

“WHITE MAN’S WORLD:” WHITE, WORKING-CLASS MASCULINE NARRATIVES IN
CONTEMPORARY ALTERNATIVE COUNTRY

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On my honor
I have neither given nor received
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ABSTRACT

Alt-country music is a popular sub-genre in country music, but its contemporary iterations are under-researched compared to mainstream country or alt-country before 2001. This study used a representative sample of three, autobiographical, alt-country songs ("White Man's World," "Long Violent History," and "Home on the Rage") discussing racism in the last ten years. My critical discourse reveals three patterns reoccurring between the songs: authenticity negotiating, violence, and white innocence/culpability. By discussing racism, the three songs challenge the intentional lack of racial discourse in country music, but the songs fail to challenge white supremacy as the songs deflect blame for racism from the artists and their white, rural communities as well as being in support of keeping white supremacist structures. As a result, the songs function more to erase the artists white guilt than it is to dismantle white supremacy.

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INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to answer the questions of how contemporary, alt-country artists construct white, rural masculinity in their music. A paradox exists in the study of country music, with there already existing a great body of research on analyzing country music and its cultural implications and yet it is still frequently dismissed by academics and upper-class, white people as a regressive or “sentimental” gimmick instead of a legitimate field of culture and artistic expression (Malone 1993: 3-77). As Geoff Mann (2008), Cervanté Pope (2020), and Cenate Pruitt (2019) suggests, the country music genre can in fact be incredibly regressive when it comes to many social topics including whiteness, class, and masculinity, but it deserves to be analyzed as a legitimate of music as it is still “one of the most popular forms of music in the United States” where identity and culture, especially of rural America, is continually renegotiated (Ching 200: 15; Mann 2008: 88; Peterson 1997: 254; Pope 2022: 22; Pruitt 2019: 176). As Mann (2008) suggests, modern country music is an inherently white genre, not because they are created and consumed by a majority white audience (though they are), but because country music started to be consumed on mass after the civil movements as a rejection of racial discourse and as a wish to return to a time to a pre-civil rights period of whiteness (Mann 2008: 88).

Mainstream country and especially alternative country (alt-country) are inherently rural, working-class genres as they started as music for poor, rural people and then even as they began to be consumed by middle-class, suburban people, the genre still constructs working-class personas for consumption (Malone 1993: 3-5). They are also dominated by white masculinity, as suggested by the fact that white men have a significantly easier time negotiating the important “country” authenticity that decides who does and does not belong in the genre (Ching 200: 15;

Neal 2020: 214; Peterson 1997: 183-185; Pope 2022: 22). As it is inherently white, working-class, and masculine, country music therefore offers a chance to study whiteness in culture from a working class and masculine perspective. As Ching (2001) suggests, the subgenre alt-country music is characterized by white-masculine performers embracing their rural, working-class identity and rejecting suburban, middle-class values, so that alt-country is the better genre to study working-class specific whiteness and masculine compared to mainstream, which is considered less strictly working-class and masculinity (Ching 2001:55). Alt-country is also considered more political, as mainstream country is meant to be popular and non-transgressive, but in a conservative genre, non-transgressive is still right of center (Pruitt 2019: 176). My study focused on the autobiographical songs of white-masculine, alt-artists Jason Isbell, Tyler Childers, and Nick Shoulders and how they constructed whiteness, class, and gender (Childers 2020, Isbell 2017, Shoulders 2021).

Definition of Terms Used

In my study, I used the terms “working-class”, “rural,” and “country” interchangeably for sake of brevity though they do not have the same meanings. Except when I am directly referencing someone’s theory, when I use one of the three terms, I actually mean “working-class, rural, and country.” For a definition for working-class, I use David Roediger's (2007) term which refers to wage labor “hirelings” from a lower socio-economic status in the United States (Roediger 2007: 13). I use both “rural” and “country” as descriptors for the conservative, “traditional,” Christian, and lower-income culture that is associated with rural whites (Mann 2008: 74) .

I also used “alt-country” when I referenced any non-mainstream country music. There are many terms used to refer to non-mainstream country (hard country, outsider, red dirt, and outlaw,

and new outlaw) but though there are nuances between the terms, I referred to them under the umbrella of alt-country as alt-country refers to any country that is transgressive and more openly political than mainstream (Liptack 2020). As Ching (2001) suggests, alt-country was formed out of rejection of mainstream, “Nashville,” country and “empty sentiments that occupy too large a space in country radio's Top 40” with alt-country being less about popularity and more about experimentation, social commentary, and “creative control” (Ching 2001: 44; Liptack 2020). Though I looked at three “progressive” artists, alt-country does not mean liberal or progressive, as demonstrated by the fact that alt-right David Allan Coe and “arch-conservative” Hank Williams Jr. are still popular figures in the genre (Strauss 2000; McCarthy 2014).

THEORY REVIEW

In his book *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, David Roediger (2007) understands whiteness in the United States as a construct. They suggest that “white workers” constructed “whiteness” because of their lower socioeconomic status (Roediger 2007: 13). To “make peace,” with the conflict between the ideals of independence and wage labor status, they differentiated themselves from enslaved peoples and then other black people during and after the Reconstruction (Roediger 2007: 13-14). Roediger (2007) suggests that white workers developed their “whiteness” in relation to being “not slaves” and “not black:” suggesting that their understanding of themselves as white is intrinsically linked to white supremacy (Roediger 2007: 13-14). Also, it suggests an intrinsic correlation between wage laborers class identity and white supremacy (Roediger 2007: 13-14) In the introduction to the edited edition, Kathleen Cleaver argues that Roediger pulls heavily from W.E.B. DuBois’ theory in his *Black Reconstruction* that “whiteness conferred compensation for exploitative and alienating class relationships” (Roediger 2007: xx). Roediger’s (2007) suggests that the

“working men” have agency when “constructing the meaning of whiteness” and that their racism is not just a product of their own marginalization in the United States' class system (Roediger 2007: xix).

Zeus Leonardo (2009) suggests that racism is frequently understood from “the vantage point of the oppressed” instead of the oppressors so that the focus is on the impact of white supremacy instead white supremacy itself (Leonardo 2009: 79). By obscuring the actors who benefit from and perpetrate white supremacy, racism is constructed as a problem for only people of color while white people's involvement is ignored (Leonardo 2009: 79). By constructing white supremacy as POC issue, Leonardo (2009) suggests that white people “mystify” the “dynamics of structural power relations” and forsake “structural analysis for a focus on the individual” (Leonardo 2009: 80). Obfuscating white people’s involvement in racism protects white supremacy from critical analysis. The lack of knowledge about their race offers white people plausible deniability, as it constructs them as ignorant of racial structures and “their personal and group investment in whiteness” and hides their agency in the continuation of oppression (Leonardo 2009: 107). A characteristic of white supremacy is the denial of the existence of white supremacy and inequality that allows people white people to perpetrate systems of oppression without labelling it as racism (Leonardo 2009: 145). Two other characteristics of whiteness that Leonardo (2009) describes is the “avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group” so that whiteness is naturalized as the norm and the minimization of racism's legacy so that a line is drawn between past atrocities and the current time in order to obscure white supremacy's continued historic, economic and cultural importance (Leonardo 2009: 29-170).

Black theologian, James Cone (1969) suggests that white solidarity with anti-racist movement functions more to defend white identity and construct innocence than it is to liberate black people (Cone 1969: 67; McGee 2017: 548). James Cone understands whiteness as a paradoxical identity: with whiteness referencing to “actual, white-skinned people or symbolically to the oppressors” (McGee 2017: 543). He also understands blackness as also both literal and symbolic: with blackness referencing skin color or symbolically representing “‘all victims of oppression’ who seek ‘liberation from whiteness’” (McGee 2017: 548). Cone (1969) suggests white liberals are white people who understand themselves in solidarity with black movement but are also anti any “extremist” behaviors that might challenge any “rights or privileges pertaining” to their identity as oppressors (Cone 1969: 67). White liberals anti-racist work functions more as “redemption” for their culpability in perpetrating oppression than it is meant to challenge oppression that they benefit from. Cone (1969) suggests a major part of white liberal, redemption is constructing themselves as innocent from perpetrating racism because of their “liberality towards black people” and essentializing the problem of racism to a white “other” (“racists, conservatives, and the moderately liberal”) that they publicly denounce (Cone 1969:53-68). As they challenge any real change to systemic racism, Cone suggests that white liberals' performance of anti-racism function more as a way for them to retain their whiteness without culpability in oppression than it is about Black liberation (McGee 2017: 556).

In my study I understand the relationship between race, class, and gender through the lens of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s (1992) theory of metalanguage (Higginbotham 1992: 251). Higginbotham (1992) understands race as socially constructed and “the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another” (Higginbotham 1992: 253). They suggest that race has a “powerful, all-encompassing effect on

the construction and representation of other social and power relation:” meaning that all forms of power and oppression are defined by their relation to the race of the systems and actors (Higginbotham 1992: 253). In relation to my study, this means I will be understanding working-class discourses as specifically white and masculinity discourse as also specifically white.

LITERATURE REVIEW

White, Rural, Working-Class Identity and Authentic Masculinity

Country music constructs white, rural, working-class, masculinity as authentic masculinity. In their lyrical analysis, Barbara Ching (2001) suggests that after country music became more mainstream after World War II, “hard” (alternative) country artists embraced their white trash identity as a rejection of the soft, “middle class masculinity” of mainstream country: with hardness being characterized by hypermasculinity and a rejection of femininity (Ching 2001: 44-55). They performed the characteristics of white trash-ness that the middle class derided them for: embracing their “hillbilly” image of “southern-ness,” “unrestrained emotion,” and an imagined citizenship to a “cultural backwater” (Ching 2001: 21-60). Ching (2001) suggests that the “hard” masculinity of alt-country singers, like David Allen Coe or Waylon Jennings, transgressed middle class values and was constructed as “authentic” masculinity compared to middle class masculinity.

White women and black country artists did not embrace the “hillbilly” identity because transgressing middle class standards does not afford them the same cultural capital of “authentic masculinity” like it did white men (Ching 2001: 44). In their content analysis of “good o’boy” narratives in mainstream country music after the Recession, Jocelyn R. Neal (2016) suggests that

as rural working-class identity represents authentic masculinity, the white, middle-class, and urban identity represented authentic femininity (Neal 2016: 35). When white women do embrace a “white trash” identity in their music like Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman,” Nadine Hubbs (2016) suggests that it not only a rejection of middle-class values, but also the non-white trash femininity that working class men expect of women (Hubbs 2016: 234). In contrast, Shannon E.M. O’Sullivan (2016) suggests in their analysis of *Duck Dynasty* that white men from higher a higher socioeconomic class will perform a white trash identity because a white-working-class, rural masculinity holds “tremendous symbolic power as markers of masculine authenticity” (O’Sullivan 2016: 370).

That is not to say all country artists, even within the alternative genre, were hegemonic in their approach to masculinity. Ching (2001) discusses the difference in how Hank Williams Sr and Hank Williams Jr approach their transgressive, working-class masculinity differently. Sr’s performance was more emotionally expressive than what was permitted for middle-class white men at the time but was still a “reflective and restrained” critique of the happy hillbilly archetype as well as the “violent, shiftless, redneck” archetype (Ching 2001: 59-60). Jr., instead, embraced the “violent, shiftless, redneck” and the “good ol’ boy” archetypes as a rejection of his father’s legacy and a way to embrace working-class, hard masculinity (Ching 2001: 60-78) .

Despite the variation, Cenate Pruitt’s (2019) content analysis of top country hits between 2004 and 2019 suggests that while the dominant archetypes in country of “the lover, the family man, the country boy” challenges white collar and “urban” masculinity, they majority still reinforce heterosexual, conservative, and white masculine narratives (Pruitt 2019: 176). Pruitt (2019) suggests even contemporary hard country artists like Sturgill Simpson and Jason Isbell who openly challenge the conservative politics of mainstream country music, reinforce

normative conservative masculinity like heteronormativity, being Christian, or being their family's breadwinner (Pruitt 2019: 176).

Whiteness in Country Music

Country music is frequently understood as both performed and consumed by a majority white audience (Mann 2008: 74). In their content and historical comparative review of country song and their consumption, Geoff Mann (2008) suggests that it is not the majority white creators and consumers that make it sound "white," but instead that "contemporary commercial country music" constructs a specific white identity that feels isolated from the "complex, dynamic, and unstable world in which 'traditional' identities, roles, and expectations are explicitly challenged" (Mann 2008: 74-84). Mann suggests that though country music has been understood as the music for all "American people," it is mostly created and consumed by white people and upholds conservative values like "tradition, faith, family (of the 'traditional' sort), nationalism, and so on" (Mann 2008: 74). The "antidote" to the isolation in country music is "nostalgia" for an imagined "rural past" that though not explicitly white, became popular immediately after the Civil Rights Movement, suggesting that it is a reaction to race politics in the United States (Mann 2008: 88). Mann suggests that after the Civil Rights Movement, a wider range of white people, (not just the poor, rural whites who are associated with country) began listening to country, suggesting that many white consumed country for the nostalgia of a white, "rural past" (Mann 2008, 90). The intentional lack of racial discourse in country music demonstrates Leonardo's (2009) theory that whiteness intentionally rejects the acknowledgment of race and inequality in order to obscure the existence of white supremacy and to treat whiteness as the accepted norm (Leonardo 2009: 29-145).

The imagined rural past constructed in country music can either ignore racism in white, rural, working-class culture or construct a narrative of white innocence and white victimhood. John B. Hatch (2015) does a lyrical and contextual analysis of Brad Paisley's "Accidental Racist," (a narrative style song about unintentional act of racism) and suggests that the song had "good intentions" and was remarkable that it was willing to have a conversation about racism in a genre that is so unwilling to address it (Hatch 2015: 109). Yet, Hatch (2016) suggests that Paisley attempts to rewrite Confederate iconography like the Confederate flag as a symbol of "Southern pride" and heritage instead of its associations with "historically rooted, socially sustained hegemony of White domination" (Hatch 2015: 101-102). Paisley portrays anyone who is offended by his use of the flag as offended by his freedom of speech and his identity as a "proud rebel son" instead of the flag's association with slavery and racism: portraying white, rural people as not only innocent of white supremacy, but as victims of the country's racial discourse about slavery's legacy (Hatch 2015:102). Travis S. Stimeling (2011) suggests that even when country artists address and deconstructs the racism within the genre, like with Austin's progressive scene, they still constructed "nostalgia" for an imagined past like Mann (2008) suggests (Stimeling 2011: 57). The audience consumed the progressive music without "acknowledging racism, misogyny, and xenophobia" that plagued the genre and culture or the critiques that the progressive music was trying to make (Stimeling 2011: 57). Country artists and country audiences' intentional erasure of the continual structural impact that the Confederacy and white supremacy in rural community have in the United States demonstrates Leonardo's (2009) theory that whiteness intentionally minimizes the impact historical systems of white supremacy have on society today or white people's continual involvement in structures of white supremacy (Leonardo 2009: 170).

Politics of Authenticity in Country

Authenticity functions in country music as a way of deciding which identities and narratives belong in the genre as well as deciding who is allowed to experiment and critique the industry while still being considered country. In their 1997 book *Creating Country Music, Fabricating Authenticity*, Richard A. Peterson uses a field theory analysis of how country was “institutionalized,” the meaning given to authenticity, and the conditions that will foster new forms of authenticity in the future (Peterson 1997: 183-185). What “authenticity” means in country music is frequently renegotiated in a political struggle to naturalize one form of authenticity or the other in country music (Peterson 1997: 254). Peterson (1997) suggests the type of pedigree that afforded artists immediate authenticity was based on a specific type of working-class pedigree and performance, suggesting:

“The verbal accent, vocabulary, grammar, and prior rough work experience affirm that a person is from the great geographic cradle of country music and hasn’t let education get the better of a working-class identification. Performers without this full pedigree have to do special authenticity work to gain acceptance” (P.260).

Peterson suggests that in order to be original or experimental in their music, both people with the pedigree or the outsiders who have to do “special authenticity work” had to constantly defend their authenticity and “right to speak” (Peterson 1997: 218-260). How they defended their authenticity was by embracing country signifiers like “the boots, the hat, the outfit, the soft rural accent, as well as the sound and subjects of the song” (Peterson 1997: 253).

A limitation in Peterson’s (1997) theory is that they do not consider race, gender, sexuality or any other kind of identity besides a specific type of white, masculinity working-class influences who is accepted as authentic and who is allowed to experiment. In their rhetorical analysis of the discourse surrounding Black country artists, Cervanté Pope (2020) suggests that the country music industry and its audience becomes more concerned about the authenticity of

country artists when the artists are Black and incorporate Black culture into their music despite Black music's historical and contemporary influence on country (Pope 2020: 6). Pope (2020) suggests the authenticity discourse functions to gatekeep people of color and their narratives from country music than maintain any real authenticity (Pope 2020: 22). Some Black, female artists like Linda Martell could gain authenticity, but her authenticity was dependent on her “paternalistic” white producers who would promote her as a country artist but expected “complete deference:” with the producers cutting references to race in her music and marketing her as a kind of vaudeville (Pecknold 2016: 147-152). Jocelyn R. Neal (2020) sonic analysis of Chris Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson’s music suggests that both are praised for bringing back “traditional” and authentic country despite both embracing soul music styling in their music and either avoiding the V chord progression that defines historical country music or, in Stapleton’s cover of “Tennessee Whiskey,” directly stripping the chord away in his version (Neal 2020: 215-222). Neal (2020) suggests that white artists like Stapleton and Simpson are considered traditional country despite not using traditional country sonic elements, but Black artists like Ray Charles’ and his *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* is not understood as country because of its experimentation: suggesting suggesting an authentic country vocal or sonic sound is defined more by the race of the artists than a definable sound.

How my research will add to existing literature on country music

Two major gaps in country music that I hope my critical discourse analysis will expand on is the lack of lyrical analysis done in contemporary, alt-country. The lyrical analysis being done on country music in the last thirty years like Hatch’s (2017) Hubbs’s, (2016), and Neal’s (2016) studies are mostly done on mainstream country, but as the music in mainstream country is

not meant to be transgressive of conservative values, it means that most of the existing literature on country is from an explicitly conservative and traditional lens (Pruitt 2019: 176). The research on the alt-country scene tends to be old and not including recent the contemporary scene, with Geoff Mann (2008) analyzing the music of alt-artist of Merle Haggard, Stimeling analyzing the alt-country scene with Waylon Jennings and the 1970s progressive Austin scene, and Ching (2001) analyzing alt-country before 2001. The problem with most of the literature being is that it does not include current discourses in contemporary alt-country like topics like whiteness, class, and masculinity. Existing literature on contemporary alt-country music is either a sonic analysis like Neal's (2020) study on Chris Stapelton and Sturgill Simpson focuses or not the focus like in Pruitt's (2019) analysis of Simpson and Jason Isbell. By leaving out contemporary alt-country, it leaves out about 30 years of content and social discourse in the genre. My study will expand on country music literature with a critical discourse analysis that will analyze the discourses in three alt-country songs from the last ten years. My study will also expand on the literature by analyzing explicitly progressive music where most of the literature has been the conservative music of the mainstream genre. By focusing on songs from the last ten years my research will include contemporary discourse on whiteness, class, and masculinity in the alt-country genre.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Design

CDA is the ideal analytical approach to understand the underlying implication and power dynamics of progressive country as it situates the critical discourse developed in the texts within larger fields of discourse (Mullet 2018: 116). In this way, CDA allowed me to analyze the discourses held in progressive country songs not only in relation to each other or the country

genre, but in the greater field of whiteness, class, and masculinity studies. Dianna R. Mullet (2018) suggests that CDA is a “qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities” and that its goal is to “uncover implicit or concealed power relations” in text (Mullet 2018: 116-117). CDA does away with this idea of good intentions as unconscious discursive choices are understood as being as purposeful and having the same consequences of conscious discursive choices (Mullet 2018: 116).

How power and domination is linguistically reproduced is a fundamental aspect of CDA, with power being understood as the “chance that a person in a social relationship can achieve his or her own will against the resistance of others” (Mullet 2018: 118). Power influences “knowledge, beliefs, understandings, ideologies, norms, attitudes, values, and plans” of a group and is reproduced in the language of cultural discourse (Mullet 2018: 119). CDA understands institutions and dominating systems as the producer of systems of power (Mullet 2018: 119). My research was specifically on how dominant institutions reproduce power in the small, progressive arenas (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021).

Sampling

I used purposive sampling in choosing the songs that I analyzed. W. Lawrence Neuman (2006) suggests that purposive sampling in qualitative research is the “a nonrandom sample in which the researcher uses a wide range of methods to locate all possible cases of a highly specific” groups (Neuman 2006: 222). Neuman (2006) suggests that in qualitative research, quantitative samples are intended to go in depth on a “small collection of cases, units, or activities” that illuminate aspects of “social life” (Neuman 2006: 222). My sample represented a specific genre: autobiographical songs by white, male, alt-country artists that have been made in

the last ten years. Using CDA, I was able to analyze the ideologies and systems of power developed in the songs discourses in depth.

The songs I selected are Jason Isbell’s “White Man’s World”, Tyler Childers’s “Long Violent History”, and Nick Shoulders’s “Home on the Rage” (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). I categorized the three men as alt-country artists because of the politicalness and anti-mainstream nature of their country music which Cenate Pruitt (2019) and Barbara Ching (2001) suggest constitutes them as belonging to the alt-country genre (Ching 2001: 44-55; Pruitt 2019: 176). I used critical discourse analysis to analyze the lyrical discourses in the songs of progressive, alt-country to understand the ways in which alt-country constructs whiteness, gender and class. I picked songs that followed a reoccurring narrative in alt-country: preogressive, autobiographical, songs discussing racism. This specific narrative represented a subgenre of progressive music directly addressing whiteness in a genre that, though characterized by its transgressiveness and politicalness, is not inherently liberal. I picked artists with white, male positionality as they are representative of the majority of alt-country artists. I wanted to analyze the racial, gendered, and class discourse being held in a preogressive country.

Instrumentation and Procedure

In my research, I used Fairclough's model for CDA as described by Hilary Janks (1997) to analyze “White Man’s World,” “Long Violent History,” and “Home on the Rage” (Janks 1997: 329). Fairclough outlines three “interrelated” steps in analyzing discourse which are “text analysis (description) ,” “processing analysis (interpretation),” and “social analysis (explanation)” (Janks 1997: 329). The structure is supposed to focus on “the signifiers that make up the text, the specific linguistic selections, their juxtapositioning, their sequencing, their

layout” so as to find “interesting patterns and disjunctions” in the discourse that can be interpreted by the researcher of having social implications (Janks 1997: 329). The goal of studying the language and the choices made by the creators is to understand the discourses playing out in the text and the power and “ideological forces at work” in the pieces (Janks 1997:335). Janks (1997) suggests that the three steps of description, interpretation, and explanation are interconnected enough that it does not matter which order the steps are done or whether the research is linear.

Prior to starting my research, I was aware of Brad Paisley’s “Accidental Research” and Hatch’s (2015) study of the white, working-class, and masculine themes in the song and I wanted to do research on similar themes with contemporary alt-country music. I selected songs with country artists of similar identities (white, country, and male) to Paisley and song with similar styles and themes to “Accidental Racist.” My first step was social analysis, where I studied existing research on white, working-class masculinity in country music, whiteness in country music, and politics of authenticity in the genre. The social analysis gave me the context to understand existing patterns in country music and the social implication of Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders using them. I did not do text analysis of the songs in isolation from each other: organizing my research so that I coded the same part of all three songs at once. The patterns or disjunctions I coded for were based on the checklist that Janks (1997) and my advisor, Dr. Figueroa, provided as well as existing patterns in country music or interesting motifs that I found reoccurring in the songs.

The checklist I used from Figueroa

- Abstraction of subject
- Repetition of particular words
- Frequencies (how many times has a word/verb/noun) been used and what does that reveal about power at play

- Collective nouns rather than direct naming
- How people and things are gendered

The checklist I used from Janks (1997)

- Choices of mood
- The thematic structure of the text
- The information focus (Pp. 335)

The checklist for existing patterns in country music or interesting motif were

- How narrators reference themselves or their audience
- Sentence types
- Verb tenses
- Pronoun usage
- Informal/incorrect grammar
- Common phrases references
- References to Christianity
- References to the mainstream country establishment
- References to racial violence (Native American genocide, police brutality, anti-black violence, etc.)
- References to heritage

There were many more patterns that Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders developed in their songs, but those were the ones I both established before coding and ended up using. After coding, I interpreted the recurring motifs in songs in relation to other codes as well as my social analysis work. Though I looked at three separate songs from three separate artists, the songs shared common patterns and themes: suggesting Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders are responding to same discourses and ideological forces in the same way.

Positionality and Ethic Concerns

My major concerns in conducting my study was that I am not from the working-class cultural background that I was researching and as a white person, I had my own issues with white innocence. The fact that I do not understand the lived experiences of being working-class

is a blind spot in my study. In the same vein, I have the lived experience of being white in the United States, which makes me feel comfortable discussing whiteness, though I have my own blind spots and struggle with white innocence. With the class and whiteness blind spots, I analyzed three, similar songs in depth in order to triangulate my findings and as a way to increase the credibility and validity of my findings and interpretations. I based the working-class/whiteness codes and how I interpreted patterns in my study on the themes on class, whiteness, and country music that other researchers presented in their theory. Examples of this is how I used Richard Peterson's and Barbara Ching (2001)'s theory of authenticity in country music to code for when the artists are signifying a white, country, masculinity like accent and naming when they are from rural communities. I also used James Cone's (1969) theory of white liberal solidarity as well as Brittany A. Aronson's (2017) understanding of savorism extensively in how I interpreted white innocence in the songs (Aronson 2017: 36).

THE STUDY

Case Study 1: "White Man's World"

Isbell's song was narrative style, with him referencing himself in first person singular 14 times along with his wife and daughter (2017). The song was about his recent understanding of his own privilege as a white man and coming to terms to the racism, Native American genocide, and sexism. He laments the times that something racist happened and he did nothing about it, referencing how he pretended not to hear another white man's offensive jokes. The violence he referenced is slavery ("oceans of cotton"), Native American genocide ("bones of red man under my feet;" "burial grounds") and gatekeeping (referencing how his wife wants to "change that Nashville sound" but that the system is not going to let her because she is a women) (Isbell 2017). The struggle in the song was his apathy for the "world" and his desire to destroy it ("want

to take a shot of cocaine and burn it down”) but that the “fire in (his) little girl's eyes,” a phrase repeated twice, gives him hope (Isbell 2017).

The narrative fits Pruitt's (2019) definition of the “family man” masculine archetype, with Isbell having referred to his wife as “momma,” his daughter with diminutive terms like “baby” or “little girl,” and referencing their home “under our roof” (Isbell 2017; Pruitt 2019: 176). When he referred to women in his son, he referred to his wife as “momma” and his daughter as little girl, suggesting Isbell was only conscious of women's struggle in relation to their roles in family (Isbell 2017). He positioned himself as a Christian by referencing his “faith” and the “man upstairs:” with both Pruitt and Peterson (1997) suggesting that performing Christianity confers either authentic masculinity or just general authenticity that gives him a “right to speak” in the country (Isbell 2017; Peterson 1997: 254). I categorized informal or incorrect grammar as presenting with a rural, southern accent: with him utilizing it four times. The infrequency might suggest he is just singing with his natural accent. As Peterson (1997) suggests, natural or affected, the accent still signifies a white, working-class, rural identity that would position Isbell as more authentic (Peterson 1997: 254).

Isbell's white, male privilege was a continual theme throughout the song, with the word “white” repeated once in the title and ten times in the song, as well as him repeating a variation of “I'm a white man living in a white man's world” four times (Isbell 2017). Isbell still engaged with white, male innocence, with him acknowledging the United State's legacy of racism and sexism while separating himself from the perpetrators. When he talked about country music's gatekeeping of female country singers, he referred to “Nashville,” which is frequently used by alt-country as a synecdoche for mainstream country and discusses how “they” are not going to

let her: excusing alt-country's own gendered gatekeeping as well as his own culpability as a country artist (Ching 2001: 133).

Isbell separated his past acts of racism and ignorance with his current state by using past tense verb to contrast his involvement in racism (“thought,” “I’d,” “pretended,” “heard”) versus his present tense to describe his new state of knowledge and apathy for the system (Isbell 2017). His approach to white guilt felt patronizing, performative, and almost silly, like when he stated how he reflects on his past misdeeds when he “looks into a black man’s eyes” or how he only has hope for the system “because of the fire in (his) little girl’s eyes” (Isbell 2017). His call to arms for the audience to wake and change was an imperative statement, with him referring to the listener with “you” pronouns and instructing them that their “creature comforts aren't the only things worth fighting for” and “it’s not too late:” positing himself as separate and in a superior position to preach to them (Isbell 2017). Isbell reinforces his own white, masculine innocence: separating his current self from systemic racism or his past act of racism and preaching for his audience to follow in his footsteps.

Case Study 2: “Long Violent History”

The general plot of “Long Violent History” was that the narrator acknowledges the reports of news, which given the context of the statement, was in response to the events of 2020 (Hudack 2020). There was a tone of apathy or skepticism, with the narrator describing the events glibly “as the worst that it's been since the last time that it happened” as well questioning the credibility of the “wild speculation/tall tales and hearsay and absolute lies” of the news (Childers 2020). The narrator resented how the news is preventing them “from enjoyin' our evening” and describing the news in the forceful language of “shoving its roots through the screens in our face” (Childers 2020). Describing how the news and “the world” has misrepresented him as

“white boy from Hickman” (Hickman being a rural, town in Kentucky) as “belligerent” and “ignorant,” Childers describes how white, rural, working-class people have been victimized by the news and larger system (Childers 2017). Yet, Childers suggested that despite him and other white, rural, working-class people being victimized by the larger system, the system has “never once made me scared just to be” and asked his listeners to imagine if they were “just constantly worryin'/ kickin' and fightin', beggin' to breathe” in reference to the police brutality against people of color (Childers 2017). In this way, Childers suggested the violence that white, rural people and POC experience are not the same level of difficulty, despite the very real class discrimination that white, rural people experience. He asked his white, rural listeners if they experienced the brutality like people of color, would they rebel in militia style or would they be complacent.

Childers' song was narrative style, with him having referred to himself in first person singular six times. The song employed interrogative sentence types six times, so that the narrator is directly addressing his and including them in his line of questioning while using first person plural eight times (“our,” “we,” and “us”) so that he united himself with his “white rural listeners” as well as his own line of questioning (Childers 2020; Hudack 2020). He also aligned himself with his white rural listeners instead of separating himself like Isbell does in “White Man’s World. The narrator described himself as “a white boy from Hickman:” depicting himself as a boy as well as aligning himself with a small, rural town in Kentucky (Hickman) and the pejorative “hick” for rural, white trash people (Childers 2020). As Ching suggests (2001), it is common for alt-country singers to embrace white trash identity and the characteristics associated with it as a rejection of middle-class masculinity and values. By aligning himself with the word the pejorative hick, Childers is embraced his rural identity: both rejecting middle class values as

well as establishing authentic hard masculinity. He used informal grammar 12 times, with eight of those times being g-dropping. As suggested with Isbell, the accent, affected or real, does signify to the audience that Childers had an authentic white rural, working class. With the accent aligning himself with “hick,” his reference to growing up in a rural Kentucky town, and his accent, Childers defended his country “pedigree” and therefore, his “right to speak” and experiment while remaining in the genre (Peterson 1997: 260).

By referencing “this mountain” (Appalachia), rural Kentucky, and working-class identity suggests that Childers aligned himself with a mountaineer, hillbilly archetype (Malone 1993: 77). In some ways he reinforces the characteristics. He directly addressed his white rural listeners, erasing rural experience of people of color, as well as gendering his listeners as “boys,” erasing female or genderqueer rural experiences (Childers 2020). His performance also resembled the white, southern “rebel son” archetype seen in “Accidental Racist,” with him referencing militia style violence (“come into town in a stark ravin' anger/ Looking for answers and armed to the teeth? / Thirty-ought-sixes, Papaw's old pistol,”) (Childers 2020; Hatch 2015:102; Putchya 2022: 11). Childers deconstructed the mountaineer archetype by openly discussing social issues like fake news and police brutality where mountaineer music is historically characterized by its a-politicalness. He embraced the violence and anti-establishment characteristics of the “rebel son” archetype to discuss racial police brutality and almost mocked his listeners for being so proud of their rebel heritage but still “tucking (their) tale and trying to abide” in the face of systemic violence: connoting imagery of a cowardly dog (Childers 2020). Childers still engages in white innocence as he suggests throughout the song that violence is being committed by an abstract other referenced as “they” (2x) , “it” (8x), or “world” that also victimizes the white, rural community (Childers 2020). He suggested white rural community has culpability in the

continuation of the violence though, with him asking them to “imagine” the reality of being a person of color in the United States and suggesting that “tucking (their) tales” and refusing to fight against systemic oppression will lead to a “long violent history” (Childers 2020).

Case Study 3: “Home on the Rage”

“Home on the Rage” was a narrative style song, with first person singular used four times. Shoulders positioned himself as Christian by referencing Luke 9:57-62 with the line “so keep your eye on the light and your hand on the plow” (Henry2022; Shoulders 2021). He also used informal/incorrect grammar twice (“that don’t love you back;” “neath”) which is an infrequent amount, but both the reference to the New Testament and the grammar suggest Shoulders used white, rural, masculine signifiers that confer his authenticity and a “right to speak” in the country genre (Peterson 1997: 254; Shoulders 2021). He also referenced his heritage in relation to the land. Compared to Isbell and Childers, Shoulders did not use any gendered pronouns or nicknames, and referenced very little about himself as an individual. He did reference his own relationship to the land and the southern United States as well as including specific elements of the history area. The general outline of the song is the narrator questioning his relationship to the land of the south: with him reflecting on the history of racial violence, southern heritage, and general feelings of apathy.

A major theme continued in the song was how land in the south and violence in the south are intertwined. Some of the references are related to the destruction of nature for capitalistic purposes (“torched the prairie for plantation, they broke the mountains for coal”). He also referenced specific examples of racial violence like Native American genocide (“land that they stole”) as well as slavery and racial violence (“blood on the cotton,” “rope on the bow,” and

“home of the slave” twice) (Shoulders 2021). He did not discuss class, but with lines like “ten generations” twice “our heritage is hate” suggested that southern heritage is a major theme, with him specifically referencing his and others white, rural southern heritage and its complicity with racial violence like in the line “my conscience is woven to the rope on the bow” (Shoulders 2021) There was a struggle in the song between “love” for the area verses the heritage of violence that the land represents, like with the line “I'd never love a land that didn't love me back” (Shoulders 2021). There was a continued motif of destruction in the song, with Shoulders intercutting between past verbs (“been,” “torched,” broke,” and “stole”) and present participle (“gasping,” “burning”) so that violence history and the present are blended (Shoulders 2021).

Shoulders' song felt more about questioning his and others complex relationship to their white, rural heritage than actually advocating for a specific course of action. He used first person plural three times (“we”) and has four interrogative statements, so that Shoulders included himself as well as his audience in his line of questioning(Shoulders 2021). Two of the interrogative lines seem rhetorical (“Why seek to conserve in nothing but name?” and “How can the land of the free be the home of the slave?”) and more meant to reinforce the corruption or hypocrisy in society than requesting an actual response (Shoulders 2021). With the motifs of destruction, the narrator seemed to grapple with apathy, comparing current society's onslaught of racial violence and destruction to “Rome...burning” and elicit a sense of hopelessness he feels at the situation (“we play a rigged game”) (Shoulders 2021). Shoulders's call to arm was part of speech with a reference to Luke 9:57-62 (“So keep your eye on the light and your hand on the plow”) that references Christians cannot neglect their “duty to God” once they start following him (Henry: 2022). In referencing Luke 9:9:57-62 , Shoulders suggested that his listeners should

continue towards the cause know that they know the truth, though the song is vague on what the cause is.

“Home on the Rage” engaged in white innocence, as Shoulders framed racial violence like it is being committed by an abstract other community: using a collective thirderson “their” and “they” five times to reference the different types of violence song (Shoulders 2021). In this way, the responsibility of violence is focused on a subject outside Shoulders or his white rural community. Also, without a clear call to arms and the general tone of apathy, the song veered into performative white guilt, with Shoulder’s centering his own feelings and white, rural heritage in the context of the history of racial violence. That being said, the song is unique in the genre of country for not only willing to discuss racism, but how intertwined white, rural heritage is with generations of violence. With his rhetorical questioning, frequently use of second person, and his references to his “rage” at white rural heritage and those who “seek conserve in nothing but name,” Shoulders veered into soap boxing and lecturing his audience (Shoulders 2021). Yet, by including himself in the white rural community and questing his own complicated feelings towards his love for the land despite its “heritage” of “hate,” Shoulders did not present himself as superior or all knowing, so the song was more about his personal confusion and apathy than him lecturing others (Shoulders 2021).

Results

Authenticity and Originality

Authenticity discourse in country music is important because it decides who what narratives and persons are allowed a “right to speak” in the genre as well as who is allowed to experiment and critique and still remain under its umbrella (Peterson 1997: 254). As the narratives are autobiographical, I did consider the artists positionality as white men within the

country genre (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). Both Isbell and Childers engage in the performance of authentic masculinity with Isbell adopting the “family man” archetype and Childers the “mountaineer” and “rebel son:” with Childers gendering his listeners as boys (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017). Isbell and Shoulders both use Christian references which Peterson (1997) suggests is a signifier important for a country artist. All three artists engage in adopting white, rural working-class signifiers like the informal/ incorrect grammar that suggests a southern accent. Childers and Shoulders referencing their attachment to rural communities or land in the South: establishing their rural pedigree. All three artists challenge the characteristics and legacy associated with the white, rural working-class identity, yet the fact that the three artists perform white, rural masculinity suggests that a white, rural, masculinity is still an important decider in determining who is a country artist. As Pope (2020) suggests being white is necessary to gain authenticity in country music, it might suggest that by negotiating authenticity, Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders are defending that they belong in the white dominant genre (Pope 2020: 22).

Destructive and Constructive Violence

Violence, especially racial violence, are prominent motifs in all three songs. All three songs reference racial violence in the United States, with Childers referencing police brutality and Isbell and Shoulders referencing slavery (“fields of cotton” and “blood on cotton”) and Native American genocide (“bones of the red man” and “land that they stole”) (Childers 2020, Isbell 2017, Shoulders 2021). Isbell and Childers address violence perpetrated by a broader lens, both referencing the “world” and Childers referencing the news and Isbell referencing a “nation” (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017;) Shoulders is more specific to the racism in the Southern United States. Individually, Isbell references gendered gatekeeping in country music; Childers the

victimization of white, rural communities; and Shoulders environmental destruction and capitalism.

All men moralize racial violence as wrong but vary in how they moralize violence outside of a racial context. “White Man’s World” and “Home on the Rage,” has both narrators discussing their apathy for the system and that their wish to destroy the system (“Want to take a shot of cocaine and burn it down” and “I ask what’s worth keeping”) (Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). Both songs suggest that the narrators fight against their destructive feelings towards the system (“I still have faith, but I don’t know why” and “our heritage is hate, though there’s plenty to save”) and positions violence and destruction of the system as a negative thing. (Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). “Long Violent History” embraces the rebel, white, rural archetype and asks whether the white, rural community is going to fight against an oppressive system or cowardly ignore systemic violence. Childers treat the militia style rebellion of a “rebel son” as a positive form of violence while moralizing the violence that comes with white, rural people ignoring systems of oppression as wrong (Childers 2020). By embracing the “rebel son” archetype, Childers creates a space where he and his listeners can be proud of their rebel heritage while also being conscious of racism (Childers 2020). Yet, it begs the question of whether the “rebel son” archetype should be separated from its association to white supremacy and racial violence and whether Childers is allowing an inherently racist archetype to continue by repackaging rebel heritage as socially conscious (Childers 2020).

White Innocence and Culpability

White innocence and white culpability are prominent themes in the three songs. Isbell addresses the systemic racism perpetrated by white people and the privilege that he and other men benefit from as white men (Isbell 2017). He references his past acts of racism or sexism (not

acknowledging offensive jokes) and discusses how mainstream country gatekeeps women.

Though he addresses systemic racism and how he benefits from white privilege, Isbell constructs individual white innocence by separating himself from his past acts of racism or the current racism. He positions himself as superior to his audience so that his acknowledgment of racism feels more about him performing goodness than a critique of his whiteness (Isbell 2017).

Childers addresses police brutality and the ongoing racial violence perpetrated by social media and greater society (Childers 2020). He engages with white innocence by positing the white, rural community as separate from police brutality and the ongoing racial violence perpetrated by social media and greater society. Childers suggests white, rural communities are victimized by the same society as people of color. Yet, he suggests white, rural communities still do not experience the kind of violence of people of color and that they culpable in the continuation of racial violence if they do nothing to prevent it. Shoulder relationship to white innocence and culpability is a little more complicated (Shoulders 2021). Shoulders frequently references how intertwined his southern identity is with historical and contemporary racism, but he also engaged with referring to the perpetrators of violence as an abstract other that functions to separate himself from systemic violence. With his song about southern heritage and identity, it can feel like “Home on the Rage” is centering a white narrative and feelings in the discourse about racial violence, and without a clear call to arms, the song can feel like Shoulders performing white guilt (Shoulders 2021).

Discussion

Even when racism is discussed in the country genre, it is usually portrayed as a problem only for people of color but not for the white artists or their audience. Leonardo (2009) suggests that focusing on the people oppressed by whiteness instead of white people themselves protect

whiteness from critical analysis and obscures white people's agency as well as "personal and group and investment" in the continuation of oppression (Leonardo 2009: 107). White people's lack of awareness about their own race is frequently portrayed as kind naïve, white ignorance that manifests as white innocence when it's used as an excuse for why white people are not more aware of systemic violence (Leonardo 2009: 107). Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders all focus their narrative about racism from the "vantage point of the oppressed," with Isbell and Shoulders referencing racial violence like Native American genocide or slavery were Childers focuses on police brutality (Childers 2020; Leonardo 2009: 79; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). When they reference the actors behind the violence, its portrayed in vague terms, like "they," in reference to social media, or some form of systems of power outside themselves or their white, rural community (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). When Isbell discusses his culpability in racial violence, it is great emphasis in how that his racist behavior is all in the past: exemplifying Leonardo's (2009) theory that whiteness "draws a line" between past forms of racism and contemporary times in order to minimize the relevancy of racial legacies (Isbell 2017; Leonardo 2009: 170). When Childers and Shoulders discuss white people's involvement in racial violence, they still portray their white, rural community as not as responsible as an abstract other: minimizing their white, rural communities historical and contemporary involvement in white supremacy (Childers 2020; Shoulders 2021). Childers even goes as far as to divorce the "rebel son" archetype from its association with the Confederacy and white supremacy: repacking an inherently white supremacist archetype as social conscious (Childers 2020). By focusing on racism as an issue outside of themselves , the artists erase the continual way they and their communities benefits and perpetrate white supremacy.

Geoff Mann (2008) suggested that country music upholds conservative values like “faith, family (of the ‘traditional’ sort), nationalism, and so on” that is coded as white (Mann 2008: 74). Mann (2008) suggests that after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, a wider audience of white people began consuming country because of the association of country music with a “rural past” that reflected a nostalgia for pre-Civil Rights period of whiteness (Mann 2008: 70-90). Country artists are outliers therefor when they acknowledge the existence of racism at all just because country music is created and consumed as a reaction against racial discourse in the United States. But as Cone (1969) suggests, white people’s solidarity with anti-racist performances can function to reify whiteness and white identity (Cone 1969: 67; McGee 2017: 548). He suggests that when white people’s solidarity rejects the extreme, systemic change that challenges their identity as white people, then their solidarity is more about absolving their white guilt than it is about dismantling systemic racism (McGee 2017: 556). Isbell and Shoulders discuss the systemic racial violence happening in America, with Shoulders addressing how interconnected his white, rural heritage is with systemic racism, but ultimately both understand extreme change as a negative of things that they try to reject (“I still have faith, but I don't know why” and “our heritage is hate, though there’s plenty to save”) (Isbell; Shoulders 2021). Though both men address white supremacy, the fact that they are ultimately in support of maintaining the white structures suggests that their condemnation of the white supremacy in their system is more absolving themselves and, for Shoulders, their white, rural communities of guilt by performing anti-racism (Shoulders 2021). Childers does have a call to arms in his song for his white, rural community to take extreme action against systems of power, but it falls flat because of how he does not deconstruct white supremacy in his own community and how he separates the southern rebel archetype from its historical association with white supremacy and racial violence (Childers

202). The three artists moralize racism for a white other, which Cone (1969) suggests is a way for them to deflect white supremacy outside their community as well as perform a type of antiracism where they are constructed as redeemed, or innocent, of any involvement in white supremacy while still retaining their whiteness.

Isbell is paternalistic towards Black people and women, engaging in the white savior complex. He has lines about how bad he feels about racism when he “looks in a Black man’s eyes” or about sexism when he thinks about his daughter (Isbell 2017). He suggests the plight of Black people and women are why he is inspired to change the system, adopting a saviorism mentality for Black people and women. A white savior industrial complex (WSIC) is a way to “validate privilege”, where white people engage in charitable actions for marginalized people and have highly “big emotional experiences” where they gain social capital for “‘saving’ those less fortunate and are able to completely disregard” their own involvement in structural white supremacy (Aronson 2017: 36). Like Cone’s (1969) theory of white liberal solidarity, the WSIC is paternalistic towards POC, performative, and is benefits white people more than dismantle white supremacy (Aronson 2017: 36; Cone 1969: 53). The main difference is that white liberal solidarity is meant to absolve white guilt where WSIC confers social capital for white people. By engaging in the WSIC, Isbell earns social capital as being charitable. He also engages in gendered saviorism with his daughter, where he expresses, he still wants to change the world for the sake of his daughter: establishing himself as the protective, “father” archetype, which Pruitt (2019) suggests is “ultimate achievement of successful manhood” in country songs (Isbell 2017; Pruitt 2019: 176). Less cartoonishly, Childers and Shoulders also engage in saviorism, as they express their emotional reaction to racial injustices, earning social capital for being socially progressive, while and beseeching other people to change without critiquing themselves

(Childers 2020; Shoulders 2021). Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders perform saviorism without critiquing their own involvement in white supremacy, so that instead of offering a challenge to white supremacy, they actually “validate white privilege” by portraying white people as blameless when it comes to systems of inequality and defends racial, power hierarchy by portraying white people as magnanimous in their care for POC(Aronson 2017: 36).

As Barbara Ching (2001) and Richard Peterson (1997) suggest, alt-country music is an inherently white-working class genre of music, and all three men use rural, masculine signifiers to emphasize their country pedigree and, especially with Childers and Shoulders, situate their narrative in white, rural communities of the South (Childers 2020; Ching 2001:55; Peterson 1997: 260; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders all perform white, working-class masculinity: suggesting that white, working-class, and masculine signifiers are still important in negotiating authenticity in country music. Leonard (2009) and Roediger (2007) both suggest that white, working-class communities are exploited and systemically oppressed economically (Leonardo 2009: 137; Roediger 2007: xix). Their oppression is not related to their race, though, and no matter how they have been victimized by systems of class inequality, they have agency when they construct their white identities on anti-Blackness and when they perpetrate white supremacy (Leonardo 2009: 137; Roediger 2007: xix). When the three artists develop a white deniability for themselves or their white, working-class community, they are reinforcing existing discourses that position poor, rural whites as innocent of racism because of the socioeconomic oppression that they experience and does not give them space to be accountable (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). Childers addresses that though white, rural people have experienced socioeconomic victimization they still have not experienced the same victimization as racism but does not further deconstruct white supremacy within his

community (Childers 2020). The artists do not analyze white, working-class people's agency and involvement in white supremacy and their songs fall short of deconstructing the specific white supremacy that poor, rural whites perpetrate.

CONCLUSION

As the men deflect accountability for themselves and/or their white, rural community, the men still construct white innocence and as Isbell, Childers, Shoulders songs are ultimately in support of keeping white supremacist structures. The songs reify white supremacy by developing white innocence and saviorism: absolving they and their white, rural communities from the guilt of white supremacy as well as portraying white people as helping POC. I based the structure of my study on Norman Fairclough's model for critical discourse analysis, as described by Hilary Janks (1997) (Janks 1997: 329). The three, non-linear steps, are "text analysis (description)," "processing analysis (interpretation)," and "social analysis (explanation)" (Janks 1997: 329). I used CDA in my research to reveal the patterns that reoccur in the language (authenticity, violence, and white innocence and culpability) of the songs as well as the power and ideology at play in the songs and how they fit into existing literature and theory on . The benefits of CDA is that I can go in depth on the multiple discourses being held in "White Man's World," "Long Violent History," and "Home on the Rage" and how they relate to existing discourses on whiteness, class, and masculinity inside and outside country (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). This study adds to the existing literature on whiteness and class by introducing an analysis of whiteness and white liberality from the rural, working-class specific genre that is alt-country. It also expands the existing literature on country music by identifying and analyzing specific patterns in contemporary, progressive country music.

Limitations of my research

Though I went into my study with the intention of analyzing masculinity, my research ended up being more about whiteness and class. As my research is meant to analyze three men, I left women or genderqueer out of my research on masculinity in country music like Amanda Shires, Margo Price, or Al Riggs. My research also leaves out of how white supremacy impacts people of color in the alt-country genre like Sabine McCalla, Tré Burt, and Lindi Ortega.

Directions for Future Research

Critical discourse analysis allowed me to analyze the ideology and systems of power being held in the lyrics of “White Man’s World” “Long Violent History” and “Home on the Rage” (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). Further research that could be done on these three songs is sonic analysis/ vocal performance or audience-driven response to the songs. Jocelyn R. Neal (2020) studied authenticity and whiteness politics by analyzing Chris Stapelton’s “Tennessee Whiskey” through a sonic lens and Travis S. Stimeling (2013) was able to study alt-country music’s response to the women liberation movement by analyzing Waylon Jennings vocal performances (Neal 2020: 215-222; Stimeling 2013: 354). Sonic and vocal performance studies research would help to analyze the ideology and systems of power being held in the stylings of Isbell’s, Childers’s, and Shoulders work. Stimeling’s (2011) research on the audience’s reaction to the Austin progressive scene served to analyze how audiences critically or passively consume progressive music (Stimeling 2011: 57). Audience driven research, which Pruitt suggests is “interviewing country music fans of various backgrounds and exploring the extent to which these songs resonate with them” would help elucidate how audiences interpret and respond to the social commentary made in Isbell’s, Childers’s, and Shoulders’s songs (Pruitt 2019: 176).

I chose songs by Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders because of their white, country, and male identity so that I could look at the specific way they approached their race, class, and gender (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). As working-class narratives are strong in most of the country, though especially alt-country, and country music is dominated by masculinity and whiteness, further research could be done into the music by non-male, artists of color and the social commentary in their songs. It would be especially interesting to look at the women and or artists of color in alt-country, as by position in alt-country music, it would position as working class but also because alt-country is an especially restricted genre when it comes to gender or racial representation. For mainstream country, further research could be done on non-white, non-male, and possibly non-rural narratives in country.

Implications

As Hatch (2015) described Brad Paisley's "Accidental Racist," Jason Isbell, Tyler Childers, and Nick Shoulders all had "good intentions" when writing their narrative style songs about racism (Childers 2020; Hatch 2015: 109; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). How much good intentions matter, if at all, is complicated in how much Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders's songs construct themes like white innocence that already dominate whiteness and class discourses. They do addresses white supremacy and systemic racial violence, but they focus their discourse on the people of color who are oppressed by white supremacy so that it does not much to actually analyze white supremacy itself. Isbell, Childers, and Shoulders fall short of offering a unique critique of whiteness, instead constructing white innocence for themselves and their communities (Childers 2020; Isbell 2017; Shoulders 2021). Yet, they are examples of artists attempting to critique whiteness in country and addressing racism in a genre consumed and constructed as a rejection of racial politics and racial discourse (Mann 2008: 70). My critical discourse analysis

has the potential for fans to recognize reoccurring patterns in the works of progressive, alt-country artists and how they fit in the larger of whiteness, class, and masculine discourses outside the country. As for country artists, my study has the potential to offer insight to how critiquing white supremacy and challenging the systems of power in the country genre can still reinforce systems of whiteness: the critiques need to have the artists take accountability for racism in themselves and their own community and if they offer a substantial, systemic challenge to white supremacy instead of just performative, anti-racism meant to absolve personal guilt and confer social capital.

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APPENDIX A

Jason Isbell Lyrics Sample

"White Man's World"

Jason Isbell

I'm a white man living in a white man's world (1)

Under our roof is a baby girl
 I thought this world could be hers one day
 But her mama knew better
 I'm a white man living in a white man's town
 Want to take a shot of cocaine and burn it down
 Mama wants to change that Nashville sound
 But they're never gonna let her
 There's no such thing as someone else's war
 Your creature comforts aren't the only things worth fighting for
 Still breathing, it's not too late
 We're all carrying one big burden, sharing one fate
 I'm a white man living on a white man's street
 I've got the bones of the red man under my feet
 The highway runs through their burial grounds
 Past the oceans of cotton
 I'm a white man looking in a black man's eyes
 Wishing I'd never been one of the guys
 Who pretended not to hear another white man's joke
 Oh, the times ain't forgotten
 There's no such thing as someone else's war
 Your creature comforts aren't the only things worth fighting for
 You're still breathing, it's not too late
 We're all carrying one big burden, sharing one fate
 I'm a white man living in a white man's nation
 I think the man upstairs must'a took a vacation
 I still have faith, but I don't know why
 Maybe it's the fire in my little girl's eyes
 Maybe it's the fire in my little girl's eyes

APPENDIX B

Tyler Childers Lyrics Sample

“Long Violent History”

Tyler Childers

It's the worst that it's been since the last time it happened
 It's happening again right in front of our eyes
 There's updated footage, wild speculation
 Tall tales and hearsay and absolute lies

Been passed off as factual, when actually the actual
 Causes they're awkwardly blocking the way
 Keeping us all from enjoyin' our evening
 Shoving its roots through the screens in our face

Now, what would you get if you heard my opinion
 Conjecturin' on matters that I ain't never dreamed
 In all my born days as a white boy from Hickman
 Based on the way that the world's been to me?

It's called me belligerent, it's took me for ignorant
 But it ain't never once made me scared just to be
 Could you imagine just constantly worryin'
 Kickin' and fightin', beggin' to breathe?

How many boys could they haul off this mountain
 Shoot full of holes, cuffed and layin' in the streets
 'Til we come into town in a stark ravin' anger
 Looking for answers and armed to the teeth?

Thirty-ought-sixes, Papaw's old pistol
 How many, you reckon, would it be, four or five?
 Or would that be the start of a long, violent history
 Of tucking our tails as we try to abide?

Or would that be the start of a long, violent history
 Of tucking our tails as we try to abide?

APPENDIX C

Nick Shoulders Lyrics Sample

“Home on the Rage”

Nick Shoulders

It's hard to love something that don't love you back
 Your dream's been their nightmare, there's bones 'neath the track
 Was it evil in their hearts or restraint that they lack?

I'd never love a land that didn't love me back

Ten generations on land that they stole

Torched the prairie for plantation, they broke the mountains for coal

I ask what's worth keeping, can we be proud of what's fair?

Oh, it ten generations, just gasping for air

It's hard to speak highly of what keeps you down

There's blood on the cotton, stone graves on the mound

My conscience is woven to the rope on the bow

So keep your eye on the light and your hand on the plow

Why seek to conserve in nothing but name?

We know Rome's been burning, and we play a rigged game

Our heritage is hate, though there's plenty to save

How can the land of the free be the home of the slave?

Is this the land of the free?