

Latinx Ambiguity in Disney Television

Angharad N. Valdivia, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Latinidad lends itself to ambiguity and ambiguous representations as Latina/os span the entire range of racial possibilities. Given the hybrid history of both Spain and the Americas, Latina/os and Latina/o popular culture are intensely diverse, sometimes ambiguous, and always hybrid. From the perspective of mainstream popular culture, which at this time is intensely capitalist, or what we now refer to as neoliberal and which I call capitalism 2.0, Latina/os and Latina/o popular culture become another cultural space to mine in terms of production, another target audience to reach, and another symbolic universe to construct. In relation to production, whether using Latina/o labor or not, Latinidad provides a pool of creativity and a template of difference. In terms of representation, we are all very familiar not just with the tropes and dominant discourses of Latina/o representation but also with tactics such as the myth of discovery, the flattening of difference, and the burden of underrepresentation.

Disney provides an ideal case study for all of the above. To begin with, Disney is a successful capitalist enterprise. I repeat this because we cannot expect the revolution to come from Disney. Disney's first goal is to make profits. Disney is not out to please Latina/o audiences. Disney is not out to diversify the representational landscape. Disney is not out to hire Latina/o creative talent because that is the right thing to do. Disney seeks to maximize profits, keep its shareholders happy, and avoid risk. Yet also Disney produces breathtaking audiovisual material. Sometimes this material is narratively creative and outright ground breaking. Disney does not abandon its Disney-fication in all it does, but even within its rigid codes there are moments of rupture, whether intentional or not.

In relation to Latinidad, Disney has a long history. Dating back to its early days, Disney has represented Latin America in familiar tropes. These tropes flatten the difference between the Latin American nations as well as between Latin American and the Iberian peninsula. More recently, much more recently, Disney has begun to represent US Latina/os. Unsurprisingly, Disney draws on its stock of tropes when construction US Latina/os. This extends the flattening of difference between Latin Americans and the Spanish to US Latina/os.

My recent task has been to track the gendered and girl Latinidad within contemporary Disney. As an outcome of research focus of three sets of Latina girls in Disney, I find that Disney vacillates between ambiguous and specific representations, sometimes using both in the same program and/or character! I am interested in the following three sets of Disney girls: Miranda Sanchez/LaLaine in the global hit *Lizzie McGuire* and Gabriella Montez/Vanessa Hudgens in the global monster hit *High School Musical*; Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato as girls who were taken up by the Disney farm system and have tried to parlay a neoliberal postfeminist career with varying degrees of

success; and *Sofia the First* and *Elena of Avalor* as representatives of animated princessdom in the world of Disney's children television. The first duo indicate that at the turn of the century, Disney gingerly began to include very subtle and ambiguous Latinas in their programming. Their sidekick status and nearly imperceptible signifiers of Latinidad introduced Latinas to an audience that often did not recognize the characters' ethnicity. The second duo, of real life girls growing up, took two talented ambiguous Latinas through their Disney process of including them as side-characters, eventually giving them protagonist roles, and launching them into a branded career that synergistically enhanced their Disney properties. As most of you know, despite some fairly severe health issues, Selena appears to have a healthy life and career. Sadly, despite many affirmations about health, exercise, and self-care, Demi Lovato has, once more, entered rehab, this time as a result of an overdose. Finally, the third duo demonstrates that Disney is still not sure about how to proceed with their Latina/o tactics. First, the avowal and disavowal of Sofia's Latinidad was followed, complete with claims that Disney does not specify ethnicity in their fantasy worlds, was followed by an avowed Latina, Elena, whose Latinidad is celebrated. Second, Elena's ethnicity is a mish mash of all countries in Latin America and Spain. As of 2018, Disney is not taking chances in their approach to Latinidad [remember, risk averse], as demonstrated by their somehow inconsistent [maybe even chaotic] approach to Latina/os. As an additional layer of their strategy, their marketing and narrative approach are inextricably ensconced within neoliberal economic and postfeminist representation. Ambiguity serves to justify inconsistency as well as to mollify enduring conservative elements among Disney shareholders and the mainstream audience.