

**Black Characters in Popular Film:
Is the Key to Diversifying Cinematic Content held
in the Hand of the Black Director?**

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The purpose of this short report is to overview character race/ethnicity in 100 top-grossing fictional films theatrically released in the United States and Canada during 2008.¹ Every distinct speaking and named character is assessed for demographic and appearance-related information. Categorization of race/ethnicity occurs by using all cues available over the course of the unfolding narrative (i.e., verbal references, physical features, clothing, geographic setting of the plot). Across the 100 films, a total of 4,016 characters could be evaluated for race/ethnicity. Four main findings are outlined below, with particular attention paid to black characters and their relationship to black directors. We end the report by comparing the current trends in black characters and black directors to those observed across 100 top-grossing films released in 2007.

#1 Prevalence of Black Characters in Film On Par with U.S. Census

71.2% ($n=2,859$) of all speaking characters in the 100 top-grossing films from 2008 are White, 13.2% ($n=531$) are Black, 7.1% ($n=287$) are Asian, 4.9% ($n=198$) are Hispanic, 2.8% ($n=111$) are Middle Eastern, and < 1% ($n=30$) are from other ethnicities. Table 1 compares the race/ethnicity of speaking characters in 2008 films to the composition of race/ethnicity in the United States. As demonstrated in the table, the greatest deviation occurs with Hispanics. Though Hispanics/Latinos/Mexicans represent 16.3% of the U.S. population, they only fill 4.9% of all speaking roles in film.

Table 1
A Comparison of Race/Ethnicity in Films & U.S. Population

Race/ Ethnicity	Top-Grossing 2008 Films	U.S. Census	Difference
White	71.2%	72.4%	-1.2
Black	13.2%	12.6%	+0.6
Hispanic	4.9%	16.3%	-11.4
Asian	7.1%	4.8%	+2.3

Note: The table only compares four ethnic groups to US Census data.² Unlike our approach, Census (2010) measures Hispanic or Latino origin separate from Race. As such, the Census column total does not add up to 100%.

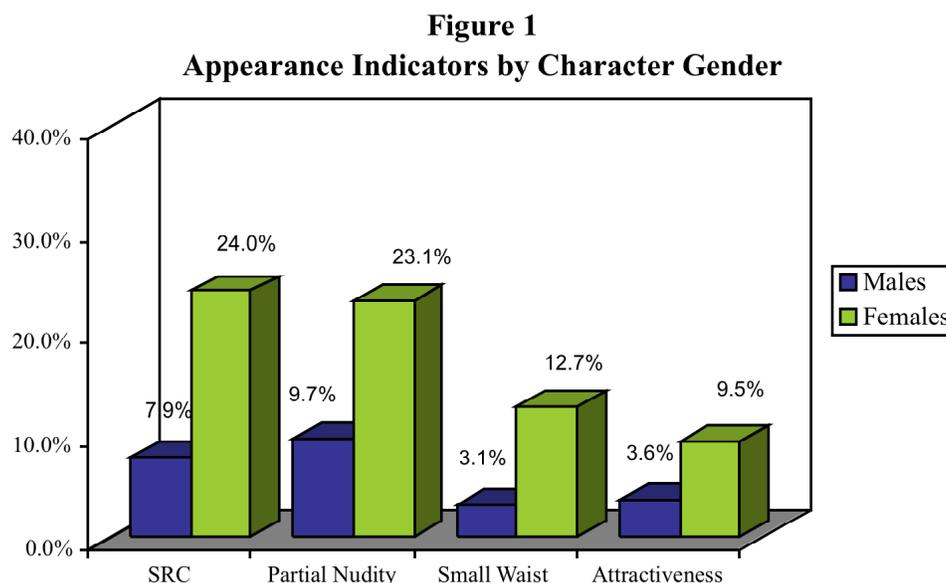
More encouraging representational findings emerged for Black characters, which occupied 13.2% of all speaking roles. This percentage is roughly equivalent (.6 above) to the percentage of African Americans in the U.S. Further, the gender distribution of Black characters is notable: 37.7% are female and 62.3% are male. The percentage of Black

females is almost five percentage points above the industry-wide norm, as females accounted for only 32.8% of all speaking characters across the 100 top-grossing films in 2008.

Further analyses explored whether MPAA ratings (G, PG, PG-13, R) are associated with the appearance of Black characters in film. To this end, the sample of speaking characters is grouped into one of two categories: Black ($n=531$) vs. not Black ($n=3,485$). Differences in the prevalence of Black characters emerged by rating.³ The highest percentage of black characters appeared within G (16.9%, $n=23$) rated films, followed by PG-13 (16.4%, $n=380$), PG (8.2%, $n=32$), and R (8.2%, $n=96$). The finding for general audience films is particularly notable, as only 6.3% ($n=10$) of all speaking characters in G-rated films were Black across the top-grossing films from 2007. It must be noted, across both 2007 ($n=4$ movies) and 2008 ($n=6$ movies), only a handful of G-rated films were in the 100 top performers at the box office.

#2 Portrayals of Black Females are Still Sexualized

Despite the higher frequency of Black female characters, girls/women of color are still more sexualized than Black boys/men are.⁴ Looking at our appearance indicators (see Figure 1),⁵ Black females are more likely than Black males to be shown in sexually revealing attire, partially naked, and physically beautiful. Also, Black girls/women are more likely than Black boys/men to be shown with a small waist. No differences emerged by gender in the percentage of black characters with a large chest or unrealistic body ideal. These findings are strikingly similar to those obtained across the entire sample of characters.⁶



#3 Black Directors Seem to Affect On-Screen Diversity

Six of the 100 top-grossing motion pictures ($n=112$ total directors) in 2008 feature a Black director. Stated differently, only 5.357% of all the directors are Black. Two of the

films were directed and written by Tyler Perry (*Meet the Browns*, *The Family that Preys*), thus bringing the total to 5 different Black directors (George C. Wolfe, *Nights in Rodanthe*; Malcolm D. Lee, *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins*; David E. Talbert, *First Sunday*; Gina Prince-Bythewood, *The Secret Life of Bees*). Only one of the Black directors is female. Not one Black female directed a film in the top 100 movies of 2007.

Using director race/ethnicity (Black vs. not Black) and character race/ethnicity (Black vs. not Black), we were able to explore the relationship between these two variables. A significant association emerged.⁷ A higher percentage of Black speaking characters is found in films with a Black director (62.6%, $n=114$) than in films with a non Black director (10.9%, $n=417$). Put another way, out of all the characters a Black director casts ($n=182$), 62.6% are Black. In films with a non Black director, only 10.9% ($n=417$) of all speaking characters ($n=3,834$) are Black.

A similar but less pronounced difference has been documented with women directors and the percentage of female characters on-screen.⁸ One key to a representational sea change in film may be held in the hand of those at the helm of direction. Studio executives may grasp another key. Ensuring that people of color and women are considered when hiring directors for *a range* of studio-driven properties, rather than simply tapping the same pool of directorial talent or relegating minority directors to certain types of story lines, may also ensure greater diversity on-screen.

#4 Notable Change from 2007 to 2008

In addition to overall patterns, we were interested in how the top grossing 100 films in 2008 performed in comparison to the top grossing 100 films in 2007. As in most of our research, we only note differences of 5% or more on major variables.⁹ Table 2 shows that the percentage of Black speaking characters jumped 12.6% in Black directed films from 2007 to 2008. Further, the percentage of Black females that are attractive, shown in sexy clothes, and depicted partially clad has decreased. It must be noted that the latter two variables are shy of the 5% criterion. Of note and for purposes of comparison, the percentage of White female characters across these three measures has deviated minimally (less than 5%).¹⁰

Table 2
A Comparison of Character Variables & Director Race/Ethnicity by Time

Variable	2007	2008	Difference
% of White Characters	77.6%	71.2%	-6.4%
% of Black Characters	13%	13.2%	+2%
% of Hispanic Characters	3.3%	4.9%	+1.6%
% of Asian Characters	3.4%	7.1%	+3.7%
% of Black Directors	7%	5%	-2%
% of Black Char. in Black Directed Films	50%	62.6%	+12.6%
% of Black Female Characters	35.1%	37.7%	+2.6%
% of Black Females in Sexy Clothes	28.9%	24%	-4.9%
% of Black Females w/Some Nudity	27.6%	23.1%	-4.5%
% of Black Females that are Attractive	15.9%	9.5%	-6.4%

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this report are clear. There is good news and bad news surrounding race/diversity in the 100 top-grossing films from 2008. Some of the data are encouraging, particularly for Black and Asian characters. The sheer prevalence of Black characters in film is over 13% and the percentage of Asian characters is 2.3 percentage points above US Census. Further, the percentage of Asian characters in 2008 is 3.7% higher than the percentage of Asian characters in 2007. The largest gap exists for Hispanics, with cinematic portrayals 11.4% below the real world percentage. However, there was a higher percentage of Hispanic speaking characters on screen in 2008 films (4.9%) than in 2007 films (3.3%). This may be a missed opportunity for the film industry. A Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) report recently showed that Hispanics purchased 26% of all movie tickets sold in the US/Canada in 2010 (as a comparison, Caucasians purchased 56% of tickets sold, African Americans 11%, other races/ethnicities 7%) and this was a 5% increase from the percentage of tickets purchased by Hispanics in 2009.¹¹

Besides prevalence, we also measured the portrayal of hypersexualized Black characters in film. Our findings show Black female characters are more likely than their Black male counterparts to be shown in a sexy and attractive light. Repeated viewing of these types of portrayals may reinforce males and females' beliefs that Black girls/women are to be valued for how they look rather than who they are. However, across three separate measures (attractiveness, sexy clothes, partial nudity), the percentage of hypersexualized females seems to have decreased from 2007 to 2008. It will be important to examine these variables in our next series of reports (released in the summer of 2011) assessing the prevalence and hypersexualization of character gender and race in the 100 top-grossing movies of 2009.

Endnotes

¹ This report contains data from a secondary analysis of Stacy L. Smith and Marc Choueiti's (2011) *Gender Inequality in Cinematic Content? A Look at Females On Screen & Behind the Camera in Top-Grossing 2008 Films*. Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, Los Angeles, CA. Each speaking characters was categorized in one of the following ways: White, Hispanic, Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian, Middle Eastern, or other. Two other values were possible: can't tell (speaking characters with an unidentifiable ethnicity) and not applicable (speaking characters that do not possess an ethnicity; for example, a super natural creature or live action animal). For more information on the study methodology, coder training and reliability, the list of films coded, and gender-related findings, please see Dr. Smith's website at USC Annenberg to download the 2008 findings (<http://annenberg.usc.edu/Faculty/Communication%20and%20Journalism/SmithS.aspx>).

² 2010 Census Data (n.d.). *Redistricting data*. Retrieved 3/29/11 from, <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>

³ The chi-square test was significant for character *race/ethnicity* (Black vs. not Black) by *MPAA rating*, $X^2(3, 4,016)=55.64, p<.01, V^*=.12$.

⁴ The six appearance indicators were defined as follows: *Sexually revealing clothing* is tight, alluring, or scanty apparel and is coded as present or absent. *Nudity* assesses exposed skin and is coded as no nudity, partial nudity (exposure in chest region/cleavage, midriff, and/or upper thigh) or full nudity. The latter two categories of nudity were collapsed, as most depictions only pertain to exposing cleavage, midriffs, or the upper thigh area. *Waist size* captures the circumference around a character's mid section and is categorized as small, average, and large. For analyses, this measure was collapsed into two levels: small waist present or absent.

Beauty captured the attractiveness of characters and was assessed by scrutinizing all acts of speech (i.e., words referencing a character's desirability) and behavior (i.e., nonverbal actions signaling a character's desirability). Characters are coded as extremely attractive (two or more indicators by another character), attractive (one indicator by another character) or not attractive. Like other measures, we collapsed this variable into two levels: attractive vs. not attractive. *Chest size*, coded as small, average, and large, encapsulates the size of female characters' breast region and male characters' shoulder and pectoral region. The data for this variable was collapsed into large chest present or absent. Last, *unrealistic ideal* measures the presence or absence of a quixotic body shape. For females, an unreal body ideal is an exaggerated hourglass figure. For males, an unreal ideal is a muscularized torso in the shape of an inverted triangle.

⁵ Four of the six appearance indicators were associated with *race/ethnicity*; *sexually revealing clothing*, $X^2(1, 525)=26.52, p<.01, \varphi=.225$; *nudity*, $X^2(1, 524)=17.41, p<.01, \varphi=.18$; *physical attractiveness*, $X^2(1, 531)=7.83, p<.01, \varphi=.12$; and *waist size*, $X^2(1,$

404)=13.70, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.18$. No significant association was observed with *chest size*, $X^2(1, 495)=2.19$, $p=.14$, $\varphi=.07$ and *unrealistic body ideal*, $X^2(1, 423)=.055$, $p=.81$, $\varphi=.01$.

⁶ Smith, S. L., & Choueiti, M. (2011).

⁷ The chi-square value for *character race* (Black vs. not Black) and *director race* (Black vs. not Black) is $X^2(1, 4,016)=405.72$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.32$.

⁸ Smith, S. L. (2010). *Gender oppression in cinematic content? A look at females on-screen & behind-the-camera in top-grossing 2007 films* (<http://annenbergl.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/~media/PDFs/07GenderKey.ashx>). Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Granados, A. & Erickson, S. (2008). *Asymmetrical Academy Awards? A look at gender imbalance in best picture nominated films from 1977-2006*.

<http://annenbergl.usc.edu/Faculty/Communication/~media/93914BE9EB5F4C2795A3169E5ACDB84F.ashx> Smith, S. L. & Choueiti, M. (2010). *Gender on screen and behind the camera in family films: The Executive Report*. A report prepared for the Geena Davis Institute for Gender and Media, Los Angeles, CA.

⁹ Only variables that were reliably coded and reported in the 2008 (Smith & Choueiti, 2011) and 2007 (Smith & Choueiti, 2010) studies are delineated in Table 2.

¹⁰ Across the three hypersexuality measures reported in Table 2, the same gender differences emerged for Caucasians in 2008 (*sexually revealing clothing*, $X^2(1, 2,828)=298.81$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.325$, Males=4.3%, Females=26.5%; *nudity* $X^2(1, 2,829)=149.82$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.23$, Males=7.8%, Females=24.3%; *attractiveness* $X^2(1, 2,858)=130.18$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.21$, Males=4.6%, Females=17.5%) and 2007 (*sexually revealing clothing*, $X^2(1, 3,186)=347.06$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.33$, Males=4.2%, Females=26.6%; *nudity* $X^2(1, 3,186)=144.59$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.21$, Males=6.5%, Females=20.9%; *attractiveness* $X^2(1, 3,205)=156.69$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.22$, Males=5.5%, Females=19.8%).

¹¹ Motion Picture Association of America. (n.d). *Theatrical market statistics 2010*. Retrieved March 28th, 2011 from <http://www.mpa.org/policy/industry>. Motion Picture Association of America. (n.d). *Theatrical market statistics 2009*.