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Teaching Diversity, Questioning Representation

Sarah E. S. Sinwell

Abstract: *This paper creates a taxonomy of representation that includes suggestions for how students might be more inclusive in terms of how they think about representations of diversity in their own media and filmmaking practices. To this end, I argue that there are six modes of thinking about how to analyse and interrogate representation in the media: 1) search for presence, 2) seek out positive representation, 3) create complex and layered characters, 4) consider casting, crew, consulting, and mentoring (including below-the-line), 5) focus on intersectionality, empathy, and empowerment, 6) interrogate your choices. This paper will explain how students may use these maxims and modes of thinking as a means of mapping out how they might move towards more inclusive representation in both their own productions as well as their mediamaking practices by using examples from documentaries such as* The Celluloid Closet *(Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 1995),* Ethnic Notions *(Marlon Riggs, 1987),* The Slanted Screen *(Jeff Adachi, 2006),* Reel Arabs *(Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhally, 2006),* Reel Injun *(Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, Jeremiah Hayes, 2009),* Latinos Beyond Reel *(Chyung Sun and Miguel Parker, 2012),* Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror *(Xavier Burgin, 2019), and* Disclosure *(Sam Feder, 2020).*



Figure 1: Laverne Cox and the cast and crew of *Disclosure* at its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020. Courtesy of the author's personal collection.

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Within the course of more than two decades of teaching, I have worked to incorporate diversity in my film and media arts classrooms at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Although I teach courses on diversity in film and media, women directors, and queer media, even in my Introduction to Media Arts and Film History classrooms, I also incorporate as many media examples and readings as possible from marginalised and underrepresented groups, including women directors, African American actors, and LGBTQIA+ creators among many others.

Over the years, as I have incorporated texts from *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–2020) and *Babel* (Alejandro Inarritu, 2006) to *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) in my classroom; I have also worked to incorporate strategies for understanding representation which include suggestions for how my students might think more inclusively about showing diversity in their own media and filmmaking practices. To this end, I argue that there are six modes of thinking about how to analyse and interrogate representation in the media: 1) search for presence, 2) seek out positive representation, 3) create complex and layered characters, 4) consider casting, crew, consulting and mentoring (including below-the-line), 5) focus on intersectionality, empathy and empowerment, and 6) interrogate your choices. This brief essay will explain how students may use these modes of thinking to map how they might move towards more inclusive representation in both their own productions as well as their mediamaking practices by using examples from documentaries such as *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 1995), *Ethnic Notions* (Marlon Riggs, 1987), *The Slanted Screen* (Jeff Adachi, 2006), *Reel Arabs* (Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhally, 2006), *Reel Injun* (Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes, 2009), *Latinos Beyond Reel* (Chyung Sun and Miguel Parker, 2012), *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* (Xavier Burgin, 2019) and *Disclosure* (Sam Feder, 2020).

1) Search for Presence

Creating and producing more diverse and inclusive media first involves recognising and analysing the histories of representation. When analysing the representation of minority, diverse, marginalised and underrepresented characters in film, television and mediamaking, often the first stage in exploring representation is to *search for presence* (including marginalised and secondary characters onscreen such as the best friend, neighbour, shopkeeper, etc.). Thus, in many media examples, just having a queer, Asian American, African American, Latino/a/x or Indigenous character on the screen at all is a first step towards inclusion. For example, the following documentaries point out the common tropes of the gay (male) best friend or neighbour in *The Celluloid Closet*, the Asian shopkeeper in *The Slanted Screen*, or the Black mammy in *Ethnic Notions*. Thus, although these marginalised identities are *present* on screen, they are still limited and restricted by these stereotypes.

2) Seek Out Positive Representation

Positive characters are not criminals, serial killers or victims, but rather they may be represented as successful and even worthy of emulation. As these documentaries portray the histories of these underrepresented identities, they often move from the negative portrayals within their early film and media histories to the attempt to represent these characters as happy (and productive) members of society. See, for example, these documentaries' discussions of films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968), *Making Love* (Arthur Hiller, 1982) and *Ugly*

Betty (ABC, 2006–2010). As Kristen Warner notes, when people are asked how they might create positive representation, "Responses are often aligned with class (good job, education, community minded), behaviour (hypersexual, well-spoken, "woke"), or with characterisations of character that either successfully assimilate into normative culture or fail to do so" (33–34). Thus, these *positive* forms of representation often still participate in tokenism and elide the intersectionalities between race, gender, class and sexuality, and instead reinscribe normative modes and understandings of class onto these underrepresented identities.

3) Create Complex and Layered Characters

Complex and layered characters are not defined only by their difference and are allowed to be as complicated as their male, white, heteronormative, able-bodied counterparts. As noted in the histories of gay, lesbian, queer and trans cinema and television in *The Celluloid Closet*, *Fabulous: The Story of Queer Cinema* (Lisa Ades and Lesli Klainberg, 2006), *Off the Straight and Narrow* (Katherine Sender, 1999), *Further Off The Straight and Narrow* (Katherine Sender and Sut Jhally, 2006) and *Disclosure* (Sam Feder, 2020), as well as in the recently released documentary series *Visible: Out on Television* (Ryan White, 2020), the media representation of LGBTQIA+ identities is attempting to move beyond just the presence of queer characters to positive representation; towards the creation of complex and layered characters. As Mary Beltran has argued, this concept of "meaningful diversity" includes moving beyond "token status" and enables these characters to be complex, providing them with "the agency to drive the narrative forward." These characters should also be fully formed, with individual and collective histories, memories and experiences as in media examples such as *Moonlight*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Celine Sciamma, 2019) and *Vida* (Starz, 2018–2020).

As Kristen Warner notes in "In the Time of Plastic Representation",

> To many men and women of color, as well as many white women, meaningful diversity occurs when the actual presence of different-looking bodies appear on screen. For them, this diversity serves as an indicator of progress as well as an aspirational frame for younger generations who are told that the visual signifiers they can identify with carry a great amount of symbolic weight. As a consequence, the degree of diversity became synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances. (33)

This mode of thinking enables students to reimagine their media and filmmaking practices in ways that move beyond this "plastic representation" and towards more "meaningful" diversity.

4) Consider Casting, Crew, Consulting and Mentoring (Including Below-the-line)

It is important to look at these labour practices both in front of and behind the screen. The positioning of marginalised people both below- and above-the-line is becoming an increasingly necessary element of the film and media industry's productions. As media critics such as Julia Himberg, Alfred L. Martin, Isabel Molina-Guzman and Kristen Warner have noted, casting is a significant means of examining the presence, visibility and embodiment of marginalised identities, particularly for both queer people and people of colour. As Alfred L. Martin points out in "The

Queer Business of Casting Gay Characters on U.S. Television", casting for gay roles in US television occupies an important space within media production studies because it exposes the patterns involved with who is allowed to work within the culture industries. For instance, audiences and critics have searched for LGBTQIA+ characters that are as multidimensional and complex "as their heterosexual counterparts" (58). And, as Aymar Christian argues, in smaller scale work "cultural production value asserts more importance, as producers create with and for their community" (255). Thus, this fourth mode of thinking encourages students to look at how they are casting and constructing their crews and to consider how these more inclusive hiring, consulting and mentoring practices may impact how these marginalised identities are represented both on and off screen.

5) Focus on Intersectionality, Empathy and Empowerment

As noted previously, recognising the intersectionalities among these marginalised identities enables even more possibilities for building empathy and empowerment, especially among audiences. In an interview with Kate Erbland, Professor Stacy L. Smith responds to a recent study in Hollywood that finds women, minorities and LGBTQ people are still underrepresented on screen:

> After witnessing little change in these numbers, it is clear that Hollywood must do more to ensure that marginalized groups are a part of the fabric of storytelling. Good intentions are not enough to create change. Hollywood needs tangible, actionable solutions that will usher in real transformation. Our work brings to light the steps that companies and individuals can take if they want to see results. (Erbland)

Thus, Hollywood's own entrenchment within these limited frameworks of representation also requires a rethinking of these practices. For example, a new digital content series from GLAAD called NEON focuses on Black LGBTQ experiences and aims to increase the visibility of Black LGBTQ people by sharing their voices and histories. In addition, showrunners and filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay, Tanya Saracho and Lena Waithe are continuing to create their own inclusive mediamaking and mentoring networks as a means of building networks and communities among women, LGBTQIA+ people, and people of colour within the industry.

6) Interrogate Your Choices

Questions that students might answer when viewing and creating their own media texts are: are there marginalised characters present on screen at all? Are those characters represented positively? Are they represented in as complex and diverse ways as their normative counterparts? Who is making these representations and for whom? Whose stories are being told? Who is telling them? How do audiences gain access to these stories? Thus, representation itself onscreen isn't the only thing that matters, but rather who is telling the stories (via writing, producing and directing, but also via other modes of storytelling such as costuming, casting and setting) is also a significant part of how students may learn to interrogate their choices and build meaningful diversity within contemporary media.

In conclusion, questioning representation enables teachers, students and mediamakers to further examine how they study and analyse media. By creating meaningful diversity through both above-the-line and below-the-line practices, they might envision new modes of character creation and storytelling that take into account issues of intersectionality, power and empathy. As a topic of further study, both teachers and students may examine their own first-hand experiences to investigate how these practices may be incorporated into both the classroom, as well as their own mediamaking.

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