Undoing Latinidad: An Intersectional Investigation into the Colonial Legacies of Latinx Representations

Major Research Paper

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Introduction

Latinidad is broadly understood as a term that is used to group people from Latin America, and it references a shared sense of identity that Latinx[1] communities experience as colonial subjects (García and Rúa, 2007). The main difference between Latinx and Latinidad, is that the former refers to a person and the latter refers to an experience (Aparicio, 2021). Latinidad invokes a pan-Latinx solidarity in ways that spotlight a shared understanding of identity, place, and belonging (Price, 2007). As a social construct, it references a geopolitical experience and creates a homogenized vision of unity regardless of race, colour, class, nation, language "and the politics of location" (Rodríguez, 2003; 10). This understanding of Latinidad is reinforced by common sayings such as "we are all one heart here" (Price, 2007) and the general discourse that surrounds Latinidad – such as when Shakira, a famous Colombian artist, shouted to a massive diverse crowd at her concert in New York "*viva nuestra Latinidad*[2]*"*(Cepeda, 2003). This is a common narrative that upholds a feeling of celebratory pride, but it also blurs distinctions of race, of country, and culture under a unified Latinidad. In many ways it can be perceived as an act of resistance and a concept used to build power through pan-Latino solidarity (Price, 2007). It is also a cultural event as it forges a shared cultural identity under an ideal of common belonging. This is especially important in the US-Canada context, as Latinx people are minorities and face complex forms of marginalization. Thus, Latinidad is an identity category, a cultural marker, a geopolitical descriptor, and a social concept that amalgamates the imaginary of Latinx representations. As I discuss through this paper, it is also a term that mobilizes complex power relations, and that comes with its own dynamics of erasure and inclusion/exclusion.

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[1] Latina/o/x is used throughout this paper depending on context and where appropriate. Latinx is a gender-neutral term that has been fuelled by LGBTQ2+ communities to counter the colonial binary that is engrained in the Spanish language, and it is the terminology I use, except for when I know the subject specifically identifies as Latina/o

[2] This translates to "long live our Latinidad"

Since Latinidad is place-specific and is shaped by the context from which it emerges, it is necessary to note that in the 1970s and 1990s, the US began to institutionalize the term by codifying Latinx as minorities in order to procure grants from private and public institutions (Mora, 2014). The US Census framed Latinx as its own racial category[3] noting that they had distinctive social traits that were "significantly different from those of Blacks and whites" (Mora, 2014). This cemented understandings of Latinidad and how it was shaped in the trans-American imaginary, oftentimes being inaccurately construed as a race. This misconception tends to conflate spatial geographies as racial configurations and homogenizes Latinx identity to one racial category. In this sense, Latinidad erases understandings of race by opting for one general definition of Latinx that melts all experiences into a homogenized pot, where specificity becomes diluted. Latinidad then functions as a homogenizing agent that envisions a unified representation where all intersecting identities become represented by a dominant ideation of what Latinx *is*. This partnered well with colonial objectives in Latin America where governments campaigned to envision a singular identity, encouraging European immigration in order to preserve whiteness (León, 2019) and thereby propelling white mestizaje to the forefront of Latinx depictions. Since then, "the US and Latin American media has done a great job at constructing an image of what Latinx look like, and that image is rarely Black or fully Indigenous" (Lazo in Massie, 2016). Thus, Latinidad is also a socially contentious term as its homogenizing nature is reminiscent of colonial legacies. There has been substantial pushback over the years on the usage of this term from predominantly Black and Indigenous communities in the region. Pelaez-Lopez (2021), for example, highlights that Latin America and the Caribbean – like the US and Canada – are not ahistorical and all four geographies have shared histories of European settler-colonial conquest.

[3] Officially noted as "Hispanic" in the US census at the time

Examining the concept and representations of "Latinidad" is therefore crucial since they inform the ways that we understand and develop policies, programs and initiatives for Latinx communities.

In this paper I explore the complexities of the concept of Latinidad by examining how the homogenizing nature of Latinidad might reinforce colonial power structures through the erasure of Black Latinx and Indigenous peoples. I explore how homogenizing narratives like "we are all one" under Latinidad fosters an illusion of inclusion and progressive politics, while covertly feeding into colonial objectives that reinforce anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. In this paper, I spotlight and contextualize key arguments from Afro-Latinx and Indigenous peoples that critique Latinidad as an exclusionary term that upholds white identities and people. My contribution to this broader discussion is to examine these arguments and examine how different representations of Latinidad position themselves as progressive and celebratory representations of Latinx people. Therefore, this paper critically unpacks the concept of Latinidad to offer preliminary answers to several questions. 1. Does looking at Latinidad from an intersectional critical race lens help to problematize and specify the nuances of Latinx identity? 2. How might the idea of Latinidad create erasure of Black and Indigenous peoples in Latin America? 3. Finally, how do mainstream media representations of Latinidad inform our common perceptions of Latinx migrants?

Although this paper is necessarily limited in scope, I seek to provide preliminary answers to these questions by first briefly exploring the critical literature on Latinidad and representation emerging from Indigenous and Afro-Latinx communities across Pan-American colonial borders. I employ an intersectional methodology and critical race theories to critically examine the operation and possible harm of the concept of Latinidad. In the second half of this paper, I apply

these frameworks to examine several representations and performances of Latinidad in mainstream (primarily American) media to identify how ideas of Latinidad function in popular culture. I then end by juxtaposing these mainstream representations of Latinidad against the common settler perceptions and attitudes towards racialized Latinx migrant women at the US-Mexico border. I contrast these two images to further understand who Latinidad functions in favour of and why we might need to undo a homogenous idea of Latinidad for collective liberation and in the ways we approach discussions on Latin American identity.

Methodology: Applying Intersectionality to conceptions of Latinidad

Positionality Disclosure

As this paper addresses constructions of identity and representation, it is important to disclose my positionality as a white Colombian-Canadian woman. This disclosure is integral to methodological concerns since my positionality has shaped my views and approach to the topic. My perspective is drawn from my lived experiences: born in Cali to a Colombian family, who subsequently immigrated to Toronto, Canada in 2001. Substantial amounts of the discourse addressed in this paper such as *mejorar la raza* and *blanqueamiento* are violent narratives that are taken verbatim from everyday speech I have heard in Latin America. My whiteness has placed me in positions of privilege, but also as a witness to the inner workings of ideations of Latinidad. These direct accounts have inspired my research, to investigate how representations of Latinidad are constructed and used in neo-colonial contexts. I recognize how I benefit from these ideas of Latinidad as a white settler Colombian who represents the “favourable” South American immigrant envisioned in the white settler American-Canadian imagination. Therefore, it is a responsibility to unlearn my identity and intentionally explore how it has been propped up and

celebrated at the *expense* of others and how the function of Latinidad has propelled erasure as a colonial legacy.

Methodological Framing: Intersectionality

This paper uses intersectionality as its methodology to analyze a mainstream construction of a homogenous Latinidad in the media and broader society. This usage and understanding has historically involved, and still continues to perpetuate, a calculated erasure of Black and Indigenous communities in Latin America. In order to thoroughly examine the discourses and representations that have helped to form this concept of Latinidad, an intersectional methodology should be applied. In 1989, Black American legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, coined the term *intersectionality* rooted in Critical Race Theory and Black feminism. Intersectionality is a method and an analytical tool (Carbado, Crenshaw, et. al., 2014) and was selected as the method for this paper because it critically accounts for identity and representation, which is essential to rigorously analyze conceptions of Latinidad. It is central to feminist theories on liberation and decolonization and contextualizes itself according to applicable systems and structures of power. As a general identity construct, Latinidad claims to represent an entire continent of people unified as one with shared ancestry, history, and culture, but this understanding dilutes specificity and perpetuates erasure. Its positioning as all-inclusive is not coincidental, it is born from a long colonial project. Latinidad has historically proven itself to be a term reserved to favour a 'select few' and lends itself as a favourable identity marker for those with a proximity to whiteness, including gender, sexual preference and able-bodied privileges (Martinez, 2019). Thus, we must ask *who is Latinidad for?* Who is included and who is excluded from its definitions? (Cruz, 2019; Martinez, 2019).

Intersectionality is a pivotal methodology for these questions – where Latinidad functions as a homogenizing agent, intersectionality counteracts this by demanding specificity in critically understanding how it cuts across different identities to produce erasure. Crenshaw (1991) unravels this indifference towards specificity as being a problematic tactic - for this reluctance to recognize differences between groups in fact contributes to tensions *amongst* groups. In this sense, if we are seeking a feminist liberationist state, intersectionality holds Latinidad accountable by applying a practice of intentionality to understand how it excludes diverse identities. Intersectionality as a methodology can spotlight who Latinidad truly represents and peel away the layers of white supremacy that surround it.

Representational Intersectionality and towards a Radical Intersectionality

Representational intersectionality as described by Crenshaw (1991), argues that race and gender are intrinsically bound together. When feminism and anti-racism are treated as mutually exclusive, racialized – specifically Black and Indigenous – women fall through the cracks between women's issues and anti-racism movements. When one movement is removed from the other, the power structures that both attempt to dismantle, become empowered. This research therefore uses this understanding of representational intersectionality to challenge Latinidad by examining *who* falls between its cracks and what that might suggest about the power relations that a homogenous conception of Latinidad upholds. Furthermore, an intersectional approach recognizes that an individual can simultaneously hold multiple identities and therefore cannot be homogenized (Lépinard, 2014). Identities are not additive, but rather they must be fundamentally reconstitutive (Crenshaw, 2020). These insights into the need for intersectional analysis of representations will have particular importance for examining several key representations of Latinidad in the popular culture.

This reconstitution is better understood through the analogy of baking a cake, which has gained traction amongst intersectional feminist scholars. It illustrates how the essence of intersectionality is much like baking a cake: identities function like the ingredients to a recipe, but once the ingredients have been combined, you can no longer pull them apart for they have created a new whole (Bowleg, 2014). As explained by the cake analogy, intersectionality recognizes that people are not the product of an additive identity formula, but rather that they exist as a whole that is informed by interlocked identities and power structures that function simultaneously and cannot be exclusively picked apart. In the context of social movements, one category of analysis cannot be treated exclusively from others because identities are fundamentally constitutive. This methodology counteracts homogenizing tactics that degrade identity politics, and instead recognizes identity politics as a way to counter the universalization of experiences so that intersectional specificity can identify roads for liberation from Latinidad.

In order to be effective, this methodology must be acutely responsive to the ways that intersectionality has been (mis)appropriated and depoliticized. Radical intersectionality guides this research to remain accountable to its goals of liberation from Latinidad. In its inception, intersectionality oriented itself in "transformative and counter-hegemonic knowledge production and radical politics of social justice" (Bilge, 2013; 407) but began to be conflated with neoliberal agendas as it was commodified and colonized for such objectives (Ward in Bilge, 2013). In this sense, some uses of intersectionality have become depoliticized to the benefit of a neoliberalism that aims to appropriate all values as market values, and identity-based radical politics become appropriated as "corporatized diversity tools leveraged by dominant groups to attain various ideological and institutional goals" (Ward in Bilge, 2013; 407). In this sense, homogenous conceptions of Latinidad also feed neoliberal values and white supremacist capitalism. This

methodology must subscribe to a radical intersectionality. The danger in using intersectionality without radical inspection, would be that it is far too susceptible to rebranding and becoming a performative vision of Latinidad where diversity and inclusion are recognized, but without actually addressing the underlying structures that produce and sustain injustices (Ahmed, 2012). Similarly, intersectionality has been co-opted in many streams, and such has been coined as "ornamental intersectionality" which enacts a performative intersectionality becoming a surface-level rebranding for institutions and individuals to gather good public relations (Bilge, 2013; 408). For this reason, this research adopts a radical intersectionality, to examine the systems and structures that tie Latinidad to whiteness while claiming be progressive representation.

Following intersectional feminist analysis of the commodification of "equality" or "progress" language, we can see that in some ways, generalized ideas of Latinidad have become ornamental figures of progress, often being interpreted as anti-racist, being perceived as a progressive marker for diversity. Since Latinidad is treated as a racialized category, despite white representation being at the forefront, oftentimes it is used to deflect issues of representation and inclusion by claiming the "latino/a/x" marker. It serves as ornamental inclusion, and Latino/a/x gets branded as an identity marker, even though it is time and time again a white Latin American. Rosa Clemente, a Black Puerto Rican journalist and organizer who has repeatedly challenged the notion of Latinidad, states: *"'Latinidad' is an academic term that failed because it erases away race. For those of us who are Black Puerto Ricans or maybe identify as Indigenous, what it really does is it just waters down who we are, and it erases Blackness. The whole term is flawed."* (Clemente in Salazar, 2019). Clemente explores her lived-experiences with erasure to help understand how Latinidad dilutes Black and Indigenous identities. This investigation requires intersectionality to understand the specific experiences and nuances diluted

by Latinidad. It requires examination of the intersection of race, gender, queerness, class, etc. to unravel how Latinidad leverages white supremacy as a way to validate its power structures and fulfill colonial visions.

Whiteness as a Structuring Agent of Latinidad

As explored in the introduction, Latino/a/x is problematically treated as a racial category in the US/Canadian sphere, and when Latinidad is referenced, it is largely understood as a racialized minority. Through an intersectional lens, we can identify that facets of culture and language can perhaps contextually exist as minority representations in the US/Canadian settler sphere. This itself should be examined with specificity and historical rigour as Spanish is a colonial language and carries its own notable power dynamics. However, claiming Latinidad as racialized means that white Latin Americans suddenly become racialized and thereby can appropriate the experiences of racialized folks. Far too frequently in mainstream media we see the erasure of Black and Indigenous Latin American peoples from the Latino/a/x identity (Martinez, 2019). For example, the recent flurry of social media posts decrying the lack of a single Latino/a/x 2021 Academy Award nomination neglected to recognise that Shaka King, director of Best Picture nominee *Judas and the Black Messiah,* is of Panamanian background (Flores, 2021). This is a glaring example of who is celebrated in the Latinx community and who is marginalized by the white imaginary of Latinidad.

Intersectionality demands that this analysis explores the non-universal experiences of people overlooked under the umbrella of Latinidad. Despite being positioned as an all-inclusive, all-encompassing identity, this is not the case because we are *not* all one. In November 2018, Afro-Indigenous (Zapotec) activist, Alan Pelaez Lopez, posted a meme to their social media, commenting on the betrayal of the term Latinidad and its complicity with structures of white

supremacy (Martinez, 2019). The image is a road sign that shows an exit lane with a straight lane, and a car with the word “Latinidad” written on it; the car is shown making a sharp turn towards the exit lane. The straight lane option states that to continue on the road you will ‘admit racism and anti-Blackness exist and commit to building solidarity with Black and Indigenous peoples’ whereas the exit arrow reads ‘mestiza supremacy and your insistence that your great-great-great grandmother was Black’ (Pelaez in Martinez, 2019). Following this post, Pelaez then posted that “Latinidad is canceled.” (Pelaez in Martinez, 2019). Essentially, this illustration depicts the power structures that a homogenous representation of Latinidad supports. Martinez (2019) goes on further to explain that as a movement in the United States [and Canada], despite intersectional differences among people in Latin America, they are unified under the term as one all throughout the Americas. Martinez (2019) then goes further into the power dynamics to question the homogenizing tactics by saying that Latinos/as/xs with the most privilege are white, cis-gender, straight, wealthy, able-bodied men, and the more you move away from that center, the more that Latinidad no longer serves you. “The pseudo solidarity that the term provides serves as a cover for the existing cracks in its foundation.” (Martinez, 2019).

Fundamental to the conversation surrounding Pelaez’ post are two elements: first, the importance of mestizaje and how simplistic representations of Latinidad uphold this proximity to whiteness and second, how mestizaje conflates a distant connection to a Black or Indigenous relative with that identity itself. Mestizaje in Latin America is directly linked to colonialism and is commonly understood as someone who has a white and Indigenous racial mixture somewhere in their ancestry and the term literally translates to “mixed” in Spanish (Gonzales-Barrera, 2019; Champagne, 2018). When Spain lost control of the majority of its colonies, racial classifications were officially discouraged in Latin America (Gonzales-Barrera, 2019). At the same time, many

governments began to promote a *mestizo* national identity based on this Indigenous and European heritage mixture. This process in the United States and Canada is referred to as assimilation (Gonzales-Barrera, 2019). However, in Latin America this terminology has been accepted as Mestizaje, and for example, in Mexico the *Mestizaje* policies ask Indigenous People to join the national community and economy, take on Spanish as their language and shed their traditional tribal communities, languages, cultures, and customs (Gonzales-Barrera, 2019).

Mestizaje has been typically praised for its proximity to whiteness since it refers to mixture and the colonial objectives of 'whitening the race', which will be further investigated in the next sections. In this research, I explore Mestizaje, particularly in the context of the second mention in Pelaez's social media depiction that conflates distant Indigenous heritage as that claimed identity in the context of Mestizaje in Latin America. Guided by an intersectional methodology, this research applies critical race theories to undo Latinidad and understand how we intentionally move away from it, for it is serving a colonial project as it stands today. To understand the blueprint of Latinidad as fundamentally tied to whiteness, we must dissect how it manifests in all streams of society as a structure of white supremacy. These ties can be practically analyzed by exploring mainstream representations of Latinidad to understand how they satisfy a colonial vision that centralizes whiteness.

Theoretical Framework – Critical Latinx Indigeneities and Critical Race Theory

In this research I have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) in tandem with an intersectional methodology. CRT directly recognizes that "racism is not a bygone relic of the past" (George, 2021) and actively acknowledges that race intersects with multiple identities like sexuality, gender identity, socio-economic status, etc. CRTs fundamental recognition of structures and systems in relation to social identities, challenges understandings of Latinidad as a homogenizing

unifier. I apply this theory to navigate complex colonial structures, since it contextualizes Latinidad within a system and not as a haphazard identity marker as CRT negates the idea that racist incidents are oddities, but instead argues that they are consequential incidents of structural and systemic racism (Bridges, 2019). CRT supports the orientation of this research by understanding how Latinidad is enmeshed with colonial histories and structures of white supremacy. Moreover, throughout this research I incorporate direct accounts from Black and Indigenous peoples that denounce and express their experiences of erasure in relation to Latinidad; CRT valorizes people's lived experiences in relation to scholarship and embraces the necessity of direct recounts from people of colour for fruitful research practices (George, 2021).

Mejorar la raza which literally translates to "improve the race" is a commonly used expression in Latin America and it expresses the idea that one should seek to reproduce with a whiter person, to make better looking children (Casale-Hardin, 2017). *Blanqueamiento* is also a commonly used word that translates to *whitening* and denotes the ideal result of *mejorar la raza.* This oppressive discourse derives from European colonialism, revolving around maintaining white dominance and social hierarchies (Ferreira, 2020) and can be related to white supremacy, which is oftentimes assumed to be an exclusively US-Canada issue, when in actuality it is a violent ideology that Latin America avidly subscribes to as well. Historically, as societies of mixed race were on the rise in the colonized western hemisphere, whiteness was threatened and thus had to develop structures and mechanisms that would keep it in power and thereby leveraged white supremacy (Rodriguez-Solomon in Ferreira, 2020). Government backed *Blanqueamiento* campaigns took place whereby countries called for European immigration while banning immigration of African-descended people (Harris, 2020). These violent racist poicies are very telling and vividly reminiscent of the colonial structures that are still in place. The goal

was to “breed out” Blackness and Indigeneity, and Latinidad’s proclamation of ‘unified’ mixture softens – if not erases – this insidious history. Mixing was a strategy to *mejorar la raza.* Latinx experiences are anything but homogenous for “white terrorism knows no borders” (Harris, 2020).

CRT can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways in which race and racism both covertly and overtly influence social structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2005). The commonly used expressions mentioned above, detail the ways in which discourse and social attitudes/practices enable a deep entrenchment of racism in Latin America. They also exemplify how social structures enable these racist ideas to thrive, as they are commonly recognized expressions across different social spheres as ‘household sayings.’ Covert expressions also exist, such as the expression “*pelo malo”* which means “bad hair” and is commonly used in reference to ‘afro-textured hair’ (Casale-Hardin, 2017). There is this common belief that because we are “Latinx” and thereby a minority in contrast to US-Canada, that we cannot be racist and thereby have a “free-pass” for discriminatory discourse (Davila in Casale-Hardin, 2017). This mentality that is often held by lighter skinned and white Latinx curbs accountability but is also a key tenet of Latinidad. It operates under the strategic misconception that we are all one, we are all Latinos and therefore cannot be racist. In upcoming sections, I apply CRT to further unpack these problematic notions and explore themes of colourism, featurism, and Eurocentric beauty standards to challenge Latinidad’s claim to unification.

In conjunction with CRT, I have also borrowed from Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI) to critically examine the problematic constructions of Latinidad and how legacies of white supremacy and colonialism have informed ethno-cultural and racial perceptions. CRT and CLI overlap and are both applied in this research to provide a contextually specific framework since

CLI derives from Latin American Studies. CLI intentionally hones in on Indigenous perspectives from the region and across colonial borders, and I specifically apply it in the analysis of *mestizaje*. I use this theoretical framework to delineate the ways that gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class and other oppressions intersect with Indigeneity and are produced over various colonial contexts (Blackwell et al., 2017). CLI fundamentally understands that Indigenous communities and families organize around language, epistemology, transnationalism and youth cultural practice to survive and resist displacement and migratory experiences with creative forms of cultural cohesion (Urietta, 2016). CLI centers the experiences and ways of knowing of Indigenous Latinx communities to strive for specificity and challenge hegemonic categories; thus, CLI carves space for the multidimensional rhetoric and ideologies "of local, national, and transnational social and cultural flows both in Latin America and in diaspora" (Urietta and Calderón, 2019; 147). Since this research examines the structures that uphold Latinidad from a Pan-American colonial gaze, it necessitates a theoretical framework that recognizes how identities travel across borders and imaginaries.

CLI recognizes the multifaceted power dynamics of colonialism and centres Indigenous experiences to uncover its complexities. This serves as a strategic roadmap to hold Latinidad accountable to its colonial history that oftentimes gets diluted by rhetoric that represents Latinidad as a race. Intersectionality in tandem with CLI as a theoretical framework also challenges the homogenizing tactics of Latindiad and understands that "not all Latinxs share the same experience in regard to access to resources and information, primarily due to inter-group inequities and oppression that are reinscribed forms of colonialism that create hybrid hegemonies" (Blackwell, 2010). Moreover, this reinscription of colonialism also necessitates CLI to critically examine the ways that Indigenous peoples are displaced and wrongly associated

with Latinidad across borders, despite being Indigenous and not pertaining to Latinx representations. CLI is used to navigate the layers of colonialism that function under systems of white supremacy and oppression, with the objective of encouraging specificity and thereby undoing Latinidad through this specificity.

Mestizaje and Settler Nativism

In this research I aim to expose the ways that Latinidad posits itself as a unifier, while being a strategic tool of white supremacy. At the heart of this analysis is *mestizaje.* The general rhetoric that 'we are all one' in Latin America depends on the idea that "mixture" is antithetical to racism (Wade, 2017). This idea is reminiscent of problematic "colour-blind" discourses that individuals claim as proof that they are "not racist" and as previously explored, they curb accountability under the guise that since we are all one, we cannot cause harm. Latinidad also depends upon this idea as a key tenet for its survival since it functions as an umbrella that encapsulates all experiences under *one* and universalizes the Latinx experience as a default of the white and mestizo experience. Further in this research I explore mestizaje and whiteness as functions of Latinidad by applying a case analysis of how this manifests in archetypical representations of the "Latina" woman in mainstream media and contrasting how these representations inform media productions through an exploration of *In the Heights*. CRT enables this analysis for it rejects popular notions about racism, such as arguments that attribute racism to 'a few bad apples' (George, 2021). As aforementioned, CRT rejects claims of meritocracy and "colour-blindness," recognizing that we must be intentional about racial identification, and it is the systemic nature of racism is that is primarily accountable for reproducing inequality (Bridges, 2019). "CLI emphasizes the intergroup diversity that Indigenous and Afro-Latinxs bring and the intergroup inequities that manifested in unequal relations of power, including internalized

oppression as well as inter-group oppression" (Urietta and Calderón, 2019; 166). Thus, CRT and CLI are fundamental to unpacking the layers of internalized oppression and intergroup oppression in the context of Latinidad as a colonial construct.

This theoretical framework is rooted in a thorough engagement with settler colonialism, and mestizaje captures this engagement in unique and complex ways. It is notable that when Latinxs do consider themselves mestizos, they tend to identify with their Spanish heritage above all and glorify it, which often results in anti-Indigenous hatred and conflict "against latinxs that demand symbols of conquest be banished" (Urietta and Calderón, 2019; 157). Defending Latinidad typically goes hand in hand with defending an appeal for whiteness, which has been fervently upheld by colonial mechanisms. The supposed racial unity within Latinidad orbits whiteness and is only afforded to those that are white passing or white. This does not encompass Afro-Latinx and Indigenous peoples. For instance, Dash Harris, a Black Panamanian activist draws the parallel that problematic blood quanta are only afforded to white mestizos, because it leaves racial ambiguity to claim this concept of Latinidad while still upholding whiteness. Harris (2020) states that her friend who is Black, gets treated as such with no ambiguity and is "Black in every Latin American country she is in" despite being 20% European genetically, this will never be recognized since phenotypically she is Black – meaning she is never afforded racial nuance through mestizaje despite being 'mixed'. To further cement the point, Harris (2020) sarcastically states that her Black Latinx friend should start prioritizing her European ancestry in the way that white Latinx prioritize their minor Indigenous and African percentages to indulge in this mixture and see if they will reap the same racial benefits. For her, she is always Black and Latinidad does not represent her in the same way. Evidently, Harris draws a satirical parallel to emphasize Latinidad's double-standards of who gets to claim this vision of mestizaje and who

does not. CRT demonstrates how systems of racial power create unequal double standards for they leverage white supremacist constructs.

CRT recognizes that race is not biologically real, but it is socially constructed and socially significant (George, 2021) This underscores the socially significant and thereby socially real construction of race. In relation to the previous parallels illustrated by Harris on who gets to claim Latinidad, Ferreira (2020) explains that identity can be contextual and relational, and can depend on how you define yourself, but it's *also how you are defined.* Thereby, Latinidad affords no ambiguity for Blackness or Indigeneity, defining mestizaje is solely afforded to those with proximities to whiteness which fit the ideal image of Latinidad. Laura Gómez (2018) denotes how racial caste ordering of the region afforded this ambiguity to those with "off-white status" who could still uphold whiteness as a majority (Urietta and Calderón, 2019; 156). In this way, CLI challenges that any form of Latinx social justice, must include recognition of settler status in order to hold Latinidad accountable for its systems of erasure (Urietta and Calderón, 2019). CLI urges the understanding of how Latinxs have and continue to become complicit with the futurity of settler colonialism "despite the fact that they have been similarly impacted and affected by U.S. Anglo settler colonial structures and processes." This complexity is important for it unpacks the layers of colonialism and recognizes that being oppressed as Latinx can exist in the same space as being an oppressor as a white/mestizo Latinx person in relation to cross-border colonial contexts.

Furthermore, within this cross-border context, mestizaje is also accountable for its complicity with white futurity, despite its claim to unity and mixture it is still accountable for its settler colonialism on Indigenous territories. I argue that many white Latinx leverage mestizaje to contribute to this narrative that "we are all one race" under Latinidad and use this to propel Anti-

Black and anti-Indigenous racism and erasure. These previously explored narratives that claim 'we are all one and therefore cannot be racist', or 'that Latinx are minorities therefore we cannot be colonizers' is perhaps a way to reckon with the settler guilt of benefitting from a system that is historically built on genocide and violence. This reckoning can be more deeply understood as a reflection of *moves to innocence,* which is broadly defined as attempts by settlers to preserve white futurity by deflecting colonial blame and reconcile their guilt and complicity without instilling any substantial change (Tuck and Yang, 2012). An applicable move to innocence in this context is *settler nativism* whereby settlers locate and construe a distant ancestor who is rumoured to have had "Indian blood," and "they use this claim to mark themselves as blameless in the attempted eradications of Indigenous peoples" (Tuck and Yang, 2012; 10). There are many forms that this settler nativism occurs as a move to innocence, including the "Indian grandmother complex" where white settlers claim to have had an Indigenous grandmother and use this as a way to deflect settler identity, while continuing to reap the benefits of settler privilege on stolen lands (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

The Indian grandmother complex directly correlates to the earlier meme that was introduce by Pelaez on social media, depicting the car as Latinidad and swerving into the lane that states "mestiza supremacy and your insistence that your great-great-great grandmother was Black" (Pelaez in Martinez, 2019). Moves to innocence under the framework of CLI help contextualize this metaphorical illustration as mestizaje also buys into the grandmother complex. Although Pelaez references a Black grandmother, it still demonstrates how mestizaje benefits from whitestreaming Latinidad at the expense of Black Latinx and Indigenous peoples, especially when the alternative lane illustrated in that image from which the car is aggressively avoiding, states: 'admit racism and anti-blackness exist and commit to building solidarity with

Black and Indigenous peoples' (Pelaez in Martinez, 2019). Evidently, mestizaje reflects moves to innocence as this distant ancestry oftentimes gets used as a deflection, despite existing in a light skinned body. As Dasha Harris (2020) states in contrast to this colonial mestizaje: "*These mixtures were not unique, novel, special, nor unlike any colonial legacy of mixing anywhere else on the planet. I am a* negra*, Black, wherever I go. My mixture doesn't matter in a racial hierarchy. Those Latin Americans who spew their privilege of not having to 'think about their race in their country' are those violently making sure I never forgot my position as a negra*[4]."

This framework conceptualizes how mestizaje operates as a function of Latinidad and how the homogenizing aspect that does not do justice to the diversity of Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences outside of this collective mestizaje for it alludes to the "the normative nationalisms that have historically regulated, erased and controlled Indigeneity and Blackness" (Laó-Montes in Urietta and Calderón, 2019; 165). In this research, I apply these theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis portion and conceptualize how these theories materialize in mainstream Latinx depictions to cement white supremacy through Latinidad. The goal is not inclusion within Latinidad, but instead the goal is to *undo* Latinidad. As Tuck and Yang (2012) explain, inclusion is premised on hierarchy and hierarchical power; since Latinidad is sustained by hierarchies and structural power, I argue that we must entirely undo Latinidad – or as Harris (2020) and Pelaez (2019) framed it: we must cancel Latinidad. Therefore, CLI and CRT in tandem with intersectionality guide this research through an analysis that explores how Latinidad functions under a whitestream settler imaginary where homogenizing tactics prevail as methods of erasure. I apply these theories to detangle how pan-Latinidad as a collective identity is thus premised on a prioritized and assumed mestizaje that dilutes the racial, class, ethnic, sexuality,

[4] Negra is Spanish for Black woman

cultural and religious diversity in order to satisfy the white supremacist settler colonial structure across the so-called American imaginaries (Urietta and Calderón, 2019).

Latinidad in Action: An Examination of Mainstream Media Representations

In the second half of this paper, I apply the methodological and theoretical frameworks discussed in the first half of this research to mainstream media depictions of Latinidad. The goal of this analysis is to examine how mainstream media represents Latinidad and to explore how colonial heteropatriarchal white supremacy structures these representations. First, I examine three prominent Latinx celebrities in mainstream media to understand the attributes that are celebrated by mainstream (and highly successful or rewarded) representations of Latinidad. I then explore how these themes are constructed in mainstream Latinx representations through an analysis of Lin Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights*. I use intersectionality to navigate how identities interact with power dynamics and structures from gendered, racial and class perspectives under the umbrella of Latinidad. CRT and CLI are used to guide this analysis by examining the multiple colonial structures that simultaneously interact within Latinx representations. Theoretical questions explored in the first half of this paper will thus be used to examine how Latinidad manifests in tangible representations.

As examined in previous sections, Latinidad centres whiteness in its representations and often erases Black and Indigenous peoples. The effects of this erasure can be actively witnessed in mainstream media representations. After actress Anya Taylor-Joy won a Golden Globe at the 2021 ceremony, she was referred to as a 'woman of colour' by *Variety* Magazine, reporting: "Argentinian Taylor-Joy is the first woman of colour to win this category since Queen Latifah in 2008 and only the fifth woman of colour to win overall since 1982 when the category was introduced" (Michallon, 2021). Taylor-Joy is a white, blonde US-born woman with a Scottish-

Argentine father; she self-identifies as a 'white Latina', yet media sources still labelled her a "woman of colour." This is a relevant testament to how treating Latinx as a race allows whiteness to claim space in satisfaction of the white imaginary. Furthermore, Taylor-Joy stated she is highly wary of auditioning for 'Latina roles,' saying: "I'm aware that I don't look like a typical Latin person, and that's not fair" (Taylor-Joy in Jones, 2018). The critical question here becomes: what is a *typical* Latin person *supposed* to look like? This is a loaded claim and becomes an ambiguous and colonial concept – is Taylor-Joy referring to Latin Europeans? Or Latin Americans? If it is the latter, which under this context is reasonable to presume, then what does the standardized Latin person look like?

To begin unpacking these questions we must look to who mainstream media (particularly Hollywood) casts to serve the role of the archetypal "Latina Woman[5]": actors such as Sofia Vergara, Eva Longoria and Gina Roriguez. These three Latinx women have been celebrated in the US mainstream as talented Latinx actors. The pattern here seems as though it is their whiteness, or proximity to whiteness, that positions them as the ideal champions of Latinidad. The boundaries of representation must encompass a form of whiteness, yet we see these actors getting celebrated under themes of progressive Latinx diversity and inclusion. This draws parallels to Pelaez' (2019) statement about "the pseudo solidarity that [Latinidad] serves." Under these structures we must question, solidarity for who? As with the example of Anya Taylor-Joy, each of these actors participate in representations that seem strategic in their portrayal of palatable visions of Latinidad while claiming diverse representation. Anya Taylor-Joy being

[5] Due to the scope of this paper, I focus my analysis on Latinx women, but it's important to note that archetypes exist for men as well. These gendered archetypes function in different ways since they operate on machismo and privileges men under patriarchal constructs across continents. There is a different, sexist, sensationalism surrounding Latinx women. This also extends beyond the gender binary as colonial Latin American constructs are fiercely rooted in a heteropatriarchy.

referred to as a "woman of colour" demonstrates the violence that Latinidad fosters, as white women are afforded the space to claim Latinidad as a racial marker and therefore erase the experiences of racialized Latinx under this homogenizing terminology. White becomes the standard for Latinidad, whilst simultaneously becoming unaccountable to racial structures under the trope that "*we are all one."* This example accounts for the ways in which Latinx has become a racialized category in the white settler US-Canada gaze (Ogata-Aguilar, 2021).

Colonial interpretations allow for Latinidad to become synonymous with "non-white," and I argue that this is a move to covertly leverage white supremacy under the guise of Latinidad. This misguided interpretation allows for "white women to indulge in self-exotization due to the way they are perceived in the US vs their countries of origin" (Ogata-Aguilar, 2021). This is true for Anya Taylor-Joy and Sofia Vergara who are white yet have benefited from the exoticization of Latinx women and been able to leverage this appeal within US-Canada mainstream media. Vergara, a natural blonde, disclosed that when she came to the US from Colombia, she dyed her hair dark brown to make herself more marketable to the industry because she was not satisfying the US vision of the exotic Latina (Lowe, 2017). Vergara then stated, "the moment I dyed my hair dark, it was, 'Oh, she's the hot Latin girl.' I loved it" (Vergara in Lowe, 2017). As Guzman and Valdivia (2004; 206) explicate, "being or appearing 'Latina/o' is the 'it' ethnicity in contemporary US mainstream culture." This level of fetishization and commodification of Latinidad, paired with the way that Vergara responds to her 'darkening' of features, exemplifies how white Latinx women profit from the exoticization and appropriation of racialized people while operating in white bodies.

As public demand for more diverse representation in mainstream media has arisen from historically underrepresented communities, we have seen a notable increase in Latinx media

representation. This is very fitting to the agenda of pseudo inclusion and diversity, as "Latinx" ticks the performative 'minority' inclusion box. Again, this can be seen through the example of Taylor-Joy being referred to as a "woman of colour" and Vergara tapping into "exotic" features that adhere to *selective* racialized standards of Latinidad being cast by white bodies that profit from this commodification. When challenged on this commodification, Vergara responded that she feels there is nothing wrong with being a stereotype (Hendricks, 2017). This is presumably because she performs Latinidad with utmost white privilege that shields her from the violent consequences of stereotypes that are not afforded to Black and Indigenous women, which is what Ogata-Aguilar (2021) meant when stating that white women indulge in self-exoticization.

It is not only the darkening of features that Vergara plays into, but also the *tropicalization* she adopts in her identity performance. Tropicalism is one of the most prominent homogenizing tools that Latinidad leverages to erase specificity (Guzman and Valdivia, 2004; 211). "Under the trope of tropicalism, attributes such as bright colours, rhythmic music, and brown or olive skin comprise some of the most enduring stereotypes about Latina/os" (Guzman and Valdivia, 2004; 211). In this instance, tropicalism notably encompasses the hyper-sexualization of Latinidad. This hyper-sexualization is a gendered performance that situates itself within a binary: erasing gender diversity and expecting Latinx women to be "spitfire females characterized by red-coloured lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewelry" (Guzman and Valdivia, 2004; 211). Sofia Vergara actively embodies these traits and has adopted them as her brand, because "Latina" in the US-Canada mainstream sells… when it is performed by white bodies.

In the context of mestizaje, we can grasp the anti-Black racism that upholds racial power for mestizos and facilitates the "we are all one" tropes of Latinidad. Eva Longoria has been a

household name in Hollywood since the 00's and identifies as a Latina woman from a Mexican background. Recently, she came under fire as she made some controversial statements after the 2020 US presidential results came through. Longoria stated that Latinas were the "real heroines" of the 2020 democratic election victory (Hernandez and Carras, 2020). This immediately sparked public outrage at Black women being erased for their pivotal contributions to the election. Longoria responded with an apology and a clarifying statement saying that she was only comparing Latina women to their male counterparts and unfortunately misspoke (Hernandez and Carras, 2020). What I want to highlight here is not the controversy itself, but the discourse surrounding it, which I think is very revealing of the ways that Longoria associates mestizaje as the default for Latinidad. Her comments speak to notions of 1. Latinidad as a race and 2. Latinidad as a homogenized white mestizo. Longoria later tweeted stating "I was comparing Latinas to Latino men. Not black women. I meant Latinas were the ones who showed up for our Latinx community. *Finally*, black women don't have to do it alone. Latina women and other women of colour are standing with them and growing their voice and power" (Longoria in Hernandez and Carras, 2020). In this statement, Longoria has entirely erased Black Latinx women from the narrative, as if they were not included in her "Latina heroines" who showed up to vote. This alludes to the inherent anti-Black and anti-Indigenous attitudes that are engrained in the homogenized representation of Latinidad. It was Longoria's *assumption* that the categories of Black and Latina heroines could not overlap in her visions of Latinidad.

Moreover, Longoria unifies Latinx women under the umbrella 'women of colour' which she also lumps herself into. In 2010, Longoria publicly took an ancestry test and it revealed she was 70% European (Wallace, 2010). As aforementioned, race is socially constructed, but it is socially real. It is about how we define ourselves, but also how others define us. Since Latinidad

has been heavily misconstrued as a racialized category in US-Canada settler imaginaries, it is understandable why Longoria would perceive herself as a woman of colour. However, her dialogue around it seems to neglect the fact that she has an immense proximity to whiteness from her light skin and features. Race is also about how we are codified into society and within these boundaries of Latinidad, I argue specificity is crucial to undo the homogenizing nature of Latinidad. Longoria's reluctance to claim whiteness might be informed by the colonial paradigms that have categorized Latinx as a minority conflated with race, or it could be a move to innocence where Longoria clings onto the non-white aspects of her identity in order to validate her claim on Latinidad and deflect settler accountability. The dynamic between the racial homogeneity that Latinidad catapults and the departure from white accountability as a colonial legacy can be best summarized by Gina Torres, an Afro-Latina and American, who stated: "when I first became an actress, I realized that the world liked their Latinas to look like Italians and not like me. So I wasn't going up for Latina parts. I was going up for African American parts." (Torres in Erazo, 2014).

Lastly, Gina Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican American actor, is another popular Latina household name across the US. She has been an outspoken advocate for women and Latinx people in Hollywood (Butler and Rao, 2019). However, like Longoria, Rodriguez has left out Black women from this advocacy and has been facing backlash for her anti-Black racism. First in 2017, when Marvel Productions began to promote the ground-breaking Black Panther movie which featured a majority Black cast in a high budget production, Rodriguez stated that she commended Marvel's efforts on "inclusion and women, but where are the Latinos?!" (Rodriguez in Butler and Rao, 2019). The question led to backlash since Black Panther marked a profound cultural moment for African Americans. Rodriguez also recently faced severe criticism for

posting a video of her singing to Lauryn Hill where she said the N-word. In her latest apology, Rodriguez said she did not intend to cause harm and supported her intent by saying that her father identifies as Afro-Latino (Butler and Rao, 2019). This statement mirrors a move to innocence in the way that Rodriguez elusively claims she cannot be anti-Black (despite confidently saying a racial slur) since she has a familial connection to the Black community regardless of her phenotype. This example again signals to an evasion of accountability under the premise that we are all one race, while operating under and exerting privileges in proximity to whiteness and centering the issues and experiences of mestizos as the default visions of Latinidad. As stated in earlier sections of this paper, this projection of Latinidad is what Pelaez' meant by 'mestiza supremacy and your insistence that your great-great-great grandmother was Black' (Pelaez in Martinez, 2019).

Time and time again there have been non-Black Latinx celebrities that use the N-word and then defend their usage of this violent racial slur under the premise of being Latinx. Jennifer Lopez said the word in a 2001 remix of her song *I'm real.* A rapper of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent who goes by the stage name, Fat Joe, also fervently defended the "right" for any Latinx to use that word saying that "Latinos are Black" (Butler and Rao, 2019). This is an important rhetoric to situate in the broader discourse of Latinidad. While these examples have been more explicit and overtly harmful, they are part of a broader discourse that non-Black Latinx leverage under the constructs of Latinidad. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the prominent Latina-American congresswoman from The Bronx, reflected similar tropes when commenting on the Black Lives Matter movement in America. Ocasio-Cortez was asked what the Latinx community should do to stop racism, to which she responded: "A lot of times I'll hear people say, this is about Black Lives Matter, what about Latinos? and I always say, Latinos are black! We are Afro-Latina, and

we run an entire racial spectrum" (Ocasio-Cortez in Varma, 2020). As socially opposite as Ocasio-Cortez and Fat Joe might appear, they share a commonality in their application of Latinidad. They have both inadvertently claimed to be Black by default of being Latinx. Within this context, it is not a celebration of Blackness but rather an appropriation. Although Ocasio-Cortez is shedding light on this racial spectrum, she is claiming Blackness by proxy of being Latinx as she further states “we have to have conversations about the African and Indigenous roots from which we come” (Ocasio-Cortez in Varma, 2020). Here she implies the construct of Latinidad as synonymous to homogeneity and mixture that every Latinx can claim as their own. Through these examples we can begin to understand how Anti-Black racism is embedded within the constructs of Latinidad, it invokes an entitlement and erasure that conflates the experiences of non-Black light-skinned Latinx speaking on behalf of Afro-Latinx and claiming it as their own identity.

Due to the scope of this paper, I only investigated Latina women in mainstream media because of the way Latina women are sexualized under themes of tropicalization and exoticization to uphold a fascination with Latinidad. It is not to say that Latino men in media, like Bad Bunny, J Balvin, Maluma, etc. are not invoked in these examinations for their racial privileges combined with patriarchal power must fundamentally be held to account and serve for further investigation. In this section I explored themes of whiteness and mestizaje in mainstream celebrity representations and looked at these women as interesting and provocative examples of how whiteness manifests in representations of Latindad. This analysis highlighted the interesting cultural moments where light-skinned/white Latina women have gained cultural power and it abets to themes of upholding Latinidad to buy into power. However, the commentary and incidents explored with each of the celebrities, potentially showcases how this prevents dark-

skinned Latinx from accessing Latinidad in the same ways. In the next session of this study, I will explore these themes more thoroughly with In the Heights to understand how performances of Latinidad inform each other both on and off-screen and materialize understandings of Latinidad.

In the Heights as a Represenation of Latinidad

To further examine the themes previously explored, *In the Heights* is used as a culturally important case study to analyze representations of Latinidad in mainstream media. *In the Heights* is a culturally significant piece because it is a Lin-Manuel Miranda production, and he is a second-generation Puerto Rican immigrant whose work has had massive influence and success in Broadway and mainstream media – he has been referred to as "the crown prince of Broadway" as he holds prestigious awards like Oliviers, Emmys, Tonys, a Grammy and a Pulitzer due to his 'Blockbuster hip-hop musical, Hamilton' (The Guardian, 2018). *In the Heights* has been a much-anticipated movie due to Lin-Manuel's popularity and has garnered plenty of attention with a budget of $55 Million USD, it was "expected to be one of the summer's biggest movies" (Grady, 2021). Moreover, its journey started on Broadway before making its way over to Hollywood over a decade later (Grady, 2021), which added to the social buzz and momentum surrounding the anticipation of this musical.

I use *In the Heights* as a case study to explore how this important cultural text portrays Latinidad and affirms colonial tropes in favour of whiteness. It directly captures how the mainstream media informs and enables social representations of Latinidad off-screen through its on-screen representations as they inform one another to cement meaning and ideologies. *In the Heights* orients itself in Washington Heights, telling the stories of *el barrio* (the neighbourhood) and celebrating Latin American communities - as Miranda describes: "ultimately, 'In the

Heights' is an epic love letter to the neighborhood and a tribute to an immigrant community made with and by a diverse cast and crew." (Miranda in Petrillo, 2021) Miranda's description on representation is particularly telling of the confines of Latinidad and how it is sewed into mainstream representations. In this section I will unpack how Latinidad is able to claim 'diversity' in the absence of Black and Indigenous representation, to examine how Latinidad seeks a white supremacist strategy that distills the experiences of Black Latinx and Indigenous peoples under the guise of racial mixture.

As alluded to in the above, *In the Heights* was promoted as a story that showcases the diversity of Latinx communities. It closely follows the storylines of several characters throughout the neighbourhood and depicts their struggles as immigrants from various generations, while also celebrating their triumphs, communities and resilience. There is much to appreciate in this musical, from spotlighting cultural events like *El carnaval del barrio* and indulging in the interpersonal community relationship, In the Heights has many moments to applaud. As a white 'Latina' immigrant in Canada, I would say this story felt humanizing in the way that it focused on their experiences as people and not just by proxy of immigration struggles. *However,* I also recognize this story was made for my identity in the way that it catered to my racial experiences – despite the movie's claim to diverse casting. The movie received criticism from Black Latinx communities, calling out that the musical roles included very few Afro-Latinx actors as leads (Bose, 2014). The musical predominantly features light-skinned Latinx leads, with almost all Black actors cast as background roles in large dance numbers (Bose, 2014). There were no dark-skinned Black Latinx characters with developed storylines – only a single dark-skinned Black lead who portrays a *non*-Latinx character.

When challenged on this in a press interview, Melissa Barrera, one of the female leads of In the Heights – and a white mestiza – responded that the film was "looking just for the right people for the roles" (Léon, 2021). At another point, she along other cast members elaborated that "we are *all* people of colour, and we all struggle for the few spaces that we're given" (Léon, 2021). This response draws parallels to *moves to innocence* that evades white settler accountability by placing the blame externally and leveraging mestizaje to universalize the experience of 'people of colour.' Moreover, what does the "right people" mean? Under the guise of Latinidad, this is a loaded statement; as previously examined with social representation in media, the 'right people' would signal those that can perform Latinidad and be marketable to the colonial US-Canada gaze. The reference to limited space also denotes how multiple colonial layers can exist at once – Barrera can be both oppressed as a Latinx minority in the US and Canada, and simultaneously be an oppressor through anti-Indigenous and anti-Black colonial racism. In this case, Barrera resists accountability for her whiteness and the space it did afford her (even if limited in the broader colonial context) by hiding under the homogenization of mestizaje and applauding the representation of Latinidad in general. This further exemplifies the erasure of Black and Indigenous folks through Latinidad, especially egregious against the fact that the real neighbourhood Washington Heights in New York, is predominantly Afro-Dominican (Garcia, Herrera, et al., 2021).

Barrera's character in In the Heights as an emblem of Latinidad's colonial projections

Segueing from the actors and towards the case analysis of *In the Heights*, I mainly focus on the female lead: Vanessa, who is played by actress Melissa Barrera. Vanessa is the male lead's love interest in the movie and is evidently lusted for and desired by the men in the movie, labelled as 'the loveliest girl in the place.' Here I will examine how the themes explored in this

paper permeate into mainstream representations and performances of Latinidad. As aforementioned, an intersectional methodology guided by CRT and CLI is crucial to critically analyze *In the Heights* because of the ways that race, gender, and systems of oppression all intersect to form colonial constructions of Latinidad. I strategically hone in on Vanessa's character to unpack Latinidad in action by examining desirability, respectability politics, colourism, and texturism, as characteristics that reinforce colonial projects under Latinidad as a practice of whiteness and eurocentrism. I then culminate by contrasting this portrayal of Vanessa as the favourable archetype of the Latinx woman against the representation of the dark-skinned migrant woman that exists in Pan-American hostile imaginaries, underscoring the violence embedded in Latinidad.

As stated in the first half of this paper, an intersectional analysis is crucial to examine In the Heights because it analyzes how multiple identities interact and converge with systems and structures. Born from this method, CRT and CLI operationalize a critical lens to examine these systems of oppression as intentional products of colonial contexts. I use these methods and theoretical frameworks to contextualize Vanessa under the constructs of Latinidad. Vanessa is a light-skinned, heterosexual, cis-woman and as mentioned, she is the romanticized object of desire in the movie. This desirability is not coincidental, it is because she satisfies the archetype of a favourable Latina with Eurocentric beauty standards. These standards include being thin and tall, long haired, light/tanned skin, large eyes, a small and narrow nose, and high cheekbones (Chen and Lian, et al., 2020). Vanessa's phenotypical description identically mirrors these features and fits the desired vision of a 'Latina.' These Eurocentric beauty standards are not coincidental and are upheld by desirability politics. Desirability politics describe how social ideals for attractiveness shape the way we experience attraction, both by how we are attracted to

others and how we view ourselves in relation to it. It is the idea that desire is politically informed and is bilaterally *affected by* and *affecting* systems of power and oppression (Oteju, 2020). Vanessa as the central love interest and commonly desired female character is a direct product of desirability politics as she embodies the desirable Latina.

Mestizaje alludes to being the result of mixture, and therefore serves Latinidad's homogenizing perceptions. Although Eurocentric colonialist policies were based on the fantasy of purity and the undesirability of racial mixture (Stoler, 1995), this was not possible due to the very nature of violent oppression and invasion. Therefore, white mixture became predominantly desired to gain proximity and sustain whiteness through diluting dark skin. For this reason, it is not accidental that there is a favouritism to Vanessa's character, owed to her Eurocentric beauty standards informed by the intersectional complexities of colonial desirability politics. These notions of mestizaje are what situated Barrera in her earlier claim that "we are all people of colour." This claim fails to recognize the historical context that has given Barrera her white skin, and how Latinidad allows her to claim "person of colour" identity under its homogenizing structures with little accountability for her whiteness. This feels contradictory by nature, but upon further examination makes sense since it almost fulfills that colonial legacy: despite not having been able to achieve a "pure" whiteness, the legacy remains as white bodies get to overshadow racialized people to be the face of Latinidad. Regardless of the intent (likely a move to innocence), Barrera's claim is another sweeping statement that is coupled with Latinidad and is completely unconscious of power dynamics within racialized communities, operating on premises of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in efforts to whitestream the term.

It is evident that Barrera's vision of Latinidad is enmeshed with understandings of racialization which she embodies as Vanessa. This symbolizes how white imaginaries that

operate under Latinidad, inform how representation is depicted and projected in mainstream media. Desirability politics necessitates the confines of colonial structures and systems to inform appeal. Colourism, texturism, and featurism are simultaneously enmeshed within racism and can be directly applied to Vanessa as a benefactor of these systems. Understanding colourism and texturism within broader systems like racism, enables a thorough analysis of how Vanessa as a character can experience oppression and simultaneously be an oppressor.

Colourism is described as prejudice and discrimination against individuals of darker skin tones within the same ethnic/racial group (Napoleón, 2020). Colourism is a product of European colonialism as it favours lightness, and the more proximity an individual has to whiteness, the more power they have access to. In Latin America, during the active colonial era and enslavement period, Spaniards instated a racial *casta* system that established colourism (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). The caste divided the population based on skin colour and assigned hierarchical positions of power based on this ranking. This was and continues to be informed by multiple factors pertaining to a racist system; colourism intersects with featurism and texturism to support racist Eurocentric beauty standards. Featurism signals a preference for Eurocentric features, while texturism is the idea that 'good hair' resembles a smoother/looser texture ("Texturism and Featurism, 2021). Earlier this paper explored themes of *blanqueamiento,* and *pelo malo* which are common expressions in Latin America and direct products of these racist beauty standards.

The way that Vanessa embodies all of these Eurocentric traits and is celebrated as the desired Latina, opens an interesting dialogue about how Latinidad is visualized. The lack of dark skinned, and lack of Indigenous and Afro-Latinx characters in *In the Heights* exemplifies the ways in which white mestizaje is glorified and contributes to colonial understandings that frame

whiteness as positive "juxtaposed with the negative portrayal of Blackness" (Howard, 2001; 31). This contrast is most notable in the way that light-skinned characters, such as Vanessa, get to take up space in the movie as central characters with developed story lines, whereas darker skinned characters are background extras, signalling they are not worthy enough to have their stories represented in this depiction of Latinidad. As Sandra Garcia (2021), an Afro-Latinx person from the Dominican Republic, states about *In the Heights*: "our culture is beautiful, our music is beautiful, but we are not enough to be highlighted with it. Everything we create, like the salchichón and mangú meal shown in the movie, or the merengue and sliver of bachata, can be celebrated, but not us." This direct account opens a provocative discussion around how representations of Latinidad take from the cultures and peoples that it erases, under the supposition that it is all one culture united under Latinidad. In this sense, white and mestizo Latinx can appropriate cultures from Afro-Latinx and Indigenous peoples – and regularly do so – claiming it as their own without attributing any recognition for the Afro-Indigenous origins of those cultural foods, practices, song and dance that they profit from.

Further, it would be remiss of this analysis to not acknowledge that *el barrio* (Washington Heights) where the movie is situated, has a large Afro-Latinx population. Yet the movie does not capture this at all. *In the Heights* appears to assume that a more presentable and representative Latinx is a white one and visualizes the community as "white with shades of mestizo" and leaving Indigenous peoples almost entirely absent (Negrón-Muntaner, 2021). The colourism is ever-present in this shading of mestizaje, favouring light mestizos. The way that *In the Heights* is casted and framed seems as though it assumes that "Black and Latinx are non-overlapping identifications" (Negrón-Muntanero, 2021). This is a strong example of the ways in which whiteness travels across colonial borders as Latinx communities uphold these racist ideals

in both Southern and Northern geographies as both fulfill colonial white supremacist objectives. But in the US context, as represented in *In the Heights*, it's about a proud reclamation of power through the solidarity of Latinidad as a progressive ideal. However, as these representations suggest, it is at the expense of Afro-Latinx and Indigenous peoples. It raises the question of what stories are prioritized and why, and as explored with the cultural appropriation, it "capitalized on Blackness while ignoring Black people" (De León in Negrón-Muntanero, 2021). Even if *In the Heights* is meant to be a fantastical representation and not an accurate one, it still curates an image of Latinidad within white imaginaries especially when it is so explicitly marketed as a 'celebration of Latinidad'. As Isabella Herrera (2021) describes: "even if we accept the view that a fantasy does not have to be representative, that argument assumes that Black Latinx do not belong in these imagined worlds anyway."

These arguments also intersect with gender in Latin America. These projections of Eurocentric beauty ideals affect all genders, but women are affected in a particular manner (Hunter, 2007). For women, there is an elevated pressure to suit the ideals of light-skin and Eurocentric beauty ideals in order to access social capital and gain advantages like in education and job rankings (Hunter, 2007). *In the Heights* is also thoroughly heteronormative and the plot is organized around its fantasized "happy ending" where Vanessa ends up readjusting her career dreams to marry the male lead, ultimately mimicking the "white middle-class ideal of a nuclear, light-skinned, heterosexual family" (Negrón-Muntanero). Although it must be acknowledged that within these parameters of North American – South American colonial contentions, Vanessa does face oppressive structures that she must conform to, but the important part here is that she possesses the currency to access layers of power as a light-skinned woman who embodies Eurocentric ideals.

With all this context in mind, I would even say she is a white Latinx woman because the racial privilege of whiteness, even when positioned as a proximity to whiteness, has to be accounted for. The way that Vanessa's character and Melissa Barrera as an actor profit from their identity under the scope of Latinidad, must be accounted for. Otherwise, conversations of race and power can become diluted through this evasive narrative that suggests *in the barrio they are all one.* This representation provokes the idea that perhaps we need to undo Latinidad in order to be able to address and name the deeply entrenched racism in our communities. If this is the case, then we need to move away from these narratives of homogenization that favour the Vanessas of Latinidad.

Juxtaposing depictions of the Latinx migrant woman and the mainstream imaginary of Latinidad

In this section I explore the material ways that mainstream representations analyzed in the latter half of this paper, inform perceptions of historically marginalized Latinx that do not satisfy the colonial constructs of Latinidad. I juxtapose the celebrity representations and Vanessa's character against the media discourse surrounding Afro-Latinx and Indigenous women crossing the US-Mexico border. The objective of this analysis is to explore how the socio-cultural power that a representation like Latinidad holds, shapes our views of how we approach countries, people and borders.

Here I examine the ways in which the Latinx migrant is portrayed in the media, in contrast to the ways that Latinidad is projected in mainstream representations. The topic of migration has always been a contentious and hostile discussion in the US, where that hostility is typically derived from bigotry and aimed at Latin American migrants fleeing their countries largely due to the violence imposed by imperialism, US intervention, and colonial legacies.

There was a rise in this hostility as the Trump government that entered in 2016 gave a platform to vocalize this bigotry, and the former president himself loudly labelled Mexican migrants as "bad hombres," rapists and criminals coming to destroy the US nation-state (Garcia, 2016). This rhetoric has crafted a demonized vision of Latinx migrants entering the US through Tijuana border crossings. This in turn also shapes social attitudes as the media has a central place in shaping the public's view of immigrants and media communications foster the conditions for policies to be produced, passed and implemented (University of Kansas, 2016). The media represents Latinx migrants in hazardous situations, often sensationalizing their suffering.

In recent years, infamous pictures have circulated from the Tijuana border, depicting migrant women and children in extreme distress. One image in particular went viral where photographer Kyung-Hun captured the moment that a mother was frantically running away from the border with her two 5-year-old twin daughters in hand as US border officers threw teargas at them (Phillips, 2018). The image portrays a Honduran woman (later identified as Maria Lila Leza Castro) grasping her two girls as they desperately flee the gassing, both girls are in T-shirts and diapers; one girl is captured in the midst of falling and the other is running without shoes. This image circulated across various US media news channels because it conveyed the horrific conditions of the Tijuana border and contrasted the criminalizing narratives that the former president was blasting. Other well-known images that have circulated depict migrant women crying in distress, trying to access resources, and typically in association with children. One image in particular shows a migrant woman wearing a face mask due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and speaking into a phone as tears of distress run down her face (Menchu, 2021). The accompanied caption with this photo is "migrants left high and dry at Guatemala border after deportations from Mexico" (Menchu, 2021). These captions and representations consistently

report on the desperation and suffering that Latinx migrants endure during dangerous border crossings.

While it is crucial to tell these stories and highlight what is happening at the border, the way that these representations are depicted is important. The vast majority of these images portray dark-skinned Latinx women of either Indigenous and/or Afro-Latinx backgrounds. Through the mass circulation of these images there is also a dehumanizing component that resembles outcomes derived from poverty porn, which refers to any type of media that exploits someone's suffering or poverty in order to generate the necessary sympathy for selling news or increasing donations for a cause (Meikle, 2013). These portrayals compromise dignity and respect that is consistently afforded to white bodies. This contrast is also most stark against the representations of Latinidad explored in this paper. Juxtaposed against the celebrity Latina woman glorified within representations of Latinidad, the migrant women depicted in these images are not represented under the same scope. Latinidad in mainstream media and cultural understandings attempts to move away from this imagery, almost disassociating entirely to say "we are not *those* Latinx." In this we can go back to the notion of how Latinidad has oftentimes framed whiteness as positive "juxtaposed with the negative portrayal of Blackness" (Howard, 2001; 31).

The contrasted portrayals of typically dark-skinned migrant women spotlighted in news sources versus the representations of Latinidad in mainstream media productions as light skinned, illustrate polarized Latinx representations. In the US and Canada, Latin American women frequently get associated in media as domestic care workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007), but these depictions are rarely of white Latinx women and are often reflective of dark-skinned racialized Latinx women. This is seen in the aforementioned media photographs of Latinx

migrant women, typically depicting them in desperate situations as caregivers holding onto their children. A UN Women report (Hennebry, Williams, et. Al., 2017) stated that over time, these representations feed assumptions about migrant behaviours and aptitude based on race, origin, and gender. This type of media framing can influence discourses, which through repetition, can become the central discourse and representation of a corresponding group of people (Hall, 1997). This contributes to how groups are understood and valued. In this sense, migrants become subjects of 'othering' discourses, which categorizes them as outsiders, 'us' versus 'them', and is conjoined with notions of inferiority (Sharma, 2001; Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2013; Daley, 2017).

When juxtaposed with the previously explored mainstream representations of Latinidad through prominent Latinx women and cultural pieces like *In the Heights*, this contrast opens a critical discussion around how racialized Latinx migrant women do not fit this mold of Latinidad and their stories are not told in these depictions. It forms a kind of juxtaposed duality by which Latinidad has become a trendy idea in the mainstream media and is consistently performed by light skinned bodies, as if it is disassociating from the depictions of Latinx migrants. This selective representation leverages white supremacy to 'other' and further marginalize racialized Latinx that do not suit the white constructs of Latinidad. Although it is notable that it is likely an attempt to reclaim the narratives of Latinx portrayals and counter harmful reductionist tropes that reduce representation to suffering and migration, it is revealing that positive representations of Latinidad are reserved for white bodies. When the representation of dark skinned Latinx women is repeatedly cycled with essentializing migration depictions of suffering and reduced to caregiving capabilities, it reaffirms what Hall (1997) attributes as a central discourse that becomes associated with them. Notably this is contrasted by the representations of mainstream

media that counter this discourse and have promoted a light-skinned archetype of the Latinx women. Not including dark-skinned Latinx in these celebratory representations of Latinidad can function as an exclusionary tactic that leaves them with the negative narratives of migration, while privileging white Latinx with access to dictating their stories of Latinidad.

A study by the University of Kansas (2016) revealed that there are collateral effects that can occur when a certain group within society has to "overemphasize characteristics it possesses to make itself seem deserving in a society." This idea is interesting in the context of Latinidad, for it signals that its performance and representation might be informed by a will to disassociate from the media news sourcing that potentially portrays a contrasting representation of Latinidad. The study then further proceeds to state that "By highlighting characteristics that make them deserving, they can inadvertently create images of the non-deserving" (University of Kansas, 2016). In this sense, the duality of both imageries can exist at once, where the mainstream media representations of Latinidad aim to disassociate from the narratives at the border and claim the 'other' depictions as 'undeserving' and out of bounds. This is suggestive and perhaps it can be analyzed under the assumption that the more you can preserve the archetype of the Latina woman in colonial imaginaries, means the more you preserve whiteness and power, cementing it into the imaginary of what the ideal Latinx is. As a result, perhaps whiteness in Latinidad functions to erase by saying we are not *those* Latinx migrants at the border, we are the Vergaras and Barreras. In this way Latinidad is used as a currency that is upheld by whiteness. As explored in the latter sections, those that satisfy a certain vision of Latinidad modelled off European colonialism can access this social capital and be celebrated under the white settler US-Canada gaze. Those that do not satisfy these white imaginaries, are deemed as "undeserving" of this currency since they cannot leverage whiteness as a means of access or buy-in.

Conclusion and Ways Forward

In this paper I used intersectionality and critical race theories to investigate how the concept of Latinidad functions to uphold whiteness at the expense of Black and Indigenous peoples across Pan-American realities. By spotlighting the direct accounts and experiences of these communities, I was able to understand the ways in which they have felt erased from the limited and homogenizing confines of Latinidad. Although the term is positioned as all-inclusive, in practice it primarily serves those that satisfy the requirements of whiteness (or proximity to whiteness) and Eurocentric beauty standards (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). This is not coincidental; it is part of a colonial legacy that adopted historical discourses like *mejorar la raza* and *blanquemiento* (Ferreira, 2020). These strategies favoured mestizaje as the ideal projection of Latinidad because through mixture with whiteness, this power structure could be preserved. In this research I unveiled that Latinidad's homogenizing nature under the mantra that we are all one, posits itself as a progressive ideology in the US while allowing white bodies to tell the stories of racialized people (Martinez, 2019). This is seen through the portrayal of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* which was positioned as a movie that told the stories of *el barrio* and Latinidad, yet it was performed by an overwhelmingly light-skinned cast that centralized those stories (Negrón-Muntaner, 2021). I explored how Latinidad has shaped the reception and representation of white and mestiza Latinx women in Hollywood while still excluding many Black and Indigenous Latinx people. (Ogata-Aguilar, 2021). I also examined the anti-Black discourses that they sometimes mobilize, by claiming entitlement to racial slurs rooted in ideologies that "we are all one" under Latinidad.

Furthermore, I speculate that Latinidad mirrors moves to innocence by allowing for non-Indigenous and non-Black Latinx to claim a linkage to these identities and therefore evade

accountability for their whiteness. This appropriation has allowed for white bodies to occupy space and represent Latinidad while erasing the voices of Afro-Latinx and Indigenous peoples. Finally, I juxtaposed these mainstream representations of Latinidad against the common settler portrayals and attitudes towards racialized Latinx migrant women at the US-Mexico border. I contrast these two imaginaries to further understand who Latinidad functions in favour of and why we might need to undo a homogenous idea of Latinidad for the ways we approach discussions on Latin American identity.

Latinidad holds a cultural power that shapes social perceptions and defines who gets marginalized from these conceptions. For these reasons, it is necessary to intervene in these portrayals and uplift the voices of Afro-Latinx and Indigenous communities so that we can foster a truly inclusive representation and better equip ourselves with understandings of Latin America and Latin American identity. Based on what this research revealed, I argue that to promote a better understanding and develop more accurate programs for the diverse needs of people from Latin America, we need to undo Latinidad and adopt a practice of specificity. As Pelaez Lopez states: “the rejection of Latinidad embraces nuance by inviting people who have traditionally been silenced in the US and also in their countries of birth” (Salazar, 2019). When discussing Latin American identity to develop programs, statistics, policies, data or any initiative, we must move away from the structures that enable homogenizing narratives, and instead approach Latin American identity with specificity. Latinidad does not capture the needs and experiences of underserved communities, thus we should specify the country, the race, the gender, etc. to name the power structures and challenge their erasure to develop accurate representations.

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