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## Book Review: *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions*

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Francesca T. Royster. *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022. 248 pages.

Over the past decade, country music studies have undergone a revision, incorporating more racially and ethnically inclusive narratives that have begun to shift understandings about who has historically played and enjoyed the music.<sup>1</sup> This correction represents a shift in comparison to earlier generations of country music scholarship. The first academic work on the genre, Bill C. Malone's *Country Music USA*, was released in 1968 and came at a moment when social history that was told "from the bottom up" began to gain traction within academic inquiry. This new field sought to tell the stories of average people, rather than elites. As country music was first placed within this framework, it defined the music as the product of a white, southern working class. As such, it became a subject of classist discrimination for its designation as "hillbilly music."

While Malone's identification of country as a type of music associated with a marginalized community was and continues to be not without merit, this narrative has nevertheless wielded unique influence over country music studies. After more than five decades, *Country Music USA* has never gone out of print. Furthermore, its grip continues to dominate popular understandings about the music. For example, Ken Burns's 2019 *Country Music* documentary heavily relied on the book in telling the genre's history, and Malone was the only historian consulted for the project. Such staunch understandings of country's associations with a working-class (and implicitly white) identity has made it difficult to begin to understand the ramifications of how its conflation with whiteness has made it a tool of white supremacy at the same time.

1. Over roughly the past decade several studies have been released highlighting the multiracial and multiethnic presence in country music, including Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Nadine Hubbs and Francesca T. Royster, "Uncharted Country: New Voices and Perspectives in Country Music Studies Special Issue," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (2020), 32; Kristina M. Jacobsen, *The Sound of Navajo Country: Music, Language, and Diné Belonging* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Jada E. Watson and Paula J. Bishop, eds., *Whose Country: Genre, Identity, and Belonging in Twenty-First-Century Country Music Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Alice Randall, *My Black Country: A Journey Through Country Music's Black Past, Present, and Future* (New York, NY: Atria/Black Privilege Publishing, 2024).

Francesca T. Royster's *Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions* offers a welcome corrective to the looming narrative that country music has historically been and continues to be limited to white appeal, adding to a growing literature that reframes which communities sit at the roots, present, and future of the genre. This work is not Royster's first foray into country music studies. In 2020, she co-edited a country music special edition of the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, which highlighted new directions in the field, especially with regard to its intersection with race and ethnic studies. In her latest work, Royster examines country music through Black artists' creative lens. She considers the work of Tina Turner, Darius Rucker, Beyoncé, Valerie June, Our Native Daughters, Lil Nas X, Mickey Guyton, Rissi Palmer, and DeLila Black in order to interpret how these artists are reclaiming and reimagining country's past and future. Part musical analysis, part history, this deeply personal exploration of her relationship with country music as a Black queer woman who grew up partly in Nashville reveals the revolutionary actions at the heart of Black country music.

In the conclusion of the book, Royster discusses the music and work of singer Rissi Palmer. In 2007, Palmer became one of only a handful of Black women to register a hit on the country charts. More recently, she has highlighted and supported past and present singers of color in country music through her podcast, *Color Me Country*, and Rainey Day Fund, which provides financial grants to country artists of color. Royster quotes Palmer as making a key distinction in her understanding of country music, saying, "Nashville the industry is something completely different from country music" (178). The singer's differentiation of the *business* behind country—centralized in Nashville and thus synonymous with the city—in comparison to the nebulous art form of country music, highlights the authoritative power the country music industry has had in defining its music and granting opportunities for certain people to find commercial success within the genre. Royster, however, is unconcerned with whether Black country artists have or haven't received endorsement from the industry, or even whether the artists themselves have explicitly identified themselves within the genre. As she explains, "Some of these musicians wouldn't even call their music 'country music,' though they are in conversation with the genre" (3).

By decentering the country music industry, which has been frighteningly successful in its past and present erasure of Black country artists, Royster uses a Black feminist lens to grant Black artists the agency to reclaim country music and its potential to represent liberatory possibilities. She explores the Black joy of artists such as Lil Nas X and Blanco Brown as a form of resistance within country music and society at large. In listening to Valerie June, Royster concludes, "I've realized the power of music—Black country music—to recognize the ghosts that haunt us. Music helps us meet our demons, humor them, and maybe exorcise them" (116). With the band Our Native Daughters, Royster explains how their music "reminds us that we can't understand the past through archives and texts alone. We need music to help us tap into the imaginations of those lost to us" (122). Collectively, *Black Country Music* provides a deep analysis of how Black artists have navigated and renegotiated their presence within a type of music so broadly understood to supposedly be not for them.

For as valuable an approach as Royster shows us it is to decenter the country music industry in her analysis of Black musicians, greater attention to the history of the business, and its erasure of Black artists and other musicians of color, could have strengthened her argument about the revolutionary work by such artists. Country music, the marketing category, is an invention of the music industry, and recognizing it as such helps to denaturalize the racial characteristics that have artificially been supplanted onto it. For country music in particular, the power of its industry has only grown over the past century, giving it greater authority over how the music is defined and who has access to it. More attention to this power structure could have helped deconstruct country's racial understandings and strengthened Royster's analysis of country as a music that has always been Black.

In discussing the emergence of what Royster terms "New Black Country Music Studies," a deeper historical background of this legacy could have likewise strengthened understandings of the significance of the modern movement she chronicles. Many of the key players she highlights, including Holly G and Rissi Palmer, are consciously building on the work of Black artists from previous generations, most notably Cleve Francis and Frankie Staton, who worked together in establishing and overseeing the Black Country Music Association in the mid- to late 1990s. While the current moment of Black country music is a hopeful one, and one which is imagining new possibilities and hopes for the future, it is worth interrogating what is and isn't new about this moment.

Overall, *Black Country Music* offers an essential new piece to the canon of country music studies. While Blackness has often been framed as simply a "presence" in country music scholarship, where its actors are on the periphery or serve as influences on the music rather than central and active agents, Royster pushes the scholarship in a much-needed direction, centering the agency of Black listenership and artistry. Current and future country music scholars, fans, and artists should look to this work as an important and much needed direction to continue to build upon and learn from in relation to the past, present, and future of country music.

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