Introduction

Race Matters in Hollywood

The movie *The Magnificent Seven* (2016), an action/adventure western, starred the veteran actor Denzel Washington alongside the less well-known white actors Chris Pratt and Ethan Hawke. The movie was directed by Antoine Fuqua, who, like Denzel Washington, has a number of successful movies under his belt. Despite their combined experience, there was a hesitance among Hollywood insiders—those with great influence on the decision-making processes in the production of popular cinema—to produce *The Magnificent Seven* for a big budget with Washington starring and Fuqua directing. In the following quotation, Steve details the reasons behind his caution:

Loved the script—plot, characters all incredibly well written and with Denzel and Antoine it feels compelling. My concern is that *Equalizer* was 36% caucasian and 35% African American. I wonder if we were to look at successful westerns like *True Grit* how much of that audience was caucasian. I honestly don’t know but if I had to guess it would be more caucasian and less african american. So if in the last week we’re figuring out what audience to double down on like we just did with *Equalizer*, I want to be sure that audience has the elements they need to buy tickets. Do we double down on the AA audience and if so does that audience show up at Westerns in a big enough way to make our number? Or do we push older Caucasian males toward a Denzel / Antoine Fuqua movie and if so will they show up in a big enough way? Obviously westerns pose an initial set of concerns but I’m not sure the pedigree is the perfect fit for the lovers of the genre. And having just been the contemporary, cool, popcorn movie to the *Tombstones* bleak, old fashioned movie—I don’t feel as excited about this as id like based on the fiscal layout.¹
While Steve is a pseudonym for a Hollywood insider, his words and the concerns he voices are real. His momentary praise for the talents of Fuqua and Washington is immediately followed by skepticism for their possibility of success. In particular, he expresses uncertainty about the financial outlook of *The Magnificent Seven* for reasons that appear to be outwardly related to race. Believing that the audience for all western-genre movies skews Caucasian, Steve imagines a predominantly white audience for *The Magnificent Seven*. He reasons, therefore, that the cast and directing should also skew Caucasian in order to capitalize on this target audience, as he puts it, “to be sure that audience has the elements they need to buy tickets” and to be certain “the pedigree is the perfect fit for the lovers of the genre.” Here, the *elements* and the *pedigree* implicitly refer to the racial makeup of the cast and director with respect to

![Figure I.1. Antoine Fuqua at the premiere of *The Magnificent Seven*, Toronto Film Festival, September 8, 2016. Photo by GabboT.](image)
imagined audience desires. Steve is unconvinced that the genre’s key audience (presumably Caucasian males) would “show up in a big enough way to make our number” for a Black actor and director. In other words, he supposes that the combination of a Black actor and director attached to the movie would not gel with white audiences in a way that would drive them in droves to the theaters for a big box-office return.

In a single breath, Steve manages to lump racial considerations with culture and economics in what he perceives to be a perfectly unbiased explanation of market and consumer behavior in a popular culture industry. If his concerns were merely a matter of individual taste, there would be little cause for alarm. However, this racial logic is not uncommon among Hollywood insiders—people who have some aspect of control, input, or voice in the processes of production, distribution, or exhibition of Hollywood movies. Clearly, race matters in Hollywood. On regular occasions, Hollywood insiders such as Steve intertwine race with expectations about profitability and concerns about dollars and cents. Race is a preeminent factor governing decisions about moviemaking, a factor that studio executives consider when determining who should star in or direct a movie and for how much. Likewise, race factors into discussions about where movies should play and to which audiences. Indeed, racial inequalities and hierarchies in the film industry are not simply natural artifacts based on objective assessments of box-office performance. As Steve’s remark indicates, race enters the conversation long before the box-office numbers roll in, oftentimes even before a movie script receives the green light for production.

Contemporary U.S. race politics shape film-industry organizations and practices. In the U.S. context, where racial boundaries play a significant role in society, race becomes an integral component for analyzing the organizational logics of the film industry. The Hollywood film industry is not one where race does not matter at all, which would be the case in a postracial society. Hollywood decision-makers embed racial logics in arguments about the economic behavior of markets. A box-office mentality determines scripts, development, green light, and production decisions. Steve’s suggestion that the race of the actor and director correlates with box-office returns attaches race to notions of box-office mentality; specifically, he invokes a stain of Blackness that devalues Black stars, directors, and movies and renders Black culture and
Introduction

people economic risks. Linking race to ideas about potential box-office performance happens even before a movie reaches theaters. Overall, movies with nonwhite lead actors and casts—the movies that nonwhites are predominantly hired to direct—are projected to perform poorly at the foreign box office. Therefore, Hollywood insiders justify decisions based on race under the logic that race is a factor that shapes box-office returns.

Making race a basis for hierarchy in Hollywood has direct implications for how people are integrated into film-industry work. The film industry’s racial hierarchy harks back to the Jim Crow days, in that one’s race marks an explicit criterion for social division. Just as in the Jim Crow era, when narratives about inherent racial superiority were the grounds for stratification, present-day Hollywood couches racial divisions in a market logic that is grounded in economic and cultural performance. The use of race in decision-making leads to unmerited privilege and undermines inclusion and equality. For U.S. racial and ethnic minorities, invoking race in decisions about who should get work and in what capacity leads to marginalization, ghettoization, and stigmatization. Movies with racial minorities attached are devalued and deemed inferior cultural products, which hinders their careers and opportunities. For whites, the use of race in decision-making leads to unmerited privilege and a direct implication for movies and directors. The Hollywood Jim Crow illuminates the process by which racial inequality and hierarchy in the film industry are socially constructed.

The Hollywood Jim Crow illuminates the process by which racial inequality and hierarchy in the film industry are socially constructed. Race occupies a salient position in everyday conversations and business practices within the film industry. As gatekeepers, Hollywood decision-makers actively create and maintain racial hierarchy in how they discuss, conceive, and package, produce, and distribute movies and in how they structure, conceptualize, and communicate decision-making processes. Hollywood’s decision-makers actively maintain and reproduce racial divides in the film industry, from actors to directors, in how they discuss, conceptualize, package, produce, and distribute movies and in how they stratify and allocate resources.
movies, actors, and directors. Their actions and opinions shape unequal outcomes that affect the careers and identities of people trying to make a living while working in Hollywood.

Aim of the Book: Making Sense of Race in Hollywood

Every day, numerous press headlines indicate that racial inequality in Hollywood is a popular and reoccurring topic of discussion. Hollywood manufactures racial difference on a global scale, both in front of and behind the camera—though the racial politics of Hollywood, especially processes by which race is made deliberate and relevant in the production and circulation of popular movies, remains underexplored. *The Hollywood Jim Crow* aims to (1) illustrate how the making of racial inequality and hierarchy is a process that is explicitly and deliberately constructed by Hollywood insiders, (2) show how in the popular cinema industry, race and racial considerations are framed around beliefs about cultural and economic value, (3) emphasize the structural underpinnings of inequality and hierarchy in the film industry by forging connections to the Jim Crow system, and (4) demonstrate the impact of racism on Hollywood workers’ careers and identities.

Shining a questioning lens on industry culture, practices, and discourses, studies of film-industry production, distribution, and exhibition illuminate the mystique behind the organizing logics of the film industry to unearth answers to nagging issues such as how the industry functions, why decisions are made, and who benefits or loses out in the process. Such studies aim to better understand the inner workings of Hollywood through investigations of its operations, organizations, industrial settings, social relations, creative processes, and/or labor.² The making of racial inequality is a process that is pervasive and deeply embedded in all phases of the culture-industry production process—from the production of cultural objects to the relations of labor to areas of financing, marketing, and distribution.

Critical media industry studies, in particular, take a critical look at popular culture, for example, to understand the contours of race and ethnicity in creative industries and cultural production by locating and analyzing national and global sites, discourses, and practices of making race, racial arrangements, racial inequality, and racism.³ Through
Hollywood cinema, one can examine how racial inequality is made, how the racial order functions, how racial groups are stratified, and how race is embedded into everyday institutional practices in a major culture industry. Within the film industry, specific sites, discourses, and practices facilitate the production and reproduction of racial difference. Of paramount importance is understanding how whiteness operates in creative industries to contribute to racial difference and power. Moviemaking in Hollywood is a global project of establishing doctrines of whiteness and white supremacism. White Hollywood industry workers’ racial practices, beliefs, attitudes, and production politics reflect a “possessive investment in whiteness” that contributes to a racialized order. In this manner, white Hollywood workers as cultural intermediaries or cultural brokers can act as gatekeepers who make decisions about cultural products and audiences in ways that create and reinforce unequal racial outcomes. The concrete ways in which Hollywood insiders use racial considerations to make determinations about the production and dissemination of popular movies is underexplored but can reveal how decision-making through a lens of whiteness operates to produce difference. Moreover, little is known about how marginalized racial groups are incorporated into the film industry’s elite ranks and how the industry resists racial integration. Hence, investigating the racial politics of the movie industry involves linking creative-industry professions with processes of race-making, whiteness, and integration into ranks of power.

Matters integral to understanding Hollywood’s racial production and distribution culture include how ideas about race, economics, and culture are socially constructed in culture industries, how racial divisions of whiteness and otherness are enacted and operate in everyday film-industry practices, and how inequality persists to shape difference and power, film after film, year after year. Race and racial hierarchies are explicitly embedded and institutionalized into decision-making processes about moviemaking—in the employment of workers and in the production, distribution, and exhibition of movies across international markets. As gatekeepers, white Hollywood insiders signify that racial difference has economic and cultural relevance, to shape unequal trajectories for movies and talent, which ultimately affects the careers and identities of Hollywood workers. Racial inequality is rationalized and protected by the structure of the film industry.
Despite the appearance of the U.S. culture industries, such as Hollywood, and their professions and occupations, such as film directing, as venues of solely harmless, feel-good entertainment, they are deeply embedded in inequality making—in manufacturing, reinforcing, and reproducing hierarchies of racial difference. This book reveals contemporary racial structures within organizations and occupations in a major U.S. popular-culture industry: Hollywood cinema. Popular-culture industries are not simply sites for innocuous enjoyment. They are also sites where power structures buttressed by racial inequality are created, reinforced, and reproduced.

The Hollywood insider Steve clearly makes an adamant case for why a Black actor such as Denzel Washington and a Black director such as Antoine Fuqua should not headline a western-genre film. What is somewhat surprising is that his argument, for who should act and direct in a western and for how much the movie should be made, is based on racial logics. While his language about elements and pedigree are race blind, he also directly refers to race, to Caucasian audiences and African American audiences, as a basis for making decisions about the production of movies.

On the surface, this use of direct racial language appears to violate social norms of racial equality, a product of political correctness birthed out of the civil rights era. Although it was law and custom in the United States to use race as a viable justification for unequal opportunities and outcomes of disadvantage and privilege prior to the 1960s, the post-civil-rights period ushered in a new era that universally condemned the explicit use of race to exercise discrimination or prejudice. Immediately following the civil rights movement, outright racism was condemned in public society and outlawed through legislation. Racial prejudice and discrimination could be accomplished through covert means but were opposed and countered if overt. Individuals and organizations, if biased, thus adopted implicit ways to covertly signal race, meanwhile producing the same effect of inequality that existed in prior eras.

In the post-civil-rights era, guiding ideologies of colorblindness and postracialism suppose a waning significance of race in shaping life outcomes. Describing how colorblindness is used to advance racial inequality in the twenty-first century, the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains, “Whites have developed powerful explanations—which have
ultimately become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color.”

Colorblind racism has gained its validity from juridical and legislative systems and has been legally inscribed in areas from college admissions decisions to voting-rights laws. It repackaged social practices that were prominent during the Jim Crow era of race relations to make them appear to be nonracial. Ideas about colorblindness—particularly, that race is no longer a relevant factor in social life—are constructed, disseminated, and used to explain away racial inequality. Most prominent is the use of abstract liberalism, a philosophy that suggests that there is equal opportunity and meritocracy for all, despite opportunities and outcomes being structured on racial grounds. Even further, postracial rhetoric relegates the relevance of race to a distant past. Postracialism is best symbolized by the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. Born to a white American mother and a Kenyan father, Obama became the first African American and nonwhite president in U.S. history. Soon after his election, however, decades-long societal norms about race that discouraged explicit racism showed signs of waning.

Perhaps the backlash against the Obama presidency prompted a monumental shift in racial norms—from subdued, implicit racism to a bold, unapologetic racism and a rise in overt racial discourse. Some social scientists argue that the image of a Black family in the White House spurred a renewed, overt nationalism among white Americans, one that brought the salience of white (American) racial identity to the forefront and ushered in the election of President Obama’s successor: the white Euro-American billionaire Donald Trump (no matter that his mother is an immigrant from Scotland and his grandfather is an immigrant from Germany). In the 2016 presidential election, Trump decisively won every category of white voters (i.e., white women, white men, college-educated whites, upper-class whites, middle-class whites, etc.). Meanwhile, challenges to immigration policies aroused Latino/a Americans’ racial and ethnic identities, and threats from state-sanctioned violence spurred Black Americans and Black racial identities to action with groups such as #BlackLivesMatter. In a matter of years, the auras of colorblindness and postracialism gave way to explicit racial relations, discrimination, activism, protest, and violence.
The prevailing societal milieu of explicit race discourse extends its pervasiveness to the film industry, where decisions about film production and distribution have undeniable racial underpinnings. Now it appears that race is no longer a covert force and is increasingly accepted as a means to explain advantage and disadvantage. In a sense, we are back to the Jim Crow days, with race being explicit and racial inequality justifiable. Steve does not use entirely coded language to imply that race should be a major factor in decision-making about movie budgets and productions. His discussion about race—about African American actors and directors and Caucasian audiences—is outright and explicit. Slowly but surely, notions of colorblindness and postracialism are being supplanted by more direct rhetoric. Race is no longer in the shadows but a pivotal characteristic that shapes how Hollywood insiders view prospective movies.

The title of the book, *The Hollywood Jim Crow*, highlights how racial inequality and hierarchy in Hollywood take their cue from the structure of race relations in society. The Jim Crow metaphor describes the enduring structure of racialization, or sorting of groups and individuals along racial lines, that occurs in the film industry today. Jim Crow is an infamous symbol of Black oppression at the hands of whites in the United States. The name originally represented the popular nineteenth-century song-and-dance theatrical minstrelsy stage act in which white entertainers dressed in Blackface, wore tattered clothing, and impersonated buffoons in an attempt to ridicule Black Americans and entertain white audiences. A racial slur, the Jim Crow caricature was a symbol of offense and oppression to Black people in popular culture and the racial imagination.

Informally named after the symbolic minstrel figure, the Jim Crow regime that enforced oppressive government laws and societal customs was enacted in the majority of U.S. states in some form from the late 1800s up to the civil rights era. Under Jim Crow segregation, an ideology of white superiority was used to justify the distribution of privilege to white Americans, while subjugating other racial groups. Jim Crow laws effectively denied equality for Black, Latino/a, Asian, and Native people in America. Buttressed by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* “separate but equal” decision, Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in many areas of social life—for example, within public facilities in schools,
housing, transportation, and the military—and granted white Americans sole access to the best of those facilities while relegating other racial groups to inferior facilities. Basing social systems on racial difference and ratifying the difference under the law, the resulting organizational practices created racial disparities of advantages for whites and disadvantages for Black Americans and other racial groups.

In a Jim Crow system, mistreatment of Blacks and privilege of whites is normalized, resulting in the legal discrimination and marginalization of large segments of the population. At earlier points in U.S. history—for example, during periods of Native American colonization, slavery, and Jim Crow segregation—it was commonplace, albeit immoral, to delineate between racial groups to determine outcomes. During slavery, as in the Jim Crow segregation era, biological notions of racial inferiority and superiority were acceptable bases for social divisions. Institutional legacies of racial inequality and difference fester like a sore, untreated wound. Though Jim Crow laws were formally dismantled during and following the 1950s and 1960s civil rights era, systems of racial inequity still remain intact within the United States. On the surface, the dominant racial order in society has evolved over time to encompass several different racial regimes such as slavery and Jim Crow. However, each regime characterized race relations in a similar racialized manner—one that normalizes and lifts white Americans atop a racial ladder and meanwhile marginalizes and sediments Black Americans to the bottom, all within the boundaries of the law.

The basic structure of Jim Crow remains intact in contemporary U.S. society. In the present era, the Jim Crow practices still form the backbone for processes that facilitate unequal hierarchies of racial advantage and disadvantage. Collectively, three basic rules govern the Jim Crow framework. (1) Jim Crow systems operate under a philosophy of racial difference. (2) The systems label and stratify racial groups on the basis of the assumption of difference. (3) The systems produce a result of advantages for whites and disadvantages for other racial groups on the basis of the stratification system. The stratification of racial groups into hierarchical systems engenders grossly unequal outcomes, at times as opposite as freedom and bondage, for whites and Blacks, respectively—resulting in overall positive outcomes for whites and negative, often life-threatening outcomes for Blacks.
The arguments, form, and structure that underlay the Jim Crows of yesteryear are the necessary and precipitant conditions for racial hierarchy in contemporary Hollywood cinematic production. *The Hollywood Jim Crow* shows how inequality shapes representation in the film industry in a way that reinforces ideas of white supremacy. Racial ideology in prior Jim Crow systems helps illustrate the inequality that is pervasive in Hollywood today. Hollywood embodies the racial makeup of the society that it inhabits, exhibiting a racial system that privileges and disadvantages different racial groups, similar to previous racial systems that structure the order and organization of social life. The Hollywood Jim Crow works against African Americans in all the same ways that Black people have been disadvantaged and legally marginalized in everyday life under prior racial regimes within U.S. society—though the present context adds new layers to the age-old practice of racial difference.

In this new era of racial politics, race is explicit in conversations about difference once again, but the reasons for justifying difference have evolved while inequality persists. The Hollywood Jim Crow uses cultural and economic notions of racial inferiority and superiority as grounds for racial difference. An insistence on the economics of the movie business reverberates in discussions about Hollywood. Assumptions about economics guide thinking about cinematic production. Indeed, many people assert that the guiding force and principal aim of the film business is profit, or the bottom line. According to the film scholar Janet Wasko, “the profit motive and the commodity nature of film have implications for the kind of films that are produced (and not produced), who makes them, how they are distributed, and where/when they are viewed. While it is common to call film an art form, at least Hollywood film cannot be understood without the context in which it is actually produced and distributed, that is, within an industrial, capitalist structure.”¹¹ Moreover, Wasko adds that “the commercial and profit-motivated goals of the industry are assumed and rarely questioned.”¹² Hollywood’s economic logic deserves more careful attention and interrogation, especially as it pertains to the focus on foreign-market profit and the way that race is linked with expectations of profit. This book reveals that this discussion about economics is not far removed from race politics. In fact, the two are linked, often explicitly.
Although the current racial politics dismisses race as purely biological, it nonetheless unabashedly invokes race in other ways. Racial difference in Hollywood is explained away as an outcome of competitive, market forces determined by audience preferences for some cultural products over others. The practice of using biological difference as a proxy for race is reproached for being discriminatory, but meanwhile the act of using cultural or economic justifications as a proxy for race is labeled nondiscriminatory and, more insidiously, an objective fact. Couching racial difference in economic and cultural terms by attributing cultural and economic deficits to racial minorities does not cause immediate social outrage and therefore provides an effective vehicle for perpetuating racism.

Jim Crow racial regimes are connected through their shared assumption of racial difference, labeling of difference, and production of unequal outcomes for members of different racial groups. Following this pattern, Hollywood executives’ make allegations of racial inferiority and superiority, legitimate the allegation through labeling, act on the labels, and ultimately marginalize African Americans and privilege white Americans. Making economic rationalizations, Hollywood decision-makers label Black films and directors “unbankable” to advance the assumption that Black films and directors are inferior financial investments at the box office compared to white films and white directors. Due to the “unbankable” label, Black directors and movies with Black characters are disadvantaged in the production process compared to white directors and films with white characters—in a way that imposes limits on the future careers of African American directors. Once the “unbankable” label is established, film companies are freely and legally allowed to marginalize Black films and directors on the basis of the assumption that they are not economically viable investments. The end result is that Black films and directors are prevented from accessing the same markets and privileges as white films and directors. Racial disparities in Hollywood mean more work and visibility for white directors and films and less work and visibility for Black directors and films. These differences for which media become normalized or otherized have abstract ideological implications and tangible outcomes for unequal livelihoods.
Of course, there are notable differences between Hollywood’s racial troubles and the racial problems that emerged from slavery, Jim Crow segregation, or even the New Jim Crow of mass incarceration. Fundamentally these prior racial regimes were entrenched on the basis of legal codes and enforced by the federal government—through law, politics, and policing. Slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration were wide-scale systems of social control that were rooted in the everyday lives of all citizens and directly impacted everyone in the nation. The Hollywood Jim Crow, in comparison, might appear to exert only a small sphere of oppression. All (or even most) people do not aspire to become Hollywood workers and, hence, do not experience a revocation of their rights to produce or direct a feature film. Notably, the direct constraints of the Hollywood Jim Crow only apply to creative personnel working in Hollywood and not to the entire nation.

At first glance, the scope of the Hollywood Jim Crow appears to encompass only a narrow, privileged sector of the population—middle- or upper-class professional artisans, many of whom are highly educated. Most Hollywood up-and-comers have relatively privileged and connected lives, though it is unknown whether this is also the case for Black Americans. Apparent financial barriers exist to breaking into film directing. To this point, Spike Lee’s grandmother Zimmie Shelton helped fund his first feature film, *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986). Robert Townsend put $100,000 on a credit card to fund his first film, *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), which illustrates the substantial sum of money required even for a small independent movie. Class, capital, and socioeconomic standing play a role in who can access lucrative Hollywood work. Obviously, denying one’s rights to be represented fully in Hollywood is by no means equivalent to denying one’s rights to use a public restroom or to experience life outside prison walls. In this way, Jim Crow inequality facing the poor, destitute, or otherwise vulnerable and truly disadvantaged populations is qualitatively different in circumstance compared to the inequality that relatively privileged folks encounter.

Nevertheless, the Hollywood Jim Crow’s sphere of influence is deceptively larger than meets the eye. Although it is true that the Hollywood Jim Crow does not instigate racial hierarchies among non-Hollywood workers, the ability or inability of workers from various racial groups to
navigate Hollywood shapes the quality and content of movies. Besides the relatively few privileged workers who attain opportunities to direct Hollywood movies, global audiences that watch movies are indirectly affected by the film industry’s racial marginalization. Representation in the production of cinema allows groups not only to produce movies but also to create and disseminate their own meaning systems for audience consumption. More than mere vehicles for profit, movies are powerful tools for shaping consciousness.\textsuperscript{13} Cinema is a forceful piston of an ideological engine that builds consensus around public and social issues. Cinematic messages influence people’s views about ideas, social issues, and groups in society; hence inequality in the production and dissemination of movies causes reverberations that echo beyond their origins. Though the racial stratification of Hollywood workers might not affect our lives directly, it shapes our lives indirectly by influencing what images and ideologies are available for consumption and what images and ideologies are withheld from our view. Withholding multiple perspectives from the mass dissemination of cinematic narratives and images facilitates a cultural imperialism—even within the same nation—in which one racial group’s perspective dominates cinema.\textsuperscript{14} Meanwhile, marginalized groups are denied full citizenship, unable to fully include their worldviews in popular American cultural artifacts. In spite of departures from previous systems of racial hierarchy, the Jim Crow structure still provides a useful framework for thinking about how racial inequality pervades Hollywood, shapes experiences in film-industry work, and, more broadly, conditions our encounters with popular movies. Examining and critiquing racial patterns of inequality in Hollywood, this book attempts to better understand the film industry using the Jim Crow framework in order to make sense of and challenge the film industry’s status quo of perpetuating racial myths and disparities.

Approach of the Book

How do industry gatekeepers create and maintain racial inequality? How does inequality affect career outcomes and identities of cultural workers—namely, directors? \textit{The Hollywood Jim Crow} situates the study of racial disparities in Hollywood within a general process to show how inequality in the film industry is embedded into everyday studio
operations and practices that facilitate an unequal distribution of rewards.

Who makes movies and the constraints they face in the film industry matter, because movies are so intimately embedded into our daily lives. While other books focus more on independent cinema production and distribution or emerging digital media, this book focuses on the mainstream film industry, commonly known as “Hollywood.” Since the early 1990s, the contemporary film industry has been dominated by major global media corporations, which the film scholar Thomas Schatz calls “Conglomerate Hollywood.” In 2011, for instance, the major studios controlled 88 percent of market share and grossed over $8 billion in revenue, twice as much as the next 140 studios combined. Movies produced and distributed by the major studios and a handful of large independents hold power and sway over the movie industry with their expansive reach and dominant position in national and global production, distribution, and exhibition of popular culture. A vital component of racial inclusion is the level to which out-groups can access once-exclusionary central institutions and operations.

In particular, this book takes a close look at how racial inequality and hierarchy structure the employment of directors and the distribution of movies in the twenty-first century. Both directors and distributors are central to film-business operations and can provide meaningful insight into Hollywood’s racial division of labor and everyday practices. On film projects, directors occupy a central and indispensable role. Though many highly skilled individuals come together to complete a movie, the director occupies arguably the most central role on a film project. The director envisions the final product and is intimately involved with carrying out that vision through preproduction, production, and postproduction. It is common practice that audiences, critics, historians, and academic scholars alike perceive a movie not only as a collaborative enterprise but also as the brainchild of the director’s vision—a gesture that acknowledges the director’s sizable contribution to the final film, over other cast and crew. Directors’ adequate representation in Hollywood holds significance for many reasons. Besides impacting on-screen images, representation for directors results in tangible employment gains. Black Americans’ employment in prominent positions of control, for instance, as producers or directors, significantly increases the
number of opportunities for Black talent in other positions. Therefore, the absence, underrepresentation, and/or marginalization of directors is troubling in a role that is deemed so vital to the operation of the movie industry. Using the occupation of film directing, this book illustrates contemporary patterns of racial inequality in a major popular-culture industry. It makes strides toward investigating racial barriers in the occupation of film directing and the racial implications of breaking into film’s elite ranks.

This story of unequal racial outcomes in Hollywood is told through statistical records, communications between Hollywood insiders, and perceptions of working directors. The book (1) draws on comprehensive industry data on the directors, distributors, genres, production budgets, and box-office receipts of more than a thousand contemporary movies, (2) examines trends in directors’ employment on different movies, (3) demonstrates how opportunities, resources, and outcomes in Hollywood are structured by race, and (4) shows how racial inequality is made in the production, distribution, financing, and marketing of movies and in the hiring of labor. Systematic attention to the organizing logics of the film industry reveals a racial division of labor; this book is the first to provide a detailed and systematic analysis of racial divisions of labor in work among Hollywood directors. Furthermore, the twenty-first-century period permits a timely discussion of the state of racial disparities in Hollywood during a post-civil-rights era that has been marked by growing postracial and colorblind discourses. Hollywood’s racial politics illustrate how race continues to matter despite public discourses that suggest otherwise.

Specifically, the book compares the career paths of Black directors to other racialized groups in twenty-first-century Hollywood. Out of all U.S. racial minority groups, African Americans have the most representation as Hollywood directors. Therefore, the book focuses on one marginalized racial group in Hollywood, Black directors, in relation to racialized others. Investigating the level of African Americans’ inclusion in the film industry particularly necessitates an examination of their access to the facets of production from which they were formerly excluded—the movies and the positions at studios that are most central to film-industry operations. Accessing high-status positions provides
financial remuneration that is important to understanding and alleviating racial income gaps—of course, notwithstanding the obvious and pervasive racial exclusion involved in who is permitted to manage large financial investments, own banks, and print and distribute currency. The state of Black inclusion in the contemporary film industry is best evaluated by assessing involvement in areas that are financially lucrative, are central to industry operations, and wield the greatest ideological power.

Beyond statistical numbers, the “deep texts” of production cultures reveal knowledge and power structures. Besides aggregating and tabulating box-office data, a more enhanced portrait of racial inequality in the film industry is achieved by incorporating Hollywood insiders’ own views about decision-making in cinematic production and considering directors’ perspectives of their work environment. Anonymized communications between Hollywood insiders from a major studio show how decision-makers frame discussions about Black movies and directors. These texts provide rare insight into how people with real power in Hollywood include race in their routine evaluations of popular movies’ economic potential and cultural appeal.

Knowledge of how directors, as industry practitioners, understand, make sense of, and explain their positions and practices is also vital to grasp the implications of racial inequality for individual experiences and livelihoods. Because directors’ perceptions of racial inequality in Hollywood give greater meaning to the revelations that emerge from the data, the book includes excerpts from press interviews of Black directors. Unlike interviews conducted behind closed doors, these press interviews are an example of “publicly disclosed deep texts,” accounts that are self-consciously created for the general public to consume. In exchange for promotion of directors’ films on blogs and websites, directors grant interviews to media outlets, which in turn publish these interviews to generate increased site traffic or user views of the web content. During the interviews, directors discuss their past and upcoming films and their work lives within Hollywood—which sometimes leads to conversations about race and gender challenges. These narratives help to properly situate the quantitative data on movies within the deeper qualitative context of directors’ experiences, in effect, enriching the complex story that is
embedded in the data in order to illustrate how directors make sense of and even sometimes successfully navigate the Hollywood Jim Crow in the face of widespread inequality.

Overview of the Book

Central to understanding the Hollywood Jim Crow is discovering how film-industry workers create, reinforce, and reproduce racial patterns of difference over time. Undertaking an institutional analysis of race in the film industry, this book examines the plight of Black directors and their movies, highlighting the places that Black movies and directors occupy in Hollywood cinema and how other racial groups are treated in relation to their plight. The chapters that follow examine the quotidian practices and effects of racial inequality in the film industry, rituals that confine the production and circulation of movies directed by racial minorities.

Chapter 1 outlines various facets of representation—symbolic, numeric, civic, and hierarchical—that are important in cultural and cinematic production. Cinematic images are disseminated globally, carrying symbols of progress that hold value for underrepresented groups. Numeric representation embodies the quest for increased proportional representation via employment opportunities for workers from racially marginalized groups. Civic representation demands cultural citizenship and belonging in a nation’s popular cultural artifacts. This chapter also gives an overview of Black directors’ representation in Hollywood and considers concerns beyond numeric, civic, and symbolic representation. Racial hierarchies in cinema dictate what kinds of movies directors take on and where their career paths lead. Looking at hierarchies of representation provides a useful metric for grasping how racial divisions characterize labor in Hollywood and what steps can be taken toward achieving racial equality.

The next chapters detail the repressive institutional race politics that structures directors’ work in Hollywood. Each chapter is devoted to unfolding the multiple layers of the Hollywood Jim Crow: assumption of racial difference, marginalization, segregation, and stigmatization. The chapters disentangle (1) how Hollywood insiders create and rationalize racial inequality using cultural and economic frames, (2) how racial hierarchy penetrates the careers of directors and the production of movies,
and (3) how racial inequality shapes the identity, self-presentation, and character of group progress.

Chapter 2 illustrates how Hollywood executives and insiders label Black films and directors unbankable at the box office, suggesting risk and uncertainty around their potential for profit, especially at the foreign box office. Ironically, the assumption that “Black is unbankable” goes against the conventional logic of creative industries that “all hits are flukes” and that “nobody knows” what creative products will succeed or fail. Armed with the “unbankable” mythology, Hollywood decision-makers devalue Black films and directors, for example, by attaching smaller budgets to Black-cast movies and attaching larger budgets to racially mixed and white-cast movies. Although films overperform and challenge the “unbankable” myth, perceptions that Black directors and films are unbankable trap them into limited trajectories. Overall, African Americans are employed and contained on the basis of this pretext of limitations on Black movies and directors.

Chapters 3 and 4 further highlight institutional efforts to disadvantage Black directors, through marginalization and segregation. Chapter 3 illustrates the ghettoization of Black directors outside of big-budget and major-studio distribution. Movies in these areas generally have white stories, ideologies, casts, actors, and directors. Some directors, such as Tyler Perry, do manage to find success directing a number of films. Still, they are usually limited to small or medium budgets due to their tendency to direct Black-cast films, which are undervalued in Hollywood. Even when directors such as Tim Story and Antoine Fuqua direct films with white or racially mixed casts, they still encounter racial ceilings, never approaching the level of whites’ inclusion. In contrast, studio executives give white directors the leeway to leap from small-budget projects to big-budget projects (or even to receive big budgets at the onset of their careers in cinema). However, this same leap of faith is rarely, if ever, granted to Black directors, due to their ghettoization in Hollywood. Moreover, white directors experience the privilege of bigger budgets when directing Black-cast movies compared to the budgets that Black directors of Black-cast movies receive. What is more, the fact that Black-directed movies typically get little to no distribution in foreign markets further exacerbates their marginality in the film industry.
Besides existing disparities between opportunities and resources for Black and white directors, gender also shapes women’s and men’s experiences in different ways. In the eyes of Hollywood decision-makers, race and gender doubly impact Black women’s perceived capabilities. Their representation is limited to only a sporadic presence behind the camera. The career trajectories of the few who have found some modicum of success give voice to the understudied population of Black women who work on major studio productions and to the constraints that hinder their advancement.

Segregation in genres, as discussed in chapter 4, is yet another factor that contributes to incomplete integration and distance from the inner circles of Hollywood. For Black directors, integration happens only in some areas of work and not others. In contemporary Hollywood films, Black directors are overrepresented in the music genre. Meanwhile, the music genre locates Black directors in literal and figurative genre ghettos. Many music-genre films are situated in urban ghettos and center on themes about violence, poverty, and drugs. Music-genre films also record the smallest average production budgets compared to other genres such as sci-fi, action, and comedy. Black directors are sparsely included in financially lucrative areas of directing, for instance, on sci-fi movies or on tent-pole franchise films—movies that are of substantial importance to the operation of the film industry and to the career success of individual directors. Even when African Americans have similar qualifications to or in some cases more experience than white directors, they rarely direct these commercially lucrative motion pictures. When they do direct franchise movies, they more often are hired on less popular films with comparatively small budgets. Distance from high-status positions that are central to Hollywood film production ultimately undermines the commercial success of Black directors and their movies. Underrepresentation on tent-pole franchise movies prevents them from achieving a level of commercial success that would make it difficult for studio executives to refuse their demands for more financial resources to create popular cinema.

Chapter 5 considers how the Hollywood Jim Crow shapes the presence of Blackness in popular cinema. To a large extent, the act of labeling Black unbankable resembles the attempt to paint a picture of a “Negro Problem,” which the pioneering sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois
detailed in his early writings. Hollywood insiders conjure up a stigma around Blackness and suggest that Blackness in movies is in need of reform. Reacting to the “unbankable” judgment, some directors face pressures to transcend race and to neutralize Blackness in their movies or in conversations about their movies. To avoid the negative consequences that result when studio executives label a movie as a “Black film,” they implement multiple strategies: attracting crossover stars, adding white characters to casts, featuring multiracial casts and postracial themes, or referring to films as “universal.” Directors endeavoring to integrate into Hollywood encounter unique obstacles. Testimonies from directors reveal that as they plunge deeper into the core of Hollywood—making films with big budgets at major studios—they are increasingly discouraged from making films with Black casts or themes. Hence, the typical Black Hollywood director’s oeuvre starts with movies with Black casts and themes, and then, as his or her career progresses to more financially lucrative movies, shifts to films with multiracial or white casts and non-racial themes. On the surface, African American directors are seemingly integrated into the film industry. However, with Blackness stigmatized, directors find difficulty expressing their ideal narratives and inscribing their own visions into the dominant cultural canon. Some people argue that this predicament undermines the very purpose of integration, a movement that initially set out to gain Black representation not only in participation but also with regard to the inclusion of Black cultural content, perspectives, and meanings. At the stage of commercially lucrative blockbuster movies, Black worldviews, ideologies, and identities are, in large part, systematically, consciously, and symbolically excluded from the screen.

Chapter 6 considers approaches to reenvision cinema in order to overcome the adverse effects of the Hollywood Jim Crow. One plan of action is to advocate for racial-minority participation in key positions. This involves closing racial disparities related to working at major studios, directing big-budget movies, and occupying decision-making positions. Another viable path toward equality involves greater investment in filmmaking outside of Hollywood. This path requires directors to place emphasis on forging youth film cultures and striving to create ways to “remake cinema” removed from Hollywood’s governance. In particular, it calls for the revival of Black owned and operated organizations
that support film production, distribution, and exhibition. The chapter details the goals, shape, and components of a Black cinema collective. Through organization, planning, institution building, and technological education, directors can orchestrate a Black cinema collective to circumvent the Hollywood Jim Crow and produce a diversity, number, and scale of movies without having to rely on financing from Hollywood studios. The revitalization of a Black cinema collective could serve as an impetus to curb racial inequality within Hollywood and include narratives it currently marginalizes or excludes. That is, if the burgeoning Black cinema industry becomes successful, it could put pressure on Hollywood to diversify in order to remain competitive as a producer of movies about Black people.

The conclusion contains a summary of the book’s main findings. Implications of the Hollywood Jim Crow are pertinent not only to comprehend how race matters in a popular culture industry but also to grasp how racial hierarchies operate in other spheres of social life—and to ameliorate their impact.