



# “BUT NOT MY SOUL”: RHIANNON GIDDENS ON RESISTING THE NIGHTMARE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

KEVIN FARRELL  
RADFORD UNIVERSITY

This study begins with Rhiannon Giddens’ 2018 show at the Harvester Performance Center in Rocky Mount, Virginia. A small venue—maximum capacity 460—specializing in Americana acts, nostalgia tours, and cover bands, the Harvester sits in the middle of Franklin County, an overwhelmingly white, politically conservative region of Southwest Virginia. Giddens, making her third appearance on the Harvester stage, having previously played there both solo and as a member of Carolina Chocolate Drops, had spent her set drawing heavily from her first two solo albums, sprinkling in a number of cover songs by artists ranging from Sam Cooke to Lydia Mendoza to Odetta. As her performance drew to a close, she turned once again to a cover, introducing a final number as “a protest song from the 1960s.” Behind her, the band began playing a well-known vamp, as she exclaimed, to considerable applause, that “we still need to play protest songs from the 1960s!”

This particular protest song was the Staple Singers’ “Freedom Highway,” a track written by Roebuck “Pops” Staples in 1965 and first released on the group’s live album of the same name. Recorded at Chicago’s New Nazareth Church, “Freedom Highway” was inspired by, and dedicated to, “the Freedom Marchers,” Civil Rights protestors who had, just a few weeks earlier, completed the arduous and dangerous march from Selma to Montgomery. With its references to both the marches taking place across Alabama and the 1955 murder of Emmet Till, the song offered a rallying cry for the Civil Rights movement, an encapsulation of both its outrage and its righteous determination.

In 2018, Rhiannon Giddens’ invocation of the song was hardly surprising: her cover of “Freedom Highway” had served as title track of her most recent album, and it had been an inevitable part of her setlists on subsequent tours. The sentiment, too, seemed



to resonate with the audience, many of whom had encountered echoes of an unsettled past earlier that evening. The Harvester draws much of its audience from nearby Roanoke City, a 25-mile drive that takes one past Boones Mill Produce Company, the self-proclaimed “rebel store of Franklin County” and a shop that, despite its name, is less noted for its selection of fruits and vegetables than for its Confederate and Donald Trump-themed paraphernalia (Boones Mill Produce Company, March 24, 2018). As such, anyone driving through Boones Mill on their way to or from Giddens’ concert that night would have been confronted by a shop visage festooned with dozens of Trump signs and Confederate flags.

Such moments of semiotic flexibility—a protest song still resonant and current fifty years after the events that inspired it, a centuries-old battle flag appropriated by a contemporary white nationalist movement—might call to mind T.S. Eliot’s sense “not only of the pastness of the past, but its presence” (1921, 44), or perhaps William Faulkner’s famous line from *Requiem for a Nun* that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” (2011, 73). These pithy, quotable phrases, exemplary as they are of high modernist literature’s fascination with temporality and tradition, are also applicable to an artist like Giddens, whose career has always balanced contemporaneity with the weight of the past. Before embarking on her solo career, Giddens had been a founding member of Carolina Chocolate Drops, a group that pulled from both old-time string music traditions and more contemporary influences. Carolina Chocolate Drops’ Grammy-winning album, *Genuine Negro Jig* (2010), had featured traditional tunes alongside renditions of songs by both Tom Waits (“Trampled Rose”) and Blue Cantrell (“Hit ‘Em up Style”), forecasting the stylistic diversity and wide temporal lens of Giddens’ subsequent work. That work would include a bravura performance of Odetta’s “Waterboy” at the *Another Day, Another Time: Celebrating the Music of Inside Llewlyn Davis* concert, membership in The New Basement tapes (a supergroup assembled by producer T Bone Burnett to record songs based on previously unrecorded lyrics by Bob Dylan), and a solo debut album, *Tomorrow is My Turn*, that featured folk, country, gospel, blues and pop covers. These various projects all reveal an artist deeply engaged with the history of American popular music, with a particular emphasis on the musical traditions of Black Americans, with Giddens presenting herself as equal parts performer and scholar.

This scholarly ethos can be seen, for example, in the official music video for “Black is the Color,” a traditional Scottish tune associated with, among others, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Christy Moore, and Nina Simone. Filmed at Fisk University, a historically Black university in Nashville, Tennessee, the video features Giddens conducting research into the university’s Jubilee Singers, a Black *a cappella* group dating to the late Nineteenth Century. “The video’s narrative,” according to NPR’s Katie Presley, finds Giddens “[poring] through trinkets and photographs depicting histories real and imagined” (2015). These photographs and trinkets—pieces of jewelry, handwritten



letters, and the like—suggest a personal version of history hidden beneath that told by textbooks, while the clips of Giddens and her band performing the song hint at the role that music, both traditional and contemporary, can be used to excavate that hidden history, to link past and present together.

While Giddens' music has always, and explicitly, been rooted in that sense of the past's living presence in the present, her treatment of that presence acquired new urgency between her first and second solo releases. The occasion for this shift was a tragic one: on June 17, 2015, a white supremacist murdered nine Black parishioners at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, an act of domestic terrorism shockingly reminiscent of similar acts of racist violence committed against Black Americans during the Civil Rights era. A month later, Giddens released a new song, "Cry No More," which responded to the massacre by placing it within the broader context of American history, of "five hundred years of poison,/Five hundred years of grief,/Five hundred years of reasons,/To weep with disbelief." While "Cry No More" was a video-only release and not included in Giddens' next album, it offered a thematic preview of *Freedom Highway*, a record that explores this same relationship between past and present, a theme explicitly stated, through reference to Faulkner, in Giddens' press releases of the time:

Her second solo album, *Freedom Highway*, while a tremendous step forward for her as an artist and songwriter, functions on a higher level, acting as a conduit that links present and the past, and insists like William Faulkner did six decades earlier, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Through the sometimes jagged prism of 12 songs, many of which were inspired by America's scarred history, Giddens movingly inhabits the characters in the songs—slaves, mothers, young black men in America, or the marchers in Selma, Alabama back in 1965—unfurling their pain and struggles (Gross 2018).

*Freedom Highway*, then, presents a portrait of American history, drawing conscious connections between various modes of white supremacy (slavery, Jim Crow, domestic terrorism, and contemporary police violence) and various modes of Black resistance, through its portraits of fugitive slaves, Civil Rights marchers, and Black Lives Matter protestors. While *Freedom Highway* is not, strictly speaking, a concept album, its overarching theme is the human cost of oppression, manifested most powerfully in its accounts of stolen and murdered children. For Giddens, this theme connects generations of Black families across centuries, and she uses the past as a means to comment upon current events, construing history in personal and familial, rather than abstract, terms. While her approach has roots in both folk and popular music traditions, Giddens, consciously or not, also echoes conceptions of history and memory found in the work of T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and James Joyce, and Giddens' vision of personalized history, oppression, and resistance offers a Twenty-



First century American counterpart to Joyce’s famous description of history as “a nightmare” in *Ulysses* (1986, 28).

My argument is not that Giddens’ work is derivative of modernist literature, or that her approach to history is consciously, or even unconsciously, inspired by the works of Eliot, Faulkner, or Joyce—indeed, from what I can glean, any resemblance in theme or technique is likely synchronistic. And yet, her own comments about the album and its design fit well with modernist notions of art and the past, as in this 2016 Facebook post, announcing the record’s forthcoming release:

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. 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 (Rhiannon Giddens, December 8, 2016).

“History,” of course, has become something of a loaded term in American politics of late, and *Freedom Highway* appeared just as debates over the national past began gaining new currency. The aftermath of the Charleston church shooting brought new scrutiny to Confederate iconography in public spaces, resulting in the removal of the Confederate Battle Flag from the South Carolina Statehouse and calls to remove Confederate monuments from public spaces throughout the South. The bitterness of these debates, manifested most grotesquely by 2017’s Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville and the murder of counter-protestor Heather Heyer by a white nationalist, revealed an America still at war over the unsettled business of its supposedly distant past. It was amidst these moments that Giddens recorded, released, and promoted *Freedom Highway*.

Giddens’ sense that history can “show [us] how the future can look, for nothing in this world has not come around before” recalls Joyce’s line in *Ulysses* about “history repeating itself with a difference” (1986, 535). In context, that phrase refers to a pair of relatively trivial, superficially similar events in which protagonist Leopold Bloom retrieves a lost hat and returns it to its owner, but the line also refers to Joyce’s nuanced approach to history in the novel. While *Ulysses* is firmly situated in time and place, the novel’s structure allows events from beyond June 16, 1904, to appear, however surreptitiously, within its pages. According to Robert Spoo, Joyce employs a “double time frame” in his work, one which accommodates both the novel’s temporal placement and the intrusion of more current events (1986, 142). Specifically, Spoo finds evidence of oblique references to the First World War, so that “June 16, 1904, was not, for Joyce, a fixed, isolable ‘contemporaneity’”; rather, “the very process of composition ensures the inscribing of the chaotic ‘present’ into any continuous parallel that a narrative may hope to manipulate” (1986, 151). Uncovering evidence of the present’s



intrusion upon Joyce's past is possible through rhetorical analysis: by reading Joyce's work in reference to the political circumstances against which it was written, one can find, in the diction and details of certain passages, oblique indications of the present's incursion upon the scene.

For Joyce and Giddens both, the present's intrusion upon the past, or the past's intrusion upon the present, can best be described as a nightmare. And so, Stephen Dedalus, in perhaps Joyce's most famous line, puts it: "History, said Stephen, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (1986, 28). This notion emerges in direct, pointed contradiction to those notions of history found elsewhere in the same chapter: Stephen's students regard history with indifference and boredom, as "a tale like any other too often heard, their land a pawnshop" (1986, 21); while Stephen's boss regards it as divine ordination, an ineluctable teleology "towards one great goal, the manifestation of God" (1986, 28). Stephen's formulation, in contrast, emphasizes the personal and experiential nature of history over its abstractness or its inevitability. Moreover, the notion that history is a nightmare suggests that history is, by its nature, characterized by the same mercurialness that characterizes all dreams, a matter Joyce would explore further in *Finnegans Wake*.

Joyce is characteristically ambiguous about his characters' prospects of awaking from this nightmare. Later in the novel, Bloom, an Irish Jew, attempts to confront both an unreceptive audience of pub patrons and the collective weight of colonialism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism by declaring "it's no use...Force, hatred, history, all that," averring instead that "love" is "that that is really life" (1986, 273). Still, later, Stephen drunkenly attempts to explain his intellectual resistance to both Church and Crown to a pair of English soldiers, one of whom responds by knocking the young artist unconscious. Bloom then takes Stephen to recover at a cabman's shelter, where the younger man wearily and irritably dismisses Bloom's talk of Irish politics: "we can't change the country. Let us change the subject" (1986, 527).

While *Freedom Highway* is not so radically experimental as Joyce's works, the same sense of a personal and mercurial history pervades it, so that its listener is situated neither in past nor present, but rather transported back and forth in time over the course of the album. In part, this effect stems from the record's stylistic diversity, as Giddens shifts from folk to Cajun to soul to hip-hop to gospel music, suggesting a historian's view of American music without the attendant chronology. Towards that end, the album's song selection and sequencing serve to blur the lines between genre distinctions and historical eras, jumping across some four centuries of American history to tell a remarkably consistent story of "history repeating itself with a difference." While this story is occasionally interrupted by unrelated songs, seven tracks engage explicitly with the American nightmare of history; an eighth, "Following the North Star," though solely instrumental music, suggests further such engagement by its title. Along the way, we encounter historical figures and fictional characters, all





connected in their experience of this same nightmare as it shifts form and reinvents itself.

Giddens begins her story with “At the Purchaser’s Option,” a first-person narrative of a slave’s experience of the antebellum slave trade, then shifts to a dialogue between slaveowner and slave during the latter days of the American Civil War in “Julie”. From there, the album moves to “Birmingham Sunday,” a cover of Richard Farina’s song about the murder of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan in 1963. Giddens then takes us to the Black Lives Matter movement of the Twenty-First century in “Better Get It Right The First Time,” an account of the murder of a young Black man by the police, before returning us to two songs of slavery in the Nineteenth century with “We Could Fly” and “Come Love Come.” The album ends with the title track, with Emmet Till’s murder, the Freedom Marchers, and the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Given the narrative bent of these songs, listening to *Freedom Highway* can feel much like reading a collection of short fiction, particularly a collection—like, for example, James Joyce’s *Dubliners*—wherein ostensibly disconnected stories are thematically linked. By presenting historical experiences outside of chronological order, Giddens insists upon the continued relevance of each character’s experience to both the other characters and to the listener, so that America’s history of racist violence and oppression cannot be neatly consigned to the distant past.

At issue, then, for Giddens, is that very pastness of the past, the sense of distance that, in the American and Southern mythoi, so often turns history into legends of “Great Men.” While academic historians have largely abandoned Thomas Carlyle’s notion that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men” (1852, 45), it is largely through those grandiose figures that America has chosen to commemorate its story in both public spaces and popular imagination. At a time when much of America was debating the merits of hagiographical statues of Robert E. Lee and his fellow Confederates, Giddens directed her voice elsewhere in the national past. As Ann Powers notes, in making *Freedom Highway*, “Giddens opened the history books to their darkest pages and gave voice to those who don’t often get the chance to speak” (2017). There are no “great men” to be heard on *Freedom Highway*—the record’s one male speaker is a teenager murdered by the police, while the other speakers are all women or young girls. This is history as lived under the thumb of those supposedly great men, the men who countenanced slavery, segregation, discrimination, rape, and murder.

In narrating this almost unfathomable cruelty, Giddens balances portraits of victimhood with portraits of resistance, so that the central story of American history is that of ordinary people refusing to bend to power. This theme first emerges in “At the Purchaser’s Option,” the album’s opening number and its most arresting song. According to Giddens, “At the Purchaser’s Option” was inspired by an item she found while conducting some historical research: “Last year I came across an advertisement



from the 1830s for a young woman," Giddens notes, in a 2017 Nonesuch Records press release promoting the song. "Thinking about her, and how she had to maintain her humanity against horrific odds inspired this song named for the end of the ad: 'She has with her a 9-month old baby, who is at the purchaser's option'" (Nonesuch Journal, 2017). This woman, though seemingly powerless—having been raped by her owner and now at the mercy of prospective buyers—nonetheless sounds a defiant note throughout the song:

You can take my body,  
You can take my bones,  
You can take my blood,  
But not my soul.

"Soul," for Giddens, becomes the means of resistance. Soul allows this unnamed woman to love a child that might be taken from her, and to endure the inhumanity of chattel slavery without allowing herself to be dehumanized. By emphasizing soul, Giddens evokes the Gandhian notion of "soul force," a principle of nonviolent resistance at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it in a 1957 letter:

We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws. We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. So in winning the victory we will not only win freedom for ourselves, but we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that you will be changed also. The victory will be a double victory: We will defeat the evil system and win the hearts and souls of the perpetrator of the evil system (2000, 341).

Soul force pervades *Freedom Highway*, not just in its depictions of runaway slaves and marching protestors breaking unjust laws in service of justice, but in its very project to reinscribe American history in the voice of the normally voiceless. It emerges next on "Julie," a dialogue between the title character, an enslaved woman, and her unnamed "Mistress." Set somewhere in the Confederate South during the latter stages of the Civil War—Giddens' characters offer few specific details—the song finds the pair waiting for the impending arrival of Union troops. While the Mistress proclaims love and friendship, Julie recognizes those claims as both hollow and self-serving, pointedly refusing to lie about the "trunk of gold" the Mistress hopes to keep secret from the soldiers. This gold, we learn, is the profit the Mistress made by selling Julie's children; and yet, somehow, Julie is both magnanimous in departing and honest about her experience: "Mistress, oh Mistress, I wish you well, but in leaving here, I'm leaving hell." Giddens draws out the last word, leaving no doubt as to the profundity of Julie's



suffering, so that the well-wishes offered seem even more extraordinary within the context of what the Mistress did to her; and yet, Julie leaves without hatred, but refusing to obey the evil laws which held her captive.

Soul force emerges yet again on “We Could Fly,” a song inspired by the folktales of flying Africans. These stories, as filmmaker Sophia Nahli Allison wrote in *The New Yorker*, offer “a story, existing on the edge of dream and memory, about enslaved Africans who could lift up and fly home” (2019). As Allison continues:

The story of flying Africans has been passed down from generation to generation since slavery — a secret, suppressed gift of our ancestors. While this myth has evolved over the years, it continues to be the source of imagination that depicts freedom, new futures, and returning to Africa (2019).

Giddens seizes upon both the literal and allegorical implications of this legend, presenting a young enslaved girl who, while talking to her mother, discovers that she has the power of flight. This power, a trait from “the old-time ways,” runs in the family: “remember Gran Eliza,” the mother asks her daughter, “well, every night she flew. /They tried to keep her down, but there was nothing they could do.” Gifted with that same power, the girl takes “her mama by the hand...and they flew away from there.” This flight away from the horrors of slavery, then, functions as a symbol of Black resistance and resilience, a refusal to acquiesce to evil systems, and a reclamation of culture and tradition in defiance of those who would extinguish them.

*Freedom Highway* ends with its title track, a cover of that song the Staple Singers debuted in 1965, some five decades before Giddens took up the song anew. Within the context of the album, and its recurrent themes of both suffering and soul force, “Freedom Highway” resounds as an anthem as relevant to our times as to the times that birthed it. Giddens realizes, as Pops Staples did before her, that one must “march each and every day,” that the present and the past are not so easily disconnected, that soul force offers a response to the nightmare of history. In this, Giddens and her various protagonists go further than Stephen Dedalus does, resisting the nightmare of history in ways that Joyce’s young budding artist does not. As such, Giddens arrives at the conclusion that Joyce only hints at, the possibility that to change the subject may well be to change the country. This is precisely the ambition of *Freedom Highway*, an interrogation of our national past as ballast for dreams of a better national future.





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