Yes, country for white men

A thematic analysis of racial relations within country music

Zacharias Fallesen

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Department of Government, Uppsala University
Supervisor: Anders Sjögren
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1. Introduction

“Country music speaks to what is tried and true for many Americans. It speaks of the common things shared by all: the happiness of a family, the pains of a broken heart, the mercy of God, and the goodness of man” (Nixon, 1971)

During the midst of the Vietnam War president Nixon signed a proclamation marking October of 1971 as country music month (Peters & Woolley). Heralding country music as banner for American people to rally under, united in spirit and identity. To denote country music as an all-encapsulating extension of the American cultural identity is an ambitious undertaking. Despite Nixon’s optimism of the narratives of country music reaching all Americans. Country is predominantly perceived as synonymous with “whiteness”. The external perception of country is that of music for white people, produced by white people, consumed by white people, and reinforced by white people. An observation reinforced by unanimous scholarly consensus (Mann, 2008: 74). Herald by the end of World War II country music has predominantly embodied stereotypical American conservatism, embracing faith, family, tradition, and nationalism (Mann, 2008: 74). However, traditionally conservative values have not always been intrinsic to country music. Country music employs a unique populistic stance with shifting allegiance that focuses on highlighting the consolidation of the identity of the in-group while simultaneously demonising the out-group, a perpetual rodeo of us versus them (Mellard, 2017: 461-462). The populistic voice of country frames the values imbedded within a small number of white Christians, as the quintessential traits of the true American identity. Seeking to claim back the nation from the forces that have subverted or corrupted it (Mellard, 2017: 464). This populistic stance expresses itself by showcasing the outgroup as the belligerents, while the ingroup as the ones being besieged. Such as the fight between, urban city dwellers, and rural folk, hippies versus rednecks (Mellard, 2017: 461-462). These messages are not inherently political, rather they portray the moral obligations, and convictions of the in-group. An apolitical message that conveys harsh identity classifications, is a medium that is susceptible to political leadership appropriating their messages to mobilize people under a political banner (Mann, 2008: 74), (Mellard, 2017: 462, 463). Most notably Nixon that appropriated the us versus them sentiment within country music for populist mobilization of the silent majority (ibid: 470).

The political fabric of country music changed after 9/11, seeing the mobilization of us versus them imbedded with jingoistic and patriotic traits. The stark emotions for the terrorist attacks of September of 2001 and the demonization of the assailants along with overarching resentment for the middle east dominated the conservative political side of country music for almost two decades (Hudak, 2021).
However, has recently in the wake of QAnon been replaced with conspiracy ridden, anti-government tunes. Imbued with thinly veiled dog-whistle rhetoric, with racist undertones (Romano, 2023).

In 2017 the USA ceased to be a predominantly white Christian nation, a development that the TAN (Traditional, authoritarian, nationalist) associated part of America faced with vocal opposition. Claiming that the demographic exchange unravels the very fabric of white Christian America, the foundation upon the country was founded (Jones, 2017). The erosion of cultural and political hegemony of the white and Christian identity, in combination with the demographic exchange no longer rendering white Christians a majority, has signalled a perceived challenge to white dominance. Heralding a commonality and a sense of in-group cohesion, leading a sizable proportion of the group to mobilize politically and socially to protect the privileges granted to them by their racial and religious belonging. Heralding the resurrection of white supremacy, within contemporary American society (Clark, 2020).

The changing political landscape of country music, in combination with the reemergence of radical racial assertions opens for a research topic combining the spillover of these two subjects. Shining light on a previously unresearched topic can bestow us with newfound knowledge of the interrelatedness of radical racial sentiment and the political alignment of country music.

1.1 Purpose and Research Question

To the extent of my knowledge there exist no scientific research that maps the thematic narratives of racial relations within contemporary country music. Interrelatedness of country music and white supremacy has been examined through obscure hate music, conceived in opposition to the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. My aim with this paper is to conduct an analysis with broader contemporary relevance to the cultural landscape of the US, by analysing songs that are commonplace within the radio repertoire. My aim with this paper is to broaden the understanding of politicized racial relations expressed through popular culture. By specifically looking at the themes of racial relations in country music. During a period of shifting demographics, and strong adherence to a sense of white Christian hegemony being besieged. Leading me to the following research question:

- What themes that portray racial relations are present within right-wing country music?

Through the entire analysis, I will employ the themes of “nostalgia and scapegoatism” as overarching themes, which I will use to relate the rest of the analysis to. I will discuss this further in the theoretical framework chapter.
2. Previous Research

2.1. Country Hate Music

In the paradigm of ethno-musicology researchers have mapped a genre ladled “hate music”, a specific genre concerned with spreading intolerance, bias, prejudice, and disdain for certain groups of society that are condemned as the outgroup by a coherent ingroup. Hate music employs a lot of different themes, such as labels, devaluation, persecution and scapegoatism of certain groups, most commonly minorities (Messner, Jipson, Becker & Byers, 2007: 1). Hate music as a musical phenomenon is not limited to a genre, rather it contains lyrical devices and narratives that are applicable to any genre of music. (Messner et al., 2007, 1). The genre of hate rock, sympathetic with skinhead and neo-Nazi sentiment emerged during the 70’s and has received the majority of scholarly attention. However, predating hate rock is what Messner et al., (2007: 1) labels as country hate music, a genre that emerged during the 1960’s in retaliation to the growing civil rights movement The genre emerged unbeknownst to the public limelight. Due to the obscurity of the labels that produced the songs, they did not garner any particular attention from the media. Country hate music can be label into two different avenues of expressing racial relations, firstly confrontational hate music. Characterized by a complete lack of subtlety, the language is direct, vulgar, and expressive. The language is extremely racist, and the symbolism and metaphors are easy to decipher. Containing themes such as but not limited to the dehumanisation of African Americans, infantilization of African Americans, promotion of white violence and the need for white unity. (Messner et al., 2007: 4-10). The second style of county hate music is social hate music. Portraying the same themes as confrontational hate music, however embedded within camouflaged symbolism and metaphors, that are less likely to deciphered by the listener (Messner et al., 2007: 12). However still endowed with the same rhetoric that the identity of the south is under threat and the south needs to unite in order to preserve their customs and traditions (ibid). Confrontational and social hate music may differ in their lyrical style, however, in their shared ambition to express unwillingness for an inclusive society the achieve the same result.

For this paper the previous research will be used in the following ways. i) Broadening the already established research of how country music employs a systemic dissonance between the outgroup in relation to the ingroup. ii) Complementing the research by Messner et al, by adding a contemporary faucet, with the usage of songs that are commercially successful and within the current musical curriculum.
3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Dog Whistles

In the study “The Hardest Hate” conducted by Messner et al. most of the analysed songs are extremely, vulgar, confrontational and lack any kind of subtlety. The songs labelled as “hate songs” were all produced and released by obscure labels (Messner et al., 2007, 1), and in a socio-political climate where the message they preach was more inclined to be socially acceptable. The songs that I am analysing were all conceived in a vastly different socio-political landscape, and I argue that if the songs used by Messner et al., were produced anytime during the 21st century, they would not have been taken on by any label, let alone receive anything but slander in the cultural discourse. Therefore, I argue that any ambition to preach messages directed towards assessing racial relations and attain any form of commercial success must be performed with far more subtlety. Therefore, utilizing the use of “dog-whistles”, a rhetorical device used to convey a coded message that mobilizes a certain demographic endowed with certain set of preconceived values or ideas. Dog-whistles within popular-culture is an under researched field, however the parallel between the two has been observed most notably in Swedish populist-aligned rock. The Swedish musician Peter Jezewski, a self-proclaimed ally of the Swedish right-wing populist party, Sverigedemokraterna, produced a song called “My Land (2018)”. Riddled with dog-whistle politics that aim to sow discontent toward the then current governments immigration policy. Alluding towards their responsibility in terror attack in Stockholm. While also, preaching the importance of heritage, birthright, and nationalism, veiled in text that would not garner the attention of the mass populous (Schiller, 2023: 11).

Conceived from my own theoretical assumption, reassured with previous research. I will conduct the analysis under the premise that the lyrics will include imbedded dog whistles. That I will have to decode in order to extract the themes. Ushering the importance of critical analysis, to extract camouflaged themes.

3.2. Whiteness and Nostalgia

The interconnected relationship between country music and whiteness is dependent on the narrative device of nostalgia, used to analyse the interrelatedness of whiteness and cultural politics. Nostalgia as a narrative device function independent of content, rather it’s a form of articulation applied to lyrical and instrumental performance. Nostalgia extracts events, dramatizes them, and conjures an arena that
enables listeners to extract a socio-cultural significance (Mann, 2007: 86). Country music often employs the narrative of loss, by implicitly or explicitly referring to societal change, either the process of change or an avenue of society that has undergone change. By referring the current state of affairs contra what once was, listeners are armed with the ability to attribute values to a fluctuating social climate (ibid). The theme of loss and the posting of a what once was often valorise themes such as return to simplicity, a strong sense of moral clarity, loyalty, adherence to traditions and portray these values as either besieged or absent within contemporary society. The decline of these ideals portrays the perceived decline of American values, constrained by societal conditions beyond the control of those who adhere to the values (ibid: 87). Lastly the act of glamorising the past, condemning the passage of time, and simultaneously presenting an anti-future undoubtedly renders country music synonyms with whiteness (ibid: 89). Having assessed the relationship between whiteness, country music and nostalgia, I argue that nostalgia should be regarded as an overarching theme that will be employed as a deductive device to relate to the inductively assessed themes.

3.3. Scapegoating

Further conceived from the analysis conducted by Messner et al., is the narrative presented by the white Christian demographic that African Americans are responsible for their shifting status and the infringement on their way of life. The songs in order to prevent this societal shift, usher for white unity to protect southern traditions and customs, and simultaneously justify dehumanisation and violence (Messner et al., 2007: 4). Effectively rendering African Americans as scapegoats, for the perceived loss of hegemony. French philosopher and anthropologist Rene Girard wrote extensively on the topic of scapegoating and developed the scapegoat mechanism. In an effort to anthropogenically understand the origin of social order (Keenan, 2023). Girard observed that communities without a strong legal system employs justice and vengeance through private enterprises of vigilante violence. In these communities the art of scapegoating works under the following principle, “to polarise the community’s aggression impulses and redirect them towards victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate, but are always incapable of propagating further violence” (Douglas, 2016). The southern part of the US has a long history of vigilante violence and a lack of a strong judicial system, both in a contemporary setting and during the time of the civil rights movement which is the era portrayed in the study my Messner et al. Coherent with the teachings of Girard lynching involves a criminal accusation, an arrest, the formation of a mob, seizure of the victim, followed by harsh torture, physical and mental torment and lastly the murder of the victim. Through the entire process any official judicial processes were excluded. The acts of lynching were performed solely by lawless mobs, working under the premise of vigilante justice (NAACP). During the period of 1882 - 1968 an estimated 4743
lynchings occurred, concentrated largely in the southern US (ibid). Adhering to the premise of scapegoating most of these accusations were fabricated without sufficient evidence, rather they were forged out of resentment and racial superiority against a demographic unable to retaliate (ibid). Lynchings are still present within the contemporary US, in 1998 James Byrd was chained to a car and dragged to his death in Jasper Texas (ibid). In 2012 Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by the neighbourhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman (Yan, 2013). Ahmaud Arbery was fatally shot while jogging in Brunswick Georgia in 2020, (NAACP). To further reiterate the theoretical principles of Girard concerning the absent judicial system, the jury responsible for the murder trial of George Zimmerman found him not guilty (Yan, 2013). Furthermore, the absent judicial system was even more prominent in the lynchings before and during the civil rights era, of all lynchings that occurred after 1900, it is estimated that only 1% of the lynchers were charged with any type of criminal offence. Most of these not being related to murder, rather minor offenses such as rioting or arson (Lartey & Morris, 2018).

In the field of social science there exists a distinct lack of research discussing the use of scapegoating narratives within popular culture. However, I reason that the empirical underpinnings conceived from Messer et al., (2007), in combination with the theoretical framework constructed by Girard, in conjunction with the history of the southern US is sufficient for me to employ scapegoating as an overarching theme for the deductive aspect of my analysis. Relating the analysed songs and the inductively assessed narratives through the lens of scapegoating.
4. Research Design

4.1 Selection of Material

In order to investigate the themes addressing racial relations within contemporary right-wing country music, it is evident that the analysed lyrics need to in a varying extent mention or simple allude at racial dynamics. To guarantee this, I had to employ a strategic sampling of the material. Rendering me unable to assume that the themes would be present in every conceivable country song. Excluding the usage of typical selection. The sampling method I employed is the usage of critical cases operating under favourable conditions (Esaiasson et al., 2017: 161-162). The lack of previous research examining the display of race within country music, lead me to employ this method as it provided a safety net while treading on uncharted research territory.

The practical implication of the strategic selection involved me creating a framework in order to find songs suitable for analysis. Firstly, I established a timespan for the analysis, a given period from where the songs were extracted from. I chose a timespan that would encompass a period of US history that saw gradual escalation of white supremacy and the hegemonic position of white Christians under the internal perception as besieged. My chosen point of departure is the terrorist attack on The World Trade Centre on the 11th of September 2001. I then established a time span of 20 years, to encompass the attack on the Capitolium on the 6th of January 20021, which I argue is the culmination of the perceived loss of hegemonic status of the white Christian demographic. To account for the time, it takes for songs to be written, produced, recorded, and released I extended the time-period with two years, to the year of 2023, time year when the analysis was performed. Rendering me with a time span of 22 years.

Secondly, I wanted the songs to have commercial success, motivated by the ambition to discuss songs that have a relevant impact on the cultural landscape of American politics. Racial identity is an intrinsic part of the political fabric of the US, and to broaden the collective understanding of racial identity expressed through the avenue of country music. I argue that its off great importance to analyse songs that attained circulation within the radio repertoire and uphold significant cultural influence. Which I determined by potential inclusion on the Billboard Hot 100, which is hitlist that compiles the 100 most played songs in the US every week. This metric is based on both commerciality in terms of album sales and on circulation on the radio (Billboard, 2018). Which I deemed a suitable metric to determine the commercial success of a song, and its prowess on the radio.
Thirdly, having limited preconceptions regarding country artists and songs, in tandem with lacking an apparent point of departure. I wanted to apply controversy as a metric for strategically picking my songs to analyse. The reasoning behind this decision stemmed from the ambition of inductiveness, unwilling to cherry-pick songs that already had well-established connotations with racially aligned identity politics. Using songs with already well-established themes, would increase the risk of conformation-bias, mending the analysis to fit the already established narratives. Having examined the relationship between country music and controversy I arrived at the conclusion that country music, gets labelled controversial for two predominant reasons, i) are songs that do not adhere to the norms, traditions, and values of the white Christian demographic, such as preaching for birth control pills and premarital sex. ii) songs that are perceived by the left-wing of the American political spectrum as racist, ignorant, or homophobic. This becomes vital when considering the fourth criteria, namely the adherence to the right-wing political agenda. The political nature of country music adheres to the president of demonising the outgroup while glorifying the ingroup. Drawing from the research of right-wing extremist music from Messner et al, I argued that demonisation of the out-group on the boundaries of race would arguably be more represented within right-wing country music. With the boundaries of the material established, I started looking through secondary sources for songs that adhere to the framework, being commercially successful, controversial, and adhering to right-wing politics.

4.2 Design and Analytical Method

For this analysis I have decided to do a qualitative thematic analysis, combining inductive and deductive elements. The decision to perform a qualitative analysis is based on the principle of dog whistles discussed in the theoretical framework. To reiterate dog whistles are coded messages disguised within varying forms of media, with the purpose of mobilizing a certain demographic endowed with a specific set of preconceived values, or knowledge. The nature of dog whistles makes it difficult to code without immersing oneself in the data. Ruling out the option to conduct a qualitative analysis examining certain words, or phrases within a great array of songs. The deductive aspect of the paper concerns the theoretical framework, the assumption that dog whistles will be present. In combination with the overarching themes of nostalgia and scapegoating. In terms of the inductive measures, I aimed to analyse the lyrics with a minimum amount of preconceived knowledge, solely the theoretical framework. With the ambition of extracting the themes without relying on previous assertions of themes, that would potentially taint the analysis with conformation-bias.
The practical work of performing the analysis was inspired by the thematic analysis (TA) framework presented by Braun & Clarke (2012). A six-phase approach, to facilitate a comprehensive analysis endowed with reliability and validity. Phase i) concerns familiarization with the data, the measure to immerse oneself within the data being analysed differs vastly depending on the data format (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 5). In the case of my analysis I listened to the songs, read the lyrics, and made semi-structured notes during reading. Of great importance to the framework of TA is reading between the lines, not simply absorbing the surface meaning of the words in the lyrics. Rather one needs to deploy critical thinking to the broader meanings of the data and the message the artist tries to convey (ibid).

Adhering to the dog whistle point of departure assessed in the theoretical framework, the aspect of critical analysis was of great importance to decipher imbedded messages within the lyrics. In terms of aspirations to implement inductive aspects, I tried to limit my understandings of the songs, to merely listening and reading through the lyrics. Phase ii) Regards the systematically analysis of the data by generating initial codes (ibid: 6). In the case of my analysis, the codes consisted of structured notes, functioning as building blocks of the larger themes. The codes take shape in form of analysed words, phrases and/or sentences that on their own do not constitute a broader theme. The codes are both descriptive and interpretive, the former constituting a clearer rendition of the conveyed message within the lyrics, and the latter being formulated by critical analysis of the message. Both codes are coherent with the theoretical framework, the assumption that dog whistles are prominent within the lyrics and need to be de-coded through descriptive and interpretive critical analysis. Phase iii) Constructs coherent themes from the constructed codes, using the definition by Braun & Clarke “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (2012: 7). For the intents and purposes of my paper the research question is to arrive at the themes. However, to deduct and find these themes I reviewed the data, clustering codes together that had similar characteristics. In conjunction with each other they reflect a certain pattern within the data, in other words a theme. In order to transform the coded data into themes, I used a variety of secondary sources to firstly reassure or refrain my description and/or interpretation. Secondly to decipher the messages, granting me information about the lyric’s relation to real world events, using encyclopaedias to define words or phrases. The use of secondary sources was imperative to decipher dog whistles, by granting me enlightened understanding of real-world events, and phrases that were imbedded with a coded message. Furthermore, during this stage I also related the discovered themes and their adherence to the overarching themes of nostalgia and scapegoating. I also aspired to use previous academic literature to reassure my transition from code to themes, however the vast majority of previous literature conducted under the same premise analyses a small section of a vast array of songs. In contrast to my paper where I analyse a small selection of songs in their entirety. Resulting in the inability to use previous research to reassure or refute my interpretations. To combat this issue, I resorted to dial down the harshness of some of the themes. In practical terms this resulted in the codes being translated into themes with less harsh interpretations.
when scholarly consensus was lacking. Phase iv) Concerns the reviewal process to ensure validity. Reviewing the emerging themes in accordance with the codes and the data sets in its entirety to ensure that the themes are derived from the data (ibid: 9). This involved me reassuring, that the themes had enough coalescing code to label it a theme. Reassuring the adherence of the theme in relation to the research question. As well as the coherence of the code that constructs the theme. Phase v) Labelling and defining the theme (ibid). For my paper I employed the labelling and defining of the theme in the analysis by referring to what parts of the data lead me to construct a theme. In combination of labelling the theme in accordance with the message it conveyed in relation to the research question. Lastly phase vi) Producing the report, providing a compelling story about the data based on the conducted analysis (ibid: 11).

4.3. Presentation of Material

The constructed framework of section rendered me with five songs fit for my analysis. The lyrics in their entire are presented in the appendix label 4. A-E. It’s important to note that the information conveyed regarding the songs, was not information that I relied on, rather it has been compiled post-analysis to grant the reader of the paper broader understanding of the songs. In chronological order the songs are the following:

“Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue” - Toby Keith 2002. The first of two entries from Toby Keith, the song reached the 25th spot on the Billboard Hot 100 while maintaining the 1st on the Billboard 100 Country Songs (Billboard A). The song is the least controversial of all the songs in this paper, however it still agitated Dixie chick’s singer Natalie Maines, labelling the song as ignorant and suggesting it taints country music with ignorance. Keith retaliated by using a doctored photo of Maines and Saddam Hussein as a backdrop at one of his shows (Olsen, 2003).

“Beers for my horses”- Toby Keith 2003. The last of four singles released for Keiths seventh studio album, “Unleashed” the song reached the 22nd spot of the Billboard Hot 100 and spent six weeks at the top place of the Billboard Hot Country Songs (Billboard A). The song only garnered the attention of a few journalists in 2003, dissecting its lyrics highlighting its romanisation of lynching and homage to vigilante violence (Haulman, 2003). The discussion of its homage to lynching flared up again in 2008 when Keith performed the song on “The Colbert Show”, and a journalist from The Huffington Post slammed Keith over the lyrics (Blumenthal, 2008). The controversial antics of the lyrics flared up once more in 2023, when online influence Destinee Stark dissected the lyrics of the song. Arriving at the same conclusion of valorising lynching and promotion of vigilante violence (Burton, 2023 B).
“Accidentally racist” - Brad Paisley 2013. Conceived as a duo between white country star Brad Paisley and black rapper LL Cool J, the song aspired to combat racism by ushering for reconciliation during the dialogues both artists have during the course of the song. However, some of the lyrics garnered a lot of media attention during the songs release. By journalists claiming that there is nothing accidentally racist about the song, rather its deliberately racist. The song features lyrics that equate common black fashion expression as being as taboo as slavery (Considine, 2013). Throughout the entirety of the song the narrative that we cannot not rewrite history is preached. However, the historic connotations that Paisley attributes to the confederate flag during the song, are a product of systemic rewriting of history (ibid). The song peaked at rank 77th on the Billboard Hot 100 and achieved the 23rd rank on Billboard Hot Country Songs (Billboard B). For the sake of a transparent analysis, I would like to shine light on the fact that I chose to exclude the verse solely sung by LL Cool J. The reasoning being that I argued it would not be relevant to the research question, as the aim of the paper is to shine light on the aspect of race uttered by white people perceiving their hegemony being besieged.

“Am I the Only One” - Aaron Lewis 2021. Upon release the song garnered a lot of attention from both sides of the American political spectrum, herald as enlightened preach by right-wingers that became enamoured with the preaching of anti-BLM messages, the opposition to removal of confederate memorabilia and the focus on all American values. In contrast the left-wing labelled the narrative of the song as right-wing non-sense bickering (Goldberg, 2021). Political commentator David Corn feared that the song might entice and encourage listener to a repeated attack on the capitol (Corn, 2021). On the Billboard Hot 100 the song upon release held the 14th spot, while simultaneously staying in the 1st position on the Billboard Hot Country Songs (Billboard C).

“Try That in a Small Town” - James Aldean 2023. Is undoubtedly the most controversial song on the list, having seen criticism and controversy from several avenues. Firstly, the same internet creator that had dissected “Beers for my Horse” by Toby Keith initially dissected the lyrics for this song, for which the creator received several death threats after proclaiming that the lyrics were inherently racist (Burton, 2023 A), (Burton, 2023 B). The music video that accompanied the song was altered post-release with the removal of clips of Black Lives Matter protests in Atlanta, that showcased the narrative and intentions of the song. What remains of the music video is Aldean singing in front of the Maury Country Courthouse, the same building was used to lynch 18-year-old Henry Choate in 1927. The combination of the inherently racist lyrics, and the tasteless music video convinced the Country Music Television (CMT) to stop airing the music video all together (Schriber & Chery, 2023). The song still managed to reach the top spot on the Billboard 100 a week after its release, while also occupying the 35th spot on the Billboard Hot Country Songs (Billboard D).
5. Analysis & Thematic Discussion

5.1 “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue” - Toby Keith 2002

_American girls and American guys_
_We'll always stand up and salute_
_We'll always recognize_
_When we see Old Glory flying_
_There's a lot of men dead_
_So we can sleep in peace at night when we lay down our head_

The opening lines glorify and valorise American exceptionalism and jingoism, by promoting American military intervention abroad. Suggesting that homeland security and the safety and sanctity of every American citizen is dependent on overseas warmongering. Considering that the song was released in 2002 the military conflict Keith is referring to is the US invasion of Afghanistan following the attack on the World Trade Centre on the 9th of September 2001. Keith stated in an interview that the lyrics were partly inspired by the passing of his veteran dad, as well as the attack on the world trade centre (Thompson, 2021).

_My daddy served in the army_
_Where he lost his right eye but he flew a flag out in our yard_
_Until the day that he died_
_He wanted my mother, my brother, my sister and me_
_To grow up and live happy_
_In the land of the free_

The same jingoistic sentiment is carried through the second verse where Keith mentions that his dad lost his eye during military service, but still flies the American flag in his yard. Which showcases severe patriotism considering that American veterans are severely disadvantaged in society and poorly take care of (Hester, 2017). Furthermore, Keith continues to equate the act of over-sees warmongering to safety for American citizens.

_Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack_
_A mighty sucker punch came flyin' in from somewhere in the back_
_Soon as we could see clearly_
_Through our big black eye_
Man, we lit up your world
Like the fourth of July

Justice will be served and the battle will rage
This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage
And you'll be sorry that you messed with
The U.S. of A.
’Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass
It’s the American way

Both verses convey the narrative of American innocence, suggesting that the US only employs violence when under attack. A notion that diminishes American influence in developing countries and their instigating of violence across the globe. As well as diminishing their attribution to the unrest within Afghanistan and their armament of the Mujahedeen during the invasion by the Soviet Union (Yoon, 1997: 580-586). Furthermore, Keith employs a dangerous use of symbolism by using American traditions like the fireworks of 4th of July as a symbolism to bombing campaigns. The last two lines also are severely ignorant and counterintuitive to the previous message, condemning American tradition to a culture of retaliation with violence. Preaching against the previous message of freedom. Lastly both verse preaches the familiar message of jingoism, retaliation with violence and the lack of any ambition of dialogue.

Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin’ her fist
And the eagle will fly man, it’s gonna be hell
When you hear mother freedom start ringin’ her bell
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

The first line of the chorus undoubtedly refers to the famous uncle Sam recruitment poster from 1916 made by J.M Flagg. As a means to recruit American soldiers for the first world war (Knauer, 2017). The second line is quite ambiguous, Keith appropriates the Statue of Liberty to either act as a symbol of condemnation towards the attack on the World Trade Centre or presents the statue as a voice of reason speaking for military intervention. The fourth line is subtle and ambiguous but arguably refers to the Liberty Bell, situated in Philadelphia it bears the message “Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants thereof”. Herald as a message of freedom and liberty, synonymous with the formation of the United States (NPS, 2016). Keith employs ambiguous nostalgia to relate to several events of common US history. Coherent with other parts of the songs, he uses this common
American symbolism to portray jingoistic sentiment, calling upon American traditions to justify military interventions.

5.1.1 Thematic Discussion & Adherence to Nostalgia and Scapegoatism

The concluding remarks for the themes present within these lyrics is the ever-present theme of jingoism, which as an ideology entails belligerent nationalism, portrayed as complete fidelity to one’s nation determined solely by one’s adherence to the virtue of the nation. However, most commonly associated in terms of foreign policy where jingoism entails aggressive warmongering guided by the belief of national superiority (McNamara, 2019). Jingoism works under premise of xenophobic constellations of traits that deprive countrymen of foreign nations, contrasted with supposed natural goodness of one’s own countrymen (Dugger, 1998: 298). Racism employs the same narrative however under the premise of ethnic or racial belonging (ibid). In that sense racism and jingoism are closely related. The jingoistic sentiment portrayed through the lyrics of Keith’s song tackles external ethnic relations but lacks any attitude towards internal racial relations which this paper aims to tackle. The links with scapegoatism, are not present in a literal sense however, assessed through a historic lens they become apparent. Keith suggests that Afghanistan as a coherent entity, should face consequences for the attack on September 11th. Instead insinuating that Afghanistan should face military intervention, as a coherent nation, in practice rendering the entirety of Afghanistan as a scapegoat. Lastly, nostalgia arguably is not present as a theme, rather as narrative device of militarized symbolism. Keith employs aspects of the US identity, and common history applying a jingoistic stance in order to change the symbolism of the history and traditions, to convey justification of military intervention.

5.2. “Beers for my horses”- Toby Keith 2002

Willie, man, come on the 6 o'clock news
Said somebody's been shot, somebody's been abused
Somebody blew up a building, somebody stole a car
Somebody got away, somebody didn't get too far, yeah
They didn't get too far

Evident through the entire first verse of “Beers for my Horses” by Toby Keith and Willie Nelson from 2002, is the theme of demonization of the out-group. The absence of an intrinsic trait for the person or persons defined as “somebody” would suggest a lack of personal connection from the artists. Both the perpetrator and the victim are denoted as “somebody”, which would further suggest a lack of empathy
for both. The last two lines allude to an ambition to hunt this “somebody” down, which is exceedingly vague and does not lend me to extract any apparent themes.

_Grandpappy told my pappy, back in my day, son_
_A man had to answer for the wicked that he done_
_Take all the rope in Texas find a tall oak tree_
_Round up all them bad boys, hang them high in the street_
_For all the people to see_

The second verse lacks any ambiguity in the theme it conveys, firstly employing “back in my day” as a nostalgic remark. Exclusively looking at the first line it is not apparent what would be better, common narratives within country music would suggest that it refers to a time where traditional white Christian traditions where not under threat, such as a lack of moral decay, or family values still being held in high regard. However, factoring in the second and third line it becomes blatantly obvious that Keith and Nelson refer to the practice of lynching, which scholarly testimony can attest to (Leap, 2020: 179). Firstly, assessing the second line, themes of justice become apparent, ushering for the act of punishment for something that remains undefined. The use of “wicked” is of peculiar interest be definition wicked does not entail something illegal, rather referring to something perceived as morally unlawful (Merriam Webster). Considering that white Christians were the prominent demographic that conducted lynchings, it is their moral codebook that dictates what is wicked or unlawful. 14-year-old Emmet Till was brutally murdered in 1955 for allegation of flirting with a white woman (NAACP), something perceived by the white Christian majority as wicked. The nature of fabricated accusations coheres with the use of wicked, to justify a crime. The third and fourth line explicitly mentions trees and hanging, which was a commonplace to display the mutilated bodies for the public to see and to terrorize African Americans (NAACP).

_That justice is the one thing you should always find_
_You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line_
_When the gun smoke settles we’ll sing a victory tune_
_And we'll all meet back at the local saloon_
_We’ll raise up our glasses against evil forces singing_
_Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses_

No specific context is given, exclusively looking at the first line we can observe justice as an aspirational merit. Justice as a prevailing factor within a given society does not allude to any harmful effects. However, the second line possibly takes a more problematic stance. Firstly “saddle up your boys” could possibly just be a reference to cowboys or sheriffs, a nostalgic trope that alludes to a
society where the aforementioned justice could be delivered by lawmen enjoying a monopoly on violence. Or “saddle up your boys” could refer to the frequent use of horses within the Ku Klux Klan, especially prominent with the poster for “Birth of a Nation that depicts a Klansman on a horse (Digital Public Library of America). Furthermore, in the preceding verse Keith in stark detail alludes to the practice of lynching, which as a mode of terror was frequently employed by the KKK (NAACP), giving more basis for the interpretation. However, the lack of any scholarly testimony for the latter interpretation renders me unable to provide any evidence for the KKK interpretation. Therefore, it is within the realm of reason to assume that Keith solely references cowboys. The second part of the line, “draw a hard line” has two possible interpretations. Firstly, an affirmative stance, ushering for the use of vigilante violence against a demographic that white males perceive evades justice, in connection with the previous verse assuming that this demographic refers to African Americans. The second possible interpretation is more punctual, a “hard line” referring to some form of arbitrary border. Which could be interpreted as a call for the reestablishment of Jim Crow segregation laws (Urofsky, 2018).

At first glance the usage of “gun smoke” seemingly doesn’t harbour any hostile intentions, however, firstly it alludes to the act to firing a gun, and in context to previous verses the intent that these guns are fired towards marginalized groups becomes apparent, preaching vigilante antes. Secondly gun smoke as a concept is antiquated and commonly associated with old rifles or cannons utilizing gunpowder, through a contemporary lens the use of gun smoke might just be a stylistic remark. Or it’s a subtle nostalgic dog whistle homage to the Civil War era, where gunpowder dominated the landscape (Kent, 2013). The last possible interpretation is that of a militaristic adaptation of the expression “when the smoke clears”, entailing the visible results after the completion of a deed. In the given context of alluding to lynching and gunning down of African Americans the sentence becomes extremely problematic, especially when the last words are taken into consideration “we’ll sing a victory tune”. Considering that song was extremely prominent during the Civil War, being a staple by both the Union and the confederacy (Pruitt, 2021), however with previous remarks made during the song it’s not overly speculative to assume where Keith’s allegiance lays.

The next line referring to the saloon could further contextualise the usage of “saddle up” as referring to cowboys, as pop culture often intertwines the two. However, the vernacular use of “saloon” extends further than that of a Wild West tavern. Saloon remains a common name for a bar establishment. Furthermore, the line remains problematic even if it solely alludes to the western tavern, as it alludes to an era of vigilantes and segregation. The lack of any scholarly testimony yet again renders me unable to determine an exact theme however, it is without doubt riddled with nostalgia.
We got too many gangsters doing dirty deeds
Too much corruption, and crime in the streets
It's time the long arm of the law put a few more in the ground
Send 'em all to their maker and he'll settle 'em down
You can bet he'll set 'em down

Ambiguity concerning what demographic is depicted as “gangsters” makes this verse difficult to interpret, either stigmatizing a certain demographic or condemning violence and crime at large, independent of the perpetrator. However, the latter part of the verse explicitly promotes the act of police brutality. Advocating for the police to rightfully carry out the death penalty. Considering that African Americans and ethnic minorities are disproportionately target by lethal violence (Bunn, 2022), a proponent for lethal police violence also adheres to structural racism. Furthermore, scapegoatism is somewhat present in the lyrics, portraying “gangsters” as responsible for a various assortment of crimes. To reiterate the lack of identification of the demographic referred to as gangsters, renders me unable to determine whether or not scapegoatism is used to portray race.

5.2.1 Thematic Discussion & Adherence to Nostalgia and Scapegoatism

The themes presented within the songs, are most notably the romanization of lynchings, present within the second verse, not explicitly stated but extracted through the symbolism of the lynchings is the call for vigilante violence. Conveyed through the song in its entirety is the use of nostalgia, firstly referring to the period where lynchings were commonplace within the southern US. The references to the civil war, and western saloons. The use of scapegoatism lacks any blatant expression, rendering me unable to determine scapegoatism as a theme.

5.3 “Accidentally racist” - Brad Paisley 2013

When I put on that t-shirt
The only thing I meant to say
Is I'm a Skynyrd fan
The red flag on my chest somehow is
Like the elephant in the corner of the south
And I just walked him right in the room
Just a proud rebel son with an 'ol can of worms
Lookin' like I got a lot to learn
In the first verse Brad Paisely mentions wearing a red shirt, in the given context it becomes obvious that it is a shirt depicting the confederate flag, as Lynard Skynyrd frequently use the confederate flag in their motives (Erlewine, 2018). In a nonchalant manner the artists try to convey the message that the shirt lacks any symbolism and only indicates that the artist is a fan of the band “Lynard Skynyrd”. However, the long and problematic relationship with the confederate flag in the Southern US cannot be neglected. The most popular iteration of the confederate flag widely observable in the Southern US, was never officially adopted nor sanctioned by either the military or any sort of government. It was commissioned as a naval battle flag as the previous one was too difficult to differentiate from the union flag when the wind picked up (Blakemore, 2021). The flag was ultimately rejected and only saw usage as the battle flag of the army of northern Virginia under the command of Robert E. Lee (Geoghegan, 2013). Furthermore, a flag almost identical to the modern iteration except for the central star missing was used as a battle flag by confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest (Kühner, 2018) the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (Glaze 2023). The modern iteration of the confederate flag was sparsely promoted by organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, to promote the valour of their fathers that served in the confederate army, promoting the lost cause mythology (Blakemore, 2021). The contemporary association with white supremacy, originates from the Dixiecrats a pro-segregation, racist splinter party that formed in the late 1940s that opposed proposed civil right legislation. The party adopted the confederate flag as their symbol, a flag that previously had some tendency to symbolise resistance gained direct symbolism with resistance to civil rights and racial integration (ibid). The flag garnered even more attention in 1956 when the Ku Klux Klan adopted it during rallies to oppose the Brown V Board of Education, cementing it as a symbol of white supremacy (Blakemore, 2021), (Nelson, 2015). The theme present within this initial verse concerns the romanticization of confederate memorabilia, apparent by the nostalgic romanisation of the symbolism of the confederate battle flag.

!I'm just a white man comin' to you from the southland
Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be
I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done

Our generation didn't start this nation
And we're still paying for the mistakes

I'm a son of the new south

Throughout several verses of the song the theme of reconciliation is present, ushering the importance of dialogue. However, the assumption that historic marginalization, exploitation, and slavery could be
mended on an individual basis solely with dialogue is an ambitious undertaking and excludes the state from having any kind of responsibility. Scapegoatism is somewhat present in the narratives conveyed by Paisley, arguing that there exists a distinction between Paisley and “the new south” contra the old south that facilitated the conditions that Paisley is in opposition to. Arguing that they are not responsible, which is in stark contrast to the reinforcement of the lost cause mythology that Paisely preaches in the first verse.

And I just want to make things right
I'm just a white man
(If you don't judge my do-rag)
Comin' to you from the southland
(I won't judge your red flag)
Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be
I'm proud of where I'm from
(If you don't judge my gold chains)
But not everything we've done
(I'll forget the iron chains)
It ain't like you and me can re-write history
(Can’t re-write history baby)

This part of the verse practically functions as dialogue between Brad Paisely and the black rapper LL Cool J, where Paisley utters the words without parentheses and LL Cool J conveys the words within the parentheses. Solely looking at Paisely’s lyrics we can see the adherence to the theme of a reconciliation dialogue. Torn with his problematic heritage hailing from the South seeking betterment, however the last line alluding to that neither of the artists can change the past. However, able to confront and learn from it would be an excellent message if the lyrics did not reinforce harmful tropes born out of historical marginalization. The dialogue suggests that eliminating perceived judgement towards the do-rag equates the removal of perceived judgement towards the confederate flag. The do-rag in its most simple term is a piece of cloth used to create or preserve different hairstyles. Originating as a tool of necessity, enslaved women would tie a piece of cloth around their head to protect their hair (Johnson, 2020). The Harlem renaissance of the 30’s and the Black Pride movement of the 60’s reintroduced the du-rag partly as a fashion statement, partly as a tool of emancipation. Regarded as a statement of cultural identity, pride, and resilience (Acquaye, 2018). Whereas the confederate flag is merely a symbol of white supremacy (Blakemore, 2021), (Nelson, 2015). Thereby promoting and equating these as two problematic symbols that both need to be de-stigmatized in order to reconcile further reinforces a dominant culture. As there is a grave dissonance between the symbolism in these two objects.
Similarly, the next few lines promote another ill-fitted effort of unequal reconciliation. Suggesting that de-stigmatizing the use of gold jewellery would result in the 300 years of slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade being forgotten, lyrically symbolized by the use of iron shackles.

The last line of the verse delivered by LL Cool J suggest compliance with the “Lost Cause Mythology”. A narrative that romanticises the loss of the confederacy during the Civil War, aiming to preserve the honour of the confederacy by promoting southern slave owners as benevolent. Furthermore, presenting the argument that the succession and subsequent civil war was merely an assertion of states’ rights and not a question of the efficacy of slavery (Blight, 2021). The narrative laid the foundation of the opposition to the reconstruction of the south, and its broad acceptance resulted in facilitation of white supremacy, and the loss of civil rights for African Americans (ibid). Within this doctrine Robert E. Lee became a prominent figure, unbeknownst to him, during his lifetime he was opposed idolizing and erecting statues commemorating the war as it would prevent the south from recovering (NPS, 2021). However, after his death his iconography became a proponent of the facilitation of the lost cause mythology (Blight, 2021). The conflation of Robert E. Lee’s legacy with the lost cause mythology makes any attempt to commemorate his actions futile, as they solely perpetuate the legacy of white supremacy originating within the lost cause narrative.

5.3.1 Thematic Discussion & Adherence to Nostalgia and Scapegoatism

The notable themes present within the lyrics is the reconciliation dialogue, it is an ambitious attempt to bridge the divide created by several hundred years of historical marginalization. However, the ill-fitted use of one-sided nostalgia, in combination demonstration of cultural expression simply reinforces the domineering stance of historical whiteness. Furthermore, distinguishable within the lyrics are the themes of confederate romanisation and promotion of the lost cause mythology. Inadvertely addressing racial relations by the nostalgic promotion of an epoch of history where white supremacy was uncontested. The theme of scapegoatism remains unrepresented except for aforementioned parallel addressing the distinction between the old and the new southern ideals.

5.4. “Am I the Only One” - Aaron Lewis 2021

Am I the only one, willin’ to bleed
Or take a bullet for bein’ free
Screamin’, "What the fuck" at my TV
For tellin’ me, yeah, are you tellin’ me?
That I'm the only one, willin' to fight
For my love of the red and white
And the blue, burnin' on the ground
Another statue comin' down in a town near you
Watchin' the threads of Old Glory come undone

During an interview on the “Candace show” on the 13th of July 2021, Aaron Lewis explained the inception of his song. Stating that the inspiration was his and his co-writer’s honest reaction to the societal climate of the US during the period of early 2020 to July 2021. Mainly concerning the pandemic and “the craziness we've watched on TV” (Blabbermouth, 2021). Commemorated in the line where Lewis screams at his TV, the song contains a certain amount of ambiguity concerning what provokes Lewis’s reaction. The aforementioned period of the US features a climate of a raging pandemic, lockdowns, protests against police brutality, impeachment of the president, an alleged rigged election, and an attempted coup d'etat (O’Kane, 2020), (Legal Information Institute). Later verse of the song would suggest that Lewis might have strong reactions to all these events, strongly advocating for the accusation of a flawed election while being hostile towards the protests.

On the 17th of June 2015, an armed white supremacist shot and killed nine and injured a tenth African Americans attending a bible study at the Mother Emanuel church in Charleston South Carolina (Schuppe & Morrison, 2017), the oldest black church in the United States. The assailant Dylan Roof frequently wrote messages imbued with white supremacy on his internet manifesto where he also posted pictures of the Confederate Battle Flag (Robles, 2015), which sparked national outrage concerning the official usage of the flag and several other commemorations to the confederacy. South Carolina and Alabama subsequently removed confederate flags from their capitol grounds, and more than 100 statues, monuments and symbols have been removed since 2015, however some states have since then introduced laws that protect the usage of the confederate flag. Most notably North Carolina where the Governor issued a bill that requires the general assembly’s consent to remove any monuments. In a statement the governor issued the following motivation “The protection of our heritage is a matter of statewide significance to ensure that our rich history will always be preserved and remembered for generations to come” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019).

In the song Lewis actively preaches that the removal of statues as a measure that deteriorates the nation. A provocative remake that not only dehumanises the victims of the hate crimes in Charleston that sparked the decision, but he also valorises the secessionist of the confederacy that seceded, determined by their belief of racial superiority (Nelson, 2015). While also ignoring the death and destruction, the enslavement, and ruthless killings of innocent African Americans. Preaching against the removal of statues promotes the lost cause mythology of the fabricated innocence and valour of the
confederates. Lastly the last line of the verse mentions Old Glory, the name of an iteration of the flag of the United States, originally a banner belonging to captain William Driver. The relic became synonymous with enduring fidelity to the United States and has since become a common nickname for the flag (Jenkins, 2013). By referring to the removal of confederate statues as the fabric of Old Glory becoming undone, Lewis effectively suggests that the very fabric of the US deteriorating, as a result of the removal of confederate memorabilia. Conceived through the analysis the themes present within this verse concern the adherence to the lost cause mythology, by denouncing the practice of removing confederate statues. Furthermore, it employs nostalgia to denounce the behaviour. Lastly the act of scapegoating could be attributed to the protestors and the victims of the shooting, that facilitated the decision to remove a considerable amount of confederate memorabilia scattered throughout the southern US.

*Am I the only one not brainwashed?*
*Makin' my way through the land of the lost*
*Who still gives a shit and worries 'bout his kids*
*As they try to undo all the things he did?*

The latter part of the verse sees Lewis’s harbour resentment towards the current trajectory of societal development. Pondering if he is the only one that is enlightened, and able to see the problems faced by contemporary society. Worried about his kids, in what capacity is not stated nor does he provide enough information to speculate. He could refer to economic stability, political culture, norms, or values. However, what becomes apparent is that Lewis a staunch conservative and Trump-supporter (Chan, 2023) believes the current government tries to eradicate all reforms and policies instituted by Donald Trump.

*Is it just me? Am I losin' my mind?*

*Am I the only one not brainwashed?*

*Am I the only one who can't take no more*

*I'm not the only one*
*I can't be the only one*

Several of lines from the verse and the chorus indicate adherence to the QAnon rhetoric. QAnon is a conspiracy theory that believes that the World Order is controlled by a satanic cult of paedophiles. Originating from New World Order and great replacement theories imbedded with white supremacy
sentiment. The followers classify themselves as belonging to a patriotic and enlightened subgroup (Suber & Ware, 2021). Prominent within the verse is the sentiment of enlightened elitist belonging, as well as patriotic alliance.

5.4.1 Thematic Discussion & Adherence to Nostalgia and Scapegoatism

Throughout the song the prevalent themes are the romanisation of confederate symbolism, which also adheres to the promotion of the lost cause mythology, furthermore, adherence to Qanon rhetoric. Nostalgia is used as a narrative device, referring to common symbolism within American culture such as Old Glory, to add substance to the conveyed message. Lastly, scapegoating can loosely be attributed to the victims of the shooting as it facilitated the decision to remove the confederate memorabilia.

5.5. “Try That in a Small Town” - James Aldean 2023

_Sucker punch somebody on a sidewalk_  
_Carjack an old lady at a red light_  
_Pull a gun on the owner of a liquor store_  
_Ya think it's cool, well, act a fool if ya like_

The first verse sees Aldean discuss his perception of behaviour in rural areas of the US in comparison to that of the rural south. Aldean brings up crimes that he perceives as common place in metropolitan cite areas, that he suggests would never take place in the rural south. The first line refers to an urban myth that surfaced during the early 2010s, where right wing media to justify a racial rhetoric promoted the myth that African Americans partook in unprovoked violence against white people (Roller, 2013). Aiming to knock-out a person with one blow for fun, as part of an internet gag. This quickly got debunked as merely an urban myth in 2013. However, the rhetoric surfaced again in 2022, sparking moral panic and inciting fear (Press-Reynolds, 2022). The last line of the verse further suggests the narrative from the first line, if Aldean follows the rhetoric that African Americans punch people for fun as part of an internet gag, “act cool” would surely be a fitting response. Furthermore, it adheres to the premise of scapegoating, Aldean following the right-wing rhetoric portrayed by the media. Depicting African Americans as perpetrators of all intercity criminal activity. This interpretation would suggest that the present theme is the perception that African Americans are proponents of unprovoked violence against white Americans.
Cuss out a cop, spit in his face
Stomp on the flag and light it up
Yeah, ya think you're tough

Introducing the second verse Aldean makes commentary on people opposing the police by denoting them as “tough”, however the use of tough in this context merely alludes to an attitude of biting of more than someone can chew. Alluding to some emanate repercussions. It is not evident if Aldean refers to a particular incident or just a behaviour at large. Spitting and vulgar language directed towards police officers would be common behaviour in any protest setting. However, in the history of the contemporary US and in the context of this song being written the most apparent protest that Aldean could be referring to is the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd. To further strengthen the BLM interpretation, Aldean mentions desecration of the flag, by stomping on the flag and subsequently burning it. During a Black Lives Matter protest in Los Angeles in 2020, protesters burnt an American flag garnering a lot of media attention (Folley, 2020). The overarching theme in the verse in combination with the first one suggests denouncing a certain behaviour and suggesting that there will be repercussions, aligning with the premise of political country music. Demonising the outgroup while simultaneously promoting desirable traits of the ingroup. Which arrives at the theme of diminishing and denouncing of the BLM movement.

Well, try that in a small town
See how far ya make it down the road
Around here, we take care of our own
You cross that line, it won't take long
For you to find out, I recommend you don't
Try that in a small town

The chorus cements the condemnation of the previous perceived metropolitan behaviour by suggesting the ramifications in a subtle nostalgic ode to a sundown town. Insinuating that anyone that would try and commit metropolitan crimes within a small city would be chased down. Sundown towns emerge across the US during the 1890’s and were towns that excluded non-white residents, either by collective or individual measures such as public violence or lynchings or by legislative measures that prevented non-whites from owning any property (Olson, 2023), (Gosner, 2024). Sundown towns were characterized not only by their homogeneous population and their violent measures to uphold their homogeneity. They commonly had signs put along the town limits bearing messages such as “Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You in City Name” (Gosner, 2024). The use of tropes that suggest African Americans as perpetrators of crime, in conjunction with the vigilante ante presented in the chorus presents a clear theme of portraying African Americans as criminals. Furthermore, insinuating a
nostalgic trope by referring to sundown towns as something desirable, that has been lost. Imbedded within the chorus is the line “around here, we take care of our own”, a saying that in the sense of American values should harbour the appreciation and care for every American citizen. Based on the American naturalisation and a history of identity free from a nationalistic consolidation of power. However, with the given context in the song it becomes apparent that “our own” solely refers to the in-group and not the entire populous at large.

\[\text{Got a gun that my granddad gave me}\]
\[\text{They say one day they're gonna round up}\]
\[\text{Well, that shit might fly in the city, good luck}\]

Parallel with the vigilante ante presented throughout the entire song, Aldean promptly states that he possesses a gun, partly preaching a pro-gun rhetoric, secondly further alluding to vigilante violence. Ambiguity arises in the second line, concerning the use of “they”, it is not apparent if both instances refer to the same demographic. However, I’m assuming that they do, reinforced by the next line which I will discuss later. Under the assumption that both instances of they are uttered by the same demographic, its apparent that one group is signalling that they are going to gather. Too vague to carry any kind of meaning on its own. However, I argue that “they” in this instance might refer to black-separatism groups such as The Black Panthers or Nation of Islam. Black separatism is a political movement that seeks to establish a separate and distinct cultural and economic development, for US citizens of African descent. Black separatism was born out racial solidarity, pride, and heritage, and implies that people of African descent and heritage have developed a distinct identity, stemming from hundreds of years of slavery and subjugation. Rendering it impossible for oppressor and the oppressed to coexist within the same nation (Mbadinuju, 1974: 206-213). Calling for African Americans all over the US to succeed. Black-separatism movements are most prominent within diverse and densely populated metropolitan areas (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015). With this in mind Aldean would be alluding to retaliate to any attempts to form any kind of black-liberation organisation within the south with violent means. However, the speculative nature of this interpretation could easily be dismissed by the lack of any scholarly consensus. Using a less harsh interpretation of the same verse could simply allude to the same sentiment of a group signalling they are going to gather, such as BLM that has increased relevance during the epoch of the song being written. However, the theme of opposition towards African American self-determination remains unaltered.

\[\text{Full of good ol' boys, raised up right}\]
\[\text{If you're looking for a fight}\]
\[\text{Try that in a small town}\]
\[\text{Try that in a small town}\]
In the last verse of the song Aldean proclaims that the inhabitants of these small towns portrayed throughout the entire song, are “good ol’ boys” “raised up right”. Which refers to a white rural southerner that adheres to a certain set of customs, culture, and traditions (Merriam-Webster, 2020). In the most innocent sense these values could refer to table etiquette, greetings, or a dress code. However, the second line refers to fighting, again alluding to vigilante violence. The verse becomes more convoluted, considering that the identity and customs of the rural south are intertwined with racist ideals (Gibbs & Cooper, 2017: 23-24).

One aspect of the song that adds another faucet to the messages convened that cannot be captured through an analysis of the lyrics is the music video. Where Aldean proudly poses in front of the Maury Country Courthouse, the same site that in 1927 saw the lynching of 18-year-old Henry Choate (Schriber & Chery, 2023). Which could be interpreted as a nostalgic remark. The production company refuted the claim that the narrative of the song was linked to the location of the music video. The original video also featured several clips of Black Lives Matter protests, that were quietly removed after they received harsh criticism (ibid). The inclusion of clips from the protests cements the Aldean’s narrative that the aforementioned crimes that would only occur in metropolitan cities solely have African American perpetrators, yet again presenting scapegoating. Furthermore, he ignores the circumstances and context of the Black Lives Matter protests and solely focus on the destruction of private property, systematically leaving out the strides for social justice that sparked the protests. Lastly even if Aldean refutes the associations of the music video with the narrative of the song, the backdrop of the music video still cements why these crimes would never occur in a small town.

5.5.1 Thematic Discussion & Adherence to Nostalgia and Scapegoatism

During the course of the song several prominent themes are found, firstly the suggestion that African Americans are involved in unwarranted physical assault against white Americans. Part of this theme also conjures mechanisms of scapegoating by projecting the notion that African Americans are responsible for metropolitan crimes. The second theme concerns the blatant opposition to the BLM movement. Lastly, the nostalgic romanisation of the Jim Crow era, with the ode to the Sundown towns.
6. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to map the themes employed by contemporary right-wing country music, to express politicized racial relations. Through an analysis consisting of five contemporary country songs, I have extracted and labelled the following themes.

i) Jingoism, the systemic deprivation of a nation’s countrymen formulated through the application of undesirable traits that renders the individuals of a nation inferior in contrast to the belligerent’s own countrymen.

ii) Romanisation of lynchings, conveyed through the lens of nostalgia as something desirable that has been lost.

iii) Poorly executed reconciliation dialogue, that attempts to mend racial relations stemming from centuries of exploitation and marginalisation.

iv) Romanization of the confederacy and confederate symbolism, prominent within several songs and with a varying degree of expression. Most notably the prominent use of confederate memorabilia, the valorisation of the Confederate flag, opposition to demolition of confederate statues and monuments.

v) Promotion of the lost cause mythology, several of the songs invoke the notion that the confederate succession was merely an assertion of state sovereignty. Valorising the self-determination of the confederate soldiers, diminishing the assertion of slavery as intrinsic to the economical fabric of the succeeding states.

vi) Adherence to QAnon rhetoric, by asserting belonging to an enlightened subgroup that is bestowed with knowledge, and harbours white supremacy sentiment.

vii) African Americans as proponents of un-warranted violence against white people.

viii) Opposition towards BLM movements, facilitated by the assertion that it conveys violence.

ix) Romanization of the segregation present within the Jim Crow era, by ushering the nostalgic demise of sundown towns.

x) Opposition towards African American self-determination acts as firstly as an extension of the theme of BLM opposition. Secondly, the opposition towards black separatism.

xi) Vigilante violence is present within several of the songs. With a lack of context, it lacks explicit relevance to the research question. However, present within every single vigilante remark is the implication that African Americans are the target. In their solitude neither nostalgia nor scapegoatism, constitute a theme in relation to the research question. Rather they function as narrative devices that reinforce already existing themes. To exemplify, in the verse mentioning lynching, the prominent theme is the romanisation of the practice. However, nostalgia is used to reinforce the practice by insinuating a grief reinforced by nostalgia. The same principal accounts for the use of scapegoatism.

Several of the songs effectively incorporate events with contemporary relevance to emphasise any potential messages. Such as Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue, that invokes the attack on the World Trade Centre to convey its jingoistic sentiment. Furthermore, try that in a small Town effectively utilises the recent BLM protests to convey oppositional messages. Of great interest would be to expand upon this correlation, studying the political expression of real-world events in popular culture.
7. References


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8. Appendix

4. A. Lyrics for Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue, Toby Keith 2002

American girls and American guys
We'll always stand up and salute
We'll always recognize
When we see Old Glory flying
There's a lot of men dead
So we can sleep in peace at night when we lay down our head
My daddy served in the army
Where he lost his right eye but he flew a flag out in our yard
'Til the day that he died
He wanted my mother, my brother, my sister and me
To grow up and live happy
In the land of the free

Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack
A mighty sucker punch came flyin' in from somewhere in the back
Soon as we could see clearly
Through our big black eye
Man, we lit up your world
Like the fourth of July

Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist
And the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
Oh, brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Oh, and justice will be served and the battle will rage
This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage
And you'll be sorry that you messed with
The U.S. of A.
'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass
It's the American way
Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist
And the eagle will fly it's gonna be hell
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell
And it'll feel like the whole wide world is raining down on you
Oh, brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Oh-oh, of the red, white and blue
Oh-oh, of my red, white and blue

4. B. Lyrics for Beer for my Horses, Toby Keith 2003

Well, a man come on six o'clock news
Said, "Somebody been shot, somebody's been abused
Somebody blew up a building, somebody stole a car
Somebody got away, somebody didn't get too far"
Yeah, they didn't get too far

Grand pappy told my pappy "Back in my day son
A man had to answer for the wicked that he'd done"
Take all the rope in Texas find a tall oak tree
Round up all of them bad boys, hang them high in the street
For all the people to see

That justice is the one thing you should always find
You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line
When the gun smoke settles, we'll sing a victory tune
And we'll all meet back at the local saloon
We'll raise up our glasses against Evil forces singing
Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses

We got too many gangsters doing dirty deeds
Too much corruption and crime in the streets
It's time the long arm of the law put a few more in the ground
Send 'em all to their maker, and he'll settle 'em down
You can bet He'll set 'em down

'Cause justice is the one thing you should always find
You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line
When the gun smoke settles, we'll sing a victory tune
And we'll all meet back at the local saloon
And we'll raise up our glasses against Evil forces singing
Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses
Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses

He knows justice is the one thing you should always find
You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line
When the gun smoke settles, we'll sing a victory tune
And we'll all meet back at the local saloon
And we'll raise up our glasses against Evil forces
Singing whiskey for my men, beer for my horses
Singing whiskey for my men, beer for my horses

4. C. Lyrics for Accidentally Racist, Brad Paisely

To the man that waited on me
At the Starbucks down on Main
I hope you understand
When I put on that t-shirt
The only thing I meant to say
Is I'm a Skynyrd fan
The red flag on my chest somehow is
Like the elephant in the corner of the south
And I just walked him right in the room
Just a proud rebel son with an 'ol can of worms
Lookin' like I got a lot to learn
But from my point of view
I'm just a white man comin' to you from the southland
Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be
I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done
And it ain't like you and me can re-write history
Our generation didn't start this nation
We're still pickin' up the pieces, walkin' on eggshells, fightin' over yesterday
And caught between southern pride and southern blame
They called it Reconstruction, fixed the buildings, dried some tears
We're still sittin' through the rubble after a hundred-fifty years
I try to put myself in your shoes and that's a good place to begin
But it ain't like I can walk a mile in someone else's skin

Cause I'm a white man livin' in the southland
Just like you I'm more than what you see
I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done
And it ain't like you and me can re-write history
Our generation didn't start this nation
And we're still paying for the mistakes
That a bunch of folks made long before we came
And caught somewhere between southern pride and southern blame

Dear Mr. White Man, I wish you understood
What the world is really like when you're livin' in the hood
Just because my pants are saggin' doesn't mean I'm up to no good
You should try to get to know me, I really wish you would
Now my chains are gold but I'm still misunderstood
I wasn't there when Sherman's March turned the south into firewood
I want you to get paid but be a slave I never could
Feel like a new fangled Django, dodgin' invisible white hoods
So when I see that white cowboy hat, I'm thinkin' it's not all good
I guess we're both guilty of judgin' the cover not the book
I'd love to buy you a beer, conversate and clear the air
But I see that red flag and I think you wish I wasn't here

I'm just a white man
(If you don't judge my do-rag)
Comin' to you from the southland
(I won't judge your red flag)
Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be
I'm proud of where I'm from
(If you don't judge my gold chains)
But not everything we've done
(I'll forget the iron chains)
It ain't like you and me can re-write history
(Can't re-write history baby)
Oh, Dixieland
(The relationship between the Mason-Dixon needs some fixin')
I hope you understand what this is all about
(Quite frankly I'm a black Yankee but I've been thinkin' about this lately)
I'm a son of the new south
(The past is the past, you feel me)
And I just want to make things right
(Let bygones be bygones)
Where all that's left is southern pride
(RIP Robert E. Lee but I've gotta thank Abraham Lincoln for freeing me, know what I mean)
It's real, it's real
It's truth

4. D. Lyrics for Am I the only one, Aaron Lewis, 2001

Am I the only one here tonight
Shakin' my head and thinkin' somethin' ain't right
Is it just me? Am I losin' my mind?
Am I standin' on the edge of the end of time?
Am I the only one? Tell me I'm not
Who thinks they're takin' all the good we got
And turnin' it bad, hell, I'll be damned
I think I'm turnin' into my old man

Am I the only one, willin' to bleed
Or take a bullet for bein' free
Screamin', "What the fuck" at my TV
For tellin' me, yeah, are you tellin' me?
That I'm the only one, willin' to fight
For my love of the red and white
And the blue, burnin' on the ground
Another statue comin' down in a town near you
Watchin' the threads of Old Glory come undone

Am I the only one not brainwashed?
Makin' my way through the land of the lost
Who still gives a shit and worries 'bout his kids
As they try to undo all the things he did?

Am I the only one who can't take no more
Screamin', "If you don't like it, there's the fuckin' door"
This ain't the freedom we've been fightin' for
It was somethin' more, yeah, it was somethin' more
Am I the only one, willin' to fight
For my love of the red and white
And the blue, burnin' on the ground
Another statue comin' down in a town near you
Watchin' the threads of Old Glory come undone

I'm not the only one
I can't be the only one

Am I the only one who quits singin' along
Every time they play a Springsteen song?

Am I the only one sittin' here
Still holdin' on, holdin' back my tears
For the ones who paid with the lives they gave
God bless the U.S.A
I'm not the only one, willin' to fight
For my love of the red and white
And the blue, burnin' on the ground
Another statue comin' down in a town near you
Watchin' the threads of Old Glory come undone

I'm not the only one
I can't be the only one

4. E. Lyrics for Try that in a Small Town, Jason Aldean, 2023

Sucker punch somebody on a sidewalk
Carjack an old lady at a red light
Pull a gun on the owner of a liquor store
Ya think it's cool, well, act a fool if ya like
Cuss out a cop, spit in his face
Stomp on the flag and light it up
Yeah, ya think you're tough

Well, try that in a small town
See how far ya make it down the road
Around here, we take care of our own
You cross that line, it won't take long
For you to find out, I recommend you don't
Try that in a small town

Got a gun that my granddad gave me
They say one day they're gonna round up
Well, that shit might fly in the city, good luck

Try that in a small town
See how far ya make it down the road
Around here, we take care of our own
You cross that line, it won't take long
For you to find out, I recommend you don't
Try that in a small town

Full of good ol' boys, raised up right
If you're looking for a fight
Try that in a small town
Try that in a small town

Try that in a small town
See how far ya make it down the road
Around here, we take care of our own
You cross that line, it won't take long
For you to find out, I recommend you don't
Try that in a small town

Try that in a small town
Ooh-ooh
Try that in a small town