

Cultural Daily

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Play or Pass? An Examination into Why Actors Choose to Step Away from Or Remain in Controversial Roles

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*We are proud to publish **Hollywood Lens Z**, a series of student essays written in partial fulfillment of Dr. Kathleen Tarr's first-year course taught in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University, "That's Entertainment! The Rhetoric of Hollywood's Inequities."*

"Women, poor people, people of color, people with disabilities, immigrants, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, trans people, intersex people — we have been pitted against each other and made to feel like there are limited seats at the table for those of us who fall into the category of 'other.' As a result, we have become afraid of one another."

~Kerry Washington at the [GLAAD Media Awards](#) (2015)

Someone goes into a theater to watch the new Hellboy movie, as this person was a huge fan of the comic series. As the movie progresses, they eventually see that the once Japanese-American character, Ben Daimio, is now a white character being played by a white actor. How does that even happen? Why didn't anyone say something about this change? Did nobody think it was a problem? When it comes to Hollywood, controversial casting choices are occasionally made in order to appeal to a wider audience, but when the public gets wind of this, they may decide to start a [widespread controversy about the decision](#). In some cases, the actor at the center of the situation decides to step down, as was done by the actor playing Daimio, Ed Skrein, in the new Hellboy film. In other cases, the actor chooses to stay in the role, dismissing the controversies surrounding their casting. Some people may attribute this to the character of the actor and determine that the actor prioritizes getting a role instead of that role maintaining accuracy to an original idea. However, the decision for an actor to step down from a role amidst widespread outcries is more nuanced than that. When examining an actor's decision to step down or remain in a controversially cast role, we must consider the actor's demographics, such as their race and gender, as a major part of their decision. Due to the current correlation of racial and gender minorities receiving less roles in Hollywood, these minority actors cannot afford to step down from these roles, as the potential consequences are more harmful to their careers as compared to their non-minority counterparts.

"Equal" Opportunity in Hollywood?

Hollywood: the city where high-profile movies are made and stars are born. When we think of the concept of Hollywood, we tend to think of the characters we see on the big screen whenever we go to the movies. However, most people do not consider the work that has to be done to even have a chance at being cast for a major role. The first step for an aspiring actor is to find a role for which he or she wants to audition. Doesn't sound too hard to do, right? Well, if said actor is white, then this step is not hard at all. According to a [study done by UCLA](#), researchers found that approximately 69 percent of roles available to be auditioned for were reserved for a white actor. Additionally, if this actor is also male, then there will be a plethora of auditions that he can attend, as, according to the same study, for every lead role available for a woman, there are three available for a man. This kind of disparity makes it such that while white male actors may have many chances for a lead role, racial and gender minorities do not have these same opportunities. As a result, these actors are pressured to cherish every high-profile opportunity they receive, as statistically, it could be their last opportunity of that caliber.

The sentiment of being grateful for opportunities is not a bad thing, yet when it is caused from a lack of said opportunities, it can lead to the prioritization of obtaining roles over everything else, such as the ethics of their own casting. The lack of opportunities available for minorities is quite evident within the casting process, but it is further ingrained when these actors watch various media productions and see very few people with demographics similar to their own. According to a [study done by the Center for Study of Women in Television and Film](#), only 21 percent of the examined TV programs had more female characters than male. In contrast, 68 percent contained more males than females. Furthermore, when it comes to the intersectionality of being a racial minority and a woman, the problem becomes even more evident, as within the population of females with speaking roles, 7 percent are Latina, 19 percent are black, and 6 percent are Asian. Thus, minorities rarely see themselves portrayed in the media, which leads to those having a desire to act potentially valuing a casting opportunity to an obsessive level.

While the above statistics are for television shows, the same pattern is found within movies. [According to a UCLA study](#), for every 100 movies, only 14 of them will have a lead that is a person of color. If this ratio is compared to the ratio of minorities in the American population (39 out of 100), a misrepresentation problem can be easily identified, and one can realize why minority actors are forced to cherish each and every opportunity, which can lead to inaccurate portrayals. In the same study, it is found that approximately 70 percent of leads in the top films have a male as their lead, which is a similar statistic to the available auditions mentioned earlier. Is this a coincidence, or demonstrated proof of a flawed casting system? While [studies have been done on the effects of misrepresentation on minority audiences](#), these same factors can have an effect on why certain actors choose to remain in roles for which they are not suited.

Wrong Place, Wrong Role

Before analyzing the nuances with actors' decisions to remedy mismatches in their own casting, it is first important to identify the issue of mismatched casting. Mismatched casting occurs when a character in an entertainment production is changed and given to an actor of a different demographic than what was originally intended, or the role is not changed, yet an actor of a different demographic is cast for the role anyway. For example, [Johnny Depp being cast as Tonto in The Lone Ranger](#) is an example of an actor being cast into an unchanged and mismatched role, while [Tom Cruise's character in Edge of Tomorrow](#) demonstrates a character being rewritten as a different demographic.

Mismatched casting can also occur when a role is given to an actor that has a much different demographic than the setting. A great example of this occurring is [Matt Damon being the lead in The Great Wall](#). While technically not whitewashing or changing a previously established role, casting a white male to save ancient China is a glaring mismatch that [many people were quick to call out](#) upon the announcement of the movie. The trope of a “white hero” that saves people from disaster has been done so many times before, yet writers and producers continue to create these roles, as the majority of people in charge of casting are white themselves. According to the [same UCLA study referenced earlier](#), approximately 92 percent of writers for top films are white, which explains the constant placement of white characters in films that warrant a diverse cast.

Despite what is written above, it does not mean that Hollywood should always have a set number of minority actors in a given movie, as this would be setting up a quota system, which is not productive towards the advancement of equality in Hollywood. Instead, Hollywood should stop casting actors from different demographics to play characters that could be portrayed by actors matching those characters’ original demographics. [This sentiment](#) is stated best by Racebending.com, in which they state:

Acting talent and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive—nor is acting ability some sort of innate racial trait. Any cultural or ethnic community in the United States will contain talented actors, so a movie studio should never argue that they had to choose between casting a talented white actor to play a character of color or an actor of color with terrible skills. There are equally talented actors of color, and they deserve the chance to represent their communities.

While this statement talks about white actors replacing actors of color, the same problem can occur between minority groups as well. In any case, there will always be talented actors that can represent a given demographic, so whenever a role is cast with a person of a different demographic, it is not out of necessity, but out of ignorance.

The problem of mismatched casting has its roots within the flawed culture of Hollywood, and this is exactly why minority actors, when finally given an opportunity to take a major role in a high profile production, will jump at the chance. Whether the mismatched casting is occurring due to the casting of a white or minority actor, it is the responsibility of that actor to handle the situation. Should the actor step down and allow someone of the matching demographic to play the part? Or, should the actor remain in the role and get some exposure? [According to the repeated social media controversies](#) often created when mismatched casting occurs, it appears as if society has determined that the actor should step down and allow a more suitable actor to take the role. However, for minority actors, the answer is not that simple. Since they already have limited opportunities in Hollywood, stepping down from a potential breakthrough moment could be crippling to their acting career, if not preemptively ending it.

Stepping Up To Step Down

Hollywood’s culture makes it such that minorities struggle to get prominent roles. Because Hollywood producers care about making the most money possible from a production, roles are occasionally rewritten away from certain groups and given to others to maximize marketability. Thus, casting and scripting decisions are made without thinking of the possible consequences on

minority groups. In this kind of situation, it is up to the actors in Hollywood to change its culture. Whenever an actor is put in a position in which he or she is taking a role away from a different demographic, it is the actor's responsibility to either step up and step down from the role, or remain in it. Often times, the controversies about mismatched casting occur too late in the production cycle to do anything, as some movies do not start advertisement until after the movie's production is complete. However, in the instances in which there is enough time for outside influence to make a difference, notable differences can be seen in the way actors handle controversies surrounding their casting.

The Duality of Scarlett Johansson's Decisions

One of the most recent major accusations of whitewashing lies with [Scarlett Johansson being cast as Major Mokoto Kusanagi in the 2017 film Ghost in the Shell](#). The film, which is based on a Japanese manga of the same name, was met with widespread criticism upon its announcement, as Johansson was playing the role of a woman that should have been Japanese, as that was the vision of the original creator. Despite the social media outcries for Johansson not to be cast as the Major, she remained in the lead role anyways. At the time of the Ghost in the Shell incident, Johansson did not answer any questions about her being in the role, which could be taken as a sign of stubbornness or being egotistical. However, after the incident had largely blown over, [she sat down and did an interview where she addressed the controversy](#). In this interview, when asked about the social media backlash, she said:

Diversity is important in Hollywood, and I would never want to feel like I was playing a character that was offensive. Also, having a franchise with a female protagonist driving it is such a rare opportunity. Certainly, I feel the enormous pressure of that—the weight of such a big property on my shoulders.

Additionally, when being asked about her status as the highest-paid actress in Hollywood, Johansson said, “I’ve had to fight for everything that I have. It’s such a fickle and political industry.” The most important thing of note in this response is Johansson’s value in being a female lead. As stated earlier, only 30 percent of top films have a female lead, so the opportunity to take a lead role is something that even Johansson, who has had prominent roles as Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Lucy in the 2014 film by the same name, could not turn down despite the criticism.

However, while Johansson did not decide to step down from this role, she has stepped down in a different situation. Recently, the movie Rub & Tug earned the attention of social media as the film announced that Scarlett Johansson would be its star. The problem? The film is based on [the life of Dante “Tex” Gill](#), a transgender gangster from the 1970s. Specifically, Gill was a woman that dressed in traditionally male clothing and preferred being addressed as “Mr. Gill”. This is another example of mismatched casting, as Scarlett Johansson is a cis-woman being cast as a transgender man. When accepting the role, one could potentially understand why Johansson did not see an issue with the casting decision, as Gill himself was a female that dressed as a male. However, when the announcement was made of the decision, she was quickly enlightened to the error in the casting, as [social media was quick to criticize the decision](#), even bringing up the previous “whitewashing” of Ghost in the Shell, and comparing this incident as “straightwashing”. Initially, [Johansson’s reaction](#) was one of ignorance, deferring those with complaints to other cisgendered

actors that had taken on transgendered roles. However, [she later realized the error in her casting](#) and decided to step down from the role, saying:

In light of recent ethical questions raised surrounding my casting as Dante Tex Gill, I have decided to respectfully withdraw my participation in the project. Our cultural understanding of transgender people continues to advance, and I've learned a lot from the community since making my first statement about my casting and realize it was insensitive.

After reading this statement, one may begin to wonder, why would Johansson step down from this role, yet she remained in *Ghost in the Shell*? Maybe she became more culturally aware? Maybe she truly did not realize the problem with her *Ghost in the Shell* casting? While these may be true, there is another factor at play here: gender. In the statistics given earlier, the percentages of roles given to males and females was presented. However, these statistics were specifically for cis-gendered actors, not transgender. In fact, the reason transgender actors were not included in the reported statistics is because they are not being given roles. Johansson, in her statement about her casting in *Ghost*, stated the importance and rarity of being a female lead in a major production. Thus, it is understandable that when Johansson was made aware of the even fewer opportunities given to transgender actors and actresses, she chose to step down out of a place of understanding. This is supported by [her statement](#) made when stepping down from *Rub & Tug*, as she stated:

According to GLAAD, LGBTQ+ characters dropped 40% in 2017 from the previous year, with no representation of trans characters in any major studio release. While I would have loved the opportunity to bring Dante's story and transition to life, I understand why many feel he should be portrayed by a transgender person.

As Johansson has been on the receiving end of discrimination based on gender, it follows that once she was presented with the statistics, or lack thereof, of transgender actors in Hollywood, she felt compelled to step down.

Another potential reason Johansson could have stepped down in this instance is because she is a part of the production company behind *Rub & Tug*, and after witnessing the [economic effects suffered by the *Ghost in the Shell* controversy](#), she did not want the same adverse effects to impact her movie. However, despite this being a potential ulterior motive, it still does not take away from the fact that Johansson made her decision on a factor besides her own pride. Whether it be for profits or for the general social good, a role that goes to the correct person leads to a more equal Hollywood and better storytelling.

Some People Have More To Lose

Scarlett Johansson is unique as she has been in a controversial casting situation multiple times, while many actors will not even have to deal with that kind of decision once in their career. However, when actors do have to make this choice, it is important to analyze the various factors playing into their decision. Recently, Ed Skrein garnered a lot of [positive attention](#) for stepping down from the role of Ben Daimio in the new *Hellboy* movie. According to his statement, Skrein was not aware of his casting being an example of whitewashing until the casting announcement

was made, at which point he was compelled to leave the project. [Skrein was praised for his decision](#), and it was noted that this was the first time an actor stepped away from a leading production amidst whitewashing controversies.

While Skrein did indeed set a good precedent for other actors met with whitewashing controversies (Johansson's Rub & Tug incident occurred after Skrein's stepping down from Hellboy), for Skrein, opportunities to be cast in film roles are not exactly hard to come by, as noted in the statistics given earlier. As he is a white male, he is in the best position to be given auditions and appearances in Hollywood. However, it still takes a lot of courage to step away from a major production, and for that, Skrein should be noted as an actor who stepped up and undermined his own privilege.

While Skrein chose to step away from this role, there are other situations in which actors or actresses do not step down from incidents of mismatched casting, but while Skrein will, statistically, have other opportunities to fall back on, these actors and actresses may not have that same privilege. One example of this situation is the casting of [Naomi Scott as Jasmine in the new Aladdin live-action remake](#) by Disney. In the original animated film, the [setting of the movie is the fictional Agrabah, which is said to be near the Jordan River](#). Thus, it can be inferred that the characters and setting of the film are based on the real world Middle East. This is further supported by the fact that the name [Jasmine has Persian origins](#), while the title of the movie, [Aladdin, has Middle Eastern origins](#).

So, why is Naomi Scott being cast as Jasmine a problem? Scott herself is of mixed white and Indian descent, while Jasmine, in the original, is of Middle Eastern descent. Thus, once again, a role is being cast for an actress not of the demographics of the original character. Once the announcement of the film was made, many people on social media were quick to note the mismatch between Scott and Jasmine, with [some people making calls for Disney to recast the role](#). However, Scott herself could also have chosen to step down upon being informed of the issue with her casting. While one could say that she decided to stay in the role as much of the production is already finished, Johansson and Skrein have already demonstrated that stepping down is a choice available to her. Thus, why has she remained in the role?

A major factor at play in this decision is the intersectionality of being a racial and gender minority in Hollywood. The opportunities for a woman of color to be a lead in a high-profile movie are practically non-existent, according to a [study done by the Inclusion Initiative at USC Annenberg](#). According to this study, of the top 100 films, only four were led by a female of color. (Additionally, all four of these females were of mixed ethnic backgrounds, which also matches Scott's demographics.) Thus, it is reasonable that Scott remains in the role due to the scarce number of opportunities available for women of color to lead movies. Additionally, while Scott has not publicly commented on the controversy yet, her lack of action falls in line with Johansson's statement about making the most of rare opportunities. Thus, while the situation is not ideal for equity in Hollywood, the rationale behind the decision can be reasonably broken down.

The Path to Appropriate Casting

Scarlett Johansson, Ed Skrein, and Naomi Scott all had different reasons for their decisions, but one common factor between all of them is the opportunities available to them in Hollywood based on their appearances. Until Hollywood's culture changes such that we reach equal casting of men and women in high profile films, and appropriate casting of various racial, ethnic, and LGBTQ+

communities, the phenomenon of mismatched casting will repeatedly rear its ugly head. As a result, movies will lose accuracy in relation to the sources from which they are based, and minorities will continue to feel underrepresented on the big screen.

So, what can be done about this problem? As noted earlier, *Ghost in the Shell* [suffered in the box office due to the controversy surrounding it](#), as it only earned 19 million dollars on its opening weekend compared to its 110 million dollar budget. Thus, whenever a mismatched controversy occurs, while it may be tempting to go see the movie anyway, the only way to impact the producers of the film is to not buy a ticket to watch. Additionally, being active on social media has been effective in notifying actors and actresses about mismatched casting incidents, as noted by Skrein's statement saying that he was informed of the casting issue through social media. While some films may be untouchable in regards to their popularity, as long as society continues to progress towards equality, Hollywood will be forced to progress along with it.

Thus, as Hollywood's culture changes, what changes should we expect in how mismatched casting incidents are handled? Presently, the only two major occurrences of people stepping down amidst controversy are Ed Skrein and Scarlett Johansson, both of which happen to be white. Based on the statistics on opportunities in Hollywood, as more movies are announced and mismatched casting incidents are reported, it can be expected that the majority of actors who choose to step down will be white males. As they are the group most often cast, and the group with the most opportunities, stepping down is not quite as career threatening as it is for other groups. In the coming years, it can be expected that more white actresses, and then minority actors, when cast incorrectly, will step down, but this depends on the changes in the culture of Hollywood that occur over those years. Actors and actresses with intersectional minorities, in gender, race, or sexuality, will, presumably, not step down from mismatched roles until Hollywood reaches a point of true equality, as the opportunities for this group are few and far in between. Thus, the solution to the problem of mismatched casting lies within the culture of Hollywood and its potential to change. The idea of true equality in Hollywood may seem unattainable for some, but as long as society hopes for equal and appropriate representation in film, it must work towards achieving this equality, whether it be through social media outcries or boycotts of films. Hollywood's culture and the casting process are intertwined, so until changes are made within Hollywood itself, seeing a white actor in a film adaptation based on another culture's original idea is something society should unfortunately get used to.

Actresses Scarlett Johansson and Kaori Momoi embrace at the world premiere of their movie, Ghost in the Shell. Image by Dick Thomas Johnson via Flickr.

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