

Lights, Camera, Representation and Direction:

How Hollywood, Netflix and other Media Empires Represent Race and Disability

Author's Name: AMRIT SANDHU

Supervisor's Name: Dr. Rachel da Silveira Gorman

Advisor's Name: Dr. Geoffrey Reaume

Supervisor's Signature:

Date Approved:

Advisor's Signature:

Date Approved:

Masters of Arts

Graduate Program in Critical Disability Studies

York University

Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3

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Abstract

Throughout history, racialized people, and people with disabilities have been harmed by negative stereotypes, especially through the intersection of ableism and racism, which is still going on today. This Major Research Paper is about the lack of representation and the misrepresentation of People of Colour and people with disabilities. Through the portrayal of various tropes, such as 'super abilities' in mass media culture, this paper will discuss how stereotypes hinder racial and disability justice. The research paper analyzes how mass media producers of film and television, like Marvel and Netflix, including international media content such as Bollywood, employ portrayals of negative stereotypes to further marginalize disabled people of various racialized identities. Through the analysis of selected media, this paper explores the way oppressive narratives have evolved toward inclusion and a more disability-positive outlook, for example disabled characters are not only playing the role of victim, or the narrative is not only about the character suffering from a disease. However, the paper argues improvements in narrative to be less racist or ableist are not enough, much more can be done to make media more inclusive, diverse and disability-positive. For example, film and television political organizations such as unions could promote and advocate for the roles of disabled characters to only be played by disabled actors.

Introduction

In North American society, we are attached to the media. We open laptops or home computers to watch streaming services, we go to the movies, we have cellphones where social media dominates, and we watch our televisions to keep up with the newest television series or to catch up on the latest news. Meanwhile, have you ever wondered, what is “the media”? How does it work? Why are people portrayed as stereotypes through their ‘roles’? Ever wonder how a film or television show writes their characters, or how they cast their parts? Ever wonder how roles of marginalized people like people with disabilities or racialized people are casted? I started out when thinking about the subject of this paper with these questions. I focused especially on representations of People of Colour and/or people with disabilities. I will be looking at multiple aspects of how disability, race and class are depicted, not only in mainstream media in North America where Hollywood dominates, but also in international media such as South American film and television, and Bollywood, among others. In addition, I will also illustrate how some characters are represented with ‘super abilities’ like in my favourite Marvel or DC comic adaptations to film and television, which makes their portrayals of disability more complex. I review disability representation in other media formats like music, print and visual media, athletics and sport, as well as on Netflix and Disney as specific providers of streaming television and film services. Lastly, I provide recommendations for the future of race, gender and disability to be represented positively in the media.

Intersectionality with Racialized Thought:

Taking an Anti-Racist and Feminist Disability Studies Approach

Ella Houston has stated, “Feminist disability studies knowledge and theory is founded on the understanding that the disabled female body is marginalized within society.” (Crenshaw, 2015). Feminist theory has powerfully addressed the issue of commodification of the female body throughout the media, however, media portrayals of disabled women have been insufficiently addressed thus far. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality and the importance of how it plays out in our day-to-day lives highlights the role of power relations, she says, “Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power” (Schalk, 2019). These feminist theories are the foundation for the perspective this paper will take on film and television portrayals of disability, race and gender. In addition, Dr. Sami Schalk writes, “black women’s speculative fiction complicates the understanding of bodyminds—the intertwining of the mental and the physical—in the context of race, gender, and (dis)ability.” (Schalk, 2019). This bridges Black feminist theory with disability studies, and demonstrates “that this genre’s political potential lies in the authors’ creation of “bodyminds” that transcend reality’s limitations.” (Schalk, 2019). Dr. Schalk is speaking about reality’s limitations such as the anti-Black racism, which is perpetuated in the media, like in film and television. Dr. Schalk uses the “neo-slavery narratives by Octavia Butler (*Kindred*) and Phyllis Alesia Perry (*Stigmata*) not only as representing the literal injuries suffered under slavery, but also as a metaphor for the legacy of racial violence.” (Schalk, 2019). The stereotypes about Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Colour in the media, or lack of representation of them in the media, like the complete absence of Black cast members in

Hollywood films, are examples of furthering legacies of racial violence. This paper will take into account how historically, and currently racism and ableism are re-enforced by negative or absent film and television representations of racialized people with disabilities. By using an anti-racist, feminist, disability studies theory approach, this paper will consider what can be done to change the future of film and television narratives of racialized people with disabilities.

Looking back, to look forward

The history behind people with disabilities and being in the media has been a negative experience for those in the multiple forms of media, whether that be in film, audio, print or digital. People with disabilities not only have been exploited in certain instances, but also have not been casted for roles that would portray their disability. Actors without disabilities are often casted to play characters with disabilities, rather than hiring actors to represent characters with their own or similar lived-experience of disability.

In “No Pity: People With Disabilities Forging A New Civil Rights Movement”, Joseph P. Shapiro (1993), stated:

As a number of writers have shown, press coverage of people with disabilities has tended to fall into one of two stereotypes; the sad, unlucky disabled person, in need of pity and charity, or the plucky, courageous disabled person, celebrated for overcoming a disability and performing seemingly superhuman feats, whether it is holding a job or scaling a mountain. (P.59)

It took until 1898 that “The first film that featured physical disability was a 50 second piece.” (Norden, 1994). The film was Thomas Edison’s Fake Beggar, and it portrayed a man who is blind that panhandled money. However, the actor who portrayed the role was not blind and the police try to capture him. The scene portrays disability in a negative light as the man pretending to be blind depicted as destitute. People with disabilities have been trying to get their equal status within the media. Numerous People of Colour with various disabilities have contributed to

changing the script on negative stereotyping, to help us get to where we are today. They need to be given credit and compensation for their accomplishments in achieving justice by being given recognition for how far they have brought the movement for racial justice and disability representation in film and television. For now, I have to address the elephant in the room. People of Colour with disabilities, especially women are not provided with good standards of living. They experience a lot of violence. It has been predominately white people in the media that have been given the spotlight. For example, Stephen Hawking, is one of the most celebrated physicists and scientists. His accomplishments are outstanding, however he is a white man known for his disability.

Even within the media, such as in the context of print media (as in comic books), Professor X in Marvel's X-Men comics is a white man in a wheelchair. There are rarely racialized people who are also disabled, intersectionality is often lacking, it is either you are white and disabled or you are a Person of Colour. Racialized people with disabilities have had issues with trying to find someone that represents them within print media. Who are our science fiction superheroes? How come we do not get any?

Even actors that are white with a disability have a much better chance at getting casted into disabled characters' roles than People of Colour. At the same time, disabled characters have been played by non-disabled actors since the beginning of film and television. For example in the Canadian television show *Degrassi*, the non-disabled actor and now rap star, Drake played the role of a wheelchair-user, his character Jimmy was non-disabled and became disabled due to the growth in narrative.¹ This is one of many examples of how different companies and corporations inside and outside Hollywood would be doing the same thing, hiring non-disabled actors to play

¹ CTV. (2001-2015). *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Toronto, Ontario. (2001-2009)

disabled roles. This is also in Hollywood, an example would be the show “Law and Order: SVU”, the episode “Disabled” features a Black woman that used to be an Opera singer and is raped.² This character was portrayed to have Locked-In Syndrome only secondary to the initial diagnosis to Multiple Sclerosis. This actress is Lisa Arrindell Anderson, she is a non-disabled actress. Additionally, there is the role that Denzel Washington played in “The Bone Collector”, which was a film that came out in 1999.³ In that film Denzel Washington played a forensic expert who is paralyzed from the neck down, he not only contemplates suicide but he also fears he could be in a vegetative state. Denzel Washington is a well known non-disabled Hollywood actor, being casted as a disabled role, and his ‘acting ability’ is seen as so great because, well, look how good he is at acting like he is disabled, when he is not? That is not fair for disabled actors who could have been casted in that role.

Disabled Musicians of Colour & Racial Justice

The first documented musician of colour that had a disability was Blind Lemon Jefferson. He was born at the end of the 18th century as Lemon Henry Jefferson in Couthman, Texas, the census at the time stated he was born blind, therefore that is how the name came about (Dicaire, 1999). He ended up going Chicago to record songs without a record label but under Paramount recordings, and he became a household hit across the south.⁴ He died in 1929, leaving behind a legacy of music (Russell, 1997).

Other artists during this time include Blind Willie McTell and Blind Willie Johnson. Blind Willie McTell was born as William Samuel McTier and the years before, not much is known

² NBC. (2010, March 24). Law & Order: SVU: "Disabled". *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. New York, New York.

³ Noyce, P. (Director). (1999). *Bone Collector* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Studios.

about his upbringing but as he recorded under different names with multiple labels throughout his recording career.⁵ His career was cut short due to his health and ended up becoming a preacher. He died in 1959 in Milledgeville, Georgia and was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1981. (Hal, 2018)

Willie Johnson was born in 1897 in Pendleton, Texas.⁶ Not much is known about his upbringing but eventually he became Blind. Later on in life, he had met another Blind musician, Madkin Butler and that's when his musical history starts. Johnson would perform religious songs on street corners (Charters, 2019). He started his recording career in 1927 for Victor Records in Atlanta until 1930 and after that he never recorded, he died in 1945 (Newswire, 2010).

The most famous musicians of colour with disabilities are Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. Ray Charles was born on September 23, 1930 in the state of Georgia (Lyndon, 1998). By the age of seven he was Blind, unable to see in both eyes, it was then that his mother put him into a school in Florida, called "Florida school for the Deaf and the Blind", in St. Augustine. His musical talent was developed while he was in school. He learned how to read braille, and he eventually learned how to read braille sheet music and play the piano at the same time. After being kicked out of school he was living broke until he left for Seattle a few years later and that's when his career as a jazz musician took off (Lyndon, 1998). When he passed away in 2004, his music was not only in film and television since the 1960's, but he also had received many awards and recognitions to his name. He was a civil rights activist, helping establish that there should be no divide between whites and blacks. He also established a foundation in his name for "The Ray

⁵ Blind Willie McTell (vocalist). (2020). In *Discography of American Historical Recordings*. Retrieved March 12, 2020, from https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/talent/detail/14075/McTell_Blind_Willie_vocalist.

⁶ Blakey, D. N. (2007). *Revelation: Blind Willie Johnson: the Biography: the Man the Words the Music*. Pg. 4-6.

Charles Foundation, its mission statements of financially supporting institutions and organizations in the research of hearing disorders.”⁷

Stevie Wonder is another Blind Person of Colour. He is known for many major hits, but as a Black man, he had issues growing up with his disability. Due to being placed in a hospital incubator because he was premature, it resulted in retinopathy of prematurity, which is when the growth of the eyes stops, causing retinas to detach, so therefore he became blind. It was at the age of 11, he had signed with Motown Records (Tamla Records), owned by Berry Gordy. He would play in theatres that would accept Black artists, and would need personal support at his gigs in order to perform. It was not until later that he got his big break, in the late 60’s, and that what was what turned him into a star.⁸ Thus, there has been a long trajectory of musicians of colour with disabilities fighting for racial justice. They are not as likely to be ‘stereotyped’ because as musicians they get to play themselves. They have all left behind their individual legacies and have collectively shown the world that People of Colour with disabilities can be musicians.

The Spectacle of Disability

In “The Image of Disability”, the spectacle of disability is discussed about how people with disabilities were put on display (Schaltz & George, 2018). For “freaks” that were in the sideshows of freak shows, a good example was that of Chang and Eng Bunker, who were conjoined twins. This led to a fascination with disabled people as being ‘special’, and eerie, getting strong reactions from audiences, through the portrayals of disabled people as forms of entertainment and amusement. This is an example of “the spectacle of disability” (Schaltz & George, 2018). In addition, the different but related issue of how the spectacle of disability

⁷ Ray Charles Foundation. (2020). Ray Charles Foundation.

⁸ Independent. (2011, October 22). Stevie Wonder: Blind faith.

comes around is in the narrative of displaying people with disabilities as “super-abilities”. Notoriously known for this troupe, is the television series called “American Horror Story”, which uses the spectacle of disability in their fourth season called Freak Show. Throughout the season, the series uses the premise of visible disability to promote the “freaks” as a spectacle of disability. For example the tall man, who is portrayed by George Bell, Bette and Dot Tattier (Siamese twins played by a single actress, Sarah Paulson) and how being born different can be lucrative, not for the “freaks”, but for the owner of the freak show, in order to exploit them for gain. However, the “owner” of the travelling show, Elsa Mars, is someone also with a physical disability. As the series continues, Elsa comes to America (originally from Germany) and sees how ‘freaks’ are treated. She starts her own family of ‘freaks’, and sells the freak show in order to procure her getaway for Hollywood. By the end of the series, her ‘freak’ family is dead. Elsa commits suicide in order to join the rest of her ‘freak’ family in the afterlife. This narrative is an exploitation of the suffering in the real lives of real people with disability. Another highly relevant issue on race and the spectacle of disability is mentioned in Lori Kido Lopez’s section in “Disability Media Studies”, titled “How to Stare at Your Television”. The piece discusses the ethics of watching Freakshow, a reality television series about freakshows. Lori discusses race and the freak show, and “how freak shows have long been targeted by disability rights activists as freak shows exploited the participants” (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017, P. 112). The normalization of showing off people with disabilities as ‘freaks’ was a form of exploitation because it dehumanized people with disabilities to be seen as objects of others’ amusement. In addition, Lori speaks about the interest in non-Western peoples is “deeply embedded within the culture of freak shows” (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017, P. 113).

Therefore, racism and colonialism are also at play within the politics of the freak show and the spectacle of disability. Bogdan states that displays of “primitive”, “exotic people,” “native villages,” and “savages” were a part of the earliest world fairs (Elcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017, P. 113). This is a clear connection between the oppression and exploitation of people with disabilities and People of Colour.

“Super-abilities” and the “SuperCrip”

There have been great advancements in technology through the progression of the age of information. Due to the current political climate, and also the rise of various political movements, people with disabilities have not only been given roles that profile their disability, but have been able to create their own movies with assisted technology. I will be looking at multiple Netflix specials in addition to television shows and major Hollywood Blockbusters regarding how various tropes such as the super crip, among others, are portrayed by disabled characters of colour. I will explain the tropes such as the “supercripple”, “own worst enemy and only enemy” and the medical model of disability. Katie Ellis’ book, “Disability and Popular Culture”, explores how disability is portrayed in cinema, especially stereotypes within narrative codes. The quote below illustrates an analysis of the use of the medical model of disability and how it interacts with the supercripple trope:

In *Disability and the Media*, it is Beth Haller’s work that was stated, applying the different framing theory to disability, as I stated before “The Medical Model: Disability is presented as an illness or malfunction. Persons who are disabled are shown as dependent on health professionals for cures or maintenance. In addition, The Supercrip Model: “The person with a disability is portrayed as deviant because of ‘superhuman’ feats (i.e. ocean-sailing blind man) or as ‘special’ because they live regular lives ‘in spite of’ disability (i.e. deaf high school student who plays softball). Another model I will be using is the business model, - people with disabilities and their issues are presented as costly to society and business especially. Making society accessible for disabled people is not really worth the cost of and overburdens businesses, that is, accessibility is not profitable. (Ellis & Goggin, 2015, Pg. 60)

Ellis uses the film “Gattaca”, to describe the example of narrative codes of “supercripple” versus “own worst enemy and only enemy” (Ellis, 2015, Pg. 64). Each character in the film portrays one identity, as Ellis has stated, “Supercripple is the character with disability who conquers individual limitations and personal tragedy through a positive personal attitude, hard work and determination” (Ellis, 2015, Pg. 65). On the other hand, “the own worst and only enemy” stereotype that comes from Barnes’ work (Barnes, 1992), is “a straightforward opposite of the supercripple and portrays people with disability as ‘self pity-ers’ who could overcome their difficulties if they would stop feeling sorry for themselves, think positively and rise to “the challenge” (Ellis. 2015, Pg. 66)

Dana Hasson’s dissertation, which was published as, “Representing youth with disability on television”, brings up many good contributions on the discussion of tropes on disability representation. Due to the lack of diversity in the media research material she used at the time, the main characters discussed in her dissertation are all white. (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017, Pg. 70). She has a breakdown of television programs featuring youth with disability, those being Parenthood, Glee and Breaking Bad all had characters that were white and had a disability (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017, Pg. 71). This led to the development of the hashtag, #disabilitysowhite to be used because there is a lack of representation of People of Colour with disabilities in mainstream media. Hashtag activism can work to bring awareness to social justice issues, in this particular case the issue of lacking representation of racialized people with disabilities is emphasized.

In the Marvel universe, they highlight the spectacle of disability in the story of Jessica Jones and Luke Cage, the audience is awed and fascinated by how a character’s disabilities are ‘special’ or ‘super-abilities’. I will elaborate on this subject in the next section.

Anti-Blackness, Race, Disability and Media Representation

Race and its representation in the media, started out with no representation at all, which is where hashtag activism like #disabilitysowhite comes from. However, disability aside, films have been primarily made by white people and with all white casts for a very long time. When films were first shown in cinemas, they were black and white silent movies. People of Colour prior to Lincoln Perry's first film (the first Black actor), Anna May Wong (first female Chinese American Hollywood actress), Kintaro Hayakawa (Sessue Hayakawa, first male Japanese actor in Hollywood) were not in film. The majority of roles that were not given to People of Colour were casted by white individuals and depicted heavy stereotypes about the people they portrayed. These racist stereotypes would carry over, for years, and we still see them in movies to this date. These stereotypes include that "Typical roles of villainess", such as the roles that Anna May played (Hodges, 2005). She had been casted predominantly in roles that continued to convey the stereotype that Asians were not to be trusted; those stereotypes were due to the anti-Chinese sentiment during the 1920's, which would have a lasting impression.

Anti-Black stereotypes would prevail well onto movies today. Some earlier stereotypes include "Sambo". This stereotype was the image of a simple-minded, docile Black man that was prominently portrayed during the era of slavery in the United States (Boskin,1986). This caricature "the happy slave" notion is the core of this "Sambo" caricature (Boskin,1986). The "Sambo" was seen "as naturally lazy and therefore reliant upon his master for direction" (Boskin, 1986). "As Sambo was born out a defense for slavery, it was transmitted through music, folk saying, literature, postcards, among many other artefacts" (Goings, 1994). The anti-Black racism was brought to the stage in the form of "blackface", which were white people with black coloured face paint to mock and hate Black people. An example of an actor that played

anti-Black racist depictions of Black characters as a white man in blackface was known as Jim Crow. Jim Crow “was when white performers darkened their faces with burnt cork, painted grotesquely exaggerated white mouths over their own, donned woolly back wigs and took the stage to entertain society” (Engle, 1978). This was the northern counterpart to the southern stereotype of “Sambo” (Engle, 1978). The savage was another stereotype that some aspects have lasted to current day. There were beliefs that “Blacks were mentally inferior, physically and culturally un-evolved, and apelike in appearance” (Boskin, 1986), in addition that the message to whites was that “we must put blacks in their place or else” (Plous & Williams,1995). Even people in political roles, for example, Theodore Roosevelt, publicly stated, “As a race and in the mass, The Negroes, are altogether inferior to whites” (Plous & Williams,1995). During this time, scientific studies were done to fabricate anti-Black racist ideology. For example, science was used as a weapon to determine the proper place of Black people in society and how much further the whites were developed:

Scientists conducted tests and measurements and concluded that blacks were savages for the following reasons: "(a) The abnormal length of the arm...; (b) weight of brain... [Negro's] 35 ounces, gorilla 20 ounces, average European 45 ounces; (c) short flat snub nose; (d) thick protruding lips; (e) exceedingly thick cranium; (f) short, black hair, eccentricity elliptical or almost flat in sections, and distinctly woolly; and (g) thick epidermis. (Plous & Williams, 1995).

This is an example of scientific anti-Black racism. In addition to these tests, “African-Americans were thought to be far less sensitive to pain than whites. For example, black women were thought to experience little pain with childbirth and animal-like characteristics” (Plous & Williams, 1995). Anti-Black racism reinforced by scientific studies was used as a violent means to justify slavery and to “rationalize their treatment during slavery, in addition to the murder, torture and oppression of African-Americans.” (Plous & Williams,1995).

Anti-Black racist stereotypes often took on specific gendered codes. “There were four female African-American stereotypes, ‘The Mammy, Aunt Jemimah, Sapphire, and Jezebel’.” (Plous & Williams, 1995). The Mammy, Aunt Jemimah, Sapphire stereotypes which were portrayed throughout this time period and each of them were that of women that were dark skinned. The Mammy stereotype was that “of a large, independent woman with pitch-black skin and shining white teeth. She lived to serve her master and mistress, this image of the Mammy as the controller of the African-American male was used as further evidence of his inferiority to whites” (Jewell, 1993). An example of this is the role of Mammy in “Gone with the Wind”, giving the stereotype a physical appearance and becoming a fixed stereotypes for Americans (Goings, 1994). Aunt Jemimah is another stereotype and it evolved out of the Mammy stereotype (Jewell, 1993). Aunt Jemimah was the stereotype that perpetuated domestic work, especially cooking. As a result, this stereotype made it into the kitchens of many Americans (Jewell, 1993). The most famous of this image was that on pancake mix boxes and pancake advertisements, which became a successes, and to this day her face can be found on pancake boxes, syrup jugs and more, making this stereotype last beyond centuries. (Jewell, 1993) Sapphire was another stereotype and demonstrated a character “as a bossy, headstrong woman who was engaged in an ongoing verbal battle with her husband, Kingfish” (Jewell, 1993). This stereotype started on the radio and continued in television and helped carry the television show through 4,000 episodes before “it was terminated due to its negative racial content” (Jewell, 1993).

Jezebel was the last of the stereotypes and it was the “image of the “bad Black girl” represented the racist exaggeration of the sexuality of African-American women”. (Jewell, 1993) “Jezebel was a light-skinned, slender Mulatto girl with long straight hair and small features.

She more closely represented the European ideal for beauty than any pre-existing images.

Jezebel served to absolve white males of responsibility in the sexual abuse and rape of African-American women. Black women in such cases were said to be ‘askin’ for it”. (Jewell, 1993)

The stereotypes today, although have changed since the time of slavery, still take on similar approaches to the ways they dehumanize Black people, especially women. For instance, stereotypes of Black people being represented as violent and lazy, among others, continue to dominate how Black people are portrayed in roles for cinema, television, and advertisements, in addition to other forms of media. The scariest thing about this is that it has a violent impact because it formulates how society discriminates against Black people. The anti-Blackness in television and film reinforce the way Black peoples’ existence is criminalized. Plous and Williams (1995) conducted their own survey to determine if there is an existence of stereotypes within society:

Findings revealed that 58.9 percent of black and white subjects endorsed at least one stereotypical difference in inborn ability. Additionally, whites are 10 times more likely to be seen as superior in artistic ability and abstract thinking ability; and African-Americans were 10 times more likely to be seen as superior in athletic ability and rhythmic ability. Further, 49 percent of subjects endorsed stereotypical differences in physical characteristics such as blacks experience less physical pain than whites and have thicker skulls and skin. Interestingly, African-Americans and those subjects without a high school degree were more likely than others to endorse racial stereotypes. (P.796)

Therefore, the representation of anti-Blackness in the media has real violent outcomes because it influences how people think, which can impact how people behave. If the media portrays violent opinions of Black people, then society will be more likely to believe violent opinions of Black people and act violently towards them.

Disability Representation and the Disease Model in Film

The medical field is also to blame for violence towards Black people, especially Black people. John Oliver, a British American comedian and television host, presented a segment regarding racial medical bias in the healthcare system. In it comedian Wanda Sykes, who is a Black woman, discusses how medical bias has negatively impacted her. She states:

Because of racism, black people, we don't get our hands on opioids. They don't even give it to us. White people get opioids like they're tic-tacs. It amazes me how many opioids you have. I had a double mastectomy. You know what they sent my black ass home with. Ibu-fucking-profin. (HBO, 2019)

It is outrageous that Black people, and People of Colour have different experiences of the healthcare system, and that women are more likely to experience poor treatment and medical neglect. This is an example of structural violence because it is not one doctor to blame, but the entire medical field. The perpetuation of misinformation on Black patients that were stated by comedian Wanda Sykes have been used to promote the stereotypes within the media regarding Black people, especially women. Most obviously is the perpetuation of the stereotype that Black people are criminals, and therefore Blackness becomes criminalized. This is an example of racist dehumanization. A study on this issue was done in 2016, that states:

Some doctors do believe there are biological differences between black and white. 25% of medical residents believed blacks' skin is thicker than whites. 14% of second year med students agreed that black people's nerve endings are less sensitive than whites and 17% of black people's blood coagulates more quickly than whites (Hoffman, Trawalter, Axt & Oliver, 2016).

This in addition has continued the stereotype about African-American and how they are portrayed in the media, especially when it comes to character representation.

Table 10
Number of Shows Without Any Black or Asian Speaking Characters by Media Platform

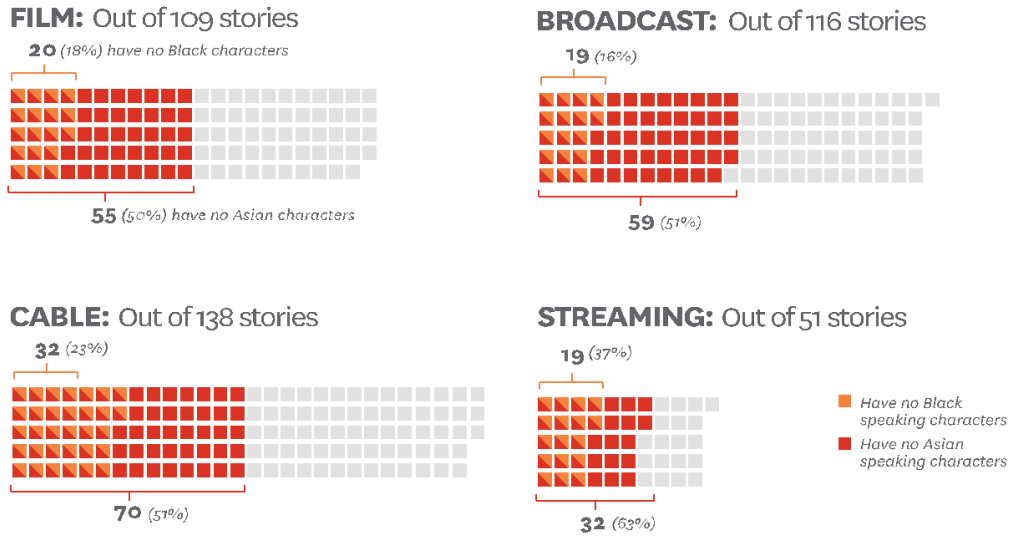


Table 10: taken from “Inclusion or Invisibility: Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment”. This table represents the number of shows without any Black or Asian speaking characters by media platform, even in terms of statistics it is made obvious that there is a lack of representation of racialized people in the media (Smith, Choueti, & Pieper, 2016). Then when we try to find positive depictions of racialized people, who are also people with disabilities, or who are not men, the numbers become smaller and smaller.

Gender, Race and Disability Representation in Today’s Media

As previously mentioned, there has been much advancement within the world of film on the subject of race and disability. The documentary, “It’s Not Yet Dark” discusses a white man with Motor Neuron Disease (MND) his name was Simon Fitzmaurice and he was a director from Ireland, with the hopes of making his first feature length film. He passed away in October of 2017, but his feature length film was created in 2015 (O’Brien, 2017). The documentary goes through the hardships he had faced while living with the disease, anywhere from his daily life situations to issues he had faced while making the film. His film that he directed, while the

documentary was being made is called “My Name Is Emily” (Brady, 2016). The main actor is Evanna Lynch, the actor that played Luna Lovegood in the Harry Potter series (she compares this role similar to her role as Luna Lovegood). Her character has depression and follows her as she tries to make sense of what happened to her father, who is in a psychiatric institution (Brady, 2016). Evanna Lynch before being an actor was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and was in and out of treatment throughout the two years after being diagnosed (Brady, 2016). Evanna Lynch is an example of someone with a disability playing a role of a disabled person, which highlights advancement on inclusivity in Hollywood.

The majority of people with disabilities in the media are there for medical documentaries. For example, “The Girl Whose Muscles Are Turning Into Bones” is one of them. This documentary is about a seven year old girl who lives out in Bolton, England, named Luciana Wulkan (Barcroft Docs, 2005). She has Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva (FOP), which is an extremely rare genetic condition. FOP is a degenerative disease that slowly paralyses the body and locks it into place. A gene triggers muscles, tendons, ligaments and other connective tissues to turn into bone causing extreme pain and immobility throughout one’s life (Barcroft Docs, 2005). As stated, it is most common that disabled actors are in documentaries about themselves regarding their own medical issues and/or medical diseases.

However, disabled characters are still predominantly portrayed as white, without any representation of People of Colour. People of Colour with disabilities, although are now shown more commonly, are still often very much lacking in the media. For example, when was the last time there was a movie done starring a Black person who is a wheelchair user? It is very difficult to find examples of People of Colour with physical disabilities, let alone any disabilities, represented in the media.

There has been television shows such as “NCIS: New Orleans” to have a Person of Colour who is a wheelchair user, as actor Daryl Mitchell (Ganger, 2019). Daryl Mitchell’s character, Patton Plame is one of the major characters on “NCIS: New Orleans”. His character is a computer specialist and is one of the main characters in the storyline as well (CBS, 2020). Having someone of Colour and disabled as one of the major storylines of the show is key to racial and disability justice.

Musicians however have always been open about drug and alcohol abuse, but having musicians especially People of Colour speak out about mental health disability, especially their own, is rare. Recently, American artist Kid Cudi, came out in terms of disability and stated how he had gone through depression and suicidal urges back in 2016 (Park, 2016). As an African American rapper, it was rare for people in his industry to talk about mental illness and having to check into rehab to get better. He came back two years later, to release his latest album and talk about how he has to take care of himself and his mental health going forward.

Alex. S. Porco’s work “Throw Yo’ Voice Out: Disability as a Desirable Practice in Hip Hop Vocal Performance”, describes Kanye West’s experience of temporary disability. Kanye West had a serious car accident that ended up having his jaw wired shut in order to fix his jaw, after two week after the accident he made a song called “Through the wire”, which documents his struggles with a temporary disability through how he sounded on the track (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017, P. 98). Which in disability and the media, the music video documents his mouth being wired shut while recording. The example of Kanye West highlighting how even a temporary disability is portrayed, is an important step for increasing representation of racialized people with disabilities.

This brings me to talk about how currently there has been disability activism interwoven in media representation of disabled People of Colour. For example, W. Kamau Bell in his television show “United Shades of America features Alice Wong, as a physically disabled Person of Colour (diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy). She stated on the subject of watching able-bodied people play people with disabilities in Hollywood that, “Because no typical disabled person lives in such a nice apartment (reference to the movie Bone Collector featuring Denzel Washington, who plays a disabled man).”⁹ As Alice had stated this is far from the truth again from Hollywood because “majority of disabled people live off of Medicaid in the United States, due to that it provides home and community based services to allow people with disabilities to stay alive.”¹⁰

As Alice Wong states in United Shades of America, “In front of the camera, there’s so many disabled characters played by non-disabled people. There are so many disabled artists and we have so many talents to share. And I think that to me is a huge loss. So, suck it Hollywood!”¹¹ Hollywood is known for using abled bodied people to play disabled roles, but this is also how abled bodied actors and actress get awards for their portrayals, such as Oscars and Golden Globes, like Holly Hunter in “The Piano”.

“Me Before You” is a prime example of an able-bodied person playing a person with a disability. The premise is a person becomes quadriplegic and ends up choosing assisted suicide because he believes he is living a half-life instead of a full life, therefore, the show is a negative portrayal of disability (New Line Cinema, 2016). It is also a prime example of the pity trope. This character falls in love, but still chooses to go through with his original idea of dying because he does not want to continue on the way he is living his life as disabled. This becomes a problem

⁹ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 5:40

¹⁰ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York.. 5:55

¹¹ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York.. 8:27

for multiple reasons within disability as being normalized in culture, especially “The idea of that you are disabled you have no place in the culture, this is an idea that people with disabilities have continued to fight against.”¹² This portrayal of disability in “Me Before You” does not promote inclusion because it makes disability a thing to be pitied, and yet again with a white able-bodied male actor playing a disabled character, we see that there is no diversity either in the casting. Would a physically disabled character agree to play this role?

Jillian Mercado is a great example of someone in the media who is also an activist. She had gone to school to study fashion, however she ended up being a fashion model.¹³ She is a Women of Colour, of Latin American decent, and a wheelchair user. She is at the height of her career within the fashion modelling industry; she was the face of IMG, one of the biggest modelling agencies in the world.¹⁴ In addition, she was also a part of the modelling campaign for Beyonce’s fashion lines.¹⁵ She states:

I first thought I’d never wanted to be a model, if you don’t know something, if you can’t see it out, exactly. So I collected all the magazines, and Cosmogirl, Vogue, and in not one did I see, the person did not even have to be in a wheelchair, just had to have a visible physical disability. So I thought I was going to be an editor in a magazine. It took me maybe about five years, and then I landed my first gig as a model. I bump into the artistic director of Diesel. So I signed up, it was a street casting, and a couple of months later I got the email, you were chosen. That was my first modeling job, a worldwide campaign.¹⁶

Another person who has a disability and is signed with a modelling contract is Aaron Philip. Aaron Philip is a gender-non-conforming trans woman, with cerebral palsy (Holland, 2019). Aaron has been modelled for online retailer ASOS and also H&M (Holland, 2019). The eighteen year old has said that they are not an activist but has pushed barriers in order to get

¹² CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 16:46

¹³ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 17:00

¹⁴ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 17:19

¹⁵ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 17:25

¹⁶ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 17:31 – 18:36

where they are today (Holland, 2019). As a person that is a gender minority, they want to dispel the rumours regarding race and disability, that they could not to modelling. Yet, they are one of the most sought after models currently.

Proper representation of racialized people with disabilities in television and film is a constant struggle. CJ Jones is an example of someone who has struggled in order to get acting roles since the start of his career. As a Deaf person and also a Person of Colour, he has auditioned for roles, but has auditioned for many roles, but never been chosen for roles, until very recently. He started as a stand-up comic and finally had his breakthrough as in actor in 2017, in the movie “Baby Driver”.¹⁷ In his interview in *United Shades of America*, he stated:

Finding a job, working as an actor was very difficult and very challenging, but I never gave up. I moved to Los Angeles, started looking for work and then I thought to myself why don't I do one man comedy show, one man stand up shows. So I have been doing that for about 35 years all over the world. That was my bread and butter type of lifestyle being stand-up comedian. Of course Hollywood is not really ready so to speak having a deaf, black actor in a role. But I realized that many of those folks don't know about deaf black actors. I have gone to many, many auditions and tried my best and the response I got was “we love your work” but I still wouldn't get hired. It was a very, very difficult time for me.”¹⁸

A question the Mr. Kamau Bell asked CJ Jones, “I would have imagined you have auditioned for roles in movies and television and see them go to people who are not deaf, what is that like?”¹⁹ CJ Jones responded, “Of course, I was pissed off. You know, come on, not again. Why? Was it because it was easy to direct that after and not have to not pay for a sign language interpreter? Was that the issue? That's one of the biggest negatives in the industry. But after seeing “Baby driver” I'm sure people are now regretting and said, I should have hired him first.”²⁰

Mo Koshier is also a part of this interview and Kamal asks him if he had taken Deaf roles or asked to audition for certain roles even though he is a hearing person that can sign because he is a child of Deaf parents. His response was that “I have, I did a show on Showtime show “Shameless”. It was a really juicy role, it was a Deaf, crack-addicted, HIV positive, male

¹⁷ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of America*. New York, New York. 46:00

¹⁸ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of American*. New York, New York. United Shades of America. 47:53

¹⁹ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of American*. New York, New York. United Shades of America. 48:32

²⁰ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of American*. New York, New York. United Shades of America. 48:40

prostitute, in a wheelchair that smokes crack with Joan Cusack. I mean it's like a great role."²¹ "You know you imagine being a Deaf actor and you get one or two a year and everyone one of them is an inspirational Deaf guy you know for a Disney channel show or something, and then this juicy role comes in and I come in, take the role and bail. Yes I have done that."²² Mo Koshier takes the role of a Deaf actor as a hearing person playing the role of a Deaf character, this is a problem.

Another actor who has difficulty finding jobs within acting as a Person of Colour and a disabled actor, is Michael Anthony Spady. He was finally nominated for an NAACP award, the first time a Deaf African American was nominated in 2012, after his role in "The Hammer" (Secret Language TV, 2012). Spady states "That I am deaf and also a Black actor, that is even more of an obstacle of facing everyday for my career. You don't see many deaf actors out here in Hollywood right? That's why I am out here too, to push it. To open the door for more opportunities for them...to not give up there dreams." (Secret Language TV, 2012).

Alice Wong's blog "Disability Visibility Project" is a great example of the how people that identify as a minority race within the disability spectrum can voice their opinion. It is an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, amplifying disability media and culture. She had started the blog which has given rise to critical thinking and also minority voices. Guest essays on people with disabilities in the media, especially as of recent show just how far we are as a society to inclusion. In addition, it gives access to encourage people with disabilities to go to StoryCorps or their mobile app in order to record their oral history with the option of having them archived at the Library of Congress in the United States.²³ Oral histories are important to not only the history of the country but to show how marginalized people do live their lives. This allow people in the future to understand how disabled People of Colour have been treated and

²¹ CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of American*. New York, New York. United Shades of America. 49:20

²² CNN. (2018, May 20). The Disability Community. *United Shades of American*. New York, New York. 49:48

²³ Disability Visibility Project. About. (2020, February 22). Retrieved from <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/about/>

what can be changed for a more inclusive environment going forward, further developing the country to be diverse and inclusive.

Crystal R. Emery is one of the many women changing the field when it comes to disability and the media. She is a quadriplegic filmmaker who has made more than twenty plays, two film documentaries and her own non-profit company.²⁴ She has stated that “it’s even worse in Hollywood. What really frustrates me to no end [is] when I see women with fewer credentials, far less qualifications [and] less experience hired for jobs in the wake of the #MeToo movement that I can do in my sleep,” she stated this during a discussion panel in Southwest (Ford, 2018). A Maryland non-profit called RespectAbility which led the daylong conference titled “From Washington to Hollywood and Beyond: The Future of Americans with Disabilities.” (Ford, 2018). RespectAbility seeks to educate the public about how to advance opportunities and combat stigmas of those with disabilities (Ford, 2018).

The U.S. Census Bureau notes nearly 383,500 more people with disabilities found employment two years ago, compared to 87,200 the previous year, advocates said more work needs to be done. The talks at the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill not only focused on the lack of representation in film and other media, but also education, employment and advocacy in Washington. (Ford, 2018).

In an article that was posted in Time Magazine, Emery says “As a woman with a disability, I’m still considered invisible. As a black woman with a disability, despite a long and successful career in the creative arts, I’m not even considered.” (Emery, 2016) In addition, Emery stated that it is through the theory of intersectionality that she is different than what is normal in society. (Emery, 2016) It should be noted that within Hollywood and within media, that this theory is key into marginalized identities and why disabled People of Colour do not get roles that pertain to disability or is a disabled character.

²⁴ Emery, Crystal. About. (2020, February 17). Retrieved from <https://www.urutherrighttobe.org/about>

“Kimberle Crenshaw, a civil-rights advocate and law professor known for her work on critical race theory and the development of intersectional theory, has described a legal framework that defines black women as a crash. Our existence at the intersection of two marginalized identities—being both female and African American—may lead the world to view us as still less than one, our identities the sum of two societal “negatives” in conflict with the dominant cultural norms. As an African American female with a disability, a wheelchair-riding quadriplegic, I exist as a triple threat to our society’s normative conceptions (white, male, able-bodied).” (Emery, 2016)

Continued in the article, Emery discusses that the work she produces “affects policies and belief systems, while it encourages other to allow their light to shine”. (Emery, 2016) However, and this is not only her issue but multiple people feel challenged about the authorship of their work, As she states, “ “Did someone else make the film for you?” “Did someone else write the article?” “Did someone else write the novel?” The physical picture of me does not match the preconceived notion of what someone who looks like me is capable of producing.” (Emery, 2016) This is not only an issue of disability, but that of a gender and race also.

Maysoon Zayid is one of the most recent examples of people who are disabled and Woman of Colour. In an article written on the Medium by Brianne Amira, Zayid as a Palestinian, born with cerebral palsy, and as she grew up she attended Arizona State University for theatre (Amira, 2019).

Where she majored in theatre, and even though her teachers were highly impressed by her acting abilities, she was never cast in an major school productions. Maysoon found not only her disability, but also her ethnicity (Palestinian descent) limited her in many ways – and, after numerous attempts at delving into the acting world, she instead turn to comedy, appearing in many famous New York clubs including Gotham and Caroline’s. (Amira, 2019).

But it was because of her stand up that she continued to fight for acting roles. She most recently got a short role in the long running series Grey’s Anatomy. For People of Colour and have a disability this is a huge step in a right direction, however her role is short lived, it’s not to say that in the future she could return. “Musical Chairs” is an example of a movie featuring

people with physical disabilities learning ballroom dancing in order to win a competition with their partners being able bodied (HBO, 2011). This movie hosts a lot of diversity, some of the actors, even though they have other disabilities are shown in this movie to have a physical disability, like Laverne Cox, which is untrue in her real life (HBO, 2011). The film does represent people who are disabled and are Women of Colour but not in leading roles. For instance, Laverne Cox is a Black trans woman actor and activist (HBO, 2011) As a Black trans woman and activist in the LGBTQ+ movement, Laverne has been a pioneer in the media, however still does not have any place taking a role from someone who is disabled that would be a better fit this role. Although, Laverne Cox, is a Black trans woman, who needs to be on television and film, along with more trans women of Colour, she cannot be taking the roles of other marginalized people, such as people with disabilities. Putting marginalized people against other marginalized people for the same role, is unjust.

“Push Girls” is a reality documentary television series that started back in 2012 and last two series (SundanceTV, 2013). There were only two People of Colour that were on the show. It stars Auti Angel, who was also in the movie “Musical Chairs”. “Push Girls” chronicled the lives of four women who are paralyzed by illness or accident and displays their challenges day-to-day (SundanceTV, 2013). The women, are played by actors, Angela Rockwood, Tiphany Adams, and Mia Schaikewitz. Chelsie Hill, and Auti Angel had two seasons of this show, with a grand total of 24 episodes for both seasons (SundanceTV, 2013). The series is set in Los Angeles, and promotes a real look at disability, not only the factors that disabled people face regularly such as barriers to accessibility, but also as women who deal with sexism (SundanceTV, 2013). This was one of the first televisions to provide a different lens on disability and a different outlook regarding women with disabilities. Both Auti and Angela are disabled on the television series,

which provides a different perspective on that has not been shown on a reality and documentary television series.

Terry Crews is another actor that continues to fight his addictions. Due to the “me too” movement, Crews shared his story of what happened to him in Hollywood, about how a high-powered executive had groped him (SundanceTV, 2013). As he tweeted, “This whole thing with Harvey Weinstein situation is giving me PTSD.”²⁵ In addition, Terry had a serious issue with depression, which almost ruined him, his profession and his personal life. He ended up going to rehab for this situation, and seeking help (Griggs, 2016). Men of Colour are rarely spoken of when it comes to disabilities, and to even talk about mental illness or their mental health, there is a great stigma.

Trevor Noah is known for taking over The Daily Show after Jon Stewart, but his battle with depression come to light as he had given interviews about his depression and how it had affected him. He is one of few Men of Colour to talk about their mental illness openly with the public. There is a great stigma regarding People of Colour, especially Men of Colour, that they are not to be vulnerable and are not supposed to discuss their feelings in the public, which extends to mental illness. “Stigma in men’s depression and suicide can restrict help-seeking, reduce treatment compliance and deter individuals from confiding in friends and family” (Olfiffe *et al*, 2016).

In addition, a study found that “participants conveyed feeling judged as a major impediment to seeking professional care for depression” (Kobau, DiIorio, Chapman & Delvecchio, 2009). This goes into the media because people do not want to go seek help. Like other problems with representation, Men of Colour are portrayed with mental illness like they could be unpredictable

²⁵ Twitter. (2017, October 10). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/terrycrews/status/917838446697226240?lang=en>

or dangerous to others. The criminalization of race and mental illness deters men from seeking treatment (Kobau, DiIorio, Chapman & Delvecchio, 2009). “Media portrayals of male depression that are not representative of the average man can also increase stigma” (Scholz, Crabb & Wittert, 2014). If there were more positive media portrayals of male depression, or that of mental illness, there would be less of a stigma regarding men and mental illness. In recent years, other famous celebrities have come out to talk about their own battles with mental illness, including People of Colour. This changes the narrative, as it allows People of Colour to share their experiences with mental illnesses without having a negative connotation attached to it. In addition, when famous celebrities talk about their mental illness, it helps to bring out the reality of mental illness, and that it can be talked about in society. In order to break stigmas regarding this topic, there “is a need for health messaging and programs to target men in gender-sensitive and specific ways. For example, the permission and affirmation of other men can garner sustainable change in men’s health and behaviour” (Olliffe, Bottorff & Sarbit, 2016). One way this can be done, that has been done previously, includes anti-stigma workshops, and includes what racial stereotypes further the stigma of mental illness in People of Colour. Therefore, racism and ableism hurt disabled People of Colour and negatively affects their mental health.

Disability Representation in Bollywood

In an article written by Abha Khetarpal, Khetarpal states that “Disability metaphors and analogies abound in our culture but disappointingly, Bollywood continues to shut out people with disabilities with blatant ableist dialogues and storylines, which objectify disabled bodies.” (Khetarpal, 2016). Khetarpal (2016) also uses an example in Bollywood, the movie, Housefull 3, as he states:

The portrayal of three non-disabled men, who pretend to be blind, deaf and a wheelchair user, as a ruse to get married to three rich girls pushes forth the idea that the disabled are

anomalous and they must either be pitied or laughed at. However, what was most upsetting was Jackie Shroff's portrayal of a father concerned about his daughter's dating men with disabilities, and his constant refrain about how he wants them to marry only 'normal boys'.

Not only is this stigmatizing to people with disabilities, it also has a negative effect on the major population. If they want someone that is normal for marrying their daughters and sons, where does that leave people with disabilities in India? As Khetarpal continues to discuss disabilities in Bollywood, she also talks about how it can change.

There are numerous Bollywood movies that have a disabled person in their storyline. Most famously "Margarita With a Straw", which is about a girl named Laila with cerebral palsy (Wolfe Video, 2016). She is a teenager who moves from New Delhi to Greenwich Village for a higher education, she befriends a Blind girl and the movie is about this experience. (Wolfe Video, 2016) The actress, Kalki Koechlin is a white Bollywood actress. Born from French parents who had moved to India, she was always bullied for her whiteness. (Wolfe Video, 2016) Again, we have a reoccurring theme; Kalki does not have Cerebral Palsy yet she plays a character with Cerebral Palsy (Wolfe Video, 2016). Another famous film in Bollywood is "Kaabil". Kaabil is about two Blind people that fell in love (FilmKraft Productions, 2017). This movie brings to light in addition to visually impaired people, the stark realism about a woman's safety in India (FilmKraft Productions, 2017). Even though this film brings about a very serious subject, women's safety and gendered violence, like rape in India, both the leading actor, Hrithik Roshan, and actress, Yami Gautam, are not Blind, which caused for some criticism when it came to their portrayal of Blind people (FilmKraft Productions, 2017). As there are numerous films that do have a disabled character in their storyline, such as "Black", "My Name is Khan", "Guzaarish", "Barfi", but there has been changes. "Yellow" is about a child with Down

Syndrome whose mother wants to raise her as a “normal” child.²⁶ The actor Gauri Gadgill, who plays the child does have Downs Syndrome, and is not acting out the experience of a disabled person. The film is based upon her life and her upbringing, which not only changes the narrative of disabled characters in Bollywood films, but also changes expectations on who are in them and who acts in disabled roles.

However there have been movies that use disability as a narrative for comic relief. Examples include, “Mujhse Shaadi Karogi”, “Tom, Dick and Harry”, “Krazzy 4”, “Housefull 3”, in addition to the “Golmaal” series. Each of these movies mocked or made fun of the characters with disabilities. In the “Gomaal” series, Tusshar Kapoor’s character has a speech disability that is mocked and there are two characters that are an older Blind couple in the film. This film had many jokes mocking the characters of their disability (Singh, 2017). In “Housefull 3”, the three main characters, played by abled bodied actors, pretend to be blind, deaf and physically disabled in order to woo three women and marry them (Singh, 2017). It was their idea to portray disabled people to get women to like them is extremely demeaning for people with disabilities, and the jokes regarding wheelchair users are horrific (Singh, 2017). This movie sends the message that is okay to openly mock people with disabilities and if people with disabilities want to lead a normal life, there is no normal life for them. In “Krazzy 4”, each of the main characters are diagnosed with mental illness. From Obsessive-Compulsive personality disorder, schizophrenia, to selective mutism, each character is made to look silly within the film (Singh, 2017). Therefore, allowing the viewer to come to the conclusion that mental illness is not important, or real, and it is something to be mocked.

²⁶ Khanna, Cheena. “Marathi film ‘Yellow’ kickstarts film festival for disabled”. (2015, December 2). Retrieved from <https://www.bollywoodbubble.com/bollywood-news/marathi-film-yellow-kickstarts-film-festival-for-disabled/>

These films allow the stereotypes about disability to be promoted while making fun of the disability community. There is still a stigma regarding international films and the way disability is portrayed in film when it comes to the international community. This needs to change. In all film, the opportunity to exploit people with disabilities and/or use the opportunity to use disability as a comic relief in a negative light is not only disrespectful but also hinders the disability movement's fight for justice and equality.

Disability and Athletes in the Media

Now I cannot discuss People of Colour with disabilities, without discussing athletes, sport and the Olympics. Mental illness, physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities have played significance when it comes to sports. Most recently in the National Basketball Association (NBA) a current player, DeMar DeRozan publicly stated that he has depression, in 2018 (NBA, 2018). As an African-American growing up in one of the most impoverished cities in America, Compton, California, (NBA, 2018) having a mental illness is not easy, and brave to admit. As someone that is in the public eye, and as the Toronto Raptors had their historic win to become the National Basketball Association the season after Mr. DeRozan was traded to the San Antonio Spurs (NBA, 2018), in 2019, players in the professional league tend to be more scrutinized than others. When DeRozen had used Twitter to state what was on his mind "This depression get the best me", and since then has been a voice for the players to talk about their own mental health. (NBA, 2018) He stated that, "We all go through it" and ended up doing a public service announcement with the NBA alongside other players to highlight mental health (Ewing, 2018). Ron Artest was one the first NBA players to come out and talk about his mental health (Powell, 2018). He has since changed his name to Metta World Peace, but as an NBA player, he would be violent. Including, having a brawl with a fan that landed him a fifty-five

game suspension, close to a five million dollar fine and a reputation as a head case (Associated Press, 2004). He was later diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Powell, 2018). He openly thanked his psychotherapist after winning the NBA championship with helping him through his struggles (Smith, 2010). He had even sold his NBA championship ring in order to fund mental health programs in his community.

The Paralympic Games are the Olympic games for athletes with various disabilities. The wide range of disabilities include, impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, hypertonia, ataxia, vision impairment, intellectual impairment, among many others (Thompson, 2016). In an interview with Vilissa Thompson of Mediadiversified.org, she discusses the expenses that can arise out of sports, especially ones that requires assistance with motion, such as wheelchair basketball. Matt Scott is one of those athletes, born unable to walk, he is a gold medalist wheelchair basketball player during the Paralympic games in 2016 and a bronze medalist in 2012 games (Thompson, 2016). Wheelchairs start out at 2500 – 3000 USD for the basic models and in what most athletes of wheelchair basketball may need the price can go up to 5000 to 7500 USD, which was stated in the New York Times (Thompson, 2016). Not many low-income families can afford buying a wheelchair for sport, and are forced to purchase a standard wheelchair. Some few athletes are sponsored and therefore they do not have to pay for their wheelchairs and other add-ons for the sport they play. Majority of the athletes rely on donations from family members and the public in order for them to play in the Paralympics (Thompson, 2016).

When it comes to the Paralympics, it is the journey of people with disabilities, and how they are portrayed in the media that can cause major issues. As soon as the Paralympics games come on, Paralympic athletes are shown in a different light, it is shown to us by how we should

pity them and how these athletes are portrayed as heroes, and as inspiration porn, just because they are disabled people. Inspiration porn as comes in a variety of disability media. Inspiration porn is defined, as the following, “Inspiration porn is an image of a person with a disability, often a kid, doing something completely ordinary – like playing, or talking, or running – carrying a caption like ‘your excuse is invalid’... It’s there so that non-disabled people can put their worries into perspective...It’s there so that non-disabled people can look at us and think ‘Well, it could be worse...I could be that person.’²⁷ This term is coined by the late disability rights activist and comedienne, Stella Young in 2012.²⁸

Disability in Print Media

There are a handful of authors of Colour that have written about their disability. One of those authors are Samantha Irby. Her work and poetic essays have given voice a new meaning. Not only does she say it like it is, her opinion on certain subjects is truly enlightening. Her written work consists of not only books but of her blog as well. Her blog, “Bitches Gotta Eat” and her book “We Are Never Meeting In Real Life”, “New Year, Same Trash” and “Meaty”, both discuss disability and how being a person of colour impacts her life, for example the “what do I have to say to a cop” to her most recent post “things I’ve accidentally peed a little bit.” (Irby, 2019). Her latest book will be published in March 2020, called “Wow, No Thank you.” (Irby, 2020). This book continues with her hilarious previous topics while discussing what it is like to be forty and feeling increasingly uncomfortable in her own skin.

²⁷ Lutz, A. S. F. (2016, October 19). Bring on the "Inspiration Porn". Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/inspectrum/201610/bring-the-inspiration-porn>

²⁸ TED Foundation. (2014, June 9). *I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much: Stella Young* [Video]. 2:37-4:31

Imani Barbarin is a well-known figure in the blogger realm. Her website “Crutches and Spice” as well as her twitter page, contains well thought out pieces and some issues that can come to light through being a disabled Women of Colour, as she has stated she “writes from the perspective of a Black woman with cerebral palsy.”²⁹ Her posts about being disabled and a Person of Colour highlights this experience and also gives a perspective that we do not often hear in the present due to the lack of mainstream media giving marginalized people a platform, and in conjunction their opinions. In one of her most recent posts how “White Fragility Makes Calls for True Disability Inclusion Ring Hollow”, she discusses how “Black, Indigenous, and disabled People of Colour experience the world at the intersection of racism and ableism, and no matter how uncomfortable it is to hear, we as a community must listen to and validate those experiences.”³⁰ These are voices that need to be amplified and more space has to be created to give disabled People of Colour a platform.

Disability in Visual Media

In “Disability In the Media” by Tracey R. Worrell, “The Images of Disability in Fictional Media”, Worrell states that “Through examining previous work and combining a bit from Nelson it seems that the majority of characters with disability falls into one of four categories; the victim, the hero, the villain and the fool.” (Worrell, 2018, P. 5). Worrell discusses the different categories in detail, from the victim, and using disabled people to play the victim, such as in the television series *Law and Order*, to other crime scene shows. An example of this is *Law and Order: SVU* (Special Victims Unit), the episode called “Disabled”. In this episode, there is a gender based violence victim, an Black woman whose is disabled, she has multiple sclerosis, is

²⁹ Barbarin, I. (2020). Crutches and Spice [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://crutchesandspice.com/>

³⁰ Barbarin, I. (2020, February 6). White Fragility Makes Calls for True Disability Inclusion Ring Hollow [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://crutchesandspice.com/2020/02/06/white-fragility-makes-calls-for-true-disability-inclusion-ring-hollow/>

quadriplegic and cannot talk. Her name is Cara and she is raped and abused (due to the fact she cannot talk and therefore cannot give consent to have sex). (NBC, 2010) She can communicate by blinking and throughout the episode, she is seen as the victim along with other disabled women who were raped by the same man. (NBC, 2010) In this episode, her own sister who was her primary caregiver also abused Cara. Cara's sister was taking her money, and also physically abusing her, as Cara was a successful Opera singer before her diagnosis and had an income. (NBC, 2010) In the end of the episode, Cara has to testify against her rapist and has to point to her attacker (a white man), making her feel as though she is victim all over again if she cannot raise her finger to point to her attacker. (NBC, 2010) The actor that plays Cara is not disabled, actress Lisa Arrindell Anderson, however being an African-American women is key as a minority, as there is a lack of representation of race in media. This does not however let the casting director off the hook because they could have brought someone in who was disabled and a Women of Colour to play the role, in addition to that she is playing a victim.

Just like how individuals with disabilities, or abilities are regarded as “Uniformly positive in nature” (Worrell, 2018, P. 5) and well known characters such as Daredevil, Professor X, while others can be seen as a bad guy or villain. (Worrell, 2018, P. 5) Which brings me to the next topic that Worrell (2018) explains, some disabled characters have been created as a villain character such as Captain Hook and Darth Vader. (P. 6) “Characters with disabilities were seen as criminals, violent, cruel, dangerous individuals that should be marginalized by society.” (Worrell, 2018, P. 6) Worrell states that self-reports of inmates, that in “the number of people incarcerated with a disability is higher than the general population with inmates in prison” (Worrell, 2018, P. 6) Finally, the last topic regarding individuals with disabilities is “the fool”.

Worrell uses the example of the movie “Dumb and Dumber” but this identity is linked to people with intellectual disability. (Worrell, 2018, P. 26)

In addition, Worrell discusses the different images of disability, from physical, Deaf/Hard of hearing and that of cognitive disabilities and their portrayal in the media. For example, how the television-series “Ironside” is portrayed in films and television (Worrell, 2018, P. 26). Blair Underwood’s character, a Black disabled superhero (as Blair Underwood is not disabled but plays a disabled character), the characters review in the New York Times article stated “Disabled, but still dangerous”, as Worrell argues that the review highlights the character’s strength. (Worrell, 2018, P. 27) A stereotype of Black people, as I have stated above. “The article also highlights the active nature of the character by reporting on his physical strength and when Ironside beats a suspect for information.” (Worrell, 2018, P. 27)

Both Guy Cumberbatch and Ralph Negrine state in “Images of Disability on Television” although this book was published in 1992, it brings to light that there were television programs and television series that did portray people with disabilities. British soap operas or dramas, Australian dramas, other situation comedians and films in regards to characters having disabilities and how their character progressed throughout the show. Which in majority of cases “most of the characterizations reverting to a stereotype about people with disabilities.” (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, P. 61). In addition, they compare the treatment of disabled and abled bodied characters in fictional programming, and how the representation of disability in UK and US dramas differ (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, P. 62-73). They touch upon the employment of disabled actors and the responses to the portrayal of disability on television (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, P. 62-73). Such stereotypes include, “the disabled as monsters, disability as compensation or the idea of substitute gift, and disability and sexuality: as sexual

menace, deviancy and danger” (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, P. 90). Cumberbatch and Negrine demand positive imagery, while they talk about people with disabilities, they bring up the correlation that attitudes towards disabled people is similar to the treatment of Black people when it comes to mass media and the stereotypes regarding casting marginalized people (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, P. 102). Therefore, this positive imagery also comes into effect with disabled people who are racialized, such as Black stereotypes and/or Asian stereotypes at the intersection of race and ableism. Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992) state, “that it would be necessary to break with convention and write main characters as a character with a disability, as in Ironside. But the disability should not be as a primary focus or as a dramatic device, similar to the portrayal of Blacks” (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, P. 129). With this notion Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992), explain a much needed point that especially with a disabled People of Colour. Disability should not be the main focus, however especially with People of Colour both stereotypes and their disability should not be the characters main focus, it should be on the role that was created for them that should be believable and not merely a stereotype.

Disability in Disney and Netflix

I will be looking at multiple Netflix shows, to talk more about the lack of People of Colour with disabilities in the media. I will also explore how People of Colour with different (dis)abilities are represented in Marvel universe. Within the Marvel Universe (which was bought by Disney in 2009), I will be looking at the Netflix series and a film, Luke Cage, Elektra, and the characters within the series that have special abilities. I will also be looking the portrayals of “abilities” and race within the accredited film Black Panther.

Walt Disney and Disney Studios have done increasing well with the changes over time, regarding disability and hiring actors as soon as they bought the Star Wars and Marvel Universe

over. Walt Disney initially back in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's right up to the 1990's were severely ablest. It took a handful of artists and graphic designers to bring out something like Luke Cage, but still, actors are mostly able bodied. Luke Cage is about a Black man working in a barbershop who has super strength, incredible abilities to heal from injuries almost immediately, in addition to other super abilities (such as being unbreakable). Unlike his counterpart, Jessica Jones (an American, white woman with PTSD, in addition to also having super-abilities), Luke Cage has a lot of Black stereotypes. Yet, it is also a fresh take on People of Colour within the Marvel Universe, since there has not been a lot of racialized people in the Marvel universe.

The story of Luke Cage is that he is a former inmate, working multiple low end jobs within his community in Hells Kitchen, New York. As his nickname from the first opening episode in season one, "Mr. Bulletproof" from the barbershop's owner suggest that, he cannot be harmed (Netflix, 2018). The nickname also comes from the racist stereotype that Black people have tougher skin and can be worked harder, something that came out of the American slavery era and is still used today as a justification of slavery in America. As again, stated in the first episode Luke describes how he had gotten his powers, he says, "I was framed, beaten and put in some tank. Like an exotic fish, came out with abilities." "Saved your life" "More like ruined it" (Netflix, 2018). This conversation between Pop (the owner of the barber shop) and Luke Cage, explain that having super abilities as a Black person is a hinderance and that it ruined his life, as everyone is looking for him to save the city as opposed to just be an average citizen. As the racial slogan goes "If it's black it don't crack", while Luke is continuously shot with bullets throughout the city in both season it goes back to the original point that black people have tougher skin and can survive tougher conditions.

Luke represents another factor in America. The issue of higher proportional Men of Colour, especially Black men being criminalized and being in jail. Statistically, African-American men are more likely to be incarcerated than any other American men.³¹ As Luke had stated earlier he was framed, this is also the case that Black men are suspected of a crime and jailed for that crime as opposed to other People of Colour and white people.

In the ending of the first episode, Luke Cage is offered a position after his abilities are shown, to the owners of the restaurant he currently lives above. Due to the threat of neighbourhood violence and issues tied to corruption this is exploitation of his abilities, he defends himself saying he is not for hire (Netflix, 2018). However, this goes back to the narrative that Black people with “abilities” are for hire and can be exploited against.

Misty Knight is another character that appears in Luke Cage, but is throughout the Marvel universe in Netflix. She is the detective of the 29th precinct in Harlem and is an able bodied character in the beginning (Netflix, 2018). However, in the final episode of the season she gets shot in the arm (Netflix, 2018). At the start of the second season, Misty is shown working without an arm and going to therapy, adjusting to life without an arm. With the help and advice of another character, Misty is customer fitted with a new “bionic” arm from Rand enterprises (Another cross-over, as Rand enterprises is from the Netflix/marvel series Iron Fist) (Netflix, 2018). Her portrayal a Black woman with a disability, to start out the second season, is quite astounding. However, her storyline is too common. When someone has a disability, especially a Person of Colour, the original establishment does not want them working. In this case her department had given her retirement with an early pension (75% of her pension and not taxed) (Netflix, 2018). However, she continued to work and on returning to work faced hostility, as

³¹ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, (NAACP 2020).

well as pity. With her co-workers not only taunting her and looking at her, in episode two of the second season she states, “Everybody take a good look, I lost an arm. This is who I am now. Now it doesn’t mean I need your pity, or your jokes, or you staring at me while I’m trying to do my god damn job. Take a good look....we good? Let’s go back to work.” (Netflix, 2018). The notion of a freak or a person that racialized with a disability, is put on display and people gawk at them. Similar to that of a freak show audience, and the spectacle of disability, but in this case, it is her own coworkers. If Misty was able bodied no one would look at her as though she is a freak, however because she has lost part of a limb, her own coworkers look at her like a freak.

Bushmaster is another character with super abilities, but his character is far more sinister. He is a supervillain in the marvel series, Luke Cage. His abilities include the unbreakable skin, not to the same extent as Luke Cage, but is able to expel bullets from his body, with minimal damage, which goes back to the stereotype of Black skin and stereotypes of medical science. However, Bushmaster increases his power using a herb called Nightshade (Netflix, 2018). Bushmaster also gains immense strength and agility. He also casts the negative stereotype regarding criminalization of African-Americans and violence. Because he is seeking revenge, Bushmaster retaliates using violence, which relates to the stereotype of “the savage”. The negative stereotype associated with Bushmaster and his abilities continue to perpetuate the stereotype of African-American men.

In Black Panther, the movie starts out about the five African tribes and the war over a meteorite containing the metal “vibranium” (Coogler *et al*, 2018). One warrior ingests a “heart-shaped herb” that was affected by the metal and the person gains superhuman abilities, which enables the first “Black Panther” (Coogler *et al*, 2018). The story line continues as he unites all of the tribe except the Jabari Tribe to form the nation of Wakanda (Coogler *et al*, 2018). As to

the rest of the world, they seem as a third world country, but in the exact opposite way, they have far more advanced technology. Later in the movie, there are many depictions of Black empowerment regarding enhanced abilities and the abilities of Black Panther. This is one of the films that have done super abilities correctly, even though Black Panther was first published as a comic book character during the 1960's. Consuming the heart shaped herb, grants the Black Panther the knowledge of every Black Panther previously in power, in addition to superhuman acute senses, enhanced strength, stamina, healing, reflexes among others abilities (Coogler *et al*, 2018). In addition, the Black Panther is trained in hand-to-hand combat, making any addition enhanced power further be powerful beyond any other person from Wakanda (Coogler *et al*, 2018). However, in print media, the Black Panther is granted, "The King of The Dead", and can visit the Wakandan city of the Dead, therefore communicating with his ancestors (Coogler *et al*, 2018). When this character was created, Black stereotypes were rampant throughout Hollywood. This was one of the first Black superheroes, having been debuted before any of the other mainstream Black superheroes.

In a research project done by the Ford Foundation, called the "Road Map for Inclusion, Changing the Face of Disability in Media", by Judith E. Heumann with Katherine Salinas and Michelle Hess (2019), they discuss what is wrong with media representation of disability. As stated, "far fewer than 25 percent of characters in the media today are depicted with a disability - and those who are, most often are not portrayed by a disabled actor." (Ford Foundation & Heumann, 2019, P.2). The paper discusses the stereotypical portrayals of disability, the super crip, the villain, the victim and the innocent fool. (Ford Foundation & Heumann, 2019, P.3-4). These are often negative stereotypes of people with disabilities. The paper further diverges into how lessons learned from other marginalized groups and how they have organized can help

the underrepresentation and stereotyped representation in the media regarding disabled bodies. This includes “social advocacy and investing in resources into creating new work, especially for public broadcasting for the Centre for Asian American Media” (Ford Foundation & Heumann, 2019, P.5). Additionally, GLAAD, the voice for LGBTQI acceptance, is another organization that has helped change the narrative regarding LGBTQI representation in the media. This included “helping media outlets tell the story of LGBTQI people in a way that is fair, accurate and inclusive”. (Ford Foundation & Heumann, 2019, P.5). These The paper discuss how the BBC and Chanel 4 out in the United Kingdom, have changed to get disability to become more integrated into television. This includes policies to include for diversity in the workplace, hiring more disabled people for roles on television, more disability content on television, and discussing about disability outside of the Para-Olympics games (Ford Foundation & Heumann, 2019, P.7).

In the book, “Libre Acceso: Latin American Literature and Film through Disability Studies”, there are numerous examples of disabled film and written work that have been discussed. Ryan Prout (2015) discusses the film “Las Buenas Hierbas” (The Good Herbs), and the change of narrative for an elderly patient with Alzheimers. He says, “Novaro does not theorize the difference between medical and social models of disability in her film.” (P.97). As Prout discusses further, “In seeing how the film fits into a specifically Mexican discourse of disability, indigeneity, and femininity...” (Prout, 2015, P.97). Within the film, it sheds light to how different cultures react to disability and illness, and as a marginalized person how important it is to respect other traditions regarding disability. The next chapter in Libre Acceso, “Crippling the Camera”, Susan Anteri explains a classic novel, “Pedro Paramo”, and “Japan”, a feature film by Carlos Reygadas. She says, “My purpose, then, in approaching this film, is to explore the

overlaps or thresholds between disability representation and personal identification via embodiment as lived, sensorial experience.” (Antebi, 2015, P. 117). Anteri also states that that the film might contribute “to a boarder discussion of disability in its colonialist contexts- made evident through the camera’s and the view’s allegorical descent into a “primitive” world.” (Antebi, 2015, P. 117). Anteri uses multiple theorists to discuss how race, disability are “mutually constitutive of one another”, and that through colonialism and capitalism how the idea of race is a “structure used to impose hierarchies between human groups, and the control of labour, resources, and capital.” (Antebi, 2015, P. 117). Anteri argues that within the film, the main character who has a limp and also ailing hands “the representation of radical disability, therefore, leads to the implied message that, considering the purportedly unfortunate fate of someone with such a disability, other should be happy they are relatively able bodied, and therefore should not take their own lives.” (Antebi, 2015, P. 117). It is known within disability in film, that disabled characters take their own life, which make them continued to be seen as hopeless and pitied. This narrative needs to change. The film “Japan” had Alejandro Ferretis as the main character. Alejandro, who passed away in 2004, had polio as a child and so he had used a cane to help him with walking, therefore changing the idea that disabled people can play leads in film.³² He had difficulty to find film work before “Japan”, and it was this film that gave him his break, however he died shortly after. Finally, the documentary *Estamira*, is a film about a woman who is homeless and that had schizophrenia, and changes the narrative about documentaries about disabled people. As this was not a medical documentary, *Estamira* “address that issue of mental illness in Brazilian society.” (Gavioli, 2015, P.215). As stated before, most disability documentaries talk about the medical aspect and become very disease model. This

³² Bensinger, K. (2004, April 20). Alejandro Ferretis Elizondo. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2004/scene/people-news/alejandro-ferretis-elizondo-1117903546/>

documentary is a social documentary to bring attention to the conditions experienced by people with mental disabilities, which is again a change in narrative to the disease model and medical documentary style.

In the Routledge Collection, Ella Houston discussed Jillian Mercado. As I have spoken about her before, as a woman and a person of colour with a disability it is a change in the narrative. Houston interviewed women with mobility aids and they “unanimously agreed that the relaxed and everyday aspect of the advertisement and Mercado’s appearance was something they could relate to”, regarding Mercado’s Nordstrom advertisement. (Houston, 2019, P. 76) In Beth Haller’s (2019) chapter regarding the authentic disability representation on television past and present, the notion that white disabled characters should be played by white disabled actors has changed the narrative for hiring people with disabilities and how they are portrayed (white, middle or upper class). (P.121) As in Patricia Almeida’s chapter “using a Telenovela to Promote the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Brazil”, an advertisement regarding children with down syndrome to help promote a positive image of what down syndrome looks like and that other children need help. Prejudgement is the worst syndrome (Almeida, 2019, P. 254). This is promoting a positive role of disability while using people that have disabilities to be pitied. Although it is for only an advertisement, and not a feature length film, it shows that society is moving towards an inclusive environment, and seeing disabled people on screen, especially People of Colour in a positive light.

“37 Seconds” is a film from Japan, and it should be noted that it is changing the way people perceive Cerebral Palsy. This ground-breaking film, which just came out in 2019, offers a rare insight into the world of a young Japanese woman with cerebral palsy (Hikari Films, 2019). The lead actor, Mei Kayama has the disorder, and as previously mentioned there are very few

international actors with disability playing lead characters (Hikari Films, 2019). As the film is about a manga artist named Yuma (Mei), who lives at home with a protective mother, however she wants more (Hikari Films, 2019). As this film is deterring from the regular narrative of putting the disability first, it allows the viewer to see a women who is more than her disability. “Yuma is a wildly creative, sexual person who deserves more than her society often gives her.”³³

On the flipside, the Netflix show “Special” (2019) is about Ryan O’Connell life (Netflix 2019). Ryan is a disabled writer, actor, director, LGBTQ activist and disability advocate. His series in each episode talks about how he hid his disability, Cerebral Palsy, from his coworkers and eventually comes out with the truth (Netflix, 2019). Each episode is how he deals with his day-to-day life of being disabled and wanting to live on his own. In one of the episodes, Ryan’s coworkers assume that his “disability” was due to a car accident, not that he is diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. Since Ryan is a gay, white and disabled man, he is treated with a different reaction from his coworkers and boss. He has an internship with a writer for a blog, and how his coworkers react to him being “disabled”, including his boss is a negative ideology towards people with disability.³⁴ Once his boss finds out he was hit by a car and assumes that is what caused “his issues”, she changes her tone and apologizes, but becomes condescending. Unlike the rest of the colleagues, she continues to act as a mean boss. Coworkers are nice to him, people will go out with him because they are sorry, and he has sex with a gay sex worker. However compared to other disabled people that have been portrayed having sex, that are People of Colour, they are the victim (Law and Order: Disabled). The story of disability has changed to being normalized when it is spoken about by a white person as opposed to someone of Colour.

³³ Myers, K. (2020, January 30). Review: ‘37 Seconds’ offers a rare, authentic view into life with cerebral palsy. *Los Angeles Times* [Los Angeles]. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-01-30/37-seconds-review-hikari>

³⁴ O’Connell, R., Parsons, J., Spiewak, T., Norsoph, E., & Dokoza, A. (Producers). (2019). *Special* [Television series]. Los Angeles: Netflix.

“Special” also discusses what is like to be gay, white and have a disability, where people are friendly and there are few stereotypes regarding disability. The main stereotype is that his disability was caused by something else, a car accident. Overall, this is the type of positive storyline that people with disabilities need, especially someone that is also a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

“The Peanut Butter Falcon” is another film that changes the notion of disability. The co-stars of this film included someone who is abled bodied, Shia LeBeouf, and Zack Gottsagen and tells the story about a man with Down Syndrome pursuing his dream of becoming a professional wrestler.³⁵ As Zack is someone who is white, he actually has Down Syndrome, therefore this movie portrays the real aspects of disability experience. This includes bullying, being targeted, and being left behind. However, there is a change in narrative when it comes to the portrayal of disability in the media. It is still a positive portrayal as opposed to how disabled People of Colour have been represented in films, as well as disabled actors of Colour. Since moving into a positive direction of casting more people with disabilities in lead roles, there should be more People of Colour with disabilities in these roles because of there is a huge lack of representation. In an article by Andrew Pulrang for Forbes magazine, he states that during the boom of disability movies in the 90’s to early 2000’s there are “several factors” contributed to this rise, which are the following; novelty, big emotions and social enlightenment. ‘Novelty’ is defined as, “Audiences, including viewers with disabilities, amazed to see disabled characters appearing in major movies in any way at all, much less in lead roles” (Pulrang, 2020). While ‘Big Emotions’ is defined as “In the popular imagination, disability is viewed as a hardship, and often as tragic, while any sort of success with disability is seen as an heroic triumph” (Pulrang, 2020). Finally,

³⁵ Nilson, T., & Schwartz, M. (Directors). (2019). *Peanut Butter Falcon* [Motion picture]. United States: Armory Films, Lucky Treehouse, Bona Fide Productions.

‘Social Enlightenment’ is defined as “Watching and appreciating these classic disability films gave viewers a sense of having learned something, of becoming more aware of an unfamiliar experience” (Pulrang, 2020). However, it is with this notion that most disability films are portrayed and mainly by white people who play disabled roles. Most film during this time provided at “least some much-needed representation for disabled viewers”, however they perpetuated and even further “deepened ableist stereotypes and clichés” (Pulrang, 2020). Some of these example include, “the angry, bitter wheelchair user, the mystic blind person, the child-like and virtuous disabled character, disabled people as either selfish, demanding to be catered and finally the better of dead, which a character fights for the right to kill themselves.” (Pulrang, 2020) These stereotypes that are mainly portrayed by white men or white women because they are the characters most likely to have disabilities in tv and film. The mystic has been seen as a racialized trope and it comes with heavily negative stereotypes because that character historically has been African-Americans. Mostly recently, this stereotype has been in the series “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina” on Netflix, as the character Rosalind Walker. (Pulrang, 2020)

Currently, there is an advertisement campaign by Goodlife Fitness Centres, the largest health club company in Canada that has always promoted the idea of inspiration porn (Lutz, 2016). At the 0.22 mark we see a Person of Colour, that is male presenting and lifting weights with artificial legs below the knee.³⁶ Not only promoting that stereotype of Black bodies and super ability strength but in also the lyrics that go along with the advertisement promotes the idea of inspirational porn. “Truth North is a hard body” is stated while he is shown lifting weights which again promotes the stereotype of Black bodies while inspiring the non-disabled, that yes

³⁶ Goodlife Fitness Canada. (2020, January 6). *Canadian Strong* [Video (Advertisement)]. Time: 0.22

you can do this too.³⁷ Historically, inspiration porn has been about children, but it has been done with adults as well. As stated before, the anti-Black racism along with ableist ideologies, have been promoted in this advertisement.

In “Disability and The Media”, Charles A. Riley II (2005), has a chapter regarding disability in movies and television, and within this chapter, he discusses the numerous ways that actors have faced issues when it came to auditioning for roles combined with the portrayals of roles regarding people with disabilities (P. 85). In particular, there is a “principle organization that targets this program in the United States is the well-regarded Media Access Office, a California state government agency that arranges for actors with disabilities to be included in casting calls for major studios and is a strident voice of inclusion in the industry” (Riley, 2005, P.85). Within the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), The Committee of Performers with Disabilities, spearheaded by Tari Susan Hartman, which now has a membership of over six hundred actors with disabilities trying to get a role which are few and far between (Riley, 2005, P.86).

On Youtube, one of the most prominent channels is Annie Elaine’s (actual name Annie Segarra). Her Youtube channel has information regarding herself and her interviews with other disabled actors, in addition to talking about the hashtag activism #disabilitytoowhite, which has now become one of the main responses to the lack of representation of disabled People of Colour in the media, whether that is in film, television, music, etc. The narrative majority has been that there has been only whiteness, when it comes to the portrayal of people with disabilities. As Annie states in the Youtube video, “#disabilitytoowhite does not intend to erase the struggles of that disabled white people experience, it is merely addressing the issue that the intersection of

³⁷ Goodlife Fitness Canada. (2020, January 6). *Canadian Strong* [Video (Advertisement)]. Retrieved from https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/goodlife_fitness_canadian_strong

race and disability is not often addressed and not often represented”.³⁸ For Annie, “The intersection of being disabled and a Person of Colour often means heighten risk of danger and discrimination. A Person of Colour can be disabled because they have never “seen it before”, there are other issues that Annie states in her video that give rise to why People of Colour that are disabled are rarely shown in the media³⁹. Finally, within the video Annie also talks about a report that was done by GLAAD in 2013, showing that “Characters with disabilities only accounted for 1 percent of the television population.”⁴⁰ As Annie is someone that is a queer disabled Latinx activist, her work is extremely important, in addition to someone who is marginalized. She has a collaboration with Lolo from Sitting Pretty, another Youtube blogger that not only educates but in addition gives an opportunity to have a different perspective on lifestyle content that has a disability spin.⁴¹ Within this clip on Youtube, she also promotes her film which is a key highlight, as she has been told that she is the first Black woman with a disability to star in a feature film, called “Give Me Liberty.”⁴²

Currently due to the lack of representation in Hollywood, independently funded directors and people that produce their own movies have used the public to fund their movies through crowd-sourcing websites like Indie Go-Go and Kickstarter. These have been hugely successful as they are publicly funded projects, films, shorts, and give a different narrative to what is out there. An example of this is the movie “Catching Up” (Crossland, 2019). Bill Crossland is a writer, director, actor, producer and has written in addition to directed a short drama/comedy starring two disabled actors (including himself and Erik O. Mayer) which was screened at

³⁸ Segarra, A. (2016, September 22). *Why is Disability Representation So White?* [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6daBu3ACbc> Time: 0.20-0.30

³⁹ Segarra, A. (2016, September 22). *Why is Disability Representation So White?* [Video].

⁴⁰ Segarra, A. (2016, September 22). *Why is Disability Representation So White?* [Video].

⁴¹ (Segarra, 2019) 0.23 – 1.00 minute

⁴² (Segarra, 2019) 1:07- 1:20 minute

Sundance Film Festival (Crossland, 2019). The short film is of the same name, “Catching Up”, and had an “overwhelming positive response from audiences who told us they had never seen disabled characters handled this way in a movie before and that they wanted to see more” (Crossland, 2019). “Catching Up” is about “Frank, a high school teacher with Muscular Dystrophy, pretends to be dating his best friend, Lorraine, so her parents won't find out she's gay. But when his childhood crush moves back to town, his desire for a real romantic relationship is unexpectedly awakened” (Crossland, 2019). Bill continues to discuss on the website that “Catching Up” is about two friends Frank and Lorraine, who find acceptance from each other but have fear from not being accepted by other people in their lives (Crossland, 2019). The relationship is very loosely based upon the director’s own life, and the director will be producing, directing and acting in it as well (Crossland, 2019). Bill wants to not only change the “idea of a relationship in a drama/comedy by dropping in a not-so-average leading man, but we’ll also be shaking up the idea of a “disability movie” by stripping away everything about that idea besides having a physically handicapped character as the lead” (Crossland, 2019). The difference, as Bill puts it, is “There are no discussions about medical prognoses or desires to become normal in this story, and Frank will live to see the end of the movie. Yes, Frank's disability has an impact on the story, but the disability itself is not his greatest challenge -- it's his fear of not being accepted by the woman he loves” (Crossland, 2019). As disability is not the sole focus and or not the ultimate obstacle to overcome, this movie would change the narrative of how people with disabilities are portrayed in films. Bill’s casting director is Bess Fifer, as Bess has worked on Netflix’s “Daredevil” and “Stranger Things”, which is interesting because “Daredevil”, is similar to “Luke Cage” and other Netflix shows, who have had able bodied actors play disabled characters. However, Bill is correct, that the narrative of how disability is

portrayed in the media, especially in the mainstream film, should improve. Therefore, funding through Kickstarter and alternative websites is necessary, as it gives freedom to the director on how to direct their movie without “Hollywood money” appealing to the box office money and playing the same tired and oppressive narrative over and over again.

Jason DaSilva is another director with a disability and is changing the narrative of how disability is portrayed in the media. Jason was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at the age of twenty-five, his first documentary, “When I Walk” follows his diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis for seven years as he progresses from using a cane, to a walker and then a wheelchair (DaSilva, 2013). This movie had won an Emmy for Outstanding Informational Programming in 2015 (DaSilva, 2019). His second film was “When We Walk”, which discusses about his relationship with his son and the struggle to stay close to him, landing Jason the Best Documentary at CAAM Fest (DaSilva, 2019). His current project is on Kickstarter and it is the final film in the trilogy chronicling his journey as a filmmaker and an activist (DaSilva, 2019). It is called, When They Walk, and it looks at the disability rights movement from around the world (DaSilva, 2019). As Jason states, the upcoming film discusses:

(...)the universal aspect of accessibility that connects every community on the planet, and the new generation confronting it with bold ingenuity. This is the Clean-Up Generation, where the consequences of unacknowledged crisis are causing the youth to develop new insights and methods for overcoming humanity's greatest obstacles. They refuse to accept the limitations handed down to them from the past, and our future will be determined by our willingness to understand and encourage them. This journey takes us around the world to interact with the Clean-Up Generation and their predecessors; as well as the unique array of individuals from all ages and backgrounds dealing with the many challenges of living with a disability. Through this varied collection of perspectives, the film illustrates the difficulties particular to our community, and how we navigate them while dealing with the universal challenges of being a human. (DaSilva, 2019)

As someone who is a minority, disabled and a filmmaker, Jason's platform is crowdsourcing for his projects. He is also the founder of the non-profit organization AXS Lab and that of AXS Map, which allows a person to rate the accessibility of businesses by using a Google map based platform, in addition this was crowd sourced (DaSilva, 2019). This is key to a lot of filmmakers that are changing that narrative and stereotypes, that they turn to crowdfunding to find their projects and/or films because of how mainstream media portrays media. The lack of funding for these projects or how Hollywood may not want to fund some of these projects because they will not be blockbusters, but it is important to still progress forward and it is these films that help to change that narrative.

Future

After listening to some People of Colour with disabilities who are in the media or within the media there is one thing. There should be more representation with People of Colour with disabilities. Due to historically and currently a disproportionate percentage of racialized people with disabilities are being negatively representative in the media. There should be guidelines and even a third party to quantify and qualify that disabled and racialized people are being represented appropriately.

I would suggest setting up an independent media firm away from Hollywood solely for the representation of disabled People of Colour. Within that department, I would like there to be a particular branch that would see that every movie coming out has role of a disabled person, as well as multiples roles for People of Colour. Then the casting should be given to the actor that has the greatest chance of understanding and identifying with that role. For example, lets say a writer develops a script for a movie with someone that has a Latinx background and is diagnosed with a mental health disability, and the movie is about how their upbringing was. This firm

would search for actors that fit the description of that particular experience and cast them in that role to give them the advantage over any named Hollywood celebrity. Because Hollywood actor names do sell when it comes to making a movie, having a secondary or another primary character that is abled body played by the Hollywood celebrity could work, then they are not taking the role away from the actor with a disability.

Secondary, I would also have external voices within the firm, these would be people that have a disability but are not working in film and television, for example, including a professor, or a lawyer with a disability. I would personally put in people who have worked in government or have worked in the healthcare field with a disability.

Third, I would put a guideline in Hollywood that any role that does play a disabled person, must go to someone that has a disability, to prevent excluding other people with disabilities from playing a similar role.

Another suggestion is having actors that do represent People of Colour with disabilities to have a panel to give feedback on the film or television series, like an advisory, and every quarter discuss what is going right, what is not working and how can we change the status quo. There can also be a separate body within these organizations to seek out roles that may help write or cast a certain role, and to help producers, directors and other behind-the-scenes workers get these projects.

In summary, having Black Studies, to focus on race, in addition to media studies in Disability Studies is necessary to talk about the issues I have focused on in this paper. Not only are People of Colour underrepresented in disability studies, the issue of representation in disability studies is also a key sign that there needs to be Black studies and more discussions on race in Disability Studies, therefore, changing the narrative when it comes to teaching on film

and inclusion of racialized people with disabilities. A key aspect would be to promote understanding on stereotypes and how historically they have come around and played a role in characterization of disabled People of Colour.

I would also like there to be an advocacy system within the Screen Actor's Guild-American Federation of television and Radio Artists of America (SAG-AFTRA). As they do have a National Women's Committee, they do not have a committee that focuses on race, or that of a persons with disabilities committee. In order to get equal representation for racialized people with disabilities, there should be a governing committee in order to help get a voice inserted within mainstream Hollywood programming and business. As SAG-AFTRA stated on the website, "We are committed to the broadest employment and involvement of our members, regardless of race, national origin, ancestry, colour, creed, religion, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, veteran status, gender identity or expression, age or disability."⁴³

I would advise as well to different governing bodies for actors of Colour to look at what the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have done. As they do awards each year promoting actors, along with directors, screen writers, etc., they have gone further to include people with disabilities, including giving out grants and scholarships to future individuals that are in the business.⁴⁴

In Canada, "the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists" (ACTRA) is the union who represents the actors as their union, similar to what I have stated above with the American system, ACTRA should adopt the same recommendations in order to have inclusion within their own organization. In addition, international unions representing actors around the world should also adopt recommendations I have suggested.

⁴³ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (2020). What is the Mission of the NAACP?

⁴⁴ Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. (2020). Equity & Inclusion.

Similar to what America and Canada have done for inclusion for people with disabilities, including the Accessibility of Ontario Disabilities Act (AODA) within Ontario, having stage sets and locations to be barrier free, and accessible to those with disabilities. This would help with filming and especially with the promotion of Hollywood North (British Columbia and Ontario, as well as throughout Canada) when hiring people with disabilities with acting and producing roles.

Bollywood however, should start not only having different kinds of disabled roles but how they project people with disabilities. The roles should advocate that people with disabilities are not just for comedic relief, to be mocked and make fun of. There should be more positive representations to show that disabled people can do things that non-disabled people can do, and to normalize being disabled, to help transform and shift culture into understanding that disabled lives matter, instead of casting them aside. Bollywood should also, as I stated earlier, have a separate body that focus on the portrayal of disabled people and not all them to be victimized by their disability. If a group of disabled people are being victimized, then allow the character to change to have other experiences, for example have someone with a disability to re-write the section so it can be more progressive. I would even go further and have someone from the advocacy advisory committee I mentioned, who is a Person of Colour with a disability be on the set going forward with any Bollywood film and acknowledge if there is anything demoralizing towards people with disabilities. This should extend to other foreign media, whether it is novellas to film, to even print media should follow the same suit.

When it comes to disabled athletes and their bodies, we should not take advantage of the situation they are in as disabled people, we should not paint them to have super abilities and put them on a pedestal. They are normal human beings just like us. To take advantage of their

disability every four years, or every two years depending on the games, is unreasonable. We should respect them for their hard work and dedication just like any other athlete, able bodied or not, and have more funding available to them as we do professional sports to normalize exposure to footage of disabled athletes. If we see them in the media, giving interviews and competing at their sport, they should be shown the dignity that they deserve.

As we move towards inclusion and diversity, overall, the majority of these recommendations have been based off of what People of Colour with disabilities have stated and the difficulty behind trying to get roles, as they go to other abled body actors. If going forward, there are still barriers in place, how as a society address this? How as a society can we justify that we live in “an acceptable and modern” society, while still holding on to yesteryears ideology regarding People of Colour who are disabled? Beyond the scope of this paper, If I were to continue to do a PhD in this topic, I would interview people in the film and television industry how it has gone through change, and how we can, as a community, get to where we do not have to choose able body actors to play disabled roles, among other demeaning issues People of Colour with disabilities experience.

Conclusion

As we are in a new decade, there are numerous things we can do as a society for the inclusion of disabled people. As stated about, there can be a plethora of guidelines, organizations, advocacy groups, that can help to push not only Hollywood but the international film and television media community, including Bollywood, independent filmmakers, etc. In addition, directors, funders and people with authority should be required to hire people with disabilities, but also push to change the narrative to be positively representative of disabled people’s real experience. There should be a requirement for hiring able bodied actors to play disabled roles. Continued activism

and raising voices to increase visibility of racialized disabled people in the media is what is needed until corporations change their ideology on hiring disabled actors of Colour. “The future advocacy for those with disabilities will be a continued push for racial justice for Blacks and the LGBTQ community.” (Ford, 2018) We should not have to be in the position to do this activism, but we must, because as a society we must push forward to include everyone, not just white people with or without disabilities. Similarly to what other racialized people have fought through during civil rights movements, the same must be done for racialized people with disabilities. Hopefully, in the future we see ourselves with multiple representations, without stereotypes, that are inspirational because they are true and real.

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