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Greening the Media

The Green Effect of Hollywood's Diversity Problem

How inequality links higher education, environmental activism, and Hollywood

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A few days before the blizzard of January 2016 hit New York City, the *New York Post*'s front page joked that "This Weekend Will Be... Whiter than the Oscars." When the *Post* notices the lack of diversity in Oscar nominations, you know the problem has edged its way into popular consciousness.

For most Americans tracking this story, the controversy is about the absence of people of color among 2016 Academy Awards nominees and the reaction of high-profile movie stars and directors who have pledged to boycott the big night. The unambiguous exclusion of minorities challenged the optimism rising from the 2013 awards season, which the trade press hailed as a "breakout year" for Black filmmakers.

It's important to keep in mind that the fortunes of Black, Asian, and Hispanic filmmakers do not fluctuate from year to year because of arbitrary factors like luck, pluck, or even talent. Institutional conditions diminish the chances of minorities making movies and being recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS). Let's start with two important and interlocking social variables: the demographic composition of the movie industry and educational opportunities for minorities.

Figures from the *2015 Hollywood Diversity Report* produced by UCLA's Bunche Center for African American Studies show that even in the so-called breakout year of 2013, when minorities comprised about 40% of the US population, 17% of lead actors were people of color, as were about 18% of directors and 12% of the writers (women made up 23%, 6%, and about 13% in those jobs, respectively). That same year, 6% of (all male) studio heads were non-white; senior management was 92% white, 83% male; and unit heads were 92% white, 61% male. The numbers are slightly more "diverse" in television, but not by much.

The Bunche Report also notes that the three top talent agencies that exercise oligopolistic power as gatekeepers play a significant role in maintaining low levels of diversity in Hollywood. And with membership of AMPAS running at 94% white and 77% male (less than 2% are Latino), the likelihood of a film winning an Oscar drops to zero if 30% or more of the cast is minority (the Emmys see similar effects). With the exception of *12 Years a Slave*, this statistic has held steady over the past three years. The gap is more astonishing when compared to the relative box office success of diversely cast movies.

It has been argued that the diversity problem in Hollywood could be solved simply by creating more opportunities for non-white filmmakers to work in decision-making positions as producers and directors. In theory, they would act affirmatively to raise the numbers of minorities in prominent roles (it's the case that female producers and directors hire more women). Current leaders of the Academy also tell us that they are going to double minority representation in AMPAS by 2020, and will look into making current members who have not worked on a film for over ten years ineligible to vote—which is the case with most members who are over sixty years old.

But these aspirations to change the demographic composition within the industry face external challenges from

institutional conditions that predetermine who gains entry to the biz. This is where educational opportunities are fundamental. According to the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), having a bachelor's degree is a "typical entry-level education" for people who want to be producers and directors. There is no significant "on-the-job training."

The entry-level credential of a BA is also distributed inequitably by "degrees of separation," as *The Economist* put it in a recent report on racial disparities in US higher education. The numbers of Black and Hispanic college graduates are significantly lower than Whites and Asians. In a vicious cycle similar to the film industry, successful retention and graduation rates for students of color depend very much on having faculty of color to advise and mentor students toward their career goals. And only 10% of faculty in US colleges are Black, Hispanic, or Native American.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says that lack of a college degree should not be a major barrier for actors, but again, the numbers do not reflect this. About 87% of [the actor's branch of AMPAS](#) is White, 6% Black, 4% Hispanic, and less than 2% Asian.

Any project designed to build a polychromatic cultural industry has to include a call for equal opportunity, comprehensive mentoring, and more effective advocacy for historically under- and mis-represented people of color—with conscious intervention not only in the Academy and the industry as a whole, but also in a diversified higher education and talent representation, and an end to persistent discriminatory hiring practices throughout the economy.

The green connection is less obvious but equally important. Might a greater presence of Black and Latino writers, producers, directors, and actors improve chances for pro-environmental themes in film and TV, given that minorities suffer disproportionately from pollution?

The demographic composition of major environmental organizations invites comparisons to Hollywood. We are all familiar with environmental activists among the movie elite, perhaps most notably Leonardo DiCaprio. Again, this group, and those who advise it, is predominantly White. The proportion of non-Whites involved in agencies that work on the environment (NGOs, governments, and grant-giving organizations) has held steady at between 12% and 16% for decades, even as the majority of people responding favorably to climate science and pro-environmental messages are Latin@ and Black.

Clearly, there is a nexus of racial inequality underlying the diversity problem not only in Hollywood but also in American higher education and our pro-environment institutions. The interconnections should be on our minds throughout the current awards season.



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