

Dancing on the line: advertising, race and the ambivalent legacy of the California Raisins

Edward Timke

*Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Michigan State University,
East Lansing, Michigan, USA, and*

Christina L. Myers

School of Journalism, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to critically revisit the iconic 1980s and 1990s California Raisins advertising campaign to examine the interplay between popular nostalgia, cultural appropriation and racial representation. It asks whether marketing practices that appear celebratory on the surface can obscure deeper structural inequalities, and what lessons this case offers for contemporary marketing ethics and memory.

Design/methodology/approach – Combining cultural history and critical media analysis, this study draws from a diverse range of archival materials from Will Vinton's studio archive, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, trade publications and fan ephemera to analyze the campaign's imagery, reception and lasting legacy. It also incorporates reflections from public memory institutions, social media discourse and personal fieldnotes.

Findings – While the California Raisins campaign was widely celebrated and commercially influential, its use of animated Black music and stylized Blackness – largely voiced and controlled by non-Black creatives – raises persistent questions about visibility without power. The Raisins embody a cultural grey zone: iconic yet problematic, beloved yet exploitative. Their afterlife in museum collections, online nostalgia and social critique emphasizes the complexity of marketing memory.

Social implications – By confronting the tensions between affection and appropriation, this paper encourages marketers, scholars and the public to engage more honestly with the past to shape more equitable representational futures.

Originality/value – This viewpoints paper provides an intersectional case study that bridges advertising history, race and cultural memory. It interrogates how aesthetics can distract from exploitation and how unresolved contradictions in legacy campaigns reveal the systemic logics of commodification in American marketing.

Keywords Advertising history, Appropriation, Black representation, California Raisins, Cultural memory, Marketing ethics, Nostalgia, Popular culture, Race and media, Representation, Social critique, Visual culture

Paper type Viewpoint

Why we write

This Viewpoint essay does not seek to offer a definitive judgment on the California Raisins as either wholly harmful or wholly harmless. Instead, it reflects on the contradictions they



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embody and the historical patterns they represent. Through this lens, the campaign becomes more than a quirky chapter in advertising history. It becomes a window into the systemic logics of the marketplace that reward stylized cultural borrowing over authentic representation and that continue to shape how race is seen, heard and sold in commercial media. To critically engage with the California Raisins, it is necessary to acknowledge our positionalities as authors and researchers and recognize how our lived experiences and scholarly perspectives on race, media and cultural representation inform this analysis.

Our early personal reflections on the California Raisins

As a Black girl growing up in the South during the early 1990s, I experienced the California Raisins campaigns less through the novelty of its Claymation figures and more through its sound. The familiar rhythms of Motown, songs my parents played in our home, suddenly appeared on my television, stitched into commercials and merchandise. At the time, it felt like recognition, as if the soundtrack of my community had been folded into mainstream culture. Now, as a critical race scholar, I return to those memories with a more complicated understanding. What once felt like affirmation now reads differently – the expressive power of Black music packaged and sold, celebrated in form but stripped of our history. The campaign exemplifies how Black creativity has long been commodified for public delight while Black people remain structurally excluded. The Raisins represent the joy I genuinely felt as a child and the erasure I now recognize as an adult. Holding both of these truths together, personal delight alongside structural critique, shapes the way I write, teach and reflect on the cultural histories that formed me.

As a White disabled boy growing up in the rural upper Midwest, I encountered the California Raisins as captivating, animated joy. I begged my parents to bring me to Hardee's, so I could collect the original four Raisin figurines. I vividly remember the California Raisins folder in my lunchbox, the plush figures, the T-shirts I wore with pride and a Trapper Keeper (a popular school binder brand at the time known for merchandise cross-promotions). My working-class parents often struggled to afford these branded items, but through birthdays, holidays and small surprise gifts, they managed to make it happen. At the time, I did not understand the cultural layers embedded in the campaign. For me, they were fun and were also among my first exposures to Black culture. Now, as a disabled media and advertising scholar, I sit with the discomfort that this exposure came not through real people or authentic stories but through stylized, commercialized caricatures. The joy I felt as a child remains real. So too does the critique. Holding both truths of my nostalgic affection and my critical awareness shapes how I approach marketing histories today. The Raisins are more than relics of 80s and 90s pop culture; they are signposts in my personal journey of reckoning with representation, access and appropriation in media.

Opening notes on a complicated icon

Few advertising icons have lived such a double life in the public imagination as the California Raisins. The California Raisins were the central figures of a widely broadcast advertising campaign that aired on national television in the USA beginning in 1986. Developed by the California Raisin Advisory Board (CALRAB) in partnership with the advertising agency Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) and Will Vinton Studios, the campaign quickly became one of the most recognizable advertising phenomena in US popular culture during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Raisins are remembered as one of the most creative and beloved ad campaigns of the era, at a time when brands began to merge entertainment, merchandising and mass media on an unprecedented scale, yet they have come to symbolize broader unresolved questions about how race and culture have long been commodified in advertising.

This paper situates the California Raisins campaign within the broader historical development of late 20th century advertising, particularly the rise of character-driven

branding, cross-promotional merchandising and the increasing convergence of entertainment and marketing in the 1980s. At the same time, it places the campaign within a longer trajectory of racialized representation in US advertising, where Black cultural forms have frequently been mobilized to generate mass-market appeal while remaining disconnected from Black authorship and control. In doing so, the Raisins are part of a broader historical pattern linking earlier figures such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben's to later forms of culturally coded branding in contemporary marketing.

The California Raisin campaign was notable because of its sunglass-wearing, Motown-inspired performers grooving across television screens to the unmistakable rhythm of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" (California Raisins, n.d.; Films Media Group, 2007). The characters themselves were anthropomorphic Raisins rendered in dark purple clay through Will Vinton's distinctive stop-motion animation technique known as "Claymation." Each raisin figure had a wrinkled, bulbous body resembling the dried fruit itself, with thin limbs, oversized lips, expressive eyelids and broad grins, allowing animators to exaggerate musical expression. They typically wore black sunglasses, white gloves, dress shoes and, occasionally, colorful jackets or accessories associated with mid-20th-century rhythm-and-blues performers while performing synchronized dance routines reminiscent of Motown vocal groups such as The Temptations. The figures often stood behind microphones or moved in choreographed formations across nightclub-like stages, visually signaling the aesthetics of Black soul performance even though the characters themselves were never explicitly racialized within the campaign narrative (National Museum of American History, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e, 2026f, 2026g).

The animated Raisins starred in nationally televised commercials and prime-time holiday specials and even launched a merchandising boom, including albums, figurines and apparel (Campbell-Schmitt, 2017; Curran, 1997). Their appeal cut across age groups and markets, combining musical heritage and racial styling with humor, nostalgia and cutting-edge animation. Beneath the surface, however, the campaign reveals a long and complicated history of race in the marketplace (Crockett, 2008; Cruz *et al.*, 2024; Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Wonkeryor, 2015). As Judy Foster Davis (2020) has demonstrated in her comprehensive historical analysis of racial and ethnic representation in advertising, campaigns have long relied on simplified or symbolic imagery of racialized figures to generate mass appeal, while often excluding those communities from meaningful economic or creative participation. Similarly, Jason Chambers' (2018, 2024) work on "positive realism" reminds us that Black advertising professionals have historically had to push against White-dominated structures to present authentic, affirming portrayals of Black life. These scholars call attention to the asymmetrical power dynamics in advertising that persist even in campaigns that appear light-hearted or celebratory.

The California Raisins campaign emerged as a cultural phenomenon precisely because of this asymmetry. Voiced by Black artists, modeled after Black musical genres and visually coded to evoke Motown and other Black performers of the era, the Raisins were instantly recognizable as drawing on Black cultural sources. The campaign made no explicit mention of race. The California Raisins were, technically, just raisins. This racial ambiguity made them widely marketable, even as their coolness and charisma were derived directly from Black cultural performance. As Davis (2020) argues, these kinds of "symbolic representations" tend to flatten and sanitize the lived experiences they draw from by reducing Blackness to a set of entertaining signifiers. Chambers (2018) reminds us that the absence of Black creative leadership in campaigns like these undermines the potential for true cultural representation, replacing it with aesthetic appropriation. The Raisins may have danced to Black music, but they moved to the rhythm of White-controlled marketplace logics (California Raisins, n.d.; Crockett, 2008; Smithsonian Channel, 2021).

The campaign's success relied heavily on what might be termed a strategy of racial coding without racial naming. The Raisins' visual presentation evoked a lineage of Black performers in American entertainment history. Their music, movement and vocal stylings unmistakably recalled the tradition of Motown and soul. Yet the campaign carefully avoided any overt identification of the characters as Black. This racial ambiguity made the characters legible to audiences as "cool" or "soulful" while simultaneously removing the burden of racial specificity that might disrupt general mass-market appeal. As [Davis \(2020\)](#) points out, this form of racial signaling has long enabled brands to extract cultural capital from Blackness while sidestepping the political realities of Black life. As [Taylor and Stern \(1997\)](#) suggest, advertising often relies on simplified visual and cultural cues – heuristics – to quickly communicate meaning to broad audiences. The Raisins' stylized gestures, musical references and visual markers functioned as precisely this kind of shorthand for "soul," enabling rapid audience recognition while compressing complex cultural histories into easily consumable forms.

That strategy hinged on a tight semiotic bundle of sound, gesture and costume that could signal "soul" while preserving plausible deniability. Sunglasses and white gloves streamlined facial and hand articulation for stop-motion but also recalled stage conventions tied to minstrelsy's exaggerated expressivity. Saturated purple backlights, spotlit mic stands and the visual rhythm of synchronized sways connoted nightclub intimacy without naming race. Likewise, "Grapevine" delivered a sonic shorthand for Motown lineage, translating complex Black musical labor into a marketable vibe. In the world of merchandise, these cues were flattened into icons: molded shades, mic accessories and poseable hip cocks that let fans "compose" performance at home. Ambiguity did cultural work here. It enabled "general market" ad copy while harvesting the affective surplus of Black performance ([Thomas et al., 2020a](#); [Wonkeryor, 2015](#)). The campaign could sell "cool" broadly because it extracted it so precisely, thereby separating aura from authorship, and style from the social histories that made the style legible in the first place ([Greene, 1998](#); [Neal, 1997](#); [Rose, 2008](#); [Rose, 1994](#)).

The campaign's reliance on "cool" as a central aesthetic register also warrants further consideration. Scholars have conceptualized coolness as a socially constructed and context-dependent trait associated with confidence, autonomy and cultural relevance ([Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012](#); [Dar-Nimrod et al., 2018](#)). In the context of the California Raisins, "cool" is not a neutral descriptor but a culturally loaded signifier that draws on the historical association of Black musical performance with authenticity, style and affective resonance. This framing helps explain how the campaign translated complex cultural expressions into a simplified and marketable aesthetic.

The creative and financial control behind the Raisins rested largely with White-led teams of animators, executives and advertising creatives, despite the campaign's dependence on Black musical and stylistic traditions. This imbalance reflected the advertising industry's structural reality during this period, where creative leadership roles, capital and authorship were unevenly distributed along racial lines. Archival and historical accounts suggest that this imbalance was normalized within industry practice rather than explicitly challenged during the campaign's development. Though some of the voice work was performed by famous Black musicians, including members of The Temptations, Michael Jackson and Ray Charles, as well as other session artists ([California Raisins, n.d.](#)), they were not positioned as cultural creators in the same way that the advertising agency and animation studio were. In this regard, the California Raisins campaign functions as a prime example of what [Chambers et al., \(2020\)](#) identifies as the structural exclusion of Black professionals from the centers of decision-making in the advertising industry. Even when Black culture was at the center of a campaign's appeal, Black professionals were too often excluded or relegated to the margins

as performers rather than the campaign's drivers. As [Davis \(2002\)](#) documents, Black-owned agencies faced significant structural barriers throughout the 20th century, limiting their influence within mainstream advertising systems. More recent research continues to demonstrate the underrepresentation of people of color in executive creative roles and its measurable impact on industry outcomes ([Lindsey-Warren et al., 2023](#)). These structural conditions shaped not only who participated in campaigns like the California Raisins but also how cultural narratives were constructed and circulated.

The campaign's commercial and cultural success also reveals how audiences were conditioned to consume racial performance without critically engaging with its origins. The California Raisins were marketed as charming and novel, not political or controversial. Their connection to Black musical heritage was treated as a stylistic choice rather than a cultural lineage. In doing so, the campaign flattened the historical context of the music it borrowed. Black musical influence was clearly present in the campaign's sound and performance style, and Black artists contributed to its production. The concern raised here is not the absence of Black participation, but how cultural expression can be recontextualized within commercial systems in ways that foreground style while backgrounding authorship and historical context. The resonance of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," a song with deep roots in the lived experiences of Black America, was transformed into a jingle for dried fruit. This transformation is not unique to the California Raisins. However, it is emblematic of broader advertising practices that repurpose and repackage Black culture for commercial use, often stripping it of its original meaning and political force ([Kern-Foxworth, 1994](#); [Neal, 1997](#); [Manring, 1998](#); [Rose, 2008](#)).

The campaign's legacy reflects a tension between nostalgia and critique that continues to shape its interpretation. Their ubiquity in the 1980s and 1990s popular culture made them iconic, but the terms of their success demand closer scrutiny. The campaign invites affection while potentially obscuring underlying inequalities. It gestures toward cultural celebration while reinforcing the structural dynamics that silence or obscure the sources of that culture. In this sense, the California Raisins serve as a case study in the aestheticization of race in advertising, a process that delights and distracts, entertains and erases.

Theoretical orientation

Understanding the California Raisins campaign requires situating it within a broader theoretical conversation about cultural appropriation, racialized cultural production and the political economy of representation. While advertising has long drawn inspiration from diverse cultural traditions, the circulation of cultural forms in commercial media is never neutral. Instead, it is shaped by power relations that determine who creates, who profits and whose cultural labor becomes visible or invisible within the marketplace. To examine these dynamics, our reflections draw from three overlapping theoretical frameworks: scholarship on cultural appropriation, consumer culture research on cultural borrowing and marketplace dynamics and critical race theory (CRT).

Among these frameworks, CRT offers a foundational lens for understanding these structural dynamics. Developed within legal scholarship and later expanded across multiple disciplines, CRT emphasizes that racism is not simply the result of individual bias but is embedded in institutional and economic systems and cultural practices that advantage dominant groups while marginalizing others ([Crenshaw, 1991](#); [Delgado and Stefancic, 2001](#)). Within media and marketing industries, this dynamic often manifests through the commodification of racial difference, where elements of Black cultural production circulate widely in the marketplace. In contrast, Black producers themselves remain underrepresented in positions of creative authority and economic ownership.

From this perspective, the commercialization of cultural forms cannot be separated from the historical and economic contexts in which racialized labor and creativity have been commodified. Cultural forms associated with Black communities are frequently celebrated as sources of creativity and authenticity, yet the institutional structures that profit from them remain disproportionately controlled by non-Black corporate actors. CRT scholars argue that these patterns reflect the historical entanglement of race, labor and economic power in American cultural industries. Understanding the Raisins through this lens helps reveal how seemingly playful marketing campaigns can participate in larger structures that commodify racial difference while limiting access to authorship, ownership and profit. Taken together, these frameworks highlight a recurring paradox in American popular culture: Black cultural expression frequently drives innovation, style and commercial success, yet the systems that monetize it often exclude the communities that produce it.

The California Raisins campaign reflects this broader historical pattern, in which Black musical aesthetics become a source of marketable “cool” while the structures of authorship, ownership and profit remain largely external to Black cultural producers. To examine these dynamics in the case of the California Raisins, this analysis draws on a range of archival materials, including the Will Vinton archives housed at the Academy of Motion Pictures Archive, written documentation and material objects in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History entertainment and popular culture collections ([National Museum of American History, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e, 2026f, 2026g](#)), advertising and entertainment trade press databases, ephemera sourced from collectors’ markets ([California Raisins, n.d.](#); [California Raisins Collectibles, 2026](#); [Curran, 1997](#)), and objects from our childhood collections.

Crisis and corporate imagination

The California Raisins campaign was born of crisis. By the mid-1980s, the US raisin industry faced plummeting sales, oversupply and a reputation problem. The Raisins were seen as old-fashioned relics of lunchboxes and grandma’s oatmeal cookies. They were far from a product that spoke to youth, vitality or modern tastes. In response, the CALRAB sought a bold new approach to reposition the fruit for contemporary consumers. Their challenge: how to make raisins “cool” ([Billboard, 2026](#); [California Raisin, 2026](#); [Campbell-Schmitt, 2017](#)).

The solution came from a collaboration between FCB, a major advertising agency and Will Vinton Productions, known for its pioneering work in stop-motion clay animation. Founded by Vinton in Portland, OR, the studio had already gained critical acclaim for its creative use of clay as a storytelling medium. Vinton had won an Academy Award in 1975 for *Closed Mondays*, and by the mid-1980s had developed a signature animation style (one he officially trademarked as “Claymation”) that blended surrealism, humor and intricate craftsmanship (Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, 2015; [American Vineyard Magazine, 2018](#); [KATU, 2026](#); [Mercury News, 2026](#); [OPB, 2026](#)). Using this Claymation technique, Vinton’s studio produced characters whose textural realism and quirky physicality made them especially appealing for character-driven advertising.

Archival materials from the Will Vinton Studios collection and holdings at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History provide insight into how this creative process unfolded and who shaped it. Production notes, design sketches and internal documentation indicate that the campaign was developed primarily by non-Black advertising executives, agency creatives and animation specialists working within established commercial frameworks of the US advertising industry. While Black musicians and vocal performers contributed to and benefited from the campaign’s sound and cultural resonance,

they were largely engaged as talent rather than as decision-makers in the campaign's conceptualization, design or strategic direction.

The animation's technical grammar (exaggerated gestures, repeatable movements, modular expressions) converted the specificity of Black soul performance into loopable, broadly marketable entertainment. The craft that made the Raisins feel tactile and "alive" also smoothed away historical specificity, an elegance of motion that risked aestheticizing Black culture into a particular attitude (Mandatory, 2020). What was gained in commercial appeal was offset by the separation of style from the cultural histories that made it legible.

The California Raisins campaign launched in 1986 and quickly reimagined the dried fruit as hip, charismatic performers. With sunglasses, swagger and slick choreography, the Raisins danced to Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" in prime-time commercials that felt more like music videos than food promotions. The choice to focus the campaign on performance rather than product enabled it to break through the advertising clutter. The Raisins became instant celebrities by appearing in commercials, on albums, in Halloween costumes, as figurines, on lunchboxes and in television specials. The campaign won Clio Awards and spurred a licensing boom (Smithsonian Channel, 2021; Smithsonian Magazine, 2026; Smithsonian Institution, 2026).

Licensing operationalized that charisma. Quick-service tie-ins (e.g. kids' meal figurines), mail-away premiums and point-of-sale displays converted television affection into must-have household items. Records and cassettes extended the brand's sonic identity. Network specials, comics and posters broadened the Raisins' intertextual universe. Retail sets often staged the figures like a Motown revue, with spotlights, mic stands and sunglasses, inviting shoppers to curate "the band" at home. What looked like novelty was actually a segmentation strategy: parents purchased for nostalgia and craft value; children for play; teens for style and music. Packaging and in-store signage framed raisins as a lifestyle rather than a boring pantry staple, using copy and visuals to imply attitude rather than fiber and healthy calories. The cross-channel marketing kept Raisins top of mind, even if they were not flying off the shelves in the long term. In that gap between cultural heat and actual raisin sales sits a key lesson for food marketing: branded characters can overperform as entertainment and underperform as category growth when the bridge from spectacle to shopping list stays symbolic. The Raisins' most successful accomplishment, arguably, was not raisins at all but Raisins™, a licensed entertainment property that sold music, jokes and collectibles more reliably than it moved bulk dried fruit (Curran, 1997).

A fusion of marketing and entertainment

The success of the California Raisins campaign cannot be separated from the broader marketing landscape of the 1980s and early 1990s, which saw an explosion in character-driven branding, cross-promotional merchandising and the commercialization of childhood. Marketing scholar Gary Cross (2000) has argued that this era marked a shift in which children became central targets of consumer culture, as brands realized the long-term value of cultivating loyalty from an early age. Henry Jenkins (2006) later described this phenomenon as "convergence culture," a new dynamic in which media, merchandising, and advertising coalesced into a seamless system of promotional storytelling. Meanwhile, Juliet Schor (2014) documented how deregulation and market pressures opened the floodgates to more aggressive advertising directed at children across television, film, toys and food.

Animation became a key tool in this convergence. Campaigns were no longer confined to 30-second TV spots; they extended to television specials, video games, lunchbox designs, cereal box prizes and fast-food tie-ins. *Transformers*, *My Little Pony*, *He-Man* and *G.I. Joe* blurred the line between entertainment and promotion. McDonald's Happy Meals regularly

featured toy partnerships with cartoons and movies, and children's cereals competed to include the most eye-catching characters and giveaways (Jenkins, 2006).

Vinton's studio thrived in this environment, celebrated for its personality-driven aesthetic that blended visual humor, emotional expression and a touch of the bizarre (Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, 2015; [American Vineyard Magazine](#), 2018; [KATU](#), 2026; [Mercury News](#), 2026; [OPB](#), 2026). The studio's work showcased Michael Jackson in surreal Claymation form ([Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#), 2015; [YourProps](#), 2026), exemplified the kind of cross-media convergence that defined the era. Much like Jackson's Thriller and Pepsi campaign, which marked a pivotal shift in cross-media entertainment and advertising (Jenkins, 2006), the California Raisins campaign drew unapologetically from Black musical traditions while negotiating visual, commercial and audience-mediated tensions.

The Raisins fit perfectly within this media environment. They were familiar enough to be accessible, strange enough to be memorable and playful enough to appeal to children and adults. Their broad appeal embodied a defining commercial logic of the era: transform an ordinary product into a cultural phenomenon through spectacle, emotional resonance and character-driven storytelling.

As the Raisins' popularity surged, the campaign expanded across multiple waves, each featuring new animations, refreshed soundtracks and heightened celebrity involvement. The Raisins became more than mascots: they became brand celebrities featured across extensive merchandise lines and Saturday morning TV specials. In a particularly striking moment of cultural homage, the campaign introduced a "Hendrix Raisin," complete with psychedelic visuals and an electric guitar, nodding to Jimi Hendrix's legacy ([Smithsonian Channel](#), 2021). Other Raisins were stylized as surfers, roller skaters and mallgoers, reflecting the era's fascination with West Coast "cool," sporting flat-top hairstyles, neon accessories and signature Ray-Ban-like sunglasses and Converse high-tops as enduring icons of attitude and effortless "urban" swagger.

Despite its massive cultural footprint, the campaign proved unsustainable as a marketing venture. Although raisin sales experienced a temporary boost, they ultimately failed to rise in proportion to the investment in the campaign. CALRAB poured tens of millions of dollars into the campaign's production, licensing and merchandising efforts, only to find that the gains in raisin consumption were not keeping pace ([California Raisins](#), n.d.). The cost of the campaign, especially the labor-intensive Claymation and star-studded collaborations, far exceeded the advertising board's ability to recoup through increased raisin sales. By the early 1990s, the financial strain became too great, and by the middle of the decade, the campaign was largely phased out because the Raisins' cultural popularity simply could not justify the cost of sustaining them.

What is being consumed?

The California Raisins were marketed as harmless fun: quirky Claymation figures selling a healthy snack. Beneath the surface, the campaign invited audiences to consume something more complex and deeply embedded within historical patterns of representation: the packaged, racialized performance of Blackness itself (Owens, 1982; Perry, 1994; Cross, 2020; Owens and Beistle, 2016). The Raisins were vessels for a carefully engineered version of Black cultural expression, animated by Black voices and steeped in the rhythms and gestures of Motown ([creativesoftie](#), 2026; Davis, 2020; Sheena, 2021). These contributions underscore the presence of Black artistic labor within the campaign, even as the broader creative and institutional framework shaping the campaign remained externally controlled. However, they were appropriations, plucked from their cultural context and therefore

stripped of the realities of the lived Black experiences they were caricatured after. The result was a product that translated Black performance into marketable form while distancing it from authorship, agency or control.

While Black musicians and vocal performers contributed to the campaign's sound and were compensated for their participation, detailed records regarding licensing agreements, compensation structures and contractual arrangements are not fully available in the archival materials consulted for this essay. As such, this analysis does not seek to make definitive claims about individual compensation or inequitable contractual outcomes. Instead, it highlights how Black musical forms and performance styles were commodified into broadly marketable cultural signifiers within a commercial system in which creative control and authorship were largely situated within non-Black institutional structures.

From the available archival and historical evidence, it is difficult to conclude that the campaign's creators explicitly set out to appropriate Black culture in a self-conscious or overtly ideological sense. Rather, the appropriation appears to operate through what might be understood as normalized industry practice, where the extraction and repurposing of Black cultural forms for mass-market appeal occurred without sustained reflection on authorship, ownership or cultural context. This distinction is important. The absence of explicit intent does not mitigate the effects of appropriation; instead, it highlights how such practices are embedded within broader systems of production that render them routine, acceptable and profitable.

The Raisins' visual and commercial evolution illustrates how cultural production can become widely circulated while its originators remain largely invisible within the marketplace. As the campaign expanded into albums, toys, television specials and licensing agreements, the characters themselves became the primary source of recognition. The animated figures functioned as cultural intermediaries, standing in for a broader lineage of Black musical labor while simultaneously displacing it. Consumers encountered the aesthetic residue of Black performance, its rhythms, vocal styles and stage gestures, without encountering the historical conditions, artistic communities or economic struggles that produced those traditions. This displacement is central to the political economy of cultural appropriation: the product retains the cultural aura of its origins while the individuals and communities responsible for that cultural production fade from public view.

The material culture is not an afterthought; it is the mechanism that turns stylized performance into intimate ownership. Bedroom shelves and lunchboxes created daily tactile encounters with animated "Black sound" that could literally be held in one's hands. Since that time, collectors' markets on auction sites and at flea markets reveal a moral economy of affection where people preserve, display and trade pieces of a past that feels good to remember. However, that affective charge can eclipse authorship and labor: Whose voices sang on the LP? Who choreographed the reference footage? Who profited from the licensing contracts? An object's patina, plastic mold seams or sleeve wear on a 45 album can be read as evidence of care while also masking the extractive logic that made the object necessary in the first place. The collectible mediates memory: it keeps the joy vivid and the inequity faint, unless we force both into view (Sturken, 1998; Schutt *et al.*, 2016).

When cultural signifiers become "collectibles," they gain new forms of value, but often still erase or distort the communities they borrow from (Mardon and Belk, 2018). This dynamic is further reinforced through visual practices in the music and advertising industries, where Black artists have historically been minimized or obscured in promotional materials such as album covers, posters and retail displays. Such practices contribute to what scholars describe as symbolic annihilation, in which the absence or marginalization of certain groups in visual culture diminishes their perceived importance in public

consciousness (Hall, 1997; Baker *et al.*, 2004). As a result, cultural products may achieve widespread recognition while their originators remain peripheral or forgotten. The California Raisins campaign extends this logic: the animated figures become the face of the music, displacing the human artists and traditions that produced it.

We suggest this is no accidental aesthetic choice. As Owens and Beistle (2016) argue in *Eating the Black Body*, marketing has long invited dominant groups to symbolically consume Blackness as a source of pleasure, novelty and cultural capital. In the case of the California Raisins, the symbolic consumption was paired with literal consumption: consumers “ate the other” not only through the spectacle of the ads, as Hooks (2012) describes, but also through the physical purchase and ingestion of raisins bound to a Black-coded persona. The product and the performance were fused. To buy one was to participate in the consumption of the other (Cruz *et al.*, 2024).

This compression of cultural specificity is not merely aesthetic; it has material consequences. Attribution is tied to systems of compensation, ownership and long-term wealth accumulation (Neal, 2013; Greene, 1998; Rose, 2008). The historical marginalization of Black artists in areas such as royalties, licensing and intellectual property rights underscores how cultural visibility does not necessarily translate into economic equity. In this way, the Raisins campaign reflects broader dynamics of cultural commodification, where Black creativity is highly valued as content but unevenly rewarded within the structures that monetize it.

Celebration: a spotlight on black sound and style

While the campaign’s structural dynamics raise important questions about authorship and control, it is equally important to acknowledge what it celebrated. For many viewers, the California Raisins offered a joyful and compelling encounter with Black musical traditions, introducing them to audiences who might otherwise have had little exposure. The marketplace, even when operating through appropriative logics, is not always a site of unambiguous harm; it can also function as a site of visibility, transmission and, at times, genuine cultural celebration (Crockett, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2019).

For many viewers, the California Raisins campaign offered a joyful and compelling celebration of Black musical traditions. The campaign’s success rested on the enduring appeal of Motown music, a genre long praised for its ability to bridge generations, cultures and geographies. Motown music has played a significant role in elevating Black musical traditions within US American and global culture, contributing to recognition, influence and economic opportunity for many artists (Smith, 1999). The musical traditions referenced in the California Raisins campaign are not simply aesthetic choices but emerge from a rich lineage of Black performance cultures rooted in migration, community formation and creative resistance. From the harmonizing groups of the Chitlin’ Circuit to the polished ensembles of Motown, Black vocal groups developed collaborative performance styles that blended artistry with economic survival (Sykes, 2016; Beebe, 2019). In this sense, the Raisins’ stylized performances draw from traditions that have historically served as vehicles for Black expressive freedom, communal identity and economic mobility, even as those same traditions have been repeatedly appropriated within commercial industries (Guralnick, 2002; Ward, 2012; Neal, 2013).

While Motown provides a central reference point, the Raisins’ aesthetic also compresses a broader landscape of Black musical innovation. Regional scenes from Philadelphia, Chicago and Detroit each produced distinct sounds rooted in their own cultural histories and local economies. By collapsing these diverse traditions into a singular, generalized “soul” aesthetic, the Raisins campaign rendered a complex musical geography into a flattened,

anonymous cultural shorthand (Vincent, 1996; Smith, 1999; Bowman, 2011). The campaign's choice of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" as its anthem was no accident. Originally recorded by Gladys Knight and the Pips and later immortalized by Marvin Gaye, the song is steeped in emotional nuance, rich in vocal complexity and beloved by diverse audiences across racial and regional lines (Raycroft, 1988; Davis, 2020; Sheena, 2021).

The Raisins' animated performance of this song became many children's first exposure to the sounds and styles of Black America, albeit in animated form. For suburban households, particularly those outside urban Black communities, the campaign served as a musical gateway, introducing Black musical traditions in a sanitized yet memorable form. The power of this exposure placed Black music at the center of mainstream family entertainment and extended its reach into international markets, where American advertising was often consumed as pop culture itself (Rose, 1994; Rose, 2008; Owens and Beistle, 2016).

Indeed, this cultural transmission was noticed and even welcomed by some of the very artists whose work inspired the campaign. Music legends lent their voices to related Raisins specials and Michael Jackson, reportedly charmed by the campaign, requested to be Claymated himself for an appearance in Moonwalker (OPB, 2026; Will Vinton, n.d.; Perrin *et al.*, 1975; Raycroft, 1988). These moments suggest an alternative reading of the campaign: not merely appropriation, but also appreciation and reverence for Black creativity. The use of authentic voice talent and the deliberate homage to Black musical stylings indicate that the campaign was not simply exploiting aesthetic forms but, in some ways, amplifying them for new contexts and audiences.

There is also a case to be made that the campaign offered potentially empowering moments of visibility, voice and relevance for Black culture, albeit filtered through corporate and commercial channels. In an era where Black musicians were still fighting for equitable representation in media and advertising, the Raisins animated a set of cultural expressions that had long been undervalued in the mainstream. The characters sang with conviction, soul and humor. They were not sidekicks or background figures; they were the stars. Moreover, many young viewers considered them among the most memorable pop culture figures of the late 1980s (Davis, 2020). These moments of celebration must nonetheless be held in tension with the broader dynamics of production, power and control, which raise important questions about authorship, ownership and access, a tension that the following sections address directly.

Appropriation: stripped context and profit without power

The California Raisins campaign occupies a critical position within the overlapping terrains of appropriation, exploitation and celebration. As Lalonde (2021) notes, debates about cultural appropriation often hinge on whether the borrowing of cultural forms reproduces or challenges existing power asymmetries. In this case, cultural borrowing operates within unequal structures, where value circulates without equivalent recognition or control. Hooks (2012) observes, "appropriating – taking something for one's own use – need not be synonymous with exploitation...The 'use' one makes of what is appropriated is the crucial factor." From this perspective, appropriation is not inherently negative. It can function as a mode of cultural exchange or solidarity (Schutt *et al.*, 2016). As Craig Owens (1982) contends, the act of representation is often implicated in structures of domination, transforming the represented into an object to be possessed and controlled, becoming an apparatus of power. Owens argues that in representing the world, a person transforms from a subjective being bound by space and time into a transcendent, objective mind that both appropriates and dominates reality.

In the case of the California Raisins, the appropriation of Black musical traditions was mediated through a corporate apparatus that restructured cultural meaning in ways that reinforced existing hierarchies of race, labor and profit (Hooks, 2012; Sammond, 2015; Davis, 2020). The performances of Black vocalists imbued the animated figures with a sonic authenticity that resonated with audiences and expanded the reach of Black musical traditions within mainstream culture. However, this mediated visibility did not center Black artists or meaningfully uplift them (Ben-Amos and Weissberg, 1999; Baker *et al.*, 2004). Rather, their identities and histories were rendered peripheral to the campaign's market narrative (Ben-Amos and Weissberg, 1999; Baker *et al.*, 2004).

The campaign's appropriative dynamics emerged from its creation by White advertising executives with no direct ties to Motown's cultural lineage (California Raisins, n.d.; Crockett, 2008; Smithsonian Channel, 2021). The California Raisins campaign can be read within this context as an example of how cultural expression is detached from its originating communities and reconstituted as a marketable commodity, reinforcing patterns of visibility without corresponding shifts in authorship, equity or control.

The visual coding of the characters, evoking minstrelsy's exaggerated expressivity through white gloves, oversized features and performative swagger, transformed deeply situated cultural expressions into consumable brand assets (Kern-Foxworth, 1994; Johnson, 2003; Crockett, 2006; Sammond, 2015; Wonkeryor, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2020a; TikTok, 2024).

Recent work in consumer research further illuminates how audiences interpret these processes. Lin *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that consumers actively evaluate cultural borrowing in the marketplace through moral and relational frameworks. Rather than simply responding to aesthetic cues, audiences assess whether cultural representations appear respectful, authentic and equitable. Central to these judgments are perceptions of authorship and the distribution of benefits. When consumers believe that cultural elements are incorporated into commercial products without acknowledgment or compensation for the originating community, they are more likely to interpret those representations as exploitative rather than appreciative.

The logic of exploitation becomes evident when examining the distribution of benefits. While the campaign generated substantial profits for corporate stakeholders, Black performers received limited recognition and compensation. Equities in copyright law often replicated social standards as it relates to lost royalties among Black musicians and while the amount of revenue lost due to discriminatory practices is hard to quantify, one could reasonably presume that the intersection of "cultural devaluation" and cultural appropriation led to the disproportionate loss of revenue for Black musicians (Greene, 1998; Kopano, 2014). The Black musicians' contributions, which were central to the campaign's cultural and commercial success, remained largely invisible in public discourse. The Raisins illustrate how ostensibly celebratory acts of cultural borrowing can shift toward appropriation, and ultimately exploitation, when the originating community is excluded from authorship, agency, and material reward. In this way, the campaign reinforces Owens' (1982) assertion that representation, when situated within unequal relations of power, is inseparable from appropriation as a form of domination (Owens, 1982; Kopano, 2014; Cruz *et al.*, 2024).

The grey zone between celebration and exploitation

The California Raisins campaign occupies a powerful space in American cultural memory. It was, by all accounts, a popular, award-winning advertising phenomenon, widely beloved by the public, praised by industry professionals and endlessly merchandised. For many who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, the Raisins were not a marketing gimmick; they were part of

the fabric of childhood pop culture ([American Vineyard Magazine, 2018](#); [Ben-Amos and Weissberg, 1999](#); [Assmann, 2011](#)). At the same time, their popularity highlights the tension between commercial success and cultural exploitation, reminding us that what becomes beloved in mainstream memory often obscures the inequities behind its creation. The Raisins were not an anomaly; they were part of a longer American tradition in which Black culture has been packaged for mass, “general market” appeal while the structural conditions enabling that packaging went largely unchallenged. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in US consumer culture, where racialized representations have long been translating stereotypes, caricatures and appropriations of Black culture into profitable commodities, demonstrating that racism is not simply tolerated in consumer culture; it is rendered profitable, packaged as entertainment and made palatable through humor and kitsch ([Thomas et al., 2020b](#)).

This public nostalgia remains remarkably durable. Today, the campaign is often remembered with warmth, humor and a kind of retro affection. The Raisins have been displayed in museum exhibitions, featured in Super Bowl ad retrospectives and celebrated in rankings of “iconic” ad characters ([Billboard, 2026](#)). Some curatorial framing has begun to surface these tensions. As the late Fath Davis Ruffins from the National Museum of American History explained in a Smithsonian Channel show, the Raisins’ legacy is complicated ([Smithsonian Channel, 2021](#)). It is neither wholly evil nor wholly innocent. It offered a stylized version of joy rooted in Black performance but carefully scrubbed of racial specificity. It borrowed the expressive force of Black music while separating it from the lived experiences, labor and historical struggles that gave that music its depth. This approach neither scolds nor sentimentalizes; it asks people to practice holding complexity, to hear the groove and the grievance at once. In doing so, experts like Ruffins have modeled a memory practice aligned with contemporary media literacy: acknowledging the craft, naming the power and inviting people to connect a beloved property to longer histories of how Black cultural labor is celebrated as style and marginalized as ownership ([Neal, 1997](#); [Smithsonian Channel, 2021](#)).

The nostalgia around the Raisins, while seemingly innocent, also demonstrates how affective attachment can smooth over histories of exclusion, making social norms and structural inequities invisible in the flow of shared memory ([Collins, 2021](#)). This dynamic is consistent with research on collective memory and advertising memorabilia, which shows that consumers often negotiate complex and sometimes contradictory meanings when engaging with racially coded marketing artifacts ([Motley et al., 2003](#)). Such work highlights how objects associated with advertising can simultaneously evoke nostalgia, discomfort and reinterpretation, reinforcing the idea that meaning is socially constructed and historically contingent.

The California Raisins are a vivid example of advertising’s capacity to create powerful emotional and aesthetic experiences while reinforcing deeper asymmetries of authorship and control. Advertising can make us laugh, sing and remember. It can also erase or flatten the very cultures it claims to celebrate. These dynamics are not confined to the past. Comparable patterns are visible in how Black musical acts that shaped entire genres have often achieved less commercial scalability in areas such as merchandise, global touring and intellectual property accumulation than White acts working in parallel formats, underscoring how race continues to shape not only cultural influence but also the distribution of economic rewards and historical recognition ([Neal, 1997](#); [Rose, 2008](#)).

Contemporary consumer research suggests that audiences increasingly recognize and evaluate these dynamics. [Lin et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate that consumers actively interpret cultural borrowing through a moral framework that weighs intention, authenticity and

distributive fairness. When cultural elements are incorporated into marketing narratives without visible acknowledgment of their origins or benefits to the originating community, audiences may reinterpret what was once perceived as homage as exploitation. This shift is particularly relevant in retrospective analyses of campaigns like the California Raisins, where nostalgia coexists with growing cultural literacy about appropriation and representation.

This paradox demands ongoing reflection, especially from those who study the history of marketing and advertising. It challenges us to ask: what are we really remembering when we look back fondly on these campaigns? Whose creativity is being recognized and whose is being overlooked? What do we do with the tension between personal delight and collective harm? Grappling with this contradiction between emotional resonance and structural exclusion is central to writing and teaching advertising history with honesty and critical care.

Dancing toward a more honest marketing memory

Cultural borrowing has always been central to creative expression, and marketing has long drawn on the aesthetics, rhythms and idioms of cultures beyond its boardrooms. However, borrowing is never neutral. As scholars of cultural memory remind us, what societies choose to remember and how they remember it is shaped by power. Memory involves preservation, but it also involves narrative choices. It reflects the values of the present even as it retells the past ([Assmann, 2011](#); [Ben-Amos and Weissberg, 1999](#); [Braun et al., 2002](#); [Erl and Nünning, 2008](#); [Schutt et al., 2016](#); [Sturken, 1998](#)).

The California Raisins campaign is an excellent example of selective remembering. The Raisins still appear on vintage T-shirts, lunchboxes and retro TV specials, and they reemerge regularly on social media as emblems of a “simpler” advertising past. TikTok creators duet clips of the Raisins with Gen Z disbelief; memes and parody videos play on their dated charm. Their persistence raises important questions: why do some campaigns endure while others fade, and what does that staying power reveal about how American entertainment and identity are remembered?

A new generation of critics, consumers and creators, many of whom were not alive when the campaign first aired, is revisiting the Raisins with a far more critical lens. On popular culture sites ([Sheena, 2021](#)) and among creators on TikTok and YouTube, video essays and stitched commentary question the use of Black musical and visual styles by predominantly non-Black creative teams ([angie_dunnn, 2026](#); [Are the California Raisins racist?, 2024](#); [Explaining California Raisins, 2025](#); [SuperRetro, 2026](#); [The Claymation Kid, 2008](#); [The California Raisins, n.d.](#); [YouTube, n.d.](#)). For many members of Generation X and older audiences, the California Raisins are remembered primarily through nostalgia, humor and childhood attachment. Younger audiences encountering the campaign through digital platforms often approach it with a more critical lens, informed by contemporary conversations about race, representation and cultural appropriation. Some users call the Raisins a form of cultural appreciation ([angie_dunnn, 2026](#); [SuperRetro, 2026](#); [The Claymation Kid, 2008](#)); others frame them as another example of advertising’s long-standing tradition of extracting value from Black creativity without centering Black lives, labor or leadership ([Are the California Raisins racist?, 2024](#); [Sheena, 2021](#)). Still others sit in contradiction, acknowledging that the campaign was fun, catchy and meaningful to them as children, while also recognizing its embedded racial dynamics.

These generational responses remind us that cultural memory is not static. It evolves. It pulses. It is a living, negotiated process shaped by shifting norms, media literacies and social awareness. Rather than simply rejecting the campaign, many young people are reanimating the Raisins not as kitsch, but as questions.

This new wave of engagement represents what memory scholars such as Michael Rothberg (2009) call “multidirectional memory,” a process in which different historical narratives and experiences intersect in the present. In rewatching the Raisins, younger audiences are seeing more than Claymation characters. They see embedded histories of racial coding, commercialization and entertainment ideology. Some pair Raisins’ clips with trap beats; others remix the commercials with modern captions, reframing them as campy capitalist surrealism. Still others produce thoughtful critiques of how Blackness was performed, stylized and depoliticized for primarily non-Black audiences (Rose, 1994, 2008). In doing so, they are engaging in what can be considered a form of memory activism that holds the past accountable while negotiating its place in the present.

This tension between nostalgia and critique also plays out in more institutional spaces. Museums, educators and scholars have taken renewed interest in the Raisins, not only as advertising artifacts but also as symbols of American cultural contradiction. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e, 2026f, 2026g) features California Raisins merchandise in its collections, recognizing the campaign’s unique place at the crossroads of pop culture, advertising innovation and racialized representation.

Academic classrooms use the Raisins as a case study for critical media literacy. In advertising history, the Raisins represent a pivot from product-driven to character- and lifestyle-driven branding. In race and media studies, they illustrate how cultural performance can be commodified and reshaped in White-controlled creative environments. Students express surprise, and sometimes unease, at learning how layered this seemingly “innocent” campaign really was. These moments become powerful entry points into broader conversations about media production, cultural power and systemic inequity.

Will Vinton’s legacy adds further complexity. As archival interviews from the Academy of Motion Pictures (2015) reveal, Vinton later acknowledged that some artists seek a commercially successful route to focus on higher-quality artwork. This candid reflection suggests an awareness, however partial, that the demands of commercial production and the aspirations of artistic craft do not always align.

This is where the broader question becomes unavoidable: what are we really remembering when we remember the California Raisins? Are we remembering the artistry? The humor? The joy of childhood? The commercialization of Blackness? The erasure of Black creators? The cultural innocence of a pre-internet era? Or All of these things at once?

This question is relevant to today’s creative professionals and historians. It challenges us to sit in complexity by acknowledging that joy and harm can coexist in the same artifact, that personal delight does not negate systemic critique and that reckoning with memory is a vital part of ethical storytelling and cultural stewardship.

Let the Raisins be remembered, not just as catchy, quirky clay puppets dancing to Marvin Gaye, but as a case study in how power works through style. To students of marketing history, the invitation is to sit with discomfort. To today’s creatives, it is to ask harder questions. To all of us, it is important to keep the dialogue open. Understanding the Raisins does not mean canceling them. It means reckoning with them, and through them, with ourselves.

Epilogue: Why we write?

The California Raisins campaign is not a merely quirky footnote in marketing and advertising history. It is a mirror. This mirror reflects the ambitions of corporate branding, the allure of cultural performance, the structural blind spots of White-led creative industries (California Raisins, n.d.; Crockett, 2008; Smithsonian Channel, 2021), and the power of

memory itself. It reminds us that the line between appreciation and appropriation is rarely tidy, and that the work of reckoning with our marketing past is never truly finished.

Our interpretations of the Raisins phenomenon as a historian and critical race scholar

As a White disabled kid from a tiny town in Wisconsin who begged for everything Raisins, I still feel the spark those characters lit within me. Today, as an advertising historian, I preserve my original collection and continue to add to it to ensure we do not forget or lose the materiality of this complex part of the cultural zeitgeist. I keep and collect these items not as uncritical souvenirs. They are a daily reminder to pair affection with accountability. They remind me to ask who was centered, who was compensated and who was turned into style without proper authorship. In my research and teaching, that childhood joy now comes with a commitment to accessibility, equity and credit to ensure students can appreciate past successes without losing sight of the labor and power behind them. We might say that the boy who collected mascots has grown into a scholar who collects questions. The Raisins are my cue to keep joy and critique always in view together.

As a Black scholar, the California Raisins function as both memory and critique, a dual lens that is inseparable from my own experience. My scholarship is inseparable from the contradictions of my own experiences, the ways Black culture is celebrated in moments of popular delight and simultaneously diminished through erasure and commodification. These tensions inform not only the questions I ask but the methods I employ, compelling me to center the voices, histories and creative expressions that have too often been co-opted or silenced. In recognizing the layers of pleasure and harm embedded in cultural texts, I am reminded that critical inquiry is itself a form of stewardship, an effort to honor Black creativity, reclaim its context and illuminate the systems that continue to marginalize it. The Raisins, in this light, become more than an artifact of nostalgia. They are a lens through which I trace the contours of race, representation and memory, and a reminder of the responsibility I carry to interrogate, teach and write with both rigor and care.

This Viewpoint essay is not the final word. It is an invitation to ask better questions, to listen to emerging voices and to build a field of marketing history that is as ethically rigorous as it is culturally attuned. The Raisins danced their way into the hearts of millions. Now, we ask what those hearts were asked to feel and commit to telling those stories with the rigor, care and accountability they deserve.

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Corresponding author

Edward Timke can be contacted at: timkeedw@msu.edu