

Racial Valuation: Cultural Gatekeepers, Race, Risk, and Institutional Expectations of Success and Failure

Maryann Erigha

University of Georgia

ABSTRACT

Racial inequality persists in culture industries, despite increases in representation. Focusing on the Hollywood film industry, this research analyzes written correspondence to understand how, in their discourses, cultural workers as intermediaries or gatekeepers construct ideas about race to make predictions about economic value, success, and failure of cultural products. Findings demonstrate that cultural workers make *racial valuations*, or race-based judgments about the economic worth of cultural products—in this case by associating white actors with low economic risk, increased chances of profitability, and the expectation of success and linking black actors to high economic risk, decreased chances of profitability, and the expectation of failure. This practice of racial valuation disrupts conventional logics that emphasize the financial ambiguity of cultural markets to advance white institutional logics that invoke race-based projections about a cultural product's expected performance. Ultimately, these racially biased assessments affect people, products, and processes along the film production, distribution, and consumption spectrum, especially privileging white workers and limiting Black workers in foreign markets, thereby creating and reinforcing unequal racial outcomes within culture industries.

KEYWORDS: race; value; risk; Hollywood; film; culture industries.

Creative and cultural industries exhibit social inequalities, such as racial inequality, that reflect broader societal divisions (Gray 2016; Negus 1997; Saha 2017). Facilitating the creation and dissemination of popular culture, culture industries experience high levels of racial inequality and perpetuate unequal racial practices. These inequalities occur, for instance, within identity and regulation processes and in the production, distribution, consumption, and representation of culture. Racial representation remains an enduring problem in the major popular culture industries within the United States (Gray 2016; Saha 2017); recent scholarship on the Hollywood film industry reveals ranges of unequal racial representation and marginalization, such as with actors and onscreen portrayals (Thakore 2016; Yuen 2017) and positions behind the camera (Erigha 2015, 2016). Even with increases in racial representation, racial inequality in the film industry persists (Erigha 2018, 2019), and scholars are

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increasingly devoting attention to investigating ways that racial inequality is made beyond representation and via other processes.

Particularly, scholars are increasingly uncovering the processes by which unequal racial outcomes in culture industries are constructed and reproduced. Integrating the study of culture and markets (Wherry 2014) from the production of culture perspective (DiMaggio 1987; Hirsch 1972; Peterson and Anand 2004), scholars discuss how the process of valuation in cultural markets depends on various factors, such as popularity, peer influence, familiarity, reputation, expert reviews, awards, and media coverage (Bielby and Bielby 1994; DeVany 2004; Gemser, van Oostrum, and Leenders 2007; Keuschnigg 2015; Shrum 1991). Less frequently debated is how characteristics such as race become salient in the process of valuing some cultural products over others—constructing racial inequality. Important work in this area explores ways that race is employed as a judgment device to confer status, assign advantage or disadvantage, and signal economic potential in cultural spheres such as book publishing and reviewing (Childress and Nault 2019; Chong 2011), fashion modeling (Mears 2011), and elite night club-going (Rivera 2010). This research demonstrates how cultural intermediaries, in their everyday discourses, construct ideas and make predictions about race, value, and performance to shape the production, marketing, and distribution of cultural products.

Especially lacking in cultural theorization is an overarching understanding of how inequalities of production, consumption, and representation function, relate, and interact (O'Brien et al. 2017). To note one example, underexplored in the widely used and cited circuit of culture model which connects production, consumption, and representation (Du Gay 1997) is how and where social inequalities, in particular racial inequality, fit into cultural circuits to facilitate, impede, or otherwise radically alter traditional understandings of cultural flows. Although such theories are less common, theories that connect cultural production, distribution, consumption, and representation to broader relations of oppressive social divisions allow further understanding of the role of culture in the reproduction of social inequality. They also provide insight into how inequality can be dismantled. Moreover, understanding inequality in culture industries can help promote, support, and foster progressive values in the production and dissemination of popular culture. The consequences of disparate treatment, bias, racial discrimination, or racism permeating decision-making processes in culture industries are debilitating and far-reaching. Inequalities produce damaging consequences, or “epistemological effects” (Saha 2017), not only leading to the production of limited, problematic representative identities but also troubling the very structure and organization of the production, distribution, and consumption of culture.

As noted by prior scholars of culture industries, issues regarding how cultural gatekeepers or intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984; Janssen and Verboord 2015; Maguire and Matthews 2012)—and their strategies—attempt to manage high economic risk and uncertainty (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Caves 2000; Keuschnigg 2015) often invoke racial considerations. While prior research has focused on racial considerations regarding the cultural product and the creative talent, a defining aspect of film industry work also entails the production process wherein the script is developed within a collaborative and interactive process for the screen. As such, valuing race within the film industry implies a predetermined judgment on the talent, the imagined film, and the entire cultural production process. Drawing on a thematic analysis of written correspondence between cultural workers affiliated with one major film studio, this study demonstrates how cultural gatekeepers make *racial valuations*, or race-based judgments, about the economic worth of cultural products by linking movies with Black casts or stars to uncertainty, high economic risk, and the expectation of failure and by associating whiteness with low economic risk, increased chances of profitability, and the expectation of success. Connecting race to ideas about value, success, and failure in the cultural marketplace, Hollywood workers fabricate a *racialized failure expectation* for Black cultural products via Black movies and talent—and propagate a *racialized success expectation* for white cultural products, while also projecting that white talent can reverse the failure expectation. This rationale is especially prominent in the way Hollywood workers make predictions about the potential for success or failure of movies in foreign markets. The institutional practice of making racial valuations simultaneously disrupts and

restructures conventional logics that emphasize the ambiguity of cultural markets, to propagate raced-based projections about a cultural product's expected performance and place the onus of risk uniformly on Black cultural products. Ultimately, these assessments privilege white workers and limit Black workers with regard to production and distribution opportunities, especially in international markets, thereby creating and reinforcing unequal racial outcomes in culture industries.

GATEKEEPERS, RACE, AND RISK IN CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Workers as “cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu 1984; Maguire and Matthews 2012), “cultural brokers” (DiMaggio 1987), those in “boundary spanning positions” (Hirsch 1972), or gatekeepers (Janssen and Verboord 2015) are integral role players in the production of culture framework within cultural markets (DiMaggio 1987; Hirsch 1972; Peterson and Anand 2004). During the production of culture, intermediaries mediate the flow of cultural products from initial fabrication stages through consumption stages, where cultural products reach audiences. Due to their critical role, mediators can act as gatekeepers who are critically situated to influence the manufacturing and maintenance of inequality in culture industries. In particular, conventional scholarly wisdom advances a difficulty to predict the success or failure of all future products, or commodities in capitalist logics, referring to the ambiguity, unpredictability, and uncertainty of popular culture markets (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972; Keuschnigg 2015) and the reality that most are unsuccessful and few are successful (DeVany and Walls 1999; Faulkner and Anderson 1987)—beliefs even discussed by industry executives (Hirsch 1972; Wasko 2008:55). Conducting an empirical study of over 2,000 movies, DeVany and Walls (1999) found that film forecasts were imprecise, and statistics explained little variation in movie success controlling for genre, name recognition of stars, production budget, and other characteristics of movies. Despite the ambiguity of economic success, cultural mediators still attempt to predict the future performance of products in cultural markets.

While mediators influence creating, editing, networking, evaluating, classifying, and censoring of cultural products (Janssen and Verboord 2015), what is of especial importance here is gatekeepers' and mediators' capacity to decide which cultural products to exclude or promote, with regard to production, marketing, and distribution strategies. In particular, they can create inequality in the way they broker the relation between production and consumption. Gatekeepers are crucial in the link between production and consumption, which involves mediation between the construction of cultural productions and the construction of consumer tastes (Bourdieu 1984; Saha 2017). Cultural intermediaries enable the functioning and operation of cultural markets, in particular by making decisions about—and therefore shaping tastes around—what cultural products are available for audience consumption (Maguire and Matthews 2012; O'Brien et al. 2017:273). Although cultural intermediaries do not have reliable information about audiences (Bielby and Harrington 2004; Havens 2006), they exercise cultural gatekeeping by constructing imagined audiences and creating ideas about fit between cultural products and audiences (Błaszczuk 2008). Their alleged “matchmaking” between audiences and cultural products (Entwistle 2006) at the site between production and distribution is a locus where inequality is made (Gray 2016; Saha 2017).

In capitalist cultural markets, mediators also serve a key role in making decisions with regard to projections for economic profit. For example, patterns of inequality and cultural consumption are forged in the understanding of how tastes and race interact to shape the logics of funding cultural products and to reify conceptions of race and value. O'Brien and colleagues (2017:275) write, “Often those from outside the narrow definition of the ‘default male’ find their practice constrained by those who continue to inhabit the upper echelons of the cultural industries, who consider the productions that foreground issues of marginality or minority experience a risky investment.” In such instances, cultural mediators invoke market logics to reinforce decisions that marginalize workers, constrain representation, and perpetuate inequality in culture industries. Therefore, cultural intermediaries can make racial inequality by promoting racialized systems of value and oppression that define default

white (male) individuals as the idealized, target audiences and workers in a culture industry, while simultaneously marking racial minority audiences and workers as marginal and high-risk.

Scholars describe “risk work” as working practices carried out to assess, manage, or minimize risk (Gale et al. 2016; Horlick-Jones 2005), typically in the scope of overcoming uncertainty at the organizational level (Beck 1992). To manage risk, production and distribution companies employ strategies such as producing an oversupply and vast diversity of releases, using well-known stars, relying on tent-pole franchise movies, producing movies built upon pre-existing brands, and using recognizable stories and characters (DiMaggio 1987; Hirsch 1972; Wasko 2008). Risk is also padded by other streams of income for films, such as releasing movies via video-on-demand, DVD, cable, and internet—or, in the case of theatrical distribution, moving beyond the domestic box office to global markets. Likewise, gatekeepers, via the structures and practices of cultural work, engage in risk work when they manage impressions of cultural products by making decisions concerning what movies they believe are desired for audience consumption, a process that can facilitate the production of inequality and difference in culture industries. This research addresses how cultural workers integrate discussions and considerations about race during their daily practices of risk work. Considering how cultural intermediaries regard race means that a re-articulation of traditional views of phenomena, such as the taken-for-granted acceptance of the ambiguity-of-success standard for cultural products, is perhaps necessary if we are to understand the mechanisms by which intermediaries assign value prior to any observable outcomes.

RACE AND THE ASSIGNMENT OF VALUE IN CULTURAL WORKERS’ DECISION-MAKING

Research on culture industries has illustrated the ways in which race is employed as a judgment device to confer status, to signal potential for economic gain or loss, and to make selection decisions—for instance, in art markets (Agnello 2010; Banks 2010), fashion modeling (Mears 2011), elite night clubs (Rivera 2010), book reviewing (Chong 2011), and book publishing (Childress and Nault 2019). Chong (2011) shows how book critics invoke race in their appraisals of literary fiction—specifically to emphasize authors’ authenticity as insiders, to frame novels in terms of ethno-racial genres, or to cater to audiences’ perceived interests. Childress and Nault (2019) highlight encultured biases in product selection: in contexts with high uncertainty, intermediary autonomy, demographically-inscribed cultural products, and markets where the homogeneity of gatekeepers interacts with the heterogeneity of a more diverse group of creators or consumers, gatekeepers’ preferences align with cultural proximity to match their identity markers (e.g., white male book editors select books written by white males for development), decisions that obstruct the inclusion and hiring of marginalized racial groups (also Rivera 2012).

Furthermore, cultural gatekeepers have employed race as a proxy for economic potential. Mears (2011) demonstrates how fashion producers, clients, and bookers operate as cultural intermediaries who assess beauty, shape popular culture representations of women, and define mainstream aesthetics when hiring models, based on their use of race to construct idealized femininities which favor extreme slenderness and whiteness for editorial looks and greater diversity in race and body type for mass consumer commercial looks; in doing so, they make routine status judgments and pass on models based on perceived market demand. Similarly, doormen at elite nightclubs in Rivera’s (2010:239) study acted as status judges and experts who made assumptions about patrons’ social connections, worthiness or unworthiness of admission, and economic spending capacities (and thus about the club’s potential profit) based on the customer’s perceived race. Finally, in Agnello’s (2010) study of art markets, the widespread devaluation of paintings by African American artists led to lower prices for creative workers, meanwhile generating increased profit potential for investors. Collectively, this body of prior research illustrates how industry workers linked skin color and perceived race to expectations of varying levels of economic profit.

In the process of racial valuation, cultural workers as intermediaries and gatekeepers invoke race in their attempts to predict and make conjectures about what cultural products will be successful or

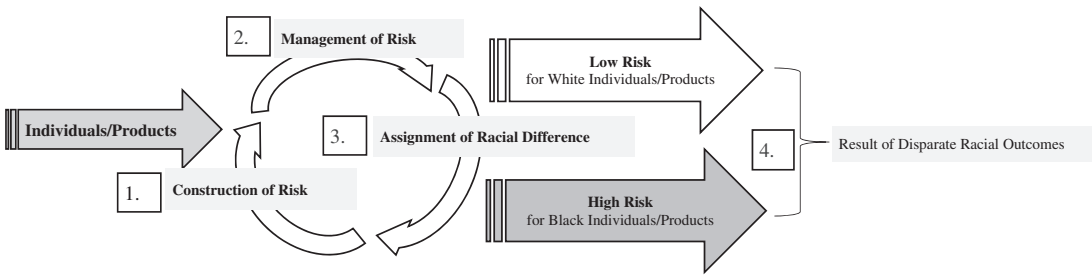


Figure 1. Racial Bifurcation/Valuation Framework

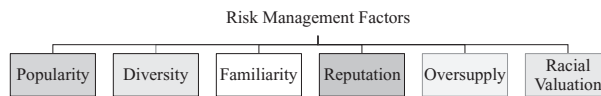


Figure 2. Risk Management in Culture Industries

unsuccessful, profitable or unprofitable, worthy or poor economic investments. In the racial valuation chain, highlighted in [Figure 1](#), the first stage concerns constructing the problem of economic risk as a burden that is inherent in business and around which gatekeepers must successfully strategize and maneuver in order to make a profit.

The second stage involves managing financial risk through a variety of procedures and strategies, including invoking racial valuation, as depicted in [Figure 2](#). In the third stage, cultural workers assign disproportionate value; for example, low risk to white talent and cultural products and high risk to Black talent and cultural products. Engaging in risk work, cultural industry decision-makers assign racial considerations as a strategy to manage risk. In the fourth stage, the assignment of different risk levels to racial groups creates and reproduces the result of racial inequality, privileging white talent and cultural products and stigmatizing Black talent and cultural products, with regard to opportunity structures and outcomes.

Though financial success itself might be unpredictable, workers' *ideas* about economic success and their claims about race and value in relation to these ideas have bearing upon the production and distribution of products in the cultural marketplace. Beyond characterizations of cultural products as inherently risky, cultural intermediaries describe race as an innate characteristic of people, products, and processes that contributes to or mitigates risk. Cultural workers manufacture racial inequality in the way they interpret success and failure to operate in tandem with attaching positive projections to whiteness and negative projections to Blackness ([Gray 1997](#)). Taking into account how ideas about economic risk and expectations of financial success and failure of cultural products are racialized in popular culture industries improves scholarly understanding of how cultural flows operate.

Though social scientists of culture and cultural industries have launched similar investigations to understand gatekeepers' processes of making inferences of perceived value from racial categorizations, less research exists on discussions of race among film gatekeepers. The film industry provides a unique lens for the examination of race and cultural valuation, because, unlike prior studies that encounter what [Childress and Nault \(2019\)](#) describe as person-to-person relations and person-to-product relations, investigating the valuation of people and products, the film industry additionally involves the valuation of creative processes. The journey from script to screen involves the coming together of creative energies of numerous workers, such as directors, costume designers, sound editors, music composers, screenwriters, and cinematographers, making it a highly collaborative and variable process with different personnel, arrangements, and situations involved. Therefore, racial valuations and assumptions about race and value in the film industry reflect not only preconceived ideas about

artists and cultural products but also about the creative process. In addition to relating persons to persons and products, the film industry also relates persons-to-processes by making demographically-based assumptions that value or devalue the production process or altogether question its relevancy to economic outcomes and cultural consumption.

DATA AND METHODS

This research aims to understand the potential biases underlying characteristics of risk work and the inequalities that are legitimated. Caldwell (2008) discusses how meanings, knowledge, and power within culture industries can be found in their deep texts, in the public or private rituals of cultural production embedded in how cultural workers construct and manage identities, communities, and work. Moreover, focusing on discourses about risk work could bridge a gap in the understanding of the social construction of risk (Gale et al. 2016; Iversen 2014). As Gale and colleagues write (2016:1066):

There are also fewer close microsocial accounts of the production of “risk” through everyday working practices, which might be achieved through use of participant observation or conversation analysis to explore what is said, and not said, in these interactions.

I draw on these recommendations and analyze the deep texts and conversations of cultural workers to gain broader knowledge on how they construct ideas about race and risk.

To understand cultural workers’ racial discourses about the success, failure, and value of movies, I qualitatively analyzed textual data of correspondence between Hollywood workers. Like many major organizations and culture industries in the United States, Hollywood is a “white space,” or a space in which whites possess an overwhelming presence and power compared to other racial groups (Anderson 2015). In Hollywood, whites control the production, distribution, and exhibition of movies and also create movies with white audiences in mind (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Quinn 2011). In the film industry, whites occupy the vast majority of positions on screen and behind the camera, especially positions of influence and power, such as the roles of casting directors, talent agents, producers, and studio executives (Erigha 2019; Warner 2015; Yuen 2017). Against the backdrop of the Hollywood film industry, this study considers how cultural gatekeepers use racial frames of financial risk to shape ideas about success and failure of cultural products, workers, and processes. In doing so, it considers how racial inequality is constructed and reinforced by cultural gatekeepers, specifically demonstrating how gatekeepers’ opinions, discourses and, perhaps, biases about race and racialized movies affect decisions concerning cultural production and distribution in the film industry. Correspondence between affiliates of Hollywood organizations demonstrates the ways people with real power in the industry formulate institutional strategies through their everyday discourse to manage economic risk and uncertainty.

Uploaded in 2015, the data collected are from the WikiLeaks online collection of emails at a major film company.¹ The correspondents held a variety of occupational roles. As studio executives, producers, sales and marketing professionals, publicists, and creative managers, among other roles, workers in positions of power exerted considerable influence to green light scripts, support or reject releases of films overseas, or determine the strength and direction of film marketing campaigns.

Given that this study focuses on racial references regarding constructions of Blackness, a search using the term “African American” throughout the body and subject of emails yielded 598 results.² For

1 Prior scholars have drawn on WikiLeaks as a source of information, while other researchers have discussed its utility for providing novel insights. For example, see Gabriel J. Michael (2015) in “Who’s Afraid of WikiLeaks? Missed Opportunities in Political Science Research” in *Review of Policy Research: The Politics and Policy of Science and Technology* and Benedetta Brevini (2017) in “WikiLeaks: Between Disclosure Whistle-Blowing in Digital Times” in *Sociology Compass*. This particular collection includes over 173,000 emails from more than 2,200 email addresses.

2 This search term yielded the most relevant results, whereas searching “Black” returned varied responses, many of which were unrelated to race. Therefore, additional research could examine other explicit or, conversely, implicit references in cultural industry decision-making processes.

example, when discussing a movie's reception with audiences, one Hollywood insider remarks that "we can highlight the obvious African-American factors. . . ." The emails that discussed African Americans and made references to movies with African American/Black stars or casts formed the basis for the analysis.

Conducting a thematic analysis, I read through and closely examined each correspondence, identified recurring themes, and refined those groupings (Glaser 2002; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Aligning with the theoretical interest in how cultural workers make valuations regarding movies, I focused particularly on conversations in which cultural workers framed and discussed issues of risk, economics, performance expectations, production budgets, decision-making, success, and failure—noting emergent themes, concepts, and strategies. In relation to these entries, I also analyzed racial references about whites/Caucasians. Key themes that emerged were: 1) an expectation of difficulty at the box office for movies with Black stars or casts, 2) a connection of the negative expectation to foreign markets, and 3) a belief that white actors or casts would reverse the failure expectation.

Several communications between Hollywood insiders centered around four movies featuring Black actors in prominent roles: *The Equalizer* (2014), *Annie* (2014), *No Good Deed* (2014), and *The Wedding Ringer* (2015). Starring Denzel Washington and directed by Antoine Fuqua, *The Equalizer* is an R-rated action-crime thriller about a man who comes out of retirement to help free a young woman from violent gangsters. The movie was made on a \$55 million budget and earned \$101.5 million in the domestic market and \$90.8 million in the foreign market—a total of \$192.3 million, nearly four times its production budget. Starring Idris Elba and Taraji P. Henson and directed by the white British director Sam Miller, *No Good Deed* is a Black-cast PG-13-rated crime thriller about an escaped convict who preys upon a lonely woman and her two children. *No Good Deed* grossed \$52.5 million at the domestic box office, roughly four times its \$13.2 million budget, and had limited foreign market release. The PG-rated family-comedy-drama musical *Annie* featured Quvenzhané Wallis and Jamie Foxx and was directed by the white American director Will Gluck. In the movie, Annie is a foster child whose life changes suddenly when a business tycoon and mayoral candidate takes her in from her mean foster mother. At the box office, *Annie* grossed \$85.9 domestically and \$47.9 million internationally, about twice its \$65 million budget. Finally, the R-rated comedy *The Wedding Ringer*, about a groom who hires a best man for his wedding, featured the actor and comedian Kevin Hart alongside the white American actor Josh Gad. Directed by the white American director Jeremy Garelick, *The Wedding Ringer* grossed \$64.5 million domestically and \$15.3 million internationally, more than triple its \$23 million budget. Although these movies experienced commercially successful showings at the box office, the analysis that follows reveals how they were, nonetheless, the subjects of discussions about racialized notions of success and failure.

RACIAL VALUATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INSTITUTIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Do cultural gatekeepers frame institutional expectations of success and failure using racial considerations? The following analysis of communications between Hollywood insiders illustrates an institutionalized racial rhetoric that situates notions of success and failure with perceptions about race. First, there is a presumption of failure that I call the *failure expectation*, which is linked to movies with Black casts or stars. Second, there are efforts to reverse the failure expectation by whitening the marketing of films, conceivably to draw white and non-American, particularly Asian and Spanish, audiences. These institutional practices contradict the widely held notion that no one can predict what cultural products will succeed or fail (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Caves 2000). Hollywood insiders, indeed, brand Black cast movies and stars as risky investments that they believe would perform more poorly than white cast movies and stars. In doing so, they simultaneously conceive of race as a problem and a solution to economic risk.

Whereas Blackness is rendered an economic liability, whiteness is perceived as an economic asset and a solution to financial uncertainty. Therefore, as depicted in Table 1, Hollywood insiders fashion

Table 1. Racial Valuation and Institutional Expectations among Cultural Gatekeepers

Theme	Expectation	Example Statements from Cultural Gatekeepers	
Racialized Failure Expectation	High risk for domestically distributed movies with Black talent in featured roles	“...being an African American actress, this ends up being another challenge.”	“...will not make a huge profit. ...The direction they’ve taken is not maximizing value.”
Racialized Foreign Market Failure Expectation	High risk for internationally distributed movies with Black talent in featured roles	“In general, pictures with an African American lead don’t play well overseas.”	“It is not without risk however as the draw of African-American leads in China has not been proven.”
Racialized Success Expectation	Low risk for movies with white talent in featured roles	“...it will play as a buddy comedy with plenty of Caucasian supporting cast. ...to find the right blend.”	“...make sure [the movie] is in no way perceived as an African-American comedy. ... [to have] the potential to be a breakout hit.”

race either to exacerbate or mitigate economic risk, uncertainty, and unpredictability in cultural markets. Making racial valuations, they use racial characteristics to judge the economic worth and quality of cultural products, particularly to fabricate a *racialized failure expectation* for Black cultural products and a *racialized success expectation* for white cultural products, hence projecting that white movies can reverse the failure expectation. The ubiquity of racialized statements among cultural workers suggests that the sentiments singularly characterize and collectively transcend individual expressions to assume an institutional character, whereby cultural mediators’ organizational practices and decisions create, shape, and reinforce institutional logics that ultimately buttress patterns of racial inequality in the production, distribution, and consumption of culture. Expectations of the performance of cultural products are guided by “white logics” (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008) or *white institutional logics* to highlight decision-makers’ status judgments made on the basis of race in the white space of a major popular culture industry.

Racialized Failure Expectation for Black Stars

How do cultural gatekeepers invoke race when making judgments about the economics of movies? Hollywood workers’ discussions about movies with Black stars illustrate a failure expectation, framing Blackness in cultural production as problematic. One cultural worker, Tom, writes, “African American movies remain a challenge.” Another worker, Martin, discusses a film’s weaknesses “beyond the difficulty of it being very African-American. . .” Statements about movies with Black casts or stars being a challenge in terms of marketing and performing well at the box office are pervasive among Hollywood insiders who propagate myths that films with Black stars would not make large profits or attract sizable audiences. Drawing on another instance, Elizabeth remarks, to counter one insider’s concern about the film’s potential audience, “I don’t feel [*Annie*] is a real African American film.” Here, the reading of a film to not feel like an African American film distances it from Blackness and therefore separates it from the failure expectation. In this particular context, the cultural worker’s

statement that a film does not really feel African American is taken to be a compliment that implies the movie could become a box office success.

Hollywood insiders highlight Blackness as a liability even when other characteristics are suggested as potential sources of risk. Though other reasons are mentioned for why films might underperform, such as having un-original storylines or unpopular genres, still the race of the cast is featured as a pervasive master narrative to justify marginalization. For example, Brian discusses the downside of the character Annie's race in reference to screenings of the eponymous film.

The movie is fantastic and very emotional, with an outstanding performance of Jamie Foxx, and Quvenzhane Wallis is such an adorable and talented girl. The movie has plenty of energy and it was above our expectations. Nevertheless, Annie being an African American actress, this ends up being another challenge, because it is also a musical. Despite this, we are optimistic about the movie and believe it will connect with mothers and their girls.

Optimism about *Annie's* prospects is coupled with racial cues that frame being African American in the negative (Gray 1997), as a challenge for movies to overcome despite the subtle acknowledgement that the film genre could be the true difficulty. Similarly, in another instance, despite other factors that Pauline mentions could dissuade Chinese audiences from patronizing *The Equalizer*, such as piracy or lack of video effects, race also emerges as a persistent characteristic that Hollywood insiders link to box office predictions. With predominantly white cultural workers holding expectations of poor performance for Black movies, the conventional wisdom that "nobody knows" what will succeed or fail (Caves 2000) and "all hits are flukes" (Bielby and Bielby 1994) become "everyone knows" and "all Black hits are flukes." Consistent institutional logics embed racial valuations in ascribing diminished value to productions with Black stars and casts, while casting doubt upon their potential for profit-making.

The racialized failure expectation is ubiquitous among workers at Hollywood institutions, as they attach race to language of economic risk and value maximization. For instance, Billy is certain *The Equalizer* will underperform, saying decisively that:

[Denzel Washington and Antoine Fuqua] will not make huge profit. . . . The direction they've [the studio has] taken is not maximizing value, but playing it safe. Which in a business of hits making a slate, doesn't make sense to me.

In this example, the failure expectation masquerades as knowledge in the hidden curriculum of how to overcome financial risk. As a result of racial valuation that devalues Blackness, films with Black casts or stars begin with a disadvantage, due to Hollywood insiders' linking race to perceptions about economic risk, value, and profitability. Altogether these discussions challenge the perceived ambiguity of cultural markets, as failure appears to be predictable, routine, and expected, so long as race is taken into consideration in decisions about production and distribution. These discourses are entrenched further in cultural workers' discussions pertaining to the distribution of movies in foreign markets.

The Failure Expectation and the Foreign Market

How do cultural gatekeepers' expectations affect the dissemination of cultural products to global audiences? Cultural mediators shape the visibility and mobility of cultural products and their meanings, which are increasingly exported internationally (Bielby and Harrington 2004; Havens 2006; Rodriguez 2018). Janssen and Verboord (2015:444) note that:

increasing globalization has enhanced the risks and uncertainties inherent in the work of cultural mediators. . . . In addition to an already huge supply of domestic products, cultural

mediators are confronted with an overwhelming abundance and diversity of foreign cultural offerings, for which the audience interest, market potential, and artistic merits are difficult to assess.

Given high levels of financial risk in international markets, the failure expectation is prominent in discussions about overseas distribution. For example, Billy writes, “In general, pictures with an African American lead don’t play well overseas. When [the studio] made *Equalizer* they had to know that Denzel opens pics domestically, however the international gross would be somewhat limited.” Saying “they had to know” the international gross would be somewhat limited, the cultural worker appears to believe that the failure expectation is a universally agreed upon assumption—that *everyone knows* movies with Black stars should receive small international box office returns.

Institutionalized racial rhetoric among workers in the Hollywood film industry suggests that movies with Black casts or stars will fail at the box office, especially in foreign markets, and perform well only among Black or minority-specific audiences in domestic markets (Erigha 2019). About *The Wedding Ringer*, Zachary writes, “The movie is funny but, unfortunately, for the Spanish audiences, having an African American cast is even worse than having an unknown cast.” Here, the cultural worker dismisses his own impressions of the film’s merit to focus on the expected negative reaction from foreign audiences due to the African American cast. The perception and subsequent prediction of low value for films with Black casts greatly limits the production, distribution, and consumption of such movies.

As another example, Roger remarks that *No Good Deed*’s “commercial B.O. [box office] potential does not rest within Australia/NZ [New Zealand] . . . but all within North America.” Hollywood insiders expect the vast majority of the box office potential for movies with Black casts or stars to reside in the domestic market and do not expect such movies to be profitable in international markets. Indeed, the Hollywood insider extends the decisions against foreign market distribution beyond the Australia/New Zealand demographic for which he explains the film did not screen well to include *all* foreign markets—everywhere except North America. According to the institutional racialized foreign market failure expectation, a Black film is predicted to perform well, if at all, only in the domestic market. Hence, the given recommendation confines Black film distribution to domestic markets only.

In a separate exchange, Hollywood insiders quickly veto the possibility for an international release for *No Good Deed*.

Vanessa: . . . Going gung-ho internationally wouldn’t seem wise.

Francine: Agree. Looking at uplifts, not expecting plan to change meaningfully . . . maybe a Spain uplift IF it makes sense (not chasing the release they did with *Obsessed* if we go at all).

Joe: Canada numbers were very low, even for an African-American movie . . . that’s a better indicator than the US box-office number.

Francine: Great info, thanks Joe. Unless somebody makes a very good case, I think we stick to where we are.

Vanessa: To be clear, I def don’t think you should go for it. I sent my original email to help you guys push back since Joe said Jim emailed about what we think internationally in light of domestic performance. Wanted you to have this info to help your argument to stay the course.

Francine: And MUCH appreciated. Jim sent this over this weekend, and we are really just trying not to dismiss it out of hand (using a teaspoon of sugar).

The comment that the Hollywood decision-makers are “trying not to dismiss” the possibility of foreign release “out of hand” belies their remarks, especially the statement that the purpose of the email was not to deliberate over the matter but to shift the conversation—to “push back” against international release, “stay the course,” and arrive at presumably predetermined outcomes.

Hollywood decision-makers are reluctant to promote movies with Black stars overseas, contending that they have little chance for financial success, a logic that violates the principle of unpredictability

for cultural products and instead demonstrates how racial valuation shapes economic decisions about movies. Indeed, cultural workers make preemptive judgments about race and value that limit distribution of Black-star movies in overseas markets, often without information regarding how audiences in those markets actually react to potential movies. About *No Good Deed*, Will comments:

Just wanted to let you know where we are given the proximity of our first releases. I am missing [results] from Croatia/Slovenia, Finland, Greece, Portugal, Russia, and Turkey. All the others are negative and I expect those listed above to be the same.

Here, with regard to predominantly white European audiences, there is an explicit negative prediction for the performance of the Black-cast movie, and the institutionalized failure expectation emerges, even when there are no observable outcomes of failure. In the above example, the results of Black-star movies in test markets are not included in the analysis, but the Hollywood insider makes decisions in anticipation of poor results. The sentiment resurfaces in the discussion of *The Wedding Ringer*, as Zachary remarks: “We are happy to take a more aggressive position and take the tour if need be but just wanted to explain that we hardly stand a chance with this one.” Due to Kevin Hart’s starring role in the movie, the Hollywood insider believes that there is little chance of success in the Spanish market, and therefore is pessimistic about the notion of an aggressive marketing campaign to promote the movie.

Particularly, Hollywood insiders invoke the language of the failure expectation in discussions about the distribution of movies in Asian markets. About *The Equalizer*, Pauline writes, “[They] believe the film will be successful in China, but it is not without risk however as the draw of African-American leads in China has not been proven.” In a similar manner regarding the distribution of *Annie* in Asian markets, Roger writes, “[He] was concerned about the commercial potential of this project He does feel this would be a very tough film for Japan, highlighted by the American-American start.” Furthermore, Lacey argues that “although the trailer itself looks great, we still have some concern how African-American ‘Annie’ will be received by Japanese audiences.” Despite positive commentary about the movie trailer, racial valuation that devalues Blackness leads to skepticism about the film’s future box office performance due to the African American lead actor—even before gauging the actual response of audience members. The failure expectation suggests that the perceived chances of success for Black cast movies, rather than being unpredictable, are predetermined due to racial characteristics.

Socially constructed white institutional logics about success and failure shape how cultural gatekeepers plan and execute marketing, promotion, and distribution for movies. In particular, the institutional myth that African American stars are unproven and risky explicitly labels them an impediment to potential box office returns and influences how Hollywood insiders think about distribution for their movies, effectively marginalizing African Americans in the foreign market. On the contrary, such institutional practices help white movies and actors by formulating racialized expectations that advantage them in the cultural marketplace.

Whiteness and the Racialized Success Expectation—or the Reversal of the Failure Expectation

When do cultural workers utilize racial valuation to signal expectations of economic success rather than risk? Irene’s statement below demonstrates how, due to the institutionalized failure expectation for movies with Black stars and casts, Hollywood insiders strategize about how to downplay Blackness in the marketing and promotion of movies.

Above all we want to make sure that [*The Wedding Ringer*] is in no way perceived as an African-American comedy. The premises here—about weddings, about best men, about friendship and budding bromance—travel the globe, translate to numerous cultures, and that’s why *The Wedding Ringer* has the potential to be a breakout hit.

This cultural worker suggests that the *The Wedding Ringer* would achieve financial success globally only if audiences do not perceive the film to be “an African American comedy” that has connections to African American cultures. As this example demonstrates, racial valuation influences strategies to market and promote movies in ways that downplay Blackness.

Similarly, Carla explains that the “only chance for us [with Spanish audiences] is to run a huge [word-of-mouth] prescreening program and to stand out the non African-American cast in all the materials.” As described earlier, the foreign market failure expectation links Blackness to failure at the international box office. In response, cultural workers inject racialized solutions to de-emphasize Blackness and promote other racial groups. Her suggestion to “stand out the non African-American cast” alludes to how cultural workers strategize to promote whiteness at the expense of Blackness in movie advertising.

At the same time that the failure expectation links Blackness to failure, it conversely and consciously links whiteness to success. The strategy of downplaying Blackness is accompanied by emphasizing whiteness and white actors—upholding whiteness as an economic gospel. As a result, Hollywood privileges whiteness and white cultural workers by asserting that white stars are least likely to fail at the box office. Ernest says about the *Equalizer*, “When I first heard Denzel [Washington] and Liam [Neeson] together (I know this is no longer the case), I liked the pairing. The balance of the casting will be important.” The cultural worker indicates somewhat implicitly that the racial balance of the casting, with one white actor and one Black actor, is vital to courting potential audiences and improving box office performance. Such a theory is prominent in the arrangements of “buddy films” that commonly pair male actors of different races to headline movies (Guerrero 1993). The addition of a white actor on the movie, according to the cultural worker, is important for the film’s box office potential. As Hollywood insiders render Blackness of the star actor(s) as problematic and suggest that Black-cast movies are unlikely to perform well at the box office, and especially in foreign markets, they simultaneously contend that whiteness reverses the racialized failure expectation. Making racial valuations that value white actors over Black actors, Hollywood insiders suggest that Blackness paired with whiteness will result in a more culturally appealing film for global audiences.

Besides pairing Black actors with white actors to balance the cast, another way Hollywood insiders discuss reversing the racialized failure expectation is by emphasizing white actors over Black actors when marketing and promoting movies. Hollywood insiders express such comments about *The Wedding Ringer*:

It’s not nearly as African American as he keeps insisting it is! We can stress [that] the creative and marketing will play up Josh [Gad] and Kelly [Kaley Cuoco] and the ensemble as well as . . . Josh Gad being part of any tour stop. I think Josh’s role is just as strong as Kevin’s [Hart] so it will play as a buddy comedy with plenty of Caucasian supporting cast to make it feel that way. I’m confident [he] will be able to find the right blend.

The racialized failure expectation makes identification with Blackness problematic; therefore, the cultural workers suggest focusing on the white actors in the ensemble cast and making sure that they are intimately involved in promoting the movie. In doing so, they highlight whiteness as a desired characteristic, contending that the white co-stars and the Caucasian supporting cast will add the sufficient elements to downplay Blackness in the movie and, allegedly, draw audiences. Whiteness, likewise, is not linked to the ambiguity of success of cultural products (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972; Keuschnigg 2015) but to the expectation of greater patronage and profits.

As cultural workers make racial valuations that factor race into decisions and judgments about moviemaking through connecting race to ideas about a film’s potential commercial success or failure, an often recurring racial valuation is the sentiment that Blackness should be downplayed in favor of an emphasis on whiteness. Heather writes about *Annie*’s trailer:

It feels very 'Black American' However our choice would be to include more Cameron Diaz, as not only is she hugely popular but also makes people connect to the fact that it will be 'fun/some laughs' . . . so if any more good bits of her would be great.

Here, the solution to counter the presumed Black-American feel of the movie is to play up Cameron Diaz, a multiracial white and Latina actor who often stars alongside white male leads in movies. Hollywood insiders perceive that Diaz's whiteness would offset the Blackness of *Annie* with its two Black stars. Ted agrees with this notion suggesting, "We'll need to get over the hurdle that [Annie] is 'black' in the film, hence the energy and music is very important to feel more modern, as is Cameron [Diaz] to give it 'movie' appeal." This cultural worker literally characterizes Blackness as a steep obstacle that the movie has the burden of overcoming, which in his opinion is most effectively possible by marketing a white(r) actor.

Ostensibly as a practice of managing risk, cultural gatekeepers invoke racial valuations, projecting economic expectations on creative people, products, and processes. Hollywood insiders view movies with Black casts or stars as liabilities that can be turned into assets if perceived through a lens of whiteness. As a consequence, they erect a racialized success expectation, making racial valuations that preemptively attach whiteness to low financial risk and commercial success—effectively institutionalizing the racialization of movies, people, and processes within cultural markets in the film industry.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Racialized institutional expectations govern film-industry practices and guide the way industry-insiders discuss potential movie projects. In addition to valuation of cultural products based on factors such as reputation, expert reviews, familiarity, media coverage, popularity, and awards (Bielby and Bielby 1994; DeVany 2004; Gemser, Oostrum, and Leenders 2007; Keuschnigg 2015; Kovacs and Sharkey 2014; Shrum 1991), race is also used as a source of economic valuation for predicting the success and failure of cultural workers and products (Agnello 2010; Childress and Nault 2019; Mears 2011). Cultural workers utilize racial valuation, drawing on racial characteristics to construct and assign economic value and worth of cultural products, though discussion of race and value among film gatekeepers is understudied. This research demonstrated how Hollywood decision-makers embed race in arguments about expectations of box office performance. Institutional racial discourses among cultural workers in positions of control and influence in the film industry reflect how the process of racial valuation works in the operation of cultural markets. Specifically, cultural gatekeepers frame moviemaking as inherently risky and uncertain and then enact racial valuation as a quotidian institutional practice by using race and racial characteristics—of the cast and directors, for instance—to estimate the potential worth and profitability of movies and make conjectures about their projected success or failure at the box office. Given the conventions of the medium, the production process within the film industry is a highly variable and collaborative process that involves numerous interactions between the director, cast, and crew in the transformation of the script to a movie. However, in evaluating risk by making status judgments through racial valuations, film gatekeepers as intermediaries project deterministic outcomes to talent and movies, whereby disregarding the ability of artists and participants to augment value during the production process.

Rather than being marked with ambiguity and uncertainty (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972; Keuschnigg 2015), expectations of success appear to be inextricably tied to racial judgments. Cultural gatekeepers' perceptions about race are embedded into institutional logics that influence decision-making about movies. Their inherent skepticism about movies with African Americans in prominent roles leads to a *failure expectation* with predictions that such movies will be high risk, will not interest foreign audiences, and will not be widely successful in international markets. In contrast, a *success expectation* marks white stars and casts as low risk and able to remedy the failure expectation. While past experiences can provide a basis to form an opinion about a film's likely success or failure, often this information is used selectively and inconsistently in performance evaluation; for instance when white directors, actors, or

films underperform at the box office, that poor performance is rarely attributed to race but to other factors (Erigha 2019). In dichotomous fashion, gatekeepers in the predominantly white American film industry frame whiteness as an asset that works in favor of whites of all nationalities and Blackness as a detriment that works against African Americans to engineer a socially constructed hierarchy that is later used to justify racial disparities in production, advertising, promotion, marketing, and distribution strategies. By suggesting that movies with white casts and directors, as cultural products, are more acceptable and favored by audiences, and therefore by implication, better investments, Hollywood decision-makers also invoke sociocultural explanations to suggest that whiteness will enhance, improve performance of, and reinvigorate Black cultural products. Ultimately, these framings of risk work enable cultural gatekeepers a language to reproduce white privilege under the auspices of making sound economic decisions, to the extent that “white logics” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008) or white institutional logics might be labeled more appropriately *paralogisms* to denote the fallacious reasoning underlying unremitting belief systems and empirical investigations that uniformly exist to reinforce and further white privilege and advantage.

Still, some people might wonder, to what extent do these actions constitute racial discrimination or bias? Racial discrimination, a result of unequal or differential treatment on the basis of race, can be motivated by racism, racist ideologies, prejudiced attitudes, stereotypes, beliefs, and/or racial bias (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Quillian 2006). Yet, previous studies have revealed that white employers consciously evaluate workers and make decisions either on the basis of race or in a manner that aligns with distinct preferences for and against racial groups (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 2001). In the event that direct bias cannot be determined, however, scholars remain concerned with disparate impact—in which rules or procedures, whether formal or informal, favor one racial group over another; therefore, in addition to understanding explicit motives and intents of actions, also worthy of exploration are mechanisms and processes that drive discriminatory action (Pager and Shepherd 2008).

Beliefs, actions, and institutional practices of cultural intermediaries have detrimental effects for the careers of cultural workers. The use of racialized institutional logics to perpetuate racism and inequality by allocating different resources to racial groups under the veneer of problem-solving bears material implications such as limited paths for Black talent within film-industry occupations characterized by persistent occupational segregation. Gatekeepers’ attitudes and actions directly facilitate who gets access to different levels of distribution and how much money and effort go into the promotion of movies. Predictions that Black movies will not perform well overseas are used to justify why films featuring African Americans in prominent roles routinely receive small production budgets and little foreign market distribution from Hollywood studios, despite their visibility in the film industry. To a greater extent, the racialized failure and success expectations affect occupations, earnings, and livelihoods for cultural workers, with advantage for whites and disadvantage for Blacks, and also circumscribe what movies are made available to audiences and the production qualities of those movies. Therefore, institutional discourses among film industry workers have implications for employment and for the perpetuation of white overrepresentation in Hollywood cinema (Quinn 2011). Essentially, these discourses solidify and uphold Hollywood as a white space (Anderson 2015) designed to showcase white cultural products and talent, while using rhetoric to justify the marginalization and ghettoization of Black talent and cultural products.

Future research can further investigate the persistence of racial inequality in culture industries by examining additional ways everyday discourses and practices of cultural workers preserve and justify the whiteness of cultural markets in cinema and beyond. Moreover, studies can explore how other factors—such as the intersection of race, gender, and age—shape the rhetoric of risk and economic value in the film industry. Staying attuned to the manners by which cultural gatekeepers, through rhetoric and action, create and maintain social inequality provides a blueprint for combatting shifting forms of racism and anti-Blackness and ensuring a more inclusive production and dissemination of popular culture. Beyond popular culture industries, the concept of racial valuation can be applied across a broad spectrum, from the field of economic sociology to the study of race and ethnicity—as well as in other contexts where markets, consumers, and audiences are concerned—to grasp how

racial inequality is inextricably bounded to economic discourses that enable privilege or deprivation and to assess the implications for the perpetuation of global injustices.

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