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Dolly Parton, Gender and Country Music by Leigh H. Edwards

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There is so much to Dolly Parton, so much to unpack, such a long career to describe, so many angles to take. Which Dolly do you know? The Jolene Dolly? The 9-5 Dolly? The DollyWood Dolly? Leigh H. Edwards book *Dolly, Gender and Country Music* attempts to look at the entire Dolly; from her early recording years to her Twitter account, her Appalachian upbringing to her performance at the Glastonbury Festival 2014. It is an awful lot to take on and there is much detail here for those that want it.

Edwards approaches her subject from a Media Studies perspective and so takes examples of Parton's career that lend themselves to discursive analysis: tours, album covers, talk shows, interviews, websites, films and music videos. That's quite some list. Her theoretical underpinnings are drawn from Film Studies (Richard Dyer, John Ellis), theories of Camp (Susan Sontag, Pamela Robertson), Reality Television (Annette Hill) and fandom (Henry Jenkins). It is a large field to draw on and there are positives in doing so, not least to try to make sense of what Dolly Parton means within a broader Anglo-American popular cultural canvas. So, Edwards covers issues such as class, gender, camp, authenticity and stardom all in the pursuit of fleshing out the 'Backwoods Barbie' narrative that Parton herself has done so much to contribute to.

Parton's career is mapped out in what seems at first to be in chronological order. Edwards starts out with analysing how Parton melded the Appalachian 'mountain female figure' with a trashy camp aesthetic. The 'sincerity contract' which imbues Country music is questioned by Parton's interweaving of authenticity and artifice at this early stage. Most of this is the retelling of a history that is pretty well established but what Edwards adds is how Parton managed through this to offer up a critique of middle-class norms of domesticity. She pursues the line of the 'authenticity narrative' in the next chapter, 'My Tennessee Mountain Home' which narrates Parton's early years, noting how this image was reinforced by album covers and her gender performance. Using Harkins' work on hillbilly offers an interesting perspective as his work notes the co-existence of fakery and realness in the genre, something that Parton continues.

There is, until this point, some sense of cohesion in terms of concepts that are being discussed, and this continues into the following chapter that investigates Parton's film roles, camp and masquerade. We then return, in 'Reclaiming Country' to the tropes of mountain girl and country tramp, the Carter family and Parton's childhood. Information on the discovery of her sexuality and how she negotiated her religion with respect to this seems to belong in earlier chapters, and this is where the abundance of sometimes dis-chronological and diverse examples start to confuse.

The final chapter discusses Parton's savviness with multimedia and her location within a digital environment, some of which is about fandom and transmedia, thus bringing in debates from Henry Jenkins on convergence culture. There is a persuasive argument here in relation to her televisual and transmedia persona, which builds on Edwards' earlier (2013)

work on Reality TV and this feels like we are heading somewhere, not least because the writing here is assured and the argument convincing. Edwards concludes with a tale about Dollyworld and how 'walking through the park is like walking through a multimedia version of manufactured authenticity', which ties the book back to her initial treatment of Parton as the Backwoods Barbie.

At times, *Dolly Parton, Gender and Country Music* seems almost kaleidoscopic. The urge to include as many varied examples as possible, from all the different stages and platforms of Parton's career, is dizzying. In this respect, the triumph of Edwards' book is also its downfall. There is so much crowded in that there is a tendency to skip some of the examples, and their underlying theoretical foundations, not only because there are so many and they seem, at times, tenuous in terms of talking to the core issue of the chapters at hand but because many of them are overly descriptive. Chapter One for example has an interview with the UK TV talk host, Graham Norton, references to The Carter family, comments on agrarian and nostalgia and a close reading of the "Backwoods Barbie" music video (2008). It seems an odd selection to start out with and maybe it is just me, but I had to resist the temptation to flick through a number of examples in order for Edwards to say something incisive about them. Her work on the 'sincerity contract' and Parton's televisual persona is hugely persuasive, but there is not enough of this throughout the book to maintain a clear conceptual line. At times the accounts of interviews and repartee, videos, film scripts are very much at the level of description and there is little that is new to the debates on Parton. There is too, fleeting reference to Lady Gaga and Madonna in terms of how they differ from Parton, but again, the analysis seems a little too surface oriented. Edwards also discusses the surprise around the reception of Parton's 2014 Glastonbury performance but does not go on to mention how she followed in a line of 'legends' for whom the Sunday afternoon slot is reserved (Tony Bennett in 1998, Shirley Bassey in 2007, Neil Diamond in 2008) and which has generated its own kitschness, and so she misses a trick here. So, there is, as we go through the book, too much crammed in at the expense of a methodical analysis of Parton that is new. Dyer's work on stardom is now nearly 40 years old, and though relevant seems only to recycle ideas about Parton with reference to her ordinariness and exceptionalism.

In sum, the book's structure works against it as Edwards groups the narrative as a linear chronology that then necessitates her to return in time when discussing themes, and this then is not helped by the myriad examples that accumulate. Admittedly, this is difficult when dealing with an artist with such a long career and so many offshoots, and there is much to enjoy in the book, when it is dipped into and the examples relished on their own. The book is interesting, how could it not be given that it is about Dolly Parton and what is, by any measure, a remarkable artistic and multi-media career. But at times, it feels like the literary equivalent of an all you can eat buffet.