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SOC 1100

Final Paper

Media Analysis of Netflix's "On My Block"

It is of the utmost importance that what we see in the media accurately reflects real life. There is an adage, "life imitates art" which, especially in consideration of our contemporary climate, reveals our impressionable nature; we often copy the styles, mannerisms, and ideologies of those we see depicted in film and television. Entertainment is no longer something we simply tune into and out of, returning to our daily lives; the things that are presented to us are accompanied by a lasting effect. In the first chapter of Shirley Fedorak's book *Pop Culture: The Culture of Everyday Life*, she expresses a sentiment that is relevant to media analysis (2009): "Through popular culture, people learn about other people-- their values, beliefs, ideals, and patterns of behavior." We learn about others as well as ourselves through mediums of pop culture, especially film and television. We are able to see versions of ourselves in characters we see. Sometimes those versions are nearer to our true natures, and other times they are improved versions of who we want to be. Regardless of how much we identify with these personifications, it is nonetheless imperative that we are at least able to observe others who look like us, talk like us, act like us, and have the same eclectic interests as we might. For this paper, I have chosen to analyze the Netflix Original show, *On My*

Block. The series, while depicting the plethora of coming-of-age issues faced by young Latino and African-American students in a fictional south-central Los Angeles city gracefully, realistically, and with appropriate humor, also highlights a number of sociological issues and concepts throughout its narrative.

On My Block is a Netflix Original series that debuted on the platform March 16, 2018. It follows the lives of a group of young students about to enter high school in their fictionalized south-central Los Angeles town. We are introduced to Cesar, Monse, Ruby, Jamal and, shortly into the ten-episode first season, Olivia. The teens struggle with leaving middle school and assimilating into the high school atmosphere, concurrently dealing with the everyday stressors of adolescence. Along with these coming-of-age gripes, Cesar has to deal with essentially being drafted into one of the rivaling neighborhood gangs, coincidentally led by his older brother, Oscar (nicknamed Spooky, probably for his unsettling gaze and overall frightening nature). Because of this fact, the neighborhood that the group lives in is riddled with gang violence.

As Cesar is being drafted into the gang by the start of the show, the group spends much of the first season planning to get him out, as they fear for the violence he will incur if he joins. A study from the *Journal of Youth & Adolescence* examined how friendship group integration is associated with weapon-related criminal activity as a young adult. Friendship group integration describes how enmeshed into a friend group one is, and how one's social functions are affected by being in this group. The authors assert that "most researchers postulate that greater social embeddedness reduces

individual involvement in harmful behaviors” (Mundt et al. 2017). The group’s attempts to spend as much time as possible with him is exemplary of this theory.

The show itself is categorized as a comedy, so as viewers we are given a bit of the lighter side of things. Aside from the darker themes of gang- and gun-related violence, we get to follow the group through Halloween trick-or-treating, preparing for the prom, planning and executing a quinceañera, and navigating new crushes and relationships. The first episode begins with the core four, Monse, Cesar, Ruby, and Jamal, anticipating what their final summer before high school will be like. It is apparent that Cesar and Monse are struggling with some kind of feelings for each other, though of course neither one wants to admit it to the other. The group is advised by Ruby’s older brother, Mario, not to engage in any kind of interpersonal relationships with one another, as that could complicate things in the overall friend group. Things then speed up to the end of that summer and the beginning of the group’s freshman year of high school. Over the first two episodes, we quickly find out that Cesar and Monse acknowledged their feelings and hooked up over the summer, and they’re now keeping it a secret from the rest of the group, so as not to disrupt the dynamics.

We are introduced to social norms in the series, right from this moment, I believe. Social norms are rules and behaviors that are considered acceptable or normal within a group or society; they represent expectations for how members of a group/society are supposed to behave. This is apparent in the pressure that Monse and Cesar feel not to acknowledge their feelings for each other. They care for and are extremely close to Ruby and Jamal, and the reverse is true, so they feel incredibly uncomfortable risking

that just to be together. Another example lies in the prom debacle. In the episode titled “Chapter Three,” the group discusses the impending prom; particularly, Olivia and Monse are unsure if they will attend, as they aren’t receptive to the idea that they’ll be expected to grind during the dances (a type of dance involving one person, usually female, gyrating with their backside against the front of someone else, usually a guy). They are also worried about the types of dresses they’ll wear. Olivia says that does not want to be objectified by the boys at the dance.

The situation of the prom, specifically for Olivia and Monse, is important because of its focus on the societal issues of young women. Another one of the first season storylines is that the group plans a quinceanera for Olivia. She came into the series right after her parents were deported; she takes up residence with Ruby’s family. Seeing that she is upset by her parents being gone, and having feelings for her, Ruby enlists the help of the gang to plan a wonderful celebration for her. The show’s focus and introspection on the way that Olivia feels about this milestone I believe is very important for the media representation of women, and in this instance, particularly young Hispanic women and female-identifying persons. Langerich, as a woman, paints significance gracefully on these issues. In the fourth chapter of *Pop Culture Freaks*, Kidd (2014:116) recalls a study in which it was purported that “women’s involvement behind the scenes has the effect of increasing women’s numerical representation and their likelihood of being featured in moments of conflict and resolution.”

Among the many issues the show tackles, it also touches upon cultural appropriation and interpersonal racism. The former concerns the adoption of some

specific elements of one culture by another culture, entails taking from a marginalized group without permission, and usually with little respect for or knowledge about the culture. In the fourth episode, titled “Chapter Four,” the group go trick-or-treating on Halloween in nearby Brentwood, a swanky area of Los Angeles, because they believe it will be safer than trying to do so in their own neighborhood (plus in Brentwood they give out full-sized candy bars, so why not?). Cesar, Ruby, and Olivia wind up at a house party whose white host is dressed like a *cholo*, a term for a Hispanic male dressed typically in plaid or flannel button downs or wife beaters and whom possess a litany of tattoos. The host becomes enraged when Olivia takes one of his mother’s pressed juices out of the refrigerator without asking, and begins to berate her in front of a gathering crowd. She responds by pouring the juice out on the carpet. She, Cesar, and Ruby then flee the home and the host and some of the guests begin to throw eggs at them.

The host’s choice of costume is an example of cultural appropriation. He adopted the style that is typical of a minority culture (the Hispanic cholos) as a white man, part of the dominant culture, simply for a costume during a trivial event such as Halloween. He shows what little respect or knowledge he has for the culture during this interaction with Olivia, where he also expresses an apparent tendency towards interpersonal racism. He tells the group that they will have to pay for the bottle of juice plus all the other food and drinks they had. When Olivia says that they don’t have that much money, the host responds that of course they don’t. He is making a generalization that since they are of

Hispanic descent, that they therefore must be poor and don't have the money to pay for their things. That is racist and also discriminatory.

The show does a good job with subverting racial stereotypes, as well as stereotypes of other natures. An obvious one, none of the characters speak with any kind of accent or really use any jargon that's stereotypical of their cultures. Jamal and Monse, who are both black, don't speak in African American Vernacular slang while neither Ruby, Jamal, Olivia, nor Monse (she is biracial) speak with any trace of a Hispanic accent when they speak English. A more subtle subversion of stereotypes can be traced to Eddie Gonzalez, one of the show's creators. While brainstorming the kind of content they wanted for the show, Gonzalez expressed interest in having the characters sort of perform and interact in the opposite way in which one might perceive them to. Citing a real life example, Gonzalez recalled being approached in high school by a gang member; instead of harassing or assaulting him, which he feared, the gang member asked if Gonzalez could teach him to dance, as he was interested in doing so at quinceañeras. Commenting on this, Gonzalez says it's "things like that [which we wanted to showcase.] Subverting the trope of what people think they know" (Wheeler 2018).

Media representation was an extremely important factor to the team behind *On My Block*. The creator of the show, Lauren Iungerich, is a white woman but she expressed a fervent desire for this story to be told as authentically as possible so she teamed up with a friend, Jeremy Hath, who introduced her to Eddie Gonzalez. The team took from Gonzalez's experience of growing up in Compton and Inwood, two

neighborhoods that have a reputation for being violent and dangerous. lungerich also decided to hire only young black and Latinx writers, because she felt that “kids from all backgrounds need to see representation of their own experience” in the media. “We wanted to lift up young storytellers from these inner-city neighborhoods who don’t normally get opportunities,” she elaborates (Wheeler 2018).

This showcases that media representation is as important on-camera as it is off-camera. The second chapter of *Pop Culture Freaks* by Dustin Kidd examines racial perspectives of pop culture. Kidd (2014:50-51) inquires if the race of the director matters for the film, and follows up with evidence from a study by Smith and Chouetti, highlighting that in six films helmed by a black director, almost 63 percent of the roles were played by black people, compared to less than 11 percent in films without a black director. He then confirms that “diversity in the labor force of the cultural industries is the most important way to generate diversity in on-screen representations.” Because lungerich made the decision to cast her writers room full of writers of color, the resulting product was one filled with more rich representations of young black and Hispanic students than has really been seen or explored on television.

All great shows do not come without their controversy, though. In her article titled “Popular Culture,” Laura Grindstaff (2000:14) argues that there is a meaning-making that constitutes popular culture; she says that this differs from mass culture *because* of the meanings that we ascribe to different parts of it. She says that “mass culture is the objective repertoire from which people create subjective, popular meanings,” and that

“this meaning-making not only acknowledges an active dimension to consumption, it requires us to consider popular culture in a more local, personal, and political sense.”

With all this in mind, the controversy surrounding the show has to do with one of the actors and their political beliefs. Ronni Hawk, who plays Olivia, recently came under fire for an apparent batch of President Trump-supporting tweets. After the results of the presidential election, Hawk tweeted out emojis of red hearts and American flags; many took this as tacit support for the then-President elect. There is another tweet, since deleted, where Hawk allegedly tweeted to the President’s twitter handle: “Go @realdonaldtrump please bring America back!!!” The tweets “spurred a flurry of outcry, primarily because of the show’s themes of diversity and hardship that do not align with Trump,” according to Shadow and Act (2018). This exemplifies the meaning-making that pop culture consumers do. They have taken to heart the themes of the show and have decided that the alleged beliefs of one of the actors, who portrays a young Latina woman, are antithetical to what the show is about. There have been calls for her character to be killed off, or for Hawk to be recast. Aside from this, the show appears to remain unproblematic.

On My Block offers a refreshing take on young adulthood through a variety of lenses. The diversity that this show strives for does not feel token-ish, but accurately depicted by a team whose makeup is reflective of the characters we see on-screen. This show demonstrates the importance of accurate media representation; when we see realistic portrayals of ourselves, it can help us to feel like we are being seen and heard on a greater scale. It seems there has been a fairly recent surge in programming

featuring more diverse casting and more diverse members of production. This is instrumental in allowing all different types of people to feel represented and, in a way, cared for. Within the pop culture realm, *On My Block* presents to viewers an experience that amalgamates a multitude of societal facets that never feels forced, just honest.

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