



Hope and repair within the Western Skyline? Americana Music's rural heterotopia

Dr Keith Halfacree

Department of Geography, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Rural
Americana
Music
Anti-idyll
American West
Heterotopia

ABSTRACT

Set against a representation of much of rural America as an impoverished and socio-economically abandoned space, reaching out in desperation to the populism of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential elections, this paper seeks to probe more critically and carefully the everyday geographies (represented, practiced, lived) of this space. It does this through engaging its artistic expression within a branch of Country Music known as Americana and, more specifically, through the American West articulated in the songs of musician and author Willy Vlautin, expressed by his bands Richmond Fontaine and the Delines. The paper shows both Americana in general and Vlautin's songs in particular to predominantly present a bleak and brutal picture of what is termed 'abandoned rural America', depicting rural to small-city lives destroyed by both 'internal' and 'external' forces. Moreover, this grim condition seems little assuaged through the kinds of residential migration and more everyday mobilities that may be associated with the West's Frontier myth of salvation or today's supposed era of mobilities. However, through a Gibson-Graham inspired reading for difference and sensitised by Neil Campbell's idea of an affective critical regionality, an alternative story of a more positive if fragile rural geography can be identified. Vlautin's songs well express this geography of hope as rooted in recuperative liminal but often deeply emplaced 'pauses' within a gruelling everyday life-course. Indeed, the abandoned rural West can be seen to present heterotopic existential life-rafts to its 'drowning' people, a position rural spaces today can be seen to adopt more generally, expressing, in sum, an affective critical rurality.

'There's a Western Skyline that I swear I can see
Where golden light shines down upon everything
...

Under Western Skyline you will be and
You'll be set free'

Western Skyline – Richmond Fontaine (2002)

1. Introduction: interrogating the conservative rural

Donald Trump's 2016 election as US President 'will be remembered', amongst other things, 'as the year the white rural voter roared' (Scala and Johnson, 2017: 162)¹. Explanation of this roar might at one level simply dismiss it as the tendency – far from unique to the US – for rural areas to be more politically conservative overall than the urban. However, paying deeper attention, the explanation – arguably also from

a more sympathetic disposition – can emphasise a populist, anti-establishment response by rural residents feeling neglected and ignored by urban political elites (e.g. Bleakley, 2018; Kurtzleben, 2016; Lund, 2016). One sees, in short, political consequences of what will be termed an 'abandoned rural America' (also Younge, 2017) that, critically, goes much further and often in different directions to Trump-voting alone.

To date, however, abandoned rural America has been unevenly recognised by academia, popular culture and policy. On the one hand, it encompasses widely-acknowledged long-standing impoverished parts of the South, such as the Appalachia and Mississippi Delta examples in Duncan's (1999) *Worlds Apart*, and the legacy of the farm crisis from the 1980s (Fitchen, 1991). On the other hand, a 'brain drain' reaching into the Mid-West (Carr and Kafalas, 2009) is indicative of the emergence of wider distress stretching to the Pacific, from remote rural through to small-city places. This broad crisis is highlighted in Jennifer Sherman's engaged scholarship (e.g. Sage and Sherman, 2014; Sherman, 2009, 2014, 2017; Tickamyer et al., 2017). It encompasses places where 'economic distress has been building, life expectancy has been declining

E-mail address: k.h.halfacree@swansea.ac.uk.

¹ However, this roar alone did not swing the election (Monnat and Brown, 2017) and there was considerable rural diversity, not least between liberal 'recreational' and conservative 'farming' counties (Scala et al., 2015; Scala and Johnson, 2017).

... and social conditions have been breaking down for decades' (Monnat and Brown, 2017: 229), further reflected in social problems of poor health, alcohol and drug dependency, and crime.

The present paper counters the relative neglect – in spite of increased nominal recognition – of these ordinary rural landscapes of despair (Monnat and Brown, 2017) through engaging anti-idyllic geographies of abandoned rural America that go beyond but nonetheless recognise its very real sense of crisis. It provides this reading via a branch of Country music labelled 'Americana'. As already suggested for the rural Trump vote, the paper challenges 'easy' first-level associations between rurality and innate conservative reaction and progressive insignificance. Aspects of rural practices, representations and lives (Halfacree, 2006a) can instead be exposed and read as expressed, imagined and lived critiques of mainstream everyday life. Moreover, they have potential to move from being anomalous to a 'polite' mainstream that ultimately return to the fold to instead inputting into a lasting critical, progressive and forward-facing 21st Century rural discursive alternative.

Two further issues merit introducing here in terms of how abandoned rural America is approached in the paper. First, and clearly pertinent for the present journal, is the understanding of 'rural'. Here, in line with scholarship since at least the 1990s (for example, Cloke et al., 1994; Halfacree, 1993; Jones, 1995), rural is seen less in absolute terms as a fixed kind of place but more relationally as expressing contextually significant contrast (rather than simply a binary opposite) to the 'big city'. Thus, for example, both the aforementioned Appalachian and Mississippi Delta regions contain urban centres but even these remain relationally 'rural' to regionally-nearby major cities such as New York or New Orleans, respectively. Second, abandoned rural America not only contains 'urban' sites but also frequently co-exists spatially with a very buoyant rural. For example, within the West – defined as the contiguous states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming – many rural counties illustrate both the relative prosperity that accompany their attractiveness for lifestyle migrants (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Jobs, 2000) and yet contain stark examples of abandoned America. Sherman's (2017) ethnographic research in Paradise Valley, Washington, powerfully illustrates such juxtaposition (also Kondo et al., 2012). In this context, the present paper's contribution to research into abandoned rural America is located within efforts to get beyond culturally powerful 'idyllic' ruralities and instead foreground the practices, representations and lives of often co-located ordinary 'rural Others' (Philo, 1992).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, the case is made for studying music to interrogate contemporary rural realities. Second, the paper's epistemological perspective is further established through developing the idea of seeking out minor(ity) discourses all too easily drowned out by the vocal major(ity). Third, this approach is developed by engaging it for reading and understanding both the American West and Country music. Fourth, more specific empirical support illustrates further the value of this perspective through interrogation of the songs of Willy Vlautin. From this interrogation, fifth, a critical heterotopic rural spatiality is ultimately identified. Finally, in conclusion, these critical insights are proposed as relevant ingredients for a broader 'affective critical rurality'.

2. The place of music in rural studies

Geographies of music have evolved strongly since 1990s' advocacy by scholars such as Kong (1995) and Smith (1994), through edited collections such as Leyshon et al. (1998) and Connell and Gibson (2003), to now being well-established (Andrews et al., 2016). They are often placed today within broader sonic geographies (Anderson et al., 2005) or studies of the performing arts (Rogers, 2012). Present-day attention may reflect belated appreciation of how '[m]usic is an integral part of the human experience' (Johansson and Bell, 2009: 1) but

geographies of music remain focused on numerous themes. These include music's entanglement and expression in and through: nation, group and individual identities; established or oppositional politics; musical scenes and genres; performance and (re)production; technology; lives of specific artists; emotional and affective atmospheres; and intersections with 'traditional' geographical themes, such as tourism and economics (Anderson et al., 2005; Andrews et al., 2016; Johansson and Bell, 2009).

A recent trend within geographies of music has been towards performative, practiced and experiential or embodied dimensions, away from emphasis on product. Whilst in line with other developments within Human Geography, one should nonetheless be wary of establishing oppositional dualism between practice and product. Agreeing that 'what music and sound do' (Anderson et al., 2005: 642) is a highly fecund research direction, it should not be forgotten that one key thing music does is to articulate person, position and place – to represent. Indeed, geography and representation remain a central constitutive element for the arts (Rogers, 2012). This includes musicians articulating lives lived, places experienced and socio-spatial imaginations. Clearly, it is insufficient just to 'map' music to place (Andrews et al., 2016). Instead, music's links to place must be seen in diverse and dynamic terms (Hudson, 2006), including how it 'actively produces geographic discourses [that] can be used to understand broader social relations and trends' (Johansson and Bell, 2009: 2). Such discourses are always plural and dynamic from the who, when, where, how and why of the representational process, including recognizing places themselves as 'neither discrete nor static' (Andrews et al., 2016: 11).

In terms of places represented, geographies of music have focused primarily on the city (Hudson, 2006; Yarwood and Charlton, 2009), as with the general artistic imaginary (Rogers, 2012). Nonetheless, recent decades have seen growth of scholarship engaging more rural places and experiences. The foci of these studies mirror the aforementioned diversity of work within geographies of music overall but notably give attention to place promotion (e.g. Gibson and Davidson, 2004; Kneafsey, 2002) and the complex mutuality of place and music (e.g. Halfacree, 2009; Yarwood and Charlton, 2009).

Broader scholarship beyond Geography has noted which kinds of rural are represented within specific types of music. Predominant have been pastoral or idyllic rural expressions, often in distinctly utopian guise. This is epitomised by Young (2010) in the classical-folk-popular crossover: from Vaughan Williams's Classical *Lark Ascending* (1914), drawing from and leading into the Folk tradition, through Fairport Convention's pioneering Folk-Rock *Liege and Lief* (1969), to the 1980s electronic Pop of Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* (1988). Prominent has been 'the ideal of "getting back to the garden" ... Romantic yearning for an intense communion with nature and the desire to reclaim a stolen innocence' (Young, 2010: 7). Nowhere is this imaginary stronger than within music orbiting the countercultural 'back-to-the-land' movement (Halfacree, 2006b), representing the rural as an 'escape' from modern life; an 'inward exodus' (Young, 2010: 45), both spatial and embodied through lifestyle (Halfacree, 2009, 2016).

Less idyllic, utopian, green and/or village-based rurals, especially of an everyday prosaic nature, are less commonly expressed within music, except by Folk and Country. However, whilst Folk frequently articulates the rural as dangerous, even murderous (Leech, 2010; Young, 2010), its frequently fantastical and historical tone rarely challenges an idyllic rural today, notwithstanding exceptions such as Show of Hands (Yarwood and Charlton, 2009). Country thus represents the musical tradition most consistently presenting a everyday down-to-earth rural. Here, emplacing mostly the White working-class in hyper-real everyday gritty contexts is rooted in and evokes a broader geographical imaginary (Mann, 2008). Politically, whilst typically associated with conservative or reactionary positions (Fay, 2014), it can also articulate art's challenges to accepted framings and understandings (Campbell, 2016). It can 'flirt with space' in order 'to attend to people's living in the world' (Crouch, 2010: 125). However, to appreciate better Country music's

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10130774>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10130774>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)