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PHOTOS (L TO R): FELICE TRINIDAD, PHYLCIA L. MUNN, PEYTON FULFORD, AND EVAAN KHERAJ

Culture

## The CW Actresses Asking for More, And Getting It

After speaking out this summer, these four screen stars talk about true visibility.

BY STARRENE ROCQUE

SEPTEMBER 23, 2020

Asha Bromfield, Candice Patton, Nafessa Williams, and Vanessa Morgan are part of a unique sisterhood of actors who play dynamic characters, based on comic books on The CW network. Collectively, they have played groundbreaking roles that challenged racism, sexism, and homophobia in popular culture. They're also channeling their superhero alter egos to affect real-life change by using their platforms to call for more diversity in Hollywood. They want to see more BIPOC in front of the camera, but also behind the scenes. better storylines for marginalized people. and better treatment on the job and in life

in general.

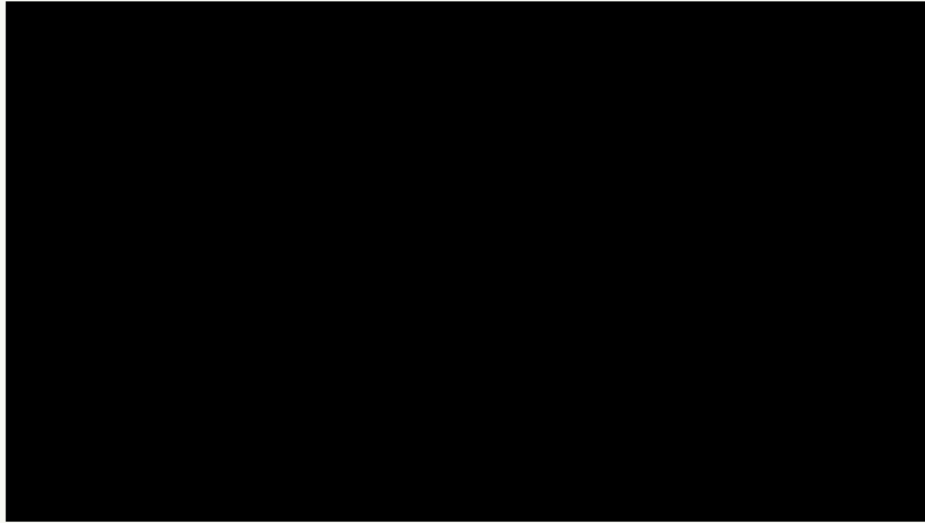
Respectively, they have been applying various methods of speaking out such as chatting with executives behind the scenes, amplifying fan voices, and using social media, fan cons, and traditional media to express how Hollywood can support a more inclusive future.

In June The CW enacted a **zero-tolerance rule** regarding bullying and racist messages on all of their social media platforms. At the time, several companies were declaring their stance against racism when equality and equity within companies were being critically scrutinized because of the political state of the country.

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“Employee input has always been the foundation of our actions against hate speech,” The CW said in a follow-up statement to *Teen Vogue*. “Words matter. Neither our company, nor our employees, tolerate hate speech within the organization, and it’s important that we demonstrate that on our social channels.” Adding, “In further support of this statement, the network also scaled up the number of monitors on our social platforms and pages, strengthened our safety protocols, and became even more aggressive in blocking offenders of our guidelines as we strive to create a space free from hatred and bullying.”

Many felt that their original statement was dilatory, considering the **years of harassment and bullying** many of their **Black actors** had already endured from online trolls. But in a time when Hollywood’s steps and missteps are under a microscope, these women are holding everyone — including themselves — accountable for dismantling white supremacy.

*Teen Vogue* spoke to these four talented actors about their experiences in the television industry, the importance of this moment, and what the future holds.

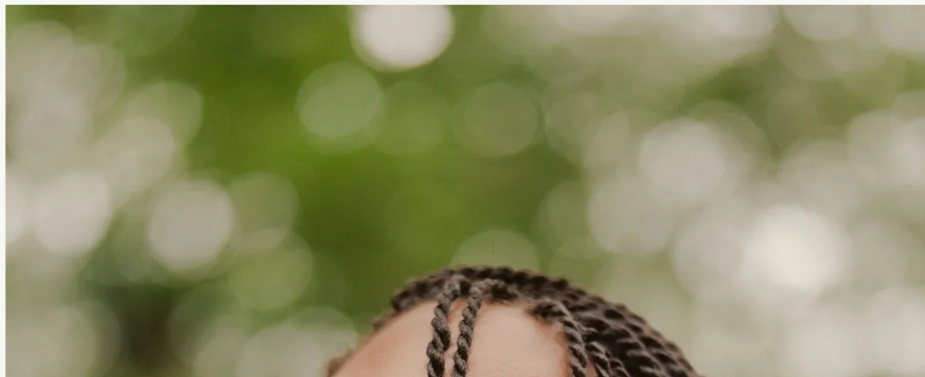




Photo: Felice Trinidad

## Asha Bromfield

Show: Riverdale

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Character: Melody Valentine

**Asha Bromfield** wasn't sure how she was going to make it to Hollywood, but she began pursuing her passion for performing at a young age anyway. Eventually, it started to pay off, and in 2017 she debuted as Melody Valentine, the drummer from Josie and the Pussycats on

CW's *Riverdale*. Melody on the TV show is based on a character that is traditionally white in the comic book and cartoon. Landing the role was “life-changing” for the Toronto native.

“I remember being onsite with Ashleigh [Murray]. We were doing the ‘*I Feel Love*’ cover and there was a moment where we had to perform it to the audience — it's the three of us, on stage, performing, and we're in the costume,” Asha tells *Teen Vogue*. “And I remember there was a moment where we all just looked at each other, and it was so overwhelming because it was in that moment that we realized like, ‘Guys, we are literally three Black women leading *Josie and the Pussycats*,’ this is iconic; this has not been done.”



Photo: Felice Trinidad



Photo: Felice Trinidad

Asha departed from *Riverdale* in 2018 after its second season, but she's always been vocal about her frustrations with Hollywood underutilizing Black actors and ethnicity-centered casting. On June 9, she appeared on [Instagram Live](#) with her former co-star Lili Reinhart to expand on the conversation.

“Now is the time to speak up about things,” Asha [told Lili](#). “It's so much bigger than *Riverdale*. It's a bigger conversation about how we are humanizing Black people on screen in all capacities.”

*“It's dangerous to perpetuate this idea that we are just there to support white people through their woes.” -Asha Bromfield*

Asha doubled down on this sentiment when we talked. “I've been in this business for over ten years now,” the 25-year-old says. “Black characters [are] being used as these shoulders to cry on, as like, some form of a support system to assist a white character on their journey, and I think that can be really toxic because there's so much more to Black people. Our existence is just as much a vital fabric of this universe in the same way that other people are. When you start from that point and you start to realize our humanity matters, then you start to see that it's dangerous to perpetuate this idea that we are just there to support white people through their woes.”

Adding, “These ideas of what it looks like to be Black, what it looked like to be Latino, what it looks like to be Asian — we're fed this idea. Then you give a white person a script and you're like, ‘OK, go write about it.’ It's so hard for them to break out about mental conditioning.”

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Photo: Felice Trinidad

Bromfield's latest project, a YA novel titled, *Hurricane Summer*, is a story about a girl visiting her estranged father in Jamaica in the middle of category five Hurricane Gustov. She hopes to "explore the full three-dimensional existence of what it means to be Black" as an author.

"I often think about little Asha and the things that she didn't think was possible for herself, or the things that maybe she did think was possible at a really young age, but then was stunned by what the world tells you is possible," she says. "I just think it's so important for people to understand that if you have a dream, if you have a story, share it, do it, go for it. And that truly is what motivates me."

### Candice Patton

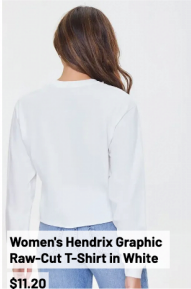



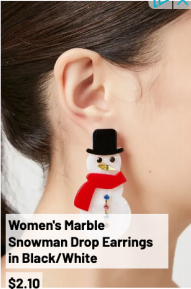




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Show: *The Flash*

Character: Iris West

When the global protests surrounding George Floyd's death began this summer, Candice Patton coyly noted on Twitter how the state of affairs was bringing up "trauma." Raised in the Deep South, the actress **has been vocal** in public appearances on social media for years about the insidious nature of white supremacy.

"It makes me very sad because a man lost his life," she says on our call. "Let's not forget that. There are a lot of positive things that are coming out of this instance in our society, but let's remember, a man had to lose his life for that to happen. It's the worst kind of martyrdom. There's a part of me that's relieved that it's happening, but at the same time, I still feel sick to my stomach that it took this Black man losing his life for people to wake up."

She's careful with her social media interaction, often retweeting statements she agrees with or commenting within threads. At times, she can seem guarded, but after six years in the limelight, playing a lead in *The Flash*, a **highly-successful superhero** television series, her tepidness is warranted.

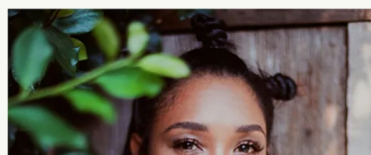
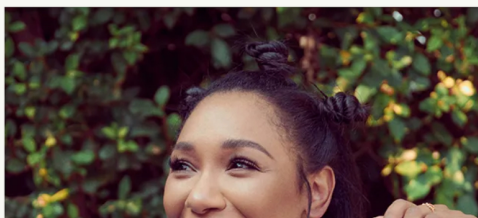
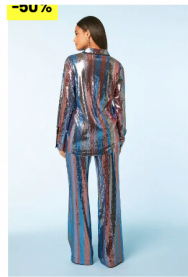




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“I engage less with my fans, which makes me sad because I want to, but I also want to protect my mental health,” the 32-year-old admits. “I did realize very early on that they were very vocal about their support for me. It means a lot because I was experiencing, at that time, not a lot of support.”

While Candice limits her engagement with fans, she still checks in to keep up with what’s going on. Her outlook is hopeful that positive changes will be made in Hollywood and beyond as more marginalized people and their allies find and utilize their voices. Candice has, after all, been in the business for 15 years making her debut on *The Young & the Restless* followed up by over a dozen roles.

“I saw these actors and actresses and people in the business kind expressing what they went through. I think it was kind of a cathartic experience for a lot of people to not feel afraid anymore, to start talking about the trauma that they’ve experienced,” she says. “That’s something I find very interesting that we, as Black people, are finally finding the courage and the strength to speak out without fear of being fired, or whatever the previous punishment we imagined in our head would be. I think that’s a really good space for us to be in, to feel encouraged to speak about ourselves so that things can actually change.”

## Nafessa Williams





Photo: Peyton Fulford

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Show: *Black Lightning*

Character: Anissa Pierce/Thunder

Back in July, *Black Lightning*'s Nafessa Williams **penned an open letter** to *E!* calling for equality in Hollywood. The crux of Nafessa's letter, inspired by the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor protests, highlighted the need for more Black writers, producers, showrunners, hairstylists, and well-rounded storytelling. She began the letter with a quote from the late John Lewis encouraging young people to get into "good trouble."

"If we're going to fight for this country, if we can give our lives over to this country, then we should be treated fairly," Nafessa tells *Teen Vogue*. "We're really beyond sick and tired of asking to be seen and to be seen fairly and treated equally. That's what it is, as a whole, in Hollywood. What I said in my letter [is that change] starts at the top. It starts with the decision-makers. It starts at the studios. It starts with the networks and it even trickles down to the agents, and the managers, and representation. We're not asking to just be there just to be there, but we're actually qualified."

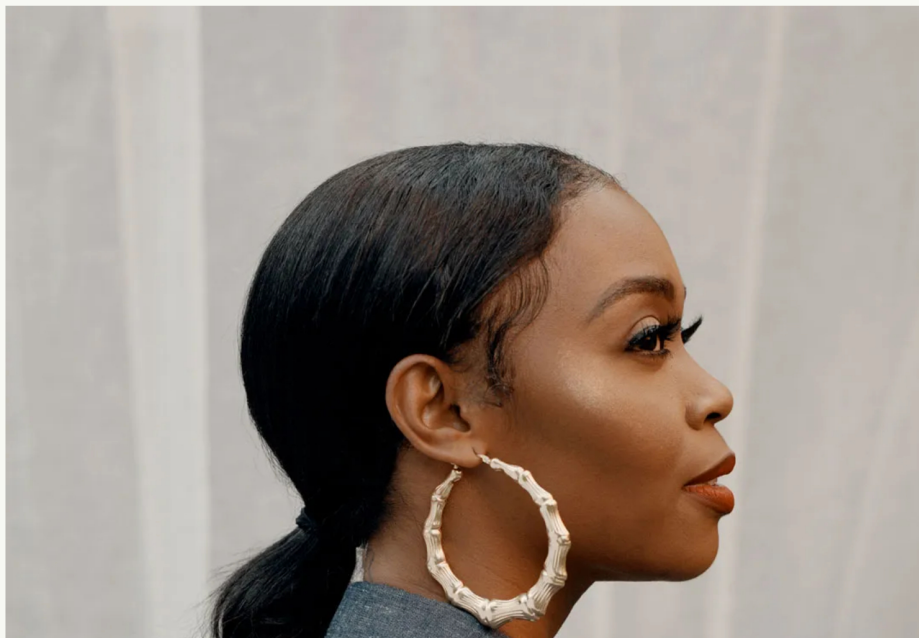




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Photo: Peyton Fulford



The 30-year-old likens herself to getting into good trouble by playing the **first Black** lesbian superhero on TV in the Mara Brock Akil and Salim Akil executive-produced adaptation of the late 1970s comic book. Her character in the comics is queer; on the show Anissa is in a monogamous relationship with an Asian woman named Grace Choi. “I was really honored and still proud to be able to give my voice over to it. I’m learning a lot,” Nafessa says about the role. “I think the one thing that always will stand out to me is a young woman coming up to me saying that she feels normal being a lesbian after seeing Thunder. I’ll never forget that.”

Her outlook on the industry is that change should not be simply isolated to performative actions. Nafessa, who hails from Philadelphia and also got her start on daytime soap operas like Candice, wants to see consistent shifts across all industries.

*“We’re really beyond sick and tired of asking to be seen and to be seen fairly and treated equally.” -Nafessa Williams*

“I think a way of protecting your employees is representing diversity. I think that’s really, really important. And allowing people to walk truthfully, whether it be wearing their hair a certain way or making sure they’re represented in each boardroom or meeting so that they can have input. And to me, protection is diversity. Protection is an equal-level playing field.”



She adds specifically about Hollywood: “Chadwick Boseman, who I pray is resting in peace... He’s done an amazing job during his time here. And he gave so much to our industry. If we can learn anything from him ... He lived his life in a way where he was the example ... When you find your purpose, that’s what we’re here for. To find our purpose and to live it and to walk truthfully in it and then inspire other people to follow theirs.”

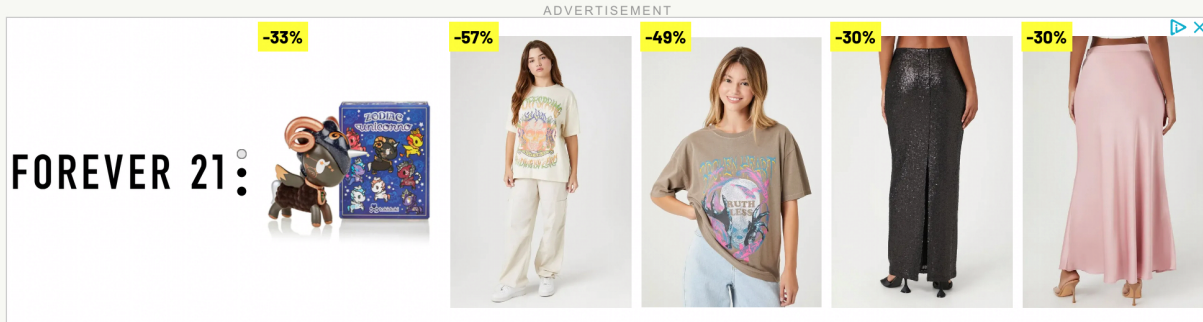
### Vanessa Morgan



Photo: Evaan Kheraj

Character: Toni Topaz

Vanessa Morgan isn't shy about speaking her mind on social media. She has taken to **Twitter** at times, to demand better portrayals of Black actors in Hollywood, including her own show, *Riverdale*. In June, she **tweeted** that she would be more intentional about pushing for the change she wants to see: "To my black fans, I have now made it my purpose to fight for us. To the six year old me who had no role model that looked like me on TV. This is for you. We aren't your token black nondimensional characters. This is being black in Hollywood. I will fight for YOU."



On *Riverdale*, **Vanessa** has been playing Toni Topaz, a recurring character on the second season who was promoted to a series regular on the third season and onward. Before joining the hit CW show, the Canadian had roles in the MTV teen drama series, *Finding Carter*, the Family Channel teen comedy series, *The Latest Buzz*, and in the Disney Channel/Teletoon film, *My Babysitter's a Vampire*.



Photo: Evaan Kheraj

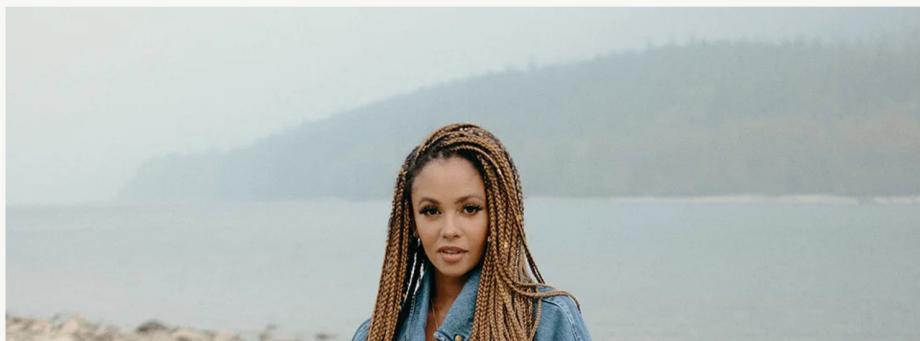









Photo: Evaan Kheraj

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Just a few days before Vanessa’s tweet about fighting for change, the 28-year-old came to the defense of her friend and former *Riverdale* co-star Ashleigh Murray. Ashleigh, who played Josie McCoy, was the **target of a user who attempted to smear her character**. In the **tweet** that’s since been deleted, the person accused Ashleigh of leaving *Riverdale* because she was being a “diva.” Ashleigh — who transitioned to *Katy Keene*, but **also vocalized** her intentions with the major role — responded to the troll refuting those claims and Morgan also chimed in with a word.

“Black women we are the first targets,” Vanessa contends about the incident. “We can be labeled as divas or people want to instantly think we’re the bad ones or something like that, or we get attacked first. And I think that comes through the media, how we’ve been portrayed over years and years — especially when that came to Ashleigh and I ... People love to jump to conclusions. People love to think that we’re not human and we’re not seeing what people are writing. And even though what they’re writing is so false and so untrue, it’s like it hurts. You know?”

Vanessa says that there’s a unique sorority-ship with her fellow Black actresses, especially those in the CW universe. **Black actresses still struggle to land meaningful roles** where they aren’t sidelined or stereotyped. Therefore, when a major role comes along, it’s met largely with the appropriate fanfare and awe because it’s not something that happens often. Vanessa has found solidarity with her fellow CW actresses.



Photo: Evaan Kheraj

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“Honestly, during this whole quarantine, I’ve become so close with — you can call it the sisterhood of The CW — with my fellow Black actresses, and even the other women on Warner Brothers,” Vanessa tells *Teen Vogue*. “We talk almost every day on group chat. It’s having that community of people that I can relate to, be like, “OK, that’s not just me? It’s happening to you, too?”

Vanessa is currently back on set filming *Riverdale*’s fifth season and says that the collective power of speaking up is starting to work out.

“After I vocalized my concerns a lot has changed,” she says about her statement made this summer. “A lot of people are going to be super happy. I hope I’m a role model to little Black girls out there because my character is definitely going to have an amazing storyline this season, and I’m super happy about it. I’m super happy that my show listened and I’m hoping a lot of other shows will follow suit for other actresses and other minorities that are feeling the same way.”

**Credits:**

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