



## Erika Alexander's Official Testimony for House Committee on the Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler

### Hearing: Diversity in America: The Representation of People of Color in the Media

Thursday, September 24, 2020

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Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee about one of the most important discussions in America today, “**diversity in the entertainment industry and the ways people inside and outside the industry can and have worked to address this issue.**”

- I've been a card carrying union member and a professional in show business for 37 years, so I'm uniquely qualified to have this discussion.
- I'll also talk about the core tenet that guides my life and progress: that “Representation Matters” and that the **impact that one character can have** on the lives and psychology of today's viewers is tremendous.
- I'll address the “big picture.”
- And, like Deep Throat, I'll tell you to follow the money.

Now, I'm a girl from Flagstaff, Arizona. My mother was a teacher. My father was an itinerant preacher. They were both orphans. They had six kids. We lived in the Starlite hotel's two-bedroom shack, off Route 66. So of course, I expected to testify before congress. ;)

But seriously folks, perhaps some of you know me from my television work on *The Cosby Show* as Cousin Pam or as Maxine Shaw on *Living Single*. Maybe you know me from Oscar-winning film *Get Out*, or *Wutang: An American Saga*. I am a two-time, NAACP Best Actress winner. I've traveled with The Royal Shakespeare Company and done six plays at the Public Theater in New York City. You may even know me as the Producer of the recent John Lewis documentary, *Good Trouble*. I'm proud to be a working actor, proud to have made my living in entertainment, but I'm one of the lucky ones.

For too long, people of color, women, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities were not represented in mainstream media, or if they were, it was through harmful stereotypes. Media images have power, power to shape opinion and lives, for good or for ill.

**That's why Representation Matters.** We know this qualitatively and also through quantitative research from the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

I know first-hand that representation matters because of what I call the "[Maxine Shaw Effect](#)." The character of Maxine Shaw, the lawyer that I portrayed on the hit television series *Living Single* has inspired thousands of people to pursue education and careers in law and politics. The character even inspired Stacey Abrams and your esteemed colleague, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley. These phenomenal women, and countless everyday people, have told me that the character of Maxine Shaw inspired them to pursue the law. They tell me that the only Black female attorney they saw growing up, that resonated with them, was Maxine Shaw. A ground-breaking fictional Black character inspired trail-blazing, real-life Black achievers.

And when we say **representation matters**, we don't just mean on-screen, but behind the camera, in the trades, in the departments, and most importantly in "the room where it happens," where decisions are made.

Let's talk about the Big Picture for a second. I have seen and experienced the structural racism and discrimination that is part of the unwritten fabric of Hollywood. When a television show can only have so many Black characters before it becomes a "Black show," and is relegated to the cultural ghetto, that's structural racism. When a certain foreign country's (China's) presumed prejudices lead to the casting of only light-skinned Black actresses in shows or films that need to make part of their profit there, that's structural racism. Most crucially, since we know that representation matters, when the faces and body types we see represented in film and television are selected and cast by a largely white executive cadre, the baked-in biases of yesterday persist, though we live in an increasingly diverse world.

Here's my experience: As a dark-skinned, Black actress, certain doors would never be open to me, no matter my accomplishments. When I was young I would never be cast as an ingenue like my white age peers. When I starred, for five years, on a hit network comedy, *Living Single*, my pay and that of my costars was only a small fraction of what our white counterparts were making on *Friends*, from the same studio.

I mentioned that I was "one of the lucky ones." Here I was, a "success" by some lights, and yet I was having a hard time making a living.

My friend, Viola Davis put it well in a 2018 [interview with Porter](#) magazine: "If Caucasian women are getting 50 percent of what men are getting paid, we're not even getting a quarter of what white women are getting paid."

Frustrated with the opportunities available, I had to expand my skill set and I taught myself how to write, to create *my own* entertainment properties, but here too, I encountered structural racism. I created a science fiction film and pitched it around town. I was dismayed and disheartened when a white male studio head told me I was wasting my time, that "Black people

don't like science fiction," because they "don't see themselves in the future." He's saying this to me, a daughter of the people who created jazz, rock and roll, hip hop. We are the original futurists in American culture, but this well-paid white gatekeeper was telling me he knew better, and I meet those same people in the talent agencies and management companies that set the tone for the town, and set the value and the price of my work.

That's the last thing I want to address: If you want to see what and who Hollywood values, follow the money. Yes, there has been some change, yes, *Black Panther*, *Hamilton* and *Crazy Rich Asians* made a lot of money, talk about "one of the lucky ones," but for every extraordinary exception like that, there are hundreds of mediocre films with white casts that get greenlit, filmed, marketed and awarded each year. The lack of diversity in the executive suite leads to this ongoing pandemic of exclusion on the cultural stage.

What would I suggest to remedy this state of affairs?

Well, the one super villain black panther would not defeat is the racist infrastructure of this industry. So the hero we need is us. We the people. And to address this complex issue it will take more than a village, it will take a nation.

The government should incentivize companies to support and fund marginalized content creators. Though artists and entertainers have been vilified as everything from radicals to spoiled babies, what we really are is small business people who make America's number one export and key to our soft power in the world, entertainment. I say, support minority small businesses.

Here's what I've done: I created Color Farm Media, a company dedicated to finding new voices. We call ourselves the "Motown of film, television and tech." Our goal is to rebrand Blackness. It's why we made the John Lewis documentary *Good Trouble*, why I'm making a film about the legendary Boys Choir of Harlem, and why I'm directing a documentary about reparations.

**The seeds of the future are planted in the stories of today.** If only certain stories are told, only certain lives matter. Going forward, diversity and true representation in our stories, in our entertainment will ensure that Black Lives Matter, too.

Thank you very much.

Erika Alexander  
Co-Founder & Chief Creative Officer  
Color Farm Media

## **Supplemental Materials**

- USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative: <https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/aii>
  - Report: Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films
- UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2020:  
<https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/hollywood-diversity-report-2020/>
  - Report: Diversity Report 2020
- CAA Diversity Study:  
<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-caa-diversity-study-exclusive-20170622-story.html>
- Two in Three Black Americans Don't Feel Properly Represented in Media (Study):  
<https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/representation-matters-study-nrg-black-americans-media-1234772025/>