

# “We Never Get Ahead but We Have Enough”: Class Narratives and Politics in American Country Music

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## ABSTRACT

Country music has cultural and narrative roots in the American working class. As such, themes of class are integral to the mythos of country music, informing the musicians and shaping the genre’s audience. Researchers have studied the origins of class narratives in American country music, but less analysis has been given to the specific ways that these themes are expressed rhetorically. The purpose of this study was to analyze how class-based narratives are expressed in country music. Through a content analysis of the lyrics of popular country songs between 1950 and 2009, three overarching themes emerged. First, the emphasis of emotional over material experiences: emotional consequences related to working-class material conditions were the focus of songs’ rhetoric, rather than underlying material issues. Second, escapism and sentimentality: class-based issues were expressed as sentimental or nostalgic as a means of escaping material struggle or downplaying their severity. Finally, parasocial commiseration: the building of a one-sided connection between artists and their audience based on their perceived shared class identity. These themes provide insight into emotional rhetoric that affects working-class politics in the US, as well as broader race, class, and political issues.

## **Introduction**

The United States has several unique musical traditions. With its wide array of culturally, ethnically, and economically distinct communities, distinct genres have developed across the US. Some of the country’s most famous musical exports include hip hop, rock n’ roll, rhythm and blues (R&B), and jazz (Frere-Jones n.d.). These and other popular American genres originated with working-class Black Americans, especially in poor urban areas, later being gentrified by record companies to increase popular, middle-class appeal. This is a common pattern in many parts of American culture, especially music (Daley 2010; Floyd 1995; Ramsey 2003). One notable exception to this phenomenon, however, is American country music. Not only is it an extremely popular genre in the US (and gaining in popularity), but its audience is distinctly White and lower to middle class (Mizell 2005). Though country is a genre influenced by Black Americans in ways that are often ignored (Lewis 2008), country music originated (and is most associated) with rural White working-class Americans. Traditionally “Black” genres and “White” country music are often similar narratively, communicating experiences of hardship and community unique to their working-class origins. They differ greatly, though, in their demographics and histories, resulting in disparate sounds and perspectives. Country music is reflective of a specific American experience, making it a useful medium through which to analyze cultural features of this demographic. Recognizing these perspectives inherent to country music culture, I performed a content analysis of class-based narratives in popular country songs between 1950 and 2009 in order to understand how these themes are expressed in country music, and to contextualize the broader cultural and political perspectives cultivated through these themes.

## Literature Review

### Country and White Working-Class Culture

Social class is a method of differentiating groups of people by their socioeconomic status (usually based on income and profession) and related living situations, and helps to explain the shared interests and experiences of groups in these socioeconomic groups. Generally, these shared experiences shape group identities and shared behaviors and beliefs, features of group cultures, such as those surrounding class (Billington et al. 1991). While there has been significant debate among sociologists about how classes should be differentiated as economic structures have shifted over time (Urry 1973), one of the most accurate and widely accepted models for class stratification in the US today is the Gilbert-Kahl model. Outlined in *The American Class Structure: In An Age of Growing Inequality* (1998), Gilbert and Kahl defined three broad class groups<sup>1</sup>: the privileged classes, working classes, and lower classes. The privileged classes are defined by limited struggles in their careers or financial situations, while both lower class groups rely entirely on employment for survival, and often face inconsistent economic conditions that result in a myriad of social and material ills. As previously stated, class culture is defined by the shared experiences within a class; for the working and lower classes, the social and material implications of their economic position are what shape their culture. On top of the cultural dictates of class, other demographics, most notably race, form the basis for more specific cultural ideas and behaviors, creating unique sub-cultures such as those defined by the intersection of race and class.

The White working class shares some cultural characteristics, and because of the size and influence of this demographic, understanding them can help explain the state of wider social and political culture in the US. Culture broadly refers to the “beliefs and values people have about societies, social change and the ideal society they see” (Billington et al. 1991). Class culture is the set of cultural patterns that arise due to shared class experiences. Researchers have debated the existence of class cultures as applicable to all people of similar class standing (Peterson and DiMaggio 1975), so the concept is ultimately not useful unless explored in the context of other cultural patterns. While there is a broader working-class culture and a broader culture of Whiteness in the United States, I explored the specific intersection of race and class that has created the unique White working-class culture.

There is not necessarily one rigid, monolithic understanding of White working-class culture. However, there is a set of cultural patterns that function under this title, and which have a great impact on broader American culture and politics<sup>2</sup>. Addressing the American cultural subgroup of the White working class leads to my discussion of country music. First, in terms of listening demographics, country music is especially popular within the White working class. According to Mizell (2005), country fans are four times more likely to be White and more likely to be of lower to middle income and education (indicators of working-class status). More importantly, the culture surrounding country music acts as a thematic representation of White working-class culture in America, indicated by its White working-class origins, its shaping from social change and populist politics, and its ingrained ideological leanings.

The early history of country music is important in understanding the class-based narratives surrounding the genre. Near the end of the nineteenth century, country music emerged in rural Appalachia and the

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert and Kahl define six specific classes (the capitalist class, upper middle class, (lower) middle class, working class, working-poor class, and underclass), but pair them into the three simplified class groups as described above. The capitalist and upper middle classes are the privileged classes, the lower middle and working classes the broader working-class group, and the working-poor and under-classes are the lower classes.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Gilbert-Kahl model, the working classes make up more than half of the total population, and since around 76% of the population is White, the intersection of these two demographics is of significant size and influence (United States Census Bureau 2020).

American South. It began as a sister genre to American folk music, as the genres shared an audience: the White working poor (Malone 2003). Especially in the early years of each genre, the suffering of their audiences defined their central themes; during this period of industrialization in the US, most non-wealthy Whites were industrial or agricultural workers, concentrated in struggling lower class communities.

Until the 1920s, country and folk music were similar in expressing the hardship of rural working-class Whites, but the two genres soon began to diverge. This divide was caused by the starkly contrasting evolution of each genre's political messages. Both focused on the material suffering of their working-class White audience, but their political responses to these realities were very different. Folk became a revolutionary genre that called for change, encouraging its audience to fight politically to improve and rebuild their lives. Folk was often played on the front lines of protests and picket lines, and it was the soundtrack to the workers' rights movements of the 1920s and 30s, with strong leftist political messages (Cohen 2006). Conversely, country music artists separated themselves from politics as an escape from the difficult lives of their audiences, and a relief from political effort (Ellis 2010). Country was still affected by the political perspectives of its artists and audience, but explicit social commentary was largely absent. Folk music became more progressive while country music became passively conservative, capitalizing on the emotional pessimism of its audience. The nature of country music at its inception continues to be displayed in the socially conservative culture that has become associated with country music over time.

## Country, Class, Race, and Conservatism

### *Social Change, Political Populism, and Country Culture*

Country music culture has grown especially conservative, both as a reaction to social change and a result of populist messaging from conservative politicians. Populism is the marketing of a political platform to the so-called working man in order to garner majority support. Historically, populist messaging lends itself to use by the left, as generally leftist movements directly focus on the conditions of the working class. Because of the dissolution of most leftist causes in America, the conservative right has adopted this messaging, despite its ideological juxtaposition to right-leaning, neoliberal economic policy. Four main periods have defined the culture of country in the areas of social change and populist messaging: commercialization in the 1940s and 1950s, the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, the Reagan era of the 1980s and 1990s, and the post-9/11 period.

The shift of country music towards conservatism from the 1940s through the 1970s was mostly shaped by its backlash to social changes during those periods. Though starting as a relatively provincial and local genre that was unique across regions, country became a national commercial phenomenon with the popularization of radio in the 1940s and 1950s. With commercialization came fabricated and neutered authenticity, a phenomenon that has been analyzed in depth (Fox 2004; Pecknold 2007; Peterson 1997). This was largely due to standardizing and creating a formula for the genre in order to increase its popularity and marketability. The stories of working-class people that were originally delivered by people immersed in those experiences were now being mutated by the influence of record labels, gentrified to garner mass appeal at the expense of personality and originality. The commodified authenticity of commercialized country is best exemplified by the "Nashville sound," the benchmark for popular country music that has guided the musical characteristics and cultural themes of the genre since the 1950s and 1960s (Jensen 1984). The disconnect between the country music industry and its roots in the rural working class created a dichotomy between the adoption of this false authenticity in commercialized country and the disavowal of it as somehow impure or not real country. Cobb (1999) argued that country was never a pure genre, but that purity politics in country culture feed into an imagined past that contributes to nostalgic, reactionary sentiment surrounding country music.

During the 1960s and 1970s, country culture became more regressive as a reaction to social revolution and the civil rights movement (Raines and Walker 2008). Historically, racial antagonism and other constructed social divides have often functioned as ways of creating discord within the working class, and this phenomenon

exemplifies the change in country culture during the 60s and 70s (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989). Country music took a hard conservative and reactionary turn, both explicitly and through its artists, illustrating White working-class audiences' attitudes towards Black working-class people and the civil rights movement. Before this period, country music was resolutely apolitical and escapist, but going forward, subsets of country culture became increasingly political in nature.

The 1980s exemplified another rightward shift of the politics of country music and the working class. Reagan's right-wing populism spoke strongly to the White working-class demographic, primed for radicalization after the tumultuous 1970s by an increasingly conservative shared culture. His anti-establishment, individualist, anti-progressive rhetoric is now seen as a significant cause of the populist phenomenon on the right today (Bimes 2002). Reagan framed his neoliberal, anti-regulation, and anti-union policies as beneficial to the working class, and this rhetoric was directly reflected in country music. Juravich (1988) examined the images of workers and unions in country music concurrent with the Reagan era, and found that the anti-union (but pro-worker) rhetoric of Reagan's presidency was apparent in the themes of country music and ideology of its audience by correlating with opinion polling of the time. Juravich (1988) explained this phenomenon through the working-class country audience and President Reagan's shared hatred of the establishment, though each held divergent definitions. After Reagan, country became fully entrenched in the right-wing populist movement, fueled by anti-establishment sentiment.

The final historical contributor to country music's current political culture was the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. 9/11 resulted in significant rightward radicalization for many Americans through increased patriotism, nationalism and xenophobia, and this was especially true for the White working class, which has historically been persuaded by racial antagonisms and cultural isolationism (Gillborn 2010). The genre of country became a distilled vector for conservative radicalization, acting as the soundtrack for post-9/11 patriotism, American exceptionalism, and jingoist imperialism in the form of the War on Terror (Boulton 2008). Due to 9/11, country music was cemented as the voice of American working-class politics, and of conservatism and patriotism.

### *Country and Working-Class Conservatism*

The specific brand of conservatism that is constructed in country music texts is integral to the genre's function as a reflection of the White working class. A full analysis of this political phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper, but understanding some basic aspects of conservatism within country music culture is necessary to contextualize my analysis. In America, conservatism broadly emphasizes three main values: the Protestant work ethic, rugged individualism, and extreme patriotism. The Protestant work ethic is defined as the exultation of work as a higher or singular purpose in life (highly related to the ethics of modern capitalism) (Weber 1958; Atieh et al. 1987). Eppard et al. (2020) defines rugged individualism as the view that one's success, usually defined monetarily, is determined solely by their hard work and personal responsibility, a view that often ignores the influence of systemic forces on one's ability to succeed. Extreme patriotism refers to love and devotion to one's country that may be blind to wrongdoing, that borders on nationalism, devotion to one's nation or culture that is often necessitated on believed superiority or a desire for global political power (Li and Brewer 2004). Conservatism is also based in the emotional valuing of the past and tradition, and apprehension towards social change. Within country music, the most strongly communicated political values are those of the importance of work, rugged individualism, and patriotism, all building blocks of American conservatism, suggesting the deeply conservative nature of country culture (Buckley 1979).

Descriptions of country's political culture have been given by numerous academics focusing on the genre. Historian James N. Gregory defined the ideology of country as "Plain Folk Americanism," inspired by the attitudes of the rural working class that founded the genre. The ideology is "rooted... in individualism, hard work, suspicion of outside involvement and big government, Protestant Christianity, and a deep patriotism" (Wolfe and Akenson 2005, 143). Gregory solidifies the basic conservative values of work, rugged individualism

and patriotism within country music. Additionally, Boulton's (2008) analysis of the geopolitical culture of country music after 9/11 displays some of the most extreme distillations of the conservative values in country music. After 9/11, country became extremely patriotic, conservative, and jingoistic, and with it its audience and reputation. The accumulation of all of these characteristics is a significantly conservative and reactionary political culture within the genre. The political lean of country music towards conservatism reflects a similar, growing conservative phenomenon in the politics of the White working class in the US. This growth is reflected in the popularity of populist, conservative politicians over the last few decades, especially among lower class White Americans. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to understand its social and cultural undercurrents, through a thematic analysis of class narratives in country music.

## Research Gap

The aim of my research was to take a more empirical qualitative approach to understanding the rhetoric of class in popular country songs through a content analysis. In country music literature, historical analyses of class issues affecting the genre are common, but these studies have focused on the broader cultural phenomena surrounding the genre as a whole, rather than analyzing the specific qualitative themes and messages that cement and promote class politics in country. My research complements the existing literature by adding an analysis of rhetoric to the broader discussion of the influence and importance of class in the country music genre. Additionally, this study increases our understanding of the way class issues are generally discussed and addressed in the US, especially through art and culture.

## Method

I performed a content analysis, defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2016) as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material [typically forms of media like news and art] for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases" (258). Content analyses are common in investigations of themes in music genres, as they allow the researcher to describe the specific rhetoric and expression surrounding those themes. Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) informed my choice of research method with their content analysis of themes of misogyny in rap music. Their method of coding, or categorizing, themes and rhetoric in their selected songs allowed them to extract five specific thematic patterns from their data, leading them to focused discussions linked to real world implications. I also performed an overarching thematic analysis, as it led to more open-ended conclusions relating to other aspects of culture and politics

My specific process consisted of four main stages: preparation of codes, song selection, first coding, and second coding. Before selecting the individual songs coded, I laid out the basic coding categories that I would be utilizing based on my initial research. Broadly, these categories were: class mobility narratives, specific class experiences, relationships between classes, and specific political themes. I defined these categories informally, and added codes within and around them. The range of songs I considered were those within the top 100 country songs of each year from 1950 to 2009, using data from the *Billboard* publication's Hot Country Charts. Due to my preparation and prior research, I had specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. My main inclusion criterion was that songs should reflect the class-based themes I identified in my preparation, but my inclusion criteria were not strict. My exclusion criteria were stricter, and resulted in the exclusion of a majority of songs on the chart. My main exclusion criterion was that songs without any significant class-based or political

theme would not be used, especially songs focusing *solely* on love and relationships<sup>3</sup>. With these criteria, I selected between 4 and 7 songs for each year and transcribed their lyrics to be coded, either from the lyrics database *AZLyrics*, or from recordings of the songs. In total, I selected 322 songs to code (Appendix A).

With all my songs collected, I began my first coding process, or the direct application of codes to bodies of work (Saldaña 2016). I used the program HyperRESEARCH, which allowed me to code each song in context, add annotations, and apply analytical tools. I applied, added, removed, and edited the codes from my preparation phase on the lyrics of my songs as I progressed through my data collection process. By the end of my process, I had created and defined 68 codes for my data, though many were overlapping, unclear, or unnecessary<sup>4</sup>. This led to the final stage of my research method, second coding. Second coding is the process of analyzing codes themselves, condensing and separating them, and reconfiguring them in order to reach areas of discussion and conclusions over the data (Saldaña 2016). I grouped my codes into seven broad groups based on their more general topics: privileged class experiences, working class experiences, class ambivalent themes, prison and the police, country culture themes, political themes, and parasocial themes. Three of these code groups (country culture, working class, privileged class) were further split into specific positive and negative depiction groups. I then sorted all of my codes into these 10 total groups. By looking at the total number of songs individual codes appeared in, I identified significant codes within each group and subgroup. I observed three overarching themes in these significant codes, which constitute my findings.

## Results and Analysis

Through my content analysis of country music, I observed three main recurring themes that guide the rhetoric of class within the genre: (1) emphasis of emotional over material experiences, (2) escapism and sentimentality, and (3) parasocial commiseration. Each theme is briefly described in the table below:

**Table 1.** Three overarching themes and definitions.

Theme	Definition
Emphasis of Emotional Over Material Experiences	Focus on (typically) negative emotional consequences of working-class material conditions rather than addressing those underlying material issues.
Escapism and Sentimentality	Pointed ambivalence towards class-related issues through the use of (typically) positive emotional/sentimental themes.
Parasocial Commiseration	Emphasis of the shared nature of class experiences that builds a one-sided trust of the artists/genre from the audience.

My observations were made based on the prevalence and thematic significance of nine main codes. Below, these codes are defined (including an exemplar lyric) and their recurrence noted:

<sup>3</sup> I excluded songs that only focused on relationship dynamics *without* class discussion, but songs that addressed relationships through the lens of class were kept (some of my most significant codes involve this rhetoric).

<sup>4</sup> The codes that I used prominently in my analysis are listed in **Tables 2, 3 and 4**; the rest of my 68 codes were discarded or combined with others.

**Table 2.** Nine main codes with prevalence, definitions, and exemplars.

Code	Prevalence	Definition	Exemplar <sup>5</sup>
Personal familiarity	180	Artist directly addresses the listener by explicitly emphasizing their (presumed) shared class experiences, creating an important parasocial bond.	“I’m gonna be somebody someday/ You can bet your hard-earned dollar I will” (Travis Tritt 1990 “I’m Gonna Be Somebody”)
Humorous stereotypes	98	Created narratives around lower class people generally through simplistic stereotypes with varying degrees of truth.	“I wanna tell you a story about a little boy that had one old string on an old guitar/ and he was raised in the part of the country why/ he was so poor that if you was on welfare they kinda looked up to ya” (Carl Perkins 1972 “Cotton Top”)
Love, community	87	Valuing relationships, community bonds, and the pride these bring as an important part of lower-class communities, including as a form of wealth outside of material wealth.	“We were poor but we had love” (Loretta Lynn 1971 “Coal Miner’s Daughter”)
Strained relationship	63	Romantic, familial, platonic, etc. relationships strained by class-based circumstances, usually caused by a lack of money and resources, and the stress caused by this insufficiency.	“Worked this piece all my life/ It broke my heart and it took my wife” (Nitty Gritty Dirt Band 1988 “Workin’ Man (Nowhere to Go)”)
General feeling of hardship	60	Feelings of hardship and struggle as a result of material and social effects of poverty/middle to lower class living.	“It was harder times and longer days/ Five miles to school, uphill both ways/ We were cane-switched raised, and dirt-floor poor” (Montgomery Gentry 2004 “Something to Be Proud Of”)
Pride, superiority	60	General feeling of pride in working class and/or country music culture, relating to feelings of traditional and moral superiority.	“She’s gone country, look at them boots/ She’s gone country, back to her roots” (Alan Jackson 1994 “Gone Country”)
Unfulfilling work	55	Feeling of general dissatisfaction and alienation that is often connected to wage work, descriptions of poor psychological (alienation) or physical	“You load 16 tons, what do you get?/ Another day older and deeper in debt/ St. Peter, don’t you call me ‘cause I can’t go/ I owe my soul to the company store”

<sup>5</sup> Some lyrics are representative of multiple themes. For example, the excerpt from Carl Perkins’ “Cotton Top” (“He was so poor...”) evokes the codes of both humorous stereotype (a poor, music-loving country boy) and a general feeling of hardship (being incredibly poor).

		(actual dangerous work) working conditions.	(Tennessee Ernie Ford 1955 “Sixteen Tons”)
Simplicity, rusticity	51	Emphasizing and valuing the simplicity with which lower class people usually (are forced to) live, often painting a rustic, romantic view.	“Home was just a camp along the highway/ A pick-up bed was where we bedded down/ Don't ever once remember goin' hungry/ And I remember mama cookin' on the ground” (Merle Haggard 1972 “Daddy Frank (The Guitar Man)”)
Authenticity, nostalgia	43	Authenticity refers to the ethos and parasocial bonding that comes from a person’s (artist's) lower class upbringing (similar to personal familiarity); nostalgia refers more to a sentimental appreciation and valuing of one’s lower-class past.	“[T]he only treasures that I'll ever know/ Are long ago and far behind/ Wrapped up in my memories of home” (Joe Diffie 1989 “Home”)

In my analysis, I described each of my observed overarching themes with reference to specific codes and to related literature. The codes above guided my overall analysis, but more specific guiding codes are listed with each theme.

### Recurring Theme 1: Emotional Over Material Experiences

The first overarching theme was the emphasis of emotional over material experiences. Below are additional codes that I will reference throughout this section:

**Table 3.** Codes comprising the theme of emotional over material experiences.

Code	Prevalence	Definition	Exemplar
Hard Work	27	Having a hardworking attitude due to working class upbringing and lifestyle.	“Around here we break our backs just to earn a buck” (Justin Moore 2009 “Small Town USA”)
Gratitude, satisfaction	20	Satisfaction in current lower-class situation, and gratitude for what resources one does have.	“We never get ahead but we have enough” (Justin Moore 2009 “Small Town USA”)
Glamorization	17	Portraying lower class living as glamorous or romantic, emphasizing the positive emotional aspects of this experience; emotional whitewashing.	“I'm going back to a better class of loser/ This up-town living's really got me down” (Randy Travis 1990 “Better Class of Losers”)
Fulfilling work, skill	10	Appreciation of work experiences due to ability to make (and possibly	“He opens up for business when the clock strikes nine/ He likes to get up



		accumulate) money, or feeling of connection to work due to skill or talent.	early when they're feelin' fine” (Red Foley 1949 “Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy”)
Liminality, stress	40	Stressful, uncomfortable, inconsistent life (i.e., marked by liminality) and access to resources resulting in feelings of stress, discontent, and a desire to escape situation.	“Been singing for my rent and singing for my supper/ I'm above the below and below the upper/ I'm stuck in the middle where money gets tight” (Jo Dee Messina 1998 “I’m Alright”)
Shame, feeling of failure	21	Internalized prejudice based on one’s income or access to resources; shame or feeling of failure due to inability to achieve social mobility.	“And I could cry for the time I've wasted/ But that's a waste of time and tears /...[T]here's nothing I can do about it now” (Willie Nelson 1989 “Nothing I Can Do About It Now”)
Reliance on wage	25	Reliance on wage work in order to survive, a generally unfulfilling work experience that contributes to alienation and stress/liminality	“Another day, another dollar/ Short of catching up/ Same old job, same old dull routine” (Ty Herndon 1998 “Hands of a Working Man”)

The defining codes of this theme specifically considered the material conditions of the audience, often in a negative **light (fulfilling/unfulfilling work, general hardship, reliance on wage)**. However, these conditions were discussed in highly emotional contexts, making them easier to examine while minimizing any subtextual references to class solidarity. The two most prevalent negative working class themes involved **strained relationships**, wherein class-related issues were discussed in the context of failing relationships: “Worked this piece all my life/It broke my heart and it took my wife” (Nitty Gritty Dirt Band 1988 “Workin’ Man Nowhere to Go”); and a **general feeling of hardship**, an explicitly emotional theme that involved descriptions of material conditions but undermined them with humor or nostalgia: “He was so poor that if you was on welfare they kinda looked up to ya” (Carl Perkins 1971 “Cotton Top”). These codes were representative of the larger theme of emotional over material discussions of working-class experiences.

Two sub themes aid in the contextualization of this main theme: the trivialization of struggle, and the individualization of struggle.

### *Trivialization*

First, the rhetoric used by country music artists leads to the trivialization of material hardship. They frequently paint material hardship as similar to emotional distress (which is also often trivialized), obfuscating the physical severity of these circumstances. This is represented by the codes of: **glamorization, simplicity/rusticity, and authenticity/nostalgia**; these themes all describe poor working-class conditions, but portray them as less damaging, more of an innate part of life that must simply be dealt with, ignored, or actually appreciated: “We never get ahead but we have enough” (Justin Moore 2009 “Small Town USA”). Overall, this trivialized discussion of material conditions through emotional means serves to reinforce a neutered view of this experience.

### *Individualization*

Second, the focus on emotional over material experiences led to these issues being seen and treated as simply individual issues, despite being shared, systemic class experiences. In almost no code category were class and material issues discussed as widespread and serious, though they were certainly seen as relatable. Issues were framed as the fault of the individual, and something that could only be overcome at the individual level. The codes that best exemplify this are those of **general hardship, shame/failure, liminality/stress, and hard work**. This pattern of individualization connects to the rugged individualism essential to country’s conservative political culture, which works to relegate societal class issues onto individuals. It also drives a kind of hopeless tone into the genre: “No matter how hard I struggle and strive/I’ll never get out of this world alive” (Hank Williams 1952 “Never Get Out of This World Alive”).

Country music lyrics showcase emotional themes to put aside the material conditions of the audience, and undermine the focus on working class issues by trivializing and individualizing them. This serves to make the music more personal or individually relatable, but less impactful, even vapid. This can be connected to the ideological feature of rugged individualism in country music’s political culture. The observation of the importance of emotional themes over material ones as a way of ignoring or escaping those material or political realities leads well into the next theme that I observed: escapism and sentimentality.

## Recurring Theme 2: Escapism and Sentimentality

Escapism is a thematic pattern that describes country music’s poignant avoidance of class issues and associated political issues through the use of emotional themes and sentimentality. This theme and the previous overlap in many key observations, including the trivialization of class issues and the undermining of class-based cooperation and solidarity, but differ slightly in their analytical insights. Escapism as a means of evading class issues connects more soundly to the ideological history of country music.

There are multiple codes I observed that contribute to this theme, including **love/community, pride/superiority, authenticity/nostalgia**, and those in the following table:

**Table 4.** Codes comprising the theme of escapism and sentimentality.

Code	Prevalence	Definition	Exemplar
General ambivalence	12	Specific ignorance of class issues, especially due to privilege or to escape and ignore hardships	“We didn’t know the times were lean/ Round our house the grass was green/ It didn’t seem like things were all that bad” (Alabama 1989 “High Cotton”)
Ambivalent description of work, boss	14	Neutral descriptions of work or bosses that are essentially class ambivalent, de-emphasize negative aspects of wage work.	“Anyway, when they’re all through/ I’ve got to go to work and mow the grass” (Tom T. Hall 1968 “Ballad of Forty Dollars”)
Spirituality	17	Use of spirituality and religion to deal with struggle by instilling hope and comfort in a divine plan; acts as a kind of escapism	“I’ve been lost in the shuffle/ I’ve obeyed the wrong commands/ I’m going back to the chapel/ In search of His hands” (Tennessee Ernie Ford 1955 “His Hands”)
Authenticity, nostalgia	43	Authenticity refers to the ethos and parasocial bonding that comes from a	“[T]he only treasures that I’ll ever know/ Are long ago and far behind/

		person’s (artists’s) lower class upbringing (similar to Personal Familiarity); nostalgia refers more to a sentimental appreciation and valuing of one’s lower-class past.	Wrapped up in my memories of home” (Joe Diffie 1989 “Home”)
Pride, superiority	61	General feeling of pride in working class and/or country music culture, relating to feelings of traditional and moral superiority.	“Well you can tell I’m from the country you can see it at a glance/ I wear broke in shoes cotton shirts straw hats and a Levi pants” (Carl Perkins 1967 “Country Boy’s Dream”)
Love, community	87	Valuing relationships, community bonds, and the pride these bring as an important part of lower-class communities, including as a form of wealth outside of material wealth.	“We were poor but we had love” (Loretta Lynn 1971 “Coal Miner’s Daughter”)

All of these codes function to moderate the impact or severity of class issues by focusing on emotional positives, metaphorically escaping the emotional effort of addressing them. Using music as a means of emotional escape is not necessarily negative, but this theme persisting strongly through such a large portion of the country genre may have contributed to much of the political and cultural conservatism of country today.

The comfort of emotional escapism is a major factor that has elevated conservative, traditionalist, reactionary tendencies in country culture. Rapid change due initially to commercialization created a form of purity politics in country music, where many rejected newer music due to its sound, themes, or performers’ reputations, describing it as not true country music (Cobb 1999). Escapism and sentimentality created a sense of comfort in the genre, which created a resistance to change and an attachment to the past, the basis of country’s vehement conservatism. The centrality of escapism in country has left the genre as popular as ever, but somewhat alienated from the rest of popular culture. This has created an insulated genre culture, which leads into my final overarching theme: parasocial commiseration.

### Recurring Theme 3: Parasocial Commiseration

My final theme surrounds the impact of the parasocial connection within the audience and between the audience and artists, which has an enormous impact on country culture. Parasocial relationships were defined as one-sided, abstract relationships a person feels to a group or person based typically on observation or consumption of media rather than actual familiarity; the term is often used to describe fan interactions with celebrities. This kind of relationship is associated with the establishment of audience communities, and country music’s audience culture is a shining example.

Country began as a provincial and personal genre, isolated to rural working-class communities. Artists typically lived and performed around their hometown, and had small, familiar audiences. Most early country artists excelled based on their more intimate relationships to their audience, and their relatable authentic working-class life and upbringing (Ellison 1995). This changed drastically with increased commercialization. Many artists became extremely wealthy and disconnected from working class life, causing a rift in this once solid relationship built on shared experience and personal connection. Huge commercial country stars no longer interacted directly with their fans, or directly empathized with the ongoing class-based struggles of their audience.

This issue was assuaged, though, through the building of the strong, complex parasocial relationships central to country music that continue to exist, propelled by parasocial commiseration.

Parasocial commiseration is the creation, or fabrication, of shared class experience through parasocial connection. This is done through emotional working-class themes that an audience may relate to (notably, **general hardship, love/community, simplicity/rusticity**, and most significantly **authenticity/nostalgia**), but there are two main themes that drive this overarching observation: **personal familiarity** and **humorous stereotypes**, my two most prevalent themes overall.

### *Personal Familiarity*

The theme of expressing **personal familiarity** with the experiences of the audience was the most prevalent theme overall, and was explicitly observed in over half of my songs. This theme refers to the way country artists relate to their audience through shared working-class experiences in their lyrics, which most often occurred as the recounting of one's own experience: "Anything at all was more than we had/In the good old days when times were bad" (Merle Haggard 1968 "In the Good Old Days"); or the direct reference to or questioning of the audience on their familiarity with an experience: "Did you ever sleep at the foot of the bed/When the weather was a whizzin' cold?" (Little Jimmy Dickens 1949 "A-Sleeping At The Foot Of The Bed"). This reference to direct personal familiarity with working class life worked to emphasize the authenticity of the artist and story as relatable to the audience. Many of these references were made in regards to an artist's childhood, which also created a sense of **authentic nostalgia**.

The relatable personal experiences expressed as familiar in country work to form parasocial commiseration around shared experiences. This bond made up the basis of country culture as one that is by and for the working class, and gave the genre an exclusive feel (Ellison 1995). However, this was often utilized as a sales strategy by recording companies or industry professionals in order to fabricate the sense of shared experience and authenticity, exploiting the emotionally and materially vulnerable audience of country (Peterson 1997). The rhetoric of personal familiarity formed the parasocial bond between artist and audience that keeps fans engaged and dedicated to country music.

### *Humorous Stereotypes*

The other significant theme relating to parasocial connect was that of **humorous stereotypes** surrounding country music's White working-class audience. This may seem like an alienating feature within the genre, but it had quite the opposite effect. The use of humorous stereotypes actually developed a shared sense of self for country's audience, and demonstrated an artist's familiarity and feeling of relation to the stereotype, thereby proving the authenticity of the artist, and acting almost as an inside joke.

The main trope/stereotype used to build parasocial connection in country was that of the so-called rube or redneck. White working-class people were painted as lazy, stupid and ineffectual by this trope, yet it was a popular theme in the songs examined in this study. Ellis (2010) noted this use of humor and stereotype as a way of deflecting from difficult material issues, as well as providing a tight parasocial bond between audiences, artists, or anyone who might be the target of this stereotype. This connected directly back to my previous theme of escapism, with self-deprecating humor being used as the emotional escape. The audience and artists were aware of the truth of liminality, existential suffering and difficult material situations behind the trope, but country music lyricists took the more ambivalent approach of directing discontent at individuals, reflecting the ethic of rugged individualism. The shared humor and behavior represented by the use of humorous stereotypes reinforces the genre's theme of parasocial commiseration, making it both more relatable and exclusive to its audience.

Overall, I observed three overarching themes in the songs I analyzed: emotional over material experiences, escapism and sentimentality, and parasocial commiseration. The emphasis of emotional over material experiences resulted in the trivialization and individualization of the material themes that were communicated,

which reinforced ideas of rugged individualism and general hardship. Escapism through sentimentality indicated how emotional themes in country helped to obfuscate the material issues that were part of country's audience's working-class experience. Finally, parasocial connection codified the previous two themes in relatable personal experiences, self-deprecating humor, and stereotypes that built strong relationships between the audience and artists. The cultural ramifications of these three themes were resistance to change, ignorance of class-based issues, and hopeless acceptance of circumstance through humor, which correlated to features of the conservative political culture country music artists espoused.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to my findings. First, content analyses are typically done by multiple researchers in order to minimize possible bias, but because I was the sole researcher, pieces of my own bias or prior knowledge regarding country music, musical rhetoric, or American politics may have informed my conclusions. Another limitation was the broad range of data I examined. My data collection spanned over 60 years, but this limited the depth of analysis I could do on the class narratives at any specific point in time. A way to improve this would be to narrowly focus on a specific period in American history (i.e., the Reagan Era) and observe the themes and narratives of more songs per year from the period, in order to represent the full range of thought and rhetoric within the genre at the time. This would also moderate the issue of political neutrality often present in popular music, as more contentious political songs that did not gain chart-topping popularity could be analyzed.

Finally, I cannot prove a direct relationship between the themes in country music, the ideological leanings of the genre, and the culture and politics of the White working class. All these subjects relate to one another, but none are directly causative. The politics of country music and the White working class overlap greatly and are affected by similar events and ideas, but country can only reflect the views of this population, not act as a direct window into its culture. My conclusions do apply to the White working-class culture of country music, but cannot logically be extended to the entire White working class.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

Class narratives are expressed in country music through specific themes of the emphasis of emotional over material experiences, emotional escapism, and parasocial commiseration. This builds on the understanding of country as an escapist genre that lends itself to conservatism through its scorn of genre-related and general social change. As an indirect distilled reflection of the culture of the American White working class, country music's themes are a relevant lens through which to view cultural features of the White working class, and reach new understanding about this population and its relationship to American society, culture and politics.

As an implication for the future of the country music industry, it is possible that the class disparity between country artists and their audience and the fabricated authenticity that serves as the basis of the parasocial connection of the genre will become clearer, and the insulated genre culture that exists today may dissolve somewhat. The implications of my research have to do with gaining an understanding of class structure in America. I did not discuss the politics of race significantly, as they are beyond the scope of this paper, but they are notable reasons for the isolation and specific features of country culture, especially resistance to change. Understanding the emotional rhetoric of country music can help to better explain ongoing race and class related issues in the US, as country music reflects the ideological tendencies that lead to the views of these issues by the White working class.

There are numerous possibilities for future study that stem from this research. My research is a rhetorical analysis of popular country music, which cannot document the direct effects of rhetoric on an audience. A

focus on the effects of country's emotional rhetoric on an audience's views and beliefs would be a way to fill this gap. This could be done through a natural experiment, a direct observation of the effects of these themes, or interviews with long-time country fans, artists, and industry professionals, which could reveal long-term cultural effects of the genre's themes more clearly. A more personal approach, involving human subjects, would be necessary to understand the effects of the personal themes and rhetoric present in country music, and to better understand the personal beliefs and struggles of the wider population country music's audience can serve to represent.

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