

## **Starlets, Subscribers, and Beneficiaries: Disney, Latino Children, and Television Labor**

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Children’s television networks are invested with moral value not attributed to other networks, yet they depend on the labor of children to advance their economic goals. Using a case study approach of Disney’s cable channels, we found that Latino children perform labor on behalf of the corporation in three ways: as subscribers to Disney’s cable networks, as actors in programming designed to deliver those subscribers, and as beneficiaries in the company’s corporate social responsibility efforts. We found that the logic by which Disney assigns various forms of labor to different types of Latino children helps to advance the company’s economic goals, rendering Latino children hypervisible in some spaces and invisible in others.

*Keywords: children’s television, Disney, Latino, labor, media industry*

In 2012, executives at Disney launched a minor firestorm when they debuted *Sofia the First: Once Upon a Princess*, a 90-minute animated film that was intended to launch a new series on the Disney Channel. The movie (and the franchise that followed) centers on a young common girl who, through her mother’s marriage, suddenly becomes a member of the monarchy. Very early on in the promotion of *Sofia*, however, the public began to suspect that Disney had coded the new princess as Latina. Both the spelling of Sofia’s name (vs. the more Anglicized “Sophia”) and the darker complexion of Sofia’s mother led reporters to ask producers whether the character was indeed Latina. Jamie Mitchell, *Sofia*’s executive producer, confirmed that she was (Rodriguez, 2013).

But then, remarkably, Disney backtracked on this story. Sofia was not distinctly Latina, a Disney executive clarified (Rodriguez, 2013). Rather, she was a character of composite ethnicity, influenced by fragments of several nations. In an effort to explain Sofia’s ethnic identity, Nancy Kanter, executive vice president of original programming and general manager of Disney Junior Worldwide, stated,

All our characters come from fantasy lands that may reflect elements of various cultures and ethnicities but none are meant to specifically represent those real world cultures. The writers have wisely chosen to write stories that include elements that will be familiar and relatable to kids from many different backgrounds including Spain and Latin America

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. . . this creates a world of diversity and inclusion that sends just the right kind of message to all children. Look around you, appreciate the differences you see and celebrate what makes us all the same. (Leal, 2012, para. 5)

Kanter's claim that Disney takes a postracial approach to cultural production, of course, ignores the television industry's long-standing tradition of appropriating ethnicity to serve normative White audiences (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Brayton, 2013; Turner, 2014). This episode also links to ongoing conversations about the representations of U.S. Latinos in mainstream television more generally. For some, the *Sofia* controversy represented the industry's fixation on light-skinned Latinas (Beltrán, 2008; Navarrette, 2012). However, the appearance, and then sudden disappearance, of the first Disney Latina princess called attention to the conspicuous absence of Latinos on mainstream television altogether.

The incident also provides insight into the ways in which industry practitioners negotiate the contradictions inherent in children's television. Because children's television is invested with moral value not attributed to other television networks, Disney must negotiate its commercial interests with the expectations that it act responsibly on behalf of children. Therefore, Kanter's argument that Disney ought to send the "right kind of message" to children reflects an ongoing narrative that children are innocent, color-blind, and should be shielded from "adult" conversations of racial politics.

The practice of targeting children raises several complex issues. As Taft (2010) argues, children share a common structural location. As minors, they are expected to practice citizenship through consumption rather than through direct political action or civic engagement. In an effort to tap into this buying power, children's television networks depend on the labor of children to advance their economic goals. Here we must consider the increasing importance of Latino children. Advertisers who subsidize much of television programming have increasingly recognized Latinos as an important economic bloc worthy of dedicated resources (Dávila, 2001), and children play an important role in this construct. Today, one in four children is Latino and by 2050, that number will increase to more than one in three (Murphey, Guzman, & Torres, 2014).

Focusing on the Disney Channel, Disney XD, and Disney Junior, we examine the various forms of labor that Latino children perform on behalf of television network executives. By detailing the ways in which Latino children help Disney advance its economic goals, we argue that Disney relegates different kinds of Latino children to different types of corporate labor. In very select cases, light-skinned acculturated Latinos can compete for a limited number of roles. Conversely, darker skinned Latinos are relegated to the realm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts where they perform the roles of beneficiaries. By examining the ways in which Disney restricts the movement of Latino bodies, we build on the work of other researchers including Casanova (2007), Banet-Weiser (2007), and Valdivia (2008) who have examined the ways in which children's television has served as a site of ideological negotiation by interpellating children into the economy while reifying social hierarchies.

### Television and the Latino Child

Today, children are big business. According to the Digitas (2012) advertising report *The Next Generation of Consumers*, kids and “tweens” have a buying power of \$1.2 trillion a year. As vehicles for delivering children to marketers, the development of a robust television marketplace has been an ongoing project. As a whole, television executives typically have approached childhood as a uniform experience, primarily segmenting the market according to chronological age and gender. However, demographic projections indicate that Latino children are becoming an increasingly important audience for children’s television networks. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2010, there were 17.1 million Latinos in the United States, or 23.1% of all children aged 17 and younger (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011). Relative to non-Latinos, the number of Latino children is expected to grow at a higher rate. By the year 2050, 35% of children are projected to be Latino (Passel & Cohn, 2008).

The relative youth of the Latino market has led to a valuation of Latinos as good for business, a narrative that reinforces corporate America’s enthusiasm for Latinos as an economic bloc (Dávila, 2001). Despite their growing attention and potential value, however, Latinos have not been adequately represented either in front of or behind the screen (Colombia University, 2014; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008). According to Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao (2012), Latinos traditionally have been either excluded from mainstream programming or presented in ways that reflect mainstream stereotypes.

Advancements in communications technologies over the past three decades have offered possible remedies to such disparities. During the 1980s, the advent of cable television resulted in the proliferation of new channels and provided the promise of making the world a more inclusive place for people of color. Through this optimistic lens, the rapid expansion of channels might grant access to diverse, independent operators who could change the limited media landscape (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Meehan, 2005).

However, this promise of greater diversity has been tempered by corresponding deregulatory policies. The 1996 Telecommunications Act empowered already dominant networks by lifting regulatory restrictions to open competition between the telephone, cable, satellite, broadcast, and utility companies (Meehan, 2005). This policy has strengthened the concentration of corporate media ownership and impeded the entry of minority-owned networks and interests. As it relates to Latino representation, Valdivia (2010) has deftly argued that Latino representations on television are produced by large conglomerates with little equity in the Latino community. At best, these networks may develop programming with hired Latino help. At worst, they are creating programming with the help of producers who have little or no knowledge of Latino culture.

Researchers working in a variety of traditions have attempted to understand the ambivalent ways in which television networks have served children of color. In her analysis of Nickelodeon, Banet-Weiser (2007) found that the network has appropriated racial identity and reconstituted it as a commodity, which provides the brand with *subcultural capital* (Thornton, 1996). In her analysis of *Dora the Explorer* and *Maya and Miguel*, Casanova (2007) found that although such shows are meant to generate cross-cultural understanding, they are designed primarily for an ideal audience of Anglo-American, monolingual children. Guidotti-Hernández’s (2007) analysis of *Dora* suggests that Latino-centered programming generates broad

discourses of "Latinidad" for primarily Anglo-American audiences attempting to negotiate shifting cultural, demographic, and political dynamics.

In addition, a significant body of research has focused on Disney's treatment of diversity in films and television programs (Brayton, 2013; Turner, 2014; Valdivia, 2008). For example, Brayton's (2013) exploration of *Handy Manny* reveals the ways that its majority Latino cast increases Latino visibility, but simultaneously reaffirms stereotypes of manual labor and promotes a decontextualized and "corrected" version of U.S. immigrant and labor struggles. Turner (2014) explores how the "Black BFF" character on Disney's cable channels enables the network to garner subcultural capital while maintaining borders of racial exclusion. Valdivia (2008) traces Disney's representation of Latinos and children of color from essentialized stereotypes to ambiguous hybridity. The new racially hybrid characters promote recognition for progressive inclusion while erasing serious realities about U.S. racial inequalities.

Of the media companies that produce children's television programming, the Walt Disney Company is one of the most prolific cultural producers. This study examined Disney as an industrial entity that is organized according to a particular logic and whose symbolic output is developed to achieve specific economic goals. In doing so, we build on the work of scholars including Banet-Weiser (2007), Lustyik (2013), Mjøs (2010), and Wasko (2001) who examined the industry practices that set the preconditions for children's television programming. Given Disney's dominance in the marketplace and its capacity to formally and informally engage children in labor practices, we examined the following two questions. First, in what ways do Latino children help advance Disney's economic goals? Second, what are the specific strategies and practices employed by Disney to maximize the value of Latino children? In the process of exploring these questions, we were interested in separating discourses from particular strategies. Consequently, we examined the degree to which Disney's programming strategies coincide with its stated objectives for accommodating Latino children.

### **Studying Disney's Cable Channels**

In an effort to examine how television networks use the labor of Latino children, we employed a case study of Disney's three cable channel properties including the Disney Channel, Disney XD, and Disney Junior. In our analysis, we drew from both political economy and cultural studies. Political economy is a tradition that focuses on the economic and social organization of cultural production (Mosco, 1996). Scholars working in this area are interested in how the television industry is organized, how resources are allocated, and by what logic it operates (Mosco, 1996). At the same time, we were also interested in the relationship between professional practices, ideology, and power. Work in this area begins with the assumption that media institutions inherently are an ideological extension of economic forces. In this vein, the role of the investigator is to uncover the ways in which audiences are interpellated into broader corporate interests (Wasko, 2001).

Because case studies are designed to bring out details from various viewpoints using multiple sources of data, we examined both external and internal forms of communication. Internally, we focused on the genre of corporate communications, which is designed to facilitate the sharing of information to various stakeholders (including investors and media analysts) to whom an organization is beholden

(Cornelissen, 2004). These data included press releases, citizenship reports, and annual reports to investors over the past 10 years. These materials were accessed through Disney's online corporate portal (<http://thewaltdisneycompany.com>). Furthermore, in an effort to assess how Disney positions itself within the broader media marketplace, we analyzed Disney's on-air promotions and public services announcements from 2012 to 2015, which were accessed through <http://video.disney.com>. External discourses included industry and trade press regarding Disney, and its Latino-oriented efforts were accessed via the LexisNexis index. Finally, although programming was not the central focus of this study, we viewed 50 hours of programming on the various Disney Channel properties, which were accessed via cable from May through August 2015.

## **Results**

### ***Latino Children as Subscribers***

Our first research question was designed to ascertain the ways in which Latino children help Disney advance its economic objectives. We found that Latino children perform labor on behalf of the corporation in three ways: as subscribers to Disney's cable networks, as actors in programming designed to deliver those subscribers, and as beneficiaries of corporate goodwill in communications aimed at Disney's various corporate stakeholders, including investors, legislators, and the media.

Launched in April 1983, the Disney Channel was initially designed as a vehicle to showcase existing Disney content. However, the project soon grew into three major networks along with several smaller, digital properties. All three channels are part of the company's "Media Networks" segment, which includes broadcast and cable television networks, television production operations, television distribution, domestic television stations, and radio networks and stations (Walt Disney Company, 2014d). Today's Disney-branded channels include the Disney Channel, Disney XD, and Disney Junior as well as Disney Cinemagic and DLife. For subscribers of multichannel video programming distributors, channel feeds also can be accessed either live or on demand by a computer or mobile device through WatchDisneyChannel, WatchDisneyJunior, and WatchDisneyXD.

According to Disney's 2014 annual report to investors (Walt Disney Company, 2014d), the properties within their Media Networks segment generate revenue from fees charged to cable, satellite, and telecommunications service providers, as well as television stations affiliated with Disney's domestic broadcast television network. Disney also generates revenue from the sale of program time to advertisers for commercial announcements. Consistent with Smythe's (1977) argument that the real commodity that is being exchanged in the marketplace is not the television show or the advertised products but the audience itself, Disney generates revenue by delivering children to marketers through programming. Disney's capacity to deliver children in vast quantities to cable companies and marketers ensures that greater revenue can be generated in licensing fees and sponsorship dollars.

To maximize its delivery of children, Disney has established separate channels that appeal to different audiences. The Disney Channel, the company's flagship brand, is targeted to kids aged two to 14 years with primarily live-action comedy series and animated programming. Disney XD airs a mix of live-

action and animated original programming targeted to slightly older children, aged six to 14 years. Finally, Disney Junior targets kids aged two to seven, by blending storytelling with education in early math and language skills, healthy eating, and social skills (Walt Disney Company, 2014d).

Disney's strategy of segmenting children primarily by age and gender is consistent with marketers' efforts to divide children into increasingly smaller categories to increase profits (Cook, 2004). Because age is the primary category for demarcating children, segmenting the audience by ethnicity is accomplished only tacitly. In our research, we found that U.S. Latinos have been historically absent from Disney's annual report to investors. Only recently have Latinos had a presence in Disney's CSR and "citizenship" publications, which are designed to present a socially minded and philanthropically oriented face to investors and company stakeholders (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Fallon, 2015). Although gestures to accommodate Latinos have been largely nominal, the company began to specify targeted efforts in their 2014 citizenship performance summary:

The U.S. Hispanic Initiative is a companywide priority that recognizes U.S. Hispanics as one of the largest domestic growth opportunities for The Walt Disney Company and brings to life the role of diversity in driving relevance in the marketplace. The initiative has served as the catalyst for projects across all of our businesses focusing on talent, cultural competency, consumer insights, product development, and content initiatives among others. (Walt Disney Company, 2014a, p. 62)

Thus far, the U.S. Hispanic Initiative has primarily been a public relations effort, communicated through listing various programs and strategic ventures. For instance, Disney has promoted its investment in Fusion, a news-oriented network that was founded in a partnership between Univision and ABC News, another Disney property, as a product of the initiative. Although the U.S. Hispanic Initiative is primarily a company-wide endeavor, Disney has been less clear about the specific ways in which the initiative will be enacted through its various children's cable properties.

Despite Disney's rhetorical commitment to Latinos, we found little evidence that they are included in Disney's overall strategic objectives. Our review of Disney's annual reports to investors over the past 10 years revealed almost no mention of U.S. Latino children as a market requiring dedicated resources. The absence of Latino children as a strategic priority may explain the lack of resources allocated for dedicated Latino-oriented programming. Instead, dedicated efforts to reach Latino children consist primarily of dubbing Disney's English-language programming into Spanish and distributing it through the Disney Channel en Español, an alternative Spanish-language audio feed available as part of a Spanish-language network package sold by cable and satellite providers or as a separate audio track with the "SAP option." In 2013, the company also launched Disney ¡Ajá!, an online portal where users can access Spanish-language content including games, activities, videos, and full-length episodes.

The lack of investment in reaching Latinos through dedicated programming is consistent with previous findings by both Dávila (2001) and Chávez (2012) who found that despite their eagerness to tap into Latino buying power, media companies are reluctant to allocate significant economic resources. Furthermore, these Latino-specific efforts are often conceptualized principally as issues of language.

Certainly, Disney's decision to serve the Latino community primarily through translated programming is economically motivated. As Havens (2006) points out, television is considered a "public good," in which the cost of producing a program is independent of the number of people who will eventually see it. If Disney can seek out new markets for existing programs, any additional dollars generated by advertising and subscriptions can yield greater profits. Conversely, incurring costs by developing original, dedicated programming significantly reduces those profits.

### ***Latino Children as Performers***

In an effort to deliver children to marketers and cable companies, Disney must create programs for them to watch, which requires actors to perform in lead and supporting roles. For large-scale television networks such as Disney, the recruitment of labor necessitates a formal apparatus for delivering children to producers. Suppose, for example, a television network wishes to develop a show about a precocious teenager. The producers of that show often will work with a casting agency to develop specs for that role, say, a girl, age 13–17 years. The casting agency will then organize a formal casting call, in which a number of girls who meet those specifications are invited to audition for the agent and, eventually, the producers. After the producers and director have reviewed the session, they narrow their selections and, in some cases, proceed with callbacks. Once an actor is selected, they will negotiate payment for her services to the project.

The needs of any given show are not limited to its lead star, but also include all the primary and secondary characters as well as the number of nameless characters who will act as classmates, neighbors, passersby, and so on. With three 24-hour cable networks and several smaller distribution outlets, Disney's needs are substantial and require partnerships that can deliver child performers on an industrial scale.

Judy Taylor, senior vice president of casting and talent relations for Disney Channels Worldwide, provides insight into Disney's preferred child actor, stating "we absolutely love when kids are multi-talented and have an additional aptitude for singing, dancing, sports, and language skills" (Flores, 2013, para. 6). For an entertainment company with various properties in radio, television, and film, actors who can produce content for numerous platforms increase their value to Disney. For example, an actor who can act in a television show, dance in one of Disney's made-for-television musicals, sing on the original soundtracks, and be aired on Radio Disney, has relatively more value than an actor who cannot be used across properties to the same degree.

We found that a similar claim can be made about actors who can be cast across various ethnic categories, although Disney is calculated about its recruitment of children of color. Disney's strategy of evoking ethnic diversity but evading explicit racial references is illustrated in Taylor's call for diverse talent in the *Huffington Post*:

We are part of a global community and television should be a reflection of our diverse audience. . . . Great storytelling comes from all different backgrounds and cultures and it's important that we have actors and characters representing all of these different voices. (Moreno, 2013, para. 4)

Under the rubric of diversity, Taylor only hints at institutional barriers that may preclude Latino children from being considered, stating that “while our casting search is for everyone, this ‘grass roots’ search is a great opportunity for us to see many young actors [and] actresses whose talent, by circumstances or geography, hasn’t yet been evaluated by a professional casting director” (Moreno, para. 6). Taylor then further evokes ethnicity by referencing Disney Latino actors including Selena Gomez, Raini Rodriguez, Bella Thorne, and Adam Irigoyen, stating that they “are very popular with our overall audience because they’re relatable, proud of their background and appreciative of the support they receive from their respective communities” (Moreno, para. 8).

The difference between subtly hailing Latino children and overtly soliciting them has a boundary that is revealed only when it has been crossed. Shortly after Taylor’s interview, a casting call was widely and enthusiastically promoted by blogs and online audition databases, including that of Ana Flores, a blogger for Disney-owned Babble, who noted,

The site to visit for additional information and upcoming dates is [www.DisneyChannel.com/talentsearch](http://www.DisneyChannel.com/talentsearch). When you go there you’ll notice that the official email account is [latweeno@gmail.com](mailto:latweeno@gmail.com). Latweeno? As in Latino tween? One can sure hope this means Disney is working on a show for and by Latinos, because while Disney has led the way in making sure Latinos and other ethnicities are well represented in their shows, there’s still a long way to go to fully represent the richness of our culture and heritage. (Flores, 2013, para. 7)

A day after the Babble post, Flores recanted her claim, reporting that Disney had changed the official talent search e-mail address from [latweeno@gmail.com](mailto:latweeno@gmail.com) to [officialtalentsearch2013@gmail.com](mailto:officialtalentsearch2013@gmail.com). In her correction, Flores noted that “No one at Disney has officially stated that this talent search is specifically for Latinos” and that the casting director “is indeed a Latina, but she works independently of Disney” (Flores, para. 8).

Disney’s inclination to straddle the line between evoking and evading ethnicity becomes further evident in the Latino actors they ultimately decide to cast and promote. With few exceptions, we found that Latino actors are underrepresented in Disney’s programming. However, Disney has touted its discovery of Selena Gomez (*Wizards of Waverly Place*), Demi Lovato (*Sonny With a Chance*, *Camp Rock*), and Bella Thorne (*Shake It Up*) as examples of featured Latina actresses. However, each of these actors (including the aforementioned Adam Irigoyen) is a light-skinned Latino (Beltrán, 2008) and acts in roles that are primarily coded as Anglo, allowing Disney to avoid the constraints of employing less racially ambiguous actors.

This dynamic is consistent with Hollywood’s long history of employing and casting ambiguously mixed racial actors across ethnic categories to avoid the expense of casting localized ethnic actors (Beltrán, 2005; Cheu, 2013; Lustyik, 2013; Valdivia, 2008). In very limited cases, actors who can be unambiguously coded as Latino have been included as part of multicultural ensembles or in more stereotypical Latino supporting roles, including Jessica Marie Garcia’s role as Willow Cruz in *Liv and Maddie* (2013–2015) or Raini Rodriguez’s character Trish de la Rosa in *Austin and Ally* (2011–2015). In light of



these exceptions, the general absence of Latinos in Disney's programming suggests an overall hesitation to recruit Latino actors in larger numbers.

### ***Latino Children as Beneficiaries***

Although Latino children are largely absent from leading roles in Disney's television programming, they are well represented in Disney's corporate communications as beneficiaries of Disney's various social responsibility efforts. Overall, images of African American and Latino children dominate Disney's citizenship reports and public service announcements, where they serve the necessary role of legitimizing the company's commitment to CSR.

In such spaces, it appears that Disney makes a concerted effort to emphasize these children's ethnicity. Unlike Disney's on-screen Latinos who tend to be phenotypically white or light brown, the Latino children in Disney's CSR materials have darker complexions. Consider an image included in the company's 2012 citizenship report, in which actors Ross Lynch and Laura Marano, stars of *Austin and Ally*, pose with six, dark-skinned Latino children as they build a vegetable garden at a Los Angeles elementary school (Walt Disney Company, 2012, p. 25). Above the photograph the caption reads,

Since the Disney Friends for Change program launched in 2009, Disney has engaged millions of kids and their families to take positive actions in their lives and communities that help people and the planet. To date, we have tracked almost 19 million global actions ranging from cleanup events, donation drives, online pledges to help stop bullying in schools and communities, volunteer hours, and tree and garden plantings. (p. 25)

The written copy positions Disney as the impetus for change in at-risk communities, and the imagery helps to substantiate the entire effort. An image of Lynch and Marano working side-by-side with darker-skinned Latinos emphasizes the distinction between White and the racialized other. Furthermore, because darker skin connotes working-class status (Valdivia, 2010), these children help emphasize the point that Disney is providing aid to "needy" communities.

Here, it is important to consider CSR efforts first and foremost as rhetorical tools that are designed to advance the goals of the corporation. CSR portfolios are based on the premise that shareholders benefit and bottom-line incentives grow when corporations engage in prosocial efforts that manage risk, bolster reputation management, promote employee recruitment and retention, and increase access to capital (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Analogous to most major corporations with similar reporting practices, Disney uses its citizenship reports to exhibit its CSR portfolio. Thus, whereas building a school is a socially beneficial endeavor, the documentation and promotion of that effort ultimately serve a strategic goal.

Consider the ways in which Disney maximizes the value of these goodwill efforts. In the 2014 citizenship report, Disney promoted its contribution of \$1 million to the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, which helps subsidize higher education for Latino students (Walt Disney Company, 2014b). This donation did not

occur quietly, but was promoted heavily through Disney's various corporate reporting. To personalize this effort, Disney showcased Charlene Riofrio, a production assistant at ESPN. Once homeless, Riofrio is a former Hispanic Scholarship Fund recipient. Although her scholarship predated Disney's formal involvement, Riofrio does an effective job of linking her experience to the Disney brand:

As an employee of ESPN and The Walt Disney Company, I've fulfilled that duty in Los Angeles and abroad. I've mentored high school students at the East Los Angeles Boys and Girls Club for the past couple of years. . . . And last year—thanks to the Disney VoluntEARS program—I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a classroom for a community in Ecuador during Disney's Global Service Project. It's admirable that a company like Disney and its employees can dedicate their time to support the Latino community. (Walt Disney Company, 2014b, para. 7)

The volunteer program in Ecuador to which Riofrio is referring was ultimately filmed and converted into a public service announcement (Walt Disney Company, 2014c), which ran as part of the Disney Channel's *Friends for Change* series. The vignette, which shows Disney employees wearing clearly branded T-shirts, working alongside rural Ecuadorians, is narrated by actress Chrissie Fit who frames the project as an exercise in community-building. Disney's decision to feature Fit, however, is a curious choice. Although Fit did have a minor role in Disney's *Teen Beach Movie* (2013) and *Teen Beach Movie 2* (2015), she is not a featured actress in any of Disney's programs. As a Cuban American, however, Fit is a signifier of Latina identity and therefore lends authenticity to the spot. After all, the image of one Latino working with others helps offset, to some degree, the trope of the White savior. To emphasize the point that this was a collaborated effort, producers of the spot include footage of Fit speaking Spanish with the Ecuadorian children.

### Discussion

Because Disney is firmly in the business of children, the company must balance the competing goals of remaining profitable while serving as a social institution that is tasked with shaping children into future adults. In both its programming and corporate communications, the company invokes the image of the innocent child, free from labor and devoted to their education. Yet, Disney's economic well-being depends largely on various forms of labor performed by children. To resolve this contradiction, Disney's relationship with Latino children is framed as both an economic and a moral imperative. For example, in their 2014 citizenship report, Disney identifies a specific goal of creating more responsible content by reflecting "a diversity of cultures and backgrounds in our entertainment experiences for kids and families" (Walt Disney Company, 2014a, p. 58). Here, Disney makes the case that inclusive programming is simply good business:

Disney is committed to appealing to a broad array of audiences and reflecting the diversity and multiculturalism of our consumers and the world. We believe that diversity

of content is integral for the growth and viability of Disney. It allows us to engage and remain relevant to a broader community of viewers. (Walt Disney Company, 2014a, p. 63)

During a presentation to movie exhibitors, Christine Cadena, senior vice president of multicultural initiatives, put it more explicitly in economic terms, stating that the industry must "Start thinking about Hispanics as your core customer, not as a segment. . . . The number one thing we've learned is Hispanics want to be included. We want to be part of the party" (McNary, 2015, para. 2).

This perspective that given their buying power, Latino children might command greater representation is consistent with Disney's overall mantra of "Empowerment and Unity," which is itself consistent with the larger television ethos of children's empowerment through consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Such optimism surrounding Latino buying power also links to ongoing conversations about "consumer citizenship," in which questions of inclusion go beyond access to rights within a formal political structure (García Canclini, 2001). As consumer-citizens, marginalized communities are said to be in the position to shape their own struggles through consumption. When consumers choose some goods over others, they publicly define what they think is valuable. From this perspective, Latino buying power may enable them to claim a place within society and eventually rights.

By promoting rhetoric of inclusion, Disney positions itself as an active participant in the struggle for social equity. However, we found a clear discrepancy between Disney's corporate discourses and its specific, professional practices. We found limited examples of Latino-oriented programming. Instead, appealing to Latino children is seen largely as an issue of direct language translation. Furthermore, specific ways that Disney uses the images of Latino children demonstrates the ways in which identity can be constructed and then reconstructed to serve specific strategic goals. Overall, Disney follows in the tradition of conceiving of Latinos as a unified bloc devoid of regional identities, what García Canclini (2001) terms "frivolous homogenization." However, within this construct, the allocation of labor is divided according to one's ethnic markers. Here, we found that Latino children play a bifurcated role, rendered invisible in some spaces and hypervisible in others; empowered in some roles, yet disempowered in others.

### ***The Empowered Latina Child***

Within its television programming, Disney's ideal Latino child actor is a young woman, a "spectacular body" (Valdivia, 2010) in which their ethnic identity intersects with commercial interests. According to Valdivia, both ethnicity and femininity are highly commodifiable, and can serve as vehicles by which to sell a program as well as the products associated with that program. However, we found that Disney's Latina children are not spectacular in the way that Durham and Báez (2007) have described in which Latinas' body types are markedly racialized outside of heteronormative White. Instead, Disney's Latinas are either phenotypically white or light brown and with no traceable accents. In other words, they possess no clear outward signifiers of Latino identity.

This is not to say that their Latino heritage is completely erased. Instead, these bodies are commodifiable because their ethnicity can be controlled to reach several different markets. As Molina-Guzmán (2010) has argued, Latinas who are closer to the mainstream are more desirable and consumable than more ethnically coded actresses. Consider actress Bella Thorne, whose father is Cuban and whose mother is Irish-Italian. During her appearances on various Disney Channel shows, including *Shake It Up* (2010–2013) and *KC Undercover* (2015), Thorne has played only Anglo characters. However, as part of an interview recognizing Hispanic Heritage Month on Disney's *Celebrity Take With Jake* (Walt Disney Company, 2013a), Thorne was invited to discuss her cultural background. Thorne, who has light skin, red hair, and no traceable accent, reported that she is proud of her Cuban heritage, yet she acknowledged that other people are surprised to discover that she is indeed Latina. When asked what she appreciates most about her Latina identity, Thorne responded,

I like that it's become such a big thing. It keeps growing, you find out more and more people are Latin. And that's why I like the ALMA [American Latino Media Arts] awards and the Imagen awards and I was so happy and blessed to be nominated for both. And I won the Imagen awards and I think it's just great that everyday people are like, wow! She's Latin, really? People are like, you're not Latin. I'm like, yeah I am. I'm like Cuban. (Walt Disney Company, 2013a [video])

Like Bauman's (1996) concept of the "tourist," Thorne has the ability to slip in and out of identities at will and for professional advantage. By suppressing her Latina identity, Thorne can compete with Anglo actresses for the large majority of roles that are available. At the same time, Thorne can also emphasize her Latino heritage for other professional opportunities such as participating in awards shows intended to recognize Latina/o actors.

Several years earlier, actress Selena Gomez articulated a similar perspective of her own Latino identity. Gomez, whose father is Mexican American and whose mother is Italian, has stated that it is "neat to be Mexican" (Brooks, 2009, p. 4), but admitted that her Latino ties are tentative: "We do everything that's Catholic, but we don't really have anything traditional except [that we] go to the park and have barbecues on Sundays after church" (Brooks, 2009, p. 9).

However, Gomez also has publicly stated that being a Latina has been advantageous professionally, claiming that her "unique" skin and hair color have allowed her to get parts over White actresses:

When I went to auditions, I'd be in a room with a lot of blond girls, and I always stood out. It actually helped . . . that I looked different. It got me where I am today! I don't know if I would have had the opportunity to be on *Wizards of Waverly Place* if it weren't for my heritage. (Brooks, 2009, p. 15)

Despite her claims of "standing out" from competing actresses, Gomez falls within accepted conventions of Latinidad. Dávila (2001) has cited corporate America's strong preference for "Mediterranean-looking" Latinas. In Gomez's case, the actress is light brown, which means she can pass as Italian or Spanish.

Furthermore, Gomez's claim that being Latina is a professional advantage in television does not play out in research. Colombia University's (2014) Latino Media Gap study indicates that Latinos are dramatically underrepresented in television programs relative to their overall numbers. Furthermore, the few roles available to Latina actresses continue to be confined to a few existing stereotypes roles, including the domestic or the sexualized Latina. Thus, Gomez's success reveals that only under very limited conditions, being coded as Latino can serve as a form of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) that can then be converted into professional gain.

In several ways, Disney itself benefits from actors such as Thorne, Gomez, and others who can be coded easily as either Anglo or Latino. By promoting these actresses during Hispanic Heritage Month or in their various CSR efforts, Disney can position itself as an inclusive company. However, we also found that there are conditions in which Disney's insistent commitment to the acculturated Latino limits the marketability of these actresses in the international marketplace.

As we have argued, Disney's ideal child actor is one who can be used across multiple properties. For some Latino performers, that value may be delivered by their capacity to reach different linguistic and ethnic markets. Colombian musician Shakira, for example, can perform in both English and Spanish, and therefore has the potential to reach mainstream U.S. audiences as well as U.S. Hispanic and international audiences. Disney has attempted to use Gomez in similar ways, but with marginal success. Gomez's band "Selena Gomez and The Scene" was signed to the Hollywood Records Label, a division of the larger Disney Music Group, in 2008. In an effort to reach Spanish-speaking audiences both domestic and international, Gomez has recorded Spanish-language versions of her songs. She has also performed in Spanish on Turner Broadcasting System's (2010) *Lopez Tonight* as well as on the Spanish talk show *El Hormiguero*.

During these appearances, it becomes apparent that Gomez is not comfortable speaking Spanish, an issue that she has addressed publicly, stating, "I don't know it [Spanish] very well because my dad's side of the family, which is the Mexican side, they are in Texas and I'm always traveling and I'm working so it's very hard for me to stay communicated . . . but I do wish I could buckle down and I want to actually learn it and be completely fluent, that's probably on my bucket list" (Karakaya, 2013, para. 14).

### ***The Disempowered Latino Child***

There is a different Latino child who is less visible, but who nonetheless plays an important role in advancing Disney's strategic objectives. This is the Latino child whose image dominates Disney's corporate communications and is meant to signify Disney's goodwill. This Latino child is not part of Disney's television programming and therefore does benefit from the visibility afforded child actors. Neither is this child protected by a professional union, nor does he or she get paid substantially, if anything, for Disney's use of his/her image.

Instead, this Latino child fits the description of Bauman's (1996) "vagabonds," who, in comparison with the "tourist," has much less control over the identities ascribed to him/her. This is not the empowered child identified in previous studies on children's television. Instead, the child is more likely to be presented in the role of a beneficiary. In these cases, Disney has chosen to emphasize the child's

ethnicity. As Esteban Del Rio (2006) argues, to be read as Latino in everyday culture, one must be marked as "other" by Anglo eyes by way of complexion, accent, and surname. By featuring darker-skinned Latinos, otherness appears to be the goal. The more "authentic" the Latino child, the more moral authority the child lends the programs.

Furthermore, by employing the recurring trope of the "needy Latino child," Disney both draws from and reinforces existing stereotypes of Latinos as dependent on social services, but instead of the state, it is Disney that positions itself as benefactor. In doing so, the company only alludes to and, ultimately, deemphasizes larger health and economic disparities faced by the Latino community. Here, Disney's narrative is bound by the medium itself. After all, CSR reports and public service announcements are, in essence, forms of advertising, in which the primary function is not to critique or draw attention to ethnic disparities but rather to promote and persuade.

In his critique of advertising, Schudson (1984) argues that because persuasive forms of communication are not meant to challenge existing values but rather to reaffirm them, their tone is generally optimistic and assumes forward progress. If problems are brought up, they can easily be solved with the support of the corporation. This was evident in a series of spots that Disney produced in 2014 for Hispanic Heritage Month. In an effort to celebrate Disney's inclusiveness, "real-life" Latino children were asked to reflect on what it means to be Latino by discussing their favorite foods, hobbies, and career aspirations. "Where your family comes from is a big part of what makes you, you" begins each spot and concludes with the lyrics, "This is real. This is me. I'm exactly where I want to be."

The use of children in these vignettes is a strategic choice. After all, Latino children are distinguished from Latino adults who connote hypersexualization and violence (Molina- Guzmán, 2010). Instead, children are filled with the possibility of becoming good consumer-citizens. In one spot titled "Hispanic Heritage: Hobbies and Careers," a boy named Karlos tells the viewer, "I want to be a director because I want to make all kinds of movies." "I want to be a singer!" says a young girl named Jeszel.

The children in these public service announcements have darker skin and speak in accented English compared with the Latino children who populate the shows in which these vignettes are embedded. However, the message of the campaign is that differences are limited to preferences for language, food, and sports. In doing so, the diverse and sometimes violent trajectories of Latino immigrants are erased to reassure the public that America is a color-blind, open, and accepting place. Thus, these vignettes are at odds with the reality of many U.S. Latinos who continue to face social, linguistic, and associational isolation in the United States. In her study of Latino representations in popular culture, Molina- Guzmán (2010) argues that such narratives exist alongside anti-immigration discourses and are meant to allay racial anxieties.

This practice of muting the harsher realities of life to create a more comfortable environment for children is not necessarily new. Instead, this practice perpetuates what Mintz (2004) describes as the Romantic vision of childhood, or the notion that children need to be sheltered from adult realities such as death, profanity, and sexuality. This, presumably, also includes excluding children from racial politics while avoiding the complex issues of racism and social inequality.

Avoidance of racial politics is symptomatic of the television industry at large (Harper, 1998; Nilsen & Turner, 2014), but Disney flagship cable channels appear to be particularly conservative. This is evident when you compare Disney television programming with its film properties, in which the source material reflects the darker, more complicated lives of children. But it also differs from other Disney television properties such as ABC, which has found success with shows that feature Latino actresses including *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012).

Recently, however, the Disney Channel has demonstrated signs of relenting. In January 2015, Disney executives publicly revealed its first Latina princess, Elena of Avalor, which will be a spinoff of *Sofia the First*. In *Elena of Avalor*, Disney has abandoned its creative approach of drawing from various cultures while representing none, and has opted for a more conspicuous pan-Latino approach. In a dramatic reversal from her 2012 position on *Sofia the First*'s Latina background, Kanter stated,

What excites us most is the chance to use distinctive animation and visual design to tell wonderful stories influenced by culture and traditions that are familiar to the worldwide population of Hispanic and Latino families and reflect the interests and aspirations of children as told through a classic fairytale. (Steinberg, 2015, para. 2)

Kanter's sudden appreciation for a Latina-specific princess suggests that the Disney Channel is only now beginning to submit to the demographic changes that have become apparent to other networks.

That same year, the Disney Channel committed to *Stuck in the Middle*, a situation comedy centered on Harley Diaz, the daughter of a middle-class family living in suburban Massachusetts. Harley's Spanish surname and light brown skin are meant to convey Disney's commitment to the Latino community. Both shows will feature Latino children, and they will also fit nicely within Disney's current repertoire of programs. In his analysis of Disney programming, Real (1996) argues that despite the abundance and diversity of Disney's texts, there is a self-contained logic with an identifiable universe of semantic meaning, what he calls "the Disney touch." In the "Disney universe," the world is bright, upbeat, and optimistic, a presentation of the world that is incongruent with explicit conversations about race and class.

Such dynamics ultimately illustrate the limitations of consumer citizenship. Narratives about Latino cultural life must neatly coincide with reality on Disney television, in which White, middle-class life and its attendant problems are the unspoken norms (Havens, 2013). Consequently, Disney's on-screen Latinas more closely resemble what Harris (2004) has described as a "can-do" girl, an ideal consumer-citizen who, although self-confident, has power emanate because she consumes the right products. This construct of the "can-do" girl sits in opposition to Taft's (2010) "girl activist," who seeks fundamental political change through direct action.

These dynamics affirm Dávila's (2008) point that the optimism surrounding Latino audiences may be premature and that inclusion on screen does not necessarily translate to inclusion in the real world. They also speak to the power we invest in television, which is seen as having effects that extend beyond the domain of signs and into the realm material well-being. Optimism surrounding Latino representation is

rooted in the assumption that such representation can improve the objective conditions characterizing those living within the scope of television's influence, what Harper (1998) calls "simulacral realism."

Disney's reluctance to cast clearly identifiable Latinos in lead roles supports previous findings that to be featured on children's television, one must be Latino "in the right way," meaning that one must be exotic without isolating an ideal audience of White, middle-class children (Beltrán, 2008; Casanova, 2007). Our own findings on how Disney uses the labor of Latino children illustrate the ways in which a corporation can be both rational and irrational at the same time. On one hand, it becomes evident that there is a clear logic to how Disney assigns various forms of labor to different types of Latino children. Projecting images of light-skinned acculturated Latinos to a general audience while restricting the images of more clearly identifiable Latinos to CSR efforts are practices that help advance the company's goals, albeit in different ways. Yet, these decisions are based on biases that reify social hierarchies that privilege White children. By keeping brown bodies in their proper places, we found that Disney wields a particularly pernicious form of symbolic violence against Latino children. Children who can clearly be identified as Latino are invited to participate in very specific spaces, but they are denied entry to others. Only in very limited cases can certain Latinos find a place in the network, so long as their Latino identities can be managed.

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