



The First Years of #OscarsSoWhite: Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, and the History of Black Media Discourse at the Academy Awards

Abstract

*The #OscarsSoWhite twitter campaign started a major conversation in the 2010s about diversity at the Academy Awards, and Hollywood more broadly. However, the moment was just the latest in a long history of media discourse responding to the event. This paper examines the news coverage around the first two Black performers to receive awards “buzz”: Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (1934); and Hattie McDaniel, who became the first person of color to win an Academy Award for her performance in *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Beavers, who ultimately did not receive a nomination, had been the first potential Black contender at the event; nonetheless, her snub facilitated a dialogue about the systemic exclusion of minority groups at the Oscars that continues today. As the first Black winner, McDaniel fueled a wider exchange about what the moment would ultimately mean for progress on screen. McDaniel had broken barriers, but did that actually accomplish anything? This paper focuses on the symbolic meaning of the Academy Awards trophy and how its allure as Hollywood’s most coveted achievement has often been used as a symbolic gesture without any long-term substance. At the same time, the modes of discourse around the event has motivated conversations and pushback exposing the wider systemic realities of the American film industry. This paper looks at the origins of Black media discourse around the event, and how they persist into the contemporary context of the Academy Awards.*

In January 2015, with the announcement of the Academy Award nominations, activist April Reign started a movement with a simple tweet and the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. As she stated: “#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair” (Ugwu). The tweet, of course, identified the reality that, despite many potential contenders, no people of color had been nominated in the major acting categories. Her tweet quickly went viral, instigating a wave of critical commentary on one of Hollywood’s oldest and most sacrosanct institutions, the Academy Awards. The controversy was further exacerbated when the snubs continued for a second year in 2016. The *LA Times* remarked: “It’s another embarrassing

Hollywood sequel” (Keegan and Zeitchik). The massive backlash has come to define recent drives from the Academy, seeking to reconfigure its voting pool and membership composition. Soonafter, the organization committed to doubling the number of women and minorities in its membership, which at the time was reported to be 91% white and 77% male; a goal it successfully accomplished in 2020 (Ugwu).

Though the aftermath of #OscarsSoWhite continues to drive the goals of the modern Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), it may also be seen as a reflection on a history. Indeed, what can be considered the first iteration of #OscarsSoWhite occurred in 1935. An article in the



Figure 1. Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (1934).

Pittsburg Courier commented on the absence of Louise Beavers for her work in *Imitation of Life* (1934) at the awards: “Louise Beavers, who ‘stole the picture’” from some of “Hollywood’s greatest film luminaries by her superior acting, would be entitled to consideration for the Motion Picture Arts and Science Academy award... but ‘she is black’” (“Color Bars”). In the run-up to the seventh Oscars, there had been a small but concerted effort to celebrate Beavers’ performance as Delilah Johnson, a domestic servant who helps her employer (played by Claudette Colbert) launch a pancake company that essentially involves Colbert’s character stealing Johnson’s recipes. As seen in the *Courier* commentary, Beaver’s snub was not surprising to contemporary critics, and was instead discussed as emblematic of larger issues in Hollywood: the limitations of roles available for Black performers, and the lack of recognition given to those who succeeded in bringing depth to the range of stereotypes typically offered (Petty). Like #OscarsSoWhite, Beaver’s Oscar snub became a catalyst for a range of discourse around the Awards and the lack of opportunities for Black performers in the American film industry.

As case studies, this paper analyzes the dialogues around the two earliest Black contenders at the event. This includes Beavers in 1935, but also Hattie McDaniel and her victory in 1940 for her performance in *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Through these examples, reporters at Black news outlets debated

two overarching questions: what does it mean to be snubbed from the event? And, and, conversely, what does it mean to be celebrated? While Beaver’s snub reflected the barriers for minority groups, McDaniel’s eventual win highlighted the inherent contradictions around the achievement. Even as Hollywood celebrated her portrayal, McDaniel was seated at a segregated table at the Coconut Grove (Sturtevant, 75). Studying these discourses, we see a history of writers trying to grapple with the meaning of symbolic representation, debating whether or not victory can lead to true change. This paper asks two overarching questions: how has the public profile of the event both fueled and hindered representation throughout Oscar history? And what has been the lasting impact? These early examples show how the Oscars have helped ingrain the kinds of systemic racism that Hollywood has only recently been forced to self-examine through movements like #OscarsSoWhite. At the same time, the highly visible space has also created a forum for discourses pushing back against those same injustices.

Louise Beavers and the Right to Participate

Louise Beaver’s Oscar snub was about more than simply missing out in the acting categories; it was about what acclaim in these kinds of white public spaces could mean for representation on the screen. Headlines like “Color Bars Louise Beavers from Film Awards” were the beginning of a dialogue about what

it means to be allowed to participate in what was emerging as a new system of meritocracy in American filmmaking. Started in 1929, only six years before, what had initially been a small ceremony with limited attendance had already become the most coveted accomplishment in Hollywood (Davis). Exploring the example of the awards commentary around Beavers, however, allows us to consider the implications of the exclusion at an event that was only growing in significance within Hollywood industrial practice and popular culture.

Rather than viewing the awards discourse as an endorsement of Beavers and the film--indeed, many reporters at Black media outlets were critical of its portrayal of a "mammy" character--much of the commentary responded to the kinds of acclaim seen in white news venues (Everett, 179). Columnist Jimmie Fidler, for example, wrote: "I don't see how it is possible to overlook the magnificent portrayal... If the industry chooses to ignore Miss Beavers' performance, please let this reporter, born and bred in the South, tender a special award of praise to Louise Beavers for the finest performance of 1934" ("Color Bars"). In response, Chappy Gardner at the *Pittsburgh Courier* commented that Fidler, "has been telling the world over the air every week that Louise Beavers has turned in the best performance of the year. And while everybody else heard him and thousands agree with him, the 700 Academy members evidently wore their ear muffers" (Gardner). Gardner's critique emphasizes the modes of recognition that Beavers had already received, from predominantly white critics praising the performance and from consumers through the national box office success around the film.

Even still, she was unable to crack the ever-elusive Academy. To writers like Gardner, Beavers's exclusion felt especially egregious because Claudette Colbert, Beaver's costar in *Imitation of Life*, ultimately went home with the Best Actress statue. Though she was rewarded for *It Happened One Night* (1934) rather than *Imitation*, Colbert's recognition immediately drew a comparison to Beavers as her snubbed costar. Gardner noted: "this actress [Beavers] stole the picture from her white sister on sheer acting ability. And the honorable judges just couldn't take it -- and didn't." (Gardner). While critics could praise Black performances, an Oscar represented the recognition by the top figureheads within the industry itself; and, more significantly, it meant being seen as part of a peer group. Beyond the symbolism of being celebrated by peers, the value of the awards has always been heavily tied to the view amongst studio creatives that winning a trophy could

benefit their careers. The Oscars are seen as a tool for social mobility into the upper echelons of industrial prosperity. From this standpoint, the conversations around Beavers' snub exposed the problem that Black performers, even at their best, were not invited to be part of this emerging system of prestige--a discussion still continued in the #OscarsSoWhite tweets roughly 80 years later. These past and present issues may be best defined in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's principles around symbolic inclusion. As he explains: "There is no other criterion of membership of a field than the objective fact of producing effects within it. One of the difficulties of orthodox defense or explicit terms of entry is the fact that polemics imply a form of recognition" (Bourdieu, 42). The first stage, as writers began to indicate, is being able to participate in the first place. Even worse, despite the acclaim, Beavers quickly began to face career setbacks following her performance in *Imitation*. After her team negotiated a higher salary for her based on name recognition, the performer began to be offered fewer parts in films, perhaps paving the way for a performer like McDaniel ("Hattie McDaniel Won't"). In Beavers' case, the public recognition led to career consequences rather than new prosperity.

Hattie McDaniel and the Meanings of Symbolic Representation

Can an Oscar win actually facilitate progress? This question became a major source of debate around Hattie McDaniel's Best Supporting Actress victory in 1940. Clarence Muse summarized the complexities of the moment in his column for *The Chicago Defender*. Speaking about the central racism in *Gone with the Wind*, a film glorifying the lost ages of the antebellum south, he notes: "The STORY is not inspiration, EDUCATIONAL, and it is DANGEROUS propaganda." Yet, he continues, "WITH all of this, HATTIE McDANIEL has been NOMINATED for the ACADEMY AWARD, and she SHOULD win it." He hoped that the mainstream critical acclaim she received would translate into more nuanced roles for the performer. McDaniel, he explains, is "A GREAT ACTRESS, that should be placed SOMEDAY in a STORY that not only SHOWS her ABILITY, but one that MEANS GLORY to a RACE, trying HARD to find TRUE DEMOCRACY" (Muse). In the run-up to the ceremony, this cause also became a call for community organizing. The *Pittsburgh Courier* published a letter from reader Bill Lawrence, proclaiming:

Why doesn't The Pittsburgh Courier start a letter-writing campaign among Negroes to write to Selznick Studios praising the work of Miss Hattie McDaniel in "Gone with the Wind" and demand that she receive the Supporting Player Academy Award for 1939? It will mean more and better roles for Negroes in major film productions. (Lawrence)

The Courier later reported that writers had "flooded Hollywood with letters on behalf of Miss McDaniel" (Morris). Notably, given the range of voters, it is unclear how this would have influenced the outcome; rather, it highlights a level of collaborative support. Like Muse's comments, Lawrence's proposal looked to the future, arguing that McDaniel's win could have a major social impact that would justify widespread mobilization to help secure this win.

At the same time, other writers questioned whether the celebration of a stereotype could actually be seen as an accomplishment. Shortly before the nomination, Afro-American columnist Lillian Johnson responded to a letter from a group of school children, asking if McDaniel could win an Oscar. In her response, Johnson downplayed the value of the trophies. Alternatively, she explains: "Miss McDaniel has something that she and the colored race need far more now than they need academy awards -- a long-term contract at a very good salary." McDaniel had recently signed a contract with Selznick Studios, becoming one of the few Black actors with a permanent contract. Johnson thereby celebrates that McDaniel's biggest achievement was her potential for future work. In a tone implying complete disbelief that McDaniel would soon be an Oscar contender, she continues: "The wisest thing to do, I think, is the thing that Miss McDaniel is doing. Just waiting and getting more roles. If she is good in all of them over a period of time, she will break down prejudice." "When that time comes" that America sees systematic change and a reevaluation of the kinds of performances available to minorities, "she will get her academy awards" (Ibid). Within two weeks, it was announced that McDaniel had received her nomination.

The commentaries raised across these articles, however, were predominantly a debate about the value of symbolic representation. Speaking about the modern Oscar landscape, Maryann Erigha explains that, in theory, "once a group has established visibility in symbols or images, its members might subsequently pursue advocacy for numerical representation" (Erigha, 26). The goal had always been to translate the visibility of the Oscars into more concrete forms of progress. Indeed, amongst many Black reporters,



Figure 2. Hattie McDaniel with her Oscar statue for winning Best Supporting Actress at the 1939 Academy Awards.

McDaniel's win was heralded as a moment of broken barriers and new opportunities. One article in the *Atlanta Daily* explained: "While many may not relish the role of servitude in which Hattie McDaniel scored, it has often been the case where a person who accepted the lower places in life or occupied the back seat has been invited to the front" ("The Academy Award Of"). The writer, however, does maintain a clear asterisk reminding readers of the racism of McDaniel's winning role. Another writer, Ruby Goodwin, decidedly proclaimed: "the Academy proved itself an unbiased body of people ... This proves beyond a doubt that a Negro who can deliver the goods will be eligible for the award that really carries with it international recognition" (Goodwin). Ultimately, however, no Black actor would win in a competitive

category again until Sidney Poitier in 1962, though James Baskett was rewarded with an honorary award for *Song of the South* (1946).

Erigha emphasizes that the central danger of symbolic representation is precisely that it is symbolic and not concrete. It “can be present but with little real improvements toward alleviating inequalities”; it “could be only superficial yet not substantive” (Erigha, 26). For this reason, awards can easily become a shield that does not translate into other industrial prospects. This was Johnson’s central reservation in her January article: she feared what a win would represent to Hollywood, explaining, “it is one thing to contend for a right and win it when only the right is at stake. It is another to win a right like an academy award at the expense of losing a right like that of earning a living” (Johnson, “Light and Shadow”). In the months ahead, McDaniel was unable to draw the frequently seen benefits of the Oscars. Though she previously gained a contract with Selznick Studios, in the aftermath she chose not to renegotiate her rate, despite this being a typical act for most recent winners. Her fear, one article noted, was that she would fall into similar traps as Beavers. McDaniel explained: “Big salaries and little work don’t interest me, I don’t want more money. I want more work” (“Hattie McDaniel Won’t”). Even still, she became typecast into Mammy characters going forward.

However, bearing in mind the initial goals that fueled the rallying over McDaniel -- better parts and opportunities -- the early-1940s did see some headway. Thomas Cripps emphasizes a new range of roles offered during wartime and the rise of new stars like Lena Horne. Nonetheless, these advances largely left typecast performers, like McDaniel, out of work. This movement was not necessarily in direct response to McDaniel’s success; it is often attributed to the work of the NAACP, and a wider range of wartime campaigns (Cripps). Yet, even as these efforts ultimately left McDaniel out of work, the public profile of McDaniel’s award was a significant public relations tool in its earliest phases. Within months of the Academy announcement, the NAACP put on an award ceremony described in many outlets as “Black Oscars.” Beyond celebrating McDaniel, honours were given to the most prominent African American performers in Hollywood, including

Beavers (“NAACP Gives”).¹ The prizes were balanced between celebrating community and making an outwardly public statement. Emblematic of the latter effort, Louella Parsons wrote of her surprise “that there are so many fine artists of this race on the screen that it is possible to have independent awards”, and the event was covered in most major newspapers (Parsons). Here, we can see how the win continued to fuel activism. McDaniel’s award emphasized the push and pull between the calls for change in Hollywood, and the industry’s own self-complacency. Yet, a place for discourse and dissent around the Oscars seemed to have been cemented.

The long-term effects of McDaniel’s win, however, may have been the impacts it had on the white corners of Hollywood. In the aftermath, mainstream coverage focused on the symbolic meaning of the victory for Hollywood, and American identity more broadly. Johnson, in another column entry, describes how, “writers of prose, philosophy, and news had a Roman holiday” with the moment “hailed as a symbol of American democracy and a blow at Hitlerism and all that it stands for” (Johnson, “A Woman Talks”). On the cusp of WWII, reporters like Ed Sullivan stated, “The United States motion picture industry served notice to the world that it was not narrow or bigoted” (“Tolerance”). The moment was promoted as a grand statement, and proof of Hollywood’s racial tolerance.

By the post-war period, many of the gains described by Cripps had already started to regress. This was embodied by the release of Disney’s *Song of the South*, which received a massive wave of backlash from Black audiences leading to protests and boycotts. Featuring McDaniel as another Mammy character, columnist Hedda Hopper remarked: “Hattie, I discovered, had not been victimized by the whites. She had been attacked by certain members of her own race simply because she had tried ‘to earn an honest dollar’ by playing roles those critics thought degrading to Negroes.” Nevermind, she explains, that “It was her mammy role in ‘Gone With the Wind’ that got her an Oscar” (Hopper). Her comments harken back to the discourse that had emerged when McDaniel won in the first place: that it would lead to better parts and

1. This included honours for Louise Beavers for *No Time for Comedy*; Ben Carter and Clarence Muse for *Maryland*; Willie Best for *The Ghost Breakers*; Earnest Whitman for *The Return of Frank James*; Eddie (Rochester) Anderson and Therese Harris for *Buck Benny Rides Again*; and a special award for Bill Robinson, “for the many contributions he has made and for his various activities as an American” (“NAACP Gives”).

better pictures. One world war later, the pushback highlighted the lack of change over the decade.

Within weeks of Hopper's article, James Baskett became the second Black performer to win an Oscar, an honorary award for his performance as Uncle Remus--also in *Song of the South*. The prospect was initially raised by the Mayor of Atlanta at the movie premiere. Richard Dier at *Afro-American* commented that the Mayor "arose and told the audience that James Baskett ... should get the Academy Award for his fine acting. What the venerable Mayer meant to say was that no film character ever created compares with Uncle Remus in his interpretation of a role that is humiliating and degrading to the race" (Dier). Dier expresses his frustration over the celebration of yet another Black performer bringing depth to characters ultimately grounded in racism. Even still, the recognition sparked the next wave of commentary about representation and the roles offered to minorities — a discourse cycle that had now solidly grown to exist around the Oscars.

Conclusion

McDaniel's victory became the stuff of generations of Hollywood self-congratulation. One immediately thinks of George Clooney's 2006 Best Supporting Actor acceptance speech, when he stated: "This Academy, this group of people gave Hattie McDaniel an Oscar in 1939 when Blacks were still sitting in the backs of theaters. I'm proud to be a part of this Academy, proud to be part of this community, and proud to be out of touch" (Clooney). Clooney was clearly unaware that the Oscar banquet itself was one of those still-segregated places. Even further, the cycle of celebrating Black performers, and publicizing this celebration as a moment of groundbreaking social progress, has historically been followed up by generations of overlook. This harkens back to Halle Berry's speech in 2002, as the first Black performer to win Best Actress. She spoke of how the moment was bigger than herself, "for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened" (Berry). She later retracted her statement in 2022, after 20 years without another Black winner: "It didn't open the door," Berry said. "The fact that there's no one standing next to me is heartbreaking" (Bahr).² This highlights what

2. Michelle Yeoh became the second woman of color to win in the Best Actress category in 2023 for her performance in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022).

has often been a cycle of optimism around the event, followed by a sea of nothingness.

However, what has been significant about them is how their visibility creates a highly effective mechanism for fueling discussion. As a spectacle designed to draw attention, it has easily become a national forum for discourse, debate, and perhaps new understanding. Nowhere has this been more clearly accomplished than with modern social spaces like Twitter, which have brought discussions of the Oscars even more to the forefront. The questions of the past decade have now become, will these new pushes actually lead to meaningful change in Black representation on screen? The success of *Moonlight* (2017) appeared to be hugely significant after two years of #OscarsSoWhite. However, to see the complications of this aftermath, look no further than the 91st Academy Awards in 2019. The night saw a record-breaking six African-American winners at the ceremony, only for *Green Book* (2018) to win Best Picture at the end of the night—a story about jazz performer Don Shirley and his white driver, described by one reporter as a film that "spoon-feeds racism to white people" (Judge).³ On the complexities of the evening, April Reign later noted: "I don't believe in having one good night and then declaring, 'Everything is great.' The pendulum swings back and forth, as we've seen" (Ugwu). For this reason, it is important not to ignore the continued challenges of representation that mainstream Oscar publicity may seek to mask.

In 2020, the Academy reached its diversity goals announced in 2016. However, even after doubling the numbers of women and POC in the organization, AMPAS remained 84% white and 68% male, raising questions about the long-term impact (Barnes). The history in this paper emphasizes the superficial role of the awards and their position of presenting all the gloss and glamour of Hollywood, often devoid of any substance. At the same time, this forum has the potential to continue facilitating productive dialogues around opportunities for Black performers in Hollywood. As Director Barry Jenkins has commented

3. Winners that night included: Ruth E. Carter - Best Costume Design for *Black Panther*; Hannah Beachler - Best Production Design for *Black Panther*; Mahershala Ali - Best Supporting Actor for *Green Book*; Regina King - Best Supporting Actress for *If Beale Street Could Talk*; Peter Ramsey - Best Animated Feature for directing *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*; and Spike Lee - Best Adapted Screenplay for *BlacKkKlansman*.

on the future of #OscarsSoWhite: “We just have to keep the conversation going and keep making movies” (Ugwu). He describes the movement as ongoing; and as we have seen, it continues to build upon a long-existing legacy.

Monica R. Sandler has her Ph.D. from UCLA, graduating June 2023. Her dissertation research presents the most extensive existing history of the Academy Awards and the Hollywood awards season. The project fixates on the socioeconomic role of prizes and the lasting effects that these systems of meritocratic achievement have had on the hierarchies of labor and disparities in opportunity still dominating the industry today.

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Figure 3. Hattie McDaniel posing at home with her Oscar statue for winning Best Supporting Actress at the 1939 Academy Awards.