

Race, Gender & Sexuality in Production Studies

“‘Plastic’ Representation: The Problem of 21st Century Black Media Industry Studies”

Kristen J. Warner, *University of Alabama*

Presently, “representation matters” is a catchphrase circulating in conversations around diversity in film, television, and theater. To many men and women of color and white women, imagining the actual presence of different looking bodies on screen as an indicator of progress as well as an aspirational frame for younger generations, the weight of diversity became synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the quality of those performances. As wonderful as it is to see a variety of people of color on screen from *Star Wars* to *Supergirl* and as wonderful a sentiment is the existence of an all-female *Ghostbusters* or future all-lady reboot *Oceans 8*, quantifiable difference alone often over determines benchmarks of progress and obscures the multifaceted challenges with not just booking roles but also in securing work on writing staffs, directing gigs, or even reaching executive gatekeeper status. What’s more, when push comes to shove, networks and studios can and do diversify their casts. Thus, while visual diversity is still not a regular occurrence, it’s not impossible to achieve. What is difficult is a more weighted diversity generated by adding dimension and specificity to the parts and often achieved in tandem with diverse bodies shaping those roles at levels of producing and writing.

Take for example, actor Leslie Odom, Jr. who when asked to share his feelings on the possibilities of diversity now that *Hamilton*, the multiracial, colorblind casting show he starred in became a critical and financial darling for Broadway. “What we really need to pay attention to is the next two seasons,” he says before taking on too much hope. He adds, “colorblind casting is great. You know what’s better than colorblind casting? Roles that are actually written about you.” As a second example, consider at the most recent Television Critics Association summer tour how FX President John Landgraf celebrates his network’s plan to increase diversity by encouraging their predominately all-white showrunners to hire directors of color and white women. Recognizing that it was less complicated to increase diversity in director roles than in other areas of production from showrunner to writing staff because directors work freelance and can be moved into the labor cycle more easily, Landgraf’s move, while an excellent moment of progress, still echoes the sentiments of the ease of visibility. Both Landgraf and Odom’s points get to the crux of the representational binary in this current era and moves this response to its goal. Exploring two types of minority visibility both in front of and behind the camera: visual diversity, or what I call “plastic” representation, and a more culturally specific representation becomes the heart of my response to this panel’s query. If we are to understand the current moment of race, gender, and sexuality in production studies, we must differentiate between actual progress and its artificial counterpart at all levels of the business. Moreover, we must recognize that even the best, most well-intentioned and excellent experiments of multiracial, majority female casts from *Grey’s Anatomy* to *Hamilton* to *Ghostbusters* do not necessarily represent the harbinger of change audiences and industry press have so hoped them to be. This is not to disparage joyous affect and identification; to the contrary I ask we as scholars simply continue to think through these

texts long game logics. They very well may indicate how much ground has been ceded in the pursuit of a simplistic yet visually pleasing kind of diversity.