

Rhinestone Cowboys

The Problem of Country Music Costuming

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Abstract. Country music critics and scholars have noticed an apparent contradiction between the practical identity of country music with the image of the male country singer as the 'rhinestone cowboy'. In this case, the problem is one of how we can make sense of the rural, working-class, ruggedly masculinity persona common to the genre with its elaborately embroidered, brightly colored, and highly embellished male fashion. The intractability of this problem has led some to argue that the simplest solution is to just deny the legitimacy of country music authenticity discourse altogether. That is, all the genre's talk of the rural working class is inauthentic and should be discarded. Here, I argue that by accounting for country music authenticity in terms of the genre being a dual character concept, we can fully address the skeptic's worries. Beyond merely being compatible with the Nudie suit however, this notion of authenticity is also our best way of understanding the aesthetic value of the rhinestone cowboy image at all. The resulting picture, in which the suit primarily serves as an epistemic signifier of one's standing in the country music community, allows for the Nudie suit to function as a class, and sometimes queer, commentary on mainstream culture.

1. Introduction

For many country music fans and critics, there seems to be a contradiction between the aesthetics of country music and the aesthetics of country music fashion.¹ For instance, music writer Holly George-Warren has gone so far as to say that there is a “great paradox” between the attention to (and kind of) costuming that male country artists have historically paid and their reputation as “macho

¹ Here, I use the terms 'fashion' and 'costume' interchangeably. 'Fashion' often invokes self-expression through clothing in one's everyday life where 'costuming' might refer to clothing chosen for some performative purpose. Given this distinction, 'costume' seems to me to be the more apt term. However, given that some views of country music authenticity might require equivocating between the personal and the performative, those inclined to these accounts of authenticity might prefer the term 'fashion'. As such, I will endeavor to split the difference so as not to lead the reader in either direction (other than a few cases where the distinction is important for the argument).

he-men” (Moore 2001). The apparent puzzle, here, is how to reconcile the masculine, rural, and working-class persona of the paradigmatic male country artist with the elaborate rhinestone, embroidery, fringe, and bright colors of what has come to be known as the ‘Nudie Suit’. These concerns are tied up in country music’s popular discourse around authenticity because ideas about country music being characteristically southern, rural, or working class are often used as accounts of what it means for works or artists in the genre to be authentic. Authentic country music is often claimed to be a matter of an artist transparently embodying their own typical, masculine, rural, traditionally southern, working-class status (Peterson 1997; Dyck 2021).² The ‘great paradox’ is one of understanding how the image of the rhinestone cowboy serves country music, and how we can reconcile the pageantry of country music fashion with the genre’s seeming folksy authenticity. The difficulty of resolving this paradox has even led some critics to be skeptics about country music authenticity all together (Coe 2018). This leaves us with a dilemma whereby we must either accept that there is no such thing as authenticity in country music or reconcile the notion with the ubiquity of the Nudie suit.

Here, I argue that the Nudie suit actually serves a variety of functional roles in country music aesthetic practice, all of which issue from and bolster the common practical identity of artists within the genre. This is to say that the Nudie suit is perfectly compatible with country music authenticity if we think that authenticity is a matter of an artist embodying the values of the genre as opposed to them satisfying a particular set of biographical facts. If this view of authenticity can resolve the problem of the Nudie suit, then that is some reason to favor it over the alternatives. Likewise, this gives country music authenticity supporters a response to skeptics who point toward the problem of country music costuming as a reason to support their skepticism.

2. The Problem of Country Music Costuming

We should be clear that the problem of country music costuming arises in at least two distinct but related forms. The apparent paradox, as George-Warren puts it, has to do with traditional gender roles and their relationship to the personas of male country artists. It can be summarized as follows:

1. Authentic male country artists perform a traditionally masculine social role.³

² The term ‘transparency’ here refers to the singer performing as themselves rather than adopting an ‘opaque’ persona, in which they perform as a fictional character (Cray 2019).

³ Notice that George-Warren’s paradox is concerned with the apparent internal tension between the particular and traditional view of masculinity often associated with country music, and the Nudie suit which is seemingly incongruent with those restrictive standards. The consequence of this is that the Nudie suit’s subsequent use outside of country music

2. Nudie suits are, by traditional standards, effeminate and, therefore, stand in contradiction or otherwise count against the performance of a traditionally masculine social role.
3. Male country artists wear Nudie suits.

By contrast, music critic (and son of country artist David Allan Coe) Tyler Mahan Coe argues for a different version of the problem, this time concerning the lived experience of the people country music is apparently made by and for. While the two are different, they both involve claims about what it would take for an artist to be authentic and result in the conclusion that the Nudie suit raises a problem for the possibility or importance of authenticity in country music. Coe's argument can be summarized as follows:

1. If country music valued authenticity, then male country artists would transparently embody their own typical, rural, traditionally southern, working-class lives.
2. If a male country artist wears a Nudie suit, then they do not transparently embody the lives of typical, rural, traditionally southern, working-class people.
3. Male country artists wear Nudie suits.
4. Therefore, male country artists do not transparently embody their own typical, rural, traditionally southern, working-class lives.
5. Therefore, country music does not value authenticity.

Notice that the account of authenticity provided in premise one packs in a number of subordinate claims about rurality, the south, tradition, and class. Depending on the story one is telling about what authentic country music is, these features could be conjunctive or subjective. That is, authentic country artists might need to be one of these in particular, any one of these, or all of these. This last, conjunctive sense, is what Coe employs:

“There is a gigantic flaw in this idea that country music fans need any sort of backstory at all, let alone one that passes some sort of hypothetical realness or authenticity test... Has anyone ever seen a sharecropper work a field while wearing a rhinestone suit? Seems like, if this authenticity thing mattered so much, everyone who makes country music would be dressed in tattered overalls and have a couple of teeth blacked out.”
(Coe 2018)

The image that Coe employs is one of a sharecropper in tattered overalls with missing teeth. This image is not just a depiction of rural life, working class life, or a traditional life in the American south, it is a depiction of the point at which all three of these intersect. I argue that we should deny premise one of Coe's argument. Country music authenticity is not about the transparent embodiment

(e.g., Elton John on the cover of his 1972 “Rocket Man” single, etc.) do not raise a similar problem, as rock music is, if anything, historically committed to challenging tradition rather than associated with it.

of certain biographical credentials, but about embodying the values associated with the genre and with the shared practical identity of the artists and fans which make up the country music community. Further, if this account of authenticity is correct, then we can turn around and use it to understand the role and significance of the Nudie suit in country music aesthetic practice. The Nudie suit is not only compatible with concerns about authenticity in country music, but also works to demonstrate an artist's authenticity. This will enable us to deny the first and second claims of George-Warren's paradox.

3. The Case Against an Authenticity Nudie Suit

Perhaps the most popular theory of country music authenticity is what John Dyck calls 'source-focused authenticity' (Dyck 2021). In this case, authentic country music comes from artists with credible biographies. In order for a biography to be credible, the artist must be from the community which that genre or artform originates with. Accounts like this are common when it comes to thinking about cultural appropriation, and they have been debated with regards to rap (Taylor 2005) and the blues (Rudinow 1994; Young 1994; Taylor 1995; Langston & Langston 2012). Source-focused theories of authenticity are especially compelling when it comes to folk art and musical practices, because they capture our sense that authentic artists will have standing in the community which composes the relevant folk. When it comes to country music, stories about who the folk are tend to follow Coe's conception. Famously, Hank Williams himself said that "you have to plow a lot of ground and look at the back side of a mule for a lot of years to sing a country song." (Peterson 1997, 217). The implication here is that country music's folk are rural and working class. This is stated explicitly by L.M. Bernhardt, who says that country music authenticity is about singing from a "rural and working-class" identity rather than more inauthentic country music, which only sings about the rural working-class (Bernhardt 2018). The idea that the country music folk are specifically composed of the rural working class from the American south emerged out of Bill C. Malone's pioneering history of the genre, *Country Music, USA*. In it, Malone details the development of country music out of the traditional music of Scotch-Irish settlers to the American south (Malone 2018). If this story is correct, then authentic country music should come from a member of the southern, rural, working-class, and will transparently demonstrate this credibility through its sincerity.

However, country music costuming has been anything but transparent. Country music, as a genre, developed slowly over time and out of a tradition of 'old-time music' (Peterson 1997). This mostly consisted of artists capitalizing on emerging recording technology to develop a popular genre out of an older American folk music tradition. Accordingly, old-time artists tended to dress in older, rural styles in order to evoke the sense of a folksy past. The next major step in the development of

country music occurred when ‘hillbilly music’ was carved off from pop and ‘race music’ at the beginning of the 20th century (Miller 2010). The fashion and costuming which followed worked to evoke the common public image of hillbillies already popular in vaudeville acts (Peterson 1997). George Hay, the founder of the Grand Ole Opry, pushed folk and ‘old-time’ artists into this newly constructed bit of market segmentation by branding new artists and rebranded existing artists to meet the hillbilly public image. For instance, the band Dr. Bate and his Augmented Orchestra became the Possum Hunters and the Binkley Brothers Barn Dance Orchestra became the Dixie Clod Hoppers (Peterson 1997). The public persona and fashion of these artists followed suit, with members wearing wide brimmed hats and overalls, and holding corn cob pipes between their teeth in promotional images and stage performances. Note that this was a conscious commercial decision to rebrand from the older, more conservative market for old-time music to a fun humorous depiction of rural people that was more adaptable as popular culture changed (Peterson 1997). This is to say that the hillbilly outfits of early country musicians were not the clothes that those artists came into the studio wearing. That is, these overalls were not a matter of fashion, but a matter of costuming. This distinction, between folk artists who might merely be documented playing their songs in their clothes, and country musicians who dress in costumes in order to perform newly written studio songs will matter later.

Despite the relative success of the hillbilly image (in comparison to the old-time image that preceded it), this standard of country music costuming did not last either. This is due, in large part, to the marketing limitations of the hillbilly image and the success of Hollywood westerns. So-called ‘horse operas’, featuring singing cowboys like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, became popular, in part, because they were relatively cheap to make compared to other Hollywood musicals and could be easily filled with royalty-free old songs which were available in the public domain (Peterson 1997). Attempting to capitalize on this increasingly popular depiction of rural life, country music producers and artists followed suit. This time, rebranding from buffoonish hillbillies to stoic, masculine cowboys. We can contrast the romantic, noble, and mysterious image of cowboys common in western films with the backwards image of rural farmers and hillbillies. For instance, take the description of hillbillies from a *Variety* cover story on hillbilly music in 1926:

“The ‘hillbilly’ is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white... of ‘poor white trash’ genera. The great majority, probably 95 percent, can neither read nor write English... [They are] illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons.” (Green 1965, 221)

While leaning into this comedic image served its commercial purpose in the era of George Hay, the pejorative association of the hillbilly placed a ceiling on the audience’s willingness to identify with the artists. By contrast, the masculine personas of Roy Rogers or Gene Autry were aspirational.

Likewise, it is easy to reconcile this image with that of the newly rebranded ‘country and western music’. For one, the newly added ‘western’ in ‘country and western music’ was a reference to the decision to chart the songs from (and popularized by) those western films alongside the country music tradition that started as hillbilly music. As such, it was only natural for artists singing the songs from westerns to dress the way that the characters who sang those songs in westerns dressed. More importantly, however, this allowed the country music industry to draw on the public image of cowboys made popular by westerns. This was natural enough, given that there is nothing incompatible between it and the male persona we tend to find in country music. The cowboy is a rugged individual, strong, enduring, and stoic in the face of an isolated and violent environment (Gibson 2015). Bill Malone has argued that country music’s rise in popularity in the post-war era coincides with the urbanization of America (Malone 2018). As formerly rural people left behind their farms and moved into cities in search of better fortunes, we saw the emergence of a class of city-dwellers who now had more disposable income to spend on entertainment and who sought ways to reconnect with the lifestyle, people, and places that they left behind. Hollywood’s cowboy image could serve this nostalgic function. As Chris Gibson has argued, “the cowboy figure, to all intents and purposes a product of the urban imagination, retains only the faintest echoes of a once-lived form of rural work and lifestyle. The imaginative, mythic, fantasy product needed visual codes...” (Gibson 2013, 16) While the cowboy may only contain the ‘faintest echoes’ of the reality they left behind, for them, it was enough.

This new cowboy image carried a great deal of Hollywood western fashion over into the now unified country and western music. The bright colors and embroidery of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers’ costumes, which had originally served to make them stand out against a more nationalistic desert backdrop on screen, found their way into the attire of musical performers off screen. These embroidered elements were only made larger, more elaborate, and more colorful across the work of designers like Bernard ‘Rodeo Ben’ Lichtenstein and Nathan Turk. Finally, when Nudie Cohn (the tailor from whom the Nudie suit takes its name) got ahold of it, he added rhinestones and the rest is history.

If this story can tell us anything, it is that country music costuming has always been downstream of marketing. Artists have consistently and radically altered their wardrobe in response to market demands and should not be interpreted as transparently embodying their own social situation. The Nudie suit is, indeed, a costume and not just the fashion of everyday folk. In turn, this has led to skepticism about country music authenticity. Without a transparent performance of the lived experience of an artist with the appropriate standing, source-focused authenticity in country music is doomed.

Yet, the issues do not end there, especially once we have arrived at the development of the Nudie suit. Source-focused authenticity requires not just transparency, but a specific kind. Authentic outfits would, if the stories we have been told about the importance of being rural, Southern, and working-class are true, reflect the attire of that community. However, Lichtenstein, Nudie Cohn, and Nathan Turk were all immigrants from eastern Europe, and all imported details like elaborate piping, embroidery, and color-blocking common there. Cohn (born Nutya Kotlyrenko), a Ukrainian native, routinely employed the use of embroidered flowers inspired by the traditional festive menswear and bridal blouses from his native country (Brautbar, La Chapelle, and Hutchings 2019). The same is true of the Polish-born Lichtenstein and Turk (born Nathan Teig). Indeed, the use of rhinestones on the Nudie suit itself were, in part, the result of a causal chain ultimately rooted in antisemitism. In Poland, Jews were only allowed to participate in a small number of industries, with tailoring being one of them (La Chapelle 2001). This family business was passed down to Cohn who, in turn, went into business as a tailor in Manhattan, “designing rhinestone-embellished costumes for chorus girls and strippers.” (Country Music Hall of Fame) This, in turn, inspired Nudie to incorporate rhinestones in the men’s western wear he began designing after moving to California.

In much the same way, later developments on the suit, made by Mexican-born designers like Manuel Cuevas and Jaime Castaneda, draw inspiration from bullfighting costumes common in Mexico. This is to say that the history of country music costuming has given us reason to be skeptical of the claim that the Nudie suit is transparent and of the extent to which it originates in the aesthetic practices of the American south. Likewise, Coe has, by pointing to the attire of sharecroppers, raised concerns about the Nudie suit being tied to the rural working-class. Thus, it would seem that every condition required for the standard source-focused account is now in question. Luckily for us, there is an alternative view which may make sense of this situation.

4. The Practical Identity Account of Authenticity

In contrast to those views already discussed, the practical identity view of country music authenticity attempts to make sense of authenticity discourse in the genre by claiming that country music is a ‘dual character concept’ (Malone 2023). Dual character concepts are those for which it makes sense to say that ‘there is a sense in which a is an x, but there is another sense in which a isn’t a real x.’ (Knobe, Prasada, and Newman 2013). In the dual character model, the difference between being an x and being a real x is one of whether the object or person in question merely satisfies the descriptive conditions necessary to count as an instance of that class or also embodies the values of the class. For instance, we might think that someone who works in a lab and publishes in peer-reviewed

journals meets the descriptive criteria necessary to count as a scientist, but someone might plausibly deny that they are a ‘real scientist’ if they aren’t, for instance, committed to the impartial pursuit of the truth. We can contrast this with concepts that aren’t dual character, like electrician (Knobe, Prasada, and Newman 2013).

In the case of country music, this means that a work or artist being ‘authentic country’ is a matter of embodying the values of the genre, not a matter of having some biographical facts match up with facts about the genre’s origins. Where other accounts do the thing that Coe complains about, by requiring that artists have a backstory that passes an ‘authenticity test’ by being sufficiently like the artists at the time of country music’s founding, this account does not. Importantly, since authenticity isn’t directly fixed by the historical origins of the

genre, what it means to be authentic on this model is free to change over time. In this way, it is clear how the practical identity account of country music authenticity avoids the historical problems faced by competing accounts. It doesn’t matter that the original country musicians didn’t dress this way, dressing the way that the original artists dressed just isn’t how country music authenticity works. The costumes need not have a corresponding folk (in the folk music sense). As long as the Nudie suit is compatible with country music’s characteristic practical identity and its corresponding values, then it is entirely possible to wear the outfit while still being authentic. In fact, however, we can go further in saying that the Nudie suit is not just compatible with these values but is an instance where “how one dresses can communicate one’s associations and values.” (Yim 2011, 111).⁴

In order to get clear about this issue, we should probably first start by getting clear about country music’s practical identity. If country music is a nostalgic romanticized vision of the rural life that city-dwellers left behind in the post-war era, as Bill Malone has argued, then that tells us something about the underlying functional mechanics of the genre. First, it is not a genre exclusively by and for rural people. Following the rural account of authenticity mentioned above, many people believe that country music is supposed to serve and represent the lives of rural people. On this view, country artists should, themselves, come from rural backgrounds. While many country artists do come from rural backgrounds, giving the core audience someone to fully identify with is best accomplished by a person who has, at least in part, had the experiences of a city-dweller (that is, the target audience’s experience). As Evan Malone has pointed out, Waylon Jennings tells us that he wants to ‘get back to the basics of love’ and ‘go to Luckenbach, Texas’, not stay there (Malone 2023). This gestures at the second lesson of the functional role of country music, that the desire for reconnection with traditional rural ways of life is a response to the conditions of urban modernity. If the narrator of Jennings’s song

⁴ For further reading on the role of adornment (a broader category which might include fashion) in cultivating and preserving values and affiliations, see (Johnson 2020; Davies 2020; Johnson 2022).

had a satisfied mind about their urban lived experience, then they would have no desire to return to the rural life they left behind. Finally, as the word ‘back’ and the term ‘reconnection’ indicate, just as identification by the audience is best-served by some experience in urban life, it is also best-served by some experience with rural life. One can’t want to go back to a place they’ve never been.

These three lessons, taken together, provide us with a kind of archetypal three-act structure inherent in much of country music, not just in the works of Waylon Jennings. The country protagonist is often a person who thought that they knew better than their upbringing. They left the farm (or family or relationship) in search of drugs, alcohol, easy money, crime, fame, material possessions, or life in the big city, but now speaks with some authority about the ways in which this lifestyle has revealed their true desire for an honest rural life of (some combination of) hard work, sobriety, and monogamy. This narrative is spelled out relatively explicitly in songs like Hank Williams’ “Honky Tonk Blues” where the protagonist leaves their home “down on the rural route” and finds that their new “city life has really got [them] down” until they decide to ‘scat right back to [their] pappy’s farm”. It is the story of a character who chooses to leave behind tradition, finds the lower pleasures and pretensions of modern city life unsatisfying, struggles with the consequences of the life that they chose, and ultimately embraces a return to the idyllic past that they left behind.⁵

If being authentic country music is about satisfying the value commitments of this particular practical identity, then the rhinestone-covered and elaborately embroidered Nudie suit actually gives credibility to this nouveau riche hero’s journey at the heart of much of country music. By presenting as the rhinestone cowboy, the country singer allows us to recognize their experience with the subject matter of this story and the authority that goes with it. The old money and high society crowd of the cities would opt for more refined attire and the rural working-class could either not afford it or would have no occasion for it. Only those who have undertaken such a journey, and who have the experience of inhabiting both worlds, would find themselves in the position of donning the rhinestone suit. In this way, the same manufactured commercial components that cause skeptics to deny the notion of authenticity all together seems to be a testament to it. The suit is a physical totem, an epistemic signifier, for a cautionary tale extolling the romanticized vision of a more traditional rural life.

Beyond this, however, the practical identity account of country music authenticity allows us to revisit our discussion of class and the Nudie suit. While the common three-act structure of country music allows artists to communicate their shared values to audiences, and the suit supports that, it also independently communicates those values. In particular, it speaks to the importance that the country music community places on work ethic (Malone 2023). Country music fans and artists are less

⁵ As Richard Shusterman points out, a version of this story is told in the aptly titled country musical movie *Real Country* (Shusterman 1999).

concerned with class than they are with the manner in which one secures their class position. As Evan Malone has pointed out, Hank Williams Jr. has heightened country music credibility as a result of his being born into a famous and wealthy family, rather than it being diminished (Malone 2023). This is because an artist's class is less important than their valuing hard work itself.

While Coe is right that sharecroppers don't tend to wear rhinestones, stage performers don't tend to wear overalls. This gestures at a continuity between the performer and the audience that runs deeper than a one-to-one correspondence between outfits. That is, both the country singer and the working-class are united in adhering to fashion as dictated by labor forces. For a working musician, overalls are a costume as much as a rhinestone suit is for farmers. The Nudie suit isn't supplanting everyday wear the way it might for folk music. In country music, the Nudie suit is more candid. It renders the apparatus of the spectacle plain. There is no pretense in an obvious costume, the way that there was for hillbilly costumes, where audiences are expected to believe the artist walked into the studio wearing the overalls and holding the corn cob pipe. The audience knows that the artist, like themselves, wears what they wear because they are here to work.

This is sometimes explicit in country music lyrics. In his song, "Another Pretty Country Song", David Allan Coe tells us that he got his rhinestone suit in California and "the diamond ring [he wears] is just for show". This is not just a possible reference to Tom T. Hall's classic "Homecoming", where the narrator tells his dad, "I got this ring in Mexico... when you're in the business that I'm in, people call it puttin' up a front." There is a sense in which the ring being 'just for show' means putting on airs and appearing to be doing better financially than they actually are. However, there is another sense in which the ring is for shows, in the sense that it is part of a stage costume. While the country singer and their audience may not be in the same tax bracket, there is some commiseration possible in the fact that the conditions of their life (down to the details of their dress) are dictated by their having to earn a living somehow.

Besides just being spectacular, however, the rhinestone suit is deeply functional as a working uniform. For instance, drawing on his experience making costumes for burlesque shows, Nudie's addition of the rhinestones works to catch the reflection of stage lights and make the artist more visible to the audience in the back of the auditorium (Gibson 2015). Even the characteristic pearl snaps themselves were added in order to solve problems during performances (albeit of a different kind).⁶ In this case, 'Rodeo Ben' Lichtenstein began using snaps instead of buttons after watching a rodeo

⁶ While discussion of the practical functions of western wear features is limited here to those relevant for various kinds of performances, the use of long pieces of leather as fringe on the sleeves of garments was introduced as a result of the influence of indigenous peoples, who added the fringe to garments in order to wick water away from the body and to break up human silhouettes. These features are incredibly useful when spending a considerable amount of time on the range or engaged in hunting (Havelin 2012).

contestant get thrashed about by a bull after its horn got caught in the buttons of the rider's shirt (Coe 2021). Likewise, the suits serve a dual function in operating as a promotional item. Artists with hit songs commission a Nudie 'song suit' decorated with imagery from the song (paid for with royalties from the song) and wear that suit while touring in promotion of the song (Moore 2001). We see this in the double-breasted jacket that Cohn designed for T. Texas Tyler, embroidered with playing cards to represent his 1948 single "Deck of Cards", or in Webb Peirce's jailhouse themed Nudie suit celebrating his 1955 hit "In the Jailhouse Now". This is all just to say that the Nudie suit is designed in accordance with the functional dictates of labor as much as overalls are.⁷ Those who inhabit them just work in two different kinds of jobs. Likewise, Cohn himself said that "[the entertainer] should wear a flashy outfit to be fair to the public... he shouldn't be wearing a sport coat like the people in the audience." (Hopkins 1969) This sentiment is echoed by fans. Peter La Chapelle quotes the lifelong country music fan Shirley Desy as saying, "the rhinestone suits symbolized a form of respect the performers had for their audiences." (La Chapelle 2001, 8) In this way, the Nudie suit is more consistent as a working person's uniform than the hillbilly and simpler cowboy outfits that preceded it. The Nudie suit suggests that the artist earns their living through the sweat of their brow just like their audience does, even if they are paid very different wages, and it also communicates to audiences that the artist respects *their* time and labor.⁸

Even the ways in which artists use the Nudie suit as a vehicle for self-expression is mediated by the sense that all good things are earned through labor. In his genealogy of the term 'cool', Joel Dinerstein ultimately arrives at an account where cool can be thought of as an 'earned individuality' which registers as a 'rebellion for-others' (Dinerstein 2017).⁹ This builds off of Stanley Cavell's contention that "when society requires greater uniformity... then the strategy of individuality and distinctness is to become identifiable within uniform—not by it, adopting its identity, but despite it..." (Cavell 1979, 68) The cool hero or antihero isn't a mindless rube who takes up whatever is expected of them by society, nor do they simply rebel in the face of those expectations. They earn their own private

⁷ For further reading on the history and functionality of western wear in general and in the context of costuming, see (Beard 1993; Beard 1999; Bull 2000; George-Warren & Freedman 2001; Weil & DeWeese 2004).

⁸ To be clear, the two functions we have so far described for the Nudie suit, 1) supporting the standard three-act story of country music and 2) communicating a respect for labor and work ethic, need not be intentionally endorsed by the artist or designer. While we can find evidence for some particular artists and designers indicating their intentions with their costuming decisions (and some do, as we have shown, endorse these functions), we can say that it functions in this way insofar as it has the effect of instilling in fans the sense that the artist is authentic and shares in the genre's common values. So long as audiences attribute authenticity to these artists, and so long as the Nudie suit furthers these attributions through its consistency with the expression of what is required for such attributions, then the costume does function in this way.

⁹ Luke Russell has argued for an alternative account of coolness in fashion where being 'cool' means caring about one's style for its own sake, rather than in order to appear trendy or fashionable to others (Russell 2011). Regardless of which account better tracks the folk notion of 'cool', Dinerstein's account is helpful in understanding the Nudie suit, so it is adopted here.

rebellion, their individuality, through some trial. This rebellion serves as a model of individual rebellion for others.

The three-act structure that the Nudie suit embodies is a story of earned individuality. The country music protagonist didn't simply obey their elders and stay in the country, nor did they ultimately do what modern urbanized society and commercialism tell them to do. They *worked* through both options, they learned their lessons the hard way, and they ultimately rebelled against the uniformity of urban life in a way that seems earned rather than merely handed down. This model can, in turn, serve a blueprint for others who might want to resist the uniformity of modern life in favor of a more traditional kind of rebellion. The main point is that this is a choice, and it is a choice earned through one's labor. Those stuck in act one might ultimately come to the same conclusion, but they did not earn this individuality the way that those in act three did. In this way, the Nudie suit, by making this story material, embodies cool for the country music practical identity. The country artist, like other rural immigrants into the city let down by urban life, rejects society's expectations on them, and they speak from a place of experience that we can read off their rhinestones.

The self-expression we find in the Nudie, in turn, is also taken to be earned. The suit worn in the cover photo for Joshua Hedley's 2018 album *Mr. Jukebox* depicts flora and fauna from Hedley's native Florida. Many of Porter Wagoner's Nudie suits incorporate wagon wheel motifs in reference to his surname. Another example of this is the suit that Nathan Turk designed for Fred Maddox of the Maddox Brothers & Rose. It features large embroidered grape motifs as a reference to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (a story which in some ways mirrored the story of Maddox' family's migration from Alabama to California in the early 1930's). As an obvious costume, the Nudie suit communicates the way in which working musicians earn anything (as performers), but as an artifact of self-expression, it also communicates that the story of their lived experience has allowed them to earn the privilege of individuality in their work. It is with this picture in mind that we can now return to Holly George-Warren's paradox concerning the Nudie suit's apparent problem for the genre's emphasis on traditional masculine social roles.¹⁰

¹⁰ For further reading on the relationship between gender, sexuality, adornment, and fashion in general, see (Brennan 2011; Collins 2011; Cray 2021a). For further reading on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and Western wear, see (Gibson 2015).

5. Country Music and Masculinity

One important point worth noting is that, while we have so far discussed primarily male tailors and artists (along with considerations of presentations of masculinity), there are plenty of exceptions on both fronts. Marge Riley, Katy K, and Kathie Sever (who owns and operates the contemporary Nudie Suit manufacturer Fort Lonesome) were or are all accomplished designers in the style in their own right. Likewise, behind many of the male designers stand a number of working women embroiderers. For instance, Hank Thompson’s “Humpty Dumpty Heart” Nudie boots were actually embroidered by Viola Grae (who designed out of Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors along with Rose Clements) not Nudie Cohn (Country Music Hall of Fame). Between many of the suits being made by women, and the influence of Nudie’s experience designing rhinestone-clad costumes for showgirls, the style of the Nudie suit is a kind of degraded signal of gender presentation passed back and forth through a feedback loop of the male gaze. Here we find women tailors and designers taking the kind of traditionally feminine persona showgirls employ primarily to satisfy the male gaze, and distorting it back on to men as a presentation for mostly male performers.

In this way, the Nudie suit constitutes a rebellion against the uniformity of the more traditionally patriarchal fashion that authors and critics like George-Warren expect country music to endorse. Even if not intended as such by the performers, it functions in this way (and appears to be intended by the designer). Labor, ultimately, represents the highest ideal within country music’s values, and women designers earn their originality and individuality through their labor, including liberation from stifling and traditionally gendered fashion norms. The same is true for the male performers like Autry, Rogers, and those wearing the suits of Nudie Cohn. Contrary to the first claim of George-Warren’s paradox, male country music artists are not expected to perform a traditionally masculine social role. As Hank Williams Jr. tells us in “The Blues Man,” he does not need to prove to us that he’s “some kind of macho man.” The extent to which country music artists have long subverted and questioned traditional norms of gender and sexuality has already been well-documented (Nunn 2011; Hubbs 2014; Goldin-Perschacher 2022). What has seen less attention is the ways in which the development and proliferation of the Nudie suit also represented a queering of these traditional roles. This is the question raised by George-Warren’s second claim.

1947, the year in which Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors opened, was a landmark year with regards to gendered fashion trends.¹¹ It also marks the year that the fashion designer Christian Dior debuted the collection which has since come to be called the ‘new look’ (Brookins 2024). Dior’s stand out design, involving a cinched waist and flaring a-line skirt, emphasized the female figure, creating a more defined

¹¹ For a broader history of men’s fashion, see (McNeil 2018; McCall 2023; Hollander 1994).

hourglass silhouette. This stood out, in large part, because of the contrast that it had against broader fashion trends of the 1940's. During the second world war, women's clothing had moved closer towards men's fashion (Wang 2022). Women entering the workplace required longer skirts and trousers, work and military uniforms (and styles inspired by military uniforms) often involved padded shoulders, reducing the differences between silhouettes in men's and women's fashion. With men returning from the war and to the workforce, traditional gender differences were reemphasized. Dior's 'new look' ushered in a decade dominated by fit and flare dresses, which coincided with the massive growth of the cosmetics industry made possible by increased consumer spending in the postwar period (Ritchie 2014).

Yet, at the same time that mainstream and high fashion trends worked to deepen the contrast between masculine and feminine social roles, the Nudie suit apparently did not. Even while the predominant image of masculinity in the media during the 1950's turned toward the cowboy, with the rise of figures like John Wayne and the Marlboro Man, country music did not take up this version of the cowboy until it was influenced by broader social trends and interaction with rock and roll through the 1970's outlaw country movement. Instead, male country artists presented themselves in the Nudie suit's bright and colorful patterns, elaborate embroidery, tassels, and rhinestones, all during a time in which men's fashion was becoming more casual and rugged (think James Dean). Why, then, was the Nudie suit the outfit of choice? Recall the second act of the standard three-act country music story. It is the stage in which the protagonist is drawn into a life of regrets, often depicted as crying and/or in prison. This should certainly strike us as a different view of masculinity than that offered in the mainstream by stoic and rugged heroes like John Wayne. As Nadine Hubbs has argued,

“It was a social order rooted in ideology equating the primitive, the criminal, and the disreputable with the working class; equating these same stigmatized qualities with sexual and gender queerness; and, by similar logic, equating the working class with the queer.” (Hubbs 2014, 155)

In this way, the apparent queerness of the Nudie suit can be seen, in the context of the traditional gender roles being pushed at the time, as a signifier of class. Just as Loretta Lynn's "The Pill" and "One on the Way" stand out as statements about the inability of rural working class women to feel the effects of advances in women's rights happening at the time, the Nudie suit can tell us something similar. While increased consumer spending may have opened up new and interesting ways for middle and upper class consumers to signal gender differences, country fans and artists remained in the queer working class, defined by its androgynous emphasis on uniforms. This queerness, when compared against the broader, more restrictive, social trends that modern audiences might expect for the time period, did not go unnoticed by the Nudie suit's designer, Nudie Cohn, who said that his designs were

modeled after “flashy looking women...” and that “every man has an aspect of woman in his personality that longs to be expressed.” (La Chapelle 2001, 8) By the strict standards of 1950’s Nashville, in which women were equated with femininity and femininity was equated with the colorful, the bedazzled, and the embellished, we can understand Cohn’s impulse as an inclination towards genderfucking (Lonc 1974; Cray 2021a; Cray 2021b). That is, Cohn’s stated intention was to engage, to some degree, in public gender nonconforming adornment practices. Country music, with its emphasis on working class aesthetics, served as a natural place to do this because, as Hubbs points out, the social order dominant at the time would also render it a class critique.

6. Conclusion

We were motivated to solve the ‘great paradox’ of the Nudie suit because it might pose a problem for country music’s discourse around authenticity. In the case of Coe, we are told that country music can’t be more or less authentic the way that folk music can because southerners, farmers, the working-class, and rural people do not wear elaborate rhinestone suits. Setting aside the extent to which the Nudie suit represents a difference in kind rather than a difference in degree between the fashion of performers and their respective audience, and in either case, this is to misunderstand what country music authenticity is fundamentally about. Instead, I have argued that authenticity is a matter of conforming to and embodying the values of the genre. This is to say that aesthetic concepts like authenticity are mediated by genre. Being authentic in classical music might mean conforming to the original intentions or demands of the composer (Davies 1987; Davies 1991; O’Dea 1994; Kivy 1995), and authenticity in folk music or blues might be a matter of having the right kind of standing to perform the songs or the style (Young 1994; Rudinow 1994; Taylor 1995). Analysis of aesthetic concepts should be sensitive to the work that those concepts do in the aesthetic practices of a genre community.¹² Alternative theories of authenticity in country music and even the skepticism about them assume a model of authenticity that is imported in from outside the genre.

In the case of country music, authenticity is a matter of comporting to the values commitments picked out by the practical identity common to fans and artists of the genre (e.g., tradition, work ethic, and individuality). This, it turns out, is perfectly compatible with the Nudie suit. Indeed, the image of the rhinestone cowboy bolsters the artist’s credibility with regards to this practical identity. It picks the artist out as a worker (and not as someone pretending to simply be documenting their folk practices), and it provides them with a sense of individuality under the conditions of their

¹² For additional instances, see (Malone 2022), which argues that the concept of musical groove is mediated by genre.

labor. Likewise, it communicates an earned, intentional or otherwise, endorsement of tradition in the face of the totalizing vision of modernity that new city-dwellers found themselves in in the post-war era.

Further, this understanding also allows us to fully address a related and only apparent paradox concerning authenticity and gender in the genre. Rather than standing in contradiction between the repressive traditional gender norms modern middle-class audiences expect the genre to have and, the Nudie suit's standing out against the background male fashion trends during the time of its development, including its seeming queerness for its context, is a result of its authenticity. In this way, the Nudie suit does not present us with a problem for authenticity but, rather, is best explained in reference to it, so long as we employ the right account.

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