In this essay, I aim to analyze the intricate ways in which popularity and unpopularity are—perhaps oxymoronically—part and parcel of contemporary country music. Importantly, I focus on commercially successful forms of country music and thus deal with a musical genre that is truly popular in one sense of the term at the same time as it thrives on its self-conscious distance from the perceived artificiality of popular culture and aims to establish itself as the true music of the common American folk—truly popular music in a slightly different understanding of the term. In this context, any study of contemporary commercial country music—thus my claim—needs to come to grips not only with the ways in which the music taps into a discourse of American popular culture, but also with its self-styling as this popular culture’s unpopular other. Even though country music truly is popular music, it relishes an image of un-popularity that stands in marked contrast to common ideas about popular music. At least in part, it does so by staging a notion of authentic Southern and Dixie identity that is constructed in and through the music and its visual representation in music videos. If we add to this claim Frith’s by-now classical observation that ‘popular music is popular not because it reflects something, or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what popularity is’ (‘Towards’ 137), the interesting question remains: what identity does country music create and construct? And how does this idea relate to the notion of unpopularity rather than popularity as well? In an attempt to provide partial answers to these questions, this paper analyzes how country music constructs the idea of a truth, a real thing behind the music, in the first place, and how this produced notion of the real takes the form of proudly unpopular forms of cultural expression. Country music, I argue, constructs a notion of authentic identity that is both widely unpopular and that plays with the image of country as popularity’s metronormative other, in Judith Halberstam’s terminology. In order to do justice to country’s simultaneous popularity and unpopularity, my reading will argue that country music is popular culture, yet at the same time pinpoint the particular strategies used by the country music industry,
its artists, and its audiences to mark their distance to it and construct an image of country music as the more authentic counterpart to supposedly artificial popular culture.²

Country and/as Popular Culture

Looking at all available indicators of popularity, country music may well be the most popular genre of music in the United States: there are more radio stations exclusively dedicated to playing country music than any other musical genre, just as the sales figures of physical records continue to exceed most other genres. A cursory look at Billboard’s so-called ‘Rich List’ of the forty top-selling musical acts of 2013 underlines this, as it not only includes more than 10 country artists but is spearheaded by two of them, namely Taylor Swift and Kenny Chesney (cf. ‘Music’s Top 40’). Moreover, even among a presumably younger audience country music is alive and kicking: From its first season in 2011, the American television casting show The Voice has included country star Blake Shelton among its superstar jurors. Already in 2005, country singer Carrie Underwood won the fourth season of American Idol by a huge margin of audience support and since then has gone on to sell more albums than any other winner of that show (roughly 15 million copies) in addition to receiving numerous Grammy, CMA, and ACM awards. Today’s biggest country stars, such as Underwood, Shelton, Miranda Lambert, or Brad Paisley not only sell millions of records, but also reach large audiences through social media such as Twitter or Facebook. Recent years have seen further in-roads of the supposedly old and outdated country music into more mainstream pop-cultural terrain.³ In a related development, television shows such as Nashville, the Southern-themed Hart of Dixie, and reality shows like Duck Dynasty have taken up explicitly Southern settings, which, at least in part, entail a cultural atmosphere permeated with, if not dominated by, country music. The South and with it country music have become thriving markets and increasingly have crossed over from being products of regional culture to becoming icons of popular culture in a broader sense.⁴

Yet, at the same time, country music presents an exquisite paradox in that it refuses to stylize itself as popular. Even though its self-understanding is that of music made by and aimed at the common man—thus, popular in a very elementary sense of the term—it explicitly rejects an association with popular culture, understood as artificial ‘pop’ culture. Of course, one can read this simply in terms of a cultural niche tailoring its products at a particular market, creating an offer for a closely circumscribed clientele
of rural, small-town people, the common folk; yet, such an analysis falls short when we consider country music’s often implicit claim to being the American music, of its being the soundtrack of American life more widely understood. As George Bush, Sr. phrased this when he declared October 1991 ‘Country Music Month’ during the height of the first Gulf War: ‘Of course, while country music speaks from the heart of the American people, it has—like liberty itself—a great and universal appeal’ (qtd. in Mann 74). Yet, while country music speaks to and for all American people, it also restricts itself to being the music of the ‘Little Man’, as Alan Jackson sang in his 1999 hit single of that title. Thus, country music epitomizes a form of self-consciously unpopular culture: it is a highly commercialized genre with immense sales figures and wide outreach and, as such, part and parcel of contemporary American popular culture. At the same time, however, everybody involved in it views this very popularity highly skeptically, since country music quickly runs the risk of selling out the interests of the small folk for whom it has to speak and sing. Despite its wide-ranging popularity and in spite of its own self-fashioning as the music of the people, country music is seldom mentioned, and even more rarely actually analyzed, when it comes to discussions of American popular music and culture. As literary critic Barbara Ching observes in her analysis of hard country and contemporary culture, country music is ‘one of the most popular forms of music in the United States’ yet at the same time has not ‘figured in any of the now canonical discussions of postmodernity’ (Wrong’s 3). And she goes on to argue that this observation is indicative of ‘just how remote country music is from intellectual discourse, and thus how overlooked it is in contemporary cultural politics’ (3). Why is one of the most popular genres of music so decidedly unpopular both with academics and ‘the people’ in a broader sense? And why are there still strong prejudices in place against country music as hopelessly outdated, decidedly un-hip, something from which it is better to distance oneself? Furthermore, why is country music proud of this very unpopularity? In this paper, I want to shed some light on the ways in which country music is a form of such unpopular culture and in doing so answer the question implied in my title: Why is country music so dang proud of only being famous in a small town?

Famous in a Small Town? – Country’s Unpopularity

Researching unpopular cultures produces a surprising dearth of studies of the unpopular. This is surprising because the unpopular is not only the
dark underside of the popular but, as popular is a relational term, studying its others and its opposites is necessary in order to circumscribe what popularity actually entails. As a wide variety of critics—in fact, more or less everybody writing about country music—has argued, the creation of authenticity is at the heart of what defines country music (cf. my own ‘Nashville’ for a critical discussion of the role of authenticity in definitions of country music). True country music, so the reasoning goes, is the unpopular realm of small-town folks and precisely not the glitter of Hollywood or Broadway and thus almost necessitates a negation of commercialism and popular success. It is not a part of the pop culture industry, but rather an honest encounter between fans and performers, who meet as equals in the shared space of the home of country music, which is usually located in an idealized, Southern small town. Thus, ‘[c]ountry music still ha[s] something popular music [does] not—it [is] “real”’ (Jensen 128, my italics). This also means, as Jocelyn Neal has shown, that the music ‘both is part of mainstream pop culture and stands in stark opposition to it’ (474). Yet, if cultural studies scholar John Storey is also correct in arguing that ‘[p]art of the difficulty [in defining popular culture] stems from the implied otherness which is always absent/present when we use the term “popular culture”’ (i), where does this leave country music? If we agree that popular culture is, indeed, ‘an empty conceptual category’ (i), one that is always defined in contradistinction to other categories, such as high culture, folk culture, mass culture, or the unpopular, how does country music figure in this equation? It is popular culture and thus stands in marked contrast to forms of high culture, yet at the same time it also is unpopular culture par excellence, self-consciously refusing to be popular. Since country music partakes of both popular and unpopular culture, it becomes clear that these two categories are working with different scales that lie orthogonal to one another: one is quantitative (successful vs unsuccessful), the other qualitative (what truly represents the people vs what represents only an elite, for example). Thus, contemporary country music can be commercially successful—hence popular—and unpopular at the same time, and these are the complex cases of unpopular popular music in which this paper stakes its claim. Even though popular for the sake of its wide appeal, country music consciously distances itself from other forms of popular culture that it views as inauthentic, fake, or artificial. Proudly inhabiting this subaltern space of unpopularity, country music then simply has to be proud of only being famous in a small town.

Of course, setting itself up as the other of popular music leads to the oxymoronic notion of an unpopular popular culture, a form of culture
that at the same time claims to speak for the average, common American as it refuses to be popular. This entails a self-positioning in explicit contradistinction to all other forms of popular culture in that it rejects the rules of pop stardom, the musical market, and the like. At the same time, however, the music also sets itself in explicit contrast to so-called high-culture and any form of elitist presumptions. The prime example for this can be gleaned from one of the oldest institutions of country music: the Grand Ole Opry, whose very name marks an explicit distinction from opera as the prototypical example of high culture. In 1925, WSM’s barn dance got its moniker to differentiate between the rich people’s opera and the folks’ grand ole opry, while also creating a rural, Southern identity in opposition to urban forms of popular culture. From its inception, then, country music has operated in opposition to both high culture and mass culture and thus in the space of unpopularity. As Lüthe and Pöhlmann state in their introduction, unpopular cultures are productive rather than expressive of identities, and they argue: ‘If popular culture—just as much as high culture—is being used to create the people in the first place, not as a culture for the people but a culture constructing the people as a people by giving them a history and an identity, the unpopular culture is the disruptive element in this construction, resisting its homogenizations and omissions, opposing the complete smoothing of a striated cultural space’ (27). In the context of my discussion of country music, I take this to mean that constructing the country folk as unpopular establishes the music as a ‘thorn in the side of the mainstream' (Lüthe and Pöhlmann 9) as it sonically creates a rural Southern identity to oppose a homogenized national culture that I will describe in Halberstam’s terminology as metronormative. This, of course, complicates constructions of American (popular) identities, if we bear in mind that country music establishes itself as simultaneously popular and unpopular. Contrary to what the editors observe in their introduction, however, country music, as the popular unpopular, does not ‘sing the songs nobody else wants to sing, [nor does it] show the world what it does not want to see’ (27). Rather, it creates a particular notion of the people as pop culture’s other, but does so not from a subaltern position but from the space of the (silent) majority—and this population does want to hear and sing these very songs, in fact needs to hear these songs in order to make sense of themselves in today’s world. In order to do that, the music clings to a nostalgic version of a past that never was in order to give the people exactly what they want and need.

Aaron Fox has convincingly shown that country music defines itself as music of, by, and for the common folk, the people, and thus is popular music
in its most basic definition. In addition, however, country music, more than any other genre of commercial music, sets itself up as the **other** of popular music. In Fox’s words, it stylizes itself as a form of ‘abject’ culture, which relishes its own status as self-avowedly ‘bad’ and unpopular music by speaking from the much disabused subject position of what Wray and Newitz call ‘white trash’. More generally speaking, country music is widely perceived as a genre that is decidedly unpopular, antiquated, uncool, something to be ashamed—rather than proud—of. In her study of country’s perceived otherness, Hubbs argues that a ‘taste for country music is the failure of taste that flags a lack of moral value’ (41) since a declaration of distaste for the music, in this context, ‘appears first and foremost as a gesture of social exclusion. Musical exclusion is secondary, a vehicle and symptom’ (24). In short, country music is unpopular not because of any inherent musical flaws, but rather due to what it is perceived to stand for: To urban, Northern, non-country ears, the music appears as ‘dumb, reactionary, sentimental, maudlin, primitive, and so forth’ as they ‘hear a commodification and cheapening of the same supposed folksy authenticity that so disgusts [them]’ (Ching, ‘Acting Naturally’ 231). Ching calls this the ‘double bind of rustic authenticity’ (232); that is to say, the music either crudely represents the rustic life of rural America (and is thus nothing but folklore) or represents failed attempts at creating the impression of such an authenticity (and is therefore, perhaps, even worse). In this context, Hubbs’s conclusion that ‘country music function[s] as proxy for the people of the white working class, figured as ignorant and bigoted’ is spot on and—drawing on Bryson—she ‘suggest[s] that shared distaste may be as culturally significant as shared taste, the usual object of inquiry in studies by Bourdieu and many other researchers’ (45, my italics).

In this shared distaste for the ways of small-town Southern folks, which finds its way into distaste for ‘their’ country music, lies the kernel that explains both the unpopularity of country music and its pride in this very unpopularity. As Aaron Fox has elaborated, country music’s ‘working class fans embrace what is ‘bad’ about the music’s—and their own—cultural identity and meaning, as a way of discovering and asserting what is valuable and good about their lives and their communities’ (52). In his argument about the music’s badness—which is quite similar to my own reading of the music as self-consciously unpopular, even if I focus more on the producers’ than on the receivers’ end of the equation—, Fox argues that the working-class fans embrace country music precisely **because** it is bad for them and thus turn it into an ‘abject sublime’. This ambivalent gesture can productively be read in terms of what Judith Halberstam has called
‘metronormativity’ (36; cf. 36-38). In metronormativity, so she claims, the urban is established as the unmarked norm by the adjudicators of good taste and culture against which the rural always already is marked as the deviant other. The lack of critical attention to country music can be explained in terms of such metronormativity in that country always already is viewed as the (marked) exception and therefore cannot tell us anything about the people as a whole. Interestingly, country music cedes this metronormative point and embraces its own non-normativity as abject bad music or, in my terms, self-consciously unpopular music, the ‘unpopular’ other to the unmarked norm of popularity. That is to say, country fans embrace the music’s ‘bad’ identity in a defiant gesture that both acknowledges the metronormative gaze as it refuses to be stymied by it. The music’s ‘sublime quality’, then, is to be found in this very badness, or rather, in this re-valuation of something bad into something good. In Fox’s words: ‘It’s all good because it’s all bad’ (59). Thus, it’s all popular because it’s all unpopular—or, put differently, they are famous because they create the credible impression of only wanting to be famous in a small town.

Miranda Lambert, ‘Famous in a Small Town’

Miranda Lambert’s 2007 single ‘Famous in a Small Town’ not only provides the title for this paper but also points to the central contradiction at the heart of much of country music: how is it possible to enjoy popular success without sacrificing one’s own authenticity on the altar of artificiality? In its lyrics as well as in its musical and visual presentation, Lambert’s music video addresses the trappings of fame and directly engages the economics of popularity by singing about the advantages of unpopularity. The lyrics of the song waste no time getting to the heart of the matter, as the first verse immediately establishes the contradiction between popularity and small town anonymity. The first line describes an outsider’s (metronormative) point of view, cryptically indicting an unreferenced ‘They’ who think that ‘life is so much sweeter through the telephoto lens of fame’, whereas ‘around here you get just as much attention / cheerin’ at the high school football game’. The deictic ‘here’ thus juxtaposes the beauty of small-town life where everybody is a star and, given the upbeat driving rhythm of an acoustic guitar strumming in a major key, the song already implies that this is neither a dirge nor an indictment of this small town but a resonant celebration of it.

The song’s video stages this conflict quite effectively by showing us two parallel narrative strands: on the one hand, we see a small-town girl in boots
and dress walking through the eponymous ‘small town’, shot in black and white. On the other hand, the clip also showcases a musician and her band, playing on a bright red carpet, closely cordoned off against the backdrop of a marquee banner with the singer’s name. This contrast is most effectively introduced in the second verse of the song: after the drums and electric guitars have set in, the lyrics move to the possible fame of Nashville as the video switches from monochrome black and white to colorful shots of pop stardom. Here, the video juxtaposes glamour shots on the red carpet—on which Lambert, in shiny clothes and full make-up, and her band perform the song—, including flashing cameras and all the other colorful accoutrements of pop stardom to the black-and-white popularity in a small town. Through the harsh juxtaposition of these two storylines, the video shows that being famous in a small town may be desirable but cannot easily be reconciled with commercial and popular success. It is an either/or-choice, it seems, since the worlds are simply too far apart. In fact, the lyrics explicitly question the need for pop-star fame and popularity, seeing that in small-town America everybody dies famous because everybody already is popular, whether it is for shooting ‘the first buck of the season’ or for ‘cheerin’ at the high school football game’. To visualize this, the video cuts various faces of small-town people against the artist singing on the red carpet, juxtaposing the two versions of popularity: real popularity vs small town popularity, a.k.a. unpopularity. Hitting home its point, the song’s bridge spells out the advantages of this latter unpopular popularity: ‘Well, baby who needs their faces in a magazine? Me and you, we’ve been stars in this town since we were seventeen’. Importantly, the black-and-white scenes do not appear bleak at all but come across as more grounded—more ‘real’, if you will—than the artificial colorfulness of popular stardom.

Given that Miranda Lambert stars in both storylines, however, the video also implies that it is possible to be both successful and to remain the simple girl next door, popular and unpopular at the same time. And this is the important point: in order for the song to work as country music, Lambert needs to be able to negotiate the gap between pop star and unpopular local hero, as country music audiences do not allow for distantly aloof superstars. No, they want even ‘their’ biggest stars to remain normal people—‘just folks’—rather than artificial industrial products. They need to be both, the black-and-white regular girl next door and the glamorous superstar. In a certain sense, then, Lambert’s song relishes the authenticity of unpopularity in country music even as it performs the very tension at the heart of country music: Miranda Lambert, of course, never would have become the country superstar she now is if she were literally ‘only famous in a small town’.
Similarly, her single would not have sold in excess of 500,000 copies and been certified gold record status had it remained within the confines of her home town of Lindale, Texas, or within Lebanon, Tennessee, where the video was shot. Rather, country music sings about and for a metaphorical small-town America in order to distance itself from mainstream popularity. Presumably, it can do so without succumbing to the allures of pop stardom, and the country artist can, allegedly, stay true to the expectation of authenticity, which requires her to remain just a small town girl. As a country musician, Lambert can, and has to be, both: famous and famous in a small town.

Brad Paisley, ‘Southern Comfort Zone’

Another song that plumbs these same depths is Brad Paisley’s 2012 single ‘Southern Comfort Zone’. It also quite self-consciously blends the dimensions of country’s simultaneous popularity and unpopularity and describes the need to leave behind the singer’s titular Southern comfort zone and venture out into a world in which ‘Not everybody owns a gun [or] wears ball-cap, boots, and jeans’. Just as in Lambert’s song, Paisley’s lyrics make no mention that its lyrical I is a musician—yet, both songs more or less imply that their singers are not narrating a fictional story but are singing autobiographically about their own personal lives. Doing so, both Lambert and Paisley fold their artistic personae and their ‘real’ identities into one, in an attempt to create an authentic country persona who is the ‘real deal’, rather than an artificial pop star. ‘Southern Comfort Zone’ tells the story of a Southerner who leaves home, only to be surprised that ‘not everybody drives a truck, not everybody drinks sweet tea’. The song opens with an acoustic guitar intro that is supported by the warm sound of a violin and the soft resonance of a mandolin, sampled into which are an excerpt from Jeff Foxworthy’s ‘You Might Be A Redneck’ routine and a snippet from The Andy Griffith Show, thus setting the story in an imaginary Southern soundscape. Even more outrageously, the song explicitly refers to the Southern Comfort Zone as ‘Dixie land’, thus taking on a historically loaded term, complete with associations of the old South, slavery, rural backwardness, and all the historical baggage that makes ‘Dixie’ a contentious and thoroughly unpopular topic. As if this were not enough, the song is framed by choral renditions of the song ‘Dixie’, and Paisley’s powerful electric guitar, drum, and banjo-driven chorus inscribes itself into the Southern tradition by directly addressing ‘Dixie land, I hope you understand’. Yet, in its overemphasis...
of some of the worst stereotypes of the Southern folk as gun-carrying, Nascar-loving, Billy Graham-following, Dixie-singing backward yokels, the song embraces these very stereotypes and claims the abject otherness of Southern identity as country music’s legacy. Paisley’s southern comfort zone, thus, is the realm of the unpopular—unpopular, that is, in the sense that Southern pride is frowned upon (in educated circles) as backward, reactionary, and highly politically incorrect; and unpopular in the sense that the comfort zone is understood not as the wide realm of the pop world but refers to a more or less closely demarcated idea of home that explicitly does not speak for all American people. In the words of the song’s pre-chorus, country music sings about and for a frowned-upon ‘minority’—an experience the singer has made on his cosmopolitan travels outside his Southern comfort zone—rather than for the people as a whole. In this, country music embraces its own outsider status, its own unpopular image, and revalues it from a stain into a rallying cry.

The supreme irony of the ‘Southern Comfort Zone’ becomes even clearer in its music video: its opening shot shows Paisley starting his tractor, dressed in Jeans, T-Shirt and wearing the inevitable cowboy hat. Different from the album version, the video opens with a sample from the First World War-song ‘How ya gonna keep'em down on the Farm? After they’ve seen Paree’ (by Joe Young & Sam M. Lewis), which ironically highlights the central oppositions at play within country music’s unpopularity: the safety of the small-town home versus the world, the unpopular tackiness of the small town boy, who phonetically misspells the name of the French capital versus the draw of cosmopolitan popularity. Once Paisley starts singing and strumming his acoustic guitar, the song slowly merges the rumbling of the tractor and the rhythm section of the band until, eventually, the scene cuts from the tractor to the singer running through a variety of European cities set against a fairly rocky musical accompaniment. As the song ends, the video cuts back to the still stuttering tractor, thus framing the popular, worldly music within a bracket of authentic Southern Dixieness. In many ways, then, the video self-consciously plays with the distinction between being down-home and worldly: it does so through its lyrics but also in its mixing of musical elements from traditional country and more cross-over/rock-oriented bits, such as the driving rhythm of the song or the extended electric guitar solo. Juxtaposing the country yokel and his tractor to the worldly cosmopolitan hectically rushing through European metropolises, the video portrays him as ultimately being equally at home in both. Moreover, the video cleverly plays with the supposedly large discrepancy between these roles and thereby signals not a ‘lack of sophistication’ but openly and self-reflexively ‘functions
as a sly, even campy, announcement of the fact that it is a performance rather than a spontaneous expression of some pure emotion or state of being’, as Ching has argued (‘Acting Naturally’ 233). In other words, Paisley’s song self-consciously performs its ‘authentic’ countryness by presenting the music precisely through the lens of a metronormative point of view that pigeonholes country music accordingly. In this respect, Paisley’s tractor and cowboy hat are simultaneously serious and deeply ironic gestures meant to underline both the authenticity of the music and the awareness that this is, after all, a performance. Rather than being a dismissal of the stereotype of the backward Southern redneck, ‘Southern Comfort Zone’ echoes and thus updates the infamous ‘Dixie’ as it loudly bangs a drum for the small-town, Southern heritage of the music. Yet, as a self-conscious performance the song also indicates that this Southern authenticity is no longer—if ever it was—to be had without the cosmopolitan dimension. In its sonic and visual blending of these two elements, the video showcases the enmeshment of the modern and the traditional, the popular and the unpopular and thereby complicates this very distinction. Yet, like so many country songs, old and new, it needs to reiterate the authentic heart of country, the Southern comfort zone without which no country popularity could ever come about: In short, without the tractor, Paisley would be just another pop star.

Darius Rucker, the South, and Unpopularity

As should have become clear, one of the defining criteria of country music is a self-conscious questioning of what it actually means to be country in the first place. As I have claimed, part of what makes country popular to its practitioners, fans, and critics is its embrace of a certain authentic image of ‘being country’ that celebrates its own unpopularity. In order to continuously underline this otherness from the merely popular, country music employs a wide variety of what Joli Jensen calls ‘authenticity markers’ that ‘certify [...] country music as real to fans [yet which] are the same markers that seem corny and hillbilly to everyone else’ (13, emphasis in original). These markers range from the ‘ball-cap, boots, and jeans’ mentioned in ‘Southern Comfort Zone’ to the seemingly ever-present cowboy hat, and also include tractors, honky tonks, sweet tea, but also conservative values and religious beliefs, and a large variety of things that make country music appear unpopular and unappealing to certain audiences. In many country lyrics, you will find such proud celebrations of authentic country identity, all of which revolve around a counter-modern, anti-popular form of Southern pride.
Telling examples of such nostalgic Southern pride can be found in the music of Darius Rucker, who, after a successful career as lead singer for the indie rock band Hootie & the Blowfish in the 1990s, has established himself as a mainstream country artist. Throughout his country oeuvre, Rucker flaunts his Southern identity, exemplified by his third country album, *Charleston, SC 1966* (2010), whose title references the singer’s own year of birth and his hometown, thus blending the singer’s private life with his public country star persona. The song ‘Southern State of Mind’ describes a Southerner’s experiences in Eastern and Western locations, where his way of life renders him an unpopular minority much as in Paisley’s song.9 Coincidentally, Rucker’s song about being the Other of metronormativity invokes some of the same authenticity markers as does Paisley’s song, singing that ‘You can see it in the clothes I wear, you can hear it when I talk / Ball-cap, boots, and jeans, and a little Southern drawl’.10 Establishing the South not only as a real geographic space but as a metaphorical home, the song juxtaposes the quirkiness of a ‘Southern State of Mind’ with the modernity of urban life, in relation to which country music self-avowedly has fallen out of both time and space. Similarly, Rucker’s 2013 Grammy award-winning hit-single ‘Wagon Wheel’ captures an image of the South as both sentimental home and as unpopular other to the ‘cold up in New England’, as the lyrics stipulate. Selling nearly three million copies of the single in two years (cf. ‘Wagon Wheel’), the song clearly was a popular smash hit that celebrates a Southerner’s running away from a Northern, urban, and metropolitan life. The song’s up-beat chorus with its catchy repetition of Dylan’s original phrase ‘Rock me, momma, like a wagon wheel’ is addressed not to the singer’s real mother but metaphorically establishes the South as nurturing mother figure to which the lyrical I of the song desperately yearns to return. Just as the musician of Lambert’s song flees the lure of Nashville, Rucker’s singer returns to the Southern small-town life that is his home as he was ‘born to be a fiddler in an old-time string band’. Within the song, the South serves as the metaphorical bosom nurturing the singer and even takes on an existential dimension as the third verse builds momentum toward the final chorus: ‘And if I die in Raleigh, at least I will die free’. Here, reaching the South means freedom—even if this entails death.12 The music video of this song further underlines this impression as it shows the singer’s hitchhiking quest through a cold world eventually to find bodily warmth and human touch in a live music setting. On this journey, the neighborliness of the kind people driving him—all portrayed by members of the Robertson family13—stands in striking contrast to his chilly surroundings. Once the song reaches its final chorus, the singer has found the place in which he can
be both warm and free: a small bar where he performs ‘Wagon Wheel’ in front of an appreciative audience that joins him in a communal sing-along of the lyrics. Catching the musically ‘southbound train’ of the oft-repeated chorus, Rucker’s lyrical I yearns for—and ultimately reaches—the small-town Southern home of authentic country life as the song celebrates the authenticity of unpopularity in contemporary country music.

**This is Country Music—and They Do**

The interaction between artists and fans, as staged in the live performance in the video to Rucker’s ‘Wagon Wheel’, is an important part of country music but also of unpopular culture more broadly understood. As the editors of this volume state in their introduction: ‘The study of unpopular culture, then, is also the study of audiences, and it tends to be concerned more with the reception of cultural artifacts than with their production, since unpopularity presupposes an audience’ (26). What is important about this definition is that production and reception need to be considered together when talking about unpopular culture, as unpopularity is neither detectable in the music per se—just as music’s ‘badness’ as defined by Fox is not an objectively measurable quality, or lack thereof, in the music—nor is it something that resides solely with the recipients of the music and thus the audience (or the people refusing to listen to it). Country music consciously encodes unpopularity into its music, i.e. produces deliberately unpopular music, and its audience willingly embraces this unpopularity. That is to say, performers and fans of country music conspire to create unpopular identities that find expression in the music. In the words of the second verse of Paisley’s ‘This Is Country Music’ (2010): ‘It ain't hip to sing about tractors, trucks, little towns, and mama’. Here, the song pretends to take on the metronormative point of view that these, indeed, are topics unfit for popular culture, only to respond by proudly rejecting its validity; in a word (or three): ‘This is country music—and we do!’ In this song, the ‘we’ of country music defiantly celebrates its own ‘abject badness’ (Fox) and the proud unpopularity that the metronormative gaze ascribes to it.

Drawing on Frith’s work on the function of popular music, Hubbs argues: ‘Country music thus performs a type of cultural work that is performed by popular music generally. It models subjectivity in forms relevant to its listeners’ (103). Yet, country music also differs from other popular music, Hubbs claims, in that it ‘treats real-life themes of hard times, including facing serious illness and facing death’ (103). And, indeed, Paisley’s ‘This
Is Country Music’ is an excellent example of the ways in which country music proudly claims unpopular topics and establishes itself as a collaborative project of both producers and recipients. In the lyrics of the song we encounter country music’s insistence on doing things differently, as the second verse explicitly states: ‘It ain’t hip to sing about tractors, trucks / Little towns and mama, / Yeah that might be true / But this is country music and we do’. The lyrics defy popular (‘hip’) tastes as does the song’s instrumentation, in which the plucking of a banjo carries the melody. As the banjo sonically represents a rural, pre-modern, old-fashioned identity, it underlines country’s otherness and thereby instruments country music’s resistance to modern popularity. While a fiddle provides the harmonies over a whining pedal steel guitar in the background in the first verse, a fairly modern electric guitar picks up the song in the second verse, in a seamless juxtaposition of modern and traditional, popular and unpopular musical elements to exemplify the ways in which country music is both similar to and different from popular music. Country music’s proud ‘We do’ serves as a rallying cry for the country community shouted into the face of popular music as a self-conscious form of othering, in which the ‘we’ sets itself in direct opposition to the implied popularity of ‘them’. Insisting on its difference from popular culture, Paisley’s country music celebrates its own tackiness and stoutly defends its usage of decidedly unpopular themes. Moreover, the chorus consciously refutes any distinction between the real world outside and the potentially artificial diegetic world of the song as it folds its listeners and its singer into one shared authentic country universe. Directly addressing the audience with ‘you’ throughout the song, the chorus explicitly states that ‘This is real, this is your life in a song / Yeah, this is country music’. In short, not only does the song embrace country music’s unpopularity by singing about unpopular themes such as ‘cancer’, ‘Jesus’, and the ‘little towns’ in which Lambert is so famous; no, it also claims that the deictic ‘this’ of country music is the authentic life-world of both performers and fans as they inhabit the unpopular realm of authentic country life together—as a ‘we’.15

Clearly, this unpopularity is celebrated as a badge that needs to be earned and that is to be found in the nexus between production and reception, residing in neither sphere exclusively. Given country music’s insistence on authenticity, it is not surprising to see how closely both artists and fans patrol the borders of what—and who—may count as authentic country music. This is why it is so important for any artist to establish their bona fide country credentials, and it also explains why Paisley’s ‘This Is Country Music’ ends by namechecking a list of legendary country songs into whose
footsteps the song quite ambitiously steps. In its extended play-out, the song reiterates the authentic strength of country music by juxtaposing its titular phrase ‘This is Country Music’ with song titles such as ‘Hello, Darling’, ‘He Stopped Loving Her Today’, or ‘Stand By Your Man’. The song never bothers to mention the names of the artists as the fans will know who they are—Conway Twitty, George Jones, and Tammy Wynette, respectively—and why their simple reference is enough to tap into the lineage of authentic country music. As Aaron Fox has convincingly argued, ‘the standard of authenticity to which country is consequently held is [...] the historicized essence of ‘real’ country music—an originary badness, always receding into the nostalgic mists of a preceding generation of stars and consumers’ (44). The ‘real’ thing into which contemporary country music thus taps is not a real to be found in the world outside, an existing way of life, as Fox importantly reminds us. Rather, it is an artistic discourse that creates the impression of realness by invoking the proud history of the music and the South, relishing a nostalgic version of the past that never was as unproblematic as these reminiscences imply. Country music is real and authentic because it sounds like the music that has come to be accepted as an authentic expression of the real, and the country community is proud of this unpopularity even if—or perhaps because—it is deemed deviant from a metronormative perspective.

**Conclusion**

The ‘wheelhouse’ of much of country music is the very tackiness of its ‘Southern Comfort Zone’, the ‘Wagon Wheel’ of Rucker’s ‘Southern State of Mind’, or Lambert’s small-town popularity. More precisely, country music is not only located in this liminal space but it has built a comfortable nesting spot in this position as a more ‘real’ alternative to the bland pop mainstream. Unfortunately, there is more to this unpopularity than just a stubborn refusal to be streamlined. As many critics, such as Pamela Fox or Geoff Mann have pointed out, country is a thoroughly white musical genre. This is not because of a lack of ‘black’ or non-white influences but, on the contrary, because it constructs and re-inscribes a certain notion of implicit whiteness that is not only unpopular but, at times, deeply racist. Therefore, the unpopularity of country music is more than a simple unwillingness to leave one’s Southern comfort zone. It also entails a refusal to take on the admittedly complicated task of honestly dealing with its own (historical) constructions of whiteness. Part of country’s unpopularity, as I have argued, lies in the music’s Southern pride and the concomitant politics of
whiteness, despite the presence of African American fans and performers, such as Darius Rucker. Viewed from a different angle, this self-image of country music as an unpopular minority entirely silences these much more uncomfortable racial politics of country music, which more or less whitewash country music and disregard the problematic aspect of proudly embracing a redneck identity with all of history’s baggage. That is to say, the music embraces a notion of authenticity that is not only unpopular but, in fact, highly politically incorrect and, at times, blatantly racist.

‘Accidental Racist’, Brad Paisley’s hotly debated yet rightfully unpopular collaboration with hip-hop artist LL Cool J, is one of the few cases in which country music explicitly deals with racial issues. Its good intentions notwithstanding, the song is an awkward attempt to come to terms with the ‘accidental racism’ that is part and parcel of so much of American life and country music; or, as the first verse of the song phrases it: ‘The red [Confederate] flag on my chest somehow is like the elephant in the corner of the south’. By ‘walk[ing the elephant] right in the room’, the song attempts to free Southern culture and country music from its historical baggage and to return to a nostalgic past back when it was okay proudly to embrace Southern identity and the unpopularity it entails. The song’s lyrical I is a proud Southerner who insists on the necessity to start talking to one another about the uncomfortable effects of the intricate racial histories of the South, even though ‘you and me can’t re-write history’. In the song’s final verse and chorus, Paisley and LL Cool J have a sincere dialogue, in which the former’s country singing and the latter’s rapping manage to overcome the past and, despite their statement to the contrary, attempt to ‘rewrite history’. Lyrically, the song is a horrible failure in that it compares black people’s ‘do-rags’ to the white man’s ‘red flag’ (the Confederate Flag) and, even more outrageously, compares hip-hop’s ‘gold chains’ to slavery’s ‘iron chains’. Adding insult to injury, the song ends by proudly embracing the ‘Southern pride’ free of the so-called ‘Southern blame’ that accompanied it in the first iterations of the chorus and thus quite self-consciously inhabits a highly unpopular, abject, Southern point of view ‘where all that’s left is southern pride’. At long last, country music can stake a claim in the unpopular realm of ‘Dixie’, the sounds of which permeate Paisley’s entire album Wheelhouse—both Dixie as country music’s metaphorical ‘wheelhouse’ and the song ‘Dixie’. Here, it becomes clear why country is at the same time the music of the common people (and thus of quite a lot of folks) and so unpopular, out of time, and embarrassing to many other people (yours truly, at least sometimes, included): as it embraces the identity of supposedly authentic Southern, redneck identity, country music creates an
image that is well-nigh impossible to be proud of for quite a large number of people. Possibly, a country song by definition cannot achieve what Paisley presumably wanted it to: that is, to go beyond the tightly drawn racial scripts of country music because it is so deeply enmeshed in its own unpopular re-production of whiteness as its default condition (cf. Mann; Fox).

In the end, country music has to be a bit corny, a tad folksy, and above all authentic. Paisley’s Southern comfort zone and Lambert’s small town are the spaces in which this unpopular culture unfolds. And there is nothing wrong with only being famous in such a small town as long as this proud embrace of the genre’s unpopularity does not entail clinging to a simplistic historical account of how its own whiteness was made. In that case it might be better if the music remained, indeed, truly unpopular and thus known only in a very, very small town.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Martin Lüthe und Sascha Pöhlmann for their insightful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. Simply by using their real names, most country stars mark their difference from the artificiality of pop stars such as Madonna or Lady Gaga. The German term *Künstlername* perhaps best expresses the ambiguity of taking on a persona: the term literally means ‘artist name’, thus naturalizing the artificiality of choosing a pseudonym rather than one’s real name for the purpose of performing an artistic identity. For an important analysis of the ways in which ‘the folk’ and folklore are often read as authentic products rather than constructions themselves, cf. Bendix.

3. A long list of indicators could be used to document the increasing cross-over success of country artists, such as ABC’s screening of a three-hour prime-time broadcast of the CMA Music Festival on 5 August 2014 (cf. Hudak) or the recent hype about so-called ‘bro-country’ on the general pop charts (cf. Dauphin and my critical discussion of the latter in ‘All Kinds of (Queer) Rednecks’).

4. This recent (re-)popularization of Southern culture is, of course, nothing really new given that Southern music has shaped American (popular) music throughout its history; as its preeminent historian Bill Malone has argued, the South ‘was the land that gave rise to virtually every form of American popular music’ (*Southern Music* 4).

5. To give just two examples out of a very small number of studies available: Covach’s essay on ‘unpopular musicology’ only uses the term in its catchy title and never discusses the term’s wider implications, whereas the editors of *The Popular Music Studies Reader* limit discussion of unpopularity in
their introduction to a short aside on ‘live opera’ as a ‘defiantly unpopular’ form of entertainment, ‘in both economic and cultural terms’ (3).

6. To give just two examples for the general dislike of and hate toward country music: Aaron Fox has pointed out that country music is the only musical genre that is often negatively referenced in personal ads in newspapers (cf. Fox 44). In ‘Anything But Country’, the first chapter of her Rednecks, Queers & Country Music (23–50), Hubbs discusses the phenomenon that so many people feel the need to distance themselves from country music—or, rather, not from the music per se but from country music ‘as a cultural category and brand’ (23).

7. In Frith’s much better formulation: ‘Authenticity [...] is a quality not of the music as such [...] but of the story it’s heard to tell’ (‘Music’ 124).

8. Thus Paisley continues the long tradition of country music’s ‘singing cowboys’: dressed in ‘ersatz cowboy costume’ this figure ‘had won the day in country music’ by the time Hank Williams and Hank Snow appeared in the 1950s (Malone, Singing Cowboys 99).

9. Given that Rucker, as of 2014, is the only major African American country artist with any semblance of mainstream success, this notion of being a minority takes on another layer of meaning—to which I will return in my conclusion.

10. Perhaps not surprisingly, both songs were co-written by Chris DuBois, which may explain the repeated use of the exact same phrase in different songs.

11. The song is a cover version of the 2004 underground smash hit by the string band Old Crow Medicine Show, who, in turn, had written this song based on snippets of a song written by Bob Dylan in 1973. While the Old Crow version already had become something of a Southern popular phenomenon—their song never hit the charts until Rucker’s version was released but could be heard around campfires, tailgates, and college parties all over the American South—, Rucker exploded the popularity of this song, taking it not only to the top of the country charts but also reaching the top 20 on the Billboard Hot 100 (cf. ‘Darius Rucker’).

12. There is a certain irony in this line, considering that Rucker, sole successful black country artist, sings about running to—rather than fleeing from—the South to gain his freedom.

13. Like almost no other on-screen personalities, the Robertsons of Duck Dynasty-fame stand for a Southern unpopular way of life that resists the pace of modernity and of artificial popular culture against which their staged authentic lifestyle is set. Not only have they been met with TV success; they have also made strong in-roads into the country music industry in recent years. They have recorded a CD of country Christmas songs, on which they collaborate with country superstars such as George Strait, Alison Krauss, and Luke Bryan, appeared at the 2013 CMA awards, and have starred in Tyler Farr’s video to ‘Redneck Crazy’ (2013). In all of these, the Robertsons
epitomize the figure of the redneck, a central—truly unpopular—trope in much recent country music (cf. my ‘All Kinds’).

14. This ending creates the impression of authentic live music. In a discussion of the history of country music videos, Fenster has analyzed this device under the heading of the ‘performance/concept combination’ (Fenster 116). Cf. also Auslander’s argument that the music video ‘has usurped live performance’s authenticating function’ (105). In ‘All Kinds of Kinds’ I briefly address the community-constructing function of such intradiegetic live performances as a form of country music’s political unconscious.

15. In this respect, it is a clever choice that Paisley did not produce a music video for this single but simply used a live performance from the 2010 CMA awards, at the beginning of which he thanks the fans for his Entertainer of the Year Award.

16. As Berndt Ostendorf so helpfully pointed out in his response to this paper: there seems to be a ‘masochistic celebration of a wound’ (Munich, 30 October 2013) at play in many nostalgic distortions of the past in American culture, an example of which can be found in country music’s embrace of the Southern past.

17. As many commentators have pointed out there are two main objections to this set-up: first, Paisley is using one black popular artist as a straw-man to absolve the South and country music of their historical mistakes and problematic silences. Second, the particular artist that he chooses has never been known for his political outspokenness (as opposed to, say, Mos Def or Public Enemy); moreover, LL Cool J, by now, is not even perceived as a musician anymore but much more widely known as an actor in the popular police procedural NCIS: Los Angeles. Paisley’s choice of him as the spokesperson for black people, thus, is viewed as misleading at best and dishonest at worst (cf. Coates).

18. I am not alone among critical audiences of the song to be irritated by Paisley’s choice of the words ‘Southern blame’ in the chorus, thus singing about an assignation of blame from outside rather than about an honest confession of guilt (shame). Thanks to Heike Paul for pointing this out to me.

Works Cited


Music and Music Videos


