**Do White and Gold go together in Hollywood?**

Matthew W. Hughey

Confederate statues and their demise have made the regular news cycle of late. But every spring a different statue captures our attention—it’s 13.5 inches tall, weighs 8.5 pounds, and is a shiny, gold, art deco depiction of a knight holding a sword. His name is “Oscar.”

Over the past few renditions of the Academy Awards (also known as “The Oscars”), there has been increasing public criticism of white actors, directors, and writers’ dominance of the award slate. Many now openly complain about white dominance of those taking home the golden man. Trending in 2016 and 2017 respectively, #OscarsSoWhite and #OscarsStillSoWhite drew attention to the over-representation of white nominees and awardees.

I have written on the “[whiteness of Oscar night](https://contexts.org/blog/the-whiteness-of-oscar-night/)” before, as well as the Hollywood tendency to produce, defend, and award films that rely on racialized myths and narratives, from that of supernatural and folksy “[Magical Negro](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2009.56.3.543)” characters who uplift disheveled white characters: just think of Morgan Freeman in Bruce Almighty (2003), Anthony Mackie in *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), and the janitor and copier-repair skit on [*Key & Peele*](http://www.cc.com/video-clips/hzlrwd/key-and-peele-magical-negro-fight). Conversely, movies that feature a white person saving people of color from themselves (called “[White Savior Films](http://www.temple.edu/tempress/titles/2263_reg.html)”) are also popular, such as The Blind Side (2009), The Help (2011), *The Legend of Tarzan* (2016), and *The Great Wall* (2017).

Now on the heels of a climatic [“Best Picture” Oscar victory](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/watching-moonlight-in-the-twilight-of-obama_us_58a72816e4b0fa149f9ac4fb) for *Moonlight* (2016)—which was the first Oscar victory for an all-black cast, coupled with Mahershala Ali’s “Best Actor in a Supporting Role” Oscar (for *Moonlight*) and Viola Davis’s “Best Actress in a Supporting Role” Oscar (for *Fences*)—many have wondered if the [2018 Oscars](http://oscar.go.com/nominees) will be a “whitelash” against these historic black victories.

Consider the following.

On the one hand, white supremacy is a historic fixture of Hollywood. In 2018, there will be (for the sixth consecutive year) no Latinx actors or actresses nominated for an acting Oscar, and Latinx people have historically received just 1 percent of acting nominations. Similarly, Asian actors and actresses have nabbed just 1 percent of all Oscar acting nominations (For instance, in 2017, Dev Patel was the sole Asian actor to receive a nomination). Moreover, the type of stories that are nominated often center on a white man, with women and people of color as sidekicks.

Since 1929 (the first year of the Academy Awards) less than seven percent of the award *nominees* (not the winners, but just the nominees) (now given in 24 categories) have been people of color. While the number of non-white nominees and award winners has grown since the 1990s, the racial diversity of the Oscars remains woefully low; since 1991, only twelve percent of nominees have been people of color.

The numbers are even more sobering when one considers African Americans. From 1929 to 2017, there have been 1,688 nominations in total for the “Big Four” Oscars: (1) Best Actor in a Lead Role, (2) Best Actress in a Lead Role, (3) Best Actor in a Supporting Role, and (4) Best Actress in a Lead Role. Yet, for “Best Actor in a Lead Role,” there have been only 23 African American nominations and 4 African American winners. For “Best Actress in a Lead Role,” there have been 11 black nominees and only 1 winner (Halle Berry in 2001 for *Monster’s Ball*). For “Best Actor in a Supporting Role” there have been only 18 black nominations and 5 winners and for “Best Actress in a Supporting Role” there has been 22 nominations and 7 winners.

In total, of the 1,688 nominations for the “Big Four,” only 74 have been Black (that’s a whopping 01.007 percent).

On the other hand, the 2018 Oscars show signs of pushback. For example, Get Out (a satire on white liberal racism) is nominated for “Best Picture.” Call Me By Your Name (a gay coming-of-age love story) is nominated for three Oscars. Directing nominations include Guillermo del Toro (for The Shape of Water), only the fifth female nominee (Greta Gerwig for Lady Bird), and the fifth black man to ever receive a nomination for directing (Jordan Peele for *Get Out*). Additionally, the 2018 Oscars have nominated Daniel Kaluuya (*Get Out*) and Denzel Washington(*Roman J. Israel, Esq*.)for “Best Actor in a Leading Role” and Mary J. Blige (*Mudbound*) and Octavia Spencer (*The Shape of Water*) for “Best Actress in a Leading Role.”

Together, these nominations may reflect the “Oscars A2020 initiative” which is dedicated to improving diversity in the Academy by 2020. In 2013, Cheryl Boone Isaacs was elected as the first black Academy president. Speaking on A2020, Isaacs [stated](http://www.oscars.org/news/academy-takes-historic-action-increase-diversity), “These new measures regarding governance and voting will have an immediate impact and begin the process of significantly changing our membership composition.” Revealed to be 94 percent white and predominately male in 2012, new members of the Academy now make the group 39 percent female and 30 percent people of color.

But such historic white male dominance isn’t just about awards or membership. [Studies](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0093650211401376) have shown that children watching their own racial group on the screen have higher self-esteem than those who watch *only* other racial groups, which brings weight to the words of social scientists [George Gerbner and Larry Gross](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VoyMl8hDKl8C&pg=PA134&lpg=PA134&dq=%E2%80%9CRepresentation+in+the+fictional+world+signifies+social+existence;+absence+means+symbolic+annihilation.%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=Y1ItNGN0Qn&sig=pi7fAGLNRbkdPM4O-57tv8s79s): “Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation.”

So, what will this now more diverse and supposedly “woke” Academy bring for the 2018 Oscars?

Even with some of Hollywood’s recent changes and increased scrutiny in the context of the fall of Harvey Weinstein and the rise of #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns, the continued dominance of white male nominations and winners of the Academy Awards (even if some win among Gerwig, del Toro, Peele, Kaluuya, Washington*,* Blige, and Spencer), it will take many more years for Hollywood to change its true colors. In the meantime, some will continue to be left black and blue.

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