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To cite this article: Geoff Mann (2008) Why does country music sound white? Race and the voice of nostalgia, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31:1, 73-100, DOI: [10.1080/01419870701538893](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701538893)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870701538893>



Published online: 26 Sep 2008.




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Why does country music sound white? Race and the voice of nostalgia

Geoff Mann

Abstract

Since American country music has historical ties to musics of many different regions and racial groups, the answer to the question ‘Why does country music sound white?’ is by no means obvious. This article asks how country became white, and how it stays white. To inquire into why country music sounds white is to wonder what whiteness sounds like, and how it is heard. This article considers the meaning of the sounds of country in the making of a pose of historically ‘innocent’ and ‘besieged’ American whiteness. Focusing on the cultural politics of nostalgia, I argue that in the construction of an idealized past-ness, or ‘used to’, country music not only ‘talks white’, but it is whites who hear it, and whose whiteness is produced and reproduced by what they hear.

Keywords: Race; country music; conservatism; nostalgia; whiteness; United States.

In the midst of the first Gulf War, by joint resolution, the United States Congress asked President George Bush, Sr, to declare October 1991 ‘Country Music Month’. In his proclamation, Bush declared himself a country music fan:

To listen to a country and western song is to hear the story of America set to music. It is a story of patriotism and hard work, a story of faith, opportunity, and achievement. Most of all, it is the story of a people whose love of freedom is equalled only by their love of life itself. . . . Country music is honest, good-natured music played with style and spirit. Like a favorite pair of faded blue jeans, it fits the way we live. Never out of fashion, always comfortable, country music has millions of fans in cities and towns across the United States – people of all ages and all walks of life. And whether they tap their toes to the lively sound of bluegrass and honky-tonk or hum

along with the rhythm and blues, country music lovers share an appreciation of the simple and most important things in life: faith, family, and friendship. Of course, while country music speaks from the heart of the American people, it has – like liberty itself – a great and universal appeal. Indeed, millions of people around the world can be counted among its fans. Maybe that is because country music crosses the barriers of culture and language, capturing all the joys, struggles, laughter, and heartache that are part of our daily lives. (Bush 1991)

The fact that the US celebrated ‘Country Music Month’ in the middle of the Gulf War – and not, say, ‘Punk Rock Month’ – may not be all that surprising. Just as the industry and its associated media have rallied behind his son’s recent aggressions, country music ‘went to war’ for Bush Sr, as it had for Johnson and Nixon in Vietnam, Eisenhower in Korea, and Roosevelt and Truman in World War II (DiMaggio, Peterson and Esco 1972, pp. 45–6; Parvaz 2003).¹ Indeed, significant segments of post-World War II country music have always embraced the canonical elements of US conservatism: tradition, faith, family (of the ‘traditional’ sort), nationalism, and so on; these relations have been especially strong since the 1960s (Schulman 2001, p. 115; Malone 2002, pp. 210–15; Gregory 2005, p. 309; Lund 1972).²

To identify ‘America’ and its ‘universal’ values with country music, however, leaves a great deal unsaid about the genre and its positioning in the broader social field of the contemporary US (Fox 2005). For, despite Bush’s claim that ‘country music crosses the barriers of culture and language’ (and the strange attempt to somehow frame rhythm and blues as a subgenre of country), country music is widely perceived to be ‘white’ music – produced by white people, consumed by white people, apparently appealing almost exclusively to white people, at least in North America.³ This is not merely received opinion, but is confirmed by virtually every scholar of the genre (Hemphill 1970; DiMaggio, Peterson and Esco 1972; Tosches 1985; Malone 1985, 2002; Sample 1996; Peterson 1997; Ching 2001; Cantwell 2003; Fillingim 2003; Fox 2004a, 2004b; Gregory 2005). Country music sounds white – so much so that Bill Malone, country’s pre-eminent historian, can remark matter-of-factly that the singing voice of Charley Pride, the only non-white ‘star’ in the history of the industry, ‘was so country that no one suspected he was black’ (Malone 1985, p. 313).⁴

Why does country music sound white? Contrary to received wisdom, the answer is not self-evident. The common belief that country music is part of an imagined ‘white culture’ in the US is confused on two counts. First, because there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ white American ethnicity or culture; this is perhaps the only issue on which most of the now vast and heterogeneous literature on whiteness is in agreement

(e.g. Omi and Winant 1986; Roediger 1991; Jacobson 1998; Gilroy 2003).⁵ Second, because even if we were to bracket the fact that there has never been an homogeneous 'white culture' in the US, and work from the not uncommon belief that country music is a product of something called 'white American' life, we would be incorrect even on these much less demanding explanatory grounds. For in fact, a complicated mix of musics, including those of Mexico, Africa and African-Americans, contribute to what is now called country music (*Journal of Country Music* 1992; Lewis 1993; Thomas 1996; Fryd 1998, pp. 268–71; Small 1998, pp. 158–60; Ching 2001, pp. 30–1; Cantwell 2003, pp. 91–142).

The suggestions that country music sounds white because it is historically 'associated' with white people, or because white people perform it, listen to it, or buy it are of course relevant, but nonetheless fall very short of an answer to the question. The same is true of the idea that country's whiteness is a product of its accented link to the US South, which according to this reasoning is presumably a 'white' region. The problem is that all these explanations make straightforward causal evaluations that are not only refutable, but must deny the histories of the people, places, and musics in question. Phrases like 'white man's blues' (Grissim 1970), and 'white soul' (Sample 1996) reproduce common sense understandings that turn a deaf ear to all the work that has gone into the erasure of the genre's multiple heritages (Tosches 1985; Thomas 1996).

The essential question, then, is how did country become white, and how does it stay white? To inquire into why country music sounds white is to wonder what whiteness sounds like, and how it is heard. For, while country music is certainly not the *only* sound of whiteness, it is nonetheless true that, in anglo North American popular culture at least, whiteness can, and frequently does, sound like country music. That it is not some 'natural' affinity that makes country sound white makes it all the more important to ask why this is so. For if country sounds white, it is perhaps worth considering the possibility that something claiming the status of 'white culture', something like a purportedly American whiteness – however historically baseless – is not *reflected* in country music, but is, rather, partially *produced* by it. While my analysis here constitutes a somewhat fragmentary contribution, this is precisely what I am trying to do.

The discussion is organized as follows. After a brief review of the limited work on whiteness and country music, I offer a rough description of the historical and musical character of country music in the US. I then suggest an outline of the ways the music might produce a subject – what John Mowitt calls 'musical interpellation' – to consider the meaning of the sounds of country music in the US and the making of a specific, but increasingly dominant, 'pose' of

historically ‘innocent’ and ‘besieged’ American whiteness. Like the content and form of country music itself (Shusterman 1999, p. 221), and every other ‘common sense’ category, this whiteness is overdetermined, and here I focus on its articulation with one of country music’s most dominant (and stereotypical) tropes: nostalgia. Linking this cultural politics of time to the form and content of country, I suggest an ideological explanation for why it ‘sounds white’: in the construction of an idealized past-ness, country music not only ‘talks white’, but it is ‘whites’ who hear it, and whose whiteness is produced and reproduced by what they hear. The songs of a racialized and mythic ‘used to’ sound a present in which whiteness makes sense retroactively, calling white people to their whiteness.

Country music as race music

History, and the people who live and make it, are the only things that can give ‘race’ a ‘sound’ or a ‘look’. Scholars have accorded the latter a great deal of attention, and with good reason. The oft-noted ‘hegemony of vision’ (Crary 1990) in our cultural-political universes has powerfully shaped the production and reproduction of race and racism, and destabilizing the obviousness of ‘I-see-it-with-my-own-eyes’ sense-making remains a crucial task. Yet the hegemony of visibility also operates on contemporary critical race scholarship itself, which thus paradoxically elides aurality for the very same reasons it attacks ‘plain sight’. It was precisely the polyvalence of what we see that Benjamin underscored when he claimed that ‘history decays into images, not stories’ (1999, p. 476), but even with this knowledge, we remain stuck in his scrapbook histories; we have yet to attend adequately to the ‘noise’ that echoes in every image (Attali 1985).⁶

Within the literature on country music, much of which is written by fans (like me), there is a defensiveness about the genre’s whiteness (e.g. Sanjek 1998) – or a refusal to discuss it (e.g. Tichi 1994) – that motivates an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to ‘lay to rest the misguided perception of country music as racially exclusive’ (Sanjek 1998, p. 35). ‘Proof’ is purportedly provided by naming the few non-whites associated with country music, like Charley Pride, DeFord Bailey (a popular Grand Ole Opry radio performer in the 1930s), and Ray Charles (whose *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* (Rhino R 2 70099) recordings of the 1950s are excellent, but do not actually sound all that ‘country’) (e.g. *Journal of Country Music* 1992). Alternatively, defenders point to songs like Merle Haggard’s ‘Irma Jackson’, which sympathetically tells the story of an ‘interracial’ love affair, in an effort to show that country music is not ‘racist’.

I am aware of these exceptional and often excellent songs and performers. But recalling Charley Pride and ‘Irma Jackson’ entirely

misses the point, while unwittingly reinforcing it: both are immediately identifiable because they so clearly contradict country's racialization. That they are worthy of mention only demonstrates further that country sounds white. Moreover, it bears emphasis that raced sound is not necessarily racist sound, an assumed equivalence that underlies the suggestion that a song about black–white love cannot sound white. In fact, Charley Pride and 'Irma Jackson', as good as they both are, make little difference to country music's widely perceived 'white sound', or to its persistent (and not always unconscious) practised whiteness (Malone 1985, pp. 312–18; Tosches 1985, pp. 162–217), examples of which are at least as easy to find in the record bin as 'Irma Jackson'. One need not go back to Johnny Russell's 1973 hit 'Red Necks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer'. Listen, for example, to 'I Hate Rap', a 1998 single by the group Confederate Railroad, a Grammy-nominated, major-label country act (Atlantic/WEA). Again, whiteness does not indelibly mark all of country music as a racist force of evil; there are many songs, like 'Irma Jackson', which highlight and challenge forces of domination and exclusion in contemporary society. The point is rather that country's 'sound' is 'overwhelmingly white' (Middleton and Beebe 2002, p. 165), in the same way that soul music 'sounds' black.

Acknowledging country's raced dynamics, then, and trying to understand them, as Ronald Radano (2003) has done so compellingly for 'black music', is surely one of popular music scholarship's more pressing tasks. Numerous theoretically and historically rich such accounts of hip-hop (e.g. Rose 1994), jazz (e.g. Moten 2003), blues (e.g. Woods 1998) and rock (e.g. Mowitt 2002) are available, and more are appearing all the time. But for country, while some interesting work has appeared on gender (Banes 1992; Stewart 1993) and sexuality (Ortega 1998; Grossman 2002), and some on class (Peterson 1992), surprisingly little has examined race in any detail. This is all the more surprising in the face of a cultural politics equally as rigidly racialized as in many other musics, if not more so. The writings of Nick Tosches (1985), Robert Cantwell (2003) and Aaron Fox (2004a; 2004b) stand as powerful but somewhat lonely examples, and whiteness is only a subsidiary interest in each of these cases.

It bears emphasis that the point here is not to discover some 'natural' sound of whiteness, which can never be anything but 'culture'. Raced sound is surely among the more effectively imposed 'obviousnesses' that constitute ideology's 'effects': there is little in contemporary American popular culture more 'obvious' than the 'colour' of music. We simply 'cannot *fail to recognize*' (Althusser 1971, p. 172) the blackness of hip-hop or soul, the whiteness of heavy metal or country.⁷ The point is thus to inquire into 'the American-born social grounds of racially attributable stylistic procedures', since the 'perception of

musical difference [has] grown so thoroughly racialized that music [has come] to epitomize racial differences generally' (Radano 2003, p. 8–9). Consequently, much more work is needed, both because of the political significance of country music in US popular culture, and because we need to consider theoretically the crucial ideological role of sound in the cultural politics of race (Radano and Bohlman 2000a; Radano 2003).

Country music in the US: sound and story

The popularity and profitability of country music in the US has grown rapidly in the last twenty-five years. New country artists are 'crossing over', reaching audiences of other genres, and country icons like Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton have found enthusiastic listeners outside of country radio. Nevertheless, full-time country music radio remains key to the industry. The most significant mode of disseminating new commercial material, the format has exploded since the late 1960s (Peterson and DiMaggio 1975; Fillingim 2003, p. 70). It is now the dominant radio format in the US, attracting 42 per cent of all listeners (Haslam 1999, p. 293).⁸ Album sales have also ballooned, although the steep increase in the 1990s is overstated by the fact that most country records are bought in department stores like Wal-Mart, whose sales statistics were not taken into account by *Billboard* magazine and other organizations assessing 'popularity' until 1991 (Cusic 1998, p. 201). Regardless, however one measures the commercial success of a musical genre, country is an unqualified 'hit'.

Of course, the genre is not homogenous – it has always been more internally differentiated than stereotypes would have it (Tosches 1985; Peterson 1997; Kingsbury 1998) and encompasses, among other sub-genres, bluegrass, Tex-Mex, and alt.country. Nevertheless, its best-recognized musical and lyrical characteristics are common to most variations, if differently inflected in each case. Musically, these characteristics include an emphasis on 'acoustic' or so-called 'traditional' instrumentation (for example, steel-string and pedal-steel guitars, banjo, mandolin, and fiddle, all with few distortional effects).⁹ Additionally, country songs rely on predictable chord intervals in major keys, and are composed in a standardized, more or less 'square' song structure with generally perfect rhythmic consistency (Neal 1998, pp. 325–7).¹⁰

As important as 'traditional' instrumentation and strict standards of musical form are to country music, however, they are not unique traits, but structure some other musical genres equally effectively, notably folk music. Country music's most distinctive musical quality is the accentuation of what is commonly referred to as 'twang', a sound

that is difficult to describe (Malone 2002, p. 254).¹¹ Roughly, it refers paradigmatically to the short sustain and dynamic resonance of instruments like banjo, mandolin or dobro, the sounds of which are distinguished by an abrupt, relatively sharp initiation when plucked, which is followed by a quick, usually slightly ascending, muting. The sound is often fundamental to the material construction of these instruments; even if you cannot play the pedal steel, you can make it twang, and when you do, it sounds 'country'.¹²

Although these characteristics together construct most country songs' musical ground, as anyone familiar with the genre knows, 'country-ness' is most closely associated with the music's lyrics (Sanjek 1998, p. 38). Yet it is not just the words to the songs that matter. Before considering the words to the songs, it is important to note also the material qualities of country vocals: the music is almost always sung with the diction and inflection of the southern US, whether or not the performer is a southerner. Indeed, in the US, country instrumentation and a voiced southern 'drawl' – particularly the process of 'diphthongization', i.e. gliding a single vowel sound to give it two audibly distinct segments (Samuels 2004) – are so consistently paired as to give the impression that twang is the direct musical expression of a white southern accent.¹³ They stand as virtually substitutable markers of 'country' and 'racial' identification. Twang – lyrical and/or musical – is thus self-referential in country music, it avers a song's authenticity like a badge or bumper sticker: when a song is musically arranged along lines more conventionally associated with 'rock', rhythm 'n' blues, or soul (to name the most common hybridizations in commercial country music), accented vocalization 'saves' the song for country radio (Feld *et al.* 2004, p. 337, p. 343 note 10). Many of the songs of popular 'new country' artists like Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Shania Twain or Garth Brooks are musically indistinguishable from 'Top 40' soft-rock records (Goddu 1998, p. 47), yet they can count as country because of the distinctive, often exaggerated regional and racial accent of the vocals.¹⁴

The question is how this works, and why it keeps working. The southern affiliation is important, but it is nowhere near enough to explain all this, for it begs similar questions about racialization, i.e. how did the South become 'white'? (It must be for the explanation to hold any water). It is far more complicated than an imputed regional association, one that becomes less and less accurate as the days pass. The implications of this vocal materiality – which might include not only accent, but intonation and timbre as well (Dolar 2006, p. 20–3) – are vast. For while it is country's lyrics (to be discussed below), that come most readily to mind in a consideration of its cultural politics, the vocal modes themselves are freighted with great political, historical and geographical significance. Accent, as Mladen Dolar says

(2006, p. 20), is itself only sensible according to a ‘ruling norm’ that is nothing ‘but an accent that has been declared a non-accent’. The southern specificity of a country accent is thus part of what he calls the ‘linguistic class struggle’ that inheres in all language, but the theatre of that struggle is not limited to class, but extends throughout the space of the political, race and region included. If so, then the persistent attachment to the southern accent in country music is a front in what Gramsci called a war of position, a ‘trench’ in the ‘siege warfare’ of contemporary US cultural politics.¹⁵ The fact that non-southerners adopt it speaks not only to its commercial necessity, but also to its broader cultural-political significance to most country music audiences, inside and outside the South.¹⁶ Indeed, one never hears non-southern country artists criticized for putting on a ‘phoney’ accent, and for precisely this reason – the genre’s authenticity is asserted and secured by vocal practices like diphthongization.

If we move beyond accent to intonation and timbre, we are on more complex ground, but country music’s vocal materiality is also registered in these modes. Fox’s work on intonation and on the broader syntax of country vocals illuminates the subtle but crucial cultural politics that animates the song and speech of country music performance by stars like George Jones and by lesser known local artists (Feld *et al.* 2004, pp. 328–32; Fox 2004a, pp. 272–99). Timbre, ‘the texture, the grain and the tactile quality of sound’ (Shepherd 1991, p. 159), is perhaps the least amenable to precise analysis, but attracts a great deal of attention, probably because of this signifying possibility. Indeed, timbre’s polyvalence has opened a space in which some argue for a ‘politics of timbre, an acoustic solidarity’ that country music – or at least some country music, in this case Hank Williams’ sorrowful songs – might forge across the far more rigid lines it draws lyrically between genders, races, and ‘cultures’ (Leppert and Lipsitz 1990, p. 270). This is surely possible. Yet such claims take no account of the fact that the ‘specifically *acoustic* opportunity to establish a relationship of resistance with another socially alienated group’ (Leppert and Lipsitz 1990, p. 270) is also always an opportunity to forge an acoustic solidarity that excludes, to produce or reinscribe a social boundary as readily as breach it.¹⁷ Indeed, one could argue, as I do below in the section on musical interpellation, that such an acoustic politics can just as readily reinforce existing cultural-political identities, even rewrite them, and recruit people to them. The extent that vocal timbre is specifically implicated in this movement may be performer and performance specific, since it is often understood as characteristic of an individual singer as opposed to a genre (Dolar 2006, p. 22 likens it to a fingerprint). Nevertheless, there are widely admired, even canonical timbral qualities to country vocals that are inseparable from (if not determined by) their southern accentuation and its

historical racial and regional associations. These qualities are related to what Barthes (1977, p. 184), in his famous essay 'The grain of the voice', calls 'patinated'. He uses the term to describe the way in which sung sounds are 'given the wear of a language that had been living, functioning and working for ages past'. It seems to me that the hegemony of the southern accent in country music is partly due to the desire for such textured, grounded vocal qualities – this is about 'authenticity', about coming from someplace 'real', talking to 'real' people about 'real life' (Fox 2004a, pp. 103–6).¹⁸

In terms of lyrics, country is notorious for its broken-home, drank-too-much, death-in-the-family, god-fearing content (at least among those who do not like the music). Again, the genre is far more internally differentiated than stereotypes suggest. Still, a listen to contemporary country radio, and to the 'classics' of the country canon, suggests that while not nearly so maudlin as sometimes thought, some of these characterizations are not entirely inaccurate. Some generalizations are possible. To mention only some of the more prominent, country's lyrical fixtures include rural life, work and everyday working-class life (especially contrasted with that of the affluent), heterosexual 'salvific love' (Grossman 2002), family life and 'values', the southern US, youthful rebellion, Christianity, alcohol, death, humour, and nostalgia.¹⁹

These themes are often mobilized in creative, rich forms and combinations. Lyrical clarity and comprehensibility are highly prized in country music. Puns, alliteration and turns of phrase or wording that have slightly different connotations in different contexts are common. The successive re-employment of one such phrase provides many songs with a narrative structure or story (Merle Haggard's 'Are the Good Times Really Over for Good?'), or allows for a 'twist' at the end (George Jones' 'He Stopped Loving Her Today').

According to Malone, country is 'America's truest music' because of these lyrical qualities in particular: it 'breathes with the contradictions implicit in our lives', and 'expresses not only the hopes and longings of average people, but also their frailties and failed dreams' (Malone 2002, p. 12). And for Malone, although 'country music addresses longings that are universal' (2002, p. 14) – 'we' are all 'average people' (cf. Gritzner 1978) – those longings emerged through, and continue to be expressed in the terms (and the speech) of 'plain white southern' working-class culture (Malone 1985, p. 418, 2002, p.15).

This account is received wisdom: country music sounds white because it *is* white, the white southern 'redneck' serving as the popular American signifier for a 'defensive articulation of whiteness' (Fox 2004a, p. 25; cf. Jarosz and Lawson 2002). From one perspective, this is reasonably accurate. Country music has long been associated with a southern working class that has often (not always) asserted its

whiteness more overtly than structurally equivalent whites in other parts of the US. Moreover, this commonplace association complements the mythic origin story of country music, in which the music was born of the hardships and everyday struggles of the poor southern 'hillbilly' culture that subsisted in the shadow of the plantation mode, and which, against the very dictates of history, survived into the present in a modified, but still more or less pure, stream of ostensibly 'authentic' white culture.²⁰

This story is not entirely bunk. But, like any cultural phenomenon, the history of country music can only be narrated by muting some elements, and listening to others more closely. Any such endeavour necessitates not only a collection of 'facts', but an *a priori* structure of selection, order and sense; this is the function of the 'already said' upon which all discourses may be said to rest (Foucault 1972, p. 25). What demands critical engagement is the fact that Malone can only tell the story he tells (and he tells it very well) from a space within the discourse of whiteness itself, a discourse based upon a dubious, or at least highly contestable, metaphysical edifice. That edifice – that there is such a thing as a 'white culture', and that country music emerged and persists as the aesthetic reflection of that culture – constitutes country's 'already said' in the 'semi-silence that precedes it' (Foucault 1972, p. 25). It is ideological, built with the silence of what, in its purported obviousness, needs not be said. But when we listen for these unsaids, their tenuousness announces itself, as does their absolute necessity to any explanation that naturalizes the white–country music pairing.

For alternative histories are possible – histories that do not dismiss the chronology so much as supplement it so substantially as to change it all together. These histories highlight the constant and crucial mixing and borrowing that comprise country's 'origins' and have constituted its history. They locate country music's sources, if they are indeed 'locatable', among other socio-acoustic spaces, especially in the blackface minstrelsy of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Tosches 1985; Shrubbsall 1987). These accounts acknowledge the western European affinities of the music – i.e. the 'celtic' and 'Anglo-Saxon' which are accorded such importance in standard histories. But they also underscore the critical contribution of African-American vocal styles, instrumentation, and song structures, not only to the work of country's 'founders' like the Carter Family, Emmett Miller, and Jimmie Rodgers (whose career, like that of several other early country stars, began in blackface (Tosches 1985, p. 165)), but to country music in all its times and variations (Cantwell 2003). These histories trouble the white–country coupling – indeed, they trouble the whole idea of raced music (Radano 2003) – making it far less obvious why country music sounds so white, or why race has any

particular sound at all. They demonstrate that it has taken a great deal of ideological work both to make country the sound of American whiteness, and, at least as importantly, to make it continue to ‘call’ to white people – to make country music seem not only as something that only white people make, but also something that only white people ‘hear’, something that recruits white people to their ‘whiteness’.

Nostalgia and ‘musical interpellation’

A focus on the ideological work of music is not novel. There are many social histories that consider the meaning of music for particular communities and cultures (e.g. Mason 1996; Chua 1999; Cruz 1999; Fox 2004a), and the so-called ‘new musicology’ is also concerned with the expression and consumption of identities through the medium of commercial and non-commercial music (McClary 1991; Walser 1993; Small 1998). Fascinating work on music and Nazism by Adorno (2002 [1945]) and others (e.g. Warren 1972) emphasizes the importance of German fascism’s soundtrack – both what music it included, and what it excised as ‘degenerate’.²¹ There is also a vein of more sociological musicology that, building on the ideas of structuralists like Lévi-Strauss (1970) and Barthes (1977), has engaged the ideological ‘coding’ of (mostly western) music (e.g. Shepherd 1977; Shepherd and Wicke 1997). This work attempts to discover, for example, ‘the articulation of an ideal feudal structure through pentatonicism’ (Shepherd 1977, p. 89) or ‘blacks’ supposed ambivalence to white society’ in the ‘bent’ notes characteristic of blues guitar (Middleton 1972, p. 38; cited in Virden and Wishart 1977, p. 170).

These approaches are by no means homogenous in their goals and sympathies, yet they are consistent in their assumption that music ‘expresses’ or ‘reflects’ the conceptions, desires, or politics of the particular social formation or group. In much of this literature, if it confronts race at all – and mostly it does not – it is equated with more or less given and bounded ‘cultures’ (Radano and Bohlman 2000b, pp. 4, 21). It is largely inattentive to the historically specific ideological work that must precede, and found, any sense race and racism are accorded.²² This is no longer adequate. We must focus less on the ways in which music *reflects* a particular cultural politics (which leads to unproductive and unnecessary arguments about cultural authenticity and ‘originalism’, e.g. Perry 2004, pp. 9–37) and more on the specifically *productive* ideological function of popular music.²³ I am arguing that contemporary commercial country music in the US, in articulation with a capitalist social formation riddled with contradictions, and from which it is inseparable, contributes to the formation of a specific kind of white subject, and thus produces a specific kind of whiteness.

The idea of ‘musical interpellation’ – in other words, the ‘notion that music is involved in producing the very bearer of an identity – that is, a subject’ (Mowitt 2002, p. 57–8) – emerges most energetically in studies of music engaged with contemporary cultural studies, as in the recent work of Radano (2003) and John Mowitt (2002).²⁴ Both recognize that such a notion ‘raises the stakes [in the study of music], for if this is so, then music is not simply tendentious – that is expressive of some particular line (white supremacy, heterosexism, etc.) – but also ideological through and through, or utterly involved’ in the ‘subjection of human agency’ (Mowitt 2002, p. 57). If so, then country music ‘sounds white’ not simply because it is sung and played by white people, but, as with Althusser’s (1971) famous allegory, because it is ‘heard’ by – i.e. produces – a particular white (American) subject. It is he or she who performs the metaphorical one-hundred-and-eighty-degree ‘conversion’ by turning to the sound of the hail (Althusser 1971, p. 174).²⁵

Mowitt and Radano found the possibility of musical interpellation on the irreducible aurality of subject-formation. Mowitt reminds us that the interpellation that constitutes the subject is, before all else, *heard*. The force of the Althusserian account of ideology and the production of the subject depends entirely on a ‘sonic infrastructure’ (Mowitt 2002, p. 47). This argument is crucial if we are to take the ideological significance of music seriously, since such an infrastructure is not only necessary to the moment of subjection, but to all that follows.²⁶ However, the theoretical focus on the ‘subject’ of psychoanalysis that Mowitt, and to a lesser extent Radano, share with Althusser is of less import to me here. I want to retain Althusser’s idea of the interpellating ‘hail’ or call, but I am more interested in the specifically cultural-political implications of the notion. Like Gramsci, I start after the initial moment or process of subjection, the conventional focus of psychoanalysis, to consider the ideological significance of musical interpellation on an already-existing white American ‘subject’.

The significance of popular culture and its media to Gramsci’s analysis of ideology can hardly be understated. Throughout his writing, Gramsci presses the point that the unending struggle for ideological hegemony is always cultural and political at the same time (they are inseparable), and popular culture and ‘the arts’ are among its most significant ‘fronts’ (1985, p. 389). Popular music, literature, and drama are ‘a powerful factor in the formation of the mentality and morality of the people’ (Gramsci 1985, p. 34), not a mirror thereof. His remarks on the ‘operatic conception of life’ contain the essence of his critique of popular culture:

Verdi's music, or rather the libretti and plots of the plays set to music by Verdi, are responsible for a whole range of 'artificial' poses in the life of the people, for ways of thinking, for a 'style'. 'Artificial' is perhaps not the right word, because among the popular classes this artificiality assumes naïve and moving forms. To many common people the baroque and the operatic appear as an extraordinarily fascinating way of feeling and acting, a means of escaping what they consider low, mean and contemptible in their lives and education in order to enter a more select sphere of great feelings and noble passions. Serial novels and below-stairs reading (all literature which is mawkish, mellifluous and whimpery) provide heroes and heroines. But opera is the most pestiferous because words set to music are more easily recalled, and they become the matrices in which thought takes shape out of flux. Look at the writing-style of many common people: it is modeled on a repertory of clichés. However, sarcasm is too corrosive. Remember that we are not dealing with superficial snobs, but with something deeply felt and experienced. (Gramsci 1985, pp. 377–8)

What I am interested to borrow from this account is not a judgment on the popular classes' susceptibility to mimic the 'nobility'. Indeed, country music is based almost entirely in an affirmation of the nobility of the ignoble and the vulgar (Peterson 1992, pp. 56–8). With country, 'the symbolic polarization of high and low states lends itself to a redemptive polemic of class that pits "lowbrow" sociality against highbrow anomie and self-interest, a nostalgic rural home of the south against the "cold" north and the empty city life'. In country songs, 'an inhabited, negating space of desire challenges the class codes of ideologically marked objects: Cadillacs versus pickup trucks, diamonds versus rhinestones, champagne in fancy glasses versus beer in the can, people who pay their bills online versus those who get their coffee already ground' (Stewart 1996, p. 125).²⁷

Instead, I must regrettably bracket the issue of class for reasons of space (and refer readers to Fox (2004a) for a compelling analysis), and work to extend Gramsci's conception of a 'pose' or 'style' that is simultaneously 'artificial' and 'deeply felt and experienced'.²⁸ For, while country is definitely classed in complex ways, it is the 'pose' of whiteness that is among country music's most powerful obviousnesses. This pose recruits white people to their whiteness by performing an historical victimhood that lies at the core of 'white' racialization. It calls white people to a 'self-imposed exile' (Hebdige 1979, p. 2) from a complex, dynamic, and unstable world in which 'traditional' identities, roles, and expectations are explicitly challenged. It offers whiteness as an antidote to that world, while at the same time asserting that the antidote will nonetheless never really work. Time will inevitably carry

the day. The persistent anxiety that results is the backbeat of nostalgia (Bewes 2002), an essential ingredient in a post-Civil Rights America whiteness in which ‘regular’ Americans feel ‘a pained, watchful desire to frame the cultural present in relation to an “other” world’ (Stewart 1988, p.228).

The sound of whiteness: a shared ‘used to’

There are several possible themes in country music through which the relations between whiteness and the cultural politics of country music might be established – the ideas of ‘America’, and the trope of self-consciously ‘low-brow’ authenticity come immediately to mind. Here, I am specifically concerned with a third theme: the well-documented, and oft-parodied, nostalgic cast of American country music (Santoro 1991, p. 458; Goddu 1998, pp. 46–7; Malone 2002, p. 28).²⁹ It is of course tricky to describe an entire field of popular culture as nostalgic. The frame of nostalgia is not only imprecise, but even with an acceptable definition, with hundreds of thousands of country songs that have been recorded, I can easily be accused of skewing the selection to fit the argument. I draw from a few sources: contemporary commercial ‘new country’, ethnographic work on the cultural politics and poetics of communities in the US in which country music is important, and the songs of artists, such as Merle Haggard, who have achieved an iconic status in post-World War II country. It is nonetheless impossible to ‘prove’ that country’s nostalgia is constitutive of the genre and its racialized cultural-political power. Although it is a common assessment of country, I must rely on readers’ inevitably varied familiarity with the music to gauge the accuracy of my critique.

Nostalgia, as Kathleen Stewart says, ‘is a cultural practice, not a given content ... Nostalgia is an essential, narrative, function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them ... to make an interpretive space that is relational and in which meanings have direct social referents’ (Stewart 1988, p. 227). Here I am specifically interested in country music’s often rueful narrative of loss which invokes not only loss itself – death and aging, divorce, displacement, etc. – but also implies or explicitly constructs that which has been lost. ‘In positing a “once was” in relation to a “now” [nostalgia] creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life’ (Stewart 1988, p. 227). A song about the end of love is nostalgic if it conjures images of ‘the love we once had’ (e.g. Merle Haggard’s ‘Stop the World and Let Me Off’); a song about the trappings of urban life is nostalgic if it posits a morally or politically preferable ‘country tradition’ that has been shirked (e.g. Haggard’s ‘Big City’).

That nostalgia is a *narrative* cultural practice, i.e. one that can be spoken, voiced, sounded, is important to the way it operates in country. For nostalgia often works through ‘the redemption of expressive images and speech ... it reorients people to a more literalizing attention to words – attention to sound, appearance, voice and accent’ (Stewart 1988, p. 229, 231). Language thus carries nostalgic weight in country music in both form (vocal and musical qualities) and content (lyrics). Its vocal and instrumental qualities, especially the textured twang discussed above, function as markers of nostalgia, then, not because they are rueful by definition, but because of the political-historical-geographical context through which they are inescapably communicated. Insofar as these acoustic qualities are conceived as ‘traditional’, for example, or from a ‘backward’ place like the South, they inevitably posit themselves as from another time, a ‘once was’. They construct an acoustic relation with the present that is implicitly retrospective and displaced, that is ‘not assimilationist but revivalistic’ (Stewart 1988, p. 239). Indeed, although the very limits of language prohibit specifying it, I would argue that country’s nostalgic temporality is constituted no less by the sound of a southern accent or the pluck of a mandolin string than by lyrical descriptions of the good ol’ days.

It is much more straightforward to discuss the nostalgia in country music’s lyrical narrative, not least because unlike rock ‘n’ roll, for example, the story is a crucial popular mode of country song. The narratives of loss these songs relate take several forms in country music, but in general, they valorize things like a return to ‘simplicity’, moral clarity, social stability and cohesion, small-scale community and a ‘slow pace’, honesty, loyalty, tradition – all of which are usually framed as in decline. It is a lament ‘in the key of nostalgia’, in Fox’s phrase, but its tone is not anti-modern; if anything, Fordism is held up as the acme of American cultural-political development (Fox 2004a, p. 91). Nostalgia for such fixtures organizes countless country songs around the notion of a besieged ‘regular’ American, compelled or constrained by conditions beyond his or her control (usually his) into a mode of historical experience that sounds a profane and ironic (i.e. anti-Benjaminian) variation on Walter Benjamin’s famous remarks on the ‘angel of history’.³⁰ As with its musical and vocal qualities, the temporal orientation is thoroughly conservative: there is nothing of Benjamin’s messianism or his openness to revolutionary immanence, merely the adopted pose of rustics resigned to the march of time, ‘exiles in their own homeland, painfully holding on to closeness in a world that has already deserted them’ (Stewart 1988, p. 235). And in what Greil Marcus (1997, p. 133) calls country’s ‘nostalgic resignation’ we find not merely a popular mode of lyrical expression, but a cultural

politics of time particular to an increasingly dominant ideology of whiteness in the contemporary US.

There are at least two ways in which the cultural politics of nostalgia in country music might be so ‘obvious’ as to hardly deserve mention. First, some country might seem aptly described as ‘kitsch’, Adorno’s epithet for that which ‘precisely sustains the memory, distorted and as mere illusion, of a formal objectivity that has passed away’:

For by serving up past formal entities as contemporary, [kitsch] has a social function – to deceive people about their true situation, to transfigure their existence, to allow intentions that suit some powers or other to appear to them in a fairy-tale glow. All kitsch is essentially ideology. (Adorno 2002, pp. 501–2)³¹

Second, insofar as it is less likely that a longing for ‘the old days’ would resonate with non-white American listeners, there is another way in which the nostalgia that suffuses country music might be plainly white. For example, in Merle Haggard’s 1981 hit ‘Are the Good Times Really Over For Good?’, the good times – ‘back before Elvis’ – are also back before *Brown v. Board of Education*, not to mention the Civil Rights movement. A reading like this finds support in Kathleen Stewart’s fascinating ethnographic work in rural West Virginia, in which she notes that it is precisely the legacy of ‘violence and tragedy’ that explains why nostalgia for a rural past ‘is a white idiom, not a black one’ (Stewart 1996, p. 106).

Regarding the first obviousness, to caricature country music as mere ‘kitsch’ is too easy, although it echoes a common dismissal. It is especially unhelpful in light of Adorno’s belief that some musics, notably Schoenberg’s chromaticism, had escaped ideology (Adorno 2002, pp. 397–9). In the echo of brilliant work by many contemporary cultural studies scholars, we would be hard pressed to argue that such an escape is possible, even strictly theoretically: ‘culture’ is always ideology (e.g. Willis 1977; Hall 1980; Spivak 1988; Gilroy 2000). The idea that we can find the truth of the former by escaping the latter is no longer tenable, if it ever was.

In contrast, the second suggestion – the idea that country music pines for an era when white supremacy operated more explicitly – must be taken more seriously. Still, as important a beginning as it is, it does not quite touch on the temporal nexus of country music and whiteness, which is not simply nostalgia for a particular historical object (experience, norm, social structure, etc.), although a ‘code of desire-filled object’ certainly comes into play in the poetics of the genre (Stewart 1996, p. 125). Instead, country music hails white people as ‘white’ at least partly through an orientation to time that is always already nostalgic, a ruefulness that needs no specific object. The object

in any particular polemic is a placeholder for what Stewart calls ‘the used to’, which cannot hold as merely ‘a simple nostalgia of origins, wholeness, and peak times’ (1996, p. 106). The temporal politics that constitutes so much of the narrative of country music must pivot discursively on *a* past (however fictional or revisionist), but it is fundamentally about past-ness itself.

Country music is thus not about proposing an alternative future, one that looks more like the past, nor is it critique, insofar as that requires systematic sense-making. It is a nostalgia not conscious of itself (Jameson 1971, p. 82), and is consequently incapable of critique in that sense. It is, rather, about an anti-future. Musically, country’s ‘old-timey’ sound is in many ways a metaphorical attempt to slow time down, while lyrically it rues, disavows, even condemns the passage of time – the movement of which it figures as the product of some other agency, outside the audience. ‘There is no one in charge, no one to blame; social hierarchies are perniciously encoded in the semiotics of everyday life’ (Stewart 1988, p. 232). The ‘vanishing present’, and all the presents to come, are by definition the object of country music’s often mournful polemic. Time is happening *to* those to whom country music calls, and it is the movement from the past through the present and beyond, to the most radically different ‘other’ of all, of which they are thus innocent.

More precisely than straightforward conservatism, this dehistoricized innocence, a naïve victimhood, is crucial to the politics of time in country music, and to much of contemporary whiteness (Mann 2003), for it rests at the centre of the perception of besieged-ness that organizes and shapes the performance of white conservatism in post-World War II American cultural politics. Here we can profitably return to Gramsci’s notion of the war of position or ‘siege’, for the besieged American white to whom country music calls is interpellated as under siege – in the trenches at the cultural front – in a manner much like Gramsci discusses. Like American conservatism, American whiteness is premised on the notion that ‘average’ (white) people are victims of an institutional and social disfranchisement that challenges not just the racial order, but a social structure that ‘whites’ created. The opposition to these changes finds its popular justification not in racial reasoning, but in the ‘understandable’ opposition of ‘the silent majority’ to disorder and instability. Indeed, country music has not infrequently been called *the* music of this presumably white silent majority (DiMaggio, Peterson and Esco 1972; Gregory 2005, p. 312), bestowing a racial mark that makes it clear whose ‘used to’ is being mobilized in the conservative mourning for the times when ‘when a man could still work, and still would’, ‘when a woman could still cook, and still would’ (in the apt phrasing of Haggard’s ‘Are the Good Times Really Over For Good?’). The pose of country’s besieged ‘regular’

American whiteness is, as such, trench-digging, or, taking liberties with another Gramscianism, what we might call ‘passive counterrevolution’ – one face of conservative reaction in a the drawn-out ‘war of position’ that is post-World War II American cultural-political history.³²

Here, and throughout country music, the ‘used to’ functions as an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 1996, p. 44), a concept whose partial meaning and imprecision is its power and an essential ingredient in ideological struggle. Binding together consonant, but in no way homogenous, ideological constructions of the ‘used to’ in the spheres of domestic life, political economy, popular culture, international relations, and more, the perception of undeserved besieged-ness in the face of someone else’s time has helped put the construction of a shared ‘used to’ at the centre of contemporary American political life (Mann 2006). That this has not resulted in notable social policy change, as Thomas Frank (2004) has argued so engagingly, is not really a product of popular ‘false consciousness’ or a massive trick perpetrated by the big business and the wealthy. It is more attributable to the fact that the conservative performance of the sort that enrages Frank and put Bush into office is far less politically homogenous and ideologically organized than is credited. It is the centrality of the ‘used to’, not its object(s), that is shared, and which performs and claims a ‘pastness’ which ‘carries crucial symbolic value in many if not all formations of culture’ (Radano 2003, p. 9).³³

Country’s ‘used to’ proves remarkably effective as historical script. Among other manoeuvres, it has enabled the recording industry to shift some of the more assertively ‘backwoods’ musical and lyrical material out of earshot, while nonetheless iteratively reproducing a twangy nostalgia that loses none of its ‘country’ for being easily modified. For example, Kenny Chesney, among the most successful country artists currently performing, had two multi-million selling songs in 2004 that reminisce about college student days (‘I Go Back’ and ‘Keg in the Closet’). Such themes are entirely new to country music. Twenty years ago, a hit country song about those crazy undergraduate years would have been about as likely as a tune that celebrated the stay-at-home father (the latter remains unlikely).³⁴ These new stories reflect not only a profit-minded embrace of urban, middle-class listeners, but the flexibility of a fluid ‘used to’ in the production and reproduction of the country music audience.

For Chesney’s songs still sound country in all the ways discussed above, and they still ‘sound white’. As indicated by the post-Civil Rights boom in sales and radio audiences, far beyond the southern and western working classes, through the suburbs and middle classes, and across the generations (Peterson and DiMaggio 1975; Cusic 1998), country’s ‘used to’ hails an increasing proportion of white people in the US (there is little evidence that country music has managed to

cross the 'colour line' in the US in any way). Even as the 'multi-culturalism' of the citizenry intensifies, the 'pose' of 'authentic' whiteness that country music performs helps both produce American 'whiteness' and whiten 'America', as George Bush, Sr did in his claim for country's place in the national imagination.

As Bush, Sr affirmed in his proclamation, the popular perception of this country conservatism's authenticity has been tightly bound, since the late 1960s, to an ideal-typical blue-collar working class (Malone 2002, p. 45), and to a 'defensive articulation' of a 'denaturalized and deprived "whiteness"' (Fox 2004a, p. 26).³⁵ The precipitate cultural politics is a ground upon which whiteness can be, in the words of the subjects of Fox's ethnography, 'real': authentic, tradition-laden, productive. For country music audiences, 'country' as cultural category is thus always simultaneously aesthetic and political. Of course, the aesthetic is always political, as both Gramsci and the 'new musicology' have shown, and country music explicitly aestheticizes this cultural politics. If authenticity is the country music industry's most important 'renewable resource', as Peterson (1997) has compellingly demonstrated, an authentic, stable whiteness is its commodity form.

Why does country music sound white?

Thus, as the trope of nostalgia, for however fictional a past, looms ever larger in the US political arena (Stewart 1996; Coontz 2000) – the reassertion of 'traditional family values' being only the most visible manifestation – country calls white people to their whiteness, promising its 'truth'.³⁶ The whiteness to which it calls is a historically contingent way of being white; perhaps unsurprisingly, it is a very George W. Bush-sounding whiteness: it is not class-specific, it is unapologetically American and Christian, defiantly 'average', 'realistic', and tired of 'political correctness' and 'elitism'. It is what Gramsci (1985, p. 390) might have called a 'mass' American whiteness whose principal political identity is its innocence regarding 'the mess we are in'.³⁷ For the nostalgic interpellation the 'used to' performs is also retroactive.³⁸ Recognizing one's whiteness is simultaneously a recognition that one has always been raced white (Dolar 1993, p. 76). Country music's nostalgia, in the context of its other dominant themes, thus provides the subject a cultural-political narrative that produces its own past, a past that is not only white, but this kind of white.

Country music sounds white, then, because white people are hailed by, hear, and turn to its sounding. This 'sounding' works in both senses of 'sound': country music is a 'sound of whiteness', and it 'sounds' whiteness, i.e. sounds its depths. Of the diverse ideological materials through which this process is mediated, the 'used to' provides one of the more subtle and powerful, for it articulates an authentic

'once was' in whiteness' historical 'depth' with the fluidity and diversity of contemporary 'white' identities. The nostalgia that voices the 'used to' reifies 'pastness' while simultaneously erasing the process of ideological iteration that is fundamental to the reproduction of all cultural sense-making. Indeed, the invisibility of iteration is necessary to all nostalgia. That race, culture, or ideology are not only produced, but must be constantly reproduced – this must be muted in order for a longing for objects past to sound true to those objects themselves. Iteration is also normalization; and inevitably involves the creation of obviousnesses, a movement toward silence and generalization. Iteration marks, but it marks so much that the mark becomes unremarkable.

Country music's whiteness is iteratively performed, made obvious. But the idea that country music 'sounds white' because its 'origins' are white – even if such a story were true – misses the essential process through which the music's ideology of whiteness must be reproduced over time, day in and day out. Nostalgia for a white 'used to' has done a great deal of this ideological work, and helps give country a raced materiality that muffles the fact that country music 'like all Western musical practices, is as patently intermusical as it is intermediated, and, finally, interracial' (Radano 2003, p. 2). Thinking about the ways in which this message is silenced marks a step in challenging the belief that 'the blackness and whiteness of sound is fundamentally, essentially, real' (Radano 2003, p. 12). And perhaps it is also, even more importantly, a step toward an ideological terrain in which whiteness can no longer call, and no longer be heard.

Acknowledgements

This article is far better for the advice of the journal editors and the comments of reviewers. I would also especially like to thank Charles Gallagher and France Winddance Twine for their many efforts, and Joel Wainwright and Aaron Fox for challenging and insightful comments.

Notes

1. In his proclamation, Bush echoed Nixon's 1974 speech at the opening of Opryland (the theme park/country music museum associated with the Grand Ole Opry), when the President said that country music 'talks about family. It talks about religion. And it . . . makes America a better country' (quoted in Goddu 1998, p. 48).
2. The connection between country music and the Republican Party has held so persistently that a group of country music industry insiders has recently formed the 'Music Row Democrats' in an attempt to combat the power of conservative Republicanism within the industry and among its fan base. See *New York Times*, 19 August 2006, and <http://www.musicrowdemocrats.com>.

3. Outside of North America, country music's popularity is less associated with those who self-identify as 'white'. Country is very popular, for example, in parts of the Caribbean and in Brazil (Fox 2004b; Dent 2005). Aaron Fox and Christine Yano are presently completing an edited volume, *Songs Out of Place* (forthcoming), which examines these other 'countries'.

4. Writing about country music, I am unfortunately forced to assume that most readers are, while perhaps not fans themselves, at least familiar with the genre and some of its better-known performers. If not, the recordings of most of the artists I name in the text are relatively easy to find. The internet is particularly helpful in this regard.

5. See John Munro's (2004) review for an excellent overview of the burgeoning historical work on whiteness in North America.

6. 'With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. . . . All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms' (Attali 1985, p. 6).

7. Emphasis in original.

8. In 1961, there were eighty-one radio stations in the US dedicated to country music; 606 stations by 1969, 1,534 in 1980, 2,108 in 1989 and 2,427 in 1994 (Cusic 1998, p. 204).

9. To think about these instruments' status as 'traditional' is part of the problem at hand.

10. 'Square' songs are those which follow a 'steady pattern of uninterrupted four-bar hypermeasures' (Neal 1998, p. 325); in other words, those that have a regular phrasing based on musical 'lines' that are four bars long. This structure (with slight variations) is commonly played in a thirty-two bar format with an AABA rhyming scheme, and can sometimes serve as an important formal limitation on what counts as 'country' (Fox 2004a, pp. 218, 242).

11. There are some (e.g. Malone 2002, p. 15) who seem to understand twang as a term of 'denigration' for the 'southern sound', but it has no such meaning here. Rather, it is the way that the 'southernness' of twang became implicit that is of interest.

12. These instruments usually have less 'sustain' than rock instruments – a note on a banjo, unlike an electric guitar, will not resonate for long after it is plucked – and thus the 'wail' of rock instrumentation is very rare in any variety of country. Although electric guitars and other instruments common in rock music are of course now standard in country music, these are often played alongside 'traditional' instruments, or amplified in a manner that purposefully distinguishes the sound from rock music. This is the case, for example, with the distinctive 'twang' of the Fender Telecaster, the electric guitar of choice in country music since the 1950s. Indeed, the Telecaster's preferred sound (a result of the guitar in combination with a specific mode of amplification) is now so 'obviously' country that one need only pluck a single note to give a phrase a country 'feel'. In contemporary commercial music, Dwight Yoakam (and his Telecaster) epitomize this vocal and instrumental 'twang'.

13. Strictly speaking, one cannot equate diphthongization with what I am here calling twang, with its distinctive cultural associations with the US South. Diphthongs – what linguistic anthropologists also call 'vowel glides' (Feld *et al.* 2004, p. 337) – are also features of non-southern anglo-North American regional dialects. In Canada's Maritime provinces, where I was raised, vowel glides of the form that Feld *et al.* (2004, p. 337) suggest singers use to 'index their "country"-ness' (cf. Samuels 2004) are very common. There are, however, important differences in pronunciation (e.g. 'bed' is pronounced 'bee-yed' in Nova Scotia, 'bay-yed' in the stereotypical southern drawl); it is hard to imagine the Maritime accent, in either speech or song, ever being labeled 'twang'. It is not merely diphthongization that is at issue here, but a way of symbolically mobilizing a suite of vocal and musical features whose nexus I am calling call twang. I want to thank Aaron Fox for helping me with these ideas and the relevant literature.

14. That race is crucial to what the accent communicates is clear from the remarks like Malone's, quoted above, regarding Charley Pride's singing.

15. On the difference between wars of ‘manoeuvre’ and ‘position’ (or ‘siege’), and the ultimately greater political importance of the latter, see Gramsci (1971, pp. 229–43).
16. I say ‘most’ because of the important work of David Samuels (2004) on the refusal of Apache country singers to sing in the stereotypical accent. Samuels argues convincingly that this move is a considered politicization of a racist historical legacy.
17. Emphasis in original.
18. It is of course arguable that country music has made a caricature of both patination and authenticity, since standardization and commodification would seem to rob them of the very qualities that determine their meanings.
19. A full discussion of the form and content of country music lyrics is impossible here, but see Fox (2004a, pp. 214–48) and Brackett (1995, pp. 77–99) for very helpful analyses.
20. Very briefly, the origin story as it is conventionally told (e.g. Malone 1985; Sample 1996, pp. 176–86) begins with poor rural southern whites in the 1920s, who were reached by the first radio broadcasts and recordings by performers like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers (Ellison 1995). The 1930s, despite economic hardships, was also the decade during which most US households obtained a radio, and promoters of commercial country music, especially in the South and West, took advantage of the medium’s wide dissemination. World War II marked the beginning of country’s urbanization, and its mass popularization. This is the era of Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry’s great popularity, and artists like Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell, whose careers began in the immediate post-war era, became household names in the South and well known throughout the US. In the 1950s and 1960s, country/rock derivatives like rockabilly – think Elvis – gained a national and international audience, and country music’s smoother ‘Nashville sound’ (à la Patsy Cline) also reached far beyond the region. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the commercial dominance of so-called ‘hard’ country artists like Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and Loretta Lynn. Today, the style of these singer-songwriters is widely associated with the sound of ‘real’ country music, true to the southern, working-class roots of the genre (Sanjek 1998, p. 23–4; Malone 2002, p. 254; Fox 2004a, pp. 103, 150), in contrast to the pop ‘new country’ that has filled commercial country radio since the late 1980s (Haslam 1999, p. 293).
21. Adorno’s (2002, p. 375) oft-cited remark that Wagner’s music ‘itself speaks the language of Fascism’ is a case in point.
22. In addition, there is a tradition of psychoanalytic writing on music and sound (e.g. Coriat 1945; Noy 1966–7; Rosolato 1974). This is a more disciplinarily specialized effort, the concerns of which overlap somewhat with mine, but with which I do not seriously engage. Founded upon the examination of purportedly universal human psychic propensities, this literature is entirely uninterested in race and cultural politics.
23. Radano’s *Lying Up a Nation* (2003) is an extended and brilliant critique of such claims to ‘originalism’, and one might read Gilroy’s *Against Race* (2000) as a complementary ‘metacritique’ of the very vocabulary through which such claims are made.
24. For an excellent framing of some aspects of cultural studies of music, see Shepherd and Wicke (1997).
25. Althusser’s famous account of ‘interpellation’ is presented in ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)’: ‘*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*’ (Althusser 1971, p. 173, emphasis in original). The passages that describe the ‘hail’ that interpellates the subject can be found on pp. 170–6.
26. Radano’s engaging excavation of black music’s ‘sonically absent history’ (2003, p. 5) brings the power of this insight to the historical record, revealing its constitutive partiality (in both senses, for the record is both filled with random gaps, and at the same time plays favourites with what it is inclined to hear).
27. The fact that these politics are in no way easily classified as ‘right-wing’ points, in Gramsci’s thought, to the political opportunity a cultural phenomenon like country presents for the left, an opportunity it must pursue energetically.
28. The ways in which class operates in and through country music merits an extensive discussion on its own. This is all the more true with the massive expansion of country’s ‘core’

audience over the years. My own feeling is that country music's growing appeal outside of its class affinities is due at least in part to the increasing inequality that characterizes the American political economy. According to this (admittedly speculative) explanation, country's nostalgic authenticity, its gritty 'realness' – for reasons similar to those I outline in this paper – is all the more appealing both to those whites who have lost or have never obtained status and welfare through this dynamic, and to those who seek to claim some working-classed 'groundedness' in their increasingly distant privilege. I think much of the appeal of 'alt.country' to educated urban whites like me is a part of this movement. Aside from Fox's work, Peterson (1992) and Hartigan (1999) can certainly help think about these processes.

29. For example, there is an old and well-known joke that asks, 'How many country singers does it take to change a light-bulb?' The answer: 'Two. One to screw in the new light-bulb, and another to sing sadly of the old one.'

30. '[A] storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress' (Benjamin 1968, pp. 257–8).

31. It may be worth noting that for Adorno, 'ideology' did not have the Althusserian inescapability that it usually connotes in contemporary cultural studies. For him, it was basically false consciousness, a veil that could be lifted – at least in theory.

32. Gramsci (1971, pp. 106–13) discusses 'passive revolution', a concept he says is very closely related to 'war of position', but differentiated in its historical specificity.

33. Country music is not, and has never been, purely 'conservative' in the 'right-wing' sense attached to the Bush administration. To take only a current issue as an example, several well-known country artists, like Emmy Lou Harris, Willie Nelson and Haggard himself, have spoken out against the invasion of Iraq (Parvaz 2003), and there is a track record of prisoners' rights activism among 'hard' country artists like Haggard, Johnny Cash and David Allen Coe. Nevertheless, country music is widely perceived to be overwhelmingly conservative, sometimes even reactionary, and current journalism and scholarship on the politics of the industry and its audiences would suggest that this perception is largely correct (Feiler 1996; Parvaz 2003; Rossmann 2004; Fox 2004a, 2005), although the 'conservatism' in question is again more heterogeneous than its stereotype (DiMaggio, Peterson and Esco 1972; Fox 2004a, p. 324, note 5).

34. Lonestar's 2004 hit song 'Mr. Mom' describes a father who is at home because of a lay-off, but, rather than celebrating this upheaval in gender roles, the song expresses an increasing amazement at 'how women do it': 'Honey, you're my hero'.

35. The fact that prior to the late 1960s country music was not associated with working-class living and values (Malone 2002, p. 45), contrary to the common notion that it has always been 'working-class music', demonstrates the 'retroactive' power of country music's rewriting its own past.

36. Stephanie Coontz's (2000) hilarious term for this family values turn in the US is 'the way we never were'.

37. 'What resources can an innovative class set against the formidable complex of trenches and fortification of the dominant class? The spirit of scission, in other words the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of its own historical personality, a spirit of scission that must aim to spread itself from the protagonist class to the classes that are its potential allies – all this requires a complex ideological labour, the first condition of which is an exact knowledge of the field that must be cleared of its element of human "mass"'. (Gramsci 1985, p. 390)

38. As Mladen Dolar (1993, p. 76) has written in his brilliant discussion of Althusser, 'one becomes a subject by recognizing that one has always been a subject'.

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