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Encanto: Everyday Hero(in)es and the Power of (Colombian) Community

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Abstract

In *Latino Images on Screen: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (2002), Charles Ramírez Berg delineates the long-lasting “Hollywood stereotyping apparatus” (5), which has allowed for many stereotypical portrayals of Latino and Latin American characters as brutes, criminals, or oversexualized lovers. Stereotyping is also attributed to Disney’s (animated) films, especially when it comes to the heroines of color and their communities. In this light, this chapter argues that Disney’s *Encanto* (2021) is a major step toward a decidedly positive representation of Latin Americans, specifically Colombians, on the Hollywood screen. Subverting race and gender stereotypes attributed to Disney films in general, *Encanto* notably avoids the dominant stereotypes of Latinos and Latin Americans as *bandidos* and *Latin lovers*. Led by a matriarch, with a “madman in the attic” and a muscle woman, the magical community of *Encanto* finds its heroine in a dark-skinned, short-haired, bespectacled girl unencumbered by romantic pursuits, whose appearance and demeanor subvert the Disney heroine stereotype. Finally, the chapter argues that *Encanto* also overturns the superhero(ine) stereotype since Mirabel’s “Not Special Special” status as the only family member lacking magical powers is comparable to that of the titular protagonists of *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022), who are no longer larger-than-life figures but products of their closest relationships.

Keywords: *Encanto*, Disney, Latin Americans, stereotypes, race, gender, superhero, *Joker*, *The Batman*

1. Introduction

If asked to summarize the portrayal of Latinos and Latin Americans on Hollywood screens in the last few decades, one's most common associations would probably be drug lords and household servants. Considering these blatant stereotypes, it is interesting to note that they include both genders, thus allowing for popular adaptations of Pablo Escobar's and Teresa Mendoza's story, and Spanglish-speaking housemaids and gardeners in sitcoms and Oscar winners alike.¹ This "Hollywood's stereotyping apparatus" (Ramírez Berg 5) has been challenged for at least two decades now by recognizing stereotypes in American-made films and by "Latino filmmakers [trying] to break with this pattern . . . through self-representation" (5). In this light, Disney's latest, Oscar-winning animated film, *Encanto* (2021), with its peaceful and loving Colombian family, the Madrigals, is a major step toward a decidedly positive Hollywood representation of Latin Americans.

Apart from defining the persistent stereotypes, which can be boiled down to violent *bandidos* and foolish Latin lovers (163), both male and female, in his seminal book *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (2002), Charles Ramírez Berg warns about the inconsistent terminological differentiation between Latino peoples on Hollywood screens, most notably, between the "U.S. Latinos" and "Latin Americans," who "[a]s far as Hollywood was concerned . . . could all be lumped together" (6). Ramírez Berg identifies (U.S.) Latinos as people of Latin descent liv-

¹ Mendoza is the protagonist of the TV series *The Queen of the South* (2016–2021), remade from the telenovela *La Reina del Sur* (Telemundo, 2011). Both are adapted from Arturo Pérez-Reverte's 2002 novel of the same title, based on the real-life Mexican drug trafficker Sandra Ávila Beltrán. Other popular TV shows with Latino housemaids are *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) and *Devious Maids* (2013–2016), and Oscar-winning films featuring Latino and Latin American characters include *As Good As It Gets* (1997), *Crash* (2004), and *Babel* (2006).

ing in the United States and Latin Americans as inhabitants of Central or South America (5). Both terms encompass several peoples whose differences are often merged to form a homogenous, stereotypical portrayal. In the case of Latin Americans, the lack of differentiation between particular nationalities (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Colombian, and others) is another concern in American films. As Ramírez Berg maintains, “if Hollywood made no distinction between Latinos and Latin Americans, it certainly could not be expected to make finer distinctions, between, say, Mexicans (citizens of Mexico) and Mexican Americans (citizens of the United States)” (6). The present chapter approaches this stereotypical lack of differentiation between Latin(o) peoples in Hollywood films from the opposite angle by arguing that *Encanto* not only diverges from its fore-runners through its decidedly positive portrayal of Colombians, Latinos, and Latin Americans but that it also eschews the reductive stereotypes surrounding these groups by simultaneously relating its characters to each of the three cultural signifiers.

Additionally, since the adjective “Latino” (introduced in the 1990s) is heterogeneous, including the feminine form, “Latina,” another variation of it has recently been introduced: “Latinx.”² Considering the “global movement to introduce gender-neutral nouns and pronouns” (Noe-Bustamante et al.), “Latinx” is suggested as a favorable alternative to the binary Latino/a. Even though this chapter aims to show that *Encanto* breaks both gender stereotypes and those specific to Latino and Latin American communities, it avoids the term “Latinx.” This is because the term is “somewhat reviled by the people it represents” (Yarin) since it has not emerged within Latin(o) communities themselves. Seen as a form of colonization, it is, as a result, used by only “a thimble-sized portion of people with Latin American ancestry” (Yarin), or the three percent of U.S. adults who self-identify as Latino (Noe-Bustamante et al.). In that, “Latinx” is similar to the term “Hispanic,” introduced in the 1970s by the

² The term emerged in 2000, but it entered the English dictionary in 2018 (Noe-Bustamante et al.).

U.S. Census Bureau (Campos) and rejected due to the general attitude that Latinos “found [themselves] being classified as Hispanic” (Yarin) rather than identifying with the term on their own.

As a product of Disney, long criticized for its treatment of race and gender and for “reinforc[ing] the social and political status quo” (Zipes 22), *Encanto* is a welcome addition to breaking Hollywood’s racial stereotypes since it portrays a peaceful, all-Colombian/Latin American community living in a typical setting, with typical flora and fauna, architecture, and fashion, but without any villains or overly sexualized characters. In addition to proving that, this chapter will show how *Encanto* undermines gender stereotypes with several of its characters, mainly with its heroine, who contrasts the stereotypical Disney Princess’s appearance, personality, and need for a romantic pairing. Drawing on the approach of feminist (media) critics, such as Celeste Lacroix and Dawn Elizabeth England et al., as well as on Ramírez Berg’s analysis of the portrayal of Latin(o) peoples on Hollywood screens, this chapter will also discuss how *Encanto* opposes race and gender stereotypes attributed to Disney films and Latin(o) peoples in general.

2. Race and Gender Stereotypes in Disney Films

Starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937 to this day, the animated Disney Princess films are usually divided into three phases.³ Depending on the author categorizing them, they are classified into the “early, middle, and current” phase (England et al. 562), the Classics, the Renaissance, and the Revival phase (Higgs 2016), or the Pre-Transition, Transition, and Progression phase (Garabedian 2015). Despite varying designations, there is a general consensus as to which films belong to which phase based on their portrayal of gender and race, that is, on the

³ According to Peggy Orenstein, the Disney Princess line was introduced in 2001, with princess-related merchandise as a marketing campaign for young girls (qtd. in England et al. 555).

heroines' personality and appearance or their racial and cultural background.

The first phase of animated Disney Princess films includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Produced before the emergence of theoretical discussions on gender issues, the early Disney Princess films reflect the stereotypical patriarchal distribution of gender roles. Emphasizing the 1950s housewife role-model, they depict a young heroine who is passive, submissive, and dependent, thus "supporting a stereotype of men as heroic protectors and women as delicate and fragile" (Laemle 5). By focusing on the heteronormative happy ending, this first phase is said to have established the pattern of all Disney Princess films, "featur[ing] a central female character, the princess, and a male character who is romantically linked with the princess" (England et al. 556).⁴ This pattern was broken only seventy-five years later, with *Brave's* Merida in 2012, co-created by Pixar. Additionally, these early films highlight delicate female beauty and Whiteness through the absence of dark-skinned characters. As Celeste Lacroix notes, early Disney heroines necessarily have "the classic porcelain skin tone and delicate features . . . tiny waists, small breasts, slender wrists, legs and arms" (220). Basically, this first phase of Disney Princess films reinforced the Western/White patriarchal female essence by featuring a beautiful and helpless young woman whose main goal in life is to find a (rich White) man to "rescue" her.⁵

For these reasons, with the rise of feminist criticism and, notably, since the 1990s, Disney films have been under constant scrutiny by the feminist, media, and other critics (see, for instance, Bell et al. 1–20; Giroux 43–46; Zipes 39–40; Lacroix 226–27; England et al. 565–66), who

⁴ This chapter focuses on animated films, but the heteronormative *happy end* pattern applies to numerous non-animated Disney and non-Disney films, undoubtedly inspired by the commercial success of the Princess movies.

⁵ England et al. see the notion of "rescue" and its "performer" as one of the key differences between traditionally masculine and feminine traits since the rescues in early Disney were performed only by men (556).

claim that Disney films reinforce racial and gender stereotypes. According to Lacroix, Henry Giroux was among the first critical theorists who, even “as a father of young boys” (214), warned about “some accepted assumptions about the ‘innocence’ and ‘wholesome’ fun of animated films” (qtd. in Lacroix 214) that represent a “marketplace of culture” (qtd. in Lacroix 217). Since the films are combined with extremely popular mass advertising and merchandise, they are “identified as a powerful influence on children’s media and product consumerism” (England et al. 555). More importantly, aimed at young audiences unequipped with “media literacy” (Goodall 163), critical thinking skills, or knowledge on race and gender discourses, Disney films, as one of the first instances from which children learn about “gender, social behaviors, and norms” (England et al. 556), represent “crucial contributions to (children’s) most important discourses of the self and discourses regarding others” (Miller and Rode qtd. in Lacroix 217). Considering such an important role of (animated) Disney films in shaping children’s identity and worldview, their scrutiny, and the recognition of both their positive messages and harmful stereotypes of gender and race, these films are said to reinforce an ongoing, worthy field of research, to which this chapter aims to contribute. The argument that Disney films are deeply rooted in social and cultural phenomena and are not just neutral family fun is supported by the fact that over the years, they have modified their takes on gender and race to reflect changes in gender roles (England et al. 563) and racial discourse (Lacroix 219; Anjirbag 13–14).

In response to the criticism targeting their emphasis on patriarchal gender roles and Whiteness, Disney Princess films introduced certain changes in their second phase. *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998) all portray increasingly independent heroines willing to fight for themselves and their loved ones. These second-phase princesses display “more [traditionally] masculine characteristics,” such as assertiveness, bravery, and physical strength (England et al. 562); they are more “physically mature

and[/or] athletic” (Lacroix 221), and some of them, like Pocahontas, even break the marriage pattern established in the first three films. Furthermore, these heroines come from a wider racial and cultural origin, such as Arabic (*Aladdin*), Native American (*Pocahontas*), and Chinese (*Mulan*). However, the critics persisted that despite “more realistic portrayals of young women” (Lacroix 223) based on their agency, these heroines were still “defined by male standards and goals” (223). They either “eventuate in marriage” (225) or sacrifice their love in favor of their people, as Pocahontas did (Lacroix 224; Streiff and Dundes 8), or do *both*, as is the case with Ariel, who must relinquish her independence in favor of either her controlling father (England et al. 563) or the prince.

However, the critics have noted that, in spite of modifying their portrayal of women by introducing multi-ethnic heroines, the second-phase Disney Princess films still exhibit stereotypes concerning race (Lacroix 222; Eddarif 61–62) as well as gender (England et al. 566). To illustrate, Jasmine from *Aladdin* and Pocahontas are discerned as non-White only due to their skin-tone and eye-shape; yet, their emphasized physique and clothing serve to, as Lacroix says in Said’s terms, “*orientalise*” and thus stereotype: “Whereas the costuming of these characters reflects stereotypical images of each woman’s ethnicity, the overall effect, taken with the increasing voluptuousness of the characters, works to represent the White characters as more . . . conservative, while associating the women of color with the exotic and sexual” (Lacroix 222). Put simply, it is the dark-skinned Disney Princesses that show more skin. Their personality traits are also not seen as strengths but as “racial stereotypes that dichotomize White from Other” (223), resulting in the “Native American . . . stereotype of the noble savage” (225) and Pocahontas’s *inability* to marry a White man, rather than her *decision* against it.⁶ Similarly, as in the other

⁶ As Lacroix comments, “[p]erhaps it is not coincidental that the two biracial couples (Pocahontas and Esmeralda’s Otherness to John Smith and Phoebus’ Whiteness) do not walk off into the fairytale sunset as husband and wife” (225). Hence, the lack of marital union for Pocahontas as the Disney Princess of color is not seen as a reflec-

second-phase Disney Princess films, *Aladdin* stereotypes Oriental women as concubines. Jasmine's rescue of Aladdin is achieved through "overt sexuality and exaggerated femininity" (England et al. 564), with Arabs being generally portrayed as "barbaric," "animal-like," and superstitious (Eddarif 61–63). Considering such criticism of "coloniality . . . embedded in animated depictions of other cultures despite Disney's reported efforts to tell more authentic stories from other cultures" (Anjirbag 2), the latest Disney films have strived to reflect further developments in racial and gender discourse.

The third phase of Disney Princess films includes *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012, co-created by Pixar), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), all of which depict culturally and visually diverse, rebellious, and free-spirited women resisting patriarchal and heteronormative demands.⁷ These modern heroines refuse to give up on love in favor of parental authority (Rapunzel), their career in favor of love (Tiana), and, most importantly, their personal freedom in favor of being romantically paired at all (Merida). This trend of strong Disney heroines "on a mission to save the world sans any romantic distractions" (Azeem et al. 8) has, with *Moana* and *Raya*, continued to this day.

These modern princesses have also been subjects of criticism. The portrayal of Tiana, the first Black Disney Princess, is seen as lacking in the context of African American culture, mainly due to her and her mothers' reliance on "traditionally feminine labor" (England et al. 563–64), such as cooking, waitressing, and clothes-making. Yet, even in such valid instances, the criticism can be counterpointed with other elements showing a progress from the early Disney Princess films. For instance, the princess's relationship with her mother, a rare (positive) figure in Dis-

tion of her potency and breaking away from the *undesirable* White heteronormativity but as her inability to achieve it.

⁷ Tiana is Black, Rapunzel is White, Merida is a redhead Scotswoman, Moana is Hawaiian, and Raya is Indonesian.

ney Princess films represents “female bonding” (Orenstein 24) and close familial relationships, critically absent in early films but present in *Brave*.⁸ The criticism also stumbles upon itself at times, for example, when seeing (paid) labor as a disservice to the princess status rather than as infantilization denigrated in the early films: “Tiana aspires for a career in the service industry while other princesses remain ‘happily ever after’ in the ivory tower of fairyland bliss profession-less and career-less” (Lester 297).⁹ The two latest Disney Princesses, Moana and Raya, and potential stereotypes in their portrayals are still to be analyzed to the same extent as those of the previous heroines, but a general tendency, which this chapter aims to elucidate, is a more positive depiction of modern non-White Disney heroines and their communities. Specifically, the heroines are no longer shown needing a man to accomplish their goals, and their multi-ethnic communities are not portrayed as barbaric (see Anjirbag 13–14; Azeem et al. 8; Wardah and Kusuma 183–84; Xu 239–30).

Apart from the notable racial variety and breakage of the romantic pattern, the latest Disney Princess films even challenge their princess’s princess status. There are thirteen official Disney princesses, as per thirteen films listed above, who have attained the status either by birth or by marriage (Coyne et al. 2), and *Encanto*’s Mirabel is not listed as one.¹⁰ However, since there are no verified official criteria, and since the Princess status depends on commercial success, the line-up is changeable.¹¹

⁸ “The character of Eudora also represents a departure from other Disney princess films. Usually, Disney princess movies do not include a mother, so having Eudora as a presence and a voice of encouragement for Tiana is unique” (Gregory 445).

⁹ England et al. have also noted “the complexity of gendered messages in these films, [since] the princess learned to cook from her father and she was shown teaching the prince how to help in the kitchen” (564). In other words, recent Disney Princess films have made progress in depicting gender roles when compared to the early films and their gender stereotypes.

¹⁰ As of August 2022, Raya has been included in the official line-up (see: Michael-
sen).

¹¹ Jasmine is a princess despite not being the titular character of *Aladdin*, Mulan is a princess neither by birth nor by marriage, and *Frozen*’s Anna was never in the official

Also, Disney has recently challenged its own notion of what it means to be a princess. Namely, after Moana has been told that an animal sidekick and a dress make her a princess (*Moana* 00:52:07–00:52:16), the latest princess, Raya, is portrayed as wearing pants and an overall masculine costume (Wardah and Kusuma 182). Although the overview of race and gender stereotypes given above is based on the official Disney Princess films, this chapter will compare *Encanto*'s Mirabel and her Latin American community to earlier non-White Disney Princess characters and their communities in order to illuminate Disney's progress in following the social and cultural discussions on race and gender. Considering the lack of academic papers on *Encanto* due to the novelty of its release and considering many stereotypical portrayals of race and gender in early Disney (Princess) films, this chapter strives to open a fruitful discussion on Disney's non-stereotypical portrayal of Latin Americans.

3. Breaking Race and Gender Stereotypes in *Encanto*

Directed by Byron Howard, Jared Bush, and Charise Castro Smith, with voice-overs by Stephanie Beatriz, María Cecilia Botero, and John Leguizamo as the main protagonists (Mirabel, *abuela* Alma, and *tío* Bruno), *Encanto* is the latest addition to Disney's increasingly multi-cultural universe of animated communities. While not the first to break the pattern of White dominance in representation, it is among the few Disney films centered on Latin Americans and the only one with a female protagonist.¹²

line-up, even though she was *de facto* a princess in the film. Tinkerbell and Esmeralda were excluded from the official line-up; therefore, just because a heroine is or is not a Disney princess at the moment does not mean she will remain as such.

¹² Previous Disney animated films set in Latin America are *Coco* (2017, co-created by Pixar Studios), *Saludos Amigos* (1942), and *The Three Caballeros* (1944). While *Coco* bears the name of one of its female characters but is centered on a boy and his great-great-grandfather's adventure, the other two films combine live-action and animation and have several protagonists, none of whom are female. Animated Latin American protagonists were previously created by DreamWorks Animations (*The Road to El Dorado*, 2000), 20th Century Fox (*The Book of Life*, 2014), and Pixar (*Coco*, 2017) but not by Disney.

Led by the bespectacled Mirabel, unencumbered by romantic pursuits, a muscle-woman (Luisa), a “madman in the attic” (Bruno), and, above all, a matriarch (Alma),¹³ the all-Colombian cast of characters “powerfully up-ends, dissects, and reimagines everything that has made [Disney] rich” (Bucey). In other words, it breaks many racial and gender stereotypes associated with earlier non-White Disney heroines and their communities.

Encanto’s first signifier of Colombian identity is the setting, which shows the country’s “diversity of nature, music, people, food, and culture . . . evident in the film from start to finish” (Carey). A joint effort of filmmakers and Colombian architects, musicians, artists, botanists, and others, it has received much acclaim (Coolidge; Phillips; Bucey), especially from Colombians themselves.¹⁴ Accompanied by Lin-Manuel Miranda’s salsa- and bachata-filled soundtrack (Phillips), the film is set in a mountainous village surrounded by wax palm trees indigenous to Cocora Valley (Carey), next to a town with colorful houses in the “earth-colored, cobble-stoned” streets inspired by Colombia’s reputable Barichara (Carey). The Madrigals’ family home, *la casita*, is adorned with typical bougainvillea vines, and all the characters’ “rooms represent one [country] region,” with herbs such as guasca and yerba buena and animals such as toucans, hummingbird (Adamo), capybaras, and coatis. The rich setting bespeaks the filmmakers’ wish to show that “[t]here’s just so much of Colombia that feels like a place of wonder and fantasy and magic” (Adamo), the portrayal of which is also a positive step in the long history of animated Disney films. Magic is a common occurrence in Disney but within the context of people of color, it has not always been depicted to their bene-

¹³ Instead of the suggested family patriarch, the character of a matriarch was explicitly introduced by the history and culture consultant Alejandra Espinoza (Santaeulalia).

¹⁴ Felipe Zapata, the botanist who provided guidance to the filmmakers, “said [they] portrayed Colombia accurately, so much so that he got nostalgic when he saw the film . . . [and details such as] the bamboo support beams within the walls of the Madrigals’ home . . . [which] evoked memories of the old houses he frequented during his memorable summers in the Cocora Valley” (Adamo).

fit. Most notably, in *Aladdin*, magic marks “the lack of reason and intelligence in the Arab world” (Eddarif 62).

In *Encanto*, the magic is a gift obtained by Alma for her strength in sustaining her family and wider community through troubled times (01:22:17–01:22:21). The Colombian village founded with the help of magic is a definite reference to Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which does set the Madrigals within a recognizable Latin American context. Yet, in spite of this intertextual link to the famous Macondo saga, *Encanto* imbues the magical with its own meaning; the film’s magical aspects amplify its characters’ modernity, their communal identity and mundane symbiotic relationships, and, most importantly, their positive representation. *Encanto*’s community uses magic to help its members, but it “also resists having its magical characters fall into the trope of the model immigrants . . . [who] have only earned their place because of their special abilities. The Madrigal family members belong even when they’re not conjuring roses or transforming the weather” (Phillips). The characters’ association with nature is also not misused, as was the case in Disney’s earlier representations of non-White communities, which perpetuated asymmetrical White/non-White power relations. In contrast to *Pocahontas*, whose titular character’s interaction with nature as well as her “personality and behavior in the plot are directly and clearly related to her ethnicity/Otherness and enacted in contrast to John Smith’s Whiteness” (Lacroix 225), *Encanto* steers away from the White/non-White dynamics by focusing on Latin Americans. All its characters are dark-skinned, with complexions varying from olive (Mirabel, her mother, grandmother, and uncle) and bronze (sister Isabela and the cousins, Dolores and Camilo) to “Afro-Colombian” (Bush qtd. in Carey) chocolate brown with an Afro hairstyle (uncle Félix and cousin Antonio).

More importantly, the plot does not feature a traditional (Disney) villain. The only true villainess is seen in a notably short scene (00:01:15–00:01:38), repeated toward the end of the movie, in which Alma and her husband, Pedro, are fleeing from war and an armed cavalry. Despite Dis-

ney's previous interest "in historical violence, such as the war between Chinese and Mongolic states portrayed in *Mulan* or Britain's invasion of West Africa as featured in *Tarzan*" (Coolidge), the scene does not take place in real time. It is only relayed through Alma's flashback and, apart from the act of pursuit and Pedro's off-screen death, it does not dwell on the pursuers. In this way, Disney obviously prevents the White/non-White dichotomization by portraying faceless villains of unidentifiable ethnicity and race.¹⁵ The pursuers are evil because they brought harm to the protagonist's community, not because they belong to a certain race or culture. This absence of on-screen violence perpetrated by the Latin Americans is particularly noteworthy in the context of the *el bandido* stereotype, discussed further in this chapter.

Villains are absent also from the depiction of the central Colombian community. The only two characters that somewhat resemble villains based on their actions or reputation are Mirabel's grandmother, Alma, and uncle Bruno, who inadvertently cause a strife within the community and threaten it due to the potential loss of magic. Both are redeemed, however, and their conflicts with each other and with Mirabel are revealed as opposite means to the same end—a wish to protect their home and each other. According to Ruth Coolidge, it is easy to understand the widowed matriarch's "going to extreme measures to ensure the Madrigals stayed strong . . . when it was made clear what Abuela had lost in order to become the protector of not just their family, but an entire community of civil war refugees" (Coolidge). In this way, Alma remains the reasonable matriarch and a loving grandmother, as opposed to Disney's previous strong matriarchal figure in *Tangled*. Unlike Mother Gothel, who is "ego-maniacal, narcissistic, and arrogant" (DelRosso 524) and usurps Rapunzel's magic for herself, Alma fights for the greater good of the entire community.

¹⁵ Since the war is never explicitly named, the scene is ambiguous, but "[b]ased on context clues . . . [it] is probably the Thousand Days' War" (Coolidge), a civil war fought between 1899 and 1902 between the liberals and conservatives in Colombia.

The character of Bruno also breaks both racial and gender stereotypes, prominent in (animated) Disney films. According to Ramírez Berg, Latinos and Latin Americans in Hollywood films are usually violent, irrational, and overly sexual, and they fall into six main stereotype categories: *el bandido*, male buffoon, Latin lover, dark lady, harlot, and female clown (66). The most violent one, *el bandido*, is “one of American movie’s favorite villains,” who behaves in “antisocial, sneaky, violent, criminal ways” (40). Often mentally unstable, “he is a threat that needs to be eliminated in order to return the diegetic world to its tranquil, prethreat status quo” (40). None of *Encanto*’s characters fit that description, and, although Bruno’s reputation initially corresponds with antisocial and mentally unstable behaviors, this turns out not to be true. Gifted with prophecy, he was mistaken for a bearer of bad luck, so he left to protect everyone, mainly Mirabel, not himself. Yet, he stayed hidden within the house because he loves his family (01:13:12). More importantly, the family and community peace, based on genuine relationships and cooperation, are achieved by Bruno’s return to the family, not by his elimination.

Attributed with emotional instability and absent for the first half of the film, though, Bruno embodies the madman in the attic. Far from Disney’s early masculine men who swoop in to save the heroine, he hides from Mirabel and cowers before engaging in the task of helping her (00:54:57–01:00:58). In this, as a man, he breaks the gender stereotype of what Gilbert and Gubar have termed “the madwoman in the attic” (see Gilbert and Gubar). Based on women’s perceived emotional instability and irrationality, “[l]abelling women ‘crazy’ is a key feature of the gender system” (Sweet 5), which allows for stereotyping women as unpredictable and dangerous.¹⁶ The detriment of such a stereotypical label is evident in Bruno’s becoming a taboo in the family, hence his theme song “We

¹⁶ *Encanto* does feature a female character characterized with volatile emotions, *tía* Pepa, whose mood aligns with the weather. Only, her portrayal is outweighed by other female characters—the rational and wise *abuela* Alma, who is undeterred by emotions in doing what she thinks must be done, as well as Luisa and Isabela, who are able to control and even hide their true emotions.

Don't Talk about Bruno." Yet, Bruno's bad reputation is disproved when Mirabel, approaching him without prejudice, learns that her uncle chose to hide from the family he loves in order to protect her (00:59:49). This demonstrates Bruno's thoughtfulness, nurturing nature, and sacrifice, which are all traditionally feminine traits (England et al. 556), as well as his intelligence and peacefulness, important in portrayals of Disney's non-White characters and of Latin Americans in general. As Streiff and Dundes argue in reference to *Frozen*, "Viewers would not expect to see this theme [of self-sacrifice] promoted for men because it is women who are supposed to put others' needs before their own" (8). Emotionality and other typically female traits are present in other male characters, as well, including Mirabel's father and her uncle Félix, little cousin Antonio, who openly expresses fear and cries (00:13:24), and Camilo, whose shapeshifting abilities can almost be interpreted as the typical female people-pleasing.

However, Bruno does exhibit one traditional masculine trait found in early Disney films; he rescues Mirabel. According to England et al., the "rescue" is one of the key features in the gendered portrayal of Disney heroes and heroines and is traditionally done by men (556). If not for Bruno's vision, Mirabel might have never learned that she is not the one who is ruining the family magic but that she is actually the one who will save it. Nevertheless, Mirabel rescues Bruno in return. She finds him in the bowels of the house and frees him from his "bad rap" (01:02:31) and hermit-life away from the family. Therefore, Bruno's rescue of her is only a stepping-stone to Mirabel's rescue of the entire community and him, too. Next, Bruno is neither the heroine's romantic interest nor her "controlling father" (England et al. 563), which further subverts gender stereotypes since those are the only two roles reserved for male protagonists in early Disney films. Despite wearing traditional male Latin American attire—a poncho but without a sombrero—Bruno also subverts the non-intelligent Latin lover stereotype (Ramírez Berg 66) by being depicted as a resourceful character focused on familial relations and not on seducing

women. Thus, considering *Aladdin*'s "nefarious sexual intentions of the villain . . . which resurface[d] in . . . *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*" (Lacroix 224), it is obvious that Disney has come a long way with its representation of non-White male characters.

The absence of sexual stereotypes, Latin lovers and dark ladies (Ramírez Berg 66), might be the single most important instance of *Encanto*'s progressive portrayal of Latin American characters in the context of both Hollywood films on Latin Americans in general and early Disney films in particular. When Disney introduced people of color as characters, these characters had very few signifiers that marked them as people of color, and women of color were overly sexualized (Lacroix 222; Eddarif 61–62). Contrary to these problematic portrayals of people of color, *Encanto* opts against highlighting anyone's sexuality, especially that of the heroine.¹⁷ As a Latin(American)a and Colombiana, Mirabel is visibly dark-skinned; her nose is prominent, her lips are wide and nude-colored, and her eyebrows are thicker than the pencil-thin lines on the early Disney heroines. Her costume is traditional Colombian female attire: a white blouse with ruffles and lace and a wide colorful skirt ("Get to Know Colombia"). Unlike Arab women's costumes in *Aladdin*, which stereotype and Orientalize by sexualizing (Lacroix 222), Mirabel's traditional clothes do not show her "bare midriff" (Eddarif 63) nor does she feature a tiny waist like the earlier Disney heroines. Neither Mirabel nor her sister Isabela—the "perfect Instagram-style princess who can make flowers bloom with her sheer loveliness" (Bradshaw)—correspond to the *spicy* stereotypes of Latin American women on Hollywood screens. Since the traditional Colombian blouse usually hangs off female shoulders ("Get to Know Colombia"), the potential was there, but Disney clearly avoided it since none of the characters' shoulders, waists, or legs, for that matter, are bare. In terms of

¹⁷ Isabela's suitor, Mariano Guzmán (voiced by Maluma), alludes to the *Latin lover* stereotype when he proposes to Dolores as soon as they get together, claiming that he has "so much love inside" (01:27:38). But he is a minor character with very little screen-time and his overly romantic character is not necessarily tied to the fact that he is a Latin American.

both gender and race in general and Latin American culture in particular, Disney's avoidance of stereotypes in *Encanto* is noteworthy.

Instead, the focus is on Mirabel's quirkiness, her quest for self-identity within her community, and her "cool glasses" (00:28:32). The latter "may seem like a small win, but Mirabel is the first Disney . . . female protagonist to wear glasses" (Williams), highlighted in several close-up shots of her or others lovingly readjusting them on her face and in Mirabel's conversation with her mother.¹⁸ That Mirabel wears glasses is, in fact, monumental since Disney's trademark in hits such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001) was the necessary elimination of glasses from a female face during the beautification process. Twenty years later, the bespectacled, curly-haired, and bushy eye-browed Mirabel is an antithesis to the titular princess, Mia Thermopolis, who is forced to wear eye-contacts and have her curly hair straightened and eyebrows plucked by a professional make-over artist.¹⁹ Mirabel's hair has not received as much praise as her glasses, but, present so far only in *Brave* (2012), the heroine's curls are also Disney's step forward to be celebrated since even the Black Tiana has "straightened hair," rather than a "more Afrocentric style of cornrows, dreadlocks, twists, or even an Afro" (Lester 298). Mirabel is also the second short-haired Disney heroine from beginning to end, as opposed to the luscious manes from before.²⁰

Next, she is the third consecutive animated Disney heroine who "doesn't need the love of a boy to complete her or her journey . . . [and]

¹⁸ The question of why Mirabel's mother, gifted with healing powers, does not "fix" her vision was raised by fans, but the director, Jared Bush, explained that Mirabel's glasses resulted from a written request of a young Disney female fan. Hence, Mirabel's mother sees nothing wrong with her eyesight and no reason to correct it (Smithey).

¹⁹ Paolo, Mia's makeover artist, even calls her eyebrows "Frida" and "Kahlo," referencing with his derogatory remark the famous Mexican painter (Ford and Mitchell 26).

²⁰ Snow White was the only Disney Princess with shoulder-length hair until Rapunzel, who cuts her hair toward the end of her film to save her love interest, notably undermining the long-haired princess ideal.

no one ever bothers bringing it up, least of all the film's screenwriter" (Yamato). Mirabel's singledom counters the "reinforce[d] cultural logic regarding the natural fulfillment of a young woman's dream as continually defined by men" (Bell et al. qtd. in Lacroix 225). Since it was only recently that England et al. noted how all Disney Princess films exhibit the heteronormative pattern of a heroine with a romantic interest (556), which was broken one year later with *Merida*, this confirms that Disney pays attention to its criticisms, making the discussions on its portrayals of gender (and race), such as this one, all the more necessary.

Disney did not limit its non-stereotypical female portrayal to *Encanto's* protagonists, Mirabel and Alma. The side-characters of Isabela and Luisa, Mirabel's sisters, also break gender stereotypes. At first glance, Isabela is a typical Disney princess—tall, lean, and beautiful, with long straight hair and the magical gift of growing flowers at every turn. Distinctly feminine in her ruffled lilac dress, she is the stereotypical "angel" (00:10:23) in the house. During the course of the film, she is to be engaged and married, fulfilling the stereotypical heteronormative pattern (England et al. 556). However, she deviates from it by rejecting her suitor and the sacrificial, typically female, role: "I never wanted to marry him! I was doing it for the family!" (01:08:24). She even rejects the ideal of constant perfection, both in appearance and in conduct. Contrary to the impression of being "effortlessly perfect" (00:27:55), Isabela finds it hard to uphold this ideal and revels in the sudden freedom of not having to be perfect, which is symbolized by her dress being dirtied in all the colors of the rainbow, as opposed to the traditionally feminine pink/lilac. In addition, instead of creating lovely and soft flowers, Isabela creates prickly cacti, inspiring her theme-song titled "What Else Can I Do," in which she subverts the stereotypical tendencies of Disney heroines to be perfect and find a romantic partner. Therefore, it is very telling of *Encanto* that the first step toward Mirabel's discovery of her own power starts with her helping the *stuck* princess Isabela reveal her true, *not perfect perfect*, identity.

Mirabel's other sister, Luisa, contrasts the stereotypical females in Disney films from the start to finish with her physical and personality traits—strength, athleticism, and repression of emotions—which correspond to those of traditional male characters (England et al. 559). Like Mirabel, Luisa is dressed as a traditional Colombiana, in a white ruffled blouse and colorful long skirt, but her physique could not be more different from the stereotypical (Disney) female build. Towering over every other character except for her father, she is robust and more muscular than any male in the film, and her bulging biceps are a sight not yet beheld on Disney women, or Warner Bros. and DC's Wonder Woman, at that. Luisa's physical might, however, is not depicted as violent at all. As the community muscle-woman, she performs duties usually done by men, like carrying heavy loads, rerouting rivers, fixing leaning houses, and so on. Despite her masculine body and deep voice, Luisa's face is still feminine; she wears girly earrings, and her hair is tied with a red bow. Thus, she embodies both male and female traits, and her uneasy confession "but sometimes I cry" (01:27:01) also functions as a subversion of the masculine stereotype *boys don't cry*.

Since the film focuses on the house the Madrigals live in, with many scenes of cooking, cleaning, and hosting dinner parties, one could argue that *Encanto* feeds into the same domestic stereotypes as those attached to both the aforementioned first Black princess and the portrayal of Latin Americans as house-bound servants. Indeed, Luisa's Herculean strength relates to household tasks; Mirabel's mother heals people with her food; Mirabel gains her power by ensuring the community's domestic survival, and both men and women sacrifice for it. However, rather than focusing on serving and romance, *Encanto* centers on family dynamics and relationships, which is Disney's "novel strategy credited with [*Frozen*]'s phenomenal success" (Streiff and Dundes 1), even with White characters. *Encanto*'s main conflict arises from the need to maintain the magical domestic life-power but is resolved with the recognition of each (ordinary) individual's place within the community and the need for mutually supportive

relationships. Considering early Disney heroines, deprived of (both) loving parents or siblings and the generally violent and sexualized depictions of Latin Americans, *Encanto's* notable avoidance of these stereotypes should prevail. The Madrigals are Colombians, but their struggles and dynamics are present all over the world since asserting one's own identity and rejecting the pressure of imposed social or cultural roles is a universally human tendency, regardless of one's skin-color and nationality.

4. Challenging the Superhero Stereotype

While the domestic sphere of Disney's Latin American narrative of *Encanto* will surely feature in future discussions on the reinforcing of stereotypes, one can view the latest Disney production positively in several ways. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the film was released only eight months after the previous Disney Princess film, *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The Polynesian Raya and the Haitian Moana before her (2016) have a lot in common: both are ethnic warrior princesses free of romantic interests who depart from their communities to find their purpose and save their people. Yet, Mirabel's household adventure departs from rather than repeats this developing pattern. *Encanto* can also be viewed as a subversion of the dominance of the superhero stereotype as a figure independent from the wider community. As Garabedian explains,

The modern Disney princess is independent, brave, and heroic, and contemporary audiences need to see strong female leads who can stand alongside their male counterparts [or even without them]. By doing so, Disney encourages the idea of equality between genders and helps build a universal acceptance of the concept of defining oneself not by how one is born, but by his or her own actions. (25)

While the argument concerning one's *actions*, that is, the importance of asserting one's own identity and path, stands true, *Encanto* shows that self-assertion is still a joint effort of community members. It is a result of self-acceptance and mutual acceptance. Alma and her children survive

thanks to her husband's actions; her family and community owe their survival to her persistence; Mirabel's safety in the community is ensured by Bruno, which she recognizes with the help of Dolores's and Luisa's insights, and, in turn, Mirabel saves everyone, including herself, by letting them be what they truly are and be accepted as such. She does not relinquish her true identity to fit in; her (magic) power comes from her acceptance of herself and of her acceptance of others. As Alma tells the younger Mirabel, but she herself loses sight of it with years, "the miracle is you" (01:25:50). As clichéd as it sounds, the real magic takes place when we accept ourselves and others as we are, Latin American or whoever. To return to Bruno's "rescue" once more: he *does* grace Mirabel with his vision, but the vision works only because Mirabel trusts him without prejudice. Bruno sees Mirabel's vision to the end due to her urging; otherwise, he would have given up, discouraged by previous negative feedback. The soapstone tile of his vision, showing Mirabel in front of the house full of cracks, is ambiguous—she might ruin the house or save it—and it is the community's prejudice toward Bruno that sways in favor of the negative interpretation. In conclusion, each member of the community is vital, starting from its youngest members. That is why, in a reversed scene from the film's beginning, the little Antonio guides his older cousin Mirabel to the door to receive her magic gift.

Hence, just like the Disney heroine, who no longer has to be a "damsel in distress" and fall "heads over heels for her prince in shining armor" (Xu 328), the superhero(ine) does not need to "single-handedly" (Nichols 242) save everyone. One's greatest power is born out of one's rootedness in their community. For this reason, Kabir's statement that "[e]ach and every child born in the family is blessed with magical powers except Mirabel, who *somehow happens* to be the main protagonist of the movie" (emphasis added) fails to recognize the breaking of the superhero stereotype that has emerged in the recent superhero films, *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022). When the *new* *Joker* film was first announced, soon after Heath Ledger's unprecedented portrayal in 2008, the public, including the

author of this article, approached it with apprehension. Nevertheless, the double Oscar-winner proved the skepticism unnecessary by not rehashing the Joker's *after* or the already developed supervillain figure but by focusing on his backstory and the abuse at the hands of his mother and wider community that made him the infamous "chaos monster" (Nichols 241) audiences are familiar with. The previous Jokers (Burton's, Schumacher's, and Nolan's) were also obviously traumatized beyond repair, but their films never dwell on the sources of these traumas. Todd Phillips's Joker (played by Joaquin Phoenix) does exactly that by depicting the community's abuse and rejection of Arthur Fleck. As Sauer contends, "Our witness of the dank and depressing origins of the movement overshadows [condemnation on the Joker's part]." In a fictitious parallel narrative of Arthur's relationship with his neighbor, the film gives an insight into what Arthur's life could have been had he not been systematically shunned.

Similarly, Matt Reeves's new Batman (played by Robert Pattison) received acclaim as a young character who relies on Albert's guidance while still figuring out his role in Gotham: "he even appears to be afraid of heights. . . . He gets hurt, he miscalculates a few jumps. He's human" (Santilli). When faced with the Riddler, his nemesis tells Batman how he earned his position thanks to the acclaim of the community: "All they could talk about was poor Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne, the orphan. Orphan. Do you know what being an orphan is?" (*The Batman* 02:16:26–02:17:23). With this, the Riddler suggests that he might have been a hero had he been given the same chance and acceptance. He is right; Batman has Albert as a positive influence who guides him, and his actions receive acclaim from the wider community, while the Riddler is rejected by everyone. Just like Bruno, everyone "saw the worst in him" (*Encanto* 01:13:07).

For this reason, Mirabel's "Not Special Special" applies to *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022), who are no longer larger-than-life figures but products of their closest relationships, proving that the relationship with family and community can make a hero and a villain out of the same per-

son, depending not only on their own actions but also on the community's attitude. All three films highlight the importance of the social aspect of individuals' lives; therefore, *Encanto*'s focus on a Latin American domestic community and the reminder of its importance is a strength, not a weakness.

5. Conclusion

Considering their massive influence on popular culture and predominantly young viewers, (animated) Disney films have long been contested for perpetuating race and gender stereotypes among young and susceptible audiences. In particular, stereotypes in early animated Disney films (1937–1959) include a White, necessarily beautiful, and powerless heroine and her heteronormative happy ending with a White male savior. While later films (1989–1998) strived to portray heroines who were more independent than their predecessors and came from different cultural backgrounds, these films nevertheless created further stereotypes, visible in the dichotomy between the Whites and the Others, a shortage of non-White markers besides skin-color, and the sexualizing of non-White heroines. Yet, the latest animated Disney heroines, from 2009 onwards, have at long last become bold and independent, even free from the need for a romantic pairing, and their non-White communities are less stereotypical.

Disney's latest animated addition, *Encanto* (2021), follows the trend by featuring modern heroines with “no boys to really think about at all, no girly hang-ups or thingamabobs to fritter over, and no romantic subplots to distract from what's truly important: survival, independence, identity, self-belief” (Yamato). The third consecutive single Disney heroine after Moana and Raya, Mirabel, is set on asserting herself and her place in the world without a romantic partner. In efficiently breaking the stereotypical Disney gender pattern, she is joined by the family matriarch, Alma, a strong and sensible female figure, her eccentric but caring uncle Bruno, who simultaneously embodies and breaks stereotypes usually linked to women, and her sisters and polar opposites, Luisa as a muscle-woman,

and Isabela, who fits the Disney Princess ideal but refuses to marry and uphold the traditional ideal of *perfect* femininity.

As representatives of the Colombian and Latin American community, the Madrigals are dark-skinned, dressed in traditional attire, surrounded by Colombian music, food, flora, and fauna, and inhabit settings modeled after real-life Colombian towns and natural sites. Deeply rooted in nature and magic, *Encanto's* community breaks the stereotypes of non-White Disney characters as barbaric and delivers a sensible and peaceful community free from villains and violence. The absence of on-screen violence in connection to Latin Americans is major proof of the attempt by Disney, and Hollywood in general, to avoid the dominant stereotypes of the said peoples as brutes and criminals. Similarly, by eliminating the heroine's romantic interest and by not emphasizing her and other characters' sexuality, *Encanto* breaks the recurrent Latin lover and dark lady stereotypes (Ramírez Berg 66). All this testifies to the fact that Disney positively portrays its animated Latin American community and reverses its own race and gender stereotypes from earlier films, while emphasizing the importance of family and community.

Since Disney obviously responds to social and cultural discussions, it will be interesting to see whether the next Disney heroine will follow or break the traditional *heteronormative* pattern and how her portrayal will align or clash with the established or newly introduced stereotypes, which inevitably emerge with each alteration to the established narratives. In any case, Disney's portrayal of race and gender remains an issue deserving of its place under ongoing social and cultural scrutiny, to which this chapter has hopefully contributed.

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