

SCREENWRITING CONTEST TRANSPARENCY

CALL TO ACTION
AUGUST 2022

[CLICK HERE FOR ACCESSIBLE VERSION](#)



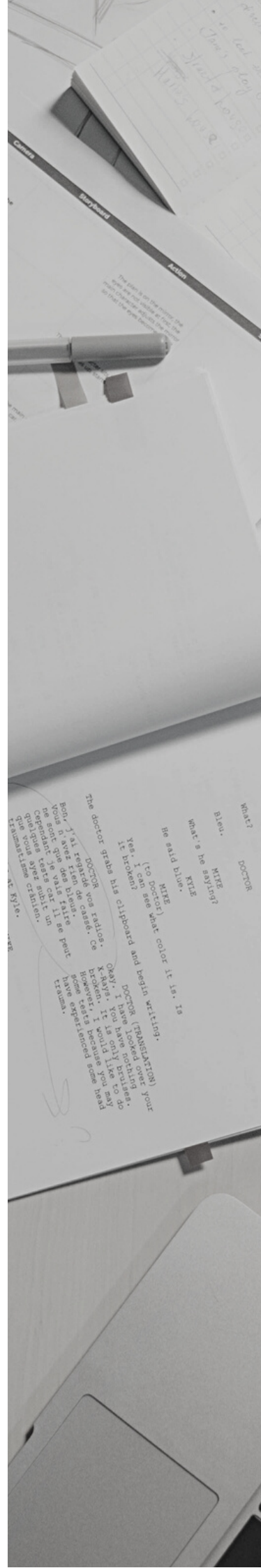
ABOUT THIS EFFORT

In June 2021, a member of Women of Color Unite (WOCU - a non-profit membership organization for Women of Color working in the entertainment industry with over 5000 members) asked fellow members about their experiences using screenwriting services like The Black List and Coverfly. This spurred a number of sub-threads about the quality of coverage and notes our members had received from these paid services, leading to larger questions about professional reader demographics and larger Hollywood diversity and inclusion issues.

From this place, the three of us, Julia, Dani and Via, began offline discussions as to how the background of a Contest/Coverage Reader might inform the coverage they write, and how these demographics could affect the momentum of the screenplays. Imagining there could be more stories out there, we created a survey to ask WOCU members about any experiences receiving biased feedback from coverage services or contests. In the midst of collecting this data from WOCU members, the Austin Film Festival's 2021 Screenplay Competition returned reader notes to their entrants. Some of these writers shared screenshots on social media of the notes they received, many of which hit on our initial concern that there could be readers who lacked cultural competencies to evaluate scripts fairly and equitably.

We realized a Call To Action could help address the multi-layered issues surrounding diversity and inclusion in the film industry, and gained the support of WOCU founder Cheryl Bedford. We're honored for the support of so many allies.

Dani Milton, Julia Morizawa and Via Bia
Women of Color Unite Members





THE PROBLEM

As Hollywood seeks more diverse stories, many agents, managers and producers say they look to screenwriting contest winners for fresh voices (i.e. new clients, and/or scripts to purchase). These contests rely on readers to judge whether scripts advance in the competition. Depending on the contest, readers may range from paid industry professionals to amateur film lovers.

Unfortunately, Hollywood's struggles with diversity appear to extend to the frontline readership of major contests and coverage services. Anecdotal experiences shared recently by writers from marginalized communities highlighted numerous instances of receiving racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and/or sizeist notes from contests and coverage services. Such biased notes were perceived as negatively impacting the advancement of these writers' scripts.

In July 2021, a private survey of WOCU members found 80% of respondents received notes they found to be biased. These notes ranged from those included as part of a contest entry, to those purchased in conjunction with a contest entry, to paid notes purchased from a coverage service. The coverage service most respondents cited for providing biased notes was The Black List.

In December 2021, dozens of social media users expressed frustration at receiving biased notes from the Austin Film Festival's screenwriting competition. Dozens more complained of notes that were sloppy, full of grammatical errors and/or word soup, or just generally unhelpful.

In March 2022, AFF announced hiring a Reader Coordinator to improve the reader/notes process. However, they are yet to specify the concrete steps AFF will take to make sure readers have the cultural competencies needed to equitably analyze their diverse entrant base.

The Black List and Austin Film Festival Screenplay Competition are examples of reputable companies that have helped launch screenwriters' careers, yet simultaneously have a history of readership bias that may neglect stories told from the perspectives of underrepresented communities.

INDUSTRY STATISTICS

- Women of color writers received the smallest share of screen credits (5%) for feature films in 2020. (Source: WGA West 2021 Screen Inclusion Report)
- During the 2019-2020 TV season, 82% of showrunners were White; 70% were men. (Source: WGA West 2020 Inclusion Report)
- Films written by women and people of color in 2020 had casts that were significantly more diverse than those written by White men. (Source: The Hollywood Diversity Report 2021, Part 1: Film)
- 2 in 3 Black Americans say they don't see themselves or their culture represented in movies or television. (Source: #RepresentationMatters report by the National Research Group, 2020)
- Nearly one in every five LGBTQ characters appears on a series that is tied to one of just four creatives -- Shonda Rhimes, Greg Berlanti, Lena Waithe, and Ryan Murphy. (Source: GLAAD's Where We Are On TV 2020-2021 Report)
- Latinx feature film writers are the most significantly underrepresented relative to their share of the U.S. population at 4.7% WGA members versus 18.3% of the U.S. population. (Source: WGA West 2020 Inclusion Report)
- The rise of screenwriting contests: In 1987, there were less than 5. In 2017, there were over 500. (Source: The History of Hollywood Screenwriting Competitions, The Script Lab)
- The Center for Disease Control's August 2018 statistics state that 26% of adults in America live with a disability, yet across the 2019-2020 television season, only 2.8% of series regular characters on broadcast programming had a disability. (Source: GLAAD Where We Are On TV, 2021-2022)

ANECDOTAL EXPERIENCES

"My experiences included having a reader refer to the African-American characters in my 1850s American period script as 'Aboriginals' and receiving notes on a different script that mansplained pro wrestling (regarding a Black female professional wrestler character), instead of focusing on character or story."

- WOCU member

"I have a 45-year-old woman protagonist and the first The Black List reader I got claimed my story was an obvious metaphor for menopause, which was never referenced or implied. The feedback seemed dismissive and unnecessary. And this was part of the Women in Film screenwriting contest."

- WOCU member

"I wrote a feature film script about my own uncle in WWII Europe. I was told by a professor, 'There were no Indians in WWII!' This sentiment followed the project throughout lab submissions, market pitches, etc. My research found there were 2.5 million Indians in WWII. A reader for The Black List gave me medium scores for a script with an Indian woman protagonist because they didn't know how to cast it. The same script won three international awards and was a Sundance Lab finalist."

- WOCU member

"My main character's name is LaShon and was repeatedly written as 'Lashon.' That might seem small but this is an ethnic character with an ethnic name and spelling. That should not be dismissed."

- WOCU member

"I used a professional coverage service and one of the notes said: 'The Latino Magical Realism market may not be a large enough market for producers to get involved. While the writing is generally strong, I'm just not sure who else would watch this story.'"

- WOCU member

"I wrote a story with a character who is fat and one of AFF's notes was, 'It would be helpful to get a final weigh in for him near the end. I realize at this point he has found his happy place, but we still want to know that he's not sacrificing his health,' which made me cringe because, why does their weight matter if the character found their happy place?!"

- 2021 Austin Film Festival Screenplay Competition entrant

ANECDOTAL EXPERIENCES

"I've gotten racist and/or sexist notes from several competitions including BlueCat, WeScreenplay's Diverse Voices, and Austin Film Festival, but the worst offender was The Black List. When I emailed support, the staff kicked my email all the way up the chain. Instead of taking my concern seriously or even respectfully disagreeing, the site's leadership stated they agreed with the racist notes. When I asserted that I personally know many BIPOC writers who have received racist notes from The Black List, they responded with a story about another Black writer who accused them of racism on Twitter but claimed that writer confused them with a different coverage site. I felt I was being accused of lying. Shortly after that interaction with The Black List, that pilot went on to get me 20 representation offers, got me staffed on two major TV shows, and there are multiple production companies begging to develop it. It's obvious The Black List scores don't reflect script quality or what Hollywood is actually looking for."

- Social media user

"I've loved attending AFF, and what they do for screenwriters. But several years ago, I submitted a script about fictional characters within the 1960s Black Panther party. The notes I received said, 'I don't like many of the choices made by the characters... I like better heroes. It's hard to write a story like this because... how does an oppressed people gain freedom? Only by earning their respect from themselves and then others. Where is the MLK of this story?' I never submitted a script again.

I did receive apologies from the executive director of AFF, but it was only after she asked why I didn't do more to alert AFF to the problem in the first place. She suggested that she wasn't victim blaming -- but that she was genuinely curious about why people hadn't felt comfortable reaching out after getting subpar notes. Truthfully, I didn't assume anything had gone wrong. AFF is a major screenwriting contest/festival that's been in this business a long time, and I assumed that they were proud of their vetting and selection process for script readers. Besides, I received the notes months after I was rejected by the reader -- and long after the score and placement outcome had been determined. The damage was done.

While I truly did appreciate that the executive director reached out to me and apologized, I was later frustrated to hear that she reached out to a friend of mine who suffered an even more unfair AFF mistake and engaged in victim blaming. Enough is enough."

- past Austin Film Festival Screenplay Competition entrant

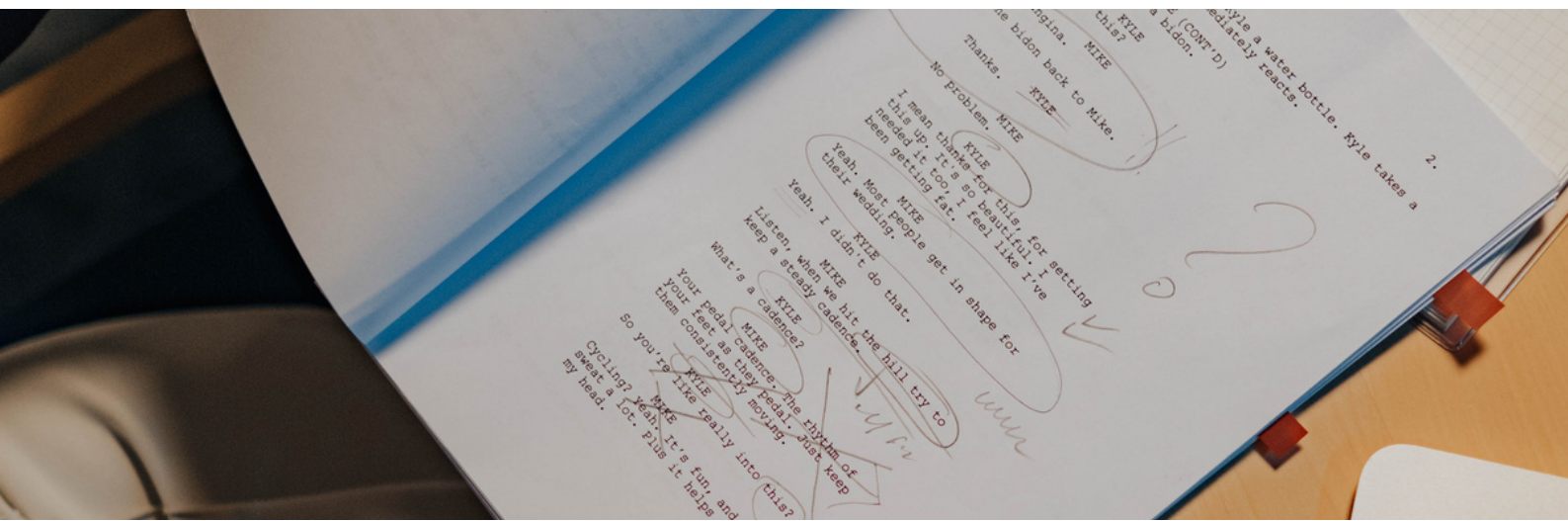
SOLUTIONS

We demand transparency and accountability in TV and feature film screenwriting competitions, labs, fellowships, and coverage services. This includes making information about the demographics of readers and the judging process readily available, as well as requiring readers to receive sensitivity training. These steps will allow writers to make informed decisions regarding which competitions to enter and services to use, as well as provide a number of benefits to organizations (see page 9). Additionally, we hope that these steps will decrease the odds of readers' critiques coming from a lack of cultural competency, or worse, racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise biased perspectives.

Below is a list of solutions, which are first steps towards TV and feature film writing organizations being more inclusive, thereby expanding media representation to reflect the diversity of our world.

We specifically demand the following be put in place by January 1, 2023:

- 1. These organizations must issue an annual “Statement of Transparency” (see next page).**
- 2. Readers must undergo implicit bias and sensitivity training prior to reading for contests, fellowships, labs, and other TV and screenwriting programs and/or providing contest notes or coverage.**
- 3. Contests must quickly address, rectify and provide redress for biased notes, prior to script advancement being finalized.**
 - a. This includes a policy addressing readers who are multiple offenders of providing biased coverage or notes.**
 - b. The writer who submitted the concerns must be kept abreast of the response and outcomes.**



ANNUAL STATEMENT OF TRANSPARENCY

By January 1, 2023 we demand that TV/screenwriting organizations (including competitions, labs, fellowships, coverage services, etc.) annually disclose:

- **Demographics of their readers who judge contests, issue contest feedback, and provide coverage services, etc. in the following areas:**
 - Gender identity
 - Race/Ethnicity
 - Sexual orientation
 - Age
 - Religious affiliation
 - Disability
 - Veteran Status
 - Location
 - Income
 - Level of education
 - Type of industry experience
 - Duration of industry experience
- **Reader pay range per script and/or coverage package (or, at the very least, wage type, such as no pay/volunteer, stipend per script, hourly, salary, etc.)**
- **Required reader qualifications (for example, some organizations require a sample notes test and/or previous full-time industry experience)**
- **Script advancement:**
 - How scripts are assigned to readers
 - How many different readers read and review a script for each round
 - How many pages of a script each reader must read for each round
 - Placement criteria for each round
 - If notes are included or purchased, disclose whether this reader is the same reader for the judging process and if their feedback affects script placement
 - If "Industry Judges" are publicized, disclose which scripts they read (i.e. "Top Ten"), how many pages they read, and whether their input determines placements
- **Statistics from the previous 3 years:**
 - Number of submissions per category.
 - Number of or percentage of submissions advancing to each round (for example, quarter-finalists, semifinalists, finalists, winners, etc.)
 - Demographics of winners and finalists, for writers who consent

This Statement of Transparency should be easy to find for writers looking to enter competitions or obtain coverage services.

WHAT CAN WRITERS DO?

1. Contact contests, coverage services, labs and fellowships and ask them to adopt the solutions proposed in this paper. Women of Color Unite is happy to directly engage with organizations on how to facilitate better transparency for emerging writers looking to use their services.

2. If you decide to enter contests, use coverage services or apply to labs/fellowships, please read and ensure you understand the organization's rules for judging/advancing scripts and/or issuing coverage scores, and providing notes (if applicable).

3. Push back when you receive biased notes. Every contest or coverage service should have a customer experience contact to reach out to. It is important that these organizations are aware of the types of notes their readers are providing and where those lack cultural competency.

#WRITERSMAKINGCHANGE PLEDGE

Take the #WritersMakingChange pledge in support of the solutions proposed in this paper on the Women of Color Unite website at wocunite.org/writers-makingchange-pledge/ and feel free to share on social media. You can sign your name as well as share your experiences with TV and screenwriting organizations (anonymously if preferred). Let us know any biased experiences you've had and the organization's response. You can also shout out any organizations you think are leading the way in this area.

BENEFITS OF GREATER TRANSPARENCY

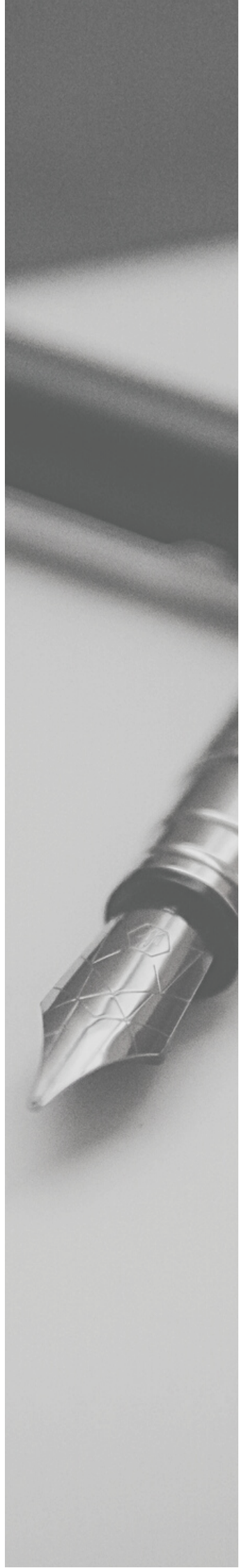
We believe increased transparency and accountability benefits both nonprofit and for-profit TV and screenwriting competitions, labs, fellowships, and coverage services, while also benefiting writers. Potential advantages include:

BENEFITS TO ORGANIZATIONS

- The opportunity to articulate and demonstrate an organization's efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in the entertainment industry
- Readers being able to distinguish between perceived story flaws based on implicit biases vs actual writing gaps, even for organizations who use blind judging, which does not address inherent bias
- Attracting writers who prioritize understanding a scoring process, and consider broader information on readers, judges, and past winners, before entering
- An opportunity for organizations to set the narrative about their operations, which may decrease negative false assumptions that deter writers from participating
- A reduction in complaints from entrants
- A decreased need for second readers and refunds

BENEFITS TO WRITERS

- Improved writer agency to determine which opportunities are worth their time and money
- A reduction in the type of notes that diminish the validity of writers' life experiences and identities
- An increase in equity for all writers, regardless of background





ORGANIZATIONS ALREADY LEADING CHANGE

In closing, we note examples of arts organizations that have taken steps to build a more equitable landscape for artists, writers, and filmmakers. It is our sincere hope that similar steps to increase transparency and equity among screenwriting contests/coverage services will lead to greater diversity and inclusion in the film industry.

Tony Awards - Now requires voters to complete unconscious bias training in order to vote in any categories

British Film Institute (BFI) - For funding, projects must meet Diversity Standards criteria in two or more of:
A) on-screen representation, themes and narratives
B) creative leadership and project team
C) industry access and opportunities
D) audience development

Age Inclusion in Media (AIM) - Created the Silver Bullet Screenplay Contest to discover and promote the work of writers over 40, or scripts featuring protagonists over the age of 40

The New Orleans Film Society - Racial equity training required for all board and staff; New Orleans Film Festival programs 55%+ BIPOC filmmakers and 50%+ female or gender non-conforming filmmakers; pay rate disclosed on all job postings

Hedgebrook - Discloses their selection process for their Writer-in-Residence application, which is open to women-identifying writers across disciplines, in an easy to understand infographic

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Via Bia is a Writer/Producer/Director whose work has been in labs through Sundance, Stowe Story Labs, and Cine Qua Non (sponsored by AMPAS). For the past seven years, Via has been a reader for screenwriting contests and fellowships, and on the programming teams of multiple film festivals. Her short film, *THESE COLORS DON'T RUN*, was distributed by HBO, and she's developed projects with Stage 13 (Warner), Tangerine Entertainment, and Fear Not Productions, among others. In addition to filmmaking, Via has worked in the social justice field, as a teacher and trainer, and holds a Master's Degree in Education. She was raised on Long Island by a Puerto Rican and Jewish multi-generational family, and loves to write comedies and dramedies, both live-action and animated, about cursey Latinas who are trying to be more vulnerable, even when it's tough.

Originally from Kansas City, Missouri, **Dani Milton** loves writing about Black women in impossible situations. While juggling an accounting career with successive Fortune 500 companies, Dani completed NYU's screenwriting certificate program at Tisch and subsequently worked for ViacomCBS. Dani has served on the board of the Kansas City Film Festival International since 2015.

Dani is two-time Athena Film Festival Writers Lab selectee; her medieval fantasy pilot, *MORIEN AND THE BLACK KNIGHTS*, was selected for the 2021 Athena Virtual Writing Lab, and her action-thriller feature, *TRINN BEGINS*, was selected for the 2019 Athena Feature Writers Lab. Dani's sci-fi short script, *THE FIRST MARTIAN*, was a 2020 WeScreenplay Diverse Voices Finalist, whereas her pilot about the militia movement, *MISSOURI SHEPHERDS*, was a 2019 WeScreenplay TV Contest finalist. Dani centers Black women in stories across space and time because, growing up, she never saw herself represented in the genres she loves. Dani was recently named as a 2022 Hedgebrook Writer in Residence.

Julia Morizawa is a writer/producer/actor with over 20 years of experience in the film, television, new media, theater, and fiction podcasting industries. Her writing and producing credits include the improvised feature film *JESUSCAT (OR HOW I ACCIDENTALLY JOINED A CULT)*, the short film *SIN & LYLE*, the play *TWENTY-TWO*, and the audio drama *AMERICAN COMEDY HORROR STORY: ORPHANAGE*. Julia's most recent project, *DRAGONFLY*, is an animated short film about the Tokyo Firebombing of March 9-10, 1945. The script was awarded Best Short Screenplay by Scriptation Showcase and Screenwriting Master in 2019, and was a semifinalist or quarterfinalist in the Austin Film Festival, Slamdance, WeScreenplay Diverse Voices, and more. Julia is also a freelance script analyst, currently reading for Shore Scripts, Coverfly, and independent production companies. She has previously read for The Austin Film Festival, Bluecat, and Roadmap Writers, and is looking to transition into development with a focus on diverse and inclusive storytelling.

IN SUPPORT OF THIS INITIATIVE



BLACK SCREENWRITERS

CINELADIES



Women of Color Unite (WOCU) is an LA-based social action and non-profit organization that focuses on remedying the inequities that face Women of Color in today's entertainment and media industries. We stand for hiring parity, fair treatment, and providing resources to Women of Color content creators industry-wide.

WOCU, a collective of over 5000 women and growing, creates opportunities for engagement between hiring agents and our active membership of experienced women to address the indefensible precept: "I don't know any WOC that I can hire."

wocunite.org