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## No Spanish in Cinderella's Kingdom: A Situated Ethnography of Disney World's Engagement with *Elena of Avalor*

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## No Spanish in Cinderella's Kingdom

*A Situated Ethnography of Disney World's Engagement with Elena of Avalor*

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**ABSTRACT** Research indicates that Disney theme parks function as sites of ideological negotiation. This study builds on the research by examining Disney World's incorporation of its first avowed Latina princess, *Elena of Avalor*. Bringing together discourses of Latinidad, theme parks, and media, this essay focuses on how the park incorporates Elena into its landscape at the level of production, representation, and audiences. I argue that Disney's inclusion of Elena, and by extension Latinidad, is malleable, situated within the geographic setting, and dependent on various factors seldom disclosed by the conglomerate. Ultimately, Elena exists as an outsider within the Disney park universe. **KEYWORDS** Latina/o studies; Ethnography; Disney; Spanish

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*Elena of Avalor* is Disney's latest princess and, according to the company, its first "Latina"<sup>1</sup> princess, although she is more so a representation of Latin America rather than US Latinidad.<sup>2</sup> *Elena*, a Disney Junior animated series, lived on the small screen for three seasons from 2016 to 2020. One of the most outstanding markers of Elena's success and its foregrounding as a cultural product was her August 2016 debut at Disney's Magic Kingdom Park in Orlando, FL, just weeks after the debut of the animated television series. Unique to this situation is that Elena's placement and debut at the park took place before Disney could gather solid data on the reception of the princess on the small screen. Given the lack of data and the differing strategies implemented at both of Disney's US theme park locations, this essay addresses the placement of the princess, and by extension Latinidad, within the Disney park universe, as malleable and ever-changing.

On the screen and at the park, Disney continues to update Elena because she embodies Latinidad and signifies nonthreatening diversity to attract Latinx and non-Latinx viewers alike. The inclusion of Elena as a nonthreatening ethnic other is a response to demographic trends and market demands appealing to diverse consumers, wherein the ideological work of whiteness is

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not necessarily disrupted. In this essay, I draw from media studies and Latina/o studies to develop what I call a modified situated ethnography. This approach engages with the circuit of culture model<sup>3</sup> by addressing the interconnectedness of culture and by exploring the ways a mediated text—embodied as a live character—is produced, represented, and consumed.

Disney theme parks in the United States promote a white-centered vision of national history, and although they are first and foremost commercial spaces, they perform ideological work. Jean Baudrillard argues that Disney parks craft a sanitized version of the world through their landscape, the layout, and the experiences they provide park guests, where they scrub history (and the present moment) of any unpleasantities.<sup>4</sup> These versions of the world, however, have to be rebuilt occasionally, sometimes responding to guest requests for inclusivity, though most often taking into account national and global trends, where the overall population is more complex than a black–white binary. While historically foregrounding whiteness, the Disney universe, including the parks, has recently responded to undeniable calls for ethnic diversity. Through my analysis, I outline Disney World’s production of Elena’s representation during the summer of 2019, at the point where it intersects with audience consumption, and I put this analysis in conversation with the narrative present at Disneyland Park in Anaheim, CA. This multilayered analysis highlights how Latinidad discourses at Disney World in Florida set the stage for broader ones in US American society.

### **MODIFIED SITUATED ETHNOGRAPHY**

Drawing on Charles Suchar’s photographic methodological approach, which relies on photographs as markers and reminders of important moments,<sup>5</sup> my situated ethnography blends photodocumentation, participant observation, and critical technocultural discourse analysis. This blending allows me to engage a three-stage research methodology, which I carried out through my summer ethnography that included 60 days of digital data gathering and a two-day theme park visit. In June 2019, I visited Disney World to observe how it produced Latinidad. I mapped the physical space and matched it with its pictorial representation advertised digitally on the Disney World mobile application. My digital analysis of the theme park included a “critical cultural approach to the internet and new media technologies; one that interrogates their material and semiotic complexities, framed by the extant offline cultural and social practices its users engage in as they use these digital artifacts.”<sup>6</sup>

Preliminary research at Disneyland in 2018 informed my modified situated ethnography in Florida. At the California location, I observed the overrepresentation of Latinidad communicated through language and location. I identified the use of Spanish and spatial location of the Elena meet-and-greet attraction as two important themes that emerged from observations, interactions, conversations, and researcher experiences with the princess. These themes highlight competing and complementary discourses about Latinidad at the two Disney parks. Although the inclusion of the princess (and Latinidad) at both US parks is malleable, an analysis of production, representation, and consumption of the princess indicates that she is consistently positioned as an outsider within the world of Disney, which is a stand-in for white normative culture.

### **ELENA'S OVERREPRESENTATION IN FLORIDA**

My experience at Disney World over the course of 20 hours (across two consecutive days) was informed by my digital analysis via the Disney World mobile application. Through my 30 days of digital analysis prior to my park experience, I tracked the availability, location, and representation of Elena at the park. Following my 20 hours at the park, I conducted an additional 30 days of digital data gathering to round out the findings. The themes highlighted below emerged from observing interactions, conversations, and experiences with the princess. I selected these due to their frequency (i.e., these were conversations or instances that happened more than twice as many times as the others) and as a way to highlight the differing discourses between the two parks.

In Florida, Elena is the only Disney Junior character granted access inside the Fairytale Hall. This serves as a frame for understanding the different tactics used by Disney at both US park locations. The themes, which emerged in Florida, must be understood alongside Elena's overrepresentation in comparison to her underrepresentation at the California park, where she lived under a purple umbrella outside of the Royal Hall. The following outlines Disney's discursive (both literal discourse and ethnoracial discourse) practices on the ground when there is a purposeful overrepresentation of Latinidad at its most popular theme park in Florida.

### **LANGUAGE: NO SPANISH**

Through my analysis I found that when Disney provides an overrepresentation of Latinidad at its theme parks, it produces a princess who is unable to

speak Spanish. During my 2018 fieldwork, I found that in California, Disney produced a Spanish-speaking Elena. Although there was an extreme underrepresentation of her presence in Disneyland when she was present at the meet-and-greets (outside of the Royal Hall), she spoke Spanish prominently. In Florida, however, Elena did not speak Spanish.

My analysis of Elena's use of Spanish is informed by Bonnie Urciuoli's investigation of how and when Spanish is used in the United States as a commodity.<sup>7</sup> Although in California, Disney included Spanish, it was able to minimize, or altogether take it away, at any given moment. Here, Elena did not occupy a prominent position at the park, nor was she featured for extended periods of time. Consistent with Urciuoli's findings, Elena's safe and consumable Spanish at the California park becomes a commodity that is used to highlight her authenticity,<sup>8</sup> but only for short periods of time.

At the Florida park, Disney included Elena as a central figure during summer 2019 but stripped her of her abilities to speak Spanish by providing scripted lines for her to deliver to park guests when she was asked about the language. As such, Disney regulated the princess's use of Spanish. I witnessed the different actresses playing Elena deliver these scripted lines on more than seven instances during my two days of fieldwork. On one occasion, a young girl asked Elena if she spoke Spanish, to which Elena replied, "*Si princesa* [Yes princess], but my grandma asked me to practice my English today because we are in Cinderella's kingdom." Later that day, another actress who was playing Elena answered a young girl who asked her a question in Spanish by saying, "I am going to answer you in English because I am practicing my English and practicing takes a lot of work." Most of these conversations centered on the importance of practicing English. These lines were uttered by five of the actresses playing Elena, further demonstrating the highly scripted nature of the theme park experience and Disney's strategic insistence that Elena not speak Spanish.

Although focusing on an educational setting, Jonathan Rosa traces the discourses surrounding language shifts from Spanish to English and notes how they are interpreted as signs of progress. He finds that "the goal for racially minoritized subjects is to supplant or supplement their perceived home language practices. These efforts toward the modification of racially minoritized individuals' linguistic practices are rooted in a troublesome accumulation-based theory of change that promotes the acquisition of cultural and linguistic capital."<sup>9</sup> These popular discourses demonstrate how Latinx difference and the racialization of Spanish are linked to anxieties

about race and connected to language. In order to ease these anxieties, Disney produced a princess at Disney World who was vocal about how much she practiced her English, gesturing toward a sign of progress.

At its Florida location, Disney did not include Spanish during summer 2019. Even though Florida, in particular Orlando, has a significant Latinx population and has become one of the top destinations for Puerto Ricans in the United States,<sup>10</sup> the fact that Elena is stripped of her ability to speak Spanish expresses larger politics of race and space. The same politics exist in California but are framed differently. Although the California park assumes that guests will be more amenable to Spanish, they do not allow the Spanish to exist for more than 30 or 45 minutes out of an average of 14 hours. At both locations, Elena's Spanish, or lack thereof, frames her as an outsider. Additionally, the use of Spanish is highly scripted and regulated.

During the fall following my fieldwork in Florida, Elena was not featured as prominently at Disney World. Between September and November 2019, Elena sometimes did not appear for two or three weeks at a time. As such, Disney's inclusion of Elena, and Latinidad, at the park is malleable. The Florida theme park constantly adapts its strategies, and these decisions are more than likely made after careful research.

#### **LOCATION: PART OF ANOTHER KINGDOM**

Elena's overrepresentation at Disney World was encased within an overrepresentation of celebration discourses, which positioned her as an outsider. Although at this park Elena occupied a prominent position inside the Fairy-tale Hall next to Cinderella, Disney marked her as an outsider through scripted lines about her kingdom's location. During every one of my experiences interacting with, and waiting in line for, Elena (this included hearing conversations between other guests and the princess), I witnessed Elena mention, or make reference to, some type of celebration. Most of the celebrations that she mentioned took place in her kingdom or, as she would often say, "where I am from." Here, we must keep in mind that Disney parks are often a place for celebration, and this could influence why Elena mentions celebrations so often. However, this was not something I witnessed during my California fieldwork or with any of the other princesses I visited at the Florida park (Cinderella, Tiana, and Rapunzel). Further, by explaining that these celebrations take place "where [she is] from," Elena confirmed her

existence as an eternal foreigner<sup>11</sup> in the kingdom of Disney, Florida, and the United States at large.

As with the previous theme, the overrepresentation of the “far away” celebration discourses through Elena highlights the highly scripted reality of the theme park cast members. Each of the women playing Elena during my fieldwork referenced celebrations in another kingdom. For example, during my first visit to the Fairytale Hall, Elena immediately asked me, “What are you celebrating today, your majesty?” I responded by saying that yesterday had been my birthday, so I was celebrating “the day after my birthday.” Elena wished me a happy birthday and said, “Celebrations are very important in my kingdom. We usually have gigantic celebrations when it’s someone’s birthday.” Later that same day, another actress playing Elena complimented a young girl on the bows she was wearing. Following her compliment, she said, “You know what would be fun? If we had a festival where everyone wears bows! Where I come from, we love festivals and all kinds of celebrations!” The following day, yet another cast member playing Elena referenced celebrations when she told a young boy from Brazil, “Oh, you’re here from far away too? Did you come all the way here to celebrate something? In my kingdom we have so many celebrations!” Sometimes Elena’s references to celebrations seemed a bit out of place (e.g., a festival of bows), but what was consistent was her frequent mention of celebrations alongside her “far away” kingdom.

These examples are only a few of many instances when Elena (all the actresses playing the part) highlighted the importance of celebrations in her kingdom or “where [she is] from.” By doing this, Elena not only reduces Latinidad to festivals and celebrations, a common media trope used to represent Latinidad,<sup>12</sup> but she also positions herself on the periphery, as an outsider. This could be a strategy used by Disney to flatten Latinidad to appeal to various nonwhite guests, who also come from “far away.” Given that Disney World attracts a large percentage of international tourists (many of whom are from Brazil), this seems like a risk-averse strategy on Disney’s part as it continues to play with Elena’s malleability. If we understand the Disney kingdom as a stand-in for normative culture, then Avalor (Elena’s kingdom) falls outside of this terrain. By referring to her kingdom as “far away” from Disney World, Elena contributes to her own othering within the theme park. Othering “is a strategy that reinforces the mainstream by differentiating individuals and groups and relegating them to the margins according to a range of socially constructed categories.”<sup>13</sup> Elena further solidifies her

position as an outsider through her discourses on the importance of practicing Spanish “in Cinderella’s kingdom.” Through these discourses, Elena not only proves that in this kingdom she is marked by her outsider status, but also highlights the importance of “hard work” in maintaining a linguistic unity through English only. Elena’s most prominent lines, which promoted a linguistic unity and highlighted her outsider status, produced a nonthreatening Latinidad for real-time audience consumption at Disney World in Florida during summer 2019.

## CONCLUSION

As one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, Disney offers audiences symbols for fantasy, happiness, magic, and love, which have contributed to long-lasting success and popularity domestically and abroad. Known by many as the “happiest place on earth,” Disney World (along with the other Disney parks) serves as an extension of the conglomerate’s hegemonic ideals. Disney World operates within the complex cultural politics already present in the state of Florida. Drawing on the circuit of culture model, this essay analyzed the park’s production and representation of its first “Latina” princess at the point of intersection with audience consumption.

The analysis herein demonstrated that at the Florida park, Elena’s existence (and her surrounding discourses) varies from her presence at the California park. Such a conclusion allows us to understand that the inclusion of the princess at the parks is malleable, situated within the geographic setting (i.e., theme park location), and dependent on various factors, which the conglomerate does not disclose. Further, the inclusion of the princess at the park is best understood as part of Disney’s recent efforts to include Latinidad. Through a modified situated ethnography focusing on frequency and patterns, I found key differences between the production and consumption of Latinidad at both parks, but a consistent positioning of the princess as an outsider within the world of Disney at both locations.

Since this study took place, the *Elena of Avalor* series came to an end (August 2020) and Disney World began removing Elena from its princess meet-and-greets altogether, even before the COVID-19 closures. Given the restrictions put into place at the Florida park after its reopening in July 2020, Elena is no longer a meet-and-greet attraction at Disney World. Although Elena’s existence at the Disney parks was only temporary, it is indicative of larger, cultural trends in Florida and beyond. For the past few years, Disney

has responded to an economic reality often influenced by ethnoracial demands and trends for diverse representations. Disney has included more nonwhite characters without necessarily decentering whiteness or delivering a nuanced representation of Latinidad. My modified situated ethnography of the two US theme parks suggests nonthreatening, celebratory Latinidad is welcomed in the Disney universe temporarily and tangentially to its main attractions. Elena's popularity at the parks is as a "far away" outsider-within from the small screen.

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## NOTES

1. I use "Latina" in quotes to highlight that this is not a claim I am making, but rather the term used by Disney.

2. The state or process of being or becoming Latinx.

3. Paul du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013).

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7. Bonnie Urciuoli, *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1996).

8. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

9. Jonathan Rosa, *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

10. Patricia Silver, "Latinization, Race, and Cultural Identification in Puerto Rican Orlando," *Southern Cultures* 19, no. 4 (2013): 55–75.

11. Angharad N. Valdivia, *The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2020).

12. Arlene Dávila, *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
13. Angharad N. Valdivia, "Othering," in *Keywords for Media Studies*, ed. Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 133.