

## Introduction

*Uncharted Country: New Voices and Perspectives in Country Music Studies*

As a child growing up . . . in a predominantly black community [I learned that] blacks weren't supposed to like country. . . . Country music was dismissed as poor white folks' blues and associated with regions of the nation that symbolized prejudice and racial bigotry. Even mainstream white America viewed country as lower class and undesirable.

—LENA WILLIAMS, "A BLACK FAN OF COUNTRY MUSIC FINALLY TELLS ALL"

Big changes are reshaping country music and the conversations around it. New music delivery platforms are blurring boundaries long upheld by radio formats and record marketing categories and are drawing new listeners into country. Social media and bloggers are bringing scholarly knowledge into popular consciousness, including new historical perspectives on the shared Black and white origins of country music and its artificial segregation by the dawning music industry.<sup>1</sup> Country's sounds and meanings are also shifting in relation to queer, Indigenous, and of-color artists, themes, and audiences, who in growing numbers are claiming the music as their own. This special issue aims to capture this moment of change and to amplify its generative potential. Country music's constitutive entanglements in key elements of the American story, including racial, religious, sex-gender, and class relations, make it a potent vehicle for scholarly inquiry, and the sounds, images, and personalities of country are compelling subjects for scholars and readers alike. *Uncharted Country* brings together a range of writers and perspectives, topics, and methods to register present changes, interrogate the past, and imagine future possibilities in country music and discourse.

One change concerns how corporate radio in the same format that produced such icons as Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Shania Twain, Miranda Lambert, and Taylor Swift has lately cut the flow of women's voices to a trickle (notably, underrepresentation of women in popular music is not unique to country). But pressure from data-driven research and academic and journalistic writers has begun to have some effect on

1. Nadine Hubbs discussed these changes in the circulation of music and scholarly knowledge and their effects in Kristin M. Hall, "Jimmie Allen Is a Reflection of a New Country Music World," *Associated Press*, 27 February 2019 <https://apnews.com/749fc46055624a36b29bd96a7513f51f>.

contemporary country's "women problem."<sup>2</sup> As this special issue goes to press, key industry players, including Country Music Television, have pledged equal air time for female and male artists. And Mickey Guyton has focused further attention on the problem through a song she debuted at Nashville's annual Country Radio Seminar.<sup>3</sup> "What Are You Gonna Tell Her?" ponders the attainability of the American dream for young people marginalized by gender, race, sexuality, and class. And Guyton, an African American singer-songwriter, approaches her socially conscious subject in the time-honored country way: through personal storytelling about individual ordinary lives.

LGBTQ+ presence is rising in academic and journalistic country music discourses and equally in country, old-time, and bluegrass music, including recent work by major label and indie artists Brandi Carlile, Brandy Clark, Karen & the Sorrows, Amythyst Kiah, Sam Gleaves, Justin Hiltner, Lavender Country, Lil Nas X, Little Bandit, Trixie Mattel, Paisley Fields, Orville Peck, and Brandon Stansell. Country musical perspectives on queer sexuality and gender feature regularly in writings by music journalists including Jon Freeman, Jewly Hight, and Marissa Moss and in a growing body of LGBTQ+-studies country music scholarship.<sup>4</sup> In this volume, sexuality and gender figure in essays by Francesca T. Royster, Clay Kerrigan, Joe Kadi, and Mari Nagatomi and in a posey of queer song lyrics, with prefatory note, by Karen & the Sorrows' Karen Pittelman.

Probably the most significant changes underway in country music and commentary lie in the accelerating recovery and expansion of African American presence. These changes connect to many factors social, cultural, and political, and we cannot possibly account for all of them. But recent indicators and accelerators have surely included the reemergence of Black string bands like Carolina Chocolate Drops and The Ebony Hillbillies; scholarship including Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound* (2010) and Diane Pecknold's *Hidden in the Mix* (2013);<sup>5</sup> the growth of Black voices in country music commentary, including those of

2. The musicologist Jada Watson has led these efforts with her data research and dissemination of it in the media. See <https://songdata.ca/projects/gender-representation-in-country/>.

3. Chris Willman, "Mickey Guyton Delivers the No. 1 Song of Country Radio Seminar—and It's a Female-Themed Gut Punch," *Variety*, 21 February 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/mickey-guyton-country-radio-seminar-what-are-you-gonna-tell-her-1203510984/>.

4. Relevant work includes Joe Kadi, "Still Listen to That Sentimental Twang," in *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 93–108; Lars Rains, "The Bear Essentials of Country Music," in Les K. Wright, ed., *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1997) 191–98; Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); the essay "'Jolene,' Genre, and the Everyday Homoerotics of Country Music: Dolly Parton's Loving Address of the Other Woman," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19 (2015): 71–76, and her discussion of this article and performance of her queer fourth verse in "The Only One for Me, Jolene," episode 6 of *Dolly Parton's America* (2019) <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america/episodes/only-one-me-jolene>; Pamela Fox, "Sexuality in Country Music," in Travis D. Stimling, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 375–94; Francesca T. Royster, "Black Edens, Country Eyes: Listening, Performance and Black Queer Longing in Country Music," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 21.3 (2017): 306–22; and Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, "Gay Country, Transamericana, and Queer Sincerity," in Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793525.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199793525-e-109>.

5. 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).

Michael Awkward, Kandia Crazy Horse, Rhiannon Giddens, Alice Randall, Tony Thomas, and two writers featured between these covers, Kimberly Mack and Francesca T. Royster;<sup>6</sup> Beyoncé’s performance with the Dixie Chicks at the 2016 Country Music Awards; Rhiannon Giddens’s 2017 keynote address to the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) and MacArthur “Genius” Award;<sup>7</sup> the Top 40 country and cross-over successes since 2017 of Kane Brown and Jimmie Allen, along with Darius Rucker; and Lil Nas X’s 2019 “Old Town Road” juggernaut, followed closely by Blanco Brown’s number one country hit “The Git Up.” As one might glean from the examples of Lil Nas X (who came out amid his months-long multichart reign) and Our Native Daughters (a Black female supergroup including both Kiah and Giddens), the changing position of African American voices here intersects with changes in LBGTQ+ and women’s positioning in country music and discourse. *Uncharted Country* registers these artistic and industry developments and advances the new Black country music studies in work by Chelsea Burns, Kimberly Mack (on Giddens’s country reclamations), Wayne Marshall, Jocelyn R. Neal, Francesca T. Royster, and Deborah R. Vargas.

What may be most striking in all the recent shifts is not so much the fact that sexual-, racial-, ethnic-, or religious-minority artists and audiences have begun to demand recognition and space in country, old-time, and bluegrass. Rather, it is that such folks should claim—out loud, in public, and in growing numbers—any association at all with this music. The current scenario contrasts with the longstanding situation depicted in a 1994 *New York Times* article, “A Black Fan of Country Music Finally Tells All.” Author and journalist Lena Williams announced her “coming out” in terms that “no self-respecting black person would ever admit to”—as a country music lover. Williams defended her passion for “honest,” at times blues-like music by Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, Dolly Parton, and other artists against the prevalent logic that would thus place her on the wrong side of racialized cultural and social group boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Just a few years earlier, another unexpected alliance arose, between queers and country music.<sup>9</sup> The music, as Williams noted, was associated with certain social groups and regions

6. See, for example, Michael Awkward, “‘The South’s Gonna Do It Again’: Changing Conceptions of the Use of ‘Country’ Music in the Albums of Al Green,” in Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 191–203; Kandia Crazy Horse, “Song O’ the South: How the Allman Brothers made a Redneck Negress out of Me,” *Rock’s Backpages* (June 2002), and “Revolutions: Cowboy Troy,” *Vibe* (July 2007); Rhiannon Giddens, “Lights of the Valley (Live by Joe and Odell Thompson),” *Oxford American* 103 (2018); Alice Randall with Carlos Little and Courtney Little, *My Country Roots: The Ultimate MP3 Guide to America’s Original Outsider Music* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006); Tony Thomas, “Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down,” in Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 143–70; Francesca T. Royster, “Black Edens, Country Eves,” and “Who’s Your Daddy? Beyoncé, The Dixie Chicks, and the Art of Outlaw Protest,” in Susan Fast and Craig Jennex, eds., *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 63–76.

7. Rhiannon Giddens, “Community and Connection” (IBMA keynote address), *Nonesuch Journal*, 3 October 2017.

8. Lena Williams, “A Black Fan of Country Music Finally Tells All,” *New York Times*, 19 June 1994, H-26.

9. See, for example, Debbie Holley and Larry Flick, “Country Music Is Striking Chord with Gay Community,” *Billboard* 104.30 (25 July 1992): 1, 22, 27; “Gay Ole Opry,” *The Advocate* (15 December 1992): 75–85; Martha Mockus, “Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d. lang,” in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd ed. (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis, [1994] 2006), 257–74; Rosa Ainley and Sarah Cooper, “She Thinks I Still Care: Lesbians and Country Music,” in Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge, eds., *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture’s Romance with Lesbianism*

linked to bigotry. And the same associations that painted country as outside the tastes of African American listeners contributed to its reputation as anathema to queers. Nevertheless, the early to mid-1990s saw the emergence of queer line-dancing and two-stepping events, bars, and organizations. The trend was concurrent with a broader 1990s achy-breaky country dance craze, both of which would fade by the end of the decade.

Amid the turn-of-the-millennium advent of Web 2.0 and social media and the attendant rise in consciousness around social politics, country music opened the twenty-first century with two glaring retrograde spectacles. First, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Toby Keith released his controversial saber-rattling hit “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American).” Then, in 2003, Natalie Maines’s criticism of President George W. Bush triggered an industry backlash that killed the career of her chart-topping trio and introduced a new phrase: getting Dixie Chicked. Country music had become strongly linked to conservative politics in the Vietnam War era, and now, the Iraq War era saw the association rekindled.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Bush mobilized post-9/11 fear and nationalist sentiment to launch a controversial war while elsewhere in a Texas drawl professing his love for country music only confirmed liberal-left suspicion toward country. “Anything but country” became a standard declaration of musical tastes for the Gen X and younger middle-class, both liberal and conservative, telegraphing social exclusion of the less-educated whites who have long been associated with the music (as Williams noted, “Even mainstream white America viewed country as lower class and undesirable”).<sup>11</sup>

But even as stereotypes of white working-class ignorance and bigotry were renewed in connection with country, very different country musical developments were also underway. In early 2005, the first Black Banjo Gathering took place in Boone, North Carolina, and later that year three young attendees, Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens, and Justin Robinson, came together to form the Carolina Chocolate Drops. The group revived and renewed the African American string band music of the Carolina Piedmont region. And the Chocolate Drops’ Grammy-winning work made space for other artists interested in an archive-driven Black country music, including Valerie June, Amythyst Kiah, and Kaia Kater. Country music has always been a reference point for soul and R&B, including the work of Ray Charles, Al Green, and Tina Turner, and recently, prominent African American popular music performers such as Beyoncé and Solange have included country music and iconography in their repertoires. In “Daddy Lessons” and in her video album for *Lemonade*

---

(London: Pandora, 1994), 41–56; and Chris Dickinson, “Country Undetectable: Gay Artists in Country Music,” *Journal of Country Music* 211 (1999): 28–39.

10. Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 3rd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, [1968] 2010); Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), and *I’d Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

11. On this social-exclusion mechanism see Bethany Bryson, “‘Anything but Heavy Metal’: Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes,” *American Sociological Review* 61.5 (1996): 884–99; and Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, esp. chapter 1, “Anything but Country.” Omar Lizardo and Sara Skiles, “Musical Taste and Patterns of Symbolic Exclusion in the United States 1993–2012: Generational Dynamics of Differentiation and Continuity,” *Poetics* 53 (2015): 9–21, adduce empirical evidence to show that, between 1993 and 2012, even as exclusions of musical categories generally declined, rejection of country music intensified.

as a whole, Beyoncé explores family memory and the limits of traditional, and often toxic, models of masculinity through images and sounds associated with the Black cowboy. In her own music video for “Almeda” (2018), an Afrofuturist R&B reconsideration of southern Black life, Beyoncé’s sister Solange also includes the Black cowboy, an example of “Black-owned things” that, she sings, “still can’t be washed away.”

For contemporary Latinx performers, country sounds and imagery can convey an expansive vision of American identity, as the “Latingrass” ensemble Che Apalache demonstrates. The band’s music video “The Dreamer” (2019) uses fiddling and finger picking, real-life storytelling, and mountain harmonies to artistic, educative, and activist ends. Their fusion of Latin and Appalachian idioms reverberates with past tradition and future possibility while putting a human face on issues of migration and the U.S.-Mexico border. Sophia M. Enriquez’s essay in this issue examines contemporary Latinx migration narratives and engagements in Appalachian music, with attention to Che Apalache and the “Mexilachian” music of the Lua Project. And Deborah R. Vargas takes a new, “blackbrown” perspective on the 1970s–80s music of Tejano country star Freddy Fender.<sup>12</sup>

Further enactments and analyses of country musical border crossings and cross-cultural exchange in these pages include Jesse Montgomery’s essay on country’s role in radical community organizing between 1960s Chicago “hillbillies” and Black Panthers; Mari Nagatomi’s account of country music-making among Japanese men in the aftermath of the Second World War; Shirli Brautbar, Peter La Chapelle, and Jessica Hutchings’s path-breaking study of Jewish presence in country music; and Ryan Ben Shuvera’s reading of Toronto-based artist Simone Schmidt’s use of old-time music “to reveal the past in the present and the present in the past” and thus, engaging settler perspectives and (in some cases) Indigenous knowledge, to “unsettle” borders and “the authority of the settler state.”<sup>13</sup>

#### CHARTING THE UNCHARTED COUNTRY: RESEARCH ESSAYS, MEMOIRS, SONG LYRICS, AND A MEGAMIX

We intend for this special issue to document the present moment of change and to advance related conversations. As editors, we have welcomed new voices and approaches. Indeed, the impetus for *Uncharted Country* was the unprecedented representation of critical race, gender and sexuality, and Indigenous studies on country music topics and of scholars of color, especially newer scholars, presenting work on country music at IASPM-US 2018 in Nashville.

12. The existing literature on Latina/o/xs and country music is small but presently growing. It includes George H. Lewis, “Ghosts, Ragged but Beautiful: Influences of Mexican Music on American Country-Western and Rock ‘N’ Roll,” *Popular Music and Society* 15.4 (1991): 85–103; Curtis Márquez, “Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style,” *Social Text* 14.3 (1996): 109–32; Deborah R. Vargas, “Brown Country: Johnny Rodriguez,” *Aztlan: Journal of Chicano Studies* 32.1 (2007): 219–28; Ludwig Hurtado, “Country Music Is Also Mexican Music,” *The Nation*, 3 January 2019; and Nadine Hubbs, “Vaquero World: Queer Mexicanidad, Trans Performance, and the Undoing of Nation,” in Jesús A. Ramos-Kittrell, ed., *Decentering the Nation: Music, Mexicanidad, and Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 75–96.

13. Recent scholarship on country music and Indigenous North Americans includes Kristina M. Jacobsen, *The Sound of Navajo Country: Music, Language, and Diné Belonging* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); and Ryan Ben Shuvera, “Southern Sounds, Northern Voices: Unsettling Borders through Country Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30.4 (2018): 177–90.

The contributions here make use of various genres and mediums and bring together new music histories; deejaying and mixing; music criticism and analysis; creative work by performers, lyricists, and memoirists; and scholarly studies. Scholarly perspectives emanate from within and without the field of country music studies; veteran and new scholars, including graduate students; and writers of diverse identities, critical standpoints, and approaches.

Several of the essays in this issue disrupt static notions of racial identity and, in the process, challenge notions of country music's putative natural whiteness. These pieces are far-ranging in the histories, music, and identities they engage, including African American, Latina/o/x, Arab Canadian, and Jewish identities. **Sophia M. Enriquez's** essay, **"Penned Against the Wall': Migration Narratives, Cultural Resonances, and Latinx Experiences in Appalachian Music,"** looks at Latinx-Appalachian migration narratives through theoretical discourse, song-lyric analysis, and ethnography and interviews with band members of the Lua Project and Che Apalache. The essay invokes Marié Abe's notion of *resonance*—here, a "phenomenon that weaves together sounds that perform the social, historical, and political"—as a tool for changing past narratives about Latinx and Appalachian identities. Quoting Che Apalache's Joe Troop, Enriquez writes of the power of the band's music to resonate with Appalachian listeners while also challenging certain local ideologies—to counter the spread of white supremacy with sounds traditionally associated with whiteness.

In **"Freddy Fender's Blackbrown Country Ecologies,"** **Deborah R. Vargas** writes of how Freddy Fender created his Tex-Mex "country" sound through soul, blues, funk, and rhythm and blues. Vargas argues against a singular narrative of brown sound in favor of one that helps us understand the Black sounds of country music as performed through Fender's brown body and voice. She proposes a "sonic ecology" of Fender's music, mining metaphors of dirt, soil, and swamp linked to Texas and the Gulf Coast as a way of thinking through the transverse, transformative, impure, and often excessive aspects of this music. And she grounds such metaphors in the racialized forces of labor, segregation, and incarceration.

**Kimberly Mack's "She's a Country Girl All Right: Rhiannon Giddens's Powerful Reclamation of Country Culture"** explores the work of musical dynamo Rhiannon Giddens to interrogate the erasure of Black artists, lives, and aesthetics from country music histories. Mack analyzes Giddens's video and recording of the song "Country Girl," her more recent contributions as founding member of Our Native Daughters, and her keynote address to music insiders at the 2017 IBMA. Mack suggests that Giddens' refusal of simple notions of authenticity frees her from the constraints of genre while allowing her to correct historic inaccuracies about Black people in country music and, ultimately, to reclaim country.

In **"The Valley of the Dry Bones: The Presence and Perseverance of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in Country Music and Bluegrass,"** **Shirli Brautbar, Peter La Chapelle, and Jessica Hutchings** explore Jewish involvements with country and bluegrass, musics that have held "romantic appeal" and at the same time often felt alienating and unwelcoming to American Jews. The authors propose a timeline starting with quiet participation and "contested acceptance" of certain Jewish promoters and managers in the 1940s country music industry; note the mid-century importance of Jewish immigrant country music clothing designers Nathan Turk and Nudie Cohn; move into the 1970s with visible and iconoclastic Jewish writers and performers such as Shel Silverstein and Kinky Friedman;

highlight the 1990s heyday of klezmer-bluegrass fusion, or “Jewgrass,” involving such artists as David Grisman, Henry Sapoznik, and Andy Statman; and view this as launching a twenty-first century “liturgical turn” in Jewish country and bluegrass by artists including Joe Buchanan, Nefesh Mountain, and Mare Winningham.

Focusing on transcultural production in a transnational context, **Mari Nagatomi** examines Japanese country engagements in **“Remapping Country Music in the Pacific: Japanese Country Music and Masculinities in the Immediate Postwar Period.”** Nagatomi argues that Japanese musicians such as the Western Ramblers did more than imitate American country music and musicians. These artists made the music their own, particularly by developing new and alternative masculinities in the face of changing class and gender roles in post–World War II Japan.

**Jesse Montgomery**, in his essay, **“Sing Me Back Home: Country Music and Radical Community Organizing in Uptown Chicago,”** follows the demographic shifts of white Southerners into northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit in the 1940s–60s, to see how these patterns changed country from regional to national music. While the better-known narrative is how the “right shifted to country,” as Diane Pecknold put it<sup>14</sup>—less is known about radical left organizing among these same communities in northern bars and neighborhoods, including Chicago’s Uptown, one of the epicenters of southern white migrant communities’ relocation in Chicago. Montgomery is interested in “hillbilly” bars such as the Dew Drop Inn and Ted’s Mile High Club as sites of leftist organizing and awareness for groups including the JOIN Community Union and the Young Patriots Organization (both with roots in the organizing efforts of Students for a Democratic Society). These mostly white working-class groups from the South built cross-racial solidarity in the 1960s with Black radical leftist groups including the Black Panthers and (early manifestations of) The Rainbow Coalition, often using country music as a space of critical analysis and connection. Montgomery’s history and analysis of their work challenges facile associations between country music, white working-class fans, and conservative politics.<sup>15</sup>

Deconstructing the historical color line that has both defined and been defined by country music, **Wayne Marshall** and **Jocelyn R. Neal** deploy close listening in rhythmic and harmonic dimensions, respectively. In **“Ragtime Country: Rhythmically Recovering Country’s Black Heritage,”** Marshall presents a case study challenging conventional views of modern U.S. popular music in terms of racially siloed traditions. Calling these “fantasies” and “products of marketing,” he argues that in fact, “on-the-ground social realities bear witness to a long history of interracial musical influence and collaboration.” Marshall makes his case through both language and sound, with a megamix drawing on 120 years’ recorded history of a syncopated rhythmic figure he dubs “American clave.” His mixtape traces innumerable occurrences of this rhythm from turn-of-the-century ragtime to present-day popular music, crossing multiple racialized category boundaries along the way. Marshall thus deconstructs

14. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*.

15. See also Nadine Hubbs, “Country Music in Dangerous Times,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30.1–2 (2018): 15–26; and multiple essays in Mark Allan Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, 170–89 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).

“Black” and “white” music categories that have sonically reified America’s color line and presents audible evidence of a “long history of interracial musical influence and collaboration.”

In “**Tennessee Whiskey’ and the Politics of Harmony**,” Neal takes a closer listen to two new artists hailed in the mid-2010s as saviors of country music’s historically white tradition, Chris Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson. Analyzing the artists’ musical arrangements, Neal identifies an instance of what we might call (via flipped cliché) new wine in old bottles. Both Simpson and Stapleton were praised for rescuing country from “formulaic” pop and rap crossover trends. But in her analysis of ostensibly traditionalist covers, Neal finds each artist performing classic songs over revamped harmonies characteristic of Black R&B and soul music. She thus offers sonic evidence of “country music’s contradictory sense of genre identity and racial politics” and points to “the essential differentiation between genre identity and musical style” as a basis for production and continued maintenance of a color line in country music.

Focusing on the history of the music industry, **Amanda Marie Martinez** further illuminates the ways country effortfully maintained and centered whiteness, in “**Redneck Chic: Race and the Country Music Industry in the 1970s**.” Martinez argues that the Country Music Association expressly defined its target audience as middle-income “affluent, white, and predominantly conservative.” “For nearly a century,” she writes, “continuous effort by the music industry has been required to maintain the perception that country music is a genre performed exclusively by and for whites. At perhaps no point in time did this require effort greater than in the 1970s, when growing numbers of commercially successful non-white artists emerged alongside a non-white audience for country music” even as “the Nashville industry capitalized on the trend of ‘redneck chic.’”

Taking another angle, **Chelsea Burns** also examines the deliberate labors that have produced country as white music, in “**The Racial Limitations of Country-Soul Crossover in Bobby Womack’s *BW Goes C&W* (1976)**.” Whereas Martinez focuses on the country industry’s 1970s targeting of an exclusively white (and middle-income, conservative) audience demographic, Burns focuses on soul superstar Bobby Womack’s little-known 1976 country album and, by comparison, recent examples including Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road,” to argue that the corporate country industry has long excluded perceptibly Black sounds, experiences (in lyrics), and artists and that the continuing predominant whiteness of country is neither accidental nor incidental. Neal, Martinez, and Burns’s essays expand the recent literature on whiteness in country music that focuses beyond its 1920s music-industry origins to account for its persistence.<sup>16</sup>

16. Writings on race in country include Nick Tosches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Da Capo, [1977] 1996); George H. Lewis, “The Color of Country: Black Influence and Experience in American Country Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 25.3 (2001): 3–4, 107–19; Aaron A. Fox, “White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as ‘Bad’ Music,” Charles J. Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Geoff Mann, “Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31.1 (2008): 73–100; Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*; multiple essays in Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*; Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Olivia Carter Mather, “Race in Country

Other contributions bring to light the transformative and healing potential of listening, performing, identifying, and loving country music, sometimes in unlikely and difficult spaces. Several of the essays included here focus on the capacity of country music to restore justice and ultimately to heal psychically and creatively. In **Ryan Ben Shuvera's** essay “**New Life' into Old Sounds: Listening to Simone Schmidt's *Audible Songs from Rockwood,*” country music represents a way of “unsettling” settler colonialism. The music here is that of Simone Schmidt, aka Fiver, their *Audible Sounds from Rockwood*, an album based on the original nineteenth-century case files of patients in Ontario's Rockwood Asylum for the Criminally Insane. Among the collection's liner notes are what Schmidt calls “unsingable songs,” songs that call further attention to silences in the history of institutions of power such as mental health institutions and prisons. Creating music that brings together traditional sounds and instrumentations with these unheard stories, Schmidt invites the listener to be unsettled and, in the process, to unsettle history.**

In “**You're My Country Music,**” **Karen Pittelman** explores what it means to “love a culture that doesn't love you back.” Pittelman is the lead singer and songwriter for Karen & the Sorrows, whose latest album, *Guaranteed Broken Heart*, was featured in *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* and on multiple Best of 2019 critics' lists. A *New Yorker*, Pittelman has worked to create queer and trans, multiracial and antiracist spaces for country music in Brooklyn and online through her Gay Ole Opry and Queer Country Quarterly concert series, and as a nonfiction writer she has addressed topics including country music and social justice. “You're My Country Music” presents a posey of Pittelman's queer song lyrics beneath a headnote that outlines her belief in the power of country music and its “core commandment” to “tell the truth about your life,” and reveals the source of her inspiration for a song about “eatin' pussy in a pickup truck.”

For three of the writers collected here, memoir serves as a means to explore the transformative powers of country music to question and to heal. **Clay Kerrigan's** “**Thunder in the Heart: Unearthing the Ache of Country and Folk and Decoding the Queer Paul Clayton**” explores the relationship between queer art and struggle by exploring the joy, pleasure, and healing the author found in Paul Clayton's recording of the sea shanty “Johnny's Gone to Hilo.” Kerrigan's queer listening opens up questions of how Clayton (1931–67) might have used this traditional folk song to explore gay desire and loss. He describes the power of Clayton's (and other) music to speak to his own internal ache. And he explores certain connections that he might have with the late artist, both being gay, having struggled with mental illness, and having a deep affinity for early country, bluegrass, and folk, music that he describes as “a cave system full of ghosts.” The essay delves deep into the artist's biography to think about the narratives around Clayton and their limits for purposes of exploring the role of his gayness in his art making and aesthetic. Kerrigan's desire to know

---

Music Scholarship,” in Travis D. Stimeling, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 327–54; Karen Pittelman, “Another Country: On the Relationship between Country Music and White Supremacy—and What We Can Do about It,” *Medium*, 17 December 2018 <https://medium.com/@Pittelman/another-country-80a05dd7fc15>; and Adam Hollowell and Alexandria Miller, “Country Music for People Who Don't Like Country Music: Sturgill Simpson and Outlaw Privilege,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31.4 (2019): 121–41.

Clayton is in part a desire to understand better the music that saved his life even though it failed, ultimately, to save Clayton's.

Merging personal essay with meditations on Hank Williams and his power to articulate and allow for the feeling of loneliness, **Joe Kadi** explores violence, geographic isolation, race, classism, and gender in his memoir "**Me, Hank Williams, and My Dad.**" Through engagement with Williams's music, particularly the iconic song "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," Kadi delves into childhood abuse and trauma. The song gives Kadi a means of entry into his father's own loneliness and struggles and their possible intersections with those of Hank Williams. And Kadi's essay gives us an example of country music's reverberations in individual listeners' lives.

In her hybrid memoir-critical essay, "**Valerie June: Ghost Catcher,**" **Francesca Royster** also considers the power of country music—here, the power of Valerie June's "organic moonshine roots music" to "capture" the traces of erased histories of trauma in ways that are instructive and contagious. Through personal narrative, cultural analysis, and close listening, Royster explores how Black country music might be a way both to court ghosts and to heal from the demons that haunt us, individually and collectively.