The Pitfalls of Positive Representation I
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What is "positive" representation, and is it something for which we should strive if we care about equity? In recent years, in which we're often told American social life and entertainment media have become racially colorblind, these questions are becoming particularly opaque. Contemporary trends include diverse ensemble cast series and films, the success of a handful of non-white stars, and satirical humor that pokes fun at (and perhaps also reinforces) racially biased thinking and racial stereotypes themselves. Meanwhile, "positive" representations of individuals of color abound.

As I noted in a recent *Flow* column, "Meaningful Diversity," the inclusion of actors and characters of color and absence of images that are clearly denigrating is not tantamount to equitable representation. Emphasis on the corporeal and on "positive" representation overlooks the ultimately more powerful dynamic of focalization, as described by scholars such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam and Charles Ramírez Berg, regarding which characters we are meant to identify with, whose stories are being told, and which communities' perspectives and ideological discourses are privileged. As I noted in this column, excerpts of which I include here, there are questions we can ask to interrogate media texts in relation to more central concerns of racial politics.

1. Are the characters of color fully realized individuals? This may seem simplistic, but it bears stating. Given how rare protagonists of color have been in Hollywood narratives, we may not always notice when characters of color are utilized primarily to lend a hip tone to a setting and in support of the white lead characters' development (Consider that Tonto was a "positive" character in his support of the Lone Ranger). Whose families, home life, or inner worlds to we get to know? Whose motivations and development are we meant to follow? (And if it's a musical, do we actually hear them sing?) *Glee,* despite the "positive" United Colors of Benetton™ visual display of its high school show choir, thus far has developed the white (or in the case of Rachel Berry, ambiguously white) characters much more than the characters of color and often reinforces this imbalance in its musical numbers. *Lost,* on the other hand, in its first seasons was particularly successful in developing its diverse characters in unique and often surprising ways through its narrative structure, which regularly included flashback sequences of characters' home lives and childhoods.

2. Do the writers and producers appear knowledgeable about and interested in the worlds and perspectives of the non-white characters? Again, this might be assumed to be a given, but the history of underdeveloped characters of color makes evident that this continues to be an important question to explore. Considering the example of *Friday Night Lights*, a series about a football obsessed small town in Texas, which I admire for its nuanced and intimate portrayal of white Texans, I've wondered how the series might have been enriched by a Tejano or Tejana writer who could have revealed the Mexican American facets of and characters within the town of Dillon.

3. Does the diversity of the cast appear realistic (and thus engaging and interesting), or is it merely presenting a flat, post-racial fantasy? Given that cities and neighborhoods still are racially divided in the U.S. more often than not, giving every white lead a best friend of color without realistic explanation typically comes across as unrealistic and gimmicky; such "positive" representations construct a multicultural whiteness, to borrow Dale Hudson's term, rather than a pluralistic perspective. On the other hand, the right setting can offer worlds of story possibilities and interesting, believable characters of various ethnic backgrounds. *The Wire* and *Friday Night Lights,* set in Baltimore and the fictional town of Dillon, respectively, are two series that come to mind as offering the potential for unique and engaging stories of Americans who normally are not shown in prime-time television and their interactions across race and class lines. Whether such settings will appeal to advertisers is a different matter, however. As Lewis and Jhally have aptly posed, does television's dependence on advertisers (and our own confusion regarding whether working class characters can be "positive") allow for contemporary narratives to focus on realities of the overlapping of race and class in the U.S.?

As I note in another *Flow* column, "What's at stake in claims of 'post-racial' media?" new methodological tools and theoretical frameworks are needed to interrogate such questions in the contemporary era, particularly as we witness a shift away from programming that specifically targets African American or Latina/o viewers and often decreasing opportunities for writers and producers of color. Exploring such trends through not only critical and cultural analysis but also in a concerted return to audience studies appears vital for scholars to understand their racial politics and potential impact.