The Performance and Perception of Social Identities in Country-Rap Music

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1. Introduction

The words and sounds of almost any country song played on a radio station in the United States conjure up images of dirt roads, southern comforts, and fierce working-class pride; the twang of a fiddle next to the slide of a steel guitar points to country’s “barn dance” and “honky-tonk” history, while also maintaining common threads throughout the genre’s ninety-year presence within American popular music. The electronic beat and spoken word of hip-hop, on the other hand, bring to mind images of graffiti, urban slang, and fierce gang loyalties, pointing to the genre’s history of breakdancing, political commentary, and anti-establishment convictions. Rather than mere stereotypes, these associations respectively represent a part of the homogenous social identity portrayed within each genre, which is created and reinforced by the social and economic investment of a disparate set of communities.

A wide array of communities—defined here, as imagined collectivities that are discursively created and socially and symbolically constructed through musical performances¹—are associated with these two genres. Each community invests in the music or musical events that they consider to be part of their genre by purchasing, supporting, and defending them. All of these investments, however, are placed by disparate groups of communities in a singular identity and ideology. In hip-hop and country music, these identities are inexplicably and inexorably connected to the concept of “authenticity.” It is this connection between genre definition, “authenticity,” and identity that I explore here, particularly in relation to the communities that have invested in country and hip-hop and their collective representations within the relatively recent phenomenon of country-rap. As a subgenre of country music that incorporates aspects of

hip-hop, country-hip hop serves as a tangible representation of the country communities’ relationship with and opinion towards those communities that invest in the hip-hop genre.

Using a semiotic-based analysis of the lyrics, music, and performance practices of country-hip hop artists, as well as the online forums that consume the aforementioned genres, this study explores the ways in which country communities incorporate the “style” and appropriate the young, black, urban identity embodied by the hip-hop genre and invested in by hip-hop communities. Incorporating discussion of the language invoked by such an analysis, such as “genre” and “authenticity,” I explore the ways in which country-hip hop music is a reflection of the racial and socioeconomic tensions that have historically existed between country and hip-hop communities, particularly in regards to the dominance of white, middle- and upper-class communities and ideals within cultural music practices in the United States. I ultimately aim to provoke further discussion of how an individual’s or community’s treatment of a genre can be seen as a reflection of their attitude towards the communities that engage with and place value in that same genre.

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The country-hip hop subgenre is a recent phenomenon, with an identifiable presence going back only to the turn of the century and a total output of about thirty albums. Its music is a sonic negotiation between the country and hip-hop genres, incorporating instruments iconic of country music, such as fiddles and steel guitars, a solo or pair of rappers, and lyrics based on core country themes. These incorporated elements range from being inclusive of stylistic aspects, to appropriative of hip-hop identities, based on the aspects of the hip-hop genre that country-hip hop artists choose to engage. As will be argued in later chapters, genre can be defined in terms of both its “style” and “generic space,” with “style” referring to the formalist aural principles of the
genre and “generic space” referring to the social constructed cultural practices represented within the traditions, conventions, and perceptions of authenticity within the genre. By referencing the style of hip-hop, country-rap artists are simply branching out from their core country roots; by incorporating aspects of hip-hop’s generic space, however, they are appropriating aspects of the social identity invested in by the hip-hop communities.

I use the word “community” following the work of ethnomusicologist Kay Shelemay, who herself draws on the writings of Thomas Turino, Maurice Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson:

A musical community is, whatever its location in time or space, a collectivity constructed through and sustained by musical processes and/or performances. A musical community can be socially and/or symbolically constituted; music making may give rise to real-time social relationships or may exist most fully in the realm of a virtual setting or in the imagination. A musical community does not require the presence of conventional structural elements nor must it be anchored in a single place, although both structural and local elements may assume importance at points in the process of community formation as well as in its ongoing existence. Rather, a musical community is a social entity, an outcome of a combination of social and musical processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to music aware of a connection among themselves.²

Drawing from this explanation, I use “community” within this paper in its plural, alluding to the fact that multiple communities associate with the identities portrayed within country and hip-hop. Within the country communities, for example, there exists a community of white, rural, working-class individuals. However, as sociologist and country music scholar Richard A. Peterson points out, there are also a number of communities who listen to country music as a way to belong to an “imagined community” of individuals who long for a nostalgic rural and working-class past, who are against “inauthentic” commercialized ways, or who simply present themselves in a way that

is distinct from other “nation- race- and religion-based ethnic identities.” Communities, in other words, are fluid entities, and contain disparate groups of people who relate to and identify with a genre in different ways, but associate with each other through their mutual subscription to the essentialized core identity portrayed by the genre.

For the purposes of this paper, country music communities will be limited to include only those individuals who listen to country music because they are invested in its identity, specifically with the social identity conveyed through its generic space. The concept of hip-hop communities will be used in a similar fashion. I make this differentiation as a way to more effectively discuss the matter at hand; by defining communities as those individuals who are invested in a genre, the use of identity-laden aspects of that genre—such as generic space—becomes more meaningful. When applied to the country-rap subgenre, this differentiation can be used to demonstrate the ways in which the use of hip-hop’s generic space is also an appropriation of those communities’ identities.

Communities can also be described in terms of their culture, a contested term that I use not in its homogenous and monolithic sense, but rather following the work of Aaron Fox, who defines culture as a socially-constructed definition of a community’s “ideas and practices, and especially the process of calibrating ideas and practices in expressive discourses.” He links this definition to the Peircian semiotic tradition, articulating the fact that culture, despite its contested use in many fields of study, is essentially the dynamic “mediation” between a community and its social experiences, be they conceptual, intuitive, concrete, or abstract. Culture, in other words,

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can refer to a community’s (or group of communities’) memories, its worship practices, its language, its music, and any number of other mediations.

However, the concept implied by the term culture is a social construction, created and defined by the discourse that surrounds specific communities. This social construction, however, does not deny the practicality of such a term. It simply necessitates an acknowledgement of the construction, a thorough understanding of when, how, and by whom the culture’s definition was established, and most importantly, the pluralistic and fluid possibilities of such a definition. The “culture” of any given community or group of communities is constantly in flux, as it is internally and externally redefined through social and political disruption. Country and hip-hop cultures are no exception.

Both country and hip-hop cultures are referenced within the music of country-rap. Within this study, these references will be explored following the semiotic tradition of C.S. Pierce, whose extensive theories allow for concise discussion of the relationships that exist within references and other representational concepts. Of particular importance are the triadic concepts of “signs,” “objects,” and “interpretants,” each of which has multiple variations that will be invoked as necessary. “Signs” are elements that represent an “object,” while “interpretants” are the interpretation or sense made of the “sign.”5 “Snow” (the sign) would be representational of “precipitation when air is under 32°F” (the object), pointing to the idea that “snow falls when it is precipitation and the air is below 32°F” (the interpretant). This model can be used easily within music as well, particularly as a way to differentiate between the signs used in country or hip-hop music. Two of the basic sign types are “indices” (which share a connection to their

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object, often created through repeated co-occurrence) and “icons” (which resemble or imitate their object). For example, as a sign, a cowboy hat worn by the main performer would be indexical to country music because audiences have built an association between cowboy hats and country music through repeated simultaneous exposure. Cowboy hats, however, could also be seen as an icon within country music because of their mutual relationship to western films; cowboy hats were a major part of the “cowboy” identity portrayed in western films, and they were also a part of the “western” identity found throughout country music in 1930s and 40s.

This semiotic terminology is of particular use to this study because of the ways in which iconic musical traits allow for both public and scholarly recognition of the intertwined references to country and hip-hop within country-rap. Colt Ford, for example, is a country-rap artist who iconically references the country genre by including references to popular country songs and artists, while also iconically referencing the hip-hop genre through the use of rapping. Such explicit musical references allow for analysis of which signs—for both country and hip-hop—artists choose to include and reject, as well as the ways in which they comment on and treat each of these signs.

Drawing specifically on the recent output of and public reactions to country-rap artists such as Colt Ford, The Lacs, Cowboy Troy, and Lenny Cooper, as well as more mainstream country artists like Jason Aldean who also incorporate elements of hip-hop, I will critically examine how country-rap navigates the relationship between hip-hop and country communities. Through their investment in the country subgenre of country-rap, these artists are members of country communities with prior exposure to communities that invest heavily in country music, rather than hip-hop; therefore, the ways in which they reference hip-hop reflect their opinions and relations toward hip-hop communities. As will be shown through an analysis of the ways in
which some artists iconically reference hip-hop’s style and others reference hip-hop’s generic space, country-rap artists negotiate with hip-hop in disparate ways, paralleling country communities’ own disparate negotiations with hip-hop communities. While some artists demonstrate a collaborative approach between country and hip-hop (such as Jason Aldean in his performance of “Dirt Road Anthem”), others continue to struggle within the racist boundaries within country music (such as the lyrical codes of the black artist Cowboy Troy), and still others attempt to appropriate hip-hop culture through the inclusion of extensive indices for the identity invested in by hip-hop communities.

Although concepts such as authenticity, genre, and culture are already firmly established terms within the fields of ethnomusicology and historical musicology as well as many other non-musically related fields of study, I invoke them here in order to question and reframe their use in the discourses surrounding hip-hop, country, and country-rap music. As terms like authenticity and genre become embedded and seemingly redundant in the discourses that use them, they not only begin to lose their established definitions, but they also run the risk of being redefined through an iconicity with their vernacular meanings.6 If we fail to continually define these terms in scholarly language, we run the risk of naturalizing their vernacular meanings, disallowing the critical disbelief that is a fundamental aspect of any discourse. Taking the opportunity provided by my study of the recent phenomenon of country-rap, I aim to critically engage with these concepts in their scholarly use, beginning with the term “genre.”

2. Sounds and Cultural Practices in the Definition of Genre

The term “genre” is typically not problematized within musical discourse, particularly when compared to more sociopolitical terms such as “culture” and “authenticity.” However, the fact that “genre” is viewed as being so unproblematic is what allows for the naturalization of a noncritical definition of the term within the literature. “Genre,” in other words, has become iconically redefined in relation to its vernacular use—a use that defines it loosely as music that sounds similar and fits together well for marketing strategies. Such a redefinition makes “genre” difficult to use in a critical manner that allows scholars to question what similarities musical practices have in the eyes of those that perceive them.

Despite these issues, one can no more thoroughly and effectively discuss what is traditionally considered to be “Western” music\(^7\) without mentioning the term genre, than one can discuss shapes of snowflakes without mentioning the term snow. Genre is a major method by which music—within the “Western” category at least—is organized, analyzed, and discussed. In other words, genre—and words like it including style and type—is part of the larger web of terminology required for the discourse of larger popular music topics, such as the marketing strategies of Taylor Swift or the combination of hip-hop and country within country-rap. Our ability to engage with sociopolitical discourses is enabled only because we have words with which we can clarify and define the more manageable concepts at hand. In the case of this study, the term “genre” is integral to both the discussion of country and hip-hop music as singular musical genres that are defined by specific genre markers, and the discussion of the ways in which the subgenre of country-rap relates to country and hip-hop music. Not only is “genre” a

\(^7\) Although the term “Western music” is problematic for many reasons—particularly for its assumption of “the West versus the Rest” (see Martin Stokes, “Music and the Global Order,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 [2004]: 47-72.), I use it here for ease in referencing music, regardless of whether it is art or popular, originating in North America or Europe. See also note 13.
term already entwined with the academic and vernacular definition of both country and hip-hop music, but it also allows for a discussion of country-rap as a combination of these two genres, in turn allowing for discussion of which communities are represented by this combination, and which communities’ music and cultural practices are being integrated or appropriated through the creation of country-rap.

However, just because “genre” and terminology like it is necessary—fundamental, even—for discourse on topics such as the combination of country and hip-hop in country-rap, does not mean it cannot also be questioned within that same discourse. In fact, the significance of the word “genre” within this topic demands its discussion here. Not only must we continually reevaluate a term’s use within the larger discourse, often by discussing and summarizing its use within existing literature, but we must also continually clarify and redefine based on our own research, combining new ideas with the existing literature in order to ensure each term remains clear, relevant, and critically defined. In order to enable its relevant use within the later part of this paper, I will first examine the use of “genre” within the literature, and then build on that usage to develop a framework for its application to the genres of country and hip-hop, and the subgenre of country-rap, as well as other genres belonging to the popular music type—meaning the group of music genres that are widely listened to and known.

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The occasions where “genre” is defined within the musicological literature is somewhat limited; although exceptions within some popular music studies do exist, it is often invoked simply as a way to categorize music and a specific definition is rarely offered. However, the term is approached and defined more often outside of music-based studies. Philosopher Tzvetan Todorov and French literature scholar Richard Berrong argue in “The Origin of Genres” that
genres within literature are an institution that sets expectations for readers and models of writing for authors.\(^8\) “Genre” also surfaces in film studies, with similar uses as those laid out by Todorov. More abstract analysis can be found in communication, anthropological, and semiotic studies, often in relation to larger philosophical debates, such as the idea of genre as a way for media institutions to help define their audience, a point Peterson argues in *Audiencemaking: How the Media Create the Audience*.\(^9\) In contrast, music-based fields rarely approach genre directly; one notable exception is musicologist Franco Fabbri. I began with his works in constructing my own framework for the definition of “genre,” outlined below. I aim to clarify the position of “genre” within the discourses of popular music, in order to enable a later discussion of the ways in which genre, as a definition including both “style” and “generic space,” can be used to isolate specific aspects within a genre, particularly in the form of indicators of authenticity.

Fabbri’s articles, “What Kind of Music?” and “Browsing Music Spaces: Categories and the Musical Mind,” both provide a clear approach to genre, defining it in relation to the community that creates and consumes it as a “set of musical events whose course is governed by a set of rules (of any kind) accepted by a community.”\(^10\) However, Fabbri’s definition, while quite useful, fails to give name to the social codes (including terms such as “authenticity”) that are an integral part of any genre definition. Todorov and Berrongs’s “The Origin of Genres,” mentioned previously, provides a community-based definition of “genre” that is similar (although strongly based in literary studies) to that of Fabbri. However, their article focuses almost exclusively on the use of the term “genre” in society, as opposed to outlining the various

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social and musical components within it. Again, their work offers no definition for the social codes that are crucial for the discussion of “genre” in country and hip-hop music.

More recent readings from Fabian Holt’s 2007 publication, *Genre in Popular Music*; Keith Negus’s 1999 publication, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*; and Jason Toynbee’s 2000 publication, *Making Popular Music*, provide approaches that are more strongly based in popular-music study and offer somewhat concrete definitions. All three define genre as a variety of styles connected through traditions, cultural values, communities, and other social and historical dimensions. In doing so, each explicitly or implicitly defines “genre” as, essentially, a two-part concept containing both the musical codes or “style,” and the social codes. From this delineated definition and aspects of Peircian semiotics drawn from Thomas Turino’s *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, I derived the majority of my own framework, outlined below.

*Genre as the Combination of Musical Style and Generic Space*

Within the popular music type, I propose that a genre encompasses music or musical events that both share a similar “style” and what I call “generic space.” “Style,” following Fabbri, refers to the musical codes embedded within a song: aurally based signs such as keys, meters, rhythms, and instrument types that have become icons for the genre based on repeated indexical experiences. “Generic space,” a term I generated to describe those unnamed social dimensions implicit in the works of Hold, Negus, and Toynbee, refers to the social codes.

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14 “Generic” is used here not to denote a lack of specificity, but rather a set of characteristics that can be attributed to all members of a group; this parallels its use in biology to reference those characteristics that are common to a genus.
embedded within a song or event: traditions, conventions, values, and expectations fulfilled or followed by the artist(s). Following Turino’s use of Peircian semiotics, one can clarify this definition by noting that style and generic space are essentially fulfilled through indexical signs present in a song or event, and therefore that a music (or musical event) belongs to a specific genre if it indexically refers to the signs of that genre’s musical style and generic space.

One can see these two aspects within almost any song of the popular music type. If, while flipping through channels on the radio, one came across a song with four subdivided beats per measure, a G major–E minor–D major–C major–G major chord progression, certain basic rhythms, and a solo singer over guitar, it would become immediately apparent that the radio station played country music. Avid listeners would also note that the song was John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” This perception of the song’s genre would be based entirely on its style; the listener’s ability to connect that style and the country genre would be based on their past indexical experiences between C–e–D–C–G chord progressions and John Denver, or between a solo singers over guitar and almost any country song from the past fifty years. This perception of style is also representative of ways in which listeners have been socialized to accept these elements of style as iconic of the country genre.

Say, however, that this individual had more than just passing indexical experience with the country music genre, and that they were ardent fans of country music. After listening to the song, these fans would decide its value to them and its accuracy in portraying the country music identity. This judgment would be based on the generic space indicators within the song they listened to: Did it follow country music conventions regarding lyric subjects? Did the lyrics express an affiliation with the core rural and Southern country communities? Is the artist a well-established country music artist and if not, do they reference other core artists within the country

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15 Turino, *Music as Social Life.*
music genre? These types of value-establishing questions help determine if a song fits the generic space requirements of the referenced genre. These generic space determinations, as within questions of style, are based on indices, but in a “dicent” form, meaning the listener hears a certain reference to country music, associates it with country music based on past indexical experiences; the distinction as dicent stems from a belief in the actual causal and affective relationship between those references and genre’s definition.¹⁶

I chose to define genre only within the popular music type because that is the music with which this paper is primarily concerned. However, it is worth noting that the term “popular music,” like “classical music,” is a category in and of itself that, following the work of Turino, could be viewed as a grouping of genres with similar purposes, ideologies, and reception contexts.¹⁷ For clarity I consider these to be “types” of music. The popular music type, for example, includes genres that follow popular taste, are designed for mass consumption, and are generally presented in either a recorded or live format; although there is a some variation within this definition, one could also generalize that the live performances of popular music are very similar to their recorded products. In contrast, the classical music type includes genres that cater to ruling class tastes, are designed with an awareness of and position towards long-established composition principles, and are more often presented in a live format. I included this level of categorization in figure 1 below to present a broader picture of genre definitions, although I have chosen to exclude what would be—by necessity—a lengthy discussion of some of the complexities of musical types given it is well outside the scope of this paper.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Albert Atkin, “Peirce’s Theory of Signs.”
¹⁷ Turino, Music as Social Life, 27-35.
¹⁸ The main issue of musical “types” arises over the delineation of “Western” versus “World” music, a controversial topic I have deemed extraneous to this paper given its focus on the popular music type. For further discussion see Timothy Taylor, Global Pop: World Music, World Markets (New York: Routledge, 1997).
The most important aspect of the definition of “genre” that I offer here, and the impetus behind my formation of such a delineated description, was the lack in the existing literature of a complex definition that took into account the stylistic and social features of genre. While many authors acknowledge that genre refers to both musical and social codes within a piece of music, no author offers terms to distinguish between these two codes. What I offer here is a simple two-part definition, with which one can not only explore the complexities of genre definition, but also effectively discuss the ways in which value is placed with the genre. The country and hip-hop communities, as I will later prove, both emphasize the generic space aspects of their genres’ definitions, which in turn places greater meaning on references to that generic space within other genres. Before approaching that discussion, however, we must further define some of the complexities within this definition, shown below in figure 1.
“Style” is defined by Fabbri as “a recurring arrangement of features in musical events which is typical of an individual (composer, performer), a group of musicians, a genre, a place, a period of time.” Although his definition is inevitably problematic due to its use of the term “genre” within a sub-definition of the term itself, it does offer a useful delineation within the larger context of “genre”—“genre” exists as an overarching term that references both musical and social codes, while “style” refers only to the recurring musical features within a referenced musical practice. Style, in other words, includes those aspects that allow one to identify the genre of a piece of music while flipping through radio channels. For example, a major part of the pop

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genre’s style is its dance-oriented beats and rhythms, whereas the genre as a whole involves music that is aimed at a mass-audience, and therefore includes such aspects as being recorded, rather than being performed live. The fact that beats (an aspect of style) are specifically designed to encourage dancing (a generic space aspect) points to the complexity that can develop within these seemingly binary classifications of genre.

The specific characteristics of a genre’s style are often easier to determine than the generic space of that same genre, since style is a term that deals with more concrete and aurally based concerns while generic space is more abstract and subjective. These characteristics are also relatively easy to see and understand in formalist and positivist analyses of the popular music type given their sonically based nature; harmonic analyses, for example, provide great insight into the stylistic aspects of many genres. Some other examples of what could be included in a genre’s style are shown in figure 1: instrumentation, chord progressions, rhythm, influences, lyric subjects, beat and meter use, tempo, type of improvisation, color/timbre, compositional style and method, and so on.

The other key component of a genre is its “generic space,” a term I developed drawing on the previously mentioned works of Holt, Negus, and Toynbee. Generic space, in this context, refers to the social codes of a genre; it is the complementary portion to the style aspects of a genre. In other words, generic space refers to those aspects that are not immediately apparent while switching radio channels, but are the aspects by which music is judged by the communities that invest in that genre. Pop music’s attempts to appeal to a wide audience and emphasis on dance-encouraging beats would be characteristic of its generic space, for example. Other aspects include those listed in figure 1: codes, traditions, conventions, values, expectations, and so on. Each of these aspects within generic space has a different meaning in various contexts, and so for
the sake of clarity, I will outline my use of them briefly in relation to the model of terminology shown in figure 1.

“Code” is a term borrowed from Holt, which he defines as “a relatively strong and fixed convention that can be identified in concrete correlations between discrete entities in the communication process. A cultural code exists in the socially sanctioned correlation between a linguistic, visual, or aural sign, for instance, and a concept thereof.” A common example would be the presence of an artist wearing a cowboy hat, which would be code for the artist’s association with standard iconography of America’s West and therefore country music. It is also important to note that codes are often linguistic in nature, and can therefore overlap with the style component of lyrics (in both subject and compositional technique). Country musicians often embed codes in their lyrics through subtle references to southern drinks (Jack Daniel’s Whiskey is referenced as simply “Jack”), southern locations (names of places near where the artist grew up that only locals would recognize), and other country artists (names of famous artists that are firmly attached to the country music tradition are incorporated in shortened form that, again, are more easily recognizable if you are familiar with them already).

“Traditions” are practices, customs, and beliefs that have occurred and reoccurred within the genre and have been passed-down from artist to artist. The code mentioned above—the cowboy hat—is also a part of country music tradition, in that artists have used it to indicate their association to country music since Gene Autry and Roy Rodgers’ notable success in Hollywood during the 1930s and 40s.

“Conventions” are, like traditions, practices and customs that have occurred and reoccurred within the genre over many years. They differ from traditions, however, in that there

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20 Holt, Genre in Popular Music, 22.
21 Peterson, Creating Authenticity, 84-94.
is no sense of past or a belief system associated with them. They are simply actions and behaviors that occur throughout the genre because it is the way it has always been done. In country music, for example, it is conventional for a separation to exist between the artists and the songwriters, with little overlap between those roles. This is a convention, rather than a tradition, because although it has been the case within the country music genre since the first successful commercialization of artists by Polk Brockman in the 1920s, there is no belief system or strong sense of past associated with it; artists that are able to both write and sing are not excluded from the label of being a “traditional Country artist.” The separation of writing and singing was simply a practicality that has remained with the genre due to increased profitability for producers, who are able to find artists or songwriters, rather than individuals who can do both.

“Values” are the social attitudes of the artists, audiences, and corporations involved in the cultural practices pertaining to a genre. These include attitudes towards individual-specific aspects such as lifestyle, sexual orientation, and social class, as well as broader values such as traditionalism, originality, authenticity, commerciality, etc. Of all the genres within the popular music type, country music has some of the most iconic and pronounced values, given the lyrics’ often brazenly conservative attitudes. Brad Paisley’s song, “This is Country Music,” offers an excellent summary:

You’re not supposed to say the word cancer in a song
And tellin’ folks Jesus is the answer can rub ‘em wrong

It ain’t hip to sing about tractors, trucks, little towns, and mama
Yeah that might be true, but this is country music and we do

“Expectations” are based on the values present within the genre; expectations can be based on physical things, such as clothing styles, or more personal requirements, such as the

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23 Brad Paisley, “This is Country Music,” on This is Country Music, Arista Nashville, May 2011, iTunes download.
availability and personality of the artists themselves. Different expectations are held to varying degrees within the genre; one expectation that is held incredibly high within country music is that the artists will be available and accessible to the fans. Perhaps most indicative of this was Garth Brooks’ decision to sign autographs for twenty-three hours straight at the 25th annual Country Music Association awards (CMAs) in 1996. Another expectation within country music is that of an “authentic” performer and performance, a concept that will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

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All music, such as that of the hip-hop and country genres, can be categorized and classified in this way. However, in many instances, musical practices are classified according to the ways in which they exist between the carefully drawn lines of established genres. Although this may inspire some academics to throw any sense of organization to the wind, it seems worth noting that rules are, almost by definition, created by the people that disobey them, and in the same way, the lines between genres can be best viewed in the wake of people who disrupt the genre. On a similar level, the establishment of a genre-based discourse is not designed to reduce music to stark categorical analysis. On the contrary, genre-based discourse allows us not only to group and categorize various songs and musical events, but also to better understand and discuss the relationships between genres and the relationships between music and its makers, listeners, and researchers. As Fabbri notes, “Genres, therefore, can help us to understand musical events, but, above all, they permit us to speak of them.”

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3. Social Constructions of Authenticity

While the framework for genre that I have outlined above does enable one to both understand and speak of musical events, it also invites further discussion of how particular genres fit within this framework, particularly in regards to generic space. In the case of hip-hop and country music, such a discussion leads to the question of how these communities define their expectations for generic space, as well as the question of how generic space is valued by these communities. In order to address these questions, one must first understand “authenticity,” as it is the primary concept through which generic space is defined and fulfilled within hip-hop and country music.

As a socially constructed trait, “authenticity” is invoked through the codes, traditions, and values that each artist chooses to incorporate, especially through the musical or linguistic presence of indices. The object of these indices is always authenticity, although the manner in which authenticity is signified varies according to genre. As will be explored within this chapter, each genre’s communities define authenticity indices differently based on their perceptions, past experiences, and expectations. The aggregate of these indices can be viewed as the social identity in which a genre’s communities have invested. Unlike style, in which communities have also invested, generic space and the construction of authenticity within it serve as a far more personal aspect of genre; an individual making the statement, “That song is authentic,” in reaction to a particular musical event says far more about the identity they invest in than the same individual commenting, “That song is in 4/4 time.”

Given the sense of social identity that exists in the perception and identification of authenticity, it seems clear that it is an important part of how one determines a song’s genre. As will be explored further within this chapter, authenticity—and generic space as a whole—is the
primary way by which a song is identified as a part of the country or hip-hop genre. For example, an artist who perfectly matches the country genre’s style, but fails to incorporate the indices of authenticity in the generic space of their music, will find little validation with country communities. Listeners’ investment in country music depends on their perception of its authenticity. Hip-hop communities make similar demands for the presence of authenticity indices within their music. The answer to the latter of the two questions posed at the outset of this chapter then—to what degree these communities value generic space—is that generic space, as the part of a genre’s definition in which authenticity perceptions take place, is valued as a primary way by which a song’s genre is determined.

The answer to the first question posed—how these genre communities construct definitions and expectations for generic space—is longer, and is the primary question with which this chapter is concerned. In order to address this topic within the frame of hip-hop and country music, I will focus on the ways in which authenticity is constructed as a part of generic space, and the ways in which this construction varies within the country and hip-hop genres. Even before discussing these constructions, however, I wish to examine the concept of “authenticity” more closely. As a word, like “genre,” that has faced iconic redefinition with its vernacular use within academic communities, its used must be accompanied by a grounded understanding of the discourses that have defined it, and of the manner in which it was defined: “Without careful definition, the continuing use of a politically loaded terminology helps to naturalize and actualize the conceptions through an iconicity with their uncritical and even blatantly self-serving use in other fields…”26 To accomplish this understanding of the discourses surrounding authenticity, I will first explore the ways in which authenticity has been defined in literature, particularly its construction and use within academic communities, as well as in relation to semiotics. I will then

26 Turino, “Are We Global Yet?,” 57.
use those academic definitions as groundwork for an analysis of how authenticity is constructed within the communities who invest in hip-hop and country, drawing from the works of music critic Kembrew McLeod and country music scholar Richard Peterson. This analysis, and the ensuing definition of authenticity-constructed social identity within country and hip-hop, will enable my later discussion of the ways in which country-rap artists incorporate and appropriate aspects of the identities in which the country and hip-hop communities have invested.

**Definitions of Authenticity within Academia**

Nearly all authors who invoke the term “authenticity” admit that it has a very real ability to significantly value or devalue music, events, and experiences. In rock criticism, for example, the concept of “authenticity” is interchangeable with value-denoting words such as “real,” “genuine,” and “good.” Authenticity, in other words, is a standard for which all artists assumedly strive. The issue that quickly becomes apparent, however, is that not all artists seem to be striving for the same end result. Take for example the two primary genres discussed in this paper—country and hip-hop. Both are genres that continually strive for authenticity, as will be demonstrated shortly. If “authenticity” is truly so singular in its definition, would not any attempt to signify its presence result in far more similar songs than the output of today’s artists? The issue this question highlights is that “authenticity” is not an inherent value, nor is it an intrinsic quality by which a song or performance or event can be deemed either “authentic” or “inauthentic.” Rather, “authenticity” is a social construction, created and defined by the communities that value its presence in their musical output. The transition between these viewpoints of authenticity-as-inherent and authenticity-as-a-social-construction serves as an

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outline for the direction of authenticity discourses as a whole, beginning with Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

Benjamin approaches authenticity within the concept of “modernity,” dealing specifically with the loss of “aura” that accompanies the mechanical reproduction of art. Within the modern use of MP3s, for example, he would strongly begrudge not only the loss of the physical CD from which digital files are taken, but also the loss of the live performance and the transient yet tangible physicality of a live performance; this physicality could include the visual impact of a performer, the interaction between artist and audience, and even the interaction between artist and music. Benjamin writes on the subject in a distinctly Marxist manner, ascribing the decline of art’s aura to the growth of capitalism. Authenticity, he argues, lies in the unique, original, and permanent aura that exists only in the physical history of an artwork. To Benjamin, a work is either authentic, or it is not.

Given Benjamin’s Marxist arguments, the direction that authenticity discourses turned in the years after his work’s publication is rather ironic: authenticity, rather than being something lost in the process of commodification, became a concept that existed as part of the commodification of a practice. The English and film studies scholar Steve Wurtzler followed this approach, responding to Benjamin’s claims with the comment, “Rather than the ‘death of the aura’ at the hands of mechanical or electronic reproducibility, the recorded reinstates the ‘aura’ in commodity form accessible only within those events socially constructed as fully live.” In other words, the MP3 mentioned above would not necessarily be deemed inauthentic simply because of its nature as a recorded and mechanically reproduced object. Rather, it would be an

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31 Steve Wurtzler, “‘She Sang Live, But the Microphone was Turned Off’: The Live, the Recorded, and the Subject of Representation,” in Sound Theory/Sound Practice, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 89.
object that could be authenticated through the addition of *commodified* authenticity in the form of “liveness”—marketing that claimed the MP3 was a recording of a live concert or of a live jam session, for example. Wurtzler’s argument, in essence, is that mechanical reproduction did not remove the possibility of authenticity, but rather redefined *inauthenticity* as the perceived “absence of the live,” thereby enabling authenticity to become a marketable and commodifiable trait in which consumers are led to view “liveness” as parallel to authentic.\(^{32}\)

The element of perception in this equation, as used in the Wurtzler’s discussion of “liveness,” has become a major ideological fixture in the more recent interpretation of “authenticity.” No longer understood in the framework of *authenticity-as-inherent* in the object, as suggested by Benjamin, authenticity—particularly following the rise of its interpretation as a commodifiable resource—is contemporarily used as a socially constructed concept; its definition is created by the ways in which people perceive and evaluate its presence, significance, and meaning. In other words, it is in the discourses of authenticity, both within the communities invoking it and the academic discussion surrounding it, that authenticity is defined. Peterson, drawing off the work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, summarizes this new interpretation of authenticity within his book’s subtitle—*Fabricating Authenticity*—and his introduction:

> The ironic phrase ‘fabricating authenticity’ is used here to highlight the fact that authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered.\(^{33}\)

With this new interpretation of authenticity has come a proliferation of academic output on the subject, as *authenticity-as-a-social-construct* allows for the use of authenticity as a multifaceted concept whose definition is constructed within and by a community or group of communities, and can be seen as a reflection of those communities’ values. In other words, by acknowledging

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\(^{32}\) Wurtzler, “She Sang Live.”

the social construction of authenticity, academia is able to explore how each community defines authenticity and the ways in which that definition reflects specific community values and social identities. Within this study, such a definition is particularly useful, as it enables discussion of how authenticity—and generic space—is defined by the country and hip-hop communities. Before exploring these varied definitions of authenticity, however, I wish to briefly expand on the interactions of genre and authenticity that I have alluded to previously, especially within the framework of semiotics.

**Authenticity, Genre, and Semiotics**

As a social construction, the concept of authenticity can be easily described in semiotic terms: individuals perceive authenticity (the object) through certain visual or aural instances within a song or musical event (signs) and make perceptions based on that (interpretants). What is less clear, however, is how genre can also be tied into semiotics, and it is this overlap between authenticity, genre, and semiotics that I wish to discuss here, as well as a brief overview of semiotics’ use within the analysis of country-rap that is to come.

As previously mentioned, the definition of a genre contains both style and generic space. Stylistic aspects are often quite easily interpreted through semiotics, usually in the form of icons; steel guitars and banjos, for example, are style indices of country music. Semiotic analysis, however, can also be applied to generic space, previously defined as the presence and invocations of codes, traditions, conventions, values, and expectations within pieces of music. Of these five main concepts within generic space, one is a term already associated with Saussurean semiology (codes) and the other four are easily viewed from a Peircian semiotic point of view. This first term—codes—can be understood as a shared method by which signs are transmitted, be they aural or visual. One example would be the dialect in which a song is written, be it
African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Southern American English, or Standard American English; the individuals and communities that speak that dialect are better able to understand its words, and are therefore better able to understand the encoded signs. Traditions, conventions, values, and expectations—all of which are often linked to the concept of authenticity within the genres of country and hip-hop—can be used and understood in a similar way; not only are they often conveyed through code, but they are also better understood by those individuals and communities who are aware of and have participated in their formation and reinforcement. The convention of drinking Jim Beam whiskey and referencing it in country songs, for example, would allow those individuals who have witnessed and partaken in that convention to better recognize references to it (for example, “Lordy, I have loved some ladies / and I have loved Jim Beam”).

The identification of certain genres, therefore, may be based on the interpretation of particular signs within the style or generic space of music; as a critical aspect of specific genres’ generic space, authenticity may also be identified through the presence of particular signs within a song or musical event. Turino expands on this concept in Music as Social Life, using the concept of dicent indices to describe the ways in which audiences experience and interpret musical events, particularly in regards to their authenticity. He argues that individuals, in the perception of genres like country and hip-hop, make value judgments based on the presence or absence of dicent indices, which act as signs of authenticity due to their perceptions as “identity signs that are actually affected by the social position, experiences, and ingrained habits that they signify.” The large and expensive jewelry often worn by hip-hop artists, for example, is a

34 For discussion of the development of AAVE, particularly in relation to African American musics, see Elaine Richardson, Hip-Hop Literacies (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–11.
36 Turino, Music as Social Life, 107.
The Construction of Authenticity in Country Music

The idea of authenticity has been of paramount importance within country music since its commercialization in the 1920s, and it is in fact one of the few defining characteristics of the genre that can be traced through its entire history. From the hillbilly singers of the 1920s to the 2010s pop-country crossover of Taylor Swift, each instance of country music—or at least, each instance that is acknowledged as country music by communities investing in it—is one that has
been perceived as authentic by its audience. However, there are two questions that usually go unanswered: first, who defines what constitutes “authenticity” within country music, and second, how is authenticity defined by those individuals? It is these questions that I aim to answer here, with the intention of first understanding how and within what power structures authenticity, as a politically-charged term, has been defined, and secondly using that definition of authenticity to ascertain in what identity the social groups of country music are investing.

To address the first question, I will start by tracing the history of what has been considered “country” music in the past, in order to demonstrate the development of who has defined its authenticity. The subgenres and various definitions of country music included here are by no means all-inclusive, but they are aimed at providing a general sense of the expansive variety of music that is linked by the thread of authenticity. To address the second question, I will consider what has been considered authentic within the outlined history of country music, culminating in a list of those traits that are perceived as authenticity-indicators within today’s subgenres, including country-rap. Three main ideas will thread through this discussion: that authenticity in country music is created through the negotiation of the communities’ expectations for that music with the expectations placed on communities by external forces; that the use of authenticity as a genre signifier was established as early as the 1950s; and that the particular signifiers required for the perception of authenticity can change and have done so over time, but remain largely similar to the signifiers set in the 1950s.

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37 Each of the varieties listed here can be viewed in two ways—as subgenres or as variations within the country genre. Either classification system is functional and accomplishes essentially the same task, but because the term “subgenre” allows for greater clarity in discussing specific variations within the genre of country music, I will use it to facilitate the outline of country music’s definition as a genre, specifically as it regards to the perception of authenticity. Both subgenres and variations are trends within a genre that incorporate elements of the overarching genre, but have some variation in the style or generic space. In country music, these variations almost always occur in the style, rather than generic space.
The issue of authenticity, as described earlier, is explicitly linked to how communities define its presence or absence in a particular musical work, specifically in reaction to how those communities are perceived by the greater populace and how those communities perceive themselves. In the case of country music, these two perceptions have not always been the same, and their emphasis within the definition of authenticity in country music has changed over time. As is shown in the examples below, the perception of authentic country music in the early years of the genre was based on the larger populace’s perception of country communities; record producers who were not country music fans were responsible, by and large, for defining what was considered “authentic” country music. By the 1950s, country music was established enough to allow the communities to define authenticity for themselves, although commercial entities such as the Country Music Association awards (CMAs) and Grand Ole Opry also had control over what social identity was considered authentic within country music.

One of the first subgenres of country music was “hillbilly” music, which reached the height of its popularity in the 1920s and 30s. In this loud, pre-amplification subgenre with solo fiddles and singers who preferred nasal timbres, country music was portrayed and commercialized using the hillbilly stereotype, which was heavily propagated by record producers despite the fact that the artists themselves did not consider themselves to actually be “hillbillies.” In performance, artists such as the Binkley Brothers and the Cumberland Ridge Runners, were encouraged (and sometimes required) to wear overalls, checkered shirts, and handkerchiefs—items that were iconic of the “hillbilly community”—despite the fact that outside of performance they did not dress this way, but instead adhered to the more modern fashion of business suits and bow ties.38 In this instance, the perception of authenticity was based on “looking the part,” and adhering to the marketing-based ideology that country music was the music of hillbillies—

38 Peterson, Creating Country Music, 76.
uneducated, rural, white, folk artists who learned music through community connections extending back several generations. Worth noting, however, is that the artists did not create this definition; rather, it was created by and for the record producers who used it to establish an “exotic” genre that would draw income for the label. In a way, this is quite similar to the way the genre of what is known as “world music” is marketed today, building on the idea of “Authenticity as Primality” articulated by Timothy Taylor and the idea that a genre—be it “hillbilly” or “world music”—can be perceived as authentic if it “has some discernible connection to the timeless, the ancient, the primal, the pure, the chthonic.”

Many of the signs for “hillbilly” characteristics remained in use even beyond the use of the term “hillbilly;” as the country music genre moved through popularity bursts featuring various subgenres such as western, western swing, and bluegrass; its definition remained balanced on the idea of a rural, white, working-class artist who was connected in some way to the past. As the genre developed, however, the “past” that artists had to be connected to became an increasingly more recent past, often depending on country artists of the previous decade as opposed to those of several decades prior. In this way, the definition of the genre continuously developed in order to incorporate new understandings and subgenres, as long as it remained connected to the artists and considerations of the past in some way.

Honky-tonk, for example, was essentially a modernization of the large western swing band—a combination of handed-down fiddle tunes and popular jazz dance styles from the 1930s—and it flourished in the years during and following WWII along with the career of Hank Williams. Most commonly found in the roadside bars that accompanied the slow repeal of Prohibition, honky-tonk music was designed to create a lively atmosphere for drinking, while also providing an authenticating experience for the patrons through the performance of songs.

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that articulated aspects of their lives. Songs dealing with love, hard labor, and sexual transgressions became popular, particularly given the non-censored performance space (as opposed to the more prudish constraints of radio). In this subgenre, country music’s definition of authenticity began to be articulated as a reflection of the country communities’ values, rather than the value of the producers who established hillbilly music based on their expectations of those communities. In order to be perceived as authentic—and therefore be accepted by the communities that invest in it—honky-tonk needed to act as a reflection of the country music communities, expressing the emotions and life experiences of their rural and working-class lives.

The 1950s were essentially the endpoint of country music’s commercialization. In the years that followed, country was a fully commercialized genre, which was established and institutionalized in a way that enabled and enhanced its dependence on a genre definition based on authenticity.\(^40\) This sense of authenticity, however, was not connected in any sense to what was actually “real” or “historic,” but was rather based on the perception by the communities of themselves, as well as the perception of those institutions that came to arbitrarily represent the country communities. These institutions, which include such powerful corporate entities such as the Grand Ole Opry and the Country Music Association, gained control of country music’s definition of authenticity through social capital-based power structures: “Consolidating authenticity claims requires building an institutional system, and one of the best ways to obscure this act of arbitrary power is to propagate the idea that the institutional system is part of the natural order of things.”\(^41\) In other words, authenticity in country music was and continues to be an institutionalized definition built partially through power structures and groups such as the Country Music Association and the Grand Ole Opry, as well as by those communities that

\(^{40}\) Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 209.

\(^{41}\) Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 212.
support such structures and country music as a whole. This institutionalized definition has remained relatively static since the 1950s, although the definition of what is (or is not) authentic can changes according to the particular social and power structures at play in any given point in time, because of the nature of authenticity’s dependence on social constructs as explored above.

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Country music’s sense of past, tradition, and custom is and continues to be a major part of its communities’ definition of the genre. However, the past and tradition that this perception of authenticity is based on is as much of a contrivance as the definition boundaries set by the power structures mentioned above; as argued and defended in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s edited anthology, traditions can easily be invented, and often are as a way to support a community or group of communities’ claim to power and respect. In a genre like country music, which began as mere curiosity within many record labels—often grouped alongside “race music” as genres designed to appeal to groups with which the producers neither had nor desired any actual physical contact—it is easy to see how the country communities would want to claim their pasts as tradition, despite its contrivance, simply as a way to reinforce their claim of value within the broader music communities.

A secondary purpose for such an invention of tradition is that it allows for the reinforcement of separation between those who invest with the country music identity and those who do not; it helps to define the genre as separate (and perhaps implicitly “better” and “more pure”) from other genres whose tradition is less well defined and are therefore less “pure” or “real.” The question of invented tradition in hip-hop follows a similar line of thought, as I will articulate in the next section. This in-group/out-group structure, however, is what allows for the

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argument of such a strong association between a particular genre and those social groups that invest in said genre. Peterson goes to far as to claim that:

Identification with country music today is like identification with an ethnic group…. Indeed, being a fan of country music and its associated way of life may serve as a way that millions of people of mixed identity can express their imagined place in society against urbane corporate ways and in distinction from other nation- race- and religion-based ethnic identities.43

Country music communities, in other words, define themselves in regards to authenticity as a way to buttress themselves from other groups, and do so through identification with an imagined past and tradition, in a way serving to reclaim the very thing (hillbilly style, with its unstylish outfits, solo fiddles, and loud nasal vocal quality) that caused their marginalization in the early twentieth century.

Despite the imagined status of many of country music’s traditions, they remain no less required by the communities for the perception of authenticity in an artist and in the music itself. For ease of explanation, I have listed these traditions below, following the work of Peterson. It is important to note, however, that it is only the perception—not the actual presence—of many of these traditions that is required for an artist, performance, or song to be considered authentic as the concept of authenticity (or what counts as authentic in a given case), as we have seen, is a social construction rather than a static definition. In other words, these are the signs by which authenticity is perceived in relation to their decent identity——signs that are interpreted as being actually affected by the cultural practices that they signify.44

Figure 2. Authenticity Indicators Within Country Music

**Artist/Performance Authenticity in Country Music**

- Concerts start on time (as opposed to other genres, where concerts start 15–30 minutes late)
- Strong rapport is established between lead singer and audience
- Sets are spontaneous rather than choreographed
- Band leader establishes Southern-ness by talking about band members’ hometowns
- Recent records and shows are promoted
- Major hits are performed alongside new music
- Artists interact face-to-face with fans (signing autographs, reaching out from stage, etc.)
- Press packs always include mention of the acceptance of artist by established country artists
- Outfits fit within “Western” tradition (cowboy hats and boots, jeans, button-downs)

**Musical Authenticity in Country Music**

- Lyrics mention already famous Country artists, songs, styles, locations (“name checking”)
- Instrumentation references early country subgenres (dobro, fiddle, banjo, yodels, pianos)
- Lyrics and melodies quote other country songs or song titles
- Lyrical subjects reinforce the country identity (rural, Southern, conservative, American)

It is important to note that the racial identity of the artists is not mentioned in this list, and yet nearly all successful country artists have been white. This is due, in part, to the difference between “being white” and portraying “whiteness,” as well as to the tendency of power structures to describe the dominant group as oppositional to all other non-dominant groups; I will discuss both of these concepts at length later from the perspective of the construction of authenticity within hip-hop music.

In the years following 1950, the signifiers listed above remained important to the perception of authenticity in country music, even as the genre went through a variety of popular subgenres, from rockabilly (late 1950s) to the Nashville sound (1960s), through southern rock (1970s-80s, revitalized 2010s) and country-pop (2000s). The rockabilly style, for example, added an energetic bass and electric guitar to the standard country instrumental lineup, but retained an emphasis on establishing an authentic perception as artists and as members of

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country music communities. Johnny Cash, a rockabilly artist who nevertheless remains an icon of core country music to this day, produced an album that explicitly outlined his affiliation with the country communities: *Jonny Cash’s Country Round-Up: The Authentic Sounds of Country & Western Music*. The liner notes further reinforce Cash’s claim to authenticity within the country genre:

> Jonny Cash is a handsome country music star with several important claims to fame…. In this album, Jonny Cash is heard in four of his very best performances for the pleasure of all country music fans. In addition, he acts as your host in introducing two other prominent acts, familiar to all followers of the Grand Ol’ Opry and country music in general.49

Not only does this rhetoric establish Cash as an outright “country music star,” but it also reinforces the distinction between individuals who are invested in the country music identity and those individuals who are not. This distinction, which was and continues to be deeply embedded in the traditions of country music, is established by the explicit statement that the other stars of the album (Billy Grammer and the Wilburn Bros.) would be familiar only to those individuals that followed “the Grand Ol’ Opry and country music in general.” By this point (in the late 1970s), authenticity had been firmly established as a genre signifier, as had the signifiers by which authenticity was perceived, even as the specific style aspects of the genre remained in flux along with the communities’ expectations of the genre and outside expectations placed on the country communities.

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In the music of Jonny Cash, as in the work of the country artists that preceded and followed him, authenticity provided the backbone by which country music as a genre was defined, emphasizing the importance of generic space—over style—in identifying a particular

song, performance, or artist as country. This is an important distinction to make, mostly because it is not one that carries over to many other genres. In pop music, for example, the importance of style far outweighs the importance of the generic space, largely because there is a limited sense of past or tradition to grow on, and little requirement for the perception of authenticity. This is partly due to the unique situation of country music within the perceived racial and socioeconomic boundaries of the United States, as it is primarily associated with the rural, white working-class of the south. Few popular genres can claim such a specific sociopolitical association, with the exception of hip-hop music, as will be seen below.

The Construction of Authenticity in Hip-Hop Music

Hip-hop music, similarly to country, has long been associated with the concept of authenticity, both in academic and vernacular discussion, particularly in relation to “blackness” and black identity. Musicologist Ronald Radano argues for this connection between hip-hop and racial identity within *Music and the Racial Imagination*, suggesting that “the cultural value of U.S. black music rests fundamentally on its materialization of race in the modern, giving audible form to new categories of racial subjectivity and group identification.”

Although hip-hop’s history as a genre extends back only to the mid-1970s, its history within the schema of urban African American communities—a relationship similar to that between country music and rural white communities—extends back to the Great Migration of the early twentieth century where millions of blacks migrated from the southern United States to other areas of the country. In the time between the 1920s and 70s, a number of genres served to express aspects of African American identities, including jazz, blues, soul, and R&B. Hip-hop, however, has been the

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primary genre associated with the intersection of black, urban, young, and working-class identities in the past forty years.

In such a sociopolitical consideration, it needs noting that almost all of the concepts mentioned—i.e. what it means to be black, urban, young, or working-class—are, in fact, social constructions alongside that of authenticity. “Race” and “class,” particularly within the past decade, have been repeatedly defined as performative rather than static, aspects of a community or individual; not only are they performed by individuals, but they are also actively projected onto individuals. One example of this performative sense of identity is the association of hip-hop with African American culture, despite its actual historical ties to communities from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico. Even with this multi-ethnic heritage, however, hip-hop has remained a genre associated with black communities by those individuals who participate in its production and consumption. This association with black communities, moreover, is a sign of the genre’s authenticity, as will be discussed later. Because of this investment in “blackness” as a sign for authenticity, I will continue to consider hip-hop in terms of its relation to African American communities, given the fact that the actual racial diversity has become conflated into an expression as a singularly African American art form. It is important to keep in mind however, that hip-hop’s place within the complex racial structure of the United States is not at all singular. Of similar complexity is the racial construction of “whiteness” within country music, and the ways in which country music is associated with white communities because that is the social identity in which country communities invest.

Another parallel between hip-hop and country music is the definition of authenticity as it relates to the communities it presumably represents: both genres have defined authenticity through the communities’ expectations as well as by the expectations placed on those
communities. This section will explore the ways in which this definition has been established and fulfilled in hip-hop, particularly over the past decade. While country music as a genre existed for nearly fifty years prior to the first instantiation of hip-hop, the perception of authenticity within the genre has remained fairly stable based on notions of tradition, even if the markers of what constitutes that tradition have changed. Hip-hop communities, on the other hand, have defined and redefined what it means to be an authentic performer repeatedly within the early years of the genre, mostly as a way to challenge the status quo and to fulfill other generic space requirements, such as the expectation of constantly besting one’s peers. These developments have led to greater shifts in the genre’s definition in comparison to country (in which emphasis is placed on adherence and recognition of past traditions), hence my focus here is on its recent definitions rather than its historical context.

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Multiple authors have explored the ways in which authenticity is constructed in hip-hop music, and most have done so through analysis of hip-hop lyrics. This approach is used because of the four-fold nature of hip-hop culture: “breaking (i.e., break dancing); tagging or bombing (i.e., marking the walls of buildings and subways with graffiti); DJ-ing (i.e., collaging the best fragments of records by using two turntables); and MC-ing (i.e., rapping).” Given that the first two elements are transient, while the last two are enacted in a way that involves physical products and dissemination, rapping has become the primary part of hip-hop culture explored by academics. These differentiated elements also serve as an explanation for the presence of the dual terms “hip-hop” and “rap;” while the former invokes the culture as a whole, the latter refers only to the specific performance—and occasionally only the words themselves—of an individual speaking rhythmically over an instrumental backing. This emphasis on a linguistically-based

52 Kembrew McLeod, “Authenticity within Hip-Hop.”
performance—to the point of the development of a word to describe that specific aspect of the performance—is the reason behind academic emphasis on hip-hop lyrics, rather than on the genre’s culture as a whole. It is also the reason the subgenre is called “country-rap” and not “country-hip-hop;” the subgenre references only the rap aspect of hip-hop culture.

There are two main trends within hip-hop lyrics: the assertion of authenticity, and the ironic opposition to and simultaneous affirmation of the status quo within the genre. The latter of these trends stems, as does the emphasis on tradition and past in country music, from the past musical experiences of the social groups in question. In the case of hip-hop, much of the communities’ past can be connected to genres other than hip-hop, including the rise of minstrelsy in the late eighteenth century and the rise of race records of the early nineteenth century. As argued by popular cultural scholar Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar in *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, hip-hop grew out of African American politics related to minstrelsy, in which:

> The marginalized… embrace dominant ideas and narratives, even if doing so engenders their own oppression. Many black people, therefore, endorse narrow definitions of black authenticity…. The articulation of a “real nigga” among many MCs reads nearly exactly as a “zip coon” character of the early twentieth century.

In this way, the acceptance—and often, the simultaneous resistance—of such a derogatory narrative closely resembles the acceptance of the hillbilly stereotype in country music. Artists within the country and hip-hop genres, having faced a marginalizing ascription by record producers, chose to accept the stereotype in order to succeed within the dominant power structure. In doing so, they were able to take control of their own past, gaining power within the dominant hierarchy, rather than remaining marginalized by it.

The other trend within hip-hop is the assertion of authenticity. Communication studies scholar Kembrew McLeod, using a semantic analysis of the dual presence of the words “authenticity” and “hip-hop” in written works such as magazines, lyrics, press releases, and Internet discussion groups, was able to derive a definition for authenticity within hip-hop culture:

Being authentic, or keepin’ it real, means staying true to yourself (by identifying oneself as both hard and Black), representing the underground and the street, and remembering hip-hop’s cultural legacy, which is the old school. To be inauthentic, or fake, means being soft, following mass trends by listening to commercial rap music, and identifying oneself with White, mainstream culture that is geographically located in the suburbs.55

Ogbar echoes this definition, also emphasizing the need for an artist’s familiarity with urban life, a consciousness of the association between “blackness” and poverty, a rejection of “whiteness” and suburban life, an intimacy with crime, a rejection of commercialism, and the reinforcement of the patriarchal hierarchy.56

Whereas country music’s list of authenticity signifiers avoids the mention of racialized identities altogether, both of these definitions of authenticity within hip-hop state explicitly that authenticity is perceived both through the artist’s identification as black and rejection of “whiteness.” The reason for this contrast, as I alluded to earlier, lies in the difference between “being white” and portraying “whiteness,” as well as in the ways in which power structures are used to describe the dominant group as oppositional to all other non-dominant groups. These same power structures are also the reason for the essentialist nature of this terminology, which implies that there are specific characteristics of “being white” that can be used to portray “whiteness,” and vice versa. While such essentialist portrayals of race are highly problematic, they are often evoked within discourses of authenticity because of the relation between

56 Ogbar, Hip-Hop Revolution, 39.
authenticity and perception. While there are no actual traits that define “whiteness” or “blackness,” there are traits that individuals perceive as defining “whiteness” or “blackness,” and it is those traits that are invoked when such language is used here.

To examine the difference between being or identifying as a particular racial category and portraying “whiteness,” one need only look to these terms’ parallel use within the definitions above. Whereas “black” is tied to phrases such as “staying true to yourself” and “identifying oneself”—both of which imply a factual connection to one’s racial identity—“whiteness” and “blackness” are tied to phrases such as “Suburban life” and “poverty.” These latter terms imply an interpretive, rather than factual, relationship between sign and object; impoverished individuals are not always black, nor are all suburban communities exclusively white, but both of these situations can and are often interpreted as being causally related to race.

Two main complexities exist in relation to this differentiation between racial identities and the terms “whiteness” and “blackness” within authenticity indicators for country and hip-hop. The first is that country’s indices for authenticity do not include “rejecting ‘blackness’.” This reason for this is apparent when one considers the ways in which being white in the United States does not require the rejection of “blackness;” rather, incorporating “blackness” is often a way for whites to project “hipness,” as argued by ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson. The second issue is that the opposite is true for hip-hop, whose indices for authenticity include “identifying as black” along with “rejecting ‘whiteness’.” Whereas “rejecting ‘whiteness’” would be expected based on the argument above, “identifying as black” seems repetitive, except when one considers the issues of dichotomous perspective within the racial power structures of

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the United States. While structuralism\textsuperscript{58} and the more recent critical race theory (CRT)\textsuperscript{59} define racial structures within the United States using the “Black/White paradigm,”\textsuperscript{60} the reality is far more complex; while whites continue to occupy the dominant position in racial power structures, non-dominant groups consist of multiple ethnicities, rather than just the single racial identity of “black.” Because of this, “rejecting ‘whiteness’” in America does not imply “being black” in the same way that “being white” implies “rejecting ‘blackness’.”

Ogbar also notes these complexities within the definition of racial identity in hip-hop, drawing attention to the ways in which concepts like “blackness” and “whiteness” are strongly tied to essentialist narratives, and yet continue to surface within definitions of authenticity:

Rappers who attempt to secure and affirm their place in the rap game have often contrived, repackaged, and embellished their images to locate themselves at the center of what it means to be legitimate in hip-hop…. Since the early 1990s, authenticity has been less measured by any quasi-black nationalist politics than by ghetto authenticity, shaped by romanticized notions of pathology and dysfunction. The fundamental thrust of the notion of authenticity rests on an essentialist premise that presupposed that there are particular traits or characteristics innate to black people…. The limited expressions of “realness” in rap reflect the pernicious stereotypes promoted by society at large about black and Latino youth.\textsuperscript{61}

In other words, authenticity within hip-hop, as within all genres whose generic space is based on “authenticity,” is structured around the perception of what is and is not “authentic.” This perception, in turn, is constructed through an ongoing negotiation between the identities, experiences, and politics of the social groups who interact with hip-hop communities, and of the hip-hop communities themselves.

\textsuperscript{58} Structuralism originated in the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure and the anthropological work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and is concerned with the ways in which contrasts and patterns may be seen in human behavior, experiences, and cultural practices.

\textsuperscript{59} Critical Race Theory is concerned with the ways in which white supremacy and broader racial power structures have affected law and power within society.


\textsuperscript{61} Ogbar, \textit{Hip-Hop Revolution}, 57-60.
Summary

The various social constructions of authenticity make it both a slippery and important subject for discussion. As a major part of the generic space for both country and hip-hop, authenticity’s importance in the study of these genres cannot be underestimated. Yet, its definition rests on both invented traditions and the acceptance and codification of derogatory and marginalizing practices into the genre. Within country, authenticity is invoked through the presence of name-checking, specific instruments, lyric quotes of other country artists, and the personification of traditional country identities (white, rural, Southern, etc.), many of which are based on the marginalizing perception of “hillbillies” in the 1920s. Within hip-hop, authenticity is invoked through a connection to hip-hop’s legacy and past, a familiarity with the ghettoized pathology of the streets, and the rejection of “whiteness,” particularly as it is tied to the artists’ identification as black. These racialized indices of authenticity are a major part of the generic space definition for each genre, and are perceived as decent indices by the communities that consume each genre. In the following analysis of country-rap music, these indices will be analyzed within the country-rap context, where they are referenced by artists both as a way to invoke authenticity through the indices of country music, and as a way to appropriate the social identity invested in by hip-hop communities through the incorporation of the authenticity indices of hip-hop.
4. **Country-Rap and the Sonic Negotiation of Country and Hip-Hop Communities**

The openings of many songs released by artists like Lenny Cooper, Colt Ford, Cowboy Troy, and The Lacs are archetypal examples of the country music genre. Steel guitars, fiddles, and even the sounds of crickets serve as icons of country music. However, the entrance of the voice after an instrumental introduction—an important marker of style in both hip-hop and country music—almost inevitably confuses the audience because these presumed to be country artists are not singing. They are rapping.

The presence of spoken text in country music is not an unheard of phenomenon. Many artists, including major country stars such as Kris Kristofferson, have switched between speaking and singing in their music, especially in live performance, and their place within the country genre is rarely questioned. However, something about the rapped style of speaking that this group of artists uses—many of whom have only begun to reach mainstream audiences within the past year or two—seems to cause controversy and unrest within country communities. YouTube comments on music videos and blog threads all highlight the arguments that surround this new subgenre of country music: is this music “authentic” country music? Is it country music (authentic or not) at all? Almost definitively, country-rap artists are not considered authentic or a legitimate part of country music by the core country community. More often than not they are not even considered good musicians.

Rather than following this mainstream reaction to these artists, I would like to argue first and foremost for the acceptance of these artists as a prime example of country music’s tendency towards a proliferation of different subgenres. Each of these subgenres is often defined by musical styles that do not fit the standard country music paradigm, but adhere very strongly to the requirements of country music’s generic space. Artists within these subgenres also define
themselves as a part of a country community, even in the face of rejection by the communities with which they affiliate themselves. Country-rap, in other words, is a subgenre of country music, rather than a discrete genre; its nomenclature reflects this emphasis. Secondly, I would like to analyze the style and generic space aspects of the country-rap subgenre more specifically, examining the ways and degrees to which these artists incorporate hip-hop into their music. I suggest that the elements of hip-hop incorporated often signal a case of cultural appropriation—the borrowing of cultural signifiers, particularly in the form of generic space, without an understanding of their importance and place within the original cultural context—but also occasionally represent creative collaboration and stylistic exchange between communities. The presence of these dual phenomena suggests the growing overlap between the country and hip-hop audiences as well as the continuing presence of racist tropes within country communities.

**Country-Rap as a Subgenre of Country Music**

As discussed in chapter 2, a genre is defined by both its style and its generic space, and the comparative importance of each of these aspects varies by genre. In country music, generic space is often the more important aspect of genre definition, as discussed in chapter 3. Drawing from these conclusions, I will demonstrate here that country-rap music fits within the country genre as a subgenre rather than hip-hop because of country’s emphasis on generic space over stylistic concerns and country-rap’s adherence to the generic space of country. This adherence is demonstrated in two main ways: either the artist refers back to other country subgenres (such as rockabilly) rather than the central stylistic ideology to which those subgenres originally reference (the “hillbilly” origins of country music), or the artist ignores the stylistic concerns of country music altogether, but remains tied to the genre through adherence to the conventions of generic space outlined in chapter 3.
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Of the four country-rap artists I have analyzed—chosen for their relative success within the limited oeuvre of the country-rap subgenre—the majority of their music fits partially within what I have previously defined as the stylistic boundaries of country music. Their music emphasizes vocals over instruments, incorporates at least one of the major country music instruments (steel guitar, banjo, fiddle, etc.), and always incorporates the use of a Southern accent or twang. Many country music fans would argue, however, that the stylistic connections to country within any given song are not strong enough to truly consider country-rap a subgenre of country music, and in a majority of cases, they would be correct. Consider the song “Country Boy with Swag” by Lenny Cooper, a white 25 year-old artist who was signed to BackRoad Records shortly after he uploaded a home recording called “Mud Digger” to YouTube.62 There exist almost no indicators of the country style to which artists usually refer: the only instruments used are a drum set, which is stylistically aligned with rock, not country, and an electric guitar, both of which sound highly synthesized. However, I would argue this song is actually strongly linked with country music, both through its connection to the style of subgenres such as southern rock (rather than the more common stylistic connections to older subgenres such as hillbilly and honky-tonk) and through its constant use of signs that adhere to the requirements of country music’s generic space.

To illustrate my point that genre or subgenre is not defined by style alone, I would like to look more closely at Cooper’s song, starting by examining its relationship to the southern rock subgenre of the 1980s and the subgenre’s later resurgence in the early twenty-first century. This subgenre dealt explicitly with the hillbilly, folk, and blues roots of country music, but expressed these roots through the frame of mainstream rock, incorporating electric guitar riffs, big rhythm

sections, and an overall feel of youth and rebellion. Southern rock resurfaced in the 2000s with an even greater emphasis on guitar, as well as the use of rhythm hooks and pop drum techniques, all of which are apparent to some degree in Cooper’s song.\textsuperscript{63} Noting the connection between the musical styles of “Country Boy with Swag” and the southern rock subgenre, it becomes clear that this song—despite its outward appearance as being entirely unrelated to core country music—is actually connected stylistically to the country genre, albeit it through a subgenre. Its use of rapping, however, obscures this connection to a degree, necessitating a stronger connection to tie it to the country genre.

Recalling country’s strong emphasis on generic space themes such as authenticity and past traditions, a brief analysis of Cooper’s lyrics in “Country Boy with Swag” demonstrates his explicit use of themes that fulfill the generic space requirements of the country music genre and firmly locate his music within the country genre.

\begin{quote}
Oh could it be, yeah Lenny C 
The Mud Digger king straight out of SC 
... 
Been down in the dumps but I’m back on track 
With a record deal and my country rap 
... 
I love the country—You don’t have to ask 
And I love Jack Daniels in my flask 
I love my huntin’, I love my fishin’ 
And damn sure I love my country women 
So pardon me darling, I just have to ask 
Whatcha know about a country boy with swag\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

The intent to tie his music with the traditions of country music is expressed explicitly in the lyrics above. Not only does he identify himself as a southern artist—SC refers to South Carolina—but he also states outright that his association with country music should be so obvious that “you don’t have to ask.” He loves southern drinks (e.g. Jack Daniels), southern

\textsuperscript{63} Neal, “Country Music.”
\textsuperscript{64} Lenny Cooper, “Country Boy with Swag,” on Diesel Fuel, Average Joes Entertainment, 7 February 2012, iTunes download.
activities (e.g. hunting, fishing), and the focal point of almost every male artist’s country love song, the “country woman.” He also offers a clear picture of who he is as an artist, identifying his album’s label (Average Joes Entertainment) through the mention of one of their recent compilation albums, Mud Digger, and identifying his style as country-rap. This purposeful mention and explicit description of his work as affiliated with country points towards his use of country indices, as well as an attempt to garner visibility and acceptance within country communities.

Before I discuss other examples of country-rap, it needs to be said that this example, despite its associations to the country-rap subgenre and country music as a whole, also contains somewhat less obvious markers of the hip-hop genre. These markers—aside from the rather obvious use of rapping technique—range from specific phrases to the lyrical content itself, which uses many indices of hip-hop. I will return to these markers later in this chapter as a way to analyze the various ways in which country-rap appropriates aspects of the hip-hop genre, and to discuss the degree to which this appropriation is acknowledged, both by the artists themselves and the audience that consumes this music. Before embarking on that discussion, however, I would like to reinforce the notion of country-rap music as a subgenre of the country music genre through a few more examples of country-rap, beginning with The Lacs’ song, “Country Road.”

The Lacs are a duo from Baxley, in south Georgia, that consists of two white performers: “hip hop artist Clay ‘Uncle Snap’ Sharpe and lead vocalist/guitarist Brian ‘Rooster’ King.” Their music’s style can be identified more heavily with the core country sound than Lenny Cooper’s southern rock style. The Lacs’ “Country Road” has a lone fiddle throughout the track,

as well as a steel guitar, both of which sit prominently on top of the heavy beat and electric guitar. The extensive use of rap technique would again—to many fans of country-rap or country—exclude it from the country music genre. The lyrics, however, locate it firmly within the generic space of country:

Get on down the road now
I got a sack and a U-Haul
I’m gonna make it back to Georgia ‘fore the dew fall
A six-pack and a half a pack of Pall Malls
Red wine, the kind that give ya lock jaw
Old tires ain’t seen dirt roads in a while
But the grass getting green so I know I’m in the south
Old back wood fiend\(^67\) and there ain’t no doubt
I was born in the south go on take me to the house

My country road take me home
Take me to the place where I was born
My country road take me home
Back to the place where I come from

... Thank God I was born in the south
Country folk gonna ride on out\(^68\)

Through the use of both explicit statements connecting The Lacs to their hometown in Georgia, as well as generic references to working-class Southern culture (e.g. six packs, Pall Malls, and bad red wine), these artists explicitly tie their output to aspects of country’s generic space. The Lacs also tie this song to core country music through the use of a standard country music theme—driving along a road towards home—that is most famously articulated in John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Road.” By capitalizing on this subtle reference to John Denver, as well as the more explicit Southern references, The Lacs provide iconic markers of country music that elicit the perception of being authentic country artists, albeit within the subgenre of country-rap.

\(^{67}\) A common pronunciation of “fiend” within Southern American English.

\(^{68}\) The Lacs, “Country Road,” on Country Boy’s Paradise, Average Joes Entertainment, 28 September 2010, iTunes download.
Perhaps the most important artist of the country-rap subgenre to discuss, however, is Colt Ford, a self-proclaimed country artist—in contrast to The Lacs and Lenny Cooper who identify as country-rap or “hick-hop” artists—whose real name is Jason Brown. Colt Ford, a white, 42-year-old and former professional golfer, has seen his career take off in the last few years, mostly due to his creation (with collaborator Shannon Houchins) of an independent label called Average Joes Entertainment. Not only has this label enabled his own music to be produced and sold, but it has also created a safe haven for marginalized artists who have similar musical interests, including—but certainly not limited to—the two artists discussed above, Lenny Cooper and The Lacs. Based out of Atlanta and Nashville, Average Joes Entertainment is self-described as a “power house indie label with a roster that includes former ‘major label’ artists like Montgomery-Gentry, Ira Dean and Josh Gracin as well as major ‘indie’ artists…”  

The tension and strong efforts to differentiate between “independent” artists like Colt Ford and “major” labels and artists of Music Row—an area southwest of downtown Nashville, Tennessee—is clear. Part of this tension is due to the fact that Colt Ford was repeatedly rejected by the major producers of Music Row, which is considered the heart of Nashville’s entertainment industry, and therefore also the heart of country music production. The producers of Music Row have been responsible for the production of mainstream country artists who have occupied radio stations for the past eighty years; these producers also have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of “authentic” country music, given that is what earned their industry the recognition it receives today.  

Despite this success, many other artists—even those that follow relatively close to the status quo—have opted to form their own independent labels in order to approach subjects that might be considered too controversial by mainstream country

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producers. Toby Keith, for example, built his own label (Show Dog Nashville) in order to more explicitly address topics like the military and patriotism. Colt Ford made a similar decision because he, like Toby Keith, needed a label that would support his marginalized music tastes. It is important to note however, that both he and Toby Keith continue to identify with the country music industry. The ramifications of maintaining an independent label while continuing to identify with the overall industry include access to a pre-established fan base, as well as a greater claim to “authenticity” as established by country music communities.

In an interview in the Associated Press from 2010, Colt Ford made the comment, “[People] have to put [my album, Chicken & Biscuits] in some sort of category. I tell them all the time: I’m a country artist. You figure it out on your own…. At the end of the day I’m a country artist 100% through and through….”71 He makes a similar statement in the lyrics to “Lucky featuring Jonathan Singleton” off his 2012 album, Declaration of Independence.

I’d rather be lucky than good,  
Country than hood,  
Any other day I’ll bale in hay,  
Fixing my truck, getting it stuck,  
Covered in mud, ice cold bud.  
Waiting that line, sipping that shine,  
Eating fried chick and gui-tar picking.72

The entire album—starting with its name—is a statement by Colt Ford about the music that he makes. Each track features a different country artist, ranging from other Average Joes Entertainment artists to major label artists such as Jason Aldean. Every song on the record contains indices representing country music, either in terms of style or generic space and often both, and yet every song also features Colt Ford rapping.

Despite being centered so squarely both by its artist and by the indices present in the country music genre, this album (as with most of Colt Ford’s personal albums and the albums produced by his label) contains references that simultaneously distance it from country music traditions. One element that is an oddity within country music is the fact that Colt Ford either wrote or co-wrote fourteen out of the fifteen tracks on *Declaration of Independence.* In a genre that, since its commercialization in the 1920s, has made a convention of separating singer and songwriter, the decision to combine these two roles makes Colt Ford somewhat of an anomaly as an artist, and yet the multitasking is also unavoidable. This is because a majority of the country songwriters—writers who would share Colt Ford’s background and his original aesthetic—are unfamiliar with writing lyrics that can be rapped, thereby forcing him to write his own music. More important to note, however, is the fact that many genres that often present as crossover genres for country artists—such as pop and rock music—are also defined by the same separation of singer and songwriter. In hip-hop, however, this separation is unthinkable, and it is for the reason that I would argue that his decision to write his own material points to greater connection to hip-hop than would be suspected based on his self-identification as “a country artist 100% through and through.”

I bring this up not to say that Colt Ford is a hip-hop artist rather than a country artist—because he most certainly does not consider himself a hip-hop artist nor is he embraced as such by hip-hop communities—but rather as a way to begin identifying the ways in which he, and many of these country-rap artists, could be alternatively perceived as a hip-hop artist by the country fans who have discounted their music. As I mentioned before, each of these artists incorporate, be it consciously or subconsciously, aspects of hip-hop’s generic space—and

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73 For a complete list of co-writers, see the appendix.
74 Associated Press, “Ford Takes a Different Country Road.”
therefore the identity in which hip-hop communities invest—into their music. These incorporations, which range from specific phrases to lyrical content to traditional hip-hop storylines, will be explored at length in later sections of this chapter. The ways in which these artists both acknowledge and actively deny this appropriation speak volumes about their views towards hip-hop communities, which can come across as an aggravated and enlarged version of the constructed racial tensions that are often found in country music lyrics, music videos, and the personae as a whole. In unusual cases such as that of Cowboy Troy, non-white country-rap artists also demonstrate these tensions in the ways in which they attempt to fit within the country framework, actively avoiding iconic references to hip-hop culture and even distancing themselves from their non-white racial identities. In still other cases such as that of Jason Aldean, these country artists also point towards a more accepting view of the hip-hop genre than most country fans and artists through the incorporation of hip-hop’s style, rather than its generic space, and the inclusion of established hip-hop artists. This ultimately reflects the growth of relationships and connections between these two historically disparate communities.

The Perception of Race in Country-Rap Music

The racial tensions mentioned above can be seen throughout the history of the country music genre, as well as in the works of country artists, if often in subtle or unacknowledged ways. When considered in the works of both white and black country-rap artists, however, these racial tensions become strikingly clear, both through the analysis of the iconically referenced styles and generic spaces of country and hip-hop, and through discourse of the artists themselves, as will be considered here. Such an analysis of style, generic space, and artists sheds light on the internal racial structure of country music as it is used and articulated by artists of both dominant and marginalized social groups. Shown by the ways in which specific artists chose to iconically
reference either country or hip-hop identities, as well as the relative success of those artists within the country music scene (shown through performance and recognition in the Country Music Association awards [CMAs] and Academy of Country Music awards [ACMs], as well as on Billboard charts), I argue here that the music of country-rap serves as demonstration of the ways in which country music communities are outwardly moving towards greater acceptance of the hip-hop genre, while simultaneously reinforcing internalized “covert racism,” suggesting the overall trend of appropriation I mentioned previously.

Within the history of country music, racism has had a constant, if often quiet, presence. Major country music events, such as the CMAs and other commercialized bodies that help establish what is and is not “authentic” country music, have historically excluded non-white artists. In forty-eight years of celebrating “the best” of country music, only two black country performers have ever performed on the CMAs: Charlie Pride (in 1966) and Cowboy Troy (in 2004). In the case of Cowboy Troy—an artist I will discuss at length later on, given he is a self-identified “hick-hop” or country-rap artist—the fallout from the performance was nearly historical in its vehemence. Although other awards shows such as the ACMs and Country Music Television awards (CMTs) have had greater diversity in their performances, the CMAs are widely considered to be the most important awards for the genre. This designation is partially due to the fact that they and the ACMs are much older than the CMTs, but is also due in part because the CMAs are staged in Nashville (the home of country music) while the ACMs are in Las Vegas. Additional diversity has occurred on all of the aforementioned awards shows in the

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76 Peterson, Creating Country Music, 211-212.
77 David B. Pruett, MusikMafia: From the Local Nashville Scene to the National Mainstream (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 88.
form of hip-hop artists such as Ludacris and Lil Wayne, who have collaborated with established country artists and appeared at country awards shows starting in 2008, a phenomenon I will discuss later on.

Despite the occasional presence of black artists, racism within country music is pervasive, as demonstrated in the words of established country artists such as George Jones. Jones, who is commonly referred to as “the greatest living country singer” and whose name is often dropped in contemporary country lyrics to iconically reference country music tradition, made the following statement during an interview from 2009:

How can you call that [rap] music? Now, I love music, too. I love all kinds. I really do. I’ve got Brook Benton. I like his singing. Ray Charles. I’ve got an open mind. But now, you can’t call rap, talking stuff like that, music. No, no, no you’ve got to have another name for that.

In other words, for Jones, rap is not music, and rappers are not artists. Interestingly enough, George Jones went on tour with Kris Kristofferson only seven years ago, an artist who talks in several of his most famous performances—“To Beat the Devil” from 1970, for example. Their decision to tour together seems to imply that Jones’ disregard for “talking stuff” does not apply to established country artists and that “talking stuff” is not all created equal.

Given the presence of racist attitudes in core country music as embodied by George Jones, it comes of little surprise that it would also permeate many of the subgenres of country music, including country-hip-hop, given the location of attitudes such as racism within the generic space of genre definition. Within country music, this permeation of institutionalized racism is

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even more likely given the importance of generic space identity within all subgenres of country.

Country-rap, however, brings with it two interesting complexities to these racist attitudes: the heightened number and importance of iconic hip-hop references, and the presence of black performers. To discuss the first of these points, I will return to the works of Lenny Cooper and Colt Ford discussed above, and for the latter point I will reference the dual performances of Jason Aldean and Ludacris, as well as the works of Cowboy Troy.

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Lenny Cooper’s song “Country Boy with Swag” articulates several aspects of the country style and generic space, as shown previously. It also, however, makes several iconic references to authenticity in hip-hop, although these have been modified to fit the context of country music. These references include the narrative of “staying true to yourself,” acting as a representative of the “street,” and articulating an aggrandized notion of a [ghettoized] life. It is important to note, however, that these references to hip-hop are incorporated within the same lyrics previously analyzed for their indexing of country music:

Oh could it be, yeah Lenny C
The Mud Digger king straight out of SC
I’m laid back so haters fade back
Been down in the dumps but I’m back on track
With a record deal and my country rap
And the hot damn and the oh snap
I love the country—You don’t have to ask
And I love Jack Daniels in my flask
I love my huntin’, I love my fishin’
And damn sure I love my country women
So pardon me darling, I just have to ask
Whatcha know about a country boy with swag

... Hell yeah is what I call my truck
You think I’m sunk come try your luck
Its cotton diesel mean and damn sure tough
But it ain’t a Ford this trucks more buff
Like a rock it can’t be topped
Chevrolet, all the way
A real man’s truck’s all I got to say
And the way I do it is the Southern way
Call the shop with what I gotta have
I’m thinkin’ of gettin’ some smoke stacks
And throw the cash in money bags
‘Cause that’s how a Country boy does it with swag.\footnote{Lenny Cooper, “Country Boy with Swag.”}

The object of “staying true to your self” is seen here through Cooper’s brief but purposeful autobiography, in which he constantly reinforces that he is a country artist, and that he is now “back on track with a record deal and [his] country rap.” This autobiography is reinforced in other songs on his album as well, including “Simple Man:” “I gotta stick to my roots and try and stay true / ‘Cause round here man that’s all there is to do.”\footnote{Lenny Cooper, “Simple Man,” on Diesel Fuel, Average Joes Entertainment, 7 February 2012, iTunes download.}

The “street” referenced by Cooper is not so much the “aggrandized ghetto” sense of street often found in hip-hop, but rather the aggrandized rural sense of the street found in the deep South, where modified pick-up trucks, rather than expensive cars and rims, are used as status icons. The relative importance of the pick-up truck, particularly in regards to its brand, can be seen in a selection of the comments (in order) found below a YouTube video of this same song:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{johnnie wilson:} …F*** FORD GO CHEVY!!! 1989 SILVERADO with a 350
\textbf{grantham1953:} Hey D*** head Chevy all the way a***hole were country get the F*** over it… It’s not r problem Ur a city slicker sorry
\textbf{trey tyers:} 1996 chevy Silverado 454 is my truck
\textbf{suzukiLTZ400rider1,}\footnote{Suzuki LTZ400 is a make and model of an all-terrain vehicle (ATV). By using an ATV model as their username, suzukiLTZ400rider1 has added to the perception of their authenticity within the country community of YouTube. See the music videos for Jason Aldean’s “Hicktown” for a visual representation of ATVs in country communities.} Chevy is a mans truck! Ford is a boys truck!
\textbf{tntbadassabel:} A dodge dodges everything but a garage u wanna talk about a mans truck get a Toyota and chevy that’s mans trucks\footnote{“Country Boy Swag-Lenny Cooper,” YouTube video, posted by MsMuddDIGGER, 21 December 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMKqGwEjYLk.}
\end{quote}

Not only do individuals claim allegiance to one brand of truck or another, but many go so far as to say what brand and year they drive, trying to establishing their authority within the online discussion. Also worth noting is the distinction between the in-group (individuals who perceive
themselves as authentic country listeners) and the out-group (individuals who are perceived as inauthentic, often referred to as “city-slickers”). Some of the other complexities of this discussion, including considerations of gender, sex, and sexuality, will be engaged later on.

In “Country Boy with Swag,” Lenny Cooper expands further upon his aggrandized sense of “street” by describing the ways in which he is modifying his pick-up, even going so far as to claim he is paying for it with “cash in money bags.” This emphasis on physical items as a source of cultural capital is articulated throughout hip-hop music, and is often grouped under the heading “Swag-Rap,” an example of which is given below with the lyrics of hip-hop artist Lil B’s “I Own Swag.”

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Bitch I own swag
Imma star like I’m in SAG
I’m so fab like I’m in Sac
I tote that Tec and I hold that Mac
Run a few scratches up on that gun
I straight spit like I ain’t got no tongue
Bitch came asking me questions
“Where’s my car?”
Bitch which one?!86
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The connection between this category of hip-hop and Lenny Cooper’s song are established not only through the overlap in language (“swag”) but also through the emphasis on automobiles as a source of said “swag.” These hip-hop icons in “Country Boy with Swag” are woven in between the icons referencing country’s generic space, and the style—a loop of a simple electric guitar line over a generic drum set—offers little iconic reference to one genre over the other. The song is listed, however, on Billboard’s “Country Album” chart (and not on the “Hip-Hop Album” chart), a placement supported by the overwhelming majority of generic space references to country music tradition and authenticity, which points to its affiliation within the country genre. Despite this placement, the album as a whole remained unpopular with both country and hip-hop

86 Lil B, “I Own Swag,” on I Own Swag, BASEDWORLD, 29 January 2013, iTunes download.
communities, peaking at only Number 73 for Country Albums on February 25, 2012, and never appearing on the Billboard’s Hip-Hop Album chart. Lenny Cooper’s music, however, is a relatively limited example of how icons of hip-hop and country come together in country-rap, and he is also a relatively new artist; Diesel Fuel, released in 2012, was his first album. For a broader view of country-rap’s incorporation of hip-hop icons, we must return to Colt Ford’s Declaration of Independence, his seventh album, and the most popular album of country-rap produced to date.

Within Colt Ford’s album, there are two songs that incorporate hip-hop icons in addition to the use of rapping, and each of those songs use icons related to both the style and generic space of hip-hop. Interestingly enough, and almost assuredly not coincidental, is the fact that both of these songs were collaborations between Colt Ford and another artist signed to Average Joe’s Entertainment, rather than an artist from a more mainstream label; these collaborative artists are also all country-rap artists (not all the artists on Average Joe’s Entertainment are country-rap artists, as is demonstrated by JJ Lawhorn and Montgomery Gentry). In “Dancin’ While Intoxicated,” the more straight-forward example of the two songs, there are no style icons for country music, and instead the track features a drum machine and auto-tuned vocals, with a primary emphasis on the lyrics rather than the melodic or harmonic movement of the line. Some of the lyrics parallel this emphasis on icons of hip-hop, including the use of the line “booty bounce,” a lyric that is found in variation throughout hip-hop music. One example from hip-hop is this brief section from “Like a 24” by Twista, T.I., and Liffy Stokes: “Let dat ass roll like 24s on a big truck / And ya g-string let it bounce when da beat bang.” Not only does this example show the object of Colt Ford’s iconic hip-hop reference in “Dancin’ While Intoxicated,” but it

88 See appendix for a full chart of icons within Declaration of Independence.
also shows yet another connection between Lenny Cooper’s reference to modified trucks and hip-hop through the above reference to 24-inch rims on a “big truck.”

Another factor to consider in an analysis of this song is the dynamics of gender, seen previously in the YouTube comments to “Country Boy with Swag.” Although a thorough analysis of gender is outside the scope of this paper, no discussion of country or hip-hop can go without at least a mention of misogynistic lyrics and other practices within each genre. As is clear by the almost exclusively male examples used throughout this paper, the representation of women within these genres does not correlate to the more diverse listenership of either communities’ music. Although women have made gains in the country music genre since the 1960s, they remain a minority within the genre; in the Top Country Artists of 2012 (as reported by Billboard), only three of the top ten artists were women.90 Women artists remain an even greater minority within the hip-hop genre; in Billboard’s Top R&B/Hip-Hop Artists category, three of the ten were women, but in the category Rap Songs Artists, only one was a woman.91 At the time of writing, no country-rap songs or albums had been released by a woman.

Even when there is a female presence within these genres, her role is often highly stereotyped and derogatory.92 The sole female artist, Laura Bell Bundy, in Declaration of Independence, for example, is a country artist who is used to simply enhance the voicing of the lyrics so that it mimics the conversation-like quality of the words in “Hugh Damn Right.”

Colt Ford (rapping):
When I saw that country girl said Lord, have mercy, look in here,
This ain’t no white girl, she like chasing Jack with Beer.
But I get my game on, can’t let this one bolt.
She came in here and looked me in the eyes and said, quote:

Laura Bell Bundy (singing):
Do you wanna have a good time, do you wanna have a good time?
Do you wanna have a good time? A really, really good time.
Do you wanna have a good time? I sure do.93

In this song, as in many songs throughout both genres, the presence of a female voice is represented in a highly sexualized and stereotyped way; her limited lyrics suggest promiscuous activities in which she would be a willing participant. When hip-hop and country are combined in the form of country-rap, these sexualized stereotypes are simply carried over and reinforced.

Despite these issues within Colt Ford’s “Dancin’ While Intoxicated,” an analysis of the song reveals several other interesting facets of country-rap, particularly in the amount of “name-checking/name-dropping,” or specifically quoting names and song titles of famous country artists and songs. Not only is this standard practice within the country music genre as a way to gain social capital and establish one’s authenticity through the acknowledgement of the genre’s tradition and history, but it is also common within hip-hop for the same reason. As an example, note the line “All my exes live in Texas like I’m George Strait” in “HYFR” by Drake, which references George Strait’s 1987 single “All my Ex’s Live in Texas.” From a commercial perspective, this technique can be used as a way for artists of both genres to raise revenue by agreeing to “name-check” certain brands as a form of advertising. In this song, however, Colt Ford primarily name-checks country songs titles, symbolically indexing other songs. “Dancin’ While Intoxicated” is also an example of coding, as only individuals who are familiar with recent

93 Colt Ford and Laura Bell Bundy, “Hugh Damn Right,” on Declaration of Independence, Average Joe’s Entertainment, 7 August 2012, iTunes download.
country song will recognize the signs. In the lyrics below, the first line is Colt Ford’s reference, and the second is the song title and artist he is referencing:

Just like Taylor, I’m Swift, baby, and I ain’t mean it’s a gift, baby.

--- “Mean,” Taylor Swift

This is my kind of party and I don’t want this night to end

--- “My Kinda Party,” Jason Aldean
--- “I Don’t Want This Night to End,” Luke Bryan

I’m a cowboy Casanova, just come on over and bring your friends

--- “Cowboy Casanova,” Carrie Underwood
--- “Come On Over,” Shania Twain

I’ll be your honey bee, ’cause, girl, I think that I need you now…

--- “Honey Bee,” Blake Shelton / “I Need You Now,” Lady Antebellum

“Name-checking” within Colt Ford’s album is used in three out of the eleven songs as a way to convey authenticity, and it is found in three out of four of the works of artists associated with Colt Ford through his label, Average Joe’s Entertainment. To say that “name-checking” is a standard formula among Colt Ford’s collection of artists would be a reach, but it does show, in the very least, a pattern in the way country-rap artists establish their authenticity within the country genre. Interestingly enough, Colt Ford seems to have found a way to appear authentic within the hip-hop genre as well, or at least appear authentic enough to rank highly on the Billboard charts for both Country and Rap Albums.

While Lenny Cooper’s album placed only on the country music charts after it was released, Colt Ford’s album Declaration of Independence reached the Number 1 position on the Country Album Billboard chart, position two on the Rap Albums Billboard chart, and position five on the Billboard Top 200 in the time since its release in August of 2012. Colt Ford, in other words, managed to produce an album that not only placed on the charts, but placed highly on the charts for both Country and Rap albums, indicating extensive support both in the form of

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95 See the appendix for a full chart of “name-checking” within Declaration of Independence.
album purchasing and radio airtime. This success within Billboard shows that he has an extensive fan base; given Billboard’s reliance on radio airtime within its ranking systems, it stands to reason that his fan base is made up of individuals from both country and hip-hop communities, although the subjective nature of radio airtime makes it impossible to state for certain.

A major part of Colt Ford’s success, however, is due to his song-writing talents, which were recently demonstrated by the song “Dirt Road Anthem,” co-authored by Colt Ford and Brantley Gilbert and performed by Jason Aldean. Released in November of 2010, the song has since gone triple platinum, the first song by a male country artist to do so. It also became the Billboard Album of the Year, and helped Aldean become the eighth top-selling artist of 2011. The song, like many of Colt Ford’s works, involves both singing and rapping, and the original recording featured Aldean performing in both vocal styles. However, when Aldean performed at the 2011 CMTs, he did not rap himself, but rather Ludacris, a famous hip-hop artist, rapped. A studio remix featuring the pair was issued shortly after the show and quickly reached the Number 1 position on Billboard. When asked to comment on the seemingly odd pairing, Aldean simply said:

…we’re both Georgia boys, so even through our music is totally different, our roots are the same. We both know about hot Georgia summers and cooling off with a six pack or two. It wasn’t that much of a stretch.

Ludacris, on the other hand, made the comment via Twitter: “I love stretching the outer limits of where music can potentially go & collaborating w/ [sic] artists that nobody expects me to.”

While Aldean’s comment emphasizes the similarities between the two artists, Ludacris’ comment makes explicit note of the boundaries he was interested in pushing, pointing to the development of a differential engagement by country and hip-hop communities within country-rap music.

“Trigger,” the founder and primary author of the blog “Saving Country Music,” commented on Ludacris and Aldean’s performance:

Slowly Music Row has desensitized the country music public into accepting artists from the hip-hop super-genre into their format, until now Ludacris, an artist that regularly refers to black people as “niggas” and disrespects women in his songs, is performing on a country music channel, on a country music awards show…. [T]he simple fact is rappers are not ripping off country artists, it’s vice versa.……

Country isn’t combining with rap in the formation of the mono-genre, it is allowing rap to take over, along with pop. When two dogs meet, one usually stands in a dominant stance, and one rolls on its back. Right now, rap is the butch, and country is the bitch. Why don’t we see country acts on the Hip Hop Awards or BET Awards? Why don’t we see rap artists aping country styles, why is it only vice versa?

In other words, this blogger is suggesting that hip-hop artists are appropriating country music.

Two main issues can be found in this argument. The first is his assertion that hip-hop and pop are “super-genres” that are encroaching on country music; in fact, nearly twice as many country albums as rap albums were sold in 2012 according to Billboard, and four country artists made it

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103 A reference to the CMT performance by Jason Aldean and Ludacris.
into the list of top-ten selling artists; in contrast, no rap artists are listed. The second issue is the implicit assertion that hip-hop communities are appropriating country music’s generic space rather than the other way around, an issue that is explicitly linked to the racialized dimensions of both genres and their respective communities.

To address this issue, one must refer back to my assertion that country-rap is a subgenre of country music, rather than a subgenre of hip-hop or a separate genre altogether. This distinction, although initially seemingly trivial, becomes extremely relevant in the discussion of the relationship between hip-hop and country communities within country-rap, a topic that incites strong feelings on both sides—as seen above. The reason behind these feelings plays into, as so many aspects of these genres do, the idea of authenticity within each genre. Both country and hip-hop are unusual in the importance that they place on the idea of authenticity. This emphasis on authenticity is accompanied by an equal desire for “purity” within the genre; after all, in order to be considered authentic, a song like “Dirt Road Anthem” needs to incorporate specific markers of country music. By placing such an emphasis on these markers, communities are able to ensure that the genres they invest in remain “pure,” and “true to the roots” and social identity in which they originally invested. Hip-hop calls for an even more explicit emphasis on “staying true to one’s roots” as a form of authenticity, as shown in the section on “Authenticity in Hip-Hop.” The concept of “purity,” then, is something of value to both genres, and elements from other genres, like the use of hip-hop elements in a country song, inherently threaten purity. McLeod echoes this assertion, primarily in regards to hip-hop, but also within country music:

The multiple invocations of authenticity made by hip-hop community members are a direct and conscious reaction to the threat of assimilation and colonization of this self-identified, resistive subculture.

Authenticity claims are a way of establishing in-group/out-group distinctions. Therefore, by invoking authenticity, one is affirming that hip-hop culture’s core remains pure and relatively untouched by mainstream U.S. culture.¹⁰⁷

In other words, McLeod is suggesting that the emphasis on authenticity is a way for genres like country and hip-hop to maintain their separation from other genres, and the identities presented within those external genres. This fear of assimilation by the “mainstream” is the drive behind “Trigger’s” comments, and his blog “Saving Country Music” as a whole; his aim, as stated by the blog’s title, is to save country music from anyone who might threaten its “purity,” tradition, and perception as authentic. From “Trigger’s” point of view, however, it is country that is threatened by hip-hop, as though hip-hop artists are infringing on and forcing their participation in country music.

“Trigger” is also not alone in his opinion. When students in an Introduction to Music History class were played a selection of music from The Lacs and asked whether or not they liked it, one student responded:

> I think the repetitive sampling of a steel guitar is a trite way to convey what is “country” and I do not generally enjoy hip/hop. Personally, I think the cultural appropriation expressed in this “genre” is offensive, given the sociopolitical context of the “artists” who make this “music.”¹⁰⁸

In other words, this student, like “Trigger,” viewed country-rap artists (who were presumably perceived by the student as hip-hop artists) as an appropriation of country by hip-hop artists.

Given the musical background and self-identification of all of the country-rap artists referenced within the paper, it is difficult to agree with the argument of hip-hop’s appropriation of country music. The artists mentioned by both “Trigger” and the student above are not hip-hop artists somehow claiming aspects of country; rather, they are country artists appropriating

¹⁰⁸ Survey of students in Music History 101, 4 December 2012.
aspects of hip-hop. This becomes even clearer when one considers Cowboy Troy, a black country-rap artist, who describes himself in the following way:

When you're six feet, five inches tall you stand out. Add a cowboy hat and you stand out even more. Then, make the subject from Texas with darker than average skin and there's no question that Cowboy Troy (AKA Troy Coleman) isn't exactly an average guy. Yet while Troy may revel in being instantly identifiable from the rank and file in many ways, he also feels that his music shouldn't be deemed something outrageous, gimmicky, or bizarre.  

Cowboy Troy, in other words, acknowledges that he is atypical, especially within country communities, which currently include only one well-known black artist, Darius Rucker. Interestingly enough, however, his commentary suggests his motivation in singing country-rap (what he refers to as “hick-hop”) is a belief in its aesthetic appeal, rather than a novelty; this, again, parallels Jason Aldean’s assertion that the combination of country and hip-hop is not farfetched, and contrasts Ludacris’ statement that such a combination is pushing the boundaries of aesthetic appeal. Despite the acknowledgement of his atypical appearance and music, however, Cowboy Troy has often gone to great lengths to alter how people perceive him and his music, both through specific marketing tactics—such as the phrasing “darker than average skin” within his description above—as well as the through the avoidance of codes such as Ebonics. Both these strategies serve to associate his music with country, rather than hip-hop music, in spite of individual’s tendencies to affiliate him with the latter because of his racialized identity as black.

The latter of these attempts to alter racial perception is particularly interesting in the case of Cowboy Troy. While many of the country-rappers previously mentioned attempt to evoke Ebonics—a code within the generic space of hip-hop—within their music, Cowboy Troy remains firmly grounded in country music style and primarily retains the grammar of Standard American

English (SAE), albeit with a Southern twang. Compare the following lyrics from Colt Ford, Jason Aldean, Ludacris, and Cowboy Troy:\(^\text{110}\)

*Colt Ford, “Ride Through the Country:”* we used to gravel roads and fishin’ with cane po’es, wasn’t no swimmin’ pools, jus swimmin’ ho’es\(^\text{111}\)

*Jason Aldean, “Dirt Road Anthem” (rapped section):* you better mind your business man, watch your mouth / before I have to knock that loud mouth out\(^\text{112}\)

*Ludacris, “Dirt Road Anthem (Remix)” (rapped section):* an I’m feelin’ lika million dollars, stacked up all hundred dolla bills / gotta whole six pack on ice, but I’m ridin’ on da hottest wheels\(^\text{113}\)

*Cowboy Troy, “I Play Chicken with the Train:”* from mic to cassette deep into your ear, my voice is your choice that you wanted to hear / Southern boy makin’ noise where the buffalo roam, flesh denim and bone as you might have known\(^\text{114}\)

While Jason Aldean and Cowboy Troy maintain full verb endings and generally follow SAE grammar, Colt Ford and Ludacris do not, leading to the conclusion that Colt Ford is using code to reference hip-hop’s generic space. Cowboy Troy, tellingly, does not invoke Ebonics, thereby indicating his attempt to associate his music with country, rather than hip-hop generic space.

Despite the attempts to distance his music from hip-hop, however, Cowboy Troy does occasionally affirm his racial identity as a black artist. In his highest-charting song, “I Play Chicken with the Train,” Cowboy Troy states, “I’m big and black, clickety-clack!” According to Cowboy Troy’s website, the song reached only Number 48 on the Billboard Country Songs chart, but simultaneously became the top country download at the iTunes music store.\(^\text{115}\)

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\(^{110}\) I have represented these lyrics in as close to aural fashion as possible, although an exact replication of spoken or performed word is impossible to render. For this reason, listening to these songs proves indispensable.


\(^{112}\) Jason Aldean and Ludacris, “Dirt Road Anthem Remix (feat. Ludacris),” on *Dirt Road Anthem Remix*, Broken Bow Records, 14 June 2011, iTunes download.

\(^{113}\) Aldean and Ludacris, “Dirt Road Anthem.”

\(^{114}\) Cowboy Troy, “I Play Chicken with the Train (with Big & Rich),” on *Loco Motive*, Warner Bros, 17 May 2005, iTunes download.

\(^{115}\) “About,” Cowboy Troy.
disparity between these two pieces of data is telling, particularly in light of the ways in which Billboard collects data; while it varies according to chart, Country Songs reflects sales, airplay, and streaming.\footnote{“Hot Country Songs,” Billboard, accessed 5 March 2013, http://www.billboard.com/charts/country-songs.} Given the high level of iTunes downloads, the low Billboard ranking indicates a near-complete lack of radio airplay—specifically on country music stations—and streaming.

While it is impossible to ascertain which communities downloaded his music on iTunes, it is probable that they were not members of country communities. I make this statement based primarily on the fact that country communities are avid consumers of radio programming, due in part to the simultaneous growth of the radio and the country music genre.\footnote{Neal, “Country Music.”} A prime example of the connectivity between the histories of country music and the radio is the fact that the Grand Ole Opry concert stage—now the cornerstone of Music Row in Nashville—grew out of a radio station started in the 1920s called “The Grand Ole Opry.”\footnote{Bill C. Malone and Travis D. Stimeling, “Grand Ole Opry,” in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press: 2012, accessed 13 March 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/.} If “I Play Chicken with the Train” did not receive radio support, it stands to reason that it also did not receive support from country communities. This lack of radio support also conversely suggests that the iTunes downloads that it received were from individuals outside country communities. However, given the plurality of “communities,” it also stands to reason that there exists a minority of country communities who are not avid radio users, and who purchased Cowboy Troy’s album through iTunes instead. Despite the possible presence of such communities, the original statement that Cowboy Troy was not supported by a \textit{majority} of country communities remains true. When connected to previous discussion of Cowboy Troy’s racial identity, this becomes evidence of the continued presence of
“covert racism” among country communities—racism that is institutional and omnipresent, but also hidden from public view.119

This split between radio play and public purchase of Cowboy Troy’s music also makes an interesting counterexample to “Trigger’s” claim that hip-hop artists are appropriating country music, rather than the other way around. Cowboy Troy, as one of the very few non-white artists within the country genre, has to work to not come across as a hip-hop artist, forcing him to emphasize his music as a part of country and its traditions. If he appeared to be too much a part of hip-hop communities through the incorporation of hip-hop indices—an affiliation made by assumptions based on the perception of racialized identities—his music would be instantly claimed, by individuals such as “Trigger,” to be appropriating country music culture and would be effectively ignored, as it was by the radio stations. His white counterparts, such as Colt Ford and Lenny Cooper, do not face such assumptions, as the white appropriation of historically African American genres is well established in country’s history; as previously discussed, “being white” does not exclude the possibility of incorporating markers of “blackness.”120 Because of this history, white artists’ use of hip-hop signs are less threatening to the country music genre than the use of those same signs by black artists, and the white artists will likely never face charges of being hip-hop artists appropriating country music culture. In essence, their ability to be perceived as white enables them to be more daring in their blending of genres, while still attaining success far beyond that of black artists such as Cowboy Troy.

An important final point to make, however, is that Cowboy Troy’s avoidance of Ebonics is paired with an avoidance of all generic space indicators for hip-hop. Whereas Colt Ford and Lenny Cooper are able to be more daring, they are also able to appropriate the identity of hip-hop

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119 Yamato, “Something About the Subject.”
communities by incorporating aspects of hip-hop’s generic space into their music. Cowboy Troy’s use of hip-hop indices for style parallels Jason Aldean’s approach, incorporating only hip-hop style, and creating music that is collaborative rather than appropriative.

**Summary**

As I argued in the “Introduction,” the country music community is not singular; rather it is a group of communities from a wide range of social groups, with a wide range of backgrounds, racial presentations, and perceptions regarding what is or is not country music. However, these diverse groups all share the common experience of consuming country music, though the ways in which they might do so and the artists in which they invest, diverge. In spite of these differences, their love of and association with country music is part of how they identify within the world at large and they all invest in—and thereby implicitly approve of—the ideas presented within country music.

This is not to say that all country communities are racist. Jason Aldean, for example, is a mainstream country artist who references hip-hop’s style in “Dirt Road Anthem,” rather than generic space, thereby creating connections between the two genres without appropriating hip-hop identities. Cowboy Troy is another example of the ways in which even some country-rap artists reference only hip-hop’s style. However, many country-rap artists—such as Lenny Cooper and Colt Ford—do reference hip-hop’s generic space, thereby explicitly referencing and appropriating hip-hop identities. While Jason Aldean is more popular by far than any of the other artists referenced, Colt Ford’s increasing popularity—particularly when considered in light of Cowboy Troy’s lack of radio support—points to a growing acceptance of racialized discourses within country music, and the increasing approval of racist ideals within the country genre.
These racial tensions within country-rap demonstrate the ways in which the appropriation of hip-hop’s generic space within county-rap reflects the attitudes of country communities towards hip-hop communities. Within the next section I will consider the final question of this paper: How can the racial tensions within country rap demonstrate the ways in which an individual’s or community’s treatment of a particular musical expression is a reflection of their opinion towards the social group that invests in the social identity represented within that musical expression?
5. Conclusion: Social Implications

Country-rap music, as the sonic negotiation of country and hip-hop communities, provides insight into the disparate ways in which country communities react to hip-hop, as well as their opinion towards those hip-hop communities. As shown through the course of this paper, these social groups are not homogenous, but the social identities in which they invest—the identity found within the generic space of each genre—are. Generic space, a crucial aspect of how genres are defined, functions as the primary part of a genre that communities invest in, as it is the part of a genre in which the perception of authenticity resides. Within genres such as country and hip-hop, the notion and perception of authenticity is crucial to their respective communities, and thus the presence of authenticity indices within country-rap music provides insight into which communities these country artists are trying to appeal to, as well as evidence of their opinion towards the communities whose indices they choose to include.

Of the four artists considered here—Lenny Cooper, Jason Alden, Colt Ford, and Cowboy Troy—half of them incorporated indices for authenticity within hip-hop. The music of Lenny Cooper and Colt Ford reflects many of the racist attitudes that are pervasive within the country genre as a whole, through their use of traditional hip-hop narratives, attempts to mimic Ebonics, and incorporations of hip-hop indices for “blackness.” As problematized within “Authenticity within Hip-Hop,” the explicit hip-hop index of “blackness” is paralleled by the implicit country index of “being white.” While both of these concepts stem from essentialist narratives, their presence within each genre’s communities is undeniable and their effect on these communities is made tangible through exploration of musical expressions such as country-rap. While Lenny Cooper and Colt Ford further racist narratives, those same narratives marginalize other country-rap artists. As one of the few black artists within the country genre, Cowboy Troy’s lack of
success on the Billboard charts serves as proof of his inability to fulfill genre expectations of “being white,” even as he actively avoids indices of hip-hop’s generic space. In contrast, Jason Aldean’s country-rap performance in “Dirt Road Anthem,” which also avoids indices of hip-hop’s generic space, garnered him extensive fame and awards.

Of these four artists, only Colt Ford and Jason Aldean have achieved notable success, although Jason Aldean’s success has been of astonishing scale. Lenny Cooper’s lack of fame can be easily attributed to his youth as an artist; further studies on this subject would do well to note his success in later albums. Cowboy Troy, on the other hand, garnered extensive visibility through his performance on the 2005 ACMs, and yet remains a low-ranking artist according to Billboard statistics. These facts imply a lack of country radio support, and therefore the support of country communities. Although the argument could be made that each of these artists has a diverse style and differing degrees of talent, the stark contrast between Cowboy Troy and the other artists remains; he, as a black country artist who performs country-rap music, has been repeatedly excluded from success within country communities based on his racial identity and his inability to fulfill the implicit authenticity index within country music, of “being white.”

Such a conclusion makes explicit the presence of covert racism within the country music genre and further studies could expand on its implications through exploration of the ways in which gender and sexuality are equally used to deny individual success within the country music genre. To make such an analysis, however, would require the existence of a larger group of country-rap artists that included women and non-hetero-normative individuals. Although several artists were not considered here due to the necessarily limited nature of this study, including the Moonshine Bandits, Bottleneck, and other artists on Average Joes Entertainment’s roster, a broader vision of country-rap’s complexities could be gained as the subgenre grows.
Another interesting aspect to be gained from this study is a sense of the ways in which history has or has not shaped the relations of certain communities. Country communities continue appropriating hip-hip culture and implicitly defining authenticity as “being white” and hip-hop continues to define authenticity in relation to essentialist principles of “blackness.”

However, both of these communities come from histories of marginalization, shown in their categorization as “race” and “hillbilly” music by record producers in the 1920s. Rather than acknowledge their mutual marginalization, however, these communities have continuously rejected each other, choosing instead to attempt to gain cultural capital through association with the dominant class of the time: wealthy whites. Ogbar seconds this observation.

Desperately poor white southerners of the nineteenth century who lived near starvation were loathe to consider that they had more in common with most black farmers than the minority of wealthy whites who oppressed them all. Poor white workers, unwilling to recognize their own terrible class position, historically embraced dominant notions of race privilege (as limited as the privilege was at times) rather than accept that they shared more in common with similarly oppressed black workers.

One way in which communities embraced these notions of race privilege was through the rejection and mockery of “blackness,” such as in the tradition of minstrelsy in which both race and hillbilly music were based. This is part of the reason behind hip-hop’s essentialized and often negative construction of the “black persona.” While such a construction is of little productivity to the black communities and perpetrates the notion of essentialized “blackness,” its use by white country communities becomes incredibly problematic. Within the country-rap context, hip-hop icons become an attempt by country communities to accrue social capital in the form of “white hipness,” a notion problematized by Monson. In other words, country-rap artists are using the negatively-portrayed black persona created by the hip-hop communities in an

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123 Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness.”
attempt to gain association with the wealthy white communities that continue to hold a dominant place within the cultural and social makeup of the U.S.

The larger question that this analysis points towards, however, is the ways in which country music’s appropriation of hip-hop in the subgenre of country-rap can be seen as an example of how an individual’s reaction to a social group’s music can be seen as a reflection of their opinion towards the culture and people of that same community. In the previously mentioned survey in an Introduction to Music History class, two other responses are particularly relevant. When students were asked “What genre of music do you think was played at the beginning of class?”, most students noted either that they didn’t like country or that they did not like rap. Two students, however, reacted negatively to both: “Crap = Country + Rap.” and “I don’t enjoy the tamber [sic] of the slide guitar, and I don’t particularly like rap either. That’s two strikes. Strike three? The beat kind of sucks. Country music sucks.”

As genres that have faced perpetual discrimination and systematically lower cultural capital within the music industry of the United States than their peers (the pop music genre and the classical music type, for example) due to racial and socioeconomic associations, country and hip-hop are easy targets for the kinds of dismissal outlined above. When viewed in light of the racist use of indices for hip-hop authenticity within country-rap, however, such a dismissal takes on a new meaning that is directly related to the racialized and socioeconomic stature of the personae typically portrayed within each genre: the urban, young, working-class blacks, and the rural, working-class whites. In the same way that the appropriation (rather than the incorporation) of hip-hop icons in country-rap music and the exclusion of black artists from the country genre mirrors the relationship between the country and hip-hop communities, the opinions and reactions of individuals such as the students quoted above can be seen as a

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124 Survey of students in Music History 101, 4 December 2012.
reflection of their opinion towards the culture and people of that same community. Just as the
country communities’ treatment of hip-hop music reflects their racialized opinions towards hip-
hop social groups, so do our own treatments of music genres mirror the ways in which we
interact with the communities who invest in those genres.
Appendix

Artists and Icons in Colt Ford’s Declaration of Independence\textsuperscript{125}

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<td>country</td>
<td>fiddle, banjo, steel guitar</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“Shotgun toter, republican voter”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivin’ Around Song</td>
<td>Jason Aldean Broken Bow Records</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>banjo, steel guitar, acoustic guitar</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“Proud to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All In</td>
<td>Kix Brooks Arista Nashville</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>fiddles</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“It’s just another weekend hanging with my rowdy friends, Jack, Jim”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t Out of the Woods Yet</td>
<td>Montgomery Gentry Average Joe’s Entertainment (alternative)</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>acoustic guitar, steel guitar</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“It’s corned, cornbread, country as a boy can get”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky</td>
<td>Jonathan Singleton Show Dog-Universal Music</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>fiddle, steel guitar, acoustic guitar</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“I’d rather be... rocky in the country than rolling in the city”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back</td>
<td>Jake Owen RCA Nashville</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>fiddle, steel guitar, acoustic guitar</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“Nothin’ better than a BB gun in my backyard just huntin’ squirrels”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancin’ While Intoxicated (DWI)</td>
<td>LoCash Cowboys &amp; Redneck Social Club Average Joe’s Entertainment (country-rap)</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>emphasis on beat and lyrics over harmonic/ melodic line</td>
<td>hip-hop music</td>
<td>“Just like Taylor, I’m Swift, baby, and I ain’t mean it’s a gift, baby”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s All</td>
<td>JEFFREY STEELE 3 Ring Circus</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>fiddle, acoustic guitar, steel guitar</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“It’s all John Deere, it’s all cold beer / It’s all Jim Dean”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh Damn Right</td>
<td>Laura Bell Bundy Mercury Nashville</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>steel guitar, fiddle</td>
<td>country music</td>
<td>“Everybody wanna get a little drunk tonight”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room At the Bar</td>
<td>Corey Smith Average Joe’s Entertainment (country-rap)</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>emphasis on beat and lyrics over harmonic/ melodic line</td>
<td>hip-hop music</td>
<td>“Got on my boots and jeans, I’m a redneck king”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy in Hell</td>
<td>Wanya Morris The Company Entertainment</td>
<td>R&amp;B</td>
<td>violin, steel guitar, acoustic guitar</td>
<td>country / R&amp;B music</td>
<td>“I really wanna love her, but I just don’t think that I know how”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{125} Italicized cells indicate portions of the figure referenced in the text.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within country music, generic space icons reference:</th>
<th>Generic Space Icons (2)</th>
<th>Within country music, generic space icons reference:</th>
<th>Other Signs</th>
<th>Referencing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity (conservative)</td>
<td>“Hank Junior supporter”</td>
<td>Authenticity (reference established country artist, Hank Junior)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authenticity (rural)</td>
<td>“USA, Chevrolet, Dodge and Ford, raising a little hell and praising the Lord”</td>
<td>Authenticity (conservative, patriotic, Christian)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authenticity (Southern)</td>
<td>“Well, it looks like a country party”</td>
<td>Authenticity (country)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity (country)</td>
<td>“Country of the conway, sweet tea all day, if you don’t know what I mean”</td>
<td>Authenticity (reference established country artist, Conway Twitty)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity (rural)</td>
<td>“I’d rather be lucky than good, Country than hood”</td>
<td>Authenticity (rural)</td>
<td>“I’d rather be lucky than good, country than hood”</td>
<td>Anti-Hip-hop narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity (rural)</td>
<td>“Took a ring from my mama’s drawer and gave it to this little girl / Her mama called mine and then my daddy had to have a talk.”</td>
<td>Tradition (honky-tonk love lyrics)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Authenticity (reference established country artist, Taylor Swift)</td>
<td>“I’ll be your honey bee,”</td>
<td>Authenticity (reference established country song, &quot;Honey Bee&quot; (Blake Shelton))</td>
<td>“Drop it, spin it... / Gonna make that booty bounce, bounce, bounce”</td>
<td>Hip-hop language (booty); emphasis on dancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity (Southern)</td>
<td>“It’s all deep fry, it’s all county fare / It’s all church crowd, it’s all real loud / It’s all flag fly, it’s all damn proud”</td>
<td>Authenticity (country, Christian, patriotic)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition (honky-tonk drinking culture)</td>
<td>“When I saw that country girl said Lord, have mercy, look in here”</td>
<td>Tradition (honky-tonk love lyrics)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity (rural, working-class)</td>
<td>Saw Jack and Jim and some good time shine</td>
<td>Tradition (honky-tonk drinking culture)</td>
<td>“They called me a freak, now I’m living up to the label”</td>
<td>Hip-hop narrative (leaving the “ghetto”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition (honky-tonk love lyrics)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Bibliography


Wurtzler, Steve. “‘She Sang Live, But the Microphone was Turned Off’: The Live, the Recorded, and the Subject of Representation.” In *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Discography


