

The Hollywood Renaissance: Is the Entertainment Industry as Diverse as it Claims?

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The New Negro Renaissance, commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, filled the 1920s with a profusion of work by black artists. Jazz rhythms permeated the art of this movement — from the music of Duke Ellington to the poetry of Langston Hughes to the artwork of Aaron Douglas. There was strife and abrupt change, their work bold and energetic: all a part of a battle to be seen and to

be heard. Their work embodied the trials and triumphs of what Langston Hughes dubbed a "community in transition".

In one of Hughes' most well-known poems, *Harlem*, he seeks the answer to the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" The question seems particularly relevant when thinking about today's surge of black artists that have made their way into Hollywood. Looking at the success of major black musical artists and actors — and now, even black writers and directors who are creating a lane for themselves — it appears that the entertainment industry is a shining beacon, fully embracing and accepting those who have been denied a voice. However, when considering that behind the glowing facade, there continues to be a horrendous lack of representation, it becomes evident that things are the same as they have always been. "The dream" — whether it be complete control of their artistry or adequate financial gain — is consistently cast aside for black artists.

A 2015 Washington Post analysis of Academy membership estimated that about 96% of film executives are white. If this is any indication of the diversity in the rest of the entertainment industry, there is clearly a problem. The people who have the most power, controlling what stories get to be told and who gets to tell them, lack perspective of different experiences.

Black artists are also often snubbed at the big awards shows. And even when they *are* recognized, they sometimes aren't able to fully enjoy the moment. This makes truly winning seem impossible.

While the artists themselves are sometimes left feeling slighted, Hollywood has recognized the profitability of black art. Audience response to black films and music has been overwhelmingly positive in recent years. Movies like *Black Panther*, *Girls Trip*, and *Get Out* have seen huge box office success. Because of the mainstream popularity of hip-hop, musical artists like Drake and Kendrick Lamar dominate the charts.

Hollywood's habit of objectifying black artists brings to mind the 1920s Cotton Club, an infamous whites-only jazz club that frequently had performances by black musicians. Black artists were, and are now, lauded for their entertainment value but discarded after they'd served their purpose for their audience. The similarities between now and decades ago reveal Hollywood's stagnancy while portraying themselves as progressive.

With all of this being said, it feels like black artists are seen as expendable to the industry — which raises the question, is Hollywood's attempt at diversity just an effort to keep up with the latest trends? Is there anything being done to make sure black artists always have a voice in the industry, or will this period of celebrating black artistry inevitably fade away?

From where I stand, it looks as though the dream Langston Hughes spoke of is still unrealized — the picturesque view of American entertainment still a ways off. What comes next is entirely up to Hollywood. The industry can embrace change and work harder to ensure proper representation among its highest ranks, or it can continue to do what it has always done and cover up the problem.

Some artists have decided to forego Hollywood's exclusivity in favor of creating their own opportunities.

And maybe that's the change that needs to occur. But either way, it seems that something huge is bound to happen — the dream for black artists has been put on hold for far too long.

See the video essay below:

<https://youtu.be/EOsNIGQNWAg>