

The Significance of Representation In Monarch

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While taking this class I have learned how to critically analyze and question the interactions that occur around me. Through the veil of gender, we as human beings see the world through a very specific lens. It is important to be conscious of who is burdened by the impact of gender and who reinforces and sustains this inequality. In my experience, I gained new insight on the empowerment I feel as a result of listening to the voices of marginalized groups. One popular culture aspect in which I have watched this phenomenon occur is on the show *Monarch*. This musical drama encapsulates country music dynamics more broadly in society. Historically, country music has represented and perpetuated hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity represents a hierarchy of inequality, privilege and positions an ideal man at the top (Wade & Ferree, 2018). As a result of this hierarchy of inequality women are largely marginalized. Women must work incredibly hard to prove their value in country music and society more broadly. This paper shall discuss the gender relations represented in *Monarch* and the significance of representation on a wider basis.

Monarch follows the “Reigning King and Queen of Country Music” Albie Roman and his tough and rebellious wife Dottie Cantrell Roman, until Dottie dies (Owen, 2022-present). To summarize: the Romans have created an incredibly powerful country music dynasty and once Dottie passes, her two daughters (Nicky and Gigi) work to become the next “Queens of Country Music” (Owen, 2022-present).

Importantly, before investigating examples of gender relations in *Monarch*, it is first important to discuss the context in which country music has been unprogressive and extremely androcentric. As described previously, Gigi and Nicki work tirelessly to reach milestones that very few female country singers have received in the past. Historically, the traditional female role in country music was to be the supportive counterpart (i.e., booking venues and ensuring the male performer was taken care of), while the male country singer

was the star (Watson, 2019). Unfortunately, this idea of work segregation reflects the idea that feminized jobs are not as important or are invisible, whereas masculinized jobs are seen as incredibly important and involve a large amount of talent (Wade & Ferree, 2018).

Unfortunately, this theme of a woman's role being less influential than a man's continued as female country singers began to set foot on the stage. For example, female country singers in the past decades have been significantly underrepresented on the *Billboard* Hot Country Charts (Watson, 2019). As seen in *Monarch*, Gigi and Nicki fight incredibly hard to become successful country singers. Specifically, Nicki worked tirelessly to prove to a tour company CEO (Chief Executive Officer) that she had what it took as a performer to take her on a cross country tour (Owen, 2022-present). Unfortunately, the tour company explains to Nicki that she is not entertaining enough and does not exude the "Wow Factor" (Owen, 2022-present). As a result of this feedback, Nicki changes her performance and begins to sexualize herself in order to prove to the tour company she has what it takes to be successful (Owen, 2022-present). This signifies the common narrative in country music and society more broadly that *sex sells*. Meaning, in order to be successful in country music a woman has to be sexualized by wearing short skirts and tall boots. Unfortunately, sexual objectification of female country singers is a common gender strategy many female country artists follow in order to be successful. A gender strategy is a specific way in which a person does gender in response to the realities and norms of their culture (Wade & Ferree, 2018).

Next I shall discuss the context of the show and the significance of the creator and screenwriter Melissa London Hilfer. Hilfer began her professional life as a lawyer and changed careers to follow her passion in screenwriting after having her three children (Guess, 2015). Importantly, during the early stages of her transition to screenwriting she was discouraged many times by people saying she would not be successful (Guess, 2015). As a very busy writer and mother, Hilfer describes she makes very good use of the sometimes little time

she has to write (Guess, 2015). Given her unique standpoint, Hilfer's many works are unique from the androcentric viewpoint of many other shows. According to standpoint theory, how we know knowledge matters and depends on how and where we are situated in society (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). Therefore, a single mother such as Hilfer may view societal issues differently than others in a position of privilege. As result, Hilfer's writing in *Monarch* represents a refreshing and inventive lens regarding what it means to be a woman in a male dominated arena such as country music.

Monarch's theme of being a woman in a male dominated career can be generalized to many male dominated professions. Not only do women need to work harder to gain the same respect as their male coworkers or superiors, but they must also face internal battles of how they see themselves as well as how others may view them. For example, Nicki understands she is just as talented and capable of headlining a tour when compared to a male artist. However, she also understands people only see her through a gendered lens of being female and therefore view her as incapable of headlining a tour without the help of a male artist. This phenomena can be described as the bifurcation of consciousness (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Overall, Nicki knows who she is as a person but she also knows how others view her. This can be termed the consciousness of oppression and allows an individual to gain insight in how they may be oppressed in their society (Wade & Ferree, 2018).

In addition to this, female country singers have to be incredibly strategic in the way they are represented by the media. In *Monarch*, this is represented when Nicki found out her husband was having an affair with another woman (Owen, 2022-present). After receiving this news Nicki understandably wanted to leave her husband; however, her publicist encouraged her not to leave him as it would wreck her reputation (Owen, 2022-present). Through a gender relations lens, Nicki's performance of gender (through wanting to leave a heterosexual marriage) was policed when she was discouraged from leaving her cheating

husband (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Meaning, Nicki's career would be punished if she were to openly discuss her divorce with her fans. This is likely as a result of the values people have in the southern United States where a heterosexual marriage represents hegemonic masculinity and thus is reinforced and rewarded (Wade & Ferree, 2018). When Nicki's publicist questioned her choice to go public about her divorce he was seeking accountability (to supply an account for why Nicki broke a gender norm) (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Surprisingly, to publicly announce her divorce with her husband, Nicki brought the mistress with whom her husband cheated on her with to a red carpet event wearing all black funeral attire (Owen, 2022-present). This action is extremely impactful and represents the challenging of male dominance over women in marriages (Wade & Ferree, 2018).

Although Nicki challenges androcentrism in the previous example, she also represents emphasized femininity (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Emphasized femininity can be described as adopting hegemonic masculinity and performing an over exaggerated form of femininity (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Some examples of Nicki performing emphasized femininity is dressing up in glamorous dresses and singing songs in which involve her seeking and desiring a heterosexual relationship in which a man can provide for her (Owen, 2022-present). Perhaps Nicki chooses the gender strategy of the "girly girl" in order to appease and be accepted by society. As a result, she receives more advantages than other country singers. Specifically, Nicki strategically chooses to not completely challenge the status quo as she is rewarded with more opportunities when she performs emphasized femininity. In a male dominated career like country music, the mere presence of a woman country singer creates a symbolic threat for men in the industry (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Meaning, male artists as the dominant group feel a sense of entitlement and therefore are challenged by a woman entering their field of work (Wade & Ferree, 2018). As a result of Nicki being a symbolic threat to men, she must strategically "do gender" and is placed into a

double bind (Wade & Ferree, 2018). To be successful as a country singer her fans expect her to be a “girly girl” performing emphasized femininity; however, working with a recording company she also must perform some masculinity (e.g. being assertive and standing up for what she deserves) in order to be taken seriously by the top record producers and CEO’s (Owen, 2022-present). Given that Hilfer also experiences the challenges faced by women working in a male-dominated occupation, she emphasizes this double bind faced by female workers in *Monarch* (Guess, 2015).

In addition to Nicki choosing the gender strategy of the “girly girl”, Gigi Roman represents resistance to hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. In our society, there are “correct” and “incorrect” ways of being a man or a woman (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Gigi does not fit into the strict rules of what it means to be a woman and thus, this challenges androcentrism and male power (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Therefore, she represents multiple pariah femininities (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Gigi Roman identifies as a lesbian and is also a mother (Owen, 2022-present). In addition to this, Gigi has been marginalized for not only her sexuality and gender but also her weight (Owen, 2022-present). Throughout *Monarch*’s first episodes, Gigi’s tough experiences as a child are shown through flashbacks. Unfortunately, her mother and father sent her away to fat camp and conversion therapy camps most summers (Owen, 2022-present). These experiences emphasize that Gigi as a child was culturally unintelligible (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Meaning, as a result of Gigi not performing a culturally accepted form of being a girl, she was outcast from society and forced to change the ways in which she performs gender (Wade & Ferree, 2018). This exemplifies the costs of challenging the status quo through enacting pariah femininities.

Monarch has been received as an incredibly influential show thus far. Specifically, *Monarch* viewers have enjoyed the representation as well as the rebellious attitude of many of the characters. For example, as Blu (2022), describes in their television review, it was

empowering and enjoyable to watch one episode centering around Nicki's daughter Tatum. In one episode, Tatum is forced to go to a school dance and perform emphasized femininity wearing a puffy pink dress and learning a complicated ballet number (Owen, 2022-present). Additionally, Tatum is also expected to go to the dance with a boy. Instead, she goes to a pool party prior to the dance in a dress with "screw the patriarchy" written on it (Owen, 2022-present). Fans of the show thoroughly enjoyed Tatum's resistance (Blu, 2022). This is likely because school dances are a place of high gender salience (gender is extremely important; Wade & Ferree, 2018). Specifically, at school dances there are evident power relations controlling students. For example, school dances perpetuate heteronormativity (normalizing only a man and woman relationship) (Wade & Ferree, 2018). Therefore, boys and girls are assigned specific gender roles and duties (i.e. girls wear makeup and dresses and boys wear tuxedos). Tatum and Gigi have an emotional moment in *Monarch* when discussing Tatum's concerns about going to the dance and performing emphasized femininity (Owen, 2022-present). During this emotional moment, Gigi has a flashback when she was a student going to the same Ball (Owen, 2022-present). In the flashback, Gigi wants to wear a tuxedo and go to the dance with a girl but her mom hits her and punishes her for doing this (Owen, 2022-present). Similarly, as Pascoe (2011) explains, the same event occurs with Rebeca. Unfortunately, girls who do not perform emphasized femininity such as Gigi and Rebeca are punished, whereas when they do perform femininity they are rewarded. With regards to Tatum, her resistance to the patriarchy is refreshing and empowering for viewers of *Monarch* because many individuals such as Gigi and Rebeca have been punished instead of rewarded for their resistance.

The standpoint of knowledge production and an individual's experience is important (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). Historically, the country music community has been exclusively from the standpoint of white, cisgender, and heterosexual men. As a result, country music

emphasized hegemonic masculinity. From my experience growing up listening to country music, I have not been able to connect with the experiences of male country singers. However, I have connected to strong and empowering women such as Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert as they enjoy breaking the rules while also sharing an incredibly different standpoint than a man's. Importantly, I feel this same empowering feeling while watching *Monarch*. Sharing our lived experiences matters from a standpoint of being less privileged than those in places of power. *Monarch* is an incredibly empowering show as there are characters that represent resistance and therefore are influential for the future of country music. Giving a voice to marginalized groups such as women that represent pariah femininities enacts change. *Monarch* can be seen as a mode of change that empowers marginalized groups to share their experiences. *Monarch* enables us to take off our gender veil and allows us to be able to see that the gender binary is constructed instead of biologically existing. Country music should be a place of inclusion and artistry rather than a place of dividing the gender binary. It will take hard work and time for change to occur and for those voices that are marginalized to fully be represented in country music. However, I have hope for the future and the redistribution of representation and power in country music and society more broadly.

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