

A Black man with dreadlocks is looking through a hand frame. The hand is in the foreground, out of focus, forming a rectangular frame around the man's face. The man is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

being seen

THE BLACK COMMUNITIES REPORT

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BSO
BLACK SCREEN OFFICE | BUREAU DE L'ÉCRAN DES NOIRS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authentic representation of Black Communities requires a good understanding of the demographics of Black Canadians, including geographic population distribution, countries of origin and immigration patterns. It is important to understand how Black Canadian populations differ from African Americans. Black Canadians do not feel represented on Canadian screens nor by the representation on American screens, which matches skin tone but not cultural context.

The list of recurring stereotypes that should be avoided include:

- Black characters as only gangsters or drug dealers
- The Angry Black Woman
- The Overly Sexualized Black Woman
- Broken families
- Being the best friend or sidekick and not the protagonist
- The ‘Magical Negro’ who helps the (generally white) protagonist on their character arc

This report further explores the consequences of poor representation and the kinds of stories and characters that Black participants in BSO’s **‘Being Seen’** consultations want to see. It identifies the topics that participants considered off limits to those who are not part of their community, including:

- Black love
- Black maleness
- Black motherhood
- Slavery
- Black hair

The final point above of—Black hair—was also explored by the participants as an equity issue. More needs to be done in terms of qualified hair and makeup artists on set so that Black performers can look and feel their best and their performances can support authentic representation.

The directives were developed from the consultations to provide creators, producers, funders, broadcasters and streaming services with guidance to help them create and assess more authentic and inclusive screen content.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘**Being Seen**’ research project was initiated in response to the growing demand for a restructuring of the Canadian screen-based media sector to provide equitable access for Canadians of all backgrounds and identities to create content, and to allow all Canadians to see themselves reflected on our screens. In the **Black Communities Report**, the research digs into the responses from consultations and interviews that were unique to those who identify as Black, namely:

- Stereotypes
- Better Portrayal of the Black Communities
- Consequences of Poor Representation
- What They Want to See More of
- Topics that are Off Limits

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

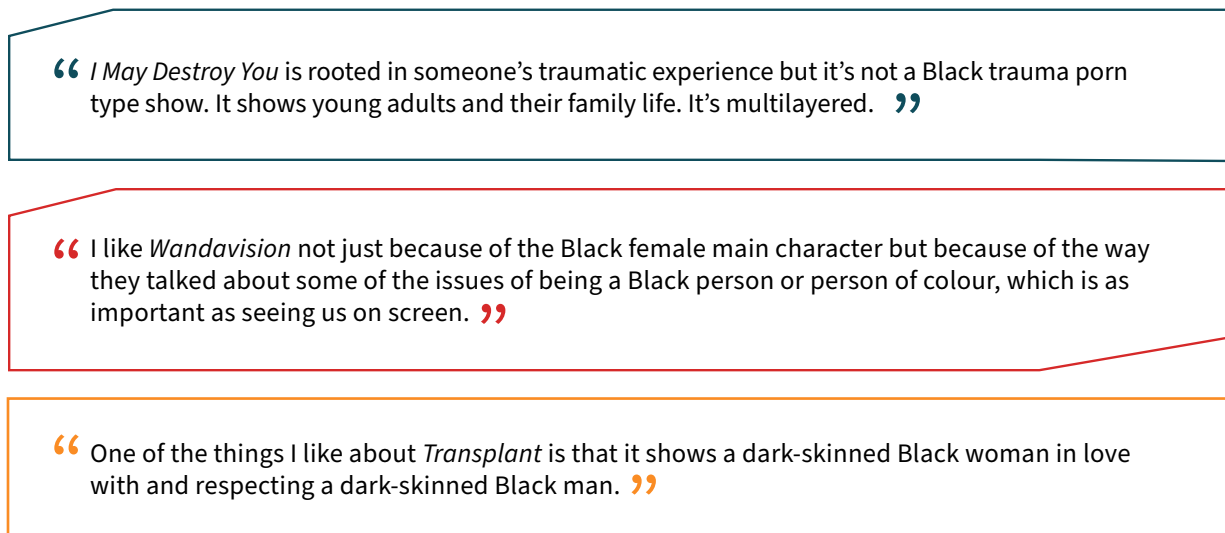
This guide, together with the **Core Themes Report** and its other companion reports (People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+, People with Disabilities and Children’s Media), will help content creators, funders, broadcasters, streaming services, digital platforms and distributors to create authentic and representative film, television and interactive digital media. It is intended that the **Black Communities Report** will be read together with the other reports, but that those with a specific interest in authentic representation of Black communities will be able to dive deeper into these issues.

The Research Team (see Appendix A of the **Core Themes Report**) conducted focus groups in English and in French that targeted Black industry professionals and members of the public. Those who identified as Black also participated in focus groups that targeted People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ and People with Disabilities. The Research Team also conducted one-on-one interviews with select Black industry professionals.

For more information on the Research Background of the project, Methodology of the consultations, overall demographics of those consulted and the Research Team, please consult the **Core Themes Report**.

What is Authentic Representation?

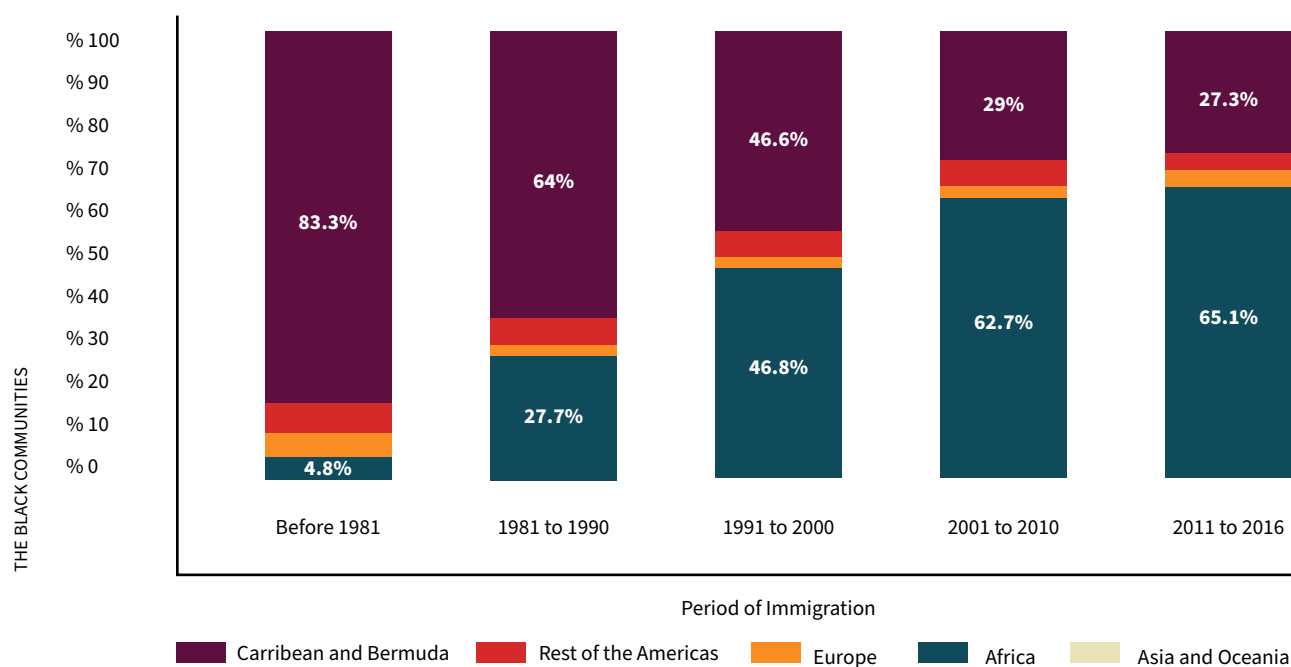
The following Word Cloud illustrates titles of shows that the participants identified as having positive representation or where they could see themselves. Size represents frequency, with *I May Destroy You*, being the show most referred to as having positive representation because of the authenticity of the characters and the fact that race was not their defining characteristic. Most of the shows mentioned were Black stories but it should also be noted that some (e.g., *We Are Lady Parts*, *Transplant*, *Anne with an E*, *Bridgerton*, *Sense8*, *Wanda-vision*), were held up as examples of positive Black representation within larger or more diverse stories. There were Canadian shows mentioned (*Da Kink in My Hair*, *Jean of the Joneses*, *Diggstown*, *Anne with an E*, *Transplant*) but most of the films, television shows and games were produced in the UK or US.



Many Black participants complained that they only saw themselves on television and in film through American content which did not reflect their Canadian experience, either as Canadians who have lived here for generations or as more recent immigrants.

In the 2016 Census, 1.2 million Canadians identified as Black¹. In 2016, the Black population was 3.5% of Canada's total population and is projected to increase to 5 - 5.6% by 2036. 43.6% of Black Canadians were born in Canada. The majority of Black immigrants in the 80s and 90s came from Jamaica or Haiti and were sponsored by family members already living here. Immigration patterns then shifted and the largest share of Black newcomers who came between 2011 and 2016 were economic immigrants. 3 out of 10 were refugees. Economic immigrants came from Nigeria, Haiti, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Jamaica. The top countries of birth of refugees were the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Haiti, Somalia and Ethiopia. The shift in sources of Black immigration can be clearly seen in the graph below.

Region of birth of Black immigrants by period of immigration, Canada 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016

As there has been significant immigration from Haiti for decades and increasing immigration from former French colonies in Africa such as Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo, a higher percentage of people within the Black population speak French at home (28%) than the total Canadian population (23.3%). 94.3% of Canada's Black population live in urban centres but no longer almost exclusively in Toronto. Urban centres with the highest percentages of Canada's Black population are Toronto (7.5% Black), Montreal (6.8%),

¹ [Diversity of the Black Population in Canada: An Overview](#), Statistics Canada. Note that Statistics Canada chose to not include as Black anyone who chose to identify as more than one group (e.g. Black and Latin American) unless it was to identify as both Black and white. It is unknown how many multiracial people who self-identify as Black are therefore not included.

Ottawa-Gatineau - Ontario side (6.3%) and Oshawa (5.7%). The Quebec side of Ottawa-Gatineau, Lethbridge and Moncton had the fastest growing Black populations between 2011 and 2016. Nova Scotia has the fifth largest Black population in the country and the majority were born in Canada. Quebec has the second largest Black population in Canada and it has more than doubled in the last 20 years. More than 43% of the foreign-born Black population in Quebec is from Haiti and the largest Haitian community in Canada is in Montreal. Though the overall Black population in Ontario is growing, its share of the Black population in Canada is decreasing. The fastest growing Black population in Canada is in the Prairies, where it has more than quadrupled in the last 20 years, driven mostly by immigration from African countries.

This detailed portrait of Black communities is important to understand when comparing the Canadian context to the context that is being portrayed by American content. For example, 14% of the American population is Black compared to Canada's 3.5% and only 10% of the U.S. Black population are foreign-born compared to 56.4% of the Canadian Black population².

“ At the Canadian or Quebec level there is not enough representation. We're not focusing enough on the different ways of being Black. You can be Black of African descent, Caribbean descent, etc., even if history says we're all from Africa. We also have to differentiate between Black Americans and Black Canadians. ”

“ The Nova Scotian experience is non-existent. People are fascinated with the history of Black people in Nova Scotia and want to include us in different forms of entertainment media. But often, folks might not understand our history. They're not sure where to place us in the Black Canadian story, what people imagine is the Black first-or second-generation experience in larger cities. So we are depicted more as kind of like Black Americans - but we have our own culture, our own stories, narratives. I'm interested in seeing Black people depicted in Canadian stories in more authentic ways, whether you're in Calgary, the Prairies, you're in Nova Scotia, you're in Toronto. The experience is different, our portrayal should be different on screen. ”

“ Having Haitian parents, I have a problem with how Haitians are portrayed as voodoo priests and drug dealers basically. In *Grand Army* they can't find people to speak Creole properly when the Haitian community is huge in New York. It's always the same struggling story. I have four cousins who are doctors, uncles and aunts who are doctors and teachers. We don't see these backgrounds for Haitian characters. ”

² [The Growing Diversity of Black America](#), Pew Research Center, March 25, 2021

“ I can’t think of any current shows that depict the contemporary Caribbean immigrant experience. It’s not all carefree and sea and sand. ”

“ There are lots of Quebeckers of Haitian origin but we never see them on the screen. ”

“ I have such a problem with bad Jamaican accents when there are so many Jamaican actors out there. How are you going to attract these people if you’re not even speaking to them? ”

“ Growing up I always felt like the outcast, not just for being Black but for having dark skin and being East African with certain features that some don’t identify with being ‘Black’. ”

Stereotypes

As mentioned in the **Core Themes Report**, people from underrepresented identities are frustrated by simplistic and tokenistic portrayals. They want to see full, rich, complex characters but too often see tokens and stereotypes. There are a handful of recurring stereotypes that appear in all screen media that upset members of Black communities:

- Black characters as only gangsters or drug dealers
- The Angry Black Woman
- The Overly Sexualized Black Woman
- Broken families
- Being the best friend or sidekick and not the protagonist
- The ‘Magical Negro’ who helps the (generally white) protagonist on their character arc

“ Part of the problem for me is just this constant assumption that because you’re a person of colour, you wear your trauma like a coat and it follows you all over the place. I don’t see anywhere a sort of level field where I just get to be. Why can’t we just be women who aren’t angry, we aren’t traumatized in some way, who have figured out who we are within the world of being Black in a fairly white world. ”

“ The rapper, the athlete, the flirtatious thief, the convict, the bouncer at the nightclub, these are all stereotypes I hate. ”

“ The Angry Black Woman or the sassy Black friend. It minimizes Black women down to a very one dimensional, often negative element. ”

“ It's a bit classic, the secondary character who helps the white guy to accomplish his mission and who dies quickly so that the white guy can accomplish his mission. ”

They are not asking that these kinds of characters be removed from our screens but that they be given complexity and that representation is not limited to these characters.

“ Single mothers, when portrayed as that is all she is. She needs to be striving for something. ”

“ We have a lot of representation of Black people in street gangs, poverty, drugs, violence. For me, I am a bit tired. It's not that it doesn't exist but often this is the entire representation of Black people. ”

“ There is a lot of representation of street gangs or crime and the character is not taken in its entirety. We don't know why he became a member of a street gang, we don't know what difficulties he has. Really what I find deplorable is making these people criminals for nothing, as if nothing got them to sell drugs. ”

“ You have the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman. Since she is angry that means that she suffered or she has something that pisses her off, so she is very violent. We don't see doctors, lawyers or a female graphic designer who is Lesbian and lives with her wife in a small village. ”

“ We are stereotyping everyone around us every day. What disturbs me about television is when stereotypes are presented but no one gives context for them. For example, a young Afro-descendant who lives in Montreal North, if it's realistic, he's going to make mistakes in his life. But when we see the character we don't see the context of why he is doing what he's doing. Generally the screenwriters who write these stories don't know the context because they are part of the white majority. ”

“ Black women, when they are going through mental health struggles, are often seen as coming undone, which is usually indicated by having our hair natural, wearing traditional clothing, being on beaches, in places where our histories have come from in Africa or the Caribbean. It is toxic to think that natural hair means that you are going through mental health struggles. ”

With some creativity these tropes can be turned on their head.

“ What upsets me is the ‘Magical Negro’. A lot of these tropes can be utilized in a powerful way, when told from the perspective of that character, as opposed to the perspective of the white character that they're assisting, essentially. ”

Consequences

The **Being Seen** research highlights the industry and the public's demand for authentic representation but what are the consequences to poor or missing representation? Why does it matter so much? In the **Core Themes Report** there was discussion about the importance of accurately reflecting our society but poor representation can have personal and direct consequences for members of Black communities.

“ I straightened my hair till I was in grade 12. That's not something that we should have to do. Now we see braids and that's nice to see in the media but it's also dismissing the experience we had growing up. ”

“ I don’t think we shouldn’t do crime stuff, but I think that we should have very complex portrayals of both our people who make their living from crime and also law enforcement, and also the civilians. I think that more harm is done from the lack of complex portrayals. ”

“ I grew up in a very white town but the media only had *Boyz in the Hood* and John Singleton films so I was always questioned ‘why don’t you talk and walk like the dudes on TV?’. This monolithic idea of what it meant to be Black came from one depiction. Some people I knew struggled with the conflict between who they were and the identity others tried to give them. ”

“ With the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman or Strong Black Woman you’re just not allowed to show any kind of vulnerability or any kind of weakness or any kind of humanity. Also dark-skinned Black women are being depicted as less desirable than their light-skinned counterparts. ”

“ The bias against dark-skinned women came from white people but now has seeped into Black culture. ”

“ There is a general representation of Africans as primitive and savage and you have to explain that there’s so many countries, so many different ethnicities, so many cultures and languages. Why am I, to this day, still having to do this? I’m tired. As a creator, I have the ability to create things. But now I have to subvert the stereotypes as opposed to wanting to just tell the stories that I want to tell. I don’t want to have to undo other people’s work. ”

“ Within the Black experience you’re seeing drugs and gang violence and these are things that have been perpetuated for years and years in the media. So when they see you, they don’t want to sit beside you on the bus. When I wasn’t wearing a hijab and people would see that I was Black, they’d think I wasn’t as smart. Family members would tell me to straighten my hair for a job interview. Some people take off the hijab for safety reasons because they’re actually scared that something is going to happen to them, they’re going to be victims of hate crimes. And there’s anti-Black racism within the Muslim community. If we had more representation, it’s a starter, it would make a difference. ”

“ We don’t have a lot of Black Canadian representation so a lot of what we see is U.S. representation and that’s what a lot of Canadians consume, ourselves included. Your neighbours will talk to you a certain way or behave as though you’re like a stereotypical American. There’s a cognitive dissonance there. It’s definitely impacted the way people perceive Black Canadians. ”

“ Everytime that I would centre a story on a person that was seen as other, I’d get ‘there was enough of that content’, ‘oh we’ve done the immigrant story’. It made me question whether I really knew what I was doing, simply by virtue of the way that I looked. What I realized was that I had to work hard and build up the confidence and ability to stand up for what you believe in. ”

“ When we talk about Black people, we talk about slavery. And when I was a kid and studying at school, it hurt. Because you’re Black, you recognize yourself and take ownership of all the things that are Black. And the only things we talked about were slavery. So it is difficult in this context to be able to build as a child, as a teenager or as a man because the models we are given are just slaves. So for me representation is something very important. ”

“ Seeing is believing. When you can see a Black woman is an engineer you can aspire to be that. If you’ve never seen an Asian female pilot kicking ass on TV and taking names, how do you aspire to become that? Eventually you might get there but the road might be longer than it needs to be for you to get that inspiration. I can be a doctor because my doctor is Black or I saw on TV a doctor who is Black. It’s important not just to the people consuming the content but also to the community as well as to Canada as a country, because you are representing the people who make up the ecosystem. When you can do that they feel more welcome and appreciated and have a sense of belonging. ”

“ You can grow up in a city like Montreal or Toronto and still don’t have diverse friends and your only exposure is through TV. Then you spend your time watching TV with no authentic representation, where all Arabs are terrorists and all Black men are in street gangs and all Black women are sexual or angry beasts. We end up in a vicious loop because the same people are creating the scripts and these people are themselves influenced by what they see. ”



See More Black Content

As described in the Core Themes Report, all underrepresented Canadians want to see more complexity in characters and story lines. That complexity includes but is not limited to intersectionality. What do the Black focus group participants specifically want to see?

“ There is so little intersectional representation for Black people in media. We want to see everybody, Black Queer people, Black immigrants, Black people who speak languages that are not English, Black folks with disabilities. I want to see more stories about communities. I want to see more stories with families that are loving and supportive. I want to see more that is reflecting the very real and very nuanced reality of being Black and there’s a million different realities. ”

“ I want to see stories about our future. I want to see where we think our cultures can go, and who we are. I want to see stories that subvert stereotypes, stories that don’t put us in a box. ”

“ There are lots of stories of struggle and pain and trauma. They need to be told but it has become a bit of trauma porn. I would like to see more stories of Black families and characters with levity and joy, prosperity, success, empowering stories like that. Yes, we need to see the struggle, but it does become the only authentic story sometimes that’s being told. ”

“ I want to see stuff that pushes us further, pushes us to imagine possible worlds, like the worlds of sci-fi, the worlds of horror, the worlds of speculative fiction. ”

“ Black people don't make it to the future. We're never in these post-apocalyptic stories or sci-fi stories. We do want to have these stories that are about the Black experience but we also want to have just like a love story or like a supportive Black family that starts their own business. ”

“ One of the things that I'm personally inspired to see more of, are more representation of non-broken Black families. There are some of us who are fortunate to have had the foundation of a family from day one. ”

“ I'd like to see stories about what it's like to be the only Black person in your city or your school. It's a pendulum, either a show with no representation or a show where it's full of Black community, but what about all the people in the middle who feel as though they're the only person having their experiences. ”

“ There should be more aspects from the Francophone side. There is the story of the first Black people that came from Caribbean countries to settle in Quebec. Jackie Robinson, he started in Montreal. Quebec in itself right now does not even acknowledge systemic racism, so I think hearing stories, having stories about that will really help the Black communities in Quebec. ”

“ I'd like to see code switching - where it shows one barrier that we as Black people have to deal with, transitioning from our home lifestyle, to our corporate lifestyle and trying to sustain ourselves to make a living and why can't we just be accepted as normal even if we have a different dialect or dress differently. ”

“ I would like to see more historical representation of Black folks. A lot of times Black folks are frozen in about two or three periods of time in a lot of media. This is not to say that I don't want more stories about enslavement. We do need more stories that fully encompass the complexities of that system. However there is a serious lack of attention played to the history of Black folks from about 1865 to about 1950. Black folks just disappear. When I teach about Black history I often have students asking me 'how come nobody told me about LGBTQ culture in Harlem in the 1920s? How come nobody told me about Black communities that had their own economic systems? How come nobody told me about the relationships between Black and Indigenous people, how they were working together? ”

“ In documentaries there is also an underrepresentation of historical characters in Quebec who have changed Quebec and who are Black. I do not understand how we regularly invest in historical figures or personalities but the teachers from Haiti who were the builders of UQAM³ are invisible. ”

Muslim Representation

We did not have focus groups based on religious minorities, but the discussion of authentic representation of Muslims came up during both Black and People of Colour focus groups. Black Muslims in particular feel like a minority within a minority due to 1) the stereotype that a Muslim only looks like an Arab or South Asian person, and 2) anti-Black racism that Black Muslims experience within the Muslim community.

“ I want to see more actual people's experiences, within their identity. I want to see more stories about what really oppresses us, like niqab bans and Quebec's Bill 21, not our religion. We need happy stories too like the show *Girlfriends* but for Black Muslim women. I want to see love stories and cute stuff. I want to see me, to see my friends, my community. ”

“ The fact that they assume that all hijabi were forced to wear it, it doesn't relate to my own experience. It's very tiring to keep seeing the same thing repeated over and over and over again because at the same time you're causing other people to think that's all there is to Muslims. ”

³ Université de Québec à Montréal

Off Limits

In the **Core Themes Report** there was a discussion about whether people not from a community could tell a story from that community. While some thought no, not under any circumstances, many felt that it was possible as long as the right amount of research and community engagement was undertaken. However, there was a list of a few stories that were considered 'off limits' for storytellers from outside Black communities.

“ All our themes are culturally sensitive. ”

“ Black motherhood, Black love, Black maleness. ”

“ Black women's hair. ”

“ Slavery. ”

“ I can only speak for myself as a Black Queer woman. I don't want to watch a story of Black Queer women told by some random white dude. That seems off limits. ”

“ Colonization and violence. It pains me when I see a man talking about a rape experienced by a woman when there is not the delicacy and the respect that there should be for this person who has experienced such violence. ”

“ The community needs to be looked at by the community because otherwise it is the case of the gaze of the dominator on the dominated. ”

“ For the Black community, there have been so many things that have been appropriated. People from other groups have created our stories and told it correctly but in some cases it's been the white saviour complex or it's not the full story or it's told from their perspective. So I think it's not totally off limits but you just damn well should be doing your homework. ”

Black Performers' Hair and Makeup

The issue of professional Black hair and makeup for performers has always been a topic of discussion but it has recently become a more prominent concern⁴. No matter how many Black performers are engaged to tell how many Black stories, many of those consulted felt that if crews do not have qualified hair and makeup artists to ensure that Black performers, and particularly Black women, can look and feel their best, then authentic representation is not possible.

“ We need more Black hair and makeup artists to support the Black actors. They should feel beautiful and then they’re going to have a great day on set. We need some kind of bylaw or law or something because the unions won’t move unless they’re forced to. ”

“ You don’t need to be Black to know how to do my hair, but you damn well better know the research. No brush! It breaks the hair. And you need to relate that to me without words. I can tell when someone has done the research. There are workshops, you can learn the products we use. I heard of someone standing up and saying ‘I’m not comfortable’ and they were blacklisted. Because of the pandemic they now ask what products do you like, do’s and don’ts, and it’s a blessing. ”

“ Every Black female knows that when she gets on set, her hair needs to be done or she risks the chance of them doing all sorts of kinds of things to your hair. So already we have to come in prepared on our own and often on our own dime. I’m on the darker side of skin tone and the makeup that has been put on me has been all sorts of kinds of tones. We need more Black hair and makeup people in the union but take a course. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been on set and people do not know how to do my makeup and don’t know how to colour correct for Black females. It should be mandatory. You should know how to do makeup for every skin tone and skin colour if you are going to be a part of the union. There have been white makeup artists who do know what they’re doing and that unfortunately has been surprising, which it shouldn’t be. But it’s an emotional experience because I’m like, ‘thank you for knowing your craft, learning it, honing it and knowing what you’re doing on set’. ”

⁴ [Championing Inclusion on our Film & TV Sets](#), Vinessa Antoine, ACTRA Magazine, Fall 2021



DIRECTIVES

Based on the thoughts shared by participants, the following Directives were developed to provide guidance in creating and commissioning more authentic and representative screen-based content that engages with Black communities.

1. There is no universal Black Canadian community or identity and Black Canadians are not the same as Black Americans. Understand who your characters are and research the community that they belong to. Ensure that it accurately reflects the region in Canada where the story takes place. For example, Jamaican-Canadians are not only in Toronto, but a story about a Jamaican-Canadian in Halifax or Vancouver will be a very different story than if they were in Toronto.
2. Understand the physical appearance of different Black communities and ensure that casting reflects those differences.
3. Recognize that there are Black Canadians across the country and that should be reflected in stories and casting and not limited to major urban centres.
4. Centre more stories on Black Canadians and do not limit them to 'best friend' or other secondary roles.
5. Understand the business case for more stories that centre Black Canadians and Black experiences as underrepresented audiences look to the U.S. and the U.K. when they cannot find stories that reflect them on Canadian screens.
6. Are the characters stereotypes? Can those stereotypes be subverted or do they need to be thrown out?
7. If you come from outside the community, and depending on the community this could mean not being Black or not being from a specific Black community such as Haitian or Nigerian, consider whether your story could be 'off limits' by that community and if so - don't do it. Ask yourself why you are the right person to tell this story.
8. While stories of slavery and Black oppression were universally considered off limits to non-Black creators and producers, other stories were considered more subjective and would depend on the research and engagement done and the perspective taken. Review the Directives contained in the Core Themes Report for guidance on research and engagement when telling a story from outside your community.
9. Ensure that authentic representation extends to equal treatment of Black performers so that they have hair and makeup artists trained in Black hair and skin tones.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Stereotypes about Black individuals and communities abound in the screen media that we produce in Canada. It is everyone's responsibility, from Creators and Producers to Broadcasters, Funders, Streamers and Distributors, to break the cycle and ensure that harmful stereotypes and marginalization of characters are erased from depictions on Canadian screens. Only with authentic stories and characters can members of Black communities feel included in Canadian society and feel that their potential is unlimited.

It is recommended that Broadcasters, Digital Platforms, Streaming Services, Funders and Distributors collaborate with the BSO and other equity-seeking industry organizations to develop strategies to meet the Directives and provide a common response to Creators and Producers. This will ensure decisions are made and strategies devised for early, thoughtful incorporation of the Directives, rather than trying to incorporate them prior to a project hitting the market. Consensus will reduce delays during development or production and ensure that the impact on budgets is consistent across stakeholders.

It is expected that these next steps will go a long way to supporting the structural change that the Directives are intended to initiate. The BSO intends to work with stakeholders to form a Collaborative Network to implement these Directives.

thank you



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