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MEDIA REVIEWS

Encanto

(Original Motion Picture Soundtrack). Walt Disney Records, B09GYH5WK6, 2021, Streaming.

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Known widely for beloved musical theater hits such as *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, Broadway lyricist and composer Lin-Manuel Miranda has fashioned in the *Encanto* musical soundtrack a world that is ultimately as much about Colombians in diaspora as it is about Colombians in South America. Casting several well-known U.S. Colombian performers in significant roles, the soundtrack of *Encanto* ultimately prompts broader, more thorny questions regarding the authenticity of diasporic cultural production; the contested character of "Latin" music; the ongoing efforts of the Disney Corporation to identify, create, and exploit new consumer markets around the globe; and the disabling impacts of present and historic violence on Colombians.

Reaching #1 on the Billboard charts in 2022, the *Encanto* soundtrack accompanies the popular 2021 Disney animated feature of the same name. Set in a nameless Colombian village, the plot of *Encanto* focuses on the large, multigenerational Madrigal family, each of whom, with the apparent exception of the protagonist Mirabel (Stephanie Beatriz), possesses a wondrous gift. For example, Luisa (Jessica Darrow) is incredibly strong; Dolores (Adassa) can hear absolutely everything regardless of distance; and Julieta (Angie Cepeda) is capable of healing all ailments with her cooking. They are presented to listeners in the first song on the recording, "The Family Madrigal," a track that borrows from Spanish syntax as well as the triethnic vallenato music of Colombia's northern Caribbean coast. Even their enormous home, which they affectionately refer to as "*casita*," is enchanted; the miraculous, always shining light of a candle in casita lets them know that the magic remains alive in the Madrigals, and that their home is still strong.

The origins of the candle and its bright light are paradoxically rooted in a very dark era for both the Madrigal family and Colombia as a whole. At the onset of the film, the future matriarch of the Madrigal family Alma (later known as Abuela, voiced by Cecilia María Botero) and her husband Pedro (known afterward as Abuelo Pedro), new parents to triplets, are forced to flee from their home due to an armed conflict, based on Colombia's Thousand Day's War (la Guerra de los Mil Días), a bloody civil conflict that took place from 1899 to 1902. Forced migration and armed conflict are quite familiar to millions of Colombians, both in South America as well as within the sizeable Colombian diaspora, and indeed researchers have identified them as events that frequently shape family life for generations.[1] In the upheaval of their sudden flight, Pedro is killed and Alma manages to save herself and their children, escaping to a small enchanted village or *encanto*. Here, Alma's family claims their magic, and the Madrigal legend is born, with casita as the primary visual evidence of the family's prosperity and ability to overcome the traumas of the past, a narrative in which Abuela is deeply invested. Maintaining a strict silence around Colombian pain stemming from the country's long history of civil conflict becomes a critical element of the psychic glue that holds the Madrigal family together, particularly its women, who are tasked with maintaining the social order.

[1]Sydney Conroy, "Narrative Matters: Encanto and Intergenerational Trauma," *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 27, no. 3 (September 2022): 309–11; Jessica P. Cerdeña, Luisa M. Rivera, and Judy M. Spak, "Intergenerational Trauma in Latinxs: A Scoping Review," *Social Science & Medicine* 270 (February 2021): 1–22.

However, despite all of the deft performances of ability—instead, hyperability manifested through their powers—that early all of the Madrigals engage in on a daily basis, ironically it is the "average" Mirabel who begins to notice threatening cracks in casita's walls and foundation. Mirabel's warnings to the rest of the family and to Abuela in particular are met with denial and even hostility. The plot from there on focuses on Mirabel's efforts to contest the powerful forces of denial by repairing casita and returning her family's gifts. As *Encanto* communicates with respect to Mirabel, the expectation that the oldest Madrigal sister Luisa (Jessica Darrow) must perform strength regardless of the circumstances persists. In other words, she must perpetually *aguantar* or endure, an expectation leveled at Colombian women of all ages—indeed, a social norm leveled in varying degrees at Colombians as a whole—and one that constitutes a foundational aspect of the societal pressure to silence the traumas of Colombia's past and sidestep their present-day impacts.

The song "Surface Pressure," a cumbia-infused reggaetón track performed by Darrow and one of the *Encanto* soundtrack's most commercially popular singles, engages the topic of gendered societal expectations directly.[2] Luisa also embodies the unique pressures often faced by the parentified children of immigrants, who frequently are expected to perform adult tasks in the name of daily family functioning and survival. Against an extra slow-rolling dembow beat, contralto Darrow's rich vocal delivery, punctuated by weary sighs and deep breaths, communicates the weighty task of upholding the demands placed upon Colombian women in its opening lines: "I'm the strong one/I'm not nervous/I'm as tough as the crust of the Earth is/And I glow, 'cause I know what my worth is/I don't ask how hard the work is." "Surface Pressure" is a musical onomatopoeia, deftly structured to frame Darrow's engaging performance, which blends into the rhythmic structure and overall feel of the song seamlessly. "Surface Pressure" also references the profound and pervasive feelings of anxiety associated with trauma: "Under the surface, I hide my nerves and it worsens, I worry something is gonna hurt us/…Under the surface, I think about my purpose, can I somehow preserve this?" "Surface Pressure" is thus anything but superficial in its lyrical concerns and musical performance, in a significant departure from most Disney/Pixar fare (with the exceptions of more recent films such as *Inside Out* (2015) and *Coco* (2017)), given the more sophisticated psychological themes of *Encanto* and its reliance on a blend of Latin musical genres in the soundtrack. (Notably, *Encanto* was scored by Germaine Franco, also one of the composers for *Coco*, Disney's last major animated feature set in Latin America.) "Surface Pressure" achieved noteworthy commercial success in the U.S. market, rising to #8 on the Billboard Hot 100 in January 2022 and making *Encanto* the first Disney film to produce two top ten songs for Billboard.

The soundtrack's most significant break-out hit, the ubiquitous "We Don't Talk About Bruno," also earned *Encanto* a Grammy in 2023, alongside two additional Grammy awards for score and soundtrack. Driven by a cha-cha-cha beat punctuated by elements of Latin pop and salsa, "We Don't Talk About Bruno" is an intricate ensemble performance featuring several members of the Madrigal family. It has captured the global popular imagination not only for its hook-laden chorus, but also for its weighty thematic content. The song is built upon a litany of complaints regarding the powers of divination of Bruno, an estranged uncle who was banished from the Madrigal family 10 years prior for divining an ominous future for the Madrigals if they did not address their traumas, and daring to verbalize what he saw. As Stephi Wagner observes, "pain travels through families until someone is ready to feel it,"[3] and in the Madrigal family, both Mirabel and Bruno are key conduits to feeling in any attempt toward addressing the family's intergenerational trauma. The ungifted and hence inauthentic Mirabel stands in for the female Colombian diasporic subject,[4] while the socially marginalized Bruno is visually marked as an Indigenous Colombian in the film. In "We Don't Talk About Bruno," we witness how Bruno primarily but also Mirabel are disciplined for their transgressions—in Mirabel's case, for even inquiring after Bruno, and in Bruno's case, for putting to words

[2]Ariana Ochoa Camacho, conversation with the author, March 1, 2024.

[3]"The end of the line: it's time to face the pain," *Restoration Counseling* (blog), October 5, 2018, https://www.restorationcounselingseattle.com/blog/the-end-of-the-line-its-time-to-face-the-pain.

[4]Ariana Ochoa Camacho, conversation with the author, March 1, 2024.

what the Madrigals have always collectively scripted as silence. The song begins with only two cast members and gradually becomes increasingly more complex in its lyrical exchanges, with performers eventually singing over each other as they return once and again to the iconic chorus, which also serves as the emphatic opening words of the track: "We don't talk about Bruno/No, no, no!/We don't talk about Bruno." Equally as insistent are the final words of the song, regretfully voiced by Mirabel, whose questions regarding Bruno prompt the entire performance in the first place. Exquisitely aware of the familial taboo that she has invoked, Mirabel queries aloud as the song closes: "Why did I talk about Bruno?/Never should have brought up Bruno!" As the sharp responses to Mirabel's questions about Bruno illustrate, virtually all of the Madrigals have long engaged in a collective denial that has been steadily rotting the foundations of casita, rendering it impossible for them to live their daily lives.

The Madrigals have been socialized in denial not only by Abuela, the family matriarch, but also by the state, also embodied by Abuela. Both entities are dedicated to maintaining the status quo, even as some of the most marginalized members of Colombian society (women and Indigenous Colombians) bear the weight of faltering familial and other institutional structures. Significantly, these structures do not acknowledge the myriad effects of the violence of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much less the original violence of colonialism. Ultimately, "We Don't Talk About Bruno" is a knotty ensemble piece that echoes many Colombians' collective investment—both in South America and in the diaspora—in disregarding the widespread societal impacts of historical and more recent trauma. The family members air their collective and individual complaints about Bruno, but what they are actually vocalizing—and that which remains the unarticulated subtext of the track—is the pain rooted in their trauma. Bruno becomes the lyrical target of the Madrigals' collective dismay because he reminds the family of that which they would rather continue to forget.

Disney conducted a great deal of research on Colombia before creating *Encanto*, and there is often an impressive level of detail, if not nuance or coherency, in the cultural references that they include. *Encanto*'s creators have not attempted to erase the plot elements of *Encanto* specifically rooted in Colombian intergenerational trauma, but they have been quite careful not to locate the roots of this trauma too chronologically close to present-day Colombia. This is a commercial and political decision as much as it is an artistic move, and Disney's choices regarding *Encanto* demonstrate that the three concerns are never mutually exclusive. However detailed the Colombian cultural references may be in *Encanto*, they are nonetheless routinely decontextualized (e.g., cultural regional differences within Colombia, arguably the most intense in Latin America, are collapsed). Upon closer inspection, the often indiscriminate nature of the sonic and visual representations of Colombian identity in *Encanto* ultimately constitute a "disavowal of Latina/o specificity" that effectively allows Disney to sidestep any claims to authenticity.[5]

A key part of Disney's ongoing survival is to constantly identify, create, and exploit new consumer markets. Latinx media audiences are an important target of this strategy, in part because they form part of Disney's move to expand their global reach, as well as the conglomerate's attempts to increase its domestic consumer base. Disney thus walks a very fine line in its efforts to include the appropriate cultural references and symbolism without alienating a global and domestic Latinx media fan base that is often stereotyped in the United States as uncritically loyal.[6] Just as notably, Disney's representation of Colombia in *Encanto* is carefully calibrated to not alienate mainstream audiences in the Global North.

Beyond the track "Colombia, Mi Encanto," performed by beloved Colombian vallenato moderno superstar Carlos Vives, and the double Oscar-nominated "Dos Oruguitas," (Two Caterpillars), sung by U.S. Colombian artist Sebastián Yatra, *Encanto* is largely a traditional U.S. musical film soundtrack rooted in genres well known to mainstream U.S. audiences, such as pop, hip-hop, and traditional musical theater elements, accompanied by disperse features of various Colombian genres, such as vallenato, bambuco, and cumbia. Whether or not this makes the *Encanto* soundtrack an "authentic"

[5]Angharad Valdivia, *The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 106.

[6]Diana Leon-Boys, *Elena, Princesa of the Periphery: Disney's Flexible Girl* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 5; Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

Colombian musical production is a vexed question: After all, hybridity is part and parcel of Latin musical performance. Much like the people of Latin America themselves, Latin musical genres are hybrids of hybrids, and must be considered on those terms.[7]

One note of particular related interest is the manner in which U.S. Colombians, traditionally posited as "inauthentic" vis-à-vis Colombia, are instead featured in the soundtrack as part of Disney's dogged efforts to offer audiences "authentic" material about the country. This is significant, given the long-standing tendency in Latinx popular culture to posit Latin American subjects and not diasporic Latinxs as the source of authentic Latinidad. However, diasporic Colombians are still effectively absent from the writing team, the research process, and all other aspects of *Encanto*'s production. Accounting for these contentious questions and many more, the soundtrack for *Encanto* offers a well-studied, highly produced musical representation of Colombia, but one that is strategically sanitized, decontextualized, and ultimately more reflective of the musical traditions and tastes of the Global North than those of Colombia.

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PUBLIQuartet, What Is American. Bright Shiny Things, BSTC-0171, 2022, CD.

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The string quartet PUBLIQuartet's latest release, *What Is American*, is a concept album that challenges the listener intellectually, emotionally, and musically while still managing to entertain. The ensemble's approach is to take two nineteenth-century works—Antonín Dvořák's twelfth string quartet (nicknamed "American") and the "fifth verse" appended to Francis Scott Key's "The Star Spangled Banner" in 1861 by poet Oliver Wendell Holmes (father of the famous Supreme Court justice)—and recontextualize them by surrounding quotations from them with spoken words and music by or inspired by twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black American composers.[1]

The album opens eerily with a dramatic reading by members of the quartet of Holmes's "fifth verse," which was written during the American Civil War to condemn the Confederacy and champion "the millions unchain'd." The reading is backed by nonvibrato string quartet chords treated with electroacoustic effects, and this combination of spoken text with enhanced string quartet is used for three additional brief "fifth verse" interludes dispersed across the album. These interludes provide a connecting thread for the album's concept. Dvořák's "American" quartet, composed in Iowa in 1893 and his best-known chamber work, is the other centerpiece of the album. The extent to which Dvořák's work actually connects with "American" music has long been a subject of debate among scholars: He publicly praised Black and Indigenous American music and the quartet contains a

[7]María Elena Cepeda, "Music," in *Keywords in Latina/o Studies*, eds. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence LaFountain-Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 144–47.

[1]The concept has similarities to the Cavani Quartet's collaborations with poet Mwatabu Okantah over the last several years, in which the quartet juxtaposes Bartok's fourth quartet and Dvorak's "American" quartet with Langston Hughes's poetry. See this 2017 performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzQQaeg1EbY.