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### Authenticity as a form of worth

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## Authenticity as a form of worth

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Scholarly engagement with authenticity has been revitalized by recent efforts to theorize the value-ladenness of authenticity claims. Yet, these approaches are restricted by the lack of available conceptual tools necessary to explain variations in the meaning of authenticity between different cultural forms and social groups. In this paper, I draw from Boltanski and Thevenot's pragmatic hermeneutics to develop an approach to authenticity in popular culture that conceptualizes it as a form of worth. I apply this new model to an analysis of the meanings of authenticity found in the discourse of fans of indie music and country music. I find that in the indie genre, authenticity involves an inspirational form of worth; in the country genre, it involves a domestic form of worth. I trace these differences back to the matched relationship between the primary groups of fans of each genre and the genres themselves that led both sides to find an interest in these types of authenticity. I conclude by sketching the relevance of this approach for explaining overarching concerns for authenticity in late modern societies.

**Keywords:** authenticity; indie music; country music; fan culture; Boltanski; Bourdieu

### Introduction: authenticity claims as value-judgments

One of the minor ironies of postmodernity is the persistent inability to understand authenticity as involving anything other than a kind of heroic objectivism. In concise form, authenticity is whatever is *not false* or *not an imitation*. Presumably, this makes *real* whatever does not fit those profane categories. However, despite the simple empiricism of these claims, authenticity still appears to hover between fact and value, description and evaluation. Like Maxwell's demon, it falls gently on neither side. Even when not claimed as a source of irresistible truth, authenticity is still used to bludgeon everything that somehow lacks reality. These manifold ambiguities are caused by needless semantic limits placed on the concept and are resolvable only by enlarging its meaning. Hence, much as Lukacs (1938/2001) defined realism not as empiricism but rather as a superior aesthetic that parses through appearances in order to represent what is most essential, making the representation more real than the reality, the discourse of authenticity, especially as it is found in the realm of popular culture, reveals much more about the desires, beliefs and understandings of the world among those wielding it when it is not defined relative to the antiquarian or art historian's vaunted efforts at distinguishing *vrai* from *faux*, but instead treated as a more other-worldly kind of process, involving the decidedly less dignified matter of people making assertions about value.

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In this paper, I follow the work of other scholars (Frith, 1998; Jensen, 1998; Kruse, 2003; Peterson, 2005) who theorize authenticity as a *value-judgment* within the realm of popular music. Using a discourse analysis of messages posted on internet forums devoted to country and indie music (respectively), I recover both the worth-based meaning of authenticity as a value-judgment and couple this with an identification of its social and historical conditions of possibility for each genre.

In particular, I draw from Frith who focuses the analysis of authenticity on “popular discrimination,” or the process of “making judgments and assessing differences that is the essence of popular culture practice” (1998, p. 16).<sup>1</sup> Hence, any sociology of popular “aesthetic discrimination” must understand “cultural value judgments [by looking] at the social contexts in which they are made” (1998, pp. 21–22). Treating authenticity as a value-judgment, understood in this sense, broadens the range of processes that it *can* signify, allowing analysts to capture a rich subtext in the collective judgments of authenticity that is closely connected to the political, economic, and social conditions that situate fans and genres.

Country and indie music are genres where a discourse of authenticity is particularly strong, especially for the ardent fan cultures surrounding them (see Ching, 2001; Ellison, 1995; Fonarow, 2006; Fox, 2004; Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Hibbett, 2005; Jensen, 1998; Kruse, 2003; Malone, 2002; Peterson, 1997). The “genre rules” of both, particularly as these are maintained in fan discourse, are highly sensitive to the meaning of authentic membership. As I demonstrate below, the value-judgments applied by these fans to evaluate cultural objects like songs and musicians finds its prerogative in targeted classifications that treat nearly everything as a claim on genre membership. Authenticity in these domains thus concerns the ability to participate as an accepted member of the genre, to be recognized as part of this relatively coherent symbolic economy, and to stake a claim on the specific capital available in it.

However, scholarship on authenticity in music, even having conceptualized authenticity as a form of popular discrimination based on value-judgments, suffers from two primary problems: first, it underplays the relationship between the fan groups making the assessments and the kinds of values they attach to genre-based music products; second, contemporary approaches cannot specify what “value” – as a cultural notion – really does when fans assign it to a cultural object. The neglect of this last problem stems, in part, from the general absence of comparative studies of the meanings of authenticity in popular culture. Without being presented with the puzzle of specific differences in the kinds of value people attribute to the objects they find authentic, any attempt to ascertain the source of variance is neutralized and authenticity is simply glossed as a generic category of value.

In what follows, I will argue for taking a *worth-based* approach to authenticity as a value-judgment (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). The advantage of this approach is that while it still captures the constructive importance of normativity for social life, it also provides a crucial mechanism for understanding how social groups make normative judgments that reflect values. The mechanism is what Boltanski and Thevenot refer to as a “test.” The tests concept is modeled on tests in educational settings and similarly refers to situations in which the tested “object” (a student, a musician, even a song) is allowed to demonstrate worth by satisfying the conditions provided by some general criteria. Thus, people “endow objects with value” by subjecting them to tests (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006, p. 40). What the test involves (knowledge of a subject, physical strength, choosing one course of action instead of another) is open-ended; however, performance on it determines the distribution of worth and a justified order between the tested objects (some better, some worse).<sup>2</sup>

This worth-based approach is a superior way of interpreting the meaning of authenticity for fans of indie and country music than approaches that involve simply making them a plaster cast of either the “art, folk or commerce” master category of music value (Frith, 1998, pp. 36–46), or which emphasize their mutual opposition to commerce (Jensen, 1998; Kruse, 2003). While indie and country can be loosely grouped according to the music values “art” and “folk,” respectively, the connections remain vague without a mechanism that accounts for *how* fans attribute these values to genre-based music products. I argue that, for indie, authentic musicians and songs embody an *inspirational* worth achieved through demonstrations of autonomy; for country, authentic musicians and songs embody a *domestic* worth achieved through demonstrations of a concern with reality. Inspirational worth involves an outpouring of emotion, spontaneity, passion in creation, and the cult of uniqueness; domestic worth involves a concern with tradition, tightknit and personal relationships, “the soul of the home,” and trust.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, musicians or songs demonstrate or *prove* these types of worth through tests, identifiable in fan discourse. Passing the test is testimony to the object’s (band, musician, and song) authenticity according to genre-specific criteria. While largely consistent with Frith’s approach to “popular discrimination,” this focus on worth provides an enriched understanding of what it means for musicians and songs to possess the value of authenticity attributed to them in fan discourse.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, while opposition to commerce is essentially correct as a diagnosis of the origins of authenticity, the puzzle here is why fans emphasize different sets of valued traits in expressing this opposition to commerce as a concern with authenticity. That the discourse of authenticity surrounding indie and country music involves a commercial critique is no surprise: strident opposition to commodification is largely constitutive of the modern “discourse of authenticity” (Ferrara, 1994; see also Bell, 1996; Goldman & Papson, 1996; Jameson, 1979). However, accounting for it does little to explain what consumers and fans actually find to be authentic. Indeed, where country fans do not appear to care about the “fabrication of authenticity” that marks the genre (Peterson, 1997), indie music does everything it can to cleanse all traces of “fabrication” from its aesthetic (Kruse, 2003). Yet, it remains conceivable that indie *could* involve domestic worth, and thus not be concerned with fabrication, while country could involve inspirational worth and value an unalloyed process of creating music above all else.<sup>5</sup> Thus, finding differences in the meaning of authenticity despite a shared opposition to commerce invites a further question: why do these social groups find these values in these music genres?<sup>6</sup>

Answering this question highlights the more general point that authenticity is a value-judgment that opposes one form of worth (commerce) with another (inspirational or domestic). Hence, commerce is not value-less, but instead sets criteria for evaluating music that appear to pull each genre toward mainstream pop.<sup>7</sup> Opposing it requires the assertion of a different form of worth that maintains the genre by maintaining its internal order. To interpret this, I place country and indie, and their separate discourses of authenticity, in social and historical context. The solution is twofold, modeled on the Bourdieusean problem of *matching* a field with a habitus. As Bourdieu puts it: “the regularities inherent in an arbitrary condition ... tend to appear as necessary, even natural [when] they are the basis of schemes of perception and appreciation through which they are apprehended” (1990, pp. 53–54). The “close correlation” between field and habitus, or between schemes of perception and appreciation used both to produce and apprehend the object, makes for the tight coupling and nonarbitrary or *matched* references to authenticity between fans and genres. To account for this, I trace the

emergence of different discourses of authenticity within indie and country music, and then situate each fan culture socially, explaining their predisposition toward the form of worth that is scripted out inside each genre.

In what follows, I first provide a brief description of the data before undertaking an inductive analysis of it for each genre. Here, I concentrate on mapping the discursive landscape as the separate forms of worth and tests that determine authenticity as a value-judgment emerge from the discourse. I then discuss the creative application of these tools (tests and forms of worth) by fans to construct a value-sphere inside each genre. Finally, I compare the meaning of authenticity between indie and country by outlining the social and historical relationships that provide its conditions of possibility.

### **Methods and data**

The data consist of messages about authenticity found on country and indie music discussion forum websites on the Internet. Discussion forums utilize an asynchronous bulletin board service. Contributors register with the site free of charge and post messages in forums accessible to anyone with a web browser. Discussion forums are structured by “threads” which contributors create by introducing topics of conversation for the rest of the forum. Contributors enter posts on topics iteratively, which gives the sense of a running conversation between them. The content on discussion forums is entirely user-generated.

To code the data, I used the following strategy: first, I selected three forums for each genre dedicated to discussions of genre-specific content. Next, I selected three forums (one for each genre and one with content for both genres) that are part of larger music discussion websites dedicated to a variety of genres. To choose among the variety of music discussion forums available on the Internet, I used a preliminary analysis of forum material and the number of registered users, posts and threads, selecting forums that indicated the most representative and extensive sample content.

For my analysis, the content of contributor posts is the unit of analysis. I emphasize the content of specific messages rather than interaction patterns among contributors. As suggested above, I treat forum material as a form of vernacular text. My coding strategy used keyword searches of forum discussion threads, entering general phrases like “authenticity,” “mainstream,” “true,” and “real” to locate relevant material. From this, I developed a list of predominant themes, which I coded and recoded using Atlas.ti until I located each individual statement about authenticity within a specific group based on the theme that it emphasizes in making an authenticity claim. In this way, I sampled over 1000 relevant messages, which I reduced to a group of 172 based on the strength of their claims about authenticity. These were the messages (82 for country and 90 for indie) that formed the basis of the analysis.

### **The soul of the home**

Reality is the most important aspect of country music authenticity, because this is what demonstrates most a domestic kind of worth that involves tradition, trust, tightknit relationships, and connections to familiar settings and scenarios. Authentic music thus connects to reality, often through richly textured stories involving shared experiences. The presence of stories is one kind of test applied to country music that assesses its domestic value. The music must also be accessible and easy to use, and does not draw attention to itself. Authentic country musicians, meanwhile, “draw fans in” because they signify membership in the same reality, and portray what “its like to be in the

country.” The domestic meaning of authenticity is thus rooted in the proofs given for someone’s familiarity with experiences characteristic of a reality that, presumably, everyone shares.

Authentic country music revolves around stories. Fans expect the music to tell stories, and their evaluations often reflect how well this expectation is met. This relates strongly to the connection between music and reality. For example, in the following entry, stories communicate real situations, which the speaker then connects to the beauty of the music itself.

Well I specifically enjoy country music because of the *real situations* that it presents to me everytime I listen to a song. I am from Alabama, so it’s practically in my roots. But a lot of the *stories* that are told through country music, I can relate to. It’s nothing depressing or sad. Sometimes, a song could be about *going grocery shopping & running into an old friend*, but it just gives you a good feeling. I love *the simplicity and the beauty* of country music ...

This suggests a kind of “cherished and critical ordinariness” (Fox, 2004, p. 43) and straightforward aestheticization of reality in country music lyrics that celebrates the unremarkable and everyday “quotidian reality” (Ching, 2001). The most effective stories are charged with meanings drawn from clear retellings of experiences shared by fans, or “music that reflects the reality.” The authenticity of the music draws from this grounding in real situations. As stories help communicate reality, so they make the music seem authentic.

Storytelling is evident in the following entry, where it is connected with a variety of different characteristics that combine to produce an evaluation of country music authenticity:

I really miss country artists that can *tell a story*. If you look at the older generations of country artists and their style of music, there was a good amount of *story telling*. It wasn’t a bunch of unrelated verses, they were combined to tell one story. A few examples would be The Gambler, Young Love or even Cocaine Blues. I want a current country artist to *tell a story* with some passion in their *voice*. I want to hear at least one of the *staple instruments* of country music in that song. I want to *believe that story* when I hear it.

Here, this post tests a song’s connection to tradition, with associations drawn between staple instruments (“fiddles and steel guitars”), emotion and performers that carry stories. Performer emotion and “grain of the voice” are a crucial part of credible stories that find clear referents. A similar kind of test is applied in the following entry: “... for me, whether it be traditional, or contemporary, mainly it has to have a deep personal impact, tells a good story and is sung perfectly with emotional inflections to *make that story real*.”

This connection to reality also concerns country fans’ sensibility that a song or artist directly “speaks to” them. This is probably the most crucial aspect of the form of worth country music asserts, which emphasizes domestic values. For example, the following entry finds two songs authentic because the speaker can draw from their experience to relate to the experiences communicated through the songs: “try listening to Whiskey Lullaby or If Tomorrow Never Comes. One of the best things about country is *how I can really relate to the songs sometimes*.” Trust and familiarity are also common evaluations of country musicians. For instance, “I would have to say that Patsy Cline is one of my faves. She had a one of a kind voice that could just *draw you in*.” Authentic country musicians connect with fans whose experiences they share and also represent. This

imagined intimacy works according to the same process that allows fans to “relate to” songs. Authentic musicians are “one of us”; the songs are about “our reality.”

A key part of communicating this is the relationship between “hard times and heaven” often found in the content of country music (Ellison, 1995). Authentic country music “speaks for” traumatic and difficult experiences, but it also serves as tool for realizing desirable activities and experiences. This is often framed by lyrics that transition between the narrative poles of “loss and desire” (Fox, 1992), which is evident in fan associations between “down and out,” on the one hand, and “sweet and hopeful,” on the other.

Authentic country songs are *the ones that take you back* to the things you once loved but have since diminished. i like a good dramatic country song, but in my eyes, i want to listen to it a lot more when it *makes me reminisce* to some comparable memory.

This contributor likes the drama of “good country songs” but also wants the pleasure of reminiscing about “some comparable memory.” The connection between music and real experience is clear, but the mixture of “hard times with heaven,” and their connection to authentic country songs, also indicates the importance of *function* for authentic country. This expectation is present in much the same way in associations between country music that is “fun to get drunk too” and “parties and dancing, and not having a care in the world.” Authentic country involves credible performers speaking to reality, but this is often mediated by how well the music accompanies other activities. It is not enough just to listen to it. Authentic country music is music that can be *used* – for parties, reminders of home or constructing a shared reality of ordinary or stigmatizing experiences. The connection with domestic worth here involves the social cohesiveness produced through country music, providing for a sense of *communitas* and *gemeinschaft* characteristic of an extended family.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, overly sanctimonious or extravagant music (“the sappy stuff by Vince Gill”) or music that seems too cognizant of form, and thus perceived as technical or “artsy” (“good country is not Dwight Yoakum, he is too out there”), is tested for its ability to meet this standard and does not qualify.

Finally, the perception among country fans is that authentic country is open and accessible, and represents, as one entry stresses, “GOOD music that ANYBODY can relate too.” The music is not supposed to be distinctive, but instead real and non-judgmental. Country music is valued more highly than other music precisely because of its openness, acceptance and lack of pretension:

Country was not made to be complicated, it was *made to speak to the people*, the music merely helps in setting the mood ... it *speaks to people in a room*. You can dance to it or emote to it without a liberal arts education and there’s *no need to prove anything to anyone* about it – it is what it is. It doesn’t have to be complicated, it just gets across to your head and feet.

Objectively speaking, country music’s apparent openness is irrelevant as in many cases country music seems “closed” for the same reasons (Bryson, 1996). But as statement of subjective experience, “openness” becomes euphemism for the shared reality communicated through a song. The domestic worth of an authentic country song is measured by openness because it insinuates familiarity and trust. Music that seems deliberately “out to prove something” violates this presumption, because it does not “make sense” or “speak too” an audience. As shaped by values inherent to the

domestic form of worth, country music should require only a prior familiarity with real situations in order to like and understand it, nothing more.

### The inspired denunciation

For indie, autonomy is essential to the meaning of authenticity, as this is the prime demonstration of inspirational worth. This is expressed in a variety of ways, but the most critical test of worth for indie music involves the situation in which indie bands could sign with corporate labels and go major, but they are authentic to the extent that they *choose* not to do this. This is the modal situation from which all evaluations of authenticity stem in indie music, as it marks the prime assertion of the inspirational form of worth against the commercial. While the choice is rarely as stark as this, the kind of authenticity demonstrated in this situation filters into all displays of authenticity in the genre, which become microcosms for the assertion of the inspirational versus the commercial.

The following entry reveals the test of indie authenticity in its most evident form:

[Indie bands] make music because they want to play for devoted fans *not to make bundles of money*. I think most indie musicians are actually afraid of fame. in my mind the epitemy [sic] of Indie has got to be Guster. these guys are unconventional made it slightly popular ... then disappeared [sic] because *they dont want fame* ...

Thus, thus choosing not to make music for money or fame, or at least being perceived as having made this choice, proves your authenticity. Indeed, having “disappeared” this band has reached the pinnacle of indie authenticity, because they fit exactly the narrative of what a discourse of authenticity keyed toward an “outpouring of inspiration” would seem to require. Authentic indie artists make music only while the inspiration lasts; when it is gone, they stop, lest making music find some other motivation that conflicts with this form of worth. Here the music remains while the band disappears. Truly inspired, they surpass themselves through the music, which thereby becomes the object of primary importance.

Privileging the music “object” (song, album) over the band is characteristic of indie music in a sense that suggests the unique kind of orientation that fans take toward the genre when they appreciate it using the inspirational form of worth. Indie fans often use the opposition between music utility and music *for itself* to critique the mainstream. “Uncompromising” music has special value, and this is communicated through the exercise of choice. Indie fans could simply listen to “whatever crap is on the radio” but they take the time to *discover* good music. According to Wendy Fonarow, this indicates that indie fans see themselves among the “spiritually elect” as an “anointed disciple” or “true scholar of music” (2006, p. 62). The indie vernacular on authenticity often suggests a *scholarly* attunement to music itself, which is discussed in a form schematically very similar to other cultural objects presumed to have transcendent value.<sup>9</sup>

However, for the music to find this significance, it must first pass the test of being opposed to the commercial – a test whose temporality, and proof of worth, is not fixed. As the following entry suggests, authentic music can be profaned through subsequent association with commercial values:

I agree that it is up to the artist to do what they please with their creativity. Some things seem to be opposed to their role as an artist however i.e. licensing their music for commercials and etc. I definitely think they have a right to do it, but, at least for me, there is

*something that is lost from the song when it is put in that kind of context ... they can't expect me to listen to that song in the same way as I used to. And, when I'm listening to the album it is on, not have that song seem to interrupt the flow of the album simply because of the different connotations the commercial has created for it.*

Here, “commercial” connotations conflict with what is the basis for finding value in the song: that its source was the inspiration of the artist alone, and not as means to reach some other end. This involves an appeal to the integrity of indie music, which can be maintained only if inspiration is the primary value. This is also evident in the kind of ritualized degradation displayed here of “music [used] as an accessory.” In the same way, the authenticity of the music is compromised when it becomes an accessory for something else, particularly if this means becoming more proximate to the commercial.

Creativity is also primary way of demonstrating indie authenticity, though seemingly less for the inherent value of creativity, than for how it suggests an opposition to commercial values:

It really pisses me off when bands/artists try and do something creative and they are branded as “weird” and cast aside. I just find it sickening really. Why would you reject such a delightful music video MTV, why?

The band is “weird” according to a commercial or mainstream template, and the contributor critiques MTV for not appreciating creativity. However, later in the same entry, the band is praised for “not buying into the MTV crap” and remaining committed to creativity in their specific way. Thus, the band proves its inspirational worth and authenticity in a scenario set up by the sacred/profane distinction between creativity and commercial. Once again, choice is the key variable in making the evaluation. But the entry suggests no other value to creativity which is not presented in the context of its opposition to commercial values and their “stale and uniform, cookiecutter standards” whose acquisitiveness removes the autonomy of indie musicians.

When a band does go the commercial, the effect is one that resembles in some ways the disintegration of country music’s extended *gemeinschaft*. For example, the following entry reads like a vignette of the watershed experience involved in witnessing an indie band “sell out:”

I loved a band down this way called “Hunters and collectors” and I remember seeing them at a pub with only about five other people in the room, and they were all at the bar ... My friend and I stood in front of them all night, and watched as the lead singer gave the drummer hell for not keepin’ the beat properly ... It was one of THE greatest sets I’ve ever seen, and I felt they were playin’ at me, for me ... OK, the next time I saw them, was in a slightly bigger venue, packed to the rafters, and I was squashed against the wall ... The music was more polished, and the audience was mucho impressed, but *I felt a distance* ... The third time I saw them, they had been “discovered”, their obvious talents recognised by a *wider demographic*. They hadn’t changed their approach in any way other than they were much more professional and accomplished stage entertainers ... *I was just another face in the packed venue, and while I was watching I couldn’t recognise them anymore.*

Here, entry into the commercial mainstream, as it makes the band more accessible, also makes them more *distant*. This, in turn, makes the fan feel anonymous. But as a situation that removes the authenticity of a band, “selling out” is further indicative of the fundamental role that inspirational worth plays inside the indie genre. As Fonarow argues, more than anything else indie fans “want the musical persona ... to be

consistent with the performer's experience and persona off-stage, to have the actor be the part he plays" (2006, p. 191). Hence, there should be no artifice if the musician is willing to be *surpassed* by the music. The contrast with country is important. Here, the connection between musicians and fans is less because indie musicians share the real-life experiences of their audience than it is that they bond over being part of something unique and transcendent. The ritual of attending shows, so crucial to the indie scene, makes "the local" a key ingredient of indie authenticity (Kruse, 2003). But this is primarily because the local and "small venues" are the spaces necessary for achieving and witnessing those affective states – spontaneous, fleeting, involuntary, and therefore sincere – that assert the value of inspiration over commerce.

### Boundaries, conflicts, and order in popular music genres

From this inductive analysis, we see that the focus of country authenticity concerns shared membership in a social group, communicated with signifiers that draw connections between the music and real experiences. On the other hand, indie authenticity is tightly coupled to autonomy and disinterest, and focused particularly on the production of the music and the motivations behind it. As suggested, what these categories reveal is the presence of two forms of worth: domestic and inspirational. In both instances, evaluating the authenticity of the music object (band, musician, and song) is determined by tests that allow for the demonstration of either a domestic or inspirational worth. Authentic objects appear to perform the values involved in *being* domestic or inspired, particularly as these are asserted in contrast to commercial values.

An advantage of a worth-based approach, however, is that it does not preclude creative and/or dissonant applications of these schemes. Indeed, as part of a pragmatic-sociological hermeneutics, the goal of this approach is only to "clarify the *competence*" that actors deploy when they make these arguments, providing an interpretive model for the arrangements that underlie and support them (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006, pp. 347–359). But this does not determine what emerges from an argumentative context in which actors align these forms of worth in support of their position. Indeed, the presumption is that anything could be dubbed "authentic" from a country or indie lens, as the meaning is contingent only upon the deployment of the competence and not upon the categories themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Consider, for example, the following entry, which emphasizes the importance of choice for indie music:

There's a huge difference between a band not going major because *they choose* to stay with the independents and a band not going major because *they can't* get a deal.

The possibilities are laid out quite clearly and verify the role that autonomy and inspiration play in the discourse of authenticity found in indie music. The speaker infers authentic motivation by contrasting choice against control, and applying choice to bands she believes to be authentic. But the added clause is that indie bands must be *good enough* even to be confronted with the choice. A band cannot choose *not* to be part of a major label, and thus attain the symbolic value for authenticity, when they remain so obscure that they do not register on the mainstream radar. However, while this entry aligns this argument with the inspirational form of worth, it can easily be countered *on the same terms* with the opposite claim that it introduces a commercial indicator of quality (being "good enough") and unfairly disregards the inspirational values found in being obscure.

A similar process is at work in the following judgment of country authenticity.

I like the *old country* because it seems more real. The country of today is mostly just so simplistic. To me, the problem is that you hardly ever hear them *sing about* anything other than themselves, or their lives. *I never hear them sing about anything interesting, like the old stories.* If it's not about them, and their own life, it's about their relationship with God or something.

Here, the possibilities are opened by the category of reality. The speaker poses the “country of today” against “old country” and calls the former “simplistic.” Contemporary country musicians sing about “themselves, and their own life and their relationship with God or something” instead of telling stories. The ideal is a connection with real experiences, shared with the audience and made through stories. But the “country of today” rejects this tradition by focusing on “themselves and their lives,” which only reinforces a distance from the audience. The term “simplistic” might express the cynicism that comes from being resigned to the world and yet confronting something that does not appear to acknowledge “hard reality.” This, in turn, emphasizes what the country musician is willing to do to be a spokesperson – or what underlies the positive evaluation: “despite her success, she is still *one of us*.” Thus, when the “country of today” is posed against “old country,” it means the former does not fit the signals of “seeming real.”

However, the opposite position is made available by the same categories. The reality test and domestic values of tradition and familiarity could easily be mobilized in support of a claim that new country is more authentic than old. Indeed, this is precisely the context for this argument: as part of a debate over the relative merit of Conway Twitty.

These creative possibilities become particularly clear in disagreements over authenticity that emerge *within* each genre on the basis of shared categories. For instance, in indie music, the relationship to the mainstream defines autonomy, which sets the terms of authenticity by signaling inspiration. The relationship to the mainstream is a legitimate problem, and autonomy carries a different value depending on what fans think it should be. Thus it is used to formulate a range of different arguments. For example, consider the following opposing views:

Indie music should be heard and enjoyed by everybody. If a band is being played on the radio or suddenly makes the charts, it just means that more people are listening to this great music instead of listening to crap. So that's good. I mean really, we all complain about how crappy popular music is these days *but then if we turn around and also complain* when MTV and radio start to play “our” music, then it's a little *counterproductive*. The only way to overcome bad music's foothold on the top 40 is for good music to become mainstream.

Why do you seem to need everyone around you to *conform* to your ideals? If you actually succeeded, wouldn't the world be like the one described in that Iggy Pop song “Mass Production”? ... *Indie music is what it is because it is not like everything else out there.* Why would we want it to be popular with everyone else? It just sounds like a slippery slope.

For both entries, authenticity involves the relationship between the mainstream and indie music, and the kind of autonomy this affords the latter. This is the focal point of a test of worth. But agreement on the value of autonomy is also the basis for *disagreement* over whether indie music, which is inspired and thus of

transcendent value, should be disseminated to the mainstream and use its transcendent capacity to “raise it up” or whether it should deliberately remain distant from the mainstream. The nature of inspirational worth validates both sets of claims.

A similar dynamic is evident in country music and its discourse of authenticity. Here, two points of view emphasize a linkage between reality and authenticity. However, they clash when trying to define what the reality, as the basis for a test of worth, should actually consist in:

Great country artists were Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, and, the greatest of them all, Johnny Cash. Now, it's all The Dixie Chicks, Toby Keith, and *whatever new blonde girl* from Shantytown, Alabama picked up a guitar and had a recording session this week. All these “rhinestone cowboys” as I like to call them, *wouldn't know what to do if real country smacked them right in the face*. It's a disgrace, the genre has died.

I still stick true to my *country roots*, but most people when they think of country music they refer directly to *old Hank Williams and the crap he used to sing about*. I think the new stuff that is coming out with some of the *new younger bands* is 100,000 times better. I mean a lot of the songs are talking about going out to the small hole in the wall bars and picking up chick. Or going out with your boys and getting drunk and just not having a care in the world.

In the first quote, old country contains more worth; in the second, new country. Both judgments draw from reality as a category that creates an implicit contrast (is it of the nature of “real experience” or not?) that provides the conditions for a test of worth. But the argument that “old Hank Williams and the crap he used to sing about” is more authentic than songs about “going out to small hole in the wall bars and picking up a chick” only involves aligning the same order of worth with a different referent. The domestic order is equally capable of being extended in support of either argument. Thus, in the same way that the basis for agreement in indie music – the inspirational form of worth – creates the conditions for disagreement, the domestic order of worth in country music is the source of both order and conflict.

The point to emphasize is that even when all parties are fidelitous to the meaning of worth and authenticity in each genre, contingences involved in the application of these schemes leads to conflict and disagreement. Because this application is restricted and consolidated by the order of worth, each genre retains a certain coherence and internal order. From this perspective, tests of worth determine the symbolic boundaries of country and indie music by distinguishing between objects. But the strength of those boundaries varies inversely with the level of contentiousness incumbent upon applying the order of worth to an object (i.e. MTV is an example of an object at the boundary of indie music; the band Guster, as noted above, at the core). Thus, while country and indie each conform to a general category and remain classifiable within the universe of music genres, internally they are fluid and fragmented as the order of worth is constantly aligned in support of new and opposing claims for the authentic merit of an object.

### **Matching habitus with field: the country and indie couplets**

From a worth-based perspective, then, genres really exist only in these contentious debates about objects, when competent actors mobilize orders of worth in support of a position. Yet, this process presupposes the *content* of that order of worth – inspiration

and domesticity – and this has yet to be explained. I will finish the analysis by drawing a link between two independent processes: first, the historical sources of the genre-based concern with authenticity in indie and country music; second, the social sources of country and indie fans' mutual predisposition to be concerned with authenticity.

My approach here is modeled on Bourdieu's (1990, pp. 53–54) claim that “non-arbitrary” meaning is a product of the *match* between field and habitus observed when the schemes involved in cultural production and appreciation are the same. Here, “non-arbitrary” meaning refers to the agreement about what authenticity means in each genre – the forms of worth that represent it, the tests that prove it. The mode of competence gleaned from assessments of authenticity thus demonstrates a “close correlation” or intersection between each genre and its fan base. But in order not to “short-circuit” the explanation by reducing the meaning of authenticity to purely the operations of either field or habitus requires locating its origins in each genre and each fan base *separately*.<sup>11</sup>

As Jensen (1998) argues, country music's concern with authenticity stems from the emergence of “Nashville Sound” in the mid-1960s. Until this period, country music offered a “honky-tonk” sound characterized by steel guitars and fiddles and lyrically and aesthetically by motifs still at the core of country music authenticity today (reality, familiarity, oscillations between hard times/heaven, “soul of the home”).<sup>12</sup> However, in the face of declining radio play caused by the rise of format radio and the emergence of rock n' roll in the early 1960s, “the solid revenue base of country music disappeared virtually over night” (Bill Ivey quoted in Jensen, 1998, p. 65). Nashville Sound was country music's response. As a blended form of “country-pop,” it was intended (by the newly-formed and Nashville-based county music industry) to maintain the country genre but broaden its appeal. To do this, the “hardcore” hillbilly signifiers were jettisoned in favor of a more “produced and lush, less twangy ... countrypolitan” sound.<sup>13</sup> The result: a revitalization of country music, now in a popular guise and commercially much friendlier form. However, the development and success of the Nashville Sound would launch, in subsequent years, a battle over authenticity that has gripped the genre ever since. Each subsequent conflict over authenticity in country music thus replays a trauma caused by the original splitting off of Nashville Sound from honky-tonk.

Indie, meanwhile, is only the latest iteration of a struggle for authenticity in rock music that stems back to the 1960s. The proto-punk movement that emerged in the late 1960s morphed into the punk movement of the late 1970s and 1980s. Both had a fundamental impact on what started as college rock and morphed into alternative and indie rock in the 1990s. This genealogy is made coherent by the consistent emphasis on authenticity that each new genre developed in contrast to the mass commercialization of rock music. Generally, this involved deliberately “[shunning] the musical conventions at the time” (Rachel Felder quoted in Kruse, 2003, p. 17). An *inspirational* form of worth shaped the aesthetic cultivated by each successive genre, becoming harder, more politically charged, and (this never changed) local and anti-industrial as forms of proof levied, often dramatically, against commodification. Indeed, in this respect, the historical trajectory of authenticity in indie music resembles that of country: it stems from the commercial invasion of music with a distinct cultural form and incorruptible core incorruptible core of expression that is constantly recovered and renewed in the face of the crass exploitation of its economic value (see Marcus, 2008, pp. 1–11).

Thus, in this way, a genre-based concern developed in indie and country, emphasizing the same characteristics as categorized above – a concern with domestic and inspirational forms of worth (respectively) as assessments of value in opposition to

the commercialized push of both genres into mainstream pop. In Bourdieu's terminology, this is a field-level process. Habitus, on the other hand, explains how fans *find an interest* in each of these kinds of authenticity, thus matching schemes of appreciation with genre-based schemes of production. As I claim, the discourse of authenticity is motivated through the habitus and elaborated by concerns for either *recognition* or *distinction* as these are tethered to the modal social situation in which primary groups of fans for each genre are located. Particular themes, symbols and allusions become elements of authenticity to fans socially positioned to respond to assertions of either "This is who we are" or "This is how we are unique."

How do I arrive at recognition and distinction? In this model, they refer to *social* concerns that lead fans to emphasize certain features of each genre. Different sets of social relations affect these concerns, first, by predisposing fans toward an interest in authenticity and, second, by determining what *makes sense* in cultivating a specific meaning of authenticity. For example, when recognition acquires signature importance and a moral accent, this reflects a social situation in which little positive status is granted to a social identity. When distinction acquires the same accent, it reflects a social situation in which an honored identity is challenged. If the clearest demonstration of a concern with recognition is Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" (Taylor, 1997, p. 112), the counterpart for distinction is Bourdieu's "dialectic of the rare and common" (1984, p. 246). Both logics are located in social relationships. Thus, according to this model, authenticity falls within the ambit of recognition in situations where social relations prohibit "reciprocal recognition"; it becomes a function of distinction in situations where social relations fuel a struggle for "natural distinction."

For country, the predominant fan-type is rural, working class, middle-aged, with relatively low levels of cultural capital. The interests of this group are suggested in the perspicacious argument that "identification with country music today is like identification with an ethnic group" (Peterson, 1997, p. 218). Scholarly portraits of country music fans reveal the value of community and identity developed through the music (Ching, 2001; Eliasoph, 1998; Ellison, 1995; Fox, 2004). Country fans "[cherish] ordinariness" (Fox, 2004, p. 43), in this sense, as an antidote to scarring experiences of anonymity and "disjointedness" (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 126). Country music gives recognition and value to their reality, and this becomes a critical act in situations that foment a struggle for recognition. Thus, to oppose what they experience as cultural devaluation, country music fans use the music to valorize "ordinary" characteristics of their lives that are often stigmatized or ignored, thus combating the sundry social injunctions that demean them.<sup>14</sup> This is the source of their concern with reality at the heart of their view of authenticity. Connected to the problem of recognition, authentic country music activates, for this fan-type, "a certain way of being human that is *my way*" (Taylor, 1997, p. 101). Such is the moral accent acquired by identity and extended as a coordinating force into fan's discourse. Thus, social relationships redolent of the master-slave dialectic and "struggling for recognition" are easily meshed with value-judgments about authenticity that emphasize domestic worth.

Indie fans, meanwhile, are (at present) largely drawn from the upper-middle class, are young, male, and possess relatively high levels of cultural capital. The modal situation they confront involves the effort to maintain the status of "anointed ones who can recognize, through their own system of authenticity, the truth in music" (Fonarow, 2006, p. 62). Thus, the "indie rock scene is an arena of competition between individuals, a grappling to secure a private space that others must *respect but cannot share*" (Hibbett, 2005, p. 71). That combination allows for the cultivation of an honored social

identity. But as an exclusive taste community within popular music, indie is vulnerable to the debasement of status, in particular, from poseurs in search of symbolic capital. In this way, it is positioned inside a constantly moving “dialectic of the rare and the common.” Possession of exclusive knowledge gains membership in the community. But given this “exclusionary boundary [erected] around the culture” (Hesmondhalgh, 1999, p. 38), a more intangible *savoir-faire* of “ironic dissemblance or ‘detachment’ that conceals a superior awareness” must also apply to members (Bannister, 2006, p. 91). For indie fans, that *savoir-faire* is the most important sign of their own inspiration, and this makes them unique. Thus, they seek out music as culturally adept as they perceive themselves to be. This is how the search for distinction inside these social relations is translated into a predisposition toward finding inspirational worth in music.

Finding these sources of fans’ concerns with authenticity, and what makes sense to them as authentic, thus reveals the intersection between habitus and field and the *match* between schemes of production and appreciation. Ever since the emergence of Nashville Sound, country music has been concerned with authenticity as emblematic of domestic worth. Country fans, meanwhile, find worth in domestic things as the result of a “struggle for recognition.” Indie music is the latest form of rock music asserting inspirational worth in the face of commercial interests. Similarly, indie fans assert their inspirational worth as part of a “struggle for distinction.” Capturing this intersection between fans and genres explains the seeming objectivity of the meaning of authenticity present in each genre. This objectivity, and the coherence of the mode of competence in each genre’s value-based assessment of authenticity, is understood here as an instance of compatibility between two independent processes.

The convergence of schemes is broadly evident in the uses to which the music is put within each fan culture, observable in key practices. More specifically, discovery and introduction, agency with new music, attending small and obscure gigs, exercising selective “refusal” and “do-it-yourself” in a variety of ways, and the easy communication and embodiment of cultural capital are all documented from inside the indie scene as the typical range of action characterizing a fan (Fonarow, 2006; Kruse, 2003). On the other hand, “enacting” and “re-textualizing” the music in memory or immediate setting, acting out sociable subjectivity *and* despondence through it, reflexivity and self-deprecation about taste but still ascribing value to what is “bad,” and singing and speaking with a vocal timbre that is stigmatized but does not apologize for itself – all of these are practices that structure the ethos of the country scene (Fox, 1992, 2004; Malone, 2002).

I mention these separate sets of indicators in order to explain how authenticity can resonate in the same way, though with a different specific content, for different groups of people. However, this should not dispel the importance of a final set of factors, which contribute *equally* to the interest in authenticity found among both groups. Neoliberalism, austerity and the extension of capitalist logic to new domains, coupled with economic crisis, provides a general motivating force that galvanizes interest in both versions of authenticity. College students and low-skilled workers, the primary fan bases of indie and country music, bear the harsh effects of these socio-structural discords, their dashed hopes and expectations similarly attendant upon a crisis of subjectivity manifested as deeply felt senses of cynicism and precariousness. Yet because indie and country music involve value-judgments that are non-commercial, they afford a means of confronting social injustice. To assert the meaning of authenticity in these circumstances involves a small effort at transcending them because it finds redeemable sources of worth in places where commerce finds none. Authenticity is

thereby lent an *emancipatory* significance. This culturo-political thrust bolsters the appeal of both genres.

Taken as a whole, each of these factors, including those enmeshed in the history of each genre, those specific to each group of fans, and those shared as part of the reality of late capitalism, constitutes the conditions of possibility for authenticity finding these sets of meanings in indie and country music respectively. The advantages of concentrating the analysis on unpacking the paired relationship between habitus and field is that it captures more variation in the kinds of significance genre-based music objects can have for different groups of fans. The *selective attraction* between college students and indie music, and low-skilled workers and country music, is made visible from this perspective. However, the presumption is that any instance of attraction, no matter how discrepant, can be explained using a similar technique. Because they involve a convergence between schemes of appreciation and schemes of production, trends in music consumption are thus distinguishable as different sets of fan/genre couplets and traceable to the articulation between sets of meanings emergent on either side.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that, having accepted the value-ladenness of all assessments of authenticity, the expression of it in popular culture reveals puzzling and compelling differences. Indie and country music, particularly once understood as fan/genre couplets of matching schemes, share a primary concern with authenticity, yet this concern takes two different forms. I have shown that indie meanings of authenticity involve an inspirational form of worth characterized by spontaneity, passion in creation, and the cult of uniqueness and tests applied to establish proofs of autonomy; meanwhile, the country meanings of authenticity are keyed toward a domestic form of worth, and thus involve the sacred traits of tradition, tightknit and personal relationships, “the soul of the home,” and trust, with proof of these coming from tests of the reality obtained by a country song, musician, band or other object. I have tied these separate meanings back to the social constellations and historical preconditions that spawned a mutual concern with authenticity and that, in each of these formulations, provide the basis for specific linkages between fans and genres that explain the shared mode of competence that appears in the discourse.

I have avoided the music itself in my analysis firstly because it remains arguable whether, in strict musicological terms, indie and country music count as independent genres (indie less so than country). However, more importantly I have avoided it because any attempt to penetrate the core of either genre and recover a specific set of things that make them musically different from every other genre seems like a preamble for some kind of rigid empiricism. At the moment, the more important question involves the schemes of production and appreciation that construct and maintain each genre’s *perceived* distinctiveness from every other (cf. Lena and Peterson, 2008). That said, investigating matched schemes between fans and genres could reveal a commonality at the musicological level that makes the linkage even tighter – for example, the use of sharp rhythmic breaks in contemporary indie music, often coupled with reverberated (oceanic) guitar sound and monotonic (disembodied) lead vocals, as evocative of inspiration; the distinctive voice of lead vocals in country, coupled with a soft pulse and pared down rhythm guitar (often featuring interludes by authentic instruments like banjos and fiddles) and oscillating drumbeat all compatible with domestic worth. Furthermore, that indie music appears musically more various and inventive than

country music is also suggestive of homologies that stem from the different forms of worth pertaining in either genre. However, here I only speculate.

The elevation of authenticity in the hierarchy of concerns in popular culture is accurately diagnosed by those arguments that cite the way that rapid proliferation of signifiers and easy access to information about desired crowds and culture amplifies social suspicions over poseurs and now hipsters (Goldman & Papson, 1996; Greif et al., 2010).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the claim that reflexivity as a mode of action reaches historically unprecedented levels in late modern societies suggests further sources for the unique level of popular concern demonstrated today for authenticity (Archer, 2010). However, these perspectives remain shortsighted insofar as the implied view of authenticity is still tied to the notion that the popular “search for authenticity” is analogous to what the art historian does in exposing a phony Picasso. Authenticity draws more from *assertion* than discovery as its modal form of action; it asserts valued forms and traits *in spite of others*. Thus, if the clamor for authenticity reaches pitched levels in contemporary society, the explanation here points to growing moral investment in value-spheres that exist in spite of commercial exchange-value and an expansionary capitalist totality.

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### Notes

1. Frith himself appeals to Fiske’s (1991) seminal treatment of “popular discrimination” to orientate his approach. The core problem involves trying to capture the basis of meaning for the unpredictable set of judgments applied by fans to carefully fabricated cultural commodities, particularly those that fail despite all the anticipation and preparation determining precisely what they’ll mean.
2. The more ontologically rigorous outcome of tests involves a “justification for existing” that is determined relative to performance. I’ll keep my focus on worth.
3. I draw these characteristics from Boltanski and Thevenot’s discussion of inspiration and domesticity as two “worlds of worth” (2006, pp. 159–178).
4. Indeed, perhaps the primary problem Frith’s approach suffers from, and which the worth-based framework avoids, is the inability to specify exactly who attributes these kinds of worth. Frith credits a vacuous abstraction – “people” – with bringing “similar [evaluative] questions” to cultural objects (1998, p. 19). But there is no effort to distinguish *which* people tend to make *which* kinds of value-based assessments. Frith can’t draw a conclusion about this because he provides no real way of accounting for how an object can be endowed with a specific value. While it makes intuitive sense that indie embody “art” values and country “folk” values, more tools are required to make that connection.
5. Wilco, and the alt-country scene more generally, appear most distinctive for how they mix these two forms of worth. While the production focus is shaped by indie values, the content of the music itself is skewed toward country (Kot, 2008). A more general argument could apply to the values found in the contemporary folk and bluegrass revival. The cross-genre success of Mumford and Sons and Old Crow Medicine Show is a prime example.
6. Ultimately, the problem is one that involves the poststructuralist problem of arbitrary meaning. Arbitrariness concerns the relationship between signifier (authenticity) and signified (musician or song). The usage of “authenticity” has a binding character, even despite its lack of necessary connection to the object to which it refers. But because Saussure nowhere theorized the nature of *reference*, the problem was simply fused (in structuralism) with the idea that meaning is constituted through difference. However, poststructuralism emerged, at least partially, from a recovery of this problem, with Bourdieu and Foucault

- enthusiastically dismantling the structuralist edifice and using practice theories to develop frameworks for non-arbitrary meaning (see Giddens, 1979, chapter 1).
7. Indeed, commercial worth is specified as follows: “wealth endows [someone] with worth, since it is the expression of the unsatisfied desires of others” (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006, p. 46). Thus, worth from a purely commercial standpoint is defined by “the unsatisfied desires of others.” This negates any traits apparently possessive of the objects themselves and makes them only the expression of relative demand. The massifying effect of the application of this form of worth is obvious. This is not to mention the purely exchange-value portion of music.
  8. In particular, see Eliasoph’s (1998) discussion of the role country music plays in facilitating a dense and cohesive, but non-political, “group style” in honkey-tonk bars.
  9. In this way, indie music appreciation strongly resembles other forms of consumer appreciation that treat commodities as having transcendent value. Thus, Podolny and Hill-Popper (2004) mention a similar form of “scholarly” engagement among fans of indie films and foodies, where in all cases the presumed transcendent (as opposed to “hedonic”) value of films and foods requires that genuine consumers possess the cultural capital necessary to display a scholarly attunement (as opposed to naïve or passive consumption orientation) to them.
  10. In this sense, the approach is similar to Barbara Hernstein Smith’s (1988, p. 16) notion of “contingent value” as determined by an “experience of the work in relation to the total economy of our existence.” However, once again, the mechanisms (test, worth) found in the more pragmatic approach to value helps capture a range of variation in these evaluations that is missed by her model and the broad conditions and variables it emphasizes.
  11. Bourdieu here presents an argument against the ideological rendering of pop culture found largely among Marxist and neo-Marxist critics, involving co-optation and controlled predetermination of meaning by industry, as well as reception-oriented studies that privilege popular discrimination, and agentic-based meanings, above all else. Drawing together both sides, the goal is to reconstruct the conditions of possibility for the instances of tight coupling that appear in the relationship between genres and primary groups of fans.
  12. Indicative of this regionalization (and thus marginalization) of the honky tonk origins of country music is that many of the characteristics that constitute this vein of authenticity are captured in W.J. Cash’s forgotten classic *The Mind of the South* and his summary view of “the South at its best: proud, brave, honorable by its lights, courteous, personally generous, loyal” (1941, pp. 439–440). In the same sense, all are suggestive of domestic worth.
  13. Most of the performers from the old honky-tonk days vanished into obscurity in connection with the rise of Nashville Sound. But the two arguably most famous and authentic musicians in country music history managed to make the transition between the two styles in tact: Hank Williams and Patsy Cline.
  14. Although, ironically, the devaluation of the same aspects of ideal-typical, rural American life are part of what has fueled what at least appears to be a “southernization of American culture” with the elevation of NASCAR, college football, cultural conservatism, and country music from principally regional to national significance (see Packer, 2013).
  15. The “testing” mechanism included in the worth-based model of authenticity seems historically apposite given its fit with this latent suspicion for poseurs and hipsters who could easily appropriate the signifiers of a desired culture without really investing in them.

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