

Working for the Miracle: A Critical, Visual Analysis of Disney's *Encanto*

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Disney's *Encanto* premiered in 2021 to worldwide acclaim that was extended by globalized and technological contexts. This essay proposes a visual analysis of *Encanto*, with particular attention to the cultural tensions and ideologies that surround the film, including paratexts produced by *Encanto* fans via the streaming platform TikTok. Although the film remains notable for its stylistic displays of Latine identities and experiences, its visual choices remain situated in western, settler-colonial ideologies of oligarchical governance, mestizaje, and postracism. The visual analysis of *Encanto* and its related paratexts contributes to scholarship on the labor of cultural translators on behalf of Disney, expanding it to include unaffiliated Disney audiences who digitally articulate histories of imperialism, displacement, and their contemporary counterparts for public audiences.

Keywords: visual culture, Latinidad, cultural translators, paratexts, Encanto

In November of 2021, Disney's *Encanto* (Bush, Castro Smith, & Howard, 2021) premiered and became a central popular culture text. The latest in a line of inclusive animated films, *Encanto* is set in Colombia and was widely praised for its elevation of Latine, including Afro-Latine, representations. Our attention to this media is situated in Latine representation and responses to the visuality that emanated from the picture. Not only were the visual choices of the film indicative of ideological understandings of Latinidad, but the paratextual media produced in response to *Encanto* illustrated dimensions of cultural awareness and understanding that merit further investigation. With the growing influence of media technologies at our disposal, this analysis focuses on both the visual culture produced and reinforced through *Encanto* and the participatory responses that labored on behalf of the film's considerable Latine references.

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Scholars have conceptualized Latinidad as an unstable, flexible, and unfinished process that is both external (as a mainstream media construction) and internal (as a collective and individual identification process; del Río, 2017; Molina-Guzmán, 2010; Valdivia, 2020). Molina-Guzmán (2010) claims that media depictions of Latinidad often rely on “the production of familiar ethnic characteristics,” including garb, food, and music (p. 5). Del Río (2017) suggests that Latinidad is a contested category that engages “subaltern and hegemonic politics,” a site of cultural expression that encompasses interethnic geographies, spaces of solidarity, and global markets (p. 9). *Encanto*'s (Bush et al., 2021) visual culture presents a rich opportunity to illustrate paradoxes of representation and identity that afflict modern conceptualizations of Latinidad in popular culture and beyond.

In the last ten years of what has been popularly billed as Disney's “revival era” (Beltran, 2022), the oligopoly has released a litany of media that has averted the so-called “princess era” of films. Whereas older pictures reinforced tropes and narrative devices rooted in subservient femininity and White/western/hetero-patriarchy, more recent films have strived to *authentically*¹ represent diverse identities and geographic contexts, expanding discussions intertwined with representation. *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) comes at a diversity-focus media turn where audiences are more tuned into contexts that directly inform the creation and reception of media. Valdivia (2017) holds that Latinidad's representation struggles involve both the production of media and the reception from audiences who are operating under their own set of conditions and expectations. We maintain that the movie and its surrounding discourses are characterized by both affordances and drawbacks. In this analysis, we unpack the intricate ideologies that surround *Encanto*, arguing that although it is a visual spectacle that centers Colombian and Latine themes, the film's narrative and visual choices maintain western settler-colonial values of individualism and identity broadly. First, we offer an account of Disney's contemporary turn toward “authentic” representation. Second, we delve into visual culture as a concurrent methodological and theoretical framework. We then analyze the intricate visual cues displayed in *Encanto*. Finally, we extend the study of Disney cultural translators (Báez, 2018; Chávez & Kiley, 2016; Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021) to account for paratextual and visual labor that has been performed on behalf of *Encanto*. This essay challenges conceptualizations that diversity lies solely in visual inclusion and further draws attention to the labor audiences exert to articulate histories of imperialism, displacement, and their contemporary counterparts.

Disney's Diversity Turn

Media studies from the late twentieth century note the disproportionate flow of United States media that circulates through audiences worldwide. Disney's role as a global content producer and distribution powerhouse is well documented (Greenhill, Rudy, Hamer, & Bosc, 2018; Wasko, 2014), as Disney's stories have worked to promote imperialist perceptions of Others in the west and globally. The corporation itself recognizes past, problematic renderings of Others as evidenced through the disclaimer (e.g., “outdated cultural depictions”) that accompany older films on their streaming platform (Pietsch, 2020). Yet, while Disney acknowledges and, in some cases, has removed early twentieth century racist media from its catalog

¹ Our emphasis is to note that although past Disney films have been situated in specific geographic contexts (i.e., China, Africa, etc.) the characters, ideologies, and stories remained informed by colonial conceptualizations of humanness.

(i.e., *Song of the South*), reductive portrayals of Others persisted into the early twenty-first century under the facade of multiculturalism. Films such as *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995) and *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998) featured diverse protagonists in historically diverse contexts, but the visual renderings that informed these stories, settings, and characters did little to offset the colonial ideologies enmeshed in their composition. As audiences become more attuned to the limited media representations that have dominated Disney, and by extension western media, contemporary efforts have sought to remedy past depictions. In 2021, the Disney website prominently featured a "Social Responsibility" hyperlink that directed audiences to their "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" statement. We note the emphasis on "amplifying underrepresented voices" and "championing the importance of accurate representation" ("Creative Development," n.d.). The statement is reflective of a directional shift in Disney's media, an explicit recognition of the limited and exclusionary portrayals that comprise most of their filmography. To this end, it is the more recent efforts in representation that draw our attention. Disney is undeniably creating more diverse and inclusive content; still, we question the ideologies promoted through more contemporary visualities of difference.

Recent efforts to depict underrepresented histories are not without market profit. As Leon-Boys and Chávez (2021) explain, Disney and its several products—from animated films to parks—are undergoing noticeable "ideological readjustments" that foreground underrepresented narratives to appease new global market demands and demographic shifts. Efforts to rectify pejorative renderings are evident in the recent slate of films produced, including *Moana* (Clements, Musker, & Shurer, 2016) and *Zootopia* (Howard, Moore, & Bush, 2016). Albeit Disney's attempt to employ culturally inclusive depictions (Yoshinaga, 2019), these films, including *Encanto*, reproduce, to some extent, settler-colonial and capitalist values (Cramer, 2020; Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2022). We turn our attention to the limited display of Latine cultures in contemporary Disney media and the manner in which western ideologies persist amid stories that center Latin American identities and geographies.

Latinidad and Disney Media

Specific to Disney's representations of Latinidad, the animated film *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017) was a cinematic departure from previous depictions of Mexican and, by extension, Latine cultures. Unlike the anthropomorphic twentieth-century chihuahua renderings in *Lady and the Tramp* (Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1955) and *Oliver and Company* (Scribner, 1988), *Coco* was part of Disney's diversity-focused cinematic expansion. Yet, as Galarza and Rodríguez Burciaga (2021) note, subsequent Latine-hired labor is largely responsible for the cultural acumen of the film. In 2013, Disney sought to trademark "Day of the Dead," a move that amassed considerable protest from Latine artists and activists (Flores, 2013; Rodríguez, 2013). For undisclosed reasons, Disney withdrew their application after three days, opting to hire Latine cultural translators to develop the film. Galarza and Rodríguez Burciaga (2021) examine the labor of Latine cultural translators that lent "legitimacy to the production" through cultural and ideological insight (p. 172). For example, Latine cultural translators were responsible for the narrative inclusion of the need for a family blessing (among other plot devices and cultural nods in the film; Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021). *Coco* was a success, breaking box office records internationally and notably in Mexico (McNary, 2017). The labor of cultural translators thus has a significant impact on media texts' ability to resonate with audiences.

Scrutinizing the work of commissioned cultural translators should include a consideration of uncompensated audience labor in the production of mediated Latine identity. Leon-Boys (2023), for instance, provide an in-depth analysis of Latinidad and girlhood, with particular attention on Disney's first proclaimed Latina princess, Elena of Avalor. In it, the author notes consumer-led tactics of diversity that have prompted Disney to engage Latin America (among other non-White geographies) for the sake of expanding upon normative White-princess lore. Yet, as diverse as representations are in characterization and design, Leon-Boys (2023) argues that such depictions rely on predictable tropes that "flatten the many differences among Latin American countries" (p. 33). These strategies forward a monolithic ethnic presence that simultaneously provides the illusion of inclusion while making Latine ethnicities familiar and safe to White audiences. This essay extends Leon-Boys's (2023) consideration of strategic, market-driven inclusion to more intently examine the visual culture in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). We investigate the rendering of a fixed Latine geography, Colombia, as well as audiences' interpretive labor on behalf of the film.

Disney, as a symbolic and visual apparatus, has been studied extensively for its rearticulation of history (Anjirbag, 2018; Edgerton & Jackson, 1996; Magee, 2012). Whether through films, merchandise, or theme parks, the conglomerate is known for framing historical and folk narratives as authentic accounts of the past while simultaneously reinforcing western values and practices. As Grayson and Mawdsley (2019) contend, Disney works intentionally to be perceived as authoritative, emotively powerful, and truthful in its output of representational content. Accordingly, we examine *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) as a product of overused visual tropes about cultural Others sold under the guise of geographic specificity and authenticity. We do so by employing visual-centric methodology and theoretical frameworks that shed light on images as texts replete with complex ideologies. Although *Encanto* seemingly centers Colombianidad, the film's visual culture reaffirms dominant ideas about colonial hierarchies and individualism, amid the central subject of Latinidad, that are illustrated in subtle and covert ways.

Visual Culture and Paratexts

Visual cultural studies explore the visual strategies and mechanisms that constitute our lived realities. Scholars study the visual to deconstruct the creator-viewer dialectic amid regulated "formats and institutions of production [and] distribution" and "socially organized relations" (Evans & Hall, 1999, p. 44). Specifically, to view is to engage in a multitude of power relationships that shape cultural production and understanding. An important factor of visual culture is its capacity to shape perceptions of self and others through strategic compositions of socially constructed meanings and subjects. The west, and more specifically Disney, remains a central purveyor of culture at large, and the power-laden visuals used to produce culture are important sites of critical exploration (Grayson & Mawdsley, 2019). Thus, visual culture is understood as existing within a geopolitical and sociocultural context with power embedded in its creation, distribution, and reception. To study the visual is to engage in the politics of existence.

A growing area of research investigates how bodies are rendered visually, making identities "meaningful, manageable, and knowable" through their representation and viewership (Boylan, 2020, p. 95). In fictional media, identity representations have been criticized for partial and oftentimes pejorative displays. Those with power within White supremacist, heteronormative, and western media apparatuses hold authority over the visual culture that is distributed and received among audiences

globally. This is especially true when one explores the “empirical characteristics” that are privileged and portrayed as desirable within United States media (Rose, 2014, p. 26). Analyses (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Nakayama, 2000) note the privileging of White-cis-hetero-patriarchal portrayals that exist within varied media forms, yet this imperial articulation of social reality is also true when dominant visual forms represent nonwestern identities. As Boylan (2020) articulates of marginal bodies, “visual culture is . . . the constant, and constantly failing, attempt to replicate or transcend bodies that are trapped in racist, gender-conforming, sexist, ableist, and ageist visual paradigm[s]” (p. 95). Visual representations constitute an ordered world, and nondominant bodies are overwhelmingly subjected to the coded ideologies of their producers. In the case of United States media, visual culture has been used strategically to reimagine histories and perceptions of Others.

A critical engagement with visual culture is necessary to understand the power relations that are reinforced in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). Accordingly, we apply three of Rose’s (2014) considerations for interpreting visual texts. The first involves taking images “seriously” (p. 12). The visual has effects that operate beyond its local context, and there is nuance and significance to the visual that cannot be fully understood in a singular setting. We investigate *Encanto* as a rendering of this consideration, as the film is available to mass audiences through theaters, digital streaming, and social media platforms. The second consideration contemplates the social conditions that visuals construct. Per Rose (2014), “visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions”; as such, a critical inventory considers the effects of these choices (p. 12). We explore depictions and omissions in *Encanto*, articulating ideologies that are reinforced and reproduced as a result.

The third consideration involves the critics’ “way of looking at images” (Rose, 2014, p. 12). As subjects who operate within a myriad of sociopolitical, cultural, and geographic contexts, it is necessary to explore how one decodes visual culture. Appropriately, we situate that the three authors of this study occupy distinct Latine identities and relationships to the United States that shape our visual interpretations. We would also like to include how audiences, as critics, expand on the understanding of the ideological effects of *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). Johnson (2017) posits that production studies must “turn [their] attention to informal settings and networks of cultural creation and distribution” beyond the bounds of media industries (p. 151). To that end, we incorporate paratextual perspectives in the form of TikTok videos and user comments that add relevant insights into how Disney’s visual culture relies on audience labor to draw interpretive nuance.

One concept audiences embody in their critical viewings is paratextual in nature. Paratexts are notable for their ability to develop a “zone not only of transition but also of transaction” (Genette, 1997, p. 2). When a central popular text is distributed to audiences, paratexts are subsequently created, amended, and circulated to the point that fans mobilize to further engage with the source text. Unlike traditional formulations of production as an activity restricted to media industries, this essay considers “a broader set of productive relations through which meaning, identity, and culture are generated” (Johnson, 2017, p. 151). The cultural labor of audiences is thus central to understanding the manifold cultural implications of a movie like *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021).

Visuals meant to represent silenced histories operate within a complex tension as dominant culture maintains considerable authority over available images; visuals aimed at promoting marginal histories must function within the very structures they seek to transcend. Popular texts have attempted “rearranging, cutting, and disorientating” various artistic forms for the sake of broadening colonial interpretations (Boylan, 2020, p.129). In *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021), we see various cultural renderings that exemplify this tension. Although the film portrays Colombian culture, we argue that its visual choices promote a version of Latinidad that aligns with U.S. ideologies of individualism and colorblindness, which in turn reveal depictions for the sake of superficially bolstering diversity. We begin our analysis with an interrogation of La Familia Madrigal and the visual ordering of the family that reinforces hierarchical and oligarchical ideologies of governance.

Latinidad’s Ideological Renderings and Audience Paratextual Labor in *Encanto*

The Madrigal Oligarchy

Disney films have traditionally rendered overt forms of hierarchy and social order. Narratives about monarchy and the symbolism of castles and crowns are obvious examples of this tendency (Artz, 2002). Although *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) is not a story about princesses, the film’s images maintain a hierarchical social order that is familiar to both Latin American colonial contexts and U.S. imperialist values, of which Disney is a known disseminator. We delve into the ideological depictions of *Encanto*’s power-laden visuals and the manner in which these choices reinforce the Madrigals’ natural place in the town’s social hierarchy.

Encanto (Bush et al., 2021) is an amalgamation of colonial and U.S. imperialist images of Colombia as well as of contemporary constructions of Latinidad. Conventionally, mediated Latinidad offers hybrid but indistinguishable cultural representations of Latin America. The town of Encanto, for instance, is set up like a colonial village with generic Neogranadian architecture, and despite the Madrigals’ home being named in the diminutive—“Casita”—it is the largest home in the village. Casita’s prominence is highlighted as it stands alone at the top of a rolling hill, signaling the power structure of a typical Latin American colonial town. This is further reinforced at the culmination of the film, when the entirety of the community gathers to physically labor over the rebuilding of the crumbled, two-story Casita. Through placement, scale, and size, the Madrigal home symbolically operates as a castle.

Beyond the colonial imagery of *Encanto*’s (Bush et al., 2021) backdrop, we also consider the social order among the Madrigals. In the film’s opening musical number, the family’s children emerge from their corresponding rooms with expansive magical dominions bestowed upon them after their respective gift ceremonies. Each member’s room is visually adorned with the magical ability they inherited, apart from Mirabel, who resides in the nursery with her cousin and the youngest Madrigal, Antonio. The social order is upended when Antonio receives his inheritance, symbolically displayed through a brand-new animal-themed room. The magical doors are visually distinct from the house in their brightness and incandescent design, emphasizing each magically endowed family member’s supernatural abilities. For instance, Isabela, who can conjure plants, has a door embellished with flowers. Later in the film, as the Madrigal family negotiates the loss of their gifts, the doors visually dim, representing their fading powers. This glow is significant in its visual authority over the town’s architecture and color scheme. Conversely, the town is depicted through

sandstone buildings and cobblestone streets while the Madrigal family members reside in incandescent, gold-silhouetted rooms. Not unlike monarchy members, adorned and represented in jewels and gold, the Madrigal family members are visually positioned as superior to the otherwise simple town architecture and interchangeable Colombian townspeople. The family resembles small-town oligarchies that have abounded in Latin America since colonial times (Gilbert, 2017). Gilbert (2017) states that powerful actors and their families consolidated political and economic dominance throughout Latin America by the early decades of the twentieth century. Oligarchs showcase their power consolidation through subtle and overt forms. In *Encanto*, we see a plethora of both noticeable and inconspicuous demonstrations of the family's hierarchical power vis-à-vis the town and its members.

One of the most patent illustrations of power differentials in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) happens during the opening musical number, a cumbia titled "The Family Madrigal" (Miranda, 2021a). The song serves to introduce members of the family, their respective "gifts," and to highlight their prominent place in town. The performance starts with Mirabel interacting through an open window with three racially diverse children from the town who anxiously ask to know each family member's "gifts." This interaction and the subsequent scenes, in which the Madrigals step out of Casita to parade before the village, demonstrating their magic, suggest that they are more than fellow community members. Each Madrigal is introduced in the context of utilizing his or her magical powers to serve the community. A sequence of images portrays them interacting with and assisting townspeople with services such as healing injured folks through food and shape-shifting to aid tired mothers. Moreover, the use of magic for communal purposes during this introduction establishes the role of the Madrigals as benevolent leaders, although the audience seldom witnesses community members benefiting from the family's gifts throughout the rest of *Encanto*.

There are a plethora of visual cues in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) that suggest that the Madrigals uphold a powerful, celebrity-like status in town. From outbursts of excitement to their sight—"Oh my gosh, it's them! What are their gifts?"—to the consultation headed by Abuela when trouble arises, the audience sees the ruling family take center stage in the life of the community. In the opening musical number, we are introduced to a colorful mural in the middle of the village that resembles a family tree. In it, we see the family distributed in a pyramid-shaped form, with Abuela on top holding the "miracle candle" under the title "Los Madrigal." Like oligarchs and monarchs that give preference to consanguineal family relationships, the mural similarly displays only members of the Madrigals related to Abuela by blood. Félix and Agustín (the husbands of the two Madrigal women) are excluded from the painting, a notable choice when considering the presence of their offspring in the image. The portrayal of a celebratory family tree mural in the village establishes the Madrigals' generational status and their revered position in the community.

The Madrigals' social status as the town's oligarchs is epitomized in one of the last musical numbers in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021), titled "All of You" (Miranda, 2021b). Although the reunited and giftless Madrigals stand on the ruins of a collapsed Casita, they observe the townspeople approaching, holding construction tools, and singing, "Lay down your load/We are only down the road/We have no gifts, but we are many/And we'll do anything for you!" The images that follow show the community consoling the Madrigals—Mariano's mother holds Abuela's hands tenderly—and working together to rebuild Casita. This overt display of collective and benign subservience is in line with previous Disney stories in which the social order must be reestablished to signal narrative resolution. A similar path is seen in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee,

2019), in which the dispossession of the neighboring indigenous population is easily forgiven, not yielding any negative consequences to the kingdom of Arendelle and the monarchs in power (Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2022). Not coincidentally then, once Casita is rebuilt, the “miracle” and each family member’s respective special powers return so their natural place at the top of the town’s hierarchy is secured once more. Their position as town oligarchs would not be possible, however, without the leadership of Abuela Alma. As the head of the family and ruler of the town, Abuela is often rendered in ways that sanction her power. We explore Abuela Alma’s oligarchical posturing in the next section.

Abuela: From Oligarch to Benevolent Leader

“Let’s be clear, Abuela runs this show!” sings Mirabel in “The Family Madrigal” (Miranda, 2021a). Abuela Alma is indisputably the leader of *Encanto*, the person who establishes family and town rules and expectations, and the one to whom the townspeople turn for aid and advice. In the film’s resolution, Abuela shifts from being a ruthless oligarch who suppresses individuality to protect the “miracle” to a benevolent leader who embraces self-actualization and encourages the expression of individual identity.

Visually, Abuela always appears stern, composed, and prominently featured when surrounded by her family and the community alike. Like a politician, Abuela speaks for the family and manages impressions of possible trouble and threats to the family hierarchy. In the opening musical number, for instance, Abuela walks down the streets of the village surrounded by the community, singing with a loose fist gesture typical of politicians giving public speeches: “We swear to always/help those around us/and earn the miracle/that somehow founds us” (Miranda, 2021b). The sequence of scenes resembles a “people like us” political advertisement. Abuela is handed a piece of wood, as though she walked into an assembly line, which she passes on to the next person, and subsequently waves to a community member looking out a window. She continues, “But work and dedication will keep the miracle growing/and each new generation must keep the miracle burning.” Abuela is the ruler of the town, the one who generates and controls the resources of the *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021).

Additional scenes in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) strategically display Abuela’s mayoral authority over the town. During the gift-revelation party for Antonio, Abuela can be seen managing impressions of the family’s miracle and reputation on the heels of Mirabel’s failure to receive a magical ability of her own. Later, when Mirabel attempts to tell Abuela that she saw the house cracking, Alma announces to the party that the magic and the drinks are strong, implying that Mirabel is under the influence and therefore unreliable. Inserting herself as the primary representative of the family and the miracle reinforces the hierarchy between the Madrigals and the community. In another instance, as Casita is crumbling, she exclaims to concerned townspeople, “the magic is strong. Everything is fine. We are the Madrigals!” As Artz (2002) argues, “hierarchy in a social order indicates a ranking according to worth, ability, authority, or some other attribute” (p. 8). At numerous points throughout the film, Abuela consistently devalues Mirabel and her placement in the familial lineage because of her lack of a gift—she is of no use in the hierarchical maintenance. At the same time, Abuela continually reinforces the urgency of maintaining order, both for her family and the town at large.

Abuela shifts from the ruthless ruler who suppresses individuality to a benevolent leader who encourages its expression. She is initially displayed as apathetic, self-interested, and cantankerous, qualities that are framed as negative and connected to the wavering happiness of family members. The antidote to the emotional weight of serving the community and of being a Madrigal comes in the form of reification of individualism, especially for Luisa, Isabela, and Mirabel. The only way the Madrigals can move forward as town leaders is by allowing some of them to express their feelings and their agency. We see this play out in the performance of "All of You" (Miranda, 2021b). In an exchange with Abuela and her daughters, she holds their hands and caresses Pepa's face lovingly as she sings, "The miracle is not/Some magic that you've got/The miracle is you." Aside from rebuilding Casita, the musical number's goal is to highlight Abuela's benevolent shift and to emphasize the self-actualization of the Madrigal family members.

Encanto (Bush et al., 2021) follows Disney's documented tendency of reestablishing order and promoting individualism, but its Colombian context is more aligned with the conglomerate's recent leanings toward cultural awareness and postracism. Although the town is visually depicted following Latinidad's recognizable media elements, such as lively songs, dance, bright colors, tropical natural landscape, brownness, and the presence of Spanish (Molina-Guzmán, 2010), the film also suggests that a community can be healthy and functional only if its members embrace western values. At the conclusion of the film, the Madrigals are awarded their gifts back, fully restoring the social order. Disney's traditional and recent visual ideologies are maintained and strengthened as a result, as *Encanto* upholds the status quo, leaving a veneer of diversity and cultural awareness. This section also evinces that only some Madrigals are afforded enough character development to grant them individuality, something so valuable to western and capitalist ideals. We turn next to how *Encanto's* visual culture perpetuates a colonial hierarchical structure supported by mestizaje as well as neoliberal ideas of postracism, aligning with Disney's contemporary promotion of diversity.

Mestizaje and Postracism in Encanto

The Madrigals are a multigenerational and multiracial family. As it is often the case with media portrayals of Latinidad, many of the main characters are brown to signal racial mixing, or mestizaje (Molina-Guzmán, 2010). However, some of the peripheral characters appear more unquestionably Indigenous and/or Afro-Latine. Isabela, for instance, is darker than her sisters and presents as phenotypically Indigenous. On the other branch of the Madrigals, Félix and Antonio are dark-skinned Afro-Colombians, while Camilo and Dolores appear to be mestizos. Like many Latin American countries, Colombian racial hierarchies have espoused, symbolically and materially, a politics of racial mixing, "provided the population steadily moves toward whiteness over time" (Cepeda, 2018, p. 128). Gradually, such ideas have transformed into a fanciful racial democracy narrative that conceals anti-indigeneity and anti-Blackness (Morgan, 2005). In *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021), we see how Latinidad's assumed racial hybridity is realized in the form of a multiracial family and community that coexist without any shred of racial tension.

Since mestizaje can be interpreted as a Whitening strategy (Cepeda, 2018), it is unsurprising that Félix, the only Afro-Colombian adult among the Madrigals, symbolizes many of the troubling ideas of that ideology. Félix is married to Pepa Madrigal, perhaps the most visibly light-skinned character of *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). Their children are all lighter-skinned than Félix, and per mestizaje's scheme, that

lightening would continue in the next generations—their daughter Dolores, for instance, becomes romantically involved with Mariano, a light-skinned mestizo character. Additionally, Félix is exoticized and stereotypically represented as an Afro-Colombian man: He often wears cumbia attire, he is a great dancer, and his “foreign” Latino accent is markedly stronger in comparison to the other Madrigals’. This is easily observed during the performance of “We Don’t Talk About Bruno” (Miranda, 2021c). In this musical number, Félix coordinates exaggerated hip and arm movements in traditional cumbia fashion with lyrics he sings to Pepa seductively. Félix also taps the rhythm of the song on his chest, kisses Pepa’s hands and arms, and exudes the Latin lover trope. This depiction corroborates Colombian racial stereotypes in which Black men are portrayed as flirtatious entertainers, characteristics that are often contrasted with images of superiorly moral White men (La Furcia, 2016).

Although the creators of *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) worked intentionally to portray a “culturally authentic” Latin America (“Creative Development,” n.d.), U.S. ideologies of Latinidad and postracial diversity made the film culturally vague and superficially diverse. *Encanto* purposefully depicts characters of different shades as evidence of diversity, which we argue happens for apolitical appeasement. Correspondingly, the three children who interact with Mirabel throughout the film are conveniently Black, brown, and White. In mestizaje fashion, they often stand next to each other in that order, which is also emblematic of Disney’s colorblind approach to distributing its multicultural products (Chávez, 2017). Hence, this tension between reifying colonial racial hierarchies and embracing postracial difference aligns with recent Disney productions that appear diverse, such as *Zootopia* (Howard et al., 2016) and *Moana* (Clements et al., 2016). Beyond appearing racially diverse, *Encanto* conveniently fits within media constructions of Latinidad, in which Latines are depicted as colorful dancers who live in exotic tropical landscapes (we once again note Antonio’s jungle-themed room), and whose racial hybridity is inherent and placid. Like other Disney narratives, *Encanto* simultaneously affirms diversity while concealing racism. Thus, Disney films that look visually progressive compel audiences to labor for additional, meaningful interpretations. Considering that media representations of Latinidad elicit internal processes of identification (Valdivia, 2020), what follows is an extrapolation of how this operates within the production and circulation of paratextual labor.

Disney and the Paratextual Labor of Audiences

The rationale for incorporating paratexts is twofold. First, expounding on Rose’s (2014) third consideration of visual culture, we argue that the interrogation of Latinidad should be multiperspectival. Given the availability of various media to audiences outside of primary texts produced by oligopolies such as Disney, we argue that consumers of these texts play a central role in the circulation of polysemic meanings. Second, Latinidad is an unstable and flexible construct that is regularly rendered through meanings and cues most familiar to its audiences (del Río, 2017). Thus far, we have argued that *Encanto*’s (Bush et al., 2021) depictions of Latinidad are rooted in hegemonic frameworks, and in turn, are presented to audiences in contradictory and nebulous ways. To comprehend how audiences make sense of these complex portrayals of Latinidad, we turn to the concept of paratexts and paratextual labor as integral parts of the production process.

Unlike *Coco*, in which the role of Mexican American cultural translators heavily shaped the film’s narrative, *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) seemed to be produced more generally as a Latin American

animation that happened to be set in Colombia. Acclaimed writer and musician Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is of Puerto Rican descent, is credited with having infused directors Byron Howard and Jared Bush's animation idea with the doses of colorful Latine audience experience in *Encanto* (Ordoña, 2021). In fact, Bush quotes Miranda as intending to make *Encanto* "the definitive Latin American Disney musical" (Ordoña, 2021, para. 2). Despite Miranda's consistent advocacy in favor of Latine media representation, scholars have criticized his cultural rendering of Latinidad for appealing heavily to White American sensibilities as well as United States values of individualism (Monteiro, 2016; Sáez, 2021). In addition to Miranda, Howard and Bush later brought in Cuban American screenwriter Charise Castro-Smith as a codirector, whose ideas also influenced the picture's final product (What's on Disney Plus, 2021). Having two United States-born Latines of disparate national origins and ethnicities in *Encanto*'s main production team might help explain the elusiveness of Colombianidad in the film, an evasiveness that gained cultural specificity via the labor of TikTok users.

Paratexts created by audiences reveal their capacities to act simultaneously as fan and critic, positioning them as capable of strengthening and/or weakening long-held meanings (Gray, 2010). Indeed, Johnson (2017) contends that traditional concepts of media production obscure audiences' necessary roles in the process of (re)producing culture, "regardless of their position within various divisions of labor and corporate structures" (p. 151). Combining Johnson's (2017) points with Rose's (2014) third consideration of visual culture, we investigate audiences' roles as consumers and critics of visuals to more thoroughly understand the impact of Disney's visual choices. To this end, we identified a few fan-made videos emanating from TikTok, a significant source of paratexts that both elevated the film's popularity and informed its prominence as a popular culture fandom (Shaw, 2022).

Launched in 2018, TikTok allows content creators and users to upload short-length videos (or TikToks). The videos range in topicality and subject matter, though paratextual commentary on popular culture is one of the mainstays of the platform. Users can comment and thread out replies in response to posted videos, often leading to sustained yet fragmented conversations. In addition to comment threads, users are able to reply to videos in line with comments whenever they wish to go more in-depth with the subject matter of original videos. Various aspects of TikTok's structure and design are extremely reliant on visuals as a vehicle for users to engage with content. More specifically, the creation and circulation of visuals on this app is a participatory endeavor that has eventually found its way to the discourse of *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). Between the immense popularity of *Encanto* and the mass audiences congregating on TikTok, we found it opportune to highlight its users to further ascertain how audiences are critically evincing the film's impact. Our audience-driven inquiry consists of two TikToks that, at the time of this writing, have totaled 1.3 million and 1.4 million views respectively, also garnering over 230,000 likes. These paratexts extrapolate a scene central to the Colombian context, which was subtly presented in the film. To better situate the responses in relation to visual analysis, we describe the scene in question below, which accounts for why the discourses of Colombian identity and displacement have been elevated through the paratextual labor of audiences, contrasting with *Encanto*'s generally indistinguishable depictions of Latinidad.

The opening scenes of *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) show Abuela recounting to a young Mirabel how the Madrigal received their miracle; she had just given birth to the triplets when she and Abuelo Pedro were forced out of their hometown by horsemen who vandalized their homes. On their path to a new life, Pedro

"was lost," according to Abuela, which we later understand is a euphemism for his death. It is unclear what "dangers" the couple was fleeing, as all we see are the shadows of horsemen setting a village on fire and subsequently confronting Pedro, who is shown down on his knees. Abuela's account of how the miracle of the family became a focal point for audience members who discuss the film in further detail on TikTok. Cepeda (2021) posits that "intergenerational trauma" and "forced displacement" are stereotypical themes of global Colombianidad often depicted in media texts (p. 8). Although both themes are not explicitly mentioned in *Encanto*, it is the film's audience members who do the meaningful cultural work of drawing them out for further elucidation.

TikTok user @ashtheacenerd shared a video featuring the scene where Abuela Alma witnesses the murder of Pedro at the hands of the shadowy horsemen. The following captions are layered over the short clip:

Encanto is Disney's darkest film . . . abuela sees her husband sacrifice himself while holding their children in her arms. Her pain and heartache create the miracle her family gets. She then puts too much pressure on her family to earn it. (@ashtheacenerd, 2021)

What follows is a generative thread of comments revolving around the "dark" themes of the film. One of the comments on the video stated that "this is the reality for so many families from all backgrounds (I'm Hispanic) . . ." Another user emphatically states, "And remember! Real people experienced this, without getting a miracle . . . many Colombians experienced this pain of seeing [*sic*] their homes taken away." What we witness in these threads is how "meaning is communicated by what is done with images, in specific moments of interpretation and evocation" (Rose, 2014, p. 38). The paratextual visuals moved many users to self-identify as Colombian, speaking to how the film portrays the extent to which their loved ones experienced violence similar to what was presented on screen. These moments of evocation are distinct in their ability to highlight the power of interpretation that audiences hold. They additionally sustain Johnson's (2017) argument that media "production unfolds as a process and series of moments" beyond the confines of the industry (p. 152), exemplifying, too, Disney's reliance on the cultural labor of ethnic minorities in several aspects of its production process (Chávez & Kiley, 2016; Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021).

In a similar TikTok by user @yersonlv_, the beginning of this scene is played with the caption reading, "the way that every Colombian understood this scene makes me so emotional." At the request of others who wanted to know more about the contextual backdrop of this scene, user @yersonlv_ goes on to explain that it is touching for Colombians since there is a deep history surrounding the movie that is not made explicit. @yersonlv_ goes on to provide their own perspective about the civil war that had befallen the country, where "violent terrorist groups" had intentions to "usurp the Colombian government." According to the user, the conflict resulted in, among other things: Killings of innocent Colombians, kidnappings of young men to be trained as soldiers, sexual violence, and the pillaging of land belonging to indigenous farmers (@yersonlv_, 2022). Following this perspective on a moment in Colombian history, the visual components of both the film and paratexts moved users toward a realization of the historical and cultural significance of this scene amid the entire film. One user states, "but everyone assumes they're colonizers, not knowing this history," and another similarly chiming in saying, "as a Colombian, thank u so much for explaining this, I'm tired of seeing people saying that they're colonizers." Another user asks where they can

learn more about the historical backdrop from this flashback scene, saying that this was explained so well. Finally, another user says, "THANK YOU FOR EXPLAINING THIS!! My stepmother is Colombian and was born there and she adored this film and cried hard to this but couldn't tell me why." These paratexts alert us to the ontologically minded perspectives that audience members are capable of connecting to the film, though they are not overtly stated (Rose, 2014).

Of all the plot points in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021), this one is most resonant with audiences for the following reasons: First, this crystallizes a common element of Disney films, which is to encourage audiences to look more into the covert meanings embedded in movies that allow the company to preserve its market-friendly image. Given Disney's position as a media conglomerate working to appeal to viewers broadly, TikTok users employed the invaluable labor of interpreting and making sense of *Encanto's* visuals. This crucial moment in the film points to audiences' abilities to apprehend histories, contexts, and discourses that are obscured within prominent texts. From movies such as *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017) to *Encanto*, the subject matter of these films proves to be more meaningful when audiences interpret them in critical ways. Second, without the paratexts that have emerged since the film's release, audiences who do not directly resonate with the film would be completely uninformed as to why this moment and similar others had cultural and historical impact for Colombian and Latine audiences. Our analysis offers an important illustration of Latinidad's external and internal elements; despite the film's partial reliance on generic portrayals of Latin America, audience paratexts carve out culturally specific meanings of the film. Third, the audience's critical capacity is an important resource for how identities and modes of representation are more deeply witnessed (Boylan, 2020). The notion that Disney films reinforce dominant ideologies has been traditionally unilateral before its "revival era." With the advent of participatory technologies such as TikTok, we are witnessing a surge in audience perspectives that both strengthen their connection to various media and empower viewers to problematize the narratives they are most connected to.

Disney, Diversity, and Beyond

In this analysis, we argued that *Encanto's* (Bush et al., 2021) visuality upholds western ideologies of governance and individualism, as well as hegemonic representations of colonial racial hierarchies and postracial sensibilities, despite its complex but covert characterization of Colombian identity. Although the creators, directors, and writers of *Encanto* attempted to represent Colombia and by extension a pan-ethnic Latinidad, the visual choices of the film ultimately prioritized colonial ideologies and social relations that support contemporary economic structures. Thus, the onus of the film is not solely about representing a geographic context with unique values and legacies, but instead to present a highly stylized caricature of both Colombianidad and Latinidad. Even in the fictive Colombian town of *Encanto*, we are presented with visual differences enmeshed in western norms and values. This is further evidenced in the paratextual media derived by audiences. Nodes to historical violence inflicted on Colombia are coded inasmuch that audiences are compelled to perform the labor of decoding and translating characterizations that would likely go unnoticed through the lens of dominant culture. Colombian TikTok users interpreted the coded imagery for anonymous social media audiences, a labor not readily available to or performed by viewers at large. *Encanto* made commendable choices in their diverse casting and portrayal of characters, though they upheld Disney's hegemonic repertoire.

Our analysis offers two implications. First, in our evolving technological contexts, the nodes of representation and diversity are heralded as prominent concerns in media that disproportionately center Whiteness and with it, colonial interpretations of history. *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) is replete with competing ideologies committed to representing Latine bodies and cultures while simultaneously promoting hegemonic ideals that reinforce capitalist interests. Second, we hold the perspective of criticism and visibility to be in tandem with paratexts and the audiences that produce them. Scott (2017) argues that paratexts both help shape understandings of the broader texts they emerge from and spark important conversations characterized by personal investments cultivated and sustained by audiences and fans. Viewers are central in the process of interpreting visuals and narratives that are both carefully crafted and contradictory in the ideologies of the Other they present. We intended to evince the dynamic relationship that audiences have with seemingly complete texts such as *Encanto*; such a relationship is constituted by the subject positions held among audiences and the covert messaging that is brought to the surface by their close readings. Relatedly, visual cultural studies can be strengthened not only by framing audiences as active members of interpretive processes but also as vital to the nuanced circulation of popular texts. Our analysis reveals the reliance cultural industries such as Disney have on unaffiliated audiences to perform culturally expansive labor that companies do not prioritize in their production of media.

Ultimately, we contend that *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) and its audience bear a significant impact on the study of visual culture. Scholars who are interested in further critiquing *Encanto* should continue to investigate its rich visual narrative, specifically vis-à-vis issues of gender, cultural authenticity, Latinidad, and global Colombianidad. Moreover, we find that similar criticisms of contemporary animated films stand to benefit from centering participatory audiences who strive to interpret popular culture. Media texts are riddled with ideological, cultural, and historical nuances that merit investigation not only by scholars but by public audiences broadly. This is particularly salient in texts that seemingly bolster discourses of diversity. We enjoyed the film and music, yet simultaneously continue to question the ever-present ideals that reinterpret history and sustain inequitable global social relations.

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