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COME 467

Professor Glantz

12/9/22

Portraying Race on Television: *On My Block*

Introduction

Throughout television's history, it has been a predominately white institute in which people of color were hardly aired. When they were, it was white people portraying them in a stereotypical manner. In an interview of Stephanie Troutman Robbins, who is the head of the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at University of Arizona, she stated that "early television really reflected a very narrow representation of non-white characters. And a lot of the earlier characters were caricatures and racist depictions in many ways" (Harwood, 2022). People of color never had a proper role in television's early times but as society improves, we are receiving more actors of color and shows containing main characters of diverse backgrounds. There is still more work to be done because "Latinos are more than 18% of the population yet made up only 5.3% of the share of broadcast TV roles in the 2018-19 season" (Los Angeles Times, 2021). Recent data shows this lack of representation from Latino actors in television shows. Representation and correct portrayal of actors from diverse backgrounds is important because proper representation assists in helping others have a better understanding of a certain culture and motives of life. Properly portraying helps avoid the concept of dehumanization and uplift people of color from the feeling of oppression. Their ancestors have faced it and those in today's society still encounter it. Having a correct portrayal helps bring awareness in a variety of

ways, positive or negative, in which it helps viewers understand today's society through the means of television.

Program Information

The show *On My Block* is a fictional story-based show that takes place in South Central Los Angeles. There are four best friends who live in a fictional neighborhood called Freeridge, who attempt to prevent one of the members from joining a gang. Monse, Ruby, Jamal and Cesar are high school students that come from a diverse background. Monse and Jamal represent/portray the black community while Ruby and Caesar represent/portray the Mexican community. The diversity in the show dominates the screen time in which it is a black and Mexican orientated show. The gang life runs in Caesar's family from generation to generation as his older brother is an active member in *The Santos*. The rest of the friend group discuss ways to get Caesar out of the gang as the gang life consumed who he was. These four characters live in an active gang neighborhood where *The Santos* (Mexican gang) and *The Prophets* (Black gang) dominate the neighborhoods and make the streets unsafe, leaving that notion of "just another day in the neighborhood." The show "holds up the realities of these kids' lives—deportation, poverty, racism—while refusing to define them solely by their obstacles" (Chavez, 2018). Gang violence consumes the neighborhood and becomes a consistent theme throughout the seasons. Another theme that defines the show is a treasure hunt in which the teenagers begin to find clues to where the \$200,000 was hidden in the neighborhood from a Santo in the past and try to use the money to buy Caesar out of the gang. This treasure hunt brings many obstacles to the group and their friendships are tested along the way. *On My Block* portrays the kids of color well to which it "doesn't lose cultural context for a second, even with the casual dynamic between the friends" and "there's barely a white face in the entire series (if it weren't for a Halloween trek to

Brentwood, there'd be none) and it was just as diverse behind the scenes” (Khosla, 2021). The entire series was dedicated to people of color and allowed for them to have their own values they have from their families and friends of diverse backgrounds.

Lens/Description of Approach

The portrayal of race in numerous shows/films “in the United States often portray ethnic minorities through the lens of distinct stereotypes” (Schmader, 2015). Stereotype is an oversimplified image or idea that is placed onto a specific person identifying to a certain group. Many diverse groups have been portrayed in a stereotypical manner in predominantly white shows/films. It causes this continuous effect that this ethnic group should be portrayed in this manner because previous shows/films have used their image as so. Visual representation, the “means to project an image of someone or something—to re-represent,” is an important aspect in television as to which it portrays individuals in a certain matter (O'Donnell, 2017, p.172). Representation of diverse backgrounds has been portrayed in a stereotypical manner which gives the audience the notion of people identifying as that race that they act according to the portrayal that is placed upon them.

Latinos have been portrayed historically in a narrow set of stereotypical manners, mostly given a negative characterization. There have been multiple portrayals to which “they include the criminal, the law enforcer, the Latin lover, the Harlot, and the comic/buffoon” (Mastro, 2015, p.111). Dana Mastro and Elizabeth Behm conducted research of Latino representation on television to which they identified these common portrayals of Latinos on television. They identified the criminal as someone who typically is a male with youth features, aggressive, dishonest, and a messy appearance. The law enforcer is someone portrayed as having fluent speaking, well dressed, and respected. The Latin lover is well dressed and appears professional,

heavy accent, hot-tempered, and sexually aggressive. The female harlot is seen as hot tempered, sexually driven, irritating, and not professionally dressed. The final portrayal, the comic/buffoon, has been depicted as having a strong accent, lazy, low position, and unintelligent (Mastro, 2015, p.111). These portrayals of Latinos have been characterized throughout television for many years, which gives that false representation to all Latinos since not everyone contains these characterizations. *On My Block* contains many portrayals of the characters that will be discussed and how some features contain similar style while not falling under the category of stereotypical.

Along with the Latino community portrayed in the show, the black community is also represented as another ethnic that has been portrayed in a stereotypical manner and has been looked down upon. Recent nationwide opinion polls were performed on ethnic images in America and that African Americans obtained lower evaluations. Whites achieved positive ratings in work ethic, wealth, dependency, violence, intelligence, and patriotism. African Americans ranked last in violence, laziness, dependence, and coming second to last in wealth and intelligence (Fujioka, 1999, p.53). These rankings have been portrayed on the black community through television and having a negative representation on this ethnic group. Similarly, *On My Block* portrays the black community alongside the Latino community with stereotypical characteristics but the characters are shown to have their own representation of themselves while still identifying themselves with their ethnic group.

Analysis/Interpretation

In the beginning scene of the show from the very first episode, the audience receives a portrayal of three Mexicans driving a lowrider, arriving at a party. The west coast style for Mexicans contained plain shirts or sleeveless shirts, mainly the color gray, white, and black. These shirts would be bigger than their true fitted shirt size, along with baggy khaki shorts with

long socks, jewelry and whichever shoes they prefer. This outfit was typically affiliated with Mexican gang members and a majority had a variety of tattoos of their choice. Additionally, the lowrider was a common vehicle for Mexicans to drive, especially gang members. This form of dress code is important to which it portrays to society their representation of ethnicity in which they identify. It also portrays their lifestyle. This entrance is important as it lays out the foundation of the show's setting, and how the portrayal of Mexicans in the show will be shown to the audience. This form of portrayal can be viewed in a stereotypical manner, but it is a realistic portrayal of how Mexicans dressed, especially gang members. The party scene comes to an end as there is a shootout that occurs, in which we see the four characters run away from the scene and comedically say "[Monse] that was a .38. [Jamal] No, it was a .45. [Ruby] It sounded like a .44. [Jamal] Wrong! [Everyone] .357!" This representation of the characters stating a variety of weapons in a comedic matter shows that gang affiliated neighborhoods leave a mark on the people that live there and at times, it is nothing new to hear gunshots going off.

In the same episode, Monse comes back from writing camp over the summer and asks Ruby and Jamal why they don't talk to Caesar, for which they don't give a reason. She would find out Caesar's brother was released from jail to which the gang influence has a negative toll on Caesar. This would cause him to do things out of his character to act tough as a way to impress his brother. Monse goes to *the Santos* house to talk and she finds him outside chilling with his brother and other *Santos* members. She asks if they could talk in private and he says they can inside but Caesar does a smirk cough to which Caesar changes his response. He ends up saying, "But if you wanna sit on my face, you got to put that mouth on pause so I can concentrate." The smirky comment to impress his brother along with other gang members portrays the influence of family onto each other who affiliate in a gang. The oldest family

member sets an example to their younger siblings as Oscar has to Caesar, which is Caesar joining the *Santos*. This portrayal of Caesar and his brother Oscar, who is an important character throughout the show, demonstrates in today's society that young kids can get easily involved and fall into the trap of joining a gang, especially if family has been involved for generations. In the same episode, Caesar goes to Monse's house to apologize and they discuss how everyone is going to have a good future ahead while he says, "But this life... it's my destiny. My family crest is and will always be a gang sign." It reveals to the audience that young kids in America and across the world fall into gang life where they didn't have a choice and that life was forced upon them with no way out. This portrayal shows a sad and truthful reality from which Mexicans have been portrayed in other shows. This also shows what people from different ethnicities think of when they hear the word Mexican.

Similarly to Caesar's situation, Jamal has an expectation from his father to play football and go on to be great like his father back in the day. We first see this scenario in the first episode as Monse and Jamal are walking to his house. His father asks how his practice went and he responds, "I don't know. Ask those D1 scouts who were all up on me." He responds with, "That's my boy," with excitement, exemplifying that portrayal of young black kids playing a sport such as football or basketball. The portrayal of Jamal goes against the stereotypical representation of young black kids playing sports since he is not a fan of playing the sport. He says to Monse, "and he keeps thinking that I'm just gonna wake up one day and be him, and...I'm not him." This portrayal assists in eliminating the stereotypical sports fanatic that every young black kid is most likely represented in shows who have some sort of connection with either sport. This portrayal that kids are seen to live up to the expectation of their father/mother who were great at something applies pressure to the mentality of a kid in which if

he/she fails to do so, they will be seen as a failure. *On My Block* helps bring awareness that not all Mexicans and blacks fill in the stereotypical portrayal that society has placed them upon.

The friend group consists of 4 members, three boys and one girl to which many would think one of the guys would lead and keep the group together. Monse states in the first episode about Caesar that “he’s the glue of our crew,” while Jamal states “that was then, and this is now.” The portrayal of Monse, being a black woman in today's society that leads and keeps a group of guys together is different because black women in America are looked down upon and seen as unprofessional. *On My Block* portrays Monse as a strong valued, well spoken woman who is the reason why their friend group stays together. Her influence upon the group is sometimes overlooked as Caesar kept the friend group together but in reality, it has been Monse. We see this occur in season three, episode eight, as Monse leaves to a different school in New York. Right before she leaves, she says to them, “If you fight, think of me, in your face, gluing the crew back together,” and then says, “Promise me nothing’s gonna change.” Everyone promises her that nothing is going to change but it does. The absence of Monse causes the group to separate and everyone does their own thing. Jamal ends up joining the football team, Ruby begins dating this girl named Jasmine who had become part of the friend group, and then Caesar ends up joining the gang. The portrayal of Monse being a leader values the strong leadership that people of color can contain, especially women, and at times, people of color never receive that chance of being a leader as they are told to follow. Monse’s representation helps eliminate the stereotypical roles people of color and women play in today’s society, as their presence and leadership can play a huge part in keeping a group together.

As *On My Block* is focused on diversity in today’s society, it portrays Mexican traditions and values in a variety of ways, such as within religion and family. An important tradition in

Mexican culture is a quinceñera. It is the celebration of a young woman turning 15 as she begins to enter adulthood. *On My Block* assists in portraying a variety of ways in which this tradition is celebrated which has been around for many years in its own form in television. In season one, episode seven, there is a character who was introduced in episode 2 named Olivia, and her 15th birthday is in a week. Ruby is shocked that she didn't tell them that her *quince* is in a week and would shout, "Mom, Dad, Olivia's *quince* is in a week!" The family came over and asked her about it, and then they would proceed to cancel any plans for that Saturday and begin planning for the big day at their house. Everyone is excited as it is a big deal for Mexicans to celebrate and to make it happen in some form. In the last episode of season one, we see how chaotic the big day can be, everyone is stressed and worried to get ready and hoping everything is set on time. The most we see is Ruby stressed because he had planned all the activities and stated that, "the party's ruined! It's a total disaster." The way Ruby is portrayed is that he cares about perfection and that everything needs to happen how it was planned. In other ways, it shows the passion and love the Mexican community dedicates itself to celebrate this longtime tradition through the portrayal of Ruby. He is the most dedicated planner and goes all out for Olivia because he loves her, the celebration of a quinceñera is all about love. *On My Block's* portrayal of a Mexican tradition helps reinforce the love and dedication the Mexican community shows to their special daughter on a special day to remember.

One of the most important portrayals that *On My Block* shows is a white teenager dressing up as a cholo in season one, episode four. We see this white kid try to imitate a lifestyle that actually exists where many die through gang violence while this kid hosts a Halloween party in one of the richest neighborhoods around the area. The white kid says, "I mean, it's like life imitating art and art imitating life, right?" This reveals how the white race sees Mexicans as

being gang members by mimicking a dress style in which they have no right to do, especially living in the comforts of safety in a rich neighborhood. They use this form of style to act cool and try to be someone who they can never be as it pertains to a dangerous lifestyle. They would never be able to understand the struggles Mexicans and blacks face in America coming from a white background and a rich neighborhood. In addition, the show portrays the white kid as an oppressor as he is upset that Olivia took a juice from the fridge that belongs to his mom. He would say, “what the hell is wrong with you people.” He would continue making racist statements upon the group. This form of oppression is still occurring to this day, as white privileged kids believe they can mimic another race while still making racist comments and oppressing that ethnicity. This portrayal of the friend who encounters a form of racism, especially at a young age, shows that racism still exists even on television. Television is a form of awareness as it is able to portray different races and *On My Block* doesn’t portray a form of Anti-Racist White Hero, as there is no white character that is involved in show after the scene occurred. White people aren’t able to feel good about themselves for experiencing some sort of oppression when having involvement with people of color, instead they are taught a lesson and this form of fear/guilt is placed upon them.

Evaluation

After analyzing *On My Block*, I enjoyed analyzing the program that I had previously watched all four seasons without analyzing. It was enjoyable to watch, coming from a Mexican background, having a show that is based on diversity allowing for inclusion on television. Containing stereotypical portrayals that comes from actual representation of that certain group eliminates forms of oppression. It is portrayed in a respectable manner and is a part of the culture. Once the white race partakes in portrayals of another race such as the Halloween party

scene, it reinforces the status quo of racism as there will be misportrayal from the white race upon the ethnic group, especially on television that is produced by a white crew. *On My Block* challenges the status quo of stereotypical portrayals of the Black and Mexican community to which each of the characters are unique in their own way while still containing family traditions and values. The show's representation of acceptance through the characters and how each one of them carry themselves shows the audience that each one of them separates themselves from society's portrayal of how a Mexican or black person is in today's society. The show gives the audience a form of racism experienced by the main characters and the unique thing about it is how the characters carry themselves after their experience. They didn't talk about it afterwards and the way they handled it was without violence because if they had done so, the white privilege card would come in as they would call the cops and face no charges for the cause of the incident. The composure they contained while being oppressed showed the maturity the main characters had during these types of scenarios. Adding to the uniqueness, Caesar had called Oscar to pick them up and when Oscar arrived, all the white kids froze and became frightened. Oscar went up to the kid that made the racist comments and wiped off his fake tear drop below his eye. Oscar then proceeded to wipe his own tear drop off and would say, "this shit's real." He gave the kid a reality check on how his costume isn't something to joke about, and that it is a lifestyle not to mess with.

The show challenges hegemony because the white race has been dominant in America and seen as the race with the most privilege and power. This country was founded by white people, therefore seeing people of color was unfamiliar to which they categorized them as low class based on their skin color, ethnicity, and cultural background. *On My Block* doesn't show white people in the Netflix series and when they did, the loss of dominance occurred as a

Mexican gang member threatened their safety and shows that the people of color can be hegemonic but white privilege prevails through the police and government this country was founded upon. The show teaches us a proper portrayal of the diverse races as people of color produce the show and are able to present a better portrayal than someone that is white. They wouldn't understand what being Mexican and black and getting stereotyped in America is like. It teaches us that not all Mexicans and blacks check off the list of stereotypes that society has placed upon them. Additionally, it teaches that in order to have a better portrayal of the black and Mexican community, the production should be done that the race it is based upon and not by another, such as the white race. Whites have misrepresented Latinos and blacks through stereotypical manners and placed upon society this form of categorization/checklist of characteristics the entire race contains as a whole. *On My Block* has stereotypical characteristics because it is mainly due to cultural values but also incorporates individual characteristics and values that don't pertain to the specific race.

My analysis relates to previous research through the lack of representation of Latino and black actors and additionally, the misrepresentation that whites have characterized upon them. Portraying people of color through stereotypical manners can cause damage physically and mentally to that specific group. That is because not every person contains those stereotypical manners that society has deemed factual upon them. The lack of research and misrepresentation of Latinos and blacks assisted me in my analysis as there was barely any that did an analysis of the portrayal of Mexicans and blacks based on the show. It helped me relate how a Mexican or black was portrayed in the show and expanded my ideas on how this predominantly diverse show helps bring awareness and a new representation on television.

Conclusion

The portrayal of race has been through a lot with tons of misrepresentations and stereotypical based characteristics. *On My Block* is one of the very few shows that is predominantly diverse and dedicated to portraying a better viewpoint to its audience on television. This show was able to portray Mexicans and blacks being their own person and not living to every stereotypical manner society has identified them as. Television is a platform to bring awareness of the racism that is still occurring today and able to show the cultural and individual values that people of color contain. More shows are needed such as *On My Block* to bring a better portrayal of diverse groups and have more representation on television.

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