

## Rednecks, Rig Pigs, and Cowboys: Rural Masculinity in Albertan Country Music

By Brenna Ward

I approached this project with the belief that Albertan identity is distinct: discursively organized around the geographical, historical, and environmental influences of the land. In this paper I will show that specific modes of masculinity have emerged in Alberta. I contend these masculinities are the result of an Albertan interpretation of frontier and cowboy mythology and the interrelationship of this mythology with the prominent oil and beef industries, the abundance of space that facilitates outdoor activities, and the massive expanses of fertile ground available for farming. I argue that Albertan country music and the imagery of its lyrics encapsulates the values, beliefs, styles, and ways of life of rural Albertan people, thereby perpetuating and reinforcing rural masculinities.

In this essay I will show that Albertan masculinity requires specific ‘performances’ determined by uniquely Albertan environmental, cultural, and historical influences. The Albertan experience of masculinity is deeply enmeshed with the rural, creating a “rural masculinity” (Campbell, Bell and Finney). I will demonstrate this masculinity is heavily influenced by frontier and cowboy mythology. I will then show that country music acts as an expression of gender fantasy, recursively performing rural masculinity and thereby uncritically affirming and reinforcing the rural/redneck/cowboy categories. That is, country music appropriates frontier and cowboy mythology and acts as a vehicle of group values and ideologies, thereby forming and defining identity, including gender identity. I aim to demonstrate the interconnections between and the continuities of social practices, and the images that

represent them. What ties the two together are narratives and ideals of cowboy and frontier mythology, often emerging from or depicting anxieties of a masculinity crisis.

I will first consider Judith Butler's gender theory to develop a theoretical framework. I will then illuminate the unique material and social practices of Alberta by exploring frontier and cowboy mythology, and the effect these have on the narration of Alberta history and gender, as well as the practical implications for contemporary Albertan industry. Third, I will consider music, gender theorists, and semiotics, and explain the link between representation and practice and country music's role in community and identity formation. Finally, I will identify the themes in Albertan country music that demonstrate fantasized rural masculinity, using the music of Corb Lund as a case study.

### **Rural Masculinity: Examining Gender**

Judith Butler argues that gender is not inscribed upon the body. Rather it is constituted through performative acts. Butler understands constituting acts as "...not only...constituting the identity of the actor, but constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief" (Butler 416). That is, the life-long project of performing gender reifies and reinforces the category itself, and thereby the actor comes to believe in the identity as truth. Butler further explains, "the authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" (418). Butler argues that "...gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make us of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (421).

Albertan country music is dominated by narratives of frontier and cowboy mythology in which artists perform a highly stylized ‘rural masculinity.’ In accordance with Butler’s model, Albertan country music artists reinforce the cowboy mythology, performing it in ways that make it appear real to the listeners and viewers. These men articulate a myth through their performance of rural masculinity, rendering country music a continual site of negotiation and contestation of masculinity. Thus rural masculinity as performed in country music has evolved with the subjects it seeks to represent, engraining the naturalness of the category within Alberta. I will show that Albertan men who perform what they consider to be natural male activities are in actual fact performing rural masculinity, thereby creating identity and reaffirming this category.

### **Frontier and Cowboy Mythology: The Crisis of Masculinity**

I conceptualize cowboy mythology as the valorization of purported male characteristics such as ruggedness, tenacity, perseverance, and strength, as embodied by the “frontier’s enduring hero, the cowboy” (Miller 62). I define the frontier as an imagined space, constructed and romanticized as a site of opportunity and as a location of authenticity. Frontier and cowboy mythology has had enormous implications for Albertan narratives and a subsequent discursive influence on industry. Through this mechanism this mythology has had lasting material effects on the construction of rural masculinity. The Albertan way of life is enmeshed with the rural, specifically emerging from narratives constructed around the cowboy and frontier mythology. These rural elements infiltrate and influence the world view of those that live in Alberta, both in rural and urban locales. Both of these narratives are connected by cultural anxieties surrounding the crisis of masculinity.

Stephen Whitehead explores this crisis of masculinity and concludes that while it may not exist as real in any absolute sense, it reveals the discursive nature of men and masculinities (59). Examining the work of Whitehead and John MacInnes, it is clear the crisis of masculinity is a consequence of the progress of society, and the failure to adapt masculinity to this progress. According to MacInnes, male privilege is slipping. He argues: “Today’s boys cannot assume the privileges their fathers could take for granted or assume to be natural” (313) and that, “It is a bad time to be a man, compared to the supremacy men have enjoyed in the past” (322).

The crisis of masculinity is a glimpse of the instability of masculinity as a category, and a reflexive effort to reinforce gender binaries and male supremacy. This crisis of masculinity is an important element of frontier and cowboy mythology, due to the emphasis these mythologies place on supposedly natural male tendencies, male-only spaces, masculine skills, and its categorization as a space of recuperated lost manhood. The crisis of masculinity consequently emerges as an underlying anxiety in Albertan narratives and in many country music videos, as examined below.

The work of Mary-Ellen Kelm shows how these anxieties manifest. Kelm argues that in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the Albertan West represented an opportunity for transformation. She contends that at the end of the nineteenth century, there was significant anxiety surrounding the emasculating effects of modernity, and that the West was thought to be the savior of masculinity. It was viewed as a site beyond the reach of modernity: a space where manhood could be restored (Kelm 716). The creator of the Calgary Stampede, Guy Weadick, was an immigrant from Rochester, New York. He was lured to Alberta by stories of cowboys and Indians, and wide open plains (716). In creating the Stampede in 1912, he wanted to present an

authentic event showcasing the abilities of real cowboys, and to teach Albertan's how to recognize this as "...their own history spread out before them" (Kelm 719). This demonstrates that cowboy mythology and the frontier mythology are mutually dependent. They are considered to be the catharsis to modernity's attack on masculinity.

### **Frontier and Cowboy Mythology: The Gendered Implications on Industry in Alberta**

Frontier and cowboy mythology have been key factors in the production of a uniquely Albertan culture. These cowboy and frontier narratives have had a great deal of influence on the construction of a particular "world-view" (Volgsten). Stuart Hall argues that "in a culture, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis – narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority" (Hall 42). Establishing these narratives and the implications for industry will assist me in demonstrating that country music acts as a site across which meanings of rural masculinity are processed and disseminated.

Jo Little explores how space and bodies are constructed in relation to each other, arguing that, "while the nature of space affects how we use our bodies and the values and assumptions through which we regulate them, bodies also shape the character of space, influencing how it is used and the acceptability of particular actions and activities within it" (Little 188). Alberta's vast expanse of fertile land, along with certain ideals of masculinity inherent to the cowboy and frontier mythology has resulted in an economic imperative to master the land. Industries that utilize natural resources have emerged out of specific gendered histories and are deeply entwined with the masculine emphasis on physical strength to conquer and succeed against natural

elements (188-189). Aspects of these gendered industries and occupations are the result of cowboy and frontier mythology and an extension of the masculine project.

Frontier and cowboy mythology has important implications for industry because of underlying notions of opportunity and transformation, reiterating capitalist ideals. Gloria E. Miller identifies W. Wright's suggestion that the cowboy myth is reflective of free market capitalism because it reflects the concepts of "freedom, equality, rationality, autonomy, opportunity, private property' and... 'the need for an open frontier, violence as a civil necessity, white male superiority, and an endlessly productive environment'" (Miller 62). The frontier represents hope, the opportunity for people to take big risks and make big fortunes: to come from nothing and fulfill the capitalist rags to riches trajectory. Alberta is narrated as the Wild West, full of cowboy culture (62), and still presents the excitement of frontier opportunity. She argues that high powered oil men demonstrate a connection to the frontier and cowboy legacy in their actions and beliefs, as demonstrated by the tendency of many successful Calgarians to purchase a ranch when they make it big (Miller 59, 62).

Miller examines the oil industry through a gendered lens in her article, "Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers." She argues that, "the oil industry is masculine, not only in the historical and contemporary demographic composition of its employees, but in its assumptions, values and everyday practices, it is almost taken for granted" (48). Miller argues that masculinity in the oil industry is expressed and maintained through the everyday practices that are based on shared masculine interests and work to exclude women from power; and that individualistic competition works to reinforce the division of work by gender (48). Indeed the very nature of the industry is continual exploration involving risks,

physical labor, and eventual success and wealth. This speaks to the white settler project which involved immigrants that followed the same celebrated trajectory and capitalist success story. To search for and find black gold is to be involved in a continued exploration project that symbolically repeats and subsequently reifies the frontier mythology.

The oil industry creates a relationship of dependence of urbanites upon rural workers that further contributes to Albertan cultural identity. Oil is extracted and processed in rural locales by blue collar men<sup>1</sup> while white collar men in urban locations reap the profit. This dependence is more than just economic, however, since the rural workers are producing the means of modernity; urban life would cease to operate if it were not for petroleum. This rural/urban divide establishes rural masculinity as the authentic masculinity due to the urban men being feminized in their dependence on rural men. This echoes the larger scheme of nationhood as reflective of the traditional nuclear family model, where the male role is positioned as the patriarch, responsible for the economic and primary needs of his dependents.

Agriculture is another industry influenced by frontier and cowboy mythology. Miller explains: “Success in the harsh frontier environment required toughness and tenacity. And those qualities, which were originally required of ranchers... are still admired. They have left *cultural imprints* on the contemporary scene” (Miller 61, emphasis in original). Successful farmers are those who have conquered the elements to produce crops and manage livestock (Little 189) and are seen as masculine. This masculinity expands to include mastery over farm machinery, extending the importance of bodily strength to include large, sophisticated machinery (189).

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<sup>1</sup> I must clarify that I mean these workers are predominantly male, according to the Government of Alberta’s profile of the mining and oil and gas extraction industry, the industry employs 151,100 people, and only 34,700 or twenty three percent of these workers are women. Government of Alberta. (2012, June). *Industry Profiles: Mining and Oil and Gas Extraction Industry*. Retrieved 12 10, 2012, from Government of Alberta: <http://eae.alberta.ca/documents/profiles/industry-profile-mining-oil-and-gas-extraction.pdf>

The Albertan countryside has become a space to be used for masculine outdoor activities. Little notes “a fit body indicated a fit mind and an ability to navigate the landscape and survive in the outdoors” (190), again reflecting ideals of frontier and cowboy mythology. In this view the urban body is feminized in its passivity and sensual deprivation (190). Miller argues that because outdoor recreational pursuits are viewed as masculine, female engineers are often excluded from male engineers’ outdoor bonding trips. She argues that, “exclusion from informal work-related networks has been argued by many scholars to be a significant factor in women’s more general exclusion from influential positions” (51). These unique intersections of oil, agriculture, cowboy mythology, and frontier mythology in Alberta have established the rural way of life as one that is inherently masculine and has gendered the spaces between Alberta’s imagined boundaries as masculine.

Frontier and cowboy mythology have had very real implications for the construction of masculinity in Alberta. Accompanying this mythology and the romanticized notions of a return to nature were the very real adjustments that settlers had to make when faced with the harsh Alberta climate (Kelm 716). Therefore, for Albertans, “transformation was at the heart of the settler experience...” (718). Gender in Alberta continues to be constructed and produced by the cowboy and frontier mythologies.

Returning to Butler’s theory of performativity, I have demonstrated how specific cultural narratives have engendered certain performances required to construct the category of rural masculinity. Through performance, this masculinity is therefore viewed as a natural extension of what has come to be considered as a logical occupation of the land. That is, this narration has become central to the discursive construction of an Albertan nationhood creating a common

world-view that resonates with Albertans. Whether they are positively or negatively invested in this world-view, Albertans will still recognize the signs of these narrations. Key to this process is the relationship between representation and practice.

### **Culture and Semiotics: Identity and Community Formation**

Stuart Hall has written extensively on systems of representation and culture, and how meaning is produced to tie these together. Hall explores how language constructs cultural meaning. He argues that “language is one of the ‘media’ through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in culture” (Hall 1). Languages are what Hall refers to as “systems of representation” (Hall). He asserts that “cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head’ [but] they organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (3). The significant influence of the frontier and cowboy narratives upon Alberta’s culture described above is demonstrative of Hall’s theory.

Hall argues that objects, gestures, clothes, etc. do not have an inherent meaning, but rather meaning is produced through language. It is in this process where language is crucial, language referring to the systems of references that people have created to establish a common context. It is important to understand when considering the concept of “world-view” (Volgsten) that “culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways” (Hall 2). Through this process between representations and communication, we “make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways” (18). Meaning is produced at “several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices within the ‘circuit of culture’” (3). Therefore meaning gives us a

sense of identity and culture and then parcels out identities, establishing members and non-members of groups, affecting a common world-view.

Diverging from discursive formations, the semiotic approach is concerned with how language produces meaning. Semiotics is “the study or ‘science of signs’ and their general role as vehicles of meaning in culture” (Hall 6). Signs are conceptualized as any “sound, word, or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, ‘a language’” (19). Semiotics contributes significantly to my argument because it can be deployed to explain how images and objects that are used in country music have certain attached meanings to them, and that those within the community will recognize the meaning that is being communicated to them.

Drawing on Hall, music sociologist Steven Brown builds on the study of semiotics and argues that:

music serves as an adjunct to language to emotively reinforce group values, virtues, and normative behaviors. Musical devices such as rhythm, repetition, and polyphony act to increase the meaning and memorability of linguistic messages. So at the level of contexts and contents, music acts as a force of compliance and conformity. (4)

He then points out that music has a major role in defining and reinforcing social identity, arguing that “people learn about the normative behaviors of their society or subculture in the context of musical rituals” (4). Music affects emotion and is an “important device for emotional expression, conflict resolution, and social play” (5). Importantly, Hall and Brown both point to the role of music in identity formation.

Aaron A. Fox argues country music in particular is connected to identity. Fox notes that “country music is... the expressive, stylized, ritualized surface of a deep ocean of popular social

experience” (21) and that “country music is a vital cultural tradition, and a specific kind of intellectual property. Country music is... an essential resource for the preservation of community and the expression of white... working-class identity” (21). Fox considers the entangled rural and country identities and argues country identity is entwined with country music. Country music is a conduit of working-class identity, which is visible in the frontier and cowboy mythology fantasized in country music.

Setting aside the lyrics and considering only the musical aspects of country music, it is clear that sounds and chords are organized to form a language read as country music. Ulrik Volgsten adds to Simon Frith’s discussion of identity production by arguing that “when we hear music, bonds between us and the music, its style and style adherents, are cohered to and strengthened” (Volgsten 76). Therefore there is an affective relationship between the listener and music, that is, “music enables the listener to feel [a] world-view and norm system, in that the music that we attune to affectively articulates the discursive content that it communicates” (96). This argument speaks to both Hall and Brown, emphasizing a common country world-view influenced by the coalesced cowboy and frontier narratives, and points to the emotional attachment that some people have both to country music and the way of life that underpins the gender fantasies.

### **Country Music Imagery: A Gender Fantasy**

Now that I have established the distinctive shaping of Albertan mythology and the function of music, I turn my attention to my argument that country music acts as an expression of gender fantasy, presenting a performance of rural masculinity that affirms the rural/redneck/cowboy way of life and reinforcing the naturalness of the category through the performance. If,

as Hall suggests, “languages work through representation” (4), we can see how country music as a language uses “some element to stand for or represent what we want to say, to express or communicate a thought, concept, idea or feeling” (4). That is, country music appropriates frontier and cowboy mythology and exhibits a fantasized rural masculinity. Frontier and cowboy mythology play a large role in the formation of Albertan narratives and as such, country music acts to produce and perpetuate this narrative. Ellen Dissanayake argues that “music is one particular way of making ordinary behavior extraordinary” (Volgsten 75).

Corb Lund’s music is demonstrative of these ideas in the context of Albertan rural masculinity. Lund is an Albertan country music artist and self-proclaimed authentic cowboy. Present in Lund’s music are gender fantasies, from which certain desires and anxieties are clear. His music specifically speaks of rural Albertan life, as described above, and semiotic signs of oil fields, trucks, and cowboys are often portrayed in his music videos. In an interview with Edmonton’s *Vue* magazine, Lund noted his songs are specifically about “being that cowboy guy in 2012” (Blinov). Lund performs masculinity according to his perception of the category of ‘authentic cowboy,’ and his songs display desires and anxieties that fit within frontier and cowboy mythology.

Aaron A. Fox argues that country music and country identity are largely reflexive, echoing Whitehead’s evaluation of the masculinity in crisis phenomenon. He argues that “working-class culture is in large part shaped in response to the commodification of human agency in industrialized capitalist society – that is to say, in response to ‘class’ in all its sociological and lived complexity” (Fox 31). Lund’s music reveals underlying anxieties that modernity posits to civilization and, as an extension, masculinity. Interestingly, Lund’s music

celebrates the working class and the roughnecks and riggers that constitute this class whilst simultaneously expressing concerns with the modernizing effects of the oil industry. His 2002 song, “Roughest Neck Around” champions the honorable blue collar rigger; his 2009 song “This is my Prairie” describes the installation of an oil pipeline through his family farm; and his 2012 song “Gettin’ Down on the Mountain” expresses the crisis to masculinity that oil presents. Class conflicts and the threat of modernity result in an urban/rural divide, which I argue is a real, material preoccupation and source of tension in the Alberta context.

Oil symbolizes and captures the rural/urban divide, as well as class conflicts, and speaks to the gendered frontier history of Alberta as demonstrated in Corb Lund’s music. “Gettin’ Down on the Mountain” (2012) reveals anxieties beneath the fantasy. The lyrics of the song and the images in the music video posit a tension between rural and urban. His lyrics: “When the oil stops, everything stops, nothing left in the fountain. Nobody wants paper money son, so you just well stop countin’. Can you break the horse, can you light the fire? What’s that? I beg your pardon? You best start thinking where your food comes from and I hope you tend a good garden” (Lund, Gettin’ Down on the Mountain) implies that the urbanite, the Calgary oil executive in the Alberta context, who has spent his life working towards earning money has done so at the cost of learning masculine skills. Lund’s condescending use of “son” works to emasculate and infantilize the urbanite. The lyrics describe a dystopic future where the oil has run out and those who have been dependant on its spoils are unable to survive without it, having lost their masculine abilities due to their feminized indulgence in pampered urban living.

The gender fantasy in Corb Lund’s music assumes that rural masculinity, as influenced by cowboy and frontier mythology, is a real and authentic masculinity. Lund’s lyrics are a call to

maintain a hold on what remains of this authentic masculinity, and to remember a time when men were closer to nature. Underlying Lund's fantasy are anxieties surrounding modernization and the threat this posits to rural masculinity. His lyrics:

Getting down on the mountain, getting down on the mountain. Don't wanna be around when the shit goes down, I'll be gettin' on down the mountain. There aint no heat and the powers gone out, it's kerosene lamps and candles. The roads are blocked its all grid locked, you got a short wave handle. Can you track the deer , can you dig the well, couldn't quite hear your answer. I think I see a rip in the social fabric, brother can you spare some ammo?" (Lund, Gettin' Down on the Mountain)

express his desire to pull back modernization and re-learn survival skills in anticipation for the eventual end of oil. These lyrics demonstrate Lund's belief that rural masculinity is, however, timeless: a prevailing masculinity that will be called upon again once the oil has been wasted.

Country music affirms the working-class identity often derided in the broader economic hierarchy and in larger society. Fox argues that, "Working-class' experience is, after all, not merely a social scientific abstraction... it is an enveloping material environment... dominated by alienated, body-wrecking, and mind-numbing manual labor" (32-33). Fox demonstrates the link between the practiced and the fantasy through his engagement with the culture of a class-based community and his argument that country music plays a central role in working-class culture, treating country music primarily as "working-class art" (31). Alberta's unique cultural context defines a working-class male identity, and it is this identity Lund speaks to, portraying Albertan men as working-class heroes. Country music is the music of the working class, and often what is portrayed and glamorized through the use of semiotic signs are the values of hard work, physical labor, and emphasis on weekend community and family activities. Fox argues that "the working-

class claim on ‘country music’ is coherent, justified, and ethical – that is to say, ‘authentic’ – in a way that a musical commodity simply cannot ever be” (31).

The symbols in country music imagery that are used to communicate ideals of rural masculinity commonly include cowboy hats, horses, trucks, and country vistas. These work to communicate the fantasized ideals of rural masculinity. Looking at who is missing in country music imagery, that is, LGBTQ people, First Nations peoples, non-white immigrants, and first generation non-white Canadians, communicates who can be considered an authentic rural man. Further, country music romanticizes heterosexual love relationships and emphasizes homosocial bonding, virtually erasing the possibility of community acceptance towards homosexuality. These elements reveal deep-seated investment in so-called traditional ways of life, emphasize traditional gender binaries, and posit the white man as owning imbued supremacy over other men.

Lund’s country music career has spanned over a decade, and the music he has produced demonstrates a continued performance of rural masculinity. As Lund considers himself an authentic “cowboy guy” (Blinov), his music does not present a self-reflective critique of masculinity or the frontier history. Rather, his performance of rural masculinity can be considered within the theoretical framework I established using Butler’s theory of performativity. Butler argues that “as an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention... the body *is* a historical situation... and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation” (Butler 417, emphasis in original). Therefore we can conceptualize how Lund’s performance reiterates the Albertan narratives influenced by cowboy and frontier mythology.

Butler speaks to the importance of historical narratives in the construction of masculinity with her argument that “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time... one might try to reconceive the body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (418-419). Lund is performing what he conceives as a natural extension of himself, presumably unaware his performance has been historically shaped by cowboy and frontier mythology. In his music videos, interviews, and concert performances<sup>2</sup>, his performance of rural masculinity is exaggerated, using semiotic symbols to communicate the country identity to his audience.

### **Conclusion**

Rural masculinity holds practical societal implications as it shapes notions surrounding the family and traditional values; shapes the relationship between rural locales and urban locales; influences how people narrate their work, their relationships, their experiences; it posits a certain relationship between the individual and the state and the individual and her/his religion; and finally, it effects the education system and the higher education system in Alberta, consequently producing more workers for industry rather than professional workers.

The study of Albertan masculinities is important to an understanding of gender because the Alberta man is largely viewed as an authentic product of his environment. That is, the typical Albertan approach to gender is uncritical and fails to consider the manner in which gender is constructed and created. Rather, the Alberta Man is posited as the man amongst men. Albertan

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<sup>2</sup> In researching Corb Lund I read and watched numerous interviews, watched countless concert performances on YouTube.com, and viewed most of his music videos. Please refer specifically to Sperounes, S. (2012, September 7). *Corb Lund, Part 2: Alley Chat*. Retrieved October 23, 2012, from Edmonton Journal: <http://www.edmontonjournal.com/entertainment/Corb+Lund+Part+Alley+Chat/7207804/story.html>; and Corb Lund’s YouTube channel, Lund, C. (n.d.). *Corb Lund*. Retrieved October 1, 2012, from YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/corblundvids>

country music, as exemplified by Corb Lund's music, reflects and reinforces this view of masculinity. Rather than offer a reflective critique of the cowboy and frontier mythology, the performance of rural masculinity in Albertan country music assumes the occupation and use of the land as an imbued right, a logical use of the land, rather than as an extension of the larger colonial project. A discussion of women's portrayal in country music, female country musicians and women's place in the rural would have provided an even more thorough analysis of identity and community, but was beyond the scope of this paper. Further, a discussion of the music itself through a gendered lens would have been useful, but again, is beyond the scope of this paper. In conclusion, I believe that my essay offers a critical analysis of the interrelations between cowboy and frontier mythology, Albertan culture, and country music, establishing the rural Albertan man as a semiotic subject, maintained through the extended performance of gender.

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