

## Agents of Change: Hollywood Agents and Gatekeeping

Jacy Duan

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In her Junior Paper, Jacy Duan explores the role of Hollywood agents in perpetuating a lack of racial diversity among actors. She carried out seven interviews with agents, which she draws on here in order to explore whether agents recognize their role as gatekeepers controlling the presence (or lack) of diversity in the industry. Jacy establishes a strong **motive** in her introduction and then weaves together the individual opinions of the agents into a broader **narrative** about diversity in Hollywood. Jacy's treatment of **narrative** ensures that her **argument** is both accessible and engaging.*

### *Excerpt*

#### *Introduction and Literature Review*

The overwhelming majority of actors represented at major agencies and getting cast in film and television still remain white. Even with more inclusive opportunities opening up with the increasing diversity of writers, directors, and actors, if agents are not keeping up and reforming their processes of selecting and sifting through actors, then #OscarsSoWhite will continue to be an issue. Thus, it is extremely crucial to look into agent-actor relationships to better understand the structural barriers that may be at play in trying to diversify Hollywood. Through data drawn from seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with agents, I demonstrate the language used by agents that may contribute to perpetuating a myth of meritocracy and colorblindness within Hollywood. The previous literature on this subject establishes that agents play a key role when examining how structures of inequality are reproduced on screen. They are the intermediaries and tastemakers, constructing the value and worth of people in the industry. They are the gatekeepers, controlling who has access to elite roles in the industry and, thus, who is able to succeed. They are shaped by the same biases and belief systems that can create unintentional discrimination in everyday life. My research aims to identify how agents perform when asked about diverse clients and what this suggests about their ability to equitably represent clients when selecting and matching them to projects. What can this reveal about the hidden industry conventions that shape intermediary interactions within Hollywood? Ultimately, this study can help determine if we have been looking in the wrong place—how can we increase representation of diverse artists in Hollywood if they aren't being “represented” in the first place?

*This is Hollywood*

“It just is what it is.”

Marcus reassures me that Hollywood simply works the way it does and there is no way of working around it or forcing it. He smiles and repeats, “it just is what it is. At the end of the day, it’s just a business.” He feels wary about the possibility of full institutional change and transformation of the industry to be less discriminatory. Rather, he believes that change will happen in small incremental steps and “we’re on a great path.” Most importantly, he stresses that lack of diversity is not a “race-thing” but a “level-thing” and there are simply not enough nonwhite actors with enough star power to inspire people to invest. But there are many “Brad Pitts” in the world who are all white and can make any movie they want. There simply aren’t enough nonwhite people at the level of Brad Pitt and thus, casts are always less diverse. It has nothing to do with agents or with racism, but simply with history and the state of diversity in the industry. Eventually however, he believes things will improve. In fact, he presses that “Hollywood, we’re very in tune, we know what’s going on, I think often we’re ahead of the curve in terms of industries promoting diversity.”

Roman has a different outlook on diversity in Hollywood, believing instead that historically, the industry has always been constructed and dominated by white people. In reference to #OscarsSoWhite, Roman explains, “White people created the Oscars, it’s their awards, so if they want to give them to their group, how you gonna get mad at them, it’s their thing!” He goes on further to assert that “if the Oscars don’t give you awards, you got the NAACP... people feel that everyone needs to be given same opportunities, but I think you should just make your own voice.” Roman adopts a unique perspective in arguing that rather than trying to assimilate into a white industry, people of color should just form their own communities of arts production and celebration, mainly because Hollywood’s desire for diversity is superficial. Hollywood will have trends like “black flirtation flicks in the 70s, then people don’t want them.” They are not truly valuing diverse representation but simply creating content “based on what the audience responds to... If people stop supporting minority cinema, then the studios and networks will stop making it, but if we are tuning in and driving numbers up, then they will continue making more.” To Roman, the only way to truly have inclusive content is to produce it yourself.

Don goes even further to describe Hollywood’s diversity as “manufactured.” Hollywood is not truly committed to any values of inclusion, but only diversifying superficially. As Don explains:

People [in Hollywood] clearly don’t have a very good understanding of what the goal should be or is in creating a diverse workplace or roster. I think it’s kind of like, let’s plug

and play, we need one of this to satisfy this and that... then we have diversity and we're so proud of ourselves!

Shows are simply casting for x person of color, x person with a disability, x queer person, but not really being inclusive of those people or telling their unique positions and stories. Don is suspicious of Hollywood's efforts to diversify because the motivation is unclear. It's a conflict of "diversity versus inclusivity, just valuing people just because they are diverse, and not really including them. Hollywood is all about face value rather than actuality." However, he does believe diversity in Hollywood is at its peak right now because "there's money to be made. I think there is a lot of public pressure for the industry to kind of move into the now." Don stresses how diversity in Hollywood is contingent on its moneymaking ability. He provides an example of how shows like *Black-ish* or *Fresh off the Boat* are difficult to invest in because they are "very domestic," and will likely "not make money in foreign territories." While it seems like Hollywood is willing to embrace diverse content domestically, with a growing amount of representation in television, it is more hesitant to make a commitment internationally. To hit blockbuster status, popular films nowadays need to appeal to moviegoers all around the world, not just in the U.S. Thus, there are box office consequences in committing to diversity and it seems that from an economic perspective, Hollywood has decided that white actors have the most worldwide, universal appeal.

### *Dodging the Question*

At first, Roman was shocked I would ask a question about the gender/racial breakdown of his roster. He exclaimed, "what, I don't know" and then laughed nervously. "I don't know why anyone would keep that number, why would anyone have that number!" He then went through his roster and actually counted people in order to generate a rough percentage for me. Later, when I asked what he thought a diverse roster meant, he kept asking me to rephrase the question and eventually just said, "I don't know how to answer that." Even more uncomfortable, Don kept asking me to clarify what diversity means when I asked him about diversity on his roster. I pushed him to just answer with his own definition of diversity, but he kept saying he didn't understand the question. He even ended up asking me why I would ask that question, confused why people would have different definitions of diversity. "I am surprised people would answer differently!"

Across the board, the agents became uncomfortable when having to address questions of race and diversity. When asked about how he chose which clients to submit for roles, Marcus pauses for a second before saying, "skillset. It's all about the clients' skillsets." When I pressed if he thinks other factors might factor into casting choices, he maintains "the skills are what

matters. At least that's what it should be like." Roman also mentions that all his decisions for who to represent come down to who has the "organic, raw talent." He never thinks about the race of the actors he's choosing to sign; he just picks the most "talented" person. Don insists that whoever he submits and whoever gets cast is always whoever is most "right" for the role. Although he criticizes Hollywood for manufacturing diversity and not truly committing itself to inclusivity, he makes sure not to pin the problem on specific decisions of agents or casting directors, but rather "Hollywood" as a monolith. He blames "Hollywood" for giving in to money interests but makes sure to emphasize that casting directors and agents are only looking for "talented" people, and they try to not notice color.

### *Discussion*

The agents in this study all demonstrated a belief that processes of casting and representing are inherently fair and meritocratic. Even when Don criticizes Hollywood, he makes sure to stress the impartiality of the system. He believes that he, and many others in Hollywood, try not to see any color and simply hire the "best person for the job." Even when discussing cross-racial submissions that were successful, they simply agree that whoever got the role was the best match for the job. If a diverse actor lands a role that was meant for a white person, it is not due to their agent's advocacy on their behalf or the studio's decision to take a chance on diverse talent, but only the actor's own talent and ability. Only with "skill," "talent," and "match" can a diverse actor move up the ranks. These words all suggest an attitude of colorblindness as agents believe in equal opportunity among all actors; the actor who lands the role is the one who deserves it, who proves to be the most "brilliant"; race never factors into the decision.

Agents also perpetuate Tatum's "color-silence" in their uneasiness when discussing issues of race. For example, Roman was shocked that anyone would think about the diversity of people on their roster, while Don completely dodged my question about diversity, confused why I would ask something like that. Furthermore, all the agents mentioned in some way words like "skillset," "talent," and being "right" for the role when discussing how they selected clients and how their clients got casted. They do not feel comfortable discussing race in relation to their client rosters and would rather hide it under a discourse of meritocracy and talent. Don mentions how he tries not to notice color and only talent. In Hollywood, color is only seen and never talked about. If it is discussed, diversity is almost always broadened to include everyone, including Caucasians, as Marcus explains. It's about a "diversity of people," not just "racial background."

At the heart of this is Hollywood's dependence on a supposed "neutral" market. Marcus explains that Hollywood is a business, "it just is what it is." Almost every agent mentioned in some way that Hollywood is "all about the money." By marking diversity as dependent on its profitability, Hollywood agents shift the blame and responsibility away from themselves and onto audiences. Agents are unwilling to consider how key assumptions about the "market" may not be neutral but completely biased. This renders them unable to understand their own complicity in gatekeeping such as when they only consider signing actors on the basis of their "talent," not taking into account the structural barriers that might allow them to see a white actor as more "talented" than a diverse actor. Thus, they perceive themselves as passive actors in the greater Hollywood "market," not key cultural intermediaries, with the power to advocate for, represent, and increase the representation of minority actors.

*Author Commentary*

Jacy Duan

The topic of my junior paper arose from my own frustration two summers ago, when I was trying to find a talent agent as an Asian American woman and was faced instead with an onslaught of microaggressions from agencies such as “we already have your type already” or “oh, we need an Asian.” It occurred to me after hearing this multiple times that these comments were not aberrations—this kind of rhetoric was normalized in the industry. Agents simply talked about their clients of color like spices to add to a pot: you can’t have too much, but you can’t have too little. I decided to use my junior paper as a way to document this language that I was hearing and sat down with seven talent agents to talk about their rosters and diversity.

In qualitative sociology, narrative is extremely important because it helps to capture what statistics cannot. In terms of the narrative in my paper, I really wanted to take my readers through the different agents’ perspectives without analyzing too much at first, simply stating those perspectives as naturalized facts, the way the agents understand them. I then wove in concepts from my literature review such as “colorblind racism” and “color-silence” to help analyze the language used by the agents, as well as the language they left out. I found that starting with a solid literature review that predicted some of the issues and rhetoric that might come up during the interviews really helped me structure those interviews and ask the right questions. But at the same time, certain concepts came up more frequently than I expected in the interviews, such as the concept of “dodging the question,” so I did go back to add more to my literature review. It’s super important to keep all your sections flexible!

I found in writing this paper that it is extremely helpful to keep referring back to the story you are trying to tell (or your thesis statement) while writing. In my introduction, I establish how agents are an important group to examine as a site of racism in Hollywood as they serve as cultural gatekeepers and mediate almost every interaction in the industry. So, if they perpetuate racist rhetoric, it is likely that their actions and language will affect their clients—actors, writers, directors, etc. I tried to continually refer back to this story I was trying to tell about agents, even when it felt repetitive to me and, ultimately, I think this helped to tie my paper together into one coherent narrative.

*Editor Commentary*

Frances Mangina

I have always found it difficult to pin down a good definition for “**narrative**” in the context of academic writing. How is a paper with strong **narrative** any different from one that has a clear and logical **structure**, or one that consistently argues a compelling **thesis**? I would argue that these are prerequisites for effective **narrative**, but that on their own, they are not enough. The best stories, whether fictional or true to life, also invite us into the world that they depict and encourage us to care about characters’ arcs as they unfold. Academic writers have a particularly difficult narrative task: they must engage readers while remaining professional and following the conventions of their particular field.

As Jacy explains in her commentary, qualitative sociology is all about narratives, both those of interviewees and of the wider groups that they represent. In her paper, Jacy has performed a delicate balancing act between presenting agents’ personal narratives in their own words and creating her own overarching **narrative** about the way these agents shape diversity in Hollywood.

The introduction and literature review at the beginning of the paper set the scene. They introduce the protagonists, namely the seven Hollywood agents who were interviewed in the study. Most importantly, they draw on sociological research to show that these agents can impact our own world of racial injustice and #OscarsSoWhite, which creates a strong **motive** for the paper’s **argument**. Jacy therefore sparks our scholarly and personal interest in her characters before we even hear their personal stories.

Jacy continues her focus on individual characters’ narratives when she shares the results of her interviews. Here, she allows each of the agents to tell his own story, often in his own words. By using the present tense and describing agents’ nonverbal reactions to her questions (smiling, looking shocked, and so on), she gives the reader the impression that he or she is actually standing there watching the interview.

At the same time, Jacy does not allow her characters’ individual stories to overpower her own **argument**. The results section is structured using creative headings—“This is Hollywood,” “Dodging the Question,” and so on. These headings tell us how the agents’ perspectives fit into the broader **narrative** about Hollywood described in the introduction. Jacy also transcends the agents’ individual narratives by putting them into conversation with one another. In “This is Hollywood,” for example, her topic sentences do an excellent job of contrasting Marcus’s, Roman’s, and Don’s stances on diverse rosters. Conversely, in “Dodging the Question,” Jacy

highlights a similarity among many of the interviews, namely the agents' uneasiness surrounding "questions of race and diversity." By looking for both commonalities and outliers in her interview findings, Jacy is able to craft her own **argument** concerning agents' contributions to diversity.

From Jacy's paper, we can see that a story tends to be more interesting if it has compelling characters. Whether your "characters" are interviewees, scholars with contrasting opinions, or even primary sources, make sure to provide a vivid description of their backgrounds and stances. You should also give your "characters" agency within the context of your paper. Explore how they would react both to your own position and to one another, and try to use at least some direct quotations in order to allow their own voices to come through. These "characters" are the building blocks of your paper's overarching **narrative**, but it is up to you to provide direction and **structure**—plot, if you will. Workshopping structural elements of your paper—everything from section headings to topic sentences—can be a great way to start building an engaging **narrative**.



**Works Cited**

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 2017. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*. Basic Books.

## **Bios**

**Jacy Duan '21** is a Sociology major with certificates in Theatre and Asian American Studies. She was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA where she subsisted solely on a diet of boba. On campus, she does all things theatre and has performed in, directed, and produced various productions. She also serves as co-president of Princeton East West Theater and works as a Fields Center Fellow. She wrote this paper as a junior.

**Frances Mangina '22** is a Philosophy concentrator with a certificate in Roman Language and Culture. She is particularly interested in Ancient Philosophy and in the intersection between philosophy and literature. In her spare time, Frances enjoys learning languages, choral singing, and wandering in nature. She wrote this as a junior.