *Rolling Stone*, March 8. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/see-margo-prices-call-for-equality-with-pay-gap-on-conan-127239/>).
- Moss, Marissa R.. 2019. "Women on Country Radio: CRS 2019 Sends Mixed Messages - Annual gathering of country radio gatekeepers can't seem to explain gender imbalance on the airwaves." *Rolling Stone*, February 27. Retrieved February 28, 2019 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/women-country-music-kacey-musgraves-crs-800797/>).
- Nielsen. 2014. "Walk the Blurred Lines: Country Music's Cross-Over Popularity." October 30. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/walk-the-blurred-lines-country-musics-cross-over-popularity.html>).
- Opportunity Insights. 2019. "The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility." Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://opportunityinsights.org/>).
- Parker, Kim, and Renee Stepler. 2017. "As U.S. marriage rate hovers at 50%, education gap in marital status widens." Pew Research Center, September 14. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/14/as-u-s-marriage-rate-hovers-at-50-education-gap-in-marital-status-widens/>).



- Parker, Kim. 2015. "Despite progress, women still bear heavier load than men in balancing work and family" *Pew Research Center*. March 10. Retrieved April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/10/women-still-bear-heavier-load-than-men-balancing-work-family/?fbclid=IwAR2CmCKg9qqZoxfkLuW9iLivCJeYpKdh6UqF-Mu3ZryvnRqNG88QOLd1FkQ>).
- Parker, Kim. 2015. "Women more than men adjust their careers for family life" *Pew Research Center*. October 12. Retrieved April 19, 2019 ([https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/?fbclid=IwAR0XSoJWXzmZXnaFf0dUx7H2lQk\\_Ldf-7zNCLlgazdZPtTal26UWjfRLAd4](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/?fbclid=IwAR0XSoJWXzmZXnaFf0dUx7H2lQk_Ldf-7zNCLlgazdZPtTal26UWjfRLAd4)).
- Pecknold, Diane. 2007. *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pecknold, Diane, ed. 2013. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pecknold, Diane, and Kristine M. McCusker, eds. 2016. *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Penuell, Russ. 2015. "On Music and Scheduling." *Country Aircheck*, May 26, pp. 1, 8. Retrieved March 4, 2019 ([https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdf\\_publication/Issue\\_449%20-%20May%2026,%202015.pdf](https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdf_publication/Issue_449%20-%20May%2026,%202015.pdf)).
- Peterson, Richard A. 1997. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Rasmussen, Eric E., and Rebecca L. Densley. 2017. "Girl in a Country Song: Gender Roles and Objectification of Women in Popular Country Music across 1990 to 2014." *Sex Roles* 76:188-201.
- Recording Academy. 2019. "Awards." *Grammy Awards*. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards>).
- Rosenthal, Rob, and Richard Flacks. 2011. *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Roy, William G. 2010. *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Samuels, Alana. 2017. "The Never-Ending Foreclosure: How can the country survive the next economic crash if millions of families still haven't recovered from the last one?." *The Atlantic*, December 1. Retrieved March 23, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/the-never-ending-foreclosure/547181/>).
- Sims, David. 2017. "What Conan O'Brien Means to Late-Night's Future." *The Atlantic*, January 10. Retrieved April 5, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/01/what-conan-obrien-means-to-late-nights-future/512633/>).
- Skrla, Linda. 1999. "Femininity/Masculinity: Hegemonic Normalizations in the Public School Superintendency." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April, Montreal, Canada.
- Skrla, Linda, Pedro Reyes, and James Joseph Scheurich. 2000. "Sexism, Silence and Solutions: Women Superintendents Speak Up and Speak Out." *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 36(1):44-75.
- Solnit, Rebecca. 2014. *Men Explain Things to Me*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

- Stark, Phyllis. 2015. "Nashville Group Looks to Change the Conversation Around Women in Country." *Billboard*, June 25. Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/6612617/nashville-group-looks-to-change-the-conversation-around-women-in-country>).
- Stefano, Angela. 2018. "2018 Billboard Year-End Charts Show Just How Tough It Is For Women In Country Music." *The Boot*, December 5. Retrieved February 9, 2019 (<http://theboot.com/billboard-country-american-a-year-end-charts-2018/>).
- Stepler, Renee. 2017. "Led by Baby Boomers, divorce rates climb for America's 50+ population." Pew Research Center, March 9. Retrieved on April 19, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>).
- Strecker, Erin. 2015. "Miranda Lambert Takes Down Sexist Country Radio Exec: 'Biggest Bunch of BULL I Have Ever Heard'." *Billboard*, May 29. Retrieved April 16, 2019 (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-615/6582917/miranda-lambert-sexist-country-radio-exec>).
- Taste of Country. 2018. "Kane Brown Defends 'American Bad Dream, His Most Controversial Song.'" You-Tube Web site. Retrieved November 9, 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCx7MAqInuw>).
- ter Bogt, Tom F.M., Marc J.M.H. Delsing, Maarten van Zalk, Peter G. Christenson, and Wim H.J. Meeus. 2011. "Intergenerational continuity of taste: parental and adolescent music preferences." *Social Forces* 90(1):297-320.
- Tichi, Cecelia, ed. 1998. *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky-Tonk Bars*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Watson, Jada. 2018. "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016." *Popular Music and Society*. doi:10.1080/03007766.2018.1512070.
- Watts, Cindy. 2018. "3 years after 'Tomato-gate,' there are even fewer women on country radio." *Tennessean*, June 10. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2018/06/10/women-country-radio-tomatogate-music-row-kelsea-ballerini-maren-morris/675471002/>).
- Weber, Max. 1904. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. New York: Charles Scribner's Son.
- Weisbart, Eric. 2014. *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- White, Gillian B.. 2015. "The Recession's Racial Slant: By 2031, the downturn will have decreased the wealth of the median black household by almost \$100,000." *The Atlantic*, June 24. Retrieved March 23, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/black-recession-housing-race/396725/>).
- Wright, Jess, Russ Penuell, and Chuck Aly. 2015. "Addressing SaladGate." *Country Aircheck*, June 1, pp. 1, 8, 11. Retrieved March 4, 2019 (<https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdfs/current060115.pdf>).
- Wright Mills, Charles. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Yahr, Emily. 2019. "Billboard said Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' wasn't country enough. Then Billy Ray Cyrus stepped in." *The Washington Post*, April 5. Retrieved on April 19, 2019 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/03/29/billboard-pulled-lil->

nas-xs-viral-old-town-road-country-chart-it-ignited-controversy/?noredirect=on&utm\_term=.250089d1ed3a).

Yale Law School. [1969] 2008. "First Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon." *The Avalon Project*. Retrieved March 29, 2019 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/nixon1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/nixon1.asp)).

Zirpoli, Tom. 2018. "Zirpoli: Female representation lacking in Congress." *Carroll County Times*, April 24. Retrieved April 18, 2019 (<https://www.carrollcountytimes.com/opinion/columnists/cc-op-zirpoli-20180424-story.html>).

## SONGS CITED

- Beathard, C. & Church, E. (2018). Drowning man [Recorded by Eric Church]. On *Desperate Man* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: Universal Music Group.
- Beathard, C. & Wallin, C. (2007). Don't blink [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *Just Who I Am: Poets & Pirates* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Beavers, B., Wilson, D., & Bentley, D. (2012). Home [Recorded by Dierks Bentley]. On *Home* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.
- Carver, L., Nettles, J., & Bush, K. (2006). Everyday America [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Enjoy the Ride* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Mercury Records.
- Church, E., Spillman, J., & Meadows, T. (2018). The snake [Recorded by Eric Church]. On *Desperate Man* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: Universal Music Group.
- Clark, B. (2016). Girl next door [Recorded by Brandy Clark]. On *Big Day in a Small Town* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.
- Clark, B. & McAnally, S. (2013). Pray to Jesus [Recorded by Brandy Clark]. On *12 Stories* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.
- Clark, B. & McKenna, L. (2016). Three kids no husband [Recorded by Brandy Clark]. On *Big Day In A Small Town* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.
- Clark, B., Musgraves, K., & McAnally, S. (2011). Mama's broken heart [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Four The Record* [CD]. New York: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Davis, S. (1998). Stand beside me [Recorded by Jo Dee Messina]. On *I'm Alright* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.
- DeStefano, C., Smyers, D., & Mooney, S. (2016). From the ground up [Record by Dan + Shay]. On *Obsessed* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Warner Music Nashville.

- DiPiero, B., House, G., & McManus, P. (1987). Little rock [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *Reba McEntire's Greatest Hits* [CD]. Chicago, IL: MCA Records.
- DiPiero, B., Sanders, M. D., & Seskin, S. (1994). Daddy's money [Recorded by Ricochet]. On Ricochet [CD]. New York, NY: Sony BMG Music Entertainment.
- Dreyer, J., Brunswick, J., Pierce, J., & Cecil, T. (2019). Freedom [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *Stronger Than The Truth* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.
- DuBois, C. & Janson, C. (2015). Buy me a boat [Recorded by Chris Janson]. On *Buy Me A Boat* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Warner Music Nashville.
- Dunn, R. & Coleman, P. (2011). Cost of livin' [Recorded by Ronnie Dunn]. On *Ronnie Dunn* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Eden, B. (2015). Daddy's money [Recorded by Brooke Eden]. [MP3 File]. Nashville, TN: Red Bow Records.
- Frasure, J., Osborne, J., & McAnally, S. (2016). Rich and miserable [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *Cosmic Hallelujah* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Sony Music Nashville.
- Garcia, D., Miller, J. O., Moore, K., & Olsen, S. L. (2017). More girls like you [Recorded by Kip Moore]. On *SLOWHEART* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.
- Gibson, S. (1998). Wide open spaces [Recorded by Dixie Chicks]. On *Wide Open Spaces* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Giles, R. & Longacre, S. (1991). Is there life out there [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *For My Broken Heart* [CD]. Chicago, IL: MCA Records.
- Goddard, G., Giles, R., & Nichols, T. (2003). I wanna do it all [Recorded by Terri Clark]. On *Pain To Kill* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.

- Gorley, A., Underwood, C., & Lovelace, K. (2007). All-American girl [Recorded by Carrie Underwood]. On *Carnival Ride* [CD]. New York, NY: 19 Recordings.
- Hayslip, B., Thompson, J., & Dragstrem, M. (2017). I'll name the dogs [Recorded by Blake Shelton]. On *Texoma Sky* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.
- Henningson, B. & Henningson, C. (2010). All your life [Recorded by The Band Perry]. On *The Band Perry* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.
- House, J., Barnhart, P., & Hogin, S. (1997). A broken wing [Recorded by Martin McBride]. On *Evolution* [CD]. Berlin, Germany: BMG Entertainment.
- Hummon, M. & Eleanor, M. (1999). Cowboy take me away [Recorded by Dixie Chicks]. On *Fly* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Hunt Oglesby, D. & Wells, D. (1995). Check yes or no [Recorded by George Strait]. On *Strait Out Of The Box* [CD]. Nashville, TN: MCA Records.
- Isbell, J. (2017). White man's world [Recorded by Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit]. On *The Nashville Sound* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Southeastern Records.
- Jackson, A. (1994). Livin' on love [Recorded by Alan Jackson]. On *Who I Am* [CD]. New York, NY: Arista Records.
- Jackson, A. (2003). Remember when [Recorded by Alan Jackson]. On *Greatest Hits: Volume II* [CD]. Berlin, Germany: BMG.
- James, B. & Chesney, K. (2010). Reality [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On Hemingway's Whiskey [CD]. New York: Sony Music Entertainment.
- James, B., Underwood, C., & Garcia, D. (2018). Love wins [Recorded by Carrie Underwood]. On *Cry pretty* [MP3 File]. Nashville, TN: Sony Music Nashville.



- Johnson, D. & James, T. (2010). Love like crazy [Recorded by Lee Brice]. On *Love like crazy* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.
- Johnston, J., Laird, L., & Douglas, T. (2016). Livin' the dream [Recorded by Drake White]. On *Spark* [CD]. Gallatin, TN: Dot Records.
- Johnston, J., Steele, J., & Douglas, T. (2013). Raise 'em up [Recorded by Keith Urban and Eric Church]. On *Fuse* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.
- Kimball, J., Derry, M., & Diamond, S. (1995). I can love you like that [Recorded by John Michael Montgomery]. On *Love Songs* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.
- Lambert, M., Hemby, N., & Galyon, N. (2014). Automatic [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Platinum* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Lange, R. J. & Twain, S. (1995). Any man of mine [Recorded by Shania Twain]. On *The Woman In Me* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.
- Leary, J. & Wiseman, C. (1997). Where the green grass grows [Recorded by Tim McGraw]. On *Everywhere* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.
- Lee, D. & Satcher, L. (2019). Ain't nothin' to it [Recorded by Cody Johnson]. On *Ain't Nothin' To It* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Warner Music Nashville.
- Martin, J. D., Begaud, P., & Corish, V. (1998). Now that I found you [Recorded by Terri Clark]. On *How I Feel* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.
- McEntire, A. & Blaylock, H. (2019). Stronger than the truth [Recorded by Reba McEntire]. On *Stronger Than The Truth* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.
- McGill, C., Hoge, J., Brown, K., & Ellis, S. (2018). American bad dream [Recorded by Kane Brown]. On *Experiment* [MP3 File]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

- Monroe, A., Lambert, M., & Presley, A. (2017). Dreams don't come true [Recorded by Angaleena Presley]. On *Wrangled* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Mining Light Records.
- Musgraves, K., Laird, L., & McAnally, S. (2013). Blowin' smoke [Recorded by Kacey Musgraves]. On *Same Trailer Different Park* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.
- Musgraves, K., Laird, L., & McAnally, S. (2013). Merry go 'round [Recorded by Kacey Musgraves]. On *Same Trailer Different Park* [CD]. Chicago, IL: Mercury Records.
- Nelson, W. (1988). Crazy [Recorded by Patsy Cline]. On *Showcase* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.
- Nettles, J., Bush, K., & Owens, T. (2006). Settlin' [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Enjoy The Ride* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.
- Nettles, J., Hall, K., & Bush, K. (2004). Something more [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Twice The Speed Of Life* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.
- Nettles, J., Hall, K., Bush, K., Simonton, L. K., Hartley, R. B., & Bieser, T. (2004). Baby girl [Recorded by Sugarland]. On *Twice The Speed Of Life* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.
- Osborne, J., McAnally, S., & Copperman, R. (2015). John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16 [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Ripcord* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Hit Red Records.
- Paisley, B. & DuBois, C. (2009). Welcome to the future [Recorded by Brad Paisley]. On *American Saturday Night* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Petraglia, A., & James, B. (2009). It's America [Recorded by Rodney Atkins]. On *It's America* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.
- Petraglia, A. T., Gottlieb, L. B., & Richey, K. (1998). I'm alright [Recorded by Jo Dee Messina]. On *I'm alright* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Curb Records.

- Price, M. (2017). All American made [Recorded by Margo Price]. On *All American Made* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Third Man Records.
- Price, M. (2017). Pay gap [Recorded by Margo Price]. On *All American Made* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Third Man Records.
- Randall, A. & Berg, M. (1994). XXX's and OOO's (an American girl) [Recorded by Trisha Yearwood]. On *Thinkin' About You* [CD]. Nashville, TN: MCA Nashville.
- Redding, O. (1965). Respect [Recorded by Aretha Franklin]. On *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* [CD]. New York, NY: Atlantic Records. (1967).
- Reneau, B. & Bynum, H. (1988). Chains [Recorded by Patty Loveless]. On *Honky Tonk Angel* [CD]. Chicago, IL: MCA Records.
- Robbins, J., Hemby, N., & Galyon, N. (2014). Babies makin' babies [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Platinum* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Robbins, J., Hemby, N., & Galyon, N. (2014). Girls [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Platinum* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Robbins, J., Nite, J., & Osborne, J. (2015). Top of the world [Recorded by Tim McGraw]. On *Damn Country Music* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Label Group.
- Rogers, R., Brooks, K., & Cook, D. (2001). Only in America [Recorded by Brooks & Dunn]. On *Steers & Stripes* [CD]. Nashville, TN: BMG Entertainment.
- Ross, A. M., Cyrus, B. R., Donald, J., Reznor, M. T., & Hill, M. L. (2019) Old town road (remix) [Recorded by Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus]. [MP3 File]. New York, NY: Columbia Records.
- Rucker, D. & Rogers, F. (2008). Alright [Recorded by Darius Rucker]. On *Learn To Live* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.

- Sampson, D. & Varble, W. (2005). Waitin' on a woman [Recorded by Brad Paisley]. On *Time Well Wasted* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Scott, D. (2000). It's a great day to be alive [Recorded by Travis Tritt]. On *Down The Road I Go* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony BMG Music Entertainment.
- Shamblin, A. & Douglas, T. (2009). The house that built me [Recorded by Miranda Lambert]. On *Revolution* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Springsteen, B. (1978). The promised land [Recorded by Bruce Springsteen]. On *Darkness On the Edge of Town* [CD]. New York, NY: Columbia Records.
- Sweeney, S. (2017). Bottle by my bed [Recorded by Sunny Sweeney]. On *Trophy* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Aunt Daddy Records.
- Swift, T., Rose, L., & Maher, B. (2006). Mary's song (oh my my my) [Recorded by Taylor Swift]. On *Taylor Swift* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Big Machine Records.
- Tompkins, C., Kear, J., & Clawson, R. (2016). Worry 'bout nothin' [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Ripcord* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Hit Red Records.
- Underwood, C., DeStefano, C., & Lindsey, H. (2015). Smoke break [Recorded by Carrie Underwood]. On *Storyteller* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Sony Music Nashville.
- Urban, K. & Marx, R. (2004). Better life [Recorded by Keith Urban]. On *Be Here* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Capitol Records Nashville.
- Wadge, A., Frasure, J., & Alaina, L. (2018). Ladies in the '90s [Recorded by Lauren Alaina]. [MP3 File]. New York, NY: 19 Recordings, Inc.
- Wadge, A., Sheeran, E., McDaid, J., & Mac, S. (2017). The rest of our life [Recorded by Faith Hill and Tim McGraw]. On *The Rest of Our Life* [CD]. New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment.

Welch, K. (2017). Millionaire [Recorded by Chris Stapleton]. On *From A Room: Volume 2* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: UMG Recordings.

Wiseman, C. & Bruce, T. (1995). Someone else's dream [Recorded by Faith Hill]. On *It Matters To Me* [CD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records.

Wiseman, C., & Collins, J. (2002). The Good Stuff [Recorded by Kenny Chesney]. On *No Shoes, No Shirt, No Problems* [CD]. Berlin, Germany: BMG.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A - Playlist

Title	Year	Performer(s)	Songwriter(s)	Highest Chart position
Any Man Of Mine	1995	Shania Twain	R. J. Lange & S. Twain	1
XXX's and OOO's (An American Girl)	1995	Trisha Yearwood	A. Randall & M. Berg	1
I Can Love You Like That	1995	John Michael Montgomery	J. Kimball, M. Derry, & S. Diamond	1
Check Yes Or No	1996	George Strait	D. Hunt Oglesby & D. Wells	1
Where The Green Grass Grows	1997	Tim McGraw	J. Leary & C. Wiseman	1
Wide Open Spaces	1998	Dixie Chicks	S. Gibson	1
Stand Beside Me	1998	Jo Dee Messina	S. David	1
Now That I Found You	1998	Terri Clark	J. D. Martin, P. Begaud, & V. Corish	2
Cowboy Take Me Away	1999	Dixie Chicks	M. Hummon & M. Eleanor	1
It's A Great Day To Be Alive	2000	Travis Tritt	D. Scott	2
Only in America	2001	Brooks & Dunn	R. Rogers, K. Brooks, & D. Cook	1

The Good Stuff	2002	Kenny Chesney	C. Wiseman & J. Collins	1
I Wanna Do It All	2003	Terri Clark	G. Goddard, R. Giles, & T. Nichols	3
Remember When	2003	Alan Jackson	A. Jackson	1
Something More	2004	Sugarland	J. Nettles, K. Hall, & K. Bush	2
Baby Girl	2004	Sugarland	J. Nettles, K. Hall, K. Bush, L. K. Simonton, R. B. Hartley, & T. Bieser	2
Better Life	2004	Keith Urban	K. Urban & R. Marx	1
Waitin' On A Woman	2005	Brad Paisley	D. Sampson & W. Varble	1
Mary's Song (Oh My My My)	2006	Taylor Swift	T. Swift, L. Rose, & B. Maher	—
Settlin'	2006	Sugarland	J. Nettles, K. Bush, & T. Owens	1
Everyday America	2006	Sugarland	L. Carver, J. Nettles, & K. Bush	9
Don't Blink	2007	Kenny Chesney	C. Beathard & C. Wallin	1
All-American Girl	2007	Carrie Underwood	A. Gorley, C. Underwood, & K. Lovelace	1
Alright	2008	Darius Rucker	D. Rucker & F. Rogers	1
Welcome to the	2009	Brad Paisley	B. Paisley & C.	2

Future			DuBois	
The House That Built Me	2009	Miranda Lambert	A. Shamblin & T. Douglas	1
Love Like Crazy	2010	Lee Brice	D. Johnson & T. James	3
It's America	2010	Rodney Atkins	A. Petraglia & B. James	1
All Your Life	2010	The Band Perry	B. Henningson & C. Henningson	1
Cost Of Livin'	2011	Ronnie Dunn	R. Dunn & P. Coleman	19
Home	2012	Dierks Bentley	B. Beavers, D. Wilson, & D. Bentley	1
Merry Go 'Round	2013	Kacey Musgraves	K. Musgraves, L. Laird, & S. McAnally	10
Blowin' Smoke	2013	Kacey Musgraves	K. Musgraves, L. Laird, & S. McAnally	23
Raise 'Em Up	2013	Keith Urban, Eric Church	J. Johnston, J. Steele, & T. Douglas	1
Pray To Jesus	2013	Brandy Clark	B. Clark & S. McAnally	—
Girls	2014	Miranda Lambert	J. Robbins, N. Hemby, & N. Galyon	—
Automatic	2014	Miranda Lambert	M. Lambert, N. Hemby, & N. Galyon	3
Babies Makin' Babies	2014	Miranda Lambert	J. Robbins, N. Hemby, & N. Galyon	—



Top Of The World	2015	Tim McGraw	J. Robbins, J. Nite, & J. Osborne	5
Smoke Break	2015	Carrie Underwood	C. Underwood, C. DeStefano, & H. Lindsey	2
Buy Me A Boat	2015	Chris Janson	C. DuBois & C. Janson	3
Daddy's Money	2015	Brooke Eden	B. Eden	50
John cougar, John Deere, John 3:16	2016	Keith Urban	J. Osborne, S. MaAnally, & R. Copperman	2
Worry 'Bout Nothin'	2016	Keith Urban	C. Tompkins, J. Kear, & R. Clawson	—
From the Ground Up	2016	Dan + Shay	C. DeStefano, D. Smyers, & S. Mooney	1
Girl Next Door	2016	Brandy Clark	B. Clark	39
Three Kids No Husband	2016	Brandy Clark	B. Clark & L. McKenna	—
Livin' The Dream	2016	Drake White	J. Johnston, L. Laird, & T. Douglas	12
Rich and Miserable	2016	Kenny Chesney	J. Frasure, J. Osborne, & S. McAnally	—
Bottle By My Bed	2017	Sunny Sweeney	S. Sweeney	—
Dreams Don't Come True	2017	Angaleena Presley	A. Monroe, A. Presley, & M. Lambert	—
White Man's World	2017	Jason Isbell, The 400 Unit	J. Isbell	—

More Girls Like You	2017	Kip Moore	D. Garcia, J. O. Miller, K. Moore, & S. L. Olsen	4
I'll Name the Dogs	2017	Blake Shelton	B. Hayslip, J. Thompson, & M. Dragstrem	1
Pay Gap	2017	Margo Price	M. Price	—
All American Made	2017	Margo Price	M. Price	—
The Rest of Our Life	2017	Tim McGraw, Faith Hill	A. Wadge, E. Sheeran, J. McDaid, & S. Mac	25
Millionaire	2017	Chris Stapleton	K. Welch	2
Love Wins	2018	Carrie Underwood	B. James, C. Underwood, & D. Garcia	11
Drowning Man	2018	Eric Church	C. Beathard & E. Church	—
American Bad Dream	2018	Kane Brown	C. McGill, J. Hoge, K. Brown, & S. Ellis	—

Appendix B - Lyrics<sup>320</sup>

## Chapter 1:

## “Love Like Crazy” by Lee Brice

They called him crazy when they started out / Said 17's too young to know what love's about / They've been together 58 years now / That's crazy // He brought home 67 bucks a week / Bought a little two bedroom house on Maple Street / Where she blessed him with six more mouths to feed / That's crazy // Just ask him how he did it / He'll say, “pull up a seat” / It'll only take a minute to tell you everything / Be your best friend, tell the truth, and overuse I love you / Go to work, do your best, don't outsmart your common sense / Never let your prayin' knees get lazy / And love like crazy // They called him crazy when he quit his job / They said, “them home computers, boy, they'll never take off” / Well, he sold his one-man-shop to Microsoft / And they paid like crazy // Just ask him how he made it / He'll tell you faith and sweet / And the heart of a faithful woman who never let him forget / Be your best friend, tell the truth, and overuse I love you / Go to work, do your best, Don't outsmart your common sense / Never let your prayin' knees get lazy / And love like crazy // Always treat your woman like a lady / Never get too old to call her baby / Never let your prayin' knees get lazy / And love like crazy // They called him crazy when they started out / They've been together 58 years now / Ain't that crazy?

## “The House That Built Me” by Miranda Lambert

I know they say / You can't go home again / I just had to come back one last time / Ma'am I know you don't know me from Adam / But these handprints on the front steps are mine / Up those stairs / In that little back bedroom / Is where I did my homework and I learned to play guitar / And I bet you didn't know / Under that live Oak, my favorite dog is buried in the yard // I thought if I could touch this place or feel it / This brokenness inside me might start healin' / Out here it's like I'm someone else / I thought that maybe I could find myself / If I could just come in, I swear I'll leave / Won't take nothin' but a memory / From the house that built me // Mama cut out pictures of houses for years / From Better Homes and Garden Magazine / Plans were draw and concrete poured / Nail by nail, board by board / Daddy gave life to Mama's dream // I thought if I could touch this place or feel it / This brokenness inside me might start healin' / Out here it's like I'm someone else / I thought that maybe I could find myself / If I could just come in I swear I'll leave / Won't take nothin' but a memory / From the house that built me // You leave home, you move on / And you do the best you can / I got lost in this old world / And forgot who I am // I though if maybe I could touch this place or feel it / This brokenness inside me might start healin' / Out here it's like I'm someone else / I thought that maybe I could find myself / If I could walk around I swear I'll leave / Won't take nothin' but a memory / From the house that built me

## “Merry Go ‘Round” by Kacey Musgraves

---

<sup>320</sup> All of the lyrics contained in this document have been transcribed by me.

If you ain't got two kids by 21 / You're probably gonna die alone / At least that's what tradition told you / And it don't matter if you don't believe / Come Sunday mornin' you best be / There in the front row like you're supposed to / Same hurt in every heart / Same trailer different park // Mama's hooked on Mary Kay / Brother's hooked on Mary Jane / And Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down / Mary Mary quite contrary / We get bored so we get married / Just like dust we settle in this town / On this broken Merry go 'round and round and round we go / Where it stops nobody knows / And it ain't slowin' down / This merry go 'round // We think the first time's good enough / So we hold on to highschool love / Say we won't end up like our parents / Tiny little boxes in a row / Ain't what you want; it's what you know / Just happy in the shoes you're wearing / Same checks are always cashin' / To buy a little more distraction // 'Cause Mama's hooked on Mary Kay / Brother's hooked on Mary Jane / And Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down / Mary Mary quite contrary / We get bored so we get married / And just like dust we settle in this town / On this broken merry go 'round and round and round we go / Where it stops nobody knows / And it ain't slowin' down / This merry go 'round // Mary Mary quite contrary / We're so bored until we're buried / And just like dust we settle in this town / On this broken merry go 'round / Merry go 'round / Jack and Jill went up the hill / Jack burned out on booze and pills / And Mary had a little lamb / Mary just don't give a damn, no more

“From the Ground Up” by Dan + Shay

Oh / Grandma and Grandpa / Painted a picture / Of 65 years / In one little house / More than a memory / More than sayin', "I do" / Kiss you goodnights and I love yous / Me and you, baby / Walk in the footsteps / Build our own family / One day at a time / 10 little toes / A painted pink room / Our beautiful baby looks just like you // And we'll build this love from the ground up / Now till forever / It's all of me, all of you / Just take my hand / And I'll be the man your dad hoped that I'd be / And we'll build this love from the ground up / For worse or for better / And I will be all you need / Beside you I'll stand / Through the good and the bad / We'll give all that we have / And we'll build this love from the ground up // This life'll go by in the blink of an eye / But I wouldn't want to spend it without you by my side / The clouds are gonna roll / The earth's gonna shake / But I'll be your shelter through the wind and the rain // And we'll build this love from the ground up / Now till forever / It's all of me, all of you / Just take my hand / And I'll be the man your dad hoped that I'd be / And we'll build this love from the ground up / For worse or for better / And I will be all you need / Beside you I'll stand / Through the good and the bad / We'll give all that we have / And we'll build this love from the ground up // Oh, oh / Someday we'll wake up / With thousands of pictures / Of 65 years in this little house / I won't trade for nothin' the life that we built / I'll kiss you goodnight and say, "I love you still" // And we'll build this love from the ground up / For worse or for better / And I will be all you need / Beside you I'll stand / Through the good and the bad / We'll give all that we have / And we'll build this love from the ground up / Oh / From the ground up / Oh

“The Good Stuff” by Kenny Chesney

Well, me and my lady had our first big fight / So I drove around till I saw the neon lights / Of a corner bar and it just seemed right / So I pulled up / Not a soul around, but the old barkeep / Down at the end and lookin' half-asleep / But he walked up and said, "what'll it be" / I said, "the

good stuff" / He didn't reach around for the whiskey / He didn't pour me a beer / His blue eyes kinda went misty / He said, "you can't find that here" // 'Cause it's the first long kiss on a second date / Mama's all worried when you get home late / And droppin' the ring in the spaghetti plate / 'Cause your hands are shakin' so much / And it's the way that she looks with rice in her hair / Eatin' burnt suppers the whole first year / And Askin' for seconds to keep her from tearin' up / Yeah man, that's the good stuff // He grabbed a carton of milk and he poured a glass / And I smiled and said, "I'll have some of that" / We sat there and talked as an hour passed / Like old friends / Saw a black and white picture and it caught my stare / It was a pretty girl with bouffant hair / He said, "that's my Bonnie; taken 'bout a year after we wed" / He said, "I spent five years in the bottle / when the cancer took her from me / But I've been sober three years now / 'Cause the one thing stronger than the whiskey" // Was the sight of her holdin' our baby girl / The way she adored that string of pearls / I gave her the day that our youngest boy, Earl / Married his highschool love / And it's a new t-shirt sayin', I'm a grandpa" / Bein' right there as our time got small / And holdin' her hand when the Good Lord called her up / Yeah, madn, that's the good stuff // He said, "when you get home she'll start to cry / When she says, "I'm sorry," say, "so am I" / And look into those eyes so deep in love / Drink it up" // 'Cause that's the good stuff / That's the good stuff

## Chapter 2:

### "It's America" by Rodney Atkins

Driving down the street today I saw a sign for lemonade / They were the cutest kids I'd ever seen in this front yard / As they handed me my glass, smiling thinking to myself / Man, what a picture-perfect postcard this would make of America // It's a high school prom, it's a Springsteen song, it's a ride in a Chevrolet / It's a man on the moon and fireflies in June and kids selling lemonade / It's cities and farms, it's open arms, one nation under God / It's America // Later on when I got home, I flipped the TV on / I saw a little town that some big twister tore apart / And people came from miles around just to help their neighbours out / And I was thinking to myself I'm so glad that I live in America // It's a high school prom, it's a Springsteen song, it's a ride in a Chevrolet / It's a man on the moon and fireflies in June and kids selling lemonade / It's cities and farms, it's open arms, one nation under God / It's America // Now we don't always get it all right / There's no place else I'd rather build my life / 'Cause it's a kid with a chance, it's a rock 'n roll band / It's a farmer cuttin' hay / It's a big flag flyin' in the summer wind / Over a fallen hero's grave // It's a high school prom, it's a Springsteen song / It's a welcome home parade, yeah / It's a man on the moon and fireflies in June and kids sellin' lemonade / It's cities and farms, it's open arms, one nation under God / It's America! It's America! Oh, oh yeah, woo!

### "Something More" by Sugarland

Come on / Monday, hard to wake up / Fill my coffee cup, I'm out the door / Yeah the freeway, standing still today / Is gonna make me late, and that's for sure / I'm running out of gas and out of time / Never gonna make it there by nine // There's gotta be something more / Gotta be more than this / I need a little less hard time / I need a little more bliss / I'm gonna take my chances /

Taking a chance I might / Find what I'm looking for / There's gotta be something more // Five years and there's no doubt / That I'm burnt out, I've had enough / So now boss man, here's my two weeks / I'll make it short and sweet, so listen up / Well, I could work my life away, but why? / I got things to do before I die // There's gotta be something more / Gotta be more than this / I need a little less hard time / I need a little more bliss / I'm gonna take my chances / Taking a chance I might / Find what I'm looking for / There's gotta be something more // Some believe in destiny, and some believe in fate / Well, I believe that happiness is something we create / You best believe that I'm not gonna wait / 'Cause there's gotta be something more // I get home 7:30, the house is dirty, but it can wait / Yeah, cause right now I need some downtime / To drink some red wine and celebrate / Yeah, Armageddon could be knocking at my door / But I ain't gonna answer that's for sure // There's gotta be something, gotta be something more / Gotta be more than this / I need a little less hard time / I need a little more bliss / I'm gonna take my chances / Taking a chance I might / Find what I'm looking for / Gotta be something more / (There's gotta be something) Got to be, got to be, got to be more

### “Wide Open Spaces” by Dixie Chicks

Who doesn't know what I'm talking about / Who's never left home, who's never struck out / To find a dream and a life of their own / A place in the clouds, a foundation of stone / Many precede and many will follow / A young girl's dreams no longer hollow / It takes the shape of a place out west / But what it holds for her, she hasn't yet guessed // She needs wide open spaces / Room to make her big mistakes / She needs new faces / She knows the high stakes // She traveled this road as a child / Wide-eyed and grinning, she never tired / But now she won't be coming back with the rest / If these are life's lessons, she'll take this test // She needs wide open spaces / Room to make her big mistakes / She needs new faces / She knows the high stakes / She knows the high stakes // As her folks drive away, her dad yells, “Check the oil!” / Mom stares out the window and says, “I'm leaving my girl” / She said, "It didn't seem like that long ago" / When she stood there and let her own folks know // She needed wide open spaces / Room to make her big mistakes / She needs new faces / She knows the high stakes / She knows the high stakes / She knows the highest stakes / She knows the highest stakes / She knows the highest stakes

### Chapter 3:

#### “Cowboy Take Me Away” by Dixie Chicks

I said, I wanna touch the earth / I wanna break it in my hands / I wanna grow something wild and unruly / I wanna sleep on the hard ground / In the comfort of your arms / On a pillow of bluebonnets / In a blanket made of stars // Oh, it sounds good to me / I said, cowboy take me away / Fly this girl as high as you can into the wild blue / Set me free, oh, I pray / Closer to heaven above and closer to you / Closer to you // I wanna walk and not run / I wanna skip and not fall / I wanna look at the horizon and not see a building standing tall / I wanna be the only one for miles and miles / Except for maybe you and your simple smile // Oh, it sounds good to

me / Yes, it sounds so good to me / Cowboy take me away / Fly this girl as high as you can into the wild blue / Set me free, oh, I pray / Closer to heaven above and closer to you / Closer to you // I said, I wanna touch the earth / I wanna break it in my hands / I wanna grow something wild and unruly // Oh, it sounds so good to me / Cowboy take me away / Fly this girl as high as you can into the wild blue / Set me free, oh, I pray / Closer to heaven above and closer to you / Closer to you / Closer to you / Cowboy take me away / Closer to you

“Settlin’” by Sugarland

15 minutes left to throw me together / For mister right now, not mister forever / Don’t know why I even try when I know how it ends / Looking like another: “maybe we could be friends” / I’ve been leaving it up to fate / It’s my life, so it’s mine to make // I ain’t settling for just getting by / I’ve had enough so-so for the rest of my life / Tired of shooting too low, so raise the bar high / Just enough ain’t enough this time / I ain’t settling for anything less than everything, yeah // With some good red wine and my brand new shoes / Gonna dance a blue streak around my living room / Take a chance on love and try how it feels / With my heart wide open, yeah, you know I will / Find what it means to be the girl / Who changed her mind and changed the world // I ain’t settling for just getting by / I’ve had enough so-so for the rest of my life / Tired of shooting too low, so raise the bar high / Just enough ain’t enough this time / I ain’t settling for anything less than everything // I ain’t settling for just getting by / I’ve had enough so-so for the rest of my life / Tired of shooting too low, so raise the bar high / Just enough ain’t enough this time / I ain’t settling for just getting by / I’ve had enough so-so for the rest of my life / Tired of shooting too low, so raise the bar high / I ain’t settling, no, no, no, no, no, no / So raise the bar high

“Alright” by Darius Rucker

Alright, alright / Yeah it’s alright, alright / Don’t need no five-star reservations / I got spaghetti and a cheap bottle of wine / Don’t need no concert in the city / I got a stereo and the best of Patsy Cline / Ain’t got no caviar no Dom Perignon / But as far as I can see, I’ve got everything I want // ‘Cause I got a roof over my head / The woman I love laying in my bed / And it’s alright, alright / I got shoes under my feet / Forever in the eyes staring back at me / And it’s alright, alright / And I got all I need / And it’s alright by me // Maybe later on we’ll walk down to the river / Lay on a blanket and stare up at the moon / It may not be no French Riviera / But it’s all the same to me as long as I’m with you / May be a simple life, but that’s okay / If you ask me baby, I think I’ve got it made / ‘Cause I got a roof over my head / The woman I love laying in my bed / And it’s alright, alright / I got shoes under my feet / Forever in the eyes staring back at me / And it’s alright, alright / Yeah, I got all I need / And it’s alright by me / It’s alright by me, yeah yeah / When I lay down at night I thank the Lord above / For giving me everything I ever could dream of / ‘Cause I got a roof over my head / The woman I love laying in my bed / And it’s alright, alright, alright, alright / I got shoes under my feet / Forever in the eyes staring back at

me / And it's alright, alright, alright / Yeah, I got all I need, yeah / I got all I need / And it's alright by me / Oh yeah, it's alright by me, yeah, yeah, yeah

“Millionaire” by Chris Stapleton

They say, “Love is more precious than gold” / Can't be bought and it can't be sold / I got love enough to spare / That makes me a millionaire // I got a woman with eyes that shine / Down deep as a diamond mine / She's my treasure so very rare / She's made me a millionaire / When we ride around, ride around this old town / In my beat-up car, with the windows down / People look at her and they look at me / And say, “That boy is sure living in luxury” / Sweet luxury // ‘Cause love is more precious than gold / It can't be bought, no, never could be sold / I got love enough to share / That makes me a millionaire // When the kisses fall from everywhere / Life reaches on, millionaire / When the pocket's are empty and the cupboard is bare / I still feel like a millionaire // ‘Cause love is more precious than gold / It can't be bought, no, and it can't be sold / I got love enough to spare / That makes me a millionaire

Chapter 4:

“Baby Girl” by Sugarland

They say this town / The stars stay up all night / Well, I don't know, can't see 'em / For the glow of the neon lights / And it's a long way from here / To the place where the home fires burn / Well, it's 2,000 miles and one left turn // Dear Mom and Dad / Please send money; I'm so broke that it ain't funny / Well, I don't need much, just enough to get me through / Please don't worry 'cause I'm alright / See, I'm playin' here at the bar tonight / Well, this time I'm gonna make our dreams come true / Well, I love you more than anything in the world / Love, Your baby girl // Black tie, Blue sky / Big town full of little white lies / Well, everybody's your friend; you can never be sure / They'll promise fancy cars and diamond rings / All sorts of shiny things / But, girl, you'll remember what your knees are for // Dear Mom and Dad / Please send money; I'm so broke that it ain't funny / Well, I don't need much, just enough to get me through / Please don't worry 'cause I'm alright / See, I'm playin' here at the bar tonight / Well, this time I'm gonna make our dreams come true / Well, I love you more than anything in the world / Love, Your baby girl // I know that I'm on my way / Well, I can tell everytime I play / And I know it's worth all the dues I've paid / When I can write to you and say // Dear Mom and Dad / I'll send money; I'm so rich that it ain't funny / Well it oughtta be more than enough to get you through / Please don't worry 'cause I'm alright / See, I'm stayin' here at the Ritz tonight / Whad'ya know we made our dreams come true / And there are fancy cars and diamond rings / But you know that they don't mean a thing / Well, they all add up to nothing compared to you / But, remember me in ribbons and curls / I still love you more than anything in the world / Love, Your baby girl / Your baby girl / Your baby girl / Dreams come true

“Pray To Jesus” by Brandy Clark



We live in trailers and apartments too / From California to Kalamazoo / Grow up, get married and when that one ends / We hate sleepin' alone, so we get married again // Don't want to be buried in debt or in sin / So we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto / 'Cause there ain't but two ways we can change tomorrow / And there ain't no genie / And there ain't no bottle / So we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto // We love to complain about what we can't fix / Mostly, mothers-in-law, traffic, and politics / We tell our kids how hard it was back when / Same way our parents did to us back then / Thought we'd be different, but we're just like them // Yeah, we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto / 'Cause there ain't but two ways we can change tomorrow / When there ain't no genie / And there ain't no bottle / So we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto // We load our kids up in our new used-car / And after church we hit the mini-mart / Behind the counter, up there on the wall / It reads, "200 million on the Powerball" / Six little numbers that can change it all // So we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto / 'Cause there ain't but two ways we can change tomorrow / When there ain't no genie / And there ain't no bottle / So we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto / Like a bumper-sticker, like a poor man's money / Times are tough and time is borrowed / So let's pray to Jesus and let's play the lotto

"Buy Me A Boat" by Chris Janson

I ain't rich, but I damn sure wanna be / Workin' like a dog all day ain't workin' for me / I wish I had a rich uncle that'd kick the bucket / And I was sittin' on a pile like Warren Buffett / I know everybody says / Money can't buy happiness // But it could buy me a boat, it could buy me a truck to pull it / It could buy me a Yeti 110 iced-down with some silver bullets / Yeah, and I know what they say / Money can't buy everything / Well, maybe so / But it could buy me a boat // They call me redneck, white trash, and blue collar / But I could change all that if I had a couple million dollars / I keep hearin' that money is the root of all evil / And you can't fit a camel through the eye of a needle / I'm sure that's probably true / Money still sounds pretty cool // 'Cause it could buy me a boat, it could buy me a truck to pull it / It could buy me a Yeti 110 iced-down with some silver bullets / Yeah, and I know what they say / Money can't buy everything / Well, maybe so / But it could buy me a boat / To float, down on the water / With a beer, I hear the Powerball lotto is sittin' on a hundred mill / Well that'll buy me a brand new rod and reel / And it could buy me a boat, it could buy me a truck to pull it / It could buy me a Yeti 110 iced-down with some silver bullets / Yeah, and I know what they say / Money can't buy everything / Well, maybe so / But it could buy me a boat / Yeah, and I know what they say / Money can't buy everything / Well, maybe so / But it could buy me a boat / Yeah, yeah it could buy me a boat

"Rich and Miserable" by Kenny Chesney

Green grass help the cows graze / Hedge fund, 401 / Cake, milk, and honey in the land of the free / New York Times, Farmer's Almanac / Too busy to call our mama / Back porch ain't what it used to be // We don't know what we want, but we want it / And we want it all right now / We're too young until we're too old / We're all lost on the yellow brick road / We climb the ladder, but the ladder just grows / We're born, we work, we die, it's spiritual / Enough is never enough / American Dream never wakes up / Too much is never too much / We won't be happy till we're rich and miserable // Go to school to get a job / Don't make enough to pay it off / And

on and on it goes / Right-wing blue jean, gotta get the new thing / Whatever it take to make the world look at you thing // We're too young until we're too old / We're all lost on the yellow brick road / We climb the ladder, but the ladder just grows / We're born, we work, we die, it's spiritual / Enough is never enough / American Dream never wakes up / Too much is never too much / We won't be happy till we're rich and miserable // And maybe we'll get it (maybe we'll get it) / Maybe we won't (maybe we won't) / But even when we get it (but even when we get it) / Really we don't (really we don't) // We're too young until we're too old / We're all lost on the yellow brick road / We climb the ladder, but the ladder just grows / We're born, we work, we die, it's spiritual / Enough is never enough / American Dream never wakes up / Too much is never too much / We won't be happy till we're rich and miserable / Come on, get rich and miserable / Come on, get rich and miserable

#### Chapter 5:

##### “White Man’s World” by Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit

I'm a white man livin' in a white man's world / Under our roof is a baby girl / Thought this world could be her's one day / But her mama knew better // I'm a white man kivin' in a white man's town / Wanna take a shot of cocaine and burn it down / Mama wants to change that Nashville sound / But they're never gonna let her // There's no such thing as someone else's war / Your creature comforts aren't the only things worth fighting for / Still breathing, it's not too late / We're all carrying one great burden, sharing one fate // I'm a white man livin' on a white man's street / I got the bones of the red man under my feet / The highway runs through their burial grounds / Past the oceans of cotton // And I'm a white man lookin' in a Black man's eyes / Wishin' I'd never been one of the guys / Who pretended not to hear another white man's joke / Old times ain't forgotten // There's no such thing as someone else's war / Your creature comforts aren't the only things worth fighting for / Still breathing, it's not too late / We're all carrying one great burden, sharing one fate // I'm a white man livin' in a white man's nation / I think the man upstairs must have took a vacation / I still have faith, but I don't know why / Maybe it's the fire in my little girl's eyes / Maybe it's the fire in my little girl's eyes

##### “Drowning Man” by Eric Church

Don't tell me about no beach / Don't wanna hear about your mountain / How the good life is a peach / You drink your sunsets from a fountain / No I don't wanna think about it / Save your breath, I don't wanna hear about it // I just wanna get right down at the fire light / Let my baby sing, “Hold me tight / You honky tonk nighttime man” / Drink away this crazy world / Hold tight to a longneck-holdin' girl / Won't you give it all boys, the fed-up give a damn / Bartender, here's a fifty / Pour some whiskey on this drowning man // We put the smoke in the stack / Put the seed in the ground / While Lady Liberty turns her back / And Uncle Sam just turns around / No I don't wanna think about it / Oh tonight I don't wanna think about it // I just wanna get right down at the fire light / Let my baby sing, “Hold me tight / You honky tonk nighttime man” / Drink away this crazy world / Hold tight to a longneck-holdin' girl / Won't you give it all boys, the fed-up give a damn / Bartender, if you're with me / Pour some whiskey on this drowning

man // I just wanna get right down at the fire light / Let my baby sing, “Hold me tight / You honky tonk nighttime man” / Drink away this crazy world / Hold tight to a longneck-holdin’ girl / Won’t you give it all boys, the fed-up give a damn / Bartender, if you’re with me / Pour some whiskey on this drowning man // Don’t tell me about no beach / Don’t wanna hear about your mountain / How the good life is a peach / Drink your sunsets from a fountain / No I don’t wanna hear about it / Save your breath, I don’t wanna hear about it

“Three Kids No Husband” by Brandy Clark

She’s got three kids no husband / She’s two weeks late on last month’s rent / She’s waitin’ on the child support and he keeps swearin’ that it’s comin’ / But if she knows him, she knows where it went / And that pile of bills ain’t gonna pay themselves / It’s been a 40-hour week and it’s only Tuesday / And there’s homework and dinner to make / Somebody wants a lullaby / Somebody wants a different channel / Somebody’s dealin’ with their first heartbreak / And the dishes in the sink ain’t gonna wash themselves // She lights a cigarette out on the balcony / When she gets a couple minutes to herself / There’s how you plan it out and how it turns out to be / And a broken-home it ain’t no fairytale // She’s got three kids no husband / And a hairnet job at a diner on Main / She knows damn-well that she don’t make the best cup of coffee / But she’s quick with a smile and good with names / Those lunch tickets ain’t gonna tip themselves // She smokes a cigarette out by the loading dock / Tries not to pick the polish off her nails / She thinks about a guy whose been comin’ in a lot / She starts to dream and then she stops herself // She’s got three kids no husband / So she’s a mom and a dad and a taxi-driver / When the baby’s sick, she’s an up-all-nighter / A hand and a shoulder and a referee / A real-life hero if you ask me / Cause those kids ain’t gonna raise themselves

“Pay Gap” by Margo Price

Honey, I work so hard for my money / And I leave my babies at home / Breakin’ my back, tryin’ to bring home a check / And workin’ my fingers to the bone / That the end of the day feels like a game / One I was born to lose / In this institution and dead revolution / It’s givin’ young women abuse / Pay gap / Pay gap / Why don’t you do the math? / Pay gap / Pay gap / Rippin’ my dollars in half // It’s not that I’m askin’ for more than I’m owed / And I don’t think I’m better than you / They say that we live in the land of the free / But sometimes that bell don’t ring true / It’s been that way with no equal pay / And I wanna know when it will be fixed / Women do work and get treated like slaves since 1776 / Pay gap / Pay gap / Don’t give me that feminism crap / Pay gap / Pay gap / Rippin’ my dollars in half // No matter your religion / No matter your race / No matter your orientation / No matter your creed / And no matter your taste / No matter your denomination / We’re all the same in the eyes of God / But in the eyes of rich white men / You’re more than a maid / To be owned like a dog / Second class citizen / Pay gap / Pay gap / Why don’t you do the math? / Pay gap / Pay gap / Rippin’ my dollars in half

“All American Made” by Margo Price

Woke up from a movie I immediately forgot / Got a heartache on the bottom and a headache on the top / The part of me that hurts the worst is the one I just can't spot / And it's all American made // Well, everywhere I go somebody puts me in the dirt / And everything I say somebody says they said it first / But I don't need 10 million baby just give me one that works / It's all American made // Well, I have been all over but I can't help feeling stuck / Something in my bloodline or something in my gut / Says go to California in a rusty pickup truck / It's all American made // 1987 and I didn't know it then / Reagan was selling weapons to the leaders of Iran / But it won't be the first time baby and it won't be the end / They were all American made // But I was just a child, unaware of the effects / Raised on sports and Jesus and all the usual suspects / So tell me Mr. Petty what you do you think will happen next? / It's all American made // And I wonder if the President gets much sleep at night / And if folks on welfare are making it alright / I'm dreaming of that highway that stretches out of sight / And it's all American made / It's all American made / It's all, it's all American made

## Appendix C - Tables

Table 1: Country Music Consumption by Gender and Age Group

Age Group	% of Male Listeners	% of Female Listeners
12 - 17 Years of Age	27	41
18 - 34 Years of Age	38	40
35 - 54 Years of Age	39	41
65 + Years of Age	39	40

Table 2: Varying Viewpoints within Five Major Conceptions of the American Dream

Major Conceptions of the American Dream	Viewpoint 1	Viewpoint 2
Homeownership & Marriage	The individual desires this	The individual does not desire this
Freedom	The individual says they have this	The individual says they do not have this and so desire it
Love & Simplicity	This is all the individual needs	The individual specifically does not need money
Upward Mobility	The individual believes that upward mobility is not only possible, but the goal	The individual views upward mobility as an impossibility
Equality	The individual believes that this exists	The individual believes that we do not have this, but we need it