

**‘Some are Preachers, Some are Gay’:
Dolly Parton, Genre, Authenticity and LGBTQIA+ Belonging**

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Abstract

This project uses a critical understanding of genre to explore how Dolly Parton articulates LGBTQIA+ belonging within country music. Parton is recognised as an LGBTQIA+ ‘icon and ally’ (Barker, 2022a, p. 144) in a genre that has been perceived as homophobic, and lacking LGBTQIA+ participation. Using queer theoretical and methodological approaches, the work is rooted in an understanding of the genre’s aesthetics and affective logics. The thesis explores how claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country are articulated in Parton’s songs. This thesis explores three research questions. First, how does a queer reading of Parton’s repertoire construct LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music? Second, how do Parton’s songs navigate the contested cultural terrain around genre and authenticity? Third, to what extent does Parton as a case study enable an understanding of issues around LGBTQIA+ people’s marginalisation within the country music industry and the historical narrative of the genre?

The thesis joins a conversation within country music scholarship that is increasingly acknowledging LGBTQIA+ participation in the genre and reveals country’s aesthetics to be deeply contested. Focusing on Parton as a case study, this thesis draws out discursive tensions within ideas of genre categorisation and authenticity within country music. This project builds on previous work around Parton’s ‘subversive’ ‘gender performance’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) and applies queer theoretical approaches to the representations of sexuality within Parton’s repertoire. Shifting the emphasis from Parton’s celebrity, the analysis focuses on the songs’ textual qualities and how queer reading can draw out possibilities around the positionality of LGBTQIA+ people within country. This thesis makes a vital call to action to integrate queer theory more widely within country music scholarship, which is a particularly urgent critical enquiry within an industry that perpetuates ‘exclusionary’ (Watson, 2022, p. 59) narratives around the genre’s audiences, aesthetics, and history.

Dedication

For my Grandma, Olive Miles (1937-2022).

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Sections 3.3.1 (paragraph 1, pp. 60-61); 4.4 (paragraphs 1 and 3, pp. 75-77); 5.1.1 (paragraph 1, pp. 84-85); 5.2.1 (pp. 88-91); 7.1.3 (pp. 151-153); 7.3 and subsection 7.3.1 pp. 168-172); 7.4 (pp. 173-183) rework material previously published in Barker, J. (2022) 'Dolly Parton's Mythologised Persona, Collective Life Writing, and Building a Home for LGBTQ+ Listeners in Country Music', *Persona Studies*, 8(1), pp. 143–155. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2022vol8no1art1541> (Accessed: 16 October 2023).

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Country music has been perceived as a homophobic genre within popular media narratives (Hubbs, 2014). Popular framings of country music's homophobia deploy classist assumptions of white working-class culture that, as Nadine Hubbs argues, is a manifestation of wider trends within US culture (especially political commentary and the wider media) 'that frame the white working class as a discrete bigot class responsible for America's social and political ills' (2014, p. 5). The consequence of framing country music as lacking LGBTQIA+ participation and expression is that this obscures the presence of LGBTQIA+ people in the genre, both as artists and as audiences. Elements of this have persisted within country music scholarship, such as Bill C. Malone's *Country Music U.S.A* (now in its fourth edition with co-editor Tracey E.W. Laird) which posits that, even when country songs have 'defended unconventional lifestyles... [this was] not to the point of homosexuality' (2018, p. 351). Later, Grossman argues that underpinning the relationship and social world of country songs is the impossibility of same-sex attraction (2002, p. 91). There have been significant interventions to challenge these kinds of assumptions about country music, within both scholarship and popular culture. Hubbs' work outlines how re-evaluating country music's working-class affective logics enables us to see LGBTQIA+ subjectivities intersecting and co-existing with working class 'social' life (2014, pp. 159-160). Shana Goldin-Perschbacher's 2022 book *Queer Country* demonstrates the presence of LGBTQIA+ artists in country and related genres throughout the history of the country music industry. Francesca T. Royster's work conceptualises ways of listening that engages with country music aesthetics as a queer method of subverting cultural expectations, norms and assumptions (2016 and 2022). This method of engaging with country music texts has informed the approach I take to my case study, Dolly Parton. Although this thesis focuses on Parton for its analysis, more widely this work joins a growing conversation about LGBTQIA+ participation, and more widely diversity in country music.

Before I introduce my conceptual approach, it is important to contextualise the industry and socio-political context around country music as a genre. (I unpack this in more detail in the next chapter, my literature review). Issues around the marginalisation of

LGBTQIA+ people in country music should be understood not as ‘retrograde’ working class homophobia (Hubbs 2015, p. 72), nor as an inherent aesthetic disconnect between LGBTQIA+ experiences and the genre, but as ‘exclusion’ enacted by the country music industry (Watson, 2022, p. 68). In country music, it is the Nashville-based industry that determines who has record label support and, as a market that remains heavily reliant on radio, who gets airplay (ibid, p. 58). Out of the ‘songs played on country format radio’ in 2022, LGBTQIA+ artists accounted for just ‘0.135% of the airplay’ (SongData, 2023). It is crucial that the structural roots of this exclusion are properly acknowledged, rather than falling back onto stereotypical images of “white trash” or “redneck” homophobia (Hubbs, 2014, p. 4) that perform the function of letting the people (often middle class) holding institutional power and perpetuating institutional homophobia ‘off the hook’ (Hubbs, 2021c). Situating these ‘exclusionary practices’ (Watson, 2022, p. 59) within their historical industry context, it becomes apparent that the industry’s ideological operations relate not to working class culture, but, as Amanda Martinez’s research shows, to the country music industry’s work in the 1970s to market itself to mainstream ‘solidly middle-class white Silent Majority’ America (2020, p. 135). At the same time, there has been much more diverse participation (as artists and audiences) than the industry has recognised (Martinez, 2020 and 2021; see also Hubbs and Royster, 2020). Country music as an aesthetic genre is a deeply contested space, despite the narrow framings of the industry, and it is with this understanding of country, that this thesis approaches its theme of LGBTQIA+ belonging.

1.1 Concepts: Genre, Authenticity and Belonging

The main way that this thesis conceptualises LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music is through interrogating the idea of what it means to belong in a musical genre. Belonging in genre relates to the policing of genre categories within the music industry, and how artists navigate this. Within the specific genre context of country music, ‘authenticity’ is wielded as a tool by ‘gatekeepers’ within the industry to determine who has access to opportunities, exposure and resources (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 5), and in the long term, who becomes part of the ‘institutional memory’ and identity of country music (Watson, 2022, p. 55). The gatekeeping around authenticity in the country music

industry (both in the present day and historically) stems from the ideological work around identity in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries as the recording (and radio) industries developed. As David Brackett outlines, the ‘concept of population’ is ‘correlated’ to the popular music industries and formation of ‘discrete markets’, genres and marketing categories, and western cultural concerns with an ‘emphasis on the measurement and tracking of individuals and the compilation of statistics about birth, death, disease and so on’ (2016, p. 19). (Section 3.1.1 explores this further and its links to ‘colonial’ logics of managing populations (Halberstam, 2018, p. 5; see also Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 10)). Identity is itself often considered to be ‘an inherent, coherent, unchanging and knowable truth to each person’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 43) with ties to essentialism, which Brackett describes as ‘the idea that one’s identity is defined by biology’ (2016, p. 18). As a consequence of this, ‘(c)ategories of music are often associated with categories of people’ (Brackett, 2016, p. 1). This was particularly the case within the development of the popular music industries and especially the construction of country music as a distinct marketing category, first labelled ‘hillbilly music’ and distinguished from ‘race records’ (Miller, 2010, p. 2). (This will be discussed in more detail in my conceptual framework in Chapter 3, especially sections 3.2 on genre and 3.3 on authenticity.)

Goldin-Perschbacher argues that the kind of authenticity required within country music as a category has been used to oppress ‘nonnormative people’ (2022, p. 41). Musical marketing categories contribute to the production of identity categorisation that racism and homophobia often draw on (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 10; Pecknold, 2013, p. 7), but also ‘nonnormative people’ often face disproportionate levels of scrutiny and requirements for ‘proof’ of authenticity (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 41). Within the country music industry, there are often higher standards for LGBTQIA+ artists and people of colour to be recognised as “authentically” country. For LGBTQIA+ people in country music, authenticity can be a tool of oppression and exclusion, whilst at the same time Goldin-Perschbacher suggests that the ‘(n)eed for authenticity, or at least for others’ appreciation of their sincerity, may be considerably multiplied for those who have been othered by mainstream society and their authenticity and sincerity challenged’

(2022, p. 54). Despite all its problems, especially when linked to essentialism and rigid genre boundaries, authenticity may be a necessary and generative tool for LGBTQIA+ people in the genre. For this reason, the thesis takes the idea of authenticating (Moore, 2002) LGBTQIA+ belonging in genre as an important political aim, whilst being aware of the social and political histories around country, genre, and authenticity, within which claims to belonging are articulated.

The conceptual approach of this thesis integrates a contextual understanding of country music as a genre with queer theoretical approaches. There are two terms that are worth clarifying how they are used in the thesis: LGBTQIA+ and queer. Sometimes queer is used in a way broadly synonymous with LGBTQIA+, however for clarity I wish to distinguish between the two. I use LGBTQIA+ to refer to a community and constituency of people, and queer as a range of methodological approaches that I draw on and use for my analysis. I expand further on the usage of these terms in Chapter 5.

Methodology. Through a queer approach to country music, this thesis uses queer theoretical insights and methods to interrogate and counter industry and 'historical' narratives (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3) that marginalise and exclude LGBTQIA+ people.

1.2 Dolly Parton as a Case Study

Dolly Parton is a significant case study to explore ideas and possibilities around LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. Parton is widely recognised as an LGBTQIA+ 'icon and ally' (Barker, 2022a, p. 144; see also Edwards, 2018, p. 6; Hamessley, 2020, pp. 194-197; Hubbs, 2015, p. 73), at the same time as a huge country music star. For this reason, Parton is a 'key case study' (Edwards, 2018, p. 235) to explore cultural assumptions and tensions around how country music is understood. The question of LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music taps into heated discourses within country around its contested self-conceptualisation of itself as a genre; around authenticity debates that change with each decade (Laird, 2018, p. 545); and concerns of its identity with 'folk culture' roots versus its 'mass culture' and commercial development (Edwards, 2018, p. 7). All of these perceived 'contradictions' (Wilson, 1998, p. 98) play out within

Parton's 'star text' (Edwards, 2018, p. 43), which, through a nearly sixty-year long career, brings together claims to country authenticity and pop crossover. Parton has released across multiple genre categories, to a large amount of discussion, yet at the same time maintains an 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29) that identifies her as country. Parton's career becomes a site to interrogate the way genre categories are constructed, and both reveals the 'instability' and changeability of these categories (Brackett, 2016, p. 26), whilst reinforcing notions of genre as an affective identity. Similarly, Parton's performance of gender deploys 'camp' aesthetics of the 'artificial' and 'excessiveness' around her 'exaggerated appearance' (Edwards, 2018, p. 27) that 'emphasizes the idea that gender roles are artificial in the sense that they are socially constructed' (Edwards, 2018, p. 6), which provides the grounds for critiquing it (Gardener, 2012, p. 287; see also Doty, 1993, p. 12; Robertson, 1996, p. 10). Parton thereby challenges 'gender essentialism' (Edwards, 2018, p. 159; see also Ross, 1999, p. 325). Yet Parton's rhetoric also uses 'sincerity' and authenticity in presenting audiences her 'life story' (Edwards, 2018, p. 2). Treating Parton's star text in this critical way enables an approach to country music that constructs authenticity and claims to belonging in genre in ways more open to 'multiplicity' (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez, 2021) that enable LGBTQIA+ participation to no longer be considered impossible, but as available within country music aesthetics.

This thesis explores how Parton's songs can be used to articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. In light of recent scholarship (especially Goldin-Perschbacher (2022)) and increased journalistic attention to LGBTQIA+ country artists, it is important to address some limitations and make some further clarifications about the focus of the thesis upfront. The emphasis of my research is not on Parton as a celebrity, or primarily about Parton as an LGBTQIA+ ally, but on how queer reading can be deployed as a tool within the industry context of country music to articulate claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre. By doing so, this work aims to re-balance the emphasis from Parton herself to her listeners and wider conceptual issues (Barker, 2022b). Previous scholarship (Watson, 2016; Edwards 2018; Hamessley, 2020) on Parton has considered the way she incorporates her autobiography and life story into her

songwriting and ‘media image’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 74). This thesis builds on this work but approaches Parton’s life writing in a different direction to explore the potential for broader resonances that enable a more ‘collective’ life-writing practice (Drag, 2019, p. 233), of which listeners (including LGBTQIA+ people) are ‘active’ participants (Negus, 1996, p. 27). (Section 5.2.1 sets out my approach to life writing in more detail.) This project uses analysis of Parton’s songs to explore the cultural terrain outlined above, namely how contested ideas of genre, authenticity and belonging can be reworked and negotiated to address the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ people within country music. By picking a star who is almost indisputably recognised as country (Sanneh, 2021, p. 156), this project aims to deploy Parton and her songs as political tools to demonstrate an almost matter-of-fact case for LGBTQIA+ experiences and identities as ‘being country’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61). Although this is no equivalent for work on LGBTQIA+ country artists directly, this project aims to interrogate the affective and cultural landscape that constructs the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ people.

Parton being so widely ‘recognised’ as an LGBTQIA+ ‘icon and ally’ (Barker, 2022a, p. 144) allows me to directly explore discourses and assumptions of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong. This can be observed within narratives produced around Parton, including in her own promotional output. Much of this tends to align Parton’s allyship and LGBTQIA+ audiences with her pop-crossover period, and pointedly outside country (see Chapter 6). This risks perpetuating ‘exclusionary’ narratives (Watson, 2022, p. 59) about LGBTQIA+ experiences, narratives and people not belonging in the genre. By analysing Parton’s songs from across her career, including what can be described as her “traditional country” output, this thesis demonstrates that LGBTQIA+ ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) and pro-LGBTQIA+ allyship within Parton’s repertory should be situated as belonging within country music, rather than being exceptional to the aesthetics of the genre. The analytical chapters bring Parton’s songs into direct conversation with the conceptual discussion around genre and authenticity and demonstrate both the potential of these concepts as political tools for wider equality within country music, and as a critical approach to navigating the dangers and limitations of these. The thesis uses the case study songs to explore how ideas of genre

and identity are reflected and reworked, to reveal ‘instability’ (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) in their construction and potential for them to be utilized by multiple subjects to assert an ‘authenticity claim’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 51) to belonging in country music.

1.3 Research Questions and Structure of Thesis

My analysis is focused on three research questions. First, how does queer reading Parton’s repertoire construct LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music? Second, how do Parton’s songs navigate the contested cultural terrain around genre and authenticity? Third, to what extent does Parton as a case study enable an understanding of wider issues around LGBTQIA+ people’s marginalisation within the country music industry and the historical narrative of the genre? I will now outline the structure of the thesis and approach to answering these questions.

The main focus of the thesis is on joining a scholarly (and journalistic) conversation that is re-evaluating the genre of country music and the place of LGBTQIA+ people within the ‘narrative’ (both current and ‘historical’) around the genre (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1). The second chapter (directly after this introduction) sets out the scholarly context around how country music has been understood, beginning with the historical development of the industry and regional associations, before moving onto contested debates around country’s aesthetics, politics and affective logics, and then finally introducing the important work around diversity in country music, drawing specific attention to race, gender and the emerging scholarship around LGBTQIA+ participation in the genre. This sets out the context for the thesis’ queer theoretical and methodological approach and situates the scholarly intervention of the analysis. The third chapter establishes the conceptual framework underpinning my work’s engagement with issues of genre, authenticity and belonging. My framework draws on insights from queer theoretical approaches to issues of identity, popular music studies, and country music studies to outline the way genre and authenticity are contested as both tools for oppression and having potential to be utilized by marginalised people. This chapter combines general approaches to these concepts, from a queer critical lens that explores the way these are socially constructed and their potential political utility,

with an approach that is contextualised within the specific discourses around genre and authenticity in country music. The chapter argues for a cautious and critical approach to assert claims of LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

Having established the broad contextual and conceptual frameworks for the thesis, Chapter 4 provides an overview of the main case study, Dolly Parton. This overview will summarise Parton's career and scholars who have worked on her, before focusing on how scholarship has approached Parton as an LGBTQIA+ icon and situating my approach within this context. Building on the work of Leigh H. Edwards, this thesis uses Parton as a 'key case study' (2018, p. 235) to explore the tensions and contradictions within country music's discourses that may enable articulations of LGBTQIA+ belonging. Having established the scholarly context around Parton as a case study, including issues around genre identification within her repertoire, Chapter 5. Methodology sets out my approach to this case study. Significant to this thesis is shifting the emphasis from Parton's celebrity star text onto the songs and how they can be interpreted and used by audiences and listeners (Barker, 2022a, p. 153). My main method utilises an approach to queer reading that draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas of 'reparative reading' (2003, p. 123), Sherry Turkle's work on 'evocative objects' (2007) and Sara Ahmed's idea of 'companion texts' (2017, p. 16), to 'consider how [Parton's] songs become evocative objects' (Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 264) that can be deployed to assert the presence of LGBTQIA+ listeners in the genre of country music.

The thesis applies this approach in three analytical chapters focusing on case study songs. Chapter 6 explores Parton's "crossover period" and unpacks the extent to which these songs essentialise or subvert genre categorisations and assumptions of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong, focusing on 'Here You Come Again', 'Baby I'm Burnin'', and 'Wildflowers'. Chapter 7 analyses Parton's pre-crossover material, seemingly "straightforwardly" country, to demonstrate how queer reading can articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging in this repertoire. My analysis demonstrates that queer resonances can be drawn out of this country repertoire and so Parton's LGBTQIA+ listeners should be linked to the songs of this period as much as the pop-crossover. Focusing on 'Jolene',

‘Coat of Many Colors’ and ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’, I unpack how these songs’ genre categorisation and identity is just as unstable and socially constructed as the songs of the crossover period (which might be presumed to have a more unstable genre classification). The third and final analytical chapter, Chapter 8, focuses on the two Parton songs that explicitly address LGBTQIA+ people: ‘Family’ and ‘Travelin’ Thru’. My analysis explores how LGBTQIA+ inclusion is situated within country music, drawing attention to aesthetics and affective logics, but also to the unstable and inconsistent (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) way that country as a genre and category is constructed. Throughout each of these analytical chapters, my analysis demonstrates the importance of resisting rigid genre categories and assumptions, and ensuring that claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging are articulated on non-essentialist lines.

These analytical chapters directly address the first two of my research questions. The analysis of specific Parton songs demonstrates how claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music work within this repertoire through my queer readings. Through these readings, my analysis engages with the contested cultural terrain around genre and authenticity to suggest that within the context of country music these tools may be necessary to engage with, in a renegotiated form, at least in the short term. My third research question is around evaluating the utility of Parton as a case study to address wider issues around LGBTQIA+ participation in country music. My conclusion builds on my analysis in the main chapters of the thesis to assess how my strategy of queer reading Parton’s songs might be useful in the current context for LGBTQIA+ people in country music. As part of this, I define what may be useful, as well as acknowledging the limitations of Parton to address these wider issues, and identifying where further research could develop different critical approaches that may need to move beyond Parton. This is not to diminish the significance of Parton and different approaches to her work, but to consider Parton as an entry point to understanding the workings of genre, and as a point of departure for conceptualising LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

1.4 Critical Stakes and Original Contribution

This thesis builds on previous scholarship on Parton that has analysed her 'model of gender performance' and demonstrated how this is 'subversive' (Edwards, 2018, p. 4), and how this relates to Parton's 'authenticity narrative' (ibid, p. 29) and genre work. I build on the considerable work around country music and gender, which has looked at Parton, to explore representations of sexuality in Parton's repertoire, and to apply queer approaches to Parton's texts. As well as exploring how Parton's songs navigate discourses around sexuality, shame, belonging and home, the queer approach of this thesis is vital to exploring how 'norms' and genre categories are constructed and perpetuate themselves (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781; see also Butler, 1993, p. 22). This project expands on previous work that has interrogated the genre categorisation and positionality of Parton's work to show the instability of Parton's genre placement and refuses to accept country as a stable category. My analysis demonstrates how genre categories throughout Parton's career are always unstable with complex work happening underlying seemingly straightforward categories. This thesis demonstrates the queer theoretical potential when applied to country music scholarship to interrogate the way norms and social categories (including genre) are constructed.

My approach to Parton also makes a significant shift in the conversation around Parton in decentring Parton's 'star text' and celebrity persona (Edwards, 2018, p. 43), and instead focusing on the songs and their complexities that enable a multiplicity of readings and perspectives to become salient. As I shift this focus from Parton to her listeners and especially LGBTQIA+ listeners, I interrogate discursive ideas around country music and authenticity. I go further than other scholars, such as Goldin-Perschbacher (2022) and Royster (2022) who also explore the way 'definitions' (Royster, 2022, p. 23) of the country genre are constructed but can also be expanded, in arguing for utilising authenticity (Tuttle, 2015, p. 79), at least in the short term, as a political tool to advocate for LGBTQIA+ equality within country music industry contexts. Authenticating' (Moore, 2002) LGBTQIA+ experiences and narratives as 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61) can be necessary and in particular can be important in combatting

‘the industry’s white heteropatriarchal narrative’ about who country music is (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 10). Parton, as a figure reified as part of country music history is a vital site to rectify the historical narrative and ‘cultural memory’ (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3; see also Misztal, 2003) of the genre. My approach of textual analysis and queer reading, looking in detail at Parton’s songs across her career provides vital evidence to demonstrate the queer ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) of her repertoire. The depth of my readings and engagement with Parton’s songs compliments other work such as Watson (2022) and Martinez (2020) that critiques the industry’s narrative and memory work, by providing in-depth close readings that engage with the textual and discursive ways that ideas of country music genre identity are constructed and ‘negotiated’ (Hall, 1980, p. 126) through songs and their listeners. Through taking a critical approach to genre that takes seriously the generative and ‘reparative’ (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 144) role both authenticity and (country) genre identity has for some listeners, this thesis provides a mode for engaging with Parton’s songs, and the repertoire loosely categorised within country music. My thesis’ approach has both the clarity to ‘mobilize’ (Butler, 1993, p. 21) resistance to exclusionary racism, transphobia, and homophobia within the industry through a robust authenticity narrative of LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. This analysis has even wider critical and cultural potential to navigate entrenched essentialism, with a flexibility to revise its terms (such as authenticity, belonging and country) so that it continues to have generative utility (Weber, 2016a, p. 21).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since the main analytical focus of the thesis is around the concept of genre, and the question of what it means to belong in genre (for LGBTQIA+ people), with the specific emphasis on making a scholarly intervention around the 'historical narrative' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1) around country music, this literature review outlines country as a genre and some relevant developments within its scholarship. I begin by briefly setting out the context of the country music industry before summarising some of the historical developments of the genre and the way it has been figured as regional, with class and racial identifications as 'white', 'southern' and 'working-class' (ibid, p. 3). After establishing these historical and industry contexts, I turn to the content of the music, including aesthetics, the way country music's politics have been conceptualised, and how the genre's affective logics have been understood. I then outline a particularly important affective dialectic within the genre, authenticity. The final three sections outline some important scholarly interventions into the discussion around country music around diversity, including gender, race, and LGBTQIA+ people. This literature review sets up the scholarly context around the genre, with which my queer critical approach (that will be outlined in Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework') engages.

2.1 Country Music Industry Context

Country music is often thought of in relation to its Nashville-based industry. Although scholars, journalists, audiences, and artists think of country in different ways, and more broadly than this, in almost all cases there is some engagement with this industry, at least discursively. Bill C. Malone's *Country Music USA* (this thesis will use the fourth (Fiftieth Anniversary) edition edited with Tracey E.W. Laird (2018)) and Diane Pecknold's *The Selling Sound* (2007) trace much of the history of this industry as it was crafted out of folk and blues roots into a commercial marketing category in the 1920s (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 6; see also 'Country Music', 2021). Malone and Laird argue that the commercial category that would become country came out of 'radio' (enabled by 'technological enhancements' (2018, p. 40) increasing the range of transmission) that was able to tap into the rural market that the 'music industry' had relatively, although 'not totally neglected' at this point (ibid, p. 38). Regional barn dances were broadcast

through these radio stations with people like 'Fiddlin' John Carson' among the most famous (ibid, p. 40). Although radio had been the first, the recording industry soon took note and, as Malone and Laird argue, 'two important commercial media [recording and radio] ... converged in the early 1920s to produce that brand of music that we now call country music' (ibid, p. 43). Radio remained a key 'catalyst' in the development of the country music industry (ibid, p. 300). The Nashville based WSM Barn Dance became the Grand Ole Opry in 1927 (ibid, p. 89) and gained increased popularity from a 'thirty-minute time slot on NBC... in 1939' (ibid, p. 114). This increase in popularity attracted a 'pool of talent and an expanding network of promoters, booking agents, publishers and the like to Nashville' (ibid, p. 300). From this point forward, Nashville became the centre of the country music industry as 'recording studios were joined by a vast, and generally interlocking panoply of music business interests that made their headquarters in the city' (ibid, p. 310).

The country music industry experienced further growth in the 1950s with the establishment of the Country Music Association (CMA), 'a trade organization for members of the country music industry' (Martinez, 2020, p. 131), in 1958 with the aim of increasing the genre's 'popularity' and saw success in largely 'economic terms' (Malone and Laird, 2018, pp. 310-311). As Malone and Laird summarise, '(t)he CMA operated under the belief that all forms of country would prosper if the industry as a whole was healthy' (ibid, p. 311). The CMA was interlinked with radio, as '(o)ne of the CMA's most significant early tasks was the sponsorship of all-country-music radio stations' and '(b)y 1967, at least 328 stations broadcast country music on a full-time basis' (ibid, p. 311). The organisation also impacted cultural understandings and identifications of country music. The CMA established the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1967 (ibid, p. 312) and to this day controls the nomination and induction process (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 2023b). Diane Pecknold argues that the cultural significance of the CMA should not be treated as a crudely economic one, but rather that its commercialism and cultural or artistic concerns were intertwined: 'the concerted and largely successful effort to recast country music as an art form worthy of intellectual study was made possible only by the commercial power of the country industry, focused through the Country

Music Association' (2007, p. 6). The CMA holds historic commercial and institutional power and, through its awards shows and Hall of Fame, holds significant sway over popular understandings of who and what country music is (Bishop and Watson, 2022, pp. 1-10). Radio is still a significant driver of commercial success and recognition in the genre (Watson, 2022, p. 55). The fundamentals of the industry remain largely unchanged, and it is into these industry dynamics that Dolly Parton's career is situated.

2.2 Country Music Historical Roots and Regionalism (US South)

Popular and academic narratives of the development of country music focus on it developing from its various folk sources. Malone and Laird describe country music as 'a hybrid form' noting 'the culture of afro-Americans' as a particularly key influence (2018, p. 1). Karl Hagstrom Miller outlines that

Southern musicians performed a staggering variety of music in the early twentieth century. Black and white artists played blues, ballads, ragtime, and string band music, as well as the plethora of styles popular throughout the nation: sentimental ballads, minstrel songs, Tin Pan Alley tunes, and Broadway hits. (Miller, 2010, p.1)

The style that came to be identified as country developed out of this varied musical context. Malone and Laird argue that the American South had unique circumstances that enabled the evolution of what would become country music, '(o)nly in the southern united states... did dynamic folk cultural expressions, black and white, evolve into viable commercial forms' (2018, p. 2). The development of the country music industry is interlinked with country music's associations with a US southern, rural, regional identity in part stemming from the activities of talent scout, Ralph Peer and folk song collector Dorothy Scarborough who sought to collect a 'distinctive Southern experience' despite this not reflecting the musical practices of or 'perspectives of Southern musicians' (2010, p. 3). The image of country music as Southern was used by the growing industry to market this music (Martinez, 2020, p. 129).

It is important to acknowledge that 'country music has always had a broader audience demographic, [however] it is still associated with a southern, working-class audience

and milieu' (Edwards, 2018, p. 48). Yet the implications of country's Southern significations are broader than fixing its listeners to the region's physical geography. As Edwards points out, increasingly country music industry target demographics were people who had migrated from the South (and rural areas) and so country music operated as a particular paradox of both a nostalgia for the South and a product of this new living situation (ibid, p. 49). Cecilia Tichi goes further to argue that country music is 'only in the narrowest sense Southern' and that the genre's images, tropes and affective logics are rooted more broadly in American culture, for instance images of home (a concept that will be discussed in the next chapter, Section 3.3) where country songs' 'ideas of home are virtually identical with "home" images in print and the visual arts over some two centuries of cultural process throughout the United States' (1994, p. 22). These images (on the surface) are of the South, but these form part of the US cultural imaginary as a whole. Country music therefore reflects wider dynamics within the US. This can be extended even further, as Malone and Laird describe country music as a 'phenomenon of worldwide appeal' (2018, p. 1). Yet country music as a projection of images and fantasies of the US South is a crucial part of its cultural significations.

2.2.1 Appalachia

Another aspect of the country music regional narrative that is worth drawing attention to is Appalachia. (This is particularly pertinent to Parton as her life story that is often referred to relates to her growing up in the region.) Fred J. Hay outlines some of the ways Appalachia as a region has been 'conceived' (2003, p. 2): 'There is little agreement on the boundaries of Appalachia' (2003, p. 10). It often refers to 'the contiguous mountainous area of the southeastern United States' (Hay, 2003, p. 2). Some of the initial ways of defining the region 'composed [it] of 161 upland counties south of the Mason-Dixon line' (Hay, 2003, p. 10). It is 'also defined in terms of its mapping by the Appalachian Regional Commission (a federal granting body) as the mountainous stretch from northern Mississippi up through southern New York' (Enriquez, 2020, p. 65). The region, especially the Southern parts, is heavily stigmatised and stereotyped. Ronald D. Eller summarises, 'Appalachia may likely have replaced the benighted South as the nation's most maligned region... still dressed, in the popular

mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole' (1999, p. ix).

There are also racial narratives projected onto Appalachia. McCarroll argues that 'there is a deep historical investment in seeing the region as "pure white stock"' (2018, p. 2). A large function of these narratives was recuperating 'the supposedly uncultured and degraded mountain folk' through linking them to an 'imagined, honorable past' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 89). One way this was done was by linking Appalachian people to 'Elizabethan England', which Hamessley argues was 'eventually... applied to Dolly' (ibid). Appalachia was described by Charles Morrow Wilson in 1929 as 'a land of Elizabethan ways - a country of Spenserian speech, Shakespearean people, and of cavaliers and curtsies' (1929, p. 238; see also Hamessley, p. 89). These narratives heavily drew on notions of idealised whiteness, as John Alexander Williams summarises of the way Appalachia could be romanticised, 'Mountain people were not just white, but the right kind of whites: bearers of 'Anglo-Saxon blood"' (2002, p. 201). These narratives 'conceptually clear the region of all its other residents, including Native Americans, African-American slaves, central European immigrants' (Peterson, 1997, p. 215). There has been significant work drawing attention to the wider diversity within the region. Fred J. Hay points out that 'many more African Americans lived in these mountains than was previously thought and that the European ancestry of recent, as well as earlier, inhabitants of the region included many non-Anglos' (2003, p. 6). Sophia M. Enriquez's (2020) work shows how the Appalachia region has also been home to many Latinx people, both historically and from more recent migration in the region.

The racialised cultural narratives of Appalachia also fed through to the way music of the region has been figured. Just like the US South more widely, people in Appalachia listened to a broad range of music, however, the idea of Appalachian music 'in the wider popular imagination... conjures up images of banjos and ballad singers, bluegrass bands and hoedown fiddles' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 66). These musical styles became romanticised as Appalachian and 'mountain music' 'to identify a type of roots music that can embody an idyllic, rural American past' (ibid). This excluded many African

Americans and some of their musical influence in the narrative of the music of the region. African-American musical practices are key to much of the musical styles that are associated with Appalachia, for example the 'southern mountain string band and its progeny blue grass [that] owed much of their rhythmic development to the influence of black fiddling and to their adoption of the banjo' (Hay, 2003, p. 14). Later in this chapter, Section 2.8 unpacks more of the way race and racism have impacted narratives around country music and as they develop from this regional history.

Appalachia remains a complex and contested place within the American imagination. Much of this relates to an underlying contradiction within representations of the region as its residents are represented as both Americans in an earlier stage of 'cultural evolution' and therefore 'primitive' or uncivilised; and at the same time 'uncorrupted by civilisation' (Peterson, 1997, p. 207). Appalachia is represented as both the underdeveloped American past and deviancy, as well as being romanticised as symbolising idealised whiteness. (Chapter 7, focusing on Parton's pre-crossover repertoire and her representations of Appalachia will explore the implications these contested representations have on conceptualisations of gender and sexuality in the region.) These representations also reflect tensions within the construction of race within country music around idealised whiteness against the 'hillbilly' image of working-class whiteness (Hubbs, 2014, p. 24). There is potential here to draw attention to diversity, multiplicity and hybridity in the musical and cultural history of the region. This complex history is the backdrop to the development of the country music industry, and country as an aesthetic genre. This has particular significance for Parton who grows up within this contested musical and cultural context.

2.3 Country Music as an Aesthetic Genre

As well as the historical narrative of particular sounds and instrumentation developing out of country's folk sources, there has been further discussion around the genre's aesthetics. Popular narratives tend to identify the key instruments of country music as 'the banjo and the fiddle' ('The Rub (Beginnings -1933)', 2019). There are further developments in sounds and instrumentation. As the industry first developed and

centralised around Nashville, a particular sound developed known as honky-tonk, relating to 'working class bars and the music played there' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 58). Sonically, honky-tonk is characterised by what Joli Jensen identifies as 'pedal steel and [a] shuffling dance beat' (1998, p. 23). By the end of the 1950s and throughout the '1960s the Nashville sound is understood to have replaced honky-tonk as the central country style' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 58). The Nashville sound incorporated 'uniform and popular music-style production techniques' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 58). This was later 'overtaken by the Bakersfield sound' with musical arrangements based around 'a driving backbeat beneath soaring pedal steel and twangy Fender Telecaster guitars' 'by the mid 1960s', and in 'the late sixties, this style... was challenged by countrypolitan', which added to 'the Nashville sound's string arrangement' with 'a horn section' and more vocal 'inflections' in the singing style (Hubbs, 2014, pp. 8-9). As the mainstream country music industry grew larger it 'imported' more stylistic trends from the pop and rock marketing categories (ibid, p. 74), not least as a result of 'raised financial expectations for country music [and]... a greater nationalization of the market' (Edwards, 2018, p. 171). Although, as already outlined, it should be noted that country music was always a 'hybrid' genre (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 1). The growth of the country industry generated various complex tensions within discourses around authenticity (Sanjek, 1998, p. 23), which will be explored in more detail in Section 2.6 of this chapter. Artists would continue to draw on previous sonic traditions even as different styles became more dominant. Peterson describes the interplay between older, sometimes labelled 'traditional' (1998, p. 237) country and more contemporary pop-oriented styles, as a 'dialectic of hard-core and soft-shell' (ibid, p. 234). This dialectic, Peterson argues, has become a vital aesthetic, commercial and political dynamic for artists, audiences, and industry professionals alike.

Even with huge variations in sound, production and even instrumentation across the hundred years of country music as a marketing category, there have been some attempts to summarise some aspects of country music aesthetics. One aspect where scholars have suggested some commonality is the importance of lyrics or, as Tichi describes, 'the emphasis on story' (1994, p. 7). Melton A. McLaurin and Richard A.

Peterson argue that because lyrics are important to be heard and understood, ‘the other song elements are generally kept simple to highlight the story. The chord structure is simple and predictable, the melodic range is slight, and the orchestration is sparse or at least clearly in the background’ (1992, p. 2). There are also trends within the kinds of singing style, for example ‘regional’ accents (particularly in ‘hard-core’ country) (Peterson, 1998, p. 244) and a sense of ‘understatement’ (Emmylou Harris quoted in Tichi, 1994, p. 7) in the vocal performance (as well as other aspects of the music) compared to pop or rock. There are exceptions and considerable tensions around these, often as they relate to changing aesthetic and commercial conditions, for example Jocelyn R. Neal writes about particular country songwriting narrative paradigms that intertwine ‘commercial’ awareness of the industry and market of the time with aesthetic considerations (2007, p. 49).

A further way of linking country music together as a genre is through its lyrical themes (McLaurin and Peterson, 1992). McLaurin and Peterson identify a range of themes including ‘the South’, speaking ‘for the working class’, the rural, ‘questions of sex and love’ and at times ‘death’ (1992, p. 10). These themes tie into the tensions around country music’s regional roots and history. They also relate to what I will outline in the next chapter, my conceptual framework, through the links to regional identity, notions of home and authenticity, as well as the question of the possibility for LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre. Some scholars have identified the themes of country music with more conservative politics (I discuss country music’s politics in the next section). For example, Kenneth J. Meier identifies ‘the goodness of the little man’ (social class), ‘traditional family values’, ‘patriotism’, ‘race’ (whiteness), nostalgia and religion (especially Christianity) (2019, p. 90). As the next sections explore, the themes of country music and how they are approached are deeply contested and with greater variation than might have once been thought. However, country music can be thought of as at least foregrounding (even as the implications of this can be debated) themes such as authenticity, home, family, relationships, class identity, religion, patriotism and nostalgia.

2.4 Country Music Politics and Class

Country music's themes are inseparable from considering country music's politics. Some scholarship links the genre with nostalgia, patriotism and conservative politics. Meier argues that country music is 'nostalgic; it pines for the good old days', and that it 'idolizes patriotism' in part as a unifying impulse 'to get people to overlook other issues that divide us is by appealing to them to be true patriotic Americans' (2019, p. 90). However, Meier does acknowledge that both the genre's politics and aesthetics 'should not be viewed monolithic' and describes the variation as having a 'chaotic nature' (ibid, p. 105). Conservative politics can particularly be identified in the country music industry. Amanda Martinez argues that a significant part of the Country Music Association's activities from the late 1950s and into the 1970s was underpinned by political and ideological decision on which audience to focus on, 'homing in on a white, adult audience' (2020, p.131). This had an explicitly political direction, as the industry sought to brand itself and 'convince outsiders of country music's respectable, solidly middle-class white Silent Majority status' (ibid, p. 135). Artists themselves have also endorsed political candidates, and the industry has historically been more accommodating of artists expressing support for right wing and Republican politicians more than Democrats (although there have been notable endorsements across the political aisle) (Neal, 2010, p. 479).

Nadine Hubbs (2021c) argues that it is important to distinguish between country music as an aesthetic genre and 'the country music industry', although artists and aesthetics cannot be completely separated out from the industry context. However, an acknowledgement of this distinction is important to unpick the misrepresentations of class in the dominant narratives of country music's conservatism and especially its whiteness, in terms of its exclusion of Black artists and people of colour. Popular representations often identify the source of country music's racism, (as well as homophobia, transphobia and misogyny), as being the poor, ignorant white working-class redneck stereotype. Nadine Hubbs argues that the white working class is often figured as 'bigoted' and a 'prime source -if not *the* source- of America's homophobia problem' (2014, p. 2). Hubbs goes further to argue that these 'mainstream

representations' obscure the role of 'privileged whites and institutions' in perpetuating this bigotry (ibid, p. 5). Karen Pittelman argues that much of this narrative works to 'enforce white supremacy', and the focus on the redneck stereotype ultimately serves to misdiagnose and mischaracterise the issue. (F)ocusing on a group of white people with the least access and the fewest resources as the face of white supremacy... prevents us from telling a more accurate story about where the power really lies' (2018, p. 4). Racism, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny are prevalent throughout US society, including the working class but, as John Hartigan argues, it is not the working class who are ultimately determining the structural aspects, such as historic denial of access to housing (2003, p. 111; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 45), and more closely related to country music, the 'exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) of country radio stations and record labels. As already mentioned, the country music industry developed to represent itself with an image of middle-class respectability. The country music industry therefore operates not as an atypical niche of 'retrograde' (Hubbs, 2015, p. 72) homophobia but as a conservative leaning segment of the American popular music industries. Artists, audiences, and aesthetics within country music navigate these industry political dynamics and are as varied and complex as any other genre.

Other scholarship has a more nuanced engagement with country music politics, especially in terms of reading politics within the genre's aesthetics. Malone and Laird argue that 'politics has actually been of minor concern to the country writers' (2018, p. 350) and instead country songs 'concern themselves with the petty details of human existence' (ibid, p. 348). Malone's argument about country music politics does important work challenging assumptions around country music's supposed ideological framings, at least as an aesthetic genre. However, this presents country music as, if not conservative, at least presenting itself as apolitical. It has also been argued that the genre avoids direct political statements and, as Patrick Haggerty from Lavender Country suggests, the country music mainstream 'after Woodie Guthrie... abandoned class critique' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2020, p. 76). Yet country songs' concerns with the 'petty details of human existence' are not necessarily apolitical, nor have they abandoned class critique. Aaron Fox argues that 'country music' can be approached as an

important ‘medium for the construction of meaning and identity, and thus for the production of a distinctive “class culture”’ (2004a, p. 20). Elements of class critique are often present in more implicit, subtle ways. Nadine Hubbs argues that the political engagement within many country songs – its critical observations and engagement with power struggles, economic and social issues – are dismissed as ‘mere whining or venting’ (2014, p. 60), for instance in its songs giving voice to the concerns and feelings of working-class people. Yet these songs, as Malone puts it, ‘express resentment, not radicalism’ (2002, p. 48). This has led to country music being ‘abandoned by’ much of ‘the popular Left’ for its perceived ‘failure’ to achieve class ‘revolution’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 116; see also Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989, pp. 13-14) and as a result the songs’ engagement with politics has been under theorised and reductively stereotyped. There has been important work around particular country artists that has added important nuances to understandings of country songs’ representations of politics and how these relate to working class experiences, such as David Cantwell’s book on Merle Haggard, which argues that Haggard ‘was born to the working class and nearly always wrote and sang... from that perspective’, and his political stances were articulated from this position and were ‘dynamic and contradictory’ (2022, p. 6). Country music’s relationship to class runs through the conceptualisations and debates around the genre’s aesthetics and is an important thread in terms of the genre’s politics. It also underpins some crucial affective logics that I will outline in the next section.

2.5 Country Music Affective Logics

Tied into Hubbs’ argument about the mischaracterisation of the politics of country songs is the need to understand the genre’s aesthetics and affective logics (Hubbs, 2021c) and ‘hear country on its own terms’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 50). In particular, Hubbs identifies ‘working-class logics’ (Hubbs, 2021c) and links many of the aesthetics to working-class value systems (2014, pp. 51-104). I will outline three notable affective logics, that will be relevant to this thesis: country music ‘compassion’ (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350), ‘working-class fatalism’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 81), and a ‘gesture.. [of] being country’ (ibid, p. 61). These affective logics are key to understanding, (as Section 2.9 unpacks and the remainder of the thesis works to demonstrate) the potential for LGBTQIA+ belonging in

country music, and how LGBTQIA+ people and narratives can and are included in the aesthetics of the genre.

As a further nuance to the discussion of country music's politics, Malone and Laird argue that 'compassion is a key value across many country songs', going on to give examples of alcoholics, prisoners, or other 'socially peripheral types,' such as 'neglected old people, abandoned or mistreated children, and homeless hoboes and derelicts' (2018, p. 350). Country music extends compassion across a wide net of both respectable and unrespectable characters. Further, there is a strong commitment to equality (Hubbs, 2014, p. 103). It would be too simplistic to argue that country music ignores 'difference' (ibid, p. 79) and diversity or that the communal sociability and compassion represent working-class 'conformity' (ibid, p. 100). Rather, diversity is simply not seen as a marker of middle-class 'exceptional individualism'; these characters' identities do not become idealised as individuals (ibid, p. 100) but as archetypes that populate the musical landscape to demonstrate the inclusivity of the genre's compassion. Country music's compassion as a strong commitment to equality is perhaps best conceptualised as seeing people's 'differences' grounded by a fundamental 'common humanity' (Barker, 2020; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 100). One particular mode of country music 'compassion' is what Steve Goodson terms: 'hillbilly humanism' (1993, p. 114). Hillbilly humanism is an egalitarian humanist theological 'conviction that all are equal before God' (Fillingim, 2003, p. 51; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 76), which challenged the perceived importance of social hierarchies (Hubbs, 2014, p. 78). These aesthetics and affective logics within the genre (the potential of which the industry does not fully utilize) contain political potential to mobilise audiences. As I will explore later in this chapter, (Section 2.9) compassion or 'hillbilly humanism' has potential for conceptualising LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. (This affective logic I also explore in relation to Parton's song 'Family' in Chapter 8).

To further contextualise this potential for class (and other) solidarity, a key concept is 'working-class fatalism' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 81). Fatalism is arguably the logic that is often most mischaracterised in discussion of country music's politics. Dale Cyphert's analysis

of working-class rhetoric of a group of concrete workers in Omaha unpacks this logic, suggesting that this fatalism can be thought of as an attitude of accommodating the outside world rather than trying to change it (2007, p. 146; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 81). Cyphert argues that this attitude enabled workers to adapt to, and ultimately survive in, a 'dynamic and potentially dangerous environment' (2007, p. 146). Working-class fatalism should therefore not be automatically assumed to be a flawed characteristic of a worldview, as Cyphert's research suggests. Hubbs suggests that understanding the fatalism of country music is important to fairly evaluating the political expressions in the genre and its engagement with issues of class and class consciousness (Hubbs, 2014, p. 117). Country songs present an analysis of the material, emotional and affective labour of working-class people. The fatalism of the genre is in part an affective expression of this class consciousness, as the pessimism and negative affect permeate through the drudgery of the repetitive mundanity of working-class lived experiences. It is important to acknowledge that there is something beyond the material labour at work. Sennett and Cobb's research around working-class experiences of daily life refigures what is often thought of as a physical or financial struggle into one that is material, emotional and affective at the same time (1972, p. 30). Therefore, what Hubbs describes as a 'daily struggle' (2014, p. 61) often represented in country songs should not be seen in purely material terms. Instead, 'the efforts and toils of working people are directed toward, not just material gains, but the pursuit of dignity' (ibid, p. 87).

This idea of a pursuit for dignity is key to understanding the final affective logic I will outline, a 'gesture... [of] being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61). This 'daily struggle' should be seen not just as a daily struggle for material or physical survival, but as a daily struggle for dignity. Through understanding the affective elements at work in country music, the genre's particular engagement with politics can be better understood. Perhaps country music's reluctance to embrace political solutions is that country music is more concerned with providing its (working-class) audiences with the sense of 'dignity' that Sennett, Cobb and Hubbs identify as being of such significance for working class people. A fundamental way that country music works affectively to support its listeners in the daily struggle for dignity is through the 'gesture' of 'being country'. This

gesture enables country audiences to claim their sense of agency, pride and dignity and resist middle-class dominance and the ‘false, negative’ associations that a middle-class value system often assigns to working class people (ibid, p. 61). Examples of this can be most clearly identified in ‘country pride’ songs (ibid, p. 57) such as Loretta Lynn’s ‘You’re Lookin’ at Country’ (1971b) and Gretchen Wilson’s ‘Redneck Woman’ (2004). The affective work of the ‘being country’ gesture runs through the genre, beyond explicit invocations of country pride and is a tool to resist class stigma, to enable its listeners dignity and a sense of class solidarity. As the next chapter (Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework) will unpack in more detail, the ‘being country’ gesture is a claim to authenticity, and through this LGBTQIA+ subjects and narratives can be authenticated (Moore, 2002, p. 210) as belonging in country music.

2.6 Country Music Authenticity

Running through this literature review, there is an implicit link to notions of authenticity. Authenticity is key to ideas of working-class identification and affective logics in the genre, the genre and industry’s regional narratives, and is a key dialectic within the interplay between country music as an aesthetic genre and its industry. In the next chapter (Section 3.3), I outline how I use authenticity as an analytical concept in more detail, particularly how authenticity is wielded by the industry to exclude people, as well as having potential for LGBTQIA+ artists and audiences to ‘assert their presence in country music’ (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 74). However, here I outline some of the ways authenticity has been discussed by scholars in the field of country music studies. Much of this has focused on the relationship between the commercial and aesthetic aspects of the idea of country as a genre. David Sanjek argues that authenticity is explicitly invoked by the country music industry (1998, p. 23). Jimmie N. Rogers describes country artists as needing to forge a ‘sincerity contract’ with their audiences (1989, p. 17). ‘Sincerity’ suggests authenticity and the idea of a ‘contract’ shows that there is commercial and industry involvement in the genre’s discourse of authenticity. The country music industry’s deployment of authenticity has a highly ‘affective dimension’ (Sanjek, 1998, p. 23) in a dialectic between a search for “simplicity”, “authenticity” and “reality”, which act as affective

markers of something 'irreducible' in country music (ibid), and there is often a rhetoric of 'desecration' and 'abandonment' when an artist or song fails to uphold particular authenticity standards (ibid, p. 25). Sanjek alludes to the first time drums were played at the Grand Ole Opry as needing to be 'played behind a curtain' as an example of this, the drums representing a "threat" to the perceived identity of country music (ibid). At any particular historical moment what is authentic within country music is deeply contested, whether that is over what instruments or musical elements sound country such as the response to the first use of drums at the Grand Ole Opry in the 1940s, but especially with 'the rise of a full-fledged business industry in Nashville' and its 'self-consciously crafted bid for post-rock-and-roll audiences' (Laird, 2018, p. 545). The significance of the business and commerciality of country music continues to be contested with the initial reaction to the Nashville Sound and Countrypolitan, which was seen by its detractors as 'insufferably bland' (Sanjek, 1998, p. 28) and implicitly as a less authentic dilution of "real" country (Peterson, 1998, p. 237).

Richard Peterson (1998, p. 243) conceptualises country music's commercial and aesthetic conflicts as a 'hard-core/ soft-shell dialectic'. The main claim of "hard-core" country is that 'it's authentic – made by and for those who remain faithful to the "roots" of country' (ibid, p. 237) both in terms of the sonic and musical elements being reflective of older country music styles and the musicians being demonstrably 'Southern', working-class or 'rural', the authenticity of these identities conveyed through song lyrics as well as vocal style including the singer's 'accent' (ibid, p. 244-245). Country music that is labelled "soft-shell" aims to 'broaden' country music's audience and 'appeal', and so will adopt sounds and conventions for popular music of the time (ibid, p. 237). Whereas "hard-core" could be described as invested in maintaining country music's roots and tradition, "soft-shell" places greater value on broadening country music's audiences, thereby with the potential for being more inclusive and outward looking. This dialectic is not purely about defending and maintaining "real" country music and a pure, idealised working-class solidarity, but the dialectic has great commercial potential not least for those artists identified as "hard-core."

Not only has country music always been a commercial genre even in its earlier folk sources (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 6). In fact, the ‘hard-core/ soft-shell dialectic’ enables the country music industry to market artists as such. The success of such a move was demonstrated when the “soft-shell” pop-crossover artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s such as Barbara Mandrell, Kenny Rogers, Lee Greenwood, Anne Murray, and Ronnie Milsap were ‘displaced’ from the charts by artists using more ‘traditional sounds’ such as Randy Travis, Ricky Skaggs, and George Strait (Peterson, 1998, p. 236). The latter group of artists were described by industry promoters and music critics as ‘traditional’ and ‘neotraditional’ (ibid, p. 237). Thereby indicating the marketability of the image of authenticity, especially when directly following a period of soft-shell pop-crossover. The commercial benefits mean that there needs to be at least the fabrication of a genre that can hold both “hard-core” and “soft-shell” artists as having enough in common to both situate themselves under the label “country”.

Other scholars have suggested that this tension around authenticity and between country music as artistic expression and as a commercial enterprise, in itself is a defining characteristic of the genre’s identity. Tracey E.W. Laird argues ‘the question of what constitutes “real” country... may, in fact, be country music’s single most enduring aspect, past or present’ (2018, p. 545). Alongside affective attempts to resist perceived threats to the genre’s authenticity, there was also strong affective work from both the industry and audiences to preserve a common thread that holds the genre of country music together. As Malone acknowledges as much as country music of the 1990s and the 21st Century sounds completely different to country music throughout the 20th Century, a large audience identifies this music as country (Malone, 2010, p. xvi). Further, the induction ceremony of members to the Grand Ole Opry involves older members inducting new members in a way that represents ‘the enduring links between past and present’ (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 492). In the Country Music Hall of Fame the room of the inductees is enclosed in a circle with the words ‘Will the circle be unbroken’ referencing the Carter Family song (The Carter Family, 2000; Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 2023a). In all these examples, there is a belief and, more importantly, strong political will and affective labour to preserve country music as a

genre that is able to remain ‘unbroken’ (Peterson, 1997, p. 223; see also Sanjek, 1998, p. 23). This circle of country music is implied to be able to link the Carter Family to Dolly Parton; Hank Williams to Taylor Swift; Johnny Cash to Shania Twain. Authenticity and a sense of country as a genre identity have affective importance for country listeners, artists, and industry professionals. In the next chapter (Section 3.2.2), I expand this discussion of authenticity in country music to explore how access to being perceived as authentic is subject to country music industry gatekeepers and has been weaponised to marginalise and exclude Black artists, people of colour, women and LGBTQIA+ artists.

2.7 Country Music and Gender

The previous sections of this literature review have summarised some of the scholarship around country music that has in general conceptualised the genre, some of its historical and industry contexts and its aesthetics. The final three parts of the literature review focus on important interventions into this field, that this thesis contributes to, around diversity in country music and challenging and expanding the ‘historical narrative’ of what and who country music is (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1). Perhaps the area that has received the most scholarly attention, until relatively recently, is work on country music and gender, which has developed substantially over the past thirty years. Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann’s work: *Finding her Voice: Women in Country Music*, first published in 1993, documents part of ‘the story of women in country music’ (2003, p. xiii) and works to provide an overview of many women in country music, who, at that point especially, had been excluded from much of the historical narrative and scholarship around the genre. Since then, there has been significant developments within this area, such as Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold’s edited collection *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* in 2004, ‘that sought to restore to memory women’s contributions to country music history’ (Pecknold and McCusker, 2016, p. vii). Further essays in the collection such as Beverley Keel’s ‘Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl: The New Women’s Movement in Country Music’ (2004) analyse the increasing range of voices, expression and topics within the country music industry across multiple generations of female performers from Kitty Wells in the 1950s, to Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton in the 1960s

and into the 1970s, and more recently to artists in the 1990s including Shania Twain, Faith Hill and The Chicks. A similar argument was posited by Deanna D. Sellnow who describes Mary Chapin Carpenter's 1992 single 'He Thinks He'll Keep Her' as 'one of the first female country music recordings to espouse bold feminist content and to earn recognition as legitimated by the hegemonic mainstream music industry, marking a significant shift for female popular music artists' (1999, p. 70). These scholarly interventions have not only restored female country artists to 'cultural memory' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3; see also Misztal, 2003), but also developed understanding of the themes and potential within the content of country songs.

A further development in country music scholarship at the point of the publication of *A Boy Named Sue* was an analytical move to treat gender as more than 'code for "women"' but as a critical mode of enquiry 'to describe social constructions of masculinity and femininity' (McCusker and Pecknold, 2004, p. xx). McCusker and Pecknold argue that gender is 'one of the central dynamics of country music history and culture' and that gendered expectations and representations not only 'evolved... in response to the changing web of relationships between performers, the industry, the audience, and larger historical forces. Gender has also helped to structure those relationships' (ibid). McCusker and Pecknold refer to the way that gender 'has been used to establish and defend the stylistic and institutional boundaries separating country music from... other genres' and the ways 'gender imagery has been a site for stylistic innovation throughout the course of country music's development' to support this argument (ibid). *A Boy Named Sue* was followed in 2016 (by the same editors) by *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New essays in Gender and Country Music*. Amongst its many developments are increased attention to 'constructions of race and sexuality in relation to earlier analyses of class and gender' (Pecknold and McCusker, 2016, p. ix). Since this publication there have also been significant movements within scholarship working to hold the country music industry to account. Jada Watson traces the continued marginalisation of women in country radio and by the industry, despite a short-lived peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s (2019, p. 547). Marissa R. Moss summarises this period as both a 'golden era for women-but also, depending on who

you ask, as a blip in the trends or a tidal wave that was cut short by sinister intentions' (2022, p. 11). There are many implications of country radio's continued marginalisation of women. Marissa R. Moss (2018) has exposed many incidents of sexual harassment within the industry, and Watson argues that the industry's 'practices have contributed' to this culture of sexual 'harassment and misconduct' (2019, p. 556). These practices also 'minimized [women's] achievements, and limited their narrative voice; (Watson, 2019, p. 556).

At the same time as the industry has shown its tendency to double down on its discriminatory practices (Barker, 2023, p. 14; see also Watson, 2022, p. 56), with little sign of change (Martinez, 2020, p. 128), there is now a well-established critical discourse (Edwards, 2021; see also Barker, 2023, p.14) around the country music industry in both scholarship and journalism (including Holly G (founder of Black Opry), Andrea Williams, Rachel Cholst (founder of Rainbow Rodeo), Marissa R. Moss and Lorie Liebig). Pecknold and McCusker assert that the field (by 2016) had 'clearly moved beyond the need to add gender to the story', so that work can now 'explore the significance of different interpretative approaches' as well as expanding to a more intersectional approach (2016, p. xiii). A further approach, of particular note for my thesis, is that of 'conflicting interpretations' (Pecknold and McCusker, p. xii) including of artists like Dolly Parton within country music's 'contentious historiography' (McCusker, 2016, p. xiii). As Leigh H. Edwards summarises, 'gender roles have been more nuanced and unpredictable in the country music industry than scholars once thought' (2018, p. 4). This thesis applies a similar lens to a queer analysis of Parton (see Chapter 4 for an overview of Parton and section 5.2 for queer reading as a method), to add further perspectives on interpreting Parton's discography and further challenge the industry narrative of who can belong in country.

2.8 Country Music and Race

A large part of addressing this industry narrative are issues around race and racism within understandings of the genre and the country music industry. Scholarship in this area has developed within recent years from acknowledgement of Black influences to

understanding the way US racism interacts within the popular music industry. Historical accounts, including Malone and Laird's, acknowledge Black influences in country music (2018, p. 1), however aspects of this narrative have been critiqued. Pecknold argues that Black participation in country music is often relegated to the role just 'as influences on their white peers' (2013, p. 1). However, as Pamela E. Foster points out, Black people in country music should be recognised 'themselves [as] significant country practitioners in a wide variety of styles' (1998, p. vi). There has been some work to address these gaps in the 'historical narrative' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1) including Pamela E. Foster's books *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* in 1998 and *My Country, Too* in 2000, Diane Pecknold's edited collection *Hidden in the Mix* in 2013, Stephanie Shonekan's *Soul, Country, and the USA: Race and Identity in American Music Culture* in 2015, and Francesca T. Royster's *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions* in 2022. Pecknold critiques critical and journalistic framings where 'black country artists and fans are imagined... as always already exceptional, racially scandalous, and transgressive' (2013, p. 6). Pecknold points to

Dozens of popular press articles over the past decade [that] have repeated the litany of African American engagements with country and precountry styles, a line that runs from black string bands and DeFord Bailey through Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, and the Stax sound, to Charley Pride and Stoney Edwards, to Cowboy Troy, Rissi Palmer, and Darius Rucker... they invariably frame their inquiries in terms of the genre's enduring whiteness (Pecknold, 2013, p. 6).

Instead, it important to understand that Black 'participation in the playing and production of country music has been more a rule than an exception' (Pecknold, p. 2; see also Foster, 1998 and 2000).

There have been significant interventions within the scholarship to address the way Black artists and audiences have been marginalised. Jada Watson's work with the SongData project, uses quantitative chart methodology to trace the representation of

race and gender across the history of the country chart as a way to demonstrate the institutional racism within the country music industry. Watson argues that for Black women especially, many songs by Black artists have 'short life cycles on the longest-running Billboard country chart, leaving behind a faint data trail marking their time in the industry's mainstream' (2022, p. 55). The 'weak data trail' visualises the low charting of most Black artists and their marginalisation within the industry, these consequences, as Watson argues, 'are the results of practices in the industry' (ibid, p. 69).

These practices have wider implications for cultural memory and who gets regarded as being country, as 'without chart topping hits', many Black artists 'have not been recognized by the industry's institutions' such as the Country Music Association Awards and the Country Music Hall of Fame, and thereby Black women in particular are 'rendered invisible by the industrial system, [and] have been largely expunged from country music's institutional memory' (Watson, 2022, p. 55). The country music industry continues 'to make business decisions' based on this data set and 'data is repeated from one domain in the industry matrix to the next, becoming a regime through which decisions are made, practices are regulated, and cultures are defined' (ibid, p. 70). The make-up of the country music industry is particularly set up for this as the various 'systems (charts, awards, inductions) are deeply interconnected: charts may provide an indicator of industry trends, but awards and inductions (both of which rely to varying degrees on charts as a marker for contention) codify the past and direct the future' (ibid, p. 56). Thereby, these continued 'industry practices' (ibid, p. 56) continue to marginalise Black artists and further perpetuate the idea of country music as a white genre.

As well as important work directed at holding the country music industry to account, there has been other scholarship that has re-evaluated the genre of country music, such as Francesca T. Royster's book *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions* that 'put(s) Black artists and fans at the centre' of its work (2022, p. 7). Notably, Royster theorises the role of listening, using 'queer... as a way of capturing the layered, sometimes conflictual experiences of pleasure that country music can bring to its Black performers and listeners' (ibid, p. 9). One example of how this kind of listening can

rework some of the ways the country genre, aesthetics and affective logics are commonly understood is in Royster's argument that 'Black country music artists for most part refuse... nostalgia. Instead, we hear the spirit and the sound of the fugitive, evoking slave escapes and rebellions and the Great Migration, as well as ongoing fights for freedom' (ibid, p. 12). Through these listening practices and articulating different readings, country music's affective logics can be reinterpreted to demonstrate the continued presence of Black narratives and experiences within the genre. On a more practical level around the industry, Black country artists and audiences also use 'multiple tactics to navigate this difficult and sometimes traumatic musical landscape, some by working insistently to find a home within the country music industry, some by pushing its edges, and others by creating spaces outside of it, in order to change the ways that Black country music and its history are seen, heard and felt' (ibid, p. 8). Artists such as Darius Rucker have sought to carve out a space within the Nashville based industry, whereas others such as Our Native Daughters and the organisation Black Opry have maintained a critical distance from that industry and look to build and sustain alternative spaces (ibid).

2.9 LGBTQIA+ Participation in Country Music

The scholarly interventions around gender and race in country music lay some important foundations for work around LGBTQIA+ people in the genre. This scholarship has done important work in challenging the industry's 'exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59), expanding the 'historical narrative' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1) around country music, and theorising different ways of engaging with the genre's aesthetics. There has been a trend within country music scholarship, until recently, to consider LGBTQIA+ participation in country music (whether as artists or as audiences) at best as an exception. Nadine Hubbs argues that a large part of this, within popular media narratives are that country music's associations with southern, rural, working-class culture, have led to the genre being connected to 'rusticity, southernness, stupidity or lack of sophistication, and violent bigotry, especially racism and homophobia' (2014, p. 3). Within country music scholarship, there is not quite the same simplistic stereotyping, although historically a number of scholars have considered country music

as a genre to be hostile to LGBTQIA+ people, such as Martha Mockus' chapter in *Queering the Pitch* that described country music as 'homophobic' and 'antiqueer' (2006, p. 259).

Although few scholars are as emphatic as Mockus is around country music's homophobia, there has been a tendency to present country music as lacking LGBTQIA+ representation and erasing this possibility. (An exception to this is Edward G. Armstrong's work that does acknowledge that country songs have touched on homosexuality (1986, p. 371; see also Fox, 2017, p. 378)). Malone and Laird argue that country songs often uphold a 'traditional scheme of values' and '(t)raditional morality' (2018, p. 349), and that even though 'songs, such as "Harper Valley PTA" defended unconventional lifestyles [this was]... not to the point of homosexuality or, usually, free love' (2018, p. 351). Implicitly, homosexuality would be considered as incompatible with country's 'traditional scheme of values' and therefore would be perceived as atypical of the genre, at least in the 1960s and 1970s. Other scholars gesture towards the significance of same-gender relationships in country music ('fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, sisters and friendships' (Grossman, 2002, p. 91), and what could potentially be theorised as 'homosocial desire' (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1). Yet, as Hubbs (2015, p. 72) argues, occasionally scholars have made the analytical move to interpret these representations of relationships in country songs as foreclosing the possibility of homosexuality or LGBTQIA+ narratives. A particularly striking example is in Mazine L. Grossman's article, that argues 'what makes this same-gender intimacy possible, I think, is country music's basic discursive assumption that sexual attraction is exclusive to relationships that men have with women' (2002, p. 91-2). There is a danger that in this kind of 'reading of country music' the presence of LGBTQIA+ people is 'erased' (Hubbs, 2015, p. 73).

Here it is important to make distinctions between country music as an aesthetic genre, and the 'country music industry' (Hubbs, 2021c). The country music industry has largely erased LGBTQIA+ people, in terms of where they show up in charting data. Jada Watson suggests that the discriminatory industry practices that have marginalised and

excluded women and people of colour, have also impacted LGBTQIA+ people. In particular, the industry's enforcement of a rigid 'male/female binary' restricted 'narrative space' for LGBTQIA+ artists (Watson, 2019, p. 541). It is critical, therefore, for scholarship not to reinforce this restrictive industry narrative, which has the consequences of inscribing 'homophobia back into the genre' (Barker, 2022b; see also Fortier, 2003, p. 120).

There has been other important scholarly work that has acknowledged LGBTQIA+ participation in country music both as artists and as audiences. Scholarship in the 1990s and 2000s, drew some attention to various LGBTQIA+ engagements with country. B. Ruby Rich's article (1992) discusses the similarities and intermixing of country working class aesthetics with lesbian culture, and the lesbian fandom around k.d. lang. Mockus explores this further, describing lang as a figure 'who admirably attempts to bring the discourses of lesbianism and country music into some sort of mutually compatible coexistence' (1993, p. 268). Other scholars have explored LGBTQIA+ country music fan cultures and scenes, including Amy R. Corin's work on the Los Angeles alternative country scene including an organisation with a visible lesbian and gay community (2000, pp. 147-8); and Lars Rains' work on the striking similarities between the subcultural dynamics of 'bear groups and gay country bars... in the late 1980s and early 1990s' (1997, p. 192; see also Pecknold and McCusker, 2016, p. xvii). There has also been work around the country mainstream, including Brett Farmer's article on Patsy Cline's gay and lesbian audiences (1994) and Teresa Ortega's book chapter on Johnny Cash as 'a lesbian icon' (1995) which is notable for explicating the role of LGBTQIA+ people as listeners. Work by Erich Nunn (2011) on Willie Nelson and Andrea K. Newlyn (2004) on the Judds have also drawn out LGBTQIA+ fan engagements and the aesthetic genre's queer potential, in the broader sense of acknowledging that 'country music's engagement with sexuality reveals a far more complicated dynamic' than might be thought (Fox, 2017, p. 375). These kinds of critical approaches continue to produce generative insights to re-evaluate our understanding of country music.

Although some of this scholarship emphasises LGBTQIA+ participation in country as a subcultural or alternative practice, there has also been scholarship that has engaged with Nashville. A significant, early work (in relative terms within the context of country music scholarship) around LGBTQIA+ country artists, is Chris Dickinson's article in the *Journal of Country Music*: 'Country Undetectable: Gay Artists in Country Music' in 1999. Dickinson (1999) platforms a number of lesbian and gay artists of the time who were involved in the Gay and Lesbian Country Music Association (an organisation that supported lesbian and gay country artists). The article is significant in bringing wider attention to the 1973 album *Lavender Country* (by the band of the same name) (Dickinson, 1999, p. 31; Seliger, 2021), the album often regarded as the 'first' LGBTQIA+ 'country album' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 2). One of the artists interviewed in Dickinson's article, argues for the need for the industry to be 'challenged', whilst also for the importance of acknowledging the presence of LGBTQIA+ listeners who engage with the genre's songs (Stevens quoted in Dickinson, 1999, p. 30). The article also suggests that openly LGBTQIA+ artists were unlikely to get mainstream success and industry support (Dickinson, 1999, p. 29). Dickinson argues that the emotional content of country songs, where 'otherness creates rupture with home and family... displacement and emotional isolation', when 'listened to from a gay perspective' has the potential to resonate with 'the often traumatic consequences that go hand-in-hand with coming out, the community and familial ostracism one risks in being honest about sexual preference' (1999, p. 30). Dickinson, like Ortega, draws out the conflict between an industry that erases LGBTQIA+ narratives, and the genre's aesthetics and affective logics that map onto some LGBTQIA+ experiences, as evidenced by artist and fan engagements with the genre.

2.9.1 Recent Developments in Queer Country Scholarship

Over the last decade the landscape of queer country scholarship has developed further with Nadine Hubbs' *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music* in 2014; Shana Goldin-Perschbacher's *Queer Country* in 2022; and Francesca Royster's *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions*, also in 2022. Royster's work uses a Black feminist and queer approach to the genre. Some of this I outlined in the previous section, and I will be

building further on Royster's approach to queer reading in my approach to engaging with Parton's text, which will be unpacked further in my methodology chapter (Chapter 5. Methodology, Section 5.1). This work is also vital to ensuring that this project keeps anti-racist work at the heart of its approach, which the next chapter (Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework) will outline in relation to understanding genre as a concept with colonial, racialised, and oppressive histories in the way it operates its mode of classification. I outline some of Hubbs and Goldin-Perschbacher's work below to set up the field of study that my thesis is contributing towards.

Hubbs' (2021c) work argues emphatically for dominant narratives about country music's homophobia and social conservatism to be rethought, framing this through an analysis of country's 'working-class' affective 'logics' within the songs (the affective logics I outlined in Section 2.6 of this chapter). It is important to recognise that these class-based and aesthetic logics may frame the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in country music differently. Instead of expressing LGBTQIA+ inclusion as a form of 'middle-class' 'exceptional individualism' and individual self-expression, country music may present LGBTQIA+ people as 'revelling in shared ordinariness [that] can reflect a rich sociality and humble humanity' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 100). LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music may more likely stem from logics of 'hillbilly humanism' (Goodson, 1993, p. 114; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 76; Fillingim, 2003, p. 51) and be an expression of the genre's 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350). Recognition of these kinds of affective logics is key in my analysis of Parton's songs that use readings of these songs to show how claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music are articulated. Linking LGBTQIA+ belonging to the established trope of hillbilly humanism places LGBTQIA+ people within the genre of country music. Within these logics, Hubbs convincingly argues, LGBTQIA+ people can be easily included within country (as an aesthetic genre), with songs such as Garth Brooks' 'We Shall Be Free' (1992), Miranda Lambert's 'All Kinds of Kinds' (2011) and Kacey Musgraves' 'Follow Your Arrow' (2013) (Hubbs, 2014, pp. 159-160). These songs represent LGBTQIA+ people as 'belonging within an everyday regular folk social world' (ibid, p. 159). Hubbs pointedly focuses her analysis on 'mainstream

country' (ibid, p. 10) to demonstrate that LGBTQIA+ people and experiences can be placed throughout the genre, including at the centre of the commercial industry.

Shana Goldin-Perschbacher's work focuses predominantly on LGBTQIA+, 'queer and trans' country, folk and Americana artists (2022, p.13), in her article 'Transamericana: Gender, Genre, and Journey' (2015) and book *Queer Country* (2022). *Queer Country* 'centers on... [LGBTQIA+] musicians and their work, continually reflecting on what it means to interpret a genre through musicians marginalized from its history' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 3). Through this work, Goldin-Perschbacher develops 'a theory of identity and genre as cogenerative' (ibid, p. 23). I build on this in the next chapter (Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework) where I outline my approach to genre and authenticity. Goldin-Perschbacher analyses 'the centrality of sincerity' (ibid, p. 22) and its potential and perils for LGBTQIA+ country artists. Further, this work explores the way different LGBTQIA+ country artists have engaged with the parameters and idea of country music as a genre. Many artists have to engage with multiple genres and have an 'experience' of being 'perceived as not "fitting" with their desired genre of country or folk' (ibid, p. 124). Many release in what might be thought of as adjacent marketing categories such as folk and Americana (ibid, p. 13). I will discuss these genre categories in more detail in Chapter 8 as context for Parton's song 'Travelin' Thru'. There are a range of political responses, with some advocating for the importance of 'equality and assimilation' and others for more 'radical politics' (ibid, p. 91). Musically and at the level of genre and marketing category, there have been a range of artistic responses. These have included engaging with smaller scenes (such as folk and Americana), LGBTQIA+ artists working to build careers within mainstream country, and artists, such as Lil Nas X, Orville Peck and Trixie Mattell (ibid, pp. 173-199) who engage with country aesthetics and affective tropes, whilst not directly engaging with the Nashville-based country music industry.

In other work, Goldin-Perschbacher argues against what she describes as 'a practice in queer music scholarship that proposes to "queer" a supposedly normative scenario, a rhetorical gesture that threatens to solidify norms rather than explore their construction'

(2015, p. 782) and instead the more generative analytical approach is to understand LGBTQIA+ artist and audience engagements with country 'as creative invocations of an unexpectedly shared space that is already queer' (ibid, p. 796). In a similar line of argument that Royster makes about the coverage of Black participation in country where 'Black country performers... [are] treated like the exception to the rule' (2022, p. 6), LGBTQIA+ participation in country should be understood as an integral part of country music history and not a novel or recent phenomenon. Goldin-Perschbacher outlines a number of examples including 'gay rodeos starting in 1976 to the relative sexual freedom of line dancing..., and from lesbian admiration of "virile female" figures like Annie Oakley and Tanya Tucker to drag tributes to Dolly Parton (who has long declared the practice flattering)' (2015, p. 781).

Although this thesis does not focus on LGBTQIA+ artists in the genre specifically, it contributes to other important work acknowledging 'ongoing queer engagement in country music' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781). As will be explored further in my overview of Parton as a case study (Chapter 4), scholars including Leigh H. Edwards (2018, p. 6), Lydia R. Hamessley (2020, pp. 194-197) and Nadine Hubbs (2015, p. 73) have paid attention to Parton's LGBTQIA+ fanbase. There has been recent work on other country stars, such as Steacy Easton's 2023 book on Tammy Wynette that both engages with Wynette's practices of camp and LGBTQIA+ fans (2023b, p. 131), but also develops a queer approach to understanding Wynette as a figure and her music, drawing particular attention to the tensions within the representation of 'domesticity' that Easton describes as 'a lot of wanting to play house, and failing to play house' (ibid, p. 11). A driving motivation behind Easton's work, which this thesis shares, is not wanting 'to give Wynette [or Parton or country music] over to the transphobes and the homophobes' (ibid, p. 162). This thesis works to question discourses around country music and open these up 'for a larger and more complex... reading' (ibid, p. 162) that engages with the genre and Parton as discourses to interrogate them and demonstrate the potential for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. The next chapter unpacks this concept of genre in more detail.

Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

Having established some key areas and developments within the field of country music studies, this chapter sets out the particular intervention my thesis makes. At the broad level, I argue that a critical approach to genre can be used to rework discourses of authenticity in country music as an effective political tool to assert LGBTQIA+ belonging. This chapter, which I am calling a conceptual framework, provides some additional literature to set out the concepts of genre, authenticity, and belonging. Having set out key aspects of the cultural terrain around these, I then build on the literature to establish how I will be using these concepts for the rest of the thesis. This chapter begins with a discussion of genre as a concept and builds on the specific discussion of country music from the literature review, but develops this further to explore how genre as an idea works, particularly as an apparatus for producing '(c)ategories' of 'music' and 'people' (Brackett, 2016, p. 1). In this section I evaluate the potential of genre that might offer an idea of musical belonging, whilst also being cautious of genre's colonial and oppressive history, drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam (2018) and Shana Goldin-Perschbacher (2022).

I delve further into these tensions in the next section on authenticity, where I argue that there is possibility of using this discourse to validate LGBTQIA+ experiences, and authenticate (Moore, 2002) these as 'being country' (2014, p. 61)., building on Hubbs' discussion of this affective logic I alluded to in the literature review. Authenticity as a discourse also sets up issues and potential pitfalls for LGBTQIA+ subjects to navigate. The final main section of the framework, having established genre and authenticity as important discourses to engage with especially for country music, focuses on the concept of belonging. Building on the earlier discussion around belonging in genre, this section unpacks this idea further, drawing particularly on the idea of 'home', which in country music is both an aesthetic trope of the genre, and a potential analytical tool to conceptualise LGBTQIA+ belonging. Drawing on queer theoretical debates, this chapter merges salient threads from country music scholarship and queer theory to suggest an approach to country music's discourses of genre and authenticity that offers cautious potential for LGBTQIA+ people to assert claims to belonging in the genre.

3.1 Genre

Musical genre can be thought of as setting rules and aesthetic expectations of performance (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 11). Franco Fabbri's 1982 essay 'A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications' is often cited as a starting point for outlining genre (Brackett, 2016, p. 6). Fabbri describes genres as 'governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules' (1982, p.52). This may appear rigid, yet as Brackett argues Fabbri's rules 'are not quite as austere and rigid as they might appear at first' (2016, p. 7). Fabbri himself alludes to 'ambiguities' and states that genre is not about strict adherence to rules: 'we see that the life of genres has little or nothing in common with a Teutonic respect for rules and regulations, but rather that it is fuelled by relationships between various laws, by transgressions against them and above all by ambiguities' (Fabbri, 1982, p.63). Brackett expands on Fabbri to offer some further insights about the operation of genre in his argument that genre rules are 'descriptive rather than prescriptive' and that instead of being 'rigid' or 'static', genres are highly 'relational', with their definitions subject to change determined by their relationship to (and their differences from) other genres (2016, p. 7; see also Fabbri, 1982, p. 52).

There is a highly social aspect to genre. Brackett observes that scholarship around genre as it developed in relation to studies of classical literature and even film studies 'have tended to follow the traditional literary emphasis on style traits' (2016, p.4). He then goes on to argue that this is inadequate when applied to popular music as this does not take into account other factors through which genres are constructed such as 'producers, consumers, critical discourse, and the music industry' (ibid). Genres are often constructed through a web of these different social relationships. The key relationship in establishing country music as a genre, as my overview suggested, is through the development of a commercial country music industry (Pecknold, 2007, p. 6) which became key to setting and maintaining genre boundaries. Genre can act as an intermediary, connoting 'what people like and why they like it' through a 'musical label' (Frith, 1996, p. 86). As well as genres being determined by social relationships, genres can also be identity forming. Jason Toynbee argues that '(g)enre is seen to express the

collective interest or point of view of a community' (2000, p. 110; see also Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 779).

3.1.1 Genre as Categorisation

A further dimension to the social aspect of genre and the link to identity, is the way '(c)ategories of music are often associated with categories of people' (Brackett, 2016, p. 1) and how genre operates as a mode of 'classification' (ibid, p. 31). David Brackett's book *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* focuses on the way musical genres operate as 'categories' (ibid, p. 11) and how the music industry interacts with shared understandings from artists and audiences to establish and develop popular music genres as marketing categories. Understanding genre as operating as a mode of categorisation means interrogating the concept of categorisation itself. Mimi Haddon argues, drawing on Foucault, that 'the formation of all knowledge (including classifying systems, read: genre categories) give rise to oppression in some form' (2020, p.13; see also Foucault, 1974, pp. 76-101). David Brackett outlines how the classificatory system that the popular music industries use around genre is inherited from the nineteenth century. 'The notion of discrete markets correlated to particular formations of musical sounds paralleling the concept of population in the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on the measurement and tracking of individuals, and the compilation of statistics about birth, death, disease, and so on' (Brackett, 2016, p.19). In this context, a concept of genre as musical (marketing) categories builds 'on the idea of homology (i.e., that categories of people are directly related to categories of music)' (ibid, p. 17).

Jack Halberstam goes further to map an even longer trajectory within colonialism describing how 'the collection, classification, and analysis of the world's flora and fauna has gone hand in hand with various forms of colonial expansion and enterprise' (2018, p. 5). Halberstam argues that '(t)he seemingly rational and scientific project of collecting plant specimens from around the world and planting them at home masks conquest with taxonomy' (ibid). This act relies on colonial logics of extraction and asserting definitional dominance. This developed 'in the nineteenth century from plant life to human life' (ibid).

These processes of categorisation were (and continue to be) part of colonial racialisation as '(i)deas of racial identity that had long been deployed within colonialism in order to justify brutal forms of rule now became a part of the logic of governance and racial difference, and racial categories' (ibid, p.6). Shana Goldin-Perschbacher applies Halberstam's analysis of how 'racial categories' are constructed through these colonial systems of categorisation to musical genre arguing that '(l)ike identity categories, musical classification systems may also seem benign to some, but they have been shaped to (mis)identify and (mis)manage populations' (2022, p.10).

3.1.2 Country Music's Racialised Genre Categorisation

This has particularly important implications for country music's definition of itself as a genre, and especially the way that the popular music industries produce country music as a category (which is reinforced by gatekeepers within the country music industry).

Diane Pecknold argues that this categorisation shows that 'the stakes of analysing the relationship between music and racial identity are at least as much about our own investments and the dynamics of contemporary racial hegemony' (2013, p. 7).

Categories of music and categories of people are constructed simultaneously. The development of country music as a marketing category was also a process of racialisation. Karl Hagstrom Miller describes the constructed narrative: 'Music developed a color line. The blues were African American. Rural white southerners played what came to be called country music' and the marketing categories 'race' and 'hillbilly' records were invented by the 'phonograph industry' (2010, p. 2). This is despite the fact that Black and white musicians drew 'from the same musical lineage' (Hughes, 2015, p. 2) of the mix of sounds and practices in the US, leading to what Tony Russell describes as a 'common stock' of 'repertoire shared by black and white' musicians in the US South (2001, p. 166).

The racialised categories 'hillbilly' and 'race' records later developed into 'country and soul' and 'were intimately connected throughout the southern recording industry' of the 1960s and 1970s (Hughes, 2015, p. 2). Hughes describes the practices of these 'records [being] made by the same people, recorded in the same places, and released

by the same record companies', referring 'specifically [to]... musicians in Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, and Muscle Shoals, Alabama [as] an interconnected recording economy... [and] 'the "country-soul triangle"' (2015, p. 2). The perceived whiteness of country music became constructed through practices of the recording industry, as Hughes argues 'they produced the cultural markers of race that... reshaped the supposed similarities and differences between white and black' (2015, p. 3). Andrea Williams describes this development, arguing that

The pat explanation for country music's enduring racism is that, in the 1920s, the industry was designed that way, that Black people weren't forced out as much as they were told we never belonged in the first place. The more truthful, more nuanced, answer is that the initial color line drawn by the industry has been repeatedly darkened over time, traced over and over by each new wave of industry executives (Williams, 2021c).

The racialised parameters of genre categories have become further entrenched 'over time'. Perhaps the most significant development in entrenching these constructed categories was the development of the Country Music Association (CMA). As mentioned in the literature review (Section 2.1), the CMA was a big driver of much of the industry apparatus including radio, as well as cultural institutions such as the Country Music Hall of Fame (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 312). The CMA's business decisions have racialised implications for the conceptualisation of country as it perceived its target audience demographic as the 'middle-class white Silent Majority' (Martinez, 2020, p. 135). The country genre as a marketing category thereby came to be constructed and racialised as a white genre, ignoring much of the significant involvement of Black artists and people of colour (See Section 2.8). As Diane Pecknold argues it is important to understand country music's 'whiteness [as] produced and... maintained... not merely as a cultural reflection of a preexisting racial identity but as one of the processes by which race is constituted' (2013, p. 2; see also Fox, 2004b, p. 50). Musical marketing categories are constructed by the industry to create and uphold hegemonic ideas of race. This idea of social construction will be unpacked further later in this chapter when I discuss authenticity and essentialism (Section 3.2).

3.1.3 Queering Genre and Belonging

The construct of country music as a marketing category to exclude artists of colour also excludes LGBTQIA+ people. As Goldin-Perschbacher summarises, '(f)or the most part, country has not welcomed outwardly lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans musicians' (2022, p. 13). There is also a danger that the 'industry's exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) set the wider narrative for what country music is and further reify the genre category system. As Paula Bishop and Jada Watson point out, there is also a risk that this affects wider understandings including 'scholarship [which] unquestioningly remains in lockstep with the industry's white heteropatriarchal narrative', and therefore this thesis will take an approach 'to critique the institution of country music' and the definitional role of exclusionary genre categories (2022, p. 10; see also Royster, 2022, p. 23). The country music industry is a particularly stark example of popular music categorisation working to 'draw boundaries, and to heighten differences' (Sanneh, 2021, p. xx). My approach to genre as a categorisation system draws on queer theory to conceptualise how these marketing categories are operating. Diana Fuss argues that identity and categories are 'infinitely permeable and [have] shifting boundaries between insides and outsides' (1991, p. 4). Discourses around country music function through what Eric Hobsbawm terms the 'invention of tradition', where despite claims to history, there is a highly 'constructed component' to the genre's identity (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 14; see also Peterson, 1997, pp. 217-218). It is therefore imperative to critique the perception of genre identities as 'natural' (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 14), and it is this kind of deconstruction of 'naturalness' where queer theory can be particularly applicable to deconstruct rigid and 'essentialist' genre categories (Ross, 1999, p. 325; see also Robertson, 1996, p. 6).

The country music industry's 'exclusionary' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) narrative imposes an illusory rigid idea of what country is, which presumes a 'stable' category (Brackett, 2016, p. 26). This is in spite of country, like all genres, changing over time and being a contested space. As outlined in the literature review about country music's aesthetics (Section 2.3), what has been considered inside or outside in terms of sound has changed over the years. Further it is important to question and not take for granted

assumptions around which genres (or categories) are considered marginal in relation to country. Folk, for example, in its more politicised form (such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez) may be considered as distinct from country (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 76), whereas bluegrass may be considered to be more closely related. Teresa Goddu argues that bluegrass is the category that most closely relates to the aesthetic styles of old-time and 'hillbilly' music of the 1920s and 1930s (1998, p. 51)). Yet at the same time, bluegrass is not at the centre of the mainstream country music produced within the industry.

It is therefore vital to consider the definitional boundaries of country music and its 'relational' (Brackett, 2016, p. 7; see also Fabbri, 1982, p. 52) ties to other genres as fluid and changeable, even before considering issues such as genre or category crossover (see Chapter 6 for more discussion of crossover specifically). Thomas O. Beebee's description of 'neighboring genres' (1994, p. 28) illuminates some of what is happening here. Beebee describes genre as a 'foregrounding against the background of its neighboring genres' and that 'a "single" genre is only recognizable' against this backdrop (1994, p. 28). In other words, there is no such thing as a "pure" genre and similarly country from its inception as a marketing category (as it developed from its folk and blues roots (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 6; see also 'Country Music', 2021)) has always been a 'hybrid form' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 1). Haddon makes a distinction between musical categories that could be considered "neighbours" and those that 'might be more accurately constructed as... "others"' (2020, p. 12). In the industry context of country music, "others" might include pop, rock, soul, disco and hip hop (depending on the historical period), and it is these relationships and crossovers that the industry 'polices' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2020, p. 13; see also Royster, 2022, p. 7). Whereas artists might perhaps more easily participate across neighbouring genres, for instance folk and bluegrass without issues arising from the industry gatekeepers. However, it should be reiterated that supposed "straightforward" (what might be labelled "traditional") country as a genre is just as unstable a definition resting on hybrid and pluralist influences and foundations.

If genre, to which country music is no exception, is unstable and continuously evolving, it raises the question about what it might mean, or if it is even possible to belong in a genre. Derrida and Haddon both suggest that belonging may not be what is happening. Derrida argues that the hybrid nature of genre, what he calls 'a principle nature of contamination, a law of impurity', means that there is 'a sort of participation without belonging' (1980, p. 58). Haddon expands on this distinguishing between 'participation' and 'belonging', arguing that "'participating" emphasizes the temporal, transient aspect of categorization, whereas "belonging" implies that genres are reified' (2020, p. 11). Haddon's use of participation and critique of belonging are useful in understanding how genres work and circumventing many of the problems with genre being rigid (which will be explored in the next section (Section 3.2), in the discussion about essentialism). Thinking of genre as participation in this way may also be an effective mode of resistance to industry gatekeepers who police rigid definitions of genre. Reification can also be an issue within scholarship, including queer scholarship (Fuss, 1991, p. 6), and specifically in relation to country music. As already mentioned (Section 2.9.1), my approach to genre is not 'to "queer" a supposedly normative scenario' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781), which some might assume country music to be, but to understand the genre as a 'shared space that is already queer' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 796). It is important not to reify country music as a consistent and coherent category, as if this exists outside of its social construction. It is also important to critique supposed 'canonization' (Watson, 2022, p. 58) of country, produced by conceptualisations of the genre as a stable category that has been 'constructed according to prevailing systems of power' (Haddon, 2020, p. 12). In practical terms for this thesis, this will mean placing Parton's genre identification under scrutiny to deconstruct the way in which this genre identification comes about. (See Section 4.5 for more detail on my approach to Parton as a case study).

There are issues with reification, which may be built into the genre category system itself, and therefore there are dangers of a political strategy based around 'belonging'. Belonging itself can also be an illusory cover for 'ties that... are profoundly delicate, susceptible to breakage' (Biddle, 2013, p. 222), and this belonging may at best be

‘precarious’ (ibid, p. 212). However, I am going to use the idea of ‘belonging’ for this thesis as there is some progressive and generative potential (at least in the short term) in working with this concept within the context of country music. Paula Bishop and Jada Watson consider ‘belonging’ to be an important word for considering the relationship between genre in the title of their 2022 edited collection: *Whose Country Music? Genre, Identity, and Belonging in Twenty-First-Century Country Music Culture*. In their approach to the genre, the book’s editors and their contributors foreground the ‘exclusionary practices’ (Watson, 2022, p. 59) of the country music industry. This strain of scholarship works to address gaps in scholarship that have excluded ‘contributions of artists born outside of the US South, persons of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ artists’ (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3). Further by doing so, this kind of work uses belonging as a mode of resistance to the particular kind of reification happening within country music industry contexts, and as mentioned at the beginning of this section ‘challenges... the industry’s white heteropatriarchal narrative’ (ibid, p. 10). This thesis, therefore, takes a critical approach to ideas of belonging in genre and what this might mean within the context of country music.

3.2 Authenticity

I will return to the idea of belonging in Section 3.3 of this chapter, but first it is important to consider country’s self-definition as a genre and its discourses of authenticity. These discourses are highly related to notions of genre and identity. This section engages with different approaches to authenticity within western culture, popular music studies, country music studies, and queer theory to suggest a generative strategy of reclaiming authenticity for LGBTQIA+ people to ‘assert their presence in country music’ (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 274; Tuttle, 2015, p. 79). Building on Hubbs’ ideas around country music’s affective logics, I discussed in the literature review (Section 2.5), authenticity discourses can enable LGBTQIA+ people to articulate a claim to ‘being country’ (2014, p. 61); and belonging in the genre (see also, Edwards, 2018, p. 39).

In general terms, authenticity is often thought of as a belief that there is 'an inherent, coherent, unchanging and knowable truth to each person' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 43). This notion of authenticity as 'inherent' relates to the previous discussion around musical categorisation that imposes supposedly rigid and innate understandings of genre. As I mentioned in the previous section, much of the system for producing musical categories came from colonial logics of 'collection [and] classification... of... flora and fauna' was moved to 'human life' (Halberstam, 2018, p. 5). This was built into the popular music industry's genre category system, particularly in the context of 'race' and 'hillbilly' records where there is an explicit homological association established linking musical sounds to demographics of people (Brackett, 2016, p. 16). Just as Haddon argued about genre categories being linked to power and 'oppression' (2020, p. 13), Goldin-Perschbacher argues that 'authenticity' is often 'used as... violence against non-normative people' (2022, p. 41). Much of the dangers of authenticity relate to essentialism, which Brackett defines as 'the idea that one's identity is defined by biology' (2016, p. 18) and which underpins the rigid genre homology of marketing categories such as 'race' and 'hillbilly'.

Essentialism entrenches oppression through its rigid defining of gender, sexuality and race. That people's identities links to genre identities is suggested through what Goldin-Perschbacher, like Brackett, points out, that the etymological root of genre from the French that 'meant "kind [or] sort, "could refer to "sex, race [or] people,"... is translated into English as gender' (2022, p. 8). '(G)ender and genre' are interlinked as 'both [are] taxonomies based in style, form, function, and discourse' (2022, p.9) and have been 'assumed [to be] fixed, but now, both are understood to be shaped by social factors' (2022, p. 10). The same problems around genre rigidity map onto much of the problems of gender and racial essentialism, especially within the particular cultural and historical context of country music.

Authenticity like genre can set the terms for inclusion and exclusion and may be 'unavailable or used against othered people' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 43). One particularly pertinent example of this is the way that trans people are often 'asked to

account for their gender identification' (ibid) and therefore the 'expectation (or demands) of truth and transparency differ for transgender and queer people' (ibid, p. 41).

Essentialist notions of gender identity subject trans people to a disproportionate level of scrutiny where they are required to authenticate themselves. Even when trans identities are not completely invalidated, trans people often have to authenticate themselves to fit a particular kind of 'trans narrative... in which a person realizes that they identify as the "opposite" gender, takes steps to transition into this self, and then feels a sense of arrival and completeness' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 138). (This narrative will be explored in more detail in my analysis of 'Travelin' Thru' in Chapter 8). Authenticity becomes a practical obstacle to be navigated within medical and legal institutions, as Zowie Davy argues trans people 'deconstruct and reconstruct various narratives of authenticity, deserving of medical interventions and legal recognition or not' (2011, p. 125). In order to access services, trans people have to navigate these definitional obstacles around authenticity.

Both essentialism and romanticised notions of authenticity create potential barriers for LGBTQIA+ people, especially trans people. The 'postmodern' view of 'identity as socially constructed' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 42) critiques some of this essentialism. As much as this critique is vital, it should also be acknowledged that there is some 'dissatisfaction with the purely social constructivist assumptions about gender identity that are inherent in queer theory' (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010, p. 435) amongst some trans people. This is also reflected in differences between queer and trans theoretical approaches, which is not to put a 'binary' between queer and trans theory (Keegan, 2020, p. 351). As Dana Baitz argues, a trans theoretical lens may 'reflect very different expressive strategies and epistemologies, different ways of inhabiting, experiencing, and understanding the world' (2018, p. 368). Baitz suggests that one point of potential difference or contention between queer and trans theory may be a tendency within queer theory to emphasise 'the "immaterial" sphere of gender performance [that] allows the subject to transcend limitations related to bodily sex' (2018, p. 370); whereas trans theory may have more 'investment in material structures' (2018, p. 373), which may include 'enduring physical change' (2018, p. 368) and understanding of the

physical body (p. 374). This is not, a return to essentialism, and does ‘not... accept materiality as given, but instead examine(s) how matter emerges’ (Baitz, 2018, p. 374). As Baitz summarises, a trans methodological approach may ‘help illustrate the coemergence of materials (such as notes and sounds, personal narratives, conditions of production, and bodily states) and their discursive processes and relationships (including our reception of the music, the social components of sex, and the cognitive determination of bodily and musical structures)’ (2018, p. 377). A trans approach takes seriously the way social structures, and their consequences, are experienced and ‘embodied’ (Baitz, 2018, p. 369). McKenzie Wark’s book: *Raving* demonstrates this through the way theory, the body and practice co-emerge, as raves ‘construct a situation that confronts the ravers with a set of constraints and possibilities. The ravers bring their freedom: their moves, raw need, and their arts of copresence’ (2023, p. 9). Marquis Bey’s work unpacks ideas of ‘embodiment’ and how this is racialised as cisgender as ‘a categorical ruse [permits]... narrow forms of *engendering*...’ whereas ‘Blackness... [is] irreverent toward cisgender’ and so has the potential to destabilise these oppressive categories (of both people and musical genre) and the authenticities they imply (2022, p. xiv).

Trans theoretical understandings of embodiment and identity have implications for the concept of authenticity. Goldin-Perschbacher suggests that the ‘(n)eed for authenticity, or at least for others’ appreciation of their sincerity, may be considerably multiplied for those who have been othered by mainstream society and their authenticity and sincerity challenged’ (2022, p. 54). People who have had their identity continually scrutinised and invalidated, mere reiteration that gender (and identity) is a social construction may be a counterproductive political strategy. Stephen Whittle critiques the reductive social construction position, arguing that trans people’s ‘self-understandings’ are undervalued in these kinds of framings (2006, p. xiii). The potential of authenticity as a term should not be overstated. As sometimes authentication can place onerous ‘demands’ on trans people (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 41), Talia Mae Bettcher uses the term ‘reality enforcement’ to describe the ‘kind of transphobia within’ ‘daily’ practices of verification, ‘invalidation’, questioning and the ‘double bind... [of] passing as non-trans (and hence

running the risk of exposure as a deceiver) or else being openly trans and consequently being relegated to a mere pretender' (2014, pp. 392-393). These acts of 'reality enforcement... occur with such frequency' that it gives cause to reconsider the effectiveness of reclaiming discourses of authenticity. For trans people, practices of authentication may not be empowering acts of self-advocacy but may be laborious actions borne out of necessity to overcome the 'frequency' of 'reality enforcement' (Bettcher, 2014, pp. 392-393).

Authenticity risks becoming an onerous requirement and another tool of oppression for trans people. Montgomery uses the idea of 'becoming spectral', within the context of hyper-pop, as a 'refusal' of these demands to be authenticated (2024, p. 380). Pearce, Gupta and Moon discuss ideas of 'possibility', and embodiment to negotiate and 'create entirely new discursive and material realities' (2019, p. 6). There is notably less attention to 'authenticity' as a term in this work, which may suggest that the concept has limited or precarious political utility. However, as I will argue in the next section, in the particular context of country music where authenticity as a discourse is so prevalent, there may be some utility to navigating authenticity. It should also be noted that Lauren Bialystok argues that authenticity can 'apply compellingly [and generatively] to... [the] gender identity' of trans people (2013, p. 123). Davy's work uses the term 'ambivalent authenticity' (2011, p. 140) to suggest a practical means for engaging with these discourses within certain contexts. It is with this approach, one of caution and treating the concept as a practical necessity, that this thesis will be using authenticity as a tool to assert LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

3.2.1 Popular Music Authenticity

Within popular music scholarship, there is a well-established critique of essentialist authenticity. Sarah Rubidge argues that 'authenticity is... not a property of, but something we ascribe to a performance' (1996, p. 219). This moves the discussion of authenticity away from being something inherent, innate or essential to the person, object or performance. Allan Moore develops this idea further considering 'authenticity as authentication' (2002). In relation to music specifically, Moore argues that

authenticity cannot be said to ‘inhere in any combination of musical sounds’ (Moore, 2002, p. 210). Authenticity is not determined by any particular musical quality (although discourses around authenticity may refer to these attributes) but is instead determined externally in the realm of the social and cultural. Moore describes authentication as ‘interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position’ (2002, p. 210). Like genre identity, authenticity in popular music is ascribed and contested by various agents, including music industry professionals, journalists, artists and audiences (Haddon, 2020, p. 13). Within each genre or context there is a particular discourse of authenticity that ‘bestow[s] integrity, or its lack on a performer’ (Moore, 2002, p. 211), in other words this discourse determines which performances and performers are read as authentic or inauthentic.

As I discussed in the literature review (Section 2.6), country music is heavily invested in notions of authenticity. One term that is often invoked by the industry, as well as artists and audiences, is “sincerity”. Jimmie N. Rogers’ term, ‘sincerity contract’ is useful here (1989, p. 17). For Rogers, authenticity is achieved through audiences as ‘the audience has to recognise and approve such sincerity’ (ibid). The word ‘contract’ implicitly invokes the way authenticity is deployed for commercial gain by the country music industry, and with wider social and political implications as industry gatekeepers determine which musical expression, narratives, songs and artists get interpreted as ‘sincere’ or ‘authentic’ (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 5). Industry professionals, for example radio programmers, in addition to audiences have a role in authenticating these performances as ‘being country’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61). There has been substantial scholarship critiquing the way the country music industry constructs and leverages authenticity, including David Sanjek who warns against attempts to return to or recuperate ‘homespun authenticity’ in country music (1998, p. 35).

Peterson conceptualises country music authenticity in a way that challenges framings of authenticity as being inherent to particular musical sounds and performances, which have similarities to essentialist notions of authenticity. Peterson uses the term ‘fabrication’ (1997, p. 206) to describe the way the country music industry produces a

‘discourse of authenticity’ (ibid, p. 209). This discourse is time and context specific, and needs to be as Peterson puts it, ‘credible in [its] current context’ (ibid, p. 208). Peterson argues that ‘what is taken to be authentic does not remain static but is continually renewed over the years (ibid, p. 220), as the change in sound within the mainstream industry I discussed in the literature review (Section 2.3) demonstrates. Claims to a coherent, inherent, authentic country identity that transcends time and context can only be a ‘fabrication’ (ibid, p. 206). The authenticity ascribed by the country music industry operates around a standard that can be thought of in terms of what Moore describes as ‘third person’ authenticity as ‘when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance’ (2002, p. 218). Authenticity becomes determined by how well a performer or performance is judged to have demonstrated their ‘fealty to a particular country identity’ (Peterson, 1997, p. 219). Authenticity becomes about establishing claims to belonging in the genre of country music, the borders of which are reified and contested by industry professionals, artists, journalists, and audiences.

3.2.2 Gatekeeping Authenticity

Authenticity is something that is also ‘policed’ by the country music industry (Royster, 2022, p. 7; see also Goldin-Perschbacher, 2020, p. 13), as the parameters of genre are maintained by ‘(g)atekeepers’. As Bishop and Watson argue, ‘(i)n the field of country music, an “item” might not pass through the gate if it does not fit the preferred model of authenticity or sound’ (2022, p. 5). Authenticity relates to the way the industry has established the country genre as an identity, both in the marketplace and its cultural significations more broadly. Authenticity becomes racialised and this filters into the aesthetic markers of authenticity, which Amanda Martinez describes as ‘signifiers of white rusticity’ (2020, p. 129), which also include ‘signifiers of rural fashion and culture’ (2020, p. 130). The signifiers of rurality and rusticity become stand-ins for whiteness, mirroring the industry practices that have excluded artists of colour. Karen Pittelman argues that ‘country music’s construction as a genre... is a part of the history of white supremacy in America’ (2018, p. 40). Authenticity becomes a key part of this construction, as gatekeepers within the industry determine ‘(w)hose stories do you tell

and promote?’ (ibid, p. 33), and ultimately get to become authenticated (Moore, 2002, p. 210) as content that belongs in country music.

Country artists also have to work to demonstrate their authenticity, with disproportionate barriers to overcome for women, LGBTQIA+ artists and people of colour to be seen as authentically country (a particular kind of third person authenticity that the country music industry and the genre’s aesthetics operate within). Marissa R. Moss describes the experiences of Rissi Palmer in the early 2000s and later Mickey Guyton around who gets to be authenticated as country by the industry, ‘if you were a Black woman you had to continually prove yourself to be as country as you possibly could be’ (2022, p. 74). This often sets up double standards where white artists, for instance Maren Morris ‘could be praised for...soul’ in her voice, but ‘Rissi Palmer would be damned for it’ (ibid, pp. 74-5) and this would be interpreted as indicating that she could not be authenticated as country.

Inconsistent standards of authenticity can also be observed in relation to the initial reception of Lavender Country by the country music industry in 1973. Lavender Country’s self-titled debut album is often regarded as the ‘first’ LGBTQIA+ ‘country album’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 2). Goldin-Perschbacher outlines how one song in particular: ‘Cryin’ These Cocksucking Tears’, exposes a number of tensions within country music’s authenticity discourses, – ‘(t)he title, while evoking a typical country music theme of “cryin” over a lost lover, is, atypically for country, both explicitly gay and also a word that been debated in terms of “decency” by the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit’ (ibid, p. 28). On one level the song fits smoothly into country music’s authenticity and sincerity discourses, whilst at the same time it could not pass through country music industry gatekeepers. As the band’s lead singer, Patrick Haggerty, remarked, ‘(n)obody ever *dreamed* of accusing *Lavender Country* of being invalid... it was honest information about the topic’ (2014, p. 19), yet because of the title lyric the ‘song was banned from the radio and guaranteed the album’s obscurity’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 28).

Allan Moore's terms around different ideas of authenticity are helpful here. Moore uses 'first person authenticity' to describe when a 'performer... succeeds in conveying the impression that his/ her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience' (2002, p. 214). This definition suggests the importance of honesty and sincerity. In the case of 'Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears', it is hard to describe the song as dishonest or insincere. The industry instead relied on characterising the song as 'unacceptable as country music' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 33), drawing on notions of 'third person authenticity' and preventing its demonstration of belonging within the genre's 'tradition of performance' (Moore, 2002, p. 218). 'Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears' could be prevented from being authenticated as country music, or at least mainstream country, by industry gatekeepers, despite sonic, narrative and affective signifiers to the contrary. The consequences of the industry's treatment of Rissi Palmer and Lavender Country extend beyond them as individual musicians, and industry gatekeeping of authenticity work to prevent these narratives from becoming part of the 'historical' record and 'cultural memory' of the genre (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3; see also Misztal, 2003).

3.2.3 Political Potential of Reclaiming Authenticity

Within country music, as well as western culture more widely, authenticity has often been used as a mode to marginalise and exclude LGBTQIA+ people. This may suggest that authenticity should be avoided as a progressive political tool. However, there are important reasons why I will be using authenticity for this thesis that will inform what I discuss in the next section around belonging. As I have outlined, many of the issues relate to formulations of authenticity being tied to essentialism. As much as essentialism comes with its own dangers, there can also be a risk of forming a reductive anti-essentialist position in a way that is counterproductive to building an effective political strategy.

Robin James argues that the post-identity position is one that has seemingly 'overcome old-school white supremacy' (2017, p. 30) and 'obsolete markers of purity' (ibid, p. 31), which also relate to musical practices where 'genre mixing is post-identity enough to

count as post-genre' (ibid, p. 31). James argues that post-genre and post-identity credibility still privileges white artists, as '(o)nly artists who inhabit the 'non-black' side of the post-identity color line... are legible as post-genre practitioners' (ibid, p. 31), and artists such as Beyoncé and Bruno Mars are not treated as post-genre, and still subject to previous 'obsolete' racialised and essentialised genre and identity categories, 'because they are not white... are perceived as racially particular, and audiences expect their musical output to correspond, genre-wise, to their racial identity' (ibid, p. 28). In practice, as Goldin-Perschbacher summarises, 'the only people who would consider themselves post-identity are those who benefit from being in the dominant, unmarked group of their culture, who have the luxury of not considering group identity categories as central to their sense of self' (2022, p. 12). It is important to remember that the constructed genre and identity categories and their oppressive and racist 'fictions become realities' (van Veen, 2013, p. 12) with consequences for those marginalised within these systems. This thesis will therefore not disregard identity and genre altogether.

I have decided to use authenticity as a tool to engage with issues around genre and identity, as the concept is significant within contemporary western culture and especially within the industry context of country music. As Goldin-Perschbacher points out, '(t)he concepts of sincerity and authenticity have continued to be embraced in North American culture, despite the challenges by postmodernism' (2022, p. 53). Therefore, it is important to take authenticity seriously and have a strategy for engaging with this discourse. Within the genre and industry contexts of country music, where authenticity is such a persistent discourse, authenticity has been deployed by LGBTQIA+ country artists. Chely Wright (2020) describes authenticity as 'the cornerstone of country music'. Authenticity, therefore, has to be engaged with in some way (at the very least as a practical and financial consideration for LGBTQIA+ artists to access opportunities and build an audience). The journalist and musician Mya Byrne (2020), in writing about trans country, Americana and folk artists, uses the term 'real' to describe the way trans experiences and stories should belong at the heart of these genres. Others, like Rae

Spoon, describe being ‘cautious’ of authenticity as they perceive it to be ‘mostly employed to lie to music audiences’ (quoted in Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 158).

I share some of this caution as the invocation of authenticity by the industry to reify restrictive, essentialist ideas of identity has dangers that parallel the way authenticity standards marginalise LGBTQIA+ subjects, and especially trans people, within legal and medical systems. However, there are ways of using authenticity that are not ‘a way of essentializing what “country” means’ (Royster, 2022, p. 25), but to use identity as a ‘necessity to mobilize’ (Butler, 1993, p. 20) and to challenge ‘historically inaccurate racialized notions of country music authenticity’ (Mack, 2020, p. 148). Taking authenticity and identity seriously is important to address the ‘historical narrative’ that ‘erases [many] contributions’ to the genre (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3). It should also not be taken as a given that country music’s discourse of authenticity is completely rooted in essentialism. As previously discussed, the changing standards and debates around country music’s sound suggest a more social and cultural determination of what it deemed as authentic at any given time. Richard Shusterman argues that the ‘sense of authenticity’ that can be seen as a fundamental thread to country music’s commercial ‘success... is conveyed not by factual demonstration but by emotional conviction: pathos proving that the song comes so directly from the heart that no falseness is possible’ (1999, p. 226).

Emotional conviction shifts country music’s discourse around authenticity away from perceived ‘essentialist underpinnings’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156). The affective role that authenticity has for listeners enables the genre to be more fluid and responsive to diversity and change than may be commonly acknowledged, and potentially include a broader range of subjects. Authenticity may also be more about resonance rather than rigid identity (see also Section 5.1 of my methodology for how this functions in my method of queer reading), and not too dissimilar to Michael Waugh’s discussion of post-internet authenticity where ‘musicians evoke authentic representations of contemporary cultural experience through their evincing of clear elements of Post-Internet identity’ (2015, p. 156). Authenticity in country music need not

be any more essentialist than this in terms of being a 'sincere' (ibid, p. 66) engagement with the changing social world. I will be approaching authenticity in a similar way and drawing on Sedgwick's ethical considerations of 'framing [the concept] in such a way as to perform the least possible delegitimation of felt and reported differences and to impose the lightest possible burden of platonic definitional stress' (2008, p. 27). In this way, my framing of authenticity avoids as best it can the essentialist definitional issues that have constructed barriers for LGBTQIA+ subjects, especially trans people, and as Shusterman's work demonstrates is compatible with a country music standard of authenticity rooted in ideas of 'emotional conviction' (1999, p. 226).

It is with this approach to authenticity that I will be deploying the concept as a way to 'assert' LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music (Barker, 2022b). As Goldin-Perschbacher and the testimony of artists such as Wright and Byrne suggest, some LGBTQIA+ people, like other listeners, are drawn to country music because of its 'storytelling' and giving LGBTQIA+ artists the ability to 'represent themselves' (2022, p. 3). The approach to authenticity this thesis takes is to explore the potential of authenticity for LGBTQIA+ people in the genre of country music, where the genre's narratives and 'sincerity' discourses might have potential. There is definitely the potential to use authenticity as a mobilising concept within some of these artists' repertoire to assert LGBTQIA+ belonging within the tradition and genre identity of country music. In other words, building on the previous discussion of Hubbs' work, LGBTQIA+ people may also be able to forge resistance to oppression and find 'dignity' (2014, p. 87) through articulating a claim to 'being country' (ibid, p. 61).

3.3 LGBTQIA+ Belonging and Home

In this chapter so far, I have suggested an approach to genre and authenticity that could cautiously deploy these concepts as tools for LGBTQIA+ belonging. As the next chapter (Chapter 4. Overview of Case Study) will outline, the analytical chapters of the thesis will demonstrate one way of reworking genre and authenticity within Parton's repertoire, through forging a 'critical authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29) to assert LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. The final part of my conceptual framework

unpacks the concept of belonging further. To do this I draw on the idea of 'home' to explore how belonging has been theorised and represented within both queer theory and country music. There is a strong body of work that has challenged dominant narratives and assumptions of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong, whether that be the family home, rural areas, or country music. I set out some of the literature on this including Halberstam's concept of 'metronormativity' (2005, p. 66) and Anne-Marie Fortier's analysis of LGBTQIA+ narratives that identify home as outside the family home (2003, p. 119). I then go further, using the work of Fortier again, to outline how across cultural representations, including many LGBTQIA+ narratives, home remains idealised as 'familiarity, comfort and seamless belonging' (2001, p. 420), whilst also arguing for alternative critical practices to the 'ideal of home' (2003, p. 131). I will then draw parallels between this and representations of home in country music, which, as the work of Cecelia Tichi (1994) explores, are more complex than they may appear. These approaches suggest that home can be deployed as an aesthetic trope and analytical tool to articulate a critical approach to belonging that does not reify exclusionary and essentialist ideals, whilst also being generative for LGBTQIA+ subjects within the context of country music.

3.3.1 Dominant Narratives of LGBTQIA+ Belonging

I will start by setting out some of the dominant narratives around home and how this has been critiqued. Anne-Marie Fortier argues that there can be a dominant narrative that LGBTQIA+ people have 'to leave 'home' in order to realize oneself in another place, outside of the 'original' home' (2003, p. 118). This can be observed in some iterations of 'coming-out' narratives. Fortier argues that in such narratives there can be a 'tendency to oppose queerness and the childhood home, where the latter is a space where queerness does not fit' (ibid, p. 116). The familial home, Fortier argues, is presented 'as the emblematic model of comfort, care and belonging' (ibid, p. 115). Home as belonging is then figured as a stark contrast to LGBTQIA+ subjects' presumed exclusion from this, and the coming-out narrative becomes one where LGBTQIA+ subjects attempt to find 'comfort, care and belonging' elsewhere (Fortier 2001, p. 410). Fortier critiques this, arguing that in narratives defining belonging for LGBTQIA+ subjects as outside the

family home, the 'familial home remains unproblematically heterosexualized', and heteronormativity 'is fatalistically... inscribed within, the family' (Fortier, 2003, p. 120). This oppositionality too readily accepts homophobic definitions of family, home, and where LGBTQIA+ people belong (McClary, 2002, pp. 160-161). It is important not to assume home to monolithically be heterosexualised or to lack or marginalise LGBTQIA+ subjects. Such a critical practice, as Fortier argues, would 'fatalistically... inscribe' (2003, p. 120) that homophobia back into this home and erase LGBTQIA+ subjects and their agency.

This issue of dominant narratives and assumptions of where LGBTQIA+ subjects can belong also relates to a body of queer critical enquiry around 'metronormativity' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66) and 'anti-urbanism' (Herring, 2010, p. 7). Metronormativity was coined by Halberstam in 2005 to describe 'the conflation of "urban" and "visible" in many normalising narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66). Through metronormativity, narratives around coming-out are also figured as coming 'out into an urban setting' from a rural one (ibid). Scott Herring further elaborates on this, describing metronormativity as the 'dominant' narrative of LGBTQIA+ 'normalization' that sets the terms through which LGBTQIA+ people's lives are understood (2010, p. 4). This narrative, Herring elaborates, is characterised as 'compulsory metropolitan migration from wicked little towns; the city as the sole locus for queer community, refuge and security; and the nonmetropolitan as a perpetual site of isolation and exclusion' (ibid, p. 10). The sense of metronormativity's dominance is conveyed in Herring's use of the word 'compulsory'. This motivates Herring to develop his own methodology of 'anti-urbanism' (2010, p. 7) as an approach to challenge this narrative and interrogate its metropolitan biases or 'metrocentrism' as Christopher J. Stapel (2013, p. 60) labels it. Metronormativity discursively works 'internally to intimidate, to normalize, and to box queers into urbane habitus formations' (Herring, 2010, p. 21). The consequences of this are that LGBTQIA+ lives outside urban or metropolitan locales remain under-conceptualised.

Related to anti-urbanism, although importantly not synonymously (Herring warns against ‘conflating the rural with the regional’ (2010, p. 26)), are narratives around which US regions and locations LGBTQIA+ people can belong. There are striking parallels between the figuration of the rural with the figuration of the US South with homophobia, and by extension country music (Hubbs, 2014, p. 4). There is a particular aspect of cultural narratives, as Whitlock argues, that often represent the South as ‘a breeding ground of social, political, and economic conservatism’ (2013, p. xxiii), which has led to figurations of the South as homophobic. This has been both in external narratives, and by conservative agents within the region. As Whitlock argues, this mythologised South ‘would rather not know at all’ its LGBTQIA+ subjects (ibid, p. xxv). Yet at the same time, for LGBTQIA+ subjects living in the South, their Southernness is an integral part of their identity, as Whitlock puts it, ‘sometimes queer voices sound Southern’ (ibid, p. xxv). Similar to metronormative narratives, these dominant narratives of the South erase LGBTQIA+ Southern experiences.

Country music draws on representations of the family home, the rural and the US South, all three of which, as I have just outlined, have been conceptualised as marginalising LGBTQIA+ subjects. Part of my analysis of Parton’s songs will be to develop queer readings of these songs (see Chapter 5) to articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging and being ‘at home’ (Fortier, 2001, p. 409) in country music. It is important to state here that as much as I draw on anti-urbanism and queer Southern studies that I have built my approach on, it is important to make some distinctions. As mentioned in my literature review, (Section 2.2.1) country music cannot be read straightforwardly as rural or southern. Country music associations of being rural and southern stem from mythologised country music industry narratives that idealise and construct an idealised rural Southernness that has excluded other voices in the genre (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3). Country music’s representations and affective logics are broader than any one US region or even the US rural as a category. For this reason, I take some valuable insights from these scholarly fields, however the focus of this thesis is not to make any regional or other geographic claims about LGBTQIA+ lives, but is more focused on articulating the possibility for LGBTQIA+ belonging within the constructed idea of a

musical genre. From anti-urbanism and queer Southern studies, I incorporate a critical questioning of presumptions of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong to critique and challenge dominant narratives that erase LGBTQIA+ participation in country music.

3.3.2 A Critical Approach to Home and Belonging

This thesis will go beyond arguing that LGBTQIA+ people belong and can be *at home* (aesthetically at least) in country music, to explore how home and belonging are figured as affective 'ideals' (Fortier, 2003, p. 131). Fortier argues that home as a concept is often 'sentimentalized as a space of comfort and seamless belonging' (2001, p. 412). This can be observed particularly in narratives around what Fortier terms the 'familial 'home'', which often conceptualises itself 'as the emblematic model of comfort, care and belonging' (2003, p. 115). Fortier argues that this ideal of home also remains consistent even when subjects move away from this family home: 'while narratives of migration-as-homcoming instigate a noteworthy reversal of the status of 'home' in migration, 'home' remains widely sentimentalized as a space of comfort and seamless belonging, indeed fetishized through the movements between homes' (2001, p. 412). Even in LGBTQIA+ narratives, such as the dominant metronormative narrative previously outlined, that might critique the sentimentality around the family home, the ideal of 'home as... belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 420) remains intact, where 'the resolution to estrangement is... the movement into a new 'home'' (Fortier, 2003, p. 118). Home becomes almost rigidly associated with ideas of belonging, with 'widespread assumptions about 'home' as a necessary space of comfort and familiarity' (ibid, p. 116).

Cecelia Tichi summarises the representation of home as an ideal in country music in terms that strikingly parallel Fortier's conceptualisation. Tichi outlines that country music 'home songs' from the 1927 Bristol recording sessions, such as 'Home Sweet Home' (Blue Ridge Corn Shuckers, 2011), set the 'cluster of values defining the home in country music. Familial, neighborly, genial... that would proliferate in country music for decades to come' (1994, p. 20). Tichi stresses that even though there are many homes in country music that are not represented as 'familial', 'neighborly', or 'genial', these are still the values that define what home is or should be. Tichi points out that 'we can think

of a contrary image of home... a picture of household dilapidation, filth and despair [but]...these “homes,” however, are contraries of the natural ideal and really support that ideal’ (ibid, pp. 25-26). Home as an affective ideal remains intact.

Tichi’s adjectives ‘familial’, ‘neighborly’ and genial’ map onto Fortier’s terms of ‘comfort’, ‘care’, ‘familiarity’ and ‘belonging’ in the description of the home ideal. It is therefore important to acknowledge that this ideal of home is not particular to country music, or a sign of the genre’s inherent ‘old fashioned... nostalgia’ (ibid, p. 21). As Tichi argues, this ideal of home is pervasive throughout US culture (and beyond), not just country music, and that ‘the cultural record of the nation suggests that their ideas of home are virtually identical with “home” images in print and the visual arts over some two centuries of cultural process throughout the United States’ (ibid, p. 22). Further, the compatibility of both Fortier and Tichi’s conceptualisations of home (across LGBTQIA+ narratives and country music representations respectively) demonstrates that country music has as much potential as any other genre to provide a critical interrogation of the concept of home.

Fortier is critical of this ideal of home and particularly its sentimentality. Instead of seeing home as a stable and consistent object, Fortier argues for conceptualising the dynamic as ‘making home’ (2003, p. 119). Idealising home conceals ‘embodied material and affective labour of women and men: the hard work (and despair) of daily maintenance of the family and the home’ (Fortier, 2001, p. 419). Idealisation obscures the emotional and material labour that sustain home. Further, if home is contingent on not only its context of the way it is constructed, but also the labour involved in sustaining it, home can be thought of not as a fixed place of feeling, but as ‘a space always in construction’, both materially and affectively, ‘even while we are in it’ (ibid). Thinking home as ‘making home’ enables us to see how home is constructed, including how the ideal of home as belonging is affectively sustained. Home becomes subject to labour, but also as something always in process, therefore unstable, and may not simply perpetuate this romanticised ideal. As well as revealing and acknowledging the labour involved in constructing and sustaining home, a less idealised view of home allows

more nuanced engagements with the concept. These engagements enable us to consider home as potentially 'a place of disjunction, of un-belonging, of struggles for assimilation/ integration, thus a space that *already* harbours desires for homeliness' (ibid, p. 419). This 'disjunction' and 'un-belonging' are not necessarily 'contraries of the natural ideal' (to use Tichi's words (1994, p. 26)), but part of home's dialectics of different tensions, labour and dynamics, where power relations and oppression may play out in various ways. These more nuanced dynamics are elided within an idealised 'home as... belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 420) rubric.

Similarly, Tichi argues that country music has a more complex engagement with home that is not simply perpetuating the ideal home as belonging rubric. Tichi acknowledges that the genre's representations of home are sometimes critiqued for perceived 'old fashioned... nostalgia' (1994, p. 21), which may have implications for romanticising home and family as ideals, including the misogyny within these representations. However, Tichi outlines an alternative conceptualisation of home, stemming from a paradox within US culture that reflects more complexity in the way country music engages with the theme. Tichi describes 'a kind of American split or schism' where home is both deeply idealised into a 'mythic American *home*' (ibid, p. 45), whilst at the same time American 'identity [is presented] as restless, migratory, and on the move' (ibid, p. 42). Those who stay at home are represented both 'as the nearest and dearest' (ibid, p. 44), but at the same time as lacking 'the vital American spirit' (ibid, p. 42) and 'become inert, sedentary figures who are foolishly content to sit still in a high-energy kinetic America' (ibid, p. 45). Tichi summarises this paradox as 'a fundamental American conundrum. To stay home is to risk feeling dejected and thwarted. But to appreciate home, one must leave it never to return' (ibid, p. 48). There is a dialectic between two different ideas of home – 'just as home can represent security and belonging', it can also be restrictive and confining (Watson, 2014, p. 52; see also Connell and Gibson, 2003, p. 15). The idealised home depends on it not becoming a reality, as it is only in the 'mythic *home*' (as Tichi terms it) that the home folks remain idealised. This schism also requires considerable affective labour to sustain. Country music's figuration of 'home' is less about idealising an actual home, but about 'arousing

strong yearnings for a kind of home so idealized that no one can actually experience it' (ibid, p. 48). The songs are about 'melancholy' and 'a meditation, not on home, but the yearning for it' (ibid, p. 49). Like Fortier, Tichi (implicitly) draws attention to the (affective) labour involved in sustaining the ideal of home. More than just perpetuating the ideal, these affective engagements also suggest a realisation and navigation of 'disjunction' and 'un-belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 419) as the ideal home continually fails to be realised. Country music may have more complex, varied, and nuanced engagements with home than may be commonly thought.

This thesis builds on the insights of Fortier and Tichi to use ideas of home to see belonging as constructed and continually in the process of this 'construction' (Fortier, 2001, p. 419). Just like home and belonging, the country music industry deploys sentimentalised ideas of authenticity and genre identity, which also 'obscure' the 'labour' of making and sustaining these ideals (ibid), which operate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Together with the concepts of genre and authenticity, drawing attention to the ways in which they are socially constructed also enables us to see tensions and inconsistencies. These tensions and inconsistencies can be thought of through Sedgwick's often-quoted description of queer as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (1993, p. 8). As Butler describes there is potential offered 'by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms' (1993, p. 22), in this case the discourses around authenticity, genre and belonging in country music. This thesis will analyse and evaluate the potential offered in the dynamics of forging belonging through Dolly Parton's songs for LGBTQIA+ people in country music. (I will set out my methodology, drawing on queer approaches, in Chapter 5.)

3.3.3 Navigating Representations of Home in Country Music

In using belonging as a strategy to address the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ people in country music, it is important to place this concept in its industry context. Notions of belonging, as already mentioned, are often evoked through the rhetoric deployed around home. Home has been a key part of the affective language of the genre, and

one that the industry has supported. In Malone and Laird's comparison between Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, they describe a particular kind of dialectic within the genre. 'Rodgers brought into clear focus the tradition of the rambling man... This ex-railroad man conveyed the impression that he had been everywhere had experienced life to the fullest... The Carter Family, in contrast, represented the impulse toward veneration of home and stability' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 78). This dynamic is also gendered, with the 'rambling man' gendering the Rambler as male, whereas the representation of 'home and stability' is gendered female. The Carter Family's song 'Can the Circle Be Unbroken?' (2000) about mourning the death of a mother, and keeping old values and family ties (Peterson, 1997, p. 221), is a particularly gendered representation of the home ideal. In contrast, as Tichi summarises, 'the roving woman is far more apt, in social terms, to be "ruined"' (1994, p. 44). These representations of home can directly relate to issues of misogyny within the genre.

The gendered implications and idealisation of home also filter through into industry dynamics. As Malone and Laird describe, 'the emphasis on home, mother, and old fashioned morality... is a self-image that the country music industry has carefully cultivated and resolutely clung to...' (2018, p. 81). This links the home in country music to the family home. This idealisation of home and family extends beyond the interpretations of country songs, but to the narrative around key industry institutions, such as The Grand Ole Opry, which today markets itself as 'The Home of Country Music' (Grand Ole Opry, 2023). This idea of family and the 'home as familiarity' (Fortier, 2001, p. 407) rubric has persisted from the 1920s barn dances, which were designed to 're-create the atmosphere of wholesome family fun and entertainment' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 81) and the Grand Ole Opry continued 'to preserve the sense of family and informality' (ibid, 2018, p. 242) as it developed into a national broadcaster and industry catalyst (ibid, 2018, p. 300). There are further insidious implications of an industry romanticising itself as a home and a family. Invocations of family have been used by some institutions within the country music industry to cover up and silence people experiencing abuse and sexual harassment (Moss, 2018). The rhetoric of family has particular implications. As Moss puts it:

And since country music's entire brand was built on preserving a sense of "family," anyone trying to disrupt the status quo, speak up, or change the climate was swiftly dismissed from the Thanksgiving buffet. Country music was a family that only lets certain people in through the door; a family that only lets certain conversations happen over the dinner table. A family that will bend over backwards to keep uncouth arguments from breaking out. A table with a fixed number of assigned seats. A family that will just as easily hug you as disown you if you say the wrong things about the beloved patriarch or step too far out of the industry's approved gate (Moss, 2022, p. 17).

The idealisation of home and family as belonging within the country music industry becomes an affective tool for the industry to gatekeep genre and authenticity (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 5). There needs to be caution about adopting this strategy around inclusion in country music, (increasing the 'number of seats [at] the thanksgiving buffet'). An approach that is about being accepted and included by these institutions, no matter what, risks removing ways of holding these institutions accountable. Similar to ideals of home and family, as Sarah Schulman critiques, where the construction of the family ideal that 'mythologises itself as perfection' (2016, p. 189), this approach to the country music industry risks causing harm. There are well established critiques within queer theory around this kind of political strategy, particularly in Lisa Duggan's work around 'homonormativity', where LGBTQIA+ equality is restricted to 'access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the "free" market, and patriotism', which narrows the scope of this movement so 'that [it] does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them' (2003, pp. 50-51). This suggests that LGBTQIA+ rights movements that figure inclusion within institutions such as family, marriage, the state and the economy, risk foreclosing important critiques of these. (This will be a particular important tension during my discussion of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Dolly Parton's song 'Family', in Chapter 8).

There are dangers to a political strategy that uses home as its affective ideal to combat the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people in country music. As previously discussed in the section about genre, there is a risk that this will not address the issue at the root, as genre and marketing categories are constructed to exclude others. Similarly, romanticised belonging risks reifying exclusionary ideals. However, temporary inclusion within some institutions may be a practical necessity to build careers within the industry (Williams, 2022). The practical (in some cases temporary) need to participate within some institutions for access to vital resources may sometimes be in tension with moral and ethical considerations of the harms they cause. In the section on authenticity, I discussed Zowie Davy's concept of 'ambivalent authenticity' (2011, p. 140), and similarly we might think of ambivalent belonging as a practical strategy for LGBTQIA+ people to navigate country music. It is also worth stating that home and belonging, just like previously discussed ideas of genre identity and authenticity, still have an important affective role for country music's diverse body of artists and audiences. Further organisations such as Black Opry, Queer Country Quarterly and Rainbow Rodeo show the importance of making home for Black and LGBTQIA+ country artists within or alongside the mainstream country music industry, with home deployed by Goldin-Perschbacher (2022, p. 79) and Royster (2022, p. 8) to describe the affective importance that this concept has within different organisations' political strategies. Further, as Royster argues, there is potential for 'claiming a more expansive vision of home' that figures belonging as extending beyond considering 'immediate family' (2022, p. 95). This thesis will now proceed with an analysis of Dolly Parton, cautiously using the ideas of genre and authenticity to explore generative potential in articulating claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. The work in this thesis will demonstrate through the case study analysis a way to engage with authenticity and belonging, because of the stakes these concepts have for LGBTQIA+ people within country music, as well as within politics and culture more widely.

Chapter 4. Overview of Dolly Parton as a Case Study

In the previous chapter, I outlined the broad conceptual approach for how this thesis contributes to country music studies, through negotiating various discourses around genre, authenticity and belonging. My thesis approaches these issues through the use of Dolly Parton as a case study. Parton is a significant case study to explore the potential for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music (Edwards, 2018, p. 235), as perhaps the artist in the genre most widely recognised for being an LGBTQIA+ ‘icon and ally’ (Barker, 2022a, p. 144; see also Hubbs, 2015, p. 73; Edwards, 2018, p. 6; Hamessley, 2020, pp. 194-197). I draw on the work of Richard Dyer, who argues that ‘textual analysis [of stars] is properly ideological analysis’ (1998, p. 3), that stars as they appear in media texts are ‘grounded in sociological’ factors, and that the ‘multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody’ means that stars and discourses around stars are where social, cultural, and political debates play out. Dolly Parton as a ‘star text’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 43) is where the issues around country music genre identity, authenticity, and belonging can be interrogated and contested. I use my textual analysis of Parton as a way to discursively assert LGBTQIA+ belonging, and thus challenge more exclusionary framings of the genre, both in terms of country music’s history and for present day artists and audiences. I will discuss my methodology in more detail in the next chapter, and this chapter outlines Parton’s career, the general scholarly context, and the ways Parton’s significations as an LGBTQIA+ icon and ally have been approached in scholarship.

4.1 Parton Biography

Before I outline the scholarship on Parton in more detail, I will first provide a brief overview of her career and relevant parts of her autobiography. Dolly Parton was born into rural poverty in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee on 19th January 1946, in the Appalachia region (Parton, 1994a, p. 3). Parton had some success as a child star with ‘a spot on a Knoxville television and radio show, *The Cas Walker Farm and Home Hour*’ (Hamessley, 2020, p. 15). Parton got a songwriting deal with her uncle Bill Owens when she was fourteen, and moved to Nashville the day after graduating high school in 1964 (Edwards, 2018, p. 17). Monument, the first label to sign her as a recording artist,

initially tried to 'market Parton as [a] bubblegum pop' artist (ibid) before Parton released her first album, a country record, *Hello, I'm Dolly*, in 1967. Parton's music was brought to a larger audience when she became part of the *Porter Wagoner Show* in 1967, and Parton and Wagoner became a successful country duo throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Hamessley, 2020, p. 18). During its run until 1981, the show 'reached over 100 markets, garnered over 3 million viewers' and thus was a 'dominant' driver of country music industry success at the time (Edwards, 2018, p. 19). Parton left Wagoner's show in 1974, and 'parted ways' in business altogether in 1976 (Hamessley, 2020, p. 19). During this period, Parton released eighteen solo studio albums in the country market between 1967 and 1977 (from *Hello, I'm Dolly* to *New Harvest... First Gathering*).

Although it is 1977's *Here You Come Again* that is considered Parton's first pop-crossover album, as Leigh H. Edwards points out there are pop elements in the earlier albums (2018, p. 14), and the previous album (released earlier in 1977) *New Harvest... First Gathering* was also partially aimed at crossing over (ibid, p. 107). During this crossover period, that I will be defining as between 1977 and 1989 before the release of *White Limozeen* (1989), Parton's celebrity status and fame increased to include films and her own syndicated series *Dolly!* (1976-1977) (ibid, p. 68). Parton's music and star image became recognisable beyond the country music industry market and world-wide. In 1989, Parton returned to releasing in the mainstream country market (Hamessley, 2020, p. 143; Edwards, 2018, p. 153), which had changed and expanded in part as a result of her own crossover success, which 'amplified financial expectations' (Edwards, 2018, p. 171).

By the mid-1990s, Parton's sales and airplay declined due to changes in programming and targeting of 'a younger demographic' (Edwards, 2018, p. 153). In response to this, Parton began self-releasing her work, through her own record label, Blue Eyed Records, between 1994 to 2006, and Dolly Records from 2007 (ibid, p. 22). There have also been notable changes within Parton's musical output and career from this moment. Beginning with *The Grass is Blue* in 1999, Parton released a trilogy of albums 'that explicitly turned to bluegrass, old-time music, and the sounds of her Appalachian

heritage' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 27). Since that period, Parton shifted her approach to targeting a 'mainstream audience' producing 'albums that are stylistically varied' and through adapting to 'a new media environment... in the age of Web 2.0 and social media' (Edwards, 2018, p. 177). Parton's media, marketing, and production strategies from this period, from the release of the album *Backwoods Barbie* in 2007, have resulted in her continued celebrity and star status (Nozell, 2019; Lordi, 2020).

4.2. Parton's use of Autobiography and Regional Identity

Parton has received considerable media, journalistic and increasingly more scholarly attention. She has been written about as a 'folk-inflected' (Edwards, 2018, p. 8) country 'singer-songwriter... pop-crossover artist... [and] media personality' (Barker, 2022a, p. 143). Parton has increasingly become a case study for wider academic debates, particularly around gender, country music authenticity and celebrity. Some of this scholarship has focused on Parton's autobiography, as have some of the more journalistic publications, such as Stephen Miller's *Smart Blonde* (2015) and a particularly significant early work, *Dolly* (1978), by Alanna Nash. Leigh H. Edwards (2018) and Lydia R. Hamessley (2020) in their monographs provide comprehensive coverage of Parton's career, weaving in relevant aspects of her biography for context. Hamessley uses this to contextualise Parton's musical and songwriting practices, especially within Appalachian, country and 'mountain' music (2022, p. 87). Edwards also uses Parton's autobiography for context, but argues that Parton 'turns her autobiography into personal mythology' (2018, p. 2) and weaves this throughout her 'media image' (Edwards, 2018, p. 74) and songs. Similarly, Jada Watson draws attention to Parton's 'autobiographical' songwriting in relation to her 1973 album *My Tennessee Mountain Home* (2016, p. 120). This thread has also been taken up by Sarah Smarsh who interprets Parton's songs and celebrity within the context of US rural working-class culture, arguing that Parton 'stands for the poor woman, the working-class woman' and 'in her songwriting, movie roles, and stage persona, [Parton exalts] the strengths of this frequently vilified class of American woman' (2021, p. 6).

This autobiographical narrative, and the way it is constructed both within Parton's repertoire and her media image, are where a number of social and cultural debates play out. Her autobiography and songwriting draw on a number of cultural tropes and representations of the US South and Appalachia (Heidemann, 2016, p. 167; Shooter, 2022). Pamela Wilson's work focuses on the way Parton's image brings together various images of Appalachian and mountain identities and 'actively exploits the contradictory meanings associated with the social categories of gender, class, ethnic and regional identity' (Wilson, 1998, p. 99). Edwards argues that Parton's image juxtaposes 'a rural, southern, white, working-class stereotype', the 'hillbilly tramp', with a 'privileged' image of 'the innocent and virtuous mountain girl' (2018, p. 30). Through 'juxtaposing the two, she reveals both to be artificial images... [and] uses the privileged version of femininity to question how the marginalized one has been stigmatized' (ibid, p. 31). Parton's image and reworking of various cultural tropes is both a 'gender critique', drawing on practices of 'feminist camp' (Edwards, p. 30; see also Robertson, 1996), and as Pamela Wilson describes, these representations 'recuperate class abjection' (2009, p. 140; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 63). Scholars such as Graham Hoppe (2017; see also Edwards, 2018, pp. 87-88) have explored Parton's image and reworking of cultural tropes such as the hillbilly stereotype through Parton's theme park, Dollywood, in East Tennessee. This thesis builds on work around Parton's negotiation of class, gender and regional identity to explore the implications for sexuality, and particularly LGBTQIA+ people. I build on the considerable scholarship on Parton around gender to explore the representations of sexuality within Parton's work and develop a queer analytic in approaching this repertoire. Like Edwards, I read Parton's 'star text' (2018, p. 43), and I draw out the potential for queer reading within the contested discourses of the country genre more widely. (In particular, Chapter 7 will explore songs that directly draw on these cultural representations of Appalachia and working-class rural America).

4.3 Parton's Pop Crossover

There have been different ways that scholars have approached Parton's crossover output, and its wider implications for conceptualising Parton's persona and repertoire.

Malone and Laird characterise Parton's crossover as an 'all-out campaign to achieve identity as a pop singer' (2018, p. 367), but argue that it is her Appalachian Mountain autobiography and musical heritage that should be valued as most significant: 'Parton's prominence in American popular culture... should not obscure the facts of her rural-mountain origins and of her thorough immersion in country music culture' (2018, p. 364). Similarly, Hamessley argues that 'Dolly has always been at her best when performing her own songs or other country songs that she feels a connection with', and that the crossover material is less successful artistically and this period was of more commercial significance 'to get her wider attention and financial security' (2020, p. 22). This would suggest that the crossover material is less significant in terms of understanding Parton and her cultural significance and meaning.

However, there has been some work that has looked at this material in more detail, including Hamessley who does look at some of Parton's crossover songs, such as 'Me and Little Andy' (2020, pp. 180-182) from Parton's first crossover album *Here You Come Again* (1977b). Mitchell Morris (2013, pp. 173-208) dedicates a full book chapter to Parton's crossover, producing detailed musical analysis of songs from *Here You Come Again*, suggesting that this musical period warrants close reading and more detailed study. More broadly, Morris argues that this part of Parton's career also offers insight into 'the cultural negotiation of the 1970s', an important decade for 'gay and lesbian' 'liberation' through which the crossover period is important in understanding Parton's discourses of 'camp' (2013, p. 207). I approach this period of Parton's career, especially in Chapter 6 focused on songs from this time, as of crucial definitional importance for conceptualising Parton. Edwards argues that 'Parton's crossover moment is highly fetishized in her subsequent media image... in part because her pre-crossover star image functions like a prehistory for Parton' (2018, p. 202). It is through this lens that Parton's previous repertoire (read as more country) is interpreted, 'as if looking back to an earlier self' (ibid). Rather than merely a commercial venture, the crossover period is significant culturally in the discourse around Parton. As Edwards argues, 'Parton becomes fully Parton after her crossover' as '(i)t is the fully evolved Parton crossover star image that is most easily recognizable to today's audiences'

(ibid). This thesis builds on this approach with the critical approach to genre and the construction of musical categories to argue that Parton's crossover period demonstrates the 'fluidity' of genre throughout Parton's entire career and repertoire (Edwards, 2018, p. 22; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 5).

4.4 Parton as an LGBTQIA+ Icon

As previously mentioned, Parton is widely recognised as an LGBTQIA+ 'icon and ally' in the genre of country music (Barker, 2022a, p. 144; Edwards, 2018, p. 6; Hamessley, 2020, pp. 194-197; Hubbs, 2015, p. 73). Parton's allyship has been consistent over the past thirty years, including an explicit reference to accepting 'gay' people in the 1991 song 'Family' (Parton, 1991c), emphatically stating in *Vanity Fair*, 'I love and understand gay people' (Parton quoted in Sessums, 1991) that same year, writing and recording the song 'Travelin' Thru' (2006) in support of trans people for the film *Transamerica* (2005), supporting marriage equality in 2009 (Bolcer, 2009), and speaking out against transphobic toilet bans in 2016 (Betts, 2016; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 194). Parton also features LGBTQIA+ people and issues in her 2019 Netflix series, *Heartstrings* (Hamessley, 2020, p. 196; Edwards, 2022 and 2022a, p. 9). Scholarly approaches to this aspect of Parton have included engaging with fan responses, rooting Parton's allyship within the context of her autobiography and especially her religious upbringing and unpacking the way her star image and her repertoire engage with LGBTQIA+ people.

Some of the recent scholarship and discussion around Parton has engaged with fan responses (both in general and LGBTQIA+ fans specifically), often in the form of writers using their own experiences as fans of Parton. Recent work includes Lynn Melnick's *I've Had to Think Up a Way to Survive: On Trauma, Persistence, and Dolly Parton* (2022), which uses an autoethnographic approach to foreground the author's personal engagement with Parton and her music, and Alice Hawkins' photography book, *Dear Dolly* (2023), that engages with Hawkins' own fandom. Helen Morales (2014) weaves in classical literature and history scholarship around 'pilgrimage' within her account of her own trip to Tennessee (including Dollywood and Nashville). Work that focuses on

LGBTQIA+ fan responses, in particular, includes Travis Wright (2013), who reflects on his experiences growing up gay in the US South and how this impacts his engagement with Parton. Royster also discusses the significance of Parton for Southern fans 'growing up Black and country and queer... in the 1960s' because of 'the over-the-top persona of Dolly, whose physical persona becomes a metaphor for her emotional expressiveness and risk-taking' (2017, pp. 313-314). There has also been work that has used the idea of fan responses in media representations of celebrity fans of Parton. Edwards discusses Graham Norton's featuring Parton on his UK talk show demonstrating the role of gay fandom and its significations within Parton's media performances (2018, pp. 40-42). Hamessley also discusses the significance of Parton's 'large LGBTQ+ fan base' (2020, p. 193), drawing on the documentary *Hollywood to Dollywood* (2011) that focuses on a number of Parton's LGBTQIA+ fans (see also Edwards, 2018, p. 193), including an interview with Leslie Jordan (Hamessley, 2020, p. 197). Although this thesis does not engage with LGBTQIA+ fandom and fan responses (beyond my own), acknowledgement of this fanbase is important for understanding the potential of Parton and her songs to engage with discourses around country music.

Parton's LGBTQIA+ allyship has been linked within her autobiography, with implications for her songwriting and repertoire. Hamessley contextualises Parton's allyship within Parton's engagement with spirituality and her own Pentecostal (Church of God) upbringing (Edwards, 2018, p. 16). Parton 'resisted... the way God was presented' (Parton, 1994, p. 70)... and 'ultimately resisted the culture of judgment in her church' (Hamessley, 2022, p. 193), which Parton experienced as emphasising 'fire and brimstone' kind of preaching (ibid, p. 186). Hamessley argues that 'the most obvious way Dolly rejects a theology of judgment is in her attitude toward issues of gender and sexual identity' (ibid, p. 193). Parton's expressed values reflect a 'live and let live philosophy' and belief in 'the God core in all people' (ibid, p. 196). This allyship has also extended to a deeper connection and empathy from Parton to LGBTQIA+ experiences, especially around religion, which Hamessley describes as 'rooted in her own sense of feeling judged as an outsider' (ibid, p. 196). I explore some of Parton's experiences with religion in my analysis of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' in Chapter 7, and more

widely my case study chapters demonstrate how this thread runs throughout Parton's discography and links inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people to country music's affective logics of 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350).

This thesis builds on scholarship on the potential 'resonances' for LGBTQIA+ audiences (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) within Parton's aesthetics. Edwards draws continuities between Parton's pro-LGBTQIA+ statements and her aesthetics (both her 'media image' and her songs) that merge 'her own authenticity narratives with advocacy for' LGBTQIA+ rights, which explicitly includes 'transgender rights' (2018, p. 39). When looking at the aesthetics of Parton's songs, there are also broader resonances, such as those demonstrated by Hubbs' homoerotic reading of 'Jolene' (2015). Part of these aesthetic resonances are a result of Parton's allyship, as Hubbs suggests the artist's 'queer friendliness' may be a factor in her approach (2015, p. 73). Yet Hubbs' reading is deeply rooted in the textual and musical qualities of Parton's song that make 'same-sex eroticism readable' (2015, p. 75). (I look at this reading of 'Jolene' in more detail in Chapter 7, Section 7.2.1.) Scholars have also looked at other Parton songs, often more explicitly linked to LGBTQIA+ people, such as 'Family' (Hamesley, 2020, p. 196) and 'Travelin' Thru' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, pp. 794-795 and 2022, pp. 150-151; Gardner, 2012, pp. 191-192). My readings of Parton's songs build on this existing scholarship to read country music (and Parton's) aesthetics to 'assert' the possibility for LGBTQIA+ belonging (Barker, 2022b).

4.5 My Analytical Approach to Parton

I draw on this scholarship to deploy Parton as a case study to interrogate the issues I outlined in the conceptual framework in the previous chapter, of genre, authenticity and belonging, and what the implications are for the figuration of LGBTQIA+ people in discourses around country music. Parton is a particularly fruitful case study because of the way that she constructs what Edwards terms an "'authenticity" narrative' (2018, p. 11). This authenticity narrative brings together two related sets of binary oppositions. As mentioned in relation to ideas of gender and class critique, Parton brings together two images of 'femininity', the 'virtuous "mountain girl"' and the 'demeaned "hillbilly tramp"'

(ibid, p. 30), and ‘in juxtaposing the two... she uses the privileged version of femininity to question how the marginalized one has been stigmatized’ (ibid, pp. 30-31). The second binary opposition critiqued by Parton’s ‘authenticity narrative’ is the ‘folk culture– mass culture split’ where there can be a ‘fabricated’, yet persistent ‘notion of a conflict between the market, and some kind of traditional American folk culture’ (ibid, p. 7). Just as with discourses around gender, Parton ‘questions the distinctions between such categories’ and ‘heals that tension [between folk and mass culture] by saying both things can be true at once: her work is both folk and mass, real and fake’ (ibid, p. 7).

Both these critiques combine within Parton’s ‘media image’ that ‘frames her performance as highly staged’ and exposes ‘the artificiality of gender through her charismatic excessiveness’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 27), as well as engagement with ‘drag and camp’ (ibid, p. 6). Abigail Gardner suggests that there is queer potential here as Parton ‘presenting herself as an archetypal hetero-feminine figure... mindful of the constructedness of this position’ through this representation can ‘comment on her own performance of heterosexuality’ (2012, p. 187; see also Doty, 1993, p. 12; Robertson, 1996, p. 10). Parton challenges ‘gender essentialism’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 159; see also Ross, 1999, p. 325) and I build on this idea to argue that this challenge to essentialism has broader potential for challenging the rigid categorisation and mode of ‘oppression’ (Haddon, 2020, p. 13; see also Foucault, 1974, pp. 76-101) underlying identity and genre categorisation systems. Parton does not just critique restrictive, binary narratives, but constructs her own ‘authenticity narrative’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 11). Parton ‘offers an image of freedom’ (ibid, p. 9), and produces generative potential for more open and inclusive ideas of genre, and for ‘the deployment of country authenticity in the service of’ LGBTQIA+ belonging (ibid, p. 6).

Parton’s approach to authenticity is compatible with the approach outlined in the previous chapter (Section 3.2.3), where making a claim to ‘sincerity’ may be important for those who have their ‘authenticity and sincerity challenged’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 54); yet there needs to be an approach to sincerity and forging authenticity narratives that are not rooted in the same oppressive essentialism that has produced

LGBTQIA+ people's marginalisation. Parton makes a claim to "real" sincerity' at the same time as presenting a fluid approach to constructing an authenticity narrative and 'persona' to how this sincerity is achieved (Edwards, 2018, p. 2). This offers potential for LGBTQIA+ people who face disproportionate scrutiny to "prove" their authenticity, both within wider culture and the country music industry (Section 3.2 outlined this), as Parton's authenticity narratives around country music 'impose' a light 'burden of platonic definitional stress' (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 27). Hamessley argues that when it comes to Parton's representations of her autobiography and mountain roots, 'the accuracy of Dolly's mountain stories and the authenticity of her music are not the issue, but it is her skill at designing and tapping into mountain scenarios and sounds that her audiences want to, and can, accept as authentic' (2020, p. 60). This shifts country music authenticity discourses firmly away from 'essentialist underpinnings' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156).

The approach this thesis takes to Parton in answering its research questions is about how claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging are articulated and removed from essentialised or romanticised notions of identity and authenticity (and thereby navigate this cultural terrain), whilst taking seriously the potential of authenticity narratives and articulating claims to 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61) for LGBTQIA+ artists and listeners to situate their narratives in the genre. As part of this, my analysis explores the way Parton's songs navigate and rework ideas of genre, and especially the construct of genre as a rigid mode of categorisation. I build on Hamessley's analysis of Parton's repertoire.

Each of the stages, perhaps a better word is *facets*, of Dolly's musical life is a blend of musical styles. A mountain-type ballad appears on a country music album, a folksy song about the beauty of God's creation nestles in an album of pop crossover hits; a sexy disco number with electronic sound effects is followed by an acoustic guitar lead-in to a country song about busking for spare change. Dolly's musical work is variegated and folds back in on itself, with all the melodic, harmonic, textual, and thematic overlaps that image brings (Hamessley, 2020, p. 5).

Parton's work resists singular and rigid genre classifications, and although genre is important stylistically, for instance drawing on folk modal harmonies (Hamessley, 2020, pp. 70-74), the use of mountain musical traditions or disco for example, fit into a 'descriptive rather than prescriptive' (Brackett, 2016, p. 7) approach to genre. The movement 'back and forth' between different 'genre' categories (Edwards, 2018, p. 22) suggests that these are not 'fixed' (Brackett, 2016, p. 26), and moreover that to consider Parton's repertoire properly is to consider the interrelationship between the different genres as the songs move between them. My analytical chapters explore the way different Parton songs at different places within her repertoire negotiate ideas of genre and genre identification, and what this means for claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging. I go further than previous scholarship on Parton in my analysis to show that Parton's repertoire calls into question the way categorisation of genres work and the 'exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) the industry enacts. My analytical approach that shifts the emphasis from Parton's celebrity to her songs and making salient different readings enables this genre work to go further. Before I get to these analytical chapters, the next chapter sets out my methodology and approach to Parton's songs.

Chapter 5. Methodology

The methodological approach in this project is a queer one. In the conceptual framework, some of the ways this thesis set out its ideas of identity, genre, authenticity and belonging were indebted to queer scholarship, including this growing area in country music studies. This chapter will set out my queer approach in more detail, specifically how I will be analysing Parton's case study songs. I begin by setting out my main method of queer reading, drawing on Sedgwick's ideas of '(r)eparative' (2003, p. 144) reading to argue that this can be a generative approach for navigating the 'exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) of the country music industry. I treat Parton's songs as 'evocative objects' (Turtle, 2007) and 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16) for LGBTQIA+ people in country music, and therefore I focus on the textual qualities of Parton's songs to draw out their potential for navigating the cultural terrain of genre, authenticity and 'precarious' (Biddle, 2013, p. 212) belonging. This approach to Parton's songs as texts and evocative objects that develop meaning through 'interpretation' (James, 2015, p. 22) and 'active' listening practices, (Negus, 1996, p. 27) shifts some of the emphasis within previous scholarship from her own life writing and autobiography, to considering a wider approach to life writing and the potential role her songs have to articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. I then set out my practical approach to analysing Parton's songs.

Before I set out my methodology, it is worth reiterating my usage of two terms: LGBTQIA+ and queer. I use LGBTQIA+ to refer to a community and constituency of people, as a tool for political mobilisation and joining a scholarly and journalistic conversation that is advocating for wider inclusion within the country music industry, using identity not in a rigid, essentialist way, but as a 'necessity to mobilize' (Butler, 1993, p. 20). I then use queer to refer to the methodological approaches this thesis draws on and specifically as a mode of understanding identity (especially gender and sexuality) as 'socially constructed' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 43), and as a critical way of engaging with the way 'norms' are constructed and maintained (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781). Butler argues that identity and the subject is 'produced' as an 'effect' of the 'repetition' of gendered and sexual norms (1993, p. 22). Potential for

‘subversion’ is ‘produced’ through the ‘gaps opened up in regulatory norms’ (ibid). Queer, for this thesis, is a mode for engaging with the way identity is socially constructed (including genre identity) and for generating a mode of resistance to the way people are marginalised (including LGBTQIA+ people in the country music industry), especially where this marginalisation is produced through the enforcement of essentialised and seemingly normalised identity and genre categories.

5.1 Queer Reading

The main methodology underlying my analytical chapters is a practice of queer reading. Queer reading can be a practical way of building on the insights of queer theory and its challenge to oppressive and essentialised understandings of identity categories. Butler uses this in her reading of *Paris is Burning*, interpreting the film through a deconstructive lens, which she describes as, ‘exposing what fails to work’ (2011, p. 88). Queer reading, like some drag performances, can be ‘subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality’ (ibid, p. 85). Some practices of queer reading work by reflecting on the imitative structure of representations of gender and sexuality within texts, and ‘exposing’ the way norms and performances are constructed and imposed. Queer reading also builds on feminist approaches. Sedgwick describes one of the insights of feminist literary criticism: ‘dichotomies in a given text of culture as opposed to nature, public as opposed to private, mind as opposed to body, activity as opposed to passivity, etc. etc., are, under particular pressures of culture and history, likely places to look for implicit allegories of the relations of men to women’ (2008, p. 34). Just as feminist reading draws out the way gender relations and representations are expressed within a particular text, queer reading makes explicit the ways in which sexuality and sexual relations are constructed.

Queer reading is a self-consciously and self-reflectively active reading approach. Just as heterosexuality and other dominant positions are no more *natural* than LGBTQIA+ identities, it is important to acknowledge, as James argues, that in all reading practices, ‘the facts never speak entirely for themselves—they require... interpretation’ and

therefore 'the theoretical lens' brought to bear on a text 'will shape the results of... analysis' (2015, p. 22). Queer reading is no more a projection onto a text than other, supposedly 'straight' (Sontag, 2018, p. 13) approaches to texts. However, queer reading has potential from its acknowledgment of its positionality and the theoretical lens it actively brings to a text. When these texts are popular music songs, the role of listeners as 'active' becomes important to acknowledge (Negus, 1996, p. 27). Royster suggests that popular music has particular potential because of the role of audiences, arguing that, 'popular music can be read as an audience-driven form of performance, consumed, queered, and transposed by its listeners, integrated into the most intimate aspects of fans' lives' (2013, p. 30).

Popular music has potential as a particularly generative object for queer reading. Royster's work explores how LGBTQIA+ audiences actively participate within the musical cultures of particular artists describing how music by artists such as Grace Jones and Michael Jackson has been used by 'queer culture' (2013, p. 30). The meanings of musical texts are generated through these active processes of listening, reading and interpretation. These reading practices can also be generative beyond the individual listener. In the essay, 'In Defence of Disco', Richard Dyer describes disco as an example of where heteronormative mainstream culture produces certain commodities that an 'oppressed group can take up and use to cobble together its own culture' (2002, p. 153). Dyer's argument has parallels with Susan Sontag's description of camp, which has 'the power to transform experience' (2018, p. 5) and to gain an alternative 'experience' beyond 'the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken' (2018, p. 13). Queer reading thereby acts as a 'contrary use of what the dominant culture provides' (Dyer, 2002, p. 153; see also Barker, 2022b).

It should be emphasised that the idea of forming culture and LGBTQIA+ communities is not to essentialise this identity. In Dyer's analysis of the appeal of Judy Garland amongst gay men, he states that 'gay men are inevitably and naturally drawn' to Garland, but this identification with her is not 'arbitrary' and 'is a product of the way homosexuality is socially constructed' (2004, p. 191), particularly in the context of the

20th century. Queer reading Garland is about drawing out the ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with gay male experiences. Garland, for Dyer, has a particularly resonant ‘relationship to suffering, ordinariness, and normality’ (2004, p. 138). Dyer argues that her initial ‘image of heterosexual family normality’ from her early career no longer held ‘after 1950’ and ‘that she was not after all the ordinary girl she appeared to be that suggested a relationship to ordinariness homologous with that of gay identity. To turn out not-ordinary after being saturated with the values of ordinariness structures Garland’s career and the standard gay biography alike’ (2004, p. 153). These relate to the way social lives are constructed, rather than innate or natural identities.

5.1.1 Queer Reading as a Political Strategy

Queer reading as a practice of making these resonances explicit can be an effective political strategy, as Stephen Maddison argues to use ‘identification with similar desires in [heterosexual] women’ (sexual desire for men) can enable gay men ‘a much wider range of places to locate culturally’ (2000, p. 6). Since women’s sexual desire for men has some form of ‘cultural legitimation and widespread representation’ (ibid) this enables gay men to have some outlet for expression, albeit coded, within a homophobic culture. This identification is not just about articulating gay male sexual desire but becomes more broadly a means of articulating an affective and political relationship to the social world (ibid, pp. 6-7). Although much of this work focuses on gay men, I will approach practices of queer reading in a broader sense. Royster’s work engages with various queer reading and listening practices. Her analysis of artists such as Grace Jones, Michael Jackson and Eartha Kitt reflects on the way these performers embody strangeness, eccentricity and queerness for their listeners, particularly Black LGBTQIA+ listeners, and similarly these listening practices have ‘shaped [socially constructed] notions of what it means... to act or to be seen as queer’ (Royster, 2013, p. 30). It is important to consider more pluralist responses within queer readings beyond a singular or ‘homogenous’ white ‘gay male constituency’ so as not to erase other subjectivities and ‘histories’ (Lawrence, 2011, p. 233). This will also follow through in my approach to Parton that does not just consider gay male identification, but also looks at lesbian

readings (for instance of 'Jolene' (section 7.2.1)) and representations of trans experiences (in 'Travelin' Thru (section 8.3)).

The main way this thesis uses queer reading as a political strategy is through using a 'reparative' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 144) approach to navigating a homophobic social world, particularly in the context of the country music industry (Barker, 2022a; Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271). Sedgwick describes a lot of critical practices, especially but not exclusively within queer theory, as adopting a 'paranoid' (ibid, p. 126) approach, meaning that the emphasis is on revealing and 'exposing' systemic oppression (Butler, 2011, p. 88; see also Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 138-139). In a world historically made up of the injustices of homophobia, racism and misogyny, the value of this kind of reading practice is all too evident. Sedgwick argues that this has led to 'paranoid reading' becoming a 'mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities' (2003, p. 125). A reparative approach in light of this 'has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant' (ibid, p. 126). As Sedgwick points out, this kind of reading practice 'does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression' (ibid, p. 128). A reparative practice could have particularly generative potential as part of a queer reading project, as Sedgwick suggests: 'what we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them' (ibid, pp. 150-151). Reparative reading could be key to the sustaining of LGBTQIA+ lives within a homophobic and transphobic culture (Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271; see also Barker, 2022b).

There are parallels between Sedgwick's approach and Dyer's ideas where LGBTQIA+ people can 'cobble together... [their] own culture' (2002, p. 153) through practices of queer reading as a 'contrary use of what the dominant culture provides' (ibid). There are also parallels with Sontag's ideas on camp. Camp is at times treated as a 'paranoid' reading practice that deconstructs (through 'denaturalization, demystification and mocking exposure') texts produced by the 'dominant culture' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 149). Yet Sedgwick argues camp can also be thought of as a 'reparative' practice, through

‘the degree to which camping is motivated by love’ of the camp object (ibid). This love, for Sedgwick, is vital for the sustaining of LGBTQIA+ lives in that they bestow recognition and visibility of ‘shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse’ (ibid, p. 150), making LGBTQIA+ engagements, communities, and queer reading practices visible. It is important to acknowledge the insights of more ‘paranoid’ reading practices, particularly around deconstructing oppressive categorisation systems (whether that be of genres or people), however this project will use Sedgwick’s idea of reparative reading as a generative approach for LGBTQIA+ people engaging with country music.

In the Literature Review (Section 2.9) I outlined how scholars have drawn attention to a range of LGBTQIA+ participation in country music. As well as being marginalised by the industry, LGBTQIA+ people have also been excluded from much of the genre’s historical narrative (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3) and some aspects of the scholarly context that has at times erased even the possibility of LGBTQIA+ representation (Hubbs, 2015, p. 73). Within this context, queer reading can be an effective political strategy to recuperate LGBTQIA+ narratives and experiences in country music. Royster’s work highlights that listening can be a subversive strategy. In *Black Country Music* she describes ‘listening to country music’ as ‘loaded’ as ‘(b)eing a Black country music fan can feel lonely and sometimes dangerous’ (2022, p. 5), and that ‘for some... loving country music... is the *other* “love that dares not speak its name”’ (ibid, p. 6). Loving country music has radical queer potential and, as Royster argues, ‘to put Black artists and fans at the centre of this inquiry is to irrevocably shift country music as a genre’ (ibid, p. 7). Royster’s queer reading approach to country works to ‘remember, reengage, and hopefully transform country music’s racial past’ (ibid, p. 7). Queer reading has radical potential to renegotiate and rework our understanding of country music (ibid, p. 23; see also Hall, 1980, p. 126), which Royster describes as ‘a productive sonic space of nostalgia and mourning for Black queer listeners’ (2017, p. 307). It is important to reiterate that the approach of this thesis is not to subvert ‘a supposedly normative scenario’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 782), but to reveal country music as ‘already queer’ (ibid, p. 796). My queer reading method, building on approaches that

reckon with the industry context, uses a reparative approach to restore LGBTQIA+ engagements with country music to the critical and historical understanding of the genre.

5.2 Approach to Parton's Songs

This thesis argues that queer reading Parton's songs can be an effective method for LGBTQIA+ people navigating the cultural terrain of country music. Sara Ahmed uses the idea of 'companion texts' to describe feminist books as key to sustaining feminist individuals and communities: 'a companion text is a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden' (2017, p. 16). Companion texts form part of what can be thought of as reparative approaches and as helping their readers navigate 'survival' (ibid, p. 17) and 'sustenance' within an at times inhospitable social world (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 150-151; see also Barker, Elliott, and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271; Barker, 2022a). I consider Parton's songs to perform a similar function as the feminist books Ahmed uses and have the potential to play a sustaining role in the lives of LGBTQIA+ listeners. I conceptualise Parton's songs as 'evocative objects' (Turtle, 2007; see also Barker, Elliott, and Longstaff, 2023, p. 259). Sherry Turtle describes 'evocative objects' as 'companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought' (2007, p. 5), and as 'life companions' (ibid, p. 9).

These texts (and evocative objects) also have a role in forming 'communities' (Barker, Elliott, and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271; see also Barker, 2022a), as Ahmed describes: 'feminist community is shaped by passing books around; the sociability of their lives is part of the sociability of ours' (2017, p. 17). Thinking of these texts as having a 'sociability' and being 'life companions' also draws questions of movement and travel, of where the texts accompany their listener to (Barker, Elliott, Longstaff, 2023, p. 275). Part of the 'sociability' of Parton's songs involves considering the way these songs enable LGBTQIA+ listeners to navigate the genre and industry contexts of country music, and as companions to movements within and between changing genre categories. It is important to consider this not as simply about belonging in country as an inherent and 'stable' category (Brackett, 2016, p. 26), but how these songs interact

with and transform genre boundaries. (Chapter 6 focuses on Parton's crossover period and will focus on these issues, especially the sociability and movement between the genres of these texts.) Thinking of Parton's songs in this way makes it more important to consider them as the main objects of analysis for this project, as it is these songs themselves that are key to forging claims to genre identity and authenticity that articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

5.2.1 Life Writing

This thesis uses critical ideas of life writing in its approach to Parton and her songs. By life writing I am considering not just formal autobiography or biographic accounts of Parton's life, but her songs as a vital part of this. The focus is on individual songs, rather than Parton's 'star text' (Edwards, 2018, p. 43), as the main object of study. Instead of focusing on the celebrity star and its significations, my focus is the way the songs themselves take on further meanings and significations. This is a shift from the emphasis of some previous scholarship on Parton that has used her autobiography to interpret her repertory (Barker, 2022a, p. 153). Exploring the potential ways of listening, reading and interpreting Parton's work (as not completely determined by her life story) enables LGBTQIA+ listeners to come to the fore over Parton as a star text. That is not to say that Parton's use of her autobiography is unimportant, but this shifts the approach towards Parton's life-writing practices. This approach also changes the approach to life writing. As Parton's LGBTQIA+ listeners (both potential and real) become foregrounded, her life writing takes on a more 'collective' element (Drag, 2019, p. 233). This thesis conceptualises life writing as constructed in a 'fragmentary' (ibid, p. 224) way and collectively constituted (Marshall, Barbour and Moore, 2020, p. 87) through her listeners' engagements with Parton's songs, in particular LGBTQIA+ listeners use queer reading to embed these engagements in their own life-writing practices, and in articulating claims to belonging in country.

Life writing in a traditional sense refers to the way that we understand our lives and our selves 'as if they were narratives' (Drag, 2019, p. 224). These narratives have strong affective power and appeal as a 'source of illusory and feeble reassurance' (ibid, p.

225). There has often been a critique of this kind of life-writing practice that suggests a linear narrative and a stable subject. Drag suggests that there is comfort in a 'quest for singularity, the therapy of becoming oneself' (ibid, p. 225), but that this kind of narrative is ultimately inadequate for conceptualising the way we experience and live our lives. Life writing as a chronological and linear narrative, in Drag's view, is inaccurate because 'life is... devoid of a teleology or narrative pattern'. Therefore the most accurate or 'appropriate strategy to represent life is parataxis—the collage-like method of juxtaposing elements without any discernible logic' (Drag, 2019, p. 226). Further, destabilising the 'singularity' (Drag, 2019, p. 225) of the self provides potential for collective life writing (Auster, 2017, p. x). In destabilising the link between experience and self, this opens up life writing to the potential to represent not just an individual life, but potentially multiple, as there is a more porous boundary between the self and other. A text like Joe Brainard's *I Remember* (2012), originally published in 1975, is structured through a 'random arrangement of recollections' (Drag, 2019, p. 229). These 'entries... do not engage with one another in any discernible way and do not constitute a chronological or cause-and-effect sequence' (ibid). Brainard conveys 'the sense of the self as [being] irreducible to being enclosed in the neat parameters of a story' (ibid, p. 228). Experience is presented as 'universal rather than unique and self-defining' (ibid, p. 232). These universalising techniques attempt 'to embrace everyone and assume a collective subjectivity' (ibid, p. 233). *I Remember* (2012) is a work of collective life writing.

Parton's life writing might be thought of as heavily invested in chronological narrative and a stable coherent self. There are aspects of 'conventional autobiographical narratives', such as the anchoring of her childhood and 'formative years' (Drag, 2019, p. 231), through her repeated references to growing up in the Smoky Mountains. It should also be acknowledged that, although Parton may not engage in 'experimental life writing' (ibid) to the same extent as Brainard, her own practices have nuance and complexity. Richard Middleton asserts that 'repetition is both subjectivity's greatest support – its mimetic screen – and the ground of its self-questioning' (2006, p. 196). Repeated narratives of the self's identity sustain its presentation of coherence, whilst at

the same time each repetition is an individual act that risks failing to sustain the illusion of coherence and stability, and thereby revealing the self's inconsistencies. Similarly, every repetition of Parton's life story risks failing to convince audiences of the coherence and stability of her own life-writing narrative.

Parton's life writing and mythology is 'knowingly exaggerated' (Edwards 2018, p. 2). The foreword to Parton's 1994 autobiography introduces her life story as if it is a fairy tale, 'Once Upon a Time and far, far away, back in the hollers at the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee there lived a little girl with yellow hair, blue-green eyes, fair skin, and freckles' (Parton 1994a, p. ix). From the 'once upon a time' storytelling cliché and the excesses of the description, there is a campy mythologising of both Parton's own autobiography and the Smoky Mountains as a region, which serve to bestow the region with a majestic quality (Hamessley, 2020, p. 57). The knowing way that these fairy tale tropes are deployed demonstrates that Parton's life-writing practices self-consciously construct the Dolly myth (Edwards, 2018, p. 2). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Parton offers potential through both deconstructing essentialist identity categories and notions of authenticity (that are embedded in traditional understandings of the self and the 'autobiographical subject' (Drag, 2019, p. 231)) whilst at the same time affectively reinvesting in notions of authenticity that are open to a broader range of subjects. Parton's reclaiming of authenticity within her life writing is 'reparative' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 144); it does not purely engage with deconstruction or demystification, but with what potential political utility these investments in authenticity (Tuttle, 2015, p. 79) can be turned to, and I argue this strategy offers potential to assert claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

A further complexity to consider when looking at Parton's life-writing practices, especially when approaching life writing through her songs, is the variety of the repertory itself. Parton's songs themselves are not as invested in sustaining Parton's autobiography as much as her broader media performances do. Although there are some songs that draw on aspects of Parton's life story (such as 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' and "Coat of Many Colors'), these are neither typical of her song

writing practices, nor are their meanings straightforwardly autobiographical (as I discuss in Chapter 7). Her songwriting might be more accurately characterised as an ‘empathic’ (Lordi, 2020) song writing style. Justin Hiltner suggests that Parton’s repertoire can function as a ‘choose your own adventure’ (quoted in Abumrad and Oliaee, 2019d) and this invites audiences to identify and relate to her songs through their themes (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 118). In a way not dissimilar to Brainard, in terms of a ‘collective subjectivity’ (Drag, 2019, p. 233), Parton’s songs offer potential to participate in wider and more collective practices of life writing. This thesis (re)interprets Parton’s songs through listening with queer ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) in mind and representing more of the ‘multiplicity’ (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez, 2021) of readings that are available in both Parton’s repertory, and by extension more widely in country music. The close readings of Parton’s songs in the following three analytical chapters become a collective life-practice of LGBTQIA+ participation in country music, and as a mode of articulating and authenticating (Moore, 2002) LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre.

5.2.2 Analysis of Case Studies

I work with Parton’s songs in a way similar to Robin James’ approach, which she describes as ‘philosophy through music’ (2015, p. 21), considering ‘what philosophical assumptions and ideas are embedded in musical works, performances and aesthetics?’ and ‘how specific pieces of music articulate, revise and critique philosophical concepts’ (ibid). Like James, I also argue that musical case studies do ‘more than reflect’ these concepts, but ‘respond to, critique and rework them’ (ibid, pp. 21-22). Parton’s songs do not just reflect country music discourses (of genre identity and authenticity), but these concepts are navigated, negotiated and reworked through these songs, and queer readings and engagements with these texts.

This approach is also informed by Jamie Heckert’s ideas of queer intimacy that ‘queer any supposed border between theory and practice’ (2016, p. 48). Reflecting on his own experience, Heckert describes how music, writers and activist groups ‘influenced [his] thinking on gender, sexuality and politics’ (ibid, p. 50) and that this understanding was in

place ‘long before [he] began to understand the works of Butler and Foucault’ (ibid, p. 49). For Heckert, his acts of queer theorising started before engaging with arguably canonical queer theorists. Similarly, my own experience of listening to Parton’s songs predated and became the preconditions for the way in which I engaged with queer theory. To ‘queer any supposed border between theory and practice’ means to engage with Parton’s songs seriously as ‘acts of theorising’ (ibid, p. 50), destabilising taken for granted ideas of what theory is, and who does theory. In particular this thesis sees queer reading, textual analysis and interpretation of Parton’s songs as a mode of conceptualising genre, authenticity and LGBTQIA+ belonging, within the particular context of country music.

In practical terms, my analysis focuses on drawing out queer ‘resonances’, exploring the potential for the affective content to resonate with LGBTQIA+ experiences, taking into account Dyer’s understanding of the social context and construction of LGBTQIA+ lives in the late 20th century (2004, p. 191), which have particular consequences for the lives of LGBTQIA+ people. This may include how the songs navigate social stigma and shame, (for example in Chapter 7’s analysis of ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ (Section 7.4)), the representation of sexuality, and the way the songs figure ideas of home and belonging. I then look at the textual and aesthetic means by which these resonances are articulated. A large part of this is through consideration of the role of genre. My analysis pays attention to sonic signifiers, but also takes into account their marketing category position. This reveals the different genres at play and ‘inconsistencies’ (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) of the categorisation regarding each song, demonstrating the changeable and unstable way that genre is socially constructed. I combine the songs’ queer resonances drawn out by my readings with ideas of genre identity, to explore how “‘authenticity’ claims’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 14) for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music are articulated, and whether this belonging is a pluralist and critical approach to genre, or whether these claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging fall back onto romanticised or ‘essentialist underpinnings’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156).

My analysis engages with the sonic features of the case study songs, and places considerable emphasis on the role of song lyrics (which are also impacted by sound). Song lyrics are sometimes used uncritically within musicological analysis, but are an important object of analysis, and this is especially the case in country music as McLaurin and Peterson (1992) argue. Song lyrics have a strong narrative function (Tichi, 1994, p. 7), and they also have a key role in ascribing authenticity 'to a performance' (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219). This is also reflected by artists and songwriters in the genre. Loretta Lynn described her songwriting process as '(i)f you write the truth... and you're writing about your life, it's going to be country' (quoted in Duncan and Burns, 2019, p. xv). Lyrics perform a key life-writing function and are key to the performers' presentation of authenticity. Guy Clark has said of the importance of lyrics in the genre, '(i)f you can't hear each word, it ain't country' (quoted in McLaurin and Peterson, 1992, p. 2). Lyrics are not only important for the songwriter or performer's craft, but for listeners to 'hear each word' means that the lyrics are also crucial for the experience of the audience. Therefore, within country music especially, the lyrics are to be taken seriously. In general terms, Lars Eckstein describes lyrics as 'rhetorical and stylistic devices... to tell tales... to propose ideas about life and the world' (2010, p. 10), in a way not too dissimilar to poetry. My approach will generally follow literary textual analysis, which as Barbara Ching argues can be 'particularly useful for discussing this genre of music that relies so heavily on the creation of remarkable characters and lyrics' (2001, p. 4). Yet, as Eckstein argues, song lyrics differ from poetry in that 'lyrics are always 'actualised' in the sense that they are given the body of a voice' (2010, p. 30). Using the idea of 'embodied language' (ibid, p. 35) of popular song compared to the 'internalised' (ibid, p. 10) or 'implied' (ibid, p. 44) voice of poetry, song lyrics are continually 'inflected' by the way they are performed, mediated and received within various contexts (ibid, p. 11). Song lyrics generate their meaning from the way in which they are 'situated spatially, temporally, socially, physically and medially, in a particular arena in which they are performed' (ibid, p. 30). My lyrical analysis of Parton's songs will draw on their sonic affective qualities alongside the narrative, linguistic and poetic aspects.

5.2.3 Outline of Analytical Chapters

I will now outline my analytical chapters. The first analytical chapter (Chapter 6) focuses on songs from Parton's pop-crossover period. Drawing on Edwards' (2018, p. 202) observation that this period can frame the way her whole discography is being positioned and interpreted, I use the crossover period to provide a framing for the analytical chapters to follow as this sets out an approach to genre identities (that are both reified and subverted, at the moment of crossover (Bracket, 2016, p. 26)), and complex narratives around home and belonging for LGBTQIA+ people. This ordering foregrounds the instability of genre in Parton's repertoire and refuses to take as a given a too simplistic categorisation of Parton as a country artist. The benefit of my approach is that it enables my analysis to demonstrate the generative potential within queer theoretical insights around 'norms' and exploring 'their construction' for country music scholarship (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781; see also Butler, 1993, p. 22). In this first analytical chapter, I explore her first commercial crossover song 'Here You Come Again' that embodies much of this uncertainty. Whilst 'Baby I'm Burnin'' suggests an ability to move further beyond rigid genre and identity expectations and definitions. The final case study song in this chapter is 'Wildflowers', written by Parton for the 1987 album *Trio*, and recorded with Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris, that unpacks a nuanced engagement with belonging. I argue that for LGBTQIA+ listeners, this can offer potential not just for belonging in country music, but for navigating more complex experiences of home, and hostile industry contexts.

The second analytical chapter (Chapter 7), focusing on Parton's pre-crossover material, what might be thought of "straightforwardly" as country, demonstrates that queer 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) can be drawn out of this country repertoire and so Parton's LGBTQIA+ listeners should be linked to the songs of this period as much as the pop-crossover. I use 'Jolene' (1974b) to articulate a practice of queer reading that uses Parton's songs as 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16), which I argue has generative political potential to 'assert' the 'presence' of LGBTQIA+ people in the genre of 'country music' (Barker, 2022a). With particular attention to Parton's life-writing practices, I use 'Coat of Many Colors' (1971a) to explore how the song deploys aspects

of Parton's life story to have broader resonances, including with LGBTQIA+ listeners. In the final case study of this chapter, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' (1973d), I explore how the song's life writing has 'collective' (Drag, 2019, p. 233), subversive potential to reconceptualise country music's genre identity to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. This is articulated through reworking affective representations of home. Throughout my analysis I suggest that LGBTQIA+ belonging can be constructed along non-essentialist lines, and my analysis unpacks how the songs' categorisation and genre signifiers are also complex, inconsistent and unstable (Brackett, 2016, p. 26), thereby just as socially constructed as during the crossover period.

The third and final analytical chapter (Chapter 8), focuses on the two Parton songs that explicitly address LGBTQIA+ people: 'Family' and 'Travelin' Thru'. My analysis focuses on how these songs situate pro-LGBTQIA+ statements within the aesthetics and affective logics of country music, whilst also acknowledging the unstable and inconsistent way that the country genre identity is constructed. 'Family' (1991c) shows LGBTQIA+ people as belonging within the family unit. In my analysis I evaluate the extent to which belonging within existing institutions and frameworks is the most effective political strategy. Through my analysis of 'Travelin' Thru' (2006) I explore how this song reworks various textual traditions, including folk songs and Christianity to represent trans narratives as being included within the broad aesthetics of country music. The song represents genre and belonging as more unstable, fluid and changing and therefore offers potential for alternative approaches to these concepts that do not rest on rigid or 'essentialist underpinnings' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156).

Chapter 6. Queering Parton's Crossover, Genre and Identity

Parton has often been discussed as a pop-crossover artist, particularly alluding to the period in her career in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. My case study overview (Section 4.3) outlined how the significance of this period (both commercially and artistically) has been evaluated in different ways. Building on Edward's argument that the pop-crossover period frames how Parton's discography can be interpreted (2018, p. 202), I approach this repertory as establishing a critical mode towards ideas of authenticity and Parton's negotiation of genre discourses in and around country music. For this thesis, there is a particularly salient discourse around how Parton's celebrity significations as an LGBTQIA+ icon relate to this crossover period. It is this period of Parton's career that the queer 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) of her celebrity persona are most commonly invoked, for instance through 'increased use of camp' within this period (Edwards, 2018, p. 104). There can be a suggestion that what makes her significant or resonate with LGBTQIA+ audiences is more readily available in repertoire identified as outside of country music (Hiltner, 2021a).

This thesis treats the crossover period as significant for conceptualising the positionality of Parton's LGBTQIA+ listeners, not for identifying them outside country, but for the act of crossover itself offering a generative critique of rigid genre categories that have formed the apparatus behind LGBTQIA+ people's exclusion and marginalisation, especially within the country music industry. Parton's crossover provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the definitions and conceptualisation of country music's genre identity, as well as providing a critical and analytically queer lens to approach the rest of Parton's discography (which I will demonstrate in Chapter 7). In this chapter, I argue that Parton's crossover establishes an anti-essentialist approach to genre and authenticity that provides her repertory the tools to articulate claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

This chapter begins by setting out some of the relevant contexts around Parton's crossover period: its commercial importance within Parton's career, the way in which Parton's crossover coincides with the development of pertinent narratives around

LGBTQIA+ subjectivities (such as ‘metronormativity’ (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66) and the figuration of a “gay” icon) in the 1970s (Morris, 2013, p. 207), and a brief overview of country music representations of rural and urban (including within Parton’s discography). As mentioned in my conceptual framework (Section 3.3.1) this thesis is not exactly an ‘anti-urbanist’ (Herring, 2010, p. 27) project, and instead focuses more on ideas of identification with and belonging in genre, however it is important to consider queer critiques of metronormativity and representations of rural/urban within the context of Parton’s crossover. I then go on to outline Parton’s crossover image in general terms, particularly around its mix of country (rural) and pop (urban) signifiers, drawing on the work of Mitchell Morris (2013, pp. 173-208), as well as discussing the way Parton sets out a fluid approach to genre categories at the moment of her commercial crossover, with some brief analysis of the song ‘Me and Little Andy’ (1977e) from *Here You Come Again*. This chapter will then move onto its main analyses, focusing on three main case study songs from across Parton’s pop-crossover period: ‘Here I Come Again’ (1977c), ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ (1978a), and ‘Wildflowers’ (1987h).

I approach these songs as ‘evocative objects’ (Turtle, 2007) and ‘companion texts’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17). My analysis draws out the queer ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) in these songs, with a particular focus on the way LGBTQIA+ belonging is figured. A large part of this belonging, in my analysis, will be the implications that this has for conceptualising belonging in the genre of country music. The crossover period enables this analysis to consider belonging in a way that does not reify rigid genre categories, but sees the construction of claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging as negotiating and reworking genre identities and borders. Queer readings of these crossover period songs utilise these companion texts’ ‘sociability’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) as they navigate genre and marketing categories. These crossover songs offer potential for LGBTQIA+ listeners and in particular ‘the possibility of a renegotiated space in the world’ (Morris, 2013, p. 207). Through queer readings of Parton’s crossover, ‘the audience tread(s) between positions, seeking to cross over in our own ways with her’ (Morris, 2013, p. 208). Each of this chapter’s three case songs offers insights into the relationship

between genre and identity, has particular resonances with LGBTQIA+ listeners, and navigates ideas of belonging.

The analysis of 'Here You Come Again' (1977c) explores how Parton represents the social and cultural implications of her crossover (both geographic and sonic) and how Parton maintains and reworks a country genre identity. I suggest that 'Here You Come Again', in its representation of simultaneous anxiety and excitement at Parton's moment of crossover and arrival, could resonate with LGBTQIA+ arrival experiences from the rural to the urban. I read the uncertainty conveyed in Parton's performance of the song as a generative critical mode to articulate a kind of LGBTQIA+ belonging that also resists rigid narratives of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong, and essentialist categorisations of identity and musical genre.

The second case study, 'Baby I'm Burnin'' (1978a), explores how Parton takes on the affective logics and queer associations of disco and sets out an approach to reading this song that does not reinforce rigid genre and social categorisation of LGBTQIA+ experiences resonating with disco and not with country. My analysis brings the affective logics of these genres into dialogue. I explore the multiple ways that 'Baby I'm Burnin'' has been classified in terms of genre, then I bring the affective logics of disco (through applying Dyer's 'characteristics of disco' (2002, p. 154) to my analysis of the song, and then I situate the representation of sexuality within the trajectory of Parton's repertoire that was released in the "country" marketing category. I demonstrate that we can interpret Parton's crossover and broader genre logics as not having to see pop (or disco) and country as juxtaposed to one another, but as complementary when the affective logics and tools for considering sexuality are brought into conversation.

The final case study, 'Wildflowers' (1987h), challenges many aspects of dominant narratives around LGBTQIA+ subjectivities, particularly the idea that rural coded genres ('Wildflowers' emphasises bucolic imagery) cannot represent LGBTQIA+ experiences, but further the song rejects the need to find a 'fixed' home or complete belonging (Fortier, 2003, p. 116). In the refrain 'Wildflowers don't care where they grow' (Parton,

Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h) this song challenges the rigidity and essentialism that operates within both conservative country music industry narratives and LGBTQIA+ narratives where home is 'idealized' (Fortier, 2001, p. 415), and subjects strive to find the ultimate place that offers complete 'comfort and seamless belonging' (ibid, p. 420). All three case studies demonstrate the potential and risks within crossover for advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusion in country music.

6.1 Crossover Period Contexts

There are some important contexts and concepts that need outlining for my case study analyses in this chapter: Parton's career; a reiteration of the concept of 'metronormativity' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66) and its role in LGBTQIA+ narratives; and the idea of genre crossover. I am defining Parton's crossover period as the 12 years between 1977 and 1989 commencing with the release of *Here You Come Again* (1977) and before the release of *White Limozeen* (1989). *Here You Come Again* achieved commercial success within pop as well as the country markets; the single charted at number 3 in the pop charts (Billboard, 2023a), and the album itself charted at number 20 (Billboard, 2023b) on the Billboard Hot 200 and was certified platinum six months after release (RIAA, 2023). For comparison, Parton's 'number one country singles had sold about 60,000 copies. 'Here You Come Again', her first crossover success, sold a million' ("Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way" (1973-1983)', 2019). The album was recorded and marketed to a broad audience and achieved this commercial crossover. As Edwards points out, Parton had incorporated pop elements before (2018, p. 14) and her previous album *New Harvest... First Gathering* (released earlier in 1977) was also partly aimed at crossing over, although did not achieve this commercially speaking (ibid, p. 107). Parton returned to releasing predominantly within the country format in 1989 (Hamessley, 2020, p. 143), in part in response to the changing cultural and commercial dynamics within the popular music industries of the time (including country) (Edwards, 2018, p. 153), although it should be reiterated that there is no complete rigid distinction between country and pop for Parton's country repertoire both before and after the crossover period (Hamessley, 2020, p. 5).

This period of Parton's career also coincides with crucial historical moments in LGBTQIA+ history, as the decade immediately after Stonewall. Mitchell Morris argues that to an 'extent... the liberation story of gay men and lesbians lies at the centre of the cultural negotiations of the 1970s' and analyses Parton's crossover album *Here You Come Again* within this historical context. This period establishes Parton as a 'post-Stonewall icon' (2013, p. 207), and more widely within a gay male canon or 'pantheon of divas' (Hamesley, 2020, p. 197), that includes Judy Garland (Morris, 2013, p. 207). This moment also entwines Parton within queer theoretical debates around metronormativity (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66). As I outlined in the conceptual framework (Section 3.3.1), metronormativity describes dominant narratives of LGBTQIA+ lives of being most fulfilled within metropolitan locations, and in particular 'coming out' narratives become mapped onto a rural to urban 'story of migration' (ibid) that Herring summarises as 'compulsory metropolitan migration from wicked little towns; the city as the sole locus for queer community, refuge and security; and the non-metropolitan as a perpetual site of isolation and exclusion' (2010, p.10). This migratory narrative mirrors Parton's musical migration during this crossover period, from Nashville to Los Angeles. Morris (2013, p. 177) argues that Parton's crossover needed to keep a sense of both country (as both a geographic marker and a musical genre) as well as the new place and genre (pop) to which she was moving. The particular way Parton's crossover was managed between country and pop has particular resonances with migratory narratives and associations of the tensions between rural and urban. More broadly, this crossover moment maps onto ideas and narratives of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong and offers an opportunity to explore and interrogate some of these assumptions, and particularly around the implications for the relationship between LGBTQIA+ belonging and musical genre.

6.1.1 Narratives of Rural/ Urban

There are significant ways that Parton's crossover maps onto a rural to urban migratory narrative. Although, as I argued in my conceptual framework, this thesis is not an anti-urbanist project per se, there are some important parallels to draw here that will inform the way genre identities are established and working, particularly around country music

in this period. A striking parallel is the way that Parton's celebrity crossover image is constructed, and the location in which this takes place. It is in this period that Parton's image fully develops into its camp excess, the previous 'mountain girl and town tramp elements' becoming elevated with added 'glamorous images... such as Hollywood star codes' (Edwards, 2018, p. 104). Morris argues that the construction of Hollywood glamour around Parton was a concerted commercial effort 'to make Parton's music and image work with respect to Hollywood' (2013, p. 182). Not only was Parton's image meant to signify 'Hollywood', but Parton's image and crossover were produced in Los Angeles. Morris outlines how Parton's record label, 'RCA sent her to Los Angeles to work with... Sandy Gallin, and the two of them developed a crossover persona' (ibid) for Parton. Los Angeles was also the location of the Executive Producer of *Here You Come Again* (1977b), Charles Koppleman, as well as the lead single and title track songwriters Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. All three had also relocated from New York. Los Angeles as a city becomes the place behind Parton's crossover image both in terms of logistics and its cultural associations of Hollywood glamour (ibid, p. 194). Scott Herring's work suggests that Los Angeles also fits into metronormative paradigms (2010, p. 19). For example, Andrew White, in *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, describes Los Angeles as 'the national centre of glamour' (1991, p. 26). More broadly, Herring argues that gay media publications in the 1970s operated with a 'bicoastal' focus of LGBTQIA+ people in the US (2010, p. 74), identifying Los Angeles as a key media market (ibid, p. 71). An illustration in *Advocate* in 1970 depicts a Pride parade with New York's St Christopher Street (the location of Stonewall) on one side and Hollywood BLVD on the other (Artist unknown, 2010, fig. 5.8, p. 163). Los Angeles, within dominant gay media narratives as well as wider cultural representations, resonates as an LGBTQIA+ friendly space and home, especially in comparison to the representations and dominant narratives of Nashville and country music.

It also should be noted that Nashville itself is not especially rural. The framing of the binary between rural and urban also has implications that are particular to country music. As Herring argues, 'the "rural/urban" distinction is as much... phantasmatic... as it is geographically verifiable' (2010, p. 8). Herring points to various discrepancies within

the US Census 2000 Rural and Urban Classification, particularly around designating areas 'like New York, New Jersey and Connecticut as a singular "urbanized" population chain' (ibid); and defining urban areas as having 'a population density of at least 1000 people per square mile' (United States Census Bureau, 2021), which when considering areas 'that have... a population density of 999 people per square mile and are deemed 'rural' by technicality' (Herring, 2010, p. 8). There is an element of arbitrariness and ambiguity on definitions of rural and urban space. Assumptions around LGBTQIA+ belonging are also cultural and social rather than relating to the physical geography. Similarly, the coding of genre and particular artists and musical features as rural (country) and urban (pop) are also socially constructed and prone to contradictory interpretations of different aesthetic and cultural signifiers.

These 'phantasmatic' narratives around rural and urban are also present within country music. Although in some ways the discourse within country music around rural and urban appears to be reversed, with the rural venerated and the urban treated with 'suspicion' (Tichi, 1994, p. 37). Tichi argues that a rural/urban dichotomy structures representations of home (and implicitly belonging) in country music – 'country music positions the home directly against the opposing values represented by urbanism' (ibid, p. 35). Tichi describes the values represented by urbanism within the country music imagination as 'materialism, social status, hurdles of hierarchy, and all sorts of false value systems' as opposed to the 'love and kindness' represented by the rural, country home (ibid, p. 35). As previously discussed in the Conceptual Framework outlining this concept (Section 3.3.2), these representations of home and the rural/urban dichotomy are not isolated to country music, but a practice in the genre that 'sustains a long-term American tradition... [as] part of a powerful historical American suspicion of – and anxiety about – cities' (ibid, p. 37). Tichi outlines how 'from the Revolutionary era on, numerous writers have worried that North America might emulate the corrupt cities of Europe... and eventually urban America drew the same fire' (ibid). Much of this has carried over into country's music's representation of the city (Jensen, 1998, pp. 29-30; see also Watson, 2014, p. 52). LGBTQIA+ subjects, through these dichotomous representations seemingly navigate exclusion from the rural home on one hand, whilst

the metronormative narrative seemingly challenges some of these representations of cities, yet keeps intact the initial moment of exclusion, 'of forced movement away from an original home' (Fortier, 2001, p. 408). One conceptual issue for this chapter is to consider that neither the rural nor urban 'homes' as essentially providing belonging for LGBTQIA+ people, and how the spatially coded genres country and pop are not completely distinct from one another.

These representations of rural and urban are incorporated into country music's authenticity debates, and consequentially these representations become more of a dialectic than dichotomy. When discussing the malleable and at times contradictory operations of what Peterson has described as 'the hard-core/ soft-shell dialectic' (1998, p. 234), Morris poses the question: 'is a Nudie suit, spangled and ostentatious, hard-core because of its indelible country associations, or soft-core because of its urban aspirations?' (2013, p. 176). This would suggest that urban and rural in terms of aesthetic signifiers are more conflicted rather than fixed. The rural and urban dialectic in country music also has its tensions and contradictions. The country music industry and some of its scholarship has romanticized country as a rural genre. Malone and Laird describe The Carter Family as singing 'of an America that was gradually disappearing, an America whose values had seemed inextricably interrelated with rural or small-town life' (2018, p. 81). Yet the genre has always required the city to produce the music, with Nashville becoming the centre of the country music industry. Further, the initial commercial appeal of country and old-time music required urbanisation to create the myth of an 'America that was gradually disappearing'. It constructs a 'nostalgia for a supposedly purer past... a purportedly "simpler time"' which the industry has 'commodified' (Edwards, 2018, p. 7; see also Lipsitz, 1990, p. 22, p. 3). As more Americans migrated from the country to more urban areas, country music provided voice to the renegotiation from the rural to the urban (Edwards, 2018, p. 49).

These conflicts and tensions have interplayed within country music authenticity debates, which Sanjek summarises as a 'rhetoric of "desecration" and "abandonment" [that] persists' (1998, p. 25) throughout the country music industry. These tensions often

make these debates fraught, as if the authentic rural roots of country need to be preserved against urban corruption. Sometimes this rhetoric is framed in terms of sound, for instance, 'the resistance for many years of the Grand Ole Opry Management to the use of electronic instruments' (ibid). Nashville and the country music industry has sought to preserve some of its rural connotations through its self-presentation of a 'sense of family and informality' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 240), as opposed to a metropolitan centre like New York or Los Angeles. Yet there are a number of country songs that have figured the 'journey' to Nashville as one of corrupting authenticity (Neal, 2007, p. 60), for example Larry Cordle and Lonesome Standard Time's 'Murder on Music Row' (1999; see also Neal, 2007, p. 62), and The Chicks' 'Long Time Gone' (2002). The final verse of the latter emphasises 'rural... contentment' (Neal, 2007, p. 60) of watching 'the children and the garden grow' over being a 'big deal' and becoming a 'star' in Nashville (The Chicks, 2002). A notable example, contemporary to Parton, of rejecting urban identifications would be Loretta Lynn's 'You're Lookin' at Country' (1971b) where Lynn's protagonist insists, 'You don't see no city when you look at me cause country's all I am'. These conflicted representations of rural and urban, and the way they interact with ideas of genre categories form the backdrop for Parton's crossover.

Parton's own repertoire's engagement with a rural to urban trajectory reflects some of this corruption narrative, although there is more complexity in these songs even before the commercial crossover moment. Perhaps most notable is the tragic narrative of 'My Blue Ridge Mountain Boy' where a 'country girl' who has never moved beyond her 'state lines' moves from the Blue Ridge Mountains to New Orleans and falls into prostitution (Parton, 1969c). 'Blackie Kentucky' also has a tragic narrative where she leaves her small town to the city and her abusive husband keeps her friends and family away leading the protagonist to take her own life (Parton, 1974a). As much as the tropes of corruption are deployed, in 'Blackie Kentucky', Parton does acknowledge issues within the rural and the 'sad poverty' (ibid) that drove her song's protagonist away to the city. These rural to urban migratory narratives are filled with loss, yet there is the question of what drove the protagonist to leave the rural if it was so fulfilling (Tichi, 1994, p.138).

The album, *My Tennessee Mountain Home* (1973b) (that will be explored in detail in the next chapter) complicates this spatial narrative. The album opens with Parton (1973d) reading the ‘first letter’ she wrote to her parents when she moved to Nashville – where Parton describes feeling ‘lonesome’. The final song ‘Down on Music Row’ is a romanticized account of Parton’s arrival in Nashville and which bounds with optimism in the upbeat melody and the (fictionalised) narrative (Edwards, 2018, p. 83) of Parton (1973a) playing her ‘songs’ for ‘Chet and Bob at RCA’ who then tell her she is on her way to being ‘a star’. Even before her pop-crossover moment in 1977, Parton is representing an urban location (Nashville may not be Los Angeles but it is distinctly more metropolitan in its associations than the Smoky Mountains) as a place of fulfilment and possibility, and not just as a cautionary tale to juxtapose the rural. These spatial representations are a manifestation of the fluidity of genre categories throughout Parton’s repertoire, and it should be reiterated that Parton’s crossover is significant not as a complete break from Parton’s previous genre work, but as making more salient the way Parton’s repertoire navigates and reworks ideas of authenticity, genre, and identity.

6.1.2 Conceptualising Parton’s Crossover

My approach to Parton’s crossover is to challenge some of the ways this moment is linked to her reputation as an LGBTQIA+ icon, which through the signifiers from Los Angeles, would seem to perpetuate dominant metronormative narratives, and more importantly for this thesis would reify rigid genre distinctions between country and pop. Such a reading would suggest that Parton’s ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with LGBTQIA+ audiences are only formed within the pop genre and marketplace. Parton’s earlier country repertoire within these loaded cultural narratives is figured as rigidly heteronormative. Emphasising her crossover into pop as the key point for Parton’s role as an LGBTQIA+ icon also reinforces conservative narratives about the country music audience. It assumes heteronormativity within Parton’s country audience and an overly geographical simplistic paradigm of where Parton’s LGBTQIA+ fans are (in metropolitan cities like New York and Los Angeles), and musically places them within more mainstream pop than “traditional” country. As the following chapter that looks at this material in more detail will go on to argue, Parton’s country repertory is just as queerly

resonant as her “pop” crossover repertory. The main emphasis of this chapter is on exploring Parton’s crossover moment in more depth. Parton’s crossover trajectory is not a complete displacement of the country genre, aesthetically, geographically, or politically, but about reconceptualising and renegotiating the terms of the genres of country and pop.

Parton’s crossover engages with issues of genre, place, and identity that considers these concepts as fluid, but also meaningful, and therefore reflecting an approach to authenticity that threads through her entire discography. Morris argues that Parton’s persona image of this period is particularly notable for its use of camp (2013, p. 205), and specifically Parton’s ‘play with appearances’ that has negotiated ‘a contrast between exterior and interior realities’ (ibid, p. 207). Parton’s image (that becomes particularly pronounced during this crossover period) relies on a dualism between outside artifice that belies her ‘real’ self and the excess of the ‘artificial’ image that provides opportunities for play and performance of different gendered and class-based stereotypes and assumptions (Edwards, 2018, p. 27).

As previously mentioned, Morris also suggests that this crossover period is significant for establishing Parton as a ‘post-Stonewall icon’, and as introducing her into a collection of figures that includes Cher and Judy Garland (Morris, 2013, p. 207). My reading of this crossover is that it makes more salient aspects of Parton’s persona, music and image that make this interpretation of Parton more pronounced, rather than a complete reworking of her. There is a particular aspect of Parton’s crossover that has striking parallels with Dyer’s analysis of Garland, a figure he considers demonstrates ‘resonances’ between this kind of figure and LGBTQIA+ audiences (particularly gay men) (Dyer, 2004, p. 165), and that is the way that both Parton and Garland navigate the notion of ‘ordinariness’ (2004, p. 151). Both to a certain extent have careers and images that play with ordinary and extraordinariness, that use certain signifiers of rural or ordinary ‘small-town values’ (ibid, p. 158). Parton’s country ‘prehistory’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 202) and Garland’s child-star role as Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz as a small-town Kansas girl provide this initial ‘ordinary’ back story for both of these figures as a

‘prerequisite’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 152) to their turning out not to be ordinary, through for instance Parton’s crossover and ‘complex... gender performance’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 31); and Garland’s later career which Dyer describes as an exaggerated performance of gender (specifically ‘gender androgyny’ (2004, p. 166)). This mirrors the trajectory of some LGBTQIA+ narratives, who are ‘brought up to be ordinary’ straight subjects by the dominant culture, and later ‘turn out not ordinary’ (ibid, p. 153). There are particular resonances with a foregrounding of this idea of ‘ordinariness’ that both suggest Parton can be situated within a group of LGBTQIA+ icons, whilst at the same time suggesting particular significations with Parton.

There are particular aspects of Parton’s crossover that suggest a relationship to genre and identity that differ from other LGBTQIA+ icons. Morris goes on to compare Parton’s trajectory to that of Cher, pointing out that unlike Cher, Parton’s crossover and status as an LGBTQIA+ icon rely on a particular kind of relationship with her audience which relies on Parton’s country backstory and identification to be maintained. Morris argues that Cher’s career ‘has sought increasing abstraction from the limitations of ethnic or class specificity’, in other words from essentialist identity markers (2013, p. 177). Parton cannot completely disavow her ‘country’ and rural identification markers; to do so would be to risk losing her marketable persona. Therefore, the migratory narrative (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66; Herring, 2010, p. 10) that abandons the rural home (Fortier, 2003, p. 116) and finds acceptance and belonging in the city (ibid, p. 131) differs from Parton’s, which works to keep both rural and urban identifications. As Morris summarises, ‘Parton’s career demonstrates the tricky manoeuvring required of those who wish to move away from “home” without leaving it behind entirely’ (ibid). Parton achieves this manoeuvre through constructing ‘an image of the ultimate glamour-puss as seen by a naïve farm girl’ (ibid, p. 183). Parton’s crossover becomes about reconciling and ‘combining’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 42) different cultural and social identities and musical styles associated with different genre categories. For LGBTQIA+ listeners, Parton may foreground complex dynamics of home and belonging through her particular work with genres and musical categories.

There is a particular paradox at this moment in Parton's career and within the concept of crossover more generally. David Brackett argues that 'crossover derives from the way in which the process appears, on the one hand, to reinforce category-identity relations, while at the same time (and paradoxically) exposing inconsistencies in the way these relations are understood' (2016, p. 26). Crossover in one sense requires distinct 'preexisting categories' of an identifiable genre for an artist to be placed initially, and another distinct identifiable genre category for the artist to 'move' into, or from which to incorporate elements (ibid). Yet the movement between and within categories destabilises the 'imagined unities' of 'categories of people and music' (ibid). Parton's crossover simultaneously requires a sense of country and pop as distinct identifiable categories with different cultural and social associations, yet also as genres that (musically and geographically) cannot be completely separated. The rural country "Dolly" must remain in conjunction with the metropolitan pop "Dolly". Parton's pop crossover image, what she would later refer to as a 'country girl's idea of glam' (Parton, 2008), is 'firmly' rooted in country culture (Hiltner, 2021a). The paradox of crossover – that it can simultaneously reinforce rigid categories and destabilise them – also relates to the way social identities are figured. As discussed in the introduction, genre can operate according to 'homology' that applies an essentialist identity logic where 'categories of people are directly related to categories of music' (Brackett, 2016, p. 17). The idea of crossover would therefore both reinforce the existence of social categories (with essentialist implications rooted in pseudo-scientific beliefs in the categorisation of people with 'colonial' logics (Halberstam, 2018, p. 5; see also Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 10) that I outlined in the conceptual framework (Section 3.1.1)), whilst at the same time challenge this essentialism by revealing identities to be more fluid and changeable. Through 'crossover, we are able to see clearly how genre boundaries are defended' and by making this boundary work visible this offers potential for resistance, 'disruption', and critique (Hughes, 2022, p. 206). Crossover reveals the unstable ground upon which genre and identity are constructed.

The potential of crossover both to reinforce rigid identity categories and to challenge them is reflected in the different ways scholars have approached Parton's crossover into

pop. As discussed in the overview to Parton as a case study (Section 4.3), some like Malone and Laird suggest that Parton's identity should remain determined by the country genre, and whilst they acknowledge Parton's wider celebrity and commercial success achieved by crossover, they ultimately use this to reinforce a discursive move to focus on Parton's 'rural-mountain origins and... immersion in country music culture' (2018, p. 364). In this view, Parton's more pop material is somewhat distinct from Parton's country repertoire. Crossover in this way works to preserve and reify a rigid country genre 'classification' (Brackett, 2016, p. 31) within Parton's discography. This would also suggest a narrative of belonging and authenticity that constructs Parton's "true" musical identity and belonging as being within a 'fixed' idea of what country music is (ibid, p. 26), as seemingly separate from pop. An alternative interpretation of this crossover moment, and the one that this chapter takes, is that as well as the crossover framing the entirety of Parton's discography through constructing a 'pre-history' (Edwards, 2018, p. 202) out of Parton's early repertoire, this framing also establishes a critical mode to genre, identity and belonging throughout the whole of her discography.

As previously outlined, Edwards argues that Parton challenges rigid binaries and tensions within discourses around country music 'by saying both things are true at once: her work is both folk and mass, real and fake' (2018, p. 7). This suggests a different approach towards belonging in Parton's repertoire. Parton's songs, both in her crossover and beyond, combine 'explicitly autobiographical lyrics', descriptions of 'pastoral, idyllic views' (which carry associations of country music rural authenticity) with the glamour of her 'multimedia' celebrity environment (ibid, p. 223). Edwards argues, using the 2014 song, 'Home' as an example, that rather than interpreting this as producing a "traditional" or romanticised view of country as an inherent home, or place of belonging for Parton, instead this is a more transient or 'hybrid space, in which she is enacting her media persona in different multimedia spaces while recalling her folk culture mountain childhood, is actually her figurative "home" space' (ibid). Parton invokes rural images of 'home' but by bringing this directly into the realm of the artificial, she resists binary assumptions that fix home (and genre) into one place. It is not that Parton is more fulfilled in the pop genre, or more at home in country, but that her songs

represent her as navigating ‘precarious’ (Biddle, 2013, p. 212) belonging in and across both. These genres and their contexts offer possibility for both Parton, but also LGBTQIA+ listeners through practices of queer reading as the songs navigate the cultural, genre and industry contexts of pop and country, which as musical spaces are ‘infinitely permeable and [have] shifting boundaries between insides and outsides’ (Fuss, 1991, p. 4).

The approach this thesis takes to Parton’s crossover period, and considering her repertoire as a whole, is to conceptualise this period of Parton’s career as furthering her critique of essentialist identity categories, at the same time as utilising identity and ‘authenticity narratives’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 32) as generative political tools for LGBTQIA+ listeners of country. Parton’s crossover paradox needs to be conceptualised carefully to not too readily read Parton’s country audience as rigidly distinct from her pop audience, and by extension to read country audiences as inherently heteronormative. Such readings feed into the ‘dominant narrative construct’ (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3) that enable homophobia within the country music industry (Barker, 2022a). This crossover moment is not about abandoning country signifiers or identifications, but about challenging essentialist identity categories and ideas about who can signify as country. Parton’s crossover repertoire and legacy is significant for demonstrating that LGBTQIA+ people can belong in country, and that country music (with its ‘authenticity narratives’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 39)) does not have to be rigidly defined and fixed. This approach builds on critiques of metronormativity to challenge rigid narratives of where LGBTQIA+ people can be ‘at home’ (Fortier, 2001, p. 409), not to merely reaffirm a romanticised sense of ‘home’ elsewhere, but as a critical mode for conceptualising the pluralistic constructions and articulations of belonging in genre, that Parton’s songs enable in country music.

6.2 Here You Come Again

I will now turn to the album that is regarded as her commercial pop-crossover, *Here You Come Again* (1977b), in more detail. Parton’s own statements about her crossover are revealing about her attitude towards genre and musical categories. Parton would say of

her crossover period, 'I'm taking it [country] with me, taking it new places' (1994a, p. 188). This claim forms a promotional function, aiming to maintain commercial viability within the country market. At the same time, Parton's statement presents country and pop as being related to one another, and not necessarily having to be rigidly distinct. In terms of how this is borne out through the period's musical output, Morris argues that Parton's claim is 'overoptimistic' (2013, p. 203) as *Here You Come Again* (1977b), is not a complete fusion of pop and country styles, but has an 'internal variety... placing... stylistically different songs in juxtaposition' (ibid, p. 197). The lead single and title track is the furthest into pop with its stylised production, pop ballad melody and vocal range (ibid, p. 196). Songs like 'It's All Wrong, But It's All Right' (1977d) are closer to country and 'Two Doors Down' (1977g) stylistically has some pop elements but its vocal harmonies, Morris argues, draw more on 'gospel' which he describes as a 'neighbour' of country (2013, p. 197). 'Me and Little Andy' (1977e) takes country and folk tragic narratives and places them in a more pop sounding production. The album arguably leans more aesthetically into country overall, with some key pop elements in its lead single, album artwork, its promotion, and some aspects of production. There is a sense that the album is 'calculated to reassure potentially worried country listeners that Parton was still recognizably herself, still rooted in a country genre' (Edwards, 2018, p. 120).

The album track 'Me and Little Andy' is perhaps the most emphatic musical support for Parton's claim that she is taking country with her in this crossover moment. The song is about a neglected child ('not more than six or seven' (Parton, 1977d)) and her dog who is out in the cold until the speaker of the song lets them in her house, but the child and her dog die during the night ('we might infer malnutrition, or the results of abuse, or simply being unloved' (Morris, 2013, p. 198)). The song's narrative fits firmly into established country music affective logics of 'compassion' and the character tropes of 'abandoned children' as well as 'socially peripheral types' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350). The little girl and her dog are social outcasts by their implicit class position reflected in their material poverty. 'Me and Little Andy' also relates to previous '(s)ongs of (t)ragedy' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 164) previously in Parton's discography, its subject matter invoking Appalachian folk musical traditions (ibid, p. 165). Morris points out that

Parton's stresses on the word 'before' gives 'Me and Little Andy' a 'slightly folky feel' (2013, p. 199). The song situates itself within long-established affective logics both within country music traditions and within Parton's previous discography. However, the song's positionality is slightly different. Sonically, 'Me and Little Andy' contains few country instrumental signifiers, apart from the acoustic guitar. There is 'a tape of the icy wind howling' (ibid, p. 199), and the sense of sadness is conveyed by string arrangements and fuller, lush arrangements (ibid, p. 200), which is more reminiscent of countrypolitan than older country styles or folk instrumentation.

There is a tension between the affective lyrical content, the scale of tragedy and 'sentimentality' (Morris, 2013, p. 200) that is broadly coded as country (if more specifically hearkening back to Appalachian folk traditions), and the instrumentation and arrangement that signify as pop. Morris points out the feature of a music box and the melody drawing on children's nursery rhymes. Melodically and sonically, these differ from country, yet these musical elements give voice to the child of the song. Parton (1977d) also imitates a child's voice in the lines 'Ain't ya got no gingerbread? Ain't ya got no candy?'. This gives a haunting quality to the song as if the child is speaking (singing) from beyond the grave. There is something significant in the way Parton evokes a country music archetypal character: 'abandoned or mistreated children' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350), but uses generically unconventional sonic tools to do this.

'Me and Little Andy' demonstrates that it is not particular instrumentation or even musical conventions that have to 'authenticate' (Moore, 2002, p. 216) a song as country, but that other musical modes of expression can also be effective at producing and conveying country affective logics. Country here is less of an essentialist and rigid sonic category and more a 'descriptive' (Brackett, 2016, p. 7) tool for exploring aesthetic and affective content. Further, in considering Parton's songs as 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16) with trajectories and travels of their own, the inclusion of 'Me and Little Andy' on Parton's major commercial pop-crossover album is significant, and this song was performed on almost all of the shows she did around *Here You Come Again*

(Anderson, 2019). As Parton is crossing over, 'Me and Little Andy' keeps a key affective link to her Appalachian identity (both personal and musical) and this substantiates her claim that she is not abandoning country music in this period, but reworking what a country identification might mean, and who can be included in a claim to belonging in the genre.

6.2.1 LGBTQIA+ Resonances in 'Here You Come Again'

The album's lead single (and title track) works to manage Parton's crossover. This is significant commercially, as Parton's first platinum record ("Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?" (1973-1983)', 2019) but also (for the focus of my analysis) aesthetically and affectively. 'Here You Come Again' (1977c) conveys the emotional side of the journey from country to pop and sonically represents these affective tensions. The song's narrative is of a past lover coming back and, despite the protagonist's better judgement, becoming infatuated once again. The dramatic tension of the song comes from the protagonist's inner conflict of wanting to move on and 'make it work without' them (Parton, 1977b), trying to resist them, whilst becoming seduced and finding joy and pleasure in the rekindled infatuation. Mitchell Morris argues that the verses lyrically and melodically convey a sense of uncertainty, 'fragility', perhaps even uneasiness (2013, p. 196). Parton's 'first entrance [into the song] can be heard as uncertain... the bottom of her phrase is low in her tessitura' (ibid). Whereas the more upbeat melody of the chorus and Parton's vocal performance, especially in her higher registers where she can belt more powerfully, convey the sense of pleasure and joy of this encounter (ibid, p. 195). As the song that announces Parton's crossover, these affective logics can also be read to resonate with Parton's spatial and genre trajectory; this moment is one of anxiety and risk (for example commercially in terms of the reception of the industry and audiences to her crossover) whilst also one of possibility and opportunities.

'Here You Come Again' embodies many of the conflicts of this crossover moment. Morris poses the question, '(c)an it also be read as a metaphor for Parton's attempts to maintain steadiness in the face of so much temptation?' (2013, p. 196). As Parton's crossover was constructed on a narrative of not having moved too far away from her

country identity, this moment produces questions of what this means for Parton to be in the pop genre: What does this crossover mean for Parton's country identity? Can Parton belong in this new musical setting? The first question, Parton attempts to resolve through the song's instrumentation, which layers on 'pedal steel' (Morris 2013, p. 194; see also Edwards 2018, p. 121) to provide sonic 'reassurance' for some listeners (Edwards, 2018, p. 181). It can be debated how much this worked to reassure and maintain Parton's country identity, and in particular identifying 'Here You Come Again' as a country song. Parton received considerable 'backlash' around the song's crossover (Edwards, 2018, p. 120). This backlash attempts to reify rigid ideas of genre category and identity. There is resistant potential within Parton's crossover and discourse of taking country with her, to foreground issues of how genre categories work and reveal that their boundaries can be porous and fluid (Brackett, 2016, p. 3, p. 26), with the potential to be more open and inclusive.

The question as to whether 'Here You Come Again' demonstrates that Parton *belongs* within the musical world of pop is also ambiguous. The emotional content of the song oscillates between anxiety and excitement. The lyrics reflect some of this anxiety from the loss of control as the returning lover wraps the protagonist's 'heart 'round [their] little finger', the ups and downs of the relationship that she describes as 'shaking me up so', and the uncertainty produced by desire that overcomes 'all [her]... defences' (Parton, 1977b). Pleasure throughout the song is combined with anxiety, uncertainty, and threat. The lyrics describe 'that smile' that overcomes the protagonist's defences, the lover's looks – 'better than a body has a right to', and the threat is more directly named in the last line of the chorus leading to a musical climax, 'you're messing up my mind and filling up my senses' (ibid). The song ends with pleasure and risk intermixed, as Parton delivers the repeated line 'here I go' with excitement (ibid), but also uncertainty as to what will happen, whether the cycle of heartbreak will repeat. Although the song's lyrical content is about a romantic and sexual relationship, there are broader implications in this interplay of uncertainty and excitement at Parton's moment of pop-crossover. The instability in the verses of 'Here you Come Again' can also reflect a sense of worry in arriving in a new place (musically and geographically), but the flip to joy and pleasure

reflects the positive flipside of the excitement. 'Here You Come Again' conveys both in tandem. There is perhaps not a 'fixed' place of genre belonging (Brackett, 2016, p. 16) for this song or Parton here, and the uncertainty can be a generative mode for critiquing rigid and essentialist modes of categorising identities.

There are potential resonances with LGBTQIA+ audiences that can be drawn out here, not least the intermingling of sexuality and identity, and the song's 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) within the historical moment of the 1970s, which as Morris argues was significant for the changing culture around gay and lesbian liberation (2013, p. 207). A queer reading of 'Here You Come Again' could see this song as a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) for LGBTQIA+ listeners of Parton, and particularly within ideas and narratives of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong. As the decade that developed what have become dominant ideas of LGBTQIA+ subjectivities, and especially 'metronormativity' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66), Parton's navigation of rural and urban through the spatially coded genres of country and pop are particularly resonant. 'Here You Come Again', with its complex multifaceted emotions, could also reflect the complex emotional experience of rural LGBTQIA+ people arriving in a city for the first time: excitement, hope, but also anxiety about adjusting to city life. The uncertainty conveyed in Parton's performance of this song challenges the supposed stability of metronormativity, and moreover the stability of genre categories and their social associations. The uncertainty conveyed in Parton's vocal performance questions the completeness of LGBTQIA+ belonging in pop and whether this has to be categorically conceptualised outside of the country music genre. By not reifying rigid genre identities and a constructed separation from country and pop in this crossover moment, Parton leaves open the possibility for country to effectively express LGBTQIA+ narratives and experiences that might not be all that different from pop. It also suggests that Parton can participate within multiple genre spaces and suggests a kind of belonging that does not need to fall back on restrictive essentialism or rigid fixed categories in order to be achieved.

6.3 ‘Baby I’m Burnin’

In ‘Here You Come Again’, Parton brought to the fore ideas of genre and identity as being fluid, whilst needing to keep identity and authenticity as important concepts, through, for instance, maintaining Parton’s identification with country. Through queer reading, I drew out the potential in the affective content of the song to resonate with the emerging context of LGBTQIA+ lives of the period. The next case study, ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ (1978a), interrogates these issues further. As a song that incorporates elements of disco, this adds a further aspect to ideas and assumptions about genre, identity and belonging, with implications for how songs during Parton’s pop-crossover period ‘resonate’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with LGBTQIA+ listeners. I first outline the way scholarship has conceptualised the significance of disco within LGBTQIA+ history and especially the ways in which LGBTQIA+ identities, especially the development of ‘gay male’ as a dominant subjectivity (Lawrence, 2011, p. 233). I then explore the various ways Parton aesthetically and commercially positions the genre of ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ in relation to disco, pop, rock and country. Finally, I analyse ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ according to Dyer’s ‘characteristics of disco’ (2002, p. 154) which I will be referring to as disco’s affective logics before bringing Parton’s ‘disco song’ (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 225) into direct conversation with Parton’s representations of sexuality in her previous discography. This will demonstrate potential synergy and complementarity between disco, pop and country that does not need to anxiously uphold stable essentialist identities of people or genre.

6.3.1 *Disco and Forming LGBTQIA+ Identities*

Disco as a genre has been identified with LGBTQIA+, particularly gay male, audiences much more commonly than country. As alluded to in my methodology discussion (Section 5.1) of the role of LGBTQIA+ audiences in interpreting texts and forming their ‘own culture’ (Dyer, 2002, p. 153), Dyer argues that disco ‘is important in forming a gay identity’ (ibid, pp. 153-154). Dyer suggests that disco’s aesthetic quality of rhythm ‘restores eroticism to the whole of the body’ and its ‘expressive, sinuous movement’, disco ‘indicates an openness to... sexuality’ (ibid, p. 156). Dyer suggests that the ‘openness’ offered by disco may resonate with gay men in part because gay men may

'have traditionally not thought of [themselves] as being 'real men'', but also as a result of the generative potential 'of gay ghetto culture...[as] a space where alternative definitions, including of sexuality, can be developed' (ibid). Dyer describes how the organisation of non-commercial discos by gay and women's groups functioned 'as supportive expressions of something like a gay community' (ibid, p. 158). Disco and the social communities built around it enabled some forms of gay identity formation. For Dyer it is important that the social organisation around disco is not separated from the music's aesthetic qualities. It is through the sound's 'opening up experience' (ibid, p. 159) that 'alternative definitions' (ibid, p. 156) and identities arise.

The exact role that disco had within the formation of gay identities has been debated and the politics remain contested, particularly around the extent to which the discourse focuses on gay men to the exclusion of the wider diversity of LGBTQIA+ people. Subsequent scholarship on disco has critiqued the perceived stability of a gay identity that is linked to disco. Stephen Lawrence argues that disco did not just 'affirm' identities that were already there but had an active role in constructing that identity as 'gay men' (2006, p. 147). Nadine Hubbs, in her discussion of the homophobic backlash to disco, describes homophobia as both 'fear of known homosexual persons' and a 'broader... fear and loathing towards any perceived aura of homosexuality... in a culture in which knowledge of actual homosexuals and homosexuality was taboo, avoided and denied' (2007, p. 232). Homophobia is targeted at a range of people, encompassing both sexuality and gender identity, beyond a rigid category of 'homosexuality'. Hubbs uses 'queer' (ibid, p. 233) to encompass a range of conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, some that did not reify a rigid identity. According to Lawrence, through the course of the 1970s, 'gay men began to comprehend... their sexuality as being settled rather than mutating' (2006, p. 147), in part due to commercial factors that perceived marketing to be easier if directed at a perceived stable demographic (Lawrence, 2011, p. 240). Thereby 'gay men' became the dominant subjectivity and dominant mode for understanding disco's role in the formation and expression of sexual identities.

As disco developed and became more commercialised, it came to represent only a 'fraction' of white gay men, who 'considered themselves to be part of some kind of elite that was organised around beauty, professional success and intelligence, and only wanted to dance with men they considered their equals' (Lawrence, 2011, p. 240). Lawrence describes a number of the venues such as The Loft and The Sanctuary in New York as 'heterogeneous' in terms of the different kinds of people that participated within early disco culture, including gay men, lesbians and heterosexual women (ibid, p. 232). Lawrence notes that The Loft 'attracted a significant proportion of Black gay men' (ibid). These venues in disco's early period were able to cater for a wide diversity of people, which is important to recognise when countering narratives of disco as a 'homogenous' white 'gay male constituency' so as not to erase other subjectivities and 'histories' (Lawrence, 2011, p. 233) from these discourses. Jaap Kooijman, in revisiting Dyer's essay, argues that the potential for identity formation has broader queer potential than just gay male identities, asserting that 'disco may not merely provide the space for the recreation of gay male... identities, but potentially also for the deconstruction of all identities along the lines of straight and gay, male and female' (2005, p. 264). Within disco, like country, there is a debate between essentialising identity as rigid and stable, and seeing the potential of destabilising these identities. Kooijman argues that the AIDS epidemic (ibid), made the need to destabilise these processes of categorisation all too clear as a strategy for 'exposing and deconstructing the categories and binary oppositions (masculine/ feminine, straight/gay) that keep us marginalised' (ibid, pp. 263-264). To this list we could also add the processes of categorisation and exclusion within some formations of musical genre, especially as marketing categories. Disco has the potential to challenge rigid categorisation of identities underlying popular music marketing categories, whilst at the same time the discourse has often reinforced essentialism and exclusionary ideas of gay male identities. Arguably this discourse is not too different in principle from 'exclusionary' definitional 'practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) of the country music industry.

When situating Parton and 'Baby I'm Burnin'' into this context, it is important to be careful not to ignore identities and 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) beyond white gay

men. There are times when Parton's own narrative of this period in her career falls on rigid, if not essentialist, ideas of a stable gay male identity, with the consequences for reifying exclusionary and restrictive ideas of musical genre. In Parton's 2020 book *Songteller*, the description of 'Baby I'm Burnin'' relates to disco and an anecdote about her 'gay manager' Sandy at Studio 54 with Andy Warhol (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 225). The geographic spatial work of locating Parton's 'queer friendliness' (Hubbs, 2015, p. 73) in New York instead of Nashville or rural Tennessee parallels the genre framing that positions Parton's LGBTQIA+ resonances in pop or disco, and implicitly outside country music. Similarly, Parton's documentary *Dolly Parton: Here I Am* (2019) underscores a discussion of her LGBTQIA+ fanbase with 'Islands in the Stream', her 1983 pop-country crossover hit with Kenny Rogers which has an electronic dance production, and with footage from Studio 54. Both these representations deploy the metronormative trope that sets up specifically New York (but more broadly the metropolitan locale of which New York is exemplary) as *the* place for LGBTQIA+ belonging (Herring, 2010, pp. 1-3)). New York (Studio 54) becomes an easy shorthand for Parton and the documentary makers to quickly signify to the audience that the documentary is moving to discuss her LGBTQIA+ fanbase, a move that reinforces this dominant metronormative association. In both disco and country, it is important to critique ideas of identity that are too rigidly essentialist and work to categorise people too neatly. By recognising the full diversity of people in disco, and the full diversity of people in country, these genre identity labels become more fluid and able to be adopted by a broader range of subjects – gay, LGBTQIA+, heterosexual, country, disco, pop – who can share the same (musical) space.

6.3.2 'Baby I'm Burnin'' and Parton's Genre Positionality

'Baby I'm Burnin'' was a single from Parton's second pop-crossover album *Heartbreaker* in 1978, the album released as the follow up to the commercial crossover success of *Here You Come Again*. *Heartbreaker* featured more pop elements, 'venturing into disco and adult contemporary easy listening' (Edwards, 2018, p. 121). Yet, as Edwards argues, some of the reassurances to her audiences of her consistency from her earlier repertoire remain, through continued inclusion of 'material that would appeal to her

country fan base' especially 'autobiographical songs that anchored her star image to her Appalachian roots' (ibid). *Heartbreaker* featured the autobiographical song 'Nickles and Dimes' (1978c) that draws on Parton's 'memories of busking on Knoxville street corners for change [and] discusses repaying with songs people who contributed to her dreams' (ibid). Edwards argues that these autobiographical features work to ensure 'her sincerity address' (ibid). In this way, even if sonically Parton is moving into pop, she is maintaining the affective importance of "'authenticity" claims' (Edwards, 2018, p. 14) and her life story in her repertoire.

Parton's genre categorisation during this period continued to be contested and the release of 'Baby I'm Burnin'' in 1978 is significant, as not only was it charting outside country markets, but its chart history reveals the 'instability' of the genre system itself (Brackett, 2016, p. 26). 'Baby I'm Burnin'' was released to the pop charts and so the song is significant as being promoted outside of country markets (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 225). Parton describes her approach to writing the song as being designed for 'disco' from the beginning, as opposed to some of her other songs that would later be remixed for the dancefloor (ibid). However, the song's charting history suggests a different relationship to genre and marketing categories. Around the time of its release and its initial chart run in 1978, the song was identified as country, rock, pop and disco. The Billboard single review on 18th November 1978 was placed under country (1978a, p. 78), and the following week under pop (1978b, p. 104), reflecting Parton's changing marketing strategy and musical category placement of the time. The texts of the Billboard single reviews are also illuminating and identify the sound most consistently across both as 'rock', with the first review in the country section saying that the song 'should... answer the question of whether Parton can rock'n'roll' (Billboard, 1978a, p. 78); and the review the following week describing the song as a 'fiery rocker' (Billboard, 1978b, p. 104). Disco is mentioned once in the pop review describing the song as having a 'disco edge' (ibid). Disco is not the main genre identified with 'Baby I'm Burnin' in these reviews. This contrasts with how Parton represents it in her more retrospective legacy work like 2020's *Songteller* which identifies the song firmly as disco. The genre

classification of ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ is fluid and changing, both in terms of its aesthetics and its commercial category position.

This reflects the paradox of this crossover moment for Parton. Crossover seemingly requires firm genre categories to place an artist into a defined genre space to start with and then a defined genre space to crossover into (Brackett, 2016, p. 26). Yet at the same time, the act of crossing over demonstrates the ‘porousness of [genre] boundaries’ (Brackett, 2016, p. 3). In terms of aesthetic markers of genre, ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ has a variety of signifiers. Sonically ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ is a pop-rock disco song about the excitement of desire and sexuality, implicitly on the dancefloor. There is little, if any, narrative or distinguishing characterisation of either the song’s protagonist or the love/ sex object who is simply addressed as either ‘baby’ or ‘you’ (there are no gendered pronouns or other gender signifiers) (Parton, 1978a). ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ conveys a short snapshot of that moment of desire ‘ignited’ (ibid) and the song’s temporal and narrative parameters are singularly focused on that moment and experience of intense desire. The song can be situated within some conventions of disco, through its representations of desire and its sonic features. Whereas ‘Here You Come Again’ had some steel guitar to reassure some listeners of Parton’s country identity, there are no similar sonic reassurances in ‘Baby I’m Burnin’’. The lack of much narrative or characterisation also means that Parton does not create any lyrical references to her previous “country” discography. The electronic keyboard that is the main driver of the rhythm and melody indicates rock, whereas its electronic sound effects and fast beat suggest disco.

6.3.3 ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ and Disco’s Affective Logics

‘Baby I’m Burnin’ may add to the genres that Parton is working in, however, it is important to be clear that disco does not have to necessarily be discussed as an ‘other’ to country (Haddon, 2020, p. 12), but it may be more generative to consider it a ‘neighbouring’ genre (Beebee, 1994, p. 28). It is the lyrics and their representation of desire and the body, supported by Parton’s vocal performance, that most clearly position ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ within the aesthetic and affective conventions of disco. Dyer

identifies three 'characteristics of disco' that function as affective logics: 'eroticism, romanticism and materialism' (2002, p. 154). Dyer describes disco's 'eroticism' as expressing the full physicality of the body, arguing that the rhythm of disco 'restores eroticism to the whole of the body... not just confining it to the penis' (ibid). Although Dyer acknowledges that certain 'phallic forms of disco' persist and that gay men can be just as 'cock-oriented' as anyone else, he argues that due to its particular aesthetic qualities (its 'expressive, sinuous movement'), disco 'indicates an openness to a sexuality that is not defined in terms of cock' (ibid, p. 156). Disco's romanticism, according to Dyer, through 'its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday' (ibid, p. 157). Disco's materialism is about an engagement with the 'material world' and by acknowledging the materiality we are 'always immersed in', disco for Dyer becomes 'the appropriate art form for materialist politics' (ibid, p. 159). All three affective logics interlink in disco as Dyer describes that we are reminded 'that we live in a world of materiality' (materialism), 'but that the experience of materiality is not necessarily what the everyday world assures us it is' (romanticism) and disco's 'eroticism allows us to rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materiality' (ibid). Dyer describes this everyday materiality as 'rooted in the structures of class and gender of this society' as well as 'ordinary sexism and racism', and therefore argues that disco's 'flight from that banality can be seen as – is – a flight from capitalism and patriarchy themselves as lived experiences' (ibid, p. 157).

Disco's affective logics engage with materiality in order to 'transform [that] experience' (Sontag, 2018, p. 5) and through 'the movement between banality and something 'other' than banality' disco keeps 'open... a gap between what is and what could or should be' (Dyer, 2002, p. 158). There is a resonance between Dyer's analysis of disco's affective logics and Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* through how they conceptualise materiality in relation to the 'everyday' (2009, p. 3). Queer utopia for Muñoz is grounded in the 'everyday life', but is an 'impulse to be glimpsed that is extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism' (ibid, p. 22). This argument has striking similarities with Dyer's about disco being both grounded in bodily

materiality, but also striving beyond it. Both scholars take the critical turn of conceptualising utopia and disco as a transformative orientation towards resisting an 'everyday' that is constituted by patriarchy, racism and homophobia. Perhaps implicit in both is a belief that any conceptualisation that restricts its horizons to the everyday will inevitably be limited by these structural oppressions. However, there is also a tension that disco can never fully escape the everyday materiality informing both its production and consumption; similarly, utopia for Muñoz is also bound up in everyday experiences. There is a tension that disco does not completely escape its material and social constructions that have demarcated it as a particular genre or marketing category. Nevertheless, disco's aesthetics do provide critical and conceptual potential through exploring the tensions and the 'gap' between everyday oppression and experiences beyond this. This cautious utopianism can be particularly generative when the genre of disco is brought into conversation with country music.

I now return to 'Baby I'm Burnin'' to explore how Parton deploys the aforementioned 'characteristics of disco' (Dyer, 2002, p. 154). The song can be interpreted according to these affective logics identified by Dyer as 'eroticism, romanticism and materialism' (ibid), and thereby resonate with a queer conceptualisation of desire and sexuality. 'Baby I'm Burnin'' evokes disco's eroticism; the song has been described by Lydia Hamessley as 'a frenetic windup to sex' (2020, p. 116) as the song is focused on the moment and experience of sexual 'desire' (Parton, 1978a). There is a direct immediacy from the opening line – 'you look at me that way' (Parton, 1978a) – that evokes the interaction between the protagonist and the lover from the beginning of the song. The song then centres its main theme – 'your eyes reflect love and desire' – before emphasising the protagonist's own desires – 'I need you to please me' – that places the song's emphasis on eroticism (ibid). The song's central image in the title 'Baby I'm Burnin'' is reinforced through the repeated imagery of 'fire' that is linked to this eroticism in the concluding line of the first verse – 'you touch me and set me on fire' (ibid). The physicality of the bodily eroticism is linked firmly to this image making it core to the song. The fire imagery around this eroticism provides the song with increased 'passion and intensity' (Dyer, 2002, p. 157) that is key to disco's romanticism. This passion and

intensity are evoked through the excesses of the imagery – ‘everything goes up in flames’ – that reflect the excesses of the experience of ‘burning’ and feeling ‘out of control’, which culminates in the image of the protagonist as ‘hot as a pistol of flaming desire’ (Parton, 1978a).

The intensity of this lyricism straddles a line between joyful excitement and danger as the surface level meaning of the lyrics – going ‘up in flames’, the ‘red hot’ (symbolising a warning), and the ‘pistol’ – all point towards danger (Parton, 1978a). Yet the upbeat sound of the track and Parton’s exuberant joyful vocal performance that becomes more intense in the chorus pull this imagery into representing the excitement of sexual desire and pleasure when it is sung. As a form of ‘embodied language’ (Eckstein, 2010, p. 35), Parton’s vocal performance impacts the interpretation of these lyrics, that on the page may appear ambiguous, yet in the actualised performance and recording encourages a specific focus on one of the potential connotations of fire: excitement, rather than the danger, or danger becomes wrapped up in the excitement. The softening of the fire’s danger furthers the song’s romanticism that evokes an intense, passionate experience that ‘negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday’ (Dyer, 2002, p. 157). The materialism of disco, through Dyer’s conceptualisation, is also present in ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ most notably through the representation of the body. The intense romanticism of the fire image is directly linked to the bodily materiality and eroticism in the first line that introduces this imagery to the song, ‘you touch me and set me on fire’ (Parton, 1978a). This ‘touch’ is key to the romanticism and eroticism. The materiality of the body has further importance in the second verse that focuses on the bodily physicality of the interaction – ‘It’s the way that you love me, the way that you touch me’ (ibid). The intensity of both the physical interaction and the fire imagery in the song can be read as an example of how disco ‘allows us to rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materiality’ (2002, p. 159). That ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ fits into these affective logics of disco so well suggests that Parton has been able to crossover and adopt the affective, and (perhaps to a slightly less extent) aesthetic conventions of this genre. There is also something notable in this song that (if temporarily) it chooses pleasure and joy in the moment over the constraints of materiality, which for Dyer is the social world

constructed by oppression. Parton's embrace and embodiment of this desire 'negates' (Dyer, 2002, p. 157) the oppressive socially constituted materiality. This has particular 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) for some LGBTQIA+ listeners, where desire and sexuality may often be linked to shame and social stigma (which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter (Sections 7.3.1 and 7.4.1)). In the song's embrace of sexuality, there is also potential for community formation, in a way similar to the aforementioned literature around disco discussed (Dyer, 2002, p.153). As *Baby I'm Burnin'* navigates different genre categories and evokes LGBTQIA+ communities, the possibility of LGBTQIA+ community within the contexts and spaces of country music is also evoked. The song's crossover offers unique potential through this particular 'sociability' of this 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 16-17) that is able to produce different musical spaces (country, pop, rock and disco) with the potential for LGBTQIA+ belonging in each. Further, this community and sense of belonging need not rely on a rigid and exclusionary elite white 'gay male identity' (Kooijmann, 2005, p. 264; see also Lawrence, 2011, p. 233). A queer reading of Parton's song, that is sufficiently critical of genre and identity classification also resists essentialism and rigid definitions of musical genre, that as outlined in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.1), are constructed by this very same oppressive materiality.

The potential to deploy *'Baby I'm Burnin'* as a critique of rigid genre categorisation can be developed further if the song is situated more broadly within Parton's engagements with sex and sexuality throughout her repertoire. The intensity of the eroticism in *'Baby I'm Burnin'* does differ from representations of sexuality within Parton's earlier, what might be labelled as more "country", repertoire, which Parton describes as being 'more delicate' (quoted in Grobel, 1978, p. 106). However, this point of difference does not position the two genres (country and pop) as rigidly distinct. When contextualised within Parton's discography, the direct evocations of sexuality in *'Baby I'm Burnin'* appear less of a break from Parton's pre-crossover material and more a further development of a trajectory that was already there in terms of Parton's treatment of sex. This trajectory arguably moves from representations of sexuality that represent sex and sexual relationships as an area manifesting structural inequalities between men and women

and misogyny with ‘devasting consequences’ (Hamessley, 2020, p. 148)) like ‘Down from Dover’ (1970 and 2001a) and songs that call for equality like ‘Just Because I’m a Woman’ (1968b) (Hamessley, 2020, pp. 133-134; Edwards, 2018, p. 95; Barker 2021a pp. 3-4). These songs do not provide much space to give voice to women’s ‘sexual pleasure’ (Barker, 2021a, p. 4). Later songs such as ‘Touch Your Woman’ (1972a) and ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ (1973c) conceptualise their protagonists’ ‘sexual desire’ (Hamessley, 2020, p. 206) with ‘Touch Your Woman’ calling for the importance of her need to be ‘satisfied’ (Parton, 1972a) and for physical affection; and ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’, as I will outline in the next chapter (Section 7.4), suggests the flourishing of sexual desire and pleasure within the Appalachian setting.

These representations are much more coded, tempered, or ‘delicate’ than the intensity of the sexual desire conveyed in ‘Baby I’m Burnin’’. However, the context of Parton’s previous repertory suggests an emboldening of the representation of sexuality that was becoming more direct and moving away from representing sex as just a manifestation of sexism, and instead foregrounding women’s sexual desire and pleasure. Although I do not negate the different cultural and political resonances between country and disco, I suggest that we can consider these different representations within Parton’s career across different genre categories as being complementary. Disco or pop might differentiate themselves from country in a way that is less about making a hard distinction, or abandoning one set of aesthetic conventions and affective logics for another, but about bringing these genres and these logics into conversation. Parton’s aesthetic success within disco shows the malleability of performance styles and affective logics that can be adapted. Yet perhaps the joy of ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ and the ease with which Parton adopts these, compared to the more anxious adoption of different genre conventions and affective logics in *Here You Come Again*, suggests an embrace of the opportunities within crossover that does not have to threaten Parton’s country identity, nor does the maintaining of essentialist identity boundaries (of genre or selfhood) need to remain the overriding concern. Parton’s crossover does change some of the affective logics within her repertoire, but in a way that could be contextualised according to changing sexual politics and cultural discussions around sexuality, of which

disco was a key contested area (Morris, 2013, p. 207). Songs like ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ and others of this period further realise the narrative logics of moving beyond origins or everyday experiences of hardship and suffering (laced with structural oppressions including misogyny, racism, transphobia and homophobia). Considering representations of desire and sexuality alongside gender has developed the critical potential in Parton’s repertoire through my analysis of this song. This actualisation, which is perhaps the most significant affective development in Parton’s crossover moment, is imbued throughout her discography from this point, even songs that might be thought of as “traditional” country. The next section explores one of these songs in depth, with an analysis of Parton’s collaborative recording ‘Wildflowers’.

6.4 ‘Wildflowers’

The final case study song in this chapter, ‘Wildflowers’, builds on the previous discussion of the way Parton’s songs of this period can resonate with LGBTQIA+ listeners, and navigate rigid and essentialist ideas of identity and genre categories. In addition, this song emphasises more explicitly the concept of belonging. Within the previous two songs this chapter has analysed, there has been an implicit thread of belonging. In ‘Here You Come Again’, Parton negotiated different musical and genre identities and oscillated between the anxiety of not belonging, and the excitement of freedom of being able to move beyond restrictive definitions. ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ showed Parton’s song being able to embrace that liberating possibility, whilst at the same time its engagement with disco’s affective logics, and that genre’s cultural, social and historical roots of forming alternative communities and culture, implicitly provided a promise of belonging for LGBTQIA+ listeners of Parton. ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ and the wider narratives around Parton’s pop-crossover, raised further questions about genre and LGBTQIA+ belonging, and where within Parton’s repertoire this might be possible. The context of Parton’s representations of sexuality throughout her repertoire suggest that the sexuality and ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) of ‘Baby I’m Burnin’ can be situated together and be ‘authenticated’ (Moore, 2002, p. 210) within an idea of country identity. My analysis of ‘Wildflowers’ explores these tensions further to challenge assumptions of where LGBTQIA+ people can belong (in terms of musical genre) and to conceptualise a

critical approach to belonging that resists essentialist approaches to genre and authenticity.

'Wildflowers' was written by Dolly Parton, recorded by Parton, Emmylou Harris and Linda Ronstadt, and released as a single from their critically acclaimed and commercially successful collaborative album *Trio* in 1987. This album came at the tail-end of Parton's pop-crossover period, released the same year as *Rainbow* (an album that was perceived to contain more pop and rock elements than country, and was poorly received both commercially and critically (Hamessley, 2020, p. 24)). Parton's next solo record, 1989's *White Limozeen* was released as a mainstream country album (ibid, p. 143). The album (1987g) draws on an eclectic range of material from 'traditional country, folk and even old-time sound' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 23): Jimmie Rodgers ('Hobo's Mediation' (1987a) , Phil Spector ('To Know Him is To Love Him' (1987f), 'traditional hymns and old-time songs' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 76): 'My Dear Companion' (1987c), Rosewood Casket' (1987d) and 'Farther Along' (1987b)) and Parton's own compositions including 'The Pain of Loving You' (1987e) (written with Porter Wagoner) and 'Wildflowers' (1987h). 'Wildflowers' is a notable song on the album as Parton's only solo composition on the record. Parton is also the lead vocalist on the track. In many ways, 'Wildflowers' exemplifies what Parton brings to the record in the way it resonates with her life story, the use of Appalachian folk elements, and the use of bucolic Appalachian imagery (Hamessley, 2020, pp. 23-24). The song is used to 'ascribe' (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219) Parton a 'mountain music' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 87) genre identity.

'Wildflowers' uses the metaphor of wildflowers to represent its protagonist as not belonging or being confined to a place 'of origin' (Fortier, 2001, p. 416) and continuously moving and thriving in a journey that does not fix her place as being one singular thing, reflected in the refrain: 'wildflowers don't care where they grow' (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h). Throughout, the natural imagery is used to represent the protagonist's need for 'freedom' and embracing their standing out from 'the crowd' (ibid). The journey is presented at times as uncertain, letting the 'wind... decide where' the protagonist

goes, yet there is some form of closure in the final verse where the protagonist declares that she has ‘no regret for the path that [she] chose’ (ibid). In the context of Parton’s discography and career, ‘Wildflowers’ can also be interpreted as another retelling of her life story and aforementioned ‘migration’ (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66) narrative of leaving her family home in the more rural, small town Sevier County, Tennessee (Hamessley, 2020, p. 13) and then moving to increasingly metropolitan cities: Nashville and then during her pop crossover period appearing in Los Angeles and New York. The song’s instrumentation also hearkens back to “traditional” country and folk, in particular the use of the autoharp (Hamessley, 2020, p. 24). The protagonist’s journey in ‘Wildflowers’ mirrors Parton’s journey within different spaces and genres. By the time of the song’s release in 1987, this was ten years since 1977’s *Here You Come Again* that marked her commercial move to the pop marketing category. This career ‘path’ had been well established for her by this time. My analysis of ‘Wildflowers’ explores how the song has ‘resonances’ with narratives of LGBTQIA+ belonging (Dyer, 2004, p. 165). This will then be related to musical genre and the extent that situating these resonances in country music can be thought of as a kind of ‘homing’ narrative (Fortier, 2003, p. 129) for conceptualising LGBTQIA+ acceptance and belonging in the genre. The final part of my analysis of the song critiques the concept of home as a tool for articulating belonging, particularly within sentimentalised narratives that risk romanticising institutions around the country music industry, as well as diluting its critique of essentialism around genre and identity categories.

6.4.1 Resonances with LGBTQIA+ Homing Narratives

‘Wildflowers’ resonates with dominant narratives around home and belonging for LGBTQIA+ people. These include metronormative tropes as already outlined in this chapter where LGBTQIA+ belonging is framed within metropolitan areas, and as I described in Section 3.3.1 there can also be a dominant narrative of LGBTQIA+ subjects needing to leave their ‘familial home’ (Fortier, 2003, p. 116) to fully arrive at (ibid, p. 131) this belonging. There are parallels between this and Parton’s life story (as represented in the song) of having left Sevier County for greater fulfilment in Nashville, and later on (aesthetically) Los Angeles and New York. This suggests that Parton can

flourish in the absence of a permanent home or 'fixed' location (both geographically and musically) (Fortier, 2003, p. 413; see also Brackett, 2016, p. 26). 'Wildflowers' makes salient an often unspoken tension (within Parton's media narrative) between the positive representations of Parton leaving her original home in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee and her decision to leave it to find fulfilment that implicitly may have been lacking had she stayed 'in place' (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h). 'Wildflowers', as Tichi argues, 'is a song of the American road. The point of origin, the hometown, is insufficient, and the individual must depart and travel' (1994, p. 138). These tropes, and in particular the need to find fulfilment elsewhere also resonate with dominant queer 'homing' (Fortier, 2003, p. 129) narratives around LGBTQIA+ belonging. As the analysis of 'Here You Come Again' and 'Baby I'm Burnin'' demonstrated, these social, spatial, and affective narratives can also be mapped onto associations with musical genres that may suggest pop as the musical place for LGBTQIA+ belonging, rather than country music.

'Wildflowers' conforms to some aspects of these narratives. The aesthetic approach in 'Wildflowers', could be described as 'ambivalent' (Herring, 2010, p. 60) towards these dominant narratives. My use of 'ambivalent' draws on Muñoz's discussion of 'disidentification' that is a practice 'that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it' (1999, p. 11; see also Herring, 2010, p. 114). Parton's song is neither an outright rejection of the metropolitan or urban, nor a complete assimilation to it. 'Wildflowers' utilises some aspects of dominant narratives around LGBTQIA+ belonging. The song deploys some aspects of the metronormative narrative, as one of 'migration' (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66) away from the family home. The song's themes of 'nonconformity, flight, freedom, individuality' (Tichi, 1994, p. 137) might also map onto what Hubbs describes as 'middle-class... exceptional individualism' (2014, p. 100) in (metronormative) LGBTQIA+ rights framings, for example in the protagonist's expression that she is not 'content to be lost in the crowd' (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h). The importance of self-expression and standing out is foregrounded here. Yet the imagery Parton uses to articulate this narrative displays an ambivalence to metronormativity. The bucolic imagery is used to represent both conformist restriction

and liberation or 'freedom' (ibid). The 'flowers... in the fields where I grew' represent the 'crowd' and the sense of restriction is embodied in the lyrics describing the flowers as 'common and close' with the alliteration before a pause in the line slowing this delivery (ibid). The subsequent clause 'I had no room for growth' continues this thought and provides an internal rhyme between 'close' and 'growth' that imbues the line with an almost claustrophobic feeling (ibid). Yet the journey out of this restrictive imagery of conformity is articulated through more bucolic symbolism as what the protagonist yearns for is 'growth', and there is further symbolism in the subsequent line – 'I wanted so much to branch out' (ibid). The natural imagery both represents the rural, and articulates the rural to urban migration narrative. There is an ambivalent use of this natural imagery. The dominance of the bucolic imagery and especially 'flowers' in the song inflects these everyday expressions to be more firmly rooted in this natural imagery. The song's refrain 'Wildflowers don't care where they grow' further reiterates the metaphor of 'growth' (ibid) and suggests that this imagery can represent freedom and self-expression as much as it can also represent restriction and conformity.

As well as the rural to urban associations, this imagery also reflects an ambivalence towards Parton's relationship to musical genre categories. This dialectic takes place within the semantic field of the bucolic and natural imagery, which are also tropes of country music (and related categories such as folk and 'mountain music' traditions (Hamessley, 2020, p. 87)), not as a dialectic between country music symbolism and pop symbolism. In terms of genre this is a dialectic and tension that is taking place within country music, not positioning country music as if it represented 'conformity' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 100) in opposition to more metropolitan identified genres like pop and rock (or disco). The song's instrumentation also reflects this. As already mentioned, Parton's use of the autoharp (from the beginning of the song) where the first two verses are accompanied by this instrument alone, explicitly situates 'Wildflowers' within Appalachian folk and country music traditions, the additional accompaniment of the acoustic guitar (in the third verse beginning 'And the flowers I knew...' (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h) and fiddle towards the end of the song all cement these country genre sonic significations. Harris and Ronstadt also provide harmonies with Parton's

lead to produce a three-part harmony which further convey these musical histories. These signifiers work to demonstrate that Parton's 'subversive' (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) home narratives can belong within Appalachian folk and country music.

At the same time there are 'tensions' within the genre positioning of 'Wildflowers' (Brackett, 2016, p. 29). The song's release in 1987 reflects this, as Ken Tucker puts it, 'at precisely the moment Parton had probably transcended the country-artist label, she chose to remind her public of it' (1994, p. 275; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 24). There is also a juxtaposition of the lyrical narrative, which Hamessley reads as potentially autobiographical – '(t)he lyrics recall Dolly's so-called departure from country even as the musical style with autoharp and fiddle suggests a return to her country and Appalachian roots' (2020, pp. 23-24). In terms of marketing category, it should be reiterated that the album aesthetically draws on a range of genres, including those that relate to older country and folk styles. The aforementioned autoharp, similarly, is an archaic instrument in terms of the contemporary country music marketing category, as Goldin-Perschbacher points out, Parton is 'one of the only famous commercial country musicians who still plays it regularly' (2022, p. 175). The identification of 'Wildflowers', within the country category is unstable, and suggests that reading of genre significations in terms of its narrative and symbolism can also be interpreted as displaying an ambivalence towards genre classifications.

6.4.2 Queer Reading 'Wildflowers' to articulate LGBTQIA+ Belonging in Country Music

Gay bluegrass artist, Justin Hiltner further elaborates on some of the resonances 'Wildflowers' might have for LGBTQIA+ listeners. When speaking to Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee (2019d) on the podcast *Dolly Parton's America*, he outlines his own queer migration narrative from Ohio to West Virginia and then to Nashville. Hiltner describes 'fraught' relationships with his 'conservative Christian Evangelical family' on first coming out where he was 'essentially on house arrest for about a year' and he left home 'in the middle of the night' (ibid) 'a few days before his 18th birthday' to stay with his boyfriend in West Virginia before moving to Nashville (ibid). On the way to Nashville 'the whole

time [Hiltner] says... he listened to Dolly's song *Wildflowers*' (ibid). '*Wildflowers*' encapsulates for Hiltner the liberatory migration part of the LGBTQIA+ coming out 'homing' narrative. When describing the way the song resonates with him, Hiltner says: 'Wild flowers are weeds. They've adapted to grow wherever they can, however they can up through the cracks of the pavement. And that's queerness' (ibid).

'Queerness' for Hiltner here means to be, to live, to 'grow' unfixed to any one location ('wherever') or set of rules or expectations of where or how this should happen, represented by growing 'up through the cracks of the pavement'. Similar to *Wildflowers*, Hiltner's narrative conforms to some elements of dominant LGBTQIA+ homing narratives, and perhaps some aspects of cultural assumptions of country music. Hiltner leaves the familial home and there is the trope of migration. However, there are significant areas where Hiltner's narrative subverts this. Hiltner does not relocate to a city, but at first to West Virginia. The subsequent choice of Nashville as the place of arrival does not fulfil quite the same role of New York or Los Angeles in metronormative narratives. Hiltner's ambivalence, similar to that displayed in Parton's song is important for the conceptualisation of belonging. LGBTQIA+ lives conceptualised as growing 'wherever they can' also means that belonging is not idealised or reified to a particular place. In '*Wildflowers*' there are multiple allusions to journeys and traveling, but no mention of the destination. The song's protagonist 'hitched a ride with the wind... [and] just let him decide where we'd go' (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h) demonstrating that the destination and the location of where the protagonist arrives is not important. That '*Wildflowers*' does not insist on a destination or home that has to be any specific thing for the protagonist to 'grow' has broader generative potential (through queer reading and Hiltner's interpretation), with the implication that LGBTQIA+ people can belong anywhere. '*Wildflowers*' resists both spatial assumptions (of rural and urban), and assumptions about genre categories (country and pop) with their associated narratives around LGBTQIA+ belonging.

Wildflowers is a significant song in Parton's discography. It is a particularly 'evocative' (Turtle, 2007) example of a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16) where LGBTQIA+

listeners can anchor their experiences into the song through practices of queer reading. The resonances are not there through direct 'authorial intention' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13), but it is notable that both myself and Hiltner independently heard these reflected in the textual qualities of the song. Hiltner's 2021 recording of the song is evidence of this companion text circulating amongst LGBTQIA+ country artists and audiences (Barker, Elliott & Longstaff, 2023, p. 274). Queer reading is a strategy for both asserting 'presence' in a space (Barker, Elliott and Longstaff 2023, p. 274; see also Barker, 2022a), but also for challenging and subverting dominant narratives about a space and genre, and who is presumed to belong there. 'Wildflowers' with its sonic and symbolic genre signifiers make an almost irrefutable 'authenticity claim' (Edwards, 2018, p. 51) for 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61). The multiple queer readings and artist interpretations of the song, for instance Hiltner's own credentials as a bluegrass musician, make a claim for LGBTQIA+ narratives and experiences (that resonate through these readings of the song) belonging in country music.

Queer readings of 'Wildflowers' perform a further subversive function in the way that Parton's career and discography can be read. As highlighted throughout this chapter, Parton's status as an LGBTQIA+ icon is often constructed in relation to Parton's pop crossover, for example a reductive reading of Parton's successful release of the "disco" song 'Baby I'm Burnin'' defining her resonances with LGBTQIA+ listeners through dominant aesthetic, genre and, not to mention, metronormative assumptions of what an LGBTQIA+ icon is. Queer readings of 'Wildflowers' challenge these assumptions. Hiltner (2021a) acknowledges that 'most of the queer community and most queer stereotypes don't allow for the possibility that queerness could be interwoven into these rootsy cultural and artistic expressions', but states that for his own musical and personal journey he engages 'with queerness and homoerotics and gay themes in Dolly's more folky, rootsy, bluegrassy music – and others – first and foremost' not least as someone who has played the banjo since he was seven years old. Hiltner argues that his 'existence is positive proof that queerness isn't just tangential to Dolly's country and bluegrass music, it's central to it' (ibid). Queer reading of 'Wildflowers' reveals the 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with LGBTQIA+ listeners that are already within

Parton's song, her wider discography, and the genre of country music. Similar to Parton's claims of this crossover period that she is not leaving country, but taking it with her, the migratory narrative in 'Wildflowers' that takes the crossover period's emphasis on expanding new horizons and achieving greater fulfilment, perhaps this new perspective on the Parton homing narrative is not about juxtaposing country rural conservatism with pop metropolitan liberalism, but about exploring untapped potential *within* country music.

6.4.3 Critiquing Home and Belonging

There is generative potential in challenging exclusionary ideas and narratives about LGBTQIA+ people's relationship to the genre of country music, and articulating claims to belonging. However, it is important to be cautious of this concept of belonging and how it is deployed. Fortier argues that in many queer homing narratives 'home' remains widely sentimentalized as a space of comfort and seamless belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 412), even if home is displaced from any fixed location. Sentimentality around 'home' risks overlooking problematic dynamics, abuse, and the emotional, 'material and affective labour' (ibid, p. 419) taking place. Preserving home as an 'ideal' (Fortier, 2003, p. 131) almost requires that these are obscured. In the context of the country music industry, the rhetoric of 'home' like 'family' is also used, for example in the Grand Ole Opry's tagline describing itself as 'The Home of Country Music' (Grand Ole Opry, 2023), which invokes a sentimentalised ideal of belonging. Even when homing narratives widen who can be included within the home, they can often maintain the sentimentality of the ideal 'home as... comfort and seamless belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 412). There are aspects of sentimentality (for instance in the nostalgic playing of the autoharp that is the only accompaniment for the first two verses) in the sonic signifiers of the song that work to anchor it at home in folk traditions of country music. Even though the queer narrative of the song may resist rigid ideas of place, home and belonging, the sound (and the cultural and commercial implications of the coded genre signifiers) is a seemingly emphatic signal about Parton's country authenticity and Appalachian folk roots. Queer reading into this narrative and the queer 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) of struggles with not belonging suggest that LGBTQIA+ lives can be 'at home' (Fortier,

2001, p. 409) in the genre of country music. This move has strong progressive potential in its 'reversal' (ibid, p. 412) of dominant assumptions about the potential for LGBTQIA+ people within the genre. Yet there remains the issue of whether idealised frameworks of home, belonging and genre, often the very tools used to form the exclusion and marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ people as well as Black artists and audiences in the first place, provide the most effective tool of resistance.

It is important to interpret 'Wildflowers' through a more critical and nuanced engagement with the idea of home. 'Home' here is presented not as a complete place of comfort and belonging, but as a place that is conflicted. Parton articulates the protagonist's feelings of conflict in description of 'I never felt right' whilst being in this home, the others being 'so different from' her and a direct expression that she 'never belonged' there (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h). Instead of 'comfort and seamless belonging', this home is 'of disjunction, of un-belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 419). In 'Wildflowers' the representation of the home itself is one of conflict. In the context of Parton's repertoire, 'Wildflowers' is significant as it raises the possibility that home might not be a place of belonging, which creates a sense of doubt in the sentimentality of Parton's other representations of home. This doubt perhaps offers the potential for a critical questioning and acknowledgement of the limits of home as an effective tool to craft belonging and resist injustice for Parton's LGBTQIA+ audiences. Further, the only time the word 'home' appears in the song is in the line 'I uprooted myself from my home ground and left' (Parton, Ronstadt and Harris, 1987h). Home is directly invoked only to be negated within the idea of being 'uprooted'. Uprootedness may offer critical potential as a mode to question the sentimentality of certain rhetoric and mobilising of people, artists and audiences to belong into homes and genres. Further it may offer transformative potential. Cynthia Weber suggests that a queer approach to social and political structures may require critical questioning, deconstruction and movement towards new structures, even if at the present moment 'we cannot name in advance what these institutions, structures of understanding and practical (dis)/ (re)orientations will be' (2016a, p. 21). Similarly, this approach to musical genre may question the stability and persistence of country music as a marketing category, particularly with its

history of marginalisation and exclusion, and this critical questioning is vital even if alternative (commercial) institutions and structures are in the process of being conceptualised and developed.

At the same time, it is crucial not to overstate the critical potential of being ‘uprooted’. Just as home and belonging can be romanticised and reify practices of exclusion, so can the idea of ‘uprootedness’. Defining LGBTQIA+ lives as ‘uprooted’ from the family home or home of origin risks reifying homophobic narratives and ‘fatalistically inscribing’ homophobia and heteronormativity into the home (Fortier, 2003, p. 120). Similarly, it is important not to crudely deploy an idea of uprootedness from genre categories, particularly within the context of the country music industry. Goldin-Perschbacher argues that LGBTQIA+ artists may often work in multiple genre spaces, and ‘(w)hile many musicians are happy to cross genre boundaries—for reasons of musical growth and enjoyment, financial gain, or otherwise—out queer country musicians... have little choice but to cross musical boundaries in search of opportunities, audiences, camaraderie, safety, and promotion’ (2022, p. 14). For some there is no option, *but* to be uprooted. The destabilisation of genre categories, therefore, should not be sentimentalised. The tensions within ‘Wildflowers’ mirror the tensions within the struggle for improving LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. LGBTQIA+ artists are critiquing the rigid defines of genre (Royster, 2022, p. 23), some trying to reclaim space, others seeking to radically transform these genre frameworks, but all navigating an industry that has often excluded them (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 13-14; Royster, 2022, p. 8). Yet as a ‘\$10 billion industry’ (Williams, 2022) country music as a category has resources that Black and LGBTQIA+ artists need (and have always deserved) to support their careers. There therefore needs to be a two-fold movement: to access practical sustaining resources in the meantime, whilst also changing, without necessarily knowing the direction of travel, the conceptual genre and industry frameworks and horizons.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on a particular period in Parton's career, a time that has become significant for understanding Parton's position in relation to ideas of genre identity and the way narratives of Parton as an LGBTQIA+ icon have been constructed. Even though this chapter has defined a time period to be demarcated as Parton's pop crossover period, it should be acknowledged that these demarcations are somewhat arbitrary as Parton had incorporated pop elements before 1977 (Edwards, 2018, p. 14), and crossover became a permanent aspect of her repertoire and persona after 1989 forming a 'prehistory' (ibid, p. 202) to frame the rest of Parton's discography. This particular aspect of Parton's crossover legacy will carry through into the following chapters as the lens through which Parton's previous repertoire is interpreted.

Edwards argues that at the point of Parton's pop crossover, the previous repertoire is positioned as 'a prehistory' (2018, p. 202). From this point songs like 'Jolene', 'Coat of many Colors' and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' (the case studies of my next chapter) are listened to through a nostalgic lens, but also one that interprets the autobiographical protagonists as the Parton pop crossover persona. Edwards makes the observation of Parton's Glastonbury performance in 2014, that it is Parton's pre-crossover material (songs like 'Jolene' and 'Coat of Many Colors') that are received most positively by the audience (ibid, p. 205). This audience is far from the assumed "traditional" country audience, including a large number of young people that Parton had focused on appealing to in this period (ibid). The next chapter will explore how what may be metronormatively assumed to be a more urban, liberal model of being a "gay icon" is threaded through the affective logics of Parton's early 1970s "country" material. This will further complicate the associations of Parton as an LGBTQIA+ icon with metronormativity and a simplistic conceptualisation of Parton's pop crossover, and show that queer resonances and support for LGBTQIA+ people can be articulated through "country" aesthetics and affective logics. This will further challenge metronormative genre narratives, and exclusionary homophobic discourses (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 10) within the country music industry.

It should also be reiterated that just as Parton's genre eclecticism did not begin in this crossover period, and neither did the discourses around authenticity and Parton's reworking of these. As Edwards notes, from the beginning of her career, Parton was experimenting with her 'image' (2018, p. 34), combining the artificial with the 'real' (ibid, p. 7), and utilising 'camp' performances of 'femininity' at this early stage (ibid, p. 29). Similarly, it is not crossover itself that is 'queer', or queering 'a supposedly... normative' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 782) genre, that is 'stable', but crossover reveals the 'inconsistencies' (Brackett, 2016, p. 26), over which the country music industry has constructed an illusory idea of consistent genre identity. Crossover is an intensifier of genre work Parton's songs were already engaged with. As the analysis in this chapter has shown, Parton's crossover enables us to establish a critical mode for ideas of identity and authenticity, with the potential for utilising Parton's songs to assert LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

Chapter 7. Queer Reading “Country” Parton and LGBTQIA+ Belonging

The previous chapter explored how Parton’s crossover period provides an opportunity to unpack how genre ‘(c)ategories’ are mapped onto ‘categories of people’ (Brackett, 2016, p. 1). I critiqued essentialist assumptions that restrict LGBTQIA+ audience engagement with Parton to repertoire labelled as ‘pop’, and which positions LGBTQIA+ belonging as outside country. Parton’s crossover ultimately revealed genres to be changeable and to have porous borders (ibid, p. 3, p.26). This chapter explores the implications of this critical approach to genre to Parton’s pre-crossover repertoire. This period includes some of Parton’s best-known songs, such as ‘Jolene’, ‘Coat of Many Colors’, and ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’. This period might be thought of as more obviously country, with less crossover between marketing categories, and the genre category of the songs being more ‘stable’ (ibid, 2016). However, as Edwards points out, Parton incorporated elements of other genres, especially rock and pop ahead of her commercial crossover in 1977 (2018, p. 14). Further, Edwards argues, Parton’s earlier repertoire becomes refigured at this point of crossover (and beyond) as a ‘prehistory for Parton’, and the distance from this creates what Edwards describes as ‘nostalgia for early Dolly’ (ibid, pp. 201-202). This nostalgic lens works to reify the music of this period to seemingly belong in a stable category of country. The approach I am taking is not to completely deconstruct these claims, but to explore the potential and affective work at stake in making these claims to belonging in genre. This can be summarised as making an ‘authenticity claim’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 51) to ‘being country’ (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61), which will now be applied to Parton’s pre-crossover repertoire.

This chapter explores how claims to belonging in country are articulated within the songs of this period, and how queer reading can assert LGBTQIA+ belonging in both Parton’s repertoire and the genre of country music more widely. Many of the songs in this period invoke the area where Parton grew up, East Tennessee in Appalachia, both lyrically and in the musical styles they use. The songs participate within historical and cultural discourses around Appalachia’s contested significations, particularly around LGBTQIA+ belonging in the region. It is important to state that my analysis does not make any historical or regional claims, but explores the way Parton’s songs engage with

representations of Appalachia as part of their figuration of country music's genre identity and discourses of belonging. I first provide some context around Parton's repertoire up until her commercial pop-crossover in 1977 with *Here You Come Again*, before outlining contradictory discourses and representations of gender and sexuality in Appalachia. I then briefly touch on the songs 'Joshua' and 'Applejack', to suggest some general ways that Parton's discography may navigate these discourses. Building on my discussion of life writing and treating Parton's songs as 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017, p.16) in my methodology chapter (Section 5.2), I set out the way Parton's songs work as 'collective life writing' (Barker, 2022a, p. 143; see also Drag, 2019, p. 233) of country music, with potential for queer reading to enable the participation of LGBTQIA+ listeners. I then analyse three main case studies: 'Jolene', 'Coat of Many Colors', and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'. These songs engage with significations of Appalachia and, as my queer readings draw out, they have potential for resonating with LGBTQIA+ listeners (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) that make them a particularly potent 'evocative object' (Turtle, 2007) for navigating discourses of country music authenticity, genre identity and belonging.

I use queer reading to approach Parton's discography of this period to 'assert' LGBTQIA+ listening practices as belonging within country music (Barker 2022a; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 274). In my analysis of 'Jolene', I build on Hubbs' 'homoerotic' interpretation (2015, p. 73) to draw out a wider practice of queer reading that uses Parton's songs as 'companion texts', which informs the rest of the chapter. 'Jolene' has a less stable autobiographical link to Parton than the other songs (although Parton does tell a story of a bankteller flirting with her husband (Hamessley, 2020, p. 119), however the song still works to authenticate (Moore, 2002; see also Peterson, 1997, p. 219) both Parton and LGBTQIA+ listeners through its sonic signifiers that link to what might be characterised as 'mountain music' (ibid, 2020, p. 87). These signifiers have contradictory associations around the extent to which they reify genre identity, with the potential both to forge a claim to belonging in the country genre, but also to destabilise the genre definition upon which this belonging is based (Royster, 2022, p. 23). I then produce an analysis of 'Coat of Many Colors', a song that perhaps

most explicitly incorporates Parton's life story and particular 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29) to authenticate her as country. I draw out its potential 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with LGBTQIA+ listeners to suggest that these resonances with Parton's life story, in this song, enable queer reading to make a claim to LGBTQIA+ people belonging in country. Again, there is 'instability' (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) in terms of its sonic features and genre definition that destabilise this claim to belonging. The final case study of this chapter, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', explores how Parton articulates belonging (through the affective ideal of home), and how queer reading can produce a promise of belonging in the song. In my analysis, I consider the tensions between a romanticised construct of belonging and genre identity, and a potential for more nuanced engagements with belonging in the song that offer a more critical approach, which enable us to consider a 'multiplicity' of listeners and readings (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez, 2021). I build on previous scholarship around Parton and gender to discuss representations of desire and sexuality in songs of this period, in a way similar to the analysis in the previous analytical chapter. Through this, queer reading becomes a method for both making a claim to belonging in the country genre but can also draw out its 'inconsistencies' (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) and assess the potential and limitations of this method for tackling the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ people in the 'industrial narrative construct' of country music (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3).

7.1 Contexts

Parton's music of this period covers a large variety of repertoire, including eighteen solo studio albums (from *Hello, I'm Dolly* in 1967 until *New Harvest... First Gathering* in 1977), and twelve collaborative albums with Porter Wagoner. Parton's songs cover a broad range of topics including addressing 'sexual double standards for women' (Edwards, 2018, p. 94; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 134; Barker 2021a, p. 3), such as 'Just Because I'm a Woman' (1968b), to comedy songs such as 'I'll Oilwells Love You' (1968a), to '(s)ongs of (t)ragedy' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 164) such as 'The Carroll County Accident' (1969b). Parton's songs of this period might also be thought of as a 'choose your own adventure kind of musical experience' (Hiltner quoted in Abumrad and Oliiae,

2019d) as the songs are not necessarily autobiographical, but draw on different characters and narratives. The songs 'are not all based on her personal experience but often reflect the situations and conditions she observed growing up in the mountains' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 59) and reflect the experiences of white working-class women (Smarsh, 2021, p. 6). Throughout this repertoire there are songs that call for equality and 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350) for social outsiders, including addressing issues of child cruelty ('Evening Shade' (1969a)) and poverty ('In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)' (1969b and 1973b)). There are also songs that represent life in the Smoky Mountains, some drawing on Parton's life story (Watson, 2016), such as the *My Tennessee Mountain Home* (1973c) album, while others focus on characters such as 'Joshua' (1971b) and 'Applejack' (1977a). Many of the scenarios and characters, Parton suggests, were inspired by people in the region where she grew up (her 1994 autobiography claims that the character of 'Applejack' was based on a person she knew (Parton, 1994a, p. 66)). The songs in general themselves are less autobiographical than some of Parton's later branding and persona work may suggest. More often they construct fictional narratives and characters in the lives of working-class women, often in rural and mountain locations. There is, however, a link to Parton's autobiography through these Appalachian roots and links to 'mountain music' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 87), which suggests that Parton's discography is already a more 'collective life-writing practice' (Barker, 2022a, p. 143; see also Drag, 2019, p. 233).

Sonically, the production of many of these songs reflect the style within the country music industry of the time, which in the late 1960s and 1970s was broadly the Nashville sound and subsequent developments into Bakersfield sound and countrypolitan (Hubbs, 2014, pp. 8-9). The instrumentation relies on guitar, banjo with some fiddle, but with less folk instruments and arrangements. However, Hamessley argues that Parton's songwriting of this period incorporates elements from her 'mountain music... heritage' (2020, p. 87), 'even [songs that]... are not particularly Appalachian in their lyrics or arrangement' (ibid, p. 72), through drawing on modal harmonies (ibid, pp. 70-74), narrative ballad forms (ibid, p. 67), and 'archaic' language (ibid, p. 74). Parton's incorporation of these folk (mountain) elements is distinct within the country music

industry of the time (Hubbs, 2015, pp. 73-74), but this also challenges easy genre 'classification' (Brackett, 2016, p. 31) of this period, which might be perceived to be straightforward. Even at this point, Parton's music can be seen as queer in terms of genre, what Hubbs describes as 'genre bending' (2015, p. 73), and it is not just Parton's crossover period that destabilises supposedly distinct genre categories. It should also be reiterated that the Nashville Sound prevalent within the country music industry at the beginning of Parton's career is also historically contingent and constructed through the racialised genre system (see section 3.1.2) that influenced certain performing and recording practices being demarcated as country, and others as different genres and marketing categories, for instance the production and marketing of 'country and soul releases to racially specific market segments', in spite of a shared 'musical lineage', musicians and 'songwriters' (Hughes, 2015, p. 2). There is nothing inherent or essential to Parton's repertoire of this period that makes it country, and its genre identity and definition (in terms of aesthetics) is just as fluid and unstable as during the crossover period (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) discussed in the previous chapter.

The case study songs in this chapter ('Jolene', 'Coat of Many Colors' and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home') have been selected, not because they are necessarily typical of Parton's repertoire in this period (such a claim across a varied discography would be hard to substantiate), but because these texts negotiate some of the themes around genre identity, sexuality, and belonging in important ways. They are also each situated in relation to tensions around Parton's life writing, and the extent to which it constitutes her 'star text' (Edwards, 2018, p. 43), and what this means for conceptualising more pluralist listener engagements with the discography and the genre of country music. This chapter makes a pointedly queer methodological intervention in its approach to Parton's songs of this period. Building on previous scholarship that has demonstrated Parton's 'gender critique' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29; see also Wilson, 1998), this chapter explores the way these songs represent sexuality. There is a highly gendered aspect to Parton's social commentary in many of these songs and the "(s)ongs of (t)ragedy" (Hamessley, 2020, p. 164) often reflect on heterosexual relationships with a narrative of abandoned women, pregnancy out of wedlock and dead

children (Hamessley, 2020, p. 148; see also Barker, 2021a, pp. 3-4). Songs such as 'The Bridge' and 'Down from Dover' dramatise the tragedy. In 'The Bridge' (1968c) the man has left the song's protagonist with their 'unborn child' and the woman is about to take her own life (along with the unborn baby). 'Down From Dover' (1970) uses a 'ballad' form to structure the progression of a narrative through the stages of pregnancy, where she waits for her lover's return whilst being excluded and thrown out of her family home and community, for the song to end with her child stillborn, which signals that her lover has abandoned her (Hamessley, 2020, p. 151). Both songs emphasise the cruelty of the man's abandonment, and so are also statements for equality.

'Just Because I'm a Woman' explicitly calls out the societal 'double standards' (Edwards, 2018, p. 94; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 134; Barker 2021a, p. 3) around sexual relationships of the late 1960s, where a man will 'ruin' a woman's reputation yet will not marry a woman, who has been with another man – 'he looks for an angel to wear his wedding band' (Parton, 1968b). In this song, Parton clearly conveys the injustice of these social dynamics around sexual relationships. Parton (ibid) exposes the way the 'shame' attached to sex outside of marriage was often disproportionately attached to the woman in these relationships especially if she was pregnant afterwards, the pregnancy becoming indisputable evidence of sex outside marriage (Barker 2021a, p. 4). This 'unwed pregnancy' plot is often the narrative of Parton's 'songs of tragedy' mentioned above (Hamessley, 2020, p. 148). As I discussed in the previous chapter (Section 6.3.3), representations of sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual pleasure in Parton's discography are varied. These representations also evolve through this early stage of Parton's career. The tragic songs give little space for 'sexual pleasure' (Barker, 2021a, p. 4), although do important work in challenging misogynistic discourses of stigma and shame that are disproportionately applied to women's sexuality. Parton's albums throughout the 1970s begin to represent sexual pleasure in songs such as 'Touch Your Woman' (1972a), and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' (1973d), as my analysis (Section 7.3) demonstrates. It is here that I draw out queer resonances and messages of acceptance from being judged 'as an outsider' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 196) in this repertoire that can resonate with LGBTQIA+ listeners.

7.1.1 Representations of Appalachia, Gender and Sexuality

A further context that is important for the songs in this chapter is the cultural history of representations of Appalachia. I touched on some of these in the literature review (Section 2.2.1) where I alluded to the region as having dualistic and conflicted representations that stem from older narratives around the US South. Popular figurations frame the region as simultaneously idealised and stigmatised; and framed as both conservative and deviant. Tropes around sexuality in the South and rural America often draw on unrestrained sexuality, incest and even, in some representations, bestiality (Bell, 2000, p. 559; Goddu, 1998, p. 46). These reductive narratives of the US South in relation to LGBTQIA+ lives, also filter through to figure Appalachia in a particular way. The territory is often (mis)characterised as having rigid patriarchal gender roles, which would suggest similarly rigid heteronormativity. The 'dualistic' (Wilson, 1998, p. 109) US cultural representations of Appalachia also impact gendered representations. Even though 'power rested primarily in the hands of men', it is important not to over generalise gender roles within the region, which were more complex and 'paradoxical' than might be thought (Heidemann, 2016, pp. 167-168). Pamela Wilson argues that Appalachian 'culture is generally perceived as strongly patriarchal', yet this 'perception [is] largely due to the work of early male "ethnographers," such as John C. Campbell), [whereas] studies by women who have examined the culture challenge that assumption; ...[and] see instead a gender-based system of coexisting models for cultural practice, whereby Appalachian women maintain a great deal of power within and through a facade of patriarchal control' (1998, p. 109). In part this is due to the conflation of Appalachia with a 'generic construct' of 'Southernness' (ibid, p. 107) that places constructs of idealised femininity in contention with working-class representations (ibid, p. 109) that are stigmatised (Edwards, 2018, p. 36). This also overlooks particular cultural experiences of Appalachian women, such as the role of 'kinship... [as] the central organizing principle of Southern Appalachian society, and a matrilineal orientation [that] has resulted in strong affective ties among women (Wilson, 1998, p. 108).

The social operation of gender is further complicated by regional and economic practicalities. Wilson summarises that although ‘in the traditional, preindustrial economy, there was a gendered division of labor: the woman's domain was her household... As industrialization overtook the agrarian mode of life... both men and women now participate in the wage-labour force’ (Wilson, 1998, pp. 108-9). Shooter argues that ‘(w)ithin a community that is primarily self-reliant and self-sustaining, women are required to take on both traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” roles, expected equally to care for the family, to maintain the home, and to complete manual tasks’ (2022, p. 110). These social realities often lead to Appalachian working-class women being stigmatised for their perceived failure to uphold standards of white middle-class femininity (Edwards, 2018, p. 56). The deviancy trope is also there in the hillbilly image, including ‘the socially inept and “primitive” hillbillies of the “Li’l Abner” comic strip and television’s Beverly Hillbillies to the violent, sexually deviant villains of James Dickey’s novel *Deliverance*’ (Wilson, 1998, p. 108). LGBTQIA+ subjects have to navigate these various (cultural and narrative) ‘contradictions’ (ibid, p. 98). The South is at once deviant (read “queer”) whilst at the same time deployed to represent conservative values, with conservative attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Parton performs significant ‘cultural work’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) across these different ‘contradictions’, where some gendered and sexual expressions are ‘culturally validated’ and others are ‘marginalized’ through stereotypes (ibid, p. 57). Parton’s work in the early period of her career navigates this regional history of cultural representations, and ‘negotiates’ (ibid, p. 13) these cultural representations to articulate claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging.

As already mentioned, this thesis does not make any historical or empirical claims about LGBTQIA+ experiences in the US South or Appalachia. Nor is this work about analysing Parton’s representations of the region. Like her persona, Parton’s life writing around Appalachia and the US South are ‘knowingly exaggerated’ (Edwards 2018, p. 2; see also Barker, 2022a, p. 147). They therefore cannot be read as a directly historical representation of the region. Along similar lines to Tichi’s assessment of country songs as ‘only in the narrowest sense Southern songs’ in that they ‘are set in the South’ (1994, p. 22), I argue that some of Parton’s songs, persona and life writing are set in the

Smoky Mountains, but reflect wider cultural imagery and significance. These tropes are significant and inform a discourse around Parton to authenticate her in the genre of country music (Moore, 2002; Peterson 1997, p. 219). Queer reading Parton's discography of this period works to authenticate LGBTQIA+ listeners as belonging in country, through extension of Parton's 'authenticity narratives' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39).

7.1.2 Potential for LGBTQIA+ Belonging in Parton's Representations of Appalachia

Parton's songs navigate the tensions within representations and discourses of sexuality in Appalachia. The songs of this period establish her take on country music's affective logics. As I mentioned in the literature review (Section 2.5 and 2.9.1), the country genre has a tradition of expressing what might be thought of as 'hillbilly humanism' (Goodson, 1993, p. 114; see also Fillingim, 2003, p. 51; Hubbs, 2014, p. 76) or 'compassion' for outsiders and the downtrodden, which has included 'tolerance for many of the foibles of humanity... neglected old people, abandoned or mistreated children and homeless hoboos and derelicts' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350). This compassion can extend to an appreciation of people's differences (Hubbs, 2014, p. 79; see also Barker, 2020). Hubbs challenges misreadings of working-class culture as conformist (2014, p. 100), and argues that working-class value systems and 'social world(s)' can be conducive to LGBTQIA+ belonging (ibid, p. 159), and by extension to be expressed within country's affective logics. Hillbilly, as a cultural stereotype, has associations with Appalachia (ibid, p. 23) and it is through Parton's songs with characters in the region that strongly demonstrate Parton's songs' use of 'hillbilly humanism' and compassion to articulate messages of acceptance, inclusion and belonging. There are two particular songs in this period that are worth drawing attention to for this: 'Joshua' and 'Applejack'. I provide some brief analysis of these songs to demonstrate the general approach of Parton's songs in the early part of her career to acceptance and inclusion of outsiders, within representations of Appalachian and mountain social life.

Both 'Joshua' and 'Applejack' relate to a character described in Parton's 1994 autobiography. Parton identifies this character as inspired by a man people 'called

Sawdust because he kept sawdust on the floor of his shack', who 'lived all alone in... a shack by the side of the road', and he was an object of 'fear' and 'dislike' leading to rumours about him: 'he had a bunch of old, mangy dogs, and some said he had sex with them' (1994a, p. 66). These rumours invoke the hillbilly stereotype and caricatured notions of bestiality (Bell, 2000, p. 559; Goddu, 1998, p. 46). Sawdust, and by extension the characters of 'Joshua' and 'Applejack', become figures of deviance and, in a broader sense, figures of queerness. In both songs the character is presented as a social outsider who then becomes included and celebrated. This suggests that Parton's 'mountain music repertoire' (Hamesley, 2020, p. 87) can encompass social outsiders and queerness.

'Joshua' is the title track (and lead single) from Parton's seventh studio album that tells the story of a man who lives isolated from the rest of the town living in a 'little old run down shack' and with rumours about him being 'a mean and vicious man' (Parton, 1971b). The character of Joshua, although Parton has not explicitly made this connection, has explicit parallels with the description of 'Sawdust' of living 'all alone in... a shack by the side of the road'. The song's first-person protagonist refuses to believe the rumours and goes to see for herself. In her encounter she discovers a kind man with whom she falls in love. Joshua is represented through archetypal redneck and hillbilly images – 'his beard and his hair was long and black', 'a big black dog laying out in the yard' and living in a 'shack'. These images of gruff, rugged and potentially dangerous hillbilly masculinity are what 'folks' have used to justify excluding the man (ibid). The song's protagonist looks past them and instead of being afraid like the folks told her to, she sings, 'he just didn't frighten me' (ibid). On giving Joshua the opportunity to relate to her as fully human, rather than a caricature, the protagonist is able to connect with him beyond these stereotypical images – 'I saw a smile come across his face' (ibid). He then offers her his hospitality, leading to them talking all night and falling in love. 'Joshua' works across contradictory images of Appalachia and 'combines' the 'stigmatized' (Edwards, 2018, p. 31) image of the deviant hillbilly with the idealised mountain pastoral image of a 'little old shack... [as] a happy home' (Parton, 1971b). The song subverts these stereotypes and expectations, and 'humanizes the figure' (Hamesley, 2020, p.

58) that the title character represents. 'Joshua' establishes a critical mode towards stereotypes and social stigma, that run through Parton's discography and will be explored further in my analyses of 'Coat of Many Colors' and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' later in this chapter.

'Applejack' further continues this challenge to social stigma and brings the stigmatised into the realm of respectability. 'Applejack' appears on the 1977 album *New Harvest... First Gathering*. Applejack focuses on the character 'Jackson Taylor' who 'lived by the apple orchard' (hence the nickname he is referred to, 'Applejack') who the protagonist nostalgically recalls going to visit and musically accompanying him whilst he plays the banjo (Parton, 1977a). The character Applejack is directly linked to the character of Sawdust in Parton's 1994 autobiography (1994a, p. 66), however, unlike in 'Joshua', virtually none of the narrative of exclusion or stigmatising stereotypes remains in the lyrics of the song. Applejack is described as 'loved by everyone he ever knew' (Parton, 1977a). No sense of any struggle to be accepted is conveyed in 'Applejack'. Parton has to deliberately and selectively rewrite her narrative to do this. Rather than the character's backstory, the song emphasises and foregrounds the music making, and in particular the banjo, in both the lyrics of the song and in the instrumentation backing its rousing sing-along chorus – 'Play a song for me and I'll sing... Play a song, let your banjo ring' (ibid). This is in stark contrast to 'Joshua' where the 'strophic form' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 58) of the verses emphasise the lyrical narrative. The banjo becomes the symbol of both social exclusion (described in the narrative of 'Joshua' and Parton's 1994 autobiography) and the promise of belonging. The banjo explicitly evokes country, both musically and through its denigrated social class status (Hubbs, 2014, p. 3). In the lyrics of the song, the instrument becomes the catalyst for forming community, which is anchored within country, Appalachian and mountain music traditions. Applejack, the character, is included in the inclusive (musical) social community that the banjo makes possible.

Whereas in 'Joshua', the couple remain in relative isolation from the rest of the town, in 'Applejack', the outsider becomes fully integrated into a community. This community is

of music making and suggests that country music as a genre can also provide this inclusion and belonging for outsiders. Of course, this is not the reality of the country music industry, however 'Applejack' gestures towards a potential within the aesthetics and affective logics of the genre. There is a possibility to authenticate LGBTQIA+ people, experiences, and narratives as 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61; see also Moore, 2002). It is this potential that queer reading my main case study songs in this chapter will draw out. LGBTQIA+ listeners, like Applejack, Joshua and Sawdust, may be figured as outsiders, both historically and in the present-day 'exclusionary practices' of the country music industry (Watson, 2022, p. 59). The individual narratives of the songs' characters take on wider social and collective importance as listeners are invited to belong in Parton's musical representations of Appalachia, and more broadly the genre of country music.

7.1.3 Life Writing, Authenticity and Mythmaking

These affective threads, exemplified by 'Joshua' and 'Applejack' are key to conceptualising Parton's repertoire of this period as collective life writing, providing 'subversive' (Parton, 2018, p. 4) and pluralist representations of country music. As outlined in the methodology chapter (Section 5.2.1), the emphasis of this thesis is to approach life writing as a collective project, through the lens of her songs and the different ways that these can be read. The main case study songs in this chapter, from the early period of Parton's career, all relate to a collective life writing around the genre of country music, that I argue is able to authenticate LGBTQIA+ belonging.

Parton's repertoire in this early period is often presented in a way to authenticate her as country and build up a particular 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29). There is a particular 'nostalgia' for this period of Parton's career (ibid, p. 201), but also this period is continually remediated and reworked into Parton's persona. At subsequent points, Parton reiterates her life story, particularly her childhood growing up in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee (Hamessley, 2020, pp. 42-49), through her onstage patter, interviews and in her own curating of her career and legacy, through for instance notably her 1994 autobiography and her book of lyrics *Dolly Parton, Songteller: My Life*

in Lyrics, in 2020. This constant remediation means listeners are often listening to this early Parton discography through the lens of these heightened, reiterative, and ‘repetitive’ (Middleton, 2006, p. 161) life-writing practices. A further discographic context for this is the period between 1999 and 2002, when Parton released a trilogy of albums ‘that explicitly turned to bluegrass, old-time music, and the sounds of her Appalachian heritage’ (Hamessley, 2020, p. 27): *The Grass is Blue* (1999a), *Little Sparrow* (2001b), and *Halos and Horns* (2002b). This period also revisits themes from her first albums of the lives of working-class women in Appalachia (Hamessley, 2020, p. 153), and even re-records songs including ‘Will He Be Waiting’ (1972b and 1999b (recorded as ‘Will He Be Waiting For Me’)), ‘Down From Dover’ (1970 and 2001a) and ‘Shattered Image’ (1976 and 2002b). Notably in these re-recordings, especially ‘Down From Dover’, Parton adds further instrumentation and arrangements from Appalachian and even Irish folk traditions (Hamessley, 2020, p. 97). These re-recordings intensify their mountain significations and claims to Appalachian authenticity in a way that is in conflict with their original recordings as mainstream country songs, which by the 1970s was a particularly commercial style drawing on pop ‘production’ techniques (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 58). There is a claim to genre identity through the representation of Parton’s music that performs a similar mythologising (Edwards, 2018, p. 3) function as her life-writing practices.

This chapter explores Parton’s life writing as mythmaking, which I conceptualise as a kind of authentication practice that makes claims to belonging in the genre of country music. My approach to mythmaking is not ‘debunking’ or aiming to ‘retrieve an authentic version of’ it, but to explore the ‘workings of myth’ (Tost, 2011, pp. xi-xii). I am less interested in exposing or discovering ‘the truth’ behind the myth, but in exploring what Parton’s mythmaking does. Parton’s life writing transforms episodes from her life story ‘into personal mythology’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 3), and by extension her persona is a mythologised construction. Mythmaking is ambivalent to ‘definitive notions of truthfulness or falsity’ (Marshall and Barbour, 2015, p. 4), yet these myths have powerful affective and tangible effects. Myths achieve their impact ‘not because ... [of] adequate empirical evidence’ (Shusterman, 1999, p. 230), but through the affective logics that

they deploy to resonate with their audiences. Similarly, Parton's mythologised life writing and representations of mountain life in Appalachia do not depend on 'factual demonstration' (ibid, p. 226) to work, 'but... [by] designing and tapping into mountain scenarios and sounds that her audiences want to, and can, accept as authentic' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 60). There is not a complete distinction between believing and wanting to believe in the way audiences engage with Parton's life-writing myths. This mythologising also constructs ideas of genre. As outlined in the conceptual framework (section 3.1.3), the approach to belonging in genre is not based on empirically linking these to inherent or essentialist claims, but neither is it about purely deconstructing claims to genre identity or belonging. Belonging in genre is articulated through the 'gesture [of] being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61) and through the articulation of an 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29). I consider Parton's life-writing practices to offer potential for LGBTQIA+ listeners to navigate and assert claims to belonging in country.

7.1.4 Queer Reading and Collective LGBTQIA+ Life Writing of Country Music

For LGBTQIA+ people who have been excluded from the country music industry, Parton's mythmaking can offer a possibility of renegotiating this relationship. Reclaiming traditional life-writing conventions and collective narratives of country music offers potential for LGBTQIA+ listeners to 'assert their presence' within the genre (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 74). In the previous chapter, I situated my method of queer reading within celebrity texts and contexts (such as disco (Section 6.3.1) and Judy Garland (Section 6.1.2)) commonly associated with LGBTQIA+ audiences (particularly gay men), whilst gesturing towards the potential of queer reading in other places and genres such as country. My approach to Parton's songs in the early part of her career, particularly as they continue to be listened to and (re)interpreted, is to demonstrate how her work 'combines' (Edwards, 2018, p. 31) life writing of country music with her significations as an LGBTQIA+ icon, demonstrating that both can and do coincide (Barker, 2022a, p. 144).

Part of this synergy comes from the reflective position post Parton's pop-crossover, and when her reputation as an LGBTQIA+ icon has been established alongside intensified, repetitive constructed narratives of her Appalachian upbringing. Both her 1994 autobiography and 2020 lyric book make statements in support of LGBTQIA+ people. In a Q&A at the end of the 1994 autobiography, Parton says, 'I have many gay friends who I love dearly' and in response to a question about trans people, she says 'all I know... I've learned from my good friend' (1994a, p. 317). In the 2020 lyric book's discussion of 'Travelin' Thru' (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter (Section 8.3)), Parton reiterates her own relationships with LGBTQIA+ people – 'I have a friend and a relative who are transgender [and]... I know gay people who are not accepted and have to live in the shadows' (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 263) – that she says she drew from to write the song. In both these examples, Parton reiterates her support for LGBTQIA+ people and as both books are autobiographies, they explicitly integrate Parton's life-writing practices of her career and country music, with her significations as an LGBTQIA+ icon. Even without considering this retrospective lens, there is a historic basis for drawing 'empathies' (Maddison, 2000, p. 8) and 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) between the social world reflected in Parton's repertoire of her early career and some LGBTQIA+ experiences. It is not the pop-crossover period alone that makes Parton an LGBTQIA+ icon, but Parton's country repertoire and persona also provide substantial material for these kinds of significations and resonances. As Edwards argues, Parton was 'already using campy and ironic elements in her imagery as a performer in high school' (2018, p. 65), and into her early career. Parton had also developed a 'gender critique' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29) that is also queer in its approach to challenge 'gender essentialism' (Edwards, p. 159; see also Ross, 1999, p. 325), and the construction of rigid identities (Edwards, 2018, p. 6). There are also particular resonances in this period that Parton's country, rural and mountain significations enable. Leslie Jordan's (Jordan was also from rural Tennessee) comments in the documentary *Hollywood to Dollywood* illuminate some of these.

Gay men like anything that sparkles and glitters. But there's a genuineness about her, and I think she's just like a big ole drag queen.... It's not easy growing up homosexual in the hills of Tennessee. I look back and it really is a wonder that

I'm sane... She would give a free concert once a year at the high school auditorium in Sevierville... This'd be '72. This is before Dolly the movie star. She would come out on stage and she'd sat [gesturing toward his hair], "What's a country girl without her haystack?" And we would scream and cry.... Oh she'd sing "Jolene" and we'd cry. Then she'd sing "Coat of Many Colors" and we'd cry.... We just have our divas, be it Barbra Streisand or Bette Midler. They're always larger than life, you know, goin' all the way back to Judy Garland (Jordan interviewed in *Hollywood to Dollywood*, 2011; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 197).

Jordan draws attention to aspects of Parton's pop-crossover and her wider media celebrity – 'Dolly the movie star' – and some aspects of gay icons in pop, such as the 'larger than life' aspects, suggesting that Parton can be situated within this group of stars. As Hamessley observes, Jordan's individual interaction with Parton also links his experience to being part of a collective: 'in his recollections Jordan became part of a larger gay community that included Dolly in its pantheon of divas' (2020, p. 197). Yet Jordan also draws out particular characteristics of Parton that signify as country that enable a particular resonance between Parton's performances and gay men. Parton's country significations need not be opposed to Parton's place within this 'pantheon of divas', to use Hamessley's phrase, as Jordan compares her to 'a 'big ole drag queen'. Tellingly, in Jordan's recollection of Parton's performance, Parton's drag aesthetic is rooted in rural imagery, such as the constructed image of a 'country girl' and her constructed hair – 'her haystack'. This challenges assumptions of where queer aesthetics and resonances with LGBTQIA+ people might be found within popular music genres and suggests that country music may also offer these. Another factor of Parton's appeal that Jordan alludes to is her 'genuineness', which can relate to specifically country music notions of authenticity. Jordan's experience of Parton at this early stage of her career, suggests that queer reading of Parton and her country aesthetics may hold potential.

There are links and resonances between LGBTQIA+ experiences and Parton's constructed narratives around her life story, including when these are articulated through her songs. Parton herself has identified 'her connection to... her LGBTQ+ audience as rooted in her own sense of judgement as an outsider' (Hamessley, 2020,

p.196), within her religious upbringing. (These will be explored in more detail in my reading of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'). My analysis of Parton's songs shows that country music as an aesthetic genre can contain narratives that resonate with LGBTQIA+ experiences, and my approach of queer reading draws out these resonances to forge "authenticity" claims' (Edwards, 2018, p. 14) to LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre.

7.2 'Jolene'

'Jolene' as a case study song offers a way into Parton's repertoire in the early period of her career. The song incorporates a direct aspect of Parton's life story (the episode of a flirtation between her husband and a bank teller (Hamessley, 2020, p. 119), whilst it implicitly draws on broader aspects of her autobiography through drawing on folk elements in its musical composition hearkening to her growing up in the Smoky Mountains (ibid, p. 87). 'Jolene' is sung from the point of view of a woman who feels insecure about her relationship and perceives the title character as being able to 'take' her man (Parton, 1974b). The song is a 'direct address' (Hubbs, 2015, p. 72) pleading Jolene not to take him. This kind of plot is common within country music, what Hubbs describes as 'the Other Woman Song', yet 'Jolene' is atypical in this '(sub)genre' for presenting a 'nonviolent communication' that can be interpreted as 'homoerotic' (Hubbs, p. 73; see also Barker, 2022b). Building on Hubbs' work, I set up my approach to queer reading, which navigates both industry and scholarly assumptions that have erased the possibility of LGBTQIA+ readings in country songs and makes the song's homoeroticism and queer resonances salient. I begin my analysis by outlining the song's queer 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165), particularly using Hubbs' (2015, p. 73) analysis of the imagery. I develop the queer potential of 'Jolene', considering the song as a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) and its potential to 'circulate' amongst LGBTQIA+ listeners (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 274). This potential can form 'community' (Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 274; see also Barker 2022b), renegotiate genre borders and identities, and articulate an assertive mode of resistance to exclusionary narratives around country. Deploying the song as a companion text enables LGBTQIA+ listeners to utilise the popularity and

‘circulation’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) of ‘Jolene’ to authenticate claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music, and more widely navigate issues around genre and authenticity. I conclude the analysis of ‘Jolene’ through consideration of its varying genre signifiers and suggest that the song uses these both to assert affective claims to country music authenticity, whilst at the same time challenging rigid genre categories that lead to restrictive and essentialist identity classifications.

7.2.1 Queer Resonances in ‘Jolene’

Approaching ‘Jolene’ through a practice of queer reading and drawing out potential resonances with LGBTQIA+ audiences means interpreting the song through a detailed ‘close reading’ (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 145). As argued earlier (Sections 2.9 and 5.1.1), there has been a tendency for some scholars to erase the possibility for LGBTQIA+ people within country songs, and one of these ways can be through overly simplistic reading practices that might interpret the songs only at a surface level (for instance as Hubbs (2015, p. 73) critiques of Grossman (2002, p. 91) using ‘homosocial desire’ and relationships (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1) to erase the potential for LGBTQIA+ representation). ‘Jolene’ on the surface is a song about a woman feeling insecure about her relationship and directly addressing ‘the other woman’ for whom her husband has feelings. However, there is a more ‘complex’ relationship between the song’s protagonist and Jolene (Hamessley, 2020, p. 122). Hamessley suggests that the plot summary of ‘Jolene’ does not do justice to the experience of listening to the song. If the song is just about these feelings of insecurity and about the protagonist’s worries for her (heterosexual) relationship, Hamessley argues, ‘it seems hard to reconcile this reading with the song’s popularity among fans who exuberantly sing along with Dolly in concerts’, and that it is this ‘emotionally complex direct address to the other woman [that] fans sing along with the loudest: the quadruple naming of Jolene’ (ibid, pp. 122-123). The fans’ exuberance suggests that audiences respond to emotional content in the song other than the feelings of powerlessness and insecurity.

Hubbs explores this complexity further and argues that ‘Jolene’ is atypical in the sub-genre of cheating or “other woman” songs in country music for its ‘nonviolent

communication' style and 'fascination' with the other woman (2015, p. 73). Hubbs draws a stark comparison between Parton's complimentary address of the other woman and the way Loretta Lynn and Carrie Underwood address the other woman. In 'Fist City' Lynn describes the other woman as 'trash' that her husband knows to 'put... in a garbage can' (Lynn, 1968; see also Hubbs, 2015, p. 72), and in 'Before He Cheats' Underwood describes the other woman as a 'bleached-blond tramp' (Underwood, 2005; see also Hubbs, 2015, p. 72). Both addresses are a far cry from the 'flaming locks of auburn hair' and 'beauty... beyond compare' used to describe the other woman in Parton's 'Jolene' (Parton, 1974b). As I will go on to demonstrate, this unique address of the "other woman" provides ample material to draw homoerotic, lesbian and queer readings out of 'Jolene', but furthermore this address places the song's emphasis on the relationship between the two women, over the relationship either woman has with the protagonist's husband.

A further inconsistency in 'Jolene' that highlights the inadequacy of the surface level reading is in the differing accounts that Parton provides for the 'genesis' of the song (Hamessley, 2020, p. 119). The content of the song extends beyond the bounds of the commercial and heteronormative accounts of the song. Parton often tells the story of her husband 'flirting with a girl down at the bank' (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 119) as the basis for the story of the song, and dramatises this for effect. Yet Parton has also spoken about the flirtation as a 'casual event' and describes 'Jolene' as 'an innocent song... but sounds like a dreadful one' (Parton quoted in Vitale, 2008; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 119). The story behind 'Jolene' has less affective investment from Parton herself and becomes the 'commercial wrapping' of the song (Abumrad and Oliabee, 2019d) that Parton describes as 'a story that [she] knew women could relate to' (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 119). Parton also describes another source of inspiration for the song as being a girl called Jolene who attended one of her shows with Porter Wagoner. Parton thought Jolene was 'a beautiful name' and in order 'to remember the name [she repeated] "Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene" until [she] could get back to the bus and write it down' (ibid). It is this repetition of the name 'Jolene' that generates the rhythm and melody that listeners enjoy (Parton, 1974b). The word,

‘Jolene’ takes on a quality that can be thought of as ‘(s)ongfulness’ – ‘fusion of vocal and musical utterance judge to be both pleasurable and suitable independent of verbal content’ (Kramer, 2002, p. 53). Although as I go onto discuss, the lyrical and ‘verbal meaning’ (Eckstein, 2009, p. 67) of ‘Jolene’ are important, there is an affective quality to the songful word of ‘Jolene’ that evokes pleasure and the potentially erotic, which provides textual potential to articulate alternative readings to the heteronormative ‘Cheating Songs’ (Hubbs, 2015, p. 72).

The melody generated by the word, ‘Jolene’, has been described as ‘rhapsodic’ (Hubbs, 2015, p. 72) and it is this quality that Hubbs argues gives the potential for ‘homoerotic’ readings of ‘Jolene’, arguing that the ‘lyric starts as a plea and quickly turns rhapsodic, an ode to the other woman’s beauty and desirability’ (ibid). The lyrics go beyond a ‘non-violent... address’ to the “other woman” and instead is ‘tenderly detailing her beauty and charms’ as if ‘through the eyes of a lover’ (ibid, p. 75): Jolene’s ‘beauty...beyond compare’, ‘flaming locks of auburn hair’, ‘ivory skin’ and ‘eyes of emerald, green’ (Parton, 1974b). This lucid description ‘tenderly’ picks out details such as the auburn hair that is ‘flaming’ and the eyes are not just green but ‘emerald’ green. This fixation on Jolene’s beauty also acts to demonstrate the protagonist’s feelings of insecurity, yet the excess of this lyricism raises the potential for reading into the song an expression of homoerotic desire (Barker, 2022a). Hubbs makes the assertion that the queer reading resonating in ‘Jolene’ is in character a lesbian reading which, drawing on the queer musicological work of Suzanne G. Cusick, she describes as: ‘a circulation of generous and attuned... desire and erotic pleasure’ (Hubbs, 2015, p. 75; Cusick, 2006). ‘Jolene’ conveys an attuned awareness of the physicality of the other woman and in its developed description demonstrates a generosity in the protagonist’s appreciation of Jolene. Hubbs speculates: ‘Am I the only listener who imagines her and Jolene getting together if the guy doesn’t work out?’ (Hubbs, 2015, p. 72). For Hubbs, the lesbian identifications within ‘Jolene’ are evocatively produced by the lyrics that practices of queer reading barely have to probe beneath the surface to support them.

These resonances may be observed perhaps in part because of Parton's 'status... as a queer idol and outspoken LGBT ally' (Hubbs, 2015, p. 75). This has been evoked in direct relation to 'Jolene' by Parton herself in some live performances of the song where Parton replaces the word 'Jolene' with 'drag queen', 'a shout out to queer fans who attend concerts in Dolly drag' (ibid, p. 72). Parton is therefore aware of some LGBTQIA+ identifications within her music, in this case drag queens, and arguably in relation to a 'gay male' subjectivity (Lawrence, 2011, p. 233). This is not to read drag queen as simply synonymous with gay men, as there are a range of gender and sexual identities amongst drag performers, but that for Parton's frame of reference drag queen as a gay male performer is the dominant association. Parton is most conscious of tapping into discourses of camp and gay male fandom and identification with female performers. Nadine Hubbs wrote a new verse for 'Jolene' making an explicit lesbian narrative with the two women getting together, which was read to Parton on the podcast: Dolly Parton's America. Parton responded that she had not thought of the song in this way (Abumrad and Oliaee, 2019). When Hubbs was asked on Twitter about Parton's 'surprise' she offered two speculations: 'years of tabloid speculations [between] her [and her friend] Judy might help to inspire denying "knowledge of the knowledge" [and that] 'Dolly may be more dialled into gay+drag-queen than lesbian fans' (Hubbs, 2021a). The media culture in the US and within the country music industry that suppresses queer readings and identifications through constructing a rigid separation between homosocial bonds and homoerotic desire, not to mention a rigid 'male/female [gender] binary' (Watson, 2019, p. 541), may be a factor in Parton's lack of acknowledgement of potential lesbian readings of 'Jolene'. Further, particular dynamics within LGBTQIA+ politics and media that frame LGBTQIA+ identities figured around the 'male homosexual' (Weber, 2016b, p. 212) in the US, may obscure other readings. These practices of queer reading relate to lesbian reading practices and have an important role of claiming, and reclaiming, 'what the dominant culture' produces (Dyer, 2002, p. 153), and then refashioning and 'rearticulating' (Ross, 1991, p. 100) these to express alternative and multiple LGBTQIA+ identifications. 'Jolene' as a text for a queer intervention into country music discourses generates a more pluralist claim to LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre.

7.2.2 'Jolene' as a 'Companion Text'

Queer reading and the way LGBTQIA+ listeners have drawn out particular resonances from 'Jolene' enable us to consider Parton's song as a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16). As discussed in my methodology (Section 5.2), a companion text is a particular kind of 'evocative object' (Turtle, 2007). Evocative objects can be considered as 'companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought' that can 'connect' us to 'places or people' (ibid, p. 5). Ahmed describes a 'companion text' as 'a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden', and in particular describes 'feminist literature' as being her 'companions as a feminist and diversity worker' (2017, p. 16). Similarly, Hubbs' lesbian reading of 'Jolene' is a path less trodden, as is openly acknowledging LGBTQIA+ artists and listeners within the country music industry (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott, and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271). Evocative objects such as 'Jolene' provide LGBTQIA+ listeners the affirmation to sustain their engagement within a genre whose industry has often not acknowledged their presence. In considering 'Jolene' as a companion text, we can consider the ways in which 'Jolene', and the lesbian reading of the song advanced by Hubbs, form a role in the lives of Parton's listeners as LGBTQIA+ listeners hear their lives reflected in their reading of the song and 'succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture' (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 150-151), the object in this case being 'Jolene'. Ahmed also argues that the 'companion texts' and the 'feminist materials' also enable 'a way of thinking about how books make communities' (2017, p. 17). These books should be thought of as 'material objects' as well as texts, and in so doing we can consider that 'feminist community is shaped by passing books around; the sociability of their lives is part of the sociability of ours' (ibid). Similarly, the recognition of Parton and 'Jolene' as having particular queer resonances is a way of building an LGBTQIA+ country community through the 'circulation' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) of these musical and cultural texts amongst LGBTQIA+ listeners (Barker, Elliott, and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271; see also Barker, 2022b).

One way we can think of the 'sociability' of 'Jolene' is through the way it has been covered over the years since Parton's recording. It is Parton's most covered song, with

over ‘four-hundred’ versions across different languages by artists of different genders (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 118). With the way in which ‘Jolene’ is gendered in the lyrics of the song, different gendered performers give rise to a multiplicity of different queer resonances. Similar to Parton’s own live performance of the song where she replaces ‘Jolene’ with ‘drag queen’ (Hubbs, 2015, p. 73), which brings a particular set of gender performances and expressions into the dynamic, there are two covers that are worth highlighting here: Amythyst Kiah in 2016 and Lil Nas X in 2021. Both versions are performed and recorded live, and both keep the lyrics and the gendered signifiers the same as Parton’s original. Kiah’s cover of ‘Jolene’ centres the homoerotic desire between a female protagonist and Jolene. Kiah extends the length of the song, but keeps the same lyrics and repeats the chorus more times than Parton’s original, but ‘(w)ith no supplementary lyrical material’ (Barker, 2022b), further drawing out the sense of the protagonist’s fixation on ‘Jolene’ (Rosposs, 2016). This has been picked up by listeners, such as Syd Miller (2020) at Country Queer who suggests that Kiah’s performance ‘gives the listener the distinct sense that the narrator is actually yearning for Jolene herself’. The ‘response and coverage of Kiah’s performance indicates that Parton’s text’ (Barker, 2022b) is circulating amongst LGBTQIA+ listeners and performers who are drawing out their own readings, validation of their experiences and identities, and ‘sustenance’ (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 150) from this ‘companion text’ or ‘evocative object’.

Lil Nas X performed his version the week he released the album *Montero* on BBC Live Lounge in 2021 (BBC Radio 1 Vevo, 2021). Lil Nas X’s version uses the sexual and gendered dynamics within the song ‘differently’ to Kiah (Barker, 2022b). Keeping Parton’s lyrics, especially the line: ‘please don’t take my man’ reframe the relationship at ‘threat’ from Jolene as a sexual relationship between two men, yet at the same time (as the above analysis explored) the central relationship in the song is not between the protagonist and their ‘man’, but between the song’s protagonist and ‘Jolene’ (Parton, 1974b). This suggests more fluid sexual desire (with implications around identity) that does not reify heteronormativity or a rigid gay or LGBTQIA+ identity. It should also be said that the queer potential within Lil Nas X’s cover of ‘Jolene’ is not just on the

implications for how the lyrics are positioned, but in wider cultural significations around genre. Lil Nas X came out in 'September of 2019' during the success of 'Old Town Road' (Royster, 2022, p. 167), and his subsequent songs have 'contained more direct expressions' (Barker, 2022a) of LGBTQIA+ sexual relationships, 'pleasure and desire' (Royster, 2022, p. 167). A reductive reading would be to represent Lil Nas X and Old Town Road as a country song as 'a desexualised pre-coming out back story' (Barker, 2022b) and to position explicit LGBTQIA+ sexuality outside the genre. However, as Royster argues, these should not be seen as distinct, but as Lil Nas X amplifying 'this raucous and seriously joyful queer spirit... with each skillfully released new single and video' (2022, p. 169). By performing Parton's country song, 'Jolene' (which as discussed has its own 'queer spirit') on the release week of *Montero* (2021), Lil Nas X integrates an explicit and unapologetic LGBTQIA+ sexuality with country significations (Barker, 2022b). Here, the circulation and 'sociability' of 'Jolene' continues to articulate and forge LGBTQIA+ country identifications.

In describing the affective power that 'companion texts' have within feminist communities, Ahmed writes, 'they are also spaces of encounter; how we are touched by things; how we touch things. I think of feminism as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care' (2017, p. 17). Similarly, the LGBTQIA+ community within country music can also be thought of as a space of encounter and this may also be a 'fragile archive' as people's experiences of country music may be laced with experiences of rejection, homophobia, and other intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 1991). Evocative objects and companion texts are a way to make these dynamics visible and the practices of queer reading that draw out and bestow particular resonances in songs like 'Jolene' also form this function. As I explore with further Parton songs, one of the most significant affective functions of this queer reading of the evocative companion text is to anchor LGBTQIA+ listeners and identities within the genre of country music.

7.2.3 LGBTQIA+ Belonging and Genre Identity

The previous discussion of 'Jolene' as a companion text suggested that this could be an effective political strategy to articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre of country music. As argued in the conceptual framework (Section 3.1.3), it is important in this approach to belonging not to reify rigid and potentially exclusionary definitions of genre categories. It is important to apply a critical lens to the 'presumed stylistic consistency' (Brackett, 2016, p. 5) of the musical genre categorisation of 'Jolene'. The continued popularity of the song over nearly fifty years suggests the commercial success of the song's authenticity claim to belonging in country music. The song maintains its identity as a country song and as part of not just a sonic 'tradition of performance' as country (Moore, 2002, p. 218; see also Peterson, 1997, p. 219), but also as part of the sub-genre tradition of 'Other Woman' (Hubbs, 2015, p. 73) songs. Recent country songs such as Chapel Hart's 'You Can Have Him Jolene' (2021) and Miranda Lambert's 'Geraldene', containing the lyric: 'You're never gonna be Jolene' (Lambert, 2022), demonstrate that 'Jolene' has become a reference point for the genre in this tradition. The perceived security of 'Jolene's musical identity is belied by 'inconsistencies' and subversion that have just been outlined (Brackett, 2016, p. 26). As already mentioned, the influence of Appalachian folk and 'mountain' musical practices run through some of Parton's songwriting of this period (Hamessley, p. 87). This influence is noticeable in 'Jolene', through its use of 'modal... melodic qualities, and... harmonic progressions' (ibid, p. 70). Hubbs argues that the song's 'musical form aligns with the Appalachian ballad in that the song uses minor mode, with the (seemingly) ancient inflections of Dorian at the refrain' (2015, p. 74). These musical aspects link 'Jolene' to folk traditions rather than country (as defined as a marketing category). This is not to make a claim that 'Jolene' is not a country song, but to question the way the parameters defining what a country song is (Royster, 2022, p. 23), and 'expose their construction' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781).

The rigid separation of country from folk in the US popular music category system is an artificial construction, and 'Jolene' demonstrates that it is one that does not accurately reflect musical practices. The 'subversive' (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) approach to genre

categories in 'Jolene' makes a musical claim that mirrors the work within Parton's star image and media persona that operates across cultural tensions and 'contradictions' (Wilson, 1998, p. 98) to assert her own 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29). Similarly, 'Jolene' makes its own musical authenticity narrative to belonging in country. This musical work interrogates both the rigidity in the idea of country as a distinct category, but also notions of country as having inherent musical characteristics, rather than understanding the genre's aesthetics as historically and contextually contingent. 'Jolene' is queer in terms of genre as well as content (Hubbs, 2015, p. 73). Articulating queer resonances in the song formulates a claim to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country at the same time as rigid and essentialist genre categories are being subverted. There is potential for a critical mode of reading 'Jolene' to construct belonging through this subversion of essentialism and rigid identity categories.

'Jolene' suggests a musical identity that implicitly links to Parton's life story of growing up in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee. The musical elements suggest a sonic belonging within Parton's life writing that through the queer reading practices enable an assertion of LGBTQIA+ belonging in Parton's texts (both songs and celebrity 'star text' (Edwards, 2018, p. 43)). By extension this makes an 'authenticity claim' (Edwards, 2018, p. 51) to LGBTQIA+ experiences belonging in country music. Although in the case of 'Jolene' there are sonic features (the modal harmonies) that link to folk musical traditions, there are also aspects to Parton's 'mountain' identity that do not have formal musical justification. One such example of what could be thought of a musical and historical anachronism is what Hamessley has outlined around Parton's vocal performance and distinct vibrato being representative of an Appalachian 'mountain sound' or singing style (2020, p. 91). One account posits, 'Dolly has captured the high lonesome sound of Appalachia... [a] kind of chill, pure vibrato' (Cook, 1978, p. 29; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 91). However, Hamessley points out that historically 'women ballad singers in Appalachia' have sung differently, summarising that 'most use little vibrato; instead, they sing with a straight tone in a naturalized chest voice that may strain for the top pitches' (2020, p. 92). Ascribing Parton's vocal style a 'mountain'

musical identity reflects social and cultural factors that desire to figure Parton this way, rather than as inherent to the 'musical sound' (Moore, 2002, p. 210).

As argued around the approach to authenticity this thesis is taking, country music's approach to authenticity often relies on 'emotional conviction' rather than 'factual demonstration' (Shusterman, 1999, p. 226). In relation to Parton's mountain musical heritage and narratives, the way various audiences (and Parton herself) 'ascribe' (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219) this identity to her reflects a level of emotional conviction driving this as the empirical evidence is not completely there in terms of Parton's musical qualities alone. As Hamessley argues, 'the accuracy of Dolly's mountain stories and the authenticity of her music are not the issue, but rather it is her skill at designing and tapping into mountain scenarios and sounds that her audiences want to, and can, accept as authentic' (2020, p. 60). Emotional conviction is the affective link that constructs the genre identification within Parton's songs. As argued in the conceptual framework (Section 3.2.3), this has generative potential as this reduces the 'burden of platonic definitional stress' (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 27) for different subjects to make claims to 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61), and opens Parton's early repertoire to authenticate (Moore, 2002, p. 216) LGBTQIA+ belonging within this conceptualisation of genre. The musical signifiers and wider cultural narratives generated around Parton's repertoire ahead of her commercial crossover, are practices of life writing and use mountain narratives to construct a 'mythology' of country music (Edwards, 2018, p. 3; see also Tost, 2011, pp. xi-xii), that is not essentialist, and may have potential to generate broader inclusion within the genre.

It is important not to overstate this claim about the navigation of genre categories in 'Jolene', and to consider some of its limitations. One particular aspect to consider is the industry relationship around 'Jolene'. Despite the inconsistency of the song's generic signifiers, 'Jolene' is able to market itself as a country song, its claim to 'being country' remains unchallenged. This raises the question about how subversive these inconsistencies are within the song's genre identification. The extent of genre category subversion in 'Jolene' may perhaps be less, by drawing on Appalachian folk aesthetics,

what might be thought of as a 'neighboring' (Beebee, 1994, p. 28) genre rather than an 'other' to country (Haddon, 2020, p. 12). Parton's incorporation of folk elements in 'Jolene' has different political and cultural associations and implications than the crossover and incorporation of pop genres, and especially disco, discussed in the previous chapter. The racialised aspects to this genre category system (as outlined in Section 3.1.2) also play a role in determining what level of subversion is deemed permissible. Parton's subversion of genre and marketing category conventions do not lead to any risk of Parton's position in the country market. There is also a risk that Parton's incorporation of folk elements can be co-opted by the identity work of the country music industry. As mentioned previously (Section 2.4), the country music industry sought to present itself with a 'solidly middle-class white Silent Majority status' (Martinez, 2020, p. 135). Further, the mountain imagery could also be co-opted into an idealised form of whiteness (especially if the stigmatised aspects of Appalachian identity could be downplayed in a more romanticised view of the folk and 'mountain' musical heritage), especially as Martinez argues, 'for a growing number of whites discomfited by the social movements of the 1960s, refuge was alternatively found in the Southern imaginary and the signifiers of white rusticity' (ibid, p. 133). It becomes imperative not to just deconstruct and make visible these inconsistencies within Jolene's genre identification, but to pay attention to the cultural work at stake, and where necessary contest and deploy the significations in a more progressive direction.

The challenge here becomes about keeping these 'tensions' (Brackett, 2016, p. 29) within Parton's songs' genre work open, and their subversive potential visible. This can be a particularly hard task since much of Parton's 'cultural work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) reinvests in claims to authenticity and 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61), rather than completely deconstructing ideas of authenticity and genre identity. Parton's autobiography and musical links to 'mountain' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 87) traditions form a large part of her 'authenticity claims' (Edwards, 2018, p. 14) to country music. The linking of queer reading, and especially drawing out a homoerotic interpretation of 'Jolene', strengthens claims to LGBTQIA+ experiences as belonging in country music. That this reading is present and supported by the content of the song in a close reading,

within this part of Parton's repertoire, challenges some of the framings around Parton's discography that identifies her LGBTQIA+ audiences with her pop-crossover and subsequent celebrity image. The folk aesthetics link to what has been identified as Parton's 'core identity' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 99). Queer reading, by forging this link, challenges assumptions of which musical genres and aesthetics can represent LGBTQIA+ experiences. There is, however, a further challenge to this narrative that is worth drawing attention to. It is important to be cautious of ideas around 'core identity' that may suggest the idea of an 'inherent' (musical) self that has ties to essentialist understandings of authenticity, identity, and genre categories (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 43). The emphasis on LGBTQIA+ belonging in the early period of Parton's career is not to downplay the crossover repertoire or to reify genre category definitions. The claims to belonging and genre identity are no more inherent in this period of Parton's career than the crossover period. What the queer reading of 'Jolene' demonstrates is that claims to belonging in country, do not have to rely on restrictive and essentialist notions of genre, and instead can be articulated through acknowledging the hybridity and inconsistencies of genre construction.

7.3 'Coat of Many Colors'

My analysis of 'Jolene' explored the way Parton's songs navigate the country genre and articulate claims to belonging. The use of musical elements relating to mountain music supported these claims, but also suggested a continued life-writing practice of the musical identity of the Appalachia region and its people. The plot of 'Jolene' also strayed from its flimsy basis within Parton's own life story to suggest that the song is a more collective life-writing practice, which is open to multiple readings and uses, for example as a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17). I develop my interrogation of Parton's life writing further in this next case study: 'Coat of Many Colors'. The song centres on a moment from Parton's life story, her receiving a coat from her mother as a child (Parton, 1971a). Out of all the songs this thesis looks at, 'Coat of Many Colors' is the one that is most commonly and most explicitly romanticised and presented as being inspired by Parton's own life and experiences. 'Coat of Many Colors' has also been described as an example of Parton's 'autobiographical' song writing (Berman, 1978, p.

78; Hamessley, 2020, p. 59). When performing, Parton will often introduce the song with a comic anecdote about her childhood (*Dolly: Live from London*, 2010). Parton identifies 'Coat of Many Colors' as being one of her favourite songs (*Dolly Parton: Here I Am*, 2019) and being key to how fans engage with her (Hamessley, 2020, p. 53). The song has become directly linked with Parton's persona, infusing it with Parton's constructed life story (Edwards, 2018, p. 23). Yet even in this seemingly most autobiographical of songs, 'Coat of Many Colors' has wider resonances, and some that may be especially significant for LGBTQIA+ listeners. Although my analysis draws on some elements of Parton's life story to contextualise some of the narrative in the song, the majority of my emphasis is on the potential ways of interpreting the song as a mode for authenticating (Moore, 2002) LGBTQIA+ experiences as belonging in the genre of country music. My reading of the song draws out the affective logics and its 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with queer theoretical ideas of shame and political mobilisation of stigmatised communities (Munt 2008, p. 4), such as the potential for solidarity between working-class and LGBTQIA+ people. Queer reading 'Coat of Many Colors' produces an emphatic promise for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. As with 'Jolene', this claim to belonging in genre is also based on unstable and fluid category definitions that suggest the importance and potential of critiquing essentialism and exclusionary genre practices.

'Coat of Many Colours' retells an episode from the protagonist's (implicitly Parton) childhood: her mother sewing her coat out of 'a box of rags' (Parton, 1971a) which gives the song's protagonist a sense of 'pride' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 52), but when she goes to school, all that the other kids see are the 'rags' (Parton, 1971a) and they make fun of her. In focusing on this moment, the song communicates the emotional significance of the coat, which represents the mother's 'love' (ibid). The coat is also a way of passing down Bible stories. 'As [her mother]... sewed she told a story from the Bible' about 'Joseph' and 'his coat of many colors' (ibid). Through these stories being passed down both orally and tangibly through the coat, the protagonist is given a sense of belonging (within the family and the stories) and pride within herself - 'I wore it so proudly' (ibid). This episode is also a moment of conflict when she gets to school 'to find the others

laughing and making fun of' (ibid) her. This conflict is upsetting to the song's protagonist and represents a conflict of value systems (Hubbs, 2014, p. 81). Parton's speaker at first 'couldn't understand' why the other children were laughing at her. In her value system she 'felt [she] was rich' (Parton, 1971a). 'Rich' in this line is about being provided for, not with material wealth or possessions, but 'with love' (ibid).

7.3.1 LGBTQIA+ Resonances in 'Coat of Many Colors'

The song has wider, collective resonances beyond Parton's life story that enable LGBTQIA+ listeners to identify with and read into Parton's persona and life-writing practices. 'Coat of Many Colors' is a key text for understanding the way Parton's persona integrates individual experiences into a more 'collective' life-writing practice (Drag, 2019, p. 233). Parton's life writing in this song, by tapping into the stigmatisation and 'shame' (Parton, 1994, p. 51) experienced by working-class people and those living in rural poverty, takes on a more collective significance beyond an individual experience of bullying and stigma – 'we had *no* money' (emphasis added Parton, 1971). Parton's song represents more than just the individual persona of the artist and resonates with the collective persona of some of Parton's audience, some of whom may have backgrounds like Parton's (Smash, 2021, p. 5) and some of whom may identify with being shamed through other identity markers and experiences. In Parton's own description of the song, she encourages different readings that enable the song to resonate widely beyond her individual experience. Parton says: 'it really covers a lot of ground... It's about confidence, it's about bullying. It's about acceptance' and describes the song as her 'philosophy...: it's ok to be different... it's ok to not be like everybody else. In fact, it's not only ok, it's wonderful that you are who you are' (*Dolly Parton: Here I Am*, 2019). Parton's statement that the song 'covers a lot of ground' could easily refer to the 'multiplicity' (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez, 2021) of experiences within her audiences. 'Coat of Many Colors' is a song that is more than about Parton herself and in its 'message of acceptance' of difference (Barker, 2020), the song has the potential to resonate across a 'diverse' group of listeners (Cottom 2021). Her 'philosophy' that 'it's ok to be different' could also be read as an LGBTQIA+ pride statement (Barker, 2021b).

Parton's song can have particular resonances for LGBTQIA+ listeners. The 'Coat of Many Colors' as a visual image has a striking resemblance with the LGBTQIA+ Pride flag (Barker, 2021b). Parton's protagonist in the song wears the coat as a statement of pride. Parton's protagonist wears her poverty quite literally on her sleeve. The poverty in the song is presented in a matter-of-fact way, whether that is describing the coat as 'rags' or 'patches on [her] britches/ and holes in both [her] shoes' (Parton, 1971a). The protagonist does not express any discontent or sadness with her situation until she experiences shame within the social environment of the school. In representing the protagonist's poverty in this way, 'Coat of Many Colors' does affective work renegotiating ideas of pride and shame (Barker, 2021a). Shame, as an affect, has been theorised by queer scholarship as being capable of being 'transmuted into pride as part of a strategy by individuals and groups to reverse the discourse' (Munt, 2008, p. 4). Further, there is potential for 'horizontal bonds [to be] formed through communities of shame [which] can be transmuted into collective desires to claim a political presence and a legitimate self' (Munt, 2008, p. 4). 'Coat of Many Colors' offers the potential for 'coalitional alliances' (Butler, 1993, p. 20) and forging 'horizontal bonds' (Munt, 2008, p. 4) through the affective reworkings of shame that makes a point of connection between the socially stigmatised groups of working-class people in Appalachia and LGBTQIA+ people (Barker, 2021b). The collective of Parton's 'diverse' audiences (Cottom, 2021) is able to interpret the affective logics (Hubbs, 2021) in 'Coat of Many Colors' around renegotiating pride, shame, and acceptance (Barker, 2021b).

The song offers a point of entry for LGBTQIA+ audiences into Parton's life-writing practices, which draw heavily on the genre of country music (the family setting (Neal, 2007, p. 43), Christian theology, and Parton's song writing). The narrative of 'Coat of Many Colors' enfolds through three frames of storytelling: the mother, the Bible, and the song's protagonist. By retelling a story her mother has told, the protagonist is continuing a family tradition. By linking that to retelling a Bible story, the protagonist's experiences of poverty and shame are granted a sense of 'dignity' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 87). Parton's performance of this song is a further act of storytelling that establishes it as part of the

country music genre's story-telling tradition (Hamessley, 2020, p. 51). Through family, faith, and the genre of country music, Parton's protagonist has tools to challenge the shame attached to poverty and achieve a personal sense of pride and dignity. This is a possibility that the song also offers LGBTQIA+ listeners. Queer reading asserts LGBTQIA+ people as belonging within these practices and works to 'authenticate' (Moore, 2002, p. 216) LGBTQIA+ experiences within the genre of country music.

7.3.2 'Coat of Many Colors' and Genre Categorisation

Just like 'Jolene', there are 'inconsistencies' (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) within the genre labels and musical signifiers of 'Coat of Many Colors' that have implications for the way claims to authenticity and belonging in country are articulated. Edwards describes the song as 'folk inflected', drawing attention to Parton presenting this song as such during her pop-crossover period and in subsequent live performances (2018, p. 115). However, Hamessley suggests that the song has conflicting genre signifiers. There is a strong narrative and storytelling pull in the opening line 'back through the years I go wandering once again' (Parton, 1971a) that could be compared to folk ballads that 'similarly gathers her listeners into the story circle' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 51). However, 'Coat of Many Colors' has 'different' melodic and harmonic qualities from these folk, modal forms, and identifies the song's 'harmony' as 'the three-chord, classic country' (implicitly the Nashville sound style) (ibid, p. 70). Whereas 'Jolene' was an example of a song that musically linked to Parton's life writing of her Appalachian mountain upbringing, but with narrative content that more closely resembled mainstream country and moved away from narratives of Appalachia, 'Coat of Many Colors' does the opposite. 'Coat of Many Colors' uses lyrical content drawing on Parton's life story and its backdrop of the Smoky Mountains, yet does not reflect this musically. There is a tension within the juxtaposition of narrative content and the musical elements that suggests an instability within Parton's 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29) linking her performances with her mythologised life writing of Appalachia. Parton has attempted to resolve this tension in some live performances, for example during the Backwoods Barbie Tour in 2008, she linked the song to older folk musical traditions through instrumentation (*Dolly: Live from London*, 2010), through the inclusion of the

autoharp, which Goldin-Perschbacher argues differs from contemporary country instrumentation (2022, p. 175). This instrumentation also differs from the 1971 studio recording that is mostly played on guitar as a 1970s country song, with production conventions of the mainstream industry of the period. Parton's subsequent performances of 'Coat of Many Colors' compound her further life-writing practices, that intensify the Appalachian mountain setting and the construction of Parton's 'regional [musical] identity' (Watson, 2016, p. 144).

These narratives work affectively and show the song's genre identity to be changeable and constructed through these shifting discourses and remediations, rather than something natural or innate (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 149; Ross, 1999, p. 325; see also Robertson, 1996, p. 6). Almost paradoxically, the nostalgia produced from Parton's pop-crossover period onwards serves to intensify pseudo-essentialist claims to Parton's country authenticity, whereas close analysis of the period's repertoire reveals a more complex picture. Deconstructing and exposing the inconsistencies in the genre identification of a song like 'Coat of Many Colors' and its relations to the life writing of the artist challenges the essentialism underpinning the policing of genre (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 13; Royster, 2022, p. 7), and removes the 'burden of platonic definitional stress' (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 27) that is often put up by country music industry 'gatekeepers' to marginalise LGBTQIA+ people (both as artists and as audiences) (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 5). Belonging in country music is about the 'emotional conviction' (Shusterman, 1999, p. 226) and success of the 'gesture [of] being country' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 61). This kind of queer reading practice would suggest that deploying or reclaiming country music authenticity can be a generative political strategy (Tuttle, 2015, p. 79) to assert LGBTQIA+ belonging in the genre.

7.4 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'

The final case study of this chapter, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' builds on the way queer reading can enable LGBTQIA+ listeners to 'negotiate' (Hall, 1980, p. 126) the particular life-writing practice and autobiographical narrative presented in 'Coat of Many Colors' to suggest that there are broader ways that queer reading can be used. 'My

Tennessee Mountain Home' uses details related to Parton's life story (such as the reference to going to 'church on Sunday' (Parton, 1973d) and the title invoking her childhood family home), but also engages with broader representational narratives of the US South and Appalachia (such as those previous outlined in Sections 2.2, 7.1.1 and 7.1.2). My analysis of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' demonstrates how a queer reading of this song engages with ideas of LGBTQIA+ belonging within these representations and, by extension, ideas around the genre of country music. From its title, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' (ibid) identifies the specific region of Appalachia and the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee as the setting for Parton's life writing in this song. Parton's individual narrative becomes part of a collective representation of Appalachia and country music. Individual listeners, including LGBTQIA+ listeners, can situate themselves within these representations. Through analysing how Parton represents 'home', I explore the potential 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' has for LGBTQIA+ listeners to 'make... home' (Fortier, 2003, p.120) and assert a claim to belonging within the song; Parton's wider repertoire, persona and life writing; and more broadly the genre of country music.

My analysis begins by reiterating some points about home as a concept interrelated with belonging before drawing out the potential 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' with LGBTQIA+ listeners around the song's treatment of 'sexual pleasure' (Barker, 2021a, p. 4) navigating narratives of shame, sin and stigma. I argue that this reading 'authenticates' (Moore, 2002, p. 216) LGBTQIA+ experiences as belonging in the genre of country music. Yet I also argue that queer reading and 'authenticity claims' (Edwards, 2018, p. 14) to belonging need to remain open and critical, especially considering the racialised aspects of narratives invoked in belonging in country music. I consider an approach to reading 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' that foregrounds issues of racism, in a way that does not reify or assume that home or the genre of country is inherently white, but in a way acknowledging the lived consequences of the racialisation of the genre. Queer reading 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' has potential to radically challenge rigid and essentialist genre categories to

articulate more inclusive narratives and authenticity claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

7.4.1 Making Home and LGBTQIA+ Belonging in Parton's Tennessee Mountain Home

Home is a key concept to explore the potential for audiences to 'assert their presence' (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 74), not just in Parton's collective life writing but also in the genre of country music. As I outlined in the conceptual framework (Section 3.3.1), Fortier has critiqued the way some LGBTQIA+ life-writing practices represent and conceptualise home within coming-out narratives. Such narratives can rely on too crude an oppositionality with a 'tendency to oppose queerness and the childhood home, where the latter is a space where queerness does not fit' (Fortier, 2003, p. 116). The implication of this is that the 'familial home remains unproblematically heterosexualized', and heteronormativity 'is fatalistically... inscribed within, the family' (ibid, p. 120). For these oppositional narratives to function, places and identities are static and 'fixed' (ibid, p. 116). This oppositionality too readily accepts homophobic definitions of family, home, and where LGBTQIA+ people belong (McClary, 2002, pp. 160-161), which extends to ideas of musical genre. The home in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' (and country music more widely as an aesthetic genre) should not be monolithically heterosexualised, nor uncritically assumed to lack or marginalise LGBTQIA+ subjects. Such a critical practice, as Fortier argues, would 'fatalistically' (Fortier, 2003, p. 120) reinscribe that homophobia 'back into' this home and 'genre' (Barker, 2022b), erasing LGBTQIA+ subjects and their agency.

Parton's life writing and repertoire challenges these dominant narratives and in its representations of sexuality becomes an area that can resonate with LGBTQIA+ experiences. In her 1994 autobiography, Parton makes the case for sexuality and sexual pleasure as having the potential to exist within her community and faith. Parton describes her experiences in an old, abandoned church, observing 'the dirty drawings on the walls... studying the way the sexual organs had been drawn and at times trying to add to them' and taking 'pieces of ivory that had been the tops of the piano keys...

and strings from the soprano section [and attaching them] to an old mandolin' (1994a, p. 77). Parton then asserts, 'here in one place was God, music, and sex' (ibid). Parton makes an emphatic claim that sex and her sexuality belongs within her faith: 'I had come to know that it was all right for me to be a sexual being. I knew that was one of the things God meant for me to be' (ibid, p. 78). Parton makes a powerful claim for divine permission for sexual desire (Edwards, 2018, pp. 162-163).

Hamessley argues that Parton's support for LGBTQIA+ people stems from her own 'sense of being judged as an outsider' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 196) during her Pentecostal (Church of God) upbringing (Edwards, 2018, p. 16). Parton knows that these institutions were often not encouraging around open sexuality and sexual pleasure. A few pages earlier in her autobiography, Parton critiques the shame-filled, 'fire and brimstone' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 186) style of preaching within her experiences of church: 'I can remember sitting in church and listening to what a worthless sinner I was, and feeling so ashamed without giving much thought to what I had to be ashamed of. What has a six-year-old kid done that justifies being burned in hellfire?' (1994, p. 72). These experiences of shame and fear are aspects of religious institutions that Parton has consistently criticised. Parton describes how sex is treated within these frameworks of shame and sin: 'it must be sex that condemns you to hell. Not that you've had sex or anything close to it, but somehow just being aware that it exists feels like a grievous sin in itself' (ibid, p. 73). Parton refuses to accept these frameworks around shame and sexuality, which is key to forging a point of connection for LGBTQIA+ audiences to engage with her, her discography, and wider representations of country music, to challenge dominant cultural homophobic narratives that attach shame to LGBTQIA+ people.

The representations within 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', like all of Parton's life-writing practices, are acts of mythmaking (Edwards, 2018, p. 3; Tost, 2011, pp. xi-xii). The song is a nostalgic and positive representation of the area Parton grew up: the poor, rural region of Appalachia. The song opens on a summer afternoon representing peace and relaxation ('life is as peaceful as a baby's sigh') before building into a

celebration of the region's natural beauty ('mountain', 'fields', 'honeysuckle vine') and wildlife ('June bugs', 'fireflies', 'crickets', 'eagle', 'songbird' (Parton, 1973d)). All of this takes place within the thriving social world connected to 'church on Sunday with the ones ya love' (ibid). The warm, relaxed pace and arrangement of instrumentation at the beginning of the song suggests that this 'Tennessee Mountain Home' is a place of 'comfort... and belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 410) for the song's protagonist. Edwards argues that 'Parton invites listeners to share in her mythologized, romanticised nostalgia for this setting' (2018, p. 82). Hamessley points out that media and cultural representations of Appalachia are rarely romanticised and positive (2020, p. 59) and therefore this mythmaking is 'subversive' (Edwards, 2018, p. 4). Pamela Fox argues that 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' recuperates 'class abjection' (2009, p. 140; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 63). Parton does this not by deconstructing dominant cultural narratives and myths, but through articulating her own. This is another example of how Parton 'combines' both the 'stigmatised' and 'privileged' together (Edwards, 2018, p. 31). The rural Appalachian poverty is brought within the realm of respectability through the comforting pastoral imagery in Parton's representation. The same potential for 'horizontal bonds' (Munt, 2008, p. 4) between rural poverty and LGBTQIA+ people in 'Coat of Many Colors' (Barker, 2021a) can be interpreted in this song. 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' also contains a direct invocation to "creating home" (Fortier, 2003, p. 131) and belonging for the song's listeners.

Parton's mythmaking in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' has the potential to demonstrate that LGBTQIA+ people belong in country music, through its representations of its social settings in the Smoky Mountains. Parton's experiences of being judged for her own sexuality are implicitly invoked in the second verse of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' where there is a clear reference to sexuality and romantic relationships – 'Walkin' home from church on a Sunday with the one ya' love, just laughin', talkin', making future plans' (Parton, 1973d). This quick succession of verbs embodies the social activity described, with the church at the heart of this. The following lines bring sexuality into this social scene – 'and when the folks ain't lookin', you might steal a kiss or two' (ibid). It is ambiguous the extent to which the protagonist's sexuality

is represented as belonging within the social world of the song. That these kisses take place ‘when the folks ain’t lookin’ suggest that this is something ‘folk’ may disapprove of. The verb ‘steal’ suggests that these moments of sexual pleasure must be gained despite the social world around the childhood family home. At the same time, the social dynamics and routines enable these sexual interactions. The walk home from church on Sunday, with the community in attendance facilitates them through the opportunity to meet potential sexual partners. In the sexual relationships alluded to there is a notable absence of shame. The tone of the line ‘when the folks ain’t lookin’ (ibid) suggests that avoiding people ‘lookin’ is predominantly a practical consideration, rather than an action driven by shame. Therefore, the ‘idealistic, nostalgic’ sound of the song remains in this verse and its representation of sexuality (Hamessley, 2020, p. 59).

The affective logics within this verse are queerly resonant and, similar to ‘Coat of Many Colors’, are ‘rearranging’ and ‘rearticulating’ (Ross, 1991, p.100) shame and pride, and work to include more people within the ‘comfort, care and belonging’ of home (Fortier, 2003, p. 115). ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ produces a sense of comfort and belonging through situating acceptance of the protagonist’s sexuality within a nostalgic, idealised representation of home. This sense of comfort alongside the song’s representations of sexuality within this pastoral scene can offer LGBTQIA+ listeners a sense of belonging within Parton’s discography. ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ constructs, even if just temporarily, a sense of a home, a ‘childhood’, ‘familial’ (Fortier, 2003, p. 120) home that is inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. The sonic palette and tropes of country music construct this home using the backdrop of the Appalachia region. This does significant ‘cultural work’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) in conceptualising where LGBTQIA+ people can belong.

7.4.2 Queer Multiplicity in ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’

In approaching Parton’s LGBTQIA+ audience as a collective it is important to acknowledge the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) within this and to recognise a ‘multiplicity’ (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez 2021) of listeners. It is important to approach the home represented in ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ critically, and

interrogate which experiences, readings, narratives and listeners are made salient, and which are 'marginalised' (Pittelman, 2021). Black listeners can have a different positionality to country music, especially to romanticised notions of home and belonging, especially when connected to nostalgia. Royster argues that 'Black country music artists for most part refuse... nostalgia' (2022, p. 12), which is reflected by comments by the artist Rhiannon Giddens that 'there ain't nothing for [Black listeners] in that nostalgia' (quoted in Abdelmahmoud, 2020). The same representations of home may invoke 'visceral feelings of fear of racialised violence' (Royster, 2017, p. 307) for Black listeners. When exploring Parton's songs, it is important to consider these different experiences and positionalities in relation to country music. Of equal importance is not to overly romanticise these life-writing narratives that remain uncritically attached to the idea of home as 'comfort and seamless belonging' (Fortier, 2001, p. 420), especially when experiences of racism are not acknowledged. Just as Parton has to navigate restrictive narratives around class and gender whilst also being able to benefit from and 'leverage' her white privilege (Cottom, 2021), white LGBTQIA+ listeners may need to navigate homophobic attitudes and narratives around the family home, but they can also access privilege through their whiteness. This privilege may mean that white LGBTQIA+ listeners may be able to enjoy a song like 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' and its invocations of home free from the 'fear of racialised violence' that Royster describes. In representing home almost unquestioningly as 'comfort' and 'belonging', 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' risks obscuring these other narratives and experiences of home. Home should not be treated in any monolithic way, neither being 'inherently' inclusive nor as a complete rejection of LGBTQIA+ people (Fortier, 2003, p. 131). Instead, home should be conceptualised as 'a contingent product of historical circumstances and discursive formations – of class, religion, ethnicity, nation – that individuals negotiate in the process of creating home' (ibid). Home is something that is always 'in... process' that different LGBTQIA+ subjects 'negotiate' (ibid) in various ways. Within the 'collective' life writing (Drag, 2019, p. 233) enabled through 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', there is the potential for a multiplicity of interpretations of the song and affective work around 'creating home' (Fortier, 2003, p. 131) to offer a more pluralistic approach to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music.

'My Tennessee Mountain Home' has potential to resonate with more people within Parton's audiences. Royster suggests that country music 'can be a productive sonic space of nostalgia and mourning for Black queer listeners' (2017, p. 307). The listener takes an active role in undertaking a 'subjective reconstruction' of the relationship between racial and sexual identities and country music (Whitlock, 2013, p. xxix). Parton's 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' may therefore not be irretrievably inaccessible to Black LGBTQIA+ listeners. The Smoky Mountains have specific geographic and cultural roots but they can also take on additional meanings and resonances through the experiences of different listeners (Ma, 2021). Jad Abumrad describes the experience of driving to Parton's Tennessee mountain home as 'exactly the feeling of driving up to [his] Dad's old village in the mountains of Lebanon' (Abumrad & Oliaee, 2019b). Kenyan artist Esther Konkara is well known in Kenya for performing Parton's songs and particularly 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' (Abumrad and Oliaee, 2019a).. Konkara grew up in a rural village and would go up to the mountain and sing Parton's song (ibid). She describes the personal significance of the song – 'my Tennessee was those hills where I come from' – and attributes this to 'the vividness of the imagery': 'Dolly's very vivid about the place. You can imagine this is how Tennessee looked like. The birds singing and you can just get that picture' (Konkara quoted in Abumrad and Oliaee, 2019a). 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' is able to resonate with different listeners across the US and globally. The song performs important functions within different narratives of home that suggest a complex and versatile potential within different life-writing narratives of belonging in country music, which can include LGBTQIA+ people beyond just cis gendered white gay men.

7.4.3 Genre in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'

In my analysis of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' I have explored the potential for different kinds of queer readings that can produce claims to belonging in country music, with potential for a more critical (and less romanticised) approach to the concept. This critical approach can be applied to its genre signifiers that work to situate the song as belonging in country music, and the relationship of mainstream country to 'mountain music' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 87) traditions. The song's instrumentation and its

arrangement does relate to some of these older musical traditions that would suggest a congruence with Parton's narratives of the Smoky Mountains. As Hamessley describes, 'the banjo figures prominently for over half the song, played in a more rustic old-time... style' (ibid), and therefore the linking to older musical styles the song works to support Parton's 'authenticity narrative' (Edwards, 2018, p. 29), but at the same time its sound challenges the stability of country music as a category through this incorporation of musical aspects that differ from mainstream country. Yet at the same time, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' conforms to some instrumentalist expectations of mainstream country with its 'acoustic guitar' and 'steel guitar' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 61). Similar to 'Coat of Many Colors' its mountain significations have intensified in subsequent live performances, as part of her 'multi-instrumentalist take on her mountain songs' (Edwards, 2018, p. 179), similar to the way her Appalachian folk and bluegrass albums added further Appalachian and folk instrumentation (Hamessley, 2020, p. 97). The song's musical identity, like 'Jolene', straddles country, 'old-time' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 61), and folk, and reflects the hybridity, inconsistency and 'instability' out of which all genres are constructed (Brackett, 2016, p. 26; see also Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 1).

The open hybridity of genre, and lyrical expression of belonging in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', 'which invites listeners [including LGBTQIA+ people] to share in... [the] mythologized, romanticised' (Edwards, 2018, p. 82) representations of country music suggests that there is a removal of 'essentialist underpinnings' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156) and loosening of rigid genre categories. This may be a politically useful approach for articulating LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music, however it may be an insufficiently critical mode, as the song's romanticised and sentimental approach to belonging may not go far enough to address the industry's 'exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) whilst it reifies its ideals of country music as a genre. It should be acknowledged that 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' was a commercial product of the mainstream (Nashville-based) country music industry at a time when the Country Music Association was reifying the industry's racialisation in the 1970s (Martinez, 2020, p. 135). Particularly, it should be noted that the song's romanticised mountain imagery and

nostalgia could easily fit into ‘signifiers of white rusticity’ that the industry sought to tap into, with its exclusionary racialised implications and consequences (ibid, p. 133). There is a danger that Parton’s articulation of belonging in songs like ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ becomes exclusionary white nostalgia and a promise of home and belonging open to some, but not all. This is especially important to recognise when considering the diversity and issues of intersectionality within LGBTQIA+ communities. It is therefore imperative that queer reading practices (or any critical reading practices) approach the song’s articulation of claims to authenticity and belonging in country carefully.

It is important that queer readings of ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ are intentional in resisting the borders of the country music industry, whether these are geographic or in terms of assumptions of audience, and the kinds of experience with which the song can resonate. It is also important to consider the belonging articulated by the song and its genre identity as transient and contingent on the commercial context of the country music industry of the 1970s, and therefore there is nothing inherently ‘country’ or ‘mountain’ about this song. Similarly, its potential resonances with LGBTQIA+ listeners may also be culturally and historically contingent on the ways LGBTQIA+ lives are ‘socially constructed’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 191) and embodied within the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It should not be assumed that reading ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ as producing the possibility for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music will always be as salient. However, whilst it is important not to overstate or romanticise belonging, and the way the song articulates this, it is also important that in resisting racist and white-washed narratives around country music, we do not overly determine the way ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ can be read by different listeners. It is important as Tichi argues about the concept of home in country music not ‘to take the songs at face value as peculiarly *southern*, reflective of a regional yearning for an idealized home south of the Mason-Dixon line’ (1994, p. 21). Even though the romanticised sense of belonging evoked in the song may relate to Tichi’s discussion of a ‘mythic... home’ (1994, p. 45), being open to the tensions and inconsistencies in this mythic construction, but without having to completely discard the myth, may offer generative potential. As Konkara’s reading and performance of the song demonstrated, ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’

has ‘sociability’ as a ‘companion text’ (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 16-17) to navigate and circumvent restrictive borders and industry assumptions of how the song might travel and resonate. The potential in this reading, that the home need not be ‘fixed’ (Fortier, 2003, p. 116), nor be Tennessee, the US or even the country music industry suggest that the song may have subversive power, particularly when navigating authenticity, identity and belonging.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has used queer reading as a method for engaging with Parton’s early repertoire to challenge ideas of genre, identity and belonging within discourses of country music, including around Parton herself. This is of particular significance for understanding this artist as Parton’s ‘star text’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 43) and songs of this period are continually revisited, remediated and reinterpreted by fans, journalists and scholars. My analysis demonstrates that it is not just during moments of crossover that genre categories and definitions are unstable and fluid (Brackett, 2016, p. 26), but that the label of “country” within Parton’s repertoire (as with all artists within the industry) are built upon hybrid and unstable foundations. Crossover does not queer or destabilise genre, but genre as a concept (for which country music is no exception) is ‘already queer’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 796). Parton’s songs that situate themselves seemingly straightforwardly as country can be a space to explore and open up ideas of authenticity, identity and belonging. Parton navigates significant cultural terrain, particularly within the context of the country music industry, around genre and authenticity, to resist limiting (essentialist) ‘(c)ategories of both ‘music’ and ‘people’ (Brackett, 2016, p. 1). Yet at the same time, songs such as ‘Coat of Many Colors’ and ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ remain attached to ideals of authenticity and sincere expressions of identity. As my critique of some romanticised readings of ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ suggests, it is important to be cautious of overly sentimentalised notions of authenticity and belonging that may not sufficiently challenge the oppression of rigid identity categories. Nevertheless, this analysis of these case study songs is particularly significant as this repertoire may most often be used to canonically establish Parton as a country artist (Edwards, 2018, p. 205; see also Haddon, 2020, p. 12;

Sanneh, 2021, p. 156; Watson, 2022, p. 58). My queer reading in this part of Parton's discography has high critical stakes as it gets to the core of seemingly stable ideas of who and what can be 'authenticated' as country music (Moore, 2002, p. 210; see also Bishop and Watson, 2022). Demonstrating that there is room for ambiguity and 'multiplicity' (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez 2021) in this part of Parton's repertory challenges the definitional basis of many transphobic and homophobic 'exclusionary practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 59) within the country music industry. The next analytical chapter, which focuses on Parton's songs that explicitly and intentionally make statements about LGBTQIA+ people, will continue this critique further to consider an approach to belonging that does not reify or blunt resistance to institutions and ideals such as home, family and the country music industry that cause harm.

Chapter 8. Parton's Songs as LGBTQIA+ Advocacy

In the previous two analytical chapters, I used queer reading as a method of drawing out potential 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) with LGBTQIA+ listeners in Parton's songs. These resonances were not directly from 'authorial intention' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) and so shifted the emphasis from Parton as a figure to considerations of what the textual qualities of the songs may enable (Barker, 2022a, p. 153). This third and final analytical chapter considers what this approach to Parton may mean within the context of more intentionality from the artist, by looking at the two songs within Parton's discography that were written and recorded deliberately as pro-LGBTQIA+ statements: 'Family' and 'Travelin' Thru'. The main approach to the analysis remains similar to the other analytical chapters, exploring the way these songs use ideas of genre identification and drawing out the queer resonances to unpack the way authenticity claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music are articulated. The songs are still treated as 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16) that enable LGBTQIA+ listeners to 'assert their presence' in the genre of country music (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 74). The addition of Parton's intentional pro-LGBTQIA+ statements further the work of these songs to challenge 'exclusionary... narratives' and discourses around country music (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3).

In the case study analyses, I also draw out the way that belonging in country music is articulated, and the extent to which this is a critical approach to the concept, rather than one that romanticises it and falls back onto essentialist notions of authenticity and genre identity. This analysis directly addresses two of my three main research questions: how queer reading constructs LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music, and how Parton's songs navigate the contested cultural terrain around genre and authenticity. The analysis of this chapter also begins to address the third research question around the extent that Parton as a case study enables an understanding of wider issues around LGBTQIA+ people's marginalisation within the country music industry and the 'historical narrative' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1) of the genre. I will do this through evaluating Parton's pro-LGBTQIA+ statements in these songs and their broader political implications. The next chapter (Chapter 9. Conclusion) will build on this analysis and

further unpack the potential and limitations of Parton as a case study for advancing equality for LGBTQIA+ people in country music.

This chapter begins with a brief outline (and timeline) of Parton's pro-LGBTQIA+ actions and the ways in which Parton has tended to articulate her support for LGBTQIA+ people. These are often in a way that are in keeping with country music affective logics, identified in previous chapters of 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350) and 'hillbilly humanism' (Goodson, 1993, p. 114; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 76; Fillingim, 2003, p. 51), and her support being an extension of a general expression of 'accepting everyone without judgement' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 193). This approach informs the analysis of the chapter's two case study songs, which coincide with the period in which Parton makes these statements (roughly from 1989 onwards (Hamessley, 2020, p. 194)) as my analysis considers the ways that 'Family' and 'Travelin' Thru' situate their pro-'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139) statements within country music's affective logics. As with the case study analyses in the previous analytical chapters, I consider the genre identifications at work within each song, including the 'tensions' within the song's 'categorisation' (Brackett, 2016, p. 29). The analysis also unpacks how belonging is conceptualised in each of these songs, and the extent to which they reify ideas of family or home, and the potential within each song to critique these ideals and institutions. In 'Family' I argue that there are some elements of critique through its deployment of 'working-class fatalism' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 81), but that the song ultimately strongly romanticises family as an ideal to articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. Alternatively, 'Travelin' Thru' can be read as more critical of rigid definitions of home and belonging, and can provide a generative deconstruction of ideas around genre and identity that may enable more pluralistic expression of LGBTQIA+ experiences (especially trans experiences) within country music aesthetics, with urgent implications for strategising around the country music industry.

8.1 Contexts

The period that this chapter covers was a significant period of change within the country music industry, as well as Parton's position within it. The two main case study songs,

'Family' and 'Travelin' Thru' were released in 1991 and 2005 respectively. This period includes the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, although this period has wider implications for Parton's 'subsequent media image' (Edwards, 2018, p. 202) and significations. During the 1990s the industry was promoting women in the genre (Jada Watson quoted in Palmer, 2021; Edwards, 2018, p. 153; Keel, 2004, p. 169), and expanding its audience (McCusker, 2022, p. 31) more than it had done before. This led to changes in the content of country songs and what could be deemed acceptable (socially and commercially) in terms of gendered and sexual content within the industry (Keel, 2004; Sellnow, 1999, p. 70). Parton at the beginning of the 1990s was releasing into this context and benefitting both commercially and aesthetically. Her 1991 song 'Eagle When She Flies' has been described as being 'feminist', and the album (of the same time) was certified 'platinum' (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 285). However, by the end of the decade, 'Parton's contract was dropped, and she was without major label representation' (Morris, 2013, p. 174). At the end of the 1990s, Parton began her bluegrass and Appalachian folk trilogy, beginning with *The Grass is Blue* (1999) 'released... with her Blue Eye Records and independent label Sugar Hill Records' (Edwards, 2018, p. 155). The two case study songs in this chapter cover the tail end of Parton releasing within the mainstream country music industry, (of which 'Family' is an example) and to just after her Appalachian folk and bluegrass albums, the impact of which I explore in my analysis of 'Travelin' Thru' both in terms of aesthetics and its genre category position.

In addition to the industry contexts in which these songs were released, Parton makes pro-LGBTQIA+ statements in the period after, which coincides with a further change within Parton's place within commercial and industry contexts. Even though Parton's music was not achieving the sales it used to, Parton has received increased critical acclaim and recognition as a legacy artist within the genre of country music. Parton's manager from 2006 onwards pursued a deliberate strategy of amplifying Parton's star persona and to incorporate 'new media' (including digital and increasingly 'social media') (Edwards, 2018, p. 177), as well as connecting to 'mainstream' audiences (Edwards, 2018, p. 179; see also Nozell, 2019; Lordi, 2020). Even if individual songs or

albums were not selling as much, Parton as a brand and persona have continued to resonate with a broad audience. It is in this broader media and music industry reception context, that Parton is making her pro-LGBTQIA+ statements.

Year	Allyship
1989	Parton's production company made <i>Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt</i> (dollyparton.com, 2017; Hamessley, 2020, p. 194).
1991	Song 'Family' off <i>Eagle When She Flies</i> released.
1991	Parton's comments to Vanity Fair 'I love and respect gay people' (Sessums, 1991).
1991	Parton asked about rumours 'about [her] being gay' by Oprah Winfrey, which Parton says are untrue whilst using the moment to affirm her 'gay friends' (Parton, 1991d).
1994	Parton's autobiography released – includes direct statements affirming LGBTQIA+ people (Parton, 1994, p. 317).
2005	Parton writes and records 'Travelin' Thru' for the film <i>Transamerica</i> .
2005	'Sugar Hill' included on Human Rights Campaign <i>Love Rocks</i> compilation – Parton receiving criticism from <i>The Baptist Press</i> (Hamessley, 2020, p. 194).
2009	Parton speaks out in favour of marriage equality (Bolcer, 2009).
2016	Parton speaks out against the North Carolina toilet ban (Betts, 2016).
2019	<i>Dolly Parton's Heartstrings</i> - 'Two Doors Down' and 'Cracker Jack' episodes feature LGBTQIA+ characters.
2019	' <i>Dolly Parton: Here I Am!</i> ' documentary released – with a section acknowledging her LGBTQIA+ fanbase.
2020	<i>Songteller: My Life in Lyrics</i> includes pro LGBTQIA+ statements, and includes both 'Family' (pp. 282-283) and 'Travelin' Thru' (pp. 262-263) in the collection of song lyrics.

Figure 1: Parton's Pro-LGBTQIA+ Allyship - Selected Timeline

8.1.1 Parton's Pro-LGBTQIA+ Statements

Figure 1 above shows a timeline of relevant events that can be thought of as Parton showing support for LGBTQIA+ people. Parton's pro- 'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139) includes her making public statements of general acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, as well as addressing some of the political discussions around LGBTQIA+ people including marriage equality (Bolcer, 2009) and challenging the North Carolina toilet ban in 2016 (Betts, 2016; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 194). Parton has continued to incorporate her LGBTQIA+ inclusivity into her 'star image' (Edwards,

2022a, p. 10) through her more recent transmedia output in her *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings* Netflix series. In the series, each episode is based on a different Parton song, many of them including LGBTQIA+ characters. In the episode 'Two Doors Down' (2019), Parton directly engages with the political terrain around marriage equality in the US. Edwards argues that this output 'amplifies' some of Parton's pre-existing 'social critiques' from earlier points in her career (2022b, p. 143). Parton's allyship implicitly draws on tropes that can be situated within some of the country music affective logics previously outlined of 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350) and 'hillbilly humanism' (Goodson, 1993, p. 114; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 76; Fillingim, 2003, p. 51).

Hamessley argues that Parton's allyship is often expressed in terms of a 'live and let live philosophy' and that 'by accepting everyone without judgment, she opens up a space for her listeners to do the same' (2020, pp. 196-197). In Parton's earliest remarks in support of LGBTQIA+ people, her comments express this general 'message of acceptance' (Barker, 2020), and not judging. Speaking to Oprah Winfrey in response to rumours about her being in a relationship with one of her childhood friends, Judy Ogle, Parton (1991d) responds, 'I have many gay friends and what other people do is up to them, but I'm definitely not gay'. Whilst Parton does dismiss the rumour, she also pointedly affirms her LGBTQIA+ friends and fans. Parton goes further in her comments to *Vanity Fair*, moving from a noncommittal statement of not judging people to a more explicit support saying of the rumours specifically: 'if we were lovers I would not be ashamed of it, I'd just say there's a great love between us—so there' (quoted in Sessums, 1991). Parton makes a point of saying that being gay is not something that should be a reason for shame. She then makes a more general statement of her views on homosexuality saying, 'I have a gay following because I love and understand gay people' (ibid). In this statement Parton does two things: first, she publicly acknowledges gay members of her audience; second, her inclusive rhetoric becomes stronger than a statement of 'live and let live', or being non-judgemental, to a statement of full acceptance. Parton expresses 'love' and that she understands gay people. The word 'understand' (Parton, 1971a) has an important affective role in Parton's musical

repertoire, as was explored in the analysis of ‘Coat of Many Colors’ in the previous chapter (Section 7.3), where this statement does significant ‘cultural’ and rhetorical ‘work’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) in articulating a place for LGBTQIA+ people (here specifically gay and lesbian) through a public acknowledgement of both LGBTQIA+ country audiences and an extension of the values within the affective logics of ‘compassion’ and ‘hillbilly humanism’.

Caitlin White (2016; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 216) describes Parton’s ‘inclusive... and sex positive take on religion... [as] ‘sugarcoated enough for the old guard, but it is also strikingly rebellious’. This could also describe how Parton articulates her LGBTQIA+ allyship, where often her ‘subversive’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) statements are ‘sugarcoated’ through her use of humour. Parton’s allyship can be conceptualised as part of a history of how women in country music have expressed agency and at times engaged with politics. Stephanie Vander Wel argues that ‘(f)or female country artists, humor has proven to be an effective approach in confronting the pressures and scrutinizing gaze of hegemonic society, as well as the gendered restrictions of the country music industry itself’ (2022, p. 87). Parton uses humour to navigate these kinds of restrictions, both within the country music industry and beyond. When making her comments in support of marriage equality in 2009 and in speaking out against the North Carolina toilet bans in 2016, Parton articulated these through her characteristic use of humour (Barker, 2020). In 2009, Parton’s response to a question on her views about marriage equality on *The Joy Behar Show* was ‘Sure, why can’t they get married? They should suffer like the rest of us do’ (quoted in Bolcer, 2009). In her first statement, the rhetorical question, ‘why can’t they get married’, there is almost an implied shrug suggesting that marriage equality is basic ‘common sense’ (Barker, 2020). Parton’s humour and ease with the question suggests a compatibility between her pro-LGBTQIA+ statement and her approach to the affective logics in the genre of country music.

Parton has also made similar kinds of statements in support of trans people. In response to the North Carolina Toilet ban, Parton said: ‘I hope that everybody gets a

chance to be who and what they are' before adding 'I just know, if I have to pee, I'm gon' pee, wherever it's got to be' (quoted in Betts, 2016). The first part of the statement is an expression of 'acceptance' for everyone (Edwards, 2018, p. 39) and her beliefs in compassion and equality (Hubbs, 2014, p. 103). This is also a statement about authenticity – 'who... they are'. (My analysis of 'Travelin' Thru' explores the implications, both generative and restrictive, for this kind of deployment of authenticity for advancing equality for trans people). In the second part of the statement, the use of humour in her 'quip' (Barker, 2020) does 'sugarcoat' and obscure some of the political edge of Parton's statements in support of trans people. There is also a second effect of this use of humour, which is as a mode of critique and statement in of itself. The joke and representation of trans people being able to use the toilet of their gender as a common-sense position also pokes fun at those who are overly invested in where trans people 'pee'. The joke works to disarm the supposed seriousness of the transphobic argument. Parton's combination of warmth and wit in her pro- LGBTQIA+ advocacy complements her acceptance of everyone being who they are, and are presented less as political statements, and more as positions that are basic decency and compassion.

8.1.2 Approaches to Inclusivity and Unity

It is important to acknowledge the limitations to the way in which Parton's allyship is expressed, as a more generalised acceptance and inclusivity. Her more recent allyship, for instance her *Heartstrings* episode 'Two Doors Down' (2019) that foregrounds issues of marriage equality, has been critiqued for having 'some contradictory rhetoric and ideological blind spots, as when it satirises the centring of the heterosexual marriage plot but still leaves it in place' (Edwards, 2022a, p. 12). Perhaps Parton's representation of LGBTQIA+ people as simply included, through an extension of existing ideologies of compassion in country music may not go far enough. Such representations may not critique the systems that produce exclusion, which this thesis argues is crucial in its approach to genre and identity. There are also issues in the way that Parton's inclusivity is represented. There have been significant discourses in the latter half of the 2010s that have developed around Parton. Edwards argues that Parton has been figured 'as anti-racist, pro-gender equity and LGBTQIA+ rights, a figure who can unite a divided

nation' (2022b, p. 139). This suggests that Parton's inclusivity has progressive potential to advance issues around equality. However, Parton's approach to unity across 'a divided nation' may not necessarily be politically progressive. As Smarsh summarises, 'Parton is a great unifier not just across differences in identity and background but also across today's devastating political chasm' (2021, p. 36; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 216). Parton resonating and selling to such a broad audience requires a particular kind of political navigation. In the podcast *Dolly Parton's America*, Brian Sever uses the term 'Dollitics' (quoted in Abumrad and Oliaee, 2019c) to refer to the way Parton navigates questions about politics where there are competing demands for Parton to demonstrate that she supports, or at least does not contradict, her audience's varying political views.

Parton's pro-LGBTQIA+ statements have continuities as well as one significant difference with her engagements with other political issues in the most recent decades of her career. The significant difference, Shima Oliaee suggests, is that Parton has made her position on LGBTQIA+ rights clear in a way that she has seldom done with other issues (Abumrad and Oliaee, 2019d). Although Parton does make more assertive statements on LGBTQIA+ rights, there is a continuity within the way Parton frames her statements. As well as using humour and sugar-coating these statements that I discussed in the previous section, Parton positions her statements in a way to appear less political and maintain her persona as a unifying figure. When Parton made her statements about the toilet bans in 2016, she said 'I try not to get caught up in the controversy of things' just as she made a statement affirming trans people's identities – 'I hope everyone gets to be who they are' (Parton quoted in Betts, 2016). This kind of statement can be interpreted as political, yet Parton makes a claim that this is outside of politics or 'controversy' and more about an ethical and social engagement with people. Parton's stated rejection of 'politics' means that paradoxically her statements have a different kind of political potential, to treat issues that continue to be used as partisan political issues as ethical issues of principle or common-sense gestures towards a position of LGBTQIA+ rights becoming beyond political debate. The most generous interpretation of this is that Parton works to set certain minimum standards for LGBTQIA+ equality. However, there are some limitations to this as Parton remains

attached to an idea of unity and even frames some of her statements as attempting to avoid getting involved in politics.

There are two particular limitations to Parton's framing of LGBTQIA+ rights as apparently beyond politics. First, treating LGBTQIA+ equality in a different way to other issues is a false separation, especially considering the diversity and issues of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) within the LGBTQIA+ community, but a romanticised attachment to unity also removes the ability for critique. This is particularly relevant within the racialised history of the US (and the country music industry) where Ed Kilgore (2021) argues that 'political unity' and 'bipartisan politics' also has potential to be damaging, and has often been used to uphold myths of white supremacy. Kilgore (2021) points to the pre-civil war white political consensus to 'tolerate slavery', and then in 1876 to abandon reconstruction, pushing civil rights back 'decades'. Political unity at this level has always been conditional and relating to some people over others, as Andrea Williams summarises, 'on one hand Americans seemed to clamor for unity; on the other, uniting North and South took precedence over the unification of Black and white' (2021a, p. 26). The country music industry (and country as a marketing category) developed out of this context (see Section 3.1.2), and this approach to unity runs through its business practices, for instance through the aforementioned tapping into imagery to appeal to 'a growing number of whites discomfited by the social movements of the 1960s [especially the civil rights movement]' (Martinez, 2020, p. 133). Parton is also complicit within this context, as she also provides representations of the 'South for white escapism and validation' (Cottom, 2021). Parton's approach to unity, although stemming from this history, has a particular quality in its invocation of her 'diverse... audience', which Cottom describes as 'a diverse, multiracial, pansexual audience for working-class feminist songcraft and queer camp subversiveness' (ibid). Parton provides both a distracting comfort and a 'post-racist' vision of the US having overcome its 'racist bones' (ibid). There is a risk that Parton's reworking of unity to be more inclusive may be limited in its effectiveness to address the racist history that has entrenched exclusion and marginalisation within the country music industry and beyond.

Parton's pro-LGBTQIA+ statements remain attached to preserving an idea of unity. In keeping with the approach of this thesis to belonging, it is important to acknowledge that this risks reifying the systems and definitions of exclusionary categories. As will be explored in the case studies in this chapter, particularly in the song 'Family', a romanticised notion of unity is an insufficient, if not regressive, political tool to address the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ people. It should be reiterated that my approach to Parton as a case study is to distinguish her songs from her as a celebrity figure. From this angle it may be that Parton's public statements perhaps 'sugarcoat' more subversive and radical potential. Focusing on the songs and drawing out their textual qualities away from Parton's branding can enable us to see a more critical approach to genre, identity, authenticity and belonging within her songs. (This will be explored particularly in my analysis of 'Travelin' Thru'). This shift in analytical emphasis that I have undertaken throughout this thesis enables scholarly interpretations of Parton's repertoire to be more expansive and critical. Like in the previous chapters, my analysis draws out the songs' queer 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) and focuses on the way the songs themselves navigate ideas of genre. In these two songs, some of these queer resonances are explicit representations of LGBTQIA+ people and experiences, however my analysis is similarly not limited by 'authorial intention' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13), and draws out further implications that the songs gesture towards in their critique and reworking of belonging.

8.2 'Family'

This section will explore how Parton uses the song 'Family' as part of her 'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139). I outline the song's role as the only example in Parton's discography to feature the word 'gay' (Parton, 1991c) and how this direct and explicit advocacy is deployed, before producing an analysis of this song to explore how Parton articulates a claim for LGBTQIA+ belonging within country music aesthetics and affective logics, most notably hillbilly humanism (Goodson, 1993, p. 114; see also Hubbs, 2014, pp. 76-79). In this analysis I treat 'family' as a term that does much of the conceptual work that 'belonging' has done throughout the thesis. This is not to say that the two terms are completely interchangeable, but to consider family as a unit where

belonging, inclusion and exclusion are constructed. I situate my analysis within the political rhetoric around “family values” and explore how affective ideas of the family are reflected and interrogated in Parton’s song. I argue that assertion of LGBTQIA+ belonging within the family, and by extension country music, has some generative potential. However, my analysis then unpacks the way the construction of the family as a unit may risk overly romanticising this kind of institution, as well as other aspects of US social life and the country music industry. Such romanticism, this thesis argues, risks reifying essentialist and exclusionary ideas of authenticity and identity, which a more critical approach to belonging should strive to avoid.

‘Family’ is an album track from Parton’s 1991 album *Eagle When She Flies*, written by Parton and Carl Perkins (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 282). The album is one of Parton’s last mainstream country releases, during the period in her career when Parton’s music was back within the country marketing category (as opposed to the pop-crossover of the late 1970s and much of the 1980s) a career move that started with the previous album *White Limozeen* in 1989 (Hamessley, 2020, p. 143; Edwards, 2018, p. 153). As Parton’s first 1990s album, *Eagle When She Flies* can be situated within wider changes in the country music industry, which was entering a period of commercial ‘growth’ (Shusterman, 1999, p. 222), and undergoing some political and demographic changes, with country radio seeking to appeal to more women (Jada Watson quoted in Palmer, 2021; Edwards, 2018, p. 153; Keel, 2004, p. 169) and the songs demonstrating a greater feminist consciousness (Keel, 2004). ‘Eagle When She Flies’, the album’s title track, has also been described (retrospectively) as having ‘feminist’ (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 285) content. Further, commercial trends with the rock and pop markets would also crossover into the country market (Hubbs, 2014, p. 74). Of particular note for the song ‘Family’ is what Nadine Hubbs calls the ‘social justice’ anthem in the late 1980s/ early 1990s (ibid), which could include Madonna’s ‘Like a Prayer’ (1989), Janet Jackson’s ‘Rhythm Nation’ (1989) and U.S.A for Africa’s ‘We Are the World’ (1985; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 74). The clearest example of this kind of song in country music was Garth Brooks’ ‘We Shall Be Free’ – containing the

LGBTQIA+ affirming lyric ‘When we’re free to love anyone we choose’ (Brooks, 1992; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 74) – which was released the year after ‘Family’.

‘Family’ can be situated within this context. Although not necessarily as anthemic in sound as Brooks or the other songs mentioned, ‘Family’ explicitly mentions ‘the word gay’, which Oermann and Parton suggest may be ‘the first country song’ to do so (2020, p. 282). ‘Family’ is a country ballad where Parton espouses an experience of what family means describing it as a place of acceptance and hardship, but a place where the song’s protagonist is resolved to keep the family together – ‘Let me be all that I should be to the family’ (Parton, 1991c). The lyrics provide some moral lessons, including drawing on biblical quotes (Holy Bible NIV, 2011, Luke 23:24) – ‘When it’s family, you forgive them for they know not what they do’ – these moral lessons include to forgive ‘mistakes’, ‘accept’ differences, ‘solve the problems day to day’, and ‘do your best’ for the family (ibid). The second verse contains the word ‘gay’ and is introduced as Parton describes the variety of people that can be included in a ‘family’ (ibid). Parton describes the writing of the song: ‘I just put in everything that all families have, or at least certain families, like his [Perkins] and mine’ (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 283). ‘Family’ is a song of acceptance, that is explicitly inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people that uses country music (‘working class’) affective ‘logics’ (Hubbs, 2021c; see also Hubbs, 2014, pp. 51-104) such as hillbilly humanism (Goodson, 1993, p. 114; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 76; Fillingim, 2003, p. 51) to articulate LGBTQIA+ belonging. I will now look in more detail how ‘Family’ deploys hillbilly humanism to make this claim. I will then critique the limitations of this mode and Parton’s representation of family as being all inclusive and the potential problematics of romanticising this ideal, which can be expressed as a need or desire to keep the family together at all costs.

8.2.1 ‘Family’ and Country Music Affective Logics

‘Family’ is arguably a ‘progressive statement’ (Hamessley, 2020, p. 196) for its time in making an explicit statement for LGBTQIA+ people belonging in the family unit. In a song titled ‘Family’ this can be interpreted as Parton’s case for what “family values” should be. “Family values” being a particularly potent political rhetoric, with affective

power that persists to the present day. Seth Dowland argues that although, especially in subsequent developments, “family values” became a rhetoric deployed across the political spectrum (with, for instance, Barack Obama deploying representation of his ‘commendable family’ (Dowland, 2015, p. 7) as a key part of his election campaign in 2008), in the 1970s to the 1990s, it was Christian right evangelicals who were able to ‘define’ what “family values” (ibid, p. 8) meant. “Family values” was used narrowly to reinstate ‘traditional gender roles’ (ibid, p. 12) and heteronormativity. Further, as more and more American families ‘depended on two incomes’ (ibid, p. 9), this standard of “family values” came to exclude many people that were not white and middle-class who could not financially support a family on a single income (ibid, p. 18). There is both conservative ideology and an economic element within these deployments of “Family Values”. There is an ideology of preserving an ‘authority structure’ (ibid, p. 12) or traditional hierarchies within social life, whilst also an economic imperative for these family units to be financially self-sufficient (Lehr, 1999, p. 20) and economically ‘productive’ (Duggan, 2003, p. 19). Parton’s song being released in 1991 at the end of this period can be seen as a historically ‘subversive’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) song in the way the song suggests a more inclusive family system. There are parallels between ‘Family’ (the song) and liberal attempts to expand the powerfully affective political rhetoric of “family values” to include, for example, ‘caring for poor children and single mothers’ (Dowland, 2015, p. 19).

In Parton’s song, family becomes a place of unconditional love and acceptance; Parton sings: ‘When it’s family, you accept them ‘cause you have no choice but to’ (Parton, 1991c). In the second verse this sentiment is explicitly linked to accepting gay people: ‘Some are preachers, some are gay/ Some are addicts, drunks and strays’ (Parton, 1991). As Hubbs (2021c) has argued, this line represents hillbilly humanism and in this line, it is ambiguous as to where ‘gay’ sits in the social hierarchy. Gay stands on the same line directly after ‘preachers’, but then precedes and rhymes with the following line: ‘addicts, drunks and strays.’ Hillbilly humanism, an affective logic that runs through a strain of country music, can be summarised as a belief that ‘all are equal before God’ (Fillingim, 2003, p. 51; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 76); and places less importance on

social hierarchies (Hubbs, 2014, p. 78). This is a distinct theological difference from evangelical conservatives who often figured the family as a tool to defend and resist what they saw as a decline in traditional roles, identities, and hierarchies. In these lines the respectable figure of the ‘preacher’ is juxtaposed against stigmatised figures of the ‘gay’, ‘addicts, drunks and strays’ (Barker, 2020). Parton then makes an emphatic statement of hillbilly humanism, ‘But not a one is turned away when it’s Family’ (Parton, 1991c). The family becomes a place where these social hierarchies that stigmatise people become dissolved.

It is notable that Parton’s conceptualisation of “family values” through this mode of ‘hillbilly humanism’ extends to be more inclusive than even some liberal proponents of the rhetoric. Namely this extends to people that likely will not be ‘productive in/for capitalism on behalf of the nation’ (Weber, 2016b, p. 105; see also Duggan, 2003, p. 19). In particular, addicts, drunks and strays may be figured by neoliberalism as unproductive. Robin James argues that neoliberalism ‘incentivizes and rewards people for choosing lifestyles that keep social institutions like capitalism, the patriarchal family and the white supremacist nation, fit and healthy. It also disincentivizes individual ones that do not contribute to the overall health of society, it renders them unviable’ (2015, pp. 8-9). Including the figures of ‘addicts, drunks, and strays’, and ‘investing’ (ibid, p. 11) affective resources in them through Parton’s song, is a way of resisting neoliberalism and the way it invests in sustaining some subjects and deprives sometimes vital life-sustaining resources from others. As Parton continues the verse, she describes the family consisting of both those who are ‘lucky’, and unlucky (Parton, 1991c). Those who are unlucky, and ‘losers’ (Parton, 1991c), are also people who require resources and are less likely to be productive under capitalism and therefore are unlikely to be the subject of many liberal extensions of “family values” rhetoric. Yet in Parton’s use of this rhetoric, informed more by a hillbilly humanist standpoint, the family is a place for ‘rapid circulation of limited resources’ to as many people as possible (Collins, 2001, pp. 118-119), regardless of what they can contribute.

Parton's invocations of hillbilly humanism do crucial 'cultural work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13). They provide an ethical framework for a particular kind of LGBTQIA+ belonging that offers a critical comparative to liberal developments of both "family values" rhetoric and of political organising and neoliberal claims to LGBTQIA+ equality, both of which can rely on 'liberal, rights-based' (Lehr, 1999, p. 12) claims that construct families as distinct, self-sufficient 'economic units' (Lehr, 1999, p. 20). As a political intervention by expanding "family values" more progressively, especially economically, Parton is demonstrating the potential of country music to engage with the politics around LGBTQIA+ equality and can offer a critique, if not a corrective, to individualistic and neoliberal developments, grounded in 'middle-class values of exceptional individualism' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 100), within LGBTQIA+ media and political organisations. Hillbilly humanism also roots Parton's assertions of LGBTQIA+ belonging firmly within the affective logics of country music.

It is not just the use of this affective logic of hillbilly humanism that links 'Family' to the genre of country music. Parton also roots the song further within country music's aesthetics. Following Parton's decision to release more "country" sounding albums with 1989's *White Limozeen* after her previous decade of pop-crossover (Hamessley, 2020, p. 143; Edwards, 2018, p. 153), 'Family' continues in a similar vein. The song is backed by distinct fiddle, steel guitar and mandolin (although piano performs a particular melodic function so these instruments' role is more in providing extra textures and significations to the sonic palette of the song) and the song is structured as a narrative ballad with the word 'family' ending each verse with some melodic repetition in the sections beginning: 'When it's Family', which provides a partial chorus function (Parton, 1991c). The song fits a trope of country music identified by Malone and Laird as reflecting the concerns of day-to-day life including domestic and emotional labour (2018, p. 348). Parton describes the practical reality of family life as 'try[ing]... to solve the problems day to day' and further reflects the mundane everyday problems of country music listeners – 'You take the trouble as it comes' (Parton, 1991c). In these moments, Parton is drawing on a further affective logic of 'working-class fatalism' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 81) that approaches the world in a way that is about weathering the world as it is, rather

than wishing for a different one (Cyphert, 2007, p. 146; see also Hubbs, 2014, p. 81). Working class fatalism, as an affective logic, is not always productive for advancing equality in accepting the world as it is, but it provides an analytical mode for conceptualising material and emotional labour. Parton sings, 'they always put you to the test', in the very first verse even alongside an emphatic claim of acceptance – 'you accept them because you have no choice but to' (Parton, 1991c) – demonstrating the labour involved in maintaining the family (Fortier, 2001, p. 419). Further, by putting these everyday struggles into the song, Parton taps into this country music trope that provides validation and 'dignity' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 87) to these lives and experiences.

Similar to 'Coat of Many Colors', this affective mode seeks to construct class solidarity, with individual 'differences' being accepted within this collective mode (Barker, 2020). One distinction between 'Family' and 'Coat of Many Colors' is that 'Family' makes an explicit claim for LGBTQIA+ people belonging within this class solidarity. As I argued about 'Coat of Many Colors', queer reading provides a way of articulating LGBTQIA+ experiences through the text of Parton's song, which also becomes a way of reclaiming and reversing discourses of stigma and shame. These all lead to bestowing a sense of dignity to its subjects, and just as 'Coat of Many Colors' rearticulated biblical stories, the mother's stories and country music songwriting conventions, the intertextual layers of 'Family' enact a similar function of inclusion. The opening line of 'Family' (which is repeated in the final verse): 'When it's family, you forgive them for they know not what they do' refers to Luke 23:24 (Holy Bible NIV, 2011). LGBTQIA+ people are represented as belonging within these textual traditions, not as sinful for being gay, but as engaging in the other theological and narrative morals just like anyone else. (I discuss this particular moral lesson in the next section). The practices of queer reading outlined in the previous chapter that 'assert' the 'presence' of LGBTQIA+ listeners within Parton's repertoire, and by extension the genre of country music (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 274), in 'Family', are more intentionally conducted by Parton herself as she produces queer readings of country music, the Bible and the family to articulate her case for LGBTQIA+ belonging within these texts and systems.

8.2.2 Critiquing Family and the Country Music Industry

The way that 'Family' makes a claim for LGBTQIA+ inclusion within the aesthetic and affective conventions and logics of country music raises a political question around the extent to which efforts towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion should be figured as a movement aiming for inclusion within existing structures and institutions of the country music industry, or whether efforts would be best spent 'creating spaces outside of it' (Royster, 2022, p. 8) for LGBTQIA+ artists and audiences at a critical distance (including geographically) from the Nashville based mainstream country music industry. Within queer theory and LGBTQIA+ politics there has often been this debate which has been figured around campaigns towards marriage equality and more generally around claims to equality based on 'assimilation' (Puar, 2007, p. 24) and a sense that LGBTQIA+ equality is restricted to 'access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the "free" market, and patriotism' (Duggan, 2003, p. 51). The critique is often made that this narrows the scope of the movement so 'that [it] does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them' (ibid, p. 50). This suggests that LGBTQIA+ rights movements that figure inclusion within institutions such as family, marriage, the state and the economy, risk foreclosing important critiques of these. Alternative queer approaches to conceptualising these institutions include Lehr who argues for a radical critique and restructuring of the family and society (1999, p. 33), and Sarah Schulman who further critiques the construction of the family ideal that 'mythologises itself as perfection' (2016, p. 189), and this mythologising idealisation causes harm. My position in relation to Parton's song 'Family' is to use the queer theoretical critiques of 'Family' not to necessarily argue for a complete deconstruction of the family unit, but to illuminate the problems of an overly sentimental and romanticised deployment of family or "family values" rhetoric for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, particularly within the context of the country music industry.

As outlined in my conceptual framework (Section 3.3.3), the country music industry uses the rhetoric of a family to describe the relationships between different parties and forge attachments, whether that is historic institutions like the Grand Ole Opry or the infrastructure of record labels and radio heads based in Nashville (Malone and Laird,

2018, p. 242; Moss, 2022, p. 17). The geographic proximity of these organisations based in one location is unique to the country music industry, leading to a dynamic that Andrea Williams (2022) has characterised as ‘a \$10 billion industry... siloed in this one specific place’. There are some particularly insidious consequences of romanticising ideals of belonging within the “family” of country music. As previously outlined, journalism from Marissa R. Moss (2018) has exposed the way the invocations of family and the informality of the industry, have been used to cover-up and silence people experiencing abuse and sexual harassment within the industry. The sinister implications to the sentimentality around family rhetoric has real-world consequences. A strategy that is solely about being accepted and included by these institutions, the family unit or family rhetoric that the country music industry deploys, no matter what harm they cause, is flawed. An unconditional belief in these institutions (or attachment to being included and validated by them) removes any mechanism to hold institutions accountable (Schulman, 2016, p. 192).

This dynamic became particularly pertinent on 8th January 2022 when Morgan Wallen performed at the Grand Ole Opry (Dowling, 2022). Wallen had used a racist slur in February the previous year and country radio had initially removed him from their playlists (Savage, 2021). A few months later, Wallen appeared on *Good Morning America*, and when asked about racism in the country music industry, his response was that he had not ‘really thought about’ the issue (Wallen quoted in Williams, 2021b). Despite not making attempts to make amends or address the racism within the industry of which he is participating and profiting, the Grand Ole Opry (and later radio) decided to bring Wallen back to the fold. For many Black artists, including some who were also LGBTQIA+, this caused many to reconsider whether belonging within institutions that continue to perpetuate racism and uphold structures of white supremacy was the best thing to aim for (Black Opry, 2022). However, temporarily working within these systems and their platforms may be a practical necessity for Black and LGBTQIA+ musicians to build careers within the industry (Williams, 2022). The practical (in some cases temporary) need to participate within some institutions for access to essential resources may sometimes be in tension with moral and ethical considerations of the harms they

cause. I now return to Parton's song to explore the way in which Parton constructs her rhetoric around "family" and the extent to which this enables or provides space for acknowledgement of potential harm and important critique.

8.2.3 *The Limits to Parton's 'Family' Rhetoric*

The strength with which the song conveys this belief in family including and accepting all of its members unconditionally is conveyed in the continuation of the line about acceptance in the first verse: 'you accept them 'cause you have no choice but to' (Parton, 1991c). This implies an imperative for the family to be inclusive and accepting of LGBTQIA+ people, but this rhetoric around inclusion and acceptance within the family has further implications. The lyrics and Parton's vocal delivery conveys a sentimentality around the deployment of 'family'. Parton's vocal performance takes on a 'declamatory' tone (Watson and Burns, 2010, p. 330) in the ending exclamations of 'when it's family' (ibid). There is a strong insistence and drive to protect and keep the family together. The line 'your heart's an open door' (ibid) demonstrates the extent to which Parton's acceptance within the family will go, but the sentimentality of this line is imprecise and slippery in terms of what this 'openness' and acceptance includes. In the following line this has more insidious implications: 'when it's family, you tolerate what you'd kill others for'. If this is applied to acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, this rhetoric of tolerance is problematic. As Chely Wright said: 'I hear the word "tolerance"— some people are trying to teach people to be tolerant of gays. I'm not satisfied with that word. I am gay, and I am not seeking to be 'tolerated'. One tolerates a toothache, rush-hour traffic, an annoying neighbor with a cluttered yard. I am not a negative to be tolerated' (2011, p. 276) A further issue is that defending a family unit so much creates a firm border between inside and outside the family, and the only thing stopping homophobic violence becomes the biological relationship and the in-group membership of the family. In spite of the inclusive sounding rhetoric of 'open door' it is clear even in Parton's lyrics of 'Family' that there is a hard limit to this openness. In the final verses of the song, this becomes even clearer, when Parton sings 'you choose your lovers, you pick your friends, not the family that you're in' (Parton, 1991c) and this lack of choice strongly

implies that this is a biological family and therefore an essentialism in forming a hard border around the category of family to this openness, acceptance and belonging.

This hard limit to openness and acceptance would suggest that the family unit is ultimately insufficient to safeguard LGBTQIA+ equality. In addition to the rigid border between inside and outside the family, the openness within the family unit itself may also mean a lack of healthy boundaries for the individuals within it. Taking the line: 'you tolerate what you'd kill others for' more broadly would suggest what Schulman describes as a lack of 'accountability' (2016, p. 192) for behaviour both to other family members and to those outside the family. As Schulman argues, 'much of the family's work is about maintaining a strange kind of anti-social version of "loyalty" in which we prove our love to family members by upholding any wrongdoing they commit on others' (ibid, p. 189). Schuman argues that this interpersonal family dynamic has wider social and political implications, describing 'the problems inherent in... families... [as] nationalism, group identification, racial and religious exclusivity, false loyalty, male supremacy' (ibid, p. 190). Parton goes on to sing 'somehow you justify mistakes' (Parton, 1991c). Again, the rhetoric is imprecise, but its sentimentality and its almost refusal to place limits on what it will 'forgive' or 'justify' within the family risks enabling abusive and racist behaviour. These implications of the sentimentality of 'family' rhetoric and lack of accountability are borne out within the context of the country music industry. 'Family' is used to silence those speaking out about abuse and to enable racist behaviour, demonstrated by Wallen being welcomed back into country music institutions with almost no accountability. In enabling and 'accepting' Wallen and this behaviour, the industry and its family rhetoric cause harm to Black country music audiences and artists and ultimately make the industry and its institutions less open to them (Black Opry, 2022).

Although these dangerous implications operate on a structural and industry level, there needs to be care in how this is applied to individual songs (Hubbs 2021b). Parton's song 'Family' does have a slippery sentimentality in its representation of 'Family' being a place of open acceptance. Further, Parton as a celebrity figure (especially recently)

resonates throughout US culture around a sentimentalised rhetoric of unity (Smarsh, 2021, p. 32), and this has particular implications for romanticised narratives around whiteness (Cottom, 2021). As the woman with the joint record for the most US country no.1 singles (The Boot Staff, 2015), there is also a case to be made for Parton's repertory being able to be deployed in a way that can advance the country music industry's racialised ideology. However, the song 'Family' does not completely reiterate this ideology and in places subverts the idealised rhetoric. One way 'Family' does this is through the use of 'working class fatalism' (Hubbs, 2014, p. 60). This fatalism approaches the world in a way that is about weathering the world as it is, rather than wishing for a different one. Parton makes two references throughout the song to there being 'no choice' (Parton, 1991c) in terms of the biological family, thereby Parton presents the family as the world that needs to be navigated as it is. Further, in describing the family as 'a mirror of the worst and best of you' (ibid) there is some degree of resistance to the sentimentality of the 'family' rhetoric that seeks to gloss over harmful behaviour. Although fatalism is not always sufficient to inspire wider social change, this fatalism can be a generative mode of critique in 'demystifying' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 144) the dynamics belying sentimental rhetoric. Although the predominant tone of 'Family' is a sentimentality to its rhetoric, there is other, more critical rhetorical and affective work in this.

These issues parallel others within the genre work of Parton's song. As alluded to in the analysis of the instrumentation of 'Family', the lyrical messages of acceptance for LGBTQIA+ people are situated within various sonic signifiers that work to sustain a categorisation of the song as country. The song's release at this point in Parton's career of reaffirming her genre positionality within the country music industry after her pop-crossover period, may also suggest an attempt to reify a country identity. Just as with her early "country" output, 'Family' is no more inherently country, and is constituted by the industry practices of the time, which by the 1990s had moved from countrypolitan to the kinds of styles and production of neotraditional artists, with some pop and rock elements (Hubbs, 2014, p. 74). It is important therefore to be conscious of the potential implications of constructing a particular idea of country, and what situating LGBTQIA+

belonging into this context might mean. We should be cautious about embracing too strong an impulse for LGBTQIA+ belonging within country music, within a sentimentalised formation of genre identity. It is important to critique the sentimentality of 'Family', both in terms of how the song conceptualises the family unit and its wider implications for the identity of country music. Yet it is also important to make salient the more critical aspects of the song, making visible the 'labour' in sustaining the ideals of family, home and belonging (Fortier, 2001, p. 419); and to recognise some of its important historical work as a pro-LGBTQIA+ statement in the early 1990s.

8.2.4 'Family' as pro-LGBTQIA+ Advocacy

For all the problems discussed about the sentimentality in the representation of family and belonging in Parton's song, it should be acknowledged that 'Family' does significant 'cultural' and even political 'work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) of explicitly including LGBTQIA+ people within "family values" rhetoric, especially within the context of its release in 1991 (Hamessley, 2020, p. 196). As the analysis of the song showed, Parton makes a claim for LGBTQIA+ people belonging within both the family and the genre of country music, a claim that Parton articulates through the use of country music's aesthetic tropes (including instrumentation) and affective logics. 'Family' is another 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) that makes visible the participation of LGBTQIA+ people in the genre. The explicit mention of acceptance suggests that this song in particular can do particular work that perhaps some of the other companion texts this thesis has explored cannot. Whereas the claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in songs like 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' required queer reading to draw out their 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) in order to articulate these, 'Family' makes this belonging explicit. The song challenges discursive assumptions of country music's inherent homophobia and definitional exclusion of LGBTQIA+ people by unambiguously, and arguably indisputably, placing LGBTQIA+ acceptance in a country song. This reading of a song that is one of Parton's lesser-known cuts as an album track from a period of her career that has received relatively less scholarly and popular attention, is important work intervening within the cultural and 'historical narrative' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1) of country music which is dominated by Nashville-based industry 'gatekeepers' (ibid, p.

5). As a companion text, 'Family' is important to be understood within the 'cultural memory' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3; see also Misztal, 2003) and conceptualisation of the genre. By doing so, this enables the song to act as pro- 'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139), and may challenge 'industry practices' (Watson, 2022, p. 56) excluding LGBTQIA+ people that deploy essentialist ideas of country genre identity as their basis.

Nevertheless, it is important to evaluate the role of 'Family' as advocacy and address its wider political implications. As already argued, there is progressive potential in Parton's demonstration and articulation of LGBTQIA+ belonging within the aesthetic genre, yet this needs to remain distinct from an unconditional notion to seeking recognition within specific country music industry institutions (such as the Grand Ole Opry). There is also the question of the extent to which Parton's advocacy benefits LGBTQIA+ artists and audiences within the genre. There are often tensions within advocacy where allyship itself can be commodified (Abma, 2020) and thereby the acts of allyship and advocacy serve to benefit the celebrity ally more than the group they are advocating for (Barker, 2021c). The way Parton's retrospective legacy work has represented 'Family' warrants a closer look. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Oermann and Parton suggest that 'Family' may be the first country song to mention the word 'gay' in Parton's 2020 book *Songteller* (2020, p. 284). However, this claim is not strictly correct as Lavender Country's eponymous album was released in 1973, often regarded as the first openly LGBTQIA+ country album, which opens with the lines: 'Wakin' up to say hip hip hooray I'm glad I'm gay' (Lavender Country, 2014a). The expressions of joy in the 'hip hip hooray' and being 'glad' form the pun in the use of the word 'gay', but also forge this moment into a clear political statement and claiming of 'gay' as an identity. Whilst it is important to recognise the output of LGBTQIA+ artists and critique Parton and Oermann's claim, a more qualified assertion would be that 'Family' may be the first song released by the mainstream (Nashville based) country music industry to mention the word 'gay'. Retrospective claims of Parton's significance risk further obscuring LGBTQIA+ participation (Lavender Country) in historical narratives of the genre.

These issues are perhaps compounded by the retrospective nature of these claims where there is a comparative safety to claim a more radical and 'subversive' (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) significance that, at the time that the song was being released, Parton may have been more tentative about. Similarly, the title track of the album 'Family' was released on, *Eagle When She Flies* (1991b), is described (retrospectively) in *Songteller* as having 'feminist' content (Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 285). Parton has consistently avoided the 'feminist' label as a descriptor for herself (Hamessley, 2020, p. 129), in part most likely due to commercial considerations. In 2020, retrospectively removed from the particular historical moment (in this case the early 1990s), there was commercial potential for Parton to attach the word to some parts of her legacy (Cottom, 2021). It should be noted that these particular ethical issues identified around Parton's LGBTQIA+ advocacy relate most directly to the retrospective legacy work in 2020 and how Parton is rearticulating narratives around her music in the early 1990s. Looking at the song itself and contextualising the statements Parton was making within that period, 'Family' can be interpreted as advocacy that has benefited LGBTQIA+ people in the genre by making this claim for their inclusion, at a time when Parton had little to gain commercially from doing so. The issue of Parton's retrospective contextualising of 'Family' raises a question of the limitations of Parton and using Parton's songs as companion texts to advance LGBTQIA+ inclusion in country music, especially in the future. (The next chapter (Chapter 9: Conclusion) evaluates these broader limitations of Parton as a case study in more detail.)

8.3 'Travelin' Thru'

This section will focus on the song 'Travelin' Thru' that Parton wrote and recorded for the 2005 film *Transamerica*. This song is notable for being written intentionally to express support and validation for trans people and the analysis of this section explores how Parton articulates this support in the song. The film *Transamerica* is a queer take on the American 'road trip film' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 792) where the main character Bree, a trans woman who is soon to have gender confirmation surgery, goes on a road trip with her 'newly discovered son' (ibid, p. 794), Toby. Bree initially does not tell Toby either that she is his parent or that she is a trans woman, initially pretending to

be a Christian missionary (Juett, 2011, p. 7). The film uses the road trip as a 'metaphor' for Bree's journey with expressing her identity (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 149). Parton's song, 'Travelin' Thru', uses some of the themes and metaphors that the film uses, particularly 'travelin'' (Parton, 2006) and the reworking of Christian teaching to construct a sense of belonging. Sonically, the song echoes bluegrass and Appalachian folk instrumentation coming at the tail end of Parton's bluegrass revival albums in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The song's lyrics focus on the notion of the protagonist's journeying and this journey being as much about discovering her identity as it is about the physical travelling (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 149).

The song unfolds across different verses with repetitions (and different lyrical variations) of 'I'm just travelin' travelin' travelin' I'm Just travelin' thru' (Parton, 2006) that evoke a constant sense of motion and traveling throughout the song. From the second verse, there is explicit reference to Christianity, which adds a further spiritual dimension to this 'travelin''. The emotional journey through the song moves from optimism and excitement to acknowledging suffering and hardship – 'sometimes the road is rugged, and it's hard to travel on' (ibid). As the song progresses, the journey becomes about finding a place where the protagonist can belong: 'trying to find what feels like home' (ibid). There is a tension within the song between it representing the particular experience of trans people and a more generalised experience of life and the quest to belong. Parton describes her intention when writing 'Travelin' Thru' as seeking to appeal to a broad audience: 'it should be a song you could sing in churches and you could sing in dancehalls' (quoted in Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, pp. 794-795). As I will discuss, Parton's song moves between the particular experiences of trans people to locating this within a more general or 'universalising' narrative (Barker, 2020; see also Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 795). The song draws on older 'folk' songs 'Wayfaring Stranger' and 'I'm a Pilgrim' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39) to further evoke the different levels of the journey and situate Parton's transgender protagonist within these wider musical and textual traditions.

The analysis in this section focuses on Parton's song but draws on the film where relevant for context. I consider how the song articulates trans belonging, more broadly

LGBTQIA+ belonging within Parton's repertoire at large, and more widely the genre of country music. The section will begin by exploring in a general sense how home and belonging are articulated in 'Travelin' Thru'. I then apply these concepts to analyse how Parton situates trans experiences in the song within the textual trajectories of folk songs, (in particular 'Wayfaring Stranger' and 'I'm a Pilgrim'), as well as the explicit references to 'Christian theology' (Barker, 2020). Through this analysis I consider the way genre categories are working and how the song articulates a claim to belonging in genre. I conclude this case study analysis by evaluating the articulation of Parton's pro-'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139) in the song and its potential effectiveness for advancing trans equality, with reference to trans theory.

8.3.1 Articulating Belonging through the Rhetoric of 'Home'

A key rhetoric for expressing belonging in 'Travelin' Thru', is 'home'. As the analysis of other case studies have shown, home appears throughout Parton's discography. In the previous chapter that discussed 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', some readings presented 'home' in the song as a distinct and relatively 'fixed' location (Fortier, 2003, p. 116) promising 'comfort and seamless belonging' (ibid, p. 130). Of course, as my analysis showed, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' is not completely straightforward in its representations, and there are other readings of home in this song; these have to be 'negotiated' (Hall, 1980, p. 126) amongst what might be thought of as more 'dominant... readings' (ibid, p. 124). However, in 'Travelin' Thru' there is a more emphatic uprooting and destabilising of the ideal of home and the related concept of belonging as relating to a fixed and stable place. Parton describes the protagonist's journeying as 'drifting like a floating boat and roaming like the wind' (Parton, 2006). There is a sense of deferral conveyed throughout 'Travelin' Thru' (Fortier, 2001, p. 409). The constant sense of forward motion refuses to fix the protagonist in place. The song opens with this sense of uncertainty: 'I can't tell you where I'm going, I'm not sure of where I've been' (Parton, 2006). This uncertainty relates to the protagonist spatially – 'where I'm going' – but also temporally – 'not sure of where I've been' (ibid).

As the verse continues, this epistemological uncertainty is brought to bear on the protagonist's selfhood – 'I'm a puzzle, I must figure out where all my pieces fit' (Parton, 2006). The self is continuously in flux and 'in construction' (Fortier, 2001, p. 419), represented as a 'journey... [that] is lifelong' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 795), a continual process of acquiring knowledge that never reaches a final certainty – 'we're here to learn, the spirit burns, to know the greater truth' (Parton, 2006). It is ambiguous how the song's protagonist feels about this uncertainty. The lyrics present the journey as 'hard to travel on' and at one point she describes her situation as 'doomed' (ibid). Yet the song's rhythm makes this journey sound optimistic in the verses, and the repeated 'travelin', travelin', travelin' (ibid) links each verse of the song together through this sense of motion. Parton's voice also sounds joyous. This sense of motion, what Hamessley describes as 'relentless forward locomotion' (2020, p. 195), is not just a journey that happens to the protagonist, with her being passive, but one with which she is actively engaging, as she is determined to 'learn' and 'the spirit burns', indicating the protagonist's drive to keep 'travelin' on'. The journey may be hard, but it is worthwhile. This mixture of emotions is reflected in the mix of verbs the second time the song repeats its 'travelin'" rhythmic refrain with a lyrical change, 'a clever variation of this frequent repetition' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 195): 'stumblin', tumblin', wonderin', as I'm travelin' thru' (Parton, 2006). 'Stumblin' and 'tumblin' reflect the protagonist's struggle and hardship on the journey and a sense of being bewildered by the uncertainty of a journey where the end and direction are unknown. 'Wonderin'" has more positive connotations suggesting the excitement and pleasure of new and unexpected experiences along the way.

Home and belonging in 'Travelin' Thru' are represented with a sense of deferral and epistemological uncertainty, rather than reifying a fixed place of belonging for the song's protagonist. In both 'Wayfaring Stranger' (Harris, 1980) and 'I'm a Pilgrim' (Norfolk Jubilee Quartet, 1924) (the folk songs Travelin' Thru draws on), for all the hardship and suffering represented, there is a certainty of life's journey finishing in Heaven and that this place will be home – home as 'comfort and seamless belonging' (Fortier, 2003, p. 130). In 'Travelin' Thru' the song does not speculate beyond life and so its

representation of divinity is intermixed with, rather than distinct from, the uncertainties of human, mortal life. The first time 'home' is mentioned in 'Travelin' Thru', it is with a tone of uncertainty both to whether the protagonist will reach it and to what this home that she is searching for is – 'trying to find what feels like home' (Parton, 2006). By describing the feeling as '*like* home' the protagonist signals that the feeling and place is distinct from home. Home is itself deferred, but there is also the suggestion that any home that can be found or made can only be temporary, partial and is 'always in construction' (Fortier, 2001, p. 419). The second and last time 'home' appears in the song, there is a stronger sense of certainty in home being a fixed place – 'I'm just a weary pilgrim trying to find my own way home' (Parton, 2006). This slows down the pace of the song and when Parton sings 'Sweet Jesus' (Parton, 2006) it is her most emotionally intense vocalisation in the song. This disruption of the rhythmic motion reflects the protagonist's desire to achieve some certainty and fix home and meanings in place, perhaps as a result of weariness from the constant 'travelin'' (Parton, 2006). The song almost seems to come to a stop as Parton sings 'home', yet it follows the exclamation 'sweet Jesus' and then the repeated travelin' thru' that slows even further. Parton's vibrato around the last syllable 'oo' (ibid) maintains some motion in the song before the fuller instrumentation and rhythm picks up again for the fade out. By deferring the end of the song from a complete close at 'home', the song closes on an ongoing 'travelin'', indicating that the fixed home and place of belonging was a temporary respite.

8.3.2 Anchoring Trans Lives in Country Music

Home and belonging are continually evoked and 'deferred' (Fortier, 2001, p. 409) throughout the song, and therefore the possibility of trans belonging for both the story of the song's protagonist, and symbolically within the texts (biblical and country music) Parton draws on in the song is convincingly created, whilst at the same time undercut by perhaps an acknowledgement of social realities where trans people both within the country music industry and within the US more widely remain marginalised. Parton's representation of the potential for trans belonging does significant 'cultural work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) through a particular use of a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2016, p.

16). The ‘circulation’ of these texts forms an alternative ‘community’ within country music, in a way similar to Ahmed’s description of forming alternative and subversive spaces within other institutions (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 16-17; see also Barker, 2022b; Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 271). ‘Travelin’ Thru’ engages with companion texts and their circulation in a further way. Through its retelling and recirculating other texts – the Bible, ‘Wayfaring Stranger’ and ‘I’m a Pilgrim’ – Parton is suggesting that these dominant textual cultures can be queered and radically reworked (Gardner, 2012, p. 192; Juett, 2011, p. 14). Just as Goldin-Perschbacher has described the music of trans artists within country music and Americana as offering an opportunity to queer and challenge cisnormativity within these genres and industries (2015, p. 775), and to reconsider how these genres are conceptualised; the dominant or mainstream of these genres is ‘already queer’ (ibid, p. 796). The potential offered through this ‘cultural work’ is to provide multiple communities and spaces, both in the mainstream and outside (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 13; see also Royster, 2022, p. 8), where trans people can belong.

‘Travelin’ Thru’ situates a statement of trans inclusion within the aesthetics and textual histories of country music. The instability conveyed in the song’s representation of home, and destabilising of reified or rigid and essentialist notions of identity and belonging is also reflected in the way ‘Travelin’ Thru’ navigates ideas of musical genre. As already mentioned, ‘Travelin’ Thru’ was released at the tail end of her Appalachian folk and bluegrass releases and so the song is not positioned within the contemporary country music industry mainstream. A further relevant genre and marketing context for ‘Travelin’ Thru’ is Americana. Americana has functioned as a distinct marketing category and radio format since 1999, where it has been used by ‘the Americana Music Association’ to refer to a range of ‘roots and country styles’, but significantly is defined as separate from country as a market category (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 776). However, as Goldin-Perschbacher argues, “‘Americana’ shouldn’t be limited by its recent commercial deployment, since it has long linked the musical, narrative, ideological, and reception elements of a range of musical traditions’ (ibid). Americana is ‘a large umbrella’ (Zimmerman, 2019, p. 2) of different musical styles and genres.

Zimmerman describes Americana as ‘a blanket term for bluegrass, country, mountain music, rockabilly, soul, and the blues’ (ibid, p. 3). Americana for Zimmerman is ‘both new and old, classic and contemporary’ (ibid) and includes artists ‘before the term was even coined’ (ibid, p. 2) such as Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Gram Parsons, as well as what might be thought of as canonical (Haddon, 2020, p. 12; Sanneh, 2021, p. 156; Watson, 2022, p. 58) country artists like Hank Williams and Johnny Cash (Zimmerman, 2019, p. 3). This musical trajectory is held together through its musical categorisation as “roots music” and its conceptualisation of ‘the wellsprings of American music’ (ibid, p. 2)) and themes reflecting on American identity (Blair, 2021, p. 45).

The conceptualisation of Americana as ‘American music’ and its historical trajectories from folk and blues roots have considerable overlap with country music (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 6; see also ‘Country Music’, 2021) in terms of its aesthetics and even thematic tropes it draws on. Some ‘Americana imagery’ may include ‘rural spaces, working class experience, and lonely journeying’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 775), which have strong parallels with country music’s themes and affective logics drawing on working-class perspectives and its use of rural imagery. Yet whilst the country music industry has often worked to narrow the sounds and styles that are connoted by its genre label (depending on the particular historical time period), Americana has maintained a breadth of aesthetic styles, whilst also functioning as a category. The Americana Music Association describes Americana as ‘contemporary music that incorporates elements of various, mostly acoustic, American roots music styles, including country, roots rock, folk, gospel and bluegrass resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw’ (Americana Music Association quoted in Blair, 2021, p. 51).

Americana in its conceptualisation of itself is broader and more open than country, yet in its functioning as a genre and a radio format, it still operates in some ways as a distinct musical and marketing category. Americana also has a particular relationship to the country music industry. Slaid Cleaves describes Americana as ‘non-commercial

country' (quoted in Dutton, 2006, p. 41) and Dutton suggests that Americana differentiates itself from the Nashville-based country music industry. Dutton argues that 'Nashville mishandles more than it handles... They do it for money', whereas Americana is 'not formulated from marketing surveys, nor is it nurtured in the common commercial environment in which record execs insist on making creative decisions' (2006, pp. x-xi). It should be noted that Americana is not completely free from commercial considerations as it operates as a radio format, and the artists described as part of its history, such as Hank Williams, were also part of the country music industry. However, like folk, it does not have the same scale of a commercial operation as the country music industry (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 13), and stylistically its borders are not as 'policed' (Royster, 2022, p. 7; see also Goldin-Perschbacher, 2020, p. 13). It has also been suggested that Americana 'welcomes a diversity of styles and voices' (Blair, 2021, p. 30), even if as an organisation, the Americana Music Association and the culture around the genre, is not as inclusive (especially to LGBTQIA+ artists and artists of colour) as it perceives itself to be (Cholst, 2023). Even though Americana's industry context does not always live up to its image of being more inclusive than country, nevertheless its position outside the industry has potential for critique and forming alternative spaces and aesthetics to Nashville.

'Travelin' Thru' can be situated within this Americana context. Although Parton does not participate within the Americana Music Association or much of the grassroots scenes around roots music, she can be situated into tropes of 'Americana imagery' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 775) and the historical trajectory of Americana's aesthetics. Goldin-Perschbacher argues that trans artists across country and Americana deploy the genres' tropes and imagery. This imagery (for instance 'lonely journeying' (ibid)) is particularly pertinent to the issues of belonging, identity and self-discovery in the song, as an Americana aesthetic 'compels us to make fresh sense of ourselves and the world' (ibid, p. 796). In particular, the song's central lyrical focus of 'travelin'" and 'journey' (Parton, 2006) link Parton's song to the lyrical tropes and themes of Americana aesthetics. Parton's market position within this period of her career, and the release of 'Travelin' Thru', also resemble that of Americana. Parton is not releasing within the

mainstream country music industry, which positions 'Travelin' Thru' to a certain extent as 'non-commercial country' (Slaid quoted in Dutton, 2006, p. 41). Further, the song does not resemble the aesthetics of mainstream (Nashville produced) country in the mid 2000s, and instead (similar to Americana) draws on older styles and folk elements. The song's positioning enables us to interrogate the way genre categorisation is working and in particular the implications for LGBTQIA+ (especially trans) belonging. Americana's relationship to country that positions it as more inclusive than the country music industry (practical issues within the scene notwithstanding) could suggest that 'Travelin' Thru' being positioned slightly outside of the mainstream is less beholden to (Nashville's) commercial levers and is able to draw on country music in the broader aesthetic sense to articulate claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging.

8.3.3 Use of Companion Texts in 'Travelin' Thru'

Parton's negotiations around genre are reflected in her use of 'Wayfaring Stranger' and 'I'm a Pilgrim'. As well as 'Travelin' Thru', itself, being a 'companion text', the song also makes use of 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 16-17) in the way that this thesis has been arguing, where Parton's songs can be strategically interpreted (James, 2015, p. 22; see also Butler, 2011, p. 88) to situate LGBTQIA+ narratives within the genre of country music. The song's trans narrative is placed within the specific textual traditions of 'Wayfaring Stranger' and 'I'm a Pilgrim'. These 'traditional folk' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 13) songs have a complex history that predates the country music industry. The songs and their aesthetics, therefore, have a somewhat tangential relationship to country music as a marketing format as Peterson argues the notion of country music as an 'authentic relic' of folk music and culture was quickly abandoned by the industry by the end of the 1930s (Peterson, 1997, p. 207), yet a narrative of country music having an influence from folk in its history remained.

'I'm a Pilgrim' was first recorded by Norfolk Jubilee Quartet (1924), 'an African-American vocal group' (Discogs, 2023), and subsequently recorded by many artists (Powell, 2011), including The Soul Stirrers (1961), The Hawkins Family (Hawkins, 1980), The Caravans (1967), Bill Monroe (1958), and Johnny Cash (2004). 'I'm a Pilgrim' itself

references another song, 'Wayfaring Stranger', through its lyrics of 'traveling through', 'stranger', the biblical reference to 'Jordan' and the longing to be reunited with lost family after death (Norfolk Jubilee Quartet, 1924). 'Wayfaring Stranger' has been recording by many artists including some who have also recorded 'I'm a Pilgrim' including Bill Monroe (1993), Johnny Cash (2000), as well as notable versions by Emmylou Harris (1980) and Rhiannon Giddens with Francesco Turrisi (2019). (Parton (1994b) also recorded the song on her album *Heartsongs (Live From Home)*). Harris' version is also notable for charting in the top 10 (no. 7) of the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, 2023c).

The recording and reception histories of 'I'm a Pilgrim' and 'Wayfaring Stranger' reflect the various tensions within country music and its industry, its tensions between 'folk culture and mass culture' (Edwards, 2018, p. 7), and the way genres and marketing categories are defined and rigidly enforced on shifting and unstable foundations. These songs with their folk and 'gospel' (Powell, 2011) roots at once represent an authenticity that the industry is perceived to have abandoned (Sanjek, 1998, p. 25), yet periodically seeks to rediscover, this narrative of rediscovery itself becoming commodified. Yet at the same time these songs are tangential to the material development of the country music industry and 'country' as a marketing category. The songs' histories, particularly 'I'm a Pilgrim', challenge racialised and segregated narratives around country music's roots and development. Its movement between gospel and folk demonstrate that any deployment to authenticity is rooted in social and political work, where constructing 'authenticity narratives' (Edwards, 2018, p. 7) becomes about which identities and histories are highlighted and which are obscured (Pittelman, 2021). This also mirrors Parton's status within the country music industry at the time. Parton's celebrity status perhaps situated her within mainstream country music, at this point in her career as a legacy artist even if her music was not charting or achieving the same commercial success as it had previously. Yet aesthetically her music has parallels with Americana where the sound differs from the contemporary mainstream country industry and thereby Parton's repertory of this period should be interpreted as a focused engagement with the broad multiplicity of aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes

that Americana scenes were also engaging with at the time (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, pp. 775-776).

At the same time, the sound of 'Travelin' Thru' can be interpreted aesthetically as broadly 'embedded within a country and western tradition' and uses these genre signifiers 'to narrate a tale of the transgendered and queer' (Gardner, 2012, p. 192). The song's use of companion texts 'merges [Parton's]... authenticity narratives with advocacy for transgender rights' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39). They work to authenticate (Moore, 2002) trans narratives and acceptance of trans people as belonging within country music through Parton's own 'traceable lineage' (Gardner, 2012, p. 188) through these musical traditions. The song's positionality within commercial musical marketing categories as critically outside of mainstream country, alongside the lyrical destabilising of the 'ideal of home' (Fortier, 2003, p. 131), suggests a mode to articulating belonging in genre that does not reify a rigid musical category system with legacies of marginalisation and exclusion.

Parton directly includes trans experiences in her invocation to 'Wayfaring Stranger' and 'I'm a Pilgrim' in the lines (Barker, 2020): 'Like the poor wayfaring stranger that they speak about in song/ I'm just a weary pilgrim trying to find what feels like home' (Parton, 2006). Parton explicitly evokes a sense of oral traditions of passing down songs – 'they speak about in song' – and she situates the experiences of the song's protagonist (implicitly trans experiences through the song's function as the theme song to *Transamerica*) within this context and history. Parton also uses 'a folk ballad style for... [this] stanza... [and] thus extenuates her own song's link with folk tradition' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39). This context and history suggest that the song 'Wayfaring Stranger' is an 'evocative object' (Turtle, 2007) and especially a 'companion text' (that is a key part of forming 'community' (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 16-17)). This community is formed through 'passing texts around' (ibid) (orally as much as written or recorded) and down through generations of singers, musicians and audiences. The reference to a second song 'I'm a Pilgrim' (itself drawing on 'Wayfaring Stranger') adds an additional evocative object and companion text, which adds further affective evocations to intergenerational community.

As well as this evocative object explicitly invoking these historical narratives and sense of community, the reference to 'Wayfaring Stranger' elicits a change in the melodic and emotional register of the song. The song begins with Parton singing in a wistful, yet optimistic tone reflected in the lyrics: 'I'm out here on my journey, trying to make the most of it' (Parton, 2006). The banjo and percussion, as well as Parton's singing, generate a sense of rhythm embodying the sense of forward motion in the lyrics. Parton then sings in a more impassioned tone, with the addition of fiddles increasing the emotional intensity with the lyrics denoting the sense of sadness: 'poor' and 'weary' (ibid). This sense of sadness evoked performs two key functions: it affectively, as well as lyrically, references 'Wayfaring Stranger', and this affect generates a stronger sense of pathos for the song's protagonist, which works to build 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350) for trans people.

8.3.4 Christian Theological Claims for Trans Inclusion

In addition to country music texts, 'Travelin' Thru' also textually links trans experiences to 'Christian theology' (Barker, 2020). This is most explicit through the 'image of [the] crucifixion' (ibid): 'We've all been crucified and they nailed Jesus to the tree, and when I'm born again you're gonna see a change in me' (Parton, 2006). Until this point in the song the only word Parton uses with explicit Christian theological meaning is 'pilgrim'. At this point the lyrical emphasis of the song changes from a more general allegory of 'travelin'" to focusing on the crucifixion and the theological concept of redemption. In most Christian teaching, the crucifixion is the way in which humankind is redeemed. The significant 'cultural work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) here is the way that Parton links trans experiences to the heart of Christian theology making a claim that trans experiences belong seamlessly within Christianity. Parton makes this claim through her use of 'universalizing language' (Barker, 2020) that references what Goodson has described as 'hillbilly humanism' (1993, p. 114; see also; Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 795) as a general belief in equality (Fillingim, 2003, p. 51; Hubbs 2014, p. 76). The verse continues with 'God made for a reason and nothing is in vain/ Redemption comes in many shapes with many kinds of pain' (Parton, 2006). There is a careful balance between Parton acknowledging the particular experiences and suffering of trans people

(Barker, 2020), suggested by the repetition of 'many' to refer to the way 'redemption comes in many shapes with many kinds of pain' and more universal claims. This represents a diversity of experiences and narratives, but ultimately all are (theologically) equal and worthy of 'redemption'. In this verse, the particular coexists with the general, the 'many shapes' with the 'all' and works 'to universalize the transgender character's quest for meaning' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 795). This movement reflects an aspect of Parton's 'inclusive' theology (White, 2016) that seeks to 'accept everyone without judgement' (Hamessley, 2020, p. 197). The word 'pain' suggests a particular affective way of linking trans experiences and narratives into the affective language of country music, as trans suffering is presented as worthy of the genre's 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, p. 350) that has historically been granted to other social 'outsiders' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 795) in both Parton's and country music's repertoire.

The centrality of this image and 'born again', is reinforced by the film when its main character Bree describes her gender confirmation along similar lines: 'Jesus made me this way for a reason, so I could suffer and be reborn, the way he was' (*Transamerica*, 2005). This parallels the line in Parton's song: 'God made me for a reason' (2006). In the context of the film's plot Bree pretends to be a Christian missionary in order to build a relationship with her son, and this theological justification is invoked functionally to maintain this cover story. As Juett describes, the film 'lays before us competing discourses' (2011, p. 2). The film engages in symbolic, serious and Christian theological discourses of the road trip, and the quest for 'reconciliation and redemption' at the same time as practices of 'camp' (ibid, p. 4). In Bree's invocation to Jesus and the resurrection there is dramatic irony as the audience knows that she is not really a missionary and so there is a camp humour in the way Bree scrambles together a way to enable her trans identity and her cover story as a Christian missionary to hold together. At the same time, this camp disguise enables the film through the character Bree to express a theological argument about trans people and trans experiences coexisting within Christian theology. 'All of the campy humor and irony, the theatrical gestures and the aesthetic moments embrace the dominant code only to queer the discourse in order to

dismantle the hierarchical values of the metanarrative and open possibilities for empathy and acceptance with lived transgendered spaces' (ibid, p. 14). The film draws on both 'camp' and 'earnestness' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781) to articulate a serious and radical engagement with theological discourses that represents trans experiences as belonging within Christianity. Here the Bible is opened up into a 'companion text' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16), which is echoed in Parton's song, that works to situate and authenticate trans experiences as belonging in the textual histories, songs and theology within the broad genre of country music.

8.3.5 Evaluating 'Travelin' Thru' as Pro-LGBTQIA+ Advocacy

In 'Travelin' Thru' Parton explicitly frames her allyship within invocations to 'country music tradition' (Barker, 2020; see also Moore, 2002, p. 2002, p. 218; Peterson, 1997, p. 219) and, as part of this, Christian theology. Although this has generative potential it is important to remain cautious and critical of romanticising this kind of articulation of belonging. Siobhan M. Kelly argues that trans representations can often fall back on 'messianic language' for 'rhetorical legitimation' (2018, p. 111). Messianic language does not necessarily refer to religion in terms of the agents deploying this rhetoric, although the terms are 'religiously inflected' (ibid, p. 110). Kelly outlines three aspects of messianic rhetoric: 'first... [it] employs language of the self as resurrected and transcendent' (2018, p. 111; see also Benjamin, 1968); 'second... transformed persons describe themselves publicly as bringing about a sea change, ushering in a new world order'; 'third... requires recognition by others of the messianic figure's singular importance and power, unrivalled in their impact' (2018, p. 111; see also Selvidge 2008; Charteris-black, 2011; Beare, 2015). This particular kind of trans subjectivity reifies the idea of the individual, but also constructs a dominant figure that determines standards and frameworks for 'legitimation' (Kelly, 2018, p. 119). Only trans subjectivities, experiences and lives that fit this 'narrative' are recognised (ibid, p. 120), or authenticated, within the messianic frame. There are also risks with this rhetoric, as Kelly argues, stemming from the public recognition of the messianic figure 'ushering in a new world order' that may leave 'some more vulnerable to violence' and backlash (ibid, p. 122). This backlash is only too visible with anti-trans legislation and rhetoric in both

the US (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023) and the UK (Baska, 2023), which has also spread into the country music industry with a particularly high profile case of Jason Aldean and his wife, influencer Brittany Aldean, in 2022 who have made explicit transphobic statements (Iasimone, 2022).

Both the film and Parton's song invoke a literalised form of messianic rhetoric in making a claim that suggests a synergy between Christ's crucifixion and trans people's experiences. A further problem in relation to this particular case of messianic rhetoric is the way in which this rhetoric inscribes a 'singular' particular trans subjectivity, that determines that as the model for 'legibility' (ibid, p. 123). The key part of the rhetoric in both the film and Parton's song that forges the link between trans experiences and Christian theology is the language of being 'reborn' and 'born again'. By linking this to trans experience, this reifies the most 'mainstream narratives' of trans experiences, of transition from the 'opposite gender' to the other (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 138). This 'trans narrative' (ibid) further marginalises trans people who do not conform to this narrative who have different self-understandings of their gender identity, less 'binary definitions of gender' (Kelly, 2018, p. 120), and more fluid gender identities than this dominant narrative that reifies a fixed, stable gender identity that is confirmed through a process of transition. There is a risk that *Transamerica* and 'Travelin' Thru' both reify the dominance of this narrative.

There are tensions within 'Travelin' Thru' around the potential of the song to represent multiple trans experiences on the one hand and constructing a singular legible trans subjectivity on the other. Goldin-Perschbacher summarises these tensions around 'the concept of "normal"' in the trans representations of *Transamerica* (that can be applied to Parton's song) as 'potentially expanding it to include a trans character, or instead illustrating that "normality" is an unappealing goal' (2015, p. 795). There are also these tensions within trans theory. As Andrea Long Chu posits, 'I want more work... that refuses... the pomp of antinormativity... for something slower, smaller, more tuned in to the ways in which ordinary life fails to measure up to the political analyses we thrust upon it' (Chu and Drager, 2019, p. 113). The valuing of the ordinary would apply to

Bree's character in the film, and it is an important caveat to the amount of political work and importance that can be attached to Parton's song. Nevertheless, there is something significant within Parton's song that differentiates it from the film's character in the way it represents its protagonist's journey and identity. Throughout most of 'Travelin' Thru', however, the life's journey, home and the protagonist's selfhood are represented as unstable and in progress. This would suggest a more open and fluid understanding of gender identities and ideas of belonging. Although the literalised theology and Christ figure remain in the song, and thereby an element of messianic rhetoric and affect remain, Parton's song mitigates at least part of the danger. This is reflected in the ambiguous genre work of the song that engages with Americana both in terms of its aesthetics, and its more fluid genre categorisation (Edwards, 2018, p. 22). The open understanding of identities and meanings enables more subjectivities and experiences to resonate within Parton's song and therefore have the potential to enter the realms of legibility. 'Travelin' Thru' is able to resonate with and hold a multiplicity of trans experiences, subjectivities, and lives, thereby demonstrating the pluralistic potential within the aesthetic genre of country music.

There are also tensions within 'Travelin' Thru' and its representations of selfhood through the imagery of a journey (in keeping with its genre and textual conventions and histories) that in one way challenges the 'trans narrative' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 138) through not representing the trans journey as one of complete arrival and fixed definition and identity. Yet in its representations of motion and its emphasis on being unfixed, 'driftin' like a floating boat...' (Parton, 2006) may suggest that the song (and its protagonist) becomes a more 'ideal [subject] for queer' theory rather than trans epistemological approaches (Baitz, 2018, p. 370). As previously mentioned (in Section 3.2), one area of potential difference between queer and trans theory is that queer theory may emphasise 'the "immaterial" sphere of gender performance [that] allows the subject to transcend limitations related to bodily sex' (2018, p. 370); whereas trans theory may have more 'investment in material structures' (2018, p. 373). 'Travelin' Thru' emphasises being unrestricted by 'material' (ibid, p. 374) and 'bodily' limits (ibid, p. 370), through for instance its reflections on spirituality, and in explicit reference to the self and

Christ as 'spirit' (Parton, 2006) as opposed to 'matter' (Baitz, 2018, p. 374). This is not to say that there is no consideration of 'embodiment' or the physical body (ibid, p. 369) in Parton's song. The way that the messianic figure is literalised within the imagery around the crucifixion enables an examination of 'how matter emerges (i.e., "materialization") and gains significance for us' (ibid). The crucifixion is about the interplay between the bodily and spiritual dimensions of Christ, and this imagery foregrounds the song's protagonist's navigations with embodiment throughout the song. The crucifixion and the following development in the narrative (both biblical and for the song's protagonist) of being 'born again' (Parton, 2006), is not necessarily 'freedom from material constraints' (Baitz, 2018, p. 370), but suggests 'enduring physical change' (ibid, p. 368) and the 'co-emergence of... bodily states' (ibid, p. 377). The change following the crucifixion or the trans protagonist's journey could also be a 'refusal' of the 'gaze' that not only imposes rigid definitions of identity (Montgomery, 2024, p. 371), but also continuously scrutinises and 'demands' proof of authenticity (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 41). As previously mentioned in Section 3.2, Bettcher's term: 'reality enforcement', can describe the 'kind of transphobia' within 'daily' practices of verification, 'invalidation', questioning and the demands for scrutiny and to have trans people's identities constantly authenticated (2014, pp. 392-393).

The representation of the song's protagonist not having a defined home or identity could be an example of what Montgomery terms 'becoming spectral' as a resistance to 'late capitalism's demand to be perceived' as these verification processes and acts of scrutiny, these 'very conditions of perception... [are] an alienating force' (2024, p. 380). This alienation may mean that 'the formulation of visibility-visibility-representation-identity' (of which this thesis' approach to reclaiming authenticity as a practical political tool may be one such) may be 'limited' through these conditions of perception that define authenticity for trans people (ibid, p. 381). Parton's protagonist, by refusing of fixed meanings and identities could, can also be read as a figure 'turning off perception itself, donning the very shroud of alienation, desubjectivizing... and becoming spectral' (ibid, p. 380). It is important to state that this 'becoming spectral' is about the particular context of navigating the pressures and pitfalls that reality enforcement and authenticity

hold for trans people. It may be that different considerations and applications of authenticity may be required for trans people when compared to other LGBTQIA+ subjects (as Goldin-Perschbacher suggests) as more perilous, requiring more justification and with the risk of being seen the narrative that ‘the listener may get the sense that [they have]... been actively and intentionally deceived’ (2022, p. 44). Thereby continuing the daily violence of reality enforcement and scrutiny. A strategy of ‘ambivalent authenticity’ (Davy, 2011, p. 140), as suggested previously, for practical purposes to navigate and access resources within the country music industry may be necessary in the short term, but a further (perhaps more ‘emergent’ (Royster, 2022, p. 187; see also Brown, 2017 and Gumbs, 2020) political strategy may be important to develop. Building in a ‘Trans* analytic’ alongside queer theoretical approaches will also be vital to bringing in ‘future Trans* operations that will come to do work and further open us up to new possibilities’ (Green, 2016, p. 80) in how country music is considered, its history, industry, and aesthetics. Such work would take account of the onerous and violent impacts authentication and verification have on trans subjects and would fundamentally call into question the affective stakes within country music’s discourses around authenticity.

8.4 Conclusion

Through this chapter’s analyses of Parton’s two songs that make explicit statements about LGBTQIA+ people, I have demonstrated how Parton’s songs can function as pro-‘LGBTQIA+ advocacy’ (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139). Thus, the songs as ‘companion texts’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) take on a more intentional role in ‘asserting’ the ‘presence’ of LGBTQIA+ people in the genre of country music (Barker, 2022b; see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff, 2023, p. 274). This role makes it particularly important to be critical and evaluate the way the representations of LGBTQIA+ people, experiences and narratives figure the concepts of genre identity, authenticity and belonging. Whereas ‘Family’ risked reifying restrictive and essentialist notions of belonging and genre, (although acknowledging the song as having an important role for the ‘historical’ record and ‘cultural memory’ of country music) (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3; see also Misztal, 2003), my reading of ‘Travelin’ Thru’ suggested that LGBTQIA+ participation and

experiences could be represented as a kind of belonging that does not rely on fixed, rigid and essentialist notions of identity or even genre category. Queer reading still offers generative insight as a method, even with these case studies that have more intentional and explicit LGBTQIA+ representation. The role of queer reading within these case studies is not to make LGBTQIA+ people visible like it was elsewhere within Parton's repertoire, but as a mode to demonstrate 'subversive' (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) potential within the songs to rework ideas of genre, authenticity and belonging. Although 'Travelin' Thru' is not perfect, the song gestures towards wider potential within the aesthetic genre of country music to interrogate practices and ideals (such as around authenticity) that have too often been invoked to exclude people by the industry (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 5). The song, treated in certain degrees of separation from the artist offers radical potential that is offered through close reading of the song's textual qualities. Shifting the emphasis from Parton decentres the celebrity, and enables a more pluralist reading of the genre and its affective logics (Barker, 2022a, p. 153). The next chapter, the conclusion, considers more broadly the political utility of this approach to Parton to address LGBTQIA+ equality in country music.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to explore the following research questions: how does queer reading Parton's repertoire construct LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music? How do Parton's songs navigate the contested cultural terrain around genre and authenticity? To what extent does Parton as a case study enable an understanding of wider issues around LGBTQIA+ people's marginalisation within the country music industry and the historical narrative of the genre? Through my three analytical chapters, I have demonstrated how a critical mode of queer reading Parton's songs has the potential to rework ideas of genre identity to authenticate (Moore, 2002, p. 216) LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music. Taken as a whole, the eight case study songs analysed in depth in this thesis show various ways that, genre, authenticity and belonging can be unpacked. The crossover period demonstrated both the importance of genre (as Parton and the songs make claims to a country identity), whilst considering the definitions of genre as being fluid, more 'descriptive' (Brackett, 2016, p. 7; see also Fabbri, 1982, p. 52), and not rooted in rigid essentialism. Queer reading Parton's supposedly more straightforwardly "country" repertoire revealed the 'inconsistencies' (Brackett, 2016, p. 26) and fluidity of genre identity further, whilst also demonstrating the affective work and political potential in anti-essentialist deployments of country music 'authenticity narratives' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39) to include LGBTQIA+ people. Finally, considering songs that made explicit pro-LGBTQIA+ statements showed that 'authenticity claims' (Edwards, 2018, p. 14) for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music can be articulated and are well situated within the affective logics of the genre, but that it is also important to be critical of the way in which some of these claims may romanticise notions of genre and authenticity (and fall back onto reified and 'essentialist underpinnings' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156)).

Such reification has particular consequences within the context of the country music industry, where romanticising belonging in the genre risks removing the means for critiquing institutions heavily involved in marginalising LGBTQIA+ people. There are both ways of reading Parton's repertoire as romanticising rigid 'ideals' of belonging (Fortier, 2003, p. 131), for instance in the expression of 'home' or 'family', and as

offering the potential for critique and articulating belonging and authenticity as at times 'contingent' (ibid) and 'precarious' (Biddle, 2013, p. 212), leading to a wider interrogation of the workings of genre, authenticity, and belonging within discourses of country music.

The analytical chapters showed how their case study songs articulated claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music, and how each song navigated notions of genre and authenticity in order to make these claims, thereby addressing the first two research questions. Some of the analysis in the third analytical chapter began to touch on a more evaluative approach to Parton's pro- 'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139) statements. This final concluding chapter focuses on my third research question about the broader political utility of Parton as a case study that enables an understanding of wider issues around LGBTQIA+ people's marginalisation within the country music industry and the 'historical narrative' of the genre (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1). Part of this evaluation is considering some of the critiques of Parton herself, building on the work of Cottom (2021) and Easton (2023a) in particular who have suggested ways that scholarship could adopt a more critical mode, particularly around the way Parton may uphold country music racial narratives. These critiques are important, however for this thesis, which has shifted an emphasis from Parton as a celebrity to focus on her songs, and the potential ways listeners might read her repertoire (Barker, 2022a, p.153), the critical mode I draw on is less focused on critiquing Parton herself, and about opening up the way her songs can be interpreted to different listeners and perspectives, making these more salient throughout my analysis.

Particularly as LGBTQIA+ artists are being increasingly recognised, within at least some areas of scholarship and journalism (although by no means enough), and within a political environment that is hostile to trans people in both the US and Europe (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023; Baska, 2023), it is worth considering afresh whether the deployment of genre identity and authenticity still has political utility for LGBTQIA+ belonging and equality within these contexts. In this chapter I argue that this thesis demonstrates a mode for wielding ideas of authenticity and genre identity, through its case study analysis of Parton. The strategy my thesis has demonstrated is to use a

critical approach to authenticity in the short-term, not least for practical reasons for musicians to make a living, but also to emphatically challenge discourses that wrongly claim that LGBTQIA+ people do not belong in country. Further, the critical approach to genre, and ideas of authenticity and home within the song analyses presents a flexibility to navigate the cultural and historical baggage related to both genre and authenticity (as highlighted throughout the thesis), and can develop future tools, concepts and analytics as they emerge (Royster, 2022, p. 187; see also Brown, 2017 and Gumbs, 2020).

9.1 Critical Approaches to Parton

In the last chapter (Section 8.1.3), I touched on the way Parton's pro- 'LGBTQIA+ advocacy' (Edwards, 2022b, p. 139) stems from her general approach to politics and a discourse that has developed around Parton as a unifying figure (2021, p. 36; see also Hamessley, 2020, p. 216). Tressie McMillan Cottom (2021) describes the contemporary interest in Parton as a 'Dolly Parton moment', where Parton is being increasingly appreciated not just for her songwriting ability, but 'because' she provides 'a story about who we are', in 'a society that wilfully believes itself "post-racist"'. Cottom argues that this can place Parton as beyond critique – 'we love her uncritically' because Parton enables audiences to project US cultural fantasies onto her (ibid). Cottom argues that in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd, as in other times through US history when confronted by the realities of the country's racism, 'popular culture looks South for white escapism and validation' (ibid). Parton provides both a distracting comfort and a vision of overcoming these 'racist bones' through her 'diverse' audiences (ibid). Parton sustains narratives of US racism as being ultimately redeemable, whilst also 'leveraging' and sustaining images of blonde (which Cottom argues is an unmarked racial identity [and]... code for white') Southern white femininity (ibid). Yet Cottom stops short of developing a critique of Parton herself; as she puts it, 'the most problematic part of The Dolly Parton Moment is us' (ibid). As mentioned in the previous chapter (Section 8.1.2), the romanticism of Parton's diverse audiences, including her LGBTQIA+ fanbase, form part of the mythology constructed around her as a unity figure. As I outlined in my approach to 'mythmaking' for the thesis (Section 7.1.3), the key issue is not just to deconstruct these myths, although deconstruction is important especially around white

supremacy and the country music industry's racialised narratives, but to explore 'what [this] mythmaking *does*' (Barker, 2022a, p. 147; see also Tost, 2011, pp. xi-xii; Edwards, 2018, p. 3). There is a risk that the figuring of the US as post-racist and Parton as its 'post-racist queen', to use Cottom's (2021) term, will lead to complacency rather than action and enable the institutions around the country music industry to enact what Ahmed describes as 'nonperformativity', where institutions use equality and diversity initiatives or ant-racist policies to give the appearance of taking action, whilst functioning as 'a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority' (2006, p. 110). Edwards argues that

Some segments of the industry [already are] undertaking a neoliberal appropriation of diversity, equity, and inclusion language for the purposes of public relations but without making meaningful structural changes, as in industry rhetoric promoting awards show appearances involving BIPOC artists,... LGBTQIA artists,... or for white, cisgender heterosexual female artists. However, that segment could also be read as the industry trying to use female singers like Parton as symbols for inclusivity while not yet making enough structural changes to address gender and other inequities (Edwards, 2022b, p. 136).

The inclusion of LGBTQIA+ and Black and of colour artists at awards shows is a particularly tokenistic move as many of those included on the CMA awards shows are themselves not legible for many of the awards, due to eligibility determined by chart data (Watson, 2022, p. 56) in some of the categories. The industry is barely making institutional changes within its direct control, let alone working to shift the 'historical narrative' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1), for which it has considerable responsibility for shaping. If Parton is deployed as a symbol 'for inclusivity' to avoid doing the important structural work, this would suggest that reading Parton to advance issues around equality in country music may not have the strongest political utility. Edwards goes on to state, '(a)s a meaningful artist, Parton herself is more than just a symbol, of course' (2022b, p. 136), especially when considering her vast repertoire. Nevertheless, it is important to be conscious of the way Parton may be interpreted, especially in ways that curtail progressive political potential.

It is also important that a critical lens is applied to Parton's specific reputation as an LGBTQIA+ 'icon and ally' (Barker, 2022a, p. 144). One such approach is taken by Steacy Easton (2023a) who argues that 'the queer work that Parton does is at the edges of her career, an afterthought in interviews and in film appearances' and that 'she has historically played with queer tropes but was never fully committed to queer liberation'. For Easton, Parton has sought the 'middle ground' and for this reason has not gone far enough to advance LGBTQIA+ equality, particularly in the US political context of 2023, and a wave of 'anti trans legislation, and the increase in anti-trans violence' (ibid). I would agree with Easton's argument about Parton's most recent lack of statements and involvement, particularly within her home state of Tennessee, and that she is having little impact in the most contemporary context addressing current issues around LGBTQIA+ equality, both within wider culture and the country music industry. Easton does raise a crucial point about acknowledging the limits of Parton to advance LGBTQIA+ equality and address wider issues of marginalisation within the country music industry.

However, I would question the extent to which her pro- LGBTQIA+ songs should be seen as 'at the edges of her career'. As this thesis has analysed, 'Family' and 'Travelin' Thru' are important songs working as pro- LGBTQIA+ advocacy. 'Family' is significant, even though it is not a single, as a mainstream country song that explicitly addresses LGBTQIA+ issues, that within the context of the Nashville based industry is an early example of a pro-LGBTQIA+ country song (Hamessley, 2020, p. 196; Parton and Oermann, 2020, p. 282). 'Travelin' Thru', similarly in 2005, is a relatively early example of 'advocacy for transgender rights' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39). It is also worth considering Parton's industry position at this point in her career, 2005, when she is no longer releasing within the mainstream country market. 'Travelin' Thru' is arguably no more peripheral than her other music of this period, coming after the bluegrass and folk trilogy. Commercially speaking, there is an argument that this period is 'on the edges' of Parton's career. While the bluegrass trilogy was not as commercially successful as previous Parton releases, the critical acclaim for the *Little Sparrow* and the general scholarly and popular response to Parton's repertory have been that this era is some of

Parton's most important music to her as a songwriter and identity as an artist (Hamessley, 2020, p. 87). It is hard to imagine a case being made for *Little Sparrow* not being significant to Parton's career. The work this thesis does incorporating songs like 'Family' and 'Travelin' Thru' into discourses around Parton's repertoire is important.

9.2 Redirecting 'Dolly Studies'

Back in 2018, when there was considerably less scholarship on Parton than there is now, Edwards called for an establishing of a sub-discipline of 'Dolly studies' (2018, p. 235) arguing that, as a case study, Parton offered potential in exploring discourses of country music. In many ways my project has been a response to this call, however now over six years later it is important to consider whether it may be necessary to place less emphasis on Parton, as a white cisgender artist, moving forward. This thesis has worked to rebalance the conversation in the way it approaches artists like Parton by shifting the analytical emphasis from Parton as a celebrity onto her repertoire, as a way to foreground LGBTQIA+ participation, in the role of listeners (Barker, 2022a, p. 153). Further, many of these listeners I've drawn on throughout this thesis have been artists. Yet, still, a larger focus on these artists and their repertoire over arguably more canonical texts in country music may be needed in the future (Sanneh, 2021, p. 156; see also Haddon, 2020, p. 12; Watson, 2022, p. 58). This is not to mean that a queer reading approach like the one in this thesis, of 'reading rebelliously within the master-canon' (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 50) of country music, is not important, and this can be done at the same time as elevating LGBTQIA+ country artists and their work. It may, nevertheless, require a rebalancing of the emphasis within the genre's repertoire to focus more scholarly attention and close reading on songs by LGBTQIA+ artists.

Nevertheless, my thesis does enable a 'multiplicity' (Martinez, 2020, p. 134, see also Martinez, 2021) of readings and engagements within Parton's repertoire, and seeks to do significant 'cultural work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) itself through challenging ideas around genre within discourses around country music. By focusing on songs by Parton, some of which like 'Jolene', 'Coat of Many Colors', and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' are treated as canonical country music texts, my analyses, throughout this thesis, make

a robust case for LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music, which at this time is more important than ever. Just a cursory glance at the comments on posts from country music industry institutions like CMT (Country Music Television) and CMA (Country Music Association) about Pride Month – where LGBTQIA+ phobic commenters use the argument that the mere expression of an LGBTQIA+ identity is “not country” – suggest that perhaps a seemingly rudimentary point that LGBTQIA+ people and narratives can belong in country, that the genre is ‘already queer’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 796), still needs to be made. Therefore, it is important to recognise Parton’s songs and their significance if ‘not... for Parton herself’ (Barker, 2022b), but to preserve a historical record of what country music is, and ‘whose’ experiences have been represented within a country song (Royster, 2022, p. 20; Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1; see also Pittelman, 2018, p. 33). This thesis is an important discursive intervention that, through engaging with authenticity and genre identity, pushes back against industry ‘gatekeepers’ who enable homophobia and transphobia within aspects of country music culture (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 5), and deny LGBTQIA+ artists opportunities to build ‘careers’ (Watson, 2022, p. 60).

This thesis also reconsiders the way the very concept of margins is constructed, especially when it comes to musical genre within a market category system that creates the marginalisation of both people and musical styles. Goldin-Perschbacher suggests ‘to interpret a genre through musicians marginalised from its history’ (2022, p. 3), and by extension narratives and audiences that are also pushed to the margins, as a means of best analysing how ideas of genre are operating. Therefore, rather than as Easton (2023) may suggest, treating songs like ‘Family’ and ‘Travelin’ Thru’ that explicitly refer to LGBTQIA+ characters as ‘at the edges of her career’, this thesis treats these songs as central to understanding Parton’s repertoire, rather than being peripheral. We can consider ‘Travelin’ Thru’ as performing significant ‘cultural work’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) demonstrating that LGBTQIA+ lives (especially trans people) exist within the core of Parton’s song writing and musical work. My analysis finding that Parton produced some of her most artistically significant music, delving deep into the aesthetics and affective logics of country (that situate LGBTQIA+ belonging), outside the country music industry

is a call for more radical understandings of the genre, and for revising narratives and 'definitions' (Royster, 2022, p. 23) of country music. The readings of the songs throughout this project have also made a claim about which content and themes within Parton's work should be considered central or peripheral. The focus on Parton's representations of sexuality and their queer 'resonances' (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) has made these central to the analysis of this thesis. This has included the reworkings of shame in 'Coat of Many Colors' and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', and the evolution of representations of sexual pleasure and desire in her work from the tragedy ballads of 'Down From Dover', to the positive portrayals of sexuality in 'Touch Your Woman' and especially 'Baby I'm Burnin'. Building on previous scholarship on gender, this project has placed sexuality and LGBTQIA+ audiences as central to understanding Parton's repertoire. The work of this thesis is an important intervention within current discourses and understandings around country music as it anchors the 'multiplicity' of its listeners (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez, 2021) throughout the genre's history.

9.3 Future Implications for Queer Reading, Country Music Authenticity and LGBTQIA+ Belonging

Since country music, as both an aesthetic genre and a commercial industry is deeply engaged with ideas of authenticity, this thesis' engagement with the genre's discourses around the concepts offers important insights for popular music studies. And far from, needing to be left on the 'intellectual dust-heap', the stakes for LGBTQIA+ people, and especially for trans people, are too vital for popular music studies to abandon the concept altogether (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 30; see also Moore, 2002, p. 210). This thesis demonstrates that it is important not just to analyse how claims to authenticity or authentication are constructed, but to take seriously the 'cultural work' (Edwards, 2018, p. 13) and progressive potential that reclaiming these authenticity discourses can do for marginalised subjects. At the very least taking authenticity seriously enables a way to combat when authenticity or modes of authentication (Moore, 2002) are deployed as oppression against LGBTQIA+ people, especially trans people (Bettcher, 2014, pp. 392-393; Goldin-Perschbacher, 2002, p. 41). Within current political discourses around identity and authenticity, country music is a vital

battleground. The analysis of Parton's songs in this thesis engages with these issues and more widely demonstrates how queer and trans theoretical and methodological approaches would benefit from deeper analysis of country songs, alongside other aspects of culture (such as some of the literature discussed in this project around disco, Hollywood, and hyper-pop).

There is a more long-term consideration needed around an approach to renegotiating authenticity and making claims to belonging in the genre, and considering at what point this progressive work within country music may surpass (if it has not already) the political utility of reclaiming and deploying authenticity to advance LGBTQIA+ equality (Tuttle, 2015, p. 79). In writing this thesis, I have been conscious of the cultural history around notions of authenticity and identity underpinning understandings of genre, particularly within the popular music industries. My analysis of Parton's songs suggests that there are ways of deploying authenticity and constructing 'authenticity narratives' (Edwards, 2018, p. 39) and claims to LGBTQIA+ belonging in country music that do not restrict different experiences and subjectivities, or reify essentialist understandings of identity. Yet within the context of the country music industry, authenticity may remain too loaded a term, with too much historical baggage of industry gatekeeping and policing (Royster, 2022, p. 7; Goldin-Perschbacher, 2020, p. 13), to ever be entirely removed from essentialism. In the short term, it may still be necessary for LGBTQIA+ artists (and audiences) to navigate authenticity and excavate what can be beneficial for financial and practical purposes within the country music industry. However, in the long term, political strategising may require, at the very least, a critical displacement of the concept.

It may be that some of the other terms used to convey aspects of authenticity, such as 'sincerity', 'honesty' or – as this thesis has suggested – Shusterman's concept of 'emotional conviction' (1999, p. 226) may remove some of this baggage (although not all, as 'sincerity' has been invoked heavily within the industry too). These terms may remove some of the 'essentialist underpinnings' (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 156) within authenticity, as potentially a performance that conveys a sincere emotion does

not have to necessarily stem from a fixed and innate identity. A queer practice, drawing on Sedgwick's often quoted theorisation of 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (1993, p. 8), could perhaps tease out where sincerity, honesty or emotional conviction overlap and differ from the meanings of authenticity. Building in a specific 'Trans* analytic' would also benefit country music studies in evaluating the stakes of its authenticity discourses (Green, 2016, p. 80). Such an approach could inform close readings of songs across the genre of country music. This has potential to reconceptualise country music's themes and affective logics in progressive and radical ways for the future, and to rework understandings of the genre's identity and 'definitions' (Royster, 2022, p. 23). Royster's work has begun to do some of this, through for instance the application of Afrofuturism to 'evolving an emergent strategy to shape the future' of conceptualising country music (2022, p. 187; see also Brown, 2017 and Gumbs, 2020), and challenging long-established ideas of the genre's themes (for instance around nostalgia (2022, p. 12)). My readings of Parton's songs throughout this thesis that are attuned to cultural and political significations, in having a critical approach to fixed definitions of genre, belonging and home, offer a localised emergent strategy that demonstrate their openness to different listeners and different spaces, which are not predetermined through the industry contexts of which they were recorded. Whether it is the global resonances of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home', the ambivalence to belonging in a fixed home in 'Wildflowers', or the embrace of undetectability (Montgomery, 2024, p. 380) in 'Travelin' Thru', these readings already displace the notion of authenticity and are engaging with ideas of new structures beyond the country genre classification even if we cannot at this present moment 'name in advance what these... structures of understanding... will be' (Weber, 2016a, p. 21).

Future research could build on this work, and a logical development of this thesis would be a larger scale exploration of country music as a genre, questioning the margins and definitions of who gets defined as country. In joining this critical scholarly conversation, my thesis has sought to engage with country music as a form of 'cultural memory' (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 3; see also Mitsztal, 2003). There is future potential and

need across country music and memory studies to ‘restore’ LGBTQIA+ participation to the cultural ‘memory’ of country music (Pecknold and McCusker, 2016, p. vii). As well as the importance of empirical and quantitative research that holds the industry to account (Watson, 2019; Watson, 2022; SongData, 2023), qualitative approaches like queer reading can complement this work through giving scholarly attention to artists and songs that have been ‘marginalised from’ (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2022, p. 3) country’s ‘historical [and emerging] narrative’ (Bishop and Watson, 2022, p. 1). The ‘close reading’ (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 145) and ‘care’ (ibid, p. 137) of queer reading can be part of preserving and continuing to engage with these texts. Applying these methods to different country music case studies could build more comprehensive coverage of queer resonances throughout the genre as a whole. This could involve further ‘subversive’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 4) and “rebellious” readings within canonical country music texts (Sanneh, 2021, p. 156; see also Haddon, 2020, p. 12; Watson, 2022, p. 58), alongside exploring lesser-known artists’ repertoire (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 50). This thesis has demonstrated the generative potential and possibility within such “rebellious” readings of what may be thought of as canonical country music texts (Parton’s songs), which has a vital impact in ensuring that LGBTQIA+ listeners and queer ‘resonances’ (Dyer, 2004, p. 165) within country music songs are preserved as part of the historical record and cultural memory. The shift in emphasis, gestured towards in this thesis, from artists to songs, may enable a greater ‘multiplicity’ of voices and perspectives in the genre to be conceptualised (Martinez, 2020, p. 134; see also Martinez 2021).

This thesis demonstrates the potential of queer reading country music to transform the field of ‘country music studies’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 235). Building the insights of queer theory more into the mainstream of country music studies provides further epistemological tools to address issues of marginalisation and exclusion within country music, beyond merely adding a ‘sexuality variable’ (Weber, 2016a, p. 13). Queer theory’s unpacking of how ‘norms’ are constructed (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2015, p. 781; see also Butler, 1993, p. 22) is particularly applicable to analysis of country music’s discourses around genre identity. This thesis, through its analysis of Parton’s repertoire demonstrates the applicability of queer theory to the genre’s songs and that there is

further untapped potential in integrating queer approaches and country music scholarship. Through continuing to re-evaluate the past, the genre's definitions, and the historical repertoire of artists like Parton, this project has shown that queer reading, as well as trans theoretical approaches to identity, can aid in a pluralist approach to understanding and constructing current and future narratives of country music.

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