

Full-Throttle Franchise



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*The Culture, Business and Politics of
Fast & Furious*

Edited by

Joshua Gulam, Fraser Elliott and Sarah Feinstein

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A critical quantitative analysis of race and representation in the *Fast Saga* films

Pete Jones and Joshua Gulam

The *Fast & Furious* franchise offers a fascinating nexus for exploring racial representation in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Produced by Universal Pictures, the nine films in the *Fast Saga* have consistently featured a central team of protagonists drawn from a range of racial and ethnic groups, and eight of these films have also been directed by people of colour. In both regards, *Fast & Furious* is anomalous in a landscape of blockbuster cinema marked by a clear and persistent white dominance at all levels: figures for cast and crew diversity from 2011 to 2019 – a key period in the *Fast Saga*'s development – show that, at its most inclusive, white actors occupied two out of every three roles in top-grossing Hollywood cinema, while people of colour accounted for just 15 per cent of directors (Hunt and Ramón 2020).

From the perspective of on- and off-screen representation, then, *Fast & Furious* appears to stand out as a model of Hollywood blockbuster diversity, as much of the recent press reception of the franchise suggests. For example, *USA Today*'s review of *Furious 7* (2015) proclaimed that 'the franchise's ethnically diverse cast ... is a wonderful example for Hollywood of how most films should look' (Puig 2015); and *Variety*'s review of the same film remarked on the difficulty of identifying 'another mainstream Hollywood blockbuster, past or present, with this level of ethnic ... diversity on display' (Foundas 2015). Similarly, *L.A. Times* critic Justin Chang (2017), in an otherwise scathing review of *The Fate of the Furious* (2017), applauded the franchise for its long-standing commitment to inclusive casting, noting that: 'Years before #OscarsSoWhite became the depressing industry catchphrase, the *Fast & Furious* movies were the glorious standard-bearer for multiplex multiculturalism.'

Compared with the enthusiastic press coverage, the academic literature on *Fast & Furious* tends to be far more sceptical about its supposed racial progressivism.

In her discussion of *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), Mary Beltrán (2005) notes how the film's 'multiculti' aesthetic belies a problematic racial hierarchy that privileges lighter-skinned characters such as Paul Walker's Brian O'Conner and Vin Diesel's Dom Toretto. For Beltrán (2005: 59–62), the casting of multiracial actor Diesel is especially significant: it lends the franchise a 'bronzer whiteness', which provides the appearance of meaningful racial difference but is also deeply invested in 'notions of white superiority'. Likewise, Lisa Purse (2011: 125–8) cautions against overstating the 'progressive agenda' of *Fast & Furious*, noting how these types of multicultural action films 'too often simply reconfirm white dominance'. These arguments sit within a much wider, well-established critique of post-civil rights representational politics that has been dubbed 'post-racial' or 'colour-blind' – terms that capture a celebration of progress which serves to deny continuing forms of white material and discursive domination (Gray 2013; Quinn 2020; Saha 2018). This critique complicates and sheds doubt on the praise that *Fast & Furious* has received for showcasing 'characters of all races' (Blay 2016).

This chapter explores the fault line that exists between these two competing accounts. In doing so, it contributes not only to scholarship about the racial politics of *Fast & Furious*, but also wider debates around the implications of quantitative data for assessing representational inequality in Hollywood cinema (Cobb 2018). Celebration of the franchise's on- and off-screen diversity – noteworthy and novel though it is – fails to register some of the more contradictory and regressive racial themes identified by Beltrán and Purse, scholars whose work is consistent with a broader cultural-theory critique of the post-racial entertainment industries (Saha 2018). One of our central aims therefore is to consider whether these scholarly arguments still ring true, in light of both the franchise's significant commercial growth over the last decade and the representational hype that currently surrounds it.

The secondary interventions of our chapter are methodological. Here, we use *Fast & Furious* to engage with a broader discussion about how best to approach the auditing and evaluation of on-screen representation. On their own, basic empirical measures of racial prevalence are insufficient, and can too easily mask the neoliberal and post-racial displays of multiculturalism that are found in texts like the *Fast Saga* films (Gray 2016; Warner 2017). However, questioning the politics of crude prevalence models shouldn't lead us to jettison empirical and quantitative methods altogether. Instead, drawing on insights from critical race scholars, we can push these methods in different directions and develop a

hybrid ‘critical quantitative’ approach. By combining a prevalence-based content analysis with other measures of on-screen representation, this approach enables us to delve more deeply into the films, uncovering the types of embedded textual dynamics and hierarchies that aren’t always picked up by a focus on visibility alone. We also consider the questions that this throws up about racial classification for auditing purposes. Quantitative approaches, often rooted in the measurement techniques of the social sciences, provide scope for more than just a dualistic Black/white logic, allowing us to gather representational data on the wide range of racial/ethnic groups that appear in the *Fast Saga*. At the same time, though, this highlights the complexity and arbitrariness of racial categorization in the first place, a fact that is brought into acute relief by the franchise’s ‘ethnically ambiguous’ protagonists (Beltrán 2005: 50).

To address these issues, the chapter employs a range of quantitative and qualitative methods. First, we review existing Hollywood diversity data to assess their strengths and limitations, and to establish some empirical benchmarks against which to evaluate the *Fast Saga* films. We then conduct a content analysis of the proportion of speaking roles among characters from different racial/ethnic groups to explore how the franchise ‘performs’ relative to dominant industry patterns. In addition to the proportion of speaking roles, our approach measures the distribution of dialogue in a character network analysis, something that allows us to further examine the relationships between and across characters (Jones 2020). Close analysis of this dialogue data, when paired with critical race studies insights and textual readings of specific films, reveals a complex picture of on-screen representation in *Fast & Furious*. Thus, by taking a critical approach to quantitative analysis of representation, our findings are able to usefully engage with previous arguments and illustrate how the films of the *Fast Saga* – despite surpassing the industry average for non-white visibility – reproduce a post-racial logic that confirms but also complicates the franchise’s reputation as a model of blockbuster diversity.

Establishing an empirical picture of the representational landscape

As more attention has been paid to representational inequalities in the film and entertainment industries, so too has there been an increase in attempts at auditing on- and off-screen representation quantitatively. Several annual studies

offer systematic content analyses of top-grossing films, providing data that can be used to establish empirical benchmarks for the diversity of Hollywood productions both in front of and behind the camera. Here, we review the findings of two studies published in 2020: the UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report (Hunt and Ramón 2020; hereinafter, HDR) and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's survey of inequality in popular films (Smith, Choueiti and Pieper 2020; hereinafter, Annenberg). Both studies provide quantitative breakdowns of the highest-grossing films each year, though each takes a slightly different approach to sample selection and analysis.¹ Together, these complementary studies help to map countable representational trends in mainstream Hollywood cinema during the period from 2007 to 2019, trends which provide a useful backdrop for our own analysis of the *Fast Saga* films.

The Annenberg data (Figure 4.1) show that the yearly proportion of speaking characters who are white declined over the course of the thirteen-year sample. This proportion remained relatively stable from 2007 to 2015, averaging 75.2 per cent over this period, but fell more sharply in the subsequent four years, averaging 67.7 per cent from 2016 to 2019. All other groups increased proportionally in conjunction with this; however, the gains were most notably concentrated among Black and multiracial actors. A similar trend is visible in the HDR data

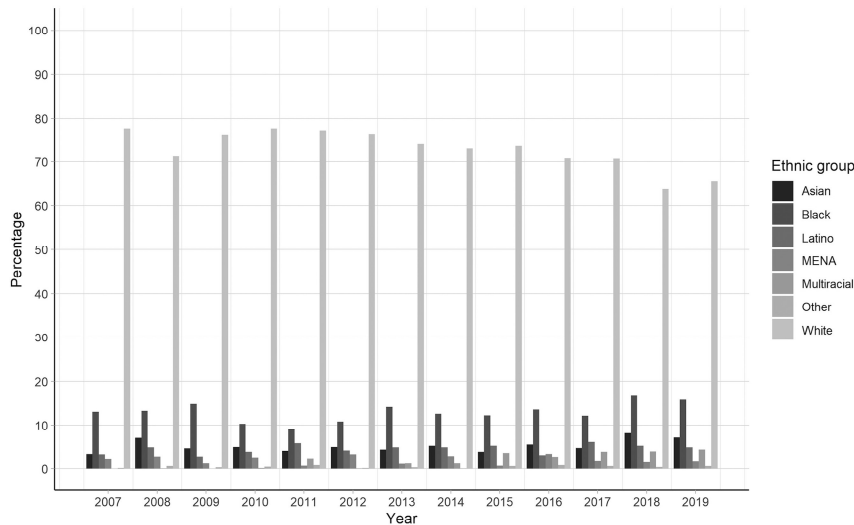


Figure 4.1 Annenberg Inclusion Initiative – Proportion of characters by ethnic group in top-grossing films (our elaboration from data presented in Smith, Choueiti and Pieper 2020).

(Figure 4.2), which present cast shares broken down by ethnic group over a shorter period, 2016–19. Nevertheless, the pattern was similar, with white actors accounting for 78.1 per cent of all actors in 2016 and 67.3 per cent in 2019.

Together, these studies suggest that levels of non-white visibility increased substantially between 2007 and 2019, with viewers more likely each year to see people of colour in popular Hollywood films. However, it's not clear from these numbers what kind of roles these characters played in the narrative, or the extent to which their inclusion was reductive or tokenistic. HDR aims to get a little closer to identifying depth of representation by also analysing proportionality among 'film leads' over time. The study finds that white actors' share of film leads fell from 89.5 per cent in 2011 to 72.4 per cent in 2019, which was a shift from a ratio of 9 white leads per non-white lead to under 3-to-1. Again, this shift is more pronounced in later years: the average for 2011–16 was 86.2 per cent, whereas the proportion fell more steeply after this period to 75.3 per cent for 2017–19. These figures are not broken down further by ethnic group, meaning that they offer a rather broad means for assessing representational progress. Overall, though, the fact that white dominance among film leads is considerably higher than across the total cast suggests that little was done in this period to address the longstanding white-centrism of popular Hollywood films.

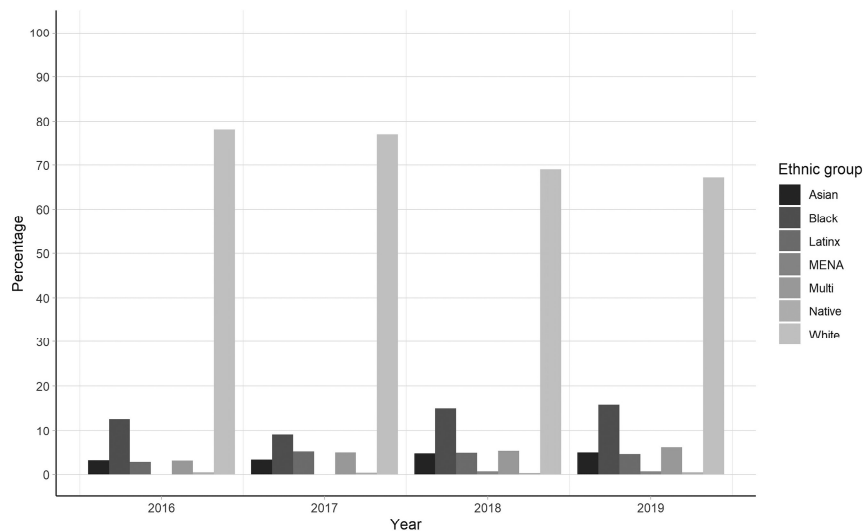


Figure 4.2 UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report – Proportion of characters by ethnic group in top-grossing films (our elaboration from data presented in Hunt and Ramón 2020).

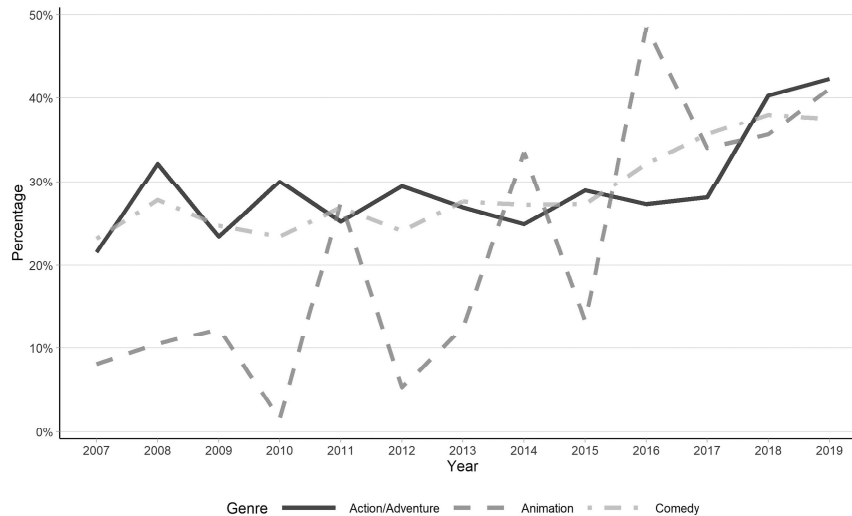


Figure 4.3 Annenberg Inclusion Initiative – Proportion of characters from non-white ethnic groups in top-grossing films by genre (our elaboration from data presented in Smith, Choueiti and Pieper 2020).

There are limited data for assessing how these trends might interact with the genre of a film, which is an important factor in determining the expectations for an action-oriented franchise like *Fast & Furious*. However, Annenberg does offer the proportion of non-white speaking characters in their sample each year in three genres – Action/Adventure, Animation and Comedy. Figure 4.3 illustrates that the level of non-white representation in the Action/Adventure genre remained largely static from 2007 to 2019, though there is evidence of a jump in the later years. Significantly, this jump occurs in the two years *after* the 2017 release of *The Fate of the Furious* (hereinafter, *Fast Eight*), the most recent film in our analysis. Thus, the benchmark of 20–30 per cent non-white visibility provides a valid backdrop for this study, allowing us to measure the *Fast Saga* films against other Hollywood action blockbusters released in the period from 2007 to 2017.

Diversity data, headcounts and the limits of visibility

The data in these reports are crucial in piecing together an understanding of the extent of under-representation in quantitative terms. The empirical picture established here would not have been possible a decade ago. What's more, the

annual publication of such data helps keep the question of Hollywood labour force inequities in the public and industry discourse. In this section, however, we wish to reflect on some of the limitations of relying only on prevalence data such as these in light of key critiques of visibility-driven approaches to representation. Our aim here is not to dismiss the value of prevalence data or the conversations that surround them, especially as those conversations constitute an important and growing effort among critics, audiences and the industry, to reflect upon Hollywood's ongoing racial disparities. Instead, we want to acknowledge that a more critical approach to quantification can advance our understanding of what it means for a franchise like *Fast & Furious* to be labelled 'diverse'.

Current conversations about racial representation in Hollywood tend to centre around questions of numerical visibility, embracing a particular kind of quantification which aims to measure 'diversity' and 'inclusion' in terms of headcounts of people from various demographic groups. Recent scholarship on screen sector inequalities has paid increasing attention to the discourse surrounding 'diversity' and diversity policy, including analysing the important role of 'diversity data' within this arena (Cobb 2019; Nwonka 2020). This scholarship calls for a more critical engagement with the data that's used to audit representational inequalities and the way it structures how 'diversity' is understood and addressed (Newsinger and Eikhof 2019).

Issues of and demands for representation have become increasingly central to the commentary and debate on pop culture texts in recent years – something that we see very clearly in the press reception of the *Fast Saga* films (Blay 2016; Chang 2017). Often, these conversations make reference to the phrase 'representation matters', which has come to symbolize the current moment of increased awareness of ongoing and historical deficits in the visibility of certain groups in the media. Here, calls for a wider diversity of representations stem from an understanding that seeing someone who looks like you in popular media can have powerful and affirming effects. For example, an implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumption of much of the discussion surrounding Hollywood representation is that demographic visibility levels should be in line with the general US population – that is, Hollywood films should 'look like' the wider country in racial/ethnic terms (Gray 2016).

Critical media scholars have expressed scepticism regarding a 'cultural politics of diversity [which] seeks recognition and visibility as the end itself' (Gray 2013: 772). For example, Herman Gray (2013, 2016) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) have both raised concerns over how the focus on representation-as-visibility has

enabled the neoliberal entertainment industries to simultaneously increase the levels of visible presence of people of colour in the media while limiting the terms of diversity talk to individualistic definitions of race as a marketable visual identity category. These perspectives caution that representation-as-visibility is insufficient for addressing the entrenched racism within representational systems, as it discursively constructs diversity in such a depoliticized way that 'racial neoliberalism willingly concedes, even celebrates difference' (Gray 2013: 780). Indeed, they ask us to think about how strategies such as quantitative diversity standards allow productions to 'adopt practices which in turn permit the achievement of *certain forms of diversity* within a film's production whilst racial inequality and underrepresentation remain undiminished' (Nwonka 2020, emphasis added).

Kristen Warner (2017) develops a similar critique in her work on popular film and television. She explores how the proliferation and dominance of a visibility-based perspective helps to produce 'plastic representation': 'a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance'. For Warner, this 'plasticity' is the inevitable consequence of reducing demands for diversity to 'quantifiable difference alone'. Indeed, one of the limitations of benchmarks based on racial prevalence models is that they can be satisfied through tokenism, whereby the addition of a handful of non-white characters may significantly impact the data even if their narrative contribution is minimal. Warner's account serves as another reminder that quantitative approaches must go beyond racial head counting, employing measures which are better able to uncover deeper textual dynamics and more of the complexity of a character's portrayal.

What these critiques ultimately highlight is that having the tools to quantify and audit differences in demographic visibility is important and necessary, but it is not in itself a safeguard against the deeply entrenched racism and hierarchies which operate within popular cinema (Newsinger and Eikhof 2019). As such, we must be wary of those discourses which imply that proportionality, or stratified visibility, is the end goal of representational struggles, carefully considering the link between how we think about 'diversity' and how we ultimately audit it. These considerations are central to our analysis of *Fast & Furious*. Given the tendency for current 'diversity talk' to emphasize visibility at the expense of dimensionality, it's not enough to merely analyse levels of non-white representation in the *Fast Saga* films – we must explore the *types* of representation, too. In other words, if these films stand out in the contemporary blockbuster landscape, do they only

do so in 'plastic' terms? Or is there a more substantial representational politics underpinning their multicultural aesthetic, one which transcends the post-racial, pro-white logics identified in the scholarly critique?

Methods and data

To determine whether *Fast & Furious* surpasses the empirical benchmarks established above, we conducted a content analysis of the first eight *Fast Saga* films. Here, we created a codebook with a number of demographic variables to record for each named speaking character in the films, allowing us to compare the representational landscape of *Fast & Furious* against the trends identified in the Annenberg and HDR data.² For each character, we recorded the following information: *gender* (Male/Female/Non-binary); *race/ethnicity* (following HDR, we used the categories Black, White, Latinx, Asian/Asian American, Middle Eastern/North African, Native, Multi and Other/Unknown); and *age* (of the actor on the date of the film's release). For the purpose of this analysis, we focus only on the results related to the race/ethnicity variable.

However, while this headcount data provides valuable insights into demographic visibility, it is limited in its capacity to reveal deeper patterns of narrative involvement. Raphael Leung and Bartolomeo Meletti (2021) explore these limitations as part of their development of a '3Ps' framework for measuring on-screen representation, where they distinguish between three 'different aspects of diversity': 'Presence' (i.e., whether someone appears on screen), 'Prominence' (i.e., the amount of 'screen time' a character has and how foregrounded they are within the narrative) and 'Portrayal' (i.e., the nature of a character's depiction, including what 'narratives and stereotypes' it may reproduce or subvert). Reviewing dominant trends in auditing representation, Leung and Meletti note that much of the current data focuses on the former aspect, 'presence', with far less attention paid to 'prominence' and 'portrayal'. This intervention is crucial because it helps to identify some of the gaps in existing quantitative approaches, and how we can begin to address them by utilizing more than just prevalence-based metrics.

Drawing on the '3Ps' framework, we expanded our content analysis for the purpose of capturing some richer information about characters' narrative activity over the course of each film. Thus, in addition to the named speaking characters, we also recorded each line of dialogue in the films, including the

sender, receiver(s) and sequence of the character interactions, as per the method outlined by Jones (2020: 22). This meant that we added two further character-level variables to the demographic variables listed above: *number of lines spoken* and *number of times spoken to* (for each film). In total, this produced data on 4,827 lines of dialogue between 107 distinct characters over the course of the eight films.

These character interactions can also be aggregated into ‘dialogue networks’ which allow us to do more than count the mere fact of a character’s *presence* (or visibility) in a film; we can also measure how much that character contributed vocally and track who they spoke to during the film (Jones 2020). The value of looking at dialogue is that it provides a stronger measure of the depth and centrality of characters from different demographic groups, meaning we can evaluate their narrative *prominence* as part of our investigation into the *Fast Saga*’s racial politics. Importantly, as we will explore later in the chapter, prominent characters can still be depicted in stereotypical and regressive ways, and so we complement these data with textual reading to better capture the *portrayal* of characters in the films. When combined, these methods constitute the type of critical quantitative approach that is able to extend our discussion of *Fast & Furious* beyond a basic account of the franchise’s visible diversity.

Visibility and vocality in the *Fast Saga*

Several findings from these data help us to understand how the *Fast Saga* compares with wider industry benchmarks. Figures 4.4 and 4.5 show the proportions of characters and lines spoken in each film respectively, broken down by race/ethnicity. These data reveal that white characters account for fewer than 50 per cent of named speaking characters in all eight films, a significantly lower prevalence level than is typical in mainstream Hollywood cinema. This fact, coupled with the broad range of different racial/ethnic classifications among its speaking characters, suggests that *Fast & Furious* is ahead of the pack when it comes to the kind of visible diversity that’s routinely privileged in critical discussions around on-screen representation. What’s more, the large number of non-white characters in these films render them somewhat exceptional within a landscape of Hollywood Action/Adventure blockbusters that continues to exhibit a clear and persistent white dominance in front of the camera: as noted,

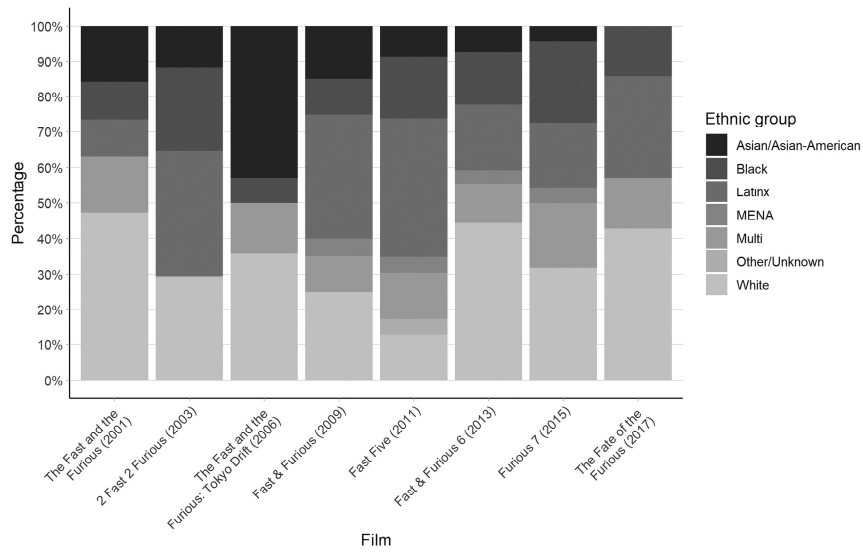


Figure 4.4 Proportion of speaking characters by ethnic group.

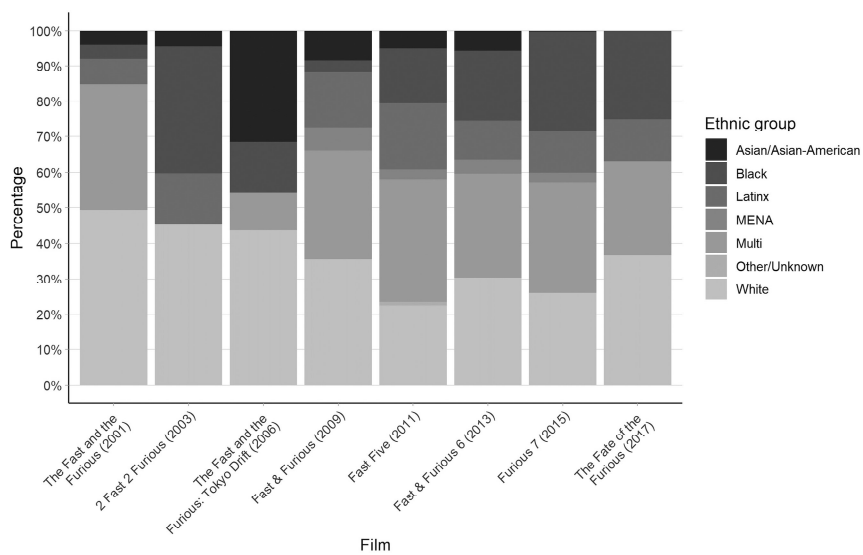


Figure 4.5 Proportion of lines of dialogue spoken by ethnic group.

the genre as a whole averaged between 20 and 30 per cent non-white visibility from 2007 to 2017; in that same period, the *Fast Saga* films consistently operated above 50 per cent.

From the initial content analysis, it's easy to see why *Fast & Furious* has been lauded for its diversity, with the data showing that the eight films far outpace the visibility-based benchmarks for mainstream Hollywood cinema by featuring a 'majority minority' cast throughout. Interestingly, though, the data in Figure 4.4 also point to a slight regression in this regard, especially when we examine them from the perspective of white visibility. The number of white characters as a proportion of all named speaking characters decreases substantially across the first five films and reaches its lowest point with *Fast Five* (2011), where the ratio of white to non-white characters stands at around 1-to-7. After that low point, however, this figure increases, so that films 6–8 contain a notably higher proportion of white speaking characters than *Fast Five*: the ratio of white to non-white characters here is more than 1-to-2. This shows that the visibility of white characters within the franchise actually increased in the period between films 5 and 8, a shift we consider below.

Looking at the distribution of lines spoken in the eight films (Figure 4.5) helps to uncover further interesting patterns, which offer an insight into the prominence, rather than just the presence, of specific racial/ethnic groups. Overall, the trend is similar to that identified in the initial content analysis: white characters never speak a majority of the lines, and the proportion falls consistently through the first five films before ticking up again in films 6–8. However, this uptick is much less pronounced when considered from the perspective of vocal activity, with non-white characters continuing to deliver over 60 per cent of the lines in these films despite the increased prevalence of white characters. What the data in Figure 4.5 illustrate therefore is that *Fast & Furious* does not just *look* diverse; it *sounds* diverse, too. Here, we can see how the *Fast Saga* consistently centres non-white voices, with non-white characters from various racial/ethnic groups speaking a majority of the lines in each of the eight films. These findings are significant because they point to one of the ways in which the franchise moves beyond representation-as-visibility, investing its non-white characters with a level of 'vocal empowerment' that's not always evident in popular films labelled as 'diverse' (Jones 2020; O'Meara 2016).

However, the data in Figure 4.5 also highlight important disparities. Although *Fast & Furious* can be said to privilege *non-white voices* overall, there are considerable discrepancies between the vocal activity of the different

groups within this category. For example, the dialogue data illustrates that while there is a generally high level of visible representation for Latinx characters, much higher than the industry average, the number of lines spoken by these characters is relatively few and declines slightly over the course of films 4–8. This suggests that even though Latinx characters contribute strongly to the multicultural look of the franchise, few are given roles which drive the narrative action. Conversely, Black characters demonstrate a level of vocal activity that is commensurate with and at times exceeds their visibility. By comparing the data in Figures 4.4 and 4.5, therefore, it's apparent that the relationship between these visibility and vocality metrics varies by group, and that Latinx characters in particular experience a representational deficit when it comes to their number of spoken lines.

Of the non-white groups, multiracial characters are by far the most vocally active. Their share of the dialogue across the *Fast Saga* is vast, second only to that of the white characters: in all but two of the films, multiracial characters deliver between 26–36 per cent of the lines, even though they make up a relatively small proportion of the speaking characters. Within this group, it's Vin Diesel's Dom, the legendary street racer, who is the most consistently prominent figure. Appearing in all but one of the films, Dom is the *Fast Saga*'s protagonist, the alpha male the other characters look to and follow. Indeed, the drop in multiracial dialogue that occurs with films 2 and 3 is directly related to his absence, a result of actor Diesel's brief hiatus to pursue other projects.

This high level of vocal activity corresponds with previous scholarship about the privileged position of multiracial characters in the franchise. In her analysis of the first film, Beltrán (2005) situates it within a cycle of post-millennium Hollywood action movies that root their narratives in multicultural urban environments and regularly feature multiracial actors as protagonists. For Beltrán (2005: 59), these 'multiculti action films' embody contradictory racial impulses. On one level, they articulate a 'utopic multiculturalism', wherein the actions of non-white heroes help to promote the idea that 'speed rules, rather than the colour of one's skin'. At the same time, though, films like *The Fast and the Furious* serve to uphold 'notions of natural white superiority' by foregrounding white and light-skinned multiracial characters at the expense of 'darker ethnic bodies' within the diegesis. Central here is Dom's 'ethnic ambiguity' (Ibid: 59–63). Played by Diesel, a mixed-race actor whose heritage has been the subject of intense speculation, Dom is unplaceable: 'a racial blank slate onto which any identity can be applied' (Carter 2008: 210). Indeed, Beltrán (2005: 54–63)

argues that Diesel's hero exemplifies a type of 'racelessness' that is prized within the multiculti action film, one which allows him to traverse 'cultural borders' with a degree of ease that's rarely afforded to darker-skinned characters. This combination of mobility and 'cultural competence' places Dom at the top of the 'new, culturally pluralistic society' depicted in these films; and, for Beltrán, it instils him with a 'symbolic whiteness' (Ibid).

Beltrán's arguments offer a useful counterbalance to the representational hype that surrounds *Fast & Furious*, highlighting key tensions in the way the franchise combines visible difference with raceless protagonism. Such tensions are crucial here because they complicate any attempt to categorize characters for the purposes of quantifying racial/ethnic diversity. The Hollywood Diversity Report (HDR), one of the most influential audits of representation in the US film industry, divides characters into the following groups – Asian, Black, Latinx, MENA, Multi, Native and white (Hunt and Ramón 2020). To enable direct comparison, we adopted similar groups in our own content analysis. As part of this process, Dom and his sister, Mia (Jordana Brewster), were included in the Multi category, alongside Dwayne Johnson's Luke Hobbs. However, the type of 'racelessness' that Beltrán discusses – and which is so clearly exemplified by someone like Dom – proves particularly difficult to capture within these groupings.

The Toretos – siblings whose surname hints at Italian heritage but whose depiction evokes a broad range of ethnic identities – illustrate the difficulties of categorizing characters according to race/ethnicity. For example, several aspects of Dom and Mia's characterization could lead them to be included within the Latinx group. Raised in the majority-Latinx neighbourhood of Echo Park, L.A., the pair demonstrates strong links to and affinities for Latin American culture, with the later films confirming that they not only speak fluent Spanish but also have Cuban relatives (Beltrán 2013). At the same time, Dom and Mia manifest their mixedness in very different ways, owing largely to the public personas of the actors who play them. Although Diesel and Brewster are both light-skinned multiracial actors, the former is much more clearly identified as such in the press, where he's described as an 'ethnic mutt' with a mix of African American, Italian and other unknown ancestry (Gleiberman 2017; see Carter 2008). The kind of diversity data generated by the demographic-based auditing strategy of representation-as-visibility is not always suited to capturing such nuances and needs to be complemented with a more critical approach to analysing race. Indeed, by assigning Dom and Mia to the Multi group, without also delving deeply into their on-screen portrayal, we risk losing some of the complexity of the *Fast Saga* and its emphasis on racelessness.

This difficulty is compounded by the casting of white actor John Cena as Jakob Toretto, Dom and Mia's estranged brother, in *F9* (2021). Played by Cena, Jakob's introduction consolidates the idea that Dom (and Mia) inhabits a 'bronzer whiteness'—something that is indirectly acknowledged in the film when one of the characters points to Jakob as evidence of an unexpected 'Nordic strain' within the Toretto 'bloodline'. These character additions and plot twists show how racial identity in the *Fast Saga* is fluid and elusive, with several protagonists embodying a particularly acute form of 'ethnic indeterminacy' (Purse 2011: 124). This makes *Fast & Furious* a fascinating but challenging case study for exploring questions of racial/ethnic diversity in Hollywood. In the next section, we look more intricately at who speaks in the *Fast Saga* and what this reveals about the films' racial politics.

Character interactions in the *Fast Saga*

Visualizing the character interaction data as dialogue networks provides a further insight into the relationships between characters from different racial/ethnic groups and how these change over the franchise's history. In these network diagrams (Figures 4.6–4.13), the arrows between character nodes show the direction of the dialogue, with darker arrows indicating more interaction over the course of the film than lighter ones. Nodes are sized proportionally to the total number of lines spoken by that character in the film, and only characters who speak more than one line are included. Overall, these dialogue networks offer a more in-depth account of the racial dynamics, allowing us to distinguish between individual characters and make comparisons based on their relative centrality to the narrative (Jones 2020).

These diagrams illustrate that the first, second, and fourth films share the same interracial buddy structure (Figures 4.6, 4.7 and 4.9, respectively). In each of these films, white cop Brian (Paul Walker) is paired with a non-white male ally. In films 1 and 4, this role is occupied by Dom, the multiracial mechanic who initiates Brian into the world of illegal street racing. In the second film, Black actor Tyrese Gibson steps into the void left by Diesel's hiatus, playing a childhood friend of Brian, Roman Pearce. The narratives are also similar with Brian going undercover in all three films to solve a crime. Over the course of his investigations, Brian encounters two highly racialized sites of power: the predominantly white world of the police/authorities, and a criminal underworld populated primarily by people of colour.

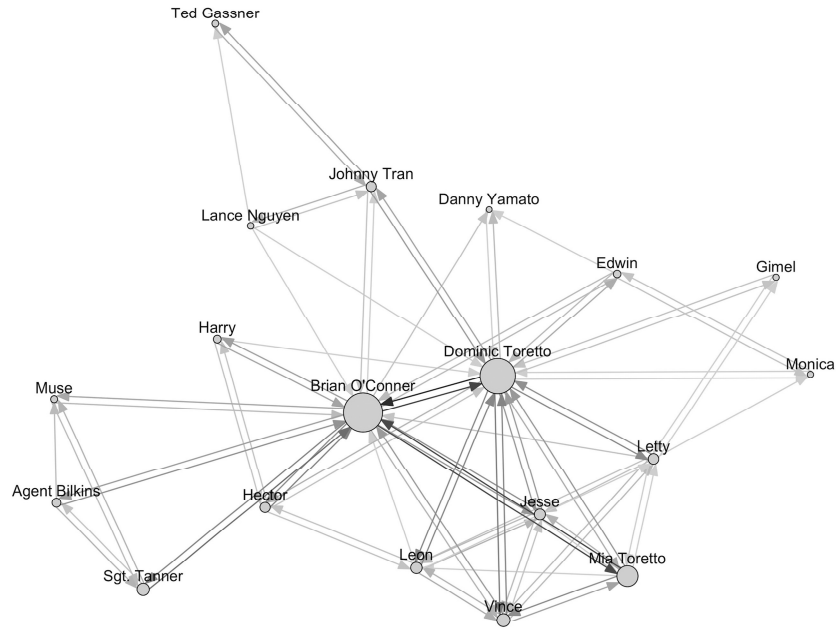


Figure 4.6 *The Fast and the Furious* (2001 Universal), dialogue network.

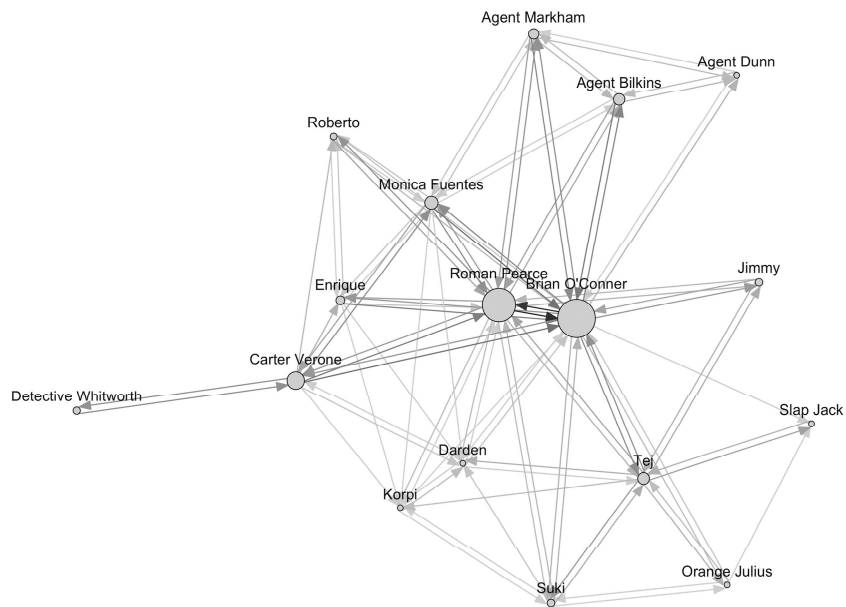


Figure 4.7 *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003 Universal), dialogue network.

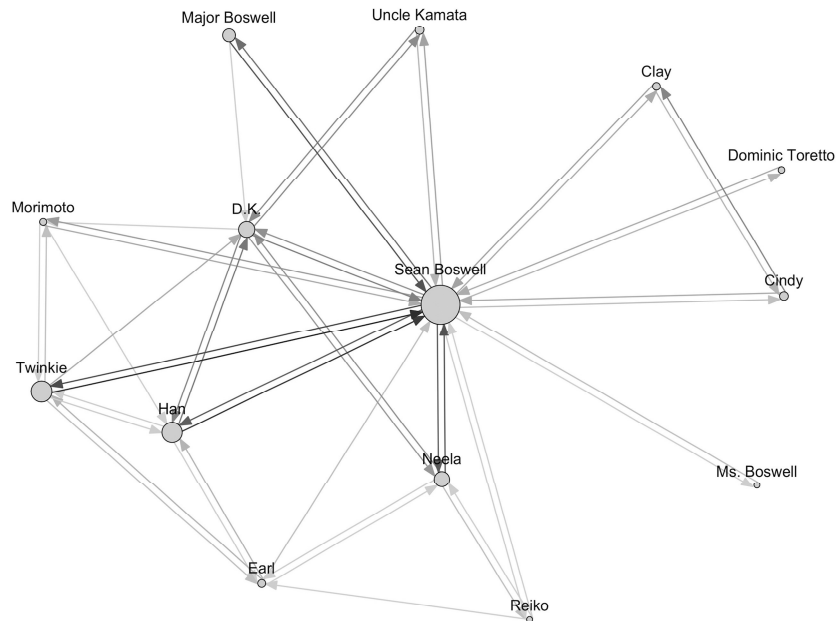


Figure 4.8 *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006 Universal), dialogue network.

Looking closely at the diagrams, the networks for films 1, 2 and 4 confirm an underlying emphasis on white protagonism and mastery. Indeed, Brian's centrality is evident here not just in the size and positioning of his nodes, but also the arrows emanating out from them, which branch off in multiple directions. These ties show how he moves seamlessly between his life as a cop and the criminal underworld that becomes his new home, engaging in the type of 'border crossing' which, according to Beltrán (2005: 50), is a prized skill in the multiculti action film. Except for Roman, someone we discuss below, it's the white and light-skinned multiracial male characters (i.e., Brian and Dom) who are most prominent and active within these three films.

In the third film, *Tokyo Drift* (2006), a different narrative character structure is used (Figure 4.8). Here, the fact that the film takes place in and around a Tokyo high school serves to move it away from the interracial buddy structure and a focus on tensions with the police/authorities. Instead, *Tokyo Drift* presents a more contained narrative, one in which white teenager Sean (Lucas Black) – a recent emigrant from suburban America – struggles to find his place within cosmopolitan Tokyo. However, while Sean is very clearly the sole protagonist

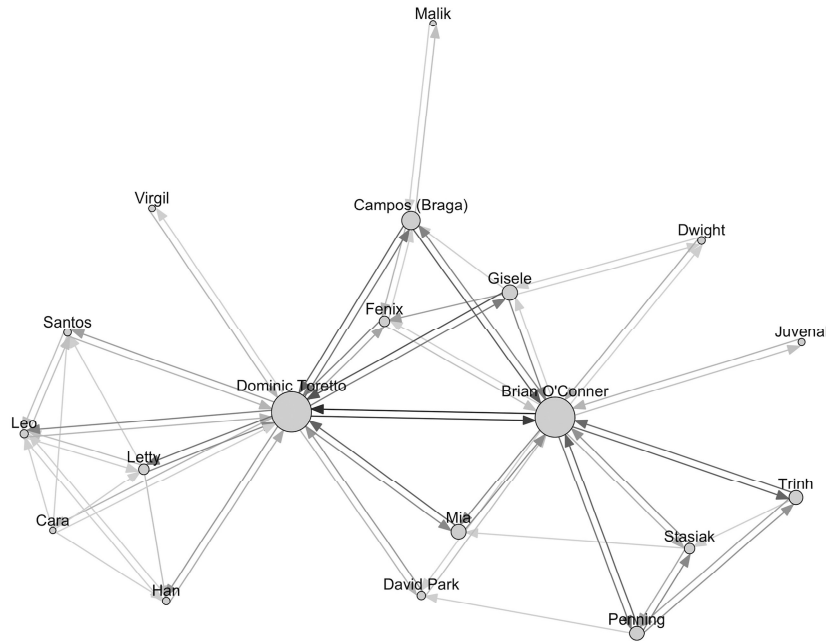


Figure 4.9 *Fast & Furious* (2009 Universal), dialogue network.

(as indicated by the size of his node), non-white characters still have prominent speaking roles, including Sung Kang's Han, a Korean American criminal who works for the Yakuza, and Twinkie, the Black high school student played by Bow Wow.

In the network diagrams for films 5–8, we see another pattern emerge (Figures 4.10–4.13). The narrative character structure becomes more homogenized across these films as the franchise hits on and consolidates its signature 'Fast family' formula. This formula is marked by a tight ensemble structure, whereby secondary characters from the first four films are reunited with Brian and Dom to form the central cast (the 'family'). Significantly, none of these characters – Han, Roman, Tej (Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges), Leo (Tego Calderón), Santos (Don Omar) and Gisele (Gal Gadot) – are white, creating a genuinely racially diverse ensemble at the core of the franchise. Here, individuals from Black, Latinx, MENA and Asian/Asian American backgrounds are given prominent speaking roles, as indicated by the size of their respective nodes and their location within the main hub of activity in the centre of the networks.

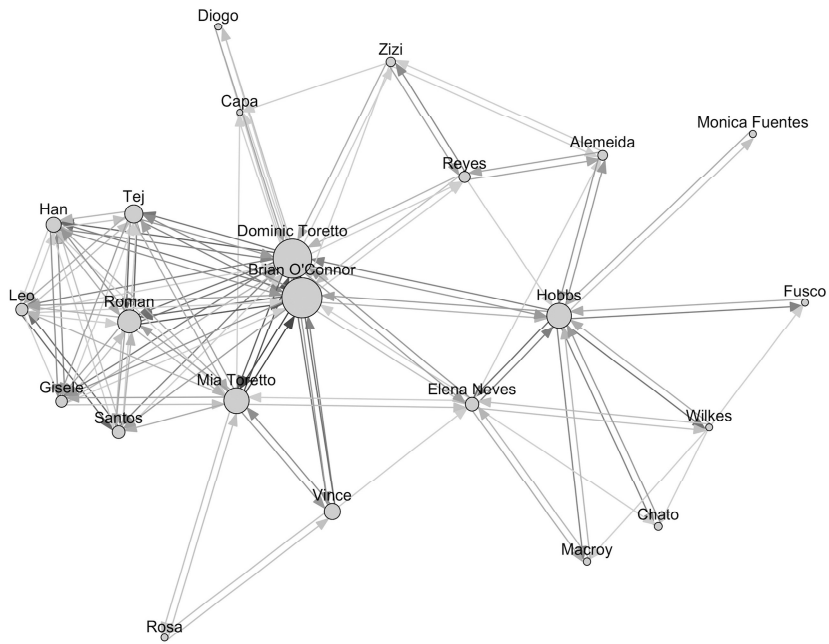


Figure 4.10 *Fast Five* (2011 Universal), dialogue network.

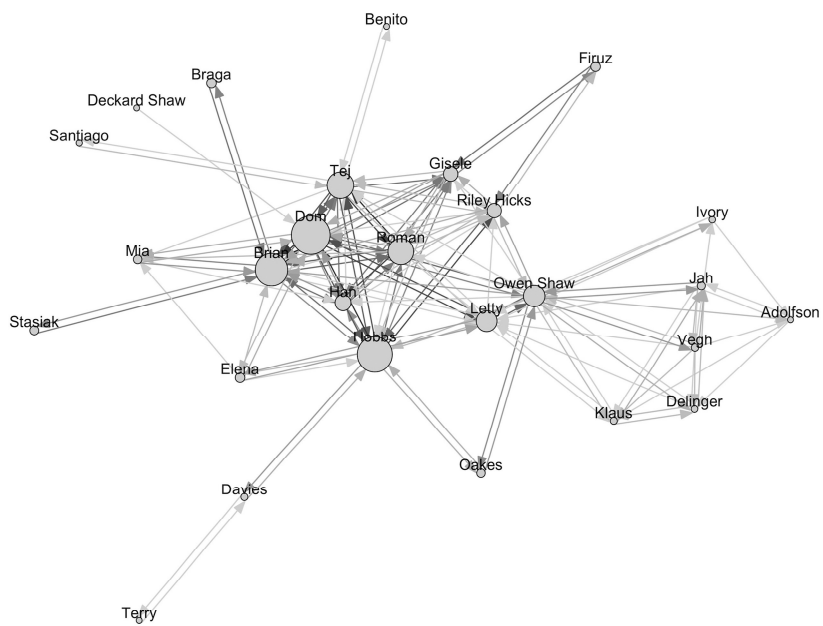


Figure 4.11 *Fast & Furious 6* (2013 Universal), dialogue network.

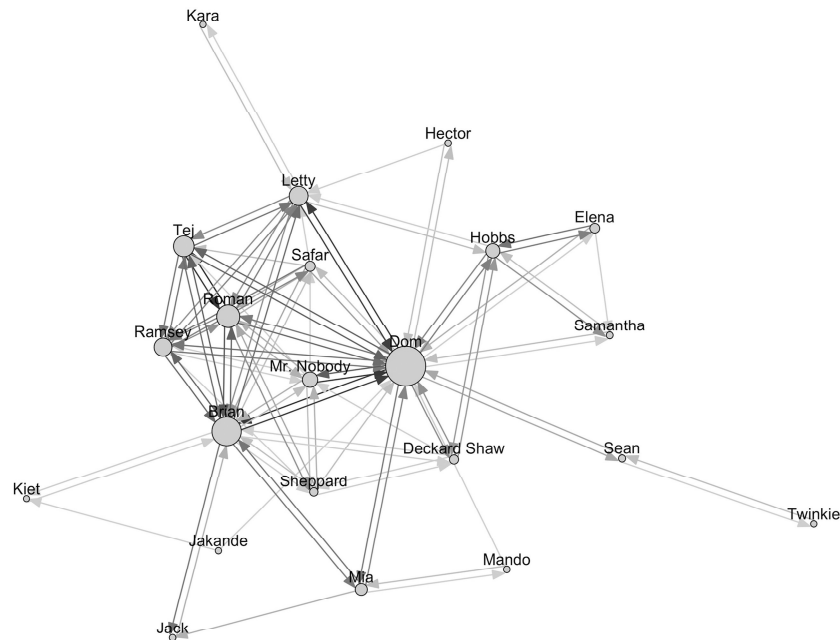


Figure 4.12 *Furious 7* (2015 Universal), dialogue network.

This is also the point at which multiracial action star Dwayne Johnson joins the cast as Hobbs, a US federal agent who first appears as an antagonist in *Fast Five*, before teaming up with Dom and the others in films 6–8. In *Fast Five*, Hobbs’s interactions concentrate on Dom and Brian, as well as his own team of agents – a team that contains a majority of non-white characters, differentiating it from the predominantly white hubs of institutional power in the earlier films. Starting with *Fast & Furious 6* (2013), however, Hobbs assumes a central role, interacting more and more extensively with the core ensemble as he becomes one of the most prominent figures in the franchise (culminating in his co-starring role in the 2019 spinoff, *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw*). The introduction and development of Johnson’s character is significant because it bolsters the multiracial protagonism that has been a consistent feature of *Fast & Furious* since the first film; and that Beltrán (2005) pinpoints as crucial to the franchise’s emphasis on racelessness. In the final section, we consider these findings in more detail and what they can (and cannot) tell us about racial representation in the *Fast Saga*.

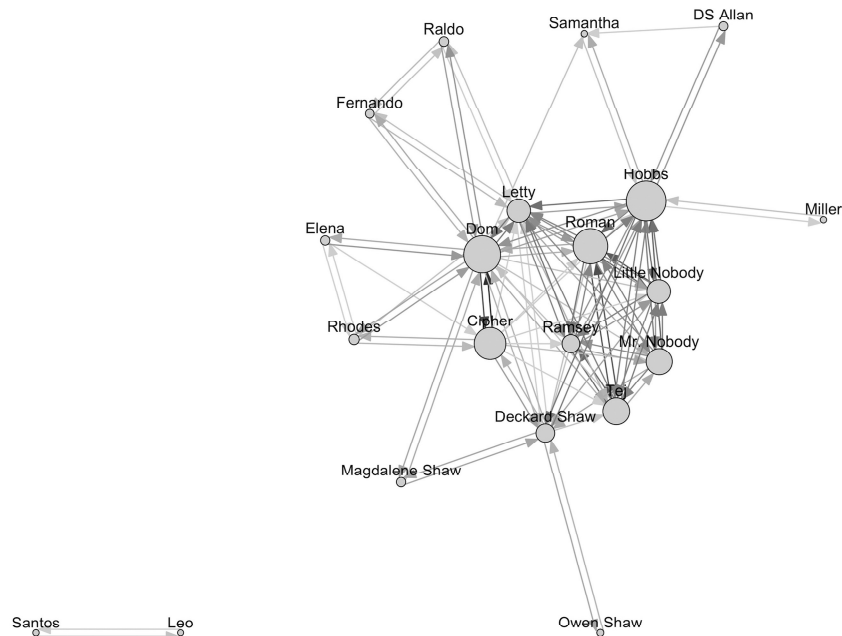


Figure 4.13 *The Fate of the Furious* (2017 Universal), dialogue network.

Discussion: *Fast & Furious* Presents ...?

The network diagrams offer an interesting account of on-screen representation across the eight films. Combined with the content analysis, they help to show the broad range of non-white groups that are included among the protagonists and secondary characters. Yet, the data in the previous sections also raise important questions about how different racial/ethnic groups are portrayed and the extent to which their presence within the films equates to something more than representation-as-visibility. Thus, for the remainder of the chapter, we complement our earlier findings with a closer look at textual and extratextual themes and patterns, drawing out some of the contradictions and discrepancies within the franchise's ostensible diversity.

As noted, one of the most interesting patterns is how white visibility actually increases in the later films. Several developments suggest that since *Fast Five*, the franchise has adopted a more racially conservative approach to casting,

tending to recruit big-name white actors as a way to augment its core ensemble. In *Fast & Furious 6*, the white Shaw family is introduced through Luke Evans's villain Owen Shaw, a former British SAS soldier who plans to disable the world's power. Although Owen Shaw is defeated over the course of the film, his brother, Deckard (Jason Statham), becomes a key figure within the franchise, operating as the primary antagonist of *Furious 7*, before joining the family in *Fast Eight*. Like Hobbs, then, Deckard transitions from villain to hero, a turnaround that's explored further in *Hobbs & Shaw*. *Fast Eight* also marks the first appearance of Deckard and Owen's mother, Magdalene (Helen Mirren), while their sister, Hattie (Vanessa Kirby), plays a prominent role in the spinoff film. In addition to the Shaws, several other white recurring characters enter the franchise after *Fast Five*, including Kurt Russell's Mr Nobody and Charlize Theron's Cipher. The only non-white recurring character introduced in films 6–8 is Ramsey, a hacker-turned-spy played by Nathalie Emmanuel. Collectively, these casting moves (re-)establish a strong white presence at the centre of the franchise, one that has persisted despite the elision of the Brian character following Paul Walker's death between films 6 and 7.

The dialogue data show that this growing emphasis on whiteness has not necessarily displaced the franchise's commitment to narratives built around a racially diverse ensemble. Nevertheless, the timing of this increase merits attention. That so many white recurring characters were added in the period between films 5 and 8 is significant because this is when *Fast & Furious* established its status as one of Hollywood's biggest cinematic properties. *Fast Five* was the first film in the franchise to top \$500 million at the worldwide box office, earning \$620 million off a production budget of \$125 million; and films 6–8 built on this commercial success with ticket sales of \$780 million, \$1.5 billion and \$1.2 billion, respectively. In comparison, films 1–4 earned considerably less at the box office, grossing an average of \$240 million per film, and cost far less to make: the first film was produced for a sixth of the budget of *Fast Eight*, for example. This is to say that *Fast & Furious* took a much more circuitous route to the blockbuster A-list than its closest competitors. Indeed, it was not until *Fast Five*, following the return of several original cast members and Johnson's addition, that *Fast & Furious* instigated the family/ensemble structure which has become so pivotal to its brand.

This rapid growth may help to explain two things: firstly, how *Fast & Furious* came to find itself so far ahead of wider representational trends within mainstream Hollywood cinema; and, secondly, why its proportion of non-white characters has reverted closer to the mean in recent years. Starting as a mid-budget film

series about street racing, *Fast & Furious* evolved under very different conditions from those other properties which have defined the overdetermined 'franchise era' (Fritz 2018: xv). In contrast to the likes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for example, the *Fast Saga* was visibly and vocally diverse from the outset: here, the comparatively low production budgets of the early films helped to facilitate the casting of little-known, non-white actors in prominent roles, as the producers sought to target an increasingly diverse segment of the domestic youth audience (Beltrán 2005). However, since breaking into the top tier of Hollywood franchises, *Fast & Furious* appears to have partly moved away from this strategy, applying the handbrake to its more racially progressive casting choices now that the films' production budgets regularly exceed \$200 million. Framed against Hollywood's broader racial conservatism, recent developments within the *Fast Saga* could be indicative of the continued entrenchment of the long-held industry belief that films centring non-white characters are commercially 'risky', despite evidence suggesting that audiences are just as keen to see these films as those which feature white protagonists (Hunt and Ramón 2020).

Turning to the films themselves, it's worth examining the portrayal of Latinx characters, especially in light of the content analysis data. Findings in the previous section show that the vocal activity of these characters does not match their visibility; and textual analysis confirms that while Latinx people and culture are afforded strong presence within the *Fast Saga*, they rarely play a central narrative role. Latin American culture emerges as an increasingly visible presence in films 4–8, where it's foregrounded through the frequent use of elements including reggaetón music, subtitled Spanish and Portuguese, and settings such as Rio de Janeiro. Developing her critique of *Fast & Furious* in relation to the fourth film, Beltrán (2013: 77–85) argues that these recurring elements fail to displace its underlying white centrism. Indeed, she observes how Latinx signifiers are regularly attached to Dom within the films, in a way that further underscores his racial 'fluidity'. According to Beltrán (2013: 85), then, this type of 'progressive visibility' amounts to little more than a 'Latinization of racelessness', whereby Latin American culture functions 'primarily as spectacle' and Latinx characters 'are circumscribed to roles supporting the more traditional American heroes'.

This pattern of Latinx representation – of high visibility but low narrative centrality – is clearly apparent in the pre-title sequence of *Fast Eight*, which shows Dom honeymooning with Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) in Havana, Cuba. The film opens with a montage of tracking shots through the city and surrounding areas, set to a reggaetón beat. Here, a series of (stereotypical) images – sun-kissed

beaches, brightly coloured classic cars and bikini-clad women dancing in cobbled streets – combine to establish an exoticized portrait of Cuba and its people. From this initial montage, the sequence cuts to a conversation between Dom and a local mechanic. Speaking Spanish, Dom intones on the ingenuity of the ‘Cuban spirit’, urging the mechanic, ‘Don’t ever lose that’. However, while appearing to champion Cuba’s distinctive culture, these scenes clearly privilege the resourcefulness of Americans Dom and Letty over that of their Cuban counterparts. Shortly after that conversation, Diesel’s hero beats Raldo (Celestine Cornielle), the fastest driver on the island, in a street race: despite driving the inferior car, Dom finds a way to pip his opponent to the finish line, proving (once again) that what matters most, ‘is *who’s* behind the wheel’. The sequence ends with Dom and Letty surrounded by cheering locals, before cutting to a final aerial shot of Havana.

Sequences like these lend a Latin American dimension to *Fast & Furious*, even though, as the dialogue networks illustrate, the narratives do not cede much centre-ground to Latinx characters. In this sense, the franchise is indicative of the ambivalent status of Latinx audiences within contemporary Hollywood. As explored by Beltrán (2013), the demographics for Hollywood cinema have changed considerably since the 1990s, with Latinx viewers constituting a growing share both domestically and internationally. These changes have proved particularly key to the commercial success of *Fast & Furious*: 46 per cent of *Fast & Furious’s* (2009) opening-weekend audience in the United States were Latinx, while *Fast Eight* recorded Universal’s highest-ever opening weekends in multiple Latin American markets including Brazil, Mexico and Argentina (Beltrán 2013; D’Alessandro 2017). Critical media scholars highlight the progressive potential of this turn towards a more diverse and global audience, while also pointing to tensions in the racially conservative strategies pursued by Hollywood. For example, Diana Leon-Boys and Angharad Valdivia (2020: 219–28) argue that studios like Disney favour ‘strategic ambiguity’ when representing Latinx characters in order to avoid ‘alienating their normative white audiences’. Leon-Boys and Valdivia observe how this creates a ‘flattened Latinidad’, whereby certain tropes and themes are deployed, but in such a way that they are simultaneously ‘subsumed or represented as ... inconsequential’. Within *Fast & Furious*, this plays out in the way the films embed Latin American signifiers at the surface level, without compromising a deeper narrative commitment to their ‘bronzed’ American heroes (Beltrán 2005: 60–2). Here, Beltrán’s account of ‘Latinized racelessness’

helps to explain why these films have been so adept at navigating Hollywood's changing demographics: it provides a version of Latinidad that's both specific and ambiguous, and therefore capable of appealing to a wide range of audiences (Beltrán 2013: 89).

In contrast to those in the Latinx group, Black characters speak a relatively high proportion of dialogue across the *Fast Saga*, with their vocal activity often exceeding their visibility. They also become more prominent between films 4–8, so that Black characters are among the most vocally active in *Furious 7* and *Fast Eight*. Within this group, Tej (Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges) and Roman (Tyrese Gibson) are the most consistently prominent figures; and Gibson's character, in particular, warrants analysis as one of the darker-skinned members of the family. To conclude this discussion, therefore, it's useful to look at the portrayal of Roman in the films and where he fits within the racial hierarchy identified by Beltrán and Purse.

Roman is introduced in *2 Fast 2 Furious* as the wisecracking friend of Paul Walker's white hero: an ex-con, he helps Brian apprehend a Miami drug kingpin in exchange for a clean criminal record. Like Dom in the first film, then, Roman occupies the role of non-white ally within the sequel's interracial buddy structure. Yet, there are crucial differences in the way that they each join Brian at the centre of the narrative. Although both characters feature prominently, it's the lighter-skinned Dom who is shown to possess superior skill when it comes to the 'cultural border crossings' that are required of the multiculti action hero (Beltrán 2005: 50). In contrast, Roman's lack of mastery is frequently played up for laughs, with *2 Fast 2 Furious* juxtaposing his hot-headedness against Brian's composure and adaptability.

Roman next appears in *Fast Five* and becomes a prominent member of the ensemble thereafter. The network diagrams show that Gibson's character is among the most vocally active in *Fast Eight*, his number of lines surpassed by only Dom and Hobbs (Figure 4.13). Despite his large share of the dialogue, Roman continues to play a supporting role in these films, functioning mainly as a source of comedy. Across films 5–8, he provides a running commentary on, or punchline to, many of the action sequences, usually expressing consternation at what's required of himself and the team. Here, Roman's panic features as a recurring gag, and it's contrasted with the quiet courage of the other characters. In these instances, a high level of vocal activity does not necessarily equate to narrative agency and empowerment. The opposite may in fact be true: Roman's frequent expressions of fear and disbelief undermine his position within a highly

gendered and racialized hierarchy of power, one which rewards the cool-headed machismo of the white and multiracial male protagonists.

Moreover, when Roman does perform a pivotal role in the action, it's often in a way that further emphasizes his racial difference. An example of this is the central heist in *Furious 7*, where the team must infiltrate a penthouse party in Abu Dhabi. At the start of the scene, Roman provides the distraction that allows Dom and Brian to make off with a vital piece of equipment: commandeering the DJ's microphone, he draws the attention of the guards by singing and catcalling female partygoers. Unlike the raceless protagonists, who move seamlessly within this new environment, Roman stands out – his designated role within the heist is to cause a scene and stir up trouble. These actions are consistent with Roman's portrayal across the *Fast Saga*, capturing how he is both a comic aside to the action and sexualized in ways that tap into regressive stereotypes of Black masculinity. The development of Gibson's character illustrates that more is not always better when it comes to on-screen representation. In fact, where regressive portrayals already exist – as with Roman's role as the hot-headed Black sidekick in *2 Fast 2 Furious* – increasing the level of prominence may only serve to amplify the potentially harmful impact of these stereotypes (Collins 2011). This is an important caveat of our dialogue-based approach and illustrates why it is valuable to complement presence-based analysis with both prominence *and* portrayal: prominence tells us how involved characters are in the action, but we also need to look at their portrayal to understand the value of this involvement.

Conclusion

As the 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' of *Fast & Furious* become more widely recognized as part of its brand identity, there's a need to engage critically and empirically with the complex nature of racial representation in the franchise. Our findings show that the *Fast Saga* films consistently outperform the empirical benchmarks for non-white visibility in mainstream Hollywood cinema, suggesting much of the representational enthusiasm around *Fast & Furious* is warranted (Blay 2016). Thus, when viewed in terms of the headcount data, *Fast & Furious* emerges as something of a Hollywood trailblazer: a long-running and popular series that embraced diversity from the outset, rather than incorporating it after the fact as so many other big-budget franchises have been seen to do. Indeed, the way the *Fast Saga* films use a 'majority minority' cast throughout,

while also consistently centring non-white characters and voices within their narratives, stands out as genuinely exceptional in a blockbuster landscape that still skews overwhelmingly white.

However, our exploration in this chapter highlights two reasons to be cautious, both of which serve as a reminder of why it is important to resist totalizing evaluations of how films 'perform' representationally. Firstly, recent instalments appear to have moved away from the racially progressive casting choices that marked the early years of the franchise, investing more heavily in the introduction and recurrence of central white characters. Therefore, at the very moment when *Fast & Furious* began to consolidate its reputation as a model of diversity, the *Fast Saga* seems to have regressed towards the mean of the broader Hollywood landscape.

Secondly, visibility and vocalicity in the franchise are broadly compatible with an underlying narrative dynamic which privileges those who are least racially salient. Here, we see that the *Fast Saga* generally centres white and light-skinned multiracial characters, with original protagonists Brian and Dom speaking the largest proportion of dialogue across the eight films. Indeed, ambiguously coded multiracial characters are particularly prominent in *Fast & Furious*. Best exemplified by Diesel's hero, they possess a striking degree of vocal empowerment and narrative centrality, confirming Beltrán's (2013: 77) earlier assessment that the franchise 'embrace[s] an ethos of postracial multiculturalism'. Within this dynamic, those from other non-white groups are typically restricted to supporting roles. Latinx characters experience high visibility but low vocal activity, for example, a discrepancy indicative of the type of 'plastic representation' Warner (2017) cautions against. Black characters, on the other hand, are more prominent within the narratives; however, their portrayal sometimes reproduces problematic stereotypes and may ultimately serve to reinforce the mastery of lighter-skinned heroes like Brian and Dom.

Press reception of the franchise tends to overlook these disparities, championing *Fast & Furious* as 'the glorious standard-bearer for multiplex multiculturalism' (Chang 2017). As noted, this account is not without substance: starting with the first film, each entry in the *Fast Saga* has exceeded the industry average for non-white visibility, a level of consistency that's unmatched among other contemporary Hollywood franchises. Yet, it's important that we analyse these figures from a more critical perspective, one that remains alert to the industry's continued investment in 'nourish[ing] racial hierarchies without calling attention to itself' (Purse 2011: 128, quoting Gabbard 2004). Indeed,

the *Fast Saga*'s combination of visible gains with a post-racial representational politics illustrates some of the blind spots and failings within the kind of 'diversity talk' that currently dominates. Yes, *Fast & Furious* is 'diverse' in the prevailing sense of representation-as-visibility, but it also presents some more troublesome patterns that illustrate why a focus on visibility alone is insufficient. At the same time, the films' emphasis on 'racelessness' – by way of their 'ethnically ambiguous' protagonists – highlights the challenges of placing characters into racial/ethnic categories for the purposes of quantification (Beltrán 2005: 50). We must therefore remain vigilant about both the value and the limits of quantification for auditing on-screen representational trends, especially where existing methods fail to register the racial hierarchies and contradictory dynamics that lie beneath the surface of texts like the *Fast Saga* films. Critical approaches to quantitative analysis of representation, as we have demonstrated in this chapter, will be invaluable in capturing this complexity.

Notes

- 1 The Hollywood Diversity Report (HDR) selects the top 200 films released each year as ranked by global box office, minus foreign language films. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's report analyses the top 100 fictional films ranked by US box office. HDR looks at both lead actors (defined as 'the protagonists around whom a film's narrative revolves') and total cast diversity, and its substantive focus is on questions of proportional representation in the film and television industry as well as the relationship between diversity and the bottom line. Annenberg differs in that its unit of analysis is the speaking character and its substantive focus is more on traditional content analysis questions relating to the prevalence of certain types of characters and the frequency with which they are represented through stereotypes.
- 2 The codebook and data are available at: <https://github.com/pj398/furious-chapter>.

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