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# Establishing Female Resistance as Tradition in Country Music: Towards a More Refined Discourse

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Graduate Program in Popular Music and Culture

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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes facets of resistance in the lyrics of female country music performers and explores how their articulations of female resistance draw on and rework Appalachian folk traditions within country music. Beginning with the musical practices of Appalachian women, who used music to lament their lives restricted by domestic responsibilities, this thesis examines expressions of female resistance through lyrical analysis, with a concentration on female country performers from 1995 to the present. Despite evolving into a performance tradition, female resistance in country music continues to address the lived experiences of its female audience. As such, the female resistance tradition is an enduring component of country music that has addressed women's issues for over a century.

## Keywords

Country music, women, gender, resistance, patriarchal ideologies, country music culture, response songs, revenge songs, domesticity

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Thanks Karly – for appropriately hijacking a sound system to make a statement. Meet me on County Road 233.

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandma, Marion Keron, who would have been so very proud to add this to her coffee table collection of family theses.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

Miranda Lambert's 2010 chart-topping single, "The House That Built Me", a song steeped in sentimental longing for a childhood home, frequently moves the country singer to tears in her live performances (Eggenberger). In the song, Lambert, after getting "lost in this old world", returns home to "find [her]self" and asks the current owners to allow her to come in so she can "touch this place or feel it", taking one last "memory/from the house that built me" (Lambert, "House"). Such songs remain ever popular in country music as the "impulse towards home and domesticity" manifests in songs depicting the "willing and often eager decision to leave home, the heartaches that accompany the departure, [and] the consequent sense of nostalgia that eventually sets in" (Malone "Above" 53).

While Lambert's emotional retrospective in "The House That Built Me" certainly has contributed to her popularity, she is perhaps better known for songs that quite violently oppose the so-called virtues of hearth and home. For instance, in her 2005 single, "Kerosene", Lambert responds to her lover's infidelity by burning down his house: "I'm soaking it in kerosene/Light 'em up and watch it burn" ("Kerosene"). Likewise, in "Mama's Broken Heart", released in 2011, Lambert once again torches an ex-lover's house and, after being "caught holding the matches/when the fire trucks show up", justifies her actions by stating: "sometimes revenge is a choice you gotta make" ("Broken"). There is a tendency in the popular press to exaggerate the significance of Lambert's violent songs. For example, in 2008, *Esquire* magazine named Lambert the "Most Terrifying Woman of the Year" ("2008 Esqy Music Awards") because of her

supposed reputation as a “saucy shitkicker” with a “badass attitude” (Hollandsworth). Lambert may very well merit this recognition as she tends to use violence as a cure-all for domestic unrest and therefore accumulates a “high body count” (Betts) in her songs.

There are clearly contradictions in Lambert’s lyrics: she expresses a sincere longing for home in “The House That Built Me”, yet torches her homes in “Kerosene” and “Mama’s Broken Heart”. However, the competing song themes in Lambert’s lyrics are typical of the repertoires of female country singers throughout the genre’s history. For instance, Tammy Wynette’s 1968 “Stand By Your Man” was a pledge of devotion to her male lover, in which she implores her listeners to do the same: “show the world you love him/Keep giving all the love you can” (Wynette, “Stand”). “Stand By Your Man” contradicts the message of her 1970 single, “I Don’t Wanna Play House”, in which Wynette sings of a little girl who refuses to play house with a male friend because “I know it can’t be fun/I’ve watched mommy and daddy and if that’s the way it’s done/I don’t wanna play house” (“House”). Likewise, in 1999, the Dixie Chicks second studio album *Fly* featured the number one single “Without You” – a breakup song where the female protagonist confesses: “Without you I’m not OK/Without you/I’ve lost my way” (Dixie Chicks, “Without”). The album also included the murder ballad “Goodbye Earl”, in which two female friends clearly have no issue losing a spouse, determining that he “had to die!” (“Earl”).

For conflicting female stances on domestic relationships to endure in country music suggests that the genre is variegated, and is not a cohesive cultural form that merely functions as a “toe-tapping form of assent to the status quo” (Ching 6). Indeed, country music is, as Bill Malone suggests, a “vigorous hybrid form of music, constantly

changing and growing in complexity” (Malone “U.S.A.” 1) because it encompasses multiple influences ranging from Appalachian folk traditions, Tin Pan Alley, evangelical Christianity and gospel songs, and African American music (4-6). This array of influences produces diverse themes and expressions, including gospel-tinged songs, rural nostalgia tunes, songs that address working class concerns, songs of domestic bliss and even articulations of female resistance – the specific country tradition to which Lambert’s violent songs belong.

In this thesis, I explore this complexity by focusing on the female resistance theme that has elucidated women’s issues since the genre’s inception in the 1920s, and has remained a vital component of country tradition ever since. I locate female resistance within the broader history and traditions of country music. In doing so, I can bypass the rhetoric that considers the resistance songs in the repertoires of current female country singers to be the markings of a “new wave” or “new breed” (Bufwack and Oermann “Voice” 380) of female performer. It is my belief that these claims obscure the complexity of country music, and distract from the enduring theme (and message) of female resistance.

## 1.1 Literature Review

Much scholarship focuses solely on the history of country music and, as such, does not allow room to analyze any specific body of work performed by female country artists. For instance, Bill Malone’s *Country Music, U.S.A.* is considered the definitive source on country music and provides a thorough history of the genre. Malone traces the roots of commercial country music, including the antecedent forms of music from which the commercial stream was formed. Malone situates country music in a proper



historical, social, and cultural context, highlighting how the genre moved from its regional roots to its current position in the popular culture landscape and will therefore be a valuable resource throughout this project. Malone's revised 2010 edition of *Country Music, U.S.A.* includes a new chapter that documents the trends in country music from 2000-2010. This chapter outlines how, in the aftermath of 9/11, country music made a vigorous effort to feature a platform of "family-oriented . . . [and] patriotic lyrics and its nostalgic characteristics" (Malone, "USA" 467). Here, Malone acknowledges the "ascendance of women entertainers" in country music who "speak out on women's issues" (431-2). However, the focus of Malone's project is historiography, and his approach is therefore centered on establishing country music's position in popular culture. As a result, a critical analysis of how and why many contemporary female performers articulate resistance in their lyrics is beyond the scope of his study.

Malone's *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* explores the relationship between country music's "southern-ness and its intimate relationship with working [class] people" (Malone "Above" ix). Malone contends that country music occupies several distinct realms: home, religion, rambling, frolic, humor, and politics. Malone argues how, "to a remarkable degree, [country music] still celebrates the values of home and hearth" that revolve around the "centrality of mother" (53). Malone holds that, within the ideologies of the rural South in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were typically positioned in "the household where she acted as the conservator of domestic values". In contrast, men's "domain existed outdoors where he sought to exercise an untrammelled freedom" (55). These ideologies then informed country music. While Malone's approach in this work is to establish the dominant

themes within country music, and not to critique these themes, his insight on the theme of hearth and home is useful to this project in that it offers understanding to how women are typified in country music.

In *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, Richard Peterson traces the evolution of country music from the 1920s to the 1950s. Peterson explains that country music was created as an alternative to the more urbane popular music that originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From here, Peterson foregrounds how, in an emerging industrial society, the genre's use of contrived imagery (cowboys, hillbillies, rural scenes, etc.) appealed to a listener's sense of nostalgia and longing for a lost rural past. Peterson argues that certain ideologies inform these contrived images: for instance, the "concept of Appalachia as a pristine remnant of a bygone natural environment" functions to "either highlight the improvements of civilization or to show its depravity in despoiling pristine nature" (215, 217). Peterson's work reveals the extent to which the genre relies on fabricated imagery to signify authenticity. However, Peterson only explores male-gendered images (cowboy, hillbilly, etc.), and, apart from generally acknowledging that women were relegated to fitting stereotypical performance roles (8), Peterson does not provide insight into what, specifically, these roles may encompass or how an audience may interpret fabricated images.

Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann's *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000* is one of the few scholarly studies that focuses on the roles and functions of women in country music and is a useful historical survey that provides an archive of female artists and songs throughout the genre's history. Beginning with women's roles as the keepers of Appalachian folk music, and culminating with the stories

of recent female performers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bufwack and Oermann reveal the enormous contributions of women in country music. While Bufwack and Oermann position female country artists in particular social and cultural contexts, their insistence that “the story of women in country music is a window into the world of the majority of American women” (xiii) is too general. As a result, Bufwack and Oermann do not afford themselves any space to critically examine the issues that are revealed through their study. However, their research provides an entry point for further examination, and will be a useful resource throughout this project.

Diane Pecknold and Kristine McCusker’s edited collection, *A Boy Named Sue*, offers several essays that explore gender in country music. Here, Pecknold and McCusker recognize the need to extend Bufwack and Oermann’s work and therefore set out to “begin the complex task of analyzing and appraising the body of performances to which [Bufwack and Oermann] brought attention” (ix). Here, Pecknold and McCusker explore gender in “its more encompassing theoretical sense . . . describ[ing] the social constructions of masculinity and femininity, and . . . emphasiz[ing] the way those constructions are used to create shared meaning” (xx).

Included in *Boy Named Sue* is Beverly Keel’s “Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl”, which explores the enormous success of female country artists in the mid- and late 1990s, including Shania Twain, Faith Hill, and the Dixie Chicks. Keel compares their feminist-tinged songs to the “adrenaline-fueled, machismo-mimicking ferocity” of female rock artists like Alanis Morissette and Fiona Apple (155). Keel then argues that the conservatism of country music and the industry’s male gatekeepers create “spoken and unspoken parameters that surround [and restrict] female country artists” (155). Keel

provides numerous examples that prove “strong empowered women are nothing new in country music” (156-7). However, Keel concerns herself more with how the country music industry’s parameters, imposed by male gatekeepers, force female artists to “play by the rules” (155). As such, Keel does not explore how and why female country artists have sustained a strong, empowered voice throughout the genre’s history; rather, Keel insists that any space given to female performers is invariably limited due to country music being one of “the last bastions of male chauvinism in the [popular] music industry” (169).

Other offerings in *Boy Named Sue* reveal the value in exploring how country music creates meaning. Joli Jensen’s “Patsy Cline’s Crossovers” explores “how Patsy Cline was shaped by, and shaped, being a female country music singer”, and, in doing so, “illuminate[s] some of what was at stake in country music’s definition of femininity then, and what remains at stake now” (108). Specifically, Jensen compares how Cline’s music and image were constructed during her career with how Cline’s image was constructed in order to create a posthumous “legend” (110). Jensen examines images of Cline and her lyrics, while also considering the clash between Cline and the music industry of the 1950s and 1960s. Jensen argues that Cline is a “bricolage . . . of accrued meanings that can be variously read, at various times, by various people” (120). Jensen’s study reveals how the image of Patsy Cline actively creates polysemic meaning that is struggled over, and certainly hints at the broad range of meanings operating in country music. Thus, there is value in extending the scope of Jensen’s study to explore meaning-making in the broader tradition of country music, with a larger body of songs by female artists.

In *Wrong's What I Do Best*, Barbara Ching explores how male country artists like Hank Williams and George Jones “unabashedly portray themselves . . . as the ‘low other’ of American culture” (33). Ching’s exploration of hard country music as a “burlesque abjection of the white male” (26) demonstrates the value of a complex, figurative lyrical analysis. Ching advocates the importance of taking “[country] music figuratively, to grant its makers the power of figurative and complex speech that is routinely granted to artists and other people we take seriously” (5, 15). In doing so, Ching addresses the notable absence of country music analysis in cultural studies scholarship, and her study of meaning-making in hard country music is a first step in legitimizing the genre as a viable field worth exploring in cultural studies. Thus, extending a figurative lyrical analysis beyond a small sub-genre of mainstream country music to a larger body of songs and artists is worth pursuing.

Heather Ann Ackley-Bean’s *Women, Music, and Faith in Central Appalachia* is a valuable resource as her study examines how Appalachian women (and Appalachian migrants to urban areas) have used music as a ‘theodicy’ – a theological processing space in which one ponders why a Christian God allows pain and suffering. However, many of the theological intricacies of Ackley Bean’s study are beyond the scope of this project, as she combines some rather complex philosophies of process theology (theodicy) with historical perspectives in Appalachia. Of greater importance to this project is how, as Ackley-Bean demonstrates, Appalachian women’s ballads function as a “natural resource for empirical theodicy” (5); that is, how these ballads provide a window into Appalachian women’s suffering, and what the nature of that suffering is. In chapter two, I use the term

‘theodicy’ to refer to the deep emotional and theological processing function of these songs that helped Appalachian women articulate their suffering.

In *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology*, David Fillingim explores the idea that, within popular music, people are afforded a space to “ponder myriad vital questions that arise out of their sense of finiteness”, and that popular music provides a “truer window into the human soul and reveals a more honest religious discourse” (3). Fillingim does not imply a necessarily Christian theology; rather, “[i]n describing country music as theology, [he] mean[s] simply that country music embodies certain basic beliefs about reality” where “a text counts as theological discourse to the extent that it interprets raw experience “ (6). Like Ackley-Bean, Fillingim connects specific themes in country music with spaces of theodicy. For instance, Fillingim explores how country’s cheating songs and certain feminist narratives “raise questions regarding the structures of moral meaning”, given that such structures “are supposed to give meaning, order, and fulfillment” yet, in reality, “become a source of frustration, repression, confusion, and anxiety” (25). Fillingim’s study supports the theodicy aspects I explore in chapter two that describe how Appalachian women used music to vent about their harsh realities. His work also gives credence to the use of theodicy songs by Appalachian women to resist the dominant male culture through music.

Karen Saucier researched images of men and women in country music in “Healers and Heartbreakers: Images of Women and Men in Country Music”. Through lyrical analysis, Saucier determines that “women presented in country music have little prestige”, as a woman’s status is defined solely by her relationship to a man (156). Saucier’s methodology reveals the value in lyrical analysis: through evaluating the top

40 country songs of 1981 (according to Billboard), Saucier argues that conservative, traditional ideology reflected in female song lyrics places parameters on women in which their acceptable role is that of “housewife, mother, and lover” (157). However, Saucier’s conclusions are limited to songs from 1981; thus, she ignores the contributions made by the multitude of female artists and their resistance songs at other points in country music’s history. Saucier concludes that women figure only as “lovers, best friends, wives, and mothers”, or, as mere “emotional fixers” in service to others (157). However, Saucier’s findings are restricted solely to her sample; thus, any correlation of her findings to the broader context of female artists in country music is dubious at best.

## 1.2 Research Question

This thesis reflects my interest in the purported “rebel” female country singers of the last 20 years and the resistance themes found in the domestic critique, response, and revenge songs that typify these artists and remain largely unexplored in scholarship. In this project, I will explore and answer the following question: how and why does female resistance function in country music? This will require consideration of the following: the influence of Appalachian folk songs and the role women played in writing, maintaining, and disseminating these songs, as well as various theories as to why songs took on an overtly assertive and violent form; an examination of complex forms of female resistance songs at other points in country music’s history; how and why female resistance songs appeal to a female audience; and the social climate and context that is resisted in the songs of these female artists.

### 1.3 Research Methodology & Frameworks

In this project, the term ‘country music’ will refer to the “stream of commercial music that began to develop rapidly in the 1920s and is now widely recognized around the world as ‘country’” and will also consider the “antecedent streams of music out of which commercial country music was formed” (Peterson 7-8). This allows consideration of both contemporary country music, and the Appalachian folk music that preceded and fed the entire commercial genre. This thesis will focus largely on female artists from 1995 to the present, locating each female artist in their modern context as well as connecting their resistance songs to the broader tradition of female resistance in country music. Through textual analysis (including lyrics and music videos, when applicable), this thesis will explore how female country artists’ resistance songs create dissonance with the genre’s conservative and male-privileging ideologies. As such, I use the term ‘resistance’ to describe the ideological stance in certain songs that directly opposes the dominant patriarchal culture – especially as it manifests in domestic configurations and relationships.

For methodology, I will borrow from Julie Haynes’ dissertation, *Feminist Cowboys and Other Contradictions: Women’s Rights Rhetoric and Country Music Videos in the 1990s*. Haynes argues that most scholarship on country music tends to either focus on individual female performers or contain assumptions that lyrical themes prescribe or transgress gender norms (Haynes 4). To move beyond this, Haynes offers a framework that places twelve music videos from the early 1990s within their immediate context (social and cultural climates into which videos were broadcast), as well as their position in the broader context of country music history (Haynes 3, 6-7). This framework enables Haynes to reveal how certain themes espoused by female country



singers recur throughout the genre's history and are therefore not "new to country music culture" (4). As such, these songs actively convey meaning and invite "specific understandings of women's issues" (7).

Likewise, I am extending Haynes' framework to female country artists and selected songs throughout the country's past with a focus on songs from 1995 to the present. This involves acknowledging the contemporary social and cultural climate that acted as the background to the domestic critique, response, and revenge songs. As well, I will locate these songs within the broader context of women's resistance repertoires in country music history. In establishing the historical precedent for female resistance songs, and by identifying its position in country music tradition, it becomes evident that female resistance is an enduring component within a variegated country music tradition, and is not at all new to the genre. It should be noted that the nature of this resistance has changed during the last century. While Appalachian women used a body of music to articulate their suffering, there has been a shift towards an indirect resistance in which female country singers adopt resistance by performing songs that speak to a female audience's lived experiences. With this shift from a folk tradition to a performance-based song transmission, resistance songs find a market in a female audience who identify with the issues articulated in the lyrics, and adopt it as resistance.

In this thesis, I argue that the historical context that informed country music shaped a particular expression of resistance in the musical texts of early female country singers. As the genre evolved, female resistance themes became decidedly more complex, with articulations taking on multiple forms, including answer songs that specifically respond to male country songs and trends (including male artists and male

industry executives); revenge songs in which women take drastic (violent, and often murderous) action against a male oppressor; domestic critique songs, including lamentation songs that women used to complain about the strict confinement of their domestic roles and appropriation songs that project a strong female sexuality but through a male cultural role. All these expressions of resistance are rooted in an opposition to the pre-constituted social context in which these songs are situated; that is, the patriarchal structure of social roles and gender relations that privileges male interests (with a concentration on how this manifests in domestic relations).

## 1.4 Chapter Organization

This project will consist of five chapters. The first chapter is introductory, in which I have provided a critical orientation of the subject to be studied. In the second chapter, I will trace the history of the country music genre, including the influence of Appalachian folk traditions in country music, with a particular emphasis on the stream of Appalachian women's folk music that influenced the repertoires of early country music's female performers. Artists and songs examined include "Barbara Allen"; The Carter Family, "Single Girl, Married Girl"; Roba Stanley, "Single Life"; Kitty Wells, "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels"; Wanda Jackson "My Big Iron Skillet"; and Loretta Lynn "The Pill". This chapter establishes that there are historical and generic genre precedents to the female resistance themes found in the domestic critique, response, and revenge songs, and that one of the main contributing forces to this resistance theme originated in the musical practices of Appalachian women, whose music entered the commercial stream through the repertoires of early country performers.

The third chapter explores various songs that provide a female critique of domesticity from the late 1980s until the present, with a specific concentration on music

from 1995 to the present. Artists and songs examined include Shania Twain, “Honey I’m Home” and “Any Man of Mine”; Deana Carter, “Did I Shave My Legs For This”; and Kacey Musgraves, “Merry Go Round” and “Stupid”. Specifically, this chapter analyzes the extent that these domestic critique songs continue to reject traditional or old-fashioned ideas of domesticity through new and familiar expressions. I explore how these songs differ from Appalachian women’s domestic critique songs yet still maintain a strong resistance theme that continues to elucidate women’s issues concerning domestic roles and relationships.

Chapter four examines response and revenge songs by recent and current female artists, and how these songs extend the discourse of prior female response songs. I will analyze what specific issue each song is responding to, including the Bro-Country trend that currently dominates the charts, and the gendered, sexist backlash that marginalized the Dixie Chicks in 2003. I then examine how this fits into the broader theme of resistance found in female response songs throughout country’s history. As well, I explore revenge songs as the ultimate form of response to male aggression in which females enact violent (and often murderous) revenge on a male aggressor. Artists and lyrics include the Dixie Chicks, “Goodbye Earl” and “Not Ready to Make Nice”; Miranda Lambert “Gunpowder and Lead” and “Mama’s Broken Heart”; and Maddie and Tae, “Girl in a Country Song”. Lastly, the fifth chapter includes a summary of my findings and offer avenues for further research.

## 1.5 Conclusion

By employing this methodology and structure, I am agreeing with Barbara Ching, who insists that scholarship and other discourse on country music must move beyond

“the bland insistence that the music represents us all” (Ching 4). Ching argues that country music lyrics “convey complex meanings”, and therefore requires listening “for complexity wherever we think we hear simplicity” (4-5). Therefore, there is value in exploring country music’s female resistance songs as a meaning-making system in country music culture, as an examination of the lyrics and images will, as Ching asserts, enable listeners to “learn more, hear more, and enjoy more” (Ching 4).

## Chapter 2

### 2 Appalachian Roots and Early Country Music

#### 2.1 Introduction

The music video for Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert's 2014 duet, "Somethin' Bad", portrays the duo as jewel thieves Priscilla Parker and Belle Boyd. As part of their jewel heist, the women defeat their male counterparts in a game of poker, promptly blow up a bank, and then flee in a helicopter ("Bad"). Given some of Underwood's previous musical offerings, including "Before He Cheats" in which she smashes a cheating boyfriend's vehicle with a baseball bat, and Lambert's torching of an ex-lover's houses in "Kerosene" and "Mama's Broken Heart", the duo is, by all appearances, "no strangers to a little danger" (Johnson).

"Somethin' Bad" immediately received attention in the popular press upon its release. *Rolling Stone* refers to the duo as "bad girls" who use the song to convey their "dangerous sides" (Hudak), and *MTV* describes them as "motorcycle-riding rebels" starring in their own "bad-ass buddy comedy" (White). This rhetoric is taken to an extreme in *Cosmopolitan* magazine's summary of the video: the article hails the "11 Most Badass Moments" in the song, including Underwood's "IDGAF face" in her prison mug shot, and her slow wink that is supposedly evidence that she could "win [against anyone] in a knife fight" (Thompson). Lambert receives similar attention: mere moments before she and Underwood scam their male opponents in a poker game, Lambert slowly sips a glass of whiskey. *Cosmopolitan* ascribes considerable significance to this, suggesting that this more masculine behavior is a 'badass moment' because "[y]ou don't swindle ponytailed men at cards while [merely] drinking a [more feminine]

vodka-cranberry [cocktail]" (Thompson). Here, *Cosmopolitan* issues several blatant overstatements, pronouncing the duo's video as "one of the most incredible things ever created" before launching into their list of "the most insanely badass things that happen in 'Somethin' Bad'" (Thompson).

The popular press is rather quick to give exaggerated interpretations of Lambert and Underwood's music as it proclaims that, because of their aggressive songs, they (and many of their contemporary female colleagues) are part of a "new breed" that represents a new direction for female artists, and is therefore "the future of [female singers] in the [country music] genre" (Dicaire 231). While terms like 'badass' and 'rebel' suggests that these artists are opposing some normative social structure, the assertion that Lambert and Underwood (and their contemporary female colleagues) are spearheading a 'new breed' of female country singer is short-sighted. Rather, both singers are merely the latest in a long line of female country artists who, throughout country's past, have consistently used themes of female resistance to disrupt the genre's dominant tendency to portray women as the "conservator of domestic values" (Malone "Above" 55).

Lambert and Underwood are not doing anything new: in the broader history of country music, there is a thread of resistance songs performed by female singers that identifies issues of women's marginalization, inequality, and double standards in patriarchal structures. These expressions take the form of harsh domestic critiques, and also include response songs that address sexist trends in men's country music, as well as violent revenge fantasies that confront issues of domestic violence. This stream of music is rooted in the specific musical practices of Appalachian women, who used folk ballads to privately process and vent in a forthright manner about their low status in their own

communities. This narrative context entered the commercial stream in the 1920s through the repertoires of various female performers, allowing other female performers and songwriters to draw on Appalachian traditions.

I begin this chapter by exploring the origins of commercial country music, when Ralph Peer and Polk Brockman sought to inaugurate a genre of old-time music (later to become ‘country music’) in the 1920s. Next, I examine the musical repertoires of Roba Stanley and the female members of the Carter Family, in which performances of female resistance first emerged in country music. I then discuss the harsh realities of Appalachian women’s domestic lives, and how these women used music as an emotional outlet to cope with their low status and confinement in the domestic realm. Within the patriarchal structure of the domestic realm (hearth and home), men are privileged to pursue activities in the public sphere, but women are saddled with hard-labor responsibilities of housework and child-rearing that severely restricts their personal and social mobility. I therefore argue that the domestic sphere is the site of women’s struggles, and is therefore the root of their discontent and provokes the themes of female resistance in country music. I conclude with a discussion of the repertoires of Kitty Wells, Wanda Jackson, and Loretta Lynn to demonstrate how female artists at various points in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s articulate resistance in their domestic critique, response, and revenge songs.

## 2.2 Genre Origins: Ralph Peer, Roots Music, and Female Country Repertoires

In *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*, Barry Mazor outlines how, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Tin Pan Alley’s sheet music industry was the primary medium for selling popular music on a large scale (2). Given its form, sheet

music appealed solely to a “musically literate audience”, and thereby excluded those with little to no formal musical training (2). By catering primarily to the musically literate, the popular music industry marginalized artists and music styles that existed outside of Broadway, concert halls, and the sheet-music mainstream, including most music made by African Americans, as well as the music of white people from the rural Southern states, Latino music, and Latin American songs (2-3). However, Mazor credits A&R (artist and repertoire) executive Ralph Peer for seeing the commercial potential in these “professionally neglected” styles. Peer therefore intentionally sought out numerous pockets of “untapped roots music – music that evidences rich history, that moved a specific people of some distinctive place and culture”, focusing on regional “roots” music because its containment in a particular locale meant that it would be an appealing novelty for other audiences elsewhere (3).

In the early 1920s, Okeh Records producer Polk Brockman sent Peer to numerous locations in the United States with a mobile recording studio to record popular regional performers (Peterson 18). In June 1923, Peer went to Atlanta to record Fiddlin’ John Carson, an immensely popular fiddler in the region who gained notoriety through his success at annual fiddle competitions in Atlanta, each of which drew excited audiences numbering in the thousands (Bufwack and Oermann 54). Carson’s notoriety also came from his many appearances (since 1900) playing for political rallies and other social gatherings. Carson’s pool of songs extended beyond the old-time fiddle music he was best known for and included classic minstrel songs, rural nostalgia tunes, sentimental ballads, coon songs, new pop recordings, and Tin Pan Alley tunes – which Carson loved (Hagstrom Miller 228-9). As the first recorded country music performer, Carson’s



repertoire is evidence of the diverse musical influences outside the South that would be used to furnish the early commercial country music catalogue, and how country music does not derive solely from folk traditions, but from an array of sources. Carson recorded “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane”, a minstrel song long performed by African Americans and white string bands yet was familiar to white rural southerners, and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Crow” in which Carson showcased his talents by mimicking barnyard animal sounds on his fiddle (Mazor 53).

Brockman and Peer both balked at the sound quality of Carson’s recordings, and Carson personally had little taste for the style, yet the first five hundred copies quickly sold out in Atlanta. Distributors immediately ordered more to meet the unexpected demand (Mazor 54). The success of Carson’s recordings helped Peer identify a niche market of old-time music that offered a “rustic alternative to urban modernity” (Peterson 55), and therefore caused early promoters of the music to “fashion a distinctive [old-time] image for the country performer in order to attract the committed allegiance of the people who did not like the more urbane popular music of the time” (14). The style was referred to originally as ‘old time’ music, and also contemptuously as ‘hillbilly’ music by industry pundits who scoffed at its supposed unschooled simpleton performers and audience (it was not until the 1940s that the style became generally known and accepted as ‘country music’) (Peterson 5, 7). Performers, dressed as ‘old time’ characters (including mountain men, cowboys, and farm hands), would sing songs that “[paid] homage to a more wholesome country past” and would feature stories of “a favorite hunting dog, the joys of the old swimming hole, the warmth of the childhood home, the spiritual solace of the old country church . . . and the tender love of mom and dad” (Malone “Above” 37).

Among the most notable of Peer's discoveries were Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, whom Peer discovered at the same Bristol, Tennessee recording sessions in the summer of 1927. Both Rodgers and the Carter Family brought their own repertoire of songs: Rodgers, the "singing brakeman", sang of life as a rambling man, and the influence of the South's diverse musical culture was evident in his music (Malone "U.S.A." 77-8). The Carter Family, consisting of Alvin Pleasant Carter (A.P.), his wife Sara Dougherty Carter, and his sister-in-law Maybelle Addington Carter, brought a repertoire of more traditional-sounding ballads and love songs that maintained a dominant "aura of wholesomeness and old-fashioned morality" (Malone "Above" 63). However, while Peer and Victor promoted the Carter's programs as "morally good" and thus family friendly, Mazor notes the considerable work done by Peer and Victor to subdue the reality of the Carter Family's domestic discord (108-109). Peer was very much aware of "A.P.'s itch to go where he needed to" (108) in that he had a tendency to wander to various locales in search of new musical material, leaving Sara alone with the children for extended periods of time. Peer would then observe Sara's "irritation and sense of entrapment in a marriage in which she and the children were regularly being abandoned without warning" (108). In response to this, Peer would over-accentuate the Carter's essence of home, family, and faith, essentially fixing the trio as "icons of country domesticity" (108) while ignoring the real-life dysfunction completely.

Aside from the Carters, numerous solo female artists were recorded during the formative years of country music, including Carson's daughter Rosa Lee Carson Johnson (also known as Moonshine Kate) and Roba Stanley. Stanley, dubbed "America's first country sweetheart", was a mere fourteen years old when she made country music's first

solo female record (Bufwack and Oermann “Voice” 56). Stanley’s songs are where evidence of female resistance in country music is first discernable. In 1925, she recorded “I Wish I Were a Single Girl Again” and “Single Life”, in which she rather joyously celebrates not being married: “Single life is a happy life/Single life is lovely/I am single and no man’s wife/And no man shall control me” (Stanley, “Single”). Stanley’s recorded songs also include “Devilish Mary” and the murder ballad “Frankie and Johnny” – older Appalachian folk songs that are notable departures from the nostalgic, rural-centric songs of hearth and home that fueled the commercial push in early country music. For instance, Stanley’s cover of “Devilish Mary” is sung from the male perspective, and tells the story of a young man and woman who marry after only a few weeks of courtship. The wife refuses to perform her domestic chores, as her husband recalls: “she wouldn’t do no dishes/She let me know right from the start/That she’s gonna wear the britches” (“Devilish”). Here, Mary rejects her husband’s request to perform a minor domestic chore, promptly leaves the house, and resolutely declares that, in wearing the britches, she is in charge and will not be ordered around by her husband.

Mazor notes Peer’s preference for “feisty, self-defin[ed] women” (60), and states that Stanley was in Peer’s mind when, in 1927, Sara and Maybelle Carter returned for a second day of recording (without A.P.) and recorded “Single Girl, Married Girl” (also quite commonly known as “The Single Girl” in Appalachian folk traditions). “Single Girl, Married Girl” bears remarkable similarities to Stanley’s “Single Life”, as both songs, rooted in Appalachian folk culture, harshly indict marriage and motherhood for its suppression of women’s personal and social mobility. As Sara’s alto voice draws out certain lines in “Single Girl, Married Girl”, (“oh, she rocks the cradle and cries”; “oh

she's going where she please"), there is a somber quality to her vocal delivery that connects to the song's message. Further, the song's repetitive melody conveys a sense of monotony that connotes a married woman's disillusionment with her lot in life. Peer noted that Sara "really had a handle" (109) on "Single Girl, Married Girl", as the song was familiar to her because, as a child, she commonly swapped folk songs with her female relatives in Appalachia (Bufwack and Oermann 11) – a practice that is especially important in understanding how a particular expression of female resistance entered country music.

### 2.3 Appalachian Women: Their Lives in the Private Sphere

Country music's "heterogeneous" roots are well documented and borrow from a range of styles and influences including "traditional Appalachian folk ballads, popular parlor songs, the blues, sacred musical traditions, minstrelsy, and other sources" (Fillingim 10) that circulated amongst Southern musicians and audiences and was then integrated into the early country commercial catalogue (Hagstrom Miller 280). Despite the wide range of sources that fed early country music, it is the specific practices of women within the Appalachian tradition that is of primary importance for understanding the particular expression of female resistance that entered country music. Throughout this project, the term "Appalachia" denotes a particular folk culture that emerged from the rural southern states in America from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (including Virginia, Alabama, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia). Thus, the precise geographical co-ordinates of the Appalachian region will not be used here to determine what is or is not Appalachian music. As Rehder suggests,

“the real Appalachia resides in its folk culture” (1) and people’s identification with this, and thus, the geography of Appalachia is a secondary concern. Of particular interest here, then, is the “self-made culture” (17) of women in 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural areas in America’s southern states, and how it shaped and influenced expressions of female resistance in country music.

The writings of Emma Bell Miles, an Appalachian poet, writer, and artist who lived from 1879-1919, provide useful insight into the realities of Appalachian women’s domestic relationships. In her *Spirit of the Mountains*, Bell Miles observes how “a rift is set between the sexes at babyhood that widens with the passing of the years” (Bell Miles 69). When it comes time to marry, both men and women enter the union “know[ing] so pathetically little of each other’s lives” (70). This schism creates separate spheres in which men and women’s lives unfold. An Appalachian woman would typically be married quite young, at which point she would be confined to the domestic sphere with a rigorous daily routine of hard household labor and would also face “relentless, life-threatening childbearing” (Fillingim103). Bell Miles elaborates: “[a]t [age] twenty the mountain woman is old in all that makes a woman old – toil, sorrow, childbearing, loneliness and pitiful want” (Bell Miles 64). Bell Miles would frequently beg her husband, Frank, to not make sexual demands as she feared that, should she be impregnated again, her repeated pregnancies and multiple miscarriages would eventually kill her (Bufwack and Oermann7). Bell Miles lived in a “crude, unheated log cabin” that, in winter, “aggravated the tuberculosis that became evident when she was thirty-three” years old (7). Her family’s poverty resulted in the death of a three-year-old son, Mark, as they could not afford any medical care for his scarlet fever (7).

Subject to their husbands' sexual urges, Appalachian women were pregnant on a regular basis; for those who survived childbirth, many women would die of old age in their forties (Fillingim 103). Pregnancies were extremely risky, as there was nothing more than boiling water to aid in sanitation, nor were there any painkillers. Any birthing complications, including torn flesh or a dislocated uterus, could not be treated. Miscarriages had potential to be fatal, as excessive bleeding was impossible to stop. Once a woman gave birth (or had complications), her female relatives (if any) would attend to any housework needs for approximately one week only. After this, the woman had to assume her responsibilities again, without being afforded the necessary time to fully heal or recover (Bufwack and Oermann 7-8). Women would often marry between the ages of twelve to fifteen, with her husband being only a few years older, and offspring of ten to fifteen were "no rarity" for Appalachian women (Semple in Rehder 38). A life of childbearing and child raising, combined with "all the work of the pioneer home, the spinning and weaving, knitting of stocking . . . the making of shoes and moccasins" meant that "mountain women . . . at [age] twenty-five look[ed] forty, and at forty look[ed] twenty years older than her husband" (Rehder 28).

While Appalachian men's lives were certainly difficult, men were at least afforded space outside of the home. As a result, their lives were more public, as they spent their days outdoors working in a forest or farming their land, and were granted social liberties outside the home, including fighting, journeying, trading, drinking, and hunting (Bell Miles 68). Music was a vital component of a man's social life: men's music was public, performed mostly for entertainment while drinking and dancing in a social environment (Fillingim 102). In contrast, women's responsibilities, and their

physical limitations, confined them to the domestic realm. Bell Miles stated that music played a significant role for Appalachian women, and also became her “one emotional outlet” because, unlike men, women had no outlet outside the home: she had “no theatre, no bull-fight, no arena, no sensational feature of any kind in their lives, [and therefore, women] must . . . find vent some other way” (Bell Miles 153-4). Women’s music was contained primarily in domestic spheres or performed for the church and was used to communicate wisdom or to share experiences (Fillingim 102). With men spending most of their time outside the home, women formed their own private social circles that involved collecting and sharing musical experiences and songs with each other.

Subject to the rule of men in their home and community, women were marginalized. As a result, when women performed music together, they often included hymns, but also many old folk ballads and songs that “lamented [their] double marginalization” in society (Fillingim 102-3). Women would preserve ancient folk songs, some dating back to 17<sup>th</sup> century England, which then came to the Appalachian region in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as the area opened to settlers (Bufwack and Oermann 4-5). Bell Miles recalls how an Appalachian mother, “crooning over her work”, would sing an “old ballad of an eerie sadness . . . something she learned as a child from a grandmother whose grandmother again brought it from Ireland or Scotland” (Bell Miles 30). With many of these songs originating in the 1600s, direct authorship is difficult (if not impossible) to identify; however, folklorists credit the survival of these ballads to Appalachian women’s rigorous collecting habits, noting that, without their private musical tradition, “many of the old mountain songs would have died out when the ways of the world came in on us” (Bufwack and Oermann 5). Such ballads were not preserved

because of any meaningful connection to English, Scottish, or Irish ancestry, but simply because Appalachian women “believed in [the songs’] messages” (6). The extent to which these songs had value to Appalachian women is evident in their responses to the lyrics, as some women were able to tolerate particularly violent songs because, at the very least, the songs “spoke the truth”, and for the “uncanny way the old, old situations still fit to the present” (6).

## 2.4 Appalachian Women: Their Specific Musical Practices in the Private Sphere

Religious belief in the form of Christian fundamentalism had considerable influence in Appalachian culture (Rehder 30), and, as a result, an Appalachian woman would often lament and vent through a theological lens. The extent of this is demonstrated in Heather Ann Ackley Bean’s *Women, Music, and Faith in Central Appalachia*. Ackley Bean contends that Appalachian women used songs as a space for theodicy, that is, a context that allowed them to process or attempt to process why God would permit evil and suffering. Ackley Bean asserts that, on its own, theodicy tends to lack a “rich aesthetic, symbolic, or ritual tradition through which to express . . . beliefs”, but asserts that Appalachian women’s folk music can be interpreted as a vehicle for theodicy, given its vivid symbolism (Ackley Bean x).

In his introduction to Ackley Bean’s work, David Ausburger outlines how people respond differently to life’s problems, and notes the differences in response to hardship, in which

[s]ome build systems from these puzzles that fill tomes of reasoned argumentation. Others struggle with them in rich conversations within human



community. Still others dismiss them and live by familiar truisms and clichés.

But there are those who turn them into poetry – poetry that sings with lyricism of outrage and pain interlaced with healing and discovery (Ackley Bean *xi*).

When using songs as theodicy, Appalachian women would sing “with the authority of the sufferer”, especially compared to male counterparts whose music derived from the “authority of position” (*xii-xiii*). Appalachian women’s musical theodicy thereby function “as the authentic cries of persons betrayed, oppressed, [and] injured” (*xiii*). Here, Ausburger highlights the importance of the particular form of expression that theodicy takes: while some sift their hardships through filters of logic and sense, others respond through art. Appalachian women, then, in their private sphere with experiences shared only with other women, used poetry (and song) as their preferred vehicle of expression.

Such ballads thereby function as a “natural resource for empirical theodicy” (Ackley Bean 5) in that they provide a window into how Appalachian women would understand and articulate their personal suffering. For example, Ackley Bean contends that Appalachian women would identify with the image of a married woman who was “driven to devilishness, a troublesome shrew who is so mean, ornery, stubborn and assertive that she outwits men and even the devil will not have her” (100). Such songs would include “Devilish Mary” (later recorded by Roba Stanley), “The Scolding Wife”, and “The Farmer’s Curst Wife” (also known as “The Old Lady and the Devil”).

In “The Farmer’s Curst Wife”, the devil informs a farmer that he has come to take away his nagging wife. The farmer responds eagerly: “O welcome, good Satan/with all of my heart/And I hope you and she will never more part” (“Curst”). The devil takes the woman to hell, whereupon several demons approach her in order to chain her up: the

woman resists this, “kick[s] the young imps about”, and then “patten[s] and beat[s] out their brains” (“Curst”). The woman turns to attack the devil and “knock[s] the old Satan against the wall”. The devil, shocked by her aggression, admits defeat, and returns the woman to her husband, claiming “I have been a tormentor the whole of my life/but I ne’er was tormented so as with your wife” (“Curst”). While “The Farmer’s Curst Wife” may be read as a man’s complaint about a nagging wife (especially when sung by a male singer), Bufwack and Oermann contend that, for Appalachian women, this song had particular appeal and was sung as an accompaniment to housework (11). Contrasting the female character in “The Farmer’s Curst Wife” with the difficult wife in “The Wife Wrapt in Wether’s Skin”, who ended up physically beaten into submission by her husband, Bufwack and Oermann argue that, in “The Farmer’s Curst Wife”, the woman “gets the upper hand” through her “shrewdish” treatment of the devil (11). As a result, the devil returns the woman to her husband, who then bemoans that he has to deal with a wife who is now “more quarrelsome than ever” (11).

Theodicy was only one function of these ballads for Appalachian women: other songs functioned as explicit warnings to women about the realities of married life. Such songs include “The Housewife’s Lament”, “Father Grumble”, and “Wagoner’s Lad”, which reiterate: “Hard is the fortune of all womankind/They’re always controlled, they’re always confined/Controlled by their parents until they are wives/Then slaves to their husbands the rest of their lives” (qtd. In Bufwack and Oermann 9). There was a proliferation of songs about single women (often characterized as an ‘old maid’) that celebrated the fact that, through singleness, a woman managed to avoid “married drudgery” (Ackley Bean 100). The single woman thus became a common figure in songs

collected and performed by Appalachian women in which the “preoccupation with marital status [that] far outweighs all other concerns in women’s folksongs” is no doubt indicative of women’s discontent in the domestic realm (Bufwack and Oermann 8-9), and their limited options under patriarchy.

One of the more widespread folksongs of this flavor was “Single Girl, Married Girl” (recorded by the Carter Family in the 1920s). This song was a “startling rural complaint” (Mazor 109) about the domestic sphere, sharply contrasting the “careworn” married woman with the “carefree” single woman (Bufwack and Oermann 9), and effectively foregrounding the extent to which marriage and motherhood strip women of individual freedoms. For instance, the song compares the attire worn by both single and married women: the married woman “wears just any kind” of dress, as the requirements of domestic work eliminate the donning of fine apparel in favor of more functional clothing (The Carter Family, “Single”). This ‘any kind’ of dress is likely alluding to an Appalachian woman’s “rag bag” collections, in which women kept scrap cloth, string, and buttons for clothing, as, often, a woman’s clothing was made from scrap cloth saved from her husband and children’s clothing and then put together to make her own attire (Bufwack and Oermann 6). In contrast to this is the single girl, whose social mobility and financial resources are signified by her ability to be “going dressed fine” (“Single”).

“The Single Girl” also illustrates the inability of a married woman to have a social life. While an unfettered single woman is able to traverse about, “going where she please” (“Single”), by stark contrast, a married woman has no such option. Because of motherhood, the married woman is bound by her responsibility to her children, and must stay home to provide care for the “baby on her knees” (“Single”). Here, the baby

represents confinement, and the repeated pregnancies a woman endured because of submitting to her husband's sexual impulses. As well, the single woman "goes to the store and buys" whatever she may please, but the married woman is bound to her domestic space, where "she rocks the cradle and cries" ("Single") in misery, again alluding to the consequences in her own life of her husband's sex drive. This song, then, warns single women that marriage and motherhood essentially strips them of agency, leaving music as their sole vehicle of expression.

Warning songs were quite common amongst Appalachian women, as folklorists have grouped together a large body of older Appalachian "come-all-ye" songs that strongly cautioned women about men and marriage (Bufwack and Oermann 8). This thread of songs is named after "Come all You Fair and Tender Maidens", a song tinged with a woman's regret over falling in love. After her lover leaves her, she laments:

I wish I was a little sparrow  
 And I had wings with which to fly  
 Right over to see my false true-lover  
 And when he's talking I'd be nigh  
 But I'm not a little sparrow  
 I have no wings with which to fly  
 So I sit here in grief and sorrow  
 To weep and pass my troubles by ("Maidens")

Ackley Bean notes that many Appalachian songs about marriage portray the domestic life as a cage or prison that the woman cannot escape. Women may then characterize themselves in song as a bird or a prisoner, using the symbol of a flying bird to express

their desire to break free from confinement, and communicating their inability to do so with images of a bird with clipped wings (105-6).

Folklorists discovered that a common (and familiar) song to Appalachian women was “Barbara Allen”, which dates back to Scotland in the early 1600s, and became part of Appalachian folklore (Bufwack and Oermann 5). In the song, Barbara Allen is summoned to the bedside of her dying admirer, Jemmy Grove. The young man begs her: “Oh lovely maid come pity me/I’m on my deathbed dying” (“Barbara”). Barbara Allen responds with indifference, and questions his motives: “If on your deathbed you do lie/What needs the tale you are telling?/I can not keep you from your death/Farewell, said Barbara Allen” (“Barbara”). Later, Barbara Allen is consumed by regret, and after she “repented of the day/That e’er she did deny him”, she dies and is buried beside him. Folklorist Alan Lomax supports the idea of this song as a space for women to emotionally vent, and he holds that the ballad’s longevity is because “the song is [a] vehicle for the aggressive fantasies of women” (Bufwack and Oermann 5). The song does not appear to be overtly aggressive as Barbara Allen is seemingly haunted by her dismissal of Jemmy Grove; however, Barbara Allen did possess a notable degree of agency, as she denied Jemmy Grove his request and thus refused to be subservient to a man. Barbara Allen’s narrative unfolds within a patriarchal arc in which her agency is still limited in that it requires her to repent. However, her subtle aggression still disrupts a typical – and expected – narrative of a woman’s unquestioning deference to a man.

These songs featuring a strong female character survived because the singers believed in the message of the song, and were then shared by women around the fireplace, or as an accompaniment to domestic work (Bufwack and Oermann 6, 11). Folk

ballads like “The Farmer’s Curst Wife,” “The Single Girl,” and “Barbara Allen” were preserved by women in order to provide a space to process their own suffering, and to warn other women about the hardships of domestic life. As well, these songs generated specific images of Appalachian womanhood, including the persona of a saucy, independent single girl, a married woman worn down by domestic drudgery, and a fiery, assertive wife who stirs up trouble. Thus, when Roba Stanley sang about “The Single Life,” and when the Carter’s introduced “Single Girl, Married Girl” into the popular music stream, they invoked familiar songs with recognizable lyrics and images of womanhood that originated in the “homemade, private, living-room music that had long been the province of mountain women” (Bufwack and Oermann 49).

While rural (or formerly rural) audiences were familiar with “Single Girl, Married Girl,” its appeal to a wider audience beyond those with immediate Appalachian connections is evident in the song’s immediate commercial success. After their initial Carter Family recordings were released, Sara was surprised to see that “Single Girl, Married Girl” was the best-selling song when her first royalty payment arrived (Mazor 110). While Peer originally sought to establish ‘old time’ music as a style steeped mainly in rural sentimentality, the commercial success of “Single Girl, Married Girl” indicates how the resistance sensibility – that is, the expression of a particularly antagonistic mood in response to oppression under patriarchal domesticity – of Appalachian women’s folk ballads appeals to a broader audience. Industry executives could then capitalize on these familiar lyrics and tropes and cater to a female audience accordingly. By integrating these elements into the repertoires of female country singers, the resistance sensibility

(with its specific lyrics and figures) extends to women outside Appalachian traditions, inviting them to identify with and share similar experiences.

## 2.5 From Private to Public: Women's Musical Repertoires at Various Points in Country Music History

In country music history, female singer Kitty Wells is located at the crux when old-time country culture faded out and a new, post-war style emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In the post-war era, the 'Nashville Sound', a more sophisticated guitar-driven sound with refined arrangements and new studio technology, became the prominent style of country music over the more traditional fiddles and whining steel guitars (Malone "U.S.A." 256-7). This coincided with an emerging, highly profitable "golden age" of country music during which Nashville, Tennessee became the commercial hub for country music (199, 209). Bill Malone credits Wells, along with other Decca recording artists Red Foley and Ernest Tubb, as marking "important milestones" in establishing Nashville as a musical center in America (210). With this shift to Nashville, the genre was poised for an economic and industrial boom.

In an era of big business (and post-war prosperity), the direct connection of female country singers to Appalachian balladry was lost. Female resistance songs no longer reflected a female performer's personal experience of oppression or her genuine need to use music to vent; rather, there was shift to professional singers who performed songs that spoke to a female audiences' experiences. As country music shifted away from folk orientations to become a profit-driven industry, Kitty Wells is a crucial figure in sustaining country music's connection to the resistance sensibility that originated in Appalachian women's folk ballads as many of her songs overtly complain about domestic

issues. Wells was consistently painted in song as the ever-familiar “mistreated housewife” (Bufwack and Oermann 151), and her repertoire included the songs “I Heard the Jukebox Playing” and “Cheating’s a Sin”, in which she laments: “I might as well face it, I’m just a has-been/You’re cheating, I’m losing, but cheating’s a sin” (Wells, “Cheating”).

Kitty Wells is best known for her 1952 complaint, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” – a direct response to male country artist Hank Thompson’s “The Wild Side of Life” (written by Arlie Carter and William Warren). The song comes from the honky-tonk culture in which men would carouse in urban nightclubs that became known as “honky-tonks” (Malone 153), a social space for casual and regular drinkers, with dancing and music at the forefront. Moreover, the honky-tonk was a “degraded place” where “conduct . . . is lewd, immoral or offensive to public decency . . . the place where men break their homes (with help from honky tonk angels), waste their paychecks, [and] fall off barstools” (Ching 35). Carter and Williams’ “Wild Side” is an example of what Ching refers to as “hard country”, a style in which male country artists (lead by Hank Williams) “unabashedly portray themselves . . . as the ‘low other’ of American culture” in a “deliberate display of burlesque abjection” (Ching 4). Here, hard country singers (white men) “strike a lowly pose . . . [with] sad songs, whining steel guitars, and wailing fiddles” (26, 33).

The “Wild Side of Life” reflects the attitudes of the men who frequented such locations, and places the blame for men’s feelings of “loneliness, alienation, and loss of community” (Bufwack and Oermann *xiv*) directly on women, specifically the “honky-



tonk angels” who came to seduce men. As Thompson performs the song, he thus complains about these wayward women who have left their husbands and homes:

The glamor of the gay night life has lured you  
 To the places where the wine and liquor flows  
 There you wait to be anybody’s baby  
 And forget the only love you’ll ever know  
 I didn’t know God made honky tonk angels  
 I should have known you’d never make a wife  
 You gave up the only one that ever loved you  
 And went back to the wild side of life (Thompson, “Wild”)

“The Wild Side of Life” condemns a wayward woman for wandering outside of the home which, according to traditional gender roles prescribed in country music, is where she ought to be “confined . . . [as she] acted as the conservator of domestic values”. (Malone “Above” 55).

“The Wild Side of Life” was a massive commercial success, spending fifteen weeks at the top of the charts in 1952 (Peterson 170). Male songwriter J.D. “Jay” Miller hoped to capitalize on the success of Carter and Williams’ “Wild Side” by writing a sequel, and came up with “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” (170-1). While “It Wasn’t God” is not a direct connection to Appalachian traditions, his song “mine[s] the same veins” of earlier country songs, as was typical of late 1940s and early 1950s country music in the war and post-war era (Malone “U.S.A.” 195). This is evident in how, musically, Miller borrows the melody for “It Wasn’t God” from “Wild Side”; in turn, the “Wild Side” melody borrows from Roy Acuff’s gospel song “The Great

Speckled Bird”, which copied the melody from the Carter Family’s late 1920s song “I’m Thinking Tonight of my Blue Eyes” (Ching 25). By appropriating the melody from “Wild Side of Life”, Miller’s created an instant dialogue between Wells and Thompson, and also situates the dialogue in a musical context with two well-known early country acts (Acuff and the Carter Family). The affiliation with Acuff and the Carter Family bolsters the appeal of Thompson and Wells’ dialogue by drawing on its association with popular acts and familiar melody to extend the song’s potential to reach to a broader audience.

More importantly, though, Miller borrows from Appalachian women’s folk ballads by exploiting the sensibility of this music that focuses on men as the source of women’s suffering. Specifically, Miller’s response to “The Wild Side of Life” indicts the patriarchal ideology that seduces women into bad places with false promises of love and marriage, and directs the blame for this back to men. Wells therefore sings:

It wasn’t God who made honky tonk angels  
 As you said in the words of your song  
 Too many times married men think they’re still single  
 That has caused many a good girl to go wrong  
 . . . From the start most every heart that’s ever broken  
 Was because there was a man to blame  
 (Wells, “God”).

Wells’ response to Thompson was well received. It spent six weeks at the top of the country charts, despite radio and the Opry balking at it by calling it too “suggestive” (Bufwack and Oermann 152).

“It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” solidified Wells as the “Queen of Country Music”, and was the first country song by a woman to reach the top of the country charts since Billboard began compiling it in 1948 (Malone “U.S.A.” 223-4). Ching contends that “Wells’ famous lament about women as scapegoats for masculine misdeeds could serve as women country singers’ commentary on many hard country songs. Even when they aren’t directly responding to masculine whining and wrongdoing, country women are often angry about such antics” (32). Here, then, Wells’ song retains strong resistance elements in that it is a female complaint that foregrounds men as the source of women’s suffering, and is an example of how the sensibility of Appalachian women’s songs remained commercially viable despite losing a direct connection to these folk traditions – even with a male songwriter.

Coinciding with the ‘Nashville Sound’ and the rock and roll craze in the 1950s and 1960s was rockabilly music, a highly energetic, upbeat blend of country, swing, rhythm and blues, and gospel styles. Many female country artists performed rockabilly music, especially young female singers (Bufwack and Oermann 186). One of the more notable rockabilly performers was Wanda Jackson, who signed a record deal with Capitol Records immediately after graduating from high school in 1955 (201). In the 1950s, Jackson worked with country artists and rock and roll singers including Elvis Presley, with whom she toured and dated for a period of time (201-2). However, in the 1960s, Jackson shifted away from rockabilly and solidified her status as a country singer, recording many country hits, including “My Big Iron Skillet” (written by Bryan and Wilda Creswell). Here, Jackson addresses her cheating lover, who, much like the men in

Wells' song believes that the domestic realm is where she ought to stay. After he returns home, Jackson confronts him:

There's gonna be some changes when you get in tonight  
 Cause I'm gonna teach you wrong from right  
 With my big iron skillet in my hand  
 Gonna show you how a little woman can whip a great big man  
 If you live through the fight we're gonna have when you get home  
 You'll wake up and find yourself alone (Jackson, "Big").

"My Big Iron Skillet" echoes similar sentiments to those expressed in the Carters "Single Girl, Married Girl" in which Jackson's protagonist complains of only having one dress, and thus not being able to dress up to please (and keep) her husband. After her husband complains that he is "sick and tired of [her] and that [she] looks a mess" (*Skillet*), he leaves to have an affair, and returns home to find an angry wife. While Wells' demeanor in "It Wasn't God" is very poised, Jackson is not nearly as composed as she retaliates with a weapon. Jackson's weapon of choice is a skillet, a large, often very heavy cast iron frying pan that, as an instrument from the domestic realm, functions figuratively as a synecdoche, a device that plays a small part in her domestic roles, yet is representative of the entire sphere.

Jackson's violent song again reinforces the sensibility of older violent revenge songs from folk traditions. For instance, the female version of "Greenback Dollar", a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Appalachian folk ballad, features a female protagonist who explicitly informs her male counterpart: "I don't want your greenback dollar/I don't want your diamond ring/All I want is a .38 special/To blow your dirty brains out" (qtd. in Bufwack

and Oermann 17). Malone discusses how murderess ballads (including “Love Henerey” and “The Murder of Jay Legg”) were a common part of an Appalachian woman’s musical repertoire and were often used cathartically to act out fantasies (Malone “U.S.A.” 14). These songs specifically address issues of domestic violence; within the commercial stream, then, these songs enable a female audience to identify with similar experiences in their own lives and with the empowered female protagonist in the song.

As country music progressed in the 1960s and 1970s, many female artists rose to the forefront, including Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn, both of whom had direct familial connections to Appalachia. Parton learned songs from her grandmother, who, in turn, learned songs from her female relatives. Likewise, Loretta Lynn grew up in Kentucky, and her mother, Clara Butcher, learned songs from her older female relatives that she would in turn pass down to Loretta (Bufwack and Oermann 11). In “Coal Miner’s Daughter”, Lynn sings of her Appalachian heritage while fondly recalling memories of her childhood despite her family’s abject poverty. Moreover, though, her repertoire is also filled with songs that strongly criticize domestic relationships, including “Your Squaw is on the Warpath” and “Don’t Come Home a-Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ On Your Mind)”, where she aggressively confronts male philandering.

Lynn’s 1975 “The Pill” hails the newfound license that birth control pills afford women by providing a means by which a woman could regain the freedoms she lost at marriage. Lynn announces that her years of being confined to child bearing and child rearing are over: “this incubator is overused because you’ve kept it filled/The feeling good time’s easy now since I got the pill” (Lynn, “Pill”). Further, Lynn discards the “old maternity dress” and replaces it with new attire that, as she claims, “won’t take up much

yardage/Miniskirts, hot pants, and a few little fancy thrills” (“Pill”). Armed with birth control and sexy attire, Lynn asserts: “I’m making up for all those years since I’ve got the pill” (“Pill”). Given the references to a woman’s maternity attire and the multitude of babies on her lap, “The Pill” may be read as a 1970s sequel to the Carter’s “Single Girl, Married Girl”. Now, with the advent of birth control, a woman is afforded a new freedom that gives her the same social and sexual license afforded to men, and celebrates female sexuality. The housewife is no longer confined to the domestic sphere, restrained by the baby on her knees in a raggedy dress. “The Pill” puts a new twist on a traditional form of music: the song clearly connected to long-standing theme of female resistance in country music, yet it is made to fit the present through its reference to modern birth control technology, allowing the song to remain rooted in history while simultaneously being read against a current social context.

## 2.6 Concluding Thoughts

As country music evolved, the theme of women’s resistance continued to be relevant to the immediate social climate it was read in, yet still remained vitally connected to its past by maintaining a strong presence in the repertoires of female country singers. Thus, while Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood’s “Somethin’ Bad” video certainly casts the duo as “ballsy . . . badass buddies” (White), the song is a continuation of a traditional form of country music in which women resist a dominant male culture. As this chapter demonstrates, this resistance is related to the musical practices of Appalachian women, proving how the music performed by female country singers “has

traveled its own road . . . separate from the music made by men before, during, and after the emergence [in the 1920s] of commercial country music” (Fillingim 102).

In the next chapter, I will explore how female resistance has continued to evolve in the domestic critique songs from the 1980s to present, with a concentration on Shania Twain’s “Any Man of Mine”, “Honey I’m Home”, and “Man! I Feel Like a Woman” in which Twain places considerable emphasis on a women’s prerogative for pleasure. I then discuss Deana Carter’s “Did I Shave My Legs for This?”, a humorous song that criticizes male ineptitude in domestic relationships. I also examine Kacey Musgraves’ “Merry Go-Round” and “Stupid”, in which her cynical tone confronts the overly idealistic portrayals of domesticity and domestic relationships often depicted in fairy tales and nursery rhymes.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Female Critiques of Domesticity: 1980s to Present

#### 3.1 Introduction

Billboard writers once hailed the Carter Family as country music's "First Family", claiming the trio's "greatest contribution to American music" was the way that they "perpetuated the traditional Anglo-Saxon ballad, making it live anew in the hearts of succeeding generations" ("Carter Family"). In considering how country music has evolved since the Carter Family, the sounds and styles of today's country music, including the "rap infused cadences" (Smith) of male artists Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley from Florida Georgia Line, are undeniably much different than the "thumb-brush" (Malone "U.S.A." 66) guitar-picking technique of Maybelle Carter. With this drastic stylistic change, numerous industry pundits and artists have concluded that, because of the absence of the dominant stylistic elements from the genre's past, that country music, in its traditional sense, is "dead" ("Clay Walker Declares").

However, such presumptions are entirely superficial. Despite the sonic changes that occurred as the genre evolved, it remains that, amongst its female singers, country music maintains specific hallmarks of female resistance that have been present since the genre's inception. Specifically, this includes criticism of and resistance to the domestic sphere and the ideologies that make marriage and motherhood compulsory. As the Carter's "Single Girl, Married Girl" offered a biting critique of domesticity, foregrounding the incongruities in the quality of life experienced by married women and single women, this resistance sensibility has been sustained in repertoires of numerous



female country singers throughout the genre's history, including Loretta Lynn, Wanda Jackson, and Kitty Wells.

In this chapter, I explore how female artists from the late 1980s to present continue to critique domestic spheres in their music. I begin this chapter by exploring the music performed by various female country singers from the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which resistance to domestic constraints is evident in a prevailing theme of encouraging women to 'walk away' from their responsibilities in the home to find new opportunities. After this, I explore how Shania Twain provoked a more complex, aggressive form of resistance that preempted women's domestic obligations with a prerogative for pleasure. The enormous response to Twain's music resulted in a slew of female artists who dominated the country music scene in the late 1990s with songs that echoed Twain. I then discuss how Deana Carter's use of humor and Kacey Musgraves' cynicism resist normative domestic roles by emphasizing the futility of traditional conceptions of romance and family. As such, nearly a century since the genre's origination, female country singers continue to incisively interrogate the domestic realm and resist its patriarchal ideologies. Traditional country music, then, is not dead; rather, traditional resistance themes are upheld in the domestic critique songs of recent and current female country singers.

### **3.2 Walking Away: Female Artists in Late 1980s and Early 1990s**

In the 1980s and into the early 1990s, many female country singers continued to articulate resistance in their music. However, there is a shift in which these songs are not merely laments that reiterate the confinements of domestic life; rather, these texts become

more dynamic as women exercise agency by seeking opportunity outside of the domestic sphere. In particular, K.T. Oslin's 1987 single, "80's Ladies", reaffirms the experiences that many women in her generation shared while coming of age. Oslin provides a "brutal look at the lives of women on the forefront of the women's lib movement" (Keel 156):

We've been educated, we got liberated/  
 And had complicating matters with men  
 ... we burned our bras, we burned our dinners/  
 And we burned our candles at both ends/  
 ... We were the girls of the 50s/  
 Stoned rock and rollers in the 60s/  
 And more than our names got changed as the 70s slipped on by/  
 Now we're 80s ladies and there ain't much these ladies haven't tried  
 (Oslin, "Ladies").

"80s Ladies" brought attention to women's adventures outside of the home, as "those who had seen much more than their name change [by marriage]" (Keel 161). Here, Oslin's broader picture of women's experiences suggests that women were not satisfied "putting themselves last as they married and raised families" (161), and therefore sought fulfillment in other ways. The song had particular resonance with female listeners, becoming the "anthem of a generation" (Bufwack and Oermann 448), selling over a million copies and earning Oslin a Grammy and multiple Academy of Country Music (ACM) and Country Music Association (CMA) awards as well (448).

Oslin earned a record deal at the age of forty-two – well past the typical age for a female country artist to begin her career. The press gave considerable attention to the

fact that an older, clearly overweight Oslin “look[ed] nothing like a girl country singer is supposed to . . . [s]he looks more like the ‘before’ in a Slim-Fast commercial, [who] is clearly old enough to vote and drink” (“Outspoken”). However, Oslin responded humorously to remarks about her age and weight by naming her greatest hits album “Songs from an Aging Sex Bomb”, using her music and wry humor to resist traditional assumptions of how women in country music ought to appear.

In the 1980s, Reba McEntire emerged as country music’s most prominent female artist. With her elaborate stage shows, McEntire was considered a “glamorous show queen” whose popularity and commercial success was on par with many of the men in county music’s male-dominated “hot hunk” era (Bufwack and Oermann 453). McEntire’s 1992 single, “Is There Life Out There?” articulated the feelings of women who dared to explore opportunities outside of the traditional domestic responsibilities that left them with “feelings of emptiness instead of satisfaction” (Keel 161). McEntire’s song tells the story of a motivated wife, mother, and waitress who aspires to leave her domestic responsibilities and obtain a university degree. McEntire asks: “Is there life out there/So much she hasn’t done/Is there life beyond her family and her home/She’s done what she should/Should she do what she dare?/She doesn’t want to leave she’s just wondering if there’s life out there” (McEntire, “Life”). “Is There Life Out There?” generated a huge response from McEntire’s audience: she received fan mail from numerous women who felt the song “struck a nerve”, and encouraged them to get an education (Haynes 65). The song spawned a movie of the same name in 1994, featuring McEntire in the lead role of Lily Marshall, who attempts to manage family life with the pressures of her newfound academic life.

In the early 1990s, Mary Chapin Carpenter, known for her “intelligent folksiness” (Bufwack and Oermann 469), echoed a similar sentiment of domestic dissatisfaction in her music. In her 1992 single “He Thinks He’ll Keep Her”, Carpenter sings: “She makes his coffee, she makes his bed/She does his laundry, she keeps him fed . . . Everything runs right on time/Years of practice and design/Spit and polish ‘til it shines/He thinks he’ll keep her” (Carpenter, “Thinks”). However, Carpenter’s song disrupts this traditional housewife narrative when the song’s protagonist, at thirty-six years of age with three children and the “perfect family”, decides to leave her husband: “She met him at the door/Said ‘I’m sorry, I don’t love you anymore/...everything runs right on time . . . At least until you change your mind” (“Thinks”).

McEntire and Chapin Carpenter both foreground a woman’s prerogative to reject domestic responsibilities in favor of her own personal interests, resisting the exclusive connection between women and domesticity. This theme was further reinforced by McEntire and Carpenter’s female colleagues, including Tanya Tucker, whose 1990 single “Walking Shoes”, asserts: “You’ll beg me, please/Come back home to you/But it’s too late/I’m putting on my walking shoes” (Tucker, “Walking”). As well, Lorrie Morgan’s 1992 single “Watch Me” confronts male ineptitude: “[t]he more I needed, the less you gave . . .you never would listen”. Now, Morgan leaves her lover no choice but to “just watch me walk away” (Morgan, “Watch”). In resisting domestic responsibility, these artists suggest a particular dissatisfaction in marriage and motherhood that is reminiscent of the laments of Appalachian women. As well, these songs are forward-looking in that the lyrics encourage a woman ought to look outside the confines of her home to find her fulfillment. As Shania Twain emerged as the most prominent female country singer in

the mid 1990s, she defined this fulfillment with more precision than her colleagues as she placed an enormous emphasis on a woman's pleasure.

### 3.3 Shania Twain: Women's Pleasure as a Priority

Shania Twain became a pivotal figure in the mid-1990s when she ignited a particularly assertive and empowered expression of femininity in country music. Her 1995 album, "The Woman in Me", had a unique sound of "pop [and] rock confection laced with country fiddles". The album contained multiple female-centered power anthems that featured Twain's "playfully assertive lyrics" (Bufwack and Oermann 478) alongside songs with other traditional country themes of undeterred female devotion to a male lover (The Woman in Me Needs the Man in You), and heartbreak (Is There Life After Love). Twain is typically credited with leading "women to the forefront of country music" (475) in the mid 1990s and beyond, as her enormous commercial appeal came from her up-beat sound and overt sensuality.

Twain's emergence drew attention away from the male "hat-acts" that had dominated the country scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Solo artists like Garth Brooks, Tim McGraw, Clint Black, and Alan Jackson were labeled as such for "playing at being cowboys (or merely emulating George Strait)" while producing formulaic, imitative music (Malone "U.S.A." 420) that catered to a presumed female interest in their sex appeal and rustic cowboy image. Twain's halter-tops and bare mid-riffs "made her famous" and while other women in country music have dressed provocatively in the past (Dolly Parton and Tanya Tucker, to start), Twain is noted for "assert[ing her] sexuality much more aggressively". (Malone "U.S.A." 433). Twain's music is marked by a vigorous foregrounding of female sensuality through her "sexiness, provocative songs, and costumes [that] take advantage of her physical attractiveness" (433). Her use of

music video to accentuate her sexiness engendered much of her success (Bufwack and Oermann 478). For example, in the video for her 1995 single, “If You’re Not In It For Love (I’m Outta Here)” Twain sings of men vying for her attention (“come be a star in the backseat of my car”). Twain then calls out these overly-flirtatious men while swiveling her hips in skin-tight pants and a red halter top that reveals a considerable amount of her midriff (Twain, *If You’re Not in it For Love*).

Twain’s *The Woman in Me* sold twelve million copies, and her 1997 album, *Come on Over* sold eighteen million copies, giving Twain the two top-selling female albums in country music history (Bufwack and Oermann 475). A number of her songs resisted standard domestic relationship dynamics and made a concerted effort to reorient women to a position of power. For example, in her 1995 single “Any Man of Mine”, Twain defined specific parameters for her relationships with men. As the song begins, Twain asserts “what a woman wants” before listing off certain criteria that must be met by a man in a relationship with her: “Even when I’m ugly/He still better love me/I can be late for a date, that’s fine/But he better be on time . . . If I change my mind a million times/I wanna hear him say . . . yeah I like it that way” (Twain, “Any”). As well, in Twain’s 1998 hit “That Don’t Impress Me Much”, she confidently shrugs off superficial male boasting as though it has no effect on her: “You’re one of those guys that likes to shine his machine/. . . I can’t believe you kiss your car goodnight/Come on, baby, tell me you must be joking, right?” (“Impress”).

However, the prevailing theme in Twain’s music is the assertion of a woman’s right to pleasure and fun. After defining her expectations in “Any Man of Mine”, Twain demands that a man must show her a “teasin’, squeezin’, pleasin’ kind of time” (Twain,

“Any”). Likewise, in “That Don’t Impress Me Much”, Twain suggests that male boasting means nothing compared to a man’s ability to satisfy her: “So you’ve got the moves, but have you got the touch?/Don’t get me wrong, I think you’re alright/But that won’t keep me warm in the middle of the night” (“Impress”). Twain places ultimate importance on a woman’s pleasure, indicating that what matters more than any legitimate reason for male boasting – including his looks, his intellect, and his material possessions, is his ability to please her sexually.

In her 1998 single, “Honey I’m Home”, Twain extends her demand for pleasure to include her care and comfort at home. Twain complains after having a difficult day: “The car won’t start, it’s falling apart/I was late for work and the boss got smart/My panty-line shows, got a run in my hose/My hair went flat, man I hate that” (Twain, “Honey”). After concluding that the stress of a bad day is worse than a woman’s premenstrual syndrome, Twain arrives home, eager to unwind. She thus informs her partner:

Honey I’m home and I had a hard day/  
 Pour me a cold one and, oh, by the way/  
 Rub my feet, give me something to eat/  
 Fix me up my favorite treat/  
 Honey I’m back, my head’s killing me/  
 I need to relax and watch TV/  
 Get off the phone, give the dog a bone/  
 Hey...hey, honey I’m home (“Honey”)

Here, Twain demands an outright role reversal in which her male partner performs these duties to comfort and please her. Thus, her ability to find solace after a stressful day is

accomplished solely through her resistance to what are, typically, exclusively female tasks in the home, and by placing the expectations of nurturing on her male partner. She reverses the notion that women are responsible for making the home a sanctuary for men, and repositions these burdens solely onto men, who are now responsible for her own nurture.

Twain's 1999 single, "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" opens with a rallying cry of "Let's Go Girls!" (Twain, "Feel"). Here, Twain invites her listeners into a sisterhood, which, as Julie Haynes contends, implies "a connection and closeness between women that is born out of their separateness from men" (17). Haynes then determines that certain historical contexts inform current uses of this rhetorical term in popular culture texts, noting how, in country music, such "references to sisterhood trace back to the genre's beginnings in the folk ballads of the British Isles" and "the folk songs of the Appalachian mountains . . . [that] focus on the unique hardships and tribulations of women" (18.) However, while Appalachian women's music created sisterhood based on shared suffering, Twain reorients women's sisterhood around fun and pleasure. She announces that "[t]he best thing about being a woman/Is the prerogative to have a little fun", and her declaration that there are "no inhibitions . . . [and] no conditions" gives women permission to "get a little out of line" and "have a good time" ("Feel"). Here, there is no submissive posturing by Twain – either at home or at work: she repositions herself so that she can achieve her desire to "forget I'm a lady" ("Feel"), resisting the domestic structure that curtails her freedom and pleasure.

Her emphasis on female sources of bonding and pleasure reorganizes a woman's priorities by encouraging resistance to anything— especially domestic obligations – that



threatens the “value[s] of women’s culture” (Wilson 297). Thus, no longer is a woman obligated to serve her household; rather, she now has the capacity to serve her own desires. Twain builds upon the pre-existing resistance discourse in women’s country music in a more complex way by assuming a cultural role normally the prerogative of men, that is, she occupies the traditional male space of carousing – as is evident in her emphasis on drinking and flirting. Her resistance plays out in a hetero-normative frame that is conventional for country music yet is limited in that it reinforces pre-constituted gender binaries. However, Twain uses the persona of a dominant, free, sexually-aware female to highlight the imbalance in prescriptive gender roles, further elucidating women’s issues of inequality and encouraging women to take control over their lives and bodies.

Not surprisingly, Twain’s assertive lyrics found an enormously receptive female audience. Keel asserts that, for the most part, women “are buying the [female] country . . . CDs”, and that, with country’s fan base extending beyond its rural roots into suburbs and cities, Twain’s music had considerable appeal for female urban dwellers, including “both corporate executives and soccer moms [who] are trying to forge their way through society’s evolving expectations of women” (171). As well, with the divorce rate so high, a good portion of country female fans themselves would be divorced, single, working moms who found these songs relatable or inspiring by giving language to their own experiences. Twain’s music therefore articulated common experiences faced by her modern female audience, allowing them to use Twain’s music to process their own struggles and to then align themselves with a strong, empowered female voice. In this way, the boom of women in country music in the mid to late 1990s creates a sense of

sisterhood at the retail level where an artist forges a relationship with her audience based on the shared experience created by these texts.

In the mid- and late-1990s, Twain led a spate of female country artists who also achieved considerable commercial success by replicating Twain's version of female empowerment and pleasure. For example, Mindy McCready's 1996 debut album *Ten Thousand Angels*, included the hit single "Guys Do It All The Time" in which McCready addresses double standards in male/female relationships. Similar to Twain's "Honey I'm Home", McCready's song appropriates male roles and spaces to enable female pleasure: after arriving home at four in the morning, McCready confesses that "time just slipped away from me" as she is interrogated by her boyfriend (McCready, "Guys"). McCready responds:

Guys do it all the time/  
 And you expect us to understand/  
 When the shoe's on the other foot/  
 You know that's when it hits the fan/  
 Get over it, honey, life's a two-way street/  
 Or you won't be a man of mine/  
 So I had some beers with the girls last night/  
 Guys do it all the time ("Guys").

Similar to Twain, McCready's late arrival home suggests that she uses pleasure to actively resist having to return to her responsibilities at home. "Guys Do it All the Time" reached number 1 on Billboard's *Hot Country Songs* chart in September 1996 (Billboard,

“Mindy McCready Chart History”), and the album went platinum in just six months (CMT).

Even in songs about heartbreak – a staple lyrical theme in country music history – the theme of women’s pleasure prevailed in the late 1990s. Wilson notes how in 1990s “hurtin’ songs”, male artists tend to “blame themselves for losing the relationship rather than the woman or some outside force” (Wilson 297). In contrast, however, female country singers actively resist this “sense of despair”, and react by “commenting on how she is coping with the situation” (297). Typically, the woman reveals that she is, in fact, not struggling at all. For example, Terri Clark’s 1995 “Better Things To Do”, which peaked at number three on the *Billboard Hot Country Songs* chart in October 1995 (Billboard, “Terri Clark Chart History”), provides a humorous list of tasks that take precedence over mourning a breakup. Clark declares:

I could wash my car in the rain  
 Change my new guitar strings/  
 Mow the yard just the same as I did yesterday/  
 . . . I’d love to talk to you/  
 But then I’d miss Donahue/  
 . . .I don’t need to waste my time crying over you/  
 I’ve got better things to do” (Clark, “Better”).

Likewise, Jo Dee Messina’s 1998 single “Bye Bye”, which topped *Billboard’s Hot Country Songs* in April 1998 (Billboard, “Jo Dee Messina Chart History”), tells of a woman who tires from waiting for her lover to come clean with the truth. Messina takes control and informs her lover that she is leaving, and that he can “find what’s left of [the

relationship] in a cloud of dust on Highway 4” (Messina, “Bye”). Messina implies that greater freedom exists beyond the confines of domestic relationships as she sings: “Bye Bye, love, I’ll catch you later/Got a lead foot down on my accelerator/And the rear-view mirror torn off/Cuz I ain’t ever looking back” (“Bye”).

### 3.4 Deana Carter: A Woman’s Humor

Deana Carter, daughter of famed Nashville session guitarist Fred Carter, made a distinct name for herself in the late 1990s and early 2000s for the wittiness and wry humor in her songwriting (Bufwack and Oermann 492). Carter was signed by Capitol Nashville because she possessed the “fun-factor of Shania [Twain]” combined with the “lyrical depth of Mary Chapin [Carpenter]” (Flippo). Her songwriting abilities are reflected in the title track to her debut album, *Did I Shave My Legs For This?*, in which she uses humor to critique the inability of traditional domestic configurations to fulfill a woman’s desire for pleasure. Carter’s lyrics reveal her initial expectations for romance: “flowers and wine are what I thought I would find/When I came home from working tonight” (Carter, “Shave”). As well, Carter sings about how she was seduced by her lover’s initial promises to her before their marriage: “Now when we first met/You promised we’d get/A house on a hill with a pool”. In each instance, Carter’s hopes are dashed by a harsh reality. As she now “stands over this frying pan” (“Shave”), her desire for romance is quashed by the demands placed upon her to prepare dinner for her family. Her hopes for an idealistic home are also unattainable, as her white-picket dream house is, in reality, a trailer that leaks, and apparently can not be fixed because she and her husband are “swimming in debt” (“Shave”).

Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* offers insight on how women's humor functions in popular culture as an "index to women's roles and values", in which the "common theme of women's desire to claim autonomy and power is central" (Walker 4, 7). Walker contends:

[t]he humorist is at odds with the publicly espoused values of the culture, overturning its sacred cows . . . [and] for women to adopt [this role of the humorist] means that they must break out of the passive, subordinate position mandated for them by centuries of patriarchal tradition and take on the power accruing to those who reveal the shams, hypocrisies and incongruities of the dominant culture (Walker 9).

Carter's use of humor for this disruptive purpose is especially evident in the video for *Did I Shave My Legs For This?* in which her cheeky tone and exaggeration of certain visuals reiterate the incongruity between her expectations and her reality.

In the video, Carter performs the song surrounded by four unruly children while in the kitchen of her trailer where there are piles of dishes and remnants of previous dinners left on the counter. Her noticeably unattractive and unfashionable husband is sitting on the couch in a cowboy hat and outdated plaid pants, drinking beer and belching frequently. Two of her husband's friends arrive, disheveled and unkempt: one has mismatched clothing comprising a striped t-shirt and plaid shorts, while the other wears a shirt that is too small and therefore emphasizes his girth. Carter spends a few moments observing the three men's boorish behavior while they watch sports on television, including their frequent belching and awkward attempts to share a can of processed cheese. In response, Carter, realizing her hope of romance for the evening is nothing

more than unrealistic wishful thinking, turns to the camera and, as she clearly second guesses her own judgment, asks: “did I shave my legs for this?” (Carter, *Did I Shave My Legs For This?*).

Carter’s sarcastic tone is evident in how she keeps a decidedly straight face throughout the entire video, with occasional rolls of the eyes and raised eyebrows, and a few brief forced, mocking smiles. She then mockingly dances with a feather boa in her trailer, undercutting her own efforts to beautify herself in preparation for romance. In her study of women’s country music videos, Robin Roberts notes how particular attention to female “rites of beauty underscores the wasted attention spent on an unappreciative and unworthy male” (143). Thus, Carter’s complaint is rooted in the failure of the detailed beauty regimen she underwent in preparation: “I bought these new heels/Did my nails/Had my hair done just right/I thought this new dress was a sure bet for romance tonight/Well it’s perfectly clear between the TV and beer/I won’t get so much as a kiss” (Carter, *Shave*).

In this song, then, “[h]umor itself is deconstructive and powerful, and can be used to make trenchant criticisms of patriarchal society” (Roberts 142). Carter’s resistance is seen in how she rejects her role as a submissive housewife, and also in her use of humor to disrupt a typical domestic narrative in which a woman compliantly performs her duties. Instead, Carter’s sarcastic response explicitly criticizes a man’s ineptitude, illustrating the futility she sees in her own attempt to extract pleasure from this relationship. In doing this, Carter places herself in opposition to the commonly held notions of domestic roles in that she is resisting the obligation to an extent; her frustration

is a manifestation her inability to fully resist her responsibilities and pursue her desire for pleasure.

Her sarcasm further indicates that she is intellectually aware of her pathetic arrangement with her spouse, and enables her self-deprecating response to it. As Walker suggests, the form of women's humor in American culture

owes its characteristics . . . quite simply to the experience of the women who have created it. . . . the distinctive characteristics of women's humor are derived from the disparity between the 'official' conduct of women's lives and their 'unofficial' response to that conduct. Implicit in this humor is protest of a very specific sort . . . women's humor seeks to correct a cultural imbalance (Walker 70).

Carter's song reveals the discrepancy between idealistic expectations of pleasure in the domestic realm, and the reality of her experiences with such an arrangement. Country music historian Bill Malone remarks that "[f]rom the earliest beginnings of recorded country music, its singers and songwriters have persistently used humor to chronicle and criticize the events of the day" (Malone "Above" 186). Thus, Carter fuses two traditional elements of country music: in a broad sense, she uses humor to criticize; however, she also directs that criticism to the domestic realm and the responsibilities therein that inhibit her ability to obtain pleasure, and is therefore an articulation of female resistance.

Carter's humor critiques the traditional conceptions of marriage that exclusively connect women to domesticity. Specifically, she exploits the incongruity in a woman's desire to be sexy and the expectations that she perform her domestic responsibilities. In this sense, "Did I Shave My Legs For This?" laments the oppression of the domestic realm and contrasts Twain's appropriation of male roles to acquire pleasure. Despite

these differences, Carter's song plays into the tradition of female resistance in country music by highlighting how the division of labor within the home burdens women with the full responsibility of providing nurture, and requires her to forsake her own desires to fulfill these obligations.

Carter broadens the song's potential reach by combining humor with the role of a defeated, frustrated housewife that a female audience can easily identify with. Carter insisted on "Did I Shave My Legs For This?" being the title of her debut album. Her label, Capitol Nashville, eventually agreed to this because the title would "provoke immediate attention, more so from women than men" (Flippo "Debut"). Carter admits the song was inspired by her own personal experiences of living with a man who did not give her much attention, and, after locking him out of her apartment, joked about it with her girlfriends. Carter felt that "Did I Shave My Legs For This?" was an appropriate "girl saying" ("Debut") that many women would relate to. The song's theme of female resistance is legitimized by Carter's personal experiences, and is further reinforced by the use of this 'girl saying' that creates shared empathy with her female listeners who may personally relate to the futility of trying to find pleasure through male attention.

### 3.5 Kacey Musgraves: A Woman's Cynicism

Kacey Musgraves' 2013 album, *Same Trailer Different Park*, received critical acclaim, and also won the singer two Grammy awards for Best Country Song ("Follow Your Arrow") and Best Country Album. Musgraves has established her career with song themes that "reject old-fashioned ideals in place of a more modern sensibility" (Buerger). For instance, "Follow Your Arrow" challenges society's double standards regarding sexuality, love, and drugs. Musgraves sings:



Kiss lots of boys/

Or kiss lots of girls if that's something your into/

When the straight and narrow gets a little too straight/

Roll up a joint (or don't)/

Just follow your arrow wherever it points (Musgraves, "Follow").

Musgraves' soft vocal tone creates a rather somber cadence in her lyrics – a noticeable departure from some of her more flamboyant colleagues, including the aggressive style of Miranda Lambert, and the power-vocals of Carrie Underwood. This injects a discernable degree of cynicism in Musgraves' critiques of tradition and domesticity that is a notable contrast to Twain's playfulness and to Carter's humor. Combined with her fatalistic lyrics, Musgraves' vocal quality adds a particular poignancy to her portrayal of domestic relationships, producing a critique that is much more biting in comparison. For instance, in "Merry Go Round", Musgraves outlines the expectations of traditional moral ideals and the extent to which this has become normalized:

If you aint' got two kids by twenty-one/

You're probably gonna die alone/

At least that's what tradition told you/

And it don't matter if you don't believe/

Come Sunday morning, you best be there in the front row like you're supposed to

(Musgraves, "Merry").

Musgraves reiterates the naturalized ideals espoused by tradition, in which people must defer to the traditions prescribed by the institutional church and the idea of marriage as a "compulsory . . . social arrangement" (Haynes 58).

Musgraves' disillusionment then manifests in the pre-chorus. She reiterates that there is the "[s]ame hurt in every heart", suggesting that these institutions fail to address real human issues beyond a superficial level. The chorus then reveals the degree of dysfunction that results from this failure:

Mama's hooked on Mary Kay/  
 Brother's hooked on Mary Jane/  
 Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down/  
 Mary, Mary, quite contrary/  
 We get bored so we get married/  
 And just like dust we settle in this town/  
 On this broken merry go round/  
 And round and round it goes/  
 Where it stops, nobody knows ("Merry")

In revealing these particular dysfunctions Musgraves undermines the institution of traditional marriage, concluding that it is merely a cure-all for boredom. This dysfunction, the 'broken merry go round', according to Musgraves, is perpetuated by the constant enforcement of traditional ideals.

Musgraves then appropriates the language of tradition by invoking nursery rhyme references to further accentuate the dysfunction of the family unit. However, she upsets the typical and expected outcome of these nursery rhymes by offering her own revisionist take: "Jack and Jill went up the hill/Jack burned out on booze and pills/Mary had a little lamb/Mary just don't give a damn no more". Historically, nursery rhymes are part of an oral tradition where mothers teach children language, music, and rhythm, and are a

common part of traditional educational repertoires (Cardany 32). The creation of “juvenile verse” is used by “maternal figure[s], an actual mother or a nurse” in domestic settings with preliterate children (Gregory 107). Given their widespread use as a didactic tool, nursery rhymes act as a symbol of how tradition is instilled in a child from his or her earliest stages of development. Thus, Musgraves’ revision suggests that the continual perpetuation of tradition causes dysfunction to be naturalized, yet the more it is instilled, social institutions will continue to erode.

As well, nursery rhymes often function alongside fairy tales as part of a broader tradition of classic children’s literature that is passed on from mother to child (Griffith and Frey). Along with nursery rhymes, fairy tales are also used to form much of an individual’s “earliest literary . . . experience” and have “exerted an enormous influence” over people. (Hallett and Karasek 11) Women are frequently portrayed as giving into “alluring fantasies” of marriage, including a “willing bondage to father and prince” resulting in her “restriction to hearth and nursery” (Rowe in Hallett 342). As a result, such romanticized notions of domesticity “may transfer from fairy tales into real life cultural norms” (342), and were maintained through constant repetition from mother to child. The perpetuation of these oral traditions “suggest[s] that culture’s very survival depends upon a woman’s acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity” (344). However, Musgraves’ revision of classic children’s literature reveals the extent to which traditional narratives, propagated in the domestic realm, ultimately delude people with false expectations of reality.

Musgraves’ song “Stupid”, while never released as a single, continues her trend of using classic children’s literature to debunk traditional conceptions of marriage.

Musgraves attacks the concept of ‘love’: she references “The Three Little Pigs” when she warns how love “[h]uffs and it puffs till it blows your house down/And you don’t know your heart from a hole in the ground” (Musgraves, “Stupid”). ‘Love’, then, is seen as a threatening, destructive force with severe emotional consequences for those who invest in it. In the chorus, Musgraves’ disillusionment is rather evident as she pronounces: “Stupid, love is stupid/Don’t know why we always do it/Finally find it just to lose it/Always wind up looking stupid” (“Stupid”). Similar to the make-up obsessed mother, drug-addicted brother, and cheating father in “Merry Go Round”, Musgraves then reveals the depressing consequences of buying into such romanticized notions of ‘love’ when she pronounces “I drink to feel/I smoke to breathe/Just look what love has done to me” (“Stupid”). In “Stupid”, more than just revealing how marriage fails to deliver on its idealized promises, Musgraves focuses on the bleak outcome of holding to such notions, and is therefore a lamentation of tradition and a critique of domesticity that retains strong elements of resistance.

Musgraves draws frequent critical acclaim for her songwriting, and her songs have been recorded by Miranda Lambert, Kenny Chesney, and featured on ABC’s television drama, *Nashville* (Rotella). However, unlike many of her female contemporaries, Musgraves’ music welds the enduring tradition of female resistance in country music with 21<sup>st</sup> century values that appeal to a modern audience. Musgraves’ repertoire is marked by forward-thinking, progressive themes that reflect the changing values of her 21<sup>st</sup> century fan base. She loudly laments old values of tradition and domesticity in “Merry Go Round” and “Stupid”, and the bleak realities in these songs resist the

conservative ideology embedded in country music culture by fragmenting the genre's tendency to mythologize family life.

As well, her song "It Is What It Is" echoes Loretta Lynn's "The Pill" in how it advocates for women's recreational sex: "I ain't got no one sleeping with me/And you ain't got nowhere you need to be/Maybe I love you, maybe I'm just kind of bored/It is what it is/Til it ain't anymore" (Musgraves, "What"). Musgraves' repertoire transgresses the traditional framework reinforced by country music's embedded conservatism and maintains the elements of female resistance by challenging the strongholds in the genre that espouse traditional domestic values. While country radio is hesitant to play her songs, her music resonates strongly with her audiences: at shows and via social media, fans – including a large homosexual contingent – regularly inform Musgraves that her music provides an accurate reflection of their lives (Rotella).

### 3.6 Concluding Thoughts

Despite the ever-changing stylistic elements in country music, the genre's female artists continue to use music to voice their complaints about traditional, patriarchal social arrangements. This chapter has demonstrated that domestic complaints remain a vital component of female resistance in country music even to the present day. Within this music, the message of female country singers remains consistent: domesticity, in both theory and practice, is a woman's primary source of confinement. Moreover, while some female artists like Kacey Musgraves and Deana Carter retain a lamenting-tone to their complaints, others like Shania Twain use their agency to take active strides towards removing domestic confinement. Thus, these female singers continue to build upon the resistance discourse in country music, and invite their audiences into a shared understanding of women's issues.

In the next chapter, I explore facets of resistance in response and revenge songs from the 1990s to the present, in which these songs take on a more complicated form. Including in this study is the Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl", which the trio used to deliberately provoke their record label, Sony/Monument Nashville. I also explore how the Dixie Chicks used their 2006 single, "Not Ready to Make Nice", to respond to the country music industry's harsh treatment of the trio after lead singer Natalie Maines' controversial remarks regarding America's role in the 2003 Iraq invasion. I then examine Miranda Lambert's repertoire of revenge songs that marks the return of a more violent form of resistance. I conclude with a discussion of Maddie and Tae's "Girl In A Country Song" as a direct response to the women-objectifying 'Bro-Country' trend that currently proliferates at the top of the country music charts. Despite the complexity of these forms, and the complicated issues addressed in response and revenge songs, these texts continue to uphold a strong theme of female resistance, thus sustaining a vital component of country music tradition.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Response and Revenge Songs: 1990s to the Present

#### 4.1 Introduction

In *Redneck Liberation*, David Fillingim observes that Kitty Wells' "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels", by challenging Hank Thompson's performance of "Wild Side of Life", successfully "place[d] the blame for cheating squarely on the shoulders of the male offenders . . . and is an answer, directly . . . to all other ways which redneck culture places undue [moral] responsibility on women" (38-9). Embedded in Hank Thompson's "Wild Side of Life" is an assumption that women ought to be the "teacher[s] of morality, and a refuge from the cruel world" (Malone "Above" 60). Thus, "Wild Side of Life" blamed honky-tonk women for men's moral failures. Wells' "It Wasn't God" clearly protested this opinion, and insisted that women's problems were the result of male indiscretions.

"It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" established a precedent for numerous other female country singers throughout the 1950s and 1960s to offer up similar answer songs, resulting in a musical "battle-of-the-sexes" in which female performers' material was "aggressively sung from a subjugated working-class woman's perspective" (Bufwack and Oermann "Women" 96). Such songs include Wanda Jackson's "By The Time You Got to Phoenix", a response to Glen Campbell's "By The Time I Get to Phoenix". Campbell's song tells how a man assumes his lover will pine away for him after he leaves her (Campbell, "Phoenix"). Jackson's response challenges this presumption by continuing the narrative: instead of wallowing in misery, as the man

presumes, the woman has immediately moved on to find true love with the man's best friend (Jackson, "Phoenix").

Response songs continue to build on the pre-existing female resistance discourse present throughout the history of country music, and have become increasingly more complex as the genre evolves, yet remain a "common way of expressing dissatisfaction with [gender] roles and expectations . . . which would reply to a man's song with a woman's perspective" (Bufwack and Oermann "Women" 96-7). In this chapter, I use the term 'response song' in its conventional sense to refer to the body of songs performed by female singers that are direct retorts to patriarchal themes and sexist trends in the lyrics of male country performers and also in actions of male industry gatekeepers. I further extend 'response song' to include violent revenge songs in which revenge functions as a form of response to manifestations of male aggression. I invite a more complex application of the terms as I argue that female response and revenge songs permit an aggressive form of backtalk that enables resistance to take on different forms: resistance is evident thematically in the music, but it also becomes evident in *how* the musical text is used as a response to sexist attitudes inside the country music industry. While the answer song has recently taken on new referents and bolder articulations by female country singers, these songs continue to function as resistance to specific manifestations of aggression produced by a dominant male culture – but on a much larger scale.

I begin this chapter by looking at how the Dixie Chicks used themes of resistance in their controversial songs "Sin Wagon" and "Goodbye Earl", to respond to the actions of their conservative record label. I also explore how the Dixie Chicks 2006 single "Not Ready to Make Nice" was a direct response to the American media, public, and



conservative country music industry that marginalized the band after lead singer Natalie Maines' controversial comments about the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. I argue that, for the Dixie Chicks, response and revenge songs were envisioned as a way to aggressively push back in response to those who sought to marginalize them. I then examine the repertoire of Miranda Lambert, which features numerous violent and often murderous revenge ballads. I bypass the 'badass' rhetoric that typifies Lambert in the popular press and reposition her in the broader context of country music history. This then reveals the extent to which her creation of a "fire-starter persona" ("Miranda Lambert Talks") upholds the more aggressive forms of female resistance in country music history and produces modern texts that function as legitimate "cries of [women who are] betrayed, oppressed, [and] injured" (Ackley Bean *xii*). Finally, I discuss the Bro-Country trend that has ruled the country charts since 2012 and how this has been answered by the female duo Maddie and Tae with their 2014 chart-topping "Girl in a Country Song". This response song reveals an embedded ideology that allows expressions of male-privilege to remain unchecked in the country music industry.

## 4.2 The Dixie Chicks: Pushing Back and Ruffling Feathers

Texas is considered home to "a musical counterculture not as concerned with hewing to a particular 'sound' as dictated by the business of Nashville" (Stokes 42). Many country bands and artists who found Nashville's profit-driven commercial push unappealing found a home in Austin, Texas, which in the 1970s became an alternative "haven" for artists like Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, and Tom T. Hall to experiment with fusions of "folk, rock, and country" sounds (42-3). As well, Dallas,

Texas emerged as an alternative home for country music, but its focus was on the more traditional acoustic hillbilly and acoustic bluegrass sounds that stemmed from the 1930s and 1940s (Malone “U.S.A” 168, 170). Within this context, the Dixie Chicks formed in 1989 as an all-female traditional bluegrass band in Dallas, Texas.

The Dixie Chicks’ original configuration included lead vocalists Laura Lynch and Robin Macy, with sisters Emily Robison and Martie Maguire on banjo, dobro, and fiddle (Stokes 43). The band regularly performed on Texas’ regional bluegrass circuit, winning awards at various festivals while also releasing three independent albums (Bufwack and Oermann “Voice” 406). With Robison and Maguire intent on achieving commercial success, the band added drums to their string-based ensemble – a more progressive element compared to traditional bluegrass instrumentation. After signing with Sony/Nashville Monument in 1995, Macy left the band, unhappy with the band’s commercial focus. Maquire and Robison then bought out Lynch’s contract, replacing her with Natalie Maines as the lead vocalist (Stokes 44). With this new configuration, the Dixie Chicks then released their debut commercial album *Wide Open Spaces* in 1997, and achieved enormous success when their first three singles, “There’s Your Trouble”, “Wide Open Spaces”, and “You Were Mine”, all hit the top of the charts (Bufwack and Oermann 496).

From the moment the band entered the commercial stream in Nashville, there was a tension between the traditional elements of their sound and their overt, expressive personalities that undermined traditional, conservative representations of women in country music. As a trio of young, blonde twenty-something women, the Dixie Chicks had particular appeal to a younger, modern female audience, and were considered by

some in the popular music press to be country's version of the Spice Girls (Fillingim 134). At the same time, they drew praise for their "unvarnished country music" and "instrumental virtuosity" on stringed instruments that rooted them in more traditional country music sounds – a strong contrast to the more pop-inflected offerings of contemporaries Shania Twain and Faith Hill (Bufwack and Oermann "Voice" 473, 495). While Twain and Hill projected a sensual femininity, the Dixie Chicks' appearance was marked by an "eclectic fashion sense that can only be described as weird" (Fillingim 136). In fact, their "quirky let's-play-dress-up fashion sensibilities" landed them on fashion critic Richard Blackwell's worst-dressed list in 2000, who described the young stars as "truck-stop fashion tragedies" (136). Maines' outspoken personality led to a reputation of the trio being "irreverent" in interviews (Bufwack and Oermann "Voice" 496"). For example, Maines once showed up to a PBS up-close-and-personal special wearing a t-shirt that read "UGLY GIRL" (Gates).

These contradictions would define the Dixie Chicks, and would play out in their relationship with the country music industry. The trio persistently pushed back against their record label, and undermined the label's authority by challenging its creative control. For instance, when the Dixie Chicks released their second album, *Fly*, in 1999, the album contained radio-friendly hits, "Without You" and "Cowboy Take Me Away" – songs that support typical domestic arrangements. Yet the album also included "Sin Wagon", a fast-tempo song penned by Maines, Robison, and Stephony Smith that became so popular from live performances that it charted in November 2000 without ever being released as an official single (Billboard, *Dixie Chicks Chart History*). "Sin

Wagon” is a raucous song about a woman shirking off her stereotypical stay-at-home responsibilities in favor of drinking and having sex:

Well now I’ve been good for way too long/  
 Found my red dress and I’m gonna throw it on/  
 ‘Bout to get too far gone/  
 . . . On a mission to make something happen/  
 Feel like Delilah looking for Samson/  
 Do a little mattress dancin’ (that’s right I said mattress dancin’)/  
 Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition/  
 Need a little bit more of what I’ve been missing/  
 I don’t know where I’ll be crashin’/  
 But I’m arriving on a sin wagon (“Sin”).

The Dixie Chicks used the song’s provocative theme to irritate their label: for instance, Sony/Nashville Monument balked at the “mattress dancing” euphemism, and also how the song “blasphemously interpolates” a classic gospel hymn (“I’ll Fly Away”) and therefore originally refused to include the song on *Fly* (Stokes 55). Maines recalls that the label was “scared to death” of “Sin Wagon” (Willman “Burn Up”), and despite the label’s objection to the song, the Dixie Chicks “reveled in the fact that the industry was outraged [by] what they saw as harmless, fun music” (Stokes 55). The Dixie Chicks then forced Sony/Nashville Monument to include “Sin Wagon” on *Fly* after performing it live at numerous concerts and arousing significant fan interest. Clearly intent on irritating their label, the Dixie Chicks used the liner notes of *Fly* to continue their push-back when they revealed that the album had to be called *Fly* “[b]ecause ‘Sin Wagon’

wouldn't be 'appropriate'" (Dixie Chicks, *Fly*). "Sin Wagon", then, became a way for the Dixie Chicks to respond to the parameters placed on them by Sony/Nashville Monument, in which its provocative, resistant theme enables the trio to push back against their label.

The Dixie Chicks' third single from *Fly*, a humorous murder ballad "Goodbye Earl", became one of the trio's most well known (and controversial) songs. The song, written by male songwriter Dennis Linde and originally recorded by late 1990s all-male country group Sons of the Desert (Schmitzer), addresses the issue of domestic abuse in which two women exact violent revenge on an abusive husband. The song featured two female protagonists, Mary Ann and Wanda, who conspire to kill Wanda's physically abusive husband Earl. The song opens by foregrounding the women's friendship: "Mary Ann and Wanda were the best of friends/All through their high school days/Both members of the 4H club/Both active in the FFA" (Dixie Chicks, "Earl"). After their high school graduation, the friends take separate paths: Mary Ann, "lookin' for a bright new world", ends up in Atlanta, while Wanda stayed local, and despite her best attempts to start a new life, ends up married to a man named Earl. Two weeks after their wedding, "Wanda started getting abused" by Earl, whose multiple beatings "put [Wanda] in intensive care" ("Earl"). Mary Ann then promptly returns from Atlanta to help Wanda recover. The women concoct a plan, determining that the only solution was that "Earl had to die!". After killing Earl with a bowl of poisoned black-eyed peas, and then disposing of Earl's body, Mary Ann and Wanda carry on with their lives and become productive citizens who purchased "some land and a roadside stand/Out on Highway 109" where "[t]hey sell Tennessee ham and strawberry jam", and do so guilt free, as "they don't lose any sleep at night/'Cause Earl had to die" ("Earl").

The song's content was nothing new to country music, as domestic violence has been a staple theme throughout the genre's history, and was included in the repertoires of many of the genre's top stars in the 1990s including Garth Brooks' "The Thunder Rolls" and "Papa Loved Mama"; Faith Hill's "A Man's Home is His Castle"; Shania Twain's "Black Eyes, Blue Tears"; and Martina McBride's "Independence Day". "Goodbye Earl" enabled the Dixie Chicks to promote further awareness of domestic violence. Robison expressed her hope that if young girls heard the song, and "if they come in contact with a man who abuses them down the line, maybe . . . they'll be strong because they heard ['Goodbye Earl']" (Stokes 54). As well, many radio stations played the song with an announcement that encouraged listeners who may be victims of domestic abuse to seek help, and the National Coalition against Domestic Violence endorsed the song (Bowers 158-159). "Goodbye Earl" also encouraged women to constructively move on with their lives after an abusive relationship, as demonstrated in Mary Ann and Wanda's successful business venture, and therefore functions as "an articulation of aspirations for liberation and change" (Bufwack and Oermann 91)

"Goodbye Earl" has a prevalent theme of female solidarity. Beyond Mary Ann and Wanda's friendship, the video for "Goodbye Earl" shows the Dixie Chicks readily celebrating Earl's death with Mary Ann and Wanda. The trio also helps Mary Ann and Wanda dispose of Earl's dead body by wrapping it in a tarp and disposing it by a lake. In the 1990s, the "women in country" became a catch phrase for the growing popularity of female performers in the genre and a common title for various country music texts by these singers (Haynes 2-3). Haynes argues that the "women in country" rhetoric drew on women's rights discourses throughout American history, including the movements in the

1960s and 1970s, and, within country music texts, also signified principles of sisterhood that originated in the shared private musical practices of Appalachian women, who used music to collectively warn other women about getting married, and to complain about domestic life (Haynes 18). “Goodbye Earl” invokes these principles of sisterhood in which the Dixie Chicks show their solidarity with the fictional Mary Ann and Wanda, creating a “collective activism” (16) that acts as a tool of resistance to male aggression.

This collective activism translates both to the issue of domestic violence in “Goodbye Earl” in which the Dixie Chicks make a very clear stand on the issue. More subtly, it translates as an articulation for change in that it suggests a campaign for women in country music to push back against the parameters placed on female artists by the industry’s male gatekeepers. For instance, unlike other murder ballads from the 1990s, there is a particularly vengeful tone to Maines’ singing in “Goodbye Earl”, and its video shows the Dixie Chicks making rather maniacal faces at times while watching Earl die (*Goodbye Earl*). This contrasts with Mary Ann and Wanda of the lyrics, who are much more composed while they carry out their plan. The Dixie Chicks’ actions do not negate the song’s overall ability to raise awareness of domestic abuse; however, the trio’s behavior in the video complicates the song’s message because Mary Ann and Wanda’s actions can not be interpreted as just self-defense when juxtaposed with the Dixie Chicks’ raving reactions.

This difference suggests a more complex degree of resistance that extends beyond the song’s narrative. In *Misreading Justice: The Rhetoric of Revenge in Feminist Texts About Domestic Violence*, Kimberly Bowers argues that “Goodbye Earl”, in foregrounding revenge over self-defense, “was responding to the sexism within country

music by giving men . . . a taste of their own medicine” (165), and therefore represented how the Dixie Chicks felt about their contentious relationship with male executives at Sony/Nashville Monument. Similar to their reaction to “Sin Wagon”, Sony/Nashville Monument was hesitant to include “Goodbye Earl” on *Fly* and forced the Dixie Chicks to include a disclaimer about the song in the album notes for *Fly* in an attempt to distance the trio from the song’s theme. The band agreed, but their response was rather ambiguous: “The Dixie Chicks do not advocate premeditated murder, but love getting even” (*Fly*). This disclaimer does not at all distance the trio from the song’s vengeful qualities; rather, it reinforces it in how they ‘love’ to get even.

Through their shared statement (and shared celebration of Earl’s murder), the Dixie Chicks’ use female solidarity as a tool of resistance to engage in collective activism against their label, by continually pushing back in response to Sony/Nashville Monument’s demands. Resistance therefore plays out beyond the just the provocative musical texts on *Fly*; rather, the trio used these songs to deliberately offend their label. Keel notes how “female [country] singers have had to make feminist stands in ways that would not offend the industry’s male gatekeepers at record labels” and that “[female singers] have had to play by the rules” (155) imposed by the male label executives. However, the Dixie Chicks use provocative texts that simultaneously build on discourses from the genre’s history of disenfranchised women venting about their low status while also using such texts to deliberately push back against the male label-heads who sought to control them.



### 4.3 The Dixie Chicks: Political Controversy & Responding to Marginalization

While in the midst of a European tour, on March 10, 2003, mere days before the American-led invasion of Iraq would begin, the Dixie Chicks performed at Shepherd's Bush Empire in London, England. Earlier that day, anti-war protests took over the streets surrounding the venue, when an estimated one million protestors rallied against an Iraq invasion (*Shut Up and Sing*). Prior to performing their current single at the time, "Travelin' Soldier", a song about Vietnam war dead, Maines spoke to this particular protest climate during the concert: "[j]ust so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas" (*Sing*). The crowd immediately applauded, and the trio did not anticipate any fallout from the incident. In a debrief after the concert, the band's manager, Simon Renshaw, made no reference to Maines' comment, only reiterating that the concert was a great success (*Sing*).

The next day, a music critic from a London newspaper, *The Guardian*, ran Maines' quote in a review of the Dixie Chicks' concert (Clarke). The story was then circulated by the Associated Press, resulting in a bitter backlash against the band that played out in the American media. When Maines issued an apology immediately after the story broke, she did not retract her comments entirely. Instead, she clarified her position and re-established the protest context she spoke in:

As a concerned American citizen, I apologize to President Bush because my remark was disrespectful. I feel that whoever holds that office should be treated with the utmost respect. We are currently in Europe and witnessing a huge anti-American sentiment as a result of the perceived rush to war. While war may

remain a viable option, as a mother, I just want to see every possible alternative exhausted before children and American soldiers' lives are lost. I love my country. I am a proud American (“Singer Apologizes”).

Maines’ apology was lost on an irate country music audience. Conservative, patriotic fans immediately branded the trio as “Terrorist Chicks” (“Singer Apologizes”), and demanded that radio stations “[d]ump that anti-American group” because “this group intends to give aid and comfort to [Hussein] a known killer of the innocent” (“Jab”). Despite the severe backlash against them, in May 2003 the Dixie Chicks embarked on their first American tour following the controversy. Prior to a concert in Greenville, South Carolina, news reports show patriotic concert protestors declaring: “be proud of your country, be ashamed of the Dixie Chicks”; “supporting the Dixie Chicks is supporting communism, and supporting traitors”; “Dixie Twits: Weapons of Mass Destruction”; and “send Natalie to Iraq, strap her to a bomb, and drop her over Baghdad” (*Shut Up and Sing*). One former fan, after dumping her Dixie Chicks albums in a trash bin, then told reporters: “I liked them, but for what they said, [the CDs] are trash” (*Sing*).

The response from country radio was equally harsh. For instance, nationally, *Cumulus Media* demanded that its 42 country radio stations immediately stop playing the Dixie Chicks’ songs, while at a local level, individual radio stations began “[Dixie] Chicks-free radio campaigns” (Adolphson 53, 55). Numerous stations banned the trio’s music altogether, resulting in the suspension of some radio DJs who continued to play the band’s music (Pruitt 89). The Dixie Chicks’ cover of Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide”, originally in Billboard’s top 10 radio airplay charts in March 2003, plummeted within one week to number 43 (one of the fastest descents in Billboard’s chart history), while

“Travelin’ Solider” quickly disappeared off the charts in the weeks immediately following the eruption of the controversy (Bronson). Radio stations catered to country music fans’ unrest by inviting them to bring their Dixie Chicks albums to station-endorsed public trashings that permitted angry, former fans to stomp on CDs, and then had tractors run over the piles of discarded albums (*Shut Up and Sing*).

The response to Maines’ comments drastically changed the Dixie Chicks’ position as country music’s most popular female act in the early 2000s. Martie Maguire, the band’s backing vocalist and fiddle player, noted that America had “turned what happened to [the band] into a verb: you can get ‘Dixie Chicked’” (*Sing*). The efforts to silence the band culminated in a death threat against Maines. After performing at a concert in June 2003, tour manager Richard Coble approached Maines to inform her of a note he received declaring that “Natalie Maines will be shot dead on Sunday July 6 in Dallas, Texas” (*Sing*). The threat never materialized, and Maines insisted on performing in Dallas, despite the danger.

The vitriol aimed at the Dixie Chicks – within the country music industry, and the American media – had a distinctly gendered tone. FOX news commentator Bill O’ Reilly presented the controversy as “an attack on American conservative values” that was uttered “by a group of callous, foolish women who deserve to be slapped around” (Adolphson 50). Other media reports dismissed the trio as the “dumbest bimbos I have seen” (*Sing*). Gendered backlash was even evident in the Dixie Chicks’ interview with Diane Sawyer. Sawyer’s employment of gender stereotypes ascribes a certain unladylike-ness to Maines as she referred to her as “untamed” and a “wild child” (Adolphson 55).

Such condescension “transformed the critical dissenting status into a sex-based stereotype that relegated and reduced women to girls who just really did not know any better” (55).

For an *Entertainment Weekly* cover shoot, Maines, Robison, and Maquire posed naked, wearing nothing but temporary stenciled-on tattoos of words that America labeled them with, including “Dixie Sluts”, “Saddam’s Angels”, and “Big Mouth” (Willman, “Stars and Strife”). The trio’s attempt to use *Entertainment Weekly* to critique the American media and public response backfired. In “Mad as Hell: Democratic Dissent and the Unpatriotic Backlash on the Dixie Chicks”, Jeremy Adolphson explores the particularly biased media representations of the Dixie Chicks during the controversy, arguing that, even in the band’s efforts to explain themselves, “these texts were shaped or edited by . . . magazine editors”, resulting in a failed attempt at vindication for the trio (48). The *Entertainment Weekly* cover shoot, Adolphson notes, “ended up reaffirming the publicly constructed persona of the Dixie Chicks . . . highlighting [the] gendered descriptions” (49) attached to the women. Even in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Maines remarks how, in speaking out against President Bush’s political move, the band “were all of a sudden [made into] sluts ” (“Oprah Part 4”).

As female country artists, there is an assumption that the Dixie Chicks ought to have adhered to the genre’s primary representation of women in which their acceptable role and demeanor ought to reflect that of a proper that of housewife, mother, and lover (Saucier 157). In speaking out against the war effort – an international crisis – the Dixie Chicks enacted a degree of power and status that clearly did not conform to the gender expectations prevalent in country music. Maines’ dissenting comments were therefore out of place, and the derogatory gendered responses implied that, as a woman, Maines is

a weak and uninformed source who does not possess the ability to provide constructive commentary on the issue. In contrast, Willie Nelson, while considered a country outlaw, released an anti-war song in 2004 (“Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth?”). However, Nelson, also from Texas, was not ostracized for his dissent. Rather, he was the readers’ choice for the *Dallas Morning News* ‘Texan of the Year’ (Pruitt 95). Unlike the response to the Dixie Chicks, there were no movements to ban Nelson’s music, or to trash his albums.

While Nelson’s age and status as a country icon may have lessened any backlash, it remains that there is a discrepancy between how Nelson and the Dixie Chicks were treated for relating similar messages. (Pruitt 95-96). As a woman, then, Maines’ comments were therefore considered unacceptable because, as O’Reilly claimed, she is “simply not smart enough to know what’s going on” (Streib). Chet Flippo responded to Nelson’s song, comparing it to Maines’ comment. He concluded Nelson and the Dixie Chicks were not doing the same thing, adding that Nelson’s song is the “expression of a true artist” who rightly contained his protest in song, unlike the “wiseass, adolescent remark” made on a foreign stage by Maines (Flippo “Willie”).

The gendered responses to the Dixie Chicks included some from their male colleagues in the country music industry. Country comedian Larry the Cable Guy, whose ‘redneck’ stage persona is used to celebrate and reaffirm stereotypes about Southern, working class white men, suggested that the band rename itself to

[t]wo Dixie Chicks and a loudmouth southern sow . . . [h]ow dare this first hippo of country music [Maines] . . . attack our President . . . I hope this starts to mark the end for this singing pork chop . . . I’m madder than a feller playing with

himself watching the Dixie Chicks video and just before he has an orgasm they show the little fat one [Maines]" (Willman, "Rednecks" 32).

While spoken in character and as part of his comedy routine that depends on exaggeration, Larry's comment actually degraded Maines through his excessively crude sexual references. As well, male country singer Travis Tritt called Maines' remarks "cowardly" (Willman, "Stars and Strife"), echoing a post 9/11 sentiment that demanded conformity to Bush's stance. Tritt further believed that "[t]o be a good American – regardless of which side you [are] on – you have to get behind President Bush" (Willman, "Rednecks" 30).

No male country singer was more outspoken than Toby Keith, widely known for his extremely patriotic songs, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. His hit single "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" claimed that "this nation that I love/Has fallen under attack", to which Keith then informed the enemy: "you'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A/'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass/It's the American way" (Keith, "Courtesy"). Keith's response to Maines' opposition of Bush was therefore predictable: the backdrop for his tour featured a doctored photo of Maines superimposed beside Saddam Hussein (Dukes). Maines responded to Keith's photo by wearing a t-shirt with 'F.U.T.K', an expletive-invoking directive aimed at Keith. Keith's fans then responded by telling off the trio with similar 'F.U.D.C' t-shirts that were worn during Keith's appearance on the *Jimmy Kimmel Show*. While being interviewed by Kimmel, Keith says of Maines: "stuff comes out of her blowhole daily . . . she needs to keep her big mouth shut" (Eliscu).

Keith's pro-American songs following 9/11 were part of a movement by male country artists to release music that aimed to bolster American patriotism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. These songs included Keith's "Angry American", "American Soldier", and "The Taliban Song"; Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?"; Alan Jackson's November 2001 single "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning"; and a re-release of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A.". The sentiments in these songs reiterated American values, which, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, would be equated with a pro-Republican stance within the country music industry. As a female country singer, Maines' comments were situated in this discourse, and were therefore interpreted as dissent, and ultimately provoked the severe response from her male colleagues.

The backlash against the Dixie Chicks was rooted in a damaged American psyche that needed to reassert dominance on the world stage following 9/11. The perceived ongoing threat of terrorists became the rationale for Bush's 'war on terrorism'. Part of the process of recovery (and revenge) for America post 9/11 involved identifying the perpetrator in order to provide a target: Bush's rhetoric equated the triumph of American values and the reestablishment of American dominance on the world scene with the elimination of Saddam Hussein and his purported 'weapons of mass destruction'. Bush's polarized discourse, in which he consistently "employ[ed] words and expressions such as 'them', 'they', 'evil' [and] 'those people'" (Merskin 129) to brand the enemy allowed no space for his tactics to be questioned. This prevailing rhetoric bolstered the need to reassert American power and control, and demanded complete deference to the President and support for American military endeavors. Maines' comments therefore cast the

Dixie Chicks as unpatriotic dissenters, and positioned the trio as the focal point of a controversy that played out in the American media and the country music industry, where, essentially, to question the war is to question Bush's rationale, and to question his rationale is to question American values.

Given the strong pro-American stance articulated in country music at the time, the industry was clearly intent on preserving the social order that reaffirmed American values. By countering this, the Dixie Chicks were essentially 'othered' – becoming not just figures of difference, but female figures of difference that stood in defiance of a male president and American values. Consequently, the band became “marginalized . . . [because they were portrayed as] the enemy of [American] freedom” (Adolphson 57), even within the country music industry. The backlash became so intense that the band went on a three-year hiatus in 2003 in order to regroup.

In 2006, the Dixie Chicks released a new album, *Taking The Long Way*, an “unapologetic and boldly defiant album” that marks an “important shift in the Dixie Chicks' musical output” (Watson and Burns 325, 327). The trio relocated to Los Angeles to record at Sunset Sound Studios with Rick Rubin, known for his work with hard punk and metal groups including the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Metallica, and the Beastie Boys (329). The Dixie Chicks also drew from multiple musical influences to create a country-rock sound that fused their traditional bluegrass and country sounds with a stronger electric guitar presence, a harder rock beat, and a more “declamatory vocal style” (330) by Maines. The trio claimed that the making of *Taking the Long Way* was a major “force in liberating the trio from [the] musical constraints” they had previously experienced in Nashville (329). Maquire expressed that *Taking the Long Way* was a



therapeutic endeavor for the band, specifically noting how “Not Ready to Make Nice” was by far the most emotionally resonant song on the album, and that she shed tears every time she heard it (*Shut Up and Sing*).

*Taking the Long Way* also marks the first album in which Maquire, Robison, and Maines co-wrote every song on the record. Many songs on *Taking the Long Way* provide personal commentary about the trio’s experiences during the controversy. In “Easy Silence”, Maines sings that “anger plays on every station” and notes how the industry “form[ed] commissions trying to find/The next one they can crucify” (Dixie Chicks, “Easy”). Likewise, in “Lubbock or Leave It” Maines sings that, in her ultra-conservative hometown of Lubbock, Texas, “they hate me now”, and then refers to it as a “fool’s paradise” where southern hospitality is an illusion since the town’s citizens are “[t]hrowing stones [at Maines] from the top of [their] rock/Thinking no one can see” (“Lubbock”).

However, the trio used *Taking the Long Way* to speak about other personal issues besides the controversy, including “So Hard”, which details Robison and Maguire’s prolonged struggles with infertility and repeated miscarriages, and “Silent House”, in which Maines sings about her grandmother’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis. The trio also wrote “Baby Hold On” as a tribute to their husbands, and “Lullaby” for their children. These more personal song themes had no connection to the controversy, and if any of these tunes were chosen as the new album’s debut single, it would have recast the trio as vulnerable and personable, acting as a way to disassociate the trio from the controversy. However, given the magnitude of the controversy, Maines was aware that the trio would be judged in a new way, and wanted their steps in releasing the record to be calculated

*(Shut Up and Sing)*. The trio chose to release “Not Ready to Make Nice” as the lead single – a response song that highlights the absurdity of the political controversy. This is a deliberate statement by the trio intended to re-establish “an instant dialogue between the Dixie Chicks and those who chastised them for speaking out” (Burns and Watson 331). The song is clearly intended to provoke and not placate the controversy, as Maines begins the song with a refusal to fully extend forgiveness, or even embrace healing: “Forgive, sounds good/Forget, I’m not sure I could/They say time heals everything/But I’m still waiting” (“Nice”).

By releasing “Not Ready to Make Nice”, the Dixie Chicks made a clear statement that they do not wish to distance themselves from the controversy. Instead, the trio released a song with a biting retort that provided Maines with space to voice her complaint without any biased media lens. In the song, Maines questioned: “[h]ow in the world can the words that I said/Send somebody so over the edge/That they’d write me a letter, saying that I better/Shut up and sing or my life would be over/” (“Nice”). Maines then informs those who offended her:

I’m not ready to make nice/

I’m not ready to back down/

I’m still mad as hell/

And I don’t have time to go round and round and round/

It’s too late to make it right/

I probably wouldn’t if I could/

Cuz I’m mad as hell/

Can’t bring myself to do what it is you think I should (“Nice”).

Maines persisted in her defiance and resisted the responses that presumptuously equated her comments with her gender. Instead of accepting the blame as a woman who was out-of-line, Maines relished her position, noting that the controversy “turned my whole world around/And I kind of like it”. Maines expressed no regret, and was not the least bit upset with herself as she sings: “I made my bed and I sleep like a baby/No regrets . . .” (“Nice”).

Choosing “Not Ready to Make Nice” as the first single was a surefire way to guarantee that the controversy was reignited and to incite the country music industry and the country fan base. Knowing that the song referred to the country pundits and fans that formerly implored her to “shut up and sing” (Flippo and *Shut Up and Sing*), the trio certainly knew that country radio would not play the song. Country radio and country fans reacted strongly against “Not Ready to Make Nice”, claiming that this song was Maines’ attempt at “gloating” and “rubbing [fans’] noses in [the controversy]” (Stark). One country radio programmer referred to the song as a “four minute fuck-you to the format and [its] listeners” (Stokes 70), while other radio executives interpreted the song as proof that “the Dixie Chicks are daring country radio to stop playing their music” (*Sing*). *Billboard Magazine* noted that the song “ruffle[d] feathers at country radio”, claiming that, “[b]y picking the defiant “Not Ready” as the first single, they’ve reopened a wound that was particularly deep for country radio fans, and left many country programmers with the burning question: Why on earth would the band choose to do this?” (Stark).

“Not Ready to Make Nice” peaked at number 2 on Billboard’s *Digital Songs* chart in March 2007, while only managing to reach number 36 on Billboard’s *Hot Country*

*Songs*. This indicates country radio's reluctance to engage with the Dixie Chicks, but also suggests that a non-country audience was willing to embrace the trio. The trio used non-country formats, including VH1 and AOL Music while also partnering with iTunes to sell the album digitally (Stokes 72). While country music audiences tend to remain loyal to a favorite artist for life, and are willing to forgive an artist's mistakes and indiscretions, they do not tolerate it when an artist turns on the audience (Flippo). "Not Ready to Make Nice" was a firm declaration by the Dixie Chicks that they did not care to defer to such an audience. Rather, the trio used the single as a way to redefine their career outside of country music, while simultaneously responding to it. The Dixie Chicks remained unapologetic, and cited a strong sense of responsibility to be role models for young female fans as one reason for refusing to 'make nice' and 'back down' (Stokes 66). The use of "Not Ready to Make Nice" as the lead single post-controversy was an aggressive response by the trio to speak to the forces that marginalized them three years prior. As a response song, "Not Ready to Make Nice" reinforced a sensibility of female resistance to male hegemony that has long been a part of country music; however, the Dixie Chicks' resistance was on an enormous scale and spoke to their marginalization at the hands of the entire country music industry and its massive fan base.

The Dixie Chicks have not recorded an album since *Taking The Long Way*, which, despite critical acclaim, failed to make any lasting inroads in country radio where the boycott continued. As well, thirteen years later, history has proven Maines' comments to be justified, given the failure of the American operation in Iraq to locate any of the purported 'weapons of mass destruction'. Maines' comment resulted in considerable financial loss for the Dixie Chicks, who lost numerous sponsors, including Lipton, their

main tour sponsor (*Shut Up and Sing*). Despite debuting at number one on the Billboard Top 200 albums, and Top Country Albums (Billboard, *Dixie Chicks Album History*), the trio saw significantly lower than normal sales for *Taking the Long Way* compared to previous album sales. Their attempt to tour in support of *Taking the Long Way* failed because of low ticket sale numbers, and all subsequent tours were reduced to occasional short-leg stints in Europe and Canada (*Sing*). However, in the summer of 2016, the Dixie Chicks will embark on their first tour on American soil since 2006. Intriguingly, the band's reunion is taking place on an American political landscape that is even more divisive now than it was in 2003. Maines' re-emergence to a prominent position in popular culture in 2016 will cause her history to be recalled; however, this history will be reinterpreted in the midst of an even-more hostile American political climate, and will no doubt reinvigorate the controversy to an unknown degree.

#### 4.4 Miranda Lambert: Reinvigorating Violent Revenge

Following 9/11 and a downturn in the American economy, country music returned to a more conservative orientation that featured "family oriented, patriotic lyrics and nostalgic characteristics" to pander to an audience worn down by hardship (Malone "U.S.A. 467). For a while, drinking and cheating songs were a rarity on country radio, and were replaced by sentimental family-friendly songs including Martina McBride's "Blessed", Lonestar's "My Front Porch Looking In" and Alan Jackson's "Drive (For Daddy Gene)" (477-478). As well, songs with overtly patriotic lyrics gave way to softer military-themed songs that focused on the sacrifices of servicemen and servicewomen and their families, such as Carrie Underwood's "Just a Dream", LeAnn Rimes' "Probably

Wouldn't Be This Way" and SheDaisy's "Come Home Soon" (478). In 2005, within this context, Miranda Lambert and 2005 American Idol winner Carrie Underwood became the genre's most prominent female performers (joined by Taylor Swift in 2006), filling the void left by the Dixie Chicks.

Swift's music is laced with pop-production and tales of teen romance including "Love Story" and "Our Song"; however, Swift's relationship with country music is rather tenuous given her pop crossover appeal, leaving Underwood and Lambert as the genre's two leading female artists in an era when women are drastically underrepresented on the country music charts. The scarcity of female artists is reflected in how, since 2006, the Female Vocalist of the Year award for the ACM and CMA has gone to either Underwood or Lambert, with the only exception being 2009 when Swift won the CMA (CMA & ACM, "Winners").

Underwood's music tends to play to the post 9/11 family-oriented themes in country music with songs like "Jesus Take the Wheel" and "All-American Girl". There are a few exceptions to this, including her revenge song "Before He Cheats" in which she takes a Louisville Slugger baseball bat to her cheating lover's vehicle. Lambert's repertoire is a notable departure from the softer good-girl themes more prominently found in Underwood's music, as it features many songs that tended toward being "harsh and incendiary" (Malone "U.S.A." 488). For instance, the title track from Lambert's 2005 debut album, *Kerosene*, is a fierce revenge tune in which she burns down a cheating lover's house, and holds up a smoking gun in an effort to "find somewhere to lay the blame" (Lambert, *Kerosene*). This ferocity enabled Lambert to establish her career on the

persona of a “gun-toting, cigarette-smoking . . . woman heroine” who flaunted her “‘bad’ behavior” (Neal 14).

Immediately after the release of *Kerosene*, some critics declared that Lambert had “Dixie Chicks-like potential” due to her fierce “vocals [that] evoke Natalie Maines” (Nash). While this is in reference to the strength of Lambert’s vocal quality, the connection of her to Maines certainly connotes a particular defiance frequently associated with Maines. Other music writers refer to Lambert as “one of the most potent forces” in country music who is a “tough-talking, no-nonsense woman not to be messed with” (Ferguson). There is then a tendency to conclude that this toughness “set[s] [Lambert] apart from Taylor Swift” (“Breaking”) and other female country singers, and cements her position as the so-called leader of a new breed of female singer who is purportedly “[b]reaking the country music mold” for its female performers (“Breaking”). However, Lambert’s music is not breaking any molds; rather, her music marks the reinvigoration of a very strong (and violent) articulation of female resistance in country music. Her repertoire is rife with themes of brutal revenge directed towards cheating or abusive men that recall the violent themes found in Appalachian murderess ballads, and other murder ballads through out country music’s history.

In Appalachian folk tradition, a typical murder ballad plot followed a formula in which a “young woman is lured away from home by her lover to a secluded spot on the pretext of marriage or discussing marriage; presumably, she is pregnant. Once they go away together, he kills her to solve the problem of pregnancy or to punish her for her sexual excesses” (Hamesley). Such songs in the Appalachian tradition include “Poor Ellen Smith”, who had been “shot through the heart” and left “lying cold on the ground”

(Frank Proffitt) and “Pretty Polly”, lured out into a valley where her lover had already dug her grave, and then “stabbed her in the heart and her heart’s blood did flow” (Loveless, “Pretty”). Bill Malone observes that these violent ballads had considerable appeal to listeners, as “their tales of seduction, rape, murder, retribution, and revenge . . . were the soap operas of their day” that “brought emotional release” to rural southerners who “loved the drama and excitement of such ballads . . . and they could easily identify with the suffering or romance of the protagonists” (Malone “U.S.A” 14).

Entertainment value aside, murder ballads highlighted the dark issue of domestic abuse, and reflect the sad reality that, “[i]n song as in life, women are far more often the victims of violence than its perpetrators” (Bufwack and Oermann “Voice” 17). However, within Appalachian folk tradition, there existed several notable murder ballads in which women kill off an abusive or philandering male lover. For instance, “Frankie Silvers” tells the tale of Frances Silvers who killed her husband, Charlie, with an ax in North Carolina in 1831 (Patterson 200). Allegedly, Silvers recited the song at her public hanging in 1833 (Bufwack and Oermann 17). Other female murder ballads from Appalachia include “The Murder of Jay Legg”, the story of Sarah Ann Legg, who murdered her husband Jay in West Virginia, and “Love Henry”, the story of a woman who stabs her lover to death after discovering that he was married to someone else (17). Songs that feature women killing off abusive and cheating male lovers carries over into modern country music, as seen in Reba McEntire’s (and Vicki Lawrence) “The Night the Lights Went out in Georgia”, Martina McBride’s “Independence Day”, the Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl” and even Garth Brooks’ “The Thunder Rolls”, in which Brooks sings of



a jealous wife kills a cheating husband (the verse depicting the murder is only sung live, and was omitted from the recording).

Lambert's violent revenge songs therefore reiterate a common – and enduring – theme in country music. Within Appalachian folk culture, murder ballads functioned as a response in that it enabled expressions of “outrage and pain”, allowing healing and release (Ackley Bean *xi*) for women who needed to vicariously process their personal suffering at the hands of men. Likewise, Lambert's revenge songs are marked by extreme emotional outbursts. For instance, Lambert's second album, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, released in 2007, featured her first top-10 single (“Lambert Chart History”), “Gunpowder and Lead”, co-written by Lambert and Heather Little. Here, Lambert addresses issues of domestic violence, a familiar theme in country music:

I'm going home, gonna load my shotgun/  
 Wait by the door and light a cigarette/  
 He wants a fight, well now he's got one/  
 And he ain't seen me crazy yet/  
 Slapped my face and shook me like a ragdoll/  
 Don't that sound like a real man?/  
 I'm gonna show him what little girls are made of: gunpowder and lead  
 (“Gunpowder”).

However, Lambert's use of the word “crazy” frames her revenge with a more emotionally-driven impulse. This adds more intensity to her response in that it connotes exasperation with the conditions that provoked her response, that is, the domestic abuse she suffered and the failure of the court system to adequately protect her, where she

urgently rushes home to grab her gun in self defense, noting that she has “10 miles [to go] before he makes bail” (“Gunpowder”).

Radio programmers admitted that the theme in “Gunpowder and Lead” was “a bit rough”, yet found that the audience was enormously receptive to it and noted how very few listeners complained or demanded that the song be removed from airplay (Tucker). The violent articulation of resistance in “Gunpowder and Lead” resonated strongly with a female audience who related to the theme, and not because the female audience was “gun-toting crazies ready to off a loved one” (Tucker).

Lambert’s 2011 single, “Mama’s Broken Heart”, written by Kacey Musgraves, Shane McNally, and Brandy Clark, features a woman who, after experiencing an elaborate emotional meltdown, burns down the house of her lover in a drunken tirade:

I cut my bangs with some rusty kitchen scissors/  
 I screamed his name till the neighbors called the cops/  
 I numbed my pain at the expense of my liver/  
 Don’t know what I did next, all I know I couldn’t stop/  
 . . . Leave it to me to be holding the matches/  
 When the fire truck shows up and there’s nobody else to blame

(Lambert, “Broken”).

While Lambert’s actual act of revenge is directed towards her ex-lover, she spends a significant portion of the song justifying her actions to her mother, who, as a symbol of tradition, dictates what proper femininity ought to be: “[p]owder your nose, paint your toes/Line your lips and keep ‘em closed/Cross your legs, dot your eyes/And never let ‘em see you cry” (“Broken”). A common implication in Lambert’s lyrics (both those she

writes and those she selects from other writers) is that women are in fact driven to extreme emotional outbursts by the actions of men. While this is certainly true in “Mama’s Broken Heart”, it is also the mother’s persistent attempts to impose traditional ideals on Lambert that created the conditions for an extreme emotional outburst. Her emotions then boil over and compel her to torch her philandering lover’s home, while mockingly justifying her actions to her mother as she claims that you “[c]an’t get revenge and keep a spotless reputation/Sometimes revenge is a choice you gotta make” (“Broken”).

While contrived, Lambert’s fiery persona represents disempowered women and provides female listeners with a figure to identify with. Further, her emotional impulses and subsequent lack of composure suggest that women’s needs are often ignored and suppressed. Her violent revenge fantasies tap into extreme threads in order to generate interest from female listeners who can identify with similar needs for justice and relief from oppression. Her spirited music causes the popular press to label her as a ‘rebel’ or a ‘badass’, which, given the current scarcity of female singers on the country charts, ensures that female country singers remain vital in any conversation about the genre. In this sense, Lambert’s overtly aggressive music provides insight on the state of country music today in that this degree of aggression is what is necessary for a female singer to remain relevant in a male-dominated country music scene. Her repertoire reveals the extent of the parameters placed around female artists by a male-dominated industry where the dearth of female artists is compensated for by permitting an overtly aggressive voice to retain a female fan base that typically identifies with the genre’s themes of resistance in the music of its female singers. Regardless, though, Lambert plays to a

resistance sensibility that has clearly not gone away, and this form of female resistance song will continue as long as the sensibility continues to reflect lived experiences of female listeners.

## 4.5 Maddie and Tae: Answering ‘Bro Country

Honky-tonk bars have long been the primary space for male carousing – both as real locales and in the lyrics of country music’s male performers. The honky-tonk, portrayed in country music as a “countrified party spot”, was the setting for male performers to sing about “break[ing] their homes . . . wast[ing] their paychecks, fall[ing] off barstools, [while] burst[ing] into tears” (Ching 35). This spawned many classic male hard country laments like Thompson’s “Wild Side of Life”, and Hank Williams’ “There’s a Tear in my Beer”. Currently, male country singers have created a new ‘party spot’ that “shift[s] the scene of the party from the honky-tonk [bar] to the [college] frat house” (Rosen “Bro”). This form of male country music is known as ‘Bro Country’, a term first coined by *New York Magazine* culture critic Jody Rosen to refer pejoratively to the male artists atop the country charts and the aggressively misogynistic, party-fueled references in their lyrics. Rosen’s assessment of ‘Bro Country’ is that it is “music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude”, resulting in pervasive themes of tailgating parties, booze, and scantily clad women; in short, Bro Country is, as Rosen states, centered on “getting drunk or laid” (“Bro”).

Rosen mocks the glut of Bro Country artists currently at the top of the country charts when he sarcastically suggests that “[t]here were a whole lot of girls on last week’s *Billboard*’s ‘Hot Country Songs’ chart” (Rosen, “Problem”). Here, rather than

highlighting the success of a cluster of female country artists, Rosen indicts Bro Country for reducing females to nothing more than bikini-clad, party-hopping objects of male sexual conquest in the lyrics of numerous current chart-topping songs by male artists, including Florida Georgia Line, Luke Bryan, and Jason Aldean. Rosen contends that women artists are more marginal than at any other time in recent memory, and that any successful female artist is an exception to the “rule driven home by all the girls in the top twenty [songs]” in which women are merely “ornamental, pretty scenery at a sausage party” (“Problem”).

A brief glance at the recent output by male ‘Bro Country’ artists supports Rosen’s critique: Luke Bryan’s series of spring-break albums feature numerous college-themed party songs (“Sorority Girl”; “Spring Breakdown”; “I’m Hungover”) about getting “wasted at ocean-side keggers” (Rosen “Bro”). As well, in his 2013 hit, “That’s My Kind Of Night”, Bryan sings: “You got that sun-tan skirt and boots/Waiting on you to look my way and scoot/Your hot little self over here/Girl hand me another beer, yeah!” (“Night”). Cole Swindell sings in “Just Chillin’ It”: “I got my shades on, top back/Rollin’ with the music jacked/One on the wheel, one around you baby/Sunset, I bet there’s a chance we can get/Sure enough tangled up” (“Chillin’”). Jason Aldean’s “Burnin’ It Down” tells how, after “stirrin’ up dirty in the back of my mind” and “sippin’ on some cold Jack Daniels”, his sexual conquest is now complete as he is with a woman “laying here naked in my bed/I’m just doing my thing” (“Burnin’”).

In 2012, Florida Georgia Line’s “Cruise” became the “dominant anthem of the male-fantasy endless summer” and subsequently “crystalized” the Bro Country

movement (Crouch) despite its not-so subtle objectifying of women. In “Cruise”, lead vocalist Tyler Hubbard sings:

When I first saw that bikini top on her/  
 She’s popping right out of the south Georgia water/  
 I thought ‘oh good Lord’ she has them long tanned legs/  
 Couldn’t help myself so I walked up and said/  
 Baby, you a song, you make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise  
 (“Cruise”).

“Cruise” fixed Bro Country atop the country charts and has since become the best-selling digital country single ever with over six million downloads, and also spent twenty-four non-consecutive weeks at the top of Billboard’s *Hot Country Songs* chart (Jessen).

However, the duo has endured criticism for the objectification of women in their music, including their use of overt sexual double entendre: the duo’s 2015 single, “Sun Daze”, contains the lyrics “I’ll sit you up on the kitchen sink/Stick a pink umbrella in your drink” (“Sun”). Within country music journalism, there is also much discussion of the objectification of women evident in the duo’s concentration of gendered terms in their music. For instance, their 2014 *Anything Goes* album contains lyrics that invoke the term ‘girl’ forty-two times; ‘angel’ twenty one times; and ‘baby’ fifteen times in a fifteen-song album (Seling).

Bro Country has dominated the top of the country charts since 2012 and has gone unanswered by female artists until teenage singing duo Maddie and Tae’s 2014 single “Girl in a Country Song” challenged the sexist themes of Bro Country. Maddie Marlow and Taylor Dye joined with male songwriter Aaron Scherz to write a direct response song

to Bro Country and its objectification of women. The song was Maddie and Tae's debut single, and topped the country charts in December 2014 (Jessen and Trust). Marlow and Dye use the song to express frustration over the objectifying of women by Bro Country artists:

Being the girl in a country song/  
 How in the world did it go so wrong?/  
 Like all we're good for/  
 Is looking good for you and your friends on the weekend, nothing more/  
 We used to get a little respect/  
 Now we're lucky if we even get/  
 To climb up in your truck, keep our mouth shut and ride along/  
 And be the girl in a country song (Maddie and Tae, "Girl").

The song, which Scherz deliberately set to 78 beats per minute to match the standard tempo of Bro Country songs (Bjorke), plays on phrases from some Florida Georgia Line songs, including the Bro Country staple, "Cruise". For instance, the fantastical bikini-top woman from "Cruise" is preempted by a dose of reality as Maddie and Tae sing: "I hate the way this bikini top chafes/Do I really have to wear it all day?" ("Girl"). As well, in Florida Georgia Line's "Get Your Shine On", Hubbard tells a woman to "slide that little sugar shaker over here" ("Shine"), to which Taylor and Dye retort: "there ain't no sugar for you in this shaker of mine" ("Girl").

While most female answer songs have tended to focus on a response to one male song, Maddie and Tae increase the complexity of answer songs as they address a cluster

of Bro Country anthems, including Thomas Rhett's 2013 single "Get Me Some of That", a song that details a man's rather stalker-esque pursuit of an attractive female:

Tryin' to come up with somethin' smooth/  
 And waitin' on the right time to make my move/  
 . . . You're shaking that money-maker/  
 Like a heartbreaker, like your college major was/  
 Twistin' and tearin' up Friday nights/  
 Love the way you're wearing those jeans so tight/  
 . . . I've never seen nothin' that I wanted so bad/  
 Girl I gotta get me, gotta get me some of that/  
 . . . Gotta get your number in my phone/  
 Gotta get me some of you alone (Rhett, "Get")

Maddie and Tae respond: "Shakin' my money maker ain't ever made me a dime", and then, "Tell me one more time, 'you gotta get you some of that' . . . you're gonna get slapped" ("Girl").

The list of male artists indicted by Marlow and Dye continues, as the duo confront Bro Country themes in songs by Blake Shelton, Tyler Farr, Jason Aldean, and Billy Currington (Hight) at other moments in their song, including the objectifying clichés that make women anonymous: "I hear you over there on your tailgate whistlin'/Sayin', 'hey girl', but you know I ain't listenin'/Cuz I got a name, and to you it ain't 'pretty little thing', 'honey', or baby'" ("Girl"). "Girl in a Country Song" is somewhat well received by male artists, including Chase Rice, who tweeted in support (Hight) despite his own Bro Country tendencies. For example, in "Ready Set Roll", as he invites a girl to "[g]et



your fine little ass on the step/Shimmy up in side/Just slide girl, by my side girl/We can run this town and I can rock your world” (“Ready”).

However, while “Girl in a Country Song” clearly builds on the response song discourse that has existed through out country music history, there is the possibility that it also reinforces the embedded gendered ideology that it attempts to disrupt. In *Natural Acts*, Pamela Fox argues that, in answer songs, women are forced to assume an inferior position to men, and must respond to men from a subjugated position within a pre-established discourse. The binary nature of the male-female dialogue “dictates the formal as well as conceptual patterns of answer songs and restricts the material setting in which women artists might actually perform them” (Fox 92). Thus, an answer song reproduces [gendered] ideology because “the very repetitiveness of this citational practice inevitably reconstitutes its gendered performances” (93).

Given this, “Girl in a Country Song” could be interpreted as the latest instance of a gendered response by female country performers that merely reiterate ideological deficiencies in country music without actualizing change. Marlow and Dye’s song is clearly located in the long history of female answer songs in country music that respond directly to songs by male artists. Fox implies that this long-standing tradition limits the ability of answer songs to articulate anything new because it is a seemingly tired and recycled format. However, Fox’s assertion places too much emphasis on form, and not on the text, which must be explored because it provides unique, commentary on a specific manifestation of sexism in country music. In this instance, the lyrics of “Girl in a Country Song” expose the overtly sexist formulations in Bro Country. Marlow and Dye use the response song as a platform to resist the culture of male privilege reinforced by

the Bro Country, but also to comment on how this has gone unchecked by the country music industry. Thus, their answer is not just a continuation of a performative recitation in a song form that holds no power to raise awareness of issues. Rather, Marlow and Dye's interrogation is resistant on multiple levels: by asking the question "how in the world did it go so wrong?", ("Girl") they invite a broad investigation into who exactly is responsible for the current state of sexist Bro Country music.

As part of the response song tradition, Maddie and Tae reveal that the immediate culprits in promulgating sexist themes in Bro Country are the male artists. However, one must also consider the radio formats that propelled Bro Country to the top of the charts. The rap and hip-hop inflections in Bro Country benefit the country music industry by broadening its appeal to a wider, younger (and mostly female audience), and are reflected in the airplay trends. Florida Georgia Line, Jason Aldean, and Luke Bryan have regularly been in the top-5 on Billboard's year-end *Country Airplay Artists* charts (*Billboard*, 'Country Airplay Charts' 2012-2015). This suggests that the country music industry, as one of the "last bastions of male chauvinism in the music industry" (Keel 169), privileges the profits generated by the crossover appeal of its Bro Country artists despite the music's pervasive sexism. Despite the boom Bro Country has brought to the country music industry by blurring genre lines, Maddie and Tae's song insists that there is an issue with an industry that relegates women to mere props in pick up trucks in order to generate fan interest and sales.

More subtly, Maddie and Tae challenge the relationship between Bro Country artists and their fans. For instance, Florida Georgia Line's Brian Kelley, when asked what he thought about "Girl in a Country Song" as an indictment of his music,

responded: “I don’t know one girl who doesn’t want to be the girl in a country song. That’s all I’m gonna say” (“Feud Continues”). There is therefore a male-centric attitude among Bro Country artists that assume female fans are flattered by how some women are portrayed in their songs. The number of female fans who have flocked to Bro Country bolsters Kelley’s belief: for instance, while watching Luke Bryan gyrate his hips while performing his Bro Country anthem “Country Girl (Shake it For Me)”, one 20-year old female fan blushed as she confessed: “Oh my God, I cried!” (Boesveld). Marlow and Dye’s song problematizes these responses, indicting the male artist and his fans for negotiating a relationship based on sex appeal and the perpetuation of misogyny in the name of flattery.

## 4.6 Concluding Thoughts

In July 2015, country radio executive Keith Hill, who oversees three hundred country radio stations, claimed that in order to bolster ratings, female country artists must be played less on radio. Hill used a rather bizarre food analogy to explain the need for disparity; he claims that country radio is like a salad in which “[t]he lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that”, and women must accept a secondary role as “[t]he tomatoes of our [country radio] salad” (Strecker). Hill’s comments sparked outrage from the genre’s female singers, including Miranda Lambert who dismissed Hill’s remarks as “the biggest bunch of bullshit I have ever heard”, and Martina McBride, who used Facebook to converse with her fans about the issue and specifically ask her female listeners to re-consider how country radio evaluates their female fan base (Strecker).

Clearly, issues involving male aggression are still as resonant today as they were over a century ago, when Appalachian women were subjugated to male rule in the home, and were often victims of domestic violence. Appalachian women used music as a vehicle to vocalize their suffering, and justified even the most violent of songs because, at the very least, the songs “spoke the truth” about their situations (Bufwack and Oermann “Voice” 6). Instances of male aggression are still an issue over a century later, even within the country music industry in which female singers take repeated shots at the genre’s tendency to reinforce –and permit – the propagation of gender stereotypes. While the response song has taken on new referents and more complex articulations, it remains that response songs function to resist specific manifestations of aggression produced by the sexism that is rampant in the country music industry.

These songs are read as texts in a pre-existing social context that still privileges patriarchy; however, female response and revenge songs continue to refute such male-centric ideologies, exposing and challenging the practices that depend upon them. Within the realm of country music, then, despite the pervasiveness of patriarchy, the genre’s female artists use response and revenge songs to bring attention to the ways in which patriarchal ideology permits male aggression, and, through their acts of resistance, disrupt its aim to devalue women entirely.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Conclusions and Further Research

#### 5.1 Summary

In this study, I have explored how the theme of female resistance has played out in country music throughout the genre's history. This resistance deviates from common assumptions about female country performers in which the conservative ideology that privileges patriarchy remains strong. As I have demonstrated, the rhetoric that brands female singers who perform resistance songs as 'badasses' or 'rebels' is decidedly short-sighted: while these labels suggest that there is something that women are rebelling against, it fails to consider the entire body of music performed by female country singers throughout the genre's history. Therefore, I have examined how the specific historical context of Appalachian women and their musical practices originally shaped a particular expression of female resistance in country music that centered on women's domestic concerns and subordination to men. I then elaborate on how themes of female resistance have been sustained and updated in country music ever since.

I then explore how, in subsequent eras of country music, the theme of female resistance has endured through various (and more complex) forms, including the response songs that answer objectifying and subordinating male country lyrics and trends; violent and aggressive revenge songs in which women take drastic action against a male oppressor; domestic critique songs that include lamentation songs in which women continue to complain about the obligatory nature of their domestic roles, and appropriation songs that permit women to reject domestic responsibility in favor of

pleasure and assuming male cultural roles. All of these expressions of resistance implicate the patriarchal structure of social roles and gender relations that privilege male attributes in female suffering. In doing so, female country singers today continue to grapple with the same issues as those a century before them.

In chapter two, I elucidated the musical practices of Appalachian women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who used music to vent about their marginalization and confinement in the domestic realm. Their music functioned to lament their lives confined to hard domestic labor and constant child-rearing, and to provide warnings to other younger, single females about how marriage drastically limits their agency and mobility. Further, given the strong connection of Appalachian people to evangelical Christianity, women's private musical practices also afforded them a space to theologially process their personal suffering through using songs as theodicy. These songs both questioned why God would permit such suffering and contained figurative language that would allow women to vocalize aggressive and often violent fantasies of escape or revenge. Appalachian women used music as a way to share their common experiences and were passed on by female relatives, thus preserving a body of music that had considerable value to them.

In chapter two, I also discussed how Appalachian women's articulations of resistance then entered the popular music stream in the 1920s as part of the repertoires of several female performers, including Roba Stanley, Sara Carter, and Maybelle Carter and appealed to an audience who was familiar with these songs. Given the strong resistance themes in Appalachian women's ballads, this sensibility remained in country music, even

as the genre evolved into a more profit-driven industry based in Nashville, and is evident in the music of Kitty Wells, Loretta Lynn, and Wanda Jackson.

In chapter three, I argued that, as country music continued to evolve into the late 1980s and 1990s, domestic critique songs remained a vital part of the repertoires of female singers. I examined Shania Twain's work, in which the tone of her domestic critique emphasized women's prerogatives for fun and pleasure. Twain enacted her domestic critique through a role-reversal where she rejected her presumed role in the home and obtained pleasure through an appropriation of male cultural spaces. Her commercial success sparked a wave of female artists who then dominated the country scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s with similar strong, assertive expressions of femininity. Despite Twain's focus on fun, there remained a more pointed critique, as seen in the sarcastic lyrics of Deana Carter's "Did I Shave My Legs for This?" and in Kacey Musgraves' cynical "Merry Go Round" and "Stupid". Despite knee-jerk references by the popular press that framed these artists as either a 'new wave' (Twain and Carter) of female or 'badasses' (Musgraves) in an effort to bolster commercial appeal, Twain, Carter, and Musgraves continued to uphold the tradition of women's resistance in country music through their critiques of domesticity.

In chapter four, I demonstrated that resistance is evident in various response and revenge songs in the repertoires of female country singers within the last 20 years. I argued that, for the Dixie Chicks, resistance played out beyond the themes found in their musical texts. Their musical texts came to represent their own ideological position and fueled an intentional push-back against the country music industry in a fight for creative control. This is evident early on in the Dixie Chicks' career, in which the trio used the

provocative lyrics of “Sin Wagon” and “Goodbye Earl” on their second album, *Fly*, to intentionally irritate their label, Sony/Nashville Monument. In doing so, I suggest that the Dixie Chicks’ deliberately resisted the ‘typical’ conceptions of passive, compliant women in country music by consistently provoking the male label executives who sought to control the trio’s creative output.

Following this, I examined the massive controversy after lead singer Natalie Maines’ remarks about President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. I argued that, after enduring vicious, gendered backlash from the conservative country music industry and its fan base, the trio’s first single released post-controversy, “Not Ready to Make Nice”, was a decidedly defiant answer song that articulates trio’s resistance against those who spoke so harshly against them. The defiance in the lyrics, and in the trio’s deliberate use of the song as their first single after the controversy, reveals the extent to which the Dixie Chicks refused to make amends with the country music industry that alienated them after the controversy.

I then discussed the landscape of country music post-9/11 (and post-Dixie Chicks), in which female artists are noticeably scarce in chart representation and radio airplay, except for Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert. Lambert’s repertoire of violent forms of resistance songs positions her squarely within the tradition of female resistance in country music – and not as some mold-breaking rebel, as country music journalism frequently portrays her. By connecting Lambert to country music’s history, I argue that the ‘rebel’ rhetoric most frequently associated with her obscures her position in the broader context of country music, and the on-going presence of female resistance in country music.



I conclude chapter four by elucidating the male-led ‘Bro-Country’ trend that has dominated the country charts in recent years. ‘Bro Country’ songs contained strong misogynistic themes that have gone largely unchecked within the country music industry. I then look at how female singing duo Maddie and Tae’s “Girl in a Country Song” is a direct indictment of certain male Bro Country artists whose lyrics objectify women, and how the duo’s response song is a resistant measure that challenges how and why this misogyny persists. I argue that this indictment ought to extend beyond just the Bro Country artists themselves, and should also include the country music industry that promotes strong sexist themes, and the audience that purchases these commodities.

## 5.2 Further Research

There are numerous potential directions that invite further study on the facets of female resistance found in country music. To start, I find the music sharing practices of Appalachian women to be fascinating. Throughout my own reading and research, I discovered numerous sources that superficially acknowledge the idea that Appalachian men’s musical practices existed in public spheres, while women’s remained private. Thus, further research could explore these expressions of resistance in Appalachian women’s music through the lens of private and public sphere theories. While this acknowledgement of private spheres certainly aided and framed portions of my study, further exploration permits a more thorough elucidation.

I am also interested in how the folk revival of the 1960s reintroduced numerous Appalachian ballads into the popular music stream. These musicians (including the Weavers and the Kingston Trio) noted the “authenticity and truth in the voices [and song lyrics] of . . . Appalachia, voices that gave expression to their feelings, validity to their

social concerns, and a framework to their own songs” (Bufwack and Oermann 239). During the folk revival, Appalachian songs were used to resist the political establishments of the day, and also used to address social issues. I am curious about the themes of resistance in Appalachian music that seem to resonate so strongly with musicians and audiences in later eras, and why these songs are constantly ascribed a particular legitimacy when it comes to articulating resistance.

I believe that the Dixie Chicks present a most intriguing case study that could take multiple directions in scholarship. The trio’s anti-establishment ethos pervaded their music and their business practices from the outset of their commercial careers, and includes numerous other incidents beyond the scope of this study. For instance, the trio recorded their third studio album, *Home*, in Texas in order to escape the pressures from their Nashville-based label. The trio deliberately reverted back to their pre-commercial traditional bluegrass sound in *Home* by including no drums and a much heavier string-instrument inflection that countered the commercial sound that pervaded their first two albums. The album inserts for *Home* declared that the Dixie Chicks were using the album to “change the way we do business” (Dixie Chicks, *Home*).

Further, the Dixie Chicks also sued Sony/Nashville Monument in 2001 for withheld royalties totaling \$4.1 million (Dansby). Threatening to void their contracts, the Dixie Chicks settled the dispute with Sony privately. Financials were not disclosed, but the trio were given their own label, “Wide Open Records”, which allowed them more creative control and higher royalty rates while still having albums distributed by Sony/Nashville Monument. Given this, I believe that a political economic analysis of the Dixie Chicks’ business practices is an inviting prospect for research.

Lastly, Dixie Chicks' rise to the top of the country music world, and then their complete downfall and subsequent marginalization invites examination into how this affects female artists in country music today, in which some suggest that "the specter of the Dixie Chicks . . . hangs over any subsequent [female] act that might be judged as incendiary, aggressive, or political" (Crouch). I am curious of the extent to which the expulsion of the Dixie Chicks factors into the current scarcity of women at the forefront of country music, as very few female artists receive prominent radio airplay and even fewer achieve any sustained chart presence. There has also been a major shift in form from the late 1990s to the present: while Shania Twain led a spate of female-empowerment songs that formerly dominated the charts, there is a rather curious regression and much lost ground in female representation, aside from Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood. Further study could investigate if this just a regular cycle, or if there are more subtle industry forces at play. In light of this, other areas of research could compare the country music industry's relationships between its male and female artists.

### 5.3 Implications

Certainly, the bold assertions of female resistance in country music can be analyzed through a multitude of theoretical lenses. Because of the limited amount of scholarship on country music, and specifically women in country music, I opted to build upon the discourses that focused on women throughout the genre's history in order to validate a particular theme in country music's variegated repertoire that has long been ignored in scholarship or misrepresented in the popular press. Connecting the resistance

repertoires of female singers in the current era to the broader tradition of female resistance in country music history illuminates what I believe is a burgeoning new area of study in popular music, and allows other theoretical lenses to be applied with more specificity.

## 5.4 Significance

I have demonstrated that women in country music have been railing about their marginalization at the hands of a dominant male culture for more than a century. Given that the general message of these texts has not changed in nearly a century, I am very much aware that the female resistance space in country music is not utopian by any means. While these songs offer women an outlet to articulate and share their experiences and invite understanding to their issues, it lacks the capacity to enact any real, sustained social change (despite the best efforts of the Dixie Chicks). However, this does not negate the effectiveness of this stream of music to provide a voice for marginalized women. I believe that, because this theme pervades the musical repertoires of female performers in country music, it illuminates the severity of the issue of male aggression and the degree to which male privilege remains entrenched in culture because these messages continue to find a receptive audience.

Female resistance texts are meaningful in that they invite understanding of women's issues despite a country music industry that embodies conservative ideologies that tend to limit women and their responses. Specifically, these texts bring to light real issues faced by women, including the devastating reality of domestic violence. Thus, any conjecture that suggests these female resistance songs are merely performative markers of authenticity, or simply function as an appealing form that exists solely to generate

profit, is dangerous because it trivializes women's experiences by prioritizing an artist's position and status over a sometimes tragic reality.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have focused on the sustained female resistance in country music, arguing for a consideration of the broader context of women in country music history when evaluating the repertoires of the genre's recent and most current female artists. Consider newcomer Brandy Clark's "Crazy Women", which is a response to male philandering that borrows elements from Kitty Wells and Miranda Lambert, who, in turn, borrow elements from other female country predecessors:

She drove around, she found his car/  
 They heard a boom from in the bar/  
 He called the cops, she called his bluff/  
 They hauled her off in high heels and handcuffs/  
 Crazy women, ex-wives, and old girlfriends/  
 Keep their crazy hidden 'till they're pushed off the deep end/  
 God forgive them, they weren't born like this/  
 Oh no, crazy women are made by crazy men (Brandy Clark, "Crazy").

We can be sure, then, that Heather Ann Ackley Bean's assertion of Appalachian women's ballads functioning as the legitimate "cries of person's betrayed" (*xii*) remains true more than a century later as it continues to be expressed in resistance songs found in the repertoires of female country singers.

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