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The Parton Paradox: A History of Race and Gender in the Career of Dolly Parton

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THE PARTON PARADOX:
A HISTORY OF RACE AND GENDER IN THE CAREER OF DOLLY PARTON

by

LINDSEY HAMMERS

(Under the Direction of Christina Abreu)

ABSTRACT

With a career that has spanned over five decades, country music artist Dolly Parton has continually redefined her image and her music to remain relevant. By incorporating the musical and lyrical stylings of disco and other popular music genres into her songs, Parton moved beyond music's color line to increase her popularity as an artist. This thesis shows how Parton established a distinct career that catered to different audiences as she traversed the musical color line and repackaged what feminism looked like to country music fans during the Women's Movement of the 1960s. Placing Parton's actions in conversation with music's color line demonstrates how she embraced racial and musical diversity, not just within her music, but also on her television shows of the late 1970s and 1980s. This analysis also examines Parton's career in relation to the Women's Movement by looking at the ways in which she used her position and popularity as a country and crossover entertainer to chip away at the traditional structure of country music. Parton presented herself as a more palatable feminist to country music fans and used her image as the genre's buxom blonde to distract her audience from her messages of gender equality. Through this combination, Parton challenged traditional racial, cultural, and gender boundaries within country music but at other times and for different reasons she conformed to them.

INDEX WORDS: Dolly Parton, Country Music, Musical Color Line, Disco, Pop, Race, Gender, Feminism, Antifeminism, The Women's Movement.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

On the night of November 2, 2016, an unexpected lineup would take the stage at the 50th Country Music Association Awards: Beyoncé and Dolly Parton. Beyoncé would be joined by the Dixie Chicks to perform “Daddy Lessons,” a new song off her album, *Lemonade*. On its own, Beyoncé’s pairing with the Dixie Chicks was controversial (if not entirely unpopular) given that the all-girl band fell from country music royalty in 2003 after Natalie Maines, the group’s lead singer, spoke ill of then President George W. Bush at an event in London.¹ But the performance was not wholly out of place: “Daddy Lessons” is a very country-sounding tune with “yee-haws” and its share of brass instruments, harmonica, percussion, and, on this night, a banjo, mandolin, and fiddle, all country music’s staple instruments. With this song and performance Beyoncé dipped into the genre of country, and some country fans did not appreciate her presence.

Negative reactions to Beyoncé’s performance from country music entertainers and country music fans demonstrate that the musical color line and racialization of musical genres were still firmly in place.² Other pop stars have shared the stage with country acts and generated less controversy. For example, when Justin Timberlake performed with Chris Stapleton at the

¹ “Dixie Chicks Pulled from Air After Bashing Bush,” CNN, March 14, 2003; ABC News, “Dixie Chicks Speak Out on ‘Primetime,’” ABC News, April 24, 2003; Greg Mitchell, “Ten Years Ago Today a Dixie Chick Dared to Hit Bush on War—and a Hate Campaign Began,” *The Nation*, March 10, 2013; Andrew Leahey, “Flashback: The Dixie Chicks Are Ashamed of the President...Again,” *Rolling Stone*, August 7, 2014; Alicia Kort, “Dixie Chick’s Natalie Maines Looks Back on President Bush Comments 12 Years Later,” *Music Times*, March 16, 2015; Grady Smith, “Is Country Music Ready to Forgive the Dixie Chicks?” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2015; Chris Payne, “The Most Scathing Political Comments from Dixie Chick’s Natalie Maines,” *Billboard*, January 25, 2016; Chris Parton, “Natalie Maines Rips Donald Trump, Country Radio Hypocrites,” *Rolling Stone*, August 11, 2016. The fact that Beyoncé’s presence at the CMAs has been continually discussed, even recently, points to the weight of this event in the eyes of country music fans.

² In my discussions of the color line, I refer to Karl Hagstrom Miller’s definition which argues that the separation of musical forms developed along racial lines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He elaborates on the ways in which the recording industry and folklore studies worked to continually segregate the sounds of early American music. Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2010).

2015 CMA Awards fans noted that even though Timberlake was not a country star, the duo had produced a satisfying musical collaboration.³ It deserves emphasizing that Beyoncé and Timberlake, both entertainment megastars, hail from the south (Houston and Memphis, respectively) and likely grew up around, if not actively listening to, the sounds of country music. But the similarities end there, shaped undoubtedly by the racial and gender expectations that still define the genre. Beyoncé's performance at the CMA's sparked an immediate social media explosion; in comparison, Timberlake's performance almost went unnoticed.⁴

Rumors circulated that Beyoncé might perform at the 2016 CMAs, but no one knew for sure if she would take the stage until moments before it happened. After her performance, the official media accounts for the CMA made no mention of her collaborative presentation.⁵ Of course, this could have been at Beyoncé's request, given that she likes to maintain an air of mystery around her. The silence may have also been the decision of the show's producers who were "playing to the culturally conservative portions of country's fan base" in hopes of increasing television ratings without having to depend on a popular artist outside of country music. Beyoncé's performance stood out for another reason: she and the musicians who joined

³ Marissa R. Moss, "See Chris Stapleton and Justin Timberlake's Stunning CMA Awards Duet," *Rolling Stone*, November 4, 2015; Maeve McDermott, "Justin Timberlake and Chris Stapleton Stole the CMA Awards," *USA Today*, November 4, 2015; Andrew Leahey, "10 Best Country Collaborations of 2015," *Rolling Stone*, December 16, 2015; Emily Yahr, "A Year After Chris Stapleton's CMAs Shockers; Country Music Still Wondering How Much It Mattered," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2016.

⁴ Associated Press, "Beyoncé-Dixie Chicks Collaboration Sparks Social Media Clash," CBS, November 4, 2016; Randall Roberts, "Conservative Country Music Fans Lash Out at CMA Performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2016; Lauren Matthews, "Travis Tritt Went on an Epic Twitter Rant Over Beyoncé's CMA Awards Performance," *Country Living* November 7, 2016. It is important to note that not all country fans or artists reacted negatively to Beyoncé's performance. Some, like Brad Paisley, issued a welcome to the artist stating that sometimes artists like to crossover.

⁵ The Country Music Association released a statement the following day refuting reports that the organization deleted all mentions of Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks' performance. Joseph Hudak, "CMA Responds to Beyoncé, Dixie Chicks Performance Controversy," *Rolling Stone*, November 3, 2016; Chloe Melas, "CMA Responds to Allegations It Removed Social Media Posts Over Beyoncé Performance Backlash," *CNN*, November 4, 2016; Carly Mallenbaum, "Where's Beyoncé on the CMA Awards' Social Media?" *USA Today*, November 3, 2016; Cindy Watts, "CMA Disputes Beyoncé Social Media Controversy," *The Tennessean*, November 3, 2016.

her on stage were just about the only blacks to perform at a ceremony aimed at celebrating a genre with undeniable black beginnings.⁶

Later in the awards show, Lilly Tomlin, one of Parton's *9 to 5* co-stars, took the stage to introduce Parton to an audience that already knew her well. Then Pentatonix, an acapella pop group from Texas and an all-star cast of prominent country female singers, including Reba McEntire and Carrie Underwood, came together on stage to honor the country singer. After the tribute, Parton was presented with the Willie Nelson Lifetime Achievement Award. She accepted the award with her usual dose of wit and cheesy self-deprecating jokes and a plug for her upcoming television movie *Dolly Parton's Christmas of Many Colors: Circle of Love*. To the shock of many in attendance and watching at home, her remarks were cut short because of time constraints. "I had a whole big speech on the teleprompter," she said. "They said we were running short... and I understand time and shows and you can't have time for everything. It wasn't all about me. It was just a moment of mine and I appreciate it."⁷ An uproar on social media ensued with country fans questioning why producers would allow time for Beyoncé's performance while sidelining Parton's historic moment.⁸ Moments after Parton was rushed off

⁶ Spencer Kornhaber, "What Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons' Had to Teach," *The Atlantic*, November 3, 2016. Charley Pride, country music's only African American performer, was also present that night and took part in the opening tribute to celebrate the success of country music by singing one of his hits, "Kiss an Angel Good Morning," with Brad Paisley, country star and co-host of the awards show. For a discussion on the origins of country music, see: Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* (New York: DK Publishing, 2006); Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Karl H. Miller, *Segregating Sound*, and Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁷ "50th CMA Awards," Country Music Association, aired November 2, 2016, on ABC.

⁸ Nick Murray, "Dolly Parton Talks Lifetime Honor, All-Star Tribute at CMA Awards," *Rolling Stone*, November 7, 2016. Multiple news outlets covered reactions to the performance and the song's failure to be considered country for Grammy Awards: Julia Brucculieri, "Dolly Parton's CMAs Speech Is Another Reason We'll Always Love Her," *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2016; Joseph Hudak, "How Beyoncé's CMA Awards Controversy Foreshadowed Trump's Victory," *Rolling Stone*, November 10, 2016; Joe Coscarelli, "Beyoncé CMA Awards Performance becomes the Target of Backlash," *New York Times*, November 3, 2016; Jason Lipshutz, "Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons': 10 Fun Facts," *Billboard*, November 3, 2016; Dave Paulson, "Beyoncé, Dixie Chicks Wow CMA Audience Despite Backlash," *The Tennessean*, November 3, 2016; Megan Reynolds, "Watch Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks Kill 'Daddy Lessons' at the CMA Awards," *Jezebel*, November 2, 2016; Joyce Chen, "Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons' Rejected for Grammy's Country Category," *US*, December 8, 2016; Dave Paulson and Cindy Watts,

stage, Chris Stapleton took the stage to accept his award for CMA Male Vocalist of the year. Likely aware of the potential for backlash, he insisted that if he had known of the time constraints, he would have gladly given up his time for Parton.

These two episodes highlight one of the themes that this thesis seeks to examine: Dolly Parton's relationship with the musical color line. This thesis argues that Parton's attempts to increase her popularity and financial success challenged cultural, racial, and gender boundaries within country music. Raised in impoverished East Tennessee, the music legend has traversed genre and gender boundaries throughout her five-decade career by including disco and popular musical and lyrical elements into her music. At times, Parton supported the contributions of black entertainers by featuring them in her concerts and television shows. She attempted to blend and desegregate musical genres that had been previously segregated by consumer preferences and music industry executives. These examinations demonstrate how Parton navigated the male-dominated music industry as a crossover trailblazer and how she encouraged other artists who also wished to increase their success to pursue a similar path.

A racial interpretation of Parton and her music has received little to no attention from scholars. Existing scholarship on Parton focuses on country music's connection to a blue-collar white audience but neglects her appeal to a more diverse audience.⁹ This work tells a more

"CMA Awards: Six Unforgettable Moments," *The Tennessean*, November 3, 2016; Joseph Hudak, "Beyoncé's Country Song 'Daddy Lessons' Rejected by Grammys," *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 2016; Billboard Staff, "Watch Beyoncé & Dixie Chicks Combine for Show-stopping 'Daddy Lessons' at 2016 CMA Awards," *Billboard*, November 2, 2016; Luchina Fisher, "CMA Awards 2016: Beyoncé Performs With The Dixie Chicks," *ABC News*, November 2, 2016; Maeve McDermott, "Beyoncé Made Country Magic With The Dixie Chicks on 'Daddy Lessons,'" *USA Today*, November 2, 2016.

⁹ See Ruth A. Banes, "Dixie's Daughters: The Country Music Female," in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, edited by Richard A. Peterson, 81-112 (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992); Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 2003); Maureen Cecile Modesitt, "Dolly Parton: A Semiotic Study of Her Life and Lyrics" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 2001). At the same time, Parton is absent from other's discussions regarding country music's connection to the working class. Perhaps this speaks to the genre's attitude towards the crossover artist and labeling her as a country music outsider during the 1970s and 1980s. See Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The*

nuanced story by examining how she was portrayed in African American newspapers and magazines as well as her interactions with famous black entertainers. As the host of her own variety shows in 1976/1977 and, again, in 1987/1988, Parton featured several acts and performers of color, a striking contrast to the white male establishment that defined country music. In doing so, she acknowledged country music's black influence, which the industry has tried to erase and silence, and demonstrated connections between artists of musical genres that were promoted by the record industry as black music or white music. As she expanded the genre of country music by incorporating more pop elements into her music, she widened country's fan base and produced racial inclusivity as a byproduct.

Secondly, I place Parton's actions and music within the Second Wave of Feminism to demonstrate how she presented herself to two very different audiences: country and pop. Within this discussion, I analyze her lyrics and musical performances with other artists during the mid 1970s and into the early 1990s to show how she presented herself as a palatable feminist to country music fans and as a relevant artist to popular music audiences. Parton was critical of the Women's Movement and felt that the leaders and participants of the Movement did not represent ordinary women. She used her stardom and unique position within country music's "boy's club" as a pulpit to assert the voice of lower and lower-middle class women. Her lyrics and films vocalized issues surrounding women's rights and equality and, at times, were met with hostility and criticism. Parton used her image as the genre's buxom blonde as a mask to distract her audience from her messages of gender equality. Through this combination, Parton repackaged what feminism looked like and transmitted that new image to country music audiences.

Politics of Country Music (New York: The New Press, 2005) and Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Dolly Parton: A Brief Biography

Born during the early morning hours of January 19, 1946, in a small log cabin along the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains in Sevier County, Tennessee, Dolly Rebecca Parton was the fourth of twelve children born to sharecropper Robert Lee Parton and his wife Avie Lee Owens Parton. This delivery had been particularly difficult for Avie Lee so the family had called for the local doctor, Robert F. Thomas. As Parton recalls in her autobiography, her father could not afford to pay the medical fees to deliver Parton so he paid for the doctor's services with a sack of cornmeal.¹⁰ Parton says she was unaware of the family's poverty as a young girl because everyone around her was in a similar situation. Also, as Parton sings in one of her most famous songs, "Coat of Many Colors," the love of her family and her dreams made her feel "rich." Parton credits some of her imagination to growing up without electricity, running water, indoor plumbing, and a telephone. Parton's childhood was dotted with colorful characters, from mountain folks to the town prostitute, who fostered her curiosity and who later inspired her art and image.

Parton grew up in a musical family and began her early music career, like many other aspiring artists, in church. She began composing songs before she could read or write and had her mother write them down for her. Her earliest song was an ode to her cornhusk doll, "Little Tiny TassleTOP." At eight years old, Parton received a guitar from her uncle, Bill Owens, a local country entertainer and Nashville hopeful himself. Parton credits her fame to her Uncle Bill who helped her land performances on Cas Walker's radio and television shows in Knoxville,

¹⁰ Dolly Parton, *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business* (New York, Harper Collins, 1994), 3. She later immortalized this story in her song, "Dr. Robert F. Thomas," off her 1973 album *My Tennessee Mountain Home* and honored him for his dedication to the region again in 1986 by naming the chapel at her theme park, Dollywood, after him. Additionally, Parton serves as the honorary chairperson of the Dr. Robert F. Thomas Foundation, a charitable organization established in 1983 with the mission to expand the range of quality healthcare in East Tennessee.

Tennessee. She quickly became a regular on Cas Walker's *Farm and Home Hour* on station WIVK, Knoxville in the mid 1950s and soon found herself being introduced to sing at the Grand Ole Opry by Johnny Cash. Although she did not enjoy school, Parton remained a dedicated student, and in 1964 became the first member of her family to graduate from high school. The morning after graduation, Parton boarded a bus to Nashville with nothing but her dreams and a cardboard suitcase of clothes. On her first day in Nashville, Parton met her future husband, Carl Dean, at a laundromat. The two married on Memorial Day, 1966 in Ringgold, Georgia, shortly after he had gotten out of the army. They kept the marriage quiet since her record label, Monument Records, thought it best that she appear to be unmarried. After early success as a songwriter, Parton released *Dumb Blonde* in 1967 and signed with Porter Wagoner to be the new "girl" on his road show and popular syndicated television show. With Wagoner, she celebrated many industry successes including three Country Music Association Awards, four Music City News Awards, and one Academy of Country Music Award for Top Vocal Duet, but in order to expand her career, Parton needed to reach beyond the country music charts.¹¹

Timeline

Due to the scope and longevity of Parton's career, attempting to cover it all would result in a surface level analysis that would produce an unbalanced examination. Therefore, I have limited my examination of Parton's career to the years between 1974 and 1992. In 1974, Parton formally announced her departure from *The Porter Wagoner Show* in hopes of expanding beyond his audience and the limitations of the country music industry. In the late 1970s, after successful solo albums with singles such as "Jolene," "Love is Like a Butterfly," and "I Will

¹¹ Stephen Miller, *Smart Blonde: Dolly Parton*, (London: Omnibus Press, 2007); Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 310-320. For more information on Parton's background refer to her autobiography: Parton, *Dolly*.

Always Love You,” Parton moved her management office from Nashville, Tennessee to Hollywood, California, a move which drew criticism from country music fans and artists who labeled her decision a departure from country music. Parton continued to record and scored some of her most popular singles during this time, including “All I Can Do,” “Here You Come Again,” and “Heartbreaker.” From 1976 to 1977, Parton also starred in her own syndicated variety show, *Dolly!*, produced by Show Biz, Inc, the same company behind *The Porter Wagoner Show*.

Her release of “9 to 5” and the movie *9 to 5* provided Parton with her first movie role in December 1980. She would later star in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982), *Rhinestone* (1984), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), and as a down-home country girl turned celebrity in *Straight Talk* (1992). The mid 1980s saw a variety of albums and collaborations, including a Christmas album released with Kenny Rogers and their certified platinum hit “Island in the Stream,” which won them two honors: Top Vocal Duet and Single Record of the Year from the CMAs (and in 2015, the song was still Parton’s “biggest selling song”).¹² In 1986, Parton celebrated the grand opening of her amusement park, Dollywood, nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains. Then, in 1987, Parton, Linda Ronstadt, and Emmylou Harris released their joint album *Trio*, which some newspapers hailed as her return to country roots.¹³ The late 1980s and early 1990s were dotted with various hits from her albums *White Limozeen*, *Home For Christmas*, *Eagle When She Flies*, and a revamped version of her late 1970s variety show of the same name, just without the exclamation mark. *Dolly* ran from 1987 to 1988 on ABC, and the network and Parton committed to a two-year contract for \$44 million dollars, one of the most expensive television deals to date.¹⁴ Parton’s only production of 1992, the film *Straight Talk*, will serve as the final event

¹² Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 376.

¹³ John Rockwell, “Three of Pop’s Best Go Romping in the Country,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1987, accessed August 3, 2016, ProQuest.

¹⁴ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 240.

analyzed in this paper as it marked the end of her acting career. Although she did appear in minor television roles, it would be twenty years before Parton appeared in another film. Her absence from motion pictures was broken in 2012 when she starred in *Joyful Noise* alongside Queen Latifah.

The Growth of a Genre

Country music emerged in the 1920s, and in less than one hundred years it has evolved from acoustic folk music performed communally by amateurs to large-scale productions written by professional songwriters across a variety of genres and performed by entertainers for sell-out performances around the globe.¹⁵ In the 1920s, country music was considered “rural music” and associated with ethnic ballads brought to regions where European immigrants had settled. The music was labeled as “hillbilly” and commemorated southern culture through song. Most of these early country music artists came from the broad regions of southwest Virginia to Texas. From its very beginnings, country music was associated as distinctly southern music.

Country music grew in popularity with the expansion of radio. By 1927, the major record companies at the time agreed that there was a healthy and untapped market for country music. During the Great Depression, the country music industry suffered, but it announced its prominence symbolically in 1932 when Nashville’s WSM erected the world’s tallest radio antenna, described proudly as “323 feet higher than the Washington Monument,” to broadcast a far-reaching signal and the Grand Ole Opry across the United States.¹⁶ During the 1930s and after World War II, country music became synonymous with the image of the singing cowboy

¹⁵ Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle be Unbroken*, 8. Before 1920, no musical product was marketed with the label of country.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

thanks to movie stars Gene Autry and Roy Rogers.¹⁷ The Second World War helped to spread country's popularity, as young enlisted men took these songs with them and shared them with their comrades.¹⁸ It is likely that soldiers found the genre's traditional themes of home, love, heartbreak, and spiritualism relatable and comforting. After the Second World War, the country music market expanded into a big business that situated itself in the southern city of Nashville, Tennessee, a location that further cemented the genre's southern roots. Performers, hopefuls, and fans flocked to the city's Mother Church of Country Music to watch the Grand Ole Opry held at the Ryman Auditorium. Quite remarkably, country music managed to retain the loyalty of its core base of listeners while broadening its appeal to an expanding audience.¹⁹

Country music songs can be grouped into multiple lyrical themes which center around spiritualism, home life, and the natural world. Usually, these songs tell stories that juxtapose some of life's extremes: good and evil, wife and lover, freedom and job, poverty and wealth, sobriety and drunkenness, South and North, country and city.²⁰ At times, these categories intersect in a single song. An example of this can be found in Parton's "White Limozeen." The song describes "Daisy Mae's" journey from the country to the city with aspirations of fame, which she ultimately achieves. "White Limozeen," then, combines a story of poverty and wealth along with a story of country values, claiming that even though Daisy Mae is now a movie star "she's the same ol down home girl."

¹⁷ Due to this association, the genre became known as country-western music. Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle be Unbroken*, 154 also notes that in 1949 *Billboard* magazine retitled its "Hillbilly" music chart to "Country and Western."

¹⁸ Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle be Unbroken*, 128, presents an interesting analysis on how country music became a symbol of America during World War II and how Japanese soldiers yelled, "To hell with Roosevelt! To hell with Babe Ruth! To hell with Roy Acuff!" while storming an Allied position on Okinawa. This grouping demonstrates the popularity of country music.

¹⁹ Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me A Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 1.

²⁰ Melton A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson, eds., *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992), 6.

Themes of spiritualism were most prominent before the 1940s, made popular by The Carter Family, widely recognized as country music's first family. Songs of home, as Cecilia Tichi discusses, make up a premier category of country music as artists have used location to connect with their fans and to recall sweet memories or to glaze over times that were not as positive.²¹ Of course, there is also another category that seems infamously linked with country music: relationships or, more specifically, songs about infidelity. Songs about betrayal and faithless love have been staples of country music. As country music historian David Fillingim explains, these traditional country themes have to do with the singers themselves and the fact that they are communicating the struggles of the people that live in the southern half of the United States. Singers were writing and performing their musical responses to the realities of life, and sometimes replacing the harshness of life with their own dreams and desires.²²

Early on, it was men articulating these themes. The rise of female singers in the 1950s gave a new perspective to those traditional themes and offered a woman's voice on those issues. From its very beginning, country music was a man's genre. The women that were present were constrained to secondary roles, "often as the distaff member of a duo, or as the girl singer in an otherwise male band."²³ In 1950, Kitty Wells changed that image by using her voice to issue a female perspective on relationships and gender roles. In doing so, she introduced realistic women's themes into the genre. Her popularity also convinced country music executives that female country music singers were marketable and worth pursuing.²⁴ As more women, such as Patsy Cline and Brenda Lee, grew in popularity among country audiences, the industry began to

²¹ Cecilia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 20-21.

²² See: David Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003).

²³ Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle be Unbroken*, 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

take notice of them. It would take the industry another decade, however, to adjust itself to include and market women country singers, but inclusion did not mean equality.

Like the general upheaval that defines the 1960s, country music also experienced changes as the genre began to break into sub-genres.²⁵ The 1970s saw the rise of the Outlaw Movement led primarily by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, in collaboration with Kris Kristofferson, Merle Haggard, and Johnny Cash, in response to Nashville's commercialized Music Row scene that limited creative freedom for artists. Wanting to record music on their own terms, Outlaw country blurred the lines between country and rock and opened the doors of artistic freedom even wider. The genre was also becoming more "rough-edged, progressive, and relevant," thanks in part to the Outlaws. As country music was beginning to restructure and grow with the inclusion of subcategories, such as the Bakersfield sound and country folk, the market began to take notice. Former opponents of "hillbilly music" found themselves toe-tapping to Johnny and June Carter Cash's version of Bob Dylan's "It Ain't Me Babe," which received air play from country and popular music radio stations.

In the 1970s, audiences started to identify country music with performers who were viewed as "more pop than country," such as Kenny Rogers, John Denver, and Olivia Newton-John.²⁶ Country music's traditionalists saw this new market, known as "countrypolitan," as a watering down of their culture and genre. With the addition of these new artists labeling their music as country, traditionalists resisted and produced music that focused more on "banjos, fiddles, explicit southernness, and presumably more 'country' country music." Their lyrics and

²⁵ Traditional fiddle songs recorded by the Skillet Lickers in the 1920s and 1930s were revitalized by bluegrass artists, such as Bill Monroe and his band the Blue Grass Boys (the name sake of the musical genre), in the late 1940s, establishing country music's first subgenre.

²⁶ Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, 288-291.

music reached back to what they labeled “true country” and idolized male frontrunners like Bill Monroe, Hank Williams, and George Jones.²⁷

Country music experienced a resurgence in popularity in the 1980s, aided by the film *Urban Cowboy*, which presented the genre in stark opposition to disco music and Black Power. To an extent, many white working-class Americans and artists used country music to assert their opposition to civil rights and other social movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These alignments reinforced country’s stigma as a genre for “backward hillbillies or ignorant hayseeds” and the belief that country music was created by white artists for white listeners.²⁸ Even smaller newspapers, such as Atlanta’s underground newspaper the *Great Speckled Bird*, discussed the “trouble with country music” and described the local country stations as “hick” stations.²⁹

There were African Americans involved in country music, such as Ray Charles and Charley Pride, but their contributions remain understudied. Pride never used his platform as country’s only African American artist in the 1960s and 1970s and he did not identify or sing about race or racial politics during his career due to threats from radio deejays.³⁰ In many ways, this demonstrates that country music’s whiteness (by way of erasing or silencing its blackness) was not solely created by the industry but also demanded by its audience; and black performers had to play along if they wanted to sing along. For example, one of Pride’s songs, “Kiss an Angel Good Mornin,” notes that the secret to happiness is a good woman and a man who can “love her like the Devil” when he returns home for the day. The song repeats traditional themes

²⁷ Dana C. Wiggins, “When Country Was ‘Cool:’ Gender, Race, Class, and Region in Female Country Music, 1980-1983,” *Southern Historian* 30 (Spring 2009): 18, accessed May 5, 2016, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/48378713/when-country-was-cool-gender-race-class-region-female-country-music-1980-1983>.

²⁸ Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 83.

²⁹ Gene Guerrero Jr., “Country Music,” *Great Speckled Bird*, January 25, 1971. The paper went on to state that one shouldn’t be ashamed of liking or listening to country music but that the genre had its issues.

³⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this see Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 298 and 237.

in country music and held fast to traditional country musical sounds. But even as country music adapted to include new songwriters and sounds, its multimillion-dollar industry was one of pledged allegiance to conservative white Americans. Of course, that is not to say that there were not voices of dissent. Country women offered alternative perspectives and turned them in to record hits.

Country music traditionalists found themselves facing their biggest threat: the rise of the female country artist. The popularity of female artists challenging country's traditional message and perceptions of women, such as Kitty Wells' early hit "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels," which questioned society's double standard of punishing promiscuous women but not men, shook the male establishment.³¹ The 1960s produced only fifteen number-one country songs by women, eight of which were by Tammy Wynette, who preached a platinum-record message on the benefits of standing by your man and did not test the boundaries of country music.³² The next decade saw almost fifty number-one country singles by a more diverse group of women, a significant increase considering the previous decade.³³ The growing popularity of country music's power couples (Tammy Wynette and George Jones, Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty, and Porter Wagoner and Parton) further challenged the genre's male power structure. In 1972, Loretta Lynn formally broke the "boys only" sign that seemed to hang over the industry by becoming the first woman to receive the honor of "Entertainer of the Year" by the Country

³¹ Parton, Lynn, and Wynette would go on to release *Honkytonk Angels*, an album that served as somewhat of a tribute to Kitty Wells.

³² Later in her career, Wynette also offered the women's perspective by addressing the hardships of women who face destroyed marriages. In her autobiography, Wynette addressed her thoughts on the contradictions within the country music industry: "The same men who treated wives and girlfriends with respect and consideration treated girl singers like a piece of merchandise." Tammy Wynette, *Stand by Your Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 115.

³³ Vanessa Carr, "'Just Because I'm a Woman': Country Music and Women's Liberation, 1964-1979" (master's thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2006), 34, accessed August 22, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/docview/304939792/197FAA80308745DEPQ/1?accountid=11225.34>.

Music Association.³⁴ At the height of her popularity, however, a significant number of Lynn's songs were banned from radio airplay.³⁵ With songs like "Rated X," "The Pill," "Wings Upon Your Horns," and "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' (With Lovin' on Your Mind)," Lynn called attention to the double standards surrounding divorce, extramarital affairs, and the stigma surrounding the loss of teenage virginity. Her songs brought these ideas out into the open within country music.

Dolly Parton was one of the several women that benefited from Lynn's groundbreaking success and continued contesting gender stereotypes in her music. These formerly taboo topics surrounding sex were now not only being discussed, but they were being discussed by bold, country women whose views were different from country music traditionalists and who were willing to challenge the genre's power structure to increase space for themselves.

Historiography

It is without question that African Americans have enriched and defined country music in three ways: instrumentally through instruments like the banjo; spatially in terms of honky-tonks or white shacks where this music was performed; and instructionally in that early country music masters such as Bill Monroe, Hank Williams, and Jimmie Rodgers all had black music teachers.³⁶ Where, when, and how the genre becomes segregated has been debated by many scholars. Cecilia Tichi points to country's lyrical emphasis on story, or storytelling, as the main

³⁴ "Past CMA Awards Winners and Nominees," Country Music Association, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://www.cmaworld.com/cma-awards/past-winners/>. Parton speaks of the early country music establishment as a "boys club" in her autobiography, Parton, *Dolly*, 292.

³⁵ "Loretta Lynn: Still a Mountain Girl," *American Masters*, aired March 4, 2016, on PBS, watched January 8, 2017, on PBS.

³⁶ Tichi, *High Lonesome*, 7.

difference that has separated white country music from black blues.³⁷ Dana C. Wiggins concludes that country music performers “adhered to the rules of whiteness, and ignored all African American influence in country music” in order to distance themselves from the Civil Rights Movement.³⁸ Wiggins presents an examination of female country musicians using the lens of race, but she limits her focus to dress, movements, and back-up singers and does not discuss the perception of these performers by blacks. Her argument that performers distanced themselves from African American audiences and performers overlooks Parton’s use of disco elements in her music as well as her performances with various African American singers.

Other scholars, like Charles Hughes and Karl Hagstrom Miller, note that the racial divide was much more purposeful at the hand of the recording industry which capitalized on the success of blackface minstrel shows and connected country musicians to those same songs popularized by Tin Pan Alley.³⁹ Miller’s *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* analyzes the emergence of country music as big business and how the “musical color line” formed parallel to the physical color line that came to define the Jim Crow South. I further Miller’s discussion of music’s color line by applying it to country music within the late 1960s and 1970s. Diane Pecknold and other contributors to her anthology, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, examine how country music has maintained its whiteness, or “white myth,” by arguing that African Americans were more than just mentors for successful white artists. Instead, contributors explain that even though black musicians were critical in the development of the genre they were creating these sounds on their own terms and not solely for a white audience. Pecknold’s article, “Making Country Modern: The Legacy of

³⁷ See: Tichi *High Lonesome*, 7-18 and McLaurin and Peterson, *You Wrote My Life*, 2-11.

³⁸ Wiggins, “When Country Was ‘Cool,’” 26.

³⁹ See: Miller, *Segregating Sound* and Hughes, *Country Soul*. Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle be Unbroken*, 27 also discuss the connection between minstrel Tin Pan Alley shows and some of the first country records produced.

Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music,” demonstrates how racially politicized the genre was in the early 1960s in her findings that radio stations refused to play “race music,” from artists like Ray Charles. Altogether, the articles in *Hidden in the Mix* point to African American participation in country music. It is within this context that I place Parton as an ally in challenging the genre’s whiteness and racial segregation. At times, however, her performances with African American entertainers presented an awkward image or relied on surface-level racialized humor.

Numerous scholars have looked at the women of country music, but discussions of Parton have been confined to chapters of larger works or comprehensive overviews of country music or other influential women in country music.⁴⁰ By studying the careers of Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton, Ruth A. Banes’ “Dixie’s Daughters: The Country Music Female,” notes the connection between conflicting Southern ideas of womanhood during the antebellum period—the lady and the farmwife—to the modern expectation of female country music singers. She argues that these women created personas that combined the idealistic representations of females and represented themselves outside of those two traditional stereotypes. According to Banes, Parton combines Victorian values and costuming to present herself as a modern woman bubbling with sensuality and grounded by values of hard work.⁴¹ In those ways, Parton does embody parts of both stereotypes of the lady and farmwife, but as I argue she also defies them.

The other chapter of this thesis builds on the conclusions set forth by Pamela Wilson’s “Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton.”

⁴⁰ See Wiggins, “When Country Was ‘Cool,’” 36. Also refer to Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, eds., *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*; James Edward Akenson and Charles K. Wolfe, eds., *The Women of Country Music: A Reader* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

⁴¹ See Banes, “Dixie’s Daughters,” 100.

Wilson sets Parton in the context of the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s by pointing to Parton's image and public persona as a form of feminism. Wilson argues that Parton has maintained the upper hand in managing her own exploitation in the media and, in doing so, has contributed to her own sexual objectification.⁴² Wilson supports her claims by analyzing popular magazines, particularly those targeted at a gendered audience. My work offers a more nuanced assessment. Wilson is right, at times Parton did participate in and sanction her own objectification. Towards the late 1970s, Parton began to use her image as a form of agency to assert herself on her own terms. In a way, she used her body, which matched society's idea of a sex symbol, to distract her audience from her challenges to traditional gender roles. At other times, however, Parton conformed to these roles.

Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann in *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000*, argue that country music "stands as one of the only documents of working class women's thoughts created by working class women for working class women."⁴³ Bufwack and Oermann refer to Parton as a "commonfolks feminist" due to her background and songs about the working class, but their discussion is short and more biographical than analytical.⁴⁴ Amy R. Peloff's dissertation, "Unexpected Feminisms: How Popular Culture Brought Feminism Beyond the Movement," builds on this line of thought and presents the actions of Parton (along with two other female popular culture icons: Helen Gurley Brown and Erma Bombeck) in conversation with the antifeminism movement. Peloff argues that these three women disseminated feminist ideas to audiences that feminist organizations and activists would never be

⁴² Pamela Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): 109, accessed September 19, 2016, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/197297520?accountid=10747>.

⁴³ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, xiii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

able to reach. My argument builds on Peloff's analysis in that I also examine the ways in which Parton confronted working-class audiences with the tenets of second wave feminism, but I insist that these more radical moments must not be isolated from those moments when she remained committed to reinforcing traditional gender roles. Dana C. Wiggins' "When Country Was 'Cool': Gender, Race, Class, and Region in Female Country Music, 1980-1983," claims that by "adopting new images of the South, whiteness, class, and southern womanhood," country music females greatly contributed to country music's newfound nationwide popularity.⁴⁵ Her article argues that women singers returned to songs that expressed femininity in country music during the 1980s instead of continuing to contest gender double standards. Some of Parton's songs did conform in this way, but I argue that other songs continued to protest women's issues. As a result of this ambivalence, Parton repackaged what a feminist within country music might look like.

⁴⁵ Wiggins, "When Country Was 'Cool,'" 36.

CHAPTER TWO:
DISCO DOLLY CROSSES AND COMPLICATES MUSIC'S COLOR LINE

At the 1979 Jack The Rapper Family Affair Convention in Atlanta, an annual conference established two years prior by Jack Gibson to celebrate African American involvement in the music industry, Dorothy Edwards Brunson, Inner City Broadcasting Corporation executive and editor of *Airwaves* magazine, took issue with Dolly Parton's latest records. She explained, "I get uptight when Dolly Parton makes a disco record...and we play it." Brunson's complaint about Parton was part of her broader campaign to challenge African American musicians, radio broadcasters, and television station owners to grant African American music equal, if not more, airtime than white commercialized disco music. Artists who were capitalizing on disco's current popularity, in her opinion, were "benefiting from black music without any respect or contribution" to the African American community. Brunson blamed the seventy-two African American-owned radio stations (compared to over 8,000 stations owned by whites) for granting more airtime to white performers. Her argument went a step further. She believed that African Americans were to blame for discos shift from "minority" to "mainstream" music. Her challenge to those present that night in Atlanta was simple: a space for African American artists and businesses to thrive must be supported and promoted by the African American community over white imitations and attempts to capitalize on black musical innovations and trends.⁴⁶

In her broadcast, Brunson questioned Parton's disco records. She acknowledged the appropriation of disco by white artists and asked for stations to respect the music created by

⁴⁶ Dorothy Edwards Brunson speech at the 1979 Jack The Rapper Family Affair, held in Atlanta Georgia at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel, reprinted in *Airwaves*, "Editorial," August 15, 1979, 2-7 and Tom Fenwick, "Jack The Rapper: The Rise and Fall of the World's Largest Hip-Hop Gathering," FACT, July 3, 2015, accessed September 22, 2016, <http://www.factmag.com/2015/07/03/jack-the-rapper-family-affair-rise-and-fall-hip-hop-gathering/>.

African Americans. Others expressed a more extreme view of the issue. Disco pioneer and former Black Panther Nile Rodgers called the release of disco records by white artists a “disgusting” example of white appropriation. In his 1986 interview with *New York* magazine, Rodgers reflected, “I would go to a club and Dolly Parton was singing disco...It was disgusting to me. I hated it.”⁴⁷ In this interview, Rodgers, a member of the group Chic, described the sting he felt from white appropriation of disco. Although Chic’s single “Le Freak” sold seven million copies, the group broke up three years later, a fact that Rodgers blamed on the music industry’s preference for established white artists over up-and-coming black acts.

White appropriation of minority cultural elements is not new, nor is it uncommon when discussing the overlooked achievements and influences of African Americans on various musical genres.⁴⁸ In the 1950s, white musicians “borrowed” the musical stylings of their black counterparts, while record executives chose to have white recording artists replicate the sound of black musicians. Although black musicians were often the innovators of different musical styles, the constraints of the music industry and demands of the market led to the recognition of white performers over black performers. White performers then received the credit for popularizing these new musical styles. Cultural appropriation led to musical forms, such as rock-n-roll and country-western, being largely associated with whites even though black musicians were pioneers of the art form or specific styles that distinguished one genre from another.⁴⁹ While scholars are aware and have attempted to write the innovations of African Americans and other

⁴⁷ Anthony Haden-Guest, “Jewel of a Nile,” *New York*, February 24, 1986, 48, accessed September 16, 2016, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NewYork-1986feb24-00046>.

⁴⁸ I use the term minority here to denote that this is a larger trend that is not limited to just one racial or ethnic group. In this chapter, however, I will focus on white appropriation of African American culture.

⁴⁹ Susan Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 92-94.

minority groups back into narratives of musical development, there are still numerous stories to recover from the historical record.⁵⁰

Some African Americans, such as Rodgers, viewed disco music as off limits to white artists. The musical genre, birthed by the social and economic turmoil of the 1970s, emerged from the struggles of African Americans and, therefore, could not be understood, or clearly communicated by a white artist, according to historian Peter Shapiro. Disco music and dancefloors provided a retreat for African Americans, offering participants the “momentary illusion of personal well-being” by celebrating blackness. Performers related their struggles to Depression Era black musicians, jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington, who performed for whites on stage but were not treated as their equals off stage. Disco music echoed class struggles and asserted blackness. Dancefloors functioned as a communal space for participants to share their struggles, but also celebrated individuality among dancers. Electric instrumentation and a pulsating rhythmic bass beat defined disco as a genre and not just as a dancehall “where you went to hear records and participate in dance culture.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Guthrie P. Ramsey, in his book *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), focuses on significant social and political events from the 1940s to the 1990s to show how popular music expressed and, as he argues, represented these moments. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. in his work *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) links musical genres across multiple centuries to demonstrate ever changing musical elements by taking on the whole span of black musical history. In addition to these works, also refer to: LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999); Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). For a further discussion on cultural appropriation, see Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao eds., *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

⁵¹ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2005), 186-187, 165.

Parton's incorporation of disco's musical elements in her songs provides another example in which Parton added complexity to music's "color line."⁵² To increase her popularity and profits, Parton released albums with distinctly pop and disco elements starting in the late 1970s. After her split with former producer and television star Porter Wagoner in 1974, Parton signed with Hollywood manager Sandy Gallin in her attempt to crossover into the pop market but still appeal to a country audience. Parton's crossover was a successful one. She capitalized on current trends within the music industry and crafted these stylistic elements into her music.

But her appropriation of black musical innovations also created performance opportunities for and shared experiences with African Americans throughout her career. Parton's move towards disco increased her visibility beyond country music audiences and eventually led to her own television shows, a number of movie roles, and various business ventures, including her theme park, Dollywood. Her albums contained songs that blended country, folk, pop, and disco elements, while her television shows featured African American performers. Her shows also highlighted issues that black and white women experienced within the entertainment industry. The Nashville community reacted with resentment to Parton's move into new musical genres, but Parton remained adamant that she was not "leaving country [music] behind." Instead, she planned to "take it with [her] wherever [she was] going."⁵³ In fact, Parton would be taking country music with her and introducing it to new places where it had never been before.

⁵² Karl Hagstrom Miller, in his book *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), refers to the "color line" that existed between different musical styles. He argues that the musical color line was encouraged by leaders in the U. S. recording industry. Although his work focuses on how this division formed during the 1880s and the 1920s, it can easily be extended beyond that period. He also states that during this time southern music was compartmentalized according to race; thus, a series of distinct genres developed that were segregated by race and ethnicity.

⁵³ "Country Entertainer Broadens Appeal," *News and Leader* (Springfield, Missouri), September 25, 1976. Parton also issued a similar quote in her autobiography *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), stating that she "was not leaving it, but instead taking it with to new places."

Country Musicians React

Country music's embrace of dance culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, fostered by Parton and a variety of other country artists including Ronnie Milsap, Sylvia, and even George Jones' "I Ain't Got No Business Doing Business Today," complicated the distinctness of disco as an exclusively African American genre. Charles L. Hughes discusses the effect disco had on country music, arguing that Nashville artists "used disco to stay musically current, demonstrate their contemporary relevance, and ultimately achieve crossover success." Some country artists, in their desire to appeal to a more popular audience, also incorporated musical elements found in disco songs into their country and crossover hits to increase the odds for profits. Other country artists rejected this trend and reaffirmed country's white identity through songs like Merle Haggard's "I'm a White Boy," which associated country music with the white working class.⁵⁴ Regardless, country artists continued to expand the confines of the genre and used stylistic elements of pop and disco music to grow country's audience.

Parton ushered in country's embrace of disco beats and stylistic elements, encouraging other artists to follow suit to increase their crossover success. The Urban Cowboy Movement, sparked by the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy*, functioned as an offshoot of country music that featured dancefloor beats and pulsating rhythms. Many of country's traditionalists saw these musicians as only capitalizing on trends and not as true country artists. Some scholars have argued that the film and musical style catalyzed the ascent of country music into mainstream American consciousness by promoting an anti-disco image.⁵⁵ Others, however, have shown that

⁵⁴ Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: The Making of Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 178-179 and 11. Hughes' discussion of the country-soul triangle builds on Miller's *Segregating Sound*. Hughes argues that the triangle, which developed between Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee and Muscle Shoals, Alabama, connected country and soul music but also racialized it. He also explains that the two genres have shared regional and stylistic roots.

⁵⁵ See Dana C. Wiggins, "When Country Was 'Cool': Gender, Race, Class, and Region in Female Country Music, 1980-1983," *Southern Historian* 30 (Spring 2009): 17-36, accessed May 5, 2016,

the Urban Cowboy Movement mirrored the dancefloors of disco halls. Country honky-tonks were also defined by a large dance movement that hinged on complex definitions of race, class, and sexuality.⁵⁶ Similar to the ways in which disco emerged as an outlet for artists who wished to break out of the traditional stylings that defined R&B, dance-floor country artists embraced that same disco beat and the rolling rhythm of the melody to craft a new style of country music. Thus, the Urban Cowboy Era of country music mirrors the relationship between disco and the longer history of R&B, and the two share more similarities than originally acknowledged.⁵⁷

Not every country music artist welcomed disco's influence, nor were African Americans alone in questioning Parton's seeming embrace of the genre. Loretta Lynn, commenting on Parton's suggested career shift, reportedly responded, "We all love Dolly, but right now we're puzzled."⁵⁸ Newspapers claimed that "Dolly Parton doing soul makes about as much sense as Pavarotti doing country," and that her *Rainbow* album contained that "ugly disco gloop."⁵⁹ Most of this discussion focused around Parton's perceived departure from country music for a more pop sound; though she was not the first crossover star, she was the first female country star to make the shift. Parton was not simply attempting to move from one genre to another but was instead combining elements from various styles to create a new sound. Again, Parton remained adamant that she was not leaving country music, only that she intended to broaden the genre. The

<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/48378713/when-country-was-cool-gender-race-class-region-female-country-music-1980-1983>.

⁵⁶ See: Jocelyn R. Neal, "Dancing Together: The Rhythms of Gender in the Country Dance Hall," in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, ed. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 132.

⁵⁷ Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America*, (New York: DK Publishing, 2006), 294-295 states that the film was a backlash against disco and helped sell country albums because it brought in a traditionally pop audience who did not enjoy disco music. See also, Wiggins "When Country Was 'Cool,'" and Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 300.

⁵⁸ Amy Peloff, "Unexpected Feminisms: How Popular Culture Brought Feminism Beyond the Movement" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2011), 170, accessed May 1, 2016. <http://search.proquest.com.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/docview/888053842/A4152C61C0B0417CPQ/1?accountid=11225>.

⁵⁹ Stephen Miller, *Smart Blonde: Dolly Parton* (London: Omnibus Press, 2007), 239.

general view from album reviewers and some country music fans was that her heart belonged in country music and the sooner she got back to it, the better.⁶⁰ Parton's embrace of stylistic elements of disco and release of dancefloor anthems signaled a rift with country music traditionalists who now labeled her as a country music outsider

At first, Parton's initial crossover songs were well-received by country and pop fans. Her 1977 crossover hit, "Here You Come Again," peaked at number three on the U.S. Pop Singles chart, while the single and the album, of the same name, topped the U.S. Country Music Singles and Albums charts, respectively. Additionally, "Here You Come Again" earned Parton a Grammy nomination for Best Pop Performance by a Female as well as a Grammy for Best Female Country Performance. Other songs off of her *Here You Come Again* album also performed well on both pop and country charts.⁶¹ Parton continued to release crossover albums throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Her crossover hit from her 1980 album *Dolly, Dolly, Dolly*, "Starting Over Again," written by African American entertainer Donna Summers, earned Parton the top spot on the U.S. Hot Country Songs chart. Although this song included certain pop musical elements, it did not prove a successful pop follow-up to "Here You Come Again," ranking at number 71 on the U.S. Top 200 Charts.⁶²

Parton was awarded Entertainer of the Year by the Country Music Association in 1978. She was only the second woman to claim that title (the first being Loretta Lynn).⁶³ This honor likely angered some country fans and performers who criticized her latest crossover album,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Two Doors Down," became Parton's seventh number one single on the US Country Music Charts and a top 20 hit on the U.S. Pop Singles chart. Team Dolly, "Here You Come Again," last modified September 19, 2016, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://dollyparton.com/life-and-career/music/here-you-come-again-album/978>.

⁶² Team Dolly, "Dolly, Dolly, Dolly," Dollyparton.com, last modified August 23, 2015, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://dollyparton.com/life-and-career/music/dolly-dolly-dolly-album/998>.

⁶³ "Past CMA Awards Winners and Nominees," Country Music Association, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://www.cmaworld.com/cma-awards/past-winners/>.

Heartbreaker, which was released in July of the same year, after the voting period for the CMA awards closed. *Heartbreaker* featured up-tempo disco hits, such as “Baby I’m Burning” and the groovier “Sure Thing,” but also slower ballads with a more country sound like “The Man” and “I Really Got the Feeling.”⁶⁴ The following year, Parton did not receive enough votes from the 5,000 members of the Country Music Association to be a finalist in any of the award show’s categories. Interestingly, Kenny Rogers, a pop-country crossover artist himself, received the most nominations that year.⁶⁵ Allowances, it seems, were made for men and not for women, which speaks to complicated gendered tensions within the genre. By including pop stylistic elements into her music, Parton was challenging the core of country music, and the Association reacted to her actions by refusing to acknowledge her album as country.

Tension between the use of traditional and modern musical elements and lyrical themes was not new in country music. The genre had evolved with the emergence of Elvis in the late 1950s, the rising popularity of non-southern artists, particularly Merle Haggard from Bakersfield, California, and most strikingly the popularity of female artists. Women challenged country’s male-dominated perspectives with lyrics that differed from the mythical image of a southern lady, such as Kitty Wells’ “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels.”⁶⁶ Wells’ songs spoke directly to women who had been victimized by society for their failure to adhere to traditional gender roles. She highlighted women’s sexuality within her music and, as a result, some radio station networks, such as NBC, banned Wells’ songs for being “suggestive.”⁶⁷ The

⁶⁴ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 159.

⁶⁵ “Dolly Not So Big; Snubbed By CMA,” *The Nashville Banner*, August 22, 1979.

⁶⁶ Ruth A. Banes, “Dixie’s Daughters: The Country Music Female,” appeared in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, edited by Richard A. Peterson, 81-112 (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992) expands on the contradicting images of women in recorded country music compared to those that would later record the music. Banes also explains the various images and themes presented by female artists over time.

⁶⁷ Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press, 2003), 152.

popularity of country music's "power couples" in the late 1960s, like Tammy Wynette and George Jones, Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty, and Wagoner and Parton, suggests that there was room opening up for female singers within the genre, but that these women were confined to secondary positions alongside men. The mid 1970s saw the rise of subgenres within country music, such as the Outlaw Movement, which responded to the commercialized Music Row scene that limited creative freedom for artists. Motivated by their desire to record the music they wanted, Outlaw country blurred the lines between country and rock, and thus opened the doors of artistic freedom even wider. Simultaneously, other artists, like Kenny Rogers, and later Parton, were blending country themes with musical elements that reflected a more pop sound.⁶⁸ While country music was broadening its appeal and moving away from its stereotype as a genre for "backward hillbillies or ignorant hayseeds," it remained rooted in its white audience.⁶⁹

Exceptions and Not Blackness Triumph

There were African Americans making country albums, but they should be viewed as an exception and not as a signal of racial progress or change within the industry. As Diane Pecknold argues, the industry enthusiastically promoted Ray Charles' 1962 album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* as proof that country music could appeal to a "modern" audience though it had no desire to label him a country singer.⁷⁰ Despite the commercial success of the album, the Nashville industry refused to credit *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* for being the first country album to sell a million copies because Charles was not a country singer. In 1978, Parton and Glen Campbell invited Charles to appear on NBC's Big Event,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 288-291.

⁶⁹ Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 83.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Nashville-filmed “50 Years of Country Music,” no doubt acknowledging his achievements in and for country music.⁷¹ Many country fans still placed Charles in the category of a soul musician, even though he continued to contribute to and produce country music into the 1980s.

In the late 1960s, country music came to acknowledge one African American performer as part of its fold, and that individual was Charley Pride. His popularity within the genre, however, should be viewed as a “significant exception” and not as “Blackness Triumph.”⁷² Perhaps what allowed for Pride’s inclusion into the country music community was the fact that he never used his position as country’s only African American artist to push a racial agenda. Pride did not identify or sing about racial politics during his career. The closest he ever came to acknowledging racial tensions within the country music industry can be found in the lyrics to the title track off his 1980 album *There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me*. This song, as an introduction to a selection of Hank Williams covers, allowed Pride to stress his equality with other white country artists through a shared sense of region and poverty. Pride’s indifference to racial consciousness and his apparent unwillingness to acknowledge racism or racial inequality might have been a factor to his success. Pride became the standard to which country record labels held African American singers; they were to sing and not to speak on racial tensions or racial politics within country music.⁷³ Although some attempted to repeat Pride’s style, they did not find the stardom that they thought country music would provide. It would take almost twenty-five years for another African American artist to repeat Pride’s success.⁷⁴

Pride developed a fan base among white and African American country fans. It is probable that some country fans that listened to his music may not have even known Pride was

⁷¹ Bill Lane, “People-Places ‘n’ Situwayshuns,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 19, 1978.

⁷² Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 298 and 237.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 270. For a more in-depth discussion of Pride’s musical career, refer to Pecknold’s *Hidden in the Mix*.

⁷⁴ That artist would be Darius Rucker, formerly of the band Hootie & the Blowfish.

an African American. According to Ralph Emery, many radio deejays were unaware of Pride's race, and it was not until after the fact that they pulled (or threatened to pull) Pride's records off their stations.⁷⁵ This fact alone suggests that some fans and executives viewed the genre as one for whites only. There is no doubt, however, that Pride had a solid country music following considering his CMA awards for Male Vocalist of the Year (1971, 1972) and Entertainer of the Year (1971) in addition to a Grammy in 1972 for Best Male Country Artist and his many Music City News awards from 1967 to 1973. It is likely that these fans, as did radio deejays and country music executives (and even Pride himself), disassociated him from his blackness and the music he produced.

African American newspapers also emphasized Pride's musical achievements. Cleveland's *Call and Post* published his award for Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year on the front page under the headline of "Charlie Pride Top Country Singer," although the misspelling of his name calls into question just how familiar the newspaper and its readers were with the country music artist.⁷⁶ The apex of Pride's career within country music was in 1971, the same year Parton and Wagoner won their third and last "Vocal Duo of the Year" Award from the CMA.⁷⁷

That Pride never appeared with Parton is curious and allows for an interesting examination of the racial politics in country music. Although a variety of country stars appeared with Parton on her 1976-1977 syndicated show *Dolly!*, Pride was not one of them. Instead, producers opted for more popular African American acts that held a more widespread appeal, a move that aimed to reach a broader audience. In doing so, the industry implied many things. One

⁷⁵ Ralph Emery, *50 Years Down a Country Road* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 249.

⁷⁶ "Charlie Pride Top Country Singer," *Call and Post*, October 16, 1971.

⁷⁷ This category "Vocal Duo of the Year" did not exist prior to 1970, so in 1968 the award was titled "Vocal Group of the Year" and I simply included all three in this tally.

of those implications was that Pride did not have enough of a fan base outside of the traditional country core audience of white southerners and would not bring in a new audience to the show. Also, during the late seventies, Pride found himself without a contract from the Radio Corporation for America (RCA) as the record company shifted their interest to market younger acts.⁷⁸ Some would argue that Pride had already reached his peak on the country charts and that his decline in popularity explains why he was not asked to be on the show; still, Pride did not slip off the country charts until after 1985, and he continued to produce hits that were popular during the run of *Dolly!*. Although those tracks were not as successful as his early 1970s hits, such as “Kiss an Angel Good Mornin,” “Mountain of Love,” and “Is Anybody Goin’ to San Antone,” they still placed on the country charts.

If Pride had performed with Parton on her nationally syndicated television show, it would have challenged country music’s position as a genre for white Americans. Country music reflects whiteness, and recent scholarship has pointed to country’s role in constructing white identity.⁷⁹ Additionally, country music has benefited from black musical styles and erased the contributions of African American artists to the genre’s sound. By not promoting Pride on a national level, the industry again suppressed the genre’s black roots. Had Parton performed alongside an African American country artist in the 1970s, she would have restructured the appearance of country music and presented the image of a more inclusive genre.

⁷⁸ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 237.

⁷⁹ See: Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Hughes, *Country Soul*; Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*.

Dolly Parton's Genre Bending

Throughout her 1976/1977 syndicated television show *Dolly!*, Parton traversed music's color line by challenging the segregation of specific genres. Parton appeared with a variety of performers including Kenny Rogers, The Hues Corporation, Linda Ronstadt, Captain Kangaroo, Ronnie Milsap, Tom T. Hall, Emmylou Harris, the Fifth Dimension, La Costa Tucker (Tanya Tucker's older sister), Anne Murray, Karen Black, K.C. and the Sunshine Band, members of Parton's Traveling Family band, and even a special show that included a sing-a-long with her mother and father. According to Parton's first biographer Alanna Nash, Bob Dylan initially agreed to appear but later declined due to his discomfort with the television medium and media corporations at the time.⁸⁰ Her diverse guest list demonstrates that the show was not meant to reach only a traditional country music audience; the appearance of such performers reveals the changing audience of country music as well as Parton's appeal across multiple genres.

For producers of *Dolly!*, the goal was to entertain the old fans while bringing in the new, to make the show popular in Tennessee and Arkansas while also appealing to markets in Los Angeles and New York. "Just as Dolly is a country singer with appeal in both big cities and small towns, so is our program," said Bill Graham of Show Biz productions, the company responsible for this venture and *The Porter Wagoner Show*, in an interview promoting the \$85,000 to \$100,000 per-program budgeted series.⁸¹ With a set designed by Hollywood's Rene Lagler and a wardrobe by one of Music Row's most famous stylists, Lucy Adams, the Opryland filmed *Dolly!* invited the Hollywood entertainment industry to Nashville, Tennessee.

⁸⁰ Alanna Nash, in her work *Dolly Parton: The Early Years* (Louisville: Butler Books, 1994), 157, quoted Parton on Dylan to which she stated, "he don't like to do TV too much I don't think."

⁸¹ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 143.

Parton's physical appearance on the show added complexity to the musical color line. In an episode from *Dolly!*, Parton appeared with the soul trio The Hues Corporation and donned a blonde afro to sing a "soulful country song" with the group, stating that she "had the hair to match." After the first line of Merle Haggard's "Today I Started Loving You Again," Parton, while patting her afro, teased, "I'm the wrong color, I didn't get enough soul in it [the song]." After the song was over, singer Hubert Anne Kelley told Parton she liked her hair. Parton replied, "Oh, well, thank you. I wore this just for you. I thought it would be appropriate. I'm glad you like it." Kelley, however, was not referring to Parton's afro but to one of Parton's hair pieces that had been hidden off stage. Kelly then proceeded to place Parton's wig of long, cascading blonde curls on singer Fleming Williams. "Oh boy! I thought I'd never have a tan," Parton cracked as they all laughed, and the audience applauded. Additionally, Parton attempted to dance during a musical interlude with the well-rehearsed Hues Corporation. After less than ten seconds and multiple missed-steps, Parton chuckled, "Oh, well... I can't get that heavy. My britches are too tight," and moved to stand behind the performers only to rejoin them to finish the song.⁸² Parton's appearance with the trio broadcasted a new image from a Nashville artist and for a moment bridged the musical color line. This performance, one of a white female country artist joining an African American trio on an Opryland stage in 1977 to sing a song originally recorded by a white male country singer, signaled that artists in both genres were willing to be inclusive.

This episode revealed that although country and soul shared musical roots and some similarities in musical styles, they have traditionally been viewed as two contrasting genres, separated by the musical color line.⁸³ This performance complicated that perspective. This skit

⁸² *Dolly!*, season 1, episode 103, "Featuring The Hues Corporation," directed by Bill Turner, aired February 15, 1976, accessed September 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PT0y-r27jU>.

⁸³ Hughes, *Country Soul*, 2, also discusses how these two genres became oppositions in the national consciousness during the 1960s despite their shared roots.

distinguished Parton, albeit temporarily, from the traditional look of a country music artist. Parton, by wearing an afro as a performative element of blackness, attempted to make both literal and symbolic connections to the trio and the “soulfulness” associated with their music. Her decision to don an afro wig during a period increasingly characterized by Black Nationalism is important because Parton was engaging in a larger political dialogue and acknowledging the musical color line. The afro became a political symbol of Black Power during the mid 1960s and into the 1970s as African Americans expressed black pride, which became synonymous with activism and political consciousness.⁸⁴ Hair came to “symbolize either a continued move towards integration in the American political system or a growing cry for black power and nationalism.”⁸⁵ Therefore, wearing an afro hairstyle became a visible challenge to the actions of white America and even the emerging black middle class. Additionally, the afro serves as an expression of black culture and history. More than just another form of white appropriation, Parton’s afro wig acknowledged the politics surrounding blackness. Parton’s comment of having a “tan” communicated that she could temporarily cross the musical color line while benefiting from her status as a white woman. Furthermore, this soulful country performance revealed that some country musicians sought to acknowledge racial politics even if that meant distancing themselves from the traditional country look and audience.

Other episodes of *Dolly!* also demonstrated a color line on stage. On another episode, Parton invited Billy Davis Jr. and Marilyn McCoo, former members of the group Fifth Dimension, to join her on the stage. The song list included “Proud Mary,” in which Parton performed solo with the camera only on her and her white, rhinestone-fringed jumpsuit for

⁸⁴ Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 6.

⁸⁵ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharpe, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001), 51.

almost one third of the song. Davis and McCoo sang backup for Parton on the chorus of the song and the remaining bridge, giving small expressions of “alright” or “oh yea” while spinning life preservers with “Proud Mary” written on them. In comparison to the episode featuring The Hues Corporation, this performance seemed out of sync, unorganized, and unequal. In that episode, the group was given equal singing and camera time while performing “Today I Started Loving You Again” and were also given the chance for more dialogue with Parton. Davis and McCoo were left with little singing time, restricted to background vocals. Later in the episode, they performed their song “You Can’t Change My Heart” without Parton.⁸⁶ However, this decision presents another interesting comparison. With Parton, they were in the background; without Parton they were enough on their own and allowed to command center stage. This situation reflected the color line in that their staging demonstrated the supposed superiority of white artists when performing with black singers.

Davis, McCoo, and Parton performed one final song together for that episode that further revealed a disconnect between country artists and disco artists. Numerous explanations could have been behind Parton’s appearance for the final song. Parton’s outfit was outdated, unfashionable, and plain compared to Davis and McCoo’s. Her appearance acknowledged that performers of soul and country music have certain distinct looks. One possibility is that she had just finished a sketch that didn’t allow time for her to change, but Parton, who usually wore a voluminous hairstyle and outfits adorned with rhinestones, instead joined Davis and McCoo on stage to present a contrasting look. Davis was dressed in a black tuxedo complete with a bowtie, a ruffled white tuxedo shirt, and a lapel decorated with sequins, which accentuated McCoo’s

⁸⁶ *Dolly!*, season 1, episode 110, “Featuring Billy Davis Jr. and Marilyn McCoo,” directed by Bill Turner, aired April 4, 1976, accessed October 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UzdIcnLv-w>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPQ4GplfgqI>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYgZY-qZFg8>.

fully sequined, colorful, vertically striped halter-styled jumpsuit. Parton stood between the two dressed in tight orange overalls that bellowed out at the bottom and a lighter orange and white checkered shirt underneath. Although Parton's overalls were trimmed in rhinestones, the details were overshadowed by Davis and McCoo's extravagant outfits. Her wig was curly but flatter to her head than other styles. With all three of them on the stage together, Parton looked out of place. What viewers saw was a different Dolly than the one who had performed "Proud Mary."

Instead of the image of a crossover star that could adapt to any genre, Parton appeared as the typical "Daisy Mae" country figure.⁸⁷ Parton looked as if she was dressed for an appearance in rural "Kornfield Kounty," the fictional setting for the famous television show *Hee Haw*, where she would be preparing corn pone as the voluptuous farmer's daughter. Additionally, before their performance, she stated that she wasn't too sure about singing Hank Williams' song "Take These Chains from My Heart" and messed up the lyrics while singing the simple melody.⁸⁸ Not only did she seem out of place visually, she also did musically. Unlike other episodes, Parton came across as being unprepared and could have benefited from an additional rehearsal of the track: a country song, which was familiar terrain for the singer, instead came across as a chore. What viewers saw was her inability to sing a country song with the R&B duo, even though they all looked as if they were having fun on stage. This episode of *Dolly!* only furthered the imagining of a color line within music, the belief that there were set genres for whites and African Americans, and that the blending or mixing of the two would only result in a strange production of individuals attempting to step over that line.

⁸⁷ Michael McCall, "Dolly Parton," in Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, and Stephen Thomas Erlewine, eds., *All Music Guide: The Definitive Guide to Popular Music* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), 692-693. For a more detailed discussion on the Daisy Mae figure, see Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in the Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 203 and Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 157-170.

⁸⁸ *Dolly!*, season 1, episode 110, "Featuring Billy Davis Jr. and Marilyn McCoo," directed by Bill Turner, aired April 4, 1976, accessed October 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYgZY-qZFg8>.

African Americans Connecting with Parton

Beyond *Dolly!*, well-known and not-so-well-known African American artists began associating themselves with her in the 1980s. African American newspapers featured stories on aspiring entertainers who partially based their talent and abilities on their associations with Parton. In 1983, the *New York Amsterdam News* published a feature on Rene and Angela, a male and female R&B duo, who have “accrued several impressive credentials on their own,” and have had the “fortune to work with renowned vocalists” Ella Fitzgerald and Dolly Parton.⁸⁹ In answering a question from a reader about Rene and Angela’s newest project, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, in their “Celebrity Lookout” section, told readers that they should “expect to hear more from this talented duo.” The report backed the assertion by discussing Angela’s session work with Parton.⁹⁰ Later in 1987, when Angela Winbush pursued a solo album, she referred to her work with Parton when she performed with Stevie Wonder’s band Wonderlove. She remembered her sessions with Parton, not just as a side vocalist but also as a songwriter for the artist, as highlights within her career.⁹¹

Other articles reported on new talent who had simply signed to work with Parton’s manager in Los Angeles, as if he held the key to their success. R&B singer Morris Day, after leaving the group The Time, signed with Parton’s manager to pursue a solo career.⁹² Miki Howard, “pop soul’s latest female contender to stardom,” noted that she spent her time as a

⁸⁹ “Rene and Angela, Make a Winsome Combination,” *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, June 25, 1983. The article also mentioned, Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, John Denver, and Lenny Williams.

⁹⁰ “Celebrity Lookout,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 10, 1981. Later reprinted in the *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, December 12, 1981.

⁹¹ “Angela Winbush ‘Sharp’ In Solo Album Debut,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 27, 1987 and “Hot Wax? The Hottest!,” *National Chronicle*, February 9, 1990.

⁹² “Ebony Etchings,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 11, 1984.

background singer for “Billy Cobham, Esther Phillips, Phillip Bailey and even Dolly Parton.”⁹³ Parton’s name among these other African American performers speaks to her notability among some African Americans. Of course, there were other successful African American performers that did not have, or at least did not acknowledge, a connection with Parton, but her continued mention among less familiar African American entertainers suggests that she had established herself as a popular figure within the entertainment industry across genres.

Members of Parton’s family received similar coverage by African American newspapers. The *New York Amsterdam News* featured a story on Milan Williams, former keyboardist for the African American singing group The Commodores, who signed Stella Parton, one of Dolly’s younger sisters. The newspaper made clear that Williams was hoping to “cash in on the same type of success as the Commodores’ mentor Lionel Richie” by producing white artists with a different, or crossover, sound.⁹⁴ Williams recorded Stella’s album on Townhouse Records at Motown’s Hitsville Recording Studios. This was not Stella’s first album. She had previously scored a country Top Ten hit in 1975 with the title track off her album *I Want to Hold You in My Dreams Tonight* and landed a major label deal with Elektra in 1976.⁹⁵ Although she would not achieve nearly the same level of fame as her older sister, this event demonstrates a unique business relationship between white country musicians and African American producers. This partnership, in which a Motown-soul artist was entrusted to produce a crossover album by a traditionally white country musician with the desire to appeal to a larger audience, and perhaps even a more African American one, provides a small glimpse of a larger trend among other

⁹³ Charles Rogers, “Miki Howard: ‘Shares Her Love’,” *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, January 24, 1987.

⁹⁴ Marie Moore, “Black Britishers Invade Manhattan,” *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, March 27, 1982. Ritchie produced the Grammy nominated song “Lady” for Kenny Rogers.

⁹⁵ Steve Huey, “Stella Parton,” iTunes, accessed October 7, 2016, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/stella-parton/id37766361>.

established artists. By integrating stylistic elements aimed at achieving a wider fan base, artists were also reaching across genre boundaries.

African American newspapers also highlighted instances when Parton featured African American entertainers as a part of her show or concert. Throughout her career, Parton performed with a variety of acts: solo, group, R&B, disco, country-western, country, pop singers, and even puppet characters and the “little marching band” from the popular television show *Captain Kangaroo*.⁹⁶ In 1981, Parton would add an African American ventriloquist to that list when Willie Tyler and Lester were asked to host the ABC television network Children’s TV series in which Parton was scheduled to perform. Tyler, a comedian, ventriloquist, and composer, and his 42-inch “life-size sidekick” Lester, began hosting the Emmy Award winning series that fall. The pair was not new on the entertainment scene as they had been performing on various television specials, such as *The Merv Griffith Show* and *The Mike Douglas Show*, as well as concerts with other performers and club engagements.⁹⁷ Parton’s premier with Tyler and Lester must have gone well since in 1982 she asked Tyler to open for her in Cleveland, kicking off her tour that year.⁹⁸

Quite significantly, Parton started her tour in the northern industrial city of Cleveland, a city smaller than other more routine country music concert stops like New York, or even more traditional country music strongholds in the south like Nashville; and she did so with an African American ventriloquist opening for her instead of another musical act. In her desire to appeal to a new crowd Parton selected a city that was outside of country’s normal fan base. An appearance in Nashville would have drawn a crowd of her usual country music fans, but in Cleveland she

⁹⁶ *Captain Kangaroo*, season 21, episode 3, “Dolly Parton Visits the Captain’s Place,” directed by Sandy Howard, aired October 27, 1976, on CBS, accessed October 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTSmGFa_vtA.

⁹⁷ “Willie Tyler and Lester Host ABC Children’s TV Series,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 2, 1981.

⁹⁸ “Willie Tyler and Lester to Open For Dolly Parton At Front Row,” *Call and Post*, August 7, 1982.

would have been able to attract a more popular audience of crossover fans. In a story published by the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1983, Tyler remarked that he had “no problems performing for specialized audiences, such as Country and Western fans” and that he could “adapt” his show to meet the demands of his audience.⁹⁹ Of course, this speaks to Tyler’s ability and talent as a performer but it also demonstrates Parton’s desire to draw in and entertain a diverse fan base.

Performers were not the only ones linking their success to their connections with Parton. The Cleveland *Call and Post* published a featurette on a local family of florists, who after only three courses in floral design decided to open a shop under the leadership of daughter Joyce Smith. With the support of her parents, she founded her own business. Before the shop even opened, Smith found herself arranging exquisite designs for the governor’s house in Tennessee, in preparation “for the social affairs of country western vocalist Dolly Parton.”¹⁰⁰ This feature did not mention that Smith saw an increase in business because of her work, but the article recognized that she must be talented to be selected for such a task. Another example featured former singer Le Nona Walton. In promoting her consulting business Very Eunique Enterprises and her production company Forever Treasure, the entrepreneur and creative consultant recalled fond memories of performing with Parton during her time with Hidle Brown “H.B.” Barnum’s Life Choir.¹⁰¹ Though some African Americans contested Parton’s music and her presence on the pop music scene, others used her stardom and their connection to her, however stretched or imagined, as a springboard for their own careers.

⁹⁹ Timothy Cox, “Willie and Lester: The Art of Double-Talking,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 1, 1983.

¹⁰⁰ “A Family Affair,” *Call and Post*, March 10, 1983.

¹⁰¹ “Walton Transforms Your Dreams into Reality,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 10, 1987. Additionally, Hidle Brown “H.B.” Barnum formed Life Choir in 1981 to function as a music ministry “for everybody, everywhere, without exception,” while serving at St. Paul’s Baptist Church of Los Angeles as their Minister of Music. This gospel group of over 100 voices committed themselves to singing events that ministered to the community and social relief efforts. They appeared with Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers on their Christmas Special in 1986.

More to the point, Parton's music was being performed and emulated by various African American singers. In a celebration ceremony for Louvon Pace and Ralph Lamar's tenth anniversary of singing together held at Savoy Manor in the Bronx, an all-female quartet most popular in the 1950s, the Bobbetts, performed contemporary hits, including Parton and Kenny Rogers' song "Islands in the Stream." A review of the event indicated they did so "better than the two originators."¹⁰² Their selection demonstrates the widespread popularity of the hit song as well as a certain affinity that many African Americans felt towards Parton. Aspiring country singers, such as Ebony Wright, created tribute albums that included covers of country's "standard classics," including a few of Parton's songs.¹⁰³

Parton's Troubles in South Africa

Parton experienced negative publicity from African American newspapers in response to her decision to perform in South Africa during apartheid. The late 1970s saw growing protests against South Africa's policy of apartheid from African Americans in the United States. In October 1983, the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid published a list of entertainers that had performed in South Africa since 1981 against the request of liberation groups. This "Register of Entertainers, Actors, and Others Who Have Performed in Apartheid South Africa" included numerous artists that ignored the "cultural boycott" which aimed to foster a spirit of renewed independence and end segregation in South Africa.¹⁰⁴ Parton, who performed at South Africa's Sun City Resort in 1982, found her name on that list.

¹⁰² Gene Gillis, "Singers Pace & Lamar Celebrate 10th," *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, March 3, 1984.

¹⁰³ Mary Lynn, "The Merry Go Round," *Call and Post*, June 20, 1981. The album contained songs from Parton, Loretta Lynn, and Patsy Cline.

¹⁰⁴ United Nations, *Register of Entertainers, Actors, and Others Who Have Performed in Apartheid South Africa* (New York: United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid, April 1986), accessed October 2, 2016, http://www.aluka.org/stable/10.5555/al.sff.document.nuun1986_03.

Earlier that year, the *National Leader* published a list of African American entertainers who have become “honorary whites” and “dishonorable Black[s]” because they performed in racially segregated South Africa.¹⁰⁵ This list was presented to readers as a suggestion of performers to boycott and speaks to the seriousness that the *National Leader* ascribed to protesting apartheid. In addition to African American entertainers, the paper named Parton and other popular white entertainers who had performed in South Africa. In 1982, the *New York Amsterdam News* printed the line “Dolly Parton is going to South Africa—Boo’oo,” as a part of a more general entertainment news update.¹⁰⁶ Parton, as well as other white entertainers, were viewed as being complicit with a politically racist agenda of disenfranchisement and being insensitive to the struggles of black South Africans. As some further associated themselves with Parton, others were attempting to disassociate.

Many African Americans sympathized and showed solidarity with the oppressed people of South Africa, relating the situation abroad to their own racial struggles at home. After the United Nations published its “Register of Entertainers,” newspapers began to take a more critical stance on individuals who performed in South Africa despite the UN’s suggestions. In November 1983, the *New York Amsterdam News* published sections of the UN’s study under a front-page headline: “Sinatra Apartheid ‘Villain?’” Parton’s name was listed in between Liza Minnelli and Barry Manilow as violators of the UN’s call for “cultural, academic, and other boycotts of South Africa.” The newspaper echoed the report from the UN. While some performers visited the country out of “ignorance” of the situation, the report stated that others were lured by profit and demonstrated “deliberate insensitivity or hostility to the legitimate aspirations for the oppressed

¹⁰⁵ Pamela Douglas, “Why Are They Called ‘Honorary Whites?’” *National Leader*, February 10, 1983.

¹⁰⁶ Billy Rowe, “Grammy Grab Almost Complete,” *N. Y. Amsterdam News*, March 6, 1982.

people of South Africa.”¹⁰⁷ The paper did not specify which group Parton ought to be placed in and it is an event that she did not discuss in her autobiography. The silence surrounding her participation in this event could be because she recognized it as a bad decision and was embarrassed by it; or, it could be that she does not deem it as important in the first place. Her few statements on her performance at Sun City suggests, however, that she was aware of problems within South Africa, but perhaps she was not informed as to the extent of the country’s apartheid system.¹⁰⁸

The December 1983 edition of *Black Enterprise* magazine brought the situation to center stage by listing for readers the names of entertainers who appeared in South Africa and justifying the boycott. The newspaper compared the realities of South African apartheid to the Holocaust and suggested that artists who performed in the country were aiding apartheid in the same ways that Germany received assistance from lucrative events such as the 1936 Olympics. Artists and athletes, such as tennis player Arthur Ashe and singer Harry Belafonte, co-chairs of the Artist and Athletes Against Apartheid organization, asserted the need for this boycott: it would “halt the growing collaboration between the Reagan Administration and racist South African regime” and would educate and expose the “horrors endured by blacks under apartheid.” According to the magazine report, an entertainer’s presence alone bolstered the government’s credibility. The *Enterprise* noted that within the United States “1,500 cards have been mailed warning of boycotts of performances and albums of any artist who visits South Africa” and restated their opposition to this racist system.¹⁰⁹ *Jet* explained that before a black artist accepts “big bucks”

¹⁰⁷ Simon Anekwe, “Sinatra Apartheid ‘Villain?’” *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, November 19, 1983. The newspaper discussed Sinatra’s “coziness” with South African officials and comments that he was “satisfied with the condition of civil rights, integration and the like” within the country, thus making him the “villain of the lot.”

¹⁰⁸ Future research might analyze South African newspapers to better understand Parton’s views on her performance and what she experienced in South Africa.

¹⁰⁹ Frank Dexter Brown, “Boycotting Apartheid,” *Black Enterprise*, December 1983, 26. Both Ashe and Belafonte were criticized for their changing opinions and stances on apartheid over time. Eric Allen Hall’s *Arthur Ashe:*

from South Africa in exchange for a performance the Artist and Athletes Against Apartheid would issue them a reminder on the country's racist system and why they should join the boycott.¹¹⁰ Additionally, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* explained that an artist could have their name removed by simply "writing the committee a letter promising not to return to South Africa."¹¹¹

Parton commented on her upcoming appearance in South Africa and the UN's list, positioning herself as apolitical: "I'm an entertainer, not a politician...I can't speak to the problems of another country. I'm just looking forward to the tour, and I'm going to stay out of trouble."¹¹² In her statement, she disassociated music from politics (and politics from music), absolving herself from any wrongdoing by agreeing to perform in South Africa. Parton expressed disinterest and little understanding of the state of race relations in South Africa (and likely the United States as well). According to one of her biographers, Stephen Miller, Parton had agreed to perform at the lavish Sun City Resort, the white-owned Las Vegas-style resort in the South African tribal homeland of Bophuthatswana, under the condition that a portion of the revenue generated by her performance would stay behind and with the understanding that the audience would be integrated.¹¹³

Eventually, Parton reversed course. In February 1986, while on tour with Kenny Rogers in Australia, Parton addressed apartheid and the UN blacklist. She became the first international

Tennis and Justice in the Civil Rights Era (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2014), demonstrates the complexities of Ashe's participation in the South African Open and his decision in 1977 to support the boycott of South Africa. Harry Belafonte, along with author Michael Shnayerson, discuss his South African initiative and single "We Are the World" in his biography *My Song: A Memoir of Art, Race, and Defiance* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

¹¹⁰ "Should Famous Blacks Entertain in South Africa?," *Jet*, May 27, 1985.

¹¹¹ Betty Pleasant, "Soulvine," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 14, 1985.

¹¹² Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 206. In her 1994 Autobiography *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, Parton references several events in her career that have brought her sadness, but does not mention this situation specifically.

¹¹³ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 206 and John M. Wilson, "UN's 'Register' Of Performers Raises Blacklist Spectre in S. Africa Boycott," *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1985. According to the *Tribune*, Sun City offered the most "tempting bait" for performers where about 1.5 million visitors, mostly white South Africans, visited this region. Additionally, the paper explained that these "homelands" were the "foundation of apartheid," created to merely give the impression of black autonomy while hiding the forced resettlement of blacks.

star to sign the Australian Anti-Apartheid Movement pledge to cut all ties with the South African regime. According to Parton, her December 1982 performance at Sun City “was just another show date,” claiming that she had not known about the policies of the racist regime. Parton, after her performance before the integrated audience, “went out of her way to find out about the apartheid regime.” Reflecting on her appearance, Parton stated that she would “certainly not” go back: “I don’t like all the things that are happening. Y’know, you always feel so bad when people ask you about it. It’s like you’ve done something wrong.”¹¹⁴ Certainly, Parton internalized her participation in accepting and sustaining South Africa’s oppressive policies with her concert revenue. Other entertainers, such as Tina Turner who performed there in 1979, expressed similar regret: “At the time I was naïve about the politics in South Africa.”¹¹⁵ What is uncertain is if Parton regretted her performance because of what she experienced and later learned about apartheid or because of the bad press her trip generated. It is likely a combination of both. Her involvement in South Africa has been generally left out of discussions on Parton and she rarely speaks of the incident.¹¹⁶ Outside of general criticism over her albums, this was the first sustained negative publicity that Parton had in her international career.

What remains even less clear is if Parton lost fans because of her placement on the UN’s blacklist. In 1985, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that anti-apartheid demonstrators protested the

¹¹⁴ John Hanrahan, “Parton Takes Anti-Apartheid Stand During Australian Tour,” *Hollywood Reporter*, February 3, 1986.

¹¹⁵ “Should Famous Blacks Entertain in South Africa?,” *Jet*, May 27, 1985.

¹¹⁶ I have found no records to indicate that she has been back to South Africa since her 1982 concert at Sun City. In the future, historians could further analyze Parton’s appearance in South Africa to better understand this event. Interestingly, she did provide vocals for Ladysmith Black Mambazo, an all-male acapella singing group from South Africa in 1997, according to the *Billboard* article “SA’s Talent Spectrum: Some Local Successes Have Global Potential,” April 5, 1997, 52. Parton does have a large international fan base and has remained a popular figure abroad. In 2014, during her Blue Smoke World Tour, Parton drew a record crowd at the Glastonbury Music Festival and was presented with a special award in recognition of selling more than 100 million records worldwide, “Dolly Parton Draws Huge Crowd to Glastonbury Pyramid Stage,” BBC, June 29, 2014, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-28080039>.

Grammys for “allowing entertainers who had been to South Africa—including Dolly Parton...through the Shrine doors.”¹¹⁷ But her coverage by the African American press remained steady after 1983, and radio stations, television stations, and businesses alike kept her name and image in their advertisements. One benefit auction for the City of Hope, a cancer treatment and research center in southern California, co-sponsored by KABC Talk radio boasted an afternoon with Dolly Parton as a “dream” prize. The “dream auction” also included two more grand prizes: starring with Linda Lavin on the television series *Alice* and a trip to Australia.¹¹⁸ This contest suggests that while Parton’s presence on the UN Blacklist, published earlier that year, was of note, spending a day with the artist was, too.¹¹⁹

Parton’s Image in the Black Press

Missing from African American newspapers are descriptions of Parton’s appearance. Compared to other newspapers that devoted entire sections and columns to discussions of Parton’s figure or attractive qualities, traditionally African American newspapers only gave a passing reference to Parton’s appearance. She was described in a 1978 issue of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* as “Dolly ‘Boom Boom’ Parton,” a sexually suggestive reference to her chest.¹²⁰ This was also implied in an article that described an upcoming boxing match between Thomas “The Hit Man” Hearn and the “possessor of the heaviest guns this side of Dolly Parton,” John “The Beast” Mugabi.¹²¹ Additionally, newspapers highlighted instances when African Americans

¹¹⁷ Dennis McDougal, “Fans of All Stripes Keep Star Vigil,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1985.

¹¹⁸ “‘Dream Auction Slated,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 3, 1983.

¹¹⁹ The station promoted that one hundred other “dream packages” were also available to the highest bidder, including the three grand prizes. These being the only prizes described, one is to believe that they were the top three, or the most popular to the audience, and therefore the grand prizes.

¹²⁰ Bill Lane, “People-Places ‘n’ Situwayshuns,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 19, 1978. Ironically, this appeared on the same day as her 32nd birthday, however, that was not the reason for her inclusion in this column. Instead, the author was discussing Ray Charles’ invitation to appear on the “50 Years of Country Music” television special.

¹²¹ Eddie Jefferies, “Hagler Hammers Hamsho, Baits Hearn,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1984.

caricatured Parton's appearance. The *Chicago Metro News* highlighted African American actor Rich Roundtree's second place win in the "Most Perverted" category at a Halloween party in Hawaii where the actor came dressed as Parton, while the smaller *Lexington Herald-Leader* included a comment on a "300-pound black woman imitating Dolly Parton" auditioning for the TV show *Puttin' On The Hits*.¹²²

In 1987, in Gertrude Gipson's "Candid Moments" section of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the writer noted Parton's dramatic weight loss, guessing that the petite singer "must be a size three." The focus of the article was not on Parton's weight loss. Instead, the emphasis was on Patti LaBelle's upcoming appearance on Parton's 1987-1988 *Dolly* television show (not to be confused with the 1976/1977 show of the same name). Gipson asked, "Now who is gonna outdo on the glamorous wigs?"¹²³ When LaBelle appeared on the show, hair was indeed a hot topic. Parton stated that the two had a lot in common, besides the fact that they were both managed by Sandy Gallin. They also shared a love for "all these beads, we love all this makeup, and this hair!" The last part of that phrase, which they said in unison, was followed by high pitched giggles from Parton and LaBelle. "I mean I'll wear anybody's hair," LaBelle said with a sly smile.¹²⁴

In this case, however, just because the papers were not themselves offering details of Parton's physical appearance does not mean that descriptions of her body were not a topic of conversation. After a Redd Foxx skit in October 1977, Parton demanded an apology from the comedian. Known for his outspokenness and suggestive humor, the comedian referenced

¹²² "Broadway Is My Beat," *Chicago Metro News*, February 17, 1979; "'Puttin' On The Hits' Reveals Newest Perversion of the '80s," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, April 11, 1986.

¹²³ Gertrude Gipson, "Candid Comments," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 10, 1987.

¹²⁴ *Dolly*, season 1, episode 4, "Featuring Patti LaBelle, Patrick Duffy, and The Flying Karamazov Brothers," directed by Louis J. Horvitz, aired October 18, 1987, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht9tYaaiskk>.

Parton's breast in a skit for his television show, *The Redd Foxx Show*. Foxx joked that instead of her hands, Parton had imprinted her breasts in the cement of the forecourt of Hollywood's famous Grauman's Chinese Theater.¹²⁵ He stated that the imprints were so large that Billy Barty, a little person who regularly appeared on Foxx's show, could get lost in them, "completely disappearing."¹²⁶ Parton's response to Foxx's comments was clear:

Regarding the remarks made about me on your show last night on the ABC-TV Network, which inaccurately made-reference to mammoth-sized 'imprints' of certain portions of my anatomy in the forecourt of Mann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, I must take exception. Imprints of these or any other parts of my anatomy are not currently in the forecourt. . . Further, the dimensions attributed to me are more than slightly incorrect. I would be the first to admit that I am well-endowed, but I seriously doubt that even your show's little person, Billy Barty, could be lost in such alleged imprints.

The telegram concluded, "I hesitate to add to your current woes, but I feel that in this case you owe me two equally ample apologies."¹²⁷ The skit satirizing the "voluptuous country singer" aired the same day Foxx threatened to quit before he would issue an apology to Farrah Fawcett for making fun of her hairdo.¹²⁸ Foxx refused to apologize, "passing the onus on" writers and ultimately network executives.¹²⁹ Parton's choice of words, her "hesitation" to bring a burden on Foxx, speaks to her acknowledgement of her position as a woman in a male-dominated industry. At the same time, she is also making a witty and playful comment by asking for "two equally ample apologies," stating that she can reference her body as well.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Originally known as the Grauman's Chinese Theater, it was renamed the Mann's Chinese Theater in 1973, only to be reverted to its original name in 2001. To date, there are nearly 200 handprints, footprints, and autographs in the theater's forecourt.

¹²⁶ "Foxx Won't Apologize To Farrah, Parton, Put Principles Over \$\$," *Jet*, November 10, 1977, 54.

¹²⁷ "Dolly Parton Wants Redd Foxx Apology," *Ocala Star-Banner*, October 23, 1977; "Dolly Demands Foxx Apology," *Daytona Beach Sunday News Journal*, October 23, 1977; "Foxx Skit Angers Dolly Parton," *Abilene Reporter*, October 23, 1977; "Dolly Joins Farrah as Red Foxx Targets," *The Lewiston Daily Sun*, October 24, 1977; "Dolly Demands Apology," *Victoria Advocate*, October 23, 1977. Also consulted: Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 149.

¹²⁸ "No Apology to Farrah, Redd Says," *Herald-Journal*, October 23, 1977 and "Foxx Won't Apologize To Farrah, Parton, Put Principles Over \$\$," *Jet*, November 10, 1977, 54.

¹²⁹ Bill Lane, "People-Places 'n' Situwayshuns," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 27, 1977.

¹³⁰ Ironically, in 1988 Parton was inducted into Nashville's Star Walk, and when asked by a reporter if she would leave impressions of her breasts in the cement in addition to her handprints, she remarked, "Heavens no, I'm afraid

Fredericksburg, Virginia's *Free Lance-Star* suggested that Parton took issue with Foxx's joke and demanded an apology as a way of garnering publicity. The report conjectured that Parton's request for "two ample apologies" proved that she was joking and that it "was her press agent's idea of a joke." The newspaper also described how this could be used as a publicity stunt, and, according to a statement from ABC, "Dolly...thinks it's all very funny and plans to appear on a future show with Redd."¹³¹ There is no evidence to confirm that this was a publicity stunt. It is also of note that country music's conservative, white fans very well could have enacted a widespread boycott of Foxx and called for the cancelation of his variety show, for making sexually-implicit (if not explicit) remarks about a white woman. It is also likely that Parton's country fans were not aware of Foxx's comments, since Foxx was already a popular figure to African Americans prior to his hit show *Sanford and Son* but not as prominent to whites.¹³²

Entertainment magazines commented on this story with mixed opinions. *Jet* published a story claiming that Foxx has taken "pot-shots" at plenty of individuals, including Jimmy Carter and Anita Bryant, so why would he feel the need to apologize to "bosomy country and western singer Dolly Parton."¹³³ Also, it is evident within *Jet*'s article and Foxx's comments that neither viewed Parton as belonging to any genre other than country. Ten years later, however, that view of Parton as a one genre act had surely expanded, and her popularity would grow thanks to her second television series.

some little kid might fall in and get killed." It is interesting that ten years later, Parton would accept such comments as a passing joke and an opportunity to keep herself in the press. Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 245.

¹³¹ "Dolly Parton Wants Foxx to Apologize—or Does She?" *Free Lance-Star*, October 26, 1977.

¹³² Michael Seth Starr, *Black and Blue: The Redd Foxx Story* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2011), x-xi. Starr includes Foxx's incident with Fawcett, stating that the whole thing "blew over" when ABC guaranteed not to joke about the star's hair again, 215-216. His dialogue with Parton is absent from the book. Future research could expand on this analysis.

¹³³ "Foxx Won't Apologize To Farrah, Parton, Put Principles Over \$\$," *Jet*, November 10, 1977, 54.

Dolly Again

In 1987, ABC, attempting to revive the variety show genre, approached Parton with a contract for another television show. Given that the last series ended rather unsuccessfully due to low ratings, Parton was reluctant to commit to a weekly show. Eventually, however, she agreed to the show because she believed that her elevated celebrity status would carry the series and allow her to demand more creative control. Parton and her longtime manager, Sandy Gallin, finally reached an agreement with the ABC network for a two-year, \$44-million-dollar contract, which was one of the largest television deals ever up to that point. *Dolly* premiered in September 1987 and was rated the fifth most popular television show that week.¹³⁴ Parton won a People's Choice Award for Favorite Female Performer in a New Television Show for *Dolly*.¹³⁵ Despite its high-profile celebrity guests and elaborate and costly production, viewers described the show as dated, and its popularity quickly declined. The show was cancelled after 23 episodes.

Viewers were also presented with a much slimmer Dolly Parton, dressed in leather and sequins instead of florals and bright bell-bottomed jumpsuits. For some, the “slim, sexy, down-home Parton” was an unwelcomed look.¹³⁶ Since her appearance on the *Porter Wagoner Show*, voluminous blonde hair and cascading curls that reached past her shoulders became Parton's signature look. Parton departed from that look in her first television series as her outfits reflected more popular trends in fashion during the 1970s, such as colorful, form-fitting, bell bottom jumpsuits. This new show presented a much flashier and embellished Parton. Her changes in

¹³⁴ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 240.

¹³⁵ Team Dolly, “Favorite Female Performer in a New TV Show,” Dollyparton.com, March 13, 1988, last modified August 23, 2015, accessed October 20, 2016. <http://dollyparton.com/tag/dolly-television-variety-show>.

¹³⁶ Susan White, “Hello and Goodbye Season First for ‘Dolly,’ Last For ‘Magnum’ Dolly Parton A High Note in ABC Lineup,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, August 8, 1987. According to Miller's biography *Smart Blonde*, at one point Parton was down to approximately 90 pounds.

style only further demonstrate attempts to separate Parton from the traditional country music look. ABC planned to use her new look as a means of drawing a different crowd. Executives stressed that even though the show would have a “distinctly country flavor...even those who don’t like country music at all will eventually come around.”¹³⁷

Dolly presented new opportunities for interactions with African American artists, especially female entertainers. The first episode featured Dudley Moore, Hulk Hogan, Paul Reubens as “Pee Wee Herman,” and Oprah Winfrey. Oprah had already established herself with her nationally syndicated television talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, in 1986; she was no newcomer to the entertainment world, but she was still an African American woman in a male-dominated business. As Parton’s guest, Oprah joked about Parton’s weight loss and new image. In their skit, “Porgy and Bess Auditions,” Oprah played the critical and prude audition judge that Parton attempts to impress. While Oprah instructed Parton not to bother to audition for the part of Bess, implying that she could not be cast in the role because she was white, Parton naively believed she was being rejected because of her height. “You are desperately wrong for this part,” insisted Oprah. Parton countered: “Oh sure, here it comes again. I heard it when I auditioned for *Dream Girls*, *Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Wiz*...I’m too short.” Oprah put it to her bluntly: “The problem is wrong color.” Parton thanked Oprah for telling her “the truth,” then she walked off in her lime green outfit and returned moments later in a red dress to sing her rendition of “Summer Time.” Oprah rolled her eyes, and she and the other judge (an unknown white man) seemed stunned: how could it be that Parton did not understand that the color problem they noted had

¹³⁷ Susan White, “Hello and Goodbye Season First For ‘Dolly,’ Last For ‘Magnum’ Dolly Parton A High Note in ABC Lineup,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, August 8, 1987.

nothing to do with her outfit and everything to do with her skin? Nearing the end of the skit, Parton broke character, admitting, “I can’t believe I’d stoop so low for a laugh.”¹³⁸

With that last line, Parton likely meant that even she realized it was a bad joke: in playing with racialized humor—even as coded as it was in this example—she was bringing attention to but failing to critique the racialized and gendered expectations and constrained roles that women confronted within the entertainment industry. Parton represented the dumb blonde who was judged too quickly, while Oprah highlighted the rejection that African American women faced from the industry. Women were traditionally underrepresented, but this sketch allowed Parton and Oprah to expose the problems that women face through a witty skit. Presenting this issue on Parton’s television show allowed her to take a stance on the industry’s inequality in hiring actors, but did not directly challenge the problem. Instead, the scene mocked the issue and communicated that it was just another complaint voiced by frustrated actors.

The show allowed for an easy exchange between Parton and her guests. On a later episode featuring Patti LaBelle, the two women were dressed in similar black sequined dresses, a planned wardrobe choice facilitated by the fact that the singers shared the same designer. In discussing their outfits, LaBelle noted that she was wearing a foundation, a bra-corset device, that formerly belonged to Parton. Parton responded cleverly: “That makes us bosom buddies.” The pair laughed like old friends.¹³⁹ Later, the two performed a rendition of “Shortnin’ Bread,” using their acrylic nails as instruments. LaBelle referred to herself and Parton as twins on the show because of their many similarities. That these two performers—one white, and the other

¹³⁸ *Dolly*, season 1, episode 1, “Featuring Dudley Moore, Hulk Hogan, Pee Wee Herman, and Oprah Winfrey,” directed by Louis J. Horvitz, aired September 27, 1987, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCrdAgKLRnk>.

¹³⁹ *Dolly*, season 1, episode 4, “Featuring Patti LaBelle, Patrick Duffy, and The Flying Karamazov Brothers,” directed by Louis J. Horvitz, aired October 18, 1987, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht9tYaaiskk>.

African American, one a country music star, the other an R&B soul legend—shared such a connection demonstrates a more nuanced view to the musical color line. Both crossover artists, Parton and LaBelle found that even though they were categorized separately by the music they performed, they recognized commonalities with each other.¹⁴⁰ The two finished the show with a gospel performance of “Up Above My Head,” solidifying a friendship marked by a belief in a higher power and hope for good things to come.

Dolly placed African American women in traditional spaces, such as the beauty shop, that have allowed them to engage in dialogue and exert agency. Jackée Harry, Whoopi Goldberg, and Nell Carter also appeared on the show. Both of Parton’s skits with Harry and Goldberg took place in the “Vanity Fair” beauty parlor where Parton pretends to be a hair dresser, a fitting role since she would play Truvy Jones, the owner and sole proprietor of Truvy’s Beauty Parlor, in the film *Steel Magnolias* the following year. In the episode featuring Harry, the actress gives Parton dance lessons to Parton’s song “Here You Come Again” and shares tips on how to be sexier on her show, while Parton fixes Harry’s “nail emergency.” In a later episode, Parton offers motherly advice to Goldberg’s young character as she tries to look good for a boy she just met.¹⁴¹

Traditionally, the beauty shop has been a place of refuge for black women. Beauticians, and those they served, viewed the shop as a central location connecting their communities and used their position to engage in political activism. The beauty salon functioned as both a public and private institution where beauticians had the economic and physical autonomy to encourage their

¹⁴⁰ Patti LaBelle with Laura B. Randolph, *Don’t Block the Blessings: Revelations of a Lifetime* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), describes Labelle’s career shifts from her early days as lead vocalist with LaBelle and the Bluebelles, her solo discos hits, pop crossover songs, and return to R&B. LaBelle also discusses her television show *The Patti LaBelle Show* and her small television sitcom roles.

¹⁴¹ *Dolly*, season 1, episode 6, “Featuring Tommy Petty, Jackee Harry, Ned Beatty, and Jon Lovitz,” directed by Louis J. Horvitz, aired November 11, 1987, accessed November 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-IsTH7YQ50>. *Dolly*, season 1, episode 2, “Featuring Burt Reynolds, Whoopi Goldberg, and Alabama,” directed by Louis J. Horvitz, aired October 4, 1987, accessed November 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31T6gXdq-KU>.

clientele and other members of the community to act on behalf of issues that concerned them.

Additionally, the shop provided women with an outlet to discuss “taboo” topics surrounding their bodies.¹⁴² Thus, Parton as a white woman is recognizing the importance of the beauty shop and stating that she has a role in it. As the beautician in the skit, Parton is also communicating that she is the central figure in the shop that is connecting these women with the outside world and the greater community.

The *Dolly* show not only highlighted the beauty parlor, but also the church through the numerous performances between Parton and African American women. Before Parton concluded the episode with a final thought and the chorus of “I Will Always Love You,” Parton asked Oprah to join her on stage for a final performance with a church choir. The two performed the gospel song “This Little Light of Mine” and danced around the stage as if they were hosting a joyful church service.¹⁴³ As we have already seen in Parton’s performance with LaBelle, the show ended with the two entertainers expressing their spirituality. Additionally, after Broadway star Nell Carter performed the song “Back in the High Life Again,” Parton joined her on stage to sing a melody of gospel songs that each woman performed on tour. Just as the beauty parlor has offered a space of refuge and power for black women, African American women have also

¹⁴² Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 130. In her work, Gill demonstrates how African American women built and sustained a culture of activism in beauty salons and argues the extreme significance that these institutions had in community building. In an interview with Michael Martin from NPR, Gill discusses how the beauty shop provided black women with an outlet to talk openly about issues and topics surrounding sex, spirituality, politics, family and other relationship issues. Similarly, National Public Radio’s “Black-Owned Beauty Shops Groom Political Activism,” last modified December 28, 2011, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2011/12/28/144381812/black-owned-beauty-shops-groom-political-activism> discusses the beauty shop as a black woman’s outlet. Recently, partially spurred by the release of Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade*, African American women’s spirituality has received additional inquiry. This is the case in Yolanda Pierce’s “Black Women and The Sacred: With ‘Lemonade,’ Beyoncé Takes Us to Church,” *Religion Dispatches*, last modified May 3, 2016, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://religiondispatches.org/black-women-and-the-sacred-beyonce-takes-us-to-church/>.

¹⁴³ *Dolly*, season 1, episode 1, “Featuring Dudley Moore, Hulk Hogan, Pee Wee Herman, and Oprah Winfrey,” directed by Louis J. Horvitz, aired September 27, 1987, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCrdAgKLnk>.

experienced agency within the church and the show played into that.¹⁴⁴ By crossing the musical color line, she is also demonstrating that the color line could also be crossed in other spaces, like the beauty shop and church.

Throughout her numerous interactions with African American artists as she reached across genres, Parton encouraged inclusivity within country music. Her presence in the disco and pop markets, at times contested by African Americans and country fans and entertainers, expanded her career and challenged the musical color line. Parton used her popularity to cross the musical color line and provided a path for other artists who wished to do the same. In doing so, Parton capitalized on white appropriation of certain musical elements, but also promoted the contributions of African Americans through her concerts and television shows. Additionally, Parton helped reshape country music and forced segments of society to change the way they thought about country music and country singers. In many ways, Parton is responsible for combining traditionally black stylistic elements, such as pulsating rhythms and dance beats, with country and folk features. Through this, Parton broke traditional cultural, racial, and gender boundaries within country music.

¹⁴⁴ Charissa Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 260-261, 276; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women...: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

CHAPTER THREE:
PALATABLE PARTON: REPACKAGING FEMINISM

In 1968, while still appearing on *The Porter Wagoner Show*, Dolly Parton wrote and recorded what would become one of the top hits of her career. “Just Because I’m a Woman,” the title song off her second solo album of the same name, presents the voice of a woman who admonishes her lover for passing judgment on her past sexual relationships. Parton based the song on her own life experiences. After eight months of marriage to her husband Carl Dean, he was devastated to learn that he was not Parton’s first sexual partner. Parton expressed her feelings about his reaction through the simple melodic lines of “Just Because I’m a Woman,” countering that her mistakes “are no worse than yours, just because I’m a woman.” The song confronts society’s notion that it is acceptable for men to engage in extramarital sex but that those rules do not apply to women, since men are encouraged to be sexually experienced before marriage while women are not.

While “Just Because I’m a Woman” challenged the gender norms of the late 1960s, it also adhered to them as Parton recognized her boundaries within country music. In the song, Parton labels her past sexual experiences as “mistakes” and asked for understanding and forgiveness from her husband. In interviews with *Rolling Stone* and television and radio broadcasters, such as Terry Wogan and Maura Moynihan later in her career, Parton made light of her sexual history and downplayed the song’s position as one of the first anthems of Women’s Liberation.¹⁴⁵ Parton was aware of the song’s message against society’s sexist double standards, but rejected the song’s feminist label even later in her career. Her choice of the word “mistake” reflected her recognition of the prevailing conservative views among her country music fan base

¹⁴⁵ Stephen Miller, *Smart Blonde: Dolly Parton* (London: Omnibus Press, 2007), 99-100.

during the 1960s. Parton's attitude towards her song also demonstrates that at such an early time in her career she was wary of alienating herself from the country music establishment. The record proved to be too controversial for some radio stations which refused to play the album and claimed that by "daring to complain" about sexist double standards, Parton had put her career on the line. Despite this partial boycott, the song still performed well on the charts.¹⁴⁶ Other stations agreed to play Parton's song citing that her "good girl" image and Bible-belt raising overruled her ambitious message.¹⁴⁷ While the song's message was radical to country traditionalists, Parton's petite frame, child-like voice, large breasts, and blonde hair—an image of male desire—eased the concerns of other country artists, fans, broadcasters, and industry executives. As a country music artist, Parton used her position to highlight the double-standards that women faced in relationships and relied on her brand of feminism to offset the politics of her songs, such as the case in "Just Because I'm a Woman." Through this complicated presentation of lyrics and image, Parton redefined what it meant to be a woman playing country music.

This chapter seeks to analyze how Parton's actions incorporated and rejected the messages of the Women's Movement within country music. Parton's interviews, lyrics, and film roles demonstrate engagement with ideas of gender equality and highlight social issues that white working-class women, a population that felt disconnected from and neglected by the Women's Movement, experienced during the second wave of feminism.¹⁴⁸ Scholarship on feminism and country music tends to compare multiple country music female artists. These

¹⁴⁶ Jancee Dunn, "Interview: Dolly Parton," *Rolling Stone*, October 30, 2003 notes of Parton's pride that the song reached number one on the music charts in South Africa.

¹⁴⁷ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 99-100.

¹⁴⁸ See: Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: Feminism Today* (New York: Zed Books, 2010); Anne Enke *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Richard A. Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, Richard A. Peterson and Melton A. McLaurin, eds. 35-62 (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992), 56.

scholars have centered their discussions on performers, such as Loretta Lynn who was more outspoken on women's issues and the more reserved Tammy Wynette, to discuss the place of feminism in country music.¹⁴⁹ I argue that Parton was an ambivalent feminist on the country music scene. Parton is not an alternative to Lynn or Wynette, nor is she somewhere in between the two. Instead, at different moments and in specific contexts throughout the 1970s and 1980s, she combined elements of both into her own brand or style of feminism. Her position on feminism and women's rights issues was contradictory throughout the 1960s and into the early 1990s. Sometimes she espoused beliefs that aligned with advocates of women's equality, while at other times she was critical of them and advocated patriarchal views of society. In a way, Parton's articulation of feminism was more palatable to the country music market. As a country artist who was raised in impoverished East Tennessee, Parton's style of feminism was recognized as an alternative to the kind of feminism popularized by middle-class women in the Movement. Like Gloria Steinem who published a mainstream magazine to "reach women who didn't—and would never—read Movement newsletters and newspapers," Parton released songs that reached a different audience.¹⁵⁰ For country music, Parton repackaged what feminism looked like, though she did not always acknowledge the multiple meanings and feminist leanings in her

¹⁴⁹ See: Ruth A. Banes' "Dixie's Daughters: The Country Music Female," in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, eds. by Richard A. Peterson, 81-112 (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992) where she compares Parton, Lynn, and Wynette; Dana C. Wiggins' "When Country Was 'Cool': Gender, Race, Class, and Region in Female Country Music, 1980-1983," *Southern Historian* 30 (Spring 2009): 17-36, accessed May 5, 2016, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/48378713/when-country-was-cool-gender-race-class-region-female-country-music-1980-1983> which compares songs by Parton, Lynn, and Wynette with songs by Crystal Gayle, Janie Fricke, and Anne Murray (artists that were not as popular, however); Vanessa Carr, "'Just Because I'm a Woman': Country Music and Women's Liberation, 1964-1979" (master's thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2006); or see Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann's *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 2003) which also fits this comparative model. Amy Peloff, "Unexpected Feminisms: How Popular Culture Brought Feminism Beyond the Movement" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2011), abstract and 6, accessed May 1, 2016, ProQuest, places Parton among two other pop culture icons that advanced feminist ideas through different mediums.

¹⁵⁰ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 209-210.

songs. This chapter examines the times when Parton's actions and messages of equality conflicted with her identity as a country artist. Additionally, this chapter highlights the various ways that observers and critics described and portrayed Parton's body over her talents as an artist.

Prior studies on Parton have made definitive claims about her position as a feminist: she either was one or she was not. My stance is more nuanced. Her shifting perspective throughout the second wave of feminism allowed Parton to keep her traditionally conservative country fan base, while also permitting her to express her opinions and views on gender equality in interviews, songs, and films. Parton was particularly savvy and used her image to temper any radical interpretations of her message. In all these ways, Parton challenged traditional cultural, racial, and gender boundaries within country music.

Brief Background on Country Music

Parton's contributions to country music must be understood within the atmosphere surrounding the genre in the 1960s and 1970s. By the start of the 1960s, some country music artists started to consistently crossover into the pop market, a trend sparked by the widespread success of Elvis Presley. Country artists and the country music industry had found entry into a broader market in the 1950s and planned to continue profiting on this new audience by incorporating popular music elements into country music.¹⁵¹ While some artists adapted to this new Rockabilly sound, since it mixed the genres of rock 'n roll and country, others resisted and reverted back to singing "straight country" tunes. The genre expanded with new musical sounds and a more diverse group of artists, even though some did not embrace the new sound and

¹⁵¹ Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* (New York: DK Publishing, 2006), 215.

decided to stick to country's traditional sound and lyrical themes during the 1960s.¹⁵²

Nonetheless, Nashville producers were weaving popular sounds into country music and attracting new artists, but they included very few women.

During the sixties and seventies country music began to break into subcategories, such as the Outlaw Movement in which artists found other avenues that allowed them more artistic freedom to record the music they wanted, instead of bending to the industry's definition of country music. As the genre restructured due to the inclusion of subcategories and grew in popularity, country music attracted performers that were viewed as "more pop than country," such as Kenny Rogers, John Denver, and Olivia Newton-John. Country music's traditionalists saw this new market as a watering down of their culture and the genre and responded in 1974 by forming the Association of Country Entertainers (ACE). Outraged over Olivia Newton-John's win of Female Vocalist of the Year by the Country Music Association ahead of Lynn, Parton, and Wynette, ACE formed in response to what traditionalists called "middle of the road music" that, they argued, toned-down country sounds and borrowed stylistic elements from popular music. Artists like Billy Walker argued that the industry's continued attempt to expand the market of country music by taking it to a more popular audience would "dilute it till it no longer exists as an art form." ACE's goal was to "preserve the identity of country music as a separate and distinct form of entertainment."¹⁵³ This desire to uphold the traditional standards of country music eventually faded as artists, including Parton, moved in a more mainstream direction, but the initial pushback to crossover music was there. Parton would become the target of such

¹⁵² Ibid., 225. Parton's first recorded song "Puppy Love" was considered a Rockabilly tune. Historians Kingsbury and Nash note, these artists, like Ray Price, Little Jimmy Dickens, and George Jones did welcome one newcomer, a former rock n' roll artist, Conway Twitty. Twitty's placement as a country star, however, was aided by his duets with another newcomer, the "antithesis of crossover music:" Loretta Lynn. Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, 249-250.

¹⁵³ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 133.

criticism when she began to incorporate pop and disco elements into her music starting in the late 1970s.

Country Music Meets the Women's Movement

Throughout these struggles, the country music establishment found itself facing its biggest threat: the rise of the female country artist. The popularity of female artists challenging country's traditional message shook the core of the country music industry. These women expressed their perspectives on formerly taboo topics, including sex, sharing views that differed from country music's traditional male perspective. Loretta Lynn led the charge. With newfound confidence thanks to her 1972 win of "Entertainer of the Year" by the CMA, Lynn, the first female to receive the honor, used the momentum to release more songs that challenged gender stereotypes.¹⁵⁴ Through her songs, such as "Rated X," which outlined the double standards surrounding divorce and birth control, and "The Pill," which dealt with birth control, Lynn presented alternative views to traditional themes in country music that painted the South as a pleasant genteel region and articulated frustrations with relationships. Instead, her songs communicated that the southern half of the United States is a region marked by poverty and that economic difficulties only strained heterosexual relationships even more.¹⁵⁵ She blurred the image of a country woman through her assertive songs which claimed that women were now free from the constraints of motherhood and monogamy because "now [they have] got the pill." That is not to say that her perspectives were uniformly welcomed, for even at the height of her

¹⁵⁴ "Past CMA Awards Winners and Nominees," Country Music Association, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://www.cmaworld.com/cma-awards/past-winners/>.

¹⁵⁵ Melton A. McLaurin, "Songs of the South: The Changing Image of the South in Country Music," in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, Richard A. Peterson and Melton A. McLaurin, eds. 15-34 (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992), 23-24.

popularity, a significant number of her songs were banned from radio airplay.¹⁵⁶ But Lynn was projecting a more blunt message with her “blue-collar feminist” songs.¹⁵⁷ In her autobiography, Lynn did not identify with the Women’s Movement: “I’m not a big fan of Women’s Liberation, but maybe it will help women stand up for the respect they’re due.”¹⁵⁸ Through this statement, it is evident that Lynn did express the need for equal rights for women but did not see herself as an active participant in the movement because of her identification with the working-class.

On the other hand, there were also women who opted not to challenge the status quo within the industry and preached a platinum-record message on the benefits of standing by your man. Tammy Wynette’s “Stand by Your Man” may have received more airplay than Lynn’s “Rated X,” but Wynette also catered to the women’s perspective by addressing the hardships of women with her tune: “D-I-V-O-R-C-E.” Reflecting in her 1979 autobiography, Wynette described the hardships of being a woman within the country music industry and viewed the achievements of one female artist as good for all women in the industry: “every time one of us stood up for our rights she made a point for us all. We had our own ‘liberation movement’ going, but I don’t think any of us was aware of it.”¹⁵⁹ It is likely that Wynette felt the benefits of Lynn and Parton’s music, but remained silent as to not jeopardize her career.

It is also important to situate the changes within country music alongside the developing Women’s Movement. Second wave feminism is normally said to have two parts, or two branches, in which two generations of women contributed to the reemergence of a large feminist movement in the sixties and seventies. One branch of the movement, which was made up of

¹⁵⁶“Loretta Lynn: Still a Mountain Girl,” *American Masters*, January 8, 2017, on GPB, originally aired March 4, 2016, on PBS.

¹⁵⁷ Kingsbury and Nash, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, 250.

¹⁵⁸ Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn: Coal Miner’s Daughter* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 56.

¹⁵⁹ Tammy Wynette with Joan Dew, *Stand By Your Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 122.

mostly older women, emphasized the need for political change and pushed for the same legal rights as men. This branch became known as the women's rights branch and advocated for equal pay for equal work, financial rights, reproductive rights, equal hiring practices, and eventually the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. It was this branch that founded the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966, which became the "largest and most prominent organization within the women's movement."¹⁶⁰ NOW formed out of the struggles of women who sought help from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in obtaining equal employment. In presenting her own case to the EEOC, Friedan learned how little the commission actually worked to help women obtain employment. For women to obtain assistance from the EEOC, she came to realize, they needed to organize their own "pressure group" to force the organization to hear their problems.¹⁶¹ So along with a group of other women, she founded NOW to do just that.

At the same time, very different types of feminist groups emerged at the local level out of the political organizations of the New Left, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).¹⁶² The women involved in these organizations tended to be younger and focused more on personal testimonies among members, informing and supporting women in their personal lives, restructuring gender roles and stereotypes, and placed a larger emphasis on sexuality. This younger branch then became more associated with the term women's liberation. Overtime, however, the term was applied to both

¹⁶⁰ Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay Company, 1975), 73.

¹⁶¹ Marcia Cohen, *The Sisterhood: The True Story of the Women Who Changed the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 132.

¹⁶² Virginia Sapiro, *Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women's Studies* (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1986), 466. Also, Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 133-136, points to the realization that many young women who were involved in these organizations had in that their efforts to address sexism within the organization were met with resistance.

branches and adopted by members of NOW as well.¹⁶³ Influenced by their involvement with the Civil Rights Movement and New Left tactics of protest, they began to stage large scale demonstrations to draw attention to their cause, such as the 1968 protest of the Miss America Pageant where they set up a freedom trash can where women could set ablaze symbols of oppression (bras, makeup, and hair products, among other things).¹⁶⁴ The younger branch of the movement did not form a prominent organization such as NOW, but instead was organized around smaller groups, or chapters, of women.¹⁶⁵

The new Women's Movement, as Virginia Sapiro demonstrates, began not as a single organization but instead as a complex network of different—and somewhat conflicting—organizations with different goals and ways to accomplish them.¹⁶⁶ It is clear, then, that the Women's Movement was not monolithic. Still, by the early seventies the two branches opted for more cooperation between them and the two branches organized their first successful strike in 1970 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment. The strike's success was largely thanks to its redefinition of what a strike could be. All women were encouraged to participate even if that meant privately in their own homes. This comforted those that were wary of being associated with the movement publically by allowing them the ability to participate on their own terms.¹⁶⁷ By the mid-seventies, the two branches of feminism worked closely together and concentrated on one specific issue: the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Even as the two began to focus their efforts on the ERA, the different branches were suspicious of each other. Some women felt that their concerns were being neglected and

¹⁶³ Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, 109.

¹⁶⁴ "No More Miss America," in *Takin' It to The Streets: A Sixties Reader*, eds. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 409-411.

¹⁶⁵ Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, discusses the structure of the small groups more in-depth.

¹⁶⁶ Sapiro, *Women in American Society*, 466.

¹⁶⁷ Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, 84-85.

that the focus on issues of employment, higher education, and women's studies programs were elitist and of little relevance to most women. Similarly, the more conservative members of NOW objected to the emphasis on abortion rights and were put off by the tactics of more radical women liberationists, such as the lesbian separatists.¹⁶⁸

Working-class women were both champions and opponents of the ERA. They noted that the amendment would help professional and upper-class women but feared that it would be detrimental to them.¹⁶⁹ Their concerns were amplified by Phyllis Schlafly in her 1973 "Stop ERA" campaign. Schlafly claimed that the amendment was an "elitist upper-middle class cause" to "betray" other women, specifically women of lower classes, in order for them to gain political power.¹⁷⁰ Schlafly, along with other antifeminists, targeted middle-and lower-class women by arguing that these "smooth-talking college women who have never seen a factory production line" were far removed and not concerned with the economic and social problems of working-class women.¹⁷¹ Other antifeminists encountered these "uppity academics first hand" and then bestowed upon themselves the role of sharing the dangers of liberation.¹⁷² Thus, the argument against the ERA, and the Women's Movement, became an argument of class consciousness.

¹⁶⁸ Sapiro, *Women in American Society*, 467. See also: Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Leia Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

¹⁶⁹ Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, 211.

¹⁷⁰ Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New York: Jove, HBJ Books, 1977), 149 and Susan E. Marshall, "Keep Us on the Pedestal: Women Against Feminism in Twentieth-Century America," in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, third edition, eds. Jo Freeman (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1984), 572.

¹⁷¹ Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, 144-148.

¹⁷² Kellie Bean, *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media since Reagan-Bush* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2007), 11.

Parton's popularity grew in tandem with the early Women's Movement and later the growing antifeminism movement.¹⁷³ Parton frequently made jokes about the movement. In an interview with *Playboy* magazine in 1978 when the interviewer asked for her views on the Equal Rights Amendment, Parton downplayed the Movement and came off as naive towards the goals of women involved in the fight for equality. When asked if she supported the ERA, she responded: "Equal Rights? I love everybody." When the interviewer clarified his question by phrasing it as "equal rights for women," she stated that she "can't keep up with it...I know so little about it they'd probably be ashamed that I was a woman...If you don't want to stay home, get out and do somethin'; if you want to stay home, stay home and be happy." Parton explained that she was so involved with her career that she was unaware of anything else "goin' on in the world."¹⁷⁴ It is interesting that Parton would make such a flippant statement about women and labor. Given that working-class women must work out of necessity and do not have the choice to stay at home, perhaps Parton perceived the Women's Movement as being made up of only middle-class women who had the economic flexibility to choose to stay home. Still her comment is vague and generic. There is also an element of disconnect from all classes of women, as if decisions about home life, work opportunities, and child care are come to as easily as just making up your mind about it.

The year before, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Parton expressed a more explicit view: "I think that women have it made, if they know how to go about it. A woman don't have to work, really, if she don't want to and if she is smart enough to make a man a good wife he's

¹⁷³ This theme is explored in Peloff, "Unexpected Feminisms," as she analyzes how feminism continued to expand and adapt to shifting frameworks of gender based on the careers of three females outside of the Movement: Helen Gurley Brown, Erma Bombeck, and Dolly Parton.

¹⁷⁴ Lawrence Grobel, "Dolly Parton: A Candid Conversation with the Curvaceous Queen of Country Music," *Playboy*, October 1978, 110.

gonna take care of her.” She clarified, however, that being a stay-at-home mother, raising children, and taking care of the house was not the life she would choose for herself. But, she continued:

Women by nature do have it easier because they were made to be a man’s helpmate, so to speak. Just to be a companion. But—if a woman is smart enough and she has a desire and an ambition to do something else, that’s fine too. I would prefer to be a woman because a man has to get out and work because that is just the law of the land. And a woman doesn’t have to unless she wants to.¹⁷⁵

This is from the same woman who joked later in her career that she “wanted to be the first woman to burn her bra, but it would have taken the fire department four days to put it out.”¹⁷⁶ In this interview with *Rolling Stone*, Parton notes that she believes women should have the right to do what they want, but at the same time, she adheres to antifeminist ideology that paints the time before the Women’s Movement as a “fictional golden age, a pre-feminist period” that was destroyed by feminism.¹⁷⁷ Here, Parton maintains a man-centered view by stating that women are by nature inferior to men. She claims that women were created to be companions and helpmates to men and that those are their most important roles. In a way, however, Parton is also suggesting that women can manipulate men as long as they are “smart enough” to make a good wife. Parton implies that if wives are successful in this, they can fool a man into taking care of them while they enjoy the freedom to participate in whatever they want. She is also noting society’s expectation that men must work, while women have more of a choice. But Parton is not considering class issues that prevent women from having the opportunity to simply choose which

¹⁷⁵ Chet Flippo, “Interview: Dolly Parton,” *Rolling Stone*, August 25, 1977.

¹⁷⁶ Seale Ballenger, *Hell’s Belles: A Tribute to the Spitfires, Bad Seeds & Steel Magnolias of the New and Old South* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1997), 166.

¹⁷⁷ Bean, *Post-Backlash Feminism*, 12.

path they would like to take. Her comments offer a mixed perspective on gender roles and demonstrate a further disconnect from working-class women.

Parton also made it known that she was not influenced by the Women's Movement: "I had my own opinion long before women's liberation."¹⁷⁸ But while Parton may have not thought of herself as a feminist, others did. In a 1987 article for *Ms.* magazine, Gloria Steinem praised Parton for "cross[ing] musical class lines to bring work, real life, and strong women into a world of pop music usually dominated by unreal romance." Additionally, Steinem wrote that Parton "has used her business sense to bring other women and poor people along with her... If feminism means each of us finding our unique power, and helping other women do the same, Dolly Parton certainly has done both."¹⁷⁹ Parton and other women who were outside of feminist organizations have been left out of the narrative of the Women's Movement. Historian Anne Enke argues that many women had difficulty identifying with the Women's Movement because of the negative connotations associated with feminism. Her work explores how "feminism exceeded feminist identification" and highlights women who have rejected the label "feminist."¹⁸⁰ Analyzing Parton in relation to the Women's Movement shows how she communicated feminism to populations that felt outside of the Movement, such as working-class women.

Themes in Parton's Music

Dolly Parton was one of those women who challenged the male establishment in country music. In 1967, Parton joined Porter Wagoner on his television show *The Porter Wagoner Show*. With Wagoner, Parton enjoyed musical success thanks to songs such as "Jolene," "Coat of Many

¹⁷⁸ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 316.

¹⁷⁹ Gloria Steinem, "Dolly Parton," *Ms.*, January 1987, 66.

¹⁸⁰ Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 5.

Colors,” and “Dumb Blonde,” along with duets with Wagoner such as “In the Good Old Days When Times Were Bad.” As Parton began to include more pop elements in her music after 1975, her hits continued to perform well on the country charts. This shows that Parton remained popular despite shifting away from the traditional musical style of country music to include more pop elements. Yet, Parton’s tendency to blur the lines of different musical genres is just one examination of a boundary line she disrupted.¹⁸¹ Many of Parton’s lyrics presented feelings of resentment and dealt with premarital and extramarital sexual encounters, unwanted pregnancies, and a woman’s perspective on traditional gender roles. Of course, not all her songs addressed these issues or went against patriarchal themes in country music, but some did. And, in doing so, they presented complex ideas of gender and sexuality.

Parton’s music acted as her declaration of independence and defiance from gender stereotypes within the music industry and broader American society. After seven years of starring alongside Porter Wagoner, Parton ended her partnership with him in 1974. This symbolized an early but crucial step in her departure from the traditionally conservative Nashville establishment. After announcing her decision to part ways with Wagoner, Parton wrote what would become one of her most famous anthems: “I Will Always Love You.” Written as an affirmation of gratitude to Wagoner for helping to launch her career, Parton also used the song to declare her independence from Wagoner’s control. Through the lyrics of “I Will Always Love You,” Parton wished Wagoner well without her and announced herself without him. Parton expresses: “I hope life treats you kind/And I hope that you have all that you ever dreamed of/And I wish you joy and happiness/But above all of this I wish you love.” Parton performed

¹⁸¹ Peloff, “Unexpected Feminisms,” 170.

this song during her final appearance on Wagoner's show. In her lyrics, Parton maintained and played into Wagoner's ego by handing him a peaceful and loving farewell.

Parton and Wagoner had a complicated partnership. In her autobiography, Parton recalls that there were numerous times in which she did not have a say behind the camera of *The Porter Wagoner Show* even as her role in front of the camera increased. This lack of influence intensified her desire to leave the partnership.¹⁸² Although Wagoner advocated for her and tried to advance Parton's career, it was for his own benefit as her manager. He often would not let Parton speak during their television appearances together on other shows. During one appearance on *Tonight with Johnny Carson*, for example, Wagoner functioned as her spokesperson while Parton sat next to him smiling. Wagoner limited Parton's creativity, and she later commented that she felt "stale" in her role with Wagoner.¹⁸³ However, in writing such a delicate and thankful song for him, wishing him "joy" and all the best, Parton presented the idea that all was peaceful and that she did not harbor any negative feelings towards the television and musical personality. Parton explained that this song mended some of the emotional trauma that happened between the two. Parton explained in her autobiography that she had already stayed two years past their original agreement and that by the early 1970s the only way the two communicated was by fighting. Additionally, Parton resented Wagoner for pushing her Uncle Bill and other family members "as far out of [her] life as he possibly could," while he managed her career.¹⁸⁴ In a more recent interview, Parton explained that the song served as a "bargaining tool" between the two stars. Parton stated that after she played it for him, "he cried and it bridged the problems

¹⁸² Parton, *Dolly*, 169-176.

¹⁸³ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 126-130.

¹⁸⁴ Parton, *Dolly*, 173.

between us and eased the way for me to be able to leave.”¹⁸⁵ Her later actions revealed another attitude.

After the split, Parton wrote a very different message to herself. “Light of a Clear Blue Morning” describes the freedom that one experiences after leaving a negative situation. In her autobiography, Parton explained that she was inspired to write her freedom song after leaving her last meeting with Wagoner where she told him she was leaving the show.¹⁸⁶ Parton vows in the song that she will never let herself feel that same type of oppression, singing, “It’s been a long long time/Since I’ve known the taste of freedom/And those clinging vines/That had me bound, well I don’t need ‘em.” Parton’s “Light of a Clear Blue Morning” reveals the inner voice of a woman who is striking out on her own after years spent in the shadow of a controlling man.¹⁸⁷ The lyrics demonstrate that Parton had “won” her freedom and was now embarking on her own path: “everything’s gonna be all right/That’s been all wrong.” Even the album cover reflected Parton’s new solo career. With Parton smiling in the passenger seat of a car with a bench seat and no one in the driver’s seat, she signaled that she was sliding over to take the steering wheel and was on her own. The song was released as a single but did not perform well on the charts. Parton attributed the song’s unpopularity to the fact that many of her fans were sensitive to the split between her and Wagoner: “It was too much of a testimonial...people knew what was goin’ on and nobody wanted to take sides.”¹⁸⁸

Some of Parton’s songs also revealed her desire to break free of the restrictions imposed by society’s definitions of womanhood and gender roles. Parton, along with other less well-

¹⁸⁵ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 135.

¹⁸⁶ Parton, *Dolly*, 174.

¹⁸⁷ Peloff, “Unexpected Feminisms,” 197.

¹⁸⁸ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 151. Also, the album *New Harvest...First Gathering* made number one on the country charts for one week and number 71 on the pop charts.

known women of country music, released a wave of assertive housewife songs throughout the late 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸⁹ Her 1972 “Wash Day Blues,” which labeled her as a “homemaker spokesperson,” questioned gender roles in the household.¹⁹⁰ The song explained the monotonous and difficulty of doing laundry by repeating the phrase “just rubbin’ and scrubbin’ and rinsin’ ‘em out,” followed by the refrain: “Wash ‘em out ring ‘em out hang ‘em on the line/Get a little tired just think about the good times.” The verses of the song, however, offered another perspective: “Well that good lookin’ good lovin’ no good man of mine/Could buy me a washin’ machine/But he spends all his money on payday to make me look like a queen/Now rubbin’ and scrubbin.’” In the song, Parton was not claiming to be a mistreated woman. Instead, she was treated like royalty, but according to the song, she would rather have help around the house. The end of the song reveals that what she is “rubbin’ and a scrubbin’” all day are diapers: “I’ve washed so many diapers I’ve got diaper rash on my hands.” As Bufwack and Oermann discuss, Parton’s hits were considered “answer records” because they were responding to songs recorded by male country music singers that discussed traditional gender roles and stereotypes within the household. These records offered an alternative to the songs recorded by men during the late 1960s and into the 1970s that portrayed the Southern lifestyle as quaint and Southern women as happy farmwives.¹⁹¹

Parton’s songs also highlighted social expectations single women face when going out. Her song “Single Women” describes the difficulties women face in finding meaningful relationships. Parton released “Single Women” in 1982 as a part of her *Heartbreak Express*

¹⁸⁹ See also her 1967 song, “Your Ole Handy Man,” *Hello, I’m Dolly*, in which Parton complains to her husband saying: “I do everything for you where’s your helping hand?”

¹⁹⁰ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 274. These other women—Norma Jean (the singer on *The Porter Wagoner Show* that Parton replaced), Billie Jo Spears, Kay Adams, Leona Williams, and Wanda Jackson—did not experience the same level of musical success as Parton.

¹⁹¹ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 274. See also: McLaurin, “Songs of the South,” 20-27.

album. The song, a slow-tempo honkytonk ballad accompanied by saxophones and steel guitar, expresses the hopelessness of finding a meaningful relationship in a bar. As Parton sings the woes of single women who carry their “toothbrush in [their] purse,” she discusses the various scenarios and problems that women experience within the sphere of dating. She explains the situation of one woman who finds out the morning after that her possible suitor, whom she may have slept with the night before, is married. The next lines discuss another situation faced by a woman who refuses to go home with a man who then proceeds to ask her, “What’s the matter? Are you gay?” As Parton states, “life could get a whole lot better/But it better not get worse.” This song appealed to country and pop listeners because its message was relatable across multiple audiences. The song’s success within the country market was also aided by the fact that Parton removed the original author’s drug references in fear that it would encounter resistance from country radio stations.¹⁹² The lyrics of the song suggests that even though a woman is sexually empowered and capable of making her own choices, she is still operating in a man’s world and must adhere to his principles and expectations in relationships.

Parton’s “Single Women” illustrates the 1980s backlash against the women involved in the Women’s Movement, but it also applauds some of the gains from the Movement. Starting in the 1980s, the media introduced antifeminism to a national audience through “pro-family” rhetoric. Newspapers and magazines asked: “if women have achieved so much, why are they still unhappy?” Commentators answered that question by blaming liberation stating: “See, she’s miserable. That must be because she’s too liberated.”¹⁹³ A 1974 article in the *New York Times*

¹⁹² The song was written by *Saturday Night Live* writer Michael O’Donoghue and was later turned into a television movie *Single Bars, Single Women*, “Movie About Singles Has Its Good Points,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, October 13, 1984. Joel Whitburn discusses the original lyrics of the song, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits: 1944-2006*, Second edition (New York: Billboard Books, 2006), 262.

¹⁹³ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 77.

noted that single women were more “self-assured, confident, [and] secure,” and claimed that the Women’s Movement was really “catching on.”¹⁹⁴ By the end of the seventies, the image of the care-free single woman had been elevated to trend status by the media. As Susan Faludi discusses, newspapers and magazines were acknowledging that “the single lifestyle for women was more respectable and that it was possible for women to be both single and whole.” By the 1980s, these same papers that highlighted the trendiness of being a single woman were now criticizing single women with images and stories that portrayed unwed women as insatiable, “too rigid to connect” with, and “expect[ed] too much” from men and being liberated. The groups of confident single women depicted by the media in the 1970s evolved into the fictional lonely single woman in the 1980s, “almost always depicted alone, hugging a tear stained pillow, or looking forlornly from a garret window.”¹⁹⁵

In Parton’s song, the women are not apologizing for their sexual promiscuity; instead, they feel that love has passed them by and that they will never be satisfied in their relationships with men. Like the lonely women on the magazine covers, they are also just trying to “make it till morning/Looking for what they can find.” So, although the women in Parton’s song have been sexually empowered by the Women’s Movement, they are left lonely and unfulfilled. Additionally, Parton’s song presents the message that even though women are now emboldened sexually, they are still racked with guilt from the “night’s they can’t forget,” when they engage in extramarital sex. In this song, intentionally or not, Parton is furthering the agendas of both feminist and antifeminists. She is agreeing that even though women have new found sexual freedoms, society is still imposing traditional gender roles on them. Parton is also using this song to comment on her own experiences. Throughout her career, Parton relied on her sexual image as

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 95-97.

her gimmick to further advance her career. At times, however, because of her appearance she was still confined to specific roles.

In her 1991 album *Eagle When She Flies*, Parton aimed to celebrate all women and pay special tribute to their struggles.¹⁹⁶ The album's title track, "Eagle When She Flies," attempts to do just that. Originally written as the theme song for the 1989 movie, *Steel Magnolias*, complete with the line, "Gentle as the sweet magnolia/Strong as steel, her faith and pride," the tune was scrapped from the film for an unknown reason.¹⁹⁷ The song's music video showcases women of all races, occupations, and generations, from Mother Teresa to three-time gold medalist Florence Joyner, accompanied by shots of Parton singing on stage or swinging from a vine-draped swing.

Some Southern radio stations refused to play the song because "they thought it was such a women's-lib song," said Parton in a 2003 interview with *Rolling Stone*.¹⁹⁸ In their descriptions of this song, scholars have labeled it as "strongly feminist" but do not expand much beyond that statement.¹⁹⁹ A closer reading of the lyrics reveals that although she is celebrating women, the women specifically mentioned in the song are mothers, friends, lovers, and wives—the traditional roles women are ascribed in society. What, then, about this song was perceived to be in direct support of women's liberation? The feminist message can be found in the video that accompanies the song. The song does not mention men (although it mentions the way women need men to live up to these roles created for them by men), but the video places men in submissive positions compared to women, such as sexually pleasuring or comforting them. The video also places women in occupations that have been traditionally assumed to be held by only

¹⁹⁶ Luaine Lee, "The Parton Paradox—Glamorous Dolly a Proud Country Girl," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 19, 1991.

¹⁹⁷ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 273. Miller records that it was probably because it would have given Parton too much prominence over her co-stars.

¹⁹⁸ Jancee Dunn, "Interview: Dolly Parton," *Rolling Stone*, October 30, 2003.

¹⁹⁹ See Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 462 and Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 272.

men: firefighter, engineer, police officer, politician and positions in the military. The video seems to tie all women together under the only description that they all have in common: that they are women. The celebration of being a woman, then, is in the acknowledgement that women can be and are many things and that they cannot be confined to traditional or domestic roles.

In returning to the lyrics of the song, one notices that there is a “you” that is never identified but blamed for causing women’s pain. The song claims: “You can toss her around and around/You can keep her in your vision/But you’ll never keep her down.” This “you” is left open to interpretation and could have multiple meanings. The most likely one is that “you” is referring to a man, or more loosely, men in general. In keeping this “you” general, Parton is acknowledging that all women have dealt with some form of struggle from some type of oppressor. She is empowering women to unite no matter their perceived differences. Parton is also reminding women of their own strength and their strength as a united body. Therefore, in this song Parton is celebrating the various traits that women possess and encouraging them to continue in their paths—whichever path that might be is up to them.

That Parton’s song and video were perceived as direct support of the Women’s Movement makes sense based on the timing of its release. As backlash against the Movement set in during the 1980s and 1990s, a market opened up for conservative women offering anti-feminist commentary. The conservative Christian values of the Reagan White House and the administration’s embrace of the New Right and campaign of Family Values aided this market.²⁰⁰ Of course, not all women subscribed to the administration’s ideology, and many fought back, but, as Susan Faludi describes, the antifeminist culture of the 1980s “daunted women more than it galvanized them.”²⁰¹ But women did not give up and continued to mark their achievements,

²⁰⁰ Bean, *Post-Backlash Feminism*, 10 and 18.

²⁰¹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 458.

especially in politics. As Rosen discusses, the year 1992 earned the designation “Year of the Woman” from newspapers due to the election of more women to political offices than in any prior year.²⁰² At the start of the 1990s, advertisers and political publicists began declaring the period as the “Decade of Women,” predicting women’s greatest “leap forward.”²⁰³ In some ways, then, “Eagle When She Flies,” a song and music video that celebrates women, can be interpreted as a response to antifeminists, serving to energize the Women’s Movement as an anthem of sorts in the 1990s.

Image as Agency

Parton used her image to her benefit and selected when and how her look would benefit her. Parton wrapped herself in a “hyperfeminine package” that distracted her country music audience from her confrontation of gender stereotypes within the music industry during the seventies and eighties.²⁰⁴ According to social psychologists Murnen and Byrne, hyperfemininity consists of three interrelated concepts: a woman’s relationship to men, her use of physical attributes to sexually attract men, and the view that men are sexually dominant in relationships.²⁰⁵ Although it is difficult to assess the third concept (perhaps expressions similar to this can be found in her movie role in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*), it is evident that Parton used the first two in her performances with other artists. As she confronted country music’s traditional message by offering a woman’s perspective on traditional gender roles and double standards, Parton used her appearance to suggest that she was different from the popular

²⁰² Rosen, *The World Split Open*, xxiv.

²⁰³ Faludi, *Backlash*, 459.

²⁰⁴ Peloff, “Unexpected Feminisms,” 7.

²⁰⁵ Sarah K. Murnen and Donn Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 28, no. 3 (1991): 479-89. Accessed February 22, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3812715>.

image of a feminist at the time. Parton's adherence to an exaggerated version of the traditional masculine fetish of large breasts accentuated by an hourglass figure, as described by historian Pamela Wilson, only made men too uncomfortable to directly address her sexuality. Instead commenters relied on nervous puns, laughter, jokes, and euphemisms to communicate their desire towards her.²⁰⁶ Thus, while Parton was asserting herself by addressing and exposing themes of sexism and gender inequality in her songs, she was also carefully crafting and using her feminine image as to appear non-threatening and more palatable to the country music industry. Parton is a difficult artist to categorize. On one hand, her popularity among country music fans labels her as a popular representative for working-class women; on the other, she has helped to cast herself as a sexual icon and fantasy. She exhibits her agency by manipulating her image for fame and financial gain. Parton embraced these contradictions to create a unique platform for herself that, in many ways, repackaged feminism to country music audiences.

Gender historian Amy Peloff discusses this paradox and claims that Parton used her femininity as an advantage or as a "shield."²⁰⁷ This shield allowed her to express radical ambitions for a woman in the country music industry during the second wave of feminism. In 1990, reflecting on her early career, Parton explained: "When I started out in my career I was much plainer-looking than I am now. I soon realized that I had to play by men's rules to win. My way of fighting back was to wear frilly clothes and put on the big, blonde wigs."²⁰⁸ Over the years, Parton has made similar remarks. In her 1994 autobiography, Parton stated that "many an old boy has found out too late that I look like a woman but think like a man. It is a great mistake to think that because I look soft, I do business that way." She also admitted that she finds

²⁰⁶ Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions," 102.

²⁰⁷ Peloff, "Unexpected Feminisms," 194.

²⁰⁸ "Love Secrets That Keep the Magic in Dolly's Marriage," *The Star*, November 27, 1990.

satisfaction in screwing over the man in the “old-boy school of business.” Parton knows that if she catches a man who is not looking into her eyes during a conversation, she has already “scored two really big points with him.”²⁰⁹ By making a reference to her bust, Parton is again using veiled sexual humor to express her savviness in business and how she operated within the music industry.

Parton’s persona mimics, in a satirical way, traditional gendered behavior, emphasizing the absurdity of society’s expectations of women.²¹⁰ Standing next to Wagoner, dressed in his famous rhinestone-tailored Nudie Suits, in her early appearance on *The Porter Wagoner Show*, Parton was limited to a more conservative dress to convey a wholesome that would match the move of this family television show. As the series went on, Parton’s image evolved. The artist opted for voluminous blonde hair with cascading curls that reached past her shoulders and rhinestone-adorned outfits that resembled Wagoner’s suits. Her equally elaborate costumes symbolized that Parton’s role was no longer that of a sidekick but that of a co-star.²¹¹ After her departure from the show in 1974, Parton reconstructed her appearance. In addition to a change in hairstyle, Parton’s wardrobe transformed during this time to reflect and appeal to the trendier pop market. Parton wore flashier gowns decorated with rhinestones and colorful, form-fitting, bell bottom jumpsuits. As some described, Parton was “stuffed sausage-casing tight” into these bright colored jumpsuits, presenting a drastically different looking Parton than the one that first appeared with Wagoner in 1967.²¹² Gone were the floral-print dresses and subdued clothing from

²⁰⁹ Parton, *Dolly*, 276 and 275.

²¹⁰ Peloff, “Unexpected Feminisms,” 6.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

²¹² Nash, *Dolly: The Early Years* (Louisville: Butler Books, 1994), 154.

her early days on the show. Parton had surpassed the simple “Tennessee Mountain Girl” image of her early career to embrace her new position as “Star of the Show.”²¹³

By manipulating her physical image, she drew attention away from her “unfeminine” behavior of challenging social norms within the music industry. As Peloff discusses, Parton used her “performance of femininity as a sleight-of-hand to distract” from the ways in which she was challenging the music industry’s power.²¹⁴ As we will see, Parton’s numerous duets with male country artists and more mainstream performers, who continued to objectify Parton based on her physical appearance, serve to illustrate this point.

As early as 1967, the popular press published articles that focused on Parton’s body over her talents. As interviewers met with the “Bombshell of [the] Great Smokies,” headlines such as “Dolly Parton: C&W’s Sexiest Songstress” ran atop stories filled with details of her childhood and her husband, Carl Dean, that also made sweeping mentions of her songwriting or albums.²¹⁵ The press labeled Parton a sex symbol, and their descriptions were laden with sexual overtones and frequent use of words, or plays on words, referencing the size of her breasts and waist.²¹⁶ In an article that appeared in New Jersey’s *Bridgeton Evening News*, Parton was categorized as a

²¹³ Song title from her 1979 album *Great Balls of Fire*.

²¹⁴ Peloff, “Unexpected Feminisms,” 200. My argument builds on Peloff’s discussion of Parton as a popular culture figure that operated and gathered a significant following during the second wave of feminism. Peloff analyzes three women that disseminated feminist ideas apart from the organizations and activists of the Women’s Movement. In doing so, Peloff challenges the dominant narrative of the Women’s Movement to include a discussion of how different populations experienced and participated in this wave of feminism. I further her discussion by focusing only on Parton and by examining more than just her body as a coded challenge to gender norms.

²¹⁵ Jack Hurst, “Miss Dolly Parton: Blonde Bombshell of Great Smokies,” *The Sunday Showcase*, September 27, 1970, and Bruce Mosley, “Dolly Parton: C&W’s Sexiest Songstress,” *Bridgeton Evening News*, October 24, 1975.

²¹⁶ Words such as “measuring-up,” and “titillating.” In articles announcing her film debut the headline typically read “Busting—In!” or something similar, see *Chattanooga Times*, December 6, 1980. In an interview promoting *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, costar Burt Reynolds leered as he described Parton as “sweet and pure as the driven snow mounds,” Dolly Carlisle, “Dolly Parton After Her Racy Debut in 9 to 5, Burt Reynolds Is Next, But She Insists, ‘I’m Not Selling Sex,’” *People*, January 19, 1981. Also, the press used her as similes such as this example in a story about one University of Florida Football coach accused of spying on the University of Louisville’s football team: “That’s like Dolly Parton checking out Twiggy in the ladies’ lounge at the Grand Ole Opry...,” D. G. Fitz Maurice, “Charley Pell Leaves a Legacy: Gatortgate,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 19, 1984.

sex symbol because she was more than just another beautiful singer: “a lot is what Dolly Parton’s got. She’s about the only one that can measure up to that title...if you’ve seen Dolly, you know exactly what I mean.”²¹⁷ In one interview, dressed casually in a T-shirt and jeans, she was not dressed “sexy enough for a woman of Dolly’s remarkable talents.” Then, for the 52nd Academy Awards, another commenter noted that she was a “movable feast—a double-scooped vanilla sundae.”²¹⁸ Even while singing “righteous music from the Bible belt,” the “sexy angel” with an “hourglass figure with sand in all the right places” stood impossible to resist.²¹⁹ In photographs that accompanied these pieces, Parton is not wearing revealing outfits that stand out as particularly revealing or suggestive. They are tight and hug her frame but are far from skimpy. Still, journalists argued that no matter what you are trying to convey about Parton, “You can’t think about how Dolly sings without thinking about how Dolly looks.” Also, according to the same writer, you should always keep Parton’s records handy because on a lonely Saturday night you may need to take them out and just stare at the album covers.²²⁰ Another interviewer bragged at his ability to have a conversation with the “reigning Queen of Country Music” and to have “not looked down even once.”²²¹

When Parton was questioned on her appearance, her responses suggest that she was embarrassed and frustrated that her breasts were at the center of media attention and not her talents. Parton explained that she got tired of her appearance being dwelled upon as her most memorable trait. Initially, she found all the talk about her appearance unwelcoming, and it made

²¹⁷ Bruce C. Mosley, “Dolly Parton: C&W’s Sexiest Songstress,” *Bridgeton Evening News*, October 24, 1975.

²¹⁸ Laura Eipper, “As Hollywood Assess Dolly in a Tee Shirt,” *The Tennessean*, January 30, 1980 and Ann Gerber, “VIPeople,” *Chicago Sunday*, April 20, 1980.

²¹⁹ Stephen West, *Milwaukee Journal*, February 1, 1976.

²²⁰ John Morgan, “You Can’t Think About How Dolly Sings Without Thinking About How Dolly Looks,” *Times-Union*, November 8, 1975. Although Morgan states that he has grown tired of the “Dolly Parton jokes” he continues to play into them through the objectification of her body.

²²¹ Mitchell Fink, “Dolly Parton Speaks Out,” *Los Angeles Herald*, September 16, 1979.

her feel like a “freak.”²²² She explained her annoyance, noting: “Nobody ever comes up to me first and says, ‘I love your music. I think you’re great.’ They always start with the image.”²²³ Hints of insecurity about her image are also noticeable in these conversations. In an interview with Peter Cobun of Baltimore’s *News American* in 1975, Parton complained, “I’d like to be taken more seriously... I am defensive about my image... I’m not so stupid.” She continued by justifying her look, saying: “I never tried to sound like nobody else or pattern after nobody else. What I do is mine, I’m an original. This is what I choose to look like and be. I could look like somebody else. But then I wouldn’t be Dolly Parton. That’s my own gimmick.” She ended by saying that she hoped that people liked her.²²⁴ In another interview in 1982, she later stated that if people had only looked past her image during the early part of her career, they would have seen “brains beneath the wigs and a heart beneath the boobs.” If they had listened, they would have realized that she did not have to sleep her way to stardom—nor did she ever intend to.²²⁵ So as “Sexy Dolly Puts Men into Hillbilly Heaven” dominated the headlines, Parton argued that her musical abilities should have received more attention than detailed descriptions of her appearance.²²⁶

Some fans also demonstrated their annoyance with how the media portrayed Parton. One fan, who attended one of her concerts in Kansas, wanted people to know that he liked Parton for her music and not just “because she is big chested.”²²⁷ But for everyone that wrote in asking if

²²² Jack Hurst, “Dolly Parton—New Superstar,” *The Charleston Daily Mail*, March 27, 1975.

²²³ Mitchell Fink, “Dolly Parton Speaks Out,” *Los Angeles Herald*, September 16, 1979.

²²⁴ Peter Cobun, “Dolly Knows Just Where She’s Going,” *News American*, November 30, 1975.

²²⁵ Michael Erickson, “Dolly Fits Right in As Madam,” *Nashville Banner*, July 23, 1982.

²²⁶ Peter Goddard, “Sexy Dolly puts men into Hillbilly Heaven,” *Toronto Daily Star*, December 6, 1975. For an example of such description see Patrick Snyder, “Dolly’s No Fool—Her Image Works,” *Detroit News*, March 18, 1979. One reporter made note that at her show at Fort Hayes State University in Kansas, Parton didn’t mention or make jokes about her figure. L. David Harris, “Hays Has Sweatin’ Good Time with Queen of Country Music,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 4, 1978.

²²⁷ Sandra Duerr, “Country Fans Wowed by Dolly Parton,” *Freeman*, February 2, 1976.

Parton was tired of jokes about her “ample bust,” there was another that asked for her measurements.²²⁸

As Parton embarked on her solo career, she used her image as her gimmick to contest and conform to society. Starting in the late 1970s, Parton expressed a sort of confidence in discussing comments about her body and appearance. By the end of the decade, Parton began to manipulate commentators as she offered up jokes about her body, especially exaggerated statements about her breasts, on her own terms. She controlled interviews by starting the conversation on her body. This is evident in her 1978 interview with *Playboy* magazine, in which Parton began with: “I’ll save you the trouble of askin’: Why do I chose to look so outrageous?” and then proceeded to explain that normally her interviewers want to talk more about her “bosoms” than what’s “underneath the breasts,” her heart.²²⁹ Television reviewers noted this change as well. Ron Miller, in his review of CBS’s “Dolly and Carol in Nashville Special” in February 1979, noted how Parton manipulated jokes about her body, stating: “More and more she is catering to that side of her natural talent.”²³⁰ In an interview with the *Los Angeles Herald* in 1979, Parton reflected: “If there had been a way that I could have been promoted just as I was, I would have preferred to have done it that way.”²³¹ In an earlier interview in 1975, Parton reminded Peter Goddard of the *Toronto Daily Star* that her look was specially crafted to work for her: “I know what I look like on stage is artificial. But everyone has a gimmick, and my look is my gimmick.”

²²⁸ “Q and A,” *The Tennessean*, January 7, 1979; “Q and A,” *The Tennessean Parade*, February 8, 1981; “Q and A,” *The Tennessean Parade*, February 7, 1982; “Q and A,” *The Tennessean*, January 22, 1984. Also, see Laura Eipper, “Miss Dolly’s Bustline Remains ‘Big’ News,” *The Tennessean*, November 1, 1979. According to Lola Scobey Dolly: Daughter of the South (New York: Zebra Books, 1977), 257, her measurements were recorded in a 1972 edition of the *Nashville Banner* by writer Red O’Donnell. Questions about the size of her breasts were also present after her weight loss for *9 to 5* and again in 1986 as if people were checking on her breasts.

²²⁹ Lawrence Grobel, “Dolly Parton: A Candid Conversation with the Curvaceous Queen of Country Music,” *Playboy*, October 1978, 82 and 84.

²³⁰ Ron Miller, “There’s More to Dolly Than a Buxom Bustline,” *San Jose Mercury*, February 13, 1979.

²³¹ Mitchell Fink, “Dolly Parton Speaks Out,” *Los Angeles Herald*, September 16, 1979.

Parton admitted that she patented her look as she began her solo career and by the end of the 1970s she maintained that she would be the one to control how it would benefit her. Through statements like these it is apparent that Parton used her position as a “homespun sex symbol” to advance her stardom.²³² She recognized that her look set her apart from other artists of the time and even began referencing her look as “Dolly.” By the end of 1979, she had successfully branded herself and communicated that her image was hers to discuss and further her career on her own terms.

Parton’s evolving expressions of feminism can also be understood in her interactions with Johnny Carson whose late-night interviews furthered the sexual objectification of Parton. Though Carson was known for his class and cool demeanor on late night television, he seemed to have made an exception when Parton was on the show.²³³ Parton appeared on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* at least fourteen times from 1977 to 1992.²³⁴ On one episode, in 1977, Carson asked Parton indirectly about the authenticity of her breasts as audience members whistled and clapped. “I would give about a year’s pay to peek under there,” he remarked.²³⁵ In other interviews, Carson continually comments on Parton’s weight and appearance. He also discussed Parton’s body with other guests including her *Straight Talk* co-star, James Woods. In 1984, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* wrote that Carson had “delivered so many Parton punchlines that he could publish his own Dolly Parton Party Joke Book.”²³⁶ Prior to his retirement in 1992,

²³² Peter Goddard, “Sexy Dolly Puts Men into Hillbilly Heaven,” *Toronto Daily Star*, December 6, 1975.

²³³ For more information on Johnny Carson see: Ed McMahon, *Here’s Johnny!: My Memories of Johnny Carson, The Tonight Show, and 46 Years of Friendship* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 2005) and Henry Bushkin, *Johnny Carson* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2013). Interestingly, Bushkin’s work does not mention Dolly Parton’s appearances on the show.

²³⁴ Information compiled from the Country Music Hall of Fame Archive.

²³⁵ *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, episode unknown, “Dolly Parton,” aired December 14, 1977, on NBC, accessed January 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sw2W8ZC7pkM>.

²³⁶ Glenn Lovell, “Parton Known for Down-Home Sincerity Give Parton Welcome Exposure,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, June 18, 1984.

Parton thanked Carson for helping her advance her career: “I really think that you have played a big part in my success,” because of the chance to perform and appear on the show.²³⁷ In these interviews, one can see how Parton’s attitude towards conversations about her body changed over time. In her first appearances, she seems uncomfortable and buries her head into her hands, but by her 1992 interview, she engages in talk about her body and appears to enjoy the direction that the conversation takes in talking about her image and early relationships. Her gratitude towards Carson in 1992 also suggests that his comments on her body pushed her to take ownership of these conversations and to turn them into ways in which she could market herself.

By the 1980s, Parton had accepted her position as a male fantasy and her image and body operated as an extension of her star power. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Parton’s necklines got lower and she seemed to become more comfortable with comments on her body. In an article that discussed the nation’s “united appreciation” of jokes at Parton’s expense,” Parton stated: “Some of [the jokes] are kind of embarrassing. They used to bother me more in the early days, but I don’t care now. I even make some at my own expense.” She continued, saying: “I’m bizarre...bizarre, fun, and cartoonish. I love the paint and the powder. I mean, I’m exaggerated in some ways, so why not play it all up?” The writer reasoned that these jokes offered Parton “good, free, publicity.”²³⁸ Discussions on her body and her engagement with them points to an evolution between the media and the Women’s Movement and a return to femininity. The 1980s was a decade of backlash or, as Susan Faludi describes, a “powerful counter-assault” against the changes brought about by the feminist movement of the 1970s.²³⁹ As Ruth Rosen discusses in

²³⁷ *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, episode unknown, “Dolly Parton,” aired April 9, 1992, accessed January 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFPA7coD-Ok>.

²³⁸ Glenn Lovell, “Parton Known for Down-Home Sincerity Jokes Give Parton Welcome Exposure,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, June 18, 1984.

²³⁹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 12.

The World Split Open, the 1980s gave birth to a “somewhat unbelievable typecast character, the Superwoman,” who could do everything and did not credit her success to the Movement. This character rarely admitted to any difficulties or discomfort and became the dominant image of feminism during this decade.²⁴⁰ Parton adheres to and resembles the “Superwoman” character. Throughout her career, she insisted that the women’s liberation movement did not benefit her. This assertion is interesting considering that her first movie, *9 to 5*, was produced to highlight the difficulties women face both in the workplace and at home. At the same time, Parton’s success presents itself as a bit of an obstacle in this schema. As Faludi argues, the media fueled the backlash by portraying women in the workforce as unhappy because they had to sacrifice traditional and innate desires of womanhood.²⁴¹ Instead, Parton is asserting ownership over her image and the way in which she wants her image to work for her. Additionally, in the mid-1980s, Parton is at the height of her career. Even though she is married, those that hold conventional views of womanhood would argue that she is not fulfilled because she is not a mother. Parton deviates from this traditional model set for women and, in some ways, acknowledges that women can be happy in positions that are different from what society has prescribed for them.

Parton’s breasts became her most recognizable physical trait, and they were often used as units of measurement and topics for discussion.²⁴² Her name became synonymous with her

²⁴⁰ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 303-304. Throughout this discussion, Rosen also refers to this image as “first women.”

²⁴¹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 8-11 and 79-82.

²⁴² For further examples see Judy Clark, “Letter to our Readers,” *Kentucky Post*, June 4, 1991 in which her breasts are referred to as “The Dolly Parton Towers;” Don Edwards, “Scarecrow Contest is Frightfully Funny Fest at Lexington Center,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, October 24, 1988 which describes one of the scarecrow competition entries was “as voluptuous as Dolly Parton;” John McGill, “Foyt Wins Derby, Lasorda Gets Some Sun, in ’87,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, January 1, 1987 states that former University of Kentucky Basketball coach Eddie Sutton went too far when he said UK basketball was bigger than Dolly Parton; “Dubious Achievement Awards for 1978,” *Esquire*, January 2, 1979, 30, commented on Parton’s wardrobe malfunction at the 1978 Country Music Association Awards with the caption “Now let’s take a break—we’ll be right back with the Himalayas;” Michael Pollan, “Into the Rose Garden,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1991, described a new rose named after Parton as a “rose with, you have probably guessed it, exceptionally large blossoms.”

breasts. In an interview with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Parton addressed an article that the tabloids had run claiming that her breasts were leaking after she supposedly had them augmented. “I’m the boob queen, the poster child of boobs, so, of course, if there is any type of story about that part of the anatomy I’m gonna get blasted,” Parton remarked.²⁴³ Parton had become the ultimate male fantasy. One Fayette County, Kentucky lawyer joked that he had a terrible dream which left him in a cold sweat. Once asked about it, he then explained that he dreamt his wife and Parton got into a fight over him, and, to his misfortune, his wife won.²⁴⁴ In a 1982 interview, Parton admitted that as much as she would like to think that she could have made it on her talent alone, she felt that her appearance had helped her “stand out in a crowd,” that it had proved to be “real handy” for her.²⁴⁵ She also mentioned that jokes about her figure no longer bothered her, a major change from her earlier responses: “They’re just talking about me and my boobs and me and my this-and-that, I get a kick out of it!” she commented.²⁴⁶ By the 1980s, the self-proclaimed “backwoods Barbie” had accepted the role her body played in promoting her talents as an artist.²⁴⁷

Some commentators took offense to Parton being treated as a sexual object, trying to combat these portrayals by writing articles focusing on her talents. Their attempts ended with

²⁴³ Cindy Pearlmann, “Dolly Parton—A Heap of ‘Straight Talk’ From a Woman ‘Born to Raise Hell,’” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 5, 1992. The writer of this article also wanted to assure her readers that Parton did not have implants.

²⁴⁴ Don Edwards, “Governor Traveling to New York for Address to Kentuckians,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, May 13, 1984.

²⁴⁵ Dale Stevens, “Dolly: ‘I Say More is More,’” *Cincinnati Post*, July 29, 1982 and Anita Harkins, “Dolly Parton Admits Appearance ‘Just an Image but Real Handy,’” *Rock Island Argus*, July 18, 1978. More examples of these statements can be found in: Patrick Snyder, “Dolly’s No Fool—Her Image Works,” *Detroit News*, March 18, 1979; Laura Eipper, “‘Worst Dressed,’ Dolly Not Too Distressed,” *Tennessee Living*, January 10, 1979; Peter Cobun, “Dolly Knows Just Where She’s Going,” *News-American*, November 30, 1975; Ann Landers Bridge, “Only Dolly’s Hair Not Real,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 9, 1976; Bob Darenne, “‘There’s Only One Dolly Parton,’” *Times-Union*, November 15, 1975; M. Howard Gelfand, “In Which Dolly Wears A Face Of Many Colors,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 28, 1975.

²⁴⁶ Susan White, “‘Real’ Dolly Parton Always Brings Smile,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 20, 1990.

²⁴⁷ “Backwoods Barbie” is the title track off Parton’s 2008 album.

mixed results, as many of these writings still included discussions of Parton's figure and comparisons to Daisy Mae or Mae West.²⁴⁸ Some recommended that the best way to listen to Parton was with "your eyes closed" as to not be "distracted" by her chest and other aspects of her appearance.²⁴⁹ One writer commented that it wasn't his place to criticize Parton for "exploiting her natural gifts," but judging by earlier interviews in which she expressed that she was more than her body, it is likely that Parton did not wish to do so.²⁵⁰ But after she realized that her breasts, hair, and waistline were going to be her selling features, she manipulated her body and comments about it to her advantage.

Parton's rural beginnings helped her connect with country music fans. Parton's songs highlighted the joys and difficulties that rural Americans experienced in their daily lives. Many scholars have framed her life story as a rags-to-riches narrative and have portrayed the star as a modern-day Cinderella.²⁵¹ Even as she began to produce songs that sounded more pop than country, Parton maintained a loyal country fan base. Her fans across multiple genres stated that they connected with Parton no matter the style of her music. Parton has genuine pride in where

²⁴⁸ See Tom Zitto, "Dolly Parton: Sexy, but No Dumb Blonde," *The Washington Post*, May 1978; Jack Albert, "Dolly Parton is a Serious Person," *Rock Island Argus*, March 13, 1977; Peter Cobun, "Parton Defends Image," *Des Moines Tribune*, December 29, 1975; Michael Grant, "Dolly Parton's A Standout In Looks Or Music," *San Diego Union*, March 3, 1977; Rock Scene, "Dolly Parton's Heartache: Too Many Men Loved Her For Her Body," *Modern Screen*, May 1976; Bill McAllister, "Dolly Parton's Physical Charm Helps to Enhance Music Legend," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 6, 1975.

²⁴⁹ Boris Weintraub, "You Have to Listen to Parton," *Washington Star*, September 29, 1975.

²⁵⁰ Ron Miller, "There's More to Dolly Than a Buxom Bustline," *San Jose Mercury*, February 13, 1979.

²⁵¹ See Banes, "Dixie's Daughters;" Pamela Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): 109, accessed September 19, 2016, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/197297520?accountid=10747>; Maureen Cecile Modesitt, "Dolly Parton: A Semiotic Study of Her Life and Lyrics," PhD diss., Ohio University 2001; Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*; Peloff, "Unexpected Feminisms;" Jonathan Zilberg, "Yes, It's True: Zimbabweans Love Dolly Parton," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29, (1995):111-125; Associated Press, "Dolly Parton like a Sexy Cinderella," *San Antonio News*, October 8, 1975; Matt Yancey, "Parton Parcels a Cinderella Image," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1975, also refers to Parton as a "country fairy Godmother;" Dick Maurice, "Hello or Goodbye Dolly: Parton's Career Goes Bust...," *ShowBiz*, May 22, 1983. A review of *Straight Talk* also wrote that the film was Parton's spin on the storyline, Stephen Hunter, "'Straight Talk' Dolly's Take on Cinderella," *The Evening Sun*, April 7, 1992.

she comes from. By maintaining a “mountain mindset” of sorts, Parton connected herself to rural and working-class populations. One interviewer argued that Parton was “more responsible than anyone else for breaking the stereotype of women as mothers, loving wives, or honkytonk cheaters in the lyrics of country songs.”²⁵² What is interesting here is that although Parton sang songs about women who challenged gender stereotypes, behind the scenes her personal life was more reserved and traditional. Parton married early in her career and helped raise her younger brother and sisters. Still, in her public life, through her performances, she offered women who were constrained by those traditional themes and stereotypes an alternative outlet. Parton’s background as once a poor, rural, white woman aided to the construction of her image as an alternative to the middle-class women associated with the Women’s Movement. Parton used her identity and unique position to include southern, working-class women that felt alienated by the Movement.

Problematic Pairings

Throughout her career, Parton has been a part of many duos with men, and these pairings contributed to Parton’s sexualization through songs, conversations, and jokes about her body. To maintain and thrive in the male-dominated country music industry of the sixties and seventies Parton had to prove her superiority as an artist. At the same time, Parton downplayed her challenge to the genre by presenting herself in a hyperfeminine package that adhered to country music’s traditional gender roles. One way in which Parton did this was through her performances with male artists. In these interactions, Parton’s look as a larger-than-life version of a male fantasy meant that men communicated their desires to her through nervous puns, laughter, jokes,

²⁵² Matt Yancey, “Parton Parcels a Cinderella Image,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1975.

and euphemisms.²⁵³ Parton used her image as a tool to manipulate men, especially in her performances with male artists.

From songs of pure pleasure and eternal devotion to songs that bubbled with the “torture-of-temptation,” the Porter and Dolly discs of 1967 to as late as 1980 presented fans with a traditional male-dominated partnership and sound.²⁵⁴ Parton performed and recorded numerous duets with Wagoner prior to her departure in 1974, and afterwards she accepted offers to work with many other male entertainers. Pop-turned-country musician Kenny Rogers appeared with Parton throughout the seventies on her television show *Dolly!*, and in 1983, the two would top both the country and pop charts with their mega hit, “Islands in the Stream.” The following year, the two released their first collaborative album, *Once Upon a Christmas*, which was followed by *Kenny & Dolly: A Christmas to Remember*, a CBS special based around the songs on the album. The 90-minute program featured a variety of disconnected skit pieces with songs interspersed accompanied by behind-the-scenes segments of Parton and Rogers engaging in vacuous banter. Although the “fantasy” special promoted the album, it also promoted Parton in suggestive sexual situations with Rogers as the two flirted, held hands, embraced, and danced while singing to each other. One scene placed the two abroad during World War II in a USO hall in Britain where Parton, a singer, was the object of affection as men stood in awe as she sang. Rogers, a lonesome Canadian pilot, later joined Parton on stage to sing a cheerful rendition of their song “Christmas Without You.” Other sketches posed the two as lovers on a romantic getaway.²⁵⁵

Parton benefited from Rogers’ popularity as an established crossover artist in the pop market. Prior to their combined success in the 1980s, Rogers was a regular on Parton’s *Dolly!*

²⁵³ Wilson, “Mountains of Contradictions,” 102.

²⁵⁴ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 305-306.

²⁵⁵ “Kenny & Dolly: A Christmas to Remember Television Special,” aired December 2, 1984, on CBS, accessed January 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aF7nlCFWHrw>.

television show. Their playful skits were usually followed by a duet of a pop song as the two stared lovingly at each other. The general consensus from fans and recording executives was that Parton and Rogers were a “winning duo” together.²⁵⁶ Later, in 1985, Parton and Rogers embarked on a nine-city tour promoting Parton’s latest album *Real Love*, which included a duet of the same name between the two stars. The tour stopped at over forty venues and after the conclusion of the U.S. leg of the tour, the pair travelled to Australia and New Zealand hosting performances there as well.²⁵⁷ At one concert, after performing Rogers’ sexually suggestive song “We’ve Got Tonight,” the two joked about Parton’s bust and form-fitting sequined black dress. In the song, two individuals discuss their loneliness and dissatisfaction with love and decide to spend the night together. After their duet, Rogers made references to Parton’s figure, and Parton followed his statements with wisecracks about the size of her breasts, comparing them to basketballs and the size of her bus.²⁵⁸ It is important to note that at this point in her career, Parton reacts and engages in comments on and jokes about her body. In the early part of her career, during the 1970s, Parton wished to be known and recognized for her talents and not her body. By the mid 1980s, however, she is exaggerating her own figure and comparing herself to outrageous measurements, such as a bus as she references here.

Not everyone was awed by music’s new power couple. Joel Selvin, in a review of a show from the *Real Love Tour* for the *New York Times*, claimed that specials and partnerships like this were demeaning to Parton, a woman of many talents. He stated that Parton “one of the most soulful queens of country music...has been reduced to a national joke about her abundant bosom,

²⁵⁶ Marilyn Spencer, “Parton, Rogers a Winning Duo,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, February 26, 1985.

²⁵⁷ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 220 and 222.

²⁵⁸ “We’ve Got Tonight,” performed by Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers, *Real Love Tour*, location unknown, 1985, accessed December 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6IIkpmw8Ow>. In this particular performance, Parton changed a couple of the lines saying, “Who needs Sheena Easton?” the woman that originally sang this duet with Rogers.

jokes in which she is fully willing to participate.”²⁵⁹ Indeed, Parton was participating in jokes about her figure. She emerged as one of the most talented and gifted artists in country music but realized that to increase her popularity, fame, and to keep herself as the topic of attention she needed to engage in comments written and asked of her. Her playful and suggestive jokes did just that. Ironically, Rogers’ comments about Parton resembled Selvin’s view: “Dolly could have been an even bigger star if they promoted her talent rather than her breasts...She is absolutely awesome...in her musical ability, her skill in conceptualizing, [and] her creativity.”²⁶⁰ But Rogers and Selvin’s seemed to miss the point: a major part of her creativity was in constructing her unique image.

In addition to Rogers, Parton performed with Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, Ricky Van Shelton, and even did a song with Julio Iglesias for his 1994 album *Crazy*. Haggard and Parton toured together in the mid-1970s, and he scored a big hit with her song “Kentucky Gambler.” Around the same time, Haggard wrote and recorded his number one hit about unrequited love “Always Wanting You.” The song is widely believed to have been about Parton. In his 1981 autobiography *Sing Me Back Home*, Haggard revealed that he was smitten with the “exceptional human being who lives underneath all that bunch of fluffy hair, fluttery eyelashes, and super boobs.”²⁶¹ Here, Haggard explained that you must strip away Parton’s crafted image to find the real Parton. In doing so, he also referenced her breasts as being her defining feature. Then, in 1982, with Parton and Nelson at the height of their popularity, Monument Records released a collection of previously unreleased songs by the two songwriters as well as songs by Brenda Lee and Kris Kristofferson. Many of those songs were edited together to create duets for the artists,

²⁵⁹ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 222.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Merle Haggard with Peggy Russell, *Sing Me Back Home: My Life* (New York: Times Books, 1981).

including two for Nelson and Parton: “Happy, Happy Birthday, Baby” and “Everything’s Beautiful (In Their Own Way).” The pair later performed the two songs together on the syndicated television special *The Johnny Cash Show*.²⁶² Additionally, Nelson sang “I Really Don’t Want to Know” with Parton on her 1982 *Burlap and Satin* album in which two lovers wonder about how many sexual partners the other one has had.²⁶³

Through adlibs, small comments, and suggestive looks, during and after their performance together, the men that performed with Parton reinforced her image as a sexual fantasy. They normally commented on the size of her breasts, as was the case with Nelson joking, “You’re certainly big, too, Dolly.”²⁶⁴ Parton usually laughed at these comments or came back with a witty comment herself. Again, we see that the Parton of the 1980s is more willing to use jokes about her body—no matter how stretched or imagined—to her advantage. She turned these comments about her body into ways to advance her career. By engaging in sexualized dialogue, Parton was presenting herself as a non-threatening challenge to country music’s male structure. At the same time, she was taking ownership of these comments to further her gimmick of an image. It is also significant here that in this last appearance, Parton was with Nelson, a country singer and that she was performing for a television special, not a concert crowd. These two facts could explain why the comment on Parton’s breasts was more subtle and not followed by a line from Parton. It is likely that Parton understood her different audiences, paying concert goers compared to family television viewers, and tailored her statements to fit the setting. In this,

²⁶²Stephen L. Betts, “Flashback: Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton Bring Hair and Harmony to Johnny Cash Show,” *Rolling Stone*, November 25, 2014, accessed January 6, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/flashback-willie-nelson-dolly-parton-bring-hair-and-harmony-to-johnny-cash-show-20141125>.

²⁶³ Nancy Cardwell, *The Words and Music of Dolly Parton: Getting to Know Country’s “Iron Butterfly”* (New York: Praeger, 2011), 101.

²⁶⁴ *The Winning Hand*, syndicated television special, “Dolly and Willie,” directed by Bob Finkel, aired 1983, accessed January 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKYJMOA_u1s and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SigvSdzIWU>.

we see Parton presenting herself in reaction to discussions on her body but not attempting to assert herself too much. Nonetheless, her responses were out of reaction to the message presented by her appearance that she was every man's desire and these duets helped further that message.

The Paradox Displayed in Movie Roles

In the late 1970s, Parton landed her first movie role in the hit film *9 to 5*. Starring alongside Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, Parton initially felt out of her league.²⁶⁵ Parton played Doralee Rhodes, the archetypical secretary. Her character was submissive, attractive, assumed to be dumb, and not liked by her co-workers who presumed she was sleeping with the chauvinist boss, Mr. Hart, played by Dabney Coleman. The plot of the movie involves three female coworkers (Tomlin, Fonda, and Parton), who want to get even with their sexist boss through an accidental poisoning that leads to a real kidnapping. The trio, once disgruntled secretaries turned best friends, take control and revamp the office into a more woman-friendly environment during his absence. This was the first of many strong, positive female characters that Parton would play in her silver screen career.²⁶⁶

Parton's casting in the role of the sweet and sassy southern buxom secretary of a 1970s office makes sense given that she was portrayed similarly by newspapers and magazines of the time.²⁶⁷ In this role, she was cast as the sex symbol of male desire. Parton was the target of Mr. Hart's attention and her tight clothes were further proof to her officemates that she was "banging

²⁶⁵ Parton, *Dolly*, 228.

²⁶⁶ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 460.

²⁶⁷ "Dumb Blonde" is a track off Parton's 1967 debut album *Hello, I'm Dolly*.

the boss.”²⁶⁸ By playing Doralee, the busty blonde with little ability to stand up for herself because she was afraid of losing her job, Parton took on a role that mirrored her early relationship with Wagoner, a partnership in which she never had full creative control of her career.²⁶⁹ In the film, Mr. Hart is attracted to Doralee’s figure and he submits her to demeaning tasks, such as picking up pencils, hoping to catch a peak of her breasts as she bent over. Towards the end of the film, Doralee, with the help of her new-found office friends, learns to take greater control of her life and finds her voice within the workplace. The three women forge a friendship and coalition in the midst of their patriarchal office, brought together by the fact that, for different reasons, they were each suffering within the workplace. In the end, Doralee fulfills her destiny of becoming a country and western singer, but, more importantly, she recasts her image and sexuality on her own terms.²⁷⁰

9 to 5 demonstrated the frustrations of working women. Starring alongside Fonda and Tomlin, avid and vocal political activists, Parton helped expose the realities that women faced within the workplace. It also signaled that she had similar feelings towards equality within the workplace.²⁷¹ Fonda, who not only starred in the film but also produced it, was “committed to promoting the Women’s Movement goals.” *9 to 5* was to be a “feminist film” that increased

²⁶⁸ *9 to 5*, directed by Colin Higgins, Twentieth Century Fox, 1980, 2006, DVD. Ironically, the DVD cover contained a post-it note above Parton’s head that read “BUSTING with ALL-NEW extras,” again a clever placement and a subliminal reference to her breasts.

²⁶⁹ Parton invited Wagoner to attend the Nashville premiere of *9 to 5* but he did not show. Dolly Carlisle, “Dolly Parton After Her Racy Debut in *9 to 5*, Burt Reynolds Is Next, But She Insists, ‘I’m Not Selling Sex,’” *People*, January 19, 1981.

²⁷⁰ Lilian Calles Barger, “Backlash: From *Nine to Five* to *The Devil Wears Prada*,” *Women’s Studies* 40, no. 3: 336-342, accessed February 17, 2017,

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=15123ad0-e5a5-4f42-9c2c-b438ae94787d%40sessionmgr120&vid=0&hid=112>.

²⁷¹ During filming one woman who the *Baltimore News American* described as a “women’s libber” tried to get Parton to admit that she hated men to which she explained that she couldn’t. The story was also accompanied by a cartoon caricature of Parton in which her breasts were popping the buttons of her shirt which looked ready to explode. Doris Klein, “Hello! Dolly!,” *Baltimore News American*, April 27, 1980.

awareness and called for change.²⁷² In her autobiography, Parton mentions several times that she and Fonda disagreed on certain political issues, such as gun control, and Parton worried that they might have trouble working together because of those differences.²⁷³ It is interesting that Parton would mention gun control but not women's liberation, perhaps in an attempt to avoid a discussion of the Movement altogether in her autobiography. In her reflections, Parton never said that she felt out of place or uncomfortable highlighting issues surrounding equal pay and equal opportunities for working women.²⁷⁴ Although Parton was cast in the film to appeal to audiences in the south, her inclusion also signaled her popularity within the music industry and her ability to cross traditional boundaries and still maintain a loyal fan base.²⁷⁵ Parton's acceptance of this role suggests that she was using her stardom to speak out on issues that she had a personal connection to.

The film received more praise than criticism and did well at the box office. Many secretaries felt that it highlighted their frustrations so well that they invited their bosses to see the movie with them. Many women left the theater feeling represented, saying that the "movie reflected this feeling" of being treated as equals, something that women have been demanding for a long time. Still, there was some opposition. Activists with the group Working Women-National Association of Office Workers expressed that they had higher hopes for the movie and complained that it was too light. They had hoped that the movie would "rally" women together, but admitted that the film brought to light important issues and stereotypes that women experience in the workplace.²⁷⁶

²⁷² Barger, "Backlash: From *Nine to Five* to *The Devil Wears Prada*," 338 and Jane Fonda, "Nine @ 25 Featurette," *9 to 5*, directed by Colin Higgins, Twentieth Century Fox, 2006, DVD.

²⁷³ Parton, *Dolly*, 228-234 and Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 183-188.

²⁷⁴ Interestingly, *9 to 5* premiered the same year that the EEOC published new guidelines on sexual harassment.

²⁷⁵ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 183 and Parton, *Dolly*, 228.

²⁷⁶ Georgia Dullea, "Secretaries Are the Ones Who Laugh Loudest at *Nine to Five*," *The Tennessean*, January 6, 1981. Out of all the newspaper articles that I uncovered during my research, very few movie reviews were written

Coming off of *9 to 5*'s success, Parton accepted another movie role, this time playing a very different character: a madam. Based on a play that was inspired by the true story of a Texas brothel, the "Chicken Ranch," *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* centers around Miss Mona and the colorful characters of the small Texas town. In the film, Parton plays Miss Mona, the madam of the town's brothel, costarring with Burt Reynolds, who was cast as the town sheriff and her love interest. According to Buffwack and Oermann, Parton "took roles that brought the self-assertive women in her country songs to life," and Miss Mona was one of them.²⁷⁷ Unlike the atmosphere during filming for *9 to 5*, the drama on the set was not a great experience for Parton. She described her experience, ironically, in terms of sex: "it was as if *9 to 5* had been my first lover, sweetly seductive...gentle and caring. Whorehouse, then was a rapist."²⁷⁸ She noted that it "was not a fun project for anyone involved" due to the many disagreements on set between Reynolds and the original playwright, Larry King; this drama ultimately led to the firing of two directors and a highly tense atmosphere.²⁷⁹ The film also exceeded its original budget by approximately \$15 million, adding to the stress on set.²⁸⁰

What the film presented was an overtly sexualized version of Parton. Her image echoed back to the voluptuous Daisy Mae, hillbilly sex symbol of *Li'l Abner*, a comic strip based on the people in the fictitious southern town of Dogpatch.²⁸¹ Parton said she felt at ease as Miss Mona. She joked, "I didn't feel like I had to act in the movie, because of the way I saw her. I've always looked like a whore, as I've often joked about...I just felt like I was playing myself. I make a

by a woman. See also, Sue Gambil, "9 to 5: Changing the Office," *Off Our Backs*, 11, no. 2 (February 1981), 14, accessed August 5, 2016, <http://jstor.org/stable/25793596> and Betsy Smith, "9 to 5: The Politics of Fantasy," *Gay Community News* 8, no. 24 (January 3, 1981), 11, accessed August 5, 2016, ProQuest.

²⁷⁷ Buffwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 460.

²⁷⁸ Parton, *Dolly*, 236.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁸⁰ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 194.

²⁸¹ For more information on the comic strip *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp see Michael Schumacher and Denis Kitchen, *Al Capp: A Life to the Contrary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

better whore than a secretary.” Here, she also wanted to make sure that it was known that she was the one making these comments about her image.²⁸² Parton’s remarks were likely inspired by the fact that she based her own look on an individual known as “the painted lady,” or the prostitute, of her childhood hometown.²⁸³ In her comments, Parton is seemingly celebrating her image and acknowledging that her look is patented from a woman who does not conform to society’s expectations of women. She is proud that she “makes a better whore than a secretary.” She is also using this statement to manipulate her image again. She is owning the criticism that she may receive for playing such starkly different movie roles by commenting on the characters on her own terms and in relation to her own image.

Parton expressed that she was “surprised” by the amount of nudity in the film, something she was not aware of until she attended the premiere.²⁸⁴ This is hard to believe since the storyline is literally about a brothel, and Parton, after seeing the Broadway version of the play, hoped that the writers would develop a stronger relationship between her and Reynolds saying, “I’m not going to miss my chance with Burt Reynolds.”²⁸⁵ Parton noted that she felt pressured by some of her “religious friends and fans” to not accept the role since the film was “glorifying prostitution.” Parton also told the interviewer that she already knew what people back home in East Tennessee would say: “I knew she was a whore before she ever left.” She joked that if anyone back home has “got a gripe” that they probably “won’t say too much as long as I keep sending money home

²⁸² Dale Stevens, “Dolly: ‘I Say More Is More,’” *Cincinnati Post*, July 29, 1982 and Joe Edwards, “On Country,” *Daily Tribune*, April 30, 1982. Parton described her look this way other times see: Robert Windeler, “The New Dolly Goes Hollywood and Plays ‘House’ With Burt,” *US Weekly*, April 15, 1980.

²⁸³ In November 2016, Parton cast herself as the painted lady in *Christmas of Many Colors: Circle of Love*, the sequel to *Coat of Many Colors* which also aired on NBC.

²⁸⁴ Dale Stevens, “Dolly: ‘I Say More Is More,’” *Cincinnati Post*, July 29, 1982.

²⁸⁵ Robert Windeler, “The New Dolly Goes Hollywood and Plays ‘House’ With Burt,” *US Weekly*, April 15, 1980. This statement also appeared in Dolly Carlisle, “Dolly Parton After Her Racy Debut in 9 to 5, Burt Reynolds Is Next, But She Insists, ‘I’m Not Selling Sex,’” *People*, January 19, 1981, but the author included that Parton was referring to “holding, hugging, kissing” and not a nude scene.

for the scholarship foundation,” which she had established in the late 1970s.²⁸⁶ Perhaps Parton was embarrassed by the sex-tinged scenes and wanted to express to her fans that she had not endorsed such acts. It is likely that she worried that upon seeing her in *Whorehouse*, she might lose or cause a divide among her more conservative fan base. It is also interesting that her fans issued such strong reservations to the film but did not direct these sentiments towards her “prostitute saga” songs of the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁸⁷ Parton explained later in her autobiography that although she had reservations about accepting the role, she viewed the story as a human story and that the occupation of the women involved was purely incidental.²⁸⁸

Parton’s third movie, *Rhinestone*, with Sylvester Stallone was labeled a flop.²⁸⁹ Stallone and Parton both remarked that they enjoyed working together, but it seems they did not have enough chemistry in front of the cameras to make the movie a hit with audiences.²⁹⁰ Despite this setback, many commentators noted people failed to realize how good Parton was as an entertainer. Roger Ebert stated that Parton’s movie career had been largely wasted on “junk” films like *Rhinestone* and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* because “Hollywood can’t get beyond her bust measurements, and keeps casting her in Mae West roles.” He argued that it was only in her more down-to-earth roles that Parton plays a memorable character.²⁹¹ One of those roles came around again in 1989 with *Steel Magnolias*. Perhaps one of Parton’s most beloved and well-known roles was her performance as the witty beauty salon owner, Truvy Jones. Parton thrived among a strong circle of female actresses. The goal of the movie was to tell a story about

²⁸⁶ Michael Erickson, “Dolly Fits Right in As Madam,” *Nashville Banner*, July 23, 1982

²⁸⁷ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 316. These songs include: “My Blue Ridge Mountain Boy,” “Mama Say a Prayer,” and “A Gamble Either Way.” The songs detail the life experiences of women who turn to prostitution as a way to earn a living, but miss the innocence of their younger days.

²⁸⁸ Parton, *Dolly*, 290-291.

²⁸⁹ Rita Kempsey, “Hello Dolly; All That Glitters is Gold to Parton,” *Ottawa Citizen*, November 26, 1989 and Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 214- 216.

²⁹⁰ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 214- 216.

²⁹¹ Roger Ebert, “Dolly Parton—Completely Natural in Her Career and Life,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 30, 1991.

women, especially strong southern women, or “steel magnolias,” through friendship and hard times. On and off the set, a form of women’s solidarity developed between Parton and her co-stars. “I thought of them as my sisters, aunts, or cousins,” she explained, and “I never saw any egos out there.”²⁹² Santa Ana’s *Orange County Register* reported how the stars were regularly spotted around town shopping and enjoying the sights of the small town of Natchitoches, Louisiana where the movie was filmed, saying that “sisterhood blossomed” there between the actresses.²⁹³

In her 1992 romantic comedy, *Straight Talk*, Parton played a character that was like herself as well: an unlikely down-home country girl who surpassed everyone’s expectations. Parton was cast as Shirlee Kenyon, an unqualified and unemployed down-on-her luck dance instructor who is accidentally hired as a radio talk show host. In the film, her show receives rave reviews, but it is based on the lie that Kenyon is a clinical psychologist. After her lie is exposed, she is let go from the show. Listeners to her radio broadcast are outraged at her firing and eventually Kenyon rejoins the radio show. The film received mixed reviews with most critics saying that although they loved Parton in this role, the film was not as successful as her previous ones like *9 to 5*.²⁹⁴

²⁹² “Parton Fits Into ‘Magnolias’ Role,” *Telegram & Gazette*, November 24, 1989.

²⁹³ Christine Arnold Dolen, “Sisterhood Blossomed During Filming of ‘Magnolias,’” *Orange County Register*, November 26, 1989. See also: Parton, *Dolly*, 276-277; Jennifer Scanlon, “‘If My Husband Calls I’m Not Here:’ The Beauty Parlor as Real and Representational Female Space,” *Feminist Studies* 33, no.2 (Summer 2007): 308-334, accessed March 14, 2017, ProQuest; Beverley Lynn Alexander Johnston, “Caught in the Flux of Change: The Southern Lady in Selected Plays and Films of the Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1994), accessed March 14, 2017, ProQuest; Lisa Tyler, “Mother-Daughter Myth and the Marriage of Death in Steel Magnolias,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1994): 98-104, accessed March 14, 2017, ProQuest; and Dana C. Wiggins, “From Country to Neotraditional: Gender, Race, Class, and Region in Female Country Music, 1980-1989” (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2009), accessed March 14, 2017, ProQuest.

²⁹⁴ Malcolm Johnson, “Dolly Parton, Prestigious Cast Not Enough to Rescue Wobbly Comedy,” *Hartford Courant*, April 3, 1992; Stephen Hunter, “‘Straight Talk’: Dolly’s Take on Cinderella,” *The Evening Sun*, April 7, 1992; “Straight Talk Should Follow Its Own Advice,” *Jewish Advocate*, April 3, 1992; Vincent Canby, “Dolly Parton Dominates a Comedy,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1992. After 1992, Parton’s future roles would consist of smaller roles and television shows. She would not star in a Hollywood movie again until *Joyful Noise* in 2012.

Straight Talk, with its subtle and explicit undertones of a Cinderella story (for example, Parton sits on a pumpkin on the movie's poster) conveys the message that the way for a woman to reach self-fulfillment is through working. This is an unusual message broadcast during the feminist backlash of the Reagan Administration, but the movie also played into themes of antifeminism as well. Starting in the 1970s, magazines such as *Working Woman*, *Self*, and *New York Woman*, emerged and packaged feminism into a product. These magazines, along with *Dressing for Success*, a bestselling self-help book, offered suggestions for how women could assert themselves in the workplace. The only way for women to differentiate themselves from the traditional attire of secretaries (dresses, blouses, and skirts), the pieces argued, was for women to don men's clothing.²⁹⁵ Parton's character adhered to this advice. She dressed in business suits (mostly skirts with a blazer) with simply-styled hair and high collared shirts, devoid of any sort of obvious sex appeal. In fact, the only hint towards sex in the film was in her relationship with the heartthrob of the film, James Woods. Ironically, Kenyon's career is undone by Woods, a reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, when he exposes Kenyon's fake doctorate degree from the University of Life, class of 1950-1992.

Kenyon's dress adhered to a man's look but her advice as a radio personality was confident and empowering to the mostly female listeners that called into her show. Kenyon emboldened them to stand up for themselves. She addressed long-held perspectives by men that marital problems were the fault of women. Instead, she proclaimed that women were not to be blamed for their failed marriages or their husband's infidelity. Kenyon became a voice of reason and the push that they needed to leave their husbands, enter the workforce, or address the double standards they were facing in society. In many ways, Parton claimed that playing the part of

²⁹⁵ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 312-314.

Kenyon was not a case of acting but of being herself: “The character was one that was very close to me. I was also able to inject a considerable amount of what might be called ‘homespun wit’ into the script.”²⁹⁶ Newspapers and reviewers noted the similarities as well and argued that “Ms. Parton drives the film.”²⁹⁷

Parton starred in made-for-television movies as well. Her first, *A Smoky Mountain Christmas*, which she co-wrote, aired on ABC in December 1986. The film proved successful, receiving the highest ratings of any ABC television movie in two years. It was after the success of this film that the network decided to offer Parton her second, and final, variety show for \$44 million.²⁹⁸ Parton also starred alongside Gary Busey in NBC’s drama *Wild Texas Wind*, which aired in 1991. In the movie, which she co-wrote, Parton plays the part of a struggling singer who falls for a physically-and-emotionally-abusive club owner, Justice Parker, played by Gary Busey. Her bandmates try to convince Parton’s character Thiola “Big T” Rayfield, complete with tight clothes and over the top hairdos, to leave Justice, but Justice will not let that happen. Again, we see Parton using a form of veiled sexual humor in crafting her character’s nickname, a suggestive reference to her breasts. According to Stephen Miller, the original title for the film was to be *Big T*, but NBC “made it clear that they were not going to back a film starring Dolly Parton under that name.”²⁹⁹ Justice promises to use his connections to get Thiola a recording contract, but problems arise when Justice is found dead.

The movie highlights problems that women face in society surrounding relationships and domestic abuse. Parton recalled that during filming, she empathized with victims of domestic

²⁹⁶ Parton, *Dolly*, 284.

²⁹⁷ Bryan Miller, “For ‘Friendly Country Clod,’ A Day for Charming the City,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1992; Kevin Thomas, “Movie Reviews: Parton Get Hung Up in Phony ‘Talk,’” *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1992; and Vincent Canby, “Dolly Parton Dominates a Comedy,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1992.

²⁹⁸ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 460.

²⁹⁹ Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 273-274.

violence and explored the reasons why some women might stay in abusive relationships.³⁰⁰

Trying to cover her bruises before a show, Thiola explains: “It’s a cultural thing. I come from a line of women who stand by their man. If I don’t help him, how will he get better?”³⁰¹ These lines present an interesting analysis for the film. The phrase “stand by their man” is a nod to the 1968 Tammy Wynette song, “Stand By Your Man,” which claims that it is a woman’s job to stay committed to their relationship, no matter the problems. By stating that “it’s a cultural thing,” Parton is referencing the social stigma and silencing that occurs in cases of domestic abuse; women, including southern women who have experienced abuse and other relationship struggles, often do not feel safe openly discussing or revealing their troubles. Parton singled out the careers of Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn as examples of this hidden abuse. Parton explained, “There’s a silent epidemic of abused women...they tolerate violence for the wrong reasons. Some even think it shows men are jealous and love them.”³⁰² As Lundy Bancroft discusses, these abusers normally have other good characteristics for a time, such as being kind or funny, that prevent their partners from labeling them as abusers. So, when “a woman finds her relationship is spinning out of control, it is unlikely to occur to her that her partner is an abuser.”³⁰³ Thiola is an example of this theory and feels that she can help Justice overcome his problems. Later in the film and before Justice’s murder, Parton’s character has decided that she is going to leave her abuser. She explains, “It all comes down to one question: Who do I love more? The man who beats me or the woman he beats?”³⁰⁴ As the movie ends, Parton concludes: “There are many

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ *Wild Texas Wind*, directed by Joan Tewkesbury, NBC, aired September 23, 1991.

³⁰² Miller, *Smart Blonde*, 274. Parton had previously written a song that dealt with abusive relationships and why women stayed in them. The song, “What Is It My Love” comes from the point of view of a battered woman who is questioning her devotion and reasons for staying in the relationship. The song appeared on her 1989 album *White Limozeen*.

³⁰³ Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), 8-9.

³⁰⁴ *Wild Texas Wind*, 1991.

kinds of love, all of them good, or at least they should be. What's important is this: When you count your friends and the one that you love, you be sure to put yourself on the list."³⁰⁵ The film is full of lines that express these kinds of thoughts where Thiola has experienced a revelation or the inner push she needs to leave her violent situation. The battered woman eventually finds her strength.

While Parton did not necessarily push a progressive feminist agenda, her songs about married life, gender roles, and sex highlighted issues that were rarely discussed within country music, and the singles found their way onto the *Billboard* charts. Her position on feminism and women's rights issues, however, was contradictory throughout the 1960s and into the early 1990s. Sometimes she aligned with the Women's Movement and advocated for women's equality, but other times she was critical of the Movement and expressed patriarchal views of society. Her songs addressed—and gave names and descriptions to—the problems that many women were experiencing during the second wave of feminism. As early as 1968, Parton was advocating for equal treatment on issues such as extramarital sex in “Just Because I'm a Woman.” Parton was standing her ground and using the airwaves to voice her opinions, and she maintained a significant following in doing so. But she also did not acknowledge the Women's Movement in interviews and at times downplayed the messages of her songs. Parton's relationship with her body also presents an interesting analysis with the Movement in that one can see how Parton manipulated her image as a form of agency to further her popularity. Parton presented a repackaged form of feminism and presented herself as a more palatable feminist to the country music market.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR:
CONCLUSION

In January 2017, country music performers Lee Greenwood and Toby Keith announced that they would perform at Donald Trump’s Presidential inauguration. From the early planning stage, Hollywood celebrities and A-list music stars publically stated that, if invited to perform at the inauguration, they would decline—and many did. Even artists that initially agreed to perform at Trump events backed out after receiving harsh criticism from fans who called for boycotts of their music.³⁰⁶ Still, Greenwood was vocal in his support of Trump.³⁰⁷ Keith, however, shrugged off the political significance, stating that he would never “apologize for playing for our country or military.” He argued that he was performing for the nation, not for Trump.

Country music has long been attached to politics. This reached a new height in the 1960s with the rise of conservatism when Barry Goldwater, a self-described cowboy, and the Republican Convention employed traditional country emblems, such as cowboy hats and line dancers dressed in sequin-adorned outfits complete with cowboy boots, to tap into “the silent majority’s” antipathy for the counter-culture movement.³⁰⁸ Since the 1960s, the genre has been linked to the stereotype that “country music has become the house genre of the GOP.”³⁰⁹

According to country music historian Don Cusic, country music has frequently reflected politics

³⁰⁶ See: Christian Holub, “All the Artists Who Won’t Perform at Donald Trump’s Inauguration,” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 16, 2017, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://ew.com/music/2017/01/10/donald-trump-inauguration-artists-who-wont-perform/> and Eli Watkins, “Who is Performing at Donald Trump’s Inauguration and Who Isn’t?” CNN, January 17, 2017, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/05/politics/trump-inauguration-performers/>.

³⁰⁷ Kory Grow, “Inauguration Singer Lee Greenwood: ‘Donald Trump Is a Patriot,’” *Rolling Stone*, January 18, 2017. Prior to Trump receiving the nomination from the Republican Convention, Greenwood first endorsed candidate Marco Rubio for president and performed at his campaign rally in Franklin, Tennessee.

³⁰⁸ John C. Skipper, *The 1964 Republican Convention: Barry Goldwater and the Beginning of the Conservative Movement* (Jefferson: McFarland Publishers, 2016) 88.

³⁰⁹ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 7.

throughout American history. Cusic explained what he thought country musicians felt regarding the 2016 election: “Even with the reservations about Trump, the male members of the industry still feel that he’s one of us.”³¹⁰ In fact, many country artists endorsed Trump, and others offered to pray for him, including one of country music’s pioneering women, Loretta Lynn.³¹¹

Given the Republican-bend of most of her peers, Dolly Parton found herself caught in political controversy during the 2016 election after she commented on Hillary Clinton’s historic bid for the presidency, noting that having a female presidential nominee “would be wonderful” and that “a woman would do a great job.” Parton argued that “Hillary might make as good a president as anybody ever has” and stated that she felt she was very qualified for the job.³¹² These statements were perceived by many as an endorsement of Clinton. It didn’t help that Clinton had used Parton’s song, “9 to 5,” during her 2008 presidential campaign. Parton’s remarks generated criticism and threats from commenters on social media who wondered if Parton might be suffering from dementia. Others wondered if it was just a sign that the silicone and hair dye had finally soaked through to her brain.³¹³ In a follow-up interview, Parton clarified

³¹⁰ Jonathan Bernstein, “‘Country Music Has Become Apolitical’: Why Have Acts Kept Quite on the Election?” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2016, accessed February 17, 2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/nov/03/country-music-election-politics>. Also see “Country Music and Politics Go Arm in Arm,” Don Cusic, aired March 1, 2016, on WBUR, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2016/03/01/country-music-and-politics>.

³¹¹ Donald J. Trump, post to Donald J. Trump’s Facebook page, January 14, 2016, accessed January 14, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump/posts/10156529265205725>. See also: Steven Hale, “Red Kentucky Girl: Loretta Lynn’s Trump Endorsement is the (Bitter) Pill,” *Nashville Scene*, January 15, 2016 and Stephen L. Betts, “Loretta Lynn on Grammys, Trump and Why Women’s March Needed More ‘Class,’” *Rolling Stone*, February 10, 2017.

³¹² Melena Ryzik, “Dolly Parton is Proud of Her Gay Fans,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2016.

³¹³ Comment on Allan Wyatt’s Facebook post, July 5, 2016 (7:34 pm), accessed February 28, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dolly%20parton%20endorses%20hillary>; Comment on Debbie Alday’s Facebook post, July 1, 2016 (2:23 am), accessed February 28, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dolly%20parton%20endorses%20hillary>; Comment on Roger Wanda Watts Otts Facebook post, June 30, 2016 (8:55pm), accessed February 28, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dolly%20parton%20endorses%20hillary>; Comment on TasteofCountry.com’s Facebook post, July 2, 2016 (3:18 am), accessed February 28, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dolly%20parton%20endorses%20hillary>. See also: Sterling Whitaker, “Dolly Parton Shares Thoughts on 2016 Presidential Election,” *TasteofCountry.com*, August 20, 2016, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://tasteofcountry.com/dolly-parton-2016-presidential-election/>.

that she was simply commenting on social change and gender equality, joking that she might as well run herself because she's "got the hair for it, it's huge, and they could always use more boobs in the race." She claimed that she had not decided who she was voting for, "but no matter what we're gonna be suffering from P.M.S.: Presidential Mood Swings."³¹⁴ In this case, Parton demonstrated that she did not find it necessary to reveal her political views. She positioned herself as an entertainer and not a politician and chose to keep her political views private. This was not a new strategy for Parton. Throughout her career, she has always chosen when, where, and how to endorse and position herself.

In her statement, Parton affirmed that her fans were of diverse political, racial, and economic backgrounds and in order to keep them, she needed to appear neutral and open to either candidate. She relied on her trademark wit to discuss the absurdity of the campaign and to acknowledge the situation, but not challenge either side and possibly divide her fan base. Aware that her popularity straddled a diverse group of fans, Parton relied on sexual humor and self-deprecating jokes to shift the conversation. In doing so, she balked at challenging country's traditional fan base and remained nonpartisan.

Through my examination of Parton, we can see that there have been moments when she did challenge traditional racial, cultural, and gender boundaries within country music. Looking at Parton through a racial lens allows us to see how she operated alongside the musical color line. To expand her popularity and profits, Parton's music incorporated musical and lyrical elements from disco and other popular music genres. Thus, Parton frequently crossed music's color line,

³¹⁴ Jon Freeman, "Dolly Parton on Election: 'They Could Always Use More Boobs in the Race,'" *Rolling Stone*, July 5, 2016; Melena Ryzik, "Dolly Parton Is Proud of Her Gay Fans and Hillary Clinton," *New York Times*, June 24, 2016; Alexandra King, "Dolly Parton on 2016 Candidates: 'I Think They're Both Nuts,'" CNN, August 26, 2016, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/26/politics/dolly-parton-presidential-candidates/>; Nicole Sands, "Dolly Parton Says She Didn't Endorse Hillary Clinton..." *People*, July 5, 2016; Sterling Whitaker, "Dolly Parton Clarifies Hillary Clinton 'Endorsement' Comments," *Tasteofcountry.com*, July 5, 2016, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://tasteofcountry.com/dolly-parton-hillary-clinton-endorsement/>.

yielding an acknowledgement of the politics and racialization of music genres. By placing Parton's actions in conversation with the musical color line, we can also see the ways in which she embraced racial and musical diversity, not just within her music, but also on her television shows of the late 1970s and 1980s. Parton's diverse guest list on these shows demonstrates her attempt to widen her audience. To do so, she moved beyond the musical color line and incorporated the musical and lyrical stylings of other genres into her songs. At times, however, her attempts of reaching across the color line produced an awkward image from the country star, as we saw was the case in her performance with Davis and McCoo. Nonetheless, Parton increased her own fame by navigating across the musical color line and encouraging others to also look beyond the boundaries of their own genre to increase their popularity.

Similarly, by placing Parton's career in conversation with the Women's Movement, we can see other ways in which she chipped away at the traditional structure of country music. An analysis of Parton's songs demonstrates her thoughts on gender stereotypes, specifically in terms of personality traits, occupations, physical appearance, and domesticity. Through these songs of protest, she expressed ideas that resonated with those involved in the Movement. That is not to say that Parton identified with the Women's Movement. Instead she viewed herself, as did other country women producing similar sounds, as the representatives of working-class women who had been neglected by the Movement. As Parton's career expanded, she played on her own image, using it as a gimmick or a caricature to hide her hidden agenda of contesting the boundaries of the patriarchal country music industry. By both adhering to and exaggerating society's physical expectation of women, Parton presented herself as a more palatable feminist to country music fans. My analysis demonstrates the ways in which she used her position and popularity as a country and crossover entertainer to contest the traditional structure of country

music. This thesis shows how Parton established a distinct career that catered to different audiences as she traversed the musical color line and repackaged the Women's Movement of the 1960s to country music.

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