Scholastic A Cappella and the Construction of Whiteness, Community, and Power

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Scholastic A Cappella and the Construction of Whiteness, Community, and Power
by
Daniel Fister

August 2022
St. Louis, Missouri
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Daniel Fister

Washington University in St. Louis

August 2022
Dedicated to my parents, Tom and Rhonda Fister.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Scholastic A Cappella and the Construction of Whiteness, Community, and Power

by

Daniel Fister

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

Washington University in St. Louis, 2022

Professor Todd Decker, Chair

Vocal-only student ensembles who cover contemporary popular music at most U.S. high schools and universities, known as a cappella groups, mold students as musical listeners and performers. Though predominantly composed of liberal and progressive people who value diversity and inclusion, a cappella communities perpetuate racialized inequities of sound and representation. I analyze how race, particularly whiteness, shapes the intersecting communities of scholastic a cappella through ideologies of sound (i.e. singing and arranging styles), social structures (i.e. audition processes, competition policies, and judging rubrics), and discourses (how a range of a cappella practitioners discuss, or not, social categories such as race and whiteness). My ethnographic research involved judging and volunteering for a cappella competitions, attending rehearsals and performances, and interviewing a range of a cappella practitioners, including performers, judges, producers, teachers, and critics. I consider how rehearsals, performances, competitions, festivals, online forums, musical arrangements, and films create moments when structural racial inequality manifests. Using a theoretical framework of interdisciplinary whiteness and voice studies, I analyze why white people typically occupy positions of power, even as groups often use songs, sounds, and styles by artists of color and perform in multi-racial ensembles. My research shows how whiteness operates in everyday,
ubiquitous musical practices; how whiteness shapes musical aesthetics and listening behaviors; and how sonic and structural whiteness organizes communities not obviously associated with race or inequity.

In my work, I explore several facets of what I call the “a cappella pipeline,” a linear path along which potential participants move through stages. The chapters roughly correlate with some of the nodes and facets of this metaphorical conduit where people try to move through or forward. As I demonstrate, the ideologies of sound and race as well as the social dynamics and structures within a cappella advantage white people at each juncture. In contrast, people of color often face inequitable barriers to entry or promotion and experience discrimination or bias based on their race. In Chapter 1, I examine the first node of this pipeline, auditions, and illuminate the racialized ideologies of voice and singing that undergird a cappella audition practices and policies from advertising to selection. Chapter 2 sets up the following chapters that focus on the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA), the largest and most prestigious scholastic a cappella competition in the United States, by outlining the competition’s history and logistics. I investigate the role of the ICCA judging rubric in Chapter 3 to understand the racialized ideologies behind it, how it influences how group singing is scored, and how judges are selected for the competition. Chapter 4 continues the focus on judging and racialized ideologies of voice, turning to how judges determine special awards for Best Soloist and how a cappella practitioners grapple with questions of cultural appropriation in their solo performances and repertoire selection. Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation with an investigation of the recent media sensation depicting scholastic a cappella and ICCA, the Pitch Perfect film franchise. I assess the relationship between how the fictional films depicts race in scholastic a cappella, through tokenized people of color and a racialized social hierarchy, and the real-life practice. I
demonstrate how the films’ narrative structures and musical performances teach audiences to ignore a cappella singing’s embedded ideologies and structural advantages toward whiteness while simultaneously illuminating the gender biases.
Introduction

Twelve white, female-presenting college students in matching black uniforms and red ties bop their heads and torsos up and down as they sing in harmony, “We be Divisi pretendin’ we Usher.” This phrase ends the cover of Black singer Usher’s pop hit “Yeah!” (2004) by the ensemble known as Divisi from the University of Oregon, an a cappella group that performs vocal-only covers of popular music. It also completes their three-song performance at the 2005 International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA) West Region Semifinals at Stanford University in Palo Alto, CA, which has been memorialized on YouTube.¹ The audience members, whose continuous cheers and whistles at sexualized choreography and humorous vocal lines frequently overtake the group’s singing in the audio playback, erupt into uproarious applause. One minute earlier, the audience laughed when one of the students began rapping in an exaggerated vocal and physical caricature of Ludacris, the analogous featured artist on the original track. The audience reacted similarly during the rap section of the chart when the white, female-presenting students of the ensemble inflected their voices with gruff timbres and lower pitches to imitate and “pretend” they were the Black men of the original track. Divisi’s performance of this song and two others before it, known collectively as a “set,” earn them high scores, first place in the competition, and a special award for Best Choreography, all of which mark how well the a cappella group impressed the judges and adhered to the musical and visual standards of what is “good” a cappella.²

Although I unpack this performance in greater detail in Chapter 4, I begin with this pointed description of Divisi’s performance to show how race, racial representation, and racial dynamics operate on multiple levels in scholastic a cappella performance in sound and social structure. The all-white student ensemble held auditions at multiple points prior to the competition event but did not admit a student of color. The white soloists perform a stylized, exaggerated form of Blackness through their vocalizing and gestures. At the time, Divisi designated themselves as a “women’s” a cappella group, though today they use a gender-inclusive term—“womxn’s”—to indicate their treble range. But they do not have to label themselves by the race of their members or the repertoire they sing because what they do lies entirely within the mainstream of scholastic a cappella practice.3

And yet, these qualities are neither the reason for the song’s iconic status nor how most a cappella people would describe the video if prompted. The set, and especially “Yeah!,” became immortalized through a YouTube video of the performance as well as the opening chapter of the book, *Pitch Perfect*, by journalist Mickey Rapkin. He describes in detail Divisi’s performance later that spring at the last stage of the competition, the ICCA Finals, and how they shockingly placed second instead of first.4 His description includes the students’ racial homogeneity, editorializing “not that there’s anything wrong with that.”5 Their loss at the 2005 ICCA Finals prompted the journalist to follow the group two years later as they sought once more to win the competition, forming one major strand of the book. Rapkin’s account loosely inspired the 2012 film, *Pitch Perfect*, which was both a surprise sensation as well as a mass-market introduction to the world of scholastic a cappella and its largest, most prestigious competition. The film, like the

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3 See the auditions flyer from Fall 2021 posted on the group’s Twitter account. @uodivisi, Twitter post, October 8, 2021, 2:00 AM, accessed June 2, 2022, https://twitter.com/uodivisi/status/1446369913422036992.


book, opens with a scene that is analogous to Divisi’s 2005 ICCA set. That iteration of the Barden Bellas, the film’s fictional a cappella group, similarly features mostly white women and two women of color positioned at the back of the ensemble who have no lines or names in the short scene. Divisi’s real-life performance of “Yeah!” may have been exceptional, as it won awards and helped inspire a book and a film. But it is also representative, epitomizing scholastic a cappella and its relationship with race, what scholastic a cappella has been and continues to be.

**Background and Dissertation Themes**

Contemporary a cappella is a musical genre in which vocal-only ensembles mostly cover current American popular songs. In the past 30 years, a cappella has flourished at many United States high schools and colleges, across demographics and geographies, where it molds musical listening and performance practices for students and their audiences. Recent media portrayals of scholastic a cappella groups such as the film franchise *Pitch Perfect* (2012, 2015, 2017), the docu-series *Sing it On* (2015–16), and the reality show *The Sing-Off* (2009–14) further illustrate the growing reach of a cappella music-making within the United States as well as the various possibilities of how a cappella groups look and sound. As a result, competitions such as ICCA hosted by the company Varsity Vocals as well as a cappella festivals, networks, and online forums have expanded in kind. The growth of these communities and institutions demonstrates Joshua S. Duchan’s assertion that a cappella “is as much as social activity as it is a musical pursuit.” Thus, scholastic a cappella forms a cohesive yet varied musical practice that is near-ubiquitous in the twenty-first-century United States.

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7 Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 1–2.
In his scholarship, Duchan examines how a cappella groups operate on macro and microlevels—the entire genre and individual groups—within musical and social structures. He maintains that “power is at work in all facets of collegiate a cappella” and various power structures “shape the way the music is produced, experienced, and made meaningful.” My study builds upon Duchan’s work by examining how whiteness organizes the power structures in the levels between macro and micro, how, as Sara Ahmed writes, “some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm.” Duchan also contends that a cappella, like fellow group singing genre barbershop, is shaped by an “ideology of blend,” a desire for a blended musical, visual, and social presentation that becomes constructed as “authentic” or “natural.” Like Duchan, I am interested in who determines the aesthetics of a cappella and how these musical paradigms affect the genre not only musically but socially and demographically—aspects that demand a racial analysis, in this case centered on whiteness.

In this dissertation, I examine how whiteness constructs community and power dynamics in the widespread musical practice of a cappella. Although predominantly composed of self-professed political liberals and progressives who value diversity and inclusion, a cappella communities persist in perpetuating racial inequities of sound and representation. While the term “whiteness” might evoke extreme examples such as nationalist rallies and rhetoric, my research examines how sonic whiteness operates normatively and often unnamed within mostly liberal and progressive communities, in urban and suburban areas that boast scholastic a cappella ensembles, as well as how it structures multi-racial vocal ensembles, discourses, and institutions. Though unnamed, this whiteness is far from invisible or imperceptible in the personnel, singing

8 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 4.
10 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 21.
styles, and music covered by a cappella groups. Ruth Frankenberg calls the possibility of unmarked whiteness a “mirage” predicated on present-day white peoples’ own observations. Instead she positions whiteness as many things—including a structural advantage, a standpoint, and a product of history—that allow whiteness to assume its own normativity. Frankenberg’s definitions of whiteness provoke consideration of who in a cappella maintains a structural advantage as well as how white people’s privileged standpoints and historical legacy in group singing influence their perceptions and behaviors in a cappella.

My research asks how does race, particularly whiteness, shape the communities of scholastic a cappella in the United States? These communities form at multiple levels: fellow groups at a university, people within competitions and festivals, and based on identity markers such as race/ethnicity or gender. To answer this question, I engaged in three years of ethnographic research during which I judged competitions and attended rehearsals, as well as interviewed a wide range of white, Black, Asian, and other a cappella practitioners of color including performers, judges, producers, teachers, and critics. Using their experiences and my own, I consider how a cappella rehearsals, performances, competitions, festivals, online forums, social media, and musical arrangements create moments when structural racial inequality manifests. In addition, I draw on some primary sources, primarily digitized student newspapers, for additional context and evidence. I frame my arguments through scholarship from interdisciplinary whiteness and voice studies to question who can participate in a cappella and who occupies positions of power. I analyze why the answer to both queries is typically white people, even as a cappella groups often use songs, sounds, and styles by artists of color and

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perform in multi-racial ensembles. I also reflect on how I—a white gay male ethnomusicologist—became a music director and judge of a cappella, and I draw on my own and my interlocutors’ experiences to consider how white privilege and racial inequity are maintained in scholastic, musical, and commercial spaces through group singing.

At the core of my dissertation, I examine the interconnections of whiteness and the voice in a cappella structures, aesthetics, and discourse. Scholars such as Katherine Meizel have argued that vocality involves not only the sounds made and the listeners who perceive them, but also how singing works within its historical and cultural context. Similarly, Amanda Weidman draws on the writing of Michel Foucault to suggest that ideologies and politics of voice constitute embodied forms of subjectivity. Contemporary a cappella exists within a United States context where, as Nina Sun Eidsheim asserts, voices are racialized by the bodies that perform them, the sounds those bodies create, and the listeners who hear them. Singers entrain not only timbre or the quality of vocal sound, but also vocal technique and style. Previous scholarship on barbershop, jazz vocal groups, doo wop, girl groups, reality singing competitions, LGBTQ choral activism, and professional a cappella groups has demonstrated that group singing genres related to and preceding scholastic a cappella showcase interactions between white and Black musical aesthetics, voices, and bodies with varying intersectional identities. Scholars of

voice and race tend to focus on how individual singers sound Blackness in a Black-white racial binary, often occluding other people of color and failing to interrogate the sounds and social structures of whiteness. My research on a cappella expands upon these scholars’ approaches to understand how people wield sonic whiteness to maintain power in a scholastic, musical, and commercial space. I also show how racial inequities differ for Black and Asian a cappella musickers who face distinctive barriers to access and inclusion. Moreover, I elaborate on voice scholarship about individual performers, demonstrating how group singing also enacts ideologies of race and subjectivity.

In addition, I consider the multi-faceted relationship between a cappella, whiteness, and its scholastic context in high school and university settings. Interdisciplinary scholarship on race and education demonstrates that the geographic disparities between school districts and student outcomes remain entrenched in legacies of segregation, particularly at the elementary and high school levels.16 Colleges and universities decide who can attend their school, thus limiting who can participate in collegiate a cappella groups. The lasting impact of racist ideals and racialized admissions on college populations, a form of what George Lipsitz calls the “possessive investment in whiteness,” affects who can join a cappella groups in college.17 Musicologists have examined how ideologies of whiteness and colonialism continue to influence collegiate admissions and music departments to continually favor Western art musics over other styles and

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white students over students of color. Extracurricular popular music-making such as a cappella has not received such attention, even though many music scholars’ own students participate in or listen to these groups. My project investigates how a cappella communities work within and beyond these structural inequalities.

Throughout the dissertation, I also explore how a cappella functions as a community in the large-scale and in small units, in institutions as well as informal social bonds, and how race impacts how these communities are formed and operate. Because a cappella exists mostly extracurricularly, especially at the collegiate level, the communities that form regionally or institutionally, amongst group with like repertoires or identities, and through national organizations like Varsity Vocals, the Contemporary A Cappella Society (CASA), or the Association of South Asian A Cappella (ASA), have some similarities to more established or institutionalized group singing practices such as choral music (including classical and jazz). But barbershop is a closer social analogue because groups are often extracurricular and the repertoire is more closely related to popular music. Miranda Joseph has argued that the concept of community can be wielded (un-/sub-)consciously in discourse—written and/or spoken communication and dialogue about a topic—to dull change within an institution such as Varsity Vocals: “Community is one of the most motivating discourses and practices circulating in contemporary society.” Her work reminds scholars and practitioners alike to reflexively examine how discourses of community can be leveraged and to approach ethnographic research.

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of tight-knit communities like a cappella with healthy skepticism. All of this is true and I study the social structures and ideologies of a cappella for this reason. Yet I also push back against the academic instinct to automatically distrust or cynically examine community. Even as my interlocutors explicated racialized social dynamics or described racist situations they encountered, they also continually stressed how much they valued a cappella as a community. As one producer put it to me: “We care. We have *chosen* this art form, built these communities together. (emphasis original)”

It is because of this affective goodwill that so many of them offered their experiences as well as suggestions of how a cappella could be more equitable and inclusive with regard to race as well as other identity axes. I ended all my interviews by asking, “What is one thing you would change about a cappella?” The wide range and length of their answers demonstrated not only that the practitioners of this community recognized where it could improve but also how much they cared to think so deeply about what should be changed and how.

Moreover, I adopt what Jill Dolan calls a “critically generous” frame towards my research and subjects. She argues for the importance of thinking “how to give back to the performance cultures about which [we] write and about how to draw out their borders, boundaries, and beauty as evocatively as [we can].”

Though many ethnographers have relationships with the people and cultures they examine, I literally grew up within the a cappella community and have spent half of my life entrenched in this art form and its epistemologies, that is, the ways we think about and conceptualize our musical and social world. Several of my interlocutors were already or became close friends. At one point near the end of my dissertation,

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20 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, October 2019.
an academic colleague asked me if someone who was not part of a cappella would have come to
the same conclusions that I had. I responded that, while I think they would have, I did not think
such a person would have the same access that I had in my interviews and fieldwork, that our
community would not have trusted an “outsider” to write about us with nuance. As such, I not
only critically examine how race operates in a cappella but offer my own opinions about how a
cappella can move towards being a more equitable and inclusive for people of all races. As bell
hooks writes, “When we only name the problem, when we stay compliant without a constructive
focus on resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of
profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture.”\(^\text{22}\) Though this dissertation is
neither a policy position paper nor an op-ed, my tone and content go beyond most musicological
writing that too often aims for impartiality and fails to realize the lasting impact that their
scholarship can have on their people. Taking my cues from Stacy Wolf’s multi-sited scholarship
on U.S. musical theater outside of New York City, I approached a cappella as “a compassionate
participant-observer”: “This method—empathetic, indigenous, critically generous ethnography—
foregrounds a relational way of knowing, so my connections to and collaborations with the
people I met varied from place to place. The book itself, then, required an eclectic form and a
range of foci, narrative structures, and voices.”\(^\text{23}\) My similarly “eclectic” dissertation takes a
slightly unconventional organizational structure—in part due to fieldwork constraints (see
below) and in part to present the content as logically as possible—that emphasizes the
interconnectedness of the chapters’ content as well as several shifts in writing style, including
chapter conclusions that tend toward the aspirational.

\(^{22}\) bell hooks, \textit{Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope} (New York: Routledge, 2003), xiv.
\(^{23}\) Stacy Wolf, \textit{Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America} (New York:
Contextualizing the Dissertation Fieldwork

Over the course of three years of fieldwork from 2019 to 2022, I interviewed 29 a cappella practitioners—including current students and alumni that now inhabit new roles in the community as judges, producers, volunteers, and sound engineers—who showcase the diversity of identities (including race, gender, sexuality, age, region) and experiences within a cappella. I use pseudonyms to protect my interlocutors’ anonymity, a condition that allowed them to speak freely about race without fear of reprisal. Actual names appear in the dissertation only when necessary and are distinguished from pseudonyms by the inclusion of last names.

In addition to formal interviews, I also spoke informally with hundreds of others at the multitude of events that comprised the participant-observation facet of my fieldwork. I conversed with audience members at performances, group members about to go on stage, volunteers between scanning tickets, and judges as we waited in our holding room. I observed rehearsals, gigs, and/or on-campus performances of most of the thirteen Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL) a cappella groups, including significant rehearsal time spent with two groups (whose names shall remain anonymous per their request) during the 2019–20 school year. I attended four in-person events of the South Asian a cappella competition All-American Awaaz (A3) in 2020 and 2022 in North Carolina and Texas. I participated in two a cappella festivals virtually, as well as several other a cappella events (though I use this term loosely). I also began writing reviews of albums and singles as a contributor for the Recorded A Cappella Review Board (RARB) during my fieldwork, although I do not write about that experience or forum in this manuscript. But I spent the bulk of my fieldwork at ten in-person Varsity Vocals events where I served as a judge or a volunteer production assistant, which built on five previous years’ experience in the same
roles and four years’ experience competing as part of my own high school and college a cappella groups. Many weekends during the spring semesters of my doctoral education were spent driving to and from ICCA and ICHSA competitions across the midwestern U.S., sitting in auditorium seats assigning scores on Varsity Vocals rubrics, debating potential special awards with fellow judges, debriefing performances at post-show drinks, and reminiscing with friends and new colleagues. My emphasis on Varsity Vocals is also reflected in the people I chose to interview, most of whom have participated in some way with the company, and the content of Chapters 2 through 5.

I chose to undertake this heterogenous collection of fieldwork experiences for several reasons: to understand some of the many communities big and small that constitute the wider a cappella community, to echo my own and my interlocutors’ varied experiences in a cappella that cannot be boiled down to only our time spent on campus or at ICCA, and to examine how these various institutions and groups intersect and inform each other. If, as Mark-Anthony Falzon writes, “the essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space,” then understanding the social world and institutions of scholastic a cappella requires moving beyond a series of case studies to understand how groups and communities across the country (and world) connect and relate to each other. This form of multi-sited ethnography both imitates and expands on Duchan’s earlier work on collegiate a cappella where he embedded himself with groups at elite schools in Massachusetts and Michigan and conducted interviews with a broad range of a cappella practitioners. While Duchan focused his study on a cappella at select universities and interviews with students and luminaries in a

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25 Duchan, *Powerful Voices*. 
cappella, my work with judges, producers, and other a cappella practitioners shines a light on the power structures of local, regional, and national competitions. Several other scholars of voice—including Meizel, Eidsheim, and Jake Johnson—have also recently pursued multi-sited, interdisciplinary studies including ethnography to investigate institutions, practices, and communities of singing. My work builds on theirs and others to understand how scholastic a cappella’s grounding in institutions connects to racialized ideologies and structures that privilege and protect whiteness.

Very little about the research process for this dissertation followed my initial expectations, not least because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic five months into my in-person fieldwork. I and every a cappella practitioner unwillingly shifted our activities online and attempted to find degrees of normalcy, to persevere through “unprecedented times.” My interview locations moved from choir rooms and local coffee shops to virtual spaces mediated by Zoom. These changes both drastically impaired my ability to write about a cappella and to observe rehearsals and performances, but also opened new avenues of inquiry, especially interviewing people around the country that would have been inaccessible to me due to financial and travel constraints. I also witnessed the a cappella community fall apart and begin to put itself back together, which as of summer 2022 is still in process. This extended moment of precarity, when a cappella largely could not happen as it had before, allowed me to witness how the people and the practice truly operated: structures that had existed long before I joined no longer functioned as planned, which laid bare their designs and the ideologies that previously upheld them. Though I do not theorize about COVID-19’s impact on a cappella in this dissertation, it

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26 See Eidsheim, The Race of Sound; Jake Johnson, Lying in the Middle: Musical Theater and Belief at the Heart of America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021); Meizel, Idolized; and Meizel, Multivocality.

27 I thank one of my mentors, Denise Gill, for instilling in me early on in my doctoral coursework how much researchers can learn when things do not go as planned.
hovers like a specter over the document, appearing in small ethnographic glimpses and looming caveat shadows over what did and did not happen during my fieldwork.

So too was my research affected by the publicized murder of unarmed Black man George Floyd by police officers on May 25, 2020, which galvanized Black Lives Matters (BLM) demonstrations around the country and the world protesting police brutality and racial inequality. Though police brutality towards Black people and other people of color and the BLM movement had already endured for years—including in St. Louis with the 2014 murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—Floyd’s murder and the video footage of it sparked a tsunami of actions and sentiments during summer 2020.

Public interest in racial justice led to many people, especially white moderates and liberals, to read books and articles about race through which they learned new vocabulary and concepts, including the ways they have contributed to ongoing white dominance. As linguist Anne Charity Hudley asserted at the time, white liberals “see this as part of what it means to be an educated white person in certain places and spaces, whether they agree with it or not.” These antiracist writings, many of which are geared towards a mainstream rather than an academic audience, have received mixed critical reviews, but nonetheless significantly shifted both vocabulary and attitudes about race and racial justice. Or, as Melissa Phruksachart has described in her review of these books, “[this] contemporary iteration of the literature of white liberalism is provocative in that several of its books pivot from ‘racial literacy’ to emotional


The political ire has been aimed in particular at white multiculturalism scholar and antiracist workshop leader Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (2018). While DiAngelo’s book suffers from lack of engagement with Black scholars of race and whiteness, she, as cultural critic Lauren Michele Jackson writes, “speaks to the well-intended [white people] whose banal blusters make racial stress routine.”

As Phruksachart argues, critics too often scorn this important, individual work that the book and DiAngelo encourage white people to undertake to assess their relationship with societal ideologies of race: “To dismiss the cultivation of emotional awareness as New Age indulgence mischaracterizes relational work as depoliticized ‘personal’ work, and wrongly suggests that such relational work is unnecessary to building progressive or radical futures.”

Many of my interviews that were conducted via Zoom occurred in June 2020 at the height of these protests and discourses when the zeitgeist of racial justice seemed more tangible than ever before, when both my interlocutors and I felt inspired to make a small difference by examining race in our a cappella community. One interlocutor had to cut our interview short because they were heading to a BLM protest in their city. The impact of the movement and this public education about race reverberated in the sophisticated ways my interlocutors described their experiences and feelings during our interviews. Two years later, many of the political, legislative, and cultural aims of the movement have stalled while citizens of color continue to be murdered, by the police and in hate crimes, at high rates due to their race. Adults in the U.S.

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32 Phruksachart, “The Literature of White Liberalism.”

have retained much of the language and newfound fluency to talk about race, structural racism, and intersectionality, but meaningful changes in how both government bodies and communities like scholastic a cappella approach race remain few and far between.

The lack of demonstrable change partially stems from a backlash by the political right against this racial justice movement. Conservatives balked at both the legislative remedies to social problems like police brutality and gun violence sought by racial justice organizers as well as the theoretical underpinnings including the concept structural racism and its academic home in interdisciplinary critical race studies. Instead of addressing racism as a societal issue as these ideologies and analytical frameworks do, conservatives claim racism to be individualized, to be only racist words or hate crimes. But, as cultural commentator Jamelle Bouie asserts, fixating on racist acts when discussing race and racism neglects the deeper racialized ideologies that uphold social structures, policies, and dynamics designed to privilege white people:

We must remember that the problem of racism—of the denial of personhood and of the differential exposure to exploitation and death—will not be resolved by saying the right words or thinking the right thoughts. That’s because racism does not survive, in the main, because of personal belief and prejudice. It survives because it is inscribed and reinscribed by the relationships and dynamics that structure our society, from segregation and exclusion to inequality and the degradation of labor.34

The field of critical race studies concentrates on understanding the causes and effects of the areas Bouie outlines which together form what he defines as “structural racism.” Though critical race studies began as a branch of legal theory led by authors including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, and Derrick Bell, it has expanded to a variety of intersecting academic disciplines, including music and American studies. For example, in her research on Dave Brubeck and his


audiences, Kelsey Klotz draws on critical race theory and whiteness studies to illuminate how whiteness appears in musical performance and reception, as well as how “racism is perpetuated daily by white folks who also attempt anti-racist actions and support anti-racist policies” in normative, even progressive spaces and social structures.35

But when thrust into the mainstream, the political right misinterprets what critical race studies and theory are. According to scholar David Theo Goldberg, right-wing politicians, pundits, and news commentators use it “as an empty signifier for any talk of race and racism at all, a catch-all specter lumping together ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘wokeism,’ ‘anti-racism,’ and ‘identity politics’—or indeed any suggestion that racial inequities in the United States are anything but fair outcomes, the result of choices made by equally positioned individuals in a free society.”36 Citing research by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Williams, Goldberg argues that the political right wants to continue to pretend that race has no material presence or effect in contemporary society that continually disadvantages people of color: “Colorblindness—the individualizing response to structural and systemic racial injustice par excellence—hides the underlying structural differences historical inequalities reproduce.”37 In this dissertation, I draw on concepts and scholarship from critical race studies to refute this façade of colorblindness, to understand the roles that white people have and continue to play in creating systemic advantages for themselves within a cappella, whether consciously or not.

**A Cappella, Race, and Me**

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37 Goldberg, “The War on Critical Race Theory.”
A cappella’s whiteness should come as little surprise to those familiar with the musical practice’s history. As ethnomusicologist Joshua Duchan demonstrates, what eventually came to categorized under the banner of early a cappella groups began in the early 20th century at elite universities in the Northeastern United States, particularly at Ivy League schools such as Yale and Harvard, but also Tufts and Amherst.38 Because higher education upheld racial segregation until the 1950s in many schools, the founders of these groups and of the genre overall were almost exclusively white. While groups sang without instruments at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or racially integrated universities such as Oberlin College, their musical endeavors and groups were categorized as other genres such as doo-wop groups and gospel choirs. To this day, very few a cappella groups exist at HBCUs and almost none compete in ICCA.39 This generic segregation between white and Black extracurricular singing groups mirrors the racialized categorization in group singing and popular music overall. As David Brackett argues, genres often become connected to identity axes through arbitrary definitions supposedly related to musical elements as well as through the structures of the music industry: “Genres are not static groupings of empirically verifiable musical characteristics, but rather associations of texts whose criteria similarly may vary according to the uses to which the genre labels are put. ‘Similar’ elements include more than musical-style features, and groupings often hinge on elements of nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on.”40 In collegiate a cappella, no one person or ensemble or university decided that the practice would be dominated by white people (particularly men). But, by virtue of its birth at exclusive schools like Yale during the

time of Jim Crow segregation, a cappella began and has continued for a very long time as a white practice.

In many ways, my journey through a cappella typifies not only the experiences of middle-class, suburban, white men participating in a cappella but also why we so often become part of and leaders of a cappella groups and organizations. My high school chamber choir in suburban Portland, Oregon transitioned to an all-gender a cappella group, renamed Soul’d Out, during my sophomore year (2007–8) under the guidance of a student teacher who was the music director of his collegiate a cappella group. He taught us how to sing and move in this new musical style. We performed at school functions, at local businesses (especially for holiday caroling), and as a guest group during deliberations of the 2008 ICCA Quarterfinals that spring held in Eugene, where I saw Divisi compete for the first time, just three years after my opening anecdote took place. After our student teacher finished the year, our group became mostly student-run and I, as the only person returning to the ensemble with music theory training (through taking the Advanced Placement class the previous year) and good piano skills, became the de facto arranger and music director. On top of my classes, voice lessons, part-time job, and other extracurriculars, I learned how to lead rehearsals, play six- to eight-part vocal arrangements into two hands on the piano, and use the notation software Finale to make said arrangements. We began participating in the local ICHSA event (the high school version of ICCA) and during my senior year, in 2010, we won the regional competition, earning a spot at the national championship in New York City. After watching me lead our group’s soundcheck prior to the show, a Varsity Vocals producer pulled me aside and said that, after college, I should apply to be a judge based on the professionalism and knowledge of the competition she had seen in me as an eighteen-year-old.
While working towards a degree at Chapman University’s Conservatory of Music in southern California, I also joined SoundCheck, at the time the only all-gender group at the small, private school. By my second semester, I had become the music director and one of the main arrangers, a role I would hold for three years. During my time in the group, we participated twice in the local ICCA Quarterfinal events (2011 and 2013) and earned special awards and spots in the Semifinals of our region, the first times our group had moved on in the competition in our short history. We also won second place at the 2013 ICCA Semifinals while singing my arrangements and one of our soloists won a special award for her performance. In addition to competing, we also performed on- and off-campus, recorded and released our group’s first album, and developed relationships with fellow a cappella groups from Chapman and other colleges that we had met through events like the ICCA.

During the 2013 spring semester while preparing for and competing in the ICCA, I also participated in a seminar called Writing about Music, which served as the capstone for Chapman’s Bachelor of Arts in Music program. Although I was nominally a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance major, I had spent most of the year sifting through potential alternate career paths and my academic advisor, Jessica Sternfeld-Shockley, counseled me to take the course, which she was teaching, to help me find some direction. On the first day, she informed us that we could write about any type of music for the seminar’s ten-page original research paper. Given my extensive involvement in the practice and encouragement from my professor, I chose to research scholastic a cappella and proceeded to interview a few contacts I had in a cappella about arranging practices. By the end of the semester, I enjoyed the process and subject of my research enough that I decided to pursue graduate studies in musicology.
During my masters coursework at the University of Cincinnati and my doctoral coursework at Washington University in St. Louis, I participated in a cappella primarily through serving as a judge and production intern for Varsity Vocals events beginning in 2015. Like many other a cappella alumni, I felt my studies and job precluded me from singing in an amateur or semi-professional group, especially as a transplant to the Midwest who had no a cappella contacts in the area. I also did not want to become a full-time performer or arranger, so judging and producing a cappella events seemed the only way for me to conceivably remain involved in the practice. While these activities eventually became a primary site of my fieldwork and I knew in the back of my mind that would probably happen, I started volunteering for the positions to retain and expand the community I had grown up with for the previous seven years.

Throughout the above narrative, I did not foreground my identity as a white, middle-class male person, but it nonetheless shaped the opportunities available for me to participate in a cappella. My control over a newly low bass voice earned me a spot in my high school a cappella group that had few options for bass vocalists. Because I had access to voice and piano lessons, I was well-positioned to take the high school’s AP Music Theory class, a benefit of living in a middle-upper-class, largely white, suburban community with a sufficient tax base to support high-quality education. My skills prompted my peers to appoint me to be Soul’d Out’s music director and arranger when we transitioned to be a student-run group the next year. There were enough local high school groups to offer a nearby ICHSA event, providing Soul’d Out the opportunity to compete and, eventually, attend the ICHSA Finals.

These experiences in high school a cappella helped me to join SoundCheck in college, and later to be elected music director, a post from which I led us through two years of ICCA rehearsals and events. Varsity Vocals producers look for experienced music directors and
arrangers to become ICCA judges, as I show in Chapter 3, so my résumé suited what they valued in potential adjudicators. Because I was financially supported during my graduate studies and had no children or other commitments that would absorb my weekends, I could easily devote time to travel to and adjudicate shows across the Midwest, which bolstered my experience as a judge. My individual experience in a cappella matches that of many of my interlocutors, particularly those who like me identify as white, and demonstrates some of the subtle ways in which scholastic a cappella privileges certain folks over others.

**Some Notes about Terminology**

Throughout this dissertation, I try to strike an accessible tone and avoid jargon, as much as possible, that would alienate academics unfamiliar with a cappella and a cappella practitioners or enthusiasts who do not read academic texts. I write for both audiences with the hope that they learn from each other and that the ideas in this manuscript might inspire readers to engage with something unfamiliar. However, I want to alert all readers about some specific terminology I chose to use throughout the dissertation and concisely explain these decisions.

First, since their inception, a cappella groups have been deeply gendered, in part due to the gendered separation of U.S. colleges and universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Duchan explains, a cappella groups at women’s and coordinating colleges played a key role in the gender integration of American higher education, even though the Ivy League schools where a cappella was founded and flourished did not all admit women students until the 1983.\(^1\) “Co-ed” or “mixed” groups started to appear once colleges began to admit students of all genders in the mid-twentieth centuries and, according to Duchan, by 1994

\(^1\) Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 52–4.
they “outnumbered both men’s and women’s ensembles.”

Today, a cappella groups have begun to move away from descriptions of their groups that cling to a gender binary because of how it labels that people who sing in an ensemble. Some groups have completely abandoned the idea that auditions or membership should be based on gender at all, including the Yale Whiffenpoofs, the oldest a cappella group still performing in the country, who in 2018 admitted the first of several non-male members. Many groups now use descriptors that refer to voice ranges (i.e. “treble voices”) or encompass a wider spectrum of genders (i.e. “male-identifying” or “all-gender”). And starting in 2019, Varsity Vocals began telling judges not to use gendered pronouns when writing comments on groups’ competition sets or discussing individuals eligible for special awards. I use these newer terms throughout the dissertation to refer to groups formerly known as “male,” “female,” or “mixed” not only to reflect contemporary naming practices and create ease of reading in the manuscript, but also to acknowledge that students who identify outside the gender binary have long participated in a cappella, even when the terminology did not yet reflect their presence. Furthermore, I refer to student performances using they/them pronouns or male-presenting/female-presenting to avoid assuming the gender of people I do not know personally.

Second, though a cappella has not standardized racial categorizations of groups, I use specific terms to designate the racial classification of people and repertoire. I refer to race (i.e. all-white, majority-students of color) when discussing the people within a cappella groups at a given point in time such as a performance or an academic year. “Mainstream a cappella” designates that a group sings almost entirely covers of American popular music, as opposed to a

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42 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 47.
more specific genre designation or music from outside English-speaking North America, though this repertoire designation typically goes unremarked in part due to assumptions of whiteness. I use this term in contrast to “racially marked” a cappella groups that sing music from a specific race and/or ethnic group (i.e. South Asian music, Chinese music) that are known by this categorization and are therefore marked as racialized.

Third, I describe scholastic a cappella as a practice rather than a genre. As Matthew Valnes explains, scholars have shown that “genre labels participate in the construction of musical identities and social conventions. Musicians use certain sonic conventions, and listeners interpret aspects of musical performance in a way conditioned by that genre.” A cappella groups primarily, though not entirely, sing covers of popular music using arrangements of said songs. But the use of vocal-only arrangements is the only sonic facet that applies to all or even most a cappella groups because the music they make; how they arrange, sing, and perform it can differ so greatly based on the membership and can change significantly over time. Today, one can attend an a cappella concert or competition event and potentially hear genres ranging from swing jazz to contemporary Top 40, country music to Bollywood, classic rock to musical theater, and hip-hop to indie singer-songwriters, potentially within the same group’s set. This generic and stylistic diversity is united through performing the songs with only voices. But how that happens in the arrangement also varies based on the number of people and parts, whether the group has a vocal percussionist (beatboxer), whether they want to emulate the original song as closely as possible or create something wholly original in their interpretation, as well as so many other creative decisions. I argue that the practice of scholastic a cappella remains cohesive through

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its instrumental forces (only voices), its institutionalization (ensembles based in schools and universities), and its sociality (communities and social dynamics), but the music groups sing varies too greatly, in part because the practice relies on covering other artists’ songs, to be considered a genre unto itself. Moreover, I refer to the wide spectrum of people involved in a cappella as practitioners to encompass the many roles one can assume (more on this in Chapter 2) and to capture the many ways in which people participate in a cappella beyond performing.

**Chapter Outline**

The eclectic, interwoven form of this dissertation reflects both my fieldwork experiences and the interrelated communities that comprise the larger a cappella community. Moreover, the roles and social structures of a cappella form what I call in Chapter 1 the “a cappella pipeline,” a linear path where potential participants move through stages. The chapters roughly correlate with some of the nodes and facets of this metaphorical conduit where people try to move through or forward. But, as I demonstrate, the ideologies of sound and race as well as the social dynamics and structures within a cappella advantage white people at each of these junctures. In contrast, people of color often face inequitable barriers to entry or promotion and experience discrimination or bias based on their race.

I begin in Chapter 1 by examining auditions for a cappella groups, which determine who can enter the a cappella pipeline. Using interviews with current students and alumni, particularly at WUSTL, I illuminate the racialized ideologies of voice and singing that undergird a cappella audition practices and policies from advertising to selection. This chapter also focuses on how the university community shapes and is shaped by a cappella groups.
The following three chapters focus on the institutions of ICCA and ICHSA, the largest, most prestigious scholastic a cappella competitions in the U.S. Chapter 2 lays out the history and logistics of how the competitions operate to set up the next two chapters that focus on specific aspects. I investigate the role of the judging rubric in Chapter 3 to understand the racialized ideologies behind it, how it influences how group singing is scored, and how judges are selected. Chapter 4 continues the focus on judging and ideologies of voice, turning to how judges determine special awards for Best Soloist and how a cappella practitioners grapple with questions of cultural appropriation in their solo and repertoire selection.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation with an investigation of the recent media sensation depicting scholastic a cappella and ICCA, the *Pitch Perfect* film franchise. I assess the relationship between how the fictional *Pitch Perfect* depicts race in scholastic a cappella, through tokenized people of color and a racialized social hierarchy, and the real-life practice. I demonstrate how the films’ narrative structures and musical performances teach audiences to ignore a cappella singing’s embedded ideologies and structural advantages toward whiteness while simultaneously illuminating the gender biases.
Chapter 1: Structures and Ideologies of Whiteness in Collegiate A Cappella Auditions and Campus Life

Time and people move in two ways in scholastic a cappella. On the one hand, the art form and community operate cyclically along the year of collegiate student life that begins with move-in day and ends with a graduation. Most a cappella performances and milestones that happen in between those two points in time also connect to seasonal events, such as gigging during the winter holidays and participating in competitions or festivals held at the same time each year. The participants themselves matriculate in and out of the institutions of higher education, leading to bittersweet farewells at ends of terms and hopeful auditions when spots open for new members, which ignites the cycle anew.

Along with these rearticulations of the cycle, we can also understand the time of a cappella as linear, as a pipeline that people move through in stages. This metaphor draws on the concept of a hiring pipeline, where who applies to a job affects not only who is hired but also who moves into leadership roles. A cappella is certainly not the only musical practice in which this social structure occurs. Naomi André describes the pipeline of Black opera singers in the United States, including its roots in “systems of education and access” that are not equally or equitably available to all young people or college students, often based on interconnected factors.
of race and geography.¹ My comparison similarly expands the pipeline concept to understand how what happens before and after college affects the collegiate a cappella experience.

Students who audition for an a cappella group, that is, (re)enter the pipeline, bring their own skills (i.e. arranging, perfect pitch), training (piano lessons, voice lessons, choirs), experiences (performances, gigs) and musical tastes to the audition and the group, including if they previously participated in another a cappella group. Admitted students of lower socioeconomic status, such as those on Pell Grants or other significant scholarships, may not have access to these skills, training, and resources that are more common in high economic status communities and schools.² A cappella groups cannot control which students their school admits, which restricts the available population and, depending on criteria favored by the admissions office, their diversity of racial identity, experience, and socioeconomic status. The overall school population also affects the number and types of a cappella groups students can join, particularly their gender make-up and repertoire. Though not present on every campus, some universities communities include racially marked groups that sing repertoire specific to a race and/or ethnic group (i.e. South Asian music fused with American popular music), often if they have a significant student population from that group. For example, Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL), one of the focuses of this chapter, is an elite Midwest private school whose students are almost half (47%) white, 16% receive Pell Grants, and 7% are international students.³

Though it fluctuates annually and per group, the thirteen WUSTL a cappella groups altogether consist of about two-thirds or more white people and only the two racially marked groups are

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majority-minority, an East Asian fusion group and a South Asian fusion group. In contrast, West Coast public school University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) boasts a different undergraduate racial and class profile that is majority-minority (only 26% white), where approximately one-third of students receive Pell Grants, and 22% are international students.¹ Several of the a cappella groups there are also majority-minority, even if the group does not have a racially marked repertoire focus, which reflects their overall student population. Five racially marked groups exist at UCLA including Da Verse, an all-race, all-gender ensemble that focuses on Black music and musicians.⁵ Though not determinative, these two schools’ undergraduate demographics, shaped by university admissions, affect both the racial and class make-up and racial dynamics of the a cappella groups before auditions have even happened. Viewing an a cappella as a pipeline propelled by a cyclical sequence of activities allows us to understand it as a system, one that is connected to other systems and ideologies that inevitably shape a cappella directly and indirectly, such as college admissions and aesthetics of how singing voices should sound.

The a cappella pipeline differs from other pipelines in what people want out of their participation in a cappella. While most people enter a job or training in a musical genre expecting to move up and find employment, very few participants in this amateur musical practice view a career performing and recording cappella as the terminus of their trajectory. When I observed group rehearsals or spoke with students currently in a cappella groups, almost all the students viewed their participation in a cappella as an extracurricular activity and hobby rather than a vocation. Only one student expressed interest in pursuing professional opportunities.

within a cappella. Instead, those who continue to participate in a cappella after leaving scholastic institutions do so as a form of what Robert Stebbins calls “serious leisure”: “the systematic pursuit of an amateur…activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that…they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.” Many a cappella alumni still sing, judge, produce, or otherwise participate in the practice, significantly affecting the community even though they are neither scholastic performers nor professionals, a rarity for a collegiate extracurricular activity. While only one student I spoke with sought a career based in a cappella, several students aspired to singing with, arranging for, judging, or coaching a cappella groups as a secondary or part-time pursuit, as serious leisure. Thus, the pipeline funnels people not necessarily towards becoming full-time singers or arrangers of a cappella, but instead towards sustained participation in the community in new, often powerful roles such as a judge. If this pipeline were perfect, the nodes between pipes would be seamless, completely connected by the fittings. However, as I argue, a cappella’s pipeline is far from perfect and many individuals leave the community or are passed over for opportunities to advance, willingly or not, at specific points, including auditions and graduations, leadership elections and solo opportunities, judging panels and producing gigs.

Who gets left out at these moments is not random chance but instead reliant upon the person’s voice, talents, and commitment level, as well as their identity, particularly their race. In this majority-white musical practice, Black, Asian, Indigenous, and other people of color face barriers to participation, which leads to white people moving through the pipeline more easily and, by virtue of their positions in power, reinforcing white overrepresentation and power. To be

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sure, a cappella groups exhibit a wide range of racial make-ups including majority white with a few “token” people of color, racially diverse, and majority person of color ensembles, especially in racially marked groups such as South Asian fusion groups. But, as I demonstrate in this chapter and throughout the dissertation, people of color struggle to enter a cappella and then to gain equitable recognition and advancement in the community compared to their white counterparts, which leads to disproportionately white group rosters, award winners, judging panels, and production teams. This feedback loop demonstrates what George Lipsitz calls the “possessive investment in whiteness” where white people benefit in economic and cultural capital from being white and therefore structure society to continue that dominance.7 The evidence for this inequity lies not only in statistics and lists, but also in interviews with current students and alumni from Washington University and other schools, as well as judges, producers, and other practitioners; undergraduate print and social media; years of experience observing and participating in a cappella rehearsals, performances, and competitions; media portrayals of scholastic a cappella such as the Pitch Perfect films (2012, 2015, 2017); and related scholarly work on the voice, race, and institutions.

To understand why this racial inequity exists, I focus on the musical and the social aspects of a cappella and how they connect. Analyzing race in a cappella singing without thinking about how it is organized, or, conversely, studying the institutions and organizations without considering how musical sounds and ideas impact them, would limit the efficacy of the findings and the effectiveness of any solutions proposed—and I will be suggesting strategies to ameliorate the pervasive whiteness of a cappella. Amanda Weidman theorizes a “politics of voice,” where embodied, culturally constructed ideologies of the voice “determine what voices

come to be heard and how,” that is, how musical tastes and ideas about the voice shape who sings and how we interpret their singing. Her concept links the sonic (racialized attitudes toward singing) with the social (structural racism) and asserts that to analyze one without the other would be to miss the point. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge identify four interconnected domains of power that contribute to inequality within organizations or institutions, which we can then use as frames to analyze how the dynamic came to be and persists. I extend these four domains to the cycle and pipeline of a cappella—the milestones, events, competitions, and institutions within the a cappella community—to understand how and why they produce inequitable outcomes based on identity (especially racial). In brief, the four domains as applied to a cappella are:

1. Structural: how social institutions such as universities, competitions, award categories, and a cappella governance are organized.

2. Cultural: how “ideas and culture” such as assumptions and ideologies of the voice influence “the organization of power relations.”

3. Disciplinary: “how rules and regulations are fairly or unfairly applied to people based on” identity categories such as race.

4. Interpersonal: how people of various intersectional identities including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and ability experience the inequalities and power dynamics of the other three domains.

As Hill Collins and Bilge demonstrate, these four domains, though distinct, overlap to such an extent that deciding to which category something belongs misses the point of this holistic style of

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analysis. Rather, I outline the categories to show that the evidence points to interconnected social structures, implicit biases about singing, vocal sounds, policies and procedures, and individual and group behaviors as *all* contributing to how and why the cycle and pipeline of a cappella favor white people.

Auditions, crucial moments of transition and one of the first nodes in the personnel pipeline for a cappella, not only limit who gains membership into these small ensembles of six to twenty people, they also dramatically narrow the future opportunities to participate in a professional group, to judge a competition, or to become a producer of a cappella. To understand why a cappella’s racial demographics at these levels of leadership are majority-white requires an understanding of why the performers themselves, college students mostly in their late teens and early twenties, are mostly white and what role auditions play in gatekeeping the community. I argue that *how* audition events unfold showcases the racialized ideologies about singing that both underscore scholastic a cappella as a whole and directly influence whether students of color can join a group. At each stage of the process from outreach to deliberations, audition procedures and ingrained ideologies influence people of color’s success. Race rarely rises to the level of explicit discourse during auditions; instead, amorphous concepts such as “vibe,” “fit,” “sound,” and “blend,” which point towards the collective whole while implicitly excluding unlike Others, empower gatekeeping socially and sonically without explicitly raising questions of race and ethnicity.

My interviews show that, while white people are generally aware of racial inequity in a cappella, they rarely know how it manifests or how to fix it, whereas people of color often pointed to specific social dynamics, attitudes, and policies that influence the outcome at each stage of the audition process. These moments demonstrate that whiteness in a cappella exists in
different guises throughout the community’s interconnected structures and ideologies. In response to activists and community interest in increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion, some individuals and groups have recently changed parts of their audition procedures in an effort to eliminate racial bias. However, much larger and systemic changes at all levels of this diffuse community—groups, campuses, and organizations—would need to occur to significantly shift the cycle and pipeline of a cappella away from its current trajectory.

“A Vibe of Inclusion”: Outreach and Recruitment in Collegiate A Cappella

Before the first sixteen-bar solo is sung at auditions, scholastic a cappella groups recruit and jockey for potential auditionees. These efforts most obviously take place in the immediate weeks leading up to auditions through targeted advertising and group showcases. Groups also establish their presence at the school year-round, sonically and socially distinguishing themselves from the other groups on campus. Articulations of their “vibe” and “sound” happen in performances, such as during freshman orientation which I discuss below, and in media. Groups hope that these short- and long-term strategies attract not only talented students who feel they would fit in to their specific ensemble, but, increasingly, diverse cohorts including by race.

In years past, race was not an active topic of discussion for many a cappella groups during the audition process or during the rest of the cycle. But that did not mean that race did not influence decisions about who would be invited to join a group. Most of my interlocutors who graduated more than five years ago acknowledged the racial imbalances in the roster make-ups at their schools, including sometimes their own, most likely owing to the fact of predominantly white ensembles where whiteness as the norm was a given. But most of them, especially the white people I interviewed, acknowledged it years later as part of our conversation about race
and a cappella while clarifying that race was not something they understood as impacting their
eperience at the time. Philip, a white judge who graduated approximately ten years ago from a
male-identifying group, reflected on how unaware of identity he and his group were when they
were holding auditions and how they looked for a particular kind of “fit”:

The things that we would talk about, about fit, right, we would talk about, “Well
are they a [group name]? Do they fit our group?” And often, because it was a
group of white men, we weren’t looking at folks for their sound or whatever. We
were looking at, do they mesh with our personalities and does that align with the
cultural context that we have versus someone else? And [looking back] I think
that there was a lot of racism, homophobia, transphobia involved in that audition
process. […] I remember thinking that there were things that were wrong, and I
remember saying that to the group, but I didn’t have the knowledge or the skillset
to…educate and address it.¹⁰

Philip identifies that the nebulous criterion of “fit” was used to continue admitting white,
straight-passing men to the group, though they were not necessarily conscious that was what they
were doing.

Even in more recent years, the discriminatory comments during auditions to which Philip
alludes might linger. The Brown University Jabberwocks, a formerly male-identifying group
with a 70-year history that recently became an all-gender ensemble, came under fire in 2021
when a notebook containing thoughts by former members about auditionees in 2017–2019 was
found in the group’s practice room. According to the student newspaper, the notes “mocked
auditionee’s accents and races, sexualized appearances and made fun of singing abilities,”
including “spanish & arabic ← downvote” and “giggles ‘terrorism.’”¹¹ Though the members
who had written the comments had largely graduated already, the current group now must
reconcile with how to make amends and create a more equitable culture moving forward.

¹⁰ Philip, personal interview, January 2020.
¹¹ Caelyn Pender, “Jabberwocks audition cards reveal racist, sexualizing comments,” The Brown Daily Herald,
racist-audition-cards.
When groups from prior to five years ago did admit members of color, they were often one of the few non-white members and the group may have ignored their experience as a racially minoritized person. This was the experience that Brad, a white music teacher who graduated about fifteen years ago and sang in a male-identifying group, related to me. Students of color at his school, especially Black students, had trouble getting into a cappella groups, so he rarely sang with more than one or two students of color any given year. At a recent group reunion, he talked with one of the alumni of color who acknowledged how difficult it was at the time, a feeling he had to repress in order to enjoy his time in the group.\(^\text{12}\) Both Philip and Brad’s anecdotes point to the generally racially homogenous experiences of white students before and during college. As scholars of race and education Mark A. Chesler, Melissa Peet, and Todd Sevig argued about the state of college education in the early 2000s, young white people’s lack of contact with people of color while growing up skewed their own identity and relationships with people of other races: “In their homes, schools, and communities these students acquired habitual attitudes, expectations, and ways of making meaning about their world. White students were socialized to not see themselves as having a race and did not understand their own (and their communities’) exclusionary attitudes and behaviors.”\(^\text{13}\) They would then bring this viewpoint to college, no matter their political ideology, and surround themselves with other white students, rarely questioning the lack of people of color amongst their friends or social groups, including extracurricular activities like a cappella.

In contrast, a cappella practitioners today mostly openly discuss race and prize racial diversity, but sometimes still find it difficult to achieve in their own ensembles. When I talked

\(^\text{12}\) Brad, personal interview, June 2020.
with current group members and alumni from the past five years of a cappella groups about race in interviews from 2020–22, they shared that race had arisen as a topic of discussion in their groups, especially within the context of recruiting new members. Students from majority-white ensembles often lamented their groups’ lack of racial diversity and discussed their difficulties recruiting talented students of color to join or maintaining current levels of diversity, even if they could not articulate why they wanted more diverse groups or what more diversity could do for their group. One current white non-binary student, Taylor, shared that, during their four-year tenure, their group’s composition changed dramatically: “When I first joined the group, it was incredibly diverse—we had only one cishet white man!…I have no idea how [this] came about, but every year the group has slowly gotten less and less diverse [in race and gender].”14 Jeffery, a straight white WUSTL alumnus who repeatedly described his male-identifying group as “very heteronormative,” explained how his group “wanted to be more [racially] diverse, but it was kind of a vicious cycle. We would go into these auditions and be like this wall of white faces.”15 He felt that, without at least a few people of color in the group, more would not feel comfortable joining because they couldn’t “see themselves” as part of it. Both of these white students felt a bit helpless: they had few ideas why their groups became less diverse over time or how to reverse that trend. But they also demonstrate significant familiarity with diversity, equity, and inclusion terminology, particularly around gender (e.g. cishet, heteronormative). Though not reflected in these statements, the students and recent alumni I interviewed and observed from 2019–22 also used terms like “anti-racist” and “structural racism,” though in general they felt less comfortable with those terms than with those related to gender and sexuality, which illustrates how open conversations about race have only recently become part of their lives and a

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14 Taylor, personal interview, June 2020.
15 Jeffery, personal interview, June 2020.
cappella. Moreover, this unfamiliarity shows in their general unawareness of reasons why their
groups are not as diverse as they could be.

Many people pointed to the importance of pre-audition outreach to ensure anyone
generally and people of color specifically would sign up for a slot. Jeffery auditioned for his
group after hearing them perform at an orientation info session, a common tactic found at
universities with a significant a cappella presence that allows for potential auditionees to learn
about a group’s “vibe” and “sound” to see if they match. For him, he was entranced by the mix
of serious and goofy energies and complex arranging style that “sounded like magic.”16 One
former student articulated her attraction to the WUSTL Evergreens (then called the Greenleafs)
in a 2008 interview with Student Life, the school’s student newspaper, “I love the music and I
had a good vibe at the audition. It was a group of girls that I wanted to be a part of as a freshman.
It seemed like a good fit.”17 For students like her, an a cappella group is more than a group of
singers. Rather, it becomes a student’s social circle, their surrogate family away from home.
Ethnomusicologist Joshua S. Duchan observes that students often speak of a cappella groups in
explicitly social terms like fraternity or family.18 Finding a “good fit” thus becomes important for
both a cappella groups and potential members who seek to expand their musical family.

The importance of fit also extends to thinking about racial inclusion in a cappella and
whether students of color would feel comfortable auditioning for and joining a potential group.
The people of color I talked with were able to articulate more specific reasons why people of
color might or might not audition for a particular group. Jeffery’s theory that people of color

16 Jeffery, personal interview.
didn’t want to be in an all-white group rang true for Lana, an East Asian alumna, who said she auditioned for her group because it already included people of color:

I think my a cappella group really strived to take in diverse people, not because they were diverse, but like I think they were just more open and I think they gave off more of a vibe of inclusion, whereas there’s like the other group on our campus kind of had more of a vibe of there are only white women in this group. And you know, I would be really intimidated to audition for a group that didn't have representation and I would definitely feel less welcome. (emphasis mine)\(^\text{19}\)

Lana describes the racial dynamics of a cappella at her school by using the term “vibes,” a theory related to fit. Mitch Therieau traces this abstract, amorphous concept as moving from West Coast hippie-counterculture into mainstream millennial and Gen Z slang, in effect “[replacing] the phony collectivity of conformity with a genuine spirit of fellow-feeling.”\(^\text{20}\) Sensing kinship, students join and groups accept auditions who match their vibe—a mix of each group’s personality, personnel, and performance sites—of which race is a tangible feature of both sight and sound.

Lana’s description of why the groups gave off “a vibe of inclusion” also points to the racial make-up of the groups, the already diverse personnel who bring more people of color into the fold. We might liken this phenomenon to the Toni Morrison effect, in which, while an editor at Random House, she helped to other publish Black writers, especially women, who she recruited and fought to published. Using statistical data, Richard Jean So illustrates Morrison’s impact on racial diversity in publishing, as well as how, after she left that position, the number of Black authors published by Random House “return[ed] to its pre-Morrison levels of Black exclusion.”\(^\text{21}\) So argues that this temporary change demonstrates the overarching trend and

\(^{19}\) Lana, personal interview, June 2020.  
structure of U.S. publishing: “unchanging racial inequality.” While I would not (yet) characterize racial inequality in a cappella as “unchanging,” the trajectory of a cappella auditions nonetheless trends towards whiteness. However, it can be intentionally reversed (at least temporarily) if students of color are able to join a group and then invite others in the future.

For groups that value racial diversity but may not attract the pool of auditionees they would like, deliberate outreach, especially by students of color, can turn the tide. Jackson, a white alumnus who had sung in a group that was half-white and half-people of color, emphasized that you “have to put in work to make it more representative” and to have a diverse group of auditionees. When he was in the group, their president, a Black woman, would go up to Black people during orientation events who were humming or singing and tell them to audition. This president functioned as a Morrison-esque figure who deliberately invited other Black folks to audition. Michelle, a current student who was only the second Black woman in her group’s more than twenty-year history, worked on outreach to other student groups on her campus with majority people of color to form connections and increase the diversity of future auditionees. Her efforts transformed her group’s membership into almost half people of color, seven out of fifteen. But just three years later, only four people of color remained (~30%), an example that showcases the transitory nature of the Morrison effect. These responses demonstrate that recruiting people of color to audition is not a mystery but requires work and intentional strategies. Moreover, both examples speak to the importance of students of color already being part of the group and showing potential auditionees that group will be a safe space for them, that it has a “vibe of inclusion.”

22 So, Redlining Culture, 5.
23 Jackson, personal interview, June 2020.
24 Michelle, personal interview, June 2020.
Because a cappella has been populated by mostly white people for so long, people of color may feel that their presence in a group amounts to a quota or that they are a “token,” a symbol of minimal-effort inclusion, especially if they are the lone member of color in a group. Tokenism in a cappella was famously satirized in a 2015 sketch on the Comedy Central show “Key & Peele” where, as explained in the YouTube description of the video posted by the network, “Conflict erupts when a black student joins a college a cappella group that already has a black member.” The group sings sixteen bars of a doo-wop number as the camera pans twice down the line of the eight members to show Troy (Jordan Peele), the lone Black member, on the far end. White comedian Bo Burnham guest stars as the leader of the otherwise all-white a cappella who praises Troy’s improvised bass lick at the end saying, “Troy, I love that little Motown outro thing. Super soulful!” Troy shrugs and with false humility explains that, “It just came to me and I went with it!,” a rhetorical move that suggests that his Blackness or experience with Black culture allowed him to uniquely improvise that lick. But when a new Black student, Mark (Keegan Michael Key), wants to join the group, tensions flare in the students of color’s eyes even as they continue to smile and snap. Troy repeats his bass lick, but Mark follows up with a falsetto tag, “ooh-wee-ee-ooh.” He explains his improvisation to the astounded white group members the same way Troy did earlier, “It just came to me and I went with it,” while staring Troy down defiantly. After the white members leave, the lights dim and ominous music underscores a serious confrontation between the two Black students who code-switch to now use African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and vulgar language, in contrast to their earlier sunny, white-friendly lines like “See you later, alligators!” Troy rhetorically asks Mark, “How long you think it took me to infiltrate this group, n*****? 25 minutes. You think I’m gonna roll

over for some falsetto-ass motherfucker?” Mark responds, “Well you know what, n****? White boys gonna do what white boys is gonna do.” The rivalry between the two students escalates when Troy crashes Mark’s improv group and also makes stereotypical jokes about race, which leads to the end title card, “Stop Black on Black violence.” LaToya Ferguson of The AV Club highlighted this sketch as the “crown jewel” of the episode for the way it captures the dynamic between people of color in a majority white space: “It might sound strange to say, but there can often be a sense of competition in being the token black person in a sea of white people (with this particularly [sic] sea being led by Bo Burnham). It doesn’t usually get as aggressive as it does between Peele’s Troy and Key’s Mark, but that’s only because it’s usually an internal conversation or debate.”

I cannot validate whether this sketch represents a lightly satirized version of experiences of Black a cappella practitioners of past and present: none of my Black interlocutors brought it up in our interviews or any other discussions. But multiple other people of color in and outside of a cappella—two interlocutors, a Wash U student not in a cappella, and my boyfriend—cited the sketch when talking to me about my research. One interlocutor named the sketch alongside Pitch Perfect as examples of racial stereotypes when asked whether a cappella is inclusive for people of color:

[redacted]: I think [a cappella] really wants to be inclusive. I think there are definitely enough people who really want see change and they want to make change. But I think inherently a cappella is a lot of white people. And I think it comes from stereotypes. It comes from like the white man barbershop group. Everyone's like, “haha that's a cappella, that's funny.” Or, you know, even a Pitch Perfect that tried to have a diverse cast, the leads were still white people. Like they were still focused on white people and the people of color in that movie were the comedic side [characters], which is really offensive. If you think about it, um [that choice is] kind of saying that like they didn't deserve to have their own story that like was emotional or, you know, was worth more screen time I guess. So

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yeah, there's definitely the thought that like a cappella is for white people. I mean, there's the Key and Peele sketch. It's so funny because it's so true. And they're just like—have you seen it before?

DF: Yes.

[redacted]: Yes, where there's only one Black guy and then another Black guy shows up and they're like, oh, we already have our one Black guy in a cappella. And in a lot of white universities and colleges, that's what it feels like: like it's like a bunch of white guys and then there's maybe one or two people of color and it definitely is not a good feeling to be like the token person.²⁷

For this person, media like this sketch reinforce stereotypes of a cappella as a mostly white activity where people of color are tokenized, which may or may not be true at all predominantly white universities. The sketch, like *Pitch Perfect*, depicts a cappella to mainstream audiences who see the clip on TV, YouTube, or social media and internalize the racialization and tokenization as inherent to a cappella, which then fuels those processes occurring in reality. These perceptions then impact whether people of color want to audition for a cappella at all or for groups that have only one or two people of color when they do not want to be a token minority member.

*Carving out a Niche on Campus: The Yearlong Project of Maintaining Vibes*

The competitive view of a cappella auditions extends beyond diversity and has a long history on campuses with more than one group. In 2005 at Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL), the a cappella community formed a governing body, the A Cappella Advisory Council (ACAC), which oversees the audition process, fosters good relationships between the thirteen groups, and mediates song selection so that groups do not arrange charts of the same original song.²⁸ Prior to 2005, groups held callbacks simultaneously, which forced prospective

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²⁷ [redacted], personal interview, June 2020.
²⁸ Governing bodies like ACAC remain relatively rare except on campuses with large numbers of groups or communities where social relations had soured enough that a neutral arbiter was necessary. One example is the
members to choose which one to attend and created animosity between groups. Then-Mosaic Whispers member John Michael Rotello alludes to this history in a student newspaper article from 2008: “Barriers between groups are coming down and we are becoming more of a community rather than just a bunch of isolated groups.”

Today, such enmity seems a relic of an earlier generation of WUSTL a cappella, most likely due to the change in the audition process de-escalating competition.

However, competition still exists during auditions in subtler forms. In order to attract potential members, WUSTL groups market themselves with the aforementioned distinctive “vibes” as well as their “sound,” their sonic identity evidenced by consistent arrangement practices, individual and group vocal timbres, and repertoire choices. In this section, I describe how WUSTL groups work year-round to establish these vibes, to carve out their niche in the a cappella community, in large part to appeal to future auditionees. Though race is not explicitly articulated in these group vibes aside from racially marked groups, these descriptive abstractions of the group’s ethos, as I showed above, affect who auditions for a group and attends their performances. Understanding how groups differentiate themselves year-round through ACAC and performance sites allows us to understand these vibes’ origins and how they are maintained in the time between auditions.

By the time ACAC was formed, all new groups had to distinguish themselves from existing member groups that largely sang American popular music. This need for distinction in the 2000s led to the creation of several groups with highly specialized repertoires such as the Sensasians (East Asian fusion music) in 2009 and the Ghost Lights (Broadway/TV/Movie music) University of Michigan’s Michigan A Cappella (MAC) Council, which has coordinated the campus’s a cappella groups since 2002.

Metter, “Singing in Harmony.”
in 2010. The list of current and former a cappella groups at WUSTL in Table 1.1 shows how, over time and with each added group, the musical differences between the ensembles became sharper. Although the groups who sing APM may differ slightly in their repertoire, they nonetheless draw from the range of genres, artists, and time periods within the U.S. without a more explicit, specific focus to the songs they sing. For example, though After Dark, a group that, while I was at WUSTL, was known colloquially—through word of mouth, in performances I attended, and general “vibes”—to sing more alternative and rock songs, they describe their repertoire in much broader terms on the ACAC website: “They pride themselves on being open to performing any genre of music and creating interesting and fun arrangements.”

This contradiction makes sense given that the group experiences complete turnover about every four years, so the current trend towards moody, experimental, and/or alternative musics may not endure. Reverb, one of the newest groups on campus, separate themselves from other groups who perform APM through a mission of community service, a relatively novel way to distinguish one’s a cappella identity.

Table 1.1: Current and former WUSTL A Cappella Groups (1985–2022).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Year Started</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Repertoire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pikers</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>American Popular Music (APM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evergreens (formerly Greenleafs)</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>APM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateurs</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>APM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosaic Whispers</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>All(^{31})</td>
<td>APM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staam</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>Jewish (music and artists)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Fools than Wise</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>Classical/Jazz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Dark</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>APM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>APM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{31}\) In 2019, the Mosaic Whispers began using the term “all-gender” group rather than co-ed include people who do not identify within the gender binary. Interview with former member, June 2020.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sur Awaaz (defunct)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>South Asian fusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliverance (defunct)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aristocats</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>Disney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensasians</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>East Asian fusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost Lights</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>Broadway/TV/Movie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverb</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>APM, Community Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sur Taal Laya</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Co-ed</td>
<td>South Asian fusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ACAC calls attention to these distinctions on their website as they advise potential auditionees how to choose for whom to audition: “With so many groups, it can be difficult to sort out each one’s distinctive sound.”

On that same page, each group provides a short, often humorous biography; links to social media and performance videos; descriptions of previous years’ performances, competitions, and albums; and indicators of the styles of music they sing and their gender make-up. Though no pictures appear and no statistics of racial make-up are included, race too factors into ACAC’s list of groups. Within the descriptions, groups that are racially or ethnically marked call attention to it while emphasizing their inclusive roster. These various strategies reflect not only the group’s “vibe,” but also their identifiers as well. Staam (Jewish), Sensasians (East Asian fusion) make clear that while one does not need to be Jewish or Asian to join their group (a point emphasized by both groups with exclamation points), these identities remain central to the groups’ musical repertory:

- “The Sensasians are WashU’s premier Asian interest a cappella group, but seriously, you don’t have to be Asian to join! They specialize in fresh, bilingual mashups that showcase a passion for music from around the world.”

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32 “Groups.”
33 “Groups.”
• “Staam is Wash U’s premiere Jewish a cappella group. They sing popular music in both English and Hebrew that is written or performed by Jewish artists…You do not have to be Jewish to audition! They are about 50% Jewish and everyone is welcome :).”34

These two groups try to preemptively allay concerns about racial exclusivity through these descriptions and attract a diverse cohort. In contrast, Sur Taal Laya, which specializes in South Asian fusion, describes their repertoire without any specific appeal to people who are not South Asian themselves.35 For groups that sing American popular music, such disclaimers are unnecessary, but the links to videos and social media can show students the people within the group and thus whether any visible people of color have joined.

The groups also affirm their “vibes” in their a cappella performances year-round. While the orientation showcase allows each group to introduce themselves to new students (and prospective auditioned), due to the inherent ephemerality of the scholastic a cappella time cycle, they are in fact always showcasing themselves for potential new members at any campus performance. In a 2016 Student Life article recapping a Parents and Families’ Weekend event, concertgoer Ashley Barrett remarked: “there was ‘so much diversity in the a cappella groups.’”36 The article’s author also recapitulated the event through descriptions of each group’s “vibe” and “sound” potentially appealing to a specific family member. For example, she styled the Ghost Lights as “For the mom who just likes a little Broadway to jazz up the day,” Staam as “For the mother who just wants her daughter to date ‘a nice Jewish boy,’” and the Greenleafs as “For the aunt who loves female empowerment. And probably Hillary Clinton, too.” In contrast, the author

34 “Groups.”
35 “Groups.”
pictures co-ed groups that sing American popular music such as After Dark appealing to “the dad who wants to get a little groove on” and the Amateurs pleasing “the mom who just wants a quiet, unassuming drive to pick up her kids.” She describes these two groups’ sounds like suburban, probably upper-middle class, and white parents because of their mixed gender make-up and mainstream repertoire. Performances like this one function as sites of identity formation at which audiences solidify their impression of the group’s “vibe” and “sound.” These descriptions situate the groups by their repertory, gender, and other identifiers, which mirrors the language and portrayal of groups by ACAC and its constituents.

At WUSTL, most groups also have an annual on-campus concert, with a recurring name, geared towards performing for their fellow students. Duchan describes the differences between concerts and gigs in terms of motivation, venue, and audiences. He draws attention to the myriad ways in which students publicize their concerts, all of which I have seen at WUSTL and other campuses: “posters, signs in dining halls, chalk drawings on campus walkways, pieces in local print media such as the student newspaper, e-mail messages, website announcements, and other electronic media, and word of mouth.” To this list, I would add social media, especially Facebook and Instagram as key mediums for contemporary publicity. But while digital communication looms large in current student life, students still use analog forms of advertising, which also promote their specific vibe. Figure 1.1 shows an example of how the Aristocats use a bulletin board sign to make clear that they will be singing Disney music at their “enchanted evening” concert. Staam’s painted walkway mural (Figure 1.2) similarly highlights the group’s

37 Steinberg, “A Cappella Brings Together Different Voices for a Broader Audience.”
38 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 106.
Jewish repertoire while also presenting some levity with a joke that ties into their concert theme, “What does a Jewish cowboy say? Yee Haw-nukkah.”

Figure 1.1: Bulletin board poster hung in WUSTL dining hall advertising the Aristocats’ December 2019 concert. Photo taken by author.
Although these concerts are not temporally close to auditions, they help to rearticulate each group’s vibe throughout the year, cementing it in students’ minds come audition time. One way many WUSTL groups reinforce their vibe is to use the same name for their annual concert (even if the theme might differ from year to year) and connect it in some way to that vibe. Some groups match their concert name with their own moniker, such as After Dark’s “A Light from the Darkness.” Other annual concerts highlight the group’s identity and repertoire. The Stereotypes, in their portrayal of themselves as pushing the boundaries of a cappella, hold a “Mr. Stereotype” contest in which the men “embody their ‘stereotypes’ and compete in the world’s only all-male a cappella pageant.”39 More Fools than Wise display their stylistic dexterity

through a fall concert of classical and jazz, “Madrigal Feaste,” that contrasts with their spring “April Fools” concert at which they perform pop charts as well. The Pikers, the dean of WUSTL a cappella groups, show off their goofy vibe at “Jammin’ Toast” with skits and off-kilter humor throughout the evening, which I discuss more below. Staam and Deliverance connected their annual concerts to winter religious holidays, “Staamikuh Hannakuh” and “Cookies ‘n Carols” respectively, to highlight their religious affiliations and invite audiences with a personal relationship to those holidays to attend.

The Pikers’ “Jammin’ Toast” illustrates how an annual concert can articulate a group’s vibe and sound. The group’s less-than-perfect tuning and knowledge of the arrangements were on full display during their January 2020 concert that I attended. However, they devoted significant time and energy to skits and wry humor including two absurdist short films, which marks the group’s vibe as less focused on musical perfection and more on having a good time together. For example, the Facebook event satirically described the group as leaving ACAC, playing on then-current event “Brexit” (see Figures 1.3a and b). Their pre-event slideshow (Figures 1.4a and b) also showcases their particular brand of humor. On the slide depicted in Figure 1.4a, they comment on the group’s long-standing history and whiteness with a picture of Grant Wood’s “American Gothic” painting supposedly representing the first Pikers-Greenleafs mixer. This historic whiteness was also on display through the almost entirely white, about twenty alumni in the audience for the performance compared to the current group which boasted five members of color out of sixteen members. But while the demographics may have changed over time, the humor and vibe of the Pikers remained steadfast.

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40 Duchan found similar humor drawing on current events when he observed Brandeis University’s VoiceMale in 2004–5 poking fun at George W. Bush’s fixation with weapons of mass destruction, which they dubbed “weapons of mass percussion.” See Duchan, Powerful Voices, 111.
Details

It has been almost four years now since 51.9% of The Pikers voted to leave WashU's A Cappella Advisory Council (ACAC). Since then, we have been paralyzed by a broken Exec that simply refuses to deliver Pexit. Though The Pikers would have certainly preferred to leave ACAC in an orderly fashion—with a deal that protects Piker trade interests while securing our borders—years of fruitless negotiation in Brussels have left us with no choice but to move forward with a "No Deal" Pexit. A Hard Pexit.

On Friday, January 24th and Saturday, January 25th, The Pikers will initiate our Hard Pexit protocol. We plan to put on two concerts so ludicrous and offensive that ACAC will be forced to unilaterally expel The Pikers from this so-called "Advisory Council."

See what your campus leaders have to say about Pexit:

"Wait a minute, what?" - ACAC President Devon Finlay
"Excited for you guys!" - WashU College Republicans
"Just make sure you run it by nationals first." - Austin Sweeney

Dates:
Friday, 1/24 & Saturday, 1/25, 7:30 PM (doors open at 7:00).
Our guest groups will be the Mosaic Whispers (1/24) and the Greenleafs (1/25)!

Location:
Friday & Saturday - Graham Chapel

Tickets:
Presale: $5 cash, $6 Bear Bucks and credit
At the Door: $8 cash, Bear Bucks, or credit

Presale Tabling:
Mon-Thru 11-2 DUC, 6-8 BD
Friday 11-2 DUC

Figure 1.3: Screenshots of Pikers' January 2020 annual concert Facebook event description.

Photos taken by author.
Concerts that feature more than one a cappella group allow for audiences to connect or distinguish between their sounds and vibes directly. Often at WUSTL, a “guest group” will perform: sometimes other a cappella groups sing a few songs while other times a dance group, cultural group, or even a magic interest group perform. The two racially marked groups at WUSTL, the Sensasians and Sur Taal Laya, presented a joint concert in Fall 2019 at which a Korean dance crew also performed and the groups sold East Asian finger food beforehand for attendees to eat outside. The audience consisted of mostly East and South Asian students, representing an alliance between the two fusion groups as well as a chance for each to grow their audience bases. Other guest groups contrast more strongly with the host. At one Greenleafs concert I attended in Fall 2019, the Mosaic Whispers gave a markedly serious performance. They sang one of their competition songs from their upcoming ICCA set, The Rescues’ “Hold On,” with their characteristic musicality and emotional intensity. The lead soloist “commanded the stage” with her resonant sound and commitment to embodying the lyrics’ heavy subject matter. Their dynamics shifted quickly and noticeably to create small and large arcs in the song, all building up to a very loud, perfectly-tuned final chord. Though the audience was supportive and clapped, they seemed surprised by the seriousness of the Whispers’ performance. But they settled in once the relatively more easy-going host group took the stage, clapping and cheering more loudly for them than the Whispers, even when the Greenleafs’ tuning and energy fell flat.
This anecdote shows not only how concerts can juxtapose the ensembles’ contrasting vibes, but also that audiences are aware of the groups’ different niches and attend a cappella concerts expecting a particular vibe. The Whispers’ serious vibe and sound plays well to auditionees and audiences who care about competitions like ICCA whereas the Greenleafs’ relaxed vibe and less pristine sound caters to other people.

Thus, while an orientation event may introduce these distinctions to new students, the groups work year-round to re-articulate these social and musical distinctions. In addition, they form support networks with other groups by performing together. All these strategies help them to recruit a large pool of auditionees who think they match with their group’s vibe. These vibes and outreach strategies are intimately connected to race, whether via representation within the group’s personnel or the more amorphous aesthetic and social niche that groups carve out for themselves. Once that happens, the auditions proper can begin.

**Narrowing the Pool through Auditions**

A cappella auditions themselves usually consist of multiple rounds in which prospective members sing on their own and with other people. Although groups and university communities differ in exactly how the events play out, my interlocutors overall described fairly similar experiences: a two-part audition process. At an initial, open-to-all audition, students sing a solo of their own choosing and run through some musical exercises. At a second, invited audition (usually referred to as callbacks), they sing with the group and/or with other auditionees and potentially another solo. After callbacks, the group deliberates about which people to ask to join. Each of these stages present different procedures and behaviors that collectively favor white people. By examining the long-standing social structures and underlying sonic ideologies that
propel these mechanisms, we can understand how a cappella and singing in the contemporary moment becomes racialized as well as how to undo it.

Relatively little musicological or other academic literature has examined audition procedures in popular music-making, much less scholastic a cappella.\textsuperscript{41} But writing on auditions in Western classical music shows how long-standing structures and ideologies continue to impact the rosters of musical ensembles. Music education researchers have shown that racially minoritized students encounter barriers in auditioning for music departments and music education programs due to lack of information about the “hidden rules”—the skills, preparation, and especially (Western classical) repertoire—necessary to succeed. For example, Kate R. Fitzpatrick, Jacqueline C. Henninger, and Donald M. Taylor note that audition materials are not always explicit in how they define the repertoire with which a student should audition, even though faculty hold implicit expectations of the music to be selected from the Western classical canon and prepared with appropriate vocal technique for that narrow repertoire.\textsuperscript{42} As Loren Kajikawa articulates, structures like music department auditions reinforce the musical and social ideologies of what he calls, drawing on Lipsitz, “the possessive investment in classical music” that inequitably benefit white students.\textsuperscript{43}


Moreover, in further demonstration of the pipeline issues that Naomi André delineates, even after gaining admission to music schools, students of color face challenges in auditions for jobs in classical music. In so-called “blind” or behind-screen orchestral auditions, performers play behind a curtain during medial stages of auditions (after initial recordings and before final auditions) in an attempt to eliminate biases in the audition process. In 2000, economists Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse argued that this audition method helped to increase the number of women in orchestras, though their conclusions have recently been contested. However, this change in procedure did not have the same effect on the racial diversity of orchestras, which remain astonishingly low for Black and Latinx players. The New York Times critic Anthony Tomassini contends that the screens in fact hinder efforts to diversify the racial make-up of these institutions and their premise is a false one: “Blind auditions are based on an appealing premise of pure meritocracy: An orchestra should be built from the very best players, period. But ask anyone in the field, and you’ll learn that over the past century of increasingly professionalized training, there has come to be remarkably little difference between players at the top tier.” In a roundtable published by the League of American Orchestras, artistic director Afa S. Dworkin maintains that the ideology of artistic merit and the goal of diversifying orchestras are not mutually exclusive: “There is no lack of talent, not even a lack of preparedness. There is a respectable roster of qualified, poised, incredibly talented, and prepared musicians of color. What we have lacked is true change, because orchestras have not prioritized it.”

Western classical music demonstrates the connection between ideology and structure in the audition process. Moreover, Dworkin asserts that, if their goal is a racially diverse roster, institutions such as orchestras must undertake large-scale reforms, including foregrounding diversity at the final selection stage as a criterion. Though the procedures and repertoire differ from a cappella, the dynamics of institutional resistance to change and thus diverse, inclusive organizations remains the same.

Of course, race and class become inexorably intertwined in these kinds of analyses and their imperfect generalizations that students of color come mostly from poorer backgrounds and white students mostly grow up in upper-middle class communities. Words like “mostly” do significant rhetorical work here. Assumptions that Blackness connotes poverty and urban life while whiteness conjures affluent suburbia demonstrate what sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant identify as a “racial project” that “connect[s] what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experience are racially organized, based upon that meaning (emphasis original).”

I ground my analyses in this dissertation in qualitative data from my own observations and interviews with my interlocutors in part to combat sweeping generalizations that conflate race and class as synonymous. Poor white people and affluent people of color absolutely exist. But my interviews reveal the reality that students of color do often face significant disadvantages in part due to class differences and assumptions. For example, one Black male music educator I interviewed, Robert, shared how the a cappella group he formed at an inner-city, largely Black and poor high school received little to no financial support from the administration. Students had to raise money for attending competitions by selling chocolate bars—a frequent fund-raising drive for music programs in all

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communities—but few of these students had parents at whose work they could circulate the sales sheet and make their quota, which is a normative expectation in suburban communities. Instead, the students tried to sell chocolate bars to others in their largely impoverished neighborhoods, which raised very little money.\textsuperscript{48} This story is not meant to evoke pathos, but to show the differences in expectations and support from schools and communities for students to participate in extracurricular music-making and that the differences owe much to class, geography, and especially race.

\textit{The Audition Process}

At the initial auditions, a cappella auditionees showcase their ability to sing solo and frame how current group members conceptualize their voice (e.g. what is their timbre? Range? Voice type? Are they using head voice/belt/mix? Can they sing runs or melismas? How expressive are they?). On top of these vocal techniques and characteristics, singers also inevitably navigate an additional, subtle layer of scrutiny based on race. A cappella auditionees usually perform in full view of the group, which means that members can see the auditionee’s race and gender presentation and develop expectations of how that person should sound like based on their outward identity, a form of essentialization.\textsuperscript{49} As Nina Sun Eidsheim demonstrates, U.S. listeners historically and today hear specific sounds as racialized based on the bodies that perform them, the sounds those bodies create, and the listener’s musical training: “a given listener’s attitudes about race will influence which aspect of the voice [they] will notice

\textsuperscript{48} Robert, personal interview, February 2020.
\textsuperscript{49} Gender presentation in audition procedures deserves to be studied, especially given changing social mores disrupting the hegemonic gender binary. However, given the constraints of this dissertation and the focus on the race in questions posed to interlocutors, there was not enough material to provide sufficient evidence for an argument about gender presentation in auditions at this time.
and how [they] will make meaning from them.” In a cappella, this societal dynamic leads to expectations for how people of various races should sound, as I show below, that become re-articulated with every cycle and begins with auditions. This is not to say that individual auditionees do not bring individualized experiences, skills, and vocal timbres to auditions that challenge these expectations, such as a classically trained Black student or a white person who can sing in Korean. Rather, these racialized expectations influence how the auditions are structured, how auditionees are judged from the outset, and that individuals must work to overcome them.

Several people of color I interviewed disclosed how pre-conceived racial vocal stereotypes impacted auditions and their time in the group. One Black woman, Jayla, recounted that, after she auditioned, her group was “so excited to have a Black girl, finally,” but she didn’t get any solos because the group’s repertoire was “very white”—consisting of Top 40 pop/rock—that “didn’t fit her voice.” Because she couldn’t riff like Whitney Houston or sing with a full-throated belt like Aretha Franklin, Jayla didn’t fit within the vocal mold that the group had envisioned for her. This stereotype is part of a musico-racial paradigm that Katherine Meizel has called the “neo-soul aesthetic” where singers strive to imitate the techniques of virtuosic Black performance, particularly the timbre and expression of R&B and gospel divas. Although this aesthetic is preferred by performers representing the diversity of race and gender (though not all people necessarily), the prevalence of this aesthetic leads to expectation of the vocal timbre and skills put on Black people and Black women, in particular. As I show in Chapter 4, white

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51 Jayla, personal interview, June 2020.
people who can make these sounds are often lauded at competitions with best soloist awards and these first-event auditions give them an opportunity to demonstrate these skills. However, white people are not limited to this one sound while Black women like Jayla are. And if students of color do not fit the expected molds, they are less likely to win solo opportunities and thus be able to move forward in the a cappella pipeline.

Asian people, both Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants, face a different set of expectations. They are often thrust into vocal percussion roles and/or are expected to be quiet, background singers. Lana pointed to how these expectations of Asian people (as well as those of Black people) appeared in the *Pitch Perfect* films, that the characters embodied what already existed in the real-life community onscreen (see Chapter 5).53 Although the auditions in the first film proceed quite differently from the typical procedure I have described—all auditionees sing the same song, Kelly Clarkson’s “Since U Been Gone,” and their background and solo lines are cut together to form a full arrangement—the scene nonetheless exemplifies the depiction of vocal stereotypes that Lana describes. The voice of the Asian character, Lilly, is barely audible when speaking or singing. Cynthia Rose, a Black woman auditioning, as well as Jesse and Benji, both white men, show off their strong riffing and belting skills in the neo-soul style. These racialized sonic expectations become codified over the course of the film and, in the real world, are re-codified with every new cycle of auditions.

In addition to a solo song, auditionees are often asked at the first event to demonstrate musical skills that are less intrinsic to a cappella success and have more recently come under scrutiny as racially biased. These exercises include sight-reading at an audition, being asked if


53 Lana, personal interview, June 2020.
they can read music, singing scales to demonstrate vocal range, or performing tonal memory exercises. For people who have participated in Western choral ensembles or taken voice lessons in Western singing technique (including the people who historically participated in a cappella groups at elite universities), these exercises may seem commonplace. Historically, most, if not all, students auditioning for a cappella groups at elite, predominantly or almost entirely white universities in the twentieth century would have been familiar with scales and most likely knew how to sight-read Western sheet music. So these exercises, transposed from audition procedures from Western choral ensembles, would historically have not excluded most people.

But for people who have sung in other ways—such as Black gospel choirs or non-Western ensembles, as solo pop singers or only in their car—these unnecessary exercises negatively affect their ability to join a cappella groups. They might freeze up or feel out-of-place when asked to sight-read, which impacts their emotional state and the group’s judgment of their audition. Several of my interlocutors described these as unnecessary consequences given that most groups in practice do not require members to learn new music through sight-reading or even sheet music. Juan, a Latino judge and former music director for his male-identifying group, wondered aloud during our interview why they asked people to sight-read when members learn arrangements outside of rehearsals, often using supplied part tracks on .midi files or .mp3 audio recordings.54 Given this change from historical practice, the skill of reading Western music notation is no longer necessary to participate in a cappella. Thus, these exercises continue to sway the audition process even as they linger as vestiges of what a cappella used to be, not what or how it works now.

54 Juan, personal interview, February 2022.
There are also more subtle issues that arise that reveal the assumptions students make about what good singing is and how people should be trained. Sophie, an Asian-American student at WUSTL, shared that because some international Chinese students use a different sight-reading technique than is taught in the U.S., they had been criticized during auditions.55 This behavior shows that U.S. students tend to have a rather narrow view of what constitutes “correct” sight-reading technique and fail to consider other ways that people and cultures might learn music.

This issue extends beyond international students to anyone who has not been educated—or, as Eidsheim asserts, “entrained” during vocal instruction—in the U.S.-Western musical system like most white, middle- and upper-class students.56 Derrick, a Black male alumnus, called attention to this disparity when he referred to scales and sight-reading as something “learned in high school choirs and other primarily white institutions,” as a mechanism that gives preference to “the kind of voice a cappella used to favor, choral voices, but is trending away from.”57 He distinguished between singing styles in choral music and collegiate a cappella, implicitly referring to both group “sound” and individual vocal technique and timbre, and characterized choral music as related to white institutions and ideologies. Although I explore the whiteness of group and solo sound in performance more in Chapters 3 and 4, it is worth emphasizing here that Derrick articulates that what he calls the choral, white style of singing, and the ideology behind it as “good” a cappella, persists in part due to mechanisms like scales and sight-reading during the initial round of auditions.

55 Sophie, personal interview, June 2020.
57 Derrick, personal interview, June 2020.
Usually, groups pare down the auditionees they heard in the initial round to a shorter list for callbacks. Those who are on the list have earned their spot based on their ability to solo and a demonstration of only small part of their musicality. Although none of my interlocutors addressed this moment in the audition process, groups use limited and “unnecessary” information to narrow the pool of potential new members. This almost haphazard decision process with imperfect information closely resembles college admissions committees using standardized test scores, a practice that is also in the midst of rapid change.58

Because members mostly sing as part of an ensemble and usually in the background, at callbacks groups want to see whether auditionees can “blend,” the vital ability to coalesce with other voices into a unified sound. Usually this occurs through learning an excerpt of an arrangement either beforehand or during the callback and singing it altogether or in small groups. Blend involves not only adapting one’s timbre and volume, but also listening to the other voices’ dynamics, diction, and other subtle but important forms of musicality. So important is this skill that Duchan asserts that scholastic a cappella, like barbershop, is shaped by what he calls an “ideology of blend,” a desire for a blended musical, visual, and social presentation that becomes constructed as “authentic” or “natural. (emphasis mine)”59 He emphasizes that blend influences not only sound, but also how groups look and behave. Groups seek potential members who can blend, who “fit” and “vibe” socially and sonically. This ideology produces a tension in a cappella

59 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 21.
groups between a person’s solo voice and the group sound, between a member standing out and fitting in. Auditionees must show both of these poles of their voices in order to gain acceptance.

The “ideology of blend,” as Duchan describes it, already links the musical, visual, and social together. Building on my exploration of “vibe” and “fit” above, I extend his term to encompass race in two ways. First, blend connotes a demarcation of who fits and who does not. While the line separating who can blend may be flexible and permeable, it is difficult to add to the group a voice or person who is radically different from the current members, including, for example, admitting a person of color to an all- or mostly-white group. Second, a cappella blend is based in historical sounds, genres, and structures such as barbershop, glee clubs, Western choral music, and Western popular music that have actively kept most Black and other performers of color from participating while absorbing their sounds and songs. Performers of barbershop, the genre Duchan cites as the predecessor for a cappella’s ideology of blend, rewrote the history of the genre to exclude how white barbershoppers learned to sing in the distinctive four-part harmony from Black performers while also excluding them from joining barbershop organizations on the basis of segregated sounds and bodies. Even after the formal rules disallowing Black members were abolished, the structures and aesthetic preferences in place disfavored Black barbershoppers from joining, as well as the almost-entirely white membership of the organization. The neo-soul aesthetic similarly demonstrates how Black timbres and sounds can be absorbed into popular music genres, even if few Black artists can propel to stardom while singing with them compared to white artists, especially due to less visible factors like access to recording contracts or socially imposed limitations on repertoire and style.

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The perception of a person’s ability to blend can become a tool of exclusion. Lisa, a current Black student, shared that Black women auditionees’ voices would be compared to hers, particularly whether their vibrato was too wide or prominent:

There have been instances where Black girls get compared to me and…ugh, it just sucks. I didn’t think about it at the time, I was thinking about it specifically from a voice perspective. […] One big consideration that [the group has], which is less considered for people who aren’t Black, is vibrato. I know it was mentioned before when I was auditioning and they [*sighs*] I guess they decided that my vibrato wasn’t problematic for my ability to blend with the group. But it just really sucks when there’s beauty in vibrato and they’re like kind of stripping that away, and I even felt that constantly in rehearsals, […] it’s something that’s discouraged.62

This anecdote demonstrates one way in which the voice becomes not only racialized but also essentialized, while simultaneously a focus on “the voice itself” masks consideration of race. In Lisa’s group’s callbacks, Black people have to meet certain standards or show they do not conform to a vocal stereotype that others, especially white folks, do not. The reasoning given is that their form of vibrato—a stereotype of Black people’s voices rooted in what white people perceive from gospel and R&B music—wouldn’t be able to blend with the rest of the group (a tacitly majority-white group) that sings straight-toned or with a supposedly more controlled vibrato. They wouldn’t fit the sound. Thus, vibrato, a seemingly neutral criterion used to evaluate a person’s timbre, here becomes a way to filter out Black people who are unable to or unwilling to control their voices in a way that aligns with this specific ideology of voice. In opera, directors and others in the business have historically cited vibrato and other aspects of timbre to exclude Black artists from participating and to criticize famous Black singers as essentially different from white singers.63 For a cappella, the longtime vocal ideal relates to the blended, often straight-tone or highly-controlled vibrato of white, Western choral music that one might sing in a school choir,
a white Christian church group, or stereotypically (but not historically) white barbershop practices, but not necessarily in other vocal ensemble traditions. As Kajikawa has argued, ideologies and procedures based on a classical music standard of excellence function as a form of property connected to whiteness due to the barriers that limit the accessibility of music lessons, instruments, and concert attendance.¹⁶⁴ To that, I would add the opportunity to participate in an ensemble that teaches vocal techniques that align with this ideology.

After callbacks finish, the group must decide who to choose. This difficult conversation proves to be yet another moment that reveals racial bias. Philip said that, in auditions he has sat in on, people of color sometimes were described through a “deficit model,” saying things like “I couldn’t believe she was so good,” which has inherently racist undertones and shows the kinds of pre-conceived biases people bring to bear on auditions.¹⁶⁵ Lisa expressed to me a different issue, a way in which white people could have a leg up in these deliberations: “I feel like it’s important to have people of color in the conversation when you’re talking about who’s going to be in the group. [The other Black person] and I have tended to be no-nonsense but vocal about it. […] We’re always the ones fighting for the people of color or fighting…to hold the same standards across the different people that you’re considering.” She then described to me one instance in which (white) people vouched for someone who they already knew from outside a cappella, whereas “for people of color, those opportunities are extremely limited for them in the a cappella world.”¹⁶⁶ Her retelling of this moment reveals a dynamic akin to legacy admissions to a fraternity or college, where people speak up for those they already know, diminishing opportunities for those without connections to join, a dynamic that Lisa names as racialized.

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¹⁶⁵ Philip, personal interview.
¹⁶⁶ Lisa, personal interview.
Structural advantages such as this one protect people and practices in a cappella from change, upholding Lipsitz’s “possessive investment in whiteness.” In this case, white people benefit from networks and ensembles that, according to Lisa, are generally unavailable to people of color.

While many groups maintain full control over who their new members should be, some participate in communities where alternative processes impact the final memberships and blur the distinction between recruitment and selection. At WUSTL, the governing body ACAC oversees what they call a “mutual selection” audition process. All students audition for groups individually and groups give callbacks to students independent of other groups. After callbacks, potential members rank groups for which they received callbacks on preference cards. Groups then choose from students who selected them as a first choice. Any student not selected by their first choice group can then be selected by their second choice group. This process continues through various rounds of choices in what the community calls an “A Cappella Draft.”

The sports metaphor connotes the especially competitive atmosphere during auditions as groups contend for the best students. But this method of distributing talent more closely reflects how fraternities and sororities recruit new members, perhaps an unsurprising connection between Greek life and a cappella considering that approximately 35 percent of WUSTL students participate in Greek life. On the WUSTL Greek life website, the leadership previously described the recruitment process as “mutually selective,” “[during] which Fraternity/Sorority leaders plan and implement specific events for potential new members and active members to meet and highlight the unique components of one fraternity to another.”

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68 “Fraternity/Sorority – FAQ,” Student Life, accessed March 16, 2022, https://campuslife.wustl.edu/fraternity-sorority-life/faq/. It is unclear how COVID-19 has affected Greek Life and when this percentage was last updated as it has been the same since I first saw it in 2017.
“mutual selection process” eliminates some of the inevitable competition between groups during auditions, which allows for students and groups to find the right fit. But it also leaves room on both sides, auditionees and groups, for race to become part of the decision-making process, whether based on the auditionee’s race or the group’s present diversity.

“Based on the Voice”: Striving for More Racially Equitable Auditions

When I asked students and alumni whether their groups considered race as a part of the audition process, many of them quickly answered no. Derrick, a Black alumnus, gave a representative answer that also reveals how a cappella practitioners think about who to let into their group: “It’s [race] not a part of auditions. And gender is only considered for voice types. Auditions are entirely focused around voices that fit the group.” Not only does Derrick say that race is not a criterion, he compares it to gender (which has long been an explicit categorization of a cappella groups but is rapidly changing) in order to show how differently the two identity categories are treated in the audition process. Moreover, he affirms that deliberations about who ultimately joins a group remain based on “fit,” on whether their voice coheres with the rest of the group’s sound. His reasoning shows how the ideology of blend remains the primary criterion for musical and social decision-making in auditions, even for someone who also pointed out ways in which race subtly impacts the audition room.

Although, currently, race may not be an explicit criterion, several of the people I interviewed mused about whether a mechanism or criterion related to race might be necessary to achieve their desire for diversity. Jeffery, a white alumnus, said that the racial identity of auditionees came up a lot for his mostly white group because they wanted have a more diverse

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70 Derrick, personal interview.
cohort, but, given the “mutual selection” system at WUSTL, his group had trouble convincing people of color to rank them first. While he didn’t feel good about potentially essentializing singers and picking them solely because they were not white, Jeffery concluded that “taking someone because of [their] race is not great, but not as bad as not taking them” and having an all-white group. Ultimately, he said that the decision “should be based on the voice (emphasis mine).”71 As I have shown though, what counts as “good voice” for a cappella remains subjective and rooted in racialized assumptions and ideals of group singing. Juan similarly shared that one year his college group had articulated two desires for their incoming audition class: admitting Black singers and students affiliated with the music department, especially the choirs. In practice, however, the members only prioritized and targeted the latter group in their recruitment efforts because “we wanted to find the best musicians and singers (emphasis mine),” and ultimately admitted only white students who were in choir or part of the music department.72 Again, the adjective “best” points to the implicit ideology that those trained in Western classical music vocal/choral technique and sight-reading skills are better-suited for their a cappella group than others with different techniques and skillsets, that students of color that are largely unaffiliated with university music departments would not be the “best” musicians and singers. In both Jeffery and Juan’s responses, we see the conflict between verbalized recruiting priorities and underlying racialized ideologies in the decision-making process. This inconsistency mirrors meritocratic values and language used in undergraduate admissions discourse that, as Daniel Markovits argues, in reality rewards middle- and upper-class, largely white families who are able to pay for the resources needed to prepare and send their children to colleges.73

71 Jeffery, personal interview.
72 Juan, personal interview
Lisa, a Black student, worked through the same dilemma of whether race should be a criterion, but in her answer emphasized the emotional toll that admitting cohorts of only or majority-white students “based on the voice” has taken on her:

I don’t think [race] should be considered as part of someone’s musical qualifications, but I also feel like not considering it for who ultimately makes it into the final group is impactful. […] If you look at the cohort that we brought back for callbacks versus who was the final members of the group, there were stark differences, and part of it…you have to look at why they would have chosen to go to a different group and not [her group]. I love my group and I know they love me, but it hurt me and I know it hurt [the other Black person in the group] to see the number of people of color that were considered on the table and then to watch them all get swept away for one reason or the other. We never thought to say, maybe [race] is something we should consider, but it still has an effect on us when we have to live with the decision at the end of the day.  

Lisa makes a compelling case for considering race as part of the audition process, or at least considering how race impacts the audition process such that people of color are disadvantaged and excluded. She argues that, while there should not be a racial quota system that would essentialize auditionees, ignoring race in a colorblind fashion has led to the current situation.

Recently, criticisms of how audition policies are racially biased have gained traction in the larger, national a cappella community. While these critiques are not mainstream or necessarily widespread, they are at least more public than private conversations or intra-group discussions. At one online a cappella festival I attended in 2020, during a panel about diversity, equity, and inclusion, several questions focused on how a cappella auditions impact racial diversity with a particularly long discussion centered on whether sight-reading should be part of the process. One panelist characterized sight-reading as classist saying that it speaks to how music majors are privileged in a cappella groups. Another panelist reframed the question to ask “what does strong sight-singing allow?” and “what do you value in potential auditionees?”

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74 Lisa, personal interview.
panelist deconstructed the audition procedures as being ideologically motivated, even if groups have not consciously made that connection, and their reframing elucidates how including these exercises in auditions fits into Kajikawa’s description of classical music ideologies infiltrating perceptions of musical value. One of the audience members then volunteered that his group had moved the scales and sight-reading portion of the initial audition after the solo portion and posited that even this small change helped them to bring in a significantly more diverse cohort that year.

To cite another example: in June 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests and discourse following the murder of George Floyd, a thread was started in the largest a cappella Facebook group about steps college groups have taken to be more racially diverse and inclusive. Several commenters shared that their groups had changed audition procedures, especially removing sight-reading and other choral exercises. Others mentioned full-group conversations about race in a cappella and in the U.S. writ large. They also connected this thread with related conversations happening in professional a cappella circles and in the choral and barbershop scenes. These comments in the thread were met with likes and replies celebrating these changes.

To be sure, removing sight-singing from auditions in individual groups will not reverse decades of structural and sonic whiteness in a cappella. These small changes only counter one effect of the sonic and structural biases facing auditionees from minoritized groups. They have recently begun to identify the causes without investigating or unraveling them. My interlocutors, especially those who are activists working toward racial equity, seemed cautiously optimistic about the community’s responses, though also quick to say that more wholesale, structural changes would need to occur. COVID-19 has made it much more difficult to follow up with
groups to see whether they have kept to their commitments in June 2020, how widespread these changes have become since then, and what other approaches groups are taking. But these small changes and the increasingly public discussions show that people recognize the community’s current, inequitable racial dynamics to be both structural and connected to sound. To return to the metaphors with which I began this chapter, opening the pipeline and changing or breaking the cycle in a cappella will be the greater, more complex challenge the community faces going forward.
Chapter 2:  
A Critical Overview of the ICCA

The aesthetics and behaviors of amateur musical genres like scholastic a cappella are frequently regulated in competitions. Groups perform for large audiences beyond their home campus, watch and learn from other groups, and receive feedback from judges on their performances.¹ Winners of competitions gain status on their campuses and within the larger a cappella scene. Their performances as captured on video become mandatory viewing for the next year as groups try to emulate victorious a cappella ensembles. Outstanding individuals from successful groups may go on to part- or full-time careers within a cappella as performers, arrangers, judges, producers, or recording engineers, following the personnel pipeline I discuss in Chapter 1. Although several a cappella competitions exist, the International Competition for Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA), currently run by a company called Varsity Vocals, is by far the largest and most prestigious. Established in 1996, ICCA is international in scope and enjoys a strong media presence in the film Pitch Perfect (2012) and docu-series Sing it On (2014–5), as well as connections to other a cappella organizations and institutions.

Because the ICCA structures so much of the overall a cappella community and will be discussed in every chapter of this dissertation, I provide a critical overview of the competition here to orient readers to how it works, how it has evolved, and how a typical event operates. This

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overview is critical in the sense that I not only lay out the facts, describe the event, and incorporate quotes from ethnographic work, but I also connect policies and behaviors within the competition realm to the dissertation’s larger themes: community, inequality, power, and whiteness. ICCA events are inherently competitive, but they also function as sites of community-building and networking and these two forces often work in tension with each other. Though I will fully examine how racial inequity stems from the competition’s intertwined structures and ideologies in later chapters, this critical overview establishes not only the basis for those arguments but also how intersecting inequities of gender, class, religion, and ability have been and continue to be a part of determining who is able to compete in ICCA and who will be successful.

Moreover, this critical overview lays bare both the obvious and the unknown parts of the competition and how a show works to anyone who reads it, revealing the “hidden curriculum” of a cappella (to borrow a phrase from education and sociological research): “the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, procedures, and norms” of an institution, “assumptions and expectations that are not formally communicated, established, or conveyed” that affect a student’s ability to succeed.² One of the goals of this dissertation, in collaboration with my interlocutors, is to make explicit these implicit norms and values so that they “can be debated, altered, even overruled,” as Rachel Gable says about the hidden curriculum at universities.³ By writing out the history, logistics, and expectations of ICCA, the many people that work in,

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compete in, and attend Varsity Vocals events can decide what to keep and what to change, as well as break down barriers of access to groups new to the competition.

The Roles, Logistics, and History of ICCA

Like many musical competitions, the ICCA involves people assuming different roles that together form the competition’s community: performers, audiences, judges, and producers. Individuals within the community can move between these roles within the larger social and musical community, both at different events and over long periods of time but generally occupy one role at a single event. Although only the performers sing onstage, those in the other roles actively contribute to the *musicking* of a cappella competitions. As Christopher Small explains, by treating music as an activity (verb, “musicking”) rather than a thing (noun), we can “widen the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance,” including listeners, composers, and arrangers, as well as ticket-takers, sound engineers, producers, and janitorial staff.4 Viewing the ICCA through the capacious frame of musicking uncovers how each role contributes to and sustains the competition’s interrelated social dynamics, musical sounds, and institutional structure.

The *performers* at the ICCA represent the colleges and universities from which they hail, which, currently, limits their demographics to college students in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. As I contend in Chapter 1, a cappella’s cyclical nature means that people occupy this role for less time than they would others, hence the performers competing in 2016 are most likely completely

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different people from those who competed in 2021—a situation that typically does not apply to judges and producers.

The *audiences* for ICCA events, while also constantly changing, experience less ingrained turnover than performers because there is no time limit on their participation. Audiences typically encompass a heterogenous mixture of mostly local people, including current and former a cappella singers, friends and family of performers, judges, producers, students from competing or host schools, and other nearby residents. Though events mostly occur at the same venues each year, they occasionally change locations, sometimes due to sound infrastructure issues, lack of available dates for the event, or fewer local groups competing from that area. But, more often, the people of the ICCA establish a rapport with the venue staff and locals and create an annual, ephemeral community brought together by a cappella.

In contrast to these broad and large constituencies, the leadership roles of *producers* and *judges* represent a narrower group with more homogeneous backgrounds. The Varsity Vocals producers are a small group of about twenty mostly white women a cappella alumni who put on the competition events as part-time jobs (Figure 2.1). They handle a variety of formal responsibilities including selecting and overseeing the 150–180 judges needed each year, planning and staging events, and managing the people and logistics at events. Informally, producers help to create the sense of community between performing groups and cultivate strong relationships with current and potential judges, which I explore below. When the competition began in the 1990s, judges were often drawn from outside a cappella, including music educators, professors, choral/opera singers, and performers of other forms of secular group singing such as barbershop. Today, most judges have previously competed in Varsity Vocals competitions or are highly involved in a cappella, but occasionally—usually due to geographic restrictions—other
people round out the panel. Because most judges and producers have also performed, they have a hyper-affective relationship to what happens onstage, which create a more closed system of aesthetics and personnel than was found in earlier years. As I argue in Chapter 3, this limited pipeline leads to a white racial majority of judges similar to the producers even as Varsity Vocals aims to expand the diversity of their judges.

Figure 2.1: Picture from ICCA Finals of the 2019 Varsity Vocals Production Team, copied from Varsity Vocals website, accessed February 28, 2022, https://varsityvocals.com/about-us/.

Since its inception in 1996, ICCA has operated on a regional basis. Groups compete against others from nearby schools in one or two rounds of events—Quarterfinals and Semifinals—to determine which group(s) will represent the region at the Finals stage. Typically these events take place at a high school or collegiate auditorium, though some events occur in a
larger performance venue, such as the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. Over time, the number and size of the regions have grown considerably: in 1996, less than 100 groups competed at nine events in four regions; in 2019 the numbers ballooned to 425 groups spread amongst forty-nine events in nine regions.\footnote{Andrew Poole, “Your 2019 ICCA Lineup,” \textit{Varsity Vocals}, November 15, 2018, accessed February 6, 2021, \url{https://varsityvocals.com/2019-icca-lineup/}.} To determine where groups compete in the spring, Varsity Vocals producers cull through application videos the preceding fall and, in the current structure, sort the survivors into Quarterfinal events comprised of eight to ten groups. The top two from each Quarterfinal progress to the Semifinal, where they compete for the region’s one slot at Finals in New York City. Starting in 2010, Varsity Vocals instituted an additional round where the second and third-placing groups from each Semifinal can send in a video to win a “Wild Card” spot at Finals.

Although the ICCA started as a small venture in 1996, the competition grew quickly and become the backbone of collegiate a cappella. Like other nascent a cappella institutions in the 1990s, the competition began as a collaboration between alumni who wanted to make a living out of a cappella. Adam Farb, one of the co-founders and the first producer, recalled, “People told me I was nuts,” but he and his co-founder, Deke Sharon, wanted to create a musical tournament rivalling March Madness, the annual basketball tournament hosted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The competition’s original acronym, NCCA, short for National Competition of Collegiate A Cappella, paid homage to their athletic inspiration.\footnote{Guang Ming Whitley, “Varsity Vocals: The History of Competitive A Cappella,” \textit{RARB: The Recorded A Cappella Review Board}, November 2, 2018, accessed February 6, 2021, \url{https://www.rarb.org/features/2018/11/varsity-vocals-history-competitive-acappella/}.} Don Gooding, a venture capitalist and entrepreneur in a cappella publishing and record ventures, purchased the competition in 1999 along with another Farb-Sharon venture, the Best of College A Cappella.
(BOCA) yearly compilation albums. In 2006, the competition expanded to a new tournament for high school groups (ICHSA). Once groups from Canada joined the events, the name changed to reflect the tournament’s international scope, which has reached across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom since 2006 and to South Africa for only the 2010 season. In 2008, Amanda Newman, then a veteran performer, producer, and executive director of ICCA, bought ICCA, ICHSA, and BOCA from Gooding and formed the umbrella company of Varsity Vocals, which she owns and runs to this day. Newman and the Varsity Vocals team of twenty-four directors and producers manage and maintain the tournaments as part-time jobs. Though the producers’ work is most concentrated in the spring when the events happen, they work intermittently year-round to prepare.

In its initial years, ICCA remained light in mood, similar to on-campus concerts that Farb enjoyed during his time in undergrad. But as the tournament grew during the 2000s, so did the competitive spirit. Many groups now base their yearly activities around perfecting their ICCA set, a shift that Joshua S. Duchan observes marks the tournament as “not just [a] musical [gathering] but also [a] goal toward which groups would work, sometimes for months at a time.” Former producer Julia Moffitt went so far as to write in 2005 that, in her experiences competing and producing ICCA, “Competition was a religion.” Duchan argues that the ICCA has become part of a yearly “calendar” of a cappella “events”—along with other competitions and festivals, compilation album releases, and award ceremonies—through which collegiate a cappella became institutionalized, transformed from ad hoc a cappella ensembles at disparate schools to a more cohesive national practice.

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7 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 62.
8 Rapkin, Pitch Perfect (New York: Gotham, 2008), 68; Duchan, Powerful Voices, 64.
9 Quoted in Duchan, Powerful Voices, 118, 209fn22.
10 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 64.
The tournament’s ultimate event, Finals, is held in New York City as a symbol of its prestige and its capitalist enterprise. Farb booked Lincoln Center for the first few years, with a total $35,000 budget including travel money to entice groups from the West coast to compete in the nascent venture. At some point, groups took over paying for travel themselves. When Amanda Newman became the executive director in 2003, she began instituting cost-saving measures such as relocating Finals to Town Hall, a smaller venue in New York City on 43rd St. near Times Square. Though the location of Finals has moved several times over the years, to venues including Carnegie Hall (57th St), the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (66th St), the Beacon Theatre (74th St.), and the now-defunct Playstation Theater (44th St), the ICCA Finals remains in New York City to entice students (and their parents) to pay for the expensive trip to competition’s main event. As I have heard from several producers and judges over the years, people have batted around the idea of holding the event in the geographic middle of the country such as Chicago where many of the producers and Newman live, venues and lodging are cheaper, and flights would be more equitable to people who live far from East Coast. However, this idea has never seriously been considered because Newman and others worry that students would no longer want to perform at a lesser-known location than Lincoln Center or a theatre in or around Times Square. This decision means that many groups must raise more money from their gigs, universities, and families if given the opportunity to perform at Finals, which favors students that attend wealthier institutions or hail from well-off areas and families, as well as groups in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic areas. When I competed in college in Southern California, my group’s leadership team seriously debated whether we wanted to win our

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2 Whitley, “Varsity Vocals.”
Semifinal or submit to the Wild Card round when we placed second in the local Quarterfinal, because we did not think we could raise enough funds to cover the travel and lodging costs. Over the years, several music directors, especially high school directors, over the years have confided to me their relief when their group did not win a Semifinal or even a Quarterfinal event, which meant they would not have to continue rehearsing and fundraising. The economic burden of traveling to competitions is also present, if on a smaller scale, for the earlier rounds of the competition. Though Varsity Vocals makes every effort to place groups at events close to their school, some groups, especially from rural areas, inevitably travel long distances.

A Day in the Life at ICCA

Although thousands of students compete in the ICCA and ICHSA each year, and many watch, most only experience the competitions from one role, maybe two. Based on my interviews with people from every role and my own uncommon experience participating at various times over the past fifteen years as a performer, audience member, judge, volunteer, and production assistant, I assemble a multi-faceted, chronological description of a Varsity Vocals event that incorporates all these perspectives. For privacy purposes, I avoid naming specific groups’ and individuals’ experiences that I witnessed and have instead generalized or summarized common occurrences I observed. Through this framing, I emphasize the tension between community and competition throughout the event. I also examine policies and behaviors both explicit and implicit that lead to inequitable participation and outcomes.

Before the Competition
While the competition events take place in the spring, the planning and preparation phase of the ICCA cycle begins months earlier. Producers usually reserve the venues a year in advance, though some large or prestigious venues require even more time. After the academic year begins, groups must submit an audition video and a one-time $300 application fee by mid-October, which will be judged by Newman and the relevant competition director (as of this writing, David Rabizadeh for ICCA or Elise Hackl-Blumstein for ICHSA). Groups are then notified by mid-November of their selection and their quarterfinal date, venue, and fellow competitors. Varsity Vocals refunds the application fees of groups not accepted to the tournaments. The collected application fees subsidize booking the Finals venue in New York. The range of ways groups view the application fee shows the vastly different budgets of high school and collegiate ensembles. While some ensembles balk at $300 and hold fundraisers or charge their members fees in order to pay for it, others are shocked at how low the number is—especially compared to show choir competitions that regularly require several thousand dollars to enter.

As groups prepare their sets during weeks or even months of arranging and rehearsing, producers email information about the event to participating groups, including the day-of schedule and logistics, microphone and sound setup information, reminders about scoring and judging rubrics, and asking for set lists, rosters, and microphone information. Groups who compete at venues far from their campus reserve lodging and arrange transportation, which also requires fundraising. What counts as “far away” depends, but because events routinely end

13 Groups sometimes attempt to switch their assigned event for various reasons, some legitimate and others more nefarious. Reasons given most often are date conflicts (even though those are supposed to listed as part of the application) and wanting to compete at a different location, both of which can be used as covers for wanting to compete against a different slate of groups from the originally assigned event.
14 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.
around 10:30 PM, most groups that live more than an hour or two away usually choose to stay in
town overnight.

On the day of the event, the producer, any assistants they have, and the sound engineer
arrive at the venue late in the morning. While the sound engineer works with the venue staff to
set up the sound board, a suite of wireless microphones, speakers, and other equipment, the
producer and assistants assign holding rooms to the competitors, set up the judges’ room, and
prepare packets of paperwork that will be used throughout the day. Performers arrive at the
venue shortly before the agreed upon “group meeting” time (usually about 1:00 PM).

The group meeting showcases the underlying tension evident between the producers’
stated goal of community building and the simmering fire of the performers’ competitiveness.
Producers utilize the group meeting to not only reiterate policies about sound and scoring that
were outlined in previous emails, but also to try to reinforce that the competition is not about
winning, but instead forming community and learning from the experience. Their speech and
actions in the group meeting reflect this mission. At one group meeting I observed, the producer
asked for a round of applause for a group competing for the first time and emphasized that
groups should come into the open audience seats during the show to watch the other competitors.
They later signaled the geographic and emotional ties between the groups: “The aca community
is so tight knit, especially in [this area]. We’re so supportive of each other. […] I hope you’ll
take time to get to know each other and feel the love.” Here, community is defined ambiguously
and capacitously, pointing to local and national boundaries as well as physical and expressive
bonds. Miranda Joseph has described this rhetorical form as part of the “extraordinary power and
 persistence of a dominant discourse of [the concept of] community.”

15 Miranda Joseph, Against the Romance of Community (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxx.

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to foster good will and communal sentiment, the performers sit on the edge of their seats, waiting
to draw the show order from numbers out of a hat, silently worrying about which group performs
when—and seemingly not internalizing the producer’s descriptions of the community ethos.
After the sequence of performances has been sealed but before the soundchecks begin, the
show’s sound engineer gives some directions to the groups including basic mic technique and
how to hand off the mics between groups. The performers are then dismissed until their assigned
soundcheck time, which follows the show order.

The microphone set up of Varsity Vocals events has changed dramatically in the past ten
years, affecting not only budgets and logistics but also sound and group preparation. In 2008–
2013 when I was competing, and then, after, in my first few years judging, groups would have
three unidirectional handheld mics used for the soloist, bass, vocal percussionist, and maybe two
more for additional soloists or vocal percussion. The rest of the group’s voices would be
amplified by “area mics” hanging over the stage area. This particular configuration influenced
not only how the singing was amplified and heard by the audience, but also how savvy groups
strategized their arrangements and choreography in order to maximize amplification. Over the
course of the 2015 and 2016 seasons, Varsity Vocals gradually transitioned to eighteen
unidirectional handheld microphones and no area mics for every show. 16 Now, every performer
could always potentially be heard, limiting singers’ ability to hide mistakes. Moreover, this set-
up can affect a group’s balance and blend if they have not sung together on individual
microphones before, which is true for most a cappella groups outside of very well-established
groups or groups that attend schools that can afford to buy their own set of eighteen handheld
microphones, plus a soundboard and speakers capable of configuring that many inputs.

16 Varsity Vocals producer, personal communication, July 2022.
Additionally, the shift in microphone configuration also limited which venues and sound engineers Varsity Vocals could use. Because most venues do not provide eighteen microphones, and the soundboard, speakers, and monitors to broadcast the sound, Varsity Vocals must hire sound engineers who can bring the necessary equipment with them, incurring significant expense: sound engineers are now usually the largest line item of a show’s budget, even more than renting the space itself. During soundchecks, then, the engineer, working off the microphone information sheet the groups submit before the show, assigns the performers to a particular numbered microphone. This information allows the engineer to know whose microphone to adjust and the performer knows which microphone to obtain and surrender between sets.

In a practical sense, soundchecks allow each group to feel out the stage’s sonic and physical space for fifteen minutes and to confer briefly with the sound engineer about their set and the sound levels they want to hear in the monitors. More than that though, the ways groups approach their soundcheck reveal the range of priorities they have as well as the benefits of performing at that venue before. First-time groups rarely know they can ask the sound engineer for different levels and are consumed with trying to run through their whole set on an unfamiliar stage and perhaps singing with microphones for the first time. In contrast, returning groups get creative in how they take advantage of their few minutes onstage. They might set up a video recording or have an alum/parent record their soundcheck to nitpick later. A music director or choreographer might go out in the house, for a minute or the entire soundcheck, to listen to levels and or check the space of their choreographic formations. Though warned by the producer not to do this, a group might run only formations without any singing to adjust their choreography to
this venue, which deprives the sound engineer of precious time to work with the group on sound issues.

Soundchecks also set the expectations for the day, especially for the producer, even though the group is not performing for them. The producer and their assistants often watch soundchecks with one eye on another task—paperwork, responding to texts/emails, dealing with crises that arise—but enough to form opinions about how a group sounds and how the show might play out. Producers work in the same regions and with many of the same groups for years, so they develop expectations based on groups’ previous competition experiences, but those expectations can be subverted with a strong/weak soundcheck or performance. Moreover, the expectations set during soundchecks might color how the producer evaluates the judges’ decisions that night, even though the producer rarely sees any of the competition itself and many producers would be the first to say that soundchecks do not correlate to performance.

Although each soundcheck spans only fifteen minutes, the total time of every soundcheck, plus passing time, for every competing and guest group adds up. As a result, groups have a lot of downtime before the evening performance. To pass the hours, they intermittently rehearse in their (usually individual) holding rooms, get food from nearby eateries, and lounge or walk around the venue. Rarely do groups hang out together unless they are already friendly or hail from the same school.

Soundchecks normally wrap up around 5:00 PM, which is about the same time that performers start to dress for the show. By this time, the emcee(s) for the show has arrived. Producers can fill this role with a variety of people—a student or pair of students, an a cappella alumnus, another producer, or even themselves—who can engage the audience between sets. While the performers prepare, the emcee(s) usually visit(s) each group to ask how they want to
be introduced, if they want the audience to clap between songs or not, and maybe to find some funny anecdotes or trivia to share. Producers use this time to take a break, eat something, and prepare the judging room and ticketing materials.

An hour before the show, the venue starts to fill up. Audience members can buy general admission tickets ahead of time online or in-person at the venue, so they may start arriving an hour or more before the show begins. Judges and scoring volunteers arrive by 6:00 PM, at which time the producer introduces everyone; explains the schedule, the rubric, and any new policies; gives advice to any new judges; and trains the scoring volunteers who double-check scoresheets and time the groups’ sets. (I discuss this moment and the judging rubrics in greater detail in Chapter 3.) The producer then helps the ticketing volunteers set up and begin letting folks into the auditorium while judges prepare their scoresheets and get to know each other. While, in the past, audience members were given a physical copy of the program, in the past five years, Varsity Vocals transitioned to online programs that people can read on their smartphones.

Just before 7:00 PM, the judges and scoring volunteers walk into the audience where they sit in a specially marked row, usually with some distance from any audience members who might try to influence them. The judges work with clipboards, pens or pencils, and reading lights in the seats; only rarely do they sit at tables, and they do not use electronic devices. Simultaneously, the first group waits in the “green room,” a holding area near the stage, where they chat with the producer and emcee amid any last minute preparations, such a prayer, a chant, and/or taking pictures. Just before the group goes on, each person will take their numbered microphone, either from a stand or from the corresponding member from the previous group.

The Competition and After
The show begins shortly after 7:00 PM, when the producer walks onstage. They inform the audience about how the tournament works and what is expected of the audience. Often, they train the audience to minimize their applause between songs—as several producers say, “Keep it to an enthusiastic minimum!”—in order to prevent a group from going over the time limit. If groups do exceed the time limit, they are knocked down one “place” in the scoring order (e.g. if they were second, they would become third), so cluing the audience into this policy is very important. The producer also indicates that some groups that are very short on time, or choosing artistically to have no breaks between songs, and that the emcee to ask the audience not to clap at all until the end of the set, so the audience should respect those wishes.

The producer then hands off the microphone to the emcee, who introduces the first group and sets the performance in motion. The next group arrives at the green room while the group before them performs, lining up to receive their assigned microphones. While this exchange is happening, the judges finish writing comments and scoring each category (see Chapter 3). This transition can take a few minutes, so the emcee fills the time with information about the tournament, funny anecdotes or comic bits, encouragement to post about the show on social media, and introductions for the next group.

Because each show features six to ten competing groups, most events are divided in two by a ten- or fifteen-minute intermission. Judges and audience members alike can use the bathroom and refill water bottles. The judges also use this time to resolve any scoring discrepancies, finish up comments, and possibly preliminarily discuss potential special award recipients. Judges are not allowed to discuss the group’s performances overall so as to not influence each other’s subjective rankings. The judges then return to their seats and the show continues until the last group has performed.
Once the competing groups have finished, the judges depart to deliberate, the groups gather backstage and/or at the back of the venue, and a guest performer (usually a local high school or college a cappella group) entertains the audience. If the judges have not finished their work by the time this act ends, then the emcee has to fill time, often by inviting the competing groups’ vocal percussionists onstage for a short beatboxing battle. This tradition can potentially bring groups closer together in community as they cheer each other on, but it can also increase the tension as the performers wait for the results.

Meanwhile, the judges finish up their scoring back in the judging room. At this point, they decide individually which groups receive their subjective ranking, an additional thirty, twenty, or ten points for the first, second, and third place groups, respectively. These extra points are awarded based on the judge’s opinion of the overall performances and are not necessarily tied to how the groups score in the rubric’s musical and visual categories. Some judges may use these points to correct for harsh judging on an early group or to reward groups for something during their set that did not show up in their category scores. While the producer and scoring volunteers tabulate the scores, the judges then turn to deciding which individual performers will win the special awards. I discuss this process in detail, especially the solo awards, in Chapter 4, but it is worth pointing out here that the producer encourages them to be efficient in their discussions to keep the show moving forward. While these commendations are not always awarded, producers usually encourage judges to choose somebody, especially at the high school level, and to avoid ties or handing out two awards for the same category. Once the scores and awards have been decided, the producer shares the group results with the room, writes out the names on certificates, and everyone files back into the auditorium.
The producer signals the emcee to wind down the guest group, beatboxing battle, or other entertainment and announce that all groups should come onstage. A hundred or more performers huddle close together in a U-shape around the wings and back of the. Before the producer announces any winners, they usually speak to the audience to thank the volunteers, venue staff, sound engineer, and judges. Several of the producers I worked with have also used this time to speak directly to the performers—sometimes without using the microphone in order to create a sense of intimacy, to emphasize that their words are just for the performers and not for the audience. The producer’s heartfelt words call back to the opening meeting, when they encouraged the groups to have fun and try their best. They remind the students that they joined a cappella and their group not because they wanted to win but because they love to sing and wanted a family to sing with them, which they got to do onstage that night. Again, this moment bubbles with tension between the community building desired by the producer and the competitive drive of the performers—and now the audience, who want to know the results. It is the last time that the producer addresses everyone and reiterates their message, and the poignant speech, if it happens, often brings tears to quite a few performers, audience members, and judges’ eyes.

Finally, the producer reveals the special award winners and then the third, second, and first-place groups. These high-pressure moments are often augmented by underscoring played by the sound engineer, a not-so-subtle method to excite everyone even further. In all, the performers and their supporters in the audience are usually gracious and clap for other groups, even if they are disappointed by the results. In earlier years, the winning group performed an encore song, usually a different song from one in the set. That practice fell out of favor sometime in the past five or six years, coinciding with the new individual microphone set-up that made it more
difficult for a group to quickly sing a song together. Now, the producer instead bids everyone goodnight and the winning groups and individuals stay near or onstage to take celebratory photos.

While the audience departs and groups return to their holding rooms to gather their belongings, the producer or their assistant hands the music directors of each group (or teachers for high school shows) the scores and comments. The sound engineer begins the arduous process of packing up the equipment and while the producer, volunteers, and venue staff clean up the venue. Judges often stay together to decide on a post-show outing, often to a bar or restaurant that serves alcohol and late-night food, where the producer, the assistants, and often the sound engineer join after completing their tasks. The performers may return home, to their lodging, or, usually just for college shows, may meet at a local group’s house or bar to hang out and party. Such revelry used to be a mainstay of the competitions, almost expected, but as venues have moved away from school auditoriums with host groups, this tradition that helped build local and regional a cappella communities has somewhat dissipated as well. One performer I interviewed also attributed the lack of afterparties to changes in local policing near college campuses that break up parties quickly, even in neighborhoods mostly populated by students. Alumni I interviewed who graduated ten to twenty years ago often remembered those afterparties more sharply than the competition itself. Those gatherings made possible networking for eager a cappella enthusiasts from different groups, who would form friendships that would keep them invested in the community, whether as an audience member, judge, producer, or amateur/professional a cappella performer. The tradition of afterparties still carries on at some

17 Taylor, personal interview, June 2020.
schools, particularly shows with longtime competitors and/or strong a cappella cultures on campus such as Missouri State University, but it is no longer pervasive.

Scratching the Surface of the Structural Inequities of ICCA

My narrative of a day at ICCA lays out the logistics and schedule of the event while contextualizing procedure changes and identifying moments where community is foregrounded. This framing combines viewpoints and duties from all of the roles in a cappella to create a holistic picture. But by describing events and policies that my interlocutors experienced as they happened, I necessarily omit what does not happen or who is not there on the day. The absences I highlight below—not the only ones but a few major or representative examples—reveal much about how the structures in place affect who is at the event and who will be successful.

The standardization of weekend evening event times prevents some performers, audience members, and judges from participating or continuing to participate after college. ICHSA and ICCA events almost always happen on Friday and Saturday nights, respectively. Though occasionally, often due to venue restrictions, an event may be moved to Saturday or Sunday afternoon, the shows start in the evening after the all-afternoon round of soundchecks. Potential adult audience members, judges, and competitors—some men but more often women—might have to arrange for childcare or may not want to stay out for an event ending at 10:30 PM.18 Additionally, most events do not fall on Sundays, so they do not interfere with most Christian religious services. But the Friday evening performances do conflict with Jewish shabbat services and the afternoon soundchecks overlap with Islamic Friday prayers. Depending on a student’s

18 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.
religious practices, they might have to choose between competing and observing their religious rituals.

Visibly disabled students rarely compete at the ICCA. Though nothing in the procedures or scoring guidelines would prevent them from doing so, other barriers to access impede their participation. As one producer told me, a cappella is an art form that works well for all kinds of ability accommodations: “there is nothing in a cappella, other than sometimes venues, that says ‘there is a limit here for you.’”

The United States theoretically mandates access for disabled people to most buildings and auditoriums through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); however, in practice, not all school buildings and auditoriums have been retrofitted to allow disabled students to access the stage areas and thus be able to perform. Varsity Vocals in the past few years phased out venues that were not in compliance with ADA, but not all stages are necessarily ADA compliant unless the producer specifically looks for them. And outside of Varsity Vocals’ control is whether the spaces on campuses where groups rehearse and perform are ADA accessible. An open question is whether performers at the ICCA are representative of scholastic a cappella in general. That is, are the students who compete more able-bodied, more financially cushioned, whiter than in the practice writ large? The answer would be difficult to obtain by quantitative or qualitative means and would need to account for differences in schools’ structures and student populations, financial support from the school and students’ families/networks, and regional differences. Examining structural issues like ADA accessibility, though, points to a complex answer that does not fall neatly along identity lines.

Several aspects of the ICCA events benefit groups with significant funding, whether from fees charged to the students, money given by parents and donors, fundraising from the local

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19 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.
community through gigs and album sales, or budgets allocated by the district or university. Groups with more financial resources, including being close to the venue, have significant advantages in the competition as well as fewer barriers to entry, including application fees and the geographic location of shows which require an overnight stay. These explicit fees are merely the tip of the iceberg for financial inequity: many high-achieving groups buy new matching outfits for the competition, send (especially high school) students to voice lessons to improve their singing technique, purchase arrangements from professionals or other non-group members, pay for outside choreographers and/or clinicians to work with their group, and have access to equipment like microphones with which students can practice. Such disparities are typical in other forms of scholastic and extracurricular musical competitions (show choir, barbershop, marching band, jazz band) and, for all of them, the advantages that money brings to groups who can afford it are numerous.

Thus, it may not be a surprise that very few low-income, inner city, majority-students of color schools compete, especially at the high school level—at any given competition, one, maybe two groups from these schools compete. Financial or class advantages often correlate along identity lines including race, especially due to the racialization and redlining of the suburbs, homeownership, and school districts.20 One high school director I spoke with who teaches at an urban, majority-Black, majority-low income public school divulged that, when his group wanted to compete in ICHSA for the first time, the school and district gave them no acknowledgement, let alone funding. As I shared in Chapter 1, these students were forced to sell chocolate bars to their impoverished community members to pay for the application fee, hotel rooms, and bus to

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their ICHSA event. The director wondered aloud how their group was supposed to seriously compete with those from well-financed suburban districts: “other schools don’t have kids on free breakfast and lunch and textbooks.” These disparities in educational funding, and funding of the arts and a cappella by extension, exemplify what social scientists Lawrence Bobo, James Kluegel, and Ryan Smith call “laissez-faire racism,” racism that is not bound by law but “relies on the market and informal bias to re-create, and in some instances sharply worsen, structured racial inequality.” The systemic racism that originally established suburbs in the 1950s continues to perpetuate inequitable outcomes for students. While Varsity Vocals cannot change the social structure of the country, understanding how that affects the groups who do and do not compete in their tournament is paramount to being an anti-racist organization.

Similar to these low-income and majority-students of color high school groups, ensembles from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or majority-Black groups rarely (if ever) compete in the collegiate tournament. None of my interlocutors (nor myself) had judged an ICCA show that featured a group from an HBCU. The only one I or anyone I interviewed could name was Afro-Blue, a Howard University vocal jazz ensemble that competed on season 3 of the Sing-Off (the same season as winners and future pop sensation Pentatonix) but has never competed in the ICCA and does not describe itself as an a cappella group. This discrepancy should come as little surprise to those familiar with the a cappella’s history. As Duchan has explained, what eventually came to categorized under the banner of early a cappella groups began in the early 20th century at elite universities in the northeastern United

21 [redacted], personal interview, February 2020.
States, particularly at Ivy League schools such as Yale and Harvard, but also Tufts and Amherst. Because higher education upheld racial segregation until the 1950s in many schools, the founders of these groups and of the genre overall were almost exclusively white. While groups sang without instruments at HBCUs or racially integrated institutions such as Oberlin College, their musical endeavors and groups were categorized as other types of group singing, such as doo-wop groups and gospel choirs. To this day, very few a cappella groups exist at HBCUs and almost none compete in the ICCA.

The musical segregation of white and Black extracurricular singing groups mirrors the racialized categorization in group singing and popular music as a whole. As David Brackett argues, genres often become connected to identity axes through arbitrary definitions supposedly related to musical elements as well as through the structures of the music industry: “Genres are not static groupings of empirically verifiable musical characteristics, but rather associations of texts whose criteria similarly may vary according to the uses to which the genre labels are put. ‘Similar’ elements include more than musical-style features, and groupings often hinge on elements of nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on.” In collegiate a cappella, no one person, ensemble, or university decided that the practice would be dominated by white people (particularly men). But, by virtue of its birth at exclusive schools like Yale during the time of Jim Crow segregation, a cappella began and has continued for a very long time as a white practice.

While majority-Black groups are a rarity at the ICCA, South Asian and East Asian groups that perform music from those cultures, often in a mashup with Anglo-American popular

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24 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 23–35.
25 For more information about contemporary group singing at an HBCU, see Marti K. Newland, “Sounding ‘Black’: An Ethnography of Racialized Vocality at Fisk University” (Columbia University, PhD Dissertation, 2014).
music, increasingly participate in the tournament. As I explore in greater detail in chapter 3, these groups have had mixed success competing in a tournament that implicitly caters to groups who sing English-language repertoire and adhere to Anglo-American musical and vocal aesthetics. These racially marked groups’ presence at the ICCA illuminates not only the aesthetic preferences of the judges and the rubric, but also the challenges of trying to create an inclusive a cappella tournament.

As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, returning groups possess advantages when preparing for the ICCA, such as knowing what they can ask for or do during their fifteen-minute soundcheck. Knowing how to approach a soundcheck may seem insignificant from the outside, but groups who understand the “hidden curriculum” in small moments like this are advantaged. Not only do they understand how the sound at the show operates and how to work microphones while new groups struggle, but they use those precious minutes effectively. Understanding what the best groups do and what the expectations are allows any group to succeed and, as I lay out in the succeeding chapters of this dissertation, who wins and who gets to decide who wins connects to that person’s race. I illuminate how these hidden expectations play out in judging recruitment and procedures in Chapter 3 and a cappella aesthetic values along racialized lines in Chapter 4.

One of the recurring themes of this chapter (and the dissertation overall) is that none of the issues or institutions that I highlight are separate from the others; they affect each other, which makes them resistant to change. For example, Varsity Vocals cannot alter whether individual schools have ADA accessible spaces, even though that affects whether that school’s

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27 A mash-up refers to two different songs put together in the same arrangement. Usually, these songs are presented separately but, in at least one section, the two songs will be directly juxtaposed through layering or other arranging techniques.
ensembles are accessible and inclusive to physically disabled students. But institutions like Varsity Vocals can work with other organizations and individuals from the a cappella community, as well as students and experts from the communities affected, to exert financial and political pressure to create change. As mentioned above, Varsity Vocals no longer hosts events at venues that are not ADA accessible and, as one producer told me, they have reported inaccessible potential venues to oversight bodies to urge them to become compliant.\textsuperscript{28} Moreover, though Varsity Vocals is the largest and most prestigious competition, the organization can work with the many other scholastic and non-scholastic competitions, festivals, and other institutions to affect change.

\textsuperscript{28} Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.
Chapter 3:  
The A Cappella Competition as Racial Project: Racialized Structures and Ideologies of the Voice in ICCA Judging

Before a show begins, judges at the International Competition for Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA), the largest and best-known scholastic a cappella competition in the United States, gather backstage. While judges wait for a producer to start the pre-show meeting or as part of the meeting itself, they go through a “credentialing” process in an effort to create community. They greet people they know, introduce themselves to those they do not, and establish their bona fides, what qualifies them to be in the room. These seemingly innocuous formalities, though, set up a social dynamic that River, a Black queer judge for a cappella competitions, described to me in an interview: “judges who come from a traditional, white-centered like music studies background,” as they phrased it, assess both performers and other judges’ merits based on the person’s race, on perceptions of musical talent based on their race, and on ingrained ideals of what constitutes musical value. They explained some of the ways these racialized assumptions affect the sociality of the judging room:

I think that there are people who think some of our Black female judges come across too strong or are too...I have been in moments or dynamics where [a Black female judge] is making a really clear point and I've seen white men in the room or other white people like sort of be taken aback. Um, *I think it's an expectation of a level of expertise that exists or technical knowledge that exists, based on somebody's race* that—you know, this is wild that I’m just sort of putting it together, but I have definitely felt this too and felt bad about it in some ways—that they [white male judges] thought like Black people are just sort of naturally good at this stuff and so we don't have the same like body of knowledge.
underneath. I particularly feel bad about this because I do not remember most of my [music] theory or any of the stuff I learned in college. And I don't do this professionally. So I do feel sometimes ill-equipped in those conversations [about arrangements], which I think has sometimes hidden to me the fact that there is a racial dynamic to that. (emphasis mine)

River’s analysis of their experiences demonstrates how race and power are subtly fused in a cappella competition judging rooms. They tellingly did not share a story of when someone directed a racial slur at them or told them they could not judge because of their race. Instead, they identified underlying ideas of how to and who can judge based on racialized assumptions of someone’s musical experience and expertise.

This asymmetrical treatment demonstrates one facet of how a cappella competitions are entrenched in whiteness, the inequitable disparity between people of color and white people in the United States that scholars have long studied but find difficult to define. Some scholars, such as Richard Dyer, consider whiteness invisible and omnipresent, allowing white people to preserve their place at the center of aesthetic production, a view that recognizes how whiteness is rarely discussed openly. However, Ruth Frankenberg deems the possibility of unmarked whiteness a “mirage” predicated on present-day white peoples’ own observations: this description fails to interrogate “to whom is whiteness invisible” and to account for changing historical conceptions of race and who is considered to be white. Instead, she positions whiteness as many things, including a structural advantage and a product of history, that allow whiteness to assume its own normativity. Frankenberg’s reframing of whiteness prompts the examination of the mechanisms by which whiteness becomes normative, that is, how and why white people continue to occupy positions of power such as ICCA competition judges. As I detailed in

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1 River, personal interview, January 2021.
Chapter 1, scholars outside of whiteness studies, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, have also taken intersectional approaches to their analyses of social and institutional inequities with a similarly multifaceted lens trained on mechanisms, be they structural, ideological, or interpersonal. River’s anecdote and realization opens the analytical door to understanding how whiteness operates in a cappella competitions.

I begin the chapter with this anecdote to show that, when talking about the racial dynamics of the ICCA, I will not be focusing on explicit instances of racism. Instead, I examine how race, particularly whiteness, permeates a cappella competitions through intertwined structures, discourses, and ideology, what sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant identify as a “racial project” that “connect[s] what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experience are racially organized, based upon that meaning (emphasis original).” Hearing scholastic a cappella as a racial project reveals how people subconsciously perpetuate unarticulated, racialized ideologies of the voice and sustain inequitable racial hierarchies through social structures, musical aesthetics, and listening behaviors.

A cappella privileges perspectives of how music should sound based in white, Western musical aesthetics, which leads to white people continually occupying positions of power, such as judges. In contrast, people of color, like River, struggle to overcome racially essentialized assumptions about their musical background, beliefs that all humans in a racial category (i.e. Black, South Asian) have the same unchanging essences (i.e. vocal timbre) and experiences (i.e. knowledge of music theory) that exist outside of social and historical context. Because of these

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racialized assumptions, people of color are implicitly questioned by some white people whether they possess the qualifications to belong in the judging room.

River’s experience is not an aberration among ICCA judges of color Jayla, a Black female judge, shared several experiences with me (from within the past ten years), in which people questioned her ability to adjudicate the competition. In one instance, a producer made her list her resumé because he did not believe that she belonged:

I remember coming in [to the judging room] and I was like, ‘Hi, my name is Jayla,’ and then he [the producer] went up to me—didn’t go up to any of the other judges—and asked me what my credentials were. I was like, ‘um, my credentials?’ He said, ‘yeah, what did you study? Did you study music in college?’ […] I was like, ‘well […] I was music director of my college a cappella group, I’m a beatboxer [...]’ I remember later just being like, ‘that was kind of odd.’

Even after he was warned by Amanda Newman, the executive director and owner of Varsity Vocals, that his behavior was unacceptable, the producer treated Jayla the same way at another competition later that year, albeit by pointedly asking the whole room this time to share their credentials. When Newman heard, she fired the producer.

At a different event, a fellow judge ignored Jayla because she shared that she did not have a college degree in music. Not until she mentioned that she had an upcoming performing engagement with a famous person in the community did he pay her any attention. During deliberations, she disagreed with him when discussing the superlative award for Best Vocal Percussionist. He championed a loud, showy candidate who she felt had not mastered the basics. But when Jayla tried to put forward an alternative choice, he cut her off: “I told him that, as a vocal percussionist, these are the things that are important: #1, keeping time; #2, keeping time; #3, keeping time. And then, he interrupts me and says, ‘well, as someone who does actual

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5 Jayla, personal interview, June 2020.
6 Jayla, personal interview.
instrumental percussion for a living, I feel like this kid needs to get it.’ [emphasis original]”

Because Jayla had not studied music in college, that judge considered her opinions less valid than his own, even though she had more experience in a cappella than him. He “mansplained” vocal percussion to her, a vocal percussionist, even though “he couldn’t even do a basic snare” sound with his mouth. Given the tension, the Varsity Vocals producer on-hand intervened and declared that, since they could not come to a decision, no one would receive the award that night. After the show, the producer informed the male judge that, while she valued his input, “‘if you ever come for my friend again, you will never judge in this region again. Are we clear?’” The producer’s language choice, “her friend,” implies that their friendship is the reason that she defended Jayla, that the producer may not have been as aware or as ready to help if they did not know Jayla personally. In both cases, Varsity Vocals staff members dealt with the condescension directed at Jayla and made clear that they would not tolerate it in the judging room. Nevertheless, the point was made to her: Black people had to defend their right to be in the room and rely on “good” white folks to help them.

These instances of indirect prejudice with racial undertones qualify as microaggressions. Christy Jay Wells explains the concept of microaggression as a form of critical analysis: it, “directs needed attention toward the unconscious damage caused by well-meaning white men lacking awareness of their…privilege, sensitivity to the problematic dynamics of institutional racism, and willingness to meaningfully confront the power structures in which their…behavior and relationships function.”

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7 Jayla, personal interview.
8 Jayla, personal interview.
9 Quoted in Jayla, personal interview.
racist is beside the point: their behaviors, both directly and indirectly racialized, reinforce long-standing inequitable dynamics. Kelsey Klotz characterizes microaggressions not as “smoking guns” of racism but as woven indirectly into the structures and ideologies of musical criticism and reception: “my evidence exists not in one or even a handful of clearly racist sentiments, but rather in the coded language of many jazz articles and reviews that sustain systems of racism—systems that have been integrated into the fabric of jazz history.”

In a cappella, the structural vantage points of whiteness and the racialized ideas of what Blackness and Asianness sound like appear in similarly “coded” or indirect forms, such as questions about qualifications based on a person’s race, assumptions about “natural ability,” perceptions of who can perform at certain competitions, and ideologies of solo and group singing.

After I connected River and Jayla’s responses, I mentally reviewed my own experiences in the judging room: had this happened before when I was present? From what I remember, no, but I may not have recognized it at the time. If the microaggressions are not as blatant as those directed towards Jayla, if you are not listening for them, or if the microaggressions are not directed at you, it can be easy not to notice. I say this even though, for the past six years, I went into every a cappella judging room actively thinking about race and social dynamics. For other white judges, it does not seem to have even registered. None of my white interlocutors, even the ones who were present for some of these anecdotes, discussed an incident like this when asked about the role of race in the judging process because they do not experience it themselves. One white ICCA producer I interviewed claimed to be unaware of any incident regarding diversity.

Conversely, River opined that “if you’re a racial minority, you’re looking at it with everything

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12 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.
with an additional critical eye,” which resonates with Frankenberg’s warning about “to whom is whiteness invisible.”13 Shannon Sullivan similarly theorizes whiteness and white privilege as an unconscious habit:

the concept of habit helps explain how white privilege often functions as if invisible. Habits are the things we do and say “without thinking.” They are the mental and physical patterns of engagement with the world that operate without conscious attention or reflection. They fly under one’s conscious radar, so to speak, and are all the more effective precisely because they tend to function unnoticed.14

Based on Sullivan’s argument, white judges like myself may not have observed racial microaggressions because we were not in the habit of consciously noticing them while judges of color like River and Jayla do not have that luxury.

When white judges force people of color on the spot to defend their place in the judging room, they not only make rash assumptions about a person’s experience based on their race, but also reinforce an unspoken hierarchy of whose and which experiences qualify a person to judge a cappella. Folks like River and Jayla might be considered by some a cappella practitioners to be unqualified because of their “non-traditional” backgrounds, that is, because they are not arrangers or don’t have a college degree in music, traits that are traditionally considered necessary to judge at the ICCA. One Varsity Vocals producer tried to dispel these perceptions to me when she asserted judges must be people “with skillsets within the rubric. They should be able to recognize the musical minutia. If you’re a choreographer, that’s a great skillset to have, but if you don’t have basic music theory or you can’t recognize a basic arrangement or an arrangement that’s unnecessarily complex, you can’t work within our rubric. (emphasis mine)”15

13 River, personal interview.
15 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, October 2019.
Nowhere did the producer say that a judge must be a music educator, have a music degree, or have won Best Arrangement, only that judges have to be somewhat fluent in (assumed Western) music theory in order to “recognize the musical minutia.” However, how that competency is assessed is unclear: the Varsity Vocals judging application at no point asks whether someone has training in music theory, nor do people have to pass a music theory examination to adjudicate.\textsuperscript{16} If they did, would Western classical music theory as it is typically taught in U.S. music departments (i.e. focusing on analyzing the music of J.S. Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven) prepare someone to adjudicate a cappella competitions of mostly popular music, which, though related, can work differently? Someone who has won Best Arrangement or has served as music director implicitly possesses the desired skill in their eyes. A person with a music degree similarly is assumed to have this skillset, even though most music degree programs (and the music theory classes those students would take) do not teach popular music theory or other skills that are directly applicable to the music they would be judging: judges do not mark down when they hear parallel fifths in an arrangement. Thus, the assumptions still influence people’s perception of who makes a good judge and, as shown in the anecdotes above, that assumption is intricately tied up with race given who is involved in a cappella in the United States.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the ways whiteness works at a cappella competitions through the mechanism of expectation—in judging rubrics, judge panels, and ideals of vocal timbre—assumptions informed by whiteness perpetuate inequity. I show how assumptions of musical values and standards based on Western classical music dictate the competition’s judging rubric, regulate who can become a judge, and affect how judges give feedback to competing groups.

Although I focus on whiteness, I also investigate how race in a cappella competitions intersects with other forms of inequality, forming what sociologist Joan Acker theorizes as an “inequality regime,” the “interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations.” Acker argues that even institutions (such as the ICCA) that strive for equal and inclusive practices still develop inequity between groups. These inequities bear out in “systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations.” Analyzing Varsity Vocals and the ICCA as institutions through an intersectional lens reveals not only the limited opportunities for people of color to inhabit leadership roles such as a judge, but also that racial equity remains a challenge even as equity in gender and sexuality has improved significantly, particularly for white people.

Expectation and the Racialized Early History of ICCA

Although I outlined the general history and logistics of the ICCA in Chapter 2, my critical narrative did not dwell much on race, this dissertation’s core issue, for two reasons. First, race and whiteness would be explored further in later chapters such as this one. Second, I highlighted other issues of identity and access at ICCA so that they received attention without detracting from the narrative of these chapters with more focused arguments. This section retraces the early history of ICCA with focuses on race, gender, and expectations in the

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competition. Expectations, like Sullivan’s theory of habit, “fly under one’s conscious radar” while influencing our perceptions and opinions. By making explicit these implicit expectations, I am both bringing them to light to be analyzed as well as marking them as racialized and gendered.

When the ICCA began in 1996, the competition stemmed from a long-standing white musical practice. Collegiate a cappella began during the time of Jim Crow at white, male-serving, elite institutions in the northeastern United States. Many of the initial participants in the ICCA hailed from these same institutions (even if they were not the long-standing or venerated groups from those universities) as well as other major schools such as the University of Virginia, the University of Illinois, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.\(^{18}\) Though a cappella was dominated by white, male-identifying groups, in the first two years of this new competitive adventure, two groups that did not fit the mold won the tournament: the University of North Carolina Lorelais, a female-identifying group, and Stanford Talisman, and an all-gender ensemble that sings music of the African diaspora and was (at the time) majority people of color. Those wins proved more the exception than the rule and lay bare some of the expectations of the ICCA moving forward.

At the first Finals, in 1996, Adam Farb, one of the competition’s co-creators and co-owners, cast an unexpected tie-breaking vote to decide in the Lorelais’ favor because the four-judge panel deadlocked over their preferences for the women’s contemporary sound versus the male-identifying Duke’s Men’s (of Yale) barbershop-inspired sound. Farb told journalist Mickey Rapkin that he “never thought we’d have an all-female group win the whole thing,” let alone in the competition’s first year.\(^{19}\) His surprise at a female-identifying group’s success reflects how

\(^{19}\) Quoted in Rapkin, *Pitch Perfect*, 68.
bias and expectation became embedded in the competition from its beginnings, the power that even one judge and producer can play in mediating it, and how it becomes entangled with ambiguous aesthetics of what “good” a cappella is.20

The issue of misogyny, as Rapkin details in his trade book *Pitch Perfect*, would come to a head in 2005, when the University of Oregon’s treble group, Divisi, was blackballed by a female judge who ranked them low enough to cause them to lose Finals. To prevent this from happening again, Varsity Vocals instituted a new policy for five-judge panels where the highest and lowest scores are dropped to prevent a single judge from controlling a group’s fate.21 Even with the larger panels, only two female-identifying groups have won ICCA in its twenty-three-year history, the Lorelais in 1996 and Brigham Young University’s Noteworthy in 2007. Moreover, only four have placed in the top three at Finals. Thus, the results of the first Finals have proven to be unusual. The five-judge policy—still in place today for Finals, most Semifinals, and many Quarterfinals—shows how the structure of the ICCA has been adjusted in response to prejudice (against all-female-identifying groups) while not completing eliminating the issue at hand.

Much has been made of the disparity of differently gendered groups at the ICCA, both in media and in printed books such as those I cite. However, almost no discourse concerns the role of race in the competition. For example, Stanford Talisman’s 1997 win goes unremarked in Rapkin’s book and Joshua S. Duchan’s monograph. No available newspaper articles describe their performance. Even in online discourse such as the archived posts of the old Recorded A Cappella Review Board (RARB) forums, Talisman’s ICCA set receives little to no mention.

While I use “bias” here as shorthand for sexism, racism, and other prejudices favoring cis-het white men, the term means something slightly different within the ICCA. For Varsity Vocals competitions, bias more frequently refers to judges’ favoritism for or against a group/school, particularly if they have attended the school or worked with the group in question. Varsity Vocals goes to rigorous ethical lengths to craft judge panels free of this type of “bias,” sometimes even dropping judges from a panel on the day of the competition.

except in threads such as one from 2007 on “diversity in ICCA.” In response to earlier assertions in the thread that a cappella is a primarily white activity, one user, dherriges, commented on their experience in a cappella at Stanford University, which at the time featured six groups, including Talisman. Four of the groups (Mendicants, Counterpoints, Fleet Street, and Mixed Company) are racially unmarked and sing American popular music. dherriges asserts that Talisman and Everyday People—groups that sing music by Black artists—represent “the most racially diverse groups.” In contrast, the four other groups “tend to be more white and Asian; but I think the scene’s about as colorblind as it can reasonably be while each group has its own musical and cultural niche.”

Deke Sharon, the founder of the RARB and co-founder of the ICCA, replied to dherriges that “Stanford’s unique; for over a decade you’ve had both a group focused on the music of the African diaspora and another focused on African American music. Find me another university anywhere with a similar one-two punch (and both excellent groups, I might add).” From Sharon’s response, we can interpret that racially diverse and racially marked groups like Talisman are the exception that proves the rule of collegiate a cappella’s overwhelming whiteness. That Talisman actually won the ICCA goes unremarked in this exchange. Talisman and other racially marked groups who focus their repertoire on an ethnic or racial basis—such as South Asian, East Asian, or Jewish music—rarely compete at ICCA: I see only one to three racially marked groups out of the fifty or more that I judge every year. No other racially marked group has taken first at the ICCA since Talisman’s all-but-forgotten 1997 win.

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one that preceded social media and YouTube through which videos of their performance would have been saved in the annals of the Internet.

The Lorelais’ and Talisman’s wins proved to be anomalies in the continued history of ICCA, in which white, male-identifying, and/or all-gender groups succeeded instead, fulfilling the expectations of a practice tied to the white and male history of elite U.S. education. Although female-identifying and racially marked groups have always been a part of the ICCA, rarely have they been reflected in the make-up of those who have won Finals, a facile but telling statement about ICCA history and identity. Jackson, a white judge I interviewed, framed a cappella as historically, and still, a “white space” precisely because of how the historic legacies I described continue to shape a cappella’s racial dynamics today.26 Similarly, Juan, a Latino music educator and judge, connected a cappella’s whiteness to group singing precedents and media portrayals, as well as an expectation of a cappella as a part of white people’s college experience:

Juan: I think anywhere that there are people of color in places that are dominated by white people, it just naturally is going to be a different experience than when you’re surrounded by people who look like you. And that’s not usually an active thought that white people have. Like I think that’s just what they know and probably that’s what they see in other groups. […] The people that compete and the people that are a part of a cappella groups are probably the people that have been surrounded by people that look like them their entire lives.

DF: Why do you say that?

Juan: *laughs* ‘Cause it’s all white. And, you know, a cappella is, it’s so weird ‘cause it’s not a historically white thing, right, like making music in that style. But I think specifically collegiate a cappella has become an inherently white thing. Like that is just a stereotype of white people in college is they [join an] a cappella group and that’s really nerdy and it’s gonna just continue ‘cause that’s just the perpetuation of it.

DF: Where do you think that stereotype comes from?

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26 Jackson, personal interview, June 2020.
Juan: I think probably from glee clubs and barbershop quartets and just that expanding into the media portrayal of a cappella groups. And probably what people experienced during college. I would say probably a generation above us, like a cappella was still a thing, but it was like a very specific niche for most groups and wasn’t as popularized as it is now. Like barbershop has been white forever, and glee clubs, or show choir…like that’s just where it’s been.27

Juan’s answer indicates the multiple sources from which people develop an expectation that “a cappella has become an inherently white thing,” even though people of color (like him) have always been a part of it and its precedent genres. In his mind, a musical practice does not have to be comprised of entirely white people for it to be a “white thing.” His language mirrors that of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who writes that, for people of color, “[w]hiteness can be a situation we have or are in; when we can name that situation (and even make jokes about it) we recognize each other as strangers to the institution and find in that estrangement a bond. (emphasis mine)”28 Competitions like the ICCA have been and remain a white space or situation because of both the make-up of the practice—who sings and competes—as well as the sonic qualities—that the music sounds white. To understand why we might characterize the music as sounding like a racial identity, especially one that is often characterized as invisible or unmarked, we must examine the judges of the ICCA, how they evaluate the competitors, and why they are so often white people.

“Skillsets within the Rubric”: The Racial Inequity of Who Can Judge ICCA

Groups competing in the ICCA adhere to explicit standards of timing and scoring. Each ensemble is allotted ten minutes to perform.29 If they go over time, the producer will dock them

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27 Juan, personal interview, February 2022.
29 While twelve-minute sets were standard up through the cut-short 2020 season, producers had long discussed reducing the time limit to ten minutes. During the virtual 2021 competition season, participants submitted videos at a
one place in the score rankings, so groups work to remain within the limit. Varsity Vocals’ judges measure a group’s musical and visual success by a standardized rubric. As described earlier, one Varsity Vocals producer explained that the rubric’s categories—such as arrangement and intonation—and the competencies necessary to adjudicate them determine who can become a judge; they must have “skillsets within the rubric.”\(^3^0\) Though none of the categories or their descriptions mention race, racialized ideologies of the voice and inequitable social structures remain implicit in the rubric’s text and those who use it. Moreover, as the opening anecdotes of this chapter showed, these skillsets and their racialized connotations impact how Black and other judges of color are perceived in the judging room, if they make it in at all.

Seemingly neutral or impartial judging rubrics and standards in fact demarcate and construct what is “good” a cappella. The direct connection between judging and musical aesthetics extends to, or descends from, other group singing genres beyond a cappella. As Gage Averill argues, the feedback and rubric of barbershop contests directly impacts how barbershop is performed: “Despite their emphasis on fellowship, barbershoppers enshrined competition as a major feature of organizational life. As a result, barbershoppers have come to understand that the evaluative criteria for judging—rules, categories, and point systems—are the principal means of shaping barbershop performance and style.”\(^3^1\) The rubric a cappella judges use and the feedback they write centers on technical criteria such as blend, tone, and intonation, which become unmarked categories for whiteness in a group singing context. These sonic ideals help form what Karen Tongson calls “choral vocality,” the marked white sound of twenty-first century group

\(^{30}\) Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.
singing heard in media portrayals from *Glee* to *The Office* as well as actual college a cappella groups. She asserts that, even if the people making the sounds are people of color or multiracial or if the genre of a cappella has Black forebears and popular figures, “the a capella [sic] mainstreamed by Ivy League societies of jocular young men,” assumed to be white, overtakes their presence. I build on Tongson’s term by detailing what is “white” about the sound of choral vocality and how it becomes synonymous with an entire practice of music like a cappella, so I use the term “white choral vocality” throughout the dissertation to insist on naming this sound as white. Though I would argue against any essentialized notion of voice or sound as raced, voice studies scholars also note that American listeners hear specific sounds as white or Black based on their timbres. Singers, reinforced by their audiences, make sounds that align with these racialized ideologies, what Nina Sun Eidsheim theorizes as the racial “performativity of timbre,” even if they do not necessarily understand those sounds to be racialized. This chapter examines how ideas of what sounds “good” in a cappella derive from these racialized aesthetics, have become the basis for the ICCA judging rubric, and limit who can interpret the rubric as a judge.

In this section, I evaluate how white choral vocality persists as the ideal in a cappella for group singing, how white sounds became structurally and aesthetically advantageous for ICCA competitors and for judges, and how whiteness reciprocally shapes who is qualified to judge a cappella. I use not only scholarly sources, interview responses, and ethnographic anecdotes, but also statistics of judging diversity I compiled from programs on the Varsity Vocals website to understand how race affects who gets to be a judge.

Collegiate a cappella’s white choral vocality balances contemporary popular music repertoire with criteria based in barbershop and Western choral praxis. The mix of racialized ideologies of the voice and long-standing social structures allow practices of group singing such as a cappella to protect themselves from change, which is how judges and producers hamper different people from infiltrating their ranks. This failsafe works to uphold what American studies scholar George Lipsitz calls the “possessive investment in whiteness,” where white people benefit in economic and cultural capital from being white and therefore structure society to continue that dominance.\(^{34}\) In making this argument about judges, I also reflect on how I, a white gay male ethnomusicologist, came to a position of power as a music director and judge of a cappella, and how I have benefitted from long-standing institutional support within and beyond a cappella that thrusts certain types of white people, especially men, into such positions.

*A “Sonic Barrier to Entry”: White Panels and Rubrics*

For most forms of group singing, blend and timbre help to construct both musical and social dynamics. Voice and vocality, as Katherine Meizel asserts, involve not only the sounds made and the listeners who perceive them, but also how the act works within its cultural context.\(^{35}\) In religious spaces, aesthetics of worship and doctrine become entangled with musical and singing style, as shown in work by Jeffers Engelhardt and Timothy Rommen.\(^{36}\) Marissa Glynias Moore observes that mainline Protestant congregations, an overall white population,

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judge their musical success based on participation and the blend of individual voices into a communal sound.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, in secular genres such as barbershop or community choruses, individual vocal lines with clearly delineated harmonic and melodic goals, but expressed with the same tone quality or timbre, contribute to an aesthetically ideal sound. Contemporary a cappella often seeks this same homogenous, blended tone, even when the voice parts are singing different rhythms and syllables that create a denser texture. Duchan argues that a cappella, like barbershop, is shaped by an “ideology of blend,” a desire for a blended musical, visual, and social presentation that becomes constructed as “authentic” or “natural.”\textsuperscript{38} Like Duchan, I am interested in determining who decides the aesthetics of a cappella and how this ideology of blend and homogeneity affects the genre not only musically but socially and demographically. In chapter 1, I showed how the policies and ideologies of a cappella auditions, rooted in an ideology of blend, can lead to a homogeneous group not only in sound and experience but also race. I continue this line of inquiry here by showing how a cappella judging that privileges an ideology of blend, in both the rubric and those who wield it, also leads to a similar lack of racial diversity, or to put it differently, a “blended” or “unified” group built on racial exclusivity.

To assess the state of diversity of ICCA judges, I compiled demographics from the event programs hosted on Varsity Vocals’ website.\textsuperscript{39} Although my focus is on race, I also recorded judges’ gender identities to understand the relationship between these two identities I categorized as well as their professions. I categorized judges according to their gender and profession based on the biographies they submitted for these programs, which almost always include personal


\textsuperscript{38} Duchan, \textit{Powerful Voices}, 21.

pronouns and information about the person’s job, and internet sleuthing for when they do not. I identified their race based a combination of their evident physical appearance in photographs, the program biographies, my personal knowledge of individual judges, and their self-disclosure. The statistics I lay out, as Todd Decker writes in his study of racialized casting on Broadway using Playbill programs, “rely on my own respectful guesses as to [individuals’] racial and ethnic identities based on the publicly available evidence” of programs and photographs.40 This imperfect method necessarily means that I am making judgments and labelling people based largely on their appearance, especially using what Linda Martín Alcoff has called the “visible or otherwise discernible features” of race.41 But, as Decker notes, this method allows for “quick assessment” where “racial casting patterns quickly become evident,” or in this case, the racialized patterns of who judges the ICCA.42

The resulting statistics illustrate the limited racial and gender diversity within a cappella ranks. In 2019, 139 of 177 ICCA judges (78%) were white and 104 (59%) were men (see Figures 3.1a and b).43 Though most events have at least one woman, trans/non-binary person, or person of color, 19 of the 49 ICCA events (39%) consisted only of white judges (Figure 1c). Six panels (12%) featured only male judges. Every panel included at least one white man.

42 Decker, “The Multiracial Musical Metropolis,” 188.
43 I use statistics from 2019 because it is the last full, regular season prior to COVID-19. While I have data from the 2020 season up until it was suspended, not all of the Quarterfinal events had occurred, so comparison of the incomplete numbers with other years would yield skewed results. Virtual judges’ identities are not always public knowledge, so there is no 2021 data and the 2022 data is incomplete because a number of events were held online with no record of who judged them. I choose 2016 because it shows the change over three years and is the earliest that for which these publicly available programs are complete.
Judges also fall into three subgroups based on their professions, which are roughly analogous to who Varsity Vocals targets to apply on their website: “If you are a music educator, performer, or an experienced a cappella practitioner, get in the judge’s seat!” Of the 177 total judges from 2019, 28% work as choral directors, part of the 34% who are some kind of music educator, including choral, instrumental, and general music educators as well as those who are primarily private music lesson teachers. The vast majority of music educators (83%) are white and a slight majority (54%) are white men. Over two-thirds of judges work as music educators, therapists, performers, managers, musicologists (including myself), or recording engineers and have a similar demographic make-up. These statistics demonstrate the current state of diversity in collegiate a cappella judging, which producers, judges, and alumni intimated to me represents a noticeable improvement compared to even a few years ago. This begs the question, why are a cappella judges so overwhelmingly white and male?

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Figure 3.1a and b: Graphical representations of judge demographics for 2019 ICCA and ICHSA Competitions, broken down by race (a) and gender (b).

Most judges for Varsity Vocals belong to a limited demographic because they can assess the adjudicatory criteria set by the organization. The rubric’s categories and descriptions, which have remained largely the same since 2004, were at least partially based on scoring criteria from barbershop festivals, such as the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS), and scholastic choral festivals.\(^45\) As Robert Hopkins has shown, the BHS defines the genre of barbershop explicitly in their mission statement, including specific musical features such as four-part texture, ringing chords, and just intonation.\(^46\) In contrast, Varsity Vocals does not define a cappella’s musical characteristics, preferring instead to define the competition by what it is not: “We accept vocal ensembles of all styles, but we are not a choral competition,” and “Any music style is acceptable, but repertoire and choreography must be appropriate for a family show. No instruments of any

\(^{45}\) Varsity Vocals administrator, personal interview, October 2019; and Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 119.

kind are allowed.”47 Though these vague statements suggest inclusion and diversity of “any music style” and “vocal ensembles of all styles,” the range of music presented onstage is quite narrow. Moreover, Varsity Vocals’ mission statement illustrates the subtle divide between group singing genres, like barbershop, that have precise musical parameters and group singing practices, like a cappella, that have loosely defined, indistinct musical details and are characterized more precisely by their social dynamics and institutions.

We see this same vague language in the competition’s rubric. Varsity Vocal’s rubric categories split between vocal and visual performance, with musical benchmarks mostly focused on Western classical music ideals of performance, such as intonation, balance and blend, and tone quality (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). Though none of the categories’ descriptions directly mention these aesthetic roots, the explanations balance bel canto/Western choral singing technique with inclusionary language about choices that are “stylistically appropriate.” For example, tone quality references vibrato vs. straight tone and “well-supported, freely produced, resonant where stylistically appropriate, volume appropriate” singing. The explanation of diction pairs “matched word sounds (vowels, consonants, diphthongs)” and “stylistically appropriate diction.” Other categories such as intonation are even more vaguely worded. “Pitch accuracy and consistent tuning. Centered pitch.” Balance and blend are defined through questions: “Do they sound like a unified ensemble?” and “Are the voices balanced across parts and within parts?”48 These ambiguous descriptions allow for interpretation, permitting judges to police the performance based on their own standards, but also assume that judges have the same or similar ideas of how to interpret them.

Judges: The following are definitions of the criteria to be evaluated in the Vocal Performance and Visual Performance categories as well as a guide to assigning point values within these categories. There is also an explanation of how to assign value within the Subjective Rank category.

### Vocal Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balance and Blend</td>
<td>Are the harmony, melody and rhythm parts balanced? Do they sound like a unified ensemble? Are voices balanced across parts and within parts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrangement</td>
<td>Difficulty Creativity (too many “doo”s or repeats? Clever textural changes? Too much repetition?) Arranged within a range appropriate for singers’ voices (avoids muddiness at low end, screeching at high end) Is it musically, lyrically and rhythmically interesting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Is the performance true to the style of the arrangement? Is the interpretation of the arrangement musically, lyrically and rhythmically interesting? Does it work in a live a cappella format? Does it convey appropriate emotion? (Please note: Do not compare the group against the professional groups they cover. Avoid preconceived ideas of how the music “should” be performed.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythmic Accuracy/Vocal Percussion</td>
<td>Rhythmic precision, tempo consistency, or effective use of non-metered time If using vocal percussion: Contribution to the musicality of the performance Use of advanced techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intonation</td>
<td>Pitch accuracy and consistent tuning. Centered pitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone Quality</td>
<td>Control of vibrato/straight tone where appropriate Vocal color and tone appropriate to the music Well-supported, freely produced, resonant where stylistically appropriate, volume appropriate Breathing does not draw attention, or as stylistically appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics</td>
<td>Are dynamics musically interesting, appropriate and well executed? Are phrases shaped?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diction</td>
<td>Matched word sounds (vowels, consonants, diphthongs) Stylistically appropriate diction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo Interpretation</td>
<td>Contribution to the musicality of the performance, quality of soloists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Visual Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Cohesiveness</td>
<td>Do they appear as a group? Is the movement, or lack thereof, appropriate to the overall perceived aims of the group and maintained effectively throughout the performance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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With one-third of judges working as music educators and another third as professional musicians, these standards are grounded in their formal training in Western vocal and choral music. Moreover, the musical criteria of the judging sheet—not just the four I listed above, but also other categories like rhythmic accuracy and interpretation—closely match the adjudication forms of choral festivals and competitions which are based primarily on Western classical repertoire. One Varsity Vocals producer shared with me that, for high schools new to competing in ICHSA who need to petition their school boards for funding for competition expenses, they have written letters of support that show how Varsity Vocals’ rubric aligns with state choral adjudication and education standards. To pick two examples from widely available state choral adjudication forms in states with strong a cappella presence at both the high school and collegiate level: On Michigan’s choral adjudication form, the highest score for diction is described as follows:

- Pronunciation of *consonants* and *vowels* is correct and language-appropriate.
- Enunciation of text is clear, precise, and *stylistically appropriate*.
- Beginning and ending consonants are sensitively articulated.
- *Diphthongs* are correctly performed. [emphasis mine]

Varsity Vocals’ criteria for diction uses very similar phrasing: “Matched word sounds (vowels, consonants, diphthongs). Stylistically appropriate diction.” Likewise, on Massachusetts’ rubric, intonation is described similarly—“The ensemble performs in tune in all dynamics and ranges throughout the performance”—without specifying that Western classical music theory ideals of tuning undergird what is implied by “in tune.”

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49 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, October 2019.
Varsity Vocals’ definitions lack even the limited specificity of the state choral adjudication forms. The open-ended descriptions of the ICCA rubric allow judges to use their discretion to assess the diction of, for example, a group that covers both a hip-hop song and a pop song in the same set. They also give judges broad leeway to interpret performances based on their own aesthetic preferences, musical training, and a cappella experiences. This is evident in one nearly ubiquitous statement producers use to instruct the judges before the competition begins—“know your fives and your tens”—which reminds judges to remind ourselves what is “average” versus “excellent” before seeing the first group. Producers do not say, “know what a five is and a ten is for each category.” They want judges to interpret the scoring rubric based on their own experiences and the limited descriptions.

Varsity Vocals’ rubric limits who can judge the competitions: expertise in its specific categories tilts the pool of judges towards music majors—including vocal performance, music education, (ethno)musicology, and instrumental performance—or those with strong backgrounds in music direction or arranging, a predominantly white population (83%, as mentioned above). These skills and knowledges based on Western classical music aesthetics behave as structural hurdles to people of color entering the judging volunteer-force. As ethnomusicologist Loren Kajikawa demonstrates, classical music functions as a form of property connected to whiteness due to the barriers that limit the accessibility of music lessons, instruments, and concert attendance. This privileged legacy endures in the admissions demographics of music majors and thus also a cappella judges, both groups that are disproportionately white.\(^\text{52}\) The unequal racial distribution becomes even more lopsided when considering the already difficult structural

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barriers for people of color to matriculate at higher education institutions. Thus, when considering the combined impact of college admissions with racialized ideologies of Western classical music aesthetics at the high school and collegiate levels, the reason music directors and arrangers and teachers, or at least music majors, are favored to become judges becomes clear. Moreover, we can understand these both as part of the a cappella pipeline described in Chapter 1, that college admissions affect who is in the pool to possibly audition for an a cappella group and choral standards and training impact who is typically considered capable of becoming a judge.

A cappella’s aesthetic ideals also lead to generic and vocal boundary policing within performances as judges try to adjudicate through their scores and written comments given the rubric’s guidelines. Though judges do not try to persuade groups to sing like a Western classical choir, they regularly comment on vocal technique, such as breathing and vowel matching, and vocal timbre, described as blended, breathy, or bright. These sorts of comments are helpful, as groups receive feedback from experts. However, the lack of diversity in demographics and experiences leads judges to give the same kinds of feedback as each other and creates the perception for groups that there is only one way to perform a cappella at ICCA. As a result, this perception becomes reality. Although Varsity Vocals’ Director of Adjudication and producer Emily Flanders told me that she tries to create panels with a variety of skillsets—such as arranging, vocal technique, choreography, and vocal percussion—challenging logistics make this ideal difficult to achieve (see below). Moreover, a mostly homogeneous judging pool allows

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54 Emily Flanders, personal interview, October 2019.
adjudicators to (unconsciously) preserve particular sounds as “good” a cappella, favoring sound qualities such as wide group tessitura, blended and balanced tone, a bright matching timbre, and perfectly tuned triadic harmonies, or, in other words, the white choral vocality Tongson describes.

These sound qualities also discriminate against groups that do not or cannot adhere to the (biased) standards, such as female-identifying or treble groups. Lisa Forkish, a prominent advocate for treble a cappella, wrote in a 2014 blog post: “So many [treble] groups are simply trying to sound as much like [a male-identifying or all-gender] group as possible, focusing on singing as low and as high as possible, as loud as possible, as full as possible.” Though wide group tessitura and full timbre seem like innocuous descriptors, they reveal a hidden bias towards male-identified and all-gender group sounds. Audiences and judges might prefer sounds from the lower vocal range, a taste they convey through comments disparaging female-identified or treble groups as “screechy” or “whiny,” adjectives I have heard used for treble a cappella since I started participating in the practice of a cappella (albeit in an all-gender group) at age fifteen. Lana, an Asian-American woman judge I interviewed, described her experiences working with older, male judges who hold tight to these ingrained ideals: “I’ve definitely hit some walls with some judges where they’re kind of more like, you know [male-identifying] groups are so, so good and like female[-identifying] groups can’t ever be that good. And I’m just like, I don't know why you’re talking right now.” (Such gendered biases and microaggressions are also prominently featured in the first Pitch Perfect film, the plot and themes of which I discuss in Chapter 5.) I have no firm argument as to why these gendered ideals exist and

56 Lana, personal interview, June 2020.
continue to persist, in part because the questions I posed to my interlocutors focused on race and less on gender and other identity categories. One probable explanation is that these ideals are held over from the long history of male-dominated choral and a cappella singing before the gender integration of college campuses in the mid-20th century. But the persistence of these biases speaks to the importance of intersectional analysis when examining identity and inequality in a cappella.

I have already identified ways that these sound qualities impose a white, Western aesthetic, but groups that combine American popular music with South Asian popular music complicate a voice studies theory of race built on an American Black-white binary, which does not cover contexts such as collegiate a cappella that have other kinds of diversity. These groups have rarely succeeded in the ICCA, often not for lack of artistry but because the judging criteria dictate that their tone, intonation, or arrangements that combine American popular music with South Asian popular music (especially Bollywood) do not match the established aesthetic ideals of white choral vocality. Their tone might be more nasal or thinner than American popular voices or their arrangements may include scales and modes outside of the Western major/minor paradigm. One South Asian judge I interviewed, Arjun, shared that the South Asian group he sang with in college changed their sound and their repertoire in order to compete at the ICCA. It is much more difficult for South Asian groups to demonstrate their artistry to the judges, he said, “when there is this aural or sonic barrier to entry.” The group had not competed in the ICCA before his tenure because of this perceived, but not explicit, barrier: “Nobody was like, ‘you

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57 Duchan, Powerful Voices, 14–16.
58 For more on the aesthetics and political dynamics of singing in South Asian, specifically Carnatic and Tamil, popular music, see Amanda Weidman, Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4–14.
brown people can’t be on stage’—no one was being racist or anything like that—but certainly there is a barrier to ‘this group of people won’t like this kind of music.’” His group’s fears bore fruit when they started competing in the ICCA, as comments from judges on their Hindi/Bollywood songs, which were often mashed-up with American popular music in English, were unhelpful and vague. Evidently, the judges didn’t know how to give feedback on music that involved microtones or was not in English; they usually misunderstood it or ignored it altogether. Given this cultural barrier and the judges’ inability to understand the music, the group shed most of their Hindi repertoire to do better in the competition. Their most successful ICCA set had almost no Hindi music except for a song from the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), which Arjun called a British imitation and not authentically Bollywood. But that choice led to them placing at their Quarterfinal and moving on to the Semifinal round.

Arjun’s anecdote highlights several ways the ideologies and structures of the ICCA reinforce whiteness. First, Arjun identified that his group’s reluctance to participate in this competition was not in response to explicit discrimination or language in the Varsity Vocals rules, application packet, or rubric, nor was the unhelpful feedback on their Hindi songs overtly racist. However, both demonstrated the unspoken expectation that competing groups would sing American popular music in English.

Second, the judges did not know how to give feedback on music outside of a specific repertoire. While nothing in the rubric prohibits music sung in Hindi, the fact that the judges could not write constructive comments for the group reflects their limited conception of a cappella music as based in the aesthetics of white choral vocality and repertoire that conforms to it. However, when groups I have judged sang in French, the judges had no such difficulty

59 Arjun, personal interview, October 2019.
offering feedback, indicating that not all non-English music is treated as Other. Although not true for all judges, Western classical voice majors like myself, as well as many choral music education majors, learn French, German, Italian, and English diction as part of our training because it is expected that we will need to be able to parse through and assess the pronunciation of these languages. Yet the same cannot be said for languages, like Hindi, outside of this narrow Western European framework. When repertoire outside the expected U.S. popular music arises, it threatens to demonstrate the limits of the judges’ competency and the preservation of their music as the standard.

Third, over time, Arjun’s group changed their repertoire and singing style to adhere to the white choral vocality implicit in the judging rubric and judges’ aesthetic preferences. That they chose different songs to sound more palatable and whiter to the audience and the judges signals the whiteness of the ICCA judging standards and the competition.

One can argue that institutions like the ICCA can set whatever standards they want, and groups that hope to succeed should meet them. However, Arjun’s group knew in advance that their repertory and sound would meet the judges’ expectations, that there was, as he put it, a “sonic barrier to entry” making it more for them (as opposed to other groups) to demonstrate their artistry and creativity. Though nothing in the rubric or rules explicitly indicates that South Asian fusion music would not be judged fairly—recall Varsity Vocals’ online decree that “We accept vocal ensembles of all styles”—the group understood, from seeing who the judges typically are and the rubric’s vague standards, that this would not be the case. In contrast, racially unmarked groups, which adhere to white choral vocality, possess an implicit structural advantage when competing in ICCA, even though whiteness is not named in the rubric’s descriptions. The racialization of these entangled policies, ideologies, and structures may be
unmarked or unnamed, but it nonetheless still problematically affects who chooses to compete in ICCA and how they fare.

One solution would be to make explicit that there is one sound that will win ICCA, to specify the Western standards of tuning, diction, blend, and the other categories as do barbershop and choral contests. But doing so would explicitly label the ICCA contests as white. Such a declaration would likely receive significant pushback from the largely politically-liberal community, especially from those trying to change the ingrained sonic ideals and diversify the competitions to move beyond white choral vocality. Another solution would be to recruit judges with broader skills and backgrounds besides white choral vocality and white, Western music theory, and to give those judges an equal voice at the judging table, which, as the opening anecdotes of this chapter show, cannot be assumed. But that poses different challenges due to the a cappella pipeline.

Aiming for Diverse Representation on Judge Panels

Varsity Vocals’ attempts to change the racial inequality of their judging demographics has achieved mixed results. For Flanders, including more people of color is not tokenism, but instead representation. In her view, performers “want to see people like themselves in the room.” So she actively seeks out judges of color and women to create more balanced panels.60 Lana discussed with me the importance of her serving on panels in the largely white Midwest. She feels a duty as a Asian woman to be a judge for both representation and to bring a different perspective:

I think, even if judges aren’t so visible all the time, especially at performances and stuff, I think it’s important that we have those options because I don’t think it

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60 Flanders, personal interview.
would be fair to have a panel of like all one race of people. Like it's just not that it's not representative of the groups that we see, it's not representative of, you know, the music that we're hearing, and I don't think it encapsulates enough perspectives of people to understand things.⁶¹

Lana’s language matches Flanders’, echoing that representation in the judging room is important, but she goes even further to say that people of color often bring a viewpoint different from that of white judges.

As a result, in the past few years, people of color increasingly fill at least one of the five judge’s seats and almost every panel includes at least one woman, efforts that almost every judge I interviewed acknowledged and praised as important. That this minimal diversity was an achievement in 2019 speaks to how homogenous the white, male panels used to be. Part of this change owes to the fact that, as Flanders pointed out, most judges now had competed in the ICCA as students or are otherwise involved in a cappella. In contrast, few barbershoppers, choral directors, or other musicians without a cappella experience, most of whom were older white men, continue to judge.⁶² Changes in the ratios of judge demographics between 2016 and 2019 confirm the anecdotes: men on panels decreased from 64% to 59% and white people similarly shrank from 83% to 78% of the judging force, though neither are statistically significant changes.⁶³ The percentage of mixed panels, ones that had at least one person who was not a white male, rose from 40% to 49%. But while the demographic statistics over time show a improvement in racial and gender diversity, the changes in the ratios of judges’ careers from 2016 and 2019 show an increased reliance on music teachers (27% to 34%), primarily at the ¹⁶¹ Lana, personal interview. ¹⁶² Flanders, personal interview. ¹⁶³ Andrew Poole, “2016 Event Programs,” Varsity Vocals, April 18, 2016, accessed April 14, 2022, https://varsityvocals.com/2016-event-programs/.
expense of people with careers not in music (35% to 30%), which increases both a relatively non-diverse group (83% white) and people intensely trained in Western music ideals.

One statistical set important for understanding the diversity of panels is the number and make-up of three- and four-judge panels, used when producers could not find any more judges for the event. As noted above, when there is a full slate of five judges, the highest and lowest scores are dropped to balance out any one judge’s bias or impact on the competition results. But when only three or four judges can adjudicate, their individual impact greatly increases.64 In 2019, nine (39%) of the twenty-three small panels featured only white people and five (22%) were all-male panels. Put another way, five of the six all-male panels in 2019 had only three or four judges compared to nine of the nineteen all-white panels. These numbers illustrate a common struggle that producers face in finding “capable” or even available judges, let alone putting together diverse panels.

The intersectional identities of judges matter too. For example: a producer for Varsity Vocals called me to ask if I would mind serving as an alternate judge, instead of a confirmed one, for the week’s upcoming competition because the panel consisted only of men and they wanted a more diverse panel. I replied I was willing. In the end, though, the panel consisted exclusively of cisgender males because no female, trans, or non-binary adjudicators proved available. Moreover, I discovered that my judging colleagues were—in addition to being all male—also all white. Furthermore, all of us had bachelor’s degrees in music and four of the five had worked as music directors for an a cappella group. When I shared the phone call I had with the producer with the other male judges on the panel, one remarked almost off-handedly that, because three of us (including myself) identified as gay, we would have no issue with sexism, so

64 Usually, when there are four judges, the lowest scores are dropped, though this has not always been a standardized practice in my experience.
it was fine. This comment signals a major red flag in how people think about diversity in a cappella, especially related to intersectionality and the judging room.

Analyzing this anecdote through an intersectional lens demonstrates how, in discussion of diversity in a cappella, race becomes secondary or tertiary, subordinate to gender and sexuality. Though assessing the changes in social mores around queerness in a cappella is outside the scope of this dissertation, understanding some of this history helps to illuminate the fuller social dynamics of this interaction. Duchan details that at the beginning of the twenty-first century—in part because collegiate a cappella, like barbershop, consisted of mostly single-gendered “male” and “female” ensembles which connoted potentially homoerotic spaces—groups worked hard to assert their heterosexuality in rehearsal and performance.65 So queer people remained closeted to avoid homophobia from other members and people outside the group. Even when I was performing with my own a cappella group in early 2010s, I knew very few other openly queer people in a cappella, especially in male- or female-identifying groups, because of this pressure. Thus, having openly queer judges is a good thing for visibility to students and to integrate different approaches thinking about gender and sexuality on stage.

But in the United States, social mores around queer sexuality have changed rapidly in the new millennium, especially since the repeal of the federal government’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in 2010, which allowed queer people to be open about their gender and sexuality in the military. As a result, much of the stigma of queerness has evaporated within a cappella, even if full inclusion and equity has not yet been achieved, especially for queer people of color who face greater threats of discrimination and violence. Thus, queer judges still benefit from other kinds of

privilege based on our race, gender, and education, not to mention class and ability. Though this
panel was technically more “diverse” than a panel of entirely straight, white men, we brought
very similar perspectives from not only our racial and gender backgrounds but also as all music
majors and mostly former directors and arrangers. As Philip, who, like myself, is also a white
gay judge, lamented during our interview, “gay men can feel like they have a pass [with diversity
issues] because they’re [*gestures airquotes*] ‘oppressed.’”  
White gay men are still white men
who work in more or less subtle ways to retain their structural advantages in a cappella.

If we reconsider this anecdote from a slightly different angle, this conversation started
because a producer suggested that there was not enough gender diversity on this judging panel.
Multiple times Varsity Vocals producers have told me, on the day of a show, that, after realizing
they had an all-male panel, they had gone out of their way to try to include non-male judges at
that event. In contrast, not once has a producer told me that they worked to be sure that their
panel would include a non-white person. Even as Varsity Vocals tries to improve judge panel
diversity and has made strides, the implicit racial advantage of white people, and their limited
ability to recognize it, remains.

Moreover, as most judges of color I interviewed related to me that, if they are asked to
judge, they are often the sole non-white person on the panel. Robert, a Black male music
educator I interviewed, expressed frustration that, most of the time, one person of color was “the
diversity” on most panels. He directly attributed the relative paucity of judges of color to
producers narrowly focusing on certain kinds of attributes for judges, such as being a choir
teacher or winning a special award, and the limited pipeline that such a focus produces:

There are only a few not white judges because they are the only few who have
had the opportunity to become a judge. But I think [...] most people who are in

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66 Philip, personal interview, January 2020.
those college groups that, unless you win a special award, we don’t really know you, you’re not really recognized. [...] Being a teacher helps, but I think that because I had won some special awards, then they kind of knew my name. But I don’t think that every person of color has that same opportunity.\footnote{Robert, personal interview, February 2020.}

He acknowledged that, though the limited judge pipeline benefitted him, few other people of color would have that same opportunity given the current structure of competitions, intra-group dynamics, and what producers look for in potential judges they would recruit.

The 2019 statistics, as shown in Table 1, confirm Robert’s experiences: panels averaged one person of color to four white people. (The typical gender ratio was two women or trans/non-binary people to three cisgender men.) Only fifteen of the forty-nine panels (31%) included more than one person of color, fewer than the number of panels with no people of color at all (nineteen). Just three panels (6%) consisted of majority people of color, two of which had only three members. Over half of the year’s panels (twenty-six, 53%) featured more than one woman or trans/non-binary person and men were the minority on sixteen panels (33%). And, while the statistics affirm that Varsity Vocals has made some progress since 2016—twenty-one panels with no people of color, fifteen with one, nine with more than one—the progress is slow.

\textit{Table 3.1: ICCA judging panels in 2016 and 2019 by race and gender.}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total # of Panels</th>
<th>All White</th>
<th>1 POC</th>
<th>2+ POC</th>
<th>Majority POC</th>
<th>All Men</th>
<th>1 Woman or NB</th>
<th>2+ Women or NB</th>
<th>Majority Women or NB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The judges and producers I interviewed were aware of the racial imbalance on panels and understood, to some extent, why there is a limited pipeline. When asked about diversity in the judging room, one white male judge, Brad, specifically cited the large population of music
educators (his own profession) who adjudicate as holding back racial diversity but not other identities:

Your judging room is going to reflect what's on stage and what's on stage is getting more diverse, possibly? You know, it's going to be people who have been in a cappella most likely. Sometimes we'll have a barbershopper or sometimes we'll have music teachers. But the aforementioned two categories have a severe underrepresentation of African American folks and people of color in general. And so you're going to see a lot more white [people]. You’ll see plenty of diversity of male to female and non-binary people. [...] You'll see intersectionality there. You'll see any number of sexual orientations. But as far as, you know, racial dynamics go, I can count the number on one hand of people of color have judged with in the last 10 years. But I think that speaks to, you know, who's on stage and who's teaching music and who's performing music and that kind of music. 68

In his answer, Brad reflected on the privileging of gender parity over racial inequity on judging panels as well as how panels’ racial diversity has not kept up with the diversification of students. He also used the term “intersectionality,” with which many of my interlocutors (particularly in the music education field) seemed familiar, freely and accurately. This fluency demonstrates a certain level of knowledge about race and inequality, that today’s participants in a cappella exhibit a worldview that recognizes how societal inequalities affect their community’s experience, but without knowledge of how to change the structures in place that maintain the disparities. In this case, he understood that racially biased judge recruitment relates to larger issues of a racially biased pipeline in a cappella that favors white music majors like himself, but did not know how to change it.

Most judges, according to their bios printed in Varsity Vocals programs, have worked as arrangers or music directors, a population that does not necessarily overlap with other kinds of performance expertise that would expand the diversity of potential judges’ demographics, experiences, and viewpoints. From my own experiences reviewing judge biographies in

68 Brad, personal interview, June 2020.
programs and talking with my interlocutors, within a cappella groups, the balance of who works as music director or arranger tilts heavily on white men; women and people of color more often serve in other executive roles—such as president, business manager, or publicity—or performance roles like soloist, vocal percussionist, or choreographer. Moreover, as Jayla’s anecdote at the beginning of the chapter demonstrated, people of color, especially Black women, are not expected to be or have been music directors. One white female producer I talked to saw this split as reflective of gendered leadership practices in American society overall, where women tend to work behind the scenes while men tend to work in public-facing roles.\footnote{Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview.} As with the earlier anecdote about the all-white men and majority-gay panel, this comment shows that a producer compiling panels might be more aware of gender disparity than racial inequity. The few non-arrangers or music directors who become judges are often pre-eminent practitioners in their profession (e.g. prominent a cappella recording engineer, vocal percussionist, etc.). Or these judges fit into a personality type that one producer described to me as “encyclopedic” because they can, for example, recall the set lists from past ICCA events off the top of their head, which indicates significant time spent pouring over the results and performance clips.\footnote{Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, December 2019.}

Some of Varsity Vocals’ recruitment struggles arise from structural barriers beyond their control. The geographic distribution of competitions constrains volunteer judges—who are reimbursed only for gas and lodging—from adjudicating in distant cities and towns and thus limits the available pool of judges for any given event. During my dissertation fieldwork, when I had the flexibility and ability to drive long distances to judge shows, I was called upon several times at last minute to judge shows in places like Lincoln, Nebraska; Chicago, Illinois; or Milwaukee, Wisconsin—far away from St. Louis, Missouri. Producers could not find somebody
nearby who could judge these events so they had to bring in people from way out-of-town and knew I was one of the few people willing to do it, which also meant that another white man would be judging. Especially in geographically broad regions like the Midwest and Southwest, producers have trouble finding enough judges who live in the region but do not have conflicts of interest with competing groups. When that happens, producers must set aside the goal of creating racially diverse judge panels.

Other factors also weigh on who is available to judge specific groups on weekend evenings. The limited compensation and standardized day and time of Varsity Vocals events excludes those who do not have disposable income and available time on weekend nights to travel and judge for free, which enables the limited class diversity of a cappella judges and producers. Moreover, as I discussed with one of the white female producers, judges, some male but more often female, might only volunteer for a few years after they graduate college because of their family obligations. Recruiting judges of color at all proves difficult due to their fewer numbers in a cappella groups, particularly in music director or arranging positions; those who volunteer are usually sought out specifically by producers. Judges of color are also more likely to live near large cities and on the two coasts, so rural, Midwest, and/or South region panels are often whiter. Qualified judges of color also often become professional arrangers or clinicians for high school and college groups, seeking upward mobility within a cappella, which limits the list of groups they can judge due to bias restrictions. Varsity Vocals has offered on a case-by-case basis to reimburse for childcare and tries to make sure that they have judging panels that reflect the diversity of their participants. But, as Flanders relayed to me, she and the producers “cannot fix racism and sexism and misogyny.”

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71 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, October 2019.
72 Flanders, personal interview.
Nearly all the judges of color I interviewed had been recruited by a producer who saw their work at a show, before and during the performance, and told them specifically to apply. Often those people said they would not have applied if not for a producer explicitly making a point to ask them because they did not feel like they deserved it or would be chosen. I share below an excerpt from my fieldnotes about a time when I served in this role for a performer. It demonstrates one way this process works and the importance of unofficial mentoring to bring in new judges in a cappella.

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I’m assisting a producer for the day, which at this moment means waiting with the student performers backstage before they go onstage. I observe the wide range of how their nerves manifest: hands twitching, silent and stolid, praying, jumping, or even practicing choreography one last time with small, quiet motions. Flashing a thumbs up or murmuring encouragement seems like the least I can do as we all wait for the previous group to finish their set. One group’s music director, who is a person of color, seems especially anxious as they rapidly shifting their weight from one foot to the other. Pulling them aside, I remind them that their group has put in the work already, say that I was in their shoes at one point and know how they feel, and tell them that now is the time to have fun and leave it all on the stage. They look at me wide-eyed but maybe slightly calmer and more assured than before.

After their set, the group streams offstage with a new energy: cheerful and confident. I escort them through the venue’s hallways so they can watch the other groups compete from the back of the auditorium. When I ask the music director how it went, they parry my question with another, wondering if I thought their second song was too fast. I confess that I wasn’t listening because I can’t hear very well from the backstage area, but assure them that it was probably fine. I probe again, did you have fun? They grin from ear to ear as they answer yes.

Two hours later, I’m handing that same person their scoresheets and comments that confirm their group won the competition. As they place the stapled pages behind their group’s certificates for First Place and Best Arrangement, I can tell they’re still trying to digest the information that they’re moving on in the competition. I remind them for the second time that evening that their hard work paid off and I ask if they’re a senior. No, a junior, they reply. “Well, I’ll see you in two years then when you’re judging!” They fling another wide-eyed look at me, full of cautious hope and wonder that someone believes they could be a judge. I recognize that look immediately: I made the same face years earlier when a producer suggested to me that I could be a judge someday based on how I conducted my group’s soundcheck. The student stammers a thank you and walks away with light, bouncy steps, like they’re on top of the world.

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As suggested by my interlocutors’ responses and the person in this anecdote’s reaction, people of color, even ones that are traditionally qualified, do not necessarily view themselves as potential judges for the a cappella institutions and competitions through which they compete. This viewpoint may also extend to white people—I might not have applied if not for a producer telling me that I should—but there is no shortage of people like me, white men who were arrangers and music directors, to judge a cappella. It takes concerted effort by producers and other people in positions of power to recruit people of color to be judges because of the racialized expectations of who can or should be a judge due to the a cappella pipeline that favors white people and people who adhere to white-based standards of musical excellence.

**Whose Voice Matters in A Cappella?**

Through a highly visible rubric and widely known judges, in a decidedly not unmarked or invisible manner, the ICCA and a cappella maintain an intertwined whiteness and politics of voice that entitles white people to serve as judges, the arbiters of aesthetics in a cappella competitions. Amanda Weidman argues that “practices of the voice…are a mode of discipline—embodied and performed—through which subjects are produced.”\(^{73}\) A cappella’s ideology of voice, based on a musical and social aesthetic of blend inherited from barbershop and other group singing practices, of seeming homogeneity, produces an unequal and exclusionary hierarchy. The judging rubric and judging personnel, influenced by this ideology, play significant roles in enacting the inequality regime that privileges white people continuing to serve in this position of power, even as racial and gender representation has improved in recent years. The possessive investment in whiteness and this ideology of voice does not end with

\(^{73}\) Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, 14.
judging demographics or rubrics for group singing, but extends to other spheres of a cappella competitions, including who wins best soloist and the politics of listening, as I explore in Chapter 4. And, as I have shown in this chapter, who judges the ICCA and how they judge impact not only this competition but also the a cappella pipeline, writ large, and the aesthetics of a cappella as a musical practice.

Although my interlocutors’ intersectional identities and experiences vary, they are all aware of inequality on the basis of race and other identity axes, including in a cappella. When asked in interviews whether a cappella is inclusive, almost all my interlocutors qualified their “yes” answer or outright said no and gave examples that demonstrated their awareness of the practice’s inequity. They based their answers, in part, on the belief that a cappella music and competitions are beholden to the racial politics of U.S. society overall. For example, while discussing how race affects the judging process, Henry, a white judge, felt that “where the culture is at right now is I think ultimately going to be reflected in some level of adjudication, as much as we might try to correct for that, and in terms of like what students and competitors are putting on stage.”

A cappella practitioners, especially white ones, recognize their limited individual agency over social problems and the lack of diversity in positions of power. Jackson, also white, pointed to “the structural angle” of inclusivity: “what organizations have money and power and what are they doing?” He clarified that, while individual groups exist in and may reflect their own specific social contexts within school, local, and a cappella subcommunities, “it doesn’t seem like the big organizations are representative” of the racial and musical diversity of the groups they represent.

Though I primarily examine voice as sound and social activity in this dissertation, his answer reminds us that voice is often used as a political metaphor, as in to give

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74 Henry, personal interview, June 2020.
75 Jackson, personal interview, June 2020.
voice to, to voice an opinion, or to have a voice/say/vote on an issue. As Eidsheim and Meizel assert in part of their definition of voice studies, “voice [can be] used as an expression of active agency.”

According to Jackson, Henry, and others, not everyone has an equal opportunity or agency to have a voice in a cappella’s positions of power because of how entrenched the practice is within the social mores and attitudes of the United States that privilege whiteness.

Those institutions, including Varsity Vocals and its competitions, may want to be racially diverse, but their past and present make-up reflects the reality that representation would require large-scale institutional changes to the culture, values, and structures. The small adjustments, like combating microaggressions after they happen and recruiting music directors of color who fit the current values of who should be a judge, treat the symptoms, not the causes. As one producer said about equity issues, “I like to think that the a cappella community…is more forward-thinking. I haven’t heard anybody say anything, but that doesn’t mean that they’re not. […] I think that Varsity Vocals as a whole does a good job at reactively solving problems, but we could do a better job at being proactive and handling those issues.”

According that producer, a cappella practitioners and people in positions of power respond to individual instances of racist statements and behaviors, but they have not changed entrenched structures in competitions and society at large that continue to create these disparities, such as unequal representation on judging panels or the standards for evaluating group performances. These two facets of the ICCA are both affected by and affect a cappella auditions and personnel diversity, solo performance and repertoire, how racially marked groups navigate a cappella communities, and a cappella media, all of which are part of the intertwined ideologies and structures that uphold the current

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77 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, October 2019.
version of the a cappella pipeline. Going forward, a cappella institutions like Varsity Vocals have big decisions to make about how they want to address the racialized inequities present in a cappella. As judges, producers, and other a cappella practitioners in positions of power like myself seek to make our ranks truly inclusive, representative, and equitable, we should ask not only whose voices are heard but what they sound like, why those are the voices we choose to listen to, and whose opinion matters in determining whose voice is best.
Chapter 4: Racialized Solo Performance and The Question of Cultural Appropriation in Scholastic A Cappella

When I asked Renee, a Black woman current student, about her experience of racial dynamics at a cappella competitions, she chose not to focus on her own or her group’s performances. Instead, she discussed watching a different group at an International Competition of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA) event perform a Lizzo song, where a Black female-presenting person sang the solo but their voice did not really match the song. Renee questioned if the group pushed that soloist to perform the song because they wanted “a Black soloist in front” or if it was an “organic” choice that the soloist made.\footnote{Renee, personal interview, June 2020.} I have seen this social dynamic, which Renee described as “unavoidable but not always negative,” play out many times over the years at competitions and gigs, and similarly wondered if Black soloists who were not great fits for solos were selected for songs originally performed by Black artists because of their race. Moreover, I too had witnessed the performance Renee described and wrote in my fieldnotes that the soloist “had to take the high notes down an octave,” a shorthand comment to myself to speculate later why the group picked this song, this soloist, and performed it in that key if the soloist had to make these types of adjustments.\footnote{There is no YouTube or other recording of this performance.} Though Renee’s inference that they picked the soloist because they are Black may be the case, the rest of the group’s set that night complicates that
interpretation. In their opening song, a white person performed what I labelled in my fieldnotes “an overly cheery version” of a Janelle Monáe song. So not all of the group’s charts were performed by soloists whose racial identities matched the original performers’. But Renee’s inclination to guess that this improperly matched soloist and song may be due to race opens the analytic door to examining how race influences both how soloists are chosen and how audiences interpret their performances and the repertoire they sing.

Brad, a white male judge, answered the question of racial dynamics at a cappella competitions similarly, discussing soloists but from the perspective of an adjudicator. He explained that, at most Varsity Vocals shows he has judged, there are only one or two Black people who have a solo, and they usually sing excellently. He elaborated by citing issues of access and assimilation in a cappella that mean very few students of color can or want to join a group, which I discuss in Chapter 1 as the beginning of what I call the “a cappella pipeline,” which limits who can participate and how in a cappella. In Brad’s opinion, there is still a “novelty” to hearing a Black person sing with “soul” because “there’s no way a white kid can sing like that.” He worried that, because of this “novelty,” people of color are tokenized or stereotyped both in how they should sound and in the repertoire they should sing to fit that sound. Furthermore, in his reasoning, groups might take advantage of people of color in their membership by having them sing repertoire that would be unavailable to an all-white group.

Brad and Renee both identified solos in relation to racial dynamics in part because of how noticeable a soloist becomes when they claim that mantle. Especially in a competition set, solos become one of the few moments when individual members can stand out from the group and receive recognition in the form of applause and potential special awards conferred by the

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3 Brad, personal interview, June 2020.
judges. As Joshua S. Duchan describes, solos elevate individual members’ social and musical capital within a cappella’s group performance setting: “[s]olos may be the ultimate statement of musical power [in a cappella] because they place one individual’s voice in a vastly more prominent role than all the others.”

Brad’s and Renee’s answers also reveal a subtle but important rhetorical shift that exists not only in a cappella but in many facets of U.S. culture: when people discuss race, they talk about Blackness. Renee and Brad represent many of my interlocutors in this regard who left whiteness unsaid. Even though I had prompted them at the beginning of the interviews that my dissertation centered on whiteness, they chose to focus on Blackness. Renee described one Black soloist’s performance because she found it remarkable, but she did not comment about the white person in the same set who covered a song originally performed by a Black artist, perhaps because it happens so frequently. Brad discussed how few Black soloists and other soloists of color he witnesses at competitions, which implies that most of the soloists are white. He explained that “no white kid can sing” with “soul” like a Black person can, but did not describe how white people sound when they sing. These absences in their answers showcase what Richard Dyer calls whiteness’s invisibility and omnipresence in U.S. cultural production. As I explained in Chapter 3, Ruth Frankenberg refutes this description: “The phrase ‘invisibility of whiteness’ refers in part to moments when whiteness does not speak its own name. At those times, as noted, whiteness may simply assume its own normativity.” But Frankenberg’s and Dyer’s conceptions both suggest that the lack of description of what whiteness is, does, and how

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it works maintains the invisibility/normativity. Dyer argues that, in order to decenter whiteness, it “needs to be made strange” by writing on “whiteness qua whiteness”: “the point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority.” To understand, then, how the power of an a cappella solo connects to race, and especially whiteness, one must not only describe what is happening in full including sound, but also recognize the loud gaps when people equate race with Blackness and other people of color.

One way to begin thinking about how whiteness becomes normative in a cappella solos is to examine how group members become a soloist. A cappella groups do not have a singular method for picking repertoire and soloists, unlike auditions (see Chapter 1). During my interviews with current and past singers, a majority described an all-group process to decide on repertoire, such as a discussion, arrangement trial period, and/or voting on potential songs to arrange. This would be followed by what Duchan calls a “democratically assigned” solo where “members decide whose voice and whose interpretation of the song will represent the group.” But many variations of this general method exist. In some groups, members audition for the solo before learning the arrangement. In others, solos are appointed directly by the music director. When I sat in on rehearsals for one group from Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL), I discovered that arrangements are brought to the music director, who then makes a unilateral decision about the repertoire. After learning the arrangement for a few weeks, members audition for the solo and must get a two-thirds majority of paper ballot votes. If no person passes that threshold, the non-auditioning members give notes to each potential soloist on their performance and have them perform again until the group reaches a consensus. Their method for choosing

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7 Duchan, _Powerful Voices_, 99.
repertoire and solos shows both the variation that exists between group processes as well as the importance that a cappella groups place on selecting what music they sing and who sings the solos. But it also demonstrates, as I argue in Chapter 1 with regard to auditions, how “the voice” takes center stage in consideration even though other factors, such as racial identity, loom in the background. Only interlocutors from racially marked groups shared that they had explicit discussions about race when selecting repertoire and soloists, mostly due to issues of language and pronunciation (i.e. can this person pronounce Korean in a fast rap section?). But, as I show throughout this chapter, a cappella practitioners—including performers, audiences, and judges—recognize soloists’ races and consider what their racial identities mean in the context of the songs they cover. Thus, the issue of who sings a solo goes beyond social structures to the types of songs that groups choose to sing, who they think would be the best person to perform the solo, and how race influences those decisions.

In part because of the limited time I could spend during my fieldwork at group rehearsals (due to COVID-19), in this chapter I do not focus on how the processes of selecting solos and repertoire contribute to the racialized “a cappella pipeline.” Instead, I examine how practitioners interpret solos and repertoire after they have already been selected by groups, much as Renee and Brad described. I begin by contextualizing a cappella’s racialized solos and repertoire in the long history of U.S. racialized musical genres and voices. I then evaluate how ICCA judges choose who wins the Best Soloist award based on amorphous criteria and consensus discussions, as opposed to the rubric used for scoring group singing. This process leads to judges determine which soloist’s voice is “the best” using subjective, racialized understandings of the voice and ideologies that favor white people and those who can adhere to the white standards. Those who win Best Soloist gain social and musical capital within a cappella and can use it to further their
status within the community, such as by becoming a judge, joining a professional group, or auditioning for a reality singing shows. Thus, these awards and the discussions that decide them propel the “a cappella pipeline” and draw on, and contribute to, the ideologies of the voice and social structures that enable inequitable racial outcomes in a cappella.

Finally, I turn to the questions surrounding race and a cappella repertoire. A cappella practitioners have recently begun discussing the various facets of understanding arrangements and performances through the frame of cultural appropriation. My fieldwork and interviews demonstrate the fluidity of these discussions within the community, the thorny issues that arise during group singing of cover songs, and some of the ways in which a cappella practitioners have begun to conceptualize their attitudes towards these questions.

**Rewarding White Singers Who Sing Black**

ICCA judges dole out both scores for group singing, as explored in Chapter 3, as well as individual superlative awards for Best Soloist, Choreographer, Arranger, and Vocal Percussionist. Unlike the group scoring, these “special awards,” as they are frequently called, are not determined through the use of a rubric or explicit process. Thus, judges do not have to abide by the ideal of choral vocality when choosing who wins Best Soloist, which makes sense given that the aesthetic implies group singing in its name. Instead, the award often goes to someone who embodies a racialized sound associated with Blackness and popular music, even as it is made by people of many racial identities, including and especially white singers.

Understanding the interplay between Black and white sounds and people in a cappella requires understanding how race became attached to sonic markers, genres, and discourses, and how it connects to broader trends in the relationship between white and Black people in the
United States. Black music, as Ronald Radano has argued, is not simply music or genres made by Black people, nor is it the opposite of music made by white people. Rather, Black and white music are inextricably linked and must be understood as “form(s) constituted within and against racial discourses,” that is, as a part of their social context, within existing social mores and racial dynamics, and within racialized perceptions and discussions about music. This formulation connects to Nina Sun Eidsheim’s theory of “the performativity of timbre,” where people rely on racialized ideologies of sound listening to voices in order to interpret them as well as when singing in order to appeal to the audience’s expectations. As I explain below, the fervent, overt, and pervasive audience behaviors when listening to a cappella soloists help us to understand not only what audiences prize in a soloist but also how it connects to racialized listening across musical genres and practices.

In addition to a long history of racially delineated “musics,” the white appropriation of Black sound recurs throughout the history of U.S. popular music. By appropriation, I mean white people using what they characterize as Black music/sounds/repertoires for their own gain in financial and cultural capital. The white fascination with Black sounds and musical techniques extends back to blackface minstrelsy, one of the earliest forms of U.S. popular music, in which white performers imitated what they perceived to be Black sounds while depreciating the Black people they copied. Matthew D. Morrison has recently theorized this dynamic as

“Blacksound,” which he asserts continues to animate the aesthetics U.S. popular music-making today:

In form, Blacksound refers to the legacies, sounds, and movements of African American bodies – both real and imagined – on which blackface performance and popular entertainment was based. In function, the concept suggests the scripting, commodification, and embodiment of these sonic performances by both Black and non-Black bodies as a vehicle for self-imagination and the construction of race. These popular, everyday and spectacular racialized sounds are central to how ideals of citizenship vis-à-venthes whiteness developed along the sonic color line throughout the long nineteenth century and continue to resonate into the present (Stoever 2016) (emphasis original).

Morrison emphasizes that Blacksound includes both “real and imagined” sounds from Black performance, a statement which implicates white observers and imaginers of that Black sound. He also draws on Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s theory of the “sonic color line,” which “is both a hermeneutics of race and a market of its im/material presence” and depends on listeners to use both sight and sound to demarcate and reiterate people and sounds as racialized. Although Stoever and Morrison identify this form of racialized listening and appropriation as beginning in the nineteenth century, they both trace how this it continues to today.

A cappella proves to be yet another American popular music space that rewards (white) singers who adopt the vocal stylings of Blackness, while maintaining a complicated relationship with Black singers who do the same. In a tweet, Morrison expands on his theory to foreground the role of white audiences and singers: “a non-Black pop/R&B star who acknowledges the influence of Black singers (& makes quality music) still does not negate the fact that a large demographic of consumers prefer their Black music from non-Black people (historically & at

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In her work on the reality television series *American Idol*, Katherine Meizel has called this musico-racial paradigm the “neo-soul aesthetic.” This approach, employed by a cappella singers of all races and genders, significantly imitates the techniques of virtuosic Black performance, particularly the timbre and expression of gospel and R&B divas. Meizel emphasizes the historical desirability of “a white singer who could perform the repertoire and stylistic symbols of Blackness” and suggests that this paradigm “has heavily informed the construction of whiteness in American popular music.” Meizel and Morrison both assert that contemporary white pop singers imitating Black artists’ sounds—and achieving fame and fortune by doing so while Black artists struggle for the same recognition—represents one of the newest ways this paradigm has played out many times in American popular music history. For example, Daphne Brooks has written about what she calls “sonic blue(s)face performance, a palimpsest of spectacular aural racial and gendered iterations.” She traces this sonic and performative phenomenon from early twentieth-century white woman Sophie Tucker, who imitated contemporaneous Black blues musicians, to the more recent Amy Winehouse’s post-modern, multi-decade sonic borrowing from Black jazz singers, girl groups, and R&B singers. These same musical techniques and vocal timbres continue to interest a cappella musicians today, who adopt the vocal sounds of Black artists from the span of U.S. popular music history.

I focus on soloists in this section to demonstrate how a cappella’s politics of voice is not only racialized but works to uphold structural and sonic whiteness. After outlining the social

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dynamics of listening in a cappella, I illustrate how practical and aesthetic ideologies of race and voice permeate discussions of soloists in the judging room. Judges’ deliberations over the Best Soloist award not only reinscribe larger structural hierarchies animated by whiteness, they also uncover how those choices are themselves manipulated by the racial project of whiteness.

**Hearing Race in A Cappella Listening Practices**

Understanding how people perform and listen to the voice in a cappella illustrates how racialized solo performances work to uphold white privilege. In theorizing the politics of the voice, Amanda Weidman shows that, rather than a universal ideal of what voice is or should be, embodied, culturally constructed ideologies of the voice “determine what voices come to be heard and how.” Building on Weidman, Eidsheim theorizes a “micropolitics of listening,” arguing that “by listening to listening we can trace voice back to ideas” and understand how those ideas become intertwined with sonic production. She explains that the United States’ “deeply ingrained” ideology views voice as “essential, innate, and unmediated,” but that “voice is always already produced through social relationships, within which it is heard and reproduced.” By identifying how listeners perceive and interpret a cappella, we can analyze how their ideology of voice is racialized and how that racialization is used to forge a musical community’s social and aesthetic practices.

In a cappella competitions, audiences, performers, judges, and producers name, use, and applaud Black sounds made by white bodies in a multi-racial, white-dominated context. These behaviors, especially in the audiences, exist not only at ICCA competitions, they pervade nearly

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all performances, including gigs on campus, other festivals and competitions, and on virtual platforms such as YouTube and Instagram live via user comments.

At a cappella events, audiences cheer for performance markers central to the neo-soul aesthetic, particularly high belting and elaborate ornamentation, no matter the soloist’s race. These behaviors signal a preference for virtuosic sounds, learned from viewership of *American Idol* and other 21st-century reality singing shows, or the celebrated pop performers they cover.¹⁹ Audience members respond enthusiastically and loudly to specific techniques of the neo-soul aesthetic—florid runs, improvisatory ornamentation of the original melody, and belted high notes sung for a long period of time (especially at climactic moments in the song)—making known their preferences through their cheers, claps, whistles, and exclamations, often overwhelming the performers’ singing with their own enthusiasm.

Performers select stylistically advantageous repertoire that allows them to emulate neo-soul vocal techniques onstage and encourage these reactions from the audience. As a cappella scholar Duchan shows, ensembles and soloists listen to and imitate successful groups’ sounds, styles, and repertoires. Success is measured not only by audience reactions, but also by competition awards and placements as determined by the audience of judges.²⁰ This forms a feedback loop between audiences, soloists, and judges of what becomes deemed the “best” sound for soloists.

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¹⁹ Katherine Meizel locates this preference as historically appearing after the 1980s, but its full cultural force is not audible in American popular music overall until the late 1990s in artists such as Mariah Carey, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Justin Timberlake. This trend exponentially increases after *American Idol* begins in 2002. See Meizel, *Idolized*, 162.

²⁰ Duchan confirms this is an ongoing practice in a cappella, one that used to occur only during live viewership of concerts and competitions. Since about 2009, YouTube and other social media have enabled this mimicking spectatorship to occur virtually. Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 123.
At competitions, judges’ selections for “Best Soloist” identify a solo performer within a group as “outstanding.” As demonstrated in Chapter 3, most judges for major competitions work as music educators after college and/or served as music directors and/or arrangers for successful collegiate groups, which means they have internalized the neo-soul aesthetic and shaped their groups’ sounds to that ideal. White people comprise the vast majority of judges and producers (the two groups with the most power), even though performers are significantly more diverse, as evidenced by my ethnographic experience, online pictures of a cappella organizations’ staff, statistics on judge and producer diversity, and the testimony of my interlocutors. Because the judging population skews heavily toward white music directors, arrangers, and music educators, their listening behaviors have an outsized influence on which voices are heard as “best.”

Furthermore, unlike the group scoring categories that have some guidance from Varsity Vocals, the individual awards for Soloist, Arrangement, Vocal Percussion, and Choreography have no adjudication standards or descriptions. This policy discrepancy highlights the tension inherent in a cappella between solo and group singing, one which is also present in auditions (see Chapter 1). While the choral vocality of group singing is built into the rubrics, judges to use their full discretion and aesthetic biases to determine the Best Soloist awards, one of the most visible and audible forms of a cappella success. This vague process for choosing winners is not unique to a cappella or even music competitions: ESPN writer Kevin Pelton tweeted about the “amorphous” Selection Sunday process for the NCAA March Madness college basketball tournament, the competition which inspired the creation of the ICCA: “I for one can’t believe
that a homogenous committee asked to pick the best teams based on amorphous criteria made an unexpected choice.”

Producers play a more subtle part in this feedback loop of listening behaviors. While socializing after an ICCA event, I have often been asked by a producer what I thought about a new judge’s comments during award deliberations. These moments may seem innocuous, like innocent chit-chat about new judges. And they are intended to earnestly gauge how a newer judge handled a very busy and stressful process, one that the producer spends limited time overseeing given their myriad responsibilities.

Yet these questions also represent a discreet form of gatekeeping. Producers use veterans’ opinions to gauge whether a first-time adjudicator “understands,” subtly interrogating if the new person’s skills and aesthetic preferences align with the producer’s and with those of the general judging population, influencing whether any given judge will be invited back. Thus, producers can reinscribe particular aesthetic ideals by choosing judges who adjudicate by those standards.

Clearly, the impetus for an aesthetic preference does not rest on a single person or role but is diffusely and unevenly spread amongst the entirety of the a cappella community at large, and reinforced at multiple levels and events. The racialized system of listening is embedded within structures such as competitions that, while not obviously associated with race, lead to inequitable outcomes that privilege white people who imitate Black sounds. These structural advantages protect people and practices in a cappella from change, upholding what George Lipsitz calls the “possessive investment in whiteness.” The ideologies of voice and listening present in a cappella competition judging rooms enable this continued power.

“This is a Singing Competition”: Racialized Soloist Aesthetics in the Judging Room

With only ten or fifteen minutes allotted to decide all four of the special awards, Varsity Vocals judges must necessarily make tough decisions quickly, a task made difficult by the lack of guiding criteria. In my experience and ethnographic work, judges most often offer two reasons for their choices: “vocal technique” and “emotional authenticity.” River, a Black queer judge, used similar terms when discussing the experience of deciding the superlative awards: “I think it's more interesting when you get to the solo stuff because every everybody has an opinion about solos. Everybody has an opinion about who the Best Soloist is. And there's a balance, I think, to some degree of like, ‘Do they perform the solo well?’ versus ‘How well do they sing the solo?’”  

For a cappella, the ideal of “vocal technique” embraces not only Western aesthetics of healthy singing (including “singing on the breath” and blending across vocal registers), but also control over the vocal mechanism and techniques of the neo-soul aesthetic (as demonstrated through melismas and the ability to “healthily” belt, that is, to mix chest and head voice). “Vocal technique” is most often invoked during the deliberation process by judges who are choral or voice teachers—and often white—out of concern for students learning the wrong habits of healthy vocal production. But, as Eidsheim, Meizel, Weidman, and Marina Gilman show, what is determined as “healthy” or “ideal” vocal technique is culturally constructed; different aesthetic ideals require different vocal techniques, which impacts what can be considered “healthy.”  

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23 River, personal interview, January 2021. 
cappella, all of the aforementioned criteria favor typically white, middle- to upper-class students who have access to voice lessons, coaches, and regular music education that teach “healthy” Western classical technique.25

Because vocal technique indexes a particular timbre, charges of someone lacking vocal technique are more often leveled at students of color, especially Black students. Rob Dietz, a prominent, white high school a cappella director, arranger, and producer, tweeted in July 2020, “The idea that classical vocal technique is the ‘healthy’ way to sing, that learning it is the only way to sing well, & that you can’t learn the same foundations of healthy production singing other styles is untrue & can have racist implications.”26 Yet, in a cappella, the ideology Dietz describes runs deep. One Black judge I interviewed, Theo, was taken aback that his colleagues said an all-Black group that impressed him didn’t tune or blend. He quickly realized that when they speak of vocal technique there is an implied “white” beforehand: “Sometimes they see something or hear something they don’t understand and then they assume that it's not quite locking or not quite how it's supposed to be intended.”27 A producer I interviewed shared an example in which a white judge questioned whether a Black singer deserved Best Soloist over the other competitors because they sang a gospel song rather than a pop tune. The judge argued that the two produced different kinds of vocal techniques so they should not be compared, even though contemporary pop songs often employ many of the same vocal techniques as gospel.28 Thus, in these discussions, Black soloists are not explicitly discriminated against based on their race, but are

25 For more on how music education benefits white, upper-to-middle-class students, see Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music.”
instead disadvantaged because of how racialized aesthetics of vocal timbre impact the way judges assess solo performance.

On the other hand, judges speak of emotional authenticity in more straightforward ways with phrases like “they moved me,” “I couldn’t look away,” and “they really got the song.” But these phrases also encompass timbre by conveying a rawness or something unpolished, usually involving growls, register breaks, and scoops that are not associated with white, Western choral singing but Andrew Legg describes as heard and valued in gospel traditions. This ideal is most often invoked when discussing students of color, and but usually judges of color, queer people, and/or those who are not choral or voice teachers advocate for its value. When I asked my interlocutors what they look for while judging group singing and solo performances, the only people who answered with aspects of “emotional authenticity” were queer judges and/or judges of color like River and Arjun. Ultimately, the categories of “vocal technique” and “emotional authenticity” reinscribe the racialized Cartesian split that broadly connects white voices to technical, “elevated,” cerebral singing while Black voices and those of other people of color’s are deemed emotional, unrefined, and bodily, even though these two aesthetics each have their own vocal technique and emotional performativity that are learned through training.

Many times, a cappella performers, audiences, and judges favor white soloists who imitate Black performance. At one competition where I was not a judge, I witnessed several talented soloists during whose performances the audience clapped and shouted over high notes or virtuosic runs. For one white soloist, though, the cheers were, as I wrote in my fieldnotes,

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“deafening.” This person sang “All I Ask” by Adele, a white British singer-songwriter who is a part of the recent blue-eyed soul revival that Brooks contextualizes in the long legacy of sonic blue(s)face performance and one who is often covered as part of ICCA sets. Like many ballads in a cappella competition sets, “All I Ask” begins quietly but gradually grows in volume and number/length of melodic runs to a bellowing climax. The soloist exploited these qualities to show off their emotional depth and strong vocal technique, especially their high-range mixed belt and clear melismas. Analogous to the audience’s explosive response, the judges in near record time, less than two minutes, decided in that soloist’s favor during final deliberations, barely considering other candidates. While this anecdote represents a single Best Soloist outcome, it typifies the type of performance and song selection that warrants the award for a white person who sings Black: they display great control over the vocal mechanism, specifically the type of belt and melismas, while covering a song that trades in the neo-soul aesthetic.

More often, judges have a longer discussion about who should win special awards. And those who champion Best Soloist candidates deploy the two ideals to make their case. In one judging room, our four-person panel came to a deadlock over different vocal ideals: two of us—myself and Charlie, another white judge—felt quite strongly about two soloists, each with one of the aforementioned strengths, while the other two judges liked both singers. Charlie and the panel thought that a white soprano possessed exceptional control over their belt and rendered exquisite high notes, but lacked stage presence and consistency throughout the song. In contrast, an alto of color captivated us (and me in particular), not only because of their exceptional voice, but also they vulnerably emoted so strongly that I, and other audience members, teared up in

31 To protect my interlocutors’ anonymity, I changed the song and artist covered, but the description still applies.
32 Brooks, “‘This Voice Which Is Not One’,” 40.
response. However, the other adjudicators pointed out that the latter performance lacked a vocal polish because the soloist of color was not always rhythmically in sync with the rest of the group and that the original song’s melody did not lend itself to technical displays of vocal prowess (at least relative to the first soloist’s song). As we debated, one judge who was still undecided, Max (who is a person of color), realized that he too liked the latter soloist’s expression, even though he had initially supported the former soloist because of their vocal technique. Charlie maintained that the white soloist’s control and timbre warranted the recognition because “this is a singing competition,” a charge meant to elevate the supposedly “objective” valuation of vocal technique over “subjective” emotions. We might liken this rebuttal to Ellie Hisama’s observation that music theory pedagogy that focuses on “the music itself” precludes considerations of identity or cultural context, which helps to enable the discipline’s focus on white composers.  

Similarly, Robin James argues that, for white male pop music critics, these moves toward objectivity are a form of “epistemic violence”: “the ‘so what about the music?’ question can be a power move that establishes the critic’s or theorist’s epistemic authority over material they don’t actually have adequate knowledge of.”34 In a cappella, judges employ these questions and rhetorical moves, which are a form of microaggression, to artificially separate “the voice itself” from criteria such as emotional performance and cultural context. After several minutes of stalemate, the panel agreed that both soloists merited an outstanding award and the producer called Varsity Vocals administrators to ask for (and receive) special permission to grant two prizes. This outcome would not have occurred if two people, including the lone judge of color, had not advocated for

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the other panelists to rethink the implied, but not codified, default aesthetics of “the voice itself” that would have normally favored the white soloist.

In both anecdotes, the importance of what qualifies as “objectively” “great” technique and timbre, and who can have it, are revealed to be quite subjective. In the second anecdote, the differences between judges’ aesthetic preferences in a soloist, “vocal technique” and “emotional authenticity,” led to a stalemate. Judges in the first anecdote were so in agreement that the award should go to a white person drawing on sonic blue(s)face performance that no discussion of other candidates was necessary. This soloist performing a song by a white artist might not qualify on the surface as cultural appropriation or white favoritism; they “objectively” sang well and imitated the original artist’s sounds well. But the layers of mimicry and imitation embedded in their cover of an artist imitating Black musicians exemplify how the neo-soul aesthetic and Blaacksound permeate popular music, and a cappella specifically, through the adoption of vocal timbres and gestures indirectly, partially obscuring any definitive line between what is a white or Black sound or who owns a sound. Because nearly every Best Soloist and most soloists overall strive for this type of “vocal technique,” white people get away with and profit from their selective adoption of Black singing gestures.

A cappella’s politics of voice reiterates the long history of vocal appropriation in group singing—from barbershop to doo wop, girl groups, rock ‘n roll, and soul—where white people profit off Black cultural production.\(^\text{35}\) Though not a direct economic benefit, Best Soloist awards

carry musical cache: they propel students from amateur musickers to auditionees for a reality singing series, pop backup singers, session singers, musical theater performers, and YouTube stars, to name a few.

To give one example: white YouTube star Peter Hollens first gained a cappella fame from his time in the male-identifying group he co-founded, the University of Oregon’s On the Rocks. While competing with On the Rocks in 2003, he won Best Soloist at the ICCA West Semifinal, at which the group took first place, and then led the group to a second-place finish at Finals. After graduating in 2005, Hollens maintained ties to a cappella as an arranger, judge, clinician, and recording engineer. He rejoined his alma mater group as their front man when they competed on the second season of the reality show The Sing-Off in 2010. While the group placed sixth on the season, Hollens benefitted significantly through further recording and touring ventures with other Sing-Off contestants as a soloist. In addition, the exposure helped him to launch a very popular YouTube channel where he creates “box” videos of himself singing all the parts of a cappella versions of songs, often with guest stars ranging from fellow YouTube personalities to recording artists such as Jason Mraz and Hunter Hayes. His online success then led to his own recording contract with Sony in 2014, one that he later turned down in favor of Patreon and YouTube where he earns $14,000 on average per video. In short, Hollens became an internet sensation. In contrast, the two groups that won The Sing-Off (Nota in Season 1 and Committed in Season 2), both of which comprised of a majority or all performers of color, had

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relatively little success after their television stints. Best Soloists like Hollens and other individual awardees might also leverage their status within a cappella to join a professional group, give a masterclass, or become judges themselves, to move forward in the a cappella pipeline. These superlative winners further the cycle of listening behaviors: future students will eagerly listen to successful performances in hopes that, by imitating them, they too might achieve a cappella glory.

**Repertoire and the Question of Cultural Appropriation**

In spring 2020 I attended a Zoom workshop hosted by two well-known a cappella arrangers, Ben Bram and Shams Ahmed. It was part of a series they curated during the initial lockdown phase of COVID-19 called “Arranging & Chill.” In addition to the usual deep dive into an arrangement and a short Q&A about arranging, this iteration featured an interview with Annette Philip, a Berklee College of Music instructor and singer-arranger for the esteemed professional a cappella group Women of the World (WOW), which specializes in singing music from many different countries and musical traditions. During the conversation, Ahmed and Philip, who are both South Asian, discussed the impact of their racial identity on their experience in a cappella, especially as professional arrangers. At one point, Ahmed asked Philip, “how do we be mindful of appropriation” if people want to incorporate musics or styles beyond U.S. pop into their arrangements and repertoire? This question seemed particularly apropos to ask of Philip because WOW sings music from so many different musical traditions, including lyrics in many languages. After thinking for a moment, she responded that groups must find balance because “the line between appropriation and appreciation is thin,” with the difference being “how much you study about it and how you intend it.” She elaborated that, in her opinion, when
singing music outside of your own cultural tradition, the group must learn the history and cultural significance of the piece and its tradition to “try to get it as close to the original intention as possible.” In addition, she stressed that groups should give credit to the song’s original creators and performers as well as the teachers from whom the group learned about the tradition. This extract of the conversation not only highlights one of the few public-facing discussions about cultural appropriation between prominent figures in contemporary a cappella, but also offers a nuanced statement from Philip about how to incorporate music from traditions besides your own meaningfully and respectfully into your repertoire.

Philip’s two-pronged approach to the question of cultural appropriation—how much did you learn about it and how did you intend it—aligns closely with Ijeoma Oluo’s model of the term in her popular press book So You Want to Talk about Race (2019). Oluo defines cultural appropriation as “the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture” and stresses that power imbalances between dominant and marginalized cultures that can push appreciation into appropriation:

That power imbalance allows the culture being appropriated to be distorted and redefined by the dominant culture and siphons any material or financial benefit of that piece of culture away to the dominant culture, while marginalized cultures are still persecuted for living in that culture. […] Even if a culturally appropriative act means to respect culture, it cannot if it can't understand and respect the past and present power dynamics defining that culture's interaction with the dominant culture.38

Avoiding appropriation, according to Oluo, involves not only sensitively borrowing cultural materials (such as musical sounds and styles) and thus avoiding one-dimensional stereotypes, but also working against imbalanced social dynamics such as financial gain/economic exploitation.

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38 Ijeoma Oluo, So You Want to Talk about Race (New York: Seal, 2019), 146–7.
After Philip explained her definition of cultural appropriation, Bram, who had been mostly quiet during the interview and let Ahmed take the lead, offered an analogy to the performance of Black spirituals by contemporary United States choral ensembles. He noted that, while everyone will have different opinions and standards of what constitutes cultural appropriation in choral music, it was important to “make [the performance] as good and as respectful as possible.” Bram’s allusion to other contemporary genres shows that, not only is this question of racial appropriation not limited to a cappella, but also that the participants see the communities and the questions they faced as linked.

In this section, I explore the current landscape of the discourse in a cappella about cultural appropriation: the typical tentative responses, the private conversations, as well as the more nuanced approaches like Philip’s. I also look back at an older example of cultural appropriation, University of Oregon Divisi’s cover of Usher’s “Yeah” from the 2005 ICCA season, that is both representative of scholastic a cappella at that time, and widely known and celebrated, as I explained in the introduction to this dissertation. I seek not to definitively say what is or is not cultural appropriation in a cappella, but to present the variety of responses practitioners have to the discourse, as well as how appropriation as a mode of analysis ties into some of the larger questions around race, voice, and repertoire in scholastic a cappella.

Contemporary Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation in A Cappella

In the early stages of my research, I tried to act as an information collector about how a cappella practitioners felt about the role of race in a cappella, aware of my role as an ethnographer as well as my positionality as a white man researching race. But the people of my community, especially high school teachers and music directors in charge of crafting competition
sets, considered me an expert before I had completed any formal interviews. They asked for my opinion about one facet of my research: whether or not they could or could not perform particular songs based on the racial composition of their group. For instance, in 2019, I received a text message from one of my interlocutors, a white high school director, that put me on the spot: “[My high school group] wants to close with [a Destiny’s Child song]. Thoughts on that? I know [you and I have] talked a little bit about white groups singing songs by Black artists, not that they are all white, but I don’t currently have any Black members. Is this something I should be thinking about? I don’t really know how to ask it either.”

I asked the director why the students wanted to close with that song. Was it because of the song’s energy or mood, the lyrical message, the multiple solo opportunities, the nostalgia factor (especially since some of them were not born when the song debuted), or because they wanted to sing a song originally performed by Beyoncé? Was there a different song that would achieve some of the same goals but not require non-Black students to embody Black womanhood? The director responded that these were good questions to think about. Ultimately, a different closing song was chosen for the set.

This short exchange demonstrates some key social dynamics of talking about race within scholastic a cappella. First, teachers and music directors increasingly realize they should consider the racial make-up of their group and how it relates their repertoire. Second, white teachers and directors, in particular, tend to seek advice from either people of color within the a cappella community or white people like me, who are known for thinking critically about race. And third, they do not have a firm grasp on how to talk about this subject (“I don’t know how to ask it either”), which shows how rarely explicit discussions of race arise in a cappella and how new the

39 [redacted], personal communication with author, July 2019.
discourse about repertoire appropriateness is. When I was in college in 2010–14, no director or arranger I talked to broached this subject; today’s practitioners might, though, even if they do not know exactly to describe it.

These questions became even more urgent over the course of my fieldwork after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 inspired nationwide and worldwide protests of racialized police violence. A side effect of this phenomenon was that more of my interlocutors became familiar with vocabulary about race, such as structural racism and cultural appropriation, because they read books like Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* or consumed blogs and podcasts about race. My interlocutors continued to pepper me with questions, but now with more specialized terminology for social dynamics and structures that had always been there, such as intersectionality and tokenism.

During my three years of fieldwork, I experienced several interactions with my interlocutors that were similar in that I, a white man, acted as an arbiter or counsel about the appropriateness of performing music by artists of color. One white director inquired about how they could explain to their mostly white students that they really should not perform Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come” as part of their competition set. I pointed out to the director that, as they knew, this song played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement. It could serve as an opportunity for the students to learn about the history of the song, how it was used by protestors, and why it has become an anthem for civil rights. Together they could discuss why a mostly white group performing this song by a Black artist would elide that historical legacy and could be perceived as if the white students were using the song for their own gain. I do not know

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40 [redacted], phone call with author, 2019.
if the director took my advice on creating a lesson plan out of this question, but the group did not perform the song during their ICHSA set the next year.

During my interviews, the questions surrounding repertoire tended to generate more questions as well as hypothetical and real-life examples. An excerpt from my interview with Juan, a Latinx music teacher, demonstrates both his interest in this topic as well as the range of considerations that directors take into account, including group make-up of race and gender and the effectiveness of the arrangement:

The part of your research that I’m super interested in is the, uh, like…groups singing music that’s outside of their identity? I think I read that on your paper [the IRB information sheet]. Like my first year in [his male-identifying collegiate a cappella group], I was the only person of color and we sang “If I Ain’t Got You” by Alicia Keys. And I don’t know if that’s a bad thing. I know that there are a lot of people who feel really, really passionately about that. I’m trying to—I try to think about that myself, like, what is the balance of like singing music that is appropriately—well it’s not like it’s inappropriate but it’s like—that is part of your identity. But then I also think about if there’s a group that’s all white, like, they’re only perpetuating things by like—if there’s [a male-identifying] group and you only sing music by white guys, then that’s like a problem in and of itself. Should you be—then you get to [hypotheticals] like should all-white guys groups be singing Beyoncé? I think there has to be intention in that. And there’s a difference between an all-guys group singing “Single Ladies” and [a specific male-identifying group] who did a really, really cool arrangement of a Beyoncé song that they sang really effectively and really well. So…I don’t have answers about this, but do people—like I think I have a problem with the “Single Ladies” thing but I don’t know if people still have a problem with singing like the other one, you know what I mean? (emphasis original)

Juan touches on several key areas of debate within the question of repertoire: 1) if and how a group can perform music by artists who do not share their race and/or gender, 2) would this not lead to all-white groups only performing songs by white people, 3) does the lyrical and emotional content of the song matter, and 4) does the quality of the arrangement, soloist, or group performance matter? He approaches these topics through a mix of personal experiences within his group or that he had seen in other groups as well as imaginary examples. Oluo
describes cultural appropriation similarly, with specific examples such as Eminem and white rappers, to try to concretize the abstractness of cultural appropriation, to help readers understand the variables that make the boundary between appropriation and appreciation analytically fuzzy.

As seen in Juan’s response, the overarching question that arises in response to these situations is whether individuals or groups in a cappella should sing music by or about racial and ethnic groups to which they do not belong. Whether a cappella practitioners use the terminology or not, these discussions of cultural appropriation make folks in a cappella uneasy and rarely did anyone I interviewed have a concrete answer for me, particularly because of the thorny issue of how to determine a group of people’s “race.” What ratio of people of color would allow a group to sing a Black artist’s song? Does the soloist have to be the same race and ethnicity as the original artist? Is it tokenism for the one or two people of color to sing only the songs by people of color? One can think of similar questions regarding choirs singing Black spirituals, a common practice in both scholastic and professional choral singing. Should all- or mostly white choirs program arrangements of these songs to counterbalance the overly white repertory of Western choral music or should they not program them because it would be cultural appropriation? Is it tokenism or respectful for Black people to sing solos on these arrangements? Like with a cappella, I do not seek to answer these questions definitively, but to show the various answers given and approaches taken by practitioners, as well as the gaps in how some of them may be conceiving the question by disregarding structural and ideological issues. For instance, why are the choirs all- or mostly white? What about their audition procedures, personnel, repertoire, and mission prevents them from changing the pipeline for their choir and the wider community? People with the choral community have also discussed these questions, especially beginning in 2019 after controversies surrounding the compositions of Ethan Sperry and Caroline Shaw, in
blog posts and podcasts.\textsuperscript{41} Going forward, such conversations in a cappella might also move into similarly public fora, which would propel the discourse further.

A cappella judges, especially white ones, tend to avoid these questions in their comments and scoring, implicitly leaving them to the director in charge of a high school group or the students themselves in the case of college groups. Jackson, a white judge, conceded that there is a wide range of acceptability when it comes to repertoire choices and race because of the plurality of white people in groups and audiences: “you can be extremely appropriative and be accepted by the community. Like in general these are white people performing for other white people. […] So like when an all-white group chooses a song by a well-known Black artist and performs it for an all-white audience and no one really has a sense of criticality around that, no one’s gonna talk about it.”\textsuperscript{42} River, a Black judge, framed the issue as groups have to “balance tokenism and paying homage” when covering music by Black artists. They argue that judges have the responsibility to identify cultural appropriation, but white judges rarely hold groups accountable:

[J]udges who don't come from a particular ethnic background, I think, will be far more likely to give awards to groups for doing a song that they should never have done. And I think this is a way that race really plays into like the whole judging process is that—I mean like groups get knocked down on scores for me for like the appropriateness score of a song. If they do a song that they shouldn't be doing because it's a white group doing Beyoncé’s “Freedom”—it's the easiest example, right—but like, no, you shouldn't be doing this all you should be taking the time and doing the research. But like other judges may have no—like they may not be


\textsuperscript{42} Jackson, personal interview.
sensitive to that at all because of their upbringing, kind of their experience because they're white. As River points out, the rubric provides a space, the category of “Professionalism,” to comment on issues of appropriation. The category summary describes “Professionalism” in through three questions: “Is it evident that this performance was well thought out and rehearsed? Is the overall effect professional? Is this a performance that people would pay to see?” Similar to the other vocal performance categories, this vague description does not detail for judges that it could be used to comment on whether the songs they sing are culturally appropriative. As one producer affirmed to me, “that’s valid feedback” to give a group. But because it is not explicitly on the rubric, judges are unaware that it is an option or are not actively looking out for it while adjudicating, as River opines, so very few judges choose to discuss the issue on the comment sheets.

During discussion in the judging room, these issues arise rarely and often only because people of color bring them up. One Asian judge I talked with, Lana, recounted how, during a deliberation period, she and another judge of color had to explain to the rest of the panel why rewarding an all-white group singing a song about the empowerment of Black people felt disrespectful: “I'm glad that there were people of color there to be like, hey, like I know that you're not meaning to be racist and you're not meaning to offend anyone. But this is kind of offensive like, there is a reason why this is uncomfortable for people. And I think that we had a really respectful conversation about it.” People of color had to push back against the issue, which demonstrates both the limited knowledge that liberal, “well-meaning” white folks have on race and the impact people of color can have in the judging room, especially in discussions of

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43 River, personal interview.
44 Varsity Vocals producer, personal interview, October 2019.
45 Lana, personal interview, June 2020.
special awards. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, ICCA judges skew white and male, and their overrepresentation on panels, especially in rural areas, means that instances of cultural appropriation or insensitivity are significantly less likely to be addressed. Black, Asian, and Latinx judges not only serve as representation but can influence the discourse and decisions—who is in the room matters. Moreover, it shows one of several contexts where racial appropriation can be and has been addressed in a cappella: the privacy of the judging room. Thus, we can begin to trace a pattern in that practitioners tend to discuss issues of race in *private* settings, including in the judging room, on comment sheets, during intra-group meetings as I detailed in Chapter 1, or in text messages and private conversations, as I experienced.

Both Juan and River used Beyoncé as their example, whether real or hypothetical, for trying to demarcate what is or is not appropriation. Over the course of my fieldwork, I absorbed the discourse I was listening to and recording from my interlocutors. I, too, found myself reaching for her repertoire as a useful shorthand when explaining what the term “appropriation” means. I would say to the person that most a cappella practitioners would agree that anyone could perform Beyoncé’s “Love on Top,” given its racially neutral lyrical content, as long as the soloist could pull off the whistle tones, high runs, and many key changes. However, performing “Freedom,” which lyrically and visually (in the music video on *Homecoming* [2019]) references the Black experience of racism and racial dynamics in the United States, would be ethically suspect because a white person would be unable to embody that positionality even if they can vocally-technically sing the part. My examples lean into the lyrical, extra-musical, and performance associations of the songs in addition to how “the voice” sounds, which as I described in Chapter 1 often comes before all else for a cappella practitioners. This approach, which I learned from my interlocutors and works well for considering covers of music, differs
but does not conflict with Philip’s/Oluo’s model—how much did you learn about it and how did
you intend it—which focuses more on learning new traditions of music rather than a single song.
Both center on the issue of power, particularly within national and global racial dynamics. As
cultural critic Lauren Michele Jackson contends, “Leading discussions about appropriation have
been limited to debates about freedom and choice, when everyone should be talking about
power.”46 A cappella practitioners’ preoccupation with the question of should falls into this
rhetorical trap. By reframing the thought process to one about power, questions of should
surrounding repertoire and solo now expand to encompass the structural and ideological
questions that I scrutinize in this dissertation, to consider how audition processes, competition
policies, and vocal aesthetics contribute to the whiteness of personnel that force groups to ask
these questions in the first place.

Hearing “Yeah” through an Analytic of Appropriation

I’m riding in a car with a young volunteer after a Varsity Vocals event. We chat as the
person drives us to the restaurant/bar at which we’re meeting other people at after the show.
They mention some of their favorite recent a cappella recordings and I ask if they know some of
the older albums and songs, ones that I found crucial to my own a cappella education in high
school and college. Included in my list is University of Oregon Divisi’s “Yeah,” performed as
part of their 2005 ICCA set. The person cuts me off saying, “Of course I know that one! But no
one sounds like that anymore.” They proceed to list more recent releases they like, which I had
to admit I’d never heard of. Long after we arrived at our destination and the conversation had

46 Lauren Michele Jackson, White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue...and Other Thoughts on Cultural
Appropriation (Boston: Beacon, 2019), 3.
changed topics, I pondered their claim that “no one sounds like that anymore.” On the one hand, I could easily point to other groups, especially other female-identifying or treble groups, who do sound like that iteration of Divisi, whether because of a full-throated timbre, a somewhat emulatory arrangement, or the wide tessitura or range of the ensemble. But based on the volunteer’s tone of voice, I believe they meant that groups wouldn’t choose a song like “Yeah” and try to imitate an exaggerated form of Black masculinity like Divisi does in the performance and recording on their album from later that same year.47

As I described above, “Yeah” stands out as both representative of and exceptional compared to other a cappella performances from 2005. The recording won several accolades, including a spot in the 2006 Best of Collegiate A Cappella (BOCA) compilation album hosted by Varsity Vocals. Because of that ICCA season and these accolades, Divisi became known not only for their notorious second-place finish, but also for their disruption of gender norms, as shown in their outfits—black pants, button-up shirts, and shoes paired with red ties and lipstick—as well as their sound and repertoire that purposefully evoke masculinity. In a 2007 interview published on The A Cappella Blog, musical director Sarah Klein described the BOCA recognition for the group as “a major and very exciting accomplishment.” She continued, “With ‘Yeah,’ we did something unheard of in the realm of female a cappella—ladies getting down and dirty with Usher. It was an honor for us to be put on BOCA, and we pride ourselves on having the capability to go beyond the boundaries.”48

According to Klein, the white women of Divisi

used “Yeah”—a hip-hop song performed by Black artists Usher, Lil Jon, and Ludacris—to buck gendered stereotypes by “getting down and dirty.” In other words, they embodied the sexuality and vocality of Black men, deliberately playing up the juxtaposition of white women pretending to be Black men, in order to liberate themselves from the social and vocal expectations of white women in scholastic a cappella.

Although gender is foregrounded in Klein’s answer, left unsaid is the fact that all the Divisi members were white and the artists they covered are Black. Viewed through Philip’s/Oluo’s model, Divisi covered the collaboration of Usher, Ludacris, and Lil Jon to further their social capital in the community, which would be a clear example of appropriation.

Delving into the arrangement, vocal performance, and choreography of the performance illuminates how Divisi uses the imitation of Black male musicians to set themselves apart from normative white, treble a cappella. Divisi’s arrangement, written by member Evynne Smith, changes some of the lyrics to the song, which personalizes the cover to become the group’s interpretation as well as cut out language that might be deemed offensive by judges and the audience. For example, the last lines of the rap section, “Me and Ursh’ once more, and we leaves ‘em dead (hey)/We want a lady in the street but a freak in the bed,” becomes, “Divisi once more, and we leaves ‘em dead/You know you wanna kiss from the lips so red.” Smith, the performer of the rap, uses a higher register for this last line compared to the rest of the rap, which she performs in at a lower pitch with more growl, meant to imitate Ludacris’s performance on the original track. Smith’s lyrical and vocal changes from the original track highlights that this is Divisi’s cover while also calling attention to the markedly feminine part of the group’s outfits, red lipstick, which contrasts with their overall masculine vocal and sartorial presentation.

Moreover, this line is immediately followed by the first instances of “We be Divisi pretendin’ we Usher,” an original lyric set to the background synth sound. The group similarly replaces “Lil Jon” with “Divisi” in the repeated final line, “Divisi got the beat that make your booty go,” which is followed by the performers smacking their butts in rhythm.

As Duchan explains in his primer on collegiate a cappella arranging techniques, setting or rewriting words to musical lines is one of many decisions arrangers/groups can make to establish a more original arrangement, as opposed to an emulatory one that seeks to closely recreate the song with voices. He explains that these decisions have “social implications”: “While emulation and originality, and covering and versioning, entail particular techniques, much of the music’s meaning also derives from the ways in which singers and audiences experience those techniques. (emphasis original)” Divisi’s cover of “Yeah” has strong elements of both poles from this continuum, allowing audience members to latch onto recognizable parts of the original song while also maintaining interest in how the group’s adaptation departs from it. Their arranging, vocal, and choreographic choices continually highlight Divisi’s cover of the song, especially the similarities and differences between the two.

On top of these “social implications,” the audience also interprets these techniques through the lens of identity, including gender and race. Smith’s and the group’s performance continually plays on the crossing back and forth of gender boundaries. In contrast, Erica Barkett, the main soloist of the chart, does not change her characterization much through the song in voice or gesture. Because she sings at pitch with high tenor Usher’s original performance, it sounds lower in her range but also quite comfortable—she does not need to project in her lower

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range, unlike the low altos who back up her vocals. But her voice is also not recognizable as an imitation of Usher specifically, so she turns to choreography and gesture. Barkett channels the protagonist/lead singer Usher and Black maleness mostly through gestures such as a sideways peace sign with her hand or holding an imaginary belt. Duchan, citing Simon Frith, describes this form of acting as common in a cappella where singers use gestures and timbre, among other techniques, to convey emotional states and embody the original performer. For most of the song, Barkett and the group hold a wide-legged stance, a male power stance, and do few choreographic gestures besides “bopping” in place or slouching until the rap section. Not until the end of the song, during the outro, does Barkett, the choreographer of Divisi’s set, show off her dancing skills, including moving her hands up and down her torso, and thus calling attention to her chest and body rather than her character. But all of the moves could easily have been performed by Usher, as he dances at the analogous point in the song’s music video. Thus, Barkett uses gesture and choreography to channel the character of Usher for herself and the audience.

To add humor to Divisi’s performance, other members of the group sing or shout lines between or during Barkett’s sung phrases. They often imitate Lil Jon’s part, including exaggerated growls and the performer’s distinctive pronunciation, or provide humorous interpolations such as “To the window, to the wall!,” the latter a reference to Lil Jon’s famous song “Get Low” (2003). For those in the audience who know the song, these vocal performances are recognizable as emulating Lil Jon. In addition, the other members of the group sometimes add a vocal run in a higher register, as happens several times during the second verse and chorus.

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52 Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 112.
These riffs not only show off the members’ vocal abilities and enhance the arrangement, but also remind the audience that Divisi is a *treble* ensemble playing with masculinity. These insertions and Divisi’s style of humor overall align with what Duchan describes as an approach primarily employed by male-identified a cappella groups in which “male interaction and the specter of homosexuality can also serve as effective comedic devices.”54 But the white women of Divisi are embodying Black masculinity, so the humor stems from gender, sexuality, and race. Duchan claims in his description of Divisi’s performance that the group “attempted no humor”: “Instead, the women rotated around the stage in precise formations and enacted moderately sexualized hip-hop-inspired moves that…suggested the seriousness, intensity, and effort with which they dedicated themselves to the performance.”55 I agree with Duchan that the group’s performance is intense and earnest in execution. However, as I have shown, and as one can hear on the video, the audience found humor and enjoyment in the group’s embodied imitations, in the juxtapositions of white women pretending to be Usher and other Black male rappers, as well as the arranging, vocal, and choreographic techniques used to highlight this acting. If they had winked or acknowledged the audience, the humor and the element of shock would have been lost, so the intensity and earnestness play an important role in selling the humor. This humor derived from impersonating Black men and the shock from seeing a female-identified group attempt it are thus the primary reasons why Mickey Rapkin described Divisi’s performance of “Yeah” at the 2005 ICCA Finals as “anything but expected.”56

Divisi subverts expectations of gender and race, as well as humor and sound, in collegiate a cappella performance. Although they ultimately did not win the ICCA Finals that year, the

54 Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 127.
55 Duchan, *Powerful Voices*, 130.
ensemble’s performance became legendary, one of the must-see videos and must-hear recordings to understand the practice. It also inspired the *Pitch Perfect* film franchise. This iconic performance relies on the appropriation of sound and gesture to convey the humor, on the performers’ white womanhood being legible in contrast to their performed Black masculinity. They can temporarily act out these roles and then resume their lives as white people. As Jackson quips about appropriation, “Everybody wants the insurgence of blackness with the wealth of whiteness. Everybody wants to be cool without fearing for their lives.”

Returning to the conversation with the volunteer, I would agree that I have not seen or heard any a cappella group in the past few years perform a song with the blatant appropriation of voice and gesture that Divisi displays in “Yeah.” But, as my interlocutors’ comments above show, the community still wrestles with relatively subtler forms of appropriation and questions of tokenism. These tensions will continue until both the groups and the judges more equitably represent the music the people whose musics they cover.

**The Whiteness of Contemporary Singing Culture**

In this chapter, I considered several facets of solo vocal performance in scholastic a cappella, including how its contrasts with, on the one hand, choral vocality and the established Western classical aesthetics of group singing, and on the other, expectations of white and Black solo vocal performance. The overlap and racialized contradictions of sounds leads to forms of appropriation and the privileging of white folks with access to certain types of training. These tensions reverberate beyond a cappella to related group singing cultures of choral music, barbershop, and show choir, not to mention musical theater and popular music more generally.

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Jackson, a white judge I interviewed, grouped a cappella along with these genres and practices into what he called a primarily white “contemporary singing culture” that is wrestling with how incorporate a historic “Black vocal tradition into the mainstream.”\textsuperscript{58} His linking of these genres into one overall culture points back to their shared legacy of long-standing racialized ideologies and aesthetics of the singing voice in classical and popular music, one that Bram also pointed to in the discussion with Ahmed and Phillips.

Moreover, these genres share social structures, such as competitions like ICCA, as well as people who move between the genres, especially high school and college-age students who participate in a cappella. In high school, I moved between rehearsals, performances, and competition for most of these genres, especially choir and a cappella, which are both usually directed by a vocal music education teacher at the high school level and thus institutionalized and with overlap between the programs. We can see evidence of this shared culture at one WUSTL a cappella event I attended where a group performed a rendition of “Loch Lomond,” arranged by Jonathan Quick, that many choirs, especially high schools, sing—I sang it on multiple occasions, including at choral festivals, back when I was in high school. I noticed several nearby members of other groups singing along in harmony from the audience because they recalled the arrangement. The people with whom I judge competitions, including the people I interviewed, have worked or continue to work in choral and instrumental music education, musical theater, and opera, and sing in barbershop ensembles, community choruses, and community theater productions, as well as participate in a cappella in various capacities. In all of these forms of “contemporary singing culture,” the practices, genres, and social structures were not created with a multi-racial, inclusive cohort in mind, but instead a white-dominated or all-

\textsuperscript{58} Jackson, personal interview.
white one. The structures and the ideologies that created them persist, even if the racialized sentiment is no longer active and participants desire a more equitable social system (or at least a more diverse one). As Elena Saavedra Buckley writes about the recent, stilted attempts to diverse classical music and its institutions in her NPR profile on Caroline Shaw, one of the composers recently criticized for cultural appropriation, “Opening music to new influences can be democratizing, but it does not mean the underlying power structures change.”59 Similarly, the presence of musical sounds and repertoires created and performed by people of color in a cappella does not mean that people of color are able to participate, be recognized, or put into positions of power like white people in a cappella. Divisi’s cover of “Yeah” epitomizes this tendency to appropriate music to further the group’s social capital, in this case, to win a competition and defy (gendered and racialized) expectations. These appropriative behaviors will continue to be rewarded and further cement the existing racialized hierarchies within “contemporary singing culture” until the structures and ideologies that hold them in place change.

Chapter 5:
‘A Fairly Honest Depiction’: Racializing Singing Style, Creativity, and Humor in the *Pitch Perfect* Film Franchise

So little media about a cappella exists that every scene makes a difference in how the practice is perceived by outsiders and operates for insiders. Although other media have portrayed a cappella, including the reality competition show *The Sing-Off* (2009–14) and the documentary series *Sing it On* (2015–16), the *Pitch Perfect* films (2012, 2015, 2017) stand out for their wide reach and narrative conceit.1 Nearly everyone I interviewed for the dissertation spoke about the impact *Pitch Perfect* had on them and the art form, how the films expanded the range of people in their life who understood something about the singing group and genre in which they participate. Juan, a Latino music educator and judge, shared that when his college group toured local high schools, rather than asking if the students knew what an a cappella group was, they asked, “how many of you have seen *Pitch Perfect*?,” and every hand would go up. He explained that the film has become “a cultural common language because it was an incredibly popular movie,” even with its minor factual discrepancies.2 Varsity Vocals, the company that produces the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA) depicted in the film, celebrates that “Millions of people saw the *true* story of our ICCA tournament in the hit movie (emphasis

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2 Juan, personal interview, February 2022.
mine)” and its sequels on their website (see Figure 5.1).³ At multiple Varsity Vocals events I attended during my fieldwork, producers and emcees referred to the ICCA as “the real-life *Pitch Perfect*” when introducing the competition to the audience. The perceived veracity of the film, as articulated the competition it represents, means that, for a cappella novices and seasoned practitioners, *Pitch Perfect* is a cappella.

![Varsity Vocals website screenshot](https://varsityvocals.com)

*Figure 5.1: Screenshot of the Varsity Vocals website. Screenshot captured by author, accessed, April 4, 2022, [https://varsityvocals.com](https://varsityvocals.com).*

The first film (hereafter *PP1*) captures many of the realities of singing in a collegiate all-vocal ensemble in 2012, when it premiered: befriending and clashing with other groups on campus, devoting significant hours to prepare for the ICCA, and bonding with the other members of the group such that they become a family. This faithful representation owes much its loose basis on parts of journalist Mickey Rapkin’s non-fiction book of the same name, in which he followed several a cappella groups for one academic year, including the University of Oregon’s

female-identifying group Divisi during their participation in the 2006–7 ICCA season.\(^4\) Television writer Kay Cannon and producer-actor Elizabeth Banks adapted the portion of Rapkin’s book centered on Divisi into a comedic narrative of an underdog group of misfit women, renamed the Bellas, who work together to win the ICCA.

The creative team also drew on a cappella knowledge and experience in hiring vocal arrangers, music directors, and producers Deke Sharon, Ed Boyer, and Ben Bram. Producer Elizabeth Banks calls Sharon and Boyer “the godfathers of a cappella” and “the most authentic people in the business.”\(^5\) Sharon, a former music director of the Tufts Beelzebubs who was in college when they were one of the first groups to use vocal percussion, co-founded the ICCA in 1996 as well as several other a cappella organizations, and is a leading arranger for a cappella groups and media.\(^6\) Boyer is the premier recording engineer and mixer for a cappella and a frequent judge for competitions like the ICCA. Bram, a former USC SoCal VoCals music director and two-time ICCA champion, has arranged for numerous a cappella media, including serving as the professional group Pentatonix’s primary arranger and producer. All three white men are veterans of a cappella performance, prolific arrangers, and intimately familiar with the ICCA. According to director Jason Moore, “Having Ed and Deke on-site and working with the actors was crucial to getting it to seem organic and real. (emphasis mine)”\(^7\) Moore discloses here the importance that the creative team placed on veracity in portraying a cappella and that their consultants played a key role in faithfully representing the ICCA and a cappella overall.

\(^7\) “Pitch Perfect Production Notes.”
Although my interlocutors lamented about the film’s small inaccuracies that they tire of correcting—like that only one group from the ICCA Semifinals moves on to Finals or the impossibility of a riff-off where a cappella groups take turns improvising arrangements on the spot—they nonetheless agreed that the a cappella world they saw on screen largely matched their experiences. As Henry, a white male a cappella singer who was in college when the first film premiered, put it when I interviewed him in 2020, “I think the movie, especially in its time in 2012, I think it presented *a fairly honest depiction* of how a cappella can be at the university: you know, kind of exacerbated a little bit for comedic effect, but not necessarily hiding the gender dynamics and even maybe the racial tokenism that can happen.” Henry’s experience aligns closely with my own as a fellow undergraduate student in 2012 and someone who saw the first film in a movie theater with members of my own college a cappella group when it premiered. Like the major groups depicted the film, my ensemble was mostly white, with a few people of color, and we competed against other groups with similar make-ups at the ICCA. But race, much less tokenism, was not something that I actively thought about or discussed with my group at that time. Instead, when my group and I animatedly debriefed about what we deemed a “must-see” film, we marveled at how closely it captured the social dynamics of a cappella, especially the competitiveness and the emphasis on gender.

The original film certainly foregrounds gender: *PP1* follows a fictional female-identifying group, the Barden University Bellas, preparing for and competing in the ICCA while trying to incorporate many new members, including protagonist Beca Mitchell (played by Anna Kendrick). After a spectacular failure at the ICCA Finals the previous year (depicted in the opening scene), the Bellas try to redeem themselves now that they’re the “laughingstock of a

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8 Henry, personal interview, June 2020.
Beca clashes throughout the film with the Bellas’ music director, Aubrey Posen (Anna Camp), when she tries to bring new ideas of musical arranging, song choice, and sociality to the group. The Bellas progress through the competition along with their in-school rivals, the Treblemakers, a male-identifying group that includes Beca’s love interest, Jesse (Skylar Astin). Commentary throughout the film makes clear that the Bellas face an uphill battle because of the casual individual and systemic sexism directed towards female-identifying groups in a cappella. By the end of the film, Beca takes charge of the Bellas, changes their set, and leads the group to victory at the ICCA Finals, the first ever by an all-female group in the fictional film space. Thus, the film not only thematizes gender in a cappella, but explicitly teaches the audience about systemic sexism within a cappella musical aesthetics and social behaviors.

In contrast, race is rarely mentioned in *Pitch Perfect*, even as the characters, music, and social dynamics are racialized throughout the film. Though the new Bellas, like their alumnae before them and most other groups in the film, boast a couple people of color within their ranks—Lilly (Hana Mae Lee), who is Asian-American, and Cynthia Rose (Ester Dean) who is Black—white people represent most performers, judges, fans, and commentators in the film. Only one ensemble that briefly performs at the ICCA Semifinals appears to have more than two or three people of color. In real life, a cappella groups exhibit a wide range of racial make-ups, not only majority white with a few “token” people of color. There are also groups with no clear racial majority as well as majority person of color ensembles, especially in racially marked groups that are seen briefly in the second film (see below). But as I show throughout this dissertation, people of color across scholastic a cappella struggle to gain equitable recognition and advancement in the community compared to their white counterparts. And from watching the *Pitch Perfect* films filled with white people supported by limited people of color, one can understand why.
In this chapter, I investigate how the characterizations, narrative structures, and musical performances of the *Pitch Perfect* films teach audiences to understand the racialized dynamics and sounds of a cappella. I focus on the first *Pitch Perfect* film (*PP1*) because of its relatively realistic plot centered around the ICCA, compared to the other two films’ fictional competitions, but still analyze how whiteness saturates all three films. Combining film and musical analysis with ethnographic data from interviews allows us to understand the film trilogy as a form of mass media *discourse* about collegiate a cappella. I show how the films portray and codify racial stereotypes of how people can participate in a cappella and racialized and gendered ideologies of a cappella singing.9 While supporting characters of color in the trilogy are pigeon-holed into limited vocal and character archetypes, white people, who occupy all the major roles of the films, exhibit depth in their musical, vocal, and social depictions. Beca’s arranging creativity shows how white people in a cappella acquire agency and skills that are valued in the community, which vault them into leadership positions such as music director, the role she assumes by the end of the film. In addition, through the narrative device of the white commentators, a role that does not exist at actual ICCA or other a cappella events, the films pair commentary on a cappella performance and aesthetics with sexist and racist jokes about the performers. The commentators’ banter, along with other film and musical devices used throughout the film, define for the audience how a cappella *should* sound, what is good versus bad a cappella, and how these aesthetic ideals connect to identities like race and gender.

This analysis demonstrates that mass media depictions like those found in the *Pitch Perfect* films have become a major source of discourse and knowledge about a cappella for

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insiders and outsiders. The films reflect and affect what happens in real-life a cappella and, thus, the racial dynamics and ideas about sound shown and heard also become widespread. Stuart Hall has persuasively argued that media produces and transforms racialized and racist ideologies, which are then learned and picked up by individual people: “ideologies ‘work’ by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to ‘utter’ ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors.”10 The trilogy’s racialization of sound, people, and social structures, drawing on both broad media stereotypes and ones specific to a cappella, codify these depictions into ideologies that reinscribe whiteness and racial inequity as the truth of a cappella.

**Tokenized Characters of Color**

Screenwriter Cannon, best known at the time for her work on the television series *30 Rock* (2006–13), sought to emulate films about high school, including *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Bring it On* (2000), to build on and poke fun at established narrative tropes for audiences who, like her, were initially unfamiliar with a cappella.11 Banks similarly compared the source material in Rapkin’s book to her “favorite films like *Superbad*, *Mean Girls*, and *Bring it On*, which always include quirky people in a subset of a larger social system. We thought it would be fun to explore people who get really obsessed about something and translate that into a very broad comedy that plays to a wide audience.”12 Both screenwriter Cannon and producer-actor

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12 “Pitch Perfect Production Notes.”

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Banks describe scholastic a cappella as a community with specific social dynamics that they want to convey to a broader audience who, like them, was unfamiliar with the practice. And as seen in *Bring it On*, competitions like the ICCA structure films like *PP1* to push the narrative forward while providing opportunities for character and group development. For example, the Bellas’ chaotic first rehearsal and gig early in *PP1* (see below) set up the herculean task before them if they want to win ICCA. The two returning Bellas, Aubrey and Chloe (Brittany Snow), must quickly incorporate their new members, even though these newest Bellas, for various reasons (including their identities and their singing), do not conform to the established Bellas vibe or blend into a cohesive sound.

Along with emulating film tropes and plot devices, Cannon also draws on established racial stereotypes from film and media, including *30 Rock*. As Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki argue in their ground-breaking monograph *The Black Image in the White Mind*, “Mediated information is inherently comparative: audiences interpret a narrative or image through filters shaped by other media content and, of course, by direct experience.”\(^{13}\) Scholarship on filmic representations of race tends to focus on how white people depict people of color, especially Black characters, using long-standing racialized stereotypes as character or plot shorthand, what is commonly referred to as racial tokenism.\(^{14}\) Daniel Bernardi has focused instead on the process of how whiteness becomes normative in film representations:

“Misrepresenting whatever is seen through it, Hollywood attempts to segregate whiteness from

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color in ways that make the former invisible and the latter isolated and stereotypical.”

During Cannon’s time at 30 Rock, the shows’ creators and characters frequently engaged race as a television topic, especially how the racialized expectations of white liberal feminist protagonist Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) conflicted with the lived experience of her Black co-worker, Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan). As J. Jeremy Wisnewski describes, Liz “doesn’t want to seem racist, and she tries to do everything in her power to prevent it,” which often leads to misunderstandings based on her assumptions and microaggressions towards characters of color. Liz typifies white, middle-to-upper-class liberals, who make up a plurality of a cappella practitioners, who want to participate in a multicultural society and struggle with the essentialized and stereotypical notions of race and gender they have internalized.

This style of humor built on microaggressions, majority expectations, and stereotypes of minorities carries over to PP1. Protagonist Beca has a frosty relationship with her roommate Kimmy Jin (Jinhee Juong), who only socializes with other Asian people; various Bellas scrutinize the potential homosexuality of Cynthia Rose, who at one point is nicknamed “Black Beauty” by Fat Amy (Rebel Wilson); and the meek East Asian Lilly reveals bizarre anecdotes so quietly that nobody can hear her. The sequel films continue to treat the characters of color distinctly from white characters. Almost all the lines spoken by new character Flo Fuentes (Chrissie Fit) in Pitch Perfect 2 (PP2) highlight the contrast between her impoverished upbringing in Guatemala with the upper-middle class lives of the white Bellas, particularly Chloe. For example, when the Bellas at the beginning of the film are awaiting disciplinary action, Chloe proclaims, “This is the worst thing to ever happen to us! Ever!” Flo replies, “You

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know, before coming to this country, I had diarrhea for seven years. But yes, this is terrible.”

Flo’s statement both puts into perspective the “first-world problems” of Chloe (and a cappella), but also marks Flo as different from the other Bellas, even fellow immigrant Fat Amy, because of her life experience as a Latina. Even though Cannon does not thematize race as she does for gender in the script, racialized humor through stereotypes and microaggressions nonetheless pervades the characterizations and social dynamics of the film.

Cannon also relied on racialized understandings of vocal sounds to characterize the singers of *Pitch Perfect*. Contemporary a cappella exists within a United States context where, following Nina Sun Eidsheim, voices are racialized by the bodies that perform them, the sounds those bodies create, and the listeners who hear them. In a cappella, this societal dynamic leads to racialized expectations for how people of various races should sound, which Cannon captures in the film. The lone named Black character, Cynthia Rose, exhibits a virtuosic singing voice and is one of three women in the group, along with Beca and Fat Amy, who demonstrates the ability to rap. The East Asian Lilly speaks and sings so quietly that nobody can hear her. But late in the film, she displays a talent for vocal percussion or beatboxing after interacting with Donald (Utkarsh Ambudkar), a South Asian member of the rival Treblemakers who also beatboxes.

To outsiders, these characterizations may seem innocuous; however, according to my interlocutors, they reinforce stereotypes of when and how people of color can participate in a cappella. River, a Black queer person, enumerated a list of a cappella stereotypes they saw rendered in the franchise: quiet Asian girl, Black woman rapping, South Asian man rapping and beatboxing, Black student who was a ‘natural,’ and multiple ethnic stereotypes joked about in the

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second film.\textsuperscript{18} Lana, an East Asian woman, identified \textit{Pitch Perfect} as not causing racialized stereotypes but embodying what already existed in the community onscreen:

“[I]t’s kind of like, I guess not because of \textit{Pitch Perfect}, but I think just the history of a cappella. They’re like, ‘oh, the Asian person is probably the beat boxer’ […] Or like you have like someone who is Black. And they’re like, oh, ‘they must have like the most soulful voice ever like, you know, whatever they’re going to get those solos.’ I just think that it’s just very frustrating, the stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{19}

Lana expresses an experience common among the people of color I interviewed in which white people assume how they would or should sound based on how they look, assumptions that the film confirms.

East Asian Lilly’s depiction demonstrates the tension between racial stereotypes of character and voice in the film. At no point during the first film do we hear Lilly sing. She beatboxes only during the last performance at Finals—which she does quite well and animatedly, in contrast to her meek performance in the rest of the film. In the second and third films, we again never hear her sing, only beatbox and deliver more extremely quiet joke lines, but her musical function in the group is assumed rather than a minor plot point. Her inaudibility, which plays into larger film stereotypes of Asian women as “dutiful” and “quiet,” contrasts with the content of her lines and her vocal percussion skills that contradict token characterizations of Asian women as “polite,” “conservative,” and “obedient.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus, while these stereotypes are not necessarily subverted in the films, they are not presented without nuance.

However, River pointed out that writing and casting the film’s two main vocal percussionists—Lilly and Donald—as people of color represented a stereotype specific to a

\textsuperscript{18} River, personal interview, January 2021.
\textsuperscript{19} Lana, personal interview, June 2020.
They explained that, because “we have different rhythmic experiences,” people of color often are pushed into these roles in real-life a cappella. While acknowledging that Black and Brown folks created beatboxing as a part of early hip-hop, they remarked that “the truth is wrapped up in a reality of where ethnic groups get slotted into society.”\(^{21}\) Jayla, a Black woman, corroborated River’s assertion when she shared that she took up vocal percussion in her college group in order to find a role within the group because she felt her voice as a soloist was not valued (see below).\(^{22}\) Lilly’s confinement to her beatboxing role would not be so noticeable if there were any other named Asian women characters in the first film, or any that we hear sing. A Korean female-appearing group is shown during the final Worlds competition of the second film, but they do not perform. In the third film, the current Bellas, who sing one number early on, have one Asian member who sings but only as backup to white soloist Emily (Hailee Steinfeld); the vocal percussionist for that iteration of the group is a Black woman. Thus, while Lilly and Donald may not conform to widespread film stereotypes of Asian people, they do embody real-life a cappella stereotypes limiting how people of color can participate in the practice.

Lana also identifies an important stereotype of Black people in a cappella as “soulful,” fulfilling a specific vocal type related to timbre, repertoire, and affect. One white male judge I interviewed specifically used the word “soul” when describing Black soloists’ voices he hears at the ICCA.\(^{23}\) Multiple Black women I interviewed expressed frustration that people in a cappella expect them to riff like Whitney Houston or sing with a full-throated belt like Aretha Franklin, and pigeon-hole them to only sing solos requiring that voice. Jayla recounted that, after she auditioned, her group was “so excited to have a Black girl, finally.” But she didn’t get any solos

\(^{21}\) River, personal interview.
\(^{22}\) Jayla, personal interview, June 2020.
\(^{23}\) Brad, personal interview, June 2020.
because of how the group expected her to sound based on her race. As Jayla put it, the group’s repertoire was “very white”—consisting of Top 40 pop/rock—that “didn’t fit her voice.”24 But she also could not imitate the runs and belting of Black divas like Houston, Franklin, and Beyoncé, so the group didn’t know how to program music for her vocal strengths. The group’s racialized expectations of how she should sound limited how she could participate.

The few moments when we can hear Cynthia Rose, the lone Black character in the Bellas, perform by herself in PP1 corroborate this stereotype of Black women’s vocality. Her two significant performances are the solo on Rihanna’s “S&M,” during the riff-off, and rapping Pitbull’s verse in “Give Me Everything,” during the Finals medley, both of which exemplify the “soulful” repertoire that Black women in a cappella are expected to perform: pop by Black women and rap (for a full list of the songs in the Pitch Perfect films, see Appendix B). The other moments we can hear Cynthia Rose sing in PP1 are much more limited and happen as part of the larger group. She riffs in the middle ground of the song’s texture during the audition sequence to “Since U Been Gone” and the riff-off closer “No Diggity,” and in both numbers she trades riffs and solo lines with the white main characters. We briefly hear her sing solo on part of Jessie J’s “Price Tag” during the Finals medley and harmonize one phrase of “Party in the U.S.A.” on the bus to Semifinals, all of which are snippets of performances focused on the overall ensemble, featuring many individuals.

I scrutinize Cynthia Rose’s portrayal so closely because she represents almost of the instances of Black women and people singing by themselves in the trilogy. The audience’s impressions of Black women in a cappella rely on her portrayal. The only other times we hear Black women sing in the trilogy are one other woman at auditions in PP1—who joins the Bellas

24 Jayla, personal interview.
but is kicked out the group off-screen before the first rehearsal for sleeping with a
Treblemaker—and one woman, Serenity (Andy Allo), in *Pitch Perfect 3 (PP3)* in the rival band
Evermoist, who sings snippets of solos to back up lead singer Calamity (Ruby Rose) during that
film’s riff-off. Black men similarly sing and appear onscreen only fleetingly in the first film: two
men during auditions (one overly operatic and another who scrunches up his face and voice), a
soloist on an ICCA Semifinals team who is a “natural performer” but is later found out to be a
high schooler (causing his majority-person of color team to be disqualified), and an alumnus
(Donald Faison) trying to make it as part of The Tone Hangers, an amateur-professional group.
In the two sequels, Black men similarly occupy very little sonic space. In *PP2*, we hear the
leader of the Singboks, a team from an unnamed African country, sing two phrases of the joint
“Worlds” performance of Journey’s “Any Way You Want It” and Reggie Watts replaces Donald
Faison in the Tone Hangers during the film’s riff-off. One rival group in *PP3*, the rap duo Young
Sparrow (Trinidad James) and DJ Dragon Nutz (D.J. Looney), briefly perform Blondie’s “Call
Me” in tandem with the other rival groups during that film’s riff-off. These short performances
are not especially memorable: my interlocutors did not comment on them, focusing instead on
Cynthia Rose. Even though I have seen the films many times, I too had forgotten some of these
appearances until rewatching the trilogy for any moment we can hear Black people sing.

While it is important to examine the frequency with which Black characters sing, when
and how they do so reveals the limited roles that Black people tend to occupy in a cappella
groups, especially in 2012. Besides Cynthia Rose, most of the Black characters briefly perform
in montages and medleys featuring many singers, often as momentary supporting and often
unnamed characters. Cynthia Rose, while a named and regularly recurring character, does not
have her own song. Instead, she sings mostly in sections of songs (like the rap verse) or moments
of soloing, usually while riffing and/or belting. Dan Dinero theorizes a Broadway musical trope he calls the “big black lady song,” which captures the restricted but important presence of fat Black women who, like Cynthia Rose, sing with big voices in gospel-like, spectacular performances: “rather than diversifying Broadway musical theatre, big black lady songs marginalize black women, assigning them a limited role on the Broadway stage. The excessive nature of these songs places them on the fringes of the Broadway musical, thereby reaffirming Broadway’s existence as the Great White Way.”

Though Cynthia Rose does not have her own “big black lady song” in any of the Pitch Perfect films, she fulfills a similar function in her limited musical moments: providing “big black lady” excessive singing through riffs, runs, and belting to support the mostly white Bellas, particularly Beca. Her presence and role confirm a cappella’s whiteness.

### Whiteness as Sound and Creativity in Pitch Perfect

While my interlocutors lamented the tokenization of people of color in sound and characterization, how the white characters of Pitch Perfect sound and are racialized never came up in my interviews. This silence reflects the widespread understanding of race in the United States to mean talking about Black, Asian, Indigenous, and other people of color, while whiteness is relatively ignored or “unmarked.” To combat this lacuna, I examine how white characters sound, in both timbre and repertoire, and how they function within the film narratives. Beca’s singing style highlights the genre flexibility of her voice and the breadth of her repertoire knowledge, especially of Black musical genres. Her arranging creativity shows how white people

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in a cappella exhibit agency and skills that are valued in the community, which vault them into leadership positions, such as music director. Understanding how whiteness manifests in the characterizations and narrative structure of the *Pitch Perfect* films reveals some of the mechanisms of how it remains normative and a structural advantage in real-life a cappella.

**White Solo Singing**

As I argue in Chapter 4, though the ideal timbre of white soloists in a cappella is not articulated in the same way as for Black soloists, they often strive for and judges reward what Katherine Meizel calls the “neo-soul aesthetic,” where singers imitate some of the techniques of virtuosic Black performance, particularly the timbre and expression of gospel divas and R&B singers.\(^{26}\) Male lead and love interest Jesse (Skylar Astin) frequently riffs in his performances, including a cover of Cee-Lo Green’s “Bright Lights, Bigger City” at the ICCA Finals. Jesse’s roommate and supporting character Benji (Ben Platt), whose plot arc and personality are based on Deke Sharon, similarly brings a heavy dose of riffing and belting to his performance of “Magic” at the same event, a quite different sound from featured artist Rivers Cuomo of Weezer on the original track by B.o.B.\(^{27}\) Protagonist Beca also demonstrates this sonic ideal through her rapping, strong belt, and clear melismas while singing Blackstreet’s “No Diggity” in the riff-off (Cynthia Rose supports her in the background). None of these three white characters sound as if they are trying to imitate Blackness, but they incorporate vocal techniques associated with Black music and performance, particularly gospel and R&B, into their overall vocal style.


This musical story where Blackness becomes absorbed into whiteness is not new or limited to Meizel’s specific neo-soul aesthetic. As I explain in Chapter 4, white singers absorbing selected sounds and techniques of Black singing into their own timbre is part of a long-standing pattern of popular music in the United States. Todd Decker notes that jazz in the 1920s underwent a cultural fusion of musical styles from migrating Black populations to Northern cities with white Broadway songs and tropes. As he shows, some of the numbers in George and Ira Gershwin’s musical theater shows in the 1920s “named and enacted onstage the cultural work done being done by musical comedy in the midtown theater district by putting Black music into white mouths and bodies in an effectively all-white zone.”

This racial dynamic has persisted through the history of the Broadway stage to the present. Kendrick, Astin, and Platt have all performed on Broadway and retain the mix of head and chest voice and over-pronunciation of diction associated with contemporary musical theater singing. The overlap of pop, musical theater, and R&B singing technique and repertoire continues the legacy of selective infusion of Black sounds into white performance, but it is also distinct from Meizel’s paradigm. Moreover, it exemplifies the vocal aesthetic heard in performances by a large section of real-life, especially white, a cappella soloists.

Other white characters in the film, whose actors did not have Broadway experience, also emulate this aesthetic, particularly in their solo singing. The scene revealing that Chloe has developed nodes begins when Aubrey questions a performance in which Chloe “didn’t sound Aguilerian at all.” Her description references pop star Christina Aguilera who, as cultural critic

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Lauren Michele Jackson describes in her book *White Negroes*, is known for “copious belts, runs, and growls” adopted from “the sonic world Black music built.” Though none of the white characters capture the “soul” that my interlocutors describe hearing and expecting from Black soloists, they selectively borrow vocal techniques associated with Black music while retaining some sonic aspects of whiteness.

In contrast, characters of color like Cynthia Rose fall into racialized, essentialized stereotypes of how and when they can sing with the white characters. For Black women like her, she exists as a background character who riffs, runs, and belts as needed to augment the songs fronted by white characters like Beca. She also supplements Beca’s fuller characterization and expression. Beca’s offering of “No Diggity” during the riff-off only works because Cynthia Rose is among the first to join in the singing, to back her up both musically and socially. Moreover, Cynthia Rose’s rapping completes Beca’s arrangements, transforming the group’s sound, repertoire, and image in the *PP1* finale and throughout the second and third films. Thus, her visual and vocal presence in the group validates Beca’s neo-soul borrowing as soloist and arranger, which echoes a dynamic that Maureen Mahon examines in her work on Black women in rock and roll: “Of particular interest are the ways the audibly Black voices of African American women background vocalists provided sonic authenticity and enabled white artists to maintain a connection to the Black roots of rock and roll.”

Not only does Cynthia Rose replicate a past trope of Black women who back up white and/or male lead singers, but this dynamic continues into the present with contemporary artists like Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry who trade on Black choreography and expression, particularly with their use of Black backup.

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dancers and singers. Cynthia Rose’s role in the group also prompts us to consider, as I do in Chapter 4, the question: how many Black people should there be in a majority-white a cappella group before its performance of a song by a Black artist is no longer considered cultural appropriation? Is it still cultural appropriation if the only Black member moves to the front of the group to sing the solo? What would happen if Cynthia Rose were to sing a significant solo moment in a song originally performed by a white artist? The film does not raise these questions—they are literally unaskable in the film’s discursive universe—which reinforces the assumed hegemonic whiteness.

In addition to their hybrid vocal timbre, white characters in the film can sing music by a range of artists and styles. At various points in PP1 alone, we hear Beca sing synth-pop (“Bulletproof”) and a folk song (“Cups”), as well as covers of Miley Cyrus (white pop), Nelly (Black rap), and Simple Minds (Brit pop/rock). Jesse likewise whips out rock tunes by Kansas and Foreigner (white) as well as the sung portion of “Right Round” by Flo Rida (Black pop-rap). Even Aubrey—whose musical taste in the film is defined by older, white artists like Ace of Base or Madonna and who sings with distinct squareness to her diction and tone—sings music by a wide variety of artists, genres, and races including up to the present moment in 2012. During the pool scene just before the ICCA Finals, she suggests Bruno Mars’ “Just the Way You Are” and duets with Beca on Nelly’s “Just a Dream.” Aubrey also opens the Finals performance by singing a slow version of Jessie J’s “Price Tag,” a contemporary pop song the likes of which she had rebuffed earlier in the film. White characters thus demonstrate expansive knowledge of and cover many genres and artists on both sides of the color line.

In contrast, Cynthia Rose’s musical taste and solo opportunities are differentiated from the other, mostly white Bellas. In a very unusual moment in PP2, her musical taste and race become a subject of explicit conversation. Late in the film, the Bellas go on a retreat to find their sound again and must sleep together in one large tent. To help Fat Amy pee in the woods, most of the Bellas including Lilly (unheard) and Flo start singing “Torn,” a 1997 pop song by white Australian-British artist Natalie Imbruglia, except for Beca and Cynthia Rose. While Beca may know the song, her disinterest in singing relates to the film’s subplot of her intense, secret internship taking time and energy away from her commitment to the Bellas. Cynthia Rose, on the other hand, exclaims, “What kind of white shit is this?,” in response to the impromptu sing-along, a question which both signifies that she does not know the song and labels the song that all of the other characters seem to know as related to whiteness. She does know some music by white artists, such as Miley Cyrus’s “Party in the U.S.A.” as shown in PP1, but this example differentiates her from the other Bellas, including the two other Bellas of color, based on the declared white repertoire and her visceral rejection of it.

But not all a cappella repertoire in the film is white-centric and, in fact, much of the “coolness” factor of Beca’s arranging (more below) and the Treblemakers’ music relies on their performances of songs by Black artists and in contemporary styles of Black music. PP1 opens with Rhianna’s “Don’t Stop the Music” (2007), as sung by the Treblemakers’ white soloist Bumper (Adam DeVine) at the ICCA Finals. Commentator John Smith (John Michael Higgins), in the first line of the film, gives exposition that, “Now this is exactly the type of performance that you would expect to see at the International Competition of Collegiate A Cappella.” The camera then pans to the all-white judging panel, who John states are “always thrilled by” the Treblemakers, a sentiment confirmed by the group’s win that night. Through the device of the
narrators, the audience immediately accepts that, for the Treblemakers, the ICCA, and collegiate a cappella overall, they can expect to see and hear a white soloist from a largely white group with token people of color covering a song originally performed by a Black artist, an expectation that matches with the general practice of real-life scholastic a cappella.

Throughout the first two films, the majority-white Treblemakers not only continue to perform music by Black artists, but also recompose or arrange music by white artists into a style drawing on Black performance that sidelines their performers of color. The a cappella practice of transforming a song’s style or genre into another for a section or the entire arrangement represents one form of Joshua S. Duchan’s term “original” arranging, which groups use to distinguish their cover of a song from the original and other groups’ interpretations. This particular technique has flourished in the 2010s in part due to popularity of arrangements by *Pitch Perfect* consultant and arranger Ben Bram written for the pop star a cappella quintet Pentatonix, such as their “African-inspired” version of “O Come Ye Faithful” and many of their other Christmas songs.

Similar popular artists like Jacob Collier, who has arranged for Pentatonix, and the collective Postmodern Jukebox (PMJ), which collaborates with many a cappella alumni, also gained fame from arrangements that reinterpret songs in new styles. They often “remix” the songs to into styles and forms of music from the African diaspora and collaborate with artists of color while foregrounding the white arrangers. As Kenton Chen, an Asian-American SoCal VoCal alumnus and multi-year ICCA champion shared about PMJ, “The only people who are

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allowed to be full human beings are the lead white women in the front.” In 2020, after the outpouring of Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, members of color of PMJ including a cappella alumni crafted an open letter to and shared their experiences of working with white founder Scott Bradlee. They wrote that he devalued their performances and labor compared to their white counterparts: “PMJ’s rise to a multimillion-dollar international corporation is in large part due to music created, arranged, performed and popularized by Black artists. Jazz and tap dance are forms of Black art. Furthermore, PMJ features many Black artists and has profited greatly from their talents.” Karen Marie, a Black woman singer, revealed she had not been paid for multiple performances and not credited for her collaborative role in arrangements with Bradlee. In comparison, Bradlee, the white male founder of the group, earned significant money and fame from the collective’s YouTube videos and tours. Though Bradlee himself and many of the members of this collective are not connected to a cappella, their experiences speak to a shared culture between PMJ and a cappella that highlights the prowess of white people like Bradlee who arrange music that uses the expressive markers of Black musical culture while remaining audibly Black but devalues the contributions of singers of color who perform those sounds. Furthermore, they highlight the racial dynamics of the arranging technique of transforming a song into a new, audibly Black style, which relies on both Bradlee’s white privilege and the presence of Black people as validation.

Figure 5.2: Benji (Ben Platt) appropriates gospel performance during the ending of "Lollipop" in Pitch Perfect 2 (2015). Still taken by author.

The Treblemakers use this technique early on in PP2, when Jesse, Benji, and the group sing at the new student orientation. They choose to perform MIKA’s “Lollipop” (2007) and in their arrangement transform the ending of the doo-wop-esque song into a gospel shout number, where the ecstatic gestures and vocal interjections of the group, especially Benji (see Figure 5.2), appropriate Black performance and religious affect. The number in the film functions as what Todd Decker has characterized in Broadway musical theater as a “white-cast production [number] that [pushes] the black gospel edge” that is common in musical theater since the 1990s and thus synonymous with the neo-soul ideal’s rise.36 More than a mere arranging device, Braxton Shelley has theorized the “gospel vamp” as an analytical framework of “repetition and escalation,” where “believers coproduce sonic environments that facilitate the experience of a given song’s message.”37 Using the repetition of the lyric “love, love, love” to propel the vamp,

the Treblemakers channel the fervent religiosity of gospel music and whip up the performers and the audience. The stylistic change also allows for a call-and-response opportunity between soloists Jesse and Benji where each gradually sings higher and higher until they both move into their falsetto registers at the vamp’s climax. “Lollipop” ends with both soloists executing long, highly melismatic, and virtuosic riffs that would have been out of place in the bright doo-wop style of MIKA’s original song but are welcome and even expected in this new style. The audience erupts in ecstatic applause and, after the performance, newcomer Emily (Hailee Steinfeld), whose mom is a Bella alumna and thus knows a cappella, compliments Jesse saying, “Great job, Trebles! You killed it!” We do not know who arranged the Treblemaker’s songs—only Beca receives credit for her arrangements—but, within the fictional world of the film, the group approved along multiple steps of the rehearsal process the arrangement and the choreography of “Lollipop” that appropriates Black gospel performance. The presence of two to three people of color in the group, including one smiling Black member, indicates that this performance and arrangement is okay, much as Cynthia Rose, Lilly, and Flo do for the Bellas. Furthermore, like the Treblemakers’ opening number in PFI, this number comes early in the film—second in the order of a cappella songs the audience hears—and is used to show the in-film and at-home audiences that, as Jesse tells the auditorium, “this is a cappella,” and thus emblematic of what we should expect from the practice.

White Group Singing

Although solo voices are important to understanding a cappella aesthetics, the sound of group singing defines the practice. As I argue in Chapter 3, most a cappella groups, especially majority-white ones, aim for an ideal that Karen Tongson has called “choral vocality,” the
markedly white sound of a cappella and other group singing genres in the new millennium.\textsuperscript{38} The
old Bellas exemplify this sound in their disastrous ICCA Finals performance in the opening
scene: they sing Ace of Base’s “I Saw the Sign” with matched vowels and bright timbre and
within a fairly small vocal range, aside from the low altos holding down the bass line. The Bellas
perform white, respectable femininity with their perfectly synchronized toe tapping on beats one
and three and their slightly revealing outfits suggestive of flight attendants. They also look the
same: one Black member and one ethnically ambiguous member stashed at the back of the stage
do not override the overwhelming white sameness of these fit, conventionally attractive women.

In contrast, the new Bellas, including Beca, Cynthia Rose, Lilly, and Fat Amy, do not
conform to this vocal or visual archetype. At their first gig, performing at a Greek life mixer, the
Bellas move and sing out of sync to disco hit “Turn the Beat Around” and the audience can
easily distinguish individual voices due to their different timbres and microtimings. No longer do
their uniforms fit everyone equally, particularly the buxom bodies of Cynthia Rose and Fat Amy,
nor do their hairstyles match, especially Cynthia Rose’s pink hair. While Chloe, Aubrey, and
Stacie (Alexis Knapp) conform to the old look, the rest no longer blend in. Moreover, Beca looks
like she wants to be anywhere else, as do the audience. A fraternity brother shuts down the
Bellas’ performance less than a minute into the song, saying, “I wanted the hot Bellas, not this
barnyard explosion,” which then cuts to a shot of Stacie, Fat Amy, Cynthia Rose, Lilly, and Beca
(from left to right). He refuses to pay the group and kicks them out because they no longer meet
his (and the campus’) expectation of what the Bellas should look and sound like. The fraternity
brother here cues the audience that these dissimilar, disjointed Bellas gave a bad performance of

a cappella, in contrast to the Treblemakers and the old Bellas at the beginning of the film that were “exactly what you would expect” from an a cappella group.

By the end of the film, the Bellas have learned to sing together but with a different sound curated by new music director Beca. They forge this new sound late at night in an empty pool, in the scene immediately before the ICCA Finals, where Beca teaches the Bellas how to sing a mashup and “remix this business.” Aubrey chooses Bruno Mars’ “Just the Way You Are,” a contemporary song by a male artist of color that is a stark departure from her earlier repertoire choices as the former music director. Chloe solos as the other Bellas improvise an arrangement behind her in which their formerly disparate timbres have now seamlessly merged. Beca then layers Nelly’s “Just a Dream,” which creates some musical dissonance. Aubrey harmonizes with her and the group smiles as they witness the musical and social cohesion between the two former foes. The women stomp and clap together until they finish the miniature mashup and then stare at each other in hopeful disbelief that they have found a new sound. In a further, very unrealistic *deus ex machina*, Chloe discovers that the surgery on her vocal nodes granted her an unexpected ability to sing very low bass notes. Lilly then hints at her budding vocal percussion technique in a voice audible to the group for the only time in the film, to which Fat Amy responds sarcastically, “Excuse me, bitch, you don’t need to shout.” This pivotal scene debuts some members’ musical skills, a newfound “sound”—which is really Beca making mashups with new repertoire and not a change in vocal tone—as well as a changed social dynamic that seems more egalitarian but also heavily relies on Beca’s arranging creativity to propel them to their eventual victory.

*Creativity as White: Beca Leads the Way*
About fifty young adults gather at night in an empty swimming pool, ready to sing when the moment strikes. This scene from *PP1* is not a *West Side Story* rumble, but a riff-off, an improvised musical contest where a cappella groups trade songs from a designated category until a group messes up or cannot think of a new song. When her group becomes stuck, a cappella newcomer Beca, who only two minutes earlier did not know what a riff-off was, offers up R&B group Blackstreet’s 1996 single “No Diggity.” After some initial hesitation from her comrades, Beca’s singing inspires the Bellas to such a rousing performance that the crowd sitting on the pool’s edge sings along. Although the Bellas lose the contest on a technicality, the women, for the first time in the film thus far, sing together in a way that is musically exciting for the in-film and at-home audiences. The riff-off—itself a fictional activity conceived by the films’ creators and not part of Rapkin’s book—showcases a nascent version of how the white Beca’s musical creativity, powerful singing voice, and knowledge of Black musical styles and techniques will eventually transform her group and the fictionalized a cappella world of the film.39

Protagonist Beca stands in for the film’s audience as an outsider to a cappella learning the ropes; her perceptions and the film’s framing shape how the audience interprets the musical and social hierarchy of nerdy a cappella. Director Jason Moore confirmed this characterization in an interview: “Beca is the eyes and ears of the audience. She considers herself a serious musician and doesn't want to be a part of this weird world.”40 She auditions for the Bellas after her father, a professor at the university who is paying her tuition, forces her to join an extracurricular activity, to give college a try before she can move to Los Angeles to pursue a DJ career. The film

39 The riff-off is a fictitious event created for the film that was inspired by producer Elizabeth Banks’ experiences at experience of going to “hootenannies” she attended in college with theater majors. As she reveals in the DVD commentary, the riff-off “feels like a real idea, a rap battle” where the campus groups duke out their musical and improvisation chops, though it is arranged by Broadway composer Tom Kitt. *Pitch Perfect* commentary, 44:37–45:33. See also “Pitch Perfect Production Notes.”
40 “Pitch Perfect Production Notes.”
leverages Beca’s established position to differentiate her musically and creatively from the other characters, especially the Bellas’ musical director, Aubrey. As the group readies to compete in the ICCA, Aubrey holds tightly to the group’s established traditions of repertoire and performance. She emphasizes that the Bellas only cover songs performed by women and older (read: white) musical styles, while Beca pushes for more recent songs and genres, especially hip-hop and electronic dance music. Aubrey also criticizes Beca’s “alternative” sartorial choices, including piercings and black clothes, which do not fit the established Bellas “vibe.” This characterization is a subtle reference to Michaela Cordova, the Divisi member from Rapkin’s book on whom Beca is partially based.41 As the audience is aligned with Beca, the film privileges her perspective: the Bellas must change in order to compete with other groups like the Treblemakers.

The conflict between Aubrey and Beca simmers throughout the film but comes to a head during the ICCA Semifinals. In this scene, the film shifts the camera’s point of view from an omniscient attendee of the competition (as occurred during the Quarterfinals when we saw the Bellas’ performance) to how Beca sees the show from onstage. The camera shows both Beca and her view of the audience, including the sound engineer checking his phone, to demonstrate their shared boredom at the set. Beca looks down as if to think of something and then spontaneously belts out a quotation of La Roux’s “Bulletproof” (2009) layered on top of the group’s performance of Ace of Base’s “I Saw the Sign” (1993). Beyond giving the in-film audience (and the film’s viewers) a new song to listen to, the new melody creates dissonance with the established bass line and harmony, a new sound for the previously wholesome and consonant-sounding Bellas. The camera briefly shows the judges rewarding Beca’s risky move with nods of

41 Rapkin, Pitch Perfect, 69–70.
approval as they score the Bellas’ performance. By using the judges to cue the audience that her improvisation was artistically laudable, the film also plays into the reality that ICCA judges, as I show in Chapter 3, play a strong role in setting the aesthetic preferences of collegiate a cappella. In contrast, the other Bellas, especially Aubrey, criticize her for the unplanned addition, which leads to Beca temporarily quitting the group. This scene demonstrates not only how the film privileges and affirms Beca’s viewpoint and aesthetic preferences but also how Beca becomes configured as creative and innovative in comparison to her peers.

Beca’s creativity also comes through as the only person in the film who arranges music, that is, who writes out what people will sing and makes artistic decisions about how the group will cover the song. She honed this skill as a DJ, prior to and during her time in college, not because of her time in a cappella. Though I have yet to encounter a real-life a cappella arranger who also works as a DJ, mashups and musical layering, techniques Beca’s learned from DJing, are certainly present in a cappella and qualify as another form of Duchan’s “original” arranging, where an a cappella cover offers a unique rendition of a song.42 Literary scholar K. Shannon Howard characterizes Beca as a “bricoleur,” a term coined by Claude Levi-Strauss for someone who can “make things and create meaning from available materials.”43 We first hear Beca’s work in PP1 during the title sequence, although not until the film transitions back to the narrative is it revealed that Beca is the one creating the mashup of Young MC’s “Bust a Move” and Azealia Banks’s “212” on her laptop.44 The music continues, even after Beca puts away her laptop, with no change in the mix and fades slowly rather than directly when Beca removes her

44 The mash-up was created in real-life by The Outfit, a film composition duo. See “Pitch Perfect Production Notes.”
headphones. More than mere source music, this mashup exists in her head, enters the film’s sound world and remains the dominant soundscape, and underscores Beca’s musicality and creativity before we ever see her face.

Other characters do not receive the same treatment. They might sing along to music heard in their headphones or projected through speakers, but they cover other music rather than creating it themselves. Music director Aubrey does not arrange new music but uses old arrangements. Even male lead and love interest Jesse, who also works at the student radio station with Beca, does not demonstrate any additional creativity beyond his star performer flair. Beca’s creativity proves important not only because she leverages it to lead the Bellas to a victorious ICCA Finals performance in *PP1*, but because a cappella practitioners prize the skill of arranging. As noted above, all three consulting a cappella producers for the film are arrangers and, as I show in Chapter 3, so are most real-life ICCA judges. By the beginning of *PP2*, Beca is known as the architect of the Bellas’ sound and sets, the creative driving force that propelled the juggernaut group to three consecutive ICCA Finals titles. As Emily exclaims when she runs into Beca at the audition night party, “I’m so excited to meet the woman who single-handedly created the Bellas’ sound!” Not until Emily in *PP2* creates an original song does someone else in the Bellas’ universe exhibit creative agency even close Beca’s. However, it is Beca who arranges Emily’s raw song and makes into a hit at her production internship, where no intern besides her demonstrates originality. Beca’s reworked version of Emily’s song anchors their Worlds performance and leads them to victory once again. This trend comes even more to the fore in *PP3*, when, on the merit of her original DJ skills, fantastic singing, and performance persona, Beca alone—rather than the whole group—wins the contest to open for DJ Khaled a. In all three
films, Beca’s individual arranging skills and agency, unparalleled and glorified in this fictional musical world, drive the Bellas and the films’ narratives about this group of women.

Beca becomes one of many characters whose portrayal and plot arc function to teach the audience about the a cappella community’s racial politics. In contrast to her colleagues of color, white characters like Beca spurn any tokenism or limitation on what they bring to a cappella. The audience learns from Beca’s characterization the high value of arranging within a cappella and how to differentiate between good and bad a cappella arranging: strong arranging is not necessarily denoted by compositional techniques but by group sound, mashups, and repertoire—especially music by Black artists. Moreover, Beca’s character arcs throughout the films demonstrate the avenues available to successful white a cappella practitioners, particularly arrangers, in music production and judging. Characters of color, meanwhile, merely sing her arrangements into sonic existence and demonstrate no creativity or possibility for advancement through the a cappella pipeline past singing in a scholastic group. While the members of a cappella groups demonstrate the social and musical dynamics within ensembles, additional characters teach the audience about the a cappella community overall, particularly competitions.

Commentating on Aesthetics and Identity

The Pitch Perfect films educate audiences in how to listen to and assess a cappella performance in part through the characters of Gail Abernathy-McKadden (Elizabeth Banks) and John Smith (John Michael Higgins), the white a cappella commentators. Like their counterparts in sports broadcasting and sports films such as Bring it On, the pair provide expert knowledge to audiences as they watch and listen, directing the audience’s attention to specific people, sounds, or movements within the ICCA performances. They frame the routines as competition while
simultaneously establishing larger themes and aesthetics of the films and a cappella. Moreover, their intermittent commentary breaks up the performances in the film, particularly of the Bellas, so that audiences are rarely allowed to fully immerse themselves in the sounds and visuals of an ICCA performance. This structural device has no inherent connection to identity, but within this film, these two characters illuminate and codify gendered listening practices in a cappella and make racist and misogynistic jokes akin to those found on 30 Rock.

The Bellas’ quest to win the ICCA proves difficult because of their group’s gender make-up, a fact the audience learns before we ever hear them sing. In the fictional universe of the film, the Barden Bellas are the first all-female group to ever reach the ICCA Finals, a nod to the group upon which they are loosely based, University of Oregon’s Divisi, who are one of the five all-female groups to place at the ICCA Finals in the competition’s twenty-six-year history. As the Bellas walk onstage at the beginning of the film, the commentators explain the real-life historic a cappella prejudice by judges against all-female groups based on gendered aesthetic expectations that favor the lower voice sounds made by male-identifying or all-gender groups. Gail asks, “Now why do you think it’s taken so long for an all-lady group to break through that a cappella glass ceiling?” John explains, “Well Gail, the women typically cannot hit the low notes that really round out an arrangement, thrill the judges, and that can really hurt them in competition.” The aesthetic issue remains an obstacle for the group until just before the final scene when Chloe improbably gains the ability to sing several octaves lower after undergoing vocal surgery. This “miracle” only reinforces that treble groups like the Bellas are at a disadvantage in a cappella due a biased vocal aesthetic that makes gender—specifically a supposed sonic lack on the part of female singers—held by in-film judges and listeners, a bias that the audience now carries. This

45 Rapkin, Pitch Perfect, 159–76.
bias was not created by Cannon or the producers, but instead comes directly from the sections of Rapkin’s book about Divisi and the gendered judging practices they face competing in ICCA (see Chapter 3). Through John and Gail, Pitch Perfect articulates and rehearses this bias without ever challenging it. These cappella broadcasters, fictionalizations conceived within the Pitch Perfect universe, thus shape how the audience listens to a cappella.

Between the explanations of a cappella aesthetics, John and Gail also crack jokes aimed at the performers’ gender and racial identities. Like real-life sportscasters, John and Gail’s language choices demonstrate how identity becomes intertwined with judgment of performance in media, which in turn helps to reinforce stereotypes. For example, without taking a breath in between, John immediately follows his explanation that judges disfavor female-identifying groups because they cannot sing like men with this quip: “Women are about as good at a cappella as they are at being doctors.” The camera then cuts immediately to the Bellas’ performance with no response from Gail. Wrapped up in John’s discriminatory remark, though, is an unintentional good point: women, who are not physically or biologically worse at practicing medicine or singing in groups compared to men, become disadvantaged through cultural attitudes like those held by John and the judges and structures like the judging rubric. But casually misogynistic lines like this one are why Lisa Forkish, a prominent advocate for treble a cappella, asserted in a 2014 blog post that “while Pitch Perfect brings the story of an all-female collegiate group to the big screen, it is arguable as to whether or not the film has actually perpetuated some of the same old stereotypes about not only women’s a cappella, but women,

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period.” This moment at the beginning of the film shows that the difficulties women face to sing and to be judged fairly extend across the musical and social aspects of a cappella. But while the film rehearses and explains these stereotypes largely through John and Gail, they are not challenged on them. Chloe’s sudden ability to sing bass notes reinforces the belief that treble groups in a cappella must overcome the limitations of range in order to credibly compete with all-gender and male-identifying a cappella.

John and Gail’s one-liners become even more tied to identity in *PP2*. Between editorializing the Bellas’ choreography and debating the merits of performing original songs rather than covers—and thus setting up the novelty of Beca’s arrangement of an original song at the Worlds Finals—the pair make several jokes about Flo, a new Latina member of the Bellas. The film first introduces Flo when she backflips onstage during the opening medley at the Kennedy Center performance. In response to her gymnastics, Gail and John trade wisecracks about her ethnicity and immigration status:

Gail: “She just earned her green card, John.”

John: “She may have to backflip right back over the fence to Mexico.”

Gail: “I believe she’s Guatemalan.”

John: “Oh none of that matters.”

Instead of giving her a solo singing moment to introduce the new supporting character, the film’s creators (including producer-director of *PP2* Elizabeth Banks who also plays Gail) foreground Flo’s race in a derogatory way. Flo does not sing until the campfire rendition of “When I’m Gone” near the end of the film, when she sings just one phrase by herself as the Bellas trade off

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who takes lead. Thus, she becomes defined not by how she sings but her gymnastic abilities and the immigration jokes she and the commentators make throughout the film.

Gail and John also perpetuate ethnic stereotypes about groups from Southeast Asia, South America, and South Asia singing at the finale Worlds competition that serves as the climax of the film. After the South Asian group, The Naan-Stops, finishes singing, John comments that they are “running off stage to take a few more of our jobs.” Gail chimes in, “I thought the little one was spicy!” Beyond the blatant racism and stereotyping, the zingers are directed only at majority-people of color groups, not at majority-white groups from Canada or Europe, which makes a not-so-subtle indication that these groups, ethnic and musical, are not seen as equal to the majority-white and Western groups who are participating. While my interlocutors expressed appreciation that real-life a cappella groups Penn Masala (the Naan-Stops/Team India group) and the Filharmonic (Manila Envy/Team Philippines group), both of which consist of all people of color, were included in the film, they resented them being made the butt of racial jokes, as demonstrated by River’s statement outlining stereotypes in the films earlier in this chapter. Moreover, because these groups appear only briefly during a medley of several groups performing and are not given any lines or stake in the narrative, they do not receive critical aesthetic treatment from John and Gail like the Bellas or the rival German group, Das Sound Machine, do, only the wisecracks. Quips like these go unaddressed in the films, which leaves the audience to critique and reject these claims by white a cappella elites themselves, work that is optional for the viewer to do.

Though there are not live commentators at the ICCA, John and Gail’s aesthetic critiques line up with those written by actual a cappella judges, as I show in Chapters 3 and 4. In addition, that John, Gail, and the judges in PP1 are all white rings true with the ICCA judging pool in
2012, which illustrates that, while there is some racial diversity among scholastic performers, white people occupy the positions of power in a cappella. This dynamic creates what Amanda Weidman calls a “politics of voice,” where embodied, culturally constructed ideologies of the voice “determine what voices come to be heard and how.”\(^{48}\) Not only do the *Pitch Perfect* films capture this racialized politics of voice within a cappella, but, through Gail and John, they also teach the audience to hear and view it as normal.

**Pitch Perfect in Real Life**

When asked about the *Pitch Perfect* franchise, my interlocutors commented on how the films depict racial dynamics and whiteness in the community, especially in 2012 at the film’s premiere but also still today, feels true. Michelle, a Black current student, said in our interview that *Pitch Perfect* “reflected a cappella at the time [2012] in terms of diversity,” but since then “it has taken a step forward.”\(^{49}\) After describing how the film became a touchstone for people unfamiliar with a cappella, Juan conceded, “But that movie is still so white. [...] Like there’s only one Black girl in that group” who conforms to stereotypes about how she can participate in the practice.\(^{50}\) White people determine the aesthetics of the practice and harbor ingrained gendered and racialized assumptions about sound and people. The line between white people appreciating and appropriating Black sounds and arranging Black music appears murky at best. Thus, while race may not be foregrounded or thematized like gender, in the *Pitch Perfect* trilogy, whiteness nonetheless influences the ideologies and structures of this lightly fictionalized version

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\(^{49}\) Michelle, personal interview, June 2020.

\(^{50}\) Juan, personal interview.
of a cappella that blurs the line between real and imagined for unfamiliar audiences and for aficionados.

As my interviews show, a cappella practitioners increasingly recognize these built-in biases to the structures and sounds of a cappella and understand the subtle ways that media like Pitch Perfect perpetuate them. But the wide reach of the global franchise nonetheless shapes how audiences perceive and listen to a cappella. Pitch Perfect reflects and reinforces a reality that a cappella has been and continues to be a music jointly made by tokenized people of color but largely by and for white people.

What would a more equitable and inclusive a cappella film look and sound like, one that captures the experiences of people of color and is aimed at a multi-racial audience? I doubt it would follow the same narratives and tropes of the Pitch Perfect films, which center on one white woman surrounded by mostly white women and a few token people of color. Most likely it would truly be an ensemble film, one that reflects the various voices, social roles, and personalities found in a given group in a more equitable split of screen time. Moreover, it might include more frank conversations about race and music that, as I shared in Chapter 1, students have more regularly in a cappella groups than is shown in these films. The narrative might also move away from the ICCA; though many groups do center their yearly activities, the cycle of a cappella, around this competition, not all do and many who compete count it as one of many performances they sing each year. By decentering the competition, this hypothetical film would not implicitly place value on particular styles of singing and performance, but instead show a broader swath of sounds from within the practice without judgment from fictional commentators who bias the film’s audience. Such a film would capture “real life” a cappella, as the practice is now and as the practitioners strive to be.
Selected Bibliography


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