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Mediated Images of Latinxs:

Histories, Agendas, and Repercussions

A Thesis in Media and Communications

by

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Abstract

Media representation has favored the dominant white population since the inception of the Hollywood film system. Because of this dynamic, Latinxs have been relegated to portraying one-dimensional supporting roles. From the bandido, Latin lover, and harlot stereotypes to more recent female clown and dark lady hybrids, Latinx actors have existed in media as simpletons. As a result, the dominant white racial caste at the head of Hollywood has eulogized itself and disparaged those that fall outside of this accepted group. Over recent years, Latinxs have gained more media visibility, and this change has called for the scrutiny of newer media representations. In this thesis, I add to the literature of media studies by analyzing three films I deem 'Latinx-centered political resistance films.' I begin my study by giving an overview of Latinx representation in media from its inception in the early 1900s to the 1970s. I then provide a brief contextual summary of the era during which each film was released, as well as outline specific genre conventions that delineate the outcomes of each film. The three contemporary films I discuss are: *My Family/Mi Familia* (Nava, 1995), *Frontera* (Berry, 2014), and *In the Heights* (Chu, 2021). In providing the history of Latinx representation in film, the agenda of specific genres, and a critical analysis of each film, I outline the repercussions of the mediated images of Latinxs. Ultimately, this thesis aims to explore whether Hollywood's political-resistance films are effective in subverting previous racist filmic representations while simultaneously working within the film system that has historically oppressed the Latinx population.

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“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference--those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older-- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.”

—Audre Lorde

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Introduction

Media scholar Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's "Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race" argues that race has historically been wielded as a mapping tool to establish a hierarchy of difference which excuses violence and subjugation over certain individuals. I build upon this theory to further examine the complicated history of Latinx media representations in Hollywood, which simultaneously fetishize our ethnic differences and cast us aside as an ethnic other. In her theory, Chun explains that racial discourse allows its participants to highlight "that race has never been simply biological or cultural, but rather a means by which both are established and negotiated" (12). Essentially, Chun argues that racial discourse is a dynamic technology which allows us to understand the continuing function of race; she names segregation and the one-drop rule as examples of racial technologies that oppress communities. Chun's understanding of racial technology, my Latinx-identity, and years of race and media courses have inspired this thesis, which is the culmination of four-years of my growing interest in Latinx representation in media.

This work is prompted by my need to understand the systemic ways in which the Latinx community is continually oppressed via years of stereotypical representation in the Hollywood movie system. Essentially, I argue that the Hollywood film system is an example of a racial technology that has used stereotypical representations to concretize the racial caste system within the United States. This caste system, an artificial construction, ranks individuals' value based on arbitrary traits that pit the supposed superiority of one group against the supposed inferiority of another. Ancestry and other irremovable traits like physical features—which would otherwise be neutral in the abstract—are ascribed meaning and form a hierarchy that favors the dominant caste, whose forebears designed it. In effect, the system uses arbitrary boundaries that, through

no decision or fault of their own, assign value to the individuals in each rank (Wilkerson). In fomenting this racial caste system, the Hollywood film industry continues to stigmatize those deemed inferior—and therefore justifies any and all misdeeds faced by the caste rank deemed as inferior. As a result, one cannot work within the Hollywood film system to undo the harm that has been caused by Hollywood. Although many films working within this system attempt to positively address the Latinx experience, re-negotiate stereotypical representation, and are seemingly sympathetic to the Latinx population, I believe the racist nature of the Hollywood system impedes positive change in representation.

Films like the ones I analyze in this thesis, *My Family/Mi Familia* (Nava, 1995), *Frontera* (Berry, 2014), and *In the Heights* (Chu, 2021), attempt to prevent future and/or reverse prior negative social constructs, cultural representations, and stereotypes. Due to the aims of these films, I refer to these works as "political resistance films." I use three criteria to determine whether a film is a utile source for this thesis: the film must 1) be a U.S. Hollywood film that centers on a Latinx storyline, 2) focus on a Latinx political struggle, and 3) attempt to persuade audiences to side with the Latinx population concerning the political struggle presented on screen. Despite the aforementioned criteria—which should theoretically avoid the stigmatizing issues resulting from negative representation—I argue that Latinx-centered resistance films working within Hollywood fail to dismantle oppressive imagery because they are foregrounded in the same histories that serve to oppress the Latinx community. It is thus necessary to discuss the relationship between resistance films and the Hollywood film system to identify ways we can create new technologies that truly serve to produce effective Latinx representation.

Historically, images of Latinx people in Hollywood have focused on othering the Latinx population and making it legibly Latinx to white audiences through the use of exaggerated

accents, innate violence, and oversexualization, amongst other mediated representations. In what follows, I explore how the aforementioned contemporary films are not successful in subverting negative portrayals because they rely on the same stereotypical imagery and genre conventions typical to the Hollywood film system. Each film attempts to positively address Latinx struggle and seemingly goes against the grain of U.S. mainstream cinematic representations of Latinxs. However, further examination reveals that the movies ultimately perpetuate the very images that have served to oppress the Latinx population. To explain why Latinx-centered political resistance films cannot succeed within the Hollywood system, I examine the political issues presented in each film (i.e., the American dream in *Mi Familia*, immigrant status in *Frontera*, and nationalism in *In the Heights*), and demonstrate how they reify the racial caste system within the United States that abhors the Latinx other and extols the dominant white caste.

This thesis is influenced by a number of scholarly works, but it is perhaps most influenced by Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. Lopez's anthology on Latinx visual media, *The Ethnic Eye*. This collection of academic work unites body, media, and discourse-specific disciplines; it analyzes a range of Latinx media arts and examines how media relates to the Latinx communities in the United States. The authors grapple with the mediated images of the border, queerness, stereotypes, and more as they attempt to make sense of media representations and their connection to authentic Latinx identity. The anthology's first section, "Critical Mappings," describes Latinx film scholars' urgency to promote the inclusion of 'Latino' in film discourses and history textbooks. The second section, "Close Readings," focuses on a detailed textual analysis of specific media arts to question the categories and master narratives posited in the first section. In particular, the latter section of *The Ethnic Eye* is essential in my

understanding of contemporary political films and the ways in which they attempt to subvert mainstream media representations.

Additionally, the anthology by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, inspired me to bring multiple critical theories under one lens, as the anthology does. As Shohat and Stam describe in their introduction, multiculturalism, postcoloniality, and transnationalism are each grounded "within multiply implicated historical and geographical contexts" (1). Although the theories are often looked at as individual critical theories, the authors emphasize the importance of evaluating all of the concerns under one umbrella to rationally cross borders between geographies, communities, and disciplines (1). In other words, the concepts should not be discussed as single theories given that they are made of different contexts that ultimately cross and combine to make deeper, nuanced connections between history and media. In an effort to remain true to this interdisciplinary understanding of media studies, my perspective encompasses Hollywood film history, American history, Latinx and Latin-American history, and US-Latinx relations to understand Hollywood Latinx-centered films. I use these histories, theories, and frameworks to describe how the conventions of the Hollywood film genre, the underlying messages of the films, and their conclusions ultimately uphold the same harmful viewpoints that have been ingrained in American film since its inception.

Given this thesis' interest in Latinx representation in the United States, I would like to address the terminology I use to refer to people of Latin-American descent living in the United States. Several terms refer to this group of people: Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx, Latine, etc. I prefer to use the term 'Latinx' for several reasons, but first I shall explain why I stray away from the other terms. As Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez notes:

> "Hispanic" is a term imposed by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1980 to lump together all immigrants from Latin America and Spain with those born and raised in the United States. The intent of the imposition was the creation of a generic "Hispanic." Institutionalized in the Reagan years as a political denomination, "Hispanic" both creates and perpetuates the misconception that the Americas are not composed of many races and cultures. In the U.S., "Hispanic" alludes primarily to a racial imprint. The usage of "Hispanic" can constitute an act of racism when functioning as a fictitious homogenization of all Latin American countries into one language and one race. ("Introduction" 12)

Essentially, to use the term 'Hispanic' is to other a person as a member of an ethnic minority that has inherently been relegated to a lower social standing. The term came into usage to politically divide the dominant white caste from the 'Hispanic' population that identifies as white. Additionally, to use the term 'Hispanic' is to homogenize a group of immigrant people from a large geographical region with multiple countries, languages, races, cultures, etc. To move away from such homogenization—to demonstrate political consciousness and to act against U.S. imperial practices and internal colonialism—some people have preferred to use the term 'Latino/a.' This term describes a person living in the United States who demands ethnic differentiation from other U.S. Americans while simultaneously reaffirming their cultural heritage as an immigrant/descendant from Latin America and demonstrating alliance with other Latin American immigrants/descendants within the United States ("Introduction" 16). I prefer 'Latino/a' over 'Hispanic' due to its underlying message of political consciousness and unity among those the term 'Hispanic' seeks to marginalize. However, I opt to use its gender-neutral variation, 'Latinx.' Spanish, the dominant language which connects much of Latin America,

employs nouns that are categorized as either masculine or feminine. ‘Latinx’ and ‘Latine’ are gender-neutral terms used to replace ‘Latino/a’ in an effort to be more inclusive—to remove gender bias and to disassociate from the inherent gender binary in ‘Latino/a.’ ‘Latine’ is preferred by those who believe ‘Latine’ is easier to say and follows the typical conventions of the Spanish language. However, given that I am speaking about the Latin American experience in the United States, which can encompass second or third-generation populations which may or may not speak Spanish (as is the case in *Mi Familia*), I find it useful to employ the term ‘Latinx.’ Similarly, I make use of the gender-neutral ‘x’ for other Latinx terms (i.e., Chicano to Chicanx, and the like). I use Latinx as a gender-neutral identifier of a collective and opt to employ Latino/a when referring to individuals, especially since the term has only recently come to prominence.

The following chapter, “Mediated Images of Latinxs in Hollywood,” historicizes Latinx representation in Hollywood films from the silent era to the rise in Latinx-themed films in the 1990s. This chapter is essential in describing the ways in which the Hollywood system has presented and oppressed the Latinx population. In describing historic representations of Latinxs, I model the typical depictions which still impact and shackle present-day Latinx film characterizations. The subsequent three chapters individually focus on the film analysis of *Mi Familia*, *Frontera*, and *In the Heights*, respectively. Each chapter begins with a description of the historical context leading up to the film’s release, followed by an analysis of the film integrated with a discussion about the genre conventions and repetitions of outdated ideology.

First, I examine *Mi Familia*, a film that was released after a period which saw the rise of Latinx-centered cinema in Hollywood. To name a few, *Zoot Suit* (Valdéz, 1981), *La Bamba* (Valdéz, 1987), and *Stand and Deliver* (Menendez, 1988) predate *Mi Familia*’s release and focus

on representing Latinx success and shifting public opinion about Latinxs. These films seemingly offered a new kind of representation for Latinx people. In the same vein, *Mi Familia* details three generations of the Sánchez family as they arrive and settle in the United States to eventually achieve the American dream. I then analyze *Frontera*, which tells the story of Miguel, an immigrant who is accused of the murder of a former U.S. policeman's wife as he crosses the U.S.-Mexico border. Lastly, I discuss *In the Heights*, a musical which chronicles the life of Usnavi as he plans to leave Washington Heights, NY to return to the Dominican Republic to revive his late father's business. Although each film attempts to renegotiate stereotypical representations and has a seemingly uplifting conclusion, I argue that the historical context and conventions of the Hollywood system foreground the films in the same harmful imagery they attempt to subvert. This is not to say that Latinx-centered films created in the United States can never subvert damaging imagery, but rather that representations that exist within the structural context of mainstream Hollywood are doomed to repeat the same oppressive imagery because they rely on the same symbols and messaging of the existing racist Hollywood system.

The first film, *Mi Familia*, narrates the story of three generations of the Sánchez family and focuses on various Latinx political struggles like immigration, police brutality, and citizenship. Despite the struggles the family faces, the film ultimately touts the narrative of the American dream. Against their trials and tribulations, the Sánchez family creates a space for their Latinx heritage; and they thrive in the United States. While this is a more positive reading of the film, I argue that the film ultimately pushes the narrative of assimilation. Despite the multiple narratives within the film, and the parents' reflection that they have lived a good life, the only successful Sánchez child is Guillermo, who now goes by Bill. He has given up his ethnic heritage to assimilate to American values, become a lawyer, and is the only child who is seen as

successful in his parents' eyes. Despite the other children's careers and the presentation of a Latinx family that has survived several generations in the United States, it is Bill that comes out triumphant. As a result, although the film is not explicitly on Bill's side—given his siblings' eye rolls and the apparent rejection his parents feel due to his assimilation—viewers equate Bill's success with his assimilation, given that it is the only thing that separates him from his siblings. Ultimately, even with the film's attempt to demonstrate that there is space for Latinxs to prosper in the United States, it is at the cost of sacrificing one's ethnic identity. Consequently, the movie is ineffective in presenting a world where successful Latinxs can exist in the United States as both Latinx and American. Ultimately, Latinxs are given one choice to succeed in the United States: to assimilate.

The second film I analyze, *Frontera*, is a modern Western film that follows immigrant Miguel as he crosses the border and is shot at by vigilantes. In the ensuing panic, the wife of a retired police officer is knocked off her horse and dies; Miguel is accused of her murder. The film follows Miguel as he fights for his freedom upon his arrest. Despite his original prejudice against undocumented immigrants who cross the border, the retired police officer, Roy, has a change of heart upon meeting Miguel. Roy realizes Miguel is incapable of hurting his wife and has been wrongly accused. In the end, Roy helps clear Miguel of any wrongdoing and offers him a job to fence his land on the U.S.-Mexico border—albeit, from the Mexican side. Ultimately, the film humanizes and de-others the undocumented immigrant through Miguel's character. However, while the film does work to undo harmful stereotypes surrounding the undocumented immigrant, and does bring their struggles to light, it is ultimately Roy who saves the day and who the audience is meant to look up to. While audiences sympathize with Miguel, he has no agency; as a result, audiences ultimately wish to be more like the white hero policeman, Roy.

And finally, *In the Heights* tells the story of multiple people living in the Washington Heights neighborhood in the New York City borough of Manhattan. The film particularly deals with the characters' *sueñitos* (Spanish for little dreams). At the forefront is the story of Usnavi, who dreams of reviving his late father's business in the Dominican Republic. Usnavi is gifted a lottery ticket and is ready to head home to the Dominican Republic to live his *sueñito*. But by the end of the film, he realizes his home is in Washington Heights and he sets out to recreate his *sueñito* in the same neighborhood he sought to leave behind. In the end, Usnavi realizes that he has lived most of his life in the United States and is, at heart, an American. Even with the film's final explosive number cheering for a home for Latinxs in the United States, it is ultimately at the expense of one's ethnic national heritage. Throughout the film, the characters denigrate their countries of origin, as only Usnavi wishes to return while the others attempt to talk him out of his decision. But, in the end, he chooses to stay in America. Consequently, *In the Heights* fundamentally becomes a film that endorses a type of Latinidad that renounces the characters' ethnic countries of origin.[1]

Despite my reading of the films—that they ultimately uphold Hollywood-centric values—I do not suggest that they reify the ideologies presented within them. Instead, I claim that the films are grounded in political understandings that make it difficult for the films to remove themselves from their historical context. Ultimately, I conclude that the films are a reflection of the time in which they were released, and of a system which has historically served

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[1] *Latinidad* is a term which refers to a shared sense of a Latinx identity, regardless of country of origin, race, legal status, language, etc. Although its intent is to link the collective experiences and cultures of people from Latin America, it diminishes the complexity of the Latinx identity and favors the white Latinx population. Ultimately, *Latinidad* is criticized for its anti-Black and anti-Indigenous practices.

to oppress Latinxs, and that further work outside of the Hollywood system is necessary to create effective political resistance films.

Mediated Images of Latinxs in Hollywood

Over recent decades, the United States has seen rapid growth in the Latinx population. Suzanne Gamboa, a national reporter for NBC Latino, stated that the most recent census found that Latinxs drove the country's demographic expansion, accounting for 51.1 percent of the country's growth ("Latinos account for over half of the country's population growth"). Over the years, this increase has led to a rise in the United States' interest in Latin culture, from music and film to issues of Latinx legality. Similarly, Latinx population growth in the U.S. can be tracked in a multitude of areas. Spotify recently announced that, for the second year in a row, Puerto Rican artist Bad Bunny was its most streamed musician in the world and made the U.S.'s top-five list ("Bad Bunny tops Spotify's streaming charts"). In addition, until 2021, Colombian actress Sofía Vergara was the highest-paid television actress for several years thanks to her stint on *Modern Family* ("The Highest-Paid Actresses 2020"). Lastly, the Spanish-language network Univision was the number one network in all of U.S. television for a portion of 2020, and it continuously outperforms English-language networks ("Univision Ends Week as No. 1 Network"). These trends emphasize popular culture's gaining interest in all things Latinx. These interests have crossed from the real world into the media, and there is a growing concern, from all political spheres, regarding how to make sense of the changing Latinx demographics in the United States.

While this recent interest in Latin culture in the United States may appear sudden, the concerns brought on by Latin popularity have been prevalent long before Latinxs began to dominate U.S. growth demographics, music, television, and more. In particular, I believe these

concerns about the Latinx presence have been reflected through film since the onset of Hollywood cinema. In fact, there has been a constant presence of Latinx people since the days of silent film. Ramon Novarro, Myrtle Gonzalez, Gilbert Roland, and Beatriz and Vera Michelena make up some of the most prominent Latinx silent film stars through starring roles in films like *Driftwood* (Farnum, 1916), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Niblo, 1925), and *Rose of the Golden West* (Rowland, 1927). These historical depictions have implications that shine through contemporary Hollywood cinema, as today's representations rely on the same systems and histories of the early days of Hollywood. In many ways, the Jennifer López and Andy García of today are inextricably tied to the 20th century's Myrtle González and Ramon Novarro.

However, it does not follow that this steady presence in film translates into positive representation. As scholar Raúl Rosales Herrera puts it, "…the output of Latino-centered films…reveals less about U.S. Latinos than it does about the shifting discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism in the United States" (108). In other words, it is the discourse surrounding Latinx identity that shapes Hollywood representation, and that representation is not necessarily an authentic reflection of Latinxs in the United States. What follows is a succinct history of Latinxs in film—guided by Rosales Herrera's overview of Latinx representation in film and Charles Ramírez Berg's taxonomy of stereotypes—to better understand the intricacies of current Latinx representation in Hollywood cinema.

Latinx actors and actresses have always been prominent figures within cinematic history. In the silent film era of the early 1900s, these figures were popular and received the admiration of moviegoers—they just were not legibly Latinx. Many Latinxs were stars of the silver screen, but their ethnicity was concealed through the act of Europeanization or Americanization. Perhaps most notable is Myrtle Gonzalez, a white-passing Latina who tended to play virtuous or heroic

roles. Indeed, many silent screen stars would change their names and physical appearance to align their stage presence with the virtuous non-Latinx roles they would portray (re: Antonio Moreno in *Strongheart*, Beatriz Michelena in *Salomy Jane*). Yet when the characters were legibly Latinx—that is, they had an ethnic name and physical appearance—they were relegated to playing stereotyped Latinxs. Consequently, Hollywood would begin to perpetuate what media scholar Charles Ramírez Berg identifies as six core Latinx stereotypes: the bandido, harlot, male buffoon, female clown, Latin lover, and the dark lady ("Crash Course" 66). The bandido is an irrational, unkempt man who is quick to resort to violence, and whose accent signifies his feeble intelligence. The harlot is characterized by her inherent nymphomania and lust for white men (Ramírez Berg, "Crash Course" 68-71). The male buffoon and female clown go hand in hand; they are both simple-minded, unable to master the English language, and often resort to explosive emotionality. The male buffoon serves as a sidekick and comic relief, while the female clown's exotic and comical nature serve to render her as inferior and unworthy of a male suitor (Ramírez Berg, "Crash Course" 72-75). Finally, the Latin lover and dark lady are opposing counterparts; the male stereotype is erotic and tender yet alluring because of his danger while the dark lady is erotically appealing because of her virginal allure. The Latin lover possesses a primal sexuality which simultaneously frightens and excites the Anglo woman while the dark lady is guarded and distant, which fascinates the Anglo man (Ramírez Berg, "Crash Course" 76-77). Ultimately, the typical Latinx character, when presented as such types, perpetuates the image of a hypersexualized, violent, and/or dumb Latinx population.

Interestingly, in the silent era, these roles were typically played by non-Latinxs. Most remarkable is the film *The Sheik* (Melford, 1921), which would solidify the Latin lover archetype. Ironically, the prototype for such representation was Rudolph Valentino; thus,

Hollywood's first Latin-lover was actually Italian. Broadly speaking, then, white-passing Latinxs played virtuous Europeans while white actors were used to reduce actual Latinx characters to bad girls and harlots or fools and savages via their exaggerated stereotypical representations (Rosales Herrera 110). This dynamic added to the othering of the Latinx population within and outside of filmic discourse.

Hollywood Latinx representation would become even more complicated after the introduction of sound in the late 1920s, which jeopardized Hollywood's domination of cinema. Other countries were now able to develop and market films in their own languages. As a result, Hollywood execs sought to produce films in foreign languages to continue profiting from large audiences (Rosales Herrera 110). In particular, due to Hollywood's proximity to the southern border and a growing Latinx population in the surrounding areas, film studios saw the potential to create more revenue by developing Spanish-language films. These films were, more often than not, direct translations of the English-language films the studios were producing. While the English-language performers acted during the day, the Spanish-speaking actors took the set at night to recreate the film. Actress Lupita Tovar noted that she felt as though she was in constant competition with the American actors during the filming of the Spanish-language version of *Dracula* (Melford, 1931), stating that she felt the need to prove to everyone that she was just as good as the English-speaking actors (*The Bronze Screen* 10:58-11:59).

Although this interest in Spanish-language films allowed for more Latinx actors on the silver screen, the introduction of sound also prompted an increase in stereotypical representations. For instance, male Europeanized Latinx actors like Gilbert Roland and Antonio Moreno, who had previously played leading roles, were unable to transition to sound due to their heavy accents; they lost their star status because they were no longer able to present themselves

as European. On the other hand, women capitalized on their otherness. Using their accents to their advantage, women played into the spitfire stereotype. Most famously, Lupe Vélez would be launched into Hollywood stardom for starring in a series of films under the *Mexican Spitfire* title (Goodwins, 1940-1943) (*The Bronze Screen* 9:05-10:00). As a result, the spitfire—a combination of the harlot and the female clown—would become both romanticized and exoticized. The repercussions of the introduction of sound are still evident today through Sofía Vergara's Gloria in *Modern Family*. Gloria is a Colombian immigrant, and the confusion that arises from the miscommunications caused by her thick accent lead to her over-the-top emotional outbursts. Gloria's "lack of knowledge" regarding the English language demonstrate her ineptitude, yet she is also beautiful and married to a man several years her senior. Consequently, she is both the female clown and the harlot; her ethnic personhood is ridiculed while her ethnic physique is fetishized. Gloria's characterization demonstrates how, as a result of the introduction of sound in film, stereotypical portrayals would typecast all Latinxs in Hollywood for decades to come. The exaggerated accent, in particular, would become a marker of Latinx otherness for ensuing generations.

The stereotypical portrayal of Latinxs via the harlot, female clown, bandido, and Latin lover only multiplied in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s and 50s. The European market would slow upon the turmoil of the Second World War, and the rise of cliched Latinx representation in film would continue. Unfortunately, this would lead to greater stereotypical portrayals, as exoticized imagery (Carmen Miranda, Lupe Vélez, etc.) remained the identifying qualities of the Latinx character. In the 1950s, Hollywood would strengthen the mold of Latinx stereotypes. Over-the-top exotic representations became one of the defining features of this post-war era. One of the biggest stars of this epoch was Rita Hayworth, born Margarita Cansino.

Originally playing ethnic characters, Cansino would eventually bleach her hair and tinge it red to transform into Rita Hayworth, an all-American dream girl. Born in Brooklyn, New York, it is important to note that Cansino lacked an accent, which helped her transition from ethnic roles to more Americanized characters. Her films were particularly popular with U.S. WWII soldiers (*The Bronze Screen* 26:26-27:50). Ironically, a white-passing Latina would become the face of American 1940s glamour through her starring roles in films like *Cover Girl* (Vidor, 1944) and *Gilda* (Vidor, 1946). While Cansino achieved star status through her de-Latinization, Hollywood saw an overall growth in simplistic ethnic framing via beachy paradises and Latinxs without a care in the world other than music and dance. While the United States was fighting the war, Latin American countries attempted to remain neutral. Essentially, this tension from the war resulted in a widespread nationalist ideology, and film provided an escape tool through simplified and exoticized representations of Latin America.

In this era, the U.S. nationalist ideology depicted Americans as righteous freedom seekers and simultaneously depicted Latinx people as a singing and dancing people excluded from any wars. While the U.S. faced hardships, Latinxs were carefree and otherwise ignorant to the ongoing battles faced by the American people. Consequently, Latinxs would feature in several musical comedy pieces during this era. Depictions of Latinxs, particularly Latinas, were rendered into caricatures and promoted Latin America as an exotic place where singing and dancing is ubiquitous. For the Hollywood film system, those fighting the war would be eulogized as heroes, while those who refrained (i.e., Latin-America and Latinxs), were depicted as ignorant clowns who existed outside of reality. Carmen Miranda films like *Down Argentine Way* (Cummings, 1940), *That Night in Rio* (Cummings, 1941), and *The Gang's All Here* (Berkeley, 1943) were particularly popular during this era, exemplifying the one-dimensional ethnic representation that

appealed to many film viewers trying to escape the realities of the Second World War. Miranda's unusual cartoonish outfits, accent, and song were unlike anything else in the United States. Her ethnic eccentricity was particularly appealing to nationalistic audiences, who sought to reinforce relationships with Latin America during the Good Neighbor Policy era.[2] As a result, different revivals of the fruit-hat, bead-necklace, colorful-clothing-wearing Carmen Miranda caricature would arise (re: Olga San Juan). This particular racist representation—which exoticized the Latina body and presented Latinxs' only useful traits as ones which served to entertain the typical American—also epitomizes the nationalist viewpoint of the United States during the era. Essentially, Hollywood films during this period emphasized U.S. political concerns and did so to the detriment of Latin-America, presenting its nations and people as carefree, dimwitted, and unconcerned with the repercussions of the war and its threat to American democracy.

In the early 1960s, a similar phenomenon occurred with *West Side Story* (Robbins and Wise, 1961). This film adaptation of a Broadway musical became the highest-grossing film of 1961. The Romeo and Juliet-esque musical tells the story of two star-crossed lovers, María and Tony. Ironically, María is described as a Puerto-Rican "immigrant," despite the fact that Puerto-Ricans are U.S. citizens at birth and have been so since 1917. Natalie Wood, a very popular white actress, donned brownface and a thick fake accent to play María. In fact, many of the characters—despite their roles as Puerto-Ricans—are not Latinxs, but white actors in brownface. It is important to note here that, like blackface and redface, brownface came to prominence in Vaudeville shows in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This practice would filter into filmic

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[2] As the possibility of WWII grew more imminent, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Good Neighbor Policy to promise non-interference in Latin-American countries. To establish this allyship and spread democratic ideas, the Motion Picture Division of the Office of Inter-American Affairs developed propaganda films with inter-American harmony at its core. For more on the Good Neighbor Policy and the film industry, see Lénárt, "First Degree Friendship."

depictions of Latinxs through D.W. Griffith's *The Thread of Destiny* (1910), which was the first film to use the term "greaser." This slur got its name from the "Greaser Act" of 1855, which made Mexican "vagrancy" illegal. Years later, in the 1920s, these images were challenged by the Mexican government, which decided to boycott Hollywood. As a result, these images would play a lesser role in films, although they would never fall completely out of favor. Despite this boycott, the imagery would regain popularity in the 1960s and *West Side Story* was one of the key players in its revival (Johnson 30 Sept. 2020).

West Side Story is both complicated in its plot as well as in its representation of Latinxs. Although Rita Moreno—an actual Puerto-Rican—won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, she also had to use brownface and a false accent for her award-winning role. The first Latina to win an Academy Award, Moreno did so because of her role as Anita, the hypersexualized musically-inclined spitfire—she encompassed all of the stereotypes that enamored Hollywood and its view of the typical Latina. Latinxs found her inspiring because of the honors bestowed upon her thanks to the role, while Anglo audiences idolized her as the epitome of Puerto-Rican identity in the United States. Yet, despite her star status, Moreno would note that she was only offered the same roles in gang-centered films for years to come. Moreno would refuse to pigeonhole herself in similar roles to Anita, and would forego a role in film for seven years as a result (*The Bronze Screen* 49:35-50:47). Despite her legendary status due to her portrayal of Anita, the stereotype she portrayed would shape the U.S.'s understanding of acceptable roles for Latinas while simultaneously relegating Latinx actors to stereotyped characterizations.

As Hollywood further molded Latinx stereotypes, the 1960s and 70s saw a rise in filmmaking in the Chicanx movement. The movement embraced Mexican-American identity to combat essentialized views of Chicanx identity, and addressed socio-economic issues affecting

Latinxs in the United States. As a result of this civil rights movement, the Latinx community and its concerns evolved into more characterizations in film in the 1980s. Chon A. Noriega notes that Chicanx filmmakers were interested in the organization of a community through their shared experiences, and not so much through the conventions of film itself. Because the Chicanx activists felt misrepresented by media coverage of their protests, they became filmmakers to work within the system that was mass media ("Imagined Borders" 9). Through themes of culture and shared experiences, Chicanx filmmakers sought to unite and educate their audiences. This urgent need for community and appropriate representation led Chicanx cinema and its filmmakers to juxtapose and straddle two locations: America and América ("Imagined Borders" 18). In other words, Chicanx cinema focused on negotiating a Latin-American lineage while living in the U.S. Ultimately, several Chicanx writers and producers would develop films that included Latinx representation without Hollywood's stereotypes. *I am Joaquin* (Valdez, 1969), *Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!* (Gutiérrez, 1976), and *Alambrista!* (Young, 1977) in particular detail Chicanxs' struggles with human rights, economic justice, and a hybrid identity in the United States. The films are from the Chicanx perspective, and long monologues describe Chicanx political struggles as the main characters come to terms with being Latinxs in America.

In this way, Chicanx cinema worked within the Hollywood system and outside of it, seeking to re-present Latinx identity in the film industry. Similarly, scholar Kathleen Newman's theoretical focus in "Reterritorialization in Recent Chicano Cinema: Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (1992)" relies on how images and sounds of Chicanx cinema have contributed to the reterritorialization of the nation-state (95-96). In particular, Newman notes four dilemmas of Chicanx film production: (1) over a decade's worth of noteworthy Latinx feature films has not made financing for Chicanx filmmakers easier, (2) current industry distribution strategies favor

genre and star discourse, which function to the detriment of Chicanx directors, as their names evoke a complex and rich history of cultural struggles, (3) "bankability" is a source of racism, as the reason Latinxs are not currently cast in starring roles is because they have not been cast previously, and (4) Chicanx feature-film directors must answer to at least two groups—the industry and the Latinx film community (97). Consequently, despite the countercultural Chicanx film movement and its seemingly growing popularity, Latinx representation in the film and television industry has not increased according to the proportion of Latinxs in the U.S. demographic, and representation has minimally improved. Overall, while the Chicanx film movement inspired a collective of like-minded urgency in the Chicanx population, it simply could not gain enough momentum or support to compete with the long-established Hollywood system so many in the United States had grown accustomed to. As a result, Latinx filmmakers opted to take some of the tactics from the Chicanx cinema movement into the Hollywood system, which brought Latinx concerns to the forefront of Hollywood films in the 1980s and early 1990s. This new period of filmmaking would bring renewed hope in solidifying change in Latinx representation within the Hollywood system.

In the following chapters, I focus on an individual film, and provide specific context regarding the era of filmmaking and political concerns during the time of the film's release. I use the histories foregrounded in this chapter to build on my analysis and answer questions relating to film as a racial technology, the repetition of Hollywood ideologies, and the overall film rhetoric. In focusing on these particular concerns, I analyze whether or not the films produce effective political-resistance messages and how—if at all—they differ from the one-dimensional cinema of years prior.

My Family/Mi Familia (Nava, 1995): An Assimilationist Family Drama

The popularity of films from the Chicanx movement led to greater Latinx presence on screen in the 1980s and early 1990s; this era gave rise to a number of films concerned with Latinx issues and, more particularly, oftentimes sought to de-other immigrants. However, Chicanx cinema was media made by, with, and for the Chicanx community. These films were created in a space that was not completely obligated to answer to the Hollywood film system or its producers, audiences, and historical representations. Essentially, the Chicanx films differed from Hollywood's Mexican-American and Latinx-centered films because they existed outside of the margins of the Hollywood mainstream. Chicanx films tackled social and political issues explicitly and unambiguously, never pulling back their punches, teaching viewers about their status and power in the United States. However, under the Hollywood system, Latinx films of the 1980s and 90s could not present the same radical messages. In this way, Latinx films of the era lacked the didactic nature that was so outward and prevalent in the Chicanx film movement. Consequently, the Latinx-centered films developed in Hollywood in the 1980s and 90s did not achieve the same kind of countercultural and educational effects that Chicanx film embraced.

The mainstream filmmakers of this period intended to humanize the stories of Latinx people, and not to essentialize them as seen decades prior. As a result, films like *El Norte* (Nava, 1984), *Stand and Deliver* (Menéndez, 1988), and *Selena* (Nava, 1995), brought Latinx issues to the forefront while simultaneously making space for Latinx stars. However, these movies were rarely big-budget Hollywood productions—the former two were independent films. Additionally, and perhaps not uncoincidentally, the films that did receive greater financial backing were not as didactic in nature as the Chicanx movement's films, and they often reverted Latinx images to the stereotypical portrayals of years before. For example, *Carlito's Way* (De

Palma, 1993)—distributed by Universal Pictures—features Italian-American Al Pacino as a Puerto-Rican bandido. Similarly, *Blood In Blood Out* (Hackford, 1993), distributed by Hollywood Pictures—a division of The Walt Disney Studios—follows three Chicanos as they ultimately succumb to gang life. These films present a one-dimensional view of the Latinx character. In contrast, Chicanx cinema like *Zoot Suit* (Valdez, 1981), *Follow Me Home* (Bratt, 1996), *American Me* (Olmos, 1992), and *Mi Vida Loca* (Anders, 1993) presented Chicanxs as multi-dimensional people dealing with the ramifications of a multicultural identity in the United States. These films attempted to demonstrate the sociocultural and lived experiences of this politically conscious group.

Not only did the Chicanx era of filmmaking put Mexican-Americans/Chicanxs at the forefront of their work, but it also discussed the racial injustices, income inequalities, and overall discrimination faced by the Latinx community. For example, in *El Norte*, Nava presents two siblings fleeing from a war in Guatemala. Upon arriving in the U.S., the pair face a culture shock and are exploited for their cheap labor. Initially released via PBS, the film demonstrates the trouble immigrants face when they are forced to leave the harrowing conditions of their native countries and are undervalued in the United States. Likewise, *Zoot Suit*, *Stand and Deliver*, and comparable Chicanx films engage in similar politics centering on Latinx identity in the U.S., from police brutality to combatting the bandido stereotypes. Apart from presenting these informative storylines, they also encouraged the audience to fight against those pressing issues through a call to action via the characters' activism.

On the other hand, Hollywood films tended to lean towards the superficial in order to obtain the happy ending expected of this capitalist film system—after all, if whimsical endings bring in more audiences, and thus more money, Hollywood films are sure to cash in. As a result,

the Chicanx movement's emphasis on educating viewers was lost in Latinx-centered Hollywood films. Thus, the gritty nature of Chicanx cinema and its hope for renewed Latinx representation described at the end of "Mediated Images of Latinxs in Hollywood" was lost.

In what follows, I suggest that *My Family/Mi Familia* (Nava, 1995) suffers the same fate and, ultimately, adheres to the same racist and assimilationist agenda of Hollywood. *Mi Familia* recounts the story of three generations of the Sánchez family and focuses on their hardships as Latinxs living in the United States. Some of the issues at hand include immigration, illegal deportations, police brutality, and citizenship. A particularly prominent issue involving all of the Sánchez children is their existence in the United States as Mexican-Americans. A recurring theme in the film is the children's individual identities and how they fail or assume their parents' expectations. As Mexican-Americans, they exist within the hyphen of two cultural identities. However, the film's overall message reiterates that there is no hyphen, but rather that one must be either Mexican or American. This dynamic is especially evident when we analyze Bill's assimilation and Chucho's death. I discuss these representations to expose the film's overall assimilationist agenda.

To begin my discussion about *Mi Familia* falling into the same pattern of racist ideology touted in Hollywood cinema, I start with an analysis of the role genre plays in film. In the introductory chapter to *Film Genre Reader IV*, Barry Keith Grant declares:

> Stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films that, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen… Traditionally, Hollywood movies have been produced in a profit-motivated studio system that, as the result of sound business practice, has sought to guarantee acceptance

> at the box office by the exploitation and variation of commercially successful formulas. (xvii)

What Grant is saying here is that genre movies use expected representations to produce favorable viewer outcomes. And yet, despite Grant's understanding of film genre, the idea of genre in film is a highly contended topic. Many are unsure of how to define 'genre,' and are further perplexed when it comes to analyzing the components film critics use to define 'genre.' For example, film critic Andrew Tudor takes issue with the term 'genre' because, he argues, there is no set definition. Tudor wonders if the definition relies on a set of conventions, themes throughout film, or if it is defined by intentions (4). Nonetheless, I prefer Grant's definition and argue that, at heart, genre films exploit successful cinematic formulas to pull audience attraction. As a result, genre films are inherently tied to the films that came before them.

Accordingly, the "Mediated Images of Latinxs in Hollywood" section of this thesis describes where specific film genre conventions and Latinx stereotypes originated in Hollywood films. In the case of *Mi Familia*, I particularly look at the drama genre, which is wide and has several subgenres (war dramas, romantic dramas, political dramas, etc.); nonetheless, I use film historian Thomas Elsaesser's observations of the family melodrama to guide my reading. Elsaesser argues that "the melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism—categories that are always relative to the given historical and social context" (437). He further argues that films like *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) and *Orphans of the Storm* (Griffith, 1921) are "classic examples of how melodramatic effects can successfully shift explicit political themes onto a personalized plane. In both cases, Griffith tailored ideological conflicts into emotionally charged family situations" (437). Essentially, Elsaesser notes that dramatic themes may include current societal ills, corrupt societal institutions, or other controversial issues

of the times, and that films reframe them into familial dilemmas. As a result, although Hollywood's drama films intend to bring light to real-life societal issues via fictional tales, the ending of the films tend to condemn the individual at the center of the film rather than the issue at large. This perspective is in line with my analysis of *Mi Familia*, indicating that despite Nava's best attempts to condemn the racist systems of oppressions addressed in the film, to be a Hollywood drama film means to exist within an inescapable framework that exonerates the very systems the film intends to expose.

Similarly, in his analysis of *The Squawman* (DeMille, 1931), academic Jean-Loupe Bourget notes:

> ...these cultural tensions remain implicit and unresolved. Obviously, the 'deconstruction' of ironic analysis is not synonymous with 'destruction.' Is this failure to resolve tensions due to weakness in the creative act or rather to the capitalistic mode of film production? In Hollywood, the director's work, however conscious it may be of social alienation, is bound by the same alienation. (71)

Bourget is noting that, despite a film's attempts to subvert stereotypical representations, it cannot effectively do so while working within the same system it attempts to dismantle; in this case, only deconstruction is possible. In other words, although a film may describe and denounce a certain social system, it can do so only if the society is fictional—essentially, the real-world system is untouchable, it is not a part of the criticism of the film because it is not being described explicitly.

Additionally, if the film does somehow describe the breakdown of a social system, the film must end on an optimistic note—one that insinuates both order and happiness are eventually restored. Accordingly, *Mi Familia* ends with this optimistic note as José and María sit in their

home. The two reflect on their life and state that they have lived a good life, despite the fact that their children do not represent the values they intended to instill in them, despite Chucho's murder at the hands of the police, despite María's illegal deportation, etcetera. In the end, the film ends whimsically; despite the Sánchez family's hardships, they achieve the American dream by simply being inhabitants of the United States.

Also, because *Mi Familia* deals with a generational storyline, the film may be considered a heritage film. Although heritage films are often described as British films, I believe the term can be applied to *Mi Familia* because it contains many of the elements used to connote heritage films; these films present a national past and narratively demonstrate "a greater concern for character, place, atmosphere, and milieu than for dramatic, goal-directed action" (Higson 611). According to these characteristics, *Mi Familia* meets all of the criteria; thus, I consider it a heritage drama film through its concern for the Sánchez clan, life in East Los Angeles, social issues affecting each generation, and how each element interacts with one another.

In this vein, I opt to reframe Bourget's framework and describe *Mi Familia* as a Latinx heritage film precisely because it pits the past against the present. University of York Professor Andrew Higson notes that "Even those films that develop an ironic *narrative* of the past end up celebrating and legitimating the *spectacle* of one class and one cultural tradition and identity at the expense of others…" (613). What Higson emphasizes here is that heritage films inherently place one cultural tradition, identity, etcetera above another by depicting two histories that are competing against each other—in *Mi Familia*'s case it is Mexican culture versus United States culture, and ultimately, the United States wins. Because the film's imaginary setting is built in reality, then the death of Mexican Chucho translates to the death of Mexico in real life. Similarly, the film touts the American dream as an attainable reality and describes assimilation

as a means of achieving that success. As a result, despite their best efforts, *Mi Familia* and Gregory Nava attempt to uplift the Latin-American U.S. population but do not ultimately do so because of the film's existence within the boundaries of Hollywood cinema. Because the movie exists within the framework that has historically marginalized and devalued outsiders—in this case, the Mexican as the 'other'—then there is no way to work within the system to break it apart. Ultimately, while the film intends to relay a message of hope, it repeats the same harmful ideology of assimilationist cinema of years prior.

Mi Familia focuses on three generations of the Sánchez family, starting with the patriarch of the family's journey to California from Mexico. Over the course of the film, beginning in the late 1930s and ending in the 1980s, the Sánchez family deals with several political and social issues, from the Mexican Cession to illegal mass deportations, to U.S. assimilation. In order to discuss how the film ultimately centers the assimilationist perspective, I focus on two characters: Jesús, or "Chucho," and Guillermo, or "Bill." Chucho is the only Sánchez child born in Mexico—and consequently, the most tied to his ethnic heritage through his clothing, Mexican identity pride, and partaking in the pachuco lifestyle[3]—and he dies at a young age. Bill follows his parents' expectations to get an education, have a successful career, and get married; therefore, he is the most successful child in their eyes. However, he achieves this superior status by neglecting his ethnic heritage and aligning himself with Anglo identification. *Mi Familia* has generally been regarded for its representation of a Mexican-American family's trials and tribulations in America; however, I argue that the film, in its attempts to describe the American

[3] The pachuco movement emerged in the 1930s. A pachuco is a person, typically of Mexican-American descent, who has great pride in their ethnic heritage, is self-empowered, and embodies the resistance to the Anglo-American hegemony in the United States. This countercultural movement belongs to neither Mexican nor American culture; it is a distinctly Chicanx endeavor.

dream as attainable for Latinxs, ultimately pushes the narrative of assimilation as the vehicle to do so. This reading is exacerbated when we take into account that Chucho's life is considered to have been on borrowed time, as his journey to the United States is marred by the sighting of an owl, a Mexican spiritual superstition. Consequently, Chucho's death is inherently tied to his Mexican identity, while Bill's success is inherently tied to his assimilation into American culture. In this way, there is not a hyphen that can coexist between Mexican and American. It is either one or the other. As a result, the film ultimately recites the same narrative often repeated in Hollywood cinema: to succeed in the United States is to assimilate.

First, it is important to discuss Chucho's birth, as well as his journey across the United States-Mexico border. His birth and status as an immigrant differentiate him from the other Sánchez children, as he is the only child born in Mexico. Additionally, he is the only Sánchez family member, other than his father, that was born in Mexico. His mother, María, is a United States citizen. Despite this fact, she was deported to Mexico while pregnant with Chucho during an illegal roundup in 1939. The oldest male sibling, Paco, narrates:

> It was the time of the Great Depression. I guess some politicians got it into their heads that the *mexicanos* were responsible for the whole thing. I mean they were taking up a lot of jobs. Jobs that were needed for what they called 'real' Americans. So *la migra* made some big sweeps through the *barrio*. And they rounded up everyone they could. It didn't matter if you were a citizen like my mother. If you looked *mexicano*, you were picked up and shipped out…All these things really happened. (12:28-13:28)

Essentially, Paco discusses the negative politics and sentiment surrounding Mexicans during the era. Despite María's citizenship status, her identity as a woman of Mexican descent led the enforcers of an unjust law to cast her away to Mexico, a land she had no real connection to other

than name. Heavily pregnant and sent to a land she did not know, María stays in Mexico and lives there with José's relatives, promising to return once she has given birth and her child is old enough to make the harrowing journey back across the United States-Mexico border.

Months later, when Chucho is still too young to even crawl, María makes the decision to return to the United States. She walks for several days until she reaches a river. She begs a man to help her cross, but he pleads with her to wait another year, as the rain came early that year and he believes the river is far too high for her to cross with a young child. She urges the man to help her across, stating that she has come too far to stop. The man finally agrees to help her, and as she prepares to set her baby in the small boat, she tells Chucho to hold onto her tightly, "*El fantasma del río es un espíritu malo y poderoso*," "the wraith of the river is an evil and powerful spirit." As she climbs into the small boat, María stops when she looks up and sees an owl, and she confusedly asks herself "an owl, in the daytime?" (18:28-18:50). This sight is an omen that death is near. Despite her fears, María climbs aboard and begins her journey across the rapidly flowing river. However, shortly afterward, the boat tips over, and María and Chucho are carried downstream. It seems as though the omen may be true, but María is able to climb to safety on a rock. She rocks the baby as he cries while the camera pans to the owl. Although Chucho dies years later—and not on that day at the river—Paco notes that Chucho's life had been on borrowed time, ultimately stating that Chucho's death was inevitable due to the omens during his journey from Mexico to the United States. However, film critics who favor *Mi Familia*—like Roger Ebert—may disregard my reading because no film can have a perfect ending; some tragedy is necessary to move the story along. However, I maintain that it is necessary to discuss why the omen is assigned to Chucho. If anything, the fate should be María's, as she is the one who sees the omen. However, just before María sees the owl, Paco makes a point to narrate that

María is a U.S. citizen and has no real ties to Mexico due to several generations of her family living and existing on U.S. land. Essentially, the film states that María is a genuine American, and the tragic fate ultimately falls upon the most Mexican Sánchez child. In other words, María's proximity to Americanness and whiteness protects her from this Mexican superstition. As a result, Chucho's greatest downfall is not the omen itself, but his Mexican identity and crossing of the border; the omen is simply a tool used to condemn Chucho and all that he signifies—a Mexican, an immigrant, etc.— to death.

After a journey that started about two years prior, María returns to her home in California and reunites with José and her other children. The film then flashes forward to twenty years later; Chucho is now an adult and the film focuses on his relationship with his parents, youngest sibling Jimmy, and his identification with the pachuco lifestyle. As a pachuco, Chucho is the leader of his neighborhood gang and also sells marijuana, two factors that lead to hardship with his parents. Consequently, Chucho presents a reiteration of the bandido stereotype. Although he speaks English well and is not unkempt (he, and other pachucos, pride themselves on their appearance), he leads a criminal life and is quick to resort to violence—this dynamic is evident through his role as a gang leader and eventual murder of a rival. As a result, Chucho exemplifies the harmful narrative about the criminal Mexican. Thus, not only is Chucho the only Sánchez child born in Mexico, but he also becomes the most legibly Mexican character through his association with the bandido stereotype. Chucho, therefore, represents the other. He is not meant to survive in American society, and consequently must die. This sentiment is made apparent when Chucho is on the run from the police after he murders his gang rival, Butch Mejía, at a dance. Chucho runs through his neighborhood until the police eventually catch up to him and

shoot him in the head in front of his youngest sibling. Jimmy watches Chucho's lifeless body as the policemen cheer and champion one another for the fatal shot.

Although the film attempts to condemn police brutality when it depicts the horrifying exchange between the police officers in front of Chucho's dead body, I argue that Paco's narration after this scene invalidates any political commentary on the police system. Paco recounts: "Everybody said that the police had killed Chucho. But my mother never believed that. She knew that he was meant to die at the river. Chucho's whole life had been on borrowed time, but you cannot cheat fate forever. The spirit of the river had come back to claim what was rightfully his" (59:45-1:00:25). In other words, Paco states that the spirit of the river is at fault for Chucho's death, implying that the police officers are simply agents who carry out the fate Chucho was given when he crossed the border from Mexico to the United States. Ultimately, the system avoids responsibility for Chucho's death, and the film suggests that these systemic forces are the tools of a Mexican superstition, thus delegitimatizing the forces' potency. Similarly, Jean-Loup Bourget notes, "The implicit subtext of genre films makes it possible for the director to ask the inevitable (but unanswerable) question: Must American society be like this? Must the Hollywood system function like this?" (71). What Bourget means is that the film can raise questions regarding real societal issues, although the question may never be answered. Whether it be because the question is too complex or because the Hollywood system does not allow for real scrutiny is irrelevant. What matters is the possibility to find answers, and in the case of *Mi Familia*, there is no space to scrutinize the police system which allowed for—and cheered for—Chucho's untimely death. Consequently, it is Mexico and the superstitions that take Chucho's life, and no kind of system—police brutality, racism, xenophobia, etc.—is to blame.

Additionally, the film's negative perception of Mexico, and all things Mexican, is exacerbated when Bill's character is taken into account. Bill is the most successful Sánchez child and the one whose life gives José and María the most pride. Their beliefs are made evident when, in one scene, María and José, unable to fall asleep, lie awake in bed and list their children's shortcomings. María cries because Toni is no longer a nun and is now married to a priest, Paco is still unmarried and wishes to become a writer, and their youngest son Jimmy is following in Chucho's footsteps. The parents are only able to fall asleep when they think of Bill, who is in law school. Essentially, as scholar Daniel Enrique Pérez puts it, "...he is their last hope that one of their children will have a successful, respectable career, and maybe even marry a woman and have children. They don't mention Irene [the Sánchez's oldest daughter who plays a trivial role in the film] and her family at all, confirming their role as merely marginal characters" (108). In other words, the most Americanized Sánchez child—that is, the child who least associates with Mexican culture and heritage—is their last hope for ensuring their American dream is reached.

Of course, this scene occurs in the middle of the film, before Jimmy turns his life around and before Toni finds her calling as an immigration rights activist. As a result, some may argue that the other children, particularly Toni, are successful in America. While I concede that Toni's contributions to society via activism are admirable and worthy of respect, the saga of the Sánchez family is based on José and María's struggle to impose their traditional Mexican family values on their children who are being raised in the United States. Therefore, because Toni does not have children and is considered a "bossy" woman—which does not align with the Sánchez's Mexican values—Toni cannot be viewed as a success. Similarly, although Irene has a job and a family, she is relegated to a supporting role. Because she is a negligible character, it is apparent that the real success and notable character is the assimilated character, Bill. To add to this

dynamic is the queering of the Sánchez children. As scholar Daniel Enrique Pérez puts it, "the children in this family defy heteronormative codes of social and sexual behavior as associated with Mexican, Chicano, and Anglo cultures, and are thus queer" (98). Through this queering, the children challenge their parents' vision of the traditions and values they hoped to instill in their children. Because the Sánchez parents view Bill as their saving-grace, it is evident that Bill is the only heteronormative child in their eyes. Therefore, it is only Bill who meets the parents' criteria for a successful life. And because Bill is the only child who is represented as a successful individual, film audiences understand that Bill's trajectory as an assimilated individual is the only path to success.

Bill's transformation and rejection of his Mexican heritage are revealed after the second time jump. Bill arrives at his parents' house with his Anglo fiancé, Karen, to introduce her and her parents to his family. When María refers to Bill as 'Memo,' Karen's parents look confused and ask about Memo. Bill then explains, "They call me 'Memo.' My family calls me that. It's a diminutive for 'Guillermo.' That's uh...That's 'William' in Spanish. So, 'Memo' is like 'Bill'" (1:48:12-1:48:25). Throughout this exchange, Bill never states that his name is actually Guillermo; he states that only his family calls him that, essentially erasing his real identity in favor of the Americanized 'Bill.' Furthermore, when Karen's father asks if the family is from Mexico, and José begins to talk about his immigrant journey walking from Michoacán to California, Bill interjects. He states, "Actually, I've never been to Mexico. I've always lived here in Los Angeles, just like yourselves" (1:49:43-1:49:50). In making this comment, Bill fundamentally denies his Mexican identity. He ends his statement with "just like yourselves," indicating that he is more like his Anglo parents-in-law than the rest of his Mexican family. In

other words, he is not 'other'; instead, Bill assures his in-laws that he is just like them, and that he upholds the same Anglo-American values they do.

As he speaks over his family members and attempts to distance himself from their Mexican identity, Bill's family look at each other in disbelief, expressing their hurt regarding his erasure of their culture. Through this interaction, the film appears to want the viewer to be critical of his assimilation or 'selling out,' and identify with the rest of the Sánchez family. However, that moment of hurt does not take away from the overall message of the film, and Bill's character arc suggests that success comes at a price. In fact, other than the disapproving glances shared by the Sánchez children, Bill's assimilation and rejection of his family is not addressed further in the film. In neglecting any examination of the repercussions of Bill's assimilation, Nava effectively disregards the negatives of assimilation, and only focuses on what Bill has gained through the erasure of his ethnic identity. Because the film plays with the notion that assimilation leads to success, the film reiterates the idea that the more one associates with the dominant hierarchy, the more one is likely to succeed in the United States. In doing so, the film reiterates the white supremacist ideology of Hollywood filmmaking, despite its intent to demonstrate Latin-American existence and cohesion in the United States.

Ultimately, Bill completely rejects all things which identify him as Mexican-American, and his reward is a successful career as a lawyer. On the one hand, I agree that the film's final message indicates that immigrants can achieve the American dream—I believe that was Nava's intent. But on the other hand, I still insist that the overall intent is not successful when taken in tandem with other elements, such as the Sánchez parents' views on success, and the denial of a political statement regarding the death of Chucho. In essence, because Bill is the only child who follows the Sánchez parents' values and is seen as their most successful child—and does so at

the expense of his ethnic heritage—the film ultimately states that assimilation is the way to achieve success in the United States. In doing so, the film suggests that whiteness (i.e., Americanness), is the only way to obtain the American dream. Therefore, the idea that there is no space for differing identities (i.e., foreign, racial, ethnic, etc.) within the United States prevails. Because these identities are considered worthless, the American dream relegates these groups to the same low-ranking caste system I refer to in the introductory chapter of this thesis. In the end, the dominant WASP group prevails, and what is reiterated throughout the film is that one must fit the WASP caste to achieve the American dream. Consequently, those who do not fit this rank will never achieve the success of the dominant WASP group. In the end, the film's intentions do not matter, what matters is what is 'done' with race and the overall repercussions of the messaging. Returning to Chun's understanding of racial technology and how race is represented through media, the final takeaway in *Mi Familia* is not that Latin-Americans can exist within the United States, but that if one wants to achieve the American dream, one must align with the dominant group.

A Modern Western: White Heroism in *Frontera* (Berry, 2014)

The rise of Latinx-centered cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s led to a change in the demographic of Hollywood's stars in the 2000s and 2010s. Actresses like Jennifer Lopez who played the titular character in *Selena* (Nava, 1995) and Salma Hayek in *Desperado* (Rodriguez, 1995), became the new generation of Latinas on screen. At the turn of the 21st century, Latinxs in American media grew, although their representation had never been more complicated. Many films still reduced Latinxs to stereotypical images prominent in Hollywood films of years past. Jennifer Lopez was often typecast as the alluring Latina, and Salma Hayek portrayed the dark lady or female clown. Additionally, despite the greater presence of Latinx actors during these years, the ongoing history of lighter-skinned Latinx actors playing white characters while white actors played stereotypical Latinx representations continued.

For instance, Jennifer Lopez would go on to play several ambiguous, whitewashed characters in various romantic comedies like *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman, 2001) and *Monster-in-Law* (Luketic, 2005), and thrillers like *Enough* (Apted, 2002) and *Out of Sight* (Soderbergh, 1998). Salma Hayek, who reads more Latina due to her darker skin and accent, did not have to worry about this whitewashing. Instead, she would star in a slew of films in which she embodied the dark lady or female clown; these one-dimensional archetypes particularly attracted the white male protagonist's attention in films like *Fools Rush In* (Tennant, 1997), *Breaking Up* (Greenwald, 1997), and *Grown Ups* (Dugan, 2010). Interestingly, both women often played roles in which they were romantically involved with white males.

However, when Lopez was depicted as a white character, her films tended to emphasize her moral integrity. *Enough* is notable as it demonstrates her struggle to leave an abusive relationship; the film paints her as an ideal woman who has married a man who takes advantage

of her purity and loyalty. This is not to say that Lopez's whitewashed characters were not denigrated in other films. Take *Gigli* (Brest, 2003) for example—Lopez plays a gangster in this romance/crime film. However, her whitewashed characters were more likely to be admirable characters, while her Latina-identifying portrayals tended to resort to images of the alluring Latina who needs to be saved by the white man. On the other hand, Hayek's roles highlighted her moral inferiority, and audiences often laughed at the compromising positions that would arise from her immoral choices—like a pregnancy resulting from a one night stand in *Fools Rush In*. In this sense, the less legibly Latin an actor was, the greater the chance they were playing respectable characters. Meanwhile those who could not conceal their Latinx-ness, like Salma Hayek, were relegated to the same stereotypical roles Hollywood had developed in its inception nearly one hundred years before.

Similarly, this era of cinema saw the whitewashing of more heroic characters due to widely famous white actors landing Latinx roles in biopics. Ben Affleck played Tony Mendez, a man of Mexican descent, in *Argo* (Affleck, 2012). Angelina Jolie portrayed Mariane Pearl, a woman of Afro-Chinese-Cuban descent, in *A Mighty Heart* (Winterbottom, 2007). And Jennifer Connelly acted as John Nash's Salvadoran wife in *A Beautiful Mind* (Riggen, 2015). What is important to note here is that these roles were given to well-established famous white actors despite the prevalence of Latinx actors in the Hollywood film system at the time. Each of the actors would portray heroic Latinxs: Tony Mendez worked for the CIA; *A Mighty Heart* details Pearl's search for her husband, a reporter at the Wall Street Journal, who was kidnapped by terrorists; and Alicia Nash was a physicist and mental-health advocate. In this way, the biopic's ethnic characters were erased to make space for the heroic white caste. Ultimately, ambiguous, light-skinned Latinx actors and well-established white performers would portray moral

characters, while actors who could not divorce themselves from their Latin identity would be relegated to stereotypical roles.

Likewise, white actors would continue to don darkened skin and exaggerated accents to portray overused Latinx stereotypes. New Zealand actor Cliff Curtis portrayed a Latino drug boss in *Training Day* (Fuqua, 2001) and *Blow* (Demme, 2001), and Jack Black played a Mexican reverend turned *lucha libre* fighter in *Nacho Libre* (Hess, 2006). Evidently, the history of lighter-skinned Latinx actors playing white characters and white actors acting out stereotypical Latinx representations was not as far in the past as one would think, despite the growing numbers of Latinxs working in mainstream media. Even with the rise of Latinx Hollywood film stars and the evolution of Latinx-centered storylines, the race issues of the early days of Hollywood were ever-present in the 2000s and 2010s. In this way, the issues of race that were particularly prominent in the 1930s and presented through Western films made a resurgence during this modern era of filmmaking.

The Western has a history that evolves from frontier fiction in the early nineteenth century. The frontier fiction genre specifically gained popularity in serialized novels. In *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, author John G. Cawelti analyzes the formulation of Western novels and the messages found within them. To provide some background on the Western genre, Cawelti explains that the style emerged around the middle of the nineteenth century when American attitudes toward the frontier began to transform. During this era, it was possible for Americans to treat the frontier as a symbol of the contrast between man and nature. However, the frontier eventually became a place in which the improving civilization met the declining savagery; as such, the setting became an area of conflict where lawless force was justified because its intent was to protect the values of society (Cawelti 22). Consequently, the most prominent

characteristics of the Western formula were the particular kind of setting, situation, and cast of characters with certain significance given to the hero (Cawelti 46).

Cawelti suggests that the basic pattern of a Western emphasizes a plot in which a hero resists a series of temptations through inner control. He states, "When faced with the embodiments of these temptations, his mode of control changes, and he destroys the threat. But the story is so structured that the responsibility for this act falls upon the adversary, permitting the hero to destroy while appearing to save" (qtd. in Cawelti 11). In other words, the Western highlights moral issues in which the hero necessitates control and the repression of invading forces. This control is typically enacted through violence, as it is the means of resolving the conflict generated by the adversary. However, the Western reconstructs violence so that it is not simply a brutal act, but rather an essential undertaking that plays a vital role in the overall structure of the action. As a result, in the Western genre, violence becomes a justifiable act by which the hero exemplifies their moral superiority.

Cawelti expands on the repetition of ideology found in works of genre by explaining, "genre can be defined as a structural pattern embodying a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language. Popular genre, on the other hand, is cultural; it represents the way in which a particular culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form" (15). Essentially, what Cawelti is saying here is that the popular genre, like the Western, makes sense of a particular moment in the culture's history. In terms of the Western, the social rift regarding the frontier reaffirms cultural values and establishes a connection between the past and the present. This genre particularly dramatizes a historical setting, the establishment of law and order, and the resolution of conflict at the frontier (typically through violence). By associating these themes with the hero, as Cawelti notes, "the Western ritually

reaffirmed the creation of America and explored not only what was gained, but what was lost in the movement of American history" (49). As a result, ideology regarding white heroism and the history of violence within America—especially in regards to the Indigenous population which is often at the forefront of the Western conflict—are repeated throughout works of this genre. However, these ideologies are not always overt, as doing so would harm America's self-image as a nation built on democracy. The realities of these horrific historical moments are masked by the Western's focus on morality and social redemption—albeit through violence, nonetheless. Due to the masquerading of American imperialism as moral purity, the fictional pattern/genre disguises the hero's vicious drive and ultimately perpetuates the indulgence of a colonialist conflict.

As a popular literary genre, it is no surprise that frontier fiction would continue to excel once it translated into the Hollywood film system as the Western genre. Despite its existence since the onset of film media, the Western truly emerged in popularity in the 1930s after the release of *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939). As scholar Poe Johnson notes, "[the] popularity and aesthetic [of Westerns] were typically a reflection of the state of American, white masculine power within national and global contexts" (23 Sept 2020). Essentially, Westerns were particularly popular with white American males as the films presented their concerns and typically sided with their values regarding national and global issues. That is to say that Westerns are inherently tied to concerns regarding nationalism, WASP superiority, and an overall settler-colonialist mindset.[4] Consequently, modern Westerns produce the same celebration of violence

[4] Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Eve Tuck discuss settler colonialism as "the specific formation of colonialism in which people come to a land inhabited by (Indigenous) people and declare that land to be their new home" (4). While the settler colonialist framework is specific to Indigenous peoples, Westerns would move into other backdrops like concerns regarding the U.S.-Mexico border, as seen in *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958).

against the out-group while making space for WASP heroes and audiences. While the Western movies of the 20th century tended to focus on hostile elements involving Indigenous Americans, the 21st century films emphasized border confrontations with Latin-American immigrants. Prominent characteristics like revenge narratives, violence, and issues of justice and morality remained the same—always in favor of the WASP protagonist. Because of this historical relationship between race and Western media, today's Hollywood depictions equate the U.S. with whiteness; anyone that falls outside of that idealized whiteness needs to be saved or colonized. This dynamic is the issue at play in *Frontera* (Berry, 2014). Although the film appears to be sympathetic to the immigrant population, the storyline ultimately sets up Roy, the white ex-police officer, to be the hero of the film.

In *Frontera*, Miguel crosses the U.S.-Mexico border through the private property of an ex-policeman, Roy. As he walks through the land, he crosses paths with Olivia, Roy's wife. She kindly offers Miguel and his companion water and a blanket to stay warm before parting ways. In the meantime, three teenage boys decide to play vigilantes as they overlook the land and shoot at Miguel and José in an attempt to scare them back across the border. In the commotion, Olivia falls off her horse, hits her head on a rock, and succumbs to her wounds. Fearful that he will be blamed for her death, Miguel runs away. What follows is Roy's hunt for his wife's killer and Miguel's fight to prove himself innocent.

Despite the film's presentation of injustices facing undocumented immigrants, I argue that the film ultimately puts forward the same narrative repeated in the Western films of the early 20th century—whiteness and WASP morality are essential for saving an inferior population. This dynamic is evident through the vigilantes and the revenge narrative that they set up, as well as the agency the characters hold. Although the film appears to be a Western where Miguel—the

other—is the protagonist, he is simply used as a vehicle for Roy's heroic arc. This reading is made even more apparent when we consider that Miguel's agency is practically non-existent and that Roy is the character that makes it his mission to restore moral order. In doing so, Miguel becomes Roy's stand in. Although the film paints Miguel as the main protagonist, it is truly Roy who takes center stage and becomes the hero of the film. As a result, the film fundamentally exploits the other, asserting that if they are not useful to WASPs, then they are not useful at all—consequently, *Frontera* is not about immigrant struggles, but about white heroism.

Essential to *Frontera* is the vigilante narrative. As the young boys take the high ground in the mountainous area, one of them uses their binoculars and sees Miguel and his companion, José, as they are making their trek into the United States. Excitedly, Kevin calls over his friends, Brad and Sean. Brad then asks Sean to hand him his gun so that he can shoot at them. Sean refuses and Brad tells him, "Look, I told you, we're only gonna scare them. You don't shoot at them, you shoot near them" (17:00-18:05). Brad's statement affirms that their intentions in visiting the area were not solely for target practice, but to act as vigilantes and to protect the land of which they considered themselves to be rightful heirs. The settler-colonialist mindset is reinforced by the boys' use of guns to scare Miguel and José; settler colonialism, as an institution or system, requires violence or the threat of it to attain its goals. The boys' goal here is to scare the men back across the border, and to ultimately protect the United States from any immigrants that seek to 'invade' their land. Interestingly, although a thoughtful analysis of the film cannot ignore this settler-colonialist ideology, the matter is never criticized outright by the film itself. Consequently, this ideology is, in a way, normalized. As culture critics Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Eve Tuck note, "By dismissing theories of settler colonialism as the new dogma, one can miss what is so generative in the turn to analyzing settler colonialism; that is, attending to life lived on

stolen Indigenous land" (7). In other words, the boys' vigilantism is brushed off, as many Western films do, and justified as people protecting their land. By ignoring the fact that the boys are protecting 'their' land that was actually stolen from Indigenous peoples, we neglect the fact that there are no 'rightful heirs' and we ignore the history of repeated aggressions against other humans for the sake of land. As a result, the film repeats the same colonialist violence and reinforces the narrative that the dominant white population is the correct, 'rightful' population for the United States.

In protecting their land, the boys carry out Olivia's death. This sets up the revenge narrative that is essential to Western cinema, and it ultimately exacerbates the power dynamics at play in the film. When Roy arrives at the scene of the crime, all he sees is Miguel standing over his wife's bleeding body. Roy immediately draws his gun and points it at the immigrant as he asks Miguel what he has done. Miguel flees the scene in fear for his life, and this sets the stage for yet another vigilante narrative. Roy assumes that Miguel has murdered his wife in an attempt to steal her horse. Consequently, Roy takes it upon himself to find Miguel and bring him to justice. Eventually, when Miguel is picked up and taken into custody, Roy watches the interrogation room and is unsure that Miguel is capable of killing his wife. Despite the sheriff's reassurance that they got the right man, Roy seems unconvinced and decides to head back to the trail where his wife died to see if he can find anything the investigators have missed. He is particularly interested in finding the bullets, as he is aware that what he witnessed, and the conclusion the police have come to, do not align. Roy eventually comes upon the bullets and, as he looks through his binoculars, he sees an immigrant using the same path his wife died on to cross the border. He watches the man who is soon hit by a bullet and sees an individual in a camouflage jacket running from the scene. On his horse, Roy races to catch up to the man who

has fled in a car (1:05:12-1:07:16). Upon witnessing this murder, Roy is more convinced than ever that Miguel did not kill his wife and decides to visit him in custody. Due to Miguel's upstanding character and his convincing plea expressing his innocence, Roy decides to help Miguel's acquittal and work alongside him to bring the true purveyors of Olivia's murder to justice.

On the surface level, this teaming up between Miguel and Roy demonstrates both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border debate working together in harmony. However, I believe that this interpretation overlooks that Miguel has no agency in the situation. While a superficial reading may state that Miguel possesses power because he actively fights to prove his innocence, it is necessary to understand the power-dynamics at play in the film. Although Miguel's relentless fight to prove his innocence is admirable and may be taken to demonstrate his agency, it is ultimately Miguel's friendship with Roy that leads to Miguel's acquittal. Roy's refusal to believe the first possible suspect, his informal investigation, and his relentless desire to have the real culprits imprisoned all lead to Miguel's eventual release. As a result, the narrative is mostly focused on Roy's point of view as he comes to terms with Miguel's innocence. Consequently, Roy becomes the protagonist of the film, and all agency is in regard to Roy. Without Roy, Miguel would not have been able to prove his innocence. This dynamic is made apparent when the sheriff repeatedly tries to convince Roy to not meddle with the case, given that it is the sheriff's son, Sean, who is responsible for Olivia's death. Had it not been for Roy's persistence, the police department would have, very likely, wrongfully accused Miguel and kept him behind bars. Although I agree with film critics like Christy Lemire who view this perspective, and apparent presentation of an unjust system, as sympathetic to Miguel and immigrants like him, I believe that the way the situation is handled must also be taken into account. My understanding

of the power dynamics at play is strengthened when we consider that John G. Cawelti notes, "Even in Westerns quite sympathetic to the Indian…the focus of the action usually shifts from the Indians themselves to the dilemmas their situations pose for the white hero and heroine" (22). In other words, Miguel's story becomes a backdrop for Roy to exert his power over the justice system that has failed him. In this way, it is not Miguel who is the agent of his own story, but rather Roy who becomes the enforcer of morality and justice through his vigilante narrative. In the end, the two are not working in harmony; it is Roy who sees the political issues at hand through Miguel's struggle. And eventually, it is Roy who takes center-stage in the fight for rights and justice.

In the same vein, while the film appears to condemn the corrupt sheriff, it is another (ex-) policeman who does the right thing and sets Miguel free, and who urges the sheriff to let the boys pay for their crime (1:16:34-1:18:10). In this way, the issue is framed as a fight between good police officers and amoral policemen, and not as an issue within a system that prioritizes WASP lives over the other. Because the film frames the sheriff as a concerned father and Sean as an innocent kid within the wrong crowd, the movie remains sympathetic to those willing to let Miguel pay for a crime he did not commit solely because he was an undocumented immigrant in the United States, and therefore, had no power. The sheriff's outright abuse of power is presented as a case of need, a need to protect one's family, rather than what it is—corruption and an immoral exploitation of Miguel and his status in the United States. Likewise, American historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz notes that framing this border conflict as an issue centered on "cultural change" and "conflict between cultures" practically avoids fundamental questions about the formation of the United States. As a result, its implications for the present and future are ignored (5). What Dunbar-Ortiz is highlighting is that in framing these issues as "encounters," we are

fundamentally erasing history, creating justifications, and ignoring responsibility for continued harm. I believe that the same issues are at play when we consider the justifications made on the sheriff's behalf.

Additionally, because Miguel has no agency, he is ultimately framed as Roy's sidekick. Hence, Miguel is not an autonomous being, but rather a tool for Roy to use and exploit. Interestingly, despite this budding relationship between Miguel and Roy, the message is that Miguel needs Roy to survive. Another piece essential to the Western is the idea that anyone that falls outside of the U.S. idealized version of whiteness needs to be saved. This notion is made apparent several times throughout the film (i.e., Olivia giving Miguel and José water and guiding them to the highway, Roy helping free Miguel, Roy escorting Miguel's wife back to Mexico, etc.), but is perhaps most prominent at the end of the film. Once Miguel is freed, Roy takes him back to his property where the pair first met. Roy tells Miguel that he has a fence to protect his land, but that he has no time for the maintenance of it and often forgets to take care of it. He then tells Miguel that he is willing to pay him time and material so that he may fix his fence, albeit from the Mexico side of the border. Although some may see this scene as a gesture of friendship and mutual respect between the two, I believe it is necessary to examine Roy's reasoning for having Miguel build the fence.

Not only does Miguel get a job out of this pact, but Roy gets to protect his land from other immigrants attempting to cross the border. Early in the film, when Olivia went out on the trail with her extra water and blankets to give to any immigrants, Roy states that the beauty and general undemanding aspect of the trail are the reasons they cannot keep the "damn Mexicans" out. Although we see Roy's growth and genuine care for Miguel throughout the film, it is safe to assume that Roy's overall prejudice has not diminished. Furthermore, Miguel becomes Roy's

stand in—Miguel serves as an extension of Roy and his interests. In building the fence and preventing other undocumented immigrants from crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, Miguel serves Roy's overall goal to protect his land. By building the fence, Miguel essentially becomes the Mexican protector of U.S. land. Consequently, Miguel becomes the "damn Mexican" keeping himself out. Ultimately, Miguel becomes an agent that favors Roy's overall agenda to continue othering the Mexican/immigrant population. Regarding this dynamic, Cawelti states, "…even more sympathetic recent Western treatments of Native Americans… justify the destruction of the Indian by having him hand on the torch to a sympathetic and understanding white character" (22). In other words, although the film appears to show an understanding between the pair, Miguel allows for the end of undocumented immigration into the United States by helping Roy build his fence. In this way, Roy's goals of protecting his land from the beginning of the film are reiterated at the very end. Despite Roy's growth, despite our sympathy for Miguel, despite understanding why immigrants migrate, the film concludes with the same nationalist idea that the U.S. border must be protected, and that the dominant white population is its rightful protector. Additionally, by giving Miguel this job, Roy has also fundamentally saved Miguel of anymore hardship regarding crossing the border. At the end of the day, within the context of the film, the agreement between the two is seen as a win for the both of them; Miguel receives a job gaining U.S. money while staying with his family in Mexico, and Roy's land is protected from further trespassing. However, the agent of this accord is Roy, and his agreement still reinforces the protection of land and the overall notion that there is a 'them' versus 'us.'

In conclusion, while a superficial reading may describe *Frontera* as sympathetic to immigrants through its presentation of the troubles immigrants face in their home countries, on their journey to the U.S., and once they arrive in the U.S., I believe that a comprehensive

analysis demonstrates that white heroism is an essential element that carries out this "sympathetic" viewpoint. Miguel and his troubles ultimately serve as a subplot to convey Roy's hero arc from a sad, vengeful, widowed husband to a carrier of justice. In the end, the film is not so much about Miguel's journey, but about Roy's protection of his land at the border. Rowe and Tuck state that these narratives are "doing profound cultural work in reminding settlers that they belong, that their place in the social order has been hard-won through the taming of savages, and confirming their status as the rightful inheritors of pastoral landscapes such scenes evoke" (6). Through this repeated white-supremacist ideology, the film reinforces the idea that one group belongs while the 'other' does not. As such, the racial discourse within the film evokes the same oppressive messages that serve to keep the dominant white caste at the top, and everyone falling outside of that racial caste system below them. Overall, what perseveres in this modern Western film is the same historical erasure of non-whiteness and preservation of whiteness that has been present since the earliest iterations of the frontier crisis in the 19th century.

Latinidad and Latin-American Rejection in *In the Heights* (Chu, 2021)

On Election Day in 2008, Barack Obama was declared President-elect, thus making him the 44th President of the United States. Four years later, the first African American President would win a second term in office. A historical first, the Obama era was considered by many Americans to be the start of a post-racial moment in which race mattered less (Anderson-Levy 133). The nation was eager for this moment as it meant that affirmative action worked. With a Black president running the country, anyone in the nation—regardless of background, race, and color—could succeed in the United States. Obama proved that enough hard work and dedication could lead people of all races, genders, creeds, etc., to hold even the most influential positions in the United States. Fundamentally, this post-racial movement seemed to indicate that race was no longer a factor in oppression. However, as scholar Lisa Anderson-Levy notes, race frames every social relation in the United States; to ignore race is a privilege, and that privilege is usually held by a select few—the white population (134-135).

Essentially, to consider the Obama era a post-racial moment is to say that we live in a time in which the dominant white population has no power to structurally institute its racism. In other words, all people—regardless of race—are at a level playing field when it comes to any social or political advancement. We know this is not true. All one needs to do is look at the oft-ignored social and political movements regarding gentrification, immigration, adequate healthcare, racial inequality, etc. To discuss a post-race era is to ignore these current struggles involving the non-white population. Consequently, Anderson-Levy suggests that it is necessary to discuss white privilege and whiteness when examining the so-called post-race era. She argues that a discussion of post-race necessitates a discussion of whiteness because whiteness has become the hegemonic norm; to ignore the norm is to ignore the ways in which the marginalized

have become marginalized. Yet this ignoring of the norm is precisely what Lin-Manuel Miranda, writer of Broadway hits like *In the Heights* and *Hamilton,* does in his work. Although his body of work is critically-acclaimed, a deeper understanding of his oeuvre entails the same concerns regarding a so-called post-race moment.

Broadway's *Hamilton* became a pop culture phenomenon upon its debut in 2015. *Hamilton* presents Alexander Hamilton's life as a founding father of the United States. Born and raised in the Caribbean, Hamilton would eventually make his way to the States to further his education, fight in the military, and begin a political career. Inspired by a book about Hamilton's life, Miranda decided to retell his story and, while doing so, affirm immigrants' centrality to United States' history. By casting all non-white actors in this Broadway hit, Miranda's goal was to de-other the historically excluded populations that took the stage. Essentially, Miranda's objective was to counteract a history of stereotypes and to convince the predominantly white, highly educated audience in attendance that they are not too different from the other (Machado Sáez 181).

The cast reinforced this notion on November 18, 2016, when they directed a plea to then Vice President-Elect Mike Pence. As Machado Sáez notes, "Brandon Victor Dixon introduced the cast as representative of a 'diverse America' and expressed their 'hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us'" (182). The 'us' mentioned by Dixon appears to refer to the full American population, inclusive of all demographics, not just the more conservative that Pence represents. However, in *Hamilton*, all of the non-white actors are both the oppressors and the oppressed. Specifically analyzing Daveed Digg's performance as Thomas Jefferson, scholar James McMasters notes:

> When the talented Daveed Diggs argues as Thomas Jefferson for the security of the South's slave-holding economy, the actor's blackness distances his performance of racism from Jefferson's whiteness, enabling a (largely white) audience to forget the degree to which they are implicated in the violent, anti-black histories of the United States. (qtd. in Machado Sáez 183)

In other words, because Daveed is not physically representative of the white oppressor, the founders that condoned unjust actions, such as slavery, are distanced from the white privilege they represent and gain from. *Hamilton* inserts the Latinx immigration story into the broader U.S. immigration myth by placing people of color in the founding father roles. However, despite *Hamilton*'s attempts at re-constructing the immigrants' inseparability from U.S. history, the overall manner in which Miranda tackles the issue has been criticized by scholars, and rightfully so. In crossing boundaries regarding casting, Miranda ignores the liberties the white founders had, and his strategies do not fully educate the spectator in regard to the histories they have benefited from, and continue to take advantage of.

The theater, and more specifically Broadway, is a privileged space in which social concerns are produced, represented, negotiated, and contested. As scholar Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez puts it, Latinx stereotypes are both visual configurations and discursive representations when present within a hegemonic theatrical domain like Broadway. He notes, "it is because of this visibility and objectification that—through images, words, linguistic constructions, gestures, and bodily presence—that the Great White Way, as it is known, represents the ideal discursive and cultural formations where liminal, imagined, and sometimes utopian realities are put to test" (8). What Sandoval-Sánchez is emphasizing is that the Broadway musical exemplifies and

celebrates the American way of life like no other theatrical genre; it is on Broadway that audiences are exposed to the magic that is the American dream.

Interestingly, Broadway audiences represent a predominantly white, significantly better educated, elite cohort that is not representative of the broader U.S. demographic. As a result, Broadway caters to this social-class that is not reflective of the 'diverse America' that the *Hamilton* cast referred to (Machado Sáez 183). Despite *Hamilton*'s intent to demonstrate a diverse America by reframing the immigrant narrative, it also ultimately re-inscribes white supremacist ideology through its casting and the inclusion of hip-hop as the primary source of communication. While it simultaneously attempts to demonstrate how similar the actors are to the white hegemonic audience, it uses hip-hop—a music genre with Black and immigrant historical roots—to convey that message. In doing so, it also signals how different the onstage actors are from the audience. Due to this inherent relationship between Broadway, whiteness, and American nationalism, I argue that resistance-films based on Broadway plays adhere to the same hegemonic ideology. What follows is an analysis of the film adaptation of *In the Heights*, Miranda's first Broadway play—and the first Latinx musical to receive as many awards as the critically-acclaimed *West Side Story* in 1958.

In the Heights encompasses several narratives that take place in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. The main storyline focuses on Usnavi, a young bodega owner who hopes to revive his late father's business in the Dominican Republic. A prominent figure in his life is the neighborhood mother-figure, Abuela Claudia. It is through Claudia that Usnavi eventually wins the lottery, which he hopes will fund his *sueñito*. Yet, he is tethered to Washington Heights due to his attraction to Vanessa, the neighborhood's aspiring fashion designer. The film follows Usnavi as he fantasizes about running a successful business in the

Dominican Republic, realizes his *sueñito* is reachable with the help of the winning lottery ticket, and eventually decides to live out his *sueñito* in Washington Heights. Through the intertwined stories of Nina and Kevin Rosario, Daniela's beauty salon, Vanessa, and Sonny, the film paints a diverse picture of life in the Washington Heights neighborhood. Additionally, *In the Heights* covers a rather extensive list of issues that many Latinxs face in the United States, from gentrification and assimilation, to racial profiling and immigration status. However, as in *Mi Familia* over twenty years prior, none of the issues are delved into too deeply. Although the film has been praised for its representation of a lively, thriving Latinx culture, what is repeated throughout the film is the denigration of the countries of origin of the characters. In this way, the imaginary culture is embodied and celebrated, although the political issues are neglected.

To further discuss this notion, I particularly analyze the overarching theme of *Latinidad* and the characters' reflections on life in their countries of origin. As the characters contemplate their dilemmas, one message is repeated again and again: we are better off here than in Latin America. This message is made even more prominent in the film's final musical number, in which Usnavi triumphantly states that he is in Washington Heights, the place where he has always belonged. Ultimately, although the film attempts to celebrate Latinxs in the United States, it does so at the expense of the nations that make up Latin-America. Consequently, the final message of *In the Heights* is not that Latinxs belong in the United States, but rather that the United States is the only place where Latinxs—or anyone, for that matter—can succeed. Hence, *In the Heights* touts a U.S.-centric ideology that is far more prominent than any uplifting message regarding Latinx-belonging in the United States.

To begin, it is essential to understand Usnavi's *sueñito* and how the rest of the neighborhood reacts to his dream. I specifically look at how Abuela Claudia and Sonny respond

to Usnavi when he tells them his plans to move back to the Dominican Republic. When Usnavi meets his father's lawyer friend, Alejandro tells him that he recently visited his father's old bar in the Dominican Republic. Alejandro shows him pictures of the rundown bar, with its electricity gone and its roof caved in. Although Usnavi is disappointed that the bar is now a shell of what it once was, he is excited—hopeful that he can now afford the property. His *sueñito* is to honor his father by returning home and reviving the bar. Filled with excitement, he tells Abuela Claudia of his plans to return to his country of origin. Abuela Claudia meets his excitement with contempt, as she tells him that he is a workaholic. Looking at pictures of the damaged shop, she asks Usnavi if he really believes things will be different in the Dominican Republic. This is the first comment that sets the tone for the rest of the *barrio*'s negative reaction to Usnavi's dream. Essentially, Abuela Claudia states that there is no real hope for him in the Dominican Republic. He is better off staying put in Washington Heights, where he at least knows he has his bodega to rely on. Similarly, this is the same argument many of the people from the *barrio* share when they hear of Usnavi's *sueñito*.

In fact, many of the people who disagree with Usnavi's point of view do so precisely because they also have a small business. As media scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner notes, "Although the emphasis on hard work is meant to combat stereotypes of laziness, *In the Heights* narratively attempts to resolve deep structural problems with improbable solutions, such as small-business ownership, a lottery ticket, or '*paciencia y fe*' ('patience and faith')" ("The Generic *Latinidad* of '*In the Heights*'"). In other words, the ownership of a small business is meant to combat any issues regarding economic inequalities in the United States. In the same vein, although Usnavi's father owned a small business in the Dominican Republic, he still had to move to the United States to achieve real success. The film thus reifies the notion that the United

States is where dreams come true and where opportunities exist. To return to the Dominican Republic, as Usnavi wishes, is to commit economic suicide, as it is a country with no resources for success. At least, it is not the country with the American dream. This concept is further solidified when we analyze Sonny's scorn for Usnavi's suggestion that he move to the Dominican Republic with him.

Sonny, Usnavi's younger cousin, is unconvinced by Usnavi's dream. Not only does he belittle the Dominican Republic, but he also makes it a point to remind Usnavi that he owes his life to the United States. He reminds Usnavi: "You came here when you was eight. You got 'island memories.' Not me. I was in pampers on that plane. NYC's my spot. I got my island, okay? Go get yours. Don't forget how you got your name" (28:40-29:00). First, Sonny belittles Usnavi's dream by stating he has 'island memories.' Essentially, what Sonny is stating here is that he only remembers the blissful moments he spent on the island as a child. This comment insinuates that not everything is as it seems in the Dominican Republic. In this way, Latin America only exists in the imaginary, and this notion is strengthened when we consider that we learn nothing about the country itself. Sonny does not elaborate on what 'island memories' means, why moving back to the Dominican Republic would be such a bad thing, or even why they moved to NYC from the Caribbean country. In the end, all we know is that, if their situation in the Dominican Republic was as ideal as Unsavi says, there would not have been a reason to leave. Sonny's point of view is further solidified when he again disparages Usnavi by reminding him that he got his name from his father's first trip to New York—during which he saw a passing ship that brandished the name 'U.S. Navy.' Essentially, Sonny is emphasizing that Usnavi, in both name and identity, is inherently tied to the United States. Moreover, he suggests that he owes his life to the United States and reminds him that he is more tied to the U.S. than to the

Dominican Republic. Consequently, Sonny's remarks reflect the same question that Claudia asked Usnavi: will their situation be any different in the Dominican Republic? Sonny is evidently of the opinion that the United States is where their *sueñitos* come true, not on a Caribbean island.

Similarly, the Rosario father-daughter storyline adds to this narrative that the United States is an immigrant's salvation. Like Usnavi, Kevin Rosario owns a small-business. Kevin owns a cab company to provide for his daughter, Nina, who is Washington Heights' golden child. After completing her first year at Stanford, Nina is left appalled by her treatment at a predominantly white institution and is discouraged from returning for a second year. Afraid of telling her father the truth, she states that financial troubles did not allow for her to enroll another year. Her father, however, has sold his company so that he may pay for her college education. Despite Nina's insistence that she does not want to return to Stanford, Kevin stands his ground. We later learn why he is so persistent when he has a conversation with Benny, Nina's boyfriend. Kevin explains that he was pulled out of high school by his father. Kevin worked for pennies on a Puerto-Rican farm until he began to wonder why he worked so hard just so others could make money off of his labor. As a result, Kevin packed his bags, headed to New York, and started his business so he could reap the rewards of his hard work.

Consequently, his background leads to his high expectations for Nina, and explains why he is willing to give up everything so that Nina can attend Stanford. If not for Washington Heights, he would still be working at a farm for pennies; of course, because there are no opportunities for success in Latin America. However, what the film fails to explore is the fact that Puerto Rico is part of the United States. Therefore, the film does not acknowledge that the issues faced in Puerto Rico are, at least in part, due to the United States' shortcomings. In her analysis of *West Side Story* and Puerto Rican Identity, Frances Negrón-Muntaner states: "As

constituted by the legal apparatus, Puerto Ricans born in Puerto Rico are American citizens who cannot vote for president or have voting representatives in Congress. Puerto Rico itself belongs to, but is not a part of, the United States; it is bound by the law but has no rights under the law" ("Feeling Pretty" 86). In other words, Puerto Rico is in a state of limbo in terms of rights under the United States constitution, as it holds status as a U.S. territory, but not as a state. In this regard, the United States plays a role in the reason why Kevin was scrounging for pennies on a farm. However, in neglecting the important aspect regarding the dynamic between the mainland and its territory, the film frames the U.S. as the land of opportunity. Ironically, the mainland is the land of opportunity, while Puerto Rico—still part of the United States—is a land where there is poverty and zero opportunity for success.

Later in the film, we finally understand Abuela Claudia's perspective and why she is so concerned about Usnavi's *sueñito*. When Usnavi first explains why he wishes to return to the Dominican Republic, she shrugs him off. Usnavi states that he works to survive in the United States and that owning his father's old bar in the Dominican Republic would be a labor of love. Claudia dismisses his statement, claiming that Usnavi is just like her mother. During the "*Paciencia y fe*" musical number, we learn what Claudia means when she makes this comment. In the number, Claudia sings about her life in Cuba where her mother was unable to find work; as a result, her family went hungry. Looking to find an income, her mother decided to move her family to New York. The background singers and dancers begin to state the typical negative comments made to many immigrants: learn English, pull your weight, etcetera. Mirroring her comment to Usnavi, they ask her if she is truly better off in New York. As she reflects on working day after day for years, she asks: "And *ay*, *Mama*! What do you do when your dreams come true? I've spent my life inheriting dreams from you. I made it through. I survived. I did it.

Now do I leave or stay?" (1:26:38-1:27:05). The place she is deciding to leave or stay is Washington Heights, presumably for Usnavi's *sueñito* in the Dominican Republic. However, as we see in Claudia's final number, moving to the Dominican Republic is not part of her dream. Washington Heights is the community that saved her from poverty; she is hesitant to move on because she and her mother worked hard to pull their weight—in the words of the background singers—and earn their place in the Heights. However, once the musical scene ends, her choice is clear. Climbing the subway stairs to a bright light, Claudia has passed on. She leaves behind the community that she has loved and taken care of since making it to the United States. Consequently, the "*Paciencia y fe*" number and Claudia's death indicate that to leave Washington Heights for the Dominican Republic is to betray the community that made all of her dreams come true.

Additionally, although the film discusses the dilemmas Claudia faced in Cuba, it does not go into detail about the systemic issues at hand. Because the film does not discuss Cuba's affairs explicitly—nor the Dominican Republic's, nor Puerto Rico's—Latin-America is perceived as a one-dimensional place where poverty is pervasive and inescapable. In this way, as Negrón-Muntaner notes, "The plot ignores intra-Latino conflicts to create a fantasy of a harmonious unity and a commonly held *cultura*—and so the movie ultimately authenticates the notion of a generic and commodified *Latinidad*, where everyone, regardless of their national origins and histories, is fundamentally the same" ("The Generic Latinidad of 'In the Heights'"). In other words, because the film ignores the details of each situation and focuses on the similarities between each immigrants' struggles, *In the Heights* reifies the same patterns of exclusion and stereotypes that white supremacist Hollywood films built. Although the film celebrates the imaginary Latin-American culture, it neglects the political and cultural geography in the name of

Latinidad. Consequently, it excludes the very Latinx population it attempts to present, embody, and celebrate.

To bring home the negative aspects of *Latinidad* in *In the Heights*, it is essential to analyze the "*Carnaval del barrio*" musical number of the film. The film calls out specific Latinx countries by name, flags, musical styles, and more. However, *In the Heights* does not make it a point to understand the differences between the countries and explain why each culture is important to the overall message of unity. Indeed, as Negrón-Muntaner states, "The cover of Latinidad also obscures the specificity of a predominantly Dominican community" ("The Generic Latinidad of '*In the Heights*'"). In fact, Washington Heights is a predominantly Black Dominican community. Yet, the film focuses on light-skinned Latinxs, with Benny being the only Black character and Nina being the only central Afro-Latina actress. Other Black actors are relegated to background roles. Despite this, much of the music the film employs—in this scene and throughout the film—were largely developed by Afro-Latinxs. In this way, Afro-Latinx and Black culture play a monumental role in the film's communication and celebration of Latinxs, yet Blackness itself is not given space on the silver screen. This dynamic is important to note because, as Julissa Contreras and Dash Harris Machado note, "Black Latinxs are fighting discrimination that dates to the colonial '*casta*' system, which placed African and Indigenous peoples at the bottom and Iberian colonizers and their children at the pinnacle — all of whom have retained social, economic and political power in the region for and among themselves" ("'*In the Heights*' is just more of the same whitewashed Hollywood"). In other words, the lack of onscreen Latinx Blackness is another example of how Latinxs are relegated to the racial caste system—even within their own cultural/ethnic group as Latinxs. Essentially, despite *In the Heights*' attempts at presenting an alternative to U.S. whiteness through *Latinidad*, it still

presents a white hegemony. As a result, the film reiterates the same white supremacist ideology prevalent within the Hollywood film system.

To conclude my analysis, I would like to focus on how my reading is further solidified by the final musical number. At the end of the film, when Usnavi walks into his bodega and sees a mural paying homage to Abuela Claudia and the Dominican Republic, Usnavi makes the last-minute decision to stay in Washington Heights. As he sings, "Finale," Usnavi states that Washington Heights is his destiny and, referring back to Sonny's earlier statement, that he has found his island. While this appears to be a triumphant ending for Usnavi, and a general reading may view the number as one that expresses that Latinxs are a part of the paradigm of a diverse U.S., I believe that this musical act reflects a similar discourse to that of highly-acclaimed, and highly criticized, "America" in *West Side Story* (Robbins and Wise, 1961). Regarding "America," Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez argues that the song emits an Anglo-American patriotic discourse and produces a racist discourse of Latinx otherness in the U.S. In his close-reading of "America," Sandoval-Sánchez argues that it is important to note that the patriotic message is delivered by an assimilated immigrant who denounces her country of origin (72). Similarly, as Usnavi sings about his belonging in Washington Heights, he comes to realize that all of his memories, his friendships, and the community he has been searching for are in Washington Heights—there is no mention of the Dominican Republic. In "America," there is a two-sided confrontation between the Puerto-Rican nationalists and the assimilated group, but it is ultimately the assimilated group—and thus the pro-U.S. propaganda—that is exalted at the end of the number. To the same degree, Usnavi's desire to return to the Dominican Republic, and everyone else's beliefs that he is better off staying in the U.S., represent the same back-and-forth in "America." Ultimately, because he chooses to stay in the United States, and because of the

constant denigration of Latin-American countries throughout the film, *In the Heights* presents the capitalistic and neoliberal United States as the only country of importance. In the Latin-American countries, there are no opportunities for success, and poverty is a given. However, each person in Washington Heights is able to achieve the American dream because they exist in the land of opportunity, one which has given many of them a chance to own their own businesses. The film constantly repeats the economic security that the United States has to offer, and that alone is what truly tethers the Latin-American immigrants to this country. In the end, the idea that anything is possible in the United States and that anyone can succeed there—so long as they participate in its capitalistic environment—prevails.

Active throughout the film is a discourse regarding whether one is better off in their poor Latin-American countries that offer no jobs, or very little paying work, and the U.S., where there is gentrification and one has to fight for their belonging. Ultimately, the myth that, in the U.S., you can escape poverty if you work hard enough—like Usnavi, Claudia, and Kevin Rosario do—wins out. However, I believe that it is also important to note that the characters of *In the Heights* represent the working-class community that makes the world turn. Essentially, they are useful to the United States because they engage with, and help reinforce, its capitalist practices. Usnavi does so through his bodega, which helps feed the neighborhood, and Kevin does so through his taxi business, which allows Washington Heights inhabitants to travel to and fro. Additionally, Kevin's business funds his daughter's college education, which is viewed as the neighborhood's saving grace in making long-lasting political effects and elevating more successful denizens. While Miranda's decision to present working-class citizens seemingly intends to counteract the bandido, harlot, etcetera, stereotypes typical to Latinx media representations, what *In the Heights*

actually does is reinforce that Latinxs—and all marginalized others—are useful only when it comes to reinforcing U.S. capitalism and the white-favoring hierarchy.

This notion is also reflected in the real world, most recently if we consider the Trump-Pence campaign in 2020. Although former President Trump made comments regarding "criminal Mexicans" and campaigned on several exclusionary practices regarding immigrants south of the border in 2016, his 2020 campaign won the votes of many Latinxs in the United States—about 25 to 35 percent nationally (Gamboa and Sesin). A large portion of Latinxs found themselves inclined to vote for Trump due to the economic issues and policies he touted. Additionally, many Latinxs tend to be conservative on issues, given the community's strong ties to religion. Bernard Fraga, associate professor of political science at Emory University, notes: "…the law-and-order rhetoric used during the [Trump] campaign really resonated with an already predisposed population to question things like Black Lives Matter" (qtd. in Gamboa and Sesin). In other words, many Latinx people voted for Trump in an attempt to make space for core values which mirror the dominant white caste's principles. Similarly, what *In the Heights* does with *Latinidad* is make space for a white Latinx identity. Thus, the idea that perseveres is the one that touts the dominant white caste (including within the Latinx sphere) as the 'correct,' 'rightful' population.

Living in the United States, where one can build their own business and gain from a capitalist economy, is both a privilege and necessitates safeguarding. As a result, *In the Heights* fails to do what it set out to do—to counteract Latinx stereotypes and to demonstrate that Latinxs belong in the United States just as much as any WASP. Essentially, the characters' Latin American countries of origin are denigrated again and again, until the last person who still has faith in his country decides that nothing good waits for him in the Dominican Republic. Usnavi's last number, "Finale," solidifies the idea that the U.S. is where dreams are made, and the unjust

issues that were so concerning to the community are ignored—and never truly delved into throughout the film's nearly 150-minute runtime. Consequently, *In the Heights* does not exemplify Latinx belonging in the United States, but upholds the same nationalist arc akin to over 100 years of capitalist Hollywood cinema.

Reflection

Media is both persuasive and pervasive. Despite several political-resistance movements and films, like the ones discussed in this thesis, racial and ethnic stereotypes continue to persist in mainstream media. Professor of communications Mari Castañeda notes that, "It is ironic that Latinos are disproportionately absent from mainstream English-language media sectors, while at the same time young Latinos continue to be the most coveted consumer demographic of the near future" (9-10). As a growing consumer demographic, Latinxs are simultaneously the most sought after audiences and the least-wanted citizens. As more Latin Americans make their way to the United States, we are preyed on for capitalist gains and, at the same time, there is a growing anti-immigrant discourse. Racial and ethnic stereotypes in the media are not seen as constructs by the mainstream. Audiences view these representations as real images that reflect the ways people truly are. As a result, these (mis)representations are often taken for face-value and are uncritically perceived as real.

By presenting a majority of Latinxs as garden workers, bodega owners, and maids, the media asserts that these are the positions in which they belong. And when they are seen in more professional roles, like Bill in *Mi Familia*, we see an erasure of their racial and ethnic identities—in this way, the marginalized still represent the white, pro-capitalist hegemony that is accepted as worthy of such roles. Castañeda summarizes the impact of these mediated images well when she states:

> The mainstream reproduction of racial and ethnic stereotypes, and the ways in which they intersect with class, gender and sexuality in the media, hence creates the conditions that maintain the status quo and reinforce racist, classist, sexist and homophobic hegemony. By reinforcing a white supremacist and pro-capitalist ideology in news and entertainment

> programming, forms of social control can be sustained in which people of color are perceived as largely embodying the negative racial and ethnic stereotypes, and consequently, unworthy of upward mobility or educational resources. (5)

In other words, the ways in which ethnic groups are represented and perceived affect the groups' agency regarding real social, political, and economic issues. These observations are what inspired my interest in analyzing Latinx-centered media within the Hollywood system. Although many works appear to deflect negative stereotypical images, I struggle with the fact that they work within the system that marginalizes those same groups. As I worked to analyze the films in this thesis and answer my research questions regarding how to enact concrete, positive representational change, I found myself with more questions than answers.

As I began to analyze *Mi Familia*, I was struck by Memo's erasure of his ethnic identity. As I concluded in the third chapter, the film ultimately reifies that success equates to whiteness. However, there is also an ongoing obsession with non-whiteness and masquerading. In 2020, a professor at George Washington University of white Jewish ancestry was exposed for impersonating different ethnic and racial identities. In a blog post regarding her lies, Jessica Krug states "I have eschewed my lived experience as a white Jewish child in suburban Kansas City under various assumed identities within a Blackness that I had no right to claim: first North African Blackness, then US rooted Blackness, then Caribbean rooted Bronx Blackness" ("The Truth, and the Anti-Black Violence of My Lies"). So, how does masquerading as a woman of Afro-descent benefit Krug?

Although the answer to this question is not simple, writing my thesis helped me dig into these complex issues. Over recent years, the United States has seen a movement to uplift the voices of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color when it comes to their history in

the United States. In identifying as an Afro-Latina, Krug perhaps thought more audiences would find her more credible. As a historian who has published several works relating to African American history and Latin America, her works would stand out because they are written by someone with deep cultural roots in its history. In this way, Krug uses her false racial and ethnic identity to boost her academic reputation and prove that Afro-Latinx excellence is possible in the United States. However, the issue is not that simple, considering racism is not solely about individual responses to non-white people. Thus, it is important to consider how Krug was able to occupy the Afro-Latinx space without having to work through the various structural and interpersonal aspects of institutional racism. By masquerading, Krug uses race and ethnicity as a tool to become an 'model minority.' This 'model minority' aligns with the dominant white caste, as it demonstrates her educated eliteness. In masquerading, Krug manipulates and gains the support of the group of people she is impersonating, and she becomes a token story that anyone can succeed in the U.S. However, in doing so, she ignores the privileges she obtains, idealizes the Latinx struggle—as many of the films I discuss do—and falsely presents her identities to gain some sort of triumphant backstory. This masquerading speaks to the American desire for Latinx culture and people—but not just any Latinx person, the whitewashed, Americanized kind. Consequently, not only does Krug—and others who masquerade—take away real opportunities for representation from the actual Black and Latinx community, but they also represent the same post-racial myth of the Obama era that I discuss in the *In the Heights* chapter of this thesis.

Currently, white people are using false ethnic and racial identities to present themselves as minority success stories. Meanwhile, as we see with Bill in *Mi Familia*, the Latinx population has to masquerade as non-ethnic, as non-different, and as part of the 'in-group' to achieve success. Bill's struggle reflects a very real dilemma for ethnic people in the United States. To be

successful, you must talk "right" and act "right," and these "right" ways of being typically align with the dominant caste system—the white racial group. As I reflect on current political issues and Bill's struggles with his identity—an issue faced by many Latinxs/communities of color in the United States—positive changes are not the ones that stand out. Instead, it is the fact that he tried so hard to erase his ethnic identity so that he could succeed in a country that devalues his personhood. Meanwhile, thirty years after the film's release, members of the dominant group use and portray his identity as a product for their own benefit—something that is not much different than the original creation of cinematic stereotypes during film's inception.

Additionally, as I analyzed *Frontera*, I began to reflect on current political concerns regarding the Latinx population in terms of immigration. *Frontera* clearly depicts the battle immigrants face when it comes to belonging in the United States (re: the young boys shooting at the immigrants to scare them back to Mexico) and the power they hold as immigrants (re: Miguel's murder trial). As a result, power dynamics are at the forefront of the film. However, in the end, the film does nothing to reflect a change in those power dynamics. In fact, Miguel becomes an agent for the white/nationalist agenda by building Roy's fence along the U.S.-Mexico border. Latinx belonging and power are ever-present in discussions regarding immigration, although they were especially present during the time the film was released, as the country saw a record number of ICE arrests and removals under President Obama around this era (Gramlich). Interestingly, while many praised the nation for entering a post-racial era thanks to the election of a Black president, undocumented Latinxs found themselves targeted by the government as well as the media. In a similar vein, Trump's campaign in 2015 ran on a promise to control immigration from Mexico and Central and South American countries. In this way, the politics of the era painted immigrants as a foreign danger to American life. Not only were

Latinxs—or as Trump simplified the Latinx population to, "Mexicans"—painted as criminals, but they were also said to steal jobs (Time Staff).

In this way, politicians like Obama and Trump reify the 'them versus us' agenda. While the conversation surrounding the mass ICE incarcerations and Trump's derogatory remarks led to a push by Latinxs for more visibility and talks of equality, it also exposed the power dynamics at play in the United States. The conversation regarding Latinx personhood in the U.S., especially from conservatives, is typically framed in a way that states Latinxs have all to gain while the dominant U.S. culture has everything to lose. If a Latinx person gains documented status, they will then that take jobs away from the people who 'belong/are from here.' They will gain rights, become the dominant group, and overtake the current white hegemony. At least this is the overall fear of those outside of the Latinx population. Consequently, this fear of losing privilege dominates current cinematic representation. Although Miguel is not a criminal and represents the population of immigrants who are simply seeking a better life in the United States, he becomes Roy's tool for his expulsion of the "damn Mexicans." The issues regarding the injustices Miguel faced are never addressed nor truly condemned; instead Miguel becomes much like the vigilantes that tried to keep him out of the United States. In the end, Miguel, and *Frontera* as a film, do not tackle any political issues but rather reinforce the idea that immigrants are not worthy of agency and are only useful when they do not threaten the status quo of the dominant white hierarchy.

And finally, as I reflect on *In the Heights*, the problematic idea of *Latinidad* is prominent. Although the film intends to celebrate the overall Latinx demographic in the United States, it oversimplifies the population. As the film discusses all of the issues that the immigrants face in their native countries, there is this message of shared experiences that ties each of the stories

together. However, each country has its own history and racial/ethnic makeup that is not addressed in the film. By touting the concept of *Latinidad*, *In the Heights* neglects that Latinxs are more than one history and one identity. For example, Afro-Latina actress Leslie Grace portrays Nina, although she is the only Afro-Latina part of the main cast. Similarly, light-skinned Melissa Barrera plays the love-interest of the film, while darker-skinned Latinxs are relegated to supporting roles. The Latinx community has always had a colorism issue, and these issues are embedded in many of the films that highlight Latinx lived-experiences, especially *In the Heights*. However, they are not explicitly dealt with. For example, in the Broadway play, a central issue regarding Nina and Benny's relationship is that Benny is a Black man. The racial issue is scrapped in the film version. Similarly, because the film is so caught up in presenting *Latinidad* and intertwining the storylines, it fails to delve into the systemic issues at hand. It makes no point to discuss the colorism within the Latinx community. It makes no point to discuss the poverty in Puerto Rico as an issue involving its status as a U.S. territory. It makes no point to discuss how the community is seen as more valuable because of its sleuth of business owners.

In the end, what makes *In the Heights* stand out as a progressive film is also its downfall. While it has been heralded as a step in the right direction for Latinx representation in Hollywood, its representation falls short. My investigation has demonstrated that representing a culture or racial/ethnic group on the silver screen is simply not enough. If we cannot tackle the deeper political roots embedded in these films and in our struggles, then we are not truly enacting change. While it is unfair to hope one film will solve the problems of a century of media exclusion and colorism, it is not unfair to criticize it and point out its shortcomings. Although *In the Heights* attempts to uplift Latinx voices, its intent is ultimately futile. What truly matters is impact, and based on its failure to discuss and condemn any systemic issues, *In the Heights* joins

the repertoire of Latinx-based Hollywood films that are more American-centrist than existing within the hyphen of Latinx-American.

Consequently, despite a growing number of Latinxs in the United States, and a growing number of social and political movements in their favor, political-resistance films have not proactively deconstructed the current stereotypical paradigm. Even with Latinx directors like Gregory Nava and producers like Lin-Manuel Miranda, Hollywood films reiterate the same capitalist, racist, xenophobic messages perpetrated since the film system's inception. This is largely because they rely on the same historical conventions that have worked to indoctrinate the masses regarding the other. While diverse media creators should be able to avoid those oppressive viewpoints and reflect progressive messages regarding immigration, racial equality, etcetera, it is simply not possible. Essentially, the idea of mainstream media and representations that uplift the marginalized are incompatible. The mainstream media currently favors—and always has favored—an affluent white population. To present the marginalized as equal to this demographic is to take away the privilege that the white population has benefited from. The fear of what the dominant culture will lose is what prevents any concrete change. Consequently, a double-consciousness is necessary if we would like to reframe media and society itself. Media itself cannot change the ways in which community members are perceived; the damage is irreparable. It is the actors of society who need to care about and actively counter the negative stereotypes in the media. By having conversations, changing behaviors, and critically examining beliefs, we can work towards more meaningful relationships and representations. If not, like the political-resistance films I have examined, we are doomed to repeat the same oppressive patterns.

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