

Testimony for the AB 3121 Reparations Hearings
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My name is Darnell Hunt, and I have studied the status of Black Americans in the Hollywood entertainment industry for nearly thirty years. I am currently Dean of Social Sciences at UCLA and Professor of Sociology and African American Studies. Since 2014, I have been the lead author on a series of annual UCLA reports documenting the progress of people of color and women in front of and behind the camera in the Hollywood Industry. Before this, I authored a series of reports for the Writers Guild of America, West on diversity among Hollywood writers, a study on the state of African American inclusion in primetime television for the Screen Actors Guild, and I helped staff Hollywood interviews for testimony before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' 1993 Los Angeles hearings in the aftermath of the 1992 uprisings.

I am here today to testify about the significant impact that Black exclusion from and underemployment in the Hollywood industry has had on the group's position in America. First, it is important to consider that the Hollywood industry was born in the early years of the 20th century during the height of the Jim Crow era, itself a backlash against Reconstruction and unfinished efforts to address the damages suffered by Blacks during centuries of American slavery. A product of that moment, the Hollywood industry was structured by the same doctrine of white supremacy that organized life throughout American society. Though recent years have seen some advances for Black talent in the industry — mostly on-screen¹ — white males remain firmly in control, calling the shots behind the scenes.

But why does any of this matter in the overall scheme of things? Given the very real challenges that the legacy of American slavery continues to pose for Black Americans in terms of economic, political, and social justice, why should we care about how the group has been treated by Hollywood?

The answer is simple: While the films and television shows Hollywood produces are entertaining, they are much more than mere entertainment. It is no accident that one of the earliest campaigns of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) centered around protesting the highly popular and racist 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*. The NAACP recognized the power of media — of the stereotypical and dehumanizing images of blackness promoted in the film — to undermine its efforts to integrate Black Americans into a

¹ See UCLA's "2021 Hollywood Diversity Report: Pandemic in Progress," (Parts 1 and 2), UCLA Division of Social Sciences. Black Americans were overrepresented among top film roles in 2020, claiming 19.4 percent of the roles. Meanwhile, the group also exceeded proportionate representation among all roles in broadcast (18.4 percent), cable (20.9 percent) and digital (15.1 percent) for the 2019-20 season.

Jim-Crow-era nation clinging to the doctrine of white supremacy.² Though the smoking gun of causation is often difficult to locate when it comes to the impact of media on society, there is ample evidence supporting the idea that heavy media consumption has a normalizing or “mainstreaming” effect, pushing consumers’ understandings of the world in directions popularized in the films and television shows they consume.³ This effect appears to be strongest when media serve as a stand-in for real, face-to-face encounters with others and/or in-person experiences with the issues depicted.⁴

Indeed, concerns about this media effect motivated the advocacy group Color of Change to commission a 2017 study I authored exploring the role race plays in the writers’ room, the creative spaces responsible for producing the scripts that animate Hollywood’s television shows.⁵ Among the more important takeaways from the study was the finding that Black voices were largely absent from these spaces for a longstanding and staple genre of network television — the crime procedural. Accordingly, crime procedurals were found to routinely glamourize policing and to legitimize the criminal justice system, while downplaying the degree to which Black Americans are racially profiled and victimized by both. This finding is particularly alarming given what we know about the normalizing effects of media, about the potential for media, in this case, to condition police officers, prosecutors, juries, judges, and/or vigilantes to perceive Black bodies as a threat, and police violence against them as justified.

According to the U.S. Census, Black Americans constituted 12.4 percent of the population in 2020, the last year examined in our most recent UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report. But among the (mostly) men empowered to make decisions about which films and television shows will be “greenlighted” for production, who will produce or direct them, and how large their budgets will be, Black Americans were largely absent. Indeed, there were no Black CEOs or members of the senior management team at the major Hollywood studios in early 2020, and only 3.9 percent of major studio unit heads were Black.⁶ The numbers were better for Blacks at the television networks but still well below proportionate representation: 6.8 percent of network CEOs, 2.9 percent of senior management team members, and 7.5 percent of unit heads in 2020.⁷ It should be noted that Hollywood did not welcome its first Black head of a major television network until 2016, when Channing Dungey was promoted to president of ABC Entertainment. But Dungey soon left ABC for a VP level position at Netflix. Among television

² For a fuller discussion of the cultural and political implications of media representations for race in America, see Hunt, Darnell. M. (ed), 2005. *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, New York: Oxford University Press

³ Gerbner, G., Gross, L, Jackson-Beeck, M., Jeffries-Fox, S, Signorielli, N. (1994). “Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective”. In M. Morgan (ed.), *Against the Mainstream: The Selected Works for George Gerbner*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, pp. 193-213.

⁴ For example, Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, 2001, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ See “Race in the Writers’ Room: How Hollywood Whitewashes the Stories that Shape America,” October 2017, Color of Change: https://hollywood.colorofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/COC_Hollywood_Race_Report.pdf

⁶ See UCLA’s “2020 Hollywood Diversity Report: A Tale of Two Hollywoods” (Part 1, Film).

⁷ See UCLA’s “2020 Hollywood Diversity Report: A Tale of Two Hollywoods” (Part 2, Television).

show creators — the creatives who develop and pitch ideas for new TV series to the networks and studios — Blacks were just 4.5 percent of the total in broadcast and 7.4 percent in digital during the 2019-20 season.

In short, the cost of marginalizing Black talent among those who call the shots in Hollywood is exceedingly high. Not only are Black managers and creatives deprived of lucrative employment opportunities,⁸ but the decisions of the white men who dominate the industry result in films and television shows that often fail to affirm the realities of Black life in America. Given what we know about the power of media to influence how we think about who we are, who we are not, and who we hope to be, this is a legacy of white supremacy that must be rectified. Thank you.

⁸ Echoing white supremacy's grip on Hollywood, a recent study from McKinsey & Company estimates that the industry is leaving \$10 billion on the table by undervaluing Black-led projects: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/black-representation-in-film-and-tv-the-challenges-and-impact-of-increasing-diversity>.