If Only They Could Read between the Lines: Alice Randall and the Integration of Country Music

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If Only They Could Read between the Lines: Alice Randall and the Integration of Country Music

Abstract
"She's got her God and she's got good wine, Aretha Franklin and Patsy Cline," sings Trisha Yearwood in her top-selling 1994 single "xxxs and ooos (an American Girl)." Cowritten by Matraca Berg, a Nashville singer-songwriter, and Alice Randall, an African American Harvard graduate, it is one of the first songs written by an African American woman to top the country charts. Randall takes special pride in the "moment of integration" created by naming Franklin and Cline, and such juxtapositions energize nearly all of her writing. Unlike Donna Summer, with her wondrous number 1 hit, Dolly Parton's 1980 "Starting Over Again," Randall has maintained a presence in country music for nearly twenty years, integrating songwriting teams by creating lyrics with many notable writers, including Steve Earle, Matraca Berg, and Marcus Hummons.1 She has also shaped the visual and intellectual presentation of contemporary country music. She cowrote two of the songs included in Peter Bogdanovich's 1993 film about aspiring Nashville songwriters, The Thing Called Love. She worked as a screenwriter on the high-profile video Is There Life Out There for Reba McEntire and the made-for-TV movie xxx's and ooo 's, set in Nashville. Both works were inspired by the complex lives of the American women described in the songs to which the titles refer. The author of My Country Roots: The Ultimate MP3 Guide to America's Original Outsider Music (2006, with Carter and Courtney Little), Randall has an encyclopedic knowledge of country songs; My Country Roots features one hundred playlists.

Disciplines
American Popular Culture | Literature in English, North America | Other Music | Women's Studies

Comments
“She’s got her God and she’s got good wine, Aretha Franklin and Patsy Cline,” sings Trisha Yearwood in her top-selling 1994 single “xxxs and 000’s (an American Girl).” Cowritten by Matraca Berg, a Nashville singer-songwriter, and Alice Randall, an African American Harvard graduate, it is one of the first songs written by an African American woman to top the country charts. Randall takes special pride in the “moment of integration” created by naming Franklin and Cline, and such juxtapositions energize nearly all of her writing. Unlike Donna Summer, with her wondrous number 1 hit, Dolly Parton’s 1980 “Starting Over Again,” Randall has maintained a presence in country music for nearly twenty years, integrating songwriting teams by creating lyrics with many notable writers, including Steve Earle, Matraca Berg, and Marcus Hummons. She has also shaped the visual and intellectual presentation of contemporary country music. She cowrote two of the songs included in Peter Bogdanovich’s 1993 film about aspiring Nashville songwriters, The Thing Called Love. She worked as a screenwriter on the high-profile video Is There Life Out There for Reba McEntire and the made-for-TV movie xxx’s and 000’s, set in Nashville. Both works were inspired by the complex lives of the American women described in the songs to which the titles refer. The author of My Country Roots: The Ultimate MP3 Guide to America’s Original Outsider Music (2006, with Carter and Courtney Little), Randall has an
encyclopedic knowledge of country songs; *My Country Roots* features one hundred playlists (fig. 10.1).

In a delicious irony, she teaches courses on country music as literature at Vanderbilt University, the place where the Nashville Agrarian and segregationist Donald Davidson, vying with John and Alan Lomax’s stunning discoveries of African American songs and singers, taught and wrote about the connections between British ballad literature and country music. Indeed Davidson’s work on southern folk music and country music epitomizes the “white sound” of country music as described by Geoff Mann: a nostalgic sense of white grievance conveyed by a southern-inflected “twang.” As Mann puts it, “If country sounds white, it is perhaps worth considering the possibility that . . . something like a purportedly American whiteness—however historically baseless—is not reflected in country music, but is, rather, partially produced by it.” In contrast, Randall’s writing challenges the “white sound” of country music in both the historical and ideological senses of the term. It not only disrupts the white nostalgia and interpellation described by Mann, but it also draws continual critical attention to class, race, and gender relations in history and daily life. Her writing, in short, talks back to “the Man.”

To show how this disruption works, I contrast Randall’s work in country music to that of other race-conscious African Americans in the genre.
In addition to offering this historical contextualization, I place the songs Randall has written on a continuum with her literary fiction, especially *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* (2004), to argue that since the early 1990s, she has used the country music lyric not only to draw attention to the lines that separate high and low culture and black and white culture but also to imagine their erasure. A postmodernist versed in critical race theory, Randall invests history with both personal and communal significance through her writing. Whether they resound in a song, on a screen, or in a book, her words limn lives inflected by the history of slavery in America, by contemporary cultural hierarchies, and by complex networks of love and theft among the races in America.\(^5\) Randall creates characters who tell stories about how these forces shape who they are and how they live and, most important, how they harness these forces to their own ends. Through her use of the country music lyric and the contemporary novel, she imagines an anti-essentialist commonality, a renewed and revalued cultural space, what Josh Kun calls audiotopia: “almost-places of cultural encounter” where we experience American popular “music’s utopian potential” to “transform the world we find ourselves in” precisely because of the multiple voices conveyed in the words and sounds.\(^6\)

The fact that much of Randall’s writing has been aimed at the mainstream, commercial market increases the likelihood that her songs will seep into our heads; the more “alternative” writing she has done, though, makes clear her commitment to constructing and deconstructing the African American resonance in country music. For the most part, however, Randall seeks to “voice the popular” in her audiotopias, a term I borrow from Richard Middleton to stress popular music’s always already subalternity, its status as a “low other” containing “plural, hybrid [and] compromised” voices.\(^7\) She contrasts her fiction to that of Nobelist Toni Morrison by claiming that her work offers intellectual play to readers as opposed to the wrenching memories of slavery and racism that Morrison conjures.\(^8\) Likewise, in place of Morrison’s opera libretto *Margaret Garner*, Randall writes lyrics to three-minute songs. Her first novel, *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), an “unauthorized parody” of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, evoked legal controversy when the Mitchell estate unsuccessfully sued to block publication. But unlike, say, the characters in Morrison’s *Beloved*, maimed and haunted by the legacy of slavery, Randall’s heroine, half sister to Scarlett O’Hara by virtue of Captain O’Hara’s relationship with the slave “Mammy,” leaves the plantation and lives elegantly ever after (often with Rhett Butler).

By “voicing the popular,” Randall refocuses what skulks about as a mystery, or, as Mann describes it, as mystified innocence, in mainstream coun-

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try music: the enduring legacy of slavery and segregation. Take, for example, Loretta Lynn’s restored plantation home in Hurricane Mills, Tennessee. In Still Woman Enough, her second autobiography, Lynn explains that she bought it because the white-pillared mansion “looked like a hillbilly’s dream”; she goes on to say that it was haunted by a Confederate soldier (as well as by her late husband’s many paramours), so she ultimately chose to build herself a new house.9 Fans can tour the antebellum dream home, however. Johnny Cash too believed his Jamaican plantation home, Cinna­mon Hill (originally owned by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s family), was haunted. Although he is not as specific as Lynn about the ghost’s identity, he implies it is a slave and claims that he was not bothered by it. In Cash: The Autobiography, he opens the chapter on his life in Jamaica by obliquely justifying life in the big house: he is descended from Scottish royalty, and the lush Jamaican landscape reminds him of his Arkansas childhood on a cotton farm. He displaces the unanswered questions about justice and complicity on (other) tourists; he doubts that the visitors golfing on “the mani­cured sod” that surrounds his house know that “thousands of slaves” once lived on the grounds.10 In contrast, while The Wind Done Gone most explicitly demystifies the symbolic nostalgia of (south­ern) whiteness, several of Randall’s high-profile country lyrics also disrupt the subtle nostalgia for the days of unquestioned white supremacy that Mann links to the white sound of country music.

Randall’s lyric-writing strategy works particularly well because she does not perform, and her strongest lyrics are evocative ballads rather than first-person expressions of sentiment. Moreover the range of her subjects and the diversity of her song placements demonstrate her skill with country music’s standard themes, such as nostalgia for a simpler past (Marie Osmond’s “My Hometown Boy”), love (The Woodys’ “A Hundred Years of Solitude”), na­ture (Glen Campbell’s “Who’s Minding the Garden”), and religion (Moe Bandy’s “Many Mansions”), as well as her ability to encompass the re­gional identities of the genre by setting songs in the West (Radney Foster’s “Went for a Ride”) and New Orleans (Jo-El Sonnier’s “Cafe du Monde”). Her “Blinded by Stars,” cowritten with and sung by the alt-country aspirant Adrienne Young, echoes and contradicts the bellicose flag-waving of Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” well enough to be an answer song: “This is my flag, but this ain’t my fight,” says the chorus. “I’ll Cry for Yours If You’ll Cry for Mine,” a confrontational song about Confederate monuments and memorials, has not found an audience in the United States, although the Danish star Tamra Rosanes recorded it.
Likewise, Randall works in several country music styles, such as the western swing of Walter Hyatt’s “Get the Hell Out of Dodge,” the old-time string-band sound in her “Ballad of Sally Anne,” and the Eagles-esque country rock of her first hit to crack the top ten, Judy Rodman’s “Girls Ride Horses, Too.” The selections in My Country Roots similarly confirm Randall’s catholicity; the section of the book titled “What We Sound Like” features playlists devoted to each of fourteen different genres of country music. Throughout, selections include famous country artists from the Carter Family to Toby Keith, little-known ballad singers, and songs performed by Chuck Berry, Leadbelly, Neil Young, the Rolling Stones, and Bruce Springsteen.

In addition to encompassing many forms of country music, Randall articulates the literary value of the country lyric. She studs her lyrics with literary allusions and her novels with allusions to Hank Williams and Tupac Shakur, consciously working to undermine the value-laden distinctions between the literary and the vernacular, the European and the American, and the class, gender, and racial categories that mark country music. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, she explained that she went to Nashville after graduating from Harvard because she was interested in “the metaphysical poetry that I found in country songs and the connection to the American Metaphysicals that I had read.” Such cross-fertilization of “high” and “low” cultural references also feeds her literary writing. For example, in the epigraph to Pushkin and the Queen of Spades, Randall quotes the Emily Dickinson poem “Hope Is the Thing with Feathers,” which is also the first line of “Many Mansions,” the title track from Moe Bandy’s 1989 album. More recently her song “A Hundred Years of Solitude” borrows its title from One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) by the Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez, an Oprah book club selection. My Country Roots frequently notes the literary lineage of the selections, tracing them as easily to the Harvard professor Francis J. Child’s nineteenth-century collection of traditional British ballads as to slave songbooks. Similarly the book praises “Pancho and Lefty,” performed by Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson and written by Townes Van Zandt as “the Iliad and Odyssey of country music.” Randall’s allusions are middlebrow, or at least safely unobscure, but such obviousness is perhaps the best way to make the point that country lyrics can have the complexity and historical resonance that we routinely accord to literary texts even as they retain the resonance of audiotopias.

When Alice Randall came to Nashville in the mid-1980s, country music had portrayed the shared experience of race at extremes of strife or mild tolerance. Charley Pride, the first black country music superstar, was fad-
ing from glory, but his career exemplified innocuous tolerance—so much so that his songs resonated little but nostalgia or present-day bliss. Entering the charts in 1967, Pride enjoyed his biggest hits with domesticated love songs such as “Kiss an Angel Good Morning,” his first gold record (1971). He won the Country Music Association Entertainer of the Year award that year too. His record company, RCA, chose songs for him, generally written by a stable of white male songwriters. Even so, Pride sang country music like he was born to it; more important, he sang it as if nobody doubted that he should, exemplifying the notion that country music and its largely southern setting had no racial legacy. The closest he ever came to singing about the racial politics of country music may have been the gentle praises of tolerance in a few songs, such as the title track of his 1980 album There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me. An introduction to a selection of Hank Williams’s covers, the song features a few autobiographical details, such as the memory of singing and listening to Hank’s songs during a Mississippi childhood and the addition of an oblique moral: “Music has no boundary it comes from the heart / And where my music comes from Hank you play the leading part.”iously Pride’s cover choices from Williams’s repertoire, particularly “Kaw-Liga,” the song about a red-faced wooden Indian, and “Honky Tonk Blues,” gain an interesting resonance when sung by a black man.) The upbeat 1974 “Mississippi Cotton Picking Delta Town” says nothing about race relations in the home of the blues, and in Pride’s 1981 hit, “Roll on Mississippi,” the singer expresses his nostalgia by sitting on the riverbank thinking of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. He doesn’t mention the escaped slave, Jim, whose plight gave the white boys’ adventures their knotty moral significance. “All His Children,” a 1972 release with Henry Mancini, implicitly advocated colorblindness with a line noting that we are all part of the family of man. The title of 1971’s “I’m Just Me” implies that the singer stands apart from ethnic or racial groups, and the lyrics even suggest that any claim to group identity would be an inauthentic expression of grievance. He thus separates himself from people (implicitly African American?) who complain that “life is rough.” The chorus, with its gloss on the title, offers a strangely timid pledge to the audience: “Every day I try to be exactly what you see” is juxtaposed with a placating “Every day I’m just me.” Again speaking explicitly for himself, Pride told an interviewer, “I don’t go for that ‘us and y’all and them’ stuff. . . . I am and have always been first and foremost an American.” When Pride’s stream of hits trickled dry in 1985, RCA dropped him. Even so, he charted a few more singles until his last top-40 hit, “Amy’s Eyes,” in 1990.

While Pride enjoyed his mellow prime, other, less successful black coun-
try artists made a point of dramatizing the connections and disjunctions between country music and their skin color. Linda Martell, the first black woman to sing on the Opry, released her only country album with the title *Color Me Country* (1969). For the most part, however, this country music dramatized black men speaking to the Man in the tradition of hard country predecessors such as Merle Haggard, “the poet of the working man.” Slyly enacting what I have called “burlesque abjection,” this tradition makes a spectacle of the failure to exert the privileges of white manhood. It takes country’s traditional working-class themes of economic hardship and familial failures and explicitly contrasts them to the suburban sublime. When a black man sings about such woes, however, the blend of ridicule and rage becomes more fraught, particularly in the early 1970s. For example, on a 1972 album title cut, the songwriter and singer O. B. McClinton set his “Obie from Senatobie” (Senatobia, Mississippi) to the melody of Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee,” and in place of Haggard’s line about rednecks “waving old glory down at the courthouse,” McClinton lampooned stereotypes about blacks, claiming, “We still eat watermelon down at the courthouse.” While Haggard’s song lent itself to both nostalgia for the good old days and satiric, progressive interpretations, McClinton’s edge becomes jagged here. Liking the song implies rejecting the racism he burlesques. Similarly juxtaposing black and white working-class identities, he released an album called *Chocolate Cowboy* in 1981 and a single called “Honky Tonk Tan” in 1984.

Likewise, in 1973 Stoney Edwards made a spectacle of abjection by tracing his lineage to the hard country heroes Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell at the same time that he called attention to his roots in African American music in the single “Hank and Lefty Raised My Country Soul.” Written by the (white) songwriting masters A. L. Owens and Dallas Frazier, this song capitalizes on the African American connotations of the term country soul. As the gifted popular music chronicler Barney Hoskyns describes it, country soul, while visibly black, arose from overt racial collaboration: the rhythm and blues sound of African American singers (most notably Aretha Franklin, Percy Sledge, Otis Redding, and Solomon Burke) working with white songwriters and integrated studio staffs at Stax and Muscle Shoals, all inflected by a shared experience of southern rural life and religiosity. O. B. McClinton also overtly played with the connection in album cuts like “(Country Music Is) American Soul” and “Country Music, That’s My Thing.” The claim to shared territory, however, couldn’t be made without struggle. Edwards’s 1976 single “Blackbird,” written by his white producer, Chip Taylor, was a musical manifesto for African American country, the story of a young boy whose
fiddling father also taught him to strum the blues with a “string from Robert Johnson’s guitar” before he formed a country band. While Pride stood only for himself (“I’m Just Me”), the men in this song hit the road as “a couple of country niggers.” In the song, their entry into the country music business meets with resistance from “scarecrows” in the music industry, but the chorus urges “blackbirds” to keep up the fight.

The limited success of these artists could be cited to illustrate the scarecrows’ power over blackbirds or the reluctance of the country music audience to confront racial conflict; likewise, it can confirm the suspicion that Pride’s high profile served as the exception that proved white rule over country music. The journalist Paul Hemphill went so far as to call Pride “Nashville’s house nigger.” The spectacle of Hank Williams Jr. performing his white supremacist fantasy “If the South Woulda Won” at the 1988 Country Music Association’s Award Show when he was named Entertainer of the Year also speaks uncomfortable volumes. As the writer Jeff Woods noted, “No one assembled at the Opry House . . . revealed the slightest displeasure with Hank,” although Billboard’s country music journalist Edward Morris resigned from the Association afterward. In the meantime, Music Row record labels, in search of the next Charley Pride, groomed black singers such as the cardiologist Cleve Francis (Liberty) and Trini Triggs (Curb). Francis signed his record deal in 1990, but his upbeat love songs and ballads in the Charley Pride tradition never achieved chart success, and by 1995 he had returned to his cardiology practice. Francis complained that Liberty did little to integrate his act with those of his label mates such as Garth Brooks, one of the era’s top concert draws. He told Nashville Scene’s music writer Bill Friskics-Warren, “I basically toured by myself. Garth could have put Mickey Mouse on his show and it would have sold, but I never got a chance to open for Garth. In fact, I never did a show with any of my label-mates. What does that mean?” In 1999 a U.S. News and World Report articleoptimistically placed Triggs on “the star track,” but his label released only a CD single, “Straight Tequila” / “Horse to Mexico” (1998), both songs with inconsequential and incongruent Mexican themes. (Darius Rucker, who recently enjoyed two top-selling country hits, may have finally repeated Pride’s exceptional success.) At the end of the 1990s black country artists began to express concern about maintaining their presence in the genre. Frustration with limited opportunities prompted the songwriter Frankie Staton to found the Black Country Music Association in 1997. The next year the journalist Pamela E. Foster self-published My Country: The African Diaspora’s Country Music Heritage, an encyclopedia and manifesto offering “definitive evidence
of the close, long-standing and tumultuous relationship between children of the African motherland and the musical core of the American heartland.”

Nevertheless, even if new opportunities were declining in the 1990s, Nashville's institutions paid plenty of respectful attention to the historical role of African Americans in country music. In 1992 the Journal of Country Music devoted an issue (14.2) to black artists in country music. As Charley Pride was disappearing from the country charts, well-publicized 1990s recordings, such as the Country Music Foundation's three-disc box set From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music (1998) and MCA's 1994 biracial duets project, Rhythm, Country and Blues documented links between country soul, the blues, and country music for the mainstream. In his introductory essay to the From Where I Stand booklet, Bill Ivey, the Country Music Foundation's director, frames the project as a "border crossing" contesting a complex of "conventional wisdom" about the African roots of the blues, the British roots of hillbilly music, and the "suburbanization of country music." Less scholarly, James Hunter closes the liner notes for Rhythm, Country and Blues by evoking unobjectionable common ground: "One of the several glories of this collection is that in a day when neither country nor soul is the exclusive province of any one region or spot or race, singers like this can still make their stories, their weather, their luck seem like everyone's." The project gained further industry recognition at the 1995 Grammy Awards: Trisha Yearwood and Aaron Neville's version of "I Fall to Pieces" won for Best Country Vocal Collaboration, and Al Green and Lyle Lovett's "Funny How Time Slips Away" took the prize for Best Pop Collaboration.

But no matter how easy it was to hear shared emotional resonances in country music, blues, and soul from earlier decades, "hot new country" was tied to a tepid, effeminate whiteness, still infused with nostalgia and still conveyed in a hurting, albeit softened, twang. No longer strictly associated with white, working-class southerners, mainstream country music now played in soccer moms' minivans. While it still lay at the bottom of an abstract hierarchy of musical genres, the Opry as opposed to the opera, in the 1990s its popular music "other" was no longer rock, with its artistic ambitions and connections to a college-educated, white, "hippie" counterculture, but rap, emanating from the inner city, and alternative country, located in a rough-hewn haze of country "tradition." Hip urbanites embraced alt-country as a counterculture, looking to older country roots as a way to express their alienation from mainstream popular music of all sorts and reconfiguring burlesque abjection into a familiar, deeply nostalgic form of white guy cool-supremacy in the process. In 1994, when "XXxs and 0O0s" reached num-

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ber 1, the Rick Rubin and Johnny Cash collaboration *American Recordings* debuted, making Cash hip and vindicating his disappearance from country music radio and record charts. In 1995 *No Depression*, the *Rolling Stone* of the alternative country movement, was launched. In its pages, top-selling neocowboys like Garth Brooks were dethroned in favor of other white men, ranging from the Carter-covering country-grunge Midwesterners in the band Uncle Tupelo to dearly departed heroes like Hank Williams.

While alt-country contrasts country’s macho past to its white bread feminized present, rap contrasts the urban jungle to the suburban city. As Bruce Feiler wrote in his gushing book on country music in the 1990s, *Dreaming Out Loud: Garth Brooks, Wynonna Judd, Wade Hayes, and the Changing Face of Nashville*, “If, as Public Enemy’s Chuck D once famously asserted, rap music is the ‘CNN of the ghetto,’ country music, in the nineties, became the CNN of the suburbs.”29 He quotes Edward Morris (the *Billboard* country music editor who resigned from the Country Music Association): “Country is fundamentally based on the white experience.” Likewise, Tony Brown, then president of MCA Nashville, told Feiler, “Country basically is white music.” In this climate, Randall skillfully wrote African Americans into the music by assuming that black and white voices had always been joined in song, just as they had also been joined in strife. Her successes mined a more complicated vein of racial self-expression than Pride’s bland blackness or the more confrontational hard country of Pride’s contemporaries O. B. McClinton and Stoney Edwards. In fact Randall doesn’t even mention songs like McClinton’s or Edwards’s in the vast selection offered in *My Country Roots*, although she does reinforce the sentiment of Pride’s “There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me” by including that song on her playlist about country music songs that reflect the black experience.30 In the book’s brief introduction she defines country music by stressing its complexity: “No genre of music deals with a more diverse body of subject matter, provides a more mature perspective, or draws from a wider range of conflicting impulses.”31 Among the conflicts and subjects she lists are race, class, gender, and African American musical heritage, a particularly complex construction at the turn of the twentieth century.

Not all of Randall’s songs raise the question of race, but in those that do, the subject gains an intriguing ambiguity in the mouths of white performers, doing what songs do best: getting in your head. At the same time, this ambiguity creates new possibilities for identification by portraying both racism and integration as historical experiences shared by blacks and whites even as blacks have borne the greater burden. In her “Ballad of Sally Anne,” sung by the contemporary bluegrass virtuoso John Cowan (1991), racial violence
resounds through a community with a simultaneously galvanizing and disarming emotional charge. This song tells of a lynching that takes place right after the wedding of Johnny and Sally Anne, but the listener can't know for certain whether the victim was a black man married to a white woman or a white man married to a black woman. Or are both lovers black? (In My Country Roots Randall lists the song in the “Who We Are” section called, simply, “Black,” although she still avoids specifying which character is black.) The song’s ancestors similarly complicate the story: in the “Ballad of Sally Anne,” Randall takes on the whitest strains of country music, the (wordless) Appalachian fiddle showpiece, the product of hillbilly virtuosi, and the ballad, with its British lineage and Harvard-educated collectors. In 1918 the British ballad collector Cecil Sharp described a version he transcribed in North Carolina that introduces a theme that Randall develops: Sally Anne’s wedding. But Randall also alludes to more racially complex songs. A model of narrative compression, Randall’s “Ballad” opens with Johnny’s simple proposal to Sally Anne. In the fourth line, we hear that “the ride from the church bore strange fruit,” an easy allusion to Billie Holiday’s signature song about lynching. The rousing melody never evokes tragedy, however, and the rest of the lyrics suggest that another union, or at least some sort of reconciliation with the community, could come about. Indeed communal wedding celebrations epitomize such harmony, especially when they feature traditional music. Thus another verse says that Sally Anne “attends every wedding around here,” adding that when the fiddle strikes up the tune, her presence can be felt. The song also enacts the joy of a wedding celebration with its infectious fiddle break. The chorus invites someone to dance with Sally Anne, to bring her to the party once again, to create a happy ending, even as the catchy melody could easily lure a crowd onto the dance floor.

Yet strange fruit is not party food, and the other songs stirred into “Ballad of Sally Anne” further embitter the brew. Many song collectors note that “Sally Anne” is related to another folk song, “Sail Away, Ladies,” and Randall and O’Connor’s song maintains that link; in place of the last chorus (“Who’s gonna dance with Sally Anne?”), Cowan sings, “Sail away, ladies, sail away,” while O’Connor’s fiddle answers. As sung by the Grand Ole Opry star Uncle Dave Macon (1927) or Odetta (1957) or Joan Baez (1959), this song celebrates living happily in Tennessee while expecting an even better home in heaven. Randall and O’Connor’s version, however, just sings out the title; it does not pick up these verses. Nevertheless any listener with a submerged memory of this song’s history can activate it, and in that respect a version in Thomas Talley’s Negro Folk Rhymes (1922) offers a more interesting twist, particularly
in light of the lynching story: “Sail away, ladies! Sail away! / Nev’ min’ what
dem white folks say.”32 This verse, in particular, prompts memories of Randy
Newman’s original composition, also called “Sail Away” (1972; covered by
Ray Charles in 2002), a song awash in guilt and irony about what white folks
said as they lured Africans onto slave ships. Sung by a slave trader, the lyrics
promise the captives plenty of food and slyly boast that in America “every
man is free to take care of his home and family.”33 Only later would these
Africans learn who the free man is and what their relationship to him would
be. In Randall’s “Ballad of Sally Anne,” which reflects all of these songs, lis-
teners too need to figure out their relationship to Sally Anne and the Man.

Similarly listeners must experiment with a range of racial and sexual iden-
tities in Radney Foster’s 1992 recording of Randall’s “Went for a Ride.” Race
is only one detail in the singer’s elliptical account of his lost trail-riding part-
ner, the black cowboy. (“He was black as the sky on a moonless night.”)
The singer’s race is not stated, and the rest of the ballad seems to be about
a love triangle such as those that shaped the story of Butch Cassidy and the
Sundance Kid or perhaps about a betrayal such as the one obscurely im-
plied in Townes Van Zandt’s “Pancho and Lefty” or Randall’s earlier “Girls
Ride Horses, Too.”34 The singer introduces the complication of a woman
(whose race also does not merit mention), noting that there was “blood on
the leather and tears in her eyes,” but he doesn’t say whose blood or what
leather. The listener wonders whether the singer killed the dark cowboy be-
cause he wanted him for himself, or whether it was the woman he wanted.
Or maybe the woman did the killing. “She stole my heart,” is as close to an
explanation as anything offered, but that only displaces the question, Where
did the dark cowboy’s heart lie?

Like “The Ballad of Sally Anne,” “Went for a Ride” also disrupts nostalgia
as it engages American history and race relations through audiotopic inter-
textuality. With its image of bloody leather, the song references and retunes
Tex Ritter’s “Blood on the Saddle,” first performed in Green Grow the Lilacs,
Lynn Riggs’s play about Oklahoma’s transformation from Indian Territory
into the forty-eighth state. (Rodgers and Hammerstein would adapt this
play for their first musical, Oklahoma!) While these musicals blotted the
blood from that trail of tears, Randall (and many listeners) can easily (re)-
trace it. “Blood on the Saddle,” though, displaces the tragedy of the Amer-
ican Indian with a rodeo accident that evokes laughter rather than sympa-
thy. Its diction jarringly blends the emotional instructions offered by tradi-
tional ballads with the language of cartoon violence: “Oh, pity the cowboy,
all bloody and red / For the bronco fell on him and bashed in his head.”35
Performed in an ominous midtempo, “Went for a Ride” regains the sense of
doom that “Blood on the Saddle” squandered, connecting it to a new under­
standing of history not only through the songs it evokes and the curiosity it
engenders but also through the dramatic flourish that closes the first verse
by announcing that history books “got it all wrong.” The referent of the pro­
noun it, as usual, is unclear, but what is clear is that the song functions both
as an antidote to nostalgia about the Old West, the rip-roaring drama that
gives cover to a more painful history, and as a reminder of nearly everyone
else’s complicity. At the same time, the reminder has the potential to re­
new the community, much like the invitation to dance with the bereaved
Sally Anne. As Kun notes, such structures 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.”

No song better illustrates Randall’s commonality-building perspective on
country music and her gentle disruptions of the “white sound” of commer­
cial country music than “xxxs and o0os,” her most successful song to date.
It differs remarkably from her first songs about women and family as it places
its subject firmly in contemporary middle-class life. When Feiler interviewed
Randall to support his argument that “country music is the cnn of the sub­
rurbs,” she suggested that the African American experience of suburbia was
more complex than he imagined; in other words, African Americans live
there and deal with both racism and friends and neighbors. He didn’t know
what to do with that insight, concluding, “This is the reason for the grow­
ing segregation [of country music]” in spite of the fact that he was talking
to Randall because she represents integration. In fact since late twentieth­
century suburbs, much like country music, were only symbolically the bast­
tion of the white middle class, the argument could just as easily be turned
around, finding reasons for the growing integration of country music.

Exploring the complexity of the integrated suburban experience was the
theme of Aaron McGruder’s Boondocks, the enormously successful and con­
troversial comic strip (and later a television show) that began national syndi­
cation in 1999, and life in a McGruderesque Boondocks is clearly part of the
story related in “xxxs and o0os.” That the suburbs now shelter the main­
stream country audience also becomes clear in the muted treatment of the
country/city dichotomy and the upbeat portrayal of middle-class woman­
hood in the song. In contrast, one of Randall’s earliest songs, “My Home­
town Boy,” recorded by Marie Osmond in 1988, relies on the country/city
dichotomy. As Randall puts it in My Country Roots, this boy’s appeal lies in
his ability to see the simple country girl that the successful urban woman once was. The title “Small Towns (Are Smaller for Girls),” recorded by Holly Dunn in 1987, expresses less nostalgia for the simple past but also imagines a way of life in which there is no suburban middle ground. Thanks to the double standard, the girl in this song, growing up in the small-town South, is denied the freedom to explore not only her sexuality but also most other aspects of adult life. She spends her days in restrictive “ribbons and curls,” and at night, while the boys enjoy wild times, she plans her getaway, “reading about New York City with her daddy’s flashlight.”

The woman of “xxxs and ooos,” who “used to tie her hair up in ribbons and bows,” seeks a different kind of recognition and freedom than that longed for in “My Hometown Boy” and “Small Towns (Are Smaller for Girls).” The simple geography of city versus country that structures both songs vanishes as well, even though in other respects this American girl could be Holly Dunn’s small-town girl all grown up. In “xxxs and ooos,” in addition to “romance and a live-in maid,” the woman balances nostalgia for who she once was with proud recognition of who she is now. With verses that list the chores weighing on a career woman’s mind, such as finding someone to fix the sink and mow the grass, the setting evokes a home in 1990s suburbia and a job downtown, both grounds covered by the aspirational “have it all” feminism of the late twentieth century. At the same time, the multiple imagery of the song sketches the psychological contours of this new geography. In the immediate context, xxxs and ooos seem to signify affection: kisses and hugs, the open intimacy between lovers, friends, and family members. It’s worth noting, however, that this symbol is one that the woman in the song used to use to close her letters. Now she’s working in the man’s world (“her daddy’s,” says the song), where she tries to “keep the balance up between love and money.” The xxxs and ooos, then, also signify a sort of conflicted and competitive emotional bookkeeping. The two letters are, after all, the symbols used to play that easily stalemated child’s game, tic-tac-toe, and the marks that represent strategies in the more macho, territory-conquering game of football. Whatever the game, the woman is winning.

In spite of the precarious emotional balance described, the American girl is not focused on loss or victimhood. She has gained territory and crossed all kinds of lines: “She’s got her God and she’s got good wine, Aretha Franklin and Patsy Cline.” This woman’s deity doesn’t deny her the refined alcohol that old-fashioned southern religiosity would prohibit. Just as heavenly, the songs in this American girl’s head feature country-tinged oldies from both
sides of the color line. (In Randall’s novel *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades*, Aretha is described as “country and colored” [181].)

This song, like O. B. McClinton’s “Obie from Senatobie” and Stoney Edwards’s “Blackbird,” acknowledges the color line by drawing upon it. Unlike those songs, however, this one enters the world of “the (white) man” without dramatic provocation. In its chart-topping incarnation, it was sung by a blonde woman (Trisha Yearwood) who pays the incongruity of Aretha and Patsy no special vocal attention and who draws up an inventory of what an American girl does when she becomes an adult that gives no more emphasis to her playlist than to her hairstyle, which used to feature the girlish trappings of bows and ribbons, but now, evidently, flows free. (Admittedly, untamed hair may have more fraught symbolism for African American women.) As Randall notes in *My Country Roots*, “Yearwood has made a living scoring number one hits which sit softly on the mind and easy on the soul.” 40 In this case, when Yearwood’s rousing yet bland performance rose to the top of the country charts, most buyers were unaware of the feminist, African American identity of the songwriter. It could be argued that the “unmarked” category, “American” without the “African” modifier, makes it easy to assume that we are hearing about white women. But nothing prevents one from imagining that the “American girl” listening to Aretha Franklin and Patsy Cline could be white, black, or something between the lines.

While “xxxxs and o000s” gently insinuates integration between listeners’ ears, Randall can underscore grotesque boundaries and their breechings when she chooses. Thus in the long-playing format of her novel *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades*, she recapitulates and deepens the scenarios of “xxxxs and o000s,” “Sally Anne,” and “Went for a Ride.” While the plot is difficult to summarize, my discussion here focuses on “the cultural conversation” that takes place when the heroine, Windsor Armstrong, a Detroit-born, black intellectual woman living in Nashville at the end of the twentieth century, integrates country music into her life (213). With a last name that evokes athletic prowess and a first name that she knows to be drawn from the ruling family of England, and, more important, from the suburb that links Detroit to Canada, a place that obscures the border and invites regular crossings (103, 205), Windsor, narrating in the first-person, evokes Randall herself. In this novel, as in her lyrics, Randall consistently juxtaposes high and low culture, the rural and the urban, and Motown and Nashville in order to marry black and white.

Windsor’s son, Pushkin X, the hero of what turns out to be a comedy, is a
star NFL defensive lineman named after the slave-descended Russian writer and after Malcolm X, “the best black brain and the fiercest black heart” (6). Windsor herself plays a sort of defensive linewoman, embarrassed that she, a Harvard-educated, Vanderbilt-tenured specialist in Afro-Russian literary relations, has raised what she sees as a “stereotypical” black male, all brawn and drawn to the status conferred by white women and suburban McMansions. Likewise, pregnant after her rape by a white executive, she once felt that her subsequent pregnancy turned her into a stereotypical unwed black mother. While her years spent in Russia and her Vanderbilt professorship remove her from ghetto stigmas, Pushkin’s engagement to Tanya, a Russian lap dancer, threatens her Nashville shelter. Worse, before his wedding, he demands to know who his father is, but Windsor wants to shield him from this information since it would reveal not only his whiteness but also her rape.

The book thus opens with Windsor struggling to find a way to accept what Pushkin has done with his life and a way to answer his question. In the meantime, her hesitation has cost her an invitation to the wedding, but with this conflict structuring the plot, the potential for comedy, a happy reconciliation of the initially grotesque juxtapositions, presents itself from the start. As she drinks in her favorite “hillbilly bar,” Windsor writes chapters from her life story, looking for ways to tell Pushkin X what he needs to know. She chooses the bar over her Vanderbilt office and her architect-designed home not only because she needs to drown her sorrows country music-style but also because in Pushkin X’s earlier childhood, she had used country music to translate her feelings about their roots in Motown. They listened to the *Smithsonian Collection of Country Classics*, valuable, she explains, because it provided “translations of [her] experience that [she] could share without damaging him” (59). They especially like the song “Detroit City.” Moreover the title of the collection announces the bridging between high and low culture that is important to Windsor (and Randall). Many compilations, after all, feature “Detroit City,” but a woman like Windsor would choose one that also emphasizes connections with cultural institutions like the Smithsonian and with the cultural capital implied in the word *classic*. Although Windsor doesn’t extensively gloss Bobby Bare’s lyrics to “Detroit City,” the song bemoans a lost southern home, replete with cotton fields and family. She does note, however, that Detroit had been a place of “hard truths” for her, and Pushkin learned to play football in Motown while she was off completing her Harvard degree (64). Perhaps the most relevant wish expressed in this song is the sole line Windsor does cite: the wish that people could “read between the lines.” Similarly she hopes her son can learn the painful truth she has to
tell him about his patrimony without reliving the humiliation that rape and the stigma of single motherhood caused her.

While Windsor writes in order to give Pushkin a way to read between the lines and discover the essential truth about his patrimony, she too learns to read between the lines of the pain she feels about his impending matrimony. She must, in short, confront her “racism,” her reluctance to accept his white bride-to-be (125), a situation similar to the scandalous wedding described in “The Ballad of Sally Anne.” Once again country music helps her get between the lines. As she leaves the hillbilly bar to meet her son at the bar in the far more prestigious Hermitage Hotel, named after Andrew Jackson's plantation but evoking as well the art museum and palace of St. Petersburg's doomed White Russians, she affirms her love for Hank Williams as a way to “get in touch with [her own] whiteness” and to acknowledge her son’s “complex ethnicity” (212–13). As the novel closes, Windsor realizes that the translations she has created for herself and her son will also connect her to her white daughter-in-law. She thus addresses some of the final paragraphs to Tanya, expressing the hope that she has “blackened [Tanya’s] mind” by “pour[ing] blackness into [her] ear” (271, 277). The word choice, as usual, is crucial. The words Windsor has written are on a page, but their impact, like the words to a song, takes place in the ear, particularly through the poem, or rap song, that she has also created by finishing, fixing, and remixing Pushkin’s unfinished short story about an impending interracial wedding, “The Negro of Peter the Great.” “Words in the air are full of life,” she notes, in contrast to the dead if enduring words committed to paper alone (137). So Windsor chooses life when she pours blackness into Tanya’s ears by writing a rap song.

At their first meeting, Tanya had enthusiastically talked about rap as poetry, recommending Tupac Shakur to Windsor, who eventually falls in love with some of his songs. When Windsor returns the favor, she hopes that the bride now has what she had long wanted for Pushkin X: the soul of black folks. In fact she had initially planned to give him a first edition of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* for a wedding gift. In the hillbilly bar, though, she works out that it’s more important to give him her own soul along with the knowledge of his white blood (200). Moreover, when the Pushkin remix replaces Du Bois as a wedding gift, Tanya becomes the “Queen of Spades” of the title, and hence the comedy’s heroine. Most important, from Windsor’s point of view, Tanya will love her son and be the mother of her mixed-race grandchildren. Much like an African American country songwriter, the disc jockey presiding at this wedding celebration...
orchestrates the racial mix. Windsor notes that he is “invisible in the heat and the history,” but the songs go in the new family’s ears, and they too speak of a long history of distinct yet blended voices: “I hear you sing America, Walt [Whitman]. I hear you too, Langston. Yep, and now I hear Tupac,” she concludes (280). And remember, Windsor wrote her story in a hillbilly bar in Nashville while Hank Williams songs resounded from the jukebox.

While her songs and stories recall the wretched history of American slavery and its aftermath of lynching and sexual exploitation, Randall, on the page and in the airwaves, also empowers our imagination to enter into new stories. These stories take the “white sound” of country music, with its nostalgia and twang, into different relationships with the past and future and, more important, into different relationships with the people who inhabit the real spaces of the world. They are as easy to listen to as a Charley Pride song, even though some evoke the kinds of struggles that O. B. McClinton and Stoney Edwards sang about. Almost all of them also build the better spaces of audiotopia. In Randall’s happiest visions, as in the novel that ends as comedies classically do, with a communal wedding feast, racial identities mingle through marriage and procreation rather than through slavery and rape. Happy families proliferate rather than bear strange fruit. Women succeed in the man’s world, and the new perspectives they bring with them remake that world. Love and gifts replace love and theft as the epitome of cultural production. Indeed Randall’s characters, whether black, white, or in between those lines, convey their struggles and triumphs through resonant gifts of new songs and stories. “Hope is the thing with feathers,” says the epigraph to Pushkin and the Queen of Spades and the first line of one of Randall’s songs. The next line, as Dickinson wrote it, tells us that the thing with feathers “perches in the soul.” It also sings.

Notes


2. Parton expressed surprise at learning that Summer wrote this song, and by extension, implied that she assumed most songs that her producers proposed to her were written by white songwriters. Roland, The Billboard Book of Number One Country Hits, 258. For the sake of simplicity, I generally refer to Randall as the writer of the songs discussed in this essay, though some are cowritten.

3. “A Southern View of Folk Song,” typed manuscript, box 27, folder 45, Donald Davidson Collection, Vanderbilt University Library.


5. I choose the word resound here to indicate my debt to Ronald Radano’s work.
on the discursive construction of “black music,” especially in his *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*. The work of Josh Kun, Richard Middleton, and Geoff Mann grows out of Radano’s argument that the racial identities tied to music are best understood as resonances. “In the figure of resonance, of an utterance without beginnings, we locate a key critical concept for imagining a different story of black music. . . . As a resonance is received . . . so is it repeatedly recast, rearticulated, and heard within the social. Conceived as a textural figuration of sound’s position within a social ‘unconscious’ and accordingly existing between and beyond an ever-present discursive sphere, it conjures a flutter of sounds and texts that give shape to resoundingly racialized constructions of difference through the continual engagement of blacks and whites” (11).

13. Written by John Schweers.
14. Written by Glenn Martin.
22. According to the Cleve Francis website (http://www.clevefrancis.com), however, he still performs in the Alexandria, Virginia, area.

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27. Hunter, liner notes, Rhythm, Country and Blues.
28. I discuss this phenomenon in greater detail in Ching, “Going Back to the Old Mainstream” and Ching and Fox “The Importance of Being Ironic.”
29. Feiler, Dreaming Out Loud, 243.
30. Randall, Little, and Little, My Country Roots, 43.
32. Talley, Negro Folk Rhymes, 17.
33. For further discussion of Newman’s song, see Erickson, “‘Sail Away’” and ‘Louisiana 1927,”’ 307–11.
34. Randall, Little, and Little, My Country Roots, describes Pancho and Lefty as “two drug dealers” (180). Pancho, caught by the “Federales” in Mexico, “loses his life,” while Lefty, languishing in Cleveland hotel rooms, “loses his soul” (32).
37. Feiler, Dreaming Out Loud, 251.
38. As the narrator of Randall’s Pushkin and the Queen of Spades puts it, “I know something about college football. . . . When I look at the diagrams of the plays . . . I get tangled up in space amid the x’s and o’s” (141; subsequent page references to this book are given parenthetically in the text).
39. If the song has any connection to “Big Dreams,” Randall’s contribution to the soundtrack of The Thing Called Love (1993), this god is a woman, since the struggling but happy woman in the soundtrack contribution states that “God must be a woman, too.”
40. Randall, Little, and Little, My Country Roots, 238.