Sweet Home America: Imagining the Small Town in Country Music and American Culture

Christopher Cimaglio

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Faculty Mentor: Dr. Shiloh Krupar
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Introduction

On October 26, 2008, Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin appeared at a rally in Asheville, North Carolina with country singer Gretchen Wilson. As US News and World Report writer Liz Halloran reported, Palin “donned blue jeans and before a packed arena…sang along lustily to [Wilson’s] country hit ‘Redneck Woman.’”¹ The song, a number one hit on the Billboard country charts in 2004, is a raucous defense of the country lifestyle with an extremely sing-a-long-able refrain: “I’m a redneck woman/I ain’t no high class broad…I say ‘hey y’all’ and ‘yee haw.’” “Some people look down on me,” Wilson’s “Redneck Woman” admits, “but I don’t give a rip.”²

The defiant rural identity she performed with “Redneck Woman” has served as a central part of Sarah Palin’s public image over the course of her 2008 campaign and since. Palin has repeatedly attacked the “Washington elite” and glorified small town Americans while claiming to speak as one of them, as she did in her September 3, 2008 acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis:

A writer observed, “We grow good people in our small towns, with honesty, sincerity, and dignity.” I know just the kind of people that writer had in mind when he praised Harry Truman.

I grew up with these people.

They are the ones who do some of the hardest work in America, who grow our food, run our factories, and fight our wars. They love their country, in good times and bad, and they’re always proud of America.³

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Palin draws on familiar rhetoric in tying the virtues of rural people—honesty, sincerity, dignity, hard work, and unconditional patriotism—to agriculture and the land: the word “grow” appears several times. She worked similar language into her stump speech and referred to rural campaign stops like Sterling Heights, Michigan, as “small town USA.”

Whenever Palin praised small town people for hard work, strong values, and patriotism, she suggested, implicitly or explicitly, that others—usually her political opponents—lacked those privileged virtues. She did this by drawing on a particular geographical imagination that located good, patriotic Americans in rural areas (“Small Town USA”) and associated untrustworthy people—Barack Obama, the “Washington elite”—with cities. In her attacks, she “zeroed in Obama’s work as a community organizer in Chicago.”

John McCain repeatedly demonized those movers and shakers who frequented “Georgetown cocktail parties.” Even the McCain-Palin campaign slogan, “Country First,” drew (intentionally or unintentionally) on the double meaning of “country,” which links nationality to the land and a nation to its rural area.

McCain and Palin did not create this imaginative geography from whole cloth. In both their criticism of city people and their praise of small town people and rural life, they drew on symbols and associations that have pervaded American culture for years. In particular, mainstream country music has often positioned the city as a place of isolation, artifice, and corruption and the country as homeland of simple virtue and old-fashioned

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values. Country lyrics have often described an idyllic “Small Town USA” where “we still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,” where “everybody knows me and I know them,” home to “picture perfect postcard[s] of America” like kids at a lemonade stand. This nostalgic rural imagery of the Norman Rockwell variety has been central to those who, like McCain and Palin, have located authentic Americanness in “small town people,” “Middle Americans,” “working people,” or “flyover people,” labels that refer to white middle-income Americans who live somewhere other than the urban centers on the coasts. Country musicians claim to speak on behalf of these people, hold them up as “real” Americans, and, importantly, mark them as “small town,” “country,” or “rural.”

Country’s mapping of authentic Americanness onto “rural” areas has broad consequences that reach from the voting booth to the Wal-Mart music section to life on Main Streets and in urban centers across the country. In this thesis, I examine mainstream country music’s imagining of small towns and rural people since the 1960s and provide a framework for thinking about country music, politics, and place. Drawing on scholars such as Edward Said and Tim Cresswell, I suggest that country songs that glorify rural life at the expense of city life construct a moral geography that positions right living, hardworking, and virtuous people in an idyllic and regionally disconnected Small Town USA and associates cities with crime, greed, isolation, unhappiness, and un-American cosmopolitanism. Through discursive analysis, I work to unpack this nostalgic

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8 This thesis focuses on the mainstream, commercial country music that features on Top 40 country radio stations. When I refer to “country music,” I mean those songs and artists that have gained mainstream popularity and airplay on country radio. Country music is an extremely broad genre that includes a diverse set of artists and subgenres, but for the sake of ease of reading, I am using the term “country music” to refer to a specific kind of country music with full knowledge that it is not the “only” kind of country music.

construction of Small Town USA in country music and reveal the race, gender, and class concerns embedded in country’s articulation of rural-urban difference.  

In addition, I place this moral geography, as well as country musicians’ negotiations of rural identity, in a conversation about national politics. I spotlight the Vietnam War era of the mid-1960s to early 1970s and the post-9/11 era, two periods where country musicians and politicians have located authentic Americanness in Middle Americans and where the intersection of rural identity and nostalgia in country music and national politics has been particularly significant. Through the lens of country music, I investigate the ways in which nostalgic depictions of Middle America and rural America, held as representative of the goodness of the United States, offer moral legitimacy to political claims. I situate country music’s investment in God, nation, masculinity, and the family in the context of American conservative politics and post-9/11 politics. Further, I discuss the implications of the positioning of rural people, especially rural men, as ideal American citizens and examine how male country stars have served as both surrogates and spokesman for “average” Middle American guys.  

This introduction begins with a brief discussion of previous studies of country music and politics and an explanation of my methodology: I advocate for an approach to studying country music and politics that foregrounds symbolism, imagery, and narrative in lyrical analysis rather than seeking explicit political statements. I then sketch out the moral geography of Small Town USA as defined in mainstream country songs, showing how several representative songs map virtue and vice in the American landscape, and

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10 The image of country music as exclusively “white” music is due in large part to 1920s record companies’ decisions to segment rural southern music into “race,” which they marketed to African Americans, and “hillbilly,” which they marketed to whites, despite musical similarities. See Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), and Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1985).
provide background on the long tradition of rural-centered, anti-urban myths in the United States. In the final section, I discuss the meaning of “rural” or “country” in this context, consider country music as a site for the construction of a nationwide rural community, and map out the structure of the two chapters to follow.

**Country Music and Politics**

Studies dealing directly with country music and national politics have generally fallen into two categories: first, accounts of individual country musicians’ personal political views, sometimes expressed in song, and their roles in campaigns (Malone 1985; Malone 2002; Willman 2005); second, content analysis studies of country lyrics (Rogers and Smith 1997; Van Sickel 2005; Mackay 1993). From the first perspective, the conventional wisdom that “country music has become the house genre of the GOP” has been difficult to disprove, as Chris Willman writes in *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music.*\(^{11}\) The widely publicized Dixie Chicks incident, which saw the group’s music disappear from country radio after lead singer Natalie Maines made statements critical of President Bush, only strengthened this assumption.

Indeed, conservative politicians and country musicians have often cultivated a symbiotic relationship. Gretchen Wilson’s appearance with Sarah Palin is not an isolated incident: as country historian Bill Malone shows, country musicians have often appeared at the White House with presidents from Nixon to Bush and fundraisers, benefit concerts, \(^{11}\) Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 7.
and rallies on behalf of Republicans; recordings of country songs like Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA” have been frequently played at Republican events.¹²

Studies of country music lyrics have shown that political sentiments in these lyrics, of course, do not always match up with Republican policies (Malone 2002; Cusic 2006). Scholars of country music and politics have been especially interested in lyrics because country is primarily “a verbal art form”: song structures are relatively simple, while storytelling and vocal abilities are greatly valued.¹³ Because of the centrality of lyrics and their prominence in the mix in recorded country, close attention to the language in songs suits country better than many popular music genres. Scholars who study lyrics foreground working class themes and distrust of government and elites and label the music as everything from “populist” (Malone 2002; Mackay 1993) to “libertarian” (Rogers and Smith 1997). Mackay and Robert Van Sickel (2005) note the prominence of an idealized vision of rural life but do not discuss its political implications.

Problematically, these studies suggest that songs are either “political” or “not political” depending on their subject matter. Jimmie Rogers and Stephen Smith (1997) and Robert Van Sickel (2005) exclude songs about romantic love (the majority of songs, of course) unless they include commentary on broader issues like gender relations (what counts as “commentary” is unclear). Van Sickel challenges the conventional wisdom in arguing that popular country songs rarely express a political point of view. He codes all

number one country hits from 1960 to 2000 and finds that these songs do not “contai[n] large doses of strident conservatism, populism, religion, and patriotism.”

In their suggestion that a text must express an explicit political or ideological point of view to count as “political” and to be worthy of further attention, these studies set up a false dichotomy between “politics” and “entertainment.” Following Adorno and Horkheimer (1979), I reject the notion that popular culture can be nothing more than “entertainment” and can remain independent of political, economic, and cultural power relations or pervasive discourses. I view country, like any kind of popular art, as necessarily political. However, recognizing that popular songs rarely dispense straightforward political commentary, I am less interested in trying to pin down country’s politics on a left/right scale and more interested in the discourses it intersects with and the identities and narratives it shapes and creates.

In this study, I treat mainstream country music as an integral part of a discourse that holds specific “truths” about rural and urban people and produces a particular kind of imaginative geography. Although I share the content analysis scholars’ interest in lyrics, my approach to lyrical analysis is different. A discursive approach that focuses on song lyrics allows songs to be placed alongside news coverage and political rhetoric as meaning-producing texts that actively shape identity and understanding of the world. With this approach, as Sara Mills has written, it is possible to examine a wide range of texts “in order to reveal the similarities these texts display across generic boundaries.”

We can see how pervasive narrative tropes and articulations of rural identity in country music intersect with the narratives of national politics. A discursive approach inspired by

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Foucault’s archaeology approach also foregrounds change over time; by asking how discursive systems have operated at a given moment, it accounts for both the similarities and the differences, revealing the lack of permanence and arbitrariness of these “truths.”

By focusing on the words and deeds of musicians and political elites, I do not mean to suggest that the politics people live on a daily basis are unimportant or that country music has no effect on this kind of politics. I view politics as something fundamentally tied to, but not limited to, formal political institutions, and I understand everyday politics as an integral part of electoral politics. All candidates draw on everyday notions of identity and “common sense,” and the discourses of national politics shape citizens’ conceptions of the groups to which they do and do not belong. Because popular music also straddles the line between the personal and the communal—it has great personal meaning for individual listeners even as it makes them aware of their part in a broader community of fellow fans—it serves as an apt point of entry for analysis of the connections between macro-level and micro-level politics (Feder 2006, 27).

Country music’s appeal is very much rooted in such a sense of the personal and the “everyday.” Country songs do not deal with the lifestyles of rock stars, clubbing, or hookups; they tell stories “about how real people think, love, and live.” Country, as Trace Adkins suggests, offers “songs about me/And who I am/Lovin’ and livin’ and good-hearted women/Family and God.” This trope is, of course, problematic in its designation of the small town or Middle American lifestyle as “everyday,” “real,” or “average,” but it is key to understanding country’s politics. Country’s topics run the gamut from young children with sippy cups to crude, explicit jingoism, but performers

16 Mills, Discourse, 26.
17 Willman, Rednecks and Bluenecks, 10.
address these topics from the perspective of an “average” parent, an “average” small town man. In the genre’s mythology, country musicians’ authenticity stems from their everyday background: had they not made it in showbiz, they would have been truck drivers, farmers, or waitresses. They are, despite their wealth and fame, like you.

This “everyday” rural perspective bridges the gap between the concrete politics of daily life and the abstractions of national politics (Fox 2004, 28). Songs construct identities that let listeners into the public sphere as patriotic, “average” rural citizens even as they provide the soundtrack for everyday life. Country music claims political legitimacy because it claims to speak for “average” Americans. No study has sufficiently examined the consequences of country’s everyday perspective and depictions of rural life for national politics. In the next two sections, I sketch out country’s treatment of rural and urban life in more detail, introduce related issues of citizenship, nationalism, and exclusion, and examine who and what counts as “country” in this context.

The Rural Myth and the Moral Geography of Small Town USA

Kay Anderson and Fay Gale write that “the cultural process by which people construct their understandings of the world is an inherently geographic concern.” In making sense of the world, they construct moral geographies, ways of imagining the world in which “certain people, things, and practices belong in certain spaces, places, and landscapes and not in others.” In Orientalism, Edward Said uses the term “imaginative geography” to describe the process of mapping difference onto particular spaces. He

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discusses the “practice of designating…a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary…”’They’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours.’”\textsuperscript{21} Because “they” are different, what “they” do in their space is different, and vice versa.

In the introduction to their edited volume \textit{Knowing Your Place}, Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching draw on Said in arguing that urbanites in multiple cultures have constructed such an imaginative geography in which intelligent, cultured city dwellers are set against uncouth rustics. As a result, “rusticity is chronically devalued” and rural people marginalized.\textsuperscript{22} Other scholars have also compared the urban-rural relationship with that of the West and the Orient in Said’s \textit{Orientalism} (i.e. Jansson 2005; Eriksson 2010). In their discussion of representations of rural figures in popular culture, Creed and Ching highlight rural grotesques, including crazed horror movie rednecks and clueless hillbillies. In these stereotypical representations, rural people are quaint, unintelligent, lacking in taste, intolerant, and violent.\textsuperscript{23} This sense of rural devaluation spurs country people to openly declare themselves as Other in reclaiming epithets like “redneck” and “hick” as signs of pride. The glorification of rural life in country music should be read as a rejoinder to this urban gaze, a proud assertion that “our” way of life is better and truly American, no matter what “they” say.

\textsuperscript{23} The imaginative geography of urban superiority has its place in American politics as well. George W. Bush, Sarah Palin, and the Tea Partiers, among others, fit easily into various stereotypes of drawling cowboys, small town idiots, and angry rednecks.
Texts that glorify Small Town USA, Middle America, and the heartland at the expense of the city and the coasts construct another moral geography: small towns are home to virtuous, independent, patriotic Americans, while cities are cesspools of immorality, arrogance, and crime and home to undesirable groups. These images of country and city have a very long pedigree. In the United States, the long tradition of the glorification of rural life and rural people amounts to a “rural myth” or “small town myth.” As Ronald Lee has written, “the small town myth is a master story of American identity” which “acts like an anthology pulling together a number of famous American tales under one title.” Puritan visions of the model religious community, Jeffersonian agrarianism, Southern pastoral, the Western or frontier myth, and notions of the Midwestern Everytown and its Main Street have all shaped the small town myth. As they have been told and retold over time, these stories have become increasingly disconnected from their original regional and religious associations and have become muddled together to inform contemporary understandings of rural life.

In the rural myth, virtue, simplicity, authenticity, and Godliness can be found in rural areas and in the rural population. Thomas Jefferson exulted the moral benefits of the agrarian way of life, as in Notes on the State of Virginia: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” This notion of people in small rural communities as chosen by God also has resonance with America’s Puritan

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24 In The Country and the City, Raymond Williams traces the contrast between country and city to classical times: Vergil and Hesiod glorified the lifestyle of farmers and shepherds, far away from the corrupting influence of cities.
religious heritage. As Loren Baritz writes, John Winthrop and the Puritans set out to build a model “outpost in the wilderness” that would be “a moral example to all the world,” or, in Winthrop’s words, “be as a Citty upon a Hill.”²⁷ In such a small town, authentic community would allow Christianity in its truest form to be practiced.

The rural myth is central to the founding mythology of the United States and to founding notions of American citizenship. Migrants to the United States fled the “corrupt cities of Europe” and hoped to construct something “authentic” and “natural” in the wilderness and the countryside.²⁸ The ideology of westward expansion and of the “City on a Hill” held the United States as a nation chosen by God to expand its borders and to serve as a moral example to all. Further, the rural myth positions a self-sufficient farmer or “average” rural man as the stock of this American nation. Jefferson regarded the yeoman farmer who worked his own land independently as “the most precious part of a state.”²⁹ The citizen-farmers who picked up their guns and formed militias to fight the British in the early days of the Revolutionary War contributed to this legacy. Similarly, frontier, Western, and pioneer stories have valorized a “white, Christian, and masculine” hero, often a mountain man or cowboy, a solitary figure whose self-sufficiency, practical skills, and virtue allow him to defend himself in a dangerous landscape.³⁰

In the twentieth century, many strands of the rural myth coalesced into what Edward Gale Agran has called the “yeoman myth of the twentieth century,” an idyllic image of the Midwestern small town.³¹ This Everytown or Small Town USA inherited

the community and religiosity of the Puritan towns, the closeness to nature and virtue of Jefferson’s agrarian vision, and the practical know-how and strong masculinity of the frontier myth. The art of Norman Rockwell has become synonymous with this nostalgic vision of the small town, where everybody knows everybody else and shares common values, values defined by Ronald Reagan, in the preface to a compilation of Rockwell’s work, as “love of God and country, hard work, neighborhood, and family.”

Country musicians, from singing cowboys to modern Nashville superstars, have frequently drawn on the imagery and the legacy of the rural myth, from Jeffersonian agrarianism to the small town imagery of Norman Rockwell. In country songs, small towns and the country have been persistently associated with right living and virtuous people. There are thousands of songs to this effect. For example, Alan Jackson’s “Small Town Southern Man” describes an small town man who seems to be the heir to Jefferson’s yeoman farmers: “And he bowed his head to Jesus/And he stood for Uncle Sam/And he only loved one woman/Was always proud of what he had.” This ideal citizen, Jackson suggests, can be found in a small town in the South; he associates the character with monogamy, proper religion, love for family, and patriotism.

Conversely, Said’s notion of an “unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’” aptly describes many country songs’ depiction of the city. Country music’s anti-urbanism also resembles that of Thomas Jefferson, who connected cities with “depravity of morals” and “dependence and corruption.” For example, Buck Owens’ “I Wouldn’t Live in New York City” suggests that the city “ain’t nothing but a concrete jungle with people packed

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34 Tichi, High Lonesome, 37.
like sardines/Where everybody’s tryin’ to live beyond their means…Sodom and Gomorrah was tame to what I found.”

In thus defining the country against the city, country music helps to create a moral geography that locates good people in rural areas.

Importantly, while country music’s mapping of rural virtue and urban vice draws on the tradition of the rural myth, it does not simply rehash the narratives of the past. Rather, it reworks them for the politics of the moment. In this sense, country music should be thought of not as preserving a bygone legacy but as continually remaking the small town myth and redeploying it in specific contexts. In this thesis, I am primarily concerned with the role of country music in the creation of a nostalgic and defensive construction of the small town or rural community as a place of refuge from modern corruption, a place where virtue and “traditional” values like love of God and true American patriotism, family, and proper gender norms still remain.

This vision of the small town as a preserve of virtue is perhaps best seen in Merle Haggard’s 1969 hit “Okie from Muskogee.” Haggard defines the behavior of the residents of the small town of Muskogee against that of corrupt, urban hippies: “We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee/We don’t take our trips on LSD/We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street/We like livin’ right and being free,” Haggard sings. “We don’t make a party out of lovin’/We like holdin’ hands and pitchin’ woo/We don’t let our hair grow long and shaggy/Like the hippies out in San Francisco do.” The kids out there may be doing drugs and burning their universities down, but “the kids here still respect the college dean” (emphasis added).

Not only do geographical markers appear in nearly every line, they are also tied to one particular view of right and wrong. It is

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36 Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee.”
(morally) wrong to smoke marijuana, burn one’s draft card, or “make a party out of lovin’” and right to respect authority and “wave Old Glory down at the courthouse.” In this way, as Tim Cresswell has written, “the constitution of what counts as moral is infused with a geographical imagination and shot through with ideology.”

The small town, held as a preserve of bygone virtue, faces a number of threats. First, mobility is a “threat to the rooted and moral existence” provided by a sense of place at home in the small town. In country songs, straying away from home, and a rooted sense of place, often leads to unhappiness and a lurid descent into wrongdoing. Further, country music often gives voice to an oppositional rural or backwoods perspective that ties in with what Svetlana Boym has called a “fantasy of persecution,” in which a group feels its home and its values to be under attack by outsiders. In the rural myth as seen through country music, these outsiders may be untrustworthy Americans—white urban elites, black urban criminals—or the enemies of the United States. In this backwoods perspective, as in the frontier myth, violent action is necessary to defend “home” from these threats, in keeping with “the original myth of violent founding.” Those who live virtuously in small towns, and those who defend them, are country’s ideal citizens.

**Country’s Imagined Rural Community**

Who belongs in country’s privileged group of “small town Americans”? Small towns and rural communities are now home to less than ten percent of the population of

the United States.\textsuperscript{43} As Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox point out, as more and more people leave the country and mass communication narrows the gap between urban and rural areas, “the opposition between the country and the city…has become more elastic, making these terms all the more symbolically charged.”\textsuperscript{44} Who, what and where can be considered small town or country is a flexible and politically charged question. As Gerald W. Creed and Ching write, “the rural/urban distinction signifies far more powerfully than physical appearances suggest”; what counts as rural owes more to “cultural discourse.”\textsuperscript{45}

The idea of Small Town USA and its citizens derives from a mishmash of overlapping discourses: “the heartland,” “the middle of the country,” “Middle America,” “the backbone of America,” “small town Americans,” “working people,” “average Americans,” and others. The extent to which these labels have become interchangeable is suggested in one of Palin’s attacks on Obama in her RNC speech:

I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a “community organizer,” except that you have actual responsibilities. I might add that in small towns, we don’t quite know what to make of a candidate who lavishes praise on working people when they are listening, and then talks about how bitterly they cling to their religion and guns when those people aren’t listening.

We tend to prefer candidates who don’t talk about us one way in Scranton and another way in San Francisco.\textsuperscript{46}

Palin locates “working people” in “small towns” and then suggests that these small town working people uniformly value guns and religion. Importantly, though, she designates Scranton, an industrial city, as the “small town” in opposition to San Francisco’s “big city.” Scranton is “small town” because it (and the state of

\textsuperscript{43} Richard Davies, \textit{Main Street Blues} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 1.
\textsuperscript{45} Creed and Ching, “Recognizing Rusticity,” 2.
\textsuperscript{46} Palin, speech to Republican National Convention.
Pennsylvania) suggests white blue-collar hard work. San Francisco is “city” because it suggests debauchery, homosexuality, and elitism. For Palin’s purposes, and the purposes of this thesis, practically anywhere between the coasts save Chicago can be considered “small town,” “Middle America,” or “rural.” “Urban” refers almost solely to the big cities on the coasts, especially New York and L.A., which are imagined to be filled with stuck-up, morally loose urban elites.

As Palin’s language suggests, the moral geography of Small Town USA has a clear class, racial, and regional resonance. In this construction, middle-income white people who live in the middle of the country believe in God, hard work, and patriotism. Advocates for country music have consistently positioned country as the music of these virtuous Middle Americans. In the first few pages of Discovering Country Music, country music scholar Don Cusic delivers this paean to the country audience:

Country music is the story of America set in song; it is America’s music because it tells the story of those who are the backbone of America, the hard-working men and women who are patriotic, God-fearing, and unpretentious, who struggle through life with neither great riches or fame and yet carve a meaning of life out through family, friends, work, and good times…[Country] is, in many ways, America’s music, especially the “fly-over people,” those in middle America that the L.A. and New York jet-setters fly over as they go from one coast to another.47

In telling the story of Middle American life through the lens of the rural myth, country music positions Middle Americans as the stock of the American nation, heirs to Jefferson’s virtuous yeoman farmers. These ideal citizens may live in cities like Scranton or Nashville, cookie-cutter suburbs, or sprawling “small towns” crawling with big box stores. Indeed, the vast majority of the contemporary country audience does not live in the country. In 1996, 71.5 percent of listeners lived in “metro” areas (including suburbs),

with 28.5 in “non-metro” areas. In practice, “rural” or “country” refers more to a shared set of values. “Country,” as Tom T. Hall put it, “is a state of mind.”

Mass media make it possible for those with a country state of mind to feel a part of a community with other country people they have never met. J. Lester Feder draws on Benedict Anderson in arguing that communities “are largely created in the newspapers, books, and music in which community members enact their sense of belonging.” He views country as such a site, one in which “people grouped together based on their racial, regional, and…political identities” and “heard music that shaped their sense of self, community membership, and politics.”

As Diane Pecknold has written, early hillbilly radio shows like the National Barn Dance took advantage of radio’s “ability to transcend time and space” in forging a “national sense of rural identity.” The programs provided listeners with (often stereotypical) imagery of hayseeds, barns, and string bands; listeners “were able to use these images to construct an imagined rural community—often one in opposition to urban-dominated mainstream culture—on a national scale.”

Country still enjoys great nationwide popularity and provides for the construction of an imagined rural community with a nationwide scope. Since the 1960s, country “has been either the most popular or second-most popular music” in the U.S. Country radio stations greatly outnumber all other types of stations, with 2,028 in January 2005; talk

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48 Ibid., 136.
51 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 44.
54 Feder, “Song of the South,” 9.
radio sits a distant second with 1,318 stations. In 1993, 41.6% of Americans listened. Country has its roots in the South, singers generally perform with Southern accents, and songs have often referenced specific Southern locales, but, as Feder observes, “by 1970...over two-thirds of country sales were made outside the South.” The number of references to specific places has declined as Nashville shoots for big hits and regional difference becomes less pronounced. Songs reference dirt roads, trucks, and churches, images associated with small towns in movies, on television, and in thousands of other country songs. As George H. Lewis writes, country identity now “takes the form of a generic, romanticized trope—an agreed-upon, media-constructed identity or sense of place that any listener...can recognize and perhaps connect with.”

Because of the extent to which “country” has become a loose collection of values and attitudes, a “media-constructed identity” that anyone can identify with, the borders of the imagined rural community are fluid. However, that flexibility does not diminish its exclusiveness. Idyllic Small Town USA is almost exclusively a fantasy of white Americans (Mann 2008, 88). The figuring of rural space as a pure, peaceful refuge simply does not square with the African American experience of slavery and racial violence in the rural South (Mann 2008; Stewart 1996; Hicks 2006). In particular, it is a fantasy of white men, overwhelmingly rooted in masculine independence and domestic family life (Fox 2009, 68). The virtue of Middle America and its claim to represent the “real” America ultimately stems from its homogeneity—everyone conforms to proper norms, and the bad apples that drag down “urban” America are nowhere to be found.

55 Willman, Rednecks and Bluenecks, 6.
57 Feder, “Song of the South,” 194.
59 Ibid.
The thesis’s structure allows me to account for both the exclusiveness and the flexibility of this moral geography. Chapter One, “‘Must We Fight Two Wars?’: Defending ‘Home’ in Country Music and Politics,” covers the period between 1965 and 1975, when conservative politicians and country musicians insisted that the “real Americans” were those who were not rioting or protesting and who were patriotic supporters of the Vietnam War. I examine the role of country music and of an anti-urban moral geography in the construction of Richard Nixon’s Silent Majority, which I understand as a kind of imagined rural community defined against corrupt urbanites—the white cultural elite and the black underclass—who posed a threat to the rural home and the rural way of life. Further, I chart how country music’s responses to the war in Vietnam and to these internal threats helped to produce a besieged Middle American masculinity focused on defending “home,” whether nation, community, or family.

Chapter One therefore allows me to trace out country music’s rural-centered moral geography as it developed in service of a defensive and exclusive political identity tied in with the populist conservative politics of the Silent Majority. In the 1960s, the claim that Middle or “average” Americans were good citizens came with the implication that the urban protestors and rioters were the opposite. Chapter Two, “‘Our Freedom and this Piece of Ground’: Country Music and the American Homeland,” examines what happened when the values mapped to Middle Americans in the 1960s (and since) in service of contentious anti-urban politics became deployed in support of a sense of unified American national identity for the post-September 11 world.

Chapter Two examines the work done by country music in the construction of the “homeland,” a national community built around the idea of common roots in the land and
the figure of the “average” white man as ideal citizen. I show how country music drew on the tradition of the rural myth to define a morally upright, victimized United States against a corrupt Middle East. In this effort, country musicians put aside “culture war” politics and extended the community previously limited to “rural” people to all Americans. This sense of national unity did not last, however, and I examine how contentious anti-urban elite politics inside and outside country music reemerged in response to the 9/11 attacks. Chapter Two therefore reveals the points of conflict that arose when Middle Americans took up a place at the nation’s moral center. In combination, the two chapters offer a thorough examination of the relationship between rural place, geographical imagination, and moral legitimacy and reveal the tension inherent in any designation of the citizens of Small Town USA as the “true” Americans.

This tension is key to the continued importance of the small town myth. While rural imagery appeals to the beauty of nature and a basic, common desire for community, it also represents a longing for a kind of homogeneity that does not admit many members of a diverse society. Because the nostalgic longing for rural life often seems to be a longing to roll back fifty years’ worth of social movements’ progress, and because many people have little but disdain for what they view as white-bread Norman Rockwell community (or a low-class redneck lifestyle), the figure of Small Town USA is extremely divisive. It serves as a kind of model of an imagined past that many passionately long for and many reject with disgust. For this reason, understanding the work done over the last fifty years by the small town myth, and by country music, is essential.
Chapter One: “Must We Fight Two Wars”: Defending “Home” in Country Music and Politics, 1965-1975

I fail to understand the man that won’t defend his home.
--Stonewall Jackson, “The Minute Men (Are Turning In Their Graves),” 1966

Stonewall Jackson’s “The Minute Men (Are Turning In Their Graves),” which reached #24 on the country charts in 1966, suggests that Vietnam protestors and draft dodgers have so shamed and shocked the American heroes of the past that they have begun “turning in their graves.” In the song, Jackson constructs protestors’ moral failure as a failure of masculinity. Rather than fighting for freedom, they would “rather live as slaves”—in other words, they voluntarily choose to submit to other men. They have even feminized the American heroes of the past, making Washington and Jefferson “[cry] tears of shame.” In the argument Jackson advances, morality, masculinity, and home interact in a clear, morally unambiguous way: A man has a moral obligation to defend his home.

The message of “The Minute Men Are Turning In Their Graves” touches on essential points of contention in American politics of the 1960s and early 1970s. First, the idea of “home,” that castle that real men should defend, drew on notions of the nation as home, the idealized rural home, and the primacy of home for middle-class Americans. “Home” resonated in the context of anxiety about busing and integrated neighborhoods, the actions of the counterculture, and arguments in favor of the Vietnam War. Further, in referencing the minutemen in particular, Jackson referred to an ideal of American masculinity firmly grounded in the rural myth: when danger comes, “average” guys pick

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up their guns and defend their home from the enemy. In the context of the Vietnam War, some men had answered the call to defend home and some had not.

Jackson’s contentious language reflects the stark division of American society in the mid- to late 1960s. Vietnam War protests, race riots, the civil rights movement, feminism, drugs, and other highly visible deviations from traditional norms spurred moral outrage among many Americans, who felt that the nation had abandoned the principles that had made it strong and that a vocal minority had drowned out the voices of patriotic Americans like them. Richard Nixon referred to these people as “forgotten Americans,” later claimed them as his “Silent Majority,” and won many of their votes. Nixon’s “Silent Majority” included white Southerners, Northern ethnic voters, and white blue-collar workers, key components of the Democrats’ New Deal coalition, and his success at wooing these voters radically changed the landscape of American electoral politics.

At this moment, these disparate social groups unhappy with the country’s direction also became known as “Middle Americans.” As Jonathan Rieder has pointed out, the term “Middle America” did not arise until the late 1960s, when elite magazines began to examine the reactions of the white “Middle” to the social change they had chronicled for much of the decade. Whether called “forgotten Americans,” the “Silent Majority,” or “Middle Americans,” this community was defined against the corrupt, vocal urbanites who protested and rioted and was imagined to contain a diverse majority of patriotic Americans across the rest of the country. As the editors of Time Magazine wrote in a 1970 piece declaring “Middle Americans” the “Man and Woman of the Year”:

The Middle Americans tend to be grouped in the nation’s heartland more than on its coasts. But they live in Queens, N.Y., and Van Nuys, Calif., as well as in

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Skokie and Chillicothe. They tend toward the middle-aged and the middlebrow. They are defined as much by what they are not as what they are...Above all, Middle America is a state of mind, a morality, a construct of values and prejudices and a complex of fears. The Man and Woman of the Year represent a vast, unorganized fraternity bound together by a roughly similar way of seeing things.62

Time’s editors grasped that identification with Middle America, or the Silent Majority, did not rest on a common ethnic group, a common workplace, or even a common social class. More than anything, it relied on the assumption of a shared moral code and geographical imagination, shot through with shared prejudices and a sense of victimhood.

Country music, popular with many Middle Americans for its wholesome, all-American values, drew such a moral geography, one that allowed this “vast, unorganized fraternity” to become mapped as a virtuous “rural” population. This moral geography offered a sense of “us and them” that foregrounded cultural and “moral” differences and represented a stark contrast to the old Left class distinctions that had marked the Democrats as the party of the working people. Against the backdrop of disorder and unfamiliar ways, centered in the city, country offered a politics oriented to the rural home, the family, and the close-knit community, masculine duty, a staunch patriotism, and nostalgic imagery of the “old ways.” Importantly, this allowed key aspects of the rural myth—hard work, virtuousness, moral innocence, and authenticity—to be articulated to the Silent Majority as an imagined community, to its homeland in the “middle” of the country, and in support of its populist conservative political orientation.

In particular, country helped to construct a notion of white Middle American masculinity as moral, essential to the survival of the nation, and under siege from multiple directions. Middle American men not only had to fight in Vietnam (or support

the war) when others would not, but they also had to defend their nation, their homes, and their families from threats on the home front. As in “The Minute Men (Are Turning in Their Graves),” they served as heirs to their rural forefathers as defenders of the nation. Country music’s portrayals of dutiful and appropriately masculine soldiers, sharply contrasted with feminized protestors, connected traditional norms of masculinity to conservative politics and located the “real” men in Middle America.

Further, country music allowed for the creation of an imagined community that included all people who identified with the “rural” virtues that seemed forgotten in the 1960s. This common fantasy drew diverse groups of listeners together into an imagined rural community opposed to the status quo. As J. Lester Feder has argued, listening to country radio and buying country records allowed Middle Americans to feel connected to those outside their immediate environs who held similar values and beliefs, and to enact a sense of unity with them. By consuming country music, listeners could feel a part of an imagined community of people who rejected the ways of the present.63

The cultural work done by country music proved essential to the Republicans’ efforts in the 1968 and 1972 elections. The moral geography country offered marked off the “average” from the elite and defined difference in terms of moral standing, gender norms, place, and race. Social and racial conservatism and distaste for protestors and the counterculture were major factors in the fracturing of the Democrats’ coalition. Meanwhile, in wooing blue-collar men, Nixon appealed to their “moral backbone and patriotic rectitude,” their “whiteness and machismo.”64 In the 1972 presidential election, the Republicans sought to paint Nixon as the candidate of the “common man” and

Democrat George McGovern as the candidate of the *New York Times* elite. More than thirty years later, this kind of rhetoric still proves successful for the GOP. Looking at country’s emergence as a force in national politics at the moment where the Republicans hit on this line of attack reveals the importance of rural-urban difference in this effort.

This chapter begins with background on the political context that made country music’s imagery and narratives so resonant in the Vietnam era, with particular attention to the demographic makeup of the country audience at the time. Then, taking into account this context, I show how the depictions of rural life in country music helped to construct its audience of “forgotten Americans” as a blameless, morally upright majority of good American citizens. Next, I examine the resonance of the idyllic rural home depicted in country songs, with particular attention to its adaptability for a suburban Middle America imagined as “rural” space. In the final section, I examine how country songs offered justification for the Vietnam War by appealing to traditional notions of masculinity, home, and the family.

*Nixon, Wallace, “Average Americans,” and the Country Audience*

In the 1968 and 1972 elections, Richard Nixon appealed to specific demographic groups who had previously voted overwhelmingly for Democrats, most notably blue-collar workers North and South and ethnic voters in the North. George Wallace, the Alabama Governor who ran for president in 1964 and 1968 and had great success appealing to these exact demographic groups, greatly influenced the Republicans’ strategy in 1968 and, to an even greater extent, 1972. As labor historian James Gregory details, the strategy pioneered by Wallace that had proven so effective at peeling these

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voters away from the Democrats centered on the combination of “social and racial conservatism with elite-bashing and gestures to ordinary working people.”66

It is important to note that the idea of the “average,” “common,” or “ordinary” American in this context had a specific connotation: it meant a white middle-income homeowner. Claiming “averageness” became a means of claiming a place in nationwide discourse, one denied by the squawking protestors and a federal government paying attention to racial minorities, and the badge of “Averageness” was used to exclude both pointy-headed white cultural elites and blacks. Urban whites fighting black migration into formerly white neighborhoods often invoked the badge of “Averageness.”67 George Wallace lauded “this average man on the street, this man in the textile mill, this man in the steel mill, this barber, this beautician, the policeman on the beat, they’re the ones, and the little businessman—I think those are the mass of people that are going to support a change on the domestic scene.”68 In another speech, he proclaimed, “We are going to show them in November that the average American is sick and tired of all those over-educated Ivory-tower folks with pointed heads looking down their noses at us.”69 The average American was not one of the “over-educated Ivory-tower folks” Wallace attacked; rather, as his list of professions suggests, the average American worked for a living at an unglamorous job—in a steel mill or a factory or a barbershop.

The Vietnam War also exacerbated the division between the elite and the “average.” Middle Americans (rightfully) felt that the elite had not carried its fair share

68 Quoted in Rieder, “Rise of the ‘Silent Majority,’” 250.
69 Ibid., 250.
of the burden for the country. Many saw protestors as morally bankrupt and un-American. One firefighter who had lost a son in Vietnam directed much of his anger at the protestors: “I’m bitter. You bet your goddamn dollar I’m bitter. It’s people like us who give up our sons for the country…[My son] told me what went on at his physical. He said most of the kids were from average homes; and the few rich kids that were there, they all had big-deal letters saying that they weren’t eligible.”

The “average” people—equivalent to “people like us”—shouldered the burden for the country. The protestors were not “people like us,” because of their affluence, their moral failings, and their cultural preferences. Further, as the firefighter’s wife argued, they did not care about people like “us”: “Their hearts are with other people, not their own American people, the ordinary kind of person in this country.”

As the firefighter’s reference to “average homes” suggests, the notion of home was also central to the construction of averageness, and, of course, Americanness. He continued, “My son didn’t die so that they can look filthy and talk filthy and insult everything we believe in and everyone—me and my wife here on this street, and the next street, and all over.” The protestors’ behavior essentially constituted an attack on the man’s home and on his values, which he linked. The man’s home “here on this street” serves as both the locus of what is right and a microcosm of a larger community: the “all over” the man refers to indicates that he feels other people across the country share his beliefs and his attitude toward the protestors. The concept of “Averageness”—the faith that most Americans were like “us,” well illustrated by the firefighter’s belief in

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72 *Ibid.*, 42.
“everyone…all over” who shared his views—was predicated on an imagined community that was held to be the Majority in both the political rhetoric of Wallace and the Republicans and the assumptions of the rank and file.

In the effort to appeal to regular Americans “all over,” both Wallace and Nixon purchased advertising slots on country music stations. Wallace made liberal use of this strategy, buying ads on stations in Northern states as a way to expand from his Southern base. The Nixon campaign bought advertising slots on Southern country stations as part of the candidate’s appeal to Southern voters. As J. Lester Feder notes, Wallace understood that country stations “targeted the same demographic” as he did. The governor once exclaimed (hopefully), “The good people that like country and western are gonna elect me president!” To a great extent, Wallace’s “good people that like country and western” were the same people that became Nixon’s Silent Majority. Feder notes that it “became a cliché” to link country music and the Silent Majority; country was branded the music of the Silent Majority in a number of mainstream magazine articles.

The cliché was based in fact: the key groups that made up Wallace’s coalition and Nixon’s Silent Majority did comprise a large portion of country’s audience. Persistent stereotypes of country as the music of the Southern rural poor do not accurately represent the country audience in the Vietnam era (or since). White Southerners, the stereotypical audience for country music, became an important part of Nixon’s base, but country had also become popular with Northern blue-collar workers and in heavily Catholic ethnic communities as well. This was in part due to the influence of Southerners who had

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74 Quoted in Feder, “Song of the South,” 207.
75 Ibid., 195.
moved North in large numbers following World War II; many found stable, unionized jobs and settled in the suburbs.\textsuperscript{76}

Country also appealed to people who had no ties to the rural South because many felt as homeless in popular culture as they did in politics. As the 1960s progressed, Hollywood and the television industry had moved away from the Westerns and working-class family sitcoms that appealed to Middle Americans.\textsuperscript{77} CBS canceled its hits \textit{Gunsmoke} and \textit{Green Acres} in the early 1970s because it felt that their audience was too poor, too country, and too old.\textsuperscript{78} Those on the far right, including John Birchers and conservative Christians, claimed that folk and rock music were leading young people to communism, Satan, or both.\textsuperscript{79} This left a dearth of popular culture choices that Middle Americans could feel good about and opened the door for country music, with its traditional values and stories about “everyday” life.

A contemporary scholarly chapter, “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority,” by Paul DiMaggio, Richard A. Peterson, and Jack Esco, Jr., helps to give a sense of the country audience of the late 1960s and early 1970s. DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco draw prominently on a 1970 study of radio audiences by the Pulse Corporation. They find that country listeners were “\textit{predominant} in the skilled and semi-skilled blue collar occupations.” The household incomes of country listeners were neither affluent

\textsuperscript{76} Gregory, “Southernizing the American Working Class,” 149.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
nor the poorest, but rather “concentrated in the lower half of the middle-income ranges.” They were, however, overrepresented at the bottom levels of education.\(^\text{80}\)

As these data indicate, and as Peter La Chapelle has suggested, the majority of country music listeners in the 1960s had relatively recently become members of the middle class—homeowners with stable blue-collar jobs and homes in suburbs, often on the outskirts of Rust Belt cities.\(^\text{81}\) This disparity between “average” income levels, low-prestige jobs, and low levels of education meant that the country audience, like the country music industry itself, felt looked down upon by the urban(e) cultural establishment.\(^\text{82}\) Country fans, by and large, wanted to be regarded as regular Americans, not as hicks from the sticks.

For country music, attaining “average American” status meant downplaying the rustic elements in the genre. Over the course of the 1950s, country industry leaders began to take offense at and to oppose use of the label “hillbilly” to describe the music.\(^\text{83}\) In the mid-1960s, country star Buck Owens insisted that country was really “American music” and that calling it “country” was “an injustice.”\(^\text{84}\) At the same time, while country had become a genre with a nationwide audience and had distanced itself musically from its Southern rural roots, country musicians continued to draw regularly on rural imagery, which did important work for them. In the following sections, I attempt to make sense of this apparent contradiction and to evaluate the rural-urban dichotomy and country’s use of rural imagery in the context of Vietnam-era politics and culture.

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\(^{81}\) La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie, 123-132.

\(^{82}\) DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco, “Ballad of the Silent Majority,” 49.

\(^{83}\) La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie, 127.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 148.
Country Music, Rural-Urban Difference, and the Silent Majority

Nixon and Wallace’s political strategy depended on the elaboration and exploitation of difference between “average” white working people and the cultural elites and minority groups who they blamed for the perceived decline in American society. As Dan Carter has written, Wallace (and later Nixon) knew that a substantial portion of the American electorate despised the civil rights agitators and antiwar demonstrators as symptoms of a fundamental decline in the traditional cultural compass of God, family, and country, a decline reflected in rising crime rates, the legalization of abortion, the rise in out-of-wedlock pregnancies, the increase in divorce rates, and the proliferation of “obscene” literature and films. Moving always beneath the surface was the fear that blacks were moving beyond their safely encapsulated ghettos into ‘our’ streets, ‘our’ schools, ‘our’ neighborhoods.”

Of course, these politicians did not need to create this antipathy from whole cloth. They simply needed to focus it and put themselves in a position to benefit from it. Wallace and Nixon’s arguments, and their political fortunes, depended on enshrining the Middle American lifestyle as characteristic of the “average” American, the good American, and therefore the majority of Americans. Meanwhile, in this construction, a corrupt minority ignored the contributions of the “average” Americans and brought down the country’s moral bearings. Imaginative geography played a major role in this effort.

America, and the world, saw and heard the rioting, protesting, and general disorder that took place in urban areas. Television news beamed images of riots and protests across the country and the world, and the city housed the moral transgressions of both the black underclass and the white cultural elite. As James Sundquist has written, “in the public’s perception, all these things merged. Ghetto riots, campus riots, street crime, anti-Vietnam marches, poor people’s marches, drugs, pornography, welfarism,

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85 Carter, From Wallace to Gingrich, 15.
rising taxes, all had a common thread: the breakdown of family and social discipline, of order, of concepts of duty, of respect for law, of public and private morality.”\(^{86}\) These notions merged in part because of the association of blackness with disorder, crime, and unrestrained sexuality and because many conservatives believed that the moral permissiveness of the elite trickled down to the underclass.

With cities—already suspect in Cold War America as potential hotbeds of communism—containing both the lowest of the low (the morally corrupt urban blacks) and the “Ivory-towered” silver spoon crowd, “rural” America served as the home of the “average American,” the “average man on the street.” The idea that the “average American” would be found on Main Street or in the country stems partly from the legacy of the rural myth, with its yeoman farmers and “average” small town men. At this moment, it had a clear racial and class resonance. The term “Middle America,” newly coined in 1967, explicitly linked class and region and suggested that middle-income, “regular” folks would be found in the middle of the country.\(^{87}\)

Richard Nixon drew on a similar moral geography. On August 8, 1968, Nixon accepted the Republican nomination for president and first described the social group that would eventually become known as the “Silent Majority.” That night, Nixon began his acceptance speech with a portrait of an America in disarray:

As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. We see Americans dying on distant battlefields abroad. We see Americans hating each other; fighting each other; killing each other at home.

And as we see and hear these things, millions of Americans cry out in anguish. Did we come all this way for this? Did American boys die in Normandy, and Korea, and in Valley Forge for this? Listen to the answer to those questions.

\(^{86}\) Quoted in Rieder, “Rise of the ‘Silent Majority,’” 257.

It is another voice. It is the quiet voice in the tumult and the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans -- the non-shouters; the non-demonstrators.

They are not racists or sick; they are not guilty of the crime that plagues the land. They are black and they are white -- they're native born and foreign born -- they're young and they're old.

They work in America's factories. They run America's businesses. They serve in government. They provide most of the soldiers who died to keep us free.

…

They give steel to the backbone of America. They are good people, they are decent people; they work, and they save, and they pay their taxes, and they care.

…

This I say to you tonight is the real voice of America.88

Nixon describes the Silent Majority of “forgotten Americans” in fairly inclusive terms, but he nonetheless constructs the forgotten American majority as rural. By explicitly locating the disorder in the cities “enveloped in smoke and flame” and referring to sirens, sounds associated with urban crime, he both primes racial fears and, importantly, implicitly locates the “quiet,” blameless people away from the urban centers. He cites virtues often associated with small towns and the agrarian ideal: the “forgotten Americans” are “good people” and “decent people,” people who “work” and “save” and serve in combat. Crucially, the forgotten Americans both are morally innocent, “not guilty of the crime that plagues the land,” and authentic, the “real” voice of the nation. Both of these attributes link that majority to the rural myth. The essentially undefined Others, who do not represent America, are guilty of the “hating,” “fighting,” and

“killing,” as well as the “tumult and the shouting.” The “us and them” dichotomy that Nixon draws pivots around moral distinctions—“we” behave morally, “they” do not.

Nixon’s support of country music also allowed him to endorse that kind of moral geography. In a 1974 speech at the Grand Ole Opry, Nixon praised country for its commitment to proper American values:

> It talks about family. It talks about religion, the faith in God that is so important to our country, and particularly to our family life. And as we all know, country music radiates a love of this nation. Country music, therefore, has those combinations which are so necessary for America’s character, at a time when America needs character.  

When country music talked about family, faith in God, and love of country, it often did so through portrayals of rural families. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some of the biggest country stars, including Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Merle Haggard, wrote and recorded high-profile songs about growing up in rural poverty. “We were poor, but we had love,” a famous and succinct line from Lynn’s “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” captures the gist of many of these songs: the singers grew up poor, but they lived close to nature and in close-knit families full of love and support. Lynn’s parents display the hard work and moral virtue associated with the agrarian ideal: “Daddy worked all night in the Van Lear Coal Mines/All day long in a field hoein’ corn/Mommy rocked the babies at night/And read the Bible by the coal-oil light.”

Similarly, in Dolly Parton’s “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad),” Daddy would work until his hands cracked and bled, until his back was “stiff as a board.” These songs spoke to an audience far removed from those day-to-day agrarian struggles and portrayed a supposedly more

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89 Quoted in Feder, “Song of the South,” 193.
90 Loretta Lynn, “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” Coal Miner’s Daughter, 1970, MCA.
91 Dolly Parton, “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad),” In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad), 1969, RCA.
authentic, morally blameless lifestyle, far away from the corrupting influence of cities. Further, they helped to mark their audience as innocent of crime and societal chaos.

Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee,” probably the most-cited, most notable political song in the history of country music, explicitly offers the rural lifestyle as an antidote to the change in American society. Haggard presents the small town of Muskogee as a preserve of the kind of virtue that much of the country has lost. The speaker, a resident of Muskogee, expresses his pride about what folks do and do not do in his neck of the woods:

We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don’t take our trips on LSD
We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street
We like living right and being free.

We don’t make a party out of lovin’
We like holdin’ hands and pitchin’ woo
We don’t let our hair grow long and shaggy
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do.

And I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee
A place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse
And white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all.

Leather boots are still in style for manly footwear
Beads and roman sandals won’t be seen.
Football’s still the roughest thing on campus
And the kids there still respect the college dean.

…

We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse
In Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.\(^\text{92}\)

In “Okie,” the rural identity is, in large part, defined negatively. The first two verses alone list five improper things that “we don’t” do. Meanwhile, kids *still* respect

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\(^\text{92}\) Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee.”
authority, and people still fly the flag with pride, as Haggard’s references to “Main Street” and “the courthouse” appeal to a generic sense of Small Town USA. This combination of a negatively defined identity and a focus on preserving tradition made Muskogee perfect as a symbolic homeland for Middle Americans and the Silent Majority.

Moral geography was central to the argument of “Okie,” as Haggard was convinced that none of the bad influences sweeping the nation could be found in or around Muskogee. As he explained while introducing the song on a live album recorded in the real town of Muskogee: “Oklahoma, for some reason or another, has been able to keep out of the conflict, and the college campuses haven’t had any trouble that I know of. They haven’t been in the news anyway [crowd cheers], and as far as I know, just about hippie free. I haven’t seen any hippies round here either [more cheers].”\(^\text{93}\) Although Haggard refers to Oklahoma specifically, the state and Muskogee serve as stand-ins for Middle America and its small towns, places of refuge from conflict and change.

The moral geography “Okie” offered proved enormously popular and influential, as the song became a sensation. Released in late September 1969, it reached number one on the charts in November and stayed there for four weeks. By all accounts, Haggard was taken aback by the success of “Okie.” His first performance of the song was in front of an audience of soldiers at Fort Bragg, and the song touched them: “Before I could even finish it they were up on the bandstand shaking my hand and hugging my neck, and they wouldn’t let us sing nothing else until we did that song again.”\(^\text{94}\) Audiences across Middle America had similar reactions to the song. Journalist Paul Hemphill describes the scene at a Dayton, Ohio show:

\(^{94}\) Quoted in Anderson, “American Popular Music and the War,” 60.
“‘Okie,’ ‘Okie,’” they are pleading. Personal-sized American flags begin coming out of purses. Haggard grins nervously…Finally, having teased them enough, Haggard lays it on them—“We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee, and we don’t take our trips on LSD”—and suddenly they are on their feet, berserk, waving flags and stomping and whistling and cheering, joining in on the chorus: “…we still wave Ol’ Glory down at the Courthouse, white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all…” [F]or those brief bombastic moments, the majority isn’t silent anymore.”

Why did this song elicit such a reaction from otherwise staid people? In a 1976 interview with Penthouse, Haggard tried to explain the song’s popularity with the suggestion that it “said something to those people who were called ‘the silent majority.’” Finally, they were having something said [on] their behalf, and they really came unwound when they heard it said the way they wanted to hear it said.”

The live version of “Okie” recorded in Muskogee even features an audience member egging on Haggard with a “Tell it like it is!” after the first verse.

Haggard’s suggestion that the silent majority “wanted to hear it said” touches on an essential issue. In Hemphill and Haggard’s construction, audience members can only make their voices heard—abandon their “silence”—through the figure of the performer. “Okie” in performance offers the “squares” a release, a chance to enact the sense of community that presumably resided in Muskogee and other small towns like it. The experience of listening to Haggard articulating their feelings or “telling it like it is” gives the “forgotten Americans” temporary release, but this still essentially restricts them to what is “expressed” in their name by politicians and opinion leaders (here, a musician). Because country musicians cultivate an “average” image, the country performer becomes both the surrogate and the spokesman for the audience.

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95 Quoted in Feder, “Song of the South,” 215.
96 Quoted in Feder, “Song of the South,” 214.
By identifying country musicians like Haggard as spokesmen for his political base, Nixon gained politically. Nixon had constructed the “forgotten Americans” as silent, morally upright citizen-subjects, essentially waiting for someone to come along and “tell it like it is.” This made them an ideal political base, one that could implicitly lend justification to Nixon’s policies without actually engaging in organized political activity. Country musicians like Haggard offered Nixon a “voice” that claimed to express all of the Silent Majority’s discontent while supporting his political aims. That voice was the voice we associate so strongly with cultural backlash, that of the angry, intolerant working-class white guy.

Merle Haggard’s “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” which reached number one on the country charts for three weeks in 1970, epitomizes that voice. Haggard wrote “Fightin’ Side” as a semi-sequel to “Okie from Muskogee” and a more direct attack on protestors. The song begins with Haggard’s assertion that he has “heard” people talking bad about the country. “If you don’t love it, leave it/Let this song that I’m singin’ be a warning,” Haggard exhorts. Several times, he addresses the stereotypical protestor “you” directly: “When you’re runnin’ down our country, Hoss/You walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.”

In this direct address and in the song as a whole, Haggard does not consistently use or omit linking verbs: he goes back and forth between the more rustic “you walkin’” and the more standard “you’re running.” However, particularly when paired with “Hoss,” “you walkin’” suggests a conscious choice on Haggard’s part to deploy nonstandard country grammar against the enemy “you.”

The success of “Fightin’ Side” allowed all like-minded people to tap into the oppositional country mindset and stubborn masculinity Haggard vocalized. According to

country star Ernest Tubb, with “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” Haggard had expressed “how we all feel.” But that was not necessarily the case—the Silent Majority was composed of an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of Americans who certainly did not all resemble Merle Haggard. Nevertheless, for people unhappy with the direction of the country, popular culture offered few alternatives to country music’s rural machismo as the “voice” of the Silent Majority. The fact that the country music industry supported the war so aggressively and consistently, while claiming to speak on behalf of the Silent Majority, also contributed greatly to the idea (encouraged by the administration) that “average Americans” supported the country’s direction and the war effort and helped to yoke support for the war to authenticity and “averageness.”

Looking at “Fightin’ Side” and “Okie” side-by-side also helps to shed some light on the connections between seemingly contradictory impulses. The macho bluster of “Fightin’ Side” and the idyllic rural homeland of “Okie” go hand in hand, for Haggard and his audience: the former is necessary to defend the latter. A real man, even if he lives in a preserve of virtue like Muskogee, has a “Fightin’ Side” that goads him into action when someone, whether Viet Cong or ACLU, runs down his way of life. This uneasy combination of moral worthiness and readiness to fight, epitomized through “Okie” and “Fightin’ Side of Me,” was central to the cultural work done by country music in constructing a rough-and-ready Middle American masculinity oriented to defending “home” and the traditional ways. In the following section, I delve more deeply into the notion of “home,” with attention to the nostalgic portrayal of the rural home in country music and the resonance of that portrayal in contemporary politics.

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Against a backdrop of chaos and moral decline, many people hoped to escape into the past. Essayist Pete Hamill, sizing up the public mood in a 1968 article for *Ramparts* magazine, argued that working- and middle-class Americans wished for a time “when there were harvests in the fall and feasts in the spring, when kids went swimming in the old swimming hole and played baseball and respected God, Flag, and Country. Most of all they want to return to a time in America when you lived in the same house all of your life and knew everybody you would ever care to know on the street where you were born.” In other words, nostalgia for pre-WWII America was rooted in the image of an imagined, idyllic small town where everybody knows everybody else and where people behave according to proper morals and norms of Americanness.

Country music, more than anything else in the popular culture of the time, consistently offered consumers this kind of imagery. The nostalgic fantasy expressed in country songs appealed to old-fashioned morality, religion, and home and the family, offering an idyllic lifestyle that clashed dramatically with the urban chaos of the time. For Jonathan Rieder, “what drew the disparate segments of the middle together was its restorationist impulse, its unhappiness with the directions of change in American life.” This collective fantasy, shared by diverse groups of listeners across the country, knitted together otherwise disparate groups, united through their common consumption of country music, around a longing for an America of the imagined (rural) past.

The country standard “Green, Green Grass of Home” aptly demonstrates the appeal as well as the one-size-fits-all nature of this fantasy. A number of high-profile

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100 Quoted in Carter, *From Wallace to Gingrich*, 67.
101 Rieder, “Rise of the ‘Silent Majority,’” 244.
country artists, including Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Porter Wagoner, Charley Pride, and Bobby Bare, recorded “Green, Green Grass of Home” in the mid- to late 1960s. The song tells the story of a man returning to his hometown after many years away:

The old hometown looks the same  
As I step down from the train.  
There to meet me is my mama and papa.  
Down the lane I look and there runs Mary  
Hair of gold and lips like cherry  
It’s good to touch the green, green grass of home.

The old house is still standing  
Though the paint is cracked and dry  
There’s the old oak tree that I used to play on  
Down the lane I walk with my sweet Mary  
Hair of gold and lips like cherry  
It’s so good to touch the green, green grass of home.¹⁰²

“Green, Green Grass of Home” suggests the extent to which rosy memories of childhood, idyllic pastoral landscapes, and notions of family, sexual desire, and domesticity intertwine in a nostalgic fantasy. The “old hometown,” frozen in time, remains almost exactly as the protagonist remembers it: the “old house” and the “old oak tree” are still there. Mary, the desirable All-American girl, becomes part of the natural landscape, with her “hair of gold” and “lips like cherry,” and she has shown loyalty and proper gender and sexual norms by waiting for her man to come home.

The beauty of nature also makes the rural home so desirable. Dolly Parton sang about “My Tennessee Mountain Home,” where “life is peaceful as a baby’s sigh,” birds sing, kids play with “June bugs on a string” and chase fireflies, and the smell of

¹⁰² Bobby Bare, “Green, Green Grass of Home,” The Streets of Baltimore, 1966, RCA. The final verse of “Green, Green Grass of Home” reveals that the singer has woken up in a prison cell on the morning of his execution and can only return home when he is buried under the old oak tree; the unattainable nature of the fantasy compounds the desperate nostalgia it expresses.
honeysuckle wafts on the breeze. The third verse of “My Tennessee Mountain Home” describes the way young people court in this rural home:

   Walkin’ home from church on Sunday with the one you love
     Just laughin’, talkin’, makin’ future plans
     And when the folks ain’t lookin’, you might steal a kiss or two
     Sittin’ in the front porch swing, holdin’ hands.\(^\text{103}\)

The song connects the rural setting with appropriate, old-fashioned dating behavior. The bashful courtship rituals described in the song contrast sharply with the promiscuity and unrestrained sexuality associated with both the black underclass and the protestors.

   The vast majority of the people pining for this kind of rural home did not live in little mountain cabins in Tennessee or anywhere else. However, country music helped them to experience “life as peaceful as a baby’s sigh” in the way that Parton described.

Scholars have often characterized the lifestyles espoused by Westerns and singing cowboys as calls for audiences to come home to the open ranges of the suburbs.\(^\text{104}\) For Peter La Chapelle, Cole Porter’s “Don’t Fence Me In,” which tells of the singer’s longing for open spaces and life on the ranch, became emblematic of “an age characterized by large private yards in new suburban quarters.”\(^\text{105}\) The suburbs, in other words, could easily be experienced as rural, particularly with suburbanites’ favorite popular culture texts narrating stories about open spaces.

   Country songs offered vague enough imagery that the fantasy was adaptable to any piece of green space. In “Green, Green Grass of Home,” “home” is definitely rural, with its green grass and old oak tree, but it is rural in a vague, ephemeral way. Mary, the hometown sweetheart, could be the girl who lives in the ranch next door; the “lane” could

\(^{105}\) La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 137.
be a tree-lined suburban street. In the suburbs, folks could sit on the porch and watch the kids chase fireflies. When the Wilburn Brothers sang about “Little Johnny from Down the Street,” who lost his life defending his country in Vietnam, Johnny could have just as soon been a suburban neighbor as the model small town boy. The investment in a rural home, for country listeners, was a fantasy that they could live, at least some of the time.

The rural home presented in country music also resonated in an “everyday” way because the idea of home held an unparalleled significance in listeners’ lives. The fact that the suburbs could be experienced as rural tied the preservation of “home” to the preservation of the improved economic position that had allowed suburban dwellers to get there in the first place. Middle-income workers’ homes, as Thomas Sugrue points out, were tremendously important to them financially, “their most significant asset” and “their only substantial investment.” But their homes were more than just financial investments—they symbolized entry into the middle class, the attainment of the American Dream. Many workers overstretched to buy houses and had to scrape to make ends meet. The mythologizing of “home” in country music compounded this centrality of the middle-class home, covering it with a lens of rosy nostalgia and making its defense both legitimate and vital.

The defense of “home” had considerable meaning for middle-income American men, because “home” was under siege during the 1960s in more than one way. As Thomas Sugrue details, urban whites in marginal neighborhoods viewed their homes and neighborhoods as a homeland that needed to be defended from black invasion. They “referred to the Black migration in military terms” as a “penetration” and to their

106 Wilburn Brothers, “Little Johnny from Down the Street,” Little Johnny from Down the Street, 1970, Decca.
neighborhoods as “battlegrounds.” Similarly, Nixon’s rhetoric on busing held up “home” as a safe space where children would not be exposed to dangerous influences: “[P]arents all over the country want a better education for their children, and that better education is going to come in schools that are closer to home and not clear across town.” The idealized rural home, of course, excluded all these dangerous people.

The defense of “home,” as the foundation of the American Way, extended to arguments for involvement in the Vietnam War. The domino theory, as political justification, was predicated on the idea that trouble far away from home would quickly reach home turf if not immediately addressed “over there”; as Willman puts it, “as goes Saigon, so goes Saginaw.” Further, attacks on protestors and the counterculture positioned them as immoral influences corrupting the home front. “Must we fight two wars?” country singer Autry Inman asked in a song of the same name, directed at protestors: “Were it not for the war we must wage here at home/The one in Vietnam would be ended…They [protestors] tear down the foundation from within.”

Inman’s use of the word “foundation” suggests that home, in a concrete sense, had become a symbol for the body politic as a whole. The domestic sphere in the United States contained bad influences trying to tear “home” down from the inside, while true Americans fought to defend “home” from the foreigners outside and the failed Americans inside. In this way, the notion of domestic duty to family and manly duty intersected with arguments in favor of the Vietnam War. In the next section, I examine topical

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108 Ibid., 560.
110 Willman, _Rednecks and Bluenecks_, 147.
111 Autry Inman, “Must We Fight Two Wars,” _Ballad of Two Brothers_, 1968, Epic.
country songs about Vietnam from this perspective, with attention to the way that these songs couch their appeals in terms of the war’s impact on “average” homes and families.

“For God, and Country, and You Mom”: Masculinity, the Family, and the War

Working class or middle-income families—“average homes”—bore the overwhelming burden of the Vietnam War. The vast majority of soldiers who served came from the “bottom half of the American social structure,” and many small towns and working-class suburbs lost multiple young men. Small-town America almost certainly lost more men in Vietnam, proportionally, than urban centers. Countless middle-income families and communities faced personal crises brought on by the casualties of the war, but country songs framed family crises in a very different way.

While several notable country songs dealing with Vietnam simply rehash talking points about the war, the vast majority of them translate political issues into personal terms, telling stories about how the war and political climate impact “average” families. Country songs like “Ballad of Two Brothers,” “Wish You Were Here, Buddy,” “Mama, Tell Them What We’re Fighting For,” and “Ballad of the Green Berets” draw a stark contrast between the patriotic, masculine, morally upright soldiers and the un-American, morally deficient, feminine protestors. These songs overwhelmingly present soldiers in terms of their domestic relationships as sons, husbands, and members of a community—all of these responsibilities, meanwhile, they fulfill heroically. Protestors, meanwhile, do not fulfill their proper roles as men, sons, or citizens. The war upsets family structures, but not in the way that political apostasy and war protesting does—these (sometimes

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112 Appy, Working Class War, 12.
113 Ibid., 14.
irrevocably) splinter families. As George Lipsitz observes in “Dilemmas of Beset Nationhood,” “patriotism has often been constructed as a matter of fulfilling one’s proper role as a family member and gendered subject.” In translating the decision to go to war (or to support the war) into personal terms, country songs offered legitimacy for the war effort as something that produces strong families and strong men.

Autry Inman’s “Ballad of Two Brothers,” which reached #14 on the country charts in 1968, tells the story of an “average” family, the Smiths, in crisis. The two brothers of the title, Bud and Tommy, could not be more different: while Bud is serving in Vietnam, Tommy, a student at the State University, is protesting the war. This home, like the national home, is divided against itself. Mr. and Mrs. Smith and their sons Bud and Tommy are presented as an average American family, upwardly mobile enough to send Tommy, their younger son, to college. The names “Smith,” “Bud,” and “Tommy” come across as those of American Everyfamily (and Everystate, where the generic State University is concerned) and divorce the characters from any identifiable ethnic group.

Each of the four verses in the song takes the form of a letter, read in a kind of spoken-word performance over music. The first verse, a letter from Bud to Mom and Dad spoken solemnly over a military drumbeat, paints Bud as a soldier and dutiful son protecting his country and his family at the same time: “If we don’t [win this war], the next battlefield may be a lot closer to home than Vietnam,” Bud writes to his parents. “All my love, your son, Bud.” The second verse, a letter from Tommy to his dad, is read

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115 Autry Inman, “Ballad of Two Brothers,” Ballad of Two Brothers, 1968, Epic.
over goofy, up-tempo swinging music that suggests Tommy’s illegal fun at the University. In this way, the song introduces music as a key signifier of morality.

The back-to-back verses featuring Bud and Tommy’s letters allow for the stoic, respectful, and heroic Bud and the loutish Tommy to be directly compared on the criteria of masculinity and filial piety. Where Bud tells his parents, “We must have marched twenty miles today through the rain and the mud,” Tommy complains, “We must have marched twenty blocks today, and, baby, I’m beat. I mean, like, the sign I was carrying got real heavy.” Meanwhile, while Bud is making his parents proud, Tommy is doing the opposite, attracting media attention for his protesting and still having the gall to hit up his dad for money: “So look for your baby boy on the front page of today’s paper. Of course, you may have a little trouble recognizing me with my groovy beard…P.S.: Dad, better send me an extra fifty bucks this week. Dig?”

The third verse, a letter from Bud’s sergeant, expresses his condolences to Mr. and Mrs. Smith: “I know you must be awfully proud of your fine son…It may comfort you to know that his last thoughts were of you.” Bud does not die in vain, however; his death becomes redemptive for Tommy, who, in the fourth verse, a second letter from Tommy to his parents, reexamines his life and resolves to make his parents proud by renouncing his friends and politics and enlisting in the Army: “In spite of all my past mistakes, I hope to someday become as big in your eyes as my brother will always be. Your son, Private Tommy Smith.” The song concludes as “Battle Hymn of the Republic” plays over a military drumbeat—although Bud has died, the song clearly ends on a positive note, with a wholesome Americanness enveloping the Smith family.
“Ballad of Two Brothers,” as a story about an “average” American family, offers an intriguing moral commentary on (upward) mobility and war. In the moral universe of the song, it is more dangerous to go to the State University than Vietnam. At the State University, unsurprisingly, the culprits are Tommy’s “turned-on friends” and his economics professor, who has told Tommy’s class that “people get along just as well under communism as they do under any other form of government.” The forces of evil embedded in the song ultimately pale in comparison to the strength of the family—ultimately, Tommy is redeemed by his love and respect for his brother and his desire to prove himself to his parents. Ironically, the war actually strengthens the family by bringing Tommy back into the fold.

Similarly, like the heroic Bud in “Ballad of Two Brothers,” soldiers in the songs fulfill their proper duties as sons and husbands. A number of songs, including “Ballad of Two Brothers,” “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” “Tell Them What We’re Fighting For,” use the conceit of soldiers’ letters to their parents or wives, suggesting both that soldiers use found time for the duty of keeping in touch with their families and that family ties survive the strain of war. Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets” ends with a verse about the girl one specific soldier left behind: “Back at home, a young wife waits/Her Green Beret has met his fate.” He has, however, left her “this last request”: “Put silver wings on my son’s chest/Make him one of America’s best/He’ll be a man they’ll test one day/Have him win the Green Beret.” In this final verse, Sadler sets up “home” as a place where a boy can become a man; the family legacy lives on, and the soldier’s sacrifice is redeemed, in the promise that his son will become a Green Beret.

117 Sadler, “The Ballad of the Green Berets.”
Family ties do not, however, necessarily survive the moral deviance of protest, as Victor Lundberg told his son in “Open Letter to My Teenage Son,” a #10 hit in 1967: “I will remind you that your mother will love you no matter what you do, because she is a woman. And I also love you, son. But I also love our country and the principles for which we stand. And if you decide to burn your draft card, then burn your birth certificate at the same time. From that moment on, I have no son.” The protesting son, committing an immoral act (significantly, an act against the state) has essentially severed the family ties, completely obliterating the father-son relationship altogether. The speaker describes a household ordered according to a classic public-private dichotomy; although the boy’s mother values her family over the country, the speaker must shoulder his duty as a man and moderate his love for his son in the wake of the son’s morally reprehensible act. Similarly, the song presents this individual family as a microcosm of how society at large should deal with protestors: while the weaker, more feminine impulse might be to indulge the protestors as a mother would a wayward child, the appropriate, masculine response means that sometimes, ya gotta put your foot down.

In these country songs, soldiers and supporters of the war display a strong and appropriate sense of masculinity. Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets” paints the Green Berets in traditional strong-silent-type style as “men who mean just what they say/Fearless men.” Protestors and draft dodgers, meanwhile, have strayed from proper norms of masculinity. In “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” Merle Haggard dismisses a draft resister as “some squirrelly guy who claims he don’t believe in fightin’.” As Susan

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119 Sadler, “The Ballad of the Green Berets.”
120 Haggard, “The Fightin’ Side of Me.”
Jeffords has observed, cultural conservatives castigated men who sympathized with the counterculture for becoming more feminine in appearance, letting their hair grow long and wearing flowers in their hair. In constructing his righteous small town of Muskogee, Haggard makes it clear that “leather boots are still in style for manly footwear” and that “beads and Roman sandals” would not be found there. The clothing preferences of blue-collar men become an important signifier of authenticity.

By presenting military service (or support for the war) as a masculine obligation much like the obligation to write to Mom and to respect Dad, country songs divorced the decision to support the war from any concrete political considerations and instead understood it as a personal moral imperative. The moral geography at work located the men who took up this obligation in Middle America, and the notion that Middle American men bore the burden for the nation both home and abroad, fighting against the nation’s enemies and the corrupt elite, contributed to a sense of Middle American masculinity as besieged and misunderstood but essential to the preservation of the nation. As I argue in Chapter Two, the events of September 11 led to the reemergence of this sense of besieged masculinity, and the legacy of the Vietnam War era contributed greatly to the divisiveness of the figure of the Middle American man.

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122 Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee.”
Chapter Two: “Our Freedom and This Piece of Ground”: Country Music and the American Homeland, 9/11/2001 to Present

Just more than a month after the September 11 attacks, journalist Lance Morrow published an opinion piece called “Has Your Paradigm Shifted?” in the November 19, 2001 issue of *Time* Magazine. Since the attacks, Morrow writes, “Americans have been shocked out of one country and into a strange new territory called the homeland.” In that “new territory” of “homeland,” a “New Paradigm” had replaced the “Old Paradigm”:

Pieties centered on individual rights have yielded to pieties of collective purpose and national security. In the Old Paradigm, flag waving was disapproved of and patriotism an embarrassment. You stood with everyone else, but never quite sang the anthem aloud. In the New Paradigm, the entire nation is festooned and flapping red, white and blue.

In the Old Paradigm, police were marginal blue blurs from the outer boroughs, and fire fighters merely the hired help. In the New Paradigm, they are Heroes Who Rushed into the Burning Buildings When Everyone Else Was Running Out.

In the O.P., machismo was a fault and the military an archaic and expensive nuisance. The N.P. admires strong men and manly virtues—courage and self-sacrifice.

Written from the perspective of an elite New Yorker, Morrow’s piece captures several of the dramatic shifts precipitated by the attacks. The late 1990s had heralded affluent suburbanites, particularly “wired workers” in high-tech jobs, as the stock of the America of the future; patriotism and white blue-collar Americans had again been forgotten by the elite, as Morrow’s reference to police (in the Old Paradigm) as “marginal blue blurs from the outer boroughs” and firefighters as “hired help” suggests. 9/11 brought about a newfound sense of “we,” a highly visible and almost obligatory

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124 Ibid.
patriotism, and reverence for the heroes, imagined almost exclusively as white, male, and blue-collar, who “died just doin’ what they do,” as country star Alan Jackson put it.  

The rise of the figure of the white blue-collar man coincided with the popularization of the term “homeland” to refer to the American nation, inaugurated by President George W. Bush in a September 20, 2001 speech to a joint session of Congress. The notion of “homeland,” and homeland security, linked the notion of home to the land and drew on a mythic sense of common American identity rooted in the land itself. In this way, “homeland” recalled the rural myth in rooting the nation’s origins in the small farmer and its continued survival in the figure of the “average” American, the yeoman farmer of the twenty-first century. Though it drew heavily on images of a victimized and innocent whiteness located in Small Town USA—and therefore owed much to the imagined rural community discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One—the homeland encompassed all those contained within the strict borders of the United States.

Divided into two sections, this chapter examines the significance of country music in the construction of the “homeland”—and in the points of conflict and controversies that revealed that imagining of the American nation to be anything but stable and unitary. Eventually, the “old” divisions became resurgent in the “new” world, and culture war discourses reemerged around the key figure that had knitted together the homeland, the white blue-collar or Middle American man. A more militant form of hypermasculinity emerged, and the idea of white men as victims and heroes ran up against stereotypes of white men as ignorant buffoons, archetypical “angry white guys.” From the other side, the Vietnam-era notion of Middle American masculinity as a particularly victimized and burdened status, one that required men to carry the burden for the nation even while

others heaped abuse on them, returned with a vengeance. Country stars, especially Toby Keith, came to represent this contentious Middle American masculinity.

The first section of this chapter examines country’s role in the construction of American national identity post-9/11. The intersection of these revivals in the aftermath of 9/11—of patriotism, nationalism, cultural nostalgia, white masculinity, family and religion—provided a dramatic opening for country music, the most popular radio format in the United States. In this section, I examine high-profile responses to 9/11 in country music, including Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning?),” Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA,” Aaron Tippin’s “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly,” Ray Stevens’ “Osama-Yo’ Mama,” and Hank Williams, Jr.’s “America Will Survive,” to reveal the work they did in forging the narratives that explained the reasons for and the proper responses to the attacks.

I argue that country music helped to construct a unified, morally upright, sharply defined “us” in contrast to the “them” of the Islamic world. After 9/11, country music drew a starkly different moral geography than the one outlined in the Introduction and in Chapter One. Indeed, the virtues usually associated with rural people—simple goodness, hard work, authenticity, proper religion—became mapped to Americans as a whole. This represented a shift from country’s usual antipathy towards city dwellers. While urbanites became part of “us,” located within the borders of the homeland, America was defined against the corrupt and savage Middle East. I show how country musicians scaled the imagined rural community up to the level of the nation-state and how even New York City, which fits extremely uneasily into a national community based on fixed attachments
and rural imagery, became part of that homeland. Finally, I suggest that country stars invested the nation’s strength in the figure of the individual “average” male patriarch.

Scaling up the contours of the rural community to include the nation-state as a whole proved unsustainable, however. In the second section of this chapter, I spotlight several points of contention around Middle American masculinity that reveal the instability of a national identity built around such a figure. First, I examine the divisiveness of the hypermasculine blue-collar figure through a reading of country star Toby Keith and the 2002-2003 controversy surrounding his song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American).” While “Courtesy” was intended to galvanize support for the military within a unified America, the controversy turned the song into a wedge that divided those who accepted its direct message and those who balked at it.

Second, I show how gun rights advocacy and the oppositional backwoods lifestyle portrayed in many country songs intersected with the notion of “homeland security” in valorizing white rural patriarchs defending their homes as the champions of the nation. Both the Toby Keith controversy and homeland security discourses helped to reconstruct Middle American men as both victims and unsung heroes through a logic of victimization that drew on an incredibly contentious legacy. Through these two points of entry, I suggest the extent to which the figures around which the homeland was constructed were deeply bound up in the “culture war” conflicts of the past and in divisive stereotypes.

I: Building the “Rural” Homeland After 9/11

In the days and weeks after 9/11, “average” white working people were placed front and center as exemplars of the moral innocence, righteousness, and heroism of the
United States. In particular, images of blue-collar white men, most notably photographer Thomas Franklin’s iconic shot of three firefighters raising the American flag in the midst of the rubble, became symbolic of the vision of victimized, virtuous, resistant, and authentic United States that prevailed in the wake of the attacks.  

Though heroic New York City police and firefighters became its most prominent symbols, the particular whiteness that became so salient at this time also owed a great deal to the imagery of the heartland and Small Town USA. Nostalgic rural imagery appeared in multiple media after the attacks. Budweiser ran a 2002 Super Bowl ad featuring the company’s signature Clydesdales traveling through a wintery rural landscape and down a small town Main Street before reaching New York City and lowering their heads on bended knee in a gesture of respect. The New York Times featured Photoshopped versions of Norman Rockwell paintings in a November 2001 series of advertisements. Country music fit into this framework too. Just as Americans unhappy with the country’s direction in the 1960s had turned to the reassuringly American values espoused in country music, the music’s patriotism, images of strong men and families, and obvious whiteness proved appealing after the attacks.

In the context of 9/11, the imagery of Small Town USA and the heartland appealed to cultural nostalgia to “reaffirm the goodness and innocence of the United States.” Because of the association of whiteness, “in its own view,” with “innocence, goodness, Godliness, and strength,” emphasis on the whiteness of the United States and

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128 Ibid., 5.
its heroes served to bring home the point that the nation was an innocent victim of 9/11.\textsuperscript{129} Small towns and the heartland read unquestionably white and have historically been positioned, in the rural myth, as repositories of virtue and Godliness. The heartland and the rural myth also hearken back to the “city on a hill” religious nationalism of America’s Puritan religious heritage, which holds the nation’s goodness as God-given and posits a mission to serve as an example for other nations. Further, the heartland supposes a common Christian or Judeo-Christian religious heritage founded on the figure of the local church community. The racial and religious homogeneity of the heartland (and the homeland) becomes a reassuring source of moral strength in a threatening world.

Because of these associations, rural America and the heartland have been central to the construction of the “homeland,” a new way of conceiving the American nation first popularized after the attacks. President Bush first used the term in a September 20, 2001 speech to Congress, when he announced the creation of an Office of Homeland Security, to be led by Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, which would coordinate the security efforts of a diverse group of local, state, and federal agencies.\textsuperscript{130} The term “homeland” had never been used on such a large scale to describe the United States, and it represented a dramatic shift in the conception of American nationalism. As Amy Kaplan points out in “Homeland Insecurities: Reflections on Language and Space,” the notion of homeland stands in direct contrast to the “traditional images of American nationhood as boundless


and mobile.” Rather, homeland “connotes a different relation to history, a reliance on a shared mythic past engrained in the land itself.”

In connecting home and land, “homeland” ties American nationalism to a literal and figurative “rootedness” in both the land and the rural myth of American identity. Its emphasis on a common American heritage values the reassuring sameness and conformity of Small Town USA. The homeland also represents itself as a reclaiming of the righteous past, and in this effort it draws on the rural myth’s nostalgia for the old ways. As Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert write in “Fear and the Familial in the US War on Terror,” “Homeland is…enveloped in nostalgia for it refers to a place and a past that has been lost and needs to be reclaimed: hence, the homeland is always elusive, its realization always deferred into the future.” Much like the imagined small town, the homeland appears as a “place of refuge in a dangerous world” and, as a “threatened private social space,” requires vigilant defense.

In keeping with its clear resonance with the rural myth, Bush administration officials have employed agricultural language in framing the “homeland.” Tom Ridge, the inaugural Director of Homeland Security, argued against turf battles among Washington intelligence and security agencies with the folksy assertion that “the only turf we should be worried about protecting is the turf we stand on.” This sense of homeland security as protecting “our” turf recalls the mythology of the American Revolution, where, as individual farmers, “we” banded together and formed militias to

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133 Ibid.
protect “our” land. Ruth Frankenberg locates this notion of homeland security in the long line of national origin stories featuring white gun-toting heroes fighting to protect order and the American way of life: “In these stories, whether self-imagined as founding fathers, cowboys, or emancipators, the US is always self-styled as innocent (Founding Fathers), good guys (cowboys), or dynamic, principled military men (World War II, Vietnam).”135 In this construction, “we” have a moral obligation to defend “our” land.

The notion of “homeland” therefore draws on agricultural language and the mythology of rural America to represent the American nation-state as contained within sharply defined and protected borders that separate “our” turf and “theirs.” In other words, homeland represents a scaling up of the rural myth to the level of the nation-state. Meanwhile, the virtuous United States is set against the corruption, danger, and evil of the Middle East in an Orientalist binary. As Amy Kaplan points out, homeland, or “the notion of the nation as home” more generally, “relies structurally on its opposition to the notion of the foreign,” to an “external world perceived as alien and threatening.”136 For the post-9/11 U.S., that alien world was the Islamic world, and the contrast between the two provided the basis for President Bush’s explanation that evil Islamic terrorists attacked the (good) United States because they hate our freedom and our culture.

Held as representative of the most authentically American lifestyle, the imagery of the small town and the heartland made the contrast between “us” (as white Christians) and “them” (as Arab Muslims) extremely stark. Further, the rural and heartland imagery tied up in the framing of the homeland helped to legitimate U.S. actions against the Middle East. While the notion of the heartland works to exclude people within the

136 Kaplan, “Homeland Insecurities,” 86.
borders of the United States, it also works to justify expansion. Homeland, as Stephen Graham has written, draws on notions of American exceptionalism as understood through the religious nationalism of the rural myth: it centers on “valorizing an exclusive, separated, and privileged population,” one that has the right to expand beyond its borders.\textsuperscript{137} In this sense, the heartland recalls the expansionary projects of the manifest destiny era and the colonialist efforts of white yeoman farmers against Native Americans and endorses a similar project against the terrorist “savages” of the Middle Eastern world.\textsuperscript{138} As Amy Kaplan explains, the “comforting images of a deeply rooted past” that homeland offers serve to “legitimate modern forms of imperial power.”\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{“I’m Just A Singer of Simple Songs”: Country Music and the Rural Homeland}

Because of the salience of both the rural myth and of everyday, blue-collar heroism, country music played a major role in the construction of the homeland and of American national identity in the post-9/11 world. The high level of popularity of country as a radio format and the glut of patriotic material on its air made country radio an important source of meaning-making. In the early 1990s, country’s popularity had skyrocketed. In 1991, 34.7\% of Americans listened to country radio weekly; in 1993, 41.6\% listened.\textsuperscript{140} This was double the number that had listened to country in 1983.\textsuperscript{141} Additionally, as Em McAvan points out, pop music experienced a turn to “white masculine signifiers of ‘rock authenticity’” after 9/11, with a focus on guitars and

\textsuperscript{138} Toh, “White Fireman,” 8.
\textsuperscript{139} Kaplan, “Homeland Insecurities,” 90.
\textsuperscript{140} Cusic, \textit{Discovering Country Music}, 136.
“authentic” performers.\textsuperscript{142} Country fit the bill, with its guitar-based musical palette and its longtime reputation as the music of white working people. Male country stars were particularly well positioned to claim to authentically voice the blue-collar ethic that had impelled cops and firefighters to run into the burning buildings.

After 9/11, country music offered a moral geography that opposed the righteous United States to the corrupt Middle East. The virtues customarily mapped to rural people—goodness, Godliness, hard work—became extended to Americans as a whole, and the boundaries of the rural community became the borders of the nation-state. Country songs drew on cultural nostalgia, pastoral imagery, and the rural myth to project an image of a morally upright, victimized America rooted in hard work, the nuclear family and traditional religion. Rural life as portrayed in country songs allowed the “homeland,” that piece of ground that we fought for, to take shape, and portrayals of the family and rural community stood in for the homeland we fight to defend. Meanwhile, male country stars turned to Orientalist tropes to rattle the saber at Osama bin Laden and the terrorist Others and to portray the stark differences between the two as a means of explaining the animus that had led to an attack on American soil. As Toby Keith insisted, “That is the reason that they don’t like us, because we are so American.”\textsuperscript{143}

With the virtues of rural people extended to the nation-state as a whole, all those who shared designated “American” values could be admitted into the community. However, even with the rural-urban tension hardly visible, fitting New York into the rural community and the homeland represented a radical shift for country music. It was

\textsuperscript{142} Em McAvan, “Boring is the New Interesting: September 11, Realness, and the Politics of Authenticity in Pop Music,” in \textit{The War on Terror and American Popular Culture}, eds. Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 100.
\textsuperscript{143} CBS News, \textit{60 Minutes II}, October 29, 2003, Toby Keith interview by Dan Rather.
possible because the blue-collar rescue workers were in many ways “rural” figures, possessed of a self-sacrificing nature and practical know-how, and because the Arab terrorist proved to be a much more evil Other than the urban elite. However, country music still offered a vision of the American homeland with “average” Middle Americans at the center. After 9/11, country music constructed an American homeland that admitted a broad range of places and a racially diverse population, but that derived its legitimacy from the figure of the everyday Middle American man performing the song and the average blue-collar men who had displayed such heroism at Ground Zero.

In country music, the figure of the “average” white Christian man worked to present an image of America as chosen by God and as an innocent victim of an evil act. In response, country musicians suggested, Americans should turn to the nuclear family and traditional religion for strength. The most high-profile country song written shortly after 9/11, Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),” presents such an image of a victimized America, centered on the performer as simple Christian man. “Where Were You” was first performed at the November 2001 CMA Awards, and a recording of this performance reached #1 on the charts.144

“Where Were You” projects an image of a virtuous, victimized America. The song features a string section on each chorus, gentle fingerpicking, and several mandolin breaks, which give the song a very emotional sound—the strings and the mandolin almost seem to be crying, and a gentle fiddle sound has a similar effect, as the lyrics ask, “Did you weep for the children who lost their dear loved ones…Sob for the ones left below [in

Jackson’s performance at the CMA Awards also suggests victimhood. He performs the song seated in a chair, sometimes singing with his eyes closed, and his tenor voice breaks several times during the performance.

Jackson presents himself as a regular American, a simple man stunned by the tragedy who could have done nothing wrong to bring about the strife of 9/11. In the chorus, he describes himself as someone not knowledgeable about international politics but nevertheless an important voice because of his Christian faith: “I’m just a singer of simple songs/I’m not a real political man/I watch CNN but I’m not sure I could tell you/The difference in Iraq and Iran/But I know Jesus and I talk to God” (emphasis added). His Christian message for these trying times is “faith, hope, and love.” This privileging of the simple Christian voice over knowledge of the “difference in Iraq and Iran” links back to the rural myth, with its faith that virtue and simple solutions will deliver the desired outcome. In addition, it frames the politics of 9/11 in terms of good and evil, deemphasizing political facts like “the difference in Iraq and Iran” in favor of proper religion and virtues like “faith, hope, and love.” For Jackson, the nation’s authentic past and country people would serve as a source of strength in a troubled time.

Country songs located this authentic past in the context of a religious nationalism rooted in family, God, and fatherly authority. Lee Greenwood’s swelling patriotic anthem “God Bless the USA,” which invokes God’s blessings upon the nation-state, places love for country and love for God on a nearly equal plane. “God Bless the USA” was originally recorded in 1984 and re-released as a single after 9/11, where it received

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147 Jackson, “Where Were You.”
significant airplay on country radio stations and reached #16 on the charts. Now one of the most well-known patriotic songs and often sung by large, diverse groups, “God Bless the USA” nonetheless delivers its patriotic message from the perspective of an “average” guy—a married father with children: “If tomorrow all the things were gone I’d worked for all my life/And I had to start again with just my children and my wife/I’d thank my lucky stars to be living here today.” Aaron Tippin, in “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly,” also draws on notions of American exceptionalism that hold the nation as a place favored by God. Tippin attributes his birth in the United States, an “extraordinary place,” to “God’s dear grace,” before noting that America is the only place for him to “love my wife and raise my kids/Hey, the same way that my daddy did.”

In “God Bless the USA,” this figure of the everyday Christian patriarch proves crucial to the survival of the nation. Greenwood’s protagonist promises solidarity with “the men who died and gave that right [freedom] to me” and promises to “stand up next to you [soldiers] and defend her still today.” In his vow to “stand up next to you” and take up arms against the unspecified “they” who want to take our freedom away, the singer fills the role of the archetypical everyday citizen-hero, a father and husband ready to defend his traditional way of life. The use of the feminine pronoun “her” to refer to the nation constructs it as part of the protected sphere that Greenwood’s protagonist watches over. As a patriotic anthem, “God Bless the USA” invites those who sing it to take up the voice and the position of this kind of father/citizen; when a large group, however diverse,

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151 Greenwood, “God Bless the USA.”
sings “God Bless the USA,” the message comes from the heterosexual male perspective of the archetypical “ideal” American citizen.

Where could this citizen be found in September of 2001? The Americans who tuned in to country radio in September 2001 and heard Lee Greenwood’s voice would have been told that “there’s pride in every American heart,” no matter where. Though the notions of religious nationalism and everyday heroism in “God Bless the USA” owe much to the rural myth, Greenwood offers a more capacious sense of America. Proud Americans, according to Greenwood, can be found “from sea to shining sea/From Detroit down to Houston/And New York to L.A.”

Indeed, after 9/11, Americans experienced a feeling of unity that extended across racial and class lines. Columnist David Brooks, writing in December 2001, observed that we were “in no mood for a class struggle or a culture war.” People in both Red and Blue America, according to Brooks, realized that we were all part of the same homeland, and that “our homeland was under attack.”

Despite this sense of national unity, the fact that New York and Washington became knitted into the fabric of that homeland was an extremely significant shift. As Amy Kaplan argues, the notion of “homeland” is profoundly anti-urban, as the diverse population of a global city like New York does not fit easily into a community based on the presumption of common ancestral roots. The fact that New York could be integrated into country music’s imagined rural community also seems incongruous, as Buck Owens’ “I Wouldn’t Live in New York City” is perhaps the seminal anti-urban screed in the canon of country music. The music video for Aaron Tippin’s 2001 number

\[152\] *Ibid.*


two hit “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly,” shot in New York, offers a clue. While the video features shots of a diverse range of New Yorkers, including an Asian-American couple, a Sikh man, a Hasidic Jewish family, and a man in traditional Buddhist clothing, the last two shots show a tattoo of “In God We Trust” on the arm of a firefighter and Tippin (whose songs often champion the working man) silhouetted against an immense flag.\footnote{Aaron Tippin, music video for “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly,” Stars and Stripes, 2002, Hollywood (produced by Lyric Street Records, 2001), available at http://www.cmt.com/videos/aaron-tippin/26222/where-the-stars-and-stripes-and-the-eagle-fly.jhtml?artist=507635.} Although the video gives a sense of the diversity of American citizenry, it ultimately returns to the true source of American strength: God and the masculine man.

As these last two images suggest, New York City could be fit into the landscape of the homeland because the everyday blue-collar heroes of 9/11 were New Yorkers. The images of New York City firefighters and police depicted a New York beyond Wall Street, Broadway, Madison Avenue, and crime-ridden slums. They suggested that underneath the glitz, real blue-collar grit, authenticity, and heroism could be found. The men were seen as everyday heroes, regular guys who went to work each day and whose jobs happened to include saving lives.

In many ways, however, New York City firefighters could be seen as “rural” men, akin to the everyday heroes exulted in so many country songs, because the figure of the “authentic” man is in many ways a rural figure. As Hugh Campbell, Michael Bell, and Margaret Finney write in their introduction to \textit{Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life}, \textquote{‘the real man’ of many currently hegemonic forms of masculinity is…a rural man.”\footnote{Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfield Bell, and Margaret Finney, \textit{introduction to Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life} (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 18.} According to the popular image, rural men work outside with their hands, and that work gives them a hardened physique, real world know-how, and a perspective that values
action over talk. All these qualities became associated with the firefighters. Similarly, in putting their bodies and lives on the line for others, they embodied the heroic masculinity of the cowboys and frontiersmen of the rural myth. With New York positioned as the home of these authentic national heroes and not the Sex and the City elite, the city could become part of the rural community and the “homeland.”

New York could also be fit into the homeland because of the figure of the foreign Other, the corrupt Middle East and its cities full of insurgents and terrorists. New York, after all, was far more American than Baghdad or Kabul. While rural pride songs customarily set an innocent and righteous rural America against the corruption and savagery of the city, after 9/11, the figure of an innocent and righteous America was instead set against the corruption and savagery of the Muslim world. The figure of this Other, whether terrorist, Arab, Muslim, or Osama bin Laden himself, allowed the vitriol of the righteous rural American to be displaced from the urban elite and the boundaries of the imagined community of authentic Americans to be widened.

This occurs at the level of the text through the use of “you” to refer to Osama bin Laden or to the terrorist, Arab, or Muslim enemy rather than the urban antagonist. Almost every country song that talks up the rural lifestyle or puts down the urban one addresses a hostile “you,” an urbanite unfamiliar with and disdainful of the country lifestyle the singer praises.158 After 9/11, “you” became Osama bin Laden specifically, a generic terrorist, or the Muslim world at large; the lines between those three, in the public mind as much as in the texts, blurred. Toby Keith brags in “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” that “we blew up your world like the Fourth of July” and promises, “You’ll be

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158 Barbara Ching, Wrong’s what I do best: hard country music and contemporary culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16. For example, Josh Thompson sings, “If it’s our backwoods way of living you’re concerned with/You can leave us alone.” (“Way Out Here.”)
It is not clear who “you” are, or that Keith addresses the same “you” in each line. This use of the term “you” girds national sentiment around a monolithically defined enemy and backgrounds the question of whether the “you” whose world we blew up was the same “you” who “messed with” us. It was not important to know the “difference in Iraq and Iran,” or to parse the situation enough to understand the complexities of the politics there.

Country comedian Ray Stevens took aim at bin Laden himself in the novelty song “Osama-Yo’ Mama.” Stevens’ biggest hit, “Ahab the Arab,” was a 1962 novelty song that drew on Orientalist tropes to tell the story of Sheik Ahab’s illicit love affair with a woman in the Sultan’s harem. “Osama-Yo’ Mama” also draws on a long tradition of Orientalist themes in American popular media: “Osama, yo’ mama didn’t raise you right/When you were young she must have wrapped your turban too tight/She should have kept you home on those Arabian Nights.” The song’s recurring motif imitates Middle Eastern music, and in the music video, Stevens “walks like an Egyptian” as in the 1986 Bangles song while dressed as Osama’s mama in purple and pink robes, beads, and a veil that covers his face. Meanwhile, he performs in front of various cartoonish landscapes featuring deserts and palm trees at night, which figure “their” land as both exotic and bizarre and convey the difference between “our” land and “theirs.”

The scaling of the rural myth up to the level of the nation-state through the figure of the terrorist Other can perhaps be most clearly seen in the case of Hank Williams, Jr.’s

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“America Will Survive.” After 9/11, Williams wrote new lyrics to his 1982 hit “A Country Boy Can Survive,” a rural pride song that touts country people’s ability to defend themselves and to survive amidst urban chaos: “You can’t starve us out/You can’t make us run/Cause we’re them ol’ boys raised on shotguns/We say grace and we say ma’am/If you don’t like that we don’t give a damn.” The “you” in the original are the corrupt urbanites encroaching on the land and the ways of the country people. Williams’ re-writing of the song suggests the way in which the figure of the terrorist Other makes it possible to displace rural-urban antagonism and reframe the struggle to preserve the old ways as a global conflict between righteous Americans and corrupt terrorists.

In “America Will Survive,” the Christianity and proper manners associated with country people become extended to all Americans. “We say grace, we say ma’am/If you don’t like that, we don’t give a damn” in the original becomes “We say grace, we say ma’am/If they don’t like that, we don’t give a damn” (emphasis added). The 1982 version locates like-minded people in the “West Virginia coal mines/And the Rocky Mountains and the Western skies,” as well as “little towns all around this land,” while the 2001 version expands this to “the big city skylines.” The song’s third verse tells the story of a New York businessman who calls the singer a “hillbilly.” In the 1982 version, Williams laments the man’s death at the hands of a mugger but proudly suggests that he would have been able to defend himself with “my ol’ 45.” In the 2001 version, the man has died in the World Trade Center, and his death justifies Biblical vengeance.

However, many of the lines stay exactly the same as they did when expressing rural pride. Williams maintains his references to country people’s ability to “plow our

163 Williams, “A Country Boy Can Survive.”
fields from dusk till dawn,” “catch catfish all day long,” and “grow good ole tomatoes,” which become reasons why “America Will Survive.” The nation’s “survival” becomes analogous to the singer’s brand of gun-toting backwoods survivalism from the original, and the strength of the nation, its ability to survive, owes nearly everything to the contributions of them “ol’ boys” from the original. With this controversial lifestyle placed front and center, however, the seeds for dissent and a breakdown of consensus had been sown. In the next section, I show how the notions of victimized white masculinity, hypermasculinity, and backwoods survivalism provoked controversy and helped to dismantle the sense of community that arose in 2001.

II: “Homeland Security Starts Right Here”: The “Rural” Community Breaks Down

In a January 2003 piece in American Handgunner, columnist Roy Huntington relates a 9/11 “conversion story,” in which the attacks force an elite New Yorker to see the error of her ways:

I recently read about a self-described “Blue” American in New York City. After September 11th she found herself, basically, useless. She had no real skills and as she stood on the roadside cheering the fire fighters, police, plumbers, electricians, equipment operators, emergency workers and others enroute [sic] to, and returning from, Ground Zero, she realized something very important.

Those tired men and women passing in trucks make it all happen. They are the ones who do the actual work of running the country. They cause the electricity to flow, the schools to be built, the criminals to be arrested and society to run seamlessly. She realized, with a blazingly bright light bulb of awareness flashing in her mind, she didn’t know how to change a tire, grow tomatoes or where electricity comes from.

As she stood, cheering alongside other New York “intellectuals,” she thought back to her low-key, condescending attitude prior to 9-11. Her frown if a waiter's efforts fell short of her expectations during a “power” lunch, her irritability at a school crossing guard who held her up -- and more, and worse, crossed her mind.
She wrote how the experience changed her attitude forever and how she now has trouble being polite to her “Blue” friends.\(^\text{165}\)

In this story, the 9/11 attacks redeem this “Blue American” much the same way that Bud’s death in Vietnam redeemed his loutish brother Tommy in “Ballad of Two Brothers.” The woman comes to see, in a Biblical moment that recalls Paul’s conversion to Christianity, that she and her friends have been persecuting the virtuous for years. Huntington offers a simple solution to the woman’s predicament: “Maybe it's time for her to move” to Middle America.

Huntington’s piece demonstrates the extent to which narratives about 9/11 could be folded into the narratives of the culture wars, in particular the construction of Middle Americans as protectors of American virtue, beset by both the elite and the foreign enemy. The glorification of blue-collar victim/heroes did more than honor those who had given their lives at Ground Zero; it also helped the notion of besieged Middle American masculinity to reemerge after 9/11. An increased respect for manly men and the sense that the nation had been wounded precipitated a revival of hypermasculine patriotism that recalled the Reagan-Rambo era of the 1980s; however, this increased importance on the figure of the “average” white guy proved extremely divisive because of that figure’s association with racism and reaction.

Tension surrounding this notion of “average” white masculinity played out around the actions of and responses to male country stars. When he released his controversial song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” in 2002, Toby Keith became the most visible representative of strong blue-collar masculinity in popular culture. Keith intended “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” as a promise from a

unified, righteously angry America to destroy those who had attacked us. However, the controversy over the unabashedly politically incorrect lyrics, particularly a censorship scandal that pitted Keith against Peter Jennings of ABC, made it clear that Toby Keith’s brand of Middle American masculinity did not serve to unify the nation. The song and its accompanying controversy marked Keith, for some, as an ignorant redneck and, for others, as a heroic citizen who took abuse because he was unafraid to speak the truth.

The gun-toting redneck stereotype threatened the national community built around the rural myth and the figure of the “average” white man in another important sense. The increased importance accorded to the individual man as a potential defender of the homeland under the aegis of homeland security intersected with the backwoods lifestyle as portrayed by country artists and the claims of gun rights advocates. Homeland security fit neatly inside a belief system that posits a fundamentally dangerous world where individual households must defend themselves against unspecified, dangerous invaders, and this linked homeland security and the figure of the “average” white man to gun rights, another highly contentious culture war issue.

The notion of a white man lashing out with “angry” nationalistic rhetoric or violence in response to perceived victimization dredged up forty years of contentious politics, dating back to the social movement era of the 1960s, and proved dangerously close to the stereotypes of the “angry white guy” and the gun-loving redneck. The gulf between these views of the “average” white man as a hero and as an ignorant bigot could not be bridged. For some, this man bore the ultimate burden of protecting his family and his nation from harm through hard work and know-how even while outsiders heaped abuse on his back; for others, he was the most destructive, repugnant, reactionary force in
American culture and politics. Ground Zero heroism did not erase this extraordinarily divisive legacy, and a national community built around the rural myth and the figure of the “average” blue-collar white guy ultimately proved unsustainable because of it.

In September 2001, the strong, gruff American man of few words, as Aaron Fox has written, “had become an almost entirely historical and nostalgic legacy.” This macho man reemerged soon after 9/11, however, as Melani McAlister has pointed out, with his return trumpeted in October 2001 headlines like “The Return of Manly Men” and “Welcome Back, Duke [John Wayne].” Manly heroes like counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer of 24 defended America in popular culture. This revival of strong masculinity represented a reaction to the 9/11 attacks as a wound on the masculine prowess of the United States, which had been bested by an enemy that had successfully realized an attack on American soil. The masculine protectors had failed to safeguard the “virgin land” that they were sworn to protect from harm. However, as Ruth Frankenberg suggests, the dominant narratives after 9/11 held a “clumsy, fragile, and inadequately armed national government” responsible for this wounding. This provided grist for calls to increase the capabilities and scope of the military and defense agencies, in other words, for the “remasculinization” of the national security establishment.

The masculine patriotism that emerged after 9/11 paralleled the masculine patriotism of the 1980s. In the 1980s, as Susan Jeffords writes, the rise of figures such as Ronald Reagan, Oliver North, and Sylvester Stallone’s action hero John Rambo heralded “a general remasculinization of American culture.” Along with their macho-man image,

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167 McAlister, Epic Encounters, 273.
168 Frankenberg, “Cracks in the Façade,” 556.
these figures “show an open disregard for government legislation and legal decisions and favor images of strength and firmness.”\footnote{Jeffords, Remasculinization of America, 169.} They firmly endorse heterosexuality, a strong work ethic, and patriotic duty, the values that were mapped to Middle American men in the Vietnam era and the values that served as the basis for the politics that Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan offered. In 2001, the blue-collar masculine hero as nostalgic figure hearkened back to the bygone days of post-World War II Fordist economic prosperity, but he also recalled the masculine patriotism of the 1970s and, particularly, the 1980s, which had also looked back to those same “good ol’ days.”

The “remasculinization” of America in the 1980s had also come in response to a perceived victimization or “crisis” of American masculinity. This “crisis of masculinity” stemmed in part from humiliation of the United States in international politics, specifically the shameful loss of the war in Vietnam, which conservatives blamed on feminized protestors and government officials who lacked the guts to let the soldiers win, and the weakness of Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy, capped by the Iran hostage crisis. More than anything else, however, it stemmed from the aggrieved position of white men amid the rise of feminism and the identity politics of the social movement era. In this view, the gains of these movements had come at the direct expense of the “average” white men, who had “lost what was rightfully theirs…the power to represent America per se, and to determine the terms of American normativity.”\footnote{Sally Robinson, Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 29.}

As Chapter One pointed out, the Middle American man was deeply implicated in this shift as representative of the “average” American, the guy with the two-bedroom house who stood for the traditional values of family, God, country, and patriarchy. In
this narrative, Middle American men had been victimized most of all by these changes because they alone stood strong for the old ways that had been deemed outmoded. The class politics of the Vietnam War also marked “average” men as particular victims. For many, the Vietnam War allowed this crisis to happen, because the women’s movement made gains while the men, or at least the “real” men, served overseas, defending the American freedom that made those identity politics possible. In this construction, Middle American men bore the burden for a nation that needed them and used them but still turned its back on them. In response to this aggrieved position, as Sally Robinson writes in *Marked Men*, “Middle Americans, so angry at others’ use of the logic of victimization, position[ed] themselves as victims.”

With the victimhood of white men positioned at the center of American narratives around 9/11, this logic of beset white or Middle American masculinity came into play. In a straightforward sense, the rescue workers who died were victims of the terrorists. However, the 9/11 attacks revived several of the old logics of victimization that had grown up around the Vietnam War. First, in allowing the military to atrophy and defense policy to become muddled, the government had essentially dealt these individual heroes a losing hand, just as GIs in Vietnam had been hamstrung by the bureaucracy’s inability to get its act straight. Second, the everyday heroes were also, in an important sense, victims of the elites who now applauded them, because those same elites had mistreated them and dismissed them for years, as in Roy Huntington’s *American Handgunner* story.

This notion of the Middle American man as oppressed victim, however, does not square with widely held negative images of white men as evil oppressors or jingoistic

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warmongers. Nor does it square with the common stereotype of Middle American men as dumb, ignorant “rednecks and Archie Bunkers out to roll back the gains of the civil rights and women’s movements.”\textsuperscript{173} Because these images diverge so much from the virtuous and victimized white masculinity offered by those who defend the Middle American way of life, the figure of the “average” white man is fraught with contestation.

Country stars’ negotiation of masculinity and rural identity after 9/11 played out in the context of this complex history of claims of victimization and oppression. When responding to the new “crisis of masculinity” brought on by 9/11, male country stars dredged up all these associations and dragged this contentious history back into view. Analysis of the response to the most vocal of those stars, Toby Keith, allows for an important angle on the contentious politics of the blue-collar white guy.

\textit{“The Angry American”: Toby Keith and Besieged Middle American Masculinity}

Music stars have played central roles in the negotiation of white Middle American masculinity. In Chapter One, I charted how Merle Haggard became one of the most prominent voices of the Silent Majority. In the mid-1980s, Bruce Springsteen too performed a variation on the role of all-American macho man that resonated with the masculine patriotism of the time; the \textit{Chicago Tribune} suggested that he had revived the “defiant, good ol’ boy, blue-collar skepticism” of Haggard.\textsuperscript{174} Though his lyrics were often critical of the cultural and economic power structure Reagan endorsed, Springsteen’s image intersected with the dominant narratives of the time, and he was


hailed as a spokesman of the patriotic white working class. Indeed, Born in the USA-era Springsteen concerts featured the artist, dressed in T-shirt and jeans, displaying his muscular body on guitar in front of a gigantic American flag, while thousands of audience members shouted the refrain to his biggest hit: “Born in the USA!” In Bryan Garman’s reading, Springsteen’s masculinity “confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism, the work ethic and rugged individualism.”

Just as Haggard had served as the voice of the Silent Majority and Springsteen had been positioned as the voice of the Reagan Democrats, Toby Keith played the role of the post-9/11 “Angry American.” Keith drew on his baritone voice and man’s man image to respond to the 9/11 attacks with righteous masculine anger. His 2002 song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” promises retribution for the attacks and features the infamous line, “We’ll put a boot in your ass/It’s the American way.” The video for “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” opens with a widely circulated image of Keith, a tall, burly man with muscular arms, performing in a white cowboy hat, jeans, and a work shirt with the sleeves cut off, holding an American flag guitar and standing in front of a flag-covered stage. Keith’s choice to perform in an outfit reminiscent of the work clothes of blue-collar men and his use of the flag backdrop clearly point to the legacy of Springsteen’s stage presence, and this image of Keith exemplifies the strain of defiant blue-collar masculinity that served as a promise of America’s strength and the military response that would follow any attack.

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175 Cowie and Boehm, “Dead Man’s Town,” 353.
176 Garman, A Race of Singers, 222.
Toby Keith’s public image brings up a great deal of the contentious legacy of the blue-collar white guy. The “Angry American” in the song’s title is angry because his nation has been attacked, but the title also recalls the stereotype of the “angry white guy,” slighted by women and forgotten by his government in favor of more vocal minority groups. Indeed, Keith pointed to Merle Haggard’s “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” which attacked hippies and protestors, as “the original Angry American song.” In addition, many of Keith’s biggest hits before “Courtesy” detail, often in mean-spirited (or borderline misogynistic) terms, men’s responses to romantic slights committed against them by women. The protagonist of “How Do You Like Me Now?!?” taunts a former cheerleader who spurned him in high school, and “A Little Less Talk and A Lot More Action” tells about a man who picks up a one night stand in a bar after his girlfriend talks too much. Toby Keith’s brand of masculinity presents itself as wounded and beset yet still ready and willing to take vengeful action, and this proves essential to his ability to both articulate nationalist anger and generate controversy.

“Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” constructs the United States as a victim of a cowardly attack that led to justly violent retribution. It begins with a gentle acoustic guitar part and builds to a fast-paced, sing-along chorus and a lengthy electric guitar solo. The opening lyrics establish the patriotism of the American people, who will “always stand up and salute…when we see Old Glory flyin’,” as Keith strums his acoustic guitar. An electric guitar part comes in as Keith sings about his father’s military service. The second verse sets the stage for the heroic drama to follow by introducing the villainous act: “Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack/A mighty sucker punch came

178 Quoted in Willman, Rednecks and Bluenecks, 252.
flying in from somewhere in the back.” But Americans transform from victims to masculine heroes in the next line: “As soon as we could see through our big black eye/Man, we lit up your world like the Fourth of July.”

The tempo builds through this verse and up to the cathartic chorus addressing the “you” of America’s terrorist enemy, when the whole band, including piano and drums, comes in: “Hey, Uncle Sam put your name at the top of his list/And the Statue of Liberty started shaking her fist/And the eagle will fly…And it’ll feel like the whole wide world’s raining down on you/Brought to you courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.” The move from acoustic to electric and the simultaneous increase in tempo, along with the subject matter of the lyrics, seems to suggest that Americans’ pride, patriotism, and authenticity (suggested by the acoustic guitar) supports our military strength and makes us worthy the cathartic act of violent revenge (the chorus, and the electric guitar solo that follows it) that we will exact from the terrorists. Our masculine strength also forces the enemy to submit sexually, as the famous threat to “put a boot in your ass” suggests.180

Likely due in large part to this controversial line, Keith became embroiled in a censorship scandal with ABC-TV in the summer of 2002. In the spring of 2002, ABC had been planning a 3-hour musical special for the first Fourth of July after September 11 intended to “celebrate the history of America through its music.”181 The network booked Keith to open the show with a performance of “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.” However, he was scratched from the lineup in June when the late Peter Jennings, the anchor who would host, objected to the song’s lyrics (although ABC attempted to pass it

180 Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.”
off as a booking conflict). In response, Keith protested publicly, doing a number of news interviews and claiming that the song expressed the anger all Americans felt over the attacks: “Nobody wrote an angry American song and this was one. It was the way everybody felt when they saw those two buildings fall.”

The ABC censorship scandal brought up longstanding tensions about who should represent the United States publicly. “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” had been intended as a battle anthem for a unified America, and Keith claimed to speak for “everybody,” but not everybody identified with the sentiments in his lyrics. Keith himself became a focal point for dissent and discomfort with the jingoistic turn of the United States, as Dixie Chick Natalie Maines’ much-reported comment to the LA Daily News suggests: “Don’t get me started. I hate it. It’s ignorant, and it makes country music sound ignorant. It targets an entire culture—and not just the bad people who did bad things.” Although he hoped to raise morale by inviting listeners to define themselves against the terrorist enemy, he ultimately also gave them the opportunity to define themselves against him as “good ol’ boy” or Middle American guy. In this case, Orientalism failed to unite Americans; divisions between the elite and the “average” and between the thoughtful and “ignorant” ultimately proved most salient.

Over the course of the media coverage, Keith worked to set up a binary between those who could be counted on to do their duty and tell it like it is and those who could not. In this effort, he relied on classic images of masculinity. Media coverage of Keith referred to his 6’-4” height, his 240-pound frame, and the fact that he played

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semiprofessional football before making it big in Nashville.\textsuperscript{184} In a 2003 \textit{60 Minutes II} piece on Keith, Dan Rather describes Keith as “the quintessential macho man.”\textsuperscript{185} While the masculine heroes of the 1980s often showed disdain for government bureaucracy and formal power structures, Keith defined himself somewhat differently, using the support of the military establishment as a source of legitimacy for his song. Though he remained obedient to the military hierarchy, he still represented himself as transgressing the norms of the media establishment and cultural elite. His willingness to serve as a target for the vitriol of unpatriotic Americans intersected with the narrative of Middle American masculinity as beset, misunderstood, and key to the survival of the nation.

Keith presented his decision to record “Courtesy” as his duty to the troops. In an interview with Dan Rather, he explained that he originally wrote the song to perform on USO tours, with no intention of recording it. He changed his mind when Gen. James Jones, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, told him (in Keith’s words) “you have to release it. You can serve your country in other ways besides suiting up in combat. We will go kick their butts, but we survive on morale.”\textsuperscript{186} This was his masculine duty as a civilian; if he could not “suit up,” he could at least increase the morale of the troops and stir up support on the home front. His deep respect for military leadership and for the troops also comes through in the music video for “Courtesy,” a compilation of video from Keith’s USO tours that features Keith shaking hands with soldiers and signing

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{60 Minutes II}.
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Ibid.}
autographs for them as well as concert footage of wildly enthusiastic audiences of soldiers cheering and high-fiving.\(^{187}\)

The respect he shows for the soldiers does not extend to Peter Jennings or ABC, however, and the censorship incident allowed Keith to claim mistreatment at the hands of ABC and situate himself as a rebel. He questioned the Canadian-born Peter Jennings’ patriotism: “I find it interesting that he’s not from the U.S. I bet Dan Rather’d let me do it on his special.”\(^{188}\) In questioning Jennings’ patriotism, Keith suggested that Jennings is not man enough or American enough to allow the song on his show. He simply could not handle the directness with which the song delivers its message. Meanwhile, Keith presented himself as the guy who’s not afraid to say something deemed politically incorrect that, nevertheless, we’re all thinking. After the song came out, “The response was so tremendous, I said, ‘Hey, we’re allowed to be angry,’” Keith explains on CNN.\(^{189}\)

The divide between Keith’s point of view and that of Jennings, from Keith’s perspective, was the divide between the elite and the “average.” “As far extreme as I seem, I’m probably catching the average Joe in the middle better than anybody,” Keith observed to Dan Rather.\(^{190}\) Whereas in June 2002 Keith had claimed that “everybody” felt the way he did, for Rather in late 2003, he slipped into the familiar role of “average Joe.” With this comment, he admits that some would consider him “extreme,” but those people do not understand “average” people. In the press, Keith presented his family (and others like them) as guardians of patriotism before it became popular: “When nobody really thought you needed to fly a flag and patriotism was gone, we flew one in our

\(^{187}\) DreamWorks Nashville, video for “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.”

\(^{188}\) Mansfield, “Keith speaks out.”

\(^{189}\) CNN, “Singer says Jennings gave him the boot.”

\(^{190}\) 60 Minutes II.
The song was very personal for him, as it had been written in tribute to his late father, a patriotic veteran. Indeed, Keith’s father’s military service forms the backbone of the authenticity claims in the song: “My daddy served in the Army, where he lost his right eye/But he flew a flag out in our yard till the day that he died.”

Keith’s father had endured a real, physical wound for his country, and Keith characterized the negative response to the song as the latest in a half-century of wounds Middle Americans suffered from unpatriotic Americans. Keith seemed to feel that anyone who attacked the song attacked his father’s values: “That’s why I’m so defensive when somebody jumps on that song, you know. You get on that and you just turn into a commie heathen with me.” Even bygone enemies reemerged to force Keith into the “defensive” posture of the Middle American victim, but he refused to stop standing up for his beliefs and his nation: “I’ll be there every time. If you, if they need me to respond, I’ll be that guy because I’m not going to lay down. And I’m not gonna shut up.”

In his defense of the Middle American way of life, Keith served as a clear successor to Merle Haggard. As a native of Oklahoma, he hailed from the same state as the patriotic “Okie from Muskogee” of 1969. Dan Rather’s 60 Minutes report positions Keith as a voice of blue-collar America and his concerts as coming-out parties for proud Middle Americans:

Look around at a Toby Keith concert and you’ll see the America he sings about: blue-collar fans and families, proudly showing their colors and embracing the music that gives voice to the lives they live.

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191 Ibid.
192 Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.”
194 60 Minutes II.
His point of view is that of a 6-foot-4, 240-pound Oklahoman. There’s God and country. There’s women and whiskey. And not necessarily in that order. Rather’s assertion that Keith’s music “gives voice to the lives” of blue-collar Americans echoes Merle Haggard’s claims about the significance of his music for the Silent Majority. Just as Haggard’s voice had articulated the Silent Majority’s claims, Keith’s voice, the voice of an angry guy from Oklahoma, came to represent all those who valued the Middle American perspective in wartime. However, Keith’s priorities, characterized as “God and country” and “women and whiskey,” mark him as a redneck in a way that Haggard’s “Okie” simply was not. The “Okie” identified himself as a “square” and thus claimed to be looked down upon, but he did not proclaim a glorified lack of taste; rather, it was those outside Muskogee who had deviated from the proper norms.

Keith, however, in part through his own efforts, has consistently been represented as a good ol’ boy. News reports pointed out that Keith generally sang about women and drinking rather than politics and that he planned to follow “Courtesy” with a single called “I Love This Bar.” This rebellious redneck image proves key to Keith’s anti-elite politics: his “rough” ways become the antidote to the uptight spinelessness of Peter Jennings and the ABC censors. His unabashed lack of decorum essentially allows him to “speak the truth” where others will not. However, with “averageness” linked to such a figure, the claims of those in the Middle suffered. Keith’s macho bluster, often directed at women, his moral certainty, and his redneck image made him a wildly divisive figure.

The fact that Keith was deemed representative of “blue-collar America” or the “average Joe” suggests the extent to which stereotypical regional representations of

195 60 Minutes II.
Middle America and the South had bled into the notion of “averageness.” In the 1960s, country musicians who claimed “averageness” had downplayed rustic stereotypes; Keith reveled in them. The fact that male country stars so easily slide into this role has negative consequences for national community; as the musicians present a cartoonish image of “Blue” America to their audiences, they appear to be cartoons to “Blue” Americans.

**DIY Homeland Security: Guns, the Homeland, and the Rural Home**

The divisiveness of the redneck stereotype and of “average” Middle American masculinity also intersected with notions of homeland security. The efforts of gun rights advocates and country musicians to claim “homeland security” as a particular responsibility of “rural” men—sportsmen and backwoods dwellers—helped to tie notions of “homeland” to gun rights, a contentious hot-button “culture war” issue, and to divisive stereotypes. In this way, the claiming of “homeland security” by these proud Middle Americans produces further tension around a national community founded on the rural myth and the figure of the “average” rural man.

Because it posits every person as a potential actor, for good or for bad, in a national security struggle, and because of its agrarian-settler investment in protecting “our” land, “homeland security” recalls the militias of farmer-soldiers so central to Revolutionary War mythology. Further, as Ruth Frankenberg notes, the dominant narrative that arose around 9/11 exposed the government’s “impotence and inadequacy” in defending the nation while posing “rugged individualism” as a potential alternative.\(^{197}\) The gun-wielding “average” man could therefore conceivably play a major role in defending the nation, and the possibility of action on the “homeland security” front

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\(^{197}\) Frankenberg, “Cracks in the Façade,” 556.
piqued the fantasy of some gun enthusiasts. A firearm retailer called the American Historical Foundation sold a Thompson submachine gun under the billing, “The NRA ‘Homeland Security’ Thompson, “which is the world’s first limited edition firearm in honor of Homeland Security—which is the most defining aspect of our time, today.” The advertisement for the weapon notes that it “could be used to defend your home, family, or nation,” and, “if terrorists come to our country with bad thoughts on their minds, what better weapon to own than the legendary Thompson!” The advertisement features a photograph of the gun lying on top of a picture of Osama bin Laden, Border Patrol and NYPD badges, and “Top Secret” Department of Homeland Security file and thus invites the individual consumer to participate in “official” homeland security activity.

Homeland security therefore helped to reconstruct the figuring of Middle American men as entrusted protectors, always under threat of attack on multiple fronts. In large part, this works through the connection between homeland security and gun rights, one of the core beliefs of Middle American identity politics. The assumptions of homeland security dictates resonated significantly with the assumptions of gun rights advocates, who claim to be under siege in a fundamentally dangerous world. In this construction, home may be under attack at any time by a series of criminals or undefined enemies. Hank Williams, Jr.’s “Country Boy” fears those enemies who would “starve us out” or “make us run,” but he expresses confidence that he and his can defend their way of life because “we’re them ol’ boys raised on shotguns.”

Gun-owning Middle Americans are not simply besieged by these undefined enemies; their political opponents also oppress them and look down on them. Rhetoric

199 Williams, “A Country Boy Can Survive.”
on gun rights often draws such a sense of victimization, as another selection from Roy Huntington’s piece in *American Handgunner* suggests:

> I, for one, am tired of being accused of being unsophisticated, of being “One of those gun people,” of being insensitive to the needs of the “rest” of society, of putting our platform at the forefront of our voting beliefs. I’m tired of hearing pontifications from ivory towers about “our” part of America from people who have never changed a spark plug, planted a seed or helped build bookcases for the school library.206

Huntington presents himself as under siege because of his political beliefs. Unspecified assailants repeatedly claim that he is “unsophisticated” or “insensitive” and heap “pontifications” on him “from ivory towers.” These opponents do not understand the essential work that Middle Americans do, especially in the dangerous post-9/11 world.

This link between homeland security and gun rights marks homeland security as something that helps define Middle America against the city. “I ain’t scared to grab my gun/And fight for my homeland,” Rhett Akins promises in his strident rural pride song “Kiss My Country Ass,” of course implying that “you” are.201 The first verse of “Kiss My Country Ass” features the protagonist driving down a dirt road in his pickup truck with a beer in his lap and a Confederate flag flying; his willingness to serve his country becomes one of the many things that differentiate him from the elite. Similarly, the NRA claimed hunters as the everyday heroes who could defend the nation. One NRA T-shirt produced during the wars in the Middle East featured an image of a hunter with a rifle and two bucks and the message, “Homeland security starts right here.” Another identified the Second Amendment as “America’s Original Homeland Security.”202

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200 Huntington, “The Insider.”
201 Rhett Akins, “Kiss My Country Ass,” *People Like Me*, 2006, BNA.
Through this connection between homeland security and the backwoods lifestyle, the rural home becomes the analogue for the homeland; both house morally upright people who stand ready to defend themselves. Josh Thompson’s “Way Out Here,” another rural pride song that hit number fifteen in 2010, begins with the threatening couplet, “Our houses are protected by the good Lord and a gun/You might meet ‘em both if you show up here not welcome, son.” The “you” who shows up unwelcome could be a terrorist or an urban outsider. The analogous duty to defend the homeland also falls to the country people, as Thompson notes: “It’s mostly us that end up serving overseas.”

In the rousing chorus of “Way Out Here,” Thompson hails the virtues of country people: “We won’t take a dime if we ain’t earned it/When it comes to weight, brother, we pull our own…We’re about John Wayne, Johnny Cash, and John Deere/Way out here.”

As the title suggests, however, it is not so much the connection to the land as the distance from corrupting influences that produces and maintains these virtues. As quoted in a biographical piece for *CMT News*, Thompson presents the backwoods lifestyle as both a preservation of proper religion and proper masculinity and an imagined community of likeminded people: “It’s really not about living out in the sticks. It’s about beliefs. Regardless of what’s going on around the country, as wussified as we may be becoming, there are still people that believe in the Bible and guns and still think John Wayne and Johnny Cash are great. They make their living and don’t stand in line for handouts.”

These people can be found, according to Thompson, in a vaguely defined but clearly rural space where the past is still present, “way out here.”

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203 Thompson, “Way Out Here.”

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that the rural-urban dichotomy expressed in country music, understood in terms of a moral geography that locates good people in “rural” areas and untrustworthy people in cities, has major implications for the narratives of American culture and politics. This moral geography undergirds the opposition between North and South and between Middle America, the heartland, or flyover country and the coasts. Contemporary American understandings of class are also shot through with this geographical imagination, and in the last forty years, it has been foundational in the construction of a particular populist conservatism centered on the figure of the “average” rural man. I have often used “country,” or “rural” to mean a set of shared values and beliefs—respect for traditional values, the family, God, country, a strong work ethic, and a sense of being looked down upon—that undergird an imagined rural community. Those values, and the people who practice them, have often been located close to nature and far from cities in an idyllic imagined small town.

My first chapter, which focused (roughly) on the years between 1965 and 1975, looked at these issues in the context of the creation of “Middle America” and the Silent Majority and the politics of the Vietnam War era. I argued that country’s depictions of morally righteous country people helped to construct Middle Americans and Nixon’s Silent Majority as virtuous, “average,” and rural. I showed how this moral geography defined its Silent Majority against both urban African Americans, viewed as a corrupt and crime-ridden underclass, and white Vietnam War protestors, held as the cultural elite. Further, I suggested that nostalgic depictions of the rural home in country music helped to galvanize those opposed to the direction of the country and integrate them into a
community of others wishing for the imagined past. Finally, looking specifically at
country songs that dealt with the Vietnam War, I examined how country songs offered
legitimacy for the war as an event that could produce strong men and strong families.

My second chapter, centered on the months and years after the September 11, 2001 attacks, examined country music and moral geography in the context of the post-9/11 construction of “homeland,” when the borders of the imagined rural community became expanded to include the nation-state. In the months after 9/11, I argued, country musicians’ portrayals of simple, virtuous rural people stood in for the nation at large and contrasted sharply with the “you” of the evil Islamic world. Country musicians offered a portrait of the United States as victimized but strong, with the figure of the “average” man as everyday hero at the forefront. However, I argued, the figure of the “average” Middle American man proved too divisive for a national community founded on that figure to stand. Instead, the notion of besieged Middle American masculinity that had arisen in response to the Vietnam War and the social movements of the 1960s reemerged and helped 9/11 and the concept of homeland security to become tied to the culture wars.

These two chapters in combination offered the opportunity to chart the consequences of the positioning (in two distinct moments) of a vaguely defined social group—“average Americans,” “small town Americans,” or “Middle Americans”—as the stock of the nation and to reveal the role of geographical imagination in the construction of authenticity and moral legitimacy in politics. Spotlighting the late 1960s and early 1970s allowed me to trace out the moral geography of the rural myth as it became articulated to the Silent Majority’s populist conservatism, an extremely divisive and defensive political identity that drew on antipathy towards the white upper middle class
elite and the black underclass. Following this chapter with an analysis of country music’s politics after the 9/11 attacks allowed me to show what happened when the key attributes identified with that defensive and divisive political identity became central to a newly defined sense of national identity: namely, the notion of the white man as an everyday hero threatening the enemy with vengeance proved too close to negative stereotypes of the redneck and the reactionary “angry white guy” and made a community founded on the figure of the “average” white man unsustainable.

In this study, I have relied heavily on textual analysis of song lyrics. While analysis of lyrics often features in studies of the political impact of popular music, it runs up against several drawbacks. Ray Pratt argues that the “actual popularity of any music is a product of a variety of factors beyond those deduced from apparent substantive lyrical content.” To be sure, listeners may pay little attention to lyrics and do not necessarily endorse the sentiments in them. Because country music places such an emphasis on lyrics and storytelling, with relatively simple song structures and vocals so prominent in the mix that listeners generally have little trouble picking them out, these arguments do not hold as much weight when it comes to country music.

Another strong challenge to this method comes from Jimmie Rogers and Stephen A. Smith, who make the persuasive claim that country music’s canon is so broad and so extensive as to contain song lyrics that would support practically any argument about its politics. To account for this, I have based my arguments around common tropes in country music, images and narratives that appear in hundreds of songs (and, in the case of

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rural pastoral, a trope absolutely vital to the genre’s identity). I have also devoted a good deal of attention to the most well known (and, in some cases, controversial) songs like “Okie from Muskogee” and “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,” the songs that reached the greatest numbers of listeners and shaped their understandings of what “country music” is or was.

Close lyrical analysis is essential for a study of country music and politics. Most often, country music offers a politics rooted not in abstract ideology or political talking points but in everyday values like love of God and family, patriotism, and strong masculinity. Country music invites listeners to relate to its stories in extremely personal terms, as suggested in one country music station’s slogan, “Music that makes you think they’re singing about you.” Any study that hopes to make sense of the political impact of country music therefore cannot simply chronicle the public political activities or private political views of country musicians or the explicit political statements in country songs. Rather, it must account for the way the texts, even those that respond to specific current events, understand “everyday” American life and narrate rural, Middle American, or American identity. Because country music claims to depict such a familiar landscape, its depictions of “everyday” life and “average” people become even more important to parse because of its claims to normativity through the “average” and the “everyday.”

However, textual analysis cannot take place in a vacuum. First, while lyrics (especially in country music) constitute a major part of a song’s “meaning,” analysis of the music itself, instrumentation, and performance provide for a more complete picture. Second, textual analysis must be grounded in clearly drawn historical context and an attempt to reconstruct the audience at the specific moment. With respect to country

207 Schmelz, “‘Have You Forgotten?’,” 123.
music, it is essential to look past the stereotypes of country music as the music of a monolithic and static southern rural working class and recognize a pop music genre with a national audience that is regionally if not racially diverse, largely suburban, and largely middle class. I have tried to walk a fine line in attempting to sketch a portrait of the country music audience in two distinct periods and to suggest how country music’s messages may have resonated with people and their concerns without making dubious claims about reception that cannot be supported by a study focused on textual analysis.

In this thesis, I have used the term “country music” to refer to the mainstream country that can be heard on Top 40 country hits radio stations. This is reflective of my goals in the study and not reflective of any conviction that mainstream country is the “only” country music or the “only” country music worthy of study. (It also reflects my understanding that readers would quickly get tired of seeing the words “mainstream country music” in every other line of this paper.) I have excluded alternative country music because it does not have the mass popularity or level of exposure that mainstream country does and because its audience profile differs greatly from that of mainstream country. Alternative country fans—an overwhelmingly college educated, liberal demographic—differentiate themselves from mainstream country fans along both political and musical lines.\footnote{Ching and Fox, \textit{Old Roots, New Routes}, 12-14.} By and large, alternative country musicians have not gained the same level of mass exposure as spokespersons for Middle Americans (in large part because they appeal to a different audience), and, since I hoped to investigate the work done by country music as a mass medium around social groups defined as “average,” middle income, and Middle American, I spotlighted middlebrow country songs and artists that have gained significant popular success.
However, much future research into country music, politics, and place should consider alternative country music. Alt-country brings up many of the issues I raised in this thesis, including the relationship between music and politics and the politics of nostalgia and authenticity. Alt-country also looks back to a more authentic past, a past when country music was “real” country and performers were “real,” and its valorization of past rural cultures takes on a different tinge since it often comes from a highly educated cultural elite. Alt-country provides a compelling example of how an orientation towards nostalgia and authenticity can support liberal politics. An interesting extension of this topic would compare depictions of rural life in alt-country and mainstream country in the context of this stark political difference.

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While working on this project, I have encountered several telling assumptions about country music as a subject of academic study. Several people have been surprised to learn that I am from Maryland (as opposed to Texas or Tennessee, I guess) after hearing about my thesis topic. One of the most common sentiments, though, has been that country music is an off-the-wall topic, one that must be cool or fun to write about because it differs so much from the expected. As it stands, country music is a fairly off-the-wall topic for cultural studies in the United States. But it should not be: as the most popular pop music genre in the country, it would seem to be of obvious interest to those who study popular media. The fact that country music is closer to a novelty than to a well-trod topic reveals a fundamental gap in the literature.

This lack of attention does not just afflict country music; it extends to rural places in general. Nothing like a critical rural studies really exists as a discipline in the United States.  

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209 Ibid., 14.
States. Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching have pointed to several reasons why cultural studies, by and large, has not paid much attention to rural places, including “Marxist distaste for rural idiocy,” an “urban bias in postmodern theory,” and the fact that the basic values of academia differ fundamentally from the anti-intellectualism and practicality associated with the rural perspective. This has contributed to the association of the urban with globalism, modernity, and fast-paced change, while the rural essentially remains fixed and provincial. Contemporary country music’s mass-mediated “country” troubles many of these assumptions about what constitutes “rural”: it suggests both that people who identify with rural values often do so as urbanites or suburbanites and that the boundaries of what counts as “rural” are not only blurry but also highly flexible.

These basic insights demonstrate that “rural” is not a fixed identity that will disappear as a vestige of an unwanted past. While the political and economic power of rural America has declined precipitously, the symbolic power of rural imagery is as strong as ever. More attention should be paid to the complex work done by representations of rural America, from Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon and the straight-laced Norwegian bachelor farmers of “A Prairie Home Companion” to Larry the Cable Guy’s stories about his “family” and the caricatured newlyweds on “My Big Redneck Wedding.” Analysis should also look at the implications of a mass mediated “rural” identity as a category almost entirely disconnected from the actual countryside.

Doing this kind of “critical rural studies” is essential because societal ambivalence about progress is so often worked out in terms of the opposition between rural and urban, as Raymond Williams has pointed out in The Country and the City:

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It is significant, for example, that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present. The pull of the idea of the country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernization, development. In what is then a tension, a present experienced as tension, we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses, which it might be better to face in its own terms.\textsuperscript{211}

Williams’ reference to a “present experienced as tension” is particularly instructive.

Rosy images of small towns may seem relatively harmless, a product of the fact that, as country music scholar Joli Jensen concludes in \textit{The Nashville Sound}, “we idealize communities we can no longer live in.”\textsuperscript{212} However, this use of rural imagery to represent the imagined past has important negative consequences in the present.

First, romanticized images relegate small towns to the realm of “history” or tourist consumption and mask the industrial work that goes on there. They also mask the not-so-idyllic realities of rural life, the severe economic and social problems many rural areas face, from severe job shortages to widespread alcohol and drug abuse.\textsuperscript{213} Small towns, Richard Davies writes, “have become neglected appendages to America’s dominant urban culture…condemned to live in the shadows of a new America.”\textsuperscript{214} Because of the moral geography at work, we do not expect to find people in dire poverty in small towns. But they are there. The 11,897 small towns (population under a thousand) counted in the 1990 census “contain[ed] larger concentrations of the poor and elderly, on a percentage basis, than America’s cities.”\textsuperscript{215}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{211} Williams, \textit{The Country and the City}, 297.
\bibitem{214} Davies, \textit{Main Street Blues}, 192, 195.
\bibitem{215} \textit{Ibid.}, 192.
\end{thebibliography}
Second, the nostalgic small town idyll, held as a space where the traditional norms still remain, attaches a troubling kind of normativity to the imagined past. In many ways, it wants to reverse undesirable change rather than come to terms with it. Merle Haggard’s “Are the Good Times Really Over?” looks to a time “back before Elvis,” “back when the country was strong,” “when a man could still work, and still would” and “before microwave ovens/when a girl could still cook, and still would.”216 The reassuring nature of these “good times” masks the fact that they point back to a deeply restrictive set of norms and an almost Luddite stubbornness about change.

Nevertheless, this kind of imagined past is extremely appealing, especially to a society that so desperately wants community. As James Combs writes in The Reagan Range: The Nostalgic Myth in American Politics, “For a vulnerable people threatened by no sense of place in the here and now, an imaginary past is preferable to none at all and certainly to a critical past of harsh events and uncertain processes. The nostalgic impulse transforms the past into a romantic drama wherein the institutions of the stable social hierarchy are created and placed.”217 Recalling an imagined past appeals to frustrated and disillusioned people because it does not require any faith in an uncertain future: that the (imagined) past was much better than the present is taken on faith. Alluring as it may be, this is a fundamentally irresponsible politics that does not offer any concrete solutions or ways forward. As difficult as it may be to stomach, a “critical past” that takes into account the complexity of experience and the multiplicity of views allows for the best, most clear-eyed analysis of the challenges facing both rural and urban life.

216 Merle Haggard, “Are the Good Times Really Over?”, Big City, 1982, Epic/Legacy.
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