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## Book Review: She Come By It Natural, Dolly Parton and the Women Who Lived Her Songs

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***Book Review: She Come By It Natural, Dolly Parton and the Women Who Lived Her Songs***<sup>1</sup>  
Sharon Ramos Goyette<sup>2</sup>

Part personal narrative, part feminist theory, part cultural commentary, *She Come By It Natural, Dolly Parton and the Women Who Lived Her Songs* (2020) by Sarah Smarsh examines the life-trajectories of poor, rural women through the lens of the cultural icon, Dolly Parton. Throughout the text, Smarsh implores us to value the individual narrative, and to use these narratives as a lens through which to examine feminism. Running through the book, is both the tension and alliance between intellectual feminism which Smarsh distinguishes from lived feminism. Intellectual feminism involves feminist theory, academic articles, and schools of thought on how and why sexism—both insidious and explicit—exists and how it should be addressed, while the other involves the struggle of living with sexism and figuring ways to manage around it, in the moment—without the lexicon of feminist theory, resources or social capital. This book is written from the perspective of an academic feminist scholar who witnessed the women she loved and admired, live their lives as feminists—though those women might never characterize themselves as such. In this way, the author’s personal narrative informs her scholarly observations on rural, poor women—particularly those from the rural Midwest or “Heartland” (the title of her first book) of the United States.

In Part I, we are reminded that Dolly Parton is a product of a sexist, poor, rural mindset, where, as Smarsh quotes her, “Womanhood was a difficult thing to get a grip on in those hills, unless you were a man”(16). Her characteristic, self-deprecating humor aside for the moment, Dolly Parton’s international celebrity is clearly a combination of her extraordinary talent as a singer and songwriter and her acumen as a business-woman. But in her ability to connect with her audience, it comes down to her authenticity: “she come by it natural”(7). As such she is a spokesperson for the poor, rural woman and anyone else who has to battle an unfair system and is unheard. Her songs are cathartic and empowering.

This section is subtitled, “Dolly Parton, Embodies the Working Woman’s Fight,” which is a bit of play on words, because in addition to discussing the ways in which Dolly Parton exemplifies some of the obstacles that poor, rural, women necessarily encounter, there is also discussion of the female body. Objectification is discussed but not in the way we are accustomed to thinking as feminist scholars. Instead, the intersectionality of being both poor and a woman make the poor woman acutely aware of how much her body shape matters, what it conveys to those who will make decisions about her livelihood. With lived knowledge, the poor, rural woman knows acutely that “The shape of a working-class woman’s body has a lot to do with her survival.” It is understood deeply by those who live it and explained by social scientists with a lexicon and literature to describe it at a societal level. “All of those signifiers of health and appearance—which are signifiers of class—affect every interaction in a woman’s day”(30).

In Part II, the act of leaving is explained as both a necessity for poor, working women and is also discussed as one factor that explains why unfair work practices are still endemic in the United

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<sup>1</sup> Smarsh, S. (2020). *She Come By It Natural, Dolly Parton and the Women Who Lived Her Songs*. New York, New York: Scribner.

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States. Stability is an elusive luxury for many working women from the rural Midwest. Often women are moving for low-paying jobs with few if any benefits and limited job security. Whatever causes them to leave necessitates restarting in a new location where often the same fate awaits. Leaving is often not a real decision, but what Smarsh calls a “self-preserving departure”(55). “One might speculate that a woman...can’t stay put...that it’s in her nature rather than her circumstances...But that would be underestimating the number of hard hands a young woman in poverty...could be dealt in a row” (57).

In these circumstances, the woman never becomes vested in the community because she has earned the hard experiential wisdom that she may need to leave again. Thus, it’s impossible to build the “social, cultural and economic capital” (58) needed change the situation. What is possible is getting oneself out of that situation by simply leaving it. This creates a reinforcing cycle in which an individual is stuck in transience while instead, the social, cultural, and economic realities that contributed to the situation in the first place are allowed to remain in place.

Part III is a commentary on past and current sexism in the workplace. Parton often uses self-effacing wit to encapsulate deep and difficult lived truths; she also uses this strategy in business. There is just no real-world reality in thinking that someone who looks like Dolly Parton and is as talented as Dolly Parton can enter a business meeting and lean in and be successful. For women in the real world, living with and within sexism, whatever works, works—and it is often not what we have been led to believe. In many cases, “women had no choice but for their actions to be reactions” (99). As Smarsh says, “Parton fashioned herself as a ‘floozy’ not because she sought men’s approval but because sexualizing herself took power away from men who otherwise would have done it for her” (99). For Smarsh, this is a difference between lived feminism and intellectual feminism.

Additionally, Smarsh contrasts the generational transition of explicit physical and verbal workplace sexism to its contemporary form: “insidious misogyny or sexism which can cut you before you see it and is the hardest to prove” (10). Further, she plainly states that there is an “emotional drain of being dismissed, underpaid, ogled, and perceived as a threat” (100 ). These kind of insights— both personal narrative and academic—are shared throughout the book, providing validation but also a sense of urgency that there is much more to be addressed in our current incomplete understanding of equality, permeating every aspect of society and including, still, the workplace.

In the final section, Smarsh outlines some of the successes in Parton’s life and the good she has done through her work as an actress and singer-songwriter. She highlights the present, where Parton with her icon status, is a philanthropist and continues to do good and provide platforms where needed.

In summary, as Smarsh says, “There is, then, intellectual knowledge—the stuff of research studies and think pieces—and there is experiential knowing” (49). These often occur in two distinct realms with very little transfer between the two, but what Smarsh wants us to know is that “Working-class women might not be fighting for a cause with words, time and money they don’t have, but they possess an unsurpassed wisdom about the way gender works in the world”(49 ). It is best and as it should be when experiential knowing informs the trajectory of academic knowledge.

Anyone interested in how personal narrative can inform and extend feminist theory should read this book. For those interested specifically in the intersectionality of poverty, being female and having rural origins in the United States, this is a must read. Finally, this book is for anyone interested in understanding some of the contemporary and real obstacles that still prevent women from having authentic agency of their bodies, in the workplace, and in society.