Pamela Fox. 2009. *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

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What constitutes authenticity in country music? Artists' claims to "realness" might be based on the sincerity of their performances, rural upbringing, or working-class credentials. Authenticity in country music is often established via the performance of rusticity—a performance is deemed authentic if it is unrefined and unsophisticated, if the performer is acting "naturally." It is also the case, however, that factors such as changing economies, migrations, and contemporaneous shifts in social norms and hierarchies all contribute to varied definitions of authenticity and how those definitions change over time. In *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*, Pamela Fox shows how some of country's "natural acts" are predicated on complex and changing definitions of authenticity produced and circulated by artists, listeners, critics, and the country music broadcast and recording industries. Through her astute analysis of several country archetypes and modes of performance, Fox demonstrates how gender and race, in addition to class, have informed these notions of authenticity in country music over the course of the twentieth century.

As Fox explores "how the uneven *coalescence* of gender, class, and race positionalities fuels country's claims to authenticity and its concomitant performative practices" (4), the chronologically and often conceptually distinct musical subjects of the book come together to form "an alternative history of country authenticity as a gendered and racialized class construction" (11). Fox focuses primarily on four phases/performative models within country: blackface and hillbilly comedy acts that appeared side-by-side in early twentieth century barn dance programs, post-war honky-tonk and the "answer songs" of female honky-tonk performers, memoirs of women country stars, and the alt.country (alternative country) movement of recent decades. Fox's critical approach is informed by multiple theories of gender, race, and class; the result of applying her approach to this variety of subjects is an insightful, multi-faceted history of the construction of country authenticity, one that recognizes the compound influences contributing to the formation of the notion of country authenticity over time.

Fox's scholarly background is in literary and cultural studies and feminist theory, with a focus on working-class literature and culture. Her prior publications include work on female country star autobiographies and

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women in alt.country, and this book represents a deeper investigation of the historically racialized and gendered elements of authenticity construction that continue to influence these more recent developments in country music culture. As she delves into the different performative models of each chapter, Fox analyzes radio scripts, song lyrics, memoirs, and publicity materials, employing feminist theory, contemporary scholarship on blackface minstrelsy, and cultural materialist theory to flesh out her approach. A large portion of her book focuses on women in country music, and Fox is indebted to the feminist country music scholars who precede her, namely Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann, Joli Jensen, Barbara Ching, Kristine McCusker, and Diane Pecknold.[1] She is primarily interested, however, in not only recognizing gender as a significant dynamic of country music culture, but in moving beyond basic identity politics to examine the intersection of race, class, and gender at various moments in country music history. Employing a framework devised by sociologist Joan Acker, Fox investigates racialized and gendered practices embedded in a class structure "governed by white middle-to-upper-class men yet almost exclusively associated with Southern white rustic or working-class imagery, lowbrow cultural taste, and artists who convincingly represent both in their personal histories" (6). In her analysis of country performativity, Fox acknowledges her debt to Barbara Ching's work on hard country (2001) and Aaron Fox's work on local Texan working-class music and culture (2004), but regards both scholars' approaches as limited by their missions of reclaiming dignity for the country music fans and practitioners they study. She moves beyond giving primarily celebratory accounts of country music practices to also examine why these performers and listeners sometimes indulge in demeaning renditions of rusticity.

Although this book does not focus on any one variant of authenticity as it is constructed in country music, a recurring theme throughout is Fox's commitment to destabilizing static conceptions of the performative modes under examination. She rightly observes that these practitioners of country music and culture engage in a constant process of both overturning and reinforcing normative ideas of class, race, and gender in country—norms that often form the basis of claims to authenticity. Fox presents her readers with a realistically dynamic conception of country authenticity, one that is redefined by practitioners of country music almost as often as it is invoked.

Fox begins her exploration of authenticity with an examination of the racialized and gendered class performance of hillbilly and blackface personas that appear in barn dance radio shows of the 1920s through the early 1950s. By looking at the intertwined ancestry of "white" and "black" rustic characters, and focusing on small, rural farming communities in

addition to urban areas as sites of blackface performance, Fox underscores the role of blackface performance in country music's rise as a commercial medium—a role that is often obfuscated in histories of the industry. She applies a composite theory of the performative mask to both blackface and hillbilly roles that draws on the work of Eric Lott and W. T. Lahmon; by adopting the exaggerated drawl, tattered overalls, and folksy humor of the hillbilly archetype, barn dance performers both identify with and reject the classed Other, just as they identify with and reject the racial Other via blackface performance. The appearance of blackface alongside the rustic hillbilly "mask" on the barn dance stage leads Fox to conclude that barn dance "thus would seem to produce a performative model that operates for its audience on myriad levels (communal, institutional, and individual: both stratified and blurred): exploiting racist ideologies and employment practices to unite white spectators across classes 'under the cultural sign and sound of whiteness'; exploiting misogyny to unite male spectators of all races and classes but also promoting elitist ideas about poor rural cultures to retain hegemonic control over what still threatened to survive as a 'lumpen theater' for disenfranchised black and white working-class audiences" (32).

With this conception of barn dance programming in mind, Fox focuses on specific broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry—a fruitful subject of study due to the Opry's long-standing reputation as country's most famous broadcast and stage show as well as its commitment to airing blackface comedy through the early 1950s. From her research in the archives of the Country Music Foundation, Fox found audiotapes and hundreds of radio scripts from the late 1940s and early '50s—some never before discussed in print—that feature the blackface comedy duo Jamup and Honey, their comedy routines interspersed among rustic musical and comedy acts (including Minnie Pearl) as well as softer, pop-influenced songs geared to appeal to middle-class listeners. Fox argues that these performances of a variety of rustic personas "playfully overturn normative concepts of gender, race, and class," yet also "paradoxically reinforce ruling ideologies" (48). For example, through her analyses of several radio transcripts, she demonstrates how the characters of Jamup and Honey functioned as antiheroes for their disenfranchised listeners as they satirized authority figures such as judges, teachers, and even commercial radio programming, while also indulging the racist and misogynistic impulses of programmers, audiences, and performers themselves.

Fox examines the more explicit relationship between gender and country authenticity when she turns to a discussion of the roles women performers played on the barn dance stage. She identifies the "sentimental mother" figure as a symbol of a southern Appalachian tradition of domes-

ticity, a character whose middle-class appeal was often blended with an "everyday gal" type to function as a representative of folk culture to barn dance's mixed-class clientele. This gendered figure of authenticity in barn dance—woman as representative of a mythic rural past—would later be referenced in contrast to the character of the prototypical fallen honky-tonk angel—the alluring yet dangerous representative of contemporary urban spaces. Fox addresses this reconfiguration of gendered rusticity as well as the re-masculinization of country identity in the third chapter. She argues that, as minstrelsy became taboo, gender replaced race as a central masking device, and white rural masculinity was reinterpreted as modern and strong, in distinction from the sentimental rube of the barn dance era.

Fox chronicles the shift from the male-dominated "first wave" of honky-tonk in the 1940s and early '50s to the "second wave" of the 1950s where female artists found their entrance into the style in the guise of the "answer song"—musical responses to honky-tonk hits by male artists. Fox identifies Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams as representatives of the "first wave," as their songs about heartbreak and their honky-tonk "home" helped to forge a new sense of white working-class masculinity rooted in sincere, deep emotion. Fox interprets this new formulation of country identity as a mask that codes as no mask at all, with the self-conscious performance of honky-tonk "operating as much out of fear and anxiety as knowing bravado" (74). As honky-tonk performers such as Williams negotiated a new identity in the face of postwar modernity, resisting as well as re-inscribing normative conventions, their songs of romantic failure ironically attempted to deny women the same opportunity to refashion their identity against the changes wrought by modernization and migration. As Fox notes, often it is the woman's refusal of traditional gender roles that is faulted as the agent of misery of the song's protagonist.

In the face of these persistent gender ideologies, the honky-tonk answer song provided women with another possible performative role besides the comic rube, sentimental mother, or country sweetheart. These answer songs were responses to hits by male artists, inserting a woman's perspective into a scenario where women were originally absent or silent (even though most answer songs were written by men). Fox construes the answer song as a "discursive tool at once enabling and limiting female artists' agency" (92) because these songs could not truly oppose dominant gender codes if their performers entertained any hope for commercial success. This problem is well demonstrated by the songs and careers of the two female honky-tonk performers that Fox discusses, Kitty Wells and Jean Shepard. For their songs to be successful, they had to reveal the properly feminine core of their honky-tonk angel song personas *and* keep those personas well

differentiated from their "real" selves, marketed as loving wife and mother or unthreatening girl-next-door.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, honky-tonk's popularity waned as the rock 'n' roll-influenced Bakersfield Sound and the pop-infused Nashville Sound gained critical and commercial success. The country music industry was influenced by the Cold War-era obsession with domesticity, ensuring the continued traditional gendering of country authenticity. Even so, during this time period, some female artists began to sing, speak, and write frankly about their pasts and private lives in a way that claimed some space in the narrative previously dominated by men. Fox points to Loretta Lynn's autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, as the instigator of this trend: "Lynn's most significant contribution . . . lies in her ability to conflate her private life, song persona, and professional image. Unlike prior women in either barn dance or honky-tonk, who had to establish a *dis*connect between these three representational components, Lynn elevated her life story to the same iconic status as men's" (112). In chapter 4, Fox focuses on the written autobiographies of six female country stars: Sarah Colley Cannon (the actor who created and played Minnie Pearl, the only non-singer of the group), Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, Dolly Parton, Reba McEntire, and Naomi Judd. While she acknowledges that this is an "admittedly unorthodox direction," she argues that the country star memoir is " the next truly significant mode of authenticity discourse generated during this latter period" (14). Akin to the honky-tonk answer song, the memoir is a way of conflicted "talking back"—a strategic move that helped women establish their authenticity in ways similar to the men of "hard" country, while also reinforcing traditional gender roles through references to motherhood, marriage, and domesticity.

This chapter is an expanded version of Fox's 1998 article, "Recycled 'Trash': Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography." Here, her discussion of women's country music autobiography benefits greatly from the background provided by the previous two chapters on barn dance and honky-tonk, giving the reader a much richer understanding of the history of country identity creation and management that precedes these memoirs. As in her article, Fox assesses the formal elements of the country memoir, stressing how each part contributes to the performance of identity already a part of country's autobiographical tradition. The women who write these memoirs, often with the aid of a ghostwriter, must constantly temper stories of their rise to stardom with claims to their continued credibility as an "ordinary gal," simultaneously symbolizing modernity and tradition. Fox points out how all these performers remain mindful of the industry's enduring attachment to the sentimental mother role; those who are mothers foreground their maternal identities, while the non-mothers compensate

for this lack by "capitalizing on other modes of class visibility available to women in country music" (129).

While these memoirs fulfill an important role in the construction of an authentic country identity for these performers, I can't help but wonder what Fox thinks about the songs (or performances) of these star authors. She recognizes that besides these memoirs, "the songs of the 1970s and 1980s constituted embattled texts in the ongoing war over the meaning of modern country identity," (114) but makes little mention of them in tandem with the analyses of her chosen autobiographies. It is possible their inclusion in this chapter would have distracted from her argument about the importance of memoirs, or might simply have made the chapter too large and unwieldy, but their absence here creates a noticeable break in the continuity of the book (an issue that she acknowledges indirectly in her opening chapter).

In chapter 5, Fox surveys several alt.country artists that have turned to past models of country authenticity as a means of critiquing and resisting contemporary mainstream country. This loosely defined subgenre is a varied mixture of honky-tonk, punk, bluegrass, and alternative rock that is described by Fox as "a *post*modern movement that has appropriated the discourse on country authenticity, exploiting while also altering prior formulas" (146). She employs the cultural materialist theory of Raymond Williams to elucidate how alt.country artists draw upon past notions of country authenticity to protest against the current state of the industry, but more often fail to recognize "how the movement's own 'alternative' chronicle of the past equally validates prevailing social relations" (151).

Fox offers a brief analysis of two albums by Michelle Shocked—whose work includes hybrids of traditional minstrel tunes paired with new lyrics that comment on war and gender politics—as an introduction to music that is at times refreshingly inventive yet deeply problematic. Fox skillfully tackles some of the most troubling aspects of this subgenre, in particular, its tendency to produce "its own androcentric historical 'time-line' that reinscribes prior masculinized models of authenticity" (151). She singles out certain performers and promoters of alt.country who seem fascinated by a masculinized version of class authenticity characterized by violence and volatility. This music's claims to artistic integrity, however, and a surrounding rhetoric of highbrow sensibility and ironic detachment from its subject lead to a type of aesthetic slumming: the middle-class consumption of "white trash chic." Fox points to the Southern rock group Drive-By Truckers as one that manages to *avoid* this pitfall by reminiscing about the South from the vantage point of survivors of working-class culture. Additionally, they manage to simultaneously indulge in and critique the potentially racist and masculinist inclinations of their music.

A portion of this chapter is an expansion of Fox's essay, "Time as 'Revelator': Alt.Country Women's Performance of the Past," which originally appeared in a 2008 collection she edited with Barbara Ching, titled *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music* (2008). (Similarly, the ideas behind Fox's critique of alt.country's ironic stance echo parts of the introductory chapter to *Old Roots* that she wrote with Ching.) Fox turns her attention to three of alt.country's few female artists—Gillian Welch, the group Freakwater, and Iris DeMent—who have gravitated toward a different version of "rawness" in the form of old-time Appalachian music (174). Fox's comparison of Welch to Freakwater and DeMent clarifies the distinction she makes between "revivalist" and "survivalist" tendencies in alt.country: "Revivalists may want to ensure the renewed presence of an outmoded music or culture, but unlike survivalists, they to some degree relish its impossibility" (180). Fox is ultimately uncomfortable with Welch's revivalist project because of her unwillingness to acknowledge the deliberately performative elements of her vintage style and sound. The members of Freakwater, on the other hand, flirt with revivalism by mixing older styles with modern references, but ultimately reject the notion that it is possible to capture an authentic rusticity in their music. For Fox, the music of Iris DeMent is a representation of the survivalist bent; DeMent sings about her own childhood poverty and anxieties of dislocation in an attempt to maintain the visibility of her seemingly "extinct" class background and culture (197). Just as she points out some of the racist, sexist, and violent aspects of some alt.country performers' masculinized version of authenticity, Fox also uncovers the class elitism inherent in some female alt.country performers' turns towards revivalism.

Fox concludes *Natural Acts* with a brief discussion of potential new models of country authenticity, citing songs of Rissi Palmer (the first African-American female artist to make *Billboard*'s Country chart in nearly two decades), alt.country and folk artist Lori McKenna, and mainstream country artist Gretchen Wilson (whose 2004 song "Redneck Woman" reached number one on the *Billboard* Country chart). Each artist's raced, classed, and/or gendered conception of "country" identity further expands the means of producing and claiming authenticity in the genre. Fox thus points future scholars of country music authenticity toward archetypes still in formation.

Musicologists interested in country music will find this book useful even though Fox only occasionally refers to musical sound. It is understandable that, given Fox's background in literary and cultural criticism, she focuses primarily on language and visual images rather than recorded or live musical sound and the reception or interpretation of that sound. Although she does

mention the contribution of vocal style, instrumentation, and recording technology to particular artists' performance of authenticity (most often in her chapters on honky-tonk and alt.country), these descriptions are often drawn from her sources and do not delve into musical details. The absence of musical details, however, presents an opportunity for music scholars to incorporate Fox's approach into their own accounts and analyses of country music and expand on the work she has presented so far. Musicologists who consider gender, race, and class in relation to the sounds as well as the historical and cultural context of country music could also expand on Fox's approach by exploring more specifically the role sexuality plays in the construction of authenticity.

Fox's multifaceted approach confers a sense of the complex forces that constantly shape notions of authenticity in country music; in this regard, Fox has done a remarkable job in portraying the nuanced character of her musical subjects. In addition to the overlooked performers and new critical readings of country she brings to light, it is Fox's commitment to analyzing the intersection of gender, race, and class in the construction of country music authenticity that makes *Natural Acts* a new and forward-thinking contribution to the field of country music scholarship.

Notes

[1] Fox cites the following: *Finding Her Voice: Women of Country Music, 1800-2000* (Bufwack and Oermann 2003); *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (Ching 2001); *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Jensen 1998); *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (McCusker and Pecknold 2004).

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