

DOLLY PARTON'S MYTHOLOGISED PERSONA, COLLECTIVE LIFE WRITING, AND BUILDING A HOME FOR LGBTQ+ LISTENERS IN COUNTRY MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises persona and life writing as being collectively constituted to explore multiplicity in the way country artist Dolly Parton's persona can be constructed by LGBTQ+ audiences. I use the idea of mythmaking, where myths are neither true nor false, to explore how Parton's persona and life writing challenge dominant narratives and assumptions around LGBTQ+ belonging in country music, a genre that is increasingly being re-evaluated in terms of its LGBTQ+ representation and queer resonances. Parton's persona is deeply invested in her constructed life story that represents a collective mythology around the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee, Appalachia, and country music. This paper uses close readings of Parton's songs 'Coat of Many Colors' and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' to explore how these texts enable LGBTQ+ listeners to anchor themselves within the life-writing practices of her country music and Appalachia. 'Coat of Many Colors' uses an episode from Parton's life story to work through class and regional representations that also have the potential to resonate with LGBTQ+ experiences through the renegotiation of narratives of shame that become reworked into pride and acceptance. My reading of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' expands on this using the idea of home and the affective role this has within queer narratives to explore how Parton situates LGBTQ+ experiences within the genre of country music. The final part of this article considers the importance of anti-racism and intersectional critiques of overly romanticised narratives around Parton to ensure multiplicity when conceptualising the role of persona in Parton's work.

KEY WORDS

Country Music; LGBTQ+ Audiences; Life Writing; Collective Persona

INTRODUCTION

Dolly Parton's self-mythologised persona and collective life-writing practices offer the potential for LGBTQ+ listeners to assert their place in the genre of country music. Parton is a figure who is recognised for embracing a duality (Edwards 2018 p. 30; Wilson 1998, p. 99) of being a folk-inflected singer-songwriter (Edwards 2018, p. 6; Hamessley 2020, p. 65; Hubbs 2015, p. 74), whilst at the same time being a hugely successful pop-crossover artist and celebrity icon in TV and films: she is a media personality (Edwards 2018, pp. 101-151). Throughout her fifty-year long career, Parton has interwoven her life-writing narratives of her childhood growing up in rural poverty in Appalachia, specifically the Smoky Mountains in East Tennessee (Watson 2016;

Wilson 1998, p. 109, see also Hamessley 2020, p. 59) into her persona (Edwards 2018; Wilson 1998). Parton tells these narratives through interviews (*Dolly Parton: Here I Am* 2019), her onstage patter (*Dolly Parton: Live from London* 2010), and songs like 'Coat of Many Colors' and 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'. These narratives fit into many tropes needed to authenticate Parton within the genre of country music (Hamessley 2020, p. 59; Moore 2002; Peterson 1997; Wilson 1998, p. 109). At the same time, Parton is recognised as an LGBTQ+ icon and ally (Edwards 2018, p. 6; Hamessley 2020, pp. 194-197; Hubbs 2015, p. 73). Popular cultural narratives around country music and rural America often posit that LGBTQ+ inclusion and country music do not belong together (Herring 2010; Hubbs 2014), yet Parton's persona and her life-writing practices become places in which they do.

Parton offers generative potential as a case study in both persona and life writing together as Parton's persona is largely constructed through her life writing, which weaves in aspects of her life story, especially her childhood (Hamessley 2020, pp. 42-49). This article will explore the way that Parton's persona resonates with LGBTQ+ audiences and how queer experiences are integrated (especially by her audiences) into Parton's life-writing practices. Parton's persona has been increasingly constructed around being inclusive of LGBTQ+ people. Parton's activities over recent years have taken a proactive role in constructing her legacy, through for instance the 2019 BBC documentary: *Dolly Parton: Here I Am* and her lyric book *Songteller* in 2020. Both of these reference her LGBTQ+ fanbase and her relationships with LGBTQ+ people, thereby explicitly incorporating her LGBTQ+ allyship into her persona (Parton & Oermann 2020, p. 263). This allyship has been consistent especially over the past thirty years, including an explicit reference to accepting "gay" people in the 1991 song *Family* (Parton 1991), emphatically stating in *Vanity Fair* "I love and understand gay people" (Sessums 1991) that same year, writing and recording the song "Travelin' Thru" in support of trans people for the film *Transamerica* in 2005 (Parton 2006), supporting marriage equality in 2009 (Betts 2009), and speaking out against transphobic toilet bans in 2016 (Hamessley 2020, p. 194). This advocacy constructs Parton's persona in a particular way and encourages readings of Parton's life writing that may suggest a way of including LGBTQ+ people in her narratives of growing up in a supportive familial home in rural Appalachia, a region dominant narratives would perceive to be hostile to LGBTQ+ subjects (Hubbs 2014). Although Parton's intentional LGBTQ+ allyship is impactful, it is also important to acknowledge the role and persona of Parton's LGBTQ+ audiences. This article will first outline Parton's persona and life writing to conceptualise the generative collective potential of her mythmaking (Edwards 2018, pp. 1-26) and the ways in which Parton's audiences are active within this. I will then analyse 'Coat of Many Colors' to explore how Parton's "empathic songwriting" enables LGBTQ+ listeners to engage with Parton's persona and life writing (Lordi 2020). This will be followed by an analysis of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' that will explore how these queer resonances are situated more broadly to produce collective life-writing narratives of an LGBTQ+ inclusive Appalachia and country music. The final part of the article will consider the limitations of mythologising Parton and how to ensure that a "multiplicity" of audience readings and personas can be conceptualised (Barbour, Lee & Moore 2021, p. 2; Lee et al. 2021).

Parton and Persona

Previous scholarship has analysed the way Parton constructs her media persona. Leigh H. Edwards argues that Parton constructs her "persona" through "strategies of exaggeration" (2018, p.4), which can be observed in Parton's use of camp and jokes about the construction and artificiality of her appearance (2018, pp. 1-2). Jada Watson identifies Parton's song writing as being an important practice "to interrogate issues related to the traditions and culture of place, helping to establish a sense of regional identity" which has "left a mark on Parton's identity"

(2016, p. 128, 127). Parton's persona (which is partially constructed through song writing) becomes a space where, as Pamela Wilson argues, "Parton manages and actively exploits the contradictory meanings associated with the social categories of gender, class, ethnic, and regional identity" (1998, p. 99). One of these contradictions, and the focus of this article, is how Parton's persona "combines" (Edwards 2018, p. 31) an Appalachian regional identity with LGBTQ+ allyship. Conceptualising Parton's persona as an LGBTQ+ ally or advocate highlights the relationship Parton has with her LGBTQ+ audiences. This dynamic can be situated within a longer history of LGBTQ+ and especially gay men's identification with women celebrities (such as Judy Garland [Dyer 2004, pp. 137-192]). Stephen Maddison suggests that this can be an effective political strategy to use "identification with similar desires in [heterosexual] women" (sexual desire for men) to enable gay men "a much wider range of places to locate culturally" (2000, p. 6). Since women's sexual desire for men has some form of "cultural legitimation and widespread representation" (Maddison 2000, p.6), this enables gay men to have some outlet for expression, albeit coded, within a homophobic culture (Dyer 2002, p. 153). This identification is not just about articulating gay men's sexual desire but becomes more broadly a means of articulating an affective and political relationship to the social world (Maddison 2000, pp. 6-7). Gay men are active in this relationship with the celebrity and in constructing the "star persona" (Dyer 1979; Wilson 1998, p. 99). Broadening this approach out to LGBTQ+ readings of Parton's persona, considering the way Parton's LGBTQ+ audiences are active in the interpretation of Parton's persona shifts the emphasis to the persona of Parton's audiences.

Parton's audiences are often described in a way that suggests that they have taken on a particular persona that marks out a collective identity that distinguishes them from that of other artists' audiences. Although the country music industry has continued to privilege white and predominantly heterosexual audiences as its main demographic (Martinez 2020, p. 128), Parton's audiences differ from this industry assumption and have been identified as being politically and demographically broad (Smash 2021, pp. 36-37), including a large LGBTQ+ fan base (Hamesley 2020, p. 194). This diversity within Parton's audiences is sometimes perceived as atypical for a country artist (Cottom 2021), although it should be acknowledged that country music audiences are more diverse than the country music industry recognises (Martinez 2020, p. 128). Parton's audiences bring an opportunity to further explore "the collective dimension of persona" (Barbour, Lee & Moore 2021, p. 3). A key idea to explore is the "multiplicity" (Barbour, Lee & Moore 2021, p. 2; Lee et al. 2021) of perspectives within this audience and, in particular, the "communicative and emotional" (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 9) ways LGBTQ+ listeners can engage within this collective persona.

In *Persona Studies: An Introduction*, Marshall, Barbour and Moore conceptualise persona as being collectively constituted where persona can be conceptualised "as a multiplicity of nodes in a distributed network, where each node connects to a different micro-public" (2020, p. 88). Micro-publics can be conceptualised as operating under the radar (Marshall, Barbour & Moore identify "The book club, the church, the clinic, or the quiet chat over a drink" (2020, p. 87) as examples). Yet through their "latency" (Marshall, Barbour & Moore 2020, p. 88) micro-publics can influence the organisation and advancement of political movements (Keane 1995, p.10). Micro-publics are key to constructing personas through a process of negotiation as there are "multiple micro-publics", which "complicates [the] shape and presentation" of the persona (Marshall, Barbour & Moore 2020, p. 88). It is therefore important to be attentive to multiplicity within this collective. The collective persona of Parton's audience creates an opportunity for (re)interpreting Parton's songs through listening with queer resonances in mind and representing more of the multiplicity of personas (Barbour, Lee & Moore 2021, p. 2; Lee et al. 2021; Martinez 2020, p. 134; Martinez 2021) that are available in both Parton's repertory, and by extension more widely in the genre of country music. This paper will shift the emphasis from

analysing the construction of Parton's individual persona to foreground the texts of the songs (Barker 2022) utilising the potential of "queer reading" (Maddison 2000, p. 8; see also Dyer 2004, pp. 137-192). Queer reading not only constructs the individual autobiographic persona of Parton, but also a particular collective persona of an LGBTQ+ country audience.

Parton and Life Writing

These tensions "between the individual and the social" (Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 8); star and audience, can be unpacked within Parton's life-writing practices. Parton's persona is constructed through practices of life writing that use aspects of Parton's life story as the Tennessee "mountain girl" (Edwards 2018, p. 30). These life-storying practices become part of Parton's celebrity representation and individual star brand (Wilson 1998, p. 99). There are other attributes to her life-writing practice that take on a more collective element. The regional aspects of Parton's life writing (Watson 2016) figure her as a representative of Appalachia and, at times, more broadly, the genre of country music. An example of this is when Linda Ronstadt described Parton as "authentic Appalachian music" during promotion of the 1987 *Trio* album (Edwards 2018, p. 123). These representational narratives figured by and around Parton transform her individual life story into narratives with collective resonances and significations. These collective aspects enable listeners to participate within Parton's life-writing practices. For LGBTQ+ listeners this provides an opportunity to participate within the genre of country music and, through the regional aspects of Parton's persona, participate in a representation of Appalachia as well as the "familial" or "childhood home" that is constructed as a space of acceptance and "belonging" (Fortier 2003, p. 131).

Parton's life writing and persona are heavily invested in affective claims to chronological narrative and understanding our lives and selves "as if they were narratives" (Drag 2019, p. 224). These narratives have strong affective power and appeal as a "source of illusory and feeble reassurance" (Drag 2019, p. 225). There has often been a critique of this kind of life-writing practice that suggests a linear narrative and a stable subject. Drag suggests that there is comfort in this "quest for singularity, the therapy of becoming oneself" (2019, p. 225), but that this kind of narrative is inadequate for conceptualising the way we experience and live our lives. Life writing as a chronological and linear narrative, in Drag's view, is inaccurate because "life is... devoid of a teleology or narrative pattern" (2019, p. 226). The most accurate or "appropriate strategy to represent life is parataxis-the collage-like method of juxtaposing elements without any discernible logic" (Drag 2019, p. 226). Further, destabilising the "singularity" (Drag 2019, p. 225) of the self provides potential for collective life writing (Auster 2017, p. x). In destabilising the link between experience and self, this opens up life writing to the potential to represent not just an individual life, but potentially multiple, as there is a more porous boundary between the self and other. A text like Joe Brainard's *I Remember* (2017) is structured through a "random arrangement of recollections [that] do not engage with one another in any discernible way and do not constitute a chronological or cause-and-effect sequence" (Drag 2019, p. 229). Brainard conveys "the sense of the self as ... [being] irreducible to being enclosed in the neat parameters of a story" (Drag 2019, p. 228). Experience is presented as "universal rather than unique and self-defining" (Drag 2019, p. 232). These universalising techniques attempt "to embrace everyone and assume a collective subjectivity" (Drag 2019, p. 233). *I Remember* is an example of collective life writing that destabilises the self to conceptualise a collective persona.

Parton's reliance on tropes of traditional life writing and a stable coherent self through, for instance, repeated references to growing up in the Smoky Mountains that anchor her childhood and "formative years" (Drag 2019, p. 233), could suggest a conservative approach to life writing. Nevertheless, Parton's life writing has its own complexity. Richard Middleton

asserts that “repetition is both subjectivity’s greatest support – its mimetic screen – and the ground of its self-questioning” (2006, p. 196). Repeated narratives of the self’s identity sustain its presentation of coherence, whilst at the same time each repetition is an individual act that risks failing to sustain the illusion of coherence and stability, and thereby revealing the self’s inconsistencies. Similarly, every repetition of Parton’s life story risks failing to convince audiences of the coherency and stability of her own life-writing narrative. Like her persona, Parton’s life writing and mythology are “knowingly exaggerated” (Edwards 2018, p. 2). The foreword to Parton’s 1994 autobiography introduces her life story as if it is a fairy tale: “Once Upon a Time and far, far away, back in the hollers at the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee there lived a little girl with yellow hair, blue-green eyes, fair skin, and freckles” (Parton 1994, ix). From the “once upon a time” storytelling cliché and the excesses of the description, there is a campy mythologising of both Parton’s own life story and the Smoky Mountains as a region, which serve to bestow the region with a majestic quality (Hamessley 2020, p. 57). The knowing way that these fairy tale tropes are deployed demonstrates a conscious act of mythmaking (Edwards 2018, pp. 1-26).

My approach to Parton’s self-mythologising is not “debunking” or aiming to “retrieve an authentic version of” it, but to explore the “workings of myth” (Tost 2011, p. xi-xiii). I am less interested in exposing or discovering “the truth” behind the myth, but in exploring what Parton’s mythmaking *does*. Parton’s life writing transforms episodes from her life story into myth, and by extension her persona is a mythologised construction (Edwards 2018, pp. 1-26). Mythmaking is ambivalent to “definitive notions of truthfulness or falsity” (Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 4), yet these myths have powerful affective and tangible effects. Myths achieve their impact “not because ... [of] adequate empirical evidence” (Shusterman 1999, p. 230), but through the affective logics that they deploy to resonate with their audiences. Parton’s mythologised life writing similarly does not depend on “factual demonstration” (Shusterman 1999, p. 226) to work, “but... [by] designing and tapping into mountain scenarios and sounds that her audiences want to, and can, accept as authentic” (Hamessley 2020, p. 60). There is not a complete distinction between believing and wanting to believe in the way audiences engage with Parton’s life-writing myths. For LGBTQ+ audiences, Parton’s myths can offer a promise of belonging within country music, Appalachia and her familial life-writing narratives that do not require “factual demonstration” to resonate (Shusterman 1999, p. 226). For LGBTQ+ people who have been excluded from country music (as an industry [Hubbs 2021]), Appalachia, and the “familial home” (Fortier 2003, p. 120) Parton’s mythmaking can offer a possibility of renegotiating these relationships. Reclaiming traditional life-writing conventions and collective narratives of Appalachia and country music offers potential for LGBTQ+ listeners to assert their presence within the genre.

Life Story and Persona in ‘Coat of Many Colors’

This next section will analyse ‘Coat of Many Colors’ to explore how Parton’s “autobiographical” song writing (Berman 1978, p. 78; Hamessley 2020, p. 59) is given collective resonances that enable LGBTQ+ listeners to identify with and read into Parton’s persona and life-writing practices. ‘Coat of Many Colors’ is a key text for understanding the way Parton’s persona integrates individual experiences into a more collective life-writing practice. ‘Coat of Many Colors’ is a song that is often presented as inspired by Parton’s life story. When performing, Parton will often introduce the song with a comic anecdote about her childhood (*Dolly Parton: Live from London* 2010). Parton identifies ‘Coat of Many Colors’ as being one of her favourite songs (*Dolly Parton: Here I Am* 2019) and being key to how fans engage with her (Hamessley 2020, p. 53). The song has become directly linked with Parton’s persona, infusing it with Parton’s constructed life story (Edwards 2018, p. 23). The process of Parton’s persona and

integrated song writing is reiterative and through its “mimetic” process (Middleton 2006, p. 196) over the past fifty years, Parton has reinforced the continual reiteration and reconstruction of this persona. Through its emotional content and storytelling ‘Coat of Many Colors’ forges affective attachments to both the song and Parton’s persona.

‘Coat of Many Colours’ retells an episode from the protagonist’s (implicitly Parton) childhood: her mother sewing her coat out of “a box of rags” (Parton 1971) which gives the song’s protagonist a sense of “pride” (Hamessley 2020, p. 52), but when she goes to school, all that the other kids see are the “rags” (Parton 1971) and they “make fun of her” (Barker 2021). In focusing on this moment, the song communicates the emotional significance of the coat, which represents the mother’s “love” (Parton 1971). The coat is also a way of passing down Bible stories: “as she sewed she told a story from the Bible” about “Joseph” and “his coat of many colors” (Parton 1971). Through these stories being passed down both orally and tangibly through the coat, the protagonist is given a sense of belonging (within the family and the stories) and pride within herself: “I wore it so proudly” (Parton 1971). This episode is also a moment of conflict when she gets to school “to find the others laughing and making fun of” (Parton 1971) her. This conflict is upsetting to the song’s protagonist and represents a conflict of value systems (Hubbs 2014, p. 81). Parton’s protagonist at first “couldn’t understand” why the other children were laughing at her. In her value system she “felt [she] was rich” (Parton 1971). “Rich” in this line is about being provided for, not with material wealth or possessions, but “with love” (Parton 1971).

Parton’s life writing in this song, by tapping into the stigmatisation and “shame” (Parton 1994, p. 51) experienced by working-class people and those living in rural poverty, takes on a more collective significance beyond an individual experience of bullying and stigma: “we had no money” (emphasis added Parton 1971). Parton’s song represents more than just the individual persona of the artist and resonates with the collective persona of some of Parton’s audience, some of whom may have backgrounds like Parton’s (Smarsh 2021, p. 5) and some of whom may identify with being shamed through other identity markers and experiences. In Parton’s own description of the song, she encourages different readings that enable the song to resonate widely beyond her individual experience. Parton says: “it really covers a lot of ground... It’s about confidence, it’s about bullying. It’s about acceptance” and describes the song as her “philosophy... it’s ok to be different... it’s ok to not be like everybody else. In fact, it’s not only ok, it’s wonderful that you are who you are” (*Dolly Parton: Here I Am* 2019). Parton’s statement that the song “covers a lot of ground” could easily refer to the multiplicity of experiences within her audiences. ‘Coat of Many Colors’ is a song that is more than about Parton herself and in its message of acceptance of difference, the song has the potential to resonate across a “diverse” group of listeners (Cottom 2021). Her “philosophy” that “it’s ok to be different” could also be read as an LGBTQ+ pride statement (Barker 2021). Amongst the multiplicity within Parton’s audience is the potential for LGBTQ+ personas and queer readings of ‘Coat of Many Colors’.

Parton’s song can have particular resonances for LGBTQ+ listeners. The ‘Coat of Many Colors’ as a visual image has a striking resemblance with the LGBTQ+ Pride flag (Barker 2021; Richard Elliott, personal communication, 2 September 2020). Parton’s protagonist in the song wears the coat as a statement of pride. Parton’s protagonist wears her poverty quite literally on her sleeve. The poverty in the song is presented in a matter-of-fact way, whether that is describing the coat as “rags” or “patches on [her] britches/ and holes in both [her] shoes” (Parton 1971). The protagonist does not express any discontent or sadness with her situation until she experiences shame within the social environment of the school. In representing the protagonist’s poverty in this way, ‘Coat of Many Colors’ does affective work renegotiating ideas of pride and shame (Barker 2021). Shame, as an affect, has been theorised by queer scholarship

as being capable of being “transmuted into pride as part of a strategy by individuals and groups to reverse the discourse” (Munt 2008, p. 4). Further, there is potential for “horizontal bonds [to be] formed through communities of shame [which] can be transmuted into collective desires to claim a political presence and a legitimate self” (Munt 2008, p. 4). ‘Coat of Many Colors’ offers the potential for “coalitional alliances” (Butler 1993: p. 20) and forging “horizontal bonds” (Munt 2008, p. 4) through the affective reworkings of shame that makes a point of connection between the socially stigmatised groups of working-class people in Appalachia and LGBTQ+ people (Barker 2021). The collective persona of Parton’s “diverse” audiences (Cottom 2021) is able to interpret the affective logics (Hubbs 2021) in ‘Coat of Many Colors’ around renegotiating pride, shame, and acceptance (Barker 2021).

This offers a point of entry for LGBTQ+ audiences into Parton’s life-writing practices, which draw heavily on the genre of country music (the family setting (Neal 2007, p. 43), Christian theology, and Parton’s song writing). The narrative of ‘Coat of Many Colors’ unfolds through three frames of storytelling: the mother, the Bible, and the song’s protagonist. By retelling a story her mother has told, the protagonist is continuing a family tradition. By linking that to retelling a Bible story, the protagonist’s experiences of poverty and shame are granted a sense of “dignity” (Hubbs 2014, p. 87). Parton’s performance of this song is a further act of storytelling that establishes it as part of the country music genre’s story-telling tradition (Hamesley 2020, p. 51). Through family, faith, and the genre of country music, Parton’s protagonist has tools to challenge the shame attached to poverty and achieve a personal sense of pride and dignity. This is a possibility that the song also promises LGBTQ+ listeners.

LGBTQ+ Belonging and “Home” in Parton’s Life Writing and Persona

To explore this idea of collective life writing that relates to broader representational narratives of the place of LGBTQ+ people within the genre of country music, these next sections will analyse ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’. From its title, ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ identifies the specific region of Appalachia and the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee as the setting for Parton’s life writing in this song. Parton’s individual narrative becomes part of a collective representation of Appalachia and country music. Individual listeners, including LGBTQ+ listeners, can situate themselves within these representations. Through analysing how Parton represents “home”, I will explore the potential ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ has for LGBTQ+ listeners to “make... home” (Fortier 2003, p.120) and belong within the song; Parton’s wider repertoire, persona and life writing; and more broadly the genre of country music (Goldin-Perschbacher 2015, p. 779).

“Home” is a key concept to explore the potential for audiences to articulate their persona and assert their presence not just in Parton’s collective life writing but also in the genre of country music. Anne-Marie Fortier has critiqued the way some LGBTQ+ life-writing practices represent and conceptualise “home” within coming-out narratives. Such narratives can rely on too crude an oppositionality with a “tendency to oppose queerness and the childhood home, where the latter is a space where queerness does not fit” (Fortier 2003, p. 116). In constructing this opposition and narrative of exclusion, these narratives nonetheless remain attached to the idea of home “as the emblematic model of comfort, care and belonging” (Fortier 2003, p. 115). Home as belonging is then figured as a stark contrast to LGBTQ+ subjects’ presumed exclusion from this, and the coming-out narrative becomes one where LGBTQ+ subjects attempt to find “comfort, care and belonging” elsewhere (Fortier 2001, p. 410). Fortier critiques this, arguing that in narratives defining belonging for LGBTQ+ subjects as outside the family home, the “familial home remains unproblematically heterosexualized”, and heteronormativity “is fatalistically... inscribed within, the family” (Fortier 2003, p. 120). For these oppositional

narratives to function, places and identities are static and fixed. This oppositionality too readily accepts homophobic definitions of family, home, and where LGBTQ+ people belong (McClary 2002, pp. 160-161). The home in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' should not be monolithically heterosexualised nor uncritically assumed to lack or marginalise LGBTQ+ subjects. Such a critical practice, as Fortier argues, would "fatalistically" reinscribe that homophobia back into this home and erase LGBTQ+ subjects and their agency (Fortier 2003, p. 120).

Parton's life writing can demonstrate how Parton's persona is infused into songs leading to sonic connections that resonate with LGBTQ+ experiences. In her 1994 autobiography, Parton makes the case for sexuality and sexual pleasure as having the potential to exist within her community and faith. Parton describes her experiences in an old, abandoned church, observing "the dirty drawings on the walls... studying the way the sexual organs had been drawn and at times trying to add to them" and taking "pieces of ivory that had been the tops of the piano keys... and strings from the soprano section [and attaching them] to an old mandolin" (Parton 1994, p. 77). Parton then asserts: "here in one place was God, music, and sex" (Parton 1994, p. 77). Parton makes an emphatic claim that sex and her sexuality belong within her faith: "I had come to know that it was all right for me to be a sexual being. I knew that was one of the things God meant for me to be" (Parton 1994, p. 78). Parton makes a powerful claim for divine permission for sexual desire (Edwards 2018, pp. 162-163). Hamessley argues that Parton's support for LGBTQ+ people stems from her own "sense of being judged as an outsider" (Hamessley 2020, p. 196) during her Pentecostal (Church of God) "upbringing" (Edwards 2018, p. 16). Parton knows that these institutions were often not encouraging around open sexuality and sexual pleasure. A few pages earlier in her autobiography, Parton critiques the shame-filled, "fire and brimstone" (Hamessley 2020, p. 186) style of preaching within her experiences of church: "I can remember sitting in church and listening to what a worthless sinner I was, and feeling so ashamed without giving much thought to what I had to be ashamed of. What has a six-year-old kid done that justifies being burned in hellfire?" (Parton 1994, p. 72). These experiences of shame and fear are aspects of religious institutions that Parton has consistently criticised. Parton describes how sex is treated within these frameworks of shame and sin: "it must be sex that condemns you to hell. Not that you've had sex or anything close to it, but somehow just being aware that it exists feels like a grievous sin in itself" (Parton 1994, p. 73). Parton refuses to accept these frameworks around shame and sexuality, which is key to forging a point of connection for LGBTQ+ audiences to engage with Parton's persona to challenge dominant cultural homophobic narratives that attach shame to queer sexuality.

The representations within 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' like all of Parton's constructed persona and life writing are practices of mythmaking. The song is a nostalgic and positive representation of the area Parton grew up: the poor, rural region of Appalachia. The song opens on a summer afternoon representing peace and relaxation ("life is as peaceful as a baby's sigh") before building into a celebration of the region's natural beauty ("mountain", "fields", "honeysuckle vine") and wildlife ("June bugs", "fireflies", "crickets", "eagle", "songbird"). All of this takes place within the thriving social world connected to "church on Sunday with the ones ya love" (Parton 1973). The warm, relaxed pace and arrangement of instrumentation at the beginning of the song suggests that this "Tennessee Mountain Home" (Parton 1973) is a place of "comfort... and belonging" (Fortier 2001, p. 410) for the song's protagonist. Lydia R. Hamessley points out that media and cultural representations of Appalachia are rarely romanticised and positive (2020, p. 59) and therefore this mythmaking is "subversive" (Edwards 2018, p. 4). Pamela Fox argues that 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' recuperates "class abjection" (2009, p. 140; see also Hamessley 2020, p. 63). Parton does this not by deconstructing dominant cultural narratives and myths, but through articulating her own. Leigh H. Edwards argues that Parton "combines" both the "stigmatised" and "privileged" together (Edwards 2018, p. 31). The rural

Appalachian poverty is brought within the realm of respectability through the comforting pastoral imagery in Parton's representation. The same potential for "horizontal bonds" (Munt 2008, p. 4) between rural poverty and LGBTQ+ people in 'Coat of Many Colors' (Barker 2021) is in this song. 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' also contains a direct invocation to "creating home" (Fortier 2003, p. 131) for the song's listeners.

Parton's mythmaking in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' has the potential to demonstrate that LGBTQ+ people belong in Appalachia and country music. Parton's experiences of being judged for her own sexuality (Hamesley 2020, p. 196) are implicitly invoked in the third verse of 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' where there is a clear reference to sexuality and romantic relationships: "Walkin' home from church on a Sunday with the one ya' love/ Just laughin', talkin', makin' future plans" (Parton 1973). This quick succession of verbs embodies the social activity described, with the church at the heart of this. The following lines bring sexuality into this social scene: "And when the folks ain't lookin', you might steal a kiss or two" (Parton 1973). It is ambiguous the extent to which the protagonist's sexuality is represented as belonging within the social world of the song. That these kisses take place "when the folks ain't lookin'" suggest that this is something "folks" may disapprove of. The verb "steal" suggests that these moments of sexual pleasure must be gained despite the social world around the childhood family home. At the same time, the social dynamics and routines enable these sexual interactions. The walk home from church on Sunday, with the community in attendance facilitates them through the opportunity to meet potential sexual partners. In the sexual relationships alluded to there is a notable absence of shame. The tone of the line "when the folks ain't lookin'" (Parton 1973) suggests that avoiding people 'lookin'" is predominantly a practical consideration, rather than an action driven by shame. Therefore, the "idealistic, nostalgic" sound of the song remains in this verse and its representation of sexuality (Hamesley 2020, p. 59).

The affective logics within this verse are queerly resonant and, similar to 'Coat of Many Colors', are "rearranging" and "rearticulating" (Ross 1991, p.100) shame and pride, constructing a persona that is recognised as trying to include more people within the "comfort, care and belonging" of home (Fortier 2003, p. 115). Home within Parton's persona and life writing represents multiple things: the literal childhood home of 'Coat of Many Colors', belonging within mythologised representations of Appalachia, and the genre of country music (Goldin-Perschbacher 2015, p. 779). 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' produces a sense of comfort and belonging through situating acceptance of the protagonist's sexuality within a nostalgic, idealised representation of home. This sense of comfort alongside the song's representations of sexuality within this pastoral scene can offer LGBTQ+ listeners a sense of "belonging" (Goldin-Perschbacher 2015, p. 779) within Parton's discography, and a way to participate within Parton's self-mythologised persona and life writing. 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' constructs, even if just temporarily, a sense of a home, a "childhood", "familial" (Fortier 2003, p. 120) home that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ people. The sonic palette and tropes of country music construct this home using the backdrop of the Appalachia region. This does significant "cultural work" (Edwards 2018, p. 13) in conceptualising where LGBTQ+ people can belong.

Queer Multiplicity in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'

In approaching Parton's LGBTQ+ audience as a collective persona it is important to acknowledge the intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) within this and to recognise a multiplicity of listeners. It is important to approach the home represented in 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' critically, and interrogate which experiences, readings, audience personas, and life-writing narratives are enabled, and which are "marginalised" (Pittelman 2021). Black listeners can have a different positionality to Appalachia and country music. Rhiannon Giddens suggests

that “there ain’t nothing for [Black listeners] in that nostalgia” (Giddens quoted in Abdelmahmoud, 2020). Indeed, these same representations of home may also invoke “visceral feelings of fear of racialised violence” (Royster 2017, p. 307) for Black listeners. When exploring Parton’s songs, it is important to consider these different experiences and positionalities in relation to country music. Of equal importance is not to overly romanticise these life-writing narratives that remain uncritically attached to the idea of home as “seamless belonging” (Fortier 2001, p. 420), especially when experiences of racism are not acknowledged. Just as Parton has to navigate restrictive narratives around class and gender whilst also being able to benefit from and “leverage” her white privilege (Cottom 2021), white LGBTQ+ listeners may need to navigate homophobic attitudes and narratives around the family home, but they can also access privilege through their whiteness. This privilege may mean that white LGBTQ+ listeners may be able to enjoy a song like ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ and its invocations of home free from the “fear of racialised violence” that Royster describes (Royster 2017, p. 307). In representing an idealised sense of comfort and belonging, ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ risks obscuring these other narratives and experiences of home. Home should not be treated in any monolithic way, neither being “inherently” inclusive nor as a complete rejection of LGBTQ+ people (Fortier 2003, p. 131). Instead, home should be conceptualised as “a contingent product of historical circumstances and discursive formations – of class, religion, ethnicity, nation – that individuals negotiate in the process of creating home” (Fortier 2003, p. 131). Home is something that is always “in... process” that different LGBTQ+ subjects “negotiate” (Fortier 2003, p. 131) in various ways. Within the collective persona and collective life writing enabled through ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’, there is the potential for a multiplicity of interpretations of the song and affective work around “creating home” (Fortier 2003, p.131).

The life writing in ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ offers potential to resonate with more people within Parton’s audiences. Francesca T. Royster suggests that country music “can be a productive sonic space of nostalgia and mourning for Black queer listeners” (2017, p. 307). The listener takes an active role in undertaking a “subjective reconstruction” of the relationship between racial and sexual identities and country music (Whitlock 2013, p. xxix). Parton’s ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ may therefore not be irretrievably inaccessible to Black LGBTQ+ listeners. The Smoky Mountains have specific geographic and cultural roots but they can also take on additional meanings and resonances through the experiences of different listeners (Ma 2021). Jad Abumrad describes the experience of driving to Parton’s Tennessee mountain home as “exactly the feeling of driving up to [his] Dad’s old village in the mountains of Lebanon” (Abumrad & Oliaee, 2019a). Kenyan artist Esther Konkara is well known in Kenya for performing Parton’s songs and particularly ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’. Konkara grew up in a rural village and would go up to the mountain and sing Parton’s song (Abumrad & Oliaee, 2019). She describes the personal significance of the song: “my Tennessee was those hills where I come from” and attributes this to “the vividness of the imagery”: “Dolly’s very vivid about the place. You can imagine this is how Tennessee looked like. The birds singing and you can just get that picture” (Konkara quoted in Abumrad & Oliaee, 2019). ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home’ is able to resonate with different listeners across the US and globally. The song performs important functions within different narratives of home that suggest a complex and versatile potential within different life-writing narratives and audience personas, which can include LGBTQ+ people beyond just cis gendered white gay men.

Conclusion

Parton’s self-mythologised persona, life writing, and mythmaking offer a generative mode for understanding LGBTQ+ belonging in country music, both geographically and musically. It is also important to acknowledge the tensions and limitations of Parton’s collective life writing in being

able to resonate across the LGBTQ+ community, and it should not be assumed that texts such as 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' and 'Coat of Many Colors' are read by LGBTQ+ listeners in any singular way. Although it is important to not overstate or romanticise belonging, it is also important that in resisting racist and white-washed narratives around country music, we do not overly determine (Hubbs 2021) or "fatalistically" inscribe (Fortier 2003, p. 120) representations of country music or Appalachia. This would risk granting them more rhetorical power than they already have (Barker 2022), by presenting them as if they are completely totalising of the way different listeners can and have responded to Parton's songs. There is a need for further critical work and critique of Parton's persona, such as Tressie McMillan Cottom's critique of the "whiteness" of Parton's image and its cultural significations (Cottom 2021). Just as these critical reading practices have the potential to open Parton's discography to LGBTQ+ listeners, a practice attuned to the cultural context of whiteness and racism within the country music industry is key to articulating and representing the multiplicity of listener (and artist) persona and life-writing practices in the genre of country music (Martinez 2020, 2021; Royster 2017; Watson 2021). More broadly the case studies in this article have shown the importance of unpicking the interrelationship between star persona, life writing, and audiences, enabling a multiplicity of readings within these conceptualisations. Further research within persona studies should continue to emphasise the "collective constitution of... persona" (Marshall, Barbour & Moore 2020, p. 87), and specifically devote more attention to audiences' interpretative and reading practices. This could involve ethnographic research to explore more empirically the ways fans and audiences participate in the construction (and deployment) of a star's persona (across different artists and musical genres), and the ways audiences interpret artists' repertory. Shifting the understanding of meaning away from the individual artist to that of audiences is vital to conceptualising persona as being collectively constructed and expanding the way cultural narratives and texts are understood.

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