

STEREOTYPICALLY, ME

Director's Statement

Perception in our world is everything. It is what our eyes determine on the surface to be good, bad, right, wrong, intelligent, average, pretty, or ugly. These perceptions are informed by our experiences, world-view, education, or lack thereof, and what we accept as truth delivered to us via our media.

Although I am American, I am not perceived as being American to many. My parents were born in Puerto Rico and they are just as American as I am. I was born in New York City, thanks mainly to my grandparents who came to Manhattan to find employment. Both non-English speaking grandmothers worked as seamstresses. That makes them stereotypes in the eyes of many. My father worked as a janitor for the Board of Education and a superintendant of a building where we lived five in a one bedroom. That makes us stereotypes. I dropped out of high school a month after my 15th birthday, which makes me a stereotype. In America, it seems, when you are poor, struggling, and trying to build a life, you are labeled a stereotype. Yet what others perceive as stereotypes are merely the humble beginnings of many hardworking people trying to pursue the American dream. Through double shifts and determination my parents bought their first home in the suburbs. As a 9 year-old growing up in Long Island, I was asked often if I spoke Mexican. I was told I was black because in America you're either black or white, and surely I wasn't white. I was told that I look funny, that I was ugly, that I spoke weird, that I was stupid because I was different. In time, my father and grandmother's accents embarrassed me. I did not want attention and emulated the English I heard on sitcoms.

It is in that experience of feeling "other" and of being perceived as less than average, that I began, unconsciously, and as a means of survival I guess, to create different identities to help me navigate my environments. I became a chameleon. I wanted to fit in. So I rejected everything that made me stand out.

By: Linda Nieves-Powell

But all of that changed in 1993 when I saw John Leguizamo perform Mambo Mouth. A Latino playing many diverse characters? Yes, finally someone validated my feelings, and I was now ready to take on the challenge of sharing my own story.

As a writer, who creates Latina characters, I have to battle this thing I like to call “levels of Latinaness.” When I’m inspired to write, I first have to ask myself a series of questions: How Latina should my characters be? Should they speak with or without accents? Are they blue collar or hold advanced degrees? Are they first generation, second generation, or are they completely devoid of any Latina characteristics and only possess a surname as evidence of their ethnic connection. If I make my characters maids, drug dealers, or whores, will there be a backlash from my own community, accusing me of perpetuating stereotypes? Before I can even begin to write, I have to figure out how to present my characters in a universal way that will appeal to everyone. This is constant pressure.

Many Latina artists are aware of the “levels of Latinaness” issue. It’s an issue we grapple with in every new creative endeavor. For some of us, our process is plagued early on with the old marketing question: Will it speak to middle America? So for some of us, it’s never as easy as, write what you know, or write from your heart, or write what you’d want to see. If it were, I’m sure more of our work would be seen. The reality is I have to challenge myself to not edit as I write and this brings me to writer, Virginia Woolf who had a very similar problem. The more I examine the lack of Latina stories in the industry, the more I keep coming back to Woolf’s essay, *A Room of One’s Own*.

In her essay, Woolf created a fictional character named Judith, William Shakespeare’s gifted sister, as proof that had Judith existed during that time and pursued the same profession her brother had, she would have never succeeded due to the many obstacles of being female in a patriarchal society. If I used the same premise, and named Judith, Marisol and use Hollywood as the industry, then Marisol’s plight would be very similar to Judith Shakespeare’s plight. Both fictional

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women are perceived as “other” or not equal to their more successful counterparts. Therefore they are not taken seriously and forced into the background or into roles that would seem more “believable” to the majority.

Woolf believed that in order to succeed as a writer, a woman had to think like a man, write like a man, to gain access to those opportunities in publishing and Academia that were always given to men. Woolf felt the only way to win in this game was to compromise part of her femininity in order to fulfill her dream of being a published writer. Although I completely understand Woolf’s logic, I disagree and refuse to do that. I will not allow the perceptions others have of me, to get in the way of my telling stories that I feel need to be told. It’s a decision I had to make early on my journey, not an easy one, but an important one nonetheless. The irony is however, that without the ideas in Woolf’s, *A Room of One’s Own*, maybe I would be on a lower rung of the female writer evolutionary ladder. Her point of view, whether I agree with it or not, has paved the way for female writers today to speak their minds. Evolution, and the time in which we live, are a huge part of why some of us are afforded opportunities and others, with equal talent, are not.

The inspiration for *Stereotypically, Me* came from these conflicting thoughts and my early experiences of finding an identity that works for me. Do I kill my perceived stereotypical muse to gain access to those bigger opportunities? Do I accept whatever fate and remain true to my voice? And die an unsung hero? Or do I sell out for the chance at the Hollywood dream.

Although this is a serious issue for many artists, *Stereotypically, Me*, is a comedy and parody of sorts that explores the relationship between a Latina writer and her stereotypical muse. This film is also about how the Latino culture influences our choice of characters. Many times the Latino culture informs my storytelling and is just as important as my plot points. Something you don’t see in a series like *Girls on HBO*.

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As I wrote in a recent blog:

“If I were to cast four Latina actors tomorrow and recreate a scene from HBO Girls, with the same dialogue, and the same direction, it would be viewed as unrealistic. I can assure you it wouldn’t fly with the suits. Because the subtext would read: No one wants to see assimilated, educated, Americanized Latinas exploring life the way white chicks do. I get the feeling when Latinas tell their stories we have to add a few teen pregnancies, an MC to rock the mic, a couple of gun shots, and lots of immigration problems. For Latinas, we’re always relegated to the background, or those other roles that seem more appropriate for us, more believable to the mainstream. The problem in this industry is perception, an industry’s perception of a group of people, their differences and similarities, and the perception of the audience who tunes in. It’s based on hunches, assumptions, prejudices, life experiences, and winning numbers. Those numbers that tell the suits what works and what doesn’t based on the majority. And according to those numbers, Latinas are still viewed as outliers.”

Yet, what determines mainstream if in a hundred years Latinos are the dominant segment of the population?

The perception of what a Latina or Latino is or should be, is what I feel needs to change. And that is what fuels my passion. I come to the writing process, like Lydia my protagonist, with pressure to fit in somewhere. The pressure to make sure that the mainstream audience is being serviced properly, while making sure I stay true to my voice. Because what is important to me is the message I am delivering, that is: Other people’s perception of you is not who you are. The perception of one’s self is all that is real.

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