

# #GrammysNotAsWhite: Critical Race Theory and the Grammys' Race Problem

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## #GrammysSoWhite and the Race Problem

Each year, the announcement of the Grammy Award nominees is immediately followed by rigorous socio-political critique. In previous years, critics lambasted the underrepresentation of black artists in mainstream award categories, their overrepresentation in racialized categories like hip hop/R&B, and absence from leadership positions within the Recording Academy. However, the November 28, 2017 announcement of the Grammy Award nominees prompted a wave of excitement among music industry professionals and fans. Of note, the four mainstream award categories, Record of the Year, Album of the Year, Song of the Year, and Best New Artist, saw a drastic increase in African American nominees. Subsequently, legions of critics took to mainstream media outlets to commend the Recording Academy, the Grammys' governing institution, for seemingly addressing their institutional race issues. Consequently, enticing news headlines leading up to the 2018 awards ceremony read: "The 2018 Grammy Nominations Deservedly Celebrates Artists of Color" (McDermott) and "The Grammys Diversity Triumph. No White Guys in Album of the Year!" (Fallon).

This celebratory discourse is a sharp departure from the condemnation routinely leveled at the Grammys' televised broadcast each year. Previously, headlines like "The Year #GrammysSoWhite Came to Life. Will the Awards Face Its Race Problem?" emerged after several highly-contested snubs occurred during the nomination process and awards ceremony (Caramanica). Frustrated by the consistent nomination omissions and award snubs, black recording artists such as

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Kanye West, Frank Ocean, and Janelle Monáe openly criticized the Recording Academy leadership for persistently denying the role the Grammys' nomination and voting policies play in producing unequal opportunities and outcomes for people of color. In addition to vocalizing their concerns, some recording artists boycotted the awards ceremony and declined to submit their eligible works for Grammy consideration. For instance, Frank Ocean abstained from submitting his critically-acclaimed 2016 album *Blonde* referring to the decision as his "Colin Kaepernick moment." Ocean expressed that "[the Grammys] doesn't seem to be representing very well for people who come from where I come from, and hold down what I hold down." Specifically, Ocean identified the Grammys' outdated nomination system as a direct cause of the underrepresentation of black artists in mainstream award categories (Caramanica).

However, despite black artists' outcries and the Recording Academy's unwavering denial of institutional race issues, numerous music industry professionals and critics attribute the wealth of 2018 African American nominees to the implementation of several new policies and procedures. Specifically, in 2016 and 2017, the Recording Academy instituted policy changes that made streaming-only releases eligible, established a new online voting system, and created a nomination review committee for the rap award categories. While some critics interpret the implementation of these measures as meaningful steps toward inclusivity and diversity at the Grammys, I remain critical of the Recording Academy's underlying intentions for instituting these new policies and procedures. For this reason, I suggest framing and examining the Grammys' nomination and awards outcomes as products of a larger racialized social system, the Recording Academy. By doing so, I reveal how these policy changes produce an illusory sense of racial progress, covertly protect white elites' socioeconomic interests, and are susceptible to dilution and reversal.

Utilizing critical race theory (CRT) scholarship I examine the discourse and implications surrounding each policy's implementation to unveil the Recording Academy's underlying motives for enacting the new measures. Specifically, I focus on both the recognized and concealed implications of these changes for black music professionals throughout the eligibility, general voting, and special committee stages of the nomination process. Furthermore, I scrutinize the Recording Academy's strategic deployment of a racially-neutral discourse to combat and invalidate claims of racial inequality at the Grammys. Conducting a study on the Grammys' structure and practices is difficult as the Recording Academy's policies,

procedures, and demographics are not readily available to the public. Therefore, to illustrate these issues, this article draws from a multitude of sources including statements made by Grammy officials, Recording Academy bylaws, narrative accounts from Grammy voting members, and online news articles.

## Applying Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory scholarship provides an array of analytical frameworks and tools to examine the dynamic relationship among race, racism, and power deeply embedded in social institutions. Since the 1970s, critical race theorists have formulated numerous race-conscious theoretical approaches and a language to demonstrate how institutional ideologies and policies advantage the privileged while denying the basic rights of the oppressed. In synthesizing the broad range of concepts and issues addressed by this group of scholars and activists, I follow critical race theorists in their contention that racism has become insidiously embedded in institutional structures and practices to the extent that they are nearly undetectable (Delgado and Stefancic 2-4). In this paper, I draw from these concepts to present a race-based systematic critique of the Grammys' struggles with diversity and how these issues connect to larger structural inequalities deeply embedded in the United States music industry. Specifically, these structural inequalities are perpetuated and reinforced by white artists and executives' unjust access to decision-making roles, outdated policies, and colorblind meritocracy.

The Recording Academy's dismissive response to music industry professionals' outcries connotes an entrenched resistance to racial reform firmly rooted by notions of liberalism and traditionalism. On the surface, the existing Grammy policies and practices promote the idea that equality and objectivity are granted to each participant. However, I contend that these policies and practices covertly maintain white supremacy and domination. For instance, Recording Academy President Neil Portnow regularly crafts narratives that depict the Recording Academy membership as both enlightened and progressive. Specifically, Portnow dismisses notions of institutional racism by claiming that: "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" (Hogan).

This blindfold analogy equates to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "colorblind racism" ideologies or "powerful explanations—which have ultimately

become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them [white elites] from any responsibility for the status of people of color” (Bonilla-Silva 2). Portnow’s depiction of musicians as having the capability to hear past racial or gender prejudices is just one example of how white elites deploy powerful yet subversive ideologies to obscure the undisturbed legacies of institutional inequalities that reinforce racial hierarchies and unequal outcomes at the Grammys. Thus, to address dominant group ideologies like Portnow’s, this study will draw from what Bonilla-Silva describes as the four frames of color-blind racism:

1. Abstract Liberalism: Engages ideas of political and economic liberalism (equal opportunity, choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters.
2. Naturalization: Explains away racial phenomena as natural occurrences.
3. Cultural Racism: Uses culturally-based assumptions and arguments to explain minorities’ positions in society.
4. Minimization of Racism: Suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ opportunities and outcomes. (76-77)

Contemporary racial inequality is reproduced through “new racism” practices, like colorblind ideologies, that are subtle, institutional, and seemingly nonracial (Bonilla-Silva 3). Abstract liberalism, specifically, is used to obscure how the music industry was built upon social, political, and economic inequalities and refute that generations of white elites have inherited privileges through these unjust structures. In the end, this article works against discourses of normalcy and invisibility to expose unchecked institutional inequalities and the potential for meaningful racial reform at the Grammys.

### Streaming and Snatching Grammys

The first step in the Grammy nomination process requires Recording Academy members and record companies to submit works for eligibility screening and category placement. Previously, two fundamental principles determined Grammy eligibility: (1) recordings released between October 1 and September 30 and (2) music commercially released through a broad distributor in the United States such as a record label, Internet seller like iTunes, or traditional brick-and-mortar retailer such as Target (Recording Academy). The Grammys’ justified their emphasis on commercially-released recordings as these guidelines were used to exclude submissions by amateur artists who often release their music for free. However,

those policies could not account for the changes in music distribution and consumption brought on by the emergence of streaming services such as Spotify and SoundCloud. The outdated eligibility policies were especially disabling to innovative black artists democratizing the music industry using online streaming services and do-it-yourself music-making and promotional practices.

In February 2016, then 15-year old Max Krasowitz created an online petition requesting Grammy eligibility for streaming-only recordings. Streaming-only recordings may be conceived of as recordings exclusively distributed through online streaming platforms and not available for digital download or physical product purchase. On the petition's webpage, Krasowitz proclaimed:

Artists like Chance the Rapper, who are now getting national recognition and performing on national platforms...are being punished for making their music available...Not all artists should be forced to release their music for free, but the ones who do should not be punished for doing so. (Krasowitz)

Krasowitz' frustrations resonated with other fans and recording artists as many professional contemporary hip-hop/R&B recordings are now released for free on music streaming platforms. Thus, an artist's decision to release their music for free may exclude them from receiving mainstream awards despite their critical success. Building off of Krasowitz' petition, Chance the Rapper used his celebrity and social media influence to lobby for free music to be considered by the Recording Academy (see Figure 1).

Chance the Rapper not only raised the public consciousness surrounding this issue and encouraged more people to sign the petition, but he also directly confronted the Recording Academy leadership. It appears that this confrontation was effective as Bill Freimuth, the Senior Vice President of Awards subsequently released a statement claiming that they would "work with them [the artists] to figure out how those changes might work." Accordingly, in June 2016, the Recording Academy announced that streaming-only releases would be eligible for 2017 Grammy nomination consideration. Consequently, Chance the Rapper's streaming-only mixtape, *The Coloring Book* won the award for Best Rap Album at the 2017 ceremony, making him the first streaming-only artist to win a Grammy.

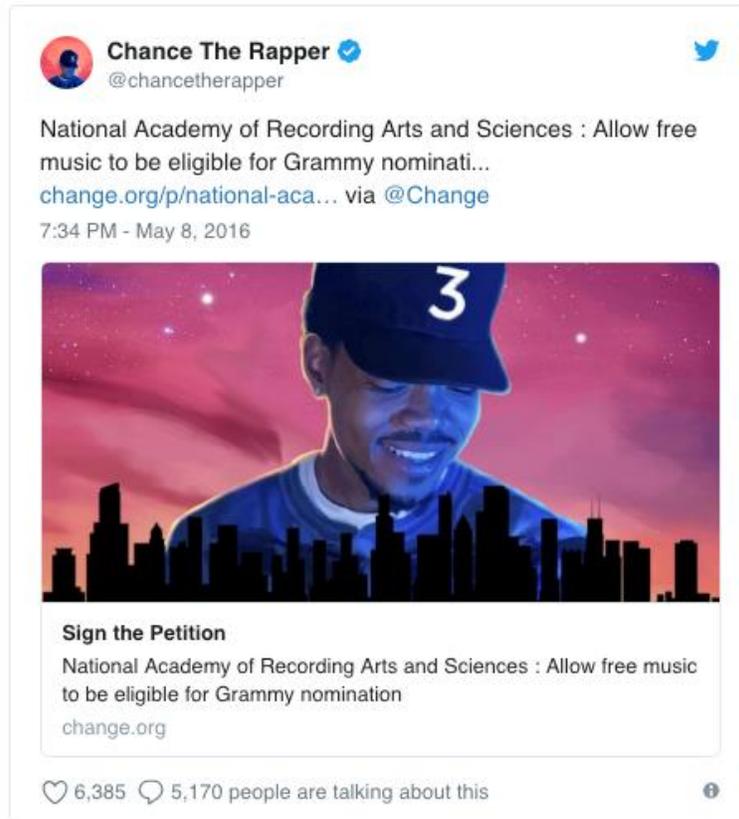


Figure 1. Screenshot of Chance the Rapper’s Tweet Sharing Krasowitz’ Petition for Streaming Eligibility (@chancetherapper)

To accommodate streaming-only artists and their music, the Recording Academy expanded their definition of general distribution to include “paid subscription, full catalog, on-demand streaming/limited download platforms that have existed as such within the United States” (Recording Academy). In other words, only works released on major paid subscription services like Apple Music, Spotify, and Tidal qualify for eligibility. Additionally, the recording must be released in high-definition quality. Hence, the Grammys are willing to include streaming-only artists only if they meet the institution’s commercial standards. Thus, despite Krasowitz and Chance the Rapper’s ambitions to make free music releases Grammy eligible, the new policy still excludes artists who release their music on platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube.

Nevertheless, Chance the Rapper presented his fans and members of the Recording Academy with a bottom-up view of the music industry, giving agency

and voice to marginalized individuals. His streaming artist-centric requests for policy intervention resonates with Kimberlé Crenshaw's belief that policy-makers should develop political and legal policies from a bottom-up perspective to address the needs of the oppressed and underrepresented (1242). Furthermore, this case shows how the advent and proliferation of digital technologies including the Internet, do-it-yourself music-making interfaces, and music streaming platforms undermine major corporations' exclusive control of mass media. Specifically, social media and mobile technologies enable the mass mobilization of a race-conscious youth, a tactic exploited by Krasowitz and Chance the Rapper. Ultimately, digital technologies have provided minority groups with powerful tools and platforms to call out the subtle forms of racism surrounding the Grammys.

However, one must also consider Derrick Bell's concept of interest convergence in which white elites tolerate or encourage racial advances for minorities as long as those advances simultaneously promote white self-interest (523). Notably, these interventions seem to coincide with changing economic conditions such as the destabilization of the music industry due to the rise of streaming services. Considering that the three transnational recording companies (Sony BMG, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group) own stock in the major streaming services and have signed several streaming-only artists to record deals, I contend that the Grammys could no longer afford to overlook streaming-only artists and their increasing presence in the mainstream music industry. Ultimately, these incentives raise questions as to whether the Recording Academy acted out of a genuine interest in promoting minority talent or economic necessity and self-preservation.

### Everybody's Online: The Myth of Meritocracy

The next step in the nomination process, first-round voting, occurs after the submitted work is deemed eligible and placed in the appropriate award category. During this stage, Recording Academy members vote to determine the five finalists in each category. Before transitioning to online voting, the Recording Academy distributed paper ballots to over 13,000 voting members. However, the paper ballot system was inconvenient for active voting members, namely young and touring individuals. Furthermore, it allowed barely-active members, most of whom being older white males, to vote uninhibitedly. The unchecked power of barely-active, older members is particularly problematic for artists in non-pop genres such as hip-

hop and R&B as they tend to vote conservatively and for the most recognizable artists (Recording Academy).

Rob Kenner, a Grammy voting member, shares that many of the “nominations are chosen by people who have little real expertise in a given field” and that while he refrained from voting in genres he was less familiar with, he could if he wanted to. He also explains the voting members’ biases toward famous artists:

I soon learned another unwritten rule during private conversations with other committee members: be careful about green-lighting an album by someone who was really famous if you don’t want to see that album win a Grammy. Because famous people tend to get more votes from clueless Academy members, regardless of the quality of their work. (Kenner)

After observing the Latin Grammys’ successful implementation of an online voting system, the Recording Academy designed an online platform to “provide greater flexibility for touring artists, eliminate the possibility of invalid ballots, and protect further against fraudulent voting.” According to the Grammy bylaws, all eligible voters are still permitted to vote in the four mainstream award categories but are now limited to vote in 15, instead of 20, specialized genre categories. Furthermore, the new voting platform provides a form of check and balance by requiring members to log on using personalized credentials and disallowing them to vote in categories in which they are unauthorized.

To encourage educated nominations, the online system provides voters with recordings and videos of nominated works (Recording Academy). Following the announcement of the online voting system, Freimuth expressed this prediction:

We hope that our nominations will better represent the entire community of music makers, especially if there’s a particular segment that we’ve been missing. There may be certain genres within our awards categories where the demographic that tends to participate in making that particular music might be more tech savvy in general, or might have more of a mobile lifestyle than certain other genres, and we think this might appeal to those folks. (Ugwu)

This statement suggests that the Recording Academy leadership has attributed the diversity problem to a lack of participation from younger voters, once again circumventing the idea of having a race problem to an age problem. Freimuth explicitly claimed that “the youth don’t want anything to do with the Grammy process” (Ugwu).

However, I suggest that the deployment of this logic is an example of the leadership shifting the blame from the institutional inequalities to the oppressed group (Bonilla-Silva 9). For instance, Portnow affirms that:

The popular vote stands by itself and completely determines who receives an award in any given year. There certainly could be those that are disappointed and that had a difference of opinion about another artist than perhaps received a Grammy in any given year, but the fact is that they had a chance to vote. (Hogan)

Based on Portnow's interpretation, we can also see how the Recording Academy leaderships' view towards voting rights and opportunities are grounded by the powerful liberal ideology of meritocracy. Meritocracy assumes a level playing field where all individuals in society have an equal opportunity to succeed and that only one's work ethic, values, and drive determine one's successes or failures (Zamudio 9). This ideological stance refutes the possibility of someone's lack of success being caused by historical and social precedents.

Rather, this ideological stance frames each Grammy award winner as an individual who worked harder than their peers and produced an objectively superior musical product. However, even if every member votes, African Americans may encounter representational issues due to their numerical minority status in the white-dominated Grammy voting membership. The voter eligibility system continues to reinforce this dominance because in order to become an eligible voting member, an individual must only meet one of the following requirements:

1. Have been credited with 12 physical or digital tracks released online and currently available for purchase, with at least one track in the past five years
2. Have six credits on commercially released tracks currently available for sale and distributed through physical distribution outlets (such as record stores), with at least one track in the past five years
3. Have won a Grammy before
4. Have received an endorsement from a current voting member (Recording Academy)

Decades of black music professionals' exclusion and erasure from the mainstream music industry imply a white-majority among artists, producers, recording engineers, and executives with eligible album credits. Moreover, requirements one and two emphasize that recordings must be available for purchase, once again disadvantaging many young and diverse streaming-only artists who release their

music for free. Furthermore, more white artists have won Grammys than black artists, and there are fewer black-centric award categories than white-dominated ones. Thus requirement three is also in favor of white members. Finally, in direct conflict with the idea of meritocracy that asserts that privilege is earned and not granted by historical and social factors, number four suggests that someone could become a voting member by asking another voting member in their closed informal network to recommend them.

In interviews, Portnow regularly asserts that the Grammys holds “a democratic vote by majority. So somebody could either receive or not receive a Grammy based on one vote.” (Hogan). However, his sentiments do not consider how the voters’ white majority makes the Grammys’ winner-take-all, peer-to-peer voting system problematic. According to Lani Guinier (7-9), a “one person, one vote” system assumes that everyone can vote and that every vote is equal, obscuring notions of disenfranchisement. Furthermore, Portnow crafts and deploys colorblind ideologies regarding voting practices and outcomes:

To your earlier question about a racial problem...You don’t get Chance the Rapper as the Best New Artist of the year if you have a membership that isn’t diverse and isn’t open-minded and isn’t really listening to the music, and not really considering other elements beyond how great the music is.  
(Hogan)

Here, Portnow is tokenizing Chance the Rapper’s win to justify that the Grammys does not have a race problem because there is proof that a black artist has won in a mainstream award category. This statement is an example of minimization in which an oppressor analyzes and mandates the terms of what is and is not racist (Bonilla-Silva 77). According to Bonilla-Silva, stories like these are important because they help reinforce arguments and persuade listeners that the oppressor’s views are correct (95). Ultimately, the Recording Academy leadership’s ability to control the narrative and obscure the disproportionality of the voting members contributes greatly to its ability to protect and perpetuate white dominance.

### Check the Flow: The Rap Nomination Review Committee

For certain award categories, the final nominees are determined by a secret review committee. The first nomination review committees were established in 1989 in response to criticism that the annual nominations were not reflective of what voting members considered to be the best in the field. Specifically, if a sizable number of

voting members felt that an award category failed to represent current tastes and expert opinions over a significant period, they sent recommendations to the general awards committee and board of trustees. If in agreement, the general awards committee could then establish a nomination review committee (Hilburn 1999). After the first-round nomination vote, a group of undisclosed experts vet the top nominations to ensure that the final nominees are reflective of what they consider to best represent excellence. While there is concern that these undisclosed members may abuse their power, the committees have been greeted with mostly positive feedback.

In June 2017, the Grammys' created a rap nomination review committee to serve as an "additional round of checks and balances to eliminate the potential for a popularity bias that puts emerging, independent music, and late year releases at a disadvantage" (Karp). The creation of the rap nomination committee followed several highly-contested nominations and omissions in the rap award categories. For instance, in 2014, the question of whether to allow Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' album *The Heist* to be nominated in the hip-hop/rap award categories generated controversy between the general Grammy community and members of the rap community. Members of the rap community argued that Macklemore and Lewis' pop-centric album was not worthy of a hip-hop award nomination and that their significant Top 40 radio exposure would likely result in less knowledgeable members voting for them. Even Macklemore agreed with the rap community's opinion regarding his album:

If we win a Grammy for Best Rap Album, Hip-Hop is going to be heated. In terms of [that category], I think it should go to Kendrick...I understand why Hip-Hop would feel like Kendrick got robbed [if he didn't win]...We obviously had massive success on commercial radio, and I think that, in ways, *The Heist* was a bigger album, but Kendrick has a better rap album. (Dobbins)

Nevertheless, the general Grammy committee disregarded the rap community's concerns and allowed Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' album to be nominated. Consequently, the duo earned seven nominations and as predicted, beat out Kendrick Lamar for the Best Rap Album and Best Rap Performance categories. Dismayed by the outcome, Macklemore sent an apology to Kendrick Lamar via text message which he later posted on Instagram (see Figure 2). This result troubled Macklemore to the extent that he decided not to submit his album *This Unruly Mess I've Made* for the 2017 award ceremony (Strauss).



Figure 2. Screenshot of Macklemore’s Message to Kendrick Lamar Made Public via Instagram (@macklemore)

This occurrence was neither the first nor last time a black artist was ousted by a white artist who later voiced their concern over the result. For instance, when Adele’s *25* won Album of the Year over Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* in 2017, she dedicated her acceptance speech to Beyoncé and broke the award in half to emphasize that she believed Beyoncé deserved the award. After the show, Adele explicitly stated: “My album of the year is *Lemonade*. What the f— does she have to do to win Album of the Year?” (Monroe and Yoo). Beyoncé’s consistent snubs further highlight the Grammys’ deeply-embedded institutional inequalities as John Vilanova suggests that:

When renowned creations by racialized artists are only honored in the categories coded black and systematically passed over time and time again for “mainstream” recognition, this belies an in-built bias that precludes nonwhite excellence from being considered on the same terms as white excellence. (Vilanova)

The Grammys’ colorblind-meritocratic ideals discount the structural elements such as white privilege and the distinct experiences of minority artists—instead choosing to deemphasize the role of race to reach a broader audience. Take, for instance,

Beyoncé's high-profile Album of the Year losses to Beck, Taylor Swift, and Adele. Beyoncé is the most nominated woman in Grammy history but has only won 35 percent of the time in contrast to Adele's winning percentage of 83 (Vilanova). The discrepancy between high nomination rate and low winning percentage prominent among established hip-hop/R&B music-makers hints at what Vilanova calls a glass ceiling for black artists. Thus, the rap nomination review committee provides an opportunity for knowledgeable experts to override the Grammys' colorblind approach to dealing with overtly racialized categories such as hip-hop/R&B.

By drawing upon the experiential knowledge of cultural insiders, namely rap artists, producers, and executives, the review committee can take a color-conscious approach to develop evaluative criteria and frameworks to specifically determine musical excellence in rap. Specifically, a racially-diverse committee can draw upon what Delgado and Stefancic (9) refer to as the "voice-of-color" thesis which suggests that because of their unique histories and experiences with oppression, minorities can confront issues and values that white voting members are unlikely to perceive and understand in black music. The implementation of this committee is especially timely as black artists are increasingly using more race-conscious approaches to represent themselves counter to the prejudices aimed against them and their music. Particularly, artists like Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar have used their recent mainstream performances and albums to empower black communities and celebrate authentic modes of black cultural expression. However, the Grammys' lack of imagination and tolerance toward race-centric performances often contrasts with the progressive and radical stances of the artists (Caramanica). As a result, members of oppressed groups sometimes frame their ideas in ways the dominant group is familiar and comfortable with, often changing the original meaning of the works (Hill-Collins 293).

Conversely, Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar's politically-charged music serve as forms of counterstorytelling that use oppositional voices rooted in the experiences of the oppressed to reveal racial inequalities and challenge dominant narratives (Zamudio 4). According to Tara J. Yosso, these "counterstories embed critical conceptual and theoretical content within an accessible story format that can serve as pedagogical tools" (15). As such, Beyoncé's 2018 black-centric performance in front of Coachella's predominantly white audience could be viewed as a way of inviting non-black individuals "under the veil" to learn about the distinct worldview black people inherit as a consequence of navigating being black and American or, as W.E.B. Du Bois terms it, their "double-consciousness" (*Souls of Black Folk* 2-

3). Viewing racial inequality from beneath the veil reveals that white elites' ideals of integration, assimilation, and colorblindness often work against the interests of black artists. Thus, having a committee of cultural insiders to evaluate the goals, values, and culture-specific meanings of the nominated works could play a significant role in combatting the traditional notions of musical excellence that contribute to the silencing and diminution of black artists and their works.

### #GrammysNotAsWhite, But Still Not Alright

After the secret committee confirms the top five nominations, the nominees are announced to the public. Final-round voting occurs, and the results are later revealed at the broadcasted award ceremony. Unfortunately, the results of the 60<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards on January 28, 2018, left some viewers and music industry insiders disappointed. Despite the wealth of critically acclaimed hip-hop and R&B nominees, pop artist Bruno Mars collected most of the ceremony's top honors over Kendrick Lamar and Jay-Z suggesting that voting members' preferences are still firmly rooted in traditional pop styles over radical, racially-conscious works. Thus, while these policy changes have produced some positive outcomes, there is still much work to be done before we can truly commend the Recording Academy for addressing its institutional inequalities.

Despite the increased public consciousness surrounding the entertainment industry regarding issues of diversity, the Grammys have continued to circumnavigate racial issues rather than confront them. Most notably, the Recording Academy leadership's deployment of colorblind ideologies has promoted a false sense of racial progress and unity while covertly maintaining white supremacy. However, considering the heightened state of contemporary race relations in the United States, how much longer can the Grammys utilize the colorblind defense? Specifically, how much longer can the Grammys promote superficial notions of multiculturalism that celebrate diversity yet refuse to acknowledge white privilege and institutional racism?

We should also reflect on the role interest convergence has played in these policy changes. I contend that since hip-hop/R&B was the top genre of 2017, the Recording Academy could no longer afford to marginalize it. Furthermore, both established and up-and-coming artists are now releasing their works via streaming-only formats. Thus, how much longer could the Grammys continue to exclude these kinds of artists before its prestigious status and bottom-line was critically impacted?

In an interview, Portnow discusses how the Recording Academy is “always working on increasing diversity in membership, whether it’s ethnicity, gender, genre, or age” specifically to maintain its relevance (Hogan). However, what happens if hip-hop/R&B becomes less popular or relevant? One possibility is that the Recording Academy will cease efforts toward increasing diversity because it is no longer necessary to maintain their relevance. Furthermore, they may attempt to reverse these new policies as we are currently seeing with Affirmative Action policies in the university and workplace settings. Ultimately, as Du Bois once articulated, black artists would enjoy only a “brief moment in the sun” before continuing down the cyclical path of racial reform (“Reconstruction” 784). Therefore, I contend that to move forward, the Recording Academy must adopt race-conscious strategies that directly confront issues of diversity, representation, and inclusion.

### Toward Meaningful Racial Reform

John O. Calmore reminds us that “Our efforts must, while directed by critical theory, extend beyond critique and theory to...relieve the extraordinary suffering and racist oppression that is commonplace in the life experiences of too many people of color” (317). By harnessing the momentum of this racially-conscious period in the United States, activists and scholars can pressure the Recording Academy to implement policy changes that mitigate and eventually dismantle the Grammys’ institutional inequalities. On these grounds, I recommend the following three-step approach toward meaningful racial reform:

1. **Diversify Leadership:** Elevate qualified and knowledgeable black music professionals into positions of power and key decision-making roles.
2. **Implement Race-Conscious Measures:** Develop long-term, race-conscious policies that acknowledge institutional racism, that diversify membership and results, and that work to redistribute power among Recording Academy members. Most importantly, the Recording Academy should develop strategies that increase voter strength among marginalized groups.
3. **Develop Transparent Agendas and Modes of Communication:** Increase transparency of Recording Academy policies, procedures, and practices among members and the public. Furthermore, promote open and constructive dialogue among Recording Academy members regarding issues of race and diversity.

When implementing these changes, the Recording Academy should take caution to avoid essentializing the experiences of minorities. Discussions of racial issues in the United States tend to focus on the challenges faced by African Americans thereby excluding other minority groups. When other minority groups are mentioned, their experiences are often analogized to those of African-Americans (Delgado and Stefancic 57-8). Thus, policy changes must also consider and confront the unique oppressions of these distinct groups. Furthermore, issues of intersectionality should be considered as most critical race theorists reject the notion that “one can fight racism without paying attention to sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression and injustice” (Delgado and Stefancic 22). Overall, implementing race-conscious strategies and deconstructing the dominant group’s colorblind ideologies will play an important role in dismantling the race-based barriers that prevent black artists’ achievement, mobility, and recognition.

### Conclusion: Critical Race Theory and the #MusicIndustrySoWhite Problem

Subtle and persistent forms of racism drawing from unchecked inequalities of the past continue to reinforce racialized structures and practices that maintain white supremacy while simultaneously disadvantaging minorities. Notably, the mass media portrayal and representation of African Americans is a double-edged sword with the ability to both counteract and perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes. While ceremonies such as the BET and Soul Train awards regularly recognize and celebrate black music professionals, the inequitable treatment of black artists at the Grammys and other prestigious ceremonies like the Emmys, Oscars, and Tony awards remain problematic as these ceremonies serve as promotional events for record labels, reinforce the popular music canon, and allow individual artists to amass cultural capital. At these ceremonies, award nominees and winners are imbued with connotations of greatness, excellence, and success often resulting in increased exposure, opportunities, and sales. Thus, images of achievement in the mainstream industry can have a meaningful impact on members of historically-marginalized groups as Beyoncé expressed in her 2017 *Lemonade* acceptance speech:

It’s important to me to show images to my children that reflect their beauty so they can grow up in a world where they look in the mirror—first through

their own families, as well as the news, the Super Bowl, the Olympics, the White House and the Grammys—and see themselves. And have no doubt that they’re beautiful, intelligent and capable. This is something I want for every child of every race, and I feel it’s vital that we learn from the past and recognize our tendencies to repeat our mistakes. (Caramanica)

In the end, the ongoing struggle for inclusive policies and practices in the mainstream entertainment industry mirrors the widespread issue of racial inequality in the United States. Future applications of critical race theory can provide an invaluable view of the racial relations within the contemporary music industry as we move further into the twenty-first century. Particularly, critical race theory’s ability to reveal deeply embedded institutionalized inequalities and social activist agenda could play a key role in helping black music professionals to share their diverse black experiences, unmitigated cultural expressive practices, and to secure socioeconomic prosperity.

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