¿Dónde están? Latin American Representation in Theatre for Young Audiences

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¿DÓNDE ESTÁN? LATIN AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

by

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B.A University of Central Florida, 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2022
ABSTRACT

¿Dónde están los Latinos? As a Latina theatre practitioner born and raised in Venezuela now studying Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) in the United States, I perceive a generalization and oversimplification of Latin American culture or culturally specific pieces across available TYA dramatic literature and other forms of children’s entertainment, with Mexican culture as a monolith for all Hispanics and Latin Americans. My thesis asks: What tropes exist within the representation of Latin American cultures? What might those tropes offer about authentic representation, and opportunities for broadened representation, within the field of TYA? My research pulls from two formative experiences in my development as a TYA practitioner: serving as a co-playwright and the director of the new musical Sombra del Sol, and the release and success of Disney’s animated film Encanto. I couple my analysis of these new works with the investigation of twenty plays within the United States’ TYA canon by Hispanic authors such as Karen Zacarías, José Cruz González, José Casas, as well as non-Hispanic playwrights including Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, Lisa Loomer, and Gabriel Jason Dean. By examining these works, I identify five tropes present in media about/for Latin Americans: Location Tropes, Celebrations, Ethereality, Spontaneous Bilingualism, and Character Tropes. These trope help to articulate the need for richer cultural specificity and diversity of content in Latino/a TYA literature, while guiding my self-reflection as an artist and audience member in response to Sombra del Sol and Encanto.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A thesis is a journey. For any journey, there are some things to keep in mind. As we explore this study on Latin American culture I would like to acknowledge that I am just one person. With my work on this thesis, I do not pretend to be the end all be all. I am one Latina with a particular perspective on theatre for youth in the United States. My ideas and opinions might concur with some, but they also differ from other Latinos in the United States, Latin America, and beyond. I do not speak for all Latinos in the field or elsewhere, I am just voicing my observations.

Several people accompanied and guided me in this journey. Without them, I would not be the writer, educator, and human I am today and for that I am immensely grateful. A mis padres, Bernardo y Julia y a mi familia por siempre apoyar mis sueños de teatro y por dejarme ser la artista designada de la familia. I am grateful to Cecilia, Minerva, and Tommy. My first soundboard, brainstormers, editors, and supporters of dreams and (slightly silly) ideas. To my committee members and Stacie Perez who have been my longtime supporters and role models. I would not be the scholar, artist, educator, and person I am today if it were not for all of them. I admire each of you. To my friends who were so patient with me when I said “I can’t, I have to thesis.”

To the cast, crew, and production team of Sombra del Sol for reminding me that “Unidos somos más.” Last but definitively not least, to my brilliant classmates and cohort from UCF. From our “honorary TYAs” like Daniela Monzón Villegas and Lesly Nunez, and to the 2022 cohort of TYAs—Morgan Cobb, Joni Newman, Samantha Reser, Nathan Tanner Stout, and Sage Tokach. I have learned so much from each of you and you were definitively the highlight of this journey.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Hay tres cosas que deben saber sobre mi al leer este documento: nací y crecí en Venezuela, siempre me ha gustado Disney, y mi amor y sueños de teatro me llevaron fuera de mi país natal. When I was a child in Venezuela, there were a couple places where young people could see theatre. However, opportunities for young people to participate were scarce. The concept of a school drama club did not exist, local theatres did not have youth productions, and only so many children could be cast in youth roles in professional productions. While I loved being an audience member from a young age, what I really wanted was to be on stage, wear costumes, and sing songs. My opportunities to perform were mostly limited to live nativities and annual Christmas pageants.

I found an outlet for this desire to perform through Walt Disney films. I loved the studio’s animated musical films as well as live-action ones. I memorized and made my own choreography and dragged my cousins and childhood friends into several movie reenactments I directed in my living room. It was not until I was sixteen years old that a local theatre group, Grupo Bagazos, began offering performance workshops and other drama workshops for adults. While I loved being the youngest member of the theatre group, I realized early on that if I wanted to major in theatre I had to leave Venezuela since my options to pursue theatre in higher education were also limited. I moved to the United States to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Studies at the University of Central Florida (UCF). I grew up with limited availability of theatrical opportunities, so I decided to use my education to create access and opportunities for others. I was not very clear on how, but I was eager to find a way.

Once I started my undergraduate program, I found a community of peers who were as passionate about theatre as I was. While I found so much joy in this community of “theatre kids,”
I also felt excluded. It was not until I began taking acting and theatre in the United States classes that I realized others, mainly my peers, saw me differently than how I saw myself. If it were not for my peers and professors, I would likely never have known I had an accent or that I “could play ethnic roles.” The topics of diversity and representation in the field as a whole were a prevalent topic of conversation among my peers and professors. The theatre department at UCF, Theatre UCF, has taken efforts to diversify its programs both at an undergraduate and graduate level, and there is a growing effort to include diverse playwrights and directors as part of their seasons. Still, in my personal experience during my undergraduate studies (which took place prior to Theatre UCF’s intensified focus on diversity and inclusion in response to the social justice uprising of 2020), I felt culturally marginalized. I saw myself or people like me a handful of times in my school’s theatre season, and I was only able to see myself and part of my history in Theatre History class for a unit or two. Although I am glad to see these efforts that happened during my undergraduate career and continue to happen today, I was left craving more. I graduated longing for the feeling of belonging in my field of study I lost when I left my birth country.

I always find myself in a similar situation to the character Nina from the musical In the Heights. In the song “When You’re Home,” Nina wonders, “When I was younger, I’d imagine what would happen if my parents had stayed in Puerto Rico. Who would I be if I had never seen Manhattan? If I lived in Puerto Rico with my people?” (Miranda et al.). What would have happened if my parents and grandparents stayed in Spain and never immigrated to Venezuela? Who would I be if I never left Venezuela? In a perfect situation, without the complexities of the economic, social, and political crises in Venezuela—the country that my parents and grandparents went to in search for a better life—what kind of theatre practitioner would I be?
My journey as a Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) student and practitioner is intrinsically tied to me leaving my home country. I would not have been able to study Theatre for Young Audiences if I had not moved to the United States. More specifically, I do not think I would be studying TYA if I had not chosen UCF for my undergraduate career, which has one of the six graduate programs in TYA in the country. During my sophomore year, I was able to interact with professors and graduate students from UCF’s Theatre for Young Audiences program. These interactions clarified my initial goal of creating theatre opportunities for others. Pursuing this interest led me to work in a variety of programs with the Orlando Repertory Theatre (Orlando REP) upon completing my Bachelor’s degree. A highlight of my work at the Orlando REP was the program EYEPlay, a professional development program for dual-language pre-kindergarten teachers. The program focused on integrating drama into the dual-language classroom for language development. Through this process as a teaching artist in a variety of schools in the Greater Orlando area, I taught several creative drama lessons in English and in Spanish, and I served students and teachers of a multitude of economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. This experience was career-defining and cemented my goals of educating young people through drama. It also connected my passion for theatre with my native language, and made me realize that there might be a connection between TYA and my identity as a Latina woman. Eager to learn more about this connection, I applied and got accepted to UCF’s TYA Master’s program.

While working in TYA, especially in dual-language programming, gave clarity to my goals as an artist, I found the same limitations of cultural representation within the texts I studied in my graduate program. Independently, I began reading more TYA plays about Latin American

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1 When I use the term Latin American I am referring to people that are from or descend from Latin America regardless of where they live.
and Hispanic characters. Some of them were recommended by my professors and peers, others I found online or in anthologies. I noticed that several of these plays, regardless of the age of their intended audiences, focused on characters from México and an overwhelming number of them feature immigration, particularly illegal immigration, as a central or essential conflict. While I love these plays and I believe the issue of immigration should be discussed and explored in theatre regardless of its intended audience, I craved more. Being a foreign person is an essential part of me. I am proud of my journey, and I am proud of coming from a family of immigrants. Nevertheless, immigration is just a facet of my life. It is part of my story, but it is not my whole story. I wanted to see more plays that celebrate joy, other countries, and I wanted to see myself in my own field of study.

My graduate program provided me with a variety of opportunities. One of which was my involvement with a new work for young audiences titled, *Sombra del Sol*. My experience with this production is one of the catalysts of this thesis.

*Sombra del Sol*

In 2018, actor, playwright, and composer Ralph Gregory Krumins, who was at the time an MFA candidate of TYA at UCF, was commissioned to write a musical for a community theatre that struggled to find a play to accommodate a large group of middle school-aged students who were Mexican-American. He confessed that as a white, non-Hispanic, and non-Spanish speaking man, he felt inadequate to write a piece but reluctantly accepted the offer upon insistence from the playhouse’s part and the reassurance that Spanish-speakers from the playhouse would be willing to make edits, if necessary. With the help of online tools like Google Translate and a title in mind (*Sombra del Sol*, meaning “Shadow of the Sun”), he wrote a script and composed six original songs. Krumins recognized the potential of the story and songs, but
believed that the play needed rewrites and lacked cultural authenticity. The opportunity presented itself through Theatre UCF’s Pegasus PlayLab—an annual new-play festival that allows playwrights to submit their unpublished plays for the opportunity to be selected for a staged reading or performance. *Sombra del Sol* was selected as a full production for the 2020 festival. Krumins collaborated with his MFA TYA classmate, Bianca Alamo, a theatre practitioner and artist of Puerto Rican origin, to brainstorm ways to make the script feel more authentically Latin American. Alamo felt confident in her contributions to the story, characters, and cultural references; however, she was hesitant about her Spanish language skills. Krumins approached me about the possibility of collaborating on the project with the hope I could help with the Spanish component and contribute to the cultural authenticity of the play. This resulting draft of the play, although not perfect, was positively received by audiences and highlighted the complexities of collaboration and cultural authenticity.

During the process, I grappled with the decision of setting *Sombra* in an intentionally vague setting, which will be further explored in this thesis. This decision made sense and served us as playwrights, but it made me wonder about what happens to cultural authenticity when there is a lack of cultural specificity. Can TYA plays have both? I found potential in the Disney animated film, *Encanto*.

*Encanto*

The Walt Disney Company dominates family entertainment; therefore, Disney serves as a trend-setter and model to TYA. I watched *Encanto* on the opening weekend of Thanksgiving 2021. I walked out thinking that this movie encapsulates everything I have been craving to see in plays—a story that features a diverse cast of characters, bilingualism, and representation of a country not often depicted in media. Other films and television shows by Disney and other
companies have created films and other media that represent Latinos\(^2\), but *Encanto* felt different to me. However, this was the first time that a company like Disney felt close to home. *Encanto* is set in Colombia, which is located west of Venezuela. Although these countries have many differences, their geographical proximity and the immigration rates between both countries have created some cultural similarities. I was able to relate and recognized several elements present in the movie. I was amazed at the amount of research and cultural consulting that was evident in the backgrounds, clothing, architecture, food, even down to gestures and expressions I have only seen people do in Latin America. I never thought I would ever see an arepa—the national dish of Venezuela and Colombia—on the big screen, much less in a Disney movie. The music featured musical genres and stylings I have only heard back home. I felt seen and celebrated. To me, *Encanto* feels authentic, honest, and joyful, and its beauty comes from its specificity.

Seeing *Encanto* and its level of specificity made me think about *Sombra del Sol*. I wondered what *Sombra del Sol* would look like if it was as culturally specific as *Encanto*, and how to make culturally-specific plays for children. I am curious about how the film’s success will impact the field of TYA going forward.

**Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences**

Much of my academic career focused on the study of representation of Hispanic and Latin people within theater and media for young people, yet I did not know what to call this research interest. Through the process of this thesis, I became familiar with the term Latina/o/x Theatre for Young Audiences (LTYA), LTYA “[plays] authentically center around the lives and experiences of Latinx youth” (Esquivel). The first time I read of it was in the anthology *Palabras*

\(^2\) By using the terms Latina or Latino, I do not mean to exclude those who are gender non-conforming. Instead, I am referring to Latino as the gender neutral Spanish term.
del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences by José Casas and Christina Marín. It is a first of its kind collection of twelve plays and essays. It even serves as a landmark in the History of TYA Timeline in the National Endowment for the Arts’ report, Envisioning the Future of Theatre for Young Audiences (Shmidt Chapman, et al. 25). Palabras del Cielo is a quintessential text in the field of LTYA. Learning about the existence of this term clarified my focus and gave me the sense of belonging in my field of study. It is exciting to contribute to this relatively new field of study with this thesis.

My background as an international student encountering theatre in the U.S, my involvement in Sombra del Sol, watching Encanto for the first time, and coming across the term LTYA were driving forces in my thesis research. My thesis asks: What tropes exist within the representation of Latin American cultures? What might those tropes offer about authentic representation, and opportunities for broadened representation, within the field of TYA?

Methodology

To answer some of the questions stated in this chapter, I will analyze twenty plays written by nineteen playwrights. Twelve of the plays come from the Palabras del Cielo anthology and the remaining eight I selected by gathering titles from my professors and colleagues in the field. I will read, cross-analyze, and categorize the plays thematically in terms of five identified tropes: Location, Celebrations, Ethereality, Spontaneous Bilingualism, and Character. Plays will be analyzed by the use of these tropes. Finally, I organize and present this information with a series of tables and graphs to help to articulate the need for richer cultural specificity and diversity of content in Latino/a TYA literature, while guiding my self-reflection as an artist and audience member in response to Sombra del Sol and Encanto.
As I read plays, I also cataloged them according to Playwright Information: Where the playwright is from and whether or not they are of Hispanic or Latin origin. I hope that this quantitative approach to the United States’ TYA canon will be a call to action for more plays that represent the diversity of the nations of Latin America and other Spanish-speaking countries.
CHAPTER TWO: THE JOURNEYS TO SOMBRA DEL SOL AND ENCANTO

The relationship between the Walt Disney Company and theatre for youth and families is a long-standing one. Disney and TYA are both known for adaptations of classic fairytales and musicals that entertain the whole family. It is a symbiotic relationship. Several films follow structures established by musical theatre, plays adapted from films bring families to Broadway performances, and junior versions of these plays are performed by young people in schools and youth theatres. Disney’s impact on TYA cannot be denied. As previously stated, my work in Sombra del Sol and the release and success of the film Encanto were pivotal moments in my development as a TYA practitioner. Both are bilingual musicals that feature young protagonists, but the processes that lead to the resulting products were very different. Sombra is a musical written for the stage by three graduate student playwrights, while Encanto is an animated musical with the resources of the biggest corporation that specializes in family entertainment. Despite these differences, both musicals succeeded in the representation Latin American cultures through multidimensional Latin American characters and regionally-specific musical genres. Although successful in some aspects, they are not free of flaws. The following chapter focuses of the processes that lead to the creation of both Sombra del Sol and Encanto.

Sombra del Sol- An Exploration on Collaboration and Cultural Specificity

As mentioned in Chapter One, Sombra del Sol began with a commission from a community theatre, Playhouse Merced, located in Merced, California. When the playhouse found themselves with a large group of Mexican-American students, it proved difficult to find a play that celebrated the students’ heritage, their native Spanish language, and that accommodated the size of the cast. Ralph Gregory Krumins was asked to write a show following these
specifications. Although not fully satisfied with the play, Krumins was excited about the prospect of a musical for children featuring and celebrating Latin American culture and traditions. From early on, he recognized both the potential of the musical and the notion that it needed rewrites and collaboration with Spanish-speaking and Latin American artists.

During his MFA studies at UCF, Krumins submitted the play to the theatre department’s new play festival— Pegasus PlayLab. The festival takes place during the summer semester and typically consists of a selection of three or four new plays to be presented as staged readings and one fully-staged production. Sombra del Sol was selected out of hundreds of submissions that came from playwrights all over the U.S. He asked Alamo to collaborate in the rewrite process. I also was asked to collaborate in hope that I could help with the Spanish component of the play and to enhance the play’s cultural authenticity. At the time, I had just started my first semester of graduate school at my alma mater. I was eager to make connections and felt pressure to use my privilege as an educated Latina to provide the Latin American representation in theatre that I had been craving since I moved to the United States. I excitedly jumped at the opportunity even without knowing many details or my role in the production. All I knew was a general idea of the plot, that the play needed some rewrites to make it feel more authentically Latin American, and that the script had translation issues.

In terms of roles for the rewriting process, the three of us agreed on working together for any major story or character changes. Alamo and I joined forces in terms of cultural elements; Krumins worked on the music, lyrics, and arrangement using Alamo and myself as consultants for culture and language; and I dedicated myself to translation and localization of the dialogue and lyrics in Spanish. Although we worked on the same document of the script independently, Krumins, Alamo, and I met on a weekly basis to work on scenes and characters together.
Plot Summary

The original script written by Krumins in 2018 told the story of four children—Miguel, Valentina, Galena, and Rómulo—who live with Abuelo Gordo and Abuela Rosa, in Sombra del Sol, a fictional town in the gulf of California. The town is about to celebrate its traditional festival which commemorates the day when the town founders, with the help of animal spirit warriors of the forest, defeated the living embodiment of darkness, Sombra, and found the light within themselves, ultimately bringing the balance of light and dark upon the site that eventually became Sombra del Sol. When the children are bored and unenthusiastic about the idea of celebrating the festival, the grandparents send them on a journey back in time during which they take the place of the town founders and live the history of their hometown.

The children are first transported to La Gula, the founders’ hometown, ridden with corruption and bandidos. When Rómulo is separated from the group by the mysterious Petalano to fulfill his destiny, the children go on their separate ways to find their friend. In their search for Rómulo, Miguel encounters three armadillos, Valentina comes across three toucans, and Galena meets three monkeys. Each animal trio serves as a mirror to their respective child counterparts. The armadillos are tough and out of tune with their emotions like Miguel, the toucans are confident, yet self-centered like Valentina, and the monkeys use humor to avoid serious topics and interactions much like Galena.

Rómulo is the only one out of our protagonists that seemed to be more interested in the traditions of Sombra del Sol, and the only one that listened to Abuela and Abuelo’s stories. Petalano guided Ramón to the Sol Temple to protect them from the attacks of Sombra. The children all reunite in the temple and bring along the spirit animal guardians. Miguel refuses to wait within the temple for Sombra’s attacks to die down and leaves in an attempt to return to his
present time. He ends up having a close encounter with Sombra, leaving him pessimistic and unwilling to fight back. The other children and the animals encourage him to join them in the war of the shadows, to find the balance in between light and dark much like the stories Abuela and Abuelo have told them. The children and the animals join forces and attack Sombra. When all seems lost and Miguel appears to have fully succumbed to Sombra’s forces, Miguel attacks Sombra, restoring the balance and returning to their present time—just in time to celebrate the festival and for the finale.

**Script Revisions**

For the collaborative version between Krumins, Alamo, and myself the main story and plot remained the same. Only minor changes were added to refine the characters and clarify plot points and character relationships. The characters of Miguel, Rómulo, and Galena were established more clearly as siblings, while Valentina is their oldest cousin, whereas in the early version it was unclear who was related to whom or if they were family or friends. This was a decision that Alamo and I advocated for because of the cultural perspective on family relationships in Latin American communities, where “family first” ideology is more prevalent. The growth of the characters is more evident in this version—Miguel goes from a bully to a warrior, Valentina begins as a dictator that later learns how to truly be a leader, Galena goes from a prankster to a creative problem solver, and Rómulo shifts from a pleaser to a peacemaker. The animal characters retained their purpose of mirroring the children’s traits, however they became more specific. The armadillos in the original version were inspired by *luchadores*³, but there were little references to indicate this other than showcasing their brute strength by wrestling each other as they meet Miguel. In the new version, they have some specific references

³ Mexican Wrestlers
to famous luchadores such as the catchphrase “Zero miedo,” popularized by the Mexican luchador Pentágón Jr. Another example of some cultural edits made to the show include the portrayal of the monkeys. The monkeys were originally modeled after The Three Stooges, in the new adaptation, they were changed to resemble the characters, comedic styles, and gags inspired by the popular Mexican TV show, El Chavo del Ocho. Dante was then renamed Kiko, as a nod to one of the series’ popular characters.

While I advocated for setting the play in a specific Latin American country, the creative team ultimately decided to incorporate and celebrate as many Latin American countries as possible. This became more evident in the music with Krumins’ new arrangements. In the original script, the language and the music lacked specificity. The songs from the three sets of animal spirits became a representation of different regions of Latin America. “When You’re a Rock,” the song of the Armadillos, is inspired by Mexican Rock and Ska. The “Toucan Song” featured Caribbean rhythms, and finally, “Live Life Like a Monkey” reminisced a sped-up bossa nova song from Brazil. In essence the Armadillo, Toucans, and Monkeys musically represented Central and North America, the Caribbean Islands, and South America, respectively. Although the music represented very broad regions, there was still some cultural overlap. One of the Toucans uses the Mexican slang fresa to describe Valentina, and the Monkeys were modeled after the characters from a popular Mexican television show, even though musically they represented South America.

As previously stated, the Spanish phrases were originally written with the help of Google Translate. Some of the phrases were grammatically incorrect or mistranslated. Others phrases,

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4 Zero Fear
5 Although fresa also means strawberry, the term is used in Mexico to describe a person as a snob.
although correctly translated, did not feel like something a Spanish speaker would say. It came across as Español Neutro, which is the Spanish accent and verbiage typically used in translations or dubs of media for Latin America, much like the transatlantic accent in English. Español Neutro delocalizes the Spanish language from the origin of the speaker in order to be more understandable and palatable to a broader audience. It is a valuable resource that definitely has its place in the media, but it becomes contradictory when a piece of media is meant to celebrate culture and language. We added slang and phrases from different countries, as well as phrases that felt applicable to several Latin American countries such as the endearing term mija/o\(^6\) with the hopes of localizing the language more and making it feel natural rather than the one heard on television.

I was brought to this project to help with both translation and authenticity. Being one of the few Latinas in the graduate program, I took this responsibility very seriously. I initiated a discussion with the team in regards to the location of the play. This discussion led to a key change in the script—a shift in the location of the fictional town, Sombra del Sol. The original location was described in the original opening number as “off the Gulf of California,” this later changed to the intentionally vague, “in the heart of the Amazon.” I advocated for cultural specificity from the very beginning of my involvement. I noticed that although the original script was set off the Gulf of California, not much in the script alluded to this location other than the Spanish phrases sprinkled throughout. The acoustic guitar and rhythm of the opening number “Sombra del Sol” felt reminiscent of the play’s location, but the remaining songs had the distinctive sound of musical theatre and not much of the rhythms and musical stylings that Latin American music is known for. The other song that felt inspired by Latin American rhythms and

\(^6\) My child. My son/daughter.
instrumentation was “Toucan”—orchestrated with steel drums and an ever-so-catchy dance break, perfect for a conga line—which transported audience members into the rhythms of the Caribbean. It is important to note that the Caribbean islands and the Gulf of California are on opposite sides of the continent. When I brought this up in one of our meetings, Krumins, Alamo, and I brainstormed different possibilities for where the script could go.

We thought of two options: we make the dialogue and music more specific to México or we change the location of the town. I have never been to México, but I always enjoyed learning about the country, its history, and its culture. I have some dear friends from México. I grew up surrounded by Mexican media, since the Latin American headquarters of television channels such as Disney Channel were located in México. Mexican novelas and the aforementioned series, El Chavo del Ocho, aired on public broadcast stations in Venezuela. I felt as though these experiences, although valuable, do not grant me the ability to write a play about Mexican culture. I felt very strongly against it since doing so felt as though I was appropriating the culture for academic validation and profit. I advocated that if Krumins, Alamo and I set the play in México, we needed to find the support of an additional person to help us research, preferably someone from México. Bringing in an additional person was feasible, but three playwrights was overwhelming at times even though we worked very well together and did an excellent job at listening and challenging each other. I wonder how different the final product would have been if we took this alternate path. After a seemingly never-ending cycle of discussing accuracy, representation, and casting, we landed on the decision of finding a new neutral location.

On the other hand, as a playwright, I found comfort in this vague location. There were no limits, and it allowed us to feature a wide variety of musical genres, references, and other concepts in the play. I suggested the Amazon because of the animals present in the story, the
diverse settings of the show, and the variety of countries that surround the rainforest and river. We changed the lyric to “in the heart of the Amazon” and never really looked back or reflected on this change as a group.

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, Pegasus PlayLab, and subsequently Sombra del Sol was postponed to 2021. With the new production timeline no longer conducive to Alamo and Krumins’ schedules, I was asked to step in as director. The new version of Sombra del Sol opened on June 10, 2021 at the School of Performing Arts Courtyard at the University of Central Florida. The cast included UCF students as well as four children from the local community to play the young protagonists.

The cast noticed and celebrated the fact that it was a fully Latin American cast, and that there was at least one Latin American person in different areas of production, design, and stage management team. This degree of representation both on- and off-stage in a production was notable for UCF, a Hispanic-serving Institution. The play opened to mainly positive audience reception. The purest example of the joy this play inspired can be seen in the cast. The cast truly bonded in this experience from the very beginning, and I believe this was a key in the success of their performance. The four young actors are, at the moment, continuing to pursue the performing arts in school and local theatres, while taking vocal lessons with Sombra del Sol’s music director. As for the UCF student actors, their group chat is still active even a year after the show closed. When two of the actors were cast in a local production, every single cast member that remained in the Orlando area attended the performance to support them. I am thrilled to see that what once was just words on a page became a memorable experience for many. I love the friendships and the professional and educational connections that blossomed from our rehearsal
process. I am grateful that I was able to contribute to a show that started with questionable beginnings in terms of its inception.

**Reflection**

Although I personally did not feel comfortable writing a play about a made-up festival in a real country that I have never visited, Latin Americans are not the only people writing Latin American stories. Ownership of stories and who gets to tell what stories are heavily discussed in different forms of media. Hazel Rochman, author and children’s literature reviewer, criticizes the idea that writers should only write stories about their own identity, going as far as comparing this idea to South Africa’s apartheid (107). TYA and LTYA also contribute to this discourse. In his essay, “Latinx Theatre for Young Audiences: Where We Are and Where We Must Go” playwright and theatre professor Ramón Esquivel argues:

All writers want the freedom to tell whichever stories thrill or scare them, and Latinx playwrights are no different. However, as a writer, I do feel the responsibility—no, I seize the opportunity—to center my stories on Latinx characters, regardless of plot or theme…There are also non-Latinx playwrights writing Latinx TYA. I am of two minds on this. On the one hand, I recognize that the field is stronger because of plays such as *Mariachi Girl* by Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, *¡Bocón!* By Lisa Loomer, and *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* by Gabriel Jason Dean… These plays succeed because the playwrights have created complex Latinx characters at the center of their stories. However, I acknowledge that white-centered theatres have historically privileged white writers when telling stories of people of color and their cultures. An artistic director might argue: ‘Any playwright should be able to write any play they want as long as it’s
good theatre.’ For too long, though, theatres have defined ‘good theatre’ as work that adheres to white American and European aesthetics.

I did not like the approach of setting the play in a neutral location, but I learned to live with it. I felt frustrated and as if I had to pick my battles if we wanted this production to happen. For a long time, I have felt conflicted in terms of stories set in vague/neutral locations. I think the idea of “a land far, far away” has its time and place. I acknowledge that the exact location a story is based in or where a certain character is from is not essential to every story. Location, however, can be tied to identity and culture. When it comes to stories about characters in the process of reconnecting with their culture, as seen in Sombra del Sol, the specificity of that location becomes part of the discourse. This is when I feel cultural and location specificity is essential.

My involvement in Sombra del Sol taught me about collaboration and cultural authenticity. The success of this draft of this play came from three playwrights who worked together and challenged each other to create to the best of our individual abilities. Much like the chorus of the play’s opening number states, “Unidos somos más,” together we can accomplish more than individually (Alamo et al.1). Our collaboration drastically improved a play with problematic origins and gave a voice to two emerging Latina playwrights.

I was not given much of a guideline as to what this concept of cultural authenticity means or how to make a play, or any type of media for that matter, feel authentically Latin American. In my research, I learned that I was not given a guideline because there is not really one. Cultural authenticity is subjective and looks different for every individual. Rudine Sims Bishop explains that cultural authenticity in terms of textual analysis “has to do with the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people whom he or she is

7 “Together we are more”
writing, and makes readers from inside the group believe that the writer ‘knows what’s going on’” (29). She complicates this further, explaining that “[cultural authenticity] is a political issue, and touches on matters having to do with economics, cultural appropriation, ethnic pride, and the desire of ethnic/cultural groups to transmit to the young, through story, a sense of what it means to be a member of their group” (Bishop 25). In their introductory essay for their book Stories that Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children’s Literature, Dana L. Fox and Kathy G. Short make the deliberate decision of not providing a foundational definition of cultural authenticity to frame the essay collection in order to reflect its subjective nature, the complexity of this debate across different discourse and academic communities, and to empower the authors in the collection “to offer their own perspectives related to how cultural authenticity should or should not be defined” (5). I agree with Fox, Short, and Bishop when they state that cultural authenticity cannot truly be defined, but it is instead something one feels— “you know it when you see it” (4). For me, cultural authenticity is found in a play or piece of media that reflects research and respect.

**Disney Pre-Encanto**

I see this kind of cultural authenticity in Encanto as well as other newer Disney films and television series. However, Encanto is Walt Disney Animation Studios’ 60th film. It took the company several years, attempts of representation, and responses to societal shifts to get to the cultural authenticity for which the films Coco and Encanto are praised. Encanto felt like an answer to my wishes for culturally specific, joyful representation of Latina/o characters. For the purposes of this reflection on media for youth and how it impacted me, I will provide an overview of Disney’s first efforts at representing Latin American cultures in feature films, and will then focus on three landmark projects of the company: Elena of Avalor, Coco, and Encanto.
It is important to acknowledge that this is a very brief overview of the company’s history in terms of Latin American representation. In this overview, I will address only feature length films from one of the company’s many media producing studios, and I do not account for other short films, television series, and other feature length films that have Latin American supporting characters. For the analysis portion, I will focus only on the previously mentioned three landmark projects.

Disney’s representation of Latina/os in their feature length animated films began in 1943 with the film *Saludos Amigos* ("Feature Films"). The film combines animated and live-action segments to showcase different elements of a variety of South American countries including Perú, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. Two years later, *The Three Caballeros* was released as a sequel. Similar to its predecessor, the film also combined live-action and animated segments, this time set in different cities in México and Brazil. Both films are the result of visits Walt Disney and some of his animators paid to these countries. Part of the controversy associated with these films is that it presents exoticized versions of these cultures, as well as stereotypes associated with Latin Americans. The most evident is in the character of Panchito Pistoles, who is a loud, gun-toting, woman-loving, anthropomorphized, Mexican rooster. The studio did not release another feature length animated film with Latin American characters at its center until *The Emperor’s New Groove* in the year 2000. Although the film has become a cult-classic in recent years, the movie was considered a box office disappointment and has been criticized for using mostly non-Latino actors to voice Latin American characters and for the use of the trope of turning the protagonist, a Latino man, into an animal for the majority of the movie’s runtime.

In 2016, *Elena of Avalor*, a spinoff series of *Sofia the First*, was released on Disney Junior—Disney’s television network that caters to pre-school audiences. Several of my friends,
knowing that I am both Latina and a Disney fan, excitedly shared the news with me. Upon doing my research on this series and its titular character, I felt conflicted. A day before the release of *Elena of Avalor*, an article was published in D23, Disney’s official paid-membership fan club. The article lists the network’s inspiration in the creation of this series and provides a glimpse as to how the company framed *Elena* within Disney’s line up of princess-related content. The first thing the article lists is that Elena’s story is universal. It also describes and provides examples of the variety of countries and cultures that inspired the fictional kingdom of Avalor, including: México, Spain, Chile, Peru, and the Caribbean and how it manifested in the clothing, food, music, and architecture seen in the series. “Avalor even has its own detailed history, including its own Mesoamerican-influenced ancient civilization, ‘Maru’” (Deitchman). Disney framed *Elena* as “a princess for everybody to enjoy” who would expose audiences to a variety of Latin American and Hispanic cultures. It is also important to note that Disney originally did not announce her as a *Latina princess*, instead “the princess is inspired by diverse Latin cultures and folklore” (Marrero). *Elena of Avalor* received criticism from Hispanic viewers. From the time the series was announced leading to its premiere on July 22, 2016, a variety of news articles criticized the series’ lack of cultural specificity and authenticity (Marrero; Lozada-Oliva; Flores Pérez). I found myself doing the same for an essay for a humanities class I took my sophomore year of college, which I now can identify as one of the first steps in my journey as an LTYA practitioner. I described my relationship and opinions on *Elena of Avalor* as bittersweet. While I was excited about Elena, I was disappointed and angry at the decision that the first Latina princess was going to be a television spinoff series. As time progressed and multiple seasons of the series were released, *Elena* appeared in academic discourse. Dr. Juan Llamas-Rodríguez,
assistant professor at the University of Texas Dallas’ School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication, stated:

Though the decision to debut the first Latina princess on cable television rather than in movie theatres was met with derision by some, the narrative and technical affordances of the medium are instrumental in expressing the plurality of the Latinx identity. The ten-episode season allows creators to build a more diverse world for Elena to inhabit and to address its diversity. This televisual convergence also befits the younger target audience for the series, a group drawn to serialized content.

Dr. Llamas-Rodríguez continues to praise how the different cultural elements of the series are integral to Elena’s story and to represent the diversity of Latin America. On the other hand, Dr. Diana Leon-Boys argues differently. In her analysis of three key episodes of the first season, Dr. Leon-Boys described Elena as “Disney’s Specific and Ambiguous Princess.” She argues:

Through the representation of Elena in the three episodes… Disney employs diversity representational tactics to attract viewers of color (in this case Latinxs), but does so through common themes and tropes, so as to not alienate its non-Latinx viewers, thus rendering the Latinidad weightless. Disney is strategic in how it employs these markers of difference, and part of the strategy, within the storyline of the series, involves downplaying the overt Latinidad so that it remains consumable for non-Latinx audiences.

My opinion on Elena of Avalor is somewhere in the middle of these two authors. I admire the ambition of including a variety of cultures, but in my opinion, the final result feels disingenuous—it is a mish-mash of cultures, traditions, and countries, much like Sombra del Sol. I am excited about the idea that audiences are exposed to a variety of real traditions, folklore, and aesthetics from a multitude of Latin American countries. However, I question if the audience
comprehends these cultural components if these elements are presented under the context of the fantastical kingdom of Avalor. Nevertheless, the purpose of Elena of Avalor is not to teach about culture. Elena is not learning about the culture of Avalor, she is learning how to become a leader. The cultural elements of different Latin American countries serve as a backdrop for Elena’s character growth.

While I was initially willing to accept the idea of an imaginary kingdom like Avalor, I found myself disappointed with the lack of specificity. I expected a situation similar to Disney’s movie Frozen (2013) which takes place in the imaginary kingdom of Arendelle, although the kingdom is situated in Norway. Instead, the kingdom of Avalor is a combination of different Latin American countries and Spain. Nevertheless, I found myself hopeful for the series’ success. If Elena of Avalor succeeded, it meant that the Hispanic people employed in the series retained their jobs, and hopefully we would get more and more Latin content in media.

What changed my point of view on Elena of Avalor was a visit to Disney World around the time the series premiered. As I walked with my friends around Magic Kingdom park, I saw a young girl wearing Elena’s dress. I got goosebumps thinking of the impact it can have on young children, whether or not they are Hispanic or Latin American, to see a princess of color that just so happens to also speak Spanish. It did not truly hit me until I went to Princess Fairytale Hall, an attraction in the park in which park goers can meet, take pictures, and get autographs from a variety of Disney princesses. As I waited in line to meet Cinderella and Elena, there was one English-speaking family ahead of me—two adults and one young girl. As the girl approached, she said “Hola, Elena,” to which Elena enthusiastically responded, “Hola, Amiga.” I heard the mother of the child tell the cast members that she learned how to say hello in Spanish, so that she could greet Elena. I began tearing up. A young child expressed interest in a language that she did
not initially speak because of a character. At that moment, the actor playing Elena was not a bilingual young woman, to the eyes of this girl and those of other children, she was a princess. Hispanic children can see themselves as royalty and as leaders. Non-Hispanic children see a Latina character who is multidimensional, a leader, and also see, as Dr. Llamas-Rodríguez described, the plurality of her identity. *Elena of Avalor* was a successful franchise, it won several awards, and it was renewed twice for a total of three seasons. Elena was not Disney’s first Latina character, but it was an attempt to cater to the Latino/a demographic and to bring some diversity to their lineup of princesses.

A year after the premiere of *Elena*, Pixar Animation studios, a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company, released the film *Coco*. Elena’s ethnic and national ambiguity set the foundation for *Coco*’s cultural specificity. *Coco* takes place in México during Día de los Muertos. It tells the story of 12-year-old Miguel, who dreams of being a musician against his family’s will, and his journey to the Land of the Dead. The animated film was praised by audiences and critics alike, earning several awards including an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, and was a box office hit, nationally and around the world. In her critical essay, researcher Elizabeth Castro contextualizes the movie *Coco* at the time of its release:

*Coco* met audiences during a time marked by a record-breaking earthquake in Mexico City, the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and Hurricane Harvey in Texas, and decisions on programs including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Countless viewers experience Coco within the context of Mexican and Latinx experience, and their positionality at large today.
Castro quotes one of the cultural advisors Disney employed in the making of Coco, Marcela Davidson Avilés, who believes that the power of storytelling comes from “the notion that storytelling really can make a difference in terms of policy.”

I believe that an essential part of Coco’s success is its cultural specificity. Day of the Dead is not commonly celebrated in Venezuela, and I did not know much about the holiday besides some superficial details in terms of its aesthetics. I was fascinated by the movie’s music, characters, loving tributes to Mexican icons like Pedro Infante and Frida Kahlo, and the heartfelt depiction of the Day of the Dead holiday and its traditions. I went to see Coco with a group of ten people on the week of its release, and we were all moved to tears by the end of the movie. I remember coming across a particular phenomenon that happened after the release of this movie. Disney-related blogs, newspapers, and magazines published articles on Coco’s success in China. I remember feeling confused while reading these headlines. Disney had opened a new theme park in Shanghai just a year prior, so I had assumed that Disney properties would have consistently profitable receptions. While animated and live-action movies have found success in the Chinese market, animated movies from Pixar studios have not. The highest grossing Pixar film in China prior to Coco was Finding Dory with $38 million in 2016 (Cain, “‘Coco’ has Single–Handedly…”). Coco was a hit in the Chinese box office grossing $17.7 million in its opening weekend (Wei). By a month after its release, Coco grossed “$166.97 million, it single-handedly topped the aggregated grosses of all twelve of the studio’s previous China releases” (Cain, “‘Coco’ has Single–Handedly…”). Why was this movie and not any other such an unexpected success? To begin with, it was surprising that this movie passed Chinese censors since according to the censorship guidelines published in 2008 by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) media depicting the supernatural,
ghosts, or the undead should be cut or edited in order to air in China. Spirits and death is an essential part in this movie. After stealing a guitar left in an *ofrenda*\(^8\), Miguel is able to see the spirits that had entered the land of the living. He encounters the spirits of his deceased family members who guide him to the Land of the Dead, in which every citizen is a skeleton. Chinese social media sites circulated the rumor that censors “saw the animated film, [and] many of them were moved to tears by the story’s warmth and its happy ending, where the young protagonist saves the day by ensuring that his ancestors are properly remembered and honored” (Cain, “‘Coco’ Got All of its Ghosts…”). Regardless of the validity of this rumor, the film performed unexpectedly well and received positive reviews from Chinese critics (Wei). It is the relation between Chinese and Mexican values and perspectives on death and honoring ancestors that heavily influences this success. Ella Zhou, a Chinese international student, writes:

*'Coco’s* translatability for the Chinese audience largely comes from the bond it portrays in the exhibition of Mexican Día de Los Muertos culture. [...] The Chinese also have Qing Ming Festival when people visit the cemetery to sweep the graves and pray for their past family members, wishing them happiness and affluence in the afterlife. This care for family members even after their death manifests an eternal bond based on bloodlines and memories, which suggests a belief in the continuous existence of the dead in the other world.

One might think that the specificity of a movie about a holiday celebrated mainly in Central America could alienate audiences that are not from the region or celebrate the holiday. *Coco’s* cultural specificity allowed it to be relatable to audiences from different hemispheres and with unique cultures. This phenomenon made me realize that universality can be found in specificity

\(^8\) Offering
and authenticity. Vagueness and genericness is fabricated; authenticity comes from honesty and truth. *Coco* inspired me to find this level of specificity and cultural authenticity in theatre, especially in regards to plays with Latin American characters.

*Encanto, Me Encantó*

In early conversations with my thesis committee, I found myself using Disney movies and properties to describe my observations on the perspectives of Latin American characters in American media for youth. I remember mentioning that I was curious about the, as of yet, unreleased film *Encanto*. At this time, all that was known about the film was that it was Walt Disney Animation Studios’ 60th film, was set in Colombia, and had music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, a celebrated rapper and musical theatre artist of Puerto Rican descent. I was cautiously optimistic.

*Encanto* tells the story of Mirabel and her family members, who are each gifted their own magical powers, except for her. The family was blessed with a miraculous candle that granted them these unique gifts when Abuela was displaced from her hometown in her youth. As the powers and the candle begin to fade, it is up to Mirabel to save the miracle that was granted to her family.

The film was tremendously successful. It grossed $254,636,109 at the box office worldwide, had a positive reception from audiences and critics, and won several awards, most notably, the Academy Award for Best Animated Film and NAACP’s Image Award for Outstanding Animated Motion Picture. Several Disney movies in the past have won Academy Awards for Best Animated Film, but songs from these movies rarely reach the number one spot on music charts. The song “We Don’t Talk About Bruno” reached number one spot in the Billboard Hot 100 list with “34.9 million U.S. streams [...] 1.5 million radio airplay audience
impressions [...], and sold 12,300 downloads…” The only Disney song from a Disney movie to reach this spot was *Aladdin*’s “A Whole New World” in 1993. Even the popular song “Let It Go” from *Frozen* peaked at Number Five (Trust).

In an interview, Byron Howard, Jared Bush, and Charise Castro Smith—co-directors of *Encanto*—share their journey in the creation of the movie. After their success co-directing *Zootopia*, Howard and Bush wanted their next project to be a musical that explores families and its complexities. Howard stated that Lin-Manuel Miranda “had wanted for years to do a definitive Latin American Disney musical” (Hazelton). Colombian filmmaker colleagues “pointed [Howard and Bush] to Colombia as a crossroads of culture, music and tradition that blended a lot of what Latin America has to offer.” In their research, they came across the literary genre of magical realism and the works of Gabriel García Marquez, whose emblematic novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* became a source of inspiration and influence to *Encanto*. In 2018 the directors, Miranda, and filmmakers associated with the project went on a research trip to Colombia in which they met with several cultural ambassadors, experts, and locals and visited several locations. “Every single detail in the movie is based on something that we saw, or someone that we met who then helped us understand things better,” stated Bush (Hazelton).

According to Castro Smith, as the COVID-19 pandemic canceled additional research trips, “Familia, a pre-existing group of Latinx Disney Animation employees, [...] became an important resource.” The Familia group revised drafts of the script to verify if “[the] movie was true to families they knew,” and provided suggestions, details, and guidance to the entire production team.

Particularly after its release on the streaming platform Disney+ on December 24th, 2021, I noticed more and more posts on social media talking about *Encanto* and the relatability of its
characters. Several of these posts speak on the songs “Surface Pressure” as an anthem for the pressures of being an older sibling and “What Else Can I Do?” as a celebration of expressing one’s true identities. These two concepts transcend cultures and ethnic origins. Another topic of discourse regarding *Encanto* is the movie’s depiction of generational trauma. There are countless videos, blog posts, and tweets sharing interpretations, theories, analysis, and personal anecdotes relating to the family dynamics portrayed in *Encanto* and the different ways family members process and learn to live with the traumatic event seen at the beginning of the movie. *Encanto* begins when Abuela tells young Mirabel that she was displaced from her hometown when Mirabel’s mother was just a baby. Abuela shares, “We could not escape the dangers, and your Abuelo was lost” (*Encanto*). Family therapist and researcher, Sydney Conroy, writes for the *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* journal: “*Encanto* incorporates many parts of healing intergenerational trauma such as naming what happened, acknowledging the impact of the trauma-constructed patterns, and recognizing emotions that family members feel/felt.” *Encanto*’s depiction of the complex matter that is generational trauma is not exempt from criticism. Although Conroy argues, “*Encanto*’s quick repair between generations may therefore set unrealistic expectations, especially for youth who may see their families reflected [in the film],” she also praises the movie’s narrative and characters:

*Encanto* has the potential to be more than purely entertainment for families. Mental health professionals can use the film or songs in session or as homework for families outside of sessions. Play therapists can include miniatures of characters in sand tray collections to help clients communicate their experiences. For other professionals working with children, *Encanto* can serve as a tool for expanding emotional literacy, as well as creating awareness of intergenerational trauma and the concept of family scripts.
Encanto joins other Disney films such as Inside Out, Soul, and Coco in incorporating complex psychological and cultural topics in an exploratory and entertaining way (Conroy).

Theatre is more than just entertainment. It is a tool for education, a mirror that reflects society, and, as Augusto Boal states, “a rehearsal for action in real life.” Looking at the way Disney depicts Latin Americans led my career to the field TYA. Elena of Avalor, Coco, and Encanto are some of the company’s attempts to target the Hispanic market. It is important to acknowledge that these three pieces of media are from three different studios, formats, and genres even though they belong to the same parent company. Disney is a trend-setter for the field of TYA. I look forward to the impact Elena, Coco, and Encanto will have on the field of TYA and the emerging study of LTYA.
CHAPTER THREE: THE FIVE TROPES

As I worked in Sombra del Sol, I was aware of the tropes, clichés and stereotypes that are typically present in media that represents Latinas/os and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals. As a Latina, I am part of the target audience of film, television, and plays that feature Latin American characters and settings. Being a TYA practitioner, my studies inevitably led me to interact with other forms of media for youth, such as Disney films and other properties, as I explored in the previous chapter. Through my consumption as an audience member, I narrowed tropes, clichés, and stereotypes to into the five most prevalent: Location Tropes, Celebrations, Spirituality, Spontaneous Bilingualism, and Character Tropes. However, several of the tropes, clichés, and stereotypes (and more) I am about to discuss are also prevalent in different types of media and entertainment intended for adults.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will use the following definitions of tropes, clichés, and stereotypes. Tropes are literary or rhetorical mechanisms that are recurrent in storytelling. They are ideas, characters, notions, or arcs that can be seen in a variety of stories. For example: the chosen one, enemies to lovers, among others. Clichés are the overuse of particular tropes to the point that they have lost their original impact. Tropes are fluid. When it comes to representing people in media, tropes can be useful story-telling devises or harmful, depending on the way they are used. The overuse of a trope in media can become a cliché and provide a narrow perspective of characters, stories, and locations; which in turn provides a narrow perspective on real, underrepresented people, stories, cultures, and places. It is important to recognize that if a play contains one or many of these tropes, it does not mean that the play is bad nor does their absence make said plays perfect. Instead, it points to recurrent elements and themes. Tropes and
clichés are not always harmful, in contrast to stereotypes. In her book, *Latina and Latino Voices in Literature: Lives and Works*, Frances Day defines stereotypes as the following:

An oversimplified generalization of a particular group that usually carries derogatory implications. Stereotypes may be blatant or subtle [... and may] ridicule characters because of their race, gender, age, ability, appearance, size, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, or native language (xvii–xviii).

Acknowledging that stereotypes come from certain truths does not excuse their problematic nature or repercussions. Some tropes and clichés have evolved into stereotypes.

In the following section, I will define each trope, provide examples, and my personal reflection on the prevalence of each trope. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use *Encanto* and plays and media intended for young audiences as examples. These five tropes will later serve in my analysis for *Sombra del Sol* and of twenty LTYA plays.

### Location Tropes: Jungles, Vague Locations, and Borderlands

Location and identity are fundamentally inseparable. When UCF’s Global Achievement Academy assisted me to integrate into an American university from my home in Venezuela in 2014, I got the privilege to interact with international students from all over the world. One of my closest friends from Brazil expressed her frustration that the media portrayals of her country focused primarily on the Amazonian Jungle or the *favelas*—slums in or near large Brazilian cities. She found herself explaining to her American classmates that not everyone in Brazil lives in *favelas*. Another one of our friends from Colombia mentioned explaining to a classmate that she did not go to school in a canoe. There is nothing wrong with living in a *favela* or using a canoe every day; but this was a reflection of the way our countries were presented in the media.
Long Ago, Somewhere Deep in the Jungle: Jungle and Jungle-Adjacent Settings

Jungle or Jungle-adjacent locations are present in different types of media representing Latinas/os. When talking about jungle-adjacent locations, I am referring to settlements or towns within walking distance to jungles, but also forests and other environments associated as places where animals live. The association of this trope with Latin America is a long-standing one, dating back to colonization. Christopher Columbus’ writings depicted the nature he saw upon arriving to the continent of America. The narrative shifted to the struggle between nature versus civilization in the 19th and 20th century. In her article, “The Trope of Nature in Latin American Literature,” professor Becky Boling explains, “nature (conceived as boundless) is set against nation (nature conquered through domestication)” (245). Authors such as Rômulo Gallegos, Horacio Quiroga, and Jorge Rivera explore the different ways in which nature and humans interact (Boling 250).

This interaction between humans and nature permeates to modern stories. An example of this can be seen in Nickelodeon’s popular T.V show, *Dora the Explorer* and its subsequent spin-off *Go, Diego, Go!* In most episodes, audiences see young Latina/o protagonists who spend the bulk of the episode surrounded by animals in jungles, forests, and other natural environments. In *Dora the Explorer*, Dora rarely interacts with other humans outside of her family. Dora lives in a house within walking distance to the jungle, but we hardly ever see her in her house or in other non-jungle or jungle-adjacent settings. We only see her house or some other setting with other humans at the beginning or at the final destination of her journey. The majority of the episode is spent in otherwise “wild” environments interacting with anthropomorphic, bilingual, animals and the same can be said of the series’ spin-off. The previously mentioned *The Emperor’s New Groove*, inspired by Incan culture, also spends a significant amount of the movie’s run time in a
jungle. The first thing audiences see is the line “Long ago, somewhere deep in the jungle…” and Emperor Kuzco, turned into a llama, looking miserable and soaking wet in the middle of a rainforest. In Encanto, the town where the film takes place is surrounded by wilderness. Although most of the movie takes place in the town which is prosperous and developed, the characters are within walking distance from jungle-like environments. A particularly interesting example is the room of one of the youngest characters, Antonio. At the beginning of the film, Antonio received the gift of communicating with animals. The family’s magical house, Casita, gave Antonio his own room which is a luscious jungle complete with a giant tree house, waterfalls, vines, and plenty of room for his animal friends.

Upon reminiscing on the representation of different South American countries—real and imagined—in different American films for adult and young audiences, writer Dr. Manuel Betancourt goes as far to claim “everywhere south of the border (and particularly below Panama) is, in the U.S. cultural imaginary, all jungle and violence.” While it is true that several places in Latin America are rich in biodiversity and that it is also home to the Amazonian rainforest, there is more to Latin America than jungles. There are a wide variety of locations from large metropolitan cities to small towns that deserve to be seen and celebrated along with nature.

**In a Land Far, Far, Away: Vague or Generic Locations**

The idea of generic or vague locations in storytelling is typically associated with fairytales and folktales. The ubiquitous expressions of “in a faraway land…,” “in a certain country,” “in a magical kingdom…,” among others give the idea of a story being set anywhere and nowhere at the same time. In his book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim explains the use of these ever-present phrases: “Such beginnings suggest that what follows does not pertain to the here and now that we know.
This deliberate vagueness in the beginnings of fairy tales symbolizes that we are leaving the concrete world of ordinary reality” (62). Bettelheim claims that this vagueness creates distance and protects children from becoming overwhelmed with the real-life realities of the story, instead it allows the child’s fantasy and imagination to fill the gap and enjoy the story for what it is—a story. It also empowers the child to “get” whatever it is they need out of the story— be it hope, a life-lesson, entertainment, or an escape from reality (61).

An example of these vague locations can be seen in the previously mentioned *Elena of Avalor*. The series is set in Avalor, an imaginary kingdom that is based on a variety of Latin American countries and Spain and features traditions, architecture, imagery, and gastronomy of a variety of countries and presents them as “Avalorian.” In contrast, *Encanto* highlights imagery that is specific to Colombia and makes sure the audience is aware of this location. The film shows flora and fauna endemic of the country, nods to the colors of the Colombian flag, and dishes like ajiaco, pandebono, and arepas at the family’s table. In case the audience is not aware of where these symbols are from, the second song heard in the film is “Colombia, Mi Encanto” which features popular Colombian singer, Carlos Vives, belting “Colombia” in the chorus.

As I explored in my response to *Elena of Avalor*, I believe that the details of a setting or location is not always essential to a story and that these vague locations can be a useful storytelling tool. Nevertheless, “when a group has been marginalized and oppressed, the cultural functions of story can take on even greater significance because storytelling can be seen as a means to counter the effects of that marginalization and oppression on children” (Bishop 25). Furthermore, this vagueness enforces the stereotype that Latin America is a monolith instead of over thirty countries with unique, rich, and diverse cultures and identities. In his essay, Dr. Betancourt analyzes Ann Patchett’s novel *Bel Canto* and its 2018 film adaptation. *Bel Canto* is
based on the 1996 hostage crisis which took place at the Japanese Embassy in Lima, Perú. The novel and its adaptation, however, is set in a “host country” somewhere in South America. As the main characters are taken hostage and look out the window, the novel narrates:

They could have been in London or Paris or New York or Tokyo. They could have been looking at a field of blue-tipped grass or a gridlock of traffic. They couldn’t see. No defining hints of culture or local color. They could have been any place where the weather was capable of staying bad for indeterminate amounts of time (Patchett 66).

Dr. Betancourt adds that the film adaptation further “muddles rather than clarifies” the novel’s vague location with its casting and establishing shots being an amalgamation of different cultural images from different countries. “Bel Canto joins a long line of U.S. cultural objects that treat South America more as a colorful and exotic (not to mention dangerous) image of a place than a real-life location.” He compares the U.S.’ perception of Latin America to the character trope of the manic pixie dream girl—female characters typically written by men with the sole purpose to better the male protagonist’s life and needs—“a mere backdrop for foreign nationals who end up finding themselves, or love, while abroad.” When characters’ arcs revolve around grappling with their identity as part of an underrepresented community, I find that a generic location or vague character origin comes across as carelessness or an excuse from writers. It shows me a priority of “relatability” over research, dramaturgy, and character’s authenticity. When I see it in media depicting Latinos, it feels to me as if writers are simply trying to “check a box” to appeal to the Hispanic demographic without alienating majorities. From an educator’s perspective, this vagueness is not teaching about other cultures. Instead, it cherry-picks aspects from a culture and ignores their context, history, and the people that created and celebrates them.
**Borderlands: México, California, Texas, and Arizona**

Even in examples in TYA literature that do have a culturally-specific setting, many are situated on or near the U.S.-Mexico border, further perpetuating the exclusion of other Latin American and Hispanic cultures. Mexican American and Mexican stories represent the majority of LTYA canon (Esquivel). So much so that Dr. Elizabeth Schildkret coined the term Border Theatre for Young Audiences to describe plays that take place or concern the literal and metaphorical border between the US and México (4). I will use the term Borderland to describe plays that feature characters from or take place in México, Central American countries, California, Texas, or Arizona.

*Encanto* is exempt from this trope, but several Disney properties feature it, including the previously mentioned *Coco* and *The Three Caballeros*. This trope can also be seen in Disney Channel properties with characters like Miranda Sanchez (*Lizzie McGuire*), Isabel Garcia-Shapiro (*Phineas and Ferb*), Marco Diaz (*Star vs. The Forces of Evil*), and many others. This trope is not a harmful one, but it is very recurrent. I love seeing stories and characters that celebrate and feature Mexican and Chicano culture. Nevertheless, I also want to see more stories that celebrate and highlight different countries in Latin America. The prevalence of this trope paints Mexico as a monolith for all of Latin America and obscures the diversity of both Mexico and the remaining thirty-two countries of Latin America.

**Festival/Traditional Celebrations: ¡Fiesta!**

Festivities and traditional celebrations are an essential part of any culture. Therefore, it is common to see holidays and festivities portrayed in the media. Just think of the myriad of Christmas television movies produced by *Hallmark* or *Lifetime*, Halloween specials, horror and holiday movies that air on television or premiere in theatres around the time of their respective
holiday. For media representing Latinos/as, celebrations, holidays, and fiestas are a trope that borders on a cliché and even a stereotype.

I have observed that media featuring Latin Americans tend to be under the context of some sort of party, festivity, or traditional celebrations. When one hears the word fiesta several images typically come to mind: piñatas, cakes, confetti, copious amounts of food, or loud music (typically in Spanish). These images permeate in media for adult and young audiences alike.

A Quinceañera\(^9\) episode is almost expected in T.V. shows that feature young Latina characters; some examples include: “My Fair Naomi” in Elena of Avalor, “Quinces” in Netflix’s reboot of One Day at a Time, and “Welcome to the Quinceañera” in The Neighborhood. A particularly interesting example can be found in Disney Channel’s Wizards of Waverly Place. The three young protagonists Justin, Alex, and Max are half Latino/a, and the episode “Quinceañera” is one of the few that addresses the character’s culture in the series’ four seasons.

Starting in 2013, Disney released a series of Mickey Mouse new shorts, several of which are set in different countries with lines spoken in the country’s language. Out of the four of them set in Latin America or Spain, three featured some sort of party or cultural celebration. “Al Rojo Vivo”—set in Spain—features Mickey and Minnie wearing the garments associated with the festival of San Fermín; as Mickey gets chased by an angry bull, he finds himself in the middle of La Tomatina festival. “Carnaval” depicts Mickey and Minnie celebrating Rio de Janeiro’s Carnaval in Brazil. “¡Feliz Cumpleaños!” was the first of three shorts released semi-annually to celebrate the anniversary of the creation of Mickey Mouse. The episode is set in México and features Mickey’s birthday celebration, complete with birthday cake, mariachis, flan, and a rendition of “Las Mañanitas,” the Mexican birthday song. The party is interrupted by a gang of

\(^9\) A fifteenth birthday party typically for Latina teenagers. Quinceañera or quinces customs vary from country to country.
bandit piñatas. The one that did not feature a party was “O Futebol Classico” which depicts
Mickey attending a soccer game in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which is also a culturally significant,
highly celebratory event. Pixar’s Coco and 20th Century Fox’s The Book of Life are films that
center around the Day of the Dead, typically celebrated in Mexico and other Central American
countries from late October to early November where the living pay respects to the dead via
offerings and other traditions. Given how people outside of Central America might know very
little of the Day of the Dead, I can see how these movies and shows can have an educational
component of exposing their audiences to different cultures. In Encanto, there are several parties
and family celebrations. The main one can be seen towards the beginning of the movie after
Antonio receives his gift. This party has extravagant flower decorations, valet parking (for
donkeys and horses), fireworks, music, dancing, food, and, according to Abuela, strong drinks.

When I see these festivities and parties, I see joy, tradition, and community. At the same
time, I wonder how it is perceived by others. I am reminded of a video that went viral on social
media in 2021 of a Mexican family in a pool at a recreation center in North Carolina who got the
police called on them after playing music in Spanish. The family had reportedly played music in
English on previous occasions without a word from the staff but the first instance of playing
music in Spanish led to the incident. The person that uploaded the video was a 17-year-old girl,
who was put in the position of translator for her family and the police officers since she was the
only one that spoke both languages. Poder NC, a local non-profit dedicated to empowering the
“Latinx community” in North Carolina, “and the family are demanding that the Henderson
County Sheriff’s Office publicize the incident report, release the 911 call audio and establish a
policy that avoids putting children in a situation where they must interpret for law enforcement”
(Shen-Berro). Every culture has traditions and celebrations, but I notice a focus on celebrations when it comes to media for or featuring Latinos/as and people of color.

Spontaneous Bilingualism- Hola and Hello

This trope is one of the most common, especially in current media for young audiences. It is commonly seen with two different purposes that sometimes intersect: second language acquisition/educational purposes as seen in Dora the Explorer, Nickelodeon’s bilingual and educational show aimed at preschool audiences; or as a tool to establish a character’s heritage, such as Rosita from Sesame Street, a Mexican monster puppet appearing on the longtime running educational PBS show also aimed at young audiences. Bilingualism, or the use of foreign languages, is not exclusive to plays or media that are about or with Latina/o characters, but Spanish-English is more prevalent since Spanish is the second most spoken language in the United States (US Census). This trope is not necessarily harmful, but it can come across as pandering or patronizing.

In my analysis, when I refer to a play or a character’s languages, I will be using these definitions: English is when characters only speak English or use it in full sentences, Spanish when characters only speak Spanish or use it in full sentences, and finally, Spanglish is when a character switches back and forth between both languages mid-sentence. A final definition is that of Mock Spanish. Jane Hill describes Mock Spanish as “a register of Anglo Spanish that is used mostly by Anglo speakers when addressing one another as the borrowing or incorporation of particular Spanish words or elements into English in a way that strategically misrepresents and stereotypes the subordinated group”—expressions like “holy guacamole” and “no way, José” are some examples. However, several Mock Spanish phrases have transitioned into common vernacular, seemingly free of malicious intent, though their origins remain. Sometimes
characters might engage in code-switching, which is when a person or character changes the way they speak depending on the context or who they are speaking to.

I offer an additional term which I will refer to as instant translation. On screen, subtitles are an option to provide translation. In theatre, where the option of subtitles on stage is not always possible or in the case of TYA, where the target audience may not be proficient readers, playwrights may incorporate the tactic of instant translation. Instant translation is ever present in multilingual media. This is when a character says a phrase in a foreign language, only for the next line to be the translation of the phrase. An example of this can be found in the play It’s All Bueno by Sigrid Gilmer, when a character says, “The great car wash war and how Candy got caught up. La gran Guerra de Lavado de carros y cómo atraparon a Candy” (16).

For a long time, I dismissed this as a pet peeve or a matter of personal preference. I did not understand why it bothered me so much whenever I came across it in a play or on the screen. There is an obvious need for translation, because elements essential to the plot or character development should be understood regardless of language. It was not until working on rewrites of Sombra del Sol that I realized why. There are two main reasons: instant translation punishes multilingual speakers and assumes the audience is incapable of analysis or understanding. Arguably, it also breaks the fourth wall since it transfers focus to the audience members that do not understand the language from the characters on stage. In addition, from an educational perspective, instant translation is not conducive for language acquisition. According to Andrew Weiler, an English as a Second Language (ESL) educator and language acquisition specialist, relying exclusively on translation hinders the learning of a second or foreign language. Avoiding translation allows the learners’ brains to develop deduction skills, which in turn creates neural
pathways ultimately promoting retention. This process mirrors that of first language development.

Character Tropes: Abuelas, Bandidos, and Characters in Process

Character tropes and stock characters date back to Ancient Greece and continue to be present today. Some character tropes, however, have become stereotypes. According to film professor and theorist Charles Ramírez Berg, there are six character stereotypes commonly associated with Latin Americans in Hollywood cinema. They may sometimes overlap, and although their depictions have evolved over the years, they are still very much present (66). The following section details the character tropes most present in LTYA.

“Whoa! Let’s Be Clear, Abuela Runs this Show”: The Overbearing Abuela

Although Latin American countries are affected and influenced by *machismo* culture and patriarchal structures, it is common for homes to follow matriarchal structures. It is not unusual for homes in Latin America to be multigenerational and/or multifamily. Grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandchildren sometimes live under one roof or in proximity to each other (Carlos & Sellers 101). In these cases, it is commonplace that grandmothers serve an essential role in making family decisions, running the home, raising, and even disciplining the young ones while parents are at work. This multi-generational, multi-family structure with an Abuela as the matriarch is exemplified and celebrated in *Encanto.*

The love and power of abuelas can be seen in a variety of nicknames: abuelita, yaya, tata, nona, abue…, but the regional nickname *Mamá* followed by their first name indicates them as a second mother. This was seen in Pixar’s *Coco* where Miguel’s grandmother is referred to as Abuelita, his great grandmother is *Mamá Coco,* same as his great great grandmother, *Mamá Imelda.* Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes wrote what feels like a love letter to
Hispanic Abuelas in the character of Abuela Claudia from the musical *In the Heights*. Doña Claudia never had any children, but she was heavily and lovingly involved in the lives of everyone in the neighborhood. In the song “Paciencia y Fé” Abuela Claudia tells of her journey immigrating to New York from Cuba in 1943.

Because of the generational gap, corporal punishment tends to be one of the methods of discipline of Abuelas. The image of an Abuela holding a *chancla*\(^\text{10}\) inspires both terror and respect to Latin American communities—it is a sign that a rule has been broken and that someone is in trouble. Although they have questionable methods with the *chancla* or a wooden spoon, abuelas care deeply about their families and are thought of as loving, yet stern. Abuelas are also tasked with upholding the family traditions and heritage. They are seen as older, therefore, wiser and more experienced. They also tend to be ones to uphold the family’s religious beliefs. When I first attended church after moving to the U.S., it was a culture shock for me to see so many nuclear families attending services and not mostly grandmothers by themselves. It is common for an Abuela to insist for her grandchildren to get baptized. Even when grandmothers no longer have the same physical capacity that they had before, their presence and power in the household is still respected.

The trope of the overbearing Abuela opens up opportunities for strong, multi-dimensional, female characters. Seeing these characters reminds me of my own abuelas, Maria Luisa and Mercedes. It brings back memories of their strength, love, and generosity. At the same time, I grapple with the prevalence of the imagery of the *chancla*-bearing Abuela as comedy relief as it makes light of physical abuse.

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\(^{10}\) A flip flop or slipper thrown at children as corporal punishment. Also known as *chancleta* or *chola*. 
Ni de Acá Ni de Allá— Oruguitas: Characters in the Process of Becoming

It is a common trope in LTYA and in other media that feature immigrant characters or characters of different backgrounds to center around a protagonist who is disconnected from their heritage and/or grappling with their identity. In the case of LTYA plays and other Latina/o media, this protagonist can assist the audience members who may only know a little or nothing about the target culture. Audiences and characters on stage follow a similar journey of furthering their own understandings of identity. In other words, it can help make the play more accessible and relatable. In his essay, “Latina/o Youth and Journeys of Transformation: Theatre of Migration, Exile and Home,” Dr. Jimmy Noriega compares the journeys of Latina/o characters in LTYA to the literary genre of *bildungsroman*. Translating literally from German meaning “education novel,” *bildungsroman* stories follow along the journey of development and growth of the protagonist. Dr. Noriega explains:

Latina/o playwrights often employ the trope of the protagonist “in the process of becoming” as a way of telling their stories. While in novels most readers experience the journey of the character in the isolated individual act of reading, in the theatre, this process becomes a physical and embodied act that is experienced as a live event before a collective public. This is especially significant for young audiences, since they are able to engage with the action and story of the play in a number of ways that may be new and/or exciting to them (50).

Dr. Noriega applies this framework to LTYA plays: Lisa Loomer’s *¡Bocón!*, José Casas’ *la ofrenda*, Elaine Romero’s *Xochi: Jaguar Princess*, and Ramón Esquivel’s *Luna*. Miguel, Alex, Xochi, and Soledad— the four respective protagonists of the plays— have experienced crises and relocations in different ways which have greatly impacted and shifted their identities and
their idea of identity (50-61). Throughout my analysis, I would like to borrow and expand upon Dr. Noriega’s framework to describe this character trope. This concept of characters in the “process of becoming” is not exclusive to LTYA, but can be seen throughout TYA and media for young people. Because of this, I would like to offer the term oruguita to describe protagonists and other characters who are in the process of discovering their ancestry, their identity as an immigrant, and/or in the process of reconnecting with their culture of origin. Oruga is the Spanish word for a caterpillar. Butterflies and their life cycle, particularly that of monarch butterflies, have become a symbol of immigrants and their descendants. This is because of the monarch butterfly migration pattern from northern U.S. and Canada towards Southern California, México, and Florida during the fall to return north during the summer. This symbol can be seen in the play Highest Heaven, where each scene is framed as a phase in the monarch butterfly life cycle. The word oruguita is reminiscent of this journey which parallels that of the young protagonist of LTYA.

I find the oruguita trope very relatable. Although I am unsure if I still consider myself an oruguita, progress in my metamorphosis has taken several years. I was an oruguita for a long time. There is a lot of universality in the process of embracing parts of oneself and one’s history. However, my struggles as a foreigner are just a facet of my identity. While I enjoy oruguita journeys, I also yearn for “butterfly” characters who go on all kinds of adventures.

“Seven Foot-Frame, Rats Along his Back”: Bandidos and its Deviations

The bandido11 stereotype is one of the oldest in American media dating back to silent films and westerns. Despite the high crime rates in different countries and cities in Latin

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11 There is a distinction between the words bandido and bandito. Bandido is the Spanish word for a bandit, bandito is a Mock Spanish term popularized in part in 1967 by the Frito-Lay company with the creation of their mascot—Frito Bandito.
America, this stereotype is still harmful and derogatory. I am concerned about the prevalence of this stereotype in media. I think bandidos and subsequent evolutions of this trope can still be justified in certain stories, but its repercussions still affect real people. This can be seen in former US President Donald Trump’s remarks during his presidential campaign announcement speech on June 16th, 2015:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people (Phillips).

Evolutions and variants of this stereotype are very much present in the media. Two variations of bandidos are the Latin American gangster or drug runner and the inner-city gang members (Ramírez Berg 67-68). Examples of these can be seen in popular television shows such as Narcos. I offer a third deviation that I have observed in media for youth is the mala conducta— the bad boy: young characters, typically male, who misbehave, deface property, and sometimes bully other characters. In other words, the “black sheep” of the family. An example of this is Jesús from Tom Smith’s play ESL. Jesús is perceived by other characters as a weirdo, an angry kid, and someone to be avoided. In the last scene, Jesús’ locker was spray painted with the words “ESL” and “Go back to Mexico” (Smith 45). It later revealed that it was Jesús himself who graffitied his own locker (Smith 48). I see the character Bruno in Encanto as a modification of the bandido stereotype. He is arguably portrayed as a mala conducta in the first half of the film. In the previously mentioned song “We Don’t Talk about Bruno,” Bruno is not only established as the estranged uncle, but as the source of all the town’s troubles—from causing hurricanes to the death of a fish. In addition, he is described as having a “mischievous grin,” “a
“seven-foot frame,” and “rats along his back.” In this musical number, Bruno is also depicted in the shadows with an unkempt look; this imagery is heavily associated with the bandido stereotype.

Ethereality: Catholicism, Spirit Animals, and Ghosts

Spirituality is present in Latin American media, both in the sense of spiritual or religious practices or beliefs, and the idea of spirits as in ghosts or spirit animals/guides.

Catholicism is the primary religion practiced in Latin America, but recent censuses and surveys have indicated an increase of people have changed religions or identify as “nonaffiliated” (Morello 64). There is also a variety of African and European practices that are still practiced today and have been blended, resulting in other religions and practices such as Santería and Umbanda (Morello 55).

There are several folktales and stories across Latin America that feature spirits and ghosts. The legend of La Llorona, a vengeful ghost who roams waterfront areas morning the children whom she drowned, is typically attributed to México, but her story has been passed down orally across Latin America (Ruiz et al. 362). The tale is so widespread that, for a long time, I believed La Llorona was a Venezuelan folktale. Although I have seen the story in academic discourse being treated as a retelling of Medea (Ruiz et al. 362; Boffone 93; Saldaña 68), I have always been told this legend as a ghost story. There are, however, different ghost or spirit stories all across Latin America such as El Silbón from Venezuela, La Luz Mala from Argentina, El Sombrerón from Guatemala. These stories are a part of Latin American cultures. This trope reminds me of a statement by Taika Waititi—filmmaker, director, and screenwriter of a draft of Disney’s animated film Moana. He shared in an interview: “Indigenous people in films, it’s all like nose flutes and panpipes and, you know, people talking to ghosts ... which I
hate” (Hunt). We see this in *Moana*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, as well as in media for adult audiences. This trope can come across as othering because it exoticizes religious and spiritual believes of native peoples into marketable products.

The notion of spirit animals is present in a variety of indigenous cultures from all over the world, including in Latin America. For example, in Zapotec culture—the predominant indigenous culture of the state of Oaxaca in México—*tonas* are spiritual animals found in the region that accompany and guide a person throughout their life (Arslanian). The role of animals in media for children is pervasive. It is hard to think about a Disney princess without her animal sidekick, and even Dora seems to be one of the few humans in a world of bilingual monkeys, cows, and swiping foxes. TYA is not the exception; plays with animal characters can be found in the American TYA canon as well as all over the world. I question the presence of this trope in LTYA and other media portraying Latinos/as and BIPOC. While it presents aesthetically pleasing opportunities for designers, this typically results in Latino/a and BIPOC actors portraying animals, which can sometimes feel dehumanizing, especially when these animal characters often lack depth and are the butt of many jokes.

**Conclusion**

Although these Five Tropes were prevalent well before I was born, they have taken new significance, especially when realizing their presence in my youth. Bearing witness to their development and projecting their potential evolution or fall out through the course of this thesis has been eye opening for me not just as a Latina, but as a TYA practitioner. This description and analysis of these tropes can help other practitioners and creators in the process of developing new characters, plays, and media for young people. It is my hope that readers of this thesis, TYA practitioners and audiences alike, understand that the validity of tropes in art is dictated by the
context in which it is applied. With this foundation in mind, I will now turn inward and examine a play that I co-created.
CHAPTER FOUR: SOMBRA DEL SOL AND THE FIVE TROPES

In the following chapter, I will apply the Five Tropes examination to the play I co-created, Sombra del Sol. These tropes will be the framework for my reflection as a contributor to this project and as a Latina in the field of TYA. In Sombra del Sol, each trope is present within the play in different forms. I reiterate, the presence or lack thereof these tropes is not necessarily an indicative of a play’s quality. Their inclusion is also not happenstance or a coincidence. They were deliberate choices with logistical and artistic considerations. In the following section, I will analyze Sombra del Sol in terms of these five tropes, reflecting on how my reception to these tropes and the ways in which they were applied within this script impacted my experience in this collaborative process.

Location Trope: Jungle Settings and Vague Location

As previously described, the town Sombra del Sol is located in the intentionally vague location of “in the heart of the Amazon.” This location was chosen both to accommodate for the possible diversity of the casting, justify the different environments, and appeal to a broader audience. Although Sombra del Sol is presented as a thriving town, the majority of the play takes place in a jungle and jungle-adjacent settings. After the children leave La Gula, the split paths and different characters find themselves in “wild” environments including: the hills where the armadillos live, the trees that house toucans, and the monkeys’ jungle.

The characters of Sombra del Sol use a variety of regional slang terms, reference different pop culture elements and characters, and sing musical genres from a variety of regions and countries of Latin America, but it is never specified which country they are in. The only cultural element that is truly specific to the town of Sombra del Sol is the celebration of the festival seen at the opening number.
Festivals/Traditional Celebrations: The Sombra del Sol Festival

The festival seen in the opening number “Sombra del Sol” does not have a name beyond the Sombra del Sol Festival. Krumins did not base it on any particular, real festival or celebration from Latin America. However, from my experience, the festival and the circumstances around it feel realistic. I associate the Sombra del Sol Festival with multiple religious and traditional celebrations that occur in Venezuela that I learned about in school and was even lucky enough to experience in person. Much like the children of the show, I did not understand the reasons and importance of celebrating these festivals. I rolled my eyes when my mom said we would be going to a small town to attend a festival or meet the organizers, when all I wanted to do was stay home in the capital and go to the mall with my friends. I am not alone in this feeling. Silvia Gonzalez S. wrote the play Alicia in Wonder Tierra (or I Can’t Eat Goat Head). Alicia is a teenage girl whose mother brought her to a Mexican curio shop when she would much rather be at the mall. Gonzalez S. explains in her artist statement concerning the play:

I have a daughter who reminds me of Alicia in the play…[She] is just now exploring her heritage. I often say to her, “I wrote Alicia in Wonder Tierra before you were born, and I wrote it about you!” I know she prefers the mall, but for fun I’m going to buy her a stuffed armadillo from a Mexican curio shop (131).

Spontaneous Bilingualism: Spanish, English, Spanglish

The characters in Sombra del Sol effortlessly communicate in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, without engaging in code-switching. Every character in the play speaks both languages; there is no particular character that only speaks one or the other making whomever this character interacts with to make a choice. The script provides no good reason why these characters engage in both languages other than the suspension of disbelief because this play was
written and performed in the U.S. In a play where animals talk and anthropomorphized manifestations of darkness exist, I do not think there really needs to be a reason why characters speak a certain language. Globalization and technology has created a world that is so interconnected with so much knowledge and tools at their fingertips that I do not think justification is always necessary in bilingual/multilingual plays and media.

In terms of instant translation in *Sombra del Sol*, the majority were justified in a variety of ways. I purposefully avoided and edited out most of the instances in the original script. We avoided longer Spanish phrases when characters mentioned essential elements to the plot, we included stage directions that clarified or gave additional context when needed, and changed the parts of speech to our advantage. An example of this can be seen in Scene 2:

PETALANO: The battle is coming.

GALENA: Battle? What battle?

PETALANO: *La Guerra de las Sombras.*

MIGUEL: The War of the Shadows? (Alamo et al. 9)

In this instance, the focus is kept on the characters. Not only have the characters just discovered that they traveled back in time, Miguel and Galena are also the characters that know the least about the details of the history of Sombra del Sol. It is natural that they question the words of a character they have just met.

In the beginning of the writing process, I was very vocal about my disdain toward this trope. We had a healthy discussion as a team on the importance of finding a balance, but ultimately the decision was made to accommodate the non-Spanish-speaking audience members as much as possible. When asked about it, the creative team and the cast described *Sombra del Sol* as “a musical with bilingual elements”—not a bilingual musical. I do not think that a person
who only understands Spanish would be able to fully understand the play, plot, and characters, while English speakers are able to fully follow along, although they might miss one or two jokes or cultural references.

**Character Tropes: The Overbearing Abuela, Bandidos, and Oruguitas**

Abuela Rosa from *Sombra del Sol* is one of the few adult characters in the play, the other one being Abuelo Gordo; however, it is established that Abuela Rosa plays a matriarchal role with Abuelo Gordo as support. They both serve as the caregivers of the children, but also serve an essential role in world building by providing exposition to the audience. They open the show and introduce the rest of the characters, they share the history of the town, and most importantly, they send the four children on their journey back in time. Abuela bearing her *chancla* was one of the first elements incorporated into the collaborative rewrite of the script. She never throws it or uses it against any of the characters. The image of Abuela Rosa just removing her *chancla* and lifting it was enough to stop the children from fighting and completely shut down the chaos that they created disturbing all the other members involved in the festival’s rehearsal. The children respect her, but they are not afraid to challenge her ideas. Abuela is loving and does not shy away from praise or physical affection, but she establishes herself as an authority figure while giving reasoning behind her actions. From reading the first draft of the script, I was pleasantly surprised to see the Abuelo Gordo character. In other media for children, and even in the plays discussed in the following chapter, the presence of grandparents is prevalent, but it is usually one grandparent. Both *Coco* and *Encanto* feature grandparents who are single parents, the play *El Viaje de Beatriz* revolves around the main character trying to find her late Abuela, and *In the Heights* highlight a woman in an *abuela* role despite never having children or a partner. Abuelo Gordo, as previously stated, serves as support for Abuela without being relegated to the role of a
sidekick. They are in constant communication and they need each other in order to get the job done, which, in Abuela and Abuelo’s case, means to put up the ‘production’ of the festival and pass along their traditions to their grandchildren.

The four young protagonists of *Sombra del Sol* are an example of oruguitas. Miguel, Valentina, Galena, and Rómulo are very much aware of their history. They know how the town was founded, but they do not have a grasp on why it is celebrated and why there is a festival in the first place. In other words, they pose the questions: Why does it matter? Why should we celebrate our culture? Each child provides a different perspective on this disconnect. Miguel is embarrassed and believes he is too “tough” or “old” to dance and participate in a festival, Valentina uses the festival as an opportunity to show off and get attention, Galena does not take it seriously and uses jokes and humor to avoid the responsibility, and finally, although Rómulo seems to be interested, it is later found out that he only does it to please his grandparents. It is through their journey back in time that they discover both their own identities and how they relate to this town’s origins.

The character stereotype I feel the most conflicted about is the Bandidos. When the children begin their journey, they find themselves in the rundown town of La Gula where three Bandidos threaten the children and even mug them with a knife. The Bandidos of La Gula appear for a musical number only to flee as soon as Petalano shoos them away. Their purpose in the script is to establish the grungy, unsettling, unsafe culture of La Gula. Later in the script, La Sombra, the embodiment of darkness, destroyed La Gula. It is established that La Sombra feeds off the darkness in the world and it is heavily implied that all the residents in La Gula are also Bandidos, or at least, apathetic to their presence—making La Gula a perfect target for La Sombra. The use of this stereotype in *Sombra del Sol* is interesting and serves a clear purpose.
The Bandidos do not inspire the journey of the children in the story, but it is through the 
Bandidos that the children learn why the founders of Sombra del Sol had to leave in search of a 
better place. It is a fundamental part in understanding the why behind the Sombra del Sol festival. 
It wakes them up from their apathy and helps them connect with the festival and their heritage.

When discussing this scene during the rewrite process with Alamo, we discussed how the 
play can be seen as a metaphor for Latin America’s independence from the colonizers. The 
founders represent the indigenous tribes of Latin America, La Gula represents colonies and 
conquistadors from Spain and Portugal, and the War of the Shadows represents the independence 
wars. The concept of the town of Sombra del Sol being the result of light and dark in balance can 
be seen as the mix of cultures, ethnicities, language, and ideals between indigenous groups, 
conquistadores, and Africans who were brought in as slaves that resulted in what Latin America 
is today. Although fascinating, I wonder if the metaphor comes across to the average audience 
members— youth and their families. Part of me says to fully trust the audience, but the 
prevalence of this stereotype and its implications still concern me. In addition, in terms of 
creating roles for Latin American actors, especially young ones, bandidos feel limited and one 
dimensional.

**Ethereality: Spirit Animals and Sol Temple**

Ethereality in *Sombra del Sol* is present in two main ways: the spirit animals and the Sol 
Temple. I still find myself conflicted at the idea of having the animals of the play being referred 
to as spirit animals, especially when they were originally coming from a white, American 
playwright for Latin American children to play. As stated previously, the concept of spirit 
animals may not be necessarily harmful, but it can come across as dehumanizing. The play 
features nine animal spirits in groups of three: Armadillos, Toucans, and Monkeys. Each animal
group serves the purpose in the script to mirror the children’s flaws. Seeing their flaws mirrored is the catalyst of their respective character arcs, therefore, allowing them to better understand their identities and their place in Sombra del Sol. It is through their respective animals that the children reunite and find Rómulo. The spirit animals do so by guiding the children to a temple that is in ruins, the Sol Temple.

Neither version of the script provides a lot of details about the temple. The audience only knows that the temple is in ruins and it is the only place where the children can be saved from the attacks of Sombra. What does the implication of a temple in ruins say about the spirituality of the characters in the play? Are the residents of La Gula corrupt because they abandoned the temple? Going back to the metaphor of this play being an allegory for the independence from colonization—a ruined temple alludes to the idea of abandoning indigenous belief systems in order to convert to the religion of the colonizers.

**Conclusion**

Waititi shared in an interview the following thoughts upon seeing the final version of *Moana*:

*I was relieved it was not insulting to Pacific cultures. That was a big worry for me. I was very nervous about it. You often ask yourself, ‘Oh my god, do I get involved with something like this?’...I thought, well, the best way of [Disney] not making something that’s insensitive or shallow was to involve people from that community, from the Pacific... If there’s some way I could be at the table and help try and make this not a bad film, then I’ll try.*

This encapsulates my feelings regarding my involvement with this *Sombra del Sol*. Overall, the play is an amalgamation of several Latin American cultures wrapped in a package with the
intention to appeal to and represent people of over 30 countries. It is guilty of stereotypes and clichés that can be harmful to the Latin American community. Nevertheless, this experience of collaboratively writing the script taught me about the reasoning behind the presence of tropes. I used to think tropes were inherently negative and only pointed to lazy writing, but now I think that tropes are a valuable instrument for playwrights and artists that can help to create a product that is logistically and artistically sound.

Going back to my use of Encanto as an example in my previous chapters, the Five Tropes are present in Encanto as well. In spite of this, the film was successful not only monetarily, but in telling a story that highlighted the beauty and complexity of a country and its people. Disney has decades of history and cultural and artistic evolution—not to mention the resources and creative teams of one of the most powerful companies in the world. The script for Sombra del Sol was a labor of love by three graduate students. They are very different, but nevertheless, have elements of these Five Tropes in common.

Although flawed, the play brings up interesting questions and perspectives about what it means to celebrate our own cultures, histories, and traditions. It also features strong, multidimensional Latin American characters for young actors to portray and audience members to look up to. Sombra del Sol is a crucial part of my research interest in plays for young audiences about Latin American characters and cultures. It made me question my role as a playwright, artist in my community, as a Latina, and as an advocate for representation. It also provided additional insight on the way I see and analyze plays.
CHAPTER FIVE: PLAY ANALYSIS

Throughout the course of this thesis, I introduced the Five Tropes and applied them to media for youth and my own work. In this chapter, I will now apply this framework to twenty plays in the LTYA canon. The initial reason that drew me to an analysis of the existing U.S.’s LTYA canon was the titular question of this thesis: ¿Dónde están los Latinos? Before this thesis, I only studied in my graduate coursework and knew of three Latin American TYA playwrights: José Cruz González, José Casas, and Karen Zacarías along with her long-time collaborator, composer Deborah Wicks La Puma, who is also Latina. I was excited to learn about more practitioners in the field, who like me, were writing plays and contributing to the discourse of LTYA. For a more detailed account of the plays, Appendix A contains an annotated bibliography of each play. Appendix B features a table with a detailed account of how/if each trope is present within each play. In the following portion, I will describe my play selection process, discuss the playwrights behind these LTYA plays as well as my findings of my twenty-play analysis based on the Five Tropes.

My first source of plays is the anthology Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences by José Casas and Christina Marín. For additional plays, I crowdsourced from other TYA practitioners, my classmates, and professors. This resulted in a list of over forty plays that I subsequently narrowed down to twenty by focusing on only full-length plays that have been published in the United States. This criteria, and therefore study, is exclusive of short plays and plays published outside of the U.S. Once I narrowed down to twenty plays, I wanted to learn more about the playwrights.
Table 1 - Playwright Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>City/Region of Birth</th>
<th>Latin American Origin?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alvaro Saar Rios</td>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Moon</td>
<td>St. Louis, MO</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Murillo</td>
<td>Bogota, CO</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah Wicks La Puma</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine Romero</td>
<td>San Juan Capistrano, CA</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel Jason Dean</td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Casas</td>
<td>Baldwin Park, CA</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Cruz Gonzalez</td>
<td>Calexico, CA</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josefina Lopez</td>
<td>San Luis Potosi, MX</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Enrique Carrillo</td>
<td>Zacatecas, MX</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Zacarias</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Loomer</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Alfaro</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam Gonzales</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramon Esquivel</td>
<td>Kirkland, WA</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne Schroeder-Arce</td>
<td>Springfield, VT</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigrid Gilmer</td>
<td>San Francisco, CA</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia Gonzalez S.</td>
<td>San Fernando, CA</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Smith</td>
<td>Rochelle, IL</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The twenty plays were written by nineteen playwrights; thirteen of them are of Latin American origin (see Table 1). I would like to reiterate that writers do not need to be of the same ethnicity or culture as the characters they create. Research and respect are key factors in creating culturally specific work and these two elements go beyond ethnicity, culture, or country of origin. Nevertheless, as Esquivel stated, white writers have been prioritized over writers of color to tell stories of other cultures.
Does the playwright’s origin correlate with the presence, or lack thereof, of the five tropes? The only plays that include all Five Tropes are *Just Like Us, la ofrenda*¹², *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, and *Esperanza Rising*. Out of these four plays, only one of them is written by a non-Latino playwright. Every single play in this analysis contained at least two tropes, regardless of the playwright’s origin. Nevertheless, it was used in unique ways by different playwrights as seen in the following analysis.

**Location Tropes**

![Bar graph showing the quantity of plays containing each location trope.]

*Figure 1- Graph Containing Location Tropes.*

Similarly to Esquivel’s observation, the majority of the plays analyzed are set in México or about Mexican Americans (see Figure 1). Notable exceptions include *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans,*

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¹² José Casas’ play *la ofrenda* is stylized with no capitalization whatsoever. To honor the playwrights’ style and intentions, I will follow this stylization when I discuss the play’s characters and title.
which centers around two very distinct characters from Puerto Rico. Rosa was born and raised in the U.S. to Puerto Rican parents, while Cenicienta is an exchange student who is attending the same school as Rosa to learn English. Five plays introduced an additional location trope: Dreamscapes– as seen in *Sueños Frosted Flakes, El Viaje de Beatriz, and Alicia in Wonder Tierra*.

**Festivals and Celebrations**

Nine plays feature a party, celebration, or traditional festivities of some kind. Some of the traditional celebrations include Day of the Dead (as seen in *la ofrenda and Highest Heaven*), and la Fiesta de San Juan¹³ (*¡Bocón!*). *Sueños Frosted Flakes* was the only play to feature a quinceañera, but other plays included birthday parties and other celebrations. *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* stands out with the play taking place on Halloween day. Some of the celebrations featured in these plays overlapped with the Ethereality trope.

More than half of the plays included themes and traditions associated with Catholicism and Christianism or featured Catholic imagery (see Figure 2). *La Virgen de Guadalupe*¹⁴ is mentioned and featured in projections of *la ofrenda*. This play, along with *¡Bocón! and Highest Heaven*, mentions saints such as San Antonio, San Juan de la Paz, and San Martín de Porres, respectively. These mentions are not a one-off expletive, but the characters describe the importance of these saints in their lives. A detail of *Simply Maria* stood out to me. Within a dreamscape, Maria is seen getting married in a Catholic church to a man named José. The names Maria and José allude to the Holy Family of the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, and Baby Jesus.

¹³ Saint John’s Feast is celebrated in unique ways in Latin America, Philippines, Spain, and other places in the world.

¹⁴ Our Lady of Guadalupe. Patroness of All the Americas. The day of her feast is a Holy Day of Obligation in México.
The Transition of Doodle Pequeño and Xochi: Jaguar Princess are the only plays to have Spirit Animals (as seen in Figure 2). Doodle has an imaginary goat named Valencia, who loosely guides his journey. Doodle picked Valencia himself as he was moving to his new place. She is Doodle’s only friend at the beginning of the play. Since Doodle spends a lot of time by himself, Valencia plays a motherly figure, but a childish one. She is playful, clumsy, and silly; but at the same time she does not hesitate to discipline Doodle or call him out for his wrong doing. Valencia made sure Doodle met and became friends with Reno, another kid from the quadruplex where they live. Only people with an imagination can see Valencia. Once Doodle has a new friend, Valencia is blown off by the wind to be found by another kid. Jaguar, on the other hand,
is portrayed more explicitly as a Spirit Animal. He helps Xochi gain the confidence to remember, carry, and tell the folkloric stories of Central America. Jaguar only appears to Xochi in her dreams. As he tells each story, he loses one of his spots, by the end of the play, he is out of spots—this is his ultimate sacrifice. It is now Xochi’s turn to become the titular Jaguar Princess and be the carrier of these stories and legends.

Ghosts and Spirits are featured in four plays. A Ghost/Spirit that appears in three out of these four plays is La Llorona, previously referenced as an emblematic example of a folktale or ghost story to Latin America. I found the portrayal in ¡Bocón! intriguing. La Llorona is portrayed as a sympathetic Spirit Guide who is forced to upkeep a ghostly and spooky appearance to protect children from escaping their homes and keep them safe. Similarly in la ofrenda, the character of califas el calacas, a paper mache skeleton, comes to life to guide the protagonist, Alex, to grieve after losing his parents. He is the only one that can see and hear califas move and talk, to Marta, Alex’s abuela, califas is only a paper mache sculpture her daughter, Alex’s mom, made in school. However, califas is able to interact with real objects and Marta is able to see the result of these interactions, catapulting essential moments in the play. I appreciate the distinction made in the play regarding ghosts and spirits: “spirits, mijo, not ghosts… ghosts are for cartoons. […] ghosts are meant to scare. spirits are meant to protect” (Casas 406). Using this framework provided by Casas, La Llorona in ¡Bocón! is a spirit and not a ghost.
Spontaneous Bilingualism and Instant Translation

All of these plays are bilingual including a mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish, to different degrees. Only two plays have no instances of instant translation: Black Butterfly, Jaguar Girl…. and Xochi: Jaguar Princess (see figure 3). The play that contained the most instances of instant translation is ¡Bocón! with twenty-nine instances. I anticipated that plays written by non-native Spanish speakers/non-Latin Americans would feature more instances of instant translation, however, this was not the case. On average, there were 9.75 instances across these twenty plays. 50% of plays contained ten instances or less, and 50% included more than ten. Out of the ten plays with ten instances or less of instant translation, seven were written by Latin American playwrights, and out of the remaining ten plays containing more than ten instances six were written by Latin American playwrights. In addition, some scripts provided other means of translation. These alternate means of translation did not eliminate instant
translation. *Simply Maria* and *Highest Heaven* provided a glossary of terms and references at the end of the play. *Luchadora* and *ESL* provided translations in brackets and a production note stating that the lines in brackets are not meant to be said.

**Character Tropes**

In terms of character tropes, Abuelas are present in six plays. Oruguitas are the trope most present, with eight plays including at least one oruguita character. As previously stated, *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans* stands out as having two characters with unique relationships to their identity. Cenicienta is very proud of being Puerto Rican and is not afraid to show it in different facets of her life. Rosa, on the other hand, is an oruguita. She rejects the notion of wearing folkloric clothing, speaking Spanish, and eating rice and beans—anything associated with Puerto Rico, in her eyes, is uncool. It is through “walking in Cenicienta’s shoes” that Rosa apologizes to Cenicienta for her wrong-doing, speaks Spanish in public, and learns to embrace her identity (Zacarías & Wicks La Puma 203). Bandidos are present in six plays. I previously mentioned the example of Jesús in *ESL*, but another example caught my attention. In *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, Toph, one of the antagonists, wears a bandit costume for Halloween and proceeds to bully Doodle in character. Toph, who is American, proceeds later in the play to ask Doodle whether or not he is “an illegal alien” (Dean 218). *la ofrenda* addresses this trope when califas stole some tamales from Marta’s ofrenda, Marta believed it was Alex who took them. Califas says, “...you better tell granny it’s not cool to perpetuate the negative stereotype of the male chicano man” (Casas 40).
Conclusion

Returning to the titular question of ¿Dónde están los Latinos?, this chapter introduces some of them. This data points to the ways in which these playwrights utilize tropes to tell stories about culture, adversity, and growth. The results contained from my trope analysis help to articulate the need for richer cultural specificity and diversity of content in LTYA literature. A place of growth for the field can be seen in the borderland trope. There is an overwhelming majority of plays related to this trope, which paints a particular experience as a monolith for all Latin Americans. These changes will not happen overnight, but instead, one play, practitioner, and playwright at a time.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

As I discussed *Encanto* with my colleagues and peers and expressed my desire to see more plays for youth with similar levels of specificity, someone stated something that struck me. They said Disney is doing the work TYA practitioners should be doing—Disney is doing the work for us. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the Walt Disney Company is an enormous international conglomerate that has plentiful funds to sponsor research trips for its filmmakers, composers, and animators. In the United States, most of these theatres that commission plays for youth are non-profits. Playwrights and theatres alike tend to rely on their individual research and dramaturgs. It is unrealistic to expect individual playwrights and theatres for youth to have the ability to fund research trips for the creation of scripts. At the same time, it is unfair to expect diverse playwrights to act as ambassadors of their respective cultures or ethnic backgrounds or to be the only ones creating culturally specific work or diverse characters. Notwithstanding, the need for diverse plays, culturally-specific work, cultural advisors, consultants, dramaturgs, and diverse leadership is and has been a topic of discourse in the field. In spite of these complications, there is hope for more plays and media that feature Latin Americans and other underrepresented communities. In 2021, The BIPOC in TYA Community collaboratively created the *Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Futures for Theatre for Young Audiences*. The guide follows the framework of “individually we know a little, but collectively we know a lot. When collective knowledge, lived experiences, and wisdom are woven together, they compose a beautifully rich and expansive tapestry” (Ramírez, et al. 7). My work in *Sombra del Sol* taught me that collaboration is the key to creating culturally specific and responsive work—“Unidos somos más”(Alamo et al. 1)
A reassuring discovery of this thesis is that I am not alone in my field of study. There are several Latin American playwrights, scholars, and practitioners contributing to the field of TYA, LTYA, and Theatre as a whole. In a report published by TYA Today of the most produced plays and playwrights of the 2019-2020 season from fifty-three theatres all over the U.S., the most produced TYA Artist is the aforementioned Deborah Wicks La Puma, with fifteen productions spanning across six titles. In third place is her collaborator, Karen Zacarías, with seven productions, and three titles. The second most produced playwrights of original stories is José Casas. This uptick in prolific Latina/o playwrights getting their works produced by theatres across the country is an encouraging trend. However, upon visiting the list of most produced plays, the culturally-specific plays from these playwrights do not reach the top ten. As I read some plays, I looked for production history and photos. I was disappointed to see that some of these plays which I thoroughly enjoyed, had no production history available online or only featured a handful of production photos, with some of them not even having a single photo. The plays exist. Artists are creating and publishing scripts. Yet these LTYA plays are not produced as often as other plays. I hope to see more culturally-specific plays in theatres and in schools.

This trope-based study not only serves as a tool for play analysis, but as a means to help teachers, artistic directors, and play selection committees to select plays for their programming. This study could be applied to more plays on the LTYA canon and expand beyond. It would be interesting to apply it to other underrepresented communities and groups. Once more, the presence or lack of these Five Tropes is not necessarily indicative of a play’s quality. It points out patterns and places of growth in the way Latin Americans are represented in TYA and beyond. It is a matter of the way these tropes are used to represent people.
Learning about my fellow LTYA practitioners was energizing. I feel inspired to write more plays and create more content to contribute to this relatively new field. For the first time in a long time, I feel at home. I am learning and giving myself permission to just exist in my field. I am unique, I have ideas and experiences to share, and that is enough.
APPENDIX A: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE PLAYS
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PLAYS
Gonzalez S., Silvia. Alicia in Wonder Tierra (or I Can’t Eat Goat Head) by Silvia Gonzalez S.

Inspired by Alice in Wonderland and The Wizard of Oz, Alicia would rather be at the mall but her mom brought her to a Mexican curio shop. When Alicia faints and breaks a pottery piece, she is transported to a magical version of Fresnillo and Zacatecas, México. In this magical land, Alicia meets a variety of Mexican folkloric and historical figures that allow her to explore her culture of origin like she has never done before.

Black Butterfly, Jaguar Girl, Piñata Woman and Other Super Hero Girls, Like Me by Luis Alfaro

Based on the writings of Alma Elene Cervantes, Sandra C. Muñoz, and Marisela Norté, this collection of monologues and short scenes follow the perspectives of five Latina girls living in Los Angeles. The play captures their thought processes from childhood to their teen years.

¡Bocón! by Lisa Loomer.

Miguel loses his voice and storytelling abilities when he was forced to flee his home country in Central America. As he journeys north to Los Angeles, Miguel encounters the mythical weeping woman, La Llorona who protects and guides him through the perilous passage.

Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans: A Salsa Fairy Tale by Karen Zacarías, Music by Deborah Wicks La Puma.

In this adaptation of Cinderella, the story is told through the perspective of the “wicked cool stepsister,” Rosa. Rosa is the basketball MVP and the most popular kid in her school— that is until Cenicienta, an exchange student from Puerto Rico, shows up.
Cenicienta only speaks Spanish, and Rosa only speaks English. With the help of the Padrino in training, they must learn to get along to succeed at the basket(ball) game.

*El Viaje de Beatriz (Beatriz’s Journey)* by Andrea Moon.

Beatriz is dealing with the loss of her grandmother and with her parents arguing. She finds comfort in her doll, Beatrizita, who guides her to a magical land in search of her grandmother.

*ESL* by Tom Smith.

Ofelia is helping her cousin Jesús adjust to the American school system since he had just moved in from México. When Ofelia begins tutoring Trey for Spanish class, they discuss issues of discrimination, race, and culture shock. Rumors and gossip ensue.

*Esperanza Rising* by Lyanne Alvarez.

Based on the novel by the same name, *Esperanza Rising* tells the story of a wealthy Mexican girl who loses her father and fortune after a sudden tragedy. Esperanza is forced to cross the border to the United States in a search for a better life and hope.

*The Highest Heaven* by José Cruz González.

During the Great Depression, Huracán was deported to México and separated from his mother. As he tries to return home to California, he found a friend and a place to stay with El Negro who takes care of a group of monarch butterflies.

*It’s All Bueno* by Sigrid Gilmer.

After spending time with the residents of Pacoima, CA, Gilmer wrote this site-specific piece as a love letter to the complexities of the town. It shows the contrast between the
privileged lives two teenage girls and two working class teenage boys and their journey to find joy, love, and optimism during though circumstances.

*Just Like Us* by Karen Zacarías.

Based on the book of the same name, Helen Thorpe follows and documents the true story of four Mexican teenage girls coming of age in America.

*la ofrenda (the offering)* by José Casas.

After Alex’s parents died during the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he must move to Los Angeles with his Chicana grandmother. During the festivity of the Day of Death and with the help of a visit from califas el calacas, they learn to put their differences aside in order to grieve and become family again.

*Luchadora!* by Álvaro Saar Rios.

Inspired by the folk story *The Ballad of Mulan*, Nana Lupita tells her granddaughter her stories of growing up in Texas. Lupita shared her journey in becoming a lucha libre fighter.

*Luna* by Ramón Esquivel.

Soledad is the daughter of migrant farm workers who have to move consistently. Her only friend is the moon, Luna. After moving to a new school, she makes friends for the first time, but she is unsure if she is able to stay to continue the friendship.

*Mariachi Girl* by Roxanne Schroeder-Arce.

Carmencita loves to listen and play mariachi music. However, her father does not allow women in his mariachi band. With the help of her mother and her teacher, Carmencita is finally able to play and sing her favorite song for the school’s cultural festival.
Simply Maria, or the American Dream by Josefina López.

Maria and her family moved to the United States from México in pursuit of the American Dream. As Maria gets older and dreams of becoming an actor, the expectations the two cultures place on her make her question her family’s values, traditions, and the notion of an American Dream.

Sueños Frosted Flakes (The Jalapeño, Heavy Metal, Baseball, Frosted Flake Adventure of Mr. Henry Carrillo) by Juan Enrique Carrillo

Mr. Carrillo is a Mexican-American 1st grade teacher with dreams of becoming a rock and roll star. Through a series of monologues and with the help of his guitar, Mr. Carrillo teaches a lesson on perseverance and the value of dreams that his students will never forget.

That Day in Tucson by Guillermo Reyes.

Based on the real story of Daniel Hernandez Jr. who rescued Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords after she was shot during a constituent meeting in a supermarket parking lot in Tucson, AZ. Daniel questions his identity after seeing the way he is depicted in media after the incident.

The Smartest Girl in the World by Miriam Gonzales.

Lizzy and Leo’s family is going through economic hardships. Together they come up with a plan to become the smartest kids in the world in order to win the top prize from their local quiz gameshow.
The Transition of Doodle Pequeño by Gabriel Jason Dean.

Doodle is the new kid on the block until his imaginary goat, Valencia, introduces him to Reno—a boy who likes wearing tutus. When bullies harass his new friend, Doodle grapples with standing up for what is right or being made fun of.

Xochi: Jaguar Princess by Elaine Romero.

Xochi is a shy girl who struggles to make friends in her new school after moving to Arizona from California. In her dreams, a Jaguar visits her and tells her stories of Mexican and Central American folklore. Xochi learns to make new friends by sharing these stories and becoming the titular Jaguar Princess.
**Table 2 - Table of Twenty Plays and Their Use of The Five Tropes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Location Tropes</th>
<th>Celebrations</th>
<th>Ethereality</th>
<th>Spontaneous Bilingualism</th>
<th>Character Archetypes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Alicia in Wonder Tierra</em></td>
<td>Silvia Gonzalez S.</td>
<td>Borderland (US; Frennillo, MX, &amp; Zacatecas, MX); Dreamscape</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Other Religious References (Aztec Temple); Catholic/Christian References (Abuela sees the devil in a horny toad)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 3</td>
<td>Oruguitas; Overbearing abuela (&quot;El diablo&quot;); &quot;The stereotype scrambles&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Black Butterfly, Jaguar Girl</em></td>
<td>Luis Alfaro</td>
<td>Borderland (Los Angeles, CA &amp; MX)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (Catholic Imagery and traditions)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 0</td>
<td>Oruguitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>¿Bacan!</em></td>
<td>Lisa Lorenzo</td>
<td>Borderland (San Juan de la Paz, INI &amp; US); Vague Areas; Dreamscape</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Ghost/Spirits (La Llorona, La Caiavera, &amp; Other folk creatures); Catholic/Christian References (Bible stories &amp; Catholic traditions)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 29</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans</em></td>
<td>Karen Zacarias &amp; Deborah Wicks La Puna</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 22</td>
<td>Oruguitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El Viaje de Beatriz</em></td>
<td>Andrea Moon</td>
<td>Vague Areas; Dreamscape; Borderland (US &amp; Zacatecas, MX)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 5; Protagonist's catephrasism is in mock Spanish</td>
<td>Abuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ESL</em></td>
<td>Tom Smith</td>
<td>Borderland (US &amp; Juarez, MX); Vague Areas</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 5</td>
<td>Bandido; Oruguitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Esperanza Rising</em></td>
<td>Lynne Alvarez</td>
<td>Borderland (Aguascalientes, MX &amp; CA)</td>
<td>Birthday; Parties every Saturday in California</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (Catholic imagery)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 20</td>
<td>Bandidos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Highest Heaven</em></td>
<td>José Cruz Gonzalez</td>
<td>Borderland (Mexis, MX &amp; &quot;The Valley,&quot; CA); Jungle-Adjacent</td>
<td>Day of the Dead; Birthday</td>
<td>Ghosts/Spirits (La Llorona); Catholic/Christian References (San Martin de Porres &amp; Several mentions of Heaven and Angels)</td>
<td>Mix of English and Spanish; Instant Translation: 18</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It's all Bueno</em></td>
<td>Sigrid Gilmer</td>
<td>Borderland (Pacimia, CA)</td>
<td>Party clowns talking about parties and celebrations</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Several dramatic and spelling errors in Spanish—not quite mock Spanish; Instant Translation: 12</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Just Like Us</em></td>
<td>Karen Zacarias</td>
<td>Borderland (Denver, CO &amp; MX)</td>
<td>Graduation Parties; Baptism; Wedding.</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (Baptism)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 16</td>
<td>Bandido</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>la ofrenda</em></td>
<td>José Casas</td>
<td>Borderland (Los Angeles, CA &amp; MX)</td>
<td>Día de los Muertos</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (St. Anthony &amp; Virgen de Guadalupe); Other Religious References (Día de Los Muertos); Ghosts/Spirits (Cafíñas el Calacas)</td>
<td>Mix of English and Spanglish with very little Spanish; Instant Translation: 16</td>
<td>Bandido; Overbearing abuela; Oruguitas; Call out to Bandidos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Luchadora</em></td>
<td>Álvaro Saar Rios</td>
<td>Borderland (Santa Teresa, TX &amp; Milwaukee, WS)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 11; Mock Spanish: 1</td>
<td>Abuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Luna</em></td>
<td>Ramón Esquivel</td>
<td>Vague Areas</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (&quot;Gracias a Dios&quot;)</td>
<td>Mix of English and Spanish; Instant Translation: 7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mariachi Girl</em></td>
<td>Roxanne Schroeder-Andrew</td>
<td>Borderland (Zacatecas, MX; Hidalgo, MX, &amp; US)</td>
<td>The first song frames the play as a fiesta.</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (&quot;Dios nos guíe&quot;)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Songsa fully in Spanish; Instant Translation: 5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Simply Maria or the American Dream</em></td>
<td>Josefinia López</td>
<td>Borderland (MX &amp; Los Angeles, CA); Dreamscape</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (Catholic weddings &amp; Maria &quot;marries&quot; Jose, alluding to the Holy Family)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Suenos Frosted Flakes</em></td>
<td>Juan Enrique Carrillo</td>
<td>Borderland (Angels, CA); Dreamscape</td>
<td>Quinceañera</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 4</td>
<td>Oruguitas; Overbearing abuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>That Day in Tucson</em></td>
<td>Guillermo Reyes</td>
<td>Borderland (Tucson, AZ)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Catholic/Christian References (Virgin Mary)</td>
<td>Mix of English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 2</td>
<td>Oruguitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Smartest Girl in the World</em></td>
<td>Miriam Gonzales</td>
<td>Dreamscape, Vague location</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mix of English, very little Spanish and Spanglish; Instant translation 4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Transition of Doodie Pequeno</em></td>
<td>Gabriel Jason Dean</td>
<td>Borderland (Southern CA &amp; MX)</td>
<td>Halloween</td>
<td>Spirit Animal</td>
<td>English, Spanish, and Spanglish; Instant Translation: 11; A character speaks mostly in broken English; Doodle is learning to codeswitch</td>
<td>The American ball is dressed as a Bandit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Xochi Jaguar Princess</em></td>
<td>Elaine Romero</td>
<td>Borderland (MX, Venice, CA, &amp; Tucson, AZ); Dreamscape</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Spirit Animal; Other Religious References (Mayan and Aztec gods, La Llorona, &amp; Other folk creatures)</td>
<td>English with very little Spanglish</td>
<td>Oruguitas; Abuela</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Average Use of Instant Translation: 9.75**
**Plays with less than 10: 11 (8 were written by Hispanic authors)**
**Plays with 10 or more: 9 (6 were written by Hispanic Authors)**
LIST OF REFERENCES


Carillo, Juan Enrique. *Sueños Frosted Flakes (The Jalapeño, Heavy Metal, Baseball, Frosted Flake Adventure of Mr. Henry Carillo)*. *Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o


Casas, José. *la ofrenda (the offering)*. *Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theater for Young Audiences*, edited by José Casas and Christina Marín, Dramatic Publishing Company, 2018, pp. 385-419.


“¡Feliz Cumpleaños!” *Mickey Mouse*, created by Paul Rudish, season 3, episode 7, Disney-ABC Domestic Television, 2015.


Go, Diego, Go! Created by Chris Gifford, Nickelodeon Animation Studio, 2005-2011.


Jackson, Wilfred et al., director. Saludos Amigos. Walt Disney Productions, 1943.


*Phineas and Ferb*. Created by Dan Povenmire, and Jeff Marsh, Disney Channel, 17 Aug. 2007.

“Quinceañera.” *Wizards of Waverly Place*, created by Todd J. Greenwald, season 1, episode 20, Disney-ABC Domestic Television, 2008.

“Quinces.” *One Day at a Time*, created by Whitney Blake and Allan Manings, season 1, episode 13, Sony Pictures Television, 2017.


*Star vs. the Forces of Evil*. Created by Daron Nefcy, Disney Channel, 18 Jan. 2015.


“Welcome to the Quinceañera.” The Neighborhood, created by Jim Reynolds, season 4, episode 19, Paramount Global Distribution Group, 2022.

