

Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism by Nancy Wang Yuen. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016. 208 pp. \$22.95, paper. ISBN: 978-0813586298

When Sidney Poitier won the Best Actor Oscar for *Lilies of the Field* in 1963, minority actors and filmmakers had much reason to be hopeful about the future. But, in 2016, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences fielded only white nominees for all the acting categories, it shined a spotlight on the limited progress made by Hollywood in addressing racial inequities (popularized by the “OscarsSoWhite” hashtag on social media). Notably, over the entire history of the Oscars, actors of color have received only 6.2% of the nominations and won a measly 7.8% of the awards—far below their share of the population. In the aftermath of the controversy, a few prominent industry figures triggered further public outrage by suggesting that white actors faced reverse-racism and that perhaps underrepresentation was the result of a meritocracy in action. For instance, Michael Caine argued that he could not say to himself, “I am going to vote for him. He’s not very good, but he’s black.” It appears that far from finding solutions, the industry is in denial about the problem itself. Why has Hollywood, an industry that wears its progressive credentials on its sleeve, failed actors of color in such spectacular fashion?

In *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, Nancy Wang Yuen maps the cultural and economic mechanisms which limit the opportunities and outcomes of minority actors. She argues that minority actors find themselves systematically slotted into racially defined roles. Such racial categories are associated with fewer and stereotypical roles, attenuated career development, limited mobility, and poor affective outcomes. In contrast, white actors are afforded more roles, a broader range of creative expression, and the opportunity to crossover to other racial categories in their portrayals. In incisive chapters which encompass key elements of her structural argument, Yuen articulates the ways in which industry norms, assumptions, and practices combine to (re) produce racial inequalities. Most memorably, she persuasively demonstrates that minority actors work under conditions that would be considered untenable under Equal Employment Opportunity regimes. For instance, African American interviewees state that they are routinely asked to act “more black” [p. 42] during auditions and can lose out on roles based on the color of their skin being

judged too dark or light—considerations which would be egregiously out of place in most modern workplaces.

Yuen begins by unpacking Hollywood's "colorblind" racism, wherein white industry figures absolve themselves of personal responsibility and deflect the blame of racial disparities onto unavoidable externalities. Here, in what is the strongest chapter in the book, she delineates and debunks the three primary extra-racial justifications—blaming "the talent," "the market," and "what you know"—that underlie colorblind racism. For instance, filmmakers often argue that there is a limited supply of talented actors of color and non-existent "demand" for movies with minority leads and casts. Similarly, writers and directors commonly suggest that movies with all-white casts simply reflect artists producing creative products centered on what they know best, life experiences which just happen to be racially homogenous. Problematically, these justifications are inherently interdependent, mutually reinforcing, and self-fulfilling. For example, the perceived market unviability of minority actors can limit their experience and growth, leading to a perception that there is a lack of talent. Similarly, when members of a predominantly white industry create, cast, and evaluate cultural products through the prism of their non-diverse experience, it is unsurprising that actors of color continue to get systematically marginalized.

Typercasting is a standard Hollywood practice, yet it affects actors of color in more persistent and pervasive forms than their white peers. Yuen suggests that while white actors are typecast based on individual characteristics such as physical attributes, minority actors are viewed predominantly through the lens of race and typecast to fit the bounds of racial stereotypes. So, for instance, Asian American actors will be categorized and cast as, "good-looking Asian, martial art Asian, character Asian" [p. 72], but not considered for roles that have no specified race, for example "American." Further, white industry gatekeepers typically seek an outsize enactment of racial stereotypes from minority actors as opposed to acting excellence. Such stereotypical performances can levy significant emotional and moral costs on minority actors who are often asked to put on thick accents and enact negative racial stereotypes [e.g., African American "crack heads" and Latina housekeepers]. Yuen goes on to explain how minority actors cope with constrained opportunities and deeply vexing career choices. Actors of color cope by distancing their "true" self from the stereotypical roles they portray, by focusing on the material and experiential benefits of playing a racial cliché and, in some instances, by only accepting negative roles in projects which portray their racial group in a balanced way overall. Finally, the last section of the book details how actors of color resist racial categorization and helpfully lists commonsensical means of increasing diversity. In keeping with the multi-sided nature of the underrepresentation problem, Yuen outlines actionable solutions targeted at different types of actors,

namely, institutions (such as the FCC and industry guilds), actors of color, and audience members.

The book is written in a clear way and admirably manages to convey the structural nature of Hollywood's diversity problem without using much jargon. Similarly, the deft use of infographics and charts in the front-end of the book adds to its accessibility. Indeed, one can imagine this book being of much interest to industry members, students, and the general public. For scholarly readers, the book might at times be frustrating. For instance, one could argue that the "coping," "resistance," and "challenging" of industry discrimination by minority actors are analytically similar and not deserving of separate chapters. The other weakness in Yuen's book is the Hollywood-centricity of its analysis. Racial-others have served as foils in multiple cultural contexts, and the discussion of these industry counterfactuals might have been helpful in situating the uniqueness of the American case. For instance, white actors have long served as villains and vamps in Bollywood. Similarly, the highest-grossing Chinese film of all-time, 2017's "Wolf Warriors 2," chronicles a Chinese special-ops officer single-handedly defeating evil white mercenaries and rescuing simple-minded Africans. In an industry context where Hollywood is increasingly dependent on foreign markets, perhaps the push for diversity has to overcome the implicit biases of not just industry insiders but also international audiences. Nevertheless, Yuen's incisive articulation of the stark contrast between the default category of white actors and other racial categories will no doubt be illuminating to scholars in multiple disciplines. *Reel Inequality* serves as a welcome addition to the literature at a time when Hollywood's discriminatory industry practices remain depressingly au courant and unresolved.

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