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#Canceled: Positionality and Authenticity in Country Music's Cancel Culture

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#Canceled: Positionality and Authenticity in Country Music's Cancel Culture

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Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

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Gabriella Saporito

From its beginning in film and television and its early adoption by Black Twitter, cancel culture has become a phenomenon in the era of social media. Marked by the popular hashtags #cancel, #canceled, #[InsertNameHere]isOverParty, and #Surviving[InsertNameHere], cancel culture is a practice which involves publicly denouncing and/or shaming a person or company when they do something that is considered offensive or objectionable. It saw a resurgence in the era of #MeToo that has not slowed down in an age dominated by social media presidents and global pandemics. Cancel culture has also seen a recent re-adoption by the political right, which begs the question: who is getting “canceled” and why?

This project answers this question by using country music as a lens through which to observe cancel culture and its victims and perpetrators. By looking into the careers of country-adjacent artists Taylor Swift and Lil Nas X, I examine the positional bias of cancel culture. Using John Rich as a counter-study, I remark on the lack of consequences that men of his race and privilege face, though I note the similarities between his and the political right's agenda in cancel culture. By researching cancel culture vis-à-vis country music, I address the issues of race, gender, and authenticity that exist in both spaces. Using digital ethnography, I draw on the work of country music scholars and mainstream media reporters alike to craft a new study of cancel culture and its effects on people not only within the country music industry, but also the world more broadly.

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For Sophie, the cat who taught me unconditional love for twenty glorious years

Introduction

Literature Review

Cancel culture. Most people who are hip with today's internet customs are familiar with the term, but how many have thought about its implications beyond the Twittersphere? What kind of influence does this culture have on individuals, on musicians? Cancel culture demands of its victims a perfectly constructed lifestyle that exhibits no mistakes and no missteps. It thrives on cliques banding together to achieve a common goal: perfection. Similarly, country music is grounded in communities and a "fabricated authenticity."¹ These two ideas, community and authenticity, will serve as the core of this work.

In order to start a largely ethnographic project on the right foot, one must start with a solid understanding of the culture which they are studying. In this case, it is not a physical culture, but a digital one, and it is not limited to one area. Cancel culture is a global phenomenon seen on the internet today, but what is it, and where did it come from? There are various definitions of cancel culture, but I utilize following definition:

Cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for (*canceling*) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. *Cancel culture* is generally discussed as being performed on social media in the form of group shaming.²

Cancel culture acts upon the impulse to remove an entire person or community from their world in order to "protect" said world. Some compare cancel culture to boycotts, but unlike boycotts,

¹ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

² "Cancel Culture," Pop Culture Dictionary, Dictionary.com, accessed September 4, 2020, https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/cancel-culture/?itm_source=parsely-api.

apologies or corrective actions often do not change the minds of those doing the canceling.

Cancel culture is especially prominent on Twitter; it began on Black Twitter, a subsection of the website run by Black voices.

As for the name “cancel culture,” Aja Romano’s research on the topic is most useful. The now-common saying, “you’re canceled,” originated in the 1991 film *New Jack City*, in a scene where a female character is dumped via the phrase “Cancel that bitch. I’ll buy another one.” Following that, we have hip-hop music and culture to thank for the phrase’s ultimate resurgence and takeover, with Lil Wayne making reference to the aforementioned line in his 2010 song “I’m Single.” In December 2014, on VH1’s reality show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York*, a cast member used the phrase “You’re canceled,” during a fight, taking the phrase from film/music to television and finally to social media. After the fight on VH1, Black Twitter users began to use the phrase “as a reaction to someone doing something you disapproved of—either jokingly or seriously,” marking 2015 as the unofficial start of cancel culture as it is currently known.³

Black Twitter not only gave us cancel culture, but often shapes popular culture in general. Meredith D. Clark writes, “I would absolutely say this decade wouldn’t be the same without Black Twitter ... But I also think it was a continuation of our larger relationship with black American communities. Black culture has been actively mined for hundreds of years for influences on mainstream American culture.”⁴ The power of Black Twitter, as André Wheeler

³ Aja Romano, “Why We Can’t Stop Fighting about Cancel Culture,” *Vox*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>. I find it important to mention that I was unable to find any other thorough research done on the inception of cancel culture. Romano’s work is the most thorough, as most others link the start of cancel culture vaguely to Black Twitter, but cannot pinpoint any of these other sources.

⁴ André Wheeler, “Ten Years of Black Twitter: A Merciless Watchdog for Problematic Behavior,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2019.

describes, is as “a diligent, occasionally merciless watchdog for problematic behavior.”⁵ Black Twitter, which began as a way for the Black community to interact globally, became the platform on which Black activists became the diligent, merciless watchdogs described by Wheeler. By calling out problematic causes, businesses, and public figures on such a large, international platform, Black activists were able to spread their message for change much more quickly. When white folks adopted this idea of “canceling” everything they found to be problematic, however, a well-intentioned movement became what we recognize as cancel culture today.

Cancel culture also saw a resurgence in the era of #MeToo, a movement which began as a way for victims of sexual violence to publicly call out their perpetrators. The movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke but went viral in 2017 with the hashtag #MeToo.⁶ Women across the world began to use the hashtag to tell and report their stories, and over two hundred men across the United States were removed from powerful positions.⁷ I see this as a more effective era of cancel culture, given that it resulted in actual action. #MeToo reinvigorated cancel culture and transformed it into what it is today.

Though well-intentioned, cancel culture often seems to do more harm than good. This could make one wonder why we are drawn to cancel culture in the first place. Psychologist Rob Henderson provides some theories as to what makes cancel culture so appealing to human nature in his April 2020 *Psychology Today* article. He suggests that canceling people is our response to

⁵ Wheeler, “Ten Years of Black Twitter.”

⁶ “Get To Know Us | History & Inception,” Me Too Movement, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

⁷ Audrey Carlsen et al., “#MeToo Brought Down 201 Powerful Men. Nearly Half of Their Replacements Are Women,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 2018.

feeling low on the social ladder. “Reduc[ing] the social status of others” provides a temporary solution to our basic need to feel like we belong. Along these same lines, Henderson also argues that cancel culture could “demonstrate a commitment to community.” In searching for the solidarity of community and belonging that we crave as humans, we look to what others are doing. When we cancel someone we see as “bad,” we feel as if we are doing something good for our community (which is now often found online), and therefore are filling that basic need for companionship.⁸ Cancel culture, therefore, is a way for some to feel more human, but that newfound humanity often comes at the cost of others’ humanity.

From its earliest days, countless celebrities have been wrapped up in scandals that have gotten them canceled. However, it rarely seems to affect the rich and famous quite like the cancellers expect. In his late 2019 article, “These Musicians Were ‘Canceled,’ But People Kept Listening,” Rich Juzwiak lists a number of musicians who have been canceled in recent history, but whose sales have not suffered much, if at all, as a result. He focuses extensively on the case of Michael Jackson, whose music faced a possible cancellation following the airing of *Leaving Neverland* and the accusations it brought of Jackson’s pedophilic grooming and sexual abuse of minors during the 1990s.⁹ Additionally, he talks about the accusations made against R. Kelly, who has been accused of multiple crimes but who had most recently been accused of “grooming and [assaulting] underage girls and running a sex cult, among other things,” in Lifetime’s documentary *Surviving R. Kelly*.¹⁰

⁸ Rob Henderson, “What Propels Cancel Culture? Human Nature May Lead People to Magnify Moral Transgressions,” *Psychology Today* 53, no. 2 (April 3, 2020): 36–38.

⁹ Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Michael Jackson: A Quarter-Century Of Sexual Abuse Allegations,” NPR.org, March 5, 2019.

¹⁰ Rich Juzwiak, “These Musicians Were ‘Canceled,’ But People Kept Listening,” The Muse, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://themuse.jezebel.com/these-musicians-were-canceled-but-people-kept-listenin-1840150589>.

Juzwiak's article offers a complete overview of the year in pop music cancel culture, with graphs showing sales/streams before and after said cancellings. As he observed, it typically did not matter if a famous musician was canceled; rather, it usually boosted their sales/streams beyond what they sold before. For example, Juzwiak shows that streams of R. Kelly's music jumped 116 percent following the airing of *Surviving R. Kelly*. He offers a couple possible reasons for this, the first being simply attention: "It could be that major news coverage alone is enough to draw people to an artist; when they then enjoy the music...they stick around." Juzwiak also suggests that "commitment to a particular artist can feel like not very much commitment at all, actually. A good beat works as a salve; on contact, it can soothe whatever issues its creator may conjure," and that "many young people, who make up the bulk of the respective audiences of many of the artists discussed here, don't want to sit through scoldings about responsible consumption, or they're specifically interested in irresponsible consumption because it's fun and cool and celebrities aren't real people to them and so many crimes don't seem like *that* big of a deal."¹¹

This could also be a case of people not wanting to see their heroes fall. William Cheng has written about the effect of the "superhumanized musician," that is, a musician who is made out to be so superior that they could not possibly have done the things they are accused of. He writes that "superhumanized musicians show just how forcefully music can beguile us into magical thinking. Music's mystique can lead us to imagine that we know far more about ourselves—and about other people—than we actually do or ever could."¹² This point could certainly be argued in the case of Michael Jackson, who had a very successful career for decades

¹¹ Juzwiak, "These Musicians Were 'Canceled,'" original emphasis.

¹² William Cheng, *Loving Music till It Hurts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 19.

before any allegations of abuse came to light. It is easy to imagine, then, that those who grew up listening to The Jackson 5 and later Michael Jackson would find it immeasurably difficult to separate themselves from his work following the accusations brought against him.

To Juzwiak's point, perhaps this trend has resulted from the idea that "all press is good press." Accusations brought against musicians bring old fans out to support said musicians in spades, while those previously unaware of the artist listen out of curiosity. In this day and age, it is increasingly easy to earn money off of any press, since those who fall in the "curiosity" bracket can stream a song or two without committing to the purchase of an entire album. I argue that this goes back to Henderson's assertion that human beings like to "demonstrate a commitment to the community."¹³ However, cancel culture inherently creates two separate communities to which people can commit: the cancellers and the canceled.

Country music culture, like cancel culture, is grounded in communities. Without the genre's imagined southernness, country music would likely not have seen the same commercial success.¹⁴ And without the communities who listen to it (largely white, but stretching across economic lines), the genre would not continue to see the success it does today. Country music scholars have researched and written about many issues within the field, including its history, politics of race, gender, and class, issues of authenticity, and recording and radio techniques. For my purposes, I focus on the genre's politics of race, gender/sexuality, class, and authenticity.

¹³ Henderson, "What Propels Cancel Culture?," 38.

¹⁴ For more about the culture of country music, see Curtis W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

RACE AND COUNTRY MUSIC

The country genre has been whitewashed. It has long been seen as a genre which “belongs” to the white working class; built by whites, for whites. Much ink has (rightfully) been spilled over its exclusion and tokenism of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx voices and audiences, most recently by Jada Watson.¹⁵ Country music developed *not only* through white folk music traditions—it also owes much of its “tradition” to Black musicians:

Many of country’s characteristic musical traits were once understood to be African American in association, if not origin: yodeling, banjo playing, blues chord progressions, blues guitar riffs, slide guitar technique, jazz-inspired solo breaks, backbeat rhythm, and minstrel singing styles thought to be imitations of southern blacks. Country also shares lyrical tropes with African American styles, tropes that include rambling, ‘the blues,’ train travel, relationship loss, murder ballads, dancing, religion, rural-to-urban migration, references to other musicians, and abjection. *Yet in the discourse of American popular music, country represents white culture.*¹⁶

As countless scholars have shown, the whiteness of country music is an idea which has been constructed by the retelling of a false, white narrative, one which “omits not only African American engagements with the genre but also the role of race and racism in southern white working class experience[s].”¹⁷

¹⁵ Jada Watson, “Redlining in Country Music: Representation in the Country Music Industry (2000-2020),” SongData, March 12, 2021.

¹⁶ Olivia Carter Mather, “Race in Country Music Scholarship,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 3.

Addressing country's beginnings, Charles Hughes' book *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* tells the stories of the countless Black voices who helped shape country music in the 1960-70s. He addresses the issue of racism in the genre and shows just how influential Black musicians were to the country music movement by writing about the instrumentalists who played in the background in order to give the music the desired "soul" sound. He writes about the Black producers and mixers of country music, the ones who also helped to clarify the Black sound desired by white listeners. Crucially, however, Hughes does not write this as a fairytale. This book addresses racism head-on. While one might think that Black and white artists working in tandem to create country music meant that the genre was helping to alleviate racism in the south, this could not be further from the truth:

Southern musical spaces—both literal and figurative—have become a kind of ahistorical interracial dreamland. This is a fallacy. Nothing mattered more to these musicians than race. Nothing structured their work more than the racial divisions and disparities that structured life and music making in the South and the rest of the United States. And African Americans did not share equally in the benefits of the music that is now routinely heralded as a demonstration of racial progress. To remove race and racial history from their experiences is to ignore this painful reality and deny the musicians' rightful place in the messy history of race and culture in the United States.¹⁸

Country's beginnings involved putting a white face on what was largely Black music, and yet it is considered the music of the white working class. The fact of the matter is that

¹⁸ Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 191.

those individuals who worked to commercialize country called on Black voices to get it off the ground. Calling on Black artists was what the genre needed to succeed, but that story would not, and does not, sell.

Country music would not exist without the Black voices helping to create it. A similar phenomenon is the concept of Black Twitter: much of today's popular culture would not exist without the BIPOC Twitter community contributing to it. Country music was born out of folk music, out of soul and R&B music, much of which was being created by and rightfully belonged to Black people. White people co-opted it and made it "their genre." Many scholars aim to remedy this by shining a light on it, by writing country's real history, but it will not erase the hurt that was caused. America's "white working-class music" is not that. As Karl Hagstrom Miller has shown and Diane Pecknold reiterates, "country music *became* white, and did so in relation to a shifting landscape of social and symbolic practices that supported white hegemony."¹⁹ As I argue here, racism is still alive and well within the country genre, and its gatekeepers continue to punish up-and-coming Black artists while praising problematic white ones.

Country music, once called "hillbilly music," is not only imagined to be white, but is also most often associated with the white working class. Its origins are described by Patrick Huber in *Linthead Stomp*: "Hillbilly music, or old-time music, as it was also sometimes called, was essentially a commercial American popular music broadcast and recorded between 1922 and 1942 chiefly by ordinary white southern singers and musicians, particularly those from the southeastern United States ... [the term was] a generic industry classification, reportedly coined in 1925 by Okeh executive Ralph S. Peer, that was intended to capture the music's racial, rural,

¹⁹ Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 3, original emphasis. See also: Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

and regional origins.”²⁰ “Hillbillies,” to most of the world, are uneducated, dirt-covered, overall-wearing, unintelligent hicks; the people working in the coal mines or on farms, listening to this music as they do so—the stereotypical working class.

While “hillbilly” is not a bad word, Pamela Grundy has observed that “many rural dwellers, including a number of musicians, considered [‘hillbilly’] ‘a fighting word’ because of its negative connotations. But it was an ideal marketing tool, and its meaning proved ambiguous enough for most players and consumers to accept.”²¹ Hillbilly music’s ambiguous definition provided more opportunities for working-class white people to become part of the tradition. As Huber has shown, for example, “Fiddlin’” John Carson, now renowned for his early contributions to the genre, was a former textile worker in Atlanta.²² These origins helped to form the country genre’s association with not only working-class listeners, but also working-class participants.

While working-class people do listen to country music, so also do those in the middle- and upper-classes. In *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Nadine Hubbs provides some reasons as to why middle- and upper-class people also enjoy country music. Citing a study done on American network television sitcoms, Hubbs offers insight on country music and how it relates back to the mainstream media. The study, conducted by Richard Butsch, concluded that, when shown at all, blue-collar families are presented in a negative light. The “white male

²⁰ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 19.

²¹ Pamela Grundy, “‘We Always Tried to Be Good People’: Respectability, Crazy Water Crystals, and Hillbilly Music on the Air, 1933–1935,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 4 (1995), 1600.

²² Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 19, 43-102.

working-class buffoon” trope which is seen throughout these television series “justif[ies] class relations of modern capitalism and maintain[s] the class status quo,” but as Hubbs suggests:

Country music may offer an antidote. Pointedly acknowledging the media’s hunger for images of white working people as rednecks and “trash”... allows [some country music] to transform alienation and private shame into class camaraderie and humor, a shared laugh in a “counterpublic” sphere. By contrast to television and other entertainment and news media, country music provides frequent, sympathetic working-class representations. Indeed, it offers an inverse perspective relative to other media, to the extent that it normalizes working-class lives and values and often criticizes middle-class values and practices.²³

It is true that country music both normalizes and praises white working-class lives in a way that no other form of modern media does. This criticism of the middle class to which Hubbs refers, however, does not seem to matter to those actually listening to country music.

Because middle-class listeners want to “return” to a “simpler” (read: more firmly white supremacist) time, the genre does not only aim for the ears of the working class. Leigh H. Edwards addresses this in her chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Country Music*: “When listeners consume their fantasy of a southern, white, rural working class through the music, it is through this projected nostalgia for their folk culture as representing somehow a premodern or ‘simpler’ time before modernity, that is, the conditions of social life after the rise of capitalism and industrialization.”²⁴ Working-class listeners may find something to which they can relate

²³ Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 62–63.

²⁴ Leigh H. Edwards, “Country Music and Class,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 308.

within country music's messaging, thus making it more appealing than popular music, while middle- and upper-class listeners enjoy the nostalgia of a time that never was.

Related to its coded whiteness and its supposed belonging to the working class is country music's association with the Republican party. Peter La Chapelle has shown that, even in its early days when white Southerners were mostly Democrats, "Politicians who used fiddlers and cowboy and hillbilly bands to attract crowds signaled that they were themselves political outsiders and thus well equipped to understand the problems of common people."²⁵ Others, such as Chris Willman, have also underscored the conservative ideals in today's mainstream country, especially in the days following 9/11.²⁶ "What all [politicians] held in common was a belief that stylistic choices in music could be used to establish authenticity."²⁷ This authenticity toward which politicians worked in their campaigns is something with which country music has been struggling for decades.

COUNTRY MUSIC'S "AUTHENTICITY PROBLEM"

The push to promote the white working-class narrative of country music has been made in an attempt to protect its "authentic" sound. The authenticity problem, as I call it, within the genre has been an important topic of conversation for country music scholars and critics for years, and it is a particularly tricky one. Given that country music is an amalgamation of many different genres and voices and has evolved so much from its origins, the idea of an authentic country music is one that does not make a whole lot of sense to many scholars. However, to

²⁵ Peter La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 9.

²⁶ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 13–18.

²⁷ La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World*, 9.

those trying to sell the music or to country music “purists,” it is presented as a hill worth dying on. As Pecknold has shown in *The Selling Sound*, when the country genre went commercial, many of its fans were outraged by the direction the Country Music Association (CMA) took in order to do so: “...audience concerns revealed in letters to fan magazines were particularly notable for their insistence on the continued importance of older definitions and social meanings for country music.”²⁸

Being “authentically country” matters to many listeners of country music, but what is “authenticity” in country music? Nadine Hubbs writes that

Scholars agree that there is no original, pure, or authentic form of country music of which commercial country represents a variant, dilution, or corruption. Many a tirade on country music owes its existence to a lack of recognition that the music is and always has been a hybridized, commercial cultural and media form. Thus, if the latest country record sounds a lot like roadhouse blues, a 1970s rock power ballad, bubblegum teen pop, or early 2000s R&B, some listeners and critics complain that it has betrayed its tradition. In a very real sense, however, such music upholds the core traditions of country music, which was founded on and has been carried forward by stylistic mixture and constant change in response to shifting market demands--that is, what people will pay for.²⁹

Real authenticity in country music, therefore, cannot be attributed to a certain sound or artist.

Staying true to the genre’s roots means that not every song will sound the same. It is constantly

²⁸ Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 169.

²⁹ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queens, and Country Music*, 8.

evolving with the times, as all popular genres are, and its authenticity rests not in its roots but in its evolution.

When critics search for “authentic” country, however, they are “demanding of its performers some proof of credibility (sometimes earned through affiliation with rural life, demonstrable hard-luck life experiences, or dedication to the Nashville music community).”³⁰ They are searching for a person who can provide both an authentic sound *and* an authentic story, as if the genre itself will crumble if they are not presented as sufficiently white-working-class. In his essay “It’s Time to Stop Promoting the White, Working-Class Cliche of Country Music,” Travis Stimeling argues that the very idea of “authentic country” contributes to the authenticity problem: “When writers treat authenticity work as historical fact, they replicate the genre’s implicit—and at times explicit—racism, sexism and homophobia and further justify the maintenance of those attitudes.”³¹

The authenticity problem is not only evident in what is demanded of the performers, but also in how the genre is being taught. Olivia Carter Mather’s aforementioned study on country music surveys also found the authenticity problem at play, citing it as a reason for the erasure of Black stories from said surveys and the genre at large.

Country music surveys work much like surveys of other styles of music, by telling a story that begins with the style’s origins and follows its developments through the present day or through its decline...The story is one of authenticity, sincerity, and identity politics. Surveys therefore sideline black contributions not because authors

³⁰ Edwards, “Country Music and Class,” 311.

³¹ Travis D. Stimeling, “It’s Time to Stop Promoting the White, Working-Class Cliche of Country Music,” *100 Days in Appalachia* (blog), July 1, 2019, <https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2019/07/its-time-to-stop-promoting-the-white-working-class-cliche-of-country-music/>.

believe that African Americans did not contribute but because of an ideology that places high value on an authentic connection between working-class whites and country music.³²

The problem with authenticity in country music, then, is not only with the performers or searching for an authentic sound, but also with the racial turmoil and class politics of which we have already spoken. Furthermore, the authenticity problem continues to be evident when we look at issues of queer and gender politics in country music.³³

GENDER AND QUEERNESS IN COUNTRY MUSIC

If one were to look at the country charts at any given moment, they could easily see the disproportionate number of male to female artists. This could be the case for most genres, of course, yet it is especially true of country music, and the imbalance has not improved over the years as most other genres have. “[W]omen have never had an equal presence on the country charts as artists, and, as with the popularity of various themes and topics for songs, the number of women has cycled up and down over the years, the obvious low being none to an occasional high of around 25 percent.”³⁴ Despite these startling statistics, however, there seems to be no shortage of women as the subject of country songs sung by men, nor is there a shortage of them in country music videos. In order to accurately assess the gender problem that country music undoubtedly has, however, it is important to look at country music’s history with women.

³² Mather, “Race in Country Music Scholarship,” 329.

³³ See Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* regarding authenticity in queer country spaces, particularly Chapter 3: “Gender Deviance and Class Rebellion in ‘Redneck Woman.’”

³⁴ Jocelyn R. Neal, “Why ‘Ladies Love Country Boys’: Gender, Class, and Economics in Contemporary Country Music,” in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 5.

Though women played different roles in the genre at different points in time, Stephanie Vander Wel's recent book, *Hillbilly Maidens, Okies, and Cowgirls: Women's Country Music* covers the history of women in country music, from barn dances in the 1930s to the present day. Her primary argument is that women in country music throughout history "confronted and contested the paradoxes of class, region, and gender" in order to make room for the female country artists of today:

In our current postindustrial environment, the working class has become a social category far removed from its former masculinized identity, the virile proletariat, as once imagined by theorists. Instead, the feminization of the service industry (the driving force of the current economy in the United States) has extended to the working class, transforming our understandings of the gendered processes of social class. No longer can working-class women be overlooked in a socioeconomic environment that depends on their labor and has made it increasingly difficult for working-class men to hold on to their breadwinning status in the industrial sector. With their musical depictions of redneck women and crazy ex-girlfriends, contemporary female country artists underscore the complex transformations of contemporary social relations, especially in respect to the feminization of the working class and the shrinking of the middle class, a category of identity whose members have worked hard to keep a safe distance from the sexualized bodies of the lower class.³⁵

³⁵ Stephanie Vander Wel, *Hillbilly Maidens, Okies, and Cowgirls: Women's Country Music, 1930-1960*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 68, 197.

Because women like Kitty Wells and Lulu Belle worked to redefine gender and class assumptions both through their gender and musical performances in the genre's early days, today's female country artists are able to continue to push these narratives into a twenty-first century mindset.

In her chapter in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, Jocelyn Neal focuses on the "country boy" aesthetic (from 2008 to 2013) and how women fit therein. Neal's text centers around the "redneck-blueblood narrative," or the many country songs which focus on a country boy falling for a city girl and her subsequent conversion to liking "country" things. This idea exists in hundreds of country songs by men, but very few by women. However, many female country artists "embody" this idea in their "careers and public selves." "Carrie Underwood, Lady Antebellum's [sic] Hilary Scott, Reba McEntire, Faith Hill, and, in the extreme case, Taylor Swift, all personify the narrative: they have achieved success in a pop-crossover world that transcends the limitations of the country genre and establishes them as stars in the bourgeois middle-American pop scene."³⁶ The redneck-blueblood narrative has existed for ages, and though the assumption may be that the man singing may be bragging about "getting" the educated, high-heel-wearing girl with his classic country charm, Neal suggests that this man "getting the girl," as it were, is "vindication of the country boy's manhood" and "is the equivalent, in a musical narrative's form, of a locker-room high-five and swagger: he still has 'it.'"³⁷ Whether or not ladies love country boys, country boys love to sing about ladies who love country boys. And therein lies the problem.

³⁶ Neal, "Why 'Ladies Love Country Boys,'" 11.

³⁷ Neal, "Why 'Ladies Love Country Boys,'" 18.

Country is a genre that gives all the power to white men.³⁸ It allows white men to speak for all women, for all men, for all people. It allows songs that glorify the “ladies love country boys” trope to soar while female artists struggle to make a name for themselves and queer artists hardly stand a chance. This trope degrades the educated woman by assuming she has won a prize by landing a country boy; other country music tropes, which do not rely on an educated woman, degrade women by assuming us lost and helpless without country boys. Country music by women, however, sings a different tune; songs about strength, power, and love—all without the help of a man. Because these songs (and female country stars, for that matter) do not fit into country music’s narrative of authenticity, however, they are very rarely, if ever, heard as loudly and as often as those songs by white men.

I would be remiss if I did not also write about the bias that country music and its scholarship shows in favor of heteronormative? gender binaries. Because of the genre’s authenticity complex, queer people, including those who identify as non-binary and transgender, have been written out of the narrative. Artists like Trixie Mattel, a popular drag artist with hundreds of thousands of views on her country music videos, have not found mainstream success simply because country music’s narrative will not allow for it. And this is *not* for a lack of queer artists. A simple Google search for “queer country music” will turn up pages upon pages of articles written about queer country artists, with titles like “10 Queer Country Artists Country Music Fans Should Know,” and “Lavender Country to Orville Peck: A History of Queer Country.”³⁹ Additionally, a quick scroll through some of these articles reveals that *many* queer

³⁸ See Jada Watson’s work to expose this issue at songdata.ca.

³⁹ Angela Stefano, “10 Queer Country Artists Country Music Fans Should Know,” *The Boot*, June 4, 2020, <https://theboot.com/queer-country-artists/>, and Rachel Cholst, “Lavender Country to Orville Peck: A History of Queer Country,” *The Boot*, June 4, 2020, <https://theboot.com/queer-country-music-history/>.

country artists exist and that the mainstream media (and most country music scholars) are ignoring them.

The idea of queer people and country music may seem counterintuitive, but as Nadine Hubbs has shown in *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, this music has been a part of rural folks' lives for a long time, and that includes the lives of rural queer folks: "...country is not written, created, or consumed exclusively by white working-class people--or for that matter, southern, rural, Protestant, or heterosexual ones..."⁴⁰ Because of the authenticity problem, however, country music has been dubbed a space for the cis-het-white-working class. Artists who have attempted to change that space, from Lavender Country to Trixie Mattel, have arguably not reached the mainstream success they could have as straight men or even as straight women. All of this goes back to the core beliefs about country music: what it should be, and what (or who?) makes it authentic. Just as Kitty Wells, Lulu Belle, and so many other women pushed to have their voices heard and the narrative of country music changed, we as country music scholars and listeners must also push to have these queer voices heard and recognized in the mainstream.

CONCLUSION

Country music, then, has more in common with cancel culture than one might think. First, it is grounded in communities: both thrive on the communities which build them. Secondly, they demand of their constituents an ideal persona, an authenticity which is not truly authentic, but rather "fabricated," as Richard Peterson would call it.⁴¹ Where the two diverge, however, is in who each considers to be "safe." Cancel culture (when effective) sees that no one

⁴⁰ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 13.

⁴¹ Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, 5.

is protected, white men, Black women, LGBTQ+ folks, and everyone in between can, will, and have been canceled, though the effects of cancel culture on differing race/class/gender identity/sexual orientations varies. Country music, however, ensures that only those who fit within a certain box are heard.

This project thus addresses the positional biases of both cancel culture and country music in regards to race, class, gender, and sexuality by closely observing the careers and cancellations of Taylor Swift, Lil Nas X, and John Rich. Additionally, I address the authenticity problem in country music as it relates to cancel culture. As a cis, white, queer woman, I recognize that I am in a position of privilege while writing much of this work. In instances where I do not feel that I have the agency to speak on the issue at hand, I will call on the work of BIPOC scholars to fill in the gaps which my whiteness has afforded me the privilege to have. And in instances in which I do not feel that I am at liberty to speak on the matter, I will say so, as I will not speak in spaces where I do not belong and am not wanted.

Chapter 1 covers the majority of Taylor Swift's career from the perspective of her many social media scandals. In this chapter, I argue that while Swift is often painted as a victim because she is a woman, she is often also an (unintentional) victimizer. I also show that, until the release of *Reputation* in 2017, Taylor Swift did not engage in much of the social media discourse which surrounded her in an effort to protect her public image, which made it more difficult for cancel culture to take her down. However, now that she does engage with her so-called "haters," Swift is now less protected by her image and is only protected by her white womanhood.

Lil Nas X is the subject of Chapter 2. I detail the backlash following his release of the viral country-trap hit "Old Town Road." Over the period of just a few months, Lil Nas X was canceled numerous times for his song, which I argue all boiled down to his race. Additionally, I

cover his coming out story, which happened just a few months after his rise to fame, and the backlash he received from the hip-hop community. I argue that Lil Nas X's race is to blame for the majority of the flack he has received; I also call for more scholarship on the issue of queer Blackness and Black queerness in the hip-hop community.

Chapter 3 uses John Rich as a counterstudy in order to detail the ways in which this country music giant has managed to use his white male privilege to escape the effects of cancel culture. John Rich, who has always found success in the country music industry, has, more recently, also had a foot in the Republican party. I underline the similarities between Rich's MuzikMafia campaign and Donald Trump's political campaigns, and posit that, despite Rich's claims that we should "cancel cancel culture," it does not (and probably will not) have any real effect on him.⁴² John Rich, like most other white men in powerful positions in the United States, are protected by their whiteness, their maleness, and their money, and despite its best efforts, cancel culture does not actually "come for [them] all."⁴³

Much of this project relies on the conversations which were/are happening on social media, namely Twitter. Due to the casual nature of those platforms, typographical errors, abbreviations, hashtags, grammatical errors, and tags (beginning with the "@" symbol) are common. The words of the subjects of this project will be copied verbatim when possible; "[sic]" will not be used in the case of social media posts unless absolutely necessary, tags will be left with their original "@" symbols, and unless it effects readability, hashtags will be left as they are.

⁴² John Rich (@johnrich), "Liberals and Conservatives should join together to #CancelCancelCulture," Twitter, March 3, 2021, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/136715756079777922>.

⁴³ PBS News Hour, "WATCH: Rep. Jim Jordan says second Trump impeachment is a product of 'cancel culture,'" January 13, 2021, video, 4:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AHgqNxGMtU&feature=emb_logo.

This project seeks to answer the question: “Who is getting canceled, and why?” Though I offer several conclusions, it is important to note that this work is ongoing. Because of the nature of my project, it is likely that it will become out-of-date immediately after its submission. But I believe that the questions which I am asking throughout this work are of value as we continue to walk into this new decade filled with new questions, new problems, and continued division. In order to have a more unified society, I believe it will take many people asking many questions such as the ones posited in this work, and my hope is that if anything is to come from this project, it will be new curiosity and new questions from more people seeking to make a change in the world.

Chapter 1 - Cancel Culture Needs to Calm Down

Victim/izer Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift may be one of the most widely criticized musicians of my generation. She has been critiqued for the songs that she writes, for her voice, and for the number of men she has dated. In a more general sense, she has often been denounced for “playing the victim.” Despite her success over the past fifteen years, Swift continues to be criticized and canceled for her music and for her actions. In the age of cancel culture, how has Swift stayed popular, relevant, and immune to cancellation? This chapter details the ways in which Swift’s career has been influenced by cancel culture and how she has reacted to and combated these effects through her music, her public persona, and her own social media interactions.

Swift has been active within the music industry since she was a preteen. Given cancel culture’s propensity to end careers at the first sight of wrongdoing, her young age, and her very carefully constructed public image, one would think Swift would be very easy to cancel. As we will see, however, cancel culture has not ended her career as it has ended others.

THE EARLY YEARS: (IN)AUTHENTIC TAYLOR

Swift’s public image has been very carefully managed by the people around her from the beginning. Travis Stimeling explains that “like most women in country music, Swift has had to devote a great deal of energy to presenting an image that is saleable to the country audience.”⁴⁴ To that end, Swift’s biographies have been written with country music authenticity in mind, citing her early childhood performances and growing up on a Christmas tree farm.⁴⁵ This

⁴⁴ Travis Stimeling, “The Very Pink, Very Perfect Life of Taylor Swift (2009),” in *The Country Music Reader*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 346. For more about country musicians’ biographies, see Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race and Rusticity in Country Music* (2009).

⁴⁵ See Travis Stimeling’s biography in *Grove Music Online* (2014) or *Biography.com* (updated 2020) for examples.

narrative is so ingrained into her identity that she even released a song in 2019 entitled “Christmas Tree Farm,” the music video for which includes home movies of Swift and her family on said Christmas tree farm when she was a child.⁴⁶ This account of Swift’s background, however adorable and “authentic” it may sound, however, is a falsehood. The Swift family did not live on this farm; they lived in a large house in the suburbs and worked on the farm as a hobby.⁴⁷ Additionally, Scott Swift bought a three-percent stake in Taylor’s new record company, Big Machine Label Group, at the time of her signing, essentially buying her way into the industry.⁴⁸ Even before people were aware that Swift’s entire origin story was largely fabricated, people saw through her constructed persona. This provided many more opportunities for her to be criticized, and later, for her to be canceled.

Not everyone in the country music industry was quick to accept Swift into their ranks, despite her seemingly authentic story and chart-topping music. This could be because, as Jocelyn Neal has argued, “the dominant voice of commercial country music as a whole is unarguably male.”⁴⁹ However, some have argued this lack of acceptance is because Swift was never considered a “real” country artist: “Swift has always been [a] pop [artist].”⁵⁰ The combination of

⁴⁶ Taylor Swift, “Taylor Swift - Christmas Tree Farm,” TaylorSwiftVEVO, December 5, 2019, video, 3:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN3rDTAdM2o>.

⁴⁷ Andy Martino, “The Real Story behind Taylor Swift’s Guitar ‘Legend’: Meet the Computer Repairman Who Taught the Pop Superstar How to Play,” *Daily News*, January 10, 2015, <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/computer-tech-taught-taylor-swift-guitar-exclusive-article-1.2072638>.

⁴⁸ Brian Hiatt, “Taylor Swift in Wonderland: The Reckless Heart, Restless Nights and Lovable Quirks of Pop’s Unstoppable Princess,” *Rolling Stone*, October 25, 2012, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/taylor-swift-in-wonderland-180107/>.

⁴⁹ Jocelyn R. Neal, “Why ‘Ladies Love Country Boys’: Gender, Class, and Economics in Contemporary Country Music,” in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 6.

⁵⁰ Grady Smith, “Taylor Swift’s 10 Country Songs,” *Rolling Stone*, September 8, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country-lists/teardrops-on-her-guitar-taylor-swifts-10-country-songs-164352/>.

sexism in the industry, Swift's pop-leaning sound, her young age, and her young fan base made it more difficult for Swift to succeed as a country artist.

Her early music was written from the honest, open perspective of a teenage girl. Kate Knibbs explains that "Swift worked in a confessional mode, and part of her widespread appeal was how flung-open her emotions appeared; if you hurt her, she wrote about *the ways* you hurt her."⁵¹ Because of her young age and her gender expression, she often faced backlash for being *too* honest and *too* open. Country music demands authenticity of its performers, but she did not fit within the confines of the industry's current standard of authenticity. Richard Peterson wrote that authenticity "is continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image," but the country music industry was not ready to accept Swift's youth, nor the youth of her fans.⁵² Swift acted as a voice for teenage girls, and therefore many were quick to write her off as an inauthentic country artist, simply because her supporters were seen as too young to be authentic fans. However, Travis Stimeling explains that

...while music produced and/or consumed by women might be highly suspect in the eyes of many, predominantly male rockist critics and fans, the literature reinforces the belief that such declarations of inauthenticity necessarily ignore the quite real—

⁵¹ Kate Knibbs, "Ten Years of Taylor Swift: How the Pop Star Went From Sweetheart to Snake (and Back Again?)," *The Ringer*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.theringer.com/music/2019/8/21/20826837/ten-years-of-taylor-swift>.

⁵² Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6. In addition to country music's racism, sexism, and homophobia, it has an additional ageism problem. This ageism comes into play on both ends of the age spectrum. Artists who are too young, such as Taylor Swift, are seen as inauthentic because of their age, but artists who are too old are also seen as inauthentic. Consult Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, "'Everybody's Lonesome for Somebody': Age, the Body and Experience in the Music of Hank Williams," *Popular Music* 9, no. 3 (1990): 259–74 for more about this phenomenon.

and, therefore, authentic—experiences of everyone—including girls—involved in the production and consumption of this music.⁵³

Because of the general suspicion that music created and consumed by women is less authentic than that of their male counterparts, Swift's country career was perhaps doomed from the start.

Swift has said that she does not like genre-labeling her music, saying that she “leave[s] [that] to other people... If you think too hard about who other people want you to be as an artist, it stops you from being who you want to be as an artist.”⁵⁴ When the country industry would not accept that this “genreless” artist was who she wanted to be, she began making a path for herself into the pop music industry.⁵⁵ Her 2012 album, *Red*, is the perfect example of her country-pop crossover, which broke sales records within its first week. Additionally, it was nominated for and won awards in both country and pop categories, which is a true testament to the far-reaching power Swift had over the industry in that year, despite criticisms from industry professionals and media alike.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION: TAYLOR AS PERPETUAL VICTIM

Swift's public perception is generally in flux. She has often been blamed for “playing the victim,” and has been since nearly the beginning of her career. This fluctuation is partially due to her carefully managed public image, but also due to her gender and her genre of songwriting.

⁵³ Travis Stimeling, “Taylor Swift's ‘Pitch Problem’ and the Place of Adolescent Girls in Country Music,” in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 89.

⁵⁴ Christopher John Farley, “Is Taylor Swift Still a Country Artist? Let's Ask Taylor Swift,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2012, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/10/22/is-taylor-swift-still-a-country-artist-lets-ask-taylor-swift/>.

⁵⁵ This “genreless” phenomenon is Swift's way of existing as both a “soft-shell” and a “hard-core” artist (terms coined by Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 138). While many may argue that Swift has been “soft-shell” from the beginning, her clear *more* pop-leaning sound heard in *Red* exemplifies this experience.

Swift has indeed been a victim, but has also, at times, been a victimizer. Here I examine Swift's numerous scandals and run-ins with cancel culture, and I analyze how these episodes in her life have affected her carefully crafted public persona and how she is perceived by the public.

Shortly after the start of her career, an incident with Kanye West occurred at MTV's VMA awards in 2009, where he interrupted her acceptance speech and began a career-long war between them. Swift was on stage accepting her award for "Best Video by a Female Artist" for her song "You Belong with Me" when Kanye West interrupted her acceptance speech, saying: "Yo, Taylor, I'm really happy for you, I'mma let you finish, but Beyonce had one of the best videos of all time!"⁵⁶ Swift, the first country artist ever awarded a VMA, was speechless. Because this happened in the early stages of Swift's career (she was only nineteen years old at the time of the incident), many people within the industry saw her as a victim and Kanye as a victimizer. To that end, Kanye West faced a mountain of backlash following the incident. Artist P!nk tweeted, "Kanye west is the biggest piece of shit on earth. Quote me."⁵⁷ Kelly Clarkson wrote an open letter to West, which read "What happened to you as a child?? Did you not get hugged enough?? Something must have happened to make you this way and I think we're all just curious as to what would make a grown man go on national television and make a talented artist, let alone teenager, feel like [shit]."⁵⁸ Even then-President Obama spoke about the incident, calling West a "jackass."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana*, Directed by Lana Wilson, Netflix: 2020, Streaming.

⁵⁷ P!nk (@Pink), "Kanye West Is the Biggest Piece of Shit on Earth. Quote Me.," Twitter, September 14, 2009, <https://twitter.com/pink/status/3967674746>.

⁵⁸ "Kelly Clarkson's Open Letter To Kanye West," *PopDirt*, September 14, 2009, <http://popdirt.com/kelly-clarksons-open-letter-to-kanye-west/76058/>.

⁵⁹ Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana*.

This incident provides a glimpse into the public's perception of Swift and the "victim" narrative. Because of the "very pink, very perfect" persona Swift presents to the public (and by nature of the fact that she is a woman and Kanye West is a man), countless people rushed to "protect" her after the incident.⁶⁰ David Leonard has argued that this event "changed the trajectory of Swift's career, who in the aftermath of being Kanyed found herself framed as the quintessential victim. Depicted as the girl-next-door bullied by the big and bad Kanye, Swift found greater popularity within the American landscape."⁶¹ So many people came to fight on behalf of Swift, in fact, that West felt the need to leave the country following the incident because he found the backlash he was receiving to be too overwhelming.⁶²

Though the incident was, at the time, read as Swift being "bullied" by Kanye West, scholars have argued that the incident had little to do with her at all, though it ultimately shaped her career and public persona. David Leonard explains that "in many regards, the interruption was directed not at Swift, but at the voters who in West's interpretation had privileged a white artist ahead of a Black artist despite their actual relative artistic merit—nothing new within America's musical landscape."⁶³ Nicholas Krebs continues by claiming that "West's actions, albeit rude, can be understood as a defensive reaction to covert and overt messages of racial privilege evidenced by the selection of Taylor Swift as the award recipient."⁶⁴ When read as a

⁶⁰ Grigoriadis, "The Very Pink, Very Perfect Life of Taylor Swift," 345.

⁶¹ David J. Leonard, "You Got Kanyed: Seen but Not Heard," in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2014), 61.

⁶² Kanye West, Ellen DeGeneres, "Kanye West Talks About the Taylor Swift Incident" TheEllenShow, October 19, 2010, video, 2:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rej2Ts_TpwQ.

⁶³ Leonard, "You Got Kanyed," 49.

⁶⁴ Nicholas D. Krebs, "Confidently (Non)Congnizant of Neoliberalism: Kanye West and the Interruption of Taylor Swift," in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2014), 195.

protest, the perception changes from Swift as “victim” to Swift as “playing the victim,” and perhaps even to (albeit indirectly) “victimizer.”

Kanye’s celebrity status would have us believe that the 2009 VMA incident was another instance of cancel culture wherein he was the canceled. However, we might also liken this incident to a lynching, an event during which Black men’s activities were policed with violence. West, a Black man, was seen as victimizing Swift, a white woman. Because many viewers read this as an attack on Swift, West found himself facing so much backlash that he fled the country. Lartey and Morris write that lynchings were triggered by “occasionally real, but usually imagined... claim[s] of sexual contact between black men and white women. The trope of the hypersexual and lascivious black male, especially vis-à-vis the inviolable chastity of white women, was and remains one of the most durable tropes of white supremacy.”⁶⁵

Kanye West found himself lynched for standing up during Swift’s acceptance speech not only because he is Black, but also because he was seen as threatening a white woman’s success. However, Swift’s whiteness, combined with her femininity, protected her from being truly harmed by West’s actions at the VMAs. Swift may not have been at the helm of West’s “cancellation,” (read lynching) or have even directly contributed to it, but it is worth noting that she did not do anything to stop it, making her an indirect victimizer of West. As we will see, this is a pattern for Swift.

When Swift made her “official” switch to the pop music genre in 2014, it was not without controversy. The song “Shake It Off” and its accompanying music video (just shy of three billion views on YouTube in 2021), was highly controversial, with many accusing Swift and its director

⁶⁵ Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris, “How White Americans Used Lynchings to Terrorize and Control Black People,” *The Guardian*, April 26, 2018. See also: Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching*, (University of Illinois Press, 2011) for more background on lynching in the American south.

of cultural appropriation.⁶⁶ The video features dancers of different ethnicities, genders, and genres throughout, with Swift dressed to match in all instances. Because of this, many blamed her for appropriating Black culture when she is seen wearing a hoodie over a snapback hat with a boombox on her shoulder in one scene, and cutoff shorts, high-top sneakers, chain jewelry and large gold hoop earrings in another while attempting to twerk. In other scenes, she is seen dressed as a ballerina, in a fully sequined sweat suit, a baton-twirler's outfit, and a cheerleader uniform.⁶⁷

Mark Romanek, the music video's director, remarked in a 2014 interview that the concept for the video "was all Taylor's," and that "she wanted to make a sort of paean to the awkward ones, the 'uncool' kids that are actually cooler than the 'cool' kids. She said she wanted to shoot all these styles of dance and then to be the individualist dork in the midst of these established genres."⁶⁸ There were a few people commenting on the problematic nature of the video after its release, but there was no real controversy until after rapper Earl Sweatshirt joined the conversation. He tweeted "haven't watched the taylor swift video and I don't need to watch it to tell you that it's inherently offensive and ultimately harmful" and that the video was "perpetuating black stereotypes to the same demographic of white girls who hide their prejudice by proclaiming their love of the culture."⁶⁹ There were many mixed reactions to this tweet: some

⁶⁶ Taylor Swift, "Shake It Off," released August 18, 2014, Big Machine Label Group, Spotify.

⁶⁷ Taylor Swift, "Taylor Swift - Shake It Off," TaylorSwiftVEVO, video, 4:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfWlot6h_JM.

⁶⁸ Kyle Buchanan, "Mark Romanek on Directing Taylor Swift's New Video 'Shake It Off,'" *Vulture*, August 21, 2014, <https://www.vulture.com/2014/08/mark-romanek-on-making-taylor-swifts-new-video.html>.

⁶⁹ Earl Sweatshirt (@earlxsweat), "haven't watched the taylor swift video and I don't need to watch it to tell you that it's inherently offensive and ultimately harmful," Twitter, August 18, 2014, <https://twitter.com/earlxsweat/status/501561180691767296>.
 Earl Sweatshirt (@earlxsweat), "perpetuating black stereotypes to the same demographic of white girls who hide their prejudice by proclaiming their love of the culture," Twitter, August 18, 2014, <https://twitter.com/earlxsweat/status/501562177698803713>.

criticized the rapper for not watching the video before commenting on it while others agreed wholeheartedly with the sentiment behind the tweets and moved forward with canceling her (though Sweatshirt did not explicitly say anything about canceling Swift).

Though the director made claims about the video's inclusivity, Rachel E. Dubrofsky offered another opinion:

In this ... context, the obstacles Swift faces performing the different dance styles have to do with who she is—her authentic self—and her inability to be anything but this authentic self. Hilarity ensues because all attempts to be anything other than her real self (white, adorable, playful and free) results in Swift's real self inevitably and unwittingly surfacing. The humor is rooted in how badly Swift fits the conventions of the style of dance she attempts to embody, and her recognition of this fact: a knowing wink-wink, nudge-nudge to the audience. There is no explicit attention to how her white body and white aesthetics might be an obstacle to performing racialized forms of dance, or to the concomitant critical issues. In this new era of racism where people are knowledgeable about racism and self-conscious about their displays of racism, Swift gives us a knowing self-reflexive wink... The wink indicates to Swift's audience, "I'm so white, you know it, I know it, which makes it so funny when I try to dance like a person of color."⁷⁰

By making a joke of her own whiteness (and therefore of her own privilege), but continuing to sing about "shaking it off," Swift not only minimizes the daily hardships faced by the BIPOC community, but she also emphasizes how little of her own privilege she recognizes. Even though

⁷⁰ Buchanan, "Mark Romanek on Directing Taylor Swift's New Video."
 Rachel E. Dubrofsky, "A Vernacular of Surveillance: Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus Perform White Authenticity," *Surveillance & Society* 14, no. 2 (2016), 192–93.

the lyrics of this song read as Swift's personal mantra more than a political statement (see her politics later), it was hard for most to disregard her ignorance. The video is tokenistic in the sense that it includes a few people of different races, genders, and cultures (and the dances associated with them), and it is not inclusive in its message. Therefore, in this instance, Swift is, again, a victimizer.

While Swift, with her white privilege can just “shake it off” and say that the “haters [are] gonna hate,” the people that she tried to include do not and cannot relate to this sentiment. The BIPOC community cannot simply “shake off” the systemic racism in our country, and appropriating their dances and costumes, however well-meaning, leaves a certain audience with a sour taste in their mouths. To add insult to injury, Swift herself never made a statement on the backlash the video was receiving. Radio silence in the face of adversity (and cancel culture) is a pattern of behavior for Swift. While this silence is likely due to Swift working to maintain her carefully constructed image, it also reads as an expression of her white fragility. Whatever the case may be, she would break this silence the following year, in 2015, following a tweet from Nicki Minaj.

When it was announced that American-Trinidadian rapper Nicki Minaj received three 2015 VMA nominations for her song “Anaconda,” but not the one for “Video of the Year,” Minaj took to Twitter to voice her displeasure with the decision: “If I was a different ‘kind’ of artist, Anaconda would be nominated for best choreo and vid of the year as well,” and “When the ‘other’ girls drop a video that breaks records and impacts culture they get that nomination.”⁷¹ Her

⁷¹ Nicki Minaj (@NICKIMINAJ), “If I was a different “kind” of artist, Anaconda would be nominated for best choreo and vid of the year as well...” Twitter, July 21, 2015, <https://twitter.com/NICKIMINAJ/status/623571674076614656>.

Nicki Minaj (@NICKIMINAJ), “When the ‘other’ girls drop a video that breaks records and impacts culture they get that nomination...” Twitter, July 21, 2015, <https://twitter.com/NICKIMINAJ/status/623574103757209600>.

tweets imply that, because Minaj is a woman of color, her video was not chosen for the nomination (however, it is important to mention that “7/11” by Beyoncé [another woman of color] was nominated for “Video of the Year”). Nicki Minaj also stated in her long string of tweets that “If your video celebrates women with very slim bodies, you will be nominated for vid[eo] of the year.”⁷²

Because Swift was also nominated for “Video of the Year” for “Bad Blood” (and because her video featured women with very slim bodies), she immediately assumed Minaj’s tweets were directed at her, as she was the only white woman on the nomination list (the “other” referred to in Nicki’s tweet). She responded on Twitter: “@NICKIMINAJ I’ve done nothing but love and support you, it’s unlike you to pit women against each other. Maybe one of the men took your slot.”⁷³ Minaj responded by claiming she was not talking about Swift and said that she had missed the point. Critics pointed out that Swift was “trying to change the conversation from racism to sexism,” and that this was yet another instance of Swift’s playing the victim.⁷⁴

It is understandable why many people read this as yet another instance of Swift playing the victim given that her white fragility shows through clearly. Robin DiAngelo writes that “white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, [and] it is born out of superiority and entitlement.”⁷⁵ Swift is certainly superior in her field and, as we have seen, has always been entitled. However, her assumption that Nicki Minaj was calling her out was not completely off-

⁷² Nicki Minaj (@NICKIMINAJ), “If your video celebrates women with very slim bodies, you will be nominated for vid of the year...,” Twitter, July 21, 2015, <https://twitter.com/NICKIMINAJ/status/623608271774072832>.

⁷³ Emily VanDerWerff, “The Taylor Swift and Nicki Minaj Twitter Feud, Explained,” *Vox*, July 21, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/21/9012179/taylor-swift-nicki-minaj-twitter>.

⁷⁴ VanDerWerff, “The Taylor Swift and Nicki Minaj Twitter Feud, Explained.”

⁷⁵ Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

base, even if her reaction was. Nicki Minaj specifically called out ““other”” girls and did not explicitly call out the racist nature of the music industry (though most people understood her implicit point). This, in addition to her white fragility, made it much easier for Swift to feel victimized; she has, after all, been legitimately victimized in the music industry. However, whether or not, as Nosheen Iqbal argues, “the broader point Minaj is making is clear” to Swift, I do not think that she was wrong to add her own points about sexism in the industry to the conversation about racism, even if it seemed like she was unable to recognize her own white fragility in the moment.⁷⁶

Of the six artists listed on the ballot for “Video of the Year” in 2015 (Beyoncé, Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift, Mark Ronson, Bruno Mars, and Kendrick Lamar), there were an equal number of BIPOC to white artists nominated for the award, with only two of the six being women.⁷⁷ I am *absolutely not* disputing that the music industry has a race problem. I will also *not* dispute the fact that the music industry has a gender problem. An intersectional analysis of the issue tells us that Nicki Minaj absolutely has suffered more at the hands of the music industry as a consequence of her seat at the intersection of Blackness and womanhood. Despite the gender problem in the music industry, Swift should have taken a step back in this instance to recognize the privilege that she has been afforded by her whiteness. However, it is also important to point out that this was one of the first times in Swift’s career in which she stood up for herself on social media, despite what would undoubtedly happen to her image by doing so.

⁷⁶ Nosheen Iqbal, “The Nicki Minaj Debate Is Bigger than Taylor Swift’s Ego,” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/22/nicki-minaj-debate-bigger-than-taylor-swifts-ego>.

⁷⁷ Kendrick Lamar was technically nominated twice, as he was also a featured artist on Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood.”

When Kanye West released his song “Famous” in early 2016, it reignited his feud with Swift in a massive way. The song features the lyric, “I think me and Taylor might still have sex, why? I made that bitch famous,” and its accompanying music video includes life-like mannequins of various celebrities, all naked and lying in a bed with West.⁷⁸ One of the mannequins, of course, was Swift. She spoke out against the song and its video, and claimed she had no prior knowledge of it. After that statement, Kim Kardashian-West (Kanye’s wife) posted footage of a phone call between West and Swift in which West allegedly asked Swift for permission to use her name in a song, and she approved. However, it was not clear from the video what was agreed upon in the phone call given that it had been edited.⁷⁹ In a now-deleted tweet, Swift wrote, “That moment when Kanye West secretly records your phone call, then Kim posts it on the internet.” with the attached note:

Where is the video of Kanye telling me he was going to call me ‘that [bitch]’ in his song? It doesn’t exist because it never happened. You don’t get to control someone’s emotional response to being called ‘that bitch’ in front of the entire world. Of course I wanted to like the song. I wanted to believe Kanye when he told me that I would love the song. I wanted us to have a friendly relationship. He promised to play the song for me, but he never did. While I wanted to be supportive of Kanye on the phone call, you cannot ‘approve’ a song you haven’t heard. Being falsely printed as a liar when I was never given the full story or played any part of

⁷⁸ Kanye West, “Famous,” with Rihanna and Swizz Beatz, released April 1, 2016, track 4 on *The Life of Pablo*, GOOD Music/Def Jam Records, Spotify.

Kanye West, “Kanye West - Famous,” KanyeWestVEVO, video, 10:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7FCgw_GlWc&t=521s.

⁷⁹ What we can assume is while the full video has been leaked since this incident, and while Swift did agree to the “...might still have sex” line, she never agreed to being called a bitch. There is also no evidence of Swift agreeing to using her likeness in the music video.

the song is character assassination. I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative, one that I have never asked to be a part of, since 2009.⁸⁰

Very few people believed that Swift's response was genuine, and she continued to be accused of lying and playing the victim. The last sentence of her statement ended up becoming a running internet joke, and amidst thousands of people making fun of her (and Kim Kardashian calling her a "snake"), Swift left social media entirely for over a year.

After years of not speaking up for herself in the face of cancel culture in order to protect her image, the final Kardashian-West scandal was enough to send Swift over the edge. It would serve as a huge turning point in her life, about which she spoke in her *Miss Americana* documentary:

When people decided I was wicked and evil and conniving and not a good person, that was the one that I couldn't really bounce back from, 'cause my whole life was centered around it. '#TaylorSwiftisOverParty' was the number one trend on Twitter worldwide. Do you know how many people have to be tweeting that they hate you for that to happen? We're people who got into this line of work because we wanted people to like us, because we were intrinsically insecure, because we liked the sound of people clapping 'cause it made us forget how much we feel like we're not good enough. When people fall out of love with you, there's nothing you can do to change their mind, they just don't love you anymore. I just wanted to disappear. Nobody physically saw me for a year. And that was what I thought they wanted. The reason why that backlash hurt so much was because that used to be all I had. I

⁸⁰ Kelli Boyle, "Here Are All The Brutal Social Media Exchanges Between Kim K & Taylor Swift," *Elite Daily*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.elitedaily.com/p/kim-kardashian-taylor-swifts-social-media-exchanges-are-so-so-brutal-8442765>.

felt really alone. I felt really bitter. I felt, you know, sort of like a wounded animal lashing out. I figured I had to reset everything. I had to deconstruct an entire belief system for my own personal sanity.⁸¹

Because Swift's whole life had centered around being liked, it is clear why she was read as always playing the victim. Her public image, which she (and her team) had always worked hard to create and protect, was rooted in country music authenticity, which demands perfection. To onlookers, that authenticity (or lack thereof), then, has always read as weakness, fragility, and therefore victimhood. By staying quiet in the face of adversity, Swift contributed to her own victim narrative. When she was truly canceled for the first time following the 2016 Kim/Kanye incident, then, it served as a wakeup call for Swift. After taking a hiatus from social media in order to "reset everything," she came back a different person—a different celebrity who was ready to deal with cancel culture in a different way.

TAYLOR'S TURNING POINT: "LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO"

In August 2017, Swift deleted all of her former posts on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and her personal website.⁸² Because it had been nearly three years since her last album release (and her "official" switch to pop), many fans took this as a sign that her next album would be released soon thereafter. Others thought she may have been hacked, while still others thought she was trying to cover something up in order to protect herself from cancel culture's tradition of tracking down old "offensive" content in the service of canceling that person years later. About one week later, however, fans were pleased to learn that her deletion of social media

⁸¹ Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana*.

⁸² Brittany Hodak, "Taylor Swift Deletes Social Posts, Sends Internet Into Collective Tizzy," *Forbes*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brittanyhodak/2017/08/18/taylor-swift-deletes-social-posts-sends-internet-into-collective-tizzy/>.

was, indeed a stunt in order to promote her sixth album, *Reputation*. Its first single, “Look What You Made Me Do,” brought with it a music video that excited fans, bored critics, and marked a notable change in Swift’s career and constructed public image.

The video opens on a headstone that reads “Here Lies Taylor Swift’s Reputation,” and then pans to her digging her own grave while dressed in full zombie makeup. The lyrics, which read “I don’t like your little games ... your tilted stage, the role you made me play of the fool ... I don’t like you,” are seemingly directed at the one who “killed” her reputation in the first place: Kanye West. The mention of a “tilted stage,” where their drama began (at the 2009 VMAs), supports this idea, combined with the line “playing the fool,” which is likely a reference to their 2016 incident. The video continues with Swift seen in a tub of diamonds with a single dollar bill, which Guardian writer Jake Nevins attributes to Swift’s then-recent win in her sexual assault case, in which she symbolically sued the perpetrator for one dollar.⁸³

The pre-chorus, “But I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time ... I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time. I’ve got a list of names and yours is in red, underlined. I check it once, then I check it twice,” acts as a warning to everyone who had ever walked on Swift. In the context of her social media hiatus, these lyrics read as Swift climbing back into the ring. In the context of everything discussed in this chapter thus far, these lyrics read as a redemption story: Swift is ready to take on whatever her critics find to throw at her. And as the new album’s name would suggest, she is ready to have a new reputation. The first time the pre-chorus is heard in the video, Swift is shown in a large golden throne wearing a red robe, surrounded by snakes. One

⁸³ Jake Nevins, “Look What You Made Her Do: Decoding the Disses of Taylor Swift’s New Video,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/aug/28/taylor-swift-look-what-you-made-me-do-music-video>.

For more information on Swift’s sexual assault case, see Yahr, “Taylor Swift Explains Her Blunt Testimony,” and Rivas, “Everything That Happened In Taylor Swift’s Sexual Assault Case.”

snake is serving her a cup of tea (“tea” being slang for “gossip”), “the kind Kim Kardashian dished out when she released audio of Swift.”⁸⁴ In the second pre-chorus, Swift is seen at the front of an army of women dressed as Barbie doll robots. The words “Squad U” appear on the screen at the front of the room, alluding to the many criticisms of Swift’s “squad.”⁸⁵ She appears as a dictator, ready to have the dolls march into battle for her. However, in the next scene, we see a pile of these dolls in pieces, with Swift sitting next to them acting like a damsel in distress. This, again, is a message: Swift does not need her “squad” anymore. Her sarcastic “damsel in distress” act says that even though the media would have her portrayed as helpless without her “squad,” this is not the case.

The chorus for “Look What You Made Me Do” is very interesting in the sense that it is very uninteresting: it merely repeats the line “Ooh, look what you made me do” in different rhythmic patterns. Though Swift had been criticized for uninteresting choruses before, this one seems to be written this way on purpose. Swift knew the criticism her music received, and therefore knew this “uninteresting” melody would not be the critics’ favorite. However, because she was taking back control of her reputation, this criticism no longer mattered to her. The first chorus in the music video sees Swift, dressed in a cheetah fur, crashing a gold sports car, and gold objects start flying around her from the impact. The car door opens and Swift is seen holding one of her Grammy awards (another dig at Kanye West).⁸⁶ The next chorus features

⁸⁴ “Urban Dictionary: Tea,” Urban Dictionary, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tea>.
Nevins, “Look What You Made Her Do...”

⁸⁵ For examples of this criticism, see Putnam, “Taylor Swift’s ‘Squad’ Has Become a Cult,” N. Swift, “Why Taylor Swift’s Squad Is Baloney,” Lindner, “How Taylor Swift’s Squad Divided Our Conversation About Female Friendship,” and Paglia, “Camille Paglia Takes on Taylor Swift.”

⁸⁶ When Taylor Swift accepted her Grammy award for “Album of the Year” in 2016, she made a speech which was widely considered to be a dig at Kanye West post-“Famous” scandal. See Abad-Santos, “Grammys 2016: Taylor Swift’s Feminist Acceptance Speech Was Really about Kanye West,” for more about this.

Swift in a fishnet bodysuit, a leather bikini, and thigh high boots. To top off the dark look, she wears dark makeup which adds to this new, “harder” persona she is presenting. She struts into a room of men, who are quick to follow her. They wear shirts that read “I [heart] TS,” an homage to her ex-boyfriend Tom Hiddleston, which again subverts our perception of her self-awareness by reminding us that she knows that we think that she “surrounds herself only with those who emblazon their love for her on T-shirts,” or that she is only concerned with writing about the men she dates.⁸⁷

In the second verse, Swift is seen in a giant golden bird cage, which reads as a comment on her femininity and (white) fragility and represents her feeling trapped in the past. She swings back and forth inside the cage while she sings the lyrics, “I don’t like your kingdom keys, they once belonged to me. You ask[ed] me for a place to sleep, locked me out and threw a feast.” This reads as a comment on her public persona pre-Kanye, when she was seen as doing no wrong and held the “kingdom keys.” When Kanye apologized for the incident, he was “asking for a place to sleep,” and then turned around and got her canceled again, effectively “locking her out and throwing a feast.” The video continues with Swift robbing a vault labeled “Stream Co.,” a reference to her years-long boycott of Spotify and Apple Music, “and now she’s back to rob them,” writes Nevins.⁸⁸ Swift is then seen getting onto a motorcycle wearing studded black leather, surrounded by other women doing the same. This again portrays Swift’s new “harder” persona as she performs the next set of lyrics: “The world moves on, another day, another drama... But not for me... all I think about is karma. And then the world moves on, but one

⁸⁷ Nevins, “Look What You Made Her Do...”

⁸⁸ Taylor Swift, “For Taylor Swift, the Future of Music Is a Love Story,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2014, <https://online.wsj.com/articles/for-taylor-swift-the-future-of-music-is-a-love-story-1404763219>.
Nevins, “Look What You Made Her Do...”

thing's for sure - Maybe I got mine, but you'll all get yours.” In these lyrics, Swift references her daily drama directly, but is saying that she will not engage with it anymore because karma will take care of it. Here, Swift also says she got what she had coming to her, perhaps because she engaged with her own drama in 2016 (rather than just “shaking it off,” as she claimed she would).

Perhaps the most interesting part of the video comes in the bridge, during the repeated lyrics “I don’t trust nobody and nobody trusts me. I’ll be the actress starring in your bad dreams.” This line references her entire career of criticism and is directed at all of the people who called her out for playing the victim or called her “fake.” Because of these assumptions about her, she does not trust anyone. Similarly, because critics have been on Swift’s case for her inauthenticity before (an “actress” playing the “role” of Taylor Swift, as it were), it would be a “bad dream” to think Swift no longer cares about her reputation. The video for this section features Swift standing atop a towering “T,” wearing a velvet leotard with the word “Rep” on it. Below her, dozens of other Taylors attempt to climb the tower and fail. These are different versions of Taylor from old videos and famous moments from “You Belong With Me” to “Shake it Off” to the 2009 VMAs. “Reputation Taylor” forces them all down, and says the next line: “I’m sorry, the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, ‘cause she’s dead!”⁸⁹ The “old Taylors” are seen falling (read: dying) in slow-motion as the video goes back through all of the things “you just made her do.”

At the end of the video, there is no music, but Swift uses this opportunity to make a statement about herself and her reputation. The “old” and “new” Taylors stand in a line, all ready to make their own statement about Swift’s career. “You Belong With Me” Taylor is making a

⁸⁹ Taylor Swift, “Look What You Made Me Do,” released August 24, 2017, *Big Machine Label Group*, Streaming.

famous “Taylor Swift surprised face,” and says “You guys!!!” while zombie Taylor (from the video) says “Stop making that surprised face, it’s so annoying.”⁹⁰ “Shake it Off” Taylor chimes in with “Yeah, you can’t possibly be *that* surprised all the time.” One of the “New Taylors,” from this video says, “What’s with that bitch?” and zombie Taylor barks back, “Don’t call me that!” “Country Taylor” says “Y’all!” Another says “Oh, stop acting like you’re all nice. You are *so* fake!” “Country Taylor” begins to cry, and another “new Taylor” says “There she goes, playing the victim, *again*.” Another asks, “What are you doing?” while yet *another* “new Taylor” says “Getting receipts. Gonna edit this later” (in reference to the 2016 Kim-Kanye debacle).⁹¹ Finally, 2009 VMAs Taylor says “I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative,” and they all scream back “Shut up!” in unison.⁹²

At the time of its release, this music video spoke not only to the new reputation Swift was creating for herself, but also to the one she was leaving behind. Her meticulously curated public image had just been left in a pile of “old Taylors,” and listeners and viewers alike were not sure where the new one was headed. This video was a turning point for Swift. Indeed, this whole album was about taking back her reputation (or perhaps caring less about it), but we also saw a shift in Swift’s public actions after this song’s release in 2017, which led to some of her biggest controversies and some of her biggest wins.

⁹⁰ Swift has faced criticism since the early days of her career for her “trademark surprised face,” which was a claim that she was always surprised by her award show wins and made the same face (it even became a running joke on the internet). I believe that this assumption and claim is rooted in sexism, however, for more information on Swift’s “surprised face,” see Schutte “Did Taylor Swift Fake Surprise for AMAs Win?”

⁹¹ To get “receipts” is to get “evidence or proof,” see *Urban Dictionary*: receipts.

⁹² Taylor Swift, “Taylor Swift - Look What You Made Me Do,” TaylorSwiftVEVO, August 27, 2017, video, 4:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tmd-ClpJxA>.

POST-REPUTATION: A NEW TAYLOR?

Though *Reputation* and “Look What You Made Me Do” did not come without its backlash, Swift took the opportunity to right some of her perceived wrongs post-*Reputation*, including standing up for herself and for others.⁹³ She became a voice in the political sphere, for women and marginalized groups, and she signed a record deal which served to help other artists earn more money. There would be repercussions, of course, but it showed a shift in how Swift handles cancel culture post-*Reputation* versus how she handled it before.

In 2018, Swift’s record deal with Big Machine Label Group (BMLG) was set to expire, giving her free reign over her music for the first time since age fifteen. She signed with Republic Records, a subsidiary of Universal Music Group, leaving behind fourteen years with Big Machine— and all of her master recordings. This move was big news at the time. Swift is worth big money in the industry, and a move like this can earn or cost a label millions. Her move was not selfish, however, and was primarily based on earning other artists money. Amy Wang explains that “as part of her joint contract with the label, UMG must promise to hand over to artists, on a non-recoupable basis, a portion of the windfall from its Spotify shares in the future. Not just to Swift, but to all its artists.”⁹⁴ This was huge news for the industry, but it would become big news again just one year later, however, for a different reason: one that was much more related to Swift’s never-ending relationship with cancel culture.

On June 30, 2019, it was announced that Scooter Braun, music producer to the stars (and notably, Kanye West), had acquired BMLG, as well as Swift’s entire catalogue with them. The

⁹³ See Donahue “Taylor Swift Isn’t Self Aware Enough to Be a Convincing Villain,” and Gotrich et al., “Taylor Swift Can’t Be The Victim And The Villain.”

⁹⁴ Amy X. Wang, “How Taylor Swift’s Deal With Universal Affects Other Artists,” *Rolling Stone*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/news/taylor-swift-universal-republic-deal-spotify-758102/>.

same day, Swift took to Tumblr to address the situation, which she claimed she had never been made aware of. In the post, she wrote that this was her “worst case scenario,” recalling the “incessant, manipulative bullying [she’d] received at [Braun’s] hands for years.” She went on to claim that Scooter Braun orchestrated some of the bullying she had received online from Braun’s celebrity clients, such as Kanye West and Justin Bieber. She also called into question why she was not offered to buy back her own masters, and rather was told she could “...sign back up to Big Machine Records and ‘earn’ one album back at a time, one for every new one [she] turned in.”⁹⁵

The same day, Scott Borchetta, BMLG’s original owner with whom Swift signed her record deal fourteen years prior, responded on his website, disputing many of the claims which she had made. He began by claiming that not only had he texted Swift the night before the news broke, but also that she should have known about the deal because “Taylor’s dad, Scott Swift, was a shareholder in Big Machine Records, LLC. We first alerted all of the shareholders on Thursday, June 20th for an official shareholder’s call scheduled for Tuesday, June 25th,” essentially saying that her dad or one of her lawyers must have alerted her of the deal before the news was announced. He continues: “I am attaching a few very important deal points in what was part of our official last offer to Taylor Swift to remain at Big Machine Records...As you will read, 100% of all Taylor Swift assets were to be transferred to her immediately upon signing the new agreement. We were working together on a new type of deal for our new streaming world that was not necessarily tied to ‘albums’ but more of a length of time.”⁹⁶ Borchetta attached the

⁹⁵ Taylor Swift, “For years I asked, pleaded for a chance to own my work...,” Tumblr, June 30, 2019, <https://taylorswift.tumblr.com/post/185958366550/for-years-i-asked-pleaded-for-a-chance-to-own-my>.

⁹⁶ Scott Borchetta, “So It’s Time for Some Truth...,” Big Machine Label Group (blog), June 30, 2019, <https://www.bigmachinelabelgroup.com/news/so-its-time-some-truth>.

proposed contract to the post, as well as text from personal messages between Swift and himself, which further contradicted her claims.

Swift's fans did not take kindly to this post, and were quick to cancel Borchetta, Braun, and BMLG altogether. A few people pointed to the differences between the two statements and blamed Swift for lying or playing the victim, but since the voices of her fans were louder than the voices of her critics, the fans won out and BMLG was canceled. While none of the involved parties had much else to say on the matter for the time being, the incident would be stirred up again a few months later.

Swift posted about BMLG on social media yet again in November 2019, this time claiming that they were banning her from performing her old music at the American Music Awards show.⁹⁷ The record label again disputed these allegations, and more internet fights ensued. This time, however, Braun, Borchetta, and their families received death threats, as their personal information was being leaked via Twitter. Swift did end up performing her old, BMLG-owned music at the AMAs, which Braun stated they never prevented her from doing.⁹⁸ The details surrounding all of this are fuzzy at best. However, what we can take away from this incident is information about Swift's new way of handling cancel culture. Though she is still perceived as playing the victim in many ways, she is going about it differently. By airing her grievances on social media (something she never would have done before *Reputation*), she is allowing fans and critics alike to see all the information (as presented by Swift) and come to their own conclusions. Instead of staying silent and letting the media run with the story, she is

⁹⁷ Taylor Swift (@taylorswift13), "Don't know what else to do," Twitter, November 14, 2019, <https://twitter.com/taylorswift13/status/1195123215657508867/photo/1>.

⁹⁸ Dan Adler, "Just in Time: Scooter Braun Breaks His Silence on Taylor Swift Ahead of the American Music Awards," *Vanity Fair*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2019/11/scooter-braun-taylor-swift-statement>.

attempting to take control of the situation by getting out ahead of it. However, by presenting herself as a victim by sharing her side of the story and then going radio silent, letting her fans take over with the canceling, she is once again becoming a victimizer à la Kanye 2009.

In response to this incident, Swift released her song “The Man” on her 2019 album *Lover*, the video for which premiered in January 2020. In the video, Swift is in full prosthetic makeup designed to make her look like a man. The whole video is a statement on feminism and the sexist world in which we live, but many people took it as another instance of Swift playing the victim. Some critics have claimed that, because of Swift’s wealth and privilege, she has no right to complain about issues of sexism. Haley Victory Smith writes “if anything, Taylor Swift’s gender has not been a hindrance to her—it has been an asset. Her incredibly successful brand is uniquely feminine.”⁹⁹ While Swift has, indeed, been incredibly successful as a “uniquely feminine” artist, I do not believe that is the point she is trying to make with this song and its video. “The Man” is making a broader point about sexism and gender inequality, something Swift knows more than a little bit about. From her beginnings in country music to her current pop music career, Swift has had to fight harder than any of her male counterparts for respect and success, and *that* is sexism and misogyny at work. Whether or not she is successful fifteen years into her career should not and does not take away from the sexism she has fought and continues to fight to be a woman in the music industry.

However, on the other hand, Swift has received a fair amount of criticism for her “brand of white feminism,” with some even accusing her of being white supremacist.¹⁰⁰ This narrative

⁹⁹ Haley Victory Smith, “The Ridiculous Victim Mentality of Taylor Swift’s Song ‘The Man,’” *USA Today*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/09/17/taylor-swift-the-man-lyrics-youre-not-victim-stop-column/2335335001/>.

¹⁰⁰ See Jagota, “On Loving Taylor Swift While Being Brown,” and Herning, “Swiftly to the Alt-Right: Taylor Subtly Gets the Lower Case Kkk in Formation.”

was not helped, then, when Swift neither published any statements in support of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election nor denounced Donald Trump. Swift has always presented herself as apolitical, in part because that is what she has always been told to do. As Swift said in *Miss Americana*, “Part of the fabric of being a country artist is ‘don’t force your politics on people, let people live their lives.’ That is grilled into us... Throughout my whole career, label executives and publishers would just say, ‘Don’t be like the Dixie Chicks. ‘And I loved the Dixie Chicks.’¹⁰¹ But a nice girl doesn’t force their opinions on people. A nice girl smiles and waves and says ‘thank you.’ A nice girl doesn’t make people feel uncomfortable with her views.”

The U.S. midterm elections in 2018, however, were another turning point for Swift, when she publicly came out in support of the Democratic senators running in her home state of Tennessee. According to the documentary, this had a major impact on voter registration in the weeks following her tweet, as well as on the young voter turnout in Tennessee. Swift said, “I’m just getting to the point where I can’t listen to people telling me ‘No, stay out of it, stay out of [politics].’”¹⁰² It was seemingly a win, then, when she came out in support of the queer community, made a generous donation to GLAAD (an LGBTQ+ organization), and wrote a song dedicated to bringing attention to queer issues. The problem, however, was that in trying to be an ally and in making a political statement, Swift would unintentionally victimize yet another group of people.

¹⁰¹ The documentary from which this quote was taken was released on January 31, 2020. The Dixie Chicks have since changed their name to “The Chicks” in light of the Black Lives Matter protests which took place in the summer of 2020. See their interview with Noel King of *NPR*, “The Chicks Look Back And Laugh,” for more about this issue. For more about the Bush issues that effectively “canceled” The Chicks, consult Willman, *Rednecks and Bluenecks*, Burns/Watson, “Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound,” and La Chapelle, *I’d Fight the World*.

¹⁰² Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana*.

In 2019, Swift released “You Need to Calm Down,” her second single from her seventh studio album, *Lover*. Released in June, during LGBTQ+ Pride month, the track was meant to collect signatures on a Change.org petition for “Senate support of the Equality Act.”¹⁰³ The song’s music video, which featured countless celebrities and LGBTQ+ icons, was presented as an offering of allyship, but many viewers took issue with something else the video conveyed: an anti-rural, anti-Appalachian message. It presented Appalachian people with many common stereotypes: dirty, uneducated, and barefoot. It also presented them as homophobic enemies of queerness and of progress.

At the forefront of the cancellation of Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down” was the intensely popular social media account Queer Appalachia (QA). On June 13, 2019, QA reposted a tweet from media/public relations professional Claire Gysegem that reads “God, @taylorswift13 you were SO. CLOSE. The enemy isn’t poor rural whites in the trailer park that YOU took over. The enemy is the people in power. The men in suits in the conference rooms and the men in robes behind the pulpit preaching and legislating hate.” QA’s caption on the post read:

@taylorswift bought all the #establishmentqueers that we love for her video that dropped today. The video also depicts #poorrural folks as not just the enemy but also #toothless #dirty / #filthy #hateful #ignorant / #stupid with their signs misspelled with an intense amount of #patriotism. I’m tired of these sad inaccurate stereotypes of our community being acceptable standards in contemporary media.

This video was quick to get @GLAAD’s blessing & they are seeing substantial

¹⁰³ Taylor Swift, “Taylor Swift - You Need To Calm Down,” TaylorSwiftVEVO, video, 3:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY>.

donations from it. This lets us know that #GLAAD only monitors how urban areas are portrayed, rural communities are obviously not on their radar.¹⁰⁴

On Instagram alone, this post received over 31,000 likes, suggesting that many people are in agreement with QA and/or Gysegem's sentiments. In an ironic turn of events, however, Queer Appalachia themselves would be canceled just one year after this post.

QA became popular for their relatable content about being Appalachian, but they seem to have remained popular by posting their own (potentially polarizing) opinions about politics, celebrities, and more. Additionally, QA began selling merchandise, the proceeds of which were supposed to be going towards funding harm-reduction projects throughout Appalachia. In August 2020, however, an article entitled "The Tale of Queer Appalachia" was uploaded to the *Washington Post* website, which effectively served as the beginning of the end for QA.

In the article, author Emma Copley Eisenberg calls out QA's founder, Gina Mamone, for collecting money through social media platforms for harm reduction but not actually using this money for these projects. She gives multiple examples of projects that were not brought to fruition due to the mishandling of funds. Additionally, Eisenberg writes, "Queer Appalachia is *not* a registered nonprofit organization, nor are most of its alleged charitable recipients. Operating this way is an intentional political statement, QA says on its site, where it positions itself as an alternative to the 'nonprofit industrial complex.'"¹⁰⁵ Because many organizations that have sought out to help Appalachia have actually done more harm than good, Mamone choosing

¹⁰⁴ Queer Appalachia (@queerappalachia), "@taylorswift bought all the #establishmentqueers...", Instagram, June 17, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/By0_K0Nlbd8/?hl=en. Some hashtags edited out for clarity.

¹⁰⁵ Emma Copley Eisenberg, "The Tale of Queer Appalachia," *The Washington Post*, August 3, 2020.

this model makes sense on the surface.¹⁰⁶ Queer Appalachian people want to believe there is good work being done for us and on our behalf, and because the account always appeared to be doing the work it said it was doing (and it was something that many people wanted to believe was true), the account's hundreds of thousands of followers kept believing and kept donating.

However, as Eisenberg makes clear, "It's impossible to know if the money QA raised [through fundraisers]—and continues to raise through its account today—lands in the bank account of its intended recipient. Donors trust that QA will transfer their donations to those in need. PayPal and Venmo donations can't be traced without consent from the account owner, Mamone, whereas any citizen can request access to a nonprofit's records."¹⁰⁷ When this article went live, the backlash was surreal, and QA's followers were rightfully upset. In the end, Mamone was removed from the account and the account has since been "decolonized," and "is now in the hands of a Black radical activist."¹⁰⁸ The account posted a couple of videos "exposing" more of Mamone's transgressions after the Washington Post article went live, but those have since been deleted. No other content has been posted since.

QA canceled Swift for turning rural people into the "enemy" when "the enemy is the people in power."¹⁰⁹ The irony in all of this is that, in the case of Queer Appalachia, Mamone became a "person in power" or "enemy" by being dishonest about where their money was going, and rural queer people were trampled once again. Ironically, this is the very thing Mamone

¹⁰⁶ Consult Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* for more about this.

¹⁰⁷ Eisenberg, "The Tale of Queer Appalachia."

¹⁰⁸ At the time of the incident, QA's Instagram account was renamed "Decolonized QA" and the bio section of the page read: "This account is now in the hands of a Black radical activist." The name remains in 2021, but the bio does not.

¹⁰⁹ Queer Appalachia, "@taylorswift bought all the #establishmentqueers..."

denounced Swift/GLAAD for doing just one year prior. However, it is important to note that QA was not the only organization speaking out against Swift for her “You Need to Calm Down” video, but they were at the forefront of the conversation.

Swift (or the video’s producer) was looking for the antagonist to the “establishment queers” and chose Appalachians. By victimizing rural people, she added to a decades-long narrative that has existed about us.¹¹⁰ Other criticism about “You Need to Calm Down” has not focused on the rural aspect, but rather criticizes Swift for making a statement of her allyship at all. Rebecca Jennings asks “what purpose does it serve, exactly, for a pop star who has built a career on breathlessly romanticizing straight relationships to take on the mantle of gay rights? This isn’t so much about artists having to ‘stay in their lane’ but about the fact that maybe there is a better way for Swift to support social causes instead of putting herself in the center of them.”¹¹¹

On the other hand, many supported Swift for this move, with many queer celebrities, such as Karamo Brown and Billy Eichner, speaking in support of her.¹¹² They, along with others, said that LGBTQ+ people need all the allies we can get. Marcus Wratten wrote, “It’s perfectly fine to note the clunkiness of its deliverance, but make no mistake: what’s key is the necessity of a message like this from arguably the planet’s biggest pop star, and the impact this will undoubtedly have on a queer kid going through a lengthy and dangerous period of self-

¹¹⁰ J.D. Vance, for example, used *Hillbilly Elegy* to take advantage of Appalachia by writing a story that plays into every hillbilly stereotype one could think of, essentially claiming it was a miracle he made it out as a “normal” person (it is important to note that QA also worked to cancel J.D. Vance, as well).

¹¹¹ Rebecca Jennings, “Taylor Swift’s New Video Is Pride-Themed. It’s Also Trying to Sell You Something.,” *Vox*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/6/17/18682588/taylor-swift-you-need-to-calm-down-gay-anthem>.

¹¹² See Curto, “Karamo Brown Defends Taylor Swift’s ‘You Need to Calm Down,’” and Nickolai, “Billy Eichner on Taylor Swift’s ‘Calm Down’ Backlash.”

loathing.”¹¹³ Swift said in an interview that she wrote this song because people were unsure where she stood on the topic of LGBTQ+ rights, and from that perspective, I believe that her intentions were pure in putting out this song.¹¹⁴ Additionally, she raised a lot of money and awareness for the Equality Act, which is huge. It is worth noting that Swift did not try to defend her actions via social media following the backlash from this video. Rather than acting like a victim of cancel culture as she so often does, she stayed quiet in order to let the message of the video speak. Though people were not completely happy with this video, Swift is clear in the way she wants to present herself: no longer as a victim, but as an ally. She is clearly not perfect; none of us are, but her new method of dealing with hate and with cancel culture becomes more and more apparent with every new music video and with every new “scandal.”

CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of writing this chapter, I have found myself struggling with my own biases and how they color my opinion of Swift. Because I am a white woman, and one who listened to her early music because I related to it as a teenager, I have found it difficult to separate myself and my own white womanhood from what this scholarship requires. Cancel culture assumes that people are black and white, either one thing or another, but people are not entirely good or entirely bad. We are gray areas with good parts and bad parts, and Swift is no different. She has certainly, at times, been a victim. She is also, at times, a victimizer. However, because no one wants to be the villain in their own story, she often played into the victimhood she can so easily grab and maintain because she is a white woman.

¹¹³ Marcus Wratten, “Criticism of Taylor Swift’s ‘You Need To Calm Down’ Video Is Misguided — Here’s Why,” *Medium*, July 22, 2019, <https://medium.com/@marcus22695/criticism-of-taylor-swifts-you-need-to-calm-down-video-is-misguided-here-s-why-dd4d7ba4a929>.

¹¹⁴ Laura Snapes, “Taylor Swift: ‘I Was Literally about to Break,’” *The Guardian*, August 24, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/aug/24/taylor-swift-pop-music-hunger-games-gladiators>.

In her early years, Swift clearly presented herself as a victim, even when she was indirectly a victimizer. This was clear not only in the 2009 VMAs incident, but in her highly publicized relationships with men and in her music. This largely has to do with the “authentic” story she wrote for herself as she came up in country music and the maintenance of her carefully constructed public persona. This also comes with being a white woman; people will always see us as “fragile.” By not fighting back against those who tried to turn her into a victim in her early years, this became who the public thought of her as. Authentic Taylor became “authentic” Taylor became “victim” Taylor. By not defending Kanye West in 2009, she indirectly became a victimizer, a narrative which would be brought back to haunt her in 2016.

“Look What You Made Me Do” was the beginning of Swift’s redemption arc. Though some have read this video as more “victim” Taylor, I see this as grown-up Taylor, finally here to stand up for herself and what she believes in. After the release of *Reputation*, she began to stand up for the rights of other musicians with her new record deal, the rights of women with the release of “The Man,” and the rights of queer people in “You Need to Calm Down.” Though she has stumbled along the way, victim/izer Taylor has perhaps finally become someone young people can look up to.

It is clear that Swift has learned more about cancel culture than anyone should ever need to from firsthand experience, but we can also learn about cancel culture through the lens of Swift’s career. Cancel culture has attempted to ruin Swift’s career on numerous occasions, but what has saved her every time is her femininity, her whiteness, and her refusal to do what the media wants her to. Her carefully managed image has played into this, and it may be easy to say that she has “gotten away with it” because she is a white woman or because she plays the victim. But I believe it is because she has always been true to herself and has also not played into the

hands of the media. Cancel culture wants “rage-tweets” and slip-ups, and it thrives on embarrassment. However, because Swift does not reply to her hate comments and largely avoids feeding into her own drama, she has continued to succeed in an era of cancel culture.

Chapter 2 - Old Town Discrimination

Lil Nas X and Being Black, Queer, and Country inside Cancel Culture

The United States is plagued by systemic and institutionalized racism. The BIPOC community has been shown time and time again that their experiences will be more difficult than those of white people. That has certainly been the case for Lil Nas X (born Montero Lamar Hill), a twenty-one year old Black musician from the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. Though Lil Nas has seen significant success in a short amount of time, it did not come without its struggles. In Spring 2021, Lil Nas X has only been in the spotlight for approximately two years, and he has been canceled more than any other white celebrity typically would be. While Lil Nas X's identity is uniquely intersectional within the music industry, ignoring his race would do an injustice not only to him, but to the countless people who have come before and will come after him.

It should be reiterated that I am not a person of color. I recognize the privilege that I have been afforded by my whiteness, and that my writing this does somewhat of an injustice to the discourse around systemic racism. I draw on nonwhite scholars for insight into the issues which I myself have had the privilege not to face and to focus my argument more on the aspects with which I do have some experience. While it is necessary for white people to be talking about the issues that nonwhite people have faced for centuries in order to help change the future, it is not our place to speak as authorities about what they have gone through.

This chapter examines Lil Nas X's successes and interactions with cancel culture, given that he is one of the first social media-made musicians. His fourteen-times platinum hit "Old Town Road" is the highest certified song in RIAA history, but it did not get there without a few

roadblocks.¹¹⁵ Additionally, in June 2019 Lil Nas X came out as gay, which puts him at yet another unique intersection of the LGBTQ+, country music, and hip-hop communities. In looking at Lil Nas X's experiences with cancel culture, I probe the issues surrounding the musician, the industry, and cancel culture at large.

OLD TOWN ROAD & THE RACIST (COUNTRY) MUSIC INDUSTRY

Lil Nas X's rise to fame, like his relationship with cancel culture, is unique. His fame was completely built through social media, a model that is virtually new to the industry. Before his musical success, Lil Nas X had a fairly substantial social media following as a member of Black Twitter, where he would post satirical commentary about current events. He began making music in 2018 after dropping out of college, and he posted his music to SoundCloud. He released his first mixtape, *Nasarati*, in June of 2018, which received about one thousand plays per day on SoundCloud.¹¹⁶ In December of that year, he released "Old Town Road:" a song that was composed over a beat that Lil Nas X purchased for fifty dollars on BeatStars, a website that allows its subscribers to create and upload beats to the website to sell to other users.¹¹⁷

Lil Nas X had no money to market "Old Town Road," so he went back to his roots in social media for aid. He created over one hundred short meme videos with the song in the

¹¹⁵ Ashley Iasimone, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' Becomes the Highest Certified Song in RIAA History," *Billboard*, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/9509238/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-riaa-history-14-times-platinum/>.

¹¹⁶ Lil Nas X @lilnasx, "Hey I'm Lil Nas X & This is my story," TikTok, February 16, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@lilnasx/video/6929969430545845510?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6925050865913480710&is_from_webapp=v2&is_copy_url=0

¹¹⁷ Deena Zaru, "Lil Nas X Bought 'Old Town Road' Beat for \$30: The Story and the Movement behind the Record-Breaking Hit's Making," *ABC News*, accessed February 28, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/lil-nas-bought-town-road-beat-30-story/story?id=64511949>.

background in order to promote it.¹¹⁸ Lil Nas X told *Time* “if you see something going around the Internet, people want to join in,” and shortly thereafter, people did. Social media influencers began picking up the song and using it for videos on the then-newly popular app TikTok, which created a new trend called the #Yeehaw challenge. This trend involved people donning cowboy outfits and dancing to “Old Town Road,” which boosted the song’s popularity enough that it reached and began climbing the *Billboard* country charts. However, shortly after it began its climb, it was banned from the country chart.

When *Billboard* banned “Old Town Road” from its country chart, they claimed it was because it did “not embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version.”¹¹⁹ Fans of Lil Nas X were not satisfied with this excuse from *Billboard*, especially after the success that (white) pop artist Bebe Rexha and (white) country duo Florida Georgia Line had seen on the same chart with their song “Meant to Be” in 2017–18, which topped the chart for *fifty* weeks (a song that is only *arguably* country at best).¹²⁰ This led many to believe that “Old Town Road” was “not country enough” because of Lil Nas X’s race rather than the song’s actual content.

The song’s genre, which Lil Nas X calls “country trap” and others may know as “hick hop,” was not new in 2019. It has existed in some capacity since the late 1980s, with Cowboy

¹¹⁸ Andrew R. Chow, “It Feels Like I’m Chosen to Do This.’ Inside the Record-Breaking Rise of Lil Nas X,” *Time*, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://time.com/5652803/lil-nas-x/>.

¹¹⁹ Dan Reilly, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was Destined to Disrupt,” *Vulture*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-controversy-explained.html>.

¹²⁰ Chris Molanphy, “The Controversy Over ‘Old Town Road’ Reveals Problems Beyond Just Race,” *Slate Magazine*, April 12, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/04/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-billboard-country-charts-hot-100.html>.

Troy, bringing it to more widespread notoriety in the early 2000s.¹²¹ Because the genre was not new and because of country music's propensity to erase Black voices, many people were outraged by *Billboard*'s banning of "Old Town Road." Sean Rameswaram of *Vox* argued that "this is the point in this story where this becomes about something bigger than country trap and TikTok and fun internet memes because you've got a Black artist in America who's charting in a very white music space and his song gets quietly removed by a very powerful, influential organization. How much of this is about race? Or how much does the conversation then shift to race?"¹²² It seemed that the entire internet had this question on their minds, with Shane Morris, a former employee of Sony Music at the forefront of the conversation on Twitter:

Former country music label person here. @LilNasX was kicked off the Billboard country charts because the (mainstream) terrestrial country music market is filled to a surfeit with racism and bigotry. Allow me to explain...Using @billboard's justifications for saying "Old Town Road" doesn't contain enough country elements, I could just as easily say "GIRL" by @MarenMorris doesn't belong on the Billboard Country charts. I love "GIRL" by Maren Morris. But it is, objectively speaking, a pop song. My favorite album [in 2018] was "Golden Hour" by @KaceyMusgraves...Many songs from that album have performed well on Billboard's Country chart. They're definitely pop-leaning, but have enough country elements to be "Country" enough for "Country" people. What's the difference between Kacey Musgraves, Maren Morris and Lil Nas X? Lil Nas X doesn't play

¹²¹ "A History of Hick-Hop: The 27-Year-Old Story of Country Rap," *Rolling Stone*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country-lists/a-history-of-hick-hop-the-27-year-old-story-of-country-rap-22010/bellamy-brothers-country-rap-1987-226651/>.

¹²² Lauren Katz, "How 'Old Town Road' Revealed a Deep Divide within Country Music," *Vox*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/8/23/20826730/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-vma-podcast>.

guitar. Just kidding. Well, I mean, he still doesn't play guitar, but the real problem here is that Lil Nas X is a black man, from Black Hollywood, AKA Atlanta...Lil Nas X made a song that is country enough to be country, and trap enough to be trap. That should be something we celebrate, as an unknown artist rode a TikTok meme to fame, and brought two audiences together. Instead, Billboard was like, "Nah, let's be racist as fuck."¹²³

Following Morris' comments, many news outlets began to run with the idea that *Billboard* removed "Old Town Road" from the charts because of Lil Nas X's race.

Country music absolutely has a race problem, one which has been laid out in great detail most famously by Charles L. Hughes and Karl Hagstrom Miller. As Travis Stimeling notes, "country music's presumed whiteness requires the erasure of people of color from its history."¹²⁴ This decades-long race problem was not only shown in the case of Lil Nas X and "Old Town Road," but has been given a very public platform in an age of social media where country radio cannot hide from its white fragility. Many critics, such as renowned pop music critic Robert Christgau, were quick to jump to Lil Nas X's defense: "...taking 'Old Town Road' off the country chart strikes me as racist pure and simple, because country radio remains racist regardless of the Darius Ruckers and Kane Browns it makes room for."¹²⁵ Activist Talbert Swan also tweeted "So, @billboard removed @LilNasX's 'Old Town Road' from its Hot Country

¹²³ Shane Morris @IamShaneMorris, "Hi. Former country music label person here...", Twitter (thread), March 30, 2019, archived, https://web.archive.org/web/20190508192637if_/https://twitter.com/IamShaneMorris/status/1112101933374943234. Morris' credibility has been disputed, as he has been seen as a social media "pot-stirrer" in the past, to the point of his Twitter account getting banned. However, his history in the industry and his prominence in this conversation make his presence necessary in this work.

¹²⁴ Stimeling, "It's Time to Stop Promoting the White, Working-Class Cliche of Country Music."

¹²⁵ Robert Christgau, "Xgau Sez," June 18, 2019, <https://robertchristgau.com/xgausez.php?d=2019-06-18>.

Songs chart because they say the song doesn't 'embrace enough elements of today's country music.' Translation: We can't have a Black rapper crossing over and topping the charts."¹²⁶

Following the heat of this backlash, a *Billboard* representative stated that the decision "had absolutely nothing to do with the race of the artist."¹²⁷ However, most were not convinced, especially after the re-release of the song on April 5, 2019.

Two days prior, on April 3, the notable country artist Billy Ray Cyrus tweeted some words of encouragement to Lil Nas X, writing that "@LilNasX Been watching everything going on with ["Old Town Road"]. When I got thrown off the charts, Waylon Jennings said to me 'Take this as a compliment' means you're doing something great! Only Outlaws are outlawed. Welcome to the club!"¹²⁸ At the time of this tweet, no one knew what was going on behind the scenes. However, the world soon learned that Billy Ray Cyrus had recorded some verses to "Old Town Road," and that he and Lil Nas X were releasing a remix of the viral hit.: "Old Town Road – Remix" was an instant hit. The song broke many records, and is longest-running number-one song on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart since the chart's debut in 1958 (nineteen weeks).¹²⁹ It has become the most-certified song in RIAA history (fourteen-times platinum), and has won Lil Nas X two Grammys, two VMAs, an AMA, and, notably, a CMA.

¹²⁶ Talbert Swan, @TalbertSwan, "So, @billboard removed @LilNasX's 'Old Town Road' from its Hot Country Songs chart...", Twitter, March 28, 2019, <https://twitter.com/TalbertSwan/status/1111254698412118018>. For more compelling tweets relating to this issue, see France, "Lil Nas X Kicked Off Country Chart."

¹²⁷ Noah Yoo, "Billboard Removes Lil Nas X's Viral Song 'Old Town Road' from Country Chart," Pitchfork, March 27, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/news/lil-nas-x-viral-hit-old-town-road-removed-from-billboard-hot-country-songs-chart/>.

¹²⁸ Billy Ray Cyrus (@billyraycyrus), "@LilNasX Been watching everything going on with OTR...", Twitter, April 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/billyraycyrus/status/1113531625336385536?lang=en>.

¹²⁹ Associated Press, "Lil Nas X Hit 'Old Town Road' Makes Billboard Charts History," Fox News, August 13, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-billboard-charts-history>.

When Lil Nas X added Billy Ray Cyrus, a white man, to the remix of “Old Town Road,” not only did his credibility skyrocket within the country music world, but so also did his streams, requests for interviews, and general notoriety. A song that had already gone viral on the internet in its original form became a mainstream phenomenon once Billy Ray Cyrus entered the scene. It played on pop, rap, and country stations alike, in public, and all over social media. While it could be argued that Cyrus added some “substance” to the song (the original version comes in at only 1:53, while the “Remix” with Cyrus comes in at 2:37, making it what most would consider a “full length” song by today’s standards), it is hard to ignore that what was originally considered to be just a young Black man’s joke became a sensation only after a credible, *white* country artist was added to the mix.

Despite all of the remake’s success, *Billboard* continued to defend their decision to pull “Old Town Road” from the country chart in a September 2019 article. The organization placed the blame on Lil Nas X by arguing that he was attempting to cheat the system, as it were:

When Lil Nas X self-released “Old Town Road” on Dec. 3, 2018, he marked it as a country song in the track metadata that streaming services use. “It’s a country trap song,” he now says firmly. “But once you take a look at it, I feel like it leans more toward country. Of course it’s easier to get seen [as a rap song], but I didn’t expect to see it on any chart. It’s not like my music was selling prior to it coming out” ... In March, after signing Lil Nas X, Columbia did not initially promote “Old Town Road” as a country song, and ultimately the charts team decided to remove it from the Hot Country Songs chart dated March 19.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Joe Levy, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’: Inside Billboard’s Charts Decision,” *Billboard*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/8530110/inside-the-old-town-road-charts-decision>.

The claim that *Billboard* is making, as some from the country music fan community did in March of that year, is that because there are more rap/hip-hop tracks released than there are country tracks, Lil Nas X tagged “Old Town Road” as a country track to boost its likelihood of being heard.¹³¹ This claim is ludicrous, and it also plays into the racism which *Billboard* so vehemently denied six months earlier. To claim that Lil Nas X was tagging his song as country to be devious or to boost his listenership reads as the trope of the “scheming” Black man.

This racist trope has been seen for decades throughout American culture, from the days of blackface minstrelsy to more modern cases of police brutality against Black bodies. The assumption within the black-white binary world in which we live is that Black folks are the bad, the evil, the lesser, and the white folks are the good and the pure.¹³² This is reinforced on a daily basis, and it not only diminishes the experiences of those people of color who are not Black, but it also continues to put forth the narrative that Black people are bad and white people are good. This is exactly what happened in the case of Lil Nas X vs. *Billboard* and the critics. When *Billboard* removed “Old Town Road” from their country chart, the “dominator culture,” as bell hooks would put it, was restored.¹³³ When this decision was not received well by those who actually enjoyed Lil Nas X’s song and viewed the removal as a decidedly racist move, the dominator culture, in this case, *Billboard*, shifted the blame off of themselves and back onto Lil Nas X in order to once again restore the “natural order” of the black-white binary.

In July 2019, directly on the heels of Lil Nas X’s success with “Old Town Road,” Blanco Brown’s country-trap song “The Git Up” hit number one on the *Billboard* Hot Country charts.

¹³¹ Trigger, “Opposing Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ in Country Is Not ‘Racism,’” *Saving Country Music*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/opposing-lil-nas-xs-old-town-road-in-country-is-not-racism/>.

¹³² See Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 75-97, for more about the black-white binary.

¹³³ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11.

The song was released in May and followed a very similar trajectory as “Old Town Road” as it first went viral on TikTok and only charted later. Brown told *Time* that “I [didn’t] want to be looked at [as] someone who put out his record after [‘Old Town Road’] started dying down. I want[ed] to get in the thick of things. I [felt] like my record [was] strong. I did ‘The Git Up’ in September of [2018]—and ‘Old Town Road’ blew up in March.”¹³⁴

Though Brown has not seen the same level of mainstream success as Lil Nas X, it is notable that he was able to chart on *Billboard*’s Hot Country chart while Lil Nas X was removed, despite the fact that both men are black and produced very similar music. Bruce Britt had this to say about Lil Nas X and Blanco Brown’s step into the country spotlight:

...for the sake of argument, let’s imagine that Lil Nas X and Brown really are culture vultures just looking to make a buck in country music. Isn’t it about time we black folks did more cultural borrowing? In the never-ending appropriation debate, we are often the most egregiously offended people, and understandably so. From redlining and voter suppression to racial profiling, we’re constantly reminded of the institutional disdain this country has for its African American citizens. Given this contempt, it’s maddening to witness the white ruling class appropriate our culture, imitating and commodifying everything from our music and fashion to our colloquialisms and mannerisms. Now, with Lil Nas X and Brown tearing up the charts, a turnabout-is-fair-play dynamic has been brought to the debate.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Andrew R. Chow, “Blanco Brown Talks ‘The Git Up’ and the Fusion of Country and Rap,” *Time*, July 27, 2019, <https://time.com/5634271/blanco-brown-the-git-up-interview/>.

¹³⁵ Bruce Britt, “Lil Nas X and Blanco Brown Show That Cultural Appropriation Ain’t Nothin’ but a G Thang,” *The Undeclared* (blog), August 5, 2019, <https://theundeclared.com/features/lil-nas-x-and-blanco-brown-show-that-cultural-appropriation-aint-nothin-but-a-g-thang/>.

It could be argued that Lil Nas X paved the way for Brown's success on the Country chart—the last thing *Billboard* would want to do, at least in theory, would have been to remove yet another Black artist from their platform in such a short period of time. Given the fact that Black artists who combine country and rap have existed and charted in the past, *Billboard*'s 2019 decision to remove Lil Nas X reads as a move to segregate country music due to their (or their listeners') discomfort with having Black-coded hip-hop beats within their white-coded world of country music.¹³⁶

“WRANGLER ON MY BOOTY”: CULTURAL APPROPRIATION & CANCELLATION

Following the rise of Lil Nas X's success with “Old Town Road” and its remix, many brands began offering possible collaborations, as they are known to do with celebrities on the rise. One brand in particular, the denim company Wrangler, came under particular scrutiny. The following lyric from “Old Town Road” provided Wrangler the perfect opportunity to collaborate with Lil Nas X: “Cowboy hat from Gucci, Wrangler on my booty,”.¹³⁷ After Wrangler announced its collaboration with Lil Nas X, however, many of the company's fans threatened to boycott the company. One comment on an Instagram post read that “Wranglers are to be worn by cowboys and farmers not rappers this is very disappointing,” while another read “This is the dumbest thing i have seen all day,” one user wrote. “[What the fuck] @wrangler? Why is it about

¹³⁶ It should be noted that, following *Billboard*'s removal of the song, many country radio stations around the nation received listener requests to hear “Old Town Road” on the radio. Due to a lack of access, however, many DJs were ripping the song from YouTube videos in order to play it for their listeners.

¹³⁷ Lil Nas X, “Old Town Road – Remix,” Featuring Billy Ray Cyrus, Released June 21, 2019, Track 1 on *7 EP*, Columbia, Streaming.

diversity and equality ? There jeans. Quit playin politics.”¹³⁸ Some went so far as to call the collection “cowboy cultural appropriation.”¹³⁹

This is, of course, preposterous. As Jawn Murray told *Vox*: “The idea that Lil Nas X is perpetuating some form of cultural appropriation by recording and having success in the country genre is simply absurd. How can you appropriate something you played a significant part in shaping?”¹⁴⁰ Though Black cowboys most certainly existed, they have been erased from the history books, as many Black stories in the United States have been: “In Texas, many black men became skilled cowhands when white ranchers left their land and cattle behind to fight in the Civil War. When enslaved black people won their freedom, the ranchers hired them to be ranch hands and cowhands, or ‘cowboys.’ [An expert] estimates that at least one out of four cowboys was a black man.”¹⁴¹

While Lil Nas X was unfazed following the Wrangler backlash, tweeting “y’all really boycotting wrangler?? is it that deep...,” it should not go unnoticed that this was his third run-in with cancel culture in as many months.¹⁴² If Wrangler had partnered with an up-and-coming white country artist, there would have been little to no backlash whatsoever, even if said artist’s

¹³⁸ Allegra Frank, “Lil Nas X and Wrangler Collaborated on a Clothing Line. Some Wrangler Customers Aren’t Having It,” *Vox*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/5/23/18636279/lil-nas-x-wrangler-collection-prices-backlash>.

¹³⁹ Cydney Henderson, “Wrangler’s Lil Nas X ‘Old Town Road’ Collection Slammed as Cowboy ‘Cultural Appropriation,’” *USA Today*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2019/05/23/wranglers-old-town-road-slammed-cowboy-cultural-appropriation/1214099001/>.

¹⁴⁰ Nadra Nittle, “Lil Nas X Isn’t an Anomaly — Black People Have Always Been a Part of Country Music,” *Vox*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/6/5/18653880/lil-nas-x-country-music-billboard-wrangler-old-town-road>.

¹⁴¹ Nittle, “Lil Nas X Isn’t an Anomaly.”

¹⁴² Lil Nas X (@LilNasX), “y’all really boycotting wrangler??,” Twitter, May 20, 2019, <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1130634802825031681>.

music was “revolutionary” in some way. The way people flock to cancel Lil Nas X is about race and *should not be ignored*. As Charles Hughes told *Vox*, “Black musicians have been very marginalized. I think the reason this [‘Old Town Road’ debate] has become such a massive cultural moment is that our understanding of rural comes from country music, even though African American folks have long been a central part of the story.”¹⁴³

POST-OTR: LIL NAS X COMES OUT

On June 21, 2019, while “Old Town Road” was still number one on the charts, Lil Nas X released his EP entitled *7*. The EP brought with it two new singles, “Rodeo” and “Panini,” which peaked on the *Billboard* Hot 100 charts at numbers twenty-two and five, respectively. Many thought that the release of new Lil Nas X music would bring with it the release of new country-trap music. However, not wanting to be pigeonholed by his success with “Old Town Road,” Lil Nas X featured much more pop- and rap-flavored music than country. “It’s bristling and obstreperous rap one moment, crisp and carefree pop the next...It’s all over the place, but it’s never ‘Old Town Road, Part 2’ (except for the fact that “Old Town Road,” and its remix, are both on the [EP]),” writes *Rolling Stone*.¹⁴⁴ “Rodeo” is the only song on the album that remotely resembles country music, and that resemblance is found more in its lyrics than its music.

Though “Rodeo” and “Panini” were the two singles on the EP, Lil Nas X had something important to say with the track “C7osure (You Like).” On June 30, 2019, he tweeted that “some of y’all already know, some of y’all don’t care, some of y’all not gone [fuck with me] no more. but before this month ends i want y’all to listen closely to c7osure,” followed by a rainbow and

¹⁴³ Nittle, “Lil Nas X Isn’t an Anomaly.”

¹⁴⁴ Elias Leight, Brendan Klinkenberg, and Charles Holmes, “How Lil Nas X Made His Debut EP ‘7’ - Rolling Stone,” June 21, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/how-lil-nas-x-made-7-ep-849385/>.

other emoticons.¹⁴⁵ This was, notably, the last day of Pride month in 2019, and Lil Nas X used the lyrics of his song in tandem with his tweet to come out as gay. Later that day, after highlighting the rainbow buildings in 7's album art, he tweeted again: "deadass thought i made it obvious."¹⁴⁶

Though these tweets alone could be seen as cryptic, he was not ambiguous in an interview a few days later with the *BBC*: "I am gay. ...[coming out] is something that I considered just never doing, ever. Just like, taking to the grave or something. But I don't want to just live my entire life ... not doing what I want to do. And I also feel like I'm opening doors for more people ... Especially within the country and the hip-hop communities ... it's not really accepted in either."¹⁴⁷ Lil Nas X began receiving backlash almost immediately following his announcement, and though the country music side of the industry was relatively silent (perhaps not wanting any more bad press directly related to Lil Nas X), the hip-hop community was very vocal about their discomfort with (or dislike of) Lil Nas X's queerness.

50 Cent, Dave East, and Pastor Troy, all Black rappers, have made homophobic comments towards Lil Nas X since his coming out (mostly in response to the way he dresses for special occasions), but Pastor Troy got by far the most publicity for it.¹⁴⁸ Following Lil Nas X's Instagram post from the Grammys in January 2020, Pastor Troy responded with the following on

¹⁴⁵ Lil Nas X (@LilNasX), "some of y'all already know, some of y'all don't care, some of y'all not gone fwm no more," Twitter, June 30, 2019, <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1145428812404068352>.

¹⁴⁶ Lil Nas X (@LilNasX), "deadass thought i made it obvious," Twitter, June 30, 2019, <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1145470707150860289>.

¹⁴⁷ "Lil Nas X Addresses Gay Revelation Backlash," *BBC News*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48880817>.

¹⁴⁸ David Artavia, "Lil Nas X Shuts Down 50 Cent, Dave East Over Homophobic Slurs, Remarks," November 3, 2020, <https://www.out.com/celebs/2020/11/03/lil-nas-x-shuts-down-50-cent-dave-east-over-homophobic-slurs-remarks>.

his social media pages: “Welp, Guess I won’t be winning a GRAMMY...If this what I gotta wear. They love to push this shit on Our kids!! ...their agenda to take the masculinity from Men, Black Men Especially. ...Y’all Better open that 3rd Eye and let your Sons Know What Is Real...Or They Ass Gone Be Headed Down That Old Town Road Foreal!!”¹⁴⁹ Lil Nas X responded in his usual way, with humor, but the backlash and number of people who canceled him for his coming out brings up bigger issues of Black masculinity and homophobia within the hip-hop community.

Pastor Troy’s comment about “tak[ing] masculinity from...Black men” suggests a very narrow view of gender and of masculinity, especially in the Black community. As C.P. Gause suggests, however

Gender is fluid and not a static concept. Our human behaviors and their interpretation by those who witness them speak of how gender is constructed, enacted, performed, and contextualized. To be male or female is to engage in and read a pattern of behaviors for the production of gender. Masculinity and black masculinity in particular, is not a compilation of lifestyles; although popular culture seeks to construct black masculinity from a pattern of consumption. Black masculinity is constituted and constructed in relation to other gender identities. These constructions are based on how those relations interface with social structures. Gender and masculinity are performed on the basis of the circumstances and people that surround us and how we view the way in which we are viewed. Commercial hip-hop and its construction of black masculinity create environments

¹⁴⁹ Desire Thompson, “Lil Nas X Repsponds To Pastor Troy’s Homophobic Rant,” VIBE.Com, January 30, 2020, <https://www.vibe.com/news/entertainment/lil-nas-x-repsponds-to-pastor-troys-homophobic-rant-in-a-very-lil-nas-x-way-673631/>.

that nurture aggressive behaviors we see portrayed in music videos and hear in the lyrics of many heavily rotated songs. The action of these heavy rotations serves as a vehicle for the continuation of the construction of black masculinity in popular space as a way to reify negative constructed identities.¹⁵⁰

As Gause suggests, hip-hop has only added to our idea that to be “masculine” as a Black man is to fit into a specific box, one which Lil Nas X clearly does not fit into with his gender identity and presentation.

Another rapper, Young Thug, spoke in an interview about Lil Nas X’s coming out, but in a different way. While he did say, “I feel like he probably shouldn’t have told the world, because these days motherfuckers is [sic] just all judgement,” it was because he was worried about the respect that he felt Lil Nas X would lose within the hip-hop/rap community. “It ain’t even about the music no more [sic]. Soon as the song comes on everybody’s like, ‘This gay ass n---a.’ N---s don’t even care to listen to the song no more [sic]...He’s young and backlash can come behind anything.”¹⁵¹ Young Thug seemed genuinely worried for Lil Nas X’s career, as opposed to the other backlash he received which was just downright homophobic. He was even featured on a remix of “Old Town Road,” which was released in July of 2019.

While queerness is not widely accepted within the country music industry (largely due to the “middle-classing of the queer,” which happened in the 1950s–60s), it seems that “true” and “authentic” country music fans were not listening to Lil Nas X prior to his coming out to begin

¹⁵⁰ C. P. Gause, “Chapter 2: BLACK MASCULINITY,” *Counterpoints*, Integration Matters: Navigating Identity, Culture, and Resistance, 337 (2008): 42.

¹⁵¹ Michael Saponara, “Young Thug Says Lil Nas X Shouldn’t Have Come Out Publicly,” *Billboard*, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8519834/young-thug-says-lil-nas-x-shouldnt-have-come-out-interview/>.

with.¹⁵² However, those who jumped in to defend Lil Nas X following the *Billboard* incident were surprisingly quiet in response to the backlash from his coming out, which points to the discomfort that the hip-hop community feels with queerness. In their article, “Beyond Expectations: Lil Nas X Forges a Freer, More Fluid Hip Hop,” Aurielle Marie writes:

Given the complex relationships to race, class, and gender expectations in both the country and hip hop genres, it wasn’t shocking that the mere presence of Lil Nas X on country charts was enough to launch a debate about what genres of expression Black people have a “right” to. And with his June 30 coming-out tweet, Lil Nas X further challenged conventional wisdom on hip hop and found a way to link together conversations on homophobia, racism, and music-industry gatekeeping.¹⁵³

Hip-hop is a decidedly Black space, one which many white artists have appropriated for their own benefit. Those white artists within hip-hop were given the agency to do so because of the color of their skin. And while I am unable to speak on homophobia within the hip-hop community, I recognize that being queer and Black is one of the most difficult intersections at which one can sit.

I am a queer woman, and I have dealt with more than my fair share of hardships because of that. However, my whiteness has granted me the privilege of not fearing being murdered for being queer or for “looking suspicious.” My queerness has never needed to compete with my race in a conversation about human rights. Those who fall at the intersection of Black and queer, however, do not have this privilege. Elena Kiesling writes that

¹⁵² Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 6.

¹⁵³ Aurielle Marie, “Lil Nas X Forges a Freer, More Fluid Hip Hop,” Bitch Media, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/lil-nas-x-coming-out-challenges-hip-hop>.

The shootings of black men, the beatings of black women, the murders of black trans women, and the retraction of voting rights for the African American community in some U.S. states stand in sharp contrast to the presumably progressive gains of an LGBT movement which more than once claimed that “gay is the new black.” This is not only a dangerous analogy which lacks any profound grounding, it also leads to a discourse that draws a clear boundary between two separate communities and movements—one black, one queer—placing the former clearly on the margins of a society that happily embraces the latter.¹⁵⁴

As Kiesling notes, despite some outward appearances, the U.S. largely accepts the queer, even as it still demonizes the BIPOC community. The backlash following the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 was enough to show that a large portion of the nation believes that racism is no longer an issue in the United States.

This scholarship deserves more attention than I am able to give it within the scope and time restraints of this project and within my agency as a white woman. An entire project could be dedicated just to cancel culture and hip-hop, as numerous artists from the genre have been canceled for various scandals, accusations, and pending lawsuits (some of whom have already been mentioned in this project), but I do not believe I am the person to do such a project. While there are some gaps in the literature concerning homophobia in hip-hop, there is certainly scholarship galore on the subject of Black masculinity, Black queerness/queer Blackness, and on hip-hop more generally, some which also touch on the homophobia aspect.¹⁵⁵ I urge the reader to

¹⁵⁴ Elena Kiesling, “The Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance,” *European journal of American studies* 11, no. 11–3 (January 24, 2017), 1.

¹⁵⁵ A few scholars have attempted to begin conversations about homophobia in hip-hop: Chideya, “Homophobia: Hip-Hop’s Black Eye,” Dyson, *Know What I Mean?*, and *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes* (film, 2016). For more on these subjects, consult Hopkinson & Moore, *Deconstructing Tyrone*, McCune, *Sexual Discretion*, White “We Some Killaz,” and *I Am a Man: Black Masculinity in America*.

consult those with lived experience in matters such as this. *“Nihil de nobis, sine nobis” - “Nothing About Us Without Us!”*¹⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

In October of 2020, up-and-coming country artist Morgan Wallen was scheduled to appear as the musical guest on *Saturday Night Live*. His invitation was revoked, however, following a viral TikTok that showed Wallen breaking COVID-19 protocols and partying without a mask in Nashville. After a quarantine period, however, Wallen was invited back onto *SNL* to perform not only as a musical guest, but also as a character in a skit that parodied the entire situation. Just a few months later, Wallen was caught on camera using a racial slur, causing the music industry to cancel him immediately and effectively:

Major radio networks stopped playing his songs. Streaming services took him off their official playlists. The Academy of Country Music disqualified him from this year’s awards consideration. His booking agent quit, and his record label, Big Loud, suspended his contract. In a five-minute Instagram apology posted February 10, Wallen said that he accepted whatever ‘penalties’ his deeds merited and asked that fans not defend him.¹⁵⁷

But defend him they have. March 2021 has seen the news that his album, *Dangerous*, is the first country album in history to spend seven weeks atop the *Billboard* Hot 200 chart.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Eli A. Wolff and Mary Hums, “‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ -- Mantra for a Movement,” HuffPost, September 5, 2017.

¹⁵⁷ Spencer Kornhaber, “The Biggest Country Musician in America Is a Disgrace,” The Atlantic, February 25, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/02/morgan-wallen/618137/>.

¹⁵⁸ Keith Caufield, “Morgan Wallen’s ‘Dangerous’ Tops Billboard 200 for Seventh Week,” Billboard, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/9532572/morgan-wallen-dangerous-tops-billboard-200-seven-weeks>.

After the news of Morgan Wallen's actions broke, Black country artist Mickey Guyton responded in a Twitter thread:

When I read comments saying 'this is not who we are' I laugh because this is exactly who country music is. I've witnessed it for 10 [goddamn] years. You guys should just read some of the vile comments hurled at me on a daily basis. It's a cold hard truth to face but it is the truth. I question on a daily basis as to why I continue to fight to be in an industry that seems to hate me so much. But then I realize there is a new artist of color, all bright eyed and excited to be in this industry. This artist might not have the strength to fight for themselves. But I do. And I will be that artists warrior as they pursue their dream of singing country music because their dreams are valid too. I love country music so much. There are amazing people in this genre behind the scenes and in front of the cameras that have kept me sane all these years. Those are the people we must keep reminding ourselves are out there and worth supporting and listening to.¹⁵⁹

Morgan Wallen did not suffer (and has not suffered) any real consequences for his racism. Cancel culture did not come for him the way it did for Lil Nas X following his rise to success. It is crucial that we continue having these conversations about race, cancel culture, and their intersections in country music: cancel culture does not "come for us all," despite what some right-wing politicians may have us believe.¹⁶⁰ Cancel culture comes for those who are already marginalized and who already have to fight for their voice.

¹⁵⁹ Mickey Guyton (@MickeyGuyton), "When I read comments saying 'this is not who we are' I laugh because this is exactly who country music is," Twitter (thread), February 3, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MickeyGuyton/status/1356964476793180161>.

¹⁶⁰ PBS News Hour, "WATCH: Rep. Jim Jordan says second Trump impeachment is a product of 'cancel culture.'"

Lil Nas X has seen enormous success, but it came only after the addition of Billy Ray Cyrus to “Old Town Road.” He lost fans after coming out, mostly from the hip-hop community. Furthermore, his continued success on social media is not so much from his work as musician, but from his work as a comic who, for all intents and purposes, makes a joke of himself to make money. Though he is still a musician in his own right, his race, for better or for worse, has been a deciding factor in his success.

Chapter 3 - Shut Up About Cancel Culture

Understanding John Rich & Friends

I don't believe in cancel culture. - John Rich, October 20, 2020¹⁶¹

The 2020 presidential election brought with it challenges unlike those that the country has seen before. A pandemic surged through the nation, and the country was at its most divided. Donald Trump's dedication to winning the election came before his dedication to the hundreds of thousands of people across the country who had died of COVID-19 and the millions who were unemployed, had been evicted, and were hungry. Donald Trump lost the 2020 election, but not gracefully. After claiming widespread election fraud and instilling distrust in our democracy, he incited an insurrection just two weeks before Joe Biden was to take office. A violent mob stormed Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, which would take the lives of five and strike fear, sadness, and anger into the hearts of Americans.¹⁶²

Following these events, many voices from both sides of the aisle called for Donald Trump to be impeached. Because Trump had been permanently suspended from his Twitter account, his hard-and-fast supporters blamed cancel culture for the negative reaction to the insurrection. Ohio Republican representative Jim Jordan stated that Democrats wanted to “cancel the president ... and anyone who disagrees with them,” warning that “cancel culture will come for us all.”¹⁶³ This was not the first time the GOP blamed cancel culture for its missteps, however. The 2020 Republican National Convention (RNC) was chock full of politicians

¹⁶¹ John Rich (@johnrich), “Nah. I don't believe in cancel culture,” Twitter, October 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/1318675508901576705>.

¹⁶² See Daly/Balsamo, “Deadly Siege Focuses Attention on Capitol Police,” Healy, “These are the 5 People Who Died in the Capitol Riot, and Washington Post Staff, “Woman Dies after shooting in U.S. Capitol.”

¹⁶³ PBS News Hour, “WATCH: Rep. Jim Jordan says second Trump impeachment is a product of ‘cancel culture.’”

condemning cancel culture, including Donald Trump himself: “The goal of cancel culture is to make decent Americans live in fear of being fired, expelled, shamed, humiliated and driven from society as we know it.”¹⁶⁴ The irony in all of this is in how much Donald Trump seems to enjoy canceling people. Throughout his presidency, Trump denounced people and businesses with whom he disagreed in a very public way, usually through social media, and in the case of businesses, he continues to call for boycotts of those companies who disagree with him.¹⁶⁵ In addition, Fox News, which served as the GOP’s go-to news source for the majority of Trump’s four years in office, has an entire section of their website dedicated to articles just on cancel culture and its “evils.”¹⁶⁶

The focus of this chapter, however, is not Donald Trump, nor is it the GOP (for the most part). Rather, this chapter will focus on a friend to them both, a man of many hats: John Rich. He is not only half of the wildly popular country music duo Big & Rich, but also the 2011 winner of *Celebrity Apprentice*, a “small business owner,” and an interviewer for and friend of Fox News. Most importantly, Rich serves as a counter-study for this project. Rich has never been canceled, and as noted above, does not “believe in cancel culture.”¹⁶⁷ However, his frequent Twitter usage and involvement with Fox News and the GOP have added to his unique voice in the country music sphere—these aspects of his career make him an interesting subject in the context of cancel culture.

¹⁶⁴ Jeanine Santucci, “Trump decries ‘cancel culture,’ but does he participate in it? He’s called for boycotts and punishment for critics,” *USA Today*, accessed January 31, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/09/03/trump-decries-cancel-culture-but-he-has-participated/3451223001/>.

¹⁶⁵ Santucci, “Trump decries ‘cancel culture,’ but does he participate in it?”

¹⁶⁶ See [foxnews.com/category/topic/cancel-culture](https://www.foxnews.com/category/topic/cancel-culture).

¹⁶⁷ John Rich (@johnrich), “Nah. I don’t believe in cancel culture,” Twitter, October 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/1318675508901576705>.

RICH BEGINNINGS: MUZIKMAFIA

John Rich's career began in the 1990s when he formed the band Lonestar with his friends. Though this band was very successful, he only stayed with them for about five years, at which point, due to "a difference of opinion concerning the band's direction," he left in 1998.¹⁶⁸ After a few relatively unsuccessful years of pursuing a solo career, he, accompanied by three other disgruntled musicians in the Nashville area, formed the MuzikMafia in 2001. According to David Pruett, it was formed by Jon Nicholson and Kenny Alphin, after many conversations which focused on "[Nashville] Music Row's marginalization of them because they are artists who combine genres and ... the distance that Music Row maintains from the average Nashville musician."¹⁶⁹ Shortly thereafter, Rich and Cory Gierman were in on the idea, and the four men made up the "godfathers" of the organization.

There is no clear definition for the MuzikMafia. It began as a way for its godfathers to make the types of music they wanted to create without facing backlash for doing so. This resulted in near-weekly live variety shows in Nashville for the better part of five years, which featured artists from all backgrounds and genres. However, it later morphed into something much greater: a record label, platinum records, and internationally-recognized names. Gretchen Wilson, Cowboy Troy, and of course, Big & Rich, were all products of the MuzikMafia.

MuzikMafia godfather Jon Nicholson explained to Pruett that

MuzikMafia is an outbreak of a musical virus...Everybody has their own interpretation. It matters when you came into the MuzikMafia, what was going on

¹⁶⁸ David B. Pruett, *MuzikMafia: From the Local Nashville Scene to the National Mainstream* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 37.

¹⁶⁹ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 38.

at that time, what experiences were happening. In the later years here when everything is going, you know, gangbusters, we got record labels, and people selling millions of records and all that. It seems like it's this big thing where, you know, with these guys are involved in all kinds of stuff. But really what it was about was a bunch of friends hanging out and bullshittin', you know, and talking about world domination and all that stuff. [We were] talking about kicking everybody else out of Nashville, all the old-timers that were messing up the music business and manufacturing artists—all the stuff that pissed us off about the music business. And we wanted to change all that. So we got all our friends together and started playing, started networking, and created something more powerful than any of those people [industry personnel], that's more powerful than any record label or anything else. It [MuzikMafia] is the governing force in Nashville. It takes all the lines out and all the borders and everything, and makes it wide open for whatever kind of music you want to make.¹⁷⁰

Shortly after their first performance, the godfathers added another facet to what MuzikMafia means, turning “M.A.F.I.A.” into an acronym which stands for “Musically Artistic Friends in Alliance.” Additionally, the MuzikMafia had a list of rules to live by:

1. Respect and accept all forms of music, people, and forms of self expression.
2. Never speak ill will of anyone or anything.
3. Be the best at what you do.
4. Do not promote yourself before any other artist.
5. No disrespect towards women.
6. No “hard” drugs.
7. No negativity towards other MuzikMafia musicians.
8. Ask what

¹⁷⁰ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 39.

you can give to the MuzikMafia, not what can you get from it. 9. Do not ask to join the MuzikMafia.¹⁷¹

They also passed around the mantra “music without prejudice.”¹⁷²

It was the summer of 2002 when it was suggested to “Big” Kenny Alphin and Rich that they form a duo. Rich’s response was not positive: “Are you out of your fucking mind? They [the country music industry] don’t [sic] even get me. They think that I am too rock and roll for country radio; there is no way they’re going to get Kenny.”¹⁷³ Kenny was, reportedly, only slightly more enthusiastic about the idea. Despite this, they moved forward with the idea and signed with Warner Bros. Records in 2003. Evidently, Rich and Kenny were not “too rock and roll for country radio,” as their first two singles, “Wild West Show” and “Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)” charted on the Billboard Hot Country charts at #21 and #11, respectively.

Some of Big & Rich’s music is indeed unusual in the grand scheme of the country genre. On their debut album, *Horse of a Different Color*, they include songs which feature flutes, rap interludes, and Red Hot Chili Peppers-esque “bedroom music” breakdowns.¹⁷⁴ Their music, which “drew heavily upon rock, blues, funk, Latin, and commercial country,” while not attracting much attention initially, “attracted significant national attention through other media. [‘Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)’] received widespread exposure as the theme to ESPN’s 2004 World Series of Poker. In addition, the song’s video entered regular rotation on CMT and Great

¹⁷¹ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 29.

¹⁷² Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 30.

¹⁷³ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ William Kenneth Alphin and John Rich, “Kick My Ass,” Released May 4, 2004, Track 4 on *Horse of a Different Color*, Warner Bros. Records, Streaming.

American Country (GAC), largely because of its visual spectacle.”¹⁷⁵ Big & Rich soon began to see the fruits of their labor. *Horse of a Different Color* debuted at #14 on the *Billboard* charts and was the seventh best-selling country album of 2004.¹⁷⁶

After a successful tour with Tim McGraw, two award show performances, two platinum records, and numerous talk show appearances, Big & Rich had made it into the big leagues of country music by the beginning of 2006. Independent of the duo, Rich’s reputation as a songwriter was also growing. He was named ASCAP’s Songwriter of the Year for three consecutive years from 2005 to 2007, and, in 2005, “ninety-six of John’s songs were recorded, seven of which appeared in the Top Ten of *Billboard*’s Country Singles chart.”¹⁷⁷

David Pruett describes 2006–2008 as being “The Beginning of The End” for the MuzikMafia (and subsequently, Big & Rich): “From 2006 through 2008 the MuzikMafia went from being a major force in the commercial music industry to a disorganized, dysfunctional collection of individuals almost unrecognizable from the close-knit community that had taken Nashville by storm just a few years earlier.”¹⁷⁸ The group was in over their heads financially after having starting an LLC, a record label, and a publishing company with very little money coming in to fund it all. Notably, however, Rich “offered to buy the MuzikMafia [name and the LLC] and put a price on the table.”¹⁷⁹ The godfathers all declined, claiming this was against

¹⁷⁵ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 65.

¹⁷⁶ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 66.

¹⁷⁷ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 109 and Staff Writer, CMT.com, “John Rich Named ASCAP’s Artist-Songwriter of the Year,” October 15, 2007, accessed February 15, 2021, <http://www.cmt.com/news/1571982/john-rich-named-ascaps-artist-songwriter-of-the-year/>.

¹⁷⁸ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 116.

¹⁷⁹ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 127.

everything for which the MuzikMafia had ever stood. However, financial and personal problems plagued the group, and by 2009, they all went their separate ways.

RICH POLITICAL OPINIONS

In his MuzikMafia/early Big & Rich days, Rich's political stance was unknown. What we do know, however, are the main themes of his music. As Pruett explains, "Dominant themes of John's commercial output included the embracing of one's roots and the life of the average working-class person."¹⁸⁰ This is not unusual for a country songwriter in Nashville. What is unique about Rich, however, is how much of this portion of his career he spent fighting for "the little guy." The MuzikMafia's mantra, "music without prejudice," though stemming from the words of "Big" Kenny, was something supposedly believed and upheld by all of MuzikMafia's godfathers. The early days of MuzikMafia brought in all sorts of talent, of every shape, size, color, and gender, earning their weekly shows the loving self-description of "freak shows."¹⁸¹ Perhaps Rich's biggest mentorship success story is that of Cowboy Troy, whom he met in 1993 during his Lonestar days but to whom he gave a voice in the MuzikMafia in 2001. Cowboy Troy, who was living in Dallas at the time, drove or flew to Nashville monthly to perform in MuzikMafia shows.

Cowboy Troy is a "six-foot five, black rapping cowboy," and therefore sits at a unique intersection within the country music genre.¹⁸² Rich and Cowboy Troy's relationship is notable not just because Troy is a Black man, but also because of the music he creates. "Hick hop," as

¹⁸⁰ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 115.

¹⁸¹ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 13.

¹⁸² Ken Tucker, "Cowboy Troy Back in the 'Saddle' on New CD," *Reuters*, April 12, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/music-cowboytroy-dc-idUSN1128219020070411>.

Troy describes his music, is a genre that has existed in some capacity since the late 1980s.¹⁸³ However, it is safe to say that Cowboy Troy would be virtually non-existent in the country music world without the help of the MuzikMafia and specifically Rich (and later Big & Rich). Big & Rich included a Cowboy Troy rap interlude on the opening track of their debut album, *Horse of a Different Color*, brought him on their tour with Tim McGraw, performed with him on the CMAs, and helped to write, produce, and perform his debut album.¹⁸⁴ Without Rich, Cowboy Troy may very well be still performing in Dallas bars.

Rich put a substantial amount of effort into helping Troy break into the country music sphere, a privilege that is not afforded to many Black men. His race aside, Troy's unique contributions to the country genre were not something for which music executives were asking. It seems, however as if Rich could not have worked harder to boost Cowboy Troy's visibility and reputation, and we might well ask why. His eagerness and Big & Rich's shared "music without prejudice" mantra read much more leftist than conservative, and many Republicans are of the opinion that success is earned in the United States by pulling one's self up by the bootstraps. Yet Rich essentially handed success to Cowboy Troy. Rich's obsession with incorporating rap, a decidedly *not* conservative-friendly genre within country music (widely considered to be the music of the GOP) also reads as a liberal move.¹⁸⁵

In fact, the MuzikMafia and its associated acts were considered so liberal that, once Gretchen Wilson received a record deal with Sony, they had to distance her from the

¹⁸³ "A History of Hick-Hop: The 27-Year-Old Story of Country Rap." *Rolling Stone*.

¹⁸⁴ See Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 66–67, 99.

¹⁸⁵ See Kupfer "Why Don't Conservatives Like Hip-Hop?" and Williams "The Conservative War on Hip-Hop: White Scapegoating and Black Respectability" for more about hip-hop and the GOP. See Willman *Rednecks and Bluenecks* and La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World* about the "conservatization" of country.

MuzikMafia (despite her induction as the only “godmother” of the organization in 2006). Pruett writes, “Sony was marketing Gretchen as a hardcore country artist to a conservative fanbase, and wanted to maintain considerable distance from the MuzikMafia, an organization that promoted a ‘love everybody’ liberalism and artistic flexibility.”¹⁸⁶ Rich, though considered liberal in his support of up-and-coming country acts (and by association with the MuzikMafia), would prove otherwise in the context of the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

For candidates John McCain and Barack Obama, it was imperative to have a strong campaign song to share across then-newly popular social media platforms. Rich, who had just won his third consecutive ASCAP songwriting award, felt he was just the man for this job. Rich explained: “As I started seeing all the media on Barack Obama, I started realizing that John McCain didn't have that rally song, or fight song, something that can get everybody together to fight, so I took it upon myself to try to write the theme song for his campaign.”¹⁸⁷ “Raisin’ McCain” became one of two official songs for the campaign, and Rich performed it at rallies across the country and at the Republican National Convention that year.

Rich’s decision to publicly align himself with the Republican party in 2008 with “Raisin’ McCain” has affected the rest of his career. As politics in the United States became more polarized through an uptick in social media posts, so too would Rich’s opinions and voice in politics. Perhaps the straw that broke the camel’s back in the case of Rich was his adoption by Fox News after the release of his song “Shuttin’ Detroit Down.” Though the song was relatively left-leaning, especially for Rich (who had just aligned himself with McCain), various Fox News

¹⁸⁶ Pruett, *MuzikMafia*, 114.

¹⁸⁷ Guy Adams, “Country singer counters Obama’s rapper admirers with anthem to raise McCain,” *Independent*, October 23, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/country-singer-counters-obama-s-rapper-admirers-with-anthem-to-raise-mccain-885211.html>.

personalities took it upon themselves to “conservatize” the song in order to align it with their beliefs and those of their viewing audience.

“Shuttin’ Detroit Down” was released in response to the Great Recession, and specifically referenced the government bailout of the auto industry in Detroit, Michigan. In an interview with Chris Williams, Rich explained that he was inspired to write the song after watching the news about the bailout:

I was watching the news and saw the story about the Merrill Lynch CEO who had just spent 1.2 million dollars of bailout money [the U.S. government] had just given his company to decorate his office with a \$38,000 toilet. The American way is not that some fat cat politician sends a big fat check to another fat cat and they sit up there laughing at all of us as they go blow it all, and that’s why this song is a runaway hit. Nobody is too big to fail, out there in the Wall Street world.¹⁸⁸

Indeed, as journalism scholar Reece Peck explains, the song’s lyrics “blasted the government’s response to the late 2000s economic crisis as it protected Wall Street’s interest with billions of dollars of bailout money while millions of Americans were losing their jobs and homes.”¹⁸⁹

From my perspective (and Reece Peck’s) in 2021, I hear this song as a form of liberal-leaning protest. However, Chris Willman, an expert in the crossover of country music and politics, heard otherwise: “‘Shuttin’ Detroit Down’ can be heard as a *conservative* protest song” (original emphasis) and “could be viewed as in the tradition of some of the conservative anti-

¹⁸⁸ Chris Willman, “Jamey Johnson and John Rich Help Country Radio Get Real,” *Huffington Post*, March 12, 2009, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jamey-johnson-and-john-ri_b_174425.

¹⁸⁹ Reece Peck, “Containing ‘Country Music Marxism’: How Fox News Conservatized John Rich’s ‘Shuttin’ Detroit Down,’” in *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, ed. Anthony Nadler and A. J. Bauer, Oxford University Press, 2019, 48.

welfare songs that came along in the 1960s, like Stonewall Jackson's 'Welfare Cadillac.'" Rich had yet another take on the song, calling it a "populist anthem that crosses ideological lines."¹⁹⁰ Regardless of its intended audience, the song (and Rich) was quickly picked up by Fox News and became, as Peck explains, "enmeshed in the discursive culture of Fox News and took on the political connotations of Fox's polarizing media brand. In addition, Fox pundits Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck tried to contain the song's leftist qualities by redirecting its critical emphasis toward 'big government' and away from 'big business.'" Over the span of a month following the release of "Shuttin' Detroit Down," Rich appeared on Fox News five times. Additionally, the music video for the song premiered on Foxnews.com. Finally, Rich performed the song at a Tea Party protest event that was broadcast live on Fox News' *Hannity*.¹⁹¹ All of these associations provided Rich with invaluable publicity for his new song and his new album, *Son of a Preacher Man*. And so began Rich's relationship with Fox News.

RICH WITH FRIENDS: FOX NEWS AND DONALD TRUMP

In 2011, Rich appeared in the spotlight once again, this time on a different type of reality television: *The Celebrity Apprentice*. An offshoot of the popular *The Apprentice* reality television show, which "judge[d] the business skills of a group of contestants,"¹⁹² *The Celebrity Apprentice* featured celebrities from all forms of media as its contestants who competed for charity rather than for take-home cash prizes. Notably, both shows were run and judged by

¹⁹⁰ Willman, "Jamey Johnson and John Rich Help Country Radio Get Real."

¹⁹¹ Peck, "Containing 'Country Music Marxism,'" 49.

¹⁹² "The Apprentice (American TV Series)," in *Wikipedia*, March 9, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Apprentice_\(American_TV_series\)&oldid=1011205054](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Apprentice_(American_TV_series)&oldid=1011205054).

Donald Trump and his family. Rich appeared in and won the fourth season of *Celebrity Apprentice*—thus marks the beginning of his relationship with the Trump family.

In a 2017 interview with *People*, Rich claims that Donald Trump disclosed that he was considering running for president in 2011 immediately following Rich's *Celebrity Apprentice* win: "[Trump had] his arm around [me]. We were taking pictures and he lean[ed] over to me and he [said], 'You know I'm thinking about running for president.' And I'm going, 'Yeah I heard about that.' And he's like, 'What do you think?' I went, 'I think you ought to go for it man. Why not?'" and he goes, 'Good. Thanks. Congratulations.'"¹⁹³ This was likely in reference to Donald Trump's unofficial run for president during the 2012 elections, however, Rich frames this conversation as if he was among the first to hear of Trump's running, a whole four years before the official 2016 presidential campaign announcement.

In 2019, three years into the Trump presidency, Rich, nose-deep in his relationship with Fox News and Donald Trump (and their relationship with each other), released a song aptly titled "Shut Up About Politics." The kicker? It featured the voices of the infamous talk show commentators from Fox News' "The Five," a show where a "roundtable ensemble of five rotating Fox personalities who [...] discuss, debate and at times debunk the hot news stories, controversies and issues of the day."¹⁹⁴ In other words, *not* musicians. Unsurprisingly, Rich went on "The Five" quite a few times in 2019 to promote Redneck Riviera whiskey, his music, and just to talk, which ultimately led to "The Five" and Rich's recording session.

¹⁹³ Mariah Haas, "John Rich on his *Celebrity Apprentice* Boss Donald Trump: 'You Never Know What He's Going to Say to You,'" *People*, September 20, 2017, <https://people.com/country/john-rich-celebrity-apprentice-boss-donald-trump-never-know-what-hes-going-to-say/>.

¹⁹⁴ Brian Stelter, "Fox News to Replace Beck With 'The Five,'" *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, <https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/30/fox-news-to-replace-beck-with-the-five/?mtrref=en.wikipedia.org&gwh=17B011BD51306270B944935605F10A5B&gwt=regi&assetType=REGIWAL> L.

Though not clever in its title, lyrics, or musicality, “Shut Up About Politics” reveals a great deal Rich’s career. He had everything he could possibly want: fame, fortune, a substantial social media presence, a thriving business, and a personal relationship with the President of the United States, and yet, he cannot seem to keep his mouth shut. He kept pushing the bar further, much like Donald Trump, to see how close he could get to the line without crossing it. Like Donald Trump and most wealthy white men in America, the line for Rich kept moving with him—it was unable to be crossed.

“Shut Up About Politics,” like cancel culture itself, is rooted in irony. At the time of the song’s release in June 2019, Rich was not only angling for a spot on Fox News himself, but he also frequently tweeted about political issues to his tens of thousands of followers. The song’s chorus, co-written by Fox News personality Greg Gutfeld, contains basic lyrics denouncing political discourse of any kind: “Shut up about politics, ain't nothing but a big pile of dirty tricks. I'm tired of all the fighting and the bitching fits, so shut up about politics.”¹⁹⁵ The irony here lies in a tweet from Rich seven years prior (2012), which claimed that “Every day Americans SHOULD discuss politics. It's not taboo, it's necessary. We need to listen/agree/disagree with each other then go VOTE.”¹⁹⁶ What changed for Rich in these seven years?

One crucial reason for Rich’s many appearances on “The Five” and other Fox News shows in 2019 was that the network was auditioning him. Fox News had just launched its streaming service, Fox Nation, one year prior and was looking for new, conservative, personalities to fill in the gaps. What Rich brought to the table were not only fans of his music

¹⁹⁵ John Rich, “Shut up About Politics,” featuring The Five, released May 17, 2019, Rich Records, Streaming.

¹⁹⁶ John Rich (@johnrich), “Every day Americans SHOULD discuss politics. It's not taboo, it's necessary. We need to listen/agree/disagree with each other then go VOTE,” Twitter, October 22, 2012, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/260556436826910720>.

and the music of Big & Rich, but also newly-acquired fans of his “Redneck Riviera” whiskey (as advertised on Fox News’ “The Five”) and now, fans of “Shut Up About Politics.”

Unsurprisingly, the announcement was made at the end of 2019: “Country music star John Rich joins Fox Nation.” His show, *The Pursuit! With John Rich*, is filmed in Nashville and features “signature star guests and personal friends of Rich who will delve into their journey of achieving the American dream.”¹⁹⁷

Though *The Pursuit!* is an interview show, it has a distinctly political undertone to it. The title sequence, which features animations of the American flag and the Declaration of Independence, is joined by a narration by Rich, introducing the basis of the show: “Our country wasn’t founded on the right of happiness, but rather the right to pursue happiness. That right is what makes America the greatest nation the world has ever known.” All of this happens within the first fifteen seconds of pressing “play” on Fox Nation. These themes are frequently threaded throughout the interviews as well. For example, Rich asks all of his interviewees the question, “What has the right to pursue happiness meant for you?” and often emphasizes the point made on the title sequence: Americans do not have the right to happiness but to pursue happiness.¹⁹⁸

The political aspect of *The Pursuit!* is especially notable given that, at the time of the show’s release (February 2020), Rich had this to say about it: “There’s no politics...Matter of fact, if somebody tried to bring up politics in my show, I’d probably shut the camera off, because that’s not what the show’s about.”¹⁹⁹ However, while the show could be about getting to know

¹⁹⁷ Yael Halon, “Country music star John Rich joins Fox Nation,” *Fox News*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/john-rich-kat-timpf-advice-fox-nation>.

¹⁹⁸ John Rich, *The Pursuit! With John Rich*. No credit information available. Streaming, Fox Nation. Accessed March 12, 2021. <https://nation.foxnews.com/the-pursuit-with-john-rich/>.

¹⁹⁹ Raechal Shewfelt, “John Rich vows to shut off camera if anyone talks politics on his new Fox Nation show,” *Yahoo! Entertainment*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/john-rich-politics-fox-nation-the-pursuit-013002827.html>.

people who came from nothing and made names for themselves anyway, it is often inundated with political undertones. As of March 2021, no ratings for Rich's show are publicly available (as is the case with most streaming-exclusive shows). However, the network has kept providing new episodes for streaming on Fox Nation (even throughout the pandemic) which suggests a certain amount of popularity among its viewers.

Donald Trump's presidency was one of great national divide. One could write pages and pages about the damage he caused to the country, but that is not the purpose of this particular document. However, in order to better understand the main focus of this chapter, Rich, we must first attempt to understand Trumpism. Daniel Bush, senior political reporter for *NPR*, writes, "As president, Trump has been known to switch positions, making it hard to pin down where he stands on an issue at any given time."²⁰⁰ But for his supporters, that did not seem to matter; many of them followed him blindly, no matter what he said or what line he wanted to cross.

Much of Trumpism is rooted in a disdain for "political correctness." This was one of the pillars of Donald Trump's campaign in 2016: "...[it] is just absolutely killing us as a country. You can't say anything. Anything you say today, they'll find a reason why it's not good."²⁰¹ Trump's ability to say whatever he wanted to without fear of the consequences was refreshing for many conservative Americans, many of whom felt their free speech was being threatened by needing to police their language in the name of political correctness. Moira Weigel writes:

Trump did not simply criticise the idea of political correctness—he actually said and did the kind of outrageous things that [politically correct] culture supposedly

²⁰⁰ Daniel Bush, "Where President Trump stands on the issues in 2020," *PBS*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/where-president-trump-stands-on-the-issues-in-2020>.

²⁰¹ Chris Cillizza, "The dangerous consequences of Trump's all-out assault on political correctness," *CNN Politics*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/30/politics/donald-trump-hate-speech-anti-semitism-steve-king-kevin-mccarthy/index.html>.

prohibited. The first wave of conservative critics of political correctness claimed they were defending the status quo, but Trump's mission was to destroy it. In 1991, when George HW Bush warned that political correctness was a threat to free speech, he did not choose to exercise his free speech rights by publicly mocking a man with a disability or characterising Mexican immigrants as rapists. Trump did. Having elevated the powers of PC to mythic status, the draft-dodging billionaire, son of a slumlord, taunted the parents of a fallen soldier and claimed that his cruelty and malice was, in fact, courage.²⁰²

Donald Trump's war on political correctness was, I believe, why he was elected in 2016, and it is a phenomenon which goes hand in hand with cancel culture.

Political correctness, as Kat Chow has observed, has no singular definition; it has been used to mean "*cowardly and courageous; invalid or hypersensitive; in step with the orthodoxy; distortion and linguistic jujitsu.*"²⁰³ In other words, to be politically correct, is to try not to offend anyone. Cancel culture, on the other hand, disposes of the politically *incorrect*, the offensive. While it seems no one has been able to pinpoint when the term "politically correct" first came into use, Weigel writes that, "Until the late 1980s, 'political correctness' was used exclusively within the left, and almost always ironically."²⁰⁴ Additionally, as Harold K. Bush Jr. has shown,

²⁰² Moira Weigel, "Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump>.

²⁰³ Kat Chow, "'Politically Correct': The Phrase Has Gone from Wisdom to Weapon," *NPR*, December 14, 2016, original emphasis.

²⁰⁴ Weigel, "Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy."

well-known conservative personality Rush Limbaugh essentially built his career around political correctness beginning in the early 1990s.²⁰⁵

Donald Trump's feelings on political correctness are certainly part of what attracted Rich to his campaign, as he said in a 2015 interview, "[Trump's] the only guy who's gonna say it like he says it. I think whether you agree with everything he says or not, at least you've got a guy there who is not pulling any punches with you, he's gonna tell you exactly what he thinks, and exactly what he feels."²⁰⁶ Indeed, he did. From the campaign trail to the Oval Office, Donald Trump consistently said whatever he wanted without fear of the consequences. During his campaign, he catered to the racist fears of Americans by calling Mexican people "rapists" and calling for a ban on all Muslim individuals entering the country.²⁰⁷ He has said horrific things about women, and banned transgender people from serving in the United States military.²⁰⁸ His war on political correctness became an all-out war on equality and equity, but when the tables were turned and his support decreased, Donald Trump used cancel culture to his advantage.

During the 2020 election season, when the tire company Goodyear announced that it would not allow its employees to wear any politically-affiliated clothing of any kind at work, Donald Trump called for a boycott of Goodyear tires, writing "Don't buy GOODYEAR TIRES - They announced a BAN ON MAGA HATS. Get better tires for far less!" and "(This is what the

²⁰⁵ Harold K. Bush, "A Brief History of PC, With Annotated Bibliography," *American Studies International* 33, no. 1 (1995), 45.

²⁰⁶ "John Rich: I'm Glad Trump Is Running for President." Fox News, June 23, 2015, <https://video.foxnews.com/v/4316343329001#sp=show-clips>.

²⁰⁷ Weigel, "Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy."

²⁰⁸ Hallie Jackson and Courtney Kube, "Trump's controversial transgender military policy goes into effect," *NBC News*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/trump-s-controversial-transgender-military-policy-goes-effect-n993826>.

Radical Left Democrats do. Two can play the same game, and we have to start playing it now!).”²⁰⁹ In 2017, following former NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s infamous “protest,” Donald Trump tweeted, “If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend!” and said at a rally, “Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired. He's fired!’”²¹⁰ Rich was also very vocal about the NFL protests on Twitter, writing in 2017: “Today is #GoldStarMothersDay which honors mothers who lost a son/daughter in combat. Remember THAT. #NFL players.”²¹¹ and opening a poll with the caption, “They stand for #GodSaveTheQueen and kneel for the #StarSpangledBanner How do you feel about that? #NFL” and the options “Thumbs up” or “Thumbs down.” 89.5% of those who voted in his poll (1,308 people) voted “thumbs down.”²¹²

Despite his role in canceling businesses, people, and organizations, Donald Trump and the GOP are still quick to use cancel culture as an excuse to get their way. During his second impeachment trial in February 2021, Trump’s lawyers claimed that “constitutional cancel culture” was to blame for the impeachment happening in the first place: “History will record this shameful effort as a deliberate attempt by the Democrat Party to smear, censor and cancel, not

²⁰⁹ Max Cohen, “Trump calls for Goodyear boycott after company bans MAGA attire among employees,” *Politico*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/19/trump-goodyear-boycott-maga-attire-ban-398469>.

²¹⁰ Santucci, “Trump decries ‘cancel culture,’ but does he participate in it?”

²¹¹ John Rich (@johnrich), “Today is #GoldStarMothersDay which honors mothers who lost a son/daughter in combat. Remember THAT. #NFL players,” Twitter, September 24, 2017, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/912011396677808128>.

²¹² John Rich (@johnrich), “They stand for #GodSaveTheQueen and kneel for the #StarSpangledBanner How do you feel about that? #NFL,” Twitter, September 24, 2017, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/911982165122015232>.

just President Trump, but the 75 million Americans who voted for him.”²¹³ Though the definition of cancel culture gets more vague by the day, and more so each time it is put to use by the Republican party, Trump’s impeachment was decidedly not cancel culture at work. Though he was acquitted, his second impeachment trial was held on the basis of his incitement of an insurrection and for the creation of distrust in the democratic system through his claims of widespread election fraud.

Following the 2020 election and leading up to the insurrection on January 6, 2021, Donald Trump decided to end his years-long relationship with Fox News, effectively canceling them with a “series of rage tweets.” He was angry because the network “called Arizona for Joe Biden on election night,” when, in fact, the Associated Press did not call Arizona until hours later. He tweeted, “@FoxNews daytime ratings have completely collapsed. Weekend daytime even WORSE. Very sad to watch this happen, but they forgot what made them successful, what got them there. They forgot the Golden Goose. The biggest difference between the 2016 Election, and 2020, was @FoxNews!”²¹⁴ Though Rich would never speak ill of his employer, he was very vocal about the election being “stolen” from Donald Trump. He even placed a ten thousand dollar bet with a journalist that the results would be overturned. The money would go to their charity of choice, and after Joe Biden was inaugurated on January 20, Rich donated his money to his favorite charity, Folds of Honor.²¹⁵

²¹³ Darch Gregorian, “‘Constitutional cancel culture’: Key takeaways from Day Four of Trump’s impeachment trial,” *NBC News*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/constitutional-cancel-culture-key-takeaways-day-four-trump-s-impeachment-n1257677>.

²¹⁴ Ted Johnson, “Donald Trump Goes Off On Fox News With Series of Rage Retweets After Report He Wants To Set Up Streaming Rival,” *Deadline*, November 12, 2020, <https://deadline.com/2020/11/donald-trump-fox-news-newsmax-1234613489>.

²¹⁵ Sterling Whitaker, “John Rich Makes Good on \$10K Bet After President Biden Sworn In,” *Taste of Country*, January 23, 2021, <https://tasteofcountry.com/john-rich-joe-biden-donald-trump-election-bet/>.

Following the insurrection, Rich seemingly no longer supported Donald Trump. On January 6, Sebastian Bach tweeted, “Hey, @johnrich, it’s your old friend and fan here who went country...we just got to know....after today do you still support Donald Trump? Are you down with what happened today? [sic]” and Rich responded, “Hey @sebastianbach I’m never ‘down’ with anyone, or any group no matter who they are, or who they ‘claim to be’ supporting/representing, carrying out violence in any manner whatsoever. Violence begets more violence and that is not going to end well for anyone. It needs to stop.”²¹⁶ Both of these tweets have now been deleted, but it is unclear if this was done by Twitter or by Rich. However, what these tweets imply is a total denouncement of Trump and those who stormed the Capitol, despite his fierce support of the former president leading up to it.

CONCLUSION

The similarities between MuzikMafia’s platform and that which Donald Trump ran on in 2016 should not go unnoticed. The MuzikMafia was founded on the idea that Nashville could not provide the Mafia’s godfathers with a career because it was corrupted by the big record labels and producers who only wanted to promote and sell one type of music. Similarly, Donald Trump’s “drain the swamp” platform was founded on the belief that the government is corrupt and can no longer provide its citizens with the help it needs because it is too focused on certain issues and not on others.²¹⁷ These similarities might explain Rich’s support of Donald Trump—though mind-boggling on the surface, it makes more sense when analyzed. Similarly, Trump’s

²¹⁶ John Rich (@johnrich), “Hey @sebastianbach I’m never ‘down’ with anyone, or any group no matter who they are, or who they ‘claim to be’ supporting/representing, carrying out violence in any manner whatsoever...” Twitter, January 6, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210107032105/twitter.com/johnrich>.

²¹⁷ Noah Bierman, “Trump Shifts Meaning of ‘Drain the Swamp’ from Ethics to Anything He Objects To,” Los Angeles Times, February 9, 2018.

business-first model of government fits the ideals which Rich presents in *The Pursuit!*. Even though Trump lost Rich's support at the end, it made sense.

This project is centered around cancel culture and country music, but this chapter has gone further into politics than it has into music. Despite his boldest claims, I ultimately argue that Rich is afraid of cancel culture. He does not need to be, of course; wealthy, cis-het white men in America do not get canceled unless they have sexually assaulted someone, and even then, it rarely affects their day-to-day operations. However, what I have shown is how close to cancel culture Rich comes with every interaction. Every song, every show, every breath. Yet he is untouchable. His relationship with Donald Trump made this even more likely, and so he cut ties when that relationship became too risky for him following the insurrection. Before cancel culture had its name, and his song about Detroit auto workers started getting heat from the left, he promoted it on Fox News. When it got heat from the right, he called the song's message "populist."²¹⁸ John Rich is afraid of cancel culture, and until he ceases to be, his career and his life will never truly be as full as they can be.

²¹⁸ Peck, *MuzikMafia*, 49.

Conclusion

Life on the Cutting Edge

When I originally began project nearly two years ago, cancel culture was not a concept which was widely known by the general public. A movement born from Black Twitter, it was not until after its recent adoption by the Republican party that it has become a widespread phenomenon. When my thesis topic came up in conversation two years ago, it took much more explanation than it does now. Cancel culture is in the news on a daily basis, which is why this project has become so much bigger and so much more topically important than I had previously imagined possible.

With its roots in misogyny and in Black culture, the phrase “you’re canceled,” was never meant to become its own culture. It was often used in a joking manner, and when it was brought up again in the era of #MeToo, I believe its intentions were genuinely good. Holding people accountable for their actions should not be considered controversial, but in a time of such divisiveness, it has become so. Something that began as a misogynistic joke has become something plastered all over news websites, social media, and even at Republican conventions. Our society is so quick to demonize what we see as the “other” that we have become entirely wrapped up in cancel culture.

In Chapter 1, I investigated cancel culture’s role in Taylor Swift’s career, and how it has played into the “victim” narrative that is often cast upon her. As I argued, she is often painted as a victim not only because of her gender and her carefully constructed public image, but also because she (previously) did not fight back against these narratives. Taylor Swift has not only been seen as a victim—she has also been seen as a victimizer. Because she did not defend the actions of a drunk Kanye West in 2009 and because she misunderstood a tweet from Nicki Minaj

in 2015, she has been painted as a racist or even a white supremacist. While I have argued against both of those points, these thoughts still exist in the back of the minds of many of Swift's critics.

Though we saw Swift slowly begin to stand up to her critics in the later years of her career, her public image was often too important to risk being canceled further, and therefore she remained silent. However, in the case of *Reputation*, we saw that she began to take back control of her life and her story, despite what the consequences may have been. With the release of and backlash following "You Need to Calm Down," Taylor Swift used her position as a woman in power to advocate for queer voices, even though some argued that her efforts were misguided. Swift's relationship with cancel culture gets more complicated with every passing day. Taylor Swift is currently in the news for comments she made about a recently released Netflix series, *Ginny and Georgia* (2021). In the show, a joke is made about how many ex-boyfriends Swift has, to which she responded on Twitter: "Hey Ginny & Georgia, 2010 called and it wants its lazy, deeply sexist joke back. How about we stop degrading hard working women by defining this horse shit as FuNnY. Also, @netflix after Miss Americana this outfit doesn't look cute on you ... Happy Women's History Month I guess." Though she is receiving backlash from many people for speaking against the joke made in the show, Swift is standing up against misogyny and is standing up for herself. More importantly for the purposes of this project, she has not given in to those trolls who want her to crack under the pressures of cancel culture.

Chapter 2 looked at Lil Nas X's relationship with cancel culture. Though his career has been short in relation to the other musicians studied in this project, he has been canceled numerous times for his music, his sexual orientation, and for his social media presence in general. I argue that this had more to do with his race than with any other factor. His debut song

“Old Town Road” was removed from the *Billboard* Country charts for being “not country enough,” (read “not white enough”) which was a relief to some country fans but caused uproar in much of Nas X’s fanbase. After his remix with Billy Ray Cyrus was released, however, it seemed *Billboard*’s tune had changed.

Following Lil Nas X’s coming out in June 2019, he received an extraordinary amount of hate from the hip-hop community. Though it is easy to assume that the country music community was also not pleased with his sexuality, they largely remained silent on the issue. Hip-hop artists and rappers came out of the woodwork to say homophobic things to and about Lil Nas X, which bolsters my argument that cancel culture does not “come for us all,” but rather for those already marginalized and those who have already needed to fight for their voices to be heard. *Billboard* silenced Lil Nas X because their country chart was not ready for any kind of hip-hop influence, but just months later Blanco Brown was successful with a very similar song on that same chart. Furthermore, I recently learned that rapper Nelly recently paired up with Florida Georgia Line to record “Lil Bit,” which includes a direct reference to “Old Town Road:” “Got the coupe on the *new* town road,” This is further evidence that country music is indeed ready for hip-hop influence.

Chapter 3 looked critically at the career of John Rich, who had his beginnings as a member of the band Lonestar before leaving and becoming one of the “godfathers” of the MuzikMafia. Though the MuzikMafia’s intentions seemed pure enough, John Rich had his sights set on bigger things and bigger money. After the success of Big & Rich, John Rich began creating his own success with a solo career, which brought with it the “populist anthem” “Shuttin’ Detroit Down.” The song, which was adopted by Fox News and later Rand Paul, became less of a populist anthem and more of a right-wing protest song, despite its arguably left-

leaning lyrics. Rich then went on to write the campaign song for John McCain, which solidified his spot at the Republican table.

After winning *Celebrity Apprentice* in 2011, Rich befriended Donald Trump, a friendship which continued into Trump's presidency. It was not until January 6, 2021 that Rich stopped publicly supporting Trump, albeit quietly, following the siege on the Capitol. Though he could have just stopped supporting Trump in order to save his job at Fox News, John Rich's (non-)denouncement of Trump was notable. Additionally, I highlighted the similarities between the structure of the MuzikMafia and of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, which both ultimately ran on platforms of exclusion. In this chapter, I argued that while John Rich has managed to escape being canceled throughout his career (largely for reasons laid out in the previous chapter), he has spent much of his life running away and hiding from scandal.

My argument is further evidenced by recent tweets from John Rich: "Liberals and Conservatives should join together to #CancelCancelCulture before it devours us all. This beast will eventually consume it's own creators."²¹⁹ Despite his earlier claims that he doesn't "believe in cancel culture," Rich, like many Republicans today, fear its wrath because they fear facing the consequences of their actions, of their hate speech, and of their lies.²²⁰

Each of these artists came to country music to change something about it, to be progressive in some way, and to have a different kind of voice in country music. In her early years, Taylor Swift brought a youthful aspect to the country music industry which it desperately needed. Lil Nas X attempted to bring a much-needed refresh to the genre by adding trap- and

²¹⁹ John Rich (@johnrich), "Liberals and Conservatives should join together to #CancelCancelCulture," Twitter, March 3, 2021, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/136715756079777922>.

²²⁰ John Rich (@johnrich), "Nah. I don't believe in cancel culture," Twitter, October 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/johnrich/status/1318675508901576705>.

hip-hop-flavored beats to the music in order to bring in a younger and more diverse audience. Even John Rich, in his own way, was trying to change country music in the early MuzikMafia years. Though his misguided and colorblind attempts ultimately failed, he and the rest of the MuzikMafia were setting out to make an audible change on country radio.

Though this project was about artists with a foot in country music, it is clear that Taylor Swift and Lil Nas X no longer consider themselves country artists (or perhaps never did, in the case of the latter). These changes are notable because, as we observed, Swift became disenchanted with country music after her run-in with Kanye West and the cancel culture that followed in 2009. Scandal pushed her away. Similarly, in the case of Lil Nas X and “Old Town Road,” despite his initial booming success, Nas X decided to not even try to produce country-adjacent tracks anymore following the backlash he received from *Billboard* and his critics. Cancel culture drove two of country’s biggest names and biggest money-makers away. On the other hand, John Rich, who has never needed to deal with cancel culture or even much of a scandal at all, has been involved in country music for the better part of thirty years. He has never switched over into the popular music realm. While he has his side projects, such as his whiskey business and his Fox News show, he is still considered a country musician, while the once-canceled voices of Taylor Swift and Lil Nas X had to find paths elsewhere.

My ultimate conclusion is this: cancel culture comes for the already marginalized and those who have had to fight for a seat at the table to begin with. Though cancel culture’s original intent was perhaps the opposite, to hold people accountable for their egregious actions, this study has shown that those it ultimately affects are not those with the most egregious acts. Taylor Swift has been canceled dozens of times, more than anyone could ever attempt to count, but she has never done anything which I would classify as “evil,” or even necessarily “bad.” Lil Nas X, who

has only been on the scene for two years, has been canceled at least four times that I can count off the top of my head, namely for being Black. While Taylor Swift has whiteness and womanhood to protect her, Lil Nas X has neither. When we look at John Rich, then, with his support of Trump, his countless angry right-wing tweets, his show on Fox News, and his highly political music, it is incredibly shocking that this man has never been the subject of a scandal or a cancelation. And yet, it's John Rich, the one with the most to lose, on Twitter calling to "cancel cancel culture."

Cis-het white men in power have never had to face the consequences for their actions, and therefore cancel culture (which ultimately, boils down to *consequence* culture) scares them to death. While they masquerade as defending "free speech" when they denounce cancel culture and all its "evils," what they are really doing is buying themselves time. White men have never needed to answer for what they have done, which is precisely why people like John Rich, Donald Trump, and the rest of the American right are so scared of cancel culture.

Just days before wrapping up this project, CPAC 2021 (Conservative Political Action Conference) took place, with its notable theme: "America Uncanceled." This, of course, is in reference to many Republicans feeling that their freedom of speech is being "canceled" by the left. Natalie Morales wrote on Twitter, "it's funny to me that the 'law and order' people who were always like 'sorry, but actions have consequences' have now invented the term 'cancel culture' because they are afraid that their shitty actions might finally be getting consequences." America is not canceled. Freedom of speech is not canceled. As I have argued here, the majority of Republicans would not even be properly canceled due to their positions of privilege. However, actions do have consequences, and hate speech still needs to be addressed and dealt with accordingly.

Every time I found myself nearing the end of this project, new tweets or new information came to light that I wanted to write about. In response to my grumblings about what seemed like a never-ending project, my advisor/mentor, Dr. Travis Stimeling, responded with, "...welcome to life on the cutting edge!" This, among all my other observations, leads me to believe that cancel culture is not going anywhere. This project has just scratched the surface of cancel culture's impact on country-influenced musicians, but its effects are ongoing. It is also possible that the moment I submit this project, its information will become out-of-date. As we have seen, cancel culture does not affect all people equally. In the era of #MeToo, cancel culture did what it was intended to: it discarded of those members of society who abuse their power to abuse others. In the days since, however, cancel culture has become a term for the same powerful men to hide behind to claim oppression.

While I do believe everyone should be held accountable to the things they have done in their lives, I do not necessarily believe that everyone should be canceled for said things. If you were to look at the things I posted on social media a decade ago, during my teen years, I am certain there would be things there of which I am not proud. However, there is a distinct difference between being held accountable for things of which we are not proud and being held accountable for things which are bad, evil, or criminal. I suspect that cancel culture will continue to affect musicians from all genres, as well as non-musicians, for years to come. What we can hope for is a more equitable cancel culture, one which does not only come for marginalized people, but also and *especially* the cis-het white men who have gotten away with so much for so long.

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