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Homosocial Regionalism in Modern Country Music

At a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game in the middle of July, fans bake in the painted red stands. They sip on beers from plastic cups, wipe away the sweat droplets trickling down their necks, and fan themselves with programs to get a moment's relief from the heat. Michael Wacha strikes out another batter for the Atlanta Braves. The crowd roars as the players clear the field and Matt Holliday prepares to go to bat. As he begins his short stroll to home plate, his walkout song, "Boys 'Round Here," by Blake Shelton, blares from the loud speakers. "Yeah the boys 'round here," Shelton croons, "drinking that ice cold beer, talkin' 'bout girls, talkin' 'bout trucks, runnin' them dirt roads out kickin' up dust." Male and female spectators alike sing along to the tune without realizing that it is analogous to the game of baseball. Just as baseball is restricted to athletic, predominately heterosexual males, "Boys 'Round Here," is limited to men who exhibit a certain type of masculinity. They must enjoy talking about women and cars, should not be afraid to get dirty, and must be fiercely prideful of their small-town, southern roots.

Shelton is singing about a male homosocial group. In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, literary and gender studies expert, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, defines homosocial as "a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex"(1). Male homosocial groups, like the "boys" in "Boys 'Round Here," serve as the foundation for the country music genre and define the celebrated stereotypical "country music masculinity" tied to misogyny, which is used as a vehicle of regional exclusion. The exhibition of sexist country music masculinity means regional belonging, while individuals or groups of people that contrast this masculinity are marginalized and exiled to the "city." Thus, homosociality within country music culture fosters a

previously unexplored and unnamed, aggressive type of regionalism that violently resists the diversity characteristic of modern city life.

In *Between Men*, Kosofsky Sedgwick examines relationships between males and women's place within these relationships in nineteenth-century British literature. Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that in order for men to exhibit freely their homoerotic desires, they need a woman to serve as a conduit. She calls this dynamic an "erotic triangle," made up of two men and one woman. Such triangular relationships reinforce a patriarchy by making "power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men"(25). While the men in the erotic triangle are responsible for maintaining the function of society, the woman performs no function but to be present, and benefit from their collective influence. Kosofsky Sedgwick says that patriarchal heterosexuality involves the "traffic of women," or the "use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men"(26).

This type of female trafficking regularly occurs in modern country music in order to emphasize the dominance of the male homosocial group, and can be readily observed in the music video for artist Brantley Gilbert's song "Kick It in the Sticks." The video, released in 2011, begins with the all-male band playing in a forest. While they play, men on all-terrain vehicles ride in circles around them or do donuts on a field in a World War II army vehicle. Then, a motorcycle gang consisting of at least fifty men pulls up to the party. The men stand together drinking beer, having conversation. After one minute of the three-minute video has passed, almost as if they were an afterthought, women arrive to the party. They stand together in groups, and are depicted very briefly between longer shots of only males. They drink beer that has been provided for them by the men, watch the men interact with one another, or dance on a pole in the back of a truck bed as the men ogle them and talk amongst themselves. The women perform no valuable function other than bearing witness to the homosocial bonding taking place. They serve as mediums through which men ensure the appropriateness of their preferred

homosocial interactions.

In addition to depicting them as embellishments to a male-bonding ritual, Gilbert verbally solidifies the role of females as preservers of heterosexual correctness within male homosocial groups by reducing their importance to the group function, yet demanding their presence nonetheless. In the first two verses of the song, Gilbert invites listeners to his southern hometown, which he calls the “home of the hillbilly.” He explains that after working tirelessly on the weekdays, on the weekends “we hang out by the bonfire just some good ol’ boys having a dang good time.” Only the men throw down in the “dirty dirty South.” Finally, halfway through the second verse, Gilbert seems to realize suddenly that he has been so distracted by his “boys” that he has forgotten about women. “Where’s the girls?” he asks, “‘bout to call them up.” When they arrive, he dehumanizes them as “bikini tops and Daisy Duke denim.” Gilbert’s exclusion of women from an all-male function indicates that he gives importance only to his male homosocial group. He includes women as an afterthought, or safety measure, to ensure their presence at the function, but equates them to objects in order to remind listeners that their sole purpose is to serve as a conduit for male homosocial interactions.

The careful placement and objectification of women within homosocial interactions indicates a conscious effort to maintain appearances of heterosexuality. According to Dana M. Britton, the aversion to females and femininity is deeply rooted in homophobia. In “Homophobia and Homosociality: An Analysis of Boundary Maintenance,” she explains that homophobia’s relationship to homosociality “lies in maintaining the boundary between social and sexual interaction in a homosocially stratified society”(425). The stigma on homosexuality prevents men from deviating from the dominant homosocial group. While country music culture is outwardly conservative and homophobic in its rejection of all but one type of hegemonic masculinity, it often demonstrates an appreciation for the same sex so intense that it is nearly homoerotic.

Kosofsky Sedgwick pulls homosociality into the realm of the erotic and theorizes that it is rooted in homosexual urges. She explains that homosociality, a term analogous to

homosexuality, can be applied to relationships in our society that are “characterized by intense homophobia, fear, and hatred of homosexuality”(1). In her study, she endeavors to emphasize the eroticism in such relationships that is fueled by what she calls male homosocial desire: a phrase intended to “mark both discriminations and paradoxes”(1). She hypothesizes a “potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual”(2).

The bond amongst males in country music culture is a poignant example of a relationship characterized by homophobia and a rejection of femininity. The continuum between homosociality and homosexuality within this bond is clearly displayed in the 2011 music video for Brantley Gilbert’s song “Country Must Be Country Wide.” In the video, a man pulls up to a gas station in a Ford truck caked in mud with bales of hay stacked in the bed. Gilbert sings, “I was gasin’ up the other day and an ol’ boy pulled up with a license plate from Ohio.” The man in the video steps out of the car, removes his work gloves with dirty, calloused hands, and begins fueling his car as the camera pans the entirety of his body. It moves from the muddy tips of his brown leather cowboy boots, up the length of his faded Levi’s jeans, which have a dirty, blue bandana hanging from a back pocket. It skips over his face to his reveal his tall white cowboy hat. “From his wranglers to his boots,” Gilbert croons, “he reminded me of Chris Deloux and that Copenhagen smile.” Gilbert’s detailed description of the man’s physical appearance would require a certain amount of time spent examining his physicality. Prolonged glances such as this normally communicate sexual attraction. The exclusion of the man’s face from the shot tells audiences that his identity is unimportant, and that they need only to appreciate his physical form. It can be inferred that these men are not homosexual, yet the manner in which Gilbert watches and appreciates another man suggests a homoerotic attraction, affirming the existence of the homosocial and homosexual on a continuum. Country music male-bonding groups are channels through which men can simultaneously maintain power and indulge in these homosexual urges.

The maintenance of this power and simultaneous penchant for the homoerotic requires the

strict definition of and adherence to a certain type of celebrated masculinity. Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that “men’s heterosexual relationships ... have as their *raison d’être* an ultimate bonding between men ... [which], if successfully achieved, is not detrimental to ‘masculinity,’ but definitive of it”(3). In her article “Men, Masculinity, and the Sign Women,” women’s studies scholar Robyn Wiegman explains that masculinity is an organized resistance to the threat of diversity and multiculturalism. Male homosocial groups “function as a scene for the negotiation, indeed, the celebration of masculine sameness in the face of a variety of potentially disrupting differences (race, sexuality, class, as well as gender)”(367). Wiegman contends that this hegemonic masculinity is a mechanism for the institutionalization of the dominance of one social group over another. The male homosocial groups in modern country music place hegemonic, white, heterosexual males in a central position of power.

The sameness within these groups is reflective of an intensely exclusive form of regionalism, a regionalism inspired by sexism that appropriates weakness and femininity to city life. Literary scholar Roberto Maria Dainotto, in his article “All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt: The Literature of Place and Region,” describes regionalism as an attempt to “fraudulently...reintroduce the very notion of an undivided ‘natural cultural unity’”(489). Dainotto dispels the common opinion of regionalism as a unifying force. He explains that it “proposes naïve polarizations between nature and culture, rustic and industrial life; ... marginalized region, and marginalizing national center”(488). Thus, he believes that regionalism is not an effort to liberate marginalized groups from the homogeneity induced by modernization and globalization, but a ploy to “protect a community from the political and cultural negotiations imposed by differences of ‘economics, gender, race, and creed’”(488). The regionalism in modern southern country music culture polarizes city and country life. It protects constituents from the diversity of the modern city by preserving the misogynistic practice of attributing weakness and femininity to life in the city.

Misogynistic homosocial groups in country music culture use regionalism to thwart

diversity in the manner described by Dainotto. In doing so, they not only assert their dominance over females, but also proliferate one type of masculinity over other, non-normative masculinities. In “Welcome to the Men’s Club,” sociologist Sharon R. Bird explores the suppression and rejection of these masculinities within male homosocial groups in order to maintain hegemonic masculinity. “Being masculine,” she explains, “means not being female”(125). Within male homosocial groups, “behaviors considered most inappropriate and most highly stigmatized, were those associated with feminine expressions of intimacy”(125). In country music, the opposite of the masculine man is the “sissy boy,” or the “city slicker.” In the song “Eye of the Storm,” popular country artists Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson sing, “Life ain’t for sissies and you ain’t no sissy boy.” In other words, weak, effeminate men are not entitled to life, much less entrance to male homosocial groups. Luke Bryan, in the song “Country Man,” claims that real men “need hands rough not soft.” He flatters his own “big strong arms,” that one cannot get from “anywhere but a farm.” “Hey,” he says, “I’m a country man; a city boy can’t do the things I can.” He demeans males from the city by calling them boys and once again ties masculinity to a rejection of the modern city. Homosocial groups in country music culture maintain power by promoting a certain type of masculinity tied to misogyny. By equating femininity to city life, these groups promote an aggressive regionalism that rejects diversity and aims to contrive a falsified sense of unity.

Luke Bryan embodies the link between country music masculinity and misogyny, and their relationship with regionalism, in his song “That’s My Kind of Night,” and uses sexism as a mechanism for the aggressively exclusive regionalism described by Dainotto. In the music video, Bryan stands outside in a cornfield. The lack of surrounding buildings indicates that he is in a rural farming area. Implicit in his selection of an ambiguous, small-town, southern setting, is a rejection of city life. He is standing on top of a large, black, souped-up Chevrolet truck as a bonfire takes place around him. The camera moves away from Bryan to depict several white men, all of whom are dressed in distressed denim jeans and monochromatic T-shirts, drinking

beer and conversing. This particular homosocial group exemplifies hegemonic masculinity. The camera then moves to the female guests who are dressed in short, distressed denim skirts and slinky spaghetti strap tank tops that bare their midriffs as they dance seductively by the fire. In many of the shots, the women are disembodied. The camera does not include an image of their faces, but is heavily zoomed in on their body parts. One frame is of a woman's cleavage, another of a woman's backside as she sways to the rhythm. Any time a man is included in a scene, his face is visible. As a result, the women in the video cannot be distinguished from one another as the men can. The remainder of the video alternates between picturesque images of the rural surroundings and scantily clad young women. We see a cornfield, then a young woman in a string bikini lying on the ground arching her back in ecstasy followed by a shot of a tree-lined creek reflecting the image of the full moon, and a woman taking her top off as she walks through rows of corn. The video reinforces the role of women as a conduit for male homosocial bonding, and, additionally, reveals sexism as the mechanism for the domination of country music masculinity. The juxtaposition of images of rural southern life and women as sexual objects in the video solidifies the connection between country music regionalism and homosocial misogyny.

In the lyrics for "That's My Kind of Night," Bryan reinforces this connection by citing a shared anti-urban sentiment as the foundation for his relationships with women, relationships in which he dominates and demeans his female counterpart. In the song, Bryan describes a night out with a female companion. He tells the woman, "You got that sun tan skirt and boots waiting on you to look my way and scoot your little self over here. Girl hand me another beer, yeah!" The tone Bryan adopts when interacting with his companion is highly problematic. He does not ask, but commands that she attend to his needs in a gross demonstration of sexually dominant behavior. In the chorus, Bryan sings, "All the other boys wanna wind you up and take you downtown, but you look like the kind that likes to take it way out." Bryan and his nameless date elect to stay "out where the corn rows grow, row, row my boat," rather than venturing

“downtown,” or into the city. Bryan’s attraction to this particular woman stems from their shared rejection of the city and a shared appreciation for their rural, country region. He concludes by saying, “My kind or your kind is this kind of night.” Bryan’s specific attraction to women that are his “kind,” who come from his region and share his dislike of the city, affirms Dainotto’s opinion of regionalism as an instrument of preserving sameness and rejecting diversity.

Brantley Gilbert, Luke Bryan, Willie Nelson, and Blake Shelton are not just a group of country crooners. They are the dominant social force within their defined musical region. The homosocial groups in their music take the shape of the erotic triangles described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: women serve as the conduit through which men interact with one another. This dynamic emphasizes the importance of male-male interactions over male-female interactions. These homosocial groups, while outwardly homophobic, are fueled by homoerotic desire. In order to ensure the normalcy of their cherished male bonding, these groups are challenged with the task of defining a certain type of celebrated masculinity. They ensure the dominance of white, hegemonic males by upholding country music masculinity tied to misogyny. The formation of male-bonding groups around a shared hatred of women and femininity serves to maintain their centralized position of power.

This homosocial misogyny in modern country music culture is a mechanism for an unscrupulous and aggressive regionalism, a link that has previously gone largely unnoticed. Country music ensures the protection of its region from diversity by connecting femininity and weakness to life in the city. It cunningly selects sexism, the most cherished value within male homosocial groups, as a means of resisting the multiculturalism of the modern city. Men who lack calluses on their hands from farm work are “sissy boys,” or “city slickers.” An aversion to females and all things feminine means regional belonging, and an opposition to misogyny translates into a life on the margins of society. This new, emergent type of regionalism, homosocial regionalism, may not be confined to the good ol’ boys of modern country music culture, and deserves further future exploration.

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