

# *The Atlantic*

## **Immigrant Stereotypes Are Everywhere on TV**

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In April, a Season 4 episode of *Jane the Virgin* sees Alba—the titular character’s grandmother—applying for her U.S. citizenship. It’s a storyline that’s been seasons in the making, as viewers watched her evolve from undocumented immigrant to green-card holder to naturalized American. When Alba passes her test with a perfect score, stars from her new country’s flag float around her head as she celebrates with her family. A portrait of Donald Trump also transforms into one of his predecessor, offering a smile and a wink to Alba. It’s a subtle critique of the current president and his anti-immigration policies that reminds viewers of how citizenship isn’t always attainable for others. But this scene, and this arc, is just one of many stories featuring Alba in the show. Her character is not confined to her citizenship status, making her a rare example of an immigrant on TV who is depicted with nuance and care.

A new study, conducted by USC Annenberg’s Norman Lear Center and the journalist Jose Antonio Vargas’s nonprofit, Define American, analyzed 143 episodes from 47 TV shows that aired in 2017 and 2018. Included in the sample were episodes with immigrant storylines or characters, such as those in *The Good Place*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *The Fosters*, *Silicon Valley*, *Roseanne*, and *Jane the Virgin*.

Immigrant characters on television are still underrepresented and largely one-dimensional, researchers found. Eleven percent of characters in the sample were immigrants, and of the 211 characters identified, nearly half had fewer than 10 speaking lines. Sixty percent were male characters, 77 percent spoke with accents (a trait often associated in entertainment with being “bad”), and 40 percent were Latinx. Meanwhile, 24 percent of immigrant characters were white, 16 percent were Asian, 11 percent were Middle Eastern, and 8 percent were black.

With ongoing reports about federal immigration policies concerning family separation, DACA, and deportation dominating much of the news cycle in the past few years, it’s clear that Hollywood is attempting to tackle such relevant issues. Forty-one percent of TV immigrants in the study were undocumented, while 36 percent were green-card holders. “Deportation” and “ICE” were mentioned in 20 percent of the sampled episodes, and Latinx characters in particular were the subject of those conversations.

But this focus on characters' citizenship statuses can be a double-edged sword if immigrants only appear in shows for the sake of a plot point or "checking off a box," as Elizabeth Voorhees, Define American's Managing Director of Creative Initiatives, described it.

"Something that we talk about a lot with our work within the entertainment industry is that narrative," Voorhees said, "and how we push past that ... to more humanized representations of characters that don't just have to be single-sided, either a good or a bad immigrant, but can actually just be fully realized."

Outside of citizenship-related story arcs, TV immigrants in the study also tended to adhere to stereotypical associations with crime, incarceration, and low education levels.

Though multiple studies have shown that immigrants don't commit more crime than native-born citizens, 34 percent of TV immigrants were linked to a past or current crime, and 11 percent of characters were mentioned in reference to a current, previous, or future incarceration (think of Blanca from *Orange Is the New Black* or Hector Ramirez from Season 18 of *Law & Order: SVU*). In reality, the incarceration rate—excluding convictions for immigration offenses—for legal and undocumented immigrants is less than 1 percent, according to the Cato Institute.

For Rafael Agustín, a writer on *Jane the Virgin* and a formerly undocumented immigrant, these negative portrayals are even more damaging in light of the current political climate. "When the leader of the free world is saying that Latinos are criminals and rapists, and then our TV shows show that, then we have a huge problem," Agustín told me, referring to Trump's 2015 comments about Mexican immigrants.

Similarly, Voorhees said that these stereotypical images of "immigrants as criminals, as breaking the law, and then as being punished for doing so" often are indicative of how writers and producers aren't actually consulting immigrants who have experienced what a show is trying to portray. But until Hollywood tackles its systemic lack of diversity and changes who is given the opportunity to share their stories, consultants for writers' rooms are just a bandage solution, Agustín said.

The same can be said for the representation of women and people of color in the industry: Despite recent strides, television and film studios still have far to go when it comes to depicting, hiring, and supporting underrepresented groups. Some studios have tried to address this problem by pursuing so-called "diversity hires." But what ends up happening in writers' rooms, according to Agustín, is that those hires don't end up staying or get fired because showrunners don't see why their characters and storylines should embrace that writer's perspective.

"I understand that under the stress of telling and producing TV, you want people in the room who've done it before and people you trust," Agustín said. "But those people who have done it before and the people you trust look exactly the same."

Thus, it falls on the people of color and women already in positions of power in Hollywood to help mentor the next generation of storytellers. Agustín said he wouldn't be where he is without the mentorship of Jennie Snyder Urman, the creator of *Jane the Virgin*, and the support of Gina Rodriguez, the show's Golden Globe-winning star.

Alba's story turned out to be full, complex, and compelling, in part because someone like Agustín was included in the writers' room. There, he was able to share his experiences—of interacting with immigration officials, of being “deeply moved” when he saw Fourth of July fireworks for the first time, and of being an undocumented immigrant in America.

“We have to empower the next generation of storytellers ... so that they have room at the table, and it's no longer Hollywood telling the world, *This is what it's like*. It's they themselves telling the world, *This is what it's like. This is what my story's like*,” Agustín said. “We can't only fight bigotry and hate with love, we have to fight it with the truth. And telling our stories is part of that truth.”