



Charting the Color Line

Jada Watson (University of Ottawa)

2022 MusicID Digital Research Fellowship Runner Up

On March 16, 2019, Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" debuted at No. 19 on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart, while also climbing Hot R&B/Hip-Hop and Hot 100 – the first Black artist to appear on the three foundational charts simultaneously. After spending just one week on the Country chart, *Billboard* removed the song from further contention, stating that "[w]hile 'Old Town Road' incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart" (Leight, 2019). The decision to remove "Old Town Road" from Hot Country Songs has been much criticized as a racially, rather than musically, motivated action (Moss, 2019), especially given the use of trap and hip-hop beats by white male country artists to commercial success in the country market (Pearce, 2019). While the song's potential on the Country chart was thwarted out of the gate, "Old Town Road" dominated other industry charts: it spent twenty weeks atop Hot R&B/Hip-Hop and nineteen on the all-genre Hot 100.

The removal of a country song by a Black, queer artist from outside of the Nashville-centered country music system forced a critical conversation about what the chart is capturing and (perhaps more critically) who controls it. It also reignited discourse about the "color line" that has segregated the industry market since the 1920s (Pearce, 2019) – a conversation that had surfaced three years earlier following the collaborative performance by Beyoncé and The Chicks at the Country Music Association Awards ceremony (Royster, 2019; Hutten, 2023).

The popular music industry developed in the 1920s along a "color line" that echoed Jim Crow segregation (Miller, 2010). Even though Black and white musicians played and listened to the same music, record executives created two categories – "hillbilly music" and "race music" – through which they would market music to white and Black communities, respectively (Miller, 2010; Brackett, 2016; Barretta, 2017). These labels were replaced with "Country" and "R&B" by the 1950s, institutionalizing racial segregation through the development of systems of production, distribution, recognition, and canonization (Brackett, 2016; Watson, 2023a/b). Lil Nas X's and Beyoncé's experiences reveal what Dennis Tyler (2021) terms the "disability" of the color line – that is, the "historic and ongoing anti-Black systems of division that maim, immobilize, and stigmatize Black people."

This project aims to explore the legacy of the "color line" that has structured the popular music industry since the 1920s through study of its three pillar *Billboard* charts: Country, R&B, and mainstream pop Hot 100. Researchers have turned to repertoire, recordings, archives, print



media, and literary texts to describe the initial process of racial segregation that structured the nascent recording industry (Roy, 2004; Miller, 2010; Nunn, 2015; Brackett, 2016; Stoeber, 2016; Barretta, 2017), but popularity charts – an important industry tool for tracking circulation of music – have received limited attention.

This project will explore how industry charts have contributed to maintaining this structural configuration through data-driven study of *Billboard's* three longest running market charts from their inception in the 1950s to 2020. Drawing on an established methodology for curating chart data (Lafrance et al., 2011, 2018; Watson, 2023a), the three chart datasets will be augmented to include the biographic descriptors of the artists responsible for each charting single (notably, race/ethnicity and gender identity) to facilitate quantitative analysis of representation in the industry.

Through the MusicID Digital Research Fellowship, I plan to run a pilot project curating datasets and analysing representation on the first decade of the Country, R&B, and Hot 100 weekly charts (~1958-1970). Focusing on this period would enable me to learn more about the structure and methodology underpinning of the charts in a period of industrial development and consider how Billboard negotiated the chart culture through changes in data sources. This is particularly critical for the Country and R&B charts, genre communities that were forming their own institutional codes, conventions, and practices in this period. The first six months would be dedicated to downloading chart data (two months) and then cleaning and curating the biographic datasets (four months). The second half of the Fellowship would be focused to deep data-driven analysis of the charts, considering not just representation overall, but an intersectional analysis of how artists chart, where they peak within the chart ecosystem, and the lifecycle of songs. In addition to providing access to historic chart data, the MusicID platform offers a suite of visualisation tools for exploring consumption patterns of these three charts. This is necessary for a project investigating the racial (and gendered) implication of chart structures and will enable analysis of the careers of Black artists within these interconnected charting spheres. The Fellowship pilot project would produce a report, as well as a conference paper and article on the structural origins of this segregated chart system.

This pilot project will build the foundation of a multi-year research project to study the history of these three charts from their inception to 2020. As such, it would offer the opportunity to explore the platform's capabilities and build out the plan for a longer-term project. "Charting the Color Line" will require continued access to MusicID for at least five years beyond the Fellowship through annual subscription. Through exploration of the deep interconnected nature of the Country, R&B, and Hot 100 charts, this project aims to open a path for considering how data influences industry decision-making, ultimately feeding back into the system from which they emerge and reinscribing the color line that has structured the industry for a century.

Selected sources

- Barlow, W. (1999). *Voice over: the making of Black radio*. Temple University Press.
- Barretta, P. G. (2017). "Tracing the color line in the American music market and its effect on contemporary music marketing." *Arts and the Market*, 7(2), 213–234.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/AAM-08-2016-0016>
- Brackett, D. (2005). "Questions of genre in black popular music." *Black Music Research Journal*, 25(1/2), 73–92.
- Brackett, D. (2016). *Categorizing sound: genre and twentieth-century popular music*. U of California P.
- Cottom, T.M. (2018). "Reading hick-hop: the shotgun marriage of hip-hop and country music." In M.A. Jackson (Ed.), *The honky tonk on the left: progressive thought in country music* (pp. 236-56). U of Massachusetts P.
- Frank, A. (2019, April 5). "Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus's "Old Town Road" remix is a banger." Vox.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/4/5/18295966/old-town-road-lil-nas-x-billy-ray-cyrus-country-rap-debate>
- Hutten, R. (2023). "Practices of genre surveillance in country music: hearing racial politics in Beyoncé's and The Chicks' 'Daddy Lessons'." In J. Watson & P. Bishop (Eds.), *Whose country music? Genre, identity, and belonging in twenty-first century country music culture*. Cambridge UP.
- Katz, L. (2019, August 23). "How 'Old Town Road' revealed a deep divide within country music." Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2019/8/23/20826730/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-vm-a-podcast>
- Kellogg, J. P. (2013). "The urbanization of the Billboard top album and singles charts: how SoundScan changed the game." *MEIEA Journal*, 13(1), 45–59.
- Lafrance, M., Worcester, L., & Burns, L. (2011). "Gender and the Billboard Top 40 charts between 1997 and 2007." *Popular Music and Society*, 34(5), 557–570.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2010.522827>
- Lafrance, M., Scheibling, C., Burns, L., & Durr, J. (2018). "Race, gender, and the Billboard Top 40 charts between 1997 and 2007." *Popular Music and Society*, 41(5), 522–538.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2017.1377588>
- Leight, E. (2019, March 26). "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' was a country hit. Then Country Billboard changed its mind." *Rolling Stone*.
<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>
- Miller, K. H. (2010). *Segregating sound inventing folk and pop music in the age of Jim Crow*. Duke UP.
- Molanphy, C. (2014, April 14). "I know you got soul: the trouble with Billboard's R&B/Hip-Hop chart." Pitchfork.
<https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9378-i-know-you-got-soul-the-trouble-with-billboards-rb-hip-hop-chart/>.
- Moss, M. R. (2019, May 1). "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' sounds like country's future. So why has Nashville snubbed it?" *Los Angeles Times*.

- <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-lil-nas-x-old-townroad-nashville-country-20190501-story.html>
- Nunn, E. (2015). *Sounding the color line: music and race in the Southern imagination*. U of Georgia P.
- Pearce, S. (2019, April 1). "How Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' became a lightning rod for race, the charts, and country music." Pitchfork.
<https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/how-lil-nas-xs-old-town-road-became-a-lightning-rod-for-race-the-charts-and-country-music/>
- Roy, W. G. (2004). "'Race records' and 'hillbilly music': institutional origins of racial categories in the American commercial recording industry." *Poetics*, 32(3–4), 265–279.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2004.06.001>
- Royster, F. (2019). "Who's your daddy? Beyoncé, the Dixie Chicks, and the art of outlaw protest." In S. Fast and C. Jennex (Eds.), *Popular music and the politics of hope*. New York: Routledge.
- Stoeber, J. (2016). *The sonic color line: race and the cultural politics of listening*. NYU Press.
- Tyler, D. (2022). *Disabilities of the color line: redressing antiblackness from slavery to the present*. NYU Press.
- Watson, J. (2019). "Gender on the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996–2016." *Popular Music and Society*, 52(5), 538–560. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2018.1512070>
- Watson, J. (2023a). "A double-edged sword: industry data and the construction of country music narratives." In J. Watson & P. Bishop (Eds.), *Whose country music? Genre, identity, and belonging in twenty-first century country music culture*. Cambridge UO.
- Watson, J. (2023b). "The market." In G. Waddell and A. Williamon (Eds.), *Sound judgement: the science and practice of valuing music performance*. Oxford UP