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## Entertainment Media Perceptions of Minorities in Young Adult Adaptations

Kynnadie Bennett

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Murray State University Honors College

HONORS THESIS

Certificate of Approval

Entertainment Media Perceptions of Minorities in Young Adult Adaptations

Kynnadie Bennett

March 2020

Approved to fulfill the  
Requirements of HON 437

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Dr. Deborah Bell, Assistant Professor  
[English and Philosophy]

Approved to fulfill the  
Honors Thesis requirement  
of the Murray State Honors  
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Entertainment Media Perceptions of Minorities in Young Adult Adaptations

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Kynnadie Bennett

March 2020



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## Introduction

According to the late author Walter Dean Myers, “Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity.” Literature will always have an impact on people, but people have had a large impact on literature. Literature usually represents and reflects what has happened or what is happening in society. However, literature not only affects people now, but the entertainment media as well. More and more books are being adapted into film and television series, and since “less than 20 percent of U.S. teens report reading” for pleasure, this is how values are transmitted to them (Twenge). Some of the values are about minorities and “whether intentionally or unintentionally...the entertainment media ‘teach’ the public about minorities, other ethnic groups, and societal groups” (Cort). The problem is what the media teaches is not always correct.

The entertainment industry relies on its ability to portray characters that are engaging both culturally and socially. However, the reality presented on the stage and screen rarely depicts the true authenticity of a character’s racial and cultural background, specifically when that character belongs to a minority group. The reason behind these inaccuracies’ rests in the fact that those interpreting and designing the scripts generally represent one race. Looking at entertainment through a white lens allows the interpretation to be stereotyped, racist, and insensitive, and these interpretations not only affect the perception of white audiences, but “minorities realize...that the media influence not only how others view them, but even how they view themselves” (Cort). Myers asks an important question, “What is the message when some children are not represented?” Is it better to not be seen correctly or to not be seen at all? The

answer is neither. Everyone deserves to see themselves, instead of being forced to accept “that these characters, these lives” are not theirs (Myers).

### **Background Information**

Before film, there was only the theatre. A form of theatre called minstrelsy was America’s own unique artistic genre that began during “the antebellum period and endured throughout Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the Great Migration” (*History of Minstrelsy*). It is a form of musical theatre that “exaggerated real-life black circumstances and reinforced dangerous stereotypes during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” (*History*). Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice is credited as the “Father of Minstrelsy” and created the first popularly known blackface minstrel character in 1830 (*History*). His character, Jim Crow, was named after a dance “that started on the plantation as a result of dancing being outlawed in 1690” (“Ethnic Notions”), which would later become the name of laws in the south that encouraged segregation and the terrorization of African Americans. According to legend, the Jim Crow character was created when Rice saw a “crippled black man dancing an exaggerated Jim Crow dance” (“Ethnic Notions”). Rice grew up “in an integrated northern neighborhood” and toured the South as an actor which allowed him the opportunity to observe African American speech, song, and dance over the years (*History*). Subsequently, he crafted this exaggerated character, wearing blackface, whose personality can be described as a “simple, docile laughing black man,” also known as “The Sambo” (“Ethnic Notions”). Minstrelsy helped shape the image of African Americans for centuries and crafted many of the stereotypes that carried over into literature, film, and television: Rice also created

the archetype for the Sambo which “represented the uneducated rural slave”; urban African-Americans depicted by the Zip Coon defined “by his flamboyant dress and clumsy attempts at sophisticated speech”; the Mammy, “an African American mother figure, often doting on her “pickanninies” or black children”; and the sexually desired, mixed-race woman who was a “symbol of master-on-slave sexuality” and frequently referred to as Hannah (*History*).

Stereotypes and caricatures were not only used against the black community, but all the other minorities in America as well. Hispanics were presented as thieves and criminals. Aspects of Latin culture were presented in extreme and false ways, and Latin immigrants were presented with thick and nearly intelligible accents with no ability to speak English. Hispanic female roles were limited to maids or the spicy, Latina lover, represented as a “hyper-sexualized ‘vamp’ with a ‘fiery [and] explosive personality” (Davine 145). The Indigenous people have been offered two main stereotypes in film: “the noble savage and the bloodthirsty savage, or more generally and simplistically, the good and the bad Indian” (Boyd 106). There are 526 recognized tribes in the United States, but the culture of these distinct tribes has been grouped together under one large umbrella under the title of “Indian” (106). These cultures were—and continue to be—reshaped into nothing more than a character in film “displaying stereotypical, historically inaccurate behavior” (106).

Despite the stereotypes referring to a specific race, minorities were not even allowed to portray themselves on the screen. Instead, the characters were portrayed by white actors who would paint their skin to match the skin color of the race they were mimicking. The process was used for this was called blackface or “red face” (108), and while Hispanic roles also suffered this

disrespect, many of the actors were already tan with dark hair and would instead use a fake accent while playing the roles. These false, poorly represented images were created and became staples in the minds of society which caused a shift in the acting roles minorities had to accept for themselves because their choice was either not work as an actor or represent their culture and community falsely.

In the north, African American actors were able to spend time on stage and even had their own theatre companies such as the African Grove Theatre which “catered to a bi-racial, but segregated audience” (Crum 23). The theatre featured many black actors and according to the article “*The Negro on the American Stage*” by Walter Francis White, a white-passing black man who was a civil rights activist and a member of the NAACP, “the New York theatrical season of 1933-34 constituted an important period in the development of the Negro as an actor and of Negro life as the subject matter of drama” (Crum 179). However, the popularity of minstrelsy caused a decreased interest in black theatre, causing black festivals and black theatres to be shut down, and allowing “blackface entertainment [to make] an explosion into pop culture” (Crum 25). The false images created by this form of entertainment had been to firmly established in the minds of the public so that, “For black Americans, the 1890s ushered in a decade of shrinking possibilities” (*History*), and the actors in this community—after the closure of their theatres and the lack of jobs available for them—“perceived the minstrel show as doorway, a doorway out of hunger, a doorway out of the south, a doorway to other opportunities” (“Ethnic Notions”). These actors had to fit in and present a stereotypical and racist image against their own community by darkening their already dark skin with soot and drawing on wider lips and noses in order to gain acceptance by their white audience (“Ethnic Notions”). Furthermore, this necessity to fit in did

not change when African Americans were finally allowed in film, nor did the way they were portrayed change either.

In the theatre scene, only a limited number of fixed roles were offered to African-American actors: “the slapstick, broad-humored buffoon,” “a brutish character, fresh from the jungle, swept by passions of lust and murder,” and “a kindly, faithful servant of pre-Civil War vintage” (White 182). The roles offered in the early years of the film industry did not stray that far from the ones offered for theatre and minstrel shows. The number of roles for black people remained limited, and most of the roles offered included “criminals, slaves, nannies, servants, blackface or just plain ignorance” (Newsy). One of the most popular characters for African American women was the portrayal of a mammy because caricatures were not just popular on stage, but on film as well. Hattie McDaniel was the first African American woman to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting actress “for her portrayal of Mammy, the devoted slave/servant in *Gone with the Wind* (1939)” (McCluskey). Her win created conflict for the black community who were excited to be represented, but not excited for the representation. At one time in film history, specifically between the mid-1910s to mid-1930s, film companies focused on creating positive portrayals of black people, but those companies began to fail when showing “all-colored casts” became “unmarketable” and less interesting to a white audience who wanted to see themselves on screen (Newsy). Around the late sixties, the extreme caricatures began to fade away, but another problem created by society and the industry continued to persist: Colorism.

While colorism is a fairly modern term—its name not being coined until 1983 by Alice Walker (Wilder 185)—it has a long history that started before the film industry with its origins

dating back to slavery. Colorism is “the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to lightness or darkness of one’s skin” (Dawson 288). Through the years of slavery and the rape of Africans by their masters, lighter-skinned individuals became more prevalent in the community, and they were afforded more resources and were assigned more responsibilities than the darker-skinned slaves (Wilder 186). By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different separatist standards “such as the brown-paper-bag, pencil, ruler, and door tests” (Wilder 186) were implemented to create greater division in the black community, while also creating an internalized bias that favored lighter skin, European features, and straighter or “good” hair. This bias carried over from society into the film industry where light-skinned actors were offered “more prominent roles” and the roles for the darker-skinned actors “generally played on or amplified racist stereotypes” (Farrow). Despite the acting jobs offered to lighter-skinned actors, problems still centered around their skin color. Actors and actresses were required to have their make-up done in a specific way that would make them appear lighter on camera (Farrow), and this helped reinforce to black people, especially black children, that “black is ugly” (Rice), and for children and young teenagers with darker skin, it encouraged the belief that being dark was “bad, evil, or dirty” (Farrow) to the point that an industry involving skin-lightening and skin bleaching products developed a market.

While colorism has a strong connection to the African American community, it appears just as powerfully in the Latinx community, along with the racism that created it. The Latinx community has a more complicated sense of race, ethnicity, and identity than what is found in the black community. What helped create this conflict surrounding identity in the Latinx community was the one-drop rule “which mandated that any person with any Black ancestry

identify as Black” created a “tri-racial system in which ‘White’ and ‘honorary whites’ and thus ‘assimilated’ Latinos/as are more likely to be accepted and provided with more access and privileges” (Dawson 288). This divide regarding race is like the divide created in the black community where being closer to appearing white provided more benefits in society. Lighter skin allowed one to be seen in a more racially ambiguous way and to “straddle the racial divide and...able to pass for White” (Dawson 287). Government forms even tried to make this divide more apparent where “if your skin is white...call you Hispanic of White heritage, if your skin is Black...then you’re Black with Hispanic heritage” (Dawson 291), and this could be different for children who live in the same household and have the exact same parents, but were born with different skin colors. Skin color became an important aspect of the community where “light skin operates as a form of social capital” (Dawson 289) and provided more opportunities “in the forms of economic, educational, and general prestige” (Dawson 289). These judgements have the same origin story found in the black community concerning colorism with “its roots in the colonial ideology where lightness is associated with White Europeans and is therefore preferred and viewed as superior to darkness,” where not only their skin color was deemed to be ugly, but also their facial features and their hair which caused people to make attempts as appearing more European (288). The concept of colorism helps preserve the years of self-hate and dismissal toward the African roots and the attempt to create as much distance as possible from being black.

In Cuba, specifically, the United States had a large hand in the racism that persisted in the country. Racism existed in Cuba long before the United States intruded into the country with Cuba receiving “329,000 more [slaves] than the total number that arrived in the United States” (Gates 179) and “the country held on to its slave system until 1886, twenty-one years after the

United States...and just two years before Brazil” (Gates 180). With slavery always comes racism, but Cuba was making attempts at correcting this mindset; not for altruistic reasons, but because they had a greater enemy that almost every Cuban—black, white, and brown—could all agree on: their colonizer, Spain. The main leader of the rebellion was Antonio Maceo, a child of a free mulatto man and an Afro-Cuban woman (Gates 182). While opponents, especially Spain, tried to use his race against him by claiming he was trying to create a “black-dominant society” (185), a poet and journalist named José Julián Martí Pérez defended Maceo’s intentions and insisted “Maceo wanted Cuba free for all Cuban” (Gates 185). The war created a united front between the races; while racism remained, especially in the upper-class, Spain was the enemy, but the increase in tolerance and unity among the Cubans was sidelined when “the United States government decided to step in” (Gates 185). Gates says that “In April 1898, US forces formed an alliance with Cuba’s rebels... Within ten weeks, Cuba was free from Spanish rule” (186), and with that victory came America’s belief that they had a say in how Cuba proceeded, specifically concerning its politics and how its society would be ordered. This war was at the same time as the era of Jim Crow, so the US similarly “began reordering and resegregating Cuban society” (Gates 186). The unnecessary influence of the United States completely altered Cuba's perceptions on race and gave the white-Cuban elites complete control over society once again.

The relationship between black and white Cubans began to rapidly deteriorate after Cuba’s independence, especially once “it launched an aggressive period of whitening” where new immigration laws, used in both Brazil and Mexico, authorized more than one million dollars to be spent importing white Europeans—mostly from Spain—over the next twenty years in order “to add more corrective whiteness to the mixed Cuban gene pool” (Gates 195-96). Even after the

United States left Cuba, the destruction they left remained, along with the influence made by Jim Crow: “There could be no talk of African roots, much less black pride...Black culture practices were discouraged as primitive and vulgar” (Gates 198), thus enforcing the belief that being black was a bad thing. The attempted destruction of other cultures, caused by the United States’ Imperialistic nature, often led to an incorrect interpretation of that community; this not only happened to the Latinx community, but the Native American communities as well.

As of 2015, the United States recognizes more than 500 Native American nations, and almost seven million people “identify as being American Indian or Alaska Natives” (Sonza) with more than 500 different cultures and practices belonging to these communities. The inaccuracies in how these cultures have been represented disrespects the different groups by exploiting them through a stereotypical lens. Over the last four hundred years, “Native American characters have been depicted in more than 4000 movies” and few of those films have paid the cultures of the Indigenous people the respect they deserve (“What Hollywood Still Gets Wrong”). The interpretation of Native Americans primarily was created through “the longstanding American construction of Indianness, which lumps all Indigenous peoples into one category and erases cultural difference between nations” (Burke 208). This is like how in the United States many Americans believe every Spanish-speaking person must be from Mexico, thus ignoring the hundreds of other Spanish-speaking countries in the world. The use of the Native American image by Europeans stems “from the earliest period of European colonization” where their image was placed in “early drawings, engravings, portraitures...and books and prints” (Hirschfelder & Molin); though some of the early artists and authors are highly sensitive to the natives’ culture and represent the natives in a very ethnographically honest way those depictions

were co-opted later. One example of their image being co-opted was during Boston Tea Party and the men who pour the tea dressed up as Native Americans (Hirschfelder & Molin).

The images of Native Americans were used by colonists to create an image of themselves outside of their connection to Europe; “the Indian Queen, an emblematic figure in use by the end of the sixteenth century, symbolized the Western Hemisphere. Her successor, the Indian Princess, became representative of the American colonies,” and this image was also used in newspapers during the American Revolution to show “a feathered Indian defying British tyranny” (Hirschfelder & Molin). The Native American image was used as a form of rebellion and power, but once the revolution was won, “their image was codified as an uncivilized people whose condition justified conquest, removal, and assimilation policy” (Burke 208). This is when the stereotypes that would later be presented in film and television truly began.

The current entertainment industry uses the same “tired and well-worn stereotypes created about Native peoples since the landings of Columbus” (Burke 207). The original perception of the Native people was created and spread by the writings of Columbus “who portrayed the Native people he met as both kind and generous and savage and brutal” (Burke 208). This juxtaposition created the main stereotypes before the modern era: the good and the bad Indians. While all native characters were portrayed as deeply spiritual with a strong connection to nature, the two categories of Indians each had specific qualities to separate the two. The “good” Indigenous characters or the noble savage “are expected to consistently and happily put the colonists’ needs above those of their own community” (Burke 208) and when presented, his easily recognizable depictions includes someone who is riding “a horse with a feather bonnet, understands nature, is anachronistic and culturally frozen in time, lives in a tipi

and roams the plains looking for buffalo to hunt or white settlers to scalp” (Burke 208). The “bad” Indigenous characters were presented as much more savage and violent, viewed as “secretive or unwilling to assist Euro-American characters” (McLaurin). Their value and morality were dictated by how helpful they were to white-European society. Between the 1600s and the 1800s, the popularity of the captivity novels spread the portrayal of “Indians as savages preying on defenseless Euro-Americans” (Hirschfelder & Molin). From the late 1800s into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wild west shows, which influenced televised westerns, traveled across North America and Europe performing dramatized Indian attacks and presenting their language as a “substandard version of English...or [one that] portrays Indians as silent and wordless or incapable of speaking proper English or other civilized languages” (Hirschfelder & Molin). Current portrayals of Native Americans in the modern era depict them as poor alcoholics living on the reservations designed by the past United States Government after its “theft of Indian lands and resources” (Hirschfelder & Molin). However, the films and movies today that take place in the past either continue using the same stereotypes described above, often times with white actors in those roles using a similar technique to blackface, called “red face,” or Native Americans are completely left out the stories all together as if they never existed during those eras.

Despite colorism and racism having origins that date long before the entertainment industry began, both have effects on the present-day film industry despite the constant declarations of celebrating the great changes that have taken place in the industry. Issues of race are still incredibly frequent with adaptations of historical and fictional stories having their characters whitewashed. Whitewashing is when a minority character is portrayed by a white

actor or the race of the character is changed to white. Issues of colorism are still a problem with the casting of lighter-skinned actors, many from mixed ancestry, receiving roles of characters created with darker skin tones. While progress has been made over time, the desire to distance oneself from their race to fit in with the dominant culture is still apparent and the side-effects of dismissing one's culture and race are apparent as well. In modern day, the stereotypes and racism directed toward minority groups can still be found in entertainment media.

### **Portrayal of Native Americans**

#### *Animated Film Portrayals*

Adaptations of minority characters are a tricky subject to approach in film, especially when the original literary text comes with its own set of problems. For instance, in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, the inhabitants of Neverland island include Peter Pan and his lost boys, the pirates, the beasts, and the redskins (Barrie 52). The immediate description of the Natives as "the redskins" is a racist term, but for a story written in the early 1900s, it is not unexpected. The rest of the descriptions, such as the "Piccaninny tribe, and not to be confused with the softer-hearted Delawares or the Hurons" (Barrie 57), are the same stereotypes presented frequently with Indigenous people being savage, murderous warriors carrying tomahawks and knives while "their naked bodies gleam with paint and oil" and around their necks "are scalps, of boys as well as pirates" (Barrie 57). However, despite this unattractive and violent portrayal, the entire island is filled with violent people: the adults, the children, the animals, even Peter Pan himself. Overall, this island is overrun with savage individuals, but the portrayal of Native Americans because vastly more problematic when the focus is placed on a specific character: Tiger Lily.

Tiger Lily appears in most of the film adaptations of *Peter Pan*. Neither her or her tribe have important parts in the story, and she and her tribe are used more as a plot device to show one of Peter Pan's many adventures. However, she is a character that is important to be discussed because her immediate characterization in the novel changes from her last moment in the story. After the description of her tribe, Tiger Lily is finally introduced to the story. She is in the back of the hunting party, "the place of greatest danger," and described as "proudly erect, a princess in her own right" (Barrie 57). She is standing in the most dangerous place to be with no fear or uncertainty in her face. She is a warrior, and there is not a man in the tribe "who would not have the wayward thing to wife, but she staves off the alter with a hatchet" (Barrie 57). Tiger Lily, despite being the chief's daughter, can be considered the most powerful person in her tribe; at one point her tribe members are described as "Tiger Lily's redskins" (Barrie 59). Despite her power, after her immediate introduction, she becomes nothing more than a damsel-in-distress for Peter to save and a sexual object for him to admire. After her introduction, she disappears for almost two chapters and is only mentioned again when the narrator is trying to decide which of Peter's many adventures should be told next and decides to "tell how Peter saved Tiger Lily's life in the Mermaids' Lagoon, and so made her his ally" (Barrie 83-84). After Peter rescued Tiger Lily from Captain Hook, "there was nothing she and her braves would not do [for Peter]" (107). Peter gains a title and a name in this community as "Peter the Great White Feather" (Barrie 107) and he is celebrated as a hero. Only at this celebration does Tiger Lily speak: "Me Tiger Lily...Peter Pan save me, me his velly nice friend. Me no let pirates hurt him," (Barrie 107-8). The language used by Tiger Lily in this scene is a constant feature in stereotypes regarding Native Americans in literature, television, and film.

The language used above by Tiger Lily is called “Hollywood Injun English” or HIE, “a composite of grammatical “abnormalities” that marks the way Indians speak and differentiates their speech from Standard American English (SAE)” (Meek, “*And the Injun goes*” 95). HIE sounds like Standard American English, but “the four grammatical markers used in HIE are lack of tense, deletion (of various grammatical elements), substitution, and lack of contraction” (Meek, “*And the Injun goes*” 99). In the above quote, Tiger Lily uses present tense to describe an experience that occurred in the past and “use of such a simplified tense system by an Indian character would then open the door for an interpretation of the character as being childlike as well as foreign” (Meek, “*And the Injun goes*” 99-100). This contrived language used to reflect the speech of Native Americans not only ignores the actual languages used by actual tribes, but also encourages “an expectation of incompetence, of a failure to acquire (some standard variety of) English” (Meek, *Failing American Indian Language* 46). Along with the grammatical markers of this created language are key vocabulary words that are frequently used alongside it “such as squaw, wigwam, How!, heap, and um” (46). The word “squaw” is used when referring to women, with Wendy’s private opinion being “that the redskins should not call her squaw” (Barrie 108). Nevertheless, Wendy was also called squaw in Disney’s adaptation of *Peter Pan*. HIE language is also used in Disney’s *Peter Pan* not only by the Native American characters, but also by Peter Pan, his lost boys, and the Darling kids.

The Indian Chief, or Tiger Lily’s father, who “resembles a heavy Chief Wahoo (mascot of the Cleveland Indians) with a giant proboscis, a stout physique, and scarlet skin tones,” (Meek, “*And the Indian goes*” 117), has a few similarities to his daughter. They both display “some rudimentary markers of the American Indian, braided hair, headband, leather garments”

(Parasher 41) and wear “a feathered headdress, black hair, and leather buckskins” (Meek, “*And the Indian goes*” 117), but the father’s speech and appearance is very different from Tiger Lily’s. Of all the Native American characters in the film, the Chief is the one who speaks the most, but the character who uses the most HIE is one of the Darling kids. When the Chief begins to deliver a speech, it is first in (incorrect) sign language which John Darling translates for his siblings, switching from “his standard English variety to an HIE style” (Meek, “*And the Indian goes*” 117). Peter Pan and the Lost boys are residents of Neverland Island and often interact with the Native American tribe, while the Darling children are new to the island and the town; John has the ability to not only translate their sign language, but translate it into his version of language. The Darling siblings and Peter Pan also have the ability to switch back-and-forth between these two different language styles; however, none of the Native Americans can, which suggests that the “adult Indians are so underdeveloped that even (non-Indian) children are more sophisticated and capable than they are” (Meek, “*Failing American Indian Language*” 48). John, while on an adventure with the Lost Boys to capture Indians for fun, says “the Indian is cunning, but not intelligent” (Barrie) and the film makes the effort to prove that statement, to show the Natives as lesser than their white counterparts, in not only communication, but also appearance.

The depiction of the Native American characters in Disney’s *Peter Pan* is not that different than their introduction in the book. Their introduction occurs later in the film when Tiger Lily needs to be rescued by Peter Pan from Captain Hook. In this interpretation, Tiger Lily has the basic outfit of her tribe, but her appearance is vastly different from the rest of the tribe. The other tribe members are drawn to resemble monsters with every feature being an exaggeration, but Tiger Lily is drawn in a style that more closely resembles Peter Pan and the

Darling children with similar features and a skin tone “is even a different shade than the film’s other Indigenous characters, lighter with less red undertone” (Johnson 50). Johnson says, “The mid-century representation of Indigenous characters in *Peter Pan* are clearly meant to be humorous caricatures of fantastical ‘others’” (50), but the only feature that truly presents Tiger Lily as an “other” is her clothing. Tiger Lily’s character design places her in the space between the “savage” natives and the “cultured” Darlings. However, another key aspect of the mid-century was to not create characters that were “thoughtful, well-rounded renderings” of native people, and Tiger Lily is no exception despite what her appearance tries to portray because Tiger Lily is not a well-rounded character, nor is she given the ability to truly communicate. In fact, Tiger Lily throughout the entire film is completely silent.

Silence is a consistent feature in the portrayal of Indigenous characters. Meek states that the “lack of expression, eye contact, and verbal response conform with popular conceptions of Native American stoical behavior” (*And the Injun goes 94*) which is found in Tiger Lily’s descriptions in the novel as well. While Tiger Lily does not do much talking, with her language in her introduction being “limited to an aloof, stubborn (but fetching) stare and a set of crossed arms” (Parasher 40), she does express a singular desire: Peter Pan. During the party to celebrate Pan’s rescue of Tiger Lily, she dances directly in front of him, rubbing their noses together in an Eskimo kiss. Based on Peter’s blushing face and the lyric from the music playing in the background, “lets go back a million years to the very first Injun Prince/ he kiss a maid and start to blush/ and we all been blushing since,” viewers can assume that Tiger Lily kisses Peter beneath his head dress. Tiger Lily, in this story, has no character depth; she is only a caricature of what many Native American women were presented as an object of desire, referred to “the

exoticized maiden/vamp” by Disney (Parasher 40). The song Tiger Lily dances to while trying to seduce Peter Pan to is called “Why is the Red Man Red?” and the song answers the question “that he’s red from a constant pursuit of red women” (41).

While media have a habit of portraying “Indians as silent and wordless or incapable of speaking proper English or other ‘civilized’ languages” (Hirschfelder & Molin), the Lost boys, who cannot copy the dialect used by the Darling children, and the Darling children, who are white-Europeans, are all able to imitate the HIE dialect almost immediately with the ability to use it in song, conversation, and translation. They do not just imitate the language, but they also imitate aspects of the imagined culture of Native Americans that the film presents. All the children have war paint on their faces and feathers in their hair, and some are even dressed like the Native Americans surrounding them; they are all “playing Indian” which is “a practice of non-Indians in which they dress up or masquerade as Indians” (Meek, “*And the Indian goes*” 114). The practice of “playing Indian” in media “reinforces the national narrative that this country was ‘inherited’ from the Native people via Manifest Destiny and divine right, which in turn justifies removal and genocide, or ignores it all together” (Burke 218). This practice of “playing Indian” can rewrite history, and an example of rewriting history can be found in another Disney film: *Pocahontas*.

Disney’s *Pocahontas*, an animated film released in 1995, tells the story of a young Indian Princess whose love for John Smith, an English adventurer in Jamestown, changes the relationship between their two warring communities. This movie tackles racism and presents the Indian tribe members as fully developed characters—as real people—unlike in Disney’s *Peter Pan*. Even with the creators of the film contacting “Indigenous consultants...throughout the

production for such elements as Algonquian language, dress, and other aspects of daily life” (M. Johnson 46), the film is still filled with “historical inaccuracy, cultural disrespect, and the sexualization of the titular Pocahontas as a Native American woman” (M. Johnson 46). The historical inaccuracies of the film begin with the premise: the fictional romantic relationship created between Pocahontas and John Smith. In the film, Pocahontas and John Smith are presented to be around the same age as adults, but when these two people first met in 1607, John Smith was an adult, but Pocahontas was “ten to twelve years old, [and] appeared prepubescent” (Gardner 15). Pocahontas was a child during the story Disney decided to tell, but in real life her motivations for peace were more than being in love with one of the settlers. While Disney achieved giving Pocahontas more depth and characterization than Tiger Lily, they nevertheless present her as another sexual object by aging her up, giving “her a body with a waspish waist, sexy hips and legs, and breasts” (Gardner 37) that she did not have, and ignoring important aspects of her life such as how “from 1608 to 1610 Pocahontas assisted in negotiations with the colonists...helped sustain relations between the two groups and preserve the peace until the first Anglo-Powhatan War in 1610” (Gardner 16); she did not accomplish this because she was in love with John Smith, in fact she married an entirely different John, John Rolfe.

The film version of Pocahontas presents her as the perfect Indian girl. Not only is she beautiful, but she is also shown as being different from her tribe, breaking against her created cultural norms because of her “adventurous spirit and curiosity regarding the newly-arrived English settlers” (Johnson 53). Her differences from her tribe are the aspects of her character that helped create her connection with John Smith “with their kindred imagination and curiosity” (Johnson 53), but despite their romance, he still views her people as savages, but making it clear

that he sees her differently when he tells her “Not that you’re a savage.” In John Smith’s mind, Pocahontas is a good Indian, and all the other Native Americans are the bad Indians who need saving. He goes on to describe the European conquest by saying “we’ve improved the lives of savages all over the world” (*Pocahontas*). This line is an example of the “white man’s burden” or “the moral and intellectual labor the neocolonizer must get through to “save” people of color” (B. Johnson 19). This perspective demonstrates the idea that colonization was done only to help and improve the lives of people of color and out of pure kindness, the colonizers gaining nothing profitable. John Smith may have had this mentality, but the song sung by John Ratcliffe “Mine, Mine, Mine” shows that the main goal is implied as being always about riches and power. The Native Americans were nothing but problems in the way of the colonizers which meant the Indigenous people would either be converted or killed. After Smith’s line, Pocahontas sings the song “Colors of the Wind” which addresses other major themes in the movie that deal with appreciating nature and accepting other cultures.

One of the images Pocahontas uses to describe her culture is “Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?” This line is interesting because the entire movie re-paints historical facts for both the Native Americans and the people who lived in Jamestown. The film ignores the months of struggles and starvation the settlers faced which essentially “devalues the Native American’s skills of living on the Frontier, skills essential for survival” because the settlers in the film master these skills in less than a day (Gardner 40). The film also creates a falsified happy ending in history where the Native Americans and settlers come to an understanding and accept and appreciate each other’s culture, when in fact the Native Americans experienced years of trauma because of the settlers. A false happy ending is created once again for Pocahontas in the sequel

film *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*. In the film, Pocahontas chooses to travel to England, falls in love with John Rolfe, and at the end of the film, she returns home as Pocahontas with her love and connection for her people intact. The second film creates an idea that nothing ever happened to Pocahontas and that everything was her choice, when instead Pocahontas had no choices and had her entire identity erased. In actuality, Pocahontas was kidnapped and while she did marry “a twenty-eight-year-old widower named John Rolfe” (Gardner 17), her name was changed to Rebecca and she was forced to accept the Christianity. The English viewed Rebecca as a “a right-thinking savage” and she “became the icon of the ultimate accomplishment of conversion in America” (Gardner 18-19). The Disney Princess movies always take the darkness out of the stories that inspire their movies: Cinderella’s step-sisters did not cut the back of their heels off to fit in the shoe, Ariel did not die at the end of the little mermaid, and Megara was not murdered by Hercules in a psychotic rage. However, these are fictional stories, not based on real life people like Pocahontas who experienced numerous tragedies, whose identities were taken away, and their cultures almost destroyed. *Pocahontas* sugar coats history by ignoring “the brutal mistreatment and genocide that came with American colonization,” but choosing to sexualize Pocahontas, and by also disappointing the Native American community “who had looked forward to finally being represented on the Disney screen” (M. Johnson 53-4). As they discovered, accurate representation is hard to find in animated films, or even in live action film and television.

*Live-action Portrayals*

Numerous animated films tell the stories of people of color, and live action films also, but like live action has its own set of problems. Peter Pan is a classic story that has been retold on film and television multiple different times, in multiple different ways and the last adaptation of the tale was 2015's Pan directed by Joe Wright. This interpretation acts as a different origin story for both Peter Pan and Captain Hook and during their journey the two characters are introduced to Tiger Lily and her tribe. In every live-action portrayal of Tiger Lily and her tribe, the characters have always been depicted as Native American, which has added much needed color and diversity to a story that is predominantly about white-European characters, "but in 2015's Peter Pan offering, Tiger Lily is portrayed by the lily-white Rooney Mara" (Klassen) and neither the character or her tribe are Native American. In this interpretation, the presentation of the tribe is inspired by numerous different cultures around the world with the director describing them as "the indigenous people of the globe," which according to Joe Wright that he "could pick from all over the world...Indian and Mongolian — a lot of Indian in there — and Native American, and African, and Chinese, and so on and so forth" (Klassen). This combination of different cultures is very similar to Hollywood's inability to recognize the different cultures of different tribes and instead combining aspects of many tribes into one singular representation for all Native Americans.

Wright made the specific aesthetic choice present the tribe as a mix of other cultures because according to him, J.M. Barrie never said Tiger Lily and her tribe were Native American and stating that "Barrie is quite unclear about their nationality in the book — subsequently

they've been cast as Native Americans, but Barrie's quite unclear about it...So I wasn't quite sure where they were from" (Klassen). Wright is not wrong, Barrie never explicitly states the Tiger Lily, her father, nor her tribe are Native American, but their race is implied or coded as such. Barrie's racist terminology and stereotypical presentation of that specific set of character shows that he is talking about an Indigenous culture, and his use of the phrase "redskins," a term used specifically used for Native Americans shows who Barrie imagined when creating his characters. These characters are Native Americans and Wright's choice seems more like a decision to differentiate his film from the countless other interpretations of Peter Pan where Tiger Lily and her tribe as presented as the culture decided by the author and an attempt "to eliminate any representational responsibility by erasing the story's Indigenous characters" (M. Johnson 55).

Regardless, Wright's decision to present these characters as citizens of the world could be perceived as a desire to add more representation to the film, but his choice to cast all the background characters as people of color and Tiger Lily, the third most important character and the leader of the tribe, as a white woman is inherently problematic. The lead actress of the film, Rooney Mara, attempted to justify the director's choice: "They are natives of Neverland, a completely made-up place... it made sense to me" (Klassen); however, after the backlash the film and actress received for the casting choice, Mara came to a different conclusion stating, "I really hate, hate, hate that I am on that side of the whitewashing conversation. I really do. I don't ever want to be on that side of it again. I can understand why people were upset and frustrated" (Sturgis). Also, coming to the realization after a year that even though she loved participating in the film, all four main characters should not "have been white with blonde hair and blue eyes" and that "there should have been some diversity somewhere" (Sturgis). This film not only took

an acting job from the specifically designed for a Native American actress, it did not offer a lead part to an actress of color or any of the lead roles in the film to any actors of color instead relegating them to the background. This film focused solely on white actors, but this is not the only problem in Hollywood when it comes to Indigenous characters. In many films, the character maintains their cultural identity, but the character is played by a white actor.

While Native American characters have appeared on television and movie screens for years, one of the most recent and popular examples occurred in Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga*. The five films were released from 2008 to 2012 and each film included the character Jacob Black who belonged to the Quileute Tribe and lived on a Native American reservation named La Push. In the second book and film of the series, it was revealed, after interacting with vampires, that the young males in his tribe had the ability to transform into giant wolves—referred to as both werewolves and shapeshifters. Many problems exist with this representation of Native Americans throughout the book and film series such as Meyer's decision to use an actual Native American tribe and their legends in her story without consulting the tribe; she admits to fans she "was nervous about what the real life citizens of Forks would think, and more especially what the real life people of La Push would think" considering she had made many changes to what she describes as "their fictional history" and "wasn't sure if they would find it amusing or irritating" (Wilson 203-04). In the first novel and film, the legends told by the tribe are solely used as a plot device to introduce Bella Swan to the Cold Ones, a name used by the tribe to describe the vampires who once attacked their village in the past, and while Meyer made an effort to include more Native Americans into the story and provide them with more characterization, she also describes all the La Push boys as having "russet-colored skin and black hair" (Wilson 201). The

main characterization for most of the La Push boys involves their lack of ability to control their anger—even their Alpha who left a large scar on his girlfriend’s face after an argument—and their lack of clothing which is especially prominent in the film series.

The shapeshifters are presented solely as eye candy when in their human forms. As a member of the La Push boys and one of the main characters, Jacob appears in many scenes and he is shown shirtless in most of them. While some critics believe Jacob Black to be an example of the “Noble Savage,” he has more in common with the stereotypical “Romantic Savage” which is described as “a lost soul, caught between the pressures of civilization and tradition. He is passionate, always attractive...and still—if threatened—capable of savage violence” (Burke); basically, he is an example of the Native American male characters shown on the cover of romance novels featuring stereotypical behavior and the seduction of white women. The white woman Jacob trying to seduce is Bella Swan, his best friend. Jacob spends most of the series ignoring her rejection and often attempting to decide what is best for her. He is often shown being overly aggressive with her, at one point forcing a kiss on her, and later threatening to get himself killed if she did not admit that she loved him. The Cullen family, the vampires who live in the Forks, also have a singular character who struggles with impulse control and aggression, but multiple members of the Quileute pack have these problems as if this is a natural part of the community, something to be expected. In actuality, the focus on violence and aggression is the direct opposite of how the Quileute Tribe view wolves where “the wolf is known as a protective spirit or honored ancestor and is associated with loyalty and intelligence” (Wilson 195). The focus on violence and aggression is clear even in the dynamic of the pack structure where the alpha of the pack can force his pack members to follow his orders just by yelling at them. The

problematic portrayal of Native Americans in the Twilight series can be found in both the books and films; however, one problematic aspect of the portrayal is specific only to the film series: Taylor Lautner.

Jacob Black can be considered one of the most important characters in the Twilight Series since he is the main character's best friend and love interest, a member of the Quileute Tribe and eventually the Alpha of his own pack, and, in the final book of the series, the narrator of the story for a few chapters. Every member of the werewolf pack is Native American, and Jacob is the most prominent Native American character of the series, but the actor who played him, Taylor Lautner, is not Native American. This was a fact known by casting because his minor connection to Native Americans was discovered during the filming process. In an MTV interview Lautner stated, "I am part Native American. We learned that through [preparing for] this film. I'm French, Dutch and German, and on my mother's side, she has some Potawatomi and Ottawa Indian in her" ("Native Americans Outraged"). Through his mother's side, he is distantly part Native American, but "having Native blood in one's ancestry and being culturally Native American are not synonymous" (Burke 212).

Taylor Lautner is a Caucasian actor playing the role of the Native American Jacob Black who is deeply connected with his tribe. He lives on a reservation, he knows his tribe's history, regardless of how altered it is by Stephenie Meyer, and he knows his tribe's culture. If asked on a standardized test to mark his race, Jacob Black would most certainly check Native American, but this could not be said for Taylor Lautner. Burke says, "In Hollywood, playing Indian for profit has a long history, particularly since Native actors were not hired to play leading roles in cinematic productions" (218), but oddly enough, Taylor Lautner is "the only Indian character not

played by a Native American” (Burke 211-12). The actors playing the members of his pack are Native American because Chris Weitz, one of the directors for the Twilight films, insisted on authenticity, “They had to have papers that proved their heritage” (Boehm). Each actor—from the Alpha of the pack to the youngest of the La Push boys—all belonged to a tribe, but the actor playing Jacob Black did not truly belong to one. The creators of these films recognized the importance of having actors whose backgrounds matched the character but did not seem to realize that same importance for one of their main characters which further promotes that idea that having main characters played by actors of color is not profitable. White actors portraying people of color can also be found in the portrayals of Hispanic characters.

### **Portrayal of Hispanic Characters**

#### *Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet*

Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* is an MTV-inspired adaptation of the famous Shakespearian tragedy, centered around star-crossed lovers and their feuding families. However, instead of the common depiction of men in tights riding in the streets on horseback and drawing their swords in a desire to do battle, this adaptation takes a vastly more modern approach to the story. While no date is every specified in the film, the use of cars, helicopters, and pistols demonstrates this story is much closer to the year 1996, the year it was filmed, than the 1590s when Shakespeare held the first production of the play in the Globe Theatre. The story takes place in Verona Beach, California, and despite the modernity of the new setting, Shakespeare’s words, characters, and story remain unchanged. However, “by updating the setting to make it more familiar to contemporary audiences, he places more emphasis on the intricacies of the

story” (Mathis 74) which allowed Luhrmann to introduce new themes and a new conflict to a story that could not have been explored in the original.

Shakespeare’s famous opening line to the story, “Two households both alike in dignity,” takes on an elevated meaning in Luhrmann’s film. The Montagues and the Capulets remain at their elevated status within the city and the division between the two households is made clear from one of the opening images in the film: two skyscrapers, showcasing the names of the families, placed on opposite sides of the street with the city caught in-between. The city created in the film, Verona Beach, “feels like Miami, Los Angeles, and Mexico City all at once and is characterized by gang violence, drug use, and excess” (Mathis 80). The two families are involved in both legal and illegal activities which has erupted into a gang war, but the divide between the two families is not based solely on wealth, but on race as well. The film “does not interpret Shakespeare in a traditional way...instead it focuses on seemingly anachronistic, modern social fantasies about race and sex” (Radel 17), and our unlucky star-crossed lovers are caught in the middle of a division that can readily be found in modern society. The issues of race are demonstrated through two different, but culturally similar races. The Montague family can be interpreted as an Irish gang and the Capulet family is coded Hispanic.

The language in the film is taken almost directly from the original play; while, no one in the family ever directly says “I am Latin,” neither does the film showcase a billboard declaring “The Montagues are Irish.” Instead these assumptions are created by visuals and key aspects of the setting and the characters. The actors that portray the Montagues are all white. Details allowing for the interpretation of the Montague’s ethnicity are Romeo’s blood related cousin, Benvolio, natural hair color being “an orangish red,” the casting decision of Brian Dennehy as

Romeo's father is of Irish ancestry, and the decision to name Romeo's mother Caroline "leads one to speculate that the Montagues are meant to be an Irish gang" (Mathis 81). However, Juliet's father's issues with the Montagues does not stem from the fact that the Montagues are white. He spends almost the entirety of the film attempting to have his daughter marry a white man, Paris, but because Paris is not Irish or a Montague, he is acceptable to the Capulets. Paris being Catholic likely helped in his attempt to connect with the Capulet family.

Catholicism is often a large part of Irish culture, and this is demonstrated through Romeo's close relationship with Father Lawrence, instead of Friar; the overwhelming number of scenes that feature a cross or take place in a Catholic church also indicate an intimate relationship to religion. The connection to Catholicism can also be found in Latin American and Spanish communities, which is a nice addition to the film because it shows that the Irish and Latin Americans have more in common with each other than the Montagues or Capulets are willing to admit. The first member of the Capulet family shown on screen, Abra, is wearing a giant silver cross and has a tattoo on his back of the virgin Mary which is glimpsed by the viewer as he is on his way to fight a member of House Montague. The Capulets, outside of Juliet and her parents, are played by brown-skinned actors with black hair and accents. Another member of the Montague family who has these features is Juliet's steel-cowboy boot wearing cousin Tybalt, played by Hispanic actor John Leguizamo. Shakespeare described Tybalt's sword fighting as showy, and in order to capture this on film with guns, the actor worked with a choreographer to create a flamenco-inspired style when it came to his gunplay.

Verona Beach is "a modern multi-cultural, multiethnic setting" and since Los Angeles is one of the inspirations for the city, it makes sense to include Hispanic people in the film

considering “they make-up 48 percent of the population” (Cepeda). While a large majority of the Capulet family has tan-skin and dark hair, Juliet and her family are outliers in this pattern, but that would not make them any less Hispanic. While it might be “difficult to imagine a person with pale skin or lighter hair to identify as Latino,” the truth is “being Latina is more than color” (Rivas). Latin Americans come in all shades and “are one of the most ethnically diverse groups in the world” because their heritage covers “African, Indigenous, and even Asian backgrounds” (Party of Five). Juliet having blue eyes and her mother having blonde hair are not outside the realm of possibilities. These two women would be considered white passing which “means passing as a white person, usually without noticing your ethnic background” (Rivas). This could have been an amazing opportunity in the film to showcase Hispanic actors and actresses in leading roles, especially ones who do not fit the conventional mold of what a Latin person should look like; instead all the background Capulets are played by Hispanic actors while the lead actors of the film are all white.

There is a concept in fiction called suspension of disbelief which “helps your [audience] let go of reality and accept what you have to offer” (X). This can affect the layout of a scene where the audience must believe the characters are in a house or that when they walk out a door, they are not just leaving a stage. This can also affect casting. One of the most famous examples of suspension of disbelief takes place in Rodger’s and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella*. In this film, the combination of families does not make sense in the real world, but it makes sense for the universe created in the 1997 film. Prince Charming being Asian while both his mother and father are different races is never questioned during the film. Another more recent television adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, titled *Still Star-Crossed*, had this dynamic. This period drama focuses on

the Capulet and Montague families after the death of Romeo and Juliet with the main characters of the story being Rosaline Capulet and Benvolio Montague. The series used color-blind casting so regardless of race or similarities, the best actors would receive the part. This led to the Prince of Verona being black and his sister being middle eastern, Romeo being black and Benvolio being white, and Juliet being white while Rosaline and her sister were both black. The people of Verona continue this mix-match of races. "Fiction is about drawing your [audience] into a world you created, making them believe that world possibly exists" (X), and these two works described above both accomplished that goal. Neither work had a focus on race which allowed for the color-blind casting. The audience had to accept the casting without question. This cannot be said the same for Luhrmann's film which has a heavy focus on race. Therefore, the decision to cast white actors to portray Hispanic characters must be questioned.

Juliet Capulet is the last main character introduced in the film, and she is "the privileged only daughter of a Hispanic gangster, hidden away from the world" (Mathis 83); even though Juliet belongs to a Latin American family, "she is played by Claire Danes, an actress clearly marked white in the Hollywood star system" (Radel 25). Claire Danes is a white actress and again while it is possible to be Hispanic and look like Claire Danes, this actress was not Hispanic even though her character is. In this film, Juliet was never going to be portrayed by a Hispanic actress, and the actress chosen before Claire Danes was Natalie Portman, another white actress. Baz Luhrmann made the decision to include race as a major theme in his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and his use of "modern racial categories to suggest that all citizens of Verona Beach are implicated in a social struggle from which no one will escape unharmed" (Radel 30) reflects the fact that hate and racial tension can lead to a dangerous and unnecessary amount of violence

which mirrors Shakespeare's "lovers cannot escape the violence of their culture any more than we can evade the pressures of race" (21-22); despite these grand revelations concerning race, Luhrmann never recognized his own problematic behavior concerning the casting of this film. Finding a Hispanic actress in Los Angeles would not have been difficult. If Luhrmann had wanted a white-passing Hispanic actress, he could have found one, and if he wanted a Hispanic actress who fit the typical conventions and expectations of a Latina, he also could have found one, but he made the decision to cast only Caucasian actresses for a character he designed to be perceived as Latina. This film demonstrates the idea that Hollywood wants to use the stories and cultures of minorities, but not use minorities to tell the story. While Luhrmann was willing to cast minority actors to play extras and Tybalt, he was unwilling to have them as his main characters in the nineties, but this also happened in another adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in the 1950s: *West Side Story*.

### *West Side Story*

*West Side Story* is a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that was shown on both the Broadway stage and the Hollywood big screen. It was one of "the two biggest hits among Broadway musicals of the 1957-58 season" (Oja 13). *West Side Story* debuted in September 1957, and "the show immediately gained fame for its bold artistic vision and unflinching engagement with social concerns of the day" ("An Out and Out Plea"): "confronting gang violence and racial prejudice against Puerto Rican immigrants as they negotiated the urban jungle" (Oja 13). The *Romeo and Juliet* in this film are known as Tony and Maria. Tony is a gang member of the all-white "the Jets," and Maria is the younger sister of Bernardo, this version's Tybalt, the leader of the Puerto Rican gang, "the Sharks." However, in this story, only

Romeo dies, and while he could not survive the hate separating the community of the west side, the love Tony shared with Maria lives on through her. This adaptation takes more liberties with the plot than the 1996 adaptation, the soul of the story remains the same, simply with its own set of positives and negatives.

Leonard Bernstein, the show's composer, wrote in his personal copy of *Romeo and Juliet* that *West Side Story* is "an out and out plea for racial tolerance" (Oja 22). He had a heavy involvement with the original Broadway production and had a strong desire to showcase more diversity on the stage than what was considered appropriate in the 1950s, an era defined by poodle skirts and segregation. According to the Broadway community, "the inaugural production of *West Side Story* played a role in integrating the theatrical world" by showcasing the talents of Chita Rivera and Jamie Sanchez, portraying Anita and Chino respectively, who were both Puerto Rican, as well as other actors who belonged to a wide-array of different races ("An Out and Out Plea"). The choreographer, Jerome Robbins, "essentially did fieldwork to give [Puerto Ricans] and their street life compelling authenticity" to depict their lives realistically (Oja). The Broadway production of this tale tried its best, but the stage production had its own set of negatives. In the original Broadway production, many of the white actors who played the Puerto Rican characters did brown-face, like blackface, where they used make-up to darken their skin color ("An Out and Out Plea"). The most outspoken criticisms about the Broadway play come from Puerto Ricans who criticize "the stereotyping [of their culture] embedded in the show's very existence" (Oja 25). While many criticized the original stage production, "there is no single American cultural product that haunts Puerto Rican identity discourses in the United States more intensely than the 1961 film" (Oja 25). Many Puerto Rican viewers of the film are upset by the

film's reliance on stereotypes, such as the exaggerated mannerisms and accents, but one of the larger issues with the film deals with the actors who portray the exaggerated Puerto Rican characters: those actors were white.

In the film version of the song "America," which is sung by members of the Sharks, Bernardo, Maria's brother and the gang leader, sings out "Life is all-right in America/If you're all white in America." While the line is appropriate for the film, it also has a level of irony on a meta level considering Bernardo and his younger sister Maria are both played by white actors. This film directly addresses the benefits of being white in America, while also contributing to the problem. Bernardo, the leader of the Puerto Rican gang, is portrayed by George Chakiris, an American actor who was the son of Greek immigrants (Davine 147). His portrayal of the character is comparable to minstrelsy through the actor's "use of exaggerated accents and mannerisms, and the use of brown face" (Davine 147); these aspects are used not only for main characters, but background characters as well. Rita Moreno, the actress who portrays Anita and the only Puerto Rican actress in the cast, "later criticized the film's exaggerated and essentialist representation of the Puerto Rican characters"; she described the make-up used on the white actors portraying Puerto Ricans "as if they had been covered with 'a bucket of mud'" (Davine 147). Rita Moreno's character Anita contributed to criticized stereotypes in the film because she "falls victim to the traditions of the hypersexualized mythology of the Hollywood Latina" (Ovalle 116-17). In the beginning of Moreno's career, the roles offered to her were created by "the racialized and sexualized myth of the Hollywood Latina" (Ovalle 101); they were looking for the vamp, a hyper-sexualized Latina with "a fiery [and] explosive personality" (Davine 142). This portrayal of Hispanic women is very popular in pop culture, demonstrated today by

actresses such as Sofia Vergara and Naya Rivera. Anita is allowed to be sexy and vivacious, which should not be seen as a negative, but the movie portrays her sexuality as a part of her Hispanic identity, while actively trying to avoid those descriptions from the main-female lead of the movie, Maria, who is played by a white actress in a white dress.

Maria's youth and innocence are highlighted in the beginning of the film, addressed in the color of a dress when she asks Anita, "Could we not dye it red at least?" Colors hold symbolism; red is seen as sexual and aggressive, and white represents innocence and purity. In popular culture, sexuality has become an assumption for Latin women which might be the reason why, in the dance scene, only the girlfriends of the Sharks are shown in red. While Maria has a desire to grow-up and be more than Bernardo's younger sister, her innocence is seen as something to be protected, with Anita forcing her to wear white to the dance. In this film, the color white and being white hold a certain perception and allow Maria to be viewed sympathetically by the audience as a "virtuous figure" (Ovalle 116); this perception is helped by Maria, a Hispanic character, being portrayed by "mainstream star Natalie Wood" (Ovalle 116). Maria being Hispanic essentially creates the main conflict in the film, but Hispanic actresses were never considered for the role; other contenders for the starring role were Jane Fonda and Audrey Hepburn. The rival gangs in the film hate each other purely based on race, and the reaction to the interracial relationship formed between Maria and Tony not only is an extension of that hate, but also reflects the concern of the 1950s regarding mixed-race relationships; however, "the cultural anxiety surrounding the interracial relationship in the film is mollified by" the knowledge that Natalie Wood is a white actress. This may have been a writing choice because during that time-period there was stigma against people, specifically women, who

engaged in pre-marital sex. The marriage kept the audience sympathetic to the struggles of the couple. A white actress portraying a Hispanic character may have had the same effect on the 1950s audience who may have been less receptive to an actual interracial couple appearing on screen. This film that acts as “a cautionary tale surrounding racial conflict...ironically, further perpetuates this conflict” (Davine 148). Essentially created to act as a cry for racial equality and to call out racism that was prevalent in the time period, the film still acted in the constraints created by a racist society.

Both adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* discussed above had a desire to showcase the dangers that hate can bring but avoided including actors from minority races that were most affected by the violence and portrayed in those films. While whitewashing Hispanic characters has decreased, it has not completely disappeared. Disney’s *Stuck in the Middle* and Netflix’s *On My Block*, which both center around the lives of Hispanic families, cast white actress Ronni Hawk to portray one of their lead Hispanic characters. The roles of Hispanic characters continue to be limited. According to the Anneberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California, “of the 100 top-grossing films each year from 2007 to 2018, only three percent featured Latino actors as lead or co-leads” (Holson). Of that three percent, about half were women and “five of the 17 prominent roles played by Latina women went to” Cameron Diaz, a white passing actress who has never played a Latina character in her career (Holson). The representation in media offered is not incredibly diverse, but it also does not the lives of Latinx people in America with many films focusing on stereotypes with “nearly one-quarter of speaking roles portrayed them as criminal” (Holson). Representation in media should reflect reality, and when the options are to be a stereotype or not be seen at all, clearly

there is need for more options. While the use of stereotypes in media is slowly beginning to decline, the desire for Hollywood to excluded specific representation based solely off skin color is still a problem. While the representation of black characters in media has increased, the main actors chosen often have lighter skin complexions, especially in mainstream films with female protagonists.

### **Colorism in Film and Television**

#### *Background Information*

The media and its viewers have a reciprocal nature where the judgements placed upon us affect the way we view ourselves and other people belonging to communities of color which in turn affects how the media represent those people. The racial majority in the United States is white and since before the creation of the colonies, the white majority has had a higher privilege in American society, placing minorities, specifically African Americans, at the bottom. The divide of privilege between white people and black people has existed for centuries, but “this dichotomy between Blacks and Whites has been expanded into a stratification system within the Black race” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 48). The divide between people with different skin colors in the black community was created during the time of slavery, as shown through darker skinned individuals being placed in the fields and lighter-skinned individuals (often the children of the master) being placed in the house. This divide gave preferential treatment to light-skinned African Americans over dark-skinned African Americans; this is known as colorism or a skin-tone bias (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 51).

This bias which was created more than 200 years ago still currently has an effect on the black community as a whole, granting social advantages for both light-skinned and mixed-raced African Americans, and “anecdotal evidence suggests that both Blacks and Whites engage in discriminatory behavior based on an individual’s skin color” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 51). This bias has affected black men and women in different ways over the centuries. Dark-skin black men have been viewed as threatening, violent, and dangerous, and have been presented frequently in the media as criminals; while this presentation is inaccurate, black man having dark skin has not affected the presentation of their desirability in media. Dark-skinned actors like Idris Elba, John Boyega, and Shameik Moore have become sex symbols who are “able to achieve a level of success that eludes their dark-skinned female counterparts” (Onyejiaka). Colorism is directly affecting the careers of black female actors in Hollywood by reinforcing Eurocentric beauty as the only beauty, and this is affecting the way black girls and women are seen by the viewers.

Hollywood tends to have black women with lighter-skin tones, straighter hair, and European features in leading roles. Hollywood has never been great at providing representation, and despite its improvement over the years, the media continue to glorify “the White standard of beauty for women” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 53-54). In 2005, *People* magazine released the “50 Most Beautiful People” list which featured only four African American women, and three of those four “possessed light-skin tones and were from mixed black/white heritages” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 52). One of the women in that group is Halle Berry who in 2001 was the first African American woman to win the Oscar for Best Actress for her performance in *Monster’s Ball*; Halle Berry was also in a television film portraying Dorothy

Dandridge, who in 1954 became the first African American woman to be nominated in the same Oscar category Halle Berry would go on to win years later (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 52). Halle Berry and Dorothy Dandridge both had “lighter complexions and Eurocentric features” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 52), and no other black woman, light or dark skin, has gone on to win this category in the Oscars, but multiple darker-skinned women have won the category for best supporting actress. However, those films involved the women being slaves or in different states of trauma and poverty. The film industry does not always paint the image of black women, especially with darker skin, as beautiful nor even sometimes, and the sub-category of film and television focused on young adults is no different.

Young Adult Fiction is given more freedom on who and how they want to represent individuals of color, especially since there are people of color involved in the creation of the books as authors. A few black female authors have gone on to achieve commercial success and been offered the opportunity to have their creation adapted into a film. This opportunity places their name, their book, and their characters onto a bigger stage, but it comes with a downside: the authors have a lot less say in who portrays their characters. “Casting agents, producers, and directors tend to gravitate toward a very distinct type of black girl who fits the ‘Halle Berry’ aesthetic: slim, light-skinned, and classically attractive in a Eurocentric sense” (Onyejiaka). This specific type of black girl is featured in mainstream young adult book-to-movie adaptations, even though the actress may not come close to representing the character created and described by the book’s author. Film making in Hollywood is a business first, and their desire to use mostly light-skinned or mixed race black actresses continues the narrative that viewers and readers do not want to see young dark-skinned actresses in lead roles, even in films featuring characters that

were created specifically for them. An actress often found in controversy surrounding skin is mixed-race actress, Amandla Stenberg.

### *Amandla Stenberg*

Amandla Stenberg is a young, mixed-race actress whose skin color has been a source of controversy since her career began. The first role that led this actress to becoming a household name was in the film adaptation of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* as Rue. Suzanne Collins describes the young girl in the books as a “twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes” (Sharp) and describes her older teammate, Thresh, as having the same physical characteristics of dark skin and dark eyes. Despite this description being clear from Rue’s introduction to the main character, Katniss Everdeen, a few members of the viewing audience were furious over the studio’s decision to cast a young African American girl in a role describing a black girl. Most of the backlash against Stenberg’s casting appeared on twitter with people posting tweets saying “on the real though, Rue was not supposed to be a little black girl” or “Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the little blonde innocent girl you picture” (Sharp). While reading comprehension could have been the reason readers ignored Rue’s race, another possibility for the racist outcry against a child is that some readers do not feel a connection to black people, in real life or in fiction, and believe that the image of a young black girl being speared through the abdomen carries less emotional weight because she does not look like them.

The most important part of Rue’s character was not her race, but her youth and her innocence. Suzanne Collins could have created the character using any race, and the impact of a

child's death should have remained the same. However, one of the tweets mentioned above completely dismisses the idea that Rue can be both black and innocent. The hyper sexualization of young black girls and the dismissal of their innocence is not new and has roots in slavery where "enslaved women and girls were frequently pregnant" as a way to produce more slaves, often by their white owners; even after the end of slavery, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "the portrayal of Black women and girls as sexually promiscuous 'Jezebels' continued" ("The Historical Roots"). This representation of black women and girls "stood in stark contrast to white women" and "reinforced the idea that white women were modest and pure, while Black women were immodest and sexually lewd" ("The Historical Roots"). While the film made the right decision to cast a black girl to portray a black character, another question remains: Why did the studio not cast a dark-skinned child actress in a role where she is described as having dark brown skin?

Stenberg is a biracial actress which grants her certain privileges because of her lighter-skin tone, less coarse hair, and European features, and this is a privilege that the actress acknowledges she and other actresses like her have. For her interview in *Variety* magazine, the actress states:

Something interesting has happened with me and Yara and Zendaya — there is a level of accessibility of being biracial that has afforded us attention in a way that I don't think would have been afforded to us otherwise...Me and Yara and Zendaya are perceived in the same way, I guess, because we are lighter-skinned black girls and we fill this

interesting place of being accessible to Hollywood and accessible to white people in a way that darker-skinned girls are not afforded the same privilege (Wagmeister), Stenberg and other mixed-race actresses are viewed as more accessible to a wider audience for essentially being not-too-black. This racial ambiguity has allowed other mixed-race actresses to portray roles that involve an entirely different race and ethnicity than the actress hired. For example, at the 2017 Black Entertainment Television red carpet, Brittany O'Grady, another biracial actress, discussed with Black Hollywood Live that she had only played Latina characters throughout her career, even though she is half-white and half-black. Some critics believe it is not the responsibility of the actor to turn down roles that require them to portray a different ethnicity or participate in films that takes away representation from dark skinned people; those critics believe it is the job of producers, directors, and casting agents not to offer those specific roles in the first place. However, actresses have a say about what roles to take and which to turn down.

Stenberg has turned down and accepted roles that some believe were not made for her. In February 2018, Marvel's *Black Panther* was released and the role of Shuri, the princess of Wakanda and the leading scientist in the country, went to actress Letitia Wright; however, Stenberg went through the entire audition process and was offered the role before turning it down "because she believed a darker-skinned actress should play the breakout part" (Wagmeister). The setting of the film is based in a fictional part of Africa that was never colonized. Most of the actors in the film are of darker skin tones and have coarse natural hair. The description of Stenberg cannot include either of those descriptors, and as a mixed-race actress she would have stood out in this cast which is something she realized and decided for herself "that was not a space that [she] should have taken up" (Wagmeister). Despite the actress

recognizing the importance of representation and Hollywood's desire to cast her in roles that were not necessarily designed for her, in October 2018, she appeared in the lead role of the film adaptation of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, which despite various school districts decisions to place the novel on the banned book list was either "at or near the top of *The New York Times Young Adult Hardcover Best Seller list*" for 141 weeks (Fequiere). The casting decision for Stenberg is vastly more complicated because despite the pushback against the actress, the author of the novel, Angie Thomas, picked Stenberg because when she compared the actress to the character she believed "everything Starr represented that's who Stenberg was, that's who she is" (Netis). Stenberg can be considered an activist in the black community and in LGBTQIA+ community, and throughout the novel, Starr Carter is working to develop her voice, to fight against the police brutality that took the life of her best friend right before her eyes.

Emotionally, Stenberg matches a lot of Starr's qualities or at least the qualities Starr is developing, but the physicality between the two is completely different. Angie Thomas said, "Stenberg was never cast because she was light skinned," but that actively acknowledges Stenberg's skin tone which is very different from the skin tone described in the book and the skin tone shown on the cover (Netis.) In the novel, Starr describes her skin tone "as if God mixed my parents' skin tones in a paint bucket to get my medium-brown complexion" (Thomas 31), and the cover of the novel shows Starr to be about that color description, if not a little darker, and with an afro. The image for the cover was not originally created for the book. The illustrator, Debra Cartwright, made the image to support the "protest over the death of Freddie Gray" (Shapiro). The original image had the girl holding a sign that said, "End Police Terror" and after seeing the image on Instagram, Angie Thomas suggested to her publisher it should be the book

cover (Shapiro). Cartwright edited the image to better match the character described in the book, being told “Just use Angie’s description and create Starr and put the Jordans on her feet” (Shapiro). When Angie Thomas was asked about the obvious differences between the cover and the casting, she admitted that “the book cover is totally different than who has been cast” but defended the difference by saying, “we thought that the cover was still a beautiful depiction of who Starr could be” (Netis). The dark-skinned black girl on the cover is not who Starr could have been because she was created using the descriptions provided by Angie Thomas in her novel. The image is not who Starr could be, it is who Starr *is*.

The film uses the cover image in the movie to fade into a reveal of the main character, but the cover used shows the girl with a much lighter skin tone to appear more like Stenberg. Cartwright was asked her opinion on the casting decision and admitted she “wasn’t exactly thrilled” and had hoped for a “very brown-skinned actress because there’s so little opportunities in these big movies for darker-skinned actresses” (Shapiro). Cartwright even understood the complaints given by readers toward the casting decision, explaining “it was a very specific description in the book, and to see that actress [as] not that description, that would annoy me as a reader” (Shapiro). Stenberg felt deeply connected to Starr based on their similar paths in life; “Like Starr, she grew up in a black community...and traveled an hour and a half across town to attend a wealthy, predominantly white private school” (Wagmeister). They have many similarities, but “Black Americans may very well live in the same society, but their life experiences may vary greatly depending on whether or not one is light-or-dark skinned” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 48). If Thomas wrote the novel with Stenberg in mind to one day play the part of Starr, she could have described the character to look like the actress in

her mind. Instead, she created representation for every darker-skinned black girl and woman who read the novel and could picture themselves as Starr without having to imagine themselves as a different color or with different hair. They were able to see themselves in the pages of that book and were rightfully disappointed to not be offered the same opportunity for representation on the big screen. The frequent decisions of Hollywood to have lighter-skinned actresses portray darker-skinned characters is not new and continues to be very common.

*Alexandra Shipp*

In 2018, the film adaptation of Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *Love, Simon*, was released and was notable as the first film by a major Hollywood studio to focus on a gay teenage romance. "While many films that have gay themes or a LGBTQ subtext often hide those elements in order to obscure the true message...to make the film more 'commercial' or 'mainstream,' this film is rightly and innovatively celebrating and embracing its themes and point of view" (Anderson). The main character of the film and book is Simon Spier. His love-interest in the book is Bram, also known online as Blue—a reference to his heritage as both black and Jewish. The film was not only praised for its themes and love story, but for keeping Bram/Blue mixed race and for having Simon's best friend Nick be portrayed by Jorge Lendeborg, a Black Latino and a Dominican immigrant. In the novel, the only other prominent black character in the novel is Abby. The main source of conflict in the movie comes about because a boy named Martin has a crush on her "just like every other geeky straight boy" (Albertalli 6) and decides to blackmail Simon because of his connection to her.

Abby is beautiful which is shown throughout the novel and film by the attraction multiple boys have toward her, including Nick, and even Simon admits “If I were straight. The Abby thing. I do think I get it” (Albertalli 33). This novel’s main goal for representation is directed towards the LGBTQIA+ community, but having the main love interest and the most desired girl in school be black is a powerful statement. As discussed in earlier sections, Black has not always been considered beautiful; in the past, blackness even symbolized “ugliness, evilness, and incivility” (Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas 48). This novel subverts those beliefs by having two main black characters not only be considered beautiful but deserving of love with Bram ending up with Simon, and Abby beginning a relationship with Nick. In the film, elements of the text related to those two characters remain similar. Blue is played by Keiynan Lonsdale, a mixed-race actor, who kisses Simon on the top of a Ferris wheel, and Abby is still shown to be beloved and admired for her beauty. There is only one minor change made; in the film, Abby is played by Alexandra Shipp, a mixed-race actress.

There was no outcry against the casting of Alexandra Shipp as Abby, and there should not be for this. Black skin comes in all different hues, and the skin color of Abby is never specified, only that she is black, made clear by Simon when he says, “She and most of the other black kids spend more time commuting to school every day than I do in a week” (Albertalli 33). This novel never specifies if Abby has light, dark, or medium colored black skin, and it does not have to because the most important thing about Abby is that she is Simon’s friend and that she is beautiful. However, casting a mixed-race, light-skinned actor perpetuates the idea that lighter skin equals beauty. This film overlooked the opportunity for more representation by having a dark-skinned actress be viewed as one of the most beautiful girls in her school. Instead, all the

main black characters in the film have light skin. While Alexandra Shipp's casting for this role was never contested, her being chosen to portray Storm in 2016's *X-Men: Apocalypse* was.

Orooro Munroe, better known as Storm, is the Kenyan-born, weather-powered superheroine, former Supermodel, and member of the X-Men. "Storm was the first major black female comic book character at either Marvel or D.C. Comics, and she wasn't just a token—she was a powerful character with a rich backstory and a prominent ethnic identity" (Williams). Storm is an African-born Kenyan Princess who was left in America after the death of her parents. From her creation in the 1970s through her animated appearance in the '90s, Storm has always been drawn as a dark-skinned African woman with white hair and electricity shooting from her fingertips. Despite this consistent appearance in comics and animation, her film portrayals have always been given by mixed-race actresses, starting with Halle Berry in the original X-men film franchise and currently Alexandra Shipp. Many critics were left asking the question "Will Storm ever be played by a dark-skin actress?" and dubbed Shipp "too light-skinned to have been cast" (Fitzsimons). The actress took to Twitter to defend her casting and to call the questioning of her casting as racist, stating, "You wanna know what I've found interesting? That 90% of the racism I've experienced in my lifetime has been at the hands of fellow black people" (Ziyad). She continued on to dismiss the conversation around the issue of color and colorism, by declaring, "This conversation about Storm is so stupid...If I lose my job to another actress, I hope it's for her talent and grace, not her skin" (Ziyad). Although the main motivation behind questioning Shipp's casting was never meant to dismiss her blackness, it was meant to call attention to colorism once again in the casting of Storm.

When asked about her connection to the role of Storm, Shipp admitted, “Growing up, when I was reading the comics, I pictured her looking like me. For any black girl, for there to be a black superhero, we picture them looking like us” (Fitzsimons). However, there is a difference between picturing and being pictured. Storm’s coloring was a deliberate choice to reflect her heritage as a Kenyan, and her connection to her culture has always been ingrained in her characterization. She is an African princess and acts with a great amount of grace, strength, and leadership. She is a dark-skinned black woman. The young dark-skinned black girls who grew up reading comics and idolizing her for not only her personality, but also her appearance have been denied the opportunity to see a Storm who looks like them, even though they grew up with a picture that did. Shipp did not picture Storm looking like her—Storm has had a consistent appearance for decades—what she pictured was herself in Storm’s position. To be that powerful and that beautiful can be hard to imagine, but every dark-skinned girl was able to see themselves that way as Storm and see a piece of themselves in Storm.

### **Conclusion**

#### *Progress for Representation*

The late author Walter Dean Myer wrote in his op-ed for *The New York Times* that the children and young adults who read his stories were “struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgement of their value by someone who understands who they are.” When he was growing up, as young black boy, all he wanted, “really needed, was to become an integral part of the mosaic that [he] saw around”

(Myer). He contributed to that landscape through his own writings. Other authors have also helped fight against the lack the representation in young adult literature.

Finding positive representation of young black people has always been difficult. The Cooperative Children's Book Center "found that of the 3,200 children's books published in 2013, only 94 were about black people" (Fequiere). However, that number quadrupled by 2018. This statistic included the novels of five very successful black, female authors: Tomi Adeyemi, Akwaeke Emezi, Elizabeth Acevedo, Angie Thomas, and Nic Stone. These women were dubbed the voices of change by *Elle* magazine. Adeyemi, the author of *Children of Blood and Bone*, a Nigerian-American author, admits her novel was inspired from seeing a postcard of a West African deity, and uses that anecdote to discuss the importance of representation: "When I try to make representation quantifiable, it's like, 'Let me show you the income I'm generating from seeing myself in a gift shop by chance'" (Fequiere). Part of that income will be coming from Fox 200/Lucasfilm who offered a seven-figure deal to adapt her novel into a film. Acevedo's novel, *The Poet X*, was inspired by one of her students asking her, "Where are the books that sound, and look like us?"

Everyone wants to read stories that have characters that they can relate to, but minority youths are desperate for the representation, and it can be found in fiction. Hispanic youths may gravitate to novels like Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Luis Alberto Urrea's *Into the Beautiful White North*, or Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* which all deal with the lives of Hispanic young adults. One of the most well-known novels featuring a Native American protagonist is Sherman Alexie's *The Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Less well-known novels written by Native American authors include Kate

Hart's *After the Fall*, Erika T Wurth's *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend*, and Eric Gansworth's *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (Carter). The selection for novels featuring Native American main characters, on televisions and movies is even more scarce; however, one show attempted to provide realistic and accurate representation for the Indigenous community: *Anne with an E*.

*Anne with an E* is a CBC/Netflix adaptation of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. While the television show takes many liberties with the original story, it does include something the other adaptations never had: people of color. During the show's second season, people of color were introduced. Sebastian "Bash" LaCroix is a man from Trinidad who Gilbert Blythe befriended while working on a boat. Bash and Gilbert become business partners on Gilbert's family farm, and through Bash, the audience is introduced to the other black people living in Canada. Bash's story is one of triumph, and while those stories are important to tell, the failures are too. Canada failed its Native American population through the horrors allowed at the Indian Residential schools.

Season three introduces Ka'Kwet, a 12-year old girl belonging to the Mi'kmaq tribe. Ka'Kwet and Anne Shirley Cuthbert meet at a hockey game where her father is selling hockey sticks. The two bond over their mutual love for education and the cultures of others, despite the town's racism against Ka'Kwet's tribe. Moira Walley-Beckett, the show creator, tried to remain as accurate to the people and cultures of the Mi'kmaq tribe and the casting for Ka'Kwet even said "INDIGENOUS MUST TRULY BE INDIGENOUS: OPEN TO ALL FIRST NATIONS, NATIVE AMERICANS, METIS AND INUIT" (Lydia). Beckett was aiming for authenticity which included not only accurate costumes and hair, but a tragic side of history "that gives Non-Native viewers from Canada and abroad a glimpse into [Canada's] villainous past, possibly

for the first time” (Lydia). Because of Ka’Kwet’s love of learning, her parents agree to send her to an Indian Boarding school, not knowing the trauma their daughter and other students would be forced to endure. In the show, “we see Ka’Kwet stripped of her name, her culture style, her hair. We see her and the other children emotionally, verbally, and physically abused” (Lydia). The goal of the school was to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man,” and this saying was created by Captain Richard H Pratt, “who established the Carlisle Indian School in 1878” (Dawson 82). The show left out some of the experiences these children experienced, such as “constant shortages, insufficient or rotten food, inadequate teaching supplies, and poorly trained staff and administration...[and] overcrowding (especially in the Canadian schools) seems to have resulted in the deaths of up to fifty percent of the new student populations...a fact carefully hidden by the Canadian government” (Dawson 82). For many this was their first introduction to this community and this history, this was also the first time Indigenous people and current members of the Mi’kmaq tribe were able to see themselves authentically on a mainstream television show. This show demonstrated culture accurately in the past, but other shows are focusing on the present.

The landscape of television and film is slowly changing. A lot of those changes took place on Netflix first with shows like *Dear White People* which follows the college lives of black students attending a primarily white institution, *Luke Cage* which shows a superhero from Harlem trying to protect his community, and *On My Block* where the main four characters in the show are minorities from California. On actual television stations that address representation is Freeform’s *Party of Five*, a remake of a show from the 90s, which addresses what happens to a

family after the parents are deported from America. While there has been progress, entertainment media can always do better.

### *Conclusion*

Angie Thomas says, “I’m trying to remind myself, anytime I enter a space, that I’m supposed to be there” (Fequiere). People of color may have to frequently remind themselves that they can be shown and depicted accurately, that they can take up space on bookshelves and television and movie screens, that their stories should be told in whatever media they desire. While scholarship is easy to find regarding how racism, stereotypes, and colorism have affected young adults in the past, it is harder to find articles focusing on how it is affecting people now, and how the change in the entertainment landscape is affecting those who grew up never seeing themselves. The increased amount of representation for African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans is great, but it can always be better.

Shows like Freeform’s *Grown-ish* were commended for doing an episode about the struggles experienced by black women when dating and addressing colorism, but do not have a dark-skinned actress on the show. The CW’s *Jane the Virgin* celebrated for having Hispanic women be the most important people in the show, but the lack of Afro-Latinx people was never addressed. There is not one mainstream movie or television show with a Native American or Indigenous person as the lead. While the focus here is on three specific minority groups, there is still lack of other minorities in the entertainment industry, and specifically in media geared towards young adults. Akwaeke Enezi, author of *Pet*, aims to “create work that functions ‘as a blueprint for something better’” (Fequiere). This is not a bad goal for everyone in the

entertainment industry to aim toward, something better, so that film and television can create a landscape where everyone can see themselves in a character or a story. This will create a world where if students ask their teacher where to find books with characters who look and talk like them, the teacher can just point.

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