

#AmericaSoWhite: What bell hooks and the #OscarsSoWhite Movement Can Teach Us About
Challenging Institutionalized Racism in the United States

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Almost twenty years before the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag first began circulating social media platforms worldwide bell hooks published her essay "Teaching Resistance: The Racial Politics of Mass Media". In the essay hooks calls for "an organized resistance movement that focuses on the role of mass media in the perpetuation and maintenance of white supremacy" (249). The #OscarsSoWhite movement, initiated by activist April Reign, was born out of the public outcry that ensued after the 2016 Academy Award nomination list was first made public—and the absence of black nominees for the second consecutive year was immediately noted (Robinson). The virtual movement, which called for a boycott of America's most prestigious film awards ceremony, quickly gained global attention and led to a myriad of questions about representation of race in Hollywood; specifically, what this representation reveals about institutionalized racism in the United States. In this paper, I will work closely with bell hooks' 1995 essay "Teaching Resistance: The Racial Politics of Mass Media" to demonstrate how the #OscarsSoWhite initiative serves as an effective realization of hooks' call for action by criticizing Hollywood's underrepresentation and negative depiction of black people, as well as its overrepresentation of white people—concurrently challenging the media's role in spreading and upholding white supremacy.

In "Teaching Resistance," hooks introduces the concept of "neo-colonial white supremacy" as "the locations where whites could best colonize the minds and imaginations of black folks", a strategy whereby film and mass media are propagated as "neo-colonial weapons" (244). hooks

offers several examples of contemporary American films and television shows in which black characters, if included at all, are represented as either "the servants of whites" (246), or "less ethical and moral than whites" (247). In every case, hooks argues that "mass media actually work to reinforce assumptions that black folks should always be cast in supporting roles in relation to white characters," asserting that this subordination of black characters to white characters reinscribes white supremacy (247).

Moreover, hooks continues to challenge the representation of race in media by arguing that the representation of whites must too be revisited; for the oversaturation of positive depictions of whiteness also works to reinforce the subordination of black people, albeit in a less obvious way (247). hooks then moves beyond the scope of racial representation of characters to address the subject matter of popular media forms themselves, noting that the films that actually attempt to resist white supremacy are either ignored or incur a largely negative response (247). She asserts that we must "be resisting viewers" in order to allow for the films that challenge neo-colonial representation to receive the positive attention they deserve, thereby pushing mass media to adapt accordingly (248). hooks states, "Until all Americans demand that mass media no longer serve as the biggest propaganda machine for white supremacy, the socialization of everyone to subliminally absorb white supremacist attitudes and values will continue" (248). This leads into her final call for action concerning "an organized resistance movement that focuses on the role of mass media" as "the starting point of a renewed movement for racial justice" (249). It is thereby my overall goal in this paper to demonstrate how the #OscarsSoWhite movement conforms to these claims made by hooks in her theory of racial politics, as well as to exhibit how the online movement manifested itself as an appropriate realization of hooks' call for intervention.

Looking first at hooks' concept of "neo-colonial white supremacy" (244), we can discern how the original goal of #OscarsSoWhite aligns with hooks' own rationale for intervention against this new form of racial subjugation. In her essay, hooks claims: "Television and mass media were the other great neo-colonial weapons... Even though most black communities were and remain segregated, mass media bring white supremacy into our lives, constantly reminding us [blacks] of our marginalized status" (244). Similarly, #OscarsSoWhite hashtag creator, April Reign, defines the primary goal of the movement as: "[Having] more marginalized people tell their stories within the entertainment industry... Everyone raising their voices, saying, 'We want to see movies that reflect our experience, and we're not going to support with our hard-earned ticket dollars until we do'" (qtd. in Harris). It is precisely this need for mass media to begin to tell the stories of those who have been, and continue to be, marginalized that both hooks and the #OscarsSoWhite creator view as an important first step in challenging the white supremacist assumptions perpetuated through mass media; thus, by extension, in disarming television and media as agents of neo-colonial weaponry.

In considering this it is important to note that the 2016 #OscarsSoWhite movement is not the first time the Academy Awards have sparked public debate for underrepresenting black talent. In 1996, just one year after hooks published "Teaching Resistance," the Rev. Jesse Jackson called for picketing across the United States to protest what he labelled "race exclusion and cultural violence" in light of an almost entirely white list of Academy Award nominees (qtd. in Braxton). Some, such as cultural critic Mark Harris, look at these occurrences of back-to-back all-white nomination lists and suggest the phenomenon "represents a dip and not a pattern" (qtd. in Griggs). Yet, statistical evidence suggests otherwise. According to a study conducted by *The Economist*, "If the data were random, ... the chances of no single person of colour being nominated across two

ceremonies would be exceptionally small—even during a 15-year span, the odds of seeing at least one sequence of back-to-back whiteouts are around one in 100,000" (para. 6). This statistic works to dispel the possibility of the "whiteouts" being attributed to randomness, and reinforces hooks' and Reign's mutual claim that racial politics are in fact at play; marginalized groups are undeniably being marginalized further still by underrepresentation in mass media.

This then poses the question: If the trend of all-white Academy Award nominations is truly not random, then what is the real reason for black people being so underrepresented in receiving this industry recognition? Many are quick to blame the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which is responsible for curating and deciding on the Oscar nominees and winners (Gehrlein and Kehr 226). In 2014, the Academy had a votership of upwards of 6,000 individuals, of which only 2% were black and 94% were white (Cox). In light of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, the Academy took swift action to create a more diverse voting board; eliminating older members, and inviting almost 700 new members to join (Harris). Yet even still, as of February 2017, the Academy remains 89% white with an average age lying somewhere in the early 60s, signaling that there is still much work to be done.

That being said, others seek an explanation for the underrepresentation of black people at the Academy Awards beyond the Academy itself, and into the American major film industry at large. In the same *Economist* report cited previously, it was found that black actors actually convert higher than the general population for both Academy Award nominations and wins:

For most of the past 15 years, the Academy has largely judged what has been put in front of them: minority actors land 15% of top roles, 15% of nominations and 17% of wins. Once up for top roles, black actors do well, converting 9% of top roles into 10% of best-actor nominations and 15% of the coveted golden statuettes, a bit above their share of the general population. (para. 9)

The report suggests that rather than the absence of industry recognition for black talent being an issue caused by the underrepresentation of black actors, it is realistically an issue of the overrepresentation of white actors (*The Economist*). This claim is echoed by many #OscarSoWhite supporters; including Will Packer, Producer of *Straight Outta Compton*, the 2015 biographical film which tells the story of black hip-hop pioneer group N.W.A.: "We need more content produced by, written by, directed by and featuring filmmakers and actors of colour being given the green light. We need them to start moving forward this year so in 2019 there are quality projects in contention!" (qtd. in Izundu). This call for an industry-wide increase in non-white talent is another parallel to hooks' sentiments in "Teaching Resistance":

Black people have... challenged how we are presented in mass media, especially if the images are perceived to be 'negative', but we [blacks] have not sufficiently challenged representations of blackness that are not obviously negative even though they act to reinforce white supremacy. Concurrently, we do not challenge the representations of whites. (247)

It is with this evidence that we can perhaps extend the scope of #OscarsSoWhite to #HollywoodSoWhite, and to #AmericaSoWhite from there. For, as hooks wants us to remember, mass media acts only as a "weapon" (244) to carry out the mental colonization that blacks in America have been inundated with and subjugated by since the days of slavery (243). In other words, the Academy Awards and the American film industry are both vehicles through which the greater problem of institutionalized racism can be realized.

Yet, we still cannot discount the harmfulness of media-produced images of black people that are in fact negative, or even "perceived to be 'negative'" (hooks 247). In "Teaching Resistance," hooks comments on television and film depictions in which blacks are represented as "misguided" (245), as "the servants of whites" (247), as "the mammy figure" (257), as "always ... cast in supporting roles in relation to white characters (257), and as "always a little less ethical and

moral than whites, not given to rational reasonable action” (247). hooks expands further on the implications of these negative representations, explaining, "Media that include us [blacks] and subordinate our representation to that of whites, thereby [reinscribe] white supremacy" (247). This is another sentiment paralleled by the Rev. Jesse Jackson when leading the 1997 protest of the Academy Awards: "Hollywood shows blacks and other cultural groups as ‘less intelligent than we are, less hard-working, less universal, less patriotic and more violent than we are’” (qtd. in Braxton). The impact of this goes far beyond stereotyping and typecasting, for as hooks notes, "The neo-colonial messages about the nature of race that are brought to us by mass media do not just shape whites’ minds and imaginations. They socialize black and other non-white minds as well” (247). In other words, if the already limited representation of black life in media is limited further still by existing almost entirely as negative depictions, then the prevailing racial structure of whites over blacks in the United States can never hope to change — black people will continue to be seen as subordinate to their white compatriots, and will eventually begin to perceive themselves this way.

This leads to another question posed during the #OscarsSoWhite movement: Why, in a seemingly progressive age, are there not more progressive and realistic depictions of black life in media? In "Teaching Resistance," hooks asserts, "Films that present cinematic narratives that seek to intervene in and challenge white supremacist assumption, whether they are made by black or white folks, tend to receive negative attention or none at all” (247). It appears that, over twenty years later, hooks' claim still rings sadly true. In 2016, *Guardian* journalist David Cox, a strong voice in the #OscarsSoWhite debate, ventured the question, "Perhaps Hollywood is being too cautious, failing to appreciate that audience appetites have broadened. If films portraying minorities were readily funded and properly marketed, wouldn't they break through?" Yet, Cox is

eventually forced to counter his own optimistic musing while presenting the disappointing facts about the 2014 independently produced Civil Rights biopic *Selma* :

Selma is often cited as the prime example of myriad sure-fire minority projects routinely turned down by over-nervous major studios. Yet *Selma*'s returns failed to cover its costs. By their own lights, the big boys were right to shun it, and are right to steer clear of its ilk. Unfortunately, the evidence shows that white people are reluctant to watch minority-dominated films. (para. 14)

Cox was not the only voice in the #OscarsSoWhite movement to expose this sad truth about the film industry. Eliza Berman and David Johnson co-authored a piece for *TIME*, in which the two journalists attribute the underrepresentation of positive depictions of black life in media as "a continuous need to contend with studios' fears—sometimes explicit—that movies with non-white leading actors won't make enough money." Even famed director Ridley Scott, upon being criticized for his selection of an almost entirely white cast in his 2014 big budget film *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, washed his hands of the debate, stating: "I can't mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such... I'm just not going to get it financed. So the question doesn't even come up" (qtd. in Gibson). Though Scott received much backlash for this comment (Foundas), the assumption that American viewers do not want to watch films featuring non-white leading actors still undeniably exists within the industry. This assumption is particularly damaging as it inhibits any major progression for black characters moving out of supporting roles, as well as any real attempt to represent realistic and positive depictions of black life—ultimately upholding mass media's role as a medium through which white supremacy can be, and is, continuously reinscribed.

However, this is not to say that there is no hope for change. In "Teaching Resistance," hooks attests, "Film and mass media in general can challenge neo-colonial representations that reinscribe racial stereotypes and perpetuate white supremacy. If more attention were given to these

[radical] films, it would show that aware viewers long for mass media that act to challenge and change racist domination and white supremacy" (248). In saying this, hooks is suggesting that it is the responsibility of the viewers to prove to media industry leaders that they are hungry for media forms that challenge the racial politics these mediums have long since upheld. Only then can any kind of real progressive change begin to take place. hooks believes that in order for "radical representations" to get the green light and begin to circulate on a mass scale, we must be "resisting viewers and break our attachment to conventional representations" (248). hooks completes this call for action by asserting, "Without an organized resistance movement that focuses on the role of mass media in the perpetuation and maintenance of white supremacy, nothing will change" (249). hooks also offers boycotting as "one of the most effective ways to call attention to the issue" (249). #OscarsSoWhite, both as a boycott and as a greater movement, set out to accomplish just that. In the wake of the success of #OscarsSoWhite, hashtag creator April Reign stated: "The last couple of years for the Academy Awards—the actual presentation—we engaged in counterprogramming... And we saw that the Academy, the last two years, had their lowest ratings in a very long time. We think that we may have had something to do with that and the disappointment with the nominees overall" (qtd. in Harris). This decline in viewership is one of the ways in which the movement was able to send a message to industry leaders that American viewers are indeed ready to be "resistant viewers". Thus, in addition to stimulating the changes made to the Academy votership, the initiative was more importantly able to draw attention to the crucial need for further action in challenging Hollywood's racial representations.

Though the 2017 Academy Awards saw a much more diverse list of Oscar nominees and winners than years past, supporters of the movement want industry leaders and viewers alike to remember that this is still only the beginning. In a recent 2017 interview with *Vanity Fair*,

Academy president Cheryl Boone Isaacs stated: “What we have said all the time is this is about recognizing talent, in whatever form it comes—race, color, gender. This conversation will continue. The conversation becomes action. Action becomes fact” (qtd. in Robinson). Reign also weighed in, voicing her concerns about complacency following greater racial representation in the 2017 Oscar lineup: “I think if we are not diligent and our voices are quieted, things can always be rolled back” (qtd. In Robinson). It is important, then, that #OscarsSoWhite supporters remember that the significance of the movement extends beyond the Academy Awards themselves. #OscarsSoWhite acts as an avenue for addressing the institutionalized racism that upholds white supremacy in the social, political, and economic architecture of the United States. As hooks reminds us in “Teaching Resistance,” “Challenging mass media to divest of white supremacy should be the starting point of a renewed movement for racial justice” (249). So long as the passion behind the #OscarSoWhite movement continues to remain strong, and voices in the industry continue to join the voices of “resistant viewers” in demanding more diverse representations of race in Hollywood, #OscarsSoWhite may manifest itself as the catalyst for the “renewed movement for racial justice” called for by hooks over two decades ago.

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