

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA: NEW ARTICULATIONS OF LATINIDAD IN THE HOLLYWOOD IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to representation for Latinx in the US film industry, Lin-Manuel Miranda stands out as one of the most varied and complex of Latinx creators working in cinema today (Mcmanus 2018; Scaletta 2021; Kawa 2021). Although he has enjoyed a blooming success through an ascending presence in Anglo-US entertainment industry, Miranda's career as a Latinx creator runs also in parallel with current Latinx demographic shifts in the United States, specifically as we move from the late twentieth into the twenty-first century. Thus, we discern how his various roles as an actor and director complicate existing schemas or paradigms of silver-screen Latinx representation and Latinidad in contemporary film spectrum. In this essay, I assess how critical race theory concepts such as assimilation and panlatinidad are foregrounded in the mediated construction of Lin-Manuel Miranda cinematic career, negotiated and contained in the context of US Latinidad in 21st century cinema. In order to do so, this paper will focus on the concept of assimilation and mixed-race theories according to Latinx film representation. Then, I will discuss on Miranda's panethnic understanding of Latinidad, as a way of improving the stereotypical conditions of Latinx representation in recent Hollywood. In the last part of this essay, the case study of two of his films, one as an actor (*Mary Poppins Returns*, 2018) and the other one as a creator/director (*In the Heights*, 2021) provides meaningful insight of the representation of Latinidad in contemporary US films in ways that implicitly address a crisis of racial/ethnic solidity onscreen, hence encapsulating a powerful sense of cultural equality crafted toward the representation of Latinx in US culture.

KEYWORDS: Assimilation, Latinx, Lin-Manuel Miranda, panethnicity, US cinema.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the largest minority group in the United States, with 18.9% of the population¹, Latinx represent a conspicuous lucrative market that media and film industry specifically have striven to get profit from. Nonetheless, several scholarship data, as the recent report *The Latino Gap: A Report on the State of Latinos in US Media* provides (Negrón-Muntaner 2014), illustrate how the longstanding Latinx absence and the stereotypical depiction in contemporary media roles subsequently remain in our days. Within this context, one of the most far-reaching issues in the Latinx film representation scholarship questions the Latinx commodification into a “generic racialized” homogeneous

group. Cheyroux details when describing US consumer culture that, “the term ‘Latino’ itself sums up the issue: being an “ethnonym,”—a word that has meaning in the particular social and political context of the United States—or “umbrella word,” it erases the myriad nationalities and situations that it covers” (2).

Both as a profitable asset and as a machinery for narrowing the range of stories and characters that individuals from this group inhabit on screen, Latinx have constituted part of the United States’ cinematic imagination since the emergence of motion pictures in the late 19th century. As we will explore further, though shifting in their specific contours, representations of Latinx have remained consistently stereotypical; Latinx have primarily appeared on screen as bandits, criminals, nameless maids, or sultry *señoritas* (Serna 2017). However, and surprisingly enough, some Latinx actors and filmmakers have also participated in the film industry as “assimilated” into the Anglo industry and its narrative, promoting a raceless adaptation of the conventional Latinx to either Anglo characters or a panethnic composition of their image (Kido Lopez 7). In this way, while some Latinx opted to work outside the confines of the US mainstream film industry, others sought to elevate the Latinx image in film from the inside. That was the case of some renowned Latinx actors such as Anthony Quinn (1915-2001) or José Ferrer (1912-1992), whose wide-ranging Hollywood career was built on non-Latino characters while advocating a much more inclusive *Latinidad* on cinema. In our days, Latinx artists such as Robert Rodriguez, Oscar Isaac or Jessica Alba have also constructed a filmography framed on assimilated Latinx characters, raceless protagonists, and panlatino narratives, taking up those prior roles initiated in the Golden Age of Hollywood. As I will discuss in the subsequent sections, Latinx representation in the 21st century cinema is being shaped by debates over raceless *Latinidad*, witnessing an assimilationist understanding of *Latinidad* in the United States, and the continuous expansion of national essentialist ideas that ineluctably have their correspondence onscreen.

In the last decades, and prompted by an unprecedented success on stage, the name of Lin-Manuel Miranda stands out as one the visible faces of the Latinx representation in today’s entertainment, especially within the film industry. Deemed as the unifying voice of

the Obama years and the visible face of a new generation of Latinx in the show business, Miranda is widely considered, parallel to the character who put him in the public eye, Alexander Hamilton, a “true revolutionary” (Schwartz 2019). Not a sociopolitical revolutionary in the sense of Hamilton but an artistic revolutionary who relinquish to follow the traditional depiction of Latinx on film. In this sense, the nature of his film characters may be considered as a tool used to mobilize people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds in order to achieve a specific goal or challenge injustices. In the context of Latinx representation in film, Miranda’s roles in cinema may positively transform a dynamic, developing Latinx society while addressing sensitive issues, such a race, citizenship and ethnic visibility.

Lin-Manuel Miranda is considered in our days as the “Latinx pop renaissance man of his era” (Shapiro 5). Gifted with an active versatility and a recognizable cultural disconformity in his approach to the medium, he acts as a theater and film performer, playwright, screenwriter, composer and filmmaker, displaying nevertheless another kind of versatility: a transnational, raceless commitment in his film works that struggles directly over Latinx racial representation in film. Miranda, who was born in the multicultural and immigration-welcoming New York City, grew up surrounded by different cultural atmospheres, filling his artistic education with Latinx influences from his native Puerto Rico but also filling his cultural apparatus background with a more Anglo style. This mixture of racial and cultural influences, as we will unfold later on this paper, conveys a mix-master of narrative conditions on Miranda’s Latinx characters and creations which transforms and whips around the presence of Latinx in current US cinema.

2. IMAGINING LATINX STARDOM IN THE 21ST CENTURY US CINEMA

2.1. *Assimilation and Mixed-Race Latinidad*

Scholarly reflections about Latinx assimilation in the United States have grown into debate within Latinx studies scholarship in the last years (Morales 2019; Hall 2021; Aldama 2022). Starting with the canonical account provided by Milton Gordon’s theories about the conceptual models of assimilation in America and the dimensions of

ethnic assimilation, it has since tremendously evolved into Latinx studies to take into account societal changes but also broaden the research according to the new waves of Latinx immigrants.

The assimilation theory has not lost its utility for the study of cinema but on the contrary, we can establish that is in tune with critical race approaches to race in cinema today. As a means of example, the analogy between the racial traits in a character and in the actor/actress who plays each role, no longer shapes as a straight process, taking into account the fact that a growing number of non-white actors/actresses are expanding in the US film industry. In this matter, while the casting practice of “whitewashing,” in which a white performer performs a role based on a non-white person or fictional character, has been an unremitting practice in Hollywood since the beginnings², it is progressively being displaced in recent years by its racial counterpart “blackwashing” and “brownwashing” (Zhang 2017). A few decades ago, rather than pretend that white actors were characters from Latinx cultures, studios simply cast white actors in these roles. Nowadays, Latinx actors such as Lin-Manuel Miranda are performing Anglo or white-skinned characters who were written that way since its narrative conception.³ Hence, indigenous/dark-skinned actors have been set aside from leading roles in Hollywood productions versus Latinx-Mestizos (Zoe Saldaña, Michael Peña, Salma Hayek) or Latinx passing actors/light-skin/mixed-raced actors (Jessica Alba, Lin-Manuel Miranda) who are gaining much more presence in the US film industry.

Regarding mixed-raced casting in Hollywood productions, film scholar Mary Beltrán has extensively analyzed the reasons and consequences of this practice. As Beltrán points out, when surveying Latinx representation norms in the Hollywood media industries since the millennium, Hollywood film industry still privileges actors of partial Latinx heritage and its implications (155). And that can be proved in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s current success along with other Latinx actors such as Gael Garcia Bernal, Oscar Isaac or Edward Ramírez, Latinx stars who follow the more general popularity in Hollywood and US popular culture since the 1990s for ethnically ambiguous looks. It can be claimed, then, that performers such as Lin-Manuel Miranda, have grounded their Hollywood success on a racially or ethnically ambiguous appearance.

Finally, in other terms but dealing as well with racial concerns in casting Latinx in Hollywood, “appropriation” is another form of transgressive action among those who are “othered,” and it is possible to take over the stereotype by this mean.⁴ In Lin-Manuel Miranda’s filmography, we find several instances of appropriation in significant roles, from Anglo-European to a wide array of Latin America nationalities. Nevertheless, it does not imply a fully assimilation of these prior values. For instance, in the Latinx terminology we find a foregrounded case with the term “Newyorican,” which was introduced to challenge the term “NeoRican,” implying a less than full-fledged Puerto Rican-ness. Poets, artists, and activists articulated and used the Newyorican term and conveyed along with it a strong, more politicized, defiant, and demanding identity and definition for the second generation group (Rodríguez 81). Similarly, the term “Chicano” was introduced and supplanted what was seen by many as the more negative term “Pachuco” or the more accommodationist term, “Mexican- American.” By showing this terminological review, I want to put on the spotlight that the ethnic/racial appropriation of some of Miranda’s film characters does not necessarily imply a negative connotation within his cinematic career but signifies a step forward in the Latinx re-imagination in US society.

All in all, there is no better example of racial assimilation and appropriation in recent years that the characters in Miranda’s major success: *Hamilton* (2015), a work that inevitably has blazed a trail in Miranda’s following roles. The same as Alexander Hamilton’s background as an immigrant gave Miranda the opportunity to shape the audience’s view of the character, in a white immigrant in early America versus mixed-race Puerto Rican Latino in modern America, the cinematic choices of Miranda have always looked upon this American model of the stereotype of the raceless modern migrants who are assimilated to the dominant culture (the use of Anglo music, Anglo attitudes) but who also coexist with different ethnic/national backgrounds, as we will analyze in the next section.

2.2 *The Transnational Stardom in Hollywood Latinidad*

The US (trans)national Latinx stardom embodied in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s persona has a direct tie with his involvement with the English-speaking entertainment business and blockbuster

productions, choosing as a personal statement, mainstream narratives instead of activist, social-oriented narratives that intentionally put in the center the Latinx sociopolitical reality. This fact is given since Miranda's film presence is articulated through a progressive transformation of his Latinx cultural identity beyond a one-dimensional Hispanic background. In other words, his Hollywood career signals an achievement as a Latinx performer within the studios' production machinery by combining an assimilation both to Anglo and panlatino perspectives. The undeniably international recognition of Miranda as a performer can be validated, in this sense, within the logics of a transnational stardom production and reception.

Since the transnational stardom principle in film studies implies a constant dialogue between different geopolitical nations or in the case of Miranda, identity patterns which are deeply dependent on the constant intersections on film roles choices, it can be claimed that Miranda's acting career in the US film industry contemplates the various meanings and construction of a transnational stardom. It can be claimed that depicting an accurate vision of a given national identity on screen is always problematic, since identity is a blend of both inherited and acquired features and a cinematic production often fails to convey its own complexity. For this reason, Miranda's national identity removal from several of his cinematic performances provide him a wider emancipation in the conventional Latinx representation. As "the star turns into a complex subset of texts, performances, and identities" (Fernández Labayen and Rodríguez Ortega 166), the embracing of a panethnic dimension in Miranda's career enables him to surpass the exotic Latinx stereotype and thus to accentuate transnationalism in his film character choices.

The stereotypical representation of Latinx in Hollywood cinema, which has portrayed a negative, inaccurate version of the Latinx reality in the US till our days, was countered by a cinematic stream instituted in the 1970's Chicano cinema. This sociopolitical way of film representation which worked against the grain of mainstream cinema, was channeled into more accessible productions along the 1980's and the beginnings of the 1990's until the arrival of the new millennium film artists. This narrative founded a subversive approach to Latinidad combining and integrating Latinx aspects taken from diverging Hispanic roots and Anglo aspects. Stereotypical images

of how Latinx looked, spoke, and acted then became meaningful tools for distinguishing between white (European) Americans and people who came from Latin American countries. As an “inaccurate conflation of disparate Latina/o cultures and the stereotypical representation of Latina/os as highly sexual, comic, subservient, and/or criminal.” This is how Mary Beltrán described the stereotypical depiction of Latinx in Hollywood (12), which took into account what Ramírez Berg had examined in his description of Latinx film roles as Latin lovers, *bandidos*, harlots, and clowns. Charles Ramírez Berg described this dynamic regarding the Hollywood narrative tradition: hero and heroine’s roles have historically been the exclusive domain of the white actors and actresses, while Latinx actors deemed nonwhite have typically been cast as villains, sidekicks, and temporary love interests (42). Conversely, cross-cultural portrayals by white actors in Latina/o roles were often played by Anglo actors during the classical Hollywood era. For example, is worth noting the role of Puerto Rican immigrant Maria in *West Side Story* (1961), played by Natalie Wood, and of Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, played by Marlon Brando in *Viva Zapata!* (1952), just to name a few.

The resistance and control over the everlasting Latinx stereotypes in Hollywood has been and is one the main purposes of Latinx artists in recent US media. And in order to counter this Hollywood stereotype and to “represent” the Latinx community, Miranda has managed to exercise control not only by carefully selecting the transnational nature of the characters he plays but also by covering the whole function of the filmmaking: music composition, singing, acting and writing have been some of her most significant contributions in films such as *Moana*, *Vivo*, *Mary Poppins Returns* or more recently, *In the Heights*. By keeping with works on transnational stardom and more specifically on the Latinx stars who made a career before him, he has worked on his image both in the press and in the elaboration of his persona. Miranda has followed a tradition of representation of Latinx actors while simultaneously distinguishing himself from his Latinx fellow artists by embodying an all-inclusive panethnicity and assimilation which helps his integration into the US media market. One of Miranda’s vital assets in his Hollywood career has been his ability to Americanize himself. He can be pictured as the ultimate “self-made man,” with a star persona image that contributes to his

Americanization, like his native English-speaking or the way he adapts to multiple Hollywood genres and sides in the filmmaking industry. However, Miranda has nonetheless never lost his *Latinness* by injecting an exoticism into her persona that US stars don't have and by increasing his value within the "system of differences and distinctions" that conforms the star system (McDonald 200).

2.3. *Beyond Stereotypes: A Panlatino Insight*

Film scholar Angharad Valdivia affirmed that, while some Latinx scholars reduced the category "Latina/o" to the "brown" race, the fact is that Latinxs come in all racial, religious, and nation-origins combinations, which in turn means the entire spectrum of skin colors (2010: 19). In the same line, scholar Eliana Rivero questions the notion of *panlatinidad* as a construct and delves into how this term reflects itself in cultural texts:

Desde la llamada "conciencia étnica latina," hasta el término "Pan-Latino"/"Trans-Latino," el análisis de la (s) latinidad (es) se ha atenido mayormente al campo de los estudios culturales, sociológicos y etnográficos, referidos frecuentemente a cierto subgrupo etnonacional presente en centros urbanos específicos. El consenso actual estriba en matizar el término latino como controvertible si se considera su capacidad para homogeneizar experiencias históricas y oscurecer distinciones importantes entre poblaciones latinas de origen diverso (712).

The panethnic nature of the Latinx identity brings also some clues to a politicized side of *Latinness* (Gregorio-Fernández 37). This leads us to understand panethnicity as a political, challenging weapon, perhaps taking over from the Chicano movement to combat racism and fight against the assimilation and status of Latinx in US society. In other terms, the notion of *panlatinidad* has not been used exclusively for political or protest purposes, but as a paradigm of Latinx diversity in positive terms, understanding the cultural, economic and political phenomena that underlie the United States. One of the multiple positive aspects of the term is that it contains ideas that arise from shared practices instead of representations imposed from outside, being decoded as an indicator of plural cultural identities as opposed to assimilation and acculturation

processes traditionally associated with being “American” in the United States. As a consequence, panlatinidad can be considered as a positive categorization even though it merges cultural differences through similarities, common experiences and identities involved with strategic identifications.

In this matter, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Latinx ethnicity onscreen can be easily described from a panlatino standpoint. In terms of media coverage, for example, he is frequently referred to in the English-language press as just “Latino.” Meanwhile some other coverages feature him as “Puerto Rican” or simply erase his Latinx background (Leland 2018). It is widely acknowledged that such category as “Latinx” is both problematic and productive, and it does not reflect on exactly the diversified meanings of the term. In fact, the label “Latinx” or its variants only exists as an imaginary idea since it is a socially constructed but is still able to create meaning (Caminero-Santangelo 2007). *Latinoness* can be defined then on how individual identities as well as national, transnational, ethnic and panethnic communities are imagined, showing different models of ethnicity and the implications of each of these ways of thinking about identity, being both a real and imagined construct. Nonetheless, and in spite of the complexity of the term, which allows the overlapping and disjuncture among multiple Latinx groups, the imagined panlatinidad might call attention to mainstream Hollywood as a way of introducing Latinx characters even if they are engaged in a blur of identities, which has been proved a successful strategic tool in order to enhance the Latinx presence in mainstream cinema. By reason of previous mainstream tendencies, “Hollywood wanted to represent an idea or an essentialist notion of who Latinxs are, but they want [ed] to do it without Latinx participation” (González 40).

Lin-Manuel Miranda represents a reconceptualized model of a Latinx film agent, one whereby ethnic assimilation and panlatinidad intertwines with the Anglo reality and where former Latinx marginalized voices evolve from object to subject elements by placing them into the spotlight of the mainstream film industry. In order to do so, his cinematic narrative and character choice enters into a panethnic, globalized, transnational perspective that highlights a broader sense of Latinidad. By addressing this newly constructed panlatino group, Miranda is seeking for a mass audience who

spans not only the Latinx population but also the Anglo and other ethnic groups along the US territory and abroad. In this way, by selecting diverse roles such as Anglo, Puerto Rican or multi-national characters, Miranda reinforces, challenges and blends different viewpoints of Latinidad by offering an alternative to both Hispanic and Anglo modes of representing Latinx in mainstream Hollywood.

3. FILM APPROACHES TO LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA'S LATINIDAD

3.1. *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018)

In the Depression-era London set in the 1930s, *Mary Poppins Returns*, narrates the coming back of the magical nanny, helping again the Banks siblings and Michael's children through a difficult time in their lives. Although this sequel to the 1964 Disney film *Mary Poppins* follows the previous narrative arc and contains multiple references to the original film, this new approach to P.L. Travers' characters offer a more ethnic inclusive version of the 1964's version by casting a Latino actor in the role of a British lamplighter. In this renewed account of the nanny, Lin-Manuel Miranda plays Jack, the lamplighter, in his first starring role since *Hamilton*. What makes this role significant from an ethnic representation viewpoint, however, lies in the fact the Miranda is not a white-European actor and he had to embody a quintessential British character with an intense Cockney accent, hiding in this particular role his Latinidad but adopting instead a current cast trend in US cinema: the reversal of "whitewashing" practices (an Anglo-white actor playing an ethnic character) into "brownwashing" practices (Latinx playing non-ethnic characters).

As Zélie Asava observes, post-race politics in the US have led to a popular colour-blind ideal, presented in various media forms and utilizing Barack Obama's success as proof of the end of racism (2017). In such a way, post-race Hollywood and the utopian politics of "racelessness" have tried to erase existing structural inequalities based on racial categorization. Although this *brownwashing* media practice may seek to stimulate racial boundaries and maintain white privilege according to some scholars (Gallagher, 2003), the contradictions and tensions between racial traits may be understood as well as a further step towards the racelessness of mainstream film characters beyond racial binaries. Although *brownwashing* could be considered

the flip side of the *whitewashing* procedure, *brownwashing* is a recent cast method that positively describes a colorblind casting for many of the Latinx who wants to enter in the mainstream Hollywood industry. While *whitewashing* is devised as a racist practice, or an act that promotes unequal opportunities, *brownwashing* is nowadays considered as an attempt from Hollywood to enhance a balanced treatment that results in equal opportunities for ethnic actors, such as Latinx artists.

Mary Poppins Returns is a film that seeks to inspire our nostalgia for the innocent fantasies of childhood, as well as the jolly holidays that the first *Mary Poppins* film conjured for many adult viewers. Part of the old film's nostalgia, however, was bound up in a blackface performance tradition that persisted throughout the *Mary Poppins* canon, from P. L. Travers's books to Disney's 1964 adaptation, adding a racial debatable component to the narrative. And this racial fact makes Miranda's *brownwashing* detail even more blatant. Looking back to the first film version, some of the most indelible images took place when Mary Poppins black's herself up, joining Dick Van Dyke's Bert to dance on a rooftop for the classic song "Step in Time." As Pollack-Pelzner illustrates, "when the magical nanny [...] accompanies her young charges, Michael and Jane Banks, up their chimney, her face gets covered in soot, but instead of wiping it off, she gamely powders her nose and cheeks even blacker" (2019). These seemingly comic scenes in blackened faces were associated with racial caricature, showing that the 1964 film replay[ed] this racial panic in a comical key (2).

As a whole, *Mary Poppins Returns* seems to offer a more racially inclusive vision of the Banks's London. However, the first film adaptation from 1964 is nowadays considered racially debatable due to the minstrelsy scenes. As Pollack-Pelzner states,

Eric Lott and other cultural historians documented [that] there was an important connection between blackface performance and American and British working-class audiences; minstrelsy offered both a chance to define their whiteness in opposition to black caricature and to thumb their noses at employers through the minstrels' antics. When T.D. Rice, a popular white minstrel performer, crossed the Atlantic in the 1830s, his manager recalled that he inspired chimney sweeps and apprentices, who "wheeled about and turned

about and jumped Jim Crow, from morning until night, to the annoyance of their masters, but the great delight of the cockneys.” These chimney sweeps with minstrel dances were only a step in time away from Dick Van Dyke’s soot-faced Bert, or Miranda’s lamplighter in *Mary Poppins Returns*. The minstrel stage convention of the “pickaninny” rendered black slave children as cheery performers who, the historian Robin Bernstein argues, were “comically impervious to pain” inflicted by their labor. [...]” Blackface minstrelsy, in fact, could be said to be part of Disney’s origin story (2).

The erasure of minstrelsy scenes in *Mary Poppins Returns*, along with a more inclusive racial London, makes Miranda’s cast choice a significant shift in a major film company. As it can be traced in the next image, the improvement in the racial representation from Dick Van Dyke’s Bert character to Lin Manuel Miranda’s Jack is more than evident, evolving from minstrelsy to brownwashing.



Image 1. The lamplighter character in *Mary Poppins* (1964)
and *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018)
Source: Courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures images

It is paradoxical, as can be seen above, that one of the most significant attributes that can be distinguished in Miranda’s character is his fairly light-skin attribute along with a European facial definition that has inevitably helped to elevate his status in Hollywood, unlike Latinx fellows as Michael Peña or Jharrel Jerome (*mestizo* and Afro-Latino respectively). Nevertheless, performances as Miranda’s that transcends race and ethnicity in a clearly role of assimilation, distance

this artist from the racialization that many Latinx actors and actresses experience. In the film poster of the film, he is promoted as a Latinx star but in parallel as a white-Latino star, fostering the assimilation to the Anglo-American culture and the Hollywood star system.

By playing this iconic white role, Miranda also brings back additional or core values that are or were present at a particular period, that is to say, ideal yet nostalgic standards displayed in previous eras, such in the “Good-Neighbor Era” or the “Hispanic Hollywood,” where Latinx were cast in less combative, activist roles.⁵ Lin-Manuel Miranda recovers throughout his role in *Mary Poppins Returns* the “good” Latinx film image who discards some of the former Latinx stereotypical representations. The dignity of hard work, traditional family values and the honesty and decency of the common man will be now inherently part of this Miranda’s character. Furthermore, the lack of love interest of the lamplighter (conversely to the *Latin lover* stereotype) along with singing and dancing skills usually associated with the non-ethnic main character in musicals, pushes him into the foreground of a narrative which empowers his “common working” features. The fascination of a character often lies in its potential for bringing together multiple, sometimes incompatible meanings while making them seem interchangeable. In *Mary Poppins Returns*, Miranda brings through the lamplighter role the American dream myth to fruition by integrating Anglo traits into an ethnic actor whose intrinsic Latinx characteristics expands on the white lamplighter role.

In conclusion, *brownwashing* in Miranda’s *Mary Poppins Returns* character can be considered as a stepping-stone to foster Latinx representation in the Hollywood film industry and a perceptible attempt that Hollywood is giving Latinx a wider representation in current US cinema. Mass entertainment media forms, like Disney studios, has been pushing Eurocentric/Anglo ideas since their origins, like those put in practice through Hollywood’s whitewashing. However, casting a Latinx actor in a traditionally white role as in Jack, the Lightlamper, can be devised as a Disney’s endeavor to add diversity into its films. In Miranda’s character, the choice of casting is arbitrary, and the character’s new race often has little or no effect on the story. However, as Stuart Hall pointed out, images can take on new meaning when they are built in connection with another (1973). With these ideas in mind,

we can understand that *brownwashing* challenges the effects of the stereotypes that have confined Latinx, making the new casting decision a redefinition of Latinx roles.

3.2. *In the Heights* (2021)

The film *In the Heights* narrates the vibrant multi-racial community in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood as a stage musical. Shot on the streets of this multi-ethnic neighborhood, with huge dance numbers and featuring a cast of rising talents like Puerto Rican-descent Anthony Ramos (Usnavi) and Mexican Melissa Barrera (Vanessa), it took Lin-Manuel Miranda almost 13 years to get the story to the big screen from the stage. Adapted from Miranda's Tony-winning musical, *In the Heights* covers a longish list of challenges that many Latinx face: gentrification, housing discrimination, debt, the high cost of college tuition, racial profiling or the failure to enact immigration reforms. Nonetheless, among all these issues, the adoption of a panlatino order emanating from the characters, the music, and the setting, stands out.

Describing the transnational nature of *In the Heights*, scholar Schuyler Ritchie argues that “while the characters [...] trace their roots to Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, Miranda's message could be extrapolated to other Latino nationalities” (1). In this sense, the symbolic nature of a panlatino community located in the very heart of New York, regarding the Puerto Rican background of his creator and the real neighborhood itself, makes the panlatinidad conceived by Miranda much more evident in this work. Furthermore, the non-correspondence between the actors' nationalities and the character's nationalities they are playing, as in the case of Melissa Barrera (Mexican playing a Dominican) or Anthony Ramos (U.S-Puerto Rican playing a Dominican), tend to corroborate the panlatino nature of the film. Some scholarly voices, though, have criticized Miranda's panlatino image of New York City reality, discrediting *In the Heights* as an assimilationist vehicle that sells out Latinidad, as “the plot ignores intra-Latino conflicts to create a harmonious unity and a commonly held *cultura*—and so the movie authenticates the notion of a generic and commodified Latinidad, where everyone, regardless of their national origins and histories, is fundamentally the same” (Negrón-

Muntaner, June 2021). While this statement may be valid, the panlatino representation of Latinx cultures in the film also helps to avoid a one-dimensional, nationalist narrative while enhances the movie into distinct cultural (audience) spheres, much in the line of Miranda's transcultural background.

Since the film seeks to translate for a predominantly white mainstream audience a set of cultural referents that are specific to a unique ethnic, racial, classed US Latinx literary tradition, the "crossover aesthetics" also appeals in the film in order to be market-profitable. *In the Heights* acknowledges how national decontextualization facilitates the move between US Latinx and mainstream public spheres and, in turn, its vision of a panlatino community. Thus, this kind of transculturation, transaction with other Latinx communities in the film, encapsulates diverse Latin American roots and experiences into a multicultural label of Latinx authenticity that is trying to sell the product in a contemporary transnational society. Delving into this issue, Elena Machado argues that the current transcultural Latinidad not only functions as a tactic in society but also as a writerly strategy in order to make "Latinx-authored productions [...] onto the mainstream stage" (189). Consequently, Miranda's autobiographical narrative valorizes his ability to navigate different publics, moving back and forth between US Latinx and mainstream US cultures and shaping this hip-hop/Latinx music musical in a positive, pragmatic way as opposed to more stereotypical and negative previous play examples, such as *Zoot Suit* (Luis Valdez, 1979) or *Cuba & His Teddy Bear* (Reinaldo Povod, 1986), which perpetuated damaging, biased images on Latinx.

As aforementioned, the main characters in the film have roots across diverse regions of Latin America; from Cuba to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. However, in Washington Heights neighborhood, they form a panlatino community that is reminiscent of and distinct from the separate Latin American countries from which they hailed, where an imaginary homeland is never far from their mind. "Carnaval del Barrio" is the musical number that better depicts this complicated nostalgia and the panlatino sense of the narrative. Sung in Spanish, this song celebrates all the flags from the Latin American countries represented in the *barrio*, calling for them to be raised, as can be observed in the following images below:



Image 2. Usnavy with the Latinx countries flags at the background (left) and weaving the Dominican Republic (right) in “Carnaval del Barrio” musical scene
Source: Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures images

As “Carnaval del Barrio” begins to take off in the street, the neighbors take the center of the stage to humorously express the geographical complexity of their status as a second or third- generation Latinx: “My mom is Dominican-Cuban, my dad is from Chile and P.R., which means:/ I’m Chile-Domini-CuRican, but I always say I’m from Queens,” challenging the concept of cultural belonging and identifying home in the place where you were born but also embracing the culture of many others. The constant reminder of their multiple heritages, as seen in the following song fragment, combined with a growing approach to the Anglo-US culture, leaves nowadays Latinx with the experience of juggling different cultural norms, values, and expectations, akin to of their parents and of the mainstream society they live in:

Uh, my mom is Dominican-Cuban
My dad is from Chile and P.R. which means
I’m Chile-Domini-Curican
But I always say I’m from Queens!
Hey!

Alza la bandera
¡La bandera Dominicana!
Alza la bandera
¡La bandera Puertorriqueña!
Alza la bandera
¡La bandera Mexicana!
Alza la bandera
¡La bandera Cubana!

As the song “Carnaval del Barrio” cheerfully declares, the representation of panlatinidad stems from the national diversification of the US Latinx population within the United States, along with a significant shift in the US demography, and more specifically in New York City manifested in the last decades.

This location was predominantly dominated by Puerto Ricans (and to lesser extent Cubans); however, the constant shifts within the Latinx population have increasingly included other immigrant diasporas, like Dominicans, Mexicans and Central Americans. There had been a mass influx of Latinx immigrants into New York City and Washington Heights in the 1950s and 1960s but prior to this influx, “Washington Heights comprised middle-class Irish-Americans and Jews” (Lendt 66). Over the last fifty years, a constant stream of Latinx immigrants has rendered the neighborhood as the heart of Puerto Rican and Dominican communities. Nevertheless, the cohesive community that Miranda creates in the film is not an entirely accurate portrayal of the Dominican and Puerto Rican relationship. As Hoffnung-Garskof illustrates regarding this issue,

Whilst low socioeconomic status tied Puerto Ricans and Dominicans together, this relationship was not always harmonious. Although Dominicans relied heavily on Puerto Ricans and their social institutions when they first arrived in New York, there were also clear differences between their two countries that were racialized in this new environment. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Dominicans tried to separate themselves from the Puerto Rican identity when establishing themselves in the city. This was an attempt to avoid the “culture of poverty” associated with Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, viewed Dominicans as “physically darker, illegal, foreign, and criminal,” similar to African Americans, and sought to avoid the social prejudices of being mistaken for being black (115-117).

What Hoffnung-Garskof details about these this close but divergent Latinx identities throughout the city’s history, proves that Miranda’s *In the Heights* eliminates the existing borders among Latinx communities to display a harmonious Latinx sisterhood and association which enables the film to be marketed to wider audiences while simultaneously makes a declaration about recent demographic shifts in the city of New York. This panlatino contemplation on the

Latinx community, which provides a more positive image within the Hollywood industry by focusing in an imagined, constructed community, is more concerned about overturning past formulaic stereotypes than entering into conversation with social Latinx issues in the US.

Although the prototypical film stereotype defines Puerto Ricans as criminals (men) and victims (women), *In the Heights* builds a panlatino story where Latinx characters are not gang members, drug dealers, or any other sort of negative stereotypes, focused on alternative narratives of Latinidad, and moving away from the depiction of poverty and working-class populations. A hope to correct the stereotypes by making ordinary people into ordinary characters, this play turned into film aims to educate the audience, to undermine the inherited stereotypes about Latinx criminality, by drawing spectators into an affective identification with the entrepreneurial US Latinx characters. In this sense, Miranda avoids the essentialist, one-dimensional Latinx racial dynamic by softening national past conflicts and portraying all Latinx as getting along harmoniously. By doing so, *In The Heights* becomes a story beyond national definitions.

4. CONCLUSION

In today's transnational entertainment industry, film artists are trying to vindicate their work and differentiate themselves from other celebrities by encompassing a wider number of cultures in their roles and productions, intertwining several nationalities and cultural references in their film works. In the case of Lin-Manuel Miranda, there is an evident relationship between the transnational inclination of the current cinema industry and the film roles that have brought him to fame. Hence, by adopting assimilated and panlatino characters in his most popular roles or/and creations, Miranda proves that the widespread negative judgement of assimilation has been replaced by the idea of a culture war in which being "Latinx" imply both an association and a disassociation toward a national heritage.

His ambivalent connection to Latinx culture and the reiterated acts of acculturation portrayed in his film roles evidence the complexity of "Latinidades" experienced by many acculturated Latinx artists today, arguably making him a potential icon for contemporary US

identity. Moreover, in his characters there is no place for the ordinary Latinx stereotypes, in which he shifts away from an ethnic-centered portrait to a more “inclusive,” panethnic image about the self. This subversive procedure has led Miranda to a successful career within the mainstream Hollywood industry, receiving widespread praise and critical acclaim from both inside and outside Latinx arenas.

Although he might be considered by the film industry as “less ethnic” than other Latinx stars, such as Michael Peña, John Leguizamo or Benicio del Toro, Miranda’s view upon his community ties (Spanish, Puerto Rico, Latinx) endures as a source of sustenance, identity, and pride in his major film productions. All in all, the changing definition of the US identity and along with the current US community building and belonging, arises predominantly in Miranda’s work, whose multilayered Latinx identity and self-making models encapsulates a powerful sense of cultural equality crafted toward the representation of Latinx in US culture through his cinematic choices. In his double-fold film image, where assimilation runs parallel to the Latinx culture assertion, the complexity of his persona entails that he is never trapped in a monolithic or fixed national stereotype, managing to Americanize himself and embodying a panlatino variation of the Latinx image in cinema.

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- Tick, Tick... Boom!* Directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Imagine Entertainment and 5000 Broadway Productions, 2021.
- ¡Viva Zapata!* Directed by Elia Kazan, 20th Century Fox, 1952.
- Vivo*. Directed by Kirk DeMicco, Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures, 2021.
- West Side Story*. Directed by Robert Wise, United Artists, 1961.

NOTES

- 1 United States Census Bureau (2021 Data), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI725221>.
- 2 See some recent scholarship on the whitewashing Hollywood trend in Mizukoshi (2018) and Brooks (2020).

- 3 It is worth noting, as well, another phenomenon which is taking place in Hollywood, thus complicating the racial assimilation process within the film industry: the *browning* of Spaniards as Latinx as in the case of Antonio Banderas (*The Mask of Zorro*, 1998), Penélope Cruz (*Bandidas*, 2006) or Javier Bardem (*Loving Pablo*, 2017), which once again demonstrates the mainstream preference for Euro-features Latinx instead of casting an actor with fully Latinx traits.
- 4 “Appropriation,” also described in critical race theory as cultural exchange, entails some differences from the concept of assimilation. While “assimilation” describes what happens when minority cultures adopt features from a dominant culture in order to fit in, “appropriation” exploits other cultural idiosyncrasies either for commercial benefits or in a cultural exchange. Cultural appropriation has been largely considered as a negative notion of ethnic studies, and thus something to be avoided. However, as we will try to demonstrate in this article, appropriation and assimilation may encompass beneficial strategies when making Latinx representation in Hollywood visible.
- 5 In order to deepen into the chronology of Latinx in the US film history, see Noriega (1992), Fregoso (1993) or more recently Rodriguez (2004), Beltrán (2009) and Gregorio-Fernández (2020), among others.