THESIS

REIMAGINING CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF *LATINIDAD* ON THE U.S. SCREEN: THIS BRIDGE CALLED DISNEY

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ABSTRACT

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As one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, Disney functions as a cultural institution in its projections of mediated cultural content. Each second of their animated films operates to mold the corporation's chosen agenda. Given the salience of Disney films as creational and conformist cultural objects, I conduct a critical cultural analysis of two animation pieces, *Coco* (2017) and *Encanto* (2021). For this thesis project, I am particularly interested in the politics of representation of Latinx characters and cultures, as essential for children's understanding of the peoples and world around them. Each film, though delivered in different contexts at different times, includes common themes of the importance of family and change/migration to a new destination/generation. At the same time, the films displayed mixed successes with their interpretation, construction, and representation of *Mexicanidad* and *Colombianiadad* on the U.S. screen. These depictions were reflective and co-constructive (I argue) of the respective Mexican-American and Colombian-American interculturalities. Through such comparative critical cultural and film analysis, I hope to contribute to the existing and emerging scholarship on the representation and (mis)representation of Latinx population in Disney animated films, and in the cultural industry at large.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

Chapter 1 - (Mis)representation of *Latinidad* on American screens.....1

Mexican and Colombian Others: The Real, the Reel, the Magical.....8

Reel Representation: The Politics of *Latinx* Identity 10

Magical Realism: Latinx Stories as Un(real).....17

Chapter 2 - Miguel's *Mexicanidad:* Between Magic and Mariachi Music.....22

Bad *Hombres* and *Niños*: Subverting Symbols of *Mexicanidad*.....26

Breaking Colonial Dualities of *Feminidad* through *Mestiza* Consciousness.....31

Bordered Living: Eternal Lives and Atemporality.....36

Conclusion: When Reel Representation Dialogues with Real *Mexicanidad*.....41

Chapter 3 - Mirabel's *Colombianidad*: Between Miracles and Mere Mediocracy 44

Colombia, *mi encanto*: Colombia on American Terms.....47

Waiting on a Miracle: American Exceptionalism.....55

Surface Pressure: Societal Progress on Women's Shoulders.....59

Conclusion: When Reel Representation Undermines Real *Colombianidad*.....64

Chapter 4 - Disney's *Latinidad*: The Good, the Bad, and the …. Upcoming.....67

Similarities in Music and Magic: The Pan-Latinx.....68

Cultural Differences: Revolutionary vs. Retroactive Representation.....74

Future Directions.....80

Chapter 5 - Building a Bridge of Cultural Understanding.....85

REFERENCES.....90

Chapter 1: (Mis)representation of *Latinidad* on American screens

The United States has long been known as a "melting pot" of cultures and peoples, and this idealistic symbol often ignores the country's tumultuous history when it comes to racial and cultural relations. Racial and ethnic controversies are present in our politics and daily lives, particularly in regard to borders and boundaries- both the physical borders shared with neighboring countries and the social borders created between groups of diverse peoples. Due to the tenuous and often violent relationships that occur with the clashing of cultures within our communities, it is salient to recognize and study the intercultural politics and the corresponding communication that can occur in media representation, as this representation can both construct and reflect the actual intercultural (mis)understandings that occur on political, social, and cultural levels.

The politics of representation of *Latinidad* (Latin-American-ness at large) through the cultural industry of Hollywood is a contributing factor of the problematic nature of the intercultural relationships between various Latin American countries and the United States. An important contributing factor to intercultural relationships is how different countries/peoples are portrayed in the media of others. Specifically, the United States' media and entertainment industry often relies upon particular tropes and stereotypes to portray Latinx people and *Latinidad*. Within this industry is the vastly growing category of entertainment media marketed towards children. Children are incredibly susceptible to messages portrayed in media as they still lack the cognitive functions to realize that media is curated and designed to elicit certain emotions and present certain messages/portrayals.

As the largest producer of children's media in the United States, Disney controls much of the representation seen (or more importantly, not seen) by children onscreen. In *Latinx Ciné,* Martín-Rodríguez (2019) explains how "the presence (and absence) of characters of Mexican descent in animated films for children is a part of the conflicted history of representing ethnic/racial Otherness" (p. 356). Not only characters of Mexican descent, but Latinx characters in general are vastly underrepresented in the United States' media, and specifically in children's media.

In cultural studies, the politics of representation of ethnicity and race are closely linked to power and profit. According to Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021), "in order to remain a competitive transnational media giant, Disney implements strategies to maximize their profit [. . .] while remaining vigilant about not alienating their normative white audience" (p. 4). This normative whiteness of both Disney production and Disney consumption has resulted into a number of issues with the representation of Latinx people: complete lack of representation (Martín-Rodríguez, 2019), extremely negative representation (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Avant-Mier, 2017), or an elusive concept of a pan-Latino identity as a cultural totality (Calafell & Delgado, 2004).

As the largest-growing demographic in the United States and arguably one of the most misunderstood by the mainstream media, Latinx people are often the center of negative, xenophobic media attention. *Mexicanidad* and *Latinidad* have been used interchangeably, fusing together various Latinx in a single story (Adichie, 2009) of the Other. *Latinos Beyond Reel – Challenging a Media Stereotype* (2012) reveals how "Latinos, Mexicans, U.S. Mexican-Americans, and immigrants of color at large are undifferentiated in the public discourse" (2012, 10:12). Avila-Saavedra (2010) emphasizes how discourse surrounding Latinx people in the

United States has come to take on a *panethnicity*: "the idea that U.S. Latin American immigrants and their descendants are one unitary group regardless of nationality, race, and class" (p. 137).

Although anti-immigrant rhetoric targeting Mexicans in the U.S. has existed since at least the mid-1800s (Flores, 2003; Nericcio, 2007; Paredes, 1971), former U.S. President Donald Trump (term in office 2016-2020) brought that phenomenon of Othering of the Mexican body to its extremes, with his intentions to build a 2,000-mile long wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, and his infamous and inflammatory speech of 2015:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. […] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Trump, 2015).

This comment was far from the end of the then president's anti-Mexican rhetoric. Trump also described Mexican immigrants as "violent criminals." He used the tropes "drug lords" and "bad hombres," and necessitated their immediate deportation: "We'll get them out, secure the border, and once the border is secured, at a later date we'll make a determination as to the rest. But we have some bad hombres here and we're going to get them out" (cited in Hughey, 2017, p. 127). By using such "mock Spanish" (Hill, 1998, p. 680) in his use of *bad hombres*, Trump reinforced negative images of Mexicans, and consequently of all Latinx people, in the public sphere. Flores (2020) claims that such public attention produces "a climate in which Mexicans must be easily seen and known" (p. 31). This "knowability" of the stereotypes of Mexicans/Latinxs is reinforced not only by the news media, but also in curated entertainment. As Ramírez Berg (2002) points out, such repetition of existing tropes means that "a 'vicious cycle' aspect to repeated stereotyping arises because expressed learned stereotypes reinforce and [...] perpetuates them," thus turning representation into narration (p. 19). In tandem, Real's (1996) central idea regarding the effects and affects of visual culture is that "narrative and discourse dominate the

way we relate to each other and to the world" (p. 127), with cultural institutions playing a focal role in the process. Despite the end of the Trump presidency, anti-immigrant sentiment remains prominent in conservative discourse and news sources, adding to the (mis)understanding and (mis)representation of Latinx cultures.

Similarly to presidential rhetoric and public address, visual media has similar impacts upon our understandings of culture, making visual representation just as salient as oral. When asked about their role models, Latinx children said that they could not come up with any Latinx heroes in media they had seen besides the character of *Speedy Gonzales* (Sun & Parker, 2012). Although these interviews were conducted in 2012, few Latinx protagonists have appeared in years since. According to the UCLA 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report, despite accounting for 18% of the population of the United States, Latinx people made up 5.3% of broadcast TV roles in 2018-2019, and merely 4.6% of film roles in 2019 (Hunt & Ramón, 2020). With such little representation, the portrayals that do exist have heightened influence in children's conception of Latinx identity.

It becomes clear then, that the voices that control the representation control the narration, and vice versa. When one voice—or rather, company—holds the control and therefore the power of the representation, the narration reflects the strategic economic and societal goals of a singular, albeit resoundingly loud, voice. As Ahmed (2006) writes, "some things are relegated to the background in order *to sustain* a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced" (p. 31). As Latinx people are moving on screen from the background margins to the forefront, the previously sustained direction is being challenged and subverted and therefore, the representation is changing the cultural and societal narration.

As one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, Disney functions as a cultural institution in its projections of mediated cultural content. Each second of their animated films operates to mold the corporation's chosen agenda. Given the salience of Disney films as creational and conformist cultural objects, I conduct a critical cultural analysis of two animation pieces, *Coco* (2017) and *Encanto* (2021). For this thesis project, I am particularly interested in the politics of representation of Latinx characters and cultures, as essential for children's understandings of the peoples and world around them. Each film, though delivered in different contexts at different times, include common themes of the importance of family and change/migration to a new destination/generation. Through this analysis, I hope to contribute to the literature on Latinx representation and (mis)representation in Disney animated films. As such, my guiding research questions are: 1. What cultural elements/tropes of Latinx peoples/*Latinidad* are upheld by Disney?; 2. What cultural elements/tropes of Latinx peoples/*Latinidad* are denied or under/misrepresented by Disney?; and 3. What intercultural, social, and political ramifications does Disney animation carry for the Latinx in the U.S., and what does it mean for the field of inclusive intercultural communication between the respective communities? The first film will focus on Mexican-United States interculturality, and the second Colombian-United States interculturality, and then I will compose cross-cultural comparisons and study implications for the representation of *Latinidad* at large in children's animated media.

In 2017 during the height of the Trump administration, *Coco* arrived on the silver screen. With Mexico and Mexicans often featured in political situations and news media coverage frequently in connection to border control and illegal immigration, *Coco* presented an alternative view of the Mexican onscreen. *Coco* came in as an overdue cultural text and became a hit. Aesthetically, it is an artistic, sensorially engaging film. "Aesthetics aside, however, […] making

a specific cultural tradition accessible to a global audience, while skirting concerns over cultural appropriation and authenticity" is a "daunting challenge" that was mastered on multiple levels (Loria, 2020, para. 1). "The movie was a huge success for so many reasons, one of them being its all-Latino cast" (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 1). Collaboration of film writer-directors contributed: Lee Unkrich, who "wanted to make a film that people in Mexico could watch and feel like it had been made for them," realized that authenticity was central for the film (Betancourt, 2019, para 3). So, he recruited Mexican-American director Adrian Molina to co-direct *Coco*. Together, they dedicated the plot to the matter of ultimate importance in Mexican culture: *la familia,* in its multigenerational, community-based complexity. Puig (2018) emphasizes how "the movie is not only a box office hit- amassing $731 million worldwide […] but it's also been a timely and soothing tonic for a community that has felt attacked and disrespected" (Puig, 2018, para. 2). Interculturally, *Coco* did something right – and this essay will attempt to analyze what that was. Although *Coco* was initially made by Pixar, and distributed by Disney, as the two entities have now combined, I will be examining *Coco* as a Disney production. *Coco*'s resounding triumph throughout the United States prompted Disney to create a second film centering Latinx characters- *Encanto*.

After *Coco*'s success, Disney produced another animated film with a Latinx protagonist in 2021, *Encanto*. Like *Coco*, themes of *la familia*, and one's role within a multigenerational family structure were also present in *Encanto*. The creators of *Encanto* had an impressive weight on their shoulders to present the first children's film about Colombia from the United States, and, like *Coco*, there were both successes and shortcomings in their representation of *Latinidad*. Although the film has been celebrated for its entirely Colombian main cast (West, 2022) and its inclusion of various "nods" to culturally- specific behaviors and language, it has received

criticism for its lack of Colombian representation in the directorial team (Garzón, 2022). The politics of representation both on screen and behind the camera are important to consider in cultural texts, as they function to cultivate our understanding of different groups and races.

Through my positionality as an intercultural, film and media, and bilingual scholar, I aim to analyze and increase the scholarly understanding of Latinx representation, and specifically address current gaps in literature relating to the introduction of *Encanto* into media discourse. I will expand upon the work of previous scholars in intercultural and media studies to add to the cultural, political, and media context of Latinx representation in film animation. I will delve into the portrayal of Latinx culture(s) in the Disney films *Coco* (2017) and *Encanto* (2021), and discuss how Mexico and Colombia are reflected and constructed through cultural institutions of white America. Hollywood, and Disney animation in particular, create and enforce certain concepts of culture(s), and I aim to investigate them.

More specifically, I intend to illustrate how these films offer cultural insights into the American understanding of self in relation to the Latinx Other, and their respective cultures, reel and real. In order to do so, I will first provide the necessary cultural context of Latinx' portrayals in American media, as well as the historical and cultural background of a very unique cultural phenomenon: magical realism. I will then proceed by focusing on *Coco* to examine Mexican-American interculturality. I will then turn the focus to *Encanto* to analyze Colombian-American interculturality. In analyzing films centered around two separate countries/Latinx cultures, I outline similarities/differences, and make educated assumptions about the future directions and trajectories of the (still) pan-ethnic portrayal of *Latinidad* in United States visual children's media. I will then draw conclusions, in the hope of contributing to the still insufficient critical cultural and media scholarship on *Mexicanidad/Latinidad* in the U.S.

Mexican and Colombian Others: The Real, the Reel, the Magical

Scholarship on *Mexicanidad, Colombianidad,* and Latinx-American interculturality has traditionally been dedicated to the subject of immigration and border crossing, especially in relation to Mexico. Building on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2007), scholars across disciplines have studied the U.S.-Mexican border – geographical, legal, rhetorical, cultural (Aigner-Varoz, 2000; Cisneros, 2011; Flores, 2003, 2020; Holling, 2006; Lechuga, 2020; Ono & Sloop, 2002; Ramlow, 2006; Woodward & Jones, 2005). Some scholars studied anti-immigration discourses in the affected communities along the border (Holling, 2006), others have explored the topicality of DREAMers in the U.S. (Anguiano & Chavez, 2011). For Lechuga and De La Garza (2021), "borders are products of human communication: they have consequences, both material and symbolic; they shape, change, and impede human subjectivity" (p. 37). Borderlands create a certain state of mind, productive of a contradictive, dual identity, a very particular state of being, what Anzaldúa (2007) defines as *mestizaje* (p. 101). That stage of *mestizaje* is both misunderstood and misrepresented by Euro-Americans. Latimer (2008) explains: "We are used to thinking of people at a borderline, who are betwixt and between categories, neither one thing nor another (for example, neither a he nor a she, or black or white), as dangerous" (p. 56). Latimer's work points out a serious issue with respect to the Latinx community in the USA. That they often have a negative perception of being dangerous (bad *hombres*/*bandidos*) which results in their systemic cultural and social othering, which directly correlates with their mostly stereotypical representation, especially representation in the media.

According to Stuart Hall (1989) "the practices of representation always implicate the positions from which to speak or write" (cited in Ruiz-Alfaro, 2012, p. 1142). The question of positionality extends to the world of media, which, as suggested by Khrebtan-Hörhager and

Avant-Mier (2017), serves as both epistemology and pedagogy of living with the Other, like Mexicans in the USA (Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Cepeda, 2016; Silber Mohamed & Farris, 2019; Valdivia, 2018). Since the beginning of the silent film industry in the United States, Mexicans have been portrayed through exaggerated stereotypes, harmful for the Mexican community. Avila-Saavedra (2010) emphasizes how discourse surrounding Latinx people in the United States has come to take on a *panethnicity*: "the idea that U.S. Latin American immigrants and their descendants are one unitary group regardless of nationality, race, and class" (p. 137).

Latinidad is often used interchangeably with an oversimplified, clichéd version of *Mexicanidad.* Perfecto (2019) analyzes the imagery: "they are stereotypical images that get reused to display 'Mexican-ness': *piñatas*, ballet *folklórico* dancers, plates of enchiladas, processions at church, mariachis in full regalia, and *ofrendas* for the dead" (p. 117). Such representation has become a cultural norm in the U.S. because such clichés enable recognize-ability, which results in mass appeal, and in the case of cultural industries, brings profit. Sinta (2020) emphasizes how "in the United States, Hollywood films, sporting events, theme parks, and the top echelons of political power have featured performances by mariachi musicians" (p. 6). Mulholland (2021) underscores how mariachi performance is Mexico's most recognized musical style, and explains that "cultural performances such as mariachi are better understood *not* as authentic, traditional, ready-made cultural product, but rather as cultural processes entangled within hegemonic structures" (p. 294). The cliches seen in portrayals of *Latinidad* function to other Latinx peoples much of United States media, including Disney's children's media in particular, leading to physical and societal borderlands constructed between peoples.

Precisely because *Latinidad* is often synonymized with an oversimplified version of *Mexicanidad,* other Latinx cultures, including Colombian, are massively underrepresented. Many

representations simply offer pan-ethnic Latinx characters, with no distinction of country or specific culture. Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021) discuss how this phenomenon appears:

> Accordingly, Disney's strategies for appealing to the US Latina/a niche market typically consist of tenuous and ambiguous approaches to repre-senting latinidad. For example, Disney often relies on actors who appear ambiguously ethnic and seldom mentions their ethnic background and/or includes barely perceptible Latina/os whose ethnicity is ambiguous. (p. 4)

This results in the presentation of Latinx people as a culturally, linguistically, and racially homogenous totality that lacks cultural nuance, leading to the production of bland, stereotypical characters, unrelatable for audiences.

Curiously, *Encanto* is the first Disney film that at least attempts to center around a Colombian family, and simultaneously the first to depict Colombia in an animated context. However, Colombia-focused film is unprecedented, that is why the question of representation is immediately problematic, unspecific, and directly related to identity politics. And yet, such mainstream representations matter. As stated succinctly by Bollmer (2019), "The idea that representation is irrelevant today should be thought of as a reactionary position which, intentionally or not, works to legitimate discrimination, prejudice, and hatred" (p. 24). Companies like Disney have immense control over media representation, and therefore extreme influence in sociocultural relationships, particularly within the United States. Representations are ideological, and have clear impact beyond just what we view for entertainment.

Reel Representation: The Politics of *Latinx* Identity

Ultimately, cultural industries and the hegemony of power and perspective are focal concepts, necessary for understanding the *modus operandi* and the politics of affect by Disney. As Diffrient (2006) points out, the Disney company's very first depiction of Latinx cultures in *Saludos Amigos* and *Tres Caballeros* were financially supported by the United States

government in efforts to further American "Good Neighbor Policy" (p. 511). Therefore, Latinx representation was not brought to the mainstream animated screen in the pursuit of cultural inclusion or education, but rather in promotion of anti-war efforts. The introduction of Latinx voices—or rather, animated animals posing as Latinx characters—was purely political in nature. Ultimately, cultural industries and the hegemony of power and perspective are focal concepts, necessary for understanding the *modus operandi* and the politics of affect by Disney. Leon-Boys (2021) explains:

> As one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, Disney offers audiences symbols for fantasy, happiness, magic, and love, which have contributed to long-lasting success and popularity domestically and abroad. Known by many as the "happiest place on earth," Disney World (along with the other Disney parks) serves as an extension of the conglomerate's hegemonic ideals. Disney World operates within the complex cultural politics already present in the state of Florida. (p. 56)

The tension between the happy place, the fantasy world portrayed by Disney, and Disney's often problematic representation of marginalized and diasporic communities has posed a challenge for the conglomerate. Leon-Boys and Chavez (2021) point out how "Disney's treatment of racialized bodies is consistent with larger discourses surrounding the concept of border, in which Latinxs and Native Americans have been reframed as Intruders" (p. 2380). Crosthwait (2020) emphasizes how "entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (p.180). Crosthwait (2020) also addresses the power of animation: "firstly, its ability to transcend and negate issues of verisimilitude and realism, and secondly its highly effective capacity to invoke emotional responses in audiences" (p. 182). Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021) acknowledge the tension between demands for visibility and against stereotypical depictions: "Disney's efforts to create a profitable tween universe lead to the additional task of including Latino/as within this tween

universe" (Leon-Boys & Valdivia, 2021, p. 2). This proves challenging. Martín-Rodríguez (2019) puts it best:

> The history of representing Mexico and Mexicans in U.S animated theatrical feature films [...] is restricted to *The Three Caballeros, The Road to Eldorado, The Book of Life*, and *Coco:* a tourist travelogue, a pseudo-historical movie, and two films about the Day of the Dead. (p. 357)

Similarly, In *Latinos Beyond Reel* (2012), filmmakers Sun and Parker set out to offer an analysis of portrayals of Latinx people in American cinema, and demonstrate the effect that these portrayals have on societal understandings of what it means to be Latinx. One 9-year-old child that they interviewed, Jonah, stated that "I couldn't imagine a Latino person being the main character because a lot of the movies that I watch, usually, all the main characters are American" (2012). Jonah himself is Latinx and American (a United States citizen), and yet does not see that the two labels can both be true simultaneously. He and the other children do not see their ethnic identity represented in protagonists onscreen. Although these interviews were conducted in 2012, few Latinx protagonists have appeared in years since. According to the UCLA 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report, despite accounting for 18% of the population of the United States, Latinx people made up 5.3% of broadcast TV roles in 2018-2019, and merely 4.6% of film roles in 2019 (Hunt & Ramón, 2020). With such little representation, the portrayals that do exist have heightened influence in children's conception of Latinx identity.

Historically, animation studios in the United States have had a problematic history with Latinx representation, as they have consistently relied on the same stereotypes of *bad hombres*, as well as other overdone tropes, such as hyperfeminization and othering. These archetypes can be seen within the depictions of characters such as the "bandido" in the chihuahua Tito from *Oliver and Company* (1988), as well as Puss in Boots from the *Shrek* (2001) franchise, the "constantly pregnant Latina" in Chicha of *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), the "Latin lover"

version of Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story 3* (2010), and the "luchador" El Macho in *Despicable Me 2* (2013), to name a few. *Coco* filmmakers Unkrich and Molina made conscious efforts to produce a more culturally accurate portrayal of Mexican culture, and especially of *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead holiday. They took two separate trips to Mexico in 2011 and 2012 to observe the celebrations and local customs (Grobar, 2017). The Disney Company also hired multiple Latinx cultural consultants to aid in accuracy and cultural translation (Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021). Surprisingly, however, Unkrich voiced comments that undermined the role of these consultants, and he reportedly stated that "These meetings with the consultants and Latino community didn't lead to any major changes to the story [. . .] however they were responsible for many small tweaks that increased the movie's connection to Mexican culture" (AnimationXpress, 2017).

If, admittedly, only "small tweaks" were made due to these cultural consultants, there is clearly room for error in positive and accurate representation. It is astonishing that after these visits and the hiring of cultural consultants, it was still seen as a viable idea by the Disney Company to attempt to trademark the words "Día de los Muertos," as the working title for *Coco* in 2013. This trademark request was met with disgust from the Mexican community, and backlash towards Disney surfaced on social media as well as internet petitions. The creator of the largest change.org petition wrote: "Our spiritual traditions are for everyone, not for companies like Walt Disney to trademark and exploit. I am deeply offended and dismayed that a family oriented company like Walt Disney would seek [to] own the rights to something that is the rightful heritage of the people of Mexico" (Sesma, 2013). Disney's trademark request was rescinded only 3 days later, with the film name then changed to *Coco* (Rodriguez, 2013). It is

clear from this decision alone that there was a lack of cultural competency in the making of the film, which is seen through the bolstering of certain negative tropes in the film's narrative.

The lack of acceptable representation onscreen is no different when the gaze moves further south—Colombians are also frequently represented only through a white, United States lens. Luna (2021) explains how important a new story of Colombia is, asserting:

> Americans tend to think of Colombia as a violent, drug-ridden failed state, half-slum and half-jungle, which also happens to be the source of their coffee and Sofía Vergara. But who can blame them? They mostly learned about Colombia from movies and television, and there isn't much room for nuance in the exoticism of 1984's *Romancing the Stone*, the cartel violence of Netflix's *Narcos* series, or Gloria's humorous otherness in ABC's sitcom *Modern Family* (para. 1).

This exoticism and violence portrayed in a variety of films centering Colombia reinforces conceptions of non-white people and non-Americans as Others. Khrebtan-Hörhager and Avant-Mier (2017) argue that this limited and negative depiction of the Other solidifies the intercultural attitudes of "our youth – as consumers of a certain type interculturality, constructed on the screen as an unchallenged ideological given and used to create certain types of cultural Others" (p. 442). It is important that Disney is clearly pushing previous boundaries in its portrayal of a variety of races and bodies onscreen. But with only one depiction of Colombia available for children, *Encanto* inherits the position of the sole source of knowledge about the country on the Disney screen, and therefore consequently participates in the narrative of a single story. hooks (1996) reminds us that "movies remain the perfect vehicle for […] everyone who wants to take a look at difference without having to experientially engage with 'the Other'" (p. 12). Disney provides a viewing of Colombia that Americans can comfortably intake without leaving the physical comforts of their living rooms or the mental comfort of being confronted with a story that contradicts their understandings and values. One strategy that is used to achieve this comfort is to

portray their Latinx protagonists in a world where magic is accepted and part of the plotline, in other words, in a world that does not exist.

Like race/ethnicity, Latinx gender is often portrayed in a simplistic, conflated manner. Portrayals of Latinx women often rely upon the tropes of the stern matriarchs whose job is to uncompromisingly lead the family and be the center of familial rules and expectations. If not seen as the strong motherly figure, Latinx women are also frequently hypersexualized in the role of the "fiery Latina." Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) remind us that along with being seen as the "sexy spitfire," Latina women are portrayed as melodramatic and aggressive. Calafell & Delgado (2004), Cepeda (2016), and Valdivia (2018) have all explored how the portrayal of Latinas in media are often constrained within these roles as fiery sexualized caricatures, or subservient, docile, obedient side characters, few roles with profundity or differentiation from these stereotypes. Molina-Guzman and Valdivia (2004) also suggest how Latinas are often targets of both gendering and racialization, and are perceived as less valuable and less powerful than their masculine counterparts through this intersectional oppression. Anzaldúa (2007) discussed how women, and particularly Latina women, are often considered "*mujeres malas*"/bad women by society when they break the boundaries of the hegemonic limits placed upon them (p. 39). Latinas are therefore often constrained within these stereotypes, and if they deviate from them, society and/or the media narrative operates in punishment. Latinx stereotypes are not limited to women; just as many character repetitions can be seen within portrayals of men.

The strict, fiery, or subservient Latina is often accompanied by the caricature of a "bad *hombre*", along with a variety of negative stereotypes about Latino men as dangerous, lazy, criminal, deceitful and sexually-promiscuous (Flores, 2003). The derogatory frame of bad

hombres has historically been used in media contexts, and was greatly exacerbated by the use of the term in the 2016 Trump presidency campaign. Children's film and media followed suit, producing Mexican villains for mass consumption, like the villain el Macho from *Despicable Me 2* (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Avant-Mier, 2017). Martín-Rodríguez (2019) reminds us of another racist stereotype that became normalized in Disney's animation: "It seems that, as far as children's animation is concerned, the best Mexican is indeed a (Day of the) dead Mexican," as he references in his analysis the emphasis in Disney media on portraying Mexican men as deceased (p. 358). The Mexican man is often used as a catch-all caricature to symbolize all Latinos, applying the same stereotypes across cultures and ethnicities. There is a distinct lack of Colombian-specific representation in children's media, but within other media sources similar tropes to that of the Mexican man are significantly repeated. The bad *hombre* is simply replaced with the *narcotraficante*, and emphasis is often placed on Colombia's history of civil war and political unrest, furthering the characterization of Latinos as uncivilized and dangerous. When previous media depictions rely heavily upon the negative and seemingly primitive, differentiation from the normative can only come through inclusion of the unreal, or the magical. If the Latino was portrayed in digital media as an equal to the standard white character, denying the reality of inequality and representational exclusion. Bollmer (2019) elaborates:

> Transformations in how individuals are represented in the media reframe how they are located in political discourse, either as 'acceptable' citizens to be acknowledged by political representatives or as subjects who do not and cannot enter into the sphere of political representation– the exclusion of which serves to make the social seem like and organized, coherent, egalitarian body, even when born out of exclusion and inequality. (p. 35)

By following Bollmer, any deviance from historical patterns of media representation deliver consequences that disrupt hegemonic power balances. Repetition of the normative is not only comfortable, it keeps sociopolitical power in its historical place, in the hands of those who have

always held it. Therefore, accurate Latinx representation largely stays off our screens, out of our living rooms, and out of our minds.

The nature of film production and consumption changed since *Coco*'s original release in 2017. The occurrence and outreach of streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and HBO Max have altered the ways we see and consume film and media. The nature of these platforms allows for a more personalized approach to digital media consumption, as more films in particular are experienced within the personal space of one's own home, instead of in a theater. Even Disney has transformed with the launch of Disney+ in 2019, attempting to accommodate the demand for content in the new streaming world, and targeting young audiences. The access to a larger variety of content within the home has resulted in more films on streaming services made for children, and regulating the stories that they consume. As a result, the representation of Latinx children in film and television has become increasingly more present and positive, ranging from Elena Cañero-Reed's character in *Diary of a Future President* to America Chávez's character in *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madnes*s (2022). These narratives join *Coco* and *Encanto* in new Latinx representation on the U.S. American screen.

Magical Realism: Latinx Stories as Un(real)

Both *Coco* and *Encanto* contain strong elements of magical realism, seen respectively in the Land of the Dead in *Coco* and the magical Madrigal family of *Encanto.* Magical realism is commonly seen in representations of Latinx cultures, and particularly in Colombia. Before watching the first episode of the hit television show *Narcos* (2015), words flash across the blank screen. "Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. There is a reason magical realism was born in Colombia" (Narcos). Latinx author Gabriel García Marquez utilized magical realism in his

works through the "re-spiritualization, re-mystification, and deconstruction of traditional narrative" (Pedrós-Gascón, 2007, p. 3). In regard to Colombia, García Márquez receives much of the acclaim for popularizing the genre through his most prolific work, *Cien Años de Soledad*/One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) centers around the Colombian fictional town of Macondo, telling the story of multiple generations of the Buendía family. Ahmad & Afsar (2014) analyze the utility of García Márquez's use of magical realism, clarifying that:

> García Márquez's re-construction of Colombian history in Solitude with the help of the device of magical realism leads him to register a forceful protest regarding (in)direct physical/psychological/verbal/mental violence against the 'other' of the society. In short, Solitude demonstrates a successful employment of magical realism as a narrative technique to comment/protest on the way colonisation affected the socio-political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Latin American, especially Colombian, society (p. 24).

This trend to use magical realism began by García Márquez as a commentary on the Others of society continues to be employed by salient Colombian authors, including Isabel Allende, and Jorge Luis Borges, as well as a variety of other Latinx writers, such as Juan Rulfo, Laura Esquivel, and Jorge Amado.

García Márquez's influence in Colombia is not contained solely within literature, in fact, his impact remains even in modern political discourse. In 2016 a peace treaty was reached between the Colombian government and FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), a self-described Marxist-Leninist guerilla group present since 1964 in Colombia that has been known to resort to violent tactics. In his speech assenting to a cease-fire between the two political groups, the FARC leader known as Timochenko referenced the yellow butterflies that are a recurring motif in García Márquez's works (CSWpress, 2016). These butterflies are recognized by Colombian society as a symbol of "infinite love and hope" (para. 4), and this reference gave the public faith in his claims of wanting harmony. The yellow butterflies also

appear in *Encanto*, important not only as a nod to García Márquez and magical realism, but also as a fundamental element in Disney's shifting portrayal of Latinx people and cultures.

I analyze *Coco* (Chapter 3) and *Encanto* (Chapter 4) as cultural texts, representative of the current representations of Latinx people as protagonists and *Latinidad* offered to children through Disney media, and therefore occupy an important role in the sole representation of entire cultures. When analyzing Coco, I first provide insight into the status of the relevant scholarship necessary for understanding the complexity of Mexican-American- relations in critical cultural communication and media studies. I then proceed with the following three analytical categories of representation: 1. Bad *Hombres* and *Niños*: Subverting Symbols of *Mexicanidad*; 2. Breaking Colonial Dualities of *Feminidad* through *Mestiza* Consciousness; and 3. Bordered Living: Eternal Lives and Atemporality. I then draw conclusions, in the hope of contributing to the still insufficient critical cultural and media scholarship on *Mexicanidad* in the U.S.

I will then conduct a critical cultural analysis of *Encanto*. In order to do so, I will first provide the necessary cultural context of the genre of magical realism as well as the intercultural and political background of Colombian portrayals in American media. I will then examine *Encanto* as a cultural text through the analytical categories of 1. Colombia, *mi encanto:* Colombia on American Terms; 2. Waiting on a Miracle: American Exceptionalism; and 3. Surface Pressure: Societal Progress on Women's Shoulders. It is my aim to contribute to the gap in literature of the American understanding of Colombia and address the conflation of Latin American countries and cultures as one identity. Building upon literature of media and rhetorical representation of Colombia and American/Latinx intercultural and power relations at large, as seen in Disney children's films, and the entertainment industry in general.

Overall, I intend for Chapters 3 and 4 to be comparative critical cultural analyses of *Coco* and *Encanto*. I will use these critical perspectives to compare the cultural portrayals of the films, and the critical cultural (mis)representations that each offers. I will analyze the representation of *Latinidad* in both *Coco* and *Encanto* and the similarities and differences present between the two films. I intend to place special focus on the ethnic and gendered components of each narrative, and how they are represented both visually and auditorily within the films. My goal is also to examine how these respective cultures are created and negotiated through animation, and what those negotiations mean for Latinx demographics in the U.S.

The following Chapter 5 will be dedicated to a discussion of my findings, and to the verbalization of the salience of this work to the field of Communication Studies, and how it will hopefully contribute to the insufficient scholarship on *Latinidad* and Latinx representation in Disney children's media. More specifically, I will discuss the Pan-Latinx similarities present in each film, with a focus on their incorporation of music and elements of magical realism. Then, I will assess the differences in the narratives of the protagonists, specifically how their individual stories of rebellion lead to greatly differing results in regard to the treatment of their respective home countries and cultures. Next, I will discuss how the two films are located in the narrative history of other Disney films featuring non-white protagonists, and how they reify and contradict historical precedent of representation.

Finally, in the next and final Chapter 6, or Conclusion, I will look to the future of Disney's currently planned projects, as well as discuss other cultural institutions that carry similar impact on societal understandings of race and culture. My goal is to contribute to the existing scholarship on interculturality, Latinidad, its understanding, representation in animation,

and the significance of such cultural dialogue in the field of communication and media studies. I will now proceed with the analytical, film-based chapters.

Chapter 2: Miguel's *Mexicanidad:* Between Magic and Mariachi Music

Coco arrived in 2017 after a U.S. presidential election season full of anti-Mexican stigma and discrimination, as well as the dismantling of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) immigration policy. Nationalism and xenophobia were on the rise, and *Coco* contradicted these movements and functioned to satisfy the timely need for social and cultural affirmation for many Mexican people in the United States. The audience follows Miguel, a 12-year-old Mexican boy, in his journey from the Land of the Living into the Land of the Dead, as he crosses the metaphorical border reminiscent of the geopolitical border in between the United States and Mexico, which had recently been prominently featured in the political and news media spheres. "*Coco* takes place partly in a utopian afterlife: the Land of the Dead," (Crosthwait, 2020, p. 184) and this specific locating of the narrative highlights the salience of space, place, and borderlands. The colorful Disney animation applies these spacial themes to the story of the Rivera family, poor shoemakers in the fictional town of Santa Cecilia, Mexico.

The film title originates from Miguel's *bisabuela* (great-grandmother), named Coco. An ancient matriarch of the family, Coco is wheelchair-bound and is clearly nearing the end of her life. As Miguel's best friend, she watches feebly from beneath her beaded shawl as Miguel continues the Rivera family legacy, or rather, as he deviates from it. Coco's father is presented as a musician, who left the family to pursue his career in a very selfish and anti-family decision. Because of this, Miguel's love of mariachi music and his desire to be a musician must remain hidden from his music-hating family members. Miguel idolizes deceased mariachi singer Ernesto de la Cruz, and in order to pursue his dream, he steals de la Cruz's guitar from his tomb. This action causes him to be banished to the Land of the Dead, where he must gain the blessing of his

ancestors in order to not be stranded as a ghost in this Land for eternity. He joins up with a scheming skeleton named Héctor, who is revealed to be his great-great-grandfather, and the actual composer of all of de la Cruz's famous mariachi melodies. Miguel and Héctor expose Ernesto de la Cruz as the lying, murdering villian that he is, and in the process, Miguel gains his family's blessing. He returns to the Land of the Living in time to connect with bisabuela Coco in her last days, and in a tear-jerking moment he brings music back to the Rivera family and rectifies Héctor's place within the collective family memory.

This story of music and family is underscored by a dynamic soundtrack that incorporates traditional as well as modern mariachi music and poignant ballads. Visually, the stunning colors and patterns of traditional Mexican pueblos are incredibly detailed and masterfully integrated into the animated feature. The film takes place on the Day of the Dead in 2017, and features many cultural traditions of the holiday, including ceremonial *ofrendas* (altars) that honor departed family members, highlighting the Mexican cultural importance of ancestry. The theme of memory is emphasized through the award-winning song "Remember Me," with its disarming simplicity and sentimentalism, and serves as a "calling card for the film" (Crosthwait, 2020, p. 189). The song fulfills its purpose in enabling Coco to remember her father, saving him from oblivion in the Land of the Dead, and reintroducing the love of music in the Land of the Living. Overall, the film became an international hit. "The movie has been embraced globally, with it translated into about 40 languages" (Puig, 2018, para. 19). Most importantly, the film had a phenomenally positive reception in Mexico, which is salient given the timing of its release.

Coco both reflected and produced cultural ideology, as filmmaking does not exist in a silo, but is contextualized through social patterns and beliefs. Therefore, despite intentions of creators to encode specific messages within the film, audience perception can vary and transform

over time (McKee, 2002, 2003). When audiences make sense of the culture portrayed onscreen through particular storytelling and production methods, humanity gets redefined through experiencing the media in different time periods and societal eras. Bollmer (2019) outlines the importance of recognizing one's own cultural and bodily identity, stating that this means an individual "visibly conforms to norms negotiated in popular culture, legible to others as something that exists within the range of possible public identities–as seen on television, in newspapers, in film, or in any other form of media" (p. 32-3). In regard to *Coco* specifically, this gives salience to new identities in reality for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, as seen through the identities represented in the film.

Mexican-American intercultural relationships are therefore further complicated through the portrayals in the Hollywood industry, and Disney in particular as a mega-producer of popular media. The representation of *Mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness, Mexican identity, or the "essence" of being Mexican) is relegated to and constricted by the nuance (or rather, the lack thereof) that is depicted on screen. In *Latinx Ciné,* Martín-Rodríguez (2019) underscores how "the presence (and absence) of characters of Mexican descent in animated films for children is a part of the conflicted history of representing ethnic/racial Otherness" (p. 356). Within intercultural studies, the politics of this representation are correlated to hegemonic power and economic profit. As outlined by Real (1996):

> The reoccurrence of dominant racial, gender, and ideological patterns in media culture indicates a symmetry between the attitudes within the larger society in which the media texts circulate and the attitudes within the specific media text itself. (p. 134)

Despite being written more than 20 years previously to *Coco*'s release, Real's words ring true today as the political importance of representation remains a key element to "the notoriously tight Disney corporate structure. This structure is controlling, litigious, and profitable in the

extreme" (p. 135). The inherent whiteness of Disney production as well as consumption concludes in a variety of problematic representations of Latinx people. Martín-Rodríguez (2019) discusses a total lack of representation, Khrebtan-Hörhager and Avant-Mier (2017) outline negative stereotypical representation, and Calafell and Delgado (2004) emphasize the idea of a pan-Latinx identity that is portrayed as a watered-down totality. As a highly constructed and framed (quite literally) faction of media, animation is a salient field of examination in regard to representation. Martín-Rodríguez (2019) discusses animation as intercultural representation:

> No U.S animated film has yet presented an extended portrayal of Mexican Americans or Chicano/a/xs, a significant omission given current population figures, the historical presence of people of Mexican descent in this country, the average age of people of Mexican descent in the United States, and their movie-watching-habits, which suggest children's films should find in them a particularly receptive and sizeable target audience. (p. 357)

Coco quickly became a hit with audiences in the United States, as a long-awaited cultural text that was accessible to Mexican and non-Mexican audiences. All this considered however, is still relied on what Real (1996) defines as a "Utopian brightness of the magic (corporate) Kingdom" (p. 121), where the villain is defeated and the Disney formula is repeated through "a narrative of endangerment and rescue," and the triumph of well-meaning characters with deep empathy, as seen in Miguel and Héctor.

The simultaneous existence of an authentic, loving, multigenerational Mexican family as seen in *Coco* and the intense reality of the U.S.-Mexican border results in a cultural paradox. On one hand, the colorful scenes and music and representation of a border in a beautiful, glowing, marigold-petal bridge; on the other hand, child separation from parents, deportation, poverty, and possibly death. Yet somehow, the film was lauded by both public audiences and critics. Perhaps Disney's echoed formula of optimism and magical realism allowed for such a positive reception,

or maybe the utopian Land of the Dead portrayed as outside of geopolitical borders "worked" to enchant its viewers. Nevertheless, upon further inspection, there are relations between these Disney representations of *Mexicanidad* and modern problematic Mexican-American intercultural relations.

Coco was the first, and remains the only animated Disney full-length feature film with a Mexican protagonist (Martín-Rodríguez, 2019), and therefore the portrayal of Miguel can navigate a sea of stereotypes and embody a new story. *Coco*'s novel approach in its subversion of many traditional tropes celebrates the *mestizaje* of Mexico and Mexican identities. Importantly, the lack of U.S.-American white characters allows for the protagonist to develop independently of any relation to normative representations, and therefore embodies a culturally complex version of *Mexicanidad*.

Bad *Hombres* and *Niños*: Subverting Symbols of *Mexicanidad*

Following the 2016 election season and President Donald Trump's fiery rhetoric, "bad *hombres" became* a much more widely-used term by politicians with similar views. Flores (2003) outlines that despite popularizing the insult, Trump was far from the first to use it, as stereotypes of Mexicans as dangerous criminals, deceitful lazy job-stealers, and sexually-promiscuous invaders have existed for decades in the United States. A few months before his election, Trump was invited by Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto to visit him in Mexico city. This visit ensued in complete mortification, as Trump insulted the president and caused controversy. This action was seen by Mexicanas as "the political humiliation of Mexico at the hands of the United States, expressed through the gendered humiliation of Peña Nieto at the hands of Trump. Trump's visit was an unabashed disaster for the Mexican president" (Mendoza-

Denton, 2017, p. 423-424). His repetition of bad *hombres* resulted in further complications to the already tenuous Mexican-United States relations. Schwartz (2016) illuminates:

> Trump did not say 'bad men.' He said 'bad HOMBRES.' It was HOMBRES that connected the notion of 'immigrant' not simply to 'men' (the literal translation of the word), but to what the Spanish-ness of his choice could index: Mexican men as inherently undesirable,'illegal;' criminal, [and] violent. (para. 5).

It is no coincidence that this racist rhetoric was soon followed by repetitions in media, including the caricature of a quintessential bad *hombre* seen in el Macho of *Despicable Me 2* (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Avant-Mier, 2017). *Coco* also addressed similar tropes, albeit in a different manner.

Upon first viewing of the film, it seems that the behavior of bad *hombres* rings true in the actions of Miguel, Héctor, and Ernesto de la Cruz. All three lie, cheat, and steal to achieve their goals. In fact, during Héctor's very first appearance onscreen, he has deviously covered himself in a Frida Kahlo costume, and is attempting to fool the border patrol of the marigold bridge. From the outset, his character is trying to cheat the system, and upholds the stereotypes of a bad *hombre*. Héctor's first appearance being located in the Land of the Dead is also symbolic, as pointed out by Martín-Rodríguez (2019):

> Zooming on the present century, once the fifty-five-year absence of Mexican main characters and themes began to be mitigated by the computer-animated films of the past two decades, it is remarkable to observe that the presence of Mexicans in animated children's movies is largely dominated by the representation of dead people. (p. 358)

Martín-Rodríguez (2019) reminds us of yet another negative racial stereotype normalized in animation: "It seems that, as far as children's animation is concerned, the best Mexican is indeed a (Day of the) dead Mexican" (p. 358). Indeed, the main action of *Coco* occurs in the Land of the Dead, and is facilitated by the spirits of dead Mexicans, including Ernesto de la Cruz and Miguel's ancestors.

Interestingly, even within the Land of the Dead Héctor is seemingly viewed as a bad *hombre*, that others do not want to associate with. After failing to pass through border control, Héctor once again lies when he tells Miguel that he and Ernesto are friends and that he can arrange for the two of them to meet. He uses Miguel, a child, to attain his own goals, and never shows regret or apologizes for these actions. He acts selfishly, using Miguel's plight in order to gain access to the Land of the Living. He therefore embodies the characteristics of a bad *hombre*, with few morals and much deception. He paints Miguel into a skeleton to disguise him, he "borrows" Frida's costume and does not return it. He dresses himself as Kahlo once again to sneak into Ernesto's celebration, paralleling the act of a Mexican man entering where he is unwanted, or rather,"illegally."

In addition to all of these tropes of being a bad *hombre*, Héctor's representation elicits another stereotype: the Latin lover. He is portrayed as unreliable, uncommitted to his family, and the man who leaves Mamá Imelda as the sole parent of Coco. According to family memory, he selfishly pursues music instead of the stable family shoe making business, causing his family to remove his portrait from the *ofrenda*. These actions result in music being banned from the Rivera families' lives. Take the trope of the Latin lover one step further and arrive at the cheating man: Ernesto de la Cruz, notably, a mariachi performer. With the inclusion of the mariachi festival in the Land of the Dead, as well as having the villain be a mariachi, a traditional symbol of *Mexicanidad*, *Coco* repeats the trope of Mexican masculinity as negative and even dangerous. Mulholland (2021) outlines how this trope is often exacerbated in popular U.S.-American culture: "These men in the popular imagination embodied all that was negative about the Mexican macho: an overly sentimental lower-class mestizo unable to control his appetite for booze and women" (p. 305). In *Coco*, Ernesto de la Cruz fulfills the same role.

De la Cruz takes the place of a classic Macho, narcissistic, seductive, and toting celebrity status. Paz (1997) explains that "*el 'Macho' es el Gran Chingón. Una palabra resume la agresividad, impasibilidad, invulnerabilidad, uso descarnado de la violencia, y demás atributos del 'macho': poder"/*The Macho is the Gran Chingón. One word summarizes the aggressiveness, impassibility, invulnerability, the brutal use of violence, and other attributes of the macho's power" [1] (p. 105). Mulholland (2021) expands on this, stating that the colonial United States view of Mexican mariachi is that of someone "macho, mestizo, and rural" (p. 295). Ernesto de la Cruz embodies all of these qualities, and furthermore, he turns on his best friend when he steals Héctor's music and then murders him. Metaphorically, de la Cruz represents a job-stealer. This idea of a lazy, sneaky Mexican man is further cemented when the audience learns that he never attends music rehearsals with the background performers before his performances. Ernesto de la Cruz does not just steal Héctor's livelihood, but in a very disturbing revelation, it is uncovered that he poisoned him as well, resulting in Héctor's death and subjecting Mamá Imelda to a life as a single parent. De la Cruz thankfully does not fulfill the entire gun-toting Latinx stereotype, as seen in popular TV shows such as *Narcos* (2015), *Ozark* (2017), *Ingobernable* (2017), and *¿Quién mató a Sara?* (2021), however, the killing of his best friend is just as disquieting. Children watching this film are still introduced to a Mexican man as a bad hombre, a lazy, job-stealing murderer. Disturbingly, Miguel takes after these men in many of his behaviors. He directly contradicts the wishes of his elders when he continues to pursue music in secret, as well as sign up for the talent show. He breaks into de la Cruz's tomb, a town monument, and steals his guitar. Within the first fifteen minutes of *Coco*, Miguel is established as an impulsive, deceitful bad *niño*, reflecting the bad *hombres* in a dangerous slippery slope to portraying multiple Mexican generations as lazy and disobedient.

After taking all of this into account, however, *Coco* then deviates from the historical tropes, and reframes the characters of Héctor and Miguel in a manner that subverts pre-existing stereotypes. The audience learns that Héctor is truly a family-man, who wanted to return to Coco and be her father. We learn that he was the true genius behind many beautiful ballads of the film, including "Remember Me." He was an extremely talented martyr who was betrayed by his best friend. He is creative, and encourages Miguel to find his true inner musician. This transformation in itself is revolutionary from previous Disney narratives that relied on "the gun-toting, happy-triggered […] images of the violent bandit, the macho, and the Latin lover" (Martín-Rodríguez, 2019, p. 357). Héctor's character development denies these past clichés, and restores his image as a loving father of Coco. He embodies the Disney theme that "love conquers all," connecting the living to their ancestors, and restoring his fatherly connection to the Rivera family. He transforms from the Mexican underdog, from the *bad hombre*, into a *good hombre*.

The subversion of previous tropes does not end with Héctor; Miguel also transforms throughout the movie into a talented, passionate mariachi performer who can reconcile his love for his family with his love of music. He creates new bonds between his living and deceased family members, he helps Coco have a peaceful end of her life, and unites everyone together. Like Héctor, he is altered from a bad *niño* to a good *niño*. He re-popularizes mariachi music in his town, making a connection between modernity and traditional *Mexicanidad*. In this way, he spurs love for this music, and for Mexican-ness across generations and metaphorical borders.

By the end of the film, Miguel is not only a talented musician, but he also occupies the place of a cultural ambassador of *Mexicanidad* through his mariachi music. He transforms the Rivera family livelihood from that of shoemakers to musicians, bridging the gap between the contemporary and the traditional. "For Mexican-American artists, mariachi is a matter of identity

and self-worth, especially in the context of school and professional settings where the music, the symbols, and the language in which the songs are written has been marginalized" (Sinta, 2020, p. 32). Miguel transverses across these borders of marginalization and makes mariachi relevant again for his family and community. Even *bisabuela* Coco is transformed by Miguel's actions, and is given new life as she sings "Remember Me" once again with her father, a moment that could not have occurred without Miguel's actions. This transformation is particularly important, as Coco obtains voice and regains her memory, which conceptualizes a new version of *Mexicanidad* for the audience and a more nuanced relationship to power and representation.

Breaking Colonial Dualities of *Feminidad* through *Mestiza* Consciousness

The first matriarch representative of Mexican femininity introduced in *Coco* is Abuelita, Miguel's grandmother. Her power in the family is clear from the beginning, as the first interaction between Miguel and his father emphasizes her influence: "If Abuelita says no more plaza, no more plaza" (*Coco*, 9:17). This line characterizes the majority of interactions between Miguel and the women in the film. Mexican women are often portrayed as melodramatic, aggressive, and/or the "sexy spitfire" (Masto & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). These "fiery Latinas" often appear alongside Latina homemakers, whose key purpose is to reproduce and further the family tree (Latorre et. al, 2006). Curated media often problematizes the "threat" of immigration as gendered, portraying Latina women as hyperfertile (Silber Mohamed & Farris, 2019). Similarly, Calafell and Delgado (2004) denote how many Latina women's roles are diminished to "popular images of the vamp, self-sacrificing señorita, or mamacita" (p. 15). Upon first viewing, the three prominent women of *Coco*: Mamá Imelda, Abuela, and Miguel's mother seemingly conform to these same patterns.

After Héctor left Mamá Imelda and Coco, music was banned from the Rivera home. She is uncompromising, and despite being a single parent, she also begins the family shoe making business, which provides for generations. This occurrence is of particular importance not only through a lens of gender, but also through a lens of social class. Representations of *Mexicandidad* often stereotype in social class as well, as Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021) remind us that "working class or aspirational middle class, are subtle signifiers of Latina/os in the mainstream" (p. 12). Perfecto (2019) adds: "this is not to say there aren't poor Mexicans or middle-class Mexican-Americans, but the overuse of these images, as seen in the data collected, are all too dominant and definitive" (p. 95). *Coco* provides an intersectional view of *Mexicanidad*, including in its stereotypes. The audience is fed an easily digestible, utterly predictable meal of repeated tropes. As the working-class shoe-making *jefa*, Mamá Imelda is dominant and decisive. Miguel meets her in the Land of the Dead, and as soon as she learns that removed her photo from the *ofrenda* (and symbolically, the family memory), she takes control of the situation. She does not listen to her great-great-grandson's pleading to allow music in his life, she is only concerned about her family image. She is unyielding and unsympathetic, reinforcing negative stereotypes of harsh Mexican matriarchs.

Mamá Imelda's descendants follow suit. Abuela, Miguel's grandmother, holds her family as the focus of her life, even down to her name as solely a reference to her familial relations, and no given name presented throughout the film. This plays into the repetitive trope of family at the center of *Mexicanidad*. In an often-mentioned scene, Abuela threatens a mariachi singer with a swipe from her *chancla* (sandal), which is a stereotypical form of discipline in Latinx culture (Castro, 2018). "It's a reference to the shared experience of Latin kids being afraid of footwear as a disciplinary tool" (Truitt, 2017, para. 9). Later in the film, she raises her *chancla* again towards

a street dog. Vidal (2014) explains that despite this behavior being normative in Mexican culture, it appears that the filmmakers are mocking that cultural norm:

> For Latinos who grew up under the reign of "La Chancla" (the flip flop), the idea of corporal punishment is not a foreign one. Many of us, from the moment we could speak in full sentences, already knew the sting of discipline and all it entailed. We knew that when we got out of line – be it at the grocery store, the post office, anywhere – a good pela was to be expected. Shoes, rulers, spatulas; these were the objects with which we were instructed to stop pestering our siblings and/or improve our grades in school. But when did this all become a thing to laugh about? (para. 1).

This mockery of Abuela continues when she destroys Miguel's precious guitar in anger. This destruction symbolizes the smashing of Miguel's dreams to pursue music, and functions to alienate Abuela from the audience as her actions become cruel. In this way, she becomes a caricature, an enemy of the protagonist as well as central white U.S.-American values such as freedom, class travel, and choice. She obliterates Miguel's chance at moving from shoemaking to musician, or the American dream of rags to riches.

Like Abuela, Miguel's mother also has no given name in the film, and her story centers around her role in the Rivera family. She is pregnant for the majority of the film, and then is holding her new child in the final scene. She functions in the story as the birther of the protagonist and a self-sacrificing mother, a model *mamacita* (Calafell & Delgado, 2004). She works in the Rivera family business and expects Miguel to continue this as well. If she has any other dreams or aspirations, the audience is unaware. She is simply *una madre,* representing tradition, family values, the importance of procreation and child-rearing, and remaining in their "place" as blue-collar workers. Through her story, the film bolsters a clichéd view of *Mexicanidad* and Mexican femininity.

The representation of Mexican womanhood may appear stereotypical, or even archaic at times, but positive, culturally inclusive details also exist within the same text. Often in

representation of *Mexicanidad*, the masculine is given preference over the femenine, as Perfecto (2019) reminds us:

> Men/boys are more often represented than women/girls. The activities that they usually have girls and women doing include washing dishes, *folklórico* dancing, decorating the house or prepping for the holiday, shopping for holiday supplies, preparing food, and serving food. The images of the boys are usually of them in active roles: flying kites, running in the street, traveling to the land of the dead for an adventure, participating in parades, swinging at piñatas, and as musicians. (p. 122)

In media texts in particular, Latinas often face the intersectional barriers of racialization and gendering, which causes them to be seen as less powerful and less useful when compared to the men of the story. *Coco* subverts this. Despite Miguel being the protagonist, the women of the film are obviously strong, independent agents who make their own decisions. All of the women are both family caretakers and entrepreneurs of the shoe business. Abuela's wielding of the *chancla* is not only extremely memorable, but a well-liked moment of the film with Latinx audiences. Vidal (2014) discusses how these moments are significant in their cultural nuance:

> One of the most striking aspects of the debate within Latino culture is the casualness with which corporal punishment is discussed. Strangely, it can even hold a degree of sentimental value, tying us to family, friends, and the international community that shares in our experiences. (para. 7)

Vidal takes a different approach to analyzing these scenes, and calls them inclusive instead of culturally offensive. Caring for one's loved ones and looking out for their best interests can manifest in a variety of ways, including using *la chancla*. This fragment of performativity leaves many audience members with a moving, thought-provoking, and even funny inclusion of *Latinidad*. According to Valdivia (2018) this inclusion is a feminist statement, due to this type of representation not "naturally happen[ing] within our contemporary white masculine normative research environment" (p.101). Abuela's character allows for this connection with her might, her passion for her family, and her *chancla.*

Finally, Mamá Imelda's character development also provides a diverse, complex understanding of Mexican womanhood. In order to avoid being captured by Ernesto, she takes the stage in a contradictory and inspirational performance, corresponding to Anzaldúa's (2007) idea of contradiction soul and voice, occupying multiple locations. According to Anzaldúa, *mestiza* consciousness allows one to occupy various places and identities simultaneously. "Because I am in all cultures at the same time, a soul within two worlds, three, four, my head buzzes with the contradiction" (p. 99). Throughout the story we watch Mamá Imelda unfold from her rejection of music and disillusionment as an abandoned partner to a woman who loves music and Héctor. She helps Miguel to both return to the Land of the Living and become a musician, and she delivers a shocking and exceptional performance on stage as a mariachi singer herself.

Through her song and performance, Mamá Imelda obtains voice, not just in her role as a matriarch, but also as a mariachi, a core identity of *Mexicanidad*. She introduces the audience to the less familiar tradition of women as mariachi singers (Mulholland, 2021). Through her singing, she feminizes the act of mariachi and takes her place on center-stage, quite literally. Her song choice of *La Llorona* also contains significance, as she identifies with the controversial mother of legend, and embraces her power, notably, in Spanish. Calafell (2001) clarifies:

> La Llorona has been cast in the role of "evil woman" or "bad mother". Popular folklore states that La Llorona was a Mexican woman who killed her children so that she could be with her lover. As a result of her treachery, she must walk the canals of the world crying and searching for her lost children whom she will never find. Her story has been told to generation after generation of Mexicans and Chicanas/os to frighten children as well as to continue to demonize Mexicanas and Chicanas who embrace and display sexuality. (p. 14).

Contemporary Chicanas and Mexicanas are similarly condemned for sexuality as the dominantly patriarchal Mexican culture maintains *La Virgen* as a saintly idol for women, aligning with the historical discriminatory duality of Madonna/whore (Calafell & Delgado, 2004). Paz (1997) states that identification with *La Llorona*, or *La Chingada*, is truly an embodiment of true

Mexican motherhood. He explains that "in contrast to Guadalupe, who is the virgin Mother, la Chingada is the violated Mother" (p.109). This embracing of *La Chingada* then, acknowledges and honors Mexico's brutal colonial history. He expands further:

> *¿Quién es la Chingada? Ante todo, es la Madre. No una Madre de carne y hueso, sino una figura mítica. La Chingada es una de las representaciones mexicanas de la Maternidad, como la Llorona o la "sufrida madre" mexicano que festejamos el diez de mayo. La Chingada es la madre que ha sufrido, metafórica o realmente, la acción corrosiva e infamante implícita en el verbo de la nombre. Vale la pena detenerse en el significado de esta vez*/Who is the Chingada? Before all else, it is the Mother. Not a Mother of flesh and bone, rather a mythical figure. La Chingada is one of the Mexican representations of Motherhood, like la Llorona or the suffering Mexican mother that we celebrate on May 10th. La Chingada is the mother that has suffered, metaphorically or literally, the corrosive and infamous action implicit in the verb of the name.[1] (p. 98)

In this nod to and identification with *La Llorona*, the virgin/whore duality and other colonial binaries are discarded for an embodiment of true Mexican *maternidad* and *feminidad*. Mamá Imelda is not the mother of the nation, a matriarchal figurehead that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, particularly women and mothers, can identify with. In this manner, the women of *Coco* are inspirational, and provide a deep respect for Mexican femininity in all of its complexities and contradictions.

Bordered Living: Eternal Lives and Atemporality

Borders are a reminder of who belongs, and who does not. The U.S. has historically problematized the idea of Mexicans as constant border crossers, and *Coco* upholds this stereotypical construct in the representation of the boundary between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead. This reinforces differences between the two Lands, as well as the present and the past, and the alive and the dead. Anzaldúa (2007) suggests: "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (p. 25). The main physical

[1] Translation by author

border in the film is realized through a bridge of marigold petals guarded by police forces and security to control who passes from one world to the other. Martín-Rodríguez (2019) expands: "Coco takes place south of the border, constructing Mexico as always forever foreign and not as the southern half of a vibrant transnational web of cultural, economic, social, and family relations that transcends geopolitical boundaries" (p. 356). This golden fantasy bridge distances the viewer from the intense, dark reality of the actual U.S.-Mexican border, and therefore disidentification with Mexicans for the white U.S.-American audience. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights asserts that border militarization is "The systematic intensification of the border's security apparatus, transforming the area from a transnational frontier to a zone of permanent vigilance, enforcement, and violence" (NNIRR, 2015). Instead of critiquing or subverting the militarization of the geopolitical borders, *Coco* functions to normalize the idea of "legal" crossing being desired as "correct" and reinforces ideas of illegal immigration.

In consuming this bordered action in the fantasy Land of the Dead onscreen, audiences can remove themselves from realities of less peaceful border-crossings and focus on the aesthetically pleasing. Disney can then continue to emit its formula of optimism and magic, and a watered-down depiction of *Mexicanidad*. The creation of this magical, fantastical reality allows the audience to forget about the intolerable cultural reality, and distance the viewer from the realness of the border, especially during the Trump administration. Still, the scenes of people being scanned by "identity detectors" and the intense policing of the entryway to the Land of the Living disturbingly reflect geopolitical occurrences of the U.S.-Mexico border. The idea that deceased Mexicans need to pass through border patrol and customs in order to visit the Land of the Living functions to reinforce the stereotypes of the Mexican migrating to the U.S. in pursuit

of the "American Dream." The crossing of a human-made border to reach a better land, the other side, insert geopolitical ideology into an animated children's film. Lechuga and De La Garza (2021) describe how this excises intercultural harm, stating: "bordering is not a mechanism of order between otherwise distinct peoples, but rather, it is a mobile technology of colonial control" (p. 38). By deciding to include a physical border in a film, *Coco* reinforces conventions of Mexicans belonging on the other side, over the border from "us."

Another border is present in the central themes of the film, death and *Día de los Muertos*, that can serve to *other* Mexicans. When Miguel crosses the border, his physical body begins to fade into a skeletal form, and he learns that this will become permanent if he stays in the Land of the Dead until sunrise[2]. In correlation, the longer he stays, the more stereotypically Mexican he transforms. He leaves behind the Land of the Living, the land of U.S.-American modernity, by connecting to *Mexicanidad* and his ancestry in mariachi performance. Martín Rodríguez (2019) posits that the intergenerational interactions between Miguel and his deceased ancestors "brings these films peculiarly close to previous stereotypical images of Mexico as an atemporal place with a rich past, a dormant present, and no visible future" (p. 359). While the brilliant, surreal, Land of the Dead shines with the light of beauty and possibility, Miguel's home is the dusty, beige *pueblo* Santa Cecilia. This stark contrast reifies that a Mexican living their fullest life, at the height of magnificent *Mexicanidad*, is a dead Mexican.

Furthermore, another metaphorical border arises from the film's tenet that when a deceased person is left off of their family's *ofrenda* in the Land of the Living and essentially "forgotten" by those on the other side, they undergo a "final death" and disappear into the

[2] It should be noted that Miguel's journey to a town of deceased people is very similar to the plot of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, and may be a nod to this magical realistic tale.

unknown. According to this system, the wealthy and famous continue to receive privilege in the afterlife and are never forgotten by those living. Morales (2020) explains this problematic issue:

> In this binary system, it is the poor who are forgotten and the upper class- celebrities, artists, and the wealthy- who are remembered on the altars of the living. Even in death, class lines are reaffirmed and solidified, as permanent death seems to befall only the disposable bodies of the shantytowns. (p. 46)

Therefore, class ideology and capitalism are reinforced by this border in *Coco*, asserting that even after one is dead, money and fame will save you from an "eternal death." Not only is this idea contrary to the Catholic afterlife teachings of mainstream Mexican culture, it also places a disturbing value on monetary wealth, contributing to a narrative of othering. Director Molina explains: "We wanted to create a land of the dead that had a certain logic to it. So that the quality of your life in the land of the dead is dependent on how well you're remembered in the land of the living" (cited in Loria, 2020, para. 20). According to the directorial team, then, apparently the "quality" of one's life is determined not by morality, but by their economic success, as seen in the reverence of de la Cruz by the inhabitants of the Land of the dead. His magnificent mansion and impressive mariachi gala performance are in complete opposition to Miguel's simple reality of Santa Cecilia, symbolizing "the struggle to represent Mexico [. . .] as cosmopolitan, modern, and stable places of investment, globalization, and 'high culture'" (Mulholland, 2021, p. 307). An economic border is therefore created in the Land of the Dead that parallels the geopolitical, stating that those without money, those on the other side, those who do not have citizenship: Mexicans, will always be different from "us."

The sepia and beige presentation of Santa Cecilia, the exemplar of "Mexico" in the film, contributes to a continued othering of Mexican culture through the representation of time. Paz (1997) states that "Mexico has to find its own way towards modernity. Our past should not be an obstacle, rather a point of departure. This is very difficult, given the nature of our tradition:

difficult but not impossible" (p. 347). *Coco* presents a variety of past technology and relics throughout the film. Miguel does not have an iPod or smartphone to listen to music, he has no access to YouTube guitar tutorials. Instead, he uses a tiny black-and-white screen to watch videos of Ernesto de la Cruz on a VHS player, the only electronic technology utilized by the Rivera family in the film apart from house lights. This lack of technology and the dusty earth-tones of Mexico presented in the film are contradictory to the supposed modern setting of the film in the year 2017, as confirmed by director Lee Unkrich in a Tweet (Unkrich, 2017). In the choice to set the film in antiquated Santa Cecilia instead of a vibrant, contemporary Mexico city, *Coco* reinforces the idea of Mexico as a country stuck in the past, behind modern times.

However, similarly to its treatment of gendered stereotypes, *Coco* accomplishes something revolutionary through its bordered representation. The lack of modern technology is reminiscent of Paz's idea of the timelessness of Mexican *pueblo* life and Mexico in the public eye (1997). Without contemporary technological aspects, an atemporal atmosphere is achieved, resulting in a bridging to nostalgic agelessness, and a connection to the life of the Other. The outcome is a land *sin fronteras* (without borders) that subverts the constructs of the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2007). The audience can be whisked away into a story outside of time and modern space. This immortality is encapsulated by Crosthwait (2020): "the film itself is a portal that allows you and I access to an impossible utopia (firstly animated and later afterlife) of music and romance" (p. 187). The enchanting scenery and melodies of this timeless landscape act as bridges of intercultural connection that cross borders, and allow for understanding of the nuances of *Mexicanidad*.

The aforementioned borders also function to connect the U.S.-American audience with the complexity of Mexican traditions and spirituality, while simultaneously providing a more

refined understanding of *Mexicanidad* in all its multifacetedness. The choice of location of the Land of the Dead, an unvisitable place, allows for the viewer to apply a worldview other than their own. Crosthwait (2020) highlights the importance of viewing Mexico's cultural nuances through storylines that do not depict solely *bandidos* and the poverty that is so frequently emphasized in United States news media portrayals of Mexico. *Coco*'s inclusion of various gestures of Mexican culture, seen in the Riveras' *ofrenda*, Abuela's *chancla*, and the *alebrijes* in the Land of the Dead all give profundity to the portrayal of *Mexicanidad*.

Furthermore, the narrative could not fully pay homage to Mexican culture without including the Mexican view of death and dying. As Paz (1997) elaborates: "The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death[. . .] it is one of his favourite toys and his most steadfast love" (p. 57). By presenting the main action of the film in the Land of the Dead and underscoring Mexican familiarity with death, denying the white American fears, *Coco* again offers nuances of *Mexicanidad*. This is specifically seen in the death of Coco, Miguel's *bisabuela*, and the film's namesake, who bridges the border between the living and the dead. She communicates in contrast to the white U.S. lifestyle of living to work, and embraces the Mexican idea of working to live. Through the inclusion of ancestors in the lives of the living and the vibrant land of the dead, *Coco* teaches U.S. Americans to celebrate their lives. Although one film cannot include every cultural nuance of *Mexicanidad*, *Coco* is still a progressive stepping stone towards constructing bridges over borders and allowing for a more profound appreciation of Mexican culture.

Conclusion: When Reel Representation Dialogues with Real *Mexicanidad*

Coco is more than simply a film, rather, it is a cultural text that is entertaining and thought-provoking for adults and children alike. With historically under- and mis-represented subjects, it invites a symbolic dialogue with the Other. My critical cultural analysis demonstrates that alongside the stunning visuals and moving mariachi ballads, there are depictions of Mexicans and *Mexicanidad* that contradict U.S. American stereotypes. Instead of repeating the tropes of cheating, lazy bad *hombres*, the men of *Coco* are talented and hardworking good *hombres*, who are closely connected to their families. As the story unfolds, it denies the *bandido* stereotypes and depicts a powerful transformation from underdog to hero and provides a more positive and nuanced understanding of Mexican masculinity. Similarly, the recognizable representations of "fiery Latinas" and *mamacitas* are counteracted with depictions of strong women who extend beyond the boundaries of simple motherhood and sing soulfully under the spotlight as mariachis. Significantly, the inclusion of *La Llorona*, a contentious folkloric figure of the conflict between *feminidad* and *maternidad* functions to breach the walls of Latina tropes. Finally, the film crosses the limits of death and time by bridging across the gaps through intercultural lenses of these concepts. *Mexicanidad* and Mexican notions of death are highlighted through the portrayal of the Land of the Dead as a beautiful land of eternally living life to its fullest. Paz (1997) calls death a Mexican's "most steadfast love" (p. 57), and through an intrepid approach to death and deceased ancestors, *Coco* demonstrates this love. In a subversion of stereotypes, the film centers tradition, complexity, ritual, and nuance of *Mexicanidad* as an entity devoid of relation to cultural hegemonic powers such as white America. In this way, *Coco* paves a progressive pathway for future films.

After the great box-office success of *Coco*, in 2021 a film set in Colombia was released, called *Encanto*. It has been lauded for meticulous attention to cultural nuances and racially

accurate representation (Ayala, 2021). This movement towards a larger variety of locations and cultures allows for children of all backgrounds to see more dynamic Latinx characters, and potentially obtain a more nuanced understanding of Latinx cultures and *Latinidad*.

Chapter 3: Mirabel's *Colombianidad*: Between Miracles and Mere Mediocracy

In classrooms, playgrounds, and homes across the country, the words "We don't talk about Bruno" have become a common phrase, whether spoken or sung. The hit song from Disney's *Encanto* marks the first time that a Disney Animation Studios number achieved the coveted #1 slot on the Hit100 billboard charts, and remained there for five weeks (Trust, 2022). The hit song, along with the rest of Disney's newest film, has clearly struck a chord with audiences across the world, as seen in its Rotten Tomatoes Audience score of 93% (Rotten Tomatoes, retrieved March 10, 2022). In Colombia, where the film takes place, *Encanto* was the highest grossing film of 2021 (Zornosa, 2022).

As only the second Disney animated film to be set in a Spanish-speaking country after *Coco* (2017) in the last 50 years, *Encanto* is the latest attempt from Disney to reach out to an ever-growing Latinx population within the United States and worldwide. Leon-Boys & Valdivia (2021) discuss how the Disney company intends to connect with its Latinx audience. "The undeniable presence and growing purchasing power of Latina/os in this nation ushers a range of approaches that both seek to appeal to this newly discovered ethnic audience while simultaneously keeping the normative white audience as the focus of product development" (p. 4). *Encanto* speaks to this change in Disney narrative, bringing to the screen a new magical story that takes place outside of the United States and is palatable for Latinx and white families alike.

Set in the lush forests of Colombia, the film centers around the magical Madrigal family and their relationships to each other and the larger community. The protagonist, a young lady Mirabel, is the only descendent of the strict Abuela who did not receive magical powers in her childhood. She does not look like the "stereotypical Disney princess," instead she has a more

curved and realistically proportional body, unruly curly brown hair, a round nose, and large purple glasses. She is clumsy and walks heavily, with a more natural gait than the floating fairytale damsels, previously represented in Disney animation. While her family members have future sight, the ability to heal with food, talk to animals, grow plants from nothing, and more, Mirabel is seemingly "giftless" and unexceptional in comparison. From the outset, it is clear that Mirabel is a complete outcast in her family, and simply does not fit in with the rest of them. Her beautiful, haughty sister Isabela tells her to step aside so that she doesn't ruin her special day, meanwhile her super-strong, ultra-muscular sister Luisa refuses to let Mirabel help her shoulder any family burdens.

Because of their lack of faith in her, Mirabel struggles to see anything special in herself. Nevertheless, she continues to bravely take action to help everyone else in any way that she can. The family's gifts are linked to a magical candle that appeared to their ancestor in a time of need, and when the candle and the family's magic gifts begin to falter, Mirabel takes it upon herself to find a solution that will save their home and the surrounding village. She finds her estranged uncle Bruno in hiding, and follows his mystical vision in order to save the family, and reconcile her relationship with Abuela. In the end, she saves the family's gifts and becomes accepted as a valuable member of the Madrigals. The tear-jerking final musical number reveals that Mirabel is the true inheritor of the family and their house, and will take the place of her Abuela as the new matriarch of the Madrigal family. Despite having no magical gift, she gains the most important role of all: the cornerstone of the family and the symbolic head of a new generation. *Encanto* tells an intriguing, revolutionary story of family, power, and loss, all the while portraying a new setting for Disney in the flourishing forests of Colombia.

Cepeda (2016) explains the difficulty when representing *Latinidad*, as it is "often critiqued for its tendency to flatten the unique cultural and historic features of individual Latina/o communities. However, it is simultaneously valued as an integral component in [. . .] everyday 'on the ground;' pan-ethnic endeavors" (p. 350). The artistic team of *Encanto* took a stab at portraying Colombia while aligning within the careful balance of attempting to appeal to all Latinx peoples as well as the white American audience. Hall (2017) highlights the potential consequences of appealing to a variety of audiences. "The interplay between the representation of difference, the production of knowledge, and the inscription of power [. . .] is a threefold relationship that is critical to the production of race" (p. 47-48). When operating within the hegemonic structure of Hollywood, Disney inevitably caters to the white audience as the dominant group of power, crafting the story for their benefit. In alignment with Yosso's (2005) critique of cultural capital, the white audience has more power in what is depicted and given screen time. Therefore the representations in *Encanto* not only demonstrate a "single story" of one family, but participate in the creation of a concept of an entire country and culture. Adichie (2009) warns of the danger of a single story encompassing the knowledge of a person or group. As the only Disney animated film taking place in Colombia, *Encanto* currently embodies the sole representation of this country in the minds of child viewers and adults alike.

Hollywood, and Disney animation in particular, create and enforce certain concepts of culture(s). Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021) explain that "Disney, rather than targeting racialized audiences, constructs a sanitized version of Latinidad purposefully assuaging the normative audience through recognizable and non-threatening tropes" (p. 12). In this way, Disney creates an understanding of Colombian culture through what content they choose to include on screen, as well as what is not included. I intend to illustrate how *Encanto* offers critical cultural insights

into the U.S. American understanding of self and the Colombian other, and where these attempts also fell short.

Colombia, *mi encanto*: Colombia on American Terms

Depictions of Latinx people and *Latinidad* often rely on particular tropes and narratives in order to remain comfortable for the white viewer, some are accurate portrayals, others repeat familiar stereotypes. Disney collected a group of architects, botanists, musicians, and others in a "Colombian Cultural Trust" in an attempt to make the film accurate to Colombian culture (Zornosa, 2022). Garzón (2022) pointed out the work of this Cultural Trust in the strong background representation of Colombian items and design:

> A kid drinking *tinto*, yellow butterflies, *chigüiros*, *arepas con queso*, white rice in *ajiaco*, a *tiple*, and a *guayabera*—these are some of the details that will delight knowledgeable viewers. The cultural objects and Colombian references were probably the strongest and most accurate type of representation found in the film [. . .] And in this sense, the movie delivered (para. 16).

Clearly the creators of *Encanto* paid attention to detail in the animation of certain cultural elements seen in the vibrant clothing styles and colors, the steaming *arepas* and flora and fauna native to the landscape. Despite this effort though, the Colombian-specific elements remain entirely in the background, none are necessary to the plot. The inclusion of various cultural objects, while thoughtfully added, did nothing to present Colombia outside of the limited box of white American understanding, or outside the prescribed limits of *Latinidad*. Betancourt (2022) elaborates that the film emerges as "an encyclopedic compendium of Colombian culture, [and] every moment in Encanto feels overdetermined. Every tile and plant and animal and piece of clothing and hand gesture and colloquialism has been painstakingly designed to exude 'Colombianness'" (p. 68).

And yet, no clear element of Colombia was needed for the development of the characters, or to the story line in general. Unlike in *Coco*, the plot could have arguably taken place in any Spanish-speaking country, in any era, in any town- there is no essential "Colombian" element that drives the action, the character decisions, or the outcome of the story. In short, the nods to Colombian culture are purely tokenistic attempts for the creators to congratulate themselves on their attention to culturally-specific details, details that completely pass by most viewers unacquainted with the Colombian cultural elements previously. The same can be said in regard to the often-touted "all Colombian cast" of voice actors. As posited by Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021), "Disney strategically uses their own Latina/o labor to promote their investments in Latinidad" (p. 4). The political use of all Colombian voice actors for a film where the name of the country is never mentioned by a single one of them, is clear tokenism used by the creators to self-congratulate on their own inclusion efforts. This hollow representation is then exacerbated by a setting of a false, magical, Colombia, similar to the Land of the Dead seen in *Coco*. Betancourt (2022) explains that as a result:

> Encanto emerges as nothing more than a commodification of Colombian culture on the part of a mostly US-based (and US-born) creative team who, while they may not be replicating the stereotypical world building seen in such classics as The Three Caballeros (Norman Ferguson, 1944), have nevertheless EPCOT-ized Colombia to the point where every marker of authenticity becomes nothing more than that: a mere sign that points solely to itself. Historical specificity, after all, is nowhere to be found. (p. 68)

Despite the careful attention to detail, *Encanto* appears as more of a travelogue of the beauty of Colombia at times, or as an exhibit the white U.S. viewer can speculate upon and feel "cultured" after their experience. The rural village town in the lush jungle below the magnificent Madrigal mansion add to the (ir)reality of Disney's Colombian attempt.

The setting of *Encanto* enacts a palatable portrayal of Colombia for the white American viewer, placing the film both physically and temporally in the past. Like *Coco*, which takes place

in the Land of the Dead and the fictional town of Santa Cecilia, *Encanto*'s action unfolds in a provincial town, not a modern city like Bogotá or Medellin. The Madrigal family's magical *Casita* is located in a verdant valley surrounded by doting villagers, "ordinary" people who rely on the gifts of the Madrigal family to solve their problems. Despite being told by the music that the film takes place in Colombia, their jungle-surrounded home could truly occur in any tropical location, as the film does not reference any real Colombian city or location. Garzón (2022) points out how this choice in framing the action in an anonymous location is problematic:

> In terms of setting, the creators decided to create a town that could encompass all of Colombia in a *locus amoenus.* Unlike Colombian Nobel-laureate Gabriel García Márquez's fictional town Macondo, which is supposedly based on the author's childhood hometown, *Encanto* cherry-picks certain geographies and elements of Colombia to create a fictional village (para. 7).

In creating a make-believe village to set the story, the creators refuse the opportunity to portray a positive story of Colombia. They had the opportunity to change the narrative, to adjust the mediated United States representation of Colombia, but *Encanto* takes place in a fantastical "Colombia" that does not exist, down to the setting of the Madrigal home.

The Madrigal family's magical *Casita* continues the trope of a captivating magical setting. Meaning "little house,", or "dear house," *Casita* is anything but small. The house grows and expands with every new inhabitant, and gives them a wonderland for a bedroom when they reach the age that their magical gift is revealed. The house flows physically and emotionally in a mirror-like reaction to the family's actions and moods. It brightens in color and is helpful when they are in their element and functioning together well, but cracks and turns gray in color when the family's magic is fading. This magical house and its bounty of food and comfort also serve to make a more digestible portrait of the Colombian family for the United States viewer. As Ahmed (2006) states, "homes are effects of the histories of arrival" (p. 9). Strikingly, the gifts and

abundance of the Madrigal family were not worked for; they simply appeared to Abuela in her time of need. The home "arrived" to her, not through any agency of her own. Although this is a common trope of seemingly divine providence in fantasy stories, it also upholds the same stereotype as *Coco* of a lazy Latino, as well as removes Abuela's agency. By appearing to her in the forest instead of through work or any effort on her part, the magical candle and gifts it produces reinforce negative tropes of Latinas in particular as without agency. The filmmakers can avoid portraying the poverty of the late 19th century Colombian working-class, and give white American audiences a more comfortable, stereotypical view of *Latinidad* and Latino agency.

This more palatable representation of *Latinidad* and Colombia permeates the music as well. It is of note that due to being a musical, certain songs are sung by the characters and work to forward the plot. There are also songs relegated to the background, one of those being the second song of the film, *Colombia, mi encanto*, performed by renowned Colombian singer Carlos Vives and written by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Significantly, the lyrics of this song contain the only verbal mention of Colombia throughout the film, and as it functions as background music, this detail can be overlooked by many viewers. The song lyrics reflect the daydream of the fantasy land the Madrigal family lives in:

> *Canción alegre*
> *Para que gane el bien sobre el mal*
> *No me despierten*
> *Que esto parece un sueño real/*
> Happy song
> For good to win over evil
> Do not wake me up
> Because this seems like a real dream (Miranda, 2021)[1].

I believe Miranda is correct in his assessment of the setting being like a dream. A hidden valley in Colombia safe from evil and despair would seem fantastical and magical to modern-day Colombians, "as the peace deal between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia threatens to unravel" (Zornosa, 2022, para. 29). The Madrigal family takes care of the needs of the townspeople with their magical gifts, so whether it is supplying food, herding animals, curing the sick, growing beautiful flora, and more, the townspeople have seemingly no worries and are completely separate from any threats. In reality, Colombian citizens have lived through decades of guerilla violence of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) against the Colombian government, with many civilians caught in the crossfire. But U.S. American viewers would not flock to the theaters to see chaos and violence in an animated children's movie, so Disney made a political and economic decision in their setting of the film. In setting the film in the magical valley where the Madrigal family lives, they could actively avoid any mention of political violence or unrest within their depiction. In *Encanto*, creators made active decisions to not only gloss over Colombia's violent history, but also Colombia's history of internal racism and race relations.

Leon-Boys and Valdivia (2021) emphasize how Disney carefully tiptoes around the subject of race in their films centering Latinxs: "Despite their previous efforts to shy away from race, Disney's recent attempts to cater to Latina/o populations predominantly through animated form where the representations stir less controversy due to the hyper-visibility of the fantastical element" (p. 11). Animation is an intriguing medium in particular because the media creators must make active decisions in the race and physical composition of their characters. Notably, the animation of Mirabel deviated from the traditional beauty normatives of female Disney protagonists in her curvy body as well as her unruly, curly hair, large glasses, and prominent

round nose, making her a relatable Latina character. The detour from princess-like body representations did not stop in just Mirabel's portrayal. The Madrigal family features a variety of body sizes, shapes, and musculature, skin tones from pale white to deep brown, as well as myriad hair colors and textures. Colombia contains a variety of racial groups, and from Pepa's pale white skin and red hair to Félix's Afro-colombian features, the family encompasses many of the various racial features seen in Colombia. *Encanto* also featured characters with never-before-seen body shapes. Luisa, Mirabel's sister, shoulders the family burdens quite literally through her super strength. She is muscular and bulky, with a body akin to that of an Olympic weightlifter. Her great size and brawn have gained favor with audiences, especially those that have similar features such as Tik-Tok star Martinez. In an interview quoted by Clarke (2022), Martinez explained: "This is more than me just looking like her. It tells my story" (para. 10). Although some were excited to see this representation on screen, Garzón (2022) pauses to consider the potential negative implications:

> You see a family whose members look very different from one another, but somehow live harmoniously, without having to discuss what race does to each of them, as if this were the case in reality [. . .] This is the danger of a generalized and beautiful metanarrative. A family like that? Not even in *Cien años de soledad*. Thus, *Encanto*'s representation of Colombia is projected from a U.S. perspective (para. 11).

Encanto may include attention to detail of the racial composition of Colombia, but it does not reflect Colombian cultural and social attitudes toward race. Rather, it reflects the popular U.S. trends of body-positivity and diversity. Colombia has a noted history of racial discrimination not unlike that of the United States, where non-white groups including Afro-Colombians, Indigenous groups, and Mestizos are systemically marginalized (Villegas Vélez, 2014). As Garzón referenced the work of García Márquez in his critique of race portrayal, perhaps it is just another facet of magical realism that the Madrigal family lives in a post-racial society. Or the racial

makeup of the Madrigals and the surrounding village are yet another less-than-accurate depiction of the real Colombia.

This fantastical Colombia extends from the physical landscape into the temporal. In a flashback to Abuela's past, it is revealed that her husband Pedro was killed as they fled from men on horseback. Although it has not been confirmed by the creators, this violence was most likely a representation of the Thousand Days War in Colombia from 1898 to 1902 (Carrasco Cara Chards, 2022). Disney deviated from the modern-day narrative of *narcotraficantes* and machine gun-toting gangs, and yet still chose to position *Encanto* in a war of the past. They followed the exact formula that Adichie (2009) warns of in *The Danger of a Single Story,* where media consistently "show[s] a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (9:25). By electing to locate *Encanto* in a time of violence and conflict, Disney reinforces the idea of Colombia as a war-torn country of turbulence. It is a step in the right direction that Disney is portraying more non-white protagonists and setting the films in countries other than the United States, but when they rely upon the same stereotypes, they reinforce negative percepts. As Adichie (2009) elaborates, "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (12:53). Yes, Disney created a story about Colombia. But it is the only story we have, and it intensifies the already-established narrow U.S. American understanding of Colombian culture. It seems that even in a fairy-tale, in a magical valley, the narrative of Colombia in U.S. media cannot occur separately from bloodshed. The enchanting soundtrack cannot overscore the looming violence that begins the legacy of the Madrigal family, with the violent death of Pedro in front of his wife and infant children. After a heartwarming

introduction to Pedro and Alma's relationship, the audience watches as he is physically torn from his family and killed offscreen.

In addition to the negative stereotype of violence, the film also focuses on another, this time positive, cliché of Colombian culture: its world-famous music. Notable contemporary musicians include: Shakira, Juanes, Fonseca, and J Balvin. Musical traditions including various genres of Colombian folk music. *Encanto* honors this cultural custom. Interestingly, even the family name "Madrigal" has significance, as a madrigal is a group of singers all singing different lines that come together in harmony. The Madrigal family in fact perform as a madrigal group in the end of the song "We don't talk about Bruno," each singing a contrasting melody that flows together into one unit. The music in the film serves as another facet of the understanding of Colombia for the U.S. viewer, as it firmly sets the location through folkloric Colombian music. This is an aspect where the filmmakers demonstrated more cultural awareness and sensitivity—researching deeply into regional music genres and instruments and incorporating many. In an interview with Collider (2021), composer Franco underscored:

> We created new textures and sonorities, using traditional Colombian instruments such *as tiples, bandolas, cununos, marimba de chonta, arpa llanera* from Latin America mixed with orchestra. The sound of the score is infused with many Colombian rhythmic styles including *bambuco, mapalé, cumbia, and joropo* (para. 5).

Through this exploration of a variety of Colombian musical genres, as well as the inclusion of prominent Colombian singers Maluma, Sebastián Yatra, and Carlos Vives, the creators cemented their story into the auditory landscape of Colombia.

Through the physical and temporal settings as well as the inclusion of typical music, the audience watching *Encanto* is presented with a slice of Colombia that is enticing and charming while simultaneously acceptable in that it conforms to previous American conceptions. From the magical house that grows and helps its occupants to the quaint village secluded from the outside,

the setting is honestly too good to be true. Viewers are not confronted in any way with Colombia's economic and governmental disorder. By making the exigence of the family's migration the death of the patriarch through the Thousand Days War, the creators situate the film in the single story of Colombian violence. Despite relying upon these negative stereotypes, however, there was attention to positive influences in the careful attention to culturally accurate music. Taken together, these elements present the viewer with an imagined Colombia safe from modern problems and stuck in past provinciality. This would make for a rather monotonous plot, if not for the addition of the Madrigal family's exceptional powers.

Waiting on a Miracle: American Exceptionalism

Each member of the Madrigal family has an exceptional gift; whether it's the ability to heal with food, shape-shift, super strength, grow flowers, talk to animals, or control the weather with emotions, they all have a magical gift to aid the family and the surrounding community. Except Mirabel. The protagonist of the film, as well as Abuela, are the two Madrigal family members that did not receive a mystical blessing from the magical candle that holds the family's powers. Meinel (2014) discussed how the desire to be seen as exceptional can "foster selfish and egoistic behaviour" (p. 186). While well-intentioned, Mirabel's disobedience of Abuela's wishes for her to stop digging into the family past are a direct contradiction to her goal of being seen as "good enough" by Abuela. Her striving to fix the problem on her own, her competition with her sister, and her desire for public recognition all fall within the cookie-cutter boundaries of American Exceptionalism.

Disney's reliance on the trope of the extraordinary is not a new idea. *The Incredibles* (2004) also explored the idea of a remarkable family, albeit framed as superpowers instead of magical gifts. Meinel (2014) argues that "in illustrating the importance of individual recognition

for a just society and by exploring the harmful consequences of the will of the majority, *The Incredibles* echo fundamental ideas about the exceptionality of US society" (p. 184). The messages of the two films in regard to fantastic abilities are the same- that they should be used for others to better society, while simultaneously highlighting the individual. A marked difference between the two films though is the setting. It makes sense that the narrative of the Parr family, as a white, suburban, middle-class family in the 1950's USA should rely on the ideal of American exceptionalism, but situating the Mirabel family within the same trope is yet another way in which *Encanto* portrays Colombia through an American lens. The goal for each family is to take what makes one individual, special, exceptional, and use it for the betterment of others.

The Parr family feels helpless when told to hide their powers, and similarly Mirabel longs to have a special power in order to aid those around her as the rest of her family does. Mirabel bemoans her lack of a gift in "Waiting on a Miracle":

> Always walking alone
> Always wanting for more
> Like I'm still at that door longing to shine
> Like all of you shine
> All I need is a change
> All I need is a chance
> All I know is I can't stay on the side
> Open your eyes, open your eyes, open your eyes (*Encanto*, 2021)

Mirabel wishes that she were exceptional like her family members, and she goes on to sing about the good that she would do for others if she had a special gift. Just as Meinel (2014) notes in their study of *The Incredibles*, it is not enough just to have a superpower, but it is also important for the characters to have *recognition* of their extraordinariness. "In spite of the democratizing and liberating features of the equality of ranks, the ensuing race for recognition also fosters novel

forms of social control: in the continuous struggle for recognition, individuals depend on recognition by their fellow citizens in order to participate in a democratic society" (p. 185). Comparable to the Parr family, Mirabel longs for a gift not only to help others, but to be noticed by her family and to gain Abuela's approval. In a very American way, this Colombian girl wants to be special, and to be perceived by others as special. Not only does Mirabel hold this as a value, but so does the surrounding community. When Mirabel tries to convince herself that "Gift or no gift, I am just as special as the rest of my family," a village girl responds, "Maybe your gift is being in denial" (*Encanto*, 2021). Like *The Incredibles, Encanto* tells the audience that the ideal character should be remarkable, and not in anonymity, but should be identified by others as such.

This desire for public recognition simultaneously fuels both individuality and rivalry, values inherent to American exceptionalism. Fisher (1973) explains this facet of determining exceptionalism within society as: "grounded on the puritan work ethic and relat[ing] to the values of effort, persistence, "playing the game," initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success. It undergirds competition as the way of determining personal worth, the free enterprise system, and the notion of freedom" (p. 161). Throughout the film, Mirabel consistently strives for this recognition through self-reliance and competition with her sister, Isabela. The sisters exhibit these American values firmly in both their decision-making and their interactions with each other.

Mirabel's competition with Isabela is clear from their first interaction in the film. Abuela is shouting orders to the gifted family members decorating for a celebration and ignoring Mirabel's efforts. Isabela flips her hair in Mirabel's face and says, "A little sisterly advice: if you weren't always trying too hard you wouldn't be in the way" (*Encanto*, 2021). Isabela has no pity

for her gift-less sister, and sees her hard work as competition, despite the clear difference in their abilities. Later in the film, Isabela is preparing for the night of her betrothal and steps out of her way to comment to Maribel: “Hey sis, I want not a sound out of you” (*Encanto*, 2021). When Mirabel is told that she needs to reconcile with her sister in order to save the family miracle, she finds this task to be seemingly insurmountable. In a story that emphasizes the importance of family, this in-fighting juxtaposes Mirabel’s desire for belonging.

Fisher (1973) outlines that American Exceptionalism encourages acting on an individual basis without help from others. Mirabel has a notable lack of a companion or a friend throughout the film. Once she finds Bruno, he guides her in the decision to reconcile with her sister, but then disappears back into the shadows, leaving Mirabel to confront the family problems by herself. One fleeting but important moment in the film involves a toucan following her into a tunnel, perhaps a nod to the frequent animal sidekicks seen in previous Disney animation. But the toucan quickly is scared and abandons her, leaving her alone in the dark. Mirabel yells “quitter!” at the bird as it flies away. While this line added an instant of humor to the dark landscape of the scene, it functions as yet another example of Mirabel’s conformity to individualism. This moment, as well as Mirabel’s aloneness throughout the film is in stark contradiction from the recent Disney message of the importance of asking for help from family or friends to accomplish goals, as seen in *Inside Out* (2015), *Moana* (2016), *Coco* (2017), *Frozen II* (2019), and *Turning Red* (2022). It is not an inherently bad message to have a completely independent female protagonist; in fact, one could argue that it is, in a sense, refreshing. But that does not eliminate the extreme adherence to American Exceptionalism that Mirabel exhibits, and the intercultural implications of imposing one country’s values over another. Latino Americans, as well as all other non-white cultural groups in the United States, are pressured constantly to conform to white, Western

values. Mirabel follows this pattern within the film, even without the presence of a single white American character to impose this pressure. Rather, I argue that Mirabel's actions conform to the white, Western wishes of the audience, or at least, the audience that Disney was catering to. This aligns with Bollmer's (2019) analysis that "representations perpetuate the interests of dominant classes so we accept various relations of power as natural–from capitalism and patriarchy to homophobia and ableism" (p. 26). As Bollmer states, the white United States audience is comfortable with Mirabel's wish to be special, to have power. What could be more natural to the American viewer than the quest for American Exceptionalism?

American Exceptionalism promotes the traits of individualism, public recognition, and competition. It makes sense for a 1950's white suburban USA family like the Parrs to uphold such strong picket-fence American values. But for a Colombian family in the early 1900's, this ideology is superimposed and colonized onto the Madrigals. In doing so, Disney creates an Other by instructing the audience in this singular story of Colombia, through U.S. American values. *Encanto* portrays a progressive Latina main character with an independent spirit who strives to help others and repair her broken family, a far cry from the sexualized fiery Latinas or the quiet maids in the background. And yet the narrative still reinforces the ideas of American Exceptionalism as seen in Mirabel's refusal to staunch independence and her competitive relationship with her sister. Both young women look to Abuela for recognition of their work, even as they carve their own paths into what it means to be a Latina in animated media.

Surface Pressure: Societal Progress on Women's Shoulders

When Pedro dies, the patriarch and "the rock" of the family both in namesake and character leaves Abuela to fend for herself and their triplet infants. It is no coincidence that her name's meaning is also salient, as Alma becomes "the soul" of the Madrigal family. Her legacy

of planting the family in the valley and supporting the surrounding village that grows there is just one of the narratives of strong, stereotype-breaking women that Disney portrays in *Encanto*. Anzaldúa (2007) discussed how women, and particularly Latina women, are often considered "mujeres malas"/bad women by society when they break the boundaries of the hegemonic limits placed upon them (p. 39). Calafell & Delgado (2004), Cepeda (2016), and Valdivia (2018) have all explored how the portrayal of Latinas in media, particularly in American media, often constrains their roles to subservient, docile, obedient side characters, or fiery sexualized caricatures, leaving few roles with profundity or differentiation from these stereotypes. Through the characters of the three Mirabel sisters and Abuela Alma, the artistic team behind *Encanto* stretched previous boundaries of the acceptable and characterized Latina women outside of familiar representations.

The three Madrigal sisters Mirabel, Luisa, and Isabela, each counteract existing stereotypes of women and historical societal barriers placed upon them. I previously discussed Mirabel's delineation of physical Disney protagonist standards, as well as her independence from a sidekick or romantic interest. Luisa and Isabela also contribute narratives of progress in their storylines. With the gift of super strength, the Madrigal family and townspeople look to Luisa to solve problems from corralling stray donkeys to lifting and moving entire buildings. Her solo song "Surface Pressure" indicates the intensity of her workload, and how she fulfills the female stereotype of the woman unable to say no to those who ask for her help, and being afraid of cracking under expectations. She sings:

> Under the surface
> I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service
> Under the surface
> I hide my nerves, and it worsens, I worry something is gonna hurt us (*Encanto*, 2021).

Luisa conforms to the constraints of archetypal womanhood in serving her family to the point of her own mental distress. But Disney makes an important veer from historical narrative in Luisa's character development—for once, a character can admit that she cannot handle everything and that she needs to be able to deny services to others if they will come at her own expense. Isabela is another female character who initially harmonizes with expectations and then realizes that her own happiness will come with learning how to follow her own needs and desires over familial and societal expectations. In "What Else Can I Do?" she explores this possibility, singing:

> I make perfect, practiced poses
> So much hides behind my smile
> What could I do if I just grew what I was feelin' in the moment?
> What could I do if I just knew it didn't need to be perfect?
> It just needed to be? And they'd let me be? (*Encanto*, 2021).

She learns to grow—literally as she grows a variety of plants with her gift, and metaphorically as she follows her own wants and goals. In this manner, Isabela joins Mirabel and Luisa as a woman who develops to contradict stereotypes and outside pressures.

Most significant in the narratives of these three young women is their support for each other and the admitting of their reliance on one another. Luisa has a minimal relationship with either of her sisters at the beginning of the film, simply seeing them as more people to help when they need. By the end of the film, she learns to trust her sisters and can confide in them when she feels weak and that she cries. There is a similar transformation in Isabela and Mirabel's relationship. They change from bitter, competitive rivals in their initial moments together to laughing, hugging sisters that share in the beauty of each other's abilities. As Rincón (2014) explains, the way that they surpass these barriers is notable:

> Woman's struggle to become a person in her own right takes on a peculiar note for the Latin woman [. . .] her battle seems almost insurmountable, and yet today the sisters are working to develop a strategy that will enable us to be women people, rather than chattel or pets" (p. 24).

With the intersectionality of their identities as women and Latinas, they confront both gender cultural obstacles. hooks (2000) puts it best: "unless we can show that barriers separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity can exist, we cannot hope to change and transform society as a whole" (p. 44). The Madrigal sisters overcome the competitive boundaries between each other to be united for the family. Their solidarity with one another at the end of the film is just as, if not more important than, the surpassing of their individual stumbling blocks. The elimination of the barriers between the sisters, as well as the metamorphosis of Abuela's relationship with the family, are both staggeringly important for Disney to depict for more nuanced personalities and relationships amongst Latinas and all women.

As the soul of the family, Abuela Alma is a motherly caretaker who emits her intentions with intensity and at times, harshness. She is quite frankly an unlikeable character for the majority of the film, especially for her stern treatment of Mirabel. Later in the film however, when we are given a glimpse into Abuela's past, we can begin to understand her motivations. Her backstory is encapsulated in the song *"Dos Oruguitas*," when Pedro is taken from her:

> *Ay, oruguitas, no se aguanten más*
> *Hay que crecer aparte y volver*
> *Hacia adelante seguirás*
> *Vienen milagros, vienen crisálidas*
> *Hay que partir y construir su propio futuro/*
> Oh little caterpillars, don't hold back any more
> You have to grow apart and return
> You will keep going forward
> Miracles are coming, chrysalises are coming
> You have to part and build your own future[3](*Encanto*, 2021).

[3] Direct translation by author. English lyrics of song in film are not a direct translation.

Abuela functions as an embodiment of the women migrants who have been forced to uproot their families and travel to an unfamiliar place in search of better possibilities for the future. When Pedro is violently taken from her, she momentarily loses her purpose and belonging in the world and chooses to forge on and become the new rock for her family by herself. Carrillo Rowe (2008) explains this trauma that can occur through transition from the comfortable to the unknown, and becoming an Other in the process. “Many cross lines of class, national boundaries, racialized communities, places of work, the language communities that hail us, each movement rendering our becoming-other as our relational needs shift over time and across space” (p. 41). Abuela Alma moves into the space of the other when leadership is forced upon her; she must fend for her family or they will perish. Vasquez Gutierrez (2022) explains why the inclusion of a migrant story is incredibly significant to the American media portrayal of Colombia. “Seeing an enterprise such as Disney show a very human perspective towards our culture and identity makes me hopeful that we can overcome the situation by showing the world and creating awareness” (para. 10). This plotline deviates from those of the narconovelas by showing the aftermath of the violence and drug wars, and the effects on the family.

In the song “All of You,” Abuela realizes through Mirabel’s actions that she was too aggressive in her intent to hold on to her family, and apologizes for how she has treated Mirabel for her lack of a magical gift. She sings:

> And I'm sorry I held on too tight
> Just so afraid I'd lose you too
> The miracle is not some magic that you've got
> The miracle is you, not some gift, just you (*Encanto*, 2021).

Mirroring modern day migrant family interactions where elder generations must often rely on younger for language and cultural understanding after a transition, Abuela rejects the ideas of American Exceptionalism that she had imposed upon her descendants and adopts Mirabel’s

contemporary ideas of acceptance. In this moment, the two women are surrounded by yellow butterflies, functioning both as a nod to García Márquez and as a symbol that they have moved beyond the shy caterpillars of their beginnings and have become butterflies themselves.

These contemporary portrayals are not only accurate in their representation of personality and character diversity amongst Latinas, but are also salient in creating a more nuanced cultural understanding of the complexities of Colombian and Latina women. Through the diverse personas and actions of the Madrigal sisters, audiences are invited to conceive of Latinas in a manner outside of existing stereotypes. The complex nature of the inner turmoil displayed in all of these women, none of whom rely on a man to swoop in and be the knight in shining armor, demonstrate a turn in Disney's portrayal of Latinas that is hopefully just one film at the start of many more nuanced depictions to come.

Conclusion: When Reel Representation Undermines Real *Colombianidad*

Encanto arrived in theaters and on-demand streaming at a time in the COVID-19 pandemic when the world could use a little more color and music. Through a critical cultural analysis of the film, I have argued and demonstrated that Disney's depiction of Colombia is told through a lens of American comfort and values. Ultimately, despite their "Colombian Cultural Trust," Disney failed to produce a film that is inherently Colombian, as it relies on tokenism and thinly veiled nods to their own cultural competency efforts. The lack of Colombian representation in the writing and directorial team resulted in a film that did not live up to its full potential. As Garzón (2022) states, "it was a missed opportunity for Colombian animators and directors. One is left to wonder what a Colombian filmmaker would have done differently if given the chance" (para. 19).

While representing a "new" (for the entertainment industry) country in Disney animation, the physical and embodied landscapes of the film demonstrate a diluted, false Colombia that could only exist with a heavy dose of magical realism. However, the attention to detail in the musical genres and artists reflects a clumsy attempt for cultural accuracy. In addition, the protagonist Mirabel, while denying limitations of other female characters, upholds primarily white, WASPy American values that do not correspond with the cultural realities of Colombia. More specifically, her competitiveness, individualistic tendencies, and desire for recognition all align within the constricts of American Exceptionalism. This is particularly notable when considered within Yosso's (2005) concept of cultural capital. Mirabel's actions that deny Colombian ideals and her heritage are not simple narrative decisions, they carry the weight of historical colonial imposition of U.S. ideals upon other cultures.

In a more positive light, the Madrigal sisters and Abuela Alma delineate from traditional media portrayals of Latinas (and women in general) in their accomplishments as well as their transformative relationships with one another. In other words, their representation is a positive stepping stone for women in general, for feminist alliances, and for on-screen role-models with real life relatability and implications. And, Latinas are the main protagonists, although somewhat clumsily, and with elements of tokenism, they are still running the show, and they still inspire, even if often on WASPy American terms. Therefore, *Encanto* is a complex film that both upholds and undermines traditional stereotypes of *Latinidad*. Although it severely lacks nuance in its depiction of Colombia, it is a ladder rung that gives hope for bolder and more accurate future depictions of Latinx people and *Latinidad*. As seen in Bollmer's (2019) research, the importance of these portrayals does not stop at the screen, but has social and political salience as

well. In this manner, *Encanto* paves the way for intersectional representation of Latinx people and Latinas in particular, with agency and diversity in their narratives.

Overall, both *Coco* and *Encanto* altered the geography of cinematic representation of Latinx people, particularly in animation and films targeted towards children. More than just simple entertainment, these films function within the sociopolitical sphere of U.S. media consumption and therefore have larger ramifications beyond family movie nights. Their presence on the U.S.-American mediascape, and their obvious popularity growth are representative not only of the changing entertainment industry, but also of the shifts within the U.S.-American demographics, its identity politics, and its cultural understanding and consumption.

Chapter 4: Disney's *Latinidad*: The Good, the Bad, and the …. Upcoming

The recent growth in the United States Latinx population as well as increased news media attention to this ethno-racial group has resulted in a new attention towards higher Latinx representation in curated entertainment media. These cultural politics of representation are reflected in both *Coco* and *Encanto* through their Latinx characters depicted in Mexico and Colombia, respectively. Cepeda (2016) discusses how the hybridity of Latinx peoples allows them the fluidity to "disrupt traditional notions of ethno-racial and national identity, sexuality, and class" (p. 352). The creators of these two films had the opportunity to deviate from previous stereotypical representations, and in certain instances, they did. The importance of this representation goes beyond the audience simply seeing a body on a screen. As Bollmer (2019) elaborates:

> To be represented in a democracy is directly articulated to media representation of identities, behaviors, and norms. This means that various marginal identities quite simply do not enter into the public sphere until they can be recognized as valid subject positions in popular culture. (p. 33)

In particular, the main characters of each film, Miguel and Mirabel, carry this weight of the current mainstream depiction of Latinx children in U.S. media, and therefore function as an entrance for the Latinx communities into the public sphere.

Both protagonists uphold and disrupt patterns of familial and cultural expectations. Miguel and Mirabel's journeys take them through coming-of-age storylines that result in identity changes. As Hall (2017) posits, "Identity is not a fixed origin to which we are attached by the harness of tradition, an origin to which we can make some final and absolute return" (p. 127). Miguel and Mirabel both grapple with familial and cultural normatives and the pressures to conform to expectations. In many ways, Miguel symbolically represents Mexico, and Mirabel

represents Colombia - and both of them need to negotiate their quests and their cultural identities, while still being relatable and likable, that is, suitable for "mass consumption." *Coco* and *Encanto* revealed that although there are certain pan-Latinx similarities of Disney's approach towards respective representations, *Mexicanidad* and *Colombianidad* occupy quite different places in American cultural industries, reflective of the larger social-political and cultural realities.

Similarities in Music and Magic: The Pan-Latinx

Despite depicting different countries and vastly differing storylines addressed by the respective films, there are numerous similarities between *Coco* and *Encanto*. The obvious is that they are both recent animated productions portraying Latinx protagonists, but there are myriad parallels between the two films that cater to historic ideals of the "single story" (Adichie, 2009), in the concept of the Pan-Latinx. Calafell and Delgado (2004) discuss the tension that arises for Latinx individuals between specific Latinx identities and the desire for connection that results in a Pan-Latinx identity. These films clearly also tiptoe the line between specifics and overarching stereotypes, but on a corporate level, which often results in the depiction of similar stories, or rather, that "one size fits all" single story. Through the music/animation soundtracks and the heavy reliance on magic to further the plot, *Coco* and *Encanto* portray similar narratives of Latinx lives.

Notably, both films incorporate extensive musical numbers, albeit in different manners. *Encanto* is a musical, with many of the song lyrics used to forward the plot, as well as give insight to characters' inner thoughts and feelings. The music incorporated in *Coco* functions differently, with mariachi being important to the plot and character development, but not as a narrative of specific plot events. Avant-Mier (2021) discusses how music in film has the ability

to transcend borders: “emphasizing songs and music serves to enable, construct, and imagine new mappings and cartographies of possibility—drawing new maps to focus on alternative geographies, social spaces, and (liminal) identities that music can enable, reflect, and prophesy” (p. 61). Despite appearing in different modalities of a musical versus a film with music performances, both films incorporate music quite extensively as a way for the audience to metaphorically (and cognitively) traverse borders, to immerse into the world of the Other, and to gain a more complex understanding of Latinx experiences.

Mariachi is upheld in *Coco* as both a connection for Miguel to his ancestors in particular and *Mexicanidad* in general, as well as an aural manifesto to a feminist moment for Mamá Imelda to take the stage as a woman mariachi performer. As a far cry from the stereotypical animal depictions of *The Three Caballeros* strumming guitars, Miguel and Mamá Imelda’s mariachi music is seen as beautiful, and engaging. Such on-screen musical delights are paralleled by and representative of actual Mexican-American intercultural realities. Having conducted dozens of interviews with mariachis in the U.S., Sinta (2020) elaborates on their impact:

> All mariachi groups who perform in spaces like the White House are there not only to showcase their musical merits but also to represent Mexican American, Mexican, and US Latino culture broadly. Mariachi, in all the richness of that term-a music, a performer, an aesthetic-is a pervasive presence in American culture as a symbol for Mexican, Mexican American, and Latino culture. (p. 6)

Perhaps even more culturally salient than a performance at the White House is a performance inside a movie theater or one’s own living room, enabled by the power of Disney animation. In *Coco,* the positive representation of mariachi deteriorates the cultural border between the viewer and a more nuanced understanding of *Mexicanidad*.

Similarly, the music of *Encanto* leads to a more nuanced understanding of a Latinx life experience through the insight into the characters’ inner thoughts and feelings, as well as

providing essential plot information to the viewer. Notably, the culture of the Madrigal family is revealed through the very first song performed by Mirabel, "The Family Madrigal." As she explains the composition of the family members and their magical gifts to the village children, the audience is simultaneously invited to look through a window at the culture of this family. As a *musical* in particular and not just a "film with music," the score functions on a deeper level to relate both plot and emotions to the audience. DeChaine (2002) explains: "musical experience forces an encounter between mind and body, clearing a liminal space that is simultaneously charged with affect and fraught with tension" (p. 81). As Mirabel whirls through fast lyrics explaining the gifts of her family, she is also giving us a glimpse into what her family holds dear: being special. The song abruptly ends when it is revealed that Mirabel herself has no gift, signaling to the audience how devastating this is for her family culture. The specific composition of the song lends to a sensorial experience that is disoriented when the music is cut off, resulting in a visceral, affective reaction for audience members. The viewer feels a punch in the stomach as Mirabel does when it is revealed that she is different from her family, and rebels from familial expectations.

Despite differing results in their rebellious journeys, both Miguel and Mirabel's identity explorations could not have occurred the way they did without one important overarching element: magic through a magical-realist perspective. Magic is intertwined throughout many of Disney's fairytale narratives, and *Coco* and *Encanto* are no exceptions. Within the first few minutes of each film, it is clear that magic is pervasive, whether it be through family gifts or traveling to a different world. Notably, both films portray elements of magical realism, drawing on a strong tradition of magical representation in Latinx stories. In literature, a "Latinx boom" of magical realism blossomed during the 20th century, and film followed suit. As with any genre,

certain tropes are repeated in many of these narratives. Ahmad and Asfar (2014) mention that magical realist authors such as García Márquez "deliberately [omit] certain events and descriptions to be addressed by the reader. One of the defining factors of magical realism, this omission is called authorial reticence. The author withholds certain information to be worked at by the reader's mind" (p. 15). Both films mentioned today reproduce this pattern of withheld information. With such an approach, they skillfully and strategically omit some undesirable cultural elements of *Mexicanidad* or *Colombianidad,* and their actual political and socio-economic struggles. In other words, the choice of animated magical realism allows the Magical Kingdom of Disney to deliver the feel-good product (and to harvest the feel-great profit).

Omission of undesirable information truly works magic. When Miguel travels to the Land of the Dead, he is convinced that Ernesto de la Cruz is his great-grandfather, based upon a family picture that includes his famous skeletal guitar. It is later revealed in the story that Héctor, who has been his companion throughout his journey, is actually his ancestor. The decision to withhold this information from the audience not only lends to a much more exciting plot, but continues the magical realism tradition of the audience discovering key information at the same time as the protagonist. *Coco* embraces this trope again when it is discovered that de la Cruz poisoned Héctor, and is actually the villain of the story instead of a heroic mariachi. By divulging this secret to the viewer later in the story, the profundity of the plot is amplified as well as the audience reaction to the secret. In keeping with magical realist tradition, the creators simultaneously provide a more engaging narrative.

Similarly, information is hidden from Mirabel (and the audience) until she uncovers it herself. She figures out that her uncle Bruno has been hiding in the walls of their family home, and that his power of future sight seemingly disclosed the demise of the Madrigal family's

powers at Mirabel's own doing. Furthermore, she connects with her Abuela and learns the devastating story of her Grandfather Pedro's death and how Abuela single-handedly worked to raise the family and keep their legacy alive in honor of Pedro. By keeping vital information hidden from the protagonist and the viewer, we are more immersed in this magical, mystical story as we discover these secrets alongside Mirabel. By implementing this secrecy, the creators follow in the footsteps of a long history of Latinx stories that incorporate magical realism. And, the strategy of intentional secrecy works magic.

Notably, each film also includes another facet of the magical realist genre, which is the escape of the protagonist from their current untenable reality into an alternate one. The creators of this type of magical realism must "endeavour to re-establish truth/reality from [the protagonist's] particular perspective" (Ahmad & Asfar, 2014, p. 5). It is clear from the outset in both films that the main characters find their current reality unsupportable, and strive to change their reality into one that is not only bearable, but ideal. It would not be enough for a Disney production to end with characters living a humdrum, everyday life, rather, their new reality must be exceptional. It is the company's desired outcome: we are talking about the Magic Kingdom, after all. The following examples are particularly telling and thought-provoking:

From the outset of *Coco*, Miguel is evidently unhappy with his existing reality. He lives his passions in secret, hiding away his love of music in an attic room. When his guitar is smashed by Abuela, he runs away to steal the guitar of de la Cruz to play instead. In this moment, he is *physically* denying his current reality and quite literally escaping to a new one. When he arrives in the Land of the Dead, he is at first scared and surprised, but quickly learns to navigate his new reality where music is honored and he can be the mariachi performer that he wishes to be. His love of music is so great, that he risks being stuck in the Land of the Dead, or rather, remaining

in his new reality, for eternity without his living family. His physical move to the Land of the Dead parallels this notion of a reality removed from the real, a reality where he can live his greatest dreams and passions. The outcome of the film then, is exceedingly satisfactory for both the audience and Miguel. By achieving a compromise in which he can have *both* his music and his family, he is living the ideal. His escapist reality has collided with the real, and resulted in the exceptional, in the paragon of a perfect life.

Mirabel's journey follows a similar narrative pattern. At the outset of the film, her entire identity is encapsulated in her in-abilities, the entire focus is on what she *can't* do. Even her support of her young cousin Antonio is seen as not good enough, and her family tells her to "step aside." Like Miguel, she then travels on a journey- to go explore Bruno's secret tower, and venture into a new reality that is forbidden to her by her Abuela. Notably, from this moment on in the film, Mirabel stops questioning her own abilities, and exemplifies strength and independence. It is important to keep in mind as before that through this, she also embodies very WASPy U.S.-American qualities, and yet from this scene on, she is fully in charge of her own narrative. Her ability to step into this alternate reality is ironically due to the fact that she does *not* possess magical powers like those of her family members. The audience sees Mirabel climb thousands of stairs, fashion a grappling-hook-like apparatus to cross a chasm, reunite her family with her Uncle Bruno, and save the day. It is precisely *because* she is so ordinary that she is able to accomplish these great deeds, and why many audience members feel an intense connection to Mirabel and her struggles. She cannot simply rely on magic to solve her problems, like us, her personal reality is limited by her human abilities. Through this magical realist trope then, the audience attains a greater connection to Mirabel and how she accomplished her goals. The viewer is invited to feel a strong affective familiarity with Mirabel's struggles, as the narrative

shows that she is "just like us" in her U.S. American quest to be extraordinary. Another successful Disney strategy towards the success of mass consumption.

Overall, these elements of musical storytelling and magical realist tropes included within both films all reflect a similar story of Pan-*Latinidad*. The enchanting soundtracks lure the audience into a deeper bond with the characters through an affective connection to emotions and recognition of cultural salience. Likewise, repeated tropes of magical realism including secrecy and alternate forms of reality allow for a familiar affective resonance amongst the viewers as they identify with the desires and roadblocks that the protagonists face in their journeys. Nonetheless, the ending of this journey for Mirabel in *Encanto* contrasts notably from the finale of *Coco*. Despite both having "happy endings," there are fundamental differences apparent in the cultural takeaways from the two films, and the messages/morals included in their respective narratives.

Cultural Differences: Revolutionary vs. Retroactive Representation

Both *Coco* and *Encanto* have been lauded for intriguing/new portrayals of familial relationships. Entwined within both films, the values of family and family legacies are essential to the plot development, and the choices that the characters make. Ahmed (2006) discusses how family trees are quite literally composed of lines, and how these lines represent so much more than simply biological connection. Ahmed posits:

> Such a line, after all, does not tell us the whole story. We need to ask what gets put aside, or put to one side, in the telling of the family story. What gets put aside, or put to one side, does not come after the event but rather shapes the line, allowing it to acquire its force. The family pictures picture the family, often as happy (the bodies that gather smile, as if the smile were the point of the gathering). At the same time, the pictures put aside what does not follow this line, those feelings that do not cohere as a smile. This 'not' as Judith Butler (1993) reminds us, also generates a line. (p. 90)

Throughout their stories, both Miguel and Mirabel make choices that "queer," or deviate from, the line of what is acceptable and desired according to their elders. Both protagonists are influenced by their families, but the choices that the characters make due to these influences differ greatly in their results. Despite quintessential Disney "happily ever after"-seeming final scenes, the films could not be more opposite in their treatment of the cultures and peoples they both claim to represent.

It is no secret from the beginning of *Coco* that Miguel's choices frequently lead him to deviate from family lines. He secretly listens to De la Cruz's music in an attic, and furtively learns to play these forbidden tunes on any guitar he can get his hands on. His family pressures him to continue along the lines that have already been drawn: to continue the family business as a shoemaker, to think of music as frivolity, and to stay in "his place" as a working-class Mexican from a small *pueblo*. Ahmed (2006) discusses these familial pressures: "these places that are under pressure don't always mean we stay on line; at certain points we can refuse the inheritance– at points that are often lived as 'breaking points.' We do not always know what breaks" (p. 90). Miguel's family does indeed push him towards specific paths through an intention of caring, but their wishes for him do not fulfill his dreams. Miguel wishes to pursue his own goals, but unlike Mirabel, his goal of being a mariachi star returns him to the quintessential *Mexicanidad*. That is to say, by deviating from the family lines at the breaking points Ahmed discusses, Miguel actually restores the best of *Mexicanidad* within his family, and recovers his own ancestry. His journey is a return to music, to heritage, and to Mexican culture. It is also a story of Mexican class travel from blue-collar workers, producing shoes, and being inseparable from the famous *chanclas,* to the white-collar musicians, the artistic clan of

Mexicanidad, the crème de la crème of Mexican culture. Art and music become central elements of cultural bridging and the version of *Mexicanidad* enabled through Miguel's journey.

Besides, as if to make the story even more relatable to the artistic milieu of actual Mexicans, Miguel's attitudes mirror those of mariachi Sebastien De La Cruz, who described his first time listening to the mariachi music as "beautiful, like angels" (cited in Sinta, 2020, p. 21). As a performer on *America's Got Talent* in 2012, De La Cruz brought mariachi to a national U.S. media platform. When asked about his goals for Mexican-U.S. relationships through the medium of mariachi, De La Cruz aims for a more nuanced understanding of the music in the U.S.: "I want to show America that mariachi isn't just about bars and restaurants. It's an actual form of music and it's beautiful" (cited in Sinta, 2020, p. 38). Similarly, in *Coco*, Miguel's character acts not only as a good *niño*, but also as the returner of mariachi music and artistic, bohemian lifestyle to his family, and to the Disney media screen. He reifies the importance of his cultural foundation, and places a spotlight on the complexity and eloquence of Mexican culture.

In addition, by diverging from the Rivera familial expectations, Miguel reconnects to his ancestral roots through music, and denies U.S. ideals of *Mexicanidad* as a solely working culture. Metaphorically speaking, he achieves the American Dream of class travel, great opportunity, and being "wealthy" enough (albeit in his case, wealthy in familial support and love rather than money) to be able to follow his dreams. Miguel's newly acquired wealth consists of what Yosso (2005) defines as "rich cultural capital," and *Coco* clearly delivers. Instead of the Mexican history of needing to toil in a low-class, blue-collar position, he has the ability to follow his dreams and pursue being a musician, a privileged position usually reserved for those who are wealthy enough to choose their profession. In other words, he is achieving the American Dream, on Mexican terms. What's more, he does not deny his cultural heritage for a white-washed

version of himself, but instead embraces his roots and once again establishes himself as a bridge between cultures, an emissary carrying Mexican tradition from the past to the present, and to the future.

Mirabel's relationship towards familial lines is also one of deviation and disruption, but with vastly different results than Miguel's narrative. From the outset, Mirabel's story differs from Miguel's in her goals and her methods to achieve them. As mentioned by Rincón (2014), Latina women face intersectional cultural and gendered obstacles in their daily lives, as well as in mediated narratives. Mirabel Madrigal is no exception. Molina-Guzman and Valdivia (2004) refer to this intersectional oppression as a "double-edged construction of femininity and otherness" (p. 206). Early on in the film, Mirabel's role as a caretaker is established as she works to make her young cousin Antonio's party perfect, and clearly has a motherly role in how she takes care of him. When her family's magical gifts start failing, she directly contradicts the orders of her Abuela (similarly to Miguel), and goes to search for an answer to her quest, hoping to gain a magical gift along the way. When Mirabel looks for a solution to their magic problems, she is told to step aside and stay in her place. She denies their wishes and her rebellion results in saving the family's magic. Along her journey, she makes a stronger connection to multiple family members and is chosen by Casita (the magical house) to take Abuela's place as the next head of the Madrigal home. In the end, Mirabel's deviation results in a return to her family, and to her (historically gendered and normative) place as a caretaker. Instead of a narrative of breaking barriers and becoming a cultural ambassador like Miguel, Mirabel goes back to her original place, within the family. Instead of exploring her relationship to *Colombianidad*, her journey results in conforming to her family's wishes in the end, and becoming a caretaker once again.

Notably, she achieves her quest to be special, or "exceptional," without help from others While Miguel can rely upon Héctor to be a guide back to mariachi and tradition, Mirabel is alone in her search for an answer to the Madrigal family's magical problems. Her independence is highlighted by a surprising lack of acknowledgement in the film of the other Madrigal family members that do not have magic, represented in her own father Agustín and her uncle Félix. The creators had an opportunity for Mirabel to have a strong, deep connection to these family members who are as "ordinary" as she is, but instead she plows through her problems independently, as the quintessential U.S.-American she represents.

If Miguel is an ambassador of *Mexicanidad*, then Mirabel embodies U.S.-Americanness - the result of involuntary cultural assimilation, typical of many migrant communities, especially of those with lower socio-economic status and those with less desirable, poverty- and war-stricken countries of origin. The final scenes of *Coco* result in a beautiful blend of the old and the modern, new ideas and tradition, and a return to one's roots. While Mirabel does attain a similar, deeper connection with her family members in the end of the narrative, their acceptance of her only arrives once they realize how *special* she is. In other words, she is expected to either fully assimilate into the normative culture of exceptionalism (typical of U.S.-America), or to be the stigmatized outsider who does not belong. Despite Mirabel's lacking magical powers, Casita still chooses her to be the next matriarch of the household. At this moment, when her own magical door appears, her family finally accepts her. We see their eyes open wider as they acknowledge Mirabel's importance, but not until it is literally in front of their faces when the actual house accepts her first. Instead of a moral of accepting one's true self and natural-born-talents like that of *Coco*'s cultural and epistemological takeaway, *Encanto's* audience is left with a reification of

the U.S. idea that people must be special in order to be worthy of true familial acceptance and love.

Miguel achieves the American Dream on Mexican terms. In contrast, Mirabel achieves the American Dream on…. U.S. American terms. In other words, an enormous opportunity was lost in her representation, with the chance to honor Colombia and *Colombianidad* entirely ignored by the creators in the final moments of the film. Instead of a glorious marriage of tradition and modernity, of the past and the present, of the Latinx and U.S. American, there is a sour divorce between Mirabel's cultural heritage and her future. The true carrier of Colombian heritage, Abuela is not even in her grave, and Mirabel is already handed the keys to the future of the family. Symbolically speaking, Colombian tradition, the past, and the old are rejected in a narrative of the exceptional Americanized present and future, surpassing and erasing the cultural past.

This narrative choice is not only disappointing, it is quite frankly culturally damaging. Returning to Yosso's (2005) understanding of cultural capital, this imposition of white, colonial normative structures over the Colombian has inherent destructive outcomes. Anzaldúa (2007) explains that "culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power" (p. 38). Films are not just pieces of media thrown into the universe, they are cultural artifacts that influence perceptions of reality. Therefore, the omission of Colombian cultural beliefs of collectivism and the heightening of U.S. American concepts of individualism have prejudicial, lasting detrimental societal salience. With this, *Coco* and *Encanto* leave their audiences with fundamentally different morals and understandings of cultural capital. Miguel and Mirabel both choose to queer familial

lines, and venture onto their own paths. The breaking points where they deviate from expectations result in vastly different outcomes. While *Coco* honors *Mexicanidad*, *Encanto* leaves behind traditional Colombian values and replaces them with U.S. American ideals of individual exceptionality. These narrative decisions have great cultural impact, and lead to real societal and political implications.

Future Directions

Coco and *Encanto* certainly brought new representation to mainstream U.S. media, in particular their production under the Disney company provides for wide-spread viewing not only in theaters, but on its 2019 platform Disney+ as well. This shift in how many viewers consume Disney films results in cultural and racial representation influencing audiences in their own homes and living rooms. As Benson-Allott (2021) posits, "material culture is always shot through with social politics, with messages about class, race, gender, and other social divisions. This is especially true of material media cultures, which also shape cultural memory and the terms for cultural participation" (p. 2). This last line in Benson-Allott's analysis about the influence is of specific salience- that media cultures, and the representation included within them, shape cultural memory and the terms for cultural participation. Media culture, and films in particular, have lasting cultural implications on who is included in a culture, and who is not.

When applying this idea to *Coco* and *Encanto*, at first glance it seems revolutionary and beautiful that Latinx characters are finally seen front-and-center in Disney animation, and to be clear, both films are a step in the right direction. But upon deeper probing, the magical stories that they tell are still veiled in a deep shadow of Othering, particularly seen in repeated tropes of existing in alternate realities and false locations. Narrative settings embody deep cultural significance; the choice of where a film occurs sends a message to the audience, that message

being “what” can occur “where.” This seemingly simple choice becomes harmful when the repeated message is that the “what” of a non-white person being protagonist can only occur in a “where” that does not exist. Through limiting the locational diversity of these settings to the unreal, the magical, the fantastical, a message is reiterated to audiences that the “what” of a non-white person being protagonist cannot occur “here,” in reality.

By using magical, unreal locations, Disney contributes to the narrative of Othering the exotic, by reinforcing that these Latinx protagonists are non-threatening to the white majority by their existence and power occurring in an unreal space. There is also a labeling of the Other as more primitive or helpless in relying upon magic to achieve their goals and advance the plot. The Other is rendered harmless to the hegemonic power structures by the lack of representation in a real space without magical elements. Therefore, the message is repeated is that the protagonist is incapable of agency within their own story without the aid of magical elements, or in “our” world. This problematic representation of a magical reality, combined with the real borders and reel (mis)representation onscreen of Latinx peoples, is simply a repeat of how Disney has historically treated non-white protagonists. *Encanto*’s imagined valley in Colombia joins *Coco*’s false town of Santa Cecilia in unreal worlds, but the trend does not stop there. Disney’s *Raya and the Last Dragon*’s (2021) occurs in a land drawing from Southeast Asian cultures called “Kumandra,” *Moana*’s (2016) created island of “Motunui” based on Polynesian island cultures, and *Big Hero 6*’s (2014) fast-paced “San Fransokyo” (a high-tech city devised of a combination between San Francisco and Tokyo). This trend displaces the animated narratives to an acceptable location for non-white protagonists to take center stage without being questioned by the white hegemonic audience.

Another theme present in these animated films is the element of magic or divine intervention, often seen in magical transformations. *Encanto* embodies both of these tropes, with the family magic being passed down through a candle from an unknown divine source. *Coco* includes magical elements seen in the Land of the Dead as well as Latinx characters turning "non-human" into skeletons. In fact, a plethora of Disney/Pixar film featuring non-white protagonists of the past 20 years has repeated these elements of magic and/or non-white human protagonists turning into something non-human throughout the film. *Brother Bear* (2003) involves Indigenous Alaskan characters turning into animals, as does its sequel, *Brother Bear 2* (2006). *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) features both non-white protagonists turning into frogs, while *Soul* (2020) involves the African-American protagonist spending the majority of the film as a disembodied "soul," a blue blob-like version of himself. The newest addition is *Turning Red* (2022), where the young Chinese-Canadian main character Mei must control her emotions in order to stop herself from consistently transforming into a stereotypically Chinese red panda.

On one hand, this recent push in non-white animated Disney protagonists may seem positive- in occurring in these false lands, these narratives have the possibility to avoid the realities of racial and ethnic sociopolitical divides that are very real and present in the locations alluded to in these films. And to be completely fair, many Disney films featuring white protagonists also rely on narratives including magic, invented locations, and humans turning into animals- these are all natural tropes of children's stories and fairytales. But, there is still a variety of white protagonist representation that does not utilize these themes. Therefore, the viewer is left with a dangerous repeated tenet of these animated films- that non-white characters can *only* take center stage in magical, unreal situations. By consistently portraying non-white protagonists

in these alternate realities, it is reiterated numerous times to the audience that this is the place they belong- in the unreal, not in "our" white hegemonic reality.

Unfortunately, it appears as if this pattern is only set to continue. The next Disney animated film to feature a non-white protagonist is *Wish*, slated to premiere in November, 2023 (Barnes, 2022). It will feature voice-actress Ariana Debose as the main character Asha, set in the magical land of wishes called "Rosas." Once again, a calculate choice is being made to feature a non-white protagonist in a magical, fantasy land. Few details are currently public about the cultural influences of the film, but the choice of a Latinx lead actress and a Spanish-named location hint towards further "Latinx cultural representation." Or rather, perhaps more mis-representation.

That being said, it is important to note that despite being one of the largest media conglomerates, Disney is far from the sole producer of children's animation. There are other Latinx-oriented producers that are beginning to compete with Disney, including Pantelion films, which names itself the first Latino Hollywood Film Studio, and Ánima Estudios, which produces Latinx films for children. Although Disney will likely continue to dominate the field, their recent interest in producing Latinx stories and protagonists has the possibility to result in trend-setting towards further diverse and inclusive representation in children's animation, and the film industry at large.

Furthermore, film is not the only pedagogical and epistemological tool of cultural and racial representation. Further strides need to be made to include more accurate and nuanced portrayals of Latinx people and Latinx history in museums, news media, and educational curricula. A change in these various mediums of representation value would lead to vast cultural transformations, removing previous limitations caused by repeated stereotypes in media. Hall

(2017) notes that "the question is not *who we are* but *who we can become.* The task of theory in relation to new cultural politics of difference is not to think as we always did, keeping the faith by trying to hold the terrain together through an act of compulsive will, but to learn to think differently" (p. 174). Hall's call to learn to think differently can only occur if people are presented with new perspectives and new narratives in media outlets. Viewed by many as simply entertainment, film plays a particularly impactful role in changing the cultural politics of difference through providing these perspectives and narratives in a context where education is subtle and nuanced. Understanding other cultures and becoming a more inclusive society does not need to look like attending a high-brow educational seminar; it can start in one's own living room, through film.

Chapter 5: Building a Bridge of Cultural Understanding

Entertainment media is an important starting place for accurate and diverse representational practices, at the most simple level because of the large audience numbers that view movies. Films from companies such as Disney have even greater cultural and social impact, due to their high viewership among children, and within family living rooms across the U.S. and the world. It is therefore all the more important that in Communication Studies, we consider the intercultural, social, and political implications of onscreen portrayals. *Coco* opened a wider door for representation of Latinx protagonists, and *Encanto* will hopefully be simply the next film in line in more culturally nuanced depictions of diverse narratives, not as perfect examples, yet a step in the right direction. In this thesis, I analyzed the representation of Latinx characters and narratives present in the two films, and the cultural implications that follow these portrayals, for the public sphere, and our understanding of interculturalities at large. Building upon previous literature by scholars in intercultural, critical race, and media studies, I demonstrated how *Coco* and *Encanto* each contributed visionary, even revolutionary -if imperfect- ideas to the history of animated Latinx portrayals, particularly in the productions of Disney children's films.

As pieces of mainstream media in our changing demographics and consumer landscape, these films have become even more salient in their role in cultural politics through the medium of streaming services that allows them to be present in our very homes, and therefore our conceptions of *Latinidad* and Latinx people are made even more personal. It becomes abundantly clear, then, through the positioning of Disney as a cultural institution that the company's influence on our living room screens creates and reflects cultural concepts and intercultural understandings. Latinx populations comprise a massive percentage of the changing United States

demographic landscape, and Disney's representations of Latinx cultures consequently become all the more important.

More specifically, I demonstrated how *Coco* (2017) features a Mexican protagonist navigating his identity as a son and member of the Rivera family, as well as a musician. This film at first reifies previous media stereotypes of Mexican men as bad *hombres*, and Mexican women as self-sacrificing matriarchal figures. Throughout the film, however, these bad *hombres* subvert tropes and are portrayed as loving, caring fathers and sons who value their family above all else. Simultaneously, the women break archetypes by taking center stage as female mariachis, portraying more nuanced identities that counteract previous limited representations. The narrative includes a physical border between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead, and through the young character of Miguel and his great-grandmother Coco, metaphorical borders are broken as they bridge the chasm between the living and the dead, the past and the present, and modernity and tradition. As a consequence, *Coco* results in a positive, modern portrayal of mariachi music and Mexican life, and offers a more nuanced understanding of *Mexicanidad*. It also provides the viewer with a more inclusive, more culturally nuanced version of Mexican-American interculturality on screen.

Besides, *Coco*'s success paved the way for *Encanto* to follow in a second Disney animated film featuring a Latinx protagonist. Despite its flaws, *Encanto* continued along *Coco*'s path in regard to counteracting certain stereotypes of *Latinidad*. Notably, the sisters' transformative relationships throughout the film as well as Mirabel's reconciliation with her Abuela deliver refreshing contradictions to the ideas of women competing for attention and power. In particular, the story of Abuela Alma as an independent migrant and single mother provides a more nuanced understanding of the traditional Latina matriarch. Unfortunately, the

film relies on exclusively U.S.-American ideals and understandings of Colombia in the narration and plot devices. The Colombia portrayed is truly a watered-down version on U.S.-American terms, commodifying culture through a WASPy hegemonic lens. This is specifically seen in Mirabel's actions that align with ideals of American Exceptionalism, and deny traditional Colombian values. *Encanto* provides a further step in Disney's Latinx representation, but at the cost of cultural objectification and othering. Both films provided a new perspective of Latinx representation in mainstream media, but *Coco* provided a more holistic and nuanced understanding of *Mexicanidad* than *Encanto* did of *Colombianidad*.

In comparing the overall messages of the two films, there were certain narrative and thematic similarities brought forward in both. Through musical and magical elements, they both contribute to an overall narrative of the Pan-Latinx, resulting in a similar, single story of Latinx experience. *Coco* and *Encanto* utilize music distinctly in their functions as a story with music and a musical, respectively, but both use this music to further the plot and the audience's personal identification with the characters. The creators of each devoted great attention to the cultural musical details of each film. Notably, each film also contains certain tropes of magical realism, following in the footsteps of much of Latin American fictional literature. The protagonists' paths are complicated through intentional secret-holding, which influences plot twists and important narrative decisions. Furthermore, both *Coco* and *Encanto* tell stories of protagonists that create their own realities when they find their own to be untenable. Through their exploration of these alternate realities, they find their own identity along the way.

Such journeys of personal transformation of the main protagonists lead to vastly differing results. Both characters choose to "queer" familial lines and expectations, forging their own paths in the search for their desires. Miguel's narrative finishes with a beautiful uniting of

traditional Mexican culture with the present. He becomes an ambassador of *Mexicanidad* and brings mariachi performing and music back to the Rivera family. His story is revolutionary in its merging of the old and the new, the antiquated and the modern. In contrast, Mirabel's story relies heavily on U.S. American ideals and the narrative reflects a pursuit of American Exceptionalism. Instead of Colombian cultural affirmation, her journey results in reification of the U.S. American cultural values, leaving behind the traditional Colombian. Her quest to be special like her family members is confirmed by their appreciation of her exceptionalism, seen in their acceptance of her role as the new matriarch of the Madrigal family. Mirabel's story therefore results in a disappointing, insipid representation of Colombian culture as archaic and forgettable.

Overall, despite the positive representations and remarkable agency of the main protagonists, *Coco* and *Encanto* join a long history of misrepresentation of non-white protagonists. They reify previous tropes including the reliance of protagonists of color on magic to forward their plot lines, including often-portrayed depictions of animal transformations. Simultaneously, these narratives frequently occur in fantasy, unreal locations. These themes have lasting, harmful effects in representation of non-white characters that bleeds from the screen to real social and political consequences. This is a harmful path that seems will only be continued by Disney in their currently planned film featuring a Latinx protagonist. On the other hand, there are multiple Latinx-led studios gaining traction in the United States and other countries. That could potentially alter the trajectory of Latinx representation in children's animation.

Animated films and entertainment media in general are only the start of possible positive and nuanced representations of Latinx communities. Through this thesis, I aim to add to the existing scholarship of Latinx representation, and call for further research into the social and political implications that these representations enact in U.S. society. *Coco* arrived during the

height of negative political rhetoric towards Latinx populations and brought messages of resistance and hope to Mexican communities in particular. *Encanto*, despite its many faults, was a further stepping stone on the way to more nuanced representation of Latinx people. As the fastest growing population in the United States, Latinx communities will continue to be placed under a scrutinous spotlight in our ever-changing racial and political atmosphere. As such, the need is only greater for positive, complex representation not only in film, but also reflected in news media, educational curricula, museums, and all cultural institutions. With this thesis, I contributed a single plank to the bridge of cultural understanding, and I hope to see continued scholarship to further promote positive representation of Latinx cultures. Media output and representational politics have much greater ramifications beyond the silver screen. As Communication scholars, it is imperative that we study under- and mis-represented communities, especially in regard to how they are portrayed in the media. *Coco* and *Encanto* are only small pieces of the giant picture of cultural representation, and therefore much work still needs to be done.

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