Object Of Your Rejection: The Symbolic Annihilation And Recuperation Of Queer Identities In Country Music

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OBJECT OF YOUR REJECTION: THE SYMBOLIC ANNIHILATION AND
RECUPERATION OF QUEER IDENTITIES IN COUNTRY MUSIC

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

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Lauren Veline

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the double-marginalization of white queers living in Bible Belt communities by examining the symbolic annihilation of queer identities in country music. Bible Belt queers face unique obstacles and have different needs than queer communities elsewhere due to the cultural context of their communities. The urban-centric (“metronormative”) standards of queer identity and visibility presented in the media do not translate to their lived experiences. Moreover, while white, non-urban southerners possess a source of popular-media expression through country music, queer identities are noticeably absent. The invisibility of Bible Belt queers in the media perpetuates a cycle of hostility and sexual stigma that negatively affects queer individuals, most notably those living in the American South.

I argue that, due to the socializing function of media representations, an openly queer country artist could be a powerful vehicle for negotiating -- or perhaps changing -- the social atmosphere of sexual stigma in the Bible Belt. However, the value systems that propagate sexual stigma and hostility towards queerness are also replicated in country music. Using questionnaires and secondary literature, I examine such value systems and the experiences of queer individuals in the country music industry and contextualize the production-content-audience chain, thereby revealing possible points of intervention for successfully introducing queer expressions. The results of this thesis confirm the prevalence of sexual stigma in the region and genre and the potential benefits of an openly queer country artist.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I must thank my parents, Bob and Linda Veline, for their unending support (financial and otherwise) and for answering the phone every time I called in a fit of school-related panic (which occasionally happened between the hours of midnight and three in the morning). I would like to thank everybody at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture for making my graduate school experience so fulfilling and memorable (disregard the part where I implied that your classes may have been panic-inducing, I’ve forgiven you), especially Dr. Darren Grem, for advising my thesis and providing support and guidance throughout the process, and Drs. Katie McKee and Simone Delerme, for being on my committee.

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We finally got a flashing light, they put it in last year
And everybody got real happy when the grocery store got beer
And last time the census men came a-knockin', we were bursting at the seams
Aw, but don't you forget it, as big as we're getting
This town's too small to be mean

Big enough for a zip code, a VFW
A good Mexican restaurant, a beauty shop or two
Got a Methodist, a Baptist, and a Church of the Nazarene
Aw, but don't you forget it, as big as we're getting
This town's too small to be mean
Yeah, it's too dang small to be mean

Too small to be lying
Way too small to cheat
Way too small for secrets
Cause they're way too hard to keep
Cause somebody's mama knows somebody's cousin
And somebody's sister knows somebody's husband
And somebody's daughter knows somebody's brother
And around here, we all look out for each other

You'll end up in the paper, wreck your family name
What goes around comes back around by Friday's football game
We only got one sheriff, but we all know how to keep the peace
Aw, and don't you forget it, as big as we're getting
This town's too small to be mean

Too small to be lying
Way too small to cheat
Way too small for secrets
Cause they're way too hard to keep
Cause somebody's mama knows somebody's cousin
And somebody's sister knows somebody's husband
And somebody's daughter knows somebody's brother
And around here, we all look out for each other

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Kacey Musgraves, “This Town” (2015)
We have this much in common with gay people everywhere, that for us our families are our first battleground. We must survive our families in order to become ourselves, to realize that we are gay, even though our families never want us to be gay. But for us in the South, the family is a field where craziness grows like weeds.

We have the church in common too, all of us, even the ones who never attended any service or sang any hymn. The church has reached its hand into every corner of the South, into every black place and white place, and has set about its task of telling people how to live, of telling women to be subject to their husbands, of telling husbands how to rule over their wives and men how to rule over women. Most of all we have the church that tells us sex is nasty, never to be discussed except in its nastiness. For gay people, this is the hardest part of all: because we can only identify ourselves as ourselves through what we desire, and we learn, from the first moment of life in the South, that desire is a deadly evil thing.

So, we have the country inside, and the church inside us, and the memory of a harsh childhood where everybody was watching us and talking about us. Then we grew up and moved to the city.

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Jim Grimsley

Excerpt from “Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South” (2001)
INTRODUCTION

The two passages prefacing this introduction illustrate the cultural uniqueness of small towns in the Bible Belt, namely the intimate level of visibility and the pervasiveness of Christian institutions within these communities. Everybody knows each other, and they watch you and talk about you to one another; there cannot be any secrets here because they are much too difficult to keep. As Grimsley writes, such an atmosphere is torturous for queers living in the community. The church, the most powerful institution in the community, teaches that queer desires are sinful. Those who experience such desires internalize the shame of their “sin” and desperately try to keep it a secret; however, their neighbors are watching them, attuned to any deviation from the norm that could be a sign of queerness, making keeping such a secret even harder. Imagine, hypothetically, little Jimmy Grimsley’s Sunday school teacher talking to a friend about how she has noticed that Jimmy is a very sensitive little boy, and he only plays with the little girls in his class. Her friend responds, remembering that while the preacher was telling the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, she noticed all the little boys in church staring wide-eyed, fascinated by the violence and destruction they were hearing, but little Jimmy was crying, looking fearful. Both women expressed half-hearted pity for the Grimsley family—it must be a shame to have a queer for a son. What is his father going to do about it?

For Grimsley, his choices were clear: stay where everyone knows me but nobody is like me, and suffocate under the weight of an oppressive and invasive institution; or, go to the city, where I can be invisible and free to live my life as I please. Like Grimsley, many Bible Belt
queers choose to leave their small communities in search of the urban anonymity they could not obtain at home, anonymity that allows greater freedom from the scrutiny of those who might condemn them. As Carolyn Leste Law writes in the introduction to *Out in the South*, “It is a popular myth that gay people cannot live in the repressive atmosphere of the South, that all gay and lesbian southerners are driven out.” While many Bible Belt queers do feel driven out of their small communities and into the cities, for just as many, leaving is not an option for innumerable reasons. Perhaps some lack the resources to leave, perhaps some must support and take care of their families, or perhaps some simply lack the desire to leave their homes. No matter their reasons, those who stay “struggle to make a way out of no way in the small towns and rural counties where they’ve always lived and feel they belong, all the while expressing the pain of also feeling that they surely don’t belong.” The logic of the myth that queer people cannot, and therefore do not, live in these communities likewise suggests that there cannot be gay culture in the region. Subsequently, gay culture and gay communities are believed to be an urban or non-southern phenomenon, and therefore gay culture and identities are constructed as such.

Identities are formed and informed by communities. For Bible Belt queers, forming their identities is like playing an infinite game of tug-of-war, where their membership in their Bible Belt community and their membership in the queer community constantly pull against each other, but neither side can ever win; the two identities remain hopelessly deadlocked in

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3 Law 4
4 Black and Rhoher 19
opposition to the other, leaving Bible Belt gays with the understanding that two integral parts of their identity must be incompatible and irreconcilable with one another. As Kate Black and Marc A. Rhoher explain, “in the worlds we live in, for example, urban gays or lesbians may judge us to be too ‘country,’ too rural, or just straight hicks. At home, that is, the place where we grew up, we may still be considered persona non grata as a lesbian and gay man.”

These myths are perpetuated by the media, which reflect and reinforce society’s dominant ideology and values while indirectly teaching audiences about society and groups within it. Media representations of places like the Bible Belt typically cast the region as ignorant and hostile towards gay people, reinforcing the message that queer individuals do not belong there. Likewise, gay representations in the media tend to be urban-centric and communicate modes of queerness that are often incompatible with, not relatable to, or simply even undesirable for Bible Belt queers. However, unlike most groups marginalized in mainstream society, white, rural, or lower class southerners actually possess a powerful popular media platform that allows them to represent themselves—country music. Yet, country music is likewise understood to be unwelcoming of queerness due to the value systems it shares with the Bible Belt, and therefore Bible Belt queers are again rendered invisible in their communities. Media scholars term the erasure of a marginalized group in the media symbolic annihilation, which frames how messages about the group, including how they are understood or how they are valued in society, are interpreted by audiences. Because media are able to indirectly socialize audiences and shape societal norms and values, media representations are incredibly powerful and important, especially for marginalized groups. Studies have shown that seeing positive media representations of LGBTQ people has a beneficial impact on struggling LGBTQ people.

4 Black and Rhoher 19
However, in order to reap the benefits of representation, the representations must be positive and *relatable*, and because the current breadth of popular queer representation are based on a “meteronormative” standard of queer experience and identity, Bible Belt queers are deprived of beneficial media representations. Considering that LGBTQ suicide rates are disproportionately higher in the Bible Belt than anywhere else in the nation, it seems that Bible Belt queers desperately need representations that can help them understand their experience and reconcile their identities.

Because country music traditionally represents rural, southern, and white identities, this thesis operates within a specifically white framework; examining the intersectionalities of race, gender, sexuality, and geography poses unique challenges that would require a different and more complex framework, and is simply beyond the scope of this thesis. Likewise, this thesis examines non-heterosexual identities, and I use terms like “homosexual(ity),” “nonheterosexual(ity),” “queer(ness),” “gay(s),” and “gay(s) and lesbian(s)” interchangeably and as general umbrella terms. To borrow from Bernadette Barton’s explanation in *Pray The Gay Away*, “an undifferentiated status of ‘homosexual,’ regardless of sex, much less whether one is bisexual or questioning, best frames the experience of Bible Belt gays,” and likewise, “in terms of the oppression we endure, how Bible Belt gays identify is less significant than how we are perceived by others.” Therefore, like Barton, “I deliberately do not invoke this alphabet-string phrase [LGBTQIAA+]” often in this thesis. Likewise, I do not focus specifically on non-normative gender identities, as sexuality and gender are two different modes of identity and therefore require different frameworks for analysis. Also, as Barton suggests, if members of Bible Belt communities continue to struggle to accept nonheterosexuals and cannot (or will not)

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distinguish between different sexual orientations, broaching subjects of non-normative gender identities would be futile at this junction.

Bible Belt queers are faced with a different set of obstacles and needs than queer communities elsewhere; therefore their experiences need to be examined within their unique cultural context. Unlike queers elsewhere, who often identify the state as a source of hostility and demand direct political action, Bible Belt queers identify ignorance about gay people, religious intolerance, and southern cultural views as the sources of hostility in their communities. Bible Belt communities perpetuate a “cycle of hostility and invisibility in which LGBT people kept invisible because they viewed the culture as hostile,” and subsequently, the “[h]ostility spread as ordinary citizens saw only LGBT folks who fit more fringe and, to them, deviant stereotypes.”

In these communities, the standard of overt expressions of difference and confrontational politics found in queer movements is unacceptable, as Bible Belt communities value conformity and familiarity. For Bible Belt queers, simply making themselves visible is a potential mode of activism, but their goals in making themselves visible is to show members of their community that gay people are respectable, familiar members of their community. This is because “southern lesbians and gays approach activism not through the confrontational politics of mass protest but rather through personal and cultural negotiations from behind.” This type of approach is necessary in this region because direct action invites some form of direct retaliation, and in communities where conformity and solidarity are cultural capital, taking such risks may not

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7 Ibid 620.
8 Ibid 626.
always be an option for queer community members, even if the retaliation is not physically violent.

However, the media, specifically country music in this case, may be a viable alternative for implementing change in an indirect ways, due to its socializing power. Exposure to relatable media representations could help queers in the Bible Belt feel less alone in their communities and provide them guides for forming their identities. Likewise, media representations of Bible Belt queers that present them as familiar members of the community could help combat the negative stereotypes that permeate their communities and potentially help reduce sexual stigma in the region. Therefore, I argue that the presence of an openly gay country artist could provide the type of representation that could benefit Bible Belt queers and also help affect change in their communities.

In Chapter 1, I provide the theoretical framework for my thesis by examining the media theories that make up the foundation of my argument. This includes the functions of media and media messages, the socializing power of media, the significance of representation, and symbolic annihilation. Then, I examine the production-content-audience chain as it applies to country music. Chapter 2 explores country music industry’s value systems. I address how the industry became associated with such value systems and then what those systems are, in terms of political values, religious values, and gender values. Then, I explore country’s history of “slow” feminism to illustrate how marginalized groups have managed to operate within their cultural constraints while still pushing boundaries in order to implement effective change. In Chapter 3, I examine the relationship between religion, gender, and homophobia in the Bible Belt and in country music. I analyze the stories of Chely Wright and Ty Herndon, two queer country artists with successful careers in the 1990s and 2000s while living in the closet, to illustrate the effects living
in an environment imbued with sexual prejudice. Then, I examine the experiences of Shane McAnnally and Brandy Clark, two openly gay country songwriters, in order to gauge the current state of gay acceptability and visibility in Nashville. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the primary data I gathered from Bible Belt queers about their lives, experiences, perceptions, and opinions about being queer in the Bible Belt, about being queer in country music, and about media representations of Bible Belt queers in general.
CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I. “I Saw it on TV”: The Power of Media Messages in Socialization

Our society is a mediated one. With each passing year, Americans consume more media per day. Such messages influence how we understand the world and our role in it. Much of what we know about, care about, and consider important is based on what we see in the media because media presentations reflect, reinforce, and shape cultural attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths. A substantial body of literature demonstrates that exposure to the media has a profound affect on beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This is explained best by social learning theory, which posits that “people acquire their beliefs, attitudes, and propensity to engage in behaviors directly based on first-hand experiences they have with others who exhibit particular behaviors and/or indirectly, based on what they observe others (in person or in the mass media) doing or saying.” As media consumption increases, engagement with others subsequently becomes more indirect, and, therefore, we are socialized via indirect exposure to various groups. This includes both the groups we identify with and those we don’t. Therefore, the way different groups are represented in the media and the messages those representations convey are significant. Even television series with “with seemingly little redeeming value”—

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such as *Keeping Up With the Kardashians, Jerry Springer,* or *The Bachelor*—“also teach us a vast amount of information and expectations about history, politics, and social values of our own and others’ cultures.”

This is because we live in *communication environments,* which Lesikar and Pettit (1993) define as “a sensory environment in which communication occurs; where sensory environment is the real world surrounding us which our senses can detect.” The world surrounding us is thus largely a mediated one, as media presentations communicate various levels of manifest, latent, and cumulative messages to us.

All media presentations contain *manifest messages,* which are direct and clear surface-level messages, which audiences have little trouble recognizing. Manifest messages are most obvious in advertising or marketing media, which *tell* the viewer something. Media presentations also contain *latent messages,* or indirect messages that are beneath the surface. Latent messages sometimes reinforce the manifest message, but latent messages may also have entirely different meanings. When audiences are exposed to similar messages repeatedly from various media, the messages become *cumulative messages,* or messages that form new meanings independent of any individual occurrence. For example, consistent messages regarding gender roles or racial/cultural stereotypes reoccur throughout many media presentations. Silverblatt et al. (2014) provide an excellent example of this relationship, namely how G.I. Joe commercials promote a line of war toys. The manifest message in such commercials is to inform the audience about the toy. However, the G.I. Joe commercials also convey latent messages that equate violence and

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14 Silverblatt et al. 11.
war with masculinity. Likewise, G.I. Joe is one of many “macho man” media figures, and such imagery’s consistent presence becomes a cumulative message about ideal masculinity.\textsuperscript{15}

When unpacking media messages, it is important to identify the dominant ideology and its expression in the media to determine if the ideology serves to oppress or repress certain cultural groups. As Lind (2010) explains:

Media perform a pivotal role in perpetuating the dominant ideology, because media texts so often produce and reproduce that ideology. If we (as members of a society) don’t see much that represents an alternative way of approaching or understanding our world, it’s unlikely we’ll embrace an alternative ideology. Because of this, it’s vital to examine the way the media represent members of a culture’s social groups. In our culture, we should look at media depictions not only of the dominant social group (straight, White, middle-to-upper-class male) but also of the subordinated groups (homosexuals, women, people of color, people of lower economic classes, and the like.)\textsuperscript{16}

Lind succinctly sums up how the media perpetuates a culture’s dominant ideology by stating, “[u]ltimately, the media help maintain a status quo in which certain groups in our society routinely have access to power and privilege while others do not.”\textsuperscript{17} While the media provide “an abundance of positive, varied representations” of the dominant social groups, marginalized groups generally receive “a limited number of predominantly negative and narrow representations.” Therefore, how media represent social groups is just as important as if the group is present at all.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Silverblatt et al. 11.
\textsuperscript{16} Lind 7.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid 2.
II. “There Aren’t Any Gays Living in Berea!”: Symbolic Annihilation and the Impact of Representation

When media presentations of a marginalized group are limited, narrow, and predominantly negative, it results in symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation is “a process by which the mass media omit, trivialize, or condemn certain groups that are not socially valued.”19 Klein and Shiffman (2009) explain the significance of symbolic annihilation:

The basic idea is that groups that are valued in a particular culture tend to be shown frequently in the media, and viewers/readers come to learn about these groups’ purported characteristics and their implied value to the culture-at-large by virtue of their media exposure. But when certain groups are not valued in that same culture, the media tend not to include them in their storylines and, in the process, cast them aside and disenfranchise them by not showing them. Symbolic annihilation in the media is of concern because it presents people with implied messages about what it means to be a member of a culturally valued group versus a member of a socially disenfranchised group (or “out group”). The absence of a particular group in the media instructs people, albeit tacitly, about how one should or should not act, and about what one should or should not look like.20

Through the manifest, latent, and cumulative meanings, framed by symbolic annihilation, audiences “learn a great deal about socially valued groups and out groups and the social consequences of being a member of the latter just from being exposed to media content.”21 Likewise, because mass media play a substantial role in the way social groups are understood by others and how they understand themselves, the invisibility of a specific group limits how and whether group members “understand what is possible for themselves and how they see themselves fitting in to contemporary domains of social life.” This results in their being “deprived of messages or strategies for how to be a person.”22 The converse is also true. In a study of how LGB visibility in the media affected LGB youth, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011)

19 Klein et al 57.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Leavitt et al 39.
found that “the LGB identity development process, including the realization of one’s same-sex sexual desires and coming out, has been conceptualized as a dynamic process that is mediated by the cultural and historical context in which LGB individuals live.” Thus, “each individual who experiences [same-sex] attraction will likely develop a distinct sexual identity due in part to the influence of such cultural factors.” Therefore, “cultural factors such as the media may influence important psychological domains, including individuals’ self-perceptions.” One participant in the study wrote that “positive role models were crucial to letting me know I wasn’t alone,” and another participant wrote that LGB media representations “[let] me know we were out there.” This confirms that the sense of social support garnered from LGB representation in the media can “enhance individuals’ psychological and physical well being.”

The results of Gomillion and Guiliano’s study show how beneficial positive representations have on a marginalized group like LGB people. However, despite the increasing visibility of positive LGB media presentations, such representations still remain narrow. Representations of LGB people in popular media “circulate the social grammar, appearance, and sites of LGBT-ness,” and these representations are almost exclusively urban-centric. Thus, such presentations not only ignore the existence and unique experiences of LGB people in rural areas, but also “teach rural youth to look anywhere but homeward for LGBT identities.” At the same time, media often portray the rural United States as “America’s perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet,” and thus rural LGB individuals are faced with the conundrum of living in communities where they are “a distinct minority” and “popularly represented as out of place.” Subsequently, they “appropriate queerness as a possibility that is disparaged not only in

representations of the rural, but also in mass-media depictions of LGBT people.” Gray (2009) explains how rural LGB individuals confront this “metronormative” standard about “the politics of gay visibility, expectations, and constraints that define and shape the recognition of LGBT-identifying people in popular culture and public life,” which are incompatible with rural experiences:

[R]ural queer youth rework their disorientations from self, in places that prioritize familiarity through codes of sameness, discourage claims to difference, and have relatively few local ‘others’ to turn to for queer recognition. Yet, in our media-saturated world, they are not isolated from narratives about queer difference. When they scan mass media and the Internet for materials to incorporate into their queer sense of self, a politics of LGBT visibility comes up on the screen. These representations organize recognition of queer difference through grammar of narrowly defined LGBT identities, a ‘visible minority,’ underwritten by capital of urban counterpublics that have no equivalents in rural areas. Perhaps even more challenging to rural youth’s queer-identity work is that the politics of LGBT visibility narrate rural communities as the last place LGBT-identifying young people should be.

Unlike gay and lesbian communities in urban areas that are able to “mobilize significant numbers of people and dollars to generate visibility,” LGB people and their allies in rural areas live in communities that “prioritize solidarity, rely on familiarity, and lack the public or private resources to underwrite sustained, visible dissent to assert queer difference.” Likewise, in such communities, “one’s credentials as ‘just another local’ are pivotal to the broader politics of rural recognition and representation.” Therefore, LGB identity politics in rural communities “rely almost exclusively on public faces that look ‘just like everyone else’ not just to integrate into local communities, but to maintain their access to the bare necessities needed to get by.”

While non-rural LGB individuals are able to look to mass media representations of queerness for guidance and social support, as Gomillion and Guiliano’s study suggests, their

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25 Ibid 3, 121-125.
26 Gray 167-168.
27 Ibid.
rural counterparts, who are likewise “fleshing out the boundaries and meanings of their identity, are no more likely to know themselves through these fictional images, particularly given how rarely they depict rural places.”

Therefore, rural LGB individuals are still being symbolically annihilated, and when a particular social group is continuously unrepresented in the media, “it becomes easy for us to assume the group either doesn’t exist or doesn’t really matter.”

This likely explains an interaction between LGB youth and their political representative in rural Kentucky, during which the representative told the young men that “he doesn’t have to be educated about LGBT issues because there aren’t any gays living in Berea.”

Of course, the narrow LGB representations in the media are only one part of the problem faced by rural LGB individuals. Indeed, such individuals are doubly marginalized in the media for their rurality. As Hubbs explains, “[i]n both entertainment and news media, representations of the white working class, when it is not scarce, is generally reductive, offering a simple, untextured, often stereotyped portrait.”

In fact, “dominant-culture images of working-class gender and sexuality bigotry stress the implausibility of queer life among the white working class in America’s so-called fly-over country.”

However, this is not entirely the result of any middle-class, “metronormative” media stereotyping of rural, working-class Americans as bigoted. White rural Americans actually possess a major “popular-media source of alternative, working-class perspectives” through country music. And yet LGB individuals are noticeably absent from this genre and culture industry.

28 Ibid.
29 Lind 5.
30 Gray 2.
32 Ibid.
III. “These Are My People, This Is Where I Come From”: Country Music and the Production-Content-Audience Chain

The history of country music and its roots in white, rural, working-class experience has been thoroughly documented and analyzed. What is most significant for the scope of this thesis is not just the genre or its listeners, but the country music industry as well. Setting aside arguments about how or if the industry reconciled notions of authenticity and anti-consumerist sentiments with blatant consumerism, what is relevant here is how country music became, as Hubbs (2014) describes it, “a rarity” in that it is a popular-media source of white, rural, and regional working-class expression in an otherwise “metronormative” media landscape.

By the 1940s, country music—then still termed and sold as “hillbilly” music—had spread out from the South. It was now heard on radios all over the country as it followed rural-to-urban migrants displaced by the likes of the Dust Bowl, World War II, and other economic upheavals. This established country music as a “commercial genre identified with the native white working class.” However, it was not until the postwar period that the genre “consolidated as a unified field and a fully developed branch of the popular music industry,” centered in Nashville. At the time, industry leaders in Nashville worked to establish respectability for the genre, which consisted of various struggles between publishing companies, radio deejays, and other music industry figures. The lack of respectability was due, in large part, to the perception of country music as “lowbrow” or “backwards,” which did not align with the white, middle-class

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34 See Pecknold.
36 Ibid 54.
“metronormativity” that was emerging as the standard for the burgeoning national culture of mass consumerism. In an attempt to garner respectability for the genre on a national scale, some country music proponents tried to position the genre as the “folklore of America”—which intended to draw on the “highbrow appeal” of the concept of “folklore” that white intellectuals embraced—by arguing that country music was a “reflection of the nation’s agrarian past…to which Americans would respond to no matter how far removed from their rural roots their adult lives became.” However, it seemed that it did in fact matter how far removed one was from their “rural roots,” as the genre’s audience consisted mostly of those who still felt (or were connected to) a sense of rurality. Hence, the argument failed to create mass appeal. Instead, industry leaders ultimately realized that the way non-country audiences “separated country music from rock and other genres by the race, age, and, most importantly, [the] class of its listeners” actually “spoke to the importance of country music as a means of establishing both the respectability and the power” of its audience. In other words, instead of trying to appeal to a national mass audience that repeatedly rejected the genre, the industry realized that it had access to a market that no other industry did, and, likewise, that its audience was being dismissed by other popular media.37

Thus, “while much of the rest of American culture became increasingly locked into national networks of television channels, retail chains, and advertising campaigns, the centralization of country music in Nashville represented an anomalous re-assertion of regionalism.”38 This is not to suggest, of course, that the industry was acting out of goodwill for rural or working-class Americans. As Pecknold states, “country music demanded respect because it commanded money, not because it tapped the spiritual wellspring of the American frontier.”39 Nevertheless,

37 Ibid 61.
38 Ibid 66.
39 Ibid 94.
the outcome remained the same. Country listeners were able to construct “symbolic personal relationships with favored stars” and use the music to “reinforce social relationships in their own communities.” Moreover, as explored in the previous sections of this chapter, such representations were beneficial to the audience for myriad reasons.

Because country music listeners come from communities that value solidarity and familiarity, and, as noted in the previous section, “one’s credentials as ‘just another local’ are pivotal to the broader politics of rural recognition and representation,” the relationship between the country music industry and its audience has always been crucial. The audience must be able to believe that an artist is someone “just like them.” To be accepted by the country music community, an artist must possess a “painstakingly cultivated” authenticity, as “to be considered a ‘real’ country singer, one must fit a template.” While “[s]cholars in popular culture studies likely will immediately identify this notion of authenticity as the construct that it is…many fans and even country artists themselves do not.” Establishing an artist’s “authenticity” is accomplished through the production-content-audience chain.

Media systems—like country music—are complex and incorporate “a variety of interrelated components, each of which experiences pressure from both within and without,” but the three major elements of the system are the producers, the media content itself, and the audience. As Lind argues:

*Production* involves anything having to do with the creation and distribution of mediated messages: how the messages are assembled, by whom, in what circumstances, under what constraints. *Content* emphasizes the mediated messages themselves: what they present, and how; what is included, and by implication, what is excluded. *Audience* addresses the people who engage, consume, or interact with mediated messages: how

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40 Ibid 66, 8.
42 Ibid 68.
they use the media, what sense they make of media content, and how they are affected by the media.\textsuperscript{43}

Because the producer creates the content and the audience consumes it, the content is clearly beyond the immediate control of the audience, and, in that sense, the media is prescriptive. However, mass media is a market-driven industry rooted in popular culture, and, therefore, producers must be responsive to the needs and interests of their audience. For the content to continue to be successful, the producer “must learn to anticipate the interests and concerns of the audience—to offer content that is interesting and challenging, without being so far afield that they lose their audience entirely.”\textsuperscript{44} This results in a reciprocal relationship between audience and producer, and grants audiences some power in shaping the media they choose to consume. For example, as the genre was establishing itself, “country music fans understood the power relations inherent in mass media, and resented them deeply,” which is why “the fan-oriented elements of the industry promoted and capitalized on class distinctions in order to develop a sense of loyalty in its audience. Country listeners were encouraged to recognize and reject the influence of middle-class taste in their music.”\textsuperscript{45} Ultimately, this rebellion against the middle class distinguished country music from other genres and became one of the defining characteristics of the industry, as “the notional unity between country music and the Southern white working class was finally and irreversibly cemented in the 1950s.”\textsuperscript{46} In fact, even as the nation as a whole became more urbanized and research by the Country Music Association (CMA) “demonstrated in market after market that its audience fell squarely into the blue-collar middle class…many country listeners clearly wished to preserve a rural and working-class

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{43} Lind 4.
\textsuperscript{44} Silverblatt et al. 95.
\textsuperscript{45} Pecknold 96-97.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid 95.
\end{footnotesize}
identity for the music.”47 This is also because the working-class versus middle-class tensions that distinguish country music from other popular media are not simply about quantitative measures like income level but about a discrepancy in respective value systems. Country music not only purports to represent the working class, but it also “links to identities southern, Midwestern, southwestern, and provincial; white; Christian; and heterosexual.”48

Today, “embracing country, with its emphasis on working-class themes and its significantly working-class constituency, can help to define one as working class,” even if demographics indicate that the audience has become increasingly “blue-collar middle class,” or industrial or post-industrial service workers with lower-middle class incomes. This is because “song after song touts the country values and virtues of its narrator or some community with which he or she claims affiliations, whether a town, region (the South, the heartland), the country crowd, or the U.S.A.,” and “directs its appeals to fantasy and imagination as well as selected perceptions of reality” for those whose identify with its implicit (and oftentimes explicit) value system. Subsequently, through a reciprocal relationship with the media, country music has become the bastion of a specific value system, one shaped by an audience that is predominantly believed to be white, Christian, blue-collar or working-class, and southern. Country music provides listeners an opportunity to engage in selective exposure, meaning the phenomenon of people tending to seek out information with which they agree while avoiding that which does not fit their preexisting views.49 According to a 2014 marketing pitch by the CMA, “the dramas of the Rihannas’ and Britneys’ are largely absent [in country music]. Country music stars mainly represent wholesome American ideals. Andre Gaccetta, CEO of event-marketing agency G7,

47 Ibid 175.
49 Silverblatt et al. 20.
summed it up this way: ‘It's hunting; it's fishing; it's family,’ he said. ‘When you turn on a country station, it's safe -- there are stories you're comfortable using as teaching moments for your children.’”

Likewise, “popular country songs continue to express an insular worldview which is disconnected from the world in which it inarguably exists,” suggesting that country music performers and audiences may be willfully ignoring aspects of the world that do not conform to their sensibilities, using country music as an “escape” from troubling aspects of their daily experiences.

In order to be seen as “authentic” in country music, one must ascribe to an identity that is compatible with this constructed world in which country music exists, which is a world where songwriters remove all incompatibilities from the narrative. Queerness is one of the “number of social issues that country song lyrics cannot, will not, or do not address” because “songwriters eliminate the need to address many of those issues by creating a world in which they do not exist.”

This is, of course, the very essence of symbolic annihilation.

In this thesis, I argue that each point on the production-content-audience chain functions as a point of intervention. Points of intervention are specific places in a system where an intentional action can interrupt the functioning of that system and open the way to systemic change. One must understand each individual point to develop a strategy that identifies the best places to intervene and have the greatest impact. To this end, Chapter 2 examines the implicit value systems of the country music audience—and subsequently, of country music—to show how the genre became associated with values that are perceived as being hostile towards or incompatible with LGB people.

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52 Grossman 103.
CHAPTER 2: THE COUNTRY MUSIC VALUE SYSTEMS

I. “I’m a Member of the Country Crowd”: Region, Religion, and Politics

Country music is closely associated with notions of place and region, conservative social groups, and old-fashioned values.\(^{53}\) Country music audiences have also long been “associated with white working-class, provincial, and southern identities.”\(^{54}\) Therefore, it is no surprise that the genre “lays claim to an ‘unchanging’ values system grounded in patriotism, sincerity, and an implicitly Protestant Christian sensibility,” as these are also the values common to the communities intended to be represented.\(^{55}\) Indeed, there is a correlation between evangelical Protestantism, political conservatism, and country music fans, especially since the highest densities of all three are prevalent in the “Bible Belt” region.

The idea of the “Bible Belt”—a region of the United States where socially conservative Protestantism plays a major role in social and political life and Christian church attendance is generally higher than the rest of the nation—was first introduced by H.L Mencken in 1924. Wilbur Zelinsky and Stephen W. Tweedie more narrowly defined and quantified in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, the accepted reach of the Bible Belt according to scholars includes Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, but sometimes includes West

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\(^{54}\) Hubbs.

Virginia and parts of northern Florida and southern Virginia as well.\textsuperscript{56} The core thirteen states of the Bible Belt constitute the majority of the southern states as well as three Midwestern states—two which are “permanent borderlands” between the South and the Midwest—that share many cultural characteristics with the South.\textsuperscript{57} Of course, there is no definitive way to describe “the South” or “southern culture” more broadly; however, many have tried and succeeded in shaping popular notions of white regional identity. In fact, one of the most well-known and “the most militant defense of Southern distinctiveness of the [twentieth] century,” the manifesto \textit{I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition}, a collection of essays by the Southern Agrarians published in 1930, was a reaction to how H.L. Mencken, the same man who coined the term “Bible Belt,” portrayed the South during the Scopes Trial.\textsuperscript{58} Mencken believed that the reason for “Southern backwardness lay in the hold over public opinion exercised by fundamentalist Baptist and Methodist clerics,” that all of the ills afflicting the region were a direct result of clerical intolerance and anti-intellectualism. He described Christianity in the South as a form of “psychic cannibalism” and a “vast machine for pursuing and butchering

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Tweedie, Stephan W. “Viewing the Bible Belt.” \textit{Journal of Popular Culture} 11 (1978): 865-76
  \item \textsuperscript{57} According to James R. Shortridge’s analysis in \textit{The Middle West} (1989), southern culture is “deeply implanted” in Missouri, which could be described as being “emotionally Southern” and having “Southern cultures in Middle-western latitudes,” due in part to its history of slavery. Oklahoma shares with Missouri “the same uncertainty of regional allegiance” because it has historically been called Southern or Southwestern due to its location and early heritage, having been “dominated by Southern interests” for much of its history, but Midwestern affiliation exists in the wheat-growing areas in the north and west. Kansas was once the epitome of Midwestern identity, but was eventually equated with the Dust Bowl, which “symbolized a failure of rural society.” The state possessed a “strong moral quality” and an “air of puritan self-righteousness,” and became defensive with “embittered agrarian dissent.” Once a national leader, Kansas became a “national backwater” and “never completely adjusted to the change”; its leaders “continue to champion old ideals to a changed nation,” and ultimately “a bold, creative state pride degenerated into a half-ashamed provincialism.” (177-133)
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Shapiro, Edward S. "The southern Agrarians, H.L. Mencken, and the quest for southern identity." \textit{American Studies} 13(2) (Fall 1972): 78
\end{itemize}
believers.” Mencken also “attributed the South's susceptibility to the rantings of fundamentalist preachers to its lack of big cities,” noting that the region was dominated by country towns and that “in every country town there is some Baptist mullah who rules by scaring the peasantry.” The Agrarians, who had previously admired Mencken’s work, “were amazed and horrified by these bitter attacks on the South by Mencken and his imitators. Even more shocking was their acceptance by much of the country as an authentic picture of the South.”

Thus, the Agrarians “became determined to vindicate the unique character of the South,” and “warmly defended the agrarianism, religiosity and conservatism of the South, traits which had been the most derided by the South's critics.” The manifesto ...

...may be seen as a direct answer to Mencken's charge that the rural and religious South was a cultural wasteland. The Agrarians, in fact, turned his argument on its head by contending that it was precisely the religious and rural character of the South which was responsible for the South's cultural excellences: her emphasis on leisure and the enjoyment of life, her code of manners, her folklore and arts and crafts, her delight in conversation and good food. According to the Agrarians, it was the industrial and urban North, with her spirit of mechanistic progress, material aggrandizement, and secularism, which was the cultural aberration and in need of the type of criticism which up to then had been mistakenly directed at the South.

The Agrarians were not reacting just to Mencken, of course, but to a larger fear that northern leaders wished to “impose the Northern way of life and thought upon the South.” They believed that southerners were “victims of what amounted to ‘a war of intellectual and spiritual conquest,’” wherein “the captive minds of young southerners were forced ‘to accept the Northern version of history with all its condemnations and its carping criticisms of Southern institutions

59 Ibid
60 Ibid 77.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid 76-78.
63 Ibid 79.
and life,’ including ‘the crying down and discrediting of anything agrarian as old-fashioned and backward.’”

This sense of persecution at the hands of a large, powerful, urban, and modern North is akin to the backlash against urban, “middle-class” standards by rural and working-class country music fans and undoubtedly was a precedent for the genre, especially considering how strongly regional identity factored in to country music listenership.

Predictably, Mencken did not review the Agrarians’ argument favorably, and contended that “[t]he real plight of the South stemmed from religion and not industrialization,” that the southern mind had been “paralyzed” by “a debasing mass of superstitions, designed frankly to make its victims hopeless in this world,” and that southern religion had created “the very sort of dull, shaky, fearful anthropoid who is now the chief obstacle to all true progress in the South, and a shame to all humanity.” He deemed the Agrarians to be “fashioners of Utopia” and “sufferers from nostalgic vapors.”

To varying degrees, the regional identity constructed by the Agrarians—and the “nostalgic vapors” that afflicted them—still persist into the twenty-first century. Although the South is no longer a rural or agrarian society, southerners who ascribe to a nostalgic version of southern identity are “[s]till tied the land,” although likely in an indirect or romantic way. This is one factor in country music’s continued ties to rural and agrarian culture despite its increasingly middle class audience. Likewise, rural communities are increasingly transforming into exurban ones due to “rural sprawl,” which is defined as “development at exurban density within areas that have an overall rural density or as strip development along highways within rural areas.”

65 Ibid.
66 Shapiro 80.
67 Survey Respondent 75.
Between 2000 and 2010, exurban populations grew over 60%, which was “significantly higher” than the growth in “more urban or densely populated areas.” This migration was motivated to some degree by a desire to live in communities with a “small town feel” or where “the vibe is decidedly rural Americana.” Various surveys conducted among residents of these areas reveal a preference for “open fields” or being in close proximity to nature, “residential development resembling traditional farmsteads or village patterns,” and “the possibility of engaging in mundane productive tasks as a lifestyle choice.” Ironically, because of this desire to relocate to rural areas as a lifestyle choice, “new residents who move to exurban areas for the amenity value become advocates for planning controls to prevent additional residential development after they are situated,” usually intending to preserve the perceived “rural” aspects of the community that motivated their relocation.

As rural communities continue to experience unprecedented population growth and become increasingly exurban, the suburban-rural boundaries are becoming more permeable; likewise, given the valuation of rural, agrarian life in both catalyzing rural sprawl and in the Agrarian-esque iteration of southern identity, and the increasing numbers of suburban country music listeners, it seems likely that the permeability of this suburban-rural boundary results in a reciprocal exchange of cultural traits rather than simply a disappearance of a distinctive rural culture. In fact, while reflecting on her experiences living in a suburban South Carolina town that borders rural-exurban communities, one survey respondent noted that “people from rural and urban areas seem to hate each other for whatever reason and think their way of life is best. People in the suburbs are usually trying to attain a spot in one of the other two.”

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71 Crankshaw 219-220
People I grew up with were either desperate to have ten kids and a farm or desperate to get a job and apartment far, far away from our hometown.\textsuperscript{72}

Christianity has also persisted in the twenty-first century South as well. In 2009, Gallup conducted a nation-wide survey asking the question “is religion an important part of your daily life?” Not surprisingly, the core thirteen Bible Belt states were among the top fifteen states with the highest percentage of “yes” respondents.\textsuperscript{73} According to data from the most recent Religious Congregations & Membership Study (RCMS), Bible Belt states still possess disproportionately high levels of religiosity and evangelical Protestantism, as the following tables demonstrate:

| Table 2.1: Percent of Population Claiming Religious Affiliation, by State |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Alabama                     | 62.92%                      |
| Missouri                    | 49.27%                      |
| Arkansas                    | 55.36%                      |
| N. Carolina                 | 47.51%                      |
| Georgia                     | 50.83%                      |
| Oklahoma                    | 59.35%                      |
| Kansas                      | 50.63%                      |
| S. Carolina                 | 52.18%                      |
| Kentucky                    | 51.57%                      |
| Tennessee                   | 55.50%                      |
| Louisiana                   | 60.59%                      |
| Texas                       | 55.65%                      |
| Mississippi                 | 58.74%                      |
| (Source: RCMS 2010)         |                             |

| Table 2.2: Percent of Population Claiming Evangelical Protestant Affiliation, by State |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Alabama                     | 42.04%                      |
| Missouri                    | 25.36%                      |
| Arkansas                    | 38.98%                      |
| N. Carolina                 | 27.11%                      |
| Georgia                     | 29.45%                      |
| Oklahoma                    | 40.82%                      |
| Kansas                      | 18.11%                      |
| S. Carolina                 | 30.51%                      |
| Kentucky                    | 33.39%                      |
| Tennessee                   | 37.57%                      |
| Louisiana                   | 23.48%                      |
| Texas                       | 25.68%                      |
| Mississippi                 | 39.38%                      |
| (Source: RCMS 2010)         |                             |

In all thirteen of the core Bible Belt states, more than 47% of the population identifies with a major religion, with eleven of the thirteen states boasting over 50% religious affiliation.

Likewise, the majority of the population that claims a religious affiliation identifies as a member

\textsuperscript{72} Survey Respondent #70
of an evangelical Protestant congregation; for example, 66.8% of religious Alabamians are evangelicals, 58.4% of religious South Carolinians are evangelicals, and 51.5% of religious Missourians are evangelicals. Comparatively, in Iowa, 53.91% of the population claims religious affiliation, but only 13.21% are evangelical Protestants, making up only 24.5% of the religious population; in Connecticut, 51.23% of the population claims religious affiliation but less than 1% of that population belong to evangelical Protestant congregations (4.4% of the total population). Cumulatively, in all states outside of the Bible Belt (including D.C. but not including Florida, Virginia, or West Virginia) 47.57% of the population claims religious affiliation, but only 9.91% are evangelical Protestants—only about 2.1% of the total religious population. In the thirteen core Bible Belt states, 54.14% of the population claims religious affiliation and 29.82% are evangelical Protestants—about 55.1% of the religious population; with Florida, Virginia, and West Virginia included, 50.77% of the population is religious and 26.62% are evangelical Protestants—still making up more than half of the religious population at 52.4%.

The Bible Belt states are also politically conservative. Data from a 2015 Gallup poll categorized five of the thirteen core states as “solid Republican” (Alabama, Kansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee), four as “lean Republican” (Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Texas), and four as “competitive” with negligible or negative Democrat advantage (Georgia: -3.9 point Democrat advantage, Kentucky: -2.8, Louisiana: -1.6, North Carolina: 0.2).\textsuperscript{74} These same states also each boast a share of country music consumers above the national average, according to research conducted by GfK MRI for the Country Music Association in 2014.\textsuperscript{75} The overlap of

\textsuperscript{74} Jones, Jeffery M. “Red States Outnumber Blue for First Time in Gallup Tracking.” Gallup, 3 February 2016.
these three characteristics is not coincidental; in fact, conservative political strategists for the Republican Party began specifically targeting country music audiences in the middle of the twentieth century.

During the 1950s, while the country music industry was vying for respectability, the CMA “sold listeners” to advertisers, marketing them as “the largest unduplicated audience in the world”; the millions of Southern uplanders and rural Midwesterners who had made good in the Northern urban economy and moved to the suburbs; and the additional millions who remained in the rural South and Midwest.”76 At the same time that the CMA was selling its listeners, the conservative movement was becoming associated with the “development of certain tendencies that had [already] existed… in the Middle West and South,”—the same regions the CMA is touting unbridled access to through its listeners—which included “a suspicion of ‘intellectuals, the Eastern seaboard and its culture’”—sentiments that were likewise common amongst country music audiences, who felt snubbed by “cultural elites.”77 Unsurprisingly, by the late 1960s, the CMA’s “efforts to communicate both the size and cultural uniqueness of its audience” attracted the attention of political strategists of the new conservative movement who saw potential in this demographic overlap.78 As Diane Pecknold notes, “In practice, country music did not so much shift to the right as the right shifted to country, consciously seeking to transform an established marketing demographic into a political one.”79 Likewise, as Michael Denning has argued, this was a missed opportunity for the left, because although country music had long been associated with southern politics, its actual partisan leanings were more ambiguous until this point; however, the left’s dismissive attitude towards country music and the

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76 Pecknold 197.
77 Ibid 98.
78 Ibid 218.
79 Ibid 219.
rise of working-class popular culture—and “industrially produced” popular culture in general, which it deemed to be nothing more than “an advertisers’ plot”—invoked sentiments of intellectual elitism and cultural snobbery among country music listeners, which played into the new conservative movement’s populist message. Once George Wallace “consistently mobilized country music and its stars in support of his gubernatorial and presidential runs,” the genre was conclusively perceived as inherently conservative, and the door shut on the left.

However, “the brand of conservatism to which mainstream country was ultimately harnessed…was more in line with the upwardly mobile suburban poetics of Spiro Agnew than the overtly racist populism of Wallace,” thanks in part to New Majority strategist Kevin P. Phillips. Phillips, who worked on Richard Nixon’s 1968 campaign and is credited as the man behind the New Right’s “southern strategy,” suggested in his writings from the late 1960s and early 1970s that if Nixon wished to win his reelection bid, he must first win over country music listeners. He contended that country music listeners were the politically, economically, and culturally “forgotten Americans…those who drive the trucks, plow the farms, man the factories, and police the streets.”

The success of this strategy was never guaranteed, but between 1968 and 1972, the popularity of country music was indisputable and linked to the “southernization” of American culture that contributed to the New Right’s successful fusion of “populist opposition to liberal elites with militaristic patriotism, evangelical Christianity, and backlash against 1960s-era social movements.” Merle Haggard’s 1969 hit “Okie From Muskogee,” which “tied pride in white working-class identity to conservative attacks on the counterculture and the New Left in a way that resonated with the political messages of George Wallace, Ronald

80 Ibid 96.
81 Ibid 218.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid 219.
Reagan, and Richard Nixon,” signified white conservative backlash. Ever the strategist, Phillips argued that embracing country music “would allow the Republican Party to ‘use the emotional issues of culture and race to achieve…a ‘positive polarization’ of American politics’ without attacking civil rights, actively opposing integration, or resorting to the kind of overt racism that would alienate moderates.” By the early 1970s, country music was “resoundingly white without being expressly anti-black,” which was “precisely why the New Majority theorists found it so useful.” As publicity agent and future CMA president Tandy Rice explained to a reporter at the time, country music “‘is stable, like the backbone of this great country. The lyrics are simple, and sincere, not about civil rights and such…The lyrics are about what concerns everyday folks.’” Rice’s statement here, of course, insinuates that black Americans were not “everyday folks.” Country music was the only cultural form that “allowed for a clear embrace of Southern traditions and values while still hewing to a moderate position on civil rights,” because the mainstream country music industry, like the Nixon administration and New Right theorists, was guilty of “downplaying the significance of race” in favor of “the class politics of the American Dream.” Nixon carefully considered Phillip’s argument, and by the spring of 1970, he decided to focus his 1972 reelection campaign “on blue-collar workers and Southern whites, and the use of country music as political symbolism was an obvious component of this strategy.”

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85 Pecknold 219.
86 Ibid 225.
87 Ibid 225-226.
88 Ibid 220.
to the GOP. By the 1984 re-election of Ronald Reagan, more Southerners identified as Republicans than as Democrats.\(^89\)

Reagan perpetuated the codification of country music listeners as Republicans in his remarks to members of the CMA during a television performance in 1983, during which he stated that “the best thing about country music is its people—a large and God-fearing, patriotic bunch from the mainstream of America. Most of them grew up in rural communities or small towns like the rest of us, and when they sing and pick and play, they tell the world about what it means to most of us: our families, our God, and our country.”\(^90\) These three ideals of family, God, and country have become synonymous with both country music and the Republican Party, and are “endemic to country music’s cultural context.”\(^91\) In fact, in a 2005 study on the relationship between country music and the 2004 presidential election, David Firestein concluded that during the course of the election, country music “primed red state voters to respond positively to President Bush's basic campaign message of family, country, and God,” and gave credit to Bush’s campaign team for being “acutely aware of this dynamic, [giving] it full play, and [riding] it all the way to a second term in the White House.”\(^92\)

In his study, Firestein tackled the relationship between country music and conservative politics through a mass communications/mass media lens, utilizing many of the concepts outlined in Chapter 1. He found that “country music radio station density, on a per capita basis,

was about three-times higher in the red states than in the blue states,” and suggested that “if you were to overlay a map of the current country music fan base onto the iconic red-and-blue map of the United States, you would find that its contours coincide virtually identically with those of the red state region, probably right down to the county level.”\(^\text{93}\) Likewise, the density of country music radio stations was three times higher in red states than in blue states on a per-capita basis, and “not only was there a consistent overall correlation between the state's country music radio density and its choice for president, but indeed, there was also a good correlation between density and the winner's margin of victory.”\(^\text{94}\) This encouraged him to examine if there was “something about red states and blue states as *communications environments* that causes voters in these regions to respond differently to presidential campaign communication [emphasis added].”\(^\text{95}\) He posited that “there exists in the United States a ‘honky tonk gap’ — a stark red/blue disparity in the penetration of country music radio — that demarcates the red and blue territories with remarkable precision,” which “explains, at least in part, the voting preference and values gaps (and a number of issue gaps) between the two regions; and gives rise to distinct communications environments that tend to favor one presidential candidate over the other.”\(^\text{96}\) Firestein suggests that considering “country music's highly skewed geographic distribution and its overwhelmingly conservative message” in tandem with “what we know from advertising and political communication theory about the grinding efficacy of repetitive communication”—which he defines as “the notion that people who are repeatedly exposed to a consistent media message will tend to vote and think differently from those who weren't exposed to it”—reveals that “the net effect of [repeated exposure to conservative messages in country music] was to

\(^{93}\) Ibid.
\(^{94}\) Firestein, 84.
\(^{95}\) Ibid 83.
\(^{96}\) Ibid.
validate, amplify, reinforce, and prime red state voters [to vote for Bush in the 2004 election].” Firestein concludes that “no force, in recent years, has done more to craft, codify, inculcate, reinforce, and popularize this specific sense of identity, particularly in the states now considered red, than contemporary country music radio.” His conclusion is almost identical to the definition of the function of media presentations—to reflect, reinforce, and shape cultural attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths. He also observes that Bush’s persona fit largely into the template of “authenticity” crucial to country music. This template is based on the idea that, in order to be a successful country music artist, one must embody the cultural and visual signifiers of the audience, as the value placed on sameness and familiarity demands that the listener can reasonably believe that the artist could be just another member of his or her community. Firestein notes Bush’s “frequent employment of potent country symbols” and rhetoric, from his platform that “advocated traditional marriage; extolled the importance of family; summoned the memory of 9/11; defended the rectitude of the war in Iraq and the U.S. approach to the war on terror; welcomed greater religiosity in American life and celebrated it in his own,” to his “Crawford ranch, pick-up truck, western-style belt and boots, and even his ‘Texas swagger.’” He ultimately concluded that “rarely if ever in the modern history of the presidential campaign has a candidate made such an obvious and concerted effort to establish and highlight his country credentials.”

However, it wasn’t just his country credentials that won Bush his second term in the White House: the success of the “southern strategy” in imbuing conservative politics with evangelical Christianity also solidified the relationship between country music audiences and the

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97 Ibid 86.
98 Ibid 87.
99 Ibid.
Republican Party because “the influences of Christianity run too deep for a separation of country music from Christianity.”\textsuperscript{100}

<p>| Table 2.3: Percent of Population Claiming Southern Baptist Convention Affiliation, by State |
|----------------------------------|------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Northern Baptist</th>
<th>Southern Baptist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>29.13%</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>22.68%</td>
<td>N. Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>18.16%</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>S. Carolina</td>
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<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>23.15%</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>15.65%</td>
<td>Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>30.58%</td>
<td>(Source: RCMS 2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bush enjoyed support from the powerful Southern Baptist Convention, which is the most prevalent denomination in every Bible Belt state besides Kansas, Texas, and Louisiana, where Catholicism is the most common affiliation—but only by rates less than five percent higher than those of the SBC in Louisiana and Texas.\textsuperscript{101} As the data in Tables 2.1-2.3 reveal, a significant portion of the population in each state that identifies as religious also identifies as an evangelical Protestant, and the majority of the evangelical Protestants likewise identify as a member of the Southern Baptist Convention; in Alabama, for example, about 46% of the religious population identifies as Southern Baptist. Therefore, when the SBC “actively urged its members to get involved in politics and vote, with an obvious message that Southern Baptists should vote for Bush and other Republicans” during the 2004 election period, they were rallying a significant constituency.\textsuperscript{102} This relationship did not begin with the 2004 election period, however; the overt association between the SBC and the GOP can, at the least, be traced back to very public courtship between Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority (the political organization of the Christian Right, led by

\textsuperscript{100} Tuttle 72.
Southern Baptist minister Jerry Falwell) that catered its agenda to the ideologies of both conservative Protestants and Catholics.\textsuperscript{103}

While the relationship between religion and politics is significant, the influence of evangelical Protestantism extends far beyond the political leanings of country music audiences; there is a reason why “the songs one hears on country radio are sprinkled with references to God and to Christian tradition as pervasive as flakes of pepper in a bowl of grits.”\textsuperscript{104} As Bernadette Barton explains:

Bible Belt Christianity is not confined to religious institutions and Sunday worship. This particular brand of Christianity permeates the multiple environments in which residents work, socialize, and worship. Christian crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news, and attitudes saturate everyday settings. Bible Belt Christianity thus influences a wide range of local secular institutions like schools and workplaces… This is especially so in rural areas with small populations in which people know one another and one’s family histories spanning generations. In these areas, regardless of any individual’s actual church attendance, most people self-identify as “Christian” (meaning conservative Protestant), defer to the assumed righteousness of any “Christian” institution, and are suspicious of and deem inferior anyone who is not Christian.\textsuperscript{105}

This results in what Barton calls “compulsory Christianity,” or the practice of “communicative exchanges that involve presenting one’s Christian identity to others in routine social interactions.”\textsuperscript{106} Barton’s description of Bible Belt Christianity is notably similar to those written by Mencken in the 1920s and 1930s, minus the antagonism.

Attitudes about gender and sexuality in the Bible Belt are strongly affected by compulsory Christianity. Combine the communication environment of compulsory Christianity with the

\textsuperscript{102} Kaylor 335.
\textsuperscript{104} Fillingim 5
\textsuperscript{105} Barton 14.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid 4.
region’s legacy of a patriarchal and misogynistic genteel society and “the resulting social atmosphere becomes imbued with gender, and sexual, clarity.”107 This is due in no small part to recent trends in Southern Baptist theology and social practice. Today, Southern Baptist doctrine establishes clear boundaries and expectations regarding gender and sexuality in particular. One must “remain abstinent before marriage, avoid affairs, divorce, and abortion, and be heterosexual.”108 Likewise, women should be submissive to men and focus on their role as mothers and wives. Feminism is portrayed as “not only an inappropriate ideology for Baptist women to embrace, but also as an enemy of biblical Christianity.”109 Crandall (2011) argues that “despite laws separating the powers of church and state, evangelical churches clamour for a return to the old practices of male dominance and try to influence the policies of its political parties,”110 and Kaylor (2010) similarly concludes that “[w]ith their continued push for patriarchal gender roles and as the largest Protestant denomination in the nation, the SBC is well poised to play a substantial role in the ‘culture wars’ on issues like abortion, homosexuality, and the role of women in society.” Moreover, “[i]f their rhetoric can convince enough Southern Baptists to adopt their proscribed gender roles, then that can help the leaders spread their messages and their policies into other areas of society.”111 This is not to suggest, of course, that everyone in the region or even all Southern Baptists adhere strictly to this theology (although many other prevalent evangelical Protestant denominations in the region share similarly conservative doctrines). Rather, it shows that the atmosphere of compulsory Christianity and the

108 Kaylor 344.
109 Ibid 345.
111 Kaylor 346.
overwhelming presence of Southern Baptists results in the undeniable influence of doctrine in daily life. Indeed, Moore and Vanneman (2003) found that the strong presence of fundamentalists in a community can increase resistance to changing gender norms through “(1) social interaction with more like-minded others, (2) conformity to prevailing norms, and (3) information flow patterns,” and that the prevalence of fundamentalists in a community has a strong effect on individual gender attitudes, even after controlling for a “wide range of individual characteristics, including whether one is fundamentalist oneself.”

The desire for strict adherence to “traditional” gender roles and the disdain for “radical” feminism is a crucial element of Bible Belt culture, and the resulting patriarchy and misogyny directly influence homophobia and sexual stigma. Therefore, an examination of gender and the gender expectations must precede considerations of the symbolic annihilation of LGB identities.

II. “Just Because I’m a Woman”: Traditional Gender Roles and ‘Slow Feminism’

As mentioned above, the combination of compulsory Christianity and a legacy of patriarchy imbues the Bible Belt’s social atmosphere with prescriptions of gender and sexuality. As Angela Wilson describes it, “Southern boys know what it means to be a man, and Southern girls know what it means to be a lady. This is as ‘natural’ as the air they breathe.” As a result, “certain gendered discourses dominate” country music, “wherein men are expected to exhibit traits considered masculine” and “women should demonstrate the corresponding feminine

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114 Wilson 3.
attributes.” Subsequently, “‘masculine’ attributes and beliefs have been privileged over those seen as 'feminine,' and, as compared to other genres, these expectations appear more binding.”\(^{115}\) But while gender expectations may seem more binding in country than in other genres, they are not necessarily permanent. As Maxine Grossman observes, while country music is understood to be conservative in tendency, “this conservatism is not reflected in an unwillingness to be open to new things. In fact, the intense valuation of ‘relevance’ (‘country music is about real life’) requires that songwriters and artists constantly experiment with new forms and introduce new motifs and images into the music.”\(^{116}\) Rather, “what makes country music conservative is what the industry does with the novel elements it absorbs,” as “new material is not only absorbed but also processed to fit within existing discursive frames,” and “lyrical and formal conventions serve to domesticate the potentially problematic new images in the music.”\(^{117}\) Accordingly, in an examination of a little over 1,000 number-one country songs from 1960 to 2000, Robert W. Van Sickle found that social change is “generally viewed with suspicion,” or with “a sense of resignation” at best.\(^{118}\) Therefore, if country music is often understood to be a “repository for and a means of articulating what might be termed ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ ‘American’ values,” including “traditional social and gender roles, even as these fluctuate,”\(^{119}\) then country music provides a “fertile arena for tapping into the ways in which society grapples with the transition from traditional to not-so-traditional gender roles.”\(^{120}\)

\(^{116}\) Grossman 99
\(^{117}\) Ibid.
\(^{118}\) Van Sickle 326.
This grappling is evident when examining the evolution of women’s roles in country music from the 1950s to the present day. Women found ways to operate within the genre’s rigid gender boundaries by using their own brand of feminism. In general, women “had to make feminist stands in ways that would not offend the industry’s male gatekeepers” and likewise had to “soften or temper their messages to ensure that country fans wouldn’t be offended or alienated.”\(^{121}\) Therefore, “to examine the quality and effectiveness of the strides that have been made, it is important to explore the spoken and unspoken parameters that surround female country artists.”\(^{122}\) Of course, one such parameter is the importance of conformity and solidarity in small communities, which requires that one does not “rock the boat” nor deviate too far from the norm. Hence, I term this brand of feminism constructed by female country artists “slow feminism.” As a nod to Rob Nixon’s idea of “slow violence,” this term reworks his definition by replacing only the words “violence” and “destruction” with “feminism” and “progress,” and perfectly encapsulates the type of feminism used by female country artists. “Slow feminism” is “a [feminism] that occurs gradually and out of sight, a [feminism] of delayed [progress] that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional [feminism] that is typically not viewed as [feminism] at all.”\(^{123}\)

In the 1940s and 1950s, “country music, like other spheres of postwar life in the U.S., could be a confining space for women.”\(^{124}\) The country music industry was “notoriously


\(^{122}\) Ibid


chauvinistic,” female artists were patronizingly labeled “girl singers,” and a woman could only have a career if she were associated with a male artist, typically her husband.  

Hence, when Kitty Wells recorded “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” in 1952, it sent shockwaves through Nashville, ultimately breaking barriers for women in the industry. The song’s message was incredibly controversial at the time, as it blatantly places blame on men by proclaiming that “Too many times married men think they're still single/That has caused many a good girl to go wrong,” and boldly retorts that “It's a shame that all the blame is on us women.” The song was banned by many radio stations and temporarily banned by the Grand Ole Opry, but it nevertheless became a massive hit. It sold over 800,000 copies in its initial release and became the first single by a female artist to peak at number one on the country music charts, where it remained for six weeks. Wells also became the first female country artist to issue an LP with the 1956 album *Kitty Wells’ Country Hit Parade*, which likewise proved to the industry’s male gatekeepers that female artists could successfully sell records. Following the initial success of “Honky Tonk Angels,” Wells “produced a string of songs offering the message that women would fulfill their domestic duties to men if men acted as responsible partners.” As a result, she ultimately “succeeded in initiating a dialogue addressing postwar gender discontent and introducing what the country music audience perceived as the woman’s side of the story.”

While “Wells’s stardom was transforming, introducing women—married, single, in or out of love—to country music fans through a single voice,” in order for her to be awarded and

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128 Neely 48
maintain that level of success during the 1950s she had to operate “comfortably within acceptable gender boundaries.” In other words, “Wells’s success depended precisely on a convincing counterpersona.” She was a wife and mother at the time her career was on the rise, and “given her unprecedented fame as a female country musician, Wells’s publicists struggled with the conflicting tensions of her success up against dominant notions of femininity,” which typically centered on domestic life and motherhood. Generally, “in navigating these tensions, her promotional material simply juxtaposed illustrations of Wells’s fame with her homemaker identity.” This image was so crucial to her success and acceptance, in fact, that in 1954, then-Tennessee governor Frank Clement proclaimed that “in addition to her artistry, [Wells] demonstrated that she is an outstanding wife and mother in keeping with the finest tradition of southern womanhood.” Eventually, the housewife image that “originated as a promotional tool got hammered into history as fact that became code for Wells’s supposed female traits such as compliance, obedience, passivity, even indifference,” and “her ability to fit into the dominant male culture” through this image explains “how Wells, as a woman, rose to the top on the strength of ‘It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels’ when no other woman had come close until then.” Thus, even though “Wells became best-known for songs that voiced desires, laments, and indignations of the honky-tonk angel, as a female entertainer she could never risk blurring the line between her ‘real’ and her performative selves,” as “she had to assure her fans and colleagues that she privately remained an emblem of their mythologized rural past even as

129 Christgau 225
130 Fox 96
131 Christgau 218
132 Fox 96
133 Christgau 218-9
she frequently performed as its antithesis in her music.”¹³⁴ Because she portrayed herself as a homemaker, “her fans chose to identify with her as a homemaker” as well, which would prove to be a crucial component to being a successful female country artist during the middle of the century.¹³⁵

Charline Arthur’s career is also indicative of how essential the homemaker image was to being a successful female country artist. Arthur seemed poised for stardom in 1955, but her career came to a “screeching halt” when RCA-Victor declined to extend her contract after it expired and no other label made her an offer.¹³⁶ Arthur was a fiery honky-tonk singer whose image “differed substantially from the contemporary image of female honky-tonk success” that Wells established; rather, she was “known for her aggressiveness and strong personality because of her performances, in which she was often the only woman among male performers.”¹³⁷ Arthur “conspicuously distanced herself from other female performers through a bold sexual aggressiveness,” typically through the use of sexual innuendo in her songs. Such “open female sexuality challenge[d] acceptable lyrical content” and “tested the stylistic boundaries of the country tradition.”¹³⁸ Arthur also “visually transmitted” her assertive persona through her high-energy stage performances—she is quoted as saying “I was the first to break out of the Kitty Wells stereotype and boogie woogie”—and through her attire.¹³⁹ Given her persona, it may seem plausible to place blame on the male gatekeepers of the country music industry for the abrupt end to her renegade career. However, Emily C. Neely suggests that “an overlooked cause for Charline’s short-lived career was her inability, created in part by a conservative media, to secure

¹³⁴ Fox 96
¹³⁵ Christgau 218
¹³⁶ Ibid 49-50
¹³⁷ Neely 44
¹³⁸ Ibid 50
¹³⁹ Ibid 52
a substantial fan base among female listeners.” Thus, Arthur “does not simply represent a martyred feminist felled at the hands of record labels preserving their status within a patriarchal establishment.” While certainly still an issue, the industry “was less an obstacle for Charline than were the popular fan media and the female listening audience.”140 In other words, Arthur’s decision to “break the Kitty Wells stereotype” more likely explains the failure of her career.

During the 1950s, when dress codes were “particularly gender specific,” Arthur “rejected a traditionally feminine image.” Neely compares an image of Arthur to an image of Wells and observes, aside from their vastly different attire, two significant markers of masculinity in Arthur’s photo: first, a car in the background which “connotes that Charline is going somewhere, [which] carries undertones of restlessness and independence normally associated with men,” and second, a cigarette in Arthur’s hand, an iconography that “almost exclusively described masculine personas in early-1950s mainstream American culture.”141 This posed a problem for Arthur and her publicists, as it was difficult to “package” this image to market her in the country music fan magazines of the time, which had primarily female readerships. Her image certainly stood out amongst other artists, but not for the best reasons—“Because she did not conform in appearance or character, she appeared lost.”142 While Kitty Wells’ image and music “spoke to women’s everyday concerns,” and their response to her represented “an initial, and early, rising of consciousness” for female listeners of country music, Arthur was likely disregarded because “her music did not address domestic struggles” and her image did not resonate with domestic female listeners.143 Neither her music nor her image were conventional, so while she “offered

140 Ibid 44-46
141 Ibid 53
142 Ibid 56
143 Ibid 57
women an undaunted female role model, this image denied the realities faced by women at this time.”

As the respective careers of Wells and Arthur illustrate, female country music listeners in the 1950s may have been disillusioned with the domestic ideal, “but they were not looking for a fundamental reconsideration of gender.”¹⁴⁴ Wells was certainly “no feminist firebrand” by today’s standards, or by her own, as she “insisted that she’d never been a feminist” but did think that she “enjoyed ‘the womenfolk getting back at the menfolk’ in her songs.”¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, I argue that she engaged in “slow feminism” by opening the door for women to have careers in country music. Wells demonstrated that a woman could be hugely successful, even if she operated within the acceptable gender boundaries. Through the rest of the 1950s and into the 1960s, women followed Wells’ lead and slowly added more female voices to the overwhelmingly male country music landscape without pushing the envelope too far.

In the 1960s, two women in particular, Dolly Parton¹⁴⁶ and Loretta Lynn, rose to stardom, initially using the Kitty Wells formula. Ultimately, they “simultaneously defined and broadened the possibilities for women’s lives and self-expression in country music culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s.”¹⁴⁷ Their respective success as solo acts “signaled the gradually increasing

¹⁴⁴ Ibid
¹⁴⁵ Fox 101
¹⁴⁶ Dolly Parton is notorious for her performance of excessive femininity, which “emphasizes the idea that gender roles are artificial in the sense that they are socially constructed,” and by simultaneously subverting and embodying the “feminine” expectation, she does not overtly challenge the boundaries of gender norms in a way that would be deemed unacceptable by the country music community. However, her performance of gender and her exceptional support of the LGBTQ community is the subject of myriad academic works—and is deserving of the extensive analysis it receives in each—and therefore will not be rehashed here due to the limitations of this thesis. See Heidemann, Edwards, and Wilson for examples.
power and presence of female artists in the country music industry,” and “also reflected the changing status of women in American culture” due to the women’s liberation movement. Unsurprisingly, the conservative, working-class ideology of country music culture rejected the aggressive and vocal calls for undoing traditional gender norms coming from women’s liberation. Even if some aspects of the movement resonated with country music’s women, “female singers had to fight to get good songs from publishers and share the bill with men,” so “they certainly weren’t going to risk everything to sing a song of feminism.” However, women like Parton and Lynn wrote some, if not most, of their own songs, an uncommon practice for women in the industry at that time, and found ways to communicate feminist messages that spoke of and for their working-class backgrounds and stayed within the boundaries of the genre.

Both Parton and Lynn penned multiple songs with feminist messages (Parton’s “Just Because I’m A Woman” and Lynn’s “The Pill,” for example), yet neither woman identified with the women’s liberation movement. Rather than aligning with the “middle-class liberal feminist movement,” Parton deemed her approach “working-class ‘Appalachian feminism,’” thus framing her feminism as “popular rather than elite.” This approach was more likely to appeal to her audience, as working-class women often felt excluded from the women’s liberation movement because they were “unable to relate to the complaints of middle-class homemakers who felt trapped by their suburban lives.” Unlike their middle-class counterparts, working-class women

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148 Keel 160
149 Heidemann 166
were “driven by a greater economic necessity to find suitable jobs,” and therefore “focused less on female oppression by men and more on such practical matters as eliminating sex discrimination in the workplace.” This approach drew from “a model of feminine action” commonly used by “rural, working-class, Southern Appalachian women to negotiate power for themselves within patriarchy and the capitalist class structure.” Women like Parton and Lynn sought to “subvert, and gain strength from within the dominant patriarchal system,” as “the apparent purpose of this subversion [was] not to overthrow patriarchy altogether, but to create opportunities for women to control their lives within it.”

This was, in fact, the very essence of female country artists’ “slow feminism,” as it did not intend to overthrow the country music establishment altogether, but rather intended to create and expand opportunities for women within it. Likewise, this “class consciousness pervaded” in Lynn’s “poor-but-proud persona and music [which] showed an awareness of the fact that women of different classes have different lifestyles.” One example included her 1971 song “One’s On The Way,” in which she contrasts “overworked mothers” in Topeka “with women marching for women’s lib, living modern lives and dancing in discotheques.”

Her attitude in this song towards those “marching for women’s lib” is merely ambivalent, not oppositional, which seemingly insinuates tacit support.

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However, “while Parton and Lynn were questioning long-held societal beliefs about women, a more conservative movement, led by Tammy Wynette, also emerged.”\textsuperscript{154} With her “high hair” and “thick southern accent,” Wynette and her hit song “Stand By Your Man,” which “counseled women to be patient because ‘after all he’s just a man,’ became a symbol of female opposition to women’s liberation.”\textsuperscript{155} In spite of the “slow feminism” of Parton and Lynn, those who aligned with Wynette and her conservative backlash to the feminist movement “cemented the general consensus that female country singers embraced traditional, if not backward-thinking, ideals.”\textsuperscript{156} Regardless, “the 1970s were exceptional years for country music’s women, who dominated the charts as never before or since,” thanks in large part to “the commercial success of Lynn’s women-centered songwriting,” which “helped convince the country music industry that female artists could be stars in their own right.” While Parton, Lynn, and Wynette had their own distinct styles and legacies, they each “brought women’s songwriting and the woman’s point of view to prominence,” and “however different their songs, their sounds, and their dress styles were from each other’s, together they revolutionized country music.”\textsuperscript{157} Although Wynette’s conservative resistance to shifting gender expectations may have overshadowed the already barely-visible “slow feminism” of Parton and Lynn, their influence nevertheless expanded the boundaries what was possible for women in country music. The number of successful female country artists continued to increase well into the late twentieth century, although they remained significantly outnumbered by male performers.

\textsuperscript{154} Keel 158
\textsuperscript{155} Bufwack 171
\textsuperscript{156} Keel 158
\textsuperscript{157} Bufwack 171, Heidemann 166
The five years between 1965 and 1970 was “the high point for songs expressing attitudes about gender relations,” and the “slow feminists” of country music “collectively progressed steadily but quietly” into the 1980s on the heels of more widespread acceptance of feminist ideals in American society. In 1987, K.T. Oslin released “80’s Ladies,” a “feminist anthem for the middle-aged woman,” and “forever changed the rules of what could be written about in country music” and while catalyzing a more visible movement of outspoken women. Following Oslin’s lead, female country singers in the late 1980s and early 1990s “began recording songs that increasingly presented a strong female perspective that questioned some of current mainstream society’s long-held beliefs,” and “challenged the ‘domestic turmoil’ tradition of country music by raising expectations for male behavior.” One influential example was Reba McEntire’s 1991 hit “Is There Life Out There,” which tells the story of a woman who married young and is now wondering if there is more to life than “her family and her home.” While the boundaries of songwriting for women’s songs undoubtedly shifted, other gendered expectations still remained fairly rigid, which McEntire’s performance likewise exemplified. In the 1990s, she explains that she removed the spandex pants she often donned in the 1980s from her wardrobe because “although they’re the most comfortable britches I’ve ever had on, since they stretch, I thought women might be offended by me walking out there in a pair of tight pants. So I went to western skirts and boots.” Here, she indicates the persistence of a traditional gender expectation in which overt presentations of women’s sexuality were deemed “offensive.”

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158 Van Sickle 320
160 Keel 156, Ellison 133
162 Bufwack 179
and conservative forms of dress were preferred.\textsuperscript{163} McEntire understood that “operating too far outside of those parameters would be career suicide” for a female artist.\textsuperscript{164}

However, this began to change in 1995, when Shania Twain “burst onto the country music scene…purvey[ing] representations of gender and gender roles that are at odds with what is traditional in the realm of country music and Nashville.”\textsuperscript{165} Twain was certainly not the only woman to achieve megastardom in the early 1990s, as she shared the spotlight with the likes of McEntire, Faith Hill, and LeAnn Rimes. Yet, as James Mandrell asserts, “[Twain’s] significance is not only about gender and women’s roles in country music,” but about how her music and videos also “raise[d] questions about the nature of sexual desire and sexuality. These perceived excesses help explain the controversy that she and her music have provoked even as they point to a frontier as yet to be definitively crossed in the country music world.”\textsuperscript{166}

Twain represented an empowered, sexual woman who pressed the limits of acceptable feminine behavior and dress. In spite (or perhaps because) of pushing gendered boundaries in country music, Twain was a massive success, especially as a pop crossover artist, where her presentations of female sexuality were par for the course. Her 1997 hit “Man! I Feel Like A Woman” changed the country music landscape. In the music video, she exudes female sexuality as she “performs a striptease” and dons an “undeniably provocative” outfit, but she also challenges traditional gendered norms by sexualizing men’s bodies, as she surrounds herself with

\textsuperscript{163} In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention specifically touches on this topic in its literature, stating that “women should dress modestly, especially to ensure they do not overly tempt men.” Kaylor 344
\textsuperscript{164} Keel 171
\textsuperscript{165} Mandrell 1020
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid 1015
“beautiful men” who are simultaneously “hypermascuine and strangely feminine.”\textsuperscript{167} Before Twain hit the scene, the country music industry had not witnessed such overt defiance of traditional gender—or stylistic and musical—norms. Predictably, she outraged many in the country music community with her deviance from traditionalism in both sound and performance, as “the shock and titillation caused by Twain’s exposed navel and curvaceous body [and] the controversies over the pop dimensions of her music…all betray[ed] anxiety not only about the new woman in the country music world but also over an incipient revision of masculinity that includes if not anticipates the metrosexual.”\textsuperscript{168} However, her crossover appeal expanded the reach of country music and brought more listeners into the fold that were less traditional. But while many country traditionalists were upset with Twain’s propensity to, as she sings in the aforementioned song, “forget [she’s] a lady,” her remarkable success indicates that just as many welcomed this “new way of representing women in the country world.”\textsuperscript{169} In fact, “the success of Rimes, Twain, and their colleagues at awards show and at cash registers led the country music industry to dub 1997 the Year of the Woman.”\textsuperscript{170}

However, this claim was a bit off the mark. As Julie L. Andsager and Kimberly Roe discovered after examining the videos in rotation on two major country music video channels in the wake of this declaration, “women have not reached an equal footing with male artists.” Their results showed that “despite the country music industry’s proclamation of 1997 as the Year of the Woman,” “male artists’ videos were played almost three times as frequently as female artists’,” which “suggested that the traditional male domination of country music has yet to

\textsuperscript{167} Mandrell borrows this term from Jill Neinmark’s article “It’s 1994 and the male body has arrived.”
\textsuperscript{168} Mandrell 1015-1016
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid 1025
\textsuperscript{170} Andsager and Roe 69
fade.” Likewise, “country music’s videos continue to present traditional gender roles, which often trivialize women. These traditional gender roles occur almost exclusively in male artists’ video depictions of female characters. However, a handful of female artists portray themselves in traditional ways, mostly as sex objects. Some videos portray men and women in equal roles, but these tend to occur primarily in female artists’ videos.”171 So, while women “may have more sexual agency” in the post-Twain country music landscape, they were still expected to (and largely did) “remain inside the archetypical roles allowed for their gender.”172 And, as the 2003 controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks reveals, some terrain still remained off-limits for women.

While touring abroad in 2003, Dixie Chicks’ front woman Natalie Maines spoke out against the Iraq War and claimed to be “embarrassed” to share her home state of Texas with President George W. Bush. The country music community went into an uproar, and reacted by banning the Chicks’ music from radio stations and organizing events where angry fans could destroy their CDs en masse. Chet Flippo, editorial director of CMT, suggested that Maines “could not have made a stupider mistake,” because “country music fans are largely conservative and patriotic.…what do you expect [them] to say when a country star dumps on the president?”173

While the political tendencies of the audience were certainly a factor in this controversy, Lesley Pruitt argues that gender played an equally significant role. Pruitt compared reactions to the Dixie Chicks’ anti-war message to those made by legendary country artist Willie Nelson, and found that “a man who disagrees with the pro-war discourses that currently dominate country airwaves is romanticized as a 'rebel' or 'outlaw,' respected terms associated with several male

171 Ibid
173 L. Pruitt 88
country music legends, while a woman who speaks out is characterized as an irrational 'slut' and a 'traitor,' unfortunate opposites of the ideal country woman.” 174 She examined another comment made by Flippo, who, when asked about the difference between the treatment of Nelson and the Chicks, argued that the performers were “not doing the same thing,” because “Willie's song is the expression of a true artist and that is what true artists do.” Flippo then compared Nelson to high art, further stating that “Willie and Kris and Cash and Waylon may have been as close as country music's ever going to come to a Picasso.” Pruitt observed that Flippo “create[s] a clear distinction between Nelson, a ‘true artist’ and the Dixie Chicks, who he casts as fraudulent or untalented. Note also how he refers exclusively to outlaw men as the true artists,” a position “typically unavailable to women artists in country music, who are constructed as gendered subjects in the industry.” Pruitt concludes that “while the Dixie Chicks are expected to be quiet and passive, it would seem the same individuals who criticized them have accepted Nelson's right to speak,” which “again is clearly related to gender role expectations.” 175

As Celeste Pruitt (2006) concluded, “Overall, while country music seems to have made some dramatic shifts in how gender roles can be expressed, the actual roles themselves have not changed much since [the 1950s],” noting that women “can be more aggressive” as long as they stay within the confines of certain gender expectations. 176 This means that by the mid-2000s—as the careers of Twain and the Chicks illustrate respectively—women can be afforded greater sexual agency as long as that freedom is expressed “within the confines…of heterosexual partnership.” 177 In other words, women’s roles must still be defined by their relationship to men, like the (hetero)sexual nature of Twain’s “aggression.” Forays into “men’s worlds,” like politics

174 Ibid
175 Ibid 96, 99
176 C. Pruitt 67-68
177 Ibid.
or similar realms, remain off-limits. Allowing women to speak on such topics would require that she be considered as an individual with just as much right to an opinion on matters beyond the domestic sphere as men.

Today, it seems that the country music landscape still generally reflects the one established in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In a series of interviews I conducted in 2016, during which I asked four women what they perceived the role of women in country music to be, all four women’s answers reflected the findings of Andsager and Roe’s 1997 study. Women tend to be presented in fairly traditional roles. Female artists tend to present more positive female narratives while women presented in male artists’ songs and videos tend to be objectified or trivialized. Women tend to sing about relationships or “emotional” matters almost exclusively while men could sing about both relationships and “masculine” activities like hunting, fishing, or partying. While Andsager and Roe found that men outnumbered women three-to-one in 1997, an analysis of the Billboard Year-End charts for Top Country Artists and Top Songs Artists from 2010 to 2015 reveals that male dominance has actually increased. Over the last six years, solo female artists, all-female groups, and mixed-gender groups make up 24.6% of the top artists and 18.6% of the artists producing the most top songs. All the while, according to 2014 demographic information from the Country Music Association, women make up 53% of the genre’s audience. Rasmussen and Densley (2016) conducted a follow-up study to Andsager and Roe, examining how women were represented in the genre in the 2000s and 2010s, and their results confirm my findings. They found that “most country songs, popular in the United States, refer to women in some way—just less than half refer to female gender roles in some way, and

179 See Tables A.1 and A.2 in A for complete breakdown.
180 “Connect with Country Music.”
more than half objectify women in some way.” Likewise, they found that “lyrics in songs sung by male singers differed from those in songs sung by female singers. Lyrics in country songs with male singers were less likely to portray women as empowered, as dependent on a man, and as distrustful or cheating, and they were more likely to refer to a women’s appearance and to a woman using slang.”\(^{181}\) They also found that songs from the 2010s were less likely to refer to women in some type of rigid gender or family role than songs from the 1990s or early 2000s, but they were more likely to objectify women. They contextualize this finding by noting:

Some scholars suggest that sexually objectifying popular music written and produced by men in recent decades is evidence of a backlash against feminism and the cultural progress that women have made. Lay (2000) argues that men use popular music to reassert their traditional dominance in the face of advancement of women and gays. The argument that objectifying media portrayals are due to an attempt to rejuvenate hegemonic masculinity is especially fitting for a genre that is produced by, and thought to be catering to, the traditional White heterosexual male.\(^{182}\)

There is evidence to suggest that, despite having a female-majority audience, the country music industry does actively privilege its male listeners and its male performers. The dwindling number of female artists on the charts has not gone unnoticed, and Nashville songwriter Shane McAnally—whose significance as an openly gay songwriter in Nashville will be examined in Chapter 3—weighed in on the industry’s double standards in a 2015 article for Billboard:

There are guys out there who may start out with a less than perfect project, but they're given the benefit of the doubt that they may grow into the artist that one day may help to carry on the genre… It'd be really hard right now for a female to break through just on hit songs[.] There are hit songs available, but I think [women] have to have a real point of view. I've heard so many people say with a good female song, “yeah, that's good and

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\(^{182}\) Ibid 191
she's pretty, but who is she?” They don't do the same to guys -- they're just like, “well that's a hit song, he's a good looking guy, let's go.”

McAnally also noticed that female songwriters in Nashville “seem close to achieving token status.” "It's funny,” he observed, “when you talk to a publisher in town and they say, 'well, we already have a girl songwriter.'" Another songwriter shared a similar story, saying: "It's even to the point where pretty much at every publishing company, you'll hear them say 'we have our girl.'” These sentiments are eerily reminiscent of how the male gatekeepers of the industry both patronized and tokenized “girl singers” in the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting that this type of treatment is by no means a new phenomenon in Nashville.

Recently, one particular male gatekeeper revealed that he believes even lower numbers of women in country music would be ideal. In 2015, radio consultant Keith Hill gave the following advice to radio programmers in the industry publication Country Aircheck: “If you want to make ratings in country radio, take females out.” Hill went on to purport that country music is “a principally male format,” that women prefer to listen to male artists, and that “playing back-to-back women is a bad idea for retaining listeners.” He concluded: “They’re just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. The tomatoes of our salad are the females.” Outraged female artists took to Twitter to voice their opposition to Hill’s claims, dubbing the incident “#saladgate.”

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184 Ibid.


186 Ibid.
Female country artists have become increasingly more vocal about their disdain for the way they are treated and represented by their male counterparts, and not just with clever hashtags. In 2014, two 18-year-old newcomers Maddie & Tae shook up the country world with their debut single “Girl in a Country Song,” which lambasts “the way women are sung about in country music’s current party phase.” The song features lyrics like “Well, I wish I had some shoes on my two bare feet/And it's gettin' kinda cold in these painted on cut-off jeans,” “Well, shakin' my moneymaker ain't ever made me a dime/And there ain't no sugar for you in this shaker of mine/Tell me one more time, ‘you gotta get you some of that’/Sure I'll slide on over, but you're gonna get slapped,” and “These days it ain't easy being that/Girl in a country song/How in the world did it go so wrong?/Like all we're good for/Is looking good for you and your friends on the weekend/Nothing more.” Through such lyrics, the women make it abundantly clear that they are tired of being objectified. The music video for the single lampoons the tropes found in the popular “bro-country” songs on the radio by replacing the female characters with men, resulting in a group of conventionally unattractive men dancing around in cut off shorts with their midriffs exposed while the women look on. The song resonated with audiences who likewise have grown frustrated with the trend and “the gender-reversing music video garnered more than 25m[illion] views.” After hearing the single, Chris Stacey, the general manager of the duo’s record label, responded, “that’s a viewpoint we haven’t

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188 Maddie & Tae, Girl in a Country Song, 2014.
189 Ibid.
heard in the marketplace before."\textsuperscript{190} It is clearly a viewpoint that the majority-female audiences are excited to hear. Following the success of “Girl in a Country Song” and a follow-up single “Fly,” about a young girl yearning to find success in her life, Maddie & Tae became the first female artists to have two, back-to-back, top 20 singles since 2007.\textsuperscript{191}

The overwhelming dominance of male voices in country music is certainly part of the reason for why such viewpoints have not been heard in the marketplace before, and Maddie & Tae are not the only women who are fed up with the lack of bold female narratives. Kacey Musgraves has earned herself a reputation as a renegade for her first single “Merry Go Round,” which paints a grim picture of the small town life so often heralded in country music, and stirred controversy with her second single “Follow Your Arrow,” which was “shunned” by many in the country music community for its references to smoking marijuana and the lyrics “Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls/If that’s something you’re into.” Although it sold over 500,000 copies, the song peaked at 43 on the \textit{Billboard} chart for country music radio play because the controversy forced many programmers to remove it from their rotation—a reaction akin to (but not nearly as severe as) the backlash faced by the Dixie Chicks a decade before. Although Musgraves anticipated there would be backlash to the song, she pushed for it to be released as a single, saying, “Whether radio or the industry wants to admit it, I think [country] music's ready for it. There's enough free-thinking, open-minded young people who would support that song.”\textsuperscript{192}


\textsuperscript{191} Smith, “#saladgate”


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Considering the song snagged the award for Song of the Year at the 2014 CMA Awards despite its minimal radio play, it seems that Musgraves may have been right.

Musgraves continued to speak out against a variety of the genre’s norms on her sophomore album *Pageant Material*, particularly on the eponymous song “Pageant Material,” in which she overtly denounces and defies the traditional gender expectations of southern women. The song begins with the lyrics “There’s certain things you’re supposed to know/When you’re a girl who grows up in the South,” which echoes Angela Wilson’s suggestion that gender roles for southerners are “natural” and imbedded in the southern social fabric. Musgraves explains the various ways she does not meet the expectations of southern femininity, giving the example, “If I had to walk a runway in high heels in front of the whole town I’d fall down.” In the chorus, she lists the ways that she “ain’t pageant material,” a nod to the prevalence of beauty pageants in southern society, singing: “I’m always higher than my hair/And it ain’t that I don’t care/About world peace/But I don’t see/How I can fix it in a swimsuit on a stage.” In the second half of the chorus, she explains that she is perfectly content to defy these expectations, singing “I’d rather lose for what I am/Than win for what I ain’t.” She again rejects the premise of ascribing value to women solely on their appearances, asking, “And who’s to say I’m a 9.5/Or a 4.0 if you don’t even know me?” Although the likes of Musgraves and Maddie & Tae are speaking out against the gender norms and expectations that dictate the genre, the dominance of male artists still poses a problem to the visibility of women’s messages, especially if men are singing songs that purport to speak for women.

In December of 2016, two songs simultaneously charting on *Billboard*’s Country Top 25 were about how women deal with failed relationships, one by a male artist and one by a female artist. The premise of the first song, “Different For Girls” by Dierks Bentley, is that men and
women deal with heartbreak differently—men can “act tough,” “get drunk,” and “hook up,” but women take the pain harder, as they are more sensitive and are not afforded the luxury of using the coping mechanisms of men. The second song, “Vice” by Miranda Lambert, almost directly challenges the premise of Bentley’s song. Excerpts from each song are presented side-by-side in Table 2.4 to illustrate the differences in thematic emphasis and gendered troping.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.4: Bentley and Lambert Lyrical Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dierks Bentley, “Different for Girls”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 She don't text her friends and say, &quot;I gotta get laid tonight.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They don't take someone home and act like it's nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A guy gets drunk with his friends and he might hook up/Fast forward through the pain, pushing back when the tears come on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's different for girls when their hearts get broke/They can't tape it back together with a whiskey and coke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the going gets tough, yeah, the guys they can just act tough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's different for girls/Nobody said it was fair/When love disappears, they can't pretend it was never there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sting of the needle dropping on a vinyl/Neon singer with a jukebox title full of heartbreak/33, 45, 78/When it hurts this good you gotta play it twice/Another vice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Country music tends to adapt to social progress more slowly than other popular genres of music because country reflects the values of the communities it represents. And, and Lewis and Galope (2014) have noted, in those communities, “opinion and law may lag behind the rest of the
country for years to come.” For example, while Kacey Musgraves received backlash for a single lyrical reference to same-sex attraction between women in 2014, Katy Perry topped the Billboard pop charts for seven-consecutive weeks with the song “I Kissed A Girl” in 2008. Nevertheless, considering country music’s conservativism, the “slow feminism” of female country artists has undoubtedly changed the genre’s landscape. Women today are able to address issues like homosexuality and gender norms in ways that would have been unfathomable only twenty years earlier. While the genre still generally tends to view social change with suspicion or a sense of resignation, Van Sickle argues that “more recently, as the music has increasingly reached a suburban audience with little direct awareness of rural life (let alone a familiarity with Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, or Loretta Lynn), younger country artists have begun to express more ambiguity about changes in society.”

While I agree that the music’s reach has become more suburban and that younger country artists are more ambiguous—or even more accepting, as per Musgraves—about changing social norms, I disagree with Van Sickle’s suggestion that this is due to a lack of direct awareness of rural life or familiarity with older country artists. Musgraves, for example, hails from rural Texas and cites a slew of classic country artists as her musical inspirations. Rather, I believe these changes are indicative of precisely what I have argued in this chapter. The last sixty years indicate that the industry will concede to changing social norms, but only at a slow pace that is

194 http://www.billboard.com/artist/305595/katy-perry/chart
195 Van Sickle 326.
acceptable to its male gatekeepers and to its imagined “traditional” audience. However, due to country audiences skewing younger than before and the permeability of suburban-rural boundaries, the value systems of some segments of the audience are changing. Therefore, the more traditional segments of the audience may be willing to accept these changes at a seemingly faster rate than before because other members of their group (the country music community, in this case) are embracing such values, and solidarity and conformity are cultural capital in these communities.

The changing demographics of country music audiences presents a possible point of intervention for changing attitudes about homosexuality in the industry, and the “slow feminism” constructed by women in the industry provides a blueprint for implementing broader social and cultural change. This is not to suggest that country music and its audiences are no longer “traditional” or conservative. The genre still embraces the conservative gendered systems outlined in this chapter, and such rigid notions of gender pose many problems for LGB individuals, as I detail in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3: HOMOSEXUALITY IN COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE BIBLE BELT

I. “Real Men Love Jesus”: Religion, Masculinity, and the Heteronormativity of the Authenticity Template

Before diving into the issue of homophobia, it is important to first distinguish the various attitudes and activities that are attributed to the catchall term “homophobia” in order to more effectively understand how and why it occurs in the Bible Belt and country music, as suggesting that either is simply “homophobic” obscures the complexity of a phenomenon that requires different levels of analysis. According to Herek (2015), homophobia is not a phobia in the traditional sense, as the underlying affective response of a “homophobe” is not necessarily fear, but rather anger, hostility, and disgust; likewise, the homophobe’s reactions are not completely irrational, as their attitudes can be characterized as rational in the sense that they often serve important psychological functions. The specific function(s) that it serves for the homophobe depends on the individual’s own psychological needs and present situation, which must be viewed against a cultural backdrop—in this case, the backdrop of Bible Belt culture and its values system. By applying the general concept of stigma—a societal-based negative regard for people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group based on the collective judgment that belonging to certain groups or having certain characteristics confers an undesired differentness—specifically to sexual orientation, Herek defines sexual stigma as “society’s negative regard for nonheterosexual behaviors, identities, relationships, and
communities,” which are “all considered bad and inferior to heterosexuality.”\textsuperscript{197} Likewise, sexual stigma is “shared knowledge, a cultural phenomenon that exists independently of any one individual’s personal attitudes,” and is “both embedded in the institutions of society and internalized by individuals.”\textsuperscript{198}

Considering the cultural significance of evangelical Protestantism in Bible Belt culture, the church is one major institution that is embedded with and disseminates sexual stigma. In 2013, data collected by Pew Research Center revealed “a strong relationship between a country’s religiosity and opinions about homosexuality, with far less acceptance in countries where religion is central to people’s lives,” and “the link between religiosity and acceptance of homosexuality explains, at least in part, why acceptance of homosexuality among Americans is low relative to other wealthy countries.”\textsuperscript{199} Lewis and Galope (2014) found that southerners in particular are “substantially less likely than other Americans to support lesbian and gay rights and to accept homosexuality,” and “this regional divergence has not narrowed in the past forty years.”\textsuperscript{200} This is because “southerners’ greater religiosity, conservatism, and Republican party identification all contribute to their greater opposition to lesbian and gay rights and condemnation of homosexuality.” They found that “the strong presence of evangelicals appears to create a climate in which Southerners oppose lesbian and gay rights more strongly than demographically, religiously, and politically comparable Americans in the rest of the country.”\textsuperscript{201} Likewise, the impact of “state-level evangelism” has a “dampening effect” on support for gay

\begin{footnotes}
\item[197] Herek (2015) S33
\item[198] Ibid
\item[200] Lewis and Galope 272
\item[201] Ibid 293
\end{footnotes}
rights “across the board,” not just on certain sub-groups. This dampening effect is indicative of the sexual stigma embedded in religious institutions, of course. Moreover, because most individuals in the Bible Belt defer to the values of religious institutions for guidance, many southerners possess the knowledge that sexual minorities are stigmatized within such institutions and accept that stigma as legitimate. This results in the internalization of sexual stigma. According to Herek, internalized sexual stigma among heterosexuals manifests as sexual prejudice, which he defines as “attitudes and actions that are in accord with society’s hostility toward sexual minorities,” and expressing this sexual prejudice can be understood as functional for the individual, in the sense that it provides a rational strategy for achieving a sense of well-being. Those who identify as evangelical Protestants may perceive their negative attitudes toward sexual minorities as integral to their religious identity, and therefore engaging in sexual prejudice is a way to express deeply felt values and affirm their sense of personal identity and feelings of self-worth; if the prejudice continues to successfully serve this value-expressive function, they are unlikely to feel a need to change.

Similarly, expressing sexual prejudice is functional for individuals when it assists in gaining acceptance from their family and peers. As Herek explains, “if group norms support sexual prejudice, and if a heterosexual individual has a strong need for the group’s approval and acceptance, expressing negative attitudes toward sexual minorities can be a means to gaining status and positive regard from the group.” Lewis and Galope similarly found that “opposition to [same-sex marriage] among comparable individuals increases with the percentages of a state’s population who are evangelical Protestants and political conservatives.” Hence, “the contextual
effects of higher levels of evangelism in the South can account for the regional divergence that is not explained by individual characteristics.”

Just as members of Bible Belt communities adopt the value systems prevalent among their peers, country artists must do the same. The authenticity template that Grossman (2002) outlines requires that an artist is able to convince listeners that they are “just like them.” Sexual stigma is implicit in a religiously-imbued values system when the doctrines of, say, fundamentalist denominations like the SBC make it “overwhelmingly clear” that “homosexuality is an unacceptable lifestyle for the Christian to consider.” However, because the crafters of the country music world (such as songwriters, advertisers, and PR folks) remove incompatibilities like homosexuality from the narrative, homophobia in the form of overt sexual prejudice is rarely expressed “in the community as in the lyrics of country songs” because “homosexuality is rarely acknowledged in the first place.” Instead, the cumulative message of assumed heterosexuality that results from the manifest and latent messages found in the music communicate sexual stigma more passively. Songs with titles like “One Boy, One Girl,” “This Woman and This Man,” “She’s In Love With the Boy,” “A Guy with a Girl,” “She Wants a Cowboy,” and “Ladies Love Country Boys” establish a heteronormative standard before the music even begins playing. Grossman notes that “[t]he discourse of contemporary country music creates a world permeated with religion and centered on the notion of salvific love,” and because “the only acceptable messages are those that can be harmonized with the implicit Protestant Christian sensibility of the music,” salvific love is always represented as heterosexual in order to be compatible with the

205 Lewis and Galope
206 Kaylor 344
207 Ibid.

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Christian message. In other words, “the public and ‘official’ discourse of the industry assumes and imposes a normative heterosexuality that shapes the composition, production, and promotion of songs, as well as the construction of country artists' public personas,” and thus “country lyrics make no place for gay or lesbian sexuality; it is not salvific because it does not exist.”

During the period that Grossman was writing, songs about salvific love were incredibly common on country radio. A cursory glance at the *Billboard* Top 100 Country Songs of 2001, for example, finds it speckled with songs like “Love of a Woman” by Travis Tritt, “When Somebody Loves You” by Alan Jackson, “While You Loved Me” by Racal Flatts, and “You’re Like Coming Home” by Lonestar, to name a few. In these songs, the male singer or singers embrace the idea that being loved by a “good woman” could save him and change him into a better man, a type of relationship analogous with the salvific love of Jesus.

However, as Rasmussen (2016) found, country songs about women in the 2010s took on a more sexualized and objectified tone. *Billboard’s* Top 100 Country Songs of 2014, for example, features songs like “Get Me Some of That” by Thomas Rhett, “Where It’s At” by Dustin Lynch, “Burnin’ It Down” by Jason Aldean, “Whatever She’s Got” by David Nail, and “Song About a Girl” by Eric Paslay, all of which sexualize and objectify women and do not present notions of salvific love, but are nevertheless still heteronormative. Songs from the 2010s not only sexualize and objectify women more than songs from the 2000s, but they seem to increasingly infantilize women as well. I examined the *Billboard* country music year-end charts from 2000-2016, looking only at song titles, and found that from 2000 through 2009, the words “woman/women” and “girl/s” both appeared in ten song titles respectively, but from 2010 through 2016, the word “woman/women” appeared only once while “girl/s” appeared nineteen

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208 Grossman, 83.
209 Ibid 103-104.
times. Infantilizing women is one way in which men reinforce the gender hierarchy of male dominance over women, so the upturn in infantilizing language during the 2010s supports Rasmussen’s suggestion that objectifying music portrayals are an attempt to rejuvenate hegemonic masculinity in the face of the cultural and political progress of women and homosexuals.

The shift from expressions of salvific love to presentations of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily incongruent with a values system steeped in fundamentalist rhetoric, as evangelical sects actively seek to perpetuate patriarchal gender roles. Hegemonic masculinity is a product of patriarchy, which is likewise founded in part on misogyny, and “homophobia is inextricably linked to patriarchal fear of any expression of effeminacy in men”\(^{210}\) (Chauncey 1982-83; Minton 1986; Terry 1999; Herek 2002, Boler 2005). Because of the high valuation of patriarchal gender norms, “attitudes toward gay men reflect attitudes not only toward homosexuality but also toward men who violate male gender roles,” and similarly, “attitudes toward lesbians are understood to reflect attitudes toward women and their social roles as much as attitudes toward homosexuality.”\(^{211}\) Likewise, homosexuals are perceived differently by heterosexuals depending on the gender of both parties: heterosexuals tend to express more negative attitudes towards homosexuals of their same gender, but this pattern occurs mainly among men; similarly, heterosexual women tend to hold more favorable and less condemning attitudes toward homosexuals than heterosexual men, and affective reactions to gay men by straight men were significantly more negative than their reactions to lesbians or heterosexual women’s reactions to either group. Overall, aggregate attitudes of both heterosexual men and women tend to be more negative toward gay men than lesbians (Herek 2002). Cultural gender

\(^{210}\) Boler 267-268

\(^{211}\) Herek (2002) 42-43
norms value the masculine and devalue the feminine, and therefore gay men bear more stigmatization and prejudice than lesbians because of a perceived gender inversion.

Intrinsically linking homosexuality and gender performance is a logical fallacy, but nevertheless, homosexuality has historically been equated with gender inversion—whereas male homosexuals are presumed to be more like women than men and lesbians are presumed to be more like men than women—and this belief is still widespread (Chauncey 1982-83; Minton 1986; Terry 1999; Herek 2002). Likewise, because the hegemonic male believes in a “homogeneous natural masculinity,” the mere existence of any other type of masculinity—especially one that seems to emulate the subordinate group in some way—is seen as threatening, and men who do not conform to the hegemonic ideal are perceived as abdicating the advantaged status of being male (Kite and Whitley 1998). Therefore, in order to maintain the advantaged status of being male, the hegemon must “delegitimize those forms of masculinity that do not conform to this ideal.”212 This is often achieved by acts of aggression—verbal, physical, or otherwise—which allow the hegemon to reinforce his masculinity by simultaneously showcasing his “natural” strength and superiority while eliminating the potential threat to his identity213; comparatively, men do not attack lesbians with the same intensity because lesbians are not directly implicated in their own heterosexual masculine identity (Kite and Whitley 1998).

In fact, Brad Paisley’s 2008 single “I’m Still a Guy”—which spent three consecutive weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart and concluded at number ten on the year-end chart—is exemplary of how aggression and delegitimization directed towards non-hegemonic men is expressed in country music:

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213 Ibid
The manifest message in this song serves to reinforce a rigid gender binary by defining masculine and effeminate behaviors and actively devaluing effeminacy. Although homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned—remember that homosexuality does not exist in this world—homophobia is implicit in the latent messages of this song. The rigid gender binary that the song reinforces is predicated on heterosexuality and the notion that these roles are natural—men are superior to women and women exist to serve men—and the latent message of the song is to discourage men from deviating from this gender binary and encourage them to police gender expectations by aggressively asserting their masculinity by attacking those who do not conform. While the song does not overtly suggest physically attacking those who do not conform, it does
endorse physical aggression and violence as appropriate masculine behaviors, and the purpose of the song is to target and delegitimize those who do not conform to gender norms, which includes homosexuals. The perpetuation of a hegemonic masculine ideal inherently results in a perpetuation of tacitly encouraged violence, gender policing, and, subsequently, violent gender policing, and it is “well documented that gay bashing and violence perpetrated against lesbians and gay men occurs almost exclusively at the hands of men, not women.”

Along with the looming threat of violence, the threat of rejection and ostracism from families, friends, and neighbors is another mechanism for policing gender and sexuality in the Bible Belt because the desire for gender hegemony and the construction of homosexuality as sinful are also central aspects of the hegemonic religious ideology that shapes the environment of compulsory Christianity unique to the region.

Benton theorizes that this atmosphere of compulsory Christianity and sexual prejudice results in what she terms the “Bible Belt panopticon”—based on Foucault’s notion of the panopticon, which suggests that when “under a panoptic gaze people feel that they are always being watched, even when they are not,” and therefore “they regulate their own behavior according to an imagined, external authority.” However, “rather than functioning through anonymous and invisible state authorities” like the guards in the panoptic prisons that Foucault analyzed, the Bible Belt panopticon “manifests through tight social networks of family, neighbors, church, and community members, and a plethora of Christian signs and symbols sprinkled throughout the region,” which “adds another, more personal layer of potential surveillance for residents of the region.” The overwhelming presence of Christian signs and

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214 Boler 267
215 Benton 24
216 Ibid
symbols “serve the panoptic function of policing open expression of a homosexual identity. Simply put, these visual markers in the landscape warn Bible Belt gays to stay closeted.” The policing of gender and sexuality is an external expression of heterosexuals’ internalized sexual stigma; however, when nonheterosexuals internalize sexual stigma, the result is internalized homophobia, which causes feelings of shame, anger, confusion, and disgust with oneself (Herek 2015). These feelings, alongside the fear of being exposed as a nonheterosexual that is enforced by the aforementioned policing, encourage many of these individuals to stay inside the “toxic closet.” As Benton explains, “the closet is toxic not only because it is a place that encourages secrecy and shame but also because closeting inhibits effective communication with others about oneself, and then this lack of language potentially compromises one’s social interactions.” This takes a toll on an individual’s emotional and physical well being, resulting in higher rates of depression, self-destructive behavior, and suicide attempts. Hatzenbuehler (2011) found that the relationship between social environments and suicide attempts by LGB youth “indicated that living in environments that are less supportive of gays and lesbians is associated with greater suicide attempts among LGB youth.” Likewise, Dr. Jeffery Fishberger, a LGBTQ youth mental health specialist and on-call clinician for the Trevor Lifeline, a LGBTQ suicide prevention service, noted that “more than 70 percent of the thousands of calls to the 24/7 Trevor Lifeline originate in the southern and central regions of the United States.” Disproportionately high call volumes came from Bible Belt states like Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri,

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217 Benton 28
218 Ibid 88
220 Hatzenbuehler 900.
and Tennessee. In fact, the experiences of Chely Wright and Ty Herndon—the only two country music artists to publically come out as gay after having had successful careers in the 1990s and early 2000s—illustrate the effects of internalized homophobia. Their stories also illuminate how living in the toxic closet could lead one to attempt suicide and other self-destructive behaviors, and expose just how powerful the Bible Belt panopticon can be, especially for country music fans and artists.

II. “Lies I Told Myself”: Chely Wright, Ty Herndon, and Nashville’s Toxic Closet

Imagine being a child growing up in a small community in the Bible Belt, with dreams of being a country star that are second only to your devotion to your Christian faith. Now, imagine discovering your sexuality and realizing that it could shatter everything that matters to you—your relationship with God, your dreams of making it big in Nashville, even the very essence of your identity. Imagine having no one to talk to and nowhere to look for guidance; imagine having to endure the isolation, pain, fear, and shame all alone. Imagine going to extreme lengths to hide the truth about yourself, constructing a fragile façade of lies to live behind, and then carrying the burden of maintaining it for the rest of your life, because if the truth is exposed, the foundation you have built your entire life on will crumble.

For Chely Wright and Ty Herndon, there is no need to imagine—this was their reality, and the uncanny similarities between their individual experiences, despite having ten years and over seven hundred miles between them before beginning their careers in Nashville, suggests

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221 Fishberger
222 Billy Gilman also came out as a gay man in 2014, but I am not including his story in this research because his success in the country industry came during his childhood, he is not from the Bible Belt, and he has since made a concerted effort to leave country music for the more gay-friendly pop world.
that their experiences are not unique, but are rather representative of LGB struggles in the Bible Belt. [Note: In the exploration of Wright and Herndon’s first-hand accounts that follows, portions of passages that I found to be particularly representative of the toxic closet are italicized for emphasis, and all italics are my own unless indicated otherwise.]

Chely Wright grew up in the small, rural farming community of Wellsville, Kansas, where religion was crucial to the social fabric of the community. As she recalls in the opening pages of her memoir, “I don’t remember a time when I didn’t believe in God. And I hardly remember a time when I didn’t know I was different. Slowly, I would learn that difference was something to be hated and feared.” She writes that she hid her sexuality for the first thirty-nine years of her life because she felt that she had to, because she “was a small-town girl with a dream of moving to Nashville and becoming a famous country singer. The dream came true. But for all my success, I was left wrestling with a secret that could destroy everything I’d built. For decades, I swore I’d take that secret to my grave.” As Barton explains, “[t]he seeds of the toxic closet begin growing in childhood. In homophobic environments, all children learn from an early age that same-sex affection is inappropriate and subject to sanctioning by both adults and peers,” and for both Wright and Herndon, the church was the nexus of their homophobic environment. Wright felt fear, shame, confusion, and loneliness as a child while trying to reconcile her sexuality with her faith and her environment. She “heard some things in church that led [her] to know that certain words and activities were negative.” As she recalls, “I had heard the words ‘whore,’ ‘criminal,’ ‘drunk,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘pervert,’ ‘liar,’ and ‘non-believer’ all strung together so many times that I understood that those were the building blocks of sin and

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224 Ibid.
225 Barton 90
evildoing. This led her to repeating the same prayer multiple times a day for over ten years:

“Dear God, please don’t let me be gay. I promise to be a good person. I promise not to lie. I promise not to steal. I promise to always believe in you. I promise to do all the things you ask me to do. Please take it away. In your name I pray. Amen.”

In fact, while she was growing up, she believed that when bad things happened to the people she loved, it was because God was punishing her for being a lesbian.

Herndon recalls a similar experience growing up in the church in Butler, Alabama: “Early on as a kid, I believed that I was put on this earth to be a preacher. Then I was in church at 10 years old when I realized I was gay, as a visiting pastor looked at me as he was giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon about homosexuality.”

Like Wright, Herndon’s only point of reference for what it meant to be a homosexual was the church, and during that sermon, he recalls that he sat there “horrified that I might be a homosexual. Whatever that word meant, I knew that I probably was one.”

He elaborates on this experience, explaining: “I ran from it my whole life, because I felt I couldn’t be in the presence of God and be who I am. How dare I! And there was no sense of worth at all in my heart, mind or spirit. And for much of my life I still was carrying around the little boy who was going to burn in hell.”

He, too, spent years praying to God, asking to not be gay anymore.

Wright recalls not knowing exactly what a homosexual was—aside from what she had heard in church—or what a homosexual looked like when she was a child, and desperately

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226 Wright 15
227 Ibid 3
228 Ibid 31
229 Willman
230 Nelson
231 Ibid.
232 Ibid
searching for someone she could relate to. One of her first childhood crushes was on her teacher Miss Smilie, and this became one of her earliest memories of struggling with her sexuality and identity:

I paid close attention to the other little girls in my class, trying to determine if they felt like I did about Miss Smilie. I hoped that I would identify it in other girls. I prayed that it was perfectly normal to fall for my teacher, who was very much a woman. I saw no such signs in my female classmates. My stomach would feel uneasy and sick every time I thought about it. I knew that I was in a bad situation, and I was painfully aware that I had no one to talk to and nowhere to turn. I don’t even think I’d heard the word “homosexual” before or understood what it meant, but I’d certainly heard jokes that adults and high school kids would tell that included the words “faggot,” “fairy,” “dyke,” and “queer” in them. When I heard people talking about faggots, dykes, fairies, and queers, I wondered what one looked like. We didn’t have them in Wellsville, as far as I knew.²³³

After forcing herself to repress her feelings for her teacher, Wright found herself having feelings for a female classmate instead. By this time, the feelings of fear, shame, confusion, and loneliness were intensifying. She notes that “as much as I loved [my crush], I was learning to hate myself. I continued to pay close attention to others around me in hopes that I might be able to find someone else like me, but I saw no signs that would lead me to believe that I wasn’t alone.”²³⁴

The italicized portions of the above passages succinctly illustrate the inverse of Gomillion and Giulano (2011) by demonstrating how equally powerful a lack of representation can be, especially for someone living in a particularly unsupportive environment. Wright felt alone; she had no point of reference for understanding homosexuality beyond its alleged spiritual consequences, which she began to internalize at the expense of her psychological and physical wellbeing. This pattern continued and exacerbated as she gets older; the culmination of a

²³³ Wright 15.
²³⁴ Ibid, 19.
negative social environment and a lack of relatable LGB visibility continued to plague Wright into her teen years:

By my teens, I was looking hard to find anyone who was like me. I knew a few girls who were considered stereotypically tough and tomboyish, but they had boyfriends. *I didn’t fit the stereotype of a gay woman, but I knew my sexual identity was outside the norm.* I hadn’t heard many discussions about homosexuality, but what I heard in church was enough for me to realize that the church did not approve. There was one person in Wellsville who I thought was gay—a single man in his thirties named Sam. I never saw him with a boyfriend, but some people called him our town pervert. I assumed the only way he could have earned such contempt would have been to be a homosexual, though I never asked about it. *I just knew I didn’t want to join him.*

This passage illustrates again the inverse of Gomillion and Giulano, as well as how Wright received and interpreted latent messages about LGB people, their social value, and the consequences of belonging to such an “out group.” The negative feelings and fear that she felt about being gay festered inside of her, resulting in internalized homophobia. She recalls that she “had never been completely and totally feminine,” that she was a “tomboy some of the time and a feminine girl too” and “felt very comfortable both ways.” She wondered why, then, she had difficulty being more “accepting and compassionate about the lesbians that [she has] seen in [her] adult life who are less than ultra-feminine,” and concluded that it was due to a “complex, multifaceted fear.” She elaborates, explaining: “I had a fear that if someone noticed a not-so-feminine behavior or characteristic in me, they would know that I was a homosexual. And in my young, frightened mind, being ‘found out’ as a homosexual was the worst thing that could ever happen to a person. *I was taught and repeatedly reminded to have this fear—by society and by my church.*” In other words, she was socialized to understand that deviating from hegemonic gender norms could implicate her as a lesbian, and if she were to be identified as a lesbian, her

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235 Ibid, 41.
236 Ibid 262-263
237 Ibid
church and her community would shun her. She also knew that the consequences could be much more dire. She goes on to explain:

*When you grow up gay, you fear that others will strike out at you simply because of who you are. The intent behind bullying and more horrifying acts of violence against gays is the same: to make sure the victims know that they need to lay low, keep silent, and above all realize that they'll never be accepted because they are defective and have no place in society...* Exclusion from others causes pain, and it can be as dangerous and damaging to a person as getting a bullet in the heart or being shoved headfirst into a toilet in the locker room while the attackers laugh and slap high fives. ‘You’re not one of us. You don’t belong. We don’t like you. You’re not good enough. There is something wrong with you, and there is nothing wrong with us.’’’

These fears are the results of the gender and sexuality policing that is common in Bible Belt communities, a process she is cognizant of in retrospect, although she does not use those exact words to describe it. What she describes as the intents of bullying LGB people are coincidentally the same as the effects of the symbolic annihilation of LGB identities. The marginalization of LGB people in the media sends the message that they are not important, are not valued, and do not have a place in society; in essence, it is society’s way of saying what Wright’s hypothetical bully says in the above passage. Wright suggests that the perpetrator’s intended message in such violence is to tell the victim that “there is something wrong with you, and there is nothing wrong with me,” and Herndon, who has been physically attacked several times by other men since coming out as gay, offers an additional perspective on this type of violence that is shaped by his own experiences with hegemonic masculinity: “The guys who threw beer bottles at me...and the guy that stabbed me in the hand with a pencil, and the guys that would hold up a sign that said ‘Faggot’...probably 100% of me believes that those little country boys were probably struggling with the same thing. To have that kind of hate to spew at someone, you have to have that kind of

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hate for yourself. And that is one of the biggest life lessons I have learned.” Wright
acknowledges that she struggled to be accepting and compassionate towards non-gender
conforming women because of her own internalized homophobia, which supports Herndon’s
theory of projection, and Boler (2005) and Tharinger (2008) confirm that insecurity and fear
motivate violence in the male hegemon and that violence directed at LGB individuals is typically
executed by men and not women, which explains why Herndon has been attacked by other men
but not by women and likewise why Wright did not feel compelled to physically attack the
aforementioned women.

The value placed on hegemonic gender norms in the Bible Belt and in country music and
the stereotypical association of homosexuality with gender nonconformity creates a significant
obstacle for queer individuals in these communities, whether or not the individual conforms. For
those who do conform to gender norms, like Wright and Herndon, the lack of relatable queer
representations made tackling their own identity even more difficult. The first time Wright had a
homosexual identified to her, she was nine years old, watching tennis player Billie Jean King on
television with her mother. This experience brought up the complexities of gender presentation
and sexuality, which Wright found confusing and discouraging. As she recalls:

My mother and I were watching a weekend sporting event on television, and Billie Jean
King was on camera, doing commentary on a tennis match. It took me a second to
determine her gender. I asked my mom why that lady was dressed like a man. “Because
she’s gay.” She said it without a vocal inflection that leaned toward the negative or the
positive, but her answer introduced a stereotype to my young mind. If a woman dresses
“like that,” she’s a homosexual… I asked myself, “That’s what gay looks like?” My
confusion and isolation escalated, leaving me just one image of a gay woman to fixate on
for a long time. The next homosexual I learned about was Martina Navratilova, a couple
of years after I saw Billie Jean King on our television set. I didn’t dress like them—pants
suits and collared shirts—and I didn’t have my hair cut short like they did, but I

239 Willman
wondered if I would eventually grow up to look like them. I was afraid that the way they appeared was the way that I was destined to become.\textsuperscript{240} 

Wright notes that the first time she was exposed to a lesbian in the media, the representation was not necessarily positive or negative, yet the experience intensified her struggle because the representations were not relatable for her and presented only one “type” of lesbian, causing her to falsely believe that all lesbians looked like this, and therefore all lesbians must be this way—remember, according to Leavitt et al (2015), individuals look to media representations for “strategies for how to be a person,” or to understand what is possible for them and how they fit in to contemporary domains of social life. Consequently, this attributed to Wright’s perception that being a lesbian and being a country music star could not coexist. As she recalls, seeing lesbians only being represented as women who were not traditionally feminine “scared me because I couldn’t imagine how a woman who had an appearance like they did would ever be able to sing on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry. All of the female country music singers I’d seen on television or in pictures were in frilly dresses with sequins and had long, flowing hair. At that young age, I was very discouraged about all of it.”\textsuperscript{241} Here, Wright acknowledges that she was already aware that success in country music requires one to follow such a template; based on the two representations of lesbians she has seen at this point in her life, she was also aware that they do not fit in to the country artist template.

However, the “authentic” country star template requires more than just traditional gender presentations; it requires that one embodies the traditional values system, and the hegemonic gender expectations endorsed by the evangelical Protestant sects that shape these values are predicated on the practice of heterosexuality, and likewise, homosexuality is openly condemned.

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid, 262.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.
Therefore, heterosexuality is “the most crucial attribute of the ‘authentic’ country star,” and subsequently, even if one were to “[adhere] to the authentic country construction in every other way, a homosexual artist [can not be] an authentic country star according to the social construction or fabrication of that authenticity.” Therefore, in order to achieve their dreams of being successful country artists, Wright and Herndon knew that they must stay in the closet, and the conflict between their homosexuality and the “authentic” country artist template naturally intensified in Nashville.

Many LGBTQ individuals in the Bible Belt struggle with deciding when, how, or even if they should come out of the closet, especially if “to come out is to risk rejection, abuse, abandonment, and loss of one’s job, friends, even, in some extreme cases, one’s life.” The fear of these consequences often keeps individuals in the closet, but, “[a]t the same time, passing, hiding, pretending, and evading also cause problems,” and living in the toxic closet come with “its own set of long-term emotional and psychological issues.” Wright suggests that “country music is like the military—don’t ask, don’t tell.” At the time that Wright’s career started to take off, she was in a relationship with a woman—who she refers to as Julia in her memoir—who also worked in the industry, but not as an artist. During this time, she confesses, “I had graduated from hiding my feelings of homosexuality to now having to hide my actions of homosexuality. It takes a lot of work to cover up an entire part of one’s life, but desperate times call for desperate measures… My answers could pass, technically, for the truth—but it wasn’t the truth and I knew it. I was telling lies by omission. It made me so sick that I developed a

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242 Fishberger 68-69.
243 Barton 87
244 Ibid
As she recalls, “I was a public person and had to navigate those risky waters, and because [my girlfriend] was in the country music industry too, we were very well aware that if we were to be together we’d have to hide...I was an up-and-coming country music singer, living in Nashville, Tennessee, and there had never been an openly gay country music star. I knew that I could not—I would not—be the first.” She knew that being a lesbian was a divergence from the “authentic” country star template, and deviation from the norm could destroy her career. However, she also knew that hiding was detrimental to her relationship, and this caused confusion and complications for her. She explains her thought process at the time:

Did I think that she and I could really survive, with any quality of life, in Nashville, Tennessee? I was a brand-new artist on Mercury/PolyGram Records; they were pumping millions of dollars into my career. How could I risk ruining my chances of making it as a successful country music artist? I was just getting started. I continued to hope that I’d be able to look back one day on those confusing times and reference them as a “phase” that I went through. I wanted to be normal too and tried to convince myself that [hiding] was the best thing for us.

However, hiding would ultimately ruin their relationship. Wright notes that “the duality of [her] life became more pronounced, and [she] became even more expert in the betrayal of [her]self as an artist and as a woman.” She would attend work dinners, awards shows, and receptions alone; she “would go do [her] appearance, satisfy [her] obligations, then go home to her [girlfriend].”

When she would return home, though, her girlfriend did not want to discuss Wright’s career because it was the source of their problems and she felt excluded from a large part of Wright’s life. Reflecting on their relationship, Wright says, “Everyone struggles in intimate relationships, but I believe that the hiding and the secret of our being gay caused irreparable damage.”

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246 Wright 69-70.
247 Ibid, 78, 82.
248 Ibid, 80-81
249 Ibid, 136.
Unlike Wright, who was completely in the closet, Herndon had actually come out to his sister and mother before he moved to Nashville. When he told his mother,

She cried, gave me a big hug. At first, I thought the tears meant she was disappointed and sad—but her tears were about her love for me because I chose to be in a profession that was not so affirming about that subject. She said, “I just want you to have a happy life, and this path is going to be hard.” That’s what her tears were about—I was actually happy to hear that.251

He acknowledges how fortunate he was that his mother was supportive, as he knows that is not always the case. He also knew that she was right about his career path—when he first arrived in Nashville, he came out to his manager and his manager’s wife, and they also told him that this would be a problem for his career if anyone were to find out. As he recalls:

I have been programmed to think that if you’re gay in this world, you’re going to lose. You’re going to lose everything. I believed it so good and strong that I did. I fucked it up real good. I was terrified that I would do something to derail all the hard work that everybody was putting into this. And I knew that if I got that big, people were going to find out. The lengths that I went to to cover up the pain of being gay and who I was created some habits that killed everything good that I tried to do. There was a self-destruct button that might as well have been the red button on the chair on The Voice. It was just right there by me, and I could push it so easily, if success got too close in anything in my life.252

The lengths he went to in order to hide his sexuality included two sham marriages. Herndon admits that it was his own idea to get married for his career, and that his wives knew everything when they agreed to the marriage, but nevertheless, the duality of his public life and private life negatively impacted all of his relationships. As he recalls, “there was always drama,” because he was literally living two lives—he had one house with his wife, and another with his “real” male partner.253 Like many individuals living in the toxic closet do, Herndon began engaging in self-destructive behavior to cope with his pain. In 1995, he was arrested for indecent exposure and

251 Davis
252 Willman
253 Ibid
possession of methamphetamine while on tour in Texas. According to Gihinda and Kola (1996), substance abuse was common among gay men living in the closet at this time. Their study addressed “the linkages between the effects of stigma, the formation of an altered identity, diminished self-esteem and the consequent abuse of substances,” and found:

\[\text{...[T]he use of substances serve to temporarily overcome an individual’s perceived inadequacies that result from stigma, thereby lessening their preoccupation with homosexual feelings, briefly elevating self-esteem and allowing sufficient empowerment to make sexual contacts. These rewarding experiences become repetitious as does the use of substances. [...] An incompletely integrated homosexual identity and diminished self-esteem [are] major predictors of substance abuse as they were posited as being strongly impacted by the societal stigmatization of homosexuals.}\]

Despite being arrested and entering a rehabilitation program, Herndon recalls feeling relieved after the incident:

The lies had been eating me alive before that. So I thought, “Oh, everybody’s gonna know now, so it’ll be okay. I can just say that I’m gay, and this is why I did the drugs; this is why I did this horrible thing.” I was not at all prepared that instead of that, we were gonna up the family man image, and say that I was just taking a leak in the park, and that I was suffering from a severe drug addiction that a lot of artists have happen to them when they’re out on the road. They had spent millions of dollars on me, and damage control was at its best. I understand that. But I was disappointed that I couldn’t just go to rehab, come out, and say, “I’m gay.”

Despite the efforts by his PR team to spin the narrative away from any potential indication of homosexuality, the incident still sparked speculation about his sexuality, and his next three albums were increasingly less successful. By 2000, he was no longer receiving radio play; in 2002, he stopped touring and was ultimately dropped from his label, leading Herndon into a downward spiral that landed him back in rehab again. Herndon remembers that after the incident, “so much effort went into sending it the other way so early on that a lot of people in the

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254 Gihinda and Kola 168.
255 Willman
256 Ibid
general fan base [didn’t] have a clue” that he was gay, which ultimately reinforced the message that he must remain in the closet.\textsuperscript{257}

While both Herndon and Wright entered into heterosexual relationships during the peak of their career, Herndon’s marriages were calculated career moves intended to make his stay in the toxic closet less difficult. For Wright, the relationship was part of a path of confusion, fear, desperation, and self-sabotage. While attempting to maintain a relationship with a woman while keeping her sexuality a secret, Wright recalls: “I just didn’t see a way for my existence and my dreams to intersect.”\textsuperscript{258} Subsequently, she “began having thoughts about wanting to be normal and actually just making a choice to live a straight life,” reasoning to herself that “if [she] was going to be unhappy and unfulfilled anyway, why not just try to be with a man.”\textsuperscript{259} While her relationship with Julia was growing more tenuous, she was beginning a working friendship with Brad Paisley. She reflects on her state of mind at the time, explaining:

> I was trying hard to hold on to her, but I was also doing things that would push her away, things that I knew would break us. And that’s why I allowed my relationship with Brad to grow. Self-destructive behavior is common among closeted gays, and I’m sure there are professionals who can tell you the clinical reasons why we do this to ourselves, but I can’t. In my case, I did it because I felt discomfort about where I was in my life, and although I didn’t quite know what to do to remedy my situation, I made a decision to just do something—anything. So I did.\textsuperscript{260}

Her decision to begin a relationship with Paisley was not an attempt to hide her sexuality from the world, although she admits that she knew it would help. Rather, she was trying to lie to herself, to punish herself for being gay—she believed that she did not deserve to be happy because she was gay, and she also was desperate to be “normal.” As she explains, “I felt that if I was going to compromise and be with a man, he’d be an amazing choice.” However, her

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid
\textsuperscript{258} Wright 68
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid, 142.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid
relationship with Paisley became almost as difficult as her relationship with Julia in many ways. Paisley wanted to make their relationship public, which Wright did not want to do; she had made it a policy to never discuss her private life, and she feared that if her relationship with Paisley were to be public, it would set a new precedent for her to be expected to talk openly about her personal life. As she explains, “There was so much that I was hiding, I didn’t want anyone to feel that my private life was no longer ‘off limits.’”261 Likewise, she was still very much in love with Julia, and she knew that Julia didn’t know what was really going on between she and Brad, but at the same time, she admits, “I think there was a part of me that wanted her to know. I was on self-destruct.”262 She admits that her relationship with Paisley did help to quell some of the rumors about her sexuality, and part of her hoped that if she could make their relationship work, she could escape the rumors for good. However, unlike Herndon’s marriages to women that knew he was gay and knew that their marriage was an act, Paisley did not know that Wright was gay and his feelings for her were sincere. While Wright may not have been able to love him in the same way that he loved her, she still deeply cared for him and worried about how making the relationship public could potentially harm him, as well: “The last thing I wanted to happen was for Brad to publicly declare his love for me, only to have the world find out someday that I am gay. I couldn’t stand the thought of the humiliation that could cause Brad.”263 Wright sums up this period of her life, saying, “I was tortured by my reality.”264

While her relationship with Paisley may have helped in managing the rumors about her sexuality, it also served to remind her why she needed to dispel those rumors in the first place.

261 Ibid 144
262 Ibid
263 Ibid 146
264 Ibid
Although she characterizes Paisley as one of the more tolerant and open-minded artist in Nashville, he still expressed homophobic sentiments common in the Bible Belt:

We’d discussed the gay issue before and Brad’s position on it was religiously based. *He was a strict Christian and adhered to the belief that the Bible clearly says homosexuality is a sin. He expressed to me on many occasions that being gay is more than likely a result of someone’s having been molested or that it is a choice. He is not alone in his thinking—especially in Nashville, in the South, and in the culture of country music.* I made my case to him that I thought he was wrong and that most gays I know swear that it is not a choice. Nevertheless, once he did spend time with the gay men in my life, he liked them a lot. One time he said to me when discussing one of those friends, “Hey, I like the guy, even though he’s gay. I sat at the dinner table with him, anyway, didn’t I?”

While Paisley was willing to tolerate homosexuals despite his belief that homosexuality is a sin, as Wright notes, this was not necessarily typical in Nashville. Both Wright and Herndon witnessed homophobia during their country music careers, and like Paisley’s, much of it was based on religious belief. For Wright, these experiences showed her that “when you’re gay you realize that, for the most part, a lot of the world hates you without having ever met you. It’s unsettling.” Her employees and band members were within her closest circles, and “many people that [she] employed over the years are conservative Christians, and to them homosexuality is nothing more than a deviant, sinful choice that some recklessly make, putting their salvation at risk.” She recalls how this affected her: “During my career, I have sat in the front lounge of my tour bus or around dinner tables with my employees as some of them have quoted scripture and pontificated about the sins of homosexuality to anyone who would listen. *It was never pointed at me specifically, because I was good at hiding, but the condemnation, ignorance, and judgment left me frustrated and angry.*” However, both Wright and Herndon were on the receiving end of pointed homophobia from other artists. Herndon remembers that

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266 Ibid, 213.
267 Ibid, 218.
268 Ibid.
“there was a time when some artists were so suspicious of me and so homophobic that they wouldn’t even let me pull my tour buses in next to theirs,”269 a sentiment reminiscent of Paisley’s fear of touching effeminate things in his song “I’m Still A Guy.” For Wright, one of the most jarring encounters she had came from artist John Rich of the country outfit Big & Rich. She relays the incident:

As we pulled into Blackbird’s parking lot, John said, “Can I ask you a question?” With great trepidation I said, “Yes.” “You know, people talk about you,” he said. “They wonder if you’re, you know, gay or something like that.” He wasn’t asking me a question, and I just sat there and tried not to show my panic. “You know, that’s not cool, if you’ve chosen to live that kind of lifestyle. Fans won’t have it. This industry won’t allow it. This is country music. It’s about God and country and family. People don’t approve of that kind of deviant behavior. It’s a sin.” He wasn’t looking at me. He was fidgeting with buttons and knobs on the dashboard. I was staring out his windshield, looking at the back of my vehicle, wishing I were in it and driving away from this conversation. John seemed to be okay with my nonresponse and just kept on with his rant. I’d heard John say disparaging things about gays before, but now he was directing those words at me, and I was rattled. He said he felt strongly that the speculation that I might be gay had damaged my career and that it was critical that I clear up the rumor. “I can help you. I’m in a great spot right now. Warner Brothers has basically written me a blank check to make any record I want, but I can’t help you out if you don’t take care of this crap.” … “The fans and radio love you,” he said. “You could be a lot bigger than you are right now, but you gotta hit this gay thing head-on. You need to take out a press release or something and clear it up, let everybody know that you’re not gay.” […] An added tragedy of the matter was that I knew that John was not alone in his disdain for gays when it came to the industry and fans of country music. John’s rant played a part in validating my fears of being outlawed, and more than likely it influenced some of my decisions in the short term.270

This encounter is exemplary of how the social atmosphere of the Bible Belt encourages LGB individuals to remain in the toxic closet out of fear, and how the country music values system is presented as incongruent with homosexuality. As Rich mentions in his comments to Wright, the country music industry and its fans would not allow for a homosexual to be a part of their community due to the genre’s relationship with “God and country”. Wright and Herndon both

269 Willman.
identified as Christians and their faith factored greatly into their personal lives, and the religious
tones of the homophobia they encountered triggered intense internal conflicts; likewise, even
though they both fulfilled the religious requirements of the “authenticity” template, the
widespread belief that their sexuality and faith could not coexist made their personal faith
irrelevant to those whose perceptions of them determined the fate of their careers. While the
religious aspect is one of the central tenants of the country music values system often presents an
obstacle for LGB individuals, Wright found equally significant pushback from the political facet.

Wright received myriad awards and honors during her career, and she noticed that “more
often than not, at some point in the speech, the declaration is made: ‘Chely Wright is a great
person and a fine American.’”271 She identifies as a patriot; her brother is a Marine and she
believes that one of the most important and rewarding things she has done during her country
music career is performing for American troops overseas. This type of patriotism is a crucial part
of the “authentic” country artist template. In 2003, after a performance for troops in Iraq, Wright
penned the song “Bumper of My S.U.V.,” which was released independently but so well
received by fans that it reached the number one spot on the Billboard singles chart. The song was
“inspired by a real incident in which another driver flipped [her] off when she saw the Marine
Corps bumper sticker on [her] car.” She confesses that “the song wasn’t meant as a political
ballad but a statement from my heart: it’s important to honor those who serve… The song was
never intended to be out on the airwaves and it was certainly never meant to be an endorsement
of the Iraq war or the policies of the Bush administration. But that’s not how some heard it.”272
Among those who heard it that way was conservative pundit Sean Hannity, who invited her to
appear on his radio show because of the song. During that experience, she recalls, “we came

271 Ibid, 197.
272 Ibid, 201.
back from the commercial break and Sean said something to the effect of my being a ‘good conservative, Republican country music singer.’ I laughed and corrected him, saying that I was not a Republican, and he seemed shocked…Maybe Sean relies on his country music friends to be well-behaved Republicans and to side with him on the issues.”

The implicit relationship between country music and conservative politics would be validated again when Wright received an invitation to perform at an event for Vice President Dick Cheney. She initially declined the offer multiple times due to a “personal policy not to participate in political events,” but once she was assured that it was a private party and not a political event, she agreed. After a pleasant evening with the Cheney’s, Wright was conflicted again over how her sexuality could coexist with her public persona:

I thought about the things [Cheney] said to the audience before I took the stage. He called me an “all-American gal from the heartland” whose family had a long history of military service. And once again I was called a “good American.” I thought of Mary, the Cheneys’ [lesbian] daughter. Her father, one of the most powerful political figures in the world, aligns himself with and is a leader in the Republican Party—the very group of people who collectively denounce homosexuals and suggest that we are a tear in the moral fabric of society. They are the very party that leads the fight to prohibit any policy that would allow real equality and freedom… I had not come out to my father yet, but I cried as I lay on the bed that night in a Washington, D.C., hotel room. I thought about how hard it would be to have my dad behave like Vice President Cheney if I ever did have the courage to tell him that I’m gay…There in my hotel room, I realized that just hours before, I had stood with the vice president of the United States and wished that he were something he wasn’t. The irony is, if he had known who I am, he’d probably have wished the same about me.”

This was just one of many incidents that caused Wright to question herself, her achievements, and her place in the industry and beyond. She found herself asking “if those people reading their speeches knew that I am a gay woman, would they say that about me?” She “doubt[ed] that Vice President Dick Cheney and Mrs. Cheney would have invited [her] to their home in Washington,

273 Ibid, 204-205.
D.C., to entertain,” or that “[she] would have been invited by President and Mrs. Bush to sing before our commander in chief took the stage for a speech in Seoul, South Korea” if they had known she was gay. She wondered, “if the world had known that I was gay, would I have been invited to be the grand marshal of the Veterans Day Parade in New York City? If I were known to be a gay woman, would I have ever been invited to do the things for the community and the troops in the first place?” She speculates that the answer to those questions is “maybe not,” and confesses that “the ‘maybe not’ has held me back my entire life.”

275 Again, she was aware that although she was adhering to the authenticity template in every conceivable way, her sexuality would invalidate all of this if it were ever exposed.

Wright spent the majority of her life struggling to reconcile her sexuality with her faith, her career, and the beliefs of her fans. She experienced “a lifetime of imposed shame and fear” that forced her to hide and lie about herself. This resulted in years of negative emotional, psychological, and physical effects, including self-destructive behavior. As she notes, “Self-destructive behavior is common among closeted gays, and I’m sure there are professionals who can tell you the clinical reasons why we do this to ourselves, but I can’t. In my case, I did it because I felt discomfort about where I was in my life, and although I didn’t quite know what to do to remedy my situation, I made a decision to just do something—anything.”

276 On January 26th, 2006, the remedy she thought was necessary to alleviate years of pain and suffering was to take her own life:

On that morning, I realized my secret had caught up with me. I might be able to hide from Nashville and my fans, but I could no longer hide from myself. Even if I had been able to fight my way out of this emotional abyss, I’d still be lying. Lying had already cost me a twelve-year relationship with Julia, the person with whom I once hoped to spend the rest of my life. Now it had claimed my relationship with Kristin, the woman with whom I’d

275 Ibid, 197-198.
276 Ibid, 142.
just broken up. Denial and fear forced us apart. Denial and fear told Kristin it was better to hide than choose what her heart wanted. But I was no better. Behind closed doors I couldn’t be the real me. So on the twenty-sixth day of 2006, I decided it would be better to stop fighting…I said a prayer to God to forgive me and to understand why I couldn’t go on anymore like this. I begged God to realize that I would never be able to fit into the life that I’d created. I hoped that God would realize that I would never be accepted.  

At this point, Wright retrieved a 9mm handgun she kept in her closet for protection and took it downstairs:

I picked up the gun and put the end of it in my mouth. It was cold. I held it steady and got my right thumb on the trigger and prepared to pull it by pushing it outward. I looked up into the mirror, the one built into the mantel. I struggle now to fully explain what I saw staring back at me. My mouth stretched open with the end of a gun in it…my eyes were wide open, bigger than they’d ever been. It occurred to me that I wasn’t crying. Don’t people cry when they kill themselves? I recall thinking, “What if I do this and somehow my eyes stay open and whoever discovers me here sees my eyes like that?” So I closed my eyes…thumb still on the trigger…then I heard a noise. It was the sound of my heart, pounding in my head. It grew louder and louder and I just knew that something was about to happen. I couldn’t stand here in my foyer with my eyes closed and a gun in my mouth forever. Then it happened—I started to cry. I opened my eyes and looked in that mirror as the tears poured out. I took the gun out of my mouth, put it back up on the mantel, and headed up to the third floor. I climbed in bed and stayed there for the next two days.

While Wright ultimately decided not to end her own life, her experience still confirm what Hatzenbuehler (2011) and Fishberger (2011) found: negative social environments increase the risk of LGB suicide attempts, and these attempts are disproportionately common in the Bible Belt region. While Herndon has never publically suggested that he personally contemplated suicide, he has said that he has “been one that’s been at death’s door a few times with addiction and depression all around being gay.”

Wright and Herndon’s personal journeys provides an exceptional amount of anecdotal support that the symbolic annihilation of LGB identities in country music can be detrimental to the wellbeing of LGB country music fans. From an early age, they were both acutely aware of

277 Ibid, Preface.
278 Ibid.
279 Willman.
the incompatibilities of their sexuality and their dreams of being a country star because of the latent messages in the genre’s music and performance. The conservative Christian environment of their upbringing and the country music industry reinforced their fear, shame, isolation, and ultimately desperation. Wright acknowledges that “had [she] been forthcoming about [her] sexuality in Music City in the summer of 1989, [she] would never have had the opportunity to make an album—not to mention seven of them… [she] knew that if [her] fans found out that [she] was gay, [she would] certainly disappoint a good number of them… [she] anticipated that [her] moneymaking opportunities could, at any time, come to a screeching halt if it were ever revealed that [she] was gay.”

Herndon was blatantly told as much by his manager. For both artists, their experiences motivated their decisions to come out publically, as they both acknowledge how powerful positive, relatable representations of LGB people can be and likely would have been for them. Wright explains, “a compelling motivation for me to come forward is to comfort young people as they come to realize and deal with the fact that they are gay. If that’s you, hear my story. I want you to know that you are not sick and you are not alone.”

In fact, Herndon credits Wright’s decision to come out as a major influence on his own decision to do the same, and expressed similar sentiments about his decision to come out publically:

*I have been on a desert island alone for all of my life in terms of having absolutely no role models to look up to in my genre of music. But there have been people in other genres of music — Melissa Etheridge and Elton John — who I’ve always wanted to sit down and have a conversation with. But I have definitely been alone for a long time in this, and I want that to change for someone else who may be just like me […] I am not your stereotypical gay guy. In country we’re selling a product now that a lot of these guys have never one time even lived; I hear all these guys singing about trucks and tailgates and all this bullshit that I’ve actually done and lived. It’s awesome for me to think that I can be authentic and still be that same redneck kid from Alabama who wasn’t really supposed to be gay but who is, even though it’s taken me half my life to accept that. I think everybody knows somebody that’s gay, even the rednecks. The people that like*

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281 Ibid, 275.
country music and that are driving the trucks and hunting and fishing probably know somebody that’s gay that’s in the closet. And I’m just a regular guy, so if it makes people think “Oh my God, if you’re gay, then who else might be?” that’s a good thing.  

In this passage, Herndon touches on the most significant aspect of rural identity politics that makes the potential benefits of the current standard of LGBT representation inconsequential for many queer individuals in the Bible Belt—the valuation of familiarity and conformity within a community. Herndon and Wright’s decisions to publicly come out as a homosexual, Christian country music artists in an effort to spare other LGB people like them from suffering is a testament to the power of the visibility and the invisibility of LGB people in country music. Herndon explains that the fear, shame, and isolation that kept him in the toxic closet made him believe that he was alone, but now, he understands that was certainly not the case. He reflects on the path that led him to where he is today, saying, “If I could have just known that all along, life would have been a lot different. But, if I’d known that all along, would I be sitting today hopefully being able to do something to change the next 10-year-old little boy’s life that’s sitting there being told he’s worthless and going to burn in hell forever?”

Wright and Herndon both came out well after their careers had peaked, which makes it difficult to discern with any great deal of certainty how their coming out directly impacted their careers. However, it is evident from their individual journeys that the effects of living in the toxic closet manifested in ways that undoubtedly impacted their careers during their prime. Wright came out publically in 2010 and notes that her albums sales decreased significantly, that she stopped receiving invitations to industry functions and events, and that she received personal attacks from fans. Neither her 2010 album nor her 2016 album charted on the country charts—

282 Willman
283 Ibid
284 Tuttle 70.
however, neither album was particularly radio-friendly, both leaning towards more traditional, folk-influenced styles. Herndon, who came out publically in 2014, released an album in 2016 that was filled with radio-friendly tracks, including the eponymous “House On Fire,” which details his struggles in the toxic closet and the homophobia he encountered in the church. The album debuted at number 42 on the Billboard Country Albums chart, but fell off the next week.²⁸⁵

Wright has not made many statements in recent years about her perception of the current state of country music for LGB individuals, although she has called for more artists to be outspoken about their support. In a 2016 interview, she said: “I know that there are some like-minded artists in country music. I know because I’ve talked to them privately. And I think their reticence in coming forward and not just saying I love all of my gay fans, I don’t judge, I love the sinner, hate the sin, that’s so 2010 [original emphasis].”²⁸⁶ Herndon, however, seems much more optimistic about where Nashville is headed, but acknowledges that there is still a lot of progress to be made:

I think you can be gay in Nashville and be behind the scenes — be a manager, be a stylist, be a cameraman, be a TV host — and you’re still scared shitless. Because it’s not traditionally been a town of huge support for the LGBT community. That’s changing. There are a lot of awesome people coming to town from different parts of the world, and I believe that Nashville is growing up. And if you’re not on that train of growing up, you’re gonna get left behind. Country music’s on the world stage now […] I have really high hopes that Nashville is ready for that.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Billboard chart history
He cites Musgrave’s hit “Follow Your Arrow” as both an indicator and a catalyst for the change he sees brewing in Nashville. He claims that when he heard that the song won Song of the Year at the 2014 CMA awards, he “welled up with tears” because “[t]here’s never been a song more affirmative of that in country music, and it’s our CMA Song of the year,” noting also that in that moment, “I felt so proud of my city. I hope that trend continues; I pray it does.”288 The song truly may be an indicator of the changes happening in Nashville. Musgraves co-wrote the song with Shane McAnally and Brandy Clark, who are both openly gay and two of Nashville’s hottest songwriters.

III. Shane McAnally, Brandy Clark and the Current State of Nashville

Shane McAnally believes that “[his] career really took off when [he] came out,” because, as he explains, “When I stopped hiding who I am, I started writing hits.”289 But despite his current success, he realizes that his career could have followed a similar trajectory to those of Wright and Herndon, had everything happened according to his initial plans.

McAnally, who was born and raised in a small city in north-central Texas, can’t recall a time when he didn’t want to be a country singer: “I used to just soak up anything country. The Nashville Network, that’s all I would watch as a kid.”290 Still in the closet, in 2000, he dropped out of school at the University of Texas and moved to Nashville, to pursue a career in country music. But unlike Wright and Herndon, his first album flopped. At the time, he “didn’t know who [he] was, but [he] blamed everyone else” for his album not succeeding; however, he now

290 Ibid
believes that this failure was serendipitous, as he explains: “The truth is, I probably would be
dead if I had become a star, because at that point I was so closeted and so afraid of people of
finding out I was gay. There was no telling what would have happened.”291

After his first attempt at country stardom failed, McAnally left Nashville for Los
Angeles, where he was able to come to terms with his sexuality in a more accepting environment
and come out of the closet. He then “moved back to Nashville in late 2007, to try his hand at
country songwriting — this time as an out gay man.” The same week he returned, LeAnn
Womack recorded “Last Call,” written by McAnally, and the “song was rapturously received by
critics and went to No. 3 on the country chart,” putting McAnally “back on the country map,” but
this time as a songwriter.292

McAnally acknowledges that anonymity is the key to being a successful songwriter,
because audiences need to feel that they are able to put themselves into a song without knowing
too much about the writer. However, he still believes that the country music industry is more
accepting than it ever has been, and is optimistic about the future for LGB people there: “Look,
Nashville is a boys’ club of redneck conservative ideas, but they’re ready to embrace gay people.
I never felt for one second that someone was judging me.”293 He admits that the atmosphere is
not quite as progressive as it may be in other parts of the country, noting that “some people are
like, ‘Oh, I love gay people’ in that ‘I have lots of black friends’ kind of way,” which he feels is
“awkward,” but he also believes that “you have to appreciate that they’re trying.”294

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291 Ibid
292 Ibid
293 Ibid
294 Ibid
that “there’s absolutely going to be an out gay country singer, sometime in the near future,”
going as far as to say that he “think[s] the labels might even be excited by the idea.”

McAnally made these statements in 2013, before Herndon publically came out as gay; however, this does not necessarily disprove McAnally’s theory, as many factors, including an already expired mainstream career, may have played a role in the less-than-stellar results of Herndon’s comeback efforts. While McAnally jokingly admits that he is disappointed that he will not be the first openly gay country artist, he feels that “Follow Your Arrow”—the song he co-wrote with Kacey Musgraves and fellow openly-gay songwriter Brandy Clark—may be the “bridge” that brings an openly gay country singer into the mainstream.

Brandy Clark’s path to Nashville differs from those taken by Wright, Herndon, and even McAnally in two significant ways. She hails from the Pacific Northwest, not the Bible Belt South, and she was already out of the closet when she arrived in Nashville. While I can only speculate on how her social environment may have differed from those raised in the Bible Belt, the manner in which she understands and articulates her sexuality indicates a high level of psychological adjustment, which is suggestive of having been able to fully integrate and develop her sexual identity in an environment without the “context of ignorance, prejudice, and often violence against same-sex sexuality” (Eccles, Sayegh, Fortenberry, & Zimet, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2005; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). Comparatively, individuals living in environments shaped by that context—like the Bible Belt—often experience poorer psychological adjustment and a less integrated sense of identity (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004). Wright, Herndon, and McAnally, who were raised in

295 Ibid
296 Ibid
such environments, have acknowledged their struggles to fully integrate their sexual identity—the result of living in the toxic closet—to varying degrees throughout their life.  

While Clark had already come to terms with her sexuality before she began her career, she nevertheless came to Nashville in 1998 with the perception that it may not be as accepting, as she admits that “the fact that she is a lesbian made her wary of how the country music community would welcome her and her music.” She began her career as a songwriter first, and after writing multiple number one singles and receiving myriad nominations and awards at industry awards shows—oftentimes alongside McAnally—she began pursuing a career as an independent artist in 2012. She released her debut album in 2013, which was well received critically but did not produce any singles with significant radio airplay. She did build up a substantial fan base, especially among fans of the country roots style, and her 2016 sophomore effort spawned a single that spent 21 weeks on the Billboard Hot Country chart, peaking at number 39. While Clark has not reached the level of mainstream success of her frequent collaborator Musgraves, Clark has a burgeoning career in the industry, admitting, “[i]t has pleasantly surprised [her] how [she has] been embraced” by the industry even though she is a lesbian. She elaborates: “I don’t feel like my sexuality has been the focus in a negative way at all. I’ve tried to make it not even the focus in a positive way because I’ve wanted it to be about the music. It feels so good that it doesn’t really matter. And I think the success of a song like ‘Follow Your Arrow’ really exemplifies that. And I think people underestimate the country music audience. I think I did.” In fact, she believes that people outside of the industry have

299 Billboard chart history
300 Thompson
placed more significance on her sexuality than people in Nashville, explaining that “[t]he only people who ask me about my sexuality are journalists -- whenever there's a story to write, it seems like a cool talking point. I've never had a label person say anything to me about it; I've never had a radio person ask me about it.” She likewise points out that straight artists are not asked nearly as many questions about their love lives, and that she believes that artists should not have to field those types of questions regardless of their sexuality. Clark’s nonchalance regarding her sexuality may be the result of being able to more fully integrate her identity than those who were brought up in less affirmative environments, or of a generally more affirmative environment on a national level due to generational attitudes, or of something else entirely. What is most significant about the way she handles her sexuality is how the country music community has responded to it, and what those responses reveal about the current state of queer acceptance in Nashville.

In November of 2014, as Clark’s career began its upswing, the country music blog Saving Country Music published an opinion piece titled “Why Brandy Clark Was The Best Candidate to Integrate Country Music,” penned by Trigger Coroneos. Analyzing the piece and the comments section reveals a variety of attitudes as well as some common themes regarding queerness in country music.

In the piece, Coroneos reflects on the general sense of ambivalence surrounding Clark’s sexuality:

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When the news began to slowly trickle out that songwriter turned performer Brandy Clark was in fact gay, it didn’t really cause the kind of stir you would assume this type of news might drum up in country music. Part of the reason is because you just sort of found out about it through osmosis. There wasn’t some big news story with a huge headline proclaiming “Brandy Clark Is Gay!” She didn’t call a press conference to officially come out of the closet. She never really was in the closet to begin with, and she wasn’t so well-known that she could be considered a household name where there may be an element of shock once the public found out.

Brandy Clark’s private matters seem to be an aside to her success, not a preface to it, and certainly not an element of adversity to it. She’s an acclaimed and awarded country music artist—that also happened to be gay. This isn’t a scandalous development, and it didn’t stimulate some debate over country music’s values. It was simply a side note that you said “huh” to when you heard about it and moved on, not really thinking about the fact much more, or allowing it to reflect negatively upon her music, or the music she’s written for others.

Saving Country Music caught on early from some buried mentions in interviews and such that Brandy Clark was gay, and that this information probably was not common knowledge to country music at large or even most of her fans who cherish her as one of country music’s best songwriters who’s actually finding some meaningful mainstream success. Immediately thoughts came to mind that this news was something that could be headline worthy and create a lot of attention. But that just didn’t seem to be appropriate for the way Brandy Clark had conducted herself about the issue. She just didn’t seem to think it mattered that much, and this is a similar stance to how most of country music has taken it.

Such passages seem to suggest that Coroneos supports an effort to normalize homosexuality.

However, the language and arguments in the passages that follow reveal a thin line between “normalizing” homosexuality and “flaunting” one’s sexuality, especially when considered in the context of the rural identity politics that shape country music:

This is in pretty stark contrast to how another openly-gay country star, Chely Wright, handled her situation. To begin with, Chely was in the closet during her heyday in country music in the mid 90’s, when she was releasing songs like “Shut Up and Drive” and “Single White Female.” Then in May of 2010, she made the big pronouncement she was gay while in the midst of releasing a new album and a new memoir. Chely made the rounds to all the major news outlets as country music’s first openly-gay star, and the whole thing seemed to be just as much about marketing as it was about Chely making a stand and bearing her soul. It looked like an artist with a dwindling career was searching for relevancy, and then almost immediately her claims of prejudice began to ring out when she wasn’t played on the radio, or represented at awards shows, even though that ship had sailed for Chely years before. No offense to Chely Wright. She decided to take
the more public route in addressing her sexuality, and that’s her right. But she was the one who decided to make it an issue by making such a big deal about it, not necessarily country music. Nearly a decade removed from the crest of her mainstream prominence, many didn’t even know who Chely Wright was. But they do now. She’s that gay country star.

The perception that Wright’s decision to publically come out was just as much of a marketing effort as it was an attempt at “making a stand and bearing her soul” is an arguably fair assessment. However, the remainder of Coroneos’s argument is more problematic. When Coroneos derides Wright for her decision to come out by purporting that she created the issue for herself, he is using language rife with coded sexual prejudice, thereby evidencing heterosexual privilege. As Barton explains, “the burden of change, of expressing or presenting a gay identity in a heterosexist culture, is all placed upon the gay person. Thus, the one experiencing the oppression is perceived as ‘causing’ any consequences that ensue.”

Likewise, Barton explains that, after one makes the decision to come out in a public fashion, they are often met with “a whole range of bizarre reactions, including an accusation that [they] are displaying the bad taste of ‘flaunting’ [their] homosexuality. This is both a double bind, and an illustration of the coming-out paradox. Being closeted constrains normal communication, but coming out is socially awkward and may be perceived negatively.”

Coroneos also does not consider the significance that Wright’s decision to come out publically may have had on other LGB individuals—again indicative of his heterosexual privilege. Rather, he implies that her decision to come out was unnecessary because, essentially, nobody cares. It is clear that his logic here is based on the assumption that the only people who would care are other homosexuals and that in the country music community, and the only opinions that matter are those of heterosexuals.

303 Barton 88
304 Ibid 109
because homosexuals do not exist there. This is a strikingly ironic conundrum, as Coroneos’s perception is the result of the perpetual silencing of homosexuals in the community like Wright.

In the next passage, Coroneos defensively incites the “us-versus-them” mentality that positions country music and its fans inherently in opposition to the “liberal elite”:

And of course when Musgraves and Clark were bestowed CMA Song of the Year awards for “Follow Your Arrow,” the leering, and left-leaning press who pay little to no attention to country music otherwise, seized on the opportunity to make a political show of the win, and to plaster Brandy Clark’s private sexual matters all across papers and the internet, as if it was some watershed moment for the stuffy and bigoted institution of country music. It played out similarly to what happened with The Dixie Chicks in the aftermath of their George W. Bush comments. Few were paying attention to The Dixie Chicks’ music outside of country before, but now the group was being played as bumper music on NPR, and in the coffee shop at the Borders bookstore. Meanwhile inside country music, very few people care if Brandy Clark is gay or not, including in some respects, Brandy Clark herself. That is why Saving Country Music has waited to broach the subject until it was such common knowledge, it was kind of an irrelevant issue. Yes, there is no doubt that if there was a bastion in the music world for bigoted fans, it probably would be country. But to the chagrin and wonder of some outside observers, Brandy Clark being gay is a big non issue.

While he is willing to draw a comparison between The Dixie Chicks and Clark, he does not acknowledge that the Chicks did, in fact, face significant backlash from the industry for speaking out against an assumed political value in the genre, and that the incident undeniably set a precedent for how non-conformists—especially female non-conformists—would presumably be treated by the industry and the audience. Likewise, even though he is willing to admit that country music is likely the “bastion in the music world for bigoted fans,” he is not willing to take the next logical step by admitting the relationship between that bigotry and homophobia; rather, he suggests that the “left-leaning” press is upset by the lack of backlash towards Clark’s sexuality, responding defensively as to suggest that the institution of country music is being persecuted by “liberal elites” instead of acknowledging the institution’s own history of being the persecutor and applauding the industry’s apparent step towards tolerance. Coroneos concludes
his piece by simultaneously praising Clark for not “flaunting” her sexuality and suggesting that her sexuality is entirely irrelevant:

That is why Brandy Clark was the perfect artist to integrate country music, because she’s not looking to make a big deal about it, or figure out a way to fall on the sword for some sort of martyrred glory or marketing ploy. She just wants to write and sing songs, and country fans just want to listen to them. She could have gone the Americana route where in theory she would be more openly accepted, but she didn’t have to. And sure, Brandy’s acceptance by country probably does give a greater opportunity to gay country performers in the future, but this process was happening naturally anyway, not to take away any credit Brandy deserves for gently nudging the country genre in that direction. An openly gay male performer is still, and has always been the big Rubicon that lays out there as a difficulty for country music to cross.

The fact that Brandy Clark is a songwriter who is returning substance to country music, the fact that she’s a performer who seems to have respect for the roots of the genre, and the fact that she is a woman, and that she’s penning big songs, and being put on big tours and singing for big audiences, and now is signed to a major label, these are the things that make Brandy’s contributions to country music exceptional and noteworthy, and something country music and the media beyond should be proud of, rally behind, and report on.

It is interesting that Coroneos is willing to acknowledge the significance of Clark’s gender but not her sexuality, especially considering the relationship between sexism and homophobia. His dismissive attitude towards the significance of Clark being openly homosexual in country music is reminiscent of “colorblind” arguments about race—which I will refer to as “queer-blindness,” for lack of a better term—wherein the dominant group (heterosexuals in this case) purports that by not “seeing” the marginalized aspects of an individual (homosexuality), they are freeing the marginalized individual from their oppression (homophobia). This logic equates oppression to acts of individual bigotry, which is blatantly ahistorical and ignorant of social facts. Ultimately, the “queer-blindness” mentality benefits the dominant group more than the marginalized group by allowing them to avoid confronting the relationship between their privilege as members of the dominant group and the subjugation of the marginalized group. It also allows the delegitimization of attempts at greater visibility by the marginalized group by rendering them as
unnecessary and nothing more than polarizing identity politics. Likewise, it misconstrues the intent behind LGB individuals’ desire for normalization (i.e. the removal of sexual stigma). For LGB individuals, normalizing their sexuality by approaching it with nonchalance is typically an effort to communicate that being gay is normal, and therefore does not need to be approached any differently than another individual’s heterosexuality.

Consider the comparison Clark makes between how journalists approach her homosexual love life relative to how they approach Musgraves’s heterosexual love life. The ultimate goal of normalization is not to suggest that their sexuality is insignificant, but rather for their sexuality to be insignificant when it is irrelevant, just as it is for their heterosexual peers. However, some heterosexuals (like Coroneos) interpret this ambivalence as an effort by the LGB individual to downplay her sexuality in order to communicate that she is normal despite being gay, and therefore her sexuality is both insignificant and irrelevant at all times. This eliding of sexuality relates back to the “queer-blindness” logic that not “seeing” homosexuality erases homophobia. But if the homosexual makes her sexuality visible, the heterosexual cannot pretend he does not see it, and, therefore, any subsequent homophobia is blamed on the homosexuals’ decision to “flaunt” their sexuality. This is clearly not the same as normalizing homosexuality, because, as Barton explains, “the language of ‘flaunting it’ when applied to gay relationships and gay expression serves as a ‘legitimizing ideology,’ a set of ideas that maintains the power of the dominant group. In this case, people who say ‘I just don’t like it when gay people flaunt their sexuality’ are wielding a discursive tool of oppression that silences gay people and reproduces the toxic closet.”305 In other words, heterosexuals are willing to tolerate homosexuality as long as the former are able to pretend that the latter does not exist. This is not to suggest, of course, that

305 Barton 109
individuals who share eliding attitudes should be labeled as “homophobes,” because the notion of “homophobia” is much too complex. Rather, such attitudes may be the result of an ingrained “prejudice habit,” which will be examined further in the next chapter.

The comments posted on Coroneos’ article by other users of the Saving Country Music blog reveals that “queer-blindness” is quite common. Examining such comments provide an interesting and insightful variety of attitudes regarding homosexuality in country music. Of the 49 total comments on the article, I selected eight comments that directly engaged with the topic of homosexuality in country music in a substantial manner. I italicized specific sections in each passage for emphasis. It is worth noting, however, that out of the 49 total comments, only one user posted a blatantly negative comment about Clark’s sexuality: user ‘brandy butch’ commented: “her album goes in the round bin,” to which user ‘Chris B’ replied “How does her being gay in any way change the experience of listening to the album?” but ‘brandy butch’ did not respond.

While overt expressions of sexual prejudice were largely absent in the comments section, the “queer-blindness” mentality towards “flaunting” ones sexuality was an unmistakable theme. User ‘Kevin Davis’ wrote:

As someone who is “traditional” on matters of sexuality, I still appreciate and enjoy Brandy Clark as an artist, and I will continue to do so as long as her artistry takes precedent. However, if her art gets absorbed as a mouthpiece for her social progressivism, then that is another matter. “Follow Your Arrow” comes close to that, perhaps, but it is an exception. My sense is that Brandy respects those who disagree with her, and most people will, likewise, respect her in turn.

This comment by ‘Kevin Davis’ is the most openly prejudiced of the comments examined herein, as he acknowledges his own negative feelings about homosexuality—although he does so

306 The entire comment thread is available at: http://www.savingcountrymusic.com/why-brandy-clark-was-the-best-candidate-to-integrate-country/#comments
under the euphemistic guise of being “traditional”—and admits that if Clark were to make her sexuality more visible, he would no longer enjoy her music. On the other hand, user ‘archenklos’ expresses his “queer-blindness” more tacitly, writing:

I think we’re nearing the point where entertainers’ sexual preferences just aren’t that big of a news story any more, particularly with the demographic that actually buys music. We’ve already crossed those barriers in other genres of music, and its happening in pro sports as well. I’m a 31 year old straight guy raised Catholic in conservative middle America, and Brandy Clark’s sexual orientation has almost zero affect on whether or not I will buy her music. I respect her a lot for how she’s handling this by letting her music be the focus, and not being in your face about her sexual preference. For the generation younger than me, I think it’s even less of an issue. Maybe there’s still a certain country music buying demographic that isn’t ready for this, but it’s not like country music is only being sold in tiny towns and down in the hollers – far from it. If we’re honest about who country music is actually sold and marketed to, its no surprise to me that an artist coming out isn’t a career ending move, especially for a female. I think the only real line left to be crossed is in the subject matter of the songs themselves. When Brandy Clark or another gay country artist releases a commercially successful album of love songs with people of their own gender clearly being the subject of their affection in the lyrics, then it would be newsworthy. I think we’re a long way from that point, particularly with male artists. Try taking it to the extreme – a gay male artist singing “bro country” style songs objectifying other men. That’s not going to be selling many albums any time soon. I certainly wouldn’t buy that.

In this comment, he acknowledges the shifting demographics of country music as being a catalyst for more tolerance for LGB individuals—a sentiment that is likewise shared by Herndon, McAnally, Musgraves, and Clark—but immediately establishes the limitations of that tolerance by suggesting that it becomes unacceptable as soon as it becomes visible.

User ‘JC Eldredge’ provides a similar outlook in regards to Wright’s decision to come out:

Chely Wright couldn’t have handled her coming out party any worse if she had tried. I don’t understand why, unless they need a career boost, celebs need to make it a major event. Just go about your business and live your life. Fans don’t need to know your sexual orientation. She made the whole thing even stranger by making a big deal out of “betraying” Brad Paisley, who had more than moved on and had never even mentioned it. I think Brandy is handling it wonderfully. Make no apologies or proclamations to get attention. Just be who you are and your fans will stay by your side.
User ‘Scotty J’ responds to ‘JC Eldredge’ in agreement, writing:

Chely Wright’s entire coming out thing came across as a desperate attempt to remain relevant in some way. Her career was pretty much over and hadn’t been all that great to start out with (one top ten hit) and she had been bouncing around labels most of which were small independents. So she made the play to be the ‘lesbian country singer’ and now her failures have a ready made excuse. I have absolutely zero issue with her or anyone else being gay or lesbian nor with them coming out publicly but her case was so blatant in it’s calculation.

Like Coroneos, both ‘JC Eldredge’ and ‘Scotty J’ are evidently looking at Wright’s situation through the lens of their heterosexual privilege, which user ‘Jonny’ points out:

I do think it is worth noting that, whilst Chely Wright did handle her coming out catastrophically, sounding horrendously bitter afterwards about not being invited to award shows despite the fact that her career was in freefall anyway, some artists can’t avoid coming out publicly given the (understandable) “straight until proven gay” mentality of most people. Clark is in the convenient position of being largely ignored by the mainstream media and as of yet not releasing any songs that explicitly reference same-sex relationships. An artist that is slightly more well established, or one that decides to release a song that sings about somebody with the same personal pronoun, however, may not be so fortunate, and will end up having to release a statement clarifying their sexuality. In other words, while I think applauding Clark’s complete nonchalance regarding the public’s perception of her sexuality is entirely called for, I hope any artist who has to come out under slightly more challenging circumstances, and thus in a slightly more formal way, is not lumped in the same category as Chely Wright, but instead also applauded for also handling their situation with honesty, openness and dignity.

Although ‘Jonny’ does not agree with how Wright chose to handle her specific situation, he still expresses an understanding of the double bind of coming out of the closet, and likewise acknowledges how the heteronormativity of the culture necessitates a public “coming out” for those in the spotlight, should they find themselves in that position. User ‘GregN’ contributes to the dialogue ‘Jonny’ introduces, writing:

1. Never heard of Chely Wright. I’ll accept the crowd’s wisdom that she did it for the publicity, but I also wonder if she did it for the kids? Which leads to: 2. The reason many people in ALL professions “come out” is not for the publicity or to save a flagging career, but to try and prevent the very real problem of kids committing suicide. See the CEO of Apple’s coming out statement for example. Everyone here is praising Clark, who’s album I purchased six months ago, for silence on the issue. I understand that
stance, but wonder if it’s enough just to be gay and not help others that DO face discrimination in their daily lives? Not everyone has to be a role model, I get that. But I still think “stars” can make a difference.

‘GregN’ illustrates an understanding of how significant visibility can be for those struggling with the negative effects of homophobia, and goes as far as to suggest that Clark’s ambivalent attitude about her sexuality renders her as invisible as it would if she were in the closet. Coroneos responds to ‘GregN’ under his username ‘Trigger,’ explaining:

I guess what I’m trying to say about Brandy is that she DID stand up for people who face discrimination, but she did it in such a savvy and respectful way that it was EFFECTIVE, instead of just symbolic, or coming across as spiteful. That is why she was the perfect woman for the job, because I don’t think she really did find a lot of discrimination in country music. Maybe she has received it in her personal life, but she’s simply let her work speak for itself, and that is something that even a lot of conservative people who may not be for gay marriage, etc., can still respect. And you see that even in the comments of this article. I have no idea if Brandy did this on purpose or accident. But it worked, and I think she deserves to be commended for that.

Coroneos frames Clark’s expression of her sexuality in a way that is similar to the “slow feminism” examined in Chapter 2. He suggests that Clark’s approach to her sexuality was effective because she managed to not alienate her potential audience, and therefore was able to expose members of a conservative fan base to an idea that they likely would have avoided otherwise. I agree with Coroneos’ argument here in that sense, which I will expand on in Chapter 4. However, his assertion that coming out as a “symbolic” gesture is not effective is problematic, as it not only ignores how powerful symbolism is—the entirety of this research is predicated on the power of symbolic annihilation—but it also ignores how effective symbolism can be for LGB individuals. Instead, he is privileging the heterosexual perspective and placing the burden of mitigating oppression on the oppressed rather than the oppressor.

Finally, two users address how gender factors into the acceptance of homosexuality. User ‘Brian’ writes:
I think people have a much easier time accepting a gay female. *I think an openly gay male in country will have a much harder time being accepted, if it all.* Society in general, especially the majority of country fans have always been much easier with the images of two females together, than the images of two males.

User ‘CraigR.’ echoes this sentiment, but from his own personal experience:

> I respect everything that has been posted *but as a gay man I am a little uncomfortable about the best way to come out.* One of the reasons I believe that she didn’t win best new artist- when she clearly is- is because she is openly gay. *I also think that coming out as a gay woman is a great deal more easy than a gay man.*

Both users acknowledge that gay men face a more difficult path toward acceptance, which was discussed in the previous section of this chapter. ‘CraigR.’, however, is quick to acknowledge the coming-out paradox, which subtly suggests that not only is there not a “best” way to come out, but if there were, it should not be determined by the discretion of heterosexuals. Likewise, as the only commenter to announce his own homosexuality, it is significant that he believes that Clark was, in fact, discriminated against based on her sexuality. This suggests that the other commenters do not believe that Clark has been the victim of any sort of sexual prejudice because of their heterosexual privilege and “queer-blind” mentality, while ‘CraigR’ has experienced sexual prejudice first hand, and, therefore, believes that prejudice is still prevalent even when it is not overt.

The comments left by the blog’s users offer insight into a small sample of country music fans and provide some sense of attitudes about homosexuality in the industry. Although heterosexual fans believe that they are more tolerant of homosexuality than audiences in the past, their “tolerance” has limits and stipulations. Likewise, it seems that they believe homosexuals face less sexual prejudice than homosexuals believe they do. However, LGB representations in country music are not for the primary benefit of heterosexual fans, nor can heterosexual fans fully comprehend the social atmosphere that LGB individuals in the Bible Belt and the country
music industry must navigate. Therefore, the next chapter focuses on the voices of various LGBT individuals who have lived or currently live in the Bible Belt to determine how they perceive the atmosphere in their own communities and in the country music industry and community. It also examines how their perceptions align with those presented in this chapter, and what this reveals about the status of LGB visibility in country music today and in the future.
CHAPTER 4: PRIMARY RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

I. Survey Methodology and Design

The secondary information analyzed in the previous chapters provides a foundation for exploring the potential impact of queer symbolic annihilation in country music. However, no research on this particularly nuanced subject currently exists; hence order to obtain a more accurate reflection of how LGB people in the Bible Belt feel about representation, they must be given an opportunity to share their experiences and opinions and, additionally, be able to do so in a safe manner. To that end, I created an anonymous, online questionnaire to collect data from LGB individuals who currently live or have previously lived in the Bible Belt. The survey concerned their experiences in the region, their perception of the region, their perception of southern/rural LGB visibility in the media, their perception of country music, and their opinions on having (or not having) representation in country music. To acquire both quantitative and qualitative data, a combination of question designs was used, including single-option multiple choice, multiple-option multiple choice, and open-ended responses. In order to ensure a representative respondent pool, the first two questions on the survey determined qualification. If the respondent indicated having never lived in the Bible Belt or identified as heterosexual, they were automatically disqualified from continuing the survey.

Following the basic demographic questions, respondents were presented with three sets of questions regarding their perception of and experiences in the region. Questions about their perception of the Bible Belt at large were followed by questions about their personal
experiences. These questions were intended to test Barton’s theories of compulsory Christianity and the Bible Belt panopticon as well as the overall cultural values system of the region. The first set of questions did not explicitly address religion in order to avoid association bias, while the second set of questions specifically addressed religion. Neither set explicitly addressed sexuality. The third set of questions addressed their experiences in the region as specifically related to their sexuality but did not address religion. Next, respondents were presented with a set of questions regarding the visibility, types, and impact of LGBTQ representations in the media—with no reference to country music—to determine attitudes regarding representation. Questions about overall LGBTQ representations were presented first, followed by questions about specifically southern or rural representations. Questions about the potential impact of media representations came last. The next set of questions addressed country music specifically. These questions were intended to gauge perceptions of the country music values system—particularly if the genre is compatible with non-heterosexual identities—as well as to determine if respondents find the music relatable, and likewise, if an openly-LGBTQ country artist would be significant. The last set of questions was optional and allowed respondents to express any closing thoughts if desired.

The survey was open for three days, during which over 100 individuals responded. After the survey was closed, I reviewed the responses by completion rate, and removed any that were less than 75 percent completed. Most removed had not progressed beyond the first page. This left 75 surveys to analyze. Of the remaining surveys, 61 were entirely complete, and 14 were at least 75 percent complete. Because some surveys were not completed and some questions on the survey were optional, the number of responses given for a respective question will be detailed when the data is presented. As with any questionnaire, there were potential biases in the methodology and survey design, an examination of which is available in Appendix B(iv).
II. Data and Findings

i. Demographic Distribution of Respondents and Individual Highlights

A complete breakdown of the demographic distribution of the respondents can be found in Appendix B(i); however, the following tables provide a general overview of the respondent pool analyzed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1: Age Distribution</th>
<th>Table 4.2: Gender Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(75 Reported)</td>
<td>(75 Reported)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24 37.33%</td>
<td>Male 29.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34 53.33%</td>
<td>Female 62.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44 6.67%</td>
<td>Non-binary/ 4.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54 2.67%</td>
<td>Non-conforming 4.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genderfluid 4.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3: Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Table 4.4: Residence During</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(75 Reported)</td>
<td>“Formative” Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual</td>
<td>(75 Reported)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.00%</td>
<td>Urban 9.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Suburban/Exurban 67.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.67%</td>
<td>Rural 20.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Other 4.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.67%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.4 indicate that the majority of respondents are between 18-35 years old, are female, and do not hail from urban environments—which is representative of the primary demographics of country music listeners as well. While the aggregate demographic data suggests a relatively homogenous respondent pool, examining data from individual respondents actually reveals a significant variety of experiences and perceptions, even among respondents within similar demographic groups. Therefore, I have selected four individuals that are representative of the demographics of the overall respondent pool as well as the diversity amongst those groups. These individuals provide a more complete sense of the various people surveyed and highlight how individuals rationalized their responses. They also help to contextualize the findings of the combined data that will be presented in the following sections. Each individual response reveals how different experiences can shape how someone approaches the idea of media representations; likewise, each response demonstrates how the aggregate data suggests collectively similar sentiments among the respondents, despite individual differences and unique experiences.

Respondent 52 is a 25-35 year old pansexual female who spent the majority of her life in the small community of Emerald Isle, North Carolina, before moving to California. She was raised in a conservative Pentecostal church but no longer identifies as a Christian due to her negative experiences with the church. As she recalls, “I was prayed for and had hands laid on me in attempts to cure me. I heard that stupid verse from Leviticus [18:22] constantly and to this day my mother posts it on Facebook from time to time.” When asked about her experiences in the Bible Belt as an LGBTQ individual, she wrote:

As a queer child I felt I had no one to talk to and I was generally confused. I didn't understand what I was feeling as I didn't have any examples or access to anything related to a queer experience. I received heteronormative abstinence only education and I knew young women in high school who had illegal back alley abortions because they couldn't
tell their parents nor carry a baby to term. I was punished - physically - by my father for "dating" another woman in high school. I was so lost I resorted to self harm and developed an eating disorder. The pressure to conform and the literal punishment for being different was grueling. And I'm just a cis white woman.

Here, she addresses having experienced sexuality policing—the pressure to conform and the consequences that resulted from not conforming—within Bible Belt communities, as well as the negative psychological effects (self-harm, disordered eating) of living in a toxic environment. Since leaving North Carolina for California, she has become more cognizant of how attitudes regarding gender and sexuality are shaped by regional contexts:

It's funny looking back now that I live in the most liberal place in the country where no one cares at all. In the South I heard a lot of "you're too pretty to be gay," which is funny because I'm not "gay." Sexuality is complex! My partner I'm with now and I visited Raleigh back in 2015. We couldn't go to Emerald Isle because of my parents, of course. We were harassed basically non stop on the street and were afraid to kiss in public. In 2015.

The comments she received from people in the South regarding the juxtaposition of her gender presentation and her sexuality are indicative of two pervasive notions that continue to shape sexual attitudes in the Bible Belt, namely that homosexuality is related to gender inversion and an inability (or unwillingness) to distinguish between non-heterosexual sexualities. Likewise, the fact that she still experienced harassment in Raleigh indicates the cultural context of the Bible Belt can permeate urban environments. As for media visibility for LGBTQ southerners, she feels that “any representation is something we must latch on to in the LGBTQ community…but there aren't many in the South. Wouldn't you love a show that depicts the struggle of a small town individual coming out and confronting her bullies?” She recalls how the lack of LGBTQ representations available to her while she was growing up impacted her, explaining, “I was led to believe I was crazy. There was something wrong with me. Obviously things are better today, but more representation is always important. Even now as an adult I would love to see any
depictions of queer people in the South.” However, despite her negative experiences in the Bible Belt, she still believes it is possible for an LGB individual to be a successful country artists—as long as they conformed to gender expectations and do not “flaunt” their sexuality. But regardless of these stipulations, she believes an openly gay country artist would be incredibly beneficial for LGB individuals in the Bible Belt, including herself. She explains: “Not only would I listen to them constantly, they'd be a great representation for queer Southerners and they'd probably help less progressive Southerners have a better understanding of the community. Something as silly as liking a gay artist can lay groundwork.”

Respondent 70 is an 18-24 year old lesbian who was raised in a suburban South Carolina town but has since relocated to Austin, Texas, which she describes as “an exception” to the rest of the Bible Belt as it is “extremely liberal.” By contrast, she characterizes “every other inch of the South” as “obnoxiously Christian, to the point of suffocation.” However, the Christian atmosphere was doubly stifling for her because she never identified as a Christian, and she recalls that “[g]rowing up in small town SC, not willing to go to church and being a closeted lesbian was exhausting.” Nevertheless, the heteronormative environment and the lack of LGBTQ representations made it difficult for her to fully realize her own sexuality: “I just remember being so bored with my boyfriends and wondering why I wasn't happy to just have a boy's attention like my friends were. It took a couple years being out of my parents' house and in college to unlearn what the southern culture had taught me I needed to be.” She explains that she did not come out as a lesbian until she was twenty years old because “I just had an odd mindset growing up that I wasn't 'allowed' to be gay. I knew my family didn't like gay people so I figured it would be a huge kerfuffle if I was.” However, her family actually accepted her with relative ease, and ultimately “[t]he worst casualty of my coming out was that my very religious best friend refused
to acknowledge me being gay and that ended our friendship.” Like Respondent 52, Respondent 70 also experienced harassment in the Bible Belt, and recognizes how gender factored in to it:

I've been spit on, pushed off a sidewalk onto a busy street, called a faggot by a stranger in public umpteen times. At my previous apartment, one of my neighbors routinely put 'Get Saved' flyers on my windshield. I've noticed there are two main groups in the South who despise us lesbians. There are good ole boys who can't stand the thought of any girl not wanting them, and deeply religious southern women. Both are frightening, but men are violent and the worst encounters I've had. The women tend to be dramatic and the ludicrousness of their concern is funny at times. I used to work at a craft store in SC and after I cut my hair I got a lot more questions. I had a few ladies specifically ask me if I like women while I was ringing up their items and then scowl and leave me those little pocket bibles.

However, she admits that “it isn’t always bad,” and recounts a positive experience she had while working at the craft store: “[a female customer] was telling me about her projects and then outright asked ‘Do you date men?’ And I smiled and said ‘No ma'am’ and gave her her change. I was expecting the usual but she squinted and pointed at me and said ‘I'm going to bring my daughter up here. You should meet her[,] she's pretty.’” But even with her mix of positive and negative experiences, she still retains the looming sense of fear resultant of the policing of gender and sexuality:

I tell my fiancé all the time there are public places we walk into that I can feel the air change. She's very feminine and people don't assume she's in a relationship with a woman upon seeing her. I'm fairly more obvious and people notice. Everywhere I go I have a subconscious barometer that activates and I try to assess the likelihood we'll have any issues. After being harassed and having slurs and bible references thrown at me so often in SC, I've learned to steer clear of places that's likely to occur. I'm stubborn enough to refuse to hide who I am, but not dumb enough to seek out trouble. People in the Bible Belt are mostly Christian and mostly conservative, but individually they have different ways of forcing it on people who are different.

Even though she has experienced significant discrimination in the South, Respondent 70 also believes that there will eventually be an openly gay country artist. But she, too, acknowledges the limitations and gender implications of such success: “I think a time will come [when] a female country artist will be able to sing about another woman and it be wildly successful. It'll
probably take longer for a man to be able to do it without ending his career, solely because, again, they're all obsessed with what they think being a man is.” Here, she acknowledges again how homophobia and misogyny are connected, and how deeply hegemonic gender norms are ingrained into Bible Belt culture.

Respondent 21 is a 25-34 year old lesbian from a large suburb outside of Atlanta, Georgia, whose coming out experience was generally positive due to her proximity to a major metropolitan area. However, she acknowledges that not everyone is as fortunate. She did not feel that Christianity was as prevalent in the culture of the area she lives in. She was not raised in a Christian church, but she attributes that to the religious and social diversity of the area in which she resides. She also believes that experiences in the region are much different as one becomes further removed from the city, and she discloses having witnessed homophobic actions or sentiments motivated by Christian beliefs. While she did not provide much detail regarding her experiences as openly gay in the Bible Belt, she communicated strong feelings about relatable LGB representation in the media, particularly in country music. She remains unsure if relatable representation would have helped her during her coming out process because she “grew up when just the mention of being gay on TV was something exciting to latch onto.” But she does feel that “[t]he media portray every LGBTQ stereotype in the book. It would be nice to see a broader representation -- say, a southern conservative gay person like myself.” Respondent 21 also considers herself an avid country music fan; she believes the music “describes my life/home. It’s clean and relatable.” While she states that she does not believe the genre is associated with a particular political ideology, she does indirectly suggest that it is a conservative genre. In her response about whether an LGB country artist would be beneficial for LGB individuals in the Bible Belt, she states that it would be beneficial: “We need more representation. We don't all live
in cities and lean left.” Likewise, while she did not personally report experiencing significant prejudice regarding her sexuality, she acknowledges that this is not the case for every LGB person in the region, and she feels that an LGB country artist would be a step toward creating a “wider range of LGBTQ people” in the media, and that a broader scope of representation would subsequently help “conservative/southern/rural viewers” feel that they have “more in common” with LGB people than they may currently believe that they do. She thinks there will be an openly gay country artist in the future because “‘country’ people are more open-minded than people like to think” and “there are also so many proud southern LGBTQ people.” Based on her personal identification as a “conservative” southern lesbian, she does not see these identities as being incompatible.

Respondent 14 is an 18-24 year old gay male from Tupelo, Mississippi, who currently resides in Oxford, Mississippi. He is a student at the University of Mississippi. His personal experiences starkly contrast those shared by Respondent 21, yet both respondents convey a deep attachment to their home region and a love for country music that stems from that association—a prime example of how vastly different experiences among individual respondents still resulted in a collectively similar outcome. Respondent 14 wrote that when he came out as gay, he was kicked out of his home, and that “[f]or the longest time in college, I lived a double life because I was scared to experience what I experienced in high school.” He feels that the Bible Belt is “full of hospitable people until you begin to challenge their beliefs,” and “[t]he majority [of people], [but] not all, are stuck in their ways and have no intentions of changing them.” In spite of this, he reflects fondly on the region, saying, “Honestly, I love it here. The Bible Belt challenges you in every way possible. I believe that I am the way I am because of the areas I have lived in. I am ready to go, but I want to come back and continue to fight the fight towards equality for all.”
Because he feels that the Bible Belt is a culturally unique region, he does believe that LGB individuals in this area would benefit from seeing their specific experiences presented in the media. While he appreciates the people who are currently producing LGB media and the representations that they do provide, he explains, “I do not think they understand the challenges that we face here. I am not trying to discredit their challenges but most of them probably lived in areas that were less religious and close minded than those that we lived in.” Likewise, if he had access to more relatable and resonate representations, he writes, “I think that I would have come out sooner, or maybe even had a better way of accepting myself and presenting it to my family and friends.” As for country music, he, too, considers himself an avid fan of the genre. He explains that because he lives in the South, the lyrics “resonate a little b[i]t more with me.” He also believes that country music is “changing with the times[,] especially new country and it gives me a sense of hope.” He cites Kasey Musgraves’s song “Follow Your Arrow” specifically, describing it as “a very progressive song.” He sees this song as an indicator that “country music is evolving.” Therefore, a gay person could be a successful country artist, speculating that “[t]hey may not be able to use terminology associated with LGBTQ+ individuals but they could be open.”

Like these four respondents, each individual that participated in this survey provides a unique set of perceptions and experiences that nevertheless relate many common attitudes, especially about media representation and visibility in country music. However, examining the feedback provided by each individual respondent is simply not feasible here; therefore, in order to keep individual contexts as in tact as possible while examining the aggregate data, quantitative data will be presented alongside direct quotes from various individual respondents.
iii. Aggregate Findings and Analysis

As noted in Section I, respondents were presented with three sets of questions intended to test the notion of a Bible Belt cultural values system (including compulsory Christianity and the Bible Belt panopticon), a country music values system, and a relationship between the two as argued previously in this thesis. The data from these questions confirms each argument, and is available in Appendix B(ii-iii). The most significant data gathered from the questionnaire for this research, however, concerns queer media representations and visibility in country music. Respondents were first assessed on their feelings about LGBT media representations broadly, and were asked if they believed enough positive or relatable queer representations currently exist in the media. Out of 69 responses, 66.67 percent do not believe there are, 24.64 percent do believe there are, and 8.70 percent reported that they were not sure. Respondents were then asked if they believe there are enough positive or relatable media representations of rural or southern LGBTQ people; again, out of 69 responses, 91.30 percent reported “no” and 8.70 percent reported that they were not sure—no “yes” responses were recorded. Next, they were asked if relatable media representations are beneficial in a broad sense. Out of 67 respondents, 86.56 percent reported “yes,” 11.94 percent reported they were “not sure”, and 1.49 percent reported “no.” This was followed by a question asking respondents if they agree or disagree with the suggestion that LGBTQ media representations tend to be “urban-centric.” Out of 58 responses, 93.10 percent agreed. Respondents were then asked if relatable representations of rural or southern LGBTQ people would have helped them personally, and given an open-ended response form to elaborate on why or why not. Out of 68 respondents, 69.11 percent reported “yes,” 19.11 percent reported “not sure,” and 11.76 percent reported “no.” The purpose of designing this question as an open-ended response was to gain more insight into how the respondent’s
personally interact with media representations through their explanations. Unfortunately, only one respondent who reported being unsure elaborated in their response, reasoning that they were not sure if it would have been beneficial for them simply because they still would have been living in a hostile environment. Those who reported that it would not have benefitted them generally shared this same reasoning—that their communities or families would have still been unreceptive or antagonistic—although one individual cited being in the military during Don’t Ask Don’t Tell as a reason. Another simply stated that they do not base their life on what they see in the media.

Those who reported that media representations would have benefitted them, however, provided a breadth of reasons. Not identifying with the common LGBTQ representations was the most common sentiment, particularly relative to reconciling two seemingly incompatible identities. According to Respondent 73, “[M]ost gay characters in media are of flamboyant, feminine gay men or butch gay women who are affluent. The affluence and the non traditional [sic] gender roles don't represent rural and therefore most of southern America. However it also shows how gays often end up in large urban areas because it is safer to act in ways that LGBTQ [sic] individuals are portrayed in media.” For this respondent, having southern or rural LGBTQ representation would be beneficial because “it shows that you don't have to be affluent or go to gay clubs or like fashion to be gay. You can be gay and be a farmer or blue-collar worker. It would also show people that gay people can still be part of the family when they aren't rich and urban.” Respondent 57 believes that “we need more Southern role models for Southern queer people to identify with” because it is “harder to identify with someone who lives a life very different from your own.” She feels that “it would've been nice to see…more Southern representation so I could better understand my place and the ubiquity of queerness without
having to dig as deep as I did into my city.” For both of these respondents, the types of queer identities they were exposed to in the media simply did not resonate with them, and this caused them to struggle to find where or how they could belong in both their physical communities and the LGBTQ community.

Respondent 66 offers a similar attitude regarding stereotypical representations, explaining that “people want to see representations or role models growing up. RuPauls drag race [sic] is great but does every gay little boy aspire to do drag? Probably not.” He elaborates, citing his own difficulties with forming his sense of self: “[I] never had a ‘hero’ growing up. I never had a set goal about who [I] wanted to be or what [I] was going to do like other kids. I literally felt like the future did not exist because [I] had no idea what [I] could do.” This is indicative of the notion that media representations essentially provide individuals a guide on how to be a person, and when particular representations do not exist, these groups are deprived of that guide. Respondent 12 echoes this sentiment, writing, “I imagine it must be hard for a rural queer person to envision a life in their hometown based on current representation.” Respondent 39 agrees, stating that as long as it does not perpetuate the aforementioned stereotypes, relatable media representation “shows people who live in rural communities that there are other options out there.” Respondent 35 brings together all of these attitudes regarding stereotypes and the benefit of relatable representations in her responses. As she explains, “[g]rowing up, I thought I would have to relocate to live openly because the amount of hypocrisy in the South is staggering. People focus on religious appearances more than they care about values. I feel media representation of queer Southern people would’ve helped me more quickly reconcile what I loved about my childhood to my present self.” She elaborates, writing, “I think it could go a long way in helping rural people understand that queer people can be anyone without being forcibly squeezed into an urban
stereotype,” which she feels is important because, despite their invisibility in the media, “[t]here are definitely queer people in rural areas. My cousin recently came out of closet at 45, and is in a happy marriage. She's still a self-professed ‘redneck’ who hunts and cuts up deer, votes Republican and is a Trump supporter, and is a fiercely protective mother to her Southern Belle daughter. I don't see people like her represented.” She concludes by stating that “[q]ueer people can be anyone. Not everyone can be gay, but any type of a person can be. People need to see diversity on screen and feel validated that they're not alone in being a rural or Southern queer.”

Respondent 35 also touched on the second most common sentiment expressed by respondents: how relatable representation could help assuage feelings of being alone or ostracized, or keep them from believing that other gay people do not exist in their community. Respondent 49 believes that having relatable representations would benefit him “because [I] could base my perceptions and experiences off these characters and [I] wouldn’t feel as ostracized. [I]n southern communities you don’t talk about being gay so the likelihood of having gay friends (that you know of during the formative years) is slim.” Respondent 59 elaborates further, writing, “[p]eople like me exist (obviously, or you wouldn't be running a survey on us). But when we never see anyone who looks like us, we think we're alone. That keeps people in the closet (case in point), which creates a vicious cycle of no one coming out, because no one believes we actually exist in the South.” She goes on to add that LGBTQ individuals in the Bible Belt “face far more opposition on a day-to-day basis, and with less media representation, that's not going to change any time soon.” According to Respondent 47, “[m]any Southern LGBT people feel very isolated,” and, therefore, “[h]aving media representation will help them see that there are others like them out there, who can ‘make it big,’” which again relates back to the idea of media representations as guides for what is possible in one’s life. Some respondents tied
media representations to making them feel less alone or to helping them better understand their sexuality and, therefore, assuaging fears about coming out of the closet. Respondent 68 explains, “I think I would have been more encouraged to come out sooner. Religion in the [S]outh is no joke and it can definitely be scary for an lgbtq [sic] person to feel comfortable and confident enough to come out in an area where they could easily be rejected.” She also notes that she did not realize she was gay until she was seventeen years old, “after seeing a show [that] revolved around the story of two girls who fall in love. Had I seen something like that earlier, I may have realized that I was gay a lot sooner. And seeing positive rural/southern lgbtq [sic] people would have helped even more.” Respondent 48 agrees, stating, “I think it would help with people accepting themselves if they saw more people from their way of life coming out.”

One vehicle for representing people who share “their way of life” is country music, of course, and out of 61 respondents, 65.57 percent reported that they listen to country music, although only 24.59 percent identify it as one of their favorite genres. More respondents indicate that they find the music relatable or that it reminds them of home than not; however, respondents were not directly asked if they found the genre relatable, and thus only a small number of responses explicitly mention relatability at all. Individual explanations as to why one does or does not enjoy the genre varied greatly. Very few of the 53 respondents provided similar answers to one another, but the most commonly repeated attitudes were: disliking the perpetual use of clichés and stereotypes (10 respondents), liking that it is “fun” and “catchy” (7 respondents), liking the stories the music tells (5 respondents), disliking that it is “boring” (4 respondents), and disliking the “twangy” sound (4 respondents).

Many respondents provided both a positive and a negative assessment of the genre. For instance, Respondent 73 feels that “[i]t can often be a bit repetitive and focus on drinking and
things that I don't related [sic] to,” but he likes “that it tells good stories” and could “also show love in more rural ways” than pop music does. Respondent 70 likes that “[i]t's catchy, nostalgic, and fun to sing to,” but thinks “[t]he lack of originality and rampant sexism gets really old”; Respondent 56 “love[s] the romance and patriotism,” but also feels that “it is very heterosexual and excludes a majority of the population in its music.” The way respondents characterized their association with country music and “home” revealed another interesting juxtaposition of positive and negative assessments. According to Respondent 52, “Mostly it feels like home. And it goes back to waxing poetic about the good things about the South. Some days I just miss being hot, drinking sweat tea, and rolling up to the beach.” Respondent 20 writes that the music “describes my life/home. It's clean and relatable.” For Respondents 24 and 57, they enjoy the “sense of familiarity it provides” and “the nostalgia it inspires in me,” respectively. While Respondent 60 considers herself a fan of country music, she notes that it is “one of the only radio stations I can get where I live that's not news, sports, or rap,” suggesting that perhaps she enjoys the genre (in part) due to its prevalence in the culture of her community. Respondent 55 concurs with such a suggestion, as she rationalizes her reluctant enjoyment of the genre by explaining that “[y]ou can't escape it so you learn to like it.” Respondent 9 offers a similar explanation, writing, “I just got used to it. It's the only type of music my golf team in college listened to on trips to tournaments. After being subjected to it for that long you just get kind of used to it.” That respondents across a range of attitudes acknowledge an association between their communities and country music is indicative of just how pervasive the genre is in the culture of the Bible Belt. It likewise suggests that individuals in such communities are exposed to this media whether they seek it out or not.
Respondents were asked if they knew of any openly gay country music artists, and if so, to name the artist(s). Out of 61 responses, 63.93 percent reported that they do not, and of the 36.07 percent that indicated that they do (22 respondents), ten named Chely Wright, three named Steve Grand, two named Billy Gillman, two named Brandy Clark, and one named Ty Herndon. Four respondents reported that they knew of a gay country artist but could not remember the artist’s name. As Respondent 21 writes, “Honestly can't remember her name-- I guess that's pretty telling.”

Next, respondents were asked if they believed an openly gay country artist could have a successful career at this moment in time. Out of 61 responses, 37.70 percent do not believe so, 37.70 percent are not sure, and 24.59 percent think it is possible. While the respondents do not seem to feel that Nashville is ready for an openly LGB artist quite yet, their outlook on the future is more optimistic. Out of 61 responses, 60.65 percent believe an openly gay country artist can have a successful career in the future, 31.14 percent reported that they are not sure but are generally hopeful, and only 8.19 percent do not feel it will be a possibility. Most respondents who indicated they do believe it is possible or that they are hopeful it will happen attribute any forthcoming changes to the changing social attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals throughout the nation. Respondent 65, for example, believes that “people's views are changing. Everywhere else in the U.S has seemed to adapt and we're usually the last ones.” While the majority of respondents echoed Respondent 65 in her belief that the culture of the Bible Belt and country music, although conservative, will ultimately concede to larger societal changes, the handful of

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307 I was unfamiliar with Steve Grand before reviewing the results of this questionnaire. Upon further research, I learned that he is a singer-songwriter with an online presence who released a video for his country-style song, “All-American Boy,” which features the singer lusting after a straight male friend. The video subsequently went viral for being the “first” gay country song. However, Grand does not necessarily consider himself a country artist, neither is his music on country radio.
respondents who do not see a future for an openly gay individual in country music feel that the culture is simply impermeable to change. As Respondent 75 writes, “I think country music is the epitome of southern culture, and I don't see southern culture changing any time soon.”

When asked if an openly gay country music artist would be beneficial for LGBTQ individuals living in the Bible Belt, 87.93 percent of 58 respondents answered yes, 6.89 percent are not sure, and 5.17 percent do not think so. Out of the 51 respondents who believe it would be beneficial, 33.33 percent indicated that it would help normalize queerness, 27.45 percent believe it would help combat stereotypes, 11.76 percent think it would help LGBTQ individuals in these communities not feel alone/ know others exist and/or feel included, and 9.80 percent feel that it would help struggling LGBTQ people know that it is okay to be gay or that being gay is not bad.

Respondents discussed the impact of these potential benefits in two ways: how it would help queer people in the Bible Belt reconcile their own identities and how it would help a traditionally hostile community become more accepting of their queer neighbors. Respondent 68 believes that an openly gay country artist would give Bible Belt gays an opportunity to “see positive/relatable representation in an arena where they are very often left out.” Respondent 6 concurred, conveying that “[g]rowing up with country and then not being able to identify with it once you realize your sexuality is VERY jarring.” Respondent 69 reasoned that “[p]eople relate to things like them so when rural people don't see rural LGBTQ people it is foreign to them,” and while she does not specify whether she is referring to queer people or not, the notion is applicable to both groups. Similarly, as Respondent 15 writes, “[s]outhern lgbtq people don't have many places to turn. They feel alone and scared of being disowned by their own family at times. Representation in media would be huge for lgbtq people to see that they're not alone and that they have support. It would also give straight southern people a chance to become more
exposed to LGBTQ issues and better educate them on those [sic].” The idea that queer invisibility perpetuates ignorance is frequently alluded to by those who addressed how an openly gay country artist may help reduce prejudice in Bible Belt communities. Respondent 68 suggests that “it would allow for a better open platform for educating those who know nothing about LGBTQ people and their experiences. Not only would it allow LGBTQ people to see accurate representation, but would also facilitate discussion about the topic among southerners in general [sic].” Respondent 60 believes that “in places where people don't think they know anybody who is LGBTQ (even though they probably do) media portrayals have the opportunity to provide positive examples.”

Regarding how the heterosexual population would respond to an openly gay country artist, many respondents addressed the parameters of acceptability. Significantly, both those who are optimistic about the future and benefits of LGB visibility in Nashville and those who do not believe it is possible acknowledged these boundaries. For example, Respondent 30 does not believe that an openly gay country artist could be successful in the future because “the conservative people in those areas are pretty set in their ways, nothing will change that.” He fears that type of queer visibility could actually be counterintuitive, depending on its presentation: “If the conservative people felt like it was being forced on them, they likely would have lashed out at local LGBTQ.” Similarly, Respondent 24 thinks that the possibility of an openly gay country artist is territory for careful treading, and it “would take the right person to break through that barrier”; Respondent 55 agrees, writing, “I think it might be possible one day as long as they adhered to the other identities: white, middle-class, cisgender and performed gender in normative ways, Christian, republican.” Respondents 57 and 74 suggest that the hypothetical gay country artist would conform to the authenticity template in these ways, writing that “[a]n LGBTQ
country artist would have a similar normalizing affect as a daytime TV star like Ellen- serving something unfamiliar on a very familiar plate would make it much more palatable to country fans,” and that “[i]t's easier for people to digest when it's presented on their own terms.” Both respondents assert here that appealing to the valuation of conformity and familiarity is essential to communicating with members of Bible Belt communities.

### iv. Discussion

Respondents expressed conformity and familiarity as a desire for themselves (i.e. wanting to fit in, wanting to be understood as normal, etc.) and as a strategy for appealing to/navigating through a potentially homophobic community (i.e. combating community members’ fear of difference by assuring them that gay people are actually familiar members of their community). Respondents felt that visibility in the media could help other Bible Belt queers not feel alone and could help initiate conversations with straight members of the community by exposing them to, and subsequently educating them about, their gay friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors. Essentially, respondents attributed the continued invisibility of gays in the Bible Belt as a major factor in the perpetuation of prejudice in their communities. Herek (2015) confirms that compared to heterosexuals without contact, those who simply know a gay or lesbian individual do have more accepting attitudes toward sexual minorities in general. Likewise, heterosexuals who have personal contact with a gay or lesbian individual, especially if it is a close friend or relative, appears to be a particularly powerful motivator to rid oneself of sexual prejudice because it interferes with the important goal of maintaining the relationship. Personal contact is particularly powerful because it can also be a source of prejudice-reduction skills, as a heterosexual individual is likely to perceive lesbian, gay, and bisexual people as a homogeneous
group and more as unique individuals and such altered perceptions can counteract negative stereotypes. However, personal contact can only occur to the extent that the culture permits it, and, as many respondents’ indicated when recalling their coming out experiences, it is still widely impermissible in Bible Belt culture. Nevertheless, visibility in the media is a step towards personal contact since simply knowing a gay person has the potential to motivate an individual to become less prejudiced. And, as long as the representation remains within the parameters of acceptability by conforming to the value systems as closely as possible, the representation can also help counteract negative stereotypes about homosexuals that fuel prejudice.

Respondents also acknowledged that as norms and values change on a national level, those same changes will begin to infiltrate Bible Belt communities and community members will likely concede to these shifts out of necessity. This is consistent with Herek’s view of sexual prejudice as a value-expressive function. He posits that sexual prejudice can serve a social-expressive function among heterosexual people with a strong need for social acceptance if social norms encourage hostility toward sexual minorities. However, if norms change and groups that are important to the individual come to condemn sexual prejudice, expressing those same attitudes may lead to rejection by the group. Hence, this “norm change’ could be a strong incentive for someone seeking social support and acceptance to change her or his attitudes to align with those of the group.

However, even if such factors motivated community members to be less prejudiced, simply being motivated to change is not enough. As Herek explains, social psychological research indicates that people usually must learn how to be unprejudiced—in particular, people must learn how to recognize, counteract, and eventually eliminate their automatic, nonconscious reactions to sexual minorities that occur almost instantaneously when the group becomes salient.
This response pattern involves rapid activation of an entire mental network of negative beliefs and stereotypes, negative emotions, and a readiness for subtle negative behaviors. Such reflexive responses result, to some extent, from an individual’s lifelong exposure to the shared cultural knowledge that comprises sexual stigma. Herek suggests that these automatic responses are part of an ingrained “prejudice habit,” which can be inconsistent with one’s conscious attitudes. In other words, even if an individual has changed his attitude about homosexuals, he may nevertheless find that negative stereotypes and derogatory terms involuntarily come to mind when he encounters a lesbian or gay man; thus, even when sexual prejudice stops being functional, there remains the task of ridding oneself of automatic negative responses to sexual minorities, which requires learning new skills and techniques. One strategy used by heterosexuals upon realizing they have activated a negative stereotype is to turn their thoughts to homosexuals who do not fit the stereotype or try to view the world from the perspective of a homosexual. Again, this can only be achieved if the heterosexual individual has been exposed to LGB persons. If their community’s culture does not yet permit personal contact, then a palatable media representation is the next best option for ensuring exposure.

All facets of sexual stigma are interrelated and working to change any of them is likely to affect the others. While appealing to the oppressor group may not seem like an ideal strategy for combating prejudice, the cultural norms of the Bible Belt presents unique obstacles for queer individuals and renders confrontational politics ineffective. Instead, Bible Belt gays must utilize personal and cultural negotiations to implement change. As Herek argues, changing a society’s institutions changes social norms, redefines important values, and creates an environment in which sexual minorities can more safely come out to their heterosexual friends and relatives. Subsequently, this can start a chain reaction by making sexual prejudice less functional for
heterosexuals, which creates new opportunities for them to establish close relationships with sexual minorities. Institutional change also provides motivation to work on changing their own attitudes and to influence others to do the same. Likewise, as structural stigma and sexual prejudice diminish, self-stigma will become less prevalent, making future generations of queer individuals less likely to internalize sexual stigma in the first place.

v. Conclusion

Queer individuals in the Bible Belt are presented with a perpetual conflict of identity, as the apparent incompatibilities of their regional identity and their queer identity doubly marginalizes them. As the examination of the Bible Belt’s value systems indicates, queers in this region face significantly hostile environments in their daily lives, and they also live with different cultural expectations than LGBTQ individuals in other regions of the U.S. Likewise, the “meteronormative” standards of queer visibility and confrontational queer politics are incompatible with the Bible Belt’s valuation of conformity, solidarity, and familiarity, which essentially excludes queer individuals in the region from the larger gay community. Therefore, Bible Belt gays must find ways to negotiate their identities within their unique cultural context by working within parameters of acceptability that constrain possible tactics in order to minimize resistance. Moreover, they feel that implementing change in their communities will be a slow and difficult process. Such negotiations may not necessarily be “acceptable” by virtue of the confrontational standards of queer politics. However, the identities and politics of Bible Belt gays should not be held to the same standards nor be measured by the same criteria as other LGBTQ communities. Bible Belt queers must attempt to change the cultural climate before any other progress can be made, which is an obstacle not always taken into consideration in the broader “meteronormative” queer politics (where direct political action is typically the ultimate
goal). However, taking direct action, whether it is overtly political or not, is a risk for queers in Bible Belt communities, as such actions undermine community solidarity and conformity and could potentially make them targets for hostility. Hence, using media like country music as a point of intervention into these communities is potentially a more effective alternative for implementing change for two main reasons. First and foremost, relatable media representations are beneficial for struggling queers living in hostile environments. Second, relatable media representations also expose prejudiced members of the community to their queer neighbors in ways that combat negative stereotypes and demonstrate that queer individuals are, in fact, “just like them,” without necessarily placing the burden of direct action on individual members of the community who may risk significant consequences for publically coming out or representing their sexual orientation and identity.

While country music provides a potential point of intervention into Bible Belt communities, queer individuals must first gain access to the genre through its own points of intervention—the production-content-audience chain. Because of the reciprocal relationship between country music and its audience, the production-content-audience chain actually functions in a somewhat cyclical manner, despite the top-down implication of its name; therefore, like sexual stigma, all facets of the chain are interrelated and thus introducing change at any point will subsequently affect change in the others. The point of production involves anything having to do with the creation and distribution of mediated messages, such as how the messages are assembled, by whom, in what circumstances, and under what constraints. The content is the message itself, including what it presents and how. The audience, naturally, addresses the people who engage with or consume the message in the content, namely how they use the media, what sense they make of the media content, and how they are affected by it.
Because the goal of using country as a point of intervention for indirectly affecting change in Bible Belt communities (which transitively are country audiences), the audience cannot be the direct point of intervention on the production-content-audience chain. Therefore, production and content provide the most viable modes of entry, and in the case of a media system like popular music, where songwriters and performers often work closely together throughout the process (or may even be one in the same), both points can be managed by the same person or group of people.

The relative success of openly gay songwriters like McAnally and Clark and of their vocal friends and allies like Musgraves, suggests that the production and content stages are already primed for queer messages. Country’s “slow” feminism not only provided strategies for how to effectively push boundaries in the industry, but it actually created the opportunity for queer potential in the industry. Consider how country feminists directly influenced Musgraves’ career: Wells opened the door for women to have successful careers independent of men, allowing Parton and Lynn to introduce subtle feminist messages into the music. Such messages became less subtle over time, and by the 1990s, female artists with feminist aims were becoming megastars. Twain, one such female megastar, pushed gendered boundaries and style boundaries, and her poppy sound generated massive crossover appeal that directly catalyzed the shifting and expanding audience of country music. Had Twain not brought pop fans, who tend to be younger and more progressive than the traditional country fan, into the country music fold, a boundary-pushing song like Musgraves’s “Follow Your Arrow” would not have had enough support to become the CMA song of the year in the face of reactionary, traditional fans forcing it off the airwaves in certain markets. Likewise, the success of “Follow Your Arrow” provided a window of opportunity for queer inclusion in country, as it suggests that queer messages are not
necessarily doomed to imminent failure, provided that they do not completely fall outside of the parameters of acceptability. Of course, the fact the “Follow Your Arrow” was banned from a significant number of radio stations indicates that audiences remain more resistant and conservative than not; however, each small victory increases the possibility for success in the future by establishing a solid foundation on which to build. The presence of a song with just one line expressing a pro-queer attitude on the country music charts shows how far the genre has come in the last twenty years.

The “toxic closet” experiences of Wright and Herndon demonstrate just how hostile an environment queer individuals can encounter in their communities and in the country music industry, as well as how deeply the symbolic annihilation of gay identities affects them. And, Wright’s story illustrates another obstacle Bible Belt queers will continue to face even as the doors of inclusivity open wider, namely how to present ones queer identity while navigating the constraints of the dominant group’s perceptions of “acceptability.” As the discussions about the Wright approach versus Clark approach revealed, unacknowledged heterosexual privilege and perpetual marginalization of homosexuals makes it difficult for many heterosexuals to sympathize with homosexual experiences. As a result, their attitudes regarding queer visibility are typically shaped by a heterosexual experience that they perceive as existing independently of any queerness. Many of the fans criticized how Wright decided to handle coming out publically, suggesting that it was unnecessary because nobody cared, an argument predicated on an exclusively heterosexual experience in which the opinions and feelings of homosexuals do not matter because homosexuals do not exist. Fans and critics alike also accused her of “flaunting” her sexuality, which is coded but oppressive language that serves to perpetuate the toxic closet by demanding that homosexuals keep their sexuality invisible. The discourse surrounding
Wright’s approach is exemplary of the conundrum of coming out. Clark’s approach, however, exemplifies the challenge of reconciling two incongruent identities. As many respondents to my survey indicated, normalizing homosexuality is an essential step towards acceptance within communities that value familiarity. However, as the discourse surrounding Clark’s nonchalant presentation of her queerness revealed, efforts to normalize homosexuality by presenting it as inconsequential can be misinterpreted by members of the dominant group as a decision to “downplay” queerness. Clark was applauded for not “flaunting” her sexuality, which is actually a backhanded way to praise Clark for what heterosexual fans understand as self-policing of her own visibility. The line between normalizing and hiding is thin. Likewise, it is impossible to determine the ideal level of visibility, a level at which queerness is visible enough to provide solace to other Bible Belt gays while also remaining within the parameters of acceptability established by the heterosexual, country music industry’s gatekeepers.

As country’s history of “slow” feminism movement demonstrated, marginalized groups are not necessarily aiming for a complete and immediate overhaul of the status quo insomuch as they are trying to create opportunities to control their lives within the current system. Unfortunately, there are no definitive answers for how to most effectively communicate queer messages to a traditionally hostile audience. There cannot be one perfect approach to such a complicated problem. What is clear, however, is that Bible Belt gays need representation—representation that can show them ways that they can exist and that can help combat sexual stigma in their communities. As Herek suggests, exposure to queer individuals can help motivate heterosexuals to break prejudicial habits. And, while he argues that direct personal contact is the most effective means for motivation, media’s power to influence socialization through indirect exposure makes media representation a viable alternative in a culture that may not permit
personal contact. Thanks to the changing attitudes about homosexuality throughout the U.S. and the shifting demographics of country audiences, queer individuals very well may find such representation in country music in the near future.
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LIST OF APPENDICIES
APPENDIX A: DATA FROM BILBOARD CHART ANALYSES
### Table A.1: Billboard Year-End Top Country Artists, 2010-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Solo Female/ Female Groups</th>
<th>Mixed-Gender Groups</th>
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### Table A.2: Billboard Year-End Top Country Song Artists, 2010-2015

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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
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APPENDIX B: AGGREGATE SURVEY DATA
i. Residential Patterns of Respondents

The following tables present a more in-depth breakdown of where survey respondents formerly and currently live, as well as their identification with the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table B1.1: Raised/Formative Years, State (71 Reported)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S. Carolina</td>
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<td>Georgia</td>
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<td>Missouri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outside Bible Belt</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
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<td>Oklahoma</td>
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<table>
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<th>Table B1.2: Current Residence, State (74 Reported)</th>
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<td>Outside Bible Belt</td>
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<td>Mississippi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
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<td>Tennessee</td>
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<td>Alabama</td>
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<td>Florida</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
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Table B1.3: Which of the following best describes you? (75 Reported)

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<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Raised in the Bible Belt and currently reside there (never lived elsewhere).</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised in the Bible Belt and no longer reside there.</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised in the Bible Belt and currently reside there (lived elsewhere but returned).</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised outside of the Bible Belt but currently reside there.</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised outside of the Bible Belt and not currently living there, but have previously resided in the region for at least one (1) year.</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B1.4: Do you consider yourself a "Southerner"? (75 Reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to confirm the value systems of the Bible Belt outlined throughout this thesis, I presented respondents with a variety of questions about their perceptions of the region. Respondents were asked to describe the region in an open-ended question, and out of 75 respondents, 50.67 percent directly referenced religion or Christianity, 28 percent used the word “conservative” in their description, and 24 percent described it as a friendly, polite, or hospitable place—as long as you fit in. While most respondents provided brief, surface-level descriptions of the region, some respondents offered more depth in their responses. For example, Respondent 24 wrote: “Self proclaimed patriots, large proponent of state rights, comfort food, right winged conservatism often stemming past simple fiscal conservatism and isolationism. Deeply and pridefully rooted in it's own history. Community yet pick-yourself up by your boots driven. Evangelical Christians.... Hesitant of welcoming of newcomers/ideas until a strong connection or familiarity is established- large feel and distrust of the unknown [sic].” Respondent 59 offered a more personal reflection on the region, writing, “The weather is so warm, it forced everything to slow down. We walk slowly, we talk slowly, and we change slowly. People are warm and open and friendly like you would expect from the world 50 years ago--but their ideas have similarly slowed down. All of that means that if you don't quite fit in how you should, you stick out like a sore thumb. For me, though, it's home. It's beautiful country, and I truly believe that given enough time and exposure, the people will come around.”

Respondents were also presented with a multiple-option word association question. This question contained a list of 35 descriptive words, and each word was generally presented with its opposite (i.e., “conservative” and “liberal” were both on the list). The words were randomized to minimize bias.
Table B2.1: Words used to describe the Bible Belt (70 Reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-Minded</td>
<td>78.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>78.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorant</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitable</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intolerant</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-knit</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-Wing</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Backwoods&quot;</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backwards</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostracizing</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogenoues</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle America</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-Minded</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlightened</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the data in Figure B2.1 reveals, almost all of the respondents indicated that the Bible Belt is religious and conservative. To further confirm the prevalence of conservative Christianity in Bible Belt culture, I asked respondents questions regarding their upbringing and their experiences with religion in the region. The data in Figures B2.2, B2.3, and B2.4 was taken from single-option, multiple-choice questions:
### Table B2.2: Raised in a Christian church (73 Reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Baptist.</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Methodist.</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Catholic.</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Lutheran.</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Presbyterian.</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Pentecostal.</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Non-Denominational.</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, Episcopalian.</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table B2.3: Believe Christianity was/is central to the daily life/culture of where you were raised/currently reside (73 Reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>83.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>10.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table B2.4: Witnessed/experienced homophobia/anti-LGBTQ actions that were motivated by Christian beliefs (73 Reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked to describe the Bible Belt, five respondents used the phrase “a church/churches on every corner.” In fact, many of the open-ended responses alluded to Barton’s concept of compulsory Christianity. As Respondent 64 explained, “Religion is said to be a focus but not many people (I know) actually participate in organize religion. Just claim to.” Respondent 11 acknowledged that “you're automatically presumed to be Christian and conservative, politically speaking.” Respondents 20 and 41 both describe how deeply compulsory Christianity is embedded in Bible Belt institutions, explaining that “the culture and values are rooted in their interpretations of Christian doctrine and theology,” and “[r]eligious ideology is everywhere. Local, city, and state governments are all ruled by it to an extent.” Respondent 1 expressed that “[r]eligion isn't just a way of life here, it's a factor that counts towards your own personal judgement [sic] in a small town.” Respondent 13 agreed, stating, “the way religion influences people's treatment of others and the fears that brings for people of different opinions.”

Moreover, when asked about their experiences as a queer in the Bible Belt, many respondents alluded to Barton’s concept of the Bible Belt panopticon. For some, it was more obvious if they had lived in another region, as well. Respondent 29 explained how the policing function of the Bible Belt panopticon made him feel that he must modify his behavior when he is in the region: “I tend to withdraw a bit when I return home. I don't flaunt my sexuality, but I don't hide it either. I tend to be a bit more cautious and aware of my surroundings, just to be on the safe side. I've had more negative experiences in the south than a have in the Midwest [sic].” Respondent 32 shared a similar sentiment, noting how she no longer experiences the fears induced by the Bible Belt panopticon since moving away from the region, explaining, “I moved to the PNW [Pacific Northwest], so being out here is so much easier than in the [S]outh. I can
hold my wife's hand here without fear of comments or stares.” Respondent 19 noticed the effects of policing since moving into the region: “I know that since I've been here my wife & I do not hold hands or show any affection in public.”

Respondents who have only lived in the Bible Belt also acknowledged the looming fear of confrontation or retaliation and feeling that they must police their queer expressions or hide their queerness all together. In fact, Respondent 67 simply described her experiences being out in the Bible Belt as “[c]onstantly living in fear.” Respondent 31 explained: “Being in the Bible Belt has made me very aware and cautionary of where I can and cannot do things (typical things you do with your partner, holding hands, kissing in public etc).” Respondent 36 wrote that since coming out of the closet, “I'm much happier than I ever have been, but there is a constant, looming fear of discrimination or hatred.” He has implemented a strategy for navigating this environment: “I get to know people first. Try to figure out their belief systems. Gauge and predict their reaction. Then once I know I won't be lectured to or preached at, the conversation just flows and the truth come[s] out.” Respondent 55 has been “the victim of a hate crime many times,” and wrote that he “[d]id not feel safe expressing physical affection with my partner.” Similarly, Respondent 8 wrote: “I have never felt comfortable speaking out about my sexuality to friends or family because of the conservative bias in this area.” As for the conservative bias, Respondent 20, who identifies as a conservative lesbian, wrote of her experiences being gay in the Bible Belt, saying: “It's a wonderful place to spend your formative years for the sense community and common values but can be awkward for the LGBT community, especially if one fears expressing ones true identity in public.” Respondent 26 has seen how the Bible Belt differs from the rest of the country through watching others: “I have lots of friends who moved away
and came out while away, and then kept things hushed while visiting home. I think that says a lot about any deviation from the ‘norm’ at home.”

The significance of familiarity and solidarity in Bible Belt communities was also expressed frequently, primarily relative to “passing” or adhering to heteronormative expressions of gender. In fact, Respondent 6 explicitly stated that her experiences as a queer person in the Bible Belt have been “[m]ostly positive—but only because I prescribe to heteronormativity.” Respondent 60 also expressed a similarly self-aware attitude: “I present in a traditionally cis-gendered, hetero-normative fashion so I’ve never had anybody say or do anything to me personally because of my sexuality.” As Respondent 73 explained, “I am not very easily identified as gay so I don't see much visible actions taken against me because of it. However I am more cognizant of the way I act and how people view [me] because of it. So I'm more cautious in public than at work or with friends.” Indeed, all respondents who reference their ability to “pass” acknowledge that passing is beneficial in their community. Respondent 11 described her experience as being “[n]ot as bad as it [could] be since I'm bisexual but with a boyfriend,” and Respondent 51 similarly described his experience as “not necessarily difficult because I can pass for straight.” Respondent 49 said that, since coming out, her life has been “no different since [I] don’t broadcast myself, but [I] sometimes wonder what would be different if [I] did.” Respondent 42 described his ability to pass as “a luxury a lot of my LGBTQ peers do not have,” and Respondent 67 wrote that he is “‘lucky’ enough to be much more masculine th[a]n my contemporaries so I had a much easier time then some of my friends.” However, he still “lost a lot [of] friends and family” when he came out.
iii. Country Music Value Systems

Respondents were presented a variety of closed and open-ended questions to gauge perceptions of what country music represents and the genres value systems. Table B3.1 shows the results of the multiple-option word association question; the same words from the Bible Belt word association question were used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table B3.1: Words used to describe/associate with country music (61 Reported)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Redneck&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Backwoods&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-Minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intolerant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-knit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostracizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlightened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-Minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents were then presented with a series of open-ended questions inquiring if the respondent believed there is a religious ideology, political ideology, or geographical region predominantly associated with country music, and if so, to specify. Not all respondents specified. The results for each question are in the tables below:

**Table B3.2: Religious ideology predominantly associated with country music (61 Reported)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes (specified Christianity)</td>
<td>60.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (did not specify)</td>
<td>18.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (specified Baptist)</td>
<td>4.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>3.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>9.83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table B3.3: Political ideology predominantly associated with country music (61 Reported)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes (specified Republican/conservative)</td>
<td>59.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (did not specify)</td>
<td>3.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirectly (specified Republican/conservative)</td>
<td>6.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, but becoming less so (specified Republican/conservative)</td>
<td>6.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirectly (did not specify)</td>
<td>3.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>4.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table B3.4: Region predominantly associated with country music (61 Reported)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes (specified the South)</td>
<td>62.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (specified the South and Midwest)</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (did not specify)</td>
<td>1.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10.71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
iv. Identifying Potential Bias or Errors

The survey’s mode of distribution created a possible sampling bias. The most feasible way to distribute the questionnaire was to share a link via social media and ask others to share the link with their social media networks, as well. This could have affected the degree of separation between a respondent and myself. I posted the link to my personal Facebook, where it was shared 33 times—often by people outside of my direct social groups and with whom I have little personal contact. I also posted the link on my personal Twitter, where it was shared four times, three of which were by people outside of my direct social groups. In an effort to offset the potential sampling bias, I posted a link on Tumblr (a micro-blogging social network where interactions are typically made based on common interests and not personal connections) which I tagged under a variety of “LGBTQ”-related categories to expose the survey to individuals with no connection to me whatsoever; the link was shared six times there. However, the data suggests that the respondent pool was geographically biased, as the most common current or former residencies reported were South Carolina—my home state—and Mississippi—my current residence. Ideally, a mode of distribution with less potential for bias would have been used.

Using the term “Bible Belt” in the title and body of the questionnaire may have resulted in an unintended association bias. However, finding an alternative term that would succinctly and accurately describe the specific region was problematic, as individual notions of “the South” vary widely and would exclude the Midwestern states, and “the South and Midwest” would be too broad. A more neutral term would have been preferable. As with any questionnaire, the ordering of the sections and the questions within each section present a potential for association bias, but an effort was made while designing the survey to minimize this as much as possible. If
this research is to be expanded in the future, the survey design should be modified accordingly to ensure more accurate feedback.
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EDUCATION
M.A., Southern Studies, University of Mississippi, May 2017

B.A., Advertising, University of South Carolina, May 2015

AWARDS and HONORS
Best Journalism Research Paper, 2nd Place, 2017
Best of the South Awards, Southeastern Journalism Conference

Ann Abadie Prize for Best Documentary Project in Southern Studies, 2016
Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi
Project: The Rebirth of Water Valley

PRESENTATIONS and PUBLICATIONS
