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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/842147cs>

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**Publication Date**

2008-12-17

# Country Music and the Expression of Loss

THE RECIPIENT OF CSW'S  
2008 CONSTANCE COINER  
GRADUATE AWARD  
TALKS ABOUT HIS  
CURRENT RESEARCH  
ON GRIEF, LOSS, AND  
MOURNING IN THE MUSIC  
OF EMMYLOU HARRIS

*by Marcus Desmond Harmon*

As a doctoral candidate in the Department of Musicology at UCLA, I have had the opportunity to work with a variety of scholars studying the intersection between music and cultural practice. In my research and my classroom teaching, I work to bring a class-aware, feminist perspective

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to popular music studies, one that is rooted in both my personal experiences and my beliefs about what studying the music around us can do to help us understand the culture that we simultaneously make and participate in every day.

My research currently focuses on American country music, a genre that even popular-music scholars often deride as commodified and devoid of serious cultural import, a neo-conservative bastion of jingoistic politics, religious hysteria, and casual racism. Having lived in a country-music culture for most of my life, I often found it difficult to find the music or its listeners as I experienced them

in the academic research I read! In my work, I look at country music as a set of relationships that creators, listeners, and the songs themselves are always renegotiating. Neither country artists, nor country fans, nor the white working-class in general is an isolated monolith—they move in diverse and often surprising directions in response to all sorts of cultural needs and anxieties. In fact, the “conservative” voice of country music, while often the loudest, is hardly the only political discourse—country music’s relationship to contemporary politics is multivalent enough to displease either the Republican campaign strategist or the academic apologist. Few country

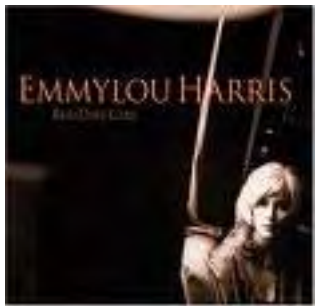
artists of any ideological affiliation eschew the religious and patriotic signifiers that make many secular critics uncomfortable, but artists deploy them in a number of complex ways. In any case, working-class concerns have rarely been of great interest to the neoconservative movement of the last three decades (outside of a few flashpoint issues).

If country music isn’t an expression of right-wing ideology or the product of a homogenous “white working-class culture,” then what is it and what does it do? While that question must necessarily have many answers, I have tried to show how country music can articulate loss, grief, and nostalgia in ways that help country fans incorporate these feelings into everyday cultural practices. My dissertation, “In a Melancholic Country: Identity, Loss, and Mourning at the Borders of Country Music,” looks at four case studies in country-music expression of melancholy—Emmylou Harris, Gillian Welch, Dar Williams, and Johnny Cash—to see what the songs are saying

and how they contribute to the larger American discourse about trauma, grief, and memory. Since the meaning of musical gestures is so often the result of individual experience interacting with broader social and cultural norms, I’ve taken a psychoanalytic approach to interpretation—looking not just at what artists and audiences say about the music they listen to, but also the ways in which that music evokes (or resists) other artifacts and institutions. For example, it would be hard to discuss the age-worn last albums of Johnny Cash without understanding the particular beliefs about sin, punishment, and redemption that stem from his Southern Baptist cosmology.

A feminist consciousness informs all of my work, both within and beyond my dissertation project. I firmly believe that feminism is best served by taking a holistic view of gender—men as well as women must negotiate difficult and contradictory gendered terrain, and no gender expressions (including the so-called “normative”) are homogenous, simplistic, or otherwise “easy.” Since





*On these albums, Emmylou Harris explores the feelings related to loss, grief, and mourning*

gendered experience is so often the site of trauma and anxiety in much of American culture, it naturally finds a place in my dissertation. My chapter, “Still with Every Turn the World Becomes a Sadder Place: Emmylou Harris and Regret,” discusses the ways that Harris, long considered one of Nashville’s most sensitive and eclectic vocalists, uses the longstanding cultural trope of the permanently lovelorn woman to explore ways of moving (or not moving) beyond irreplaceable losses. Harris first rose to fame as the duet partner of country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons. As with other country duet acts (like Dolly Parton/Porter Waggoner and Loretta Lynn/Conway Twitty), speculation about romantic involvement between Harris and Parsons flourished, but Parsons’s sudden death from drug overdose in 1973 ended that possibility. In 1975, Harris released “Boulder to Birmingham,” an elegy for Parsons that made her (now-impossible) love for him explicit. Its success cemented her image as a grief-stricken survivor

poised at the edge of a Miss Havisham-esque obsession with tragedy and abandonment.

My work on Harris begins more than twenty years later, when Harris revisited the ideas of grief, loss, and regret in the “crossover” album *Wrecking Ball* (Asylum, 1995) created with rock producer Daniel Lanois. In this album and the two others that follow it (*Red Dirt Girl* [Nonesuch, 2000] and *Stumble into Grace* [Nonesuch, 2003]), Harris’s songs are striking in their abject portrayal of mourning. Her first-person characters are often the friends, lovers, or near-strangers left behind after disaster, unable to really mourn their losses and even less able to put those losses firmly into the past. Rather than allowing these damaged creatures to sit mired in what they have lost, however, Harris emphasizes the fact that despite crushing grief and intense self-castigation, these survivors continue their lives one way or another—even if they often would rather not.

To examine Emmylou Harris’s portrayals of grief more closely, I

turn to the work of Melanie Klein (1882–1960), a leading figure of post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Like Freud, Klein was puzzled by melancholia, the then-current term for complicated grief and depression with no obvious cause. Freud imagined that melancholia was a strange, rare disease that affected people with weak or vulnerable characters. Klein, on the other hand (perhaps because she herself suffered from melancholia) saw melancholy as the basis not just for depression and illness, but also for love, guilt, and the desire to repair wrongs. By folding long-term grief into the realm of “normal” emotional development, Klein made the melancholic experience (which, like modern clinical depression, primarily affected women) a valuable one.