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The Dixie Chicks: A Case Study in the Racial and Gendered History of Country Music

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**The Dixie Chicks:
A Case Study in the Racial and Gendered History of Country Music**

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Advisor: Professor Leigh Gilmore

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies

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Introduction

In recent years, activists and fans have pushed the music industry to address gender and race disparities, an issue that garnered widespread debate when only one woman, Alessia Cara, was recognized for a solo award at the 2018 Grammy Awards.¹ Like the 2015 #oscarssowhite protest that sought to bring attention to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in Hollywood, this activism shed a light on the structural limitations of participation and success in the music industry. Referring to this controversy, Neil Portnow, Chief Executive of the Recording Academy, the organization that awards the Grammys, commented, “That moment kind of shed a light on an issue that needed attention, and that is a lack of diversity in the industry...and if the light that was shed becomes a catalyst for change, then you can feel that it had a reason and a value.”²

Following the 2018 criticism, the Recording Academy organized a task force to, “‘identify the various barriers and unconscious biases faced by underrepresented communities’ at the academy and in the wider industry.”³ The Recording Academy used this controversy as an opportunity to address gender and racial inequities in the wider recording industry; however, some genres perpetuate these inequities more than others. Most notably, it has taken a long time to spotlight the sexism and racism in the country music industry. Country music, which has a contemporary reputation for being conservative, patriotic, and patriarchal has recently been confronted about exclusion within the genre by female artists, fans, and other members of the industry.

¹ Respers France, “Grammys Put #MeToo, Time’s Up Center Stage, but Where Were the Women Winners?”

² Sisario, “Can the Grammys Please Anyone?”

³ Sisario.

Specifically, the lack of female representation on country music radio has been garnering attention from the media, industry experts, and artists affected by this gender imbalance. In 2019, research put out by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that between 2014 and 2018 only 16% of the artists in the top 500 songs in country music were female.⁴ Additionally, no women over the age of 40 are represented on these charts. In comparison, the average age for male artists on these charts is 42.⁵ This indicates that men are being allowed to have longer careers in country music, while women are aging out of the genre and industry.

In addition, Reba McEntire, the female country artist who hosted the American Country Music (ACM) Awards on April 7th, 2019, expressed disappointment ahead of the awards show that so few women were being considered for entertainer of the year.⁶ Following McEntire's statements, ACM's president announced the launch of a taskforce to examine the barriers and biases that impact women and other underrepresented groups in country music in March 2019.⁷

The current controversy surrounding African American hip-hop artist Lil Nas X's song "Old Town Road (I Got Horses in the Back)" has started a conversation about racism in the country music industry. Lil Nas X's song, a country hip-hop crossover, was originally charting on three *Billboard* Charts: the Hot 100, Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs and Hot Country Songs. However, once the song began to gain popularity, *Billboard* removed it from the country chart, inciting a discussion about race in country music. *Billboard's* decision led members of the music

⁴ "No Country for Female Artists Artist and Songwriter Gender on Popular Country Charts from 2014 to 2018." 1.

⁵ "No Country for Female Artists Artist and Songwriter Gender on Popular Country Charts from 2014 to 2018." 2, 4.

⁶ Betts, "Reba McEntire on Lack of Women ACM Nominees: 'I Was Very Disappointed'."

⁷ Sawyer, "Academy of Country Music Creates Diversity Task Force."

industry to question why white artists are afforded more creative license in generating country music with pop, hip-hop, and rock influences.⁸

These contemporary discussions are part of a longer history of systematic exclusion and gatekeeping within the country music genre. By looking to this history, we can better understand how exclusion in country music continues to operate today. Country music's treatment of the Dixie Chicks, an all-female country music trio, following their anti-war comments in 2003 represents the most sensationalized historical example of exclusion within the country genre. This thesis uses this controversy, the Dixie Chicks' protest, and the Dixie Chicks' subsequent reinvention as a case study to explore how history, gender, race, class, and politics operate to exclude and control the participation of certain groups and identities in the country music genre.

The Dixie Chicks were one of country music's most popular groups through the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, Kyle Young, director of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, compared the Dixie Chicks to country music legends, saying, "When I think of them, I think of people like Willie Nelson and the Judds and Garth Brooks, who have taken something, built on it and created something new. When that happens, it's almost as assurance that they'll have longevity."⁹ From 1998 to 2003, the Dixie Chicks won thirteen Academy of Country Music awards, six Billboard Music Awards, and seven Grammy awards.¹⁰ However, during a concert in London in 2003, Natalie Maines, the group's lead singer, made a comment about the United States' impending invasion of Iraq, "We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed

⁸ Molanphy, "The Controversy Over 'Old Town Road' Reveals Problems Beyond Just Race"; Omeokwe, "Lil Nas X, Country Music's Unlikely Son, Sparks Conversation On Genre And Race."

⁹ Skanse, "Hot Chicks."

¹⁰ "Dixie Chicks"; "Winners Database"; "Winners."

that the President of the United States is from Texas.” The result was a violent reaction and protest from many country music listeners.¹¹

The highly publicized national controversy that followed these comments demonstrates the close contemporary connections among patriotism, populism, and country music, but also suggests the historical importance of gender and race in country music. Following their antiwar comments, the Dixie Chicks were banned from country music radio stations in 2003, an intentional and motivated instance of exclusion in the country music genre. In some cases, stations determined to stop playing them, while in other cases, large radio conglomerates made the decision to stop playing the Dixie Chicks’ music at a corporate level.¹² The Dixie Chicks experienced a swift and violent correction when they made a comment that was perceived by some country music listeners, radio stations, political commentators, and other members of the American public as unpatriotic and unaligned with what country music represented. This reaction initially surprised the Dixie Chicks, a feeling that Natalie Maines captured by commenting on the scandal, “Everything was so bizarre it was almost humorous, I just could not believe people cared what I said.”¹³ However, the gendered and racialized history of country music helps provide a backdrop for the scandal that erupted following these comments.

This thesis shows how country music developed as a genre rife with anxieties about race, class, and gender. Conjointly, the heightened patriotic and nationalistic sentiment that emerged following the 9/11 terrorist attacks empowered members of the country music community to act swiftly and violently in adjudicating and excluding the Dixie Chicks from the genre.

¹¹ History.com Editors, “The Dixie Chicks Backlash Begins.”

¹² “Dixie Chicks Pulled from Air after Bashing Bush”; Sanders, “Senators Scold Radio Chain for Tuning Out Dixie Chicks: HOME EDITION.”

¹³ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia, *Shut Up & Sing*. 1:04:41 - 1:04:49.

Additionally, country music history has been selectively utilized as a way for politicians to connect with working class white voters, starting with a speech given by President Richard Nixon in 1974, which has caused many country listeners to view country music as inherently politically conservative.¹⁴ This view of country music renders the Dixie Chicks' criticism of President Bush as incompatible with what many believe country music to represent.

Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a full historical account of the racial and gendered dimensions of country music, I will show how the perceived whiteness and maleness of country music represents a selective history, at odds with the diverse reality of musical practices that make up what we know today as country music. I will look at specific episodes that trouble the idea that the country genre is white and male in order to expose the well documented counter history that lies beneath the facade. In this effort, I am guided by intersectional feminist theory, an analytical framework that attends both to the “interlocking forms of oppression” that impact women of color, in particular, and to the systemic inequalities related to those oppressions that impact that lives of women broadly, people of color, the queer, and disabled.¹⁵ The term intersectionality was coined in feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's 1989, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” in which she centers her analysis around the experiences of black women to expose how it is insufficient to treat gender and race and exclusive categories of “experience and analysis.”¹⁶

Because intersectionality is interested in identities, it offers a lens for analyzing who has been excluded from country music and why. Because intersectionality is concerned with

¹⁴ Jackson, “Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music.” 1-2.

¹⁵ Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*. 28, 21, 29.

¹⁶ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” 139; Cooper, “Intersectionality.” 1.

structural inequality, it also offers a way to expose who benefits from disparities of power and how. Intersectionality is especially relevant for my project because of the central role of white, male gatekeepers in policing who can and cannot be considered “authentically” country and the way that histories of country music involving people of color and women go unacknowledged. I will show how these forces help to contextualize the treatment and exclusion of the Dixie Chicks and other members of minority groups within the country music genre. Finally, this case study underscores the importance of social protest and organization in contemporary country music.

Background on the Dixie Chicks and Controversy

Hailing from Texas, the Dixie Chicks began their career as a bluegrass group in 1989. Original band members included sisters Martie and Emily Erwin, who would later marry and change their names to Martie Maguire and Emily Robison, and Laura Lynch.¹⁷ In 1995, Laura Lynch left the group and Natalie Maines joined as lead singer. The Dixie Chicks found their first commercial success in 1998 with the album *Wide Open Spaces*.¹⁸ The Dixie Chicks first headlined their own tour, *Fly*, in 2000.¹⁹ In 2003, while anticipating their second tour, *Top of the World*, the Dixie Chicks performed the national anthem at Super Bowl XXVII.²⁰

At the beginning of their careers the Dixie Chicks were portrayed as fun-loving, all-American, heterosexual, blonde girls from Texas. Robison, Maguire, and Maines are all conventionally-attractive white women, and when they first found success in the late 1990s, they

¹⁷ During the final week that I was working on this thesis, I learned that Emily Robison has changed her name to Emily Strayer. Throughout the controversy and the subsequent period of her career that I analyze here, her name was Robison. I will refer to her as Robison throughout the thesis.

¹⁸ Burns, “Dixie Chicks”; Leahey, “Dixie Chicks Biography.”

¹⁹ Flippo, “Dixie Chicks Gear Up For Massive Road Trip.”

²⁰ Zaleski, “16 Years Ago: Shania Twain and the Dixie Chicks Take over Super Bowl XXXVII.”

were all blondes. In a 1999 interview with *Country Weekly* magazine, Emily Robison commented that, “The best part is dispelling the myth about women playing music -- you know the old stereotypical blonde thing... Half the fun is having guys say, ‘Oh God, an all-girl band.’ And then blowing their socks off!”²¹ Additionally, all of the band members talk openly about their romantic relationships with men in interviews.²² Furthermore, in an interview in 2000, Maines spoke openly about wanting to become a mother.²³ When the Dixie Chicks achieved commercial success, they were very strategic about the way that they chose to present themselves in order to fit into the industry. Simon Renshaw, the Dixie Chicks’ manager at the time, explains the way that he helped the Dixie Chicks to change in order to become attractive to a modern country music audience:

I met the Chicks in 1994. There they were, and they had their hair really big, and they had hoop dresses on, and the spangles, and the cowboy hats. And they went on stage and they performed these songs which were pretty bad, basically western swing, very old-fashioned very not contemporary. But the one thing that was very, very clear was that they were three beautiful girls, and incredibly talented, and they could really play, and if they had a willingness to kind of like change direction moving more into a contemporary country music space, there actually could be a really interesting slot for them. We had to go out, we had to find the right material, and we had to develop it into something new.²⁴

Early in their careers, the Dixie Chicks were strategic in shaping their appearance to conform to the standards for femininity in country music.

²¹ Holden, “Ruling the Country Roost.” 19.

²² Holden, “Murder Mayhem On the Set of the Chicks New Video.” 29.

²³ Holden, “Murder Mayhem On the Set of the Chicks New Video.” 29.

²⁴ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia, *Shut Up & Sing*. 00:29:35-00:30:22.

Their strategic navigation of the country music industry included their band name. The use of the word “Dixie” in their name serves to associate them with the southern United States, and maybe even the confederacy, which suggests another instance where they are representing industry norms. In reference to the scandal, Martie Maguire commented, “It had to be somebody or some group that seemed like the all-American girls. It was perfect. It had to be the unlikely voice from what looked like the conservative heart of America saying it. That was perfect.”²⁵ Here Maguire acknowledges that she can understand why their comment may have been shocking to some listeners, as the group in many ways embodied country music prescriptions and norms, and they disrupted many people's conception of them when they spoke out against the Iraq War.

However, this strategic navigation of the country industry combined with their musical talent helped the Dixie Chicks become the best-selling female band of all time in the United States.²⁶ The group’s successful trajectory was undeniably altered by comments that Natalie Maines made during the 2003 London performance, causing a scandal that resulted in the Dixie Chicks being swiftly banned from country music radio. The Dixie Chicks were performing in Europe on a promotional tour for their upcoming *Top of the World Tour*, and their London concert was on March 10th, 2003, nine days before the United States invasion of Iraq. At the time, Londoners were protesting the US rush to war, and during their concert Maines expressed solidarity with the anti-war protesters, stating, “Just 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.”²⁷

²⁵ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 1:04:49-1:05:07.

²⁶ Casey, “The 20 Top-Selling Country Acts of All Time: Who’s Bringing Home the Bacon . . . And Frying It Too?”

²⁷ History.com Editors, “The Dixie Chicks Backlash Begins”; “War in Iraq Begins.”

In a review of this concert for British newspaper, *The Guardian*, columnist Betty Clarke wrote, “‘Just so you know,’ says singer Natalie Maines, ‘we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas.’”²⁸ While Clarke did not include Maines’ entire quote, this abridged statement was quickly picked up by American newspapers. On March 14, 2003, *CNN* reported that, “country stations across the United States have pulled the Chicks from playlists following reports that lead singer Natalie Maines said in a concert in London earlier this week that she was ‘ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.’”²⁹ Station managers said that they were responding to requests from listeners who had called in asking that they stop playing the Dixie Chicks. The same *CNN* article reported that, “one station in Kansas City, Missouri held a Dixie ‘chicken toss’ party Friday morning, where Chick critics were encouraged to dump the group’s tapes, CDs and concert tickets into trash cans.”³⁰

This marked only the beginning of a national controversy. In the months that followed, the majority of country music stations stopped playing the Dixie Chicks’ music, and former fans boycotted their concerts. The Dixie Chicks’ radio censoring received attention from the Senate Commerce Committee when in July 2003, Cumulus Media Inc., one of the United States’ largest radio broadcasters, was reprimanded by Senator John McCain for its decision to ban the Dixie Chicks from some of its stations the following spring. McCain had concerns about this decision prohibiting the exercise of free speech, pointing out that the decision to ban the Dixie Chicks from the radio was made at the corporate level, rather than the station level. Referring to the the banning at the corporate level, McCain said, “It’s a strong argument about what media concentration has the possibility of doing...If someone else offends you, and you decide to censor

²⁸ Clarke, “The Dixie Chicks.”

²⁹ “Dixie Chicks Pulled from Air after Bashing Bush.”

³⁰ “Dixie Chicks Pulled from Air after Bashing Bush.”

those people...the erosion of our 1st Amendment is in progress.” At the time, Cumulus was the second largest radio broadcaster in the United States with about 250 stations. In the hearing Cumulus maintained that it made the decision to ban the Dixie Chicks from some stations based on listener complaints.³¹

Clayton Elton, a Program Director for KJ 97, a San Antonio country music station explains that, “No other artist that we play on the radio would get the kind of hate mail and complaint calls and ‘I’m never listening to you again’, and ‘I’m never doing business with you again.’ No one gets that. I could probably put Marilyn Manson on the radio station and not get that kind of negative feedback, even though we’re a country station.”³² This comment highlights the force of the crusade against the Dixie Chicks.

Many country music listeners were furious that the Dixie Chicks had spoken out against the President of the United States and against the war, reading these comments as unpatriotic and unaligned with country music. Some of these reactions are collected in the 2006 documentary, *Shut Up and Sing*, which follows the Dixie Chicks before, during, and after their 2003 comment about the Iraq War and President Bush. One woman is pictured throwing away her Dixie Chicks CDs, explaining, “I liked them, you know but, for what they said, it’s trash.”³³

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* provides a useful framework to help explain the intensity of the the backlash against the Dixie Chicks. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson explored the origins of nationalism, arguing that the rise of print capitalism, “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others,

³¹ Sanders, “Senators Scold Radio Chain for Tuning Out Dixie Chicks.”

³² Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:46:43-00:46:58.

³³ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:11:01-00:11:05.

in profoundly new ways.”³⁴ Anderson uses the example of the widespread reading of newspapers, explaining that each person who reads the paper everyday, “is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being repeated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose his existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion,” and in turn this knowledge allows readers to create an “imagined community.”³⁵ Anderson argues that it then becomes possible to imagine a nation, because individuals feel connected through these imagined communities that are made possible through print capitalism, “the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.”³⁶ In my analysis of the Dixie Chicks and the backlash that they faced from the country music community, I have found it useful to conceptualize country music listeners as having their own sense of imagined community. Listening to much of the same music on the radio, country music listeners can conceptualize that there are thousands of other people who are listening to the same broadcast as they are listening to, and listeners can imagine people all around the country listening to similar country music radio broadcasts. If country music listeners imagine that all of these community members are similar to them, then any perceived transgression of this imagined space would be disturbing. In 2003, much of the country community who turned their backs on the Dixie Chicks would have imagined the country music community to be politically conservative, white, and male, the histories of which I will explore further in the next chapter.

³⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 36.

³⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 35.

³⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 46.

Scholar Kristine M. McCusker looks at how imagined communities began to develop during the barn dance radio shows of the early to mid 1900s. Country music evolved from this barn dance tradition, where different entertainment acts would perform in a country variety show and be broadcasted on radio. In *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance*, McCusker argues that, “On barn dance radio in these early years, stage shows served as tools to integrate like-minded migrants, forging a new ‘imagined community’ that welcomed some Midwestern and Southern migrants but excluded others.”³⁷ These performances helped, “to realize relationships based on common experiences and a common love for music.”³⁸ The concept of an imagined community within country music persisted through 2003, and many listeners use their conception of this community to judge who can and who cannot be considered authentically country. The Dixie Chicks’ liberal comment transgressed this imagined space, and the backlash against them was swift and zealous.

Station-sponsored events where listeners could come to throw away their Dixie Chicks CDs, popular at the time of the scandal, provide an example of this backlash. This provided an opportunity for country music community members to come together over their feelings that the Dixie Chicks has crossed the line of what they considered to be acceptable within the genre. These events effectively functioned as station-sponsored endorsement of the anger that their listeners were feeling, and they provided a site where listeners could share in their punishment of the Dixie Chicks. Notably, many country music fans went beyond expressing anger and also declared a desire for violence. In her book, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne has

³⁷ McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio*. 31.

³⁸ McCusker. 31.

argued that misogyny, often manifesting as violence towards women, functions as patriarchy's enforcement mechanism in maintaining gendered hierarchy:

We should think of misogyny as serving to uphold patriarchal order, understood as one strand among various similar systems of domination (including racisms, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on). Misogyny does this by visiting hostile or adverse social consequences on a certain (more or less circumscribed) class of girls or women to enforce and police social norms that are gendered either in theory (i.e., content) or in practice (i.e., norm enforcement mechanisms).³⁹

In one instance of this violence, *Shut Up and Sing* shows a man calling into 61 Country, a Kansas City country music station, "They should send Natalie over to Iraq, strap her to a bomb, and just drop her over Baghdad."⁴⁰ This comment highlights the violence that many former fans were advocating, and the decision of the country music radio stations to air these comments also serves to implicitly validate these sentiments.

Given this context it is important to note that many people were very turned off by the way that the Dixie Chicks were being treated, including many of their female supporters. However, these voices were not prioritized throughout this controversy. Rather, it was a vocal group of misogynists whose voices were highlighted. Specifically, an organization called the Free Republic which organized to ban the Dixie Chicks from country radio gained attention while many women's voices remained silenced. In a 2006 interview with Chris Matthews, Natalie Maines explained that she believes that the efforts against them were, "originally started

³⁹ Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. 13.

⁴⁰ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:12:25-00:12:30.

by the ‘Free Republic.’” She also notes that, “they were very organized in calling radio stations across the country and telling them that they would never listen to their station, when they didn’t even live in that town. And we knew that.”⁴¹ In 2003, one female Dixie Chicks fan explained, “All I know is all these radio stations, they pretend to support ‘em, but they won’t play ‘em. We call and ask, and they won’t.”⁴² This suggests that certain voices were valued and amplified throughout the course of the Dixie Chicks controversy.

Additionally, *Shut Up and Sing* captures the reaction of protesters at the Dixie Chicks’ Greenville, North Carolina show on May 1, 2003, shouting, “Be proud of your country. Be ashamed of the Dixie Chicks.”⁴³ In an interview, one protester says, “In my opinion, they’re ignorant and they don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”⁴⁴ Other protesters are shown walking around with signs that read “Former Dixie Chicks Fan” and “Shut Up Dixie Twits”.⁴⁵ Concert goers are shown wearing shirts with the words, “I’m only here cuz I couldn’t get my \$ back!!!”⁴⁶ Another protester explained that he was not upset that the Dixie Chicks had spoken out, but that he was upset about the way in which they had spoken, “Freedom of speech is fine, but by god you don’t do it outside of the country and you don’t do it in mass public place.”⁴⁷ Reflecting on the controversy, country music journalist, Chet Flippo, wrote for CMT news, “Memo to Natalie Maines: You’re an artist? And you have a message? Hey, put it in a song. We’ll listen to that. But, otherwise — shut up and sing.”⁴⁸ The variety of these reactions shows

⁴¹ “Dixie Chicks Say They’ve Been on a ‘Hate List.’”

⁴² Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia.00:46:36-00:46:42.

⁴³ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:39:56-00:40:01.

⁴⁴ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:40:10-00:40:14.

⁴⁵ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:40:15-00:40:20.

⁴⁶ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:40:30.

⁴⁷ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:45:39-00:45:45.

⁴⁸ Flippo, “NASHVILLE SKYLINE: Shut Up and Sing?”

that people took issue with the Dixie Chicks' comment for different reasons. Some people took issue with the fact that the group had spoken out at all, while others pointed to the public nature of the comment and the fact that these comments were made abroad. The the idea that the Dixie Chicks were "ignorant" in making these comments, a common thread that many angered listeners pointed to, serves to undermine the Dixie Chicks' credibility and respectability.

The controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks was not insulated to the country music community. Their comments were also widely discussed in the mainstream news cycle at the time. Conservative commentator, Pat Buchanan said, "I think they are the Dixie Twits. These are the dumbest dumbest bimbos with due respect."⁴⁹ Similarly, on his Fox News program, *The O'Reilly Factor*, Bill O'Reilly refers to the Dixie Chicks as, "callow foolish women who deserve to be slapped around."⁵⁰ These comments highlight the way that gendered violence manifested throughout this controversy. The attack on the Dixie Chicks' intelligence is gendered with the phrases "dumbest bimbos" and "callow foolish women." Furthermore, O'Reilly blatantly promotes violence towards these women. Many listeners destroyed their Dixie Chicks CDs, a physical manifestation of the violence that many people were advocating. Notably, one country radio station hosted an event where listeners brought their Dixie Chicks CDs to be smashed by a 33,000 pound tractor.⁵¹ Additionally, Natalie Maines received a death threat ahead of their July 6th, 2003 Dallas performance.⁵² This can be interpreted as the most extreme expression of the violence that was present in many people's reaction to this controversy.

⁴⁹ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:41:01-00:41:07.

⁵⁰ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:41:07-00:41:10.

⁵¹ Sanders, "Senators Scold Radio Chain for Tuning Out Dixie Chicks: HOME EDITION."

⁵² Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 01:05:54-01:06:02.

The swift and organized critical response to the Dixie Chicks' anti-war sentiment, through protest and boycott, resulted in the Dixie Chicks being banned from the majority of country music stations. However, the Dixie Chicks responded with a counter protest, challenging the way that they were being treated by their former fans, country music radio, conservative news networks, and other members of the country music community. At a time when they struggled to get airplay, the Dixie Chicks made a visual statement, by using their nude bodies, covered with the various slurs that they had been called by former fans and radio hosts, as a site of protest on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly* on May 6, 2003.⁵³ Through this cover, various interviews, and the release of their 2006 album, *Taking the Long Way*, the Dixie Chicks protested their treatment and exclusion by the country music industry.⁵⁴

In 2003, country music legend, Merle Haggard, referred to the way that the Dixie Chicks were treated during their controversy as, "like a verbal witch-hunt and lynching."⁵⁵ Recently, in a September 2018 episode of *Pod Save America*, singer songwriter, Jason Isbell, commented that the Dixie Chicks were cast out by the country music community, "because they were women...If Tim McGraw had done it, nobody would have cared. It's because they were women; they were talking out of turn."⁵⁶ As Haggard and Isbell's comments make clear, the Dixie Chicks treatment following their anti-war comments was heavily gendered. This thesis will examine and explain how the scandal's unique, violent, and misogynistic manifestation reflects the gendered and racialized history that is specific to country music. Specifically, I will show how country music's reputation for being white and male is one that has been created and exploited for specific

⁵³ Willman, "EW Exclusive: The Dixie Chicks Take on Their Critics."

⁵⁴ Browne, "Dixie Chicks' 'Taking the Long Way': EW Review"

⁵⁵ Grace, "Merle Haggard Sounds Off."

⁵⁶ Ding, "Jason Isbell Says Dixie Chicks Were Blacklisted For George W. Bush Comments Because They Were Women."

political agendas throughout history. Additionally, by looking at specific historical moments that upset this illusion, I will highlight where women and minority groups have always played an important role in country music history despite being routinely excluded.

Gender, Race, and Class Anxieties in Country Music History

A specific account of country music -- namely, that its roots and authenticity lie in its white, male, Southern, and conservative identity -- has been used historically to rally a specific type of political base. Country music is often used politically as music exclusive to the working class white man. Yet, it is a common misconception that country music evolved from southern folk music, a music of rural southern whites, unaffected by commercialization, modernization, cultural and racial mixing, or societal shifts. As country music historian, Bill Malone, points out, “southern white folk music was neither pure white or ‘Anglo’ in origin or manifestations, neither was it exclusively rural or non commercial.”⁵⁷ The genre was impacted by non-white influences and commercialization from its inception. While it is true that folk music, mainly coming from Ireland, Scotland, and England, was passed between generations, mainly through oral tradition, in Southern immigrant families, these songs were Americanized and mixed with other musical traditions that were present in the southern geographic region where country music was born.⁵⁸ Early country music was characterized by blending and borrowing from many different cultures that were present in the American South, including Native American, German, French, Spanish and Mexican. However, country music borrowed most heavily from African musical traditions that were brought to the United States through the forced migration that occurred as a part of the

⁵⁷ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* 5.

⁵⁸ Malone. 5.

transatlantic slave trade.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the spread of early folk music is tied to traveling medicine shows, a form of traveling entertainment where paid performers would thrill crowds with character acting and musical performances before ‘doctors’ would attempt to sell various medicines to the rural communities they visited. Accordingly, new folk music was introduced to rural communities through these traveling shows. Folk and country singers were paid to participate in these circuits, marking these medicine shows as early commercial influences on Southern folk music.⁶⁰

Despite the reality that early country music represented a blending of different 19th and early 20th century southern cultures, the myth that country music stems from the uncorrupted music of poor rural whites exists to this day. Furthermore, this legend has persisted, even as country music evolved, changed, and redefined itself various times over the course of the 20th and 21st century. Today this myth works to exclude people of color from participating in the country genre, and this myth helps to create a specific version of white womanhood that is deemed acceptable within the genre.

Throughout her 2009 book, *Natural Acts Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*, Pamela Fox argues that gender is central to understanding the classed and racialized performances that persist within the country genre. She argues that, “unstable models of femininity and masculinity, working in conjunction with other markers of identity, shape the very definition of country identity.”⁶¹ Fox uses gender, race, and class to historicize the

⁵⁹ Malone. 4-5.

⁶⁰ Malone. 6.

⁶¹ Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*. 5.

constructs of rusticity, “a class-based concept rooted in unspoiled rural life and values,” and authenticity, “country music’s ‘roots’ and (hence) ‘soul’.”⁶² Fox argues:

[W]omen have served as contradictory and ultimately marginalized signifiers of country authenticity: initially figured as the composite private and public ideal of “home” during the Depression era, yet dismissed as the autonomous and desiring honky-tonk “angel”-- the antithetical “cold” quintessence of postwar and 1950s modernity-- when rejecting or reconfiguring that earlier rustic archetype, and similarly critiqued once again in the mid 1960s and later by “hard country” enthusiasts of the 1980s and ‘90s as the corruption of that rustic past due to later country performers’ ostensible embodiment of country’s sell-out pop sensibility.⁶³

The history of the barn dance tradition is one that illuminates the various ways that people of color and women have helped to shape the country genre, but also had their participation regulated. Barn dance, a form of radio-broadcasted country variety shows, is a tradition that emerged with the invention and proliferation of radio in the 1920s. At this time, southern country music was discovered, refined and proliferated.⁶⁴ The earliest major southern radio station, WSB in Atlanta, began featuring country performers in 1922, and was soon followed by other Midwestern and Southern radio stations.⁶⁵ Within five years Chicago’s *National Barn Dance* program and Nashville’s *Grand Ole Opry* program were also featuring folk performers.⁶⁶

⁶² Fox. 4, 8.

⁶³ Fox. 11.

⁶⁴ Malone. 32-33.

⁶⁵ Malone. 33.

⁶⁶ Malone. 33.

Many of the archetypes that persist in country music today were solidified on the barn dance stage. Fox explains that, “The barn dance genre marked a critical turning point in the development of the hillbilly/rube archetype, in part because it created a mass, explicitly national audience for its folksy images. In its inception, barn dance was an *urban* radio genre...broadcast in major industrial cities attracting migrating Southerners.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, minstrelsy, the performance of blackface, was also a popular component to these barn dance shows.⁶⁸ Fox reads the performance of rube and blackface in barn dance as, “models of a complex kind of agency available to poor or working-class white Southerners both creating and consuming these images.”⁶⁹ To do this, Fox draws on Eric Lott’s scholarship on blackface and the minstrel tradition.⁷⁰

In his landmark study, *Love and Theft Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott traces the history of minstrelsy and the performance of blackface in the 19th century. Lott explains that, “blackface provided a convenient mask through which to voice class resentments of all kinds—resentments directed as readily toward black people as toward upper-class enemies.”⁷¹ In addition, Lott explains that there has been a, “historical logic in glossing working-class whites as black, given the degree to which large sections of these groups shared a common culture in many parts of the North.”⁷² For this reason, the claim about the whiteness of country music has always been part of a more complex history of class resentment and populism.

⁶⁷ Fox. 19.

⁶⁸ Fox. 18.

⁶⁹ Fox. 20.

⁷⁰ Fox. 22.

⁷¹ Lott, *Love and Theft Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. 71.

⁷² Lott. 71.

The performance of blackface in early commercialized country music performances provided a way for working-class whites to work out their anxieties surrounding the construction of their whiteness and their masculinity. Lott explains, “Minstrelsy’s role as a mediator of northern class, racial, and ethnic conflict—all largely grounded in a problematic of masculinity—has much to do with the equivocal character of blackface representations,” noting that the majority of blackface performers in the American North were working-class Irish men.⁷³

The barn dance stage was not only a site of the minstrel tradition, it was also a site where white male gatekeepers attempted to erase the influence that people of color had on the genre. In her book, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio*, McCusker points to WLS Chicago’s *National Barn Dance*, as a location where producer John Lair, “helped render invisible some of those who were part of Chicago’s ethnically and racially diverse landscape -- typically blacks and Jews, odd choices because much of WLS’ music had black roots, and Jews were key contributors to vaudeville’s development.”⁷⁴ Vaudeville was a popular form of eclectic theater show that was influential in developing the barn dance performance style.⁷⁵ Lair attempted make blacks and Jews invisible on *National Barn Dance*, despite the fact that both groups influenced the development of barn dance in its music or performance style.

Furthermore, working class whites also utilize rigid and traditional gender norms as a form of class identification, even when it means falsifying the more diverse history of the genre and the performance. This precarious entangling of gender, race, and class has left female country artists with specific archetypes that have proved successful avenues for women to

⁷³ Lott. 36.

⁷⁴ McCusker. 31-32.

⁷⁵ McCusker. 10.

historically participate in country music without threatening the delicately constructed working-class white masculinity that persists through the genre.

Kristine M. McCusker explains that one of the most notable female archetypes utilized in the barn dance tradition is the ‘sentimental mother’. The sentimental mother is an archetype of a rural mountain mother who is unshakeable and steadfast, set on preserving traditions, culture, and home, that became popularized with the emergence of barn dance.⁷⁶ Another female archetype that arose from barn dance is the chaste mountain girl, made popular by the character Linda Parker, originally performed by the actress Jeanne Muenich. Linda Parker was the first southern solo-female performance that incorporated Appalachian roots and vaudeville in radio. Jeanne Muenich’s management team carefully created an image for her of a pure girl from Appalachia.⁷⁷ These archetypes, which in some form persist to this day, established boundaries for the way that women were able to function as artists, musicians, and performers in the country music genre. Notably, McCusker argues that the images of women presented on barn dance radio expose a “middle-class influence on the air.”⁷⁸ McCusker explains that this presentation of women in barn dance was influenced by the tradition of vaudeville where the participation of women was used strategically to help secure the respectability and morality of the theater.⁷⁹

Looking at the barn dance tradition, Fox argues:

We need to examine white male and female rubes and blackfaced tricksters alongside middle-class sentimental “mothers” and mountaineers-cum-cowboys as they appeared on the same stage, within a single program. When we do, we can glimpse the development

⁷⁶ McCusker. 37.

⁷⁷ McCusker. 29.

⁷⁸ McCusker. 3.

⁷⁹ McCusker. 9.

of a white rusticity stigmatized at least in part because it is *feminized* by long-standing cultural images of poor Southern whites, as well as particular material circumstances of mass male unemployment during the depression years that produced a “widespread crisis of masculinity.” This gendered effect was never entirely offset by either the appropriation of black masculinity in minstrel skits *or* the middle class trappings of other, more “properly” gendered performative roles.⁸⁰

Here, Fox underscores the class and race based anxieties that are woven into the history of country music from its inception on the barn dance stage. While country music has evolved far beyond barn dance, this history and the archetypes that it created for women, provide a backdrop for the scandal that erupted around the Dixie Chicks, especially because the Dixie Chicks effectively utilized a modern iteration of the ‘sentimental mother’ and ‘chaste mountain girl’ archetypes in their earlier music and public personas.

For instance, their use of romantic themes about home, love, and motherhood in their music plays on these archetypes. Examples of songs that have these themes include “I’ll Take Care of You”, “Loving Arms”, and “Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)”.⁸¹ These archetypes that emerge from barn dance serve to regulate women’s performance in country music, and the rigidity of the roles available to women helps to dictate what women can and cannot say in country music, and how they can and cannot act. Stepping outside of these prescribed roles risks challenging country music’s construction of white working class masculinity and a challenge of this kind is so threatening to white working class identity that country listeners quickly close the ranks against any sort of threat of this kind, as we have seen in the case of the Dixie Chicks, who, by

⁸⁰ Fox. 20.

⁸¹ “Dixie Chicks Lyrics: ‘I’ll Take Care Of You’”; “Dixie Chicks Lyrics: ‘Loving Arms’”; “Dixie Chicks Lyrics: ‘Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)’.”

positioning themselves as progressive and opinionated, stepped outside of the roles historically available to women in country music.

Fox discusses how women's participation in country music was further regulated with the development of honky-tonk, a subgenre of country that emerged after World War II, popularized by Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb, when many southern men returned from war to find a rapidly modernizing world that was incompatible with their conceptions of masculinity.⁸² Pamela Fox traces how this myth altered the perception and construction of women in the country genre. Marked by themes of loneliness, self-pity, and infidelity, Fox argues that, "Honky-tonk song and discourse turned to white masculinity as a new performative strategy to manage insecurities fueled by dislocation and loss."⁸³ Women, who had joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers during the war, had seemingly accepted the modern world that troubled honky-tonk singers, thus, women were no longer able to emblemize the rural home that they had been tied to through the sentimental mother figure, as rusticity and modernity are at odds.⁸⁴ This led men to the create a new "home", one within the honky-tonk, or dive bar, a strictly masculine space.⁸⁵ The women who would go to these bars were dubbed "honky-tonk angels", sexually promiscuous and attention-seeking, while 'good' women were barred from the honky-tonk.⁸⁶ This location served to exclude women from the country genre, and women's authenticity as country artists became, "located in the perpetual *division* between a personal 'traditional' or domestic identity and a performative 'modern' one," forcing them to pursue two contradicting

⁸² Fox. 63-65.

⁸³ Fox. 68-69, 76.

⁸⁴ Fox. 64.

⁸⁵ Fox. 71.

⁸⁶ Fox. 70.

tenants.⁸⁷ Looking at the Dixie Chicks in this context, their comment about the Iraq War marked their personal beliefs and identity as modern, or at least progressive, and this violated the construction of authenticity that developed for women through the honky-tonk tradition.

The honky-tonk music that developed in this heavily masculine space is rife with misogyny as many of the men participating in honky-tonk blame women for their anxieties about being displaced. Fox argues that the honky-tonk established a masculine identity, “accentuating the vulnerability as well as strength of white working-class manhood forced to search for a new home.”⁸⁸ Through honky-tonk, “white rural masculinity became reconfigured as modern and ‘strong’.”⁸⁹ What develops from this tradition is a masculinized iteration of country that, “left women artist precious little access to the genre.”⁹⁰ Fox points out that honky-tonk, “transformed authenticity standards for country music as a whole,” through the creation of, “a distinctly masculine performance model boasting a truthful connection to the artist’s life,” which left women with few ways to signify their “rusticity,” and as a result, they often still had to rely on the roles that were available to them from barn dance.⁹¹ In addition, the women portrayed in honky-tonk music were forced into a binary of ‘good’ women and ‘honky-tonk angels.’

Fox notes that women pushed back against the restrictive and misogynistic narrative that honky-tonk created for them with answer songs, songs that respond to a prior song. Fox uses the example of Kitty Wells’ song, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels.” This song is a response to honky-tonk star, Hank Thompson’s “Wild Side of Life.” In “Wild Side of Life,” Thompson laments that his wife has left him, and he sings, “I didn’t know God made honky tonk

⁸⁷ Fox. 13.

⁸⁸ Fox. 74.

⁸⁹ Fox. 65.

⁹⁰ Fox. 91.

⁹¹ Fox. 91,13.

angels.”⁹² In Wells’s response she sings that, “it wasn’t God who made Honky-Tonk angels [a]s you said in the words of your song.” Rather, Wells criticizes men for their role in encouraging the infidelity that started in honky-tonks, arguing that, “There’s many times married men think they’re still single [t]hat has caused many a good girl to go wrong.”⁹³ Wells critiques the self-pitying and misogynistic themes that accompanied the rise of Honky-tonk. Fox points out that Wells, “defiantly charges men with ‘the blame’ for transforming ‘good girls’ into ‘angels’.”

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In addition to honky-tonk, rockabilly was also developed in the 1950s. This music style was popularized by Elvis Presley, and it combined musical elements of country with rhythm-and-blues.⁹⁵ However, many listeners saw this cultural and racial exchange as threatening to white society. As a result, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Nashville Sound, another subset of country music intended to be unthreatening, was then born out of this anxiety. Nashville Sound had more pop elements to it, and it was made popular by singers including Patsy Cline and Jim Reeves.⁹⁶ This fear of “Black” influences in the 1950s and 1960s further enforces the idea that the majority of country listeners were ignorant to the African American influences that had existed in the genre since its early folk origins, and that they wanted to exclude Black Americans from participating in the country genre.

This history of country music highlights the classed, racialized, and gendered anxieties that inform the genre. Early country music is a product of a mixture of musical forms and their racial roots. When white people claim country music as something that is white and belonging to

⁹² “The Wild Side of Life: Hank Thompson.”

⁹³ “Kitty Wells – It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels.”

⁹⁴ Fox. 95.

⁹⁵ Malone. 248-250.

⁹⁶ Edwards, “‘Backwoods Barbie’ Dolly Parton’s Gender Performance.” 44.

white people, they attempt to appease their anxieties around their own social class and race, anxieties that Lott outlines in *Love and Theft Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*.⁹⁷ This false claim of historical whiteness remains pervasive in country music today. The racialized anxieties surrounding working-class white masculinity are partially resolved through the preservation of country music's repository of strict gender roles, and the attachment to this gendered hierarchy is worked out when white participants and gatekeepers in country music strictly regulate what country music is (and is not) and what country musicians can (or cannot) say or sing. These regulations still serve to exclude people of color from music today, and to adjudicate acceptable gendered roles within the genre. Class identification works quickly to close ranks against any form of perceived threat. The boundaries that have developed within the country genre to mitigate racialized, classed, and gendered anxieties, all provide important context for understanding the 2003 controversy that arose with the Dixie Chicks. When the scandal unfolded, persistent anxieties about class, race, and gender erupted in the context of heightened national anxiety about the safety and sovereignty of the United States following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The essay "Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music" by Mark Allan Jackson traces how country music became tied to conservatism and the Republican party during Richard Nixon's Republican presidency. Jackson writes that in 1974, Nixon gave a speech at the Grand Ole Opry where he described country music, "as native as anything American we could find." Nixon characterized the aspects of country music that he admired in order to claim these values for his presidency and to signal to the imagined

⁹⁷ Lott. 58-59.

community of conservative Americans that he was one of them: “It talks about family, it talks about religion, the faith in God that is so important to our country and particularly to our family life. And as we know, country music radiates a love of this Nation, patriotism.”⁹⁸ Nixon elaborates on this patriotism, “Country music, therefore, has those combinations which are so essential to America’s character at a time that America needs character, because... the peace of the world for generations, maybe centuries to come, will depend not just on America’s military might, which is the greatest in the world, but it is going to depend on our character, our belief in ourselves, our love of our country, our willingness to not only wear the flag but to stand up for the flag. And country music does that.”⁹⁹ Through this speech President Nixon paints country music as focused on ‘family values’, patriotism, and belief in God, values that have been associated with conservatism and the Republican party in the United States. Jackson also points to a 1971 op-ed by Kevin P. Phillips, whom he describes as, “the much touted architect of Nixon’s Southern strategy of coded racism and white working class pandering.” In this op-ed Phillips had asked President Nixon to “connect with ‘forgotten whites’ whose tastes were the antithesis of the counterculture: ‘More and more people are evidently finding the “straight” songs and lyrics of country music preferable to the tribal war dances, adolescent grunts and marijuana hymns that have taken over so many pop stations.’”¹⁰⁰ This illuminates how country music was strategically utilized by conservatives in the 1970s in order to appeal to people’s sense of patriotism and to relate to working-class whites.

Country music’s explicit use as an appeal to working-class white voters helps contextualize the way that the genre became entwined with white populism, a social and political

⁹⁸ Jackson, “Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music.” 1.

⁹⁹ Jackson. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Jackson. 2.

formation that provides important context to the 2003 controversy. The specific location of this scandal within country music is integral to the way that gendered violence manifested in the 2003 backlash towards the Dixie Chicks. The history and evolution of the country music genre provides necessary context for understanding contemporary and past manifestations of populism, patriotism, patriarchy, and misogyny within the genre. Looking to the history of women in the genre informs the boundaries and opportunities that have governed women's entrance and participation in country music.

Dixie Chicks as Boundary Pushing?

The Dixie Chicks are frequently described in popular media and the promotional materials of their sponsors as boundary pushing. For instance, in 2003, representatives from Lipton Iced Tea, sponsors of the Dixie Chicks' *Top of the World Tour*, lauded the Dixie Chicks for their musical mastery and boundary pushing within the country music genre, commenting that, "the Dixie Chicks are redefining the traditional conventions of country music."¹⁰¹ However, contrary to the widely held belief that the Dixie Chicks were boundary pushing on account of their lyrical themes and their empowered public personas, the group actually occupied a space in country music that was supported by historical precedents for women within the genre, precedents dating back to the genre's 19th century folk roots. As exemplars of a tradition of women musicians, singers, and performers within the genre of country music, the Dixie Chicks' boundary-pushing was, in fact, part of a long established pattern that marked women's entry into

¹⁰¹ Barbara Kopple and Peck, Cecilia. 00:04:04-00:04:08.

country music as “new” and “challenging” in such a way that preserved the association of country music with men.

The Dixie Chicks were also considered boundary pushing by some because their song lyrics received pushback from the country music community for being too provocative. Their lyrics about intimate partner violence in the song “Goodbye Earl” and sexual promiscuity in the song “Sin Wagon” were seen by some as challenges to the country music status-quo of gender roles and feminine passivity. Natalie Maines captured this sentiment in a 1999 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, where she explained, “Our label is so scared about ‘Sin Wagon’ because it says ‘mattress dancing.’ They’re scared to death about that song, and they won’t talk about it in interviews.”¹⁰² Similarly, an *LA Times* article from 2000, explains the controversy surrounding “Goodbye Earl,” a song where two women team up to kill the one woman’s abusive husband, “some have blasted the group, and stations playing the song, either for treating domestic violence lightly or for championing a protagonist who takes the law into her own hands.”¹⁰³

Country music evolved out of the tradition of southern folk music, and women composing and performing southern folk music were discussing themes including intimate partner violence, sexuality, unwanted pregnancy, and the difficulties that come with marriage as early as the 18th century.¹⁰⁴ In Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Dermann’s 2003 book, *Finding Her Voice Women in Country Music 1800-2000*, they describe that in the early 1900s conservative post-Victorian academics were shocked to find rural Appalachian women singing about sexual, intimate, and reproductive themes when they sought to collect and record the folk

¹⁰² Willman, “The Dixie Chicks Burn up the Billboard Pop Charts.”

¹⁰³ Lewis, “‘Earl’ Creates Heat—and Heated Debate.”

¹⁰⁴ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000*. 4. 6-9.

music that had been passed orally for generations.¹⁰⁵ While there were key shifts and developments within the genre throughout much of the 20th century that result in country being viewed as a more conservative genre today, this was not always the case.

In addition, in much of the music that the Dixie Chicks released prior to the 2003 controversy, the Dixie Chicks utilized, knowingly or unknowingly, the sentimental mother archetype that has historically allowed for women's participation in the genre. For instance, the group's 2002 album, *Home*, makes many specific reference to home, domesticity, and motherhood.¹⁰⁶ The album includes the lullaby, "Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)," an explicit reference to motherhood.¹⁰⁷ In the song "A Home," the narrator discusses the domestic home life that she could have shared with a former lover if they had stayed together, a longing for domesticity that aligns with the sentimental mother figure.¹⁰⁸

The Dixie Chicks' alignment within traditional country music boundaries helps to explain the violent backlash that they received when they were perceived as crossing these boundaries with their comment about President Bush and the Iraq War. Country music audiences would have attached certain associations with them, socially and politically, that they disrupted. This disruption would have been disturbing to audiences as it threatened some country music listener's sense of imagined community.

Chicks Protest

¹⁰⁵ Bufwack and Oermann. 7, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Keogh, "BBC - Music - Review of Dixie Chicks - Home."

¹⁰⁷ "Dixie Chicks Lyrics: 'Godspeed (Sweet Dreams).'"

¹⁰⁸ "Dixie Chicks Lyrics: 'A Home.'"

The violent and gendered backlash that the Dixie Chicks faced after Maines' 2003 comment caused the group to protest the way that they were treated by the country music community, radio stations, former fans, and commentators. Maines' refusal to apologize for her comment in a way that the country music community deemed satisfactory constitutes a form of protest, as do the various interviews that the Dixie Chicks conducted in the weeks and months following the scandal. Additionally, the Dixie Chicks' visual statement by posing nude on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly* marks a challenge to their former fans and critics. The group's protest and their 2006 album, *Taking the Long Way*, mark a departure for the group, as following the controversy they reinvented themselves as something distinct from and critical of the country music industry and the listener base that supports it.

As the scandal erupted in March 2003, the Dixie Chicks responded with Maines' release of a statement, "We've been overseas for several weeks and have been reading and following the news accounts of our government's position. The anti-American sentiment that has unfolded here is astounding. I feel the president is ignoring the opinions of many in the U.S. and alienating the rest of the world. My comments were made in frustration and one of the privileges of being an American is you are free to voice your own point of view. While we support our troops, there is nothing more frightening than the notion of going to war with Iraq and the prospect of all the innocent lives that will be lost."¹⁰⁹ This initial response is not an apology; rather, Maines is defending her comment by explaining the background and context for the comment.

Furthermore, Maines paints herself as a proud American, grateful for freedom of speech. Despite Maines' refusal to apologize for her actions, the use of this figure, the proud American, suggests

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, "The Dixie Chicks Nude EW Cover 10 Years Later: Emily Robison and Martie Maguire Reflect."

that the group was still willing to work within the established boundaries of country music at this point during the scandal.

However, fans were unsatisfied with Maines' initial statement, and they were enraged that the group had not released a formal apology. Maines released a subsequent statement later that month apologizing to President Bush for being disrespectful: "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."¹¹⁰ Here Maines is careful not to apologize for her anti-war sentiment, but she acknowledges that her comment towards President Bush was not respectful. Although she is offering an apology here, her refusal to revoke the entire statement signals a sort of protest, as many members of the country music industry were calling Maines' entire statement unpatriotic. The sentiment that the Dixie Chicks had no idea what they were talking about and that these girls should just "shut up and sing," was expressed by many conservative commentators and members of the country music community.¹¹¹ Regardless of what reason the Dixie Chicks' opposition pointed to as the reason for their anger, many former fans wanted more than just an apology to President Bush, they wanted to punish the Dixie Chick. The magazine cover that the the Dixie Chicks chose to pose for in May 2003 signifies strength, unity, and protest in spite of the gendered violence that was being targeted at the group.

The Dixie Chicks made a strong visual statement of protest when they posed nude for the 2003 issue of *Entertainment Weekly*. On this cover, Emily Robison and Martie Maguire are positioned to the left and right of Natalie Maines. Their nude bodies have the various slurs and

¹¹⁰ "Dixie Chicks Singer Apologizes for Bush Comment."

¹¹¹ Flippo, "NASHVILLE SKYLINE: Shut Up and Sing?"

insults that they had been called over the course of the controversy, as well as buzzwords surrounding the controversy, tattooed on their bodies. On Emily Robison's body you can read the words "Patriot", "Dixie Sluts", and "Boycott". On Martie Maguire's body you can read the words "Traitors", "Brave", "Hero", "Opinionated", "Saddam's Angels", and "Proud American". The words "Big Mouth", "Free Speech", "Shut Up!", "Peace", and "Hippies" are tattooed on Natalie Maines' body.¹¹² The women make direct eye contact with the camera, effectively asking viewers to challenge them. The combination of their straight faces and dark eye makeup add gravity to the cover. It was Robison, Maguire, and Maines' idea to do this shoot. In the article accompanying the cover, Maguire explained, "we wanted to show the absurdity of the extreme names people have been calling us. How do you look at the three of us and think, Those are Saddam's Angels?"¹¹³ On the decision to pose nude, Maines commented that, "We don't want people to think that we're trying to be provocative. It's not about the nakedness. It's that the clothes got in the way of the labels. We're not defined by who we are anymore. Other people are doing that for us."¹¹⁴ The Dixie Chicks were aware that they had lost control of their narrative and representation at this point in the scandal, and this *Entertainment Weekly* cover was a way for them to regain agency amid this controversy that they had no control over.

Ten years after this cover was shot, in a 2013 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Robison explained her feelings on the cover, "It definitely was the most bold thing as a person and as a band we had ever done".¹¹⁵ Additionally, Maguire explained that, "Our publicist was freaking out and trying to talk us out of it...but it had to be all the way, like with the 'Saddam's

¹¹² Willman, "EW Exclusive: The Dixie Chicks Take on Their Critics."

¹¹³ Willman, "EW Exclusive: The Dixie Chicks Take on Their Critics."

¹¹⁴ Willman, "EW Exclusive: The Dixie Chicks Take on Their Critics."

¹¹⁵ Anderson, "The Dixie Chicks Nude EW Cover 10 Years Later: Emily Robison and Martie Maguire Reflect."

Angels' stuff. Those were real things people were writing to us in e-mails and posting on the web. There were publicists and people at the shoot who were trying to get us to tone that down, but we felt like you can't go half way when you're naked."¹¹⁶ The Dixie Chicks built on the feminist tradition of using the naked body as a site of protest. Alexandra Fanghanel explains in her work on disruptive protests, "A naked body in public space is disruptive. It disrupts normative codes of how a body should appear in public space and normative ways of using public space. It is a sign of vulnerability. It can be injured, abused, it can become ill; it is a conduit through which we feel pain."¹¹⁷ This form of protest is particularly effective for the Dixie Chicks, as they are drawing our attention to their vulnerability. When Maines commented on the Iraq War, the public reaction that followed was gendered and violent. These reactions ignore both the humanity and the vulnerability of the group. In a 2003 interview with Diane Sawyer, Maguire draws attention to these violent reactions, stating, "We know some of our fans were shocked and ... and upset, and we are compassionate to that...my problem is, when does it cross the line? ... When is writing a threatening letter OK?"¹¹⁸ Through this cover, the Dixie Chicks asked audiences and fans to recognize their humanity. Furthermore this cover gave them the opportunity to critique the gendered violence that was being directed at them, even though they were not able to control this violence. By using their nude bodies, the Dixie Chicks draw attention to the fact that women's bodies, their bodies, are what was being fought over, policed, controlled, and literally censored through this controversy.

While it was Maines' comment that sparked this controversy, all three members of the Dixie Chicks stuck together through the scandal. The united front that they presented suggests

¹¹⁶ Anderson. "The Dixie Chicks Nude EW Cover 10 Years Later: Emily Robison and Martie Maguire Reflect."

¹¹⁷ Fanghanel, "Disruptive Protests." 72.

¹¹⁸ Murphy, "Dixie Chicks Fire Back (And Get Naked)."

strong female solidarity. In a 2006 interview with *Time* magazine, Martie Maguire explains, “Natalie knows we could have totally convinced her to apologize...But the fact is, any one of us could have said what she said.”¹¹⁹

In the wake of the controversy, Natalie Maines also critiqued country singer Toby Keith’s song “Courtesy of the Red White and Blue (The Angry American).” The song is a patriotic and militaristic anthem that Keith was hesitant to record at first, knowing that it would “cause a storm.”¹²⁰ In reference to the damage that the United States military would cause as a reaction to 9/11, Keith sings, “Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list, and the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist, and the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell when you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell and it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you, Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue.”¹²¹ Maines called this song “ignorant”, inciting a feud between her and Keith. Keith began displaying doctored photo of Saddam Hussein and Natalie Maines at his concerts. Equating Maines with an enemy of this kind serves to vilify her and to distance her further from the acceptable roles for women in country music. The sentimental mother figure that the Dixie Chicks often utilized before the 2003 scandal is seen as protecting the rural and domestic home. The coupling of Maines and Hussein at Toby Keith’s concert positions Maines as a foreign enemy, an antithesis of the protective and sentimental mother. Keith’s use of Maines’ photo is another example of how the Dixie Chicks were painted as incompatible with the values of country music.

Brian Phillips, the president of Country Music Television (CMT) in 2006, explained that he believed that much of the Dixie Chicks’ audience “feels a little betrayed, a little left behind

¹¹⁹ Tyrangiel and Sachs, “IN THE LINE OF FIRE.”

¹²⁰ Yahr, “Toby Keith Was a Loud Political Voice in the Bush Years. What about the Trump Era?”

¹²¹ TobyKeithVEVO, *Toby Keith - Courtesy Of The Red, White And Blue (The Angry American)*.

maybe,” and a 2006 edition of *Time Magazine* suggested that this could be the reason that many country music listeners were so quick to gravitate towards Toby Keith, his blatant distaste for Maines, and his fervent patriotism following the scandal.¹²² Maines retaliated against this treatment by wearing a shirt at with the letters F.U.T.K, an acronym for ‘Fuck You Toby Keith,’ when the Dixie Chicks performed at the 2003 Academy of Country Music awards show.¹²³

Dixie Chicks Reinvention

Following the controversy, the Dixie Chicks would not release another album until their 2006 *Taking the Long Way* album. This album represents the Dixie Chicks’ reinvention following the 2003 scandal. Notably, the first single that the Dixie Chicks chose to release off of this album was “Not Ready to Make Nice,” a song that one radio programmer at the time called, “a four-minute f___ - you to the format and our listeners. I like the Chicks, and I won't play it.”¹²⁴ This song addresses the members of the country music community who turned on them during the 2003 scandal, and it makes direct reference to the death threat that Maines received in 2003.

“Not Ready to Make Nice” received critical acclaim, winning song of the year at the Grammys; however, the song did not receive much play time on country music radio.¹²⁵ The Dixie Chicks did not seem to care about this fact and in a 2006 interview with *Time Magazine*, Martie Maguire discusses “Not Ready to Make Nice,” explaining, “I guess if we really cared, we wouldn't have released that single first... That was just making people mad. But I don't think it was a mistake.”¹²⁶ This comment, as well as Maines’ comment from the same interview that, “If

¹²² Tyrangiel and Sachs, “IN THE LINE OF FIRE.” 64-65.

¹²³ Gilbert, “CMT News Special Explores Maines-Keith Controversy.”

¹²⁴ Tyrangiel and Sachs, “IN THE LINE OF FIRE.” 62.

¹²⁵ Mauet, “Dixie Chicks Find Stations ‘Not Ready to Make Nice.’”

¹²⁶ Tyrangiel and Sachs, “IN THE LINE OF FIRE.” 62.

people are going to ask me to apologize based on who I am... I don't know what to do about that. I can't change who I am," suggest that the Dixie Chicks were not interested in mending their relationship with the country music industry or with the former fans who had deserted them after the 2003 controversy. *Taking the Long Way* marks a departure from their earlier work, which in the same *Time Magazine* interview Maines refers to as "amateurish." They did not write the majority of their early music, but they wrote the entirety of their *Taking the Long Way* album.¹²⁷

"Not Ready to Make Nice" directly addresses the scandal that the Dixie Chicks experienced, and it defiantly states that they are not going to repent or apologize for what happened: "I'm not ready to make nice. I'm not ready to back down... It's too late to make it right. I probably wouldn't if I could, 'cause I'm mad as hell. Can't bring myself to do what it is you think I should." Additionally, the song explains that the time since the scandal has not healed things over for the group, and it references and critiques the death threat that the Dixie Chicks received following Maines' comment, "And how 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 will be over?"¹²⁸ Following the creation of this album, Maines corrected her previous comment that President Bush was owed respect: "I apologized for disrespecting the office of the President... But I don't feel that way anymore. I don't feel he is owed any respect whatsoever."¹²⁹ The album was described in a 2006 review by David Browne, "The album, produced by the ubiquitous Rick Rubin, is a little bit country, a little bit rock & roll — but also a little bit power balladry, alt-country, and roadhouse boogie."¹³⁰ Brown further describes that the album,

¹²⁷ Tyrangiel and Sachs. 62.

¹²⁸ dixiechicksVEVO, *Dixie Chicks - Not Ready To Make Nice (Official Video)*.

¹²⁹ Tyrangiel and Sachs. 62.

¹³⁰ Browne, "Dixie Chicks' 'Taking the Long Way': EW Review"

“rectifies something that’s long been confounding about the Dixie Chicks. For all their feistiness and rebel-yell image, their records have been comparatively meek — the work of coffeehouse folkies rather than outlaw-country bad girls. On *Taking the Long Way*, most of that dichotomy vanishes along with quaint mandolin solos. Finally, they put their music where their opinionated mouths are.”¹³¹ As Browne describes, this album is something distinct from country music.

While many songs on the album have country elements, including the focus on storytelling and the group’s authenticity about their experiences in motherhood, marriage, and handling the 2003 scandal, many of the songs are blatantly critical of country music and the country music listener base. For instance, “Lubbock or Leave It” points out the hypocrisy that often exists in conservative Christian communities in the United States, “on the strip the kids get lit so they can have a real good time come Sunday they can just take their pick from the crucifix skyline.”¹³²

Songs on this album are personal to the Dixie Chicks. They are writing about their own experiences rather than characters that they created. Maines explains that in the past, “I never wrote anything from my point of view...Even if it was something that happened to me, I would write it like it was a character and I was telling someone else's story ... That's not very brave.”¹³³

In reference to the 2006 album, Robison explained, “We wrote it for ourselves, for therapy. Whether or not other people think it was important enough to say, we think it was.”¹³⁴ As evidence of their new turn to personal experience, the women address the fertility issues that both Robison and McGuire experienced in their song “So Hard.” They talk about the difficulties that come with marriage in “Baby Hold On,” and sing about their experience with a loved one

¹³¹ Browne.

¹³² “Dixie Chicks – Lubbock or Leave It.”

¹³³ Tyrangiel and Sachs, “IN THE LINE OF FIRE.” 64.

¹³⁴ Tyrangiel and Sachs. 65.

who is suffering from memory loss in “Silent House.”¹³⁵ The decision to write their own music coincided with their choice to use a more autobiographical “I.” The women claim personal experiences as their own and assert that their lives deserve to be reflected in song. Furthermore, the Dixie Chicks are not restrained here by any of the archetypes that have historically governed women’s participation in country music, as they have already been excluded from formalized participation in the genre by radio, and they present a more complete and genuine representation of womanhood. They present their authentic experiences and observations, pushing back against the archetypes of the “sentimental mother,” “honky-tonk angel,” and “chaste mountain girl.”

The Dixie Chicks’ *Taking the Long Way* album did not receive much air time on country radio stations. However, the album won five Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year and Best Country Album, and did well on the Billboard charts despite not having received much play on country radio.¹³⁶

Since this 2006 album, sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison released music under the name Court Yard Hounds, and Natalie Maines released a solo album called *Mother*.¹³⁷ In 2016, the group reunited for their DCX MMXVI tour which included 53 shows.¹³⁸ Furthermore, the Dixie Chicks recorded a version of “Daddy Lessons” with Beyoncé, from Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* album in 2016.¹³⁹ Beyonce typically performs songs in the hip hop, R&B, or pop genre, and although Beyonce is from Houston, Texas where country music is popular, the genre of this song and her decision to perform with the Dixie Chicks was outside her typical artistic

¹³⁵ The Boot Staff, “Story Behind the Song: Dixie Chicks, ‘Silent House’”; “Baby Hold On by Dixie Chicks”; PEOPLESTAFF225, “Dixie Chicks Martie Maguire and Emily Robison Open up about Their Fertility Struggles.”

¹³⁶ Leeds, “How the Dixie Chicks Hit the Charts Without Radio Support”; Leeds, “Grammy Sweep by Dixie Chicks Is Seen as a Vindication.”

¹³⁷ Rosen, “Court Yard Hounds”; Rosen, “Mother.”

¹³⁸ Light, “The Dixie Chicks, Long Past Making Nice.”

¹³⁹ Leight, “Beyonce, Dixie Chicks Unveil ‘Daddy Lessons’ Studio Version – Rolling Stone.”

realm. This song was performed by Beyonce and the Dixie Chicks at the 2016 Country Music Association (CMA) Awards which caused an outcry from many country music listeners. One viewer of the awards show tweeted, “I don't know what I find more disturbing...Beyonce's outfit, her facial expressions, her stupid dancing or just #Beyonce in general.”¹⁴⁰ This statement is racially coded. By pointing to her dress which was a low-cut sparkly gown, her facial expressions and her dancing in order to mark her as other, this viewer is evoking racist stereotypes about the sexualization of black women. Furthermore, this viewer asserts that Beyonce, a black woman, does not belong within the country music genre, a genre which through the historical performance of blackface and erasure of cultural mixing in its creation, has been claimed as a white space.

Similarly, a commenter on CMT’s facebook page wrote, “SHE DOES NOT BELONG!!!! When have they ever invited ANY country singer to their BET awards...NEVER!!!!STOP IT. I bet Alan, George and Vince think CMT has gone NUTS.”¹⁴¹ This commentator explicitly states that Beyonce does not belong, evoking segregationist language by pointing to the fact that country singers, traditionally white men and women, have not been invited to the Black Entertainment Television awards. By referencing “they,” Black americans, this commenter, is advocating that Black people do not have a space in country music and there is space that is racialized as Black, BET, where he does believe that Black Americans “belong.” Additionally, a commenter on the website Country Living posted, “Figures they would pair up. One who has no respect for the American military and another who has no respect for the American law enforcement. Ashamed they would be allowed to perform at the CMAs at all.”

¹⁴⁰ Roberts, “Conservative Country Music Fans Lash out at CMA Performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks.”

¹⁴¹ Roberts.

¹⁴² Writing about this performance for *the Atlantic*, Spencer Kornhaber suggests that it is possible that through the recording of this song and her subsequent performance at the CMAs Beyoncé's intent could have been to shed light on country's music history which has drawn heavily on African American influences, "Perhaps Beyoncé came to the Country Music Awards to put up a fight: a fight for the song's legitimacy as country, for the black lineage of a genre typically thought of as white, and/or for some play on rural airwaves."¹⁴³ Episodes like this represent a microcosm for the greater history of racialized, classed, and gendered boundaries in country music, as a result of anxieties around working-class white masculinity.

Women in Country Today

Very recently, there has been an acknowledgement that women face different barriers than men in the country music industry. In 2017 women only received 10.4% of airtime of commercial country radio, a fact that has pushed many women in the industry to question this glaring gender disparity. However, this gender gap has appeared in the last two decades. Looking back to the early 1990s there was lots of female representation for women, including the Dixie Chicks, on country radio. However, political economist Devarti Ghosh, found that women's radio success in the genre began to turn in the early 2000s, and by 2008 it became clear that women were struggling to get played on the radio.¹⁴⁴

While country music themes in the 1990s, when the Dixie Chicks began performing, were not particularly boundary pushing compared to the tradition of women in 18th and 19th

¹⁴² Roberts.

¹⁴³ Kornhaber, "Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons' at the Country Music Awards With the Dixie Chicks Was an Olive Branch."

¹⁴⁴ Hopper, "The Women of Nashville's Music Scene Are Calling Time's Up."

century folk music, they represented a departure from some of the more patriarchal themes that were present throughout much of 20th century country music. Women in 1990s country were discussing more themes of female empowerment and solidarity than the decades prior.¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, in the 1990s, women were receiving much more radio time than they do now.

In the 1990s women in country music emphasized female solidarity and took feminist stances on issues that would have resonated with white, rural, southern women. Feminist scholar, Julie Haynes, calls this rhetoric, combined with the discourse about women in country music that was promoted by the media and country stars of the time “hillbilly feminism.”¹⁴⁶ The rhetoric that emerged at this time was notable in that it acknowledged and addressed issues of women’s rights while incorporating, “working-class sensibilities and attention to US southern, rural identity.”¹⁴⁷

The empowered and independent persona that women in country music were embodying in the 1990s, a persona that the Dixie Chicks utilized as well, would have appeared progressive in comparison to the prior decades, when many country music stars were still preaching traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. Haynes points to the fact that in previous decades, women in country music, both performers and the women portrayed in song lyrics, were often portrayed as rivals, competing for the love and attention of men.¹⁴⁸ These songs include Loretta Lynn’s “You ain’t Woman Enough (to Take My Man)”, Dolly Parton’s “Jolene”, and Kitty Wells’ “A Woman Half My Age.”¹⁴⁹ In all of these examples the female narrator references or

¹⁴⁵ Haynes, “Looking for (Women’s) Rights in All the Wrong Places? Country Music and Hillbilly Feminism in the 1990s.”

¹⁴⁶ Stars include Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, and Dolly Parton.

¹⁴⁷ Haynes. 315-316.

¹⁴⁸ Haynes. 316.

¹⁴⁹ Haynes. 316.

addresses the woman who has either seduced or “stolen” her man. These songs are rife with insult. For instance, Lynn sings, “Women like you they're a dime a dozen you can buy 'em anywhere. For you to get to him I'd have to move over, and I'm gonna stay right here.”¹⁵⁰ This song both dehumanizes Lynn's would-be rival and preserves her man's reputation, painting the woman as the sole aggressor and her husband as defenseless towards these seductions.

In a similar vein, country singers Reba McEntire and Linda Davis are portrayed as professional rivals and romantic rivals, in 1993 music video for the song “Does He Love You.” In this duet McEntire and Davis sing, “But does he love you, like he loves me? Does he think of you? When he's holding me?”¹⁵¹ Until the last 30 seconds of this video, we are led to believe that the two women in this video vilify each other, while the man in the video is considered guiltless, despite the fact that he is being unfaithful to both of them. The movie ends with a producer yelling, “Cut!” exposing that this rivalry was part of a movie the entire time. While the lyrics of this song and the accompanying music video in many ways fit thematically with the female rivalry themes that were present through much of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, this video signifies a departure from this trope with the plot twist at the end, towards the more feminist theme of female solidarity that emerged for women in country in the 1990s.

Haynes notes that in interviews and their music, women of 1990s country were often discussing sisterhood among women and themes around female solidarity.¹⁵² The rise of female country duets at this time also supports the female collectivity that emerged.¹⁵³ Country music lyrics of the 1990s often addressed issues of intimate partner violence and abuse, and Haynes

¹⁵⁰ kkiilljjooy, *Loretta Lynn - You Ain't Woman Enough (To Take My Man)*.

¹⁵¹ RebaMcEntireVEVO, *Reba McEntire - Does He Love You Ft. Linda Davis*.

¹⁵² Haynes. 316.

¹⁵³ Haynes. 316

gives the examples of Martina McBride's "Independence Day" (1994) and "Broken Wing" (1997) and Garth Brooks' song and video for "Thunder Rolls" (1990).¹⁵⁴ The controversial video accompanying Garth Brooks' "Thunder Rolls" features an enraged wife who plans to kill her cheating husband. However, this video was pulled from CMT for the controversy that it caused.¹⁵⁵ The Dixie Chicks' 1999 hit song "Goodbye Earl" also tackles and critiques intimate partner violence.¹⁵⁶

Haynes also notes that another lyrical theme that emerged through this hillbilly feminism of the 1990s was a critique of the traditional idea that women belong in the domestic sphere.¹⁵⁷ Haynes cites McEntire's "Is there Life Out There?," which asks, "Is there life out there? So much she hasn't done. Is there life beyond her family and her home?" The accompanying video portrays a mom who is working to get her college degree.¹⁵⁸

Recording industry expert, Beverly Keel, argues that Shania Twain, contemporary of the Dixie Chicks, was one of the most influential feminist voices to emerge in country music, since the release of her 1995 album *The Woman in Me*. To characterize Twain's persona Keel explains, "She loves her man, but she loves herself more. She is turning the tables on men, insisting that she's the one who must be pleased." Twain sets ground rules for any man who would be interested in her romantically in "Any Man of Mine".¹⁵⁹

Although, Haynes critiques hillbilly feminism for relying on "essentialist and narrowly-defined feminist ideals," she notes that it forced the genre to grapple with its

¹⁵⁴ Haynes. 317

¹⁵⁵ Dukes, "Remember When Garth Brooks Was Banned From Television?"

¹⁵⁶ Haynes. 317.

¹⁵⁷ Haynes. 316.

¹⁵⁸ RebaMcEntireVEVO, *Reba McEntire - Is There Life Out There*.

¹⁵⁹ Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl: The New Women's Movement in Country Music."

historically conservative reputation. She also points out that it is easy to dismiss country music as blatantly conservative despite the feminist resistance that arose in the 1990s.¹⁶⁰

The 1990s is not the first decade to witness female country singers championing progressive or feminist themes. For instance, Loretta Lynn's 1967 song, "Don't come Home A-Drinkin' (with Lovin' on Your Mind)," addresses marital rape, more than twenty years before this would be considered a criminal offense in all 50 states.¹⁶¹ In this song Lynn discusses marital rape and critiques the ideal of traditional heteronormative domesticity, "You never take me anywhere because you're always gone. Many a night I've laid awake and cried dear all alone. And you come in a-kissin' on me. It happens every time, so don't come home a-drinkin' with lovin' on your mind."¹⁶² Nonetheless, Keel writes, "songs like Lynn's 'Don't come Home A-Drinkin' (with Lovin' on Your Mind)' have been the exception to the rule that women were supposed to sing about heartbreak and longing. In the world of country lyrics it seemed that women were either crying because they had been dumped or were singing with glee to be back in baby's arms."¹⁶³

Lynn's 1975 song "The Pill" also falls in to the category of progressive women's music.¹⁶⁴ This song discusses the empowerment that is granted to women when they have control over their reproductive systems. In "The Pill," Lynn sings, "All these years I've stayed at home, while you had all your fun, and every year that's gone by another baby's come. There's a gonna be some changes made right here on nursery hill. You've set this chicken your last time 'cause now

¹⁶⁰ Haynes. 317.

¹⁶¹ England, "The History of Marital Rape Laws"; Betts, "Loretta Lynn Scores With 'Don't Come Home a-Drinkin'."

¹⁶² John1948EightC1, *Loretta Lynn - Don't Come Home A Drinkin' (1969)*.

¹⁶³ Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl: The New Women's Movement in Country Music."

¹⁶⁴ Talbot, "Review: Loretta Lynn's 'The Pill.'"

I've got the pill.”¹⁶⁵ Released only ten years after the Supreme Court granted married couples the right to use birth control in the landmark *Griswold v. Connecticut* case, this song was written at a time when the use of contraception would have still been accompanied by heavy stigma.¹⁶⁶

Country music icon, Dolly Parton, also incorporated many feminist themes into her music. Starting with the 1968 song, “Just because I’m a Woman”, Parton critiques the double standard that exists for women and men surrounding sexuality. In the song she tells her fiancé that she is not a virgin, pointing out that, “Now a man will take a good girl, and he'll ruin her reputation but, when he wants to marry, well, that's a different situation.”¹⁶⁷ While this song does not go as far as to critique the pressure surrounding virginity related to patrilineal inheritance, it addresses a concern that would have resonated with southern, female, audiences listening to these themes. In 1980, Parton released a song that similarly acknowledged the struggle of many women with “9 to 5.”¹⁶⁸ In this song, Parton discusses how difficult it is to be a working woman, expressing, “Workin' 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin'. Barely gettin' by, it's all takin' and no givin'. They just use your mind and they never give you credit. It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it.”¹⁶⁹ In this song she criticized that her male boss receives credit and generous monetary compensation for her labor, while she is struggling to make ends meet. This song critiques the fact that women are not being adequately compensated for their labor, picking up on the feminist theme relating to the devaluation of women’s work.

The aforementioned examples suggest that there was a feminist voice for women in mid-twentieth century country music that carried into the 1990s hillbilly feminism. It is possible

¹⁶⁵ lorettafan1, *Loretta Lynn “the Pill.”*

¹⁶⁶ “Griswold v. Connecticut.”

¹⁶⁷ “Dolly Parton – Just Because I’m a Woman”; “Lyrics for Just Because I’m a Woman by Dolly Parton.”

¹⁶⁸ “9 to 5 by Dolly Parton.”

¹⁶⁹ DollyPartonVEVO, *Dolly Parton - 9 To 5 (Official Video)*.

to trace a this feminist voice from women's early 1800s folk music through the late 1990s and early 2000s, but this was not always the dominant narrative for women throughout the mid 20th century. There were also many songs released in the mid-twentieth century that asserted traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. Perhaps the most well-known country song with this messaging is Tammy Wynette's "Stand by Your Man", in which Wynette tells women, "Stand by your man, Give him two arms to cling to, and something warm to come to when nights are cold and lonely," despite his infidelity and the pain he causes you.¹⁷⁰ This song perpetuates the dangerous narrative that "boys will be boys" which socially allows men and boys to practice harmful behaviors.

While country music's focus on women in the 1990s represented progress for women in terms of visibility, the focus on feminist issues, and airplay, since the mid 2000s country music has been experiencing a retrenchment to towards something that looks more similar to the environment that existed in country music during the 1950s and 1960s honky-tonk in that there is a limited voice for women on commercial country radio which has become dominated by a hypermasculine voice. While women in country music are vocalizing the desire to remain in solidarity with one another, current women in country music report that in Nashville it is common to hear people in the industry say, "We already have one woman on our roster."¹⁷¹ This suggests that there are very few spots for female artists in the country music industry, and it pits women against each other by suggesting that there is not room for more than one woman.

I interviewed Beverly Keel, chair of the Department of Recording Industry at Middle Tennessee State University and co-founder of Change the Conversation, a coalition designed to

¹⁷⁰ TammyWynetteVEVO, *Tammy Wynette - Stand By Your Man (Audio) (Pseudo Video)*.

¹⁷¹ "On Country Music Airwaves, Female Artists Fight For Equal Play." 03:54-04:00; Brown and Carlson, "Shunned by Country Radio, Female Artists in Nashville Are Looking to Break Through."

to fight gender inequality in country music, on April 19, 2019 about the gender gaps that exist today. I was specifically interested if Keel believed that the exclusion of women in the country music industry today was connected to the Dixie Chicks controversy in 2003. Keel explains:

I don't think they're necessarily related, but I don't think what happened to the Dixie Chicks helped women in country music... it's like when you have a leader of any minority group who does something that's perceived as messing up, it can reflect on others in that same group following in that path... All eyes are on you, you're the role model, if you do well they might accept others, if you don't do well it's like... well we hired that person and they didn't do well, so...¹⁷²

While Keel acknowledges that the Dixie Chicks' banning was likely negative for women in country music, she does not believe that this is the whole story of why women are receiving such limited radio play. So what happened? Keel suggests that the rise of "Bro country" might have something to do with the limited play of women today.¹⁷³ The new hyper-masculine style country that has emerged since the early 2000s has been referred to as "Bro country" by members of the country music industry. Luke Bryan is said to embody this persona. He is a good 'ol boy, who likes beer, tractors, and women.¹⁷⁴ Given this narrow male character that has developed, the opportunities and available personas for women in country music have become limited. The narrative of the strong hyper-masculine figure does not leave space for a complementary female voice. This masculine country music persona that is being presented in "Bro Country" is misogynistic at times and evocative of the honkytonk era masculinity of the

¹⁷² Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁷³ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁷⁴ E.J., "'Bro Country' Is out, 'Woke Country' Is in - Walking the Line."

1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, Keel says that, “if you’ve got the majority of the programming in the ‘Bro Country’ sound, then other kinds of music are not going to fit in with that sonically.”¹⁷⁵

The characterization of women in country songs during this contemporary period is the “crazy girl” valued for her beauty. This is reflected in Luke Combs’ number one song “Beautiful Crazy.”¹⁷⁶ The theme of referring to women as girls in country music has a paternalistic effect on women in the industry, and the idea that women are “crazy” undermines women’s credibility. This questioning of women’s credibility is intertwined with a long history of the public questioning women’s testimony regarding sexual harassment, assault, and rape.¹⁷⁷

Beyond the rise of “Bro country” to explain why women are receiving more limited play, Keel also points to the long held belief in the industry that women do not want to hear other women on the radio, and that it has been a sort of “conventional wisdom” in Nashville not to play two female songs back to back.¹⁷⁸ Keel said that she did not realize that this was a widely held belief about women on country radio, until “Tomato-gate.”¹⁷⁹ “Tomato-gate” was a 2015 controversy where prominent country music radio consultant, Keith Hill referred to women as the “tomatoes” of the country music “salad”, “Trust me... I play great female records, and we’ve got some right now; they’re just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. The tomatoes of our salad are the females.”¹⁸⁰ Keel explains that it was during this controversy that the president of *Country AirCheck*, an industry

¹⁷⁵ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁷⁶ LukeCombsVEVO, *Luke Combs - Beautiful Crazy*.

¹⁷⁷ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say about Their Lives*. 2-3.

¹⁷⁸ Radio stations say that their research shows that women don’t want to hear other women, but Keel says that she never sees this research.

¹⁷⁹ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁸⁰ Keel, “‘Tomato-Gate’ Galvanizes Women in Country Music.”

publication, explained to her that he did not understand why these comments caused so much controversy, as this perspective represented a widely held belief in radio.¹⁸¹

Additionally, Keel explains that women in country are now referred to as female artists rather than just artists, “I call it the asterisk right, that you’re considered a *female* artist. So that’s like a little asterisk. Well is that less than? Is that different from? It’s like you’re a doctor, you’re a lawyer, you’re not a female doctor or female lawyer.”¹⁸² The demarcation of women in country as “female” artists implies that they are somehow different from the majority of country artists, white males, or less authentically country than this majority. The qualifier, female, marks women as not fully a part of the country music community. Furthermore, Keel discusses the double standard that exists for women in country music today, “you’ve got to have high fashion clothes, or you’re gonna be criticized, your hair and makeup have gotta be perfect, or your gonna be criticized, ... but if you’re too good...you think you’re too good, you’ve left country, you don’t even know who you are anymore.”¹⁸³ This is a contemporary iteration of the tension that Fox traces where women have to accept modernity to succeed professionally in the country industry, but that they also have to show that they are “authentically” country through their display of rustic and traditional values.¹⁸⁴

Keel explains that progress has been made for women in the industry, because at least now people are recognizing that there is a problem, “When I started talking about it in 2014... I was really criticized for it by people...sort of saying that the problem didn’t really exist, I was just trying to make one...when we first started some people were saying ‘oh it’s not so bad’, and

¹⁸¹ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁸² Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁸³ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁸⁴ Fox. 13.

now nobody can say that. So I feel like we're halfway there. At least now everybody knows there's a problem."¹⁸⁵

While it seems that change could be on the horizon, as conversations are happening in Nashville and more nationally about the lack of women being included in mainstream commercial country music, I believe that the lingering memory of the Dixie Chicks, and their violent mistreatment by the country music industry will need to be addressed before the country music industry is able to take tangible steps towards closing its gender and content gap that currently exists. For instance, on February 11th, *The Economist* released an article titled "'Bro country' is out, 'woke country' is in", arguing that in recent years country artists are beginning to challenge the conservative nature of the country music industry. The article notes that, "The story of the Dixie Chicks became a cautionary tale in Nashville, the capital of country music. It served as a warning to respect the music's conservative values: if folk was the music of protest, then country was the music for those who fly the flag. Many of the protagonists of commercial country radio drink beer, drive a pick-up, go to church, and support the troops and the second amendment."¹⁸⁶

The treatment of the Dixie Chicks created a culture of fear for many artists. After the 2003 Iraq War scandal, people started to use the Dixie Chicks as a verb, you could get 'Dixie Chicked.'¹⁸⁷ This meant that if you were to say something that upset the country music community, the listener base, or the radio gatekeepers, your music could get pulled from rotation. Keel says that the Dixie Chicks' being banned from radio had a "chilling effect" on many artists who feared backlash for speaking out, "I had one artist tell me once, it's not worth it

¹⁸⁵ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁸⁶ E.J., "'Bro Country' Is out, 'Woke Country' Is in - Walking the Line."

¹⁸⁷ Leight, "Country Music, Politics & the Lingering Fear of 'Getting Dixie Chicked.'"

because whatever you say you'll alienate fifty percent of your audience... so fifty percent may love what you say but fifty percent is going to hate what you say, so unless it's the core of who you are, like Rosanne Cash, like Sheryl Crow... it's just not worth it."¹⁸⁸

Historically, commercial radio has been the only country music discovery platform, a platform by which potential fans could hear new music, but this is being disrupted to some extent by online streaming services, satellite radio, and social media. The Dixie Chicks were banned from radio before music streaming services were as prolific as they are today. Artists today may have opportunity to glean exposure to listeners without the support of commercial country radio. Kacey Musgraves is an acute example of this phenomenon. Musgraves was just awarded four Grammy awards, and she did it largely without getting played by commercial country radio.¹⁸⁹ Rolling Stone magazine notes, that even winning these Grammy awards may not guarantee Musgraves airtime on country radio, pointing to Sturgil Simpson, Vince Gill, the Dixie Chicks, and Loretta Lynn as country artists who received Grammy for songs or albums that were not radio hits.¹⁹⁰ Keel agrees that these new platforms could help women, but she still maintains that many opportunities, like late-night tv shows, tours, and award nominations, in the country music industry are only available to you when you have hit songs on country radio.¹⁹¹

On March 21st 2019 episode of National Public Radio's "On Point," Meghna Chakrabarti talked with Beverly Keel, Kalie Shorr, and Kelleigh Bannen, about the current issue of women fighting for equal play time on country music radio. Shorr and Bannen are both country music singer songwriters in Nashville, and Shorr is also the co-founder of a collective and showcase

¹⁸⁸ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

¹⁸⁹ Moss, "How Kacey Musgraves' Grammy Wins Give Country Radio a Choice to Make – Rolling Stone."

¹⁹⁰ Moss.

¹⁹¹ Keel, Interview with Beverly Keel.

called Song Suffragettes that showcases women in country music.¹⁹² This radio show was done only days after PBS NewsHour also featured a segment on the gender gap in country music.¹⁹³ On the show, Shorr and Bannen explain that overt discrimination based on their gender is something that they have experienced and that they believe most women in the industry have experienced.¹⁹⁴ This spotlight on the issue indicates that people realize that the gender gap in country music is a problem.

The prevalence of overt sexism that is still present in this industry indicates that there is a need for social protest and organization within the country music genre. If the fear of being ‘Dixie Chicked’ is still prevalent, this could pose an obstacle to organization and outspoken criticism of the current structures, including radio stations and record labels, that govern the country music industry.

Conclusion

When I began this project I was interested in how gender shaped the Dixie Chicks scandal. Furthermore, I was interested in what the implication of this gendered influence might be on women in country music more broadly. Through this case study, I have learned about the various ways that constructions of gender, race, and class serve as interlocking forms of oppression, working to regulate and exclude certain groups from the country music. Looking to the work of Lott, Fox, and McCusker it became clear that anxieties around a delicately constructed white masculinity underscore the genre . These anxieties are mitigated through the

¹⁹² “On Country Music Airwaves, Female Artists Fight For Equal Play.”

¹⁹³ Brown and Carlson, “Shunned by Country Radio, Female Artists in Nashville Are Looking to Break Through.”

¹⁹⁴ “On Country Music Airwaves, Female Artists Fight For Equal Play.” 02:55-04:13.

regulation of established boundaries of behavior and performance in country music. This regulation serves to exclude people of color, and to police acceptable gender roles for women in country music. This regulation determines who belongs or doesn't belong, and how people, specifically women, can or cannot act in the genre, and class identification of country listeners works quickly to close ranks against and sort of threat to this imagined space.

The Dixie Chicks expose the precarious position of women in country, heavily regulated by boundaries of acceptable behavior. This positioning makes it difficult for women in country music to speak out politically, especially progressively, and also maintain the identifications that mark them as authentically country. It is ultimately class and race based anxieties that underscore white masculinity that creates this precarious position, and unless these fears are mediated, they will continue to impact the genre. The scarcity of women on country music radio today speaks to the magnitude of impact that these anxieties and regulations can have on the success and exposure of female country singers. This reality underscores the importance for protest in country music in order to achieve better representation for women and minority groups. Artists need to be willing to protest and call out discrimination and exclusion, as the culture of silence that evolved out of a fear of being "Dixie Chicked" serves as another form of control over women and minority groups in the industry. In order to understand the exclusion of women in country music today, and the scandal around the Dixie Chicks in 2003, it is important to look at the development of the genre with a focus on gender, race, and class, as there is a history that provides a backdrop for these situations.

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