

## **USA: Generations and Repetitions, country music, love and work**

Friday 20 June 2014, by [CLOVER Joshua](#) (Date first published: 17 June 2014).

### **The story of country music is not love and happiness but love and work**

This is the second of a two-part column before summer break, when county fairs blossom and country music season begins in earnest. The previous entry tracked the waning of the country/city antagonism vital to the genre's "tradition," noting some departures that this change has allowed or even required.

But tradition isn't broken. It is hard to imagine there could be such a thing as country music that didn't affirm tradition every four minutes. A second opposition, even more sedimented, still retains its hold on what we might call country consciousness: an understanding of the world that country music both assumes and ceaselessly reaffirms, so basic it need be stated explicitly only every now and then.

We could call it "love and work." This is so vague as to be useless. The world of country music is structured by two cycles; one we might call the cycle of life, the other the cycle of money. If the former sounds saccharine, it nonetheless moves us. It travels an infinite loop whose signposts are birth, the (oft-coded) entry into sexuality, marriage, childbirth, death. Sometimes divorce appears, without much interrupting the orbit. It recalls Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, which shows that even the most fantastic tales are snapped together from repetitive units, always in the same order. The great formalization is Lorrie Morgan's "Something in Red," assigning inflection points between birth and death to various dress colors' from the red of sexual adventure to the maternity blues?after which the child commences its own cycle.

It is a story of generations and repetitions, in short. Its signal moment comes when we discover that a tale of crazy kids is being told by their parents, once crazy kids themselves. Thus the reveal of Trisha Yearwood's "She's in Love With the Boy": "My daddy said you wasn't worth a lick / When it came to brains you got the short end of the stick / But he was wrong and, honey, you are too / Katie looks at Tommy like I still look at you." Lather, rinse, repeat.

The other cycle is much shorter, but no less prevalent. Punching in on Monday, it trudges toward the Friday whistle; the weekend runs from paycheck to the local bar, the working man's church. Maybe a moment of romantic or domestic happiness, maybe just a hangover; then Monday coffee sings its bittersweet song as all begins again. Toby Keith's "Get Drunk and Be Somebody" grasps in miniature not only the sequence but the tenor of every moment and every player. The verse is working week, the dehumanizing rule of the boss: "I give him forty hours and a piece of my soul". / Hell, I don't even think he knows my name. "Thus the chorus: "Well, all week long I'm a real nobody / But I just punched out and it's paycheck Friday / Weekend's here, good God almighty / I'm going to get drunk and be somebody." But all we ever become is the person who goes back to work Monday morning.

Much as the country/city opposition is racialized, these cycles are heavily gendered. The former is generally sung by and about women, the latter almost exclusively men. Interesting things happen during periods of high unemployment (see Craig Campbell's "Family Man") and the mass entry of

women into the workplace (Dolly Parton's "9 to 5"), but the divided equilibrium generally returns, a bastion of tradition. One might almost think the sexes exist in separate spheres.

Except there is something else about this pairing, something so obvious that it often goes unremarked. Everybody loves love and hates work (this generally seems the case on the country charts); the compulsions of the latter are aggressively hostile to the former. But "opposition" isn't quite right, since the word is unable to name the mutual dependency. Each sphere needs the other to function and to continue; their contradiction forms a unity. The money cycle needs the life cycle's product. The life cycle needs money from labor to make more life, more love and weddings and babies. Male labor and female labor, sigh. Bosses are just part of the money sphere, like factory and paycheck.

While we rarely see the moment of transfer, country music offers a picture of the world made by this conjoined contradiction. Its great lesson: there is no future unless these two spheres give each to the other. They are utterly interlocked, two gears churning in opposite directions. If you agree to one, you must agree to the other. The worldview of country music is one in which money and humans are always busy reproducing themselves by reproducing each other.

It's here we might see something with utmost clarity, something hidden behind the screen of gender. Indeed, gender exists in part to make this whole arrangement seem natural. It isn't. The wheeling gears are not natural, not universal; it's a diagram of the class relation, capital and proletariat - the two words that country music, and US citizens, are not allowed to say. However we name things, this is the "affirmation trap"; we are told ceaselessly that we must affirm what crushes us just to stay alive. This is the absolute core of political struggle, which country presents as if it's beyond debate. Again, it isn't.

The most basic terrain of transforming our lives is the delinking of these two gears: finding ways to reproduce ourselves that do not keep reproducing the existence and the power that has captured us. Demands for more and better jobs are demands to preserve the great gearing system, the endless trap, the iron wheels churning away, us beneath them. But freedom must be something else, must be going to work only for each other, for those we love and not for capital; it must be struggling until the wheels come off.

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**P.S.**

\* Published under the title "The story of country music is not love and happiness but love and work". June 17, 2014 | This article appeared in the July 7-14, 2014 edition of The Nation.