

The Washington Post

Arts and Entertainment

# Meet Dylan Marron, the actor and playwright behind those ‘every single word spoken by a person of color’ YouTube videos

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By [Soraya Nadia McDonald](#) July 10, 2015

The Internet is all abuzz about a series of videos from Dylan Marron, an actor, writer, and director who lives in New York. He’s the creator of the Every Single Word Tumblr blog. The premise is simple: to illustrate the paucity of screen time and speaking roles for people of color in film, Marron picks a film, and then splices all of those scenes together in a YouTube supercut.

Marron, 27, found a powerful device that resonated, by taking movies that are anywhere from one to two hours long, sometimes more, and pointing out the comparatively infinitesimal amount of time actors of color get to speak in those films. It illustrated the issue in a way that’s easily digestible in comparison to spitting out the same percentages from Hollywood diversity studies in news articles year after year.

It’s art-as-data-visualization.

“The history of this project is that growing up as a brown kid in this country, you are very aware of your difference and I have always loved movies,” Marron said. “We’re talking the whole range, as mainstream as it gets and as independent as running for one weekend at an art house cinema. I love that medium, so I’ve been an avid consumer since I was young and when I was growing up I never really saw my reflection on film. I never saw people who really looked like me and I think when you’re younger, you don’t really have the tools to wonder why, or you don’t think to ask why. You just accept it as truth.”

Perhaps the most shocking video is the one for “Into the Woods.” After watching a few videos that where there’s at least a few seconds of dialogue, you come to “Into the Woods” and it’s just silent.

Marron is Venezuelan-American. He says he has firsthand experience with getting excluded from productions because of his race or his sexuality. If his name sounds familiar to Washingtonians, it’s because his play, “Ridgefield Middle School Talent Nite” was part of the [2010 Fringe Festival](#), and he was invited to stage it at the [Kennedy Center](#). You may also recognize him as the voice of the “Welcome to Night Vale” [podcast](#).

“Even as early as high school, when I would be performing in school productions, sometimes casting directors would come check out the plays and sometimes they would call me in for auditions for roles, and then out of those I would get meetings with agents. And the agents would always tell me the same thing, which was that there wasn’t that much work out there for me and that I was never going to play the romantic male lead. It’s an incredibly hard thing to hear, but you don’t realize it’s hard. It’s just that’s the answer.”

*[How Hollywood stays white and male]*

The Washington Post spoke to Marron Thursday afternoon by phone.

*This interview has been edited for length.*

**What’s the coded language agents have used to let you know you’re not right for a project because you’re a person of color?**

Being brown and queer, there’s a very specific role out there. But I find the big road block is being a person of color.

They say it on varying levels. Some are very explicit and some are not. Some are like, “let’s see how much there is out there” or “I don’t know how much there is out there for your type.” It’s funny how many euphemisms there are for that: “Well, I’ll keep my eyes peeled, but you’re very specific.” That’s such a funny way to put it. You’re very brown. You’re very “specific.” It feels like no matter how much I’ve done, no matter how much work I have under my belt, no matter how much I have to speak for, the talent just doesn’t matter.

*[Why Hollywood can’t do better on race]*

**What were you hoping to accomplish with this project?**

I guess this project is a means to explore why I’m getting this reaction. It’s like, “Oh, I know why I’m being told there isn’t much work out there.” It’s because this is what mainstream film looks like.

To root it just in terms of I’m proving why I can’t get work — this isn’t just a cause I’ve struck up for the labor issues. This is a systemic problem I’ve noticed since I was a kid. I’m telling you all of these things about the meetings with agents because it’s a way I’ve confronted it directly. But it’s just a problem I’ve been noticing for a really long time. I’m part of this industry. I want to keep working in this industry. I want to tell stories in this industry. I want to tell stories through this medium and I want to be in stories in this medium. But there is a real problem going on with the lack of representation.

You want a conversation to start from the work you make. My goal in this — I don’t want to get on a megaphone and start yelling. I don’t want to post a ranty blog series. I feel like I am just highlighting and outlining a pattern that is at play ... characters without names, movies that feature people of color and they speak for less than a minute. Showing patterns and showing them without embellishment, without comment and just placing them on the table is so much more effective than yelling about the problem.

### **Are things any better in theater?**

Race-blind casting happens so much more on stage in a really, really cool way that film has not caught up to yet because on stage the story is what reigns supreme. People are there for the story, and I wish film would catch on to that.

*[Broadway veteran Norm Lewis will be the first black lead of ‘Phantom’]*

**I’ve seen a lot of people saying that television seems to be the most welcoming frontier these days for nonwhite actors. Do feel like there’s a division erupting between film and television where if you’re a person of color who wants to be an actor your best bet is to pursue TV?**

I think television is good, but it still has a really long way to go. There are these really great examples, like Shonda Rhimes, who is doing amazing things, and Lee Daniels has “Empire” on. This is really, really cool. But unfortunately, they are exceptional. They are exceptions. We just need more voices like that. Or we need more people who are willing to tell these universal stories and use a whole diverse cast of faces to project these stories onto.

### **How do you pick the movies [for your video project]?**

There’s a big variety of movies, but they do have one thing in common: all of these movies are not about whiteness. They are not about white people. They are not about the experience of being white and they

are not historical dramas that are just about white people. They’re not about whiteness. They are about really universal and very human themes. They’re about love and they’re about loss. For example, “The Fault in Our Stars” is an incredible book. I love that book so much. John Green, I think, is a wonderful writer. I’m a huge fan of his. But nowhere in his book was anyone’s race ever mentioned.

So my question with these videos is why are we using white people to tell these universal stories? And what is that saying? I think it’s saying something really dangerous and the message it gives to people of color — and I can say this as a person of color who grew up watching these stories that I related to thematically and didn’t see reflections of myself in them — what it tells you is you don’t really have a place in this world. And this is your place. Your place are these specific speaking roles and you’re mostly credited as your job, like “busdriver” or “waitress no. 2” or “hostess.” I think what is so insidious about this is that it just creeps in.

We as a society are so, so well-trained at calling out racist people. We’re really great at ganging up on them on Twitter, pointing at racist people, and evicting them from the social sphere so that we feel really, really good about ourselves. But we really don’t have the tools to talk about systemic racism. I’m not saying that any of these films are racist. I’m not saying that any of these filmmakers are racist. I’m saying that the system that they’re contributing has some deeply racist practices.

### **What kind of reaction have you received?**

The response has been overwhelmingly positive and I’ve been really humbled by that. I’m also not the first person to point this out. I found a way to point it out that makes the point very clear. I’m not the whistleblower, but I’m glad my work is highlighting this problem.

### **I wonder if anyone has accused you of cherry-picking movies to make your point?**

The day's most important stories.

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The point of the series is to highlight stories that are universal that cast almost entirely white people and put people of color in a very secondary role.

**It seems like it would be really easy for someone to ask, “why don’t you do the same thing for white people in ‘Best Man Holiday?’” You know, the way every year during the BET Awards people ask why there’s no White Entertainment Television?**

People have been saying that since day one on YouTube in the comments. I don’t want to quote these people because I don’t think it’s a productive thing, but let’s say hypothetically to anyone who would say that, it’s just such a different thing. When Tyler Perry comes out with a movie, it’s called a “black movie.” The “Best Man Holiday” is marketed as and sold as a “black movie” even though it also deals with universal themes, even though these other movies are just like, “oh no, that’s normal.” This buddy comedy that only features white people? That’s just a normal movie. It’s not a “niche” movie. BET has to exist because everything else is White Entertainment Television.

**How long will you keep doing these?**

Really, I am a creator and an actor. I would much rather be telling these stories rather than highlighting these problems with the way they are told. I’d like to make 100 and then I would like for them to live on the Internet. It’s not my job ... I don’t want to dedicate myself to highlighting the problem. I just want to be part of the group of people who are telling the stories instead of pointing out that it’s so hard for the stories to be told.