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# "Ain't My Mama's Broken Heart": The Mothers and Daughters of Hillbilly Feminism

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**Abstract:** The women of country music have long defied the genre's patriarchal associations and used their music as a platform for subversive social messages about gender inequality, and in the past several decades, the country music establishment has grown more willing to alter its image and accommodate these feminist themes. Because country music is marketed and understood by many of its fans as a representation of a lifestyle, this shift in expectations for women's social roles and possibilities in the genre has an impact on the women who identify themselves with the particular rural, down-home image country music aims to define. This potential for country music to reach women who may not ordinarily be exposed to feminist messages, or who may even feel those messages to be antagonistic in other mediums, demonstrates the possibilities and stakes in revising a fraught and problematic tradition, such as country music, for feminist, socially progressive aims. In this essay, I discuss country music as a type of mother figure, offering advice and defining expectations for its daughter's lives. This 'mother' is imperfect and often maddeningly contradictory, yet, as with many real mothers, her messages should often be questioned but not automatically discounted. In light of the current "cancel culture" or "call-out culture" trend in feminist spaces by which traditions or people associated with current or historical promotion of social inequality are labeled irredeemable, the feminism of country music offers lessons about how one might work within a fraught tradition, or alongside a difficult mother, rather than tossing it/her aside.

**Keywords:** feminism, country music, mothers, daughters, nostalgia, cancel culture, call-out culture, music videos

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In 2017, country music artist Chris Janson wrote the song "Drunk Girl" in response to the #MeToo Movement. The song opens by describing an obviously intoxicated woman, followed by an announcement that the song's narrator will take her home. After attempting to provoke some token outrage with the first verse, the song flips the expected script, and the chorus describes in the detail the process by which the narrator sees the woman safely home to "sleep all alone," then admonishes other men to emulate this behavior:

Take a drunk girl home.  
Let her sleep all alone.  
Leave her keys on the counter, your number by the phone.  
Pick up her life she threw on the floor.  
Leave the hall lights on, walk out and lock the door.  
That's how you know the difference between a boy and a man.  
You take a drunk girl home.

The song is obviously well-intentioned and clearly a bid to follow the feminist plea that men engage in conversations about consent and sexual violence with other men. However, in the song's attempt to shame men who would take advantage of an intoxicated woman, it also oddly makes the violent behavior seem normative, implying that rape in this situation is simply the behavior of boys ("the difference between a boy and a man"), which partly excuses the behavior as boyhood foolishness rather than criminal violence. The song makes its appeal not through the language of women's rights, but rather through the invocation of traditional masculinity and the benevolent man's duty to protect vulnerable women. Furthermore, Janson's personal politics further exemplify the ambiguous state of his, and country music in general's, cautious and selective adoption of feminist themes. In spite of Janson's contribution toward ending sexual violence perpetrated against women, Janson has also used his country music clout to help elect Donald Trump (a man who bragged that his fame allows him to sexually assault women and is the subject of numerous sexual assault allegations) even changing the lyrics to Tim McGraw's hit "Truck Yeah!" (2013) to "Trump Yeah!" for a performance at the 2016 Republican National Convention. "Drunk Girl" demonstrates how country music has evolved in paradoxical new ways in response to the feminist movement and that demands for more equal intimate relationships, increased freedom and social power for women, and an end to male violence, have been answered in large part by repackaging essential elements of traditional Southern gender identity and established sentimental narrative arcs.

Because the genre is so heavily associated with tradition and nostalgia, the partnership of feminism and country music seems entirely incompatible, and many of the conservative, xenophobic, and white-supremacist beliefs frequently expressed in or associated with country music fundamentally are. In an essay written in 1979 about the first female country stars, Sharon McKern claimed of country music that it is a form "disseminated by rural, conservative, white, Protestant, Anglo-Celtic Southerners," whose lyrics "link together to form a musical morality firmly grounded in the provincial heritage" (105). In many ways this assessment still holds. However, while it is still imagined to reflect the lifestyle of a rural, Southern white working-class population, country music is and has always been adaptable and capable of absorbing changes to the cultural landscape as well as the makeup of the population. For example, as country music has expanded in popularity, it has increasingly associated itself with the entirety of the country's middle, the largely white, Republican, and rural 'fly-over states' of the West and Midwest. That said, while that genre has expanded its associations as well as its fanbase, it still retains a clear commitment to at least a nominally white, working-class, and Southern vision. The traditions imagined to coincide with this identity regarding gender, race, and morality vie with the influence of social equality movements and changing national standards of acceptability. This conflict often results in a hodge-podge of inconsistencies masquerading as an identifiable group "morality," held together through token references to rural working-class culture: Fords, Daisy Dukes, bare feet, daddy's old boat.

However, while country music can be critiqued on multiple fronts for its incompatibility with social equality movements, generations of women in country music have used this genre to express their frustration with patriarchy and with the home and family they were primed to care for. Encountering the characteristics of the genre that might have served as roadblocks, country music feminism instead grew around, over, and into these obstacles to produce a unique feminist vision with a distinct generational and communal focus. Country music's focus on the lament and on communal relatability gave women the particular freedom to voice common struggles and relatable stories, forging a sense of female community around shared burdens. Moreover, country music's entrenched love of stasis, nostalgia, tradition, and incorporation of older musical characteristics and themes encouraged the women of country to build on the work of feminist foremothers in the genre and to understand themselves as connected to a living narrative of women's history.

Thinking back 'through the mother' has long been an idea which allows feminists to create a women's narrative of history, but also to justify feelings of connection to a particular tradition and to the past. Stretching back to Christine de Pizan's vision of the "city of ladies," many female authors have attempted to provide a chain of foremothers through which women might define themselves. However, this project is only an easy one to entertain when, as in *The City of Ladies*, the foremothers imagined are ideals. Real mothers, who are complex people, often providing models for liberation alongside terrifying visions of subservience to patriarchal domination, are much more difficult to integrate into a vision of the feminist future. The foremothers of country music, through all their associations with nostalgia and tradition, can be understood as just those sorts of difficult, real mothers; and for the many women who grew up learning lessons of life and love and how to be a woman through country music, this idea needs no explanation. Julia Haynes has labeled the movement which grew from these foremothers and came into full popularity in the 90s, calling attention to patriarchal norms specific to rural working-class identity and popularizing an aesthetic of assertive country women, *hillbilly feminism*. Reluctant as it is to branch beyond white heteronormativity and rather essentialist ideas of feminism, hillbilly feminism, as Haynes acknowledges, is an imperfect and limited feminist vision which nevertheless provides crucial insight into the issues and messages of liberation that most resonate with working-class, rural women and continues to influence and embolden real women, perhaps women who might not be reached by feminist messages in a more traditional medium. Haynes further points out that,

Given the overwhelming white, working-class roots of the genre and its association with Southern, rural America, it is easy to dismiss country music as a bastion of political conservatism. Such a dismissal, however, fails to engage the complexities of popular music, popular culture, and feminism and relies on uncritical reflections of region and politics. Additionally, as others have argued, academics' failure to engage in the critical possibilities of country music may reveal an elitist, middle-class aesthetic and potential bias of the academy. (317)

Because country music is clearly not an easy genre to envision used for feminist aims, and the individual foremothers of country music can certainly not be imagined as progressive ideals easily integrated into a feminist vision (country music stars themselves are rarely willing to claim the feminist label), country music provides a useful example, as well as a necessary caution, about how a difficult mother might be grappled with rather than tossed aside on the path of progress. Attempting to own these difficult mothers and the unwieldy feminist movement they helped produce offers a vision of feminism open to selectively embracing rather than uniformly excising tainted cultural visions and traditions and perhaps offers an alternative to the black and white morality and zealous purging of contemporary call out culture.

### **"One's on the Way": Generations of Change**

In 2015, the duo Maddie and Tae raised heads with their cheeky tune about sexual objectification in country music, "Girl in a Country Song," which lamented "we're lucky if we even get/ to climb up in your truck, keep our mouth shut, and ride along." The song critiques the ridiculous over-reliance by the genre on standard tropes of female sexuality labeled "country," and the music video backs up this assertion by performing a gender reversal in which men writhe about on truck beds, shakin' it in daisy dukes and cowboy boots. However, the road to country music videos featuring men in bikini tops (sensually licking popsicles) has not been smooth, and country music has a long history of resisting the integration of a popular feminist perspective. Despite the significant contributions of women to country music, as

outlined in Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann's *Finding Her Voice*, commercial country music has historically tended to favor a male perspective and the country music industry has long been critiqued for its chauvinism. As late as 2004, Beverly Keel wrote, "the double standard is still alive and well on Music Row. Women are still regularly referred to as 'girl singers' within label conference rooms and on tours. It wasn't until the last decade that executives even realized that female artists could sell if given equal opportunity and promotion" (169). In addition to the conservative leanings of the audience and the misogyny of Nashville executives, the genre also boasts a history of glorifying violence against women. In particular, country music songs frequently detail the punishment of a 'wayward' woman who cannot be controlled by a man: she cheats, refuses his advances or she might be more vaguely described as 'triflin', travelin', or devilish. From country music's Appalachian roots, the folk songs "Knoxville Girl" and "The Banks of the Ohio" (both recorded and re-recorded through the decades by countless country artists, original dates are unknown) tell the story of a male narrator who first beats and then drowns his love interest because he is unable to marry her. Jimmie Rogers, one of the first commercially famous country music stars, tells of shooting "poor Thelma/ just to see her jump and fall" in "T is for Texas" (1928) after she has presumably taken up with another man. As late as 1994, Johnny Cash re-recorded the Southern folk song "Delia's Gone." This song, like the others, begins characteristically by establishing the male narrator's perspective and his relationship to the victim ("If I hadn't shot poor Delia/ I'd have had her for my wife"), then later describes the actual murder in fairly gruesome detail: "First time I shot her/ I shot her in the side/ Hard to watch her suffer/ but with the second shot she died." The patriarchal message and threat is made explicit at the song's end: "So if your woman's devilish/ you can let her run/ or you can bring her down and do her/ like Delia got done." Modern incarnations of this theme are still abundant, particularly the murder of the cheating wife: notable examples include the country music "classics" "Ol' Red," "Papa Loved Mama," and Waylon Jennings' "Cedartown, Georgia." This long tradition of depicting violence towards women from the standpoint of the abuser accepts and even seems to celebrate male violence as a means to influence female behavior or cement ownership of individual women.

While country music is also known for glorifying male violence in general (one of the most famous lines of country music, also by Johnny Cash, is "I shot a man in Reno/ just to watch him die"), the country music establishment is far more comfortable with male violence against women than the reverse. Both TNN and CMT banned Garth Brooks' music video for "The Thunder Rolls" (1991) in which a battered wife shoots her abusive husband after he returns home from another woman's bed. Regarding the ban of Brooks' video from their network, a CMT representative commented that the network was "in business to entertain, not to promote or condone gratuitous violence or social issues" (Cox 2009, 93). Notably, however, Brooks' song "Papa Loved Mama" (1992), which tells of a man who shot his cheating wife, received no such criticism.

The history of conservatism, adherence to rigidly defined gender roles, and open misogyny in Nashville's music scene make it even more remarkable that the women of country have succeeded in cementing a lasting feminist influence in the genre. This success, limited as it is, was built through generations of country music foremothers. And true to country music form, today's women of country music consistently call attention to their reliance on previous generations of women in country to both bolster their authenticity and provide a precedent for a feminist message, relying on established templates for advocating women's equality and voicing women's frustrations while still remaining within the collection of allegiances and sensibilities labeled "country." The "Coal Miner's Daughter" (1971), Loretta Lynn, is one of the most potent references for both working-class, down-home, good-ol'-girl authenticity and early success with daring feminist messages. Lynn's "The Pill" (1975), for example, takes the familiar country music conventions of the barefoot and pregnant rural housewife, and the lament of the woman neglected by her man, and flips these conventions into a rip-roaring celebration of contraception. The

housewife from whose perspective the tune is sung tells her husband after years of consecutive pregnancies she is "tearing down [his] brooder house" and putting on "hot pants" because she has discovered the birth control pill. Lynn never called herself a feminist (and doing so certainly wouldn't have aligned with her country music persona), but the contribution of her music to feminism might be measured by its real-world impact on women—especially women who may not have been reached through any other means.

In an interview for *Playgirl*, Lynn recollects being approached by a rural physician who claimed her song had done more to educate isolated, rural women about the availability of the birth control pill than "all the government programs put together" (Cahn 91). Though the Coal Miner's Daughter did receive considerable backlash for "The Pill," her adherence to the traditions, gender norms, and allegiances of country's "musical morality" ultimately outweighed her potential disruption to the fabric of society (as many conservatives, rightly, thought contraception and feminism might do). Lynn, who was born into abject poverty in Butcher Holler, Kentucky, and was married at 15 and mother of four by 18 (eventually having two more children), had the background and experience to speak to and about backwoods, blue collar women from a place of authenticity, and Lynn never stopped reminding audiences of her origins. While her music might have introduced unconventional themes, the familiarity of her traditional rural, feminine persona and the references, storylines, and concerns of her music allowed audiences, particularly female audiences, to feel that her music's feminist message had a place in their world.

Early female country music artists, however, didn't just adapt the conventions of the genre's "musical morality" in order to make their messages acceptable, they also built upon precedents established in earlier work by other women. Kitty Wells, who might be called the first female country music star, established her popularity in 1952 with the song "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Her hit was a response to Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side of Life" (1952) which condemned so-called "honky tonk angels," fallen women who love the nightlife and have multiple male partners. Wells' song answered "it's a shame that all the blame is on us women" and described how men's philandering might cause "many a good girl to go wrong." Not only did the popularity of Wells' hit pave the way for more women to gain a foothold in country music, but its content set a precedent for future country music stars to address controversial issues from a female perspective. For example, Dolly Parton more forcefully reiterated the argument of "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" in 1967 with her hit "Just Because I'm a Woman," which stated "my mistakes are no worse than yours/ just because I'm a woman."

In line with the focus of these early women of country on common and pragmatic troubles related to rural women and to suffering in heterosexual romance, later artists, such as Reba McEntire, and, still later, Martina McBride, Faith Hill, and The Dixie Chicks, began to address the very real and relatable problem of domestic violence. Because of the commonality of murder and revenge stories in country music, particularly concerning lovers, female artists were able to present domestic violence as a common social problem in their music without losing their country music clout. Country music is still full of songs by female artists about domestic violence, perhaps more visibly so now than ever, in part because the modern daughters of country are capitalizing on the niches of feminist thought their mothers already carved out, spaces where feminist messages might be built upon most securely and without losing those essential elements of familiarity and relatability to their audience.

## **“You’re Lookin’ at Country”: Nostalgia, Feminism, and the Difficult Mother**

Beyond the individual foremothers of country music, the genre itself might be read as centrally concerned with mothers through its investment in nostalgia, and therefore all female artists, particularly those attempting a feminist interpretation of the genre, might be said to work against or alongside a mother. Nostalgia has long been an avenue by which mothers have become associated with history, particularly visions of history representing ideas of the utopic or primitive. Rita Felski’s “On Nostalgia: The Prehistoric Woman” examines how the emergence of sociology, and particularly the writings of Georg Simmel, formed an image of maternity imagined to be antithetical to modernity (1995). Felski states that the maternal has rather come to represent “an authentic point of origin, a mythic referent untouched by the strictures of social and symbolic mediation” (38). This image of utopic femininity aligns women with an imagined primitivism and unplotable, yet certainly pre-industrial, past. This figuration of the mother is particularly salient in a genre associated with the South, in which the pre-industrial and pre-capitalist past is imagined as being comparatively recent. Furthermore, Felski argues that the association of the primitive with mothers necessitated that men’s plots of self-development and emergence into the modern be framed as a rejection and separation from the feminine: “within this tradition, nostalgia and the feminine come together in the representation of a mythic plenitude, against which is etched an overarching narrative of masculine development as self-division and existential loss” (1995, 38). In this way, discussions of returning to historical ways of being or to historical knowledge are frequently framed as a return to the mother.

Modern women, however, have also been presented with the option of breaking with the mother in order to enter what Marianne Hirsch calls a “male plotline” of self-development and progress in which the woman is imagined as entering into both the modern and the public (1989). The adoption of feminist ideas prompts women to adopt a “daughterly” perspective, rebelling against “foremothers” in an attempt to overcome their association with patriarchal oppression and the stifling of female opportunity and mobility. Adrienne Rich calls this process of aligning oneself with the male plot “matrophobia,” described as “a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free.” She continues, “The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree women, the martyr” (1976, 236).

However, because country music is so symbolically invested in the mother through its idealization of the past and its investment in nostalgia, the mother is not so easy to escape. Because allegiance to the problematic past (and therefore the mother) is built into the genre, feminist intentions of the country singer might be viewed as always somewhat compromised, or alternatively, she might be viewed as forever at the frontlines of a battle between progress and tradition. The country music singer and songwriter is forced to demonstrate a commitment to the tradition, including traditional ideas of gender and the ambiguous category of the ‘Southern lady,’ even while attempting to envision new ways to be a woman in a rural Southern-identified world. Nevertheless, it is because the country singer is forced to first grapple with and then ultimately work alongside the mother that the genre presents a lesson to feminists concerning the pitfalls and joys of entertaining what Hirsch calls “maternal discourse.”

The song referred in this article’s title, “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2011), emblemizes this grappling of daughterly and maternal perspectives. The daughter in Miranda Lambert’s bad-break-up anthem must overcome the image of her mother as a silent and suffering martyr to emotional pain in order to express her own anger and sadness. The mother, furthermore, becomes the representation of patriarchal social custom, indicating that appropriate behavior for women includes maintaining silence and an appealing façade in the face of all manner of emotional turmoil. As the song’s chorus makes clear, the imagined mother’s voice stands for a rejected “Old Guard” of ladies and seems to speak for the set of

social rules to which they so rigidly adhere: Go and fix your make up girl, it's just a break up run an'/ Hide your crazy and start actin' like a lady 'cause I/ Raised you better, gotta keep it together even when you fall apart./ But this ain't my mama's broken heart." The emphasis is not simply on reining in the public displays of intense emotion which give the song its comedic tone; the mother demands silence: "Powder your nose, paint your toes, line your lips, and keep 'em closed." It is clear how, in country music and in life, the admonishment that a woman who maintains her pride by keeping silent about heartache results in women unable to pursue means, legal and otherwise, of bettering her situation.

The figure of the silent, suffering martyr who remains stoically resigned to her man's cruel treatment is a staple of country music songs written by women in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" (1969) advises women to forgive all manner of indiscretions and cruel treatment in order to receive and retain a man's love<sup>1</sup>, and songs like Reba McEntire's "The Stairs" (1987) dramatize the woman who covers up the evidence of abuse and is unable to imagine a means to safely leave her situation. In "Mama's Broken Heart," these messages about the essential suffering entailed in being a woman cohere in the figure of the mother, who stands in for a collective idea of 'oppressed women from the past.' The conflict between this figure and the protagonist is represented symbolically between mother and daughter (as the younger speaker pits her worldview against that of older women), as well as literally between mother and daughter, as the song's speaker imagines a fight with her mother concerning rumors of her behavior.

In order to imagine taking revenge for the heartbreak she's endured, the song's speaker rejects and silences the voice of her mother, an opposition which associates the mother with stasis and the daughter with action: "Can't get revenge and keep a spotless reputation/ Sometimes revenge is a choice you gotta make/ My mama came from a softer generation/ Where you get a grip and bite your lip just to save a little face." Hirsch claims that this silencing of the mother and the maternal in order that the daughter might be inscribed into the male plotline of progress, action, and mobility is a defining feature of the mother/daughter plot. This formulaic opposition requires the daughter to disassociate from the mother in order to imaginatively join the non-domestic and masculine realm of action and progress, but it also recreates her as a representative rather than a victim of patriarchy—the obstacle that precludes mobility.

"Mama's Broken Heart" might also be seen as an allegory for the state of women in country overall. Because current female artists, such as Lambert, have become known for expressing themselves in terms and tones of anger that weren't as easily accessible to earlier generations, it would be easy to label this distinction as a point of opposition between current and previous generations of women in country music (generations in which women were more overtly required to present an acceptably domestic façade in order to be accepted in the country music scene). However, as previously demonstrated, earlier generations were never so silent and compliant, and current generations, still stifled by industry standards, are not so free. On the surface, "Mama's Broken Heart" depicts a mother shunted aside so a daughter can take her place. However, one might wonder why turning away from the mother's perspective is followed by such obviously destructive and fruitless behavior (Lambert's character giving herself a terrible haircut and causing a drunken scene at a local bar). As referenced earlier, while mainstream country music has become more adaptable in recent years to certain strains of feminist thinking, it does so with the caveat that the allegiances essential to the genre (home, tradition, nostalgia, and, symbolically, mothers) be maintained. Miranda Lambert's character might fight with her mother, but she can't leave and go on without her, and there is no clear triumph in the daughter's wholesale rejection of the mother's standards of behavior.

While Lambert's character breaks the mold and expresses all the emotions denied to her in her mother's lady-like template, and she's left at the end of the music video with an impending arrest warrant.



Because country music forces the new to come into some compliance with the old, the daughter cannot simply reject the mother, and feminist country singers as a whole are forced to remain in constant dialogue with foremothers, working to reference and integrate their country music foremothers and the visions of society they came to represent. In more successful visions of rebellion, when one element of that maternal vision is rejected, such as the privileged role of women's silence in maintaining the family honor and morality, often another is pushed in its place to compensate for the loss, such as the particular role of women in building communal ties. Though allegiance to the mother and the more traditional vision she represents assures that attempted integration of feminist thought will only be accepted if packaged alongside familiar notions of gender and family, this continual peacemaking often reveals pleasant and surprising new visions of a mother who was never so backward and compliant as she seemed.

### **“Fist City”: Domestic Violence Activism in Country Music**

In country music depicting female revenge for domestic violence, the merging of female perspectives allows the songs to achieve a feminist message that moves past the airing of heterosexual female complaint and the acknowledgement of domestic violence as a legitimate social concern (the goal of many previous generations of female country music singers when addressing intimate violence within the family). The domestic violence revenge songs of the past few decades often situate family violence within social institutions and the community and, perhaps most subversively, redirect the listener or viewer's allegiances from the primary coupling of the man and woman to a coalition of capable, powerful, and ultimately triumphant women.

“Goodbye Earl,” the Dixie Chicks' 1999 hit, for example, frames the solution to domestic violence as female collaboration and the creation of alternative family structures. “Goodbye Earl” ends with the abused woman and her best friend, after murdering and disposing of the abuser's body, growing old together, living off of the profits of a roadside stand, and enjoying casual sexual escapades with their customers—possibly charging the men for the privilege (with a wink and a smack on the behind, the video suggests more is offered than ham and jam). While the presumption is that the song, as well as the video, will focus on the heterosexual coupling in which the abuse takes place, “Goodbye Earl” shifts the spotlight to the dynamic and intimate friendship between two women and their creation of an idyllic alternative family coupling by the song's end. Although the song's title announces it to be about a relationship with a man named Earl, the opening line “Mary Anne and Wanda were the best of friends” signals a jarring reversal of expectations. Earl, in fact, appears merely as a caricature of a violent man who serves to further the central plotline following Mary Anne and Wanda. The trope in domestic violence narratives is that the violence is kept secret between the heterosexual pair. In the story of Mary Anne and Wanda, the violence between Earl and Wanda is left entirely exposed while the women hold the real secret: the location of Earl's body.

Moreover, in “Goodbye Earl,” activism and action come through direct identification with tradition and identifiable rural and Southern “ladylike” behavior. Both the murder, which liberates Wanda from Earl, and the women's eventual creation of an alternative family are effected through a reworking of Southern, rural tropes of femininity: Mary Anne and Wanda are introduced as “both members of the 4H Club, both active in the FFA” and kill Earl with a bowl of black-eyed peas. Further, the murder and the post-murder lifestyle both involve the service of food to men. The story of the murder and the women's escape from punishment ambiguously parodies and harmonizes with the feminine ideals of earlier generations even as the plot, in other ways, radically breaks with that same traditional narrative of feminine life and essentialized feminine suffering.

Like the Dixie Chicks, many current country music singers are able to use scenes of violence against women to justify critiques of systemic issues of patriarchy, as well as depict radical female rebellion, all the while maintaining a perceived allegiance to a nostalgic vision of Southern and rural femininity. These songs also frequently foreground connections between women rather than between the abuser and the abused. Mother/daughter pairings are especially common and reveal both how the genre views abuse as generational, as well as how our contemporary understanding of domestic abuse is filtered through traditional models of intimacy, family life, and gender expectations.

The lasting endurance of the domestic violence revenge motif in country music over the past thirty years can partly be attributed to its memorable beginnings as a source of wild controversy and partly to its eventual status as a symbolic triumph for women's rights in country music (the songs became "classics" in spite of the outrage). As a woman's revenge in response to domestic violence became a common motif in country music throughout the 90s, many songs were refused air time, and many singers touted as dangerous and immoral on country music stations. This public outcry, moreover, was patently linked to the woman's use of violence to end the abuse. As stories of women lamenting yet ultimately unable to leave their abuse had been established in country music for decades, it was plainly the woman's act of violence and the assertion that the woman's action was an acceptable punishment for the man's behavior which branded the contents immoral. Several years before Martina McBride and the Dixie Chicks were the subjects of controversy and were issued a series of bans on country music stations for their revenge anthems "Independence Day" (1994) and "Goodbye Earl" (2000), one of the first music videos to be banned for depicting a woman murdering her husband in retaliation for domestic violence, "The Thunder Rolls," was written and directed by a man. Brooks said that he got the idea for "The Thunder Rolls" from women who told him they identified with his song "If Tomorrow Never Comes" because they were routinely abused by their husbands and in constant fear for their lives (Nash 1991). "This is real life," Brooks stated, "Where I'm from, people aren't afraid to talk about it." The veracity of that statement, however, might be weighed against the response his song prompted, both from those eager to put the women of country music (in and out of the lyrics and videos) back in their place and from those willing to praise the song's progressive potential (in the same year that Brooks' song was banned from most mainstream country radio-stations, as well as CMT and TNN, the song won CMA's "Music Video of the Year" award).

Notably, the controversy surrounding both Garth Brooks and Martina McBride also focused on the fact that each of the music videos in question imagined a young daughter to be the key witness to the abuse. Garth Brooks' "The Thunder Rolls" video intersperses scenes of domestic violence with cuts to the young daughter's face as she watches from the stairwell. This focus on the next generation is clearly meant to imply that violence allowed to continue in the present has ramifications for the future, but it might additionally prompt the critique that the mother in these visions of revenge comes to be viewed as a necessary sacrifice to her children's well-being, aligning any radical action the mother might take with the traditional notion that the body of the mother is less important than that of her children. In analyzing the rhetoric of the pro-life movement, Lauren Berlant (1997) theorizes that the body of the mother serves as a reminder of national history and memory, particularly the most traumatic and unpleasant knowledge of the past, in opposition to the body of the fetus she carries within her, which is ahistorical and untouched by memory. The fetus in this nationalist pro-life rhetoric stands for the possibility of an ideal national future, free from memory and the traumas of history. In Berlant's reading, the mother's gendered body is a representation of the burden of memory as well as a potential site of national disaster, in that her rights to an abortion may symbolically blot out the nation's future, as well as its means of escape from the past.

This is particularly important as domestic violence is an issue that is frequently deemed a part of the past, something that no longer routinely happens or an issue that has been solved in the narrative of

American progress. The death or confinement of the mother in country music might be interpreted through Berlant's reading as the means by which the narrative of American progress might be restored, as the past is swept aside while the daughter comes to reassure the audience by representing the unblighted future. "The Thunder Rolls" seems partly to embrace this symbolism, ending with a close-up of the mother, as she listens to the encroaching police sirens, first lighting and then gripping two tapered candles next to her face in a manner reminiscent of jailed prisoners gripping the bars of their cells. The relationship between this mother's actions and her daughter's presence is left unclear. The daughter might be read as saved or abandoned. The only clear message is that they are the only parties left standing in the end and left to reckon with each other in the aftermath of violence. Unlike in the pro-life rhetoric Berlant uses as source for her discussion of the intersections of nationalism and reproductive futurity, the daughter in this and other revenge anthems is not like the blank slate of the fetus. Already inscribed on the daughter are the events she has witnessed, and she carries her mother's story and the problems of 'the past' into the future.

Martina McBride's "Independence Day" presents a similar vision of a daughter critically invested in the traumas of her mother. The story is told through the perspective of the young daughter who comes home to find that her mother has set the house on fire, killing the father and most likely herself, in response to years of unrelenting abuse. Again, the emotional center of the song is not the abusive heterosexual relationship but rather the way the mother and daughter have been bonded by mutual care during the shared experience of abuse, symbolized in the music video version by an intro showing the mother and daughter clasping hands before the song begins. The opening lyrics, moreover, intimate the depth of this bond by illustrating the young daughter's investment in her mother's emotional state: "Well she seemed all right by dawn's early light/ Though she looked a little worried and weak." It is only because the daughter is so attuned to her mother that she is able to tell the story, as the song and video blend both the mother and daughter's perspectives, allowing the daughter to recount events only her mother could have personally witnessed. The mother's death, moreover, seems to solidify that connection even more powerfully. As an adult woman telling a story from her childhood, the daughter's worldview and identity have been shaped by the mother's choice. She says of the story, "Now I ain't sayin' it's right or it's wrong,/ But maybe it's the only way." The daughter's assessment of her mother's murder/suicide as "the only way" justifies the mother's action in an environment that leaves her no other viable options—an assertion which implicates the systemic nature of patriarchy, institutional inadequacies, and a complex web of social problems rather than the bad actions of an individual man.

The melding of the mother and daughter's perspectives in the music video, moreover, allows this shift in blame from individual bad outliers to the community and its institutions to be made more overtly and forcefully. The video for "Independence Day" begins with a cut-in of "Amazing Grace" during which the mother and daughter are seen holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. As well as foreshadowing the mother's death in the choice of song, this pseudo-memorial service sets a precedent for the rest of the video. The visual connection established between mother and daughter as they look at one another will be broken, but their perspectives remain intertwined as the narrative unfolds, each informing the other. While the mother endures her drunk husband at home, the daughter walks alone to the county fair and sees two clowns enact a slapstick fight. The mock domestic violence portrayed by a male and female clown is interspersed with scenes of the mother brutally beaten by her husband, the distressed and crying faces of the mother and daughter cut between the laughing faces of the fair-goers. Leading up to the daughter's arrival at the fair, McBride sings, "Some folks whispered and some folks talked/ But everybody looked the other way/ And when time ran out there was no one about/ On Independence Day." By weaving the mother and daughter's planes of vision together, the sense of responsibility for the abuse within the family extends beyond the domain of the home and into the community as a whole. In creating

a frightening mockery of the violence, the fair indicates the mockery that the daughter's suffering makes of rural Southern communal values, in which neighbors are expected to look out for one another and men are expected to protect women and children. Moreover, after the mother resignedly makes the decision to burn down the house with both herself and her husband inside, shots of the burning debris alternate with images of detritus left after the fair. While these coexisting messes continue to implicate one another, the lyrics explain the inadequacy of the belated response:

Well, she lit up the sky that fourth of July  
By the time that the firemen come  
They just put out the flames  
And took down some names  
And sent me to the county home.

The video also places a policeman at the scene who stops the daughter from running toward the burning home. As with the firefighters and the social workers, his appearance within the scene seems meant to demonstrate that kindly intervention has come far too late. It is both the community and its institutions that have failed this mother and daughter.

Furthermore, while the song's emotional appeal relies on repurposing patriotic rhetoric (particularly for its intended core audience), the accompanying music video parallels this appeal with an almost absurd number of American flags, appearing first as the daughter reaches the fair-ground and then cut in throughout the rest of the video. The flags, as well as the lyrics, referencing freedom, liberty, and, obliquely, war, tap into a guaranteed emotional reservoir; however, they also implicate the entire nation with their presence, extending the scope of blame from the failed community (who "looked the other way" and ultimately were only able to "just put out the flames") to the nation as a whole. The American flags indicate failure of the entire country to adequately protect and provide for its women and girls. Moreover, as the narrative progresses, the increasing filth, in the form of discarded items from the fair, around the absurdly large and numerous American flags also suggests that the country has sullied its core values by ignoring the plight of women and allowing violence to continue unabated. The story's narrator, a grown up version of the daughter, sings of her mother's decision to end the abuse with violence, "Now I ain't sayin' it's right or it's wrong/ But maybe it's the only way./ Talk about your revolution/ It's Independence Day." The diminishing of America's attachment to the core values associated with patriotism, community, and Christianity, the lyrics imply, is what has left this mother without recourse for help, believing in the end that her choice was "the only way." The values of freedom, justice, equality, and Christian virtue then conversely come to be represented by the tragic and violent mother whose actions right the wrong that has been allowed to continue. Following this line of logic, the mother is regarded on an epic scale, a revolutionary on par with the founding fathers and soldiers in the war for American independence. Because traditional gender roles (men as the protectors of women), social institutions, and communal assistance have failed, this reversal of gender expectations, as the chorus makes clear, is not only a necessary "reckoning" but one sanctioned by God:

Let freedom ring, let the white dove sing  
Let the whole world know that today  
Is a day of reckoning.  
Let the weak be strong, let the right be wrong  
Roll the stone away, let the guilty pay

It's Independence Day.

The reference to the stone which was supernaturally rolled from Christ's tomb suggests not only enlightenment and the freedom from bondage in Christian parlance (generally the bondage of sin), but is also raises the specter of life after death through the figure of the risen Christ. The comparison of the mother's choice to burn down the house to the experience of enlightenment upon accepting Christianity again highlights the radical terms with which the song is willing to voice acceptance of her decision; however, the reference to the resurrection also suggests the continued life of the mother, presumably in spirit and in her daughter.

Although the song relies on a conservative blend of nationalism, patriarchy, and glorification of violence to achieve its emotional appeal, the connection between daughter and mother allows the song to channel these nostalgic desires for "older" or "truer" American values toward a progressive end, teaching that the blame for male violence doesn't lay with individual bad men, but rather with social and cultural institutions and communal apathy. Moreover, even the glorification of vigilante-style violence is made more complex by the mingling of generational perspectives. While, in some senses, the mother is clearly viewed as an avenger restoring the balance of justice, it is also clear that insufficient social and institutional support ultimately drove her to take the drastic actions she did. Like the discarded litter from the fair which increasingly surrounds the American flags as the song closes, the mother and daughter have similarly been forgotten and left behind by their community, their country, and the institutions that claim to protect them.

However, it might be argued that the song's reliance on traditional frameworks of Southern gender identity and established sentimental narrative arcs undermines its progressive social message, even if those traditional frameworks and narratives have been repurposed to new meaning. Berlant (2008) has argued that because the conventions of sentimentality encourage the reader (or listener) to see mass trauma through the suffering of an individual family, the genre facilitates an understanding of systemic violence as the result of individual acts rather than institutions of power. However, while country music concerning domestic violence is almost always sentimental, the genre also frequently expands the issue both vertically and horizontally, presenting abuse through communities of women, both friends and relations, and through generations, a problem passed from mother to daughter. The songs also envision and predict a community of similarly affected women. "Independence Day" is not alone in highlighting the failures of these traditional safety nets. Frequently, as in "Goodbye Earl", the woman first tries to end the abuse thorough other means, or it is implied that others might have intervened and ended the violence. The most common complaint, however, is that police protection is inadequate and often rather protects the abuser than the victim. Wanda, in "Goodbye Earl," first relies on the legal system and a divorce to separate herself from the abuse. However, after letting "the law take it from there," she finds that none of these systems are able to set her free from Earl. The song focuses specifically on the restraining order, one means by which abused women frequently attempt to protect themselves from an abuser. Earl is able to "[walk] right through" this restraining order and "put her in intensive care." Before any mention of retaliatory murder, "Goodbye Earl" makes clear that the expected legal channels of ending abuse are often profoundly ineffective at protecting women from further violence.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in Faith Hill's "A Man's Home Is His Castle" (1995), the abuse victim only decides to buy a gun after she experiences firsthand that law enforcement is unwilling to substantially intervene. The song describes a waitress who confides in a boss or coworker the reason she has come into work with a black eye. Not only has her husband beaten her, but when law enforcement was called, they appear more sympathetic to the abusive husband (a man who is also "laying down the law"). She narrates,

Someone must have heard the noise and they dialed 911  
And the cop that showed up at the door asked,  
"Is there a problem son?"  
Jimmy smiled and said "No sir, just a little fight that's all  
Hey you know how it gets sometimes  
When you're layin' down the law.

After this experience, it's clear why the woman believes she must enforce justice herself. Only because police are unwilling to restrain this man does the woman attempt to leave this violent situation by making her own threats of violence. The critique of police intervention in situations of domestic violence continues in the line, "Somebody oughta lock him up but I'm the one/ Who's done the time." While the overt metaphor is that the woman's home has become a jail, the shift from incarcerating the perpetrator to the victim also seems to reference the practice of blaming the victim for involving themselves with a violent person or for staying after the violent behavior became apparent.

The context of the song also provides insight into the social and economic fallout of abuse for the victims. The song itself is the woman's explanation of why she has dared to come to work with a black eye: "I wouldn't have come in today/ But I really need the cash/ I know I can't fool anyone 'cause dark glasses tell no lies/ But make-up won't cover up a blackened eye." The lyrics imply that the customers and her coworkers will be made uncomfortable not by her physical injuries, but because they will correctly be able to deduce that she is being abused. It is only desperation for money (to buy a gun and leave) that has caused the woman to brave social disapproval by coming to work in her state. Both the woman's desperation to work in order to leave and the difficulties that the abuse causes in her work-life demonstrate the frustrating complexities of the economic impact of abuse. The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (in collaboration with the CDC) estimates that victims of intimate partner violence lost almost 8 million days of paid work due to the abuse (2003, 3). "A Man's Home is His Castle" testifies to the untenable economic situation abuse often creates for victims, unable to afford leaving yet also unable to succeed at work or even continue working at all. However, the most revolutionary aspect of the song is that it links all these forces that prevent the abused woman from leaving. Though unnamed, the song gestures toward patriarchy, represented by the titular phrase "a man's home is his castle," as the force which causes the man, police, restaurant workers and patrons alike to believe that a man has a right to do whatever he pleases in his home.

The domestic violence revenge song is currently such a staple in country music by female performers that one popular meme claims that while male country artists write lyrics like "I love my truck and my beers," female country artists write about killing their husbands. Because each generation of women in country music consistently built on the messages and themes of foremothers in the genre, a woman revenging herself on a violent husband is currently accepted, and even expected, as a part of country music's usual repertoire. Once the subject of outright bans, the domestic violence revenge song has now, bafflingly, become a fixture of a wholesome country persona. Carrie Underwood, who built a career for herself as a family-friendly, controversy-free performer, is also known for a profusion of domestic violence revenge songs. Her song "Church Bells" (2016) like Martina McBride's "Independence Day," implies that a type of holy justice has been meted out by an abused woman who kills her husband. Jenny, a pretty country girl who marries a rich and violent oil man, has answered her own prayers by poisoning her husband, and the church bells, which at first celebrate her marriage and then seem to advocate submission and resignation to God's plan during the abuse, chime their approval of the murder by the song's end. God, in "Church Bells," appears flexible to a little vigilante justice if the cause is right. And the cause, twenty-three years after Martina McBride released "Independence Day," is right. For

better or worse, country music now unquestioningly celebrates the victory of an abused woman killing her violent husband. After decades of repetition, the women of country have made the unacceptability of domestic violence, and the justice of the victim doling out her own retribution, part of the “musical morality” of country music.

While these songs and their messages certainly gain their power from a host of problematic associations and beliefs, such as the glorification of violence and protections due to women which have historically excluded women of color, the women of country have collectively succeeded in making domestic violence unacceptable to the extent that the punishment of perpetrators is beyond controversy. Much like Loretta Lynn’s “The Pill” was invaluable in informing rural women about the availability of the birth control pill, as well as making it feel acceptable and familiar, songs about domestic violence have undoubtedly impacted the outlook of real women caught in abusive domestic situations. While the methods artists have used to accomplish this culture shift within country music are certainly subject to critique, the popularity of these songs has undoubtedly made it easier for victims of domestic violence to speak out about their abuse and to find sympathy and institutional support when they do.

### **“Lead Me On”: Learning from the Feminism of Country Music**

Even as female performers have forced the genre to change its values and standards of acceptability for content, country music as a whole, as a perpetually male-dominated production and distribution establishment, remains a bastion of sexism. Jada Watson’s recent study (via SongData and in consultation with WOMAN Nashville), demonstrates that the amount of airtime women receive on country music radio, as well as the percentage of their songs to reach top 40, has actually drastically decreased between 2000 and 2018. Even further, Watson’s study reveals that songs by women and male-female ensembles are frequently relegated to midday and late-night timeslots when listeners are fewer (12). After twenty years of political correctness and the growth of social justice movements, country stations no longer openly denounce the radical content of female artists’ music, or issue outright bans of their songs, but in return they seem to have mastered the more insidious art of subtlety, quietly shuffling female artists’ songs out of the line-up by refusing them prime air time. In a controversy later termed “tomato-gate,” one country music radio consultant openly advised that songs by women be treated as accessories in what ought to be a foundationally male-dominated genre, specifically as “tomatoes” in the otherwise male “salad” of country music.<sup>3</sup>

However, women in country music are still releasing contentious new content in spite of the backlash and revising what it means to connect with a country music identity. The Dixie Chicks, for example, recently changed their name to “The Chicks,” dropping the “Dixie” in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, and releasing a protest song, “March March” (2020) on their latest album *Gaslighter*. Newer singers like Kacey Musgraves, with lyrics such as “kiss lots of boys, or kiss lots of girls, if that’s something you’re into,” continue to build on the foundation of earlier women of country, branching into more controversial topics and traditionally off-limits themes. Musgraves, who some have claimed as the future of country music,<sup>4</sup> has notably used her music to promote LGBTQ acceptance and explore such topics as safe sex, recreational marijuana use, and the plausibility of Christian belief systems. She has even used her platform to advocate for political action to end gun violence. In an interview with *Billboard*, Musgraves named Dolly Parton as a career inspiration for her challenge to the traditional morality of country music: “Beauty, sex appeal, brains, wit, humor, beautiful songwriting, meaningful songwriting, no apologies for who she is, LGBTQ advocate long before it was even a thing or trendy or whatever... She’s fearless and I admire her spirit a lot and she’s very kind.” Perhaps especially because of

the ongoing efforts to silence female artists by the country music establishment, today's women in country are aware that they have been passed the baton. The work of generations of women in country is still ongoing, and today's female artists are still quick to remind audiences of their connection to the chain.

Looking at country music as a whole, it is easy to discount the feminism of a genre with such controversial associations and that clearly invests in the essentializing gender fixations often connected with the sentimental. Berlant's writing might support the position that "A Man's Home is His Castle" is part of "the complaint genres of "women's culture," the complaint being "women live for love and love is the gift that keeps on taking" (2008, 1). These genres, she says, "tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place. . . One might say that it's a space of disappointment, but not disenchantment" (2). While I have already asserted that the domestic violence revenge songs of country music point to institutional problems in addition to bad ideologies and individual men, the critique that this form maintains some enchantment with the causes of these disappointments is entirely within reason. In particular, I've identified nostalgic Southern traditions and gender identities as worlds of distinction and desire to which these songs maintain a conflicted but sincere fidelity. Each of the songs discussed gives clear markers to indicate that the women in them are recognizably feminine and part of the small town, Southern working-class tradition with which modern country music aligns itself. "A Man's Home is His Castle" might be seen as connected to a long line of women's country songs complaining about men who "come home a-drinkin" (Loretta Lynn's "Don't Come Home a Drinkin'" 1967) and about the double standards of gender which cause a "good girl to go wrong" (Kitty Wells' "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" 1952). However, while these songs align themselves with the world of rural, Southern distinctions and desires, it is not as though that world is only capable of recreating familiar disappointments. Like Mary Anne and Wanda, the listener might find happiness in a life that weaves together both old and new, using tradition to envision alternate possibilities. In this way, the feminism of country music argues against that overt rejection of tradition, which is ultimately an attempt to reject our mothers' broken hearts in order to give ours a chance.

Moreover, attempts at a feminist message within such a conservative and maligned genre raise questions about the efficacy of feminist activism (or any activism) through media that isn't traditionally progressive. In addressing the need for a more diverse approach to feminist theory, Audre Lorde famously stated that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1984, 111). Certainly, feminism that tears down one pillar of injustice while building another is not ideal or efficient. That said, this seemingly sensible idea is often used, I believe, overzealously, to bar anything historically associated with forms of oppression from the possibility of feminist adaptation or revision. The result ironically opposes Lorde's initial call for creative integration of difference by making feminism seem unreachable and seemingly hostile to women who identify themselves with traditions branded unwelcome—rural, working-class white women in particular seem to feel this hostility. A side effect of "cancel culture" or "call-out culture"—the rush to identify and condemn what is problematic in academic and popular culture—is a narrower margin of real or perceived acceptability and inclusion. The seemingly inevitable result of this sheer volume of critique is the demonization of the mainstream in favor of the niche: the hidden, unpolluted zones of progressive, woke-minded folk.

For example, Kate Eichhorn's *The Archival Turn in Feminism* (2013) seeks to document the evolution of feminist archival work over the past two decades and, in doing so, stabilizes what a feminist archive should look like using examples exclusively from urban centers and niche collectives (focused mainly on Riot Grrrl and Zine collections). In one sense, this move toward the niche is part of the larger, laudable project of moving the 'margins to the center'; however, it in part reflects a search for sin-free spaces in the wake of an overflow of condemnation. In light of Eichhorn's claim that, in examining the



evolution of feminist archives, she is also writing about “what has become of the [feminist] movement during the past two decades,” her choice of examples insinuates a poignant message of exclusivity in which feminism is to be found in culturally progressive urban collectives and youth culture (2013, ix). The rejection of the mainstream, the traditional, and the rural serves to make feminism seem antithetical to the experiences of women who identify with those categories. As context, 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the last presidential election. We might read the crowds of rural and working-class white women who turned up in droves to vote for Trump as repudiating a brand of feminism which hasn’t appealed to them or seemed to meet their needs. Loretta Lynn, when asked whether or not she considers herself a feminist, continues to make this argument today. In her song “One’s on the Way” (1972), she critiques the feminist movement for its unrelatability to rural, working-class women who are likely lacking access to education, spare time, and niche progressive spaces. The lyrics claim, “The girls in New York City, they all march for Women's Lib and better homes and garden shows, the modern way to live. And the pill may change the world tomorrow, but meanwhile, today here in Topeka, the flies are a buzzin', the dog is a barkin', and the floor needs a scrubbin'. One needs a spankin' and one needs a huggin', Lord, one's on the way.” Although Loretta Lynn released this song in 1972, the class and cultural tensions she addresses are still relevant today.

To reach these women, I argue that the master’s tools may be exactly what is necessary and that it makes a difference whose hand holds the tools. In the zealous work of cleaning house, tossing out all forms of culture and tradition dirtied with a history of inequality, it is worth questioning who and what is lost in the bargain. For this reason, there are stakes in looking at something like country music, which appeals to a particular audience of women who may see themselves as outside the scope of traditional feminism, to see what kinds of feminist messages it attempts as well as what lessons it offers about attempting progressive change while holding onto a fraught tradition. At its best, the hillbilly feminism of country music demonstrates how feminist communities can maintain a sense of continuity and communion between generations of women by consciously celebrating and building on the work of foremothers. The approach to feminism which would toss out anything which could be labeled as “the master’s tools” leaves us without much of the knowledge of previous generations of women, those imperfect, maddening, and possibly mad mothers. We need that knowledge, even if it is flawed and imperfect, to write a story not of individual progress but of a collective push for change, one that includes as many women as possible.

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## Notes

1. “Sometimes it's hard to be a woman/ Giving all your love to just one man./ You'll have bad times/ And he'll have good times,/ Doin' things that you don't understand/ But if you love him you'll forgive him,/ Even though he's hard to understand/ And if you love him oh be proud of him,/ 'Cause after all he's just a man.”
2. A report published in *Homicide Studies* four years previous to the release of “Goodbye Earl” found that 54% of femicide victims reported stalking to the police before they were murdered (310).
3. One reference to tomato-gate can be found at Grady Smith (2015).
4. Reference to this can be found at Frank Olito (2019).

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