

The importance of Chicana Identity : Chicano Culture Representation in Modern Television

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Television and film allow people to watch other characters' stories unfold. As audience members we can sometimes see a little part of ourselves, the people we know and the people we sometimes wish we could be in the characters and story lines that we watch. However, majority of Hollywood films do not project relatable characters and themes equally to all people. Seeking accurate representation specific ethnic groups set out to categorize and develop their own kind of film. One of the most significant film representation to grow was that of Chicano/as, which strives to bring authenticity and respect to roles and stories that portray Chicano culture. Jason C. Johanson a writer and former professor of Latino film and media said that Chicano film is depicted as being by, for, and about Chicanos along with the inherent weaknesses and limitations. This means that certain films, television shows, and characters can portray accurate representation of Chicanos but by definition will not be considered genuine Chicano film unless they cover all three categories.

In the ABC show *Grey's Anatomy* Chicana actress Sara Ramirez plays a senior medical resident whose father struggles to come to terms with her recent announcement of her bisexuality. While the show and episode were not made by a Chicano and as a whole is intended for a wide audience, the specific portrayal of a Chicana character's ownership of sexuality, femininity, and personal identity is a valuable film representation for the Chicano/a community. *Grey's Anatomy* first aired on the ABC network in 2005 and is currently still airing. Created, written, and produced by Shonda Rhimes the show has received significant praise over its eleven plus year run for its racially diverse cast and complex story lines. The show as a whole focuses on the daily working environment of the surgical interns, residents, and attending doctors at a Seattle based teaching hospital, while also diving deep into their personal lives. Often times highlighting and

bringing significance to the cultural and ethnic differences between the characters. Although the show does not follow Johanson's rule of being made by and specifically for Chicanos, it does appeal to a wider audience and affect social change. In his article *Notes on Chicano Cinema* Johanson writes that as a whole Chicano cinema must work for social change and "given the ability of the medium to reach a wide audience, Chicano film must remain linked to and be an integral part of the revolutionary process." (Johanson, 306) This means that through the creation and depiction of relatable and standout characters, plot, setting, and use of other cinematic devices, a Chicano film work must inherently affect social change. The Chicano story being portrayed must constructively add to Chicano representation in film, and the appearance of Dr. Callie Torres on *Grey's Anatomy* does this quite well.

The character of Callie Torres is played by Mexican American theatre and film actress and social activist Sara Ramirez. Ramirez herself is of both Mexican and Irish-American descent and was born in Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mexico before moving to San Diego with her mother at the age of eight. Bilingual in both English and Spanish Ramirez received her B.F.A. in drama from the Juilliard School and has won and been nominated for countless awards. Ramirez's role as Dr. Callie Torres on *Grey's Anatomy* is significant because she is the show's main character with Latin heritage. In the show Callie is known for being a tough badass orthopedic surgeon who never goes down without a fight in her work and personal life. Having a Chicana play a significant role on a popular television show with a broad audience serves great importance to the Chicano/a community. When a character is portrayed earning respect and stature in a job without compromising and despite their racial and ethnic backgrounds it allows for

marginalized groups to achieve representation. Representation through characters that constructively add to their own identities.

Another way in which the character of Callie Torres depicts positive representations for the Chicano community, is through sexuality and femininity. During episode five of season six Callie's father visits her after months of zero communication following the news of her homosexual relationship and bisexuality. This type of character development is significant because she was the first openly non-heterosexual doctor and fully embraced her sexual identity along with her prominent Latin heritage. In the article *The Limits of Desire: On the Downlow and Queer Chicago Film* Author Bill Johnson González writes about how the depiction of queerness in diverse circumstances is important in creating new social possibilities while acquiring, "the sense that queerness can be mobilized in emancipatory and transformative modes of imagination and living." (González, 14) Queerness as a whole is unfortunately is not fully excepted into mainstream media and society. Queer identities within minority groups is often less excepted and severely underrepresented. González explains that when film does depict accurate portrayals of ethnically and racially diverse queerness it allows for it to be more widely accepted in society. Having Callie Torres be a bisexual Chicana woman of high professional ranking gives representation to Chicana femininity and sexuality, both which have received damaging representations in film. In the chapter on Feminism and Film from the book *Movies and Methods* author Bill Nichols talks about the negative roles that Latin American actress have predominately played, which include the virgin, wife, mother, and seductress. Nichols explains that in origin these roles are not stereotypical, yet, "like the representation of ethnic minorities, they become stereotypic when they serve oppressive ends, usually categorizing people in objectifying ways

that deny their individuality.” (Nichols, 399) When minority characters with these identities are given little to zero development and complex individualization it sets a low bar for what people can achieve on and off screen. It is depictions of characters like Callie that bring back to the surface individualistic traits, complex identities, ownership of femininity and sexuality and make it a standard to be reached.

Misrepresentation of ethnic, racial and gender diverse groups in mainstream film holds more consequences than can be perceived. When a minority audience member can not see any characters sharing in their own identities they can have a sense of disconnect from the mainstream. If there are characters who represent minorities but in a negative and damaging portrayal it allows for false identities to enter the mainstream. The creation of Chicano/a film was to allow Chicanos to create films that were about Chicanos and for Chicanos, to ensure that they were receiving the positive and complex representation they deserve. However, some characters arise in mainstream film that do not completely fit the Chicano film mold, but serve a great deal in the growing and promising portrayal of Chicano culture. The character of Callie Torres on the hit television show *Grey's Anatomy* does an extraordinary job in creating a relatable, self-ensured and complex Chicana image and should be considered important within Chicano film.

Works Cited

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