

**“Another Bed I Shouldn’t Crawl Out Of”: Sexual Moralism  
and Toxic Sociality in Country Music’s Representation of  
One-Night Stands**

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## Introduction

On 18<sup>th</sup> July 2016, country artist Miranda Lambert released 'Vice' (2016) a song candidly exploring its protagonist's casual sexual relationships or one-night stands as a coping mechanism for heartache and loneliness, as the lead single from her sixth studio album: *The Weight of These Wings* (2016) (Konicki, 2016). Country music has a reputation for being more 'conservative' (Keel, 2004: 155) than other genres in popular music and for its sexist industry practices that women have to navigate (Watson, 2019; Keel, 2004). Yet there has been increased recognition for a 'subgenre of feminist-oriented work' (Meier, 2019: 105) especially from the 1990s onwards. There have often been 'sexual double' standards (Keel, 2004: 158) around what sexual content men and women can express in the genre. The release of 'Vice' with its candid expression was noted by some journalists as indicative of gender parity in contemporary country music's representation of one-night stands (Freeman, 2016). However the song's use of an addiction trope, the 'vice' (Lambert, 2016), suggests that the genre's moralism around promiscuity still persists. Yet country music's aesthetic traditions of representing addiction with 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018: 350) and as a mode for expressing class solidarity (Hubbs, 2014: 61) suggest that this trope should be interpreted less as part of the genre's moralism and more as part of country music's means of representing and interrogating social relations.

Queer theory has also explored this, through challenging dominant and heteronormative grand narratives around institutions such as marriage and monogamy, as well as interrogating its own grand narratives around sexual liberation and romanticism of the LGBTQ+ community, overlooking the potential for conflict and toxicity within these relationships (Cobb, 2007; Muñoz, 2009). Queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Michael Cobb critique these theoretical positions and advance alternative modes of critical enquiry that better conceptualise sexuality and relationships as they are experienced. Cobb's writing around loneliness argues that loneliness puts a pressure on individuals to connect with others at all costs, and this desperation pushes people to engage in 'toxic forms of sociality'

(2007: 447). Grand narratives of sexual morality or sexual liberation are insufficient to conceptualise these relationships.

These theoretical issues will be interrogated through an analysis of Lambert's song 'Vice'. This essay will explore some of the ways one-night stands have been represented in country music historically, before outlining a queer theoretical framework around sex, relationships and 'sociality' (Cobb, 2007: 447) to explore the way loneliness impacts relationships in a toxic way, whether this is a one-night stand or a long-term relationship. I will then produce a queer analysis of 'Vice' to demonstrate how Lambert negotiates country music's social and aesthetic traditions to express a critical awareness of relational dynamics underpinning sexual behaviour as a productive approach to conceptualising sexual experiences and relationships.

### **One-night Stands in Country Music**

Country music has often been interpreted as representing traditional views of gender and sexuality. It has been argued that country music upholds a 'traditional schema of values' and 'traditional morality', and that although some 'songs... defended unconventional lifestyles [this was not] to the point of homosexuality or, usually, free love' (Malone and Laird, 2018: 351). This interpretation of country music would suggest that country music generally expresses disapproval of sexual behaviour outside monogamy, marriage and procreation. Beverly Keel argues that country music's conservatism around morality and sexual behaviour has contributed to misogyny within the country music industry resulting in women having to navigate sexist double standards around what is considered acceptable content to express in a country song (2004: 158). These dynamics have impacted the different ways men and women in country music have represented one-night stands. In 'Just Because I'm a Woman' (1968), Dolly Parton explicitly challenges 'society's sexual double standard' (Keel, 2004: 158) where a man will sleep with a woman out of wedlock ('ruin her reputation') and yet will not marry a woman, who is not a virgin: 'He looks for an angel to wear his wedding

band' (Parton, 1968). Parton pointedly holds men to account for abandoning women after sex, often to face society's sexist and moralistic censure alone, especially if the one-night stand has resulted in pregnancy. These narratives are explored in Parton's tragedy ballads such as 'Down from Dover' (1970). As much as Parton challenges the misogynist double standard of moralistic censure around promiscuity, the terms Parton uses to describe a one-night stand in 'Just Because I'm a Woman' are not free from this moralism. Parton's song repeats the religious rhetoric of a woman being expected to be an 'angel' and the song's protagonist reflects on herself that 'I know that I'm no angel' and still considers one-night stands to be 'mistakes' (Parton, 1968). Parton critiques the misogynist double standards of the period, but one-night stands are still moralised.

By the late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s, women in country music began to release songs foregrounding sexual pleasure with reduced religious rhetoric and moralism. Merrilee Rush's 'Angel of the Morning' (1968) and Parton's 'It's All Wrong But It's All Right' (1977) acknowledge sex outside of marriage, candidly exploring the 'temporary' and 'fleeting' nature of these relationships (Dyer, 2002: 157) and express sexual pleasure. However, Parton's (1977) protagonist questions the morality of these experiences: 'It may be wrong if we make love', and the romantic intensity of Rush's 'Angel of the Morning' seems excessive for a casual relationship. This is in contrast to country songs released by men in the 1970s such as Hank Williams Jr.'s 'One Night Stands' (1977) and Jimmy Buffett's 'My Head Hurts, My Feet Stink and I Don't Love Jesus' (1976). These songs represent one-night stands in a darkly comic way, seeing promiscuity as part of the experience of a Saturday night along with alcohol. There is still an element of religious moralism in these songs, however it is expressed less as a personal moral crisis for the songs' protagonists. The protagonists are relatively free from consequences beyond a hangover the morning after, unlike the personalised moralistic censure and pregnancy that is gestured towards in some of the songs released by women in country music of that period.

Since the 1970s there have been significant changes in the country music industry which became more at ease with incorporating pop and rock sounds into the mainstream country pallet (Laird, 2018). This has coincided with more liberal views around sexual expression in the genre (Yahr, 2014) and by the end of the 1990s women's commercial success was becoming increasingly recognised by the country music industry (Keel, 2004: 170). However gendered differences in the representation of one-night stands persisted, as well as discriminatory industry practices restricting women's airplay on country radio (Watson, 2019). Men of the genre such as Sammy Kershaw ('Third Rate Romance' (1994)) and Alan Jackson ('I Don't Even Know Your Name' (1994)) sang about one-night stands casually and candidly with little individual consequences, or if the stakes were higher this was conveyed through a tone of dark comedy. In comparison, the stakes could not be higher in Reba McEntire's 'She Thinks His Name Was John' (1994) which describes a woman dying of AIDS after a one-night stand. Similarly, Pam Tillis' 'Spilled Perfume' (1994), although with less religious imagery and less physical consequences, uses the emotional lyrics and vocal performance of the ballad to convey feelings of regret and even self-loathing afterwards: 'Right now you hate yourself because you knew better'. The moral, social and emotional stakes are high in these songs and arguably it was not until Carrie Underwood's 'Last Name' in 2007 that a country song released by a woman represents the situation comedically. By the 2010s some women began to represent one-night stands with the same low stakes as the men of the genre had done for decades. In 2015 Cam released 'My Mistake' as the lead single from her debut album, and in that song the consequences are notably not ruinous and are little more than a hangover. Although one-night stands are not as morally loaded as they once were in country music, the persistence of gender inequality means that these representations still need to negotiate the gendered dynamics of the genre.

### **Queer Theory**

Thinking conceptually about the one-night stand explicitly brings a focus on sex and sexuality and the ways in which these are gendered. Jada Watson (2019: 541) has argued

that a rigidly enforced gender binary also contributes to suppression of LGBTQ+ or queer expression in the country music industry, as well as limiting the acceptable gendered expression and representations available to women in the genre. Anxieties around sex and the way sexual identities have been ascribed to sexual acts suggest that using sexuality itself, not just as an extension of gender inequality, but as an 'analytic axis' (Sedgwick, 2008: 32) of its own may have generative potential for interpreting the genre. Queer theory has often questioned and resisted the dominance of certain institutions and ideologies, particularly heteronormativity, marriage and monogamy. There has been, as Cobb phrases it, 'a well-trodden sexual liberation argument about sex without love; sex without relationship; and sex without the imperatives of marriage' (2007: 446). In the country music context, where the genre has had a moralistic view towards sex and sexuality, especially outside of heterosexual marriage, rhetoric around sexual liberation does have potential, especially for those who have historically been excluded from the industry. However, some queer theoretical work has gone a step further to question the centrality around sex itself. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work begins questioning this when exploring the idea of 'pure *difference*' and presents a number of axioms around sex and sexuality, including: 'Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others' and 'Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none' (2008: 25). These axioms question the idea that sex or sexuality can generate stable narratives around identity and morality if the significance and role they play in people's lives varies between individuals. Thinking of sex and sexuality in this way provides a means of challenging narratives of sexual moralism.

It is not just heteronormative traditionalism that has fixated on sex to establish dominant grand narratives. Muñoz outlines how certain practices in queer theory have led to an 'anticritical understanding of queer community' that has generated its own 'romance of community' (2009: 10). Arguably these approaches displace the uncritical sanctity attached to marriage or monogamy onto a romanticised narrative of the LGBTQ+ or queer community

with non-monogamous sexual practices simply valorised. Muñoz, although himself taking seriously the idea of utopia, is emphatic about this not being 'naivete, impracticality, or lack of rigor' (2009: 10) asserting that 'books of criticism that simply glamorize the ontology of gay male cruising are more often than not simply boring' (2009: 18). Just as consensual sexual practices should not generate hyperbolic narratives of moralistic censure, they also do not warrant uncritical utopianism or liberatory associations being attached to them as individual acts and behaviours. Utopia for Muñoz does not just mean 'simple positivity and affirmation' (2009: 14) but there is space to consider and hold 'all sorts of bad feelings and brittleness', as well as experiences of ecstasy, pleasure and joy amongst these (2009: 187), in the material and day-to-day experiences of our relationships with others, including but not exclusively sexual relationships. Muñoz's thinking around utopia and consideration of the ways we relate to others in a multiplicity of affective and material ways offers a compelling alternative to totalised and romanticised grand narratives of sex and sexuality, both moralistic and liberatory.

Cobb's essay 'Lonely' goes even further in challenging the centrality of sex in queer narratives and critical practices, by thinking 'single' (2007: 446) and exploring how this figure is conceptualised, arguing that whether it is the monogamous couple or promiscuity coded as sexual liberation as the paradigm, the 'single' figure is often seen as lacking and 'lonely' (2007: 455). Cobb draws out the idea of loneliness as key to understanding how the single is figured, but also how this feeling is key to the power of dominant affective logics around love and sex. Loneliness becomes a toxic pressure as 'the world wants people to feel desperate, lonely' and therefore are pushed to engage in 'toxic forms of sociality' (Cobb, 2007: 447). It is the 'terror' (Cobb, 2007: 456) of loneliness that drives people in desperation to avoid being alone. These dominant affective logics then construct the solution to this loneliness as 'falling in love, coupling off, or simply the rubbing and touching of sexual contact' (Cobb, 2007: 449). Cobb does not just dismantle the couple, and he suggests that loneliness can also exert its toxic pressure on more casual sexual relationships. In thinking 'lonely' the

subject is not alone but surrounded by (and defined by interactions or the lack of interactions with) others in the pressure and desperation to connect: 'What one begins to encounter among the lonely is not the absence of people, but the sheer abundance of others' (Cobb, 2007: 448). A large part of the problem is the overpromise of love and sex to settle this loneliness (Cobb, 2007: 450). In thinking about sex and loneliness in this way, we can work through the way particular relationships are impacted by the affect of loneliness, and the role sex has or does not have within that.

### **Miranda Lambert**

These queer theoretical issues have particular resonances within country music, a genre that has traditionally been viewed as 'conservative' (Keel, 2004: 155). Consequentially, there have been presumptions that its representations of gender and sexuality perpetuate a straightforward endorsement of dominant patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies (Hubbs, 2014). As my analysis of the song 'Vice' will demonstrate, artists within country music have critical perspectives that warrant attention. Miranda Lambert has become one of the most commercially and critically successful country artists of the 2000s and 2010s, becoming the most awarded artist in the history of the Academy of Country Music Awards (Liptak, 2019), and notably in a period where women in country music have faced continued barriers to being played on country radio (Watson, 2019). Lambert's music can be seen as a development of the opening 1990s country music provided for women in the genre to assert a stance of feminist self-determination (Sellnow, 1999: 70; Laird, 2018: 556). Lambert's musical persona during the early years of her career combined late 1990s and early 2000s feminist country self-determination (Keel, 2004) with echoes of the 1970s country outlaw movement, a movement that has historically been gendered male (Hubbs, 2014: 120), with her first two albums: *Kerosene* (2005) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2007). Alongside this highly marketable persona, Lambert's repertoire demonstrates a great variety, including her early albums, incorporating alt-country and neotraditionalist country elements alongside mainstream country-pop (Neal, 2010: 488). In later albums Lambert has refined this persona

so that the outlaw elements have become more subtle, which has enabled Lambert to be viewed with a high level of respect as a versatile country artist.

### **‘Vice’**

In 2016, Lambert released her sixth studio album: *The Weight of These Wings*. This album expands her aesthetic pallet even further through its blend of older country styles, Americana and rock. In addition to expanding the sound of Lambert’s output, the album also develops the narrative and character elements of her work. *The Weight of These Wings* has a loose narrative arc structured as a double album split between ‘The Nerve’ and ‘The Heart’. ‘The Nerve’ focuses on representing the protagonist’s habitual coping mechanisms after a break-up: alcohol, sex and traveling from place to place in a disconnected way. The behaviours are a mask for the underlying pain. ‘The Heart’ focuses on interrogating the underlying emotions that these coping mechanisms attempt to conceal. ‘Vice’ was the album’s lead single, demonstrating Lambert’s increasingly sophisticated writing and performance style that articulates a critical exploration of the dynamics underpinning sexual relationships. In the album’s narrative arc this song becomes a key moment when the protagonist gains self-awareness of her habitual behaviour and starts to identify and interrogate the emotions underneath.

‘Vice’ was noted by journalists for candidly approaching the subject of one-night stands (Freeman, 2016), referenced by the line of the chorus: ‘Another bed I shouldn’t crawl out of’ (Lambert, 2016). This line represents one-night stands casually and without the overt religious moralism of previous decades, perhaps suggesting that mainstream country music has moved closer to gender parity. ‘Vice’ also resists constructing a romanticised narrative glamorising one-night stands as key to sexual liberation. The song interrogates the dynamics of these relationships, foregrounding many of the ideas in Cobb’s essay as Lambert (2016) describes the drives and motivation of the song’s protagonist at the start of the song: ‘Where the numb meets the lonely’. The song explores the protagonist going through a break-up and

explores her coping mechanisms at this time, represented through the repeated cycles of 'another vice' (Lambert, 2016). As suggested by the song's title: 'Vice' (Lambert, 2016), one-night stands are represented through an addiction and habitual behaviour trope. It could be argued that country music's moralism over one-night stands and women's sexual pleasure remains in this song. Lambert (2016) does pointedly sing 'another bed [she] *shouldn't*' (*my emphasis*) be having sex in, although she does vocally express sexual pleasure at times throughout the song, particularly with the non-linguistic vocal trill after the chorus 'mmhmm'. The addiction trope has a particular context within the genre of country music that enables 'Vice' to constructively interrogate the dynamics, toxicity and potential within the protagonist's one-night stand. The trope is less moralising than the religious symbolism of previous eras. There is also a sense of gender parity as men in country music have represented Saturday night with its excesses of drinking and sex being part of this. These narratives and experiences are often represented with a sense of regret, but they are not heavily moralised.

Country music uses songs about drinking in various ways to reflect on how people use it to mask uncomfortable feelings. These songs provide a way to interrogate these emotions. The country drinking song is one of the strongest case studies of what has been identified as the genre's 'compassion' (Malone and Laird, 2018, 350). Malone and Laird argue that 'drunkards are often treated with humour or scorn, but they are also made the objects of pity or sympathy' (2018: 350). It is this compassion that enables country to challenge certain middle-class standards of respectability and moralism. Nadine Hubbs (2014: 61) argues that country music offers working-class listeners a means of 'refuting the false, negative' stereotypes and denigration of working-class culture, people, and behaviour through asserting its own 'positive meaning of working-class identity'. This is most apparent through the gesture of 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014: 61) and this idea is explicit in songs such as Loretta Lynn's 'You're Looking at Country' (1971) and Barbara Mandrell's 'I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool' (1981). The affective work of the 'being country' (Hubbs, 2014:

61) gesture runs throughout the genre and is a key method of resisting class stigma to enable its listeners to achieve a sense of class solidarity.

Lambert's repertoire has shown a consciousness of these social and aesthetic conventions. In 'We Should be Friends', Lambert (2016) sings: 'If you use alcohol as a sedative... we should be friends', this line extending its compassion for listeners who may be in a similar situation and the offer of friendship is an offer of solidarity through the song. In 'Hard Staying Sober', a song about using alcohol to cope with heartbreak after a breakup, the protagonist asks the rhetorical questions: 'Why you think the world drinks? Why you think the world smokes? Why you think we all sit around and tell a bunch of dirty jokes?' (Lambert, 2014). In an expression of solidarity and compassion that challenges moralism and standards of respectability around the use of vices, including sexual experiences, Lambert challenges us to look beyond the vice, and instead to look at the underlying roots and emotional dynamics that lead to these habits. Country music has itself been pathologized through research that draw links from country music to high alcohol consumption and suicide (Oberle, 2015; Stack, 1992). In 'Vice' the opening reference to playing a vinyl and the line: 'It hurts this good you have to play it twice' (Lambert, 2016) suggests a habitual listening to country music as a coping mechanism. 'Hurts this good' (Lambert, 2016) could describe the pleasure listening to a lot of country music and especially country songs about loneliness, for example Hank Williams' 'I'm So Lonesome I could Cry' (1998). Lambert makes little moral distinction or differentiation between country music, alcohol and sex as coping strategies. The song is more interested in patterns and emotional dynamics than the particular vices themselves.

In 'Vice' the only time the word 'addicted' appears is not in relation to any material vice, but when the protagonist ponders: 'Maybe I'm addicted to goodbyes' (Lambert, 2016), 'goodbye' being a more abstract, relational concept. The problem of addiction is about the emotions. The vices in the song are treated casually as individual behaviours, but it is the habitual recurrences that take their toll. The toll this takes is performed evocatively through

Lambert's (2016) vocal enunciation of the word 'crawl' in 'another bed I shouldn't *crawl* out of' (*my emphasis*), her hard Texan accent giving an almost visceral quality to the word. This sense of emptiness conveyed by Lambert's (2016) performance is reflected by the casual dismissiveness, disconnection and disengagement expressed in the song's lyrics: 'Another vice', 'another bed', 'another life', 'another town', these phrases performing the loneliness that she describes at the beginning of the song: 'Where the numb meets the lonely'. As Cobb argues, this loneliness is not due to a lack of relationships with others but due to constant 'toxic sociality' (2007: 447). Within the superficial engagement of moving from place to place without meaningfully connecting, when the protagonist sings: 'Where my past can't run me down' (Lambert, 2016) there is a sense of disconnection and a failure to achieve intimacy or a sense of intimacy that can adequately address the protagonist's loneliness. At the end of the song the protagonist's loneliness remains unresolved. 'Vice' concludes on expressions of sexual pleasure of 'another vice' (Lambert, 2016), suggesting that the habitual behaviour cycles are ongoing. The situation is not one that is particularly illuminated by discourses of sexual immorality or of sexual liberation. Although the song does not point to a specific solution, it better diagnoses the problem, through suspending a focus on sex and bringing loneliness and the habitual behaviours driven by it to the fore.

## **Conclusion**

Queer theorists like Cobb and country artists like Lambert encourage us to consider that whether it is a marriage or a one-night stand, if the people engaging in these relationships are doing so under the pressure of loneliness, these relationships are at risk of becoming toxic. It should also be noted that due to the persistence of gender inequality in the country music industry, discourses of sexual liberation may have some generative potential in the genre. Songs like 'Vice', by interrogating the affective and relational dynamics at the root of people's sexual behaviours, enable artists like Lambert to circumvent some of the critical pitfalls of overly romanticising or glamorising sex, as Cobb and Muñoz have critiqued around some queer theoretical practices. 'Vice' as a song may not avoid all the genre's issues

around grand narratives and moralism around sex and particularly women's sexuality. However the song has progressed the discourse within country music, with more songs being released on this subject, such as Ashley McBryde's 'One Night Standards' (2020). Songs like these demonstrate that artists in country music have the musical and conceptual tools to engage meaningfully with discourses around sex and 'sociality' (Cobb, 2007: 447) in the genre.

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