

**Department of Cultural Studies**

Freya Syson

Dr Christophe Van Eecke

Bachelor's Thesis

Becoming Dolly Parton: A Case of Constructed Identity

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Radboud University Nijmegen

Author: Freya Syson

Supervisor: Dr. Christophe Van Eecke

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## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: Literature review.....	8
Chapter 3: Dolly and Appearance.....	11
Inspiration.....	11
Popular culture.....	12
Beauty.....	13
Exterior vs Interior.....	14
Chapter 4: Dolly and Gender.....	17
Authenticity.....	17
Business.....	18
Womanhood.....	19
Male Gaze.....	19
Chapter 5: Dolly and Queer Communities.....	22
Autobiographies.....	24
Chapter 6: Dolly and Music.....	25
The Importance of Authentic Performance.....	26
I Will Always Love You.....	27
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	30
Bibliography.....	32

## CHAPTER 1:

## INTRODUCTION

Cineaste: “Your image has a very strong popular appeal. Does it have limitations? Or ever get in your way?”

Dolly Parton: “My image get in my way? Ya gotta be crazy. It’s my image that gets me most everything I want. I created the whole thing. My gimmick and my look, it all comes from a very serious place. Country girl plays dress up . . . To a lotta folks, I’m Cinderella, but I don’t think anybody who talked to me seriously for very long finds me anything but gen-you-wine.” [sic] (Jaehne 16)

Dolly Parton is a global country music icon with a silhouette that is recognizable worldwide. She is worth approximately \$600 million (*Celebrity Net Worth*), has a career spanning over fifty years, and a fan base which stretches across the globe, transcending class, gender and political boundaries. Parton was born in the Great Smoky Mountains in 1946 (*Dolly Parton.com*), a time when the status quo in country music and the business industry was upheld by men. Her astounding ability to make audiences all over the globe fall in love with her is quite unmatched by any other current star.

As a woman born in post-war Tennessee, a southern US state renowned for its adherence to a patriarchal structure, and at a time when the woman’s place was in the home, how has Parton achieved this phenomenal career? In order to explore this, the author will analyse Parton through the lens of gender performativity, with specific reference to Judith Butler’s conceptual framework for discussing gender. What this research will add to the existing literature is a discussion on how, through her constructed identity, Dolly Parton has crafted her empire within this patriarchal sphere and managed to maintain her appeal to widely different, even diametrically opposed, demographics. This examination will be undertaken through a gendered lens. Judith Butler’s essays *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An*

*Essay in Phenomenology* (2006) and *Feminist Theory and Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2011) will be used as a theoretical framework upon which this section will expand. Butler's famous idea that gender is constructed through a "stylized repetition of acts" (519) can be unquestionably linked to Parton's various constructed personas, and as life is a performance it goes without saying that different audiences receive her differently.

Dolly Parton's identity can be read as a mass of contradictions. The shaping of Parton's identity and how she proclaims her genuine country roots to the public eye whilst having and maintaining multiple distinct personas is a central theme. Parton has a certain quality which makes her appear genuine, despite the obvious cosmetic work she has subjected her exterior to. However, it could be contended that when Parton asserts "but I don't think anybody who talked to me seriously for very long finds me anything but gen-you-wine" [sic] (qtd. in Jaehne 16) she might not in fact be referring to her appearance, but to her ability as a serious musician.

In Pamela Wilson's "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," the author firstly examines Dolly Parton through a semiotic approach, using an argument from Richard Dyer; "stars . . . are semiotic constructions produced through the intertextual interaction of media texts, publicity and promotion" (2), and argues that Dolly Parton's entire entity is precisely this: a constructed persona, supporting Parton's own assertion in her interview with *Cineaste*, as cited overleaf. Wilson also considers how Parton is represented by different cohorts in the media. She argues that Parton has been portrayed in different lights by various branches of popular magazines and that these prescribed personas add up to a seamless performance of a singular identity.

This thesis seeks to examine the role played by Parton's constructed identity in her achieving success in a man's world. Hence, the research question which will be answered in this thesis is as follows: "how has Dolly Parton's creation of her multifaceted persona as constructed identity aided her astounding success?" Specifically, this will be achieved through

consideration of how she performs her identity through her music, appearance, and gender. Each of these areas will be considered in turn and the author will additionally explore a couple of Parton's own songs as this is a unique way to understand her opinion on the matters at hand, since it is likely that she encodes her opinions into her songs.

Parton's relationship with gender and power has a distinct impact on the way she has constructed her public identity. Parton's excessive feminine appearance and her abundance of 'feminine' qualities, such as her charming giggle and high-pitched voice, make her an interesting case study to apply gender performativity theory to, as put forward by Judith Butler.

A key factor which had aided Parton in the formation of her career is her relationship to power. Wilson writes how "Parton openly discusses her strategies regarding the construction of her image in almost every interview and makes no secret that the external Dolly image is a facade she has created to market herself" (5). This construction can be explored as a possible method of challenging the power of the press, as her 'real' self has the possibility to remain untouched and untainted by the assumptions made about her constructed self.

A review of some of the key literature in the field of constructed identity will now be presented following which the author will examine the role of Dolly Parton's appearance, gender and music in her identity construction.

## CHAPTER 2:

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The role Dolly Parton's appearance, gender and music has had on her identity will be considered in terms of identity construction, as each of these topics have contributed in some way to the success Parton has achieved.

Parton's appearance is of vital importance to her performance. Parton famously quips "[i]t costs a lot to make a person look this cheap" (qtd. in Fox 258), emphasising her awareness of her rather kitsch exterior. A quote to further support this is as follows: "Although I look like a drag queen's Christmas tree on the outside, I am at heart a simple country woman" (qtd. in Fox 258). This neatly ties outwards appearance with internal sincerity, something which will be examined later in the thesis.

Theory on appearance has been proposed by Judith Butler and Pamela Wilson. In relation to appearance, Butler posits that "the body is only known through its gendered appearance" (523) and considers how this gendering of the body occurs. She argues that the body becomes its gender via acts which are "renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). Wilson draws a connection between Parton and popular culture icons such as Madonna and Marilyn Monroe, suggesting that Parton goes one step further in a bid to appeal to her audience by pointing out her authenticity.

Gender is a central aspect of Parton's performance, both for herself personally and for her audience. Theory on gender has been put forward by Judith Butler and Pamela Fox and Pamela Wilson. Butler discusses feminist theory and how this can be related to phenomenology. She argues that we are not only our bodies but also the way we "do" (521) our bodies, and a lot can be understood from how we perform in our bodies differently to those around us. This connects to Parton because she performs her persona through her body for a wide range of audiences whilst occupying the space in a similar way. Parton is well known for



deviating from the social norm of wishing to appear sophisticated, and Butler examines how people use their bodies to conform to or flout socially conventional norms and how this can be linked to theories on gender performativity and gender performances. One way to understand Parton's relationship to gender is by examining her autobiography. Pamela Fox does this and discusses how Parton's experiences with factors related to femininity: the male gaze, the beauty products and the attainment and maintenance of a desirable body, all build on one another to create the Dolly persona.

Butler posits that gender must be understood as "the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519). Parton engages in typically 'feminine' acts such as flipping her hair and swinging her hips, and this reinforces her femininity whilst ensuring those who see her perceive her as behaving in an appropriate way for her gender. Along a similar vein, Wilson argues that Parton's appearance, "the images of her body and especially her breasts, have become in the popular press the terrain for a discursive struggle over the social meaning of the female body and the associated ideologies surrounding the social meaning of 'woman' in our society" (4).

Parton's music is what has secured her fortune. She has grown with the genre of country music, allowing herself and it to become inseparably intertwined. Theory on music has been conducted by Michael Ann Williams and Larry Morrissey and Tara Tuttle. Williams and Morrissey look at country music from the perspective of tourism. They relate country music to the idea of authenticity and the need for Americans to offer tourists "authentic experiences" (161). This closely links to the topic most country singers lament about: the ideas of home and homesickness. The authors additionally discuss how the notion of artificiality is central to the concept of authenticity. Tara Tuttle examines the impact that straying from the norms of sexual orientation can have on a country star's career. She looks at themes including authenticity, queerness and spirituality.

Thus, the themes which will be discussed are appearance, gender, queer communities, and music, because they are relevant to how Parton has created her multifaceted persona as a constructed identity.

## CHAPTER 3:

## DOLLY AND APPEARANCE

Parton's songs are what made her famous, but her appearance has also played a significant role in her extraordinary success. Her signature look is her curvaceous figure, long blonde wig, high heels and pushed-up cleavage. Fox discusses how beauty products like wigs and makeup made Parton feel "beautiful" (259) as a young woman, which rather than making her a victim to the capitalistic world of artificial beauty, they instead brought her "autonomy" (259) and freedom to express her Dolly persona in the way she thought best. The 'appearance' of Dolly Parton can have numerous interpretations. There is the appearance of her as a woman, a singer, a wife and as a star, to mention a few. Her appearance, like that of everyone else, is a performance which has been cultivated, shaped and managed over time. It is a factor which has allowed her to succeed in the music business, because she has changed only a little over the years maintaining a consistent brand image. She does not come across as aggressive or intimidating, rather she seems sweet if rather dim, giving the impression of the 'dumb blonde.' It can be argued that her created persona has facilitated her rise to stardom, and by never straying too far from her original template her authenticity is believable. Parton's created identity is an "object of belief" (Butler 520) which, by refraining from reinventing, has the whole world humouring the performance of her real self.

## INSPIRATION

Dolly Parton has mentioned in numerous interviews that her looks are influenced by the local 'loose woman' in her hometown, and that she was Parton's source of inspiration because she found her pretty. This opposes the norm of looking upon prostitutes as inferior and rather makes gaudy, colourful and revealing outfits become fashionable, whether this was Parton's intention or not. Parton forged her own image, and it was a conscious decision to look like 'trash.'

Appearance and gender performance are closely intertwined. The strength with which someone identifies with their prescribed or chosen gender can have a stark impact on how they perform said gender. Parton has at times been compared to Marilyn Monroe and Madonna for her manipulation of femininity, although there is something which “resonates with a more rural . . . audience than any of these other stars” (Wilson 3) and this increases her appeal as a role model rather than a “mere visual icon” (3). What does being compared to these female icons do for Parton’s image? It is possible that being likened to such overtly sexual stars had a positive impact on her popularity as a country music singer because Parton is like a more authentic version of the excessively and unabashedly feminine woman.

Fox argues that Dolly Parton’s autobiography *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business* (1994), in addition to autobiographies about other female country stars, allows us to “deepen our understanding of the class and gender- coded notions of authenticity, discourse, and performative identity shaping the distinctly American form of popular culture known as country music” (235). These autobiographies shine a light on the contradictions and injustices which women face within the realm of country music. There is a constant balance, which many prominent women face, between being famous and in the public eye and being normal women with private lives. It can be argued that all components of her appearance are a method of exerting power over those in her company. By looking, in her own words, like ‘trash,’ she is regarded as harmless and manageable. This allows her to dictate her own public life by seeming to be on everyone’s side.

#### POPULAR CULTURE

There have been a couple of instances where Parton has been compared to figures from popular culture. Jaehne compares Parton to Cinderella:

Sitting high above Central Park, watching her consume Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup and cheerfully chatter about her schedule and hopes and hair and songs . . . is like watching Cinderella at 12:01 . . . she has a definitive female logic that juxtaposes babies and broadcasting without batting an artificial eyelash. (16)

This comparison dresses Parton in the façade of the country princess. It works well in Parton's favour; she sounds unique and treasurable. Being compared to popular culture figures also ensures Parton remains relevant in our ever-evolving society where people can be notable celebrities one day and infamous the next, for example by allowing herself to be discovered by different fan groups.

A second comparison which has been made is that between Parton and 'Li'l Abner' character Daisy Mae Scragg. Hoppe discusses how the Daisy Mae character is a 'hillbilly.' These fictional mountain people are classified in distinct ways, the women being "curvaceous and usually blonde . . . man-crazy, oversexed and just as dim as their male counterparts" (50). Arguably, this is the stereotype which Parton attempts to meet with her devised façade. Living up to this generalisation was an intentional ploy on Parton's side. By appealing to the audience who knows the hillbilly lifestyle, she secures a loyal audience who perceive her as 'one of them.' A concrete example which demonstrates Parton's sympathy for the character is that in 1978 she posed in an outfit inspired by Daisy Mae for a poster (50).

## BEAUTY

Linking to this is Parton's own eagerness to be conceived as beautiful. She is no stranger to cosmetic surgery and is quoted as saying

I have done it and will do it again when something in my mirror doesn't look to me like it belongs on Dolly Parton . . . *I feel it is my duty to myself and my public.* My spirit is

too beautiful and alive to live in some dilapidated old body if it doesn't have to.

(emphasis added; qtd. in Fox 259)

This is quite complex as she admits that she is not entirely autonomous over her appearance; she maintains it for the sake of her fans and fame. It also presents Parton's opinions on spirituality; she suggests that the Dolly persona, as a separate entity from herself, requires maintenance and attention which goes deeper than the surface level.

Despite this reliance on artificial enhancement, she insists that what matters most is her genuine self, her authenticity, as she says "if I got any charm at all, it's that I look totally phony, but I am totally real. That's my magic" (qtd. in Jaehne 18). The relationship between the interior and the exterior creates a perfect mix of authenticity and artificiality, making her both lovable and imposing. Parton gives herself a mysterious air by insinuating that she has 'magic,' highlighting the fact that we as an audience will never get to know the 'real' Dolly, the Dolly she is internally.

#### EXTERIOR VS INTERIOR

The Dolly projected to the world is excessively womanly (Wilson 5), confident and bold. This is the persona audiences adore and so it is the one which will continue to be performed. Her appearance is made up of her surface identity, which includes her physical appearance, and her interiority (5) which includes her dreams and emotions. Wilson quotes Jahr (85): "Dolly built overstatement into what she calls her 'gimmick,' that is, looking trashily sexy on the surface while being sweet, warm and down-to-earth on the inside" (Wilson 5).

Parton's 'Dolly' facade is a way for her to market herself. In order to acquire as large an audience as possible, she must allow her image to be manipulated by her audience. She has done this by allowing herself to be classified in different ways by various fan groups. Wilson explores how Dolly has been 'packaged' by different popular magazines. Music magazines,

men's magazines, supermarket tabloids, women's service magazines, liberal feminist magazines and mainstream news magazines have all created a different version of Dolly and all focus on different sides of her, emphasising whichever characteristics of hers best suit their interests. For instance, women's magazines may emphasise how Dolly has concerns about her weight, thus illustrating that she is a 'normal' woman who has the same worries as her readers.

Parton is quoted as saying: "I'm careful never to get caught up in the Dolly image, other than to develop and protect it, because if you start believing the public persona is you, you get frustrated and mixed up . . . I see Dolly as a cartoon: she's fat, wears a wig, and so on . . . Dolly's as big a joke to me as she is to others" (qtd. in Wilson 5). Despite being rather tongue-in-cheek, this summarises how she is able to live for so many hours of her life as her persona without becoming confused about who the 'real' Dolly is.

## CHAPTER 4:

## DOLLY AND GENDER

In the cultural field Simone de Beauvoir, appropriated by Judith Butler, posits that “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (519), arguing that gender is founded upon a “constructed identity” (520) which is created over a lifetime of performance (520) actualised through repeated acts. To be (seen as) feminine means to meet the standards laid out by feminine persons before you and meet the expectations of those who surround you. If women, and also men, refused to comply with the standards which have been historically laid out for them, gender performativity may be of much less societal importance.

Through having a ‘constructed identity,’ defined by Butler as a “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520), Parton is able to perform multiple identities simultaneously whilst seeming to be authentic in each role. She has the identities of the hillbilly girl, the businesswoman, the town trash and the conventional (albeit rather hidden role of) wife. These performances function as pieces which make up the whole jigsaw of Parton’s external identity.

The accoutrements of the body, including its presence, gestures, clothes and behaviours are the media via which we share and perform our stories, history and present. It has been argued that the body is central to the country identity, it is the hub of “work, rebellion, excess, pain, and pleasure” (Fox 246). Fox additionally posits that

the emergence of country's carnivalesque mode . . . introduce[d] another female persona: the coiffed and made-up sexual tease . . . the prototypical ‘honky-tonk angel’ primarily fuelled [sic] men's fantasies and fears as a vision in song, rather than as a live female performer on stage. (247)



This fetishization is intriguing, it implies that female singers function as pleasure-givers to men rather than as entertainment for any audience. Parton uses her body as one of her main points of allure, aside from her voice. She is able to maintain the interest of an audience without acting in an overtly sexual way, indicating that she has managed to steer clear of satisfying the testosterone-fuelled male gaze.

#### AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a key aspect through which Parton solidifies her constructed identity, and Tara M. Tuttle relates this authenticity to gender and country music identity. Tuttle asserts that:

*authenticity is the painstakingly cultivated attribute key to the construction of country music artist identity. To be considered a 'real' country singer, one must fit a template. Consider the similar backgrounds of those among country's pantheon: small town, rural roots; working class childhoods replete with struggles with poverty, hardship, and manual labor; Protestant Christian upbringings; performance skills honed in the church choir. . . the inevitable journey to the big city (Nashville, of course); and finally, the meteoric rise to stardom. (emphasis added; 67)*

This quote succinctly sums Parton's whole persona. This is how she has managed to appear so authentic despite her numerous sides: she has become an embodiment of the country music artist identity.

#### BUSINESS

Being a woman in the world of business comes with struggles. The Parton hit *9 to 5* is the famous theme tune of the 1980 film of the same name (IMDb), which stars Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin. It tells the well-known daily routine of preparing for a stint at the office. The expectations held of American women in the 1980s are exemplified in the film. It

presents a telling example of how women were expected to behave both in private and public life. The film follows a brief period in the lives of three female protagonists as they attempt to make their nine-to-five office jobs more pleasant for all employees, much to the dislike of their male boss. Much to the viewers' satisfaction the protagonists manage to evade the patriarchal system, or at least as much as they can taking into account their gender and social class. The role that gender performativity plays in American identity is arguably crucial and can be linked to American identity in its traditional form.

In connection to this, the role which women had in the country music scene was equally prescribed. According to Fox,

historically, female country artists have been more or less confined to . . . two definitive versions of authenticity . . . the natural and the carnivalesque” (246).

Arguably, these can be divided into the smaller categories of virgin, matron, and whore (246). Parton does not fit wholly into any of these prescribed categories. There are aspects of her persona which can be classified by these terms, but she does not tick all of the criteria; for example, she is a matron, she has been married for many years, yet she does not fit the stereotype of the middle-class, sophisticated matron.

## WOMANHOOD

Dolly's persona projects “excessive womanliness” (Wilson 5) through her body and gestures. This womanliness has been nurtured since Parton was a young girl, she explains in her autobiography:

“womanhood was a difficult thing to get a grip on in those hills, unless you were a man. My sisters and I used to cling desperately to anything halfway feminine . . . we could see the pictures of the models in the newspapers . . .we wanted to look like them . . . they didn't look as if men and boys could just put their hands on them any time they

felt like it, and with any degree of roughness they chose. The way they looked, if a man wanted to touch them, he'd better be damned nice to them. (Parton qtd. in Fox 258-259)

It can be understood from this revealing quote that it was more desirable to Parton to be a painted, overtly feminine woman as opposed to a plain natural looking farm girl (259). Parton perceives the natural look of farm girls as 'cheaper' than models in the magazines, because the women in magazines had more power to resist men's unwanted advances. This is partly Parton's inspiration for the appearance that she has maintained over her long career, although the irony is that although she and her sisters perceived painted women as less 'cheap,' most other people would consider them to be more. Parton's willingness to not be 'cheap' has resulted in her adopting all of the behaviours and appearances society deems as 'cheap.' For example, this could include her garishly coloured clothes and her use of exuberant makeup.

This friction between embracing the natural and the unnatural is further complicated by life in the limelight. In summary, "as women, much of that identity finally entails a private, domestic life pre-empted [sic] and compromised, if not erased entirely, by their 'unique' status as successful performers" (Fox 248). The friction then must be somehow mediated by their performed selves.

## MALE GAZE

The concept of the male gaze is a natural discussion point in relation to the above points. It "relies rather heavily on a binary opposition which structures the relation between the male and the female positions as active subject and passive object, the man as the owner of the gaze and the woman as the image" (Schuckmann 671). The idea is that men act as voyeurs while women function as seducers or "passive victims" (Wilson 9). Parton has been a subject of the male gaze, despite exploiting it for her own (financial) benefit throughout her life and her whole appearance is geared towards attracting attention from anyone who encounters her. Somehow,

Parton manages to twist the male gaze around so that despite her being the sexualised subject, her male counterparts also experience the limelight whilst in her presence, which raises the question of who is in control. Leigh H. Edwards' book *Dolly Parton, Gender and Country Music*, summarised by Marci Cohen, posits that Parton disrupts the male gaze through being camp, meaning that she is so exaggeratedly feminine that she becomes almost more theatrical than appealing. Each part of her body is caricature-like and amplified. However, this is open to discussion, as her male admirers may see her as a wholesome form of femininity, and the male gaze could be admiring rather than sexual.

It can be difficult for women to exist comfortably whilst the male gaze is lurking in every corner. Parton's method for subverting the male gaze is one that has been cleverly thought out. She is conventionally beautiful, meaning that she attracts much attention. To combat this, she tends to be inclusive and ensure that she is not the only one in the spotlight.

Some argue that one way for women to evade the male gaze in the realm of country music is to refrain from being a sexual body and rather claim the role of motherhood, allowing themselves to "become body while remaining free of eroticization" (Fox 248). At the time when Parton was growing in the industry, country culture placed femininity "squarely with the domestic sphere, especially motherhood-the single mode of gender authenticity available to poor southern white women" (244). This claim can be strongly argued against, as Parton does not follow this category of femininity and yet she still manages to subvert the imposing gaze. She exists squarely within the male gaze and uses it to her advantage to increase her popularity. She has exaggerated her features, such as her slim waist and her large bust, making her an unsurprising object of sexualisation, which suggests a form of sexualised femininity beyond motherhood which is able to exist alongside the male gaze.

In response to the assertion that motherhood is the only way to avoid sexualisation, Wilson argues that rather than the objectification of women turning them into victims, women

have power through being able to control their own image (9). Parton, by “managing and manipulating her sexual image in such a way as to attain the maximum response from male readers of her image while maintaining her own dignity and self-esteem, is exploiting the channels of patriarchal discourse to her own advantage” (9). She manages her own marketing and thus maintains agency over her image.

## CHAPTER 5:

## DOLLY AND QUEER COMMUNITIES

To the recurrent allegation that she is carrying on a secret relationship with her lifelong friend Judy Ogle, Parton answers, “Well, I’m not gay, but if I was, I would be privileged to have Judy as a partner!” (Price qtd. in Hubbs 71)

This is a classic Parton riposte where she uses a clever, humorous reply to deflect a personal question and make her audience laugh, whilst also making a significant point. She has been quietly supporting those on the margins of society for a long time. As far back as 1968 in her song *The Bridge* Parton is acknowledging the plight of a young pregnant woman who has been abandoned by her lover and who society will judge. It can be suggested this type of support comes from her understanding of alienation and the need to belong. Her appeal to the gay community might have stemmed from this empathy in her music.

Parton has long had a queer fan base which seems to be derived from both the serious and frivolous sides to her persona. On the serious side she has long been a supporter of gay rights. For example, in the sixth episode of the WYNC studios podcast: Dolly Parton’s America ([www.wnycstudios](http://www.wnycstudios)) Dolly comments “God made us as we are, whether you’re gay, whether you’re straight” (00:29:16-00:29:23). Also, many of Parton’s lyrics can be viewed as equally relevant to gay and straight individuals, with a choose-your-own interpretation that you do not get with many song writers. Whilst on the frivolous side Parton is a favourite icon for drag queens. Parton herself likes to tell the anecdote that she once entered a look-alike contest as herself and lost. The relationship between country music and the queer community is discussed by Goldin-Perschbacher, who comments, “many queer people have been drawn to country music and culture, from gay rodeos . . . to drag tributes of Dolly Parton (who has long declared the practise flattering” (791).

One way to explore her connection to the community is through Goldin-Perschbacher's piece "TransAmericana: Gender, Genre, and Journey." It shows how gender fits in with the complex construct of American identity. Similarly, Tuttle's "Queering Country Music Autobiography: Chely Wright's 'Like Me' and the Performance of Authenticity" argues that country music does attract a large queer audience, however the country music industry is not always willing to accept them openly. This unreceptive response is one which Parton avoids because she, at least outwardly, identifies as wholly feminine. Her femininity, though, allows others such as drag queens to temporarily embody the female gender, often in a relatively safe space.

Goldin-Perschbacher discusses the relationship between country music and the queer community in America. One specific case study she uses is the 2005 movie *Transamerica* directed by Duncan Tucker (IMDb), which features Parton's song *Travelin' Thru*. The movie covers topics such as the family struggles and the battles which transgender people can face. Parton's song *Travelin' Thru* was written for *Transamerica* (dollyparton.com) and it is argued that through this song Parton voices her support for her transgender and queer communities.

It encapsulates Parton's ideas on sexuality in the lyrics "God made me for a reason, and nothing is in vain, redemption comes in many shapes with many kinds of pain." According to Parton's website, her motivation for writing the song was that "some people are blind or ignorant, and you can't be that prejudiced and hateful and go through this world and still be happy. One thing about this movie is that I think art can change minds. It's alright to be who you are" (dollyparton.com). Goldin-Perschbacher asserts that "Parton's persona in the song is not explicitly identified as transgender—her main identity is as a traveler . . . She cleverly positions the transgender character and, crucially, herself as outsiders" (794). The chorus "I'm just travelin', travelin', travelin', I'm just travelin' thru" (795) is ambiguous and does not directly reveal what Parton's stance on the matter is. This can be read as a further illustration of Parton's

ability to subvert the current hegemonic power structure without overtly challenging it, she cannot be disliked by her conservative audiences for having liberal views.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

One way to understand the experiences of women in the world of country music as a backdrop for Parton is by examining autobiographies. Pamela Fox explores the lives and autobiographies of six famous female country singers in her text. She argues that Dolly Parton's autobiography *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business* (1994), amongst the other autobiographies of country singers, allows us to "deepen our understanding of the class and gender-coded notions of authenticity, discourse, and performative identity shaping the distinctly American form of popular culture known as country music" (235). These autobiographies shine a light onto the contradictions and injustices which women face within the realm of country music. There is a constant balance, which many of these women face, between being famous and public and being a mother and private.



## CHAPTER 6:

## DOLLY AND MUSIC

Music is a central element in the formation of Dolly Parton's constructed identity. Fundamentally, Dolly Parton is a talented musician. She is not only a singer who plays a wide range of instruments ranging from the guitar, fiddle and dulcimer to the saxophone and piano, but also a songwriter with almost 800 published songs (dollyparton.com). With her ambitions set on a career in music she emerged from humble beginnings to become a well-established country singer-songwriter after moving to Nashville, Tennessee at the age of 18 to pursue her dream. Originally her music was purely country and western and this was the market she appealed to. However, she ultimately achieved global stardom by introducing her 'country pop' to a much broader fan base and by appearing in a number of Hollywood movies.

The music Parton has created and performed is a clouded window into the precarious private identity she is willing to put before audiences present and future. Her image as an amalgamation of her identity merged with her music will be discussed, as will her development as an artist and an individual over the span of her lengthy career. Pamela Wilson in "Mountains of contradictions: Gender, class, and region in the star image of Dolly Parton" posits that "in spite of its broader appeal, the country music industry has continued to align itself with perceptions of a white, Southern, rural, working-class culture and associated cultural tastes" (1-2). This context can be clearly read in Parton's delivery of her persona.

Country music arguably epitomises the values most treasured in traditional white American life: home, family, and authenticity. Williams and Morrisey argue that since the birth of country music in the 1920s, it has been "strongly self-referential, constantly making notes of its own authenticity" (162). This context indicates that country music closely corresponds with American authenticity and tradition.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC PERFORMANCE

Most music artists strive for their audience to perceive them as genuine; this is what allows fans to experience a sense of emotional connection with the artist and a sense of belonging in the music community, and constantly emphasising their place in the industry encourages fans to stay engaged. Williams and Morrissey argue, “Dolly Parton’s public persona would seem to have little to do with her mountain roots; but, it might be argued that it has everything to do with country music’s roots in vaudeville” (170). Parton has taken inspiration from her genre’s history and turned herself into an embodiment of it. This enhances her authenticity, making it unquestionable despite her incongruous appearance.

Parton has ingrained the soul of country music into her very being. In certain situations, she “markets the ‘real’ Dolly, the poor mountain girl who learned to sing in her grandfather’s Church of God congregation” (Williams and Morrissey 170). This creation of a ‘real’ versus a ‘fictional’ Dolly makes her apparent authenticity even more complex. Parton must perform both simultaneously in order for her body, in the literal and theoretical sense, to be understood as something deeper than a performance.

According to Williams and Morrissey, country music is a means for one to “authenticate one’s own life experiences,” (162) meaning that the music is a way to perform themselves rather than simply writing about it; it functions as a medium for autobiography. Parton has balanced this well, she does not reveal so much that any fan group would discard her, yet she shares enough for her lyrics to feel intimate. The authors go on to state that the world of country music is a genuine one, despite the “artifice” (162) of the genre and its foundations in vaudeville. This contradiction becomes more apparent when examining Parton’s appearance and performed identity. She brands herself as a blonde bombshell, a global superstar, yet she simultaneously markets herself as a “poor mountain girl” (170) who learned to sing at church.

Linking to this is Tara Tuttle's article "Queering Country Music Autobiography: Chely Wright's 'Like Me' and the Performance of Authenticity." Tuttle looks at how part of the authenticity celebrated by the realm of country music is its relationship with Christian morals. In order to explore the relationship between Parton, music and morals, a segment can be taken from Tuttle's argument.

Parton wrote in her autobiography of her religious conversion in an old abandoned church . . . 'Here in one place was God, music, and sex,' said Parton, and it was there that she found God . . . Realizing that God meant for her to be sensual, Parton is not inhibited from singing a hymn while donning five-inch heels, heavily-styled hair, low-cut glitzy dresses, and pushed-up cleavage . . . Parton decided, 'spirituality is the most intimate part of a person's makeup, and it's strictly up to the individual to choose how to express it.' (74)

The relationship between Parton, music and morals is clearly a complex one, despite her discussing it in a simple and direct way. Expressing the opinion that God can be in the same place as music and sex may be controversial, yet it can be argued that people can find religion in the most unlikely of places. Parton's religious upbringing and undeniable respect for the Christian faith is an important factor in the way she manages to appeal to a middle-class Christian audience, however she does not frequently mention religion in her lyrics meaning that she appeals to a wider audience than only Christian listeners.

#### I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU

Parton's song "I Will Always Love You," most famously recorded by Whitney Houston, is known and adored worldwide. It is a song of passion yet resignation, love yet heartbreak and it captures the emotions felt during the disintegration of a relationship beautifully. Whitney Houston in 1992 turned Parton's soulful, woeful country song into a passionate and celebrated

power ballad. This demonstrates the transition Parton went through, as she did not perform the cover herself, but she allowed another artist to bring the song to fame. It shows how she translated her identity as a Southern American white woman into a star with a globally known ballad to her name. The song allowed Parton to perform her authentic sentimental self, putting forward an image of herself which is not commonly seen by the public.

Richard Rischard discusses the theoretical side of power ballads in his article “A Vision of Love: An Etiquette of Vocal Ornamentation in African-American Popular Ballads of the Early 1990s.” The author emphasises that there are two particular features of Dolly Parton which are of interest. The first is her song-writing success, and the second is her “ability to crossover in the 1970s with a remarkable amount of country twang . . . as well as a style of ornamentation grounded in the sacred and secular traditions of her native Tennessee” (419). As will become clear throughout this text, Parton is a mass of contradictions within herself.

In a formal sense, Parton’s and Houston’s versions are nearly identical. The difference comes in the performance by the two artists. David Metzger, author of “The Power Ballad” published in *Popular Music*, argues that Parton’s original is a “country weeper . . . a tale of a sad farewell” (441), as opposed to Houston’s version being passionate and powerful. One of the most striking differences between the two versions takes place in the third verse. Where Houston sings passionately, Parton speaks; a “humble moment for a singer” which indicates “heartfelt directness” (441). The way Parton opens her heart in this song connects to how she finds alignment between her various personas; at the centre of it all, she is always the same woman.

One way this difference can be interpreted is by looking at it through a gendered lens. In the world of country music, female singers can be broadly classified as sentimental and heart wrenching or defiant and vengeful. There is no doubt that Parton is in the former category, especially if she is being classified based on her performance of *I Will Always Love You*. In

power ballad, however, the emotions portrayed are more likely to be passionate and effusive. Rischar posits that a key reason for the difference between the two singers' version is the "gendered-passive role of female soloists in country music in the late 1960s and early '70s" (420). This indicates that Parton recorded the song in the manner she did because she was satisfying the expectations held of her by her genre at the time, additionally the song with its emphasis on "timidity and regret" (420) fits neatly into the country music genre.

## CHAPTER 7:

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to answer the research question “how has Dolly Parton’s creation of her multifaceted persona as constructed identity aided her astounding success?” This was examined with particular focus on her appearance, gender, relationship to the queer community and music.

This thesis sought to examine the role played by Parton’s constructed identity in her achieving success in a man’s world. There is no doubting her success on a number of measures including fame, wealth, business success and appeal to a widely divergent fan base. As a concert goer comments in the sixth episode of the WYNC studios podcast: Dolly Parton’s America ([www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america](http://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america) (00:00:48 – 00:01:00) minutes) “It was the most diverse place I have ever been. There were people wearing cowboy hats and boots, people in drag, church ladies, lesbians holding hands, little girls.” Perhaps this is a further measure of her success in that she can appeal to such a wide fan base who all cohabit the same space comfortably when at a Parton concert.

“Dolly and Appearance” concluded that her over the top appearance with blonde wig, high heels and curvy figure has remained consistent throughout her career and seems not only to help Parton create a public identity which she can both feel beautiful as but also hide behind. But also, in many ways is designed to disarm and be non-threatening to the male status quo by appearing as the dumb blonde that she definitely is not.

This is further supported by the examination of Dolly and Gender in chapter 4 where is argued that Parton’s attempt at subverting the male gaze allowed her real self to not become overwhelmed and overpowered by the sexualisation. Through this subversion, Parton manages

to take control of her own image and portray herself in the light she wishes the world to see her in.

“Dolly and the Queer Community” put forward the idea that Parton’s ability to tactfully respond to accusations of queerness aimed at herself has earned her a place in the hearts of her LGBTQA+ fans. In addition, her lyrics are relevant to those across the gender and sexual orientation spectrum. Her joy at being represented by transexual individuals is a clear indication of her allyship.

Chapter 6, “Dolly and Music,” suggests that it is essential to Parton’s success that through her music she is authentic at all times. Without her Southern USA background to prove her grit she would unlikely be as triumphant as she is today. Her being a genuine musician with a frivolous appearance has given her the freedom to play with her persona as much as she pleases.

Based on the arguments outlined above, I would argue that Parton has successfully used her constructed identity to help her overcome barriers previously faced by women. It can be suggested that she was only able to become a successful star and businesswoman by first adhering to the expectations laid out for a woman of her class and race: by looking beautiful and trashy. It was a clever intention of Parton to set out to externally portray herself as the town trash (Fox 258) and it has permitted her access to the male-dominated world of country music without causing offence or damaging egos.

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