

## A Happy Ending for Movie Representation

You're sitting on the edge of your seat watching a movie. The main character looks like you, talks like you, has a life similar to yours, and you feel like the protagonist could be you. Some people experience this almost every time they sit down with popcorn to watch a movie. It took me 15 years to have that experience myself. One day, while I was perusing Netflix aimlessly, as one often does, I saw the trailer for the Netflix original, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. Once the end credits started to roll, I realized that I had found something special. I watched it 5 times and wanted to show everyone I knew, especially my little sister, because the sisters in the movie were so much like us. They were best friends, the older one was the romantic and the younger one was the cool one, and they had a white dad and Asian mom. As half-Asian American girls, my sister and I had never seen any character who resembled us in a movie, and finally seeing her was like seeing myself on the screen.

The protagonist, Lara Jean, is quirky, lovable, funny, and everything that a teen rom-com character should be. The fact that she is biracial does not take away from the story; in fact, it adds a whole new perspective to the classic teenage romance trope. Seeing myself in her gave me hope. Here was someone like me in my favorite kind of story getting the happy ending. I could connect to her so much that I felt like a small part of me had gotten a happy ending too. I had to wait 15 years before feeling that way. How long did other people have to wait? And how many people are still waiting?

UCLA's 2018 Hollywood Diversity Report stated that in the Top Theatrical Films in 2016, the percent of minority leads was 13.9%, but the minority population in the US is 38.7% (Hunt). The minority population is reduced three times in our popular movies. If we look at my experience with seeing myself in Lara Jean for the first time, the diversity report showed that 3%

of film roles in 2016 were mixed race (Hunt). The chance of seeing a character who looks like me is 3 out of 100. That tiny number seems to say that my story and the stories of people who look like me **don't matter**.

It might be hard for some of you to understand how it felt for me to see myself in a movie character for the first time, but everyone knows what it feels like to identify with someone and see a little piece of yourself in them. During the pep rally earlier this year, when a student from each grade was facing off in the intense four-square match, every grade was cheering loudly for the person who represented them. And when the senior won, it was like their whole grade was a part of that victory, because they could connect to the winner. When your classmate or friend, or someone that you can identify with accomplishes something, you naturally feel like a small piece of you is a part of that accomplishment. You may also feel that way when the team you always root for wins a tough game, or you reread a favorite book because the author seems to have written it with you in mind.

Representation is an inspiring experience that every person deserves to have for themselves, but the data from the diversity report shows that not everyone is getting it. So why isn't Hollywood doing anything? Producers use the pretense that diversity doesn't sell to justify the whitewashing of roles meant for people of color, or not having stories for people of color in the first place. But Hollywood shouldn't hide behind this excuse anymore, because diversity really can sell. In 2018, we saw *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians* become incredibly successful financially, with *Black Panther* becoming the third highest grossing film in US history according to the box office (Box Office Mojo) and *Crazy Rich Asians* now the most successful romcom in 9 years (McClintock), showing that people were, in fact, craving this diverse representation in the movies.

Clearly, diversity in Hollywood is valuable for people of color. But other minorities deserve the same. Different body-types, sexualities, genders, religions, people with disabilities and mental illness and more, they all need to be seen on the big screen too. With more representation starting in the movies, minorities can find role models and be inspired. Little girls can see a strong female protagonist and decide to be a leader. Members of the LGBTQ community can be more confident in embracing their identities. People with all different body types can see their beauty, and people of color can feel empowered in their own skin.

Increasing representation would also benefit the people who already see themselves on screen. If a straight white man sees movie after movie with himself as the main character, he would naturally think that he is always the hero. That's not to say that all straight white men have a false sense of superiority because they see themselves in the movies, but rather that the entertainment industry has historically favored their stories in a way that presents them as the norm, or the only stories that matter. Minorities have always had to put themselves into the shoes of a protagonist who might not look like them, but they could still enjoy the movie and find some way to connect to the character. People who are used to seeing themselves as the star can do the same by inhabiting a character who does not look like them, and they will find that they are not so different after all. When a person can connect to other people in the movies, then they will gain more understanding and empathy to connect to them in real life too. We can all benefit from more diversity, but we have a long way to go before everyone is represented. We can start with Hollywood, and we can take action to make sure that everyone's story is told.

I don't expect you to run out and start making your own blockbuster film that champions diversity, but I do want you all to understand how valuable representation in the movies is for all of us. Even though it seems like change is completely up to the producers in Hollywood, your

influence as a consumer is powerful. If you choose to support films with diverse casts, directors, and characters, you are telling Hollywood that you want to see diversity. We can all demand representation so that new movies will be produced to represent everyone's experiences. I believe that you all should have the opportunity to see your own story told, and benefit from everyone else's story. We all deserve a chance at our own happily ever after.