

The Routes of Power and Difference: Reflections on the Regional Identity of Dolly Parton

In *Mountains of Contradictions*, Pamela Wilson states, “[Dolly] Parton can be understood as a self-empowered woman whose image, challenging social stereotypes through parody, becomes empowering and counter-hegemonic.”¹ Through parody and exaggeration, Dolly Parton’s star image embodies identities of Southern Appalachia, the figure of the “painted woman,” the rural and religious woman and the successful business/ entertainment industry woman. How do these contradictions of identity and difference play out in terms of power? Wilson argues they result in self-empowerment for Parton; if this is the case, can Parton’s case study be useful in understanding regional differences in general and its implications in power? I assert this is the case. In looking at the star image of Dolly Parton in the context of New England regional identity, it becomes clear that Parton is not an anomaly, but rather an example of the many routes in which “difference” travels that results in moments of empowerment. If culture is understood not as a fixed state, but rather something that “travels in the context of unequal social relations and asymmetrical relations of power,”² Parton’s star image and New England regional identity in the late nineteenth century occupy cultural spaces in which their difference, or “queerness” enables these identities to shift from the culturally peripheral to the symbolically central.

¹ Pamela Wilson, “Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton,” In *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 126.

² Ardis Cameron, “Spaces of Encounter: The Cultural Labor of Class Difference,” *International Labor and Working Class-History* 69 (2006): 183.

Specifically, I wish to discuss how Parton resists the generalizing terms of the “South” and “women’s culture” and projects the personal over the political in asserting her right to be an artist. Looking at the authorship of Sarah Orne Jewett and elements of queer theory as they apply to regionalist literature, I will demonstrate how the “queerness” of Parton and characters in New England regionalist literature use their “difference” to gain control over their lives and promote “empathy” over abuse for their situations. I will also draw upon Stuart Hall’s discussion of difference theories in analyzing the various ways difference is constructed through power. I do not mean to set up a compare/ contrast scenario between Parton and Jewett; rather, I wish to show through these examples how the “normal” becomes questioned, destabilized and meaningless as the “queer” becomes appealing.

One of the contradictions of Parton’s star image that Wilson examines is Parton’s participation in the modern, commercial country music industry while simultaneously espousing the values of “old” rural Appalachian folk music. Wilson points out that in commercializing country music, the music becomes less associated with geography (the South), but becomes an open market for which anyone can participate and be “country.” The “adversarial voices” of folk music become mainstream, “thereby economically insinuating them into a capitalist order to which they have been traditionally opposed.”³ Country music is no longer about place, but a symbolic culture that becomes general and universal and part of the larger construction of the “South.” The South becomes a region of stereotypes and cultural constructs. As Wilson notes, “the signifiers of Dolly Parton’s distinctive white Southern Appalachian culture are collapsed into a nonspecific

³ Wilson, “Mountains of Contradictions,” 124.

‘Southernness’ and ‘countryness’ by the popular culture discourse relating to country music.”⁴ As a culture, we “know” the South because it is not the West or New England. As Stephen Nissenbaum points out, “a region, much like a class, is something that gets generated in the process of distinguishing itself from something else.”⁵ In this construction, regions are defined by what they are not, by their opposites. While this is helpful in constructing meaning, the simplification of this theory is troublesome, because as Stuart Hall discusses, it hides the discourse of power embedded in understanding difference in relational terms: “There is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition.”⁶ Simply grouping Parton as a country musician from the South not only hides her identity with a specific place (southern Appalachia) but also the other social constructions that make up her star image.

This paradox of place and universalization of “country” is not an anomaly. A similar process occurs in other regions, particularly in New England. In her discussion of nineteenth century tourism in New England, Dona Brown points out the contradictions of the “escape” that the middle and upper class believed tourism provided: “Tourism offered remedies for crass commercialism, urban blight, labor conflict, the loss of permanence, the loss of community...But far from opposing that [new industrial] order, tourism was

⁴ Ibid, 121.

⁵ Stephen Nissenbaum, “New England as Region and Nation,” in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, ed. Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, et al (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 46.

⁶ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 235.

an integral part of it.”⁷ Furthermore, just as place becomes problematic in the South, so it does in New England, as the region itself becomes a commodity and specific locales are glossed over into one coherent, pastoral New England. Those “left behind,” the residents of the South and New England, become “quaint” and “queer” at the exact moment their existence becomes a marketing tool for the country music and tourist industries, respectively. As Brown points out in her discussion of New England rural towns, “poverty and failure” now represent the “serenity and dignity of the old days.”⁸ Richard Brodhead points out that in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, written concomitantly with the rise of New England tourism, the narrator’s experiences in Dunnet Landing, a rural Maine coastal town, become “strangely abstractable, generalizable, and portable...She learns...that one need not stay in their spot to possess their virtue.” The book “[carries] the good of the place *out* of the place.”⁹ Similarly, sub-regions of the South, particularly rural Appalachia, places of “poverty and failure” become endowed with rural values and become representative of the whole South through the modernization of the country music industry.

It is important to note that generalizing, universal images of the South and New England that have come into existence are constructed by those in power, the country music industry and the tourist industry, respectively. Dolly Parton embodies resistance to these regional groupings. As discussed earlier, simply understanding difference as binary

⁷ Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 12.

⁸ *Ibid*, 109.

⁹ Richard Brodhead, “Jewett, Regionalism, and Writing as Women’s Work,” in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 148.

opposites is self-limiting, as it hides the discourse of power. Hall's discussion of difference as anthropological is much more helpful. This theory posits that meaning is given to the world in terms of where things fall in a classificatory system; culture is organized as a "symbolic order." In this theory, everything has its assigned place. However, as Hall discusses, things that fail to fit into the established order "float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy-in-between."¹⁰ Things that fail to fit into categories are pushed back in; however, most importantly, this failure to fulfill categorization has the potential to make difference powerful, because of its threat to the cultural order. The "taboo" and "forbidden" becomes "symbolically centred." This theory is helpful in looking at Parton's "taboo" images and how they offer her self-empowerment.

Parton's "difference" becomes evident when it is realized that though she participates in the country music industry, which promotes the "South" in general, at the same time she refuses this generic label in her alignment with a specific place: rural, Southern Appalachia. Parton's determined identification with Appalachia makes it more difficult to lump Parton into Southern culture and so Parton becomes "different." By remaining in Tennessee, developing Dollywood to bring a stronger economy to her region and strongly identifying herself with rural, working women, Parton breaks down her "nonspecific Southernness." In addition to refusing the Southern label, Parton also refuses the universal "womanhood" label. Parton does not hide her music or image in the cloak of politics or social concerns nor does she necessarily connect herself to women's rights or feminism. Rather, as Wilson points out, Parton represents "a type of popular

¹⁰ Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'," 236.

feminism that has little knowledge of or use for the political rhetoric of the women's movement."¹¹ In promoting her image over any other concern or cultural identification, Parton makes claim to the role of an artist in her own right.

Part of what disassociates Parton from a universalizing "women's culture" is her focus on interiority and emotions, which further connects her to working women who "are probably beyond the reach of liberal feminist rhetoric."¹² The women's movement is enmeshed in politics and intellect; by focusing on emotions, she reaches out to a specific set of women and vice versa, by reaching out to a certain class of women, she focuses on the personal. As Wilson notes: "from her interviews it is clear that she does not distinguish the abstract condition of being female from her personal experience as a Southern Appalachian, working-class woman."¹³ Just as she breaks down the universal construction of the South, Parton breaks down the universal construction of women.

In identifying herself with a certain geographical locale in the South, Parton makes for an interesting comparison with the Midwest. Place becomes more important for Parton, and as Kent Ryden argues, for writers in the Midwest. Regions like the Midwest lack a cohesive regional identity because of the lack of a sense of a "large" history, in comparison to regions like New England, the South and the West. Because it lacks a unifying image, the Midwest becomes a region made up of multiple places, a "mosaic" of identities and personal experiences.¹⁴ Ryden asserts that contemporary

¹¹ Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions," 127.

¹² Ibid, 129.

¹³ Ibid, 113.

¹⁴ Kent Ryden, "Writing the Midwest: History, Literature, and Regional Identity," *The Geographical Review* 89 (1999): 522.

midwestern non-fiction writers are “partisans of place who distill felt and known local experience into words in order to replace insignificance with significance, vagueness with precision and meaning.”¹⁵ For Midwestern writers, focusing on the local and personal enables a contribution to the larger patchwork of places that construct the ambiguous region of the Midwest. Regional identity becomes centered on the experiential present (not the past) and furthermore, in all these experiences, “attention is directed inward and...identities derive from within.”¹⁶ In this sense, Parton takes more of a “Midwestern” approach to her regional identity, focusing on the personal and emotional to challenge the generic Southern identity that she struggles against. Parton refuses to be nonspecific and thus challenges cultural constructs of regional identity, concomitantly creating a specific, personal form of female empowerment.

Parton’s specific claim to female empowerment is linked with her claim to being an artist in her own right. Between her non-traditional marriage, her lack of motherhood and multiple star images, Parton resists various media designs to push her back into a space that is culturally normative. Women’s magazines often downplay her eccentricities, while tabloids spread rumors that Parton is contemplating adoption. In so doing, media outlets have attempted “to contain and/ or deny the creative potential of other forms of cultural production for women.”¹⁷ The fact that different aspects of Parton’s image are addressed in a variety of periodicals proves the chaotic, unstable cultural space Parton commands. In resisting “normalization,” Parton claims the role as

¹⁵ Ibid, 512.

¹⁶ Ibid, 522.

¹⁷ Wilson, “Mountains of Contradictions,” 119.

artist. In embodying exaggerated “womanliness” and at the same parodying her male country singer predecessors by flaunting glittery, gaudy stage costumes, Parton asserts claim to a cultural space formerly occupied solely by men. As Wilson points out, Parton is not attempting to reform or break down the patriarchal authority; rather, she works very hard to assert power and status for herself by manipulating the multiple cultural images she possesses. Wilson notes, “Parton is not an anomaly, but is instead drawing upon a model of feminine action in which women subvert, and gain strength from within, the dominant patriarchal system...[and] to create opportunities for women to control their lives within it.”¹⁸

As Wilson emphasizes, Parton does not claim a new role; certainly other women have created similar cultural niches for themselves. In his discussion of Sarah Orne Jewett’s authorship, Richard Brodhead notes that Jewett does not drape her writing in social, moral or religious concerns, as her sentimental novelist predecessors had. Instead, she “writes things as they are” and asserts her right to the profession of artist: “[it is] the moment when a publishing woman author first claims the duty (hence the right) to take her art seriously, and to define her proper self as the maker of her art.”¹⁹ Jewett claims a role previously solely occupied by men. She is not situated in the cultural categories of wife, mother or other traditional female role, but “sacrifices” herself to simply being an artist. Jewett is writing within a hierarchy of “Great” and “minor” literature and because of the social and cultural situation in which Jewett exists, she accepts her “humble” role as a minor writer. Brodhead notes, however, that even though “Jewett gave up the will to

¹⁸ Ibid, 126.

¹⁹ Brodhead, “Jewett, Regionalism, and Writing,” 169.

do major work, she also won the ability to claim what she saw as a major writer's attitude toward her work."²⁰ Even though Parton may seem to be quite the opposite of Jewett in her presence in the artist role (Parton's images are hardly humble!), she nevertheless is still operating within the discourse of patriarchy. Wilson points out: ""She has also exhibited a strong-willed determination to master and manipulate the social codes and conventions of the patriarchal and capitalist systems, deploying these codes to her own advantage without transgressing them. This is a key to her acceptance as a non-threatening but powerful influence."²¹ For both Parton and Jewett, they gain power by asserting themselves within the realms of patriarchal discourse, in the world of country music and literature, respectively. Both women took different routes within that discourse to gain power within their respective positions.

Furthermore, both Parton and Jewett assert their worth as individuals. As Brodhead points out, "in the real historical world there has been no 'women's culture' but plural and divergent women's cultures, each defined by a host of other social determinants."²² This reminder is relevant in Parton's case; if we were to simply define Dolly in terms of her gender, we would be limiting ourselves in understanding her power (much as we limit ourselves if we simply group Parton as "Southern"). Differences cannot be limited to mono-terms like gender or ethnicity, but rather difference needs to be understood in the context of social and cultural historical moments, encompassing all

²⁰ Ibid, 172.

²¹ Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions, 129.

²² Brodhead, "Jewett, Regionalism, and Writing," 144.

aspects of “class, race, ethnicity, and place.”²³ By simply focusing on gender, like feminist critics have done with Jewett, it limits the possibilities of power and redefining social roles and social spaces for women.

Thus far, I have discussed Parton’s difference in terms of regional and women’s cultural identities. I would like to further focus on Parton’s embodiments of the “forbidden and taboo” I brought up earlier with respect to Halls’ difference theory that asserts difference can be powerful. While Parton’s emphasis on specificity of place and role of artist/ claim to individuality breaks down the generalizations of region and womanhood, I would like to now look at Parton’s star image as a whole and how the contradictions in her image construct her as “queer.” Because Parton fails to fit into a category in the cultural classificatory system, she occupies a shifting space somewhere “in between.” If elements of Parton’s star image are “socially peripheral,” why has she become “symbolically centred?”²⁴ As Hall points out, the downside to difference as signifying meaning within culture’s symbolic order is that those things that don’t fit can “give rise to negative feelings and practices.”²⁵ Elements of queer theory pertaining to regionalist literature are helpful in analyzing why the contradictions in Parton’s image and Parton’s “different” cultural space result in “empathy” over abuse.

As discussed previously, the rise of tourism in New England marketed “local folks” of rural New England as “queer and quaint.” Regionalist literature often did the same. It is important to note that the term “queer” is not a stable construct, but rather a

²³ Wilson, “Mountains of Contradictions,” 121.

²⁴ Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” 237.

²⁵ Ibid, 236.

“shifting signifier, capable of being self-consciously adapted and deployed as a mode of critique against what in any given moment gets constructed as the ‘normal’.”²⁶ In this sense, Parton indeed constructs her image in resistance to the “normal” (the South, the women’s movement, traditional women’s roles as artists), thus her star image becomes “queer,” for all the reasons I have already discussed. However, Parton’s image is not subject to the “negative feelings and practice” that Hall asserts can occur if something does not fit into a cultural category. Why is this so? Part of the reason lies in the very definition of queer theory: “queer” is a “shifting signifier” and depends on the construction of the normal. Parton reconstructs “normal” by questioning its very purpose to her life. “Normal” does not interest Parton because it does not serve her needs. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse note: “if one cannot or will not engage in the business of defining the self as norm and the other as queer, then perhaps there is only the option of finding creative ways of being queer.”²⁷ Indeed, this is what Parton has done. But how does she avoid the negative associations with being “different”?

In their discussion of Sarah Orne Jewett, Fetterley and Pryse emphasize that regionalist literature is a “form of resistance.” Many of Jewett’s fictional characters (as well as the characters of many other regionalist authors) are constructed as “queer.” They note: “By filling her fiction with queers...Jewett’s work gains much of its energy from negotiating the tension that comes from at once recognizing the meaninglessness of

²⁶ Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, “Regionalism as Queer Theory,” in *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 319.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 327.

the term 'normal' and being drawn to participate in its operations."²⁸ Furthermore, many of the characters gain self-empowerment by being "queer." Thus, like Jewett's characters, Parton not only finds "creative" ways of being "queer," but she also ultimately questions the very meaning of the term "normal." Parton's star image questions the construct of the "normal" and the term thereby becomes "destabilized," giving Parton the power to manipulate and subvert cultural stereotypes for her own empowerment.

There still remains the question of the construction of the queer resulting in "negative feelings." Fetterley and Pryse concur with Hall that the term "queer" is a judgment usually made in the "context of terror and threat." However, they suggest that employing the queer in regionalism "suggest[s] the oddity of the so-called normal and offer[s] empathy as an alternative to terrorism in the approach to difference."²⁹ Because Dolly questions the "normal," she is able to gain power not just as a visual icon, but also as Wilson points out, a "popular role model," gaining empathy and acceptance more than anything else. Thus, by managing her star image, Parton is able to destabilize cultural constructions of the normal and her "queerness" becomes "symbolically centred."

It is also important to point out that the local, rural "folk" of New England were not defined as "queer" until the rise of tourism and vacationers and urban rusticators needed to define themselves in terms of what they were not. As mentioned previously, the "queer" folk were co-opted as a commodity for promoting tourism to the region, at the same time the whole of New England becomes a commodity and place becomes

²⁸ Ibid, 326.

²⁹ Ibid, 320.

meaningless. Their “queerness” gave some “stable” defining characteristics to a region that was quickly becoming homogenous and “straight.” Hence their “queerness” becomes more and more appealing. Similarly for Parton, as she becomes enmeshed in the country music industry and the construction of the generic “South,” her “queerness” becomes a focus because it too challenges the “straight.” In both situations, those in power have created regional identities (New England and the South) to create a unified whole; at the same time, however, this uniformity and standardization becomes monotonous and the “taboo and forbidden” becomes desirable.

In the discourse of how difference is defined (and who gets to define it), elements of power continually shift and travel along different routes. In the cases of Dolly Parton and Sarah Orne Jewett, both women created moments of cultural self-empowerment within the context of region, gender and their identification with the “queer.” As “normal” becomes homogenous and non-specific, the more difference is not only accepted, but welcomed. The paradox of regionalism is that the very idea itself can be argued as a longing for “placeness” and a hope for identity. Yet in the moment of creating unified, whole images for regions like the South (where anyone can be “country”) and New England (the whole region becomes a non-specific tourist destination), the very stability and importance of place and community that it espouses and hopes for is lost. The “otherness” of rural folk hence becomes central, because for the country music industry and tourism the “queer” seem to be the only ones left who still value “place.” Thus, in this construct, the “marginal” become symbolically important. In his work to define “Great” literature, Henry James emphasized the importance of the interior workings of the individual and a grand and complicated plot. In much the same

way, Parton redefines country music as profoundly personal. In Parton's "complicated plot" of her routes to power as a country singer, actress and television host (among other things), she redefines what is "normal" and asserts her "queer" contradictions of image as the source of her power.

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