

# Disney's Fantastical Latinx Universalism

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With its recent purchases of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox (2017), Lucasfilm (2012), and Marvel Entertainment (2009) Disney's massive ownership allows it to remain at the forefront of Hollywood. It is often simple to forget that the entertainment monolith controls the representations in films and series such as *Star Wars*, *Black Panther*, *Modern Family*, *Devious Maids*, *Bates Motel*, and more. Disney's representational practices seep into our mediated experiences on a daily basis. As such, Disney ought to be included in a discussion about the current status of Latinxs in Hollywood, especially when it appears they are making great strides in terms of representational practices. The media giant has previously stumbled upon issues of diversity, and there is a wealth of literature highlighting their use of racist representations. Currently, Disney tends to fluctuate between ambiguous and specific Latinx representations as they attempt to figure out which generates the most profit. This position paper focuses on *Elena of Avalor*, Disney's first Latina princess, to highlight one of Disney's latest efforts at providing a specific representation of Latinidad. I argue that Disney feels safety in providing specific Latinx representations in animated form, and continues to use ambiguous Latinidad in their live-action productions. This safety often hinges on the creation of fantastically universal narratives, which appeal to most demographics through their universal storylines, while at the same time showcasing specific cultural elements that appeal to niche markets.

As one of the most rapidly expanding global media giants, Disney's content is not limited to animated images or representations aimed at attracting children, but for the purposes of this response I will limit my claims to Disney's animation in the hopes that we can expand or challenge these observations as they relate to live-action content. *Elena of Avalor* is part of Disney's latest efforts at representing Latinxs on the screen. Recently, Disney has highlighted their links to Latinidad, in particular Latina girls, through their showcasing of Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato, Jenna Ortega, and Sofia Carson. Although these Latinas typically play ethnically ambiguous roles on the screen, their Latinidad is strategically showcased strategically. *Elena of Avalor* made her debut in 2016, after these Latinas had already been established as part of the Disney cannon and shortly before *Coco*'s release. *Elena of Avalor* is an animated television series replete with magic and mysticism, much like the Mexico depicted in *Coco*. Avalor is a make-believe kingdom supposedly inspired by Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, and essentially any Spanish-speaking region. The creative team says they borrowed myths from Central and South America to create their fantastical storylines.

A look at behind-the-scenes footage of the series reveals a push towards an "authenticity" narrative. The voice actors, producers, and directors often emphasize the series' "authenticity" through interviews. The "authenticity" that they claim is a type of Pan-Latinidad, where the series flattens differences and essentializes Latinidad under

the umbrella of “Hispanic culture<sup>1</sup>,” as if “Hispanic culture” was a one size fits all. Claims to authenticity pervade ethnic representations, but like most claims to “truth” their actual veracity is highly questionable. Given that Disney claims an “authentic” and specific universe through this series, their selective sampling provides viewers with a world that is in many ways foreign to everyone as few people can be familiar with cultural myths, legends, and folk tales from thirty-three countries. In sum, the audience has to accept this universe, regardless of their ethnicity, and Latinx audiences encounter yet another version of a flattening of difference. The creators of the series seek to reach as many audiences as possible through the creation of this pseudo-authentic implausible universe. In this sense the series is much more *fantastically universal*—as in the production of a universe—than specific, albeit the series is promoted as a very specific representation of Latinidad.

*Elena of Avalor* safely allows Disney to claim specific representations of Latinidad. In the past, Disney has represented Latinxs on the screen as ethnically ambiguous characters, who almost always served as sidekicks. *Elena of Avalor*, on the other hand, is very openly Latina. The series showcases a quinceañera,<sup>2</sup> el día de los muertos<sup>3</sup> celebrations a few times, and often includes Spanish words/phrases without translations. These are only but a few examples of the many instances of mediated Latinidad found in *Avalor*. The series’ record-breaking ratings allowed for the renewal of the third season before the first season had even ended. Disney has achieved undisputable success by rolling out this animated Latinx series, and I argue that the success of this supposedly specific Latinx representation is due to the *fantastical universalism* created to represent Latinidad.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the terminology used by the creative team.

<sup>2</sup> A coming of age celebration when a young girl turns fifteen-years-old

<sup>3</sup> Day of the Dead