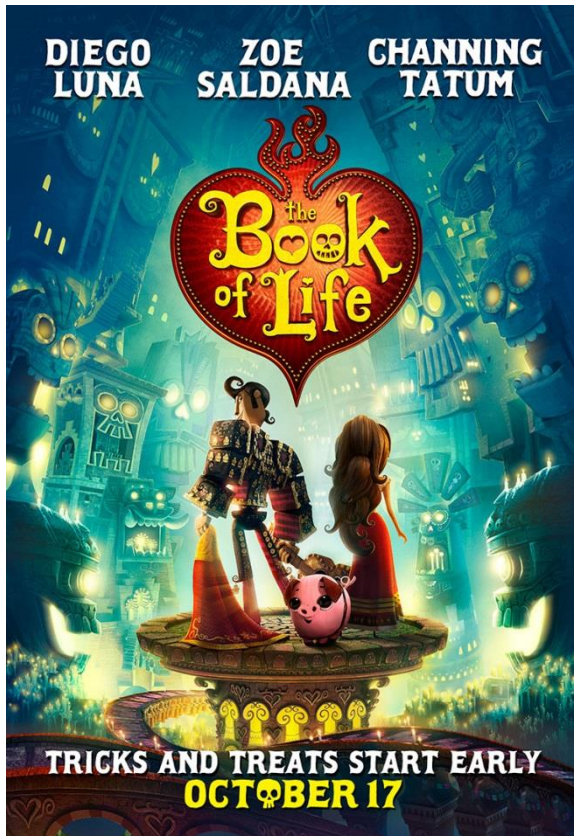


**The Racial and Cultural Other in Animation: The Mexican  
Portrayals of *The Book of Life* and *Coco* as Case Studies of  
Contemporary Representational Politics**



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## Introduction

Due to an increasing public push for multiculturalism in mainstream media, films have (at least since the 1990s) been attempting to give a more positive representation of what is deemed to be a racial and cultural Other from the target audience's perspective, and animation films are no exception. Case in point, while the two animated films discussed in this study, *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017), are made by different studios, they share a general goal of trying to give such a representation of a racial and cultural Other for a Western target audience. This goal makes these films some of the latest examples in a long trend of American animation aiming to broaden their representation of minority cultures and ethnicities, in response to pressure from various social movements in the 1990s (Palmer 2, 4). Consequently, such animation has increasingly received academic reading, with scholars studying the medium's role in the representation of racial and cultural Others and multiculturalism in general. This study will add to this budding field by analyzing two contemporary iterations of this representational trend.

One reason that animation draws specific interest in the context of racial representation is that the medium shares several traits with those of racial caricatures – exaggerated features and stylization – so that animation is considered to be “an unavoidable expression of human caricature” that could easily dip into the practice of othering (Palmer 28-29). Additionally, racialized subjects in Western animation tend to be depicted as more animated than their normalized white counterparts, as if they are moved by an unseen force outside of themselves, much like the way they are drawn by an animator. This is a continuation of a longer-running trend meant to show racial Others as more authentic and natural, as well as depriving them of agency by objectifying them into a passive agent of their own actions (Ngai 572-573, 577). Since animation, then, is a potential tool to actively other

racial and cultural minorities by capturing their supposed essence, American animation can show “how a dominant culture constructs its subordinates” (Burton-Carvajal, qtd. in Palmer 61). Furthermore, since most animated entertainment in the global market is American and family-oriented, this othering undertone raises concerns about how such racial stereotypes could be perpetuated by the medium among a younger, more impressionable audience. These concerns have even led to accusations that American animation is a tool for the US to spread an imperialist ideology throughout the world (Palmer 17). For this reason, many social movements have been pushing for the medium to provide more positive representation of minorities (Palmer 18-19), so as to counter their defamatory images and possibly deconstruct their otherness through humanizing portrayals. This demand came through in mainstream animation in the 1990s when Disney aimed for a more politically correct portrayal of the putative Other.

### **Methodology**

The departure point for my study is Janet Palmer’s sociological study of three Disney films from the 1990s that she pins as the first Disney films to try to respectfully portray racial minorities: *Aladdin* (1992), *Lion King* (1994), and *Pocahontas* (1995). In her book *Animating Cultural Politics: Disney, Race, and Social Movements in the 1990s* (2000), Palmer argues that the reception of each of these films reflects the changing field of representational politics of the time (Palmer 25). My study will build upon this concept by applying a similar analysis to a thematic duology of contemporary animation films to gauge if and how this political climate regarding multiculturalism has changed over the past two decades. To this end, this study will also use the same model that Palmer applied in her analyses of the Disney films: Wendy Griswold’s cultural diamond model. This model shows the four aspects of each cultural object such as a film – content, production, consumption, and cultural context – and

how they are all interrelated and influence each other in all directions (Griswold 15-16). In her book, Palmer studies all four of these aspects in equal measure for all three films, focusing particularly on how the reception of a film could influence its perceived cultural meaning, as well as the production of the films that follow (Palmer 25).

However, my study differs from Palmer's research in several regards. For one, it veers away from the sociological aspect of Palmer's research to instead focus more on the angle of film analysis to try to understand the thematic content of each film. This angle may help to better understand the reception of the films by zooming in on how they convey complex, politically inflected meanings and ideas. Such an analysis may also yield thematic data from the films on their cultural representation that general audiences missed. Another notable difference is that I will use the lens of Author Theory when looking at the production aspect of each film because, unlike Palmer's selection of Disney films, the two films I discuss are made by different creators, each with their own background and pre-existing oeuvre, setting up a certain image of themselves. Thus, I will apply Author theory to study each creator separately so as to better contextualize the film in question, per the suggestion that animation lends itself well to this theory on account of the strong degree of creative control animation authors have (Hernández-Perez 300). Specifically, I will use the collaborative model of Author Theory, which focuses on texts as a collaborative rather than individual creation, which applies better to films than the individual model (Carringer 371). This model also ties in with the notion that corporations can be viewed as authors just as well as individual artists (Hernández-Perez 301). Additionally, this theory operates on the notion that an author is a deliberately cultivated public persona that aids in the marketing of a film (Hernández-Perez 308). I chose this approach in order to explore how the background of an auteur influences public expectations or perceptions of their work and, consequently, what they can and cannot get away with in their representation and construction of a cultural Other. In fact, when I look

at the production aspect of each film, this Author Theory takes precedence over other aspects of the film's development that do not directly pertain to their multiculturalism, as opposed to Palmer's study which focuses more on technical details of a film's production than on their Author or marketing.

Indeed, while Palmer acknowledged the factors of Author personae and marketing in framing audience perception, this study will examine their role in influencing public reception of the films to a greater degree. To this end, I will use Jonathan Gray's comprehensive study of so-called 'paratexts': auxiliary texts or elements that relate to a greater text (e.g. a film, TV show, etc.) and serve to set up a particular expectation for said text (Gray 25). While paratexts can constitute audience-generated discussion, this study concerns itself primarily with those paratexts consciously produced by filmmakers to both establish expectations for the main text and set up the way in which they intend said text to be interpreted (Gray 48-49). Such paratexts are composed of promotional material, such as trailers and posters, and the aforementioned Auteur persona, particularly as it is shown through interviews (Gray 136). The focus on such promotional paratexts is not meant as an attempt to construe authorial intent, but rather to assuage how the author engages the representational aspect of their film and, consequently, how this stated intention influences public reception. Additionally, in the interest of analyzing the establishment and subsequent satisfaction (or lack thereof) of audience expectations, I will also consider independent paratexts concerning the films that were not intentionally produced for marketing purposes but nevertheless affected public perception of the associated product. However, this study mainly observes paratexts that occurred before the film itself was released, defined by Gray as 'entryway paratexts', as opposed to 'in medias res paratexts' that are made after the film's release date. Thus, while I do include reviews and audience comments regarding the films, they are meant as examples

of the reception and interpretations of those films, as their propagation of said interpretations is beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, since the two films in this study do not share a creator, I will not focus on how they influenced each other's production, as it is unlikely that films independently produced and released a few years apart can significantly alter their content late in development. Rather, I will only take their intertextuality into account insofar as the viewing of one film can influence the audience's horizon of expectations for the films that come after. Thus, the cultural representation of the films may be compared with each other so as to explain their differences in audience reception. Otherwise, I will apply the same technique as Palmer's, where I first examine the critical reception of each film and then analyze not only the expectations set up by paratexts and the Auteur but also the thematic content of the film itself, in order to try to explain its reception.

As to the cultural context, this is a factor that *The Book of Life* and *Coco* share, as their chosen settings are motivated by the same real-life political subject: both films focus on Mexican culture with predominantly Mexican casts of characters. I will argue that the choice of this setting can be attributed to the highly contested US immigration policies regarding Mexico, both before and after Trump's election. In other words, these two films focus on Mexico as a setting so as to serve as a reaction to this political issue that dominates US public consciousness around the same time.

### **Social Context**

The US' controversial immigration policies toward Mexicans mainly manifest themselves in their excessive security measures to and militarization of border zones in order to combat an influx of illegal immigrants. Such anti-immigrant policies tend to conflate immigrant status with ethnicity, so that local law enforcement is encouraged to use racial profiling and

discrimination in their enforcement of these policies (Sabo et al. 67). The resulting violent treatment of border residents of Mexican origin is a physical manifestation of US structural racism (Sabo et al. 67), which seeks to scapegoat immigrants as “powerful vectors of crime and terrorism” (Leary 146). Since such a system benefits from othering immigrants, it is no surprise that this militant border security forms “the cornerstone [of] the normalization of the immigration status of [...] 12 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the US” (Sabo et al. 72). More recently, Trump’s wall separating Mexico from the US is a more explicit expression of this othering narrative, serving as a symbolic cultural boundary that contains the innocent white American populace, “uncontaminated by anyone perceived to be ‘Latin American’ or otherwise ‘foreign’” (Leary 146). In order to justify these jingoistic policies, the US has to construct a narrative where Mexicans are inherently criminal and dangerous, so that Americans can feel entitled to exile them from their society to protect their own values. This is where American cinema comes in.

American cinema has played a huge role in steering public opinion against Mexican immigrants, representing them through negative stereotypes that perpetuate American jingoism and prejudice (Beckham 130). Generally, American narratives about immigration focus on efforts to expel immigrants from the US, thus painting them as outsiders that do not belong in the domestic audience’s land (Mains 253). Such stories also tend to generalize all Mexican immigrants as illegal, thus connoting them with criminality and danger (Berg, “Latino Images” 22) and fostering further distrust and paranoia against them. The most salient illustration of this principle is the specific Mexican stereotype of the *bandido*, a sadistic violent bandit who serves to implicate the entire Latin American ethnic group as innately criminal and untrustworthy. Such stereotypes are also designed to further the character’s status as outsider by showing him as being outside of mainstream morality, psychology, and ideology (Berg, “Latino Images” 17, 40-41). This kind of rhetoric about being outside the



mainstream also operates on the ethnocentric assumption that the mainstream is defined by the white American audience, meaning that by othering racial and cultural minorities, these stories normalize their own culture by proxy (Berg, "Latino Images" 14). Furthermore, since identity and space are generally interwoven in cinema (Mains 261), these stereotypes also play to a much grander myth about the US and Mexico and their relationship: they construct a neo-colonialist narrative that places both countries in a hierarchical binary, with Mexico invariably in the subordinate position (Beckham 131). In this narrative, the US is always justified in subjecting Mexico and its people to draconian security measures because they are inherently lawless and must be contained and policed for the safety of the American public. Tellingly, American films that directly engage this subject rely on corroborating this narrative for financial and critical success (Beckham 138), showing how they reflect these views as much as they propagate them. With this long history of defamatory stereotypes taken into account, *The Book of Life* and *Coco* posit themselves as counterweights with their humanizing portrayals of Mexicans.

It is here where the subject of Latino representation in American cinema intersects with the so-called 'culture wars', as the decision to provide such positive representation is an extension of the same trend of multiculturalism that Palmer examined. In general terms, the culture wars are a political conflict between the progressive Left and the conservative Right where they use cultural objects such as films or songs as a platform. Both sides wish for their values to be reflected in popular culture so as to be encoded as the norm in society, seeking to censor any work that runs counter to their interests (Lyons 10-11). This can be traced back to the abolishment of the Hays Code in 1968, leaving activist groups as the major factor governing film censorship in American culture (Lyons 2). Among other groups, the Left consists of socially marginalized groups while the Right represents white Christians, with the former clamoring for multiculturalism (Lyons 3). In terms of relative political sway, the Left

was more prominent than the Right in the culture wars up to the 1980s, with Hollywood conceding to their demands for broader representation (Palmer 3-4). It is this same push for multiculturalism that led the Disney Company to take its first foray into new political territory in the 1990s (Palmer 3), and which has now produced two contemporary examples of respectful representation of a cultural Other by American film productions.

However, one thing that makes *The Book of Life* and *Coco* different from other multicultural projects (esp. in animation) is that they concern the direct neighbor of the US, with which the US is engaged in a conflict about immigration policies. Therefore, the portrayal of Mexico by an American film becomes more than the representation of a cultural Other; rather, the portrayal will inevitably be read as a reflection of the creators' attitude to the country, its culture, and, by extension, their views regarding the immigration debate.

While neither of the featured films address this conflict directly, they do have varying degrees of awareness of this context and occasionally allude to it, if only through subtext.

Nevertheless, neither of them can be said to be about the immigration debate directly, and the relationship between each plot and this debate differs in each film. It should also be noted that, while the films are definitely catered to the Left side of the culture wars, that does not necessarily mean that they openly take a stance against US treatment of Mexico. Indeed, the fact that neither of the films so much as address the US means that they effectively side-step the issue of the fraught relationship between the two countries. Furthermore, while they seem to reflect a positive attitude toward Mexican culture, the focus on Mexico can also be read as the US wanting to keep an eye on its neighbor so as to define the space and identity of both (Mains 253-254). Ambiguities notwithstanding, I do believe that each film can be ranked based on how vocally they express their political views on the featured culture or its relation to the US. *The Book of Life* can be seen as the most outspoken of the two, having a clearly defined stance in favor of Mexico and making a case for it against an American audience.

Meanwhile, *Coco* is comparatively 'safe' as far as political inflection goes, in that while it does contain references to the larger debate, they are mostly buried in subtext and the film prioritizes entertainment value over making a statement. This is not to say that in this study I am primarily interested in making value judgements based on the films' political stance; rather I want to examine how audiences place each film and how this reception is related to their political message. To this end, I hope to elucidate the reception of each film by close-reading their thematic content and author's background.

## Chapter 1

### Reading *The Book of Life*: an Insider's Take on Mexican Culture

The first film analyzed in this study is also the first big-budget mainstream animation production to focus on Mexican culture: *The Book of Life*. Indeed, the film is known for trying to reference as many facets of Mexican culture, both ancient and modern, as possible. Additionally, it is the only film of the duology of this study written and directed by Mexican creator Jorge R. Gutiérrez, a fact which gives the cultural representation of his film a significantly nationalist quality. This impression is further supported by the fact that the film, while made by American studio Reel FX, is produced by another famous Mexican Auteur: Guillermo Del Toro. Because of this quality, *The Book of Life* is the most self-consciously political of the two films discussed in this study, as it aims to paint as complete a picture of Mexican culture as possible. Furthermore, as the first family-oriented animation film in US cinema to portray Mexico positively, *The Book of Life* implicitly takes a bold stance against the American jingoist narrative that Mexicans are innately criminal people who do not deserve to enter American territory. This stance is strengthened by the aforementioned fact that its creator is himself Mexican. The film seeks to counter many of the stereotypes of Mexicans that US cinema has provided, by focusing on precisely the Mexican cultural events and rituals that have traditionally been used by American cinema to depict Mexican culture as the cultural Other.

Most prominently, the film's plot is centered around the Mexican national holiday of *Día de los Muertos*, an event during which people remember their loved ones who have passed away. This holiday is internationally famous for its exuberant and light-hearted treatment of death, as expressed through its colorful decorations and confectionaries in the shape of skeletons and skulls. Such practices are thought to reflect a uniquely Mexican

attitude towards death, to the point that Mexicans are often stereotypically depicted as obsessed with death (Brandes 181-182). In fact, the supposed uniqueness of this attitude has historically been emphasized by Mexicans and non-Mexicans alike to construct a distinct Mexican national cultural identity, either for nationalistic or defamatory purposes (Brandes 182, 184). Rather than making light of the loss of human life, the frivolous treatment of death is meant to poke fun at the concept itself in the spirit of gallows humor, which is thought to have a historical precedent in the massive loss of life among Indians in Mexico during colonial times (Brandes 211). And yet, in playing to a thriving international market for Mexican *Dia de Muertos* trinkets that showcase their supposedly ‘unique’ life philosophy, Mexicans themselves have kept this stereotype alive. In short, the film has a complicated dual objective: to subvert othering stereotypes of Mexicans while also exhibiting the things that make them unique as a cultural group. Therefore, what Palmer writes also applies to *The Book of Life*: it faces the challenge to “creatively assert identity but not to essentialize or stereotype it” (Palmer 28).

## 1.1 Reception

Since *The Book of Life* is the first major case of positive Mexican representation in American animation, initial reception would have a significant impact on the inclusion of Mexican culture on the silver screen and behind the scenes. It was, then, beneficial to director Gutiérrez that his love letter to his own culture was generally well received, with a modest return of almost one hundred million dollars against a budget of approximately fifty million (*IMDb*). Notably, the largest profit for the film from outside the US market came from Mexico (McClintock), indicating its popularity in the country that the film homages. Moreover, the film had favorable critical reception from general audiences and critics alike, as reflected by its *IMDb* score of 7.3 and its *Metacritic* score of 67, which reflects “generally favorable

reviews” (*Metacritic*). The strong presence of Mexican culture has been nearly unanimously praised, with many American viewers commending the film’s educational value for US audiences (Baumgarten; 3xHCCH; RforFilm). One particularly politics-savvy viewer noted how the film could serve as a counterweight against the overwhelmingly negative depiction of Mexico in US media (RforFilm). Even those reactions that were otherwise negative toward the film praised this representative aspect, with one critic conceding that the film “at least introduces American kids to the Mexican holiday of *Día de los Muertos*” (Baumgarten par. 1).

One of *The Book of Life*’s aspects that has been consistently praised and emphasized is its originality or uniqueness as an animation film. This uniqueness is generally credited to its positive and informative portrayal of Mexican culture that Western audiences are not used to see, with one critic noting: “Drawing on Mexican folklore and other Latin American traditions, Jorge R. Gutiérrez’s version of death ... is bursting with vibrant colours and magic” (Diestro-Dópido par. 1). Such notions of uniqueness as relating to the creator’s culture – foreign from an American perspective – serve to construct a particular author persona for him, one that is set in opposition against the dominant culture and, in the context of animation, particularly against the Disney brand (Hernández-Pérez 308). In this narrative, ‘Disney’ as a brand is taken to represent various qualities of the dominant culture and industry: hegemony, automation, and traditionalism. Conversely, the independent animation creator is set up as a romantic image of the ‘true artist’ who, by proxy, is opposed to these very qualities and is instead taken to be subversive, personal, and progressive (Hernández-Pérez 308). Significantly, critics particularly attribute the film’s uniqueness to its visuals – bright colors, stylistically exaggerated proportions, and busy character designs – and they never fail to mention how these visuals are inspired by Mexican folk art and toys. They compliment the film on “[standing out] at a time when most other computer animated movies

tend toward a lot of the same visual choices” (Hughes par. 1) and tout it as a “vibrantly alternative animation” (Kermode). Moreover, in praising the film’s sentimentality, many expressed indirect opposition to the larger animation industry which they painted as impersonal and predictable, noting that the degree of character depth is “surprising” (Shawnofthedeath) and that the film “brings an *unusually* warm and heartfelt quality to the high-tech medium” (Berkshire par. 9, my emphasis). While the persona constructed for Gutiérrez correctly places him on the progressive Left side of the culture wars, such a persona is not entirely unproblematic: the excessive focus on uniqueness as relating to culture may conflate the artist’s talent with that culture, effectively essentializing and exoticizing his identity as a ‘foreigner’ (Hernández-Pérez 308-309). It is no coincidence that critics’ insistence on *The Book of Life*’s uniqueness is reminiscent of similar notions of the *Día de Muertos* feast that the film revolves around, a nationalist ritual that US Americans have also interpreted as “evidence that Mexicans really are different from mainstream Americans” (Brandes 182).

Indeed, this expectation that the film would be wholly unique is reflected even more clearly in negative reviews, which are generally phrased to sound disappointed that the film is not as original as they had anticipated. In contrast to the lauded visuals, complaints about unoriginality were overwhelmingly aimed at the film’s plot and characters, with the story being derided as “overly familiar” and “dull” (Wloszczyna par. 3; Rife) and the characters being described as “poorly developed, clichéd and one-dimensional” (MartinHafer par. 2). And yet, even these negative reactions show tacit approval of the cultural representation, because they view the film as being disappointing “despite the rich cultural references” (Wloszczyna par. 3), seeing its shortcomings as “regrettable flaws” (Solomon par. 1) or lamenting that the film was “so close to greatness” (DonaldDooD par. 1). In fact, many detractors continue the narrative of a uniquely Mexican product, depicting the film’s positive

qualities (e.g. visuals, animation, themes) as the only Mexican parts of the film. Thus, commenters claim that the plot is not Mexican and therefore bad, saying that they “really did want to see a Mexican storyline” (MartinHafer par. 2) or that the film “is filled with Mexican beauty. I wish it had a better Mexican story” (RforFilm). Consequently, any weak or familiar aspect of the film is painted as a form of pandering to the US audience, as it frustrates the American image of a completely self-contained and unique cultural product reflective of its culture. For example, some people complained about the use of American pop tunes in the film’s soundtrack as they felt it “lessened the originality of the flick” (Bbickley par. 4) and only served to take the viewer out of the pure Mexican setting (Micalclark par. 2; Rife par. 3-4), and several viewers wondered why the film could not have used Mexican pop songs instead (Micalclark; Kvatter). More generally, critics lamented that what they felt was the film’s originality suffered under its need to entertain a contemporary audience, arguing that “in trying to appeal to the broadest audience possible, *The Book of Life* loses touch with the proud tradition that inspired it and becomes just another clichéd tale...” (Rife par. 5). This complaint also extended to the racial and cultural background of the (predominantly Latin American) cast, with people noting that the Caucasian Channing Tatum and the African American Ice Cube felt like “odd additions” (MartinHafer par. 2) and describing the former in particular as a “decidedly inauthentic casting choice” (Berkshire par. 7). Even positive reviews allude to this narrative of inauthenticity, suggesting the film’s flaws come from its sacrifice of cultural purity for entertainment’s sake. One critic saying that the conventional climax is when “the burden of trying to play to as wide an audience as possible finally gets the best of [Gutiérrez]” (Berkshire par. 8) while another viewer praises the film for representing Mexican culture “instead of shying away from its Mexican roots to increase its global marketability” (Shawnofthedeath par. 5).



Such criticisms show that the film's originality is conflated with the Mexican culture it depicts, as its Mexican influences are described as "much more interesting than the Americanized A-plot" (Rife par. 5), equating its clichéd elements with American culture. These dichotomies play into the US-Mexican binary, where the countries are mutually exclusive from each other in all aspects of culture and identity (Beckham); whatever one of them is, the other cannot be. Therefore, while disappointment with anachronistic pop-cultural elements in a culturalized story may be understandable, such reactions nonetheless subscribe to this exclusivist idea and ignore other possible readings of *The Book of Life*. Rather than thinking of the American cultural markers as intrusions upon an untainted cultural bubble that the creator inserted as a commercial concession, one can instead read the mixing of these two cultures as signifying a deliberate political message regarding the future of US-Mexican relations. Such a message advocating cultural mixing and integration reads as particularly relevant for the US in a period when Mexican immigration to America continues to be a contentious issue, two years before Trump's inauguration.

One final thing to note is that, in discussing the degree of originality in *The Book of Life*, many critics and viewers drew particular attention to one specific element: the gender dynamics reflected in the love triangle between the three protagonists, as well as female lead María's role therein. In terms of cultural representation, examining such gender dynamics in a Mexican story is mainly relevant to the concept of machismo, a concept that delineates acceptable norms and expressions of masculinity in Mexican culture (Nance et al. 1986). While machismo is traditionally composed of both positive and negative traits, a pernicious Western stereotype involves exaggerating only the bad side of these gender roles, depicting Mexican men as, among other things, overly patriarchal and domineering toward their wives (Cromwell and Ruiz 357). Thus, when *The Book of Life* features its female lead as a seemingly passive object of affection between its two male leads, US American audiences –

primed with the expectation that the Auteur be subversive – put particular pressure upon this gender dynamic to uproot presumed Mexican gender stereotypes. For this reason, several viewers bemoaned her ending up married to the protagonist as slipping into the cliché of placing heroines in the socially acceptable arrangement of marriage (JuanGm), to the point where one critic accused her of being “ostensibly independent” and even a “human prize” (Abrams pars. 1-2). One comment succinctly illustrates the pressure imposed on the film to advocate this gendered progressivism, saying that it is “too conventional by miles, which is pretty damning considering the subject” (Atishoo). Along the same line, positive reviews anticipate such concerns in defending the film, assuring the reader that the love triangle works despite being “trite” and that it is “centred around a girl who knows her own mind – and *rest assured* that Maria [sic] speaks it often enough” (Shawnofthedead pars. 4-5, my emphasis). Another critic draws a further comparison with the Disney brand in making this point, reassuring that María maintains her agency “if the idea of two men fighting over a pretty lady seems a bit retrograde in the post- ‘*Frozen*’ era of animation” (Berkshire par. 5). This comparison directly appeals to the framing of intertextual competition between the Disney brand and the foreign Auteur mentioned earlier (Hernández-Pérez), where Gutiérrez’s female love interest is contrasted with the female leads of *Frozen* (2013), a contemporary Disney film that won acclaim for subverting such gender roles. And yet, such a comparison falls into the ethnocentric trap of defining all cultural output by one’s own norms which are propagated as ideal and the measuring stick for everything (Cromwell and Ruiz 355). Already, a pattern in the reception of the cultural representation within *The Book of Life* becomes apparent: audiences (especially US Americans) are receptive to depictions of the cultural Other, but only insofar as they constitute cinematic content that is original from their perspective; once this need for originality is denied, the common reaction is one of disappointment or frustration.

## 1.2 Production

As discussed earlier, the public expectation of *The Book of Life* being unique can mainly be attributed to the circumstances of Gutiérrez being both Mexican and independent as a director, which lend him an aura of both cultural and artistic legitimacy and, consequently, cause audiences to hold his work up to higher scrutiny. However, such expectations stem from more than just Western biases and stereotypes of foreign Auteurs; in many ways, the marketing of the film itself has encouraged this mode of interpretation so as to imbue the product itself with the same air of artistic authenticity (Gray 82, 97). To this end, the marketing is also eager to foster the anti-Disney persona of Gutiérrez, emphasizing his passion and individual vision for his project and pushing the authenticity of his artistry as a distinguishing factor of the film itself (Gray 99). In this sense, the advertising for *The Book of Life*, to some degree, indulges in the same process of essentializing Gutiérrez' artistic merit as an integral aspect of his Mexican cultural background. And yet, the marketing and production also provide framings of the film's meaning that do not agree with this exoticizing framework, instead providing a broader understanding of the cultural context of both the film and its creator. In fact, some of the comments provided by the production or marketing teams appear to anticipate the very complaints that people would level at the film. Evidently, such mitigating comments did not achieve their intended effect with a sizable number of viewers, and I hope to explain the reason for this by analyzing these elements of the film's production as well.

In selling the film's cultural representation as an asset of artistic quality, the marketing first draws attention to the filmmakers' background and previous work, with the message differing for each party: if they are Mexican, they are presumed to have the cultural authority to represent their own culture faithfully in the film; if they are American, they are instead praised for raising their profile by tackling a more multicultural project than they have done

before. For example, whenever critics mention the Dallas-based studio that made *The Book of Life*, Reel FX, they tend to compare the film favorably to their previous animation feature, *Free Birds* (2013), praising the former as “a major step forward” for the studio in terms of visuals (Berkshire par. 9) and being “more stylish and elaborately conceived” than the latter (J. Gutiérrez, “Talks ‘*Book of Life*’” par. 1). Differences in general quality notwithstanding, the films tend to be compared primarily regarding their visual styles, with such comparisons placing particular focus on the Mexican folk-art inspired visuals of *The Book of Life*, subtly drawing a parallel between its superior quality and its incorporation of such multicultural elements which *Free birds* lacks. Conversely, in order to invoke the cultural authority of the filmmakers, the marketing draws much attention to producer Guillermo del Toro, whose respectable presence as a celebrated Mexican Hollywood director lends gravitas to the film. Thus, he is included with Gutiérrez in interviews (“Interview - *Book of Life*”; “*Book of Life*: Exclusive Interview”), has his name listed on top of the poster, and receives a prominent credit in the trailer that contrasts with the comparatively obscure director’s split-second credit (*Book of Life* Trailer #1). Incidentally, his prominence may have had the unintentional side-effect of invoking his intertextuality as a highly creative director rather than as a Mexican filmmaker, so that some people mistakenly thought that *The Book of Life* would abide by his particular brand of creativity and were subsequently disappointed (Oscar-chinchilla; RforFilm). Additionally, interviews would remind the reader that Gutiérrez previously co-created the animated TV show *El Tigre* (2008) (J. Gutiérrez, “Talks ‘*Book of Life*’” par. 1), which not only won Emmys for its animation, but also featured many references to Mexican culture. Such a background lends both creative eminence and cultural authority to Gutiérrez himself and, by extension, to his film. Finally, a succinct example of the filmmakers’ use of cultural authority can be seen in cast interviews, where Latino actors may discuss Mexican

culture as insiders, whereas a non-Latin actor such as Ron Perlman has to sensitively approach the subject “as an American” (Saldana et al.)

Of particular note is how the marketing draws attention to female lead María and her position in the story, seemingly anticipating the issues viewers would take with her arc in particular. She is repeatedly compared to a princess by Gutiérrez, who calls her either “no princess” (*Art of Book of Life* 71) or “anti-princess” (“Gutiérrez, *Book of Life*” par. 9), with one trailer expanding this comparison by referring to Manolo and Joaquin as “not your average prince charmings” and saying the story is “not your ordinary fairytale” (*Book of Life* Trailer #2). Invoking the term ‘princess’ in a family-oriented animation inevitably calls to mind the prolific Disney Princess line, a merchandising line targeted primarily at little girls which has drawn significant attention because of its construction and representation of female gender roles (England et al. 556). Disney’s princess characters are known for displaying traditional feminine behaviour and conservative gender roles, thus encouraging anti-feminist values of passivity and helplessness (England et al. 557, 565). Therefore, comparing María to this archetype serves two functions: it insinuates that the feisty, assertive María is a superior, emancipated alternative to her Western animated counterparts, in one of the marketing’s most brazen engagements with the anti-Disney narrative; and it subverts national stereotypes about rampant Machismo holding Mexican women down. However, given the high level of scrutiny to which the character has been held by critics and viewers alike, this marketing method may have been counterproductive in that it caused people to have unrealistic expectations for the character and her progressivism.

As for the film’s originality, this is another aspect that was strongly pushed to the forefront in the marketing, with Gutiérrez and Del Toro specifically highlighting its authenticity as a product, implicitly drawing other CG animation films as more rote and calculated and playing into the anti-Disney narrative. For one, both trailers for the film

advertise it as “unlike anything you’ve (ever) seen” shortly after highlighting the *Dia de los Muertos* as a theme (*Book of Life* Trailer #1 and #2), signifying the uniqueness of the feast both in itself and as a positive presence in American cinema. Additionally, Del Toro stresses how the film is “genuine” as opposed to “a calculated marketing project” (“Del Toro & Gutierrez Interview”) and Gutiérrez names authenticity and originality as his priorities in making the film, saying he did not want the film to “feel like the other movies” (qtd. in Chevat par. 3). He elaborates in the tie-in artbook *Art of the Book of Life* that both of these priorities are mainly met through the film’s distinct visuals, which are inspired by handcrafted Mexican folk art and incorporate asymmetry and other imperfections to “reflect the presence of the artisan’s hands” (J. Gutiérrez, *Art of Book of Life* 9, 136). He was also adamant that no alterations be made to his designs for fear of them getting “watered down” as with other films’ productions, so that producer Del Toro made it a point not to meddle with the creation process (J. Gutiérrez, “Talks ‘*Book of Life*”” par. 1, par. 10, par. 19) and protected it from studios as well (Del Toro and Gutiérrez, “Exclusive Interview”). In addition, Gutiérrez has related the story of how he struggled for fourteen years to get this film made, mainly because most studio executives were turned off by its innovative style and believed that there was no audience for such “Latino content” (“Every Picture Tells a Story”). All of these details are spotlighted together to paint a picture of Gutiérrez as a struggling independent artist who has to fight against narrow-minded producers to realize his pure artistic vision.

Incidentally, Gutiérrez also used this framing of authenticity to defend some of the film’s more contested elements (i.e. its derivative plot, flat characters, and American pop songs). For instance, he explained how Manolo’s arc drew from his personal experience (J. Gutiérrez, “Talks ‘*Book of Life*”” par. 33) and how many of the characters are inspired by his own family members (*Art of Book of Life* p. 66, 118-119). Moreover, he defends the pop songs as having personal significance for him and being deliberately selected for their

relevance to the story, referring to them on several occasions as “the playlist of my life” (“Gutiérrez, *Book of Life*” par. 12, “Interview: Gutiérrez”). And yet, these defences failed to sway a significant number of people who took issue with these creative decisions, even though the distinct visuals that had equal passion behind them were more unanimously praised. Here a double standard becomes apparent: audiences will accept authenticity as a selling point, but only if it is used in the service of elements that support their pre-conceived notions of cultural representation.

However, as an additional defence of the film’s Western aspects the creators have also repeatedly communicated their intention to mix cultural elements in their conception of *The Book of Life*. Again, the negative reaction to the film’s ‘Americanized’ elements can be attributed to the fact that the marketing overemphasized the film’s representation of Mexican culture, leading people to think that this would be its sole cultural focus. Not only has Gutiérrez himself stated his intention to normalize Latino culture for American audiences (Hughes par. 22), but the cast has also played their part extolling the virtues of Mexican culture and undermining stereotypes about *Día de los Muertos* (Saldana et al.). However, Del Toro indicated in one conference that the film incorporates both traditional Mexican and modern multicultural influences because it was always intended to reflect “the international essence of Mexico” (qtd. in Chevat par. 4), and Gutiérrez reflects this sentiment by openly sharing his multicultural inspirations and saying that he considers the central belief of *Día de Muertos* to be universal (J. Gutiérrez, *Art of Book of Life* 10). As a matter of fact, the inclusion of the American pop songs can be seen as a microcosm of this design philosophy. Gutiérrez was particularly inspired by “hybrid songs” that mixed different cultural backgrounds to reflect today’s multicultural world (“Interview: Gutiérrez”), and he was fascinated by the idea of redressing one’s interests for one’s own culture, to the point where he integrated this as a moral lesson about letting your passions guide you without cultural

restraints (“Gutiérrez, *Book of Life*” par. 12). This design motif of cultural hybridization is also visible in the film’s constructed mythology, which borrows from both Mesoamerican and Greek myths. In particular, the director was inspired by the Orpheus myth, as well as similar Mayan stories about people traveling to the underworld (Hughes par. 14), which he essentially retooled into Mexicanized versions for his film, much like the song covers (*Art of Book of Life* 7). In this sense, the film also reflects the composite nature of *Día de Muertos* itself, the customs of which have cultural precursors in both Pre-Columbian and European history (Brandes 208). In conclusion, this cultural fusion is Gutiérrez’ answer to the dilemma of how to represent a racial and cultural group without essentializing them: he aims to show that their identity is fluid and multi-faceted in terms of culture, being defined strongly by ethnic traditions, but not exclusively. However, given some of the reactions to the American elements of *The Book of Life*, not all audiences are receptive to this idea of cultural hybridization, even in representative form, perhaps because mixing Mexican and American culture upsets the hierarchical dichotomy between the two countries that US culture has constructed for decades (Mains 261). Thus, American viewers are conditioned to view Mexico in particular as exotic but inferior, as most American films that portray the country try to define the Mexican space and its associated power and identity (Mains 253-254). In other words, US audiences consider positive portrayals of Mexico to be acceptable, as long as no American cultural elements infringe upon the portrayal and muddle the presumed exclusive nature of the two cultures.

### 1.3 Content

Generally, people responded positively to the Mexican representation of *The Book of Life* because of educational value for Western audiences, and the film itself primes viewers for this perspective through its frame narrative (00:55-09:43). The film features audience surrogates



in the form of five schoolchildren on a museum trip and a diegetic narrator in the museum's guide, who presents to them "the glorious beauty of Mexico," framing the story as an educational and enriching exercise for the viewers. Indeed, the film follows through on this promise as much of the opening segment is dedicated to explaining the premise of *Dia de Muertos*. At some points, this frame narrative is also utilized to acknowledge or relay Mexican stereotypes, with one child anxiously wondering: "What is it with Mexicans and death?" in regards to the plot's macabre proceedings (46:54). The same child is also corrected on his notion that *Dia de Muertos* is a "national zombie day" (03:35), a comment that mirrors remarks that Gutiérrez himself received from confused studio executives while trying to pitch the film ("Every Picture Tells a Story"). Notably, all of the children are stated to be Americans in *Art of The Book of Life* (186), suggesting that the film and its cultural education is aimed in particular at a US audience. Thus, the narrative operates from the cultural authority granted by the director's Mexican nationality, providing insider knowledge of his culture and its customs. In a sense, this dynamic between educating creator and outsider audience can be gleaned as a subtext in the introduction scene for the Land of the Remembered (47:08-48:55): just as Manolo is inaugurated into a strange and festive land, the audience is given a look at a foreign culture and its festivities. This idea can also be seen within the frame narrative, as the American expositor is revealed to be La Muerte (1:26:43), whose Mexican-American voice actor and design based on Mexican cultural icon *La Calavera Catrina* (Posada; *Art of Book of Life* 28) code her as Mexican. One other thing that the frame narrative serves to set up is the film's light-hearted approach to its representation, as the narrator says that "Mexico is the center of the universe." This hyperbolic statement is accompanied by the absurd visual of a mustachioed Mexico in the middle of a sombrero-shaped galaxy, setting the tone for the film's tongue-in-cheek nationalism.

Indeed, what stands out most prominently about the cultural representation in *The Book of Life* is that it prioritizes iconography over verisimilitude, with the filmmakers taking various artistic liberties to fill the film with as many Mexican icons as they can, to the point where it stretches suspension of disbelief. Again, such a reliance on stereotypical signifiers of Mexican culture is mitigated by the paratext of Gutiérrez being Mexican himself, allowing him to speak for his culture when saying that “we’re not exactly taking ourselves too seriously” (*Art of Book of Life* 120). A non-Mexican creator, on the other hand, could not depict the culture as such a humorous caricature without being seen as offensive, as can be seen when one reviewer, who evidently overlooked the product’s cultural origin, derided its iconography as “Speedy Gonzales-level ethnic humor” (Abrams par. 4). One reason that this approach has garnered overall appraisal is that, in distinguishing themselves from the conventional Disney-style of animation, the filmmakers create a more fantastical look and feel that allows for a broad approach to depicting culture. Specifically, whereas Disney films are defined by their aim toward ‘animated realism’ – with space having a three-dimensional depth and characters having somewhat realistic movements and proportions (Palmer 57-58) – *The Book of Life* features several 2D-sections of animation and stylistically exaggerated character proportions that, combined with the mythical inspiration and overtones of the plot, construct a tone and setting that Gutiérrez himself has described as “Magic Realist” (@mexopolis). To some extent, such a tone plays into Western ideas of Mexico as an exoticized Other, but this implication is balanced out by the fact that the main characters are written in a more humanized manner in order to normalize Mexicans in film. Because of this, the cultural representation of *The Book of Life* resides primarily in its visuals rather than in its plot and characters, which leads the divided reactions of the audience on their difference in representation and perceived quality. Perhaps, to compensate for this representational disparity, the filmmakers overloaded the film with visual signifiers of Mexican culture:

besides the character designs mentioned earlier and 2D-segments inspired by Mexican folk art and murals, the film contains allusions to the art of José G. Posada and Frida Kahlo, while the town San Ángel is based on real-life Mexican island-town Janitzio, and each of Manolo's ancestors represents one of the country's historical periods (*Art of Book of Life* 28, 70, 80, 150). This representation of cultural history is particularly prominent with the Adelita twins, who represent the *soldaderas* (soldier-women) who fought in the Mexican Revolution (*Art of Book of Life* 151) and whose name, taken from a soldier's ballad of the time, is synonymous with the archetype of a strong, Mexican woman (Arrizón 90-91). Furthermore, the film contains cultural references beyond what the art book explicitly mentions, such as the luchador priest who shares his occupations and mask design with Fray Tormenta (Nusbaum par. 4), or the Land of the Forgotten being named after Luis Buñuel's film *Los Olvidados* (1950), a film that shares *The Book of Life*'s theme of Mexican youths having their prospects limited by society (Patricia). Having this many cultural markers in the film serves to bolster the cultural authority of the director on which the narrative is founded, allowing him the playful approach to representing his own culture.

This authority also allows him to take a subversive approach in his representation of Mexican culture, in that he mixes its elements with foreign parts to effectively create a hybrid of Mexican and other cultures. One of the most salient examples of this is the mythology the film constructs, which borrows from different cultures and myths, primarily Mayan and Greek (Hughes par. 14). For one, the story appropriates the Orpheus myth by changing the snake in the original myth into a two-headed one – referencing an Aztec sculpture (*Double-headed serpent*) – and turning Hades' character into Xibalba, a fictionalized counterpart named after the Mayan underworld, reflecting how Hades shared his name with the death realm he ruled. Moreover, La Muerte is based on *La Catrina* (1910), a folk figure associated with *Día de Muertos* and created by José G. Posada, a Mexican printmaker whose satirical engravings

have had a significant influence on the modern aesthetic of the holiday (Brandes 204-205). Fittingly, *La Catrina* was herself based on the Aztec goddess who ruled the Aztec afterlife and oversaw the festival from which the modern Day of the Dead originates (Delsol pars. 8-9), just as La Muerte does in *The Book of Life*. It should be noted that *La Catrina* was and is meant to mock a type of Mexican noblewoman who favored European culture over her own (Delsol par. 7). The fact that Gutiérrez portrays this figure more sympathetically further suggests his more positive attitude toward multiculturalism. Lastly, the Candle Maker strongly evokes the Abrahamic God with his grandfatherly appearance and his association with light, as well as occupying a centrist governing position in the story's cosmology and being associated with the titular Book of Life, which takes its name from a similar book of human records in Christianity and Judaism. Besides the mythological elements, the film also provides examples of hybridizing in its use of American pop songs covered in a Mexican style. Gutiérrez has described this creative decision as expressing the idea that Manolo "can grab songs from the universe and make them his" ("Gutierrez, *Book of Life*" par. 12), an idea that is more broadly expressed in the film's appropriation of other cultural concepts as well. In this regard, Gutiérrez follows a time-honored Mexican practice of Mexicanizing cultural ideas that appeal to them, as they did with both Catholicism and wrestling (Nusbaum par. 18) and as Posada did with the Aztec deity (Delsol par. 8). Indeed, the film's reinterpretation of Mesoamerican deity characters is reminiscent of Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa's invocation of such deities in her political and autobiographical writing (Kauffmann 57). The film may even contain a direct reference to Anzaldúa's work, as it contains a statue of the Aztec goddess Coatlique (*Art of Book of Life* 162), a figure that also played a prominent role in Anzaldúa's mythos (Kauffmann 65). It can be argued that, in a broad sense, both Anzaldúa and *The Book of Life* utilize these myths for the same purpose: to offer their alternative vision of the modern world. In the latter's case, as with all its uses of culture mixing, it is meant to

reflect a hybrid, multicultural world (J. Gutiérrez, “Interview”). This view is also reflected in the fact that the children who serve as audience surrogates all have mixed ancestry (*Art of Book of Life* 186). Notably, audiences only took issue with the film’s usage of American songs and supposedly ‘Americanized’ plot beats, despite the fact that the film liberally mixes in elements of other, more ancient cultures as well. However, since average Western viewers would not know about such historical cultures, they miss these other hybrids and are lead to think that the American elements are the sole non-Mexican elements in an otherwise purely Mexican cultural production.

Another liberty allotted to the Mexican storyteller is his ability to criticize some of his culture’s more contentious aspects, and unlike the visuals or hybridizations, these criticisms are plainly visible in the film’s plot as well as its visual dimension. Most prominently, it takes a stand against the controversial sport of bullfighting, having protagonist Manolo state in no uncertain terms that “killing the bull is wrong” (26:41). Furthermore, since this sport is commonly interpreted as a gendered ritual revolving around masculinity (G. Robinson 1, 28), this stance also serves as a critique of Mexican machismo. This idea is also represented in the character designs, with most male characters being given top-heavy body types to suggest that they are weighed down by their own machismo, and secondary antagonist Chakal in particular representing “machismo gone bad” (*Art of Book of Life* 36, 125). This backlash against excessive masculinism can also be seen in Manolo’s character arc as he has to free himself from an overbearing patriarch and his stifling family traditions (*Art of Book of Life* 57). In fact, the film draws a parallel between Manolo and the bulls: both are victims of an unfair hierarchy but are freed in the end, which is primarily visible in the scene where his song pacifies the great bull (1:13:19-1:15:24). Manolo himself makes the comparison when singing to the bull that “we were bred to fight” (my emphasis), and it is drawn further by having both relent at the same time. Also, shortly after Manolo pacifies the bull through his apology, his

father apologizes in turn to Manolo for his own misconduct. In addition to this, the scene where the leads free pigs from a butchery as children draws a broader parallel between the children and the animals as being oppressed (12:28-17:13). For one, María's creed to "free the animals" is equated with the cause of "freedom of the oppressed" (*Art of Book of Life* 66), and the scene concludes with all three children being forced into a pre-conceived social role: María is sent off to become a proper lady; Manolo is encouraged to become a bullfighter; and Joaquin is enlisted to become a hero like his late father. Moreover, the motif of upending conventional hierarchies is also expressed in the dynamic between gods and mortals, as the scene with the apology song also serves to make Xibalba reconsider his preconceptions about humans. Gutiérrez himself hinted at this parallel in one interview, saying that "[his] favorite mythology is where humans teach gods a lesson" and comparing the dynamic to a child-parent relationship (Hughes par. 14). In a different way, the theme of freeing the oppressed is obliquely expressed in the Land of the Remembered, which emphasizes that all are equal in the afterlife, including humans and animals (*Art of Book of Life* 157). Again, Gutiérrez follows in the footsteps of Posada, whose skeletal depictions of the ruling class were also meant to playfully protest the hierarchies of his time through the theming of equality in death (Brandes 204; Delsol par. 4). Although the film makes no direct reference to it, this subversive theme of opposing conventionally accepted hierarchies also bears relevance to the relationship between the US and Mexico, which has historically been constructed to push the US as the superior of the two (Mains 261). Furthermore, since the film is generally aligned with the progressive Left side of the culture wars, given its representation of marginalized groups and dismantling of social and family hierarchies, it may also have received a negative reaction from conservatives, especially when considering that they are usually wary of any threats to conservative family values (Lyons 12). Because films that question this US-Mexican dichotomy are generally denied critical appraisal (Beckham 131), *The Book of Life's*

use of these themes may thus account for some of its critical backlash. Furthermore, its progressive tone could also account for its conspicuous lack of an Oscar nomination, given that the film's inclusion would have provided cultural diversity for an event that has often been accused of favoring white American creative output (Hughes par. 1).

One way in which the film directly engages with this US-Mexican binary is in its appropriation and subversion of various Mexican stereotypes prevalent in American society and cinema. For instance, while the film acknowledges that domineering patriarchs are a social problem in Mexican culture, in doing so it shows that this family dynamic is not uncontested in Mexican culture (Cromwell and Ruiz 357); moreover, both fathers in the story learn the error of their ways. The same goes for the anti-bullfighting plot, which serves to mark both the sport and toxic masculinity in general as problems that need to be addressed in Latino culture, as opposed to being accepted. Another way in which the film subverts Mexican machismo stereotypes is by showing how Manolo and Joaquin manage to sustain their friendship despite fighting over the same girl. Additionally, the film utilizes several specific stereotypes of Mexican people, presumably for purposes of efficient storytelling (Berg "Latino Images" 42), yet it takes care to reinterpret them so that instead of othering Mexicans they affirm Mexicans as the norm. For example, Manolo's zany mariachi friends are incarnations of the *Male Buffoon*, a kind of comic relief character meant to disarm the Hispanic male of his perceived threatening qualities (Berg, "Stereotypes" 295). However, rather than affirming a dominant Anglo group as the norm, they serve to make Manolo seem less pathetic by comparison, indirectly normalizing him as the conventional Hispanic male.

Another more obvious example can be seen in Chakal, whose heinous character and unkempt appearance mark him as a *Bandido*, a villain archetype constructed by US cinema meant to depict Mexicans as being outside of the dominant norm, in terms of not just race and nationality but morality and psychology as well (Berg, "Latino Images" 40). Interestingly,

since everything in the film is already stylistically exaggerated, the stereotype has to be given even more excessive traits to mark Chakal as an animalistic outsider from the rest of the human cast. This includes giving him a monstrous size, sharp fangs, and gorilla-like movement (*Art of Book of Life* 40), even homaging the 1933 film *King Kong* as he scales a tower with María as damsel in tow (1:19:24). Again, a Mexican stereotype is reinterpreted here to affirm Mexican civilization itself as being the norm, with Chakal advancing from outside as a threat to the village and the heroic Hispanic cast defeating him to symbolically disown the stereotype. Furthermore, the film also corrects some misconceptions underlying this stereotype: the image of the *Bandido* – sombrero, bandoliers, weaponry – is a vilified version of the rebel soldiers who fought in the Mexican Revolution (Berg “Latino Images” 17-18). Thus, having the heroic Adelita twins fight Chakal’s army as *soldaderas* effectively reclaims the look for its true historical context, similar to how Joaquin is also marked as heroic with the same attributes earlier in the film (*Art of Book of Life* 48). Other stereotypes are avoided entirely, especially the one of the *Female Clown*, a Hispanic female character that serves as the gender-flipped version of the *Male Buffoon*, meant to neutralize the threat of the feminine Other through derisive laughter at her exaggerated traits (Berg, “Stereotypes” 295). While the Mexican-coded La Muerte does have lapses of comic emotionality for example, she manages to look composed when compared to her erratic non-Mexican male partner Xibalba. Also, when referencing Hollywood star Carmen Miranda and her fruit hat, a famous example of this stereotype in her time (Berg, “Stereotypes” 295-296), the allusion is applied to Manolo rather than a female character (17:35), thus removing the image from its connotation of racial gender stereotyping. Given that audiences have predominantly given positive reception to the film’s efforts to normalize Latino groups, the reworking of such stereotypes can be said to have accomplished its goal.



The one exception to this subversive approach to cultural stereotypes is María herself, whose character has received considerable debate on whether or not she is handled or represented well as a female lead. Part of the character's contested nature can be attributed to the fact that she is one of the few characters who is subject to a more straightforward use of Mexican stereotypes to some degree. Mainly, she fits the type of the *Dark Lady*, a Hispanic female character who is idealized through her exotic traits of mystery and inscrutability, often accentuated by having her be aristocratic as well (Berg "Stereotyping" 296). Although her love interests are Hispanic themselves, her exoticized framing still carries racial implications given the Anglo-American target audience. This framing is particularly visible in her introduction as an adult (23:46-24:22), as the viewer is given only close-ups or medium shots while she covers her face, building up a sense of mystery and sensationalism around her appearance. Such close-ups of body parts serve to fetishize the woman's body as bearer of the male gaze (Mulvey 837-838), an exoticizing othering technique reflective of an exclusionary perspective similar to that used for racialized Others in American cinema (Berg "Stereotyping" 293). The sense of exclusion that the character suffers is exacerbated because, unlike her two male co-leads, she is not given either any character development or a sense of agency within her own arc: her arranged marriage with Joaquin is interrupted by Chakal's arrival and made obsolete by Manolo's heroics, rather than being resolved through her own actions. Not helping their case is that the filmmakers associate her strongly with the Disney Princess archetype, thus encouraging Western audiences to judge her by their own standards of female characters rather than with a Mexican perspective, like all the other characters. This association has also led to disappointment among viewers who expected her arc to be more subversive, as opposed to ultimately showing gender conformity like most of the actual Disney Princesses (England et al. 565), and displaying a similar exaggerated feminine form in her character design to appeal to the cinematic male gaze (Palmer 59-60). Finally, insofar as

María is emancipated as a character, this aspect too gets commodified to reinforce her role as love interest for the male leads: whenever she expresses either her independence or her skill, it draws impressed or surprised reactions from Manolo and/or Joaquin, framing her as more desirable because of her competence. Even within the universe her role as love interest to either of the male leads is taken for granted, as the cosmic wager that drives the plot hinges on her choosing either of them as her partner. The one time she displays strength without it facilitating a potential relationship is when she rallies the townspeople to fight Chakal's army (1:10:11), though this heroic action is inconsistent with the general framing of her character. On the whole, while María may at best represent the efforts of a well-meaning filmmaker who fails to consider all the implications of his framing techniques, the way María was handled nonetheless led to a considerable degree of backlash, even from viewers who were otherwise enthusiastic about the film. This reaction is indicative of the attitude people have toward products that endeavour to provide progressive representation: they are expected to show this progressivism for all marginalized groups as opposed to emancipating one group while neglecting to positively represent another.

## **Conclusion**

In general, *The Book of Life* displays a bold approach toward cultural representation, using the cultural authority provided by its Mexican director to poke fun at its tropes, criticize its faults, and mix its Mexican representation with other cultures. As evidenced by its generally positive reception, the film manages to get away with this approach by emphasizing both its educational value for non-Mexican audiences and the authenticity of the story through its relations to Gutiérrez's personal experience and knowledge. Conversely, in the interest of normalizing Mexicans and appealing to an international market, most of the film's cultural content was relegated to its visuals, while the plot was kept familiar and the characters were

built on recognizable types. However, this led to disappointment among Western audiences who thought of the film's qualities as deriving from its uniqueness, which they found in the visuals but not in the plot. More importantly, American audiences generally reacted negatively to the inclusion of explicitly American elements such as the pop songs, seeing them as breaking suspension of disbelief. The conclusion that can be gleaned from this reaction is two-fold: on one hand, modern audiences are receptive to positive representations of other cultures than their own to the point where they will scrutinize a film's quality as relating to this aspect; on the other hand, they are not yet at a point where the majority is comfortable with the idea of the other culture mixing with their own, perhaps because of the political implications in real life.

## Chapter 2

### Coco Plays it Safe: Pixar and the Limitations of Respectful Portrayals

While *The Book of Life* was the first mainstream animation film to showcase Mexican culture, *Coco*, released three years later, is the first animated feature focusing on Mexico made by a predominantly American crew, being pitched and directed by the white American Lee Unkrich through Pixar and having co-director Adrian Molina as its most prominent Mexican-American crewmember. Besides their shared choice in cultural subject, the films show other similarities as well: an educational introduction to the *Día de Muertos* holiday; a journey toward a Mexican-inflected afterlife, leading to a meeting with deceased ancestors; and the theme of the conflict between family tradition and personal ambition, represented by the protagonists' playing guitar. Moreover, the two films were released a mere three years apart, so that the former would surely influence audience expectations for the latter given their similarities. Therefore, *The Book of Life* shall be considered as a pretext to *Coco*, in that it frames the meaning of *Coco* by offering itself as a point of comparison and setting up a particular horizon of expectations for those who watch one before the other (Gray 120). Beyond this, I will also compare the two films as points of contrast, examining, for example, the divergent ways in which they address the same themes or ideas. Furthermore, in considering these differences, I will take into account how Author Theory may account for these contrasts, particularly in the context of the creators' nationality and how it informs their approach to representational politics. Specifically, the American perspective of Pixar, which places them in the dominant position of the US-Mexico hierarchy construct, limits the ways in which they can approach the subject of Mexican culture without inciting considerable backlash, so that *Coco* displays comparatively less radical politics than Gutiérrez's creation. Furthermore, given that the production lacks the cultural authority imbued by the presence of

a Mexican Auteur, the production would need to make more effort to convince the viewer of its qualifications to depict Mexican culture accurately and respectfully.

Besides comparing the film to *The Book of Life*, this study will also examine *Coco*'s place within the larger oeuvre of Pixar animation. Specifically, I will compare its thematic content with that of other Pixar films so as to assert whether the representational angle influences their usual approach to their familiar topics, given that *Coco* is the first Pixar film to feature a non-white human protagonist. Again, their position as an American studio and a subsidiary to Disney functions in itself as a paratext framing the meaning of the film, since Pixar has been accused of espousing American imperialist dogma similar to Disney (Meinel 15). The focus on Pixar as a studio brand fits within the collaborative model of Author Theory that acknowledges corporations to be Auteurs just as individuals can be (Carringer 377-378; Hernández-Pérez 301), a model that is well-suited for a studio distinguished for its high level of production control (Salyer 257-258).

## 2.1 Reception

In the previous chapter, I determined that the critically divisive reaction to *The Book of Life* could partly be attributed to its Left-leaning politics, which resulted in conservative audiences giving a more ambivalent reaction. Concurrently, *Coco* is comparatively neutral in regards to cultural politics as a result and has received nearly unanimous praise, as reflected by its IMDb score of 8,4 as well as its Metacritic score of 81, which reflects "Universal acclaim" (*Metacritic*). The most eminent example of the film's positive reception is its acquisition of an Oscar for best animated feature at the Academy Awards of 2018 ("The 90<sup>th</sup> Awards"), a victory which stands in contrast to *The Book of Life* lacking even a nomination in its own year. On top of this acclaim, *Coco* also won generous financial returns, with it grossing over eight hundred million dollars globally against an estimated budget of one hundred seventy

five million (*IMDb*). Notably, the film was also considerably financially successful in Mexico, its cultural subject: it performed so well that it became the highest-grossing film in the history of Mexico's box office (Tartaglione), which speaks volumes of *Coco*'s feat to cater to Mexicans through its respectful portrayal of them.

Indeed, many viewers and critics point to the film's competent handling of its cultural portrayal as one important reason for its overwhelming success, as such multicultural representation adds a progressive element to the overall profile of Pixar. While the respect and accuracy of the native Gutiérrez's Mexican depiction are taken as a given, audiences put more pressure on an American company such as Pixar to honor this cultural Other because of the historical baggage of US cinema's unflattering portrayals of Mexico. For instance, critics praised the film's portrayal of Mexicans and their country for feeling "inclusive rather than exoticizing" (Scott par. 4) and for honoring their aesthetic heritage by incorporating its iconography throughout the whole product (Debruge par. 6; Abele par. 14). Casual viewers were similarly enthusiastic about the portrayal, commending it for being both accurate and beautiful (Inxsfett pars. 3-4; Mryohal) in a way that shows the filmmakers' "loving care for the Mexican traditions" (Semisonic par. 6) and how they went "above and beyond in research in getting those in Mexicos [sic] stamp of approval" (Bradinhanson). In lauding *Coco*'s cultural representation, audiences also ascribe positive qualities to the film similar to those given to *The Book of Life*: its positive portrayal of Mexico and *Dia de Muertos* was seen as original and daring (Scott par. 2; Seitz par. 6; Bradinhanson; Ex\_umbrellacorp) as well as educational (Jon-stokes; Jared\_Andrews); and its emotional plot was emphasized as being genuine (Abele par. 15; Namashi\_1 par. 3). This similarity in the films' commendations coincides with a similarity in the Author personae of their creators: much like foreign Auteurs such as Gutiérrez, Pixar as a company has also often been viewed as a brand distinguished from Disney because it is seen as more innovative and emotionally authentic, specifically

through their eschewal of Disney's "conventional aesthetics and normative politics of representation" (Meinel 10).

However, this constitutes all the similarities between Pixar's Author persona and the anti-Disney paradigm that Hernández-Pérez delineates, as the fact that Pixar is an American corporation means that they are exempt from the paradigm's aspects of autobiography and Orientalism (Hernández-Pérez 308). In fact, this circumstance causes Pixar to receive similar accusations as Disney of spreading US imperialist ideas through their entertainment since it normalizes values that reflect US American cultural sensibilities (Meinel 15; Salyer 6). Thus, *Coco*'s positive representation of Mexico is also read as a calculated political move to counter such accusations and make amends for past missteps, as one critic bluntly states, "There's no getting around that Disney/Pixar hope 'Coco' absolves them of past ethnic-representation sins in forging popular movie fare" (Abele par. 15). This political correctness, in turn, leads some critics to lament that the film feels "too constrained by formula" in aiming for a safe plot with familiar themes (Chang par. 11-12; Semisonic par. 3; Ex\_umbrellacorp), accusing the film's Latino representation to be its only innovation as a Pixar film (Debruge par. 1; Chang par. 4; Semisonic). Conversely, many of the film's defenders paint the choice of familiar themes as an appeal to universality, serving to humanize the Mexican cultural Other by fashioning the story as "less-homogenized, but no less universal-in-theme" (Abele par. 15) and ascribing relatable ideas to the Mexican characters (Charliedog2015). Furthermore, they describe the film's predictable plot as instead being classic or "time-tested" (Abele par. 10; Scott par. 6). In short, rather than being touted as an asset for the film's originality, the representational politics are instead feared to have a limiting effect on the level of innovation it displays. This general reaction is emblematic of Pixar's complicated position: as Pixar, the studio is expected to be original and innovative, but as an American company it is obliged to be culturally sensitive in its portrayal of Mexico.

This limitation is more pronounced when it comes to comparing *Coco* with *The Book of Life*, a film that would color audience's expectations for the former because of their similarities. In fact, many people suggested that the former plagiarized the latter due to these similarities (Freeman par. 1), an allegation that hardly holds up to scrutiny given the timeline of both the films' developments (Freeman par. 3-4). And yet, such accusations already employ a particular narrative in comparing the two products, where Gutiérrez's Auteur persona is invoked to depict his film as the more artistic labor of love while Pixar's corporate side is emphasized to paint its executives as soulless profiteers and its film as derivative and unoriginal. This narrative can also be seen in readers' comments on an article directly comparing the two films: while the article views *Coco* as the superior film, bringing up many points against *the Book of Life* mentioned in the first chapter (Hixon pars. 11, 17), several commenters instead sided with the latter due to the fact that it was seen as the more authentic cultural portrayal. They describe *Book of Life* as "feeling more authentically Mexican" while *Coco* is "like every other Pixar . . . animation they do" (Chesley) and note that Gutiérrez, unlike Pixar, also represented *Día de Muertos* through his film's tone as well as its plot (Mari). One commenter even defended *The Book of Life*'s shortcomings as also being part of its cultural representation, noting that Latin American fiction in general favors aesthetics and atmosphere over logistics of plot (Stephanie). Interestingly, the article itself uses a similar argument against *The Book of Life*, saying that it takes its culture too much for granted, while *Coco* actually draws attention to its representational subject (Hixon par. 24). Thus, regardless of for which film viewers argue, everyone agrees that positive cultural representation is an important quality. Moreover, another article also argued that the vast difference in financial gains between the two films can mainly be attributed to their difference in marketing budgets, noting that *The Book of Life* could have had just as much of an impact as *Coco* if not for this disparity (*Coco & Book of Life* par. 4), implying that they are at least equal in artistic merit.



However, this explanation does not account for their difference in critical reception, as *Coco* received far less contested reactions than its spiritual predecessor despite having similar flaws. Evidently, there are other things distinguishing the two films that cannot be gleaned from the latter's reception alone.

## 2.2 Production

In many ways, the marketing of *Coco* is similar to that of *The Book of Life*: in both cases, the marketing emphasizes authenticity resulting from its faithful Mexican representation, and it also invokes the cultural authority of the Mexican filmmakers to add credibility to this portrayal. In particular, both films heavily focus on *Día de Muertos* and its ideas to provide a glimpse into Mexican culture, in such a way that the portrayal is both respectful to Mexicans and educational for non-Mexican viewers. However, that is where the similarities end, as *The Book of Life* was made by an independent Mexican director, a circumstance which resulted in him being given an anti-Disney Auteur persona that allowed him to take risks, but also pressured his film to be original and unique according to American preconceptions of Mexican culture and the holiday. Meanwhile, *Coco* was pitched by a white American director at a prestigious subsidiary of Disney itself, so that audiences were pre-emptively sceptical that Pixar could manage a respectful portrayal of Mexico (Gray 33). For one, by virtue of the history of the US framing of Mexican subjects, even a positive portrayal by Pixar would still carry implications of exoticizing and surveilling an outside group so as to define that group's space and power in relation to themselves (Mains 253-254). Moreover, Pixar has always been analyzed as spreading American imperialist ideology, much like Disney (Meinel 15), and it had never had a non-white human cast before, let alone an ethnic group that has historically been shown unfavorably by American cinema.

Indeed, a perfunctory glance at Pixar's past works focusing on human characters reveals a clear pattern of white ethnocentric storytelling that is the main factor that contributes to viewers' doubts that Pixar could handle a non-white cast properly. Not only that, but Pixar has also generally been read as espousing conservative American values, especially traditional ideas about the American Dream and its tenets of family and community (Salyer 244-245). Such an emphasis on family and traditional values would already seem to place Pixar on the Right side of the culture wars, which has generally been opposed to the representation and multiculturalism of the Left (Lyons 3). Adding on to this view is that Pixar tends to favor its white subjects whenever other racial groups do come up in its narratives. For instance, Pixar's film *Ratatouille* (2007) sets up a classic American Dream story where a Parisian rat aspires to become a chef and enlists the help of a white kitchenhand to do so. While they do work in a multiracial environment, all of the other chefs abandon the kitchen (and the film) upon learning of the rat's presence, leaving the white heroes to help the protagonist achieve his dream and thus playing into the white exclusionary aspect of the American Dream (Meinel 110). Furthermore, this film features two antagonists that both have aspects of an exaggerated racial caricature to make them less sympathetic, with one of them in particular being "[p]ortrayed in crude orientalist stereotypes" (Meinel 106). Meanwhile, while the other villain is a grotesque white stereotype, such white racism merely serves to frame the non-exaggerated white human leads as ordinary in terms of racial identity (Meinel 108), effectively equating 'white' with 'normal'. To give another example, *The Incredibles* (2004) is an earlier Pixar film with a set-up involving superheroes being outlawed due to overwhelming backlash from their unintended civilian victims, focusing on a white superhero family that experiences their new domestic setting as stifling. Given the film's setting in a 1950s American metropolis, this social change in the story can be read as an allegory for the real-life Civil Rights Movement of that era, so that this film upholds the narrative that white

people are the most disenfranchised group in the wake of this movement (Meinel 172). Finally, *Up* (2009) involves an old white man turning his house into a balloon-suspended airship to settle it on a South-American cliffside, in an attempt to fulfill his imperialist childhood dream that he shared with his late wife. While this film takes pains to distance itself from America's colonialist past, with the hero abandoning his dream in order to return home and the villain being a literal ancient colonizer, it nonetheless reinstates American imperialist ideas by focussing on the imperialist rather than the colonized and having the hero leave his vacant house on the cliff, which serves as a symbol of surveillance and ownership (Meinel 150, 152). However, the film does not read as wholly conservative, as its ending involves the white hero forming a reciprocal friendship with an Asian boy, exalting a progressive value of community unbound by racial hierarchies (Meinel 149) and thus supportive of racial integration. Such a sentiment would have Pixar sympathize with the Mexican immigrants in the political debate about US-Mexican relations surrounding *Coco*'s production, whereas their conservative worldview and ethnocentric stories would instead lead one to believe that they would side with the US. Hence, audiences were uncertain whether Pixar could be trusted with such a multicultural project, which is why the marketing for *Coco* is primed to reassure potential viewers that its Mexican subject is handled with care and respect, as well as to vouch for its cultural authenticity by appealing to the cultural authority of its Mexican filmmakers and inclusive crew.

For one, main director Lee Unkrich has repeatedly emphasized his anxiety regarding the film's representation, displaying self-awareness that "as a white guy from Ohio, I had that much more pressure on my shoulders to get it right" (Nakhnikian par. 19) and that he was liable to receive accusations of cultural appropriation (Ugwu par. 3). Thus, he and other production members state to have taken particular care to avoid cultural stereotypes and provide a respectful portrayal of Mexico (Ugwu par. 5, Lasseter Foreword 2, Molina and

Unkrich). Unkrich has also addressed the increase in anti-Mexican rhetoric surrounding Trump's campaign while advertising this portrayal, hoping that its positivity would act as a counterweight against Mexico's negative image amongst part of the US American public (Ugwu par. 21; Nakhnikian par. 13). Furthermore, he took several measures to make both the film and its production more inclusive for Mexicans in order to demonstrate the film's progressive representation and prove its authenticity, presenting the Mexican crew members as authorial ambassadors who have sanctioned the portrayal of their culture. Most prominently, Unkrich promoted the Mexican-American co-writer Adrian Molina to co-director during production, though he downplayed Molina's background as a "fringe benefit" to not appear tokenistic (T. Robinson par. 13). He also draws attention to the use of Spanglish in the film for purposes of verisimilitude and its all-Latino cast of voice actors (T. Robinson 21; Ugwu par. 13), as well as the inclusion of various other Chicano artists in its production (T. Robinson 25; Lasseter *Art of Coco*). Besides the production, the film itself is also repeatedly emphasized as representational in the artbook, noting how several people and places in *Coco* are based on real Mexican natives and locales that the production team saw during their trips to Mexico (Lasseter et al. 9, 28, 52, 89, 129, 131, 206, 240, 303). In contrast to *Art of The Book of Life*, *Coco's* artbook also includes photographs of the Mexican sights from which the filmmakers took inspiration, as if to legitimize their portrayal by citing its real-life precedent as a source. Another example of the production deferring to the Mexican population for such legitimization is when Unkrich cites their overwhelmingly positive reception of *Coco* as a counterpoint against the accusations of plagiarizing *The Book of Life* (Nakhnikian par. 15). Finally, in order to avoid an ethnocentric perspective they changed the initial plot about a white American child travelling to Mexico to let go of the memory of his deceased mother, which they realized was antithetical to the core concept of *Dia de Muertos* about preserving the memory of one's ancestors (T. Robinson par. 7; Cook par. 21). Although

such changes are intended to convey the creators' good intentions, they also betray how they experienced some initial difficulties in settling on a proper portrayal, as many of those changes were only thought up during production as opposed to from the beginning.

One incident that likely increased the filmmakers' anxiousness to provide a respectful portrayal is a controversy regarding the trademarking of the name of *Día de Muertos*, inciting fear of cultural exploitation amongst Latino audiences. To elaborate, Disney had attempted to trademark the holiday's name in 2013 in order to secure rights for merchandizing, which resulted in monumental backlash from several online communities (Ellison par. 1), culminating in respected Mexican illustrator Lalo Alcaraz chiming in with his political cartoon "Muerto Mouse" (Segura par. 8). Not only was this reaction sufficiently large to make Disney retract the trademark case, it also motivated Pixar to win back audiences' goodwill by paying closer attention to representation and inclusiveness. Firstly, they hired several eminent Mexican representatives, including Alcaraz himself, to act as cultural consultants for the film (Segura par. 9), a move notable for going against Pixar's usual modus operandi of putting a project on "creative lockdown" until it is finished (Ugwu pars. 9-10). Another decision deviating from Pixar's norm was Unkrich dispensing with the usual method of world-building to instead rely primarily on research trips to Mexico for material and inspiration (Ugwu par. 8). Although this creative decision predates the trademark controversy (Segura par. 8), it exemplifies the director's eagerness to please viewers expecting proper representation, going so far as to discard his prestigious studio's time-tested techniques to instead apply a more inclusive angle to the creation process. This immense pressure for representation also explains the relatively safe plot despite Pixar's reputation for original storytelling (Salyer 1), a plot which various critics have commented on as a mild weakness of the film. If one comment from before the film's release date is anything to go by (Concerned Citizen), then Pixar's

assurances of culturally conscious filmmaking already generated fears before its release that *Coco*'s story would suffer for its need to be respectful.

In response to such trepidations, the marketing takes care to mention several ways in which its cultural representation and inclusiveness are an asset to its storytelling rather than an obstacle. For example, both Unkrich and Molina emphasize how adding cultural nuances aided the screenwriting process (Ugwu par. 18) and how the material provided by their research trips to Mexico allowed them to “create a story that was entirely different from anything we could’ve . . . dreamed up from our imagination” (Molina and Unkrich). In this way, they also counter the notion that the film eschews innovative storytelling or production by emphasizing the representation itself as an innovation that enriches the story. Besides Unkrich’s comments mentioned earlier about providing much-needed positive portrayals of Mexico, cast member Benjamin Bratt also expressed hope that the film would be “a game-changer” for Mexico’s global image (Bratt and Gonzalez). In addition, one article highlights the film’s employment of both a nearly all-Latino cast and Spanglish in the dialogue, the latter of which is especially emphasized as “a rarity in commercial American cinema” (Ugwu par. 14), a comment which is meant to invoke Pixar’s reputation for authentic storytelling through the studio’s respectful and inclusive approach. Moreover, Unkrich himself commented that the imagery of *Día de Muertos*, which marries macabre skulls and bones with festive colors, would be unfamiliar and novel to most non-Mexican audiences, as well as that using such a presumed-unfamiliar holiday could serve to educate these audiences (Cook par. 27). The marketing itself already capitalizes on this educational merit, as two trailers (*COCO* Trailer 3 and Final) and both the artbook’s forewords (*Art of Coco* 2, 6) serve to introduce the basic concept of the festivity to the audience. Notably, none of the trailers make any explicit mention of Mexico or its culture, a decision reflective of a comment by one of the film’s consultants that the film serves as “a departure without making a big deal out of it” in terms of

its positive representation (Ugwu par. 23). However, this decision also reflects another tactic to win over potential non-Mexican audiences: downplaying its representational aspect to relay fears that it would utterly dominate the film's identity. To this end, the filmmakers also advertise the film's more universal themes of family and legacy (Nakhnikian par. 5), trusting that non-Latino audiences would be attracted to the film through this universality (Ugwu par. 12). Tellingly, the trailers do draw attention to this aspect, with one focusing on the film's central theme of family (COCO Trailer 4) while two others further underline its universality with various taglines: "A journey that connects us all" and "We're all a part of those who came before" (COCO Trailer 3 and Final). This appeal to common values also ties back in with their goal to give a positive portrayal of Mexican people, humanizing them by ascribing familiar ideas to them. Interestingly, all of these aspects of the film's representation (i.e., novelty, informativity, and universality) were also promoted as virtues of the Mexican portrayal of *The Book of Life*, albeit with a difference in emphasis. Whereas *The Book of Life* sold itself more on its originality to pander to Western stereotypes of Mexican uniqueness, *Coco* instead had to convince potential viewers that its portrayal would be not only informative but also respectful and accurate, rather than following the general trend of American cinema and slandering or exploiting Mexico further.

### **2.3 Content**

Given the fact that general audiences and critics lauded *Coco* as a celebratory look at Mexican culture, Pixar's efforts to show its respect for and understanding of the culture have evidently succeeded. *Coco* itself mainly manages to foster such a reaction by foregrounding most of its cultural elements, making them impossible to miss by either integrating them as plot points or by drawing attention to them through its cinematography. The film already sets the tone for this mode of presentation with its prologue, which tells the Rivera family's backstory through

a series of close-ups of stylistically animated *papel picado* flags (01:06-02:53). By contrast, when *The Book of Life* featured these traditional decorations for the festivity of *Día de Muertos*, they were only included as background elements that did not draw any attention to themselves (J. Gutiérrez, *Art of Book of Life* 94-95). Indeed, comparing the cultural markers of both films shows how much they are highlighted in *Coco*: while María's dress in *The Book of Life* is a subtle allusion to Frida Kahlo's dress (J. Gutiérrez, *Art of Book of Life* 70), *Coco* features the painter herself as a prominent side character, complete with a parody of one of her self-portraits (38:22; Kahlo). Similarly, while Gutiérrez's film indirectly referenced a famous *luchador* through a minor character (*Art of Book of Life* 138; Nusbaum par. 4), Pixar's film contains an extended cameo of famous *luchador* El Santo himself (57:07; Radeska par. 1). In demonstrating their respect, Pixar even feels the need to ground the fantastical Land of the Dead in real-world locations, inspiring its design mainly from Guanajuato and Mexico City (Lasseter et al. 121, 123). Finally, the representation of the two films differs in that Pixar is eager to prove that their film's multicultural element is an asset to storytelling to a sceptical audience, so that they incorporate the ideas and mechanics of *Día de Muertos* into the plot itself. Meanwhile, Gutiérrez played more on themes that are indirectly associated with the festivity – especially through Posada's activism – that non-Mexican viewers would not register as culturally inflected. This difference is what leads some audiences to view *The Book of Life* as “[glossing] over” its culture (Hixon par. 24), while *Coco* is more informative on its cultural subject. Besides the lore of *Día de Muertos* on display, the film is also quick to deliver on its educational element, as an early scene serves to introduce the audience to the basic tenets of the holiday and the function of the *ofrenda* (09:55-10:38).

Another difference between the two films is the perceived cultural authority of its creators owing to their nationalities, since Gutiérrez as a native Mexican could get away with a more playful approach to the portrayal of his culture, whereas the American Pixar is



pressured to show respect lest they appear exploitative. Thus, while the Mexican filmmakers of *The Book of Life* could afford “not . . . [to take] ourselves too seriously,” *Coco*’s creators have to demonstrate their regard for Mexican culture by treating it utterly seriously, relying mostly on situational comedy for humor. In the same vein, while Gutiérrez could humorously invoke several tropes and stereotypes without coming across as offensive, Pixar has to be careful to avoid such defamatory portrayals and show the Mexican culture and holiday as faithfully as possible. Hence, their film focuses more strongly on the holiday’s central theme of memory as well as its physical components, with only minimal artistic licence being used. One such artistic liberty is the fact that they leave out the offerings that can be given to forgotten souls, or *ánima sola* (I. T. Gutiérrez 232), since the drama hinges on the fact that the memory of the departed can only be maintained by people who personally knew them in life (46:14). Another liberty is the inclusion of *alebrijes* – which the art book admits are not directly related to *Día de Muertos* (Lasseter et al. 216) – as well as their interpretation as spirit guides, which has little precedent in their original conception as strange monsters (Bercovitch par. 1). In this particular case, the liberal inclusion would have been excused by Mexican audiences due to the fact that *alebrijes* are another form of Mexican artistic export meant to showcase Mexicans’ talent (Bercovitch par. 7), meaning that their addition in the film serves to celebrate Mexican culture even more.

Moreover, this difference in cultural representation is further underscored by the different art styles of the two films: as previously mentioned, *The Book of Life* has a more toon-esque style with its exaggerated proportions and movements as well as its two-dimensional character designs and animation segments, giving the film a cartoonish look and feel befitting its playful representation. By contrast, Pixar has always had a filmic style that emphasized realism through its use of live-action cinematographic techniques and realistic, non-cartoony character designs (Clarke, qtd. in Meinel 10). While this style is distanced from

Disney's style in its lack of cartoony features (Meinel 10) and Pixar's narrative focus on "adultlike problems" (Price, qtd. in Meinel 10), it is nonetheless reminiscent of the 'animated realism' and its associated trait of idealizing reality that Disney pioneered (Palmer 58-59). Thus, even without the social pressure to provide a respectful portrayal, Pixar already had a design philosophy that would move the filmmakers to favor faithfulness and romanticization in their representation.

Another thing that the American Pixar could not afford to do with their representation was deliver criticisms toward their Mexican cultural subject, as the real-life power inequality between the US and Mexico would render such a message insensitive at best. Therefore, such criticisms are clandestinely delivered through two antagonistic characters, with their flaws being heavily contextualized as their individual traits while also serving as covert critiques of certain aspects of Mexican culture. Firstly, Imelda is initially presented as the main villain: she tries to halt main character Miguel's progress, being described in the art book as the film's "emotional antagonist" and, tellingly, a "traditionalist" who is "stuck in the past" (Lasseter et al. 181). Thus, her character serves to critique the stifling traditions of Mexican family heads, given that she has to learn not to impose her ideals onto her progeny, as shown by the fact that she initially tries to offer Miguel a blessing on the condition that he stop playing music before switching to a blessing without conditions (30:48; 1:28:02). This message is further emphasized in one confrontation between her and Miguel where the latter gets the last word in asking her: "Why can't you be on my side? That's what family's supposed to do, support you" (56:30). However, this cultural criticism is filtered through her highly individualized backstory, as she is given a specific reason for ousting music from her household that turns out to be based on a misunderstanding (01:06-02:53; 1:17:31). Secondly, Ernesto is eventually revealed to be the greater villain given his murder and theft, and the top-heavy, vaunting star represents the more negative aspects of Mexican machismo, mainly

aggressiveness and sexual proficiency (Nance et al. 1986). The latter is only obliquely referenced through the fact that he never questions having a great-great-grandson despite not being married, implying that he has had at least one fling with a lover that he subsequently abandoned. Furthermore, the fact that he nevertheless still shows off his supposedly illegitimate descendant to an approving crowd alludes to the Latin American concept of the *casa chica*, which refers to the house of a married man's concubine and serves as a backdrop that glorifies adultery as a display of virility and fecundity (Wertheimer 449). Although Ernesto would not have committed adultery, the acceptance of his extra-marital offspring by the crowd still touches on this cultural value, a value which has generally been unfavorably received by North American audiences (Wertheimer 450-451). In this sense, Ernesto can also be seen as a Western projection of everything that US Americans disapprove of or find threatening in Mexican men: prolific sexuality, competitive career ambition, and treachery in pursuing that ambition (Berg "Stereotyping" 288, 290, 296). And yet, he is conspicuously not made a wholly two-dimensional caricature, as the writers have him save Miguel from drowning because of "[c]ommon decency" (@leeunkrich) in order to humanize him a bit. In addition, this defamatory aspect does not extend beyond his character, as the rest of the Mexican cast react with horror to his crimes and he loses all prestige once the truth is revealed, meaning that he can also be read as a disavowal of these traits by the larger Mexican community, similar to Chakal in *The Book of Life*. This reading is supported by the fact that Ernesto's narrative foil Héctor can be seen as representing the positive side of Mexican machismo through his nurturing of Miguel and his loyalty and responsibility to his family (Nance et al. 1987). It is through this ambivalent vilification of issues that resonate with Mexican viewers that Pixar manages to give *Coco* a broad appeal, as Mexicans and conservative Americans can see its villains as cleansing and disarming Mexican culture of their associated flaws, respectively.

One subtextual aspect of the film that seemingly shows a more conservative bias is its treatment of the central theme of family versus personal ambition. While *Coco* takes a middle-ground approach to this conflict in giving both sides a representative antagonist and granting its lead a climax where he can “[have] it both ways” (Cook par. 29), it still gives several hints that it favors the side of family, just as most earlier Pixar films did. For one, while Imelda and Ernesto represent the sides of family and ambition, respectively, only the former is given a chance to learn her lesson and redeem herself, whereas the latter is written as an irredeemable murderer who must be defeated. Indeed, all of Ernesto’s most heinous acts are framed around his ambition: he murders Héctor to steal his songs and start his career, and he attempts to either imprison or murder Miguel on two occasions to safeguard his reputation. Significantly, in both of the latter two acts he invokes his catchphrase to “seize [his] moment,” a phrase which succinctly shows the ambition for which he stands that is thus directly associated with his reprehensible behavior (1:08:44; 1:25:13). Furthering this thematic bias is the fact that his foil Héctor is by contrast more in favor of family, given that he relented from his dream to return home, unlike Ernesto. Héctor also makes it clear that he prioritizes reuniting with his family over reclaiming credit and fame for his stolen songs, and despite revealing the truth about his death he remains apologetic for abandoning his family in the first place (1:13:52; 1:18:18). Finally, Miguel himself also learns a moral about appreciating his family more and even becomes willing to give up his own dream to save his ancestor Héctor because he learns that “[n]othing is more important than family” (1:17:15). In short, *Coco*, Pixar’s first Mexican story, is where the lead learns to prioritize his family over his personal dreams and where the only enterprising main character is the villain. In general, these plot elements lead me to read the film as conveying a covertly conservative message in the context of the contemporary relation between the US and Mexico: by appealing to

Mexicans' traditional family values, the film encourages them to stay on their side of the border and not pursue over-ambitious careers in the 'land of opportunity'.

However, there are two elements in the film that complicate this reading and that have almost certainly prevented the film from receiving a massive backlash for such a regressive moral. One such element is the fact that Miguel's own dream is never actually explicitly stated, distancing him from the career drive that makes Ernesto threatening to US Americans. While it is implied that Miguel wants to pursue a similar career as his idol given their shared hobbies, the strongest implication is when he recounts Ernesto's career and the adoration and fame he received before concluding that he "[wants] to be just like him" (06:20). Besides that, the only other hint is near the beginning when a *mariachi* advises Miguel to show his musical skill in a talent show to gain acclaim like his idol, and Miguel does not correct him on this advice (07:00-07:24). Thus, it cannot conclusively be stated that Miguel learns to give up his ambition to tour and make a career with his skill because his aspiration is never specified as such. The other element contradicting the conservative agenda reading is the fact that Héctor's attempt to bypass customs in the Land of the Dead strongly evokes a Mexican immigrant trying to illegally cross the border to America, despite its fantastical trappings. Given the fact that much of the plot of the third act involves assisting Héctor to cross this border, the film appears to support the admittance of such Mexican immigrants in real life, which would be more aligned with a progressive viewpoint and muddles the political inflection of the film as a whole. Therefore, the film displays a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the theming of family and ambition, as well as the implicit politics of its cultural subject in relation to Pixar's home country, which reflects both a reluctance to supply a conclusive answer to a contentious issue (Nakhnikian par. 23) and a wish to broaden appeal.

Still, one more argument in favor of the film's conservative bias can be found in Pixar's oeuvre of previous animation films that have dealt with the subject of family values in

conflict with individualistic norms. As previously mentioned, Pixar has consistently exalted traditional family values over the desires of the individual (Salyer 245), so that *Coco*'s conservative conclusion adheres to the studio's pre-established worldview. However, Pixar has also encouraged "individual freedom through the flourishing of community" (Salyer 244), and their previous films have reflected this by allowing their protagonists to achieve their dreams while maintaining good relations with their family. For instance, *Ratatouille* also portrayed the lead's family as an oppressive presence that held him back (Meinel 101) and concludes with that family learning their lesson to support him so that he can become a chef. Similarly, when the protagonist of *The Incredibles* yearns for his former vigilante career to the point where he neglects his family (Meinel 169-170), the film resolves his conflict by having the family take up vigilantism alongside him. By contrast, *Coco* does not contain such a clear-cut resolution in favor of the lead's ambitions: the family eventually allows Miguel the freedom to indulge his talent while he himself conveniently goes through an arc where he discards the desire to do anything with that talent, if he ever had such a desire in the first place. Furthering the ambiguity of the film's thematic resolution is the fact that Miguel wears a *mariachi* outfit at the end (1:35:41) – which is associated in the film's context with both the *mariachi* at the beginning and Ernesto, both people who spurred on Miguel's ambition – while only playing music to his family at his home, so that he ends the story in the same location where he started as if to represent his decision to settle there. This contrasts with the climaxes of *Ratatouille*, where the lead's family migrate from a bar to a kitchen to represent them shedding their inflexible ideology (Meinel 106-107), and *The Incredibles*, where the family's suburban house is destroyed as a symbol of the stifling community they have escaped (Meinel 176). Thus, while the ennoblement of family does align with Mexican cultural values (Nance et al. 1987) as well as Pixar's (Salyer 242), they still conspicuously deviate from their own pattern by having *Coco*'s hero remain in the same domestic space

without explicitly pursuing his dream further. Given that this hero is also Pixar's first Mexican protagonist, this change therefore bears implications that Pixar deliberately downplayed this trope so as to not upset its more conservative US viewers, who might feel intimidated at seeing ambition encouraged in Mexicans.

There is one other element of *Coco*'s cultural representation that is ambivalent in its design and appears to appeal to both sides of the culture wars: its portrayal of gender in the context of the conflicts portrayed in the film. Specifically, the film adds a gendered dimension to its thematic divide between family and career by having all female Riveras represent the side of family while the male characters engage with the side of ambition. This contrast is first set up in the prologue and backstory where Imelda and Héctor split up after conceiving their daughter, as the former explains: "I wanted to put down roots. He wanted to play for the world" (56:13). Miguel's *abuelita* Elena then follows in Imelda's footsteps in life, ensuring that the ban on music is upheld so that the family sticks together. However, her militant prohibition only serves to drive Miguel away from his family, so that he repeats Héctor's mistake and has to learn the same moral to appreciate his family more. Meanwhile, the macho Ernesto represents the side of ambition and pursues it to a psychotic degree with an utter disdain for family, sacrificing Miguel for his reputation at a point when he thinks they are related (1:08:41). On one hand, this dichotomy plays into a traditional separation of male and female spheres, where masculinity is associated with activity and mobility while femininity connotes immobility and passivity in the domestic space (Meinel 150). Notably, Pixar used this gender model before in *Up*, but that film focuses on white American subjects who are allowed to maintain their world-trotting mobility in the form of a zeppelin, thus corroborating the reading of this film as a screed for American imperialism and expansionism (Meinel 151). In this context, the reverse treatment of this model in *Coco* supports my reading that the film carries a subtext of encouraging immobility in its Mexican subject through its appraisal of the

domestic sphere and family unit. On the other hand, the depiction of a Mexican family as a matriarchal community subverts the stereotype that Mexican men dominate their families (Cromwell and Ruiz 357), and serves to empower its female characters through this subversion. This interpretation is supported by the inclusion of the strong-willed Frida Kahlo, who is included to represent “the deep matriarchal female presence and strength that exists in Mexican culture” (Lasseter et al. 240). Besides appealing to the political Left who would support such positive representation of racial minorities, this portrayal could also serve to further disarm the Mexican subjects for the conservative Right audience members by appealing to the traditional family values that they share with the average Mexican (Lyons 12).

Besides this inverted stereotype, there are little to no other Mexican stereotypes that the film directly engages with, so as to not offend either Mexicans or the political Left. For one, there are mostly no female Hispanic stereotypes in the film because of the fact that such types tend to be based around sexuality, especially as perceived through the male lead’s gaze; Miguel as a prepubescent boy lacks such a perspective and mostly interacts with female family members, rendering them immune to such othering lenses. In addition, these female characters are empowered in their matriarchal role within the family, so that they are emphasized as an authoritative presence rather than objectified as side characters. The only exception to this is Frida Kahlo, who is mostly presented as comic relief through her extravagant art projects and eccentric behavior. Combined with her colorful dress and the sexually inflected, yonic imagery of her art display, this presentation marks her as a *Female Clown*, a stereotype who is meant to disarm the female Hispanic Other of the “overt sexual threat” she poses to the white audience (Berg, “Stereotyping” 295). However, the insulting nature of the character is mitigated by the fact that she is also shown to be an integral artist and helpful to the heroes, as well as the fact that her characterization does align with the real



Frida Kahlo to a certain degree. As for male stereotypes, these are also generally circumvented, though more through subversion than outright avoidance as with the female stereotypes. For example, Héctor initially appears as an example of the *Male Buffoon* with his jocular attitude and cartoonish movements (Berg, "Stereotyping" 295), but he is subsequently given a more dramatic, three-dimensional characterization so that he is no longer derided as a mere joke. While he is portrayed as an outsider the same way Mexicans are portrayed as outside the norm in a general sense (Berg, "Latino Images" 22), Héctor is only shown as outside the Mexican norm so that it does not come across as othering Mexicans as a group. Also, his status as an exile from the mainstream is treated sympathetically and eventually subverted at the end of the film when he is allowed to cross the border, which carries a progressive subtext about allowing Mexicans in real life to migrate across the border to the US. Moreover, Ernesto is initially presented as a kind of *Latin Lover* whose larger-than-life charisma and sensuality is venerated (Berg, "Stereotyping" 296), only to be revealed as a reprehensible murderer who is unanimously rejected once the truth comes to light. Furthermore, while he is shown as utterly evil and unscrupulous, the fact that he is adored by the masses due to his ruse and maintains a charming well-kempt façade stops him from falling into the *Bandido* stereotype as well. However, as my analysis has shown, the fact that he does not agree with any one Hispanic stereotype does not make the character exempt from problematic interpretations. In other words, *Coco* manages to avoid backlash by mostly eschewing Mexican stereotypes altogether, relying instead on well-rounded characterizations and context for the characters' flaws that keep them from feeling like defamatory generalizations.

## Conclusion

*Coco* has received overwhelming praise, staggering box office returns, and the most prestigious accolade for an animated film in the form of an Oscar, as well as a notably positive reception in Mexico itself. This reception can be attributed to the great degree of care that Pixar has put into portraying its cultural subject as faithfully and respectfully as possible. This approach was in turn motivated by the strong doubts that audiences initially had whether Pixar could manage such a respectful portrayal, given the history of both American cinema's treatment of Mexico and Pixar's perceived background as an American imperialist propaganda machine, as well as the volatile state of US-Mexican relations during the film's development. While viewer's expectations were considerably soured by the trademark controversy in 2013, this was a singular incident that only motivated the filmmakers to show their cultural sensitivity even more. However, in the interest of maximizing profit, Pixar also implemented certain elements into the film's subtext that could be interpreted to appeal to more conservative American sensibilities rather than the Mexican and progressive demographic for whom the film was supposedly made. They managed this broad appeal and a lack of backlash by making such elements just vague enough that people on either side of the culture wars could see it as what they wanted to see, so that nobody got offended. However, this cautious approach to the representation did lead some critics to comment on the relative unoriginality of the film's writing compared to previous Pixar products. And yet, since the American Pixar was not burdened by the expectation to be original as much as the pressure to be respectful, the film nonetheless received a positive reception for managing the latter, and complaints about its lacklustre writing were reduced to a minor niggle.

## Conclusion

In her analysis of the first three Disney animation films that sought to provide a respectful portrayal of a racial and cultural Other, Palmer concluded that the studio's progressive push is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the fact that Disney is such a dominant American company meant they could engage with multiculturalism on their own terms, setting their own boundaries for discussion of this debate through their films (Palmer 298). Also, the reading of racial subjects in animation continues to be fraught with ambiguity given the medium's reliance on "shorthand typifications and recognizable tropes of social differentiation" when representing people, which have historically been used to uphold racist ideologies (Palmer 300). On the other hand, Disney's initiative in showing an unprecedented level of cultural sensitivity for the time did have an effect on the industry in general, as other studios followed their example in consulting cultural experts for the relevant works and considering the sensitivities of racial and cultural minorities in producing content (Palmer 302-303). Nevertheless, Palmer urges that continued vigilance on the part of media watch organizations is necessary to ensure the enforcement of proper representation of minorities in mainstream media (307-308).

In the context of animation films, the evolution of this scrutiny can be seen in the development of *Coco*, as the pressure to be respectful to its Mexican subject was such that the filmmakers had to display hyper-awareness of all the cultural nuances in the film and its production to allay people's suspicions. Indeed, since Palmer's study the social pressure for proper representation in animation has increased to the point where this concern largely dominates the film's production, influencing the content of its story as well as imposing limitations. Instead of adapting a pre-existing tale that happens to take place in a particular foreign country, Pixar conceived *Coco* as an original story that was built around the Mexican

national holiday of *Día de Muertos*, so that it could not have been set anywhere else. The studio's eagerness to display its cultural awareness is also reflected in the fact that the filmmakers made several research trips to Mexico and screened the film for their cultural consultants, breaking from the studio's usual isolationist norms.

And yet, despite the film's overwhelming critical and financial success, it is still not entirely exempt from some of the problems of American animation where the representation of non-American cultures and characters is concerned. For one, the very need to be respectful given their position is also seen as a limitation to the product, as many have commented on the relative predictability of *Coco*'s plot compared with other Pixar films. Furthermore, a close analysis of its story and characters reveals more conservative leanings hidden under the film's seemingly progressive veneer, showing that such a mainstream film is first and foremost a commercial product meant to have as wide an appeal as possible. Exacerbating this sense of detachment from the crew is the fact that director Unkrich posted a tweet of solidarity for Mexico from the US in response to an earthquake in Central Mexico in 2017, given that the enclosed artwork erroneously left the coat of arms out of the Mexican flag, making it look like the Italian flag (@leeunkrich). Misrepresenting the flag of the country the crew supposedly celebrated is astoundingly tone-deaf, and it shows that their cultural awareness is ultimately a mere formality that ceases outside of the marketing.

Contrariwise, *The Book of Life* displays a consistent engagement with its cultural subject, on account of its director being Mexican and expressing his love for his country. By virtue of his nationality, his film is imbued with cultural authenticity and it can afford to be more playful in its representation, as well as be more critical of some of the culture's aspects, such as their penchant for bullfighting and stifling machismo. However, this authenticity also worked against it, as most Western audiences expected such a Mexican product to be wholly original due to their subconscious exoticizing of the foreign film Auteur and the ethnocentric

assumption that the tropes familiar to them are what define 'normal'. Additionally, the fact that the film could afford to espouse a more explicit political stance still meant that it would alienate a number of viewers. Nevertheless, the film was so successful that many jumped to its defence when suspicions arose that *Coco* might have plagiarized it, a level of support that was made possible by American companies like Disney paving the way for acceptable multiculturalism in animation. Perhaps if this trend of increasing media vigilance continues in animation, future productions might incorporate the creative input of cultural insiders more, as they suffer from none of the restrictions put upon American creators who need to show respect in their portrayals.

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