



Selma and the American-ness of the Academy

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Last week, I attended a screening of Ava DuVernay's *Selma* about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the 1965 voting rights marches of Alabama.

Desperate for inspiration, fresh off my second rejection from Sundance Screenwriters Labs—this time, unlike last year's form letter, a lovely e-mail from the program director praising my "empathy" towards the story's characters—I took the subway uptown to the Academy Theater in Manhattan.

A light rain fell as I pushed my way into a modern building at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue, the East Coast home of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In the lobby, a lone security guard manned the front desk while a mousy-

haired woman handed attendees tickets to the post-screening dinner.

I took one and headed downstairs to the theater, breezing past a giant Oscar statue to the check-in table where New York program director Patrick Harrison, a bespectacled man of color, greeted me.

"Are you a guest?" he asked, searching my face. It's his job to know all the local members and I clearly wasn't one, though I seemed interesting enough.

My short film, I told him, had screened here at the 2013 Student Academy Awards (SAA) semifinals. Having received an invitation for the *Selma* screening tonight, I couldn't pass up an opportunity to watch the film before its release.

Patrick nodded, remembering my name, and asked what I'd been up to lately.

"I'm turning the short into a feature for my NYU Grad Film thesis," I replied. As ambitious as it sounded, I had come to realize the more I said it out loud, the more attainable it seemed. He wished me good luck, waving me into the theater with just a few minutes to spare before the film began.

Walking down a long aisle past an audience of largely silver-haired, older white people, I took a seat near the front where five director-style chairs were arranged in a row. The Academy members stared at me, as people do, trying to figure out what my story was. Despite my long wool coat and jeans, I felt objectified, largely owing to my butterscotch skin, dreadlocks, and the berry-tinged lipstick I'd smeared on at home before leaving.

Every year at awards season, dozens of similar screenings are scheduled for Academy members to attend in anticipation of voting on the year's best films. Nomination ballots are mailed out to active members in late December and, once the nominations are in, final ballots are mailed to decide the winners prior to Oscar Sunday.

Waiting for the lights to dim, I thought about that evening, now more than a year ago, when I jittered anxiously in the audience at the SAAs. The crowd brimmed with members, guests, and students each vying for a spot at the nationals, whose winner qualifies for a bona fide Oscar nom. Including, there were three of us NYU graduate students and one undergrad—Shanghai-bred Bruce Li, a young Brett Ratner of sorts with an eight-person entourage—who screened films that evening.

Seeing our grad film chairman in the front row, I deflated, remembering the somewhat blistering reviews he'd given my early work. But the film played well and, at the reception, he told me how proud I should be, instilling hope that the \$100K in student debt I'd incurred had somehow been worth it.

I made it into NYU on a long shot. My Nigerian parents relied on thrift stores and discount food programs to raise my sisters and me in an African immigrant community in Albany, New York. As a Stanford biology undergrad, I gravitated toward kindred creative, starving artist types who fell outside the mainstream.

When I finally abandoned the med-school track and applied for film school, I was ill prepared for the smug privilege of Tisch School of the Arts—rich kids, famous kids, faculty darlings, and, in a category all by himself, James Franco. Broke, black, female, and African, I didn't figure on any of those lists, but was solidly marginalized simply because I did not have a film background.

I lasted two weeks before I took a year off to buck up, enrolling with the following year's crop of students. After that first year, I was so broke that I had to take off another three years just to work before coming back to finish my last two years.

Leaning back in my chair, I smiled, buoyed by the realization that my hard work had brought me to this theater on my own merit. I had screened here before and was adapting my short into a feature—called *Aissa's Story*, loosely inspired by the Dominique Strauss-Kahn case—for which I had won a Spike Lee Production Fund grant.

Sundance or not, I thought, *I should be proud of myself*. I repeated it like a mantra until my friend Tammy arrived, snapping me out of my reverie before the theater went dark and the film began.

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I had no clear expectations of *Selma* going in, though I had heard about its Golden Globe nomination for Best Director—the first for a black female—and had seen it on a few Oscar short lists, namely Manohla Dargis's Best Movies of 2014. I was skeptical, though, given that Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* was on the list too and, though impressed by the directorial feat, I had tried and failed to enjoy it on more than one occasion.

Sometimes with biopics, their nominations have more to do with the film's epic scope and cultural significance, and the fact that the actors' tour-de-force performances dwarf anything anyone else could have possibly made that year.

But when the film opened up on a shot of Martin Luther King, Jr. disagreeing with his wife Coretta about wearing an ascot to his Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony, I was immediately spellbound by the intimacy of the scene—the quiet, loving way Coretta, played by Carmen Ejogo, and Martin, played by David Oyelowo, looked at each other.

No less captivating was the cut from the ceremony to a group of schoolgirls skipping down the 16th Street Baptist Church basement steps in Birmingham, Alabama, mere moments before a bomb went off and killed them. (On a singing tour with my college a cappella group, I had visited the church where Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair were murdered.)

Watching the concrete, wooden beams, and debris explode and settle around their lifeless bodies dropped me deep into my bones, where I stayed throughout the final strains of a freedom song over the end credits.

To say that *Selma* went beyond my expectations is to propound the falsehood that I could have even imagined it. Having seen Ava Duvernay's *Middle of Nowhere*—though interesting and promising, definitely an early director's effort—I would not have envisioned the near-perfect storytelling of *Selma* two years later. It had the nuanced, dynamic performances of Oyelowo and Ejogo; the boldness to include a scene about King's noted infidelities, the kind of messy truths that make our heroes human; the luminous cinematography of Bradford Young who, if he hasn't received one yet, deserves an Oscar nomination. Then there was the brilliant way the documentary footage was handled, interwoven in a way that was never expositional, but served to lift a fictionalized narrative to a kind of operative truth.

It was a transformative experience, a story of multi-racial coalition coming together to make the civil rights movement and societal change possible in the face of state-sanctioned violence and deadly opposition, embodied by the bloody confrontation between marchers and state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge—named, to this day, after a former Confederate brigadier general and Alabama state senator, who was the Grand Master of the Ku Klux Klan.

In the face of this hate, we watched hopeful children milling amongst the adult marchers, theologians and faith leaders, weary travelers smiling and eating lunch at the side of the road, and octogenarians who walked the 50 miles from Selma to

Montgomery. We cut out of the doc footage with King's voice, in the speech he delivered on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol building.

The film ends with King still alive, disallowing us from wallowing in the tragedy of his ultimate death, but rather urging us to live in the transformational glory of the march and the positive change that came of it, the slain leader's true legacy.

Selma was divine. I could hardly contain myself when the director and cast took the stage for a Q&A after the screening.

On her directorial motivation, Ava said:

"My father is from Lowndes County, Alabama, which is something that David [Oyelowo] didn't know about as he was advocating for me [to direct the film]. So I know that place, and it was really about imbuing the script with a sense of place and time. That's why we open up with the four little girls. I feel it's important not to sanitize that time in history. To not just have the physical violence, but the emotional violence as well."

David Oyelowo added:

"We now live in a different world. We live in a world where a black woman can direct this movie. We live in a world in which Oprah Winfrey is on that set as a producer. One of the things I loved about this movie is for Oprah to symbolically take on the role of someone who, fifty years ago, wouldn't be allowed to register to vote—and right now she could buy that registration office a billion times over."

What really resonated for me in the film was how the march echoed the protests going on across the country right now. If you just changed the references in King's speeches, he'd be speaking to the exact moment we're in now, with the slight riff of cops killing kids in the park, the preschool to prison pipeline, mandatory sentencing minimums, and the mass disenfranchisement of black and Latino men.

And releasing the film on the heels of the Ferguson decision, at a time when the nation has been drowning in an unending tide of state-sanctioned killings—of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice among others—*Selma* could not be more timely.

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After the Q&A, we reconvened at a nearby restaurant for dinner and conversation. My friend and I put our coats down and palmed glasses of white wine, making light conversation with the other guests. Being a second-year thesis student, I've met my share of directors and actors, and found the entire cast to be warm, heartfelt, and approachable, though Common had me starstruck. After asking the origin of my name, David even gave me a hug from one fellow Nigerian to another.

The room was fairly narrow and we soon bumped elbows with Carmen Ejogo, with whom we chatted at length about the film and life in New York. As we wound down, a rather tall, elderly gentleman tapped me on the shoulder. He had gotten up from the dinner table to introduce himself, he said, because everyone at his table kept telling him what an amazing job I'd done in the film. I gave him a puzzled stare, throwing my glance back toward the table where his friends grinned eagerly at me.

But what was this man talking about?

I do not look anything like anyone in the film, although, by virtue of our dreadlocks, I could be said to bear a passing resemblance to Ava. That said, it would have been obvious, given my conspicuous absence from the Q&A, that I was not in the film. And of course there was the problem of my dress, a pair of jeans, while Carmen, in a ball gown, and the rest of the cast were in their Sunday best. I simply did not know what this man could possibly be thinking, other than all the black and brown faces in the room were the creative help.

"I wasn't in the movie," I replied, with a kind, almost apologetic smile.

His eyebrows knit together as he squinted, examining me, his face gradually relaxing into a smile. "Well then, what brings you here?" he asked, extending a hand. I told him I was a film thesis student, working on a feature, before he drifted quietly away.

Tammy thought it was great that people were mistaking me for an actress—I must look good enough to be on camera. But my discomfort at the glaring mistake only deepened when it happened again later that night, as we sat at a table eating fancy egg rolls and prawns, when a younger man in a cowboy hat wrapped his arm around my shoulder and boomed a hearty congratulations. This time I made no attempt to be warm and apologetic, replying, "For what?" His eyes glazed over as he tried to dig his way out of an obvious hole—though he repeated congratulations, I suppose, simply for my existence.

The entire debacle reminded me of the Student Academy Awards when, though my picture and name were in the program, and projected onto the wall during the closing reception, at least half a dozen members asked who I was, what I did in my movie, or congratulated me on my performance in it. Even more puzzling was the fact that my lead actress, whom I look nothing like, was also present at the event, sometimes standing right next to me.

I was pretty angry over how hard it was for people to tell us apart, and I remember my sister saying it was to my credit that the Academy members could not imagine a young, attractive black woman as a director. I exceeded their expectations, challenging their most deeply-held assumptions about what people like me are capable of.

Perhaps that is true, but what concerns me is what it says about the hope for films by people who look like me, who congeal into an indistinguishable brown swill at the bottom of the mainstream cup—simply because whiteness assumes a kind of individualized identity that rises above the homogenized, monolithic other into which the rest of us fall.

I have not finished my feature yet—nor the memoir I've been writing for a decade, but I digress—which is perhaps why nobody knows my face. But it becomes a problem when a group of older white people, most of whom have long passed the point of creative relevance, watch, vote, and decide which films in the entire culture and world get applauded. Some of them are literally falling asleep in the theater, while a significant portion of the rest can't even distinguish the faces of the black and brown people they've been watching speak for two hours on camera.

I hope that Ava gets an Oscar nomination for *Selma*, a film that offers a platform for black actors who otherwise wouldn't get work to hone their craft, and I wish the film and others like it could also be a platform to change the Academy. Because you walk into this room, you see meet people, and you understand why subtitled and experimental films often don't do well at the Oscars, why black-cast or -helmed films frequently get excluded.

To get in the Academy, you have to be nominated for an Oscar (or make a significant contribution to motion pictures) and be invited to join. And in a field with fewer opportunities for "others" to receive those nominations, we simply don't get to join—much like the Jim Crow voting practice, explained in the film, whereby Blacks could only register to vote if someone who was already a registered voter could "vouch" for them, a de facto denial in majority black counties.

Most "other" filmmakers don't have anybody to vouch for them, or rather, they don't have access to the kinds of opportunities that gain them acceptance into the club.

Though the Academy does not release demographic information, a recent survey by the Los Angeles Times found that, of its 6,172 voting members, 72% are men and 28% are women, and 89% of the most recent 271 invitees were composed of white non-Hispanic film practitioners.

These numbers are disturbing when you consider that, by the year 2043, Americans will be living in a majority non-white nation.

Among all the other very real inequities in housing, jobs, employment, healthcare, education, and wealth, the Academy is one of those lingering bastions of inequity that seems rather tone deaf to the changing culture. To be perfectly blunt, the kind of work that millions of protestors agitate for—the dismantling of racist institutions in society, of which the Selma marches are a prime exemplar—is the same work that needs to happen within the Academy. (Read Chris Rock's take at [The Hollywood Reporter](#).)

And as a film student, I see that's exactly the kind of work people don't talk about as more and more frustrated, young creative talent turns to alternative means of distribution to get their stories told. Don't get me wrong, those platforms are important for circumventing the gatekeepers that have historically silenced so many "other" voices. And yet without this type of institutional activism, nothing will ever change.

I would be remiss, however, in painting Academy members with a monolithic brush, discounting the multi-cultural coalitions that were the very foundation of the Civil Rights movement itself and made the event, gathering all of us together, possible.

One of the great joys of the evening was meeting the ebullient Wynn Thomas, production designer on most, if not all, of Spike Lee's early work. And meeting the documentarian Rob Richter, who was a CBS reporter during the marches of 1965 struggling with whether or not to attend and receive backlash from his employers.

He didn't attend and ultimately regretted it, spending the better half of his adult life making politically incisive documentaries, the latest of which charts the famous legal trial of Huey P. Newton, and how a black jury foreman changed the course of American justice. Hearing Mr. Richter speak firsthand about his experience of that

time, and the life's work it inspired, gave me hope that not all of the Academy members are completely out of touch with the culture and the plight of black and brown people.

So why am I writing this? The world is so complicated and it's hard to make sense of this moment now. All things being equal (which they're most certainly not), I'm excited for this time in which we're seeing so many films, like *Selma*, helmed by black women directors this year. And though one film can't change the world, those of us who take up the challenge of working within the system, and give people of color or women or immigrants or non-English speakers jobs on feature films, are doing important work.

I had always dreamed of working in Nigeria—not just because it's my cultural homeland, but because it seems to offer the kind of access to which many "others" trying to break into Hollywood will never gain. But having experienced *Selma* and the Academy last week, I realize that the entire film ecosystem should be opened up. Though I have never wanted to sacrifice my life to change a system as archaic as Hollywood, I recognize that it may be a call that I and many others have to answer.

The rain settled into a light drizzle as I boarded the subway to Brooklyn at midnight with a belly full of prawns and white wine. I leaned against the window, closing my eyes as my head swirled with questions: *What is the touchstone that will galvanize people to change the Academy? As a black, Nigerian-American woman, I will do what I can to change the Academy, but should I want to be a part of the institution I'm fighting to change?* I know that my dreams, like Dr. King's and Ava DuVernay's, are still possible. After all, I was there that night doing the work. And as Dr. King always taught, no matter what, the universe will eventually bend towards the work of justice.

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[Photos via Getty]



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That's two articles in a row that resonate with me. I lasted in film school for exactly one month. It was one of the worst experiences I've ever had. Like you, I was probably completely unprepared for the demographic that would be in school with me. It was just plain awful. Even an African American female teacher didn't help. She was horrible too.

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