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When *Coco* Feels like Home: Film as Homenaje

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Film Synopsis

Released in November 2017, Disney/Pixar's *Coco*¹ centers around the traditional celebration of Day of the Dead set in Mexico. The story follows Miguel Rivera, a 12-year-old boy with a talent for the guitar despite his family's generational ban on music. Young Miguel reveres Ernesto de la Cruz, a former film star and musician who is the point of pride in Miguel's hometown. After a dispute with his family, Miguel breaks into Ernesto's mausoleum only to be swept into the Land of the Dead. There, he must find his way home with the help of savvy navigator, Hector. Amid the discoveries he makes about his family's past, Miguel comes to understand the love that is shared amongst family.

Aiming to "Get It Right"

Marked with subtle commentary on Mexico's society, the film *Coco* is uniquely situated in a line of Disney

ventures in Latin America combining policy and storytelling. Contributing their insight, Marcela Davison Avilés and Lalo Alcaraz, two of the cultural consultants from the film, were interviewed by senior editors Elizabeth Castro and Bryan Cortes of the John F. Kennedy School of Government *Journal of Hispanic Policy*.

Disney met swift backlash from the Latinx community in their early attempt to trademark the phrase Day of the Dead or "Día de los Muertos."² The studio blunder was a prompt toward forming collaborations with cultural consultants who provided feedback for the film. Marcela Davison Avilés is a producer and strategist with long-standing consultancy work for Latino-related projects at the Walt Disney Company. A graduate of Harvard College, Marcela has produced Latino arts and culture festivals. Lalo Alcaraz is a political cartoonist, satirist, and creator of the nationally syndicated comic strip "La

Cucaracha," as well as early critic of Disney's doomed trademark effort. When invited to join the film, he was upfront by fielding questions such as "If there was going to be brown-facing." Audiences today are quick to call out studios for casting decisions that favor white or prominent actors while diminishing opportunities for under-represented artists. In *Coco*'s case, the film is imbued with a long list of Latin voices.

Critiques of the film range from assertions of appropriation to skepticism of Disney's corporate backing of the venture. As someone who grew up crossing the border between San Diego and Tijuana, Lalo's worldview is informed by tuning in to Mexican perspectives. For *Coco*, he has "rarely heard criticism from the Mexican side of the border." Marcela adds that communities have strong feelings about how identity is depicted as part of their critiques. "My own view is that here in the States, the context also has to do with feelings of identity that don't necessarily exist in Mexico, or if they do, they exist in a different way. The political situation is different," she adds.

Sharing about her production of mariachi events, Marcela recalls instances "where folks who have attended were very conservative, not necessarily supportive of our [Latino] community, but they attended because friends invited them. They left with that proverbial 'aha.' The lightbulb going off over their head because

the music spoke to them. Seeing kids perform this music the way Miguel does spoke to them." With *Coco*, "I think, for the most part, we were able to create something that people feel very deeply."

The Role of Indigeneity

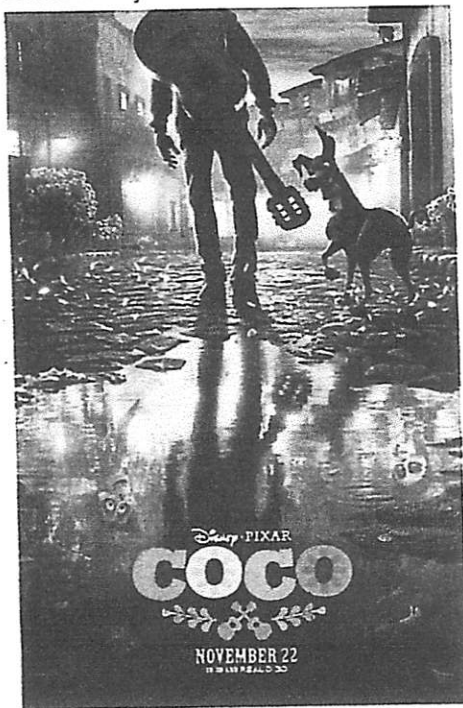
Marcela and Lalo underline that "indigeneity is at the core" of the film. "From the beginning, we brought in elders who have spent their lives creating magic through Día de Muertos through their creation of ofrendas," Marcela shares. Elders include Ofelia Esparza, a master artist engaged in altar-making who is known across the Los Angeles Chicano art scene and brought to the film via Lalo. In respect to a traditional altar, *Coco* is replete with cempasúchil, the orange marigold meant to attract spirits through its color and scent.³ Miguel's dog is a xoloitzcuintli, sacred to Mayans, Aztecs, and multiple communities who regard it as a spiritual guide. The film has "actual dark-skinned characters, indigenous-featured characters on film," Lalo says.

In Mexico, *Coco*'s success exists in a context where colorism and anti-indigenous sentiment permeate across Mexican media. There, *Coco* became one of the highest-performing films of all time. Mexican national newspaper *Milenio* positions *Coco* as a jab to Mexico's entertainment executives who render Brown and indigenous characters as inferior to their blonde counterparts in national television.⁴

Marcela emphasizes *Coco*'s music for highlighting musical fusion, or syncretismo. The film scores are a result of "musicians from all over Mexico coming to Mexico City to record for the movie." Beyond the nod to mariachi

"Seeing kids perform this music the way Miguel does spoke to them"

music, source music includes son jarocho from the Gulf state of Veracruz, a style riddled with indigenous, African, and European influence. "I don't recall that type of homenaje [tribute] in any other movie coming out of Hollywood."



Interpreting Scenes in the Film: The Serenade, Frida, and Shoeshiners

spoilers ahead Strengthening the themes of female empowerment in

the film is a scene featuring Mamá Imelda, the proud head of the family, singing a serenade. Marcela details:

"First of all, you don't get more Mexican than the song La Llorona. In the Siglo de Oro, you see Pedro

Infante, Jorge Negrete, Javier Solís, a singer who is typically down in the street singing up to their novia [girlfriend] who is on a balcony. And she is receiving the song and he is ... doing his macho thing. In this instance, who sings the song? It's Imelda. Imelda the entrepreneur. Imelda who had to create a business to provide for her family. She has to go back and recall a very painful memory, and out of that memory comes a serenade. But then what happens? She is literally on a pedestal that is raised as she is singing. And don't we all put our mothers on pedestals? There is this whole thing on *marianismo* and veneration of women, except that here, this woman is claiming her agency. She is singing to her family, and through that she is re-uniting them. If you look at women like María Félix or María Grever, or now like Natalia Lafourcade. That's my favorite scene and I think that it was so marvelously done. And that came out of the brain of Lee, Adrian, and the team."

An unconventional narrative is *Coco*'s depiction of Frida Kahlo, one the most recognized women from Mexico. Famed for her self-portraits, Frida's real-life art addresses trauma, love, and

disability. Lalo adds, "A part that could have been done wrong but was not was all the Frida stuff. There was a moment when we were talking [around a] screening. Lee [Unkrich] is immersed in this and, I think, said 'What do you think of this Frida sequence and gag? And the papaya?' They were thinking about cutting it, and they ran it by us. I was like, 'No way!' It is so unexpected, kind of a modern gag, really an adult gag. It is so great that it is in a Pixar or even just a mainstream Hollywood movie." In effect, the light-heartedness in portraying Frida became a comical way of incorporating her into the film.

La chancla scene, as it is known, is also a nod to Mexico's shoeshiner industry. After Miguel's grandmother finds him talking to a mariachi, she reacts in a scolding tone, taking off and shaking her chancla, the infamous leather sandal. Simultaneously, this scene shows Miguel, a 12-year-old boy working as a shoeshiner, mirroring real-life shoeshiners in Mexico, or as they are locally known, *lustradores* or *boleros de zapatos*. Across Latin America, *boleros* are recognized for carrying a shoeshiner box, or *cajón de bolero*, to hold their brushes and supplies, all details that are present in the film. Mexican news sources, particularly in southern states, continually report on the stories of shoeshiners, including youth, who carry out this work every day.⁵ Among discussions of inclusivity, one finds a less-addressed image of youth working during their school-age years in *Coco*.

From Donald Duck to Abuela Coco: Disney's History in Latin America

Historically, *Coco* joins a line of Disney films on Latin America, the first dating to the 1940s during the Roosevelt administration's promotion of the Good Neighbor Policy.⁶ Using film as a policy vehicle, Roosevelt was keen on combatting "Nazi influence" and the threat of this infiltration in Latin America.⁷ Marcela writes, "President Roosevelt and his team also knew... they needed to reach the hearts and minds of ordinary Americans and invite them to re-imagine negative stereotypes of Latin Americans which painted Latinos as lazy, suspicious, and uncivilized."⁸ In the US State Department, the Office of Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) had a division seeking to "present Latin Americans in more favorable images,"⁹ and the government enlisted Walt Disney himself to support their work.

Before *Coco*'s Rivera family, Disney featured Mexican rooster Panchito Pistoles belting "*¡Ay, Jalisco, no te rajes!*" in the 1944 Disney release, *Los Tres Caballeros*. True to his last name, Pistoles is a pistol-wielding character replete with boot spurs and a sombrero. *The Three Caballeros* follows the lively rooster travelling and teaching his buddies about Mexican culture and traditions, from *posadas* to *piñatas*. A distracting part of the film centers around Donald Duck

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chasing after Latinas as love interests, including Carmen Miranda's younger sister, Aurora.

Saludos Amigos (Greetings Friends), released in 1942, features Goofy in Argentina and introduces José Carioca, a Brazilian parrot. To draw inspiration for the films, Walt Disney and studio artists gathered research during their "Goodwill Tour" in Latin America, a trip captured in *South of the Border with Disney*.¹⁰ At times almost a head-on educational tool, the films are inescapably centered in their political moment and consciousness.

Coco met audiences during a time marked by a record-breaking earthquake in Mexico City, the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and Hurricane Harvey in Texas, and decisions on programs including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Countless viewers experience Coco within the context of Mexican and Latinx experience, and their positionality at large today. For Marcela, the power of narrative lies in "the notion that storytelling really can make a difference in terms of policy."

The Spotlight and the Future

Looking toward the future of Latino-oriented animation, "I am hoping that they are done right, with care, and that they actually are using Latino creators in these instances...I'm hopeful," Lalo shares. Marcela is opti-

mistic about seeing more pilots being green-lit for TV and life-action work. "I am from Nogales. You got two border babies on this team here. We know the sweet/bittersweet elements of the stories of la Frontera. And I am hoping that we will see more of that in terms of what comes from our filmmakers," she says.

Powerhouses such as Mexican film directors Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Guillermo del Toro are already taking Hollywood by storm. In a span of five years, they each won coveted awards for Best Director: two Academy Awards and one Golden Globe. González Iñárritu won praise after the dedication of his win to the immigrant community and those in Mexico.¹¹ Given its reception, it is not surprising that Coco cinched a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature film in 2018.

Yet the most heart-warming reception to the film is seen in the faces of elders in Oaxaca, Mexico, some of them reportedly visiting the cinema for the first time.¹² Disney and Pixar's Coco demonstrates that generations of Latinx will continue to vocally praise and thoughtfully examine the intentional portrayals of our cultura that are yet to come.

Author Bio:

The daughter of migrant farmworkers, Elizabeth Castro grew up surrounded by apple orchards in Mesa, Washington and sugarcane fields in Veracruz,

Mexico. She is driven to serve rural students as they transition to higher education. Her research has addressed higher education for Canadian Inuit and Mexican rural teacher colleges, centered on the Ayotzinapa college. Most recently, she engaged university students in Iztapalapa, Mexico City as a teaching assistant. Elizabeth is an Ed.M. candidate in Education Policy and Management at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and she participates in the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School. She is a Fulbright and CHCI alumnus and a McNair and Gates Millennium scholar. She graduated from Columbia Basin Community College and the University of Washington, majoring in International Studies.



End Notes

¹ *Coco*, directed by Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina (2017; California: Disney/Pixar). Theatrical Release.

² Cindy Y. Rodriguez, "Day of the Dead trademark request draws backlash for Disney," CNN, published 11 May 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/10/us/disney-trademark-day-dead/index.html>.

³ Erick Huerta, "Master Altar-Maker Ofelia Esparza: L.A.'s National Treasure," Grand Park LA, accessed 21 January 2018, <http://grandparkla.org/master-altar-maker-ofelia-esparza-las-national-treasure/>.

⁴ José Antonio Álvarez Lima, "Coco' y los racistas..." *Milenio*, published 30 November 2017, http://www.milenio.com/firmas/jose_antonio_alvarez_lima/coco-pelicula-pixar-calidad-cine-television-racista-milenio_18_1076472345.html.

⁵ "Los boleros de zapatos: historias de vida," *El Diario de Yucatán*, published 6 February 2017, <http://yucatan.com.mx/merida/ciudadanos/los-boleros-de-zapatos-historia-de-vida>.

⁶ Coincidentally, Marcela is a curator at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Foundation, associated with Adams House at Harvard College, and she aims to amplify Roosevelt's role in US-Latin American relations.

⁷ Dale Adams, "Saludos Amigos: Hollywood and FDR's Good Neighbor Policy," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 3 (2007): 289-95.

⁸ Marcela Davison Aviles, "FDR's Good Neighbor Policy," The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Foundation, published 15 September 2016, <http://fdrfoundation.org/author/marcelada/>.

⁹ Dale Adams, "Saludos Amigos."

¹⁰ Keith Gluck, "Walt and the Goodwill Tour," The Walt Disney Family Museum, published 8 September 2016, <http://waltdisney.org/blog/walt-and-goodwill-tour>.

¹¹ Matt Hamilton, "Inárritu calls for 'dignity and respect' for immigrants in Oscar speech," *Los Angeles Times*, published 22 February 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-irritu-oscar-speech-20150222-htm1story.html>.

¹² Daniel Barcenas, "Un cine en Oaxaca organizó una función especial de *Coco* sólo para abuelitos," *Sopitas*, published 6 November 2017, <http://www.sopitas.com/812270-reaccion-abuelitos-oaxaca-coco/>.