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## She's A Country Girl All Right

*Rhiannon Giddens's Powerful Reclamation of Country Culture*

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**ABSTRACT** Classically trained vocalist, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, and 2017 MacArthur “Genius” Fellow Rhiannon Giddens has in recent years enjoyed increased visibility in the contemporary country music world. In 2016, she was a featured singer on Eric Church’s top-ten country hit, “Kill a Word,” and she won the Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass that same year. Giddens also had a recurring role as social worker Hanna Lee “Hallie” Jordan on the long-running musical drama *Nashville* in 2017 and 2018. While Giddens now enjoys a certain degree of acceptance in the country music world, she has not always felt included in the various largely white, contemporary American roots scenes. As such, she continues to speak out to audiences and the press about the erasure of African Americans from histories of string music, bluegrass, country, and other styles and forms of American roots music. Using Giddens’s 2017 International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) keynote, and the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ music video for the song “Country Girl” from 2012’s *Leaving Eden*, I demonstrate that Giddens effectively reclaims American old-time string music and country culture as black, subverting historically inaccurate racialized notions of country music authenticity. **KEYWORDS** popular music, race and ethnic studies, performance

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Classically trained vocalist, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, and 2017 MacArthur “Genius” Fellow Rhiannon Giddens has in recent years enjoyed increased visibility in contemporary country music. In 2016, she was a featured singer on Eric Church’s top-ten country hit, “Kill a Word,” and she won the Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass that same year. Giddens had a recurring role as social worker Hanna Lee “Hallie” Jordan on the long-running musical drama *Nashville* in 2017 and 2018. And the website [savingcountrymusic.com](http://savingcountrymusic.com), whose mission is evident in its name, has fully embraced Giddens and loudly trumpeted her work, and its impact, since 2015. While Giddens now enjoys a certain degree of acceptance in the country music world, she has not always felt included in the various largely white, contemporary American roots scenes. As she shares in her 2017 International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) keynote, “before Joe [Thompson], before the Carolina Chocolate Drops [the Americana band she co-founded in 2005], when I first got into string band music I felt like such an interloper. It was like I was ‘sneaking’ into this music that wasn’t my own.”<sup>1</sup> As such, she continues to speak out to audiences and the press

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1. Rhiannon Giddens, “IBMA Keynote Speech 2017: Community and Connection,” 4–5.

about the erasure of African Americans from histories of string music, bluegrass, country, and other styles and forms of American roots music.

For Giddens, it is not only important that audiences understand the shared legacy of country music between black and white people—the banjo, for instance, is an instrument of African American origins, what she calls “a hybridization of African construction and tune systems and European adaptation and adoption”—but that old-time string music, and later outgrowths, such as bluegrass and country, have long and important black histories.<sup>2</sup> This is one reason why, despite contemporary country’s embrace of Giddens, she is more invested in engaging black string music as a precursor to country music in its different forms:

I’ve chosen a very odd career. I could have, I think, made a case for actually going for mainstream country [music], once upon a time...but it’s not what I’m interested in, to be honest. I mean, I love country history, and I love old country, and I love where it came from—the old-time string band music. And that is really where my heart lies, because you know that’s where so much African American presence went into the genre, and it’s completely ignored.<sup>3</sup>

As the Carolina Chocolate Drops—and Giddens in her solo work—introduce audiences to the history of black participation in rural string band music, they simultaneously carve a space for themselves.

In May 2019, Giddens released *There Is No Other*, a genre- and nation-crossing collaboration with Italian multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi that resists the concept of “otherness” based on purported difference. And her efforts with all-black female banjo quartet Our Native Daughters—whose *Songs of Our Native Daughters* was released in 2019 by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a testament to Giddens’s eminence—demonstrate the ways in which music can help fill in the gaps of an incomplete historical record.

Our Native Daughters is composed of Giddens; guitarist and banjo player Amythyst Kiah; cellist, banjo, and guitar player Leyla McCalla, who has recorded with the Drops; and Allison Russell, a guitarist and banjo, ukulele, and clarinet player, who is one-half of the Chicago-based Americana/folk duo, Birds of Chicago. As Giddens states in the liner notes for *Songs of Our Native Daughters*, the group’s name is inspired by James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*. Instead of re-telling familiar men’s narratives, however, *Songs of Our Native Daughters* focuses on the important, and largely untold, stories of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century black women’s experiences with enslavement and misogyny that, sadly, resonate in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> Giddens’s work with Kiah, McCalla, and Russell, three black women who create music that engages American roots styles, speaks to Giddens’s artistic and political goals.

2. Giddens, “IBMA,” 5.

3. Maiysha Kai, “Black Myself: Rhiannon Giddens Forms Supergroup ‘Our Native Daughters’ and Reclaims the Soul of Country Music,” 1 February 2019. <https://theglowup.theroot.com/black-myself-rhiannon-giddens-forms-supergroup-our-nat-1832218543>.

4. Giddens, “Introduction,” 5.

Using Giddens's IBMA keynote, where she pointedly asks the majority-white crowd, "Are we going to acknowledge that the question is not, how do we get diversity into Bluegrass, but how do we get diversity BACK into Bluegrass?,"<sup>5</sup> and the Drops' music video for the song "Country Girl" from 2012's *Leaving Eden*—a work that I argue serves as an aural and visual corrective for people outside of the South, particularly the Carolinas, who see country culture, including country music, as the domain of white people—I demonstrate that Giddens effectively reclaims American old-time string music and country culture<sup>6</sup> as black, subverting historically inaccurate racialized notions of country music authenticity. Giddens's IBMA speech, and her embodied musical performance and song lyrics in "Country Girl," allow her to make a convincing case for country music's enduring blackness, serving a vital educational purpose. This article highlights the political strides her cultural productions make, while demonstrating the effectiveness of her intentional teacherly and scholarly moves. Strikingly, in Giddens's attempts to revise the general public's—blacks and whites, Southern and non-Southern—thinking about race and country, she paradoxically, in the case of "Country Girl," signals her belonging, her authentic countryness, through a glossy music video, in stark contrast to her unfussy visual presentation in the promotional videos for *Songs of Our Native Daughters*, demonstrating the unresolvability<sup>7</sup> of what Benjamin Filene calls the "cult of authenticity."<sup>8</sup>

Giddens was born on 21 February 1977 in Greensboro, North Carolina, to a white father and black and Native American mother. She grew up in a musical environment, with her parents and extended family dedicated fans of various styles of music. Her father played in rock bands, while her mother enjoyed classical music. Her maternal grandparents were admirers of jazz and the blues, and one of her paternal uncles played in a bluegrass band. At 17, Giddens successfully auditioned for a prestigious summer choral camp at the Governor's School of North Carolina in Raleigh. Based on the exuberant reactions of the choral teachers during her audition, she realized that she might have a future as a singer. After studying opera at the renowned Oberlin Conservatory of

5. Giddens, "IBMA," 3.

6. Giddens's expansive view of Americana has allowed her to include Puir a Beul or Scottish mouth music—a traditional form of song native to Scotland, Ireland, and Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia that was transported by Scottish immigrants to the American South—in her solo repertoire. So when I talk about Giddens's reclamation of country culture and music, from a musical perspective, included under that umbrella is string music, bluegrass, blues, and Scottish mouth music.

7. In my article, "'There's No Home for You Here': Jack White and the Unsolvable Problem of Blues Authenticity," *Musical Autobiographies*, special issue of *Popular Music and Society*, 38, no. 2, (2015): 176–93, I argue that White, a white blues-rock musician and singer-songwriter from Detroit, adopted a highly-stylized, Pop art visual aesthetic for his band the White Stripes to navigate complicated issues of blues authenticity and cultural appropriation while performing blues-based music. Giddens's concerns with country authenticity are similarly racialized, though rather than finding ways to circumvent charges of cultural appropriation as a racial interloper, Giddens's goal is to educate the public about her rightful place, as a black American, in the country music realm.

8. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 64.

Music in Ohio, Giddens returned to North Carolina, where she joined a Celtic band and worked as a contra-dance caller.<sup>9, 10</sup>

In 2005, she attended the Black Banjo Gathering at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. It was there that she met the two men who would become her bandmates in the Drops: fiddler Justin Robinson, and harmonica, guitar, and jug player Dom Flemons. Giddens's output with the Drops is situated within the categories of black old-time string music, blues, and traditional country, while her solo work has expanded into gospel, soul, jazz, R&B, and Celtic genres. At the Black Banjo Gathering, she also met the late Joe Thompson, one of the last remaining black string band originators. Thompson would become the band's mentor, teaching them how to play black old-time music.<sup>11</sup> That these three young artists would find each other at a black string music festival is not as unexpected as it may seem. As Robinson recounts, "There were maybe 200 or 300 mostly white people there, so it wasn't like we were, um, unapparent to each other."<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that black Americans have historically participated in a variety of roots-based musical styles, there are few in the contemporary Americana scene. Karl Hagstrom Miller argues that toward the end of the nineteenth century, and into the first two decades of the twentieth century, Southern blacks and whites played the same music. Any categorical distinctions that were made, i.e. blues versus country, were based on socially-constructed ideas about race alone. According to Miller, "Southern musicians performed a staggering variety of music in the early twentieth century. Black and white artists played blues, ballads, ragtime, and string band music, as well as the plethora of styles popular throughout the nation: sentimental ballads, minstrel songs, Tin Pan Alley tunes, and Broadway hits."<sup>13</sup> Of particular note is the fact that blacks, alongside whites, created string music that evolved into what we now call country music. As Miller states, "Both black and white artists recorded examples of the string band styles that had developed throughout the South. String bands utilizing combinations of fiddles and guitars were among the major features of old-time catalogues."<sup>14</sup> Even so, there are few black musicians working in the contemporary Americana scene, or black fans attending Americana concerts. As Flemons explains, "The idea of country got left behind. If you look at black people in popular culture now, there aren't many country blacks. Black is usually a very urban thing. The idea of being black, where black people live, what they do, is all based around the urban center."<sup>15</sup> He adds, "Blacks will either create something or invent something and make an American music form out of it, and when it becomes too

9. Tommy Tomlinson, "Rhiannon Giddens & The Making of NC's Most Beautiful Voice," 21 May 2016. [www.ourstate.com/rhiannon-giddens/](http://www.ourstate.com/rhiannon-giddens/).

10. Eric Volmers, "Rhiannon Honours Great Ladies of Song," *The Calgary Herald*, 22 July 2015. C1, LexisNexis Academic.

11. Dan Craft, "Good to the Last Drop. The Carolina Chocolate Drops Celebrate a Forgotten American String Band Tradition." *The Pantagraph*, 19 March 2009. D1, LexisNexis Academic.

12. Ibid.

13. Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

14. Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 218.

15. Doug Pullen, "Carolina Chocolate Drops," *El Paso Times*, 22 February 2009. LexisNexis Academic.

popular, they move on and go to the next thing.”<sup>16</sup> The lack of black interest in earlier forms of black American musical expression fuels Giddens’s passion to both share her music with new audiences and convert non-believers into believers.<sup>17</sup>

In order to demonstrate the ways in which Giddens complicates discourses of authenticity through her work, it is necessary to first offer a few definitions. When considering persistent ideas around whiteness and country music authenticity, I am engaging the concept of authenticity in a couple of different ways: I am borrowing musicologist Allan Moore’s definition as one that is predicated on the listener’s subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> In this case, his concept of “*authenticity of expression*” is useful. As he states: “‘first person authenticity,’ arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience.”<sup>19</sup> Moore’s theorizing of a “‘second person’ authenticity, or *authenticity of experience*, which occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them,” gets even closer to the dilemma that Giddens and the Drops face.<sup>20</sup> Being in the wrong skin makes it harder for white audiences to accept that they are “‘telling it like it is’ for them [white country fans]” so, as seen in the “Country Girl” video, Giddens endeavors to undermine stereotypes about which bodies play this music and in what contexts.<sup>21</sup> As she asserts at the IBMA, “the banjo, which was once the ultimate symbol of African American musical expression, has done a one-eighty in popular understanding and become the emblem of the mythical white mountaineer - even now, in the age of Mumford and Sons, and Bela Fleck in Africa, and Taj Mahal’s ‘Colored Aristocracy,’ the average person on the street sees a banjo and still thinks Deliverance, or the Beverly Hillbillies.”<sup>22</sup> Yet she also reinforces romantic and nostalgic ideas about country life, and engages simplistic visual signifiers of country culture, to quell her anxieties about Filene’s “‘cult of authenticity’ [in which] the folk musician was expected to be a master craftsman but raw, a powerful showman but unselfconscious and devoid of commercial attributes, an exemplar of American character but untrammelled by societal norms.”<sup>23</sup>

For the black folk artist, notions of musical authenticity, predicated on expressions of so-called authentic blackness, add further complications. As E. Patrick Johnson suggests, “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/

16. Ibid.

17. Biographical information about Rhiannon Giddens, and how she met the other members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, as well as parts of my discussion about the Drops’ “Country Girl” video, are excerpted from my forthcoming book, *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2020).

18. Allan Moore, “Authenticity As Authentication.” *Popular Music* 21, no. 2, 2002 (Cambridge University Press), 210.

19. Moore, “Authenticity,” 214.

20. Ibid., 220.

21. Ibid., 220.

22. Giddens, “IBMA,” 2.

23. Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 64.

delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black’ culture.”<sup>24</sup> It is this unstable “blackness” that necessitates conversations about the ways in which “black” culture is properly expressed.<sup>25</sup> Johnson, building on the work of Stuart Hall,<sup>26</sup> Gina Dent,<sup>27</sup> Greg Tate,<sup>28</sup> and others, creates a space for non-essentialist approaches to blackness, as well as cross-racial cultural engagement, stating that “some sites of cross-cultural appropriation provide fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other.”<sup>29</sup> This is important in a discussion about Giddens because much of her artistic and cultural-historical work revolves around her reclamation of American roots music, and specifically country music and culture, as black despite its continued circulation in American culture as white. Giddens embraces country music’s cross-cultural, black and white histories, and acknowledges that “black” popular culture—and here I am speaking specifically about country music as part of that tradition—is a hybrid form. As Hall asserts:

there are no pure [black] forms at all. Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base. Thus, they must always be heard, not simply as the recovery of a lost dialogue bearing clues for the production of new musics (because there is never any going back to the old in a simple way), but as what they are — adaptations, molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces of popular culture. They are not the recovery of something pure that we can, at last, live by.<sup>30</sup>

Giddens has referred to North Carolina, and her work, as a bridge: “I think North Carolina is a bridge state. I feel like what I do as an artist is bridge things. I bridge classical and secular. I bridge black to white. I bridge country to blues. Even though that stuff doesn’t really need bridges, that is something that I do.”<sup>31</sup> She imagines this bridge as

24. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

25. Important discussions about racialized authenticity and cultural expression can be found in the works of black cultural critics including, but not limited to, Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Kennell Jackson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005); and Daphne A. Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play,” *Callaloo* 34, no. 1, 2011: 176–97, (The Johns Hopkins University Press). Brooks’s work is particularly salient in a discussion about Giddens, given Nina Simone’s resistance to musical generic barriers based on her race and gender.

26. Stuart Hall, “What is this “Black” in Black Popular Culture?” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21–33.

27. Gina Dent, “Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 1–19.

28. Greg Tate, “Preface to a One-Hundred-and-Eighty Volume Patricide Note: Yet Another Few Thousand Words on the Death of Miles Davis and the Problem of the Black Male Genius,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 243–48.

29. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 6.

30. Hall, “What is this ‘Black,’” 28.

31. Tomlinson, “Rhiannon.”

bringing people and things together across race and musical genre. It is in this spirit that this article engages Giddens's approaches to country music, and her efforts to resolve the difficult issues of race, musical genre, and authenticity.

### BLACKS IN THE COUNTRY MIX

Black Americans have long played a crucial role in the creation and development of country music. But as Miller, Nadine Hubbs,<sup>32</sup> Charles Hughes,<sup>33</sup> Patrick Huber,<sup>34</sup> Tony Thomas,<sup>35</sup> Diane Pecknold,<sup>36</sup> Erika Brady,<sup>37</sup> Barbara Ching,<sup>38</sup> and others have noted, black contributions to country music, and by extension to country culture, have over time suffered erasure as the genre has slowly and thoroughly become marked as white. Commercial recording practices in the early twentieth century play an important role in the origins of the conflation of country music and whiteness. As Miller notes, "Music developed a color line. The blues were African American. Rural white southerners played what came to be called country music. And much of the rest of the music performed and heard in the region was left out. By the 1920s, these depictions were touted in folk song collections as well as the catalogues of 'race' and 'hillbilly' records promoted by the phonograph industry."<sup>39</sup> The creation of race-based musical genres by Okeh Records A&R Director Ralph Peer—"I discovered and developed the idea of making recordings by Negro artists exclusively for sale to Negroes. I saw that this was really a business like our foreign record business, so I decided that, like the German [records] were all on [their own series], we had to give them a different series"<sup>40</sup>—and others, was so effective that the artificial divide reverberates in the early 2019 Lil Nas X controversy. His song, "Old Town Road," which he calls "country trap" because of its use of hip-hop trap drums, climbed the *Billboard* Hot Country charts in March 2019, reaching the top 20 before *Billboard* removed it.<sup>41</sup> As a *Billboard* spokesperson states, "While 'Old Town Road' incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough

32. Nadine E. Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014).

33. Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

34. Patrick Huber, "Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924–1932," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 19–81.

35. Tony Thomas, "Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 143–70.

36. Diane Pecknold, "Introduction: Country Music and Racial Formation," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–15.

37. Erika Brady, "Contested Origins: Arnold Schultz and the Music of Western Kentucky," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 100–18.

38. Barbara Ching, "If Only They Could Read between the Lines: Alice Randall and the Integration of Country Music," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 263–82.

39. Miller, *Segregating*, 2.

40. Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015), 38.

41. Andrew R. Chow, "Lil Nas X Talks 'Old Town Road' and the Billboard Controversy," *Time*, 5 April 2019. <https://time.com/5561466/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-billboard/>.

elements of today's country music to chart in its current version."<sup>42</sup> For some, this controversy highlights country music's intractable whiteness, but, of course, black people have long been involved in the creation, recording, and reception of country music.

Before Lil Nas X, there was Darius Rucker, another African American man who is also the lead singer for roots rockers Hootie and the Blowfish, who were at their peak popularity during the 1990s. In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Charley Pride was a country superstar. During his 30-year career, he recorded 55 albums, sold 35 million records, and was a regular at the Grand Ole Opry.<sup>43</sup> And during the 1920s and 30s, more than a generation earlier, DeFord Bailey also performed regularly on the Grand Ole Opry. In fact, as noted in 1983 by Richard Fulton—then the mayor of Nashville—during “DeFord Bailey Day,” he was the “first musician to perform on the Grand Ole Opry” and he “performed for the first recording session ever held in Nashville.”<sup>44</sup> But even that does not tell the whole story. As early as the late eighteenth century, “Close to half of the households in the southern mountains were made up of poor white tenant farmers and sharecroppers who worked alongside slaves at corn huskings and other work parties.”<sup>45</sup> And it was in these integrated work spaces that black and white people played string music side by side, confirming what scholars like Miller and others have long determined: During the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, the proximity of Southern American blacks and whites resulted in sustained cross-cultural influence, with blacks and whites playing similar music, featuring the same instrumentation.<sup>46</sup>

As Giddens and others note, although the banjo is an African instrument, and there is a long history of black American string music with the banjo at its center, it somehow remains conflated with whiteness. The reasons for this are under debate. For some, including Giddens, the banjo's relative unpopularity with black audiences is because of its correlation with blackface minstrelsy. For Elijah Wald, Thomas, and others, the fact that the banjo has fallen out of favor has little to do with its connection to racism and white supremacy. According to Thomas and Wald, during the 1920s and 30s, some of the most important jazz players engaged the banjo.<sup>47, 48</sup> Rather than advancing the idea that the banjo was rejected by blacks

42. Elias Leight, “Lil Nas X's ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind,” *Rolling Stone*, 26 March 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>.

43. Pamela E. Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage*. (Nashville: My Country, 1998), 196.

44. David C. Morton and Charles K. Wolfe, *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 1–2.

45. Phil Jamison, *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 12.

46. *Ibid.*, 12. According to Jamison, “Daniel Hundley, who grew up in a slaveholding family in northern Alabama, wrote in 1860 . . . ‘And when the long winter evenings have come, you will see blacks and whites sing and shout, and husk in company, to the music of Ole Virginny reels played on a greasy fiddle by some aged Uncle Edward, whose frosty pow proclaims that he is no longer fit for any more active duty, and whose long skinny fingers are only useful now to put life and mettle into the fingers of the younger huskers, by the help of de fiddle and de bow.’”

47. Thomas, “Why,” 152.

48. Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 51. As Elijah Wald notes, “the most sophisticated black groups of the period, the orchestras of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Jelly Roll Morton, continued to use banjos until amplification made the guitar viable in a bigger band setting.”



because of its negative connotations, Thomas asserts that black people moved on from the banjo as they created new musics using different instruments.<sup>49</sup> The five-string banjo receded as a dominant instrument for African Americans because of the evolution of black musics over time, just as it disappeared from most white musics; however, because it “has been retained by bluegrass and old-time revivalist music, two minority musics even among whites. This situation creates the misconception that the five-string banjo has always been a chiefly southern white instrument. The ‘hillbilly’ stereotype identified with country music, especially bluegrass, nourished another misconception: that the five-string banjo had always been a primarily Appalachian instrument.”<sup>50</sup> As Giddens herself admits, “I grew up thinking the banjo was invented in the mountains, that string band music and square dances were a strictly white preserve and history—that while black folk were singing spirituals and playing the blues, white folk were do-si-do’ing and fiddling up a storm—and never the twain did meet—which led me to feeling like an alien in what I find out is my own cultural tradition.”<sup>51</sup> It is this misunderstanding of the history of string band music that ultimately set Giddens on the path to learning more about her African American musical inheritance and passing that knowledge on to others.

#### IBMA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In 2017, Giddens was invited to give the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) keynote. This was another opportunity for Giddens to share her vision of the uniquely American cross-racial and cross-cultural experience through American roots musics. Based in Nashville, and formed in 1985 in Owensboro, Kentucky, the IBMA is a member organization for bluegrass professionals. As it states on its website, “The IBMA is the non-profit music association that connects, educates, and empowers bluegrass professionals and enthusiasts, honoring tradition and encouraging innovation in the bluegrass community worldwide.”<sup>52</sup> While on their website, the IBMA counts “Diversity & Inclusiveness” as one of its core values, its board and staff are currently all white or white presenting.

Giddens’s IBMA speech is remarkable for its range and depth. Moving beyond her experience as a musician whose work falls within the realm of black string music—and country more specifically—her keynote takes on an academic tinge as she engages scholarly sources, quoting and paraphrasing liberally from texts about old-time string and country music by Dena Epstein,<sup>53</sup> Patrick Huber,<sup>54</sup> Barry Mazor,<sup>55</sup> and more. Giddens’s approach to writing her keynote speaks to the seriousness with which she takes her role, not only as educator, but

49. Thomas, “Why,” 144.

50. *Ibid.*, 162.

51. Giddens, “IBMA,” 7.

52. “IBMA About,” <https://ibma.org/about/>.

53. Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977, 2003).

54. Huber, “Black Hillbillies,” 19–81.

55. Mazor, *Ralph Peer*.

also as a cultural scholar who uses available information about a particular time period to tell a story about blacks and country music that will keep her audiences engaged. Her scholarly stance also lessens the burden of the “cult of authenticity,” as she does not have to worry about negotiating the balance between the body she is in and her music.<sup>56</sup>

It’s a weird feeling - I constantly felt the awkwardness of being the ‘raisin in the oatmeal’ in the contra dance world, in the old-time world, and in the bluegrass world. What was odd to me then but makes sense to me now was the place I felt most comfortable was the bluegrass world. Because there, in the piedmont, I was “Dale’s niece” and everybody had an accent I grew up hearing, and an upbringing that I understood. But regardless, whenever I brought out my fiddle or banjo, or my calling cards to call a dance, no matter where I was, I still felt like the ‘other.’<sup>57</sup>

Giddens here engages the concept of alterity. While she does not directly define “otherness,” she offers a compelling narrative that demonstrates its meaning. Describing herself as “an interloper” who felt like she was “‘sneaking’ into this music,” and was a “‘raisin in the oatmeal,’” her audience understands exactly what she means.<sup>58</sup> As a young black woman in predominantly white musical spaces, she always felt like an outsider. But through further study, she is able not only to cement a sense of belonging in the various country music traditions in her own mind, but also to educate white audiences that have, for generations, viewed country music as a white art form.

After noting, in her speech, the cross-cultural musical engagement of black and white Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she asks, “so what happened to change the paradigm so quickly between the turn of the century and the advent of Bluegrass? Well, to begin with, there was the Great Migration.”<sup>59</sup> Giddens then rehearses the movement of blacks from Southern cities to New York and Chicago, noting that as they migrated they left behind some of their rural ways and musics, and what they did carry forward was necessarily transformed. As she notes, “African American culture began a pattern of always innovating, always moving on to the next new sounds.”<sup>60</sup> This is certainly reminiscent of those she cites in the bibliography at the end of her keynote,<sup>61</sup> such as Tony Thomas<sup>62</sup> and Mazor.<sup>63</sup> So why is it important that Giddens includes the works of popular music scholars in her keynote? Giddens’s scholarly moves demonstrate her intentionality. Her educational mission is bound up in her artistic one. Giddens’s strategies through her speech (academic sources) and media (music video) to affect her audience’s consumption of not only her own music, but popular music writ large, is what truly sets her apart as an artist.

56. Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 64.

57. Giddens, “IBMA,” 4–5.

58. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

59. *Ibid.*, 8.

60. *Ibid.*, 8.

61. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

62. Thomas, “Why,” 143–70.

63. Mazor, *Ralph Peer*.

After Giddens helps the predominantly-white IBMA audience to understand the history and legacy of black Americans in country music, she issues a pointed challenge. Due to the strength of her own words, I am quoting this section of Giddens's speech at length:

So that's the legacy—the question now: is that the future? Are we going to let a handful of dead A&R men and white supremacists decide how we feel about our own music? About who gets to play our music? Are we going to stand up to the kind of prejudice that had people warning me and my fellow Chocolate Drops, oh, don't go to the Galax Fiddlers Convention? That fellow in Floyd who said to my husband, oh, you're with that high yellow gal? and I see you got one of them blue gum negroes in the group. . . Except of course, he didn't say Negro. Are we gonna remember that pioneering hillbilly star Fiddlin' John Carson was a devoted member of the KKK? Or that we remember the Carter Family, but not Leslie Riddle? Hank Williams, but not Tee Tot Payne? Jimmie Rodgers, Hobart Smith, Tommy Jarrell, Doc Roberts and countless others, who freely acknowledged all the black musicians who inspired them, but that we, as a society, don't remember or value? And what about Earl Scruggs' amazing innovation but not the hundreds of years of cross-racial music making that led up to it? When the Carolina Chocolate Drops became the first black string band to play the Grand Ol' Opry, and let me tell you, it felt amazing, people started calling it a Healing Moment. But I have to ask—a healing moment for whom? One or two black groups, or one or two black country stars is not a substitution for recognizing the true multi-cultural history of this music. We have a lot of work to do.<sup>64</sup>

Giddens clearly shows the limitations of diversity initiatives that are devoid of genuine inclusion in the present, and an honest reckoning of the past. Without these elements, diversity or representation becomes tokenism. She expresses her anger and frustration about the willful erasure, not only of black people from country music, but of the effacement of the history of racism and white supremacy that played a significant role in that obliteration. Strikingly, this is echoed in the first episode of *Country Music: A Film by Ken Burns*, titled "The Rub (Beginnings–1933),"<sup>65</sup> for which Giddens is a prominent interview subject. While the fact that Fiddlin' John Carson played at KKK rallies is mentioned, his connection to the Klan is quickly glossed over. The voice-over narrator does not offer any critique—Carson is not labeled a white supremacist. In fact, while the African American role in country music's origins and continued development is noted throughout, there is little overt talk of race or racism in Episode one. The audience, of course, is not privy to how Giddens's comments were edited—what things she might have said that were not included—but her statements in the episode are notable for focusing exclusively on the black and white origins of country, instead of the racism that obscured this shared history. In the documentary, she once again serves as educator and bridge builder.<sup>66</sup> Giddens does assert though, after playing her banjo: "It's America, but it's got Africa in it"<sup>67</sup>—with her subtle emphasis on the word "Africa"

64. Giddens, 14–15.

65. *Country Music: A Film by Ken Burns*, directed by Ken Burns (2019; Boston, MA: PBS Distribution, 2019), DVD.

66. Tomlinson, "Rhiannon."

67. *Country Music*.

echoing her IBMA keynote. As a potential corrective to what Giddens highlights in her IBMA speech, the Drops' "Country Girl" song and video exist to help bring about a legitimate healing moment where a broader audience understands the history of black contributions to country music and culture, and makes room for a dynamic country future that includes African Americans.

### GIDDENS AS COUNTRY GIRL

The Carolina Chocolate Drops' song and music video, "Country Girl,"<sup>68</sup> is an intervention by Giddens into persistent ideas about racialized authenticity and ownership of string music and its offshoots. Here Giddens engages a double narrative: There is the arc of the lyric—an enumeration and recitation of the joys of country living, an expression of her own experience growing up in Greensboro—and the visual, interracial "story" of country culture: the music, food, and rural landscape. In the video, before the song even begins, Giddens, Flemmons, and Jenkins stroll down a dark country road, instruments in hand, on their way into a packed summer barn dance. As Giddens passes a young white girl in the midst of hula hooping, she glances at her, giving the girl a quick thumbs up while ambling toward the barn with her band. This interaction forecasts the interracial engagement to come. The "Country Girl" video resists the notion of the country dance as an exclusively white space, presenting a different reality where people of all races, ages, and genders share a love of black string music, and dance together in close quarters. Giddens's thumbs up seems staged, and perhaps a little bit corny—reminiscent of how a young Giddens viewed the 1970s and 80s TV show *Hee Haw* with her black maternal grandparents: "We laughed at the cornpone jokes, watched the great guest performances, and all around had no notion there was anything odd with any of it, a black rural household in the South being entertained by this commercial idea of Southern music and culture while actually living the real country life."<sup>69</sup> So the lyrics to "Country Girl" are crucial for Giddens to stake her claim to a *legitimate* country childhood. Her determination to not only redress ideas about race-based country music authenticity, but also to advance honest depictions of country culture, leads her to craft lyrics and share visuals that do this work. But why does she include this corny element in the video? In what ways is it connected to Giddens's interest in resisting black erasure from country music?

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Muñoz discusses punk performance artist Vaginal Davis, and the ways in which academics and her drag peers undervalued her work, missing the pointed cultural critiques underneath what Davis calls her "innate," "too homey," and "too country" performances.<sup>70</sup> For Muñoz, "Her [Davis's] uses of humor and parody function as disidentificatory<sup>71</sup> strategies whose effect on the dominant public sphere is that of a counterpublic terrorism. At the center of all of Davis's

68. Ccdrops, "Carolina Chocolate Drops - Country Girl [Official Video]," Filmed [May 2012], *YouTube video*, 03:41, Posted [May 2012], [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVIaiADsyYo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVIaiADsyYo). Accessed 16 May 2016.

69. Giddens, 4.

70. José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 100.

71. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11–12.

cultural productions is a radical impulse toward cultural critique.<sup>72</sup> As Muñoz continues, “It is the ‘innateness,’ the ‘homeyness,’ and the ‘countryness’ of Davis’s style that draw this particular academic to the artist’s work. I understand these characteristics as components of the artist’s guerilla style, a style that functions as a ground-level cultural terrorism that fiercely skewers both straight culture and reactionary components of gay culture.”<sup>73</sup> This approach proves to be disidentificatory,<sup>74</sup> as it allows Davis to exist as a queer black person in the largely white and straight L.A. punk scene while at the same time resisting dominant ideologies that would seek to erase her.<sup>75</sup>

Giddens also participates in a “guerilla style” “cultural terrorism” through her country corniness.<sup>76</sup> Her corny thumbs up in the “Country Girl” video perpetuates a commercial and inauthentic version of country culture, but it also offers Giddens a sense of familiarity and belonging as it harks back to her black grandparents’ rural home. Her surety of her countryness is further bolstered by her white paternal uncle who played bluegrass when she was growing up, a style of music, and a musical scene, in which she has talked about feeling simultaneously unwelcome and strangely comfortable.<sup>77</sup> Davis makes a disidentificatory move by choosing Angela Davis as a Black Power model for her stage name in reaction to the toxic compulsory heterosexuality of the Black Panthers, “us[ing] parody and pastiche to remake Black Power, opening it up via disidentification to a self that is simultaneously black and queer.”<sup>78</sup> And Giddens uses disidentification through the country corniness in the Drops’ commercial “Country Girl” video<sup>79</sup> to make a space for herself in contemporary American roots scenes. Rather than bringing her teacher/scholarly persona into the video, she instead promotes a celebration of country life that hinges on interracial engagement and artistic cross-pollination. Giddens’s thumbs up does more than enunciate a parodic notion of country culture: it also masks her anger and disillusionment at African American erasure from country music traditions.

In spite of her fame and critical success—the Drops won a GRAMMY Award for Best Traditional Folk Album in 2011—and her eventual relocation to Limerick, Ireland, Giddens identifies first and foremost as a country girl from the Southern United States. By the time the Drops produced their first music video, Robinson had left the band, and founding members Giddens and Flemons were joined by multi-instrumentalist Hubby Jenkins, cellist Leyla McCalla, and beatboxer Adam Matta. When Giddens, Flemons, and Jenkins—McCalla and Matta are already inside—arrive at the barn in the video, the crowd lets out a roar that cues the music. The exuberant hugs and smiles exchanged between young and old, black and white, gives way to shots of Giddens in pigtails, perhaps a representation of a younger version of herself. The rest of the video cuts between the barn dance and the various shots of

72. *Ibid.*, 100.

73. *Ibid.*, 102.

74. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

75. *Ibid.*, 102.

76. *Ibid.*, 102.

77. Giddens, “IBMA,” 4–5.

78. Muñoz, 99.

79. Ccdrops, “Carolina.”

the adult and younger Giddens. It features myriad signifiers of country life: Shots of Giddens, Flemons, and Jenkins eating at a BBQ joint, piling into the back of a pickup truck, and frolicking in stacks of hay. These are juxtaposed with scenes of a smiling Giddens, singing by herself in the Carolina dusk or standing by as her “mother” serves a bountiful feast.

Giddens celebrates Southern foods here as signifiers of country culture, and when she sings, “All day I dream about a place I’ve been/A place where the skin I’m in/Feels like it’s supposed to be/And anyone around who looks at me says...,” and she repeats the chorus that asserts her countryness, she both signals her sense of comfort and safety in her body when in the familiar South, while also demonstrating discomfort in a music scene that does not accept her racialized body as authentically country. But since it is skin that is the site of the authenticity question, it is also important that her black skin is in a place of ease in rural spaces. As demonstrated with the banjo example, where the instrument with African origins became “white” as black people moved on to musics informed by urbanity, the broad umbrella of country music, including old-time string music, is tied to rural identities. This song lyric, and the accompanying visuals trumpeting black rurality, disrupts black erasure from country music. If one is a country girl, then one can authentically participate in country culture.

The inclusion of old-time costume design—particularly in the case of Flemons, who wears a pink plaid shirt with brown suspenders, trousers, bowler hat, and pipe—completes the “authentic” Southern tableau. The “Country Girl” video is meant to be an example of the “real country life” Giddens talked about in her IBMA speech.<sup>80</sup> The video is rather slick—the colors pop, and all of the main subjects are well-coiffed, with Giddens wearing glamour makeup, invoking contemporary commercial country—but its high production values make it accessible so audiences will learn about blackness in country life and music. Flemons’s clothing engages signifiers of old-time country authenticity that, along with the corny thumbs up, might be found in the stereotypical notions of rural life in *Hee Haw*,<sup>81</sup> though that show is marked by a degree of authenticity as well because of Giddens’s enjoyment of it with her family during childhood. And Giddens wears contemporary clothing that might be seen in any current pop music video. This juxtaposition between old-timey and current country demonstrates that black people are part of this historical tradition, and should also be included in country music in the present.

It is noteworthy that Giddens is wearing full makeup in the video, as it is not uncommon for her to appear in promotional photos with minimal or no makeup. In the Smithsonian Folkways “Our Native Daughters On Their Roots and the African American Banjo Tradition” YouTube video upload,<sup>82</sup> Giddens does not appear to be wearing makeup. At the beginning of the video, she sits on a porch outside of her producer Dirk Powell’s Lafayette,

80. Giddens, “IBMA,” 4.

81. Giddens, 4.

82. Smithsonian Folkways, “Our Native Daughters On Their Roots and the African American Banjo Tradition,” Filmed [April 2019], YouTube video, 04:12, Posted [April 2019], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jG1sRvFDnUo>. Accessed 20 July 2019.

Louisiana studio, sporting a flowered shirt with a black hoodie and a red scarf to match her magenta hair coloring. She holds a mug of coffee, or perhaps tea, in her hand:

Four black female banjo players? Writing historically-based songs? I don't think so. I don't think there's ever been a project with two black female banjo players on it. I don't know. Yeah, I just think the focus on the banjo and all the different banjos that we have. It's amazing. The focus on the different rhythms and the different voices. It feels like something pretty special.<sup>83</sup>

The clip features interviews with Giddens, and her bandmates Kiah, McCalla, and Russell, all singer-songwriter-multi-instrumentalists. In between interviews, there are shots of them performing music, all with their banjos. What does it mean that Giddens wears makeup to reclaim her country belonging, but she eschews it in many other promotional materials, and in her *Songs of Our Native Daughters* videos? Perhaps it signals another disidentificatory approach, alongside the corniness, to help move blacks into a space of country belonging with a plan of resistance once inside. Giddens's makeup could be a capitulation to a strand of commercial country music, specifically the country and pop music video forms that perpetuate narrow ideas about beauty standards for women. Giddens's makeup, therefore, helps her to claim a space in a visual sense as a contemporary country girl. Alternatively, in *Our Native Daughters*, Giddens exists in a sisterhood with other black women—a safer space where she does not have to prove country music's black origins. It is simply a given.

While many of the images in the "Country Girl"<sup>84</sup> video feel forced, and present well-worn and romanticized notions of a particular sort of Southern experience, Giddens uses the clip not only to show that string music is black music too, but also to suggest that being a "country girl" allows for cross-racial experiences. Southern musical spaces are white *and* black, and country music continues to bring black and white people together, as it has historically. Giddens's description of her native state, and her work, as a "bridge"<sup>85</sup> suggests that she sees herself as existing in the middle between oppositional forces. She is introducing seemingly incongruous ideas and sounds, and challenging audiences to come to the conclusion that no bridge is needed. These ideas and sounds fit together as they always have. This bridge is also reflected in the music itself. The song "Country Girl" brings country together with bluegrass, pop, soul, and a dash of hip hop by way of Matta's intermittent beatboxing. While Flemons's banjo and Giddens's fiddle evoke country and bluegrass music, Giddens's vocals are absent the expected country twang. Her classical training ensures her clear enunciation, and her vocal performance resembles pop and soul more than country. An undercurrent of up-tempo pop runs through the song despite its country instrumentation.

Another way that Giddens educates through her music video is by allowing the work to make room for, fully embrace, and articulate the larger breadth of African American participation in American roots music, created and disseminated in largely rural, country spaces. In other words, the rural landscapes in the video read as country. When Giddens—fiddle in

83. Smithsonian Folkways, "Our Native."

84. Ccdrops, "Carolina."

85. Tomlinson, "Rhiannon."

hand—walks up to Flemons—banjo at his side—he is smoking his corncob pipe, and chatting with an older, well-dressed black man who is sitting in the doorway of a trailer home. The older man is wearing a dark shirt, black jacket, pink pants, dark shoes and a brown hat. As he plays an acoustic guitar, his cane leans against the trailer to his left. Of course, the audience cannot hear what he is playing, but he has the persona of a lone country bluesman. The scenario in which Giddens has to find Flemons, and make sure that he joins her in the next part of their adventures, lest he while his day away, harks back to the master-apprentice dynamic the Drops enjoyed with Joe Thompson. As Giddens discusses in the liner notes for “Track 1 – ‘Lights in the Valley’ (Live) by Joe & Odell Thompson” in the North Carolina music issue for the *Oxford American*, “Along with the other original Carolina Chocolate Drops, Dom Flemons and Justin Robinson, I was so fortunate to have had the opportunity to sit at Joe’s feet. For that is what we did.”<sup>86</sup> This positioning of three musicians coming together, with two of them splitting off to find the third member of the Drops—Jenkins—sitting in the back of a pickup truck flirting with three young women, seems like the sort of scene that might occur in this country narrative. When Giddens, Flemons, and Jenkins drive off together without the young women, but with their instruments, ending up in an empty barn continuing their lazy afternoon, it feels like these three people, dark skin and all, were made for country living.

At the end of the video, when the dancing and the music has (mostly) stopped, Giddens sings while breaking the fourth wall: She reminds the audience that she is a country girl because she was born there, and grew up in the midst of spectacular rurality. As the camera closes in on Giddens’s face, she offers a smile that is simultaneously triumphant and mischievous, suggesting a teaching victory with a successful learning outcome for the viewing and listening audience.

Giddens continues to educate the public about the participation of black people in American roots musics through her creative work. Her *Songs of Our Native Daughters* project is an important recent example, as is the 2017 IBMA keynote, where she asks the crowd, “How do we reframe the narrative so that it is seen to be welcoming to all—that the impact of Arnold Shultz, for example, on Bill Monroe is not a footnote, but rather recognized as being part of the main narrative of the story?”<sup>87</sup> This is the sort of question that evinces Giddens’s recognition of her place in the American roots music tradition, her determination to resist confining paradigms of rural American musical authenticity, and her powerful reclamation of country culture. ■

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