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Producing The Latina Disney Princess

Ashley Sarah Richardson

College of William and Mary - Arts & Sciences, arichar@comcast.net

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Producing the Latina Disney Princess

Ashley Sarah Richardson

Hanover, Virginia

Bachelor of Arts, The College of William &
Mary, 2017

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William &
Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

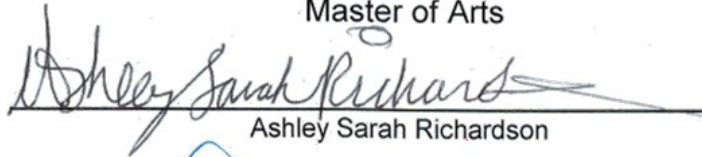
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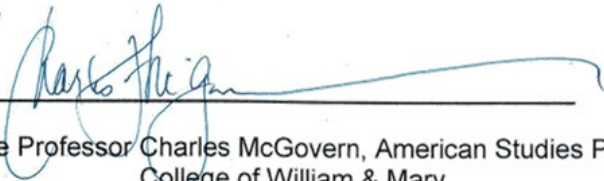
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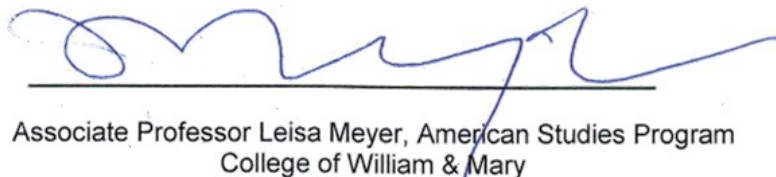
Master of Arts


Ashley Sarah Richardson

Approved by the Committee May 2018


Committee Chair
Associate Professor Arthur Knight, American Studies Program
College of William & Mary


Associate Professor Charles McGovern, American Studies Program
College of William & Mary


Associate Professor Leisa Meyer, American Studies Program
College of William & Mary

ABSTRACT

In our contemporary moment, which some are suggesting is a “Golden Age” of American television, programs featuring Latinx characters, especially Latinas, remain scarce. The history of Latinx representation in American television is filled with stereotypical portrayals of violent drug dealers and forlorn domestic workers. This thesis examines how the animated fantasy television program *Elena of Avalor* (2016-) offers alternative, and potentially empowering, narratives for Latinas. *Elena* challenges gender norms, explores the ramifications of colonialism, and imagines a world in which whiteness is not the default. However, the show often fails to acknowledge the colorist and anti-Black discourses prevalent within the US and Latin America. As a product of the Disney empire – a corporation that for years has faced criticism for its portrayals of Latinxs in their live action and animated films and shows – *Elena* embodies the struggle for representation and the fight against commodification. Though a “Latina Disney Princess” can be a source of inspiration to Latinas around the world, there remains the question of how the Latina body is commodified by and for white, non-Latinx consumers. By analyzing the episodes and tie-in merchandise of *Elena* alongside other Latina-centric programs like *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) and Disney films like *Saludos Amigos* (1942), I argue that Hollywood’s fixation with cultural and ethnic authenticity is reifying hegemonic notions of Latinidad. While shows like *Elena* have the potential to dispel stereotypical understandings of Latin America, the US film and television industry continues to disregard the cultural complexity of its Latinx viewers, normalizing whiteness and exoticizing Latinidad.

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Dedicated to my family.

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I. Introduction: Wishing for a Latina Disney Princess

For almost a century, The Walt Disney Company has dominated the American film industry. Once just a film studio, the company has since expanded into the television, merchandise, and theme park businesses. Despite the global appeal of Disney, the company continues to cater to its white, English-speaking, heterosexual audience with projects that reaffirm this hegemony. Consequently, there are few depictions of people of color in Disney's animated works and even fewer projects that feature people of color in leading roles. The few films starring people of color, like *Mulan* (1998) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), have become vehicles for tokenism as Disney brings these Asian and Black characters out only when 'diversity' is needed; otherwise, one can expect the white characters from *Cinderella* (1950) and *Frozen* (2013) to be at the front and center of Disney's marketing campaigns. Long and notably absent from Disney's roster of token 'diverse' characters were Latinx or Hispanic characters. Recent demands for a Latina "Disney Princess" from Latinx Disney fans have, as this research will show, prompted a response from Disney, but the saga that would unfold showed that all wishes come at a price.

In the months leading up to the premiere of the animated children's fantasy show *Sofia the First* (2012-) on Disney Junior, debates surfaced online about the ethnicity of the show's titular character. During the show's press tour, executive producer Jamie Mitchell said that Sofia's mother, Miranda, "is Latina," therefore making Sofia the first Latina princess in an animated Disney production.¹ While Miranda has a darker

¹ Emily Rome, "'Sofia the First': Disney's first Hispanic princess?," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified October 23, 2012, <http://www.ew.com/article/2012/10/16/disney-princess-sofia-the-first-latina/>.

complexion than the noticeably white characters on *Sofia* and is voiced by Mexican-American actress Sara Ramirez, Sofia has fair skin, light brown hair, blue eyes, and is voiced by white, non-Latina American actress Ariel Winter. The appearance and voice of



Figure 1. The characters of *Sofia the First* (left to right: James, Amber, Roland, Miranda, and Sofia). "Elena and the Secret of Avalor."

Sofia, combined with the lack of discussion of Sofia's potential Latina identity within the show's narrative, sparked a discussion about the representation of Latinas in the media and the challenges of being "Latina enough."

CNN contributor Ruben Navarette Jr. categorized three groups of people who were responding to the debate online. While the group of "activists" questioned why Sofia's alleged Hispanic identity remained a secret until the press tour, the "Latino bloggers" group asked why Sofia was light-skinned. Navarette emphasized the discussion among the Latino bloggers was an intra-community conversation, whereas the activists were interested in engaging with Disney. A third group defended the notion that Hispanic

people have to look a certain way to be authentic.² Juan Alanis, one of the members of the “Latino bloggers” group, responded to Navarette’s piece, arguing that Navarette was pointing the blame at Latino bloggers and activists for escalating the controversy to unnecessary levels. Alanis expressed less concern with the question of “is she Latina enough” and more with the reality that children “will be the ones deciding who and what exactly Princess Sofia is to them. If they think her skin tone is dark enough, if her lack of accent is relatable enough, if her mother looks and sounds Latina enough, will ultimately depend on how they each individually perceive her.”³ While Latinas are a phenotypically diverse group, and the representation of light-skinned Latinas may be appreciated by Latinx viewers, the underrepresentation of Latinas with darker skin remains a major point of contention in the struggle for Latinx representation. For some viewers, a light-skinned Latina princess is not adequate representation, not because the character is not ‘Latina enough,’ but rather because the light-skinned Latina does not truly represent those with dark skin – many of whom have strong connections to Black and indigenous heritages.

About a week after Mitchell’s announcement first stirred up this controversy, Nancy Kanter, Disney Junior Worldwide’s Senior Vice President of original programming and general manager spoke with the National Hispanic Media Coalition to clarify that Sofia is not a Latina character and that Mitchell misspoke about the character’s ethnicity. NMHC president and CEO Alex Nogales accepted Kanter’s clarification regarding *Sofia the First*, then went on to praise Disney Junior for promising

² Ruben Navarrette, Jr., “Why isn’t Disney’s Princess Sofia Latino?,” *CNN*, October 26, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/25/opinion/navarrette-disney-hispanics/index.html>.

³ Juan Alanis, “So if Disney’s Princess Sofia is Not Latina Enough, Who is?,” *Juan of Words* (blog), November 1, 2012, <http://www.juanofwords.com/2012/11/so-if-disneys-princess-sofia-is-not-latina-enough-who-is/>.

the eventual release of “an exciting project in early development that does have a Latina as the heroine of the show.”⁴ At the time, nothing else was known about this future Latina heroine, but three years later, Kanter, now Executive Vice President for Disney Junior, revealed the network’s plan to introduce a character whom ABC News (also owned by Disney) referred to as “Disney’s first Latina princess.”⁵ This character, Princess Elena of Avalor, is a “confident and compassionate teenager” who lives in a kingdom “inspired by diverse Latin cultures and folklore.”⁶ The press release from Kanter explained that Elena would make her debut on *Sofia the First* before starring in her own spin-off series, *Elena of Avalor* (2016-). The initial plan for *Elena* was to present the series in 25 languages on Disney Junior and Disney Channel in 154 countries, with a focus on children ages two to seven. Creator and executive producer of *Sofia*, Craig Gerber, would serve as executive producer on *Elena*, while Silvia Cardenas Olivas, who produced *Moehsa* (1996-2001) and *The Brothers Garcia* (2000-2004), would serve as story editor. Though having a Latina producer does not guarantee the show’s commitment to its Latina characters or audiences, Cardenas Olivas’ presence reflects some commitment on Disney Channel’s part to promote Latina talent. Additionally, Walt Disney Animation Studios animator Elliot M. Bour would serve as supervising director on the series.⁷ Gerber, Cardenas

⁴ Cindy Y. Rodriguez, “Disney producer ‘misspoke’: ‘First Latina princess’ isn’t Latina,” *CNN*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/25/showbiz/disney-sofia-not-latina/index.html>.

⁵ Lesley Messer, “Meet Elena of Avalor, Disney’s First Latina Princess,” *ABC News*, January 29, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/meet-elena-avalor-disneys-latina-princess/story?id=28581447>.

⁶ Messer, “Meet Elena of Avalor.”

⁷ The Deadline Team, “Disney Junior Launching ‘Sofia the First’ Spinoff ‘Elena of Avalor’ In 2016,” *Deadline*, January 29, 2015, <http://deadline.com/2015/01/sofia-the-first-spinoff-elena-of-avalor-disney-junior-animated-series-1201362375/>.

Olivas, and Bour are effectively the three people with the most creative control over the visual and narrative direction of *Elena*, but I advise against using auteur theory to study this program. Auteur theory was developed by French film critics in the 1950s who argued that a film reflected an artist's unique creative vision. Typically, the director is seen by film critics as the auteur because the director oversees all aspects of production and implements their unique style of film-making into the finished work. The theory has since been adapted and applied to television, but due to the nature of the television industry, directors often have less influence and are not recognized as auteurs. Instead, Lori Bindig and Andrea Bergstrom observe, television auteurism has focused on the authorial voice of writers, producers, and showrunners. Bindig and Bergstrom suggest that contemporary television auteurism has been used as a marketing technique, allowing for the showrunner-auteur's voice to be used as a marker of quality and a distinct brand, as is the case with popular showrunners like Shonda Rhimes and Ryan Murphy. Bindig and Bergstrom call attention to some of the criticisms of auteur theory, one of them being that auteur theory ignores the collaborative process of filmmaking.⁸ In the case of *Elena*, outside influences from the executives at the Walt Disney Company, Disney Channel and Disney Junior, and Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media (the merchandise arm of Disney) arguably shape the direction of the show just as much as Gerber, Cardenas Olivas, and Bour do as showrunner, writer, and director, respectively. From Princess Elena's seemingly endless supply of outfits to the appearance of adorable fictional animals with large eyes and bright fur, *Elena* is tailor-made for a major

⁸ Lori Bindig and Andrea M. Bergstrom, "Josh Schwartz: Auteur?: Showrunners, Authorship, and *The O.C.*," in *The O.C.: A Critical Understanding* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013), 63.

merchandise campaign. Furthermore, the inclusion of cultural advisors Marcela Davison Avilés and Diane Rodriguez influences how the show incorporates Latin American cultures into the narrative and production design.⁹

The work of Davison Avilés and Rodriguez played a significant part in the promotion of *Elena* as a culturally ‘authentic’ show. The promotional tour for *Elena* emphasized the integration of Hispanic cultures into every aspect of the show, from the costume designs to the music to the voice cast. An infographic provided by Disney for *USA Today* directly compares the architecture and props on the show to specific artifacts from Mayan, Mexican, Caribbean, and Spanish cultures.¹⁰ The infographic also reveals that the producers visited the Teotihuacán pyramids in Mexico, which echoes earlier Disney practices of sending its artists and producers on research expeditions to Latin America. Disney is not the only studio to use research trips during the production process, but the studio’s distinctly touristic approach to understanding a culture from a short expedition warrants discussion.

⁹ “Lead Sheet: Elena of Avalor,” Disney|ABC Press, June 9, 2016, <https://www.disneyabcpress.com/disneychannel/shows/11836/press-releases/>,

¹⁰ Maeve McDermott, “Exclusive: How Disney brought 'Elena of Avalor's Latin heritage to life,” *USA Today*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2016/07/12/meet-disney-channel-first-latina-princess-elena-of-avalor/86982644/>.



Figure 2. Infographic detailing the cultural research on *Elena of Avalor*. (McDermott, “Exclusive: How Disney brought ‘Elena of Avalor’s Latin heritage to life.”)

On the surface, this desire to create an “authentic” rendering of Latin America stems from Disney’s desire to appeal to its growing Latin American audience. According to Kanter, the creative team on *Elena* “delivered a universal story with themes that authentically reflect the hopes and dreams of our diverse audience.” Kanter added that the team was excited by “the chance to use distinctive animation and visual design to tell wonderful stories influenced by culture and traditions that are familiar to the worldwide population of Hispanic and Latino families and reflect the interests and aspirations of all children as told through a classic fairy tale.”¹¹ Kanter’s use of the word “diverse” calls into question how Disney imagines the concept of diversity. For Disney, critics have argued that, historically, appealing to a “diverse” audience has meant focusing on the

¹¹ Lesley Messer, “Meet Elena of Avalor.”

white, upper-middle-class segment of their consumer base and virtually ignoring or tokenizing other groups, as was the case with films like *Pocahontas* (1995), which devoted a considerable amount of time to glamorizing the white colonist John Smith at the expense of the films' Powhatan characters. According to Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Pocahontas* was Disney's response to the rise in public criticism over racial stereotyping in *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994). While the studio claimed *Pocahontas* offers a respectful and informed view of Native American culture, Edgerton and Jackson's examination of reviews from 1995 show that the film is inherently fraught with contradictions and "alternately described as progressive or escapist, enlightened or racist, feminist or retrograde – depending on the critic."¹² Because of this history, we need to examine carefully how Disney uses buzzwords like "diversity" and "authenticity" to promote their products as somehow more respectful and therefore more worthy of consumers' time and money. The presence of people of color might make a film or show "diverse," but as long as those stories are developed within a media landscape that valorizes whiteness, these "diverse" characters are otherized next to the white characters who are presented as default.

As with Sofia, critics were quick to dissect the alleged Latina identity of Elena. An opinion piece from *The Huffington Post* writer Carolina Moreno opened with the headline "Sorry, Disney's New Princess Elena Probably Doesn't Count as Latina." Moreno notes that while Kanter said that Elena lives in a kingdom inspired by Latin

¹² Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson, "Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the 'White Man's Indian,' and the Marketing of Dreams," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24, no. 2 (1996): 95.

cultures and folklore, there was no explicit confirmation of Elena’s Latina identity.¹³ Julissa Catalan of *DiversityInc* echoes Moreno’s sentiments, adding that the concept art of Elena included in the press release evokes a “very stereotypical look with flowers in her hair, large gold-hoop earrings and a very ruffled red dress.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Catalan explains, the fact that Elena is on television and not in a feature film excludes her from becoming an official Disney princess in the Disney Princess lineup. In fact, Latinx critics were generally more frustrated with Elena’s place on the small screen instead of getting the big Hollywood treatment. Since Elena is on television, they reasoned, the production value and accessibility of the show would be severely limited, compared to the treatment that Disney’s feature films receive. Arguably, the rise of streaming services and improvements in animation technology have allowed for animated shows to be more accessible and have higher quality animation than in decades past. In terms of marketing and merchandise, however, *Elena* faces an uphill battle to diversify the stores and theme parks because Disney tends to give more space in its stores and parks to film characters.

Despite the initial controversies, *Elena of Avalor* premiered on both Disney Junior and Disney Channel to July 22, 2016 to 4.2 million viewers in Nielsen live +3 ratings, which includes those who watched the show with commercials within three days of the initial air date. About 2.2 million of those viewers were children ages two to eleven, and another 1.1 million viewers were adults ages eighteen to forty-nine. When the Disney

¹³ Carolina Moreno, “Sorry, Disney’s New Princess Elena Probably Doesn’t Count as Latina,” *The Huffington Post*, last modified July 14, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/29/disney-elena-of-avalor-latina_n_6573968.html.

¹⁴ Julissa Catalan, “It’s 2015, Disney Discovers Latinas!,” *DiversityInc*, January 30, 2015, <https://www.diversityinc.com/news/2015-disney-discovers-latinas/>.

Junior and Disney Channel show became available on Disney’s streaming apps on devices like the Apple TV, more than 6.5 million viewers “engaged” with the show on the platform.¹⁵ These initial ratings indicated strong interest in the show, at least by Disney Channel’s standards. Airing before the live-action shows *Stuck in the Middle* and *Girl Meets World*, *Elena*’s premiere garnered more adult viewers over the age of twenty-five than either of those live-action shows did on that same night.¹⁶ One can speculate that a portion of these adult viewers were watching the show with their children, but *Elena*’s rising popularity with adult fans online prompts further discussion about the supposed “kids only” world of children’s animation.

Now in the middle of its second season, *Elena* continues to enjoy commercial success. Tie-in products featuring *Elena*’s characters are available at major retailers nationwide and the show’s presence in Disney’s American theme parks continues to grow. Beyond tie-ins aimed at children, the series also has merchandise geared towards adults, including high-end collectible dolls and fragile decorative figurines. The Disney Store’s Limited Edition *Elena* doll, priced at \$119.95 – the highest-priced *Elena* product on the retailer’s website – can also appeal to children, suggesting a comparison between the doll and American’s Girl’s similarly-priced dolls.¹⁷ The fact that *Elena* is being marketed alongside Cinderella and Elsa, despite being a television princess, is notable.

¹⁵ R. Thomas Umstead, “Disney’s ‘Elena of Avalor’ Delivers Royal Ratings,” *Multichannel*, July 28, 2016, <http://www.multichannel.com/news/content/disney-s-elena-avalor-delivers-royal-ratings/406725>.

¹⁶ Brian Cantor, “Ratings: “Elena of Avalor” Premiere Draws 2.22 Million Viewers; “Girl Meets World” Rises,” *Headline Planet*, July 25, 2016, <https://headlineplanet.com/home/2016/07/25/ratings-elena-of-avalor-premiere-draws-2-22-million-viewers-girl-meets-world-rises/>.

¹⁷ “Elena of Avalor Doll – Limited Edition,” shopDisney, accessed March 18, 2018. <https://www.shopdisney.com/elena-of-avalor-doll-limited-edition-1451478>

The show (and its merchandise) has found such remarkable success at Disney that the studio ordered a third season of the show back in February of 2017, months before the second season aired.¹⁸

The trouble with *Elena*, at least for some critics, is how the show grapples with issues pertaining to Latina identity, including colonialism, gender norms, colorism, and cultural differences. As Melissa Lozada-Oliva of *The Guardian* observes in her editorial following the show's premiere, "Elena isn't indigenous or Afro-Latina or from a specific Latin-American country. She is a thin, light-brown Latina princess from Avalor, a made up Latin-American-esque kingdom that exists in a pre-colonial, pre-Columbian world."¹⁹ Consequently, Lozada-Oliva argues, the show flattens and generalizes Latinx identity in an attempt to create a princess for everyone. And yet, Lozada-Oliva writes, "I remember that there is so little of [Latinas] reflected in the media that any resemblance – however messy and inaccurate – can feel like someone calling us home. It's a relief to have a costume that fits us, to buy a little doll that looks like us. It can feel good to have a version of ourselves on a backpack, even if it is a caricature."²⁰ The tension between the desire to be represented on screen and the frustration with the integrity of a production is a byproduct of the white supremacy prevalent in American film and television. While activists and casual viewers clamor for more people of color on screen in the US, the

¹⁸ Brian Cantor, "'Elena of Avalor' Already Renewed For Season 3, Disney Touts 1 Million Doll Sales," *Headline Planet*, February 13, 2017, <https://headlineplanet.com/home/2017/02/13/elena-avalor-already-renewed-season-3-disney-touts-1-million-doll-sales/>.

¹⁹ Melissa Lozada-Oliva, "The problem with Disney's new Latina princess: one size doesn't fit all," *The Guardian*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/22/elena-princess-avalor-disney-latina-problem>.

²⁰ Lozada-Oliva, "The problem with Disney's new Latina princess."

fraught nature of the concept of diversity allows for unintentionally stereotypical or flat-out hateful depictions of people of color to be sold under the guise of “representation.” There is no clear line between “positive” and “negative” representation, in part because meaningful representation for one person might be thoughtless representation for another. As long as someone can spin a representation as respectful and accurate (and it does not have to be a member of the group being represented – it could be an advertising executive or filmmaker of another race) then a company can run with the narrative that they are providing some sort of service to the underrepresented group.

The representation of Latinas in US television, across genres and channels, remains atrocious, much as it is for many people of color. For years, American television shows starring Latinas have typically been remakes of Latin American telenovelas, like *Jane the Virgin*, *Devious Maids*, *Ugly Betty*, and *Queen of the South*. Occasionally, programs like *Superstore* or *Desperate Housewives* will offer an original Latina lead character who is not derived from a preexisting show, but these instances are few and far between. As it is, all of these shows are set in an identifiable, albeit melodramatic, version of reality, begging the question of why Latinas are continuously excluded from the worlds of science fiction and fantasy. What makes *Elena* so remarkable is that the show is one of the only shows on American television that is attempting to integrate Latina identities into a fantasy setting. Only one other show, *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018), which is also a Disney property, features Latina characters in a fantasy realm, but the race and ethnicity of its three Latina leads in its seventh and final season are not central to the show’s narrative as they are in *Elena*. Comparing *Elena* to *Once*, however, is a useful exercise in understanding how Disney dodges discussions about ethnoracial

identity in its fantasy programs by inserting the characters played by Latina actresses into a realm where Latin America does not exist.

Further complicating *Elena*'s place in Latina television history – and, indeed, further complicating the questions of diversity and authenticity in representation that interest me – is the show's relationship to the “Latina” and “Hispanic” categories. As Cristina Mora explains, the term “Hispanic” originates from the panethnic category developed by the United States Census Bureau to gather population data on Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban people in the United States. Criticizing “Hispanic” for overemphasizing the connection to Spain, some advocates have called for the term “Latino” to refer to people of Latin American descent because it acknowledges those who are not of Spanish origin, such as Brazilians. The US Census, along with networks like Univision and Telemundo, typically use “Hispanic” and “Latino” simultaneously in an attempt to appeal to the broadest demographics possible.²¹ In recent years, the term “Latinx” has become a more inclusive alternative to “Latino” or “Latina” because of its gender-neutral ending, allowing for the label to include gender non-conforming persons. Though “Latinx” and its variants are popular in some spaces, a 2012 study from the Pew Research Center concluded that while most people of Latin American descent prefer to use their family's country of origin to describe their identity, 51% of those surveyed had no preference for either “Hispanic” or “Latino,” and the remainder preferred “Hispanic” over “Latino” by more than a two-to-one margin.²² For these reasons, in this project I will

²¹ G. Cristina Mora, “Cross-Field Effects and Ethnic Classification: The Institutionalization of Hispanic Panethnicity, 1965 to 1990,” *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 2 (April 2014): 200.

²² Paul Taylor, et al., “When Labels Don't Fit: Hispanics and Their View of Identity,” *Pew Research Center: Hispanic Trends*, April 4, 2012,

use the terms “Hispanic” and “Latinx” interchangeably, and will prefer national origin labels whenever possible.

Overview

The aim of this project is to call attention to the significance of *Elena of Avalor* in the twenty-first century construction of Latinx and Hispanic identity in the US. In the second section of this work, I will conduct a close reading of selected episodes from *Elena*. The episodes that I will analyze focus on topics like colonialism, gender norms, and cultural differences. I also critique how a specific version of Latinidad is normalized within the show and how Black and indigenous voices and bodies are excluded from the narrative.

For the third section, I will place *Elena* in context with both Disney’s history of Latinx representation and the current state of Latina representation in American television. By comparing *Elena* to *Jane the Virgin* (2015-) and *Once Upon a Time*, I intend to show how all three of these programs offer imperfect, but still important, representations of Latina families on screen. Making note of Disney’s portrayals of Latin America in its animated films, I argue that Disney’s push for cultural authenticity clashes with and attempts to correct, though it cannot, the harmful racist and sexist stereotypes employed by its films for almost a century.

The fourth section will cover the marketing tactics used by Disney to promote *Elena*. By examining dolls, costumes, and theme park attractions used to promote *Elena*, I observe how Disney is signaling Latinidad to its Latinx consumers using language and

<http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/04/when-labels-dont-fit-hispanics-and-their-views-of-identity/3/>.

visual markers. Using the work of Arlene Dávila and Isabel Molina-Guzmán to guide my research, I suggest that Disney is reducing Latinidad to a set of marketable characteristics and ignoring the complexities of a phenotypically and culturally diverse group of people.

Elena of Avalor marks a shift in children's television and US popular culture. The show dares to imagine a fantasy world in which whiteness is not the norm. While scholars have yet to publish works on *Elena* (likely because the show is relatively new), I must emphasize the significance of this show as a form of representation for Latinx viewers. Though I will demonstrate throughout this work how *Elena* is an imperfect creation with some major flaws, the show is one of the few programs on the air – not just in children's television, but across US networks – that decenters white masculinity. However, in attempting to construct an authentic version of Latinidad, *Elena* reinforces the notion that authentic Latinxs must speak Spanish, have light brown skin, and celebrate traditional Latin American holidays, which only serves to other Latinx cultures and people. By analyzing episodes of *Elena*, critiquing Hollywood representations of Latinxs in animated films and live-action television, and evaluating the marketing strategies used by Disney, I argue that while *Elena* offers some much-needed ethnoracial diversity to Disney and American television, it essentializes Latinx identity to a few practices and characteristics.

II. Understanding *Elena of Avalor*

Over the course of its first 34 episodes, *Elena of Avalor* has delved into the culture and politics of the fictional kingdom of Avalor. In order to understand the complex nature of the show's fictive Latin American-inspired setting and characters, I will examine selected episodes that deal with issues of colonialism, traditions, colorism, cultural differences, and gender norms that speak to real-life Latinx experiences. Though some of these issues are present throughout the entire series, certain episodes confront these issues directly in ways that both reflect and contradict the popular images of Latinx peoples around the world.

Set in the same universe as Disney Junior's *Sofia the First*'s kingdom of Enchancia, *Elena* tells the story of sixteen-year-old Princess Elena Castillo Flores. After her parents are murdered by the evil sorceress Shuriki, Elena is trapped in an enchanted amulet, while her sister, Isabel, and her grandparents, Francisco and Luisa, are frozen in time in a magical portrait. Forty-one years later, Elena's amulet winds up in the hands of Princess Sofia of Enchancia, the star of *Sofia the First*. After freeing Elena from the amulet, Sofia helps Elena rescue her family and reclaim the throne from Shuriki. With Shuriki out of the way, Elena, now the Crown Princess of Avalor, must restore the cultural traditions of Avalor, ward off Shuriki's followers, and find a way to honor the legacy of her late parents. In addition to her grandparents and sister, Elena is aided by her cousin, Esteban, the Chancellor of Avalor, and Armando, the chief of the castle and a friend of the family. The show emphasizes the importance of family, but Elena spends just as much time taking advice from her friends. Elena's friends include Naomi Turner, a fourteen-year-old girl who recently moved to Avalor and does not know about the

kingdom’s culture, Mateo de Alva, the sixteen-year-old grandson of one of the most powerful wizards in Avalor’s history, and Gabriel “Gabe” Núñez, an eighteen-year-old member of Avalor’s royal guard.



Figure 3. Main characters in *Elena of Avalor* (left to right: Esteban, Francisco, Luisa, Isabel, Elena, Naomi, Mateo, Gabe, Armando). “First Day of Rule.”

Currently in its second season, *Elena* airs weekly on the Disney Channel and Disney Junior. Most of the show’s episodes are twenty-two minutes long, with eight minutes of commercials. Each episode contains an original song that is also available to purchase on services like iTunes. Episodes are available to watch on Saturday mornings on the Disney Channel’s DisneyNOW app, which is available on devices like Apple TV, Roku, and Chromecast.²³ As of March of 2018, the show is not available to stream on Netflix or Hulu in the US, making the show available exclusively to those with a television subscription that includes the Disney Channel. With a third season underway,

²³ “DisneyNOW Help,” *DisneyNOW*, <https://disneynow.go.com/help>, accessed March 17, 2018.

and assuming each season will be 25 episodes, it is likely that there will be over 27 hours of *Elena* available by the end of 2019. Though *Elena* has been criticized because of its television format, audiences can spend more time with Princess Elena than they can with Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) or Princess Merida from *Brave* (2012), whose feature films both clock in under two hours and have not received a television adaptation.

While the first season of *Elena* followed a mostly procedural format, the second season is much more serialized and relies on episode recaps to help its young viewers follow the storyline. Arguably, serialization gives the show the cinematic quality that critics desired during the first season, but when combined with the lack of ways to watch the show outside of the DisneyNOW app, viewers can easily lose their place in the show's continuity. Contrary to the notion that procedural children's shows are too simplistic, television scholar Jason Mittell argues that the use of formula and repetition can be rewarding for long-time viewers. Mittell finds that shows that rely on formulaic episodes, such as Disney Channel's *Phineas and Ferb*, are distinctly pleasurable to audiences when the formula is broken. For instance, if a repeated sight gag throughout the show is subverted, the young viewer who recognizes the original sight gag will appreciate how the deviation challenged their expectations.²⁴ Though procedural shows can be complex and rewarding for dedicated viewers, the association between formulaic content and children's television might turn some older viewers off from such shows. The decision to change *Elena*'s format suggests that Disney Channel is re-imagining their

²⁴ Jason Mittell, "Phineas and Ferb: Children's Television," in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 61.

audience as slightly older and more invested in character development. Disney Channel is also expressing confidence in its viewers to watch every episode in order to follow the show's increasingly complicated storylines. The show provides a brief recap of relevant events at the start of some episodes, but for the most part viewers are expected to know what is happening to about fifteen characters at a time.

The following close reading of selected episodes of *Elena* will situate the show's storylines within the context of some issues pertinent to contemporary US Latinx culture. While these topics are present throughout the series, the episodes discussed in detail are the most demonstrative of the show's attitude towards these issues.

Colonialism

The most pressing and unexamined aspect of *Elena* is its depiction of colonialism. In his research on attitudes towards colonialism in twentieth century Western filmmaking, Jon Cowans proposes that there are four components to colonialism. The first component, occupation, refers to the physical presence of the colonizer. The colonizers often include troops, business people, administrators, and missionaries. The process of occupation involves seizing land and resources and usurping political functions through violence and coercion. The second component, exploitation, in the context of colonialism, involves taking unfair advantage of a market through trade monopolies and barriers, price setting, currency-exchange restrictions, forced labor, and slavery. In order to ensure the benefits of exploitation, colonizers had to enforce a system of discrimination, which is Cowan's third component of colonialism. Historically, discrimination in colonies depended on the barriers between ruling and subject ethnic groups. According to Cowans, in colonies with less rigid social barriers, colonizers used

forms of cooptation and tokenism to preempt resistance and create the appearance of equality. While biological concepts of race have varied over time, Cowans argues that colonialism required establishing stigmatizing differences between colonizer and colonized. Acculturation, or the forcible replacement of indigenous culture with that of the colonizer, is the fourth component of colonialism. In addition to banning indigenous religions, languages, and cultural practices, acculturation can involve the colonized internalizing the colonizers' values so they accept their own inferiority.²⁵

The impact of occupation and acculturation are heavily present in the first two seasons of *Elena*. As established in the crossover episode with *Sofia the First*, "Elena and the Secret of Avalor," the kingdom of Avalor experiences a violent occupation for forty-one years under the rule of Shuriki, an evil sorceress. After negotiating a deal with the King and Queen's young nephew, Esteban, to seize the throne in exchange for the royal family's protection, Shuriki breaks the agreement and murders the King and Queen. With Elena trapped in an enchanted amulet and the rest of the royal family magically preserved in a painting, Shuriki declares herself the new Queen of Avalor. Under Shuriki, many of Avalor's cultural festivals and practices are banned, including the use of magic, which was one of Avalor's tools for defense. Forty-one years later, Shuriki, still in power, meets with Sofia's family to discuss trade agreements, revealing that those outside of Avalor are unaware of how Shuriki came to power. Once Sofia frees Elena from the amulet, Elena breaks Shuriki's wand in half, effectively causing Shuriki to age rapidly and fall down a waterfall to her apparent death. Elena then spends the rest of season one of *Elena*

²⁵ Jon Cowans, *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 4-6.

attempting to reverse Shuriki's impact on Avalor by reinstating cultural traditions and reopening trade with other kingdoms.

Through her occupation and acculturation of Avalor, Shuriki, a visibly white woman voiced by white actress Jane Fonda, is its colonizer. Although Shuriki is not connected to any particular nation, real or fictional, her status as an outsider to Avalor is crucial to her character. Unlike the denizens of Avalor, Shuriki does not speak any Spanish, and she has no interest in Avalor's traditions, which are based on real Latin American practices, such as Carnival. Musical performances are also banned in Avalor because Shuriki does not like Avalor's Latin-inspired music. The music ban causes immense distress among the people of Avalor, but without access to magic or an army, the people are unable to defend themselves. When Elena returns to Avalor to reclaim the throne, she immediately recognizes the violent nature of Shuriki's rise to power and her forcible dismantling of Avalor's culture. By explicitly villainizing the colonizer and her actions, *Elena* frames the colonial project in a negative light – a far cry from Disney's sympathetic portrayal of colonizers in *Pocahontas* and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*.

Shuriki's occupation of Avalor launched a wave of colonialism in Avalor, but it was not Avalor's first encounter with colonization. Throughout the first season, references are made to the Maruvians, who appear to be the original practitioners of magic in Avalor. In the second season premiere, "The Jewel of Maru," Elena travels to Tepet Muul, the former capital of Maru. In Elena's time, Tepet Muul is a collection of abandoned and supposedly haunted pyramids that are strikingly reminiscent of Mesoamerican step pyramids. Inside one of the pyramids, Elena encounters Amaláy, the spirit of Maru's last royal wizard and the creator of Elena's magical scepter. Amaláy

explains to Elena that an invasion of dark spirits prompted the Maruvians to use so much magic in self-defense that all the Maruvians disappeared. Elena, who was previously unaware of the nature of the Maruvians' disappearance, accepts Amaláy's explanation, but the nonchalant attitude the show takes to the Maruvians' disappearance is troubling for a number of reasons. For one, while the Maruvian people all supposedly died, their magical knowledge, documented in the Codex Maru, remains intact. Furthermore, the majority of people in Avalor, Elena included, cannot read Maruvian text (which look like Mayan glyphs), but Mateo, the royal wizard, and the Fiero, a villainous wizard, can read Maruvian effortlessly. Mateo and Fiero have darker skin than the rest of the non-black people of Avalor, hinting that they might be descended from the Maruvians themselves. Additionally, the language and architecture of Avalor is not entirely based on Hispanic



Figure 4. Amaláy and Elena talk inside a pyramid at Tepet Muul. “The Jewel of Maru.”

traditions – indigenous, Mayan-esque aesthetics and vocabulary permeate the kingdom, begging the question of how such cultural markers made their way into Avalor. Lastly,

the events surrounding the disappearance of Maru and the rise of Avalor are still a mystery in the program's storyline. While Amaláy says that dark forces attacked Maru, the source of this attack is unknown. How exactly did aspects of Maru's language and design end up in Avalor, considering that the English and Spanish languages remain more prominent?



Figure 5. A page of Maruvian text. "Rise of the Sorceress."

While some of the failure to address the nature of Maru's disappearance and Avalor's sudden appearance could stem from the fact that the show's creative team has not put much thought into this aspect of their world-building, the show's commitment to discussing how the people of Avalor are impacted by colonization suggests that such a storyline is possible. In fact, calling attention to the indigenous heritage of its characters would be in line with the show's professed engagement with Latinx cultures. By drawing upon real Mayan and Aztec aesthetics, the creative team shows how indigenous groups influence contemporary Latin American nations, but they fail (or at least so far) to *tell* the story of why indigenous and Hispanic cultures are intertwined in a way that favors lighter skin and European languages and erases indigenous history from all but a few records.

Gender Norms

In Elena's world, sexism does not appear to be an obstacle for the Crown Princess and her female compatriots. The show has yet to tackle the specifically gendered oppression of Latina women and girls, instead preferring to suggest that the disadvantages these women and girls face is due to other circumstances, typically class or ability. What the show lacks in analysis of misogyny, it makes up for in this takedown of machismo, or Latino macho attitudes.

Anthropologist Alfredo Mirandé explains that the macho Latino can take on one of two forms. One perspective, held by Anglo ethnographers, traces macho behaviors to Spanish conquest. From this point of view, colonized men attempted to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and inferiority by taking on a hypermasculine and aggressive demeanor. The alternative perspective, which Mirandé argues is more common in Mexican popular culture, associates macho qualities with a distinct code of ethics that emphasizes humility, honor, respect, and courage. According to Mirandé, "*Un hombre que es macho* is not hypermasculine or aggressive, and he does not disrespect or denigrate women."²⁶

The episode "The Curse of El Guapo" focuses on Gabe Núñez, the eighteen-year-old friend and bodyguard of Elena. When the captain of the royal guard announces his retirement, Gabe and the other young guards must partake in a series of trials to determine who will be the next captain. While delivering a package, Gabe discovers that the package contains a spectacular sword, which he needs for the competition. Upon

²⁶ Alfredo Mirandé, *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) 67.

picking up the sword, however, the spirit of the general “El Guapo” possesses Gabe and makes him a rude and overconfident competitor. During the first round of the trials, Elena expresses her disgust at Gabe’s excessive swagger and says that he is unfit to be captain in his current state. Gabe eventually realizes that the sword is magical, but the only way to keep the sword from reappearing in his hand is to drink a magic potion. When Gabe has second thoughts about drinking the remedy because he enjoys the power of El Guapo, Elena reminds him that the royal guard is a brotherhood that looks out for one another. Gabe ultimately decides to drink the potion and help his competitors during the final trials, which leads to him receiving the captain title because of his selflessness.

The show’s rejection of aggressive masculinity helps to reinforce the notion that the ideal Latino and macho man is honorable and humble, not selfish and violent. According to the show, an aggressive man will not succeed in the workplace or in his relationships. The alternative form of masculinity presented is still heteronormative, especially since homosocial relationships are meant to be strictly platonic, but it does offer a strong counterimage to the typical ‘macho’ Latino men seen on US television.

Tradition

Out of all of the cultural festivals depicted in the show, from Carnival to a quinceañera, the Day of the Dead is the most prominent. Regina Marchi argues that the increased fascination in the United States with Day of the Dead celebrations marks a positive shift in the portrayal of Hispanic people in the media. According to Marchi, Day of the Dead celebrations in Latin American countries are meant to be for members of a community, not for outsider spectatorship, but in the US, media coverage, particularly from the press, has become part of the annual ritual. Marchi praises the coverage of Day

of the Dead for showcasing the lives of “everyday” Latinxs and legitimizing their cultural practices for outsiders and for themselves. That being said, Marchi observes that some Latinxs are skeptical of the increased commodification of the Day of the Dead in the US. Some of this commodification comes through the manufacturing of Day of the Dead-themed products sold by non-Latinx retailers, ranging from local vendors to major corporations like Walmart. Marchi disagrees with this criticism, instead arguing that cultural traditions and commerce often sustain each other, so the commodification of the Day the Dead can help to build a community and educate the public.²⁷ But what happens when a cultural tradition is commodified, purchased, and re-commodified? *Elena*’s Day of the Dead episodes arguably participate in this cycle of commodification.

In the first season’s Day of the Dead-themed episode, “A Day to Remember,” Elena joyfully prepares for the holiday she calls Día de los Muertos by preparing an *ofrenda*, or offering, for her family’s altar. She declares that the holiday is her favorite celebration of the year because she loves to celebrate the memories of departed relatives. Since this is the first Día de los Muertos celebration since her parents’ deaths, Elena’s younger sister Isabel is too upset to participate in the song and dance. After resolving a minor holiday-related dispute between some of her subjects, Elena spends the rest of the episode comforting Isabel in private. Elena explains to Isabel the importance of remembering their parents on the Day of the Dead, and Isabel finally agrees to go to the celebration. The episode reinforces the role of community in Day of the Dead celebrations while also emphasizing the holiday’s material culture – particularly its foods,

²⁷ Regina M. Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 122.

decorations, and outfits. Elena and her family put on outfits with skeleton patterns, scatter marigold flowers, and prepare sugar skull sweets as part of the celebration.

Within the show's narrative, Day of the Dead artifacts are made and sold in Avalor, allowing for cultural exchange to happen on a local level. Since *Elena* is a Disney television show, however, these cultural artifacts are also translated into tie-in merchandise. The details of such merchandise, including dolls and books, will be discussed in the section on marketing, but it should be noted here that the inclusion of a Day of the Dead ceremony in a Disney production, however respectful that portrayal may be, will ultimately allow Disney to profit off of the real, and ongoing, traditions and practices of Latinx people, making Disney, a US corporation, a colonizer of Latin America.



Figure 6. Elena celebrates Day of the Dead in Avalor. “A Day to Remember.”

Cultural Differences

As Arlene Dávila explains, Anglo marketers often hybridize Latin American cultures in attempt to appeal to the largest market possible. This “Hispanic market” is

associated with general, non-culturally specific concepts like “familia” while nation- and region-specific traditions are cast to the side. Oftentimes, the Spanish language is centralized as the supposed commonality among all Latin American viewers, despite the fact that many Latinxs do not speak Spanish. According to Dávila, television networks emphasize Spanish because their corporate clients believe that “culturally specific advertising and programming are not only unnecessary but also an impediment to Latinas’ ‘assimilation’ into U.S. society, which should leave them without vestiges of ‘tainted’ culture or language.”²⁸ Dávila’s evidence for this corporate belief about the importance of Spanish comes from interviews with advertising and television executives, including those at Univision. Though Hispanic-focused television claims not to be culturally specific, Dávila notes that some cultures are still privileged over others, especially in language. The use of Mexican upper-class Spanish, as opposed to something like Hispanic Caribbean or South American Spanish, has become “generic Spanish.”²⁹ The challenges of representing a multitude of Latin American cultures on screen prompt the media to favor practices and aesthetics that are marginally closer to a white, Anglo-centric image.

In the pan-Latinx society of Avalor, cultural traditions are blended together, but there remain tensions among its people because of their differences. These tensions culminate in the holiday-themed episode, “Navidad.” For Nochebuena, or Christmas Eve, Elena invites the people of Avalor to come to the park for a holiday celebration. In an elaborate musical number, “The Way We Do Navidad,” the townspeople explain the

²⁸ Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

different ways they celebrate the holiday, such as launching fireworks, preparing a community feast, and singing by candlelight. Various Latinx cultural objects, such as papel picado, piñatas, poinsettias, and pozole make an appearance during the song. When the chaos of everyone's celebrations becomes too much to manage in the park, Elena decides that the celebration should be a parade. Doña Paloma, the local businesswoman, figures that she can profit off of the event by telling each group that she can help them make their Navidad celebration better than that of anyone else. The competition among the townspeople turns into a massive fight, causing the parade floats to crash. Elena finds out that Doña Paloma was pitting people against each other for profit and invites everyone back to the palace to celebrate Navidad. While the episode does celebrate the variety of traditions existing in Avalor, it also demonstrates the challenges of being a truly pan-Latinx community under capitalism. Most of the people of Avalor may speak a mixture of Spanish and English, but the pressure to have their traditions recognized by the elites drives them to put down other groups who do not



Figure 7. Celebrating Navidad with piñatas. "Navidad."

possess the same level of social or economic capital. The episode's conclusion at the palace, where everyone brings a small part of their tradition to the festivities, seems to say that in order to create a pan-Latinx image, almost everyone must sacrifice a portion of their culture – except for those, like Elena, with the most power.

Colorism

Though *Elena* offers a relatively phenotypically diverse cast, it often fails to address the colorism that is prevalent in the Americas. The animation style of the show does not allow for hyper-exaggerated facial features or body parts, so the diversity manifests in the skin tones, hair textures and colors, and body types. The skin tones of the people of Avalor range from lightly tanned to dark brown, with Elena, her sister, and their grandparents being the lightest of the main cast. Though characters with darker skin are present, they lack the power that Princess Elena and her family possess. Alice Walker first defined colorism in 1983 as the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.”³⁰ While Walker's definition describes the preferential treatment of black people with lighter skin tones, the definition has since been expanded to refer to the colorism prevalent in Asian and Latinx societies.

Meeta Rani Jha observes that the “global multicultural, or hybrid, aesthetic,” which is an approximation to white femininity, is visible in Latin America through the many Latina Miss Universe winners with fair complexions.³¹ Peter Wade attributes this Latin American fascination with whiteness to the Spanish idea of *limpieza de sangre*, or

³⁰ Alice Walker, “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?,” in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 290.

³¹ Meeta Rani Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 23.

the cleansing of the blood. In thirteenth century Spain, *limpieza de sangre* served to discriminate against Jewish and Muslim people in favor of Christians. In the Americas, where colonizers were having children with black and indigenous people, the elites were concerned that mixed-raced people were unfit to hold public office, attend university, or be ordained in the Church. To prove one's *limpieza*, or cleanliness, one had to attest that there was no racial mixture in their families for at least two generations. As such, those with a stronger resemblance to the white, non-mixed-race, elites had an easier time claiming their status.³² Given the prevalence of light-skin Latinxs and the erasure of Afro-Latinxs in Latin American and US media in the twenty-first century, it is safe to say that not much has been done to combat colorism in society or popular culture.

Like the topic of racism, colorism is not explicitly discussed on the show, but the show reinforces some troubling connections between skin color and villainy. Out of all of Elena's family members depicted on the show, the one with the darkest skin tone is her



Figure 8. Elena and Esteban argue. "Shapeshifters."

³² Peter Wade, *Race and Sex in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 69-70.

cousin, Esteban. As previously mentioned, Esteban betrayed the royal family by working out a deal with the evil Shuriki to forfeit the kingdom in exchange for his protection. Esteban remains complicit under Shuriki's reign for 41 years, and while he eventually aides Elena in overthrowing Shuriki, he has yet to confess his role in Elena's parents' murder. Although Esteban is far from being the villain of the show, he frequently is the voice of opposition to Elena's plans, much to Elena's frustration. Both the show and Elena herself frame Esteban as the least reliable member of the family, perpetuating a negative association between darker skin and trustworthiness.

Colorism also manifests in the season two episode, "Royal Rivalry." The episode opens with Shuriki (who miraculously survived her fall from the first season) and two of her allies, Carla and Victor Delgado, heading towards the kingdom of Paraíso, another Latin American-inspired kingdom. In order to send a search party into Paraíso, Elena invites the King of Paraíso to Avalor to sign a treaty, but the King refuses, citing a decades-old petty feud with Avalor. Instead, the king sends Princess Valentina Montanez Tores, a princess with dark skin and dark curly hair – a notable contrast from Elena's tan skin and wavy hair. Valentina also wears bright pink clothing and everything she wears matches her dress, enhancing her stereotypical femininity. Throughout the episode, Valentina angers everyone in Avalor with her demands and complaints. When the conflict between Elena and Valentina leads to the destruction of some of Avalor's statues, Valentina finally confesses that she felt insecure around Elena because she had heard how Elena rescued Avalor.



Figure 9. Elena meets Valentina. “Royal Rivalry.”

The episode is ultimately a lesson in the importance of humility, but the framing of Valentina as insecure and rude in contrast to Elena’s jovially competitive nature calls into question why the show repeatedly makes Elena’s opponents have darker skin. Even Carla and Victor Delgado, the two allies of Shuriki who make an appearance at the start of the episode, have darker features than Elena. Darker skin is not always equated with villainy, but all of the non-white villains have darker skin than Elena. Furthermore, the lack of black characters in the main cast (though one of the magical talking animals is voiced by black actress Yvette Nicole Brown), draws attention to the ways that blackness is still excluded from the supposedly utopic pan-Latino Avalor.

An Imperfect Show

The topics discussed in this section are present in many of the Latina-centric shows on US television, but none are engaging with the specific matter of colonialism like *Elena* does. The show challenges the authority of white colonizers and creates a world in which whiteness is not the norm. The show is not without its imperfections; it

struggles to confront its colorist rhetoric and it is uncritical of the cultural and economic power that the monarchy possesses. Additionally, Disney's corporate influences lead to the commodification and exploitation of real Latin American objects and practices. Are these imperfections typical of Latinx-centric programs and films? Further examination of how other programs grapple with Latina issues, as well as how Disney portrays and contributes to colonialist projects in its own works is necessary to understand *Elena's* place in contemporary US popular culture.

III. Latinxs on Screen

Having analyzed *Elena of Avalor*'s construction of Latinidad, I will now situate *Elena* within the landscape of both US television and Disney animation. The underrepresentation of Latinas on US television means that the few leading roles available to Latinas often fall into unflattering stereotypes. Occasionally, a few Latina characters will step outside these boundaries and draw attention to pertinent issues among Latina women, such as income inequality and racism, but there remain limits to how outspoken or non-stereotypical Latina characters can be on screen. The tendency of US media conglomerates to prioritize 'authenticity' over contradictory and complex portrayals of Latin America and its peoples has helped to solidify certain versions of Latinidad as more authentic than others. The Walt Disney Company has played a significant role in this fashioning of a limited, limiting, and hierarchical form of authenticity. From earlier Latin America-centric projects *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945) to the more contemporary *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), research expeditions and cultural consultations have remained a cornerstone of the Disney animation process. Despite their careful attention to the visual aesthetics of Latin America and their expressed interest in diversity, these Disney films, along with other Latina television shows, reaffirm the hegemonic social position of white Americans.

US Television in 2018

US television in 2018 continues to be overwhelmingly white and non-Latinx. Looking at prime-time first run scripted series and digital offerings airing from September 1, 2014 to August 31, 2015, researchers at the USC Annenberg School evaluated various forms of representation in 305 broadcast, cable, and digital series. Of those 305 shows, 161 had zero Asian speaking characters and 70 shows had no Black

speaking characters. Though the researchers studied the presence of “Hispanic/Latino” characters on television, the report does not distinguish between television and film representation, concluding that 5.8% of speaking or named characters across 305 shows and 109 films were recognizably Hispanic or Latino.³³ Overall, the representation of Hispanic/Latino actors on screen is severely lacking.

Though white, non-Latinx performers continue to take up the most space on screen in the US, television productions often frame themselves as “post-racial.” According to Catherine Squires, the term “post-racial” was seldom used in the 1980s and 1990s, but discussions about the meaning of identity and race were widespread. Squires attributes this interest in race to the growing popularity of Black media and celebrity culture in the 1980s, which resulted in commenters pondering the meaning of Blackness in the “post-civil rights era.” By the mid-2000s, Squires observes, US media was regularly depicting people of color living discrimination-free lives. The success of Barack Obama, as well as the accomplishments of various Black, Asian, and Latinx celebrities, businesspeople, and politicians, have been used by the media and white audiences in their post-race discourses. As Squires notes, the term “post-race” has been used in multiple contexts for various purposes, but for this work, the term refers to the neoliberal discourses that blame racial inequalities on individuals and ignore the effects of institutional racism.³⁴

³³ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Katherine Pieper, “Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment,” *Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative*, April 7, 2017, https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf.

³⁴ Catherine R. Squires, *Post-racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: New York University Press 2014), 6.

In the so-called “post-race” and “post-feminist” contemporary television landscape, Isabel Molina-Guzmán explains, mainstream media constructs a version of Latinidad that frames Latinxs as ethnically and racially ambiguous, but also outside the racial binary of whiteness and blackness. Consequently, post-race discourse suggests that Latinxs are exempt from the institutional racism that affects Black Americans and have somehow moved ‘beyond’ racial categorization. The reality is that on most US television shows, Latinx bodies are still subject to harmful racial categorizations, even when the shows carry on as if racism no longer occurs. For instance, *Modern Family* (2009-) demonstrates how shows typically rely on language, dress, and music to communicate national origin in a stereotypical manner. On the show, Gloria Delgado-Pritchett (Sofia Vergara) has a strong Colombian accent, wears more revealing clothing than the rest of the adult cast, and frequently has violent outbursts of anger, all of which are played up for comedic effect. A reoccurring plot device on the show is Gloria’s inability to be understood by the rest of the family, which the show attributes to her Colombian accent. From the show’s post-racial perspective, Gloria does not fit in with the Pritchett family not because she is Latina, but because she herself cannot keep up with the English language.

Molina-Guzmán also notes that post-racial television relies on phenotypic racial markers such as hair and skin color, which in combination with ethnic signifiers, code a character as ethnically Latinx and racially brown. Under this logic, some Latina bodies can perform a variety of ethnoracial identities in popular media, but rarely whiteness and Latinidad at the same time, because whiteness is still valued by television producers and viewers. Molina-Guzmán presents light-skinned Latina actress/singer Demi Lovato as an

example of a Latina with the flexibility to signal Latinidad only when it is economically or culturally profitable. Lovato can play white, non-Latina characters on screen *and* be the cover star of *Latina* magazine – a privilege not afforded to darker-skinned Latina performers.³⁵ For light-skinned Latinas, Latinidad becomes a quality that can be deactivated to perform a kind of symbolic whiteness.

Molina-Guzmán defines contemporary US Latinidad as “a social construct shaped by external social forces, such as marketing, advertising, and the US Census, and internal cultural factors, such as individual identities and the shared cultural expressions of people who identify as Latina/o.”³⁶ Molina-Guzmán is particularly interested in how television functions as both an external social force and an internal cultural expression to construct representations of Latinidad for the small screen. As a branch of the mainstream media, television fuses gender, ethnicity, and race to represent Latinxs, which Molina-Guzmán suggests contributes to unstable and contradictory constructions of Latinidad. She explains that mainstream US television representations of Latinidad depend on the unstable ethnic and racial space in which some characters can stake a post-racial claim to be all races and no particular race at the same time.

Latinas in particular play a significant but complex role in contemporary US television. Molina-Guzmán explains that young Latina bodies in television function as both desirable commodities and potential threats to US culture. Given the lack of Latina representation on television, there are few shows starring Latinas to compare to *Elena of*

³⁵ Isabel Molina-Guzmán, “Latina Ethnoracial Ambiguity in Postracial Television Narratives,” in *Latinos and Narrative Media: Participation and Portrayal*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

Avalor. *Queen of the South* (2016-), an adaptation of Telemundo's *La Reina del Sur* (2011-) continues the longstanding tradition of linking Hispanic people with the drug trade and cartel wars by telling the story of a Mexican woman who inadvertently becomes the leader of a drug cartel. *Jane the Virgin*, an adaptation of the Venezuelan telenovela *Juana La Virgen*, tells a multigenerational story of a young Venezuelan-American single mother and her family in Miami. As for shows not inspired by telenovelas, NBC's *Superstore* (2015-) is a workplace comedy starring Honduran-American actress America Ferrera of *Ugly Betty* fame. Disney Channel's *Stuck in the Middle* (2016-), which premiered around the same time as *Elena* and stars *Jane the Virgin* and *Elena* actress Jenna Ortega, is a family comedy about a Hispanic girl with six siblings. On Netflix, *One Day at a Time* (2017-), a remake of the 1975 CBS show, tells a multigenerational story in the tradition of *Jane the Virgin*, but with far less callbacks to telenovela tropes than *Jane* uses. The eighth and final show that is on the air in the 2017-2018 television season with a Latina lead character is ABC's fantasy drama *Once Upon a Time*, which chronicles the adventures of Disney's fairytale characters who are magically transported to a seemingly ordinary small town in Maine.³⁷

Though shows like *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), *Riverdale* (2017-), *Modern Family*, *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-), and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-), offer notable Latina representation, including the portrayal of lesbian and bisexual Latinas, these shows ultimately do not center around the existence

³⁷ NBC also offers the Jennifer Lopez cop drama *Shades of Blue* (2016-2018), though the show went on an extended hiatus during the 2017-2018 television season. ABC's firefighter drama *Station 19* (2018-), starring Jaina Lee Ortiz, premiered during the 2017-2018 season, but not until after this study concluded.

of the Latina characters, rendering them expendable, as was the case with *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), which easily carries on despite the sudden exit of actress Sara Ramirez, the show's only Latinx cast member for ten seasons, in 2016. The fact that there are less than ten shows on the air on US cable channels that are carried by their Latina stars is worth noting in comparison to the dozens of television shows starring white people airing in the same season.

Out of the few Latina-centric shows airing during the same time frame as *Elena's* second season, only *Once Upon a Time* takes place in a fantasy setting, making it most akin to *Elena's* animated fairy tale world. The fantasy genre is a crucial component of *Once*, as it centers around sorcery and spellcasting, but the show never claims to be portraying an authentic version of Latinx culture in the way that *Elena* does. Conversely, *Jane the Virgin*, is set in a heightened version of reality in which melodramatic telenovela tropes manifest as everyday occurrences, all while confronting issues of immigration, language barriers, and economic disadvantages. By comparing *Jane* and *Once* to *Elena*, I suggest that there are multiple ways for Latina-centric fantasy to manifest on screen, and each iteration has its particular strengths and weaknesses.

Jane the Virgin, Elena of Avalor, and the Fantasy of Wealth

Jane the Virgin premiered on the CW in 2014 to critical acclaim, culminating in a Golden Globe win for star Gina Rodriguez at the end of the first season. Based on the Venezuelan telenovela *Juana la Virgen*, *Jane* critiques the improbability of telenovela tropes while simultaneously reproducing them. Though telenovelas are often maligned for their campy production values and melodramatic storylines, they have played a significant role in the formation of contemporary Hispanic cultural productions. The

Latin American telenovela is a direct descendant of the Cuban radionovela, which in turn is descended from the 19th century European serial melodrama. As Hector Amaya observes, all of these serial melodrama forms emerged at the intersection of economic, political, and social transformations happening in the world around them. The relationship between the serial melodrama and the political allows for both conservative and progressive elements to emerge. Amaya explains that the conservative potential of the serial melodrama comes from the fact that a program can become a series of montages designed for the continuous pleasure of its viewers. Conversely, a serial melodrama has progressive potential in the way that it memorializes history and reflects on the politics of the moment.³⁸ By codifying a community's political past and present in a cultural text, the telenovela functions as a community ritual that brings together Spanish speakers across national origins. Contrary to the belief of many television executives, Spanish is not the universal language of all Latinxs, and the telenovela can serve to exclude those who do not understand Spanish.

The use of the Spanish language in Latin America has a complicated and sometimes violent history. In addition to unifying Spanish speakers across regions, Spanish language media allows for Hispanics to remember how their cultural roots have always been partly shaped by colonialism. The conquest of Latin America involved the disintegration of indigenous cultures and languages across nations. That Spanish, and not an indigenous language, is one of the two most widely spoken languages (in addition to Portuguese) in Latin American countries is the result of centuries of Spanish

³⁸ Hector Amaya, "Eva Luna: Latino/a Audiences," in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 124.

colonization. Though Spanish is the language of colonization in Latin America, and arguable, much of the US central and southwest, in the US it is seen primarily as the language of immigrants and the Other. Amaya calls attention to the significance of having television in Spanish available in the US because “rarely do you hear professors, honest politicians, detectives, teachers, or physicians speak Spanish or English with a Spanish accent.”³⁹

One of the challenges of developing a Latina-centric show in the US is meeting the cultural needs of the entire Latinx diaspora within the US. Although Jane and her family are Venezuelan-American, actresses Gina Rodriguez, Andrea Navedo, and Ivonne Coll, who play Jane, Xiomara, and Alba Villanueva, are all of Puerto Rican descent. Jane’s father, Rogelio, is played by Mexican actor Jamie Camill, and his mother is played by Puerto Rican actress Rita Moreno. The show’s Miami setting, which somehow lacks any significant Cuban characters, contributes to the pan-Latinx atmosphere. While the show takes a pan-Latinx approach to casting, it struggles to acknowledge the diversity of Latinxs living in the Miami area. Much like the Los Angeles-based *Eva Luna*, which Amaya argues fails to depict the economic and social realities of Los Angeles, *Jane* continues the tradition of Venezuelan and Mexican telenovelas by offering a critically unrealistic vision of a Hispanic community.⁴⁰

Compared to *Elena*, however, *Jane* does offer a more critical view of economic inequality and social success – something that many Mexican and Venezuelan telenovelas fail to provide. In *Jane*, Alba and her late husband Mateo flee from

³⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 127.

Venezuela and raise Xiomara in a small home, all while not speaking much English or having US citizenship. Xiomara has Jane at a young age and does not tell Jane's biological father Rogelio about Jane until Jane is adult, requiring Xiomara to work to provide for both her daughter and her mother. Jane grows up in poverty, working as a hotel server while taking classes at the local university. Rafael Solano (Justin Baldoni), the father of Jane's child, owns the hotel where Jane works and is immensely wealthy, which leads to a number of discussions between Jane and Rafael about how they will raise their child, given their different economic backgrounds. Jane's poverty dictates the sacrifices she must make, from giving up her dream house to leaving her newborn son at home while she works to pay off her education bills. Conversely, Rafael and Rogelio use their wealth to make outlandish and impractical purchases, and the two men frequently make mistakes with their spending habits, preventing them from helping Jane with her expenses. According to Amaya, telenovelas often concentrate on melodramatic fantasies of economic and social success, so the connections between naïveté and wealth on *Jane* help to challenge that fantasy.⁴¹

Since she is the Crown Princess to the kingdom of Avalor, Elena and her family experience no economic struggles. While Elena's friends from working-class backgrounds live in small homes and must perform manual labor to survive, none of them have any qualms with Elena's lavish lifestyle. The only characters in the show who express resentment toward the royal family because of their wealth are the villainous Victor and Carla Delgado and the antagonistic Doña Paloma. While Victor and Carla's resentment is fueled by a materialistic desire for wealth and power, Doña Paloma's

⁴¹ Ibid., 127.

frustration with Elena stems from her fear of returning to the hardships of her working-class childhood. Elena seems to be aware of how others do not live as comfortably as she does, but she does not take any action to redistribute the wealth of Avalor. Arguably, *Elena* perpetuates the aspirational fantasies of telenovelas by presenting an uncritical view of wealth. This fantasy of economic success is also present in most Disney productions, going all the way back to the definitive rags-to-riches tale, *Cinderella*.

Once Upon a Time and Ethnic Ambiguity

Disney and ABC's fantasy drama *Once Upon a Time* adapts Disney's classic fairytale films for a contemporary audience. In the earlier seasons, the show jumps between the present-day drama of the denizens of Storybrooke, Maine and their past lives in the Enchanted Forest, a place where magic and fairytales come to life. The witch responsible for bringing the people of the Enchanted Forest to Storybrooke is Snow White's nemesis, the Evil Queen, who goes by the name Regina Mills. Played by Puerto Rican/Italian actress Lana Parrilla, Regina spends the first couple of seasons terrorizing everyone she meets because of a desire to get revenge for the murder of her lover at the hand of her mother, the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland*. Eventually, Regina learns the importance of loving herself, her son, Henry, and her sister, Zelena, offering a compelling character transformation over the course of the first six seasons. Following the departure of the show's lead actress, Jennifer Morrison, at the end of the sixth season, Parrilla assumed the lead role and received first billing. In the seventh season, which jumps forward several decades, Regina now lives in Seattle, Washington, while her son has no memory of his family because of a dark curse. Meanwhile, Henry's wife, Jacinda Vidrio (played by Dominican-American actress Dania Ramirez) and their daughter, Lucy

(Alison Hernandez) are struggling to make ends meet because the dark curse also caused them to forget their connection to Henry. Flashbacks reveal that in the Enchanted Forest, Jacinda is Cinderella and Lucy is a princess. While the show's earlier seasons repeatedly failed to feature characters of color in significant roles, the seventh season stars four women of color (including Black actress Mekia Cox as Princess Tiana from *Princess and the Frog*). *Once* does not discuss race or ethnicity directly, but it does offer an imagining of how women of color can exist in a fictional fantasy setting.



Figure 10. Cinderella and Regina in the Enchanted Forest. "The Garden of Forking Paths."

The lack of racial specificity, however, prevents some viewers from recognizing the Latinidad of Regina, even though Parrilla declared that the "Evil Queen is a Latina" during her 2012 ALMA award speech.⁴² In their research on the *Once* fandom on social media, Rukimi Pande and Swati Moitra find that some fans deny Regina's Latinidad on

⁴² Javier Hernandez, *Lana Parrilla wins NCLR Alma Award 2012 DBC*, 02:50, YouTube Video, September 22, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jzxi2S9rjkk>.

the basis that it is not explicitly stated within the show. Pande and Moitra attribute this attitude to the default whiteness that mass media productions like *Once* employ, which allows for color-blind interpretations of the source text, even within parts of the fandom that claim to celebrate diversity.⁴³ As Philip Kretsedemas explains in his analysis of *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), characters who are aligned with signs of Latinx culture or who are identified as Latinx become racialized as nonwhite by viewers.⁴⁴ One could argue that the inverse is true as well – characters who are not displaying their Latinidad in ‘obvious’ ways can be racialized as white. Regina troubles the notion that a Latina character must perform Latinidad in stereotypical ways in order to be read as Latina by the audience. That being said, the normative whiteness of US media requires Latinidad to be expressed, or risk being erased altogether – but also historically marginalizes explicit expressions of Latinidad.

Whiteness on *Elena* is not the default, but the racial ambiguity of most of the show’s characters presents its own challenges. The only white character in the main cast is Elena’s friend Naomi Turner. Naomi has porcelain skin, straight blonde hair, blue eyes, cannot speak Spanish, and is not from Avalor – on the show, these characteristics make her an outsider, which is useful from a storytelling perspective because Naomi serves as the audience surrogate who must learn about Avalor’s traditions. Sometimes Naomi disappears from the show for several episodes at a time, resulting in episodes without a

⁴³ Rukmini Pande, Swati Moitra, “Yes, the Evil Queen is Latina!” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.0908>.

⁴⁴ Philip Kretsedemas, “Mainstreaming Latina Identity: Culture-Blind and Colorblind Themes in Viewer Interpretations of *Ugly Betty*,” in *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America*, ed. Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 286.

single white character appearing. In contrast, for the first six seasons of *Once*, Regina has to share the spotlight with the multiple white characters in the main cast, which means that sometimes entire episodes will go by without a single person of color doing anything significant for the plot.



Figure 11. Naomi, Elena, and Gabe. "Royal Rivalry."

Both of these fantasy shows are set in a fictitious world, but *Once* presents whiteness as the default and *Elena* presents Latinidad as the default. Arguably, the true fantasy of *Elena* is that it imagines a world in which Latinxs can succeed without white, non-Latinx interference. Granted, white people want to colonize Avalor, but the kingdom manages to prosper on its own. The lack of racial specificity on *Elena*, however, prevents viewers from reading characters as explicitly Black, indigenous, or mixed-race. Though one could think about the show's stance on race as "color-blind," or ignoring racial difference, a more accurate descriptor is "culture-blind." Kretsedemas defines culture-blindness as the suppression of minority cultural identities that attempt to speak to the

dismissal of social barriers caused by racialized perceptions of cultural difference. From a culture-blind perspective, Latinx cultural differences are superficial garnishes for a set of norms and values that are understood to be universal and normatively white.⁴⁵ Within the world of *Elena*, Latinidad may be the norm, but Blackness and indigeneity, which have been historically marginalized in the U.S. and Latin America, are simply phenotypic variations of Latinidad, not unique identities that carry specific histories. The homogenization of cultures and races on the show presents a culture-blind version of Latinidad.

Animating Latin America

Since the 1940s, Walt Disney Studios has been depicting Latin American cultures and people in its feature films, with troubling results. While earlier features like *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* exoticize the Latinx body and geography, *The Emperor's New Groove* shows little regard for the film's Incan characters and setting. Disney and Pixar's latest attempt to cater to the Hispanic market, *Coco* (2017) is culturally specific, features an entirely Latinx voice cast, and shows great interest in Mexican tradition, but its negative portrayals of femininity and its uncritical view of US border policies does a disservice to immigrants and Latina women. By examining these four films, which are the only Disney or Pixar films to be set in Latin America and have Latinx or indigenous characters, I will review how *Elena* both challenges and critiques these supposedly multicultural and authentic renderings of Latin America.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 291.

The Authenticity of Disney's "Good Neighbor" Films

Saludos Amigos and *The Three Caballeros* were part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" program, which aimed in part to dispel negative stereotypes of Latin Americans in Hollywood and to promote a better relationship between the US and Latin America. The Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which financed the production of Disney's "Good Neighbor" films, paid for Walt Disney and a group of 15 artists to travel to Latin America to research the history, customs, music, art, and literature of various regions. By incorporating footage from the research trip into *Saludos* and *Caballeros*, the filmmakers asserted that they were creating an authentic product. Despite the purported objective of these "Good Neighbor" films, Karen Goldman argues that these films nevertheless promote inaccurate stereotypes and



Figure 12. Donald Duck and José Carioca in Brazil. *The Three Caballeros*.

code the nations and people of Latin America as exotic, idealized, and sexualized.⁴⁶

Saludos and *Caballeros* consist of a collection of short segments that blend animation

⁴⁶ Karen S. Goldman, "Saludos Amigos and The Three Caballeros: The Representation of Latin America in Disney's "Good Neighbor" Films," in *Diversity in Disney films: Critical essays on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013), 25.

and live-action footage, most of which was shot in Latin American nations during Walt Disney's "Good Neighbor" expedition. Disney staples like Donald Duck and Goofy make appearances, trying on Latin American clothing in an act of touristic cultural appropriation. According to Goldman, the two films position the US and Latin America within an 'us-versus-them' structure. Disney's production team claimed that *Saludos* and *Caballeros* offered an authentic portrayal of Latin America, but as Goldman notes, the inclusion of diverse elements in the films are highly selective. For instance, discussion of African heritage is completely absent from the segment on Brazil. As mentioned in the second section, the erasure of African heritage from Latin American history is part of the racist and colorist regime of colonialism that endures today in most Latinx societies. While the version of diversity that Disney was promoting was inaccurate, their films shaped views of Latin America in the US.

The production of ethnic authenticity remains central to mainstream media depictions of Latinidad. As Isabel Molina-Guzmán explains, these dominant representations of Latinidad are often grounded in familiar and marketable characteristics. Given Molina-Guzmán's assertion that Latinidad is a social construct, her argument can be extended to say that authenticity itself is a derivative of this construction. Molina-Guzmán notes that media stories that present themselves as "authentic" inevitably rely on constructions of identity based on reductive assumptions that homogenize cultural practices and reify racial differences. Therefore, she writes, "media practices that define one Latina as more 'real' or 'legitimate' than another inevitably participate in symbolic colonization by reproducing dominant norms, values,

and beliefs about Latinidad.”⁴⁷ The struggle for authenticity is further problematized by the burden of representation. The burden of representation is the result of the underrepresentation of groups in US culture, which in turn demands that those few who are visible speak for the entire community. Molina-Guzmán observes that in the US, the burden of representation is rarely placed on dominant media depictions of men, heterosexuals, or white people.⁴⁸

Even when content is developed by Latina producers, ethnic authenticity remains contested, especially by Latinx viewers. For instance, the biopic *Frida* (2002), produced by and starring Mexican actress Salma Hayek, prompted a discussion among Mexican and Mexican-American critics and casual viewers about whether Hayek had “sold out” Mexican culture. Among some Mexican critics, Hayek’s residency in the US discredited the film’s authenticity. These critics seemed to say that in order to be authentically Mexican “one must be Mexican and demonstrate an ongoing political and cultural commitment to Mexico by living and working in Mexico.”⁴⁹ Molina-Guzmán argues that these criterion for authenticity are unsustainable and ignore the transnational experiences of Mexicans who cross the border to work in the US. Molina-Guzmán suggests that signifiers of Latina authenticity can help sell media and provide more visibility, but the unstable nature of ethnic identity prevents total cultural cohesion. Embracing the instability of ethnicity, she argues that more complex definitions of ethnic identity and culture are possible and desirable, writing that “by questioning how [Latinas] are

⁴⁷ Isabel Molina-Guzmán, *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

represented, we are provided the opportunity to redefine ourselves, and in redefining ourselves critique dominant systems of social stratification.”⁵⁰ Attempting to label a work as authentic will always be met with skepticism by some because authenticity is not a fixed quality, though it does have affective power over many consumers.

Films like *Saludos* and *Caballeros* that employ harmful stereotypes and erase entire groups of people from a nation’s history in the name of authenticity draw attention to how authenticity can be leveraged for dubious purposes. Tracing the authenticity of these productions is arguably less vital than questioning how these films lay claims to authenticity. For *Saludos* and *Caballeros*, the claims to authenticity come from visual markers like Latinx bodies, clothing, and landscapes, as well as auditory markers like music and voices. To the viewer in the US, these on-screen markers of authenticity become part of their understanding of Latinidad, leading to the expectation that authentic Latinxs look like those in *Saludos* and *Caballeros*. From the 1950s to the 1980s, save for *The Jungle Book* (1967), Disney avoided stories centered around people of color (though that did not stop them from incorporating racist stereotypes into many of their films), but by the 1990s, when Disney started making animated films about people of color, that essentialized vision of authenticity returned.

Disney and the Multiculturalist Project

Starting with *Aladdin* in 1992, Disney began to promote itself as a supporter of multiculturalism. Despite this claim, the company continued to cater to a white, middle-class, American audience. M. Keith Booker argues that Disney’s definition of multicultural is actually “bicultural,” with mainstream white American culture

⁵⁰ Ibid., 117.

representing what might be called ‘normal’ culture, while all nonwestern cultural perspectives are lumped into one exotic heap at the other pole.”⁵¹

Disney’s commitment to biculturalism is evident in their 1995 feature, *Pocahontas*. Booker observes that the Native American characters in *Pocahontas* “represent a virtual embodiment of Disney’s long-standing glorification of the natural and the authentic.”⁵² Despite Disney’s claims that the film is an authentic portrayal of Native American people, the film suggests that the English settlers were not part of the colonial mission, save for a few individuals such as Governor Ratcliffe. While Disney is interested in providing an authentic image of Native Americans, they are less interested in providing an authentic image of the English colonists, which will appease white American audiences who do not want to confront their colonialist history.

Following Dreamworks Animation’s Latin America-based comedy film centered on an indigenous kingdom, *The Road to El Dorado* (2000), Disney released its own Latin America-based comedy film centered on an indigenous kingdom, *The Emperor’s New Groove*. Booker notes that the film continues Disney’s multicultural trend of the 1990s by taking place in an unnamed mountainous empire that is reminiscent of a pre-colonial fifteenth century Incan empire. In the film, cultural, architectural, and topographic clues remind the viewer of the connection between the fictional kingdom and the Incas. Nevertheless, the film shows no interest in exploring Incan culture or history, instead opting for a fantastical and humorous retelling of the Danish story, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” In the film, the emperor, a spoiled teenager named Kuzco (David Spade) turns

⁵¹ M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 61.

into a llama during a botched assassination attempt by Yzma (Eartha Kitt) and winds up in the village, where he meets Pacha (John Goodman) and makes a plan to return to the palace and reclaim the throne. Besides lacking a single Latinx or indigenous voice actor, *The Emperor's New Groove* relies on anachronisms and American popular culture references to the extent that its Incan setting seems superfluous.



Figure 13. Parody of Bob's Big Boy Restaurant in Incan-inspired style. *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000).

Elena is somewhere in between *Pocahontas* and *The Emperor's New Groove* in terms of its investment in cultural history. *Elena* flaunts its use of “authentic” music, architecture, and artifacts, but in contrast to *Pocahontas*, the relative lack of Anglo characters in *Elena* keeps the show from falling into a white savior narrative. Compared to *The Emperor's New Groove*, *Elena* is much more inclusive in its casting practices, given that most of the voice cast and guest stars are Latinx actors. At the same time, *Elena's* fictional setting only serves to disconnect Latinidad from actual Latin American geography, whereas *The Emperor's New Groove* clearly takes place in the Andes region

of what is now Peru, ensuring some sort of cultural specificity. However, the anachronistic pop culture references render the South American setting irrelevant – the film might as well take place in a fictional land like Avalor. Though cultural specificity can sometimes draw attention to the specific history of a group of people, *The Emperor's New Groove* demonstrates how cultural specificity can be interlaced with anachronistic visuals and dialogue to separate a people from their culture.

***Coco*: Crossing Borders, Building Walls**

Released in late 2017, *Coco* is still relatively new at the time of this project, so little has been said so far by scholars on the film's various strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, I will offer my own interpretation of the film. *Coco* tells the story of a young Mexican boy, Miguel, who aspires to become a musician like his idol, Ernesto de la Cruz. However, his large family, who are all shoemakers, do not allow music in the household because Miguel's great-great-grandfather supposedly abandoned the family to play music. Miguel assumes that his great-great-grandfather must be Ernesto de la Cruz, so on the Day of the Dead, he goes to Ernesto's altar and takes Ernesto's guitar, which transports Miguel to the Land of the Dead. In Pixar's version of the Land of the Dead, the



Figure 14. Héctor is denied entry into the Land of the Living. *Coco* (2017).

dead, who appear as expressive skeletons with clothes and hair, must pass through a security system that matches a photo of them with their skeleton. Guards, who are also dead, prevent those without a photo from either entering or exiting the Land of the Dead. Miguel sneaks through security to enter the Land of the Dead and happens upon Héctor, a down-on-his-luck man hoping to visit the Land of the Living before the Day of the Dead celebrations are over for the year. When Héctor loses the photo that he needs to pass through security, he enlists Miguel to help him find the photo. Over the course of the film, it is revealed that Héctor is actually Miguel's great-great grandfather and Ernesto de la Cruz was the one who murdered Héctor, leading Héctor's family to think that he abandoned them. In the end, Miguel is able to get Héctor and his photograph into the Land of the Living, which causes Miguel's great-grandmother, Coco, to remember how her late father loved music. Miguel's family comes to accept music in their lives and they commemorate Héctor and the rest of the family in song.

Upon release in Mexico, the film received immense praise from Mexican film critics and viewers alike, rising to the top of Mexico's box office charts.⁵³ The film also performed well in the United States, receiving two Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature and Best Original Song. Incidentally, neither of these Academy Awards went to Latinx creatives, instead going to white producers Lee Unkrich and Darla K. Anderson, white songwriter Kristen Lopez, and Filipino songwriter Robert Lopez. In the wake of all this praise for *Coco*, few are calling attention to the ways in which the movie fails its Mexican and Mexican-American audiences.

⁵³ "Mexico Yearly Box Office," Box Office Mojo, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/mexico/yearly/>, accessed March 31, 2018.

First of all, the film relies on stereotypical archetypes for its Latina women while allowing its male characters to have complicated motivations and personalities. In the world of *Coco*, women are either passive, senile, or dismissive and cruel. Miguel's mother and sister show some concern for Miguel, but their presence in the story is largely inconsequential. Miguel's grandmother, however, drives the plot when she breaks Miguel's guitar in a devastating scene, framing her as a cruel antagonist standing in the way of Miguel's dreams. Likewise, Miguel's great-great grandmother, Imelda, who resides in the Land of the Dead, spends most of the movie trying to stop Miguel from pursuing his musical ambitions, telling him that she will not let him leave the Land of the Dead until he swears to stop playing music forever. Coco, an elderly woman, shows kindness to Miguel, but being senile and in a wheelchair, she does not participate in most of the action-packed, dialogue-driven story. Although there are few positive portrayals of Mexican or Latino men in US media, the complexity of *Coco*'s male characters should not come at the expense of its female characters.

On another note, the film's depiction of the barrier between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead looks like a cross between a US Customs and Immigration station and the entrance to Disneyland. While some critics have praised *Coco*'s filmmakers for including the border allegory, its inclusion raises several questions. Why must the border exist in the first place? If the Land of the Dead is supposed to be a paradise for Mexican people who have passed on, then why do they still have to endure a system developed by an imperialistic United States government meant to discriminate against Mexicans? At no point in the film do the characters question the authority of the guards or pose a direct challenge to the Land of the Dead's immigration

system. In fact, the film celebrates how Héctor is able to recover his photograph and pass through security without problems, rather than express frustration that Héctor must partake in this oppressive system. Additionally, the guards, dressed like policeman, are shown to be somewhat incompetent with technology and occasionally buffoonish, but never excessively violent or murderous. Compared to Mexican writer-director Jorge R. Gutiérrez's similar Day of the Dead-themed animated film *The Book of Life* (2014), which suggested that one could enter the afterlife simply by dying, *Coco* uses Mexican culture to imply that closely guarded borders, and by extension, the US Customs and Border Protection agency are essential, natural, and even whimsical.



Figure 15. The entrance to the Land of the Dead. *Coco* (2017).

Although *Elena* lacks cultural specificity, it arguably does better than *Coco* does at portraying the spiritual aspect of the Day of the Dead. As discussed in the second section, the Day of the Dead in *Elena* is a jovial celebration, much like it is in *Coco*. Though *Elena* does not enter the Land of the Dead, she can interact with the spirits of the dead during the holiday, so the border between the living and the dead is constrained by a

living person's proclivity for magic, not the dead person's ability to provide documentation. In fact, immigration legislation does not exist in *Elena* – visitors can come and go from Avalor they please, there are no discussions about border walls, deportation, or documentation. As Mae Ngai explains, the “illegal” immigrant cannot be constituted without deportation. By criminalizing unauthorized entry in the US, the border patrol created the “illegal” Mexican immigrant.⁵⁴ *Elena*'s rosy portrayal of immigration disregards the legal challenges that real-life Latinxs face in the US, but it also presents a desirable fantasy in which Latinxs are not “illegal” subjects and can live without fear of deportation.

Additionally, *Elena* offers more complex portrayals of women and girls, allowing them to pursue careers, educations, and friendships with other women, whereas all of the women in *Coco* exist only in relation to their husbands, fathers, or sons. *Saludos and Caballeros* also lack complex portrayals of women, typically treating them as sex objects for the male cartoon characters to ogle at. *Emperor's New Groove* has the villainous Yzma, who admittedly has some agency as she plots to assassinate Emperor Kuzco, but the film repeatedly mocks her appearance and age with harsh close-ups of her wrinkled skin and commentary on her lack of sex appeal. Though *Elena*'s teenaged female characters all have the same slender, doll-like body, the older female characters are not disparaged by the show for having more diverse body types and facial features.

Disney's Hidden Pictures

The ultimate goal of any Disney animated project is to engage with audiences in

⁵⁴ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 71.

such a way that builds loyalty to the characters and the brand after the film or show is out of theaters or off the television. The aforementioned films, *Saludos Amigos*, *The Three Caballeros*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Emperor's New Groove*, have all struggled to maintain their status within Disney's collection of films and as pieces of American popular culture. Simply finding a new copy of *The Three Caballeros* and *Saludos Amigos* in stores is impossible; the movies are only available to purchase on Blu-Ray through Disney's Movie Club website, whereas the rest of Disney's animated catalog are sold at all major retailers in the US (save for the handful of the studio's most popular films embargoed under the Disney Vault). Whether or not *Elena of Avalor* can endure in the decades to come will be up to executives and consumers, but for now it stands uniquely in both the realms of Latina-centric television and Disney animation, drawing in viewers invested in these media worlds.

IV. Marketing, Merchandise, and Commodification

The premiere of *Elena of Avalor* in July of 2016 coincided with the release of the first wave of Disney's tie-in merchandise campaign. The merchandise included the usual Disney collection of action figures, dolls, costumes, stuffed animals, and school supplies. What made this wave of merchandise remarkable was the presence of Elena, a girl with brown skin, at the center of all of the merchandise. In a sea of Cinderella backpacks and Elsa lunchboxes, Elena stood out as a visible alternative to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed characters.

After a successful first season, Disney amped up the marketing campaign with more elaborate promotional tactics, including the release of specialty collectibles and the increased presence of Elena in Disney's American theme parks. An integral part of this marketing campaign has been the dual use of English and Spanish in promotional material. Though English is typically more prominent on *Elena* marketing tools, the incorporation of Spanish into US-based marketing raises several questions about the relationship between corporations and Latinx people. For one, how does the use of Spanish serve to include and exclude Latinx consumers? Additionally, why is the Spanish language used by Disney as a marker of authenticity and approachability?

This section will examine some of the marketing tactics and promotional materials released during the first two seasons of *Elena* and ask what these materials are doing for the representation of Latinas in US popular culture. On one hand, *Elena* is the product of a corporation that capitalizes on the underrepresentation of people of color. This process of capitalizing involves marking said people of color as outside the mainstream (read: white and middle-class), which only serves to reinforce the notion that white American consumerism is something towards that people of color should strive. At

the same time, however, *Elena* offers consumers the invaluable experience of seeing themselves represented on screen and in merchandise. Considering Disney's tendency to capitalize on most populations, one could argue Disney's commodification of Latinx cultures in *Elena* was an inevitability. Ultimately, Latinx consumers must navigate the relationship between validation and commodification.



Figure 16. Promotional Poster for Elena of Avalor. (Miranda, “Check out the Teaser Posters.”)

Selling The Latina Disney Princess

The first official promotional material for *Elena* was a set of three posters. These “teaser” posters do not reveal much about the show itself, but they do convey Disney’s approach to marketing the show for its US audience. One of the posters features a closeup

of Elena and the subtitle “Bienvenida, Princess Elena.”⁵⁵ While the other two posters read, “Every legend starts with someone special” and “She has an eye for adventure,” the poster with the Spanish word for “welcome” marks Disney’s first use of the Spanish language for its English-speaking, US-based audience to promote *Elena*.

Spanish plays a significant role in the formation of the image of Hispanics in the US. As Arlene Dávila explains, marketing researchers since the 1980s have argued that the most important cultural unifier of Hispanics in the US is their use of Spanish. Advertisers in both the US and Latin America use Spanish audio and text to confirm the Latinidad of the people in an advertisement. In the US, an advertisement’s language depends on who is the intended audience. By using language as a marker of one’s supposed acculturation level, marketers assume that Hispanic people who only speak English or are bilingual are already being reached by mainstream (English-speaking) US media. When advertisers want to appeal to English-speaking Hispanics, they will throw in a couple of Spanish words thrown into an English commercial to signal Latinidad and encourage the Hispanic consumer to think of a product as part of their culture. Dávila problematizes this essentialist connection between Spanish and Hispanics, writing that “Even if they do not speak it, Latinos are hence deemed to be symbolically moved and touched by Spanish, reproducing essentialist equations of Latinos with their language.”⁵⁶ Consequently, Hispanics in the US who speak Spanish are thought to be less acculturated, and therefore more “authentically Hispanic” than those who primarily (or

⁵⁵ Julia Miranda, “[BTM EXCLUSIVE] Check out the Teaser Posters for Disney’s New Latin Princess ‘ELENA of AVALOR,’” *Beyond the Marquee*, May 8, 2016, <http://beyondthemarquee.com/40112>.

⁵⁶ Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 71.

only) speak English. From the perspective of these advertising agencies, the monolingual, Spanish-speaking Hispanic person is considered to be the source of authenticity – a notion that grants power to advertising agencies to determine who is and is not Hispanic.⁵⁷ The selective inclusion of one Spanish word in the *Elena* marketing campaign arguably reproduces the essentialist relationship between Latinxs and the Spanish language. The Spanish word “Bienvenida” lies in contrast to the English word “Princess” so that one must have an awareness of both English and Spanish words to understand the poster. Such a blend of English and Spanish would likely not come up on a poster for one of Disney’s Anglo characters, but on a poster for a character who some people doubt is actually Latina at all, the two languages connect Elena to a US-centric construction of Latinidad.

The first trailer for *Elena*, airing on Disney Channel and available on YouTube, invites viewers to “experience a story like never before” before the male narrator switches to a vaguely Spanish accent to declare the title of “Elena of Avalor.” The trailer promises high-stakes adventures, a rebellious princess, and empowering messages of female independence and family. The trailer is posted by Disney Channel’s official YouTube account, and viewer comments range from skeptical to cautiously optimistic. A comment from user che wangia reads, “A Disney princess hasn’t used a sword since Mulan. Elenas [sic] alright with me.” User Annette maple offers a more critical outlook, writing “while I do appreciate that there is an attempt to make a Latina Princess, I feel like this was too....quick. I feel like there really is no plot, like its just ‘okay you want diversity, here it is. Be happy. We did it.’ I mean, there was no spanish besides the accent

⁵⁷ Ibid., 76.

in the title, the script is a bit....too washed I guess? I mean it is just a trailer. But come on, we all know a Disney princess isn't really official unless the movie hits the big screen. While I am excited about *Elena of Avalor*, I am looking forward to the remaking of this movie that hits the big screen. TLDR: It seems a bit rushed to me. No plot really. No Spanish. I'm waiting for the remake.”⁵⁸ Annette Maple’s comment about the show being too “quick” suggests that they think Disney is just capitalizing on Latinx audiences without regard for the quality of the program. Many of the skeptical commenters echo the desire for a feature-length theatrical film, calling the decision to release the show on Disney Channel and Disney Junior “messed up,” and “racist.” Those who were critical of the show’s construction of Hispanic cultures questioned why Elena did not have a Spanish accent, why she did not speak Spanish, and why had to be Mexican (even though Mexico does not exist in the *Elena* universe).

While some of the commenters clearly misunderstand the premise of the show (for one, Elena is not Mexican, and second, Spanish is used sporadically on the show), they call attention to Elena’s place within Disney’s commercial universe. Lacking a feature film, these viewers argue, means that Elena might not be as visible as the wildly popular characters from Disney’s most commercially successful film, *Frozen* (2013).⁵⁹ As previously discussed, the television format creates exciting opportunities for character development that a film cannot provide, but the exclusivity of the Disney Channel and Disney Junior networks definitely limits *Elena*’s viewership. Additionally, Elena’s status

⁵⁸ DisneyChannel, *Trailer | Elena of Avalor | Disney Channel*, YouTube video, 01:08, June 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRpmMwQ0aR4>.

⁵⁹ “Frozen (2013),” Box Office Mojo, accessed March 20, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=frozen2013.htm>.

as a television character could jeopardize her chance of becoming a “Disney Princess.”

Within the collective Disney fandom, there is a great deal of confusion over which characters are Disney Princesses and which Disney characters who happen to be princesses. For this reason, clarification about what makes a character a Disney Princess is necessary before proceeding. Although the first Disney Princess, Snow White, made her debut in the late 1930s, Lisa Orr notes that the Disney Princess brand did not come onto the scene until 1999. The brand started with eight characters – Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty/Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas and Tinker Bell, who were put together despite their differences of race, setting, and species.⁶⁰ According to Orr, this convergence of characters is known as integrated marketing, or when “companies simultaneously release related products in multiple formats, from digital to print to collectibles.”⁶¹ The key to Disney’s success with their integrative marketing strategy was setting some ground rules upfront. Former Disney executive Andy Mooney, who spearheaded the launch of the Disney Princess brand in 1999, explained in an interview with *Bloomberg*’s Claire Suddath that there were concerns from other Disney executives that putting multiple characters from different movies together would be detrimental to the individual mythology of each character and their film. To alleviate these concerns, Mooney established two “rules” for being a Disney Princess: Princesses cannot look at each other (to keep their mythologies separate) and they cannot wear dresses in the same color when placed side-by-side on promotional material (to guarantee

⁶⁰ Tinker Bell was soon removed from the lineup and replaced with Mulan, allowing Tinker Bell to spearhead the Disney Fairies franchise in the 2000s.

⁶¹ Lisa Orr, “‘Difference That Is Actually Sameness Mass-Reproduced’: Barbie Joins the Princess Convergence,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2009): 9.

that each character has a distinct look).⁶² These conditions are the only two “rules” of being a Disney Princess. As far as maintaining the narrative separation of the characters, however, to date, the only Disney-approved projects that have the Disney princesses interact with one another on screen are the television show *Disney’s House of Mouse* (2001-2003), the video game *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) and the upcoming film *Ralph Breaks the Internet: Wreck-it-Ralph 2* (2018). The addition of Pixar’s Merida from *Brave* (2012) to the lineup all but confirmed that Disney Princesses do not need to be in a Walt Disney Animation Studios film to be a Princess. Since Elena’s default dress is red and she never interacts with the other Princesses in her show, she meets the basic criteria to be a Disney Princess.

As of 2018, there are eleven Disney Princesses: Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, and Merida. Disney continues to release new movies about princesses and heroines, including *Frozen* (with Princess Anna and Queen Elsa) and *Moana* (with Moana), but the female characters from these movies are not “official” Disney Princesses. So where does Elena fit into the Disney Princess brand? According to the show’s executive producer Craig Gerber, “Elena is going to be considered as much a Disney Princess as Anna and Elsa.” When a Twitter user pointed out that Anna and Elsa are not official Princesses, Gerber explained that “Being an ‘official Disney Princess’ is not determined by the ‘line-up’ anymore. Elena is being considered a Disney Princess.”⁶³ While Disney is giving Elena more

⁶² Claire Suddath, “Battle Over Disney’s Princesses: How Hasbro grabbed the lucrative Disney doll business from Mattel,” *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-disney-princess-hasbro/>.

⁶³ Craig Gerber, Twitter Post, May 22, 2016, 8:52 AM, <https://twitter.com/CraigGerber/status/734411642365054980>.

attention than some of its official Disney Princesses, she still lacks the ubiquity of Cinderella or Snow White. If Disney wants Elena to stick around after her show comes to an end, they will need to make Elena accessible to a wider audience. Without Elena, Disney stands to lose their only representation of a Latina, which would require them to introduce another Latina character to fill that void. Alternatively, Disney could shut out Latinx consumers and never make another Latina princess again. This alternative scenario is a very realistic possibility, considering that Disney has yet to introduce a princess that is the same race as one of the already existing princesses of color. For now, Disney's marketing team is doing a considerable amount to fit Elena into the Disney Princess brand without actually adding the character to the official lineup.

Theme Park Promotion

On August 11, 2016, just a couple of weeks after the show's premiere, Walt Disney World presented a "Royal Welcome Induction Ceremony" for Elena at the Magic Kingdom park in Florida. The ceremony, broadcast live on Disney Channel's streaming app and hosted by *Elena* voice stars Aimee Carrero and Jenna Ortega, involved musical numbers, speeches from Disney's Nancy Kanter and the CEO of Girl Scouts of Citrus, Maryann Barry, and a parade down the park's Main Street entranceway. At the ceremony, Kanter confirmed the second season of *Elena* was underway, while Barry announced the first "*Elena of Avalor* – Scepter of Light Award," given to a Gold Award-earning Senior Girl Scout who promoted STEM education in the community. Disney cast members dressed as Cinderella and Prince Charming introduced Elena as she rode in an open carriage down Main Street, escorted by a group of Girl Scouts ranging from Daisy to Senior Scouts. Walking through Cinderella's castle, Elena greeted the crowd with a

“hello” and “hola.” After Cinderella told Elena to believe in her dreams, Elena declared that “with my familia and best friends by my side, anything is possible.” Elena then sang a song from the show’s first episode, “My Time” while pantomiming guitar playing. In her conversation with Cinderella, Elena used Spanish phrases like “de nada,” “gracias,” and “adios.”⁶⁴

The ceremony is quite similar to the theme park’s welcoming ceremonies for Elsa and Anna, Merida, and Tiana, all of which had parades, speeches, and musical numbers. Since the ceremony, Elena has remained an attraction at both Walt Disney World and Disneyland. In WDW, Elena can be found at the Magic Kingdom’s Princess Fairytale Hall, where she typically is paired with Cinderella for meet-and-greets with park guests.⁶⁵ At Disneyland in California, Elena has her own outdoor pavilion at the Disney California Adventure park (DCA).⁶⁶ Neither venue in Florida nor California is permanent – compared to Ariel’s meet-and-greet grotto specifically built for the mermaid character to show off her tail⁶⁷ – highlighting the temporary aspect of Elena’s presence in the parks. The same can be said for the other Princesses of color – Jasmine, Tiana, Mulan, and Pocahontas, who often greet guests in pavilions or near a storefront, while white

⁶⁴ The DIS, *NEW Princess Elena of Avalor’s Royal Welcome Induction Ceremony | Magic Kingdom*, YouTube video, 14:56, August 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41nX0X3vEKA>.

⁶⁵ “Meet Cinderella and Elena at Princess Fairytale Hall,” Walt Disney World Resort, accessed March 21, 2018. <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/entertainment/magic-kingdom/character-meet-elena-fairytale-hall/>.

⁶⁶ “Meet Elena of Avalor,” Disneyland Resort, accessed March 21, 2018. <https://disneyland.disney.go.com/entertainment/disney-california-adventure/character-meet-princess-elena-of-avalor/>.

⁶⁷ “Meet Ariel at Her Grotto,” Walt Disney World Resort, accessed March 21, 2018. <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/entertainment/magic-kingdom/character-meet-ariel-grotto-fantasyland/>.

Princesses like Belle and Merida have elaborate rooms or sets built around their character's hobbies.

Elena is valuable to Disney, however, because of her connections to Hispanic cultures. During the 2017-2018 winter holiday season at Disneyland, Elena played a major role in Disney California Adventure Park's Disney Festival of Holidays. As part of



Figure 17. Entrance to ¡Viva Navidad! at Disney California Adventure. Photo by author. December 27, 2017.

the annual event, Disney promoted its Disney ¡Viva Navidad! celebration. The Disney ¡Viva Navidad! festivities included Mexican-inspired decorations around the Paradise Gardens segment of the park, as well as a parade featuring animated characters from *The Three Caballeros* and *Saludos Amigos*. The area was not exclusively Mexican-themed, however, as musicians from various Latin American nations performed on the small stage in front of the Paradise Gardens dining area. Adding to the pan-Latino atmosphere, Elena

also received her own short parade, which featured a cast member dressed as Elena on top of an elaborate float while her theme song played on repeat through the speakers.

While Donald Duck and the other characters from *The Three Caballeros* and *Saludos Amigos* are unable to converse with park guests, Elena can have verbal conversations with guests and shape their understandings of Latin American culture with her words. Furthermore, her physical presence in the Latin America-themed area of



Figure 18. Elena of Avalor in Disney's Festival of Holidays program. Disney California Adventure.

Disney California Adventure (DCA) heightens her perceived Latinidad. Typically portrayed by a cast member with light brown skin, Elena embodies the US version of the ideal Latina body that is distant from whiteness but also distant from indigeneity or Blackness.

Her location within DCA is also important, especially compared to her place in the Magic Kingdom. Given Mexico's proximity to Anaheim, California, and the prevalence of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in southern California, it is strategic for Disney to incorporate Mexican aesthetics into the park, but the sectioning off of the

Latinx-themed festivities creates the illusion that Latin America is another fictional land alongside DCA's *Cars*-themed Radiator Springs and the *A Bug's Life*-themed A Bug's Land areas. While Elena and Avalor are fictional, the Latin American cultures she is placed within are very much real, and the blurring of fiction and reality in that part of the park only heightens the exoticization of Elena's Latinidad. By comparison, Elena's place at the Princess Fairytale Hall in the Magic Kingdom does not serve to exoticize Elena solely based on the location. The Princess Fairytale Hall frames Elena as a fairytale princess with equal status to Cinderella, but in taking away the Latin American-themed setup, the area signifies that the European-inspired aesthetics of the room⁶⁸ are normative while the Hispanic aesthetics are nonstandard.

Dolls and Dresses

In addition to her presence in the American parks, Elena is the subject of a growing supply of merchandise. The current supply of *Elena* products on Disney's official retail website as of the end of March of 2018 includes almost 100 different costumes, dolls, swimwear, school supplies, party favors, books, and stuffed animals.⁶⁹ By comparison, the merchandise available for *The Princess and the Frog*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan* combined is still less than the number of tie-in products for *Elena*. Additionally, white characters like Cinderella, Belle, and Ariel have more merchandise than all these characters of color. Most of the *Elena*-themed items are akin to the standard Disney merchandise that accompanies any successful animated show or film. However,

⁶⁸ Inside the Magic, Princess Fairytale Hall tour with Rapunzel, Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora at Walt Disney World, YouTube video, 02:58, September 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UR4icveZAWU>.

⁶⁹ "Elena of Avalor," shopDisney, accessed March 22, 2018.

<https://www.shopdisney.com/movies-shows/disney/disney-channel/elena-of-avalor>.

three of these items stand out for their significance within the seemingly endless world of Disney merchandise.

The Disney Animators' Collection started in 2011 with ten dolls based off the Disney Princesses. For the series, veteran Disney animators like Glen Keane and Mark Henn designed Disney's characters as adorable toddlers who look strikingly like their teenage or adult counterparts. These toddler dolls, which were initially priced at \$24.50 in the US, are popular with collectors of all ages and genders.⁷⁰ A search on YouTube in March of 2018 for "Disney Animator Doll" yields over 103,000 results. Many of these videos are either reviews of the dolls or tutorials for how to customize a doll's hair, clothes, or face. The brand has since expanded to include newer movie characters from *Frozen* and *Moana*, as well as the addition of male characters like Aladdin and Flynn Rider from *Tangled*. In January of 2018, Elena became the first Disney television character to be made into a Disney Animators' doll. Designed by Elena's character designer, Ritsuko Notani, the doll has brown skin, cartoonishly large brown eyes, long dark hair curled into ringlets, and wears her signature red dress.⁷¹

Reception of the doll from the adult doll-collecting community on YouTube has been largely positive. In her unboxing and review video, one Latina YouTuber, "Resin wonders," reveals that she bought the doll because of the doll's physical similarities to herself, without watching any episodes of the show, saying that "when I saw her I was

⁷⁰ Wendy Michaels, "Disney Princesses: The Toddler Years! New Disney Doll Collection," *Babble*, October 23, 2011, <https://www.babble.com/mom/disney-princesses-the-toddler-years-new-disney-doll-collection/>.

⁷¹ "Disney Animators' Collection Elena of Avalor Doll – 16"," shopDisney, <https://www.shopdisney.com/disney-animators-collection-elena-of-avalor-doll-16-1461142>, accessed March 28, 2018.

like, oh my God, that is like, my mini-me.”⁷² Another Latina YouTuber, “Tsum Tsum Mommy” says that she loves Elena, but she has only seen the first couple of episodes because she does not have a cable subscription. She praises Elena’s skin tone and calls Elena “hermosa,” or gorgeous.⁷³ While these two YouTubers’ reactions do not speak for all of the doll collectors online, they do hint at the social significance of Latina dolls.



Figure 19. Disney Animators’ Collection Elena doll.
(ShopDisney.com).

In her study of American Girl dolls, Emilie Zaslow argues that the brand’s only Mexican doll, Josefina, “embodies the generic Latina look employed by marketers who seek to garner the largest share of a diverse Latino/a market and a non-Latino market as

⁷² Resin wonders, *My first Disney animators' doll! - (Elena of Avalor)*, YouTube video, 10:53, February 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZsHBPEV6f8>.

⁷³ Tsum Tsum Mommy, *NEW Elena of Avalor Animators Doll Review*, YouTube video, 06:57, January 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZVkgkXk6ec>.

well.”⁷⁴ Consequently, Josefina’s ambiguous racial identity prevents consumers from moving beyond a colorblind or multicultural analytical frame to understand her difference. The Elena Animators’ Doll, which looks similar to the Josefina doll and is about the same size, also embodies the ambiguous Latina look – she is an ethnic Other, but consumers are the ones who will racialize her as white or ambiguous. Lacking a historical connection to a Latin American nation, Elena takes this ambiguity even further than the Mexican Josefina did. Like Josefina, Elena is not a US citizen, but Elena is also not a Mexican citizen, which perhaps makes her more palatable to an Anglo-centric US audience. Zaslow observes that African American dolls are often associated with oppression and exploitation, but Native and Latino dolls fail to address racism and injustice in the US.⁷⁵ While Elena deals with some matters of injustice on her show, racism is not part of that discussion. Essentially, Elena is a politically neutral, racially ambiguous character that becomes a screen for individual consumers’ projections of ideas in the body of a toddler doll. The consumers must decide for themselves if Elena embodies resistance or if she just an exotic Other meant to diversify a predominately white doll collection.

Though Elena’s racial ambiguity does not foreground Latina political resistance, the doll offers Hispanic consumers valuable representation. In their 1947 study on dolls and race, Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark reveal that both white and black children in the US learn from an early age to favor white dolls over black dolls. The Clarks note that the tendency to prefer the white doll is not statistically reliable, but the “tendency of

⁷⁴ Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 162.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

the three-year-olds to negate the brown doll ('looks bad') is established as a statistically significant fact."⁷⁶ In response to these results, which played a role in the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education*, African American leaders increased their push for black girls to have black dolls to encourage self-love and racial pride. As Zaslow observes, however, white dolls continue to dominate the doll market in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Advertisements often depict girls of color playing with white dolls or relegate them and their dolls of color to the background.⁷⁷ Elena's existence as a child-friendly doll with brown skin alongside the white characters from *Frozen* and *Tangled* helps to counter the prevailing whiteness of Disney's Animator's Collection and their doll catalogue in general. Additionally, Elena, priced at \$26.50, is a much more affordable alternative to the \$115.00 Josefina, the only other well-known Latina doll in the US of comparable size.⁷⁸

On the other end of the price spectrum, Disney offers a "Limited Edition" doll of Elena for \$119.95. Disney routinely releases limited edition dolls of their Disney Princesses at the same price point, but Elena is the first Disney television character to be made into a doll that is this expensive and limited. The doll is about 17 inches tall and looks similar to a Barbie doll because of its thin frame and articulated arms and wrists. Though the doll's articulated joints make her ideal for child's play, the doll is also an adult collector's item. There are 6000 of these luxury Elena dolls on the market, each

⁷⁶ Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark, "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. Theodore M. Newcomb and Eugene L. Hartley, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), 175.

⁷⁷ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 45.

⁷⁸ "Josefina Doll & Book," American Girl, accessed March 20, 2018.

<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/dolls/beforever/josefina/josefina-doll-paperback-book-bk102>.

with a numbered certificate of authenticity. Doll collectors on YouTube seem to appreciate the craftsmanship of the Elena doll, taking note of the embroidered beads on her gown and her thick eyelashes.⁷⁹ The doll's symbolic place within Disney's doll catalogue is comparable to the Elena Animator's Collection doll, but the price difference and conflicting target age demographics for the Limited Edition doll add another layer of complexity to *Elena* merchandise.



Figure 20. Limited Edition Elena doll.
(ShopDisney.com)

According to Zaslow, the cuts to social welfare programs made by the Reagan and Bush administrations during the 1980s accelerated the economic divide between the “haves” and the “have nots,” which would continue into the Clinton administration in the

⁷⁹ Sallyheartsjack80, *Disney Store Elena Of Avalor 17" Limited Edition Doll- Magical Monday!*, YouTube video, 06:49, February 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTh24lfEXE8>.

1990s. This divide created a market for high-end dolls who were meant to be played with, not just items on a collector's shelf. Middle class consumers could risk their economic stability to purchase these high-end dolls for their children in order to appear as "haves" instead of "have nots."⁸⁰ The Limited Edition Elena doll fits somewhere in between the collectible item and the luxury plaything. Depending on the consumer, Elena may be someone's most expensive toy, or she may be just another item in an ever-growing collection. Much like the similarly-priced American Girl dolls, the Limited Edition doll is exclusive because of its price point, limited availability, and its luxurious packaging. Zaslow suggests that these attributes give a doll a "magical" quality for collectors of all ages. Parents embrace the luxury of the doll and encourage children to be more careful with how they handle the doll. For children, knowledge of the doll's luxury status fosters a stronger attachment to the doll as well as a higher level of care for the doll than for other lower-priced dolls.⁸¹ Consequently, children who receive the high-end Elena doll may come to prioritize her over their lower-priced white dolls. That being said, the price of the doll restricts her availability to a large segment of consumers, further heightening the economic divide that Zaslow describes. With so few luxury Latina dolls on the market, the existence of Elena's doll is indicative of more inclusive luxury doll lineup, but the ongoing use of luxury dolls as a status symbol actively encourages economic inequality.

The third piece of merchandise to examine is Elena's gown, which is available in children's sizes for purchase at standard and "deluxe" price points. While Elena wears a

⁸⁰ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 56.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

wide variety of outfits on her show, two of her outfits are more prominent in the promotional material. The first outfit is Elena’s formalwear, which is a floor-length red dress designed by *Project Runway All Stars* contestant Layana Aguilar. Aguilar, who is Brazilian, describes the dress and its elaborate patterning as “very Peruvian, Inca-like.”⁸²



Figure 21. Deluxe and Standard Elena dresses for children.
(ShopDisney.com)

The second outfit is Elena’s casualwear, which is a shorter version of her formal gown that has more room for mobility. On the Disney Store website, the gown is the “deluxe” dress and the casualwear is the more affordable option.⁸³

⁸² Rosemary Feitelberg, “‘Project Runway All Stars’ Layana Aguilar Designs Ballgown for Disney’s Latina Princess ‘Elena of Avalor,’” *Women’s Wear Daily*, May 6, 2016, <http://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/project-runway-all-stars-layana-aguilar-designs-ballgown-disneys-latina-princess-elena-of-avalor-10425359/>.

⁸³ “Elena of Avalor Deluxe Costume for Kids,” shopDisney, accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.shopdisney.com/elena-of-avalor-deluxe-costume-for-kids-1416673>.

In addition to being available at Disney Stores nationwide, the dresses are part of the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutiques at the theme parks in Anaheim and Orlando. The Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutiques offer young girls (ages three to twelve) the opportunity to purchase a dress and a “makeover” experience package that they can then wear in the parks.⁸⁴ In a promotional video from Disney Parks, a Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique stylist asks a young Latina girl: “¿Cuál es tu princesa favorita?” (which is your favorite princess?). The girl responds in English, “I want Elena of Avalor,” and grabs an Elena dress from the rack of costumes. After receiving her makeover, the girl goes to see Elena at Disney World and the two of them talk excitedly about their matching dresses.⁸⁵

The importance of dress-up in the formation of gender identity remains an area of interest for both feminist writers and psychologists. In their longitudinal study of African American, Mexican American, and Dominican American children, May Ling Halim and Diane Ruble, et al. find that girls played dress-up more frequently than boys at all ages studied.⁸⁶ They also note that there are no notable differences in the dress-up rates between Latinx children and African American children, though Dominican girls adhered to more normatively feminine conventions than did Mexican girls.⁸⁷ According to their results, girls engaged in dress-up play as princesses more than boys did as superheroes. The increased emphasis on a feminine physical appearance in dress-up, the researchers

⁸⁴ “Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique – Magic Kingdom,” Walt Disney World Resort, accessed March 22, 2018. <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/shops/magic-kingdom/bibbidi-bobbidi-boutique-park/>.

⁸⁵ Disney Parks, *A Royal Transformation: Princess Elena | Disney Springs*, YouTube video, 01:26, April 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wfSwVtcrM>.

⁸⁶ May Ling Halim, et al., “Rigidity in Gender-Typed Behaviors in Early Childhood: A Longitudinal Study of Ethnic Minority Children,” *Child Development* 84, no. 4 (2013): 1275.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1280.

suggest, could put girls at risk for psychological distress later in life.⁸⁸ Although the availability of Elena's dresses at several price points allows for girls of all backgrounds to aspire to be a Latina princess, the hyper-femininity of the Disney Princess "look" – namely the dress, shoes, hair, and makeup – reinforces the importance of physical appearance (and material accessories) in becoming a princess. As the researchers demonstrate, additional research on the impact of princess dress-up on Latina children of different nationalities is needed to understand how the various Latina constructions of femininity impact girls' early understandings of gendered behaviors.

Buying the Stereotype

Each of these tie-in products exemplifies both the benefits and drawbacks to the increased visibility of Latinas in mainstream, corporate-driven media. On one hand, this merchandise allows Latinas of all ages to feel valued by a company that has repeatedly excluded them from any of its products. On the other hand, these products and the marketing that goes into them essentialize certain notions of Latina identity. The issue at stake is less how authentic *Elena* is, and more the apparent choice Latinx viewers make between validation and commodification.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1279.

V. Conclusion: A Princess of Our Own

This work has addressed how *Elena of Avalor* operates as a show, a product, and a work of cultural representation. Halfway through its second season, the show is still raising new questions each week about race, ethnicity, gender, colonialism, class, and more. So much is unknown about the world of Avalor and its characters. The seasons that follow will undoubtedly demand further study, as will other Latinx-centric projects that Disney and other studios develop in the coming years.

As a show, *Elena* successfully navigates some aspects of Latinidad and falters in others, especially colorism and income inequality. But *Elena* is still one of the only shows in the US that portrays Latinx characters as something other than maids, drug dealers, or criminals. While some critics have scoffed at the fact that *Elena* is on television and not in theaters, neither film or television has been particularly kind to Latinas, and any representation is significant, even if it is not always beneficial to Latinxs as a whole. As Disney's sole animated Latina heroine, Elena is burdened with the task of representing millions of people across the world. No matter what the show tries to do, Elena will never speak to the experiences of every Latinx viewer.

Disney's self-congratulatory stance in the production of *Elena* is another issue altogether. The lack of Latinx characters in Hollywood productions is the direct result of major studios like Disney not creating opportunities for Latinx performers and creatives. When Disney boasts about how *Elena* diversifies their brand, they are bragging about breaking a racial/ethnic glass ceiling that they built themselves. Can Disney do better and make a character that is connected to a specific Latin American nation? *Coco* showed that white, US-centric ideologies are present in Disney's works no matter how much money the company puts into their research expeditions and cultural consultations.

What *Elena* offers is a conversation about how we define Latinidad. Why do Latinxs have to pass a virtually impossible litmus test to prove their ethnicity? Why are some Latinx bodies more privileged than others in the US and in Latin America? Why are Latinxs constantly made to feel that they are not “Latinx enough?” Members of the US Latinx/Hispanic community, myself included, grapple with questions like these on a daily basis, but rarely does our popular culture encourage us to talk about these matters upfront.

I cannot propose a solution to the contradictions and conundrums that *Elena* presents. As Disney has demonstrated in their films, paying too much attention to authenticity leads to simplification, and ignoring historical and cultural accuracy leads to whitewashed interpretations. Authenticity is a construct that has been defined by advertisers and sold to consumers who internalize the belief that if they do not behave a certain way or buy certain products, then they are not Latinx enough. Since authenticity is such a fraught concept, attempts to convey authenticity on screen will always be met with skepticism by viewers, no matter how connected a filmmaker or performer is to a culture. Yet the need to try and represent Latinxs remains present. I speculate that if *Elena* was not the only animated Latina princess out there – if whiteness were not so dominant in US media – the conversations surrounding the show would be entirely different. Do we doubt the whiteness of Disney’s Snow White because she fails to speak German? Do we doubt that Belle is French because her movie was directed by American men? Elena is being held to higher standards than any of Disney’s white heroines, simply because she is the only Latina representation we have. If Elena and her show do not meet the standards of authenticity dictated by corporations, then what use is she to Latinx viewers?

Is *Elena of Avalor* a “positive” representation of Latinx people and cultures? I argue that an essentialist conceptualization of “positive” and “negative” representation eliminates room for contradictions. *Elena* is a flawed product. It is inaccessible to anyone without a cable or satellite subscription, it treats Asian and Black characters as an afterthought, and it repeatedly glosses over the colonization of indigenous people in Latin America. On the other hand, *Elena* gives Latina girls a heroine that looks like many of them. Is Elena a Latina? Not in the conventional sense, but for many Latina girls watching the television show or shopping at the store, Elena is Latina. Elena might not look, talk, or dress just like they do, but neither do any of the other Disney Princesses. How long must Latina girls aspire to be blonde-haired, blue-eyed Princesses?

I conclude this work by challenging the role of authenticity in US media. Latin American cultures are living, breathing, and changing at every moment. They cannot be defined by a single language, skin tone, garment, food, or song. The aspects of authenticity that matter, including acknowledging how Black and indigenous contributions have shaped Latinx cultures, are being overlooked by advertisers and studios, while Spanish words and light-skinned bodies are being held up as the pinnacle of Latinidad. *Elena of Avalor* might reify these essentialist notions of authenticity, but in decentering whiteness and normalizing Latinidad, it is paving the way for a media landscape that may finally allow Latinas to speak on their own multivocal and multifaceted terms.

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