



HOLLYWOOD'S COLORBLIND RACISM

I'm not interested in diversity, I'm interested in brilliance.

—Nick Stevens

Nick Stevens is a top Hollywood talent agent who has worked at United Talent Agency (UTA) and William Morris Endeavor (WME). A white man in his fifties, Stevens has an impressive client list that includes A-list white actors Ben Stiller, Jack Black, Owen Wilson, Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill, and Amy Poehler, as well as writer-producer Judd Apatow.¹ Ben Stiller made this statement about Stevens: “I think Nick Stevens is a unique entity in this business: an agent with integrity, a point of view, and, most of all, humanity.”² When I asked Stevens about the lack of racial and gender diversity in Hollywood, he readily acknowledged that Hollywood “sucks at” diversity, but quickly added that he is “not interested in diversity, but brilliance.”³ This statement epitomizes Hollywood’s ambivalence about diversity. On the one hand, Hollywood purports to be an industry made up of progressive, open-minded artists who publicly condemn racism and support

diversity. On the other hand, it is one of the most powerful and flagrant (even if unconscious) perpetrators of racism through exclusionary and stereotyped storytelling and casting practices. At the root of this reasoning is a flawed meritocracy: if actors are “brilliant” enough, their race should not factor into their chances at success. The idea that intentionally casting actors of color will somehow dilute the “brilliance” of the talent pool effectively ensures their exclusion. Hollywood refuses to acknowledge that it is not an equal playing field, and brilliance is not measured in a vacuum. This is the case with the Academy Awards, given to the supposedly most brilliant actors of our times, who happen to be mostly white and chosen by a majority white male membership. In response to accusations of racism in failing to nominate a single actor of color, one anonymous Academy member said, “I’m very offended by the idea that some people are calling us racists—race was the furthest thing from my mind when I cast my ballot.”⁴ The inability of the Hollywood elite to recognize or acknowledge their own racial biases perpetuates the problem.

Hollywood maintains the racial status quo through colorblind racism, or the attribution of white dominance to individual merit and cultural explanations, while denying institutional discrimination.⁵ White director Steven Spielberg, in critiquing the Academy’s decision to strip non-active members of their voting rights, says this: “I don’t believe that there is inherent or dormant racism because of the amount of white Academy members. . . . Look, I have two black children, you know? I’ve been colorblind my entire life.”⁶ The media, according to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, reproduces dominant ideologies under an air of neutrality.⁷ It is this air of colorblind neutrality that allows Hollywood to continue its practice of excluding people of color without sanction. Colorblind racism allows white decision makers and creative personnel to divest themselves of any social or moral responsibility while maintaining hegemonic control

of the industry. Colorblind racism also exists in the larger US society, where more than 80 percent of white Americans deny the role of race in job, income, and housing discrepancies between whites and blacks.⁸ Hollywood began employing colorblind rhetoric after the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) tried to prosecute the industry for racial discrimination.⁹ Hollywood rebranded itself as an “open door” industry to all races and attributed any racial difference to fair competition.¹⁰ In addition, it curtailed any government or civil rights demand for affirmative action by labeling it “preferential treatment” and “reverse racism.” This is still the case today. Although Hollywood industry personnel affirm the existence of racial inequality, they deflect blame onto colorblind factors. Three of the most common forms of blame are (1) blame the talent (that is, Hollywood blames actors of color for lacking the numbers and skills); (2) blame what you know (that is, white Hollywood writers naturalize racial bias based on their life experiences); and (3) blame the market (that is, Hollywood naturalizes racial bias by deflecting it onto imagined audience preferences, which drive market dynamics).

BLAME THE TALENT

Hollywood sees casting as purely merit based and blames actors of color for not being up to par. The assumption of an equal playing field is a key component of colorblind racism. The idea that everyone has an equal opportunity to “make it” means that people who do not succeed must not be “good enough.” However, a study of casting notices reveals that the problem is not a lack of talent but a lack of roles written for actors of color.¹¹ White actors have access to the majority of the written roles in Hollywood (77 percent of casting notices), shutting other groups of color out from consideration.¹² As a result, actors of color have fewer work opportunities, irrespective

of their skill sets. Viola Davis said this about the lack of roles in Hollywood: “The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there.”¹³ The systematic exclusion of actors of color creates a vicious cycle in which actors of color have less access to on-the-job skills, professional recognition, and social networks. Because of systemic exclusion, actors and other artists of color have less experience, which then bars them from consideration. HBO’s president of programming, Michael Lombardo, describes this problem:

People say, “I want the most experienced person.” And the minute you say that, you’re cutting out, by and large, women, people of color, and you’re left with white dudes. And, nothing wrong with white dudes—I’m one of them—but there has to be a decision made that the experience on a résumé is not the sine qua non for success as an executive. And everyone’s on the same page that it’s the right thing. I think unfortunately everyone wants somebody else to take a gamble on someone whose résumé doesn’t reflect the kind of experience they need.¹⁴

Another common “blame the talent” excuse is the complaint that there are not enough actors of color. One African American female talent agent told me that among agents there is a perceived shortage of Asian American actors. When I asked whether she had contacted East West Players (the leading Asian American theater group in the nation, located in Los Angeles), she said she had never heard of it. An unwillingness to go outside traditional venues to find actors of color is a common problem among Hollywood personnel. As Adam Moore, the national director of equal employment opportunity (EEO) and diversity for the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), explains:

People just get frustrated. “No I can’t find them, they’re not out there, so I’m just not going to look anymore.” As opposed to you might have to go to places that you don’t normally go. Maybe the ten agents you normally work with or have for the last ten years, maybe their rosters aren’t as diverse as you want, but it doesn’t mean there aren’t people out there representing them who are qualified for the work. They probably just aren’t in the places you’re used to looking.

Because white gatekeepers have mainly white social networks, their knowledge of actors of color is limited. One Latina actor told me, “I have a good friend of mine who was a [white] producer, a really well-known producer of sitcoms. And he once called me to ask something about a casting choice because the only Latinos he knew were his gardener and maid. He doesn’t—he just doesn’t—socialize. . . . So, they wanted to put Latinos in, but they only knew the maids and the gardeners.” Instead of acknowledging their own ignorance or taking responsibility for not investing in a deep and thorough search, Hollywood gatekeepers would rather blame a lack of qualified talent.

Hollywood also blames the exclusion of actors of color on a lack of skill and excellence. In 1999, Fox Entertainment President Doug Herzog downplayed the fact that none of the Fox prime-time television series featured a single person of color by saying he wanted “the best show on the air.”¹⁵ Similarly, when asked why no black characters appear in his films (many of which are set in ethnically diverse New York City), Oscar-winning director Woody Allen said, “You don’t hire people based on race. You hire people based on who is correct for the part. The implication is that I’m deliberately not hiring black actors, which is stupid. I cast only what’s right for the part. Race, friendship means nothing to me except who is right for the

part.”¹⁶ Allen denied any personal racism by claiming he hires the person who is “right for the part.” Given that whites are more likely to hire other whites, who is “best” and “right” is likely to skew white. One of the very few black actors cast in Allen’s films is Hazelle Goodman, who played a prostitute in *Deconstructing Harry* (1997).¹⁷ This tendency to limit actors of color to stereotyped roles prevents them from consideration for many lead roles. African American actor Gabrielle Union dismisses the “blame the talent” excuse: “So when you’re saying, ‘We just went with the best person,’ that’s all good and well if every person was considered. But every person isn’t considered, so this idea of the best person is sort of a random, made-up thing to make up for a lack of inclusion in the audition process.”¹⁸ When white gatekeepers are reticent when it comes to exerting an additional effort to recruit actors of color, they end up relying on the larger pool of white actors. The “best” person is really the most convenient.

Hollywood also blames the talent by pointing to the few successful actors of color as evidence of meritocracy. In my interviews, a white male actor and acting teacher pointed to celebrities of color, such as Forrest Whittaker and Oprah, as evidence that hard work and focus are sufficient for overcoming any obstacles in the industry. However, the presence of a few token celebrities of color does not prove racial equity. In fact, Samuel L. Jackson says the film industry often seems to have tunnel vision when it comes to black talent: “There is an A-list . . . and if they can’t get us, they say, ‘Well, we’ll wait till we can.’ They’re not looking for the next us.”¹⁹ Using the few stars of color to blame actors of color for not working hard enough assumes falsely that Hollywood is an equal playing field where everyone has the same opportunities for success.

Blaming the talent is such an endemic rationale that even some people of color espouse it. Kenan Thompson, an African American

cast member of *Saturday Night Live* (SNL, NBC), blames the lack of black women on SNL on not being able to “find ones that are ready.”²⁰ Similarly, an Asian American male writer-director blames the lack of trained Asian American actors on the Asian American culture, in which Asian parents dissuade their children from entering the entertainment industry. Though there may be some truth in these observations, they focus on outcomes rather than root causes. They fail to account for structural barriers that prevent actors of color from gaining adequate professional experience to be “ready.” Furthermore, the dearth of successful actors of color makes the occupational field less attractive to communities of color, particularly immigrants. When there are so few successful actors of color, the risk may seem too high for some groups of color. Consequently, the root cause is structural, not individual.

Sometimes Hollywood blames an entire racial group for their low numbers in Hollywood. Specifically, casting directors blame Asian American actors for being unexpressive and therefore less castable. This generalization pigeonholes Asians into very narrow stereotypes, while excluding them from the majority of roles—particularly leads. Mako, a veteran Oscar-nominated Japanese American actor, describes the systematic exclusion of Asian Americans: “Asian-American actors have never been treated as full-time actors. We’re always hired as part-timers. That is, producers call us when they need us for only race-specific roles. If a part was seen as too ‘demanding,’ that part often went to a non-Asian.”²¹ This prejudice against Asian American actors denies them employment and skill-building opportunities central to career advancement. Thomas, a Chinese American male actor in his mid-thirties, describes to me the structural racism that prevents Asian American actors from improving their skills: “It’s not a lack of talent. I think it’s a lack of opportunity to really spread your wings and get really strong. . . . It’s

very hard to get better when you have a one- or two-liner here and there. . . . It's like how can you become a great marathon runner if you're only allowed to sprint twenty-five yards?" Hollywood would rather blame actors of color for lacking numbers and skills than admit a systemic bias that prevents them from gaining the necessary exposure to showcase their talent. As one African American female actor told me, "Nobody can tell you're a good actor with eight lines."

Hollywood also claims "reverse racism" to deny the existence of structural inequality. In 1972, African American activists and artists formed the Coalition Against Blaxploitation to protest "the power exploitation of the black condition in America by the white-owned, white-controlled, and white-financed motion picture industry."²² In response, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)—a trade association that represents the major Hollywood studios—dismissed the coalition's claims of discrimination and framed the lack of African Americans in the industry as a natural outcome of competition between groups.²³ Instead of acknowledging institutional bias, the MPAA accused the group of "reverse discrimination" and asking for "a handout."²⁴ The usage of accusations of reverse racism to prevent structural changes to Hollywood's racist system continues to this day. In 2015, a *Deadline Hollywood* article critiqued the trend of "ethnic" castings in the 2015 television season as reverse racism. The author wrote, "Some agents have signaled that, instead of opening the field for actors of any race to compete for any role in a color-blind manner, there has [*sic*] been a significant number of parts designated as ethnic this year, making them off-limits for Caucasian actors."²⁵ Reverse racism dismisses the historical exclusion of people of color and frames white domination as evidence of white superiority. Any increase in the number of people of color within film and television is therefore attributed to quotas rather than talent. This type of thinking is not only

flawed, but also a major barrier to racial progress. As one critic said, "If one group maintains an apartheid chokehold on the arts even as the country grows more diverse, there's a problem with the pipeline, not the talent pool."²⁶

BLAME "WHAT YOU KNOW"

Hollywood writers use the "Write what you know" mantra as a defense against accusations of racism. This rationale, at its core, naturalizes racial segregation: whites simply prefer to be with other whites. Therefore, whites cannot be blamed if all they have are white relationships and experiences on which to base their writing. By reducing the creative process to personal experience, white writers divert attention away from their racial bias.²⁷ When asked about the lack of blacks in his ABC network show *Wasteland* (1999), set in New York City, white male show-creator Kevin Williamson stated that New York looks that way because that is his "experience of it."²⁸ Given that New York City has a population consisting of 25.5 percent blacks, 28.6 percent Latinos, and 12.7 percent Asian Americans,²⁹ writers are intentionally eliminating 66.8 percent of the population. Similarly, Lena Dunham, in response to criticism about the lack of actors of color on her hit HBO show *Girls* (also set in New York City), said she writes "super-specific" to her "experience" as a "half-Jew, half-WASP" rather than experiences of women of color she "can't speak to accurately."³⁰ To fend off critiques of racism when writing for all-white casts set in diverse locations, white writers personalize the writing process to their life experiences.

The "Write what you know" rationale is pervasive throughout Hollywood, even among actors of color. Latina actor Sofia Vergara exonerates writers thus: "I cannot blame the writers because when you're a writer, you write about what you know. So you cannot tell

an American writer to just write about some other culture and think it will be as natural as writing about an American person.”³¹ Similarly, Cassie, a forty-five-year-old African American female actor, attributes the overrepresentation of white roles not to racism but to white writers’ lack of exposure to blacks: “Well, the white actors get more [roles] because there’s white writers writing it. See, you can’t say they’re prejudiced or nothing because they’re white—white to white people. They’re white, that’s what they know. . . . I mean, how many producers know black people, really? They don’t hang out on Crenshaw.” Cassie takes the prejudice factor out and attributes the lack of black roles to a lack of social contact between white writers and African Americans. Similarly, Isabel, a Chinese American actor in her late forties, ascribes stereotyping to writing outside one’s race: “I think until the script or the writer who created an Asian character knows the culture, they will always be writing from the outside. . . . So, nine out of ten times when you get a script with an Asian character, the lines are usually not quite how an Asian or an Asian American would speak. . . . But they write it in broken English.” Too often, the “Write what you know” rationale lets white writers off the hook for their racial bias or lack of racial awareness.

Despite its wide acceptance, the “Write what you know” rationale is fundamentally flawed. First, the idea that white writers can never write authentic stories about people of color is problematic. It falsely assumes that people of color are defined only by their race and glosses over national, ethnic, and geographic diversity within racial groups. This rationale also gives primacy to race, avoiding the ways gender, sexuality, class, age, and other factors also influence experiences. Furthermore, it assumes immutable differences between racial groups—marginalizing people of color as racial “others.” This is false because white writers never mention racial kinship when

they create white characters. In an interview, writer-director Christopher Nolan describes how he based the (white male) protagonist of *Interstellar* (2014) on his own “underlying moral quandaries, the underlying emotional stakes,” and “fatherhood.”³² These are common human qualities that are not restricted to a single race. Nonetheless, many white writers see emotional depth and relational experiences as exclusive to white characters.

The “Write what you know” rationale also fails to account for creativity and imagination in the writing process. White male screenwriter and director Scott Cooper describes his multipronged writing process: “I tend to write from personal experience, from research, and from imagination.”³³ Cooper set his film *Out of the Furnace* (2013) in Braddock, Pennsylvania, a working-class town made up of African Americans and whites. Though his protagonist was white (played by Christian Bale), Cooper cast two supporting stars of color: Zoe Saldana (who played Bale’s love interest) and Forrest Whitaker. Clearly, not all white writer-directors are incapable of writing characters of color.

A writer’s life experience is a single, not total, source. After all, no one in Hollywood expects a writer to have firsthand experience when creating a serial killer character. Writers of fantasy and science fiction must employ their imaginations. For period projects set in the past, writers have to research the setting, the people, the dialect, and so forth. If all stories were based strictly on “Write what you know,” entire genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror, would disappear. Consequently, the “Write what you know” excuse is merely a trope that allows white writers to exclude people of color without sanction. As one veteran Latina actor told me: “Latinos get stereotyped because people don’t know how to write about us. Not because they’re not Latino, but because they

don't do their homework. And the only Latinos they know are the service workers.”

There are also too many exceptions to the “Write what you know” excuse for it to be true. Danny Strong—a white executive producer and writer on Fox’s hip-hop melodrama *Empire*—writes dialogue for black characters based on research. He admitted watching hours of interviews with rapper Kanye West to write dialogue for the black hip-hop moguls in *Empire*.³⁴ White male writers can even create characters of a different race and gender than themselves. Peter Nowalk, the white male creator of *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC), credits Viola Davis (the African American female star of his show) as his muse: “Working with her, I’ve realized how much she’s a storyteller at heart. . . . With her performance, she’s telling a story. She wants to tell the best story. For me, it elevates my writing. I will forever be a better writer for working with her.”³⁵ Consequently, “write what you know” is an incomplete characterization of the creative process, selectively used by some white writers to justify excluding characters of color. All writers, regardless of race and gender, can recognize the universal human experiences that transcend race and can “do their homework” to properly represent any group with whom they are unfamiliar.

White writers use the “Write what you know” rationale to cover up their own implicit racial biases. In reality, it is a form of color-blind racism that naturalizes racial difference to justify the institutional exclusion of actors of color from film and television. By characterizing people of color as fundamentally different from whites, white writers strip them of their humanity, making it easier to exclude them from complex roles. The “Write what you know” framework facilitates the racial dominance of white-centered projects.

BLAME THE MARKET

A common saying in Hollywood is “It’s not a black or white issue, it’s a green issue,” meaning that profit trumps racial considerations.³⁶ Hollywood commonly blames racial inequality on market forces, equating white actors with profit and actors from all other groups with risk. A white vice president of development at a film studio explains this rationale:

When I’m in a meeting about a big film, if the script doesn’t call for a black or minority character, it really doesn’t cross our minds to put somebody black in it. It’s not racism, though I’m sure that’s what everyone wants to call it. But all-white movies sell. There’s no blacks in *Saving Private Ryan* or *There’s Something About Mary*, and they sold at the box office. So there’s not a lot of incentive to make changes. It’s wrong, but that’s the reality.³⁷

This ethnocentric idea that the market prefers white actors is a myth that continues to drive funding and casting decisions in Hollywood.

The uncertainty of success fuels Hollywood’s culture of racial bias. There is a general belief in Hollywood that actors of color lack the universal appeal to sustain big-budget film and television.³⁸ Despite having no large-scale evidence, the “blame the market” rationale circulates widely in Hollywood. From film financiers to directors, there is a racist perception that actors of color devalue the market.³⁹ Director Ridley Scott, in response to critiques of his casting of white actors as Egyptian leads in *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), blamed it on financiers: “I can’t mount a film of this budget . . . and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such. . . . I’m just not going to get it financed.”⁴⁰ However, an actor’s race is not a reliable method of predicting commercial

success for films or television shows.⁴¹ In fact, between 70 percent and 75 percent of new television series are cancelled in their first year, making prime-time television a high-risk enterprise irrespective of the racial breakdown of cast members.⁴² Consequently, having white stars does not guarantee profit. In fact, the majority of 2014 summer films flopped at the box office despite featuring white male leads. Adjusting for inflation, it was the worst summer box office since 1997.⁴³ Nonetheless, Hollywood's majority white-male decision makers would rather try and fail with the same (white) formula than take a chance on projects featuring actors of color. As a capital-driven, high-risk industry, Hollywood cultivates racist creative and casting decisions that reproduce the same white male-centered films and shows.

At the heart of Hollywood's "blame the market" argument is an imagined "middle American" audience—characterized as conservative whites residing in the Midwest and watching only white films and shows. This is the "watch what you know" version of the "write what you know" rationale applied to an imagined white audience. It also naturalizes racial prejudice, assuming that whites naturally gravitate toward stories about other whites. Hollywood often references the middle-American audience when casting whites over actors of color. A producer once told a Latino actor that Latinos are "not going to sell in middle America."⁴⁴ The trope of the middle American audience can influence how actors of color present themselves. One white female casting director told me that actors of color have to alter their behaviors: "I have black actor friends who have to *be* white on commercial auditions—they have to speak white and move white and think white, and look as white as possible, so that they don't frighten the ad agency's middle America people who have to cast a black person so they get their demographics." For black actors to raise their star power, they have to foster crossover appeal

by appearing in projects with predominantly white casts, which receive higher funding and wider distribution.⁴⁵ White actors do not face the same pressures. Forcing actors of color to fit into white behavioral expectations further solidifies white cultural dominance in Hollywood.

Hollywood fails to acknowledge that any audience preferences for white male protagonists are “socially constructed choices based in part on the industry’s history of discrimination and stereotyping in casting.”⁴⁶ The very idea that audiences will not accept stories about people outside their own social identifiers (for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class) disregards Hollywood’s power to shape tastes. Any preferences for white male protagonists must be attributed, at least partly, to the fact that audiences have never or rarely been offered any alternatives.⁴⁷ One study of white moviegoers found that “frequent movie viewers preferred White casts to Black casts . . . but light movie viewers showed no such preference.”⁴⁸ This shows that audiences’ preferences for all-white casts actually come from watching films and not from preexisting racial inclinations.⁴⁹ At the same time, white audiences’ preferences are no longer racially homogenous. White audiences increasingly consume shows featuring actors of color. For example, *Fresh Off the Boat*, with its all-Asian American cast, has a 60 percent white audience base.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the idea of a white market disregards audiences of color. As audience demographics and preferences change, Hollywood must reevaluate who the intended market is. Forty-three percent of millennials (twenty to thirty-five years old, as of 2016) are nonwhite, the highest share of any current or previous generation.⁵¹ By 2043, whites will no longer make up a majority of the overall US population.⁵² The imagined middle-American audience no longer exists. Middle America is increasingly diverse, with more than a quarter of the population made up of nonwhite residents. As Adam Moore told

me, “There are always going to be people who say, ‘Well that’s not going to play in Peoria’ but I think people’s understanding of what Peoria looks like is outdated. I don’t think it looks like what [they] think it looks like.” Peoria, Illinois, is often the referenced location of an imagined middle-American audience. However, present-day Peoria is more than a quarter nonwhite.⁵³

In fact, people of color are the biggest media consumers—exceeding white audiences. In 2014, people of color purchased 44 percent of domestically sold movie tickets.⁵⁴ African Americans watch more television than does any other racial group: nearly 200 hours per month, or roughly 60 more hours than the total audience, according to Nielsen.⁵⁵ Latinos are more likely than any other ethnic group to go to movies, and are growing in their annual ticket purchases. This may be a continued trend, considering that the market share of white moviegoers declined from 2009 to 2013, while the share of Latino moviegoers increased over the same period.⁵⁶ Asian Americans use the Internet and download movies more than any other racial group.⁵⁷ All of these numbers will only increase as US demographics shift from a majority white country to one populated primarily by people of color.

Audiences of color already propel the success of diverse projects. Films and television shows with casts and writers that match the nation’s racial and ethnic diversity are likely to see higher box office returns and ratings.⁵⁸ The financial success of racially diverse franchises such as *The Fast and the Furious* films counters Hollywood’s traditional view that actors of color are not bankable stars. The film *Fast and Furious 6* (2013), directed by Taiwanese American director Justin Lin, did particularly well among Latinos, who comprised 32 percent of the audience.⁵⁹ After only seventeen days in theaters, *Furious 7* (2015) became Universal Studio’s first film to cross the \$1 billion mark in its initial theatrical release.⁶⁰ Directed by James

Wan (an Australian director of Malaysian Chinese descent), *Furious 7* featured a diverse cast, including Dwayne Johnson and Michelle Rodriguez. One study of 5,438 domestic films (1997–2007) found that African American films generally outperform other types of films at the North American box office.⁶¹ Furthermore, according to another study, “return on investment for white films in the domestic market” is “much lower than that of black films, for which revenues significantly exceeds the cost of production.”⁶² In 2015, three very different African American–led films (*Straight Outta Compton*, *The War Room*, and *The Perfect Guy*) topped the US box office for five consecutive weeks.⁶³ This proves that actors of color-led films can beat out white-led films at the box office. Furthermore, the international film market, with growth coming mainly out of Asia and Latin America, makes up nearly 70 percent of movie studios’ annual box office revenue.⁶⁴ In fact, with an average growth of 34 percent a year, China is on track to surpass the United States as the largest film market by 2017.⁶⁵ Already, Chinese investment in Hollywood has led to increased castings of Chinese actors in films such as *Looper* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014).⁶⁶

In television, audiences of color have brought success to shows featuring leads of color, such as ABC’s *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, Warner Bros.’ *Jane the Virgin*, and Fox’s *Empire*. All of these shows have significant proportions of African American viewers (*Scandal* at 37 percent, *How to Get Away with Murder* at 32 percent, *Jane the Virgin* at 19 percent, and *Empire* at a whopping 61 percent).⁶⁷ Audiences of color demonstrate a clear preference for shows featuring people of color. The largest percentage of viewers of color tuned into the Academy Awards in “years when the most nominees of color and films featuring protagonists of color were in contention” and tuned out in the years with the least diversity.⁶⁸

Despite evidence of success, when a single project or a handful of projects with leads of color fails financially, decision makers extrapolate the failure to the entire racial group. Despite debuting as the highest-rated new series, *All-American Girl*—the first prime-time Asian American sitcom on a broadcast television network (1994–1995)—was cancelled after the first season.⁶⁹ Broadcast networks did not take a chance on another Asian American sitcom for another twenty years. In contrast, when white male-led projects fail, the blame is attributed to factors other than their race and gender. Hollywood is also more likely to support white-led projects even if they have a rocky start. Case in point, the television series *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990–1998) was renewed for a total of nine seasons despite low viewership in the first four seasons.⁷⁰ The differential racial treatment is based on prejudice rather than rigorous research.

Hollywood also fails to consider how racial disparities in film funding, distribution, and promotion can doom projects featuring actors of color. Because studios and networks doubt the ability of projects starring actors of color to succeed, they invest less money in funding and promoting them, thereby dooming many to failure. African American director Ava DuVernay describes “a fundamental disrespect inherent in the distribution and amplification of films,” resulting in “cinema segregation in how films are seen and not seen.”⁷¹ This is what happened to Tina Mabry, whose film (*Mississippi Damned*) was rejected by sales reps who told her the market could not support two black films when her film premiered the day after Lee Daniels’s *Precious*.⁷² The inability to see films beyond the race of the filmmakers and actors demonstrates the racist myopia of Hollywood decision makers. The misguided belief that projects starring people of color do not make money prevents them from getting funded, made, or even properly distributed. As Oscar-winning actor Octavia Spencer says:

There are so few roles out there. And even if it is a film that could be led by a black actress, how many times is that film going to get funded? Let's just be real. But it's not just black people. It's Asians, it's Hispanic people if you're not Selma Hayek. . . . The fact that *Think Like a Man* made so much money last year—over \$100 million—but got very limited worldwide distribution is a problem.⁷³

There is a long-standing belief that films and television shows starring actors of color do not sell overseas. *Think Like a Man* (2012) was cancelled in France for fear that a film that “lacked diversity” (because of its nearly all-black cast) would not sell, though other US films with all-white casts did not prompt the same concerns.⁷⁴ However, *Creed* (2015), a film with black leads, sold over one million tickets just two weeks after its opening day in France.⁷⁵ *Empire* also built an overseas audience, dispelling Hollywood's staunch belief that shows with black casts cannot sell well internationally.⁷⁶ Besides lack of distribution and marketing, distributors may not know how to market a film featuring people of color. Rather than researching target audiences, they rely on racial stereotypes and conflation. For example, New Line Cinema botched the theatrical release and marketing campaign for *Bamboozled*, an art house film, by marketing it instead as a hip-hop gangsta film like *Menace II Society*.⁷⁷ The lack of proper distribution and promotion of films leads to lower box office sales and lower profits. Rather than blame actors of color for failing to make money, Hollywood can reevaluate its own distribution and marketing biases.

Even though most Hollywood industry personnel profess to be politically and socially liberal, they remain “steeped in the tacit assumptions of a dominant culture that retains vestiges of prejudice.”⁷⁸ Implicit bias affects everyone, regardless of political

persuasion. Hollywood's confusion over artists of color who share the same race (Yukta Mookhey for Priyanka Chopra on *Nightline*,⁷⁹ Gina Rodriguez for America Ferrara in a Golden Globes tweet,⁸⁰ and Alan Yang for Kelvin Yu in *the Hollywood Reporter*⁸¹) is evidence of an industry-wide implicit bias. They simply do not recognize or value actors of color in the same ways they do white actors. Like Americans' unwillingness to pay more than ten dollars for Chinese or Mexican food,⁸² Hollywood industry practices are based in racial and cultural biases that have nothing to do with an actors' net worth. By pinning racial bias onto an imagined audience, Hollywood gatekeepers effectively absolve themselves from any prejudicial writing and casting practices. But, as one talent agent explains, "It's not the audience that is the problem. It's the people behind the scenes. It's the head honchos, the big business people."⁸³ Hollywood's racist system gets perpetuated because the industry refuses to recognize the implicit bias people at all levels harbor and the institutionalized colorblind excuses they perpetuate.

To change the system, Hollywood must reevaluate how it measures merit and stop positing diversity and brilliance as mutually exclusive. Diverse viewpoints generate more innovation than homogenous ones do. As a result, the idea of diversity hires should not be a stigma but an accolade. Colorblind excuses such as a lack of talent of color or market preferences no longer ring true. Projects starring actors of color continue to demonstrate universal appeal by their domestic and global successes. Intentionality in creating, funding, distributing, and publicizing projects led by people of color is both an equal employment issue and a savvy business move.