



OPINION

When Lil Nas X calls out BET, it means something

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Lil Nas X performs onstage during the Grammys in April.

Rich Fury/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

The BET Awards air on Sunday night, and at least one notable person is highly unlikely to be in attendance: Lil Nas X. In case you missed it, the pop star is presently incensed with the network because his name was nowhere to be found when nominations were announced earlier this month. That same day, he sent out a now-deleted tweet: "thank you bet awards. an outstanding zero nominations again. black excellence!" And for the last few weeks, the masterful social media provocateur has been trolling BET and teasing "Late to Da Party," a new song that dropped on Friday and includes the repetitive chant, "F*** BET!"

I can hear the snark chiming in already: *So ... you mean to tell me a super famous wealthy celebrity is out here complaining about not being nominated for a totally subjective award? Who even cares?*

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I hear you. The ego is strong with this one. But – it's not quite that simple.

Lil Nas X's dismay has stemmed in part from the sense that his very overt queerness – still relatively rare for a pop star of his status, especially a Black male one – had something to do with the omission. In another since-deleted tweet, he wrote, "I just feel like black gay ppl have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top mfs try to pretend we are invisible."

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BET's response, in part, was that the network "love[s] Lil Nas X," and that its Voting Academy is made up of "nearly 500 entertainment professionals ... No one from BET serves as a member of the Voting Academy."

So it's crucial to note here that Lil Nas X has been nominated for two BET Awards and performed at the ceremony twice in the past; last year's ended with him sharing a passionate kiss with one of his male background dancers. He's also won two BET Hip-Hop Awards, and received two nominations at last year's ceremony. And since coming out in 2019 at the height of "Old Town Road" pandemonium, he's garnered an unprecedented and overwhelming amount of support from fans and celebrities alike.

Lil Nas X & NBA YoungBoy - Late To Da Party (F*CK BET) (Official Video)



Lil Nas X's new single, "Late To Da Party."

YouTube

But! He's also faced plenty of homophobia and derision from online trolls and celebrities, too. (See, for one, rapper Boosie Badazz, who seems to have a sickening, violent obsession with antagonizing him.) And his flamboyance has been criticized by other queer people, who have accused him of being too "in your face" about his sexuality, especially following that BET Awards performance. His suspicions about why he was snubbed this year, after releasing a critically acclaimed and commercially successful debut album, haven't just appeared in a vacuum. (Meanwhile, his collaborator on "Industry Baby," the polarizing white rapper Jack Harlow, curiously scored a nod for Best Male Hip Hop Artist, and is also set to perform Sunday.)

Lil Nas X's contentions with BET speak to a paradox that's played out in high-profile fashion over the last decade: How to square the ostensible subjectivity of entertainment awards with historical biases among awards voting groups? Drake and Frank Ocean, for instance, have protested the Recording Academy and the Grammys, accusing the organization of being dismissive of Black artists. Ocean declined to submit his album *Blonde* for consideration – "[The Recording Academy] just doesn't seem to be representing very well for people who come from where I come from, and hold down what I hold down," he told the New York Times. For this year's ceremony, Drake withdrew his two nominations for *Certified Lover Boy*, piling on to a long run of criticisms he's had for the Grammys – "I'm apparently a rapper, even though 'Hotline Bling' is not a rap song," he said during an interview in 2017, adding, "The only category that they can manage to fit me in is in a rap category, maybe because I've rapped in the past or because I'm Black."



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Like Lil Nas X, Drake and Ocean have won awards from the same institutions they criticize, but I don't think that, or the fact that there are undoubtedly some self-serving interests at play, necessarily invalidates those arguments. Awards ceremonies *do* have a lot of issues to contend with, starting with who, exactly, is doing the voting, and how. Just last year, it was announced that the Grammys would eliminate its secret nominating committees, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has been working to diversify its membership against the backdrop of #OscarsSoWhite. The disgraced Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which presents the Golden Globes, came under intense scrutiny last year for its lack of Black membership. The industry seems to know it's got a problem.

Often the retort to accusations of bias with these awards is that perhaps the work wasn't good enough to be nominated, or win; "subjectivity" and "meritocracy" are easy ideas to get behind. But those two things are exactly that – ideas that are rarely, if ever, borne out in practice. Lobbying, expensive campaigning, and so many other factors go into putting these awards together every year, that it's impossible to suggest with a straight face that the only barriers to becoming a nominee or winner lie with the art itself. You need only recall how *Green Book* won Best Picture over, among other things, *Roma* and *Black Panther*, or Macklemore – *Macklemore*, people! – won Best Rap Album over Kendrick Lamar.

Back to Lil Nas X. The BET Awards are not the Grammys or the Oscars or even the Golden Globes. To the outside world, they're more like MTV's Video Music Awards, a ceremony where it's all about the fashion and the performances, and where almost no one's going to remember who won the year prior, much less who was nominated. I can't recall ever seeing an artist, movie, or show presented as a "BET Award-winner."

Yet they *do* seem to matter to the artists and the industry itself, and for Lil Nas X, there's something about feeling rejected by his Black peers, in a predominantly white industry that has found every way to shun or dismiss them all at some point or

another, that makes it particularly upsetting for him. When someone on Twitter pointed out his Grammy wins, he responded, "this is my point exactly how can i get acknowledged by the most acclaimed award show in the world and then not even just 1 nomination from my own people? is that not crazy?"

OK, "most acclaimed award show" seems like a stretch, but I get his point. Awards shows are faulty metrics of talent or artistry, but they're also a part of the game. They exist to feed egos, but when you're Black and queer, that recognition – or lack thereof – just hits different.

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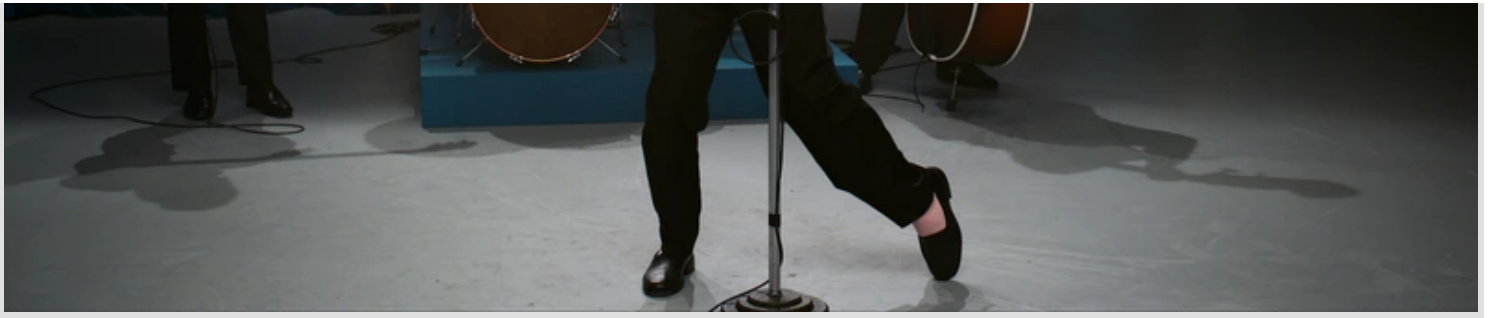
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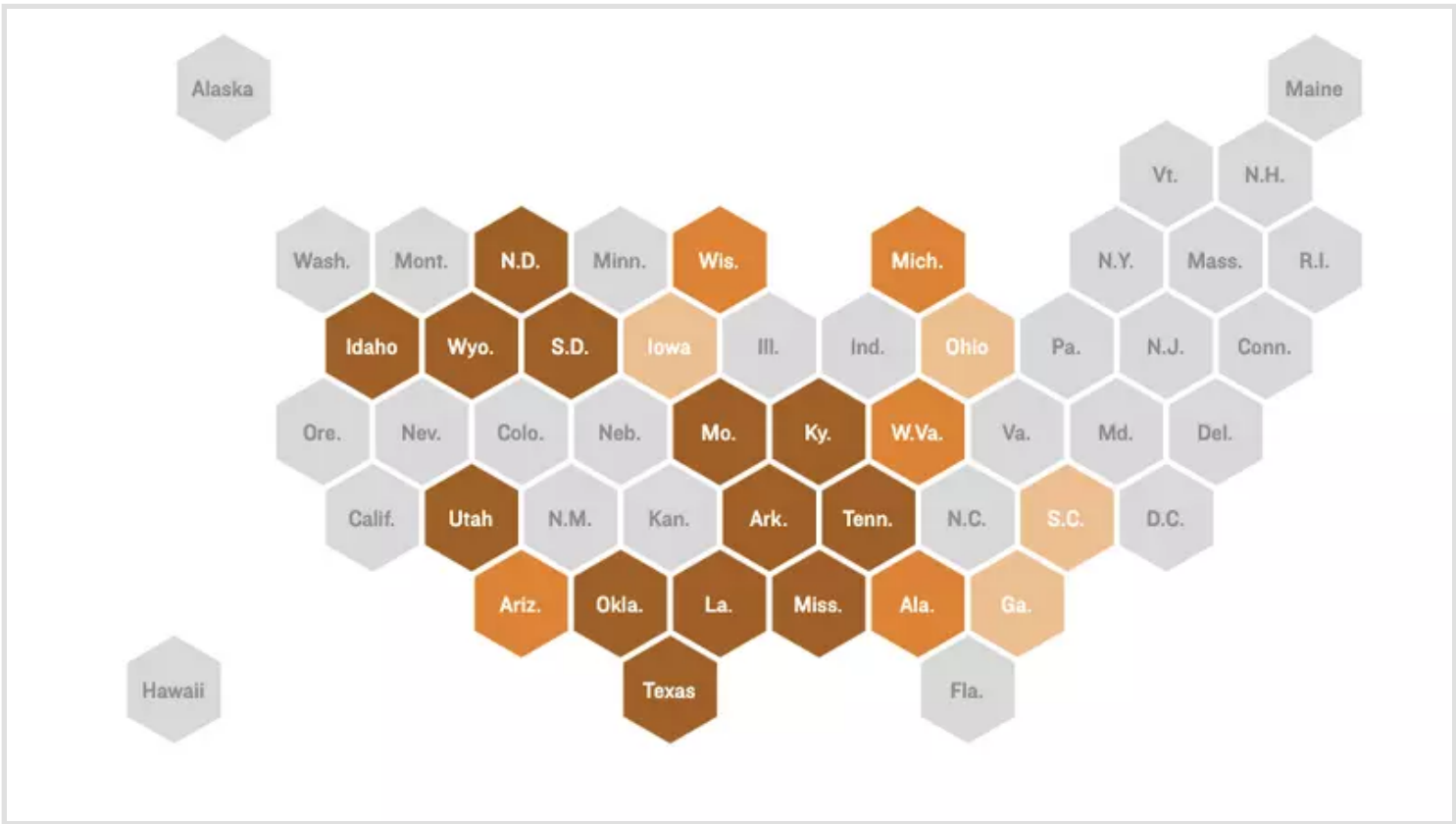
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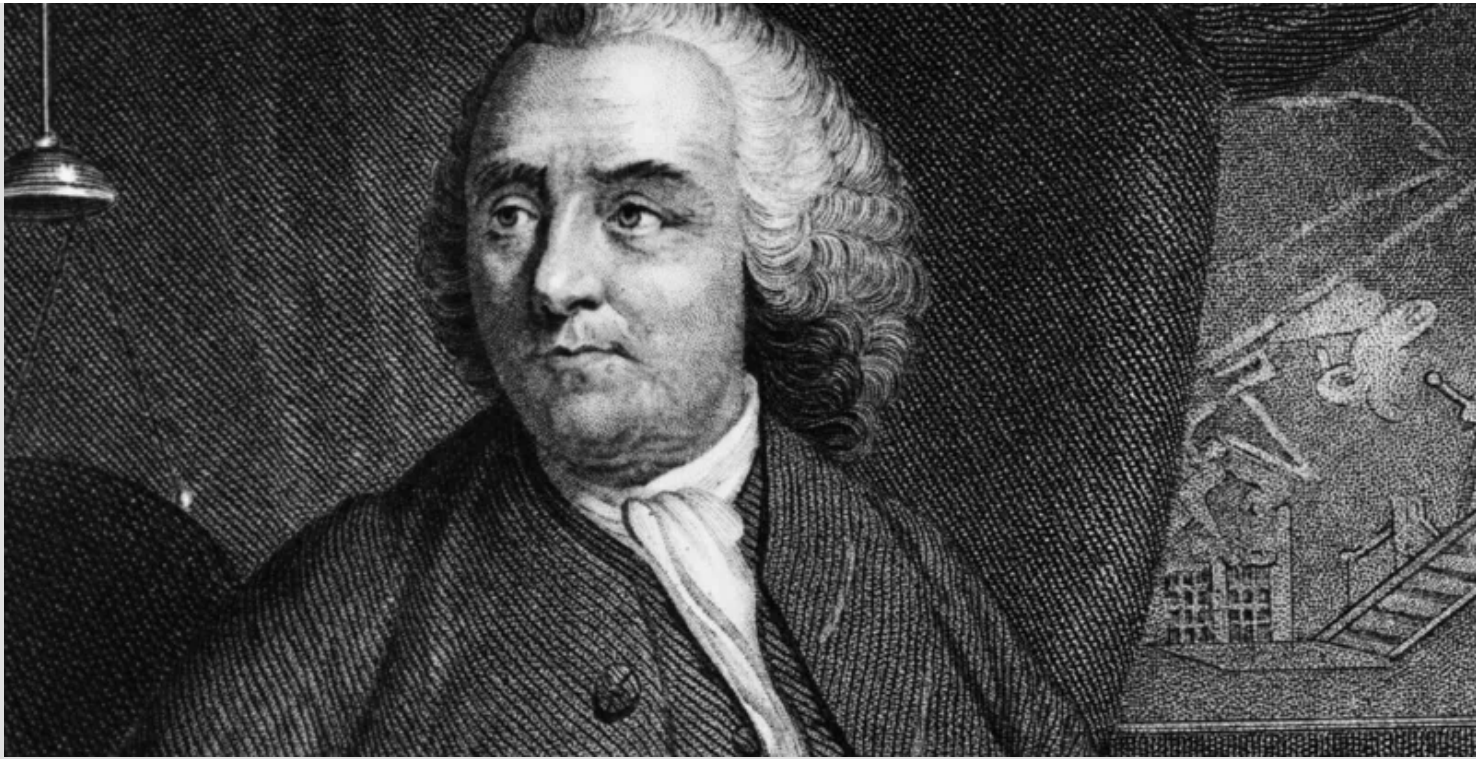
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