Not Simply The Best: The Grammy Awards, Race, And America

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Abstract
This dissertation critically analyzes the global music industry’s premiere event, the GRAMMY Awards. It takes the mainstream music industry as its object of study, illustrating the ways in which a cultural-industrial apparatus contains within its foundations the myths, symbols, assumptions, and biases of the world in which it operates. The music industry has remained an amorphous object in media industry studies work, and when it has been critically theorized, it has been done so inchoately. Through archival research in the trade press; interviews with journalists, industry workers, and stakeholders; and conceptual theorizing, this project historicizes the discursive and material conditions surrounding the GRAMMYs’ vision of itself and of music. It suggests that industrialized music and its most public-facing event have at their roots a set of under-examined race-based attitudes. Its intention is to further understand further the place of racist and race-based decision-making on the part of the Recording Academy voters and organizational structure throughout the history of the awards show, connecting these decisions to their broader cultural and industrial contexts. This dissertation asks the field of communication studies to consider the extent to which race mediates our industrial and capital relations as well as our mass-mediated soundscape, again considering the discursive and material conditions of the racial state. At the same time, it encourages a renewed emphasis within the field on music as mediated text and race as media, with an emphasis on the popular music industry as a media industry and the GRAMMY Awards as a media event. Ultimately, this dissertation identifies and explicates the institutionalization of racial attitudes, specifically with regard to merit and artistic excellence in music. The history of the GRAMMYs’ determinations of greatness is also a history in which atmospheric racist and race-based attitudes cohere in voters’ opinions of what quality is and is not. This dissertation lays bare an unacknowledged racial politics at the root of what greatness in music might mean. It suggests that mainstream conclusions about artistic excellence ultimately carry and reinforce long-held ideas about coded racial superiority in high/low culture hierarchies and musical genres and styles.

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NOT SIMPLY THE BEST:  
THE GRAMMY AWARDS, RACE, AND AMERICA  
John Vilanova  
A DISSERTATION  
in  
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in  
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Early in my scholarly career, I could not fathom the “Acknowledgments” section of the scholarly monograph. Listed before even the Introduction, it read like name-dropping and posturing. While of course the academy as I conceived of it was about making connections with coworkers and colleagues, the writing process was a fairly monastic one. How could it possibly take the help of that many people to produce a book?

I know now that that sentiment—one of many I held when I first began a master’s degree in 2010—was deeply flawed. I would not be typing these words without the village of scholars, colleagues, influences, and friends who have supported me throughout this process. And while I still believe it fits better at the end of this dissertation, I understand why it winds up placed at the front of many. This does in some small way feel the most important page of all.

I am deeply indebted to my advisor, John L. Jackson, Jr., whose balance of ambition and attentiveness inspires me to pursue doggedly a chance at scholarly impact of my own making. It was reading his *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (2010) that drove me to seek to work with him. “This is the type of book I want to write someday,” I said to myself. I work still in pursuit of that goal, and this feels like an important step.

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Lastly, I write for my twin North Stars, Shane and Sara. Shane, I write in your honor always and forever. Sara, I write with you in my heart and soul for all eternity.
ABSTRACT

NOT SIMPLY THE BEST: THE GRAMMY AWARDS, RACE, AND AMERICA

John Vilanova

John L. Jackson, Jr.

This dissertation critically analyzes the global music industry’s premiere event, the GRAMMY Awards. It takes the mainstream music industry as its object of study, illustrating the ways in which a cultural-industrial apparatus contains within its foundations the myths, symbols, assumptions, and biases of the world in which it operates. The music industry has remained an amorphous object in media industry studies work, and when it has been critically theorized, it has been done so inchoately. Through archival research in the trade press; interviews with journalists, industry workers, and stakeholders; and conceptual theorizing, this project historicizes the discursive and material conditions surrounding the GRAMMYs’ vision of itself and of music. It suggests that industrialized music and its most public-facing event have at their roots a set of under-examined race-based attitudes. Its intention is to further understand further the place of racist and race-based decision-making on the part of the Recording Academy voters and organizational structure throughout the history of the awards show, connecting these decisions to their broader cultural and industrial contexts. This dissertation asks the field of communication studies to consider the extent to which race mediates our industrial and capital relations as well as our mass-mediated soundscape, again considering the discursive and material conditions of the racial state. At the same time, it encourages a renewed emphasis within the field on music as mediated text and race as media, with an emphasis on the popular music industry as a media industry and the GRAMMY Awards as a media event. Ultimately, this dissertation identifies and
explicates the institutionalization of racial attitudes, specifically with regard to merit and artistic excellence in music. The history of the GRAMMYs’ determinations of greatness is also a history in which atmospheric racist and race-based attitudes cohere in voters’ opinions of what quality is and is not. This dissertation lays bare an unacknowledged racial politics at the root of what greatness in music might mean. It suggests that mainstream conclusions about artistic excellence ultimately carry and reinforce long-held ideas about coded racial superiority in high/low culture hierarchies and musical genres and styles.
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INTRODUCTION

The 2017 GRAMMY Awards aired on Sunday, February 12, 2017, and featured the usual combination of performances, fashion moments, and controversies that are part and parcel of the Twenty-First-Century awards show spectacle. The evening’s most noteworthy moment happened at the end of the ceremony, with the awarding of Album of the Year, the show’s most prestigious category. The two betting favorites were *Lemonade*, a mixed-genre work by the black American singer Beyoncé Knowles, and 25, a more-classic record of ballads and melodrama by white British soul-pop singer Adele Adkins. Adkins had previously beaten Knowles for Record of the Year and Song of the Year, the other two-thirds of the ceremony’s “Big Three” awards, three-fourths of the “General Field” (along with Best New Artist).¹ She completed the sweep with the announcement of 25 as the Album of the Year.

As she took the stage in apparent shock, Adkins addressed Knowles and the crowd in Los Angeles’s Staples Center. “I can’t possibly accept this award, and I’m very humbled, and I’m very grateful and gracious, but the artist of my life is Beyoncé,” she said, proffering a piece of the award, which had broken accidentally as she received it, to Knowles, who was sitting in the arena’s front row. “And this album to me, the *Lemonade* album, was just so monumental.”

Backstage, Adkins continued to discuss the strangeness of the moment. “My album of the year is *Lemonade,*” she said. “I felt it was her time to win. What the fuck does she have to do to win Album of the Year?”

Incredulous, I (Vilanova, 2017) asked what amounted to the same question in an Op-Ed that ran in the *Los Angeles Times* the following day and connected the perceived slight to a set of larger issues—of race, racism and their influence on the GRAMMY Awards and the music business itself. Why did Knowles—the most-nominated woman ever—only win 35% of the time?

¹ There were 84 awards categories in 2019; the number has fluctuated over the years to accommodate new genres and other changes. The first awards, in 1959, had 28 categories. Album, Record, and Song of the Year (along with Best New Artist) are called the General Field; they represent the most significant awards because they are an open competition between all nominated acts rather than genre-based.
she was nominated when Adkins won 83% of the time she was? Why had only three black women ever won Album of the Year in the GRAMMYs 59-year history? The answer, I argued, was due to a combination of factors, including in-built industry bias against black musicians and black music more broadly. Other writers in the mass media suggested similar concerns (Powers, 2017).

Two days later, on February 14, 2017, Neil Portnow, president of the Recording Academy (née NARAS, or the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences), the technical organization of musicians, producers, recording engineers, and other industry professionals which has put on the awards since its founding in 1957, gave an interview to music news and pop culture website Pitchfork. When asked about concerns surfaced in the popular media with regard to the racial ramifications of the Adele-over-Beyoncé decision, he responded,

“I don’t think there’s a race problem at all. Remember, this is a peer-voted award.[…] We don’t, as musicians, in my humble opinion, listen to music based on gender or race or ethnicity. When you go to vote on a piece of music—at least the way that I approach it—is you almost put a blindfold on and you listen. It’s a matter of what you react to and what in your mind as a professional really rises to the highest level of excellence in any given year. And that is going to be very subjective. That’s what we ask our members to do, even in the ballots. We ask that they not pay attention to sales and marketing and popularity and charts. You have to listen to the music. So of the 14,000 voters, they listen, they make up their minds, and then they vote” (Hogan, 2017).

This response contains within it a number of claims that this dissertation seeks to investigate, among them most chiefly (1) the GRAMMY organization and voters' perceived race-blind standard for excellence and (2) a belief in an industry-wide expertise among the voting body that allows them to transcend any racial baggage or character within the music they appraise. Taken in concert, what we see here is a denial of the impact of race at all in the way the music industry apparatus hears and appraises music written and performed by its members.

Portnow elaborated a similar argument in response to the 2018 GRAMMY Awards nominees list, which featured a larger percentage of black and brown artists than usual in the Big Three categories. When asked if the nominees might have anything to do with cultural shifts

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2 White Americana musician Alison Krauss, the second-most nominated woman ever, wins 64% of the time she is nominated.
regarding the criticism the GRAMMYs and the Academy Awards had faced, Portnow doubled down on his assertion, suggesting that it was nothing more than a fortuitous coincidence that, a year after my criticism (the latest in what seemed to be a semi-annual occurrence), #OscarsSoWhite, and various other social and mass media campaigns had drawn attention to problematic patterns in the tastes of ostensibly progressive cultural industries workers around art given voice, image, and space by people of color:

“I honestly think that our community—musicians—really listens with their ears more than their eyes or anything else. So if you put our voters in a room with a blindfold, I think our community is very open-minded and thinks about music in a universal more holistic fashion, but our voters in particular are thinking about the craft. So I don’t know that there’s a movement here as a result of criticism and difficulties in the film or TV industry—I just think this is how our highest level of professionals feel about music today” (Aswad, 2017).

This dissertation principally argues that Portnow is sadly mistaken. There is no way to conceive of American music (or America at all, for that matter) in all its fullest complexities without an ongoing and serious connection to race, racism, and racial attitudes, and this dissertation identifies the racial valences that inform voters’ ears and minds over the awards’ sixty-year history. It suggests that the colorblind rhetoric Portnow employs has never been the guiding logic of the awards, arguing instead that their results have always been a product of racial logics and broader cultural and institutional phenomena.

Recent influential work by Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016) suggests that America’s “cultural politics of listening” are racialized, whereby “listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance” (4). This work follows Stoever’s argument, that sound is “unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression,” situating a conversation about the mainstream music industry’s race-based attitudes, which have argued for the second-class status of black music in different (but consistent) ways throughout the entire history of recorded music. A most appropriate way to tell the long history of recorded music in America—and of the GRAMMYs specifically—is one that takes into account the often-central-but-veiled place of race and these racial attitudes in the
industry’s view of itself and to make that centrality visible. It should consider the impact of racialized listening on the music industry itself.

This can be accomplished through historical inquiry by explicating black artists’ treatment in the contemporary trade press coverage of the awards themselves, paired with macro-level analysis of themes, trends, sentiments, and cultures within American popular culture within their specific contexts. It can be accomplished with expert interviews, where GRAMMY voters and critics are asked what they make of Portnow’s claims and the Recording Academy’s racial record. It can be accomplished through elaborating conceptual frames drawn from analyzing the discourse—specifically around key ideas and terms of the periods of study such as race, excellence, and musicality. This multi-methodological approach allows for discussion of broad themes in American culture and the texts, actors, and institutions that both reproduce old themes and dictate new ones.

Portnow’s convenient overlooking, eliding the place of race in the tastes and sensibilities of his Academy’s voters, is part and parcel of a broader misunderstanding of race’s centrality in American culture. Further, it represents an unwillingness to acknowledge race and its nefarious coproduct racism’s larger constitutive role—both in the macro-cultural fabric of the nation and the modern global system, the meso-institutional organization of media industrial systems, and the micro-level tastes of his voters. The “blindfold test” flattens the complex social construct of racial identity into a phenotypic simplicity, suggesting that there is no sonic blackness—that music itself is not marked by racial attitudes or hierarchies. It suggests, we might argue, that black music does not exist in voters’ hearts and minds. Instead, objectivity—couched in the purportedly race-blind concept of “excellence” that has framed the GRAMMY Credo since the early Sixties—emerges as a trump card capable of overlooking any bias or preference among the voters and installing a white-supremacist race blindness as the “normal.” “[I]dentity Categories of sexuality and race are condensations of historical processes saturated with relations of power,” Julian Carter (2007) argues. “Normality serve[s] as a sort of discursive umbrella under which white, heterosexual Americans claim both physical and cultural ownership of modern civilization” (p. 31).
This allegedly objective, bias-free, and normalized ownership of American culture by white Americans has worked to make dissonances and incongruities naturalized or normalized, particularly with regards to racial inequality given the status of the “peculiar institution” at the bedrock of the modern world. From the Three-Fifths Compromise of the 1787 United States Constitutional Convention to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)’s denial of equal protection under the guise of “separate but equal,” the specificity of Black Americans—their original status as chattel and the unequal distribution of their rights—had been up for debate. To wit, somehow, despite judicial rulings otherwise, “Black Lives Matter” remains a political declaration rather than statement of fact in contemporary parlance and its rejoinder, “All Lives Matter,” is a colorblind rejection of racial specificity. What this dissertation does is both contextualize and historicize the times the GRAMMYs are racially specific in justifying excluding black artists from the winners’ circle and reveal the veiled ways they work in service of broader racial projects of the times.

Fredrickson (2002) argues that racism in its more modern form required a kind of hierarchical reset because, in medieval feudal society, titled nobility meant that hierarchy was vividly and undeniably present in social structure. “To become the ideological basis of a social order, [race] had to be clearly disassociated from traditionalist conceptions of social hierarchy,” he writes (47). “In a society in which inequality based on birth was the norm for everyone from king down to peasant, ethnic slavery and ghettoization were special cases of a general pattern—very special in some ways—but still not radical exceptions to the hierarchical premise.” This dissertation very much explores the stickiness of social hierarchy where race attaches itself in a network of ways.

The contemporary moment, though, guarantees unimpeachable human rights. If one seeks instead to imagine a society based on equality, one has to come up with a framework to explain then how inequality is possible. “When the unequal treatment of people based on their race is bureaucratized and “rationalized” in the Weberian sense,” Fredrickson writes, “one can say that racism has been modernized” (100). Perceived immutable biological difference thus emerged as the rational, “scientific” explanation for white domination and the enslavement of
black people. “Paradoxical as it may seem, the rejection of hierarchy as the governing principle of social and political organization, and its replacement by the aspiration for equality in this world as well as in the eyes of God, had to occur before racism could come to full flower,” Fredrickson writes (47). This is wedded to the processes by which objectivity and the objective epistemological position was claimed by whiteness. This epistemic condition is the one upon which numerous false ideas about blackness emerged (see Fairchild, 2011; Roediger, 2007; Kendi, 2017, among others).

These perceived and discursively codified hierarchies were of course resisted by African Americans, and as progress was made towards denaturalizing these taken-for-granted assumptions, again a shift in the way hierarchy functioned became the hegemons’ feint. “For three hundred years black Americans insisted that ‘race’ was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted ‘race’ was the determining factor in human development,” Toni Morrison writes in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1988, p. 126). This disconnect sits at the heart of this dissertation’s theoretical inquiry, which combines the embodied hyper- and strategically discursive in-visibilities of black people and their texts, respectively. Or, more specifically, it tries to understand how ideas about musical excellence are racialized and what effects that has more broadly in the business of recorded music. Morrison continues:

“...When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. In trying to come to some terms about “race” and writing, I am tempted to throw my hands up. It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of ‘race’ when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist (126).”

Morrison’s stakes—advocating for the influence of black writers on the American literary canon—were akin to those of this dissertation. The argument that “literature” was chiefly and principally the product of “whitemen” writers had had its day, she argued, and what emerged in its defense
in the wakes of criticism from feminists and writers-of-color was an idea of “quality” that sought to invisibilize race—the very shorthand that had been used as a dividing line for hundreds of years prior. Once the hypocrisy of racial superiority was laid bare, a new means of adjudication had to emerge.

That means is “excellence,” a term conveniently rendered as raceless in the ears, minds, and ballots of GRAMMY voters. Portnow’s suggestion advances the idea that the industry over which he presides and the term that the first chapter of this dissertation will reveal to be paramount—is effectively post-racial. Hopeful discourses around the post-racial have always bled into discourses from authors of various ethnoracial identities, often particularly and concerningly wrapped up in individualistic neoliberal ideological frames (see Gilroy, 2000; Womack, 2010; Touré, 2012). Exceptional individuals, the argument went, would ultimately effectively transcend their racial tethers through their exceptional status, either in their own eyes or in those of white elites (see Roediger, 2002). And exceptional individuals—particularly in an international cultural milieu where the star-making apparatus of celebrity culture—would become metonyms and example setters, models for black people to aspire to follow (see Cloud, 2002).

The literature (see Squires, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; among others) has rightly pushed back against over-easy narratives where racial caste can be neatly or easily resolved, particularly because, the argument seems so flawed. Omi and Winant (1994)’s Racial Formation Theory, for instance, asks readers to “understand race as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (55). It uses paradigms of race—ethnicity, class, and nation—to unpack real-world battles and moments that are more historically specific than in Fredrickson. “A more effective starting point,” they argue, “to avoid both the utopian framework, which sees race as an illusion we can somehow ‘get beyond’ and also the essentialist formulation which sees race as something objective and fixed” (55). They argue that we should “think of race as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it” (55).

Bonilla-Silva in particular has been a steadfast and thorough scholar of racial structure
and racial order in post-Civil Rights America. Racialized social systems have created structures where the material interests of white and black Americans are different, and that racial structure today is most reflected in color-blind racism vis-à-vis institutional and “apparently nonracial means” (2001, p. 12). He references Mark Chesler’s definition of racism—“an ideology of explicit or implicit superiority or advantage of one racial group over another, plus the institutional power to implement that ideology in social operations” (Chesler, 1976, p. 22, cited in Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 26). Noteworthy for our purposes is the idea of implicit superiority: This dissertation holds that the Recording Academy believes (intentionally or not) in an implicit superiority of white musical forms, cultures, genres, and performers. That, along with the use of “excellence” as the driving force of their implementation, is fundamental point this dissertation seeks to explicate.

This dissertation explores the GRAMMY Awards as an institutional outgrowth of a social organization with regimented and institutionalized conceptions of hierarchized difference that began with the organization’s repudiation of rock ‘n’ roll, the black-created genre dominating the pop charts during the GRAMMYs’ founding and continuing through their contemporary sidelining of hip-hop, which does so now. The awards exist for the purpose of naming and establishing distinction. But considered in context with racial attitudes, this work suggests matter-of-factly that the Recording Academy is a racist institution, in part due to its operation within a racist society and additionally due to its historical relationship to black music. It is both cause and effect. This dissertation principally seeks to identify and describe the history, politics, and contours of the institutional racism(s) of the music industry assemblage, which are (un)knowingly built upon the structural racisms of the American cultural, media industrial, and pop cultural systems. This does not necessarily manifest itself in exclusion from the industry. But it does suggest that a kind of second-class status persists and that by historicizing the GRAMMY Awards with this interrogation at its center, we can describe how that status has shifted, with the awards and the discourse around them a structuring frame by which to name and taxonomize the racial-cultural politics of the GRAMMY Awards themselves.
Given all this, what this scholarship is not is a simple advocacy for black artists to have won awards, even when the author feels their contributions were more deserving of acclaim. This is not intended to be a corrective or an adjudication of past wrongs, perceived or real. In fact, those debates, while enjoyable and validating—see the discourse around rapper Kendrick Lamar’s 2018 Pulitzer Prize victory—miss the greater stakes and scale of the project of antiracism. I argue they are what Derrick Bell (1993) calls “peaks of progress,” fleeting moments followed by slides backward. This dissertation’s final chapter will illustrate how moments of progress create new conditions by which white supremacist ideology reaffirms its hegemonic dominance, manufacturing new frames by which white cultural domination re-emerges and reasserts itself again and again.

The reason there should be more black winners is not motivated by restorative justice models. Instead, it suggests that these people were great all along, and the only thing resisting or tamping down their greatness was the self-interestedness of white supremacy and a social structure of racialized understandings of acclaim and excellence. So what this dissertation is is an attempt to understand and explicate the impact of racial attitudes and biases on the mainstream American music industry, the music trade press, and the Recording Academy. Operating within a social system with deeply inbuilt anti-black racial differentiation, how do those systemic hegemonic forces inform the music business itself, and more specifically the institutionalized arbiters of musical excellence?

***

The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences was formed in 1957, riding the wave of postwar American economic growth, a confluence of favorable industrial conditions, and a desire (and seeming mandate) to define the hierarchical boundaries of music itself. Columbia’s 12-inch LP, which at 22 minutes per side could capture nearly fifteen times the 10-inch 78 rpm record, made its debut on June 18, 1948. Within a year, its principal competitor—RCA’s single-song disc, the 45—would be released on March 31, 1949, emerging quickly as a technological
vehicle to pair with the radio’s move away from block and talk formatting and the embrace of a ranked tier—the Top 40 system first developed by Nebraskan DJ Todd Storz at KOWH—from which to determine the songs that would be played.

These “speed wars” were not just a technological discussion—a concurrent conversation emerged where established industry insiders lamented what they saw as a kind of Faustian bargain: The 45” pop single was a moneymaking tool as teenagers gobbled up hit singles, but it was also a base, unsatisfying sound—rock and roll—that compared unfavorably to the more-adult LP. One *Billboard* writer called the 45 records “admittedly juvenile,” describing their “sometimes unpleasant character” in a 1957 issue (“Doubt Upswing,” 1957). “The complaint of these record men is that increasingly they are becoming slaves to the enthusiasms of the teen-age girl who dominates the purchase of pop singles, and in this pursuit of the ‘hot 89 cents,’ records may be losing their long-range appeal to a broader music market,” *Billboard* wrote at the time.

In addition to the age-based debates, there was a concurrent discomfort with the adjacency of teenage musics—including the main culprit, rock ‘n’ roll, but also gospel and rhythm and blues—to black musics and musicians like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and the like. Black radio stations saw their audience potential surging in cities such as Memphis (DJs Rufus Thomas and B.B. King at WDIA and Dewey Phillips at WHBQ), Nashville (Gene Nobles, John R. Richbourg, Herman Grizzard, and Hoss Allen, the “50,000 Watt Quartet), Atlanta (Daddy Sears at WGST); and Los Angeles (Hunter Hancock at KFVC). and of course Alan Freed on Cleveland’s WJW and later WINS New York. These DJs attracted the ears of American teens, who ventured into black-friendly spaces as musical miscegenation horrified many.

Hollywood was undergoing a similar battle with the emergent rebelliousness of the postwar period and the newly emergent identity category of the teenager coupling with racial unease around anti-Jim Crow activism and the long shadow of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case in 1954. Old caste categories were in flux, with the quiet hegemonic superiority of white audiences and their tastes being concurrently questioned as black Americans demanded addressing of their still-second-class status. Hollywood—the story goes—was in decline, with

The first model for a reassertion of cultural supremacy and taste superiority came in the form of the Hollywood Walk of Fame, conceived by Hollywood Chamber of Commerce president E.M. Stuart in 1953. The walk, Stuart suggested, would “maintain the glory of a community whose name means glamour and excitement in the four corners of the world.” He enlisted a group of major-label record executives including Jesse Kaye (MGM Records); Lloyd Dunn and Richard Jones (Capitol Records); Sonny Burke and Milt Gabler (Decca Records); Dennis Farnon (RCA Records); and Axel Stordahl, Paul Weston, and Doris Day (Columbia Records) to determine what musicians were appropriately glamorous and exciting. “[I]t was Sonny who came up with the idea,” Kaye told Grammy Pulse, the Academy’s yearly publication that accompanied the awards. “He said there were Academy Awards for the movies, and the TV industry had already organized its own academy. He felt that the record business was getting of age and we ought to be thinking about the same thing. We all agreed that it was a great idea” (cited in O’Neil, 1999, 11).

That group met over a series of months beginning in 1955 at the Brown Derby Restaurant to weigh possible music industry candidates, eschewing album sales as criteria for inclusion after realizing that many of the group’s favorites would not meet potential thresholds. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences was officially created on May 28, 1957, with a mandate to collect “vocalists, leaders, conductors, art directors, engineers, arrangers, orchestrators, composers, producers, directors, and instrumentalists” (O’Neill, 1999, 11)—the creative side of the business. Their first regular meeting was held June 26, 1957 at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, where the first board of governors included Nat King Cole and songwriter Sammy Cahn. Their purpose was to defend high-quality music from outside, debasing influences.

The GRAMMY Award itself came a bit later—as a way to legitimize the new Academy and give it purpose. After establishing a New York chapter in early 1958 (with the chapter’s legal counsel’s office serving as its mailing address as it lacked formal office space), the two chapters began to work together to create a symbolic award around which to build the Academy brand. Val
Valentin of the Awards and Nominations committee designed the award—to be modeled after the gramophone—and the Academy used the Associated Press to solicit suggestions for the award’s name.

GRAMMY voting is a four-stage process: (1) submission, (2) first-round ballots, (3) committee review and (4) final voting. Any commercially released recording may be submitted for consideration as long as it was released nationally and within a given window; recent years have produced upwards of 20,000 submissions. These submissions are screened in reviewing sessions (which may contain 350 listeners) to ensure their proper genre placement. Voting members (those who have technical credits on at least 6 commercially released tracks) then receive lengthy lists and are allowed to select their choices in the General Field and a predetermined number of other categories of their choosing (typically fifteen). Since the mid-Nineties, what follows this mass selection (from which shortlists of roughly 20 acts are noted, based on majority rule) is a small committee of high-powered influencers that reviews the majority’s choices and derives the final nominees list from the choices. This list goes out to voting members, who take the final lists in direct competition with each other and make up the final vote. Much of my framing focuses on the final vote, since the scale—choosing between five or eight artists—is by its nature more directly comparative than the initial “vote,” which is similar in structure to the nominations process.

The first award show was held May 4, 1959, at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles. By that time, the organization had roughly 700 members who voted for winners in 28 categories.

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3 The window for the 2018 awards, for instance, was all albums released between October 1, 2016 and September 30, 2017.
4 In the past they have had roughly one week to do this, a really strikingly limited period of time (Sheehan, 2017).
5 Victor Willis, lead singer of The Village People, took serious exception with the presence of these committees (which were established after Lionel Richie beat out Bruce Springsteen’s Born in the U.S.A. in 1985). “Certain people (mostly white) were very upset about this and thought Springsteen should have won,” Willis argued in an open letter to Portnow in 2017. Frustrated with Atkins’s victory over Knowles, he asked “If there really is an issue of race, as some people have suggested with respect to Album of the Year, could this select committee be the problem?” Given the timing of the committee within the process, Willis’s contention is not possible. But it does not take away from the continued discomfort with the voting process.
with Henry Mancini becoming the night's biggest winner, with five awards. Frank Sinatra, the face of the music industry, took home only one award from his twelve nominations. From a media standpoint, it was an inauspicious start: A planned TV broadcast fell through and the organization ran out of awards after not appropriately making enough trophies to accommodate the number of winning bands. Over the subsequent years, the Academy professionalized further, with the second ceremony (also held in 1959, on November 29) producing a televised special for the first time.

Over the following sixty years, the Awards have become a mass media event, ranking among the most-watched TV broadcasts each year. Today, there are 84 categories; the first show had 29. Virtually every major artist who has achieved mainstream success has had their turn on the GRAMMY stage, from The Beatles (1965) to Bruno Mars (2018). The GRAMMYs helped a reeling industry cope with the murder of John Lennon in 1982 and celebrate the rights of gay couples to wed with Madonna and Macklemore in 2014. Performances—Whitney Houston’s “Saving All My Love For You” in 1986; Eminem and Elton John’s duets in 2001 after the former’s use of gay slurs; Kendrick Lamar’s enchained prison and “Compton-is-Africa” scene in 2016—emerge as major moments of political activism in mass media circles.6

The first awards in 1959 saw two black winners: Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie each picked up two awards. Over the years, black artists would make advances in terms of categorical inclusion—R&B has been included since the first year; other raced genres such as reggae (1985), rap (1991), and “Latin” (1976) have cropped up over time. In recent years, this dissertation’s last chapter will argue, the categories have emerged as a ghettoizing space where 6 This seldom bleeds into the awards, though. I explore this distinction in a recent article for the MusiQology.com blog titled “Bruno Mars’s Big Night Suggests The Grammy Awards Want To “Stick To Music,” in which I write, “‘Stick to music’ hasn’t quite gained the same momentum that “stick to sports” has in the athletics world, but clearly some GRAMMY viewers would agree with Haley’s comments. They wanted their television spectacle without the side of protest politics, woke hashtags, and coded-message fashion choices—an escapist party where music took center stage. But what’s troubling is that outside of that bit and a set of incredible performances that dove head-on into social issues, the GRAMMY Awards themselves drew a stark and clear line between social context and musical excellence” (Vilanova, 2018).
black artists consistently win, only to find disappointment in mainstream categories where nomination functions as a kind of racial glass ceiling. To wit, Beyoncé Knowles is tied for the seventh-most wins of all time (22), but only four wins have occurred outside of raced categories. The “Big Three” categories upon which much of this dissertation’s focus lies—Album, Song, and Record of the year—have been dominated by nonblack artists. I argue that these high-profile, high-stakes categories represent the most clear concentration of the Academy’s focus on notions of race-blind “excellence” because they are the places where black and white artists’ art come into direct competition.

Often, the GRAMMYs have courted controversy with their selections, as many have suggested over the years that the Academy remains out-of-touch with music listeners and fans. This dissertation, though, illustrates that such a critique would be largely and essentially irrelevant to the Academy itself, which has maintained a belief that it is the arbiter of taste and that the role of its voting body is not even necessarily to be “in-touch” with the greater music listening public. Instead, it remains an institutional bulwark whereby deeply held and historically and discursively constructed beliefs about what great music is produce results that are indicative of wider cultural phenomena. This dissertation analyzes the GRAMMY Awards within a cultural-discursive frame, emphasizing the place of race and racial attitudes on voters and results.

**Literature Review**

As far as the GRAMMY Awards are concerned, there has been little scholarship that engages with the awards themselves. Anand and Watson (2017) recently argued that the GRAMMYs should be considered as a ritualized performance that shape the music-industrial organizational field. Martínez (2006) discusses the Latin GRAMMYs as a non-politicized ceremony where certain national identities (Cubanidad) are treated with caution while others are subsumed under a metonymic Latinidad umbrella (see also Martínez, 2003; Gonzalez and Heuman, 2003). Shamsai (1996) took a specific look at the 1996 awards’ attempt to adjust its perceived behind-the-times image. Perhaps most relevantly, Watson and Anand (2006) suggest that the ceremony is a vehicle through which the Academy links with commercial interest and an
arbiter of canon formation in the popular music industry. The linkage of these two phenomena is hugely important to my own analysis. But blackness, specifically, is seldom mentioned in the academic literature despite its major importance in American popular music.

Similarly, English (2008)'s important work, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* historicizes the practice of awarding, suggesting that it is an important twentieth-century phenomenon, “perhaps the most ubiquitous feature of cultural life, touching every corner of the cultural universe, from classical music to tattoo art, hair styling, and food photography” (2). He, too, willingly connects prize-awarding with capital interest:

“The rise of prizes over the past century, and especially their feverish proliferation in recent decades, is widely seen as one of the more glaring symptoms of a consumer society run rampant, a society that can conceive of artistic achievement only in terms of stardom and success, and that is fast replacing a rich and varied cultural world with a shallow and homogeneous McCulture based on the model of network TV. Prizes, from this vantage point, are not a celebration but a contamination of the most precious aspects of art” (2-3).

I agree with this analysis, largely, but what this literature review (and larger project) suggest is that we need to zoom out even further. These “precious aspects of art” have a specific and understudied racial tenor. This project explores that.

My interest in articulating the broader stakes of race and the GRAMMY Awards discourse directly corresponds to other conversations within the literature around structural and institutional racism as explanations for (and refutations of) “objective,” invisibilizing race-blindness. To investigate the ways that race informs the awards—and thus, the industry—this study requires a robust understanding of how objectivity and expertise as functions of white supremacy have perpetuated throughout the history of the awards. It also seeks to historicize the shifting conditions and cultural discourses throughout the history of the awards, always in support of a race-based system of differential acclaim.

“[D]ifference, such as it is, is increasingly obliged to respond to—and be managed by—the categories brought into play by European modernity,” David Scott argues in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (9). This dissertation suggests that this very
idea—that reason and rationality are claimed by continental philosophy—turns the results of an otherwise simple awards show into a broader philosophical re-instantiation of a centuries-old claim. Specifically, the evidence suggesting an industrywide belief in the superlative quality of white music is symptomatic of a larger problematic condition of modernity.

Pierre Bourdieu is famous for his 1979 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, which argued—among other things—that societal standards of aesthetics were classed and that the social world was effectively a symbolic system of power relations masked as taste. Usefully for our purposes, Bourdieu (1983; trans. Halle, 2016) also attempted to address race’s role in this frame, through something he called “racism of the intellect,” which connected *Distinction* to race, something he was often accused of overlooking.

“[Racism of the intellect] is characteristic of a dominant class whose maintenance depends to some extent on the transmission of inherited cultural capital understood as inherent and therefore natural and innate. Racism of intelligence is that through which elites aim to produce a ‘theodicy (rationalization) of their own privilege,’ as Weber characterizes it, which is to say a justification of the social order which they dominate. It is this which makes elites convinced of their own inherent superiority.”

Again, we see a connection of racism to rationality through a frame of superiority. Race is a key component of cultural capital. “All forms of racism are based on essentialism and racism of the intellect is the rationalization of the social order characteristic of the elite class whose power resides in the possession of credentials which, as do scholarly credentials, are supposed to confer the possession of specialized knowledge,” he continues. The habitus—Bourdieu’s term for social systems of disposition to practice—is thus using credentialing (the expertise the Recording Academy’s claims to objective rationality rest upon) as a means of rationally consolidating power. Credentialing “formally guarantee[s] a specific competence (like an engineering diploma) [but] really guarantees possession of a ‘general culture’ whose breadth is proportionate to the prestige of the qualification,” he writes in *Distinction* (25; cited in Devine-Eller, 2005).

This is a phenomenon the decolonialist thinker Frantz Fanon identified and criticized in his important text *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). “In its narcissistic monologue the colonialist bourgeoisie, by way of its academics, had implanted in the minds of the colonized that the
essential values—meaning Western values—remain eternal despite all errors attributable to man,” he writes (11). The suggestion here is that credentialing systems (such as the academy and the Recording Academy) ultimately work to naturalize systems of values that have a particular tenor within the colonized/colonizer frame. The GRAMMY Awards are not as serious a subject as Fanon’s context. But we might use his work—and the work of all of these philosophers—to set the theoretical stakes of this project.

Cultural production emerges as a key battleground for these types of arguments. Hume’s “These people write no histories” claim (cited in Beattie, 1805)—a longstanding delegitimization of black contributions to modernity and letters—rested upon cultural production as its delimiting line. This is most crystallized in the arguments around black literature that Morris brought up earlier, though there is a long history that bears further study (Wilson, 1996; Baker, 2000; but especially Warren, 2011 and Warren, 2012). To wit, Thomas Jefferson once “declared that [Phillis Wheatley’s] verse was beneath the dignity of criticism” (Hart, 1995, p. 712, cited in Dieng, 2016). “As I try to show in my book, *Black Letters and the Enlightenment*, racism and—dare I say it?—logocentrism marched arm in arm to delimit black people in perhaps the most pernicious way of all: to claim that they were subhuman, that they were ‘a different species of men,’ as Hume put it so plainly, because they could not ‘write’ literature,” Henry Louis Gates reminds us (1986, p. 209).

The GRAMMYs are a history-making project, canonizing genres and soundscapes. The locution “Album of the Year” quite literally implies that the awarded recording most accurately and/or quintessentially captures 365 days in American popular recorded music. “The relationship between institution and canon is reflexive: while a canon is legitimised by judgements made by institutions, the accuracy of canonical judgements often decides the continuing legitimacy of institutions,” Watson and Anand write (2006, p. 54). But in this case, the hegemonic influence of the major record labels and industry stakeholders—who have always been deeply involved with the GRAMMY project—means that the legitimacy of the GRAMMYs, despite the many claims to their “irrelevance” vis-à-vis their award-winner choices, is assured. The GRAMMYs are relevant because the industry says they are.
This dissertation will further investigate the interrelatedness of canon and race in the music industry, taking the GRAMMY Awards as a mass media event where excellence is the ground upon which judgments about aesthetics further connect to the capitalist project of the industry itself. In 2014, the Academy launched an advertising campaign titled “The Grammy Effect.” “[The] campaign is built around the insight that what happens on the GRAMMY stage transcends the show itself, creating iconic music moments that ripple through all parts of popular culture,” a press release reads. “More than just an awards show, the GRAMMYs has a unique power to influence fans, artists, fashion, social media, and music sales.” This is, in many ways, an argument for the relevance of this project—citing influence, sales, and the idea that the GRAMMY stage influences popular culture. It is important that we understand what this means in a long-historical context.

This dissertation intentionally sits at the intersection of critical race theory, musicology, and media industries studies. Seldom are the three taken together despite their inherent interconnectedness and their usefulness in addressing each other’s conceptual and methodological gaps. It suggests that it is at their overlap where the most productive engagements with the fields can occur. Racism is usefully considered as an ideology reflected in our cultural and financial institutions. Recorded music is necessarily understood as an industrial product. Media industries are not always equipped to consider the unique media texts produced by their machines idiosyncratically and specifically. So what this work does is bring together a group of disciplines that productively address each other’s shortcomings.

Historically, the academic study of music within the discipline of Musicology has suffered from a rigid adherence to formal analysis and the Western canon; at the 2017 meeting of the American Musicological Society, estimable feminist musicologist Susan McClary felt it still germane to remind the conference attendees that “as long as we focus analysis on chords and forms we will never get close to anything that approaches social representation.”

This is not a new debate, as evidenced by the well-known wrangling fifty-plus years ago at the 1964 American Musicological Society by Joseph Kerman, who argued for criticism’s place
in the discipline. The critical—in a different way—is still missing from the field’s vision of itself (see Kerman, 1965A; Lowinsky, 1965; and Kerman, 1965B, in order). In my estimation, a few of the field’s key issues particularly relevant to this dissertation are: (1) a stubborn hierarchy of taste, where Western classical music is still privileged at the discipline’s core and discursive organizations such as canon formation remain under-criticized, (2) an ongoing positivism related to the subfield of theoretical analysis that downplayed interpretive lenses, and (3) resulting from these a not-robust-enough interest in issues of hegemonic power, identity, inequity, the political, and the social. Many have addressed this, including Kerman (1986), Kramer (1992), McClary (2001), and Ramsey (2001) under the heading of “new musicology,” a movement that emphasized the need for more of a cultural studies influence within the field, but it has been still slow to adapt and its disciplinary ecosystem remains disjointed. A kind of cloistering marks the discipline’s history such that the critical and social are still not universally accepted. To wit, “musicology” is still largely presumed to refer to the study of Western classical and art music whereas “ethnomusicology” is still problematically associated with the study of non-white people.

Meanwhile, a new form of music study at the university level has emerged: The contemporary American academy has seen a growing number of “music industry” programs such as the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at New York University and the Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business at Nashville’s Belmont University. Their press and recruiting materials emphasize a particular orientation toward pedagogical and scholarly expectations: Most of these exist largely for the purpose of training new media-makers and industry workers in the various options for a career in that realm after graduation. These programs generate buzz in the neoliberal, professionalizing academy, where pseudo-vocational training leaves graduates prepared to take part in the music industry in a variety of positions, including management, production, entertainment law, marketing, publishing, promotion, event production, and even journalism. But in many cases, these programs lack a historical and critical orientation to the music industry apparatus. What is its history? Who are its real stakeholders? What is its political economy? How does it work?
There are myriad ways scholars study music, including formal analyses, ethnographic studies of the musical-cultural heartbeat of a particular culture, histories of its great figures, and close-reading of its texts. Industrial-level analysis, though, is not often taken up, particularly when compared to its closest analogue, Hollywood. Sterne (2014) offers a possible explanation in a recent journal article titled “There is No Music Industry.” “The locution ‘music industry’ still too often refers to a single subset of profit-making practices in music: record labels and the activities around them. Media scholars are partly to blame, as they continue to define record labels, and especially labels that are part of conglomerates, in this way,” he writes (50). As the major labels’ market share is disrupted (changed, if not necessarily weakened as much as too-ambitious neoliberal suppositions might want to believe) by independent distribution systems and digital technologies, the hegemonic, monolithic “music industry” frame is ripe to be criticized. Sterne’s essay is a provocation more than a genuine claim; there is of course a music industry, just one that needs a more complex rendering than he sees in the contemporary literature. In this case, the Recording Academy is a similarly slippery subject, but we can use the awards and the discourse around them to make at least reasonable (not totalizing) generalizations about industry sentiment throughout its history. I suggest that we should not singularly understand the music industry as a production-and-profit industry, but instead as a cultural institution that carries with it certain professional and ideological standards and assumptions. We thus might then take a media industries frame toward approaching music industry study. Many of the usual frames for media studies can be applied to the study of music, music industries, and music institutions as well.

It makes sense to begin any discussion the study of music within Communication/Media Studies scholarship within discourse around Media Industries. There are musics that can be studied independent of the “music industry” writ large, but the music most relevant to the broader conceptualization and history of Communication Studies scholarship—as well as many of its productive, distributive, cultural, commercial, technological, and massified characteristics—is connected to a networked industrial apparatus. We would not have guitars without Fender,
Gibson, and their contemporaries. We would not be able to play CDs without Sony, RCA, or the various other producers of sonic-reproductive technologies. We would have a hard time envisioning a television or radio advertisement (much less a film) without a soundtrack of some kind, from a jingle to composed orchestration. Music in the contemporary world is often a mass-industrial product.

But music-as-product is different from other industrialized products because of the diversity of offerings and the means of pre-production—the writing that comes before mass distribution. While every recording of Beyoncé Knowles’s “Single Ladies” is, in essence, the same, there are millions of other recordings all moving about the world in similar, if less profitable, ways. We can and should study the mass industrialization of music through supply chains (see Alexander, 1994A; Alexander, 1994B; Black and Greer, 1987; Graham, Burnes, Lewis, and Langer, 2004; and more) and product histories (see Du Gay, 1997; Sterne, 2012; Pinch & Trocco, 20004 and more). The massified nature of music consumption and distribution apparatuses make clear that this is a mass culture industry.

This sub-field is known as Creative Industries or Cultural Industries and is headlined by the work of Caves (2000), Howkins (2002), and Hesmondhalgh (2013). This trio is ordered intentionally—they represent a progression from the mass-industrial to the specific study of the nature of creative industries products (and also a progression in their usefulness to the discipline and to this developing scholar). Caves’s is an organizational analysis that emphasizes the economic interactions between creatives and the industry through an emphasis on the role of the contract. Howkins provides a detailed taxonomy, a fifteen-part breakdown of the creative economy including advertising, architecture, art, crafts, design, fashion, film, music, performing arts, publishing, research and development, software, toys and games, TV and radio, and video games that emphasizes the imbricated relations between physical and intellectual property.

Hesmondhalgh robustly explores the cultural place of the cultural industries, emphasizing their importance in a world and workplace where creative labor’s percentage of the workforce is growing with each passing year. His definition of cultural industries—“those institutions (mainly
profit-making companies, but also state organisations and non-profit organisations) that are most
directly involved in the production of social meaning”(16)—emphasizes the meaning-making
capacity of creative labor and creative products. This framing allows for a deeper exploration of
the sociocultural tenor of music at the intersection of commercial imperative and personal import.
Further, it suggests again that the GRAMMY Awards might be appropriately considered as a
mediated event where social meaning is constructed. This dissertation attempts to explicate and
situate those meanings.

Hesmondhalgh continues, “The importance of the cultural industries in modern societies
rests on three related elements; their ability to make and circulate products that influence our
knowledge, understanding and experience (texts); their role as systems for the management of
creativity and knowledge; and their effects as agents of economic, social and cultural change”(4).
The cultural industries represents a useful and important middle ground between industry
analysis and the musicological, which often lacks the necessary prerogative to scale up to the
level of analysis Communication Studies trains its scholars to work in.

That all being said, it is also important to study mass music in a way that emphasizes its
industrial tenor, specifically as part of a global, multinational media system and as a global
commodity in its own right. As Herman and McChesney (1997) suggested, the global media
system continues to consolidate around a small number of large transnational corporations, a
concern they do not take lightly. “Such a concentration of media power in organizations
dependent on advertiser support and responsible primarily to shareholders is a clear and present
danger to citizens’ participation in public affairs, understanding of public issues, and thus to the
effective working of democracy,” they write (1). With major label domination of the GRAMMY
Awards, we can consider them siloed against potential intervention. And further, the media power
they demonstrate implies their ability to set the contours of discourse around race, excellence,
and music in a more broad cultural staging.

But we might argue that recorded music has been part of media consolidation since the
beginnings of its history. “Music developed as a commodity in two distinct registers,” David
Suisman (2009) writes in a history of the beginnings of recorded (and thus commercial) music. “In its primary markets music was produced, marketed, and sold directly to consumers. In ancillary markets, it circulated as capital that could be used by other industries, either as a supplement or as indispensable raw material for other ‘producers,’ including vaudeville, dance halls, department stores, cafés, radio, and movies” (10). Today, the music industry is both a part of this media consolidation and symptomatic of the wider pattern: Three major record labels—SONY, Warner Music Group, and Universal Music Group—controlled nearly 70% of the global revenue share (Music Business Worldwide). Adele’s “Hello” topped iTunes singles charts in 85 of the world’s countries on its release (Papadatos, 2015). Music and its makers are engaging with global marketplaces on a scale that we need the tools of industrial analysis to better understand and study. The popular music industry’s hegemony is unquestioned, and if we accept the GRAMMYs as both a piece of that and an institution in their own right, the racial politics of their classification are significant within broader global popular culture.7

Another of the ways Communication Studies can bring an alternative analytical frame to the study of music within a is through the study of labor, as Banks (2007) does in The Politics of Cultural Work. Banks identifies three scholarly traditions that are the precursors to any discussion of “cultural work”—determinist Marxist critical theory, neo-Foucauldian discursive/governmental control, and liberal-democratic optimism. At the heart of this study is the relationship between art and commerce as the distinction blurs more and more, thus necessitating new frames to ensure that we are truly understanding what Miège (1989) called “the capitalization of cultural production.” It is in the cultural industries where the apparent coming together of artistic and commercial imperatives is most pronounced and most demanding of our investigation,” Banks argues, suggesting that “the separation of art and commerce is a necessary feature of [successful] cultural industries production” (6-7). This is why now, more than ever, a critical musical industries perspective is needed—a tenuous balance has been upset by the economization of cultural work (see also du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Lash and Urry, 1994; Negus

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7 Mary Douglas (1986) suggests that institutions by their very nature are classifiers.
and Pickering, 2004; Ray and Sayer, 1999). While this dissertation does not spend much time dealing with the creative labor workforce Banks identifies, it does instead examine the labor of intellectuals, policymakers, label executives, and journalists, all of whom play a role in creative industries labor.

In Unfree Masters: Popular Music and the Politics of Work, Stahl (2012) continues this discussion of the creative labor force. Following Banks’s suggestion that the creative cultural worker sits at the intersection of art and commerce, he takes up the figure of the popular recording artist and explicates their role as laborer. An artist produces a text such as a song, which, once outside of the hands of the laborer, begins to function as a commodity—either reproduced materially as vinyl record or CD or digitally as an mp3 file or audio stream via any of the distribution services of the day. The artist’s labor—creative labor—though, is different, and thus becomes part of a rich subfield of the discipline. Artists often have a high degree of autonomy in terms of when and what they produce; they are not typically expected to conform to the nine-to-five workplace; few, if any, recording studios have dress codes. (Not coincidentally, all of these might be considered almost-harbingers of the direction contemporary labor is going.)

So the idea of recording-artist-as-laborer is worth nuancing to show its relevance in connecting the disciplines. Stahl elaborates this:

The recording artist—the successful recording artist, in particular—is a double figure. On the one hand, she is a symbolic figure othered for our consumption, contemplation, and identification; she enacts forms of expression, autonomy, and desirability, seeming to encapsulate some of our society’s most cherished virtues and values. On the other hand, she is a political and economic actor, a working person whose contractually governed relationship to her company is sometimes one of real subordination. In this doubleness, the recording artist embodies a paradox: as an agent of self-expression under contract to a major entertainment conglomerate or a subsidiary company, the recording artist is both autonomous and the target of control. He must be free to generate new material and unfree when it comes to the labor and intellectual property covered by the contract”(2-3).

This type of study is necessary to understand the conditions under which musicians and other cultural workers are producing the texts that are too often studied too uncritically by journalists and formalists alike. Further, the agential individual nature of the recording artist lends itself to the naturalizing of many of the paradigms explored in this dissertation such as genius and
individualized meritocracy. The music industry by its design is set up to assess individuals; the GRAMMYs are thus an organic product.

Stahl also speaks of a growing influence of music and cultural industries economization in the contemporary economy. "What [Richard Sennett] calls the 'new capitalism' is an economy in the process of reconfiguration around the model provided by these industries, invoking and eliciting a normative new self 'oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience,'" he writes (12). Again, we see that, increasingly, an industrial lens through which to analyze music is becoming unavoidable; the worlds are meeting in ways that humanities disciplines alone may not be able to analyze in full. And further, the GRAMMYs represent this: a way to use the media event to supplement the sale and marketing of its products.

Science and Technology Studies—another subfield with connections to Communication Studies—emphasizes sound, specifically the material, technological, political, and historical reverberations of soundings themselves, moving away from aesthetics and instead examining the cultural impact of sound production and reception. Key among this field is the work of Jonathan Sterne (2003, 2012), R. Murray Schafer (1977, 1994), Trevor Pinch (Pinch & Trocco, 2004), Emily Thompson (2002) and others. The aural, the field suggests, is an under-examined but hugely important area of analysis overlooked when the musical text itself is over-emphasized. Sound Studies starts with the soundscape, Murray's term for a sonic environment. "Like a landscape," Thompson writes, "a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world" (1). Her work importantly argues that the American soundscape evolved at the turn of the Twentieth Century, becoming, like the political, discursive, epistemological, and ontological worlds around it, decidedly more modern. America listened differently thanks to new technologies for amplification, a re-inscription of the relationship between sound and space, the material commodification of sound emission, a new emphasis on efficiency (recording and reproduction by their nature sorted sound between wanted and unwanted or desirable and undesirable), and a
reconceptualization of sound-as-signal, or transmission of information. Music—the sound we care most about here—changed from something idiosyncratic and singular to something repeatable and broadly transmittable.

Sterne argues similarly in *The Audible Past* (2003), which is a technological history of the ramifications of this new sonic modernity. “Sound-reproduction technology indexes an acoustic modernity,” he writes, describing a paratextual relationship between the technologies and the world of their creation. “Sound-reproduction technologies are shot through with the tensions, tendencies, and currents of the culture from which they emerged, right on down to their most basic mechanical functions.” Katz (2004) elaborates this—songs and albums, for instance, became a certain length based on how much recorded sound a vinyl record could hold. The fidelity at which we preserve digital files is dependent on our hard drive space or cloud storage.

Sound Studies seldom includes the formal analysis of music—the five-line-staff standard Western classical notation (a master’s-tools-master’s-house debate if there ever was one)—thus troubling the centrality of hegemonic ways of notating the sonic. Further, it emphasizes the intersections of technology and the social in the production of sound. And what this means for the dissertation is a framework that connects sonic politics to the broader idea of a cultural soundscape. Music’s technologies from the radio to the streamable song create contextual soundscapes; this dissertation explores their influence.

Importantly, a body of scholarship associated with Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, gives us a toolkit to critically study music from a theoretical perspective. While Communication Studies has no more of a claim to the legacy of places like the Frankfurt School and Birmingham’s CCCS than Music does, the analytical and critical disposition is best served in a multidisciplinary frame where the various disciplinary approaches can address each other’s lacunae. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972)’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” for instance, is rightly criticized for its pessimistic and hyper-deterministic outlook, but the frame it suggests for mass culture is an importantly cautious one. “Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show
through," they write. "The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries; and when their directors’ incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed." Benjamin (2001[1969]) provided a useful counterpoint in suggesting that mechanical reproduction might push against hierarchies of culture and “parasitical dependence on ritual.” Miège, in his analysis of the debate, lands in the middle ground and lays out an appropriate pursuit for Communication Studies theorizing: “the intention is not so much to propose the development of economic and sociological approaches alongside other approaches such as aesthetic, semiotic, ethno-methodological etc., as to introduce into interdisciplinary research the methodologies and problematics originating in the social sciences”(12).

Most integral to this, perhaps, is the work of Jacques Attali, whose Noise: The Political Economy of Music (1985) distills music’s place in critical social analysis. “Music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning,” he writes (5). Attali also emphasizes the ways music is symbolic of the world in which it is created. “Music, an immaterial pleasure turned commodity, now heralds a society of the sign, of the immaterial up for sale, of the social relation unified in money,” he writes (3-4). Attali is even willing to suggest that music might be a hermeneutic: “Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding,” he writes. "An instrument of understanding, it prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge” (4). “A sound form of knowledge” suggests a full reorientation, where music in its multiplicity is the source from where our understandings of the world come from, a concept that will demand further study in my ongoing scholarship. What potential does this formulation hold, specifically when we use it to generate knowledge about the worlds studied within this discipline?

This is where Communication Studies can (and should) enter into the discussion, splitting the difference between romantic positivism and naked professionalism. The study of music from
the perspective of a Communication Studies scholar combines macro, micro, and meso-level analysis, coming at the musical object from a variety of perspectives. This dissertation shows what this can be explicates some of those, explaining how music fits within broader media and technological ecologies; mass industrial, economic and political economic organizations; and the critical problem-posing apparatus of the academic project. By bringing the study of Music into Communication Studies, we can begin from new epistemological orientations and apply different methods, bodies of literature, and political stakes, allowing us to study the musical text with new lenses.

Surprisingly, the discipline has largely eschewed the study of music as a media-industrial product and of the industry as a coherent whole. “What is lost here is any sense of the dialectical relationship between acts of musical communication on the one hand and political, economic, and cultural power-relations on the other,” Born and Hesmondhalgh write in the introduction to a 2000 volume titled *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*.

“Postcolonial analysis, then, sets a fruitful example for music studies in that it pays meticulous attention to textual detail, but always sees such analysis as subsidiary to the larger project of thinking through the implications of cultural expression for understanding asymmetrical power relations and concomitant processes of marginalization and denigration” (5).

This informs my ultimate approach, which seeks to develop a relationship between race, history, and power that takes into consideration the contemporary music industrial institutional assemblage as an important player in mediated representations of raced people and cultural productions.

A multitude of scholars have both argued and shown how race structures civil society, pushing against color-blind ideological formations that deny its continued relevance. Omi and Winant’s racial formation (1994) “emphasizes the social nature of race, the absence of any essential racial characteristics, the historical flexibility of racial meanings and categories, the conflictual character of race at both the ‘micro-’ and ‘macro-social’ levels, and the irreducible
political aspect of racial dynamics” (4). Critical Race Theory is perhaps even more grounded: “The movement[…]questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law,” Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write (2012, p. 3). The theoretical review from earlier suggests quite clearly that this is a project informed by and seeking to “do” critical race theorizing, with the important work on institutional and structural racism as the grounding for analysis of industry ideology.

Institutional racism, first named by Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton (1967), suggests that overt interpersonal racism (individual actions) serves as cover for a more nefarious pattern of privileging whites and denigrating blacks at the societal level. They reference Charles Silberman (1966)’s seemingly straightforward claim that the United States is a racist society and suggest that institutions create what amounts to a colonial subjectivity for black Americans. “Institutional racism relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices,” Ture and Hamilton write. “A sense of superior group position prevails: whites are ‘better’ than blacks; therefore blacks should be subordinated to whites. This is a racist attitude and it permeates the society, on both the individual and institutional level, covertly and overtly.”

Weheliye (2014) continues this with work that names the theoretical term “racialized assemblage.” “If racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot,” he writes. “Conversely, ‘white supremacy may be understood as a logic of social organization that produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized ‘human’ difference” (3; see also Rodriguez, 2006, p. 11).

Race may be understood and operationalized as a social fact, a structure of knowledge-meaning that plays out in voters’ tastes, understandings of “mainstream,” and opinions of excellence that are themselves products of a racist institution as well as results that lead to the
perpetuation of racial-aesthetic hierarchy. “Throughout popular music, [racialism] also takes the form of pervasive ideas,” NPR’s Ann Powers wrote in response to my work on the GRAMMYs in February 2017.

“These include the notion that music made with ‘real’ instruments and sung straightforwardly, like Adele’s softly tinged soul or Sturgill Simpson’s raucous country, require more skill and vision than those created within the synth- and sample-driven vernacular of hip-hop; the assumption that artists who stand still and sing, like Adele, are more ‘authentic’ than those who dance, like Beyoncé, although dance and music have been inseparable at least since the Jazz Age; and the elevation of the self-contained singer-songwriter, a figure who’s almost always white, over those who work more collaboratively.”

These mythic figures, aesthetic judgments, and racial ideologies present in the music industry necessitate unpacking, taking up the GRAMMY Awards as emblematic of an industry that has an organizing racial logic built on long histories heretofore largely unconnected.

The long history of the American recorded music industry is one of institutionally racist policies and practices. Miller (2010) argues compellingly for the emergence of compartmentalization in southern musics that served as a de facto color line where “a sonic demarcation[…]corresponded to the corporeal distinctions emerging under Jim Crow” (3). Chief among these compartments was the minstrel show—perhaps the first unique form of American popular entertainment. As “half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy” (quoted in Lott, 2013, p. 3), the minstrel show represented a syncretism that again carried with it the othering and dehumanizing performances that crystallized and continued to affirm white supremacist domination. Lott calls the minstrel show “the first formal acknowledgment by whites of black culture[…]based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation” (4). These crimes—performed ironically as they were—crystallized the difference between the two groups. The cultural practice and spectacle of the minstrel show concretized the inferiority of blacks and black culture by virtue of the fact that the only way the culture might be
recognized in the first place was as racial-superiority re-affirming spectacle for the delight of white audiences.  

“Examining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying this self-understanding articulated by the musicians who have made it the symbolic use to which their music is put by other black artists and writers, and the social relations which have produced and reproduced the unique expressive culture in which music comprises a central and even foundational element,” Paul Gilroy writes (1993, p. 74-75). These big-picture frames are necessary before exploring the racial, aesthetic, cultural, political, and economic components that characterize musical performance and creation in the modern world because to understand the musical habitus, we must fully explicate the unequal structures that guide aesthetic judgment, economic imperatives, and the like.

Virtually every genre of music raced black has been scrutinized (and subsequently plundered) by the popular music industry. The GRAMMYs, I argue, are key to the functioning of that history and process. Their acceptance of genres is often a product of broader social acceptance. At the same time, their rejection of them—while sometimes ludicrous, as in the case of rock ‘n’ roll in their early years—is evidence of the specific priorities of the awards show. Namely, in most cases, that is boundary policing, keeping black musics conceptually on the industry periphery even when their capital contributions mark them as squarely in its center (an issue I explore in Chapter 3). “NARAS, through its awards scheme, purported to influence the social cognition of legitimate popular music genres. As we shall show, NARAS’s view of categorical ‘correctness’ of genres at any given time was very much predicated by the dynamics of its membership,” Watson and Anand write (p. 45). This dissertation explores those dynamics.

This, too, is not entirely new. In Blues People: Negro Music in White America (1963), LeRoi Jones writes about the complicated interactions between African music with listeners and performers in its new world. Musicologists of the time, he suggests, had so essentialized the

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8 We might connect this to Goldberg (2002), who writes “Cultural colonialism mediates racial inferiority, culture replacing biology as the touchstone of racial definition” (69). The idea of a full-on replacement may be a little strong, though.
intervals and tonal properties of Western art music that the idea of what he provocatively (and seemingly ironically) calls an “African scale” was lost on them. Thus, “blueing” notes—a practice taken up by black musicians responsible for the hybrid form that came to be known as “the blues.” The blues—a mixing of white hillbilly music and black race music—emerged from a space of synthesis in the antebellum south. But what comes with that synthesis is, at least at the outset, a presumption about right-ness and wrong-ness of formal choice that manifests in spatial and ideological rhetoric connected to the broader ideological understanding of racial normativity and superiority. “Look, a wrong note,” carries with it the same kind of presumptions and delegitimizing work, where syntheses are still bringing with them fraught and unequal social conditions.

These kinds of debates over formalism also marked the cultural conversation around jazz, another music birthed in Creolized urban spaces marked by these same racial politics. Free jazz—the genre conceived in the 1950s and 1960s—epitomizes the way cultural mores, expectations, and standards of taste affect the politics of ongoing hybridization. Refuting regular rhythm and tonality, the genre was a response to formal systems that had their standards determined by white ears. “[O]ne of the most persistent traits of the Western white man has always been his fanatical and almost instinctive assumption that his systems and ideas about the world are the most desirable, and further, that people who do not aspire to them, or at least think them admirable, are savages or enemies,” Jones writes. This is insidious politicking of these systems—cultural difference comes to work hierarchically. The self-right-ness of accepted systemic standards legitimized and prioritized culture that was read as—or accepted by—a whitened world while at the same time delegitimizing other forms of expression. “As rules of the world or as owners of these black people, they, Americans, were certainly in a position to declare that all thought outside their known systems was at least ‘backward’” (8).

“African-American music—however much it owes to its African heritage—cannot be explained simply in terms of oral traditions and the sedimented memories of particular communities. It has also been shaped profoundly by its contact with mass mediation: the musicians who are promoted to stardom, the images that are given license to circulate, all have
passed through the hands of industry pundits who decide what to sell," Walser and McClary write in an essay that broadly theorizes the body in modern black music-making (79). This is particularly the case with hip-hop, the Afrodiaporic music birthed in the South Bronx, a black-and-brown space set aside by racist housing policies and other cultural factors, which is another place worth considering the interplay of power and influence. Hip-hop has become among the most important musical formations of the contemporary moment, but its history too is inflected by this complex set of dynamics. "In conjunction with specific technological innovations, this routed and re-rooted Caribbean culture set in train a process that was to transform black America's sense of itself and a large portion of the popular music industry as well," Gilroy writes of the genre (33). Journalist and scholar Greg Tate provided an important caution in a 2004 Village Voice article titled "Hiphop Turns 30. Whatcha Celebratin For?," an important piece that illustrated hip-hop's fraught and ongoing relationship with the world that birthed it. "Hiphop\(^9\) may have begun as a folk culture, defined by its isolation from mainstream society, but being that it was formed within the America that gave us the coon show, its folksiness was born to be bled once it began entertaining the same mainstream that had once excluded its originators," he writes. This contention is at the heart of why analyses of synthesis must consider the historico-racial foundations of musical intermingling. Tate continues:

> Hiphop’s effervescent and novel place in the global economy is further proof of that good old Marxian axiom that under the abstracting powers of capitalism, ‘All that is solid melts into air’ (or the Ethernet, as the case might be). So that hiphop floats through the virtual marketplace of branded icons as another consumable ghost, parasitically feeding off the host of the real world’s people—urbanized and institutionalized—whom it will claim till its dying day to ‘represent.’"

Hybrid musical genre and formation does not exist without the long history that structures these interactions. Tate’s intervention is an important one because it emphasizes the place of capitalism and the economic dimension to this relationship, something that is worth exploring at length in the future in connection to the work of authors like bell hooks, who in “Eating the Other" describes the process by which hybridization becomes subsumption: “When race and ethnicity

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\(^9\) His chosen spelling.
become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (1992). Hybrid music culture might be described most pessimistically as an aspect of ongoing colonial and neo-colonial organization.

These are just some of the hybrid musics whose politics suggest an interplay of ideological hegemonic and dominated forces that can trace their spatial pathways to the Middle Passage and their performative and practical ones to moments of racial recognition. There are many more cases worth studying, such as Radio Raheem, the teen-aged black flâneur of Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing (1989), who roams Bed-Stuy with his Public Enemy-blasting boombox as the Italian-American pizza shop owners denounce the music’s lyricism. The recent work of Jack Hamilton (2016) historicizes the decades-long whitening of rock and roll, where “a musical culture rooted in interracialism came to imagine whiteness as its most basic stakes of authenticity” through a “forced marriage of musical and racial ideology” (4-5). And the recent GRAMMY Awards situation involving the continued lack of recognition for black artists in mainstream (read: white) categories such as Album of the Year, Song of the Year, and Record of the Year suggests a kind of cultural revanchist push-back against black artists whose contributions to our multifaceted musical soundscape are being judged to be over-reaching.10

Interactions across cultures in music are complicated and incredibly fraught.

All this is not to say that music—particularly hybridized music—does not hold the potential to be revolutionary and vibrant, creating solidarities, interesting new genres, and perspectives. But what this review has attempted to illustrate is that the social practice of music and musicking—particularly in the American and Afro-Diasporic contexts—carry with them long histories that are fundamental to understanding their aesthetics, cultural standing, political economy, and more, and that they should not be considered without also incorporating these

10 By this I mean to reference the controversy over Beyoncé Knowles’s attempt to have two of the songs from her 2016 album, Lemonade, considered for Rock and Country categories. In both cases, the songs were rejected by the sub-committees for their respective sets of categories.
frames. Further, it suggests that a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary to connect the important dots between race, music, and media in the American social.

**Methods**

“Media industries research requires a politics of cultural production informed by social theory and by empirical work,” estimable scholar of the cultural industries David Hesmondhalgh (2009) writes in a contribution to a volume titled *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (246). Taking that requirement as a starting point, this methods section explores the methodological concerns inherent in Media Industries research or, more specifically, music and music industries research, concluding that a multimethodological approach was most appropriate for this project. Studying industrial, political, and corporate assemblages, which in our current cultural and economic moment have expanded to multi- and international conglomerations, requires a reevaluation of method. There are more than 14,000 voting Recording Academy members. How do we study a business or industry that has thousands of employees and stakeholders with conflicting and contradictory jobs and desires? How do we account for the individual imperatives of networked actors (ANTs, in a Latourian(2005) sense) but still say something about the social that is more than a disassembling project? Cultural Studies as an intellectual trajectory and as a set of methodologies has been rightly questioned. How do we respond?

Recalling Sterne’s rejection of the “music industry,” this type of work thus necessitates a flexible and capable marshalling of methods that aid the researcher in developing a complex study of music in performance, production, distribution, and culture at large. While Sterne’s premise may be (intentionally or not) overstated, it does address a concern in Media Industries study that people like Latour felt needed addressing—how do we generalize to the social in all its multifarious polysemy? “For scholars interested in music as a media industries issue, our first analytical step must be a simple subtraction,” Sterne concludes. “When we go looking for unity inside a music industry, we should instead assume a polymorphous set of relations among radically different industries and concerns, especially when we analyze economic activity around
or through music. There is no “music industry.” There are many industries with many relationships to music” (53).

I take exception to this statement and would argue that whatever status or nomenclature we have for the music industry(ies), their coherence is multi-layered but present. It is up to the researcher to determine how to grasp and analyze it. The method this section suggests, comes from a necessarily interdisciplinary approach. If the study of culture—or culture, the thing, itself—is so multiple, so too must our methods of approach. In trying to explicate what this would look like, Angela McRobbie (1997) suggests a return to the social within cultural studies, emphasizing the intersections of the three Es—empirical, ethnographic, and experiential. The ideal study of culture might use these three methods and imperatives in concert. And this dissertation proposes a multi-methodological approach that is at least informed by these tent poles.

A scholarly study such as this one, which examines music, musicians, and the music industry in concert with the cultures from which they spring and the experiences they create, needs a multi-modal approach. This will be indebted to Cultural Studies but cautiously so: The field’s approach to method and methodological development is often fraught with rejections, more quick and willing to critique other disciplinary methods than to simply press forward and reconcile the blind spots of any single method. Critique-as-problem-posing method is appealing but it lacks the robustness needed for continued and sustained scholarly inquiry. This was one of the great challenges with the project: How could I take an op-ed that concluded something—that the GRAMMYs were a “racist institution” by nature of their presence in a racist world—and instead craft a sustained exploration over the length of the dissertation? The answer, I found, was a robust, multi-methodological project that combined archival historical research with interviews and discourse analysis methods. This meant an expansion from critique to scholarship, creating new

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11 To forestall the empty gestures towards the ethnographic that so many cultural studies works make, this introduction eschews a lengthy discussion of ethnography, a wholly worthwhile and well-defined methodological orientation. It is not, however in this author’s view, something that can be done half-heartedly, and rather than advocate for ethnography-lite, I will refrain at this time. This project uses interviews and interview methods—not ethnography.
knowledge about the contexts, stakes, and politics worlds that produced the GRAMMYs and their results.

What Cultural Studies needs is to dispel infighting; there is not one “best” method for analyzing culture because culture is not one thing. So if we want to say things about the socio-cultural worlds created by music and within which music operates, a workable solution is a multi-methodological one where the combination of methods is organized such that each subsequent methodological strategy helps address the shortcomings of the others. This dissertation thus employs a mixture of Media Industries Methods, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), Memory Studies, and historical archival research as its methods.

First, Media Industries Methods. Again, using Sterne as a jumping-off point, the music industry (or whatever we might call it) is a network of interlocking parts, specifically those responsible for production of the musical text (artist, producer, engineer); the publicity of said text (radio disc jockey, publicist); the recruitment and sustaining of the artist (label executives, artists and repertoire (A&R)); the mass-materialization of said text (vinyl pressing plant workers; quality-control inspectors in factories producing CDs); the streaming of said text (the Spotify and Apple Music engineers); the live concert (tour manager, venue owner, fans-in-attendance); and the protection of the text and its creator (copyright offices; intellectual property attorneys). There are ways to study music that only emphasize some of these groups (particularly the first, obviously), but an industries approach to music might be called most germane given the massive global infrastructure interactions that happen between the plucking of keys on a piano or the strumming of a guitar and the fan’s first hearing of a mainstream release.

Industries work is particularly important because of the extent to which so many academic studies of cultural production miss the role of industrial and capital-organized cultural texts and products. Elitist and out-of-time as works like Horkheimer and Adorno (1972)’s Culture Industry frame may be, it is hard to deny that our industries have become more “cultural” and our “culture” has become more industrialized. Many wings of Cultural Studies choose to overlook or ignore this, instead emphasizing the liberatory and celebratory practices of cultural receivers
without contextualizing the media industrial environment in which they practice. This need not be a mutual exclusivity—there is a way to discuss fandom and meaning-making that still takes into account complicating contexts. Julie D’Acci (2004) discusses this at length in a contribution to a volume on television studies.

“There developed, in other words, a tendency in some analyses to overlook the conditions and specific shaping forces of production; the conditions and intricacies of reception; and, ironically, because much of this was considered to be text-based work, the specificities of the televisual form (from narrative structure to genre to the operations of televisual techniques). Some of this text-centered work began to branch out to incorporate loosely conceived ‘ethnographies’ (mostly to demonstrate the multiplicity of viewer interpretations) but with little attention to the histories and complexities of these methods or the status of the evidence and the conclusions involved” (422).

What is needed is a zooming-out within industry-oriented approaches that willingly accepts the industry-as-assemblage model after Sterne’s critique. There may not be a singular, coherent music industry, but there is nothing wrong with suggesting that there are still coherent industrial mindsets and logics throughout the history of recorded music. The Recording Academy—from its founding to its swelling to 14,000 members today—thus might be an object of study from which we can generalize, using a combination of trade journals as primary source materials (Billboard, Variety, Rolling Stone and major national newspapers covering the awards) as well as supplemental interviews with Academy members and music critics in the contemporary moment, many of whom can provide data that allows us to survey the long history of the industry.

“By taking an industries approach to the critical study of media we are indicating a perspective that is inherently contextual and interrelated,” Hilmnes (2009) writes in an essay that discusses media industry historiography and its challenges. “The concept of ‘industry’ implies the coming together of a host of interests and efforts around the production of goods or services; it also indicates commercial purposes, meaning the distribution of goods or services in a marketplace for accumulation of profit, though this is sometimes more figurative than literal” (22). In this case, the goods produced and distributed (the records themselves) are of course a linking factor for the networks of producers and label employees.
There are challenges, though. Media studies scholar J. Thornton Caldwell (2008) takes up the difficulty of culture industry study from a methodological perspective because the massified, capitalized industries have so skillfully and quickly consumed even modes of inquiry. Caldwell offers a three-part methodological concept—*critical industrial practice*—that might act as a guide for how to structure scholarly inquiry. “[T]rade methods and conventions involving interpretive schemes (the ‘critical’ dimension)[…]are deployed within specific institutional contexts and relationships (the ‘industrial’ environment) when such activities are manifest during technical production tasks or professional interactions (labor and ‘practice’),” he writes (5). Synthesizing these can be done through practical methodological work such as interviews, stakeholder analysis, and organizational research. They can also be structured by heuristic models: D’Acci points to Stuart Hall’s “encoding/decoding” (2001); Richard Johnson’s “circuit of production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products (1986/87); the Open University’s “circuit of culture” (du Gay et al., 1997); and her own “circuit of media study” as outlines for methodological organization. Each may prove useful for structuring an examination of music on the industrial level, though they are not specifically my vision here. Instead, I am seeking to create my own model for industrial analysis that links discursive and historical research.

This dissertation is very much about grasping ideological and epistemological conditions around anti-black racism and in-built structural and institutional white supremacist logics within the mainstream music industry. Some of its main thrust—that industry experts invented an almost performative belief in their own objective expertise on what “music” is—rests upon the researcher’s ability to substantiate and justify claims about the existence of ideology that expand beyond the bounds of what the empirical might be able to give us. How do we empiricize Hall’s discursive power and ground our theoretical analysis of the industrial and hierarchical consequences of “what is *made* to be true” (1998, p. 290).

How do we methodologically marshal theoretical evidence? I do this by taking up what the discourse-historical approach, or DHA. Popularized by Wodak (2015; see also Wodak, 1996; Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2008; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016), this methodology integrates research
methods with empirical data as a way to study discourses and media events, using them to make “middle-range” theoretical claims that generalize industry sentiments, discursive trends, and epistemological conditions, but are additionally grounded in and derived from empirical research methods. “The DHA attempts to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive ‘events’ are embedded,” Wodak (2011). “Further, it analyzes the historical dimension of discursive actions by exploring the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change. Lastly, and most importantly, this is not only viewed as information. At this point we integrate social theories to be able to explain the so-called context” (65). In this case, a DHA analysis names the practices of the Recording Academy as entwined ideologically with an episteme in which white ownership of so-called mass or mainstream culture and a racialized hierarchy of taste are hegemonic ideological constructs epitomized by the GRAMMY Awards voters and the wider music industry discourse.

The DHA also emphasizes intertextuality, an important and useful method for considering discourses and creative texts in conversation with each other. This is thus a useful way to consider how musical texts—the songs and albums in competition for GRAMMY awards—are subjects of discourse related to each other and to a longer tradition of listening by which ideas about “greatness” in music cohere.

“Ideologies are shared by members of specific social groups,” Wodak writes. “Ideologies serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse: for example, by establishing hegemonic identity narratives or by controlling the access to specific discourses or public spheres (“gate-keeping”). us the DHA focuses on the ways in which linguistic and other semiotic practices mediate and reproduce ideology in a range of social institutions. One of the explicit and most important aims of the DHA is to “demystify” the hegemony of specific discourses by deciphering the underlying ideologies.” (2015, p. 4). The ideology in this case that this problem-assessing method seeks to address is in-built structural and institutional racism manifested as a taste hierarchy that masquerades as expert objectivity.
This is not suggesting that the Academy is shady cabal intent on devaluing the contributions, culture, and artistic contributions of black musicians. But what it does, though, is use the historical readings of discourse to reveal and educate scholars and practitioners about racial subtext symptomatic of a broader societal racial state apparatus. This method suggests we can illustrate the workings of power.

This follows closely after Foucault (1977; 1978)’s genealogical method, whereby we denaturalize both the race-blind assumptions of GRAMMY voters by revealing the racial ramifications and acclimatizing cultural forces that the awards both create and respond to. This is a way to analyze the epistemic conditions of the music industry apparatus to understand the ways hegemonic power manifests itself through constructions of taken-for-granted “knowledge.” The new exercise of power in a “post-Jim Crow” America\(^{12}\) is illustrated by the Morrison quote from earlier—whereby race both matters and does not depending on the interests of the white hegemons. This dissertation suggests that in this case study, objective excellence emerges as an organized discourse to direct social relationality and classify raced artmaking practices and texts.

Moving on to history, this dissertation necessarily creates periodizations for its chapters, setting up discursive frameworks for industrywide trends. In all cases, surely there are textual outliers from prior and future periods that could be considered as well. Additionally, the chapter summaries at the end of this introduction illustrate further periodizations around specific industrial moments and trends such as the “hip-hop era” or “the Eighties.” But for the purposes of this dissertation, a specific period of study—roughly 1950 to the present day—is necessary given the topic, and the literature supports periodization If we take Jameson (1991)’s suggestion that—“all isolated or discrete cultural analysis always involves a buried or repressed theory of historical periodization” (p. 3)—then surfacing that in this planned dissertation is not inappropriate. Further, this passage from Jameson suggests that history, methodologically, is at the root of all cultural analysis. It is (very often) the way the narratives that are our sources are constructed. It is in the ordering of our source material. And while non-narrative histories do present an appealing

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\(^{12}\) Legally, not actually.
counter-balance, the narrative often emerges as our way of telling history. “Engaging with history within cultural studies has two major strands: doing culture in a way that is informed by general theoretical and hermeneutical history, including those framing cultural studies; and developing critical analysis of contemporary uses and manifestations of the past and versions of the past in contemporary culture, including media representations of the past in and versions of the past in the vernacular traditions and conventions of everyday life,” Michael Pickering writes in a contribution to a volume titled Research Methods for Cultural Studies (2008, p. 194). The years build on each other. Historical work’s contribution to the academy is undeniable; it is the consistent and longstanding province of much of humanities work, and the usefulness (and excitement) of discovering a new archive or a new text that changes the way we understand the past will always be an important contribution. I am not ready to give up “what happened” as a valid pursuit for academic scholarship, despite the (valid) ways ontology can complicate and trouble the very idea of being able to answer that question in the first place.

What becomes so useful about history is the various ways it can be done. Historians like Thompson (1963) and Zinn (1980) give us “history from below,” a kind of historical writing that can serve the same kinds of political, anti-hegemonic aims as argumentative critique can. Social history works at the middle-level, relating reality itself to social structures, processes, and experiences. The new historicism played a significant role in the massive change within the academy in the 1980s, making space for new voices, subjects, and imperatives; Trouillot (1995) cuttingly illustrates the issues in the long tail of academic historical writing in terms of reifying hegemonic power. Following the development and redevelopment of historical writing is a way to track the progress of the scholarly project, broadly conceived. Writing on new developments in the field, Iggers (2005) suggests a path toward Communication Studies, “While traditional historiography had focused on the agency of individuals and on elements of intentionality that

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13 “The production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production,” he writes (xxiii).
defied reduction to abstract generalization, the new forms of social science-oriented history emphasized social structures and processes of social change” (3).

This project is largely a historical one for the purpose of understanding the constructed historical narratives and for making new ones—using the same facts and texts and from them gleaning newer, deeper understandings. In trying to reveal and understand the industrial dynamics and ideological formations of the music industry assemblage, history is the method by which we can gather a corpus of data from which to make generalizations about the Recording Academy and, more broadly, the music industry itself. No such study though should occur within a presentist vacuum, which is why industrial analysis needs past-looking methods to enhance its contribution: We should be more interested in understanding how industry workers saw each other and musical texts in their moment.

Continuing this appraisal of meso- and micro-levels of analysis, memory studies offers a way to zoom back in after the big-picture work of industrial analysis. While memory data may seem particular and idiosyncratic, Keightley (2008) suggests the bigger-picture relevance of memory. “[R]emembering is a process that exceeds the psychology of the individual,” he writes.

"It speaks to more than personal experience, implicating the everyday operations of social and cultural relationships which are performed in the creation of memory narratives and embodied in the resulting cultural texts. It is necessary to consider the commonalities and collective trends in memory, the features of their communication and representation, and their ritualised performances, all of which suggest that memory is more than an expression of individual consciousness, and is both socially and culturally constructed”(176).

Memory offers a context-specific understanding of meanings and semantic networks of a given period. Keightley continues, “The relationship between memory and social environment is not a one-way flow: although what is remembered is dictated by the groups in which we participate, remembering also has a social function in the present. By remembering according to particular social conventions, those conventions are constantly being affirmed and re-constructed” (176). This suggests a kind of iterative relationship that makes it a consistently useful and vital approach both on the individual level (the interview) and on the more wide-scale level (discourse analysis).
As far as the individual level goes, memory and interview methods are inherently linked both from the most obvious—people’s recall produces the content of interview data—and the more broadly conceptual. Interviewing “provide[s] access to the meanings people attribute to their experience and the social world” (Miller & Glassner, 2004).

And on the larger scale, Collective Memory, explicated by Halbwachs ([1925] 1992), helps us explore the “intersection of collective influences” (44); Connerton (1989) calls recollection a “cultural rather than an individual activity” (4). Lipsitz (1990) suggests that social and cultural memory are, carried within mediated technologies and texts, specifically highlighting musical texts. Memory becomes an essential way of formulating an understanding of cultural life, “not because it is the past, but because it is the modality of our relation to it” (Terdiman 1993, p. 7, quoted in Keightley). Memory in its various approaches become a way to understand the social both in context and in our own context (and its relation to that context), a frame where the experiential is brought to bear.

Memory studies also provides a similarly productive messiness as discussed earlier in the media industries frame. “[A]s a resource for cultural studies, memory allows us to centralise everyday temporality as it speaks to the vernacular untidiness of lived practices of remembering that conventional historiography aims to smooth away,” Keightley writes (179). Lipsitz’s work, which emphasizes “popular culture” and the place of the idea within a memory-forward methodological approach, advocates for the study of musical and other mass-mediated texts as a window into larger analysis about the social. “Cultural forms create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future,” he says. “Perhaps the most important facts about people and about societies have always been encoded within the ordinary and the commonplace,” he suggests (16, 20).

Particularly with a topic like the GRAMMYs project, memory is unquestionably at the heart of the analysis—both as a historical one looking backwards through the awards’ history and given that the awards themselves are a performance of memory and memorialization (see English, 2008). An inquiry into, say, Stevie Wonder’s 1970s heyday must necessarily consider
why, contextually, this period is understood the way it is now and what factors, in the moment, were motivating voters. How did they want to be remembered?

Further, considering the GRAMMYs in toto is to consider an environment of memory-making: These awards are literally how the stakeholders of the popular music industry want to be remembered. Canonization as they employ it is a process of institutional memory. And thus we take up their history with full knowledge that they themselves are attempting to engage in collective memory-making.

The way to analyze that is through critical theory. Theory is how we push beyond history’s positivist frames, and a history informed by it (not reliant upon it) can be strengthened by the empirical as proof-of-concept. Cultural studies can take up texts and representations of history and analyze them. And yet the two sides continue to be at odds. Pickering continues,

“One of the sources of frustration in this impasse has been the failure of historians and cultural studies practitioners to learn from each other. The former stand potentially to gain a firmer understanding of the need to conceptualise key categories, to theorise major findings, and to develop an analytical framework for the presentation of their evidence rather than supposing that such evidence will speak for itself. The latter stand potentially to gain a firmer understanding of the need to relate concepts, argument and theory to empirical evidence as a means of validation and verification, to bring different sources and contrary evidence into confrontation, and perhaps most importantly of all, to develop a sense of long-term continuities as well as of short-term changes” (195-96).

So then, a successful methodological strategy is one that learns from this disconnect and rather than emphasize the weak points of the respective sides, one is best served by using the productive aspects of their intersection. As far as music goes, far too often musical histories are not adequately considerate of the greater stakes at hand; the genesis of a piece, group, or musical culture, often rendered through the genre of biography, is not enough. But theorizing about a musical context, situation, moment, text, or figure without context is poor scholarship.

Thus, this dissertation seeks to thoughtfully and thoroughly bridge the gap between theoretical and empirical by taking up the historical past in its relative “presents” through discourse analysis. Its methods are attuned to cultural studies and the long legacy of academic theorizing, but grounded in primary source analysis for the purpose of telling an alternative
history, enriched and informed by discourse analysis that helps researchers read between the lines in revealing the true machinations of the industry and the GRAMMY Awards.

**Chapter Outline**

As the literature review has suggested, taste hierarchies, particularly around the linking of exceptionalism and rationality, are historically connected to the philosophical reiteration of white/Western cultural superiority. These claims to cultural superiority are inextricable from ones around racial superiority. We must continue to think through the way that this cultural/racial logic influences and impacts institutions and discourses. The dissertation uses history of the GRAMMY Awards and the industry that puts them on as a hermeneutic to further explore and interpret music industrial race relations. As the methods section suggests, this is an interpretive research track rather than a strictly empirical one. It still relies on data, but its conclusions are argumentative in nature: Each chapter will be a context- and research-backed argument about what the industry practice and discourse mean with regard to race at a specific time in the history of the music business.

The dissertation’s first chapter focuses on the early years of the awards, setting the groundwork for the notion of race-blind excellence espoused by the Academy’s founders. “Excellence” was a term that took on a particularly raced valence in postwar America as a colorblind explanation for racial difference. Starting with policy and legal discourses, this chapter lays the cultural groundwork into which the GRAMMYs stepped. It elaborates new understanding of racial difference, suggesting that postwar solutions to “The Race Question” focused too exclusively on race and racism as discriminatory or negative practice. “Excellence” was the convenient explanation for racial difference, but I argue that it was ultimately an underexplored and underrecognized operationalization of a different kind of racism: that of white affirmation.

Discussions around the idea of excellence intensified and calcified contemporaneously to the GRAMMYs’ beginnings, with John W. Gardner’s 1961 text *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* coming in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. “The ‘two souls’ in the breast of every American are the devotion to equalitarianism and the attachment to individual
achievement,” he wrote (6). This chapter argues that “excellence” gained a new importance only when the (in)equality of people of color had been affirmed and addressed (see Jordan, 1969; Butler, 1998; Ferguson, 2012; Ahmed, 2012; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al, 2012). To reify racial hierarchy, a new means of categorization had to be established whereby even among “equals,” excellence began to hold sway. The early history of the GRAMMYs tracks along these same lines, whereby the importance of continuing to buttress boundaries between high and low culture came as an indirect result of racial tensions (Levine, 1990). It uses other critical discourses around “excellence” to argue that it became a new form of discrimination at a time when Presidents Kennedy (1961) and Johnson (1965) were creating legal barriers to race-based discrimination. “Excellence” became a workaround in a music industry preoccupied with maintaining boundaries and hierarchies. This first chapter unpacks industry discourse around excellence as a justification the rejection of rock and other musics that were raced black.

The dissertation’s second chapter takes up the case of Stevie Wonder, who became the first (and eventually second and third) black Album of the Year winner, dominating the 1970s. Why was Wonder such an attractive figure for the Academy in a post-Civil Rights, post-King nation? The answer, this chapter suggests, is due to the confluence of three factors, (1) that Wonder’s combination of technical wizardry and proficiency made him into a kind of superhuman figure whose skill allowed him to make auteurist music that transcended typical tropes around black music-making, (2) that his physical disability (blindness) and perceived squeaky-clean reputation made him an ideal token figure for industrywide admiration, and (3) that Wonder’s well-publicized break from Motown established him as an individual against a discursive landscape around black music-making that labeled it un-artistic and quotidian.

Wonder is an important figure because he was seen as the ultimate technological expert—the liner notes to 1974 Album of the Year winner, *Innervisions*, credit him as having played every instrument on the album—pushing against usual, race-based narratives of black music as a product of a collective rather than singular voices. The argument goes, as Hamilton (2016) suggests, that in industry discourses, many believed that white artists such as Bob Dylan
produced creative work by virtue of their exceptional status, whereas black artists such as Sam Cooke were products of a race of people from which culture and art sprung. Wonder, we might argue, was seen as the first black auteur of the modern music industry era, and that being interpellated as such, combined with discourses around his disability, made him more willingly accepted by a resistant industry. Disability—usually a grounds for exclusion or inferiority—in this case became an unassailable argumentative factor for Wonder’s excellence.

The final chapter moves into the contemporary era and addresses a deeply concerning phenomenon: the rolling-back of mainstream progress of black music. At the time of writing, since 2009, the Big Three categories—Album of the Year, Song of the Year, and Record of the Year—have been handed out ten times each, or thirty total times. Only once during that time span has a black artist wielded the golden gramophone. Why? This chapter suggests that the GRAMMYs rollback of its acknowledgment of black artists is a result of seeds sewn culturally and politically in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, the first black President of the United States and a building racial resentment whereby white, mainstream audiences’ frustrations at perceived media over-representation of black people has led to a conscious rollback of the industry’s support for black artists.

In popular media, this is a kind of re-ghettoization that has gone by many names. On his Comedy Central series The Nightly Show, black comedian Larry Wilmore called his 2016 election coverage “Blacklash 2016: The Unblackening,” with the implication that U.S. electoral politics would represent a repudiation of the legacy of the first black President, Barack Obama. In the election night stupor of 2016, CNN anchor Van Jones attributed Donald Trump’s unexpected victory as a “whitelash,” where an angered white majority rebelled against “a changing country” and a black president. Journalist Jeff Chang (2016) describes cultural patterns of resegregation. Criminologist Mike King (2017) calls racial resentment the new white identity politics. This chapter argues that these racial discomfitures after the election of the first black President and the subsequent gains in media representation have been overstated, leading to an exaggerated
compensatory recentering of white conservative subjects, values, and tastes. The music industry is not immune, this chapter argues, and it suggests that we are in a moment of capitulation influenced by white fears of black representation.

It examines the rhetorics and racial attitudes around recent GRAMMY debates where white and black artists have faced off and, usually, white artists have emerged victorious. With a renewed emphasis on objective excellence as seen in the quotes from Academy head Neil Portnow earlier, the Academy seems to be conservatively doubling down on race-blind objectivity to obfuscate the deeper forces at play. The topics that occur throughout this dissertation—on what “artistry” and “excellence” are to the academy—persist as well.

The conclusion briefly outlines a path forward, redoubling the dissertation’s efforts to show the connections between race and excellence in the awards and further unpacking the stakes of these matters within broader media and industry conversations around meritocratic epistemological and industrial frames. It argues that these 50 years of tradition—of canon formation, of arguing what “great” is—have set the discursive parameters by which it is codified and reified.

The decades not covered in this dissertation also featured black winners, though they deserve their own lengthier explications as well. These two periods will be explored in chapter-length depth in the book manuscript, but I offer a brief summary here. The 1980s saw Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie take home the major prizes during a decade in which male-fronted acts swept the Album of the Year category on the strengths of new, non-normative portrayals of masculinity, highlighted by the General Field sweep of white soft-rocker Christopher Cross in 1980, still the only time an artist has taken home all four categories. Neal (2006) elaborates what this new masculinity meant for black men, describing the Eighties moment’s codification and

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14 This all is akin to many among the media’s desire or perceived responsibility to “explain” and rationalize Trump voters, leading to myriad reported stories in mass media publications such as The New York Times. These people were always-already to a large extent the subjects of the paper of record.
mediation of black uplift and respectability politics troubling black masculinity’s role in the culture of the Nineties to come.

An important coterminous and coproductive media development during this time period comes in the form of early VH1 and MTV programming. It thus allows us to query how softness was heard and appraised differently along racial lines and the role of a new media technology—the music video—in mediating the representational possibilities of masculinity. “Video, through the conduit of MTV, helped to turn music performers into national and international stars in a way which had not been possible in the 1970s,” Thompson (2007, p. 129) writes. This chapter thus analyzes the discourse around Jackson and Richie’s videos compared to others of the times as way of querying the impact of this new media form on racial-industrial attitudes of the time (see also Brown and Campbell, 1986; Craig, 1992; Seidman, 1992; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, and Davis, 1993). It ultimately investigates these two masculinities in networked concert.

The 1990s and early 2000s, meanwhile, saw the coalescence of critical and popular acclaim around a group of women artists—black musicians Whitney Houston, Natalie Cole, Lauryn Hill among them—who fell under the broad heading of “divas.” Notably, all of their albums (alongside that of Mexican-American guitarist and Album of the Year winner Carlos Santana) went “platinum,” the Recording Industry code for sales greater than 10 million units. This period represents the time in which the Academy consensus—heretofore considered “above” popular sentiment and album sales figures—most often tracked alongside popularity. This happened, I suggest, due to a confluence of factors—specifically managed neoliberal multiculturalism paired with industrywide consolidation and industrywide precarity as the CD sales bubble burst with the rise of illegal downloads. By 1992, five organizations owned 93 per cent of US music sales (Thompson, 2007, p. 132), but we additionally might understand this era as an industry-scale integration of black and brown artists into the mainstream as motivated by neoliberal profit motives as the consolidated music industry put aside many of its racial anxieties and superiorities in seeking to maximize profits.
In a sustained critique of multiculturalism, Katharyne Mitchell argues that national multiculturalisms emerged as “tool[s] of domestication,” calling them “broad technolog[ies] of state control of difference, and as one of many capillaries of disciplinary power/knowledge concerning the formation of the state subject.” Multicultural difference was thus, in her words, “a strategic partner in the growth and expansion of a Fordist capitalist regime of accumulation” (Mitchell, 2004, 92, 119, 123–4, cited Kymlička, 2012). The GRAMMY might further serve that purpose; Sara Ahmed (2012) importantly reminds us: “We might want to be cautious about the appealing nature of diversity and ask whether the ease of its incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge” (1). To wit, in 2000, the GRAMMYs launched an entirely separate ceremony, the Latin GRAMMYs, to capitalize on Spanish-language musics and Spanish-speaking fans.

What will become the fourth chapter thus asks what the role of this late-capitalist musical blockbuster phase—and its hastened decline at the hands of Napster and other piracy means—meant more broadly with regard to raced artists. To what extent did the discourse of the moment welcome more “diverse” artists as a business decision? How did changing industrial capital dynamics impact the relationship between Recording Academy voters and the major labels? And, finally, did Napster affect black artists’ sales differently from white artists?

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“A critical approach to race should encompass both the history of racial ideas and the forms of historicity and temporality embedded in those ideas and practices,” Tavia Nyong’o writes in *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (2009, p. 11). Many scholars discuss racism and music, but this dissertation suggests that few do so with industry as a framing schema to contextualize, historicize, and theorize the way racial attitudes sit at the bedrock of music as an industrial and modern product in the U.S. and global arena. Many scholars discuss racism and structure, but seldom is music considered as an industrial and institutional product: this dissertation takes up an industrial assemblage too often overlooked. Thus, this dissertation calls for a fuller accounting of the history of racial attitudes, using the GRAMMY Awards as a way to study the relations between discourse, mediation, and taste and
using Communication as the appropriate discipline from which to launch such a study. Our understanding of this industry must take account of the historical, technological, mediated, and discursive conditions of hegemonic power that give racial institutions their structure.

Given the embeddedness of white supremacy within the history of the American music business, it is fair then to suggest that a more useful and expansive conversation around what it means to be “racist” is worth having. For too many, racism is still understood as an interpersonal, interpellative, and/or praxis-based concept. If one noticeably treats a person of another ethnoracial identity with malice or as an inferior, he or she is “racist.” If a person uses the “n-word” he or she is racist. This is an overly simplistic dodge, a way by which longstanding conditions of racial inequity are dodged with the emphasis on the personal. The project of naming people “racist” leaves much more work to be done.

Similarly, rather than using the deployment “the music industry is racist,” this dissertation instead suggests that racial biases and racist attitudes inform the way music is heard, discussed, and awarded vis-à-vis the GRAMMY Awards. This thus suggests the frame should certainly argue (and prove, to whatever extent we may) that the industry is “racist.” But the work does not stop there. Instead, it seeks to explore all the resonances of that racism.

This dissertation is principally interested in granting greater understanding of the extent to which race structures our cultural industries apparatuses, specifically, in this case the music industry. It takes the GRAMMY Awards as an example of how we might do that—the historical discourse around “music’s biggest night” is evidence of larger industrial patterns and collective ideologies. Ultimately, I will argue that “excellence” in this context is the means by which hierarchized ideas about raced groups cohere, using that as the argumentative frame for an alternative historical project. Ultimately, it argues that any GRAMMY winner, like Tina Turner, from whose 1991 song this project’s title is derived, is never simply the best.
Chapter 1: Excellence, Cultural Supremacy, and the GRAMMYs’ Beginnings

Few Supreme Court cases in the history of American jurisprudence are as easily recognizable as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which when decided on May 17, 1954 declared that racially segregated “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” The decision, a landmark in the ongoing battle for Civil Rights, rested upon the idea that segregation was discriminatory in nature and practice, a deprivation of opportunity for black students that would delimit their ability to achieve the pursuit-of-happiness third leg of the Declaration of Independence. “Segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal,” the case’s syllabus reads.

The *Brown* decision ultimately rested upon the idea that racism was at its heart the unequal treatment of black Americans and that that treatment denied black students of equal protection of the law guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, one of the key Reconstruction Amendments. In the opinion offered by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the court found that many of the “tangible factors” that would be evidence of inequality—buildings, curricula, qualifications and salaries of teachers—had been equalized or were moving towards equalization in black and white schools. These objective, one-to-one criteria were not what *Brown* would address; instead, Warren argued, “We must look instead to the effect of segregation itself on public education.”

“Effect” is the key word here, as Warren clearly states, “To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” *Brown* is thus at its heart a decision about the emotional impact of segregation on black Americans—specifically the psychological toll of separation on black students and their futures—and not an all-encompassing criticism of racial difference. Attempt at redress, they presumed,
would require directly addressing segregation as a process of ill-treatment, with the full support of the Court and the United States government to end it.

The nation attempted to end school segregation, with a legal mandate from *Brown II* the following year to do so “with all deliberate speed.” Between 1955 and 1960, federal judges would hold more than 200 school desegregation hearings (Torres & Fireside, 2017). Tens of thousands marched in support of integration in the late Fifties; the Little Rock Nine marched into Central High School with the protection of the Arkansas National Guard and President Eisenhower. And yet no one would argue that integration as redress for discriminatory racism has been an unqualified success. In fact, the nation’s schools are more segregated now than they were at the apogee of Civil Rights (Rosiek, 2019).

This chapter examines what came after *Brown*, specifically the postwar period’s focus on discriminatory racism that obscures another side to a coin that lays flat on the bargaining table. That other side contains with it a converse explanation for racial difference that is key foreground to explain and contextualize the cultural environment into which the GRAMMY Awards entered, in a Fifties moment when the cultural industries, Delmont (2004) writes, functioned as “overlapping and reinforcing sites of struggle over segregation.”

That obscured side—with black inferiority as its visible opposite—is white cultural superiority. On that side, whiteness is located not at the normative middle as many would claim but rather in an esteemed space of excellence, which became a key term of art in ongoing conversations about segregation and integration—both of schools and more broadly of institutions and the national fabric more conceptually. Race thinking in mid-century America was too limited, focused not on a structural understanding of race that also considered the complexities of whiteness. Desegregation addressed the second-class status afforded America’s black citizens, but a unidirectional conception of racism’s results overlooked the esteemed status afforded to whites as unmarked, non-raced citizens, with a special tenor and character of culture and taste.
This chapter reveals that, functionally, whiteness is not actually the normative or standard status denied blacks through segregation to which these court cases attempt to restore them. It is concomitantly divergent in the opposite direction away from a supposed normative center. The gulf between the two was not unidirectional and guarantees of legal rights to black people did not mean they would ever be on equal footing with whiteness. Racial difference was not (and is not) singularly based on a logic of black inferiority that need be named and discarded. It would also be necessary to interrogate the structure that whiteness sat atop. And to understand the cultural climate into which the GRAMMYs emerged—a milieu that resonates across the awards’ history—it would be worthwhile to frame how difference worked in midcentury America.

This chapter does that, first taking up the postwar Fifties as a period of great upheaval in world politics, when racist slaughter of Jews throughout Europe forced a broad-based interrogation of what race was and what work race did. It is set within the Fifties’ cultural, legal, intellectual, and geopolitical milieus, providing an overview of the tentpole arguments about what racism was at that time and arguing that major discourses around anti-racism were largely focused on racism as something that was directly discriminatory, masking the way race functioned as a fulcrum of white distinction. It also suggests that this discursive space was one into which structures of distinction stepped and were legitimized by new rhetorics at the intersection of cultural studies and conversations around (in)equality. The anti-rock sentiment of the time—couched in the language of excellence—was actually a cover for racist rejection of the growing form. Lawson (2002) suggests that “rock and roll, a musical form that traced its origins to African Americans, became a surrogate target for opponents of civil rights in the South and for those who feared increasing black cultural influence over American youth throughout the country” (205).

What this all means is that whiteness—and specifically for the context of this chapter white cultural and musical texts—came to possess a status that not only made them superior to black ones; they establish a supremacy even above the popular norm. That supremacy—their excellence, this chapter suggests—relies up on a presumption that they are always already
superior. Excellence in this arena was not solely on the basis of its superiority to the black underclass. Instead, it was a rhetorical development specifically tied to postwar discourse and intellectualism. “Excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential,” Bill Readings writes (1996, p. 22). The middle third of this chapter takes up the roots of excellence as a post-Brown tool for a different type of raced discrimination, whereby the new function of racism was to elevate people and texts above the norm. It situates these phenomena around a broader discussion of “excellence” inaugurated at the time in the American academy.

Discussions around the idea of excellence intensified and calcified contemporaneously to the GRAMMYs’ founding, with John William Gardner’s 1961 text *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* leading the way as part of a set of texts that emphasized the term in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. “Our society cannot achieve greatness unless individuals at many levels of ability accept the need for high standards of performance and strive to achieve those standards within the limits possible for them,” Gardner writes.

“We want the highest conceivable excellence, of course, in the activities crucial to our effectiveness and creativity as a society; but that isn’t enough. If the man in the street says, ‘Those fellows at the top have to be good, but I’m just a slob and can act like one’—then our days of greatness are behind us. We must foster a conception of excellence which may be applied to every degree of ability and to every socially acceptable activity” (131).

This also manifests in institutions such as the academy, where Ferguson (2012), Ahmed (2012), Jordan (1969), and others argue that, among other things, “diversity” has been deprived of its revolutionary potentiality by a neoliberal university seeking to capitalize upon it. Ferguson also argues (along with Readings, 1996) that excellence has been similarly depoliticized and connected to capital projects. “Readings maintains that ‘excellence’ has become the academy’s keyword because of the ways in which multinational corporations disseminate ‘excellence’ as a standard for all practices within the university—from the management of parking services to the significance of scholarship,” Ferguson writes (80). “Its power comes not from the content that it bears but from the wide application that its lack of content affords[…]. Hence, ‘excellence’ is not
only an ideal shared by the contemporary university and present-day corporate capital; it is the principle that defines their relation to one another.

Excellence emerges as the new lingua franca of achievement, a way to resolve the legal dictates of equality with the persistence of inequality. This chapter theorizes the concept of “excellence” in mid-Twentieth Century America, suggesting its emergence was as a key animating concept in an integrating American culture that ultimately acted in support of colorblind discrimination of a different order. Achievement was a blameless explanation: Inequality persisted not because of continuing discrimination, but as an unfortunate byproduct of the strivings of “excellent” white Americans to reach their fullest potential. Inequality was thus no longer perpetuated by discrimination; it was just a happenstance byproduct of white excellence. This chapter argues that “excellence” gained a new importance only when the (in)equality of people of color had been affirmed and addressed. To reify racial hierarchy, a new means of categorization had to be established whereby even among “equals,” excellence began to hold sway.

Further, this section suggests that the postwar intellectualism which sowed the seeds for the founding of the Frankfurt School and launched the careers of scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer among others, which emphasized the debased nature of corporate mass culture, was ultimately in the service of a racial project. I write against their postures of defensiveness because they insufficiently accounted for race in their broader critique. What Bourdieu (1984) would call distinction, or the ability to determine what constituted taste in society, also fell along these ethnoracial lines.

Defensiveness is the same pose taken by the industry workers who developed the idea of the GRAMMY Awards as a way to reaffirm and reestablish dividing lines within culture: The GRAMMYs were in essence founded on the idea that white soloists Domenico Modugno, Sinatra, Henry Mancini, and others amongst the awards’ inaugural class in 1959 had offered music that was “sheer artistry” and attained the “highest degree of excellence,” metrics that would be proffered in the credo the Recording Academy would adopt two years later.
“Excellence” would be the key term for actor, radio DJ, recording satirist (and rock ‘n’ roll hater) Stan Freberg, who crafted the credo, the text of which remains the Academy standard today. “We, the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, being dedicated to the advancement of the phonograph record, do pledge ourselves as follows:

We shall judge a record on the basis of sheer artistry, and artistry alone—artistry in writing, performance, musicianship and engineering.

A record shall, in the opinion of The Academy, either attain the highest degree of excellence possible in the category entered, or it shall not receive an Academy Award. Sales and mass popularity are the yardsticks of the record business. They are not the yardsticks of this Academy.

We are concerned here with the phonograph record as an art form. If the record industry is to grow, not decline in stature, if it is to foster a greater striving for excellence in its own field, if it is to discourage mediocrity and encourage greatness, we, as its spokesmen, can accept no other Credo.” (Recording Academy Website)

As a result, this chapter focuses on rock ‘n’ roll, the most influential genre of music in postwar America. Born in the fingers and voices of black rhythm and blues musicians who had seen their labor labeled “race music” in the Thirties and Forties, rock ‘n’ roll’s emergence as the soundtrack to new American identity as it crossed over into white living rooms, radios, and dancehalls forced an undeniable sonic-cultural integration. Rock’s sound could not be ignored.

And yet the GRAMMYs did ignore it. There was no rock ‘n’ roll category in the awards’ first four years despite the genre’s preeminence on the radio airwaves. Presley would not win a GRAMMY until his late-career religious awakening in 1967. Best Rock & Roll Recording appeared in 1962 before lasting only three years before having its genre category blurred into versions of “Best Contemporary” throughout the late Sixties. While Chubby Checker’s “Let’s Twist Again” in 1962, the category’s first winner, was a quintessential example of the genre, the unremembered winners that followed—“Alley Cat” by a Danish pianist called Bent Fabric in 1963 and April Stevens and Nino Tempo’s “Deep Purple” in 1964—were hardly examples of the form. In 1965—the last year the category was exclusively rock ‘n’ roll focused before it became

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15 Emphases mine.
“Contemporary (R&R) Single”—the winner was Petula Clarke’s “Downtown,” a swelling pop number that hardly represented the style. The following winners included Roger Miller’s lazy “King of the Road,” New Vaudeville Band’s novelty “Winchester Cathedral,” and black pop group The 5th Dimension (for some reason a GRAMMY favorite)’s “Up, Up & Away” (better known as “My Beautiful Balloon.”

Rock would be eschewed for decades to follow: Best Rock Song was not awarded until 1992 and Best Rock Album was not awarded until 1995, with both going to legacy acts (Sting and The Rolling Stones, respectively) for later-career retrospective achievement. Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Big Momma Thornton, Big Joe Turner, and other black progenitors of the genre were ignored altogether or would be acknowledged long after their careers (or lives) had ended, a fact not lost on the former, who, while presenting the Best New Artist award in 1988 declared himself the winner and castigated the audience. “I have never received nothing,” he said. “Ya’ll ain’t never give me no GRAMMY. And I’ve been singing for years. I am the architect of rock and roll. I am the originator” (Schipper, 1992, p. 85).

This chapter suggests that the GRAMMY’s refusal to welcome rock ‘n’ roll in their early years hinges on a combination of racial unease, high-minded cultural defensiveness, and an operationalization of the idea of “excellence.” This chapter unpacks “excellence” within an industry and intellectual infrastructure determined to resist rock ‘n’ roll as debased and massified, arguing that in their early years GRAMMYs operationalize excellence in the same way the academy uses the term to justify racial and cultural division, ultimately operationalizing a musical-racial division at the awards’ bedrock. It reveals that the importance of continuing to buttress boundaries between high and low culture came as an indirect result of racial tensions (see Levine, 1990) and uses other critical discourses around popular music to argue that “excellence” was a new manifestation of racial difference at a time when Presidents Kennedy (1961) and Johnson (1965) were creating legal barriers to race-based discrimination.

“Discourses often map boundaries as a way to attribute coherence and legibility to their objects,” Roderick Ferguson writes (2012, p. 104), citing Bauman (1992) who argued similarly.
“Discursive practices achieve institutional identity by setting boundaries on the meaning and analysis of their objects, boundaries that stipulate which language may be mobilized to interpret an object and who has the right to deploy it,” he writes (70). This chapter will briefly review key moments in the postwar discourses around anti-racism, arguing that they focus on the idea of racism as discrimination. It will then elaborate a second, concurrent logic of cultural racism that instead carries a subtext of white superiority in output and value.

“Excellence” became a workaround in a music industry preoccupied with maintaining boundaries and hierarchies. This first chapter’s final third thus unpacks industry discourse around excellence as a justification the rejection of rock and other musics that were raced black. “The traditions and practices associated with legal segregation unquestionably cast the longest shadow and were the most pervasive informants on all aspects of race,” historian Michael Bertrand (2000) argues in Race, Rock, and Elvis, his intellectual history surrounding the racial-musical taste gap and its navigation by Elvis Presley. “Reality was an institutional and social environment that emphasized black degradation and total racial separation” (3).

The latter half of that description of the social environment—“total racial separation” is the terrain into which the GRAMMYs stepped. Elvis’s white rock ‘n’ roll—which soundtracked a generational shift in attitudes around integration, suggests Bertrand—was actually concurrently combated by a different manifestation of racial bias that argued not for the biologically informed racial inferiority of American blacks but instead for the cultural, artistic, and aesthetic superiority of white music. The argument for the need for the GRAMMY Awards, then, tapped organically into the moment of the times. This chapter negotiates race as what Du Bois (1940) calls “a question of comparative culture,” where “the cultural equipment attributed to any people depended largely on who estimated it” (99), and the GRAMMYs, this chapter argues, begin supposedly as a repudiation of raced music, with the voters’ stated desire to use the awards to reset taste boundaries and keep rock ‘n’ roll sidelined. Like the world around them, they are product and producer of affirmative racism where “excellence” offers a justification for white musical supremacy.
Ultimately, this chapter concludes that the GRAMMYs permanent metric—excellence—was and still is informed by the racial tenor of the times of their founding. It further argues that excellence is allowed to function in the colorblind way that it does because a too-unidirectional understanding of racism as ill-treatment ignores the other side of the coin. Racism, it argues, is not just discrimination and a denial of black people’s ability to attain equality; it is also the processes, discourses, and arguments by which white culture and productions are marked as exceptional. Its flexibility has been termed “a scavenger ideology, which gains its power from its ability to pick out and utilize ideas and values from other sets of ideas and beliefs in specific socio-historical contexts” (Solomos and Back, 1996, p. 18-19).

What Brown, the coterie of cases around it, and the global attempts at racial redress fail to address is the codification of taste caste and the other side of American racism. This is a critical oversight at such a critical juncture: America’s race problem was (of course) unsolved because even supposedly structural initiatives were ultimately insufficiently addressed because desegregation focused too much on individual-level racial disadvantage and not enough on structural racial advantage. The racial order, in the terms of Fredrickson (2002), was maintained through a more veiled manifestation of racial difference—one that was celebratory rather than discriminatory.

So the broader racial and cultural program of the 1950s should thoroughly be reassessed with affirmative racism—that emphasizes the superlative quality of individuals, masking its racial valence—at the center of our analysis. To understand the rhetoric of the early GRAMMYs and why their premium on “excellence” produced racially significant results (both then and now), we need to explore the concept in its context.

**Racism as Discrimination: A Legal and Political Oversight**

“Of course,’ [a white friend] says, ‘you know Negroes are inferior.’”

-W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940)

In the aftermath of World War II, the smoldering nations of the world were left to confront the greatest systematic and coordinated racial violence since the Middle Passage after the murder of six million Jews by Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany. America faced its own internecine
crisis, where pressures for broader integration grew after the wartime passage of Executive Order 8802, race riots in Detroit and Harlem raged, and American troops returned home from a war fought ostensibly under the guise of combating Nazi racism while its armed forces were still segregated.

Much of American racial history relies upon the idea that black slaves and freedpeople alike were less than human, from the three-fifths humanity codified in shameful compromise during the 1787 Constitutional convention and onward. Ramsey (Forthcoming) terms this "wretched" blackness, a social identity formed and crystallized as a lesser humanity based on the idea of some kind of immutable human difference between those raced black and those not. Race—itself an invention—invariably rested upon the static inferiority of its "other." Spaniards’ handling of Fifteenth-Century Jewish conversos was inflected by doctrines of limpieza de sangre, or purity of blood that, in the words of Fredrickson (2002) "represented the stigmatization of an entire ethnic group on the basis of deficiencies that allegedly could not be eradicated by conversion or assimilation" (33). Samuel Purchas’s 1625 travelogue opined that the Indigenous Americans had "so good a Countrey," but were:

"so bad people, having little of Humanitie but shape, ignorant of Civilitie, of Arts, of Religion; more brutish than the beasts they hunt, more wild and unmanly than the unmanned wild Countrey, which they range rather than inhabite; captivated also to Satans tyranny in foolish pieties, mad impieties, wicked idlenesse, busie and bloody wickednesse" (cited in Lincoln, 1986).

The enslavement of black Africans was built on the presumption of their inferiority; Jefferson—he of the “all men are created equal” coinage in the Declaration of Independence—believed blacks were inferior to whites (Jefferson and Magnis, 1999) and wrote extensively about that deficiency. This continued after slavery: An insurance actuary published in 1890 statistics showing the Negro race was dying out in the United States due to “physical inferiority” (Du Bois, 1940, p. 99). And of course the Nazis operationalized the idea of non-Aryan inferiority through the use of the term untermensch, itself drawn from American Klansman Lothrop Stoddard’s 1922 racist text The
Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under-man. Throughout its long life, racial difference rested upon a presumption of the racially marked group as inferior.\footnote{There have of course been operationalizations of what I call affirmative racism throughout history, and any hierarchical structure by its nature has some that are below and some that are above. This chapter, however, focuses on Twentieth-Century racism and argues that, leading up to the 1950s period on which it hinges, discriminatory racism was identified as the process and set of ideas that needed to be battled, obscuring and missing the layer of affirmative racism, which was then obscured through colorblind concepts and rhetorics.}

Another key tentpole of race-based epistemology was the IQ test, which was first created in 1912 and served effectively as a precursor to the move from discriminatory to affirmative racial framings. These quantitative measures created a metric scale to compare unlike things (individuals), but further used the guise of science to objectivize racist results. American eugenics proponent Henry H. Goddard (1914), who translated the Binet-Simon Test precursor to the IQ test into English, suggested that poor performance on the Binet-Simon Test was indicative of “feeble-mindedness” and that those who scored low on the test were “morons,” a word of his coinage. Du Bois critiqued “the hurried use of the new technique of psychological tests, which were quickly adjusted so as to put black folk absolutely beyond the possibility of civilization” (1940, p. 100). Post-Brown, intelligence tests that argued black intelligence was inferior to whites’ were used by segregationists to combat integration (Jackson, 2005). A common theme should be clear: What is missed in so many of these framings both pre- and post-Brown (and of course Brown itself) is the resonance of race and racial logics on whiteness. What cultural work did these fabricated, pseudoscientific delineations do to the broad national and international conception of whiteness’s relation to the supposed neutral center.

This was not just a national phenomenon, either. With nations adding their allegiance to the Declaration by United Nations throughout the Forties as its precursor, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization prepared a constitution for its 37 member countries, working to contribute to global peace and security through a reform agenda that focused on education, science, and culture. From the outset, racism—as denigration of raced peoples’ humanity was a key feature. “[T]he great and terrible war which has now ended was a
war made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men, and by the propagation, in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races," UNESCO’s constitution reads. One of their goals was to discredit the scientific racism upon which the Nazi campaign had been launched.

One of the first major publications by the international body was titled “The Race Question,” which was furnished with an eye toward “dissemination of scientific facts designed to bring about the disappearance of that which is commonly called race prejudice” (1). “Race prejudice” is the prevailing operationalization of race in the document, which suggests racism “threatens the essential moral values by satisfying the taste for domination and by exalting the contempt for man. Concern for human dignity demands that all citizens be equal before the law, and that they share equally in the advantages assured them by law, no matter what their physical or intellectual differences may be. The law sees in each person only a human being who has the right to the same consideration and to equal respect,” it argues (3). These grand declarations take for granted a level of equality that had never been the case, suggesting that the only thing that stood in the way of consideration and respect was discrimination.

Back in the United States, President Harry S. Truman established The President’s Committee on Civil Rights, a commission created in December 1946 to investigate civil rights in the nation. “[A]ll parts of our population are not equally free from fear,” Truman’s instructions to the commission, which included a number of academics including Sadie Alexander, the first black woman to earn a PhD in the U.S., Dartmouth College President John S. Dickey, and University of North Carolina President Frank Porter Graham alongside founder of the ACLU Morris Ernst, labor leader James B. Carey, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Jr., head of the AFL-CIO Department of Civil Rights Boris Shishkin, and others read. “And from time to time, and in some places, this freedom has been gravely threatened. It was so after the last war, when organized groups fanned hatred and intolerance, until, at times, mob action struck fear into the hearts of men and women because of their racial origin or religious beliefs” (vii). Like the UNESCO declaration, Truman articulated the way to restore civil rights was to examine discrimination, which it presumed existed as a result
of inadequate legislation—again a presumptively structural issue but one this chapter suggests is an inadequate view of structure.

To wit, the Commission makes clear its target in the opening stanzas of its report, To Secure These Rights, which was issued the following year. “We did not[…]devote ourselves to the construction of a balance sheet which would properly assess the great progress which the nation has made, as well as the shortcomings in the record. Instead, we have almost exclusively focused our attention on the bad side of our record,” they write. The report dedicates a high degree of space to describing lynchings, police brutality, unjust criminal cases, involuntary servitude, housing, healthcare, the vote, and Japanese internment and further names that “bad side”—human slavery, religious persecution, mob rule—all of which focus on prejudicial discrimination as the tangible outgrowth of racial division and note that “We still have their ideological remnants in the unwarrantable ‘pride and prejudice.’”

In taking up “separate but equal,” the writers again suggest that racial division hinges upon the operationalization of the inferiority of black Americans. “On one hand, it recognizes Negroes as citizens and as intelligent human beings entitled to enjoy the status accorded the individual in our American heritage of freedom.[…]On the other hand, it brands the Negro with the mark of inferiority and asserts that he is not fit to associate with white people,” they write. Haranguing “separate but equal” as “one of the outstanding myths of American history,” they conclude, “No argument or rationalization can alter this basic fact: a law which forbids a group of American citizens to associate with other citizens in the ordinary course of daily living creates inequality by imposing a caste status on the minority group” (82).

In their discussion of the American “ideal,” they write, “All men are created equal as well as free. Stemming from this principle is the obligation to build social institutions that will guarantee equality of opportunity to all men. Without this equality freedom becomes an illusion. Thus the only aristocracy that is consistent with the free way of life is an aristocracy of talent and achievement” (4). “Equality of opportunity” follows the rhetoric of James Truslow Adams, who popularized the phrase “American Dream” in his Epic of America (1931). “But there has been also
the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement," he writes (373). The emphasis in both of these cases on ability and achievement as dividing lines on which the responsibility or explanation for "opportunity" falls is how they provision for the persistence of inequality despite the Constitution's argument for equal rights.

*Brown* thus rested on this notion, seeking to prove that separate was inherently unequal. Working on behalf of Oliver Brown and his co-plaintiffs, Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP’s lawyers used social science data in arguing the case, which were noteworthy enough to be cited in Footnote 11 of the Court's decision. Many of these citations—Witmer and Kotinsky (1952), Deutscher and Chein (1948), Chein (1949), Brameld (1949), and K.B. Clark (1950)—studied specifically the impact of prejudice on the psychology of black people. The latter, the work of Kenneth and Mamie Clark, who studied the developmental patterns of "race awareness" in black children through what came to be known as the Doll Experiments, was key to the case and the Court's decision. Proffered four dolls, two brown with brown hair and the other two white with blonde hair, black children were asked a set of questions including "Give me the doll that you like best," "Give me the doll that is a nice doll," "Give me the doll that looks bad," and "Give me the doll that is a nice color," among others (Clark and Clark, 1947). Their findings suggested that the answers mapped onto racist ideas, where majorities of black children said that white dolls were "nice dolls" and black dolls "looked bad."

However, if we interpret the Court's decision, it focuses on the deleterious impact of these studies, taking two results concurrently and arguing that they create an experience of inferiority. But what this missed entirely was the lifting up of the white doll as "good" and what that meant within a broader context. The nation's focus on racism-as-negative discrimination missed the systems of values and ideologies that developed a converse sense of race awareness in the young black children—that told them (and others) that the white dolls were "nice." Without

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¹⁷ A third collaborator, Natalie Sadigur, is incorrectly uncited in the court document.
examining affirmative racism in more sustained detail, the conclusions would always be missing half the puzzle.

Footnote 11 also mentioned a general citation, Myrdahl (1944), as another social science text that played a role in the run-up to the landmark case. Two decades before Brown, The Carnegie Corporation commissioned Swedish Nobel-laureate economist Gunnar Myrdal to study American race relations. His findings, summarized at great length in An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1944), critiqued stereotypes that black Americans’ “excellence [was] limited to emotional activities,” and, following noted black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, suggested that segregation created a different set of standards of comparison altogether. “This produces an artificial situation in which inferior standards of excellence and efficiency are set up,” Frazier wrote (Myrdahl, 1268).

Myrdal’s major contention was that racism was located “in the heart of the [white] American,” a sentiment ultimately critiqued by Ralph Ellison in 1944 (1964). Ellison explained that the “main virtue of An American Dilemma lies in its demonstration of how the mechanism of prejudice operates to disguise the moral conflict in the minds of whites produced by the clash on the social level between the American Creed and anti-Negro practices” (304). That moral conflict was what Myrdal articulated as what he called an “American Creed.” Ultimately, the nation was attempting to reconcile an irreconcilability: How could it purport to promise equality when inequality persisted?

One way to explain this disjunction is to suggest then that it is not race prejudice alone that explains inequality, but rather there exists another quality that exists within American social

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18 Incredibly germane to this broad study’s arguments is the idea that Du Bois was considered to be asked to conduct the study that would become An American Dilemma, especially given he was working on the Encyclopedia of the Negro at the time, but Carnegie Corporation president Frederick Keppel determined Du Bois would not be able to approach the problem “objectively” (Cohen, 2004). Myrdal, a Swede, was chosen in part because he was from a “non-imperialistic country with no background of domination of one race over another” (Jackson, 1990; cited in Cohen, 2004).

19 Myrdal did conclude “It is in the field of entertainment that the Negro’s achievements are most widely recognized, and the opportunities made available to him there have made it possible for him to develop excellence in the economically subsidiary fields of arts and sports” (987).
and discursive structure. This factor—excellence—implied that difference was the product of the superior quality of white people, ideas, and artistic formulations, furthering a masked and perpetuated phenomenon of affirmative racism. It should come as no surprise that, as the nation turned its eyes towards the ongoing issues of racism as discrimination, this other side of the white supremacy project would crystallize and solidify.

**Racism as White Cultural Superiority: Excellence and the Academy**

“Now, superiority consists of what?” he argues.

Life is, I remark, (1) Beauty and health of body, (2) Mental clearness and creative genius, (3) Spiritual goodness and receptivity, (4) Social adaptability and constructiveness.

“Not bad,” he answers. “Not bad at all. Now, I contend that the white race conspicuously excels in one, two and four and is well abreast even in three.”

*And I maintain that the black race excels in one, three and four and is well abreast in two.*

Sheer nonsense and pure balderdash! Compare the Venus of Milo and the Apollo Belvedere with a Harlem or Beale Street couple.”

-W.E.B. Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn (1940)

In 1940, the esteemed black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois published *Dusk of Dawn*, a semi-autobiographical engagement with the impact of race on the life of *The Souls of Black Folk* author. "In the elementary school [race] came only in the matter of geography when the races of the world were pictured: Indians, Negroes and Chinese, by their most uncivilized and bizarre representatives; the whites by some kindly and distinguished looking philanthropist" (1940, p. 97). Du Bois articulates through his own person—he would go on to be the first black Harvard PhD—the ultimately farcical nature of race as inferiority. "[M]y racial inferiority could not be dwelt upon because the single representative of the Negro race in the school did not happen to be in any way inferior to his fellows," he writes sardonically.

This farce—rendered so by Du Bois’s person—is the one affirmative racism in the Fifties emphases on “excellence” reframes. Du Bois argues that the American project—the “white world,” in his terms—rests upon the idea that America itself, despite its stated and exulted creeds, would fail if the caste that keeps “efficiency” empowered did. The state itself is imperiled by
upsetting of hierarchy. “[W]e have got to have the best at the top and we know pretty well who the best are,” he writes ironically (p. 158). Centuries of refinement of the racial project provided a readymade explanation for inequality falling along racial lines: excellence.

The epigraphs here and the previous section are drawn from a staged conversation Du Bois was having with a white friend, who begins the argument—in an article titled “The Superior Race” which was reprinted as part of Dusk—with the discriminatory presumption of black inferiority. However, later in the conversation, the friend instead flips his argument, focusing instead on the superiority of white art, virtue, and form. Having found his argument regarding black inferiority rebutted, the friend turned instead to a second side of the spectrum: white superiority. This section unpacks a similar reframing in postwar America through the codification and use of the term “excellence.”

Though this chapter situates excellence within the 1950s milieu, I do not intend to suggest that “excellence” is a new concept. Early religious texts discuss the Great Chain of Being, suggesting all life is hierarchical; in later writing on the chain, Arthur Lovejoy (1936) argues, “Difference of kind is treated as necessarily equivalent to difference of excellence, to diversity of rank in a hierarchy” (p. 17). Humanism—as articulated by Gianozzo Manetti in 1452’s *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man in Four Books*—depended on “the genius of man ... the unique and extraordinary ability of the human mind” (cited in Kerr, 2010).

Just as slavery has been modernized and white supremacy is inextricably positioned within modernity (see Mignolo, 2011), so too, I argue, has a notion of excellence that is colored white. “The white race possesses all motivating forces and talents in itself, therefore we must examine it somewhat more closely,” Kant wrote in 1831 (cited in Eze, 1997, p. 117). Eze suggests that Kant is preoccupied with the idea that European humanity is humanity “in itself” and seeks to explain how his philosophical writing suggests a belief in Europe as the “ideal” or “true” humanity. “Skin color for Kant is evidence of superior, inferior, or no ‘gift’ of ‘talent,’ or the capacity to realize reason and rational-moral perfectibility through education,” he writes (112; see
also Anderson, 1995; Farr, 2002). Rationality, Kant (1798) suggests, is something that makes humans human. Therefore, rationality is part of European society’s superiority.

Stuart Hall (1997) rightly suggested that a racial ideology of white supremacy became the justification for Europeans conquest and enslavement. Evolutionary biology, too, rested upon these distinctions: “Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world,” Charles Darwin wrote (1881).

Darwin’s locution, though, does mention the other side of a racial binary—the “higher civilised races.” I argue that that delineation is masked and obscured by rhetorical moves in which “excellence” is a more palatable and less frank articulation of affirmative difference. This chapter argues that a specific formulation of “excellence” is a product of the legal and geopolitical environment outlined in the previous section. Like previous rationalizations of racial inequality—as purportedly logical result of centuries of enslavement, as a product of biology, as an effect of ongoing poverty, as a failure of effort on the part of black Americans—excellence essentially functions as a contemporaneous explanation for difference, notably problematic because of its apparently colorblindness. “Excellence” naturalized as an inevitability of society provisioned for affirmative, race-based distinction.

“We must foster a conception of excellence that may be applied to every degree of ability and to every socially acceptable activity,” John Gardner would write in Excellence in 1961. “The tone and fiber of our society depend upon a pervasive, almost universal striving for good performance” (119-120). Throughout the 1950s, Gardner became an educational innovator, laying the groundwork for the White House Fellows program, starting the Model UN, and launching some of the first experimental studies of television (“Education and Excellence”). Prior to Excellence, he helped author “The Pursuit of Excellence: Education and the Future of America,” a report of the Special Studies Project of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund which received coverage in TIME (“The Pursuit of Excellence, July 7, 1958, p. 55).
“The Pursuit of Excellence” (1958) asserts from the outset that free society exists to support individual liberty (v) where “freedom” is neoliberalized and individualized to exist contra communism and other looming scares of the time. “It is now widely recognized that our society has given too little attention to the individual of unusual talent or potentialities,” they write, citing Ralph Barton Perry and arguing that democracy must maintain “an express insistence upon quality and distinction” (p. 16).20 Further, they argue that “when the rewriting of the rules is designed to banish excellence, to rule out distinguished attainment, to inhibit spirited individuals, then all who have a stake in the continued democracy must protest” (p. 15) and argue “it is possible for us to cultivate the ideal of excellence while retaining the moral values of equality” (p. 17). The Fifties also saw a stark proliferation of honors designations in American university education with the formation of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student, another Carnegie-funded operation that would eventually become the National Collegiate Honors Council.

The integration paradigm, though—one that Gardner would eventually be charged with enforcing (and would do so ably as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1965)—was the crucial place where the flip occurred—where the layered roots of the racial delineations surrounding “excellence” began to show their seams. “By insisting that equality means an exactly similar exposure to education, regardless of the variations in interest and capacity of the student, we are in fact inflicting a subtle but serious form of inequality upon our young people,” the report suggests. “We are limiting the development of individual excellence in exchange for a uniformity of external treatment” (p. 22). Implied heavily here is the idea that the equal treatment fought so passionately for throughout the decade created a converse discrimination—against individual achievement that was raced white by IQ tests and other pseudoscience of the time.

The report’s broad phrasing—Gardner is credited ex post facto with coining “pursuit of excellence,” a reworking of the Constitution’s “pursuit of happiness”—took hold alongside the concept of “excellence” itself. In a 1959 New York Times article headlined “Pursuit of Excellence,”

20 This quote—one of Gardner’s favorites—would appear in numerous of his own publications as well as national education proceedings.
the *Times* wrote, “Recent surveys of job opportunities for college graduates this year give impressive evidence that employers are more than ever in ‘pursuit of excellence’” and advocated for a National Government award for intellectual achievement and “more unofficial citations for special excellence” (May 24, 1959, p. 181). It also mentions an Open Letter to the College Graduates of 1959 from Secretary of Labor James Mitchell that read “the premium on excellence is going up.”

Refiguring the Constitution’s right to the “pursuit of happiness” to instead allow for the “pursuit of excellence” is the rhetorical dodge needed to continue to justify positive inequality on a societal scale, a reminder that difference enables achievement, a flipping of the dialectic that suggested difference meant inferiority. It implies a level of social stratification, a higher-level standing to which Americans are encouraged and ostensibly freed to pursue the standing their innate intelligence presumably allows them to hold.

Gardner’s book-length work, *Excellence*, refined the arguments around the concept as the new marker of difference in the America he envisioned, one that was very different from the equality-first work of the prior section. “Some of those who complain about the quality of our national life seem to be dreaming of a world in which everyone without exception has talent, taste, judgment and an unswerving allegiance to excellence,” he wrote.

“Such dreams are pleasant but unprofitable. The problem is to achieve some measure of excellence in this society, with all its beloved and exasperating clutter, with all its exciting and debilitating confusion of standards, with all the stubborn problems that won’t be solved and the equally stubborn ones that might be” (xiii). Differentiation was necessary, he argued, and in an environment where negative discrimination had been outlawed, the logical derivative was one that instead acknowledgement of achievement. He suggested that society placed fetters on performance that, when removed, would allow men to be restored to their “natural state” of individual-level difference. “We might as well admit that it is

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21 The term would return to the “paper of record” again in 1963 in its coverage of a symposium at Princeton University on “The Pursuit of Excellence in the Creative Arts,” which was attended by Robert Penn Warren, Edward Albee, special consultant on the arts to the White House August Heckscher and FCC chairman Newton Minow (Esterow, 1963). And in 1974, in response to a series on recruiting abuses in college sports, the paper again used the term as a kind of trump card: “The Purpose of Intercollegiate Sports: Help the Individual Pursue Excellence,” the article headline reads (August 25, 1974).
not easy for us as believers in democracy to dwell on the differences in capacity between men,” he continued.

“Democratic philosophy has tended to ignore such differences where possible, and to belittle them where it could not ignore them. And it has had some grounds for doing so: the enemies of democracy have often cited the unequal capacities of men as an excuse for institutions which violate our most deeply held beliefs. But extreme equalitarianism—or as I would prefer to say, equalitarianism conceived—which ignores differences in native capacity and achievement, has not served democracy well. Carried far enough, it means the lopping off of any heads which come above dead level. It means committee rule, the individual smothered by the group. And it means the end of that striving for excellence which has produced mankind’s greatest achievements” (14).

This rhetoric—of telling “hard truths” was couched in the idea that the pursuit of excellence was American manifest destiny and part of its mythos22, a foundational aspect of the American project. America was a society built by recognizable winners, and it was going to be the job of the government, education, and the populace not to stand in their way. “Because of the leveling influences which are inevitable in popular government, a democracy must, more than any other form of society, maintain what Ralph Barton Perry has called ‘an express insistence upon quality and distinction,” Gardner wrote, following the language of the report he had no doubt had a hand in authoring. “When it does not do so, the consequences are all too familiar: the deterioration of standards, the debasement of taste, shoddy education, vulgar art, cheap politics and the tyranny of the lowest common denominator” (73).

“It must never be forgotten that ours is one of the few societies in the history of the world in which performance is a primary determinant of status,” he continued. “What the individual can ‘deliver’ in the way of performance is a major factor in how far he can rise in the world.” These formulations show the depths of meritocratic ideology contemporaneously to it being named and pilloried in England by Michael Young, whose *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033* (1958) created the term to critique the premiums being placed on IQ tests and other midcentury

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22 “Few themes have gripped the imagination of Americans so intensely as the discovery of talent in unexpected places—the slum child who shows scientific genius, the frail youngster who develops athletic skills, the poor boy who becomes a captain of industry,” Gardner writes. “Our popular literature and our folklore are full of such images. They encourage self-discovery, stir ambition and inspire emulation. The American who wins success overnight traditionally insists, ‘I never dreamed it could happen to me!’ But as surely as he is an American, that is precisely what he did dream” (17).
psychometrics. Unfortunately then—as now—the idea’s satire was missed and the logic of
meritocracy took deep hold: Difference was an earned characteristic piloted by excellent
individuals who, by the virtue of their hard work now deserved their place at the top of the heap.
Centuries of privilege and a discursive environment in which they constructed themselves as
“best” was irrelevant; they had earned it. Meritocracy would be key to the cases of many artists—and,
as the following chapter will illustrate—a key cog in the defense against other, “underserving” genres.

What this means is that a “just” America would be one that was justly unequal. Further, the
naturalization of America’s connection to inequality driven not by discrimination but instead as
a logical product of differential intelligence implied a level of natural immutability that aligned with
the development of race as outlined by Fredrickson (2002) and others. Natural, unchangeable
difference should not be the target of regulation; doing so would be unnatural and hurt America.

Given Gardner’s close relationship with the government, it made sense that his work informed the broader national orientation toward “excellence.” Clark Kerr, former chancellor of
UC Berkeley and former president of the University of California, suggested in his The Uses of
the University (1963) that “the general policy of federal agencies in allocating research grants to
universities for the last two decades has been one of ‘seeking excellence wherever it is’” (p. 52). Kerr
was also blunt about excellence as preserver of hierarchy, writing “How to preserve a margin
of excellence’ in an increasingly egalitarian society has become a most intense issue” (100).

Writing at the same time, David McClelland (1961) published The Achieving Society,
arguing that standards of excellence helped support “the need for Achievement” (in Achievement
in his terms), which was purportedly a key precursor to national economic growth. He also
attempts to empiricize the Protestant ethic of individual hard work as precursor to national
rejuvenation. Slavery and the continued substandard caste status of black Americans was a
social system that failed (he dubiously claims it inhibited economic development) because it

\[23\] Wilson Smith and Thomas Bender note about Gardner’s text, “The major theme of educational
excellence in the post-Sputnik years was increasingly posited in a sometimes tense relation to
egalitarian social pressures of the 1960s” (cited in Ferguson, 2012, p. 83).
wholesale lowered the race’s achievement. “All his rewards come, not from individualistic achievement, but from dependent compliance,” he writes (376).

Coupled with the emphasis on personal, individual achievement that was contemporaneously framed as a push against the presumed conformity of a Soviet future, excellence’s rise in the American consciousness was a product of its time. “In sum, excellence arose out of the interface between academy and federal government, an interface that was motivated by minority difference, and Gardner’s book would launch excellence as a standard for state and civil society, promoting it as a principle that would help to determine the character of social and subject formations alike, fostering it as a technology of power that would target both institutional and personal horizons,” Roderick Ferguson writes (2012, p. 83).

This chapter suggests—following the work of Ferguson—that this cultural move need be understood as part of a longer racial genealogy. Ferguson devotes an entire chapter of The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference to what he calls “The Racial Genealogy of Excellence,” which is hugely influential for my framing here because it helps unpack the veiled racial valence contained within these operationalizations.24 Inspired in large part by June Jordan’s landmark essay “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person” (1969), Ferguson suggests, following Jordan, that “seemingly abstract discourses of ‘standards’ and ‘excellence’ were part of the racialized genealogies of colonialism, slavery, and neocolonialism” (78) and that “conversation around excellence is shaped by a theorization that regards minority difference and culture as marginal” (81).

Excellence, he suggests, was a category used by the American academy “to reshape institutional engagements with minoritized subjects and knowledges,” functioning as “a mode of power that intertwines race and bureaucracy[…]reaches into conservative and progressive realms alike” (78-79). And “‘excellence’ fundamentally antagonizes democratic understandings of ‘the people,’ constructing them as the antithesis of that category’s principles” (89).

He suggests “discourse is rooted not only in academic parlance but also in the genealogies of slavery and colonialism and within the discourse of the liberal individual, that supreme figure of integration and incorporation into democratic and capitalist societies” (90).
More specifically, the presumptively neutral or agreed-upon standards which excellence relied upon rendered raced students as antithetical to achievement. Their presence in spaces of higher education (and by extension the formerly white high schools) implied that their presence there had only been earned by virtue of their legal case. This, of course, laid the groundwork for the anti-affirmative action arguments that stretch into the present day: Black students gain admission to highly selective institutions because of policies that force administrators to admit them; white students attend such institutions because they are, in a word, excellent.

This is contrasted by the Open Admissions movement launched in the 1960s, which advocated for unselective, noncompetitive college admissions to preclude discrimination. Opposition to Open Admissions, Jordan argued, rested upon the idea that this form of equity “would catapult the university into a trough of mediocrity” and “preclude excellence of standards and achievement” (Jordan, 1969, p. 20-21 cited in Ferguson, 2012, p. 79-80). To put it more directly, opposition to Open Admissions—something fundamental to the nature of special awarding—rested on the idea that racial others lacked the capacity to be excellent.

Excellence, according to Bill Readings, becomes the “common currency of ranking;” its “very lack of reference allows excellence to function as a principle of translatability between radically different idiom” (1996, p. 24). Its arbitrariness and subjectivity are masked by its broad affiliations with social science, the academy, and the nation itself. Further, it operates as a closed system, what Readings calls “a purely internal unit of value that effectively brackets all questions of reference or function, thus creating an internal market” (27). “Who could be against excellence?” he asks (28).

This chapter reveals, though, that the Fifties-era timing of its specific propagation ultimately served as a production of the affirmative “re-order” of racial hierarchy in the wake of Brown and other challenges to discriminatory racism. I argue that this is the cultural environment from which the GRAMMYs take their cue: to reaffirm and reestablish cultural hierarchy and the supremacy of art coded white against that which was coded black. The final third of this chapter is in effect a filtration of the previous two sections, examining how popular music found itself a key
target in the crosshairs of protectionism and negative discrimination, followed by the GRAMMYs advocacy for affirmative "excellence."

**GRAMMY Excellence as Raced Product: A Cultural Industries Problem**

"If we take even that doubtful but widely heralded test, the frequency of individual genius[…]. If we take the Genius as the savior of mankind, it is only possible for the white race to prove its own incontestable superiority by appointing both judge and jury and summoning its own witnesses"  

This final section explores discourse around popular and mass culture inaugurated contemporaneously to the policy and legal debates that precede it in this chapter. It suggests that the same discriminatory-to-affirmative racism moves were playing out in real time, with the anti-rock sentiments of the new intellectual class, credentialed into power by the national turn towards university life, making the GRAMMYs a logical move for a music industry similarly swayed. It suggests that these same conceptual debates made their way into the cultural industries whereby cultural protectionism logics coupled with excellence and individual achievement laid the groundwork for the GRAMMYs' founding.

This section gives weight to the suggestion that the GRAMMY voters themselves adopted the critical pose and prerogative of the emergent Fifties intelligentsia: Namely adopting the defensive stature, operating under the pretense that rock, the raced-black, teen-driven, popular-consumption genre of the times, needed to be put in its proper place. They were of course preaching to its perceived social ills, but, further, their more systematic move was to undertake a PR effort based on the excellence of non-rock music. This section suggests that moment was illustrating the power and persuasiveness of appeals to the affirmative.

In this concluding section, I read the Fifties-era cultural industries and intellectuals, specifically their anti-popular and anti-rock sentiment, as an analogous playing-out of excellence politics, where the GRAMMYs fit perfectly within a cultural moment where excellence becomes a *de facto* structuring racial logic, superseding the racism-as-ill-treatment model that international and legal entities were working against. Instead, emerging out of industrial and intellectual discourses where rock and other black-descended musics were roundly criticized, the
GRAMMYs’ adoption of excellence as an indisputable articulation for their results fit perfectly with the rhetorical moves of the time.

Though it would not be published in French until 1979 and in English five years later, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984) is a key text in elucidating the structures and contours of these cultural moves. “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class,’” (1-2) he writes. His word for aesthetic differentiation was taste, suggesting the imbricated nature of the social and the aesthetic. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,” he writes in an oft-quoted passage. “Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (6). This implies that the act of judgment of taste is a self-fulfilling prophesy, itself a marker of higher-level discernment.25

He also suggests a complex interplay between negative treatment of low culture and affirmative treatment of high culture. “The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures for ever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (7). Much of the rhetoric around the new genre of rock ‘n’ roll dealt with its unbridled emotionality; its name itself was purportedly a euphemism for sexual intercourse.26

25 Previously, Sheridan (1937, cited in Horowitz, 2012), optimistically believed that teaching taste would be a way to educate the masses. “The way to rescue civilization, by way of the motion picture would be to sharpen in every possible way the perceptions of those who attend, so that they will be critical of what they see and cognizant and responsive to the best when it was projected before them on the so-called ‘silver screen,’” she writes (174).
26 “It wasn’t just primitive or sloppy musicianship that Grammy founders reviled in rock. The raw energy and freedom of the music went completely against the grain of the repressed and fearful fifties,” Henry Schipper writes in *Broken Record: The Inside Story of the GRAMMY Awards.* “The
Recall also the postwar intellectual debates over mass culture led by such intellectuals as Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Paddy Whannel, Stuart Hall, CLR James, Ralph Ellison, Marshall McLuhan, and others. As this chapter turns to the cultural industries and the GRAMMYs themselves, their critiques should take on a new light: While many of their criticisms of the mass corporatization of the culture industry rang true then and now, this chapter writes against them when it frames their broader critique within the context of race and popular culture. What if all their high-minded attempts at cultural protectionism were concomitantly inflected by the subtext of racism? What if what they were essentially projecting their own insecurities about their potential obsolescence in a new, integrating world? In the music industry, distribution, standardization, replication and other forces that were pilloried as products of a manipulative culture industry—that Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) called "enlightenment as mass deception"—were at the same time forces of democratization and integration.

“What is the relationship between high culture and popular culture?” Raymond Williams would ask in 1974, outlining two positions that followed that question.

First, it is said that high culture—“the best that has been thought and written in the world”—is in danger, or is indeed already “lost,” because of widespread popular education, popular communications systems, and what is often called “mass society.” Secondly, that high culture—“the tradition”—is, in the main, the product of past stages of society, that it is ineradicably associated with ruling classes and with elites, and that it is accordingly being replaced in modern democratic conditions by a popular culture. The debate between these two positions has practical results in social policy both in the allocation of resources and in the political shaping of cultural institutions.

This (white) fear—of being replaced by minoritized others breaking down the gates of ivory towers—animates much of the GRAMMYs’ history, from their founding to the contemporary discomfort over hip-hop discussed in the final chapter of the dissertation. "Excellence" was a

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artistry of singers like Crosby, Sinatra, Como, and Cole lay in their ability to sublimate emotion, to transcend, refine, etherealize it. The results were sometimes exquisite, sometimes shallow, but always in keeping with the controlled posture of a generation that came of age during the Depression, fought World War II, then segued into the Cold War. Rock n’ roll was an antithesis, a yelping breakaway and discovery in youth of vitality and emotion—the end of the fifties in the midst of the fifties. Grammy elders complained about the noise of rock, but that was just a cover. It was the abandon, the shout, the idea of a shout, that put them in such a spin, deafened them to the exhilarating and sometimes liberating musicality of Elvis, Chuck Berry, and the rest. (1-2).
rhetorical justification for the buttressing of boundaries, functioning similarly to broader national sentiments.

The G.I. Bill of 1944 coupled with the postwar Baby Boom led to massive growth in credentialing through university degrees (almost tripling college admissions between 1950 and 1970 per *Time* (“Open Admissions: American Dream or Disaster?,” 1970, p. 63), creating a caste Packard (1959) described as a “diploma elite” in his work at the time; reviews of his work suggested this replaced “the old aristocracy of bloodlines and breeding” but cautioned against a “two dimensional class system” which fetishized “indicators of status.” The “credential society,” to quote Collins (1979), whose work would characterize the period, was about the proliferation of prizes and other institutional affirmations of excellence—a term they themselves had given oxygen. I argue that credentialing functioned ultimately in the service of a new, affirmative racial rhetoric. “The hierarchical array into which [social institutions] sort the citizenry[…]is neither as simple nor as meritocratic as the common wisdom suggests,” English (2008) writes.

The rise of cultural capital is [a] general expansion of the field on which cultural value in all its forms is produced, driven by a society’s greater and greater reliance on the maintenance and manipulation of what are at bottom arbitrary distinctions of symbolic rank or prestige. What has transformed society since the 1970s is not the rise of a new class per se but the rise of a formidable institutional system of credentialing and consecrating which has increasingly monopolized the production and distribution of symbolic capital, especially but not exclusively of educational honors and degrees, while at the same time making the accumulation or control of such capital more and more necessary to almost any exercise of power” (76). Bertrand (2000) suggests the postwar intellectual climate featured a caste of “cultural guardians,” public figures whose status “conferred prominence and the responsibility to protect and instruct their constituents and communities” (127). Concerned about the work of Riesman (1950) and others who suggested that innovation and creativity might come from those previously marked “lower,” integrating in the postwar climate, they used a combination of condemnations of low culture and the affirmation of higher culture to protect their own status. He calls their criteria of separation “arbitrary aesthetic standards” and suggests that the anti-rock sentiment among the intelligentsia was “couched in the language of taste” (127). This section provides a brief overview of some of these taste standards, again straddling the discriminatory and affirmative treatments.
“Within a mass-culture argument that labeled the majority passive and what the masses enjoyed as mechanical and contrived, critics lumped together as inane all idioms outside their own cultural spheres,” Bertrand writes. “Unable or unwilling to detect the diversity of the American community and the assorted voices straining to be heard, various literati categorized modern industrialized society as moronic and conformist. […] To the erudite, American culture seemed mired in a malaise of mediocrity” (130).

So this intellectual class—to justify their credentialed status through dialectical rejection of a lesser “other”—turned their lenses on popular culture. “Consumption constituted the last frontier, the last opportunity [for the intellectual] to exercise some influence on society” Jackson Lears writes (1989, cited in Bertrand, 2000). At the time, intellectuals were beginning to grasp the shift: Paul Lazarsfeld (1948) called their focus on dangers of radio and other mass cultural texts an “obsession,” suggesting a resentment among the intellectual class when their role as aspirational definers of taste seemed to be slackening. They instead adopted the rhetoric of protection so as to reinstall themselves and their subjects to their rightful order.

Though of course many intellectuals focused their ire on the latest scourge, the television, music also sat squarely in their crosshairs. One of the key protectors was Theodor Adorno, who published a number of pieces critiquing the commercialization of the production of music, including “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), *Philosophy of New Music* ([1948]2006), and others. To be at “false peace” with the industrialization of cultural production, he argued in *Philosophy*, was to “conform with calculated idiocy to mass culture” (9). He described the postwar as an era of “false musical consciousness,” which was witnessing “the collapse of all those criteria for distinguishing good from bad music that were initially sedimented in the early bourgeois period” (10) and lamented the divergence between public taste and the quality of work.

Max Lerner (1955) suggested society itself faced a crisis “in which almost everything is degenerate” and “genuine creativeness in the arts has dried up and popular culture casts its pall of deadly mediocrity over everything” (p. 24). The combination of a demand from upper-class
whites and the scholars’ desire to continue to prove their own relevance coalesced, birthing taste hierarchy that functioned along raced, classed, and ageist lines. “The manner in which the postwar cultural elite confronted rock ‘n’ roll demonstrates how a ruling group responds to challenges from antagonistic factions and values by quickly forming a defense strategy of containment and illegitimation,” Bertrand concludes (2000, p. 139).

Excellence continued to be an aspirational and unimpeachable *ne plus ultra*. Early in his career, Tom Wolfe—later a journalistic hero for his association with the Sixties’ New Journalism—made clear the connections between discriminatory and affirmative formulations discussed thus far in this chapter. His senior thesis, *A Zoo Full of Zebras: Anti Intellectualism in the United States* (1951, cited in Fishwick, 1991) critiqued the “unnaturalness” of postwar America, arguing that mass culture had won out, with a “mass man” destroyer unnaturally and unsatisfyingly leveling the world. “He crushes everything beneath him, tears everything alien to his level, and therefore everything which is excellent, down to that level, which is, like the technological naturalness of water, the lowest level,” he wrote, arguing that postwar Americans’ inability to understand the natural order was a matter of national concern. “Failing to find coherence, the mass man resorts to conformity, so that nobody else is better than he is amid this great riddle of the universe. So it is that America is preeminently a nation of Goodguys, of mediocre people bound forever to the sacred oath of non-excellence.[…]Something has gone out of our lives; love of the excellent” (Fishwick, 1991, p. 2-3).

It must not go missed that these critiques rang in an era where the musics that had ruined the critics’ careful curation came from black artists and genres. Jazz, in particular, while largely respected by NARAS, was a target of Adorno, who would suggest that it was dogged by “subjective expression” that dominated its objective artfulness, calling it inherently “comical, grotesque, and anal,” producing a “fundamentally ridiculous and heart-rending effect” ([1936]1989, p. 67-68). Reflecting on Adorno in an article titled “Why did Adorno ‘Hate’ Jazz?,” Witkin (2000) suggested the breakdown of distinctions would “lead ultimately to the sublation of art in mass cultural kitsch, its total colonization by the culture industries, which he saw as the
creatures of an overwhelming collective and administrative force. Jazz, in Adorno’s theoretic, is a product of the culture industries, a reflex of market relations” (151).

Rock ‘n’ roll was the intellectuals’ (and later the GRAMMYs’) dialectical opponent, against which its purported poverty of purpose and substance the awards would define themselves. “It smells phony,” Frank Sinatra, one of the GRAMMYs’ favored sons in the awards’ early days, said of rock ‘n’ roll. “It is sung, played and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration and sly, lewd—in plain fact—dirty lyrics, it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth” (cited in Schipper, 1992, p. 11). His sentiments were not alone—even as rock ‘n’ roll began to line industry executives’ pockets, a fervent resistance remained in place. Variety called it a “raw musical idiom [that] smell[ed] up the environment” (Lawson, p. 208). The format of music consumption became a marker of the divide, with the LP suggesting a more adult sophistication and the radio single a marker of the quick burst of youth. And the racial valence of this was never inescapable, in all regions of the States: “Following the landmark Brown decision, southern segregationists embarked on a campaign of massive resistance to racial equality that included attacks on black-inspired rock and roll. Joining them were northerners who believed that rock and roll, identified with working-class black and white youths, eroded middle-class values and standards of sexual conduct, thereby threatening the morality of their sons and, more important, their daughters,” Lawson argues (2002, p. 206).

Delmont (2012) even unpacks the degree to which the business feared rock ‘n’ roll due to its role in payola scandals: ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, which was at the time in the midst of a lengthy battle with its competitor Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) even hired Vance Packard (author of The Hidden Persuaders (1957)), who argued that “the rock and roll, hillbilly, and Latin American movements were largely engineered, manipulated for the interests of BMI, and … that the public was manipulated into liking rock and roll” (cited in Delmont, p. 144). The implication here is clear: Rock was part of the massified culture industry and deserving of scorn because its low commoditized status was broadly

The extent to which race and rock were separable—at least in this time period—is germane as well. One writer in 1954 suggested that the hate the genre inspired was due “solely from the fact that Negro musicians predominate in the field,” (Walker, 1956, quoted in Bertrand, 2000). George (1988) suggests a kind of effective minstrelization on the part of Alan Freed—the DJ who popularized the genre (and purported introduction of the phrase “rock ‘n’ roll” itself) on mainstream white radio in Ohio and New York—and white artists who caricatured it in their cover versions of black-recorded tunes, hurting its candidacy for excellence. “Music made by the white bands was inevitably (and often deliberately) adolescent, addressed to adolescent ears about adolescent fears,” George argues (68). And as for Freed, George argues that based on the slipperiness of what constituted rock ‘n’ roll in Freed’s radio oeuvre, the term itself was a bit of an open signifier. “[I]f rhythm & blues was the discovery of the black market, rock & roll was the exploitation of white teens, first by Freed and then by marketeers without his ingenuity,” he writes (67-68).

These calculations had a cost: Even white performers and supporters could not move rock into higher esteem. Black performers were a nonstarter, but white performers such as Elvis Presley—who intentionally caricatured and mimicked black dance, dress, and affect—further reinscribed the genre’s low-class status. “[T]o applaud black excellence and white mediocrity with the same vigor is to view them as equals, in which case the black artist in America always loses,” George writes (92).

So instead, the GRAMMYs began as a way to re-establish distinctions in the industry between high and mass culture, which subsequently fell along racial lines. The GRAMMYs tasked themselves with taking something subjective—musical appreciation—and standardizing it, canonizing and codifying a stylistic hierarchy, eventually grouped—like the times—around
excellence as an unquestionable unifying principle. Taking the 1927 founding of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—itself created as an anti-progressive means of union-busting—as its model\(^\text{27}\), the GRAMMYs, this chapter suggests, were established as a kind of affirmative discrimination model, whereby the elevation of their group of “excellent” winners functioned just like they did in the education discourse outlined by the previous chapter.

The Walk of Fame opening was the spatial realization of what would become the GRAMMYs’ political project: “NARAS created the Grammys, at least in part, to clean up and gentrify pop,” Schipper writes. “The Walk, it was hoped, would maintain property values in Tinseltown. The Grammys, it was hoped, would maintain musical values—as understood by esteemed elders like Weston and his peers” (9). The way to do this was to create a model where, as judge and jury, NARAS could dictate the industry’s hierarchy based on their own preferences.

Also, like the Oscars, the GRAMMYs from their outset favored an academy model where they invited (and thus created) a creative high-caste of experts, drawing a line in the sand whereby their ears were more attuned to acknowledge and award the metric they sought, even as it remained usefully vague. With the purportedly lessened impact of criticism in a populist culture industries space against which the academies were doubling down, credentialing and “achievement” became the new way to delineate.

After its formation in 1957, NARAS moved fairly quickly towards establishing its bonafides. Coverage in trade publications of the time suggests NARAS was focusing on building its membership by adding a New York chapter to pair with the Brown Derby crew in Los Angeles (England would come on board in 1958), though early coverage suggested its executive committee was focused on developing qualifications for membership (“Switch Thrown,” July 29, 1957, p. 20). The fact that this featured in the limited coverage suggested rhetorical and

\(^{27}\) Contemporary publications of the Oscars suggest that during the first meeting of the Academy—held in 1927 at the Biltmore in Los Angeles—focused on the hinge word of this chapter. “Among the topics discussed that night was how best to honor outstanding moviemaking achievements and thereby encourage excellence in all facets of motion picture production,” their website reads (Emphasis mine).
discursive emphases on qualification. At the same time, friendly trade group RIAA’s head, John Griffin, suggested that current circumstances had made the establishment of the Recording Academy necessary (“Newly Formed NARAS,” June 10, 1957, p. 18).

Those circumstances were evident: NARAS’s musical priorities were made clear even in positive, PR-style pieces that ran in trades at the time: President Guy Lombardo offered the nascent space program at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio records with the eye towards buoying the early astronauts’ moods. “Airman Donald Farrell, who just lasted seven days in a simulated moon trip, says he was ‘cheered by soft hi-fi music’ piped into his sealed five-foot cabin,” Billboard reported (“Music Hath Charms,” February 24, 1958, p. 8).

Only six months later (“Naras Preps Plans,” December 30, 1957, p. 13), Billboard was discussing the organization’s plans for awards. “The academy has now achieved a sufficient stature in terms of the number and quality of its membership that we can make tangible plans for nominations, voting, and presentation of awards on a national television show,” Jim Conklin said during a meeting of the Los Angeles chapter.

Awards became the key focus: Their first general membership meeting, held Wednesday, May 28, 1958, in New York focused on the awards show to recognize “bests” in the recording field. George Avakian, described as a “sparkplug of the outfit” described separate categories for pop and classical musics. During the Q&A following Avakian’s presentation, drummer and member of the West Coast chapter, Chico Hamilton asked a pointed question: “Mr. Chairman, will the Academy try to bring back music?” (“NARAS Holds Meeting,” June 2, 1958, p. 5). Avakian replied “Very definitely.”

That year was filled with dry runs of the balloting process (outlined in Zhito, June 30, 1958, p. 1). In advance of the first awards, a full-page advertisement in the January 5, 1959 Billboard invited songwriters, conductors, artists-and-repertoire, producers, composers, engineers, literary editors, arrangers, musicians, comedy acts, documentary and spoken performers, singers, album art directors, and record performers (narrators, etc.) all to join the
organization, which would serve its stated purpose; To bring recognition to its creative men and women” ([Advertisement], January 5, 1959, p. 36).

The awards would be held May 4, 1959, commemorating releases from 1958. The General Field—Album, Song, and Record of the Year—featured no black nominees. Rock, the genre dominating discourse and the charts, had no category at all. The first GRAMMY for R&B, a raced-black genre, was won by The Champs’ Latin-influenced “Tequila.” Jazz received categories in the awards’ early years, though it ran up against the same glass ceiling problem that other black categories would throughout the awards' history, with a systemwide block against crossover.

A certain kind of black music—made by a certain kind of black artist—did fit the description laid out by the GRAMMY credo in the early years. Ella Fitzgerald won fourteen GRAMMYs. Ray Charles won nine R&B awards between 1960 and 1966. But again, the majority of these came in black categories, with the General Field being all-white until 1965 when Brazilian João Gilberto’s collaboration with white American jazz musician Stan Getz, Getz/Gilberto, featuring ”The Girl from Ipanema” took home Record and Album of the Year and suit-and-tied Louis Armstrong’s “Hello Dolly” won Song of the Year. It would not be until 1967 that a rock album—The Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band—would break through into the General Field. Disappointingly, by that time, much of rock’s black roots had been obscured by the genre’s racial remaking in the nation’s imagination (see Hamilton, 2016).

Certain stars were rewarded while others such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and the various recording artists of Motown Records went unrecognized. “We had nothing to do with rock ‘n’ roll, nor did we care much for it,” Les Brown, a white jazz artist who was the first president of the Los Angeles chapter, told Schipper unabashedly after the fact. “NARAS was founded to reward the good stuff—what we though was the good stuff—and to challenge the crap” (1992, p. 2). Two years later, the GRAMMY Credo—emphasizing excellence—would codify the process.

**Conclusion**
In a few short words, this quote from Les Brown sums up the push and pull of discriminatory and affirmative racial treatment and how it manifest in the GRAMMYs foundations. This chapter essentially argues for “excellence” as a presumptively colorblind measurement that is an outgrowth of a discursive moment in which discriminatory “negative” definitions of racism were replaced by the more coded, insidious affirmative racism. The nation’s discomfiture between its purported theoretical creed and its ultimate reality needed an explanation, and that explanation—namely that some people, art, and music just so happened to be “better” than others—ultimately functioned as colorblind, affirmative racism, maintaining racial division.

The final Du Bois epigraph which leads the previous section—“it is only possible for the white race to prove its own incontestable superiority by appointing both judge and jury and summoning its own witnesses” (1940, p. 143)—is in essence the cultural work this chapter alleges “excellence” (and ultimately he GRAMMYs themselves) to be doing. In response to an unavoidably integrating industry, they set the parameters of superiority and redirected racial ideas and attitudes from discrimination to exultation.

Like discrimination, affirmative aesthetic distinction too reflects and reifies racial baggage and history, and this chapter illustrates that from an under-examined direction. In setting the stage for the larger history, this chapter suggests that environment into which the GRAMMYs emerge should be understood as a moment where declarations of excellence would hold persuasive and cultural sway.

The GRAMMYs, I would argue, are effectively an outgrowth of the masked sentiments described throughout this chapter, where an emphasis on (in their case musical) excellence performs the hidden labor of maintaining structural racism. Then as now, “excellence” remains an empty term, evidenced by the GRAMMYs continued inability to articulate what makes an album, song, or record deserving of the award in the first place. This point is largely missed in emphasizing anti-rock discourse, in part because from their inception—and to this day, quite frankly—the GRAMMYs lack a clear definition for what “excellence” is. Voters just so happen to know it when they see it.
“There is a way of measuring excellence that involves comparison between people—some are musical geniuses and some are not; and there is another that involves comparison between myself at my best and myself at my worst,” John Gardner wrote in 1961 (128). Ultimately, though, these are not two distinct modes of comparison: One’s self at their best is itself a product of context-driven comparison. It must not be taken for granted or missed altogether that the “pursuit of excellence” so seemingly naturalized within the American experience takes its cue from a discursive moment in which the term came to use to redraw boundary lines integration was crossing. If it means anything at all, this environment of meaning-making must be considered. And in the case of the Fifties, rock ‘n’ roll, and the GRAMMYs foundations, excellence became a key concept in a new form of colorblind taste segregation.

“This is the truly marvelous way in which you prove your superiority by admitting that our love of life can only be intelligently explained on the hypothesis of inferiority,” Du Bois wrote in response to his hypothetical white friend extolling the excellence of whiteness over blackness (147). The excellence of culture and song lifted up by the GRAMMYs should be understood within a broader spectrum of differential acclaim—a racial genealogy of excellence, as Ferguson writes. The maintenance and defense of boundaries around distinctions between high art and popular culture recurs at different times with different players, stakes, and sounds. But racial difference is always the defining heuristic.

“‘High culture,’ then, has no real social structure, but at best a professional structure or series of professional structures in which people inherit and practice a selection of skills and maintain and disseminate a selection of works,” Raymond Williams would write in 1974. “Such professional structures have important common interests, from an international perspective, in such activities as the study of alternative traditions, visiting, exchange-teaching, translation and so on. They also have important common interests, in national perspectives, in maintaining and extending the skills and works that they value.” This chapter explores the interconnected nature of professional structuration in the national and international context postwar context. What was
the common interest in a new doubling-down on excellence during a time of integration? This chapter suggests that they were dual approaches in service of the same racist system.

Moving forward, this chapter inaugurates an ongoing analysis throughout the dissertation and the larger project—that "excellence," or at least the GRAMMYs' and larger mediascape's interpretations of it—is contextual and must be considered within their time to fully understand it. But, the following chapter asks, what would it take for a black artist to follow in the footsteps of Oliver Brown, the Little Rock Nine, and others who integrated their institutional context? How could black artists break the GRAMMYs' "excellence" boundary?
Chapter 2: Stevie Wonder, Black Genius and Herald of Industry Integration

To this day, one of the oft-recalled “GRAMMY Moments” from the GRAMMYs’ second decade is remembered as Paul Simon took the podium on February 28, 1976 to accept the 1975 Album of the Year Award for his album *Still Crazy After All These Years*. “Well, I’m very happy to win this. I want to thank Phil Ramone, who co-produced this with me,” the diminutive singer-songwriter said bashfully. “And Phoebe Snow who sang along with me on the album. And Art Garfunkel who sang with me on ‘My Little Town.’ And most of all I’d like to thank Stevie Wonder, who didn’t make an album this year.”

So large loomed Stevie Wonder, at the time a twenty-six-year-old wunderkind who had taken home the Album of the Year GRAMMY each of the two preceding years and would go on to win it again the following year in 1977, for the instant classic *Songs in the Key of Life*. Wonder—the first, second, and third black Album of the Year winner, almost singlehandedly changed the GRAMMYs General Field from a criminally under-representative space for black creators, where no album by a black artist took home the album award in the GRAMMYs’ first fifteen years, to a 16% black winners’ list by year eighteen. It would be seven years before another black artist would win Album of the Year when Michael Jackson’s nigh-undeniable *Thriller* was recognized in 1984, followed by Lionel Richie’s *Can’t Slow Down* the following year before another five-year gap. To date, only four other acts (Simon, U2, Taylor Swift, and Adele, none of whom are black) have won Album of the Year twice and only one other artist—Frank Sinatra, of course—has three Album of the Year trophies. Wonder’s three awards in Best Pop Vocal Performance, Male, were only the third by a black performer in the awards’ first two decades, after singular awards by Louis Armstrong in 1965 and Ray Charles in 1961. Wonder was a barrier-breaker, a precedent-setter, and a unique figure in the history of the GRAMMY Awards, unquestionably producing “excellent” music in the eyes of the Academy at a rate and level no black artist before or since has achieved.
The academy was not alone in this assessment—the 1970s have come be known as Wonder’s “classic period,” in which he released a quintet of albums—*Music of My Mind* (1972), *Talking Book* (1972), *Innervisions* (1973), *Fulfillingness’ First Finale* (1974), and *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976)—that were marked for their lyrical and conceptual themes and technological newness through the use of electronic synthesizers and Wonder’s broad instrumental proficiency, in which he often played most or all of the instruments on the records. They were notably interpellated by journalists and the Recording Academy as individualist, auteurist statements, where Wonder, having freshly signed a new contract with his label, Motown Records, had successfully lobbied for an unheard-of degree of creative and artistic control from the notoriously controlling, black-owned Detroit label. Wonder was credited with playing most—if not all—of the instrumental parts on many of these records. This was an artist operating at the peak of his creative powers, with moving and stirring songs springing from him in wave after wave as the prophetic blind virtuoso wrote the post-Civil Rights American songbook. The blind “Prophet of Soul” was evidence of an integrating music industry—a black artist who had earned widespread acclaim as a true artist. There had been many black artists who had achieved commercial and popular success since the GRAMMYs’ founding, but only Wonder grabbed voters’ attentions and ballots, becoming the most successful crossover artist in GRAMMY history.

“The term ‘crossover’ has its own curious history, and it—as well as the term ‘popularity’—has served as a sign in ideological debates,” David Brackett writes in 1994 in an article about the mid-Sixties moment.

“Some see the idea of crossover as utopian, a metaphor for integration, upward mobility, and ever-greater acceptance of marginalized groups by the larger society. Others see it as an inevitable result of dividing and hierarchizing musical style and audiences: after all, a mainstream can define itself only in relation to the margins. Put another way, the term ‘crossover’ implies that there must be discrete boundaries between musical styles, for a recording can only ‘cross over’ when one style is clearly demarcated from another. However, the act of dividing and hierarchizing musical styles and audiences is never innocent or natural (and the fact that it is unstable attests to this): some stand to benefit from the way the hierarchy is constructed while others will lose out” (p. 777).

This chapter and the dissertation more broadly are concerned with an interlocking set of dichotomous demarcations: race and excellence. Crossover was a running narrative of the 1970s
(Kirsch, January 3, 1976, p. 1), where the timing of crossover as it relates to post-Sixties integration is impossible to overstate. Typically, crossover is understood in terms of record sales, market segmentation, radio airplay. But what this chapter seeks to understand is a kind of acclaim-crossover. Why did Wonder and to a lesser extent his other black contemporaries who won General Field categories successfully traverse an acclaim gulf that had always carried with it the heavy baggage of racial disconnect and notions of white artistic superiority?

So what was it about Wonder’s music and the time in which he was writing it that made him the first black artist to win the most significant General Field award, and, further, dominate it throughout the mid-1970s? Recall: To this point in the awards’ history, Album of the Year had never been won by a black artist until Wonder’s triumph for Innervisions in 1974. In the preceding sixteen years, only Ella Fitzgerald (1959), Harry Belafonte (1960, 1961), Nat King Cole (1961, 1962), Ray Charles (1963), The 5th Dimension (1970), and Isaac Hayes (1972) had been nominated for Album of the Year. From 1964 through 1969, no black artists were nominated for Album of the Year. This chapter thus asks and posits answers to a resultingly straightforward question: Why was Stevie Wonder so beloved by NARAS? Why was he the artist to break through and his the album to break through?

The answer, this chapter suggests, is because Wonder’s combination of unique backstory and technical skill—paired with music-industrial, cultural and technological developments—created an image of him as an almost superhuman figure whose unique standing (as a blind-but-highly-skilled composer of conceptually rich music) allowed him to make auteurist art that transcended typical tropes around black popular music-making as a quotidian, non-artistic process. The mainstream music and newspaper press evidenced Wonder’s individuality and argued for its significance, which flew in the face of long-historical presumptions about black music itself as well as the reputation of his label, Motown, the lodestar of black pop in the Sixties. Further, his conciliatory nature and physical disability made him an ideal token figure for industrywide admiration in an integrating moment. Stevie Wonder—the blind prophet of a soulful past and a technofuturist present—dominated the GRAMMYs because he was the first black
musician that the GRAMMYs truly recognized as an artistic genius whose work met their purportedly high standards for artistry. His work stood above the work of other black musicians before him because, due to his disability and perceived singular, persistent excellence, he alone had willed himself to greatness.

From his beginnings as a twelve-year-old sensation, Wonder was treated as a musical genius, a self-taught savant gifted with other-worldly talent. As he grew, narratives around this raw talent (and his own artistic prerogatives) coalesced into a figure granted more artistic attention than his black peers and, as a result, a GRAMMYs experience where the General Field and the Pop categories—largely foreclosed to many black artists who came before—were thrown open to him. This GRAMMY acceptance, this chapter suggests, comes because of the combination of narratives and choices made earlier by his label, Motown, and later by Wonder himself. It contextualizes Wonder’s rise, using national media and industry press discourse to tell a cultural history of Wonder’s rise, where newspaper advertisements, interviews, and other discourse throughout the 1960s paint Wonder as a unique genius figure.

This chapter argues that, to a large extent, black musicality is discursively constructed as a collective force and that this construction is ultimately detrimental to black musicians’ cases for GRAMMY-ordained musical excellence, especially in the face of white discourses around individual achievement. Stevie Wonder was the first black artist to achieve significant General Field and crossover success because he, unlike so many popular black artists who had come before, was framed and seen as a thoughtful individual, an artist. If the GRAMMYs are a meritocracy seeking to reward artistic achievement, they rest on a long history of artist-as-individual-creator narratives. This chapter suggests those narratives are raced, whereby discourse (and to a lesser extent Afro diasporic cultural history, though that is exaggerated by the discourse itself) delimits black musical individuality, suggesting instead that black popular musics spring whole-cloth from black culture, black spaces, and black life. The church and other black spaces “wrote” black popular music, and if black music is a vernacular product of black life, then it is not “art” in the singular artist-as-creator model. This dichotomy is rendered most clearly in the
case of Wonder because the narratives around his career and his GRAMMY success suggest he is an outlier. It would take a truly exceptional black artist to make individual popular contributions worth acknowledging, and if Stevie Wonder was to be the first black artist accepted by the GRAMMY Awards, he would have to undo a lengthy discursive cultural history. He would need to rewire voters' conceptions of black music itself.

The albums that ultimately earn the Recording Academy’s acclaim are thus contextualized after more than a decade of narrative-building. By the “classic period,” the stage has been set, and Wonder’s genius status was furthered by his reputation as a technological expert—for instance, the liner notes to 1974 Album of the Year winner, *Innervisions*, credit him as having played every instrument on the album—pushing against Motown’s race-based narratives of black music as a product of the label—a collective “machine”—rather than singular voices. In industry and popular discourses, it was taken-for-granted that the early white lions of GRAMMY acclaim—Frank Sinatra, Henry Mancini—produced creative work by virtue of their exceptional status, whereas black artists such as were products of a race of people from which culture and art sprung whole-cloth. Motown, the largest black-owned business in America through the 1970s (“The 100 largest black-owned,” May 10, 1982), was discursively framed as a factory which successfully turned its artists into cogs in a machine; the nascent American music press helped facilitate that narrative and publicized the story of Wonder breaking free from it. That discursive formation led to GRAMMY success.

Part of Wonder’s appeal for the Recording Academy, we can conclude, was because discourses around his creative process and products throughout his entire career—but especially during the “classic period”—(as well as the products themselves) positioned Wonder as an individualist, a singular actor, a genius. This was particularly noteworthy given how Wonder’s contemporaries were framed: Recently, in a similar analysis of Sam Cooke, Hamilton (2016) situated argued that rhetoric around the work of Cook (contrasted with that of white “genius” Bob Dylan) “perpetuates notions of ‘authentic’ black musicality that are rooted in imaginings of black music as primordial and premodern”(35). This disconnect is a point from which we can unspool a
race-based understanding of Wonder’s trajectory, where the idea of “black genius” was the sum of a set of historical and discursive phenomena.

In media discourse, Wonder was Sam Cooke’s converse—his originality and individuality plus forward-thinking, genius-level compositional and performance skill set him apart from those who were set apart by their race. It would be too grandiose to suggest Wonder is a unique figure within the history of American recorded music, but the admixture of individual and collective expression(s) is a fundamental conversation within scholarly literature and musicological-historical literatures of African, Afrodiasporic, and African American music. Theorizing that the GRAMMYs’ embrace of Wonder is tied to long-held and historically grounded notions of black collectivism (versus white individuality) is thus an explanation for the impact of the primary-source materials explored in the body of this chapter. His greatness was linked to a long-historical set of presumptions wherein music was understood to be ontologically embedded in black life that could be connected to Africa itself, and his ability to transcend that was key to his crossover appeal and potential for “true artistic genius” in the eyes of GRAMMY voters and America itself.  

“Dance, Drum, and Song was inseparable from the traditional communities in which it existed—communities in which social and cultural conformity and egalitarianism prevailed, in which extraordinary individual achievement and the failure to live up to one’s social obligations were interpreted as hostility toward the community,” Samuel Floyd (1995, 33) writes, referencing the work of Basil Davidson (1969, 66). Music and musical innovation, Floyd and Davidson concluded, took place in a “robustly collective” society where collective responsibility meant that any individual achievement was supposed to serve African communities.  

28 This follows Bohlman (1999)’s tripartite ontological approach to music—as object, process, or something embedded. I argue specifically for the presence of what was then a raced understanding of black music as the third.  
29 Timothy S. Hughes (2003), who has written a dissertation on the music of Wonder, nuances the distinction I am drawing here. "While the collective voice is certainly also emphasized in African-American music, it is not emphasized 'over the individual voice' because, in most African-American musical traditions, the collective voice is made of individual voices. The group is not a single entity of multiple parts, but a number of distinct individuals working in concert. The intersections of the individuals constitute the collective, while the collective provides the background that allows individuality to be perceived. I contend that the working out of this
“It was this system, with its moral and aesthetic supports, that would most fundamentally determine the emergence and course of African-American music,” Floyd writes (34). The field and work songs of newly force-imported slaves throughout the Americas—what Du Bois called “the sole American music” (1969)—were sung in concert by dozens of enslaved field workers in concert. The blues, Barlow (1989) writes, were “a mix of personal sentiments and collective memory” (4). Gates and McKay (2004) describe much of black American expression as a “vernacular tradition.”

“African, Afro-American and Caribbean music is based on quite different principles from the European classical tradition,” sociologist Dick Hebdige (1987) writes in Cut ‘n’ Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music, drawing a more definitive (and concerning) conclusion. “The collective voice is given precedence over the individual voice of the artist or the composer” (11). Adorno (1980), one of the villains of the early pre-GRAMMY intellectual discourse, called jazz “rhythmic-spatial music,” “sprouting forth everywhere as though they are rooted in nature” (p. 164).

Monson (2010, cited in Ramsey 2013) suggests that the Sixties were generally the moment in “populist notions of what might be called African identification reached its apex” (102). The Sixties movements—Civil Rights, Black Nationalism, Black Arts—were very much about legitimizing and making specific the coherence and trajectory of the black American experience. This creates a problem, though: Music-making as a collective experience, Miller argues, “has a tendency to trap individuals within a racial collectivity, naturalizing music as an outgrowth of one’s life rather than as a cultivated talent and obscuring the meaning and uses of art that falls outside of racially defined cultural borders” (2010, p. 74, cited in Hamilton, 2016, p. 42). The collective experience—epitomized by the Motown Machine—ultimately delegitimized the work of its artists because of these long-held notions about the nature of black musicality as non-art and, this chapter argues, explains the representational lack of Motown artist wins throughout the label’s paradoxical combination of the group and the individual—the musical expression of the basic human desire to belong and yet be different—is one of the most powerful forces shaping American popular music and is the source of the key, twin mechanisms of groove and flow.”
Sixties apogee. Black popular music was seen as largely outside the awards’ purview. This chapter suggests that that representational dearth is symptomatic of a music industry ecosystem that rejected black popular music on the grounds of its unexceptional nature—music made to soundtrack the loud, lurid desires of the teen-aged masses the Recording Academy loathed.

Stevie Wonder helped the GRAMMYs see that black popular music could be both commercially and critically successful, and with Motown as a convenient scapegoat against which pitched battles could be fought, Wonder’s success was a product of his own skill and the atmospheric social and cultural forces around him.

It is important to clarify that this chapter does not suggest that Wonder transcended his race. It does however suggest that Wonder’s music and discursive status ultimately created room for a kind of purchase seldom afforded to black musicians. If any black artist was going to be accepted by the academy to this degree, it might as well have been a man Ebony once called the “blind seer apocalyptically exposing America’s injustices” (Slater, 1977, p. 31). Wonder became the first black darling of the Academy; this chapter contextualizes Wonder’s place in the industry history.

So, more than any other chapter, the following pages focus on one artist in particular because that artist, Wonder, sits at the intersection of social, cultural, and music industrial integration, new developments in technology, and rhetorics of creativity in the GRAMMYs’ history and the broader shadow of the awards. To understand Stevie Wonder’s place within the music industry in the 1970s is to understand the prerogatives and logics of the industry itself. This chapter thus attempts to use historical methods to show the development and lasting impact of discourses around Wonder, illustrating Wonder’s social and critical standing and using that history to make clear the working politics of the music industry during this period.

Fifty-odd years after he burst onto radio and later rose to a reputation of artistic excellence, Wonder holds 25 GRAMMY wins from 74 nominations, with his first nominations coming in 1966 for “Up-Tight” for R&B Recording and Vocal Performance. The subsequent four nominations throughout the later Sixties were also in R&B categories before his breakthrough.
awards in 1973, when he captured Album of the Year (Innervisions) and Best Pop Vocal Performance, Male (“You Are the Sunshine of My Life,” which was nominated for Record and Song of the Year) alongside wins for “Superstition” in Best R&B Vocal Performance, Male and Best R&B Song. The following year, Fulfillingness’ First Finale took home Album of the Year and Best Pop Vocal Performance, Male, with genre wins for “Boogie On Reggae Woman” (Best R&B Vocal Performance, Male) and “Living for the City” (Best R&B Song) as well as a nomination for Best Producer of the Year. After a yearlong hiatus in 1975, his return in 1976 yielded a Best Producer of the Year win alongside his third Album of the Year and Best Pop Vocal Performance trophies for Songs in the Key of Life. To that point, only Frank Sinatra—the champion of the old guard—had experienced such a period of sustained acclaim.

This mapped onto broader cultural change with regard to the standing of black artists in creative industries: The awards industry apparatus also began to take notice of black artists, with Isaac Hayes’s “Theme from Shaft” from the film of the same name winning the Academy Award for Best Music/Original Song in 1971, the first Academy Award for a black winner in a non-acting category (and only the third overall, after Sidney Poitier won Best Actor in 1963 for portraying Homer Smith in Lilies of the Field and, of course, Hattie McDaniel won Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Mammy in 1939’s Gone with the Wind). Black playwright Charles Gordone was the first black Pulitzer Prize for Drama winner in 1970, taking home the award for No Place to Be Somebody, his work on the intersection of racial and rural/urban tensions. Leroy “Satchel” Paige became the first black baseball player inducted into Major League Baseball’s Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. Cultural industries were beginning to acknowledge black people and their contributions to the broader culture industries. The stage was set for Wonder’s coronation.

“It was one man, actually, who brought together the entire black American tradition for the world to witness in the 1970s,” author Ricky Vincent later wrote about the period. “Stevie brought together the entire black music legacy and served up plate after plate of exquisite soul-food gumbo, and made diverse, digestible music that funk bands far and wide aspired to” (Vincent,
1996, 131-33). This chapter situates that one man within a broader music industry ecosystem, tracing his rise and sustained apogee in a post-Civil-Rights music industry.

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Born Stevland Hardaway Judkins (later changing his surname to Morris) on May 13, 1950 in Saginaw, Michigan, Wonder moved with his mother, Lula Mae Hardaway, to Detroit as a four-year-old after his parents divorced. Six weeks premature, he was diagnosed with retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) during his time in neonatal care and was, as a result, blind. He displayed an aptitude for music from an early age, though, picking up the harmonica at the age of four after receiving a four-holed harp from an uncle (Davis, 2003, p. 19). Within a few years, he had mastered the piano and been gifted a drum set. Along with another neighborhood boy, John Glover, Wonder, still not yet a teen, performed Motown tunes and gained attention around urban Detroit.

Concurrently in Detroit, failed record store owner Berry Gordy Jr. had just incorporated Motown Record Corporation on April 14, 1960. Setting up shop at 2648 West Grand Boulevard in what would become the Hitsville U.S.A. building, Gordy signed his first act, the Miracles (né the Matadors), who would go on to have a number-one-charting R&B hit with “Shop Around.” Ronnie White, one of the group’s members, was introduced to Wonder by his brother, Gerald White. Ronnie White arranged for an audition at Motown for Stevie—first with talent scout Brian Holland (later one third of the iconic Motown songwriting trio Holland-Dozier-Holland) and then with Gordy himself. “Little Stevie Wonder” became Motown’s youngest signee at eleven years young, releasing his first LP, *The Jazz Soul of Little Stevie*, in September 1962. By 1963, he was performing alongside many of the future legends of Motown during a “Show of Stars” in Evansville, Indiana (“1963 ‘Show of Stars,’” April 25, 1963, p. 3) as a thirteen-year-old and was billed as an “Extra Added Attraction”—a kind of curiosity—as part of a traveling Motown Revue in *Baltimore Afro-American* papers that summer (June 15, 1963, p. 20). The tour, which hit many
Chitlin’ Circuit venues throughout the American South, was an awakening for many Motown artists (Werner, 2004, p. 111).

In his *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, George (1988) suggests these tours were also important in helping build Motown’s relationship with national black DJs. The fledgling label lacked the ability to provide lucrative under-the-table payola payments, instead relying upon “racial solidarity to overcome an early lack of capital” (88). Many of these shows would be booked without payment for the label, instead traded for valuable radio airtime. Gordy entered into a similar relationship with Ruth Bowen, the first black female talent agent, who ran Queen Booking Corporation. But before too long, Gordy’s impulses were revealed—he began to book the larger acts through the national powerhouse the William Morris Agency, a move George suggests was emblematic of an “integrationist philosophy” and one that primarily served his label rather than the other fledgling businesses of the black music industry.30

By October, “Little Stevie” was receiving top billing in New York and Indianapolis over more established acts such as The Miracles, Marvin Gaye, and Martha and the Vandellas. He would tour Europe that spring after appearing for the first time on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in January 1964, a month before The Beatles would make their fated first appearance on the program.31 Despite his rising profile, *The Jazz Soul of Little Stevie* did not chart, but its connection to a substantive genealogy was clear.

30 “As the decade progressed, Bowen found integration’s victories created new battles for her and other black entrepreneurs bred in the Chitlin’ Circuit,” George writes. “In the Fifties the battle had been to get black acts decent money from black-oriented venues, as well as some consideration from whites. The fight now was with white mainstream business people for the very acts they’d once ignored. In the industry there was, in Dave Clark’s words, ‘white payola’ and "black payola," a financial double standard in which whites were usually given more money for airplay. There was also, in the minds of blacks raised in the music world and beyond, a sense of inferiority that gave them little confidence that blacks could perform traditionally white jobs. Motown’s embrace of white booking agents and implicit rejection of Queen shows the effects that the combination of successful integration and powerful feelings of black inadequacy could have. It was a bad omen for the R&B world” (89).

31 Ironically, Wonder would share the bill on *Ed Sullivan* in May 1964 with part of the cast of a minstrel show set to perform at the Louisiana World Exposition world’s fair later that month (“TV Scout,” May 1, 1964, p. 2).
Jazz was a genre that made sense to connect to Wonder due to the prevalence of “genius-talk” among its practitioners and press. While the collective/individual trap was still being discussed in jazz circles—“You see, jazz was so much a part of our total way of life that it got not only into our attempts at playing classical music but into forms of activities usually not associated with it: into marching and into football games, where it has become a familiar fixture,” Ralph Ellison suggested to an interviewer in 1961 (1964, p. 10)—jazz had elaborated sets of rhetorics around genius for years. Many more broadly used the idea of genius to argue for the quality of the genre, something Ellison described as a “thrust toward respectability” (Ellison, 1995, cited in Ashe, 1999, p. 282). “[T]he jazz industry worked overtime in a complex dance to secure the music as a discrete art world,” Ramsey writes (2013, p. 94).


“Literary production is, of course, the most prestigious of the three; after all, this activity reflects the kind of cultural capital most closely linked to western cultural dominance. The physical labor associated with the legacies of slavery, sharecropping, and the institutionalization of a black service class continues to shape how black achievements in other spheres are interpreted. Toiling black bodies became distanced from associations with intellectual pursuits. Musical ability seems to occupy a middle ground in this configuration.[…]Thus, the proclamation of Powell's astounding musical abilities cannot be understood as simply an acknowledgment of a virtuoso’s creative work, but must be thought of as part of a larger complex of ideas”(95).

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32 For many, the collective didactic nature of jazz was vital for agential, black nationalist purposes. “The black musician is ahead of everyone in the expression of true black sensibility,” jazz critic Ron Wellburn wrote in 1972. “For him, negritude or soul or blackness has never been a matter for soap-box articulation. . . . More than any other kind of black artist, the musician creates his own and his people’s soul essence, his own negritude. He can also do more damage to the oppressor’s image of himself than heavily armed urban guerrillas. . . . Black musicians do not really think about the aesthetic; they simply project it. Soul is a manner of dancing, walking, speaking, interpreting life as we see and know it. . . .We should all, then, re-establish ourselves as musicians: every black American can at least become a drummer or learn to play on a simple reed flute, just as every black person can dance. (135; cited in Waksman, 1999)
But by the 1960s, jazz had moved away from the popular consciousness and instead into the dark, smoky clubs where nightly bebop excursions thrilled the shrinking crowds. "Genius" in jazz was a cloistering trade-off whereby its ascendance to "high art" status occurred consequently and simultaneously with the "genius status" for its progenitors. What makes Wonder unique in this frame, then, is that his black genius would go on to be a popular one, where he was able to assert a right to his "genius" title while still making commercially oriented music. By the time he was an adult, much of his childhood output would be reflected on as novelties, though they were purported to be the works of a "genius" at the time. And "genius" stuck to Wonder throughout the entirety of his career.

*Recorded Live: The 12 Year Old Genius*, released in the summer of 1963, became Wonder’s big break: The album hit #1 on the *Billboard* charts (the label’s first #1 crossover album), along with lead single "Fingertips" on which he played vocals, bongos, and harmonica. "Fingertips" became a hit, rising to number 1 on both the *Billboard* Pop Singles chart and the R&B Singles chart. Garnering positive reviews throughout the nation, "Fingertips" was the first record to hit number one simultaneously on both charts, marking a concurrently occurring crossover success ("Tops in Records," June 27, 1963, p. 11B, among others). He was also the youngest-ever chart-topping artist. It was also the first live recording to top the charts, recorded during a June 1962 Motortown Revue performance at the Regal Theater in Chicago. It begins with an introduction, during which master of ceremonies Bill Murray reminds the audience of two facts that would recur constantly throughout media discourse around Wonder: his age (twelve at the time) and his singularity. “He is considered as being a genius of our time,” Murray says. “12 Year Old Genius” is replicated on the 45” record’s label.33

His blindness was also a major factor in his media coverage and industry acclaim, with a *Billboard* award for "Fingertips" success being printed in braille for the budding star (Gardner, 33

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33 The communitas was short-lived, though: “[I]t got to the point that Motown began, not totally unreasonably, to take black radio for granted, since these deejays were committed to Motown’s success by economics and by race—even cynics in the industry were inspired by the label’s exciting music and aura of black upward mobility,” George writes (1988, p. 88).
and the label creating special autographed pictures of Stevie for teenagers that were autographed in Braille (Adams, Wednesday October 16, 1963, p. 13). “Calls Blind Singer Another ‘Sugar Child,’ a short piece in the Indianapolis Recorder (May 19, 1962, p. 13) was headlined, introducing “Little Stevie” in comparison to Sugar Chile Robinson, another child prodigy who famously performed for then-President Harry Truman at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner in 1946 as an eight-year-old, adorably shouting, “How’m I doin’, Mr. President?” during a performance of the jump blues song “Caldonia.” The piece mentioned Wonder’s ability to play piano, organ, drums, harmonica, and bongos, calling the then-twelve-year-old Wonder a “sightless genius” and comparing him favorably to Ray Charles, another blind pianist (and relative GRAMMY favorite). Motown capitalized upon this connection with Wonder’s second LP, Tribute to Uncle Ray, which was released a half-year before Recorded Live and did not chart. Werner (2004) even suggests the existence of a Motown public relations campaign suggesting Wonder was Charles’s illegitimate child (p. 107).

It might be argued that Charles paved the way for Wonder’s later acceptance by the GRAMMYs and that many of the rhetorics of genius this chapter applies to Wonder may apply also to Charles, who did win four crossover GRAMMYs at the third-annual awards in 1960, including Best Vocal Performance Single Record or Track, Male, for “Georgia on My Mind” and Best Vocal Performance Album, Male, for The Genius of Ray Charles (Though he would not win another non-black award until a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1987). Charles also released The Genius Hits the Road in 1960 and The Genius After Hours and Genius + Soul = Jazz in 1961. It was another Charles album, Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music, in which the singer reworked folk standards and earned Album and Record of the Year nominations (though a curious win for Best R&B Recording, despite the record’s conscious move away from the genre) that would garner much of the attention from critics in the years to come.

Jazz genius was often rhetorically pathological, with the term going hand-in-hand with a pseudo-suffix: “tortured.” Monk devolved into mental illness; Parker was dead from decades of

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34 Robinson was the first black performer at the WHCA.
drug abuse at thirty-five; Powell was institutionalized numerous times throughout his too-short life.

Ellison’s “thrust toward respectability” coincided with a “calculated surlieness and rudeness,” which “white audiences[...]learned quickly to accept such treatment as evidence of ‘artistic’ temperament” (Ellison 1995, cited in Ashe, 1999, p. 282). “If nothing else, this stage presence, read by many white patrons as barely controlled hostility, was, for them, a validation of the jazz musician’s[sic] status as alienated ‘artists’ in the Western tradition” (Ashe, 1999, p. 283).

But Wonder and Charles, despite an obvious disability, never took or asked for space to lament their lot; instead their disability was the technology on which their “excellence” rested. But further, their blindness suggested an elision of notions of race and music as ontologically embedded and co-productive: Their experience of race—something to this day is stubbornly reduced to phenotype—was different because they could not access race visually. This meant could espouse a colorblindness with a degree of scientific certainty: “Color doesn’t affect me either White, black, yellow — could be green!” Wonder would go on to say (Wilson, October 11, 1969B, p. 13). He extended that to music, suggesting, “People ask me what soul is, but all people have soul” (Werner, 2004, p. 147). This level of colorblindness was used refractorily to reframe his own position in the industry as Wonder successfully advocated against easy compartmentalization of his own music as his profile grew: “Categorization can be the death of an artist. It’s the whole thing—the concept of a black artist. All that ‘Oh Stevie—he’s a soul man.’ That kind of thing. It can kill an artist” (Werner, 2004, p. 147). Forty-odd years after Langston

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35 This flew in the face of Black Arts Movement organizing in the 1960s, which drew clear aesthetic distinctions between white and black art. “The motive behind the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors?” Larry Neal wrote in 1972 (272-274, cited in Waksman, 1999). This rhetoric would prove consistent throughout Wonder’s career: In a review of a concert in 1974, Robert Christgau quotes Wonder, who preached and advocated for “... pure love between all people, a love that is willing to give honestly and sincerely regardless of the color of your skin...” (Christgau, December 16, 1974).
Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Wonder’s wrestling with this—and his insistence on colorblindness—offered him a path.\textsuperscript{36}

Within a larger context, this combination of blindness and perseverance meant Wonder was seen as a solo black act, not playing with those who had come before. This flew in the face of a long-historical narrative of black musics; Wonder’s musical prowess was not acquired through the vernacular way of being; he willed himself to musical greatness. Wonder’s candidacy was even further solidified because he embodied the pervasive, Horatio Alger-inspired mythos of rags-to-riches narrative where his own individualist meritocratic genius allowed him to transcend his limitations—which included blindness along with other stereotypically raced framings. In a story headlined “Blind Dropout,” Wonder was praised:

“A...recent example of a dropout who has made good is little Stevie Wonder, the blind Negro boy who at the age of 14 has sold one million recordings of his famous song ‘Fingertips.’ Little Stevie is coming to Washington from Detroit this weekend for the Big Brothers barbecue to help raise money to combat juvenile delinquency. He is the kind of boy that Big Brothers try to help; only in this case, Stevie, born blind, helped himself climb to the top. As the product of a broken home in Detroit, he experienced stark poverty\[sic].” (August 6, 1965, p. 4A).

Like many of these articles, this piece was widely syndicated and ran in a number of cities throughout the country such as Arkansas City, Kansas; Defiance, Ohio; Charleston, West Virginia; Lumberton, North Carolina; Beatrice, Nebraska; Eureka, California; Oxnard, California; Arkansas City, Kansas; Lowell, Massachusetts; Reno, Nevada; South Haven, Michigan; Sikeston, Missouri; Laurel, Mississippi; Alamgordo, New Mexico; Fayetteville, Arkansas; and Decatur, Alabama. It suggests—like many other articles at the time—that Wonder’s blindness meant that his force of will and drive to succeed were exceptional qualities.\textsuperscript{37}

In Hillsdale, Michigan—two hours across Michigan’s Lower Peninsula from Wonder’s hometown—a writer polled Jonesville High School students on their favorite groups, reflecting on 1966 as the “Teenage Group Musical Era.” One high schooler, Mike Gamble, offered the following praise, linking race and disability: “I think Stevie Wonder is about the coolest, mainly

\textsuperscript{36} Werner (2004, p. 147-153) elaborates a non-black network of influences Wonder cited at the time.

\textsuperscript{37} The fact that this sentiment was propagated throughout the entire nation is an argument for this method being an appropriate one after which to make claims about discourse.
because he has overcome two obstacles: He is a Negro and he is blind. To balance out these disadvantages, he has a wonderful voice” (Holmes, January 23, 1967).

But in some formations, his blindness was a kind of trade-off, the cost of his preternatural musical ability. “Stevie Wonder is Dealt Trump Card,” one headline read, in a story that mentioned Wonder’s birth into a “poor Negro family…a broken home” and his blindness at birth, calling Detroit a “teeming Negro ghetto” (Pledge, July 7, 1967, p. 4; this was also syndicated and ran in a number of other papers throughout the country). Music, the writer suggested, was Wonder’s escape—a means by which he could, through his natural gifts and the luck of his proximity to Motown’s headquarters, play his way out of the “ghetto.” Another, in downplaying the handicap, directly suggested a sort of cosmic trade-off: “Blind since [birth], Stevie’s handicap is almost negligible in coping with the problems which beset a teen-ager. He is compensated by instinctive musical acumen and a perceptiveness which belie his years” (“‘Prophet of Soul,’” July 18, 1967, p. 7).

More contemporaneous film criticism and scholarship offer an explanatory trope: the Magical Negro (see Hicks, 2003; Gabbard, 2004; Hughey, 2009; Zevallos, 2012; see also Appiah, 1993). The Magical Negro, a Saintlike, often-physically disabled character, possesses wisdom beyond their station and a desire to help white characters. Films of the time including Vanishing Point (1971), which featured a blind black disc jockey, suggested that disabled black figures could be spiritual guides for white audiences.

Wonder’s trademark line was repeated in various forms in dozens of newspapers throughout the Sixties: “A handicap isn’t a handicap” he said, “unless you want it that way.” (Wilson, October 7, 1969, p. 41). This reframing, while of course positive, suggested a degree of agency that downplayed the affliction and implied a degree of choice that connected him to broader meritocratic ideals. Through hard work, he could overcome anything: “Stevie has held onto his place in the entertainment world by dint of hard work and by refusing to give in to his affictions[sic],” one article read (Lassen, 1967, p. 15). Stevie Wonder’s blindness and the multilayered rhetoric around him made him into an individual.
The idea that the Sixties and Seventies were the time of genius-level individuality was seeded throughout other creative industries discourses. “Genius” took other forms for creatives, specifically the concept of the auteur, which is understood to have begun in the French film criticism of Cahiers du Cinéma in the 1950s. These rhetorics took an ostensibly group-based creative endeavor—filmmaking—and attributed its director who, as “auteur,” was chiefly and largely individually responsible for a final, individualistic stamp, making film unique. “[T]he director is the author of a film, the person who gives it any distinctive quality” (Cameron, 1962, cited in Sarris, 1999, 561). Film critic Andrew Sarris was the first to publish on auteur theory in the United States, suggesting three criteria: technical competence of directors; distinguishable personality; and individual interior meaning as criteria of value for film. The third, Sarris’s most-prized, was encapsulated in the idea of “intangible difference between one personality and another, all other things being equal” (563).

By the mid-1960s, auteurist ideas had begun to proliferate in the music industry press, with white creator figures such as producer Phil Spector and Beach Boys songwriter Brian Wilson. But Wonder was being groomed as the first true black genius of the music industry, whose “intangible difference” in Sarris’s words was noteworthy because discourse surrounding facilities and talents ostensibly marked him different from other black artists on his label and the airwaves.

Wonder’s entrée into white pop culture was furthered through an appearance in the Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello-starring Muscle Beach Party (1964) that year, where the still-thirteen-year-old Wonder performs backed by surf guitarist Dick Dale and his band, the Del-Tones. “Now children of the surf, do you think there are seven wonders of the world?” an exotically-masked performer asks a crowd of surf resort guests. “Well now here’s the eighth!” As Wonder pulls out his harp, the all-white beach crowd jump up onto tables dancing along, before engaging in call-and-response “Hallelu” chants drawn directly out of the black church vernacular.
The camera focuses on the midsections and rears of the dancers' bodies, suggesting a connection to the kinds of aberrant, sexualized dance practice and that Elvis Presley had set off the nation's cultural alarms with the previous decade. Wonder's song, "Happy Street," was reprised in the end credits.

He would also appear in *Bikini Beach* (1964) later that year, performing at a key concluding moment in the film when older white elites join the rebellious, sex-crazed, watusi-dancing beach teens. “That certainly isn’t the Bunny Hop they’re doing,” one older woman muses to a friend during his performance. Together, the performances paint Wonder as a welcoming-party of sorts, inviting white audiences to dance to black music. This translational role—where a “safe” black artist introduces white audiences to black music—would wind up recurring throughout the GRAMMYs history, even occurring in 2018 with Bruno Mars’s nimble, radio-friendly translations of black music sweeping the General Field. Wonder and Motown would attempt to capitalize on these performances with a full album, *Stevie at the Beach*, that year, though it failed to chart. By this time, he had dropped the “Little” from this album (though it still appeared on many of the films’ print advertisements) and the prior *With a Song in My Heart* (1963).

Lengthier articles of the time speak of him in glowing, wondrous terms though, holding his musicality and blindness as co-productive of the state of awe he inspired in fans and reporters. “Behind the unseeing eyes of Little Stevie Wonder there is music and rhythm,” a Pennsylvania columnist at *The Monessen Valley Independent* writes. “As he sits and talks his hands beat jazz rhythm on imaginary bongos. It seems as if he is giving a beat to a tune playing in his mind. Almost every waking hour of the 13-year-old recording sensation concerns his music” (Larson, October 17, 1963, p. 18). This was repeated by his Motown peers: “he would play rhythms and melodies which no child of his age should even know, he was that creative,’ Martha Reeves (of the Vandellas) told DJ Alan Taylor” (Davis, 2003, p. 23).

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38 I have argued elsewhere (Vilanova, 2013) that these films allowed surfers to perform an aberrant “alternative whiteness,” but this is noteworthy one of the few connections in the film series specifically to African American culture.
He would have another hit (#33 on *Billboard*’s Pop Albums and #2 on R&B Albums charts) with *Up-Tight*, released in May 1966. The title track was the first on which the now-fifteen-year-old (whose voice had noticeably changed) had a co-writing credit; the recordings featured the legendary Funk Brothers backing band and earned him his first GRAMMY nominations for R&B Song and Performance. Noteworthily, the album also included a cover of Bob Dylan’s millions-selling protest anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind,” though in concert he refrained from espousing the specific politics of the song and wading into the morass of Civil Rights. “When Stevie introduces ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ in concert, he tells the audience that he’s almost sure they wonder about the questions asked in the song,” one newspaper story from the time reads. “He doesn’t feel that he should go further than that in expressing his own opinions on the issues of the day. ‘People have different ideas. I don’t feel I should get involved. In the beginning you keep your mouth closed. How you feel is your personal business. Once you have made it, you can take a stand’” (“Blind Stevie Never Quit,” September 13, 1966, p. 6). This reluctance—strangely held up as a virtue—came just 18 months after the Selma to Montgomery March.

Motown’s influence loomed large over discourse around Wonder and other acts. “Most of its artists describe it as a family but it is also school, work, play, religion, life,” a profile of fellow act the Four Tops explained. “Artists spend eight hours a day at the studio even when they’re NOT recording.” (Szekely, November 22, 1966, p. 12). By this time, Wonder was establishing his own bonafides as a songwriter, authoring future number #1 hit “The Tears of a Clown” for Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. But credit went to his label and its head: “Mr. Gordy is largely responsible for the success of such entertainers as[...]Stevie Wonder,” *The Baltimore Afro-American* explained in an article discussing an award Gordy received in 1967 (March 28, 1967).

By 1967, the “Little” prefix had been dropped entirely, as Wonder, still only seventeen, reportedly stood six feet, one-inch tall. His singles continued to chart (he is a near-weekly fixture on the *Billboard* Hot 100 throughout the 1960s for one song or another), though his momentum had slowed a bit as he hit puberty and his youthful voice began to deepen. He took courses in
composition and arranging at Michigan State University and discussed his ambitions to attend college full-time after graduation (something that received national coverage when he decided to enroll at the University of California, though he did not graduate). Releases—*Down to Earth* (1966), *Someday at Christmas* (1967)—received relatively muted buzz outside of non-album single “I’m Wondering” and the Civil Rights-themed “A Place in the Sun” single from *Down to Earth*, Wonder’s first release featuring explicit social commentary on the moment. “Yes, there’s a place in the sun/Where there’s hope for everyone,” he sings, adopting the “I have a dream”-esque rhetoric of broad-based acceptance and integration and eschewing more confrontational lyrical choices that other artists such as Nina Simone were making at the time.

One of the keys to white understandings of black genius, then, is the idea of universality—that black genius becomes self-evident by whites’ recognition of it. An article in the black newspaper *The Baltimore Afro-American* from July 1967 christened Wonder “The Prophet of Soul” (“‘Prophet of Soul[sic],’” July 18, 1967, p. 7) and suggested that Wonder had become rival to Ray Charles, the man Frank Sinatra—a grand arbiter if any—was said to have called “The musical genius of the century” (Rutledge, July 25, 1967A, p. 6). The nickname, which implies a second sight that can draw connections to Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology, stuck, appearing in advertising materials and other articles. He began touring with a 10-piece orchestra, though the group took away somewhat from Wonder’s luster with coverage of the enterprise as “what has come to be known as the Motown Sound” (“Stevie Wonder,” August 23, 1968, p. 9). There was even (ultimately unrealized and unsubstantiated) talk of Wonder starring in a feature film alongside Janet Leigh and Roger Moore (Muir, October 10, 1968, p. 9A).

In June 1969, Wonder performed during a “Summer in the Park” program in the nation’s capital. Hosted by First Lady Pat Nixon, the event (which according to one newspaper had a majority-black crowd of 50,000) featured a number of protesters who roundly booed Nixon throughout the ceremonies, making the Black Power salute (“Pat Booed…,” June 30, 1969, p.

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39 This quote has never been sourced and may be apocryphal, though it has been used so often as not to matter either way.
Wonder, the papers suggested, was somewhat of a salve for any racial tension. “Stevie, everybody’s waiting for you. We’re so glad you’re here,” Nixon said. A photo of the two hugging appeared in newspapers throughout the country, again suggesting Wonder’s conciliatory potential. “It could be that the people are ignorant of the movement. I mean people on both sides, the white, the black, the rioters and the non-rioters,” Wonder suggested in a 1967 interview (Rutledge, September 2, 1967, p. 1) conducted with The Baltimore Afro-American, one of the nation’s premier black newspapers. Though still young, Wonder was calculating.

Wonder—in a blue suit and tie—also returned to Ed Sullivan, though Wonder did not feature on the Gordy-produced TCB television special that aired in December 1968 alongside other Motown standbys including Diana Ross and the Supremes and the Temptations. Meanwhile, Wonder was the only Motown act to perform during a televised special, The Sound of the Sixties, hosted by white heartthrob (and inaugural Best New Artist and Record of the Year winner in 1959) Bobby Darin. Alongside Judy Collins, Buddy Rich, and Laura Nyro, Wonder performed Darin’s “If I Were a Carpenter;” Darin and Rich performed “Up-Tight.” Wonder would later become the only Motown artist to perform at a NAACP tribute to Duke Ellington at Madison Square Garden in 1970 (Campbell, February 24, 1970, p. 13). He also appeared on The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour in February 1969, a musical variety show oriented toward rural audiences that was canceled as part of the network’s “rural purge” in 1971 (see Eskridge, 2013). Wonder and Campbell, a white symbol of country music, performed “Blowin’ in the Wind,” suggesting music could be the key to racial harmony. He and Tom Jones duetted a medley of their songs in 1969; he was on the bill for a Johnny Cash-hosted Everly Brothers tribute in 1970; his high school graduation from the Michigan School for the Blind was covered in newspapers throughout the country (“Kiss from Mother,” June 12, 1969). Wonder’s profile was rising and surpassing the Motown machine structure.

40 Temptations tenor Paul Williams sang Wonder’s then-hit “For Once in My Life,” a curious choice.
The music industry in the post-Civil Rights period was marked by its own set of integrations: of dancing spaces, of radio frequencies, of label rosters, and of discourse. The last lingering infamous ropes and painted lines of the segregated dance hall were discarded and painted-over, though integrated space—even for Wonder—still met some resistance in the deep South. Wonder’s rise spanned the Sixties, though like the rest of Motown, little of his early music touched specifically on the racial unrest even as events such as the March on Washington, the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church, Watts’s race riots, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King captured American television screens and the music of other acts such as Nina Simone. Radio had been viciously segregated throughout the early part of the decade. Though black radio had come of age at the turn of the Seventies (see George, 1988), Motown under Gordy’s guidance preferred not to make waves within the still white-dominated industry, purportedly valuing the label’s relationships with white radio stations over black ones in Detroit, though Berry, Wonder, and a number of Motown artists took part in Poor People’s Campaign gatherings in Atlanta in 1968 after King’s death. But a concern held: “Has Motown been completely taken over by whites as many have reported?” one Detroit columnist wrote discussing a black radio boycott of Motown (cited in Posner, 2005, p. 174). The only Motown artist not boycotted was Wonder, whose conciliatory appeal escaped controversy.

Wonder released a somewhat strange project at this time, an easy listening instrumental album titled *Eivets Rednow* (Stevie Wonder in reverse). This was the first Wonder release in which some of the album’s songs were written solely by the composer, who played harmonica, piano, clavinet, drums, and percussion. One single, “Alfie,” charted. Interviews throughout 1968 repeat a quote from Wonder that suggest his prodigious, self-generated talents—which by this point included more instruments—were divinely inspired, “a gift from God—I never had any

41 “You may not agree with my feelings that jungle music is for jungle people, but the hatred and upheavals caused by recent forced race-mixing must concern us both,” Maurice Bessinger, chairman of the segregationist South Carolina Independents wrote to University of South Carolina president Thomas F. Jones in advance of a scheduled Wonder performance on the campus, which had integrated in 1963 (“Objection Voiced,” September 16, 1967, p. 7).
lessons," he said at the time (Johnson, June 3, 1968, p. 73). Divine providence functioned rhetorically to separate Wonder from other black musicians who ostensibly (to whites, at least) would have learned music in church or the community. Additionally, at the turn of a new decade, a new framing for Wonder and the other Motown acts’ live circuit began to appear in newspapers, which previewed, reviewed, and discussed the “Stevie Wonder Show,” a live headlining tour for Wonder that featured his Motown contemporaries Martha and the Vandellas and The Spinners as support rather than bill-sharers (“Stevie Wonder Presented,” January 9, 1970, p. 8). His band grew to fifteen pieces, a far cry from the more-produced, dance-focused Motown stage shows of the decade prior. He even embarked upon a 1970 residence at the fated Copacabana, playing to mostly white audiences.\(^{42}\) The \textit{Times} writer covering the concert, though, grasped a dynamic that would define much of the GRAMMYs frictions:

“The audience, virtually all white, is strangely polarized; on the one hand, fiftyish couples, dully glazed and more responsive to the bathroom humor of a lead in comedian than to Stevie’s rhythms; on the other, youngsters—17, 18, bright-eyed and well-scrubbed, the living image of Middle America’s optimistic fantasies about youth” (Heckman, April 12, 1970, p. D28).

Even after number-one hits and prime-time performances, Wonder was still received with a degree of lukewarmth: As a curiosity to an older set but a favorite of the up-and-coming generation. As a singer and a Motown artist, like most other younger black musicians at the time, he was not taken seriously.

But more growth followed with hits “I Was Made to Love Her” (from the 1967 album of the same name), “For Once in My Life” (from the 1968 album of the same name), and “Signed, Sealed, Delivered I’m Yours,” the latter of which was Wonder’s first sole production credit. Noteworthily according to historians, the song had sat unreleased for a year because label head Berry Gordy did not like the song; in hindsight this decision seems almost laughably short-sighted and is certainly surprising that Gordy’s opinion alone had such sway (Posner, 2002, p. 226). \textit{For Once in My Life} featured Wonder on a new instrument, the Hohner Clavinet, the crunchy sonics

\(^{42}\) Noteworthily among the celebrity-studded crowd was a pair of nonwhite guests: Stokely Carmichael and his wife Miriam Makeba. Later in his dressing room he told her jokingly, “Sorry — I didn’t see you” (Wilson, April 6, 1970, p. 8B).
of which would become key to Wonder finding and producing a signature sound. “His rendition of ‘For Once In My Life’ literally made the tune a standard, and more than 100 singers have since recorded the song,” one newspaper writer suggested (“Mini Features, August 10, 1970, p. 31). This suggestion—that Wonder could “make” a standard—implies a major level of creative autonomy.


That album was a major hit, *Signed, Sealed, & Delivered*, which saw its title track a #1 hit for Wonder, who as he neared his second decade, began to assert a more individualist creative and artistic impulse. Receiving his first production credit on the album—as well as songwriting credits for seven of the album’s twelve songs—Wonder was creating a sonic palette different from his Motown contemporaries, pushing against the “Motown machine” narrative. Further, on a cover of The Beatles’ recent hit “We Can Work It Out,” Wonder does an impression of a chorus of singers through multi-track recording, allowing him to sing both the lead and backup vocals after recording them separately and then merging them into a single track in the studio. It was a telling studio decision he would return to throughout this period: Wonder could play all the instruments and sing all the parts.

These new moves did not go unnoticed. “Consistent Motown albums are rare, and this has its weak moments, but it’s still the most exciting LP by a male soul singer in a very long time, and it slips into no mold, Motown’s included,” Robert Christgau of *The Village Voice* wrote of *Signed, Sealed, & Delivered* at the time (January 7, 1971). A few years later, Christgau again suggested a uniqueness about Wonder’s musical standing in the Motown machine. “‘Fingertips’ was basically a novelty instrumental—as any record featuring a prepubescent harmonica player
and a live audience had to be—and its follow-ups were also novelties ['Up-Tight'] established a vocal identity. Wonder’s strength, unlike that of most Motown performers, turned out to be freedom from discipline—the wild innocence of his harmonica carried over into his singing,” Christgau wrote. “Stevie was held partly in check by the rigorous Motown production machine, but whereas in the [Four] Tops’ music the resulting tension often grated, in Stevie it only increased the excitement. He never wallowed in emotion. Instead, he soared above it” (Christgau, February 1973). “Freedom from discipline” does a significant amount of work here, suggesting that Motown’s success came as a result of disciplining the talent of its artist roster whereas Wonder’s true magic was bound up within the rigid system and searching for an opportunity to be set free. Further, “[t]he social category of musical genius is connected to a powerful set of ideals that are in turn connected to the idea of the autonomy of art. The word autonomy here presumes that certain categories of cultural production (and the people involved in them) can and do transcend the limits of the political, social, and everyday world,” Ramsey writes (2013, p. 94).

Wonder noteworthily announced his engagement to Motown songwriter Syreeta Wright in July of 1970. Pictures of their engagement—which happened in London during another Wonder residency—received coverage throughout the country, along with notes of congratulations. The couple married two months later in Detroit. As the Seventies began, the label marked its tenth anniversary, though the label’s standing remained mixed. The label was lauded for helping bring black music and musicians into the mainstream, but the cost of doing business—specifically eschewing politics and teaching its artists to do the same—was taking a toll. “Long criticized for not being more involved with the struggle of blacks, the company has branched out with recordings offering commitment. Even the pop music is changing, becoming more diverse to fit the wide pattern of musical moods that prevail today,” one critic wrote at the time in an article summing up the label’s place in culture as it released a ten-year retrospective box set. “Motown never offered any particular ideals, but there was plenty of expression as that distinctive of the thinking cymbal, the impeccable bass lines and quasi-spiritual vocal backgrounds to the singers
slid into the American mainstream” (Kelly, May 7, 1971, p. 6). Wonder was pushing Motown further, deepening its import despite the mainstream press’s growing skepticism of its motives. 

_The New York Times_ was even less generous: “Success seemed to have been a contagious commodity at Motown. However, beneath the facade of its sophisticated and urbanized sound was an even more sophisticated growth pattern that had been personally charted by the corporation’s young president. . . .,” one writer suggested.

“And almost all [the box set] shows, finally, is how an original, gutsy black music (listen to Barrett Strong’s “Money”: no wonder the Beatles copied it almost note for note!) can be dressed up, watered down, straitjacketed into sequins and Copacabana wigs, processed, primped and prettified, until you get . . . Diana Ross, the last of the whiteface minstrels, breathing husky banalities into her own TV special. Even the Jackson Five, which started out with some fire ricocheting around the edges of that multi-angled sound, have settled down into Motown syrup. On their latest album three of the songs are credited[sic] to “The Corporation”—and they sound like it. Manufactured, know? Like Detroit autos” (McGregor, September 12, 1971, p. D23).

Wonder’s push against this structure began with his April 1971 album, _Where I’m Coming From_, and the discourse around it began to make suggestions key to the argument of this chapter.

“Wonder produced and (with his wife, Syreeta Wright) scripted this escape from Berry Gordy’s plantation,” critic Robert Christgau writes (Review). “Ambitious, personal albums may be a glut on the market elsewhere, but at Motown they’re something new,” _Rolling Stone_’s Vince Aletti wrote in a joint review of _Where I’m Coming From_ and Marvin Gaye’s _What’s Going On_. “These, from two of the Corporation’s Finest, represent a subversive concept, allowed only to producers the overseerstars of Motown’s corporate plantation as long as they didn’t get too uppity. Both Gaye and Wonder have been relatively independent at Motown, their careers following their own fluctuations outside the mainstream studio trends, but these latest albums are departures even for them” (Aletti, 1971). Writers suggested that Motown had declined to provide sales data to the RIAA that year, denying all Motown artists the gold records that would have recognized and signified 500,000 albums sold—a certainty for groups such as the Jackson 5, the Supremes, and Wonder (Doughty, January 26, 1971). The fact that this individual achievement, an important

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43 Emphasis mine. I have been unable to determine whether this review was written contemporaneously in the 1970s or after the fact.
industry signifier that traced its origins to the beginnings of recorded music in America, was seemingly devalued by the Motown label was likely alienating for their artists seeking acclaim.

Further, as the decade came to a close, the GRAMMYs had been largely uninterested in Motown recordings throughout the 1960s: Despite a staggering 110 Billboard Top 10 records released between 1961 and 1971, the label earned only seventeen GRAMMY nominations in the 1960s and only one win—The Temptations' “Cloud Nine” in 1968. All but one of these nominations came in R&B categories. Dr. Logan Westbrooks, former CBS executive, suggested that this was because the GRAMMYs voting body was still dominated by the major labels that had made up its initial board of directors (personal correspondence, 2018, August 2).

Long-held notions of a lack of profitability in the black music market were proving faulty by the beginning of the Seventies. “There was the belief that there was not that much money to be made in the black market. They mainly had single sellers, but they were limited, and they needed to sell an album. And they made the record companies look at the album sales. That's a big uptick," Westbrook tells me in an interview. But the album-sized aspirations on the part of Wonder and Gaye coupled with broader moves towards representational diversity in advertising by companies like McDonald’s and Coca-Cola created a business environment where black music was afforded space to move into more central cultural standing. In 1971, CBS and Columbia Records Group (CRG) created a black music division; the following year they commissioned the Harvard Business School to conduct a study into attracting black record buyers, published as “A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group.” Known subsequently as the “Harvard Report,” this document prompted Columbia to invest in Philadelphia International Records and Stax Records, sign of a number of black groups including Earth, Wind, and Fire and The Isley Brothers. The report suggested that, heretofore, major labels had largely been indifferent to black artists despite a roughly 10-percent market

Mary Wells's “You Beat Me to the Punch” was nominated for Best Rock & Roll Recording in 1962, more evidence of the Recording Academy's persistent and utter confusion about what rock 'n' roll even was.
share and that the key would be to integrate—adding black staff members, cultivating relationships with black radio DJs, and building an artist roster (Sanjek, 2002).

Meanwhile, Wonder's 21st birthday in May 1971 meant a number of important changes in his business relationship with Motown that would become key parts of the "escape" narrative. The childhood contract Wonder had signed at twelve in 1962 had provisioned to put all royalties into a trust fund, which now contained more than $1 million, according to Posner (2002, p. 254).

Further, Gordy later told Billboard that Wonder had designs on discontinuing their relationship: “Stevie seemed to know what he wanted even before he became an adult,” Gordy told Billboard. And he did indeed take charge of his career. At first, it was very rough [to accept]. Not because I didn’t think Stevie could do it. He had proven that he could do things himself and that he had genius qualities and all that. What bothered me, I think, the most was the fact that he, in my opinion, was defiant. Stevie had been at a party with me in Detroit the day before his 21st birthday, and when I got to the West Coast, there was a letter from his attorney that he was disaffirming his contracts. I was more upset about that aspect of it than 1 was about his being able to do it. The attorney had jumped the gun, Stevie was not going to send me a letter that day. So he fired that attorney, then he got another. After negotiating with his new attorney, Johanan Vigoda, it was agreed on” (White, November 5, 1994, p. 68).

Vigoda's negotiations rested upon Wonder's uniqueness: “They never had an artist in 13 years. They had single records, they managed to create a name in certain areas, but they never came through with a major, major artist,” Werner writes (2004, p. 164). Wonder's ascent as that artist was assured.

With his new status in hand, Wonder set out to create more conceptual, bigger-picture statements in the form of LP "concept albums," the popular music industry's version of the Wagnerian gesamtkunstwerk. Rather than a collection of singles—or more usually a collection of songs surrounding a hit single or two, particularly over Wonder's career and that of many other Motown musicians—the concept album, which ostensibly took some inspiration from the song cycle (German lieder, which traces its roots to the 19th century) focused on a concept, idea, or narrative, creating a sum-of-parts whole that suggests a more comprehensive artistic statement due to its multi-textual form.

One of the progenitors of the concept album was none other than GRAMMY favorite Frank Sinatra, whose work in the 1940s and 50s, in line with the 1948 launch of the lengthier LP,
popularized the genre. According to his biographer, Sinatra “sequenced the songs so that the
lyrics created a flow from track to track, affording an impression of a narrative, as in musical
comedy or opera” (Rojek, 2004, p. 43). In connection with this, another writer calls Sinatra “[t]he
first pop singer to bring a consciously artistic attitude to recording[…]the first pop singer to
perceive possibilities for record making that went beyond individual songs” (Friedwald, 1995).

Artistry was more than singing or performance ability—it should privilege a conceptual
wholeness. Also germane was a growing distinction between “singles artists” and “albums
artists”: the “former most often originals targeted toward younger consumers and the latter
already-familiar repertory geared toward a broader audience whose base constituency was

Radio and the single remained the primary way for young fans to learn about new music,
though through the work of influential artists such as Isaac Hayes, Marvin Gaye, and Sly and the
Family Stone, the LP (concept album or otherwise) was growing in import for black artists in the
eyear 1970s as its import as the preferred medium rose for white audiences and artists as well.

Albums such as *Hot Buttered Soul* and *Superfly*—paired with the rich concepts of blaxploitation
cinema soundtracks such as *Shaft*, *Sparkle*, and others—meant black music, which in the hands
of Motown had always been conservatively-constructed verse-chorus structured songs, was
stretching out. The 1972 album version of The Temptations’ “Papa was a Rollin’ Stone” clocked in
at almost twelve minutes in length.

Thus, given the GRAMMYs “adult” conceptions around fandom, genre-worthiness,
professional affiliation, and art-emphasizing motive (all epitomized by Sinatra), Album of the Year
was the true test of an artist’s centrality: the greatest measure of the “sheer artistry” espoused by
the GRAMMY Credo, a measure that would further establish the “phonograph record as an art
form” and “to foster a greater striving for excellence.” For the GRAMMYs, Album of the Year was
a prestige category upon which much of the longstanding resistance to rock ‘n’ roll and its
preferred delivery method, the ‘45 single. The first year’s nominees featured two Sinatra concept
albums, a Tchaikovsky piano concerto, and Ella Fitzgerald singing the music of Irving Berlin
alongside the ultimate winner, Henry Mancini’s *The Music from Peter Gunn*, a soundtrack to a TV series. Classical music, live performances (Judy Garland’s 1962 winner *Judy at Carnegie Hall*), other film soundtracks (*West Side Story*, *The Pink Panther*), and jazz and world music albums dot the list, perhaps the most obvious elision of popular music in all the GRAMMYs’ early years. It took a concept album—The Beatles’ acclaimed *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1968—for rock to break through. Black artists were nominated, though their optics—Fitzgerald singing the music of a white composer, Harry Belafonte’s almost systematic walk through black musics of the world in *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall*—were often questionable.

Noteworthily, the nascent rock press emerged in the late-Sixties with the founding of *Rolling Stone* in 1967, *Creem* in 1969, and *Crawdaddy* in 1966. College campuses were enthusiastic about a new direction, “Motown music, which has never sold very well in the past, is doing increasingly well,” *The Times* would write in 1974, noting that Wonder was “a particularly popular artist” (McGilligan, March 10, 1974, p. 109).

This was also a propitious time to shed the relative apolitics that had been Wonder’s calling card throughout his youth, as he began to speak out more freely regarding racism, though maintaining a broad means of condemnation rather than a more specific criticism of white oppression. “The only people who are really blind,” he told one writer, “are the ones whose eyes are so obscured by hatred and bigotry that they can’t see the light of love and justice. (“Blind Musician Knows Secret of Life is Love!”, May 11, 1969). Wonder hand-waved suggestions of white interloping in black music, a rising concern for many. “Nobody can steal what you’ve got inside you. If these white cats dig our music, why not?” he inquired after being asked about blue-eyed soul, the raced coding for R&B-style music played by ostensibly “blue-eyed” white musicians (Rutledge, September 2, 1967B, p. 2).

Black DJ Frankie “Hollywood” Crocker, whose WBLS catered to black listeners with “college-educated values,” a Seventies-style euphemism for what Du Bois would have called the Talented Tenth a generation prior, suggested Wonder was already crossing raced genre lines where “pop” was a white genre and “R&B” was a black one.
“Stevie Wonder is a black artist, but a lot of his music comes out pop. It’s the same way with Diana Ross. I just don’t think along those lines. I know I’ve got to fight the next guy—black, white, or brown—to get a ticket to her show. So there are those artists where the music just transcends the color of their skin. There are clearly those artists that just do black music, just as there are artists, white artists, that just do white pop. But when you have artists that do music that can be successful in three or four different markets—black, Spanish, and so on—it’s just a hit” (George, 1988, p. 130).

The question, though, was the extent to which conversations around crossover were suited to address the cultural and racial politics around those divides in the first place. For Wonder, eschewing those aided his path.

Meanwhile, in the press, Motown remained presumptuously uninterested in politics and continued to take the blame for its business decisions and perceived overall strategy. “Motown Industries, the nation’s largest black enterprise, increasingly presents an image of black and white management whose favorite color is green,” The New York Times wrote in 1974, complimenting the largest black-owned and black-managed business in the country at its fifteenth year (Wright, July 7, 1974, p. 111). The article praised Gordy’s ability “ability to extract talent from the desolation of the Detroit ghetto,” but mentioned the departure of major groups such as the Four Tops and Gladys Knight and the Pips from the label. Wonder was the success story of a label trying to find itself. “Motown sound, performed by black artists, has always made its mark in the rhythm and blues market. But such stars as Stevie Wonder, whose records appeared first in the R & B popularity charts, eventually crossed over to lead the pop charts. [Suzanne de Passe, label executive] sees Motown developing more of what the industry calls MOR (middle of the road) and country and western performers, who also will pass over to the other charts.” Whereas Wonder’s boundary crossing was viewed as an extension of his own artistic process, Motown’s was framed as a business decision for commercial appeal—something the white Recording Academy establishment purported to reject.

Music of My Mind, the first of Wonder’s post-contract-negotiation concept records, dropped in March of 1972. The title implies, of course, that this music springs from the intellect of Wonder, a choice that manifests much of the dissonance this chapter suggests is key to Wonder’s reframing. “The sounds themselves come from inside his mind. The man is his own
instrument. The instrument is an orchestra,” the liner notes suggest. This was also Wonder’s first studio record produced outside of Motown’s Hitsville U.S.A. studio, a choice which seemed to go hand-in-hand with discourses around the growing role of the studio in creating more artistic statements on record.

"Modern recording techniques make it possible for a single performer to play a multiplicity of instruments, one at a time, gradually adding parts in a series of layers upon layers, until the final result—as many as sixteen different musical elements—is combined into a synchronized whole," *The New York Times* wrote, praising the record as “undiluted,” an expression of Wonder’s true artistic greatness (Heckman, July 30, 1972, p. D20). This technology—in the form of the multi-track recorder—was relatively new, with the 4-track recorder growing in use in studios in the 1960s. Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys—a “genius,” recall—famously utilized multi-track recorders to produce *Pet Sounds*, suggesting that mastery of multi-track was the mark of high skill. This notion was dispensed by the press: “The studio’s power of rarefaction is salient for both professionals inside the studio and consumers, who come to know the studio through the rhetoric of the popular media, the promotion of recordings, and advertising of electronic wares,” Meintjes writes (2003, p. 74).

*Pet Sounds* inspired The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the crossover concept album that finally broke rock’s losing streak in Album of the Year in 1968. By the early Seventies, Wonder—who had chosen to record *Music of My Mind* at Jimi Hendrix’s newly completed Electric Lady Studios and Media Sound in New York along with Crystal Industries in Los Angeles.45 Scholars (Waksman, 1999) suggest Hendrix’s studio may have boasted 32-track capability, though tragically its benefactor would pass away just weeks after its grand opening party.

Wonder also entered into a collaboration with two engineers, Robert Margouleff and Malcolm Cecil, whose “The Original New Timbral Orchestra” (TONTO) had intrigued Wonder, who had recently purchased a Moog synthesizer after hearing the instrument’s use on Walter

45 By the recording sessions for *Songs in the Key of Life* in 1974-76, Crystal, according to one engineer who helped with the process, had a 24-track board (Crane and Russell, 2001).
Carlos’s *Switched-On Bach*, a commercial tour-de-force in the classical world, which would go on to top the *Billboard* classical charts for three years and win three GRAMMYs. The TONTO synthesizer—a giant, wall-sized device, was installed in Hendrix's Electric Lady studios. One of the keys to this item, for Wonder, was the idea that he needed not rely on a band to create what would be called the music of his mind. “Stevie was apparently quite taken by the idea that this was a keyboard instrument that he could possibly play that made all of these sounds,” Cecil told the BBC in 2010 (Sacks, 2018).

“He was tired of having to play his songs to an arranger who would then go away and write the arrangement, record the track with the band, call Stevie in after it was recorded, tell him where he had to sing, what he had to sing, and then send him away again while they did the mix. And Stevie said it sounded nothing like what the song sounded like in his head.”

Further, the hesitation (and out-and-out furor) about electronic music that would come fast and furious with the advent of disco less than a decade later was never leveled at Wonder. Many of what would become longstanding critiques of the music—specifically its inorganic inhumanity—were actually reversed in Wonder’s case. “What makes him even more amazing to me is that he creates so much of his music on the synthesizer which he uses as a totally natural extension of himself rather than a dazzling electronic gadget,” one article read (Alterman, August 25, 1974, p. 122).

Together, the technological and musical discourse around *Music of My Mind* suggested Wonder was at the vanguard of a new generation of black musicians who should be considered seriously for their supposed self-liberation from black collectivity, where his new version of soul music was being discursively reframed as a solo, personal project. An advance review in *Sounds* touted it as the conclusion of black soul music's *bildungsroman*. “This has been hailed as Stevie Wonder’s final ‘coming of age,’ Penny Valentine wrote at the time (Valentine, 1971).

“But I think this album is more important and will certainly have more important repercussions than that. To me this album represents the ‘coming of age’ of black soul music. A growth that started with Curtis Mayfield, was extended by Isaac Hayes, and has now reached fruition in the hands of Stevie Wonder. It is that important a landmark in contemporary music.”

Valentine continued: “To Wonder this is a personal triumph. Not only in conveying his music to the listener, not only in no longer being thought of as simply a clever little black kid who swung through a song with apparent effortlessness. It’s a triumph comparable to Marvin
Gaye’s break with Motown tradition for *What's Going On* so that he could go out alone and do what had laid innate in him for so many years. But in Stevie’s case the break with Motown’s confining musical structures and his own image was perhaps more desperate a need than even Gaye’s.”

The idea of “effortlessness” is one upon which much of this chapter (and larger dissertation) rests: the idea that an ease/effort dichotomy is key to the artistic and musical greatness of an act or a recording. Wonder’s blindness—an in-built degree-of-difficulty—made his mastery of a half-dozen or more instruments even more impressive. But further for Wonder—who at this point was clearly constructed and framed as a genius autodidact, early novelty recordings were seen as effortless commercial-driven products steered by his label. Once Wonder was given space to challenge himself, the product would be notable.

The personal praise of Wonder and his labelmate Marvin Gaye is contrasted by the ongoing discussion of Motown (and its “confining musical structures”) at the time. Tellingly, Motown becomes a kind of shorthand signifier for black collectivity, a force holding back Wonder who, now released, could produce more artistic, individual music that was no longer limited by Motown’s controls. “Since he assumed complete control of his musical direction in 1972 (relegating Motown to the role of merchandiser), Wonder’s albums have been about vision,” Emerson writes (1974). In the *Music of My Mind* review, Aletti writes.

“*Music of My Mind*, the first album on which Wonder has had such total control, is also his first outside the Motown Superstructure (i.e., without Motown arrangers, producers, musicians, studios or supervision of any kind). This is an important step, especially when it’s taken with such strength and confidence as it is here. While it’s not likely to start a trend (there are few at Motown who could afford or would want to abandon the structure that created and nurtured them), Stevie has made a move that’s bound to have some far-ranging effects” (1972). Those effects were clear at least as far as Wonder was concerned as the music press’s appreciation of Wonder’s work that would later be called the “Classic Period” hinged over and over on the artist’s individuality. “It’s certainly the best thing to come out of Motown since Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Goin’ On* and perhaps even more impressive as a personal achievement considering Wonder not only wrote, arranged and produced the entire album but (with the exception of a solo run by ex-Butterfield guitarist Buzzy Feiton on “Superwoman” and a trombone solo by Art Baron on another cut) played every instrument,” Aletti continued. He called Wonder,
“A multi-tracked one-man band, with Stevie on piano, drums, harmonica, organ, clavichord, clavinet plus the Arp and Moog synthesizers with their various attachments (on the synthesizers he is assisted by Robert Margouleff and Malcolm Cecil, listed as associate producer).” The following year, the same writer framed Talking Book similarly, noting early in the review that the album was “almost entirely the work of Wonder himself” and closing with the conclusion that Wonder is a “now quite matured genius” (Aletti, 1973).

Aletti also makes mention in both reviews Wonder’s multiply-tracked vocal recording, in which Wonder would record himself singing the melodic lead on tracks such as “Love Having You Around” and “Happier than the Morning Sun” on Music and “I Believe” on Taking Book before recording himself singing harmony and overlaying the two to allow him to sing two parts at the same time. Aletti describes the vocal as “gorgeously orchestrated on an infinity of tracks, testifying almost gospel-style to the power of love.” “Gospel-style” is deeply telling here: Wonder’s singular genius allows him to singlehandedly recreate the sound of blackness, fulfilling a kind of translational role, an attractive quality to GRAMMY voters throughout the awards’ history. Wonder needed not a chorus or a community—he and he alone could tell his own version of black musical history, despite the fact that he had allegedly not been to a Baptist church until the sessions for I Was Made to Love Her five years prior (Elsner, 1977, p. 32).

Shockingly, a Billboard-sponsored class on the music industry hosted at UCLA Extension in 1977, which featured Wonder in discussion with Ewart Abner alongside a presentation titled “A Superstar Look at the Process,” discusses a key moment from this period that offers a further window into Wonder’s approach to race relations. “You Are the Sunshine of My Life” won an award in 1972 from the National Association of Recording Merchandisers (NARM), a trade association that promoted music commerce.46 The award was for “Best Soul Song;” Wonder turned it down. “The song wasn’t one that should be played for a special kind of people. All of us can feel love. When music is categorized, yet everyone can relate to it, I wouldn’t be thankful for accepting it,” he told the UCLA classroom (Harrison, June 25, 1977, p. 36). Though this did not

46 The association is now known as the Music Business Association.
receive major coverage at the time (this is the only mention I have come across to this point of this award), it is backed up by earlier colorblind statements from Wonder that suggested his own (earned) presumption about his deserved status. All six of his GRAMMY nominations to that point had come in raced categories, though he had not yet won an award, so it is impossible to know how he would have responded to the GRAMMY, a more prestigious if still racially marked consolation prize.

Meanwhile, in 1972, Wonder also embarked on a tour as the opening act for The Rolling Stones which achieved national coverage. In the band’s first U.S. tour since the Stones’ fateful performance at the Altamont Speedway in 1969, which left one man dead, Wonder opened for a national tour in which newspapers blurred the genre lines, calling him a rock act. This was also key to his reframing: “[R]ock music conceived of musical creativity in fiercely individualist terms,” Hamilton (2016) writes, “as matters of personal transcendence that could hardly be more starkly opposed to collectivist notions of black musical authenticity” (53).

In the studio, the groundwork laid by the previous albums bore fruit with Talking Book released later in 1972, which featured classic singles “You are the Sunshine of My Life” and “Superstition.” Both hit #1 on the Billboard charts. The latter represented more technological wizardry through the use of the Hohner Clavinet, Moog, and other synthesizers. The former, the album-opener ballad, earned Wonder his first General Field nominations, both for Record and Song of the Year. The winner that year in both categories was Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly with His Song.” But because of the timing of the releases, Wonder’s follow-up to Talking Book, Innervisions, was also eligible in the same window as Talking Book and nominated for the big prize: Album of the Year.

Innervisions had received favorable reviews upon its release August 3, 1973. “Where did the preceious[sic] ‘Little’ Stevie Wonder of yesteryear go?” Ebony asked, answering its own question. “Into another musical dimension where he has fused the raw insistence of rock with black blues, balladry and a special sensitivity that can only be called his own thing. His gifts for melody, harmony and pure innovation make him quite possibly the most creative popular artist of
the day, for there’s always more to his music and lyrics than meets the ear on first encounter.” (Garland, 1974, p. 26). The New York Times’s review (Riley, October 21, 1973, p. 176) of Innervisions was headlined “Stevie Wonder is a Whole Gang” and celebrated Wonder’s “unique, personal history of serious popular music.” “On this album, his 14th, Stevie identifies himself as a gang and a genius, producing, composing, arranging, singing and, on several tracks, playing all the accompanying instruments. (Yes, it is impossible, or used to be.),” the Times writer suggests. “[H]e sings all the things he hears: rock, folk and all forms of Black music. The sum total of these varying components is an awesome knowledge, consumed and then shared by an artist who is free enough to do both.[…] Wherever American music can go, Stevie will go, up front, most likely. “Inner Visions” is a citation of where he is among the soothsayers. Out there, I do believe, competing with no one but himself, knowing how he wants to sound.”

Three days after the release of Innervisions on August 6, 1973, Wonder was involved in a near-fatal car crash in North Carolina, where a piece of lumber broke loose from a logging truck, crashing through the windshield and hitting him in the face. The accident was very serious: Gordy recalls in his autobiography being told that Wonder, who would in a coma for a number of days, was not expected to live (Gordy, 1994, p. 329). Even then, Wonder’s near mythical connection to music was part of the coverage though: “Friends knew that he was going to make it only when his aide, Ira Tucker Jr., knelt down next to Wonder’s ear, started singing his song ‘Higher Ground’ (‘God is gonna show you higher ground/He’s the only friend you have around’), and Stevie’s fingers slowly began moving in time to the music,” TIME magazine wrote. (“Black, Blind, and on Top of Pop,” p. 51-52). He was released from the hospital on August 28 (“Stevie Wonder

47 Riley—a black writer—was pointed in his analysis of the broader context, suggesting “Understanding any of this is understanding that Black music’s legitimacy is tied to what constitutes legitimate activity in any other areas of Black life. (Couldn’t there really be a correlation between a dislike of Black music and a similar distaste for Black people?)” and suggesting that Miraculously, he has transcended his own perimeters to construct musical appeals to Striver’s Row and its bourgeois dormitories. Simply because he tells the truth. (“... listen, mama, c’n you unda’stand that?”)[...The Black cosmos exists, murderous America to the contrary. Our music is ourselves, Stevie translating for all people, us, and others who’ve begun to see the forest and the trees. With both his vision and his full and present artistry, Stevie, say Stevie Wonder leads
Recupes,” August 29, 1973, p. 35) and returned to public life in November 1973, emceeing an event at Shaw University in North Carolina. Wonder’s near-death experience coupled with the dynamism of the record and the massive groundswell of discourse led Innervisions to be named Album of the Year, the first such win for a black artist in the category.

Wonder returned to the stage Monday, March 25, 1974 at Madison Square Garden, where only two years prior he had been a frustrated opening act for the Stones; coverage in The New York Times suggested that Wonder, so soon after confronting his own mortality, presented a “new seriousness” around social and racial issues (Rockwell, March 27, 1974, p. 34). “But more than the accident has happened to Mr. Wonder since his last appearance here,” the writer continued, contextualizing the recent breakthrough Album of the Year victory. “By winning five Grammy awards in Los Angeles on March 2, he achieved an enormous personal triumph, of course. But his achievement was also a sign of black music’s ever stronger claim to its legitimate place at the center of American popular music. For years the inspiration for white musicians who borrowed and cashed in, black music is now accepted by the white record buying and ticket buying masses. Mr. Wonder stands at the center of contemporary black music, and his bringing on of Roberta Flack, Sly of Sly and the Family Stone and Eddie Kenricks[sic] at the end amounted to an affirmation of that centricity.” He had arrived at the center of the industry.

That standing—or at least the press’s perception of it—seemed to grow even more by 1974, at least in the Rolling Stone review for Fulfillingness’ First Finale. “FFF is less funky, less specifically black than its predecessors,” Ken Emerson writes (1974).

For Wonder’s onward and upward development has consistently been away from strict soul music and racial categories or limitations. Because of this, his appeal — greater than that of almost any other performer today — cuts across social and ethnic barriers. In this respect he’s ideally suited to Motown, which has never been content with an exclusively black market. But unlike so many Detroit acts, whose wooing of white listeners leaves them pallid and gutless, Wonder’s music expands and its integrity is strengthened, not diminished.”

In a review of a 1974 concert, The New York Times called him a “genuine rock superstar for some time,” but suggested that that meant he had not “degenerated,” again suggesting the genre’s still complicated status among a certain class of thinkers (Dove, September 15, 1974, p. 129).
57). His music was called an “ecumenical apotheosis of the blues[…]a wide array of black and white musical styles into a hugely popular personal idiom that emphatically defines where pop is at right now” (“Black, Blind, and on Top of Pop,” p. 51-52). The 1975 GRAMMYs rewarded Fulfillingness with four more GRAMMYs, including Album of the Year and Best Pop Vocal Performance.

Motown continued to be a place of tension for black music. In a lengthy *The New Yorker* article titled “Leaving Motown” brought about by The Jackson family’s decision to leave the label for CBS—the very same label that had funded the 1972 Harvard Study—was able to be summed up in three sentences that summed up much of the raced framing of the industry in the mid-Seventies. “We left Motown because we look forward to selling a lot of albums,” Tito Jackson told a reporter. “Motown sells a lot of singles. Epic sells a lot of albums,” [Joe, the family patriarch] Jackson added (Trow and Kincaid, July 14, 1975).

Motown’s one great albums artist, Wonder, was hard at work on a grand finale, with his longest-ever period of silence coinciding with his work on *Songs in the Key of Life*, though another matter led the press coverage of his absence. “A looming non-nominee is Stevie Wonder, who won no less than 10 GRAMMYs[sic] during the past two years. He did not release any records this year, presumably due to lengthy contract negotiations with Motown,” *Billboard* wrote (Freedland, January 24, 1976, p. 27). The following April, of 1975, Wonder’s contract came up again, which prompted another concession from Motown in the wake of overtures from other labels, purportedly including recently ousted former CBS head (and eventual GRAMMY power-broker) Clive Davis’s Arista, a seven-year, $13 million contract, the largest ever awarded by a label to an artist. A front-page *Billboard* article (Kirsch, August 16, 1975) trumpeted the deal, which topped a recent $8 million deal ex-Beatle Paul McCartney had signed with Capitol. Wonder also received at least 20% of his royalties, a surprising concession by the label.48 Then-president Ewart Abner suggested that the deal was a spirit-booster for the label, telling *Billboard* that given

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48 Gordy makes mention in his autobiography that by the mid-Eighties, Wonder even had a clause in his contract that Motown could not be sold unless it was to a buyer he approved. It is not clear when this provision was added (p. 391).
the departure of the Jacksons, morale “was important[…]and we thought of it during the negotiations” (10). The article went on, though, to ask if contracts of this scale were a sign of the future, though Abner and the writer agreed that a higher-class, cream-of-the-crop of musicians was emergent, “a handful of artists who command the complete adulation of the public and actually sell enough product for the label to pay what seem like unrealistic amounts of money,” comparing Wonder to the Rolling Stones, Elton John, Neil Diamond, and McCartney. The article noted that the Stones' contract allowed them to have their own label, emblematic of the control Wonder, too, had earned by virtue of his excellence and commercial appeal.

But the article’s argument was that this was a product of changes in the industry itself: “[S]ingers seem to have taken the place of movie stars as the real lords of fantasyland,” Kirsch suggested. The article went on to historicize the contracts within the last decade—suggesting that five years prior, a $250,000 contract was considered “lavish,” as was the $50,000 Capitol and EMI spent on the first U.S. promotional push for The Beatles. Abner tellingly compared the artists to a text that would forever change another cultural industry—*Jaws*—which had recently become the highest-grossing film ever, defining the category of the “blockbuster” and establishing a prototype. “This is a recession period and a film like *Jaws* grosses $85 million in a few months. Super artists are in the same kind of category.”

Reflecting after the fact, Gordy suggests this hit Motown particularly hard: “We had become dangerously dependent on a handful of our superstars—like the Commodores, Marvin, Smokey, Diana, and Stevie. When we got a new album from one of them, it meant millions; when we didn’t—it meant trouble” (1994, p. 358).

The contract began to pay almost immediate dividends for artist and label as momentum built for *Songs in the Key of Life*. A billboard—60 feet by 240 feet—advertised the album in Times Square (“The Pop Life,” August 20, 1976, p. 62). Upon its release in September, it immediately went to Number One and generating massive sales numbers. “With sales already totaling a phenomenal 1.7 million, the album could well earn Motown most of its $13 million back before year’s end,” the *TIME* review suggested (“Jumping Jamboree,” November 15, 1976). *Songs was
in many ways the culmination of these discourses: “This is another personal tour de force: Wonder produced, arranged, wrote and composed everything here (only three songs list cowriters); he sings all leads and most of the backing tracks as well; and, though a number of stars (George Benson, Herbie Hancock, Minnie Riperton, Bobbi Humphrey, Deniece Williams, Syreeta Wright) make cameo appearances, the majority of the cuts list at most four or five other musicians besides Wonder and many list only him. Wonder confronts us virtually single-handedly, grasps our expectations and wrestles them to the ground” (Aletti, 1976). *Time* called him a “a virtual one-man music company,” who “sings in his distinctive black/white style, which occasionally echoes Paul McCartney or Ray Charles. *Time* complimented the album’s range: “The broad range of musical styles is equally absorbing: those Beatlesque strings in the austere Village Ghetto Land, the swinging blues underpinnings of Black Man, the Latin glee of Another Star” (“Jumping Jamboree,” November 15, 1976). Wonder’s anointed return to the GRAMMYs took place on February 19, 1977. “I’m very proud of this Academy. There aren’t many institutions that would go to so much time and care just to throw an annual get-together for Stevie Wonder,” host Andy Williams deadpanned during the show’s opening. (GRAMMY Awards Website).

One quote in *Rolling Stone*’s *Songs in the Key of Life* review sums up much of the sentiment around Wonder at the time: “His voice contains its own history, from the riveting rawness of Little Stevie Wonder to the husky, warm ballad style of his recent albums,” Aletti writes. “And he delights in playing these voices against one another from separate tracks, teasing us with his virtuosity, flaunting it with jumping, jiving glee.” Almost no black artist of the time would be given such creative leeway, given purchase by the music press on his own unique achievement—making “For Once in My Life” a standard; having a “voice that contains [its] own history” and operating as an individual star—the first black star of the integrated music industry.

This sentiment—and this chapter broadly—aligns with long, deeply held ideas about America that this dissertation explores, chiefly the neoliberal individualist subjectivity codified by rhetorics of the American Dream and their ability to conflate achievement with individual drive. Interpellated in this fashion, discourses around Wonder served a dual purpose: they suggested
that Wonder truly was a great, unique artist and they also set him apart from longstanding ideas about what black music was.

It would be three years before Wonder released another album, and even his license to mint GRAMMYs had a limited shelf-life with *Stevie Wonder's Journey Through “The Secret Life of Plants,”* a soundtrack to a documentary film, marking the end of the “Classic Period” and Wonder’s GRAMMY preeminence. But Wonder’s Classic Period is so exceptional (and thus worth a whole chapter of this study) because it nuances over-simple framings of the GRAMMYs and the industry itself as merely racist or anti-black. Those facile understandings are refuted by Wonder’s acceptance and his GRAMMYs hauls of the 1970s, and though it took far longer than it should have for the GRAMMYs to more adequately integrate the winners’ circle, Wonder was embraced wholesale. But further, this case study illustrates the insufficiency of that framing altogether: The GRAMMYs have always been products of discourses and music and broader cultural industries machinations. Instead, Wonder’s case asks and answers the question: What would it take for the GRAMMYs to recognize a black artist among the industry’s very best?

This chapter suggests that Wonder was a product of a set of discursive formations around genius, individuality, ability, and technical proficiency that made him a compelling figure, transcendent of his disability and of the musical frames that held back other black artists from achieving his level of artistic excellence. At the same time Wonder’s acceptance was emblematic of a changing industry and a set of discourses that made room for him on the GRAMMY stage. And as much as this chapter is about understanding why Wonder broke through in such a tremendous way in the 1970s, much of its conceptual frame suggests why, conversely, Motown was devalued and disregarded during their commercial and cultural apogee. Motown’s handling of Wonder—the “eighth wonder of the world”-style advertisements, the glowing articles about his character and the handling of his pushing against Motown control—suggested a unique standing that ultimately made clear a pathway for the contributions of black artists to the GRAMMYs and other systems of acclaim to be legible.
Further, the continuity and coherence of black music as genealogy has long been held as a badge of honor for black American and Afro diasporic musicians, given a musical teleology when the horror of the Middle Passage had robbed them of a cultural one. But, this chapter suggests, that sonic connective tissue has ultimately been operationalized in a way that delegitimizes the artistry of their production. This, we might conclude, is ultimately somewhat responsible for the GRAMMYs unparalleled embrace of Wonder in the 1970s. For a black artist to be “individually” great required a high degree of difficulty—the “excellence” that was the awards’ stated ne plus ultra criteria—because what was truly excellent about Wonder was his ability to transcend the musical and cultural milieu of blackness. Wonder made music that the industry (and America more broadly) was ready to consider a black genius.

Chapter 3: Racial Rollback and Representational Danger

On October 30, 2017, white octogenarian Phoenix-area resident Steve Guinn, annoyed at what he perceived as the overabundance of black people in television commercial advertisements that aired while he watched syndicated reruns of the CBS crime drama Law & Order, wrote a letter to the editor of his local newspaper, The Arizona Republic. “Advertisers are mixing social issues while selling product,” it reads.

“By my count, nearly 50 percent of the folks in commercials are African Americans. That is not the ratio of the general population. It is an attempt to be politically correct. But, a feeble one. There are few Asians, Native Americans or Latinos. African Americans are way more sensitive and activist about their image. Does this diversity in advertising create more sales for the advertised product? I don’t think so, but that is only my opinion. Mixing a social issue with product promotion may only dilute the product message.” (quoted in Magee, 2017).

In a few short words, he had summed up many of the major tentpoles of contemporary discourse around black representation in popular television and commercial media as well as the consequences of a presumptuously diversifying media ecosystem, whether the result was one
that was Guinn’s perception or objective reality. Black people had—by a combination of their own
efforts to be seen and the commercial mediascape’s willingness to capitalize on visions of
diversity in kind—made their way into mainstream media. And this was the result for many
conservative-leaning white people: annoyance. This brief vignette sits at the intersection of issues
of racial resentment, media representation, black hypervisibility, and commercial media, gesturing
toward the complex intermingling of politics and ideological forces at play in this chapter and
moment for the culture and media industries more broadly.

On a whim, I phoned Mr. Guinn one summer afternoon (personal communication, July 30, 2018), to learn more about the nature of his complaint. He answered, impressed that
someone on the other side of the country had read his letter, and spent the next thirty minutes
explaining further his argument, which he maintained was largely about overrepresentation
relative to the racial demographics of the American population. It was, he said, connected to what
he perceived as a belief on the part of advertisers that a more diverse block of advertising would
appease progressively minded shoppers in a country polarizing along political and racial lines. He
asked why the country’s roughly 13% black population minority was so emphasized in popular
media and suggested this was a recent phenomenon that he linked to the around-the-clock media
coverage of protests after the 2014 murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. He also
suggested that the kinds of black advertisements and black people he was seeing on television
was more unapologetic, confrontational, and unavoidable than in years past. “I had good buddies
in the Air Force that were officers as I was, and you’d be hard pressed to remember whether they
were black or not. Today it’s in your face. Written across their forehead is ‘I’m black and you’re
white and it’s your fault,’” he explained grumpily.

He also argued—similarly to his claim above that African Americans "are way more
sensitive and activist about their image" above—that the coherence of black activism in particular
had forced the hands of advertisers. “Blacks have succeeded in making a lot of noise, and
corporate America has fallen on their own swords in order to get the most vocal groups of that
group, which are the blacks, to be portrayed on public media,” he stated. This notion suggested
that the overrepresentation he claimed to be observing was the result of capitulation, whereby commercial media and advertisers had been swayed to be more “politically correct.”

At the risk of giving oxygen to concerning beliefs, I share his quotes in part because Mr. Guinn is not alone in them. In fact, his views are shared by many white Americans who believe, among other things, that there is something particularly egregious about black people and black media representation in the current moment, that this is a new phenomenon, and that things have, in fact, changed. “In some parts of the country it does seem like the America we know and love doesn’t exist anymore.” FOX News commentator Laura Ingraham opined in an August 2018 telecast. “Massive demographic changes have been foisted upon the American people,” she says. “And they’re changes that none of us ever voted for and most of us don’t like” (see Samuels, 2018).

Her comments display a similar feeling of helplessness and inevitability as Mr. Guinn’s—that whites have been victimized by a media apparatus interested in appeasing (vague, but longstanding) notions of political correctness and inappropriately overcorrecting course with regard to black and non-white representation. This white victim narrative has proven surprisingly persistent: Similar to the resistance to university and affirmative action programs outlined throughout earlier chapters of this project, black encroachment has been consistently marshalled as something needing to be checked or defended against. Given voice by Guinn, Ms. Ingraham, and others, a cultural subtext to the current moment is a frustration with the unavoidability of black people and culture within the modern mediascape and a consequential presumption that their visibility is ill-gotten and aberrant.

This chapter, like those before it, historicizes the discourse and music industrial conditions around a specific period in the GRAMMYs history, continuing to explore the dissertation’s foundational themes of racialized “excellence,” merit, and meritocracy; the impact of outside cultural forces on the awards results; and the subsequent tone-setting made possible by the awards’ mediated influence. It focuses on the most recent decade, between the years 2009 and 2019, illustrating the ways discomfort around black musical genres, artists, and culture
persist in an academy and industry recovering from the piracy- and medium-induced collapse of the mid-Aughts and the rebirth through digital and streaming avenues. It discusses the consequent growth of hip-hop as industry tentpole and the GRAMMYs’ seeming lack of recognition of that fact, with General Field awards going to non-black artists almost exclusively in a moment when black music is more central than ever to the industry’s (and nation’s) culture and bottom line.

Herbie Hancock’s 2008 concept album, River: Letters to Joni, featuring jazz covers of the white Sixties folk artist Joni Mitchell, captured the headlining Album of the Year GRAMMY in 2008. Since then, no black artist has won Album of the Year, an eleven-year gap that is the longest period without a black Album of the Year winner since 1974, when Stevie Wonder was the first black artist to capture Album of the Year in the awards’ sixteenth staging. At the time of writing, Record of the Year had gone unearned by a black artist since Ray Charles’s posthumous honor in 2005, the longest gap for Record of the Year in the awards’ history. Song of the Year featured just one black winner during the most recent decade, with Beyoncé Knowles’s only General Field win (for “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” in 2010). Why was there such a disconnect between the winners’ circle in the integrated General Field categories and the broader industry? Why was the music industry—and the picture of itself it and other media industries painted—more diverse than ever while the awards stubbornly and surprisingly redrew lines between black art and white excellence?

The chapter uses Guinn and Ingraham’s assertion as an important animating theoretical and conceptual schema to explain the industry’s step backwards: It suggests the industry’s discomfort with black artists in the General Field categories is due at least in part to attrition, where white cultural and industrial centrality perceives itself to be threatened by black artists and black culture. There is a re-assertion here, a reclamation of the industry center.

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49 Song of the Year is awarded to the credited songwriters for a given album, but it is largely unclear the extent to which voters truly separate this from Record. So for my purposes, I consider the artist who performed the song as the key figure in the Song of the Year category.
The time period of study is of course bookmarked on its front end by the election of United States President Barack Obama in 2008, a moment that left many optimistically declaring the beginning of a post-racial moment when, in reality, race and its impact would surge back into the popular American consciousness, drawing battle lines. The combination of fear and frustration given voice by Guinn and Ingraham was acted upon in the voting booth on November 8, 2016, realized in the form of what CNN commentator Van Jones named the “whitelash”—racial resentment animating and motivating a reinstatiation of white-affirming and white-supremacist-proximate ideology in the form of votes cast in favor of an unqualified accused candidate who, despite a recent admission of sexual assault, won the election. Jones’s argument has been supported in the literature (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). It might not be unreasonable to call this past decade of the GRAMMYs a Recording Academy whitelash.

A year-and-a-half earlier, black Compton, California-born rapper Kendrick Lamar posed triumphantly with a group of black friends on the lawn of the White House, an image that appeared on the cover of his acclaimed album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which would go on to win five GRAMMYs and lose three GRAMMYs, with all of the wins coming in raced-black categories and all of the losses coming in unmarked (and therefore white) categories, including Album and Song of the Year. That photo on the lawn—exultant, defiant, triumphant, released mere months after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri visibilized the nation’s racial tensions in mass media once more—is an enduring image, one that many white Americans, and GRAMMY voters, this chapter argues, saw and said, consciously or not, “enough is enough.” GRAMMY voters had perhaps (un)intentionally argued with their votes an alignment with a movement and industrial text that recalls a different media figure, Clint Eastwood’s racist character Walt Kowalski of the 2008 film *Gran Torino*, who notably growled at his non-white neighbors, “Get off my lawn.” Mr. Guinn’s concern speaks to that sentiment and is thus an appropriate epigraph to the dissertation’s final chapter, which addresses the rolling-back of mainstream GRAMMY acclaim for black artists and its connection to broader cultural phenomena of re-segregation.
This chapter situates the GRAMMYs results and discourses within this fraught cultural minefield, historicizing the most recent ten years of the GRAMMY Awards with this cultural discomfort as a backdrop. It uses this period to understand some of the ways the excellence of black music of this period—specifically hip-hop, arguably the world’s most popular musical genre—has been delegitimized. As in previous chapters, it points to moments of concerning language regarding race within the awards discourse, specifically in these cases assessing a corpus of programs from the years studied for language of coded racial resentment and a discursive network of backhanded praise, dinging black artists’ candidacies in the General Field categories and implying a distance from the hegemonic white center. It maintains the historical bent, exploring the discourse around artists such as Lil Wayne, Kendrick Lamar, Beyoncé Knowles, Adele Adkins, Taylor Swift, and Bruno Mars, all of whom have sat at these intersections on the awards stage. Black artists among this list have a combined 19 Album, Song, and Record of the Year nominations between 2009 and 2018, with only one win to show for it.

But these artists also have 31 GRAMMY wins over the same period. They appear on almost every telecast, with noteworthy performances from Lamar in 2016 and 2018 and Knowles in 2017, the latter occurring famously with Knowles eight months pregnant with twins. These artists are clearly present in the industry fabric—they have just never been the “best” at any point during this period. So accordingly, this chapter also analyzes media discourses, interviews with stakeholders, and the shows themselves specifically as a corporate, mass media product operating within this particularly fraught cultural milieu, focusing on the extent to which the awards are a mass media event and the role that television representation in the form of the GRAMMY stage show plays within wider conversations around race and representation.

Again, this chapter—like the dissertation broadly—is not an attempt at redress or re-litigation. Instead, it tries to understand why at a historical moment in which R&B, hip-hop, and certain artists within the pop ethos—sounds and songs and people ostensibly raced black—are the musics with the highest market share among America’s listening public, they, like other raced-black genres in the history of the awards before them, are sidelined (2017 U.S. Music Year-End
It tries to understand how rapper Kendrick Lamar could win a Pulitzer Prize recognizing his “vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life” before being recognized for artistic achievement by the industry in which he works. It tries to understand how industry progress toward inclusion has remained fixated on the idea of a particular type of music performed by a particular type of artist as being the most objectively excellent. What this chapter argues is that, more than a cataclysmic moment such as Election Night 2016, the industry represented by the GRAMMY Awards is guilty of a more subtle, piecemeal resistance to full acknowledgment and acceptance of black artists and art. It suggests that the process of “Making America ‘Great’ Again” has iteratively been manifest in the concerning rollback of mainstream-award-level acclaim for black artists. Black artists are seldom “greatest” at anything in the eyes of the Academy.

This chapter argues that the centrality and success of black artists—and black people and culture more broadly—has led to a cultural backlash that has, unintentionally or not, bled into the contemporary GRAMMY Awards results and discourse. If racial progress comes in fits and starts, with one step back for every two forward, this chapter argues that the GRAMMYs are in the “one-step-back” moment of progress, where gains made over the last decades face a new kind of hurdle that sits at the intersection of the broad phenomena that animate this dissertation: the GRAMMYs’ perhaps unwitting concessions to a broad set of ideological challenges that repositions black artists as outside an industry center they are, by any reasonable metric, very much already inside. A concerning pattern has emerged where GRAMMY acknowledgment in racially unmarked or mainstream categories has become elusive due at least in part to a kind of performative fatigue. Together, these forces in their current instantiation have produced GRAMMY results that are as racially concerning since the awards’ early years.

Between 2008 and 2018, the “big four” categories of Album, Song, and Record of the Year and Best New Artist have been awarded 48 times, with only three wins for black artists during that time period: jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding and Chance the Rapper won Best New Artist in 2011 and 2017 respectively, with Beyoncé Knowles’s win for Song of the Year in 2010
the only win for an established artist in a mainstream, integrated category. The previous decade, by contrast, saw seven wins for black artists across the four categories—a still-small number but one that, for whatever it is worth, is in line with the nation’s demographics held up by Mr. Guinn.

By analyzing trade, media, and industry discourse and conducting interviews with industry and Academy stakeholders, this chapter suggests that the GRAMMYs rollback of its acknowledgment of black artists is connected to and at least partially explainable by the themes of Mr. Guinn’s claims: namely racial resentment, a fear of black encroachment, and a media system set up to benefit from and draw just enough attention to black artists without handing them the trophies themselves. It suggests that these factors and the sociopolitical climate have taken a toll on GRAMMY voters and that that attrition is connected to industrywide discomfort, with hip-hop a convenient scapegoat. It suggests that the music industry is in fraught and dangerous times where black music is more central than ever in the apparatus but backtracking in terms of acceptance. Recent discourses and results represent a re-ghettoization of black music, a new kind of industrial elitism, influenced by larger factors in the culture, media, and industry discourses. Ultimately, it offers an explanation for the recent struggles of black artists when nominated in the awards’ General Field categories. It suggests that a history of the last ten years of the GRAMMY Awards is a history of a music industry influenced profoundly, if largely unintentionally, by these factors and that these discourses are influencing voters’ ballots.

Theorizing the Battles over Contemporary Black Representation

As this dissertation has argued throughout, race itself and the subsequent actions, logics, and sentiments it evokes are fundamental to and constitutive of both American culture and the music industry. This manifests in various ways at various times, from the anti-black roots of anti-rock sentiment during the awards’ founding discussed in Chapter 1 to the post-Civil-Rights acceptance of Stevie Wonder discussed in Chapter 2 and so on.

In the contemporary case, understanding the place of black art and black people in American culture might logically conclude that things have already “tanned,” in the words of

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industry influencer Steve Stoute (2011), who will have a part to play in this narrative at the end of
the chapter. Black vernacular speech from “yo” to “bae” has become absorbed into white speech
patterns; fashion trends from baggy pants athleisure and brands such as Adidas and Nike are
commonplace; and a black man, Barack Hussein Obama, became “the leader of the free world.”
Mainstream American popular culture has subsumed and absorbed black signifiers, fashions, and
culture. The “other,” in the parlance of hooks (1992), has been eaten, swallowed, and digested.

But a countercurrent to this paradigm shift is the racial resentment given voice by people
like Steve Guinn, who have been told by people like Laura Ingraham that they inhabit a
precarious, fragile domination, where the “America” mythologized in ways to affirm their own
cultural importance and centrality is under attack from outside influences. A diversifying
America—which the census projects will be minority-white by 2045 (Frey, 2018)—is not, in Guinn
and Ingraham’s parlance, adding to a rich and diverse cultural fabric. Culture and citizenship are
instead effectively zero-sum games. Those speech patterns are evidence of the degradation of
language and standards; those fashion trends lead to “pull up your pants” discourse and racist
dress codes; and that black man was a symbol against which political movements from the Tea
Party to #MAGA railed.

Should we take these arguments seriously? White racial precarity in the face of more
non-white neighbors and TV characters can and should be understood as an outgrowth of white
supremacy, where resistance to “outside” people, culture, and ideas is essentially a desire for
continued cultural supremacy and centrality. The zero-sum-ness suggests that culture is not a
melting pot, where the “spice” of the exotic adds richness and flavor; instead it is a bland dish for
picky eaters afraid of heat or anything different. This may read harshly, but resistance to diversity
should be taken as a manifestation of white desire for a status-quo that has for the entirety of its
existence maintained a second-class status for black and brown Americans.

So whether or not we agree with this perspective’s reasoning, its import in 21st-Century
America is undeniable. Racial resentment—the often-used name for the feeling of resistance that
comes as a result of this perceived precarity—is a tremendous motivating factor for contemporary
white voters and consumers where resistance to racial crossover bleeds into schooling (Rosiek and Kinslow, 2015); housing; and, this dissertation argues, taste and the broader concept of excellence.

What could this mean for the GRAMMYs? This chapter argues that hip-hop, the key genre here after forty years of existence, remains strategically outside the music industry’s surprisingly resistant center, chewed up by consumers and the industry machine but strangely undigested and never absorbed into its bloodstream. This unwillingness to allow hip-hop fully into industry culture when so many other cultural signifiers and even previously railed-against musical ones such as jazz and rock and roll have made their way into the mainstream. Hip-hop’s curious alterity is reinforced in awards discourse, where its outsider status persists. This should be seen both as evidence of its incredibly salient and political potential, a foundation of black nationalism, and as an explanation for its persistent lack of full acceptance. Hip-hop represents a coherent black aesthetic that resists subsumption or the slow, bit-by-bit process of co-optation. It need be swallowed whole by an America and an industry unable and uninterested in opening its maw widely enough to do so.

Further, black feminist scholarship gives us the term "hypervisibility," which is specifically used to discuss the mediation of black womanhood as excessive against a “paradox of normative whiteness” (Reddy, 1998; see also Mowatt, French, and Malebranche, 2013; Noble, 2013). I take up hypervisibility and suggest it is the theoretical explanation for Mr. Guinn’s complaint, where he experiences black people as hypervisible, allowing him to conclude “50%” even when that number is not backed up by empirical data. Hypervisible black popular culture—in the form of black wins in segregated categories, presenters, and performances during the awards—is presumed to take up more space than it actually does, an exaggeration that is key in giving fuel to racial resentment claims. The way black people, art, and culture are mediated are always already presumptuously overexaggerated, making them seem extra-present when, in reality, their presence is moderated by their lack of General Field win representation.
This section thus explores hip-hop within a cultural and discursive context that contains seeds sewn culturally and politically, theorizing the impact of the combination of two interlocking forces—resegregationist rhetorics and the persistent monolithic “outsideness” of this particular black music. Together, they are part of Hall’s “chain of meanings” used to describe the constitutive forces of ideology (1995), here used to give a groundwork for the rollback of black artists’ success at the GRAMMYs when their music is more popular than ever. Ultimately, this chapter argues that white, mainstream audiences’ frustrations at perceived media over-representation of black people has not gone unheard—that its persistence has led to attrition of support for black music in the industry after the managed multiculturalism described in the previous chapter. The cultural moment has contributed to a potentially (sub)conscious rollback of the industry’s support for black artists. It shows a concerning pushback to representative diversity where the awards themselves remain a protected class, insulated from black artists and music.

Before diving into the industry, we should first theorize the constellation of forces around black representation in the cultural moment. A number of studies suggest that American whites have for some time held a distorted view of the racial makeup of the American population, with some yielding results three times the actual figure (“Black-White Relations in the United States 2001 Update,” 2001; see also Kaiser Family Foundation et al, 2001; Gallagher, 2003; Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz, 2005). A 2002 UCLA study argued that black people were in fact overrepresented on prime-time television (Hunt & Ryder, 2002; nuanced by Hunt, 2004; Signorielli, 2009) relative to the population. Enders and Scott (2018) argue that racial resentment is a longstanding phenomenon in American culture that predates Barack Obama’s election. Among scholars, Tesler (2012, 2013, 2015, 2016) has developed a corpus of literature arguing two relevant and interlocking factors to this study, namely 1) that old-fashioned racism, another name for explicit belief in white supremacy or behavior in accordance with Jim Crow logics, became a determinant of white Americans’ broader preferences during the Obama electoral cycle and 2) that Obama’s presidency has polarized mass politics by racial attitudes in such a way that it has led to a “racial spillover” effect, whereby racial attitudes bleed into one’s appraisal of other
issues such as welfare (Gilens, 1996, 1999), crime (Valentino, 1999), the economy (Chen and
Mohanty, 2018; Wilson and Davis, 2018), and even climate change (Benegal, 2018) and the
Obamas’ dog, Bo. Mostly argued through quantitative studies, these writers make the case that
seemingly non-political factors are raced. One might argue that, given the way race is constitutive
of modernity, these always already were raced (see the work of Fredrickson, 2002 and Mignolo,
2011, among others), but they manifest in discourse specifically in a post-Obama moment where
race and racial discomfort gain a more-central place in so many aspects of American life.

The eight years of the Obama presidency and its relationship to music were eulogized
powerfully in a 2017 cover article in *The Atlantic* by Ta-Nehisi Coates titled “My President Was
Black.” “If Obama’s enormous symbolic power draws primarily from being the country’s first black
president, it also draws from his membership in hip-hop’s foundational generation,” Coates
argued. The article’s title is a play on 2008 Young Jeezy song, “My President,” the video for which
triumphantly collapses merges coverage of 2008 election and the genre, with signs for states’
delegates typically held at election parties alongside signs bearing the names of deceased hip-
hop artists such as Notorious B.I.G. and Soulja Slim. “My president is black,” the song’s first line,
echoes throughout it, delivered matter-of-factly, but pridefully.

The Coates piece discusses the Obama administration’s attempts at racial recompense
through ostensibly color-blind policy such as the Affordable Care Act and guardedly color-blind
discourse (see also Gillion, 2016) and the fact that whenever the President confronted raced
issues—the arrest of famed academic Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 2009, his comments that “if [he]
had a son he’d look like Trayvon [Martin],” the black teen murdered in cold blood by George
Zimmerman in Florida in 2012—it gave white conservatives space to critique the president’s
racial bias, effectively turning colorblindness into a standard to hold above the black president’s
head rather than an end-goal of progress. Regardless of the President’s efforts to tread carefully,
groups such as the Tea Party emerged, with race-based animus the key to their platform (Leone
and Presaghi, 2018). After his election, web traffic to the white-supremacist website Stormfront
increased sixfold (Coates, 2017A).
In the broader political moment, music was a key subtext towards delegitimizing the (unavoidable) presence of black people in the Obama White House and the broader culture: Obama’s wife, Michelle, was pilloried for inviting rapper Common to the White House in 2011 (Zak, 2011); FOX News called Common a “vile rapper” for 2004 lyrics critical of former President George W. Bush and the Iraq War (Greene, 2011); Sarah Palin referred to Obama’s foreign policy as “shuck and jive schtick” (Cirilli, 2012).50 A racist vendor at the Republican Values Voters Summit sold boxes of Obama Waffles, bearing a racist caricature of Obama along with rap lyrics:

“Yo, B-rock here droppin’ waffle knowledge/
Spellin’ it out, ‘cause a graduated college/
Some say I waffle so fast,/
Barry’s causin’ whiplash
Just doin’ my part, made wafflin’ a fine art/
For a waffle wit style,
like Chicago’s Magnificent Mile
Spray whipped cream around the edge/
Shake it first like Sister Sledge/
The say wit me,
I can be as waffly as I wanna be!
(That goes out to my Ludacris posse)” (“Republican Racism Example #6,” 2012).

Music became a salient place for critique of the president because of its inextricability from blackness, its low standing in cultural hierarchy, and, particularly in the contemporary case of hip-hop, its coherence. Black music in the Obama era and post-Obama era was a symbol of undeserving-ness and cultural inferiority, a martailing point for white racial resentment with myriad easy targets for ire, from the genre’s Nineties gangsta era to the contemporary use of taboo words such as the “n-word.” The Obamas’ proximity to hip-hop by way of their race was a compelling way to delegitimize their deservingness of their station, to say nothing of denying them the “excellence” achieving the Presidency ostensibly represented.

The price of a black presidency was the enabling of a set of forces, coalescing as a phenomenon that goes by many names from racial resentment to Van Jones’s locution of a

50 Gerald Benjamin, director of a center at SUNY New Paltz, told The New York Times in response to the candidacy of black former rapper, Rhodes scholar, and Harvard Law-trained candidate Antonio Delgado for Congress “Is a guy who makes a rap album the kind of guy who lives here in rural New York and reflects our lifestyle and values? People like us, people in rural New York, we are not people who respond to this part of American culture,” adding that he did not consider rap to be “real music” (Herndon, 2018).
“whitelash,” justifying the election of Donald Trump as white backlash against the first black president. Trump, Coates (2017bB) would later write, “arrived in the wake of something more potent—an entire nigger presidency with nigger health care, nigger climate accords, and nigger justice reform, all of which could be targeted for destruction or redemption, thus reifying the idea of being white. Trump truly is something new—the first president whose entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president.”

I theorize racial resentment using Jones among a constellation of other thinkers, who together help theorize the results of racial resentment in the contemporary context. Journalist Jeff Chang describes cultural patterns of resegregation (2016A), following the disconnect between the visual and sonic he previously explored in Who We Be: A Cultural History of Race in Post-Civil Rights America (2016B). Multiculturalism—effectively cultural desegregation and representative in the musical cultures of the nation—was challenged by rhetorics of white nostalgia, pushing against forces that would “transform” America further. The President, despite his stated desires to not be “the president of black America” (Dingle, 2012), had become just that in the eyes of frustrated white consumers. Representational diversity—black voices in media talking about a black presidency—stoked fears that they would be squeezed out of institutions and screens by people who did not look like them.

The recourse was what criminologist Mike King (2017) calls the new white identity politics—whereby black representation and white precarity have fueled a massive new wave of racial resentment—“aggrieved whiteness” in the face of a new presumption that whites are “a structurally oppressed group.” Whiteness launches its defense from the center, as Ahmed (2006) writes: “The alignment of race and space is crucial to how they materialize as givens, as if each ‘extends’ the other. In other words, while ‘the other side of the world’ is associated with ‘racial otherness,’ racial others become associated with ‘the other side of the world.’ They come to embody distance. This embodiment of distance is what makes whiteness ‘proximate’ as the
‘starting point’ for orientation” (p. 121).\textsuperscript{51} The recourse from this starting point is essentially a revanchist position; revanchism, a term deployed by Neil Smith (1996) to describe gentrification and white re-taking of urban space is useful in this context because what this chapter argues for is that the current moment is essentially a kind of cultural and institutional revanchism, wherein political actors’ and whites like Mr. Guinn’s rails against black people’s, culture’s, and music’s perceived intrusions into the mainstream are the explanation for the GRAMMYs step backwards in awarding black artists.

On his Comedy Central series \textit{The Nightly Show}, black comedian Larry Wilmore called his 2016 election coverage “Blacklash 2016: The Unblackening,” with the implication that U.S. electoral politics leading up to the election would represent a repudiation of the legacy of the first black President, Barack Obama. “We started it as a joke that the black people were moving out of the neighborhood. It took a couple hundred years for black people to get in the White House, and now it’s being unblackened,” Wilmore told The Ringer’s Justin Charity in a 2016 interview. “We saw it as a cynical thing, really—as a comment on some of the Trump supporters. Some of the energy behind that was an unblackening type of energy” (Charity, 2016).

The conversation between Wilmore and Charity discussed the speedy process by which news media addressed its representational dearth of black voices, which Charity suggested to me in a separate interview was happening in media and pop-culture circles in the aftermath of the 2008 election. “When Obama was elected, there were all of these conversations that happened about how, just from a staffing perspective, a lot of publications and a lot of media—either creative media or news media—just weren’t staffed and weren’t equipped to provide comprehensive analysis of the first black American presidency. You’re gonna have an all-white MSNBC [panel] try to contextualize the hyper-scrutiny of the first black President?” (personal

\textsuperscript{51} An artist such as Adele Atkins illustrates this: She has only 18 nominations, half of which have come in the Big Four categories. This implies a quality-over-quantity metric where the General Field is her domain whereas black artists are attempting to cross over into it. For the record, she has won seven of those times and the last thirteen times she has been nominated.
communication, September 7, 2018). He continued, describing the media environment described in the Coates article:

“Once Obama’s second term was over, you had to think of that then as like the second shoe dropping, which is that whether Clinton wins or Trump wins, the editors who only were able to perceive of black culture as valuable in that way, or black perspectives as valuable in that way—because this specific person was elected to this specific position—naturally those people who had a myopic outlook on black perspectives would ditch that outlook once the president was white again. Outside of Obama, outside of the eight years of Obama’s presidency, Unblackening seems like it is the process by which American culture works, which is American culture hosting black culture as the thing that germinates a lot of its ideas, but then American culture has to create...I feel like so many things where you talk about politics, whether you’re talking about music, it just feels like there are very formalized processes by which dominant mainstream white culture, it desalinates itself, black culture is this thing that it both has to rely on for nutrients, but then also has to strip away at the end of its metabolization process.”

Charity’s use of “hosting” suggests a kind of Orientalizing relationship, with whiteness at the center of America and black people and black art being temporarily welcomed like envoys from a foreign space (see Said, 1978). “Bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white’ as a world that is inherited or already given,” Ahmed (2006) writes, suggesting that a perceived “ownership” of space is part of how white supremacy’s hold manifests itself. “This is the familiar world, the world of whiteness, as a world we know implicitly. Colonialism makes the world ‘white,’ which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach” (111).

I apply Ahmed’s reading here to describe the media industries themselves, where gains by black artists—Bell’s “peaks of progress” (2018)—are short-lived and ultimately also harmful. The Unblackening process was also, I argue, a combination of the process described by Charity—namely a perceived less-pressing need for black voices—and also a concession to the rhetoric espoused by Donald Trump of “forgotten Americans,” namely white voters. “I think sometimes it’s hard to put that thing back in the bottle, but you never know. I work in television comedy, and I’ve seen movements that have opened up diversity, and then two years later, it seems to disappear. Sometimes it can go in cycles, and that can be very frustrating,” Wilmore told Charity, though the real consequences were revealed when Wilmore’s show was canceled.
around that same time. “[K]eeping it 100, I guess I hadn’t counted on ‘The Unblackening’ happening to my time slot as well,” he said in a statement (Koblin, 2016).

My argument here is that the GRAMMYs in the period this chapter covers were essentially dealing with what was their Unblackening, where an unexpected deracination of the General Field suggests a music industry that had been enriched by black music but effectively reasserted white music at the center of the industry’s vision of itself. Further, I suggest The Unblackening is happening as a result of a creeping both-sidesism whereby the loud demands of white voters accusing media companies of “liberal bias” and a false presumption of over-representation of black artists co-create a cultural fear of a black planet, media system, and, by extension, music industry. The GRAMMYs represent a white institution grappling with its own reliance on black artists for profit and attention and a stubborn resistance, a desire to hang onto some level of control and superiority. That comes in control of “excellence,” a remaining vestige of cultural centrality and superiority.

With a renewed emphasis on objective excellence as seen in the quotes from Academy head Neil Portnow in this dissertation’s introduction regarding the “blindfold test,” the Academy is conservatively doubling down on race-blind objectivity to obfuscate the deeper forces at play. The topics that occur throughout this dissertation—on what “artistry” and “excellence” are to the academy—persist as well. “Neil Portnow can think he is fighting to whatever degree he can think he’s fighting racial bias and whatever, but on the atomic level of the GRAMMYs, he’s still working with distinctions in commercially recognized genres of music, and those genres are, per se, racialized from their conception,” Charity told me. “The fact that it is literally imperceptible to him why, just at face value, his thoughts about people wearing blindfolds while listening to music is nonsense. His not being able to perceive why that is nonsensical and in-fact, silly, that’s the actual ideology of the GRAMMYs.”

As far as how this manifests with the awards themselves, these phenomena manifested in what I called “the structural limits of black excellence” (Vilanova, 2016) and a “glass ceiling on black art” (Vilanova, 2017) whereby in the contemporary moment, NARAS’s record suggests that
recognizing artists of color as among the best albums of the year would be a suitable degree of validation, a sentiment largely echoed in mass media discourses before my interventions. As long as black artists from Lil Wayne to Kendrick Lamar were pictured holding trophies (and they certainly were), the GRAMMYs was fulfilling a mandate for representational diversity—at least until critics such as myself began to suggest otherwise. In the meantime, after hard-won moves into the mainstream, black artists were still under-appreciated due at least in part, this chapter suggests, to an ongoing national discomfort with black people and black art, particularly black art in the sonic and cultural constellation of hip-hop. Those trophy photos were fuel for the racial resentment argument, creating a feedback loop by which black achievement was both over-representative (in media) and under-representative (in acclaim) at the same time.

During this time period, commentators raised similar alarms. Quincy Troupe, who notably authored Miles Davis’s autobiography in 1989, warned of changing sentiments in the spring of 2011. “Over the past two or three years, we have witnessed a tacit rebirth of white nationalism in many aspects of American society,” he wrote in Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noir, the NYU-based journal he edits.

“The signs of its ugly rise are documented everywhere we look: the nearly all white winners of Grammy and Oscar Awards in 2010, almost all of the so-called print sports analysts, literary critics, television anchors, movie stars, film directors and producers, university presidents, most of the talent celebrated in the music industry these days, in the visual arts, the literary world, the fashion world, magazine and newspaper editors everywhere one looks, if we don’t lie to ourselves, we constantly witness celebrations of white people and their achievements over people of color. “I feel that minds are more closed now,” artist-producer Helen Bruner, a current Grammy trustee, told Billboard in 2017 (Weiner, 2017). “I believe if Stevie Wonder released Innervisions [the 1974 Album of the Year winner discussed in Chapter 2] now, he wouldn’t win.”

What has changed? The next section explores the intersection of these forces and their impact on the music industry itself.

**Structures of the Industry: 2009-2018**
“Hip hop is not dead, but it is gravely ill,” Tricia Rose begins the preface to her 2008 book *The Hip Hop Wars*, assailing the limited vocabulary with which hip hop fans and critics discussed it as its popularity continued to rise. “The beauty and life force of hip hop have been squeezed out, wrung nearly dry by the compounding factors of commercialism, distorted racial and sexual fantasy, oppression, and alienation” (ix). Her argument—that the version of hip-hop popularized in the middle-to-late Nineties and early Aughts and dominant in mass-media representations of the genre had been overcapitalized and controlled by white labels, robbing it of its political potency and turning it into a caricature—was essential, following the work of Greg Tate (2004) discussed in Chapter 4 of the larger book project and in dialogue with other scholars (see Negus, 2004; Garofalo, 1994). Popular hip-hop walked a fine line between outsider rebellion and white industry-mediated minstrelsy, flattened into that either/or by an industry apparatus that was always already racist. “Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the “primitive” or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo,” bell hooks (1992) writes in “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” continuing, ”The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” This process of reinscription reduces the possibility of black music’s deserved richness.

It is the project of white supremacy for this flattening to occur whereby black music’s complexities both broadly and idiosyncratically on the individual level are reduced to this problematic possibility. Bhabha (1994) theorizes this; he calls stereotypes colonialism’s “major discursive strategy”(66) in support of their “regimes of truth,” his framing for a matrix of epistemological domination. Stereotype, he suggests, is an “arrested, fixed form of representation” (75); the implication here is that stereotype is a flattening of difference to the benefit of the colonizer. In our context, this is relevant because the idea of a “flat” black music
delimits the discursive and representational parameters that define mainstream popular black music.

This limited vision of hip-hop connects to a longstanding debate, continually given life in recent years regarding its musicality. Hip-hop and contemporary black musics remain also dogged by the same debates Toni Morrison faced in 1988 around African American literature, only within the industry itself: One of the ways to delegitimize black art was to question its status as art itself, or as she put it in her area, the “idea of the novel.” (128-129). In musical circles, this is represented by the ongoing question of whether or not hip-hop and rap constitute music at all. “Rap isn’t music. And if you think it is, you’re stupid,” conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro tweeted in 2012.

This not just an opinion held in political circles, of course—it is shared by influential musicians alike. “Rap—so many words, so little said,” Keith Richards, the Rolling Stones’ guitar player, opined to the New York Daily News in 2015. “What rap did that was impressive was to show there are so many tone-deaf people out there. All they need is a drum beat and somebody yelling over it and they’re happy. There’s an enormous market for people who can’t tell one note from another” (Farber, 2015; see also Blistein 2015 for more from Richards on rap). Rap is often critiqued for its perceived lack of melody, a building block of popular song. “There is no singing in rap music,” the argument goes.

Mark Steyn, the conservative author, elaborated similar feelings in a 2013 podcast hosted by National Review’s Mona Charen and Jay Nordlinger, the former of whom called it “rap ‘music’ (a symbol of the decline of the West if ever there was one). “I think there’s an absence of human feeling in these songs. It’s not just that they’re explicit. When you talk to social conservatives, they get upset because there’s all these bad words in there. It’s beyond that, actually,” Steyn said before later continuing, “To go back to rap, the idea that rap is the authentic expression of black identity, which is what a lot of these people -- the idea that Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald ... the idea that any of these authentic black musicians would’ve thought that some guy doing some pneumatic laundry list of his hos is any kind of authentic
expression of black culture or black identity is outrageous. Those guys wouldn’t have been on board for that” (Friedersdorf, 2013).

There are even critiques from rap’s presumptive allies on the black side of the racial color line: “I started saying in 1985 I don’t think we should have a music talking about niggas and bitches and hoes. It had no impact. I’ve said it. I’ve repeated it. I still repeat it. To me, that’s more damaging than a statue of Robert E. Lee,” Wynton Marsalis, the acclaimed jazz trumpeter and nine-time GRAMMY winner told The Washington Post in a 2018 podcast (Capehart, 2018), a frustration shared by the poet Maya Angelou upon learning the “n-word” appeared on a song by the rapper Common for which she’d recorded a poetic recitation (Itzkoff, 2011).

“You can’t have a pipeline of filth be your default position, and it’s free,” Marsalis continued. “Now, the nation is entertained by that. It’s not free. Just like the toll the minstrel show took on black folks and on white folks. Now all this “nigga” this, “bitch” that, “ho” that, it’s just a fact at this point. I feel that that’s much more of a racial issue than taking Robert E. Lee’s statue down. There’s more niggas in that than there is in Robert E. Lee’s statue.”

These critiques, informed by respectability politics, contain within them a dual-edged attack on black musicality—that contemporary black music (specifically hip-hop) does a disservice to black people by its messages and its disconnect from quality musicality. The conclusion here, then, becomes obvious: Of course a genre that sees its relationship to musicality remain up for debate would by its very nature require less of the studio magic mythologized and held up by the industry. So the vision of black music in media is both hypervisible and flattened into the most reductive, unfair representation of the genre.

And yet, as I will explore in the chapter covering the previous decade in the larger book manuscript project, this period of study has been a significant one for black music industry workers still benefiting from more democratized technological developments, ranging from home music-editing software such as GarageBand, ProTools, Logic, Ableton Live, and FL Studio (formerly Fruityloops) to digital distribution that allows artists to avoid longstanding institutional infrastructures altogether if they so choose. These Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) along with widespread high-speed Internet availability make the path to audiences for creative work more
streamlined than ever. Further, consumption platforms are an even more significant evolution for the industry during this period, which has seen the rise of subscription-based streaming platforms Spotify (which launched in the United States in July 2011), Apple Music, and Jay Z’s Tidal, the latter two of which launched in 2015. Google’s video-streaming service YouTube, launched in 2005, also continued largely to facilitate on-demand music streaming (McIntyre, 2017). These services would ostensibly play a surprisingly important role in allowing voters access to the large number of nominees; previously the Recording Academy had no version of screeners such those typically shipped to Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members in advance of the Oscars. Surely a number of voters would have access to the nominated music through their work in the industry, the radio, connections to publicists and the like, but these services would seem to afford opportunities for more voters to have access to more obscure musics than otherwise.

Further, during the period of study, a 2016 rules change allowed for streaming-only releases to be considered for awards for the first time, in part it seems to accommodate for the popular streaming-only Coloring Book LP released by Chance the Rapper, who would go on to win Best New Artist. More access to more music should—one would think—help adjudicate this more fairly.

And yet stubborn, raced industrial logics around difficulty, deservingness, and merit persisted. “Grammy voters are recording industry pros: engineers, players. They like high craft. Adele was tailor made,” NPR’s Ann Powers wrote on Twitter in the wee hours of February 13, 2017 after the curtain had fallen and the credits had rolled. “I’ve had many people say to me, #LEMONADE was great but not as music,” she added, suggesting that music industry insiders see albums like “Lemonade” as an achievement in pop art, but not necessarily in musicianship.”

Powers elaborated these ideas further the following day in an article titled “The Problem with the Grammys is not a Problem We Can Fix” (2017). “Throughout popular music, [racism] also takes the form of pervasive ideas,” she writes in a quote I repeat from the introduction because of its relevance.
“These include the notion that music made with ‘real’ instruments and sung straightforwardly, like Adele’s softly tinged soul or Sturgill Simpson’s raucous country, require more skill and vision than those created within the synth- and sample-driven vernacular of hip-hop; the assumption that artists who stand still and sing, like Adele, are more ‘authentic’ than those who dance, like Beyoncé, although dance and music have been inseparable at least since the Jazz Age; and the elevation of the self-contained singer-songwriter, a figure who’s almost always white, over those who work more collaboratively” (Powers, 2017).

Rolling Stone Associate Editor Andy Greene shared the same sentiment during an interview (personal correspondence, 2018, August 23). “I think a lot of GRAMMYs voters don’t have a basic understand of how hip hop is created and what it takes to a pop song,” he said. I think they think I just go into the studio and just go, ‘Yo.’ I think they have this vision of rap trapped in 1982 or something. And I don’t think it was right then. And pop they sort of see that it takes ten producers to make this song and six writers and they understand that.”

Recall the arguments of Chapters 2 and the work of Hamilton (2016): A pervasive and historically sonorous belief suggests that black music springs effortlessly from black people and black culture and is thus therefore less a work of artistic achievement than a performance of vernacular and quotidian expression. Recall also the arguments of Chapter 1 regarding the earned excellence of white artists. This gives fuel again to the argument that white music’s discursive framing is such that they are automatically granted a higher degree of difficulty for their “excellence” and studio production. White music can aspire to higher highs because it is by its nature and history an artmaking practice, contrasted against the “musicking” of black life (see Small, 1998).

Consider also the following excerpt from a 2016 GRAMMY roundtable published by Billboard (Mitchell, 2016). The speakers listed below sat alongside GRAMMY producer Ken Ehrlich and president/CEO Neil Portnow for an interview. Portnow, when asked about the awards’ lack of transparency with nomination, defensively suggested that critiques of the process might be connected to “fake news,” the term of the day. “Sometimes you don’t want to believe everything you hear,” he said. “The reason for [confidentiality] is not that there’s anything secretive about it. It’s a process by which if you have a roomful of people having to essentially create objectivity around something that’s inherently subjective—art and music—you want people
to be able to say what they’re thinking without feeling that there’s going to be some sort of retribution. We also don’t want to create a situation for someone volunteering their time to be subjected to lobbying and influence peddling.” This response furthers the rhetorical disconnect the GRAMMYs’ mouthpieces have elaborated throughout the history of the awards: that objectivity, connected with the normativity of white ideas, voices, and music, would be tied to a variety of factors that were marked by race.

The questioner also asked, “What common elements do you see in Grammy-nominated songs — stylistically, emotionally or structurally?”, seemingly attempting to tease out what, exactly, the GRAMMYs award. What does excellence sound like in 2016?

Universal Music Publishing Group chairman/CEO Jody Gerson (a white woman): There are certain things as a music publisher that I think about, and for me it’s about emotional resonance: that a song moves me and was produced in a way that takes me somewhere. A lot of the songs that have been nominated this year do that.

Grammy-winning producer Om’Mas Keith (a black man who has worked with Frank Ocean): There’s definitely a shift toward a more insightful kind of songwriting. People are approaching songwriting now with an understanding that there’s a lane to really express themselves. You have artists like Chance the Rapper writing very endearing songs that are very positive.

Songwriter Greg Kurstin (a white man who has won Producer of the Year multiple times and worked recently with Adele Adkins): There are a lot of changes I’m seeing in the way songs are written. Like Jody said, there’s this emotional connection with those songs that get picked. There’s always something about them that breaks through to a lot of people -- songs that say something, are about something.” This idea—that successful songcraft is about a universalizing sense of “connection”—automatically presumes and privileges a kind of sameness when one considers the extent to which whiteness has been systematically and consequently invisibilized in the culture. Black artists who succeed are translators—who successfully help white audiences and the academy itself understand their perspectives and their music. Musical excellence is about race-blind, universal meaningfulness.

And yet few black artists achieve this specific tenor of crossover. Many skeptics are quick to suggest that a way towards more awards would be a more diverse voting pool—that more black artists would win awards if there were more black academy voters. But, as Washington
Post music critic Chris Richards suggests, that point precludes the kind of structural change this dissertation advocates for. "We’ve reached a point where we’re talking about a genre of music that’s been dominant for at least 25 years in the United States and you have this gigantic mechanism, corporate mechanism, that hasn’t recognized it," he said. "Why would anyone want to waste their time investing and trying to repair this thing that’s never done anything for them whatsoever? If anything, the academy should be out, and the studios, knocking on doors and getting people to sign up if they care about representing the music that was getting made in this country." The academy is doing that in recent months, with new membership drives and outreach. But structural challenges—in the form of $100 annual dues, a small-but-not-insignificant barrier to entry for lower-end industry workers and the broad and continued devaluation of the music continues this disconnect.

With this backdrop, it makes sense why hip-hop saw such little General Field representation in the period discussed in the previous chapter: the most well-known albums (and thus the most likely to generate academy attention) were likely to be dogged by these debates, which were (and still are) fueled by yet another instance of slow-moving industrial forces resistant to black music’s growing influence and import and establishment voices leveling principled-but-calculatedly-conservative critiques of the music.

"It stems from the manner in which both the music industry and the culture at large conceptualize “pop,” Amelia Mason (2015) writes in an incisive blog post on WBUR, Boston's NPR affiliate.

"‘Pop’ is short for ‘popular music,’ the linguistic implication being that the genre is determined purely by record sales, regardless of an artist’s genre, race, sex, or audience. But in practice, it is the standard against which otherness is defined. On the one hand, pop suffers from a culturally elitist view that scorns the genre for its apparent lack of seriousness or highbrow intent; ‘pop’ carries the connotation of convention, of easy consumption, of mass appeal. But the term perpetuates its own form of exclusivity because it is so frequently defined by what it is not: rap, Latin, R&B, country. Often, pop music borrows heavily from these ‘other’ categories, but brands itself as something distinct—the mainstream, the arbiter of popular taste. Thus, an ‘urban contemporary’ category must be manufactured because the Recording Academy cannot conceptualize a pop field (and implicitly, a general field) dominated by R&B and hip-hop (read: black) music, even though that is precisely the state of Top 40 today."
As Ferguson (2004) has argued, this in-betweenness is how black labor functions in late capitalism: “Both superfluous and indispensable, surplus populations fulfill and exceed the demands of capital,” he writes (p. 15). Stuart Hall (1993) argued similarly: “It is this mark of difference inside forms of popular culture—which are by definition contradictory and which therefore appear as impure, threatened by incorporation or exclusion—that is carried by the signifier ‘black’ in the term ‘black popular culture’” (110).

Fleetwood (2011) agrees. “Black popular culture is a hybrid, commercialized arena: one that while it is absorbed within dominant popular culture and often circulates as mainstream culture, it continues to assert practices and a rhetoric of strategic contestation,” she writes. “But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus inauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization.” These contours are important because they force us to examine the extent to which black popular culture and black people circulate within mainstream culture. By its very nature, it strategically contests hegemonic ideas about representation. The problem, though, is at what cost?

She continues: “The relationships between corporate sponsorship and the black body in contemporary mass culture are deliberately sensationalized, as black celebrities self-consciously produce hypervisible representations of themselves as commercial vehicles.” Hyper-visibility is the key term here, typically used to theorize the visual representation of black women and black female bodies. In our case, though, we must understand the consequences of hyper-visibility within a white revanchist mediascape. The hypervisibility of black people combined with the narratives of a white population under threat creates a culture where black representation is presumed to come at the expense of white representation, which needs to defend itself from obsolescence.

The way that that happens in the GRAMMYs, this chapter argues, is through rhetorically framing black music as operating outside the frames of excellence that the show awards. Black artists are framed as colonizers, irreverently forcing their way into the awards show by virtue of
their market success, even if they are insufficiently “excellent.” Hip-hop can be both inside and outside of the industry at the same time, and both relied upon for profits and criticized as sacrilege. It is caught in a double-bind, where it is perceived by many to be over-influential when in reality its influence has been rhetorically delegitimized. “What ultimately is somehow an unbelievable testament to hip-hop’s power, there remains something that is divisive and subversive about it,” the estimable critic Alan Light, told me (personal correspondence, 2018, August 23).

“I can’t figure out how. I mean it is a thing that makes me love it and respect it, even more is…40 years later, how is it still possible? That I get calls and tweets to my radio show every day that are like “That…rapping…is not music”. Like if you’re really going to talk about that, how does it still have any of that when everything else, including everything else that emerged out of black culture, ultimately got swallowed up. That it is still as African-American-identified that, yes of course there are still white rappers that you can point to. But they remain the exception. That remains the identifier. And rock and roll couldn’t do that. It couldn’t be race music forever like that. And then hip-hop has somehow still managed to have that power and have that energy, which I think is extraordinary. So I think that when you’re talking about those awards and talking about that consensus zeitgeist-y thing. What are the hip-hop records that broke past that to where they connected even with these people who don’t have a recording credit for 25 years?”

The only way for hip-hop to break through is to accept the white center’s hosted invitation to translate itself. But for the GRAMMYs themselves, this two-ness creates a complex bind for the GRAMMYs, where they are forced to make concessions to TV and ad-revenue demands, highlighting black artists throughout while seldom rewarding them. Again, it is hard to fathom that this comes at a time when hip-hop’s presence and influence in the industry is arguably greater than ever, but the disconnect between visual representation and industrial acceptance is the intersection at which the awards sit.

The GRAMMYs as Media Event

“African-American music—however much it owes to its African heritage—cannot be explained simply in terms of oral traditions and the sedimented memories of particular communities,” Walser and McClary write in an essay that broadly theorizes the body in modern black music-making (1994, 79). “It has also been shaped profoundly by its contact with mass mediation: the musicians who are promoted to stardom, the images that are given license to
circulate, all have passed through the hands of industry pundits who decide what to sell.” To understand the place of black music within contemporary American culture, we need also consider mass mediation and the awards in the contemporary media moment.

Over the time period studied, the GRAMMY Awards have averaged more than 26.5 million viewers, a massive viewing audience. This is a media spectacle of the highest order—with a multi-million-dollar budget; major sponsorships ranging in cost from $500,000 to $10 million and including Delta Air Lines, MasterCard, and Hilton Hotels; and costs-per-20-second-commercial upwards of $1 million (Aswad, 2018A; Spinelli, 2016). The television show is produced by veteran Ken Ehrlich, the head of AEG Ehrlich Ventures, and has been since 1980. Ehrlich’s company is a subsidiary of Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), the second largest presenter of live music and entertainment after the giant Live Nation. AEG’s properties include the National Hockey League’s Los Angeles Kings, the Sprint Center arena in Kansas City, and Major League Soccer’s Los Angeles Galaxy. Ehrlich is well-regarded among the artist community (Waller, 2015).

The telecast is an important financial event for the Recording Academy, the city that hosts it, and the artists themselves. The awards represent a significant portion of the Academy’s operating budget any given year; a study of the 2014 awards’ economic impact conducted by Micronomics suggested that roughly $14 million was spent on production of the show and other events and galas, but that the awards themselves had produced at least $82 million in immediate benefits to Los Angeles county (Weinstein and Stanford, 2015). Budgeting is not discussed often in mass media, but in the run-up to the 2018 New York GRAMMYs—the first time since 2003 and only the second time this century the awards were held outside of Los Angeles—Variety reported a $6-8 million shortfall (Aswad, 2018A). This is all to say that the awards are a major expense for the Academy, which apart from its $100-per-member-per-year dues, is reliant upon the awards to keep its lights on.

According to a Billboard study after the 2015 awards, songs performed on the show that evening, including those by Ed Sheeran, Kanye West, Paul McCartney, Rihanna, and others, saw an overall 87% increase in the two weeks that followed compared to the two weeks prior
Albums from performers also experienced tremendous gains. A 2017 report suggested similar results: a 207% gain in download sales on the date of the show (Caulfield, 2017). “This immediate and impressive reaction proves the unparalleled power of the Grammy Awards to reach a wide audience and engage fans,” David Bakula, Senior VP of Global Product Leadership and Industry Insights for Nielsen Music, told Billboard. This phenomenon—often cited in popular discourse as “the GRAMMY Effect”—is evidence of the show’s influence and that the performances do matter and benefit the artists’ wallets. Performing at the GRAMMYs does have an influence, even when performing artists go home with fewer trophies than they would prefer. Performance space is thus coveted and is subject to backroom dealings and power brokering on the parts of label heads and other stakeholders angling for space for their artists. Presenters—usually television and film actors or musicians—are invited based on current-moment noteworthiness and are ostensibly frequently worked into the telecast as promotion for new films or television shows, with the PA system that introduces them typically making sure to note their current roles.

A typical telecast in the time period this chapter covers features roughly twenty performances and presentations, the latter introducing awards presentations, performances, and tributes. Typically, all General Field nominees are invited to perform, though Ehrlich has courted notable controversies in the recent period regarding who is invited and who is not. In 2012, three years after R&B singer Chris Brown was unable to appear on the 2009 awards after abruptly turning himself into authorities after horrifyingly abusing his then-girlfriend, Rihanna, Ehrlich welcomed Brown back to perform. “It may have taken us a while to kind of get over the fact that we were the victim of what happened,” Ehrlich said, a framing that, six years later, seems inexcusable, “We’re glad to have him back. I think people deserve a second chance, you know?” (Johnson, 2012). After the Australian singer Lorde—an Album of the Year nominee—was a notable omission from the 2018 performers list, Variety reported that she had not been offered a chance at performing her own music, as the other five Album of the Year nominees (all men), had been (Aswad, 2018B). Pop star Ariana Grande expressed similar frustrations in 2019. The 2018
awards—which notably produced Portnow’s “they need to step up” comments regarding the lack of female representation among nominees and winners—were already a fraught space. “It’s not for me to talk about. I produce the TV show,” Ehrlich said when asked to comment on the controversy (Angermiller, 2018). Regarding Lorde’s exclusion, he commented, “I don’t know if it was a mistake. These shows are a matter of choices. We have a box and it gets full. She had a great album. There’s no way we can really deal with everybody.”

But in general, performances are determined in large part by the awards themselves, with no invitations or approaches made until after nominations are announced in the fall prior to the show. This does create a level of concern for Ehrlich: His awards show constitution is largely based on the nominees. “Frankly, I was scared out of my skin until we saw what was in the envelope,” he told Billboard in the December 2016 roundtable, illustrating the extent to which he is at the mercy of the voters. “That’s the way it always is: We’re dealt a hand and we have to play that hand. Some years are better than others. But I was really pleased because the palette we have to paint a three-and-a-half-hour TV show with is broad[…]musically rich with a lot of choices” (Mitchell, 2016). Nomination thus effectively serves as the structuring aid for the telecast itself, where the bank of twenty General Field nominations allows for a bulk of the major performers which is supplemented by genre nominees and legacy acts that appeal to older viewers and industry workers in attendance.

Ehrlich admitted in 2006 that “You can pretty much tell the landscape,” he told the Hollywood Reporter. “We weren’t shocked about Mariah Carey’s year or Kanye West’s year or John Legend’s year, so you’ve got some givens that you might as well lay some tracks with” (Morris, 2006). This locution is telling, as all of these artists have more complicated histories with the GRAMMYs than Ehrlich would suggest. “Might Carey’s year” might mean 1991, the year in which she lost Album, Record, and Song of the Year (discussed in Chapter 4) but won two “unmarked” categories (Female Pop Vocal and Best New Artist). But it could also easily mean 1996, in which she was nominated for six awards, including Album and Record of the Year, and lost all six trophies or 2006, during which she took home three raced awards and lost her other
five nominations, four of which came in unmarked categories. “John Legend’s year,” 2006, saw him take home a General Field win in Best New Artist, to date one of his two wins not to come in a raced category. That year he won three awards, including Best R&B Album and Best Male R&B Vocal Performance. Kanye West, perhaps the only person who cares more about awards shows than this author, has 21 awards but has never won a GRAMMY outside of a raced category. He has lost the last 17 times he has been nominated. And given the fact that the majority of the awards presentations happen outside of the three-hour telecast, particularly as its number of performers has swelled, the likelihood of these artists appearing on the telecast decreases. To wit, in the 2018 awards, only two black artists—Beyoncé Knowles for Best Urban Contemporary Album and Chance the Rapper for Best New Artist—were shown giving victory speeches on the telecast. But as far as Ehrlich is concerned, it can be an artist’s year without major wins or markers of acclaim. How?

“The thing that I always have to remind myself every February is that this is a television show as well and it creates enormous amounts of advertising revenue for the network that airs it and they have to have viewers turn it,” Chris Richards, music critic at The Washington Post, told me (personal correspondence, 2018, September 17). “The thing that’s strange to me is that they now seem to have figured out that having black artists perform on their telecast is a good thing, it will get people to watch. Kendrick Lamar opened the 2018 GRAMMYs with an incredible performance. So it’s good enough to get ad dollars but it’s not good enough for the winner’s circle.”

The GRAMMYs have effectively created a self-fulfilling prophesy whereby black artists contribute to the awards show, its performances, and its promotional materials despite their purportedly inferior products. “We have consistently collaborated to ensure that a dynamic, fresh and diverse live telecast is presented, and we are proud of the collective growth and results we have achieved,” Portnow said in 2011 announcement of a 10-year deal locking up the broadcast partnership through 2021 (“The Recording Academy,” 2011, June 21). By all accounts, this is true: though black artists have a 7% winning percentage in the General Field over this time period
despite their outsized influence, performing and presenting are more appropriately representative. Since the 2009 awards, there have been a total of 375 performers or performing groups during the ten ceremonies’ various showcases, medleys, and tributes. Of this 375, 218 were white performers or all-white performing groups, 132 were black performers or groups including at least one black member, and 25 were non-white, non-black performers or groups. Thus, black artists made up 35% of the performer population over this period of study. Additionally, there were 271 presenters during the ten-year period covered by this chapter; 85 were black, 153 were white; 33 were neither black nor white. This means that black artists presented 33% of the awards between 2009 and 2018. All of these cases, while still somewhat surprisingly low given black music’s impact in the current moment, are evidence of a more-diverse field and symbolic of a more-diverse telecast.

Participation ostensibly brings with it an eye toward representation: Nominees almost always attend the awards, giving the production team black and brown faces to pan to in the audience. When the screen cuts in five as the presenters fumble with the envelope announcing an award winner, there is very likely to be at least one black face in that image. It is undeniable that black artists are a part of the GRAMMY telecast Over the same time period, black artists made up 36% of the 50 Album of the Year nominations, 32% of the Record of the Year nominations, 26% of the Best New Artist, and 24% of the Song of the Year nominations. Further, during this time period, aging rapper LL Cool J took over hosting duties in 2012, steering the behemoth telecast for the subsequent four years. Alicia Keys followed in 2019. Black artists are always among those considered and represented, creating a false portrayal of a reality in which their win percentage is far lower than their import in the industry.

Lastly, Ehrlich is also credited with creating the signature “GRAMMY moment”—a catchall for notable performances such as Eminem and Elton John’s unified front after the former’s homophobic lyrics in 2001 and the Queen Latifah-officiated weddings of 33 LGBT

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52 For the purposes of this calculation, groups that were majority-white but contained at least one non-black member were coded as black. Mixed-race performers, if their racial identity included black, were coded black.
couples during the 2014 awards that often bring together artists of disparate genres (Newman, 2015). GRAMMY moments are featured prominently in the awards’ marketing and promotional materials (see “My GRAMMY Moment Finalists Announced,” 2014, for instance). The GRAMMY Moment, though, might also be understood yet another dodge, a palliative opportunity for media coverage and discourse to feature black artists on stage and on screen—only without trophies in their hands. GRAMMY moments can be understood as tactical multicultural calculations, pairing Stevie Wonder with the Jonas Brothers, a boy band or Alicia Keys and Frank Sinatra. Again, this is the kind of multicultural vision described in the previous chapter, but it, too, portrays a false mediation of an industry far less integrated than this would suggest.

The reality is straightforward: The GRAMMYs are a television show, and a hugely consequential one for the Recording Academy’s bottom line. This means that the telecast needs to draw broadly and widely—to create a product that has mass appeal by virtue of its manicured collection of micro-appeals to various constituencies, age groups, and ethnic backgrounds.

Ehrlich and the Recording Academy are more than willing to give space in performance and presenting duties to black artists, as well as to nominate them for mainstream acclaim. And yet the victory speeches, and record books remain frustratingly segregated, particularly in the current moment. There is a disconnect here: the awards have become a bifurcated and uncertain product whereby demands and expectations of a diverse viewing public create one set of representative figures—the nominees and performers—while voters are unable to produce a set of winners that match that. This shows the power and influence of representation, fulfilling the prophesies of aggrieved and concerned white viewers in a representational space but protecting the awards themselves. And at the same time, this representational diversity belies an environment where “greatness” and the standards with which it is conceived are elusive and/or unobtainable for black artists.

This shows an industry interested in representational diversity on-screen, to the chagrin of people like Mr. Guinn and others. This ultimately gives a false impression: that black artists are an essential part of the GRAMMYs. “We’re talking about the people who are organizing a telecast
that is meant to get viewers to turn in and stay turned in versus the electorate which is tasked with honoring greatness and whatever that may mean,” Chris Richards from The Washington Post added in our interview.

This creates a frustrating double-bind, where black artists are used to prop up the telecasts’ vision of representational diversity, allowing them to make purchase on the idea that they are delivering a satisfyingly multicultural on-screen experience for viewers. The reality, though, is that this is a false representation of the industry’s true ideological foundation, which continues to rest upon the superiority of white-made music and the exteriority of black music from the industry’s center.

A Decade of Damning by Faint Praise

Turning now to the broad historical overview, this section summarizes the ten-year-period covered by this chapter, highlighting notable instances of media discourse around race and/or raced artists for each year. At times, it drills down into specific conflicts that received substantial attention before, during, or after the awards. Together, it contextualizes noteworthy black artists’ nominations in mainstream categories and the media and industry discourse around them.

Outside of 2018’s 60th anniversary celebration at New York’s Madison Square Garden, each of the ceremonies discussed in this chapter took place at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. Telecasts were broadcast on CBS, as they have been since 1973. Each year, they draw between 20 and 30-million viewers, with a low of 19 million in 2009 and a high of 39 million in 2012, an outlier number prompted by the massive culture and media attention following legend Whitney Houston’s shocking death the day before the awards. The GRAMMYs are typically the second-most-watched awards show after the Academy Awards and have proven relatively resistant to the attrition that many live television events are experiencing due to over-the-top, streaming, and cord-cutting culture. There is also a star-power level factor that has persisted throughout their history: “TV executives have also suggested that viewership is cyclical, largely depending on whether there are blockbuster movies to promote or superstar singers set to perform,” John Koblin writes in The New York Times (2018).
Each attendee at the GRAMMYs receives a glossy, professionally produced magazine-style program produced by the Academy which includes lengthy feature articles on the Academy’s grassroots and local community activism and a round-up of all of the awards categories alongside glossy, full-page advertisements from record labels and the like congratulating their artist rosters on their nominations. They also dedicate a page of each program to each Best New Artist, Record and Album of the Year nominee. These bios, which are used often in the history below, offer a useful corpus of primary source data that illustrates how the GRAMMYs see their nominees. Particularly in the cases of black nominees, there is clear discursive evidence in support of the dissertation’s arguments regarding black music’s devaluation and the chapter’s more specific arguments regarding perceived over-ambition and exposure of black artists. Almost universally, these programs utilize problematically Orientalizing or strangely critical language in discussing the black nominees. For many people in attendance unfamiliar with some of the black acts, their first introduction is typically an uneven one, or at least one that furthers the industrial and discursive dynamics this chapter elaborates. Additionally, these biographies are written almost exclusively by white male writers. This furthers the kind of distance and white taste and sensibility-centrality elaborated earlier. White men voice the industry, supposedly necessarily translating outsider black artists for readers, many of whom likely already know them. So then what other work is this translation doing?

And further, why would a document put out by the very institution that exists to celebrate these artists so insistently and consistently deride or delegitimize the very nominees? This damning by faint praise, I argue, is reflection of an organization and an industry still hesitant to cede space for black artists who have been discursively framed as being on the outside. The writing—done almost exclusively by white male authors—treats these essential contributors to the fabric of the industry as curiosities, holding them at a distance that implies an alterity that is not realized actually in their record sales, streaming data, or, more meaningfully, their impact on the soundscape of popular music in the contemporary moment. They are the music industry. The
only place they are outside is the winners’ circle, a rarefied space held and controlled by a certain set of ideas about music, race, and excellence.

The 2009 GRAMMYs, held just three weeks after Barack Obama’s Inauguration Day, were dominated by the Americana collaboration between Led Zeppelin frontman Robert Plant and bluegrass-country vocalist Alison Krauss. Produced by T-Bone Burnett, their album *Raising Sand* produced wins in Record of the Year and Album of the Year, defeating black artists Leona Lewis (“Bleeding Love” for record and Lil Wayne’s *Tha Carter III* and Ne-Yo’s *Year of the Gentleman* for album) among other nominees. Coldplay’s strings-driven “Viva La Vida” defeated Estelle’s “American Boy” and three other nominees for Song of the Year.

Lewis is complimented for “non-diva-like interests” in the program, a strange locution given the industry’s embrace of the term’s valorization in describing acts such as Celine Dion, Gloria Estefan, Shania Twain, Aretha Franklin, Cher, Mariah Carey and the television specials *VH1 Divas*, a recurring television special series, the first of which was produced in 1998 by Ken Ehrlich (see Burns & Lafrance 2002). The idea of diva in popular music is derived from the Italian usage to describe female opera singers with a performative combination of prodigious talent and difficult personality. To describe Lewis as not “diva-like” implies that she has played the game the right way and paid proper deference to the establishment, earning her place among the Record of the Year nominees. “Bleeding Love” is framed as a “soulful R&B” song, a designation that is far more reliant upon Lewis’s parentage (half-Guyanese; half-Welsh) than her sonics. Instead, she is framed as a hard-worker in contrast to the complicated and difficult Amy Winehouse, her countrywoman, who would go on to win Record and Song of the Year in 2011. Lewis decried autotune and name-checked her engineer in a *Harper’s Bazaar* 2008 cover story (2008). She had earned her place among the nominees, even if she was not going to emerge victorious.

Meanwhile, in the run-up to the 2009 awards, mainstream press celebrated Lil Wayne’s field-leading eight nominations as a major accomplishment (Itzkoff, 2008; Parham, 2008). “Lil’ Wayne leads with eight Grammy nominations, but how many can he win?” an AP Radio News advisory asked. The answer was four, with all four wins coming in rap categories. He would go on
to lose his only nomination in non-black category, for Album of the Year. Like many before and after, and in the parlance of Ken Ehrlich, these awards might be seen as “Wayne’s night” because wire photos show the rapper with his arms full, carrying his trophy haul. This creates the impression that the GRAMMYs are an inclusive space—giving ammunition to those who would suggest there is no problem here—while still holding black music as something “outside.”

The following year, 2010, was described in media discourse as a face-off between industry tentpoles Beyoncé Knowles and Taylor Swift. Knowles’s nominations haul was trumpeted, headlining *The New York Times*’s coverage of the nominations (“10 Grammy Nods for Beyoncé, 2009). *USA Today* wondered if she would sweep the ten nominations, but used a quote from *Rolling Stone*’s Brian Hiatt to provide cover either way: “But if (Beyoncé) loses in all 10 categories, it will have absolutely no effect on her career,” he said (Gardner, 2010). This idea—that Knowles does not need the awards, furthers a sense of her power and inevitability.

Taylor Swift’s *Fearless* triumphed over Beyoncé Knowles’s *I Am…Sasha Fierce* and The Black Eyed Peas’ *The E.N.D.* for Album of the Year and rock group Kings of Leon’s “Use Somebody” defeated Knowles and the Peas for Record of the Year. “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It),” the breakaway hit from Knowles, did defeat Swift among others for Song of the Year, marking the most recent time a black artist won one of the “Big Three” categories as of this writing. From Knowles’s ten nominations, (two more than Taylor Swift), she wound up winning six awards, four of which were in black categories. She defeated Swift among others for the Best Female Pop Vocal Performance Award, her only win in a non-black-genre-specific category.

The 2010 program compliments Knowles’s solo work as part of “an increasingly mature artistic arc” that stands in contrast to her “sassy attitude” and “catching coming-of-age tunes” of her previous work the R&B group Destiny’s Child, suggesting that the key for black artists to make “better” art is maturity, a patently absurd conclusion. “Halo” provides a definitive statement of love, support, admiration, and respect in an era when the old verities seem less certain, especially dedication to someone or something,” it continues. Given the racial politics around
relationships, again this discourse takes up a didactic tone, suggesting that Knowles’s themes are successful because they are more-like a presumed white narrative.

It makes sense here to bracket Knowles, likely the most well-known black female musician of the age. It is worth remembering that the music industry establishment has been debating Knowles’s deservingness of acclaim for almost ten years. After Knowles lost the 2009 MTV Video Music Award for Best Female Video to Taylor Swift, a frustrated Kanye West notably took the stage decrying a system where “the best video of all time” went unrecognized. This incident—which I contextualized at length in an unpublished master’s thesis (Vila nova, 2012)—precipitated and presaged ongoing debates over Knowles. Her album sales, popularity, and impact were unquestionable—recall the Ann Powers quote from earlier—but many work to discredit her achievements or suggest that her success is calculated to take away awards from deserving white artists in what is framed as a zero-sum game.

Over her career (her first nomination came in 2000), Knowles has 22 GRAMMY wins (and 63 nominations), only five of which come in non-racially marked genre categories. When she is a nominee in a “black” category such as R&B, she wins 46% of the time (17 wins from 37 nominations), compared to a 19% (5 wins; 26 nominations) win percentage in unmarked categories. Knowles’s number of GRAMMY wins is often touted as an accomplishment of note: “X-time GRAMMY winner” in the glossy magazine profile is supposed to be a marker of prestige and industry acclaim. And yet, we might argue that Knowles’s total of GRAMMY wins is not reflective of industry excellence but rather artificially inflated by the fact that the vast majority of her wins come in these ghettoized categories. Further, this inflation distorts the reality of the awards themselves, where representational diversity is a stand-in for excellence. Black awards serve the purpose of mollifying claims that the awards privilege white artists; media coverage supports that elision while at the same time giving oxygen to the frustrations of people annoyed by arguments about the persistence of structural racism. This is a lose-lose for black artists.

The program section on The Black Eyed Peas follows another of the programs’ trends, mentioning multiple times their flexibility as a key towards more awards. “No longer viewed as just
a rap group, The Black Eyed Peas with Fergie had the freedom to explore music in increasingly diverse ways," Soren Baker writes. This implication—that being "just a rap group" is somehow a bad thing—is as stark evidence as any elaborated in this chapter of hip-hop's perceived lesser-status. The Black Eyed Peas were a relatively successful rap group, but to be considered for awards they needed to do something more.

Crossover—an industry concept that runs through this dissertation—takes on a different light in a cultural moment when the idea of it has taken on a more fraught place. “Crossing over” still presumes a kind of industrial subject position with black artists, hip-hop, and affiliated genres at the periphery and that the Peas, like the newly “mature” Knowles, are moving towards that center with work oriented towards white ears and white audiences, whose tastes are inherently superior in a high/low or art/folk binary (see Levine, 1990). Given the popularity and impact of black artists in this moment, these rhetorics lay claim to a persistent industry centrality that is eroding based on tastes of listeners and music fans.

Further, in emphasizing the ambition of the Peas (and other artists in later years), crossover becomes an essentially (de)colonial action, where Orientalized, othered artists make moves for space within media and discourse, seeking a piece of an industry that is inherently “not theirs.” Seeking to nuance their contributions was not heralded as a new artistic step; it was instead an evolution away from the backwardness of rap. This is where the anxiety of Guinn and Ingraham ratchets up—black artists seeking General Field recognition, this suggests, are invading the pop charts, drawing attention away from deserving white artists through a combination of strategy and skill.

The 2011 awards themselves saw white rapper Eminem lead the field with ten nominations. Five of these came in rap categories, which continued to serve as padding the resumes of hip-hop artists. For the first time in a number of years, there were no black nominees in Album of the Year, which was surprisingly won by the indie rock group Arcade Fire. “Maybe Arcade Fire was the inevitable choice – it gave voters an opportunity to not vote for hip-hop,
to not vote for country, to not vote for pop. Could have been anyone else,” The New York Times’s Jon Caramanica asked during a post-show live-blog (Caramanica and Itzkoff, 2011).

The only black General Field winner of the night (who would be the last until 2017) was Esperanza Spalding, a then-27-year-old jazz bassist who had come across voters' consciousnesses after performing at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies honoring Barack Obama in 2009 and an attention-grabbing Austin City Limits performance in 2010. Classically trained, she also became the youngest-ever member of the Berklee College of Music faculty at the age of twenty after earning a scholarship to attend the school at sixteen. She beat out Drake, the favorite a decision writer Paul Grein told USA Today “was helped by the fact there was no clear-cut favorite in her category,” calling rap “a hard sell with voters” (Gardner, 2011).

Record of the Year went to the country music group Lady Antebellum for their “Need You Now,” beating Eminem and Rihanna’s “Love the Way You Lie,” Cee-Lo Green’s “Fuck You,” and Jay Z and Alicia Keys’s “Empire State of Mind.” Lady Antebellum also won Song of the Year, again beating “Love the Way You Lie” and “Fuck You.” Relatively unknown black jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding beat out Justin Bieber, Drake and others for Best New Artist. Best New Artist nominee Drake is credited for “revealing a vulnerability rare in hip hop,” again implying an old-school vision of the genre. Drake’s “Best New-ness” is an award for doing something that seems only “new” to the industry giants and is based again in the flat vision of hip-hop elaborated by the industry at this point in history.

The 2011 program paints a reformed and humbled Eminem, whose path to recovery mirrors a victory over the unexplained “macho constraints of rap culture” and whose album, Recovery, as a “schizoid mix of trash talk and self-effacement unwittingly taps into the spiritual confusion slinking just below the surface of post-boom America.” The messaging was clear: Even a rapper can tap into fundamental Americanness if he is a white one. Eminem has won Best Rap Album five of the six times he has been nominated in the category.

This is further exacerbated by a particularly galling passage: “At first glance, these two seem like the ultimate odd couple—the provocateur rapper who courts controversy like a moth
romancing a flame, and the glamorous R&B princess,” the program reads in reference to Eminem and Rihanna’s collaboration, “Love the Way You Lie.” “But this unlikely pair have two crucial things in common: both are record industry luminaries with well-publicized experiences in abusive relationships.” These “well-publicized experiences” take two very different forms—Eminem’s “Kim” from 2000 was a horrifying murder fantasy where the rapper kills his ex-wife, Kim Mathers; he once lied to her about whether he would be performing it at a concert (he said he would not and he did). Mathers said the experience prompted her to attempt suicide that night (Doyle, 2010). Meanwhile, Rihanna was not an abuser, but rather a victim viciously assaulted by then-boyfriend Chris Brown the day before the 2009 awards. This collapse—of abuse and abuser—is remarkably inappropriate.

Meanwhile, Cee Lo Green—the soulful voice of Gnarls Barkley—seemed to have created a fair degree of consternation for the GRAMMY program writers after his song, “Fuck You,” was nominated for Song and Record of the Year. In a nod to more conservative readers, the program (in a very not rock-and-roll choice) stylizes the title as “F*** You,” calls obscenity “Fuck” the song’s “central gimmick” that is thankfully “transcend[ed]” by Green’s “peacock strut and straight-faced delivery to become a powerful slice of classic neo-soul in its own right.” Implied here is the idea that Green’s success came because he had increased his own degree-of-difficulty by beginning a song with an (apparently) unprintable word. It also calls the song the “first viral internet hit” nominated in the Song and Record of the Year categories, a distinction that goes unexplained but unnecessarily situates the song within a more mass-mediated context than a high-art one.

Another nominee, Jay Z and Alicia Keys’s “Empire State of Mind” begins with a question of whether or not it was necessary: “New York didn’t necessarily need a new anthem—Sinatra’s “New York, New York” was working just fine,” the program reads in a dissection of the duo’s motives for writing more than a celebration of the Record of the Year-nominated song itself. Again, the implication here runs alongside the discursive ones this chapter has suggested: “Black artists seek to colonize the New York City anthem,” it might as well read. “All the attention it
attracted makes anthemic ambivalence seem like a side issue to a bigger question," it concludes. "Does ‘Empire State of Mind represent two of our greatest living hip-hop era rap/R&B artists rapping and singing about the greatest place on earth? The jury will forever be out."

The 2011 awards were also noteworthy for what came after: The following Sunday after their airing, a full-page advertisement ran in the Sunday edition of The New York Times by black Steve Stoute (Aswad, 2011). “Over the course of my 20-year history as an executive in the music business and as the owner of a firm that specializes in in-culture advertising, I have come to the conclusion that the Grammy Awards have clearly lost touch with contemporary popular culture," Stoute wrote to introduce a stinging (if unoriginal) critique. “Where I think that the Grammys fail stems from two key sources: (1) over-zealousness to produce a popular show that is at odds with its own system of voting and (2) fundamental disrespect of cultural shifts as being viable and artistic.” Citing frustration over a variety of what he perceived to be incorrect decisions in the awards’ last decade, Stoute wrote:

“As an institution that celebrates artistic works of musicians, singers, songwriters, producers and technical specialists, we have come to expect that the Grammys upholds all of the values that reflect the very best in music that is born from our culture. Unfortunately, the awards show has become a series of hypocrisies and contradictions, leaving me to question why any contemporary popular artist would even participate. How is it possible that in 2001 The Marshall Mathers LP — an album by Eminem that ushered in the Bob Dylan of our time — was beaten out by Steely Dan (no disrespect) for Album Of The Year? While we cannot solely utilize album sales as the barometer, this was certainly not the case. Not only is Eminem the best-selling artist of the last decade, but The Marshall Mathers LP was a critical and commercial success that sold over 10 million albums in the United States (19 million worldwide), while Steely Dan sold less than 10% of that amount and came and went as quietly as a church mouse. Or consider even that in 2008 at the 50th Annual Grammy Awards, after going into the night as the most-nominated artist, Kanye West’s Graduation was beaten out for Album Of The Year by Herbie Hancock’s River: The Joni Letters. (This was the first time in 43 years that a jazz album won this category.) While there is no doubt in my mind of the artistic talents of Steely Dan or Herbie Hancock, we must acknowledge the massive cultural impact of Eminem and Kanye West and how their music is shaping, influencing and defining the voice of a generation. It is this same cultural impact that acknowledged the commercial and critical success of Michael Jackson’s Thriller in 1984.

Just so that I’m not showing partiality to hip-hop artists (although it would be an entirely different letter as to how hip-hop music has been totally diminished as an art form by this organization), how is it that Justin Bieber, an artist that defines what it means to be a modern artist, did not win Best New Artist? Again, his cultural impact and success are even more quantifiable if you factor in his YouTube and Vevo viewership — the fact that
he was a talent born entirely of the digital age whose story was crafted in the most humble method of being “discovered” purely for his singing ability (and it should be noted that Justin Bieber plays piano and guitar, as evidenced on his early viral videos).

So while these very artists that the public acknowledges as being worthy of their money and fandom are snubbed year after year at the Grammys, the awards show has absolutely no qualms in inviting these same artists to perform. At first I thought that you were not paying attention to the fact that the mental complexion of the world is becoming tanned, that multiculturalism and poly-ethnicity are driving new meaning as to what is culturally relevant. Interesting that the Grammys understands cultural relevance when it comes to using Eminem’s, Kanye West’s or Justin Bieber’s name in the billing to ensure viewership and to deliver the all-too-important ratings for its advertisers.

What truly inspired the writing of this letter was that this most recent show fed my suspicions. As the show was coming to a close and just prior to presenting the award for Album Of The Year, the band Arcade Fire performed “Month of May” — only to... surprise... win the category and, in a moment of sheer coincidence, happened to be prepared to perform “Ready to Start.”

Does the Grammys intentionally use artists for their celebrity, popularity and cultural appeal when they already know the winners and then program a show against this expectation? Meanwhile the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences hides behind the “peer” voting system to escape culpability for not even rethinking its approach.

And I imagine that next year there will be another televised super-close-up of an astonished front-runner as they come to the realization before a national audience... that he or she was used.

You are being called to task at this very moment, NARAS.

And to all of the artists that attend the Grammys: Stop accepting the invitation to be the upset of the year and demand that this body upholds its mission for advocacy and support of artistry as culture evolves.

Demand that they change this system and truly reflect and truly acknowledge your art.

Lip service to Justin Bieber and Arcade Fire conspiracy theory accusations aside, Stoute’s critique drives to the very heart of the intersections of media, race, commerce, and excellence where the GRAMMYs sit, and he identifies hip-hop as the influential genre of the prior decade caught in the middle of a battle for the industry’s ears and acclaim. He suggested—as I do here—that the GRAMMYs were more than willing to use the names and reputations of hip-hop artists to draw viewers to the telecast but fell short in recognizing the genre’s influence. The GRAMMYs issued a noncommittal response two weeks later, the delay illustrative of their lack of concern:

“Expanding constructive and positive ways to continue to actively incorporate generational and artistic diversity in The Academy’s development and good work serves those important missions.
The participation of new and culturally diverse voices has and continues to be a goal which benefits our members, the creative community, and music fans everywhere. To that end, we have come together in a collaborative manner to discuss how the Recording Academy can continue to evolve in an ever-changing cultural environment” (Barshad, 2011).

That April, the Academy cut thirty-one of its 109 categories, a move that was said to address the dilution of the “excellence” the GRAMMYs purported to recognize. Discourse in the time suggested that this was due to “longstanding criticism that there were too many categories;” Portnow called it insurance “that the Grammy remains a rare and distinct honor and continues to be music’s most prestigious and only peer-recognized award” (Sisario, 2011). While the cuts were spread throughout genres, this culling hit hardest for more niche and raced categories, given their elimination implied that awarding them cheapened the import of larger, more established categories, a fairly spurious suggestion. Best Contemporary R&B Album, a category that existed from 2003 to 2011, was one of the categories eliminated, with the remaining umbrella category, Best R&B Album, absorbing albums that formerly would have landed in the contemporary field.

While sometimes the addition of categories has served protect white artists from black challengers such as gospel’s division into “traditional” and “contemporary” to further make clear the raced lines in 1978, in the contemporary moment culling categories such as Native American Music and Zydeco/Cajun Music was concerning. Outrage ensued, particularly from Latinx musicians such as Bobby Sanabria, Mark Levine, Ben Lapidus and Eugene Marlow, who filed a class-action lawsuit against the Academy for eliminating the Latin jazz category and devaluing the genre. “I think they’re racist. Period. I do,” Carlos Santana, the esteemed guitarist and former Album of the Year winner complained. “First of all we have so many categories of Country & Western. Country & Western people have seven to nine to 10 (awards) shows a year and you seldom see Negroes or Latin people. You can’t eliminate black gospel music or Hawaiian music or American Indian music or Latin jazz music because all this music represents what United States is: a social experiment” (McLaughlan, 2011).
By that June, Latin jazz artists had announced plans to sue. “This is the most blatant example of racism in the history of any arts organization,” Sanabria argued, noting that three-quarters of the thirty-one categories being eliminated were dedicated to the music of racial or ethnic minorities (Rohter, 2011). He went on to imply that the move represented a step backward in “[keeping] pace with the cultural diversity of this country” and called it “a slap in the face to cultural and musical diversity.” He harangued the exclusivity and secrecy, which he implied served hegemonic industry interests: “The trustees chose instead to rubber-stamp a secretive process that serves the interests only of those popular performers who already enjoy broad exposure,” he said. The GRAMMYs offered a harsh rebuttal.53 By January 2012, the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Cornel West had criticized the action, the former threatening protests but conceding that “Sometimes inclusion is inconvenient but it's the right thing to do” (Mumbi Moody, 2012).

This back-and-forth, while not specifically limited to the anti-blackness that this dissertation seeks to investigate, does illuminate the complicated tightrope the GRAMMYs walk, wherein they are tasked with representing a massively diverse industry while at the same time arguing that too many awards cheapens the accomplishments of those artists whose categories went untouched in the purge. This implies that these artists—again, the ones raising the critique being black and brown should not be missed here—were always already interpellated as “lesser,” add-ons fulfilling a diversity quota and that their representation (even though these awards go untelevised) creates the perception of cheapening the accomplishments of their upper caste. Increasing the number of awards, ostensibly a gesture to make space for the scale and breadth of musical contributions to the industry, was seen as dilution. Further, the Latin jazz artists leading the protests spoke openly about the precarity their niche genres experienced within the

53 “It is disappointing that some individuals chose to make false, inflammatory statements suggesting that this realignment of the Grammy award categories was motivated by race or ethnicity,” read an open letter signed by Portnow and the chair of the board of trustees that went on to say “we would never tolerate any attempt to advance a racist agenda using our organization, and we were appalled when these provocative, unwarranted allegations were raised” (McKinley Jr., 2011A).
industry, where the GRAMMYs lent attention and viability to an otherwise small corner of the musical world, suggesting a kind of Faustian bargain for artists reliant upon the awards to boost sales and perception.

With this as subtext, the 2012 awards, even more distracted after the shocking death of Whitney Houston nearby the day before the ceremony, were marked even before they began by a snub—that of Kanye West’s critically acclaimed, high-concept My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, which had dominated critical polls the previous year. The album was not nominated for Album of the Year, though West led the field in nominations with seven, repeating an oft-echoed pattern that this chapter suggests is a symptom of the larger issues of representation at play. In the coverage of the nominations, which were released in late November of 2011, The New York Times headline read “Kanye West Tops Grammy Nominations,” clear evidence of the kind of representational politics that this chapter is concerned with (McKinley Jr., 2011B). West’s nominations were the pretext for his face in advertising (though he did not perform or present), followed by a set of wins in segregated, raced-black categories and rejection in the General Field. Predictably, he won the four times he was nominated in black categories and lost both of his non-black-category nominations. Instead, Adele Adkins swept the “big three” categories, defeating black nominees Rihanna’s Loud for Album of the Year and West’s “All of the Lights” for Song of the Year. “One almost shudders to imagine just how high she has yet to climb,” the program reads for Rihanna, again implying the outsider status of the black artist, whose move into the mainstream is implied to be a foregone conclusion. Chris Brown was welcomed back to the GRAMMY stage just three years after his assault on Rihanna. “[T]he show went out of its way to uphold antiquated values,” Jon Caramanica (2012) wrote in the aftermath, criticizing the telecast. “The induction of Adele into a not-so-secret society will be cheered as a triumph over artifice, and what an unfortunate thing that will be.” He continued, “Charming though Adele’s album was, there is nothing forward-looking about it, or about the accolades rained down on her this year. “21” is a spare, slightly haughty pop album, at the intersection of classic soul and singer-songwriter post-

54 He was nominated twice in the Best Rap Song category.
folk, sounds that have long been welcome at the Grammys. The same was true of the work of [Norah] Jones and, to a slightly lesser degree, [Lauryn] Hill, who was the most adventurous of the three but who was recognized largely for making hip-hop palatable to Grammy voters."

The following year, 2013, R&B singers Frank Ocean and Miguel were the only black artists nominated in the whitest General Field nominees shortlist in decades; the former lost both Record and Album of the Year and the latter lost Song of the Year. Best Latin Jazz Album and Best Urban Contemporary Album categories were reinstated, with Best Classical Compendium, a new category, added, presumably as a one-for-one racial equivalency. Ocean's *Channel Orange* was complimented for not being a "slavish" derivative of his influences (yes, really) in a biography that connected Ocean to the singular narratives around artists such as Marvin Gaye and Prince, though he, like them, would fail to find General Field success.

2014 was dominated by the retro sounds of French electronic duo Daft Punk, whose "Get Lucky" was voiced by black artist Pharrell Williams and featured the guitar of Nile Rodgers of legendary black disco group Chic. The release took home Record and Album of the Year, with the white New Zealand-born singer Lorde winning Song of the Year. Kendrick Lamar was nominated for his first seven GRAMMYs including Album of the Year and Best New Artist; he won zero awards. Jay-Z won two awards from a field-leading nine nominations, including Best Music Video, a non-raced category, though both wins came from a partnership with white pop/R&B singer Justin Timberlake.

The key controversy involving racial discomfort, though, occurred after white rapper Macklemore and his producer Ryan Lewis beat out a fellow newcomer, Lamar, for Best New Artist and Best Rap Album. "[I]t was the difference between a talented-but-blandly-agreeable emcee rapping over sugary earworms (Macklemore) and a virtuosic visionary precipitating the revival of story-oriented hip-hop with an ode to a childhood growing up tough in Compton (Lamar)," Amelia Mason (2015) wrote for WBUR the following year in an article titled "Why do the

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55 Janelle Monáe featured on fun.'s "We Are Young," though I have made the decision not to include her here.
Grammys Always Get it Wrong?”. “Something about the combination of Macklemore’s whiteness, his pointed political progressiveness, and his taste for earnestly inspirational beats seemed to epitomize the appropriation of hip-hop by mainstream (read: white) popular music. It was disheartening to see a very brilliant African-American man lose a rap award to a white guy with an undercut, no matter how technically proficient and well-meaning said undercutted man.”

After the ceremony, Macklemore posted to Instagram a screenshot of a text message he had sent to Lamar after the ceremony “You got robbed. I wanted you to win. You should have. It’s weird and it sucks that I robbed you. I was gonna say that during the speech. Then the music started playing during my speech and I froze. Anyway you know what it is. Congrats on this year and your music.” This gesture, a largely empty one, is not new to the GRAMMYs—John Mayer broke his GRAMMY trophy in half in 2005 after his “Daughters” beat Alicia Keys’s “If I Ain’t Got You” for Song of the Year and Adele would do the same thing five years later. But the only artist ever to refuse a GRAMMY was Sinead O’Connor, who protested overcommercialization in the industry in 1990. Further, these individual half-gestures presumptuously wind up standing in for larger industrial change. The program from that night is tellingly predictive of Lamar’s close-but-not-yet-there result: “[B]eing among the top 56th GRAMMY nominees, and receiving nods in some of the most prestigious categories, is a fitting coronation for the man dubbed ‘New King of the West Coast’ by such luminaries as Snoop Dogg, and fellow Compton natives the Game and producer Dr. Dre,” it reads.

Lamar is an important artist through whose career the issues of discomfort are brought into stark relief: He is unquestionably auteurist in the conception, scope, and voice of his work while at the same time unapologetically black in conceit, sound, and frame of reference. That combination—of undeniability and discomfort—is what has made him such an animating subject for this dissertation. He has been called a “street poet of mental health” (Sule and Inkster, 2015); an artist of “existentialist hip-hop” (McLeod, 2017). An uncle is pictured flashing a gang sign on the cover of good kid, m.a.a.d city, surely the only Album of the Year nominee to feature that combination. Lamar’s navigation of these dichotomies reveals the lack of depth around the
broader criticisms of hip-hop: It can be “artistic” while still gangsta-ized despite the debates around the genre’s broader politics and musicality.

To wit, Lamar would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2018 for DAMN., another album that (spoiler alert) would be nominated for Album of the Year but fall short. Noteworthily, though: The Pulitzers recognized the “vernacular” quality of DAMN., a word that ultimately feels somewhat backhanded in a conversation around artistry: It might not be unfair to suggest that the very thing that the Pulitzers praised was the quality that kept him off the GRAMMYs stage in 2014 and again in ’16 and again in ’18 and ’19.

The 2015 awards saw two black artists lead the way in award nominations, with Knowles, famed producer Pharrell Williams, and white soul/pop singer Sam Smith each garnering six nominations. The program here handles Williams and Knowles with a particular sort of distanced fascination and in both cases implies a kind of ambition on the part of the artists that previous entries had hinted at. Williams was complimented—“so much of [his] work seems to flow not from inflated ego or crass commercial ambitions, but from a pure, simple joyfulness in the act of making music,” it reads, though it also notes Williams’s work as a producer on Knowles’s Album of the Year-nominated album and white crooner Ed Sheeran’s X in addition to his own. “Maybe if Pharrell Williams had worked just a little bit harder this year, he’d have had something to do with all five nominated works in the Album of the Year category,” his biography jokes.

Knowles’s is similarly all about ambition. “Now Beyoncé’s creative audacity has culminated in six GRAMMY nominations. Moreover, with 53 total nominations she stands as the most nominated woman in GRAMMY history. Far from resting on her laurels, Beyoncé is adding to her copious collection,” it reads. The premise of the biography, compared to that of Williams is noteworthy: Knowles is among the most-nominated artists ever and is rhetorically framed as being unsatisfied with raced-black categories, seeking a move into the white interior of the industry. Ambition for black artists implies a number of interlocking things, namely: (1) that they are outside the industry center, (2) that they seek to move into it, and (3) that they are unsatisfied with the segregated (and thus “inferior”) spaces they have been given in raced-black categories.
This is where the connection to white threat narratives is worth making, when ambition-as-motivator for desegregation, specifically in the case of Knowles, would carry with it a subtext of the “enough-is-enough” attrition of the Academy a few years later when she would submit songs for consideration in Country and Rock. “So much for resting on her laurels,” the biography concludes. Indeed.

Discourses began to call attention to racial discomfort within the awards structure, as Mason (2015) wrote: “The 2015 nominees for Best Urban Contemporary Album are all artists of color who display a more overt hip-hop influence than their brethren in the Best R&B Album category.”

“Three of them—Beyoncé, Chris Brown, and Pharrell Williams—released albums this year that debuted at the top of the Billboard 200 and remain there still,” she continued. “Essentially, they make pop music, so why aren’t any of them nominated for Best Pop Vocal Album? The nominees in that category are Coldplay’s electro-pop-rock “Ghost Stories,” Miley Cyrus’s hip-hop-inspired “Bangerz,” Ariana Grande’s R&B-inflected “My Everything,” Katy Perry’s pop grab bag “Prism,” and Ed Sheeran’s ballad-driven “X.” Looked at one way, the Urban Contemporary category provides a space to celebrate oft-overlooked African-American artists, but the flip side of the coin is that the category operates in implicit support of a pop award that honors mainly white artists, even when they are appropriating black music.”

Pop—a category that would ostensibly be integrated as the music is on the radio—was now coming under scrutiny as a segregated category, wherein the very notion of “popular” carried with it a raced baggage.

And on the 2015 awards stage, on a night when most expected Knowles’s long-delayed victory, it was the diminutive white experimental artist Beck, who had earned fame in the 1990s for his hit “Loser,” who received a career-achievement award of sorts, taking home Album of the Year for his relatively acclaimed Morning Phase. The arena’s reception was shocked, and as Beck took the stage, erstwhile awards show crusader Kanye West, who had famously interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for Best Female Video at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, decrying the result and advocating instead for Knowles, ran onto the stage before waving his arm, thinking better of it, and returning to his seat.

“Beck needs to respect artistry and he should have given his award to Beyoncé,” a frustrated West said after the ceremony (Nessif, 2015). “At this point we tired of it because what
happens is when you keep on diminishing art and not respecting the craft and smacking people in the face after they deliver monumental feats in music, you’re disrespectful to inspiration. We aren’t playing with them anymore. And by the way, I got my wife, my daughter, and I got my clothing line, so I’m not going to do nothing that would put my daughter at risk, but I am here to fight for creativity. That’s the reason why I didn’t say anything tonight, but you all knew what it meant when ‘Ye stepped on that stage.’

Beck’s defenders organized around a tripartite attack on Knowles, focusing on her lyrics, production team, and instrument credits; a highly-read Buzzfeed article, “5 Reasons why Beck Beat Beyoncé” (Shepherd, 2015). sourced a number of tweets and highly trafficked memes (see Figures 1-3).

Figure 1: A comparison of Knowles’s and Beck’s lyrics. The implication here is that Beck’s album was a superior release due to more thoughtful, less-repetitive lyrical content.
Figure 2: A one-to-one comparison of songwriting credits on the debated albums. The implication here—that Beck’s “artistry” was superior due to his solo songwriting credits for the songs—hints at the primacy given to the individual-as-creator that Chapter 2 of this project elucidated. This is a long-held issue, this would suggest: That songwriting ability would be held up as a virtuous aspect of a musician’s candidacy and credibility towards excellence.

Figure 3: Another comparison that this dissertation has not spent a significant amount of time exploring is that of instrumental ability as a marker of excellence. Beyoncé as “just” a singer/performer/dancer is presumptuously “unskilled” in much of the songwriting process.

This type of derisive comparison is not new: The means of comparison was actually driven from a similarly comparative meme that circulated on the internet for years before the awards (going back at least as far as 2012), comparing Knowles’s “Run the World (Girls)” to Freddie Mercury and Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” and attacking the former’s lyrics, number of
songwriters, and producers, all of which presumptuously compared unfavorably to the latter, despite the fact that the numbers cited were incorrect, as two of the production credits for Knowles's song were due to the presence of a sample.

What was once argued through subtext and internet memes was now out in the open, now, as all of these arguments carry racial baggage. The surprise at Knowles's loss was a product of the collective sensitivity that Mr. Guinn had complained about and a longstanding, multi-layered campaign against the validity of hip-hop music.

The 2016 awards in their early stage were noteworthy for who was not in attendance, the acclaimed R&B/soul singer Frank Ocean, whose elected not to submit his album Blonde for the awards, a choice the artist made despite overtures from the GRAMMYs. “That institution certainly has nostalgic importance,” he told The New York Times. “It just doesn’t seem to be representing very well for people who come from where I come from and hold down what I hold down” (Caramanica, 2016). He continued, “I think the infrastructure of the awarding system and the nomination system and screening system is dated,” he said. “I’d rather this be my Colin Kaepernick moment for the Grammys than sit there in the audience.”

The connection to Colin Kaepernick hinted at a growing sense of disillusionment with an(other) industry (like football) that relies heavily upon black labor while keeping in place racial
caste structure. And yet the awards themselves maintained the tired tropes in the 2016 program, calling Record of the Year nominee D’Angelo “audacious” for releasing a 6-minute song “well in excess of radio’s time strictures” and suggesting the record contained “ungrammatical sentiment.” Lamar’s fellow black Album of the Year nominee The Weeknd “managed to create a unified statement,” as if such an idea was surprising.

Again suggesting the outsider-invasion rhetoric that places hip-hop on the periphery of the industry, the bio for Lamar’s Album of the Year nomination suggests that his previous record, good kid, m.a.a.d. city (which lost, recall) “ran roughshod” over the industry. To Pimp a Butterfly is called a “surprise departure” from his previous work for tapping into the nation’s political and cultural consciousness, a “challenging yet rewarding listening experience.” “Challenging for who?” we might ask. No album in recent memory seemed to capture the “of the Year” status more than Lamar’s work as Black Lives Matter organizing visibilized the threats of police violence against black communities throughout the country. “We gon’ be alright,” was an articulation of resiliency and strength in an uncertain moment.

D’Angelo and The Weeknd would wind up losing to Bruno Mars in Record, Lamar and fellow black rapper Wiz Khalifa would lose to Ed Sheeran in Song, and The Weeknd and Lamar would famously lose out in Album of the Year to Taylor Swift. To Pimp a Butterfly had boasted eleven nominations and five wins, both field-pacers. But all of his wins came in rap categories other than Best Music Video, for which he won as a featured artist on Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood.” Even when breaking through in an integrated category, the award was for his work on a white artist’s song.

The night after these awards, I (Vilanova, 2016) penned a screed for MusiQology, the blog of Dr. Guthrie Ramsey for which I had recently taken a post as Managing Editor. Leading with the age-old critique that black people often feel put upon to “work twice as hard for half as much,” I critiqued a moment where an album that had so ably captured the post-Ferguson pain and perseverance of black Americans somehow was not the album “of” the year prior.
But further, I cited coverage in Rolling Stone, The New York Daily News, Fuse, and Billboard, all of which implied that Lamar had been one of the evening’s biggest winners for his four segregated-space trophies and one as a token contributor to an uneven song from a pop record that defeated him. “Reviewed on its own merits, Lamar’s work was seen as exceptional, but when it went up against a white artist, Swift, his work was no longer superlative,” I wrote at the time. “That NARAS’s record suggests that recognizing artists of color as among the best albums of the year is a suitable degree of validation. Just making the final cut is a tribute to their success. And the media coverage implies that artists in minority-identified genres should be satisfied with their niche accomplishments. Their place in the pecking order has been set.” The media coverage—of Lamar’s “big night”—both obscured the reality of Lamar’s continued struggles in the segregated categories and furthered the false narrative that black artists find success at the GRAMMY Awards.

On the microblogging platform tumblr., Frank Ocean wrote lengthier thoughts, making reference to his panned 2013 performance, which Ehrlich had somewhat surprisingly argued Ocean should shoulder the blame for (Coleman, 2017).

“Ok ken (and david). As much as i hate to make you guys famous or even respond to you directly. We all die one day and you’re old so fuck it. Yea yea my 2013 performance at the grammys was absolute shit. Technical difficulties, blah blah. Thanks for the reminder. Very much appreciated. Fuck that performance though. You think that’s why i kept my work out of the grammy process this year? Don’t you think i would’ve wanted to play the show to ‘redeem’ myself if i felt that way? In reality, i actually wanted to participate in honoring prince on the show but then i figured my best tribute to that man’s legacy would be to continue to be myself out here and to be successful. Winning a tv award doesn’t christen me successful. It took me some time to learn that. I bought all my masters back last year in the prime of my career, that’s successful. Blonde sold a million plus without a label, that’s successful. I am young, black, gifted and independent.. That’s my tribute. I’ve actually been tuning into cbs around this time of year for a while to see who gets the top honor and you know what’s really not ‘great tv’ guys? 1989 getting album of the year over to pimp a butterfly. Hands down one of the most ‘faulty’ tv moments i’ve seen. Believe the people. Believe the ones who’d rather watch select performances from your program on youtube the day after because your show puts them to sleep. Use the old gramophone to actually listen bro, i’m one of the best alive. And if you’re up for a discussion about the cultural bias and general nerve damage the show you produce suffers from then i’m all for it. Have a good night” (Ocean, 2017).

Calling the GRAMMY a “TV award” is actually a stinging piece of criticism, which suggests that the awards themselves serve more pointed functions within a media ecosystem conversation.
From a political perspective, the GRAMMYs are very much “TV awards,” essentially using the medium and platform to prescribe notions of greatness and excellence. The “cultural bias and general nerve damage” the GRAMMYs suffer from is also a TV-induced one, where the awards very much feel a need to acknowledge the work of black artists but remain stubbornly unwilling to make space for them in the final presentations of the night.

Following this, the 2017 awards, of course in many ways the genesis for this dissertation project, were all about a face-off between Beyoncé Knowles and Adele Atkins, who had both released acclaimed records in the previous year. Despite overwhelming critical praise for both artists, the program is still circumspect about Knowles’s candidacy. “With *Lemonade*,” the program reads, “Beyoncé transcended the pop diva who teased us about putting a ring on it to a bold provocateur wielding a baseball bat and raised middle finger while publicly questioning the fidelity of her equally high-profile mate.” It went on to call her “an adept manipulator of the pop zeitgeist, breaking down musical, racial, and gender boundaries with seemingly effortless aplomb.” These comments suggest a number of concerning precursors: Namely that Knowles’s *Lemonade* was viewed as transcendence from her only prior General Field GRAMMY, which apparently as the work of a pop diva, was conceptually inferior. The “adept manipulator” sobriquet implies the kind of invasion language seen in previous biographies, where the calculating Knowles’s ambition is seen as strategic rather than art for art’s sake. It also furthers the longstanding issues of the presumed “ease” of black musical creation that knock the music’s candidacies throughout the awards’ history. The program even uses its Song of the Year space to give voice to the spurious criticisms of *Lemonade*’s lead single “Formation,” which debuted to great fanfare during the Super Bowl, as an anti-police song: “Despite the controversy, she remained resolute in her conviction of the song’s positive impact,” it reads. This framing continues the trend throughout these programs: Damning by faint praise the work of black artists being considered in the General Field.

While Knowles’s release has attracted the majority of the critical attention, Rihanna was also nominated in the General Field that year. The Barbadian singer receives backhanded praise
regarding her album *Anti* and its dancehall-inflected hit single “Work” from the GRAMMY program, which mentions that the “Work” topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart for nine consecutive weeks, while at the same time containing “repetitive, sometimes inaudible wordplay,” a dig at the song’s Caribbean Creole and Patois influences. The program cites an interview with *Forbes* with the song’s cowriter, Jahron “PARTYNEXTDOOR” Brathwaite, and calling the work “repetitive, sometimes inaudible, wordplay was an unorthodox approach unheard in the traditional pop space.” The producer admitted there was some uncertainty behind the song’s potential to become a hit single from Rihanna’s eighth studio album, *Anti*. “Nobody really understood it,” Brathwaite said. “Nobody really agreed with it but [Rihanna]. She told me it was her little brother and her mom’s favorite song.” This perspective—reducing calculations of record labels to a seemingly ad hoc, flippant decision—demeans the work of the artist, again implies a level of undeserving ease with which black artists approach the industry, and does not belong in a biography of this nature.

Further, pre-awards controversy swirled when it was revealed Knowles had submitted songs for consideration in Best Rock Performance and a country category (likely Best Country Song or Best Country Solo Performance). “Daddy Lessons,” the country song, was rejected for consideration at the committee level, meaning it could not appear on the nominee shortlists. This stirred much discussion: Should Knowles’s submission have been rejected? Could she have written a “country” song in the first place?

This in many ways is most emblematic of the intersection of mediation and racial resentment-fueled protectionism this chapter alleges. Tellingly, Knowles was invited with relatively open arms to perform “Daddy Lessons” with the Dixie Chicks at the 2016 CMA Awards (the song was not nominated for any CMAs), which was marked as a sign of progress for the awards. But *The New York Times* reported on backlash from country fans. “Neither are country, and Beyoncé could not be bothered to put some clothes on for the occasion,” one Facebook commenter quoted in the *Times* wrote (Coscarelli 2016). The article suggested a common sentiment that Knowles “[wasn’t] even what country represents.” I argue that we should
thoughtfully read this moment within this broader context, where Knowles’s seemingly harmless submission activated a broad sentiment against her candidacy, suggesting that she was an ambitious boundary crosser and that crossing over would represent taking up valuable space in the zero-sum game of culture.

At the GRAMMYs, in a too-well-known moment, Knowles lost out on Album, Song, and Record of the Year awards to Adele, who herself was shocked, calling Lemonade “the album of my lifetime” and asked “What the fuck does Beyoncé have to do to win Album of the Year?”

“Grammy voters are recording industry pros: engineers, players. They like high craft. Adele was tailor made,” Ann Powers wrote on Twitter during the fallout. “I’ve had many people say to me, #Lemonade was great but not as music,” she added, suggesting that music industry insiders see albums like Lemonade as an achievement in pop art, but not necessarily in musicianship.” This chapter is very broadly about the consequences of mediation and representation and the way hip-hop has been caught in the middle of an industry wrestling with what its center truly is. But at the end of the day, Knowles’s music’s status as music itself remained an open question the GRAMMYs answered by their choice.

I among others spoke out, haranguing the GRAMMYs for again doubling-down on these ideas of white superiority. After the firestorm of 2017, the following year was presaged by a banner crop of nominees, featuring the highest-ever ratio of black and brown to white nominees.

“I honestly think that our community — musicians — really listens with their ears more than their eyes or anything else,” Portnow told Variety upon the release of the nominees that November. “So if you put our voters in a room with a blindfold, I think our community is very open-minded and thinks about music in a universal more holistic fashion, but our voters in particular are thinking about the craft” (Aswad, 2017).

If we follow Portnow’s logic at face value, it just so happens that the best music in 2017 was recorded by people of color. It is a coincidence rather than an intervention. “I don’t know that there’s a movement here as a result of criticism and difficulties in the film or TV industry — I just think this is how our highest level of professionals feel about music today,” he says.
It doesn't take much thought to reasonably infer that the GRAMMYs responded to our loud calls for them to reassess their racial ratios.

Jay Z, Kendrick Lamar, and Childish Gambino nabbed Album and Record of the Year nominations, with the former also adding a Song of the Year nomination for his confessional “4:44.” Program blurbs for Jay Z and Lamar both make sure to mention poverty—the racial Horatio Alger myth remains alluring—and Lamar’s *DAMN.* was “a spiritual journey.” But the GRAMMYs turned instead to Bruno Mars, who swept the Album, Song, and Record of the Year with a turn-back-the-clock release that was “so authentically retro, you could have sworn it was unearthed during an archeological dig.” “In a year marked by political tumult and tragic celebrity passings, Bruno Mars’ 2016 album *24K Magic* was a welcome, soul-soothing relief,” the program reads. Given the opportunity again to consider the broader social climate change, the Academy doubled down again on race-blind ignorance and “excellence” bliss.

After the awards, somewhat unsurprisingly, the conversation around race and anti-blackness I and others launched in the wake of the 2017 awards has to some extent fallen by the wayside in mainstream coverage due to similar revelations regarding the awards’ gender bias in the wake of #MeToo and #TimesUp moments and Portnow’s disappointing comments when asked why only one woman, Best New Artist Alessia Cara, was shown accepting an award during the telecast. “It has to begin with… women who have the creativity in their hearts and souls, who want to be musicians, who want to be engineers, producers, and want to be part of the industry on the executive level,” Portnow told *Variety.* “[They need] to step up because I think they would be welcome. I don’t have personal experience of those kinds of brick walls that you face but I think it’s upon us — us as an industry — to make the welcome mat very obvious, breeding opportunities for all people who want to be creative and paying it forward and creating that next generation of artists” (Angermiller, 2018).

“Structural flaws in the makeup of The Recording Academy itself have led to systemic issues in the selection of nominees and winners for the awards,” an open letter from 38 male industry executives that circulated after patronizing comments from Portnow following the 2018
awards. “Now is the time for NARAS [the Recording Academy] to lead and be transparent and dedicated to transforming its member base to truly mirror the rich gender and cultural diversity of our community. NARAS should reveal the diversity (and/or the lack thereof) of its voting members and make necessary changes to the population of the Academy to better reflect the diverse music business voices the organization is meant to serve” (Aswad, 2018C).

Steps were taken in the right direction, to be sure, which were borne out in the 2019 awards in which elusive Song and Record of the Year victories happened for rapper Childish Gambino. And again, this dissertation is not interested in facile arguments around which artists “should” have won in various years. The fullest and most thoughtful accounting the Recording Academy can and should take should instead revolve around the questions raised by this chapter, specifically asking what the place of black music is within the industrial apparatus and the media that cover it. In this case, that will mean honesty about the distance at which it continues to hold hip-hop and black music of the moment. Further, it will mean a realization of the broader consequences of that manufactured distance, whereby the music’s visibility without results may do as much harm as it does good within a longer trajectory. Only by a fuller accounting of the ideological roots of racial discomfort in the industry and a broader-based understanding of the impact of discourses of racial resegregation can the awards achieve a more equitable future.

To talk about black artists, popular culture figures, and creative industries media broadly in the current moment is to confront the fact that racial identity has emerged as a fault line. This chapter has argued that these racial discomfitsures after the election of the first black President and the subsequent gains in media representation have been overstated, leading to an exaggerated compensatory recentering of white conservative subjects, values, and tastes and that that overstatement is recognizable in discussions around contemporary black music and at least partially can be attributed to the GRAMMYs rollback of awards for black artists. This all is akin to many among the media’s desire or perceived responsibility to “explain” and rationalize Trump voters, leading to myriad reported stories in mass media publications such as The New
York Times. These people were always-already to a large extent the subjects of the paper of record. The music industry is not immune, this chapter argues, and it suggests that we are in a moment of capitulation influenced by white fears of black representation.

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to enrich conversations around representational diversity, illustrating both its limitations and its consequences in a national, cultural, institutional, and industrial ecosystem where whiteness still sits at the center, hosting black people and music as outsiders. The GRAMMYs are one such institution and the music industry is one such assemblage, where hip-hop and other black musics’ growing centrality in business terms is held in check by attitudes and sentiments that continue to imply its inferiority as music qua music. Only through a broader accounting for this long-historical disjuncture can real change begin.
Conclusion

In terms of their utility in knowledge creation, it is my sincere hope that the conclusions reached here, while specifically oriented towards describing, revealing, and critiquing a certain set of institutional politics and practices within the mainstream popular music industry, are broadly applicable to other institutions. Others of the media industries—television, cinema, journalism—all face critiques about the presence of underrepresented minorities amongst their newsrooms, writers’ rooms, and casts, with their solutions walking a careful tightrope between tokenism and perceived pandering. The Oscars award Green Book, a glib, pandering film that centers a white protagonist and others the black motorist for whom the film’s title literature was written, Best Picture in 2019. But the stakes are not limited to entertainment and media: Government entitlement programs such as the social safety net often use the trope of the hardworking individuals who “deserve” their lives while subsidizing those of the “undeserving.” American universities, for instance, were complicit in the purveyance and legitimization of “excellence” as the sine qua non of American life, a phenomenon that continues to resonate with the ongoing debates around the “deservingness” of black students who step foot onto campus each fall. The lessons learned from this dissertation—specifically about the specific contexts of racial attitudes throughout the past half-century of American life—teach us as much about the nation and its discourses around racial difference as they do the music industry itself.

So then what would a Recording Academy (and music industry more broadly) moving towards equitable diversity of representation, respect, and acclaim in which the sociocultural and racial politics of “excellence” take into account racial difference and its effects on the broad idea of what great music is look like? In the wake of the 2018 awards—which featured only one woman winning an award during the telecast, Recording Academy President Neil Portnow turned the blame away from his institution, suggesting instead that women needed to “step up” within the industry. This seemed to be a final straw after the racial issues of the previous year, and a Task
Force on Diversity & Inclusion was formed in March of 2018, with the expressed goal of addressing its longstanding issues. "The music industry faces numerous challenges — from combatting long-held biases to making sure women are represented and respected within the community," Tina Tchen, formerly chief of staff to former First Lady Michelle Obama and now the task force’s leader said in a statement. "This task force is an important initial step by the Recording Academy to demonstrate its commitment to tackling these challenges in a comprehensive way. I am honored to partner with them in this effort and look forward to working with members of the task force as we look to make the music industry a diverse and inclusive community for all" (Variety Staff, 2018).

While the colorblindness of the statement was certainly concerning (if unsurprising), the task force quickly put forth a set of actions including listening session in major chapters to give women and people of color chances to explain their personal experiences of discrimination in the industry, a restructuring of membership including 900 targeted invites to further diversify the academy body, and efforts to address representational deficiencies in the Nominations Review Committees and the National Governance Committees. The former determines the final shortlists of nominees in specialized categories while the latter oversee membership and advocacy. A recent press release touted 51% female and 48% people of color (compared to 28% female and 37% people of color in the 2017-18 cycle) composition of the Nominations Review Committee; 48% female and 38% people of color (compared to 20% female and 30% people of color) for the overall National Governance Committee; and 43% female and 43% people of color (compared to 46% female and 23% people of color) among the appointed National Governance Committee co-chairs (Aswad, 2018D). Sixty years of often disappointing results, we might conclude they would argue, were a meso-structural problem: with the voting body rather than the industry itself writ large.

In the wake of this, the 2019 GRAMMY Awards, which aired as this study was in its final stages, produced a surprising set of General Field results. When the dust settled, the Album of the Year streak (now eleven years running) remained unbroken, with white country singer Kacey
Musgraves beating out seven other nominees in a just-expanded field, including black nominees Cardi B, Drake, Janelle Monae, Kendrick Lamar, and newcomer H.E.R. But Childish Gambino, the stage name of 35-year-old actor Donald Glover, had taken home Record and Song of the Year trophies for his surrealist “This is America,” a seeming meditation on the mundane horrors of racial gun violence that had captured the internet’s consciousness the previous spring upon its release. Record of the Year had gone fourteen years between black winners, with Gambino’s victory for a black artist’s first in the category since Ray Charles’s posthumous honor in 2005 and the first General Field winner to feature rapping since Outkast in 2004. This was the longest gap for Record of the Year in the awards’ history. Song of the Year, which had been Beyoncé Knowles’s only General Field win (for “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” in 2010) was captured by a black artist for only the second time in the past decade. Knowles’s 2010 win came after a six-year gap.

Was this a blip, another outlier year such as Outkast’s Record of the Year triumph in 2004? Despite the coherence of the narrative elaborated by this study, there were, of course, black artists who, like Stevie Wonder, successfully earned General Field acclaim. Quincy Jones’s Back on the Block, a generations-and-genres-spanning collection of black artists including Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and more, took Album of the Year in 1991. Ray Charles—largely off the strength of a cultural re-engagement with his work after the Jamie Foxx-fronted biopic—took home one last round of trophies (eight in total, including Album and Record of the Year) for Genius Loves Company, a posthumous collaboration album released one month after his death.

In June 2018, the GRAMMYs announced they would increase the number of shortlisted nominees in General Field categories from five to eight, “a move that may help increase gender diversity after the awards were sharply criticized this year for their lack of recognition for women artists,” The New York Times editorialized (Sisario, 2018). This move is a typical first step—the Oscars increased Best Picture nominees from 5 to 10 in 2009—but I hold as I have throughout the dissertation that nomination and winning are two very different things. Being counted among the best artists or releases in a given year is certainly worth noting, but the almost systematic way this has been utilized in the General Field (to ensure black artists will be part of the telecast and aid the ratings; so as not to court the type of controversy we saw in 2018 with only one female Album of the Year nominee; etc.) fuels the argument that nomination is a far cry from a victory. “We had some of the presidents of the labels say, ‘You’ll never win. Be happy you got that,’” Helen Bruner, a black recording artist and former National Trustee of the Recording Academy, told me ((personal correspondence, 2018, September 7).
Despite what I feel this dissertation has proved is a longstanding national and industrial construction—conjunctively long-historical and discursive—of bias against seeing black music as superlatively artistic (or excellent), black musicians do win General Field awards. Childish Gambino’s victories could be a sea change, they could be what I asserted in the introduction might be what Derrick Bell (1993) calls “peaks of progress,” or they could be chapters in lengthy, rousing, and ongoing push-and-pull of discourse around blackness, musicality, and aesthetics.

Bell cautions against declaring any progress in the fight for racial equity against white supremacy as the end of the road, suggesting that white supremacy often finds way to use these gains by black artists to shift and reassert itself anew. It might thus be said that the performers, stakeholders, and atmospheric contexts shift, but the animating center—race, or blackness itself—holds in a way resonant with a concept Amiri Baraka (Jones, 1968) described as the “changing same” in 1966. Black music and its place in the industry around it shifted, even as certain coherent and persistent logics and prejudices held because they themselves were derived from the construction of race itself. What this project thus does is attempt to connect the new ways race manifests in concert with the old ways that are foundational, using the popular music industry both as its specific subject of study while at the same time arguing that it is both a product of and symbolic of broader cultural phenomena. Along these same lines, Henry Louis Gates (1979) argues that “‘Blackness’ is defined by a network of relations. If [the black artist] does embody a ‘Black Aesthetic,’” he writes “then it can be measured not by ‘content,’ but by a complex structure of meanings” (67). That structure of meanings, which explains the functioning of race—and racism—changes with time, and I see the work of this dissertation having been the explication of the meanings that make up that structure. “Why was Childish Gambino the black artist who broke through the Record and Song of the Year glass ceilings?” is a question that can be answered by situating the contemporary artist at a specific point along a historical continuum.

In fact, the work of this dissertation might be summed up with a similar question that seems straightforward on the surface but in reality is deceptively complex: Why do GRAMMY Awards voters vote for who they vote for? The answer, I have tried to illustrate, is a complicated
matrix of personal choice and ideas about aesthetics, historically specific ideas about musicality, industry prerogatives and groupthink, and the discursive construction of the qualities (sound, look, instrumentation, lyrical content) of musical excellence. In the case of the data points I have focused on, this is of course informed by broader racial politics, histories, and discursive formations. Getting to the “why” of something so subjective as this—despite the Academy’s longstanding attempts to frame their choices as objective-adjacent due to the trappings of credentialism and expertise—thus requires a long-historical understanding where we can make our best informed conclusions about the intersecting signifiers that lead Academy voters to make the choices they make. It requires reading results alongside media of their time. It requires a willingness to think broadly, drawing connections across institutions and how their internal politics influence and are impacted by the world around them. This dissertation argues that it is at the intersection of this set of key concepts—race, excellence, and music itself—where we should look for answers to that question, taking them in concert to emphasize their co-productive, networked qualities.

GRAMMY voters vote for who they vote for based on a set of ideas about music and artistry that prioritize individuality and artist-as-creator narratives, foregrounding meritocracy and its rhetorical partner “deservingness.” No GRAMMY winner would be said not to have “worked hard for” or earned their trophy. And no set of criteria would not also, given the discursive formations around rock, Motown, and hip-hop that this dissertation explores, question the artistry of black music because of a perceived lack of difficulty. Longstanding rhetorics about the quotidian nature of black music-making, which draw their roots to the Middle Passage and to anthropological accounts of Africa itself complicate the rhetorical construction of black music in America to this day. Contained within this are joint universalizations of whiteness at the cultural center and the artistic summit. And at the same time as nonsensical questions about the artistry of black music linger, the populace—and the industry—are inured to their opposite: White musical artistry remains unexamined, taken for granted.
GRAMMY voters vote for who they vote for based on opinions they hold about race that are products of its genealogy within the so-called "modern" world. Racial difference functions such that race is hypervisible, a status only amplified by a media apparatus that contains black people and black popular culture within it while still othering them. Conversely, the other side of this coin is the masked, hiding-in-plain-sight status of whiteness, which Reddy (1998) cautions is a “norm” rather than a racial category in these types of debates. This means that “black music” is judged against “music” and “black artists” are judged against “artists.” Despite Neil Portnow’s insistent clinging to the “blindfold test” as a sort of equalizer, racial difference is unavoidable in the appraisals of a likely majority-white Academy voting body.57 Racial difference informs the hearing and judging of all musics marked as “other” by the Recording Academy, an institution that misses the extent to which white sensibilities and ideas about musicality are inescapable despite their veiling.

And, of course, GRAMMY voters vote for who they vote for because of the open signifier of “excellence.” The term remains the unmarked lingua franca of striving—an abstract descriptor that is ultimately, linked to affirmative racism that leads to what Marchevsky and Theoharis (2000) call the “racialization of entitlement” where we can understand rhetorics of deservingness as reforms that ultimately do as much work arguing for the existence of an undeserving population as they do to celebrate those who are seen as deserving. “Excellence”’s refinement serves as a kind of institutional reform against equitable integration of difference in its 1950s heyday and remains a bulwark signifier into the contemporary moment.

This dissertation offers a survey of the intersections of these terms and concepts, specifically in the GRAMMYs context. The GRAMMYs, I argue, are a literal staging of many of the nation’s discomfitures and structures around racial difference. In its first chapter, affirmative excellence does a new and modern race work in postwar America, where an industry used antiblackness cloaked as celebrations of “excellence” to codify and buttress its legitimacy as art. At

57 Noteworthily missing from the Task Force’s announcement was data regarding a diversifying electorate.
the same time, its second chapter takes up a resetting of the taste hierarchies, concurrently
happening in an America dealing with Civil Rights, the most sustained challenge to many of its
foundational myths. “Little” Stevie Wonder’s story in Chapter 2 offers wary promise: that the
music industry might make room for black artists at its center, even if it requires a perfect storm of
public events, media, and shifting national discourses. But never far from that progress is the
long-historical tracking of racial collectivity and individual “genius,” signifiers that reverberate in
the final chapter’s discussion of hip-hop. The final serves as a warning: That many gains made by
black artists into the industry come with costs and that the inescapability of black music from an
industry that still pretends it is not at its center means a renewed battle against that music’s
artistic quality. Whatever the next years of the GRAMMYs hold, they will add to a rich
environment of memory-making and the broader cultural politics and impact of music itself.

But another question lingers, too: Why do people do this in the first place? By “this” I
mean specifically the exultant sorting process that is the GRAMMYs and the “economies of
prestige” that contain them (English, 2008). What are the racial-cultural politics of celebratory or
affirmative sorting? Why does this matter? Ultimately, if we should take anything away from this
project, it is that this case study is indicative of the insidiousness the GRAMMYs particular brand
of affirmative sorting, which contains within it claims about deservingness, memory, canon-
formation, and artistry, all of which are couched, I have illustrated, in ideas about unequal racial
difference. Who deserves to be remembered for their artistic contribution? Who deserves to have
their image standing on stage with their trophy commemorated? Whose music is worthy?

Hortense Spillers suggests in her seminal “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American
Grammar Book” (1987) that chattel slavery and the Middle Passage are not simply aspects of
history, but rather extended processes by which hegemonic European whites made sense of the
world. Racial ordering is to her an “American grammar,” or a set of heuristics and rules that are
constitutive of the nation. While clearly less vile in scope and circumstance, the “sense-making” of
the sorting this dissertation describes can and should be understand as an outgrowth of these
original heuristics—turns of phrase of an American grammar in which a means of sorting gives
“sense” to a world in which whiteness instantiates itself as central, dominant, and unmarked while blackness is othered and delegitimized.

Spillers’s use of “grammar” suggests the importance of racial sorting in language, sitting at the root of American discourse, itself. So perhaps what we might conclude is that the GRAMMYs are evidence of race’s place at America’s tonal center, too. The sounds of American musical history—cultivated, promulgated, and celebrated by the popular music industry’s powerful stakeholders—are informed by and in service of a racial ordering schema.

Truth about the signifying dynamics of epistemological categorization, Spillers suggests, requires we “strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order” (65). That “order” is not merely categorical—it is also hierarchical—and this dissertation has illustrated the ways that sorting music and celebrating the “best” among it are ultimately in the service of a longue durée where criteria of deservingness and acclaim stand in for reifying racial inequity. When telling the truth about this ordering, we begin to truly understand what the GRAMMYs mean.
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