

4 Black, Asian, and Latino Directors in Hollywood

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You're in L.A., you've got to try not to hire Mexicans.
—Chris Rock

In his December 2014 essay in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Chris Rock noted the irony of the dearth of Latinos working in Hollywood. As Rock (2014) pointed out, “you’ve got to try” to have a racially homogeneous workforce in an area that boasts residents from an array of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The greater metropolitan area of Los Angeles, unlike the Hollywood industry within it, is sprawling with diversity. According to United States Census figures, in 2013 Los Angeles County recorded a population of 9.2% Black, 14.6% Asian, 27.2% White, and 48.3% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). With such a diverse population, one might naturally expect the city of Los Angeles and its greater metropolitan area to reflect diversity in all areas of social life, including its cultural institutions. It seems rather counterintuitive that Latinos would reside in such large numbers in the greater Los Angeles area where the film industry is headquartered, but then not comprise some sizeable portion, or at least a noticeable slice, of Hollywood workers. A cursory glance at the racial/ethnic demographics of Hollywood workers is all one needs to suggest that the film industry does, in fact, try exceedingly hard to be racially exclusive.

Despite a diverse population of Los Angeles residents, major Hollywood studios have yet to embrace the diversity of their surrounding locale. Although nearly 50% of the population in Los Angeles is Latino and 72% are members of racial minority groups, neither of these groups have a palpable presence in Hollywood. In his essay, Chris Rock lambasted Hollywood studios and mostly White studio executives for their failure to hire Black, Asian, and Latino workers on all aspects of film projects, from roles that require little to no education and formal training to roles that wield ultimate decision-making power. Regarding the latter upper-management positions, Rock expressed little optimism that people of color would ever occupy them. Though headquartered in the Los Angeles area, the Hollywood industry still remains racially homogeneous in all areas of behind-the-scenes and on-screen employment, with Whites monopolizing the production of popular culture, while groups constituting the racial majority in Los Angeles remain on the fringes.

Scholars have previously described Hollywood as a racialized industry wherein workers are sorted into unequal and hierarchical strata, in positions of advantage and disadvantage, based on race (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Thakore, 2014). For decades, U.S. racial/ethnic minorities have struggled to gain increased representation behind the scenes of mainstream media organizations and to integrate into key positions—namely, acting, producing, and directing—within the film industry's core institutions. Despite their gradual yet wholly incomplete progress concerning struggles over representation, research has shown that people of color working in behind-the-scenes positions have historically faced difficulties accessing core institutions in the center of Hollywood production and more often gained representation at marginal organizations (Erigha, 2015a; Hunt, Ramon, & Price, 2014). Lacking representation in core institutions excludes them from benefits like greater reputation, resources, and strategic networks to help further their careers (Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Schatz, 2009). Further research has also shown that members of underrepresented racial groups are segregated into niche areas in cultural institutions, on few projects about race, and in limited genres (Smith & Choueiti, 2011; Yuen, 2004, 2010). In this present moment of post-racial discourses, what racial dynamics of representation exist behind the scenes of contemporary media structures wherein cinematic images are constructed?

In this chapter, I examine the racial dynamics of representation for Black, Asian, and Latino directors behind the scenes of Hollywood filmmaking. Specifically, I delve into the social locations of Hollywood directors behind the scenes of contemporary films in the post-2000 era to consider: how present are Black, Asian, and Latino directors behind the scenes; in which studios and genres do they find work; and in which areas are they underrepresented? I also investigate where women of color stand in the fight to gain representation behind the scenes as film directors, in particular, how intersectionality combines racial inequality with gender inequality to forge deeper representational obstacles. Drawing on over 1700 Hollywood films distributed by Hollywood studios and theatrically released to U.S. cinemas between 2000 and 2011, the results show that Hollywood still remains a racialized place in 21st century media.¹ In the film industry, directors' opportunities and outcomes—including allocation of production budgets, placement in genres, and representation in studios—are largely structured based upon racial group membership.

Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Hollywood

Film directors play a vital and important role on film projects, overseeing the production process from start to finish and interacting with nearly every role on the film set. However Black, Asian, and Latino directors are vastly underrepresented in Hollywood filmmaking. During the first decade of the 21st century, between 2000 and 2011, they collectively directed less than

13% of Hollywood films released to theaters. Of these racial groups, Black directors were the most present, directing 7.5% of Hollywood films theatrically released between 2000 and 2011. Three percent of directors were Asian, while less than 2% were Latino.

In Hollywood, there are marked differences in whether directors of different races are American-born or foreign-born. In general, Hollywood far more often draws on narratives from foreign-born Latino and Asian directors than from Latinos and Asians born in the U.S. Meanwhile, the industry disseminates more stories told by African Americans born in the U.S. and fewer stories of Africans abroad in the diaspora. Although the overwhelming majority of Black directors in Hollywood are American-born, a few were born on the African continent: Sunu Gonera, director of *Pride* (2007), was born in Zimbabwe; Sanaa Hamri, director of *Just Wright* (2010), *Something New* (2006), and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2* (2008), was born in Morocco; and Cheryl Dunye, director of *My Baby's Daddy* (2004), was born in Liberia. Besides American- or African-born directors, some hailed from other regions of the world: Robert Adetuyi, director of *Turn It Up* (2000), is from Canada; *Soul Plane* (2004) director Jessy Terrero was born in the Dominican Republic; and Sylvain White, director of *Stomp the Yard* (2007) and *The Losers* (2010), was born in France.

In contrast, most of the Latino and Asian directors are born outside of the United States, suggesting that Hollywood rarely draws from its American-born populations of Latinos and Asians to hire directors. Latinas Carmen Marron, director of *Go For It* (2011), and Linda Mendoza, director of *Chasing Papi* (2003), were both born in the United States. Miguel Arteta, director of *Cedar Rapids* (2011) and *The Good Girl* (2002), hails from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. But numerous popular Latino directors who have films distributed by Hollywood studios were born outside of the U.S. For instance, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, director of *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006), and *The Others* (2001), was born in Chile. Mexican-born Guillermo del Toro directed *Blade II* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). For Asians, Jon Chu, director of *Step Up* (2010); Kevin Tanchanen, director of *Fame* (2009); and Joseph Kahn, director of *Torque* (2004), are all U.S.-born. However, the majority of Asian directors had birthplaces outside of the U.S.—in China, Japan, and Hong Kong, while a smaller contingent of directors were from Thailand, Taiwan, India, or various other countries. To some extent, one might conclude that African Americans are more able to contribute to the Hollywood cinematic narrative than are Latino or Asian Americans, though African Americans' participation in Hollywood and access to all aspects of production remains, nonetheless, limited.

Generally, there was a declining inclusion of Black, Asian, and Latino directors over the 12-year period between 2000 and 2011, as their share of directing opportunities decreased during the latter years, especially between 2009 and 2011. Understandably, during the years following the Great

Recession, the total number of directing opportunities for all races declined. Yet compared to Whites, Black, Asian, and Latino filmmakers absorbed the hardest hit and saw a smaller proportion of directing opportunities following the economic recession.

It is not in the least surprising that filmmakers from racially underrepresented backgrounds are the most disadvantaged behind the scenes as film directors at major Hollywood studios. In fact, fewer directed movies distributed by core studios compared to noncore studios. Despite comprising over 36% of the U.S. population, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, and representing 13% of directors of Hollywood films between 2000 and 2011, Black, Asian, and Latino filmmakers directed only 8% of films distributed by the six major studios—Sony, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Universal, Warner Brothers, and Disney. Of these major studios, Warner Brothers had the smallest percentage behind the camera with only 6% of directors from these racial groups, while Paramount had the largest percentage with 12%. However, even Paramount's proportion of Black, Asian, and Latino directors was only one third of their percentage of the general population (36%), which means that the major studio that hired the most directors from underrepresented backgrounds would need to triple its representation in order to reach parity. On the other hand, Warner Brothers executives would need to hire 6 times the number of Black, Asian, and Latino filmmakers than they currently staff if their behind-the-scenes composition of directors were to truly reflect the nature of the U.S. population.

There were also racial differences in what proportion of directors from each racial group had their films distributed by a major studio. Only Asian directors had an equal proportion of films distributed by major studios as they did by studios outside of the Big 6. In contrast, the majority of films directed by African Americans and Latinos was distributed by studios outside of Hollywood's core. Only 32% of Latino-directed films was distributed by a major studio compared to 41% of Black-directed films and 50% of Asian-directed films.

Outside of major studios, other studios are generally more inclusive, although they, too, fall short of employing a percentage of Black, Asian, and Latino directors that would match or exceed the level at which they are represented in the general population. At Fox Searchlight, Black, Asian, and Latino filmmakers directed 26% of films. Sony Screen Gems, Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM), and Lions Gate each had 19%–20% of films with directors who were Black, Asian, or Latino. Industry records also indicate that African Americans, Asians, and Latinos experience greater inclusion at studios that are further from the central operations of the Hollywood film industry and are substantially less integrated into its inner core (Erigha, 2015a, pp. 82–83).

One disadvantage of not working with a major studio is distribution. In a 2003 interview with Lia Chang from AsianConnections, Asian American filmmaker Justin Lin discussed the disadvantages of his earlier films not having a major studio attached. Lin said:

That is the hypocrisy of distribution. The way the studios work. They know how to make mainstream films with big stars, put them in 3000 screens and the per screen average can be really low but they have 3000 screens. They can make millions of dollars in one weekend. It's a business of volume. They'll spend tens of millions on billboards and commercials and everything. For all independent films that are going through platform release, they are only going to put you into ten theaters to begin with. They are not going to put any money into prints and advertising but they expect you to do five times the business of a regular Hollywood film. If you can do that you prove to live another a week. Then they will expand.

(Chiang, 2003)

Lin described the hindrances directors face when major studios are unwilling to spend large amounts on marketing and promotion or widely exhibit their films across theaters nationwide.

Though few surmount the barriers and break into Hollywood filmmaking, some directors are successful at forging a relatively stable working relationship with big studios, directing several films that are distributed by the majors. Later in his career, Justin Lin directed a number of movies distributed by major Hollywood studios, including three from the internationally popular *Fast and Furious* franchise: *Fast Five* (2011, Universal), *Fast and the Furious* (2009, Universal), and *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006, Universal). Lin also directed films that were distributed outside of major studios. Comparable success is also characteristic of the careers of African American filmmakers, including Antoine Fuqua and Tim Story. With major studios, Fuqua directed *Training Day* (2001, Warner Brothers), *King Arthur* (2004, Buena Vista), *Shooter* (2007, Paramount), and *Bait* (2000, Warner Brothers). With 20th Century Fox, Tim Story directed *Fantastic Four* (2005), *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), and *Taxi* (2004). Although filmmakers like Lin, Fuqua, and Story were able to navigate the racially exclusive Hollywood studios and direct multiple films, opportunities to have lucrative Hollywood careers remain the exception and not the norm for the majority of Black, Asian, and Latino directors.

Production Budgets and Genre

In addition to racialized representation at studios, average production budgets for films were stratified by the director's race. For Asian directors, the average film budget was \$41 million. The average production budget for Latino directors was \$34.5 million. Black directors registered the smallest average budgets at \$28 million. In stark contrast, White directors had the largest average budgets at \$46 million.

Between 2000 and 2011, four Asian-directed films at Hollywood companies were budgeted at or over \$100 million: Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003),

John Woo's *Mission Impossible II* (2000), and Justin Lin's *Fast Five* tapped out at \$125 million. John Woo's *Windtalkers* (2002) was produced on a \$115 million budget. Only three Black filmmakers directed Hollywood films with budgets at or over \$100 million. The upper limit of production budgets for African Americans was \$130 million, achieved by Tim Story for *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007, Fox). Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004, Buena Vista) was made for \$120 million, while Tim Story's *Fantastic Four* (2005, Fox) was made for \$100 million. No Latino-directed film crossed the \$100 million mark. The largest budget for a Latino-directed film was \$85 million for Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy II*.

Unlike Asian, Latino, and Black filmmakers, White directors received considerably larger production budgets with over 150 White-directed films having production budgets at or over \$100 million and more than 20 with budgets above \$200 million. The upper limit for White directors was \$300 million for Gore Verbinski's *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007, Buena Vista), the third film in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. All of the top budgeted films for Black, White, and Asian directors were blockbuster franchises, suggesting that only White directors are hired to direct the most lucrative franchise films (Erigha, 2015b).

Clearly, Whites in Hollywood occupy the highest rungs of production budgets. They also direct the majority of films in the lucrative science fiction/fantasy genre, with the largest average budgets, theatrical releases, and box office grosses of any genre. Filmmaker Reginald Hudlin expressed his frustration with not being able to direct a science fiction (SF) film in Hollywood. Hudlin said:

For me, I sort of looked at George Lucas' career. He did the teen comedy *American Graffiti* and went on to do *Star Wars*. I always wanted to do the same thing. I figured I'd do *House Party* and then do my version of *Star Wars*. I had a big sci-fi project, several of them, that I kept trying to get off the ground and wasn't successful at getting those off the ground. It hit this glass ceiling in Hollywood.

(Morales, 2012)

Hudlin's SF project never took off, perhaps because this is a genre where few African Americans ever produce Hollywood films. Collectively, Black, Asian, and Latino directors experience great underrepresentation in the SF/fantasy genre. Not only are their voices notably absent from making conjectures about the future, they also miss out on projects that are lucrative for prosperous career trajectories.

In contemporary Hollywood cinema, racial groups are segregated into specific film genres and virtually excluded from others. For instance, Black directors are overrepresented behind the camera of music genre films, which have strong elements and themes of musicality, singing, hip-hop culture, rap, and dance. Part of Black directors' overrepresentation in the music

genre stems from the number of African Americans who, prior to becoming film directors, had careers directing music videos. For example, DJ Pooh, F. Gary Gray, and Sanaa Hamri forged careers directing music videos for prominent artists before making the transition to feature filmmaking. Additionally, Black directors' overrepresentation in the music genre is a likely consequence of their tendency to be excluded from presumed intellectually minded SF genres and typecast within the entertainment and performance fields where they are assumed, stereotypically so, to have innate talents and abilities (Friedman, 2011; Rhines, 2003).

With regard to genre, Latino directors primarily direct dramas, though they also have a substantial presence in horror/thriller, romance, and comedy genres. Asians were most represented in the horror/thriller genre, directing popular horror films like Hideo Nakata's *The Ring Two* (2005), James Wan's *Saw* (2004) and *Dead Silence* (2007), James Wong's *Final Destination* (2000) and *Final Destination 3* (2006), and Takashi Shimizu's *The Grudge* (2004) and *The Grudge 2* (2006). Though this segmentation reflects the popularity of the horror genre in Asian popular culture, it is also indicative of Hollywood's propensity to concentrate the inclusion of Asian directors into a niche market.

Intersectionality

Hollywood film directing remains a male-dominated occupation, perhaps due to its location in technical fields, wherein women have been historically underrepresented and women of color have been virtually nonexistent. For each racial/ethnic group, men were the majority of directors, while women were in the minority. As the most established group in the directing occupation, White men directed 82% of films compared to 6% directed by White women. A gender gap also existed between the presence of Black male and female directors, albeit a much smaller gap than that between White men and women, since both Black men and women make up only a small percentage of the total population of Hollywood directors. Black men comprised of 6% of Hollywood directors, while Black women approached 1%. Even for Asians and Latinos, the gender gap in directing persisted. Asian men accounted for around 2% of directors, while Latino men accounted for 1% of directors. Together, Latinas and Asian women comprised of less than 1% of directors. Therefore, altogether women of color comprised of less than 2% of Hollywood directors of contemporary films, a dismal percentage that is in dire need of attention to increase women of color's presence in technical behind-the-scenes positions in the film industry.

Due to the double burden of race and gender inequality, it is no surprise that women of color are vastly underrepresented in Hollywood filmmaking (Collins, 2009). Few women of color are able to sustain careers directing multiple films. Some notable exceptions are Gina Prince-Bythewood, who directed *Love & Basketball* (2000) and *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008), and

Kasi Lemmons, the filmmaker behind the camera of *The Caveman's Valentine* (2001) and *Talk to Me* (2007). Kasi Lemmons discussed the challenges of being a female filmmaker of color in Hollywood.

I don't wake up every day and say: I am a Black woman what do I do? You know it's only when I'm in a meeting with a bunch of directors or I look at statistics that I'm like: I got to hold it down from where I am. I don't dwell on it. The biggest challenges are always getting into the rooms that you need to get into and having people open to the types of stories that I want to tell. And I feel that just being a female director and doing that is a big deal in this country. On my third movie, I worked with a French DP [director of photography]. I asked him has he ever worked with a woman director before? He said in France a third of directors are women; so you can't avoid them. So I realized that the US is behind.

(Dowell, 2013)

Lemmons suggested that Hollywood studio executives are not always open to the types of stories that she, as a Black woman, would like to tell. Another striking remark was that gender inequality was not as stark in France compared to the U.S. She noted "the U.S. is behind" with its failure to incorporate racial and gender diversity in its national agenda. Culture industries like Hollywood need only to look across the Atlantic Ocean to France, or also to Nigeria's Nollywood industry, to see noteworthy examples of film industries that include rather than exclude myriad ethnic and gender groups from their populations.

Unlike films helmed by male directors, female-directed films are not as likely to be distributed by major studios, but rather distributed by studios outside of Hollywood's core. For example, each of Asian filmmaker Gurinder Chadha's three films was distributed by studios outside of Hollywood's core: *Bend It Like Beckham* (2003, Fox Searchlight), *Bride and Prejudice* (2005, Miramax), and *What's Cooking* (2000, Lionsgate). Furthermore, Latinas, Black women, and Asian women are also concentrated into few genres, primarily directing comedies, dramas, and romance films, and largely excluded from more financially lucrative action and SF/fantasy genres. With women of color vastly underrepresented in Hollywood and relegated to few movies, their sole method of effectively producing popular culture remains on the independent track, though this path has limitations for reaching mainstream audiences.

Conclusion

Behind-the-scenes representation of Black, Asian, and Latino directors in Hollywood remains limited and problematic. Their persistent inability to construct images and characters that appear in mainstream media raises

questions about the extent of their influence over media images. Furthermore, their placement in restricted genres raises the issue of which roles they are able to penetrate behind the scenes and which roles still remain elusive for them to occupy. With Black, Asian, and Latino directors having little representation in mainstream studios and facing near exclusion in lucrative genres, contemporary racial ideologies in cinema will likely continue to reaffirm the status quo of a White power structure, rather than offer nuanced characters derived from a diverse set of cultural creators. Likely, more filmmakers from diverse racial/ethnic groups working on cultural products in a variety of genres will move us closer to ensuring that on-screen images more appropriately reflect the desires and worldviews of diverse audiences. What remains most surprising is the fact that racial minorities in the U.S. are actually the collective racial majority in Los Angeles, with Latinos being the majority group. Yet, these demographic increases appear to have no bearing on the racial/ethnic composition of Hollywood studios, which still remain inflexible to changes in the surrounding social milieu.

However, it is ever vital that diverse racial groups participate in the production of mainstream culture for many reasons. Movies, in particular, have an expansive reach in American and global culture. Thus, exclusion from being a vibrant faction in the construction and manufacturing of mainstream culture prevents underrepresented groups from exerting their influence on what is at present a monolithic representation of America. Being underrepresented in the film industry also constitutes a denial of citizenship rights, including the right to produce and be recognized in the nation's dominant cultural myths, narratives, and images (Tillet, 2012). Moreover, the film industry is yet another area where high unemployment disproportionately plagues underrepresented racial/ethnic groups in America. Alternatively, media and cultural industries should be places where people can strive for and potentially achieve access to greater employment opportunities, from highly visible positions like actors, producers, and directors, to positions with considerably less visibility like costume designers, sound engineers, and colorists. Gaining work in film directing reaps benefits for employment in a high-paying and lucrative occupation. Employment of Black, Asian, and Latino filmmakers in directing also holds importance for increasing their presence in other behind-the-scenes and on-screen positions. In positions of influence on film sets, African American, Asian, and Latino filmmakers are able to advocate for and address diversity in other positions, which leads to breaking down color barriers on "lily-white" film crews (Reid, 2005). Hence, their employment as directors has pronounced benefits that extend beyond any single individual.

While Black, Asian, and Latino representation as Hollywood film directors lags well behind their proportion of the U.S. population, ironically, their support for Hollywood productions actually surpasses their share of the population. As audiences, they are overrepresented, comprising 44% of frequent moviegoers (MPAA, 2015, p. 12). Because of this disproportionate representation

at the box office, one might say that these groups actually *overpay* as moviegoers. To their misfortune, their overexcitement to spend hard-earned dollars supporting the film industry does not readily translate into more support behind the scenes of Hollywood. Since their percentage of behind-the-scenes employment does not meet their percentage of the general population, much less exceed it to meet their share of box office receipts, it is fair to suggest that Black, Latino, and Asian audiences are being shortchanged—paying more proportionally for movies, but not receiving their comparable piece of the pie in exchange in the back end. At this contemporary moment, members of underrepresented racial groups still have a long way to go to make their mark on an industry that creates and disseminates mainstream culture, presumably on behalf of all Americans. Rather than trying not to hire Mexicans, a disservice that Chris Rock intimated studios regularly commit, Hollywood studios must make the effort to prioritize diversity if its films are to ever reflect the rich, multifaceted character of the American populace.

Note

1. I compiled data on films, directors, actors, film organizations, and box office receipts on films using three online databases as primary sources: Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com), the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), and The Numbers (www.the-numbers.com). A number of scholars have used these databases in previous research (e.g., Banjo, 2013; Hughey, 2009; King, 2008; Lincoln & Allen, 2004; Ndounou, 2014; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittmann 2003).

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