University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
May 2023

Outlaws and Rhinestones: The Cowboy Figure in Historical and Modern Country Music Media

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Abstract

The cowboy is a prominent figure in country music, though as a legitimate historical entity he is largely divorced from the process of generating or influencing country music itself. Orville Peck is an example of a modern performer who utilizes cowboy themes extensively, though his interpretation of the cowboy is markedly different from some historical realizations of this character, such as Willie Nelson's "Red Headed Stranger". Other scholars of country music isolate market factors which gave rise to the cowboy aesthetic in country music, as well as the utilization of thematic material which *purports* to be located in the distant past. In this paper, I reference those writings, while also expanding on them through comparison with other authors and my own conclusions drawn from analyses of country music media. Notably, this comparison suggests that the cowboy character is inconsistent with itself due to the past-oriented aesthetics of country music, but that the rigid structures of country music allow for subversive material to be created out of minor deviations from the status quo. Also notable is the time scale in which these aesthetic manipulations can take place - with some new takes on country music moving from taboo to mainstream in less than a decade.

Personal Interest Statement and Topic Introduction

As a young person, I was entertained by stories from my mother and grandparents, particularly my grandfather. These stories were filled with interesting characters and locales from the American West, namely Texas and New Mexico. Together, they accumulated their own landscape and chronology. Generated in my young mind was a vision of the West, half-fact and half-fiction. Though doubts about the authenticity of these stories did arise, I found that their origin did not matter. Whether these stories were authentic or borrowed, they relayed a tension between comedy and tragedy which is endemic to working class Southern life - a central tension of country music. In this way, my grandfather's role in my life was that of a folk poet or troubadour. And for this, in my adult life I find country music to possess an emotional depth which would otherwise be lost on me. So to start, I would thank LD, Juanita, and my mother, Xan. If not for them, my life would not be touched so deeply by art, least of all country music.

This emotional depth which I acknowledge above is interesting to me, in that it is contingent on my personal life experiences. This sentiment is seemingly played in reverse within Chris Stapleton's song from 2015 "Nobody to Blame." Here he sings that he "Turned [his] life into this country song", presumably by his adherence to the themes of country music, with the implication that he has cheated on his wife or has otherwise done something to merit the degeneration of the features of his life into simplistic country tropes. Whereas in my case I find that the features of my life have generated a medium of accessibility to country music content, it seems that in the case of this cautionary tune, country music may also possess the reverse power – that it can influence the way in which we live and perceive our lives. This interplay of structures, meaning, and perception plays all through the landmark pieces of country music, where some of our honky tonk heroes fall into the same prototypes set by the music which they perform. A simple answer is that these "heroes" are not the central figures of their own narratives. Under deeper analysis we learn that the relationship between the country music performer and country music persona is not so simple.

One of these landmark pieces of country music which I find deeply fascinating because of my exposure to themes such as these is *Red Headed Stranger* by Willie Nelson. This early country concept album is filled with interesting symbological material that enforces both its deep country roots as well as a Western aesthetic, which was at this time new for Willie Nelson. Alongside the classic album is a less revered although interesting companion film of the same name, released eleven years later. When starting the process of writing, I chose to relisten to the album, but I also decided to watch the film for a second time, this time with my family. One remark that my mother made which stuck out to me was: "this seems like one of those movies that grandpa would have liked." I was slightly surprised to hear this given Nelson's more enigmatic personal presentation which stands in contrast to the broader conservatism which my grandfather favored in musical performers. This remark gave me all the more reason to reapproach the classic, as well as the companion film, to understand what is so

effective about the story and the way its constructed, as well as the symbology utilized by Nelson in his classic country sound and newfound Western aesthetic.

The Red Headed Stranger: A Review

The *Red Headed Stranger* exists as one of the more multifaceted pieces of Country-Western media to this day. Though the album is limited in its musical material and instrumentation, its identity as a rare concept album of the genre, as well as its film tie-in from 1986 give it greater prominence. The work also launched Willie Nelson to a renewed superstardom in his post-Nashville career. The post-Nashville element is important, as Nelson adopted a more earthy persona, one demonstrated well by the *Red Headed Stranger* album art with a depiction of a bearded, cowboy hat-wearing Willie. This lies in contrast to Nelson's earlier career of moderate success in Nashville, in which he presented himself in a more clean-cut fashion[1] . Despite the aesthetic change, *Red Headed Stranger* demonstrates features of a country and cowboy masculinity which has roots in honky tonk, Appalachian folk, gospel, and Texas swing. The feature which makes the Red Headed Stranger an interesting character is his grappling with familiar gender dynamics as a modern antihero, and his personal and intimate redemption.

To begin, it would be useful to outline the plots of both the album and the film. The album and the film both are stories of a woman who leaves her husband, which prompts the central character to murder his newly estranged wife, and later a blonde woman at a tavern. In the film, these women are Raysha and Cindy respectively. The central male character is the Red Headed Stranger, a preacher, known as Julian in the film. After his short killing spree, the Stranger is given a chance at redemption in both the film and the album. In the album, the content shifts in the latter half to be more jovial, with some dancier songs appearing, as well as the sentimental ballads "Hands on the Wheel" and "Can I Sleep in Your Arms." The film offers Julian his redemption in the form of a stint on a farm owned by a woman named Laurie. Here, Julian works the land while his relationship with Laurie develops.

The film differs from the album in that Julian is largely occupied with a conflict in the town which he moves to in Montana. This conflict exists between the townsfolk and the local Claver family, who control the town's water supply. Though the townsfolk are complacent when he arrives, Julian attempts to restore sovereignty over the water to the townsfolk so that they will no longer be dependent on the Claver family for water. He continues this effort until he suffers his mental break brought on by his Raysha's abandonment of him, after which he commits the murders and is seemingly roaming around in avoidance of punishment for his crimes. He only returns to address the problems of the town after his restorative time spent at Laurie's farm. After the Clavers are disposed of, Julian returns to Laurie and her son, presumably to live "happily ever after." Having established the plot, I will now address the thematic intricacies of the film and the album, as well as their connection to the relationship between Country music and lived experiences.

Gender in *Red Headed Stranger*

The *Red Headed Stranger* album opens with “Time of the Preacher,” setting the stage for the eponymous murder ballad. The song details: “... he loved her so dearly he went out of his mind when she left him for someone that she’d left behind”[2]. This dynamic is established from the start of the accompanying film, as Raysha, Morgan Fairchild’s character, is seen sharing glances with another man amidst her wedding to Julian Shay, Nelson’s character. This establishes the love triangle dynamic, seen in murder ballads like the modern “Hear the Willow Cry” or the Kingston Trio’s version of “Tom Dooley,” recorded in 1958. Much like Dooley, The Red Headed Stranger, or Shay, murders his former love for her infidelity.

In this sense, *Red Headed Stranger* attaches itself to gender dynamics as old as the folk tradition in the United States but also the gender dynamics which play through honky tonk, as the relationship between Raysha and her lover seem to swap the roles of the “One Has My Name (The Other Has My Heart)” love triangle. Infidelity figures as a prominent theme in honky tonk, notably in songs like “The Wild Side of Life”, depicting a woman being wooed away from her relationship by “the glamor of the gay night life” and the men who inhabit it[3].

Tense gender dynamics continue as Raysha and Julian first find themselves in Montana. Here a sexually tense interaction takes place between the two and some of the locals. The locals suggest sexual payment for use of their pond, in a scene which is reminiscent of Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* in its portrayal of a jeering, and exploitative masculine sexuality aimed at the wife of the main character. This craven sexuality represents one extreme completely opposite of the “glamor” like discussed in “The Wild Side of Life”- in this scene Julian appears to be fending off destitution itself. This plays on a class dimension to sexuality which is further demonstrated later in the film, but is also present within classic country music. Diane Pecknold isolates this trend in her description of masculinity and country music marketing in the mid-century: “The role of breadwinner became synonymous with manhood; earning power and success within the corporate structure were increasingly the measure of masculinity”[4]. This scene at the pond seems to be the first in a line of economic factors which derail Shay’s marriage.This is emphasized later with lines like, “I came with pretties like that,” spoken by the mother of the town’s previous preacher in regards to the extravagant dresses owned by Raysha. All of this foregrounds the termination of Raysha and Julian’s relationship, placing economic status as the most consequential factor in the downfall of their marriage.

Moreover, Julian’s masculinity oscillates in its quality due to his economic situation and the features of his environment. Pecknold writes, “As Appalachian studies scholar J.W. Williamson has argued, the image of the hillbilly has long been a mirror for hopes and fears about American masculinity, whether as the embodiment of frontier freedom and self-sufficiency or as the personification of darker impulses to lust and violence”[5]. Whereas the sexual themes of the aforementioned *Straw Dogs* suggest an allure to rapacious masculine sexuality, *The Red Headed Stranger* takes a turn in the opposite direction. This scene at the pond highlights both the “hopes” and the “fears” outlined by Pecknold, with the men at the well, who are revealed later to be part of the

Claver family which controls the town's water supply, showing a glimpse of the "lust and violence" of hillbilly masculinity. Julian, in his newfound frontier lifestyle and subsequent conflict with the Claver family aligns with a concept of masculine self-sufficiency. However, as Raysha's appraisal of their living situation deteriorates, indicated by lines like:"I didn't ask for any of it," Julian's masculine qualities embody the fearful more than the hopeful - he becomes more wild or "hillbilly" as he spends time in the frontier environment.

Julian's marriage with Raysha is not the only relationship which deteriorates throughout the film. Perhaps the most dynamic relationship in the film exists between Julian and the community in Montana where he has moved. Wherein the *Red Headed Stranger* album focuses specifically on the intimate drama of the infidelity and subsequent revenge killing, the film, nearly three times the length, incorporates the town as a means of augmenting the story's moralistic dimensions. The town plot plays on Julian's appearance as a Christ figure, notably in the style of temptations in the wilderness - the subject of Julian's first sermon upon entering town. Julian appears to have a positive effect on the town early into the film, attempting to break a monopoly on the town's water supply held by the local Claver family. The coercion of the Clavers is so great, that Julian must try to restore the water on his own, until slowly he is aided by other members of the town. This dynamic is displayed by Scoby's line: "Nobody'll help you," and Julian's response: "You help, Scoby. And you help, Cauley."

In this sense, the film takes on an interesting commentary about self-sufficiency. The film spurns dependency, yet Julian's changes within the community are communitarian. Julian acts as a moral leader for the townsfolk, yet it seems that his objective is not to seize power for himself, but instead to animate some degree of communal engagement in the wellbeing of the town. Later in the film, the positive influence of Julian in the community is marked by Scoby's remarks on the town in Julian's absence: "... the people bowing and scraping to the goddamn Clavers." Julian's character thus takes on dimensions of moralism and class struggle, which are most pronounced in terms of his characterization as a Christ figure. Ironically, Julian's drive to improve the standing of the town is broken not by issues with organizing the townsfolk or having to deal with the Clavers, but instead he is deterred by his wife's abandonment of him. Ultimately this marks his moral break. In terms of the Christ analogy, this is where Julian has fallen for the temptations in the wilderness.

The Gendered Moralism of *Red Headed Stranger*

In the film's emphasis on Julian's spiritual and communitarian breakdown being caused by Raysha's infidelity, it generates some themes on gender dynamics which are less than progressive. It could be argued that this situation mirrors the section of The Fall from the Bible, a section which is often scrutinized for its misogynous implications. Moreover, the fact that Julian's fall from righteousness is realized not only by female agency, but by female *sexual* agency aligns with a perspective on gender which is suspicious of women's liberation. As T. Walker Herbert puts it in his analysis of the *Red Headed Stranger* album, "When a man's redemptive 'little darlin'' reveals that she has a mind of her own, and needs of her own, by leaving him for another man, a cycle of

misogynist violence begins”[6]. It is hard not to think of the animating sexual dimension of honky tonk which fits more or less along the same lines, like that which is present in the aforementioned “Wild Side of Life.” More specifically, Julian, though male, seems to exemplify the good girl gone wrong dynamic discussed in “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels”[7]. The violent extremes of this theme were not popularized until the mid 2000s, when songs like “Gunpowder and Lead” by Miranda Lambert could be heard on the radio. Until then, violent revenge for mistreatment was narratively reserved for the men of country music, like the Red Headed Stranger character[8]. Certainly Loretta Lynn set the stage for female-enacted violence in Country music with the song “Fist City” released in 1968, but this song depicts female on female violence. Though this depiction of violence was still new within the world of Country music, it was still a few steps removed from the deep subversion achieved by later artists like Miranda Lambert, who challenged hundreds of years of music history by allowing the woman to get violent revenge on the man.

Teresa Goddu writes on this role reversal of violent revenge in country music in 1998, nearly a decade prior to the subsequent popularization of the theme. In her writing she notes, while referencing the music video for Garth Brooks’ “The Thunder Rolls,” “Reversing the plot of ‘boy kills girl’ appears to be a violation of law and order. However, it is when the plot is reversed that its excesses become most apparent - and most threatening”[9]. At the time of her writing, the subversions of this classic country trope were present, though strongly resisted. Within ten years, mores shifted enough to allow for artists like Miranda Lambert to be catapulted atop country charts. Though these macabre themes have been present throughout the history of country music, this specific reconfiguration has shifted from offensively subversive to popular and marketable within the scope of a few years. Goddu describes how these dark structures have been allowed to exist with bluegrass for so long, stating, “...bluegrass ‘gets away with’ being gothic by its self-construction as a music securely located in the distant past”[10]. She later elaborates on how these themes have permeated the seemingly more contemporary country genre. Certainly this is visible in the case of the country classic, “Red Headed Stranger,” with its excessive yet accepted revenge dynamic falling well within the scope of the gothic tropes portrayed by bluegrass.

Another feature of this gendered revenge dynamic is the light punishment given to the central male characters in murder ballads. In most cases, this is shown as a prison sentence for the killer, but within the narrative of *Red Headed Stranger*, as well as the album, the central character seems to go unpunished for his actions. The album and the film both work to establish justification for these killings, in a way which makes the Stranger slightly more sympathetic to the audience, and by extension less deserving of punishment. As the line from “Red Headed Stranger” warns, “...you can’t hang a man for killing a woman, who’s trying to steal your horse”[11], and the same logic holds true for the film, with Julian adding, “Horse thief.” after killing Cindy, the film’s character for the “yellow-haired lady” mentioned in the original “Red Headed Stranger” song. In this sense, there is some justification given to Julian for his action taken against both Cindy and Raysha in his killing of the women, despite the fact that he is ultimately at fault in both cases. Perhaps the redemption of a character who has committed such acts would

only make sense for the audience in a work that pulls so deeply from sources of religious and emotional meaning for its narrative stability. .

Red Headed Stranger's Construction of Meaning through the Popular Imagination

In no place in the film is this religious and emotional material put in play more than during Julian's stay on Laurie's farm. Though the audience gets to see some slight justification for Julian's killing of Cindy, Raysha, and her lover, it is not until this point in the film that there is any sort of substantial investment of screen time in establishing a relationship between characters. Up until this point, the audience is given all of the heartbreak associated with romantic relationships, and now the film takes a cause after effect approach at dictating the emotional justification for Julian's breakdown.

In a more traditional film context, it would be a more appropriate form of plot construction to show the audience elements of Julian and Raysha's relationship early in the film to foreground the violent emotional break which Julian suffers as a result of the relationship being ended. However, the *Red Headed Stranger* film follows the narrative structure of song instead. In a manner which makes complete sense within an understanding of musical expression, Nelson does not introduce the relationship before describing its turmoil. In this sense, *Red Headed Stranger* inherits the oft felt but rarely elaborated affectual quality of music, which works well for the *Red Headed Stranger* album in constructing a narrative. In the song "Red Headed Stranger," musical elements establish a mood which allows for dramatic and violent narrative elements to take place. Nelson's vocal tone is mournful, and the iconic and idiosyncratic sound of the strummed nylon guitar sounds almost fragile.To add to this, the song plays into country music's strength of relating to the lived experiences of the audience. The emotional distress which causes the stranger to kill his wife is understood by the audience already – they have all felt the anguish of love gone wrong. The film, in taking the same narrative organization, is less effective in that Raysha's character must be elaborated, and in doing so it seems that the writers have little to come up with.

In this way, the efficacy of the film versus the album in telling the same story elaborates much about the construction of musical meaning and narrative. This revealed truth does much to reveal the greater social dimensions of the Red Headed Stranger character as well. Julian, or the Red Headed Stranger is both a dynamic character in terms of his development, but also in terms of the multifaceted themes of American life and country music which he embodies. Much like Chris Stapleton's lyric stating that he "Turned [his] life into a country song" for his failures in his relationship[12], the Red Headed Stranger animates emotional turmoil and real fears faced by working class Southern men: failure to provide economically, estrangement from.a wife, and failure to resist negative social pressures. What makes this different from the emotional and narrative function of other popular music is the degree to which country music prioritizes storytelling. This is why the differences in effectiveness of the narratives of the *Red Headed Stranger* album and the *Red Headed Stranger* film are so interesting –

country music is a primarily narrative art form, though its structural means of storytelling relies more on affect than chronology.

Aaron A. Fox explains the relationship between country music and popular sensibility in his book, *Real Country.* Fox details one of his interactions with a local patron of a Texas beer joint, in which he exclaims “You can’t bring me up in a beer joint, and tell me how to live!”[13]. After his exclamation and Fox’s subsequent recording of the remark, the patron realizes why it is a point of interest for Fox, and identifies that the sentiment and its phrasing would make for a good country song. In some sense, most people can identify with “country” sentiments in their day to day lives, and moreover, the most effective country music operates in direct relation to points of emotional resonance for its listeners. As Ray Charles put it, "And, of course, the lyrics that they were saying were very everyday type conversation, if you know what I mean. You didn't have to be an Einstein to figure out what they were talking about or what they were saying about. So it was very calm and very much like the blues in a sense"[14]. This is the music, which for its successful commentary on the themes of daily life is given the honorific: “Real Country Music”[15].

Structures of Southern Life and the Red Headed Stranger

One of the forms in which the Red Headed Stranger relates to the lived experiences of working class people is through the stranger’s “redemption.” This redemption is realized through the latter portion of the album and the film, where the material softens dramatically to explore themes of renewed life and love. As Aaron A. Fox notes, “ Many people, in fact, move between these institutions throughout their lives, growing up in the church, ‘falling’ into a drinking lifestyle, and dramatically being ‘saved’ as death approaches.”[16]. This redemption as explored in the story of the Red Headed Stranger connects both to the lived experiences of many Southerners as well as the underpinnings of the Christian faith, which is both a central influence in the South and in Willie Nelson’s life. The redemption offered in the film does not come on a religious basis however, instead using Julian and Laurie’s relationship as the vehicle for Julian’s new lease on life. Though this story of redemption fits within the greater narrative, it does break with the historical structure set by other murder ballads in which the central male figure is punished, even if only very lightly[17].

A potential reason for the narrative of *Red Headed Stranger* allowing Julian to be redeemed rather than punished could be the assumption that he is a subject under the influence of greater powers than himself, and is thus partially absolved of the guilt associated with killing. The features of his life are dictated by a local political structure, as well as the emotional and relational difficulties which come with his class and his environment. Though the narrative is aware of Julian or the Red Headed Stranger’s wrongdoings, it seems to want to grant him redemption for the simple fact that he was coaxed into his breakdown by forces outside of his control. In this sense he embodies a self-loathing guilt which is present throughout country music, seen in tunes like Merle

Haggard's "Mama Tried", wherein the central character has fallen victim to the structural forces at play in his life despite his social safety net[18].

Other examples include the aforementioned murder ballads, which will occasionally cite things like the "eternal triangle" as reason for the central character's deviance. Otherwise, "Down in The Willow Garden" makes the interesting inclusion, "My father oft had told me that money would set me free"[19]. This line is peculiar in its inclusion of a monetary dimension to the tune which otherwise has no such references, thereby indicating that in some sense money is what led the narrator to kill Rose Connelly[20]. Class dynamics is certainly a feature of the film, with the primary driver behind Raysha's abandonment of Julian being her inability to deal with the humble lifestyle which Julian has chosen on the frontier. Julian's humble economic situation exists in contrast to the well-dressed other man, who seems to offer a more secure lifestyle than that in the Montana wilderness. Julian also may have committed the murder of Raysha as a means of forever possessing her love, protecting their relationship against the encroachments of a more alluring set of economic circumstances. This aligns with Goddu's description of the psychological underpinnings of murder ballads, wherein the central male character must "punish" their victims in order to possess their sexuality[21]. However, there is a notable irony in the fact that the killing detailed in the actual murder ballad of the title track is done against a completely different woman while the central character's "little lost love lay asleep on the hillside."

The Land, Sexuality, and Redemption

Significantly, for the purpose of this paper, the actual process of Julian's redemption bears some interesting features in relation to gender. The gendered interactions of Julian's redemption certainly relate to his relationship with Laurie – the song "Can I Sleep in Your Arms?"[22] is given some import in this process, putting emphasis on Julian's physical and sensual renewal. However, the symbological dimension of Julian's redemption also bears some gendered weight, with his tending to the land metaphorically suggesingt a sexual and sensual relationship to the land itself. Annette Kolodny tracks the historical and literary perception of land as woman in her 1975 text, *The Lay of the Land*. In the text, she reveals some features of the symbolic operations of the gendered landscape in a way which demonstrates the intentionality in the film's juxtaposition of Julian's maintenance of the land and his developing relationship with Laurie. As Kolodny states, "In one of [Frederic Jackson Turner's] few later papers on the same subject, he made explicit what had always been the experiential truth of the American continent: the West was a woman, and to it belonged the hope of rebirth and regeneration"[23]. Here Kolodny summarizes a common thread in the histories and arts of America: that the nature of the continent, and by extension the West, has been given with a female gender. Moreover, this quotation is interesting in that it identifies the relationship in the American imagination between rebirth, and redemption with the land.

One of Kolodny's primary points is that in the gendering of the landscape, its gender role takes on both the erotic and the maternal.

> With the pastoral dream of a wholly gratifying return no longer able to make any claims upon the present, writers like Irving, Cooper, and Simms turned to an

> imaginatively restructured past, and converted the pastoral possibility into the exclusive prerogative of a single male figure, living out a highly eroticized and intimate relationship with a landscape at once suggestively sexual, but overwhelmingly maternal[24].

Here Kolodny identifies a "single male figure" who lives in relation to the landscape, hearkening the familiar cowboy character central to country music and film. Further cementing this relationship between the Western genre and Kolodny's assessment is her reference to James Fenimore Cooper, who Richard A. Peterson identifies as one of the original sources of American pastoral, and whose works would have been used for generating images for country performers had the process of country music commercialization started a century earlier[25].

Even further to this point, the "imaginatively restructured past" which Kolodny cites aligns not only with the suggestions made by Peterson, but also those made by Goddu, who cites bluegrass's "self-construction" as allowing it to exist as a form of music *seemingly* lodged in the past[26]. In this sense, it becomes obvious that though bluegrass and country music look to the past for many of their structural and aesthetic components, this retrospective reconstruction will almost certainly be tinted by contemporaneity. In this case, the contemporary tint comes in at the point of the *Red Headed Stranger* film's portrayal of the land, which falls into patterns of writing and metaphor which are now so ubiquitous and old that they have entered the realm of ideology. In Kolodny's text, she too isolates contemporary views looking at the past, when she describes how a well-intended environmental protest fell into using ubiquitous, fantasizing language toward the land[27]. Though the language of country music is largely fixed, with frequent references to lyrical themes like small Southern locales, drinking, vagabondism, and prison, the genre says many different things depending on when one listens.

Later on, Kolodny's assessment makes reference to the religious dimension as well, with her discussion of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "...he describes 'infancy' as 'the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise"[28]. This identification of the religious characteristics of renewal seems particularly fitting in relation to *Red Headed Stranger* due to its invocation of religious themes throughout, and most notably its use of "Bringing in the Sheaves," a hymn about harvesting crops, as a background song amidst the portion of the film where Julian is on Laurie's farm.

In describing how the plot processes are fundamentally spiritual in nature, Herbert writes: "Killing 'bad' women and sex with 'good' women become paired means of saving a man's soul…This composite image of man's sin and man's salvation recapitulates the feminization of Christ in evangelical religion, who is at once the source of tender mercy and marked for death"[29]. This idea of Christ's feminization seems to play even further with Kolodny's description of the spiritual and maternal element in characterizing the landscape. It seems as though the land itself could be a stand in for the "feminized slain saviour"[30] which Herbert describes, in that its spiritual renewal through works seems to operate within the plot of the film much like Laurie's character - the "good woman" for Julian to have sex with. Further supporting that point, the land seems to be a potent example for a feminine messiah in its operation as an agrarian

fetish in country music, which exists in tandem with cowboy symbology, despite the fact that the cowboy character is predicated on exploiting or conquering the land which he is dependent on. Even further to this point, Herbert describes the Stranger's action as being fueled by an "infantile desperation"[31]. This isolates a similar childish quality which foregrounds salvation, like that which Emerson identifies above

To make things even more complex, Herbert's discussion of the Red Headed Stranger is housed within a larger writing where he underscores the homoerotic tendencies in Nelson's depictions of Christ throughout his body of work. The Red Headed Stranger, in his patterning as a Christ character in the film, as well as his sensual dimension seems to still fall within this broader trend in Nelson's music. Now it seems that Christ could be the stranger, the land, or the slain women within the narrative of the Red Headed Stranger. All at once these seemingly distinct symbols in the narrative of the film merge together, to create an amalgam of sinful, sacrificed, sensual, violent, and redeemed figures within the same story. Though this cowboy character as well as his environment and companions have become messy, little else should be expected. This outlaw finds himself at a crossroad between multiple streams of symbol histories. He must contend with hundreds of years of writings on the landscape, hundreds of years of folk music history, dozens of years of the cowboy occupying country music, the revisionist western subgenre which he is seemingly native to, and the hundreds of years of Gospel music history, which T. Walker Herbert says the outlaw subtly undermines. To expect the interplay of all of these symbols to generate a cowboy character who is singular and easy to read would be unreasonable.

To summarize, the Red Headed Stranger character as well as Willie Nelson himself seem to embody many complex features of the cowboy character as well as Southern masculinity. This is not to say that Nelson's music or the film are exclusively problematic in their embodiment of gender themes, but rather a suggestion that the symbology of country music and Western films themselves were at this point already burdened with stances on gender which were frequently patriarchal. These themes were not one note however. Though "Red Headed Stranger" embodies some of the misogyny inherent in the murder ballad subgenre as outlined by Teresa Goddu, Willie Nelson's work including the material within the *Red Headed Stranger* film seem to observe Christ in a sensuous and even erotic fashion, despite an outward maintenance of heteronormativity. With this, both the movie and the album about the Red Headed Stranger seem to indicate a degradation of cowboy symbology which had existed in popular media for less than fifty years at this point.

Perhaps a more fitting description of the symbolic interplay would be to call it destructive interference. Much like Kolodny's description of the sexual and maternal tendencies in descriptions of the landscape leading to an overall image which is incestuous, it appears that at this point the cowboy image as well as accompanying country and Western themes have started to generate dissonance. Whenever topics of gender, money, religion, or the landscape are concerned, from at least this point on no two cowboys are singing the same tune. This trend aligns with broader reappraisals of cowboy symbology which began shortly before "The Redheaded Stranger" was released, such as the revisionist Western subgenre emblemized by films such as *The Wild Bunch,* directed by the aforementioned Sam Peckinpah.

Trixie Mattel and Orville Peck's "Jackson": A Modern Example of Complex Cowboy Signaling

As these trends were present beginning in the latter portion of the 20th century, I will now approach a more contemporary source and look at its symbolic operations as a point of comparison. One of the more prominent contemporary "cowboy" performers available for this kind of examination is Orville Peck. Donning rhinestone cowboy apparel, replete with a mysterious tassel mask, his visual performance influence is clearly drawn from the annals of commercial country music. In 2021, Peck collaborated with "RuPaul's Drag Race" star Trixie Mattel in a rendition of "Jackson," the classic country tune made famous by Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash. This cover stands in unique contrast to other versions for its invocation and manipulation of familiar country and Western performance elements.

When watching the music video for Mattel's version of "Jackson," the most immediately apparent aesthetic choice made is Mattel and Peck's wardrobe. Though Mattel's appearance seems somewhat natural with her sleeved dress and Dolly Parton-esque hairstyle, she does don heavy drag makeup, which gives notable contrast to an image which otherwise conveys classic country womanhood[32]. In a performance of "Jackson" for "The Johnny Cash Show" in 1969, June Carter Cash is performing in a sleeved dress herself, with a voluminous mid century hairdo much like the kind which Mattel is imitating[33]. June Carter Cash seems more matronly by contrast - her dress is ankle length unlike Mattel's, and at the beginning of the performance she even mentions that she has recently given birth to a child. In fact, she informs the audience that she has not been on the show for some time due to her role as a new mother. As she puts it, she has been, "busy doing other things"[34]. Though not solely rooted in her visual presentation, Carter conveys a time-honored country music sensibility about family. This is all the more underscored when she reveals her child's name, which is of dynastic importance: "John Carter Cash." This gives the performance a familial dimension, while also demonstrating a tension between the social roles of country performer and mother.

Using this same "Johnny Cash Show" performance as reference, Peck's apparel seems to offer a more dramatic shift over the classic example. While Cash wears his well known "man in black" attire, Peck's costuming is far more ostentatious - a blue, yellow, and black suit and shirt combo. This already bold outfit is made even more extravagant by Peck's signature mask and cowboy hat, as well as boots, a belt buckle, pocket square, and a peacock patterned tie. There are gold accents throughout the outfit, and his hat even bears golden flames under the brim[35]. All of this is to say that Peck's outfit makes the term "rhinestone cowboy" look like an understatement, by drawing from and making augmentations of the source material.

The source material in question is of course the historical tendency for male performers in country music to perform in Western apparel, with some performers like Hank Snow and Del Reeves taking country costuming to garish new heights with various rhinestones, colors, textures, and patterns. In Richard A. Peterson's text, "Creating Country Music," he shines a light on the historical operation and development

of this cowboy image. Importantly, he details how the visual symbol of country music changed over time, from an old timer on to a hillbilly, then eventually on to a cowboy. One of the ways in which this approach is described by Peterson is as performers "singing hillbilly songs while wearing a cowboy's clothing."[36], though as he details, "... a substantial majority of those who would become Opry regulars were not even rural residents in 1925 … Instead, they were steadily employed residents of Nashville who worked at a wide variety of urban trades ranging from barber, cigar maker, and railroad dispatcher to insurance salesman, watchmaker, and physician" (Peterson 1999, 75). In this sense, even the hillbilly element is overstated in considering the background of the performers themselves. Personal authenticity aside, there had to be some outward representation of country performers for the sake of public imaging. The more salient image proved to be the cowboy over time, despite Bill Malone's remark: "'The cowboy contributed nothing to American music,"[37] accompanied however by the acknowledgement, "the cowboy did, however, contribute 'the fabric of usable symbols' which surrounded him'"[38]. Perhaps the most meaningful idea of Malone's referenced by Peterson is his suggestion that the cowboy is symbolically significant mostly in the fact that he "fit the American self concept"[39]. These features, as described by Peterson, allowed for the development of a cowboy image among country musicians, sometimes reverent to the historical material, and sometimes far more ostentatious.

In this way, Peck's peacock motif in his outfit seems fitting, given the performative nature of rhinestone cowboy-style crooner apparel. The element of Peck's outfit which pushes the envelope past the high bar set by his forebears is his signature mask. With a leather panel covering the top portion of his face, and shiny tassels draping down well below the shoulder[40], the mask itself seems a statement on the aesthetic sensibilities of country performers. Though black leather and tassels might be appropriate on a Western garment, their juxtaposition on the same item of clothing makes apparent the kitschy underpinnings of country costuming. This is not to mention the fact that masks are in themselves scarcely used to adorn country and Western performers. Though drawing from the well of the mythic outlaw aesthetic, masks obstruct the face of the performer, thereby diminishing some of the "down homeyness" which is so often sought in the promotion of commercial country music. All of this is to say that Peck, both in his solo work and his collaboration with Mattel, is putting on a performance of camp par excellence, with costuming and performance practice which falls just outside of the normative tradition of country music.

Blocking and Perceived Intimacy

The costuming of the video is not the only feature which sits in contrast to previous renditions of "Jackson" and other implicit country performance practice. Visually, there is an immediately noticeable difference in the way that the two performances are shot. Trixie Mattel's version shows her spaced some distance away from Peck, with the drummer in center stage. The video relishes in a few wide shots which showcase the large theater setting[41]. In contrast, Cash and Carter are in center frame, with a glaring amount of emptiness on either side. It is almost as though the camera is working to push them closer together than they already are[42]. The wider shots of Mattel's version

look visually balanced though, largely because of the similarities in stature between the two performers. This height similarity is exploited even further at 1:58[43], as Peck joins Mattel at her microphone. Here Mattel, though wearing heels, actually appears to be taller than Peck - a significant reversal from the “Johnny Cash Show” performance in which the man in black appears markedly taller than his counterpart.

This moment at 1:58 in the video shows an important contrast from the original material in its aural component as well. At this point in the video, Peck joins Mattel at her microphone and the two begin to sing in a higher register than before, with Peck’s vocal pushing into some high notes far past the range of his counterpart. This makes more plain the interest of the performers’ vocal registers in the context of the cover as a whole. While some other contemporary versions of the song truncate the gap between vocalists’ registers, such as the 2020 cover done by Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, they seem to be slightly less notable in their doing so. The Welch and Rawlings cover closes the register gap by having Rawlings sing in a higher register[44]. This shift, in contrast to Mattel’s version, seems less radical. Rawlings’ whining vocal is all too reminiscent of that high and lonesome sound which has been popular in country and bluegrass recording for decades. The Mattel and Peck version manages to push the envelope here, with the more masculine performer taking on the typically feminine vocal role. In this sense, Mattel’s cover achieves a level of subversion which is new even when compared with other similarly handled versions.

Part of what makes Peck’s subversive embodiment of these archetypes possible is the fact that the well of symbolic resources has changed considerably since the original considerations of country costuming were being made. This “well” at the time of Peck’s drawing from it now contains all of the symbolic augmentations made to the cowboy image by the tradition of country music itself, as well as the related mythology of Western films. Now bearing symbolic implications from multiple sources, including the historical, the cowboy as an image now must push against the weight of multiple interpretations. This character no longer embodies a singular, masculine “American self image,” and must instead contend with its own internal disagreements.

One of these internal disagreements seems to be brought on by questions over the cowboy’s sexuality. The suggestion of a homosexual cowboy has existed for some time, notably in films like “Brokeback Mountain.” Prior to the 2005 film, trailblazing works established gay themes in country and Western spheres, such as the artwork of Tom of Finland and Dom Orejudos, or the album “Lavender Country” by the artist of the same name. With some of these works appearing as early as the 1960s[45], it seems as though the idea to depict cowboys as homosexuals was coincident with the rise in the popular appeal of the cowboy character in the mid 20th century.Though present, the effects of early gay-themed cowboy art seems to have had a more minute effect on cowboy mythology than its straightlaced and non-subversive popular counterparts. The incorporation of cowboy imagery in presidential campaigns as well as modern responses to the gay cowboy, seem to evidence the fact that broadly speaking these gay-themed cowboy works are not the version of cowboys that America knows. The “true” cowboy character seems unfettered by, if not resistant to questions around his sexuality. This all being said, the popular availability of the gay cowboy theme seems to be increasing.

Peck's Retrospective Inventions on the Cowboy Theme

This is all to say, that Peck is not breaking new ground with his suggestions of a homoerotic cowboy sexuality. However, he is reaching a broader audience than some of the original work on the theme ever did. To be sure, Peck's work is also more marketable than its forebears – Tom of Finland and Orejudos' work is distinctly sexual at least, pornographic at most. As for "Lavender Country," the material is too explicit to garner much radio play, with one radio DJ even seeing her broadcasting license revoked for playing "Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears" by Lavender Country over air[46]. Peck's work is also notable in that it seems to operate on different principles than these earlier works. The visual erotic art mentioned above seems to demonstrate a virile and dominant gay sexuality, with virtually all cowboys depicted with large muscles and prominent "packages"[47]. As for Lavender Country, the majority of the gay themes present are conveyed through lyrics alone[48]. The cover of "Jackson" by Mattel and Peck is free from any lyrics which actually convey gay sexuality, and the juxtaposition of the glitzy rhinestone cowboy and drag apparel stand in definite contrast to the overtly masculine visual artwork by Tom of Finland and Orejudos. Though these works broke ground, Peck and Mattel do so in a different way.

Peck's contribution is not his invention of an interpretation of the cowboy where he is homosexual, but rather the generation of a new context in which the time-honored rhinestone cowboy character is placed within the other already existing gay cowboy interpretation. Peck's juxtaposition of these two interpretations of the cowboy is anachronistic, and its subversion comes not from a dissonance between these two interpretations, but rather their uncanny consonance. This oddly fitting gay setting for the once hegemonic cowboy performer reaches back in time and mark all of these instances of the rhinestone cowboy as camp, even though this performance practice preceded the the notion of camp itself by several years, and gay cowboys remained largely outside of the popular consciousness for several years after the rhinestone cowboy lost traction.

Here I am reminded of the case of the gender reversed violent revenge dynamic of country music, demonstrated by songs like "Gunpowder and Lead." Much like this other reconfiguration of gender structures within country music, Mattel and Peck's performance emerged at a moment of popular accessibility, despite early resistance to similar works, like "Lavender Country." Whether its a girl with a gun or an openly homoerotic take on the rhinestone cowboy, these "excessive" structures of country music remain covert until contemporary artists come along to occupy these structures themselves, and then shatter the facade by way of their identity being incongruent with the strict fixtures of classic country tropes.

In Skip Hollandsworth's analysis of the girls with guns trend in mid-2000s country music, he describes how the music connects to the real life problems faced by women, allowing them the courage to face their own neglectful relationships[49]. I believe Mattel and Peck do something similar with their rendition of "Jackson," making room in the

world of country music for a group which has always been there though not always seen or heard. Moreover, I am reminded again of the lyric: “I turned my life into a country song” [50], and how country is patterned by and patterns the real lives of the people who interact with the genre.

Soft-Shell and Hard-Core: (Peterson)... a useful, but limited, framework

This manipulation of symbolic material can only be described as falling outside of the soft-shell and hardcore dichotomy which Richard A Peterson assigns to country music. As Peterson puts it, “... the sort that appeals to ‘rustic’ assembly or frolic tradition is here called *hard core* and the more pop-music-like parlor or domestic tradition is called soft shell”[51]. What Peterson suggests is that there are two given trends present in Country music at any given time, which are distinct in their appeal to either popular or traditional sensibilities. Though this description of aesthetic differences within country music is useful, Peck and Mattel’s rendition of “Jackson” breaks the overly simple formula. Firstly, the visual and aural styles of Peck signal back to an earlier time in country music, seemingly aligning him with Peterson’s hardcore designation. However, when the Western crooner subgenre which Peck references was still prominent within country music, it was regarded as one of the more commercial and less authentic veins of country expression, in short it would have fallen into the “soft-shell” category in its own time[52]. Even more to this point, the visual presentation of these crooner artists like Marty Robbins, Eddy Arnold, or even Dean Martin certainly draw from the well of Western wear, though not to the same garish extent of some of their more hardcore counterparts[53].

In this sense, Peck combines elements of country music which though not in opposition, have avoided total combination over the years. What Peck does with his adapted visual and sonic styles is not to totally assimilate into a prototype set by earlier country performers, but rather draw from these various prototypes and the attached cowboy mythology to create a personal image and performance style which conveys a unique gay cowboy character, who has not been adequately conveyed within a single image up to this point. Peck does not lean into a new soft-shelled image, nor does he attach himself directly to any preexisting performance practice from country music history; instead he combines styles to generate a specific character. Moreover, this specific character, in his homosexuality and his evocation of earlier tropes, brings forward for evaluation the sexuality which has always been present in the crooning style as well as the rhinestone cowboy performance practice.

“Jackson’s” Efficacy in Being Off By an Inch

Aaron A. Fox contends that adherence to restriction is a central tendency of country music, calling it, “... a delight in working within severe formal and thematic limits”[54]. Even further to this point, Fox cites place names as one of the compelling tropes of country

music[55] -- a trope by which “Jackson” obviously abides. In the invocation of classic country structures and the conscious failure to maintain others, Trixie Mattel’s “Jackson” and its music video demonstrate the very power of being off by an inch. This is because the audience’s eyes are drawn specifically to the breakpoint - the item which breaks country music’s aesthetic spell which would otherwise guarantee immersion. In the case of the visual presentation of the video, the breakpoint comes from a few locations: the aesthetically fitting yet uncanny mask, the height similarities between the performers, the register-location of the performers’ voices, and the drag makeup, which though feminine, does little in the way of conveying a conservative country womanhood. By looking at these elements in particular and seeing them as out of place, the audience is made to question why other features such as the croon of Peck’s voice or his cowboy costuming are more socially acceptable. That is to say, that audiences are forced to come to an understanding about the sociological posturings of this cover, and then from there are drawn to more deeply understand the operation of social norms which exist in country music as a whole.

In describing Willie Nelson’s evocation of homosexual undertones in his rendition of gospel music, T. Walker Herbert says, “In the posthomophobic performance context that Nelson has generated these buried erotic potentials are brought to the surface” [56]. Similarly, “Jackson” and its music video do not generate new material with gay themes; instead, it seems to manipulate already existing features of country performance and the song itself to create a *context* in which audiences must finally reckon with the camp which is already inherent in the genre.

CONCLUSION:

To summarize, it appears that functionally the cowboy image adopted by country performers is inauthentic as Richard A. Peterson suggests, but the employment of these images takes on a level of symbolic complexity which falls outside of the scope of Peterson’s soft shell and hard core dichotomy. The cowboy image at present has become an amalgam - representing elements which are at once subversive and hegemonic, rigorously heteronormative and homoerotic, as well as outlaw and orderly. To add to this, the cowboy is the key symbol for country music, with its penchant for a past nostalgia, despite the fact that the cowboy too represents forward movement in his conquering of the West. It appears that this is at least in part due to the fixedness of country themes and language, which can seem excessive in the face of an ever changing social order. This dissonance can provide for pointed meta discussions on genre and its social discourse, as Orville Peck demonstrates in his occupation of the cowboy character. Otherwise, even those pieces which do not seem to aim at metacommentary in their construction can demonstrate the impossibility of a singular cowboy image - such as Willie Nelson’s *Red Headed Stranger*, which is at once engaging with a folk music tradition as old as the United States in its generation of a murder ballad story, at the same time as it takes on the ‘revisionist’ characterization. Looking forward, it will be interesting to see if the cowboy maintains his symbological power in his evocation of the American self-image, or if his various interpretations and

appearances will cause him to collapse in on himself as he continues his semio-inflation. One is left to wonder if this town is big enough for all of them.

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