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"Fly Over States": Punk, Country, and the Cultural Despair of "Middle" America between 9/11 and Trump's 2016 Election

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 "If You Don't Vote": A Personal Introduction

One story from my childhood that my mom loves to tell goes something like this: The year is 2002. I am five years old and in kindergarten, the first official year of elementary school for most students in the United States. It's November, so it's time for the general midterm election, the halfway point between the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, which would decide congressional, state, and local positions for the next two years. I go with my mom to vote at the polling place at our local fire department. After she votes, she gives me her "I Voted" sticker, which I'm allowed to take to school for show and tell. She explains that "I went and voted so now I have the right to bitch about things and complain about things if they're not going the way that I want them to go, because by voting I took part in the process." When it's my turn for show and tell, I proudly present the sticker and repeat my mom's words. Apparently, my kindergarten teacher wasn't impressed by my use of swear words, but my mom was happy that I understood the importance of voting.

Two years later, my family sat around the Thanksgiving table, and when it was his turn, my uncle said that he was thankful that Bush, "not that other guy"[1] had won the 2004 presidential election. Later, during the Obama years, when we did mock elections as part of our history curriculum at my school in a rural, conservative community, the Republican candidate always dominated the outcome, and during these pretend elections, the few kids who did vote for Obama, the Democratic candidate, were teased mercilessly. Growing up, I got the message loud and clear: voting was imperative, but so was voting for the "right" candidate, who was someone that allegedly would ensure jobs, low taxes, and an intangible sense of "freedom" while also maintaining a certain status quo.

I was so excited to vote in my first election that when I moved into my college dormitory, a few days after I had turned 18, the legal voting age in the US, I immediately registered to vote, despite the fact that the next election wouldn't occur for another year. By 2016, the conservative values I had grown up with no longer resonated with me, and I wanted to vote for someone who didn't just represent me and my interests, but someone who would improve things for everyone. So, when I cast a ballot for the first time, thrilled to finally be exercising my right to vote, I somewhat begrudgingly chose the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton. I

[1] Democratic nominee John Kerry

wasn't happy with either choice, but I knew I couldn't vote for Trump, and my mom's voice echoed in the back of my head: "if you don't vote, you can't bitch."

At that time, I was in my second year of undergrad, in the midst of an American History 101 course. We were learning about trends in presidential elections, and discussing how more progressive presidents were often followed by more regressive presidents. Not only did Obama champion more progressive polices, but he was also America's first Black president. Both his policies and his race challenged the preexisting status quo in the US, and it is my opinion that the USAmerican public would not allow that status quo to continue to be challenged by placing another marginalized candidate, this time a woman, in the country's highest office. In the days and weeks that followed the Trump election, there were countless think pieces written as individuals in America's perceived cultural centers tried to work out how, exactly, Trump could have possibly won. While I was sorely disappointed with the outcome of the election, I wasn't necessarily surprised. Trump represented what a large swath of the voting population longed for: he presented himself as authentic and as having the solutions to the (real or imagined) suffering experienced by a committed chunk of the voting public. For years, cultural productions created by white, working- and middle-class men from rural and suburban areas had professed a deep dissatisfaction with their place in American society, as well as with American politics more generally, and white, working- and middle-class men from rural and suburban areas made up the majority of the electorate in 2016 (File; Quirk).

1.2 New Expectations: A General Introduction

In American popular music, there is a long tradition of a DIY ethos. Across genres, artists who sign to major labels are viewed as "sellouts" who have betrayed their listeners, their communities, and themselves. DIY artists have something to say, and they are going to say it, record label be damned. Nowhere is this ethos clearer than in the genres of punk and country, which, at first glance, seem to have little, if anything, in common with each other. However, in both cases, all that's really needed to make music is a voice and a guitar, perhaps also bass and drums in the case of punk, though, as music and cultural critic Andy Greenwald notes in *Nothing Feels Good*, the playing of the instruments is "aggressively sloppy" (143). Particularly in the 2000s, as new subgenres started to emerge and gain momentum, guitar-heavy, lyrically rich, lo-fi, fusion subgenres of Midwest emo, folk punk, alt.country, and bro-country began to occupy similarly unique niches across America, especially in the

space that has been deemed “flyover” or “Middle” America, the places where culture is perceived to not exist. Importantly, the main uniting factors across the genre spectrum is the lyrical focus on cultural despair and the perception of “authenticity.” In “Fish Sticks and Caviar,” Vicki T. Purslow and Amy T. Belcastro, music professors at Southern Oregon University, argue that “Country music has been evolving into a uniquely American art form that crosses many social, cultural, and political issues, polarizing America. It presents a critical opportunity to give voice to a marginalized population and understand the history and culture of rural America” (41). Country music, therefore, is representative of the “real” America. Similarly, Ryan Moore, a professor of sociology at San Francisco State University, notes that punk “has involved a quest for authenticity and independence from the culture industry, thus altogether renouncing the prevailing culture of media, image, and hypercommercialism” (307). By existing outside of the mainstream culture industry, punk, therefore, also represents the “real” America. Both genres utilize this perceived authenticity to draw attention to the real and imagined problems of Middle America.

In this thesis, I will focus on a selection of songs from subgenres of punk and country in an effort to understand and analyze an overall feeling of cultural despair in Middle America during the fifteen-year period between 9/11/01[2] and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. While there is no objective basis for these perceptions, these genres are typically perceived as being politically opposed. By both those inside and outside of the scene, punk is popularly believed to be inherently left-wing—a recent poll by New York Magazine shows that 47% of respondents identify as “Democrat,” with a further 10% identifying as “Anarchist” (“The New Punks Poll”). Country fans, on the other hand, “have generally been thought to be rural, less educated, less technically savvy and a lower earning group of people than the general public” (Hackett), all traits typically associated with the right-wing. Despite these perceptions that punk and country are wholly incompatible and even diametrically opposed, I argue that during this time, the songs being produced in these genres are actually expressing the same political frustrations through the use of similar motifs, which is ultimately reflective of an overall cultural feeling of despair, collective trauma, and being trapped.

The first two decades of the new millennium in the US were marked by political instability, economic instability, and environmental instability. Events like 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Bush elections, the financial crash of 2008 and the collapse of the housing market, the Obama

[2] Because this thesis focuses on USAmerican cultural production, I will use the standard US date format of Month/Day/Year when citing dates.

elections, school shootings, drug epidemics, unemployment, the Trump election, and massive rural-to-urban population changes punctuated these decades. At the same time, the rise of the internet, social media, and online file-sharing sites and streaming services began to democratize cultural production and distribution. Culture no longer had to come from mainstream centers such as New York City or Los Angeles; instead, it could be created and distributed wherever an artist was. As such, cultural productions by, for, and about Middle America began to become more prominent, and, in the music world, artists turned to punk and country, DIY genres that provided space for white, middle-class men a space to sing, however poorly, about their despair and alienation.

While mainstream country music, as well as pre-2000s punk music and subculture, have been written about extensively, there is less scholarship that deals with the post-9/11 turn in the new millennium. Additionally, because these two genres are generally conceived of as politically opposed, they are rarely put in conversation with each other in a scholarly context. However, it is important to consider these genres not as separate entities, but rather as a spectrum that employs similar themes, instrumentation, and DIY ethos. Cultural studies scholarship also typically reinforces strict lines between genres, thus reinforcing perceptions of strict political divides, when, in reality, genre, especially since the turn of the century, is increasingly fluid and political expressions are complicated. Because punk is typically perceived as left-wing, it can be easy for racist and misogynist sentiment to be overlooked or ignored in favor of rallying points about class and imagined collective trauma. Similarly, because country music is typically perceived as right-wing, it can be easy for legitimate political and socioeconomic critiques to be overlooked or ignored in favor of celebrations of nationalism and militarism. By examining a selection of artists and songs across two sub-genres each of punk and country—folk punk and Midwest emo, and alt.country and bro-country, respectively—I aim to bring less frequently studied cultural productions into a larger conversation about how communities in Middle America are perceived by outsiders and how they perceive themselves. In doing so, I expect to find lyrics across genres that express similar political sentiments.

By applying a framework featuring Raymond Williams' notion of "structures of feeling," which identifies a nebulous gap that precedes official, mainstream, and popular discourses, and Anthony Harkins' conception of "flyover states," which describes how "middle" America is perceived as a place where culture does not exist, I will examine how punk and country draw on the discourse initially borne out of 9/11 to create structures that center

alienation and despair. Structures of feeling can help explain how and why music from these genres within this time period has an archetypical focus on place and space, as well as mediations on drug and alcohol abuse. The perception of alienation creates a very real cultural response. This thesis will thus consider why these genres are typically opposed, discuss the generic similarities, explore how the imagined cultural trauma is expressed in the lyrics of the songs, analyze recurring themes, symbols, and motifs, and finally explore the political discourses engendered by these songs, including questions of co-option and appropriation.

This thesis will examine a selection of songs from alt.country artists Jason Isbell and Old Crow Medicine Show, bro-country artists Florida Georgia Line and Jason Aldean, folk punk bands AJJ and Defiance, Ohio, and Midwest emo bands Modern Baseball and Hawthorne Heights. The representative artists and songs were picked from artists who are from Middle America, which excludes major coastal "cultural" centers of NYC and LA. Representative songs were picked only from full-length studio albums, and did not include live albums, EPs, demos, or bonus tracks.

Because the artists I am focusing on are exclusively white men, with the exception of one female vocalist who appears on some Defiance, Ohio tracks, ideas of whiteness and masculinity will be taken into consideration as part of the larger discourse analysis. I am interested in examining why, at this time, straight, white, working and middle-class men felt so alienated. This thesis does not aim to be a comprehensive overview of all punk or country music. It does not even attempt to be a comprehensive survey of all folk punk, Midwest emo, alt.country, and bro-country music released between 9/11/01 and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Instead, it seeks to strategically analyze a selected sample of songs from the aforementioned subgenres to provide specific insight into the state of music, cultural production, and community formation over an approximately 15-year period. By focusing on music outside of the "mainstream" and analyzing the ever-changing and blurred genre, I aim to bring the periphery into greater focus.

In Chapter Two, I provide a theoretical framework. The central argument of this thesis is built around several concepts, including Anthony Harkins' "flyover states," Williams' "structures of feeling," Mimi Nguyen's "'whitestraightboy' hegemony," and Dick Hebdige's "subcultures." This chapter also offers a working definition for the concept of "authenticity" and notes which states and regions are included in my definition of "flyover states." In

Chapter Three, I delve into genre, discuss how genre overlaps, and define my subgenres. While these punk and country are often perceived as diametrically opposed, this chapter seeks to bring the commonalities in sound, themes, and politics into greater focus. In Chapter Four, I conduct a close reading of a selection of lyrics from my example discography. This close reading is centered around four different thematic groupings: place, working classness, police & military, and drugs & alcohol. This analysis will provide insight into what mattered to artists across the genre spectrum and how they responded to major sociocultural upheavals, and will lay the groundwork for the analysis in Chapter Five. Then, in Chapter Five, I conduct a political discourse analysis wherein I compare points of discourse from official, top-down sources, that is, presidential statements, speeches, and press conferences, with the discourses put forth by the songs in my example discography. In Chapter Six, I provide a conclusion and discuss the importance of bringing the periphery into the mainstream. The appendix includes a track listing that lists the songs mentioned in Chapters Four and Five in order, as well as a map of the United States, which highlights the regions that I have identified as being "flyover."

Music permeates the fabric of our daily lives, yet as Andrew Boulton writes, "Expectation matters; context matters; lyrics do not speak for themselves" (375). Through a careful examination of lyrics and their context, I hope to challenge ideas that dictate a stark oppositional divide between punk and country music and provide insight into how these genres overlap, interact, and address similar themes. Ultimately, my aim in this thesis is to provide the context and analysis necessary to adjust the expectations and improve the understanding of cultural productions from flyover country.

Chapter Two: Theory

2.1 Setting the Stage

In order to situate the emotions of cultural despair and alienation, I will draw on Anthony Harkins' conception of "Flyover States" and Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling." Harkins, an associate professor at Western Kentucky University who specializes in social and cultural history, proposes that middle America is a place where culture is perceived not to be, whereas locations such as New York City and Los Angeles are places where culture is perceived to be/where culture is created. This framework helps contextualize the tension between middle America and coastal America, as well as explore why cultural artifacts produced in middle America tend to express feelings of being forgotten or being passed by and ignored. Williams' theory helps explain where feelings of being forgotten or passed by and ignored emerge from in the first place, and is defined as "the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts" ("Structures of Feeling"). It has been well-established that USAmerican punk and country from the 20th century react to a variety of political and social discourses. The music and aesthetic present in punk and country music of the first part of the 21st century specifically draw on the discourse initially borne out of 9/11 to create structures that center alienation and despair. Structures of feeling can help explain how and why music from these genres within this time period has an archetypical focus on place and space, as well as mediations on drug and alcohol abuse. The perception of alienation creates a very real cultural response that demands "authenticity" and "community," but the definition of who and what is "authentic" and who is allowed into what communities remains very narrow, and in the case of punk and country subcultures in the US, is predominantly white and male. I combine Williams' approach to the structure of feelings with Dick Hebdige's account in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* to further analyze structures of feeling, particularly to explain community formation and the role and importance of whiteness across the generic spectrum. Moreover, I will analyze the gendered and racialized exclusions of both punk rock and country, drawing on a selection of works of *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*, edited by cultural scholars and punk rockers Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, as well as "The Aesthetics of Country Music" by John Dyck, lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Auburn, Alabama. The following chapter will outline similarities between the two genres, further delineate the subgenres, and

offer background and biography information for each of the bands. To that end, I will also consult selections from *Old Roots, New Routes: the Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, edited by Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching, as well as various reviews of and interviews with the bands.

2.2 Structures of Feeling & Authenticity

To further discuss structures of feelings, Williams states that this mode of analysis is "concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt […]. An alternative definition would be structures of experience" (Williams, "Structures of Feeling" 23). In the post-9/11 moment, the structure of feeling espoused in contemporary punk and country was one that mirrored but did not fully repeat "the Greatest Generation values that Bush had so assiduously claimed as his own" (Hayes). In her essay on the role of physical objects in memory of 9/11, Ester Peeren, professor of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, writes that "the entanglement of official and practical consciousness in the spectacularization of the memory and mourning of 9/11 […] destabilizes some influential assumptions about affect" (92). While the official narrative surrounding 9/11 is intensely affective and meant to inspire an emotional response in the USAmerican population, the cultural response to 9/11, especially in the years following the event, does not always align with or support the official narrative. Thus, it is first important to understand the state of each narrative in the immediate aftermath. Hebdige argues that "the material (i.e. social relations) which is continually being transformed into culture (and hence subculture) can never be completely 'raw'. It is always mediated: inflected by the historical context in which it is encountered; posited upon a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life" (80). In order for cultural material to be completely "raw," it would have to appear spontaneously and not be informed by external forces. Structures of feeling, then, is the closest we can get to the "raw" material—the immediate reactions of artists—before it cements into culture/subculture. How cultural productions inform and are informed by structures of feeling will be further discussed in the political discourse analysis chapter.

Post-9/11 politics, says Chris Hayes, an American political commentator, were dominated by a celebration of the "[m]anly heroism of the cops and firefighters who sacrificed their lives to save people. Editorials proclaimed the 'death of irony' and a return to earnest patriotism." A keyword here is "earnest," which could be substituted for "authentic." Here, it is necessary to further define "authentic/authenticity," as it is a term often used but not as frequently defined

in cultural studies. For this thesis, "authentic/authenticity" should be understood as an imagined objective cultural truth that includes individuals acting in a way that is perceived to be honest and genuine. This definition can be further expanded by the work of Vannini and Williams, editors of *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*, who are opposed to the idea that "authenticity cannot be stripped away, nor can it be appropriated. In short, the object, person or process in question either is authentic or is not, period" (20). There is no objective state of "authenticity," rather, authenticity is a socially constructed cultural phenomenon.

It is exactly this sense of truth and authenticity that was lacking in American culture in the '90s and early '00s. As Hayes writes:

> The late '90s was a strange time in American history. With the Cold War over, the country faced no overarching enemy for the first time in decades. The United States seemed possessed of no greater national purpose than making money through IPOs and an ever-expanding Dow. Our politics were dominated by the petty and trivial: from school uniforms to the president's sex life. Memories of former glory rushed in to fill this vacuum.

However, Hayes also argues that "nostalgia quickly descended into kitsch." It is against this backdrop of kitsch and purposelessness that 9/11 occurred, and in the following months and years, musicians across the punk/country genre spectrum were responding to this perceived lack of authenticity. In the post-9/11 moment, the US was lacking in authenticity, or at the very least, in institutions, art, politicians, and individuals that feel authentic. It is inarguable that 9/11 was a major cultural trauma, one that left people unsure of their purpose, their place in society, and the country's position in the global order. In the face of such trauma and uncertainty, the USAmerican public wanted to regain a sense of purpose and do something that "mattered." Kitsch was no longer acceptable.

In their study "Popular Billboard Songs and Performer Preferences Across Social and Economic Conditions in the USA," Pettijohn and Sacco argue that "popular music media is both a reflection of, and an exacerbating influence upon, the attitudes, values and behaviors of individuals within society" (159) and "music preferences may be a reflection of the particular needs of society during specific periods of time" (165). Thus, what is attempted across the genre spectrum is to create something authentic. However, this attempt falls short and paradoxically feeds back into the bigger cultural system and remains disillusioned and inauthentic. Moore contributes to a further understanding of how "authenticity" functions in the genre space, noting that "the 'culture of authenticity' seeks to establish a network of underground media as an expression of artistic sincerity and independence from the allegedly

corrupting influences of commerce" (305). Authenticity, then, also seeks to operate outside of corrupting capitalistic forces in a state of truth and purity, where the creation of art, music, and other cultural productions is not beholden to the whims of the market. Authenticity is a cultural construct, and punk and country both operate within specific discourses of authenticity that dictate a certain sound and image that is meant to convey true artistic and emotional purity. Structures of authenticity and the creation of an authentic image will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

2.3 Flyover Fictions

Notions of authenticity, or lack thereof, in USAmerican culture are one factor that creates the structure of feeling between 9/11/01 and 11/08/16, the date of Donald Trump's election as President of the United States of America. A second factor is tied to geography, cultural identification, and imagination, and can best be understood by consulting Anthony Harkins' conception of "Flyover States." Harkins traces the proliferation of the term "flyover" to "the development of long-distance commercial passenger air travel beginning in the 1920s and the creation of the interstate highway system starting in the late 1950s" (97-98). Flyover country can thus firstly be understood as a literal geographical region of the states, cities, and people that are flown over between New York City and Los Angeles, the US's two largest and (arguably) most well-known cities. Flyover country can be a synonym for "Middle America" or "the Heartland." It has also been used to refer to the specific geographic region of "the Midwest," which, depending on who you ask, includes a variety of different states. As delineated by the US Census Bureau, the Midwest includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin ("Census Regions and Divisions of the United States"), but other maps[3] also include Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, parts of Texas and New Mexico, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee. For the purposes of this thesis, I extend the term "flyover country" to refer primarily to all states that aren't on the West Coast (Washington, Oregon, California). "Flyover country" also excludes parts of Texas, New York, and the federal capital city Washington, D.C. This analysis includes the 48 contiguous states, and excludes Alaska and Hawaii. In addition, I borrow from Raymond Williams' *The Country and The City* to further refine my concept of "flyover country" to not just the states themselves, but also the urban/rural divide and tension between cities as "an

[3] Based on both personal experience and a Google Image search yielding four conflicting maps on the first page alone.

achieved centre: of learning, communication, light" (Williams, *The Country and The City* 1) and the countryside as "a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue" (Williams, *The Country and The City* 1). Moreover, in the USAmerican context, cities are frequently viewed as spaces of liberal depravity and the countryside as spaces of conservative goodness. Hence, this is why I do not include all East Coast states in my definition of what is not flyover country, as the rural areas of states like Florida and Georgia are the subject of cultural productions that paint them, as Williams has suggested, as simple, peaceful, and innocent.

Harkins argues that the act of flying over the interior states contributes to "a view of the country between the coastal megalopolises as spatially and culturally homogenous, interchangeable and, ultimately, forgettable" (98). The key part of his argument, however, is that the term is most resonant within the flyover states themselves, and it is individuals within that geographical area, more specifically within the Midwest, "who have played the most central role in spreading, repudiating, and reappropriating the term" (98). The flyover narrative is thus less one put forth by the "coastal elites," and more one that is put forth by those in the flyover states who are engaged in a powerful act of imagination that creates a mythology wherein "flyover citizens" imagine "coastal elites" imagining "flyover citizens." More simply put, it is a discourse of us imagining them imagining us. Yet, as Harkins aptly and succinctly puts it, "It is not that [coasters] think of it as 'flyover country'—they simply do not think of it at all" (109). Nonetheless, this narrative of places that matter versus places that don't matter has incredible power to shape ways of thinking. Places that matter and places that don't matter also become interpolated as people that matter and people that don't matter. The tension between mattering/not mattering feeds into the wider structure of feeling, as those who fall into the perceived "don't matter" category do anything they can to shout their despair, attempt to be seen, and become somebody that does matter in the larger cultural discourse.

Importantly, "flyover states" view themselves in dialectic terms as both the protagonists/forgotten side characters and the underdogs/the champions. Moreover, the "flyover states" both conceive of themselves and are propagated, particularly through TV media, as "the *real* America." Victoria E. Johnson, Chair of the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine, writes in the introduction to *Heartland TV* that the Midwest "represent[s] the 'all-American' cultural values of populism" (2), and that the Midwest has emerged as "the key place-holder for the pastoral within U.S. culture"

(15). The construction of the "Midwest" is thus a powerful myth that is reduplicated through cultural production.

2.4 "whitestraightboy" Hegemony[4]

Authenticity and the flyover imagination converge with two other important identifying factors of whiteness and maleness. While the mythologies behind the punk and country genres posit each genre as inherently white and male, further study of the origins of each genre shows that assumption to not necessarily be true. However, the image of punk and country as white, male, and working class is put forth to contribute to a sense of authenticity. Women in each scene, even if successful, are often seen as outsiders or, to use a colloquial term, "posers." Because the artists I am focusing on are almost exclusively white men, ideas of whiteness and masculinity will be taken into consideration as part of the larger discourse analysis. I am interested in examining why, at this time, straight, white, working- and middle-class men felt so alienated and how these spaces across genres are hostile, both lyrically and physically, to female subjects and female listeners/participants in the scene.

Here, Dick Hebdige's definition of hegemony may prove useful. He writes "subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological': which appears instead to be permanent and 'natural', to lie outside history, to be beyond particular interests" (16). Though punk and country allege to operate outside of the mainstream and practice authenticity, the music and performers contained within these genres often reinforce hegemony, as opposed to breaking with the status quo. Punk and country criticize structures, but the dominant members of the scene are, in fact, "white, male, straight kids railing against the reprehensible dominant culture loudly to one another but [are] largely unable to accommodate criticisms of their own assumptions" (Tremblay 30). By positioning themselves outside of "the system," participants in the scene across the punk/country genre spectrum attempt to grant themselves immunity as they express conservative sentiment through their music.

This reinforcement of hegemony is also visible with regard to gender. If, as Judith Butler argues, gender is a performance and not an innate fact, punk and country musicians across the genre spectrum perform and negotiate gender and masculinity through certain sets of

[4] Taken from Nguyen, Mimi. "It's (Not) A White World: Looking for Race in Punk." *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*, edited by Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, Verso, 2011, pp. 302-313.

expectations tied to each genre. By consulting articles by Jocelyn R. Neal and Diane Pecknold, which deal with the performance of masculinity in punk and country spaces, I will discuss how the hegemonic understandings of masculinity are reproduced by those who claim to operate outside the mainstream.

Furthermore, as Mimi Nguyen, now Associate Professor and Chair of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign notes in a zine essay republished in *White Riot*, "Whiteness falls into a 'neutral' category, and race is a property that somehow belongs only to 'others'" (304). Nguyen's idea is complemented by Johnson's argument:

> The persistent association of 'midwesternness' as 'white' is critical to the region's revaluation—particularly in moments of social upheaval and trauma—as 'home' of 'authentic' cultural populism and traditional U.S. values. In such moments, the Midwest is recuperated *as* a 'white,' heteronormative, familial space, in 'a strategic deployment of power' that invests the region with identifications that have functioned historically to 'universalize [the region] into Americanness' (Johnson, "Introduction" 18).

Both of these assessments are critical to understanding the issues brought forth in the music when, as the "default" or "universal" race and gender are questioned and contested, there is a pushback from members of that "default" category who feel like they have lost their status.

2.5 (Sub)Culture

Taken together, the preceding sections build toward an understanding of the idea of how individualism, community, subculture, and culture function across the punk/country genre spectrum. These ideas will be briefly discussed in the following chapter and more thoroughly explored in the lyric and political discourse analysis chapters.

In the formation of community, one major issue is the issue of power, the "us vs. them," in-group/out-group mentality. According to Hebdige:

> We must first consider how power is distributed in our society. That is, we must ask which groups and classes have how much say in defining, ordering and classifying out the social world. […] Some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favourably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world. (14)

In the context of the punk/country scenes, the seeming lack of power afforded to working-class rural communities supersedes the power that white men possess in USAmerican society at large. Feelings of powerlessness thus bind individuals and allow for the formation of community.

Moreover, these feelings of powerlessness emerge from a subconscious place, and engage with ideas that are assumed to be inherent. Hebdige writes that "ideology by definition thrives beneath consciousness. It is here, at the level of 'normal common sense', that ideological frames of reference are most firmly sedimented and most effective, because it is here that their ideological nature is most effectively concealed" (Hebdige 11). These unconscious ideological ideas and biases can be identified in lyrics across the punk/country genre spectrum, and should be thoroughly investigated and interrogated.

While these are not the only ways to read cultural production, an understanding of the physical and imagined spaces is vital to explaining why these genres are typically opposed, discussing the generic similarities, analyzing recurring themes, symbols, and motifs, understanding how the imagined cultural trauma is expressed in the lyrics of the songs, and exploring the political discourses engendered by these songs. There is a tension that exists between punk and country in our current cultural imagination, thus, understanding the discourses that inform not just the cultural productions themselves, but also the communities that form around these cultural productions will provide insight into how and why these tensions exist. In the following chapter, I will examine the genre-defining elements of punk and country, bring their commonalities into greater focus, and discuss the role of authenticity in the construction of genre and subgenre categories. While there are tensions between the two genres, much of it, as we will come to see, is manufactured and not inherent to the genres themselves.

Chapter Three: Genre and Bands

3.1 Genre Similarities

The question of "why punk and country together" is one that has been posed to me dozens of times while writing this thesis. On the surface, these two genres could not be more different: people view them as possessing different sounds, different politics, different lyric topics, different artist personalities. However, a closer examination reveals that punk and country have far more in common than aspects that differentiate them. In the first section, I will examine the origins and racial mythologies behind punk and country, the sonic and instrumental similarities, the concept of authenticity, and the "DIY" ethic and complicated relationship with consumerism and commodification that unite these two genres. As the overarching genres get broken down into more specific subgenres, the lines between them get even blurrier. Later in this chapter, I will address the defining features of the selected subgenres, as well introduce the representative artists for each subgenre, and discuss how each artist's public persona is constructed. In this context, "public persona" refers to the personal and biographical information that an artist chooses to share, as well as the public or fan perception of the artist. Section 3.2 will focus on country, while Section 3.3 will focus on punk.

3.1.1 Origins & Racial Mythology

While it is impossible to trace the exact lineage of any particular genre, it is possible to trace its roots and influences. Thus, one uniting factor across the genre spectrum of punk and country is that they have their roots at least partially in Black music and Black culture, yet eschew these associations and are constructed as fully and inherently white forms of music. In the case of punk, Hebdige discusses that during its formation in the UK, "many white musicians have 'jammed' with black artists while others have borrowed (some would say stolen) the music, translated and transferred it to a different context" (46). John Dyck admits that, as country developed as a commercial genre in the US, "early country was recognized in terms of what we now consider subgenres, such as hillbilly and old time music. (Hillbilly was influenced by the blues and Anglo folk traditions; old time was influenced by hymnody and Black spiritual music)" (2). The construction of whiteness as a category in opposition to Blackness as a category can be understood, at least partially, through the definition and construction of punk and country as "white music." This idea will be further explored in the following analytical chapters.

In the USAmerican context, both genres present themselves as white, and not only white, but as emerging from a pre-American "Anglo-Celtic culture" (Dyck 7). This construction allows for the mythical creation of both genres as pure and authentically white, thereby legitimizing their politics. In the introduction to "Four: White Power," Duncombe and Tremblay note, somewhat dismissively, that "for those on the political Right, punk offers—illusory—pure white people's music" (144). While the supposition that punk and country are purely white genres is, indeed, illusory, this illusion nonetheless feeds into a powerful mythology, one that draws on race and class status to legitimize itself. By doing so, a space is created in which white musicians are able to express their frustrations, their angst, and their unhappiness, via a genre that is by them, for people *like* them.

In an essay featured in *White Riot*, the anonymous author proudly proclaims:

> The Scottish Highlanders of the American South were dirt-poor and oppressed working class Whites. Their "mountain music" on banjo, fiddle, harp, guitar and piano is arguably one of the greatest and most potent folk formats on earth. […] White folk musical genius is too overwhelming to be resisted and that is the root of the appeal of modern Rock. ("Rock 'N' Roll: White or Black?" 176)

Dyck affirms this idea further in his essay on authenticity in country music, noting that "folkloric authenticity also includes a racial assumption about authentic country: authentic country is the expression of a white culture" (7). The irony, of course, is that neither genre is "purely" white. Importantly, both genres are cited as emerging from a *folk* tradition. Thus, it could be argued that punk and country are not separate, distinct genres that emerged from disparate backgrounds; rather, punk and country are two branches from the same common ancestor. This idea will be further explored in the following section on the sonic and instrumentation similarities between the two genres.

3.1.2 Sonic & Instrumental Similarities

Harlan Howard, one of early Nashville's legendary songwriters, is credited with coining an oft-quoted phrase in the country music world: "country music is three chords and the truth" (qtd. in Dansby). The same could be said of punk. In a personal anecdote, Duncombe writes that "Some friends and I heard the Ramones and […] figured that we could learn to play at least as well as they did. 'Blitzkrieg Bop,' with its simple three-chord musical structure […] was the first song we learned" ("White Riot" 17). Across the genre spectrum, the guitar features as the primary instrument, and guitar parts are typically simple, featuring repetitive chord structures. Sonically, it can be difficult to place songs, let alone artists, in a particular

genre because of the instrumentation they use. In addition to guitar, other major instruments are bass, specifically upright (also known as “double”) bass, and banjo. For example, AJJ is categorized under “folk punk,” while Old Crow Medicine Show is categorized under “alt.country,” but both bands feature similar instrumentation, including acoustic guitar, standup bass, and mandolin.

Indeed, “musical connections are made on the basis of the perceived simplicity of the styles; many songs in [country, punk rock, alt.country] involve only a few chords, and most musicians in these genres are self-taught” (Smithers 177). Interviews with band members in the representative bands back this claim up, Sean Bonnette of AJJ, for example, says that “I switched over from bass to acoustic guitar because that’s what you could learn to be self-contained on. My friend taught me a couple of chords that are still pretty much the same chords that I use to this day” (qtd. in Yamaha Guitars). Even acts that rely on a high production value during their live shows—Florida Georgia Line, for instance, was known for shows “enhanced with pyro” (Sparbanie)—are able to strip down their songs and play them acoustically. Moreover, “the raw sound of performances and recordings, often with low production values” (Smithers 177) can contribute to not only the sonic similarities across genres, but also the perceived authenticity of the artist.

3.1.3 Authenticity

Punk and country alike struggle with defining a baseline of authenticity within the genre. Certain stylistic and subgenre labels are resisted; for example, “the phrase ‘alt-country’ is the ‘emo’ of the country world: No artist or label espouses it, but everyone sort of grudgingly co-exists with it” (Ryan 305). Subgenre identification rarely comes from the artists themselves; rather, fans and critics assign labels and artists reject them, or claim only the main genre label. Jason Aldean, one of the artists I have identified as belonging to the “bro-country” subgenre, outright disparages the term, saying that “I feel that term is a little derogatory … I don’t know one person who thinks it’s a good term” (qtd. in Guarino). While not as hostile to the term “folk punk,” AJJ likewise does not claim the label, instead describing “themselves as a ‘multi-genre punk band’” (Rowley). Subgenre labels can therefore be seen as compromising artistic integrity or limiting the range of what is authentically acceptable to play or sing about. So, to quote Vannini and Williams, “how does one distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic, the real from the fake, the genuine from

the fraudulent, the true from the false?" (18) First, we must identify areas that can be perceived and performed as authentic.

According to Dyck, there are three kinds of authenticity in the realm of music: "source-focused" or biographical authenticity, sonic authenticity, and folkloric authenticity. Source-focused authenticity means that the artist has some sort of life experience, cultural background, or inherent trait that enables them to perform from a place of authenticity. Examples of this could include an artist who struggled with addiction singing about addiction, or an artist who grew up in a working-class family singing about working-class issues. Sonic authenticity includes, as discussed in the previous section, instrumentation and production that is deemed "authentic" or "true to the genre" by fans and critics. Finally, folkloric authenticity is "pure self-expression" (Dyck 7). The music thus reflects the true feelings of an individual artist or the wider culture, and is, importantly, performed by the *right* artist—in the case of punk and country, the artists who belong to the "in" group are straight white men. Moreover, true authenticity does not serve commercial interests, as commercially motivated music is "calculated and thus inauthentic" (Dyck 7). Controlling the production, or "doing it yourself," controls the narrative and thus allows for what is perceived to be a truly authentic expression of both personal emotion and reaction to cultural events.

3.1.4 The DIY Ethic & Commodification

Smithers notes that "scholars make note of the similarities between the do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic of punk and country music's populist leanings" (177). Both genres rail (or again, present themselves as railing) against the commodification of music by "creating independent media and interpersonal networks in opposition to the corporate media" (Moore 307). This means that punk and country are, or at least present themselves as and are perceived as, more accessible and more democratic than other genres. In order to be a band, all you have to do is *be* a band. As Greenwald puts it, "they were a band precisely because they desperately wanted to be a band" (46). Within the subgenres I am focusing on, the DIY ethic runs deep and is a defining feature of alt.country, folk punk, and Midwest emo. For example, Old Crow Medicine Show got their start busking (Secor), while Modern Baseball's first two extended plays (EPs) were self-released ("Modern Baseball Discography"). Bro-country remains the outlier, and with its excessive production and slick commercialization, it acts as the inverse of the DIY aesthetic. This begs the question that if the way to the top is to sell out, why not go all in on selling out? While bro-y artists like Jason Aldean and Florida Georgia Line started

out, as their origin stories will show, as truly authentic musicians, their commercial success is certainly aided by the turn away from only "three chords" and instead choosing to embrace extensive production.

The tension between the DIY ethic of alt.country, Midwest emo, and folk punk and the hyper-commercialization of bro-country proves that, no matter how hard one tries to fight "The Man" and embody DIY politics, regardless of genre affiliation or loyalty,

> […] once you stop strumming a guitar on your back porch and begin seeking a record deal, an audience, a movement, and a magazine eager to put your photograph on the cover, you are also leaving your 'home down on the rural route' (to quote Hank Williams) and deliberately entering a culture in which, as Raymond Williams notes, your tastes, no matter how boldly and honestly stated, are expressed by engaging in capitalist consumption. (Ching and Fox 8)

No matter how DIY they claim to be, punk and country artists, like artists affiliated with any other genre, are necessarily and inherently part of "the system." Moreover, while, as we have seen thus far, genre oftentimes defies strict definition, it is exactly the whims of the market that dictate what genre is, thus placing marketable genre at odds with "authentic" genre. Former Country Music Foundation director, Bill Ivey, defined the genre of country music as "any record that a station that calls itself 'country' will play and any record that a consumer who considers himself a 'country fan' will buy" (qtd. in Pecknold, "Selling Out or Buying In?" 46). These ideas will be discussed further in the following sections dedicated to defining the country and punk genres as separate entities.

3.2 Country

One of country's defining features is its entanglement with working-class culture. Aaron Fox notes that "the majority of mainstream country stars, however, have been, until recently, products of working-class and rural or small-town backgrounds, and their music has been marketed substantially to working-class fans" (184). Additionally, Buckley identifies eight common themes that are commonly expressed in the genre. These are: Satisfying and fulfilling love relations; Unsatisfactory love relationships; Home and Family; Country; Work; Individual worth; Rugged individualism; Patriotism (294-296). Work and class are thus two distinct categories that comprise both interior and exterior defining aspects of the country music genre.

A predominant understanding of country music is that it is a "tradition most associated with rural hillbillies, American country music is often seen as the music of the conservative, white,

poor, rural, and working and middle classes" (Purslow and Belcastro 41). However, Boulton suggests that it is the only genre that can "claim to have a truly national reach within the United States […] country music radio is heard by 44 million Americans each week" (76). Country, or at least songs that are classed as "country" and receive airplay on country radio, is therefore resonant with a significant part of the US population. Still, country music scholars complain that "there is almost no tradition of country music criticism" (Dyck 1) and that the genre "has been marginalized by academic institutions" (Purslow and Belcastro 43). If country is objectively commercially popular, where is the disconnect that allows country to position itself as "flown over" or ignored by the mainstream? The answer may lie within its perceived politics. Buckley notes that "the music has been criticized for being both too vacuous and too reactionary. It is, moreover, often seen as a persuasive medium for the transmission of rural conservatism" (293). Thus, country musicians and country music scholars feel as though they have been marginalized or ignored by the mainstream specifically because of the rural and conservative associations with country music. However, as will be shown in the following analytical chapters, "rural" music does not always translate to conservative politics, nor does "country" necessarily indicate that the music will espouse conservative themes.

Another interior defining feature of the genre is the sound itself, something that has been hotly contested over the years through stylistic and subgenre shifts. Dyck notes that, in general, "country music is sonically simple, too, in its melodies and chord progressions" (3). Harlan's "three chords" are not merely a quippy talking point; many country songs utilize "common progressions, limited scales, and major keys" (Schiebel). This standard, simplistic musical style also forms the basis for country's sonic authenticity, which leads to controversies in subgenre constructions that deviate from these standardized structures.

3.2.1 Alt.country

One of the country subgenres that I pay particular attention to in this thesis is "alt.country," a portmanteau of "alternative" and "country," stylized most often with a period between "alt" and "country." The term gained popularity through *No Depression*, a quarterly music magazine first published in September 1995. While the magazine gave rise to the usage of alt.country, it also refused to define what exactly that means. Indeed, "for the first ten years of its publication, No Depression featured a subtitle announcing that it covered 'alt.country (whatever that is)'" (Ching and Fox 8). So what is "alternative" about "alt.country"? Is it the

sonic quality? Is it the lyrical content? The politics espoused through the music and by the artists? The artists themselves? The answer remains unclear, as "the 'Frequently Asked Questions' portion of [*No Depression's*] Web site still insists on the indefinite: 'Do you still cover alternative country music? Whatever that is, we still cover it'" (Ching and Fox 8). Moving away from this tongue-in-cheek, intentionally obfuscating definition, a more specific definition is that alt.country is perceived as more thematically and sonically complex, and, as Ching and Fox argue, more "intellectual" than other country subgenres. Another important defining aspect of alt.country is that it draws heavily on punk influences in both its sound and its politics. Pecknold shares the mythologized origin story:

> Downstate Illinois punk rockers start out playing hard-core but eventually combine their punk sensibilities with country music, writing songs about the decay of small-town life and America in general and delivering them with an abrasive DIY aesthetic that flies in the face of Nashville's slick, celebratory country pop. ("Selling Out or Buying In?" 28).

The urban/rural, city/country, establishment/independent, consumerist/DIY dialectic is also at play in the construction of alt.country. "Alternative country is presented as a more ethical form of country music, one that does not support the bombastic consumerism of a Garth Brooks concert and that respects the rich traditions of American vernacular musics" (Ryan 305). Alt.country purports to be anti-Nashville, anti-selling out. Alt.country thus positions itself as being "flown over" by the establishment. Of course, as discussed earlier in this chapter, if one wants to be successful in the country world, it is impossible to avoid Nashville and "selling out" altogether.

The musicians I have chosen to represent this subgenre, Jason Isbell and Old Crow Medicine Show, fight against the "long-lived lowbrow stigma attached to country music" (Ching and Fox 13). They deal with politically and emotionally complex themes, such as addiction, alcoholism, and how the American Military Industrial Complex affects the common man.

Jason Isbell first emerged on the scene when he joined the country rock band, Drive-By Truckers, in 2001. Isbell was one of the band's primary songwriters until he was kicked out in 2007, ostensibly over "creative differences," but actually over alcoholism. He then proceeded to write and release his first solo album, *Sirens of the Ditch*, later that same year. Isbell's image as a (recovered) alcoholic is a major part of his overall persona, as is his rural, working-class background. Isbell was born and raised by blue-collar parents in "Greenhill, which is in rural northern Alabama. [According to Isbell] there wasn't much to the town but

liquor stores and speed traps" (Garner). It is this image that has helped propel Isbell to commercial and critical success; a *GQ* profile published in early 2016 labels him as "the new king of Americana music" (Welch). Isbell's personal and cultural background is clearly reflected in his music, which deals with addiction, place, and work: "physical labor, manual labor—if you can stay close to those folks, there's always plenty to write about, 'cause their issues are real issues" (qtd. in Doyle). Isbell thus presents himself as authentic on both source-focused and folkloric levels.

Similarly to Isbell, source-focused authenticity is a defining characteristic of the second alt.country representative band, Old Crow Medicine Show. Old Crow Medicine Show's two leading men, Ketch Secor and Chris "Critter" Fuqua, first met in grade school in Virginia. The band got its start busking and spent a period of time in rural North Carolina (Beal Jr.). During their stint in North Carolina, Secor describes how they "lived off the land, worked in tobacco fields, made corn whiskey, and learned from the old-timers the affairs of plain living […] We were a collective, immersed deeply in the richness of Appalachia" (Secor). The band's origin story is set up in a way that presents them as live-off-the-land vigilante anarchists; they are, similarly to Isbell, presented as authentic on source-focused and folkloric levels.

Sonic authenticity is also important to the band. In an interview with *CBS Minnesota* in 2012, Secor proclaimed that "it's more urgent than ever for traditional music to take a stand and be heard." For Secor, music and politics are inseparable, and he sees performing as a political act:

> I only picked up a fiddle because it made me a bit bigger on my soapbox. I'm against the war. I'm against all wars. I'm against the military-industrial complex. I'm against environmental degradation. I think that those things need to change in our country right away, right away, right now. I correspond with a number of GI's. I love to get my letters from Afghanistan–I get them a couple times a month–and I think of it as news from the front. I like to read a letter to the crowd because I'd like them to be mindful about the fact that there is killing in our name going on in every moment that passes. (Secor qtd. in CBS Minnesota)

The issues Secor is passionate about, and are therefore present in the band's lyrics, will be further discussed in the following analytical chapters.

3.2.2 Bro-country

The second country subgenre that I focus on is the so-called "bro-country." Jody Rosen, American music critic and writer for publications such as *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker*, is credited with coining the term "bro-country" in his 2013 article "Jody Rosen on the Rise of Bro-Country" for *Vulture*. Rosen defines the label as follows: "bro-country: music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude." In the article, Rosen names Florida Georgia Line, specifically their multi-platinum 2012 hit single "Cruise," as "a turning point" in country music, a move away from more "traditional" country sounds to a more "cosmopolitan" (i.e., hip-hop/rap) sound. Dyck also notes this, albeit in a more positive light, saying that "country music has continued to evolve both by reaching back to traditional country sounds and by absorbing sounds from other popular genres. […] The same trend continues today; artists like Sam Hunt and Florida Georgia Line draw on hip‑hop influences" (Dyck 3). A further defining feature of the subgenre is that, despite its popularity, it is disparaged, both by critics and by artists to whom the label has been applied.

I have selected bro-country for interrogation precisely because of its commercial popularity, perceived shallowness, and critical reception. I believe the subgenre reflects an important moment in the cultural zeitgeist, and that there is more depth to the lyrics than the chart-topping singles immediately reveal. While both Florida Georgia Line and Jason Aldean, the representative artists for this subgenre, are associated with Nashville record labels, they fit my definition of "flyover" artists due to their backgrounds and the issues they choose to engage with.

Florida Georgia Line was a duo consisting of Brian Kelley, from Florida, and Tyler Hubbard, from Georgia. The band's founding story sounds like something out of a Nashville fairytale: they met at college, "began writing songs together between classes," self-released an EP, and were picked up by a label before releasing the genre-redefining "Cruise" (Erlewine). Florida Georgia Line's place in the country music canon is contested, but they defend themselves by stating that "[they] just wanna make music that [they] love" (Kelley qtd. in Wax). Kelley and Hubbard love country music, and they are from the "country;" therefore, they consider the music they create to be country music. Florida Georgia Line made music that was played on country radio for people who wanted to call themselves country music fans. Their music has been criticized as "redundant, and portrays Southern life as a series of drunk, horny Saturday nights" (Tannenbaum). Arguably, even these topics fall under Buckley\s genre-defining

themes, but, more importantly, these topics romanticize and bring excitement to small-town life and make it worthy of engaging with on a national cultural scale.

Where Florida Georgia Line are country's biggest frat bros, Jason Aldean's public persona is that of the "anti-establishment Everyman." Interviews typically lead with how he's a private guy and an industry outsider, despite the fact that "he made $36.5 million [in 2015], most of it from touring, and he made remains one of the country's most reliable live draws" (Hudak). Part of this image comes from Aldean's sound, which, similarly to Florida Georgia Line, is "hard rock and hip-hop influenced" (Hudak). Aldean is therefore not sonically authentic, but he creates a source-focused and folkloric authenticity through his music and public image.

While politics permeate country songs, Nicholson argues that "for years, country artists have shied away from discussing politics, for fear of alienating listeners." This claim runs counter to the perception that country music is by rural, conservative artists for rural, conservative listeners. Further refuting this claim is the fact that Aldean is fairly vocal and upfront about his personal politics, which skew right. His discography includes singles such as "Amarillo Sky" and "Flyover States," which deal directly and specifically with rural and Middle America. These songs will be discussed in more detail in the following analytical chapters.

3.3 Punk

In a mirror to the perceived conservatism of country music, punk is often viewed as inherently leftist. However, punk scholars can't seem to agree exactly what punk's politics are or where their allegiances lie. One of the stronger arguments for punk as leftist praxis comes from Moore, who states that "punk subcultures [are] a response to 'the condition of postmodernity,' defined here as a crisis of meaning caused by the commodification of everyday life" (305). Even still, there is no singular "right" way to respond to the condition of postmodernity. Greenwald defines punk as "historically nihilistic, based on subverting the system and striving against it, whatever the system may be" (141). Bengal similarly notes that "punk's philosophical standpoint [is] a reactive one, always framed negatively, always defining itself against something else, whatever the dominant mode ('the Law') is perceived, correctly or incorrectly, to be" (174-75). Punk, therefore, cannot exist on its own, it necessarily must be acting in opposition to *something*. It is exactly this nebulous, definition-resistant nature of punk that leaves the genre open to appropriation by any group, for any purpose. As opposed to a cohesive and coherent set of institutionalized values governing or at least informing the politics espoused in punk songs, the value system changes

with the times and under the use of each individual artist. Kristiansen affirms that "although historically vocal about social and political issues, punks have never been savvy when it comes to political pragmatism" (23). Punk, Kristiansen argues, favors critique and criticism over tangible action.

Punk's sonic sensibility can be summed up with a quote from Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols: "We're into chaos, not music" (qtd. in Hebdige 109). Punk favors loud, punk favors fast, punk favors short. Unlike the stronger delineating features between bro-country and alt.country, the selected punk subgenres, folk punk and Midwest emo, have considerable overlap. In addition to a shared sonic sensibility and DIY ethic, record labels also play a large role in the definition of folk punk and Midwest emo. In the following subsections, I will briefly outline what distinguishes each subgenre, as well as discuss the artists and prominent record labels associated with them.

3.3.1 Folk Punk

The idea of "folk punk" should be easy enough to explain. A definition of folk punk is "the fusion between folk music and punk rock. The subgenre combines acoustic instruments and personal lyricism of folk music with anarchist learnings of punk rock" (Pradeep). Simply put, it is folk music plus punk sensibility, or maybe it is the other way around: folk sensibility plus punk music. In his doctoral dissertation, Haas similarly struggles to define what exactly makes folk punk, well, folk punk, writing that "one could perhaps create a flow chart or taxonomy: speed of play, attire, instruments, lyrical style, etc. Though such an approach might produce an archetype of the folk punk band, I am certain an archetypical band does not exist" (4). In an interview with Haas, Chris Clavin, founder of Plan-It-X Records, the seminal folk punk record label,[5] says that "I don't think Folk Punk means anything really" (qtd. in Haas 6). As we have seen with the country subgenre labels, on the punk side, markers like "folk punk" are less of a way for members of the community to define themselves and more of a way for outsiders to define, categorize, and make sense of commonalities between various artists.

Both bands I have classified as folk punk, AJJ and Defiance, Ohio were, during the timeframe this thesis covers, associated with Plan-It-X Records. The label was founded by

[5] That is, until the label's prominent artists, including AJJ, broke ties with Clavin and the label after sexual abuse allegations leveled at Clavin (Hatfield). These allegations broke in 2017, which is outside of the scope of years that this thesis covers, but I still feel it would be remiss to *not* mention this incident.

Clavin and Sam Dorsett in 1994. They self-described the purpose of their label the following: "we release music we love. music that we want other people to hear. plan-it-x records is not about making money. we are about getting punk music heard"[6] (Clavin). Plan-It-X emphasized the DIY and anti-capitalistic ethos, as underscored by the website's tagline, "if it ain't cheap, it ain't punk." These are also prominent themes in AJJ and Defiance, Ohio's music. These two bands are also connected through the history and symbolism, intentional or not, behind their names, which brings up the tension between white America and Native Americans.

Founded by Sean Bonnette and Ben Gallaty in Phoenix, Arizona in 2004, AJJ initially went by the name "Andrew Jackson Jihad." They formally changed the name in 2016 because "We are not Muslims, and as such, it is disrespectful and irresponsible for us to use the word jihad in our band's name […]. We no longer wish to be a living reminder of president Andrew Jackson" (AJJ). The band's original name could be interpreted in several ways, either as support for or an indictment of President Andrew Jackson's war against Native Americans. Bonnette takes pride in the name change, noting that afterward "[they] got an email from a Canadian attorney who defends racists and racist activists, calling [them] cowards. It was a great decision, just to bum out so many edgelords" (qtd. in Ozzi). AJJ's politics certainly skew left; since he was a teenager, Bonnette has worked at least part-time in the social work sector (Zurlo), and the band's lyrics touch on themes like homelessness, addiction, and mental health issues. Gender politics in punk spaces are also brought into focus with this band. While Bonnette "definitely tried [his] very best not to write misogynistic garbage" (qtd. in Ozzi), Matt Mitchell "remember[s] a time when dudes would go to AJJ shows and be too vicious in the pits—merciless to their fellow men (but mostly women) to the point where the band would call them out for their behavior." This contradiction made clear that what the band espouses and what is practiced by its community are often two different things.

Even the bands themselves are not free from battling the tensions between theory and practice, as is made evident by the second folk punk exemplar, Defiance, Ohio. Founded in Columbus, the band takes its name after the town of Defiance, Ohio which "is named for Fort Defiance, constructed in 1794 by General 'Mad' Anthony Wayne, who was sent to subdue the Native Americans and end British influence in the area" ("Explore | Our Rich History"). Guitarist and vocalist Geoff Hing defends the name choice by saying that "it was a band

[6] Stylized in all lower case.

name that spoke to the resistance that is implicit to punk and also the experience of being in the Midwest. It can be both a resilient and cantankerous place" (qtd. in Green). Bassist Ryan Woods attempts to further validate the name by explaining the band's founding philosophy: "When you are a kid and you first get into punk, you do it because you want to stand for some sort of cause and feel part of something more thoughtful than the world around you is providing" (qtd. in Conoley). While these ideas point to how the band uses sourced-focused and folkloric authenticity to legitimize its politics, the band's name and subsequent defense of it also show Nguyen's "whitestraightboy hegemony" in action. Though the majority of the band's members hail from Ohio and grew up in what is arguably the heart of the "Heartland," or the perceived most culturally devoid place in the entire United States, it is questionable if the name is rightfully theirs to claim. These contradictory ideas are also present in the band's lyrics, which will be discussed further in the following chapters.

3.3.2 Midwest Emo

The "Midwest" part of "Midwest emo" is more or less self-explanatory, though as discussed in the previous chapter, the Midwest itself is an elusive and slippery area to define. So, simply put, a Midwest emo band is an emo band that is from the Midwest. Greenwald notes that the perceived absence of culture or cultural relevance contributes to the formation of new communities and new musical stylings: "since the late '70s, punk movements had sprung up and been carefully tended to in unexpected pockets of the country—the more suburban, dull, and culturally isolated the locale, the more likely it was to have a strident local scene" (17). The Midwest, then, is the perfect candidate for the creation of a specific, geographically informed scene.

"Emo," in and of itself, has long since been a highly contested term, one that is often eschewed by artists and rejected by listeners. Nobody labels themselves as emo, that label must come from someone on the outside. But what *is* emo, really? Greenwald proclaims that "everyone has their own emo" (4), marking it as a highly personal and introspective subgenre. Sonically, "its common features included cycling guitar parts, chugging bass lines, and unconventional singing that sounded like a sweet neighbor kid with no vocal training but plenty of heart" (Galil). Midwest emo can therefore be a study in how the personal gets commodified and resold. The two bands that I have chosen to represent this subgenre are Hawthorne Heights and Modern Baseball, both of which have a cult following and an intense focus on place in their lyrics.

Hawthorne Heights was formed in Dayton, Ohio in 2001. Their breakout song, "Ohio Is For Lovers," was actually a b-side, but as Overton mentions, this track "deftly wrangle[d] their home state of Ohio into the emo spotlight, making Ohio dramatic for the first time ever." Sanders backs that idea up, stating that "[i]t's one thing to have hometown heroes. It's another to have a band from your backyard go on MTV to say that they can't make it on their own because their heart is in Ohio." Hawthorne Heights' place in the Midwest emo canon is that of putting the Midwest, at least within the context of this specific scene, on the map. The band's commitment to place is not just lyrical or theoretical, as "rather than leaving their hometown in the dust for greener musical scenery in Nashville, Brooklyn or Los Angeles, the quartet relishes their hometown ties" (Anderl). It is this intense focus on place that lends Hawthorne Heights their source-focused authenticity.

A similar focus on place defines Modern Baseball's discography. While the band's founding members, Bren Lukens and Jake Ewald, are not originally from the Midwest, as they hail from a small town in Maryland and later moved to Pennsylvania for university, they nonetheless managed to cement themselves as part of the Midwest emo canon. The band name itself calls forth the all-American baseball tradition. Place plays a large part in the construction of their public persona and lyrics: "due to their place-based lyricism, the city of Philadelphia being such a prominent backdrop to their public narrative" (Robins-Somerville). Philadelphia, Pennsylvania boasts a robust DIY scene (Morris) and Lukens and Ewald took advantage of that to cement Modern Baseball in the Midwest emo canon. However, the band's sound is quintessential "Midwest emo": it's "sorta pop-punk, kinda emo, and occasionally folky" and the lyrical content deals with "romantic angst and existential malaise" (Hyden). Modern Baseball's songs capture the ideal of small town, big feelings. The band's lyrics also carefully navigate the relationship between genders. *Pitchfork* reviewer Dan Caffrey notes that many "pop-punk and emo songwriters would respond to romantic rejection by shaming the opposite sex, co-frontmen Brendan Lukens and Jake Ewald strive for something more even-handed" (Caffrey). Though, as also discussed with regard to AJJ, just because the lyrics say one thing doesn't necessarily translate into the "correct" action on the part of community members.

Whether source-focused, sonic, folkloric, or a combination of all three, authenticity plays an important role in the definition of subgenre, the construction of public persona, and the dissemination of political discourse through music. While punk and country may be, at first glance, difficult to reconcile and view on a level plane, examining the genre makeup brings

the similarities into relief. Building on this foundation, in the following chapter, I will examine thematic similarities across the genre spectrum.

Chapter Four: Lyric Analysis

4.1 Learning the Lines

In this chapter, I will perform a close reading of a selection of lyrics from albums by the genre representative artists released between October 2001 to October 2016 to identify and analyze a set of themes, motifs, and symbols present across the genre spectrum. A comprehensive list of the songs discussed in this thesis, as well as a link to a Spotify playlist, can be found in the appendix. First, I will focus on place, including analyzing the role the ideas of the road play, as well as the tensions between flyover and non-flyover places. Second, I will turn to ideas of working classness, and discuss how working classness is performed across the genre spectrum. Third, I will examine the function of the archetypes of the cop and the soldier. Finally, I will discuss the presence of alcohol, drug use, and addiction. Closely analyzing these themes, symbols, and motifs will lay the groundwork for the political discourse analysis in the subsequent chapter.

4.2 "Give Meanings to Lines on Maps":[7] Place

4.2.1 The Road

One idea that dominates narratives across the genre spectrum is the road, which is presented through road narratives. A subcategory of the road narrative is what I have termed the "traveling song," which is a type of folk song that is upbeat and deals with themes of vagrancy and moving from place to place, or features narratives about returning home to someone, typically a female lover. One example of the traveling song is Jason Isbell's "Tour of Duty," which is an upbeat song with a syncopated rhythm that details a soldier's return home after his deployment. The narrator has left home and returned a changed man; now that he has "seen the world," he is content and happy to be returning to his flyover town, and has no new intentions to leave:

> I'm arriving on the day's last train
> Stepping on the platform trying to see you through the rain
> I don't know the ways you've changed since I left
> And I really don't care
> I've done my tour of duty
> Now I'm home and I ain't going anywhere (Isbell, "Tour of Duty")

[7] From "Hairpool" by Defiance, Ohio

The traveling song ends with the narrator firmly in place, with no intentions to leave again. In this song, as in other traveling songs, the function of the road is literal, as it chronicles the narrator's movement along the road.

Road narratives in the USAmerican context have been written about at length. In her book *The American Road Trip and American Political Thought*, Susan McWilliams Barndt, chair of the politics department at Pomona College in Claremont, California, argues that "the American road may well be, in the end, the central site of shared experience and democratic recognition in the United States. Thus, one way to read stories of the American road trip is as a form that sets the private experiences of Americans against the background of American public space" (xxi). Private traumas are made public on the road, as the road is a liminal and confessional space. Hoyt defines liminal spaces as "transitional or transformative spaces that are neither here nor there; they are the in-between places or thresholds we pass through from one area to another. […] [They] evoke feelings of eeriness or discomfort because they are not meant for staying." Thus, the road acts as both a literal and figurative liminal space. "Tour of Duty" exemplifies how private experience and emotion are performed in the public space of the road. Here, on the road, the narrator is able to share his private anti-war feelings, an admission that would only be possible within a liminal space. Another example of a road narrative is Old Crow Medicine Show's "Wagon Wheel." The song starts as the narrator is "headin' down south/to the land of the pines" and ends as he approaches Raleigh, North Carolina. In between, there is plenty of adventure, including

> Walkin' due south out of Roanoke
> I caught a trucker out of Philly
> Had a nice long toke
> But he's a-headed west from the Cumberland Gap
> To Johnson City, Tennessee (Old Crow Medicine Show, "Wagon Wheel")

The narrator was forced out of New England due to his gambling habit, and he returns home to his "baby" in Raleigh, professing that he is a changed man who "ain't a-turnin' back/To livin' that old life no more" ("Wagon Wheel"). The road has thus been transformative, as it has allowed the narrator a public space through which to work out his anxieties and set himself on a new path, one that eschews the vices of his old one.

Many road narratives also include the motif of the car, because unlike many other developed countries, the United States lacks public transit systems in vast swaths of the country. As a study published in 2015 by Nathan Yau shows, even in places with public transit

infrastructure, public transit is not necessarily reliable, affordable, or people's first choice when choosing how to get from point A to point B. As such, most individuals will drive a car. Getting a driver's license is a major coming-of-age milestone in the US, and the American reliance on and infatuation with cars, movement, and travel is clearly reflected in song lyrics.

Freedom, Contemplation, Estrangement

In some instances, cars represent freedom from the dullness and despair of certain locations. This is a common theme in Defiance, Ohio's songs. When, for example, the male narrator is feeling beat down and oppressed by his suburban lifestyle, his girlfriend suggests leaving: "She said we can take this weekend/drive out past city limits, keep on driving just as far as we can go" ("Road Signs Always Look Better Looking Over Your Shoulder"). While cars are driven on public roads, the private sphere is maintained within the interior space of the car itself, as it is typically shared only with those whom the driver allows inside. Thus, cars and driving can also be indicative of agency and autonomy. Driving indicates that the driver has autonomy, something that passengers lack. Children and adolescents, for example, have no agency, as they are unable to drive: "Beneath their cookie-cutter houses, fields and streams and woods/They'll sit in cars and wait for mom to drive them out of this boring neighborhood" ("Oh! Susquehanna"). This particular line combines both the road narrative and car symbolism, as it describes the experience of someone leaving their home, only to come back years later and see the once wild and natural world overtaken by barren suburbia. The only way to escape this dull, repetitive world is to drive away from it, but the subject is still too young to drive, and thus must rely on their mom to take them away. The adolescent subject lacks agency, whereas the narrator has the autonomy to choose when to leave and when to return.

The road can also trigger contemplation. In "Good to Go," Jason Aldean sings about "waitin' at a stoplight yesterday as a funeral procession made its way" which is the catalyst for a narrative that includes supporting the troops and seeing the narrator be grateful for his "all-American" life. In the public space of the intersection, Aldean's character witnesses a private moment of mourning from the private space of his own vehicle. The private emotions are negotiated in a public space, but neither party has to interact. Aldean's character embarks on a voyeuristic contemplation that occurs within the confines of the vehicle, and by the time "traffic started," he "drove away a little more able to see the good things on my table" ("Good to Go"). Forcing gratitude is a common theme that appears in various iterations

across the genre spectrum. It is a way of reconciling one's hardships with one's privileges, and can be viewed as an aspect of USAmerican patriotism, but is also indicative of USAmerican individualism. On the one hand, this idea is used to elevate the United States, by drawing on the myth of American exceptionalism and suggesting that no matter how bad things get here, at least we're still here (in the United States), and not somewhere else. Within this framework, there is no place better than the United States. The United States is as good as it gets, and it is impossible to imagine that the standard of living, the quality of life, the available opportunities, or one's own happiness could be better elsewhere. On the other hand, this idea of patriotic gratitude and reconciling hardship with privilege is used to elevate and absolve the individual, as no matter what structural and systemic challenges the individual may face, as long as they are doing better than someone else, and are grateful to be doing better than someone else, they are fine. This idea is also present in Isbell's "Relatively Easy" and Defiance, Ohio's "Petty Problems." In these songs, the singer reminds themselves, and by extension, the listener that "compared/To people on a global scale/Our kind has had it relatively easy" (Isbell, "Relatively Easy"). Defiance, Ohio cite false scarcity, as exacerbated by the US's capitalistic and consumerist culture, as a reason for feeling like such problems exist in the first place: "My problems aren't really all that bad/So distracted by the things that I don't have" ("Petty Problems"). Thus, we can see that across the genre spectrum, there is a focus on the idea that life in the US is better than anywhere else.

Similar to how Aldean's character in "Good to Go" leaves the road encounter feeling grateful, the narrator in Modern Baseball's "Coals" comes to a similar conclusion after "eight hours on the top of a bus" he realizes that he "will never stop falling in love." Where Aldean's primary emotion is gratitude, Modern Baseball's primary emotion is love, but both are equally powerful emotions. Because the road is a liminal space where the driver passes through and does not linger, men are more allowed to show emotion and engage in deep contemplation. On the road, specifically within the private confines of one's personal vehicle, men are not required to perform the same levels of stern masculinity that they would in other public venues.

Conversely, the road acts as a site of personal and emotional estrangement. For example, the central conflict in Hawthorne Heights' "Ohio is For Lovers" is that the narrator is on the road, touring with his band, and therefore not emotionally available enough to his girlfriend back home:

> Hey, there
> I know it's hard to feel like I don't care at all
> Where you are and how you feel
> With these lights off as these wheels

The road has both literally and figuratively distanced him from his loved ones. In this way, the road can also be read as an analogue for the "empty" frontier. Since traders, trappers, and colonists set foot in the "New World," the American frontier has been imagined as empty and wild, and cultural productions, from early narratives like James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, to Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* and western dime novels, to the conflicts in classic Western and Science Fiction movies, have contributed to the enduring myth of the "empty" frontier, a vast expanse of barren land beyond the borders of "civilization" waiting to be tamed and conquered by archetypal masculine types, which will be discussed further later in this chapter. When one engages with the road, one is writing themselves, consciously or not, into the frontier myth. The road moreover represents the border between civilization and wilderness.

The Trucker

The reliance on cars also extends to the reimagining of the cowboy, an archetypal USAmerican hero, into a trucker. The trucker is a symbol of individualism, freedom, and is a working-class hero. It is the trucker's job to drive goods across the country, and this job is consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous jobs in the US, with truckers experiencing a high rate of workplace injuries and fatalities (Johnson, "The Top 10 Most Dangerous Jobs in America"). Both AJJ and Jason Isbell sing about the trucker, as does Jason Aldean in his cover of Blake Shelton's "Asphalt Cowboy." The trucker, like the cowboy, seeks to dominate the wilderness, and both figures engage in vigilantism or position themselves above the law, as noted in a 1988 *Washington Post* report. In the report, Yates notes that "DOT [Department of Transportation] mandates no more than 60 hours of trucking duty per week—a number that is commonly doubled by pairs of enterprising truckers. Such drivers keep two logbooks: one for the authorities, which they call the 'comic book,' another that records their actual schedule." Truckers, following in the cowboy legacy, take the law into their own hands in order to perform their work. In AJJ's trucker ode, Bonnette sings:

> Truckers are the blood in the veins in the body of America
> States are the arms and the legs and the brains and the eyes
> There's a disease, spreading from organ to Oregon
> And you are the white blood cell that fixes the problem ("Truckers are the Blood")

The trucker binds the nation together; the nation relies on the trucker to get goods from place to place, otherwise, the nation would be isolated and non-functional. In "Traveling Alone," Isbell likens the trucker to the image of the lonesome cowboy. Paul offers an explanation for this archetypal figure, noting that there is a "female absence in conventional accounts and representations of the West. [T]he American West symboliz[es] a male homosocial and at times interracial space" (328). As discussed with regard to the traveling song, the female love interest is rarely on the road with the driver, and is instead left behind at home. Referencing the female love interest thus protects the trucker's masculine image. In addition, the challenging and isolating lifestyle of the trucker is highlighted in "Traveling Alone":

> Mountain's rough this time of year
> They close the highway down
> They don't warn the town
> I've been fighting second gear for fifteen miles or so.

"Fighting second gear" indicates that this is a difficult route to drive, as the mountain road probably has a steep incline. In a heavy vehicle with manual transmission, it is necessary to shift into a lower gear to drive up steep inclines. Moreover, given that the highway is shut down, the road conditions are probably icy or otherwise less than ideal. The trucker must fight and subdue the environment of the dangerous wilderness in order to perform his job. If he backs down from this challenge and doesn't resort to fighting second gear, the (presumably small, rural) town he's trying to reach would be completely cut off from the outside world until spring.

Excitement

The road also acts as a site of excitement and enjoyment. This theme is particularly present in bro-country songs. In these songs, specific makes and/or models, such as Chevrolet (colloquially referred to as "Chevy") and the Ford Bronco, are invoked as a way to underscore the authenticity of the song and connect with the listener. Chevrolet and Ford are both American automobile brands that have been in existence for over a century. Both brands invoke images of the glory days of American manufacturing, as manufacturing plants had a large presence in the Midwest, and, even with the decline of manufacturing in America, both companies have continued to manufacture parts in the US. In addition, both brands are representative of middle-class success and achievement. To drive a Ford or a Chevy is to hold a tangible piece of American history and culture, and the lyrics invoke these specific vehicle brands as a means to proclaim their Americanness.

Tannenbaum notes that one criticism of bro-country "isn't that it's not traditional, but that it's redundant, and portrays Southern life as a series of drunk, horny Saturday nights." I argue that it is exactly this so-called redundancy that engages the listener and evokes feelings of excitement and enjoyment. As Harkins and Victoria Johnson recognize in their analyses of flyover country, flyover spaces present themselves and are presented in dialectic, and at times, conflicting terms. They are at once both traditional and backward, both the moral center and lawless, both boring and the place everyone should want to be. In bro-country party songs, the flyover is the place to party because it is traditional. "Drunk, horny Saturday nights" aren't supplanting tradition; they're *part* of that tradition.

The central narrative of "Cruise," Florida Georgia Line's smash hit, is a guy taking his girl out for a drive:

> Well, baby, you a song, you make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise
> Down a back road, blowin' stop signs through the middle every little farm town with you
> And this brand new Chevy with a lift kit would look a hell of a lot better with you up in it, heh
> So, baby, you a song, you make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise

The central point here is that even though they're driving, they don't necessarily need to be going anywhere to have fun. The chorus can also be read as an extension of the romantic cowboy hero, hauling the female love interest up onto the horse with him, and then riding off into the sunset.

In several of his songs, Aldean references jacked-up trucks and drag racing, which, in this context, is a form of illegal motor racing, wherein two cars race at a fast speed over a short distance. In flyover communities, where there isn't much to do in terms of traditional cultural activities, one way people make their own fun is by turning to driving, racing, and caring for their vehicles. Vehicles also function as status symbols and are signifiers of masculinity. In the opening lines of "Hicktown," we learn that "Little Jimmy Jackson is jackin' up his Bronco/He's gonna lay a little rubber later on at the truck pull." 'Jacking up a truck' means to "lift" or raise the suspension to accommodate bigger tires. While this does have practical purposes, as "the tires and ground clearance allow for better approach angles, less risk of damage, and a smoother ride across those tougher obstacles" ("Lifted trucks for sale"), it is more often done for purely cosmetic purposes. A lifted truck is meant to project masculinity, because it is bigger and taller than other vehicles on the road, as well as convey that the truck's owner possesses wealth and the DIY skills necessary to install such a modification. A

truck pull is another type of motorsport, and it originates from early 20th-century draft horse pulling ("Ace Tractor Farms"). Originally meant to show the power of a farmer's horses, the sport later evolved to show the power of a farmer's tractors, and eventually came to include modified pickups and racecars as well. Truck and tractor pulls are a popular form of entertainment in the flyover states, both as officially sanctioned events by the National Tractor Pullers Association, and as locally organized events that occur in conjunction with state and/or county fairs.

That Little Jimmy Jackson participates in stereotypically "hick" and masculine activities sets up the expectations for the rest of the song, and plays into ideas of source-focused authenticity. Per Aldean himself, when releasing this song as his debut lead single, it "allowed me to come out [as myself]" (qtd. in Hudak); that is, Aldean was able to immediately position himself in the public eye as the anti-establishment, down-to-earth, good ol' boy who connected to and understood the frustrations and desires of his "hick" audience, as opposed to appealing to the urban, liberal masses. Later in his career, the nostalgia-tinged ode-to-hometown "Tattoos on This Town" opens in much the same way as "Hicktown": "There's still black marks on that county road/Where we drag raced our pick-ups and Mustangs." By again invoking cars and driving, Aldean reaffirms his authentic image. The tattoos as rubber marks on the road further bring the road as a liminal space into focus. Private actions have marked a public space, and the results of these private actions will remain visible to all. This is also a way of claiming ownership over space and dictating who belongs—straight, white, working American men—and who doesn't—everybody else.

Trucks and Gender

When, as discussed earlier, a vehicle is not referred to by its specific make and/or model and a generic term is used, it is more often "truck" and not "car." The "truck" is a site where gender is performed and negotiated, and it implies power and superiority, as pickups, particularly "jacked up trucks," like those described earlier in the chapter, literally tower over smaller cars like sedans or hatchbacks. In addition to spatial environmental domination, the "compare side-by-side" tool on FuelEconomy.gov shows that pickups are markedly worse for the environment in terms of fuel consumption and mileage. Moreover, the truck represents the division between people from flyover and non-flyover places. In the logic of these songs, women are passive (quite literally, they are always the passengers, if they are in the vehicle at all). Even in Aldean's "Wide Open," when the waitress, the female subject of the song, is

behind the wheel, she herself is not doing the driving. Instead, the truck itself is "Itchin' to sling a little gravel/Take her who know where" ("Wide Open"). In another example from Aldean, the female subject has less autonomy than money: "She's a hot little number in her pickup truck/Daddy's sweet money done jacked it up" ("She's Country"). In this song, "she" did not "jack up the truck;" rather, "daddy's sweet money" did. When women are not passengers, they are still passive because they are stationary at home, or wherever it was their paramour left them, while the male actor is out on the road. Finally, men have to drive pickup trucks, semi trucks, (tour) buses, or sports cars, like Aldean's Mustang. To drive a sedan, for example, would be emasculating and infantilizing, and therefore not allowed by the gender codes. In songs that do not explicitly reference vehicles, the male subject is always actively driving. In his analysis of the "frontier thesis," Kushner writes that the frontier myth provided solutions to "concerns that the fluidity of urban life threatened to blur gender roles. […] [t]he frontier, despite its putative promise of freedom, represented the place where patriarchal authority would be reimposed" (54). One central premise of the frontier myth is to maintain control, and on the road, the "whitestraightboy" of the '00s to mid-10s is able to reassert his patriarchal power by placing female characters in passive roles and dominating space and the environment.

4.2.2 Suburbia

As laid out in Chapter Two, there is a great deal of tension between flyover and non-flyover regions of America. This extends not only to states themselves, but also to the urban/rural divide. In between the urban and rural, however, is the suburban and the niche of suburbia, which occupies a particular place in the American imagination. While suburban areas are technically classified as the typically residential regions that grow up around major urban centers, "suburbia" is also an imagined place, a stand-in for a place that is perceived as "boring" or less culturally important than other major urban centers. Cities in flyover regions can thus be understood as, "suburban cities," which are regions that are "culturally suburban" even if not technically suburban according to census delineations. Indeed, while life in suburbia (the idyllic white picket fence, happily married, 2.5 children nuclear family) is often posited as *the* American dream, songs across the genre spectrum posit suburbia as a site of decay and despair. Traber argues that to "banish [oneself] from 'paradise' is a transgression of the American dream" (112). Across the genre spectrum, artists actively resist getting caught up in the suburban fantasy; rather, they exile themselves from suburbia, thus going against the stereotypical American dream.

Suburbia as decay is a frequent theme in Defiance, Ohio's work. "Chad's Favorite Song" sets the scene: "We live in the unhappy shadows of skyscrapers freight trains and malls." One proposed solution is as follows:

> Fuck this city, and fuck this filthy air
> Let's build a-frames in the woods and just live there
> We'll all eat berries and build fires every night
> And forget this mistake we call modern life (Defiance, Ohio; "Chad's Favorite Song")

"Chad's Favorite Song" thus suggests that one solution to the soullessness of suburbia is to retreat even further into the country and return to a pre-modern, agrarian past, to go back to a time before the frontier, when the West was "truly" wild. This idea ignores, of course, the indigenous populations who had lived on and with the land long before the western frontier came into being. The countryside has never been infinite, nor has it ever been truly "empty," yet a common solution to contemporary problems is a retreat into this mythical past. Despite professed dissatisfaction with modern suburban life, there is still something in these places worth saving, and when one does leave and return home to a changed, more "developed" city, one that has sunk deeper into the cesspool of suburban sprawl, there is no worse fate imaginable:

> It's like we follow I-83 down to harbor cities with strip malls and tarmac, people swirling and teeming
> It seemed so exciting, but now it seems like such a blight [...]
> I grew up near Kentucky's Mt. Zion Road
> And all that was there was some old cemetery
> All I wanted to be able to walk to the store
> Now I don't live there, but there's too many stores, some apartments, and a Sunoco (Defiance, Ohio; "Oh! Susquehanna")

Even in spite of the many frustrations presented by suburbia, Defiance, Ohio still feels a deep sense of responsibility to place: "This dirty old town/I try so hard not to leave" ("Old Dead Tree"). A similar sentiment also shows up in AJJ's music: "And Toni says it's important to bear some witness when you can/And that's not hard to do in the city that I live in" ("People II: Still Peoplin'"). Remaining in place and bearing witness to a place's tragedies and shortcomings, even when life could be materially better elsewhere, in a non-flyover place with more opportunities, is indicative of a sense of grit and loyalty to community.

An intense, specific focus on place also pushes back against Simkin's argument that "a large sector of alt.country territory—in terms of both performers and audiences—resides not in the country but in the city, and punk itself is very much an urban cultural phenomenon" (203-04).

My counterargument, however, would be the opposite. While performances can certainly take place outside of flyover spaces, the songs themselves are not songs for and by an urban population; rather, they are songs for and by flyover populations. Indeed, AJJ asks "Why didn't the Shins come to Phoenix?/And why didn't Mirah come to Phoenix?" ("Scenesters") The Shins are an indie band from New Mexico, who gained mainstream success and popularity with their 2001 single "New Slang;" Mirah is a solo recording artist who likewise enjoyed critical acclaim in the 2000s. AJJ points out that, when artists are on tour, nobody "cool" ever comes to Phoenix, because, to the outside world, Phoenix isn't culturally important. The notion of an imagined/cultural suburbia can thus be applied to Phoenix. "Scenesters" helps prove that when culture refuses to come *to* suburbia, suburbia makes its own culture.

Finally, the suburban city is posited as soulless and empty, in both the lyrics of the songs and through the ways in which the cities themselves are constructed. Of live venues, Greenwald writes "the venue in Dallas is yet another in a proud line of utterly faceless, outdoor performance 'sheds' and pavilions that have replicated like fruit flies across the blasted suburban nothingspace that surrounds the country's biggest cities" (Greenwald 96). Even in California, the suburban space is nothing more than "an utterly anonymous strip of low office buildings, located, like much of Southern California, amidst some vague combination of palm trees, mountains, and expressways" (Greenwald 230). The death of the suburban ideal is reflected in Hawthorne Heights' "Ghost Town." While "ghost towns" are typically associated with the decline of industry and working-class prosperity—think the Rust Belt or western mining and logging towns—Hawthorne Heights posits suburbia as a type of ghost town:

The city streets are bare at best
A ghost town is all that's left […]
We used to be a city square
It's a desolate, stark, sad affair
And everyone is forced into seclusion ("Ghost Town")

Instead of representing the realization of the American dream, this song argues that suburbia is responsible for the erosion of community. This again underscores that the American dream of a suburban life is dead.

4.2.3 The "Country"

While suburbia symbolically functions as the site of the (corrupted) American dream, rural spaces—the "country"—symbolically function as the ideal America. While the "American

Dream" suggests that life in suburbia is what we should want, the mythology of the frontier perpetuates the idea that the country is where we should come from. Despite the fact that a small fraction of the United States population actually resides in rural areas, and this population has been in steady decline since the 1990s ("U.S. Rural Population 1960-2024"), the myth of rural purity prevails:

> The American mind was raised upon a sentimental attachment to rural living and upon a series of notions about rural people and rural life that I have chosen to designate as the agrarian myth. The agrarian myth represents a kind of homage that Americans have paid to the fancied innocence of their origins. […] Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. (Richard Hofstadter qtd. in Paul 315)

This idea is underscored in Florida Georgia Line's "May We All," which opens with the line "May we all get to grow up in a red, white, and blue little town." Red, white, and blue are often used to invoke patriotic sentiment, as they are the three colors of the American flag. This red, white, and blue little town is exactly the archetypal one referenced in Victoria Johnson's *Heartland TV.*

The country is frequently referred to in indirect, symbolic terms. For example, in "Round Here," one of Florida Georgia Line's party anthems, the chorus concludes with the duo proclaiming "Yeah, that's how we do it 'round here." Contextually, it can be assumed that "round here" is a rural setting. The first verse describes a working man coming off his shift and getting ready to pick up his lady on a Saturday night. Terming a place "round here" places a further divide between insiders (those from "round here") and outsiders (those not from "round here"). "Round Here" draws inspiration from earlier country songs that follow "[t]wo typologies of geopolitical message: a 'banal patriotism,' in which a (sub)national identity (the South) is valorized in its own right, versus a more active popular geopolitics formulating 'our' (Southern) identity in contrast with an enemy (Northern) other" (Boulton 375). In "Round Here," instead of Southern versus Northern, the tension exists between flyover and non-flyover.

A second example comes from a song off of Florida Georgia Line's sophomore album. Here, the country is again represented symbolically, this time as "Elm shade, red rust clay you grew up on" (Florida Georgia Line, "Dirt"). The elm tree is an enduring symbol of the country; Williams himself includes the elm tree in his description of one of the "many meanings" of country life: "it is the elms, the may, the white horse, in the field beyond the window where I

am writing" (Williams, *The Country and The City* 3). "Red dirt" is another commonly employed symbol of the country, as it is indicative of iron-rich soil good for farming.

The cultural relevance of the country is also at stake in these songs. Murray takes Florida Georgia Line's "Cruise" as a particularly salient example of this phenomenon:

> Country artists had spent much of the 2000s attempting to portray small-town life as either meaningful (Brad Paisley) or valiant (Toby Keith). With 'Cruise,' Florida Georgia Line made it seem exciting—and not just exciting but cutting edge. Small towns can feel like places where nothing ever happens, but 'Cruise' portrayed the small town as a place where everything was happening at once (Murray).

However, they are certainly not the only artist to do so. An earlier example would be Jason Aldean's "Hicktown":

> Yeah, we let it rip
> When we got the money, let it roll
> If we got the gas it gets wild
> Yeah, but that's the way we get down
> In a hicktown.

Life in a "hicktown" is fun and exciting, and moreover, it works to reclaim the term "hick," which is a derogatory term for a person from the countryside. Aldean takes pride in being from a "hicktown," and later in the song, derides people from the city: "We hear folks in the city party in Martini Bars/And they like to show off in their fancy foreign cars." Drinking martinis and driving foreign cars are status symbols that are unnecessarily high-class for Aldean's simple and pastoral "hicktown."

Identification of being from the country also occurs through the use of certain sociolects, such as shortening "around" to "round," as seen in the earlier example of Florida Georgia Line's "Round Here," or lopping the "g" off of "-ing" suffixes, a practice that is common amongst all bands across the genre spectrum. Additionally, the use of specific words, such as "reckon," are indicative of being from the country: "I reckon you grew up in a town/That said 'reckon' all the time" (Modern Baseball, "See Ya, Sucker"). While "country" sociolects are often the grounds for mockery or parody of those from flyover areas, in these examples, the sociolect is reclaimed and celebrated.

4.3 "The Bills Left on the Table Will Be Paid If I Was Able":[8] (Working) Class

4.3.1 Performing Working Classness

The issue of class in the US is complex. Vincete Navarro, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins, advocates for differentiating between "class and not socioeconomic status or levels of income" (610), as "in the establishment's vision of the nation, the majority of people are middle class. The social structure is such that on the top are rich people, and at the bottom, the poor" (602). USAmericans, Navarro argues, self-identify as "middle class" or "working class" based on socioeconomic status, rather than actual class status as defined by Karl Marx. In Marxian analysis, there are two classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who are the workers and do not own the means of production, instead they sell their labor to the bourgeoisie. Socioeconomic status, on the other hand, refers to "the position or standing of a person or group in a society as determined by a combination of social and economic factors that affect access to education and other resources crucial to an individual's upward mobility" ("Socioeconomic Status"). Socioeconomic status is then divided into high, middle, and low class that takes into consideration income, education, and occupation. Thus, it is important to take into account self-perception and identification *as* working class. Whether or not one actually belongs to the working class as defined by Marxist categories of class is rather beside the point. Navarro also notes that "[working class] is almost a forbidden term in the United States" (602). Indeed, terms like "blue collar," "working man," or "working families" are more likely to be applied, and coming from a "rural" area is likewise indicative of self-identification as a "working man." As such, working classness is often highly performative, and individuals often posture or playact as "working class," especially in cultural productions.

There are several ways working classness is performed. One is through the use of what Dyck terms "source-focused authenticity," wherein the artist intentionally incorporates specific biographical elements into their public-facing persona in order to highlight their personal working class background and/or engage in the "theater of poverty" (Fox, "'Alternative' to What?" 183) rags-to-riches narrative building. This is not to discount the fact that all bands analyzed in this thesis do come from either working class or low socioeconomic backgrounds, but rather to highlight how one's background is subsumed as part of the

[8] From "Picket Fences" by Hawthorne Heights

persona to authenticate and legitimize their music. For example, Old Crow Medicine Show's biography on their official website reads:

> Once [the mountains of North Carolina], Old Crow lived off the land, worked in tobacco fields, made corn whiskey, and learned from the old-timers the affairs of plain living. Willie and Benny built banjos. Critter trimmed Fraser firs. Kevin and I shared a cabin deep in a holler with no electricity or plumbing (we did have a sheep, Daisy, and a potbelly pig named Jazz). We were a collective, immersed deeply in the richness of Appalachia, but more than that we were a pack of friends becoming a band. (Secor)

The band's collective public identity hinges on their presentation as live-off-the-land, vigilante-esque, men of another era who represent a version of America that has since been passed by. A second example is Jason Aldean, who was once a delivery truck driver. He claims:

> I didn't get into this business to have this or make a ton of money. I honestly wanted to get up and go to a job and do something every day that I enjoyed. […] It's a little like the American dream, as far as you don't have to come from money to go out and achieve goals for yourself. If you work hard enough for it, there is no substitute for that. (qtd. in Hudak)

Aldean's public rejection of fame and fortune is one way in which his anti-establishment Everyman identity is constructed.

Another way in which working classness is performed is through the invocation of "the heroic, male, blue-collar American worker, the man of few words and strong deeds" (Fox, "'Alternative' to What?" 172). While all bands come from working class backgrounds, they themselves are not blue-collar workers. They do not perform manual labor, however, they do embody these personas in their songs. This idea will be discussed further and in greater detail in Section 4.3.3: The Working Man.

The issue of working classness also ties into the DIY ethic that is present across the genre spectrum. Modern Baseball explicitly invokes this ideal by asking "What do you call someone/Who calls you out on DIY ethics you don't embody/As he drains his dad and mommy's monthly data plan?" ("Going to Bed Now") One point of tension within DIY communities is that there is a right and a wrong way to embody the DIY ethic. Traber writes that for some DIY punks, "it is a choice about a certain way of life: immersing oneself in urban decay and the asceticism of harsh poverty" (112). Those who live in poverty, then, are the purest embodiment of DIY, and if one comes from a middle or upper class, they would be required to give up their middle/upper-class comforts in order to be authentic and accepted.

However, the person Modern Baseball is calling out does not adhere to this ideal because they are still reliant on their middle-class, suburban upbringing for support.

4.3.2 Working Class as the True American

While it has been noted that "'country music' came to stand for 'working-class' (and 'white') identity, which was in turn a metonym for 'American' identity" (Fox, "'Alternative' to What?" 172), I argue that this is true of not just country music, but of any music that invokes working-class identity as a means to establish authenticity. Being from the country, as discussed in the previous section, is by itself not enough to grant access to the identity of "true" American, rather one must also be appropriately working class:

> We just figured that's how it was
> And everybody else was just like us
> Soaking in the rain, baking in the sun
> Don't quit 'til the job gets done (Aldean, "The Only Way I Know")

In fact, it is inconceivable to the working class "true" American that it would be possible to live in any other way.

This idea is perhaps most explicit in songs on the country side of the spectrum, but punk songs similarly employ this idea. To turn again to the example of "Truckers Are the Blood" by AJJ, Bonnette states that "Truckers are the blood in the veins in the body of America." Without blood, the body does not, *cannot* function. This means, again, that without these working class heroes, the country would simply cease to function.

This idea extends beyond the music itself, as it also requires the appropriate audience reception. When being interviewed for 2012's *Carry Me Back*, Ketch Secor of Old Crow Medicine Show said that "There's a whole lot of people in America still working their asses off, and they need a hard-working song now more than ever. A lot of these folks are working for Uncle Sam now, and they're reading *No Depression* in Jalalabad or Basra, wishing they were back in Kentucky" (qtd. in Mateer). The function of the soldier will be discussed further in Section 4.4. For now, it is important to note that soldiers are viewed as working class heroes, because in the US, a military career often represents upward socioeconomic mobility. Various bills, including the original G.I. Bill of 1944 and the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (colloquially, there is little differentiation between these two bills, and they are typically simply referred to as the "G.I. Bill"), as well as the Army National Guard's Free Tuition Assistance program, and other state or university specific programs, claim to

make university education more affordable, which is viewed as a benefit by those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, soldiers are often vaunted as protectors of the rest of the working class. To return to the discussion of patriotism in Section 4.2.1, life in the United States, particularly in the flyover states, is presented as "better" than everywhere else in the world, and the privilege of living in "the greatest country on earth" is protected by soldiers who "fight for our freedom." Secor makes it explicit that this is music created by the working class for the working class heroes.

4.3.3 The Working Man & His Challenges

Butler writes that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44). The "stylization of the body," which can also be understood as the construction of gender, occurs through sets of performances and adherence to certain cultural norms. One such cultural norm that informs gender construction and performativity is the jobs that are acceptable for men and women to do. Unsurprisingly, one way in which masculinity is constructed across the genre spectrum is through the invocation of acceptable masculine jobs, which are primarily blue-collar jobs. Within these songs, women are relegated to a scant handful of roles as workers: waitress (Aldean, "Old Boots, New Dirt" and "Wide Open"), sex worker (Isbell, "Traveling Alone" and "Different Days"; Aldean, "Wide Open"), and mother (AJJ, "Golden Eagle"; Isbell, "Children of Children"; Old Crow Medicine Show, "Methamphetamine"). Women's roles are secondary to those of men and are often in service of men, whereas men are engaged in primary physical labor that is either productive or protective.

Post-9/11, working classness took on new dimensions of heroism and masculinity, as the blue-collar working man saw a symbolic resurgence and "loomed up from the rubble of the World Trade Center as a fireman, a cop, a construction worker, and a soldier" (Fox, "'Alternative' to What?" 172). Of particular interest to me are the archetypes of cop and soldier, and I would further expand this list to include trucker, as discussed in Section 4.2.1, as well as farmer, which will be discussed further in this section.

The figures of cop and soldier will be discussed more extensively in the following section, 4.4. For now, it is important to note that while Fox identifies both as supporting the nationalist and imperialist agenda of the post-9/11 world, they serve a slightly different function within the logic of punk/country flyover music. The soldier is universally loved and

supported, while the cop is generally derided and is a figure that the songs' narrators act in opposition to. The cop does not command respect and deference in the same way the soldier does.

My primary analytic focus in this section is on the figure of the farmer. The farmer is a hard worker, but he is always just on the edge of ruin and destitution due to drought and/or fluctuating prices and economic circumstances. Moreover, though the farmer undeniably plays a vital role in the very existence of the nation, as with the trucker, the farmer's work often goes unappreciated and unrecognized. Furthermore, there are implicit threats to the farmer's way of life, that being that he is a relic of a past pastoral agrarian society, and the contemporary world simply moves too fast for him. The farmer's life is disappearing. There is despair over this loss of the traditional way of life. The farmer works his body to the bone out of necessity:

> He gets up before the dawn
> Packs a lunch and a thermos full of coffee
> It's another day in the dusty haze
> Those burnin' rays are wearin' down his body (Aldean, "Amarillo Sky")

Old Crow Medicine Show's "We Don't Grow Tobacco" provides further evidence for the intense physical labor that farmers undertake:

> Hardest work that ever I done
> Been beneath that burning sun
> Hauling that tobacco round to cure
> I would chop that wicked weed
> Till our hands and fingers bleed
> Working like a mule, maybe more..

Naming tobacco, as opposed to a different crop, like corn, functions on several levels. First, it calls back to the nation's founding mythology, as tobacco was an early export from the American colonies. Second, it obfuscates and erases the legacy of slavery, as instead of acknowledging that tobacco was typically harvested by slaves and later by Black sharecroppers, it places the white working farmer at the center of the story. Yet, despite all of the farmer's hard work, there is very little pay off, and it becomes more and more difficult to eke out a living as a farmer: "The diesel's worth the price of gold/It's the cheapest grain he's ever sold/But he's still holdin' on" (Aldean, "Amarillo Sky"). Outside factors, like the price of diesel for farm machinery, as well as the selling price of crops, affect the farmer's ability to survive, let alone thrive.

“Amarillo Sky” was released in 2005; by 2009, the year following the onset of the so-called Great Recession, it was seemingly no longer possible for Aldean's farmer to “hold on”:

> Goodbye, crack of dawn
> Goodbye, harvester
> Goodbye, hello baby
> After a long hard day of plowin’ dirt
> Goodbye, way of life
> Goodbye, pass it down
> Goodbye, up all night of prayin’ for rain, a two-year drought
> Walkin’ on faith and toughin’ it out (Aldean, “Fast”)

The negative economic factors, Aldean suggests, have made it impossible for this traditional way of life to be sustainable any longer.

Across the genre spectrum, there are also a fair number of complaints leveled against the “system” and many frustrations of the working class are voiced. Purslow and Belcastro note that “there is a perception that the American working class is being hurt by free trade agreements and growing globalization, which resulted in declining manufacturing jobs, working conditions, and wages” (42). Furthermore, Duncombe and Tremblay “acknowledge that the problems of poverty, unemployment, and a palpable loss in political and cultural power faced by working-class whites in the deindustrializing West, are real” (145). Working class complaints do not arise spontaneously, and they are based in reality. This is one point of tension I will discuss further in the following chapter, as the line between real complaints and real privilege is often blurred by political discourse.

In addition to the farmer, the construction worker occupies an interesting place in the imagination of the USAmerican working class. Old Crow Medicine Show makes explicit reference to the construction worker in “Half Mile Down” by having the character of the construction worker narrate, in first person, the destruction of his hometown. This song alludes to how, as a member of the disenfranchised working class, you are responsible for your own self-destruction:

> First they started their surveyin’
> And makin’ up their plans
> To flood that peaceful valley
> Just to build Watauga dam
> Oh they brought in their bulldozers
> And pushed our homes away
> And they handed me a shovel
> And sixty cents a day (Old Crow Medicine Show, “Half Mile Down”)

The Watauga dam project flooded the original town of Butler, Tennessee and is one of numerous such examples across the United States. Construction on the projected occurred during the 1940s ("Watauga Dam"), making 60 cents a day in 1940 the equivalent of about $13 a day in 2024 ("CPI Inflation Calculator"). In the name of industry, urbanization, and progress, construction workers are exploited for their labor and expected to work against their own best interests in terms of their personal physical health and/or their environment.

Across the genre spectrum, lack of disposable income is another common complaint. For example, the narrator in Modern Baseball's "Wedding Singer" can't produce, let alone afford to part with, money for a cab ride: "Fucked for the ride home if I can't find two bills/To rub together." The image of rubbing bills together is reminiscent of the "pay me" gesture, which involves rubbing one's thumb, index, and middle fingers together. The narrator's wallet is presumably empty; he has no bills to rub together, and therefore cannot pay the fare. Similarly, the narrator in AJJ's "Zombie by the Cranberries by Andrew Jackson Jihad" has so little money that he can't even afford to spare change for the homeless:

> And if I had some spare change
> Every time a perfect stranger asked me for some spare change
> Then I'd have enough spare change
> To take care of these bills I need to pay.

However, poverty is so widespread that if he did have enough spare change to fulfill every request, he would be able to afford his own bills.

In 2011's "Fucc the Devil," AJJ sings about addiction, isolation, and the state of the job market. The misspelling of "fuck" in the song's title is "in homage to [*Season of Da Siccness*, a mixtape by] Sacramento horrocore rapper, Brotha Lynch, who is aligned with the [LA-based gang] Crips and therefore avoids the letter combination 'ck' as it connotes 'Crip killer'" (Noisey). The mixtape deals with themes of violence, alcoholism, and self-isolation, which AJJ echoes in "Fucc the Devil." While the song's narrator struggles with "Siccness," (addiction), he is nonetheless better off than some:

> I'm gonna quit my job
> 'cause I've got another job
> And I don't need to work two jobs
> I guess you could call me lucky (AJJ, "Fucc the Devil")

A 2015 Genius annotation by user Caliber199 reads "This is commentary on American culture. It is now common for a person to hold two jobs in order to get by on a

month-to-month basis. One of the narrator's jobs is now enough to hold him over each month" (Caliber199, "Genius Annotation 4413234"). In 2011, the federal minimum wage was (and, at the time of writing,[9] still is) $7.25, after being raised from $6.55 in 2008. Meanwhile, around 5% of the surveyed, legally employed working population in 2011 worked multiple jobs ("Table A-16"). This number is not indicative of any under-the-table employment, nor is it reflective of unpaid care work. The narrator in "Fucc the Devil" is therefore lucky because, despite the rising cost of living and the stagnating wage, he can get by with just one job.

> On the other hand, work is presented as futile:
> Work through the winter, work through the spring
> Yeah plant my corn and taters and then it wouldn't rain
> And there ain't a thing for a poor man
> In this world (Old Crow Medicine Show, "Poor Man")

Work culture in the US is bound up in Puritanical ideals of piety and productivity, which means that not only one's self-worth, but also one's perceived value in their community and society is dictated by their ability to perform productive labor. Not working or being unemployed is perceived as a moral failure, as is "slacking off" or taking time to rest. Indeed, it has been argued that "the success of American capitalism rested on the combination of the Puritan traditions (wealth as a symbol of worth; being well-off through one's own efforts as a sign of God's approval) with a unique culture of optimism and self-confidence" (Porter 537). However, even by following these tenets and working ceaselessly, one is not necessarily guaranteed the desired outcome, as demonstrated by Old Crow's "poor man," who, despite his best efforts, finds no respite, reprieve, or success.

While cultural norms dictate that it is the fault of the individual for being poor, cultural production argues against this. For example, Defiance, Ohio expresses frustration with the Bush administration's economic policies on their 2006 album *The Great Depression*. "But god is great and god is good and someday soon he'll feed you too/'Cause once we've got our yachts and crowns, we'll plant some food to trickle down" ("The New World Order"). This is in reference to the idea of "trickle-down economics," a concept popularized by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, which has informed USAmerican economic policy ever since. The essential idea behind "trickle-down economics" is that "tax breaks and benefits for corporations and the wealthy will trickle down to everyone else. [It] involves less regulation and tax cuts for those in high-income tax brackets as well as corporations" (Kenton).

[9] May 2024

However, various studies, including Hope and Limberg's "The Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich," indicate that trickle-down economic models actually lead to further income inequality, as opposed to improving economic conditions for all. Moreover, "trickle-down economics" follow the logic of the Puritan work ethic, in that this model suggests that those who are successful are so because they are willing to work and worthy to receive reward for their work. Defiance, Ohio is critical of this idea, in "The New World Order," the wealthy are able to afford yachts, whereas the poor can't even afford food, and have no social welfare to fall back on, because the luxuries of the wealthy have been deemed more important than the base needs of the collective.

Later in *The Great Depression,* Defiance, Ohio offers a follow-up to their critique of trickle-down economics by critiquing the position of the consumer:

> You're a sheep in wolf's clothing, you got big important friends
> Who with a twinkle in their eyes say they'll be with you 'til the end
> They invite you out to ice cream, they insist you eat your fill
> Then they smile at each other and they stick you with the bill
> They giggle extra hard when you max out your credit card ("Lambs at the Slaughter")

Within the framework of the trickle-down economy, spending money is essential. It is not enough to earn money, money must also be spent and put back into the economy, and it should be spent on consumer goods (in this example, ice cream). The reward of working is getting to spend money; thus, the consumer is the model citizen, because the consumer not only earns, but also spends, which contributes to the wealth and power of the ruling class instead of improving material conditions and social safety nets for the population at large. Indeed, the rich get richer by exploiting the poor and vulnerable and promising them entry into the elite club that they then refuse. Social benefits, in this example, are only afforded to the few who already possess wealth and power, and are promised to the underclass only if they buy into the elite club that they will, in fact, never be allowed in.

Hawthorne Heights expresses disappointment with this reality: "The children in the school yard have grown so old and tired/The shift is almost over I'm praying I don't get fired/Life isn't everything I thought it should be" ("Picket Fences"). A lie has been sold as a dream, and when that promise of a better life and upward mobility isn't delivered on, there is disappointment, which leads to apathy. Meanwhile, Defiance, Ohio expresses anger at the seemingly apathetic attitude of the American public:

Are you angry?
Are you searching for a better life to live?
Are you waiting?
Have you been waiting too long?
What holds us back? (“Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry?”)

However, one thing lacking in any of these songs is a solution to the current state of affairs. The frustration and anger are palpable, but there are seemingly no alternatives to being angry and downtrodden.

4.4 “Boys in Blue”:[10] Police & Military

4.4.1 Sympathy & Support for Soldiers

Because soldiers are an archetypal working-class American hero, soldier death and funerals are a common theme across the genre spectrum. As discussed in Section 4.3.2, the soldier represents upward socioeconomic mobility, particularly to those in marginalized and/or impoverished communities. Military recruiters promise recruits stability in the form of steady pay, housing, health insurance, and pensions, as well as the opportunity for free university tuition, and thus, the prospect of better jobs. For individuals living in precarious financial situations, the military presents a way out. For example, in *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance describes how the military lifted him out of poverty and away from a dead-end job into more lucrative opportunities. Because military members are celebrated as working-class heroes, their deaths are viewed as tragic losses, not only on the private, individual level, but also insofar as the death of a soldier represents the death of an American dream.

Moreover, soldier funerals often reference other symbols of American patriotism, including Arlington National Cemetery. In “Good to Go,” Aldean witnesses a military funeral procession: “Waitin’ at a stoplight yesterday as a funeral procession made its way/Through the gates I watched it roll up a windin’ road, through a field of green with white headstones/All in a row.” This is likely an allusion to Arlington National Cemetery, one of the United States’ most well-known cemeteries, identifiable by its rolling green hills and uniform white headstones. The cemetery is maintained by the United States Army, and service members from all armed conflicts that the United States has participated in, from the Revolutionary War to today, are interred at Arlington. There is also an interesting tension to Arlington, in that even though it is located in Virginia and Virginia was a slave state during the Civil War, Confederate soldiers were not allowed to be buried there until after the

[10] From “Dirt Road Anthem” by Jason Aldean

Spanish-American War, and then only if they had served in that conflict. Arlington is also alluded to in “Carry Me Back” by Old Crow Medicine Show, which tells the story of a “rebel boy” during the Civil War who asks, “won't ya carry me back?/I wanna be buried in Virginia.” Being buried at Arlington is presented as a high honor, one that is befitting of the soldier’s role in USAmerican society.

When discussing the lives and actions of soldiers, the lyrics often remove agency from the soldier's choices. He is not responsible for his involvement in the conflict; he is as much a victim of the “system” as anyone else. Boulton argues that “country music’s representation of ‘heroic Americans’ is part of a wider context in which American foreign policy is, on occasion, reduced to the level of the individual and understood in terms of personal objectives/bravery/integrity evocative of broader national values” (382). The soldier becomes mythologized and depersonalized. He—and the soldier is always a “he;” occasionally, as noted by Decker, the “he” interacts with the “the female home front” (98) or a female love interest or family member back home, but “she” herself is never a soldier, that role is reserved for the “he”—is no longer an individual, but rather a symbolic expression of national values or personal outrage.

While the War on Terror is most frequently invoked, earlier conflicts, including the Civil War, as discussed earlier, as well as the Vietnam War, appear as well, and are just as symbolically charged. Old Crow Medicine Show uses the Vietnam War to legitimize and apologize for the soldier’s involvement:

> Down in Eutaw, Alabama in 1965
> A young man ‘bout 21, no different than you or I
> He’s catchin’ catfish, and gettin’ drunk
> But Uncle Sam called, he called him up
> Sent him out to Vietnam
> That young man
> Got his life turned upside down
> Turned his smile into a frown
> Robbed that king of his crown
> For an ideal he didn’t even know about (“Big Time in the Jungle”)

This is but a young, simple, country boy who has no business being involved in the war and no understanding of the conflict. Because the country boy does not understand the ideals behind his involvement in the conflict beyond his duty to heed the call of Uncle Sam, he cannot be held responsible for his actions.

Isbell's soldier-centric songs typically allude to the War on Terror, and "Dress Blues" describes the death and funeral of one specific soldier: is described:

> Mamas and grandmamas love you
> 'Cause that's all they know how to do
> You never planned on the bombs in the sand
> Or sleeping in your dress blues.

Because the soldier has been absolved of personal responsibility for his role in the conflict, his death is depoliticized at the interpersonal level, while at the same time used as a vehicle through which to critique the government's actions and the War on Terror:

> Now the high school gymnasium's ready
> Full of flowers and old legionnaires
> Nobody showed up to protest
> Just sniffle and stare ("Dress Blues")

Finally, the narrator turns the blame to Hollywood, the antithesis of this soldier's small, flyover hometown:

> There's red, white, and blue in the rafters
> And there's silent old men from the corps
> What did they say when they shipped you away
> To fight somebody's Hollywood war? ("Dress Blues")

As Hayes notes, the War on Terror was made possible in part through the romanticization of World War II in cultural production. Again, the soldier is not active. He bears no responsibility, and can therefore be made sympathetic. In "Levi," Old Crow Medicine Show even goes one step further than Isbell to explicitly say that this soldier does not belong in this environment and can therefore not be held responsible:

> Now it's parachutes and combat boots
> And camouflaged airplanes
> And a country boy who don't belong
> In the desert anyways.

The country boy belongs in the country, he does not belong in the deserts of some far off land. He does not belong in this conflict, and because he is out of place, he cannot be held accountable.

4.4.2 Cops as Bad Guys

While the soldier is respected, even venerated, the cop is not. The figure of the cop is generally denigrated, and the song narrators will typically place themselves above the law.

Cops are a feature of country life, but within the logic of the songs' narratives, they exist as something for narrators to define themselves in opposition to.

One defining aspect of the county is that, because it is the US's moral center, cops are superfluous, and individuals from the country are above the law. In "Laid Back," Aldean explicitly tells us that "out here way back, you can feel that country high/Out here way back, you can do what you want to do tonight." The "way back" is thus an extension of the Wild West, where the laws of "civilization" don't apply. While they may be pursued by the cops, they are never caught:

> On a Friday night joyride
> Out there on the county line
> Drag racin' 'til the blue lights chase us
> And we scattered like sparks from a Black Cat fuse (Florida Georgia Line, "Hell Raisin' Heat of the Summer")

Being "on the county line," the border between two state-level administrative districts, places them in an even more liminal, above the law space, because even if a cop were to catch them, an arrest may or may not be valid, depending on the jurisdiction of the arresting cop. Finally, opposing the cops is a coming of age milestone: "Where ya learned how to kiss and cuss and fight too/Better watch out for the boys in blue" (Aldean, "Dirt Road Anthem"). In this context, rejecting police authority is as formative as one's first romantic/sexual encounters, male bonding rituals, or using "adult language," that is, cussing.

The cop is also portrayed as an evil character. The cop in Isbell's "Speed Trap Town" is named as the cause of the narrator's troubles; moreover, he brings shame to his whole family: "Was a tough state trooper 'til a decade back/When that girl who wasn't Mama caused his heart attack." The cop character violates Heartland morals by violating the sanctity of the family and injuring the family's reputation. Moreover, he uses his institutional power as a cop for personal gain. Taken together, these ideas present the cop character as corruptible and immoral.

4.4.3 Criticism of the Military Industrial Complex

While the cop is directly criticized, the soldier, as we have seen, is not. The surrounding circumstances can be criticized, but this is typically aimed at the government, which plays into the structure of feelings. Interestingly, both the official narrative and the feelings narrative around the War on Terror tend to function under the slogan of "supporting our

troops." Even if the feelings narrative does not support the war itself, the soldiers are nevertheless supported in cultural production. Thus, the soldier and the war are viewed as two separate entities. Another strategy is using the unspecific "you" or the collective "we" in song lyrics, to argue that the entire nation is complicit and/or responsible for the ongoing conflicts and/or the death of the soldier. In this subsection, I will discuss some criticisms of the war itself, as well as examine more ways in which the soldier is absolved of his responsibility in the war machine.

In "Lambs at the Slaughter," Defiance, Ohio directly invokes 9/11 and criticizes those who bought into the propaganda:

> Then one day with dismay your friends say you've been attacked
> But you can buy a shred of safety with the shirt right off your back
> And your sacrifice reveals your patriotic sons and daughters
> Were once sheep in wolf's clothing now you're lambs at the slaughter.

That 9/11 was an attack that occurred on American soil is an oft-cited reason why the Bush administration felt justified in launching the War on Terror. The "America under attack" thesis, Defiance, Ohio argues, inspired a sense of duty in the population, with "patriotic sons and daughters" signing up to fight, only to be turned into sacrificial lambs. In the same verse, however, Defiance, Ohio places the onus of responsibility on an unspecific "you," indicating that the entire nation is at fault for buying into the propaganda and participating in the war, rather than any one specific individual or institution.

In "Tour of Duty," Isbell takes on the persona of the soldier to describe the futility of war: "I taught myself to tolerate the pain/On the loneliness and boredom and the work I did in vain/All the work we did in vain." Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in soldiers has been well-documented, and a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs shows that 29% of veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) (campaigns of the colloquially known "War on Terror"), have or have had PTSD at some point in their life ("How Common is PTSD in Veterans?"). A further study by the Pew Research Center shows that the majority of veterans surveyed thought the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were "not worth fighting" (Igielnik and Parker). Veterans are promised great rewards, like high, secure salaries, housing or home loans, life and health insurance, and college tuition, among others ("Veterans Benefits Administration"). However, the reality is that the work is dangerous, destructive, and, as indicated by veterans themselves, not worth it. Again, while soldiers themselves are not directly criticized or held responsible in songs like

"Tour of Duty," the singer will inhabit the persona of a soldier and use the first-person voice to share the narrative. Decker notes that "this expressive strategy draws a sharp distinction between the singer—known to not be a soldier, yet at times singing as one—and actual soldiers. But both sorts of masculinity—that of the soldier, that of the male country singer—are reciprocally enhanced" (96). The soldier is affirmed as a working-class hero who has been let down by "the system," while the singer gains legitimacy by giving voice to the soldier. Thus, the masculinity of the singer is affirmed by inhabiting the role of the soldier. Moreover, this allows the singer to criticize the war and the government without holding the archetype of the soldier responsible. These ideas will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter on political discourse analysis.

4.5 "Smoke and Drink the World Away":[11] Drugs & Alcohol

4.5.1 Alcohol as Fun and/or Nostalgic

Alcohol and light drug usage, including tobacco and marijuana, appear frequently in songs across the genre spectrum. These substances are used for fun and/or to invoke happy, nostalgic memories of idyllic days gone by. On the other hand, even if it's not hard addiction or concerning alcoholism, people turn to substances because there's "nothing else to do":

> Well, I grew up in one of them old farm towns
> Where they hit it hard 'til the sun goes down
> Nobody really seemed to care
> That we were living in the middle of nowhere (Aldean, "The Only Way I Know")

In this same vein, the community enables substance usage, and it becomes normalized and a defining feature of country life, which runs counter to the moral center narrative, but also reinforces it, as the ways in which substances are engaged with often place the narrator above the law.

Driving drunk or under the influence of other substances is likewise accepted and even encouraged, because those in the country are, as discussed in Section 4.2.2, above the law: "Lime on the rim of that Dixie silver/Smokin' up a faded out 4x4" (Florida Georgia Line, "Anything Goes"). "Dixie silver" could refer either to a type of cocktail made with clear liquor that is garnished with lime, or it could be a play on "fine China." "Dixie" cups are a brand of disposable cups that are frequently used at parties, so like in Aldean's "Hicktown," it could be a way to contrast the luxuries and snobbishness of city life with the down-to-earth

[11] From "Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry?" by Defiance, Ohio

way of country living. Finally, “Dixie” is an old-fashioned term for the South, derived from the Mason-Dixon line, which demarcated slave and free states during the Civil War, so “Dixie silver” is also likely a reference to place. The following line refers to smoking cannabis in the cab of a pickup with the windows rolled up, in an attempt to further the high with secondhand smoke. Moreover, chewing tobacco, cigarettes, and whiskey are presented as essential coming-of-age elements, and even though the users in this nostalgic ode to the teenage self are presumably underage[12] because they are in the country, they are exempt from underage drinking and substance use laws: “The king in the can and the Marlboro man/Jack 'n' Jim were a few good men” (Aldean, “Dirt Road Anthem”). Within the logic of these songs, substances are an inherent and necessary part of a “good time.”

4.5.2 Alcohol/Addictions as a Means of Coping With Despair

Substance usage, which frequently turns into addiction, is also presented as a means of coping with despair. These range from less concerning depictions of behaviors casual users may engage in to descriptions of more alarming behaviors that invoke a sense of shame and despair.

In Defiance, Ohio’s “Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry?” the narrator has resigned himself to the current state of despair:

> How can you help but feel depressed?
> Get up in the morning and get dressed
> Look out the window through rush hour smog
> Smoke and drink the world away
> ‘Cause what the politicians say
> Won’t answer any of my questions like.

Here, the singer is despairing because politicians refuse to engage with the reality of the situation. The population faces economic struggles, mental health disorders, pollution, and addiction, yet politicians continue to turn a blind eye, and no policies are enacted to lessen the challenges the population is forced to cope with.

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[12]While the age of majority in the United States is 18 years old, the legal age to purchase alcohol has been 21 in all states since 1986. In states where cannabis is recreationally legal—in 2012, Washington state was the first to legalize cannabis—the minimum purchase age is 21; medical usage has different restrictions. In 2019, the legal age to purchase tobacco was raised to 21 nationwide, prior to that, between 2009-2019, the federal minimum age to purchase tobacco was 18, though some states set higher age limits. Prior to 2009, there was no federally enforced minimum age to purchase tobacco. See: “U.S. history of alcohol minimum purchase age by state,” “Legality of cannabis by U.S. jurisdiction,” and “U.S. history of tobacco minimum purchase age by state.”

In AJJ's "Junkie Church," the narrator describes the community that emerges through substance use by recounting an encounter with a friend or lover with whom they partake in substance use.

> Last week, I saw you at the junkie church
> You told me all the things I need to hear
> Like I've got a heart of gold and a kind and open soul
> So we went and bought ourselves a can of beer
> Steel Reserve (AJJ, "Junkie Church")

In this first verse, the narrator is in need of emotional reassurance, so they and their companion get a can of Steel Reserve, which according to a Genius annotation by iamtheopal, is "infamous for its low price and high alcohol content" (iamtheopal, "Genius Annotation 10261495"). Thus, poverty and addiction are linked.

Prescription drug abuse is frequently referenced; for example, in AJJ's "People II: Still Peoplin'," Bonnette expresses compassion for those afflicted by drug addiction:

> But when your Hustler subscription and your Xanax prescriptions
> Make you feel lonelier instead
> You don't wanna hear about all the starving children
> You don't wanna be told it's all in your head.

The reference to "Xanax" is one of several times throughout the example discography that benzodiazepine is referenced. Benzodiazepine is a type of sedative, typically used to combat anxiety, or, in lesser doses, aid in sleep. However, it is also frequently abused, as, according to guidelines from the American Addiction Centers, it is "highly addictive" (Miller). Thus, the "you's" reliance on pornography and a sedative to get through the day is indicative of their numbness to the world around them. Benzodiazepine is also referenced Isbell's "Different Days:" "You can strip in Portland from the day you turn 16/You got one thing to sell and benzodiazepine." Here, we again see the lack of work options available to women. As discussed in Section 4.3.3, across the genre spectrum, there are only a few "acceptable" feminine jobs, one of which is sex worker. In this context, the female subject's benzodiazepine usage allows her to disassociate from the depressing reality of her work. In a different song, Isbell references Klonopin, which is another type of benzodiazepine:

I lost a good friend
Christmastime when folks go off the deep end
His woman took the kids and he took Klonopin
Enough to kill a man of twice his size ("Relatively Easy").

These lines reference the specific despair people may fall into around the Christmas holidays, as they present additional financial strain to already financially burdened families. In this case, the "good friend" saw no choice but overdose in response to the financial and emotional stress presented by the Christmas holiday season.

Isbell also references Codeine in his songs, another prescription drug that is frequently abused and used recreationally. Much has been written about the prescription drug epidemic in the United States. J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, for example, gives a personal and anecdotal look into prescription drug addiction, while Patrick Radden Keefe's *Empire of Pain* offers a more in-depth, research-backed discussion of the historical and socioeconomic factors driving the opioid epidemic. In "Codeine," Isbell sings

> One of my friends has taken her in and given her codeine
> Them eyes was big as stars
> When I saw you behind the bar
> I guess that's the way to keep on smilin' where you are
> But girl, them eyes was big as stars.

Codeine is an opioid pain medication, and the girl's smile indicates that there is nothing else to smile about aside from drug use and the next high. In addition, "starry eyed" or "wide-eyed" are metaphors often used to convey a sense of wonder and innocence, but opioid use can cause artificially wide pupils, so this line contrasts the innocent dreams of a child with the jaded reality faced by the adult woman character.

4.5.3 Meth

In addition to various songs across the genre spectrum referencing alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and perscription drugs, there are also several songs that make either implicit or explicit references to meth. Meth is a highly addictive recreational drug. Throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, there was a widespread meth epidemic in the United States, but it particularly affected rural areas. Anthropologist William Garriott suggests that rural areas were so vulnerable because "[i]t was easier to hide and access key ingredients like anhydrous ammonia" in less-populated places, such as Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Appalachia. He also cites the changing rural economy and the fact that meth is a big money business as key factors in the meth epidemic: "Jobs weren't paying as well or were going away altogether. Meth found a niche as a kind of performance enhancement drug for people working long hours at physically demanding jobs [...] Eventually some folks just left these jobs to work in the meth economy full-time." To combat this, individual states ran a

variety of public awareness campaigns, including the Montana Meth Project's "Meth: Not Even Once" campaign to show the consequences of meth usage. Old Crow Medicine Show and AJJ take up these issues in several songs.

Old Crow Medicine Show's "Methamphetamine" identifies the area where meth use was particularly widespread:

> Times, they ain't like nothing they used to be
> From rocky mount' to northeast Tennessee
> Where the river flows with a dusty, coal disease
> And the babies whine cause they can't find nothing to eat.

In addition to the geographical region afflicted by meth, Old Crow Medicine Show also identifies the people most likely to turn to meth, i.e., poor, rural, working-class individuals. The song goes on to detail the consequences of meth use, proclaiming that "it's gonna rock you like a hurricane," i.e., completely destroy your life, but first, it will cause you to "lose sleep," lose your job, send you "out on the street," have you "down on your knees," and "have you begging pretty please" ("Methamphetamine"). The implication here is twofold: first, it invokes Christian imagery, as in getting down on your knees to pray for salvation, here in the form of more drugs to stay high and prevent withdrawal. Second, these lyrics suggest that users will "get down on their knees," that is, debase themselves and perform oral sex acts in exchange for drugs. This is meant to show how degraded and desperate meth users become during their addiction.

While Old Crow Medicine Show details the conditions that may lead to meth usage in the first place, AJJ describes the feeling that perpetuates the addiction: "Feeling weird, yet tasting sweet/It's a top bottom rock smoking magic mask, making it bleed/Feeling sweet, getting weird" ("Getting Naked, Playing With Guns"). "Rock smoking magic" likely refers to meth, as one way of consuming (particularly crystal) meth involves smoking it. The "sweetness" of the drug, moreover, encourages users to get high and stay high and have a way of escaping the unpleasant reality around them.

In "No More Tears," AJJ imagines a world in which there is "No more HIV, no more tweakin'/No more drugs or immune systems bein' weakened." A Genius annotation from TDB notes that "'tweaking' is also slang for being high on methamphetamine, and many habitual users of it use it intravenously, and those 'tweakers' sharing needles leads to them getting HIV" (TBD, "Genius Annotation 3256670"). Thus, in AJJ's ideal world, there is both no meth, and the conditions for people to become meth users do not exist.

The major themes that I have identified in this chapter—place, working classness, the police & military, and drugs & alcohol—provide insight into what mattered to artists across the genre spectrum and how they responded to major sociocultural challenges and upheavals. These threads then lay the groundwork for a further discussion in the following chapter on the specific structure of feelings and political discourses present in the flyover states between 9/11/01 and November 8, 2016.

Chapter Five: Political Discourse Analysis

5.1 What the People Want to Hear

In his first official statement following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, then-President George W. Bush put forth two specific points of discourse that would inform the official political discourse for years to come. I identify them as the "America Under Attack" and "One America" theses. In his analysis of Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric, John Murphy, professor of communication at the University of Illinois, notes that when choosing to enter (or, in this case, instigate) a war, "the president must rally the nation to pay any price or bear any burden in the pursuit of victory" (609) and identifies Bush's use of epideictic or "praise-and-blame" rhetoric as the means through which Bush justifies the war. The "praise-and-blame" rhetoric manifests in the "America Under Attack" thesis, which states that the United States is under threat and thus can and should retaliate with as much force as possible in order to protect the freedom of its citizens. Murphy also identifies a second rhetorical turn wherein Bush "recounted acts of sacrifice and courage that, in their individual parts, came together to display the whole of the nation's character in the midst of terrible trauma" (611). It is this allegedly unwavering togetherness that forms the "One America" thesis, which states that the USAmerican people stand completely united as one singular body politic. While both discourses have a long history and neither discourse originated with Bush, he did revitalize these discourses and bring new life and meaning to them. When Barack Obama assumed the office of president in 2009, he, too, continued to reinterpret and perpetuate these discourses.

As both Williams and Hebdige argue, structures of feeling and subcultures emerge from the disconnect between the official narrative and the actual lived experience of the population. During both administrations, each president pushed these points of official discourse, despite obvious flaws with each discourse and the political polarization and social tensions occurring outside of the confines of the White House. Cultural productions gave voice to sentiments that conflicted with the official narratives.

In Section 5.2, I will consider the role of official, top-down discourses, give a brief overview of major events during each administration, and provide examples of how both Bush and Obama used these events to affirm the "America Under Attack" and "One America" discourses. Then, in Section 5.3, I will consider several major themes from Chapter Four, particularly militarism, masculinity, and flyover narratives, and compare the official

discourses with the structures of feeling offered by the music. This section will see how these discourses compare, if/how the artists accept the official discourses, and if/how the artists reject or refute the official discourses.

5.2 Official Discourse

In addition to analyzing the "America Under Attack" and "One America" discourses, it is also necessary to point out how Bush and Obama fashioned and presented their respective public-facing personas as a means of performing and projecting authenticity. Bush employed "source-focused" authenticity by playing into the frontier myth and constructing a cowboy image. While Bush was not the first president to have employed such methods, his cowboy persona also informs how he disseminated official points of discourse. Obama's election was historic in that it marked the first time a Black man had been elected to the US presidency, and Obama similarly leaned into "source-focused" authenticity by positioning himself as a breadwinning family man in an effort to be relatable to the USAmerican public. While there have always been official, top-down discourses, and as Hebdige notes, they are what culture and subculture either align themselves with or define themselves against, respectively, the Bush and Obama administrations mark a moment in time when these discourses were more immediately articulated and received via mass media, the Internet, and later, social media. Although Bush and Obama come from different political parties, (right-wing) Republican and (left-wing) Democrat, respectively, they both employ similar points of discourse. In Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2, I will discuss several major events that inform the structures of feeling that contribute to the cultural productions discussed in this thesis. These events were chosen for their national reach or wide-reaching ramifications, and are events that are most relevant for understanding the discourses that arise in Middle America.

5.2.1 Bush Administration

In his statement on the evening of September 11, 2001, Bush opens with "Good evening. Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts" ("Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation"). The official line, which would inform foreign policy for the rest of Bush's presidency and beyond, positions the United States as "under attack," and everything that will come to pass is tied back to this event and is to be understood as a direct response to this provocation. In the closing paragraph of this statement, Bush goes on to explicitly present the "One America" thesis:

> This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. ("Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation")

While the attacks on 9/11 were, in some ways, local, with two planes striking the Twin Towers in New York City, the third hitting the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the fourth being diverted and crashing down in rural Pennsylvania, they were, in other ways, national. The hijacked flights themselves were transnational routes, scheduled to fly from East Coast hub cities to California, the targets were major symbols of USAmerican power, and across the country, people watched the attacks occur live on TV. Thus, the official narrative was, at first, widely accepted by the general population, with Bush's approval rating reaching an all-time high of 90 percent, the Red Cross seeing $3 million in donations in a two-day time span, and the New York Blood Center receiving 36,000 units of blood in a short time (History.com Editors). However, the narrative of America as one and America coming together fails to account for the spike in Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims ("What It Meant To Be Muslim In America After 9/11"), as well as Sikhs mistaken for Muslims (History.com Editors). In addition, various conspiracy theories began to crop up, blaming Bush himself for the attacks.

In the wake of 9/11, Bush tapped into the frontier myth and fashioned himself (and the country) as a vigilante cowboy in an attempt to reaffirm the country's identity and status as a global superpower, as well as position himself as an authentic, true American. The frontier thesis and Bush's cowboy persona heavily informed the state response to 9/11 and the pursuit of Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda and the man deemed responsible for the 9/11 attacks, with Bush responding to a reporter's question of if he wanted bin Laden dead, "I want justice. There's an old poster out West, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive'" (qtd. in Smith 209). Bush not only used the frontier myth in his rhetoric, but he also projected a cowboy image by living out a cowboy fantasy on his "ranch" property in Texas. The property was more of a recreation area than a working ranch that actually managed livestock—a Seattle Times article from 2005 quips that "Secret Service agents now outnumber the cows" (Vieth)—yet his Texan background and land ownership helped project an image of a hardworking, down-to-Earth, true American cowboy, who just so happened to be president. Later in his presidency, Bush's "working vacation" on his Texas ranch in late August 2005 can also help explain the administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, which is widely

regarded as botched and incompetent. Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, but Bush did not leave his property and return to Washington, D.C. to manage the disaster until two days later, on August 31 (Walsh).

Despite his own delayed response and detachment from the catastrophe, in his official statement following Hurricane Katrina, Bush again invokes the "One America" thesis, closing with, "The country stands with you. We'll do all in our power to help you" ("President Outlines Hurricane Katrina Relief Efforts"). Similar to 9/11, it is to be understood that not just those immediately and intimately affected by Hurricane Katrina are the victims of the event, but instead, the whole country is. Indeed, a study by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics shows it is the country that comes together to engage in relief and recovery efforts when administration responses fall short. In that way, the "One America" thesis is affirmed, but in this case, America is united against Bush, as his approval rating fell to just 40%, and would continue to decline for the rest of his presidency ("Bush and Public Opinion").

With his approval already at an all-time low entering the final years of his presidency, Bush then had to manage the 2007-08 financial crisis. Unlike 9/11 and Katrina, which were physically localized events, the financial crisis directly impacted people across the country. With this in mind, when making official statements about it, Bush again returns to the "One America" thesis:

> Our economy is facing a moment of great challenge. But we've overcome tough challenges before—and we will overcome this one. […] And together, we will show the world once again what kind of country America is—a nation that tackles problems head-on, where leaders come together to meet great tests, and where people of every background can work hard, develop their talents, and realize their dreams. ("President's Address to the Nation")

In this statement, we also see other major points of rhetoric, including the American Dream and the Puritanical notion of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." The discourse surrounding the financial crisis relies heavily on tropes and clichés because Bush has no actual solution and does little to improve the material reality of the USAmerican people.

These three events during the Bush administration demonstrate major blows to collective USAmerican identity and trust in governmental institutions and the official discourse. By the end of his presidency, Bush had only a 37% approval rating ("Bush and Public Opinion"), and the USAmerican public was ready for a change. Though, as we will see, the next

president, Barack Obama, continued to invoke the same points of discourse as Bush and faced many challenges of his own.

5.2.2 Obama Administration

Managing the economic crisis that he inherited from Bush was one of Barack Obama's major tasks during his first term as president. When, two and a half years into his presidency, economic conditions in the country had still not significantly improved, a protest movement against wealth inequality in New York erupted, dubbed "Occupy Wall Street," which would later spread to other major US cities and go on to be referred to simply as the "Occupy Movement." In addressing these concerns, Obama turned to the "America Under Attack" thesis. In a news conference discussing the Occupy movement and the "Jobs Bill," a bill meant to create more jobs, improve public infrastructure, provide job-related services, and thus stimulate the economy, Obama acknowledged the frustrations of the USAmerican people, but he placed blame for the economic problems on outside factors. Some of the factors he cites are "[t]he combination of a Japanese tsunami, the Arab Spring, which drove up gas prices, and most prominently Europe, I think has gotten businesses and consumers very nervous" ("News Conference by the President"). In this same news conference, Obama also deploys the "One America" point of discourse, but he very interestingly posits "the American people" and "Congress" as two different entities, wherein "the American People" are united in their fight against "Congress," and this fight, in addition to anxieties from outside threats, is what has sparked the Occupy movement:

> And what the American people saw is that Congress didn't care—not just what I thought; they didn't care about what the American people thought. […] [t]hat cynicism is not going to be reduced until Congress actually proves their cynicism wrong by doing something that would actually help the American people. This [passing the jobs bill] is a great opportunity to do it. ("News Conference by the President")

In this case, the official discourse is closer to the reality of public opinion than in other cases, but Obama's insistence on "America Under Attack" and "One America" still show a disconnect between the official narrative and the feelings expressed in cultural productions from this time.

In addition to inheriting the financial crisis, Obama also inherited Bush's War on Terror. Obama's tenure did, however, see the fulfillment of one of Bush's promises, that is, the execution of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Obama used the announcement of bin

Laden's execution as an opportunity to perpetuate the "America Under Attack" thesis and garner support for continued military operations, despite the fact that public support for the war was waning (Doherty and Kiley). Obama declared that:

> The death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al-Qaeda. Yet his death does not mark the end of our effort. There's no doubt that al-Qaeda will continue to pursue attacks against us. We must—and we will—remain vigilant at home and abroad. […] The American people did not choose this fight. It came to our shores, and started with the senseless slaughter of our citizens. […] We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies. (qtd. in Phillips)

By the time Obama left office, the majority of those surveyed, around 53%, said that they thought the US had "failed" in Iraq. Thus, there is a large disconnect between official points of discourse and public opinion.

Aside from the financial crisis and the ongoing war, Barack Obama's time as president also saw two significant changes in social policy: the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010 and the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015. Both pieces of legislation were controversial, yet in both cases, Obama took the opportunity to restate the "One America" thesis. Following the passage of the Affordable Care Act, Obama describes the unity of the country as an inherent aspect of national identity: "All kinds of people are working hand-in-hand because we're all in this together—that's when America is at its best. That's what this country is all about" ("President Obama Speaks on the Affordable Care Act"). While, at the time of its passing, a slight majority of the American public viewed the bill as favorable (Kirzinger, et al.), its implementation did not necessarily go smoothly. The second significant change in social policy, the Supreme Court decision on Obergefell v. Hodges, the ruling that legalized same-sex marriage in the United States, was likewise a polarizing issue. Nonetheless, Obama celebrated the decision and affirmed the "One America" thesis, saying "Because for all our differences, we are one people, stronger together than we could ever be alone. That's always been our story" ("Remarks by the President on the Supreme Court Decision on Marriage Equality"). These events are of particular note because they challenged the "whitestraightboy" hegemonic order. The Obama presidency in and of itself challenged this order, as Obama was the first Black president in the country's history. White men no longer saw themselves immediately represented in the country's highest office. The passage of the Affordable Care Act disrupted the myth of "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" individualism, as it meant that the cost of health insurance would no longer be the sole

responsibility of a single individual and that "the wealthiest Americans—families who make more than $250,000 a year—will have to pay a little bit more. Extremely costly health insurance plans will no longer qualify for unlimited tax breaks" ("President Obama Speaks on the Affordable Care Act"). Finally, the legalization of same-sex marriage was perceived as a threat to the "traditional" nuclear family structure. While the United States is often mythologized as a land of opportunity for any and everyone, the reality is that opportunity is limited by a variety of factors, and those who are used to being the beneficiaries of such opportunity, i.e., the "whitestraightboy," become uncomfortable and uncertain of their place in the social order when that hegemonic status is challenged.

5.3 Structures of Feeling

While the official discourses during the Bush and Obama administrations continually sought to affirm the "America Under Attack" and "One America" theses, the lived experiences and opinions of the USAmerican public, particularly those in flyover country, did not always align with the official discourses. In this section, I will return to Williams' theory of structures of feeling, which is "concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt […] An alternative definition would be structures of experience" (Williams, "Structures of Feeling" 23). Understanding the divide between official and experiential discourse allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural productions from this era informed and were informed by structures of feeling. Each theme in this section—the military, gender, and flyover—connects back to either or both official points of discourse identified in the previous section.

5.3.1 "The Work We Did in Vain":[13] Discourse on the Military

According to the "America Under Attack" narrative, sacrifice is presented as necessary for the greater good of the country as a whole. Soldiers are not viewed as individuals, but rather as collateral. As Decker argues, "real human losses due to war, caused by political and military choices, are cast as entirely personal matters" (101). Under the offcial discourse, the soldier loses his humanity; cultural productions recast and repersonalize the soldier. As discussed in the previous chapter, across my example discography, the soldier is absolved of his participation in military action. He is a single individual, and an unwitting actor in a larger play where he has no control over the outcome. The soldier is simply "doing his job," and all the soldier knows is that "Uncle Sam needs me/To fight for an ideal I know nothing about"

[13] From "Tour of Duty" by Jason Isbell

(Old Crow Medicine Show, "Big Time in the Jungle"). In addition to the soldier being cast as unable to understand his role in the war, the work of the soldier is posited as having been done "in vain" (Isbell, "Tour of Duty"). Finally, where the soldier himself is celebrated, the war itself is not. Defiance, Ohio parodies the official Bush discourse that states the war is in defense of the US's "freedom" by asking for forgiveness from the countries that the US has invaded: "So don't think us rude if we intrude/God in heaven ordained us to" ("The New World Order"). While several songs, such as Defiance, Ohio's "Lambs at the Slaughter," do acknowledge 9/11 as the official justification for why soldiers are sent to war in the first place, the artists themselves do not necessarily agree with this. Indeed, Isbell's "The Devil Is My Running Mate" proclaims that the official reasons do not truly justify the war: "It ain't the reason for the war/That's meanness, boy, and nothing more." Overall, the sentiments across the genre spectrum do not agree with the "America Under Attack" thesis.

5.3.2 "I'm A Straight White Male in America":[14] Discourse on Gender

In the changing social landscape of the 2000s through early 2010s, the "whitestraightboy" hegemony is disrupted, and anxieties around gender arise, specifically around masculinity and how masculinity should properly be performed. Gender anxieties are negotiated in various ways across the discography, but they typically stand in opposition to the "One America" thesis as put forward by the Bush and Obama administrations. Where the "One America" thesis is often rejected, the "America Under Attack" thesis is affirmed as songs across the genre spectrum lament the loss of "traditional" American values.

One way this manifests is through what Bengal describes as "a wider paranoia, especially among some white men, about so-called 'political correctness' and its perceived purpose of stifling free thought in order to impose a leftist political agenda" (173). Songs such as AJJ's "American Tune" attempt to parody these anxieties. In the song's chorus, Bonnette sings

> So if I see a penny on the ground
> I leave it alone or fucking flip it
> I'm a straight white male in America
> I've got all the luck I need (AJJ, "American Tune")

The song is self-flagellating and apologetic, because, in Bonnette's America, there is, for better or for worse, a clear racial and gender hierarchy. Bonnette is privileged because "no one clutches their purses when they're in a room alone with me" (a reference to prejudices and biases that view Black men as inherently suspicious), not to mention that he's "a guy

[14] From "American Tune" by AJJ

getting paid more than a girl with a degree" ("American Tune"). To acknowledge such realities is at odds with the "One America" narrative.

In her essay "Why 'Ladies Love Country Boys,'" Jocelyn Neal offers a further explanation for the performative masculinity present specifically in bro-country songs where, like in Aldean's "Country Boy's World," the corporate woman from the city gives up her cosmopolitan lifestyle for a more traditional and simple life in the country in order to be with her working-class "country boy." Neal writes that such narratives "function as a cultural metaphor for the relationship between society at large […] and country music's home base, a predominantly (although not exclusively) middle- and working-class, white, heterosexual, young-to-middle-aged slice of Middle America" (6). During the financial crisis of 2007-2008, men were unemployed at higher rates than women ("The Recession of 2007–2009" 4), so successful "ladies" or "gals" were thus perceived as a threat to the traditional, post-war ideal wherein "the role of breadwinner became synonymous with manhood" (Pecknold, "I Wanna Play House" 84). In "Dig Your Roots," Florida Georgia Line's ode to the virtues of a rural upbringing, a similar logic is at play. The narrator is "a good ol' boy, just like my old man" who shares his philosophy for a happy life: "raise your kids, love your wife" ("Dig Your Roots"). In this era, as the economy stagnated and traditionally masculine work was threatened by industry moving out of the country, farms going under, and construction work being put on hold it is clear that there was a move towards more regressive gender politics that operate on the logic that traditional gender roles and family structures in the US are "under attack."

5.3.3 "Why God Made Those Flyover States":[15] Discourse on Flyover Country

The "One America" narrative is most strongly refuted by flyover discourses. Wherein the official discourse presents a homogenous, unified whole, the flyover discourse operates very explicitly on an "us versus them" binary. In this section I will focus on two songs from two different ends of the genre spectrum, the first being "Ohio Is For Lovers" by Hawthorne Heights and the second being "Fly Over States" by Jason Aldean.

With regard to "Ohio Is For Lovers," the actual content of the song itself is less important, and what's more important is the immediate cultural response to it, and how it demonstrates the necessity for cultural production that represents diverse swaths of the population. Dyck argues that certain elements of music, such as the rural focus of country music, can be

[15] From "Fly Over States" by Jason Aldean

alienating to those who do not have a personal connection to the rural. By the same token, "this is just what country fans like about it. They want country to truly express their own country lives—or at least to be accurate to their conceptions or experiences about country living" (Dyck 3). This also applies to "Ohio Is For Lovers" and helps explain why it was as successful as it was. Through this song, the band "manage[s] to deftly wrangle their home state of Ohio into the emo spotlight, making Ohio dramatic for the first time ever" (Overton). In a *Stereogum* interview with the band's lead singer, JT Woodruff, interviewer Brad Sanders says "I remember feeling like we were living through something that for Dayton kids, especially suburban Dayton kids, just doesn't happen." Songs like "Ohio Is For Lovers," produced by and for those in flyover areas, fill a niche and contribute to the binary "us vs. them" flyover discourse, which is inherently at odds with the "One America" narrative.

Aldean's "Fly Over States" best articulates the flyover feeling. While the Bush and Obama administrations both pushed the "One America" narrative, all of America clearly did not feel as though it was together and united. Particularly as those in flyover states continued to suffer from declining employment, crumbling infrastructure, and the American dream slipped further out of reach, artists across the genre spectrum in middle America reacted to the assumption of unity through their music. What we can begin to see and understand, then, is that there is a lack of unity, and tensions between the flyover and the non-flyover grow ever deeper. The song opens with a critique of white-collar businessmen, "guys in first class on a flight/From New York to Los Angeles" (Aldean, "Fly Over States"). The white collar versus blue collar, urban versus rural, non-flyover versus flyover conflict is immediately established. These "guys" view the land that they are flying over derisively, looking out at a "bunch of square cornfields and wheat farms," and wondering "who'd want to live down there in the middle of nowhere?" (Aldean, "Fly Over States") The refrain explains that these first-class businessmen are out of touch with the reality of the rest of the country because they've never "met the men who plowed that earth/planted that seed, busted his ass for you and me" (Aldean, "Fly Over States"). The businessmen don't know the farmer, one of the working class masculine archetypes, nor, does it seem, do they care to. Throughout the song, Aldean also invokes the names of so-called flyover states, including Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, and cities or regions like Santa Fe (New Mexico), the Badlands (South Dakota), and Amarillo (Texas). The song suggests that if the first-class businessmen were to engage with these locales on a more immediate level and "breathe in all that open space," they might "understand why God made/those flyover states" (Aldean, "Fly Over States"). If, the song

proposes, they made an attempt to understand, they might “even wanna plant your stakes,” that is, settle down, “in those flyover states” (Aldean, “Fly Over States”). In this song, Aldean refutes the “One America” thesis by making explicit the divide and lack of understanding, but at the same time, the song is hopeful, as it invites outsiders in and asks them to engage and understand the misunderstood part of America.

The disconnect between the official discourses put forth by Bush and Obama through their speeches and the structures of feeling that arise from the music suggest that the artists, regardless of genre affiliation and perceived political affiliation, refute the official discourses. The music indicates declining public support for the War on Terror and a rejection of the “America Under Attack” thesis, while increasing anxiety around the performance of gender roles and a growing divide between flyover and non-flyover regions disprove the notion of a singular, fully united USAmerican population.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

It is difficult, if not impossible, to identity any era of USAmerican history during which the country stood completely united and was in full support of official discourses. Subcultural discourses that push against mainstream cultural discourses have always existed, and both punk and country music have a long history of going against the grain. Yet the period between 9/11/01 and 11/08/16 stands out for having produced a slate of artists who, despite belonging to what are viewed as politically opposed genres, embraced a DIY ethic to produce songs with discourses closer to each other than to the official discourses of the political parties they allegedly aligned with.

As Hebdige argues, culture, and therefore subculture, do not appear spontaneously, and are thus in a constant process of reaction. The space in between the official or mainstream reaction, the one that will eventually solidify into mainstream culture or subculture is where we find, as Raymond Williams terms it, "structures of feeling." Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, a distinct structure of feeling emerged, one that was deeply informed by the collective cultural trauma of 9/11, as well as the tension that intensified between "coastal" America and the "flyover states." The flyover states, as Anthony Harkins notes, are the swaths of the rural and suburban US where cultural is perceived to not exist. As the country dealt with the fallout of 9/11, and was faced with political polarization, environmental catastrophes, social tensions, and economic crises, punk and country artists, particularly those originating from the flyover states, produced songs that reflected their frustrations, worked through cultural trauma, and created structures of feeling that center alienation and despair. This perceived alienation resulted in cultural productions that demanded authenticity, though who and what were considered to be "authentic" was narrowly defined, and the most "authentic" members of the punk and country scenes were predominantly white and male. This quest for authenticity is reflected not only in the lyric content of these songs, but also sonically and through the genre definitions themselves.

Regardless of the immediate genre affiliation, it is through music that "personal alienation [is] given social expression" (Duncombe, "White Riot" 20). The basis of the commonalities between punk and country lies in their investment in making the personal public and sharing that alienation with the audience. The lyrical engagement with personal alienation, along with shared sonic elements, similar genre and subgenre origin stories, and, perhaps most importantly, a universal DIY ethic, allowed bands across the genre spectrum to create a

carefully negotiated image of authenticity and thus be perceived as "authentic." Both punk and country rely on mythological origin stories to substantiate their inherent "authenticity," which is code for inherent "whiteness" and "masculinity," yet across the genre spectrum, both punk and country subgenres have their roots at least partially in Black music and Black culture, yet ignore and bury these associations. Moreover, though punk and country are frequently positioned as opposing, they feature similar instrumentation, including (acoustic) guitars, banjos, bass, and drums. These instruments are meant to be accessible, and chord progressions are meant to be simple combinations that anyone can play. As the saying goes, all you need to be a punk or country musician is "three chords and the truth" (Howard qtd. in Dansby). This performative simplicity affirm the authenticity of punk and country music and makes way for the audience engagement with the lyrical content.

A close lyric analysis reveals that, through explorations of place, working class anxieties, the role of the police and military in USAmerican society, and drug and alcohol use or abuse, bands across the genre spectrum give voice to the same fears. The intense mediation on place highlights the tension between flyover and non-flyover places, as well as expresses feelings of alienation and fears of being "left behind" or ignored by the rest of the country, particularly perceived cultural centers like New York City and Los Angeles. In songs such as "Chad's Favorite Song" by Defiance, Ohio and "Ghost Town" by Hawthorne Heights, "suburbia," which is the site of the stereotypical American dream, is instead posited as a place of decay. Conversely, the "country" is presented, through songs like Florida Georgia Line's "May We All," as the home of the most authentic Americans. Across the genre spectrum, the performance of working classness is vital to the image of authenticity constructed by the bands and disseminated through the songs. This idea is particularly salient in "Going to Bed Now" by Modern Baseball, which emphasizes the necessity of performing working classness the "right" way. In addition, archetypal masculine working class characters, including the cop and the soldier, are employed as a means to reject official discourses of unity. Finally, images of drug and alcohol usage, like those in "Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry?" by Defiance, Ohio, underscore the despair and alienation felt by the artists. These feelings of despair are then tactically employed to rebut the dominant mainstream discourses, especially those put forward by the presidential administrations.

Whereas Bush and Obama use the "America Under Attack" and "One America" theses as a way to rhetorically justify the War on Terror and promote an image of national unity, artists across the punk and country genre spectrum ultimately reject this discourse and instead take

an individualist, anti-war stance. Particularly with regard to discourses on militarism, gender, and flyover country, the views presented in songs across the genre spectrum refute the official discourses advanced by both presidential administrations. For example, when discussing the War on Terror, Bush states that "America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time" ("Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation") and Obama, years later, promises that "We must—and we will—remain vigilant at home and abroad. […] We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies" (Obama qtd. in Phillips). However, songs like Isbell's "Tour of Duty" and Old Crow Medicine Show's "Big Time in the Jungle" dismiss the "America Under Attack" thesis and present the military efforts as futile and destructive. Similarly, where both Bush and Obama use their official statements as a vehicle to celebrate unity and equality, songs such as AJJ's "American Tune" and Jason Aldean's "Fly Over States" reveal just how divided public opinion was.

The years since Donald Trump's election in 2016 have brought with them new challenges, new upheavals, and new traumas, and the effects of those experienced during the Bush and Obama years are still felt. The economy never truly recovered from the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the War on Terror is still ongoing, racial tensions have grown deeper—culminating with the eruption of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020—and the global community is still coping with the fallout from the onset of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Meanwhile, flyover communities confront demographic changes. Where, for many years, there was a trend of outmigration from flyover communities due to lack of economic opportunity, such communities have, since 2020, seen a reversal of that trend, with individuals from coastal urban areas moving into smaller communities in the flyover regions (Rogers et al.). This trend has resulted in housing shortages and a more pronounced clash between different political philosophies. The mainstream has entered the periphery, and the periphery has yet to adjust.

Yet, the punk and country genre spectrum continues to produce music that runs counter to both mainstream and official discourses. Recent releases from AJJ, Jason Aldean, and contemporary Midwest emo band The Front Bottoms, as well as newer artists like alt.country's newest sweetheart, Zach Bryan, continue to deal with similar themes and express similar anxieties. The "whitestraightboy" hegemonic order has been challenged, but it has not ended; flyover country has been acknowledged but is still not understood; the authenticity sought after in the wake of 9/11 has still not been found.

As the United States prepares for what is sure to be yet another contentious and polarizing election cycle, it is necessary to continue to critically examine cultural productions, particularly from those places that imagine themselves as the periphery. By applying the flyover and structures of feeling framework to these contemporary cultural productions, I believe that we will be able to gain better insight into both the what and the why and more effectively address the anxieties contained therein.

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——. “Wagon Wheel.” *O.C.M.S.* Nettwerk, 2004.
——. “We Don't Grow Tobacco.” *Carry Me Back.* ATO Records, 2012.

List of Illustrations

Appendix

A1: Songs In Order of Appearance

To listen along on Spotify, please visit:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0bWDrJaG34Z00Y8t9L94Ba?si=5df44b6a6c6c4b89

Note: Repeat songs only appear once in the playlist.

Chapter Four: Lyric Analysis

4.2
Hairpool - Defiance, Ohio

4.2.1
Tour of Duty - Jason Isbell
Wagon Wheel - Old Crow Medicine Show
Road Signs Always Look Better Looking Over Your Shoulder - Defiance, Ohio
Oh! Susquehanna - Defiance, Ohio
Good to Go - Jason Aldean
Relatively Easy - Jason Isbell
Petty Problems - Defiance Ohio
Good to Go - Jason Aldean
Coals - Modern Baseball
Ohio Is For Lovers - Hawthorne Heights
Asphalt Cowboy - Jason Aldean
Truckers are the Blood - AJJ
Traveling Alone - Jason Isbell
Cruise - Florida Georgia Line
Hicktown - Jason Aldean
Tattoos on This Town - Jason Aldean
Wide Open - Jason Aldean
She's Country - Jason Aldean

4.2.2
Chad's Favorite Song - Defiance, Ohio
Oh! Susquehanna - Defiance, Ohio
Old Dead Tree - Defiance, Ohio
People II: Still Peoplin' - AJJ
Scenesters - AJJ
Ghost Town - Hawthorne Heights

4.2.3
May We All - Florida Georgia Line
Round Here - Florida Georgia Line
Dirt - Florida Georgia Line
Cruise - Florida Georgia Line
Hicktown - Jason Aldean
Round Here - Florida Georgia Line
See Ya, Sucker - Modern Baseball

4.3
Picket Fences - Hawthorne Heights

4.3.1
Going to Bed Now - Modern Baseball

4.3.2
The Only Way I Know - Jason Aldean
Truckers Are the Blood - AJJ

4.3.3
Old Boots, New Dirt - Jason Aldean
Wide Open - Jason Aldean
Traveling Alone - Jason Isbell
Different Days - Jason Isbell
Wide Open - Jason Aldean
Golden Eagle - AJJ
Children of Children - Jason Isbell
Methamphetamine - Old Crow Medicine Show
Amarillo Sky - Jason Aldean
We Don't Grow Tobacco - Old Crow Medicine Show
Amarillo Sky - Jason Aldean
Fast - Jason Aldean
Half Mile Down - Old Crow Medicine Show
Wedding Singer - Modern Baseball
Zombie by the Cranberries by Andrew Jackson Jihad - AJJ
Fucc the Devil - AJJ
Poor Man - Old Crow Medicine Show
The New World Order - Defiance, Ohio
Lambs at the Slaughter - Defiance, Ohio
Picket Fences - Hawthorne Heights
Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry? - Defiance, Ohio

4.4
Dirt Road Anthem - Jason Aldean

4.4.1
Good to Go - Jason Aldean
Carry Me Back - Old Crow Medicine Show
Big Time in The Jungle - Old Crow Medicine Show
Dress Blues - Jason Isbell
Levi - Old Crow Medicine Show

4.4.2
Laid Back - Jason Aldean
Hell Raisin' Heat of the Summer - Florida Georgia Line
Dirt Road Anthem - Jason Aldean
Speed Trap Town - Jason Isbell

4.4.3
Lambs at the Slaughter - Defiance, Ohio
Tour of Duty - Jason Isbell

4.5
Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry? - Defiance, Ohio

4.5.1
The Only Way I Know - Jason Aldean
Anything Goes - Florida Georgia Line
Dirt Road Anthem - Jason Aldean

4.5.2
Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry? - Defiance, Ohio
Junkie Church - AJJ
People II: Still Peoplin' - AJJ
Different Days - Jason Isbell
Relatively Easy - Jason Isbell
Codeine - Jason Isbell

4.5.3
Methamphetamine - Old Crow Medicine Show
Getting Naked, Playing With Guns - AJJ
No More Tears - AJJ

Chapter Five: Discourse Analysis

5.3.1
Tour of Duty - Jason Isbell
Big Time in the Jungle - Old Crow Medicine Show
Tour of Duty - Jason Isbell
The New World Order - Defiance, Ohio
Lambs at the Slaughter - Defiance, Ohio
The Devil is My Running Mate - Jason Isbell

5.3.2
American Tune - AJJ
Country Boy's World - Jason Aldean
Dig Your Roots - Florida Georgia Line

5.3.3
Fly Over States - Jason Aldean
Ohio Is For Lovers - Hawthorne Heights
Fly Over States - Jason Aldean

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Chad’s Favorite Song - Defiance, Ohio
Ghost Town - Hawthorne Heights
May We All - Florida Georgia Line

Going to Bed Now - Modern Baseball
Hey Kathleen, Are You Hungry? - Defiance, Ohio
Tour of Duty - Jason Isbell
Big Time in the Jungle - Old Crow Medicine Show
American Tune - AJJ
Fly Over States - Jason Aldean

A2: Map of "Flyover Country"

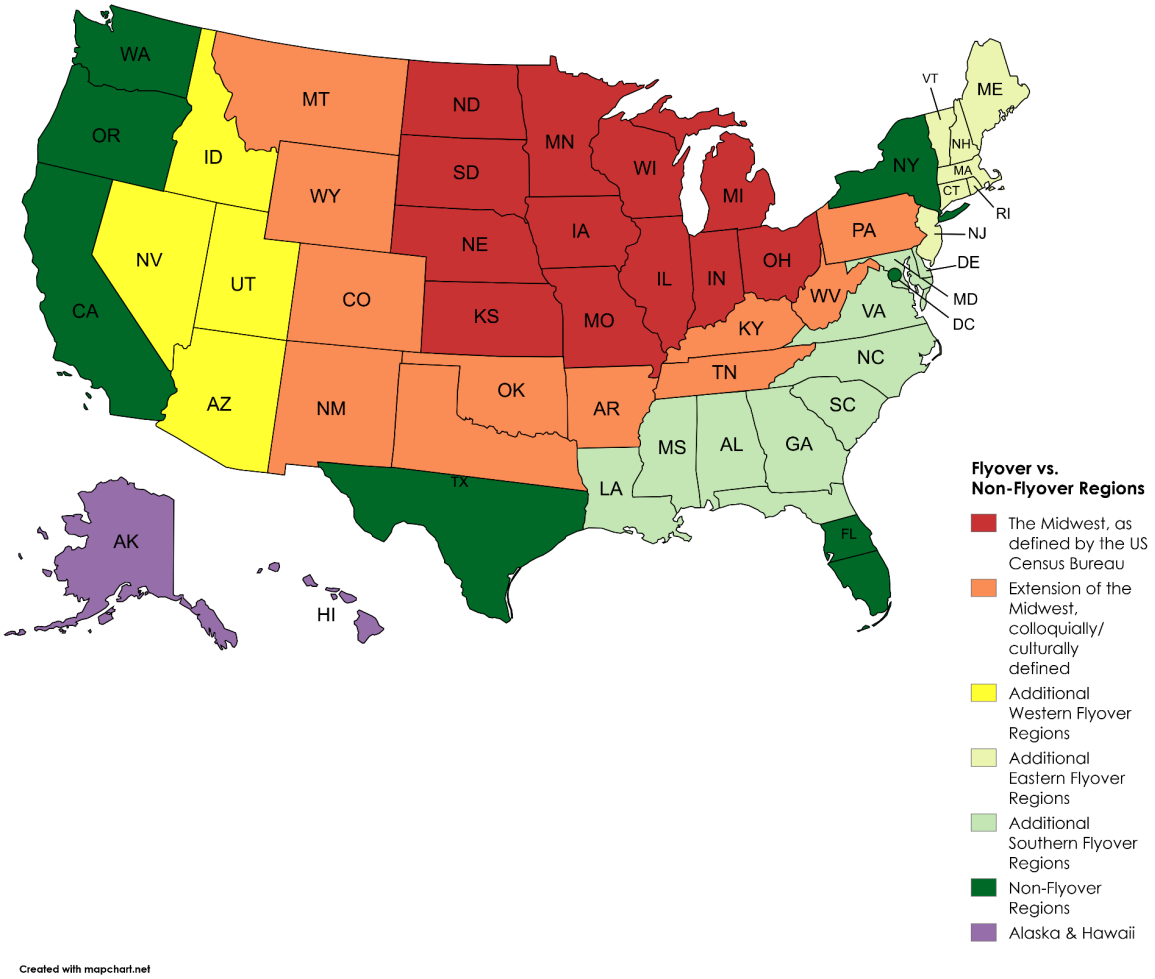

Figure 1: Map of Flyover vs. Non-Flyover Regions, created by the author with https://www.mapchart.net/usa.html. Note: This map does not account for the urban/rural divide, and instead focuses more broadly on state/regional boundaries.

A3: English Abstract

In the United States, punk and country are typically viewed as oppositional genres. The prevailing perception is that punk is the music of the political left, while country is the music of the political right. In this thesis, I argue that these genres share more in common than first meets the eye, both sonically and in terms of content. Moreover, these genres tend to produce songs that push back against the mainstream and official discourses. Against a backdrop of political strife, environmental disasters, and sociocultural upheaval in the 2000s and 2010s, the fusion subgenres of Midwest emo, folk punk, alt.country, and bro-country occupy similarly unique niches across America, particularly in the space that has been deemed "flyover" or "Middle" America, the places where culture is perceived to not exist. By using Raymond Williams' notion of "structures of feeling" as well as Anthony Harkins' conception of "flyover states," I engage in a close reading lyric analysis of a representative discography featuring songs from Jason Aldean, Florida Georgia Line, Old Crow Medicine Show, Jason Isbell, Hawthorne Heights, Modern Baseball, AJJ, and Defiance, Ohio. Following the lyric analysis, I will conduct a political discourse analysis that compares the popular discourse with the official discourse put forth by the Bush and Obama presidential administrations. Through a careful examination of lyrics and their context, I hope to challenge ideas that dictate a stark oppositional divide between punk and country music and provide the context and analysis necessary to adjust the expectations and improve the understanding of cultural productions from flyover country.

A4: Deutsche Zusammenfassung

In den USA werden Punk und Country typischerweise als gegensätzliche Genres angesehen. Die langläufige Meinung ist, dass Punk die Musik der politischen Linken ist, während Country die Musik der politischen Rechten darstellt. In dieser Masterarbeit argumentiere ich, dass diese Genres deutlich mehr gemein haben als erwartet werden würde, sowohl akustisch als auch inhaltlich. Außerdem tendieren Lieder dieser Genres nicht mit dem Mainstreamdiskurs oder politischer Berichterstattung übereinzustimmen. Vor dem Hintergrundpolitischer Unruhen, ökologischer Katastrophen, und soziokultureller Umbrüche im Verlauf der 2000er und 2010er, belegen die Fusions-Subgenres “Midwest Emo”, “folk punk”, “alt.country” [die Kurzform von “alternative Country”], und “bro-country” ähnliche Nischen quer durch die USA, besonders im so genannt “Flyover” oder “Middle” Amerika, die Orte in denen Kultur nicht als existent gilt. Ich verbinde die Ansätze “Structures of feeling” von Raymond Williams und “Flyover Country” von Anthony Harkins. Mit ihnen betreibe ich Close Reading der Songtexte einer repräsentativen Diskografie von Jason Aldean, Florida Georgia Line, Old Crow Medicine Show, Jason Isbell, Hawthorne Heights, Modern Baseball, AJJ, und Defiance, Ohio. Auf die Analyse der Texte folgt eine politische Diskursanalys, welche den popkulturellen Dialog, mit der offiziellen politischen Berichterstattung der Bush und Obama Präsidialverwaltung vergleicht. Durch eine vorsichtige Erörterung der Songtexte und ihrer Kontexte hoffe ich vorgefasste Annahmen zu hinterfragen, die eine strenge Teilung von Punk und Country Genres annimmt. Weiter hoffe ich, den Kontext und die Analyse zu liefern, um bestehende Erwartungen aufzubrechen, und das Verständnis der Kulturproduktion von “Flyover Country” zu verbessern.