CHAPTER TEN

Reading Hick-Hop

The Shotgun Marriage of Hip-Hop and Country Music

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In 2012, country act Florida Georgia Line released "Cruise." The song used a hip-hop cadence, structure, and imagery. The song and the band would later become identified with the 2010s trend of "bro country," which narrativized beer drinking, partying, and chasing girls. But it also sonically mimicked the braggadocio and rhythm of African-American popular music. This move is a departure from a genre said to "sound so white."[1] In essence, two genres of music that wrestle with and promulgate specific narratives of racial authenticity are, in fact, closely related. Certainly, it is not news that musical genres are racialized or that hip-hop and country music, in particular, play with legitimate expressions of racial identity. It is not news that country music has historically been bound up in other supposedly race-specific music, such as gospel and blues. However, at the time of Florida Georgia Line's huge hit, it was news that pop country could appeal to both hip-hop sensibilities and narratives about authentic white racial identity.[2] The two genres seemed diametrically opposed. Hip-hop music is characterized and often caricatured in popular culture as urban, black, and dangerous. Critics have

derided themes of gang culture, violence, and misogyny in hip-hop music—often, deliberately ignoring hip-hop that does not fit that mold. In contrast, country music is characterized and occasionally caricatured as rural/suburban and white. Perhaps above all, popular culture constructs country music as safe. Critics may comment on country music's gender norms and narrow-mindedness, but almost no one thinks country music is dangerous. How then do we explain hick-hop—the merging of the most dangerous musical genre with popular music's safest musical genre?

This essay approaches that question from a cultural studies perspective. Stuart Hall argued that critical interrogations of culture as a political, epistemic, and economic system could decode how we live structural oppression in our everyday lives.[3] Popular culture matters—just as economic systems, political processes, and knowledge creation matters to popular culture. As a trained sociologist, I also take seriously how race, class, and gender pattern our social world through our experiences of it. Richard Peterson and Paul Di Maggio once used data on cultural tastes and country music to argue for musical styles as "indicators of emerging culture classes."[4] Culture classes refers to "groupings of individuals who share similar consumption patterns, yet do not distribute themselves neatly with respect to the traditional indicators of taste culture."[5] This essay considers the structural and organizational contexts of how these two forms of popular culture—hip-hop and country—were shaped and are consumed as indicators of culture classes to explore race, identity, and authenticity in the twenty-first century.

Born amid Reagan's urban apocalyptic landscape in exotic places such as Brooklyn and the Bronx, hip-hop music is a decidedly black, urban cultural product.[6] Unlike jazz, rock, and bebop before it, hip-hop maximized a unique moment in a disrupted corporate music industry to afford black artists control of the iconography of the latest iteration of race music. Country music may have once been the poor white man's attempt at singing the gospel and the blues, but it evolved as the symbolic culture of non-elite, working-class, rural whiteness. Its attendant values proudly defy middle-class cultural conformity and racialized urban imagery. Country fans unironically embrace faith, family, and country in a cynical pop culture world. Hip-hop fans may embrace the

free market ethos of "money over bitches," but mainstream hip-hop is largely resistant to sentimental ruminations on hearth and home. How then do we understand the emergence of what the *Wall Street Journal* called "hick-hop," country music with hip-hop verses, hip-hop language, hip-hop posturing, and even occasionally actual hip-hop artists rapping in country songs?[7]

We are not just talking about an underground, marginal subgenre. For example, in 2013, a number one hit song by Florida Georgia Line was remixed with rapper Nelly, an effort lacking all irony that ended up in rotation on both country and pop radio. Also, Jason Aldean remixed his hit "Dirt Road Anthem," originally written by self-proclaimed country rapper Colt Ford and remixed with Southern rapper Ludacris. Earlier attempts at merging the two genres include Trace Adkins's "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk" and Dierks Bentley borrowing the hip-hop slang for crazy in "5-1-5-0" (itself borrowed from police codes). These songs are not the farce that was black country rapper Cowboy Troy. Instead, each effort represents a fairly seamless movement of hip-hop culture, language, and stylings into a musical form that defines itself in large part by how *not* black it is. How is it possible that country fans embrace Nelly and Ludacris popping up in hit country songs *and* fist-pump to Eric Church's melodramatic admonishment of the lost country white boy who thinks he is "too bad for a little square town" with his "hip-hop hat" and "pants on the ground"?[8] To be astonished by the hip-hop country crossover is to misunderstand the history of "race" music or the contemporary reality of poverty among rural whites. Not entirely unlike hip-hop, hick-hop is the cultural reflection of poor rural whites' resistance to the erasure of their material reality from cultural discourse.

Rising inequality and structural changes in the labor market that replaced good-paying skilled jobs with low-wage service work have hit poor whites hard.[9] At the same time, wealth has concentrated in urban centers while suburban sprawl has eaten away the landscape of rural America.[10] Literally, the "country" of which country music sings is diminishing rapidly. The American South is country music's spatial and symbolic ground zero, and the shifting demographic and economic realities reshaping poverty and mobility throughout the nation are particularly acute in this region.[11] This change explains, in part, the fault lines of acceptable hip-hop

crossovers into country's musical backyard. Rendered largely invisible by ideological fetishes for pathologizing black urban poverty, country music remains a symbolic space for poor white culture to be centered. The adaption of black hip-hop culture speaks to the greater youth culture of popular music but also to the constraints of poor rural whites to contest their cultural representations even in country, the supposedly purest of all American white cultural products.

To understand why hip-hop is the means for this cultural crossover but not other genres, one must first understand that the neat marketing demographics that define corporate radio silos are not natural.[12] Culture is a messy entity that defies rigid boundaries and even outright ownership. There is a long history of interracial cultural making in every single genre of music, including that which would brand itself the most authentically American music genre: country music. In *Segregating Sound,* Karl Hagstrom Miller argues that the categories that we have inherited to think and talk about Southern music bear little relation to the ways that Southerners long played and heard music. I would add that these categories also ignore how Southerners actually lived.[13] Jim Crow was always better at policing public spaces and bureaucracies than it was at severing the intimate lives of Southern blacks and whites.[14] That reality is reflected in the sonic race-mixing that produced the genres we now take for granted as distinct and naturally occurring. That sonic refutation of distinct racialized spheres of social life can be heard in Lesley "Esley" Riddle's significant contribution to the famous Carter Family clan or spied in the black artists singing backup for a range of country stars. I point this out to refute the notion that country music is "white music." It is not, of course. Instead, it is an expression of ethnic, racial, and cultural miscegenation that marks all culture. But country music has been leveraged as a tool of whiteness, particularly as a powerful mechanism in the delineation of the cultural boundaries of rural, Southern, working-class whiteness.

Sociologically, we understand that rural Southern whites have experienced significant economic and social change over the past fifty years. Writer Chauncey DeVega argues that the "new white poor" comprise the formerly white working class and that they bear little resemblance to the toothless, uneducated "redneck" caricature used to erase this reality.[15] Travis Stimeling contextualizes these changes in his chapter in

this volume, "Alternative Country Music and the American Midwest as Industrial Wasteland." Stimeling discusses how alt-country groups emerge as poverty transforms from an urban phenomenon to a white, suburban one. Similar changes have structured how culture forms like hip-hop and country music emerge from how people navigate macro processes such as poverty, (de)industrialization, and demography. Suffice it to say, census data show that while racial disparities among the impoverished persist, they have narrowed since the 1970s.[16] That shift is not because of greater mobility for minority groups but because of the expansion of white poverty. Today, 76 percent of whites will experience poverty by the time they reach sixty years of age. This reality is most acute for what some demographers call the "invisible poor": poor whites in suburban and rural rings throughout the country (especially the South and the Rust Belt).[17] More than 60 percent of the poor in outer urban rings that span the Appalachia and the industrial Rust Belt through the Midwest are white. The poor rural and suburban whites that make up the core country music audience are more likely to be born poor, live poor, and die poor today, regardless of educational achievement, than they were fifty years ago.[18] Rather than working hard all day in a union job and coming home to an ice-cold beer—a ritual memorialized in hundreds of country tunes—today's white poor are more likely to be working shifts at Wal-Mart or the Piggly Wiggly, if they are working at all.[19] This turn is a qualitative change in the day-to-day reality of non-elite whites, and they recognize this reality: just 46 percent of whites polled in a nationally representative survey think they "will have a good chance of improving their economic position based on the way things are in the United States."[20] That pessimism is a fairly accurate interpretation of the decline of upward social mobility for whites. Ideological fetishes that reward a hyperfocus on poverty as a black urban peculiarity often obscure that decline—a hard truth that often escapes both the political right and left. The reality of poor whites might be absent from our news, from our dominant narratives about poverty, and even from our academic research, but it is being played out in the country music soundtrack of their lives.

Our culture's relentless representation of poverty as a black underclass phenomenon obscures how hip-hop and country are embarking upon similar paths of cultural adaptation. If country music is the tool of

a particular type of whiteness, then hip-hop can be understood as a tool for the delineation of a particular type of blackness. At its roots, hip-hop was the musical grandchild of the black Americans who made the great migration so great, and American music is the direct beneficiary of black migrants who, in their economic and social ambassadorships, were also cultural ambassadors. The men and women who traveled north and west to Chicago, New York, and California from Georgia, Mississippi, and the Carolinas carried with them the music, rhythms, instrumentation, and genius of black art, even as they toiled in the bowels of the industrial revolution for meager pay.

Cultural tools—here, music and musical styles—are a way for individuals and groups to define themselves, particularly in relation to how they would be defined by powerful hegemonic structures and sociological forces. Poor black people made the blues because social ills like segregation, black codes, and institutional violence gave them some blues to sing. Later, when the grandchildren and great grandchildren of those cultural ambassadors were living the disappointment of the northern dreams of their freedom-seeking foreparents, they started beating on tables and speeding up melodies to reflect the urgency of their social condition. They made hip-hop when political, social, and economic forces created the material reality that made it necessary to create hip-hop.

Because the peculiarity of whiteness demands it never be racialized in the ways that blacks are always racialized, it is easy to forget that white people are living among social, economic, and political processes similar to those that gave rise to hip-hop. Rising inequality in the United States is absolutely racialized, but it is by its nature a class construct from which whites are not exempt. The amorphous middle class has declined from 28.2 percent of the population in 1967 to 23.7 percent today.[21] This reduction has pushed ever more whites beyond the boundaries of middle-class respectability. The bifurcation of our social structure reinforces the ideology that rich white elites have little in common with their poor white brethren. Policing the boundaries between "white trash" culture and high culture becomes a way of solidifying the superiority of elite whites. The economic contrasts are being drawn ever more sharply and so, too, are the cultural contrasts. In popular culture, reality television either valorizes the white economic (if socially trashy) elite in the housewives of Orange

County or demoralizes the lives of Myrtle Beach trailer parks. Cultural critics and scholars alike have noted what writer Eric Deggans calls the proliferation of "hicksploitation" television and the demise of working-class settings like Archie Bunker's urban enclave on the 1970s *All in the Family*.[22] There is no middle in the popular culture depiction of whiteness because increasingly there is no achievable middle in the white economic class structure.

The resulting loss of upward mobility for poor whites influences their contemporary engagement with black cultural goods. Historically, when white folks wanted to enjoy black music without the danger of actually listening to black musicians, they simply put the black music in whiteface. The organizational logics—the prevailing organizational structure for an industry—made this particularly lucrative in the twentieth century.[23] Early on, that organizational logic favored large, paternalistic music companies. Operating in a sort of Wild West before copyright had deigned to catch up with new modes of producing and distributing cultural products, these music and entertainment companies were more Rockefeller robber baron than Rock-a-fella distribution deals. There was no negotiating with talent, for artists were hired, shaped, and packaged by music companies that had an unholy ownership over the performer, the music, and the product that was sold and played on radio.

These organizational logics do not materialize from thin air. They are produced by that cultural stew in which we are always being slowly roasted at temperatures just low enough to escape our awareness most of the time but hot enough to make us notice when change is afoot. Also, while culture is lived by us all, it is made for the young. Therein lies a special tension for hip-hop and country audiences. For when race music was capturing the hearts and, perhaps more important, the bodies and libidos, of white youth in the twentieth century, organizational logics responded to the dictates of a segregation by shaping black music into "rock and roll." Elvis's gyrations may have been dangerous, but thanks to anti-miscegenation laws, Ike Turner's would have literally been criminal and unnatural. The music that defines the culture of young people is intuitively understood by a society as an intergenerational hegemonic tool. It shapes how young people will acculturate into or, as sometimes happens, resist acculturation into existing hegemonic roles and structures.

Making black music over into whiteface was an organizational logic with a profit motive, but it did not operate independently of the social structure of hegemonic culture.[24] In fact, the two worked in tandem to exert control over the acceptable trajectories of white youth and the social dominance of whiteness over blackness. This dominance is reinforced by the malleable, phenotypic construct of whiteness, which is very much at the mercy of what was once called "miscegenation." The legal definition of blackness as anyone with "one drop" of black blood makes whiteness biologically fragile. Controlling white youth culture becomes a way to control the making of white babies by criminalizing black sexuality and especially criminalizing the intermingling of black and white sexual selves. If you have ever seen a young white woman "drop it like it's hot" when Jay-Z is played at a nightclub, you may see how hip-hop could be a problem for maintaining boundaries between black and white sexual selves.

Throughout most of U.S. history, an interlocking set of political, legal, social, and corporate norms empowered by white hegemonic racism colluded to strip black musicians of the means to own their art. In his book *Race, Rock, and Elvis,* author Michael T. Bertrand argues that Elvis did not steal black music as much as he borrowed heavily from all forms of music.[25] It remains that black music, as opposed to white roots music, was singularly translated to divorce the music from its black creators. Hip-hop, however, has steadfastly resisted being made over into whiteface. Sure, there has been Third Bass, the Beastie Boys, and the white hip-hop savior Eminem. However, unlike Elvis Presley (here a stand-in for the many, many white artists who borrowed black music to profit from its mass commodification for white youth), these acts were legitimized and produced by black artists—meaning that the audience could not access hip-hop without also getting a black face, a black pelvis, and all other aspects of blackness.

The power to effect that kind of legitimizing is a product of the times in which hip-hop was born. By the late twentieth century, the entertainment market was fragmenting. Radio was the primary point of distribution for music. Corporate entertainment companies, which are almost comically bad at predicting or shaping emergent technologies, did not see much room for growth in the music market. This reaction produced a laissez-faire attitude to building new markets and controlling the markets they

already owned, pretty much lock, stock, and barrel. In the language of the culture, record companies got caught slipping. Because major labels were not much interested when new technologies emerged that rearranged the relationship between music maker and music distributor, they had not yet bothered to co-opt them. These boxes—the synthesizers, the drum machines, the turntables—seem quaint and low-fi now, but at the time, they represented no less than a revolution of the control over distribution of cultural product. You could make the music in your bedroom, duplicate it on tape decks, and distribute it at house parties and swap meets.

These black kids were making black culture, but they also were owning that culture's trajectory in ways not possible for their foreparents. This change is due in large part to the disruption of music models mentioned above, but it is also a function of the competitive nature of hip-hop. Historically, hip-hop MCs (or "emcees") earned their dominance publicly in "ciphers" or competitions among rappers, dancers, and deejays. A record company could not brand you the best. Only your peers—other black and minority participants in the culture—could make you the best. This guerrilla legitimization was a bottom-up process. By the time record labels caught on to the noise coming out of Brooklyn (or the Bronx, depending on your orientation), they were still thinking of it is as just race music 2.0 (or maybe 3.0). It would be years later before they understood what those badass black kids were really making: youth culture.

By then a crop of brash young black entrepreneurs owned much of their product and, as a result, much of their culture and some of its capital. Russell Simmons, Puff Daddy, Jay-Z, young music executives like Dame Dash, and others were then in a position to sell its youth culture to the major music labels. That ownership meant a type of legitimacy of the culture as black and of blacks as the gatekeepers of the culture. This control precluded a total whitewashing of hip-hop. For sure, major music labels eventually co-opted most independent black hip-hop makers, but they never got a chance to buy it wholesale, cut out the black middleman, repackage it, and sell it as authentically white.[26] In 1950, a white business executive like Jimmy Iovine would have stolen some beats from Dr. Dre and lyrics from Jay-Z and used them to make an Eminem. But in 1994, Iovine had to bring a white kid to Dr. Dre, who, in turn, made him Eminem.

When MTV, Fab Five Freddy, Kid Rock, MP3 sales, Billboard rankings, and corporate radio made it official—this hip-hop culture was *the* youth culture—it had to do so using black iconography—the only legitimate one available. Industry could not strip the blackness from the cultural product being sold without devaluing the product. The culture being shipped out from the powerful East and West Coast conglomerates to Middle America and rural America was then decidedly, irrefutably black. To be cool, to participate in the dominate youth culture as every American generation has sought to do for generations, white youth had to engage it through black language, black dress, and black sound. To be young, in many ways you had to effect blackness.

If those black kids were born listening to their parents' soul records, rural poor white youth were born listening to the country music that, although influenced by black musicians and performers, was always careful to make that influence invisible by the time the music entered the intimate spaces of homes and ears. But this new era was not their parents' time. These white youths do not have to wait for their youth culture to be distributed to them by the corporate radio stations or their parents' television choices. They can now listen to music in headphones. Their parents need never even hear it. Also, they do not wait for the music to come to them. They can go out and get it. The Internet, peer-to-peer sharing cultures, and hypersegmented cable television markets made youth culture a separate sphere from the adult sphere in ways it had not been in the early days of rock and roll. In the hip-hop era, white kids can partake in the youth culture without much parental or corporate control of how they access it or internalize it. With hip-hop lyrics, they are using the language and the posture of youth culture and grafting it onto the cultural tools of their particular space and place. But before this view descends into post-racial melting pot utopianism, let us be clear that when white kids do this transposing, they are divorcing hip-hop from blackness to make it more palatable, not entirely unlike white corporate radio did to rock and roll seventy years ago. That they are able to do it only within narrow purviews speaks to changes in structural authority over ever-declining white spaces, not to the declining significance of race.

Despite the narrowing of the purview, how white country audiences define authenticity determines which hip-hop–country pairings work.[27]

Hip-hop and country music construct authenticity similarly. That similarity provides a mechanism for white audiences to exert influence over black cultural adoption in white rural country music sonic landscapes. Nelly's verse on the Florida Georgia Line remix is notable not only for its presence but also for its seamlessness. Nelly's hip-hop career was always anchored by his authentic claims to midwestern southernness. From St. Louis, Nelly was not from one of hip-hop's East Coast dynasties. He could not draw on references to New York projects or use Harlem street slang to signal his legitimacy. Instead, Nelly did what Southern rappers like Outkast and Scarface have done: he redefined authenticity symbols from his specific cultural geography.[28] This music included a Southern cadence, introducing regional slang, and regular shout-outs to St. Louis cultural symbols. Nelly's hip-hop authenticity draws on his country authenticity. That Nelly's version of country is materially different from Florida Georgia Line's seems to matter less than that it exists.[29] The same is true of Atlanta rapper Ludacris's verse on Jason Aldean's remix of "Dirt Road Anthem." Nelly and Ludacris work while LL Cool J's verse on Brad Paisley's "Accidental Racist" does not. LL Cool J's verse does not fail just because he appears to be issuing a blanket forgiveness of racism on behalf of all black people. It falls flat, in part, because LL Cool J attempts to drag country iconography to the symbolic urban jungle of his native Queens, New York, from which he derives his hip-hop legitimacy. In contrast, Nelly and Ludacris linguistically slip into the rural white imaginary as familiars. The hoods from which they derive their authentic cred are suburban country. They are likely closer in actual and social distance to the poor suburban and rural hoods of white country fans than to those of elite whites. The crossover is made possible by the same U.S. spatial segregation that allowed Eminem access to black Detroit from 8 Mile or introduced Elvis to Arthur Crudup. Nelly's and Ludacris's visit to country music is paved by the historical spatial and cultural coexistence of nonelite whites and blacks. That is authentic history, authentically shared if not authentically owned by white country audiences. How country artists toe the line of authenticity while yielding to the popularity of hip-hop iconography exposes the limits of that power over the only musical genre that centers white poverty. However, when the dominant popular music is hip-hop music, the authority of country masses to contest what is

authentically country gets extra complicated, real fast. Because the country audience is one of the most loyal, it can also be the most rabid. The sanctions issued for violating the complex code of authenticity and values that define country music can be some of the most artistically and economically severe meted out by any group.

For examples of the price of pop success and country sanctions, see Dolly Parton in the 1970s or the Dixie Chicks and Faith Hill in the first decade of the twenty-first century (and note the penalty appears highest and most often for women). The Dixie Chicks case is especially illuminating. While they were exiled not for crossing over but for violating country's political ethos, the swiftness of the country audience response is noteworthy. The pervasive belief is that big, bad, corporate country radio stations orchestrated the near immediate elimination of the Chicks from country music and popular culture. But Princeton researcher Gabriel Rossman's study of the Chicks controversy shows that the pressure to put this group out to permanent pasture was exerted by the country masses, that is, poor rural whites.[30] Top-down imposition of culture from elites has its limits. Although the poor white ex-urban and suburban country music audience may lack the material power to define themselves in the dominant ideology, they can and do shape what constitutes authentic country music. This constrained authority exposes how class defines the authority of whiteness differently. It also frames how poor whites have contested the ways in which hip-hop has been allowed to infiltrate country music.

To draw on popular culture memes is to necessarily draw on black culture because of the unique black legitimacy of hip-hop, and to draw on that black culture, country music has to engage blackness directly. Yet this pursuit of popular relevance risks violating deeply engrained racial beliefs of country's loyal but brutally responsive white, poor, rural fan base. This situation is particularly dangerous as many of those poor whites feel that they are being marginalized by economic elites, losing their social identity in an increasingly diverse America that does not necessarily default American to white and competing with ever more ethnic groups for a dwindling pool of good jobs and beneficial citizenship arrangements that have long been a social salve for their economic pain. Yet to not engage this black culture that is now youth culture, artists risk irrelevance as the youth contingent of their core white, poor, rural fan base listens to and adopts

much of the hip-hop/youth culture. The top-selling examples of hick-hop, or this cultural fusion, exemplify the difficulty of that dance, while artistic approaches to navigating the tensions of cultural legitimacy speak to the fault lines running through race, class, gender, and culture.

Certainly, there is the wink-wink good times approach. This attitude is epitomized in Trace Adkin's "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk." The term "badonkadonk" is a black euphemism for a woman's ass. But it does not refer to just any ass. In the black cultural imagination, there has long existed a beauty ideal that has simultaneously internalized white beauty norms and resisted them through the valorization of "uniquely black" phonotypical traits.[31] As complicated as the notion may be, a rotund ass is one of those ideals.[32] Even as white norms have been internalized as a preference for light skin and straight or curly hair (as opposed to dark and nappy hair), a black woman's supposed "natural" dominance in the genetic market of rotund asses has resisted white adoption.[33] When Sir Mix-a-Lot wrote the official ode to rotund behinds in 1991, there was a reason that a stereotypically white valley girl voice, named Becky, opens the song with disgust for a "big ol' butt." As fat has become a class marker among whites, it has necessarily become a racialized class marker. A "big" anything has been conflated with "fat" in a way to make poor bodies non-normative.[34] Black bodies become trapped by this representation oddly irrespective of class, forming one of many other well-documented hegemonic distinctions that makes black inherently wrong by white standards in ways that money cannot buy you out of.[35] If you doubt me, ask Oprah. For all her money, she is still fat with a big ol' black booty, and it has caused her no small amount of existential crisis or marginalization.[36] It has been rumored that Joan Rivers once told Oprah "she must lose the weight!"[37] Oprah is one of the wealthiest women in the world. She could have bought Rivers a thousand times over. Being fat, however, opened Oprah up to a classed critique from someone many times her economic junior. This example shows the significant conflation of fat and inferior black bodies. A billion dollars cannot buy you out of it.

Some feminists and black womanists have long understood that beauty is not just about being aesthetically pleasing; beauty is a means of granting a certain type of legitimacy with attending access to material resources through, for example, marrying well.[38] When Adkins draws on the lexicon

of black beauty ideals with badonkadonk, he must do so without lifting up black women as beauty ideals. It is a tricky maneuver. To pull it off, he couches the entire endeavor in humor. The woman Adkins is singing about has it "going on like Donkey Kong" and works her "moneymaker" to the chagrin of all the women present. The "poor ole boys" can't help but stare. Adkins is telling us that if a white boy—a Southern country white boy—cannot help but stare, then the woman in question must be white no matter the blackness of the language used to describe her. No self-respecting good ole boy would be caught dead looking at a black booty, certainly not while in the presence of white women. Thus, Adkins qualifies "badonkadonk" with "honky tonk," a quintessential country music setting. It refers to the small social gathering spaces that dot many white rural communities. Honky tonks exist in contrast to the country clubs of the white elite. Honky tonks play country and western, and maybe for a pretty girl, as Montgomery Gentry tell us in "Hell Yeah," they might play a little Bruce Springsteen. But Colt Ford warns in "Hip-Hop in a Honky Tonk" that a proprietor would be smart to keep the hip-hop off the jukebox because "rednecks" don't come to a honky tonk to hear no hip-hop.

The etymology of "badonkadonk" is inseparable from a black female beauty ideal. All such cultural ideals are a way of defining sexualized interest and attention. What we make sexually desirable in our culture also risks affording its power to its possessors. Women with a badonkadonk in a hip-hop song yield a certain power over men, albeit always constrained by dangerous heteronormative, misogynistic authority to define acceptable female sexuality. Still, black feminism is clear that any power can feel like a tool for liberation when your identities exist at the axis of multiple oppressions. A country musician could no more allow a symbol of black female power into a country song through an earnest appreciation of a badonkadonk than could a honky tonk in Colt Ford's world play Snoop Dogg. There's cultural appropriation, and then there's *cultural appropriation.* To blunt the blackness of the slang, Adkins must divorce the badonkadonk from black women. He does this feat by situating it within the honky tonk, where it is clear in country music that no blackness should be allowed to transverse. The humor is a signal that Adkins will be back in another tune with an appropriate ode to a blue-eyed girl he is allowed to sexualize earnestly sans humor. Employing the honky tonk as qualifier does not just

place this hip-hop euphemism into a country music imagination but also situates it within a proper discourse of acceptable cultural exchange and sexual norms. Black lexicon and rhythms are acceptable within narrowly defined constructs that signal to listeners that white norms, including beauty, are still privileged.

Songs like Jason Aldean's "Dirt Road Anthem" take a different approach from that of Adkins. But for the guitar riffs and the slowed-down delivery, this is a hip-hop song through and through. It is brash and male—also, it big-ups Aldean's hometown. It has liquor, partying, and women, and it's riding the beat not entirely unlike LL Cool J's 1980s hip-hop love song, "I Need Love." There is no melody. Aldean does a country spoken word performance for most of the track. As in classic hip-hop odes to place, such as Jay-Z's "Empire State," Aldean draws on imagery and narratives of the down-home country towns that he loves. But unlike Jay-Z's ode to New York City, Aldean's is not a love song to a specific town. It is an allusion to a material reality: there really isn't a "country" anymore.[39] Family farms have given way to industrial farm giants like Monsanto. Watering holes have been enclosed by zoning laws and planned communities. Spray-painting the water tower can constitute a violation of the Patriot Act. You need expensive automotive computers to fix pickup trucks. People may be rural in that they do not live in cities, but they are increasingly suburban, not country. As white poverty has increased, so has the spatial concentration of poverty been impacted by the decline of rural America. Suburban poverty has grown faster than anywhere else in the country over the last decade, at a rate of 64 percent since 2000. A 2013 report from the Brookings Institution says that "job losses triggered by the Great Recession in industries like construction, manufacturing, and retail hit hardest in suburban communities and contributed to rising suburban unemployment and poverty."[40] This reality might explain why one rarely hears a country artist sing an ode to an actual rural town anymore. Instead, they harken back to the town of their childhood, which today is as likely to have a strip mall and a couple McDonald's as it is a drag strip and a Main Street. Or like Aldean, they romanticize a fictionalized Anytown, USA.

In this town of Aldean's, the boys live to fight, learn to love their women, and get in trouble on Friday nights. These are all old country music tropes. Only here, Aldean waxes poetic using the linguistic styling of hip-hop.

There are the sixteen bars (OK, eighteen or so), a musical bridge, and even space for a little call-and-response should the song be played live. And it has been played live. In fact, Aldean says the song started out as a tune strictly played at his live shows. He had no intention of recording it. However, his band noticed the extreme positive response from the audience every time they played it. Through the magic of cell phone videos and social networking, the song had become a record on its own as fans ripped, remixed, and reworked it as a single sans distribution. It could be argued that Aldean tripped into a hip-hop cipher and played catch-up by releasing the song on his album.

Aldean's "Dirt Road Anthem" is unique for its earnest deployment of hip-hop elements. He is not using it as comical capital for "cool points," as does Adkins or the tragicomedy that was Cowboy Troy. "Dirt Road Anthem" is also notable for who wrote it: Colt Ford. The same artist who wrote for himself the redneck anti–hip-hop manifesto, "Hip-Hop in a Honky Tonk," also wrote Aldean's quintessential country hip-hop song. Born in 1970, Colt Ford is two years younger than LL Cool J and would have been nine years old when Sugar Hill Gang's "Rappers Delight" brought rap to the mainstream and a teenager when Run-D.M.C. saved Aerosmith's career with their remake of "Walk This Way" in 1986. Ford likely understands the tensions between hip-hop and country and represents so perfectly its dueling duality in the music he produces because he, like his audience, embodies it.

The white poor and working class do not have a consistent narrative of racial identity in popular culture or policy. The closest we come to that kind of narrative is the one that emerges from the sociological and economic literature on class and mobility: poor whites, especially men, are being left behind in the new economy. The narrative only become more salient as the nation ramped up for the 2016 presidential election. Many attribute Donald Trump's popularity to poor whites who have been left behind. Poor and working-class whites, again, especially white men, are described as angry and racist. The tribal explanation for their anger goes something like this: unable to compete for fewer good jobs which increasingly require higher education, poor whites lash out at blacks and immigrants. In Trump, they may see a willing translator of their anger. It is an auspicious moment to think about how we can reconcile the popularity

of black youth culture—hip-hop—among poor, working-class, and uneducated whites. One way to think about this moment is to consider an awakening of a visible racialized white identity through mainstream cultural symbols.

In many ways, poor white people are correct when they talk of losing their country. However, they are not losing it to blacks or immigrants. Neither are they really "losing," as that implies poor rural whites once owned this nation's promise in the material sense. The cultural divide between the white elite and the redneck white poor has existed in some form for generations. However, the hope of escaping one's redneck past is becoming less likely, while even the comfort of an actual country to ease that sense of loss is being gobbled up by suburbanization, by the collapse of middle-class work, and by rising income inequality. Poor whites are not losing their country but their "country": the symbolic hope of the utility of their whiteness to improve their material lives by rendering them visible and autonomous—and they are losing it to the white plutocracy. Sadly, rich whites do not have a banging soundtrack. Black folks do. When people like uber rich, uber white Gwyneth Paltrow is on national television dropping hot N.W.A. bars from memory, it is easy to see how poor white people can conflate the encroachment of black culture into their symbolic spaces with the dominance of the white economic elite over their material spaces.[41] They live a million social miles from both.

The success of hick-hop is grounded in mutually constituted authenticity of two genres that both value their respective authority to define that authenticity. While they cannot control the boundaries of popular culture, country fans can still erect limited boundaries of acceptable cultural remixing. The contestation of boundaries of that cultural remixing signal an awareness among poor whites of the structural limitations of whiteness as necessary *and* sufficient for social mobility. Most black Americans have been socialized to develop an awareness of the external constraints of blackness, eloquently described in W. E. B. DuBois's theory of double consciousness. The historical privileging of whiteness as a master identity has left poor whites with few such tools to navigate what that means in our new economic reality. Branding poverty with a black urban face simultaneously makes black poverty ubiquitous while erasing black lives, but it erases poor whites almost entirely.

Historically, participation in popular culture promised a type of upward social mobility into higher-status whiteness. It created a shared culture in which poor whites could assemble such cultural tools as language and dress to transverse mobility bridges out of backwoods United States of America and into middle-class, white United States of America. That bridge now seems to lead only to blackness, and god knows no one should ever want to end up there. The youth culture is developing a shared language, but the language is being shared and, in many ways, controlled by blackness (if ultimately for the economic benefit of corporate media). That this trend might actually represent similar cultural bridges to mobility really only antagonizes the diminishing utility of one's whiteness or, at least, the perceived diminishing utility. Sociology suggests it is still pretty good to be white in America, but it is quite true that it is not uniformly good to be white in America.

It is understandable how the benefits of whiteness can be hard to see for poor whites on which country music depends. It certainly must not feel true in their daily lives as they experience joblessness, poor health outcomes, shrinking social safety nets, and the near erasure of the poor and working class from television, movies, and pop culture, save but a trailer park minstrelsy or two. It could be that the shifting economic realities of poor whites is exposing an emerging group identity crisis. Living with that at your nine-to-five, or in your search for a nine-to-five, may be one issue. Dealing with this problem in the spaces where you should be able to exert some control—your personal spaces, your homes, over your children, in your honky tonks, and at your tailgate parties—could present a particular kind of crisis. White invisibility in national discussions of poverty may be a kind of privilege (one black Americans surely do not enjoy), but it is not without its perils. The erasure of the structural demise of social mobility for poor whites leaves them with few uncontested spaces, symbolic or material, to work through that group identity crisis. That it is hip-hop that provides them tools, albeit in limited and constrained ways, to explore that crisis is a function of hip-hop's domination of popular youth culture, spatial segregation of the haves from the rural have-nots, and shifting corporate logics. This structural change is reflected, as such things usually are, in the beautiful ugly culture people make as they try to construct their ideal selves under less than ideal conditions.

NOTES

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41. Paltrow has demonstrated an affinity for both mainstream and unedited hip-hop lyrics in media interviews. In her acting life, Paltrow most frequently plays the iconic symbol of white femininity—pale, thin, blonde, and wealthy. In her nonacting career she is making a business of packaging that white femininity into a lifestyle brand. Her GOOP website, books, and tours feature white elite taste markers for public consumption. Seeing someone like Paltrow spit hot bars by groups like Niggas with Attitude (N.W.A.) juxtaposes her wealthy, white, female, elite, high cultural taste against what was once a black, poor, male low cultural product. Here, I am considering what that looks like not as a black cultural consumer but as a white working-class or poor consumer.