

RACISM AT WORK

The Danger of Indifference



Black and Minority Actors & The Oscars

In 1940, Hattie McDaniel was barred from going to see *Gone with the Wind* at Loew's Grand Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, because of The Jim Crow laws. These laws enforced segregation of black and white people in public places and meant that, as a black person, McDaniel could be prevented from seeing the movie despite the fact that she not only appeared in the film, but two months later, became the first black person ever to win an Oscar: Best Supporting Actress.

McDaniel's humiliation did not end whilst she attended the ceremony to collect her award. She was segregated from the white guests and made to sit on a small table for her and her escort, at the back of the room rather than enjoying the banquet with the other guests.

Ground-breaking as her achievement was, McDaniel was not the precursor to further change in Hollywood. The next time a black person took to the stage to collect an Oscar was 1963 – 24 years later. This time the recipient was Sidney Poitier.

It would be 50 years before a black woman repeated McDaniel's landmark, when Whoopi Goldberg collected her Oscar for her role in *Ghost* in 1990.

Looking at more recent history, taking the period from 1980 – 2016, whilst there is still a huge bias, the data looks a little more promising. During that 36 year period, in the male categories, white actors won 84% of the awards, followed by black actors at 10%, Hispanic and Asian actors collected 3% each.

For the women's categories, white actors won 89% of the awards followed by black actors at 9% and Hispanic actors at 3%.

So, whilst minorities are not as successful at the Oscars as white actors, the situation seems worse for minority women. This is a reflection of the industry of course because so few minority women are given leading roles in film. In fact 93% of leading female roles go to white people, 6% to black people and 1% to Asians.

Finally, not only have there been no Native American Oscar winners, only two have ever been nominated, both for Best Supporting Actor: Chief Dan George for his role in *Little Big Man* and Graham Greene for his role in *Dances with Wolves*.

The issues with race and the Oscars therefore is not just a binary black and white one, but something that impacts and affects all minorities. Having a more diverse Academy would obviously be a good thing as it would be representative of the talents that exist in all communities. However, the transformational shift will only occur when minorities are given more substantial roles to play. Only then can this affect the number of minorities being nominated and having a chance of winning. Which in turn, will help more minorities being invited into the membership, and therefore being part of the voting panels.

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