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Editorial: Challenging diversity in Maine

Sarah Allisot

February 26, 2018

Education is one of our best safeguards against ignorance. Without the crucial work of activist groups, representation would take a serious blow in our mostly-white state. Race demographics from the 2010 U.S. Census report that Maine is 94.8 percent white, with the remaining population split among several racial groups. The census also reports that black residents of Maine make up less than 1 percent of our population. Forbes reported on the 2016-2017 academic year demographics of the University of Maine, showing a modest 2 percent population of black students. Needless to say, Maine is mostly white, and very sheltered from diversity as a whole.

That’s not — and never should be — the end of the story though. Despite Maine’s demographics, white residents are not the only people here. There are vibrant, important stories waiting to be told by the other communities in our state. It’s easy to dismiss calls for diversity, especially in regards to film and television. How much does one movie really matter, in the grand scheme of things? A lot, as it turns out. The reality is that white people are safely stitched into the narrative of society; we are the dominant group as far as popular media is concerned. We must make the conscious decision to include people of color, or risk dehumanizing and misunderstanding huge groups of people simply because we don’t know any better.

Perhaps simpler to understand is the importance of female representation. Stories featuring women in the lead give inspiration to young girls and empowerment to other women. The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, based at San Diego State University, found that women represent 29 percent of protagonists in 2016 — and this was a record high for representation. The relaunched “Star Wars” franchise centers on a girl, and kid’s movies like “Brave” and “Moana” offer alternative ideas to the dated Disney princess archetype. This issue is seeing continuous improvement, but it addresses only one segment of under-representation.

In recent years, we’ve seen social media movements, celebrities speaking out against the racial homogenization of characters in film, and wild successes of black-character-led stories. #OscarsSoWhite raged through 2015 as a response to the devastatingly low number of black-produced work receiving nominations and awards. David Oyelowo, a British-Nigerian actor and producer known for his work on “Selma” and “The Butler,” said about the lack of diversity in the Academy Awards: “For 20 opportunities to celebrate actors of color, actresses of color, to be missed last year is one thing; for that to happen again this year is unforgivable… I am an Academy member and it doesn’t reflect me, and it doesn’t reflect this nation.” This month’s release of Marvel’s newest film, “Black Panther,” sent tidal waves of support for black characters and stories through the nation. One star of the film, Lupita Nyong’o, showed her support for increased diversity, posting to Instagram in 2016: “I stand with my peers who are calling for change in expanding the stories that are told and recognition of the people who tell them.”

Representation is more than just making marginalized communities feel good about seeing a movie or attending events that suit their cultures and heritages. Everyone in the nation will benefit from increasing diversification. Nicole Martins of Indiana University offered her perspective on representation to The Huffington Post. “There’s this body of research and a term known as ‘symbolic annihilation,’ which is the idea that if you don’t see people like you in the media you consume, you must somehow be unimportant.” What we consume leads us to make decisions about people and situations. Someone with only infrequent, superficial encounters with black
Americans will benefit from interacting with the black community and their work.

This February, the UMaine campus celebrated Black History Month with several events, including a book club, topic discussions, potlucks and movie viewings. These gatherings offer community to the black students on campus, and bring exposure to black art, culture and voices for the rest of us. In a place as white and rural as Maine, these experiences are much-needed lessons.

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