

Another Country

On the relationship between country music and white supremacy—and what we can do about it

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From Reba McEntire's 1991 video "Is There Life Out There?" with script written by Alice Randall

I started writing this piece last summer, when the majority of country music stars remained silent about Charlottesville.¹ As a musician and as a fan, I wanted to be part of a more organized anti-racist response, and I wished there were a group called Country Music Against White Supremacy so I could join it.² Then I started wondering about what I could do to help make that a reality.

A group like this wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. There's a long tradition of both liberal and conservative musicians and their fans organizing to speak out on critical issues, raise money and awareness, and support political candidates in almost every genre of American popular music. And conservative country musicians often do have an organized, political platform, brought together by groups like the NRA.³ When it comes to progressive politics in country music, though, we're usually on our own.⁴

Ever since 2003, when Natalie Maines said, "We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas" and the Dixie

Chicks were subsequently blacklisted from country radio, people have cited the “Dixie Chick effect” as the reason that more country musicians don’t publicly claim progressive values. But the more I learned about the history of country music, the more I saw that the Dixie Chick effect was only one part of a much longer and more complicated story. I realized that until we have a better shared understanding of country’s relationship to conservative politics and, specifically, to white supremacy, we’ll never be able to speak out together effectively about what needs to change within the industry itself or in the world around us. I’m hoping that this essay can be a step toward building that shared understanding.

First, I want to remind you of the stakes here and why this is a fight worth fighting: country music is hugely influential in the United States. According to this [2015 marketing report from the Country Music Association \(CMA\)](#), more than 42% of America’s population listens to country music. And despite the stereotypes of this audience (which we’re going to get into soon), this represents people of all ages and in every region, including 25% of all Hispanic people and 20% of all African Americans. The stereotypes don’t hold for class either: 70% of listeners own their own home, 59% are college educated, and their average income is \$76,000.⁵ As Nadine Hubbs, author of *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, explains:

Of course, country is not written, created, or consumed exclusively by white working-class people—or for that matter, southern, rural, Protestant, or heterosexual ones. Characterizations of country music as speaking for or to a narrow constituency defined along such lines are at odds with (among many things) the long presence in country music of African Americans in the South and Mexican Americans in the Southwest and the diaspora, the middle-class suburbanization of ‘new country’ audiences in the 1980s and after, and the music’s pivotal role in lesbian and gay two-step bars and International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) events.⁶

So to sum up: a lot of people in the United States listen to country music.

One last note: I’m also very invested in understanding the relationship between country and homophobia, transphobia, and sexism, especially as a queer woman making this music. But as I worked on this piece it became clear to me that, while all these oppressions are interconnected and it’s vital that we understand each and also how they work together to reinforce each other, the story of country music as a genre centers

around white supremacy. And while I also want to acknowledge that this means more than just talking about Black and white people, and that there are many diverse influences we need to honor, at its core, this story is about anti-Black racism.

What Do We Mean When We Say Country Music is Racist?

Everybody knows that country music is racist. Go ahead, google “Is country music racist?” and you’ll see. It’s the butt of plenty of jokes.⁷ Everybody knows that country music is for poor white, uneducated, red-state bigots with confederate flags on their pickup trucks. It’s the soundtrack for the ignorant “rednecks” who keep dragging our country back into its racist past, the people who hated Obama and elected Trump, while educated, non-country listening, Obama-loving liberal white people keep trying to move us forward into a glorious, never-racist future.

The thing is, this stereotype doesn’t just get it wrong, it’s part of the problem. Before we can understand the ways that country music *is* racist, we need to look at why talking about country music like this actually helps keep white supremacy in place.

Nadine Hubbs writes that, “Mainstream representations of ‘redneck’ bigotry, which often feature country music, perform the conservative work of erasing privileged whites and institutions from prevailing images of racial and sexual bigotry past and present.”⁸

What I hear Hubbs saying here about white supremacy is that by focusing our attention on this “redneck” stereotype as the face of racism, we’re just helping out the white people with the real power. We may be a nation obsessed with displays of wealth, but that’s only when it comes to *The Real Housewives* or the Kardashians. When it comes to the unglamorous work that rich, white people do to influence and operate the institutions that affect all our lives, the kind of work that is actually keeping white supremacy in place, we’re not nearly as well informed. And that is great for people in power, because then there are fewer of us getting in their way.

Even if the “redneck” stereotype were true, did that violent racist with country music blasting from his pickup truck work in management at Wells Fargo, targeting Black families for predatory loans that decimated their wealth? Was he the one making sure that even for people with credit scores of 660 and higher, 21.4 percent of Black people received high-interest mortgages as opposed to only 6.2 percent of whites?⁹ Is he an

executive at the Corrections Corporation of America, the largest for-profit prison company, where “38 percent of CCA’s ‘revenue stream’ comes from incarcerating Black people, making enormous profits from a incredibly biased system that has “more black men in prison and jail, or on probation and parole, than were slaves before the start of the Civil War”?¹⁰ Is he behind the current wave of voter suppression policies that include closing polling places in communities of color, purging eligible voters from the rolls without their knowledge, implementing new discriminatory voter ID laws, and eliminating early voting, all significantly decreasing the numbers of people of color who are able to vote?¹¹

I’m not saying that white, working class people aren’t racist or that they don’t benefit from and help enforce white supremacy. But let’s get clear: this is true about all white people. All white people, including me, benefit from a system which continues to steal lives, labor, and land to build this country. All white people are a part of keeping white supremacy in place.

However, all white people don’t have the same amount of power. There’s something fishy about focusing on a group of white people with the least access and the fewest resources as the face of white supremacy. This prevents us from telling a more accurate story about where the power really lies. (By the way, it also makes it a lot easier for conspiracy theories that blame groups like Muslims, Jews, or immigrants to flourish.) This is why Hubbs says these representations of country music fans “perform the conservative work of erasing privileged whites and institutions.”

You Can’t Fight What You Don’t See

All this matters because you can’t fight what you don’t see. To dismantle our country’s white supremacist institutions, we need to be clear on how they work and who has the power to operate and influence them. Endlessly rehashing some version of *Deliverance* isn’t just classist, it’s actually protecting those in power.

If you don’t think this is a real problem, then let’s talk about Trump. While the media often paints this same stereotypical poor white, uneducated, country-music-loving “redneck” as the face of Trump supporters, in fact, “those who reported being in fair or poor financial shape [were 1.7 times more likely to support Clinton](#), compared to those who were in better financial shape.”¹² How are we going to succeed in building real

coalitions across race and class to defeat Trump if we don't even understand who put him there in the first place?

We need to start by recognizing that more privilege and more education do not automatically make someone more liberal—in fact, it often makes people more committed to the establishment. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Lowen talks about polling his audiences on “what kind of adults, by educational level, supported the war in Vietnam.” By a margin of almost 10 to 1, audiences believed that college-educated people would have been “more informed and critical” and “more tolerant” and supported the withdrawal of troops. But in reality, more educated people disproportionately supported the war—“twice as high a proportion of college-educated adults, 40 percent, were hawks [against the withdrawal of troops], compared to only 20 percent of adults with grade school educations.” And even as the war went on and public opinion shifted, “grade-school educated were *always* the most dovish, the college-educated the most hawkish.”

As Lowen explains, audiences guess wrong because they don't know that, “educated people were and are more likely to be Republicans, while high school dropouts are more likely to be Democrats. Hawkish right-wing Republicans, including the core supporters of Barry Goldwater in 1964, of Ronald Regan in 1980, and of groups like the John Birch Society, come disproportionately from the most educated and affluent segments of our society, particularly dentists and physicians.” Kinda makes you want to have another look at what we think we know about “the Dixie Chick effect,” doesn't it? And also, to maybe take another look at your dentist.¹³

I want to reiterate here that it's a stereotype that only people with lower incomes and less education listen to country music. If you look back at the statistics from the CMA that I opened with, you'll see that's just not true. My point is that if you want to talk about the relationship between white supremacy and country music, using this classist stereotype, even as a joke, isn't the way to do it. It has the opposite effect and ends up helping to reinforce white supremacy instead. What's more, it's holding us back from having the conversation we really need to have about the ways that country music is racist.

Ok, Then, Is Country Music Racist?

It's time to really get into it. Now that we know this question is a lot more complicated than just pointing our finger at a classist stereotype, there's a ton to break down here about how country music actually does help keep white supremacy in place.

For as long as country has existed as a genre, there have been those who have tried to enlist it for white supremacist political agendas. For example, the powerful industrialist Henry Ford, a white supremacist who believed that the social problems of the 1920s were caused by immigrants, Black people, and Jews, invested heavily in the promotion of square dancing and old-time fiddler competitions, hoping it would help combat what he believed was the corrupting influence of jazz.¹⁴ (Not that either square dancing or fiddling were actually only white.¹⁵ But we're gonna come back to this soon.) And the KKK's long tradition of musical propaganda in all genres includes country records released in the 1960s on underground labels like Reb Rebel Records that people still share online today.¹⁶

From its earliest days, country music has also provided a soundtrack to the vast, racist "cowboys and Indians" mythology used to justify colonialism and genocide as manifest destiny. It has worked to erase the presence and resilience of Indigenous people by positioning them as a "[vanishing race](#)"¹⁷ that exists only in the past. Mocking, racist songs like Hank Williams' "[Kaw-Liga](#)"—Williams' version was number 1 on the country charts for 14 weeks in 1953 while Charley Pride's cover went to number 3 on the charts in 1969—and Tim McGraw's 1994 hit "[Indian Outlaw](#)" are still favorites in the country canon. And there are countless others that unquestioningly [romanticize cowboys](#) and the frontier while appropriating and/or mocking Native American culture and [objectifying Native American women](#).¹⁸

Yes, there have also been white country musicians like Johnny Cash who have supported Indigenous rights in well-intentioned though sometimes problematic ways.¹⁹ More importantly, there is a long tradition of Native people making country music, from [Apache Spirit](#) to [Floyd Red Crow Westerman](#) to [Wigwam](#), whose songs are all written in their native language Anishinaabe, to contemporary artists like [Tracy Bone](#) and [Desiree Dorion](#).²⁰ But this complexity does not change the fact that celebrating white settlers has always been a central part of country music's imagery and imagination and one of its longest-running racist traditions.

However, country music's role on the American conservative political stage didn't really begin until 1968. While it was standard practice for all local southern politicians to include country music as part of their campaigns, segregationist George Wallace, who ran as a third party candidate in 1968 against Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, was the first to take it national. And Nixon was paying attention. As Lester Feder explains:

Nixon's victory was dependent on prying away Southern whites, working class whites, middle class whites that had traditionally voted Democratic. And those were the same voters that George Wallace was going after. So he knew that in 1972, when he was going to run for reelection, if Wallace ran again, it would be a major problem for him because he still [needed]... those votes to win. So in the intervening years, he reached out to the South, to those middle class, working class whites, through the same means that George Wallace had. And he took a page right out of his playbook and courted country music.²¹

Nixon began positioning country music as a celebration of conservative, pro-establishment values. He declared October "Country Music Month" in 1970 and started inviting country musicians to the White House. In 1974, he even gave a speech at the Grand Ole Opry, celebrating country music's American values of family, faith, and patriotism.²² Nixon praised country music lovers as the embodiment of his "silent majority"—racially coded language for the white, middle-class people who supported the Vietnam war and weren't so-called civil rights militants, bra-burning feminists, or pot-smoking hippies.²³

Every conservative politician since Nixon has followed his lead, building their base by using country music and the celebration of its "values" as a way of referring to white supremacy without being overtly racist. Trump has carried this tradition into the present moment: here's the crowd at [a Trump rally in West Virginia](#) singing along to John Denver's "Country Roads" and [Trace Adkins at a Nashville rally](#) this year. (Dammit, Trace, couldn't you have let me listen to "[I Left Something Turned on at Home](#)" in peace?)

If you think all this sounds like a conspiracy theory, read up on Kevin Phillips, the architect of Nixon's "Southern strategy." [In this 1970 interview](#), he clearly explains that the plan was to win the south by courting the vote of racist whites.²⁴ He believed country music would help them do just that.²⁵ It worked then and it still works now.

Here's the weird thing though: many of the biggest, chart-topping country hits of Nixon's era are about as anti-establishment and the opposite of the "silent majority" as you can get. Just look at [the lyrics](#) to Johnny Cash's "[Man in Black](#)," which went to #3 on the country charts in 1971—he sure sounds like a civil rights militant. As for bra-burning feminists, a doctor who taught sex education told Loretta Lynn that her song "[The Pill](#)," which went to #5 in 1975, did more to educate people out in the country than all the government programs put together.²⁶ And pot-smoking hippies? Even Merle Haggard's 1969 smash "[Okie from Muskogee](#)," which undoubtedly helped coalesce this conservative base,²⁷ was originally intended as satire and likely written as a joke while the band was getting stoned on their tour bus.²⁸

Protest, resistance, and progressive politics have always been a part of country music. Hubbs locates this in its tradition of "hillbilly humanism," in songs like Hank Williams' "[Pictures from Life's Other Side](#)," that share a simple but radical message—"all people are equal before God and no one has the right to judge another." She also sees it in country's antibourgeois stance that "articulates a critique of existing power relations in society" in songs like Johnny Paycheck's "[Take This Job and Shove It](#)."²⁹ Meanwhile, the essays in the *The Honky Tonk on the Left* look at everything from pro-New Deal songs in the 30s to the liberal stance of Garth Brooks.

It's not a given that country music—or even any particular country song—stands for one political party or another. While George W. Bush played Brooks and Dunn's "[Only in America](#)" throughout his campaigns, Obama also played it after accepting the nomination at the Democratic National Convention.³⁰ In fact, in that same 1972 election where Nixon claimed country for his own, Democratic presidential candidate Edmund Muskie was using country music too, hitting the campaign trail with "the Chocolate Cowboy," Black country artist [O.B. McClinton](#).³¹ So what made someone like Phillips think that country music would help Republicans win over racist white voters? We know the answer isn't any of those classist stereotypes we just looked at. So why did it work? And why does it still work?

The answer to this question is in the history of how country music as a genre came to be. So let's jump in the wayback machine and have a look.

The Influence of Minstrel Shows

We're headed to the 1920s, when country music was first created as a genre. But before we can talk about that, before we can talk about the history of *any* popular music in America and its relationship to white supremacy, we have to start further back and talk first about minstrel shows. Their popularity began to grow in the 1840s and soon these theatrical performances of racist stereotypes by white people in blackface were America's most popular entertainment and remained so for the next *50 years*. As Rhiannon Giddens explains, "It was the first American cultural export to sweep other nations, a full hundred years before rock and roll. It was banjo fever everywhere, and the real birth of the American popular song industry from Daniel Emmett's 'Dixie' to Stephen Foster's 'Oh! Susanna,' and minstrelsy became the bedrock of American popular culture."³² I think Giddens' term "bedrock" is especially helpful here. We need to remember that even though recorded music didn't exist yet, the foundations of the record industry lie in the way this music—which dominated national culture for decades—was put explicitly in service of white supremacy.

While minstrelsy is bedrock for all American popular music, it is especially so for country. Even as the West African origins of the banjo have lately become more well-known and honored, the fact that it was minstrel shows that popularized the instrument for most white people is usually glossed over. ([Watch this](#) for a good history lesson from Giddens.³³) Moreover, although minstrel shows had lessened in popularity by the 1900s, much of their style was incorporated into "country music barn dances [such] as the Grand Ole Opry, National Barn Dance, WWVA Jamboree, and *Hee Haw*. The personae and performance styles of many early country music performers, including Uncle Dave Macon and Roy Acuff, owed much to minstrelsy, since those musicians started their performing careers in medicine shows, a form of entertainment strongly influenced by the minstrel show tradition."³⁴ And of course, many of the songs of this era are still a part of the country canon today, especially for string bands, although their minstrel backstory isn't usually recognized. Think about the first time you learned "Oh Susanna," which is still a beloved children's song. ([Here's one](#) of the countless animated versions of it for children on youtube.) Have you ever seen [the original lyrics](#), especially the extremely racist second verse?

Minstrelsy is only one part of country music's origins, though. In Giddens' keynote speech to the International Bluegrass Music Association in 2017, which is what I was

quoting from above, she goes on to describe how, “in countless areas of the south, usually the poorer ones not organized around plantation life, working-class whites and Blacks lived near each other; and while they may not have been marrying each other, they were quietly creating a new, common music.” So as minstrel music is “becoming a huge commercial success, with traveling troupes bringing professional songs to different regions of the US,” at the same time, “blacks and whites in places like Appalachia, and the piedmont, and other racially diverse areas are beginning to pass the music back and forth, and a wide flung net of black dance musicians are providing the music for communities all over the country, and are becoming the first to call square dances.”³⁵

Here is where the story of country music as a genre begins. There was never a time when it was just a story about white people. And it was always also a story about white supremacy.

The Segregation of Hillbilly Records and Race Records

When U.S. Talking Machine companies began to record and market blues and old-time music during the early to mid-1920s, they effectively began the process of transforming southern vernacular music, heard for decades at fiddle contests, dances, house parties, tent shows, and other social gatherings, into immensely popular commercial products. This music, the product of more than three centuries of vibrant cross-racial exchange and adaptation, was profoundly and inextricably multiracial, but talking-machine companies, in an effort to streamline their marketing efforts, separated the music of black and white southerners into special categories of “race” and “hillbilly” records.... What began as merely marketing categories soon evolved, for all intents and purposes, into musical genres... and the generic labels of *race* (first applied in 1921) and *hillbilly* (first used in 1925) would remain the sound-recording industry’s dominant terms to describe black and white southern vernacular music until *rhythm and blues* and *country and western* replaced them shortly after the end of World War II.³⁶

As you can probably guess from this quote, these two new genres were not nearly as segregated as their marketing campaigns implied. As Patrick Huber explains in his essay “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932,” the early hillbilly catalogues were “remarkably diverse,” including selections from African

American string bands, Cajun bands, Creole Haitian singers, Hawaiian guitarists, and Mexican groups.³⁷

Early country music “was not an organic folk tradition” nor a whites-only tradition, but instead “a culturally constructed commercial music.”³⁸ In fact, the same songs were sometimes released in both the race and hillbilly series, but “firms often disguised the identity of African American artists who appeared in these [hillbilly] series, particularly if they were relatively well known as race recording artists, just as those same firms concealed the identity of white hillbilly artists whose selections appeared on race records.”³⁹

But what about the music itself? Early country and blues both “rely heavily on many of the same musical resources” and are “deeply intertwined” when you start to look at their shared song structures, as Nicholas Stoia explains.⁴⁰ This is part of what Giddens means when she’s talking about “working-class whites and blacks...quietly creating a new, common music.” Stoia’s article has [tons of examples](#) that make it easy to hear. Take Jimmie Rodgers, “the father of country music,” with his 1929 “[Frankie and Johnny](#).” Now listen to Ma Rainey, “mother of the blues” with her 1926 “[Stack O’Lee Blues](#).”

Speaking of Jimmie Rodgers, let’s talk about yodeling. Is there anything more closely associated with country? Yet, in his article “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk,” Erich Nunn looks at the similarities between Rodgers’ breakthrough hit “[Blue Yodel](#)” recorded in November 1927, and African American singer Tommy Johnson’s “[Cool Drink of Water](#)” recorded a few months later. While most who write about Rodgers acknowledge that he was deeply influenced by the Black railroad workers he grew up around and later worked together with, they usually insist that his yodeling comes from Swiss tradition. But it turns out Black musicians were singing the “blue yodel” too.

Nunn explains how both these songs have similar yodeling plus similar harmonic structure and melody. Johnson and Rodgers may have even known each other and played music together. And in fact, as Nunn looks at the earliest reviews of Rodgers’ music, he finds Rodgers characterized as a “white man singing black songs.” On top of all that, because, well, because America, the only “Swiss” yodeling tradition Rodgers would have likely been familiar with would have come through a popular yodeling burlesque in minstrel shows performed in blackface. It’s not that Nunn is saying these two songs are the same or that one came from the other. It’s that they both come from the same roots

and people understood that at the time—at least until Rodgers was declared the “father of country” and those roots got erased.⁴¹

Even if you’re not a music theory nerd, it’s worth listening to some of these examples. Because when you recognize how intertwined this music was, it’s easier to see how the creation of these categories wasn’t just a tactic for marketing music to segregated audiences. *It was a tactic for marketing segregation and white supremacy itself.* By constructing these genres, the industry was also helping to construct race according to the dictates of Jim Crow, which said that racial difference—and white supremacy—could be seen in everything, including music. The segregation of these genres helped build the idea that racial difference could be heard, that this is what Black or white *sounded* like, and so gave “cultural legitimacy” to segregation.⁴² This is why the separation of these sounds and the creation of country as a distinct genre from the blues had much more to do with white supremacy than with the music itself.⁴³

On Shared Roots

Before we get into how the country music industry went about constructing this sound of whiteness, I want to spend a little more time looking at what these shared roots of country and the blues could be. We’re gonna talk more about appropriation in a minute—and there is definitely a lot to say—but simply dismissing country as the “white man’s blues” doesn’t explain the way all this music evolved together over centuries nor does it acknowledge the diverse group of people who were and are making it. I know that it seems like an anti-racist thing to say, but as we start to unpack all this history together, I hope you’ll be able to see why it’s not an effective intervention. Calling country the white man’s blues accepts the industry’s segregation as musical truth and implies that country doesn’t belong equally to Black people and other people of color. That’s not true, it’s never been true, and I think a big part of the work we need to do together is to break that assumption down.

While I was thinking about all this, I watched the documentary *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World*. In it, First Nations blues artist Pura Fé explains that when she hears Charlie Patton, “it’s Indian music to me. And that rhythm...I can hear all those old traditional songs...That’s Indian music. With a guitar. That’s where it went, you know? That’s where the traditional music went.”⁴⁴ This blew my mind. How had I not read anything before about the influence of Native music on the blues? Or on country? I

scoured the internet looking for more research and was shocked to find very little. I did at least track down a few articles that went more into depth on what Fé meant:⁴⁵

Pura Fé — a Tuscarora woman known for her work with Ulali, an a cappella female trio that blends Native music with contemporary styles — has been investigating the connection between Native and African-American music for decades. On her *Follow Your Heart's Desire* album, she blends both styles to make this connection clear. "People forget Charley Patton [the Father of the Blues] was Choctaw, Scrapper Blackwell was Cherokee, all the early jazz and blues people were mixed; it was like another race that gave birth to this rich musical culture, a race that's largely been forgotten about. My people, the Tuscarora of North Carolina, were known for harboring runaway slaves — black, white and Indian. They were escorts on the Underground Railway and helped stir up the slave uprisings that happened around here, so the races have been mixing and influencing each other for a long time.

The call-and-response thing in blues and gospel and its modulation is what Indians call Stomp Dance," Pura Fé explained. "The blues shuffle rhythm is a Round Dance, the heartbeat of Native music. Taj Mahal talked about this with me. I had been singing with Lee Gates, who is Albert Collins' cousin, and he pointed out how similar my wailing was to the sound of Lee's guitar. Taj said that the wailing guitar you hear in rock and blues is the sound of the powwow singers; nowhere in Africa do you hear that kind of guitar playing. It's obviously a Native expression."⁴⁶

If there's surprisingly little written about Indigenous peoples' influence on the blues, there's pretty much nothing written about it when it comes to country. I did find one book, though: *The Guitar and the New World: A Fugitive History* by Joe Gioia. (You can [read an excerpt of it here](#).) Gioia proposes that "what we now call blues and country music are divergent branches of a single root, one indigenous to North America." He goes on to explain that, "though certain traditions of musicianship, along with the banjo, can be traced to Africa," there is no antecedent there or in European music for some of the things that make both the blues and country what they are. As Fé also marked, there's that four-beat measure with the emphasis on the two and the four. The Native tradition of call and response. Vocal techniques like jumping into falsetto (i.e. yodeling or howling). Gioia also mentions the "individual let-me-tell-you-how-things-are-with-me" storytelling style that is so central to both blues and country, and even the expression "hey hey" that finds its way into so many lyrics.⁴⁷

I'm not a music historian or a musicologist, I'm just a nerdy country musician, so all I can do is share with you what Gioia and Fé are saying and acknowledge that I couldn't find much more to back it up. But, as a musician, if there's one thing I know to be true, it's that musicians will always find a way to seek out, soak up, teach, jam, and steal each others' sounds, even in the most violent, brutal, divided periods of history. It seems obvious then that, over the course of hundreds of years, Southern musicians descended from Africa and Southern musicians descended from Europe would have been as profoundly influenced by Southern Indigenous musicians from tribes like the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Tuscarora, as they were by each other. If so, suddenly the intertwined music of early country and the blues makes a lot more sense.

At the very least, it seems crucial, especially given country music's long history of justifying and romanticizing violence against Native people, that we start asking about and uplifting their influence on its creation. As Fé explains, "It's an important story and when its descendants tell it right, it will build a bridge between Native music and the mainstream. People will finally acknowledge our part in the creation of American roots music and culture."⁴⁸

Shared Roots, Part 2: Native Hawaiian Music and the Steel Guitar

There's another significant root the blues and country share that we should to talk about here: Native Hawaiian music and the steel guitar. Again, this history has been mostly buried. Luckily, I found my way to John W. Troutman's recently released deep dive into the archives, *Kīkā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music*.

One thing Troutman said when asked why he thought this history has been buried really stuck with me. He talked about how this is part of a larger trend of how historians rarely acknowledge "the innovations and ideas" as well as the political agency of Indigenous peoples "as central participants in the making of the modern world," but instead relegate them "to serve as anti-modern foils."⁴⁹ As we looked at earlier, this kind of "vanishing race" erasure of Native people is something country music has been a big part of. And soon we'll get deeper into how this kind of nostalgic invisibilizing in country music is tied to white supremacy.

Kīkā Kīla is a Hawaiian expression that describes both a type of guitar invented in Hawaii in the 1880s—what is now called, among other names, steel guitar, lap steel, dobro, or Hawaiian guitar—and a technique for playing it. The pedal steel is also its direct descendant. Modifications to the guitar and a new style built around sliding a steel bar along its strings created a mournful wailing sound that set the musical world on fire. Soon Hawaiian steel guitarists were touring around the globe and influencing pretty much everybody, not just in America but as far away as India and New Zealand. By 1916, in the early days of the recorded music industry, Hawaiian guitar music was outselling all other genres in the U.S.⁵⁰

Any fan knows how central the steel guitar has been to the evolution of country music, but most are only vaguely aware that it was a Native Hawaiian invention or that, as Troutman details in his book, “Native Hawaiians played the steel guitar on some of that genre’s most formative recordings” and defined the way everyone else who picked up the steel guitar in country music played it. What’s more, Troutman argues that, “southerners of all colors embraced the Hawaiian steel guitar, and that it directly inspired the development of the African American delta blues ‘slide guitar’ style that soon followed.”⁵¹ Troutman is thinking along the same lines here as Fé and Gioia:

What is missing from popular, and in many cases, scholarly understanding of southern music, however, is its cultural messiness...The South [for many blues and country scholars] is essentially a land of only two cultural ancestries, with black music coming from Africa, and white music coming from ancient English or Scottish ballad traditions. The dozens of vibrant southern American Indian communities are excluded from this strictly black-and-white mosaic, as are people rooted more intimately in the Caribbean world, or migrants from Nova Scotia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, or, of course, Hawaiian troubadours.⁵²

Troutman explains that, “in local newspapers and archival collections I found Hawaiian steel guitar troupes playing every small town and crossroads in Mississippi and elsewhere in the 1900s and the 1910s. It seems that the very first African American ‘blues slide’ guitarists actually played in the ‘Hawaiian style,’ as it was known in the Deep South, and even Son House, the father of the blues slide guitar style, referred to it by this name.”⁵³

Life under Jim Crow made touring difficult and dangerous, but it also “brought all sorts of entertainers of color together in southern segregated boarding houses. Life on the vaudeville and chitlin’ circuits brought together Mexican bands, Chinese acrobats, Hawaiian troupes, American Indian singers, and African American artists in previously untold ways in the South. They ate together, performed on stage together, and jammed into the wee hours.”⁵⁴

So it turns out that one of the most defining sounds and styles in both country and the blues evolved from the same Native Hawaiian root. Here is one more clear reason why this early music was so intertwined.

Looking at this gives us a glimpse into the messy and complicated ways that new kinds of music are born and grow. But now we need to get back to how *genres* are born and grow, and their commercial, cultural, and political demands. Which, it turns out, is a very different enterprise altogether.

Creating the Sound of Whiteness

“Music helps to constitute race rather than expressing an essence that precedes it.”—Diane Pecknold⁵⁵

“For if country sounds white, it is perhaps worth considering the possibility that something claiming the status of ‘white culture’, something like a purportedly American whiteness—however historically baseless—is not reflected in country music, but is, rather, partially produced by it.”— Geoff Mann⁵⁶

“You can take a black guy to Nashville from right out of the cotton fields with bib overalls...and they will call him r&b. You can take a white guy in a pin-stripe suit who has never seen a cotton field, take him to Nashville right out of a subway in Manhattan, and they will call him country.”—O.B. McClinton⁵⁷

So here we are in the 1920s, in the early days of the recorded music industry, with this newly created genre of hillbilly music that, between its African, Mexican,⁵⁸ Cajun, Hawaiian, and Native roots, is not very white at all. We’ve barely even scratched the surface of all its non-white influences! This is music that has evolved over hundreds of

years, played by poor people in the South across race. If this genre was going to become the sound of whiteness, there was *a lot* that had to be left out of the story.

But the industry's task was much larger than just erasing hillbilly music's origins. People of color never stopped making country music. That means this erasure didn't just happen in the early days of hillbilly records. It required and continues to require constant, vigilant maintenance.

Keep in mind that there has always been room in country's construction of whiteness for a few exceptions, mostly for Black men. Harmonica player and Opry star DeFord Bailey. Charley Pride. Darius Rucker. Or just look at the current coverage of new stars Kane Brown and Jimmie Allen. The industry and press work hard to portray these musicians as an anomaly. In this way, instead of creating space for other people of color to be recognized in country music, these artists are cast as the exception that proves the rule, reinforcing the message that country music is still largely by and for white people.

However, these few musicians are *not* the exception. Again: people of color never stopped making country music, no matter how unwelcoming and flat-out racist the industry has been—including people who have been big stars, who had big hits! It's as if, even while they were center stage, they were also being written out of country's history to maintain its whiteness. Even country's first million-selling album, Ray Charles' 1962 landmark *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, which transformed the country music industry, was practically deleted from country's canon for decades.⁵⁹ That's bananas.

At first I was going to make a list here, drawing from the growing body of work about the people of color who have been left out of country's history. Play you The Mississippi Sheiks' "[Yodeling Fiddling Blues](#)." Talk about how songwriter and pianist Frankie Staton set up the Black Country Music Association in 1997 and [headed up Black Country Showcases](#) in Nashville.⁶⁰ "Black people want to be involved at every level, from producers to booking agents to road managers to bus drivers," Staton explained.⁶¹ Get into outlaw country star Johnny Rodriguez's six number one songs, like "[Ridin' My Thumb to Mexico](#)." Look at Freddy Fender's smash hit "[Before the Next Teardrop Falls](#)." Quote from Stoney Edward's songs about his African American hard country roots like "[Hank and Lefty Raised My Country Soul](#)" and "[Blackbird](#)."⁶² Remind you that the Pointer Sister's first big hit "[Fairytale](#)" won the Grammy for Best Country Duo/Group

Performance. Point you towards Buffy Sainte-Marie's 1968 album [I'm Gonna Be a Country Girl Again](#). Take you through a more recent playlist of some of my favorite songs by musicians like [Yola Carter](#), [Mickey Guyton](#), [Crystal Shawanda](#), [Lindi Ortega](#), [Kandia Crazy Horse](#), [Kaia Kater](#), [Amythyst Kiah](#), and [The Ebony Hillbillies](#).⁶³

I wanted to make such an overwhelming list that you would be like, damn! That's an overwhelming list! But it still felt reductive. This is so much deeper than a list. So instead I want to talk about what happens when you google Linda Martell.

Linda Martell

Linda Martell was the first African-American woman to play at the Grand Ole Opry. She performed at the Opry 11 times, as well as on popular tv shows like *The Bill Anderson Show* and *Hee Haw*.⁶⁴ Here she is singing "[Bad Case of the Blues](#)" on *Hee Haw*.

Her biggest hit, the 1969 song "[Color Him Father](#)" went to 22 on the country charts. While this song could not sound any more country, it was a cover, and the original, by [The Winstons](#), went to number 2 on the R&B charts and number 7 on the Billboard Hot 100 that same year. It's the kind of thing that can make you lose your mind longing for an alternate reality where hillbilly and race music had not been segregated but were allowed to openly inspire and inform each other. Even so, crossovers like this still happen all the time. My favorite example is when John Michael Montgomery had a [number 1 country hit](#) in 1994 with "I Swear" while [All-4-One's version](#) went to number 1 on the Hot 100 chart that same year. Oh and here they are [singing it together](#).

Next, check out this 1970 [feature in Ebony Magazine](#) on Martell which has some great pictures of her performing and doing radio interviews and generally being a country star.⁶⁵

Martell's only album *Color Me Country* was released that year from Plantation Records. By 1974, though, she had quit the industry. She said it was because touring was hard on her health and she had a family at home, but it's impossible not to wonder how dealing with the industry's racism and sexism might have played into her decision.

In her essay "[Linda Martell's 'Color Him Father'](#)," Alice Randall also wonders about how racism might have stalled Martell's career, and talks about what it meant to her to

discover Martell's forgotten legacy.⁶⁶ Randall has been a Nashville songwriter for decades and was the first Black woman to write a number one country song—Trisha Yearwood's 1995 "[XXX's and OOO's](#)." She is also a novelist and professor at Vanderbilt University.

Barbara Ching has an amazing essay about Randall in *Hidden in the Mix* where she looks at some of the rich and complex ways Randall takes on race and gender in her lyrics. There's "[The Ballad of Sally Anne](#)," which tells the story of how Sally Anne's wedding to Johnny is cut short when "the ride from the church bore strange fruit" and he is lynched. In "[Went for a Ride](#)," we hear about a Black cowboy and how "they got it all wrong in that book of history," as Randall breaks down nostalgia for the Old West to find, "more than one kind of pain/ more than one kind of theft." And as for the suburban heroine of "XXX's and OOO's" who is "trying to make it in her Daddy's world"—"She's got her God and she's got good wine/ Aretha Franklin and Patsy Cline."⁶⁷

Randall also scripted Reba McEntire's award-winning 1991 video (which is really more like a short film) "[Is There Life Out There?](#)" There are a million reasons you need to drop everything to watch this right now (and yes, that is Huey Lewis playing Reba's husband), but please pay special attention to the scene where Reba is reading "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" to her daughter.

Finally, back to Martell, now watch a little bit of the 2014 show [Jills Veranda](#), where Jill Johnson, "Sweden's very own queen of country," invites other Swedish musicians with her to Nashville to discover "the heart and soul of country." In the show's first episode, her guest is Swedish pop and R&B star Titiyo. Titiyo talks about loving Emmy Lou Harris's *Wrecking Ball* and then says, "Since I'm half Black, I'm not expected to sing Emmylou-type songs." She wants to know if Black people are making country music, and soon she and Jill embark on a quest to track down Linda Martell. Along the way, they talk to Hank Williams III who tells them about his grandfather's mentor, Black musician TeeTot Payne, and they hang out with Black country musicians Leroy Harris and Paris Delane who tell them about watching *Hee Haw* as kids and what country means to them. Finally Titiyo gets to visit with the elusive Martell. They sing "Color Him Father" together and Martell explains that country music is "really all about remembering, knowing what has been, and what is, and what can be."⁶⁸

Friends, all of this was so easy for me to find! Except for Ching's essay on Randall, it's right there on the internets! The industry may work hard to bury this history, but they

don't bother to bury it very deep. The connections are there for us if we want to tell a new story about country music. We can take Martell's words as a call to action and start remembering what has been and knowing what can be.

What's Going On Here? Is It (Just) Appropriation?

Ok, it's time to talk about appropriation. The last thing I want to do is elide the long history of appropriation and outright theft in American popular music. White people in America have always stolen from and capitalized off of the cultural creations of Black people, Native people, and other people of color just as they have stolen labor and land. Sometimes acts of musical appropriation are blatant and intentional, or even purposefully mocking and racist, as in minstrelsy. Other times the situation is murkier. But I think it's part of our responsibility as listeners and fans to constantly question the power dynamics in musical relationships and ask who is benefiting, especially financially.

For example, what does it mean that [Rufus TeeTot Payne](#) was a "mentor" to Hank Williams?⁶⁹ How does that change when you factor in that Williams is lifted up as one of the most important country musicians of all time while most people don't know about Payne and he died penniless? On the other hand, influence and collaboration across race, especially between working class and poor people, are a part of Payne and Williams' story too. On the other, other hand, what Hank Williams might have intended as a musician is not necessarily the same thing as what this new industry might have intended when it came to offering opportunities and promoting the music of one person over another and the way those decisions were grounded in white supremacy.⁷⁰

In his essay on country soul, "You're My Soul Song," Charles L. Hughes argues that the "story of interracial musical conversations in the country-soul triangle [Memphis, Nashville, and Muscle Shoals] and their ultimate impact on country music, should be neither simplified nor romanticized." He looks at a number of Black musicians in the country industry from the 1950s to the 1970s, including songwriter and producer Jerry Williams Jr. In 1972, Williams' song "[She's All I Got](#)" was a huge hit for Johnny Paycheck and went to number 2 on the country charts. Meanwhile, as his alter ego Swamp Dogg, Williams was also recording politically-charged soul music (listen to "[God Bless America](#)"—"Oh what a joke is the statue of liberty/ When the Indians on the reservation and black folks still ain't free"), and he continues to release innovative records today.⁷¹ Williams tells Hughes, "Everything I write and sing comes out country, and that's why I

have to take so much time in arrangements and instrumentation, because—if not—I'd just be cutting a bunch of country records with black people. And we *know* that black people are not makin' it in country.”⁷²

There are a lot of layers to what Jerry Williams Jr. is saying here and I want to hold them all. The concept of appropriation is crucial and always needs to be a part of the conversation but it also isn't enough to cover the complexity of Williams' role in the industry—or Martell's or Randell's, for that matter—and their important contributions and simultaneous invisibility. Let's break it down:

1. Racism in the industry

First off, Williams is talking about the industry-wide discrimination that keeps Black musicians from the spotlight, sometimes driving them away from country music altogether—this is the main reason “we *know* that black people are not makin' it in country.” The story of when Williams received the 1972 Songwriters of the Year award for “She's All I Got” from Nashville-based songwriters' union BMI is probably a good place to start. Williams only learned about the award after it arrived in the mail with a note from BMI saying they were sorry he was unable to attend. In this *Nashville Scene* article, BMI president Frances Preston explains it must have been a mistake and couldn't possibly have been racism because, “Charley Pride was on our board at that time.”⁷³

Why did DeFord Bailey really leave the Opry, where he was a giant star, to run a shoeshine parlor? I find it hard to believe it was only a contract conflict, as most biographies explain, and not related to the relentless racism he must have encountered. Again, was it just the exhaustion of touring that was affecting Linda Martell's health? People are often eager to dismiss country music and its fans as racist, but rarely focus on the rampant racism of the industry itself.

In their essay “‘Leave Country Music to White Folk’?,” Stephen A. King and P. Renee Foster detail some of the interpersonal and institutional racism contemporary African-American artists in the country music business have encountered. Even with major label support, musicians like [Cleve Francis](#) and [Rissi Palmer](#) felt there was no place for them and eventually left the industry. Francis says, “I've always felt I had the God-given talent to perform this music. But I was made to feel like I didn't belong in the music.” And

Francis makes it clear—he’s talking about industry people here, not the fans who he says couldn’t care less what color he is and accepted him “hands down.”⁷⁴

In fact, country industry leaders have gone out of their way to make it clear to artists like Francis and Palmer that they don’t belong. In the late 90s, Tony Brown, then president of MCA Nashville, told author Bruce Feiler, “Country basically *is* white music.” *Billboard* country music editor Edward Morris told Feiler, “Country is fundamentally based on the white experience.”⁷⁵ And here’s Tammy Genovese, who was head of the Country Music Association (CMA) for twenty-four years, interviewed in a 2006 article in *The Guardian*:

“The black community’s lifestyle is different from what we communicate with country music.” [says Genovese] Perhaps the problem is that the industry has failed to reach out to black fans, I suggest. “We try to market to all types of people,” she says. “But every culture has its own kind of music, and that is something we can’t change. Black people have their own types of music that they like to listen to, be that jazz, hip hop or whatever.”⁷⁶

There are a lot of fucked up things in Genovese’s quote here. But let’s just focus on the fact that, again, according to her own organization’s 2015 statistics, 20% of all Black people in America are listening to country music. And that’s not a new trend—the CMA has been tracking this for a while and Black people have been an integral part of country’s audience since the first days of the Opry.⁷⁷ So not only is everything that Genovese is saying total garbage, there are literally millions of Black listeners the country music industry isn’t marketing to right now. This means either the CMA and others in the industry are bad at capitalism (and I’m pretty sure we know that’s not true). Or they believe that if Black people were more visibly included in country music, this disruption of country’s “whiteness” would lead to losing more profits from white fans than they would gain from Black fans. This is white supremacy at the most foundational level of the country music industry.

2. *Policing genre*

Let’s get back to Williams’ quote, where he talks about having to take extra care with his instrumentation or he’d “just be cutting a bunch of country records with black people.” Another layer here is the way that white supremacy dictates who is allowed to experiment beyond musical boundaries and be considered an innovator in their genre

(spoiler alert: white musicians) and who must keep to their genre's strictly policed borders or be considered an unmarketable interloper (spoiler alert: Black musicians).

Jon Bernstein lays out how this kind of gatekeeping works in his recent article in *The Guardian*, "['They Put us in a Little Box': How Racial Tensions Shape Modern Soul Music](#)."⁷⁸ As Bernstein explains, "While each artist interviewed for this piece stressed a musician's typical reluctance to have their music limited by genre, every artist of color described deep-seated, racially loaded, creatively stifling assumptions, that pressure them to prescribe to the few models of traditionally leaning black music." Or as soul star Millie Jackson said, "I've always been a country-rocker at heart. But it served me no purpose, because no one would let me cross over!"⁷⁹ Meanwhile, white musicians can experiment with, incorporate, and flat-out appropriate diverse styles while still remaining welcome in whatever genre they choose. Just listen to Sam Hunt's "[Body Like a Back Road](#)," a song that blends hip hop, R&B, and country and spent a record-breaking 34 weeks at number 1 on the country charts in 2017. Some critics may have grumbled about Hunt ruining country music (the way that critics are always grumbling about someone ruining country music), but that doesn't change Hunt's status as an industry darling and megastar.

I think a lot about an episode of the podcast *Song Exploder* where Michael Kiwanuka explains that when he first started writing "[Black Man in a White World](#)," it came to him as a country song:

I had my acoustic and I started playing some chords, like country style, bluesy chords and just started singing, 'I'm a Black man in a white world'.... I knew straightaway that there was something to it. But when I got signed and I started making music professionally, it was the first time people would say, well you're this or you're that, you should be doing this kind of music. Every time I sent a demo in or a track in, the A&R guy would be like, you know, you're not gonna sing a country song, you're Black. So that used to really rile me up because I felt like being Black stopped me from being a successful artist because I thought if I was white, you know, I'd be able to do country music because it would fit. It would be like, oh yeah, he looks like that, it fits. So I had this feeling of: you don't fit. So I thought, well, let's get rid of the acoustic guitar country lick.⁸⁰

Imagine how much amazing country music never gets made, or, gets made but never gets promoted, because of the way the industry polices genre for Black musicians. It's

easy to see how the initial segregation of hillbilly and race music has evolved over the years into this patrolling of country's borders, deciding who is entitled to artistic freedom and continuing to reinforce what "sounds" white or Black.

3. Betraying country's core

Ultimately, the industry's outright discrimination, appropriation, and genre policing all work together in interrelated ways with its denial of its diverse history to construct country as the sound of whiteness and so help keep white supremacy in place. But there is one more layer to Williams's quote— when he says that "everything I write and sing comes out country"—that asks us to go even deeper.

When I think about how musicians like Williams and Kiwanuka felt they had to turn their backs on the country music coming through them to get their songs heard, I see how white supremacy seeps all the way into country's core. That core is something powerful and profound. It's where this music takes our suffering and transforms it into a high lonesome sound.⁸¹ And it belongs to Jerry Williams as much as it belonged to Hank Williams, as much as it belongs to Randall, to Martell, to Payne. This is why it isn't just racist when the industry discriminates, appropriates, segregates, erases, and excludes. It's a lie about country's beating heart. It's a betrayal of the music itself.

Using Nostalgia to Create the Sound of Whiteness

There's one more piece left that we have to examine if we're going to make sense of how country music constructs the sound of whiteness. It's not enough to erase the presence of people of color from the genre. Country has to perform a second erasure, and to understand this, we have to look at its relationship to nostalgia.

By constantly harkening back to the fantasy of a simpler, purer time, country music presents a gauzy-through-a-lace-curtain version of American history that makes invisible our violent, racist past and present. This is what the confederate flag is doing there next to that rocking chair, pecan pie, hunting raffle, train whistle, loyal dog, and your mama praying. However, the confederate flag is not required to perform this work of erasure—it will continue on just fine without it until we really confront what's happening here.

Obviously I'm not trying to say to my fellow country-music-loving white people that just because you like your "chicken fried," "cold beer on a Friday night," were "raised underneath the shade of a Georgia pine" in a house that may not be "much to talk about" but was full of "a mother's love" and "sweet tea," that you're automatically a member of the KKK. What I am saying is that we need to look more closely at the lyrics and imagery associated with country music's nostalgic themes. When we do, I think we will continue to find the cues and clues to how country legitimizes white supremacy.

For example, take the song those lyrics above come from, the ridiculously catchy "[Chicken Fried](#)" by Zac Brown Band, which went to number 1 on the country charts in 2008. In this nostalgic version of America where we must "thank God" for the "stars and stripes" for allowing us to live a life full of "all the things we love/ like our chicken fried," there is no room to even imagine the possibility of the oppression that continues to deny so many people in our own country the safety from violence required to enjoy these same pleasures. For the Zac Brown Band, freedom is only something that troops fight for overseas. It's not something that Americans have had to fight for and continue to have to fight for right here, under the shade of that same Georgia pine—which, if we were in another song, like, say "Strange Fruit" or Randall's "The Ballad of Sally Anne"—might have a very different meaning.

In his essay, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," Geoff Mann talks about country's nostalgic "used to," a longing for a past that is not necessarily specifically historical, but that "hails" white people who feel they are "victims of an institutional and social disfranchisement" that is not expressed in terms of race, but more, like Nixon's "silent majority," as an "'understandable' opposition...to disorder and instability." And yet, it's still clear that white people are the ones who are besieged here and that this "used to" is a segregated nostalgia that, as in "Chicken Fried," belongs to white people alone.⁸²

Let's track back to that study I quoted earlier, about how white working-class people who were in "fair or poor financial shape" were 1.7 times more likely to support Clinton over Trump. That study also found was that what led more economically-stable white working-class people to vote for Trump weren't financial reasons at all, but instead exactly this kind of nostalgic anxiety that country music helps produce. Feeling like the American "way of life has deteriorated," that "things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country," that America needs to be "protected from foreign

influence” and “is in danger of losing its culture and identity”⁸³—this study could basically *be* a country song if it just added in some fiddle and maybe [Alan Jackson water skiing](#) in his jean shorts. (Sorry, I just thought you might need an Alan Jackson water ski break.)

This is why we need to keep in mind that not just any whiteness will do here—country is tasked with constructing a specific kind of whiteness. You can see this clearly in the early 1950s, when the genre first takes on the name “country.” Up until then, a number of different names were being used to describe it, including folk, cowboy, country and western, and its original designation, hillbilly, which some felt had negative connotations as a classist slur. Many press and industry members as well as fans and musicians, including Hank Williams, were using the name “folk,” especially in the wake of folk group the Weavers’ huge success. But when McCarthy attacked the Weavers as communist sympathizers and Pete Seeger was called to testify before the Committee on Un-American Activities, the word folk was politicized. Suddenly, “folk” disappeared from any press or advertisements for the genre and “country” emerged in its place.⁸⁴ Pete Seeger and his politics were the wrong kind of white.

The right kind of white is what Nixon described in his speech at the Opry as “the heart of America”—a heart that is not just patriotic, that doesn’t just love the troops and fried chicken, but pledges an unquestioning allegiance to those in power.⁸⁵ Or as country star Neal McCoy more recently sang in response to Black athletes protesting police brutality, “[Take a Knee...My Ass](#).”⁸⁶ This is why the Dixie Chicks were also the wrong kind of white and were banned from country music radio after criticizing Bush. There was no room in country’s “heart of America” whiteness for this critique, especially coming from women.

The country music industry continues to be as committed as ever to producing this sound of pro-establishment, American whiteness. If you doubt it, just look at the controversy that sprung up around Beyoncé’s song “Daddy Lessons.” In 2016, the Recording Academy refused to consider it for the Grammy’s country music category and some fans raged on social media when [she performed it at the CMA Awards](#) with the Dixie Chicks. (Though, by the way, plenty of other country fans embraced the song.) Fierce debates broke out about whether or not “Daddy Lessons” was country.⁸⁷ Thankfully, our hero Alice Randall clears up any confusion with her article, “Beyoncé’s ‘Daddy Lessons’ Is Classic Country.” She’s got a check list that I love:

What makes a song country? Once we get beyond Harlan Howard's "three chords and the truth," there's not a lot of agreement, but I've got a checklist. Evangelical Christianity and African musical influences? Check. Concerns with family legacy? Check. Love of whiskey and guns? Check. Offering advice? Check. Feeling sentimental about Bible-thumping and open roads? Check. Putting child-rearing and sibling relations over sexual adventures with lovers or bonds with friends? Check. Honoring the patriarchy? Check. Concerns with good and evil and a determination to be good? Check. Shouting out to Texas? Check. Horse-opera riffs that remind us cowboy movies helped make country country? Check. Doing right by Mama and listening to Daddy? Check, check, check, that's country.⁸⁸

As Randall makes clear, all this controversy had little to do with the country bonafides of "Daddy Lessons." The problem was also not, as some proposed, that Beyoncé was a superstar in another genre. No one had a meltdown about Justin Timberlake performing with Chris Stapleton at the CMA's the year before. Or Rihanna at the CMA's in 2011, by the way.⁸⁹ The problem was not even that Beyoncé is Black, or at least, not only that Beyoncé is Black. The real problem was that, with the release of *Lemonade* and in particular the first single "Formation," Beyoncé had recently made a clear political statement and aligned herself with the Black Lives Matter movement. Of course, Beyoncé knew all this—is there anything Beyoncé doesn't know?—and I think that's why she positioned herself with the Dixie Chicks in her performance. There was no place in country music's construction of pro-establishment whiteness for Beyoncé's vision.

Luckily for us, though, "Daddy Lessons" is a country song. Because, luckily for us, while there are many ways that country music succeeds in building this heart of America's whiteness, as we've seen, there are also so many ways in which it contradicts itself and fails. And it's in these failures that I find what I love most about country music. It's why I believe it's something worth fighting for. Another country is possible. So what are we gonna do about it?

WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO ABOUT IT?

Stop Pretending That Calling it Americana Changes Anything

“The most insidious part of American racial politics, music industry or otherwise, is the part that says that race doesn’t matter. Americana is very directly tapping into that mythology.” —Charles L. Hughes⁹⁰

“There is an arrogance in assuming that your community can claim an artist because she represents the things you would like to see yourself representing. Americana thinks of itself as the more 'enlightened' arm of the country music machine, yet I look at the artists you laud, and I am met with the same homogenous blanket of White (throw in a few token artists of color to keep the mix right.)”—Adia Victoria⁹¹

As Hubbs explains in *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, when people say they listen to “anything but country,” this is a way of distancing themselves from the stereotype of country music lovers as poor, uneducated bigots, and establishing their own class privilege. I would add that it’s also a way, particularly for white liberal people who don’t want to be viewed as racist, to distance themselves from country’s reputation. In other words, Bad White People listen to country music. Good White People listen to everything but.⁹²

This is where we need to talk about Americana.

Recently the genre of Americana has emerged out of a hazily-defined murk to take on a more institutionalized and profitable form. In its first days in the mid-90s, Americana was, together with sometimes-synonyms “alt-country” and “roots” music, a bit like country music’s island of misfit toys. Or, as Rosanne Cash says more generously, “like finding this really cool island that you tell all your friends about because the hotel is great and the weather is always sunny.”⁹³ But now the Americana Music Association (which produces the festival Americanafest and the Americana Honors & Awards Show) has established itself as an award-granting, taste-making institution, *No Depression* has re-established itself as a more curated and authoritative voice of the genre and brought back its print edition, and the music industry has seen, with the huge success of artists like Jason Isbell, that there’s real money to be made here. We can’t keep pretending that

Americana is its own island or that there is anywhere on the map of American popular music where the borders are not marked by white supremacy. We (and that's including me, of course—my albums are marketed as Americana) are a part of this conversation about race and music. And what we're saying is a problem.

Because what Americana is saying, whether we mean to or not, is: here's a way more privileged, more liberal white people can enjoy country music without the stigma. Bad White People listen to country music. Good White People listen to Americana.

But wait! Americana is not the same as country music! The Americana Music Association says that it's "contemporary music that incorporates elements of various American roots music styles, including country, roots-rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B and blues, resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw."⁹⁴ And Hilary Saunders, the new editor of *No Depression*, writes, "To us, roots music is simply music of the people, a form that comprises a range of genres including but not limited to folk, country, bluegrass, blues, Americana, and jazz. Especially in America, those roots come from all over the world, borrowing and blending all kinds of musical elements along the way."⁹⁵

Obviously there is a little confusion here in terminology: is roots music a kind of Americana or is Americana a kind of roots music? What is this new genre even called? The name Americana is leading the pack, with its own Grammy category since 2010, and Billboard changing the title of its Folk Chart (and I know, we've barely touched on the question of the folk-country genre border!) to Americana/Folk in 2016. Meanwhile, "alt-country," the only term to belie its country origins, is rarely used anymore. *No Depression*, which started out as an alt-country journal back in the 90s, merged in 2014 with Fresh Grass. Fresh Grass runs a festival that is "a wonderland of traditional and cutting-edge bluegrass,"⁹⁶ so this likely influenced their lean toward the term "roots" since it more clearly implies bluegrass. (By the way, where is gospel in any of these lists? While it's probably the only kind of music that could actually connect all the styles they're naming, it seems conspicuously absent.)

There may not be a clear consensus on what this new genre is called, but at least everyone agrees on what it's not: country.

Yet even if country were truly only one of the many genres that Americana or roots music contained, this new genre would still inherit country's history and all the problems that come with it. Expanding the definition to include other genres like blues and jazz, while making it technically more diverse, does not change this fact unless you take country music out altogether. Until we reckon with country's history, it will continue to seep into the spaces and places where the music lives, making people of color feel unwelcome there, no matter how diverse the line-up is on stage.

For example, compare these three marketing images: one was in an email I received advertising this year's Americanafest, under the heading "music memories tailored just for you"; one is from that CMA marketing report I talked about earlier, on a page titled "Today's Country Music Consumers"; and one is from Fresh Grass's instagram, promoting the upcoming festival. If there's one thing we can learn from this, besides the fact that white ladies love to have fun, it's that whether you call it roots, Americana, or country, the marketing people have the same audience in mind. (Also, is it just me, or is that actually the same blond lady in the center of all three pictures?)



Or we can look at the Americana awards if you want. Over the last three years at the AMA awards,⁹⁷ in the six categories voted on by members of the Americana Music Association, with four to five nominees in each category: 2018, one non-white nominee; 2017, two non-white nominees; 2016, two non-white nominees. None of them won.⁹⁸

And of the AMA's five to six lifetime achievement awards, which are not voted on by members: 2018, one non-white awardee; 2017, two non-white awardees; 2016, one non-white awardee. Yes, the performers at the show are more diverse than who gets the awards, but the fact is that the people who are nominated and the people who are winning are almost all white. Just as they are at the CMA and ACM country music award shows. But unlike at country music award shows, the AMA's definition of Americana includes R&B and blues.

It's probably worth mentioning that, at least according to my calculations, Jason Isbell was nominated for 100% of the awards he was eligible for over the last three years and won 62.5% of them. If we want to solve all these problems by changing the name of the genre to Isbellacana, I'm not against that—"Manuel/Danko" is one of my favorite songs of all time. Otherwise, though, there's probably something wrong with this statistic given Americana's broad definition. Even Isbell himself tweeted after this year's awards, "I'm conflicted. Yes, I'm extremely grateful for the awards last night @AmericanaFest, but I also wish the list of winners was at least as diverse as the list of nominees. How to move forward with voters who share that sentiment? I don't know. I'd honestly like to see it, though."⁹⁹

Finally, the awards show takes place at the Ryman, the home of the Grand Ole Opry, which is often referred to as "the mother church of country music." A place where, by the way, until last year, the sign "Confederate Gallery" hung from the balcony across from the stage, staring its performers straight in the face.¹⁰⁰

Look, I know that everyone has good intentions about making Americana diverse. But many of those with decision-making power believe that there is some pure version of musical merit that exists outside of political questions of history and identity, and that therefore we don't have to reckon with our past or even the present. "I think the reflection of the nominations of who our membership has acknowledged has been based purely on artistic integrity and it shouldn't be based on anything else," explains Jed Hilly, the AMA's Executive Director.¹⁰¹ This is probably obvious to you if you've stuck with me this far, but just in case it's not: more diversity does not mean less artistic integrity. It just means thinking about who is seen and recognized, who is not, and who has the power to decide.

Whether you believe my argument that country remains Americana's defining genre or see it as just an influential genre among many, the fact is that all these good intentions will only ever be tokenizing until we confront country music's relationship with white supremacy. Adia Victoria, in her open letter to the Americana Music Association about why she is not interested in being named as an Americana artist, makes this clear: "Until Americana is ready to come clean about where we are, where we've been and champion music that represents a reality beyond the infantilized South much needed to keep the White consumer spending, I will not sit down at your table."¹⁰² I can't help but hear Linda Martell's words echo here and her radical declaration that country is "really all about remembering, knowing what has been, and what is, and what can be."

I know there are plenty of advantages to working for change within Americana instead of within the country music industry. Just from a selfish standpoint, my odds of being accepted in Americana as a queer Jewish woman from New York City are a lot higher than they'll ever be in the traditional country machine. After all, you can't even get played on country music radio as a woman. Still, if it were up to me, I'd go back to that moment when alt-country started to coalesce as a separate genre, and I would say: wait! We don't have to cede the field! This is country music too! I'd go back to that moment when the Dixie Chicks got blacklisted and yell the same thing.

Instead of trying to run away from country's history by creating a new genre, I want us to stay and fight instead. We could tell the truth about country's relationship to white supremacy while honoring and lifting up those whose contributions have been made invisible. We could welcome all those who want to make this music and all those who are its fans. We could build spaces for the music to live where everyone feels at home.

Just because we're progressives who believe in social justice doesn't mean we're wimps. Shouldn't we take a stand for the soul of the music we love? I believe that we can build another country. I know it will be an epic struggle. But we are country fans! We are not afraid of a trip to fist city! I know Merle meant pretty much the opposite of what I'm saying here when he sang this, but they're runnin' down our country, hoss. Isn't it time we finally show the country music industry our fightin' side?

Commit to Diversity for Real

Whether you agree with me that we should take this fight to country music itself or you think it's more effective to stick with Americana, the work involved here looks pretty much the same. Supporting a diversity that goes deeper than surface level takes time, effort, a commitment to listening and learning, and, above all, the investment of serious resources.

First and foremost, we must make it absolutely clear that as a community of musicians, industry people, and fans, we are committed to ending white supremacy. That we believe Black lives matter. That we are going to speak up and show up for each other when people of color's lives are on the line. If there is no organized, anti-racist, progressive voice as part of our musical culture, why should anyone believe that things have changed?

Next, we must get to work in every corner of the industry that brings this music into the world. Yes, we need to look at the songs we sing. Especially at the language and images they use. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. Who has the resources to make the music they hear in their head? How is their creativity celebrated or curtailed, depending on their race, gender, and sexuality? Who do we listen to and who gets left out in the cold?

What do our events look like? It's the details that add up here: how do the staff treat people? How is the space decorated? What neighborhood is it in and what's the history there? How accessible is it? How is security run and who runs it? How are conflicts and complaints addressed? Are there anti-racism trainings for all those who are doing service work at your festival? Do you have an anti-racism policy stated on your website and in your materials? If someone is wearing the confederate flag, how will you handle it? If a white person threatens a Black guest, how will you handle it? If a white guest feels threatened just by the presence of a Black person, how will you handle it? Do your staff see the police as protectors or as a potentially dangerous threat to your guests?

How do you let people know that they are invited in? Where do you advertise? What do your marketing materials look like? Who gets paid to do the advertising in the first place and who are they most experienced in reaching out to? What about the larger culture shapers: the PR people, the writers, the editors of the websites and journals that employ those writers? Who do you see as your audience? Whose stories do you tell and

promote? Who do you celebrate and who do you ignore? Who gets the awards? And who decides who gets those awards?

Maybe most importantly, we need to look at who gets hired. At who gets the opportunities. Who gets their start with an internship and is it viable for people who may not have money and connections to work for such little pay? Who makes these decisions? Who controls the resources required to make these decisions? Who is making the copies and the coffee? Who writes the tweets, who makes the playlists, who is on air, who is on stage, who is in the band, who is running sound, who is rigging the lights, who is engineering, producing, scripting the promos, booking the band, planning their route, driving the bus, selling the merch? Who can hire or fire them all?

And who comes in late at night after everyone else is gone to clean it all up?

These aren't abstract questions. This is concrete work we need to do to make country music a more welcoming place for the people of color who love it. Listen to writer Marcus K. Dowling struggling with his love of country music amidst the terror of Charlottesville and Trump's new era of white supremacy. Dowling writes about spending summers as a child with his aunt in Falling Waters, West Virginia, glued to reruns of the Grand Old Opry and hanging out with the white kids who lived across the road for "pie, milk, and Randy Travis." But with the image of Charlottesville's violence burned into his mind, the music that once brought him comfort is just reminding him of how unsafe he feels and filling him "with a second-guessing paranoia about my adoration of country music."¹⁰³

This is really what I'm getting at here, about why if we care about our fellow country music fans, we have to take a stand within country music against white supremacy. We have to let Dowling know that we stand with him and for him.

Dowling also interviews Kamara Thomas, who makes some of my favorite cosmic country music. (You should probably listen to her song "[You Wreck Me](#)" right now). Thomas says, "There's a feeling now, this shitty, discouraging feeling in your gut, where you're in a compromised double bind. The black/white dynamic that governs the racist mythology that creates America, makes the music that you want to create and enjoy not feel like something that's meant for you."¹⁰⁴

Or listen to musician and songwriter Priscilla Renea: “It's not an environment where black people feel welcome. So I don't think it's that black people don't like country music or that they wouldn't like to exist in that space, but I'm not going somewhere where I feel like I'm going to get beat up.”¹⁰⁵

Again, I know that none of this is easy to change for exactly the same reasons that it needs to change. The way white supremacy operates is by keeping the resources, decision-making power, and opportunities in the hands of white people. It also creates spaces that are designed to make only white people feel comfortable so that, without even needing to resort to overt racism, it's still clear who is truly welcome and who is not. But until we start to challenge this on every level of the music industry, our commitment to diversity is just for show.

Create a New Canon

“The ‘country’ music establishment, including ‘country’ radio and the ‘Country’ Music Associations, does after all seem to have decided that whatever ‘country’ is, some of us aren’t.”

—Johnny Cash¹⁰⁶

Maybe right now you're thinking: I don't have the power to change this stuff. And you probably don't. Most of us don't on our own. But that's the point of organizing! And why I started writing this in the first place. What we may not have the power to do alone, we have the power to demand together.

In the meantime, we're gonna need some inspiration.

By building a new canon of songs—not just including them in a listicle from time to time as proof that country's not all that racist—we can help create space in country's culture for all those who may love the music but feel that there is no place for them. We have at least as much right to claim songs for a progressive agenda as all the politicians since Nixon have had to appropriate country songs for their conservative politics.¹⁰⁷ I hope that if I have proven anything this far, it's that whether or not performers just “shut up and sing,” the music itself continues to do powerful political and cultural work. We must be a part of that political and cultural struggle if we don't want our music to be used to undermine our social justice values.

So let's get started by making some playlists that lift up the buried history of country's diversity. That celebrate and center that diversity in contemporary country and Americana. That highlight the kind of country music that speaks truth to power, that stands up for all those who have been treated unjustly, and that does it with a middle finger and a smile.

Let's listen to the country stars or Americana stars or whatever you want to call them, who are asking the hard questions. Here's Rhiannon Giddens, talking about her most recent album, *Freedom Highway*:

Know thy history. Let it horrify you; let it inspire you. Let it show you how the future can look, for nothing in this world has not come around before. These songs are based on slave narratives from the 1800s, African American experiences of the last century, and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and headlines from streets of Ferguson and Baltimore today. Voices demanding to be heard, to impart the hard-earned wisdom of a tangled, difficult, complicated history; we just try to open the door and let them through.¹⁰⁸

Here's Kacey Musgraves [in support of taking down confederate monuments](#).¹⁰⁹ Sturgill Simpson busking outside last year's CMA awards, [soliciting donations for the ACLU, and "calling Trump a 'fascist f-king pig.'"](#)¹¹⁰ Jason Isbell on [why it's important to talk about his white privilege](#).¹¹¹ Kip Moore after Charlottesville, speaking out on Instagram and asking his fans "to [stand up to your friends when you hear them or see them doing racist shit](#). It starts with each one of us individually if we wanna change what this world looks like."¹¹²

Let's remember too that, though they may not all articulate their politics as clearly or as well as we might want, so many of country's most famous heroes are on our side. We've got Willie Nelson! Dolly Parton! Garth Brooks! Ray Charles! Tim McGraw! Faith Hill! The Dixie Chicks! Brad Paisley!¹¹³ Johnny Cash! So what if they've got Bocephus and (sigh) Loretta Lynn.¹¹⁴

Yes, country music is Hank Williams Jr singing his "white supremacist fantasy '[If the South Woulda Won](#)' at the 1988 Country Music Association's Award Show where he was

named Entertainer of the Year.”¹¹⁵ That song went to #8 on the country charts that year. But it’s also Tanya Tucker in 1974, singing “[I Believe The South Is Gonna Rise Again](#)”:

Our neighbors in the big house called us redneck
‘Cause we lived in a poor sharecroppers shack
The Jackson’s down the road were poor like we were
But our skin was white and there’s was black

But I believe the South is gonna rise again
But not the way we thought it would back then
I mean everybody hand in hand
I believe the South is gonna rise again

I know this isn’t the world’s most nuanced or radical analysis of class and race. My point is, this is country music too. *Mainstream* country music—this song went to #18 on the country charts and was written by Bobby Braddock, one of the most famous country songwriters of all time. If we look hard enough, there’s enough here to help us not only dismantle white supremacy within country music, but also to make country music a part of the struggle to dismantle white supremacy in the institutions around us. In particular, I believe we could figure out how to use it as part of anti-racist organizing strategies within communities of white fans.

One more time, I’m not saying any of this will be easy or even that we’ll win. But I am saying that I’m pretty sure Tanya Tucker could kick Hank Williams Jr’s ass any day.

Use Country’s Commitment to Authenticity as a Radical Strategy

"I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." —James Baldwin, *Another Country*

“Country music is a genre that deals with serious pain and sorrow, sometimes with gallows humor but often looking it square in the face. There’s a certain degree of trust that has to be there for that to work. You don’t have to play 200 shows a year for 10 years in Texas to be a great singer. You don’t have to work in a coal mine to know struggle. You don’t have to be poor to get your heart broken. But do you mean it? Because that’s the only test you have to pass. It’s an easy one

to pass. All you have to do is be sincere. You can use a stage name, start wearing different clothes, have a toupee, get plastic surgery, create an entire alter-ego for yourself but you'd better mean it." —Tyler Mahan Coe¹¹⁶

Country's centering of authenticity, much like nostalgia, can be a conservative trait, especially when authenticity is defined as a specific performance of race, class, gender, and sexuality. But as Coe explains, there's another way to understand country's emphasis on authenticity: it doesn't matter who you are, it just matters that you mean what you sing. This is what I think Harlan Howard was talking about when he said those famous words, that country music is "three chords and the truth." It's that outright honesty about what it feels like to be alive, about the pain and the joy of it, that gives country music its power.

In "[This is Country Music](#)," Brad Paisley lists some of the topics that country, unlike other genres, isn't afraid to tackle, including: illness, religion, rural life, crappy jobs, and losing a loved one in the military. Things like racism and homophobia aren't on Paisley's list, but by his logic—"This is real, this is your life in a song"—they belong there too. Listen to Mount Moriah's "[Reckoning](#)," about a daughter asking her mother to let go of the homophobia of her religious beliefs to finally love her child as she is. Listen to Desiree Dorion's "[Bad Outlaw](#)," about breaking the chain of her family's and her larger Native American community's struggle with alcoholism. Listen to Priscilla Renea's "[Land of the Free](#)"—"That's just life for me/Living while Black in the land of the free." As Renea explains, "The essence of country music is talking about your experiences....There's so many instances of black people getting pulled over and getting shot, so If I'm going to be honest about what it's like to be a black female country singer, I have to talk about it."¹¹⁷

The industry may not be interested in centering songs like these. It may even pretend that they don't exist. That we don't exist. But, to borrow Paisley's phrase, *this is country music and we do*. These will always be the kinds of stories country tells best: ones that are sincere, that are about our "serious pain and sorrow." I would argue that country music is, at bottom, made for exactly the truths that Mount Moriah, Dorion, and Renea are trying to tell. Despite its century of work legitimizing white supremacy, I believe that at its heart, country music still thirsts for the truth of *all* our lives.

And there is more than just musical power in singing this truth like you mean it. Connecting to each other through these stories, using them to organize together, inspire

resistance, build coalitions, and speak our truth to power is a big part of how social justice movements succeed. Music that helps us do this can have enormous political and cultural power, especially when it's used deliberately as part of organizing. If you think I'm exaggerating, just read a little about the history of how civil rights organizers came together at the Highlander Center and [strategized about how to use songs like "We Shall Overcome"](#) to strengthen the movement.¹¹⁸ Country music could be a part of the struggle too.

Claim Country Music for Resistance

"American music consists of three basic ingredients: country, gospel and the blues. All are born from one another. If you want to ask about colours and cultures, we could go on and on. But that's the answer." —Charley Pride¹¹⁹

Country, gospel, and the blues were born from one another because they were all sounds that poor rural people in the South, across race, were making. The evolution of these sounds is part of the history of white supremacy, a product of the settler colonialism, chattel slavery, and unending violence that created and continues to create America. Our challenge is to learn to hold that history while also holding the power of the music that grew out of it.

"That joy that you hear, it's the joy of Johnny Cash. It's the joy of Othar Turner. It's the joy of Rosetta Tharpe. It's the joy of Pete Seeger. It's the way in which people have took their suffering and bent it into a minor key."¹²⁰

That's [Rev Sekou](#) being interviewed by Kaia Kater, and I think Sekou is talking about something similar to Charley Pride here. It's this joy, this bending into a minor key that unites and defines country, gospel, and the blues. The power to take suffering and bend it, to turn it not just into joy but resilience, even resistance—this power is also dangerous. It has the potential to connect the poor, rural people who are sharing that sound. And I believe that this is one more reason why country and the blues were so deliberately segregated.

White supremacy is designed to destroy this connection, to obliterate any possibility of poor people, especially poor white people and poor Black people, uniting in a common cause. Choose any moment in American history where there was even a chance of this—

like Bacon's Rebellion in 1675¹²¹ or the [Poor People's Campaign](#) in 1968¹²²—and you can see how those in power reacted with both enormous violence and the granting of just enough benefits to poor whites to undermine coalitions and reestablish their allegiance to the status quo.

Back to Rev Sekou: “There is no understanding of American Roots music without understanding the legacy of poor people who have struggled in opposition to elites. People have used music as a way to stay alive and keep track of their own humanity while others were attempting to deny it.”¹²³

From this angle, you can see why it would be in the best interests of the white owning class to keep country and the blues segregated, to erase their shared history, and to co-opt country music's cultural power to reinforce white supremacy instead.

The thing about erasing history, though, is that there are always traces left behind. We may not know the names or the stories, but they are still there in the music, telling their truth. Telling on us. Resonating like the strings of a guitar do when you pluck a note, though you might not notice if you don't know how to listen for it.

The history of country music's construction as a genre and an industry is a part of the history of white supremacy in America. It has been used in many ways to support this violent, brutal, and oppressive ideology. But music is more than genre. Country is also part of a body of sound that hears and holds people's sufferings and their struggles and transforms them into song. In this way, country music holds the seeds of a resistance to the very ideology it has been used to help legitimize.

I want us to claim that resistance, to lift up those sounds. Maybe they aren't the notes on the page we're supposed to play. But they are there in the bend, the slide, the lonesome twang, the ways we resonate in harmony with each other to hold our sadness and our joy. It's all in there. It always has been. We just have to learn how to listen for it.

END NOTES

All links were last accessed between August-December, 2018.

¹ Winona Dimeo-Ediger, “Why Country Music Stars Are Reluctant to Speak Up About Charlottesville,” *Rolling Stone*, August 21, 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/why-country-music-stars-are-reluctant-to-speak-up-about-charlottesville-114760/>

² What is white supremacy? Why am I using such a heavy word? Because it’s the right word to describe what we’re going to look at. Here are two quotes that might be helpful:

“By ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”—David Gillborn, quoted in Vann R. Newkirk II, “The Language of White Supremacy: Narrow Definitions of the Term Actually Help Continue the Work of the Architects of the Post-Jim Crow Racial Hierarchy,” *The Atlantic*, October 6, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/the-language-of-white-supremacy/542148/>

“When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs, even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.” —bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 113.

Here are a few links to get you started if you’d like to learn more and get involved:

[Black Lives Matter](#)

[Southerners on New Ground \(SONG\)](#)

[Showing Up for Racial Justice \(SURJ\)](#)

³ Jon Bernstein, “‘Welcome to NRA Country’: How the Gun Lobby Tried to Tap into Country Music,” *The Guardian*, April 4, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/04/nra-country-gun-lobby-music-nashville>

⁴ One important exception to this was the Music Row Democrats. Formed in 2003, they were active through 2008. They raised money and spread awareness for Democratic candidates, including releasing an online compilation album in 2006. Though “few [members] were in the limelight,” Music Row Democrats had 1,200 members from the Nashville music industry (and another 1,100 others) including award-winning songwriters like Bobby Braddock and co-founder Bob Titley, a former manager of Brooks & Dunn. Theo Emery, “In Nashville, Sounds of Political Uprising From the Left,” *The New York Times*, August 19, 2006. <https://nyti.ms/2P8Se5t>

And it looks possible a similar group may re-emerge sometime in the near future. Marissa R. Moss, “The Country Music Industry Is More Liberal Than It Lets On: Will More Start To Speak Up?” *Billboard*, June 5, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/8458774/why-liberal-country-music-artists-executives-dont-speak-up>

⁵ Country Music Association, “Today’s Country Music Market,” 2015. <http://www.cmaworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/CMA-Country-Music-Market-82015o.pdf>

⁶ Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 13.

⁷ It’s so obvious that country music is racist that it serves as the punchline for jokes. Like [this sketch from Key & Peele](#) where Key is oblivious to the fact that his song’s “traditional country imagery” like “the only hood I love is pointy and white” is racist. Or this [Daniel Tosh joke](#): “I was watching the country music channel the other day and I fell asleep and I woke up racist. Ah, that explains the holes in my linens.”

⁸ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, 5.

⁹ The Editorial Board, “Blacks Still Face a Red Line on Housing,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/opinion/blacks-still-face-a-red-line-on-housing.html>.

Also, Nathalie Baptiste, “Them That’s Got Shall Get,” *The American Prospect*, October 12, 2014. <http://prospect.org/article/staggering-loss-black-wealth-due-subprime-scandal-continues-unabated>

¹⁰ Jorge Rivas, “Largest Private Prison Group in U.S. Wishes You a Happy Black History Month,” *Colorlines*, February 8, 2013. <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/largest-private-prison-group-us-wishes-you-happy-black-history-month>

Also, The Sentencing Project, “Trends in U.S. Corrections,” June 22, 2018. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf>

¹¹ Jay Michaelson, “Republicans Have a Secret Weapon in the Midterms: Voter Suppression,” *Daily Beast*, October 12, 2018. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/republicans-have-a-secret-weapon-in-the-midterms-voter-suppression>

¹² Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, “Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump,” *PRRI/The Atlantic Report*, May 9, 2017. <https://www.prii.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-election-donald-trump/>

¹³ James Lowen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 303-311.

¹⁴ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 60-62.

¹⁵ We’re going to get into the bigger issue here a lot more soon, but specifically on square dancing, see Robyn Pennacchia, “America’s Wholesome Square Dancing Tradition is a Tool of White Supremacy,” *Quartz*, December 12, 2017. <https://qz.com/1153516/americas-wholesome-square-dancing-tradition-is-a-tool-of-white-supremacy/>

Also, Erin Blakemore, “The Slave Roots of Square Dancing,” *JSTOR Daily*, June 16, 2017. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-slave-roots-of-square-dancing/>

¹⁶ Beth A. Messner, et Al., “The Hardest Hate: A Sociological Analysis of Country Hate Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 30:4 (October 2007): 513–531. <http://qualquant.org/wp-content/uploads/text/Messner%202007%20Popular%20Music%20&%20Society.pdf>

¹⁷ Check out Rhiannon Giddens’ 2014 cover of “[Vanishing Race](#)” with Gillian Welch and David Rawlings where she adds a new verse recasting the lyrics as “invisible race,” responding that “actually we’re still here” and still fighting. And here is [a short interview with her](#) about it. By the way, the link I included in the text is of Johnny Horton’s original, but it was then [covered by Johnny Cash](#), which is the version Giddens is responding to.

¹⁸ The songs linked here not mentioned by name in the text, just in case the youtube links disappear, are: Johnny Horton, “The Vanishing Race” (plus see Johnny Cash’s cover and Rhiannon Giddens’ reimagining cited above); Willie Nelson, “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”; Merle Haggard, “Cherokee Maiden” (which is a cover of Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys).

¹⁹ Dustin Tahmahkera, “An Indian in a White Man’s Camp’: Johnny Cash’s Indian Country Music,” *American Quarterly* 63:3 (September 2011): 591-617.

²⁰ See David W. Samuels, “Singing Indian Country,” in Tara Browner, ed., *Music of the First Nations: Tradition and Innovation in Native North America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

Also Tom Barnes, “Native Americans Are Writing the Most Powerful Country Music Today,” *Mic*, December 10, 2014. <https://mic.com/articles/106178/native-american-country-music-is-the-truest-kind-of-country-we-have#.yzGWi4Q6F>

²¹ “The Conservative Evolution of Country Music,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, February 18, 2007. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7484160>

²² See Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, 64-67.

Also, Diane Pecknold, "Introduction: Country Music and Racial Formation," in Diane Pecknold, ed, *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.

And Mark Allan Jackson, "Introduction: Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music," in Mark Allan Jackson, ed, *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 5.

²³ Sam Sanders, "Trump Champions The 'Silent Majority,' But What Does That Mean In 2016?" *NPR*, January 22, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/22/463884201/trump-champions-the-silent-majority-but-what-does-that-mean-in-2016>

²⁴ James Boyd, "Nixon's Southern strategy: 'It's All In the Charts'" *The New York Times*, May 17, 1970. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/05/17/archives/nixons-southern-strategy-its-all-in-the-charts.html>

²⁵ As Phillips explained in a 1971 op-ed in the *Washington Post*: "More and more people are evidently finding the 'straight' songs and lyrics of country music preferable to the tribal war dances, adolescent grunts and marijuana hymns that have taken over so many pop stations." Quoted in Jackson, "Introduction," 1-2.

²⁶ Mark Allan Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man: The Working-Class Feminism of Loretta Lynn," in Mark Allan Jackson, ed, *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 113.

²⁷ "The Conservative Evolution of Country Music."

²⁸ Tyler Mahan Coe, "Breaking Down Merle Haggard's Okie from Muskogee," *Cocaine and Rhinestones*, November 21, 2017: <https://cocaineandrhinestones.com/merle-haggard-okie-from-muskogee>.

²⁹ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, 138.

Also, Nadine Hubbs, "'Them's My Kind of People': Cross-Marginal Solidarity in Country Music of the Long Seventies," in Mark Allan Jackson, ed, *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 176.

And this interview with Hubbs: "Class Politics, Country Music and Hillbilly Humanism," *On the Media*, WNYC Studios, October 6, 2017. <https://www.wnyc.org/story/class-politics-country-music-hillbilly-humanism/>

³⁰ Chris Willman, "'Only in America' Could Obama Borrow the GOP's Favorite Brooks & Dunn Song," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 29, 2008. <https://ew.com/article/2008/08/29/only-in-america/>

³¹ Charles L. Hughes, “I’m the Other One’: O.B. McClinton and the Radical Politics of Country Music in the 1970s,” in Mark Allan Jackson, ed, *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 122.

And the link is to McClinton’s song “Don’t Let The Green Grass Fool You.”

³² Rhiannon Giddens, “Community and Connection,” International Bluegrass Music Association World of Bluegrass Business Conference Keynote Speech, September 26, 2017, 6.

For a video clip and link to a transcript of the speech, see David Menconi, “As National Debate Over Race Continues, Bluegrass Music Industry Joins the Conversation,” *The News and Observer* [Raleigh, NC], September 27, 2017. <https://www.newsobserver.com/entertainment/music-news-reviews/bluegrass-raleigh/article175715751.html>

³³ “Rhiannon Giddens: On the Lost History of the Black Banjo,” <https://youtu.be/DkGSns7-e0>. This is an excerpt from *A Great American Tapestry: The Many Strands of Mountain Music*, directed by David Weintraub (Hendersonville, NC: Center for Cultural Preservation, 2017).

³⁴ “Minstrel Music/Blackface Minstrelsy,” *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, 2018. <http://www.encyclopediaofappalachia.com/entry.php?rec=155>

³⁵ Giddens, “Community and Connection,” 6-7.

³⁶ Patrick Huber, “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932,” in Diane Pecknold, ed, *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 22.

³⁷ Huber, 47.

³⁸ Huber, 47.

³⁹ Huber, 49.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Stoia, “Early Blues and Country Music,” *Oxford University Press Blog*, October 21, 2014. <https://blog.oup.com/2014/10/early-blues-country-music/>

⁴¹ Erich Nunn, “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk,” *Criticism* 51:4 (Fall 2009), 628-32, 635-7.

⁴² “The fiction that divergent musical practices reflected racial difference offered cultural legitimacy to the increasingly strict imposition of Jim Crow segregation.” Pecknold, “Introduction,” 3. Also, see Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, 69.

⁴³ If you think all this sounds like revisionist history or a conspiracy theory, I promise you, most of the white people in the almost entirely white recorded music industry of the time as well as the white folklorists, song catchers, and other academics who collected and categorized songs were racist as fuck. Back then it was all right out in the open—especially for the folklorists, proving white supremacy was often one of the points they were trying to make. Erich Nunn has some good examples of this in the article I mentioned earlier, “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk.” Or just take it from Ralph Peer, generally credited as the marketing genius A&R man, record producer and publisher behind both the hillbilly and race catalogs. As Huber mentions in a footnote, Peer bragged in a 1959 interview, “I invented the hillbilly and the n**ger stuff.” Huber, 60.

⁴⁴ *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World*, directed by Catherine Bainbridge and Alfonso Maiorana (Montreal, QC: Rezolution Pictures, 2017).

⁴⁵ Three articles to be exact: the one I’m quoting from here, by j. poet, was originally in *Grammy Magazine* but now only exists online in a repost to a message board. M. Celia Cain’s essay “Red, Black and Blues: Race, Nation and Recognition for the Bluez” is easier to access, published in a Canadian music journal. Like me, she quotes heavily from j. poet’s article. And then there’s Kara Briggs, “Exploring Native American Influence on the Blues,” which was published by the American Indian News Service but now only exists on a Native American Natural Foods website. Cain and Gioia both talk a little about how white supremacy has erased this legacy and some of the difficulties in researching it, but it’s still mind boggling to me that this isn’t a field of study as well as a larger dialogue among musicians.

j. poet, “American Music’s Native Roots: Native Americans Shaped the Various Sounds and Styles of American Music,” *Grammy Magazine*, April 22, 2005. Reposted at <https://weeniecampbell.com/yabbse/index.php?topic=422.msg42572#msg42572>

M. Celia Cain, “Red, Black and Blues: Race, Nation and Recognition for the Bluez,” *MUSICultures* 33 (2006). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/21588>

Kara Briggs, “Exploring Native American Influence on the Blues,” *American Indian News Service* (no date listed). Found at <http://www.tankabar.com/cgi-bin/nanf/public/viewStoryLeftRightImages.cvw?storyid=101330>

By the way, it looks like there might be a section of the documentary *A Great American Tapestry: The Many Strands of Mountain Music*, directed by David Weintraub, that I mentioned earlier, which looks at Cherokee influence on mountain music. This part isn’t available online though, so I am waiting to receive the DVD and will update as soon as I learn more!

⁴⁶ j. poet, “American Music’s Native Roots.”

⁴⁷ “But something about that accepted history doesn’t add up. After almost half a century of extensive research and, beginning in the 1960s, a wave of associated books, blues antecedents in Africa remain undocumented. Though certain traditions of musicianship, along with the banjo, can be traced there, nobody’s proved that the regular rhythms, tonic intervals, vocal techniques, and the individual let-me-tell-you-how-things-are-with-me at the heart of blues music are originally African. Contemporary writers, such as Bruce Cook, Francis Davis, Elijah Ward, and Marybeth Hamilton, have maintained for over a decade that the origin of the blues is empirically unknowable, that the idea that the blues is even a distinct musical form is a nostalgic social fiction created by white song catchers and record collectors.” Joe Gioia, *The Guitar and the New World: A Fugitive History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), 89.

⁴⁸ j. poet, “American Music’s Native Roots.”

⁴⁹ Gina Mahalek, “Interview: John W. Troutman on Kīkā Kila,” *UNC Press Blog*, May 19, 2016. <https://uncpressblog.com/2016/05/19/interview-john-w-troutman/>

⁵⁰ Mahalek, “Interview: John W. Troutman.”

⁵¹ Mahalek, “Interview: John W. Troutman.”

⁵² John W. Troutman, *Kīkā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 157-8.

⁵³ Mahalek, “Interview: John W. Troutman.”

⁵⁴ Mahalek, “Interview: John W. Troutman.”

⁵⁵ Pecknold, “Introduction,” 8.

⁵⁶ Geoff Mann, “Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia,” in Charles A. Gallagher and France Winddance Twine, eds, *Retheorizing Race and Whiteness in the 21st Century: Changes and Challenges* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 71.

⁵⁷ Gerry Wood, “Nashville Scene,” *Billboard*, November 15, 1986, 135.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=UCQEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA11&vq=gerry%20wood&pg=PA34#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁵⁸ Though I couldn’t find anything about Mexican or Indigenous Mexican tribes’ influence on the origins of country music, I know there’s got to be a ton there. The same logic about musical influence and being neighbors we were just talking about should apply here too: Mexican musicians were touring the South. Many of the musicians who were creating both country and the blues either lived further west or had traveled there. The same southern Native tribes who influenced this music’s creation were forced to move west because of the Indian Removal Act. (And all this is referenced in the music itself—“the territory” plays an important role in both early blues and country music imagery.) Look at a map on the Oklahoma and Indian Territory from that time period and it’s easy to see how Mexican musicians had to have been an important influence. The research on this just hasn’t happened yet or at least I was unable to find it. But Nadine Hubbs is currently writing a book about it, so hopefully there will be lots for us to learn soon!

⁵⁹ “The enormous success of Ray Charles’s country covers allowed Nashville to advance its vision of country-format radio as a thoroughly modern, respectable, and profitable enterprise, and that image decisively moved the genre from margin to mainstream, from a denigrated niche market to the most programmed format in the country.” Diane Pecknold, “Making Country Modern: The Legacy of Modern Sounds in *Country and Western Music*,” in Diane Pecknold, ed, *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 82, 87.

⁶⁰ Bill Friskics-Warren, “That Ain’t My Song on the Jukebox,” *Weekly Wire* [Nashville, TN], September 2, 1997. http://weeklywire.com/ww/09-02-97/nash_cover.html

⁶¹ Stephen A. King and P. Renee Foster, “Leave Country Music to White Folk’?: Narratives from Contemporary African-American Country Artists on Race and Music,” in Mark Allan Jackson, ed, *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 224.

⁶² Barbara Ching, “If Only They Could Read between the Lines: Alice Randall and the Integration of Country Music,” in Diane Pecknold, ed, *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 269.

⁶³ The songs linked to here are: Yola Carter, “Dead and Gone”; Mickey Guyton, “Better Than You Left Me”; Crystal Shawanda, “My Roots Are Showing”; Lindi Ortega, “Tin Star”; Kaia Kater, “Saint Elizabeth”; Amythyst Kiah, “Myth”; The Ebony Hillbillies, “Another Man Done Gone—Hands Up Don’t Shoot (The Black Lives Matter Version).

⁶⁴ Shameika Rhymes, “Profile: Linda Martell,” *The National Museum of African American Music Blog*, July 10, 2018. <https://nmaam.org/profile-linda-martell/>

⁶⁵ “Country Music Gets Soul,” *Ebony*, March 1970, 67-72. <https://books.google.com/books?id=vtVJKRwRDLgC&lpg=PA1&pg=PA67#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁶⁶ Alice Randall, “Linda Martell’s ‘Color Him Father’” *Oxford American* 67 (Winter 2009). Posted online on April 4, 2010: <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/316-linda-martell-s-color-him-father>

⁶⁷ Ching, 273-277.

⁶⁸ *Jills Veranda*, Episode 1, directed by Agnes-Lo Åkerlind (Sweden: Warner Bros. International Television Production Sverige, 2014). <https://vimeo.com/277966725>

⁶⁹ Geoff Boucher, “Before He Was Hank: Bluesman Who Taught Hiram Williams Has Gotten Little Credit. That May Change,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 2003. <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jan/03/entertainment/et-boucher3>

⁷⁰ In other words, there's Elvis Aaron Presley, a poor white boy from Tupelo, Mississippi growing up in a mostly Black neighborhood. And then there's "Elvis," the creation and cash cow of industry professionals like Sam Phillips who were very deliberate about what they were doing. Phillips is often quoted as saying, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.' When cultural theft is taken to this level, does it really matter if the white person came by what they stole "honestly" because of their class background? I do think though that it's still important discuss class and not over-simplify the story—or re-trench an essentialist definition of what is Black or white music as opposed to what music Black or white people are historically making—if only to understand the mechanics of how appropriation actually operates.

⁷¹ Check out "[I'll Pretend](#)" from his new album *Love, Loss, and Auto-Tune*.

⁷² Charles L. Hughes, "You're My Soul Song: How Souther Soul Changed Country Music," in Diane Pecknold, ed, *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 297-298.

⁷³ Friskics-Warren, "That Ain't My Song on the Jukebox."

This article names Preston as the head of the Country Music Association and that it was a CMA award. However, Preston was actually running the BMI awards in 1972. This is also how Hughes refers to the award in his conversation with Williams in "You're My Soul Song," so I have corrected it in the anecdote.

⁷⁴ King and Foster, 222-3. The songs linked here are Cleve Francis, "Love Light" and Rissi Palmer, "Country Girl."

⁷⁵ Bruce Feiler, *Dreaming Out Loud: Garth Brooks, Wynonna Judd, Wade Hayes, and the Changing Face of Nashville* (New York: Avon, 1998), 250.

⁷⁶ Martin Hodgson, "The Hidden Faces of Country," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/jul/16/folk>

⁷⁷ As Tony Thomas discusses, having DeFord Bailey on the Opry was an important commercial strategy for National Life and Accident Insurance, the Opry's major sponsor and owner of WSM, the radio station that broadcast the show. Thomas quotes from David C. Morton and Charles C Wolf's book *DeFord Bailey*: "A large portion of National Life's business consisted of small policies popular with both white and black low-income customers. Judge Hay [Opry emcee and director] told DeFord that 'half of National Life's money comes from colored people.' He said that DeFord had helped make those sales." Tony Thomas, "Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down," in Diane Pecknold, ed, *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 147.

⁷⁸ Jon Bernstein, "'They Put us in a Little Box': How Racial Tensions Shape Modern Soul Music," *The Guardian*, June 13th, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jun/13/soul-music-racial-tensions-leon-bridges>

⁷⁹ Hughes, "You're My Soul Song," 298.

⁸⁰ Hrishikesh Hirway, "Episode 106: Michael Kiwanuka, 'Black Man in a White World,'" *Song Exploder*, May 22, 2017: <http://songexploder.net/michael-kiwanuka> at 2:35.

⁸¹ Am I claiming that there is some essential “music” that exists beyond the means of country’s production and the cultural and historical forces that bring it to life? Beyond even something like Josh Kun’s concept of an “audiotopia” which many of the writers I’m using would cite in a moment like this? I could just stick with the way Barbara Ching quotes Kun in her essay about Alice Randall, showing how her lyrics can encourage us to “listen and think audiotopically...for music that is already made but not yet heard, music that makes audible racialized communities who have been silenced by the nationalist ear.” (Ching, 275.) But I guess I do mean more than that. I was raised on post-structuralism, so I don’t usually go in for this kind of thing. But if I’m being honest here, more than all this being a political, theoretical, or even ontological question, it is an issue of theology for me. I believe music is a spirit that comes through us, even though the ways we channel and manifest it are mediated by culture, history, and political identity. I believe it’s a moral obligation for us as musicians and songwriters to be right with that spirit and to treat it with respect if we are lucky enough to channel it. The ways this music has been constructed as “country” and pressed into the service of white supremacy—especially the ways in which so many of those the music has chosen are made to feel unwelcome—shows that we are not right with that spirit. That is why it is on us, as disciples of the music, to struggle until we make it right. Ok, now back to our regularly scheduled, less woo woo programming!

⁸² Mann, 84-85.

⁸³ Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, “Beyond Economics.”

⁸⁴ Peterson, 198-199.

⁸⁵ Jackson, “Introduction,” 1.

⁸⁶ American white supremacy can be complicated—McCoy’s mother, who he credits for his patriotism, is Filipino. So McCoy can still be the right kind of white for country music even when he’s not white. Keep in mind though that this wouldn’t be true if he were Black, because anti-black racism remains the immovable center of country’s relationship with white supremacy and of white supremacy in general. Here’s a pretty interesting interview with McCoy about his song and why he wrote it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W27kOAgTrLU>

⁸⁷ For anti Beyoncé response: Randall Roberts, “Conservative Country Music Fans Lash Out at CMA Performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks,” *LA Times*, November 3, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-conservative-cma-beyonce-dixie-chicks-20161103-htmstory.html>

For pro Beyoncé response: Claire Heinichen, “Lessons From Beyoncé’s ‘Daddy Lessons’: The Door Is Always Open in Nashville,” *CMT News*, April 27, 2016. <http://www.cmt.com/news/1765458/lessons-from-beyonces-daddy-lessons/>

Also, see this post from Kandia Crazy Horse for more interesting thoughts on Beyoncé as well as Crazy Horse's own experiences as a Native Americana and Black Hillbilly musician. <https://kandiacrazyhorse.com/2016/11/04/throwback-thursday-of-race-country-music-the-2016-cmas/>

An example of articles arguing that “Daddy Lessons” isn't country: Alison Bonaguro, “What’s So Country About Beyoncé? And How Is “Daddy Lessons” a Country Tune?” *CMT News*, April 25, 2016. <http://www.cmt.com/news/1765408/whats-so-country-about-beyonce/>

Some critics complained that the song is not country because it features horns. This makes me want to scream and throw things. Are they saying “Ring of Fire” is also not country? Or as Alice Randall puts it, more diplomatically: “It’s the horns that people keep talking about that they find so offensive, but do they remember that Louis Armstrong played on Jimmie Rodgers records in 1931?” (Brittney McKenna, “Award Show Controversy and Beyoncé’s Country Roots,” *No Depression*, December 18, 2016. <http://nodepression.com/article/award-show-controversy-and-beyonces-country-roots>)

⁸⁸ Alice Randall, “Beyoncé’s “Daddy Lessons” Is Classic Country,” *American Songwriter*, October 27, 2016. <https://americansongwriter.com/2016/10/beyonces-daddy-lessons-is-classic-country/?mid=66>

⁸⁹ Though admittedly people were a little mad about Pitbull at the CMAs, among other pop stars, in 2016. But nothing like the outrage over Beyoncé. By the way, you can thank or blame Priscilla Renea, who we’re gonna come back to in a minute, for both Rihanna and Pitbull’s path to the CMAs. She co-wrote Rihanna’s “California King Bed” and Pitbull’s “Timber,” and though they were hits in other genres, Renea was the one infusing each with that country feel. She also co-wrote the number 1 country hit “[Somethin’ Bad](#)” for Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood which isn't really related to this footnote, but I just wanted to tell you about it in case you don’t know that song because it’s awesome. Here is Renea singing “[California King Bed](#).” Like Swamp Dogg/Jerry Williams Jr. before her, she’s said, “Every song I have ever written, no matter whether it turns into a rap song, an R&B song, a rock song or a pop song—everything I’ve ever written is a country song,” Carena Liptak, “Interview: Priscilla Renea Turns From ‘Undeniable Smashes’ To Authenticity On ‘Coloured,’” *The Boot*, June 22, 2018. <http://theboot.com/priscilla-renea-colored-album-interview-2018/>

⁹⁰ Jonathan Bernstein, “Inside the Americana Genre’s Identity Crisis,” *Rolling Stone*, September 13, 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/inside-the-americana-genres-identity-crisis-202818/>

⁹¹ Adia Victoria, “An Open Letter to the Americana Music Association,” Facebook, December 29, 2016: <https://www.facebook.com/adiavictoria/posts/an-open-letter-to-the-americana-music-association-on-black-art-and-the-white-gaz/1415201258490959/>.

⁹² Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, 39-42.

⁹³ Bernstein, “Inside the Americana Genre’s Identity Crisis.”

⁹⁴ From “What is Americana Music?” on the Americana Music Association website, <https://americanamusic.org/node/494>.

⁹⁵ Hilary Saunders, “Welcome to (Im)migration, Summer 2018,” *No Depression*, July 15, 2018. <http://nodepression.com/article/welcome-immigration-summer-2018>

⁹⁶ From the front page of the Fresh Grass website, <https://freshgrass.com>.

⁹⁷ From the “Honors and Awards” page on the Americana Music Association’s website, <http://americanamusic.org/awards/2018>.

⁹⁸ These statistics are just from my own research on the list and what I could find out in the press about how the nominees identify—I know this doesn’t always tell the whole story and I apologize if I am missing info on how other nominees might identify.

⁹⁹ Jason Isbell, @JasonIsbell, Twitter, September 13, 2018: <https://twitter.com/JasonIsbell/status/1040461979746488321>.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Elliott, “Ryman’s Confederate Sign Moved to Museum Exhibit: Auditorium Had Shrouded It Occasionally for Several Years,” *Nashville Scene*, September 21, 2017. <https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/pith-in-the-wind/article/20976369/rymans-confederate-sign-moved-to-museum-exhibit>

¹⁰¹ Bernstein, “Inside the Americana Genre’s Identity Crisis.”

¹⁰² Victoria, “An Open Letter.”

For an overview of responses to Victoria’s letter, see Betsy Phillips, “Blues Artist Adia Victoria Gave Americana Music an Opportunity to Reckon with its History. So Far the Genre Has Failed to Take It,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/02/14/blues-artist-adia-victoria-gave-americana-music-an-opportunity-to-reckon-with-its-history-so-far-the-genre-has-failed-to-take-it/?utm_term=.38f1bb3aba52

¹⁰³ Marcus K. Dowling, “When Being Black and Loving Country Music's Got You Down: My Love of the Genre Has Been Stolen,” *Noisey*, October 20, 2017. https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/a37wae/when-being-black-and-loving-country-musics-got-you-down

¹⁰⁴ Dowling, “When Being Black and Loving Country Music's Got You Down.”

¹⁰⁵ Michel Martin and Dustin Desoto, “Priscilla Renea Refuses To Be Quiet About Racism In Country Music,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, June 23, 2018: <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/23/622316454/priscilla-renea-refuses-to-be-quiet-about-racism-in-country-music>.

¹⁰⁶ Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 13.

¹⁰⁷ Sometimes conservative politicians don't even bother to take note of the song's actual meaning. Though Martina McBride's "Independence Day" is very clearly a feminist song about a woman killing her abusive husband to keep her daughter safe, both Sarah Palin and Sean Hannity have appropriated it as a patriotic anthem. As the song's writer Gretchen Peters explains, "[They] completely perverted the song's meaning.... 'Independence Day' is about domestic abuse, about a woman who's powerless to escape a deadly situation. Everything Hannity (and later, Sarah Palin, who also used it) stands for goes against what that song is about." Locke Dan, "Gretchen Peters Shares A Little Bit Of Herself," *Unrated Magazine*, Jun 1, 2018. <http://www.unratedmag.com/89332-2/>

¹⁰⁸ Rhiannon Giddens, Facebook, December 8, 2016: <https://www.facebook.com/RhiannonGiddensMusic/photos/a.435231987859/10154651163367860>.

¹⁰⁹ Sterling Whitaker, "Kacey Musgraves Jumps Into Confederate Statues Debate On Twitter," *Taste of Country*, August 19, 2017. <http://tasteofcountry.com/kacey-musgraves-confederate-monuments-twitter/>

¹¹⁰ Althea Legaspi, "Watch Sturgill Simpson Busk, Take Questions, Slam Trump Outside CMA Awards," *Rolling Stone*, November 9, 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/watch-sturgill-simpson-busk-take-questions-slam-trump-outside-cma-awards-126215/>

¹¹¹ Randy Lewis, "I Can't Stay Completely Silent': Country Music's Jason Isbell Looks Inward in Examining a 'White Man's World,'" *LA Times*, June 29, 2018. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-protest-music-jason-isbell-country-20180629-story.html>

¹¹² Kip Moore, Instagram, August 13, 2017: https://www.instagram.com/p/BXvsUeEhoYH/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet.

¹¹³ Yes, "[Accidental Racist](#)" is a failure as an anti-racist statement. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, it ends up being racist in itself. But the fact that a country music icon was trying to open up a conversation about racism is worth discussing thoughtfully as opposed to with mockery. I believe we can do some calling in with Paisley instead of just calling him out, so I'm still claiming him for our team. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Why 'Accidental Racist' Is Actually Just Racist" *The Atlantic*, April 9, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/why-accidental-racist-is-actually-just-racist/274826/>

¹¹⁴ Emily Flitter, "Country Musician Loretta Lynn to Trump: Call Me," *Reuters*, January 9, 2016. <http://blogs.reuters.com/talesfromthetrail/2016/01/08/country-musician-loretta-lynn-to-trump-call-me/>

¹¹⁵ Ching, 270.

¹¹⁶ Tyler Mahan Coe, "Wynonna," *Cocaine and Rhinestones*, January 9, 2018: <https://cocaineandrhinestones.com/wynonna>.

¹¹⁷ Martin and Desoto, "Priscilla Renea Refuses To Be Quiet About Racism In Country Music."

¹¹⁸ See “The Song” on the Highlander Center website, <http://www.highlandercenter.org/programs/we-shall-overcome-fund/the-song/>.

¹¹⁹ Hodgson, “The Hidden Faces of Country.”

¹²⁰ Kaia Kater, “The Power of the Minor Key: An Interview with Rev Sekou,” *No Depression*, June 22, 2017. <http://nodepression.com/article/power-minor-key>. And the song I linked to is Sekou’s “The Revolution Has Come.”

¹²¹ Here I originally cited and linked to Michelle Alexander's reference to Bacon’s Rebellion in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. This argument about Bacon’s Rebellion is often made on the left and originally grew out of work by Theodore W. Allen on the construction of whiteness, particularly his 1994 book *The Invention of the White Race*. I still want to argue that white supremacy is designed to obliterate any possibility of poor people, especially poor white people and poor Black people, uniting in a common cause and that you can see in Bacon’s Rebellion how those in power react to this with both enormous violence and the granting of just enough benefits to poor whites to undermine coalitions and reestablish their allegiance to the status quo. However what this reading of Bacon’s Rebellion almost always leaves out and what I only learned since I first published this article is what united this coalition in Bacon’s Rebellion: the demand for Indian land and a call for genocide. As J. Kēhaulani Kauanui explains, “Bacon saw the colony’s policy on tribes as dismissive, especially after two Indian raids (the 1622 massacre by the Powhatans and a 1675 attack by the Doeg). His demands to preemptively massacre all Indians were not accepted by the governor, and so in response Bacon rallied his own troops against Berkeley for his refusal to retaliate for Native attacks on frontier settlements. Bacon organized thousands of indentured servants, bond laborers, and slaves—English, Irish, Scottish, and African—who joined the frontier mutiny.” The rebellion was kicked off by a massacre of an allied tribe, the Occaneechees, after first convincing them to capture warriors from the Susquehannock. As Kauanui continues:

“Scholars and activists alike have perpetuated some romanticized accounts of the rebellion as a historical moment when poor Africans and Europeans united to fight their common exploiters (the English elite)...Today, Bacon’s Rebellion is often evoked among the white Left as a reminder that elites will divide and conquer, keeping whites and Blacks from unifying. But what drops out in this lamenting account is that they were allied in challenging the English elites through their united efforts to commit genocide against indigenous peoples.” J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “Tracing Historical Specificity: Race and the Colonial Politics of (In)Capacity,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 69, Number 2, June 2017, 260-261.

Is this coalition that the white elite fears even possible? Or were the struggles against settler colonialism and slavery and its afterlife incommensurate? Are they still incommensurate today? I am not trying to offer an answer. I only offer that over hundreds of years, a common music undoubtedly grew out these entanglements, that this music has enormous power to connect people especially through the expression of grief and sorrow, and that those who aim to keep the status quo in place must therefore work to contain its dangerous power.

¹²² See “Why a Poor People’s Campaign?” on The Poor People’s Campaign website, <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/history/>.

¹²³ Kater, "The Power of the Minor Key."