

THE Hollywood REPORTER

Hollywood Stories Can Offer "Moral Intervention" as Americans Lose Trust in Media

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It's time to move beyond criminal and sexpot stereotypes as millions of immigrants' lives may be upended under Trump, and the stories Hollywood tells can serve as "an artistic and moral intervention," writes journalist Jose Antonio Vargas.

Immigrants helped build Hollywood, and now, in the Trump era, immigrants need Hollywood's help.

The American film industry was launched by immigrants — specifically, Eastern European Jewish immigrants who felt like outsiders in their new home. As a new wave of immigrants, mostly Latinos and Asians, leads America's demographic makeover in the 21st century, we need Hollywood to tell stories that speak to the humanity and complexity of the lives of millions of people.

There would be no Trump presidency without a Make America Great Again campaign that was centered on immigration and the systematic other-ing of Muslims and immigrants, with illegals as the country's ultimate bogeymen.

I am one of those "illegals" — the dehumanizing and inaccurate term that Trump, Fox News and a whole ecosystem of conservative news outlets use to refer to undocumented immigrants like me. To be in the country unlawfully is a civil offense, not a criminal one. But the usage of "illegal" is deliberate and has proven effective. How do you legalize people whom you call "illegal"? You don't. You call them "illegal," end of discussion. There is no further inquiry about why immigrants come to America in the first place (the root causes of migration), and why they can't simply "legalize" and "fix" their status (the process of becoming a U.S. citizen). After more than a decade of working as a journalist, I outed myself as undocumented in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2011 and founded Define American, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to humanize the very political issue of immigration.

Immigration is more complicated than the simplistic "illegal" vs. "legal" binary. It's more complicated because our families are complicated. According to the Pew Research Center, an estimated 43 million immigrants live in the U.S., about 11 million of whom are here unlawfully. And the reality is, millions of American households are comprised of people who are U.S.-born citizens, permanent legal residents with green cards and undocumented immigrants — like my very own extended family.

As an immigrant of Filipino birth and descent (my mom sent me to America at age 12 to live with my grandparents, both naturalized citizens), I am part of the U.S.' fastest-growing immigrant population: Asians and Pacific Islanders. That's a key fact you would not know from watching Trump kick off his campaign 18 months ago. The way the president-elect talks about immigration, and the myriad ways in which the news media fails in contextualizing it, you would think the issue is all about Mexico, building a wall and keeping America safe.

This is where Hollywood's creative class — the stories they tell, the narratives they frame — is sorely needed. This is where storytelling is more than just mere entertainment. Stories can serve as a correction, as an artistic and moral intervention.

Like any new immigrant to this country, most everything I learned about America, including how to speak and sound American, I learned from watching television and movies. For me, the films of Mike Nichols, Spike Lee and Sidney Lumet, and episodes of *Frasier*, *Roseanne* and *The Golden Girls* were especially educational.

In my 23 years of living in the U.S., I've lived in cities surrounded by all kinds of Americans, places where diversity is as visible and tangible as the people walking the streets. It was not until I started traveling extensively, speaking about Define American in the Midwest and the South, that I realized that most white Americans live in predominantly white communities. While producing *White People*, a television special for MTV, I learned that the typical white American lives in a town that is more than three-quarters white, and the average white person's group of friends is more than 90 percent white. For white Americans who live in homogenous communities, one of the chief ways they are exposed to immigrants — the same immigrants who are making America less and less white — is through pop culture.

But aside from playing maids, nerds, criminals, terrorists and heavily accented, exoticized sexpots (looking at you, Sofia Vergara), how are immigrants portrayed in movies and television shows? What's the connection between how immigrants are portrayed in entertainment media and the public's perception of us? And given that, according to Pew, in the next 50 years immigrants and their descendants will constitute 88 percent of our country's overall population growth, how are stories of immigrants — not just Latino and Asian immigrants, but also black, white, Middle Eastern immigrants, et al. — being told in popular culture?

This year, Define American is launching the first research study of its kind to explore these urgent questions.

Our organization believes that we cannot change the politics of immigration until we change the culture in which we talk about immigrants, both documented and undocumented. Entertainment media proved to have enormous influence in changing the culture around perceptions of LGBTQ Americans. As a gay man, I cannot imagine the march toward same-sex marriage without Ellen DeGeneres on the cover of *Time* magazine and without the popularity of *Will & Grace*. We believe that entertainment media can also do the same for perceptions of immigrants, who, for the most part, are marginalized and rendered invisible in entertainment media.

The invisibility is blinding. Although immigration has been a primary topic of conversation over the past two years, our team at Define American found that none of the new network TV pilots

this fall featured an immigrant character or immigration storyline that is significantly tied to the plot. And when immigration storylines are featured on television, many of the stereotypes seen have no factual basis, such as immigrants as criminals. According to the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian group, "Immigrants are less crime prone than natives or have no effect on crime rates."

There are some bright spots, however, and they shine even brighter in our gloomy political environment.

While streaming a recent episode of *Fresh Off the Boat*, now in its third season on ABC, I had to pause the show and hit the rewind button, just to make sure I really saw what I saw: Taiwanese immigrant Jessica Huang, brilliantly played by Constance Wu, goes through a roller-coaster of emotions — frustration and confusion, embarrassment and desperation — as she sits through an interview to become a naturalized U.S. citizen.

As I finished the episode, I realized that stories like Huang's are exactly what we need to watch in the Trump era. At a time when many Americans have lost trust in the news media, accurate and humanistic portrayals of immigrants in popular culture will be crucial in countering harmful rhetoric and rampant misinformation.

Fittingly, the *Fresh Off the Boat* episode was titled "How to Be an American."