

≈ | “She went to Nashville to sing country music”

Gatekeeping and the Country Music Industry

PAULA J. BISHOP AND JADA WATSON

In the Spring of 2021, Marquia Thompson, the granddaughter of country artist Linda Martell, started a GoFundMe campaign to raise funds to produce a documentary on the singer’s career. Martell went to Nashville in the late 1960s to sing country music, signed a recording contract with Shelby Singleton on Plantation Records, and became the first Black female country artist to chart on *Billboard’s* Hot Country Singles in 1969. For the last fifty years, Martell has been absent from the received historical narrative of country music and, as Thompson reflects, “never exactly got her due in terms of business in Nashville” (Moore 2022) – with questions about unpaid royalties emerging as work on the documentary began in 2020. The stories of artists like Martell, who participated in the creative work of the country music industry yet were forced to the margins, have recently begun to surface through recovery work of artists, journalists, and researchers, complicating the genre’s historical narrative, raising the question: “whose country music is this, anyway?”

This recovery work was due in large part to the efforts of Rissi Palmer. In 2019, as the country music industry grappled with the presence of Lil Nas X’s release “Old Town Road,” Palmer was frustrated. Media noted the same five Black artists – Charley Pride, Darius Rucker, Jimmie Allen, Kane Brown, and Mickey Guyton – as if these were the only artists of color to participate in the country music industry. She took to Twitter (@RissiPalmer May 23, 2019) to set the record straight on the presence of Black artists in the industry, correcting a misconception about the number of Black women who had charted (often reported as zero) by naming Linda Martell (1969), the Pointer Sisters (1974), Dona Mason (1987), herself (2007/2008), and Mickey Guyton (2015). Followers immediately chimed in listing dozens of Black women in country music. The magnitude of the response inspired her to create a podcast, *Color Me Country*, named after Martell’s 1970 album of the same name (*All Things Considered* 2020). Palmer sought to give space to Black, Indigenous, and artists of color (hereafter as BIPOC) who have contributed to country music, “who for too long have lived outside the spotlight and off mainstream airwaves” (*Color Me Country*). Before she launched the podcast,

Apple Music Country Radio invited her to be part of their radio initiative, giving her access to resources to produce the show and a large audience. In addition to introducing new artists, Palmer educates listeners on the artists like Martell who laid foundations for later generations of BIPOC artists. Following the launch of *Color Me Country*, *Rolling Stone* (Browne 2020) published the first in-depth interview with Martell in over fifteen years and CMT honored her with the EqualPlay Award in June 2021, both initiatives finally bringing her work into the story of country music. Palmer's show is part of broader restorative work by artists, journalists, and researchers who are recovering the stories of BIPOC artists erased by the industry's restrictive and exclusionary practices. What emerges through this work is a picture of the industry as a vigorously controlled system that has constructed a very narrow view of what constitutes country music and who is eligible to participate.

How We Got Here

The country music industry has historically been defined through a "Southern thesis," which suggests that the music emerged from the countryside and mountain hollows of the rural US South, linking the artists and music to agrarian economy, social conservatism, and rural lifestyle. This thesis consciously constructs rigid binaries that define the music and its musicians in terms of geographic ("south" vs. "north" / "rural" vs. "urban") or stylistic affiliations. Perhaps more critically, this paradigm is linked to Jim Crow Era racial constructs that have privileged the work of white artists and marginalized the contributions of Black, Indigenous, and artists of color. Black and white musicians played and listened to the same music, but it was the work of record executives – who segregated their music along a color line to market music to white ("hillbilly music") and Black ("race music") communities – that established arbitrary genre categories that structured the music industry. Though "hillbilly" and "race" are no longer used today, the racial segregation established by the industry in the 1920s was institutionalized through the development of the systems of production, distribution, and recognition in the 1950s; maintained throughout the second half of the twentieth century; and remain firmly embedded within the popular music industry's structures today. As a result, Black and of color artists have remained at the margins of the country music industry; although a handful of artists have been successful, the majority have been ignored, silenced, or excluded by the establishment.

Country music scholarship has until recently served to reinforce this industrial narrative construct. The first published history, Bill C. Malone’s *Country Music, USA*, has played a significant role in perpetuating the industry’s white, southern racial framing of country music history. Although updated and revised four times since 1968 with an expanded timeline, the book continues to present a constricted view of the genre’s history, creating a metanarrative of the history of country music that has constrained scholarship and created a narrow view of the genre, its creators, and its consumers. A cursory glance at the literature that followed Malone’s text shows the terms used to capture the evolving musical sound and reveals a pendulum swinging between two constant poles of “traditional” and “country pop.” Richard Peterson (1997) uses “hard core” and “soft shell,” Joli Jensen (1998) “down home” and “uptown,” and Barbara Ching (2003) “hard country” and “mainstream.” These are loaded stylistic definitions that are used to define its associated artists with “authentic” and “artificial” practices, with “low” and “high” class culture, with “rural” and “urban” values. This binary narrative echoes the marketing constructs created by the industry in the 1920s, effectively putting music and musicians in boxes, separating them into categories, and then using those categories to elevate some and disregard all others. More critically, these practices serve as a powerful exclusionary tool that obscures and even erases the contributions of artists born outside of the US South, persons of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ artists.

Theories of social remembering offer a critical framework for conceptualizing the impact of this narrative paradigm on the development of country music scholarship. Barbara Misztal’s (2003) work encourages us to consider more fully the role that these dominant narratives play in shaping cultural memory, evaluating the ways in which privileged voices are canonized and “remembered,” while others are cast away and “forgotten” (Watson 2020a). Already culturally disadvantaged by discriminatory practices within the industry, certain artists – notably women, artists of color, and LGBTQIA+ artists – are further marginalized in the kind of historical narrative created by the industry and reinforced through Malone’s Southern thesis, perpetuating a practice of favoring artists that fit into his white, Southern, male, working-class model. Over the course of the first two decades of the new millennium, scholars have actively contested the “Southern thesis,” pointing to the significant role that urban musical communities (Huber 2008, 2014, 2017; Tyler 2014), African American musicians (Huber 2013; Hughes 2015; Miller 2010; Pecknold 2013a), and women (McCusker and Pecknold 2004, 2016; McCusker 2017) have played in shaping commercial country music. Other studies have chronicled the industry-imposed segregation of southern

music in the mid-1920s, when Okeh records reduced the once-fluid network of musical styles into distinct genres tied to specific racial identities. As both Karl Hagstrom Miller (2010) and David Brackett (2016) have observed, the blues became the music of African Americans (released in Okeh's "race" records series) and folk/country became the music of rural white southerners (in Okeh's "hillbilly" records series). Pecknold (2013b) argues that this fictive construct has been perpetuated by the industry and embedded in the broader country music discourse. The work of these scholars represents some of the recovery of lost and hidden voices within the prevailing meta-narrative, showing that they are not the exceptions. The *Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, published in 2017, synthesizes this foundational work and offers a state of the field for key themes and issues within country scholarship. The collection's authors grapple with the challenges of viewing country music through a narrow lens, suggesting a path forward for future scholarship.

Despite this recovery work, Malone's tome continues to pervade country music culture. Documentarian Ken Burns turned to *Country Music, USA* as the main source for his eight-part, sixteen-hour documentary of the genre for PBS. Burns's *Country Music* further advances the closely circumscribed historical narrative of the genre into the multicultural, globalist twenty-first-century pop culture memory, making it even more urgent that other scholarly voices enter the discourse around the genre. As *New York Times* writer Jon Caramanica (2019) quipped in his review of the documentary, "Tell a lie long enough and it begins to smell like the truth. Tell it even longer and it becomes part of history."

In a period in which racism and gender inequity are at the fore of public, political, and scholarly discourse, the chapters in this collection address issues of gender, race, class, and geography as they are shaped by and relate to contemporary country music identity and culture. Building on the recovery work of the authors noted above, we examine contemporary issues in country music through feminist, postcolonialist, and critical race theories, as well as other cultural lenses. The authors pose questions about diversity, representation, and identity as an act of cultural remediation and as they relate to larger concepts of artist and fan communities, stylistic considerations of the genre, and modes of production from a twenty-first-century perspective.

Whose Country Music?

Who is permitted to participate in the genre and how they participate are critical issues within the cultural/social context of country music. On the

surface, the issue appears to be driven by the economics of record production – industry players study their markets and choose product strategies that meet the demands and needs of the consumer at a cost that maintains an acceptable profit margin for everyone involved. But as our collection demonstrates, what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) would call the “field” of cultural production encompasses more than the physical production and distribution of the “product.” It includes radio stations, streaming services, tour operators, talent managers, lawyers, and accountants. So, too, does it include artists, songwriters, session players, touring band members, roadies, sound engineers, postproduction personnel, and all the other creative and support personnel required to make a live or recorded performance. Outside of the business of music, fans, critics, and scholars participate in cultural production.

Every one of these individuals or institutions acts as gatekeeper of the sound and identity of country music. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) theorized gatekeeping as a set of channels where products and processes exist and flow, with forces that determine what can and cannot pass through a gate into another channel. The gatekeeper chooses from the available input based on organizational rules and expectations, as well as personal ones (White 1950). In the field of country music, an “item” might not pass through the gate if it does not fit the preferred model of authenticity or sound. Gatekeepers in this space, then, are cultural mediators in the Bourdieusien sense. The term “mediator,” though, suggests neutrality, but, as Lewin (1947) and particularly David Manning White (1950) have demonstrated, gatekeepers invariably insert personal choices into the process.

Gatekeeping, as generally described in media and mass communications studies (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009), does not specifically account for the bidirectional nature or the multiplicity of the gates in the entertainment industry. In communications channels, information flows to the gate where the gatekeeper culls it based on organizational and/or personal rules and expectations. In the music industry, though, gatekeepers also control access to the channel and therefore access to the product and the processes that create and control the product (here “product” means physical or digital performances, as well as all other tangible and intangible elements associated with the performance). Celebrated songwriter Alice Randall opens the collection with a memoir of her experience navigating the gates in the country music industry. The first Black female songwriter to write a No. 1 charting record, Randall shares her story of pursuing “mailbox money” – from her decision to move to Nashville to become a songwriter and publisher, to the early conversations she had with the white men signing

and working with songwriters (i.e., the gatekeepers to the publishing world), to the work that she did to learn what makes a “hit” and how to navigate the industry’s structures. At the same time, she honors Black artists whose stories are often ignored by the industry and highlights the contributions of numerous women whose work behind the scenes helped to shape the development of the industry.

Kristine M. McCusker and Rachel Skaggs further illustrate how multiple players can act in concert to restrict access to the resources (broadly conceived). McCusker describes how a record label limited the ability of The Chicks to receive fair compensation. Radio station programmers reduced their access to airplay and therefore to consumers (fans) by contextualizing Natalie Maines’ remarks in 2003 about George W. Bush as a political act that defied the norms of country music. Skaggs explains how publishers, labels, and artist representatives have created publishing deals for songwriters that have worked to define the sonic boundaries of country music as well as define who is assigned the label of songwriter and can financially benefit from the publishing revenue. Jada Watson similarly argues that data – presumed to be neutral – does in fact control access to the systems of production and consumption, effectively erasing voices that cannot achieve a measurable data presence.

Most studies of gatekeeping in the music industry have focused on the means of production and consumption (e.g., radio stations [Rossman 2012], local scenes [Balaji 2012], streaming services [Bonini and Gandini 2019]), with little attention afforded to consumers (fans) or surrogate consumers (critics, scholars).¹ The digital revolution and the prevalence of social media have redistributed power in ways that elevate the consumer’s role as gatekeeper and have resulted in scholarly attention. For instance, Kimery S. Lynch (2020) argues that digital gatekeepers on Reddit can control the social reality and understanding of a popular Korean band, BTS, along a transcultural axis. Rebekah Hutten’s chapter draws attention to the surveillant nature of social media platforms and demonstrates how the fans attempted to define the terms by which Beyoncé and The Chicks could or could not participate in country music. Sophia Enriquez centers scholarship as a form of cultural gatekeeping that controls access and therefore perceptions of the field of inquiry, asking us to consider how citational practices define the scholarship and limit participation.

¹ Paul M. Hirsch (1972) differentiates the surrogate consumer from the consumer in his gatekeeping model, though he depicts these surrogates as an extension of the cultural distributors rather than the consumers.

Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos (2009) assert that gatekeeping determines social reality. In media studies, this means that the information (news) received by individuals through gatekeepers (news organizations) informs their world. In the entertainment industry, the actions and decisions of cultural actors define the “reality” of the product for the artists, fans, critics, and all the production entities. Though scholarship tends to focus on “industry” agents, these other individuals and entities act as gatekeepers that operate in the country music ecosystem to mark out belonging through codes of conduct or behavioral expectations. Stephanie Vander Wel historicizes comedy as performed by women in country music and offers a close reading of how female artists have used humor as a resistive force in the industry. Through a close analysis of lyrics, vocal performance, and musical style, she demonstrates how these carefully controlled boundaries can be subverted, creating new spaces for female performers. Conversely, Jocelyn R. Neal depicts the boundaries around male performativity, working-class identity, and geographical imagery. While the scene may have changed – from the rugged ranches of the Southwest to the lush tropical beaches of the Caribbean – the expectations of male identity have simply moved to the new location with little change. Phoebe E. Hughes describes heteronormative relationship expectations. Drawing on the archetype of the “gentleman,” she lays the foundation for the concept of a gentleman in country music and shows us the complicated nature of romantic interactions in song narratives. Within the lyrical framework, women do not have agency, which Hughes locates in the lack of consent asked for or granted. What we see in the work of these three authors is a combination of actors – artists, industry, fans, journalists – mediating the behavioral expectations.

This relationship between these cultural mediators creates a feedback loop, constantly reinscribing particular values and worldviews on the music, musicians, and audiences. The feedback loop extends to what Hirsch (1972, 647) called the “surrogate consumers,” which, in our model, includes scholars. Sophia Enriquez illustrates the feedback loop between the industry and scholarship, noting how readings of Latina subjects in lyrics are ignored, a direct result of the exclusion of BIPOC artists from radio airwaves, the popularity charts, and the historical narrative (Watson 2021). Her analysis of several songs reveals the objectification of Latinas by white male artists. At the same time, she demonstrates how contemporary Latina artists are reclaiming their agency and sexuality. In Enriquez’s work, we are asked to disrupt the feedback loop by considering the other voices who contribute to the music and the environment and read these words

through additional lenses. She goes further, cautioning that to do so is the only sustainable and equitable direction forward for the field of country music studies.

Central to this conversation is authenticity and identity in the country music field. Authenticity is a negotiation with the past, as Paula J. Bishop details in her exploration of the rhetorical use of nostalgia. She offers a framework for understanding nostalgia, incorporating psychological and sociological conceptions of the concept. She examines the historical arc of nostalgia in country music, noting the ways in which country artists refer musically and lyrically to other artists as a means of establishing the lineage within the historical narrative of the genre. Connecting with the past and demonstrating one's place in the genre is integral to country music authenticity. Janet Aspley looks at fashion, in the form of the Nudie suit, as a central component of authenticity in the twenty-first century. Aspley historicizes Nudie's style, pointing to its Ukrainian and Mexican origins in spite of its perception as a quintessentially American country music style. The Nudie suit, as Aspley shows, was central to male country music identity in the 1960s. When it returns into fashion in the twenty-first century, the Nudie suit and its successors (e.g., Manuel, Atwood) are worn by artists who are working at the margins of the mainstream – women and queer artists, as well as noncountry artists. No longer a signifier of mainstream country, artists such as Orville Peck, Lil Nas X, and the Highwomen have turned to this style as a way of forging their own unique country music identity. Nancy P. Riley takes us even closer to the edges of the country music ecosystem in her analysis of Chicago-based Bloodshot Records and the emergence and reconfiguring of so-called Americana music in the twenty-first century. Through an intertextual reading of the label's first and twenty-first anniversary albums, Riley explores how Bloodshot positions itself in opposition to the mainstream – as a community of musicians drawing on small-scale practices to forge more intimate relationships with fans. But the distinction between mainstream and indie labels is no longer – and has never truly been – clear, and Riley's chapter considers how the Covid-19 pandemic has brought these spaces closer together. Leigh H. Edwards brings us an example of one of the most authentic mainstream country music artists, Dolly Parton, who paradoxically built her authenticity on her terms, and has continued to redefine it, most recently turning to twenty-first-century media tools to update her authenticity narrative. Focusing on her Netflix series *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings* (2019), Edwards considers how the singer-songwriter revises/rewrites narratives to classic songs from her catalog in a way that

allowed her to reframe her cultural politics, challenging the conservative reactions to her support for the LGBTQIA+ community, while at the same time critiquing gender stereotypes. Perhaps more critically, in an industry that has continually buried/ignored its multiracial and ethnic roots, the series afforded Parton a platform to express her support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Newman 2020). Edwards challenges us to consider the role that media plays in Parton’s twenty-first-century reimagining, showing us how “Jolene” offers the singer the opportunity to reject white, middle-class gender codes of respectability and domesticity. Parton’s attempts to rebrand her authenticity and cultural politics come at an interesting time in the history of the industry and of the United States, as it coincides with her financial contribution to vaccine research during Covid-19 and to public debate over the perception of her as a hero, a debate that is fueled by the very same media tools that Parton herself uses (Cottom 2021a; Martinez 2021b).

What emerges from conversations about the industry, codes of conduct, and authenticity is a porousness and fragility of the perceived boundaries of country music culture, identity, and style. This is particularly striking when we examine country music within geographic and racial boundaries, which are equally as arbitrary as those of musical genres. Both Kristina Jacobsen and Nadine Hubbs deal directly with national boundaries, drawing out the idea of country music as a border culture. Jacobsen describes country musicians who are negotiating identity as they move across boundaries, crossing the border from the Navajo reservation to border towns that surround it to perform for audiences that are largely white. For the musicians with which Jacobsen works, musical performance disrupts Colorado’s settler-colonial history. Hubbs describes communities of Mexican Americans living in Texas and California, whose engagement with country music similarly disrupts perceptions about country music audiences. Jacobsen and Hubbs refer to boundaries that can be drawn on paper, but Tracey E. W. Laird deals with arbitrary boundaries of musical style – those demarcations of genre that were institutionally defined by the industry in the 1920s. She describes the work of Rhiannon Giddens, whose research has been integral to the recovery of Black American musicians and musical traditions. Through conversation with the singer-songwriter and analysis of her first two solo albums, Laird illustrates how Giddens actively dismantles these genre structures, revealing the sonic and spiritual connections between a range of musical styles.

Throughout the chapters in this book, the authors deal with a variety of boundaries – genre, institutional, performativity, identity, geographical, racial – and question who is permitted to participate within the

mainstream. This becomes particularly evident in Rebekah Hutten's analysis of Beyoncé and The Chicks' performance of "Daddy Lessons" at the fiftieth anniversary of the Country Music Association Awards ceremony in November 2016, which provoked a range of impassioned responses from the industry, fellow artists, and country music fans. As Hutten argues, these boundaries don't exist unless someone is watching and policing them. Drawing on theories of surveillance, her analysis of audience and social media responses to the performance exposes and destabilizes the power structures that have attempted to control the industrial narrative. In this chapter, we see that fans play a critical role in gatekeeping, dictating who gets to perform on country stages and how.

This collection challenges the paradigm in which scholarship unquestioningly remains in lockstep with the industry's white heteropatriarchal narrative, drawing on new theories and methodologies to critique the institution of country music (both scholarship *and* industry), and we are not alone in this work. Artists, journalists, and researchers have been actively pushing back at this received narrative that follows from Malone's early work. Palmer's work with "Color Me Country Radio" is but one example. And she expands on this action-driven work in the epilogue to the collection. Palmer's experience, as revealed in the collection's closing chapter, is reminiscent of Randall's in the book's opening. She reveals to us how little has changed for Black women in this industry. Like Palmer, Mickey Guyton, Cam, Maren Morris, Amanda Shires, and Jennifer Nettles use their social media platforms and access to national media to advocate for change in the industry. Karen Pittelman, Country Soul Songbook, Holly G. and the Black Opry, Rainbow Rodeo, and others are working to build new spaces for artists that have been shut out of the industry, while Jason Isbell and Tyler Childers use their musical platform to model what allyship can look like – even publicly learning from their mistakes. Andrea Williams, Jewly Hight, Marissa Moss, and Lorie Liebig are actively documenting and exposing different forms of oppression through their reporting on the industry. The work presented in this book coincides with the public conversations initiated by these artists and journalists and has implications for the future of country music scholarship. And yet, as Rhiannon Giddens says (quoted in Laird's chapter here), "we have a lot of work to do."