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Representation: the Effects and Why it Matters

Representation for people of color in the media is vital. From children being allowed to see themselves on screen to adults feeling seen for the first time, everyone deserves to have their stories told. The majority of stories in movies, television, and books are told through a largely white lens. While there is nothing wrong with these types of stories, there are many more points of view that deserve to be told. One could argue that by now, there is plenty of representation, like the (tired, old) examples of *The Hate U Give* or *Call Me by Your Name*. However, these are far from POC fan favorites, with the first being seen as overly cliched and the second being full of harmful tropes related to gay men, including pedophilia. Clearly, better work and representation is needed. However, the actors of color needed to fill these roles also deserve better treatment, as fanbases of any kind prove to be downright awful to POC actors. This essay will contain information on why representation is important, with experiences from multiple people, what can happen when representation is poorly done and poorly accepted, actors who have been victims of their fanbases, and what impact current changes will have on future representation in the media, all to support the point that representation for people of color is important for the development of individuals in those groups and ideas about them, and needs to be improved.

To an outsider, representation in the entertainment industry may not be seen as important. Our world has many bigger issues, so why would this matter? The truth is, the media affects a lot of these other issues. For example, in entertainment, Black people are stereotyped as big and violent, and this encourages the stereotyping in real life and using it as an excuse for injustices like murder and police brutality. It also matters on a personal level, especially for children. Growing up, children who never see themselves in stories can be affected badly. The characters they see everywhere are usually white and male, and there are very few women. A few examples are *The Maze Runner* series, the *Percy Jackson* franchise, and pretty much the entirety of the *Marvel* franchise. One might not see a lot of issue in this, but for example, imagine a young child, having all of the characters they would always see themselves as being White. They would start questioning why. How does one explain to a child their race or ethnicity is not respected by the media? Children need characters, role models, and stories they can see themselves in, because by only showing white characters, children of color grow up thinking those stories cannot be for them. This is why there was so much protest around *Black Panther* and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (Masters), people in charge just did not think films about superheroes of color would do well, since not much like this had been done before (Masters). However, both films went on to shatter records, proving them wrong.

Since people are so accustomed to traditionally White main characters, they can react badly to a person of color being in those roles, for example, Tyler Posey as Scott McCall in *Teen Wolf*. The show began in 2011, when representation was even worse than it is now. Posey was the main character in a show extremely popular with White teen girls, and with that audience came many things, both good and bad. Posey and his character are Hispanic, and though they like to claim it was not because of his ethnicity, both the actor and his character were destroyed

in the fanbase. Posey was accused of being homophobic, queerbaiting, attention-seeking, obsessed with his costars, self-centered, and so much more (Stitch). As one can clearly see, each of these claims contradict the other, and none of them were true. The sources of these claims, in order, is Posey not supporting a popular queer (albeit problematic) fan pairing, supporting a queer relationship involving himself on his show, *Teen Wolf*, posting content based on said show reminiscently, and his close relationship with costar Dylan O'Brien. The fanbase wanted any excuse to hate him, and the bias was revealed when one of his white costars did everything the same as Posey, but did not get any criticism whatsoever. The costar was actor Colton Haynes, who like Posey, came out as queer, constantly refers back to *Teen Wolf*, makes a lot of content praising O'Brien, and is generally very similar to the prior. The difference? Haynes is white, while Posey is not. This is not accusing anyone who finds fault in Posey or his character to be racist, but the majority do not go after other actors who have done the same things, showing their clear bias against him for no valid reason.

While Posey was relentlessly attacked, his character, Scott McCall, did not get any better treatment. There is a common formula one can notice in most fanbases, and it is to divide characters of color by beloved White characters to produce the most popular (and White) character in the fanbase. Scott is a very deep, multilayered character in the show, and because of this formula, most of these layers were torn apart and assigned to other (White) characters the fanbase was obsessed with. *Teen Wolf* is a supernatural drama, and centers mostly about werewolves. Scott, being the main character, is shown as being strict with his moral compass, to the point where he is awarded the title "True Alpha," which just means he was so good and honorable he gained a higher werewolf status. Another character, Derek Hale, is not shown in the same light. He acts on bad impulses for his own purposes, even if he was pushed to it by other

characters, he is a far cry from Scott. However, the fanbase flips these roles often, remembering Derek as righteous and good while making Scott into a C-list villain. This is not seen with any of the White characters, like Dylan O'Brien's Stiles Stilinski. Stiles is always whole, even elevated for his character in the fanbase. The only part of him erased is his close relationship with Scott, and how their friendship withstands thick and thin. The fanbase turns this into a parasitic relationship, showing Stiles trying to keep the friendship while Scott ignores him in favor of girls. This is not accurate in the show at all, they are both in the end shown to always gravitate to each other, and while female love interests cycle in and out, Scott never abandons Stiles. The fanbase has it out for Scott McCall, and again, the character is conspicuously not White. There can be another motive, however, when another look is taken at the fanbase of mainly straight White teenage girls. The kind of romantic relationship popular in this demographic is two attractive (White) men, in the *Teen Wolf* fanbase, being previously mentioned Derek and Stiles. The two have barely any screen time together, and when they do, it is mostly animosity. The (platonic) relationship is mended by the end of the show, but romantically shipping these two characters is wildly problematic. First of all, in the pilot episode, Derek is 20 at the youngest, and Stiles is 16. No explanation is needed as to why that is a problem. Next, their dynamic is not one of romantic tension, with the characters grudgingly working together out of respect for Scott. At the beginning of the relationship, Derek constantly belittles Stiles and Stiles constantly wants to dump Derek out of the picture, even if it means harm for him. This is not a good relationship dynamic to be idealized, and yet it is with the fanbase. The relationship develops in a better way around the final season, with both characters obviously respecting each other and having bonded, but that is not the one romanticized by fans, instead most of them idealized the early, borderline-abusive relationship. Lastly, all of the loyalty and romance the fanbase gives the

Derek/Stiles pairing is blatantly stolen from in-show content of Scott and Stiles. The reason Scott is swapped out for Derek in the fanbase is, yet again and most likely, because Scott is Hispanic. As progressive as the showrunners and fanbase claim to be, the main character/actor of color is treated despicably, undeniably because of his ethnicity.

Like McCall, heroes of color are constantly torn into pieces and handed off to White characters by the fanbases. This phrasing may be hard to understand, but as writer Stitch puts it, “I’ve never seen folks in fandom cut up aspects of a white hero to then give those characteristics to another white character. No one’s writing stories where Bucky was always Captain America and he went on to link up with the Avengers as a fandom norm. No one’s rewriting the Skywalker saga so that Luke is actually the (totally unrelated) rogue who falls in love with Leia while Han is shot into the icy vacuum of space” (Stitch). Her point is that characters of color constantly have their stories stolen and replaced with White characters. This is seen again in Star Wars, with the story of Finn, Rey, and Kylo Ren (AKA Ben Solo). Rey and Kylo are both white, while Finn is Black. A love triangle is teased between the three, however, all of the romantic experiences between Finn and Rey are handed off to Kylo, a character who is on the “dark side” and known to be very toxic towards Rey. Finn himself is not perfect, and not the ideal romantic partner for Rey either, but the good in his character does not deserve to be stripped away for Kylo. In this instance, it is more than just the fans, with Finn’s connection and love (platonic or otherwise) for Rey, their rocky first meeting on Jakku, even his backstory of being a soldier forced to fight for the First Order and giving it to Kylo being practically seen as canon. As Stitch puts, it was “all while insisting that those traits were there before, and that Finn’s actual fans are selfish for pointing out that he is being cut up and grafted onto Kylo by a fandom that actively

seems to hate the idea of Finn as a hero.” This proves that the *Star Wars* fanbase also follows the aforementioned “formula.”

Another franchise that confusingly blends pro- and regressive elements is *The Maze Runner*. The plot follows Thomas, portrayed by Dylan O’Brien, a boy thrust into an unknown place called the Glade full of teenage boys, the only way out that all of them try to work through is a deadly maze. The story follows Thomas’ journey out, and how the group navigates the outside world. There are 2 notable characters of color, Minho and Alby. Alby is Black, and plays into the trope of being the wise mentor, as he is the leader of the group of boys, along with being the Black character who is killed early as, well, Alby is killed early on. Minho’s character is more complicated. He is Korean, but it is less so to include a Korean in the story and instead to just make a character Korean for the sake of the appearance of representation. This conclusion is because he breaks some harmful tropes surrounding Asians, but also plays right into some of them (Asian American Popular Culture). For example, he leads a section of the boys called the Runners, who map the Maze. Films do not often see Asians as leaders, however there is no hesitation in referring to Minho as one, his subsequent title in the series even being “A-7: the Leader”. However, another trope about Asians is being perceived as introverted and reserved. Minho is very blunt and to the point, often speaking in short and terse sentences. This is only in the movies, as in the books he is a much more sarcastic, playful, overall a teenage boy. For an Asian character in the 2010s’, Minho is very well written, with all of the layers of being a child forced into growing up and taking the role of an adult, still being a teenage boy, being protective but fearing attachment and the subsequent loss, and all of the traits that dubbed him the leader. Minho is made of contradictions when it comes to racial tropes, but without meaning to, he is a

good example of common representation, as his race is not the center of the story, he just happens to be Korean.

The fanbase of *The Maze Runner* is, predictably, not entirely welcoming to him. Minho is referred to as the sassy flamboyant side character, only accepted as long as he is in the background of Thomas and another (White) character Newt, played by Thomas Brodie-Sangster. However, Minho and Ki Hong are blatantly erased from everything having to do with the franchise, with fans assigning aspects of his character to Newt and leaving Ki Hong out of their conversations. A quick look at any fan content will show Thomas and Newt being the overwhelming pairing plastered everywhere, as well as O'Brien and Sangster. Ki Hong is noticeably left out for anyone who looks for him, even though fans gush over any picture, video, or statement to come from any of the White actors. Predictably, Minho's character suffers a similar fate. Things like Thomas' desperation when he is separated from Minho, Minho's devotion to following Thomas and all of his ideas even though Minho is the leader, their mutual protectiveness of each other, practically any positive interaction is assigned to, yet again, the other attractive White character Newt. One would be hard-pressed to find as much fan content for Minho as for any of the other White characters, when Minho is one of the three main characters and practically titular, as he and Thomas are the last maze Runners. The entire bond so carefully created between Minho and Thomas is torn into pieces for fans to sew Newt into, yet another example of the formula.

All of this actors of color and their characters to go through, just because people are not used to seeing non-White main characters. That is why it needs to be more normalized and inclusive, because if there are no opportunities for people of color as leads, the few current ones will face the same struggles. A good example of a little bit of both is the recent film *Shang-Chi*

and the Legend of the Ten Rings. The cast was almost completely Asian, with input from all of the actors and Asian screenwriters in order to properly portray the story. They reinvented tropes such as the racist character Fu Manchu, AKA The Mandarin, who was a stereotypical Chinese proverbial but easily defeated villain. Instead, they fixed their old mistake and reintroduced his original purpose as Xu Wenwu, a much more respectful and appropriate portrayal. Many other similar stories have come out, like the actress Meng'er Zhang, who portrays female fighter Xu Xialing, having vetoed the planned streak of color in Xialing's hair because of the trope of strong female Asian characters having dyed hair (O'Sullivan). The progressive film was not accepted by everyone though, with multiple critics and news sites projecting that the film would flop (O'Sullivan). However, the film grossed a whopping \$94 million over the Labor Day weekend. Obviously, the previous records (and opinions of all the critics) were shattered (Masters). So many people were excited to see themselves finally have a place in this film. The story of *Shang-Chi* was crafted by multiple Asian actors and writers giving input, and that is why so many old, tired tropes were broken. Instead, an important story for the representation of Asian individuals was created.

The main actor Simu Liu (*Shang-Chi*) speaks on this himself. Featuring in the podcast *Asian Enough*, he says "It is an insane privilege to be able to be the role model I didn't have growing up," referring to the fact that people (especially children and teenagers) of color do not have enough representation to be able to see themselves in, with all of the superhero and romance and drama stories being led by White actors. By limiting the representation, children see it as their opportunities being limited, when everybody has the right to the same stories. Another topic *Shang-Chi* precariously played with is that people of color are not traditionally in roles considered "attractive" to the audience. Actors of color are especially predisposed to

noticing this, apart from Liu, Tyler Posey has also spoken on being the “hot, shirtless guy” and how it connects to being Hispanic (Hernandez), Ki Hong Lee says that while embarrassed at first, he is proud to have been named “4th Sexiest Man Alive” because of how important it is for Asian teens and men to see themselves as attractive (UC Berkeley). Not only that, but because of the lack of representation, wanting to pursue acting as a career is a bit taboo in communities of color. As Liu puts it, parents will often say “That’s a White people job (Los Angeles Times)” because even with their intentions of protecting their children, they have been perpetuated with that idea by the lack of opportunities for actors of color, often leading to tension between young people of color who want to pursue this and their parents. Representation is so important it even affects families, career paths, entire lives, revealing the complicated nature of the issue of leaving POC out of the media.

Clearly, there has been change for the better, but what does this mean for the future? Leaving the scene as it is is not enough, as the changes representation has seen are just the first step. *Shang-Chi* shows that putting people of color in charge of telling their own stories will always yield better results than having White individuals at the helm. To have this available, people of color need to be in positions of power in the media. “Things are never going to change until we have Black partners at the big talent agencies and Black people in positions to greenlight movies... Things will never change until these positions have people of color (Faughnder).” Business as usual cannot continue, instead, the business needs to be changed to be able to have better representation. As characters of color become more common, hopefully their treatment in fanbases will become better, as well as their actors. Writers need to support their characters and not let the fanbases’ hatred and erasure towards characters of color to continue, as sadly writers are often quiet on these issues. To see vital representation, the system must continue to slowly

but surely change, as the uncertainties of a low audience and low revenue have proven wrong. Hollywood has no excuse to continue to ignore people of color, and fanbases have no excuse to ignore characters of color. For change to occur, everyone needs to acknowledge the flaws the system has established, and work together to keep this change going.

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