FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Mariel wrote this paper midway through her "Race, Class, and Gender in the U.S. Today" WR 100 seminar for multilingual students in Spring 2018. Like all WR 120 classes, this section of WR 100 invited students to write in a genre other than the standard academic essay for a portion of the course. Our class studied Op-Eds, the short-essay form of opinion writing common in newspapers, and then students chose their own topics related to the overall themes of the class. Mariel circled around and around her topic at first, not sure where she wanted to go with it, not sure exactly what she wanted to say. She had a lot of fun experimenting with voice in this paper, and I think you can see from this final product that she both found a strong, appealing Op-Ed voice and also found what she really wanted to say.

Christina Michaud
WR 100: Race, Class, and Gender in the US Today

FROM THE WRITER

I love Twitter. It's a place where people can both enjoy silly jokes and engage in serious discourse. A lot of the time, the jokes and the discourse come together and create conversations about real issues. It was on Twitter that an interaction between a student and a local celebrity sparked one such conversation about colorism in Philippine media. It was this conversation by Filipino netizens that dominated my Twitter feed for a few days and left me thinking about the issue of colorism for a few weeks. During this time, my class was given one of our major assignments for the term: an op-ed about a topic related to race, class, or gender. I knew then exactly what I wanted to write about. Colorism in the United States, a country with multiple ethnicities, usually lives in the shadow of the more immediately visible issue of racism, but it is still very present. By contextualizing colorism in a country where it is prevalent, I hope to make it more visible to an American audience.

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MARIEL DE LOS SANTOS

FULL-COLOR TELEVISION

On Valentine's Day, thousands of people flocked to their nearest cinemas to see the newest Marvel superhero movie, *Black Panther*. The movie was highly anticipated by many and quickly established itself as one of the highest-grossing movies in the already successful Marvel franchise. It's not hard to see why this is so—in many ways, *Black Panther* is a love letter to black America by a culture that has constantly been putting it down.

Black Panther envisions an African country that has never been colonized. The fictional Wakanda flourishes with its advanced technology, its lack of poverty, and its unapologetic celebration of African culture—a culture that, for the longest time, has been suppressed in America. Most importantly, the protagonists are black. Black people are not relegated to one-sided roles of sidekick, or comic relief, or bad guy, or gangster, or whatever stereotype they are usually cast as. The characters are complex and human. Each character gives black audience members the space to find themselves on the big screen, perhaps for the first time in their life.

At the same time, on the other side of the world, a new television series was premiering in the Philippines. The series, *Bagani*, has a premise that was similar to *Black Panther*'s in many ways: it is a vision of a world that was never colonized, and draws inspiration from Philippine mythology. Women are warriors and leaders, and tribal influence is evident in the costume design, the hairstyles, and the face paint. However, while *Black Panther* took care to finally shine the spotlight on black actors who have long been shunned, *Bagani*'s leads are mainly half-white actors, with darker-skinned actors only playing minor characters. This is the route taken by most Filipino *teleseryes*, as light skin and Western features are considered the beauty standard in a country where brown skin is the norm.

Colorism, or the preference of lighter skin over darker skin, is rife in Philippine culture. You see it in the alarming frequency of commercials and billboards advertising whitening creams, whitening pills, and whitening treatments. You see it in comments from close friends and relatives telling you to cover up when you go out in the sun so your skin doesn't tan. You see it in the desire of young Filipinas to marry a Western foreigner and have light-skinned kids.

And of course, you see it in the media's obsession with lighter-skinned actors and actresses, who are almost always the stars of movies and television series, while darker-skinned actors are relegated to supporting roles.

Such was the criticism *Bagani* faced on Philippine social media. I had not seen any trailers for it, which were the main source of the backlash, but I understood the frustration. It was only when I visited my grandparents in New Jersey last week that I saw firsthand what that frustration was about. We were watching the Filipino channel when *Bagani* came on. It followed the usual recipe that every *teleserye* follows: ridiculous plotlines, overdramatic cut-scenes, and draggy pacing. The main stars were Filipino actors Liza Soberano, who is half American, and Enrique Gil, who is half

Spanish. The pair, together known as LizQuen, is currently one of the hottest loveteams in Philippine showbiz today. On *Bagani,* they play the tribal leader Ganda ("beauty"), and the warrior Lakas ("strength"), respectively. Had the controversy about the show not been on my mind, and had I not watched Black Panther the weekend before, I probably would've watched the show indifferently, after all, it was just another *telenovela,* something I'd seen a million times before. I would have dismissed how five out of the six main characters were light-skinned and foreign looking, something that made them stand out against a background cast of brown-skinned Filipino actors, who only served as foils for the main cast. I would have dismissed the producers' attempt to make Enrique's skin darker by piling on a lot of bronzer on him—something that just ended up making him look very strange. I would have dismissed the fact that Liza's character, the only girl with Western features in their fictional tribe, was constantly referred to as "the most beautiful." It was all these seemingly mundane things that made me crave something more for the show: a show that highlighted dark-skinned, or *morena,* beauty, instead of perpetuating the Eurocentric beauty standards we have now.

In the middle of February, a tweet from a Manila local expressed disappointment about Liza and Enrique's casting, describing that they weren't even Filipino. This tweeter was wrong in questioning the ethnicity of the two actors—of course they were Filipino—but the tweet expressed the very real frustration of the constant shunning of darker-skinned actors in the media in favor of foreign-looking ones. Liza tweeted back a defense of her Filipino ethnicity, how her dad was Filipino, how she was raised by two Filipinos since she was young, how she "looooves Sinigang," a popular Filipino dish. Her tweet quickly became a viral meme, likely because of two reasons: one, the wording of her tweet and her whole defense was ridiculous; two, Liza had missed the point.

It's hard to see injustice from a position of privilege. Haitian-American feminist author Roxane Gay writes that "one of the hardest things [she's] had to do is accept and acknowledge [her] privilege" (16). This is true for most of us—we feel that recognizing the privileges we do have negates the hardships we've experienced in life, which isn't true. Liza and all the other light-skinned actors are privileged in Philippine media, and light-skinned people are privileged in Philippine society. It is a privilege that they should recognize. According to Gay, "You need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about" (17). There needs to be a change in the way Philippine culture defines what is beautiful, and, with their influence over the general public, these actors have the power to instigate that change.

In an interview last February with CBC Arts, Amandla Stenberg, an actress most recognized for her role as Rue in *The Hunger Games* and star of the recent movie *Everything, Everything,* reveals that she was one of the contenders for the role of Shuri in *Black Panther*. Stenberg decided against continuing to fight for the role, as the rest of the cast would be darker-skinned, while she was lighter-skinned and biracial. She recognized that colorism was prevalent in Hollywood—lighter-skinned African Americans were favored for African-American characters. Stenberg acknowledges the privilege she has, and she knows the importance of representation. Lighter-skinned Filipino actors should do the same and work to help promote their *morena* counterparts.

The real power lies with the television producers. The main reason they cast these light-skinned actors in starring roles is that that's what sells to the public. It's a cycle: they take advantage of a beauty standard that already exists, which leads to the perpetuation of that beauty standard. The

key to breaking this cycle is by taking small steps. Producers could slowly cast more and more darker-skinned actors along with lighter-skinned actors. They could give darker-skinned actors characters who are more complex and real. They could get rid of the skin-whitening commercials altogether.

Changing a national beauty standard is no easy task, but real change can be made by changing the dynamics of the characters we see on television. Maybe one day, Filipino culture will become an environment where kids aren't teased for having dark skin, and young girls won't feel the need to bleach their skin or hide from the sun to feel beautiful.

Works Cited

Gay, Roxane. "Peculiar Benefits." *Bad Feminist.* New York: Harper, 2014. 15–19. Print.