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I. Introduction

Beer, pickup trucks, small farm towns, and pretty girls are the four main stereotypes of modern country music. Recent Billboard number ones are filled with lines such as “I got that real good, feel good stuff / Up under the seat of my big black jacked up truck” (from Luke Bryan’s “That’s My Kind of Night”) and “She's poppin' right out of the South Georgia water / Thought, ‘Oh, good Lord, she had them long tanned legs’” (from Florida Georgia Line’s “Cruise”). Music critic Jody Rosen is credited with coining the term to describe these songs. “Bro country,” an evolution of the country music genre that has sparked controversy within the industry, is the “music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude” (Rosen). It is a sub-genre of country, which has been alienating audiences for decades. Country music is often viewed as representing everything that is “wrong” with the South, therefore causing music listeners to frequently avoid and openly mock the genre. The fans and artists within country music are very aware of their reputation, and frequently make the choice to further play to their audience, rather than appeal to the masses. “Outsiders disliking it endears it all the more to its fans, who figure those outsiders probably don’t like them much either” (Wilson). This often apt perception of “outsiders” causes artists and fans alike to dig in and further embrace the very thing that causes certain audiences to dislike them.

Bro country in some ways has bridged this gap. Merging the styles of modern hip-hop and pop with the typical country accent and content, the 2010s brought an offshoot of country that widely appealed to “frat bros” for the first time. Luke Bryan, one of the biggest stars in country music, noticed the possibilities of combing these types of sounds early on. He noticed that his music could be directly followed by a hip-hop track, and that the college educated, partying audiences never minded merging the two genres. Since then, he has thrived off his bro

country image. He is both aware of the impact he has had on future artists as well as the controversy surrounding his style of music. Bryan acknowledges that “I didn't know I was gonna open up another avenue… And you know what? There'll always be people who say I ruined country music” (Wood). Bro country is confusing territory when considering the content, representation, and problematic nature of many of the songs. On one hand, it has opened up the genre to an entirely new audience by using the pop influence to make it more palatable for those who aren’t a fan of traditional country. In addition, by successfully merging hip-hop with country, the typical country audience is also exposed to a new genre of music. This crossover has allowed for a more complete representation for black artists within country music, a genre that has historically struggled with racism and a lack of diversity. Lil Nas X, an artist who lives almost entirely in the rap genre, gained fame with his song “Old Town Road,” a song with country overtones alongside rap formatted lyrics. This wouldn’t have been possible without the introduction of the stylistic aspects of hip-hop that bro country brought to Nashville. Similarly, there has been a rise in collaboration between country and rap artists. Kane Brown, Swae Lee, and Khalid teamed up to make “Be Like That” while Morgan Wallen and Lil Durk created “Broadway Girls.” Rosen argues that this is the benefit of bro country, despite arguments that the genre is being ruined (Smith). While blurring the line between country and rap might be alienating for old school fans, it does have the potential to open the minds of many listeners while merging fan bases.

However, it is also true that with the rise of this sub-genre, a worse representation of women came with it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, songs about drinking, casual dating, and small-town parties don’t always take in to account the harmful effects of depicting women as nothing more than an accessory to the aforementioned parties and small towns. This type of negative

representation is not only being noticed by fans and critics, it is a trend that female country artists are arguably the most aware of. For example, country music duo Maddie and Tae wrote an entire song dedicated to the deterioration of how women are treated within the genre. “Girl in a Country Song” highlights all the harmful tropes found in many of the bro country songs.

The term “bro country” is both alienating and at times, confusing. Even Rosen, who was the first to use the phrase, expresses conflicted feelings and certain regrets about the stereotypes the term has led to. It was never his intention to turn traditional fans of the genre against the modern artists or to assist in “outsiders’ pretentiousness” towards the genre (Smith). “Maybe I wish I’d chosen some slightly less loaded term than bro” (Smith), he admits, but while there may be some regrets about the wording, he embraces how the phrase has improved awareness for disproportional representation of women in country music. In an interview with The Guardian, he explains “’*That* I feel very strongly about. There’s not one male artist these days who I think has done anything as interesting as Miranda Lambert over the course of her last five albums’” (Smith). These female singers are, in many ways, fighting back against the rise of bro country through their music. While songs about pretty girls and summer parties continue to top charts, songs filled with lyrics condemning the small-town mindset and archaic view of women gain popularity as well. Lyrics such as “Now we're lucky if we even get / To climb up in your truck, keep our mouth shut and ride along / And be the girl in a country song?” (from Maddie and Tae’s “Girl in a Country Song” and “If you ain't got two kids by 21 / You're probably gonna die alone / At least that's what tradition told you” (from Kacey Musgraves’ “Merry Go ‘Round”). These songs have topped the Billboard charts and even won Grammy by combatting the simplistic formula perfected by many male artists.

Personally, I had known about "bro country" for a while. I'd heard the term thrown out and was familiar with the songs. It wasn't until I decided to write my thesis on Nashville and the country music industry that I discovered the negative impact some of these songs have had on the progress of women in the industry. And I will admit, it left me in conflicted spot. On one hand, it feels hypocritical for me to completely condemn this type of music because looking at my Spotify, I have a lot of these types of songs saved, and they consistently rank as my most listened to music. What's even more conflicting is that a lot of the musicians I mentioned as promoting this problematic sub-genre I have seen in concert, including Luke Bryan (twice) and Florida Georgia Line.

However, the more I read about the growing disadvantages of female artists, the more I felt I had to address these issues in my script. The extent of the sexism in the industry has been surprising. For example, radio consultant Keith Hill, in Country Aircheck Weekly, drew an odd comparison between the current songs on the radio to the ingredients of a salad. He claimed that male artists are the lettuce and female artists are the tomatoes, and "If you want to make ratings in Country radio, take females out" (Hill, 8). While the representation and view of women in the industry continues to be a problem, it feels important to acknowledge that the genre isn't all bad. Despite the fact that bro-country is incredibly popular, it is far from the only type of country song that is popular right now. The genre is more innovative now than it ever has been. At the time of the Slate article, the Billboard Hot Country Chart was "more diverse than it has been in years" (Wilson), with singers such as Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves, Thomas Rhett, Sam Hunt, and Little Big Town all finding ways to tackle complex topics and/or merge country R&B and other genres. Still, sexism is present not only within the songs themselves, but by fans and industry professionals as well.

Overall, there was plenty of information to draw from when I began writing my screenplay. The trends, sexism, and reaction towards the recently developed sub-genre were all things I wanted to include in the script. Something I also wanted to explore was how many female artists use their music to "fight back" against the bro-country music and even how many artists try to separate themselves from the traditional country genre and the toxicity that comes along with it. For example, Kacey Musgraves is an artist that frequently gets grouped into the country genre, but her music is difficult to put a label on. Her first big hit "Merry Go 'Round" targets small town life and expectations. It is not hard to notice the contrast between how this song views small towns and how songs written by male artists view those same towns. Musgraves once explained her complicated relationship to the genre by saying "I love country. Do I love what it's turned into? No, not all the way… My favorite compliment ever is when someone says, I hate country music, but I love your music" (Moss). It is this contrast, along with the harmful standards of the genre, that I set out to explore in my script.

II. Literature review

Country music and the representation of women were not the only things I wanted to research and focus on in my script. I've always envisioned my script as a dark comedy, the genre that I most enjoy watching. I wanted to research this genre, why I felt it was used more frequently in TV than in films, as well as how women fit into the genre. In addition, knowing that I would be focused on death and murder and that I wanted to write a more realistic portrayal of coping with these themes than I had seen in many murder mysteries, I focused a bit on how death is reacted to in life and in media. Finally, I wanted to research why many murder mysteries

trended towards being absolutely absurd. However, I was met with a lack of sources and so was not able to include this in the literature review.

Death and Murder in Media and Real Life

Keith F. Durkin in his article *Death, Dying, and The Dead in Popular Culture* addresses the commonly cited idea that America is a "death-denying" culture that "attach fearful meanings to death, dying, and the dead" (Durkin 43). This is an interesting notion that seems to contrast many of the popular movies and TV shows that have become popular not only recently, but throughout history as well. In fact, Durkin references a study from 2002 that showed one-third of TV listings advertise that the content of the shows will somehow reference or talk about death or dying (43). He addresses the ways in which death and dying is seen in popular culture and breaks them into categories including films, television, music, recreation and jokes. In the film and TV sections he mostly discusses how widespread death and violence are, which did not benefit my purposes very much.

However, in the sections that relate to real life such as the recreation and humor sections, there are some interesting observations for how death is perceived and reacted to by American culture. A common phenomenon that is referenced is the concept of "dark tourism" which is "the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites" (46). This is interesting because it contrasts the idea of the American people being inherently death adverse even more so than the sheer amount of death related content available for our viewing. The obvious appeal that death has in real life, rather than simply in media that we know to be fictional, demonstrates that there is a real fascination for death and dying that can be used to explain the prevalence of death related media content. In addition, Durkin discussed the tendency of people to use death as material for jokes. He references jokes about AIDS, specific

murderers like OJ Simpson, as well as wars and mass suicides. While shocking, he explains that these jokes "invite us to be amused by images of bodily mutilation, vulnerability, and victimization" (46). This type of humor is obviously controversial and objectionable to many, but it is within that outrage that Durkin claims "increases the humor's entertainment value" (46).

Durkin concludes by using all of his examples of death being consumed or referenced by American culture to state that by incorporating death into our popular culture, we "effectively neutralize it" (47). He goes on to explain that "death is a disruptive event" (47) that requires the development of coping mechanisms. This allows individuals a space to explore their feelings and questions regarding death. This was helpful for me for two reasons. Number one is that it explains not only the presence of an audience for my script, but also the need for such pieces of work in helping to address death. More importantly, however, is how his discussion about death being "a disruptive event" has not been represented accurately in films. This emphasizes my initial observations about how the murder mystery genre fails to realistically depict the deaths that are used as the major driving plot point.

While Durkin uses his research to reduce fears about the amount of death in popular culture, others use the data of the wide array of death in media as grounds for concern. In their article *Sensational! Violent! Popular! Death in American Movies* Ned Schultz and Lisa Huet conducted a study on death in films to get a better understanding of the type of violence shown in films as well as a profile for the average victim in these films. The majority of their discussion showed that women "were nearly twice as likely to be recipients as instigators" (Schultz 137). They elaborate further to claim that "in American film, death is distorted into a sensational stream of violent attacks by males, with fear, injury, further aggression, and the absence of normal grief reactions as the most common responses" (138). They then use these claims to

address her concerns regarding the representation of death. They compare these deaths to obscene language that can negatively impact the audience. They also take issue with the inaccurate representation of grief and coping mechanisms. They conclude by saying that by allowing these types of scenes to be so widespread in films, society is allowing for a "denial of death" (140) and the normalization of such violent deaths will in turn lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms that reflect those of the film world more than the real world.

While the results of the study were interesting, I do not agree with the discussion portion that the amount of death is cause for as much alarm as they claim. I think Durkin's theory about how death in popular culture is actually beneficial for coping is more accurate. However, it is was worth keeping in mind what was said about the violence towards women and the unrealistic reactions of characters towards death and violence while writing my script.

The discussion of using humor to cope with death is not one that exists solely within entertainment. Brian D. Vivona researched the real-world application of jokes in dealing with heavy topics such as murder and death. He did so by conducting interviews with actively working crime scene investigators (CSIs) that he wrote about in *Investigating Humor Within a Context of Death and Tragedy: The Narratives of Contrasting Realities*. He found that even while dealing with very serious and disturbing cases, humor can be found in the workplace, or as he puts it "humor often exists side by side with human tragedy" (Vivona 1). This assertion demonstrates what I have been trying to articulate about why whodunits do not feel complete to me. It has been my belief that films choose to show death and murder as completely humorous or as completely tragic. However, through the course of this article, Vivona demonstrates that this is not true to the human experience. It is therefore my belief that there should be more interest in writing films that depict this reality, which is what I hope to accomplish in my writing. To

support his claims, Vivona interviewed several CSIs who recanted funny or embarrassing incidents that occurred at a crime scene that are used to liven the workplace to this day. The situations they described were not lighthearted. They were even more gruesome than the typical murder mystery film chooses to show. Generally, the murders shown in the whodunits such as *Clue* (1985) are quick and noticeably lacked blood or visible injury. The Cook in *Clue*, for example, is stabbed in the back with a knife but the wound lacks any blood or gore. Contrastingly, in the case of the real CSIs, a murder suicide is described where a high-power assault weapon was used, which resulted in exit wounds so large "a man's fist could fit through" (13). It is important to note that the jokes generated at this scene did not revolve around the victims themselves, but rather secondary events that occurred at the scene that impacted the CSIs such as a burst pipe and a dusty ceiling fan being turned on. However, it can still be surprising to think of a reality where someone looks at such a gruesome death and proceeds to make jokes or draw cartoons about the scene. However, Vivona explains that doing this actually helps the CSIs perform their job at a high level. It is stated that "distancing and disassociation from emotionally disturbing experiences allow workers to perform necessary work tasks. For example, gallows humor can serve an adaptive function" (4). If all the investigators focused on was the death and they did not allow themselves to laugh at themselves and each other, it is likely that the reality of their jobs would weigh too heavily on them to continue.

Workers in industries such as this see first-hand the "horrors that one human can inflict upon another" (11) and still manage to blur the line between comedic and horrific, which is something feature films don't do very often, at least not within the murder mystery genre. I am not saying I wish every whodunit should have the same type of gruesome murders seen in slashers or crime TV shows. I think *Clue* was a better movie because it avoided such violence,

however I find it interesting that the genre as a whole avoids such depictions. I am surprised that there has not been more variation on the genre and that many films have maintained the same form.

Dark Comedy/Horror Comedy

The rise of the type of story I am going to write was discussed by Jen Chaney in her Vulture article entitled *The Rise of the Murder-Con*. She explains her thoughts on this up-and-coming genre but does so solely through the lens of TV series. She first credits the rise of this genre with the "expanding definition of the comedy genre, where experimentation and deep character study are as common as setups and punchlines" (Chaney). She also explains that these genres did not come out of nowhere, the addition of comedy is simply the new part. She uses shows such as The Sopranos and Breaking Bad as examples of shows that use an anti-hero protagonist that have prepared audiences to root for such characters in the murder-com. The transition into adding comedy to these types of stories wasn't difficult. She concludes by saying that "Dastardly deaths happen in the real world every day. The murder-com acts as a release from that fact, and a less threatening way to reckon with it."

It is interesting to note that all of her examples of media that can fit into this genre are from TV. There is a huge opportunity to explore this in film that hasn't been done yet. *Barry*, *Good Girls*, *Search Party*, and *Trial & Error* are all used by Chaney to represent this genre in various ways. It is important that not all of these shows fit into the genre in the same way. *Barry* is explicit in its depiction of murder, but *Search Party* doesn't evolve into a murder-com until season 2, while *Trial & Error* doesn't follow a murderer as a main character but rather the lawyers who represent them. This demonstrated to me that there is room to experiment within the genre, especially within film where the dark comedy genre as a whole is lacking. A murder

mystery that combines the aspects described by Chaney while maintaining certain elements of whodunits throughout history is well within the realm of possibility for the growing murder-com genre.

Chaney's article, while interesting and relevant to my thesis, is not scholarly. In fact, it was difficult to find sources for the type of content I had in mind. I really wanted to focus on murder and comedy, or even death in comedy films, but to my surprise there was not much of any scholarly research on this specifically. I then expanded to focus more broadly on dark comedy as well as the "horror comedy" genre.

Noël Caroll's chapter *Horror and Humor* from The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism explores the intersection of classic horror and comedy. He initially addresses how horror elicits responses of fear and dread while humor creates relief. The two seem to be psychologically incompatible. However, as he dives deeper it becomes clearer that the aspects of each genre that generate the two different responses are very slight, and that by simply removing those small differences the two genres can be blurred. He chooses to focus on horror that revolves around the scientifically unnatural and the innately disgusting. Monsters such as Frankenstein would fit in this example. At the same time, he views humor as the unexpected properties found in conflicting or unnatural scenarios. Therefore, he makes the connection that both horror and humor rely on the unnatural/unexpected, or as he states, "The impurities of horror can serve as the incongruities of humor" (Caroll 156).

This source was slightly disappointing for me because of the limited definition of horror that it worked in. He briefly addressed slashers but also dismissed them saying that horror only existed when it created disgust in the audience. Because of this, the writing was less about how to blend elements of comedy and horror, but rather finding the small differences between them

and removing any aspect that made the original film scary. For example, Beetlejuice which is frequently used as an example of this genre is in no ways genuinely scary. It is classified as horror only because it focuses on the unnatural, however this does not fit with what I hoped to write because I wanted there to be moments of both fear and laughter that are rooted in reality.

After this source I tried to refocus more on dark comedy rather than horror comedy. Researching dark comedy results in a lot of broad results, many of which are not relevant for my purposes including psychological studies and close readings of dark comedies from several centuries ago. Because of this, a lot of the sources I found that discussed dark comedy in a way that was helpful and representative of what I plan on writing highlighted the dark comedy used by specific directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock was one of the filmmakers who was frequently mentioned in the sources addressing dark humor. I think this is because not only did his films incorporate humor and horror, but he addressed the fact that this was intentional and therefore solidified himself as the director who would aim to merge the genres. Glenn Novak's *Humor in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock* explains how he was very good at utilizing the "juxtaposition of the horrible or dangerous with the absurd or mundane" (Novak 6). Hitchcock was not someone I had initially considered as an example. However, after reading this article I realized that his works of dark comedy fit more into what I plan to write than the articles that explored "horror comedy" because of how Hitchcock's films use real-world scenarios to create fear and dread. Unlike the scientifically unnatural monster focused on in a lot of the horror research, Hitchcock uses real people and psychologically scary scenes in his films. By juxtaposing this with humor, he is creating an atmosphere similar to what I hope to achieve in terms of humor and realism. By using humor to "keep the pressure off the audience" Hitchcock allows the moments of suspense and fear to be even more appreciated and "to enjoy the film on a

level quite distinct from the level of mystery or suspense" (2). In other words, by combining genres in a way that incorporates the expected suspense with moments of comedy, he is elevating his films in a way that focusing solely on mystery or suspense could not. This is the same reasoning I give when explaining why I resonate with dark comedy TV shows, so to see it successfully done by Hitchcock was promising.

Women in Dark Comedy

Nicole Richter's *1990s Dark Comedy and the Female Screenwriter* discusses both the lack of attention given to comedies written by women (despite the high quality of these scripts) as well as dark comedy as a genre and the role women have in influencing it. She notes that comedies written by women have been generally ignored as a whole, but the lack of scholarly attention given to dark comedies only amplifies this reality. She begins by noting that "rather than providing optimistic closure, dark comedies usually offer no resolution, refusing to give the audience an escape from their critiques" (Richter 150). The inclusion of dark comedy as a tool to critique relates to the main point of her research, which was to demonstrate that women in dark comedy use the conventions to joke about, and therefore take control of, the gender biases perpetuated by a male dominated space. She notes that doing this can be difficult because the standards for comedy have historically been crafted by what men find funny. The screenwriters then must "carefully navigate generic conventions that are often built on making fun of women" (152). Successfully pursuing this can have a very positive effect on the traditional values found in humor. By changing who is used as the basis of the joke "the spectator is aligned with female subjectivity and experience and sexist practices are mocked and ridiculed, rather than perpetuated" (157). This is important to note in combination with the studies on women in

country music because, as demonstrated by Richter, humor can be used as a tool to address these issues while attempting to diminish their harmful impacts. I aimed to approach the problematic nature of the country music industry using the tools learned in reading Richter's work.

There has been a good amount of research done on the rise of the "female anti-hero." A character that has been influenced by the trend that came before it of the male anti-hero. *The Rise of the Murder-Com* noted that such characters as Tony Soprano, Walter White, and Don Draper embody this type of protagonist. Margaret Tally in her book *The Rise of the Anti-Heroine in TV's Third Golden Age* theorizes that this type of character has become popular in both men and women because it paints a more real picture of "the people in-between who are deeply flawed" (Tally 44). She notes the grim reality that for much of history female characters would fall into two endings which can be summarized as being "either in marriage or in death" (4). She then explains how the anti-hero takes back control of these expectations, often through questionable morals that allow her to reach "a desired end" (5).

Milly Buonanno discusses much of the same thing *in Television Antiheroines Women Behaving Badly in Crime and Prison Drama*. In addition, she also discusses how women that serve adjacent to male anti-heroes could also be viewed as shaping feminist media content. It is stated that these roles are "difficult to categorize but impossible to overlook" (Buonanno, Ch. 3). By viewing these women as characters given tools to navigate a male dominated world as seen in many crime and gangster films/TV shows, they can be viewed as having more autonomy and capabilities as initially thought. Both this book and Rise of the Anti-Heroine highlight the ways in which women can be portrayed that differ from the "marriage or death" options. In all cases the most important aspect was their morally ambiguous choices as well as the tools to navigate male dominated worlds.

Whodunits Research (Or the Lack Thereof)

I had noticed very early on that many of the whodunit films I viewed as part of my research treat death and the dead body as an absurdist joke rather than show any of the dark reality. No doubt this is funny and can create very good and popular films. However, I was intrigued that throughout these films, they chose to ignore any gruesome, violent, or dark aspects of murder. The characters don't even react very much beyond what is required to launch the script into Act 2 as they begin the murder investigation. I thought it would be intriguing if I could combine all the aspects that I enjoyed into one script. The dark nature and realistic depictions balanced with humor seen in TV shows such as *Barry* and *Dead to Me*, the gore and emphasis on the manner of death seen in many horror movies and crime shows, and the mystery solving aspects of the whodunit genre. I felt that I needed an explanation for why this genre trended in the direction that it did.

I tried to find sources that explained the overwhelming focus of absurdity in whodunits and found nothing. In fact, there was an overwhelming lack of research on the whodunit genre as a whole. I would guess that the reputation of whodunits as being gimmicky or lowbrow have contributed to this. Many of the films received mixed reviews at best, even *Clue* was given low critical ratings with one stating "the gimmick undermines the movie and the gimmick is attached to the wrong part of the movie" (Siskel). It wasn't until recently with *Knives Out* (2019) that such movies began to receive positive critical reception and public response. While I think there is a good amount to be researched within the genre, including the tendency to focus on "gimmicks" as well as the sexualization of the female characters, it seems to have been widely avoided by scholars thus far.

Nashville and Country Music

This section of research is arguably the most important because of how central it is throughout the entirety of my script. Still, it is much easier to find articles and music reviews on Nashville and country music than it is to find a scholarly source relevant and timely enough to help form my thesis. In his book *Beyond the Beat: Musicians Building Community in Nashville,* Daniel Cornfield discusses how those pursuing music careers in Nashville begin to form communities despite the rise of individual entrepreneurship. The main takeaway from reading this book was what he discussed in chapter 2 regarding the different orientations artists use to determine their "assumption and enactment of artist activist roles" (Cornfield 19). These orientations are broken into Strategic, Success, Audience, and Risk. I found the first two to be the most useful when considering how I will apply his study of real musicians to the characters in my script. Strategic orientation "orients them toward both the individual and group mobility of their occupation and peers" (19). This relates to how artists form a community that not only offers support but helps the members within the community achieve success. This shows that Nashville is far from an individualistic society which is something to keep in mind while describing my characters as "competitive."

Additionally, the success orientation discusses how different artists determine their personal success and what factors contribute to them chasing success. Cornfield defines it directly as a "subjective benchmark by which workers pursue career mobility and gauge their career success" (20). During this portion, Cornfield recounts interviews he had with musicians where he asked them their definition of success. The most impactful for me to read was the musician who used fame and the pursuit of a number one song. He said "it might sound like a vain goal, completely out of pride, but it's not… I want to be the best at what I do, because if I'm not, that means I'm not working hard" (21). This was helpful because in developing my

character bios, I was worried that the desire for fame was not enough of a "motivation" for a character in a movie. While it is true that developing a more complicated background for my main characters has helped to add depth, it was nice to know that chasing fame will not come across as unrealistic or ingenuine. In addition, knowing that in reality, desiring fame or a number one song doesn't make you a villain or any less passionate is helpful to note for character development.

I also chose to focus some of my research on the depiction of women in country music to better understand what my female lead characters would be facing in terms of representation. Rasmussen and Dansley's *Girl in a Country Song: Gender Roles and Objectification of Women in Popular Country Music across 1990 to 2014* addressed the surprising reality that representation for women in country music has gotten worse in modern times. They note that women have been sexualized across many genres of music, and that country is often depicted as the more "wholesome" genre (Rasmussen 188). They also note that the country music industry is male dominated, only "8% of Billboard's charting singles were sung by women" (188) while 52% of country music listeners are female (189). A main focus of the research was the impact of "bro country" on the representation and sexualization of women in country music. The theory was that "bro country," which has risen in popularity since the 2010s and focuses largely on partying, has harmed how women are depicted in these songs. This is interesting because we tend to view more modern forms of media as depicting progress in representation. However, the study found that the songs from the 2010s were "were less likely to refer to women in some types of less rigid gender roles" and "more likely to objectify women" (198). This shows that the fear of "bro country" contributing to negative gender roles was warranted. It is relevant to me because I had planned on making the killer of my script one of these bro country singers before I

had even considered this research. Now I know that this plot element of my script is rooted in real life concerns regarding the industry and representation. In addition, understanding these discrepancies not only allows me to better create realistic characters, but to create humor surrounding these situations as well.

Janelle Wilson in her study entitled *Women in Country Music Videos* chose to look at the representation of women in the visual elements of country music rather than simply the lyrics. This study was written in 2000, and is therefore older than the Rasmussen and Dansley piece, which is important to remember as she finds that women in these videos have "strong voices" and are working "toward challenging the old honky-tonk girl or country bumpkin images that permeate the collective unconscious" (Wilson 301). After considering the *Girl in a Country Song* article this sadly seems like a temporary development in the country music industry. She concludes by saying "it would be overly sanguine to suggest that country music has created the liberated woman, but it does seem fair to suggest that country music is an element of popular culture in which we can see women's resistance to submissive roles" (301). While this did not resemble the trend of the 2010s, it can still remain true in that there seems to be an intentional push back from modern female artists who are aware of the regressing representation. This includes Maddie and Tae who created the song the Rasmussen and Dansley article was named after. These studies are both good to be aware of while crafting characters of different ages who would have come up during these ever-shifting periods of representation.

III. Relevant Films and Television Shows

In an era where true crime, crime dramas, and murder mysteries are arguably more popular now than ever, I had plenty of content to draw inspiration from. I watched films with

obvious similarities to my script in addition to shows with looser ties to what I was trying to create. This meant I was watching and reading the scripts of everything, from *Knives Out* to *Criminal Minds.* My watchlist began with the murder mysteries that most closely matched the script I hoped to write. However, with the whodunit genre spanning several decades, I had to narrow it down to a select few.

Knives Out (Rian Johnson, 2019)*:*
This was the original inspiration for my thesis script. When I first began pitching my idea, I would describe it as a "*Knives Out* style murder mystery." I had seen the film in 2019 when it came out in theaters, well before I landed on the idea for my own script. I think that this film is incredibly well written and clever, and I loved the use of flashbacks to subvert the expectations of the audience. Also, there are parallels between the initial police questioning scene in *Knives Out* and the interrogation scene in my script. I would frequently return to the script for this film to help me when I had questions about the style and format for my own project.

Clue (Jonathan Lynn, 1985):
I hadn't seen this film before I started my research, and I enjoyed it more than I expected to. It definitely had a few laugh out loud moments that I admired, and I thought the way they chose to show multiple endings was interesting. During a time when I was struggling so much with who my killer would be, why they decided to kill, and how they managed to do it, seeing a professional film essentially choose not to decide and show three endings was somehow comforting. However, this film also inspired a lot of what I didn't want to do. It is the embodiment of the absurd murder mystery that I tried to explain through research, only to discover a lack of sources. While *Clue* is certainly funny, the ridiculousness of the characters tossing the bodies around wasn't something I wanted to be imitated in my thesis. As previously mentioned, I naturally gravitate towards dark comedy. I love when a story is able to combine realistic and funny reactions with tragic situations, which is something that *Clue* didn't do.

Only Murders in the Building (2021-)
The first season of this show was incredible. I thought they did an excellent job establishing characters, dropping clues, keeping the end surprising, all while incorporating humor. It quickly became the first thing people would ask me if I had seen when I told them I was writing a murder mystery. The inclusion of true crime obsessed characters was something I decided to imitate with Dylan's character in my script. *Only Murders* also helped me to understand how to handle allowing one of the dead characters to speak. Tim Kono's ghost is given the chance to speak despite a hole in his head, yet they do not overdo the supernatural aspect of the story. I tried very hard to include that with Shawn's ghost in the beginning of my script.

The Undoing (2020)
This was another piece of content that I watched before I knew what my thesis would be about. But after settling on my idea, there is a lot about this show that has been helpful. The unclear or false memory flashbacks were something that I heavily relied on in my script that is also used a

lot in *The Undoing.* The show also serves as a good example of how a main character can be the killer and avoid detection, despite all the evidence pointing to them throughout the entire story. When I began watching, the first thing I said was even that though Hugh Grant's character, Jonathan, was suspicious, the writers were never going to make him the killer because he was the main character and they made him *too* suspicious. The reveal at the end was comforting because after spending so much time with my own script, every twist I tried to include felt obvious to me, so it was good to see that it was okay if the killer was a very prominent figure in the story.

IV. Song and Artist Inspirations

This was the fun part for me. As I previously mentioned, despite the fact that I wrote a script critiquing the industry and modern genre, I've been a fan of country music for years. I kept a running list of songs that I envisioned fitting in my script as well as the artists I could model my characters after. I began listening to the songs I'd heard countless times in a new way, constantly thinking about how they fit into what I had learned about the genre or how they could influence my script. The list I've included here is far from exhaustive. As previously established, there is over a decade worth of "bro country" songs that could fit, and equally as many innovative female driven songs. These seven songs are all useful for helping to understand the mindset of my characters, the tone of my script, and even a little bit of background knowledge for those unfamiliar with the genre. The bro country samples highlight the partying and hyper-masculine lifestyle and persona I worked to portray in characters like Bentley. The songs by female artists are all great examples of how aware and exhausted they are of the current state of the genre.

Luke Combs, 'Doin' This'

An inspiring departure from some of his more bro heavy songs, "Doin' This" is written about Combs' dedication to singing, and how he does it for the love of music, rather than to achieve wealth and fame. I felt that this embodied the mindset I wanted my characters to have. While my characters are definitely driven by financial security and recognizability in the industry, the determination depicted in this song is still necessary while trying to make it in a competitive city like Nashville.

Luke Combs, 'When It Rains It Pours'
Pretty much the opposite of the wholesome message in "Doin' This." In this song, a man celebrates breaking up his "bitchin' and moanin'" girlfriend and wins enough money off of a lotto ticket to buy beer and fill his truck up with gas. Not many songs summarize the misogynistic, bro country vibe I was trying to get across like this one.

Luke Bryan, 'All My Friends Say'
On the surface, this song that made Luke Bryan famous might sound like a departure from what people expect from country music. But it is definitely the kind of song people party to, and as one of his songwriters Jeff Stevens said, "as long as you put that hillbilly voice on top of it, it's going to sound country" (Stephenson). Luke Bryan is often viewed as the pinnacle of bro country, and of all his songs that fit within this title, this is the song that best highlights that.

Brad Paisley, 'I'm Still a Guy'
I heard this song on the radio recently and I immediately hated it. It's absolutely ridiculous and there isn't much more to say. It's just Brad Paisley singing about the sexist and homophobic reasons he's manlier than everyone else. However, it very much fits with the disgustingly masculine songs I wanted to highlight in my script, so I had to include it.

Kacey Musgraves, 'Merry Go 'Round'
This song offers a pointed critique of the same small-town life that is often the subject of country songs. It is one of many songs by Musgraves that fit well in my script. She was a big inspiration behind Madison's character. While she still identifies as country, she also openly dislikes certain aspects of the genre while sharing her support for the LGBTQ community and experiences using LSD, making her much more progressive and modern than some of the other artists coming out of Nashville.

Miranda Lambert, 'Mama's Broken Heart'
Similarly to "Merry Go 'Round," this song criticizes how women are taught to be modest and quiet, especially when growing up in small towns. It is also a good indicator of Miranda Lambert's voice and style, which is important because she was also a big inspiration behind my characters. It seemed like a very fitting choice to contrast the hyper-masculine music inspirations.

Maddie & Tae, 'Girl in a Country Song'
Compared to other songs with similar themes, this song is definitely the least subtle of all in its critique of the current state country music. It would have been impossible to leave this off after an entire research study was named after it. It also clearly highlights the fed-up attitude Maddie and Tae have towards the bro country trend. This level of pure frustration towards the industry as well as the desire to call it out directly was exactly the type of approach I wanted Madison's character to have.

V. Writing the Screenplay

One of my biggest struggles with the script was incorporating the academic theme I had been researching. After finishing my literature review in October, I was so concentrated on the creative aspect, that I would frequently forget that there were themes I needed to emphasize that related to my research and academic focus. Because of this, the two portions of my project often felt disjointed. I had to remind myself that ultimately, the script was being written for academic purposes, and with each draft, I worked to make my themes stand out more.

I had never written a feature length screenplay before. I'd written pilots, short films, and sketches, but the prospect of where to begin for a full-length feature was daunting. Before I had even landed on a topic for my script, I decided to read Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat.* Snyder's approach emphasized the importance of an outline and a fairly strict structure to all screenplays. His book even provides a page-by-page guide for when each of the main beats he examines should happen. While I was reading this, it seemed simple enough to follow his instructions precisely. However, something that I have always struggled with has been outlining and following strict screenwriting structure. It wasn't until recently that I did much of an outline at all, I would typically just start writing and figure it out as I went. So, while *Save the Cat* was helpful, I had to grapple with Snyder's opinion that if the exact beats outlined in his book were not followed, a movie was destined to fail. By this point, I had decided on a murder mystery and was using *Knives Out* as initial inspiration. After watching *Knives Out*, I began reading the script. I tried to apply Snyder's formula to the beats of Rian Johnson's script, but I struggled to apply them exactly. With the script being 124 pages long, the Break into Two section should be on page 28, the Midpoint should be page 62, and all the other beats should have been easy to spot on their correct pages. Except I found that it wasn't that simple. The beats being delayed could possibly be explained by the fact that the film requires a lot of set up to introduce all of the

characters in addition to the flashback structure. However, even then, the beats weren't as glaringly obvious as Snyder's book made it seem like they had to be.

In some ways, this was comforting. Here was a script that was nominated for an Academy Award and it wasn't confined to any rigid structure. On the other hand, it reinforced my sometimes-unproductive approach of beginning writing before fully knowing where I was going. I wrote the first 10 pages without fully deciding on who the murderer was going to be. It wasn't until I talked through my idea with a friend for several hours that I landed on a murderer and general plot and finally forced myself to outline a bit. I used the "Beat Board" function on Final Draft, it included "cards" to highlight the main beat but also scattered thoughts of mine that I would throw in among the primary outline. Act 1 was pretty easy to come up with, it would begin with establishing Madison as a struggling song writer and the catalyst would be Shawn dying. Act 2 and 3 are where things got a bit messy. I had picked a complicated format that required me to find ways to incorporate red herrings alongside real clues plus I decided to utilize frequent flashbacks and even the occasional presence of a dead girl helping the investigation. Plus, I chose that instead of keeping the majority of the film contained to one location as is seen in typical murder mysteries, I incorporated the entire city of Nashville.

Still, I enjoyed the initial writing process despite my loose outline. I had taken the approach that the first draft of my script would serve as my outline. While this isn't the most efficient way to write a script, it did allow me to begin the writing process without the fear of a bad first draft. It also allowed me to be creative and come up with many new ideas that I don't believe would ever have come out of an outlining process, no matter how thorough it may have been. Overall, I find it difficult to be creative in an outline. While completing my thesis has made me appreciate an outline much more than I used to, and has encouraged me to attempt to use

them in the future, I still enjoy the process of working out issues on the fly and seeing how a script naturally develops.

After I finished my 100-page outline (AKA "first draft"), I essentially started the planning phase from scratch. This time around, I made a list of what I liked from my first draft and what I wanted to change, remove, or add before making a more traditional film treatment that outlined the story. The second draft looked incredibly different as I completely changed the role of one of my main characters. Initially, Deputy Osweiler had been the one assisting Madison with investigating the crime. It eventually became clear that no number of re-writes could explain why a cop would risk their career to help a murder suspect, so I changed it so Dylan would be assisting with the investigation. I also changed the personality of Bentley to be more misogynistic and creepy while making him less prevalent in the middle. Finally, I worked to further incorporate other characters that appeared at the beginning of my first draft but became forgotten in the second and third act. I am much happier with my "final" draft, but part of the process of completing my thesis has been coming to the realization that what I submit won't be perfect. When I initially began working on my script in the fall, I envisioned a perfect script that required no further edits. This was of course unrealistic as there will always be aspects of the script that can be changed or made better. I have been continuously coming to the realization that it will be a work in progress even after I submit the thesis. However, each of my drafts made the story better, and the submitted script is something that I am confident in presenting and showing to others.

VI. Conclusion

When Kacey Musgraves' first album *Same Trailer Different Park* debuted, Carl Wilson wrote that "The media went wide-eyed, the way it does whenever it glimpses diversity in the

supposedly wall-to-wall redneck genre of country music" (Wilson). The album came out in 2013, and I'd argue that since then, the genre has gotten more diverse to the point that one untraditional song shouldn't cause the media to go "wide-eyed." Still, the genre currently has an interesting conflict. It stands somewhere between being more diverse than ever, with its fusions with rap, R&B, and pop, while simultaneously doing a worse job at representing women than in previous decades.

It wasn't until doing this thesis that I learned about the implications of bro country. I'd listened to that type of music all throughout high school, been to their concerts, and liked the songs on Spotify. Through the research required for this thesis, I realized that the struggle for representation continues even in a seemingly more progressive society. While many artists and even fans might object to the term "bro country" for the stigma it created, it has helped to shed light on the struggles and obstacles many female artists are facing. Not only are the singers and songwriters affected by the negative progress of the industry, but female fans are as well. The frat centric songs contribute greatly to the objectification of women that makes day to day life for all women increasingly difficult. The content of the male partying songs creates a kind of fan that expects women to be used only for the purpose of drinking and having fun, which harms women everywhere while also forcing female artists into a position where they must "fight back" with their music rather than enjoy the same creative freedoms as their male counterparts.

In writing *Lower Broad,* my goal was to tackle these disturbing themes and trends through a humorous lens. In my script, the hardships that Madison faces in her pursuit of success aim to depict the ongoing struggle of female musicians, both the aspiring and the famous. At the same time, I hope that regardless of the level of familiarity with Nashville and the country music industry, the audience can relate to the fight a woman must face in any industry to overcome

misogyny and longstanding barriers. While characters like Bentley and the other men in the script are modeled after the iconic bro country players, they also represent the type of men that women are forced to interact with throughout their entire lives.

Film and television have been instrumental in forming who I am today. Screenwriting has been a field I've wanted to pursue for years, and writing this thesis only solidified that goal. Over the past year, completing this thesis felt impossible at times. However, the process has been incredibly rewarding and has helped me to learn a lot about myself as a writer. Moving forward, I will take what I learned from the months spent writing this script with me as I pursue a career in the industry. I hope to continue incorporating my humor into scripts while telling female driven stories that hopefully resonate with audiences the same way I hope *Lower Broad* does.

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