

This project stems largely from the Latina and female aspects of my identity and the representation, or lack thereof, that I've seen in various forms of media. As a young person, the musical *In the Heights* greatly impacted me; the show takes place in a mainly Latinx neighborhood in New York and was the first time I remember relating to a character for reasons besides their feelings or actions. One of the main characters, Nina Rosario, is Puerto Rican and the first from her family to attend college. Besides immediately noticing how Nina spoke Spanish and grew up in an area not far from my own, her feelings about attending a private, mainly white school, were clearly articulated, and personally easily relatable. While America's black population is the leader out of all minority groups to proportionate representation in media, other groups will need to, in some cases, triple their number of roles in order to reach the proportions of white representation.

I wanted to address this in my video, which combines animation and found footage. The words in the closing clip are from Ezekiel 25:17, which is also part of Samuel L. Jackson's famous monologue in *Pulp Fiction*. I was most drawn to the subtle word changes throughout, such as "brothers" changing to "sisters." The remaining audio is sourced from recorded conversations with friends, where we openly spoke about my topic. The found footage is meant to contrast this audio by using movies and shows that I believe have good representation. To me, recording these conversations was one of the most important aspects of the project, since it helped to ground my research in other personal experiences. Towards the end of the video, audio from each conversation starts to overlap, showing how each person has their own unique history with and relationship to this topic.

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# Carnaval Del Barrio: The History and Stereotypes Surrounding Diversity In Media

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When my parents informed me that we had tickets to see a Broadway show, a large part of me was more excited about the promise of going to BBQs for lunch beforehand. “The show is set here, in New York,” my mother told me later as we filed into our seats. I studied the set that was on stage, noting that it did resemble a street that I’d been on numerous times on the way to my grandmother’s Harlem apartment. The Manhattan Bridge is clearly visible as the backdrop for a hair salon that resembles countless others in Upper Manhattan, and a ‘bodega’, or small deli next door; each building is below apartments, which is another common sight. I looked down at the Playbill in my hand, and the bold red title stared up at me: *In the Heights*.

Once the curtains closed, my eight-year-old self was filled with happiness. Having lived in New York City for my entire life, I had seen countless stories set on the streets that I’ve come to know and love; however, in barely any of those stories had I seen characters that looked like me, sounded like me, or spoke my family’s language. Both sides of my family are mainly from Puerto Rico, which is a part of my identity that has always been extremely important to me - even in elementary school, when asked to write a statement that began with “I’m 100% \_\_\_”, I opened by saying that I was 100% Puerto Rican. I remember getting responses from my peers saying that I must be at least partially American, but sticking by my writing. Growing up in New York while also being immersed in the culture of another place entirely is not necessarily uncommon, given the amount of diversity in the city. However, since I was spending the majority of my time in a mainly white school on the Upper East Side, and still am today, for a while this phenomenon felt unique to me. That’s all the more reason why I was so excited to hear a story like mine told to a wide audience, since characters like the ones in *In the Heights* are so difficult to find in Hollywood.

The musical *In the Heights* takes place over the course of three days and follows multiple characters living in Washington Heights, a majorly Latinx neighborhood in New York. The main story follows Usnavi and his own ‘bodega’, and he eventually learns that his store sold a winning lottery ticket. It’s then revealed that the ticket was sold to Abuela Claudia, who is not biologically his grandmother, but did help raise him and others in their neighborhood. While I was able to see my family and neighborhood in the entirety of the story, I related the most to one of the main characters named Nina Rosario. She is the first in her family, and even from ‘el barrio’, the Spanish term for the neighborhood, to go to college. In fact, at the opening of the show, Nina is returning from her first year at Stanford University. While I’m not the first generation in my family to continue my education after high school, my mother was the first in her family to go to college; from a young age, she dreamt of becoming a lawyer, which she was able to accomplish. In later years, where I continued listening to the musical’s soundtrack, I understood Nina’s feelings of guilt when she realized how hard her parents worked to help her get to a school like Stanford, as a woman of color from a lower income neighborhood.

When I first saw the show, I initially connected with different aspects of Nina’s identity- for example, we’re both Puerto Rican, along with our families- but later on, I was able to see that we’re similar in more than just that way. There is even a moment when Nina sings, “When I was younger, I’d imagine what would happen if my parents had stayed in Puerto Rico. Who would I be if I had never seen Manhattan, if I lived in Puerto Rico with my people?” (Miranda, 2008) I had wondered the same thing, especially since I wasn’t sure what it would be like to live with my family that lives there; to this day I’ve only been able to visit Puerto Rico one time. My favorite memory from that trip was riding in a rocky school bus with my family, in the middle of the night, to visit Bahía Bioluminiscente, or the Bioluminescent Bay in Vieques. We took a boat out to the middle of the bay and got to swim, each of our movements being brightly highlighted by the glowing blue in the water. When I got too cold, the tour guide took a bucket of the water up onto

the boat for me to play with for the remainder of the trip, my towel still wrapped tightly around me. Meanwhile, the most accessible “natural” landscape in New York is the man-made park at Manhattan’s center.

Later in the show, it’s revealed to the audience that Nina dropped out of Stanford. The scholarship money wasn’t enough to cover her entire tuition, and she had been working two jobs to make the money, but because of this, she didn’t have time to read the books she was purchasing. As a result, her academic performance suffered, her grades weren’t high enough to keep the scholarship, and she wasn’t able to return the next year. Before informing her parents, the guilt and pressure that Nina feels is evident when she sings, “They are all counting on me to succeed. I am the one who made it out, the one who always made the grade. But maybe I should have just stayed home” (Miranda, 2008). When she does tell them the news, they’re upset, and her father, Kevin Rosario, is especially confused as to why she didn’t reach out for financial help. Kevin owns his own taxi cab service and, in his own way, has resisted following the path of his father; his father and family were all farmers, and he was told from a young age that he would be a farmer as well. He rejected this idea, saying, “Papi, I’m sorry, I’m going farther. I’m getting on a plane. And I’m gonna change the world someday!” (Miranda, 2008), which was met with a slap in the face by his father. Nina’s parents are much more supportive of her exploration than her father’s, but she still feels the need to impress them.

Personally, I’m thankful to go to the school that I get to attend and have been attending since kindergarten, but I understand the constant feeling of wanting to prove yourself. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve started to feel that I’ve been going back and forth between two different worlds of school and home. While both of those “worlds” have communities that I’m glad I get to be a part of, it can be difficult to balance, especially considering the amount of diversity, or lack thereof, and general competitiveness in my school. My parents have worked extremely hard for me to get my education, in the same way that Nina’s parents have. Time and time again I’ve experienced similar feelings that her character does, knowing that I could also be considered, in my extended family, and of course, to a lesser extent, the one who “made it out” - just like Nina. While the musical *In the Heights* could be relatable to people of all different backgrounds, Nina’s experience as a Puerto Rican woman in New York, attending a well-known, mostly white school that her family wasn’t always able to think possible, is a unique one.

Every person should be able to find a character that they can relate to somewhere in media, whether that be a musical, TV show, or movie. The response to *In the Heights* was a great one, even when it was released in 2008; it won the Tony Award for best musical, best original score, best choreography, best orchestrations, and was nominated for nine more- and that’s only the original Broadway production of the show. Having positive representations of each minority group will only result in more inspiration for those groups, creativity, and fewer negative stereotypes being taught to the next generation. To me, *In the Heights* is one strong example of the necessity of having diversity in accessible media; in 2020, there will even be a full movie based around the story. In more recent years, the statistics supporting this necessity have been even more evident. In the past few years, great strides have been made, but most minority groups are still far from adequate representation in casting, TV, and film production that’s proportionate to their numbers in American society today.

In order to understand why diversity and representation need to be prioritized, it’s important to take a look at the history of minorities in media. While the role that minorities play in entertainment today is not as damaging as it once was, the stereotypes are still present in the way that people of color are cast in shows or movies. Black characters have been appearing in

American movies since the beginning, around the year 1888, in which degrading stereotypes and white supremacy were commonly reinforced (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). Initially, there weren't even people of color cast to play these parts- instead, it was typical for white actors to play these roles in "blackface" (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). One of the more notable anti-black films was D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, which supported the Ku Klux Klan (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). The backlash from this movie helped inspire the creation of 'race films', which "portrayed blacks in a positive light and addressed some social concerns of the community ... after the introduction of 'race films', blacks were depicted with more dignity and respect" (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999).

An example of someone who contributed to these "race films" was Noble Johnson. Working as both an actor and producer, he eventually became president of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, one of the first movie companies to be organized by black filmmakers (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). Their goal was to "not only produce pictures entertaining to Negroes, but to all races. Our market is as large as we make it; the world is our field" (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999), as stated in their brochure, which shows how inclusive they were aiming to be. The first movie produced by this company was *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, in 1916, and portrayed black people in roles that were not stereotypes. This means that each character was not shown as less intelligent as the others, or as violent.

According to a study in 2001, which looked at a set of movies and specifically their female African American characters, 89% of the black characters used profanity, compared to 17% of the white characters, and 56% of black characters were portrayed as physically violent, while 11% of the white characters were (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). This shows two examples of stereotypes that have been present in the media since years prior, and are still showing up regularly in stories today. The second film from the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, *A Trooper of Troop K*, from 1917, tried to build race pride (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). While these films were not shown to a very widespread audience initially, they were being played in schools, churches, and "colored only" movie theaters.

Another instance of an all-black movie company being created was the Micheaux Film Corporation, founded in 1918 by Oscar Micheaux. He had approached Johnson and his company to produce one of his books, which they refused; so he decided to produce the film himself. Many of the films from the Micheaux Film Corporation ended up getting support from both black and white communities, such as *The Homesteader* (1919), which was entirely financed by farmers (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). Between the years 1919 and 1940, the corporation made over 35 films, covering topics such as Jim Crow laws, racial solidarity, assimilation, and the politics of skin color (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). These movies were typically shown in houses in the North, segregated theaters down South, and black churches, schools, and social organizations. Similarly to the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Micheaux rejected the typical Hollywood portrayal of black people and instead placed them into positions of power, and as fully developed people. In general, these movies, in even as late as the 1970s, gave black people a voice in the industry, and encouraged them to fight back against oppressors in the Civil Rights Movement.

However, the "race movies" started to decrease in popularity over the next ten years, and Hollywood took that opportunity to make movies with entirely black casts. The first Hollywood movie with an all-black cast was *Hearts in Dixie*, released in 1929 (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). As described by the authors of "Portrayal of Minorities in Film, Media and Entertainment Industries", the story follows a "lazy, but good-natured slave, unwilling to work, but forgiven for his errant ways" (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). There is even a scene where the owner kicks

him “playfully”, and then shows him smiling and winking at the audience. It stars Stepin Fetchit, who was a talented actor, but played many roles that reinforced racial stereotypes. In fact, in *Hearts in Dixie*, he is described as “a ‘black clown’, is a ‘good nigger’, lazy and shiftless, yet ‘all right at heart’. Most importantly, he ‘knows his place.’” (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999) Hollywood announced in 1952 that they would stop casting him because they didn’t want to offend black people.

In modern-day Hollywood, the lasting impact of stereotypical portrayals such as this one are still evident and debated. For example, in *Nothing to Lose*, which was released in 1997, the roles that Tim Robbins and Martin Lawrence play each have a present bias in their characterization. Robbins is the “quintessential white guy, a square straight and narrow”, while Lawrence is the “wise-ass, street-smart black guy” (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). There is even a scene where Robbins tells Lawrence that he’s a bad person for being involved in armed robberies, who essentially responds by calling him weak. Even films that are widely praised and generally well known can cause controversy; while many still defend the first part of the series, *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* has been criticized in the past for the character of Jar Jar Binks. The criticism has included how his ears resemble dreadlocks but mainly circulates around his broken English, accent, and role of the “servant” in the movie. While these are only two examples of movies sparking debate, there are countless more where the bias is clearly present. Whether it be a person of color always playing the role of a criminal, or a female character playing into the damsel in distress stereotype, there are still many steps to take before these tropes disappear entirely.

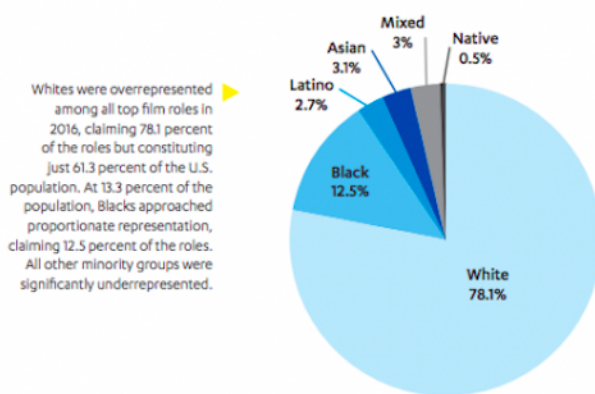
The main importance behind removing these stereotypes lies within the influence that television and movies have today. These characterizations of certain races or other minorities might portray people in a way that the viewer won’t otherwise interact with, and the number of people watching is only growing. This is especially true because there are children who don’t have the ability to tell the difference between characters and reality, which means that the bias could be subconsciously present from a young age (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999). This is not to say that improvements haven’t been made in the past years- barely any people of color were being cast in the 1950s, and black representation has increased since then. In general, there have been fewer depictions of criminal behavior, with the exception of reality shows.

For the Latinx community, there has not been as much of an increase in representation, but the roles have improved since the José Jiménez characters of television. José was a Latino character created by Bill Dana, a Hungarian and Jewish comedian, who was extremely popular during the 1960s. Raúl Perez argues that Dana’s routine, which featured José’s heavy accent and whose catchphrase wasn’t even a complete sentence, “continued the tradition of racial ridicule at a time when blackface minstrelsy was increasingly unpopular: a result of contestation by African American civil rights groups” (Perez, 2014). There have been strides towards more representation in Hollywood, but minorities are still underrepresented, and the women are not working “on par” with the male leads (Betancourt, 2018). Regularly, UCLA releases a Hollywood Diversity Report that helps place statistics alongside the claims about representation in current day media. The 2018 report looked at hundreds of movies, over 1,200 broadcasts, cable, and digital shows. Immediately, it is shown that, in the past year, 78.1% of roles were white, while they only take up about 61.3% of the U.S. population (UCLA College, 2018). America’s population of black individuals was almost proportionately represented, with 12.5% of roles and 13.3% of the population. However, every other group was underrepresented; all people of color would have to triple their numbers in order to have overall proportionate representation (UCLA College, 2018, see Figure 2). For

example, in 2015, minorities were 13.6% of leads, and increased by .3% in 2016; in order to accurately represent the population, the number would have to reach 38.7%. Only 1.4 out of 10 lead actors in films and 1.3 out of 10 film directors are people of color, (UCLA College, 2018). Women have also been underrepresented in the past few years, even within the movie-making process itself; in fact, less than 1 out of 10 film directors are female (UCLA College, 2018). This is especially true for Latina women, because, while white and black women are closer in numbers to their male counterparts, Latinas are not even close.

Statistics similar to those found in the Hollywood Diversity Report prove that the myth that movies with more minorities won't do well is completely false. Minorities made up the majority of ticket sales for over half of the top films that year, and most people on social media engage with

**FIGURE 2:** Share of Film Roles, by Race, 2016 (n=1,352)



shows that most accurately represent America's diversity; movies with 20% or less minority casting even had the lowest rankings in the box office (UCLA College, 2018). 6 out of the 10 top broadcast scripted shows in 2016 had at least 21% minority casting, and the #1 show was *Empire*, which has over 50%. And, while it is significant that improvements are being made within the United States, it is also important to see what international audience these majorly minority movies have. In 2016, movies with black, Latinx, and other minority leads were released in the fewest international markets, compared to movies with mostly white characters. The films that reached the most

international markets were those with between 21% and 30% minority casting (UCLA College, 2018).

There are some tests that both critics and moviegoers alike have been applying to new blockbusters. An example of this is the "Bechdel Test," also known as the "Mo Movie Measure," "Bechdel Rule," or "Bechdel-Wallace Test," which looks at the role of women in fiction; in order for a movie to pass, it has to have at least two women that talk to each other about something other than a man. While this definitely isn't the only way to determine the rate of female representation in movies, it is one indicator. Over time, more movies have been passing- between the years 1970 and 1974, only 25% of movies passed, but between the years 2010 and 2013, that number rose to 50% (Dusenbery, 2014). Some fairly recent statistics even show that movies that pass the Bechdel Test made even more money, which supports the fact that movies with more minorities will be more well received by audiences (Dusenbery, 2014).

Besides the reason that every person should be able to find a character that relates to, at the very least, one aspect of their identity in a positive light, there are now even clear monetary reasons behind including more minorities in media. While it is true that people inherently cast actors that look like them in 'good' roles and people who don't look like them in the 'bad' roles (Horton & Price & Brown, 1999), this is all the more reason to make sure there are minorities involved in the production of these shows and movies as well. With shows with this positive characterization of all types of people, many adults and children alike should find it easier to relate to the story. In recent years, for every step forward, there has been a step back, which is important to recognize.

For example, a remake of a show called *One Day at a Time* aired on Netflix in 2017; the sitcom follows a Cuban-American family, led by a single mother, Penelope, who is an Army veteran and now a nurse. The show includes perspectives of other generations with the character of their grandmother and has LGBTQ+ representation through the character of Elena, Penelope's daughter, and her significant other who identifies as non-binary, Syd. *One Day at a Time* touches on countless other important subjects, such as mental health and illness, including realistic depictions of PTSD, anxiety attacks, addiction, and group therapy sessions. The show, whose writing team is mostly made up of Latinx people, was recently canceled by Netflix after three seasons. In the company's announcement of this news, they acknowledged that it's important that stories such as this one continue to get told, and that many may have felt seen for the first time by this show. They said that it was not getting enough viewers, despite not actively promoting it. As the statistics support, this series did have a wide audience because of its inclusion of minorities, and this was proved when a hashtag saying "save *One Day at a Time*" was still trending days after the news was released. The outrage by Netflix canceling this series shows how important it was for so many people, myself included. There may not be hope in knowing that Netflix decided to stop funding this show, but there is some in the way that so many others have been offering to continue telling the story, and I believe that shows like this one will only continue to grow in numbers.



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