



## 24 Frames

MOVIES: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Category: Reed Johnson

### Oscars 2012: Despite Halle and Denzel, gold mostly eludes nonwhites

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A decade ago, Halle Berry and Denzel Washington made history when they became the first African American performers to win the top acting Oscars in the same year, for "Monster's Ball" (Berry) and "Training Day" (Washington). A third black actor, Will Smith, also was nominated that year, and Sidney Poitier took home a lifetime achievement award.

"This moment is so much bigger than me," Berry said at the time. "This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll.... This is for every faceless woman who now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened."

But in the decade since, Berry's prediction has been slow to materialize, and a new UCLA study explores some of the underlying reasons why.

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Titled "Not Quite a Breakthrough: The Oscars and Actors of Color, 2002-2012," the study was sponsored by the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, UC Berkeley School of Law and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Drawing a parallel between 2002 and 2012, the report notes in its opening paragraph that this year's Oscar nominees include two black women, Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer, as well as the Mexican actor Demián Bichir. The authors go on to observe that from 2002 through 2012, "almost 20 percent of nominees were people of color," a "notable increase" over the 9% of Oscar nominees in the top categories who were people of color between 1990 and 2000.

That's the good news. However, the study further observes that:

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- All lead actress winners since 2002 have been white.
- No winner in any acting category during the last 10 years has been Latino, Asian American or Native American.
- Oscar winners and nominees of color make fewer movies per year after their nominations than their white peers do.
- Oscar winners and nominees of color are more likely than their white peers to work in television, which is considered lower-status work.
- Oscar winners and nominees of color are less likely than their white peers to receive subsequent nominations.

It's questionable whether television still is regarded as "lower-status work" than film, given the critical praise that's been heaped on ambitious, high-quality TV series such as "The Wire," "Treme" and "The Sopranos."

More complex is the question of why Oscar distribution tends to favor white over nonwhite actors. As a recent L.A. Times story documented, the membership of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is indeed overwhelmingly white (94%) and male (77%). But the poor showing of nonwhite actors during Oscar season also simply reflects the under-representation of nonwhite actors in Hollywood films as a whole.

As L.A. Times reporter Lorenza Munoz wrote in a prescient March 2002 story about Washington and Berry's Oscar triumph, when individual nonwhite actors win Oscars they're unlikely to open doors for other nonwhites. That's because today's bottom-line-driven Hollywood studio industry is increasingly reliant on the international market, "where having minorities and women in starring roles is considered a detriment, particularly in action blockbusters," Munoz wrote.

Munoz's story went on to quote James Ulmer, author of "James Ulmer's Hollywood Hot List," which tracks actors' global marketability. "None of this is going to change the fact that you cannot package or sell [a movie] to the world market today with a black woman," Ulmer said of Berry and Washington's achievement. "I don't see [the Oscar win] as changing an industry where white male actors drive the train of the international marketplace." Those comments seem just as applicable, or more, today.

But, as the UCLA study's authors also observe, the issue isn't just the infrequency of nonwhite actors earning Oscar nominations and wins. It's also the limited types of roles for which nonwhite actors *do* get nominated for Oscars. For example, they write, the Oscars still tend to reward black females not for playing women like Berry's tough, complex, erotically charged character in "Monster's Ball," but for roles that conform to old Hollywood racial stereotypes of black women "who are sassy, full-figured, maternal, or non-sexual."

"In short," the report asserts, "Hollywood has required black female Oscar nominees and winners to resemble Hattie McDaniel more than Halle Berry."

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-- Reed Johnson

*Photo: Hattie McDaniel became the first African American female to win the supporting actress Oscar, playing Scarlett O'Hara's Mammy in "Gone With the Wind." Credit: Marc Wanamaker / Bison Archives*

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