CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

In his 1903 seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, African American scholar W. E. B. DuBois boldly predicted that the problem of the twentieth century would be “the problem of the color line” (3). This pronouncement was made as he was perched on that shaky threshold between the morally tragic nineteenth century and the tentatively hopeful twentieth century. As hope gave way to helplessness in the early twentieth century, in spite of valiant waves of resistance to the most violent racism and bigotry, DuBois’s statement seemed eerily prophetic as the problematic matter of race in America continued to dig its jagged roots into the receptive sociocultural soil of the United States. Once imagined as a contained field of contamination in the Deep South, historical evidence has shown that these divisive roots had spread from sea to shining sea. Discourses that revolve in complicated circles around media representations of American culture, the educational and criminal justice systems, and campaign rhetoric during voting season in the United States reveal the fruit of those racial roots, further reminding observers that DuBois’s statement may be an apt measuring stick for investigating the twenty-first century.

Halfway through DuBois’s century, writer Susan Sontag reflected on the status of race and racism in the United States: “This is a passionately racist country; it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future” (“White Woman Black Vision,” 50). During this intense period in American history, artists and intellectuals of the Black Arts Movement—Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Larry Neal—reiterated this verdict. At the dawn of a new century,
this work seeks to examine the enduring implications of this assertion. While DuBois presented sociological evidence that explored religion, labor, leadership, and education, this work rests its theoretical basis on the cultural pillars of soul and country music as the gateway into the question of race, identity, and relationship in twenty-first-century United States. These musical genres serve as cultural markers, similar to the two ends of a dial on a compass that leads a traveler on a journey along the historically sensitive and complex road that is layered with troubled race relations and restless identity formation in the United States.

As I have embarked on this intriguing road, I am often asked: What does a scholar with African and Caribbean roots have to do with American music and culture? This is a recurring question especially as I pose questions and begin my line of inquiry with music fans and citizens of the United States. The raised eyebrows, the disbelieving half-smiles, the gasps of laughter, all point to the incredulous bemusement that welcomes my announcement of a research interest in these two iconic American musical genres. I suspect the raised brows are more about the country music than the soul. The thought is that scholars with a heritage like mine may not possess the cultural credibility to interrogate country music. There seems to be an unwritten law that states that non-Americans are not supposed to seriously consider and comment on the other side of American history, culture, and identity. That honor is reserved for Americans. So, what do I have to say about soul and country music? What could I possibly have to add to the already great scholarship on these two genres?

Besides the fact that these two genres are rarely linked, this work attempts to do something that has been done many times, but in the reverse direction. Westerners have often focused their investigative lens on the African continent. From the first European explorers to the early Western anthropologists and literary scholars to the more recent American scholars of postcolonial studies, various cultural and historical aspects of Africa have been carefully examined, scrutinized and sampled, tested and tasted by outsiders. These endeavors have produced definitive studies such as David Livingstone’s *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi* (1865) and novels like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart