



In the Heights' and Colorism: What Is Lost When Afro-Latinos Are Erased

The film, set in a New York neighborhood known as the Little Dominican Republic, didn't cast dark-skinned Latinos in lead roles. Our writers discuss how that absence reverberates.

By Maira García, Sandra E. García, Isabela Herrera, Concepción de León, Maya Phillips and A.O. Scott

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"In the Heights," the long-delayed Hollywood adaptation of the Broadway musical, has been heralded as a step for more Latino representation in Hollywood, but a conversation has emerged about colorism and the casting of the film.

The New York neighborhood at the center of the story, Washington Heights, is predominantly Afro-Dominican. In an interview, Felice León, a video producer for The Root, asked Jon M. Chu, the director, and some of the stars about the lack of dark-skinned leads in the film: "As a Black woman of Cuban descent specifically from New York City," she told him, "it would be remiss of me to not acknowledge the fact that most of your principal actors were light-skinned or white-passing Latinx people." Chu said it was a conversation and something he needed to be educated about. In the end, he said, they "tried to get the people who were best for those roles."

Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is a part of the film's creative team, which includes the writer Quiara Alegría Hudes, addressed the criticism last week in a statement on Twitter. He apologized for falling short in "trying to paint a mosaic of this community." Several prominent Latinos came to Miranda's defense, including the pioneering Latina actress Rita Moreno, who later backtracked her comments. It's not the first time Chu has had to contend with questions of identity. His box office hit "Crazy Rich Asians" also had to address similar issues when it came to the casting of Asians and Asian-Americans in the film. (The lead actor in that film, Henry Golding, is biracial.)

I asked five critics and reporters at The Times to weigh in on the criticism and what it means for representation in the arts. These are edited excerpts from the conversation. MAIRA GARCIA



The film's creative team, including Jon M. Chu, left, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, are facing accusations of colorism. Macall Polay/Warner Bros.

Like many people, my first trip back to the movies since the pandemic hit was to see "In the Heights" on the big screen. It was a joyful moment, after a year where so much wasn't. It was thrilling to see brown bodies singing and dancing in a city that has been my home for nearly a decade.

There has long been a lack of Latino representation in Hollywood, and "In the Heights" was aimed as a step toward rectifying that. However, León's interview raised important questions about colorism in the casting in the film, which is centered on a neighborhood that is a big Afro-Latino population. Did the creative team do enough when it comes to representation?

CONCEPCIÓN DE LEÓN In my view, no. I've been concerned about the issue of colorism in the film since the trailer was released. Aside from Leslie Grace, the Dominican-American actress who plays Nina, a Puerto Rican college student struggling with belonging and community at Stanford University, none of the lead actors are Afro-Latino. Hollywood has long valorized and highlighted fair-skinned

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Latinos over Afro-Latinos, often denying the latter roles that reflect their culture. It's a limited and inaccurate representation of Latinos, who are diverse in culture and complexion.

But what makes these casting choices particularly egregious is that the movie is set in the Heights, which is known as Little Dominican Republic. At least 90 percent of Dominicans are of African descent, according to a recent population survey, and I am one of them. So why were we not prominently featured? As far as what the team could have done differently — it seems simple. They could have hired more Black Latino actors, not to fill a diversity quota, but because that would have reflected the truth of the neighborhood. Or at the very least, they could have been clearer that this film was not meant to represent them.

SANDRA E. GARCIA Dominicans are of African descent, they are a Black people and I did not see that represented. The Latinos I saw were the kind that Hollywood has always favored: Jennifer Lopez, Sofia Vergara-adjacent Latinos. Latinos like myself, where there is no ambiguity about their Blackness, those who wear their Blackness on their face, barely make the cut in any production whether it's Hollywood or Univision. There is a reason my mother can name all the dark-skinned newscasters on Telemundo and it's because they are rare to see in the spotlight. "In the Heights" continues the gaslighting that Black Latinos have endured for my entire lifetime. Our culture is beautiful, our music is beautiful but we are not enough to be highlighted with it. Everything we create, like the salchichón and mangú meal shown in the movie, or the merengue and sliver of bachata, can be celebrated, but not us.



Various flags show up in the "Carnaval del Barrio" scene, but not many Black faces. Warner Bros.

MAYA PHILLIPS I'll admit that I didn't notice it at first; my eyes were too glossed over with the happiness of seeing a big, bright musical on a big screen. But I did start to notice the absence: For example, in the "Carnaval del Barrio" number (which was beautifully choreographed, by the way!), there's that part where the camera pans around to show different groups of residents repping various flags, and I noticed the lack of Black faces. And Benny really stood out to me as the one dark-skinned character apparently in the whole neighborhood! Sometimes my mother and I will be watching a movie or a play or just be out in the world somewhere and play a game called "Find the Black People" — like "Where's Waldo?" but less fun, ha. So many public arts and gatherings seem to just pretend Black people don't exist.

I will admit the same, Maya. I am a big fan of musicals and Latin music, so I think some of this clouded the truth about this particular neighborhood — it is predominantly Afro-Latino and the lack of Black faces has become a more glaring omission.

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ISABELIA HERRERA I've seen justifications like, "In the Heights" is not a documentary and is not meant to represent the actual Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights; it's a fantasia of a Latino neighborhood. Yes, we understand that this is a musical, a story with surreal and fantastical elements. Even if we accept the view that a fantasy does not have to be representative, that argument assumes that Black Latinos do not belong in these imagined worlds anyway. At the same time, the director, actors and producers have used the language of community celebration and the cultural history of the actual neighborhood of Washington Heights to market the film. This feels like a contradiction, and one that is very telling for me.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/21/movies/in-the-heights-colorism.html>

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What does colorism mean in the Latino community and what are the ways it manifests itself? What do we lose by not having a broad spectrum of representation in the arts?

DE LEÓN Colorism in the Latino community manifests itself similarly to how it does in the Black American community: The fairer your skin, the more beautiful and desirable you are perceived to be. My complexion was always a topic of conversation when I was growing up, and cousins of mine who are darker than me had it worse, often ridiculed with demeaning words like "mona," meaning monkey, that are normalized but have racist undertones.

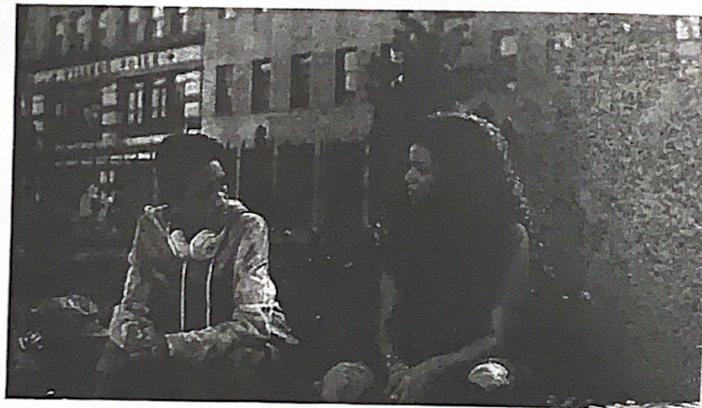
In the Dominican Republic and elsewhere there is the concept of "improving the race" by dating white, thereby lightening your lineage. It's a notion that has roots in colonization, when Spain implemented a caste system on the island of Hispaniola, which the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti, that placed folks who were of European or mixed European descent higher on the social ladder and allowed them more opportunities to advance. Though this system no longer exists, there are still traces of it in how Black Latinos are viewed and treated. They are more impoverished and have less access to a quality education, housing or health care than fair-skinned Latinos. By erasing them onscreen, we are perpetuating this harm and furthering the narrative that only white is right.

In my family (I am Mexican-American), I am darker skinned than some of my relatives and it earned me the nickname Prieta or dark-skinned. I have siblings and cousins who are fairer than me, even white-passing. While some might consider words like "prieta" terms of endearment, they can also be very damaging in that they convey a difference — you are not the norm, which is to say, white.

GARCIA As someone who has existed in Black skin as a Latina my whole life, colorism is everywhere in Latinidad, an academic term that says Latinos share common threads of identity. The scars of colonization and a dictator that powdered his skin to appear lighter are still visible in Dominican culture. For people like myself, those scars are still very viscerally felt. I do believe that Dominicans are awakening to a Blackness that they have been taught to eschew, and I think there is more room for dark-skinned Dominicans now than ever before. That being said, the status quo is that lighter-skinned Latinos are better and many people are not ready to renounce that, for whatever reason.

A.O. SCOTT That seems to be the case in a lot of Latin American cinema and television as well. It's rare to see Black or Indigenous protagonists in films from the Caribbean or Brazil, and rarer still to find directors from those backgrounds.

PHILLIPS I think this all reflects the terribly narrow view our society has of racial representation, that a Latino person must look a very specific way and a Black person must look a very specific way, and those identities can't intersect. It's as though there's this fear that having that broad spectrum of representation would be confusing.



Leslie Grace, right, is the sole Afro-Latina among the "In the Heights" leads, who include Gregory Diaz IV as a Dreamer. Warner Bros.

The film didn't have major stars in the lead roles because the creative team wanted to take a chance on newer talent. It seems like it could have been the perfect opportunity to prevent the colorism issues. Chu said that they selected the best actors for the roles. What did you think about his response?

DE LEÓN His response perpetuates the notion that Black actors are somehow less talented or capable than white actors, when in fact casting choices are often marred by personal biases and ingrained ideas about who is deserving or worthy of a lead role. It's no accident that Latinos onscreen are (mostly) fair-skinned. It's a reflection of a global culture of anti-Blackness. There have been some exceptions. Melissa Calderon is an Afro-Dominican with a prominent role on "Gentefied," the Netflix sitcom about the quickly changing Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. And newcomer Alycia Pascual-Peña, an Afro-Dominican from the Bronx, was one of the leads in the Amy Poehler-helmed "Moxie." But these representations are rare.

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GARCIA People are very much used to the dark-skinned woman, still in 2021, playing the maid in the novela. As smart as Chu and Miranda are, they conformed just like everyone else does. There is absolutely no way that there wasn't a dark-skinned Black Latino to hire for a lead role. There are too many of us. It is easy to believe that rhetoric, but it is simply false. I do believe that people have been trained to believe that a Latino looks like Gisele Bündchen, Jennifer Lopez and Sofia Vergara, whatever their heritage. It takes a lot of conditioning to get here and there has been more than enough. This is a movie they wanted to sell and they perpetuated the idea that Black Latino cannot sell a movie.

HERRERA I would have loved to see someone like Jharrel Jerome in this film; he is a Black Dominican actor who was in "Moonlight" and won an Emmy for his role on Netflix's "When They See Us." There was an open casting call for "In the Heights," which is supposed to democratize the casting process and allow for more emerging talent to audition. So the point about not having enough major Black Latino stars seems baseless.

As for Chu's response, it is the same excuse that white Anglo executives and casting directors have used to exclude people of color from Hollywood for decades. That, for me, really exposes how deep the problem runs. The issue goes beyond one film or one casting decision: it is about the legacies of white supremacy that have positioned whiteness as a universal experience from which we can tell stories.



Lin-Manuel Miranda, right, at the Washington Heights premiere of "In the Heights." He has apologized for falling short in the film's casting. Jeenah Moon/Reuters

Miranda issued an apology on Monday. It's unclear how much of a hand he had in the casting decisions for the film — he was one part of the creative team — but he is an important voice in Hollywood and on Broadway. What did you think about it? Is there unfair pressure put on Miranda, making him the stand-in for many issues involving the Latin community?

DE LEÓN That Miranda is being held to task for the representation of Black Latinos is a product of the continued lack of diversity in Hollywood. We don't have many heroes, or people to look to for Latino stories. That's not Miranda's fault, of course. He didn't create the dynamic. But to quote Spider-Man, "With great power comes great responsibility" — especially when your film is set in a Black Latino neighborhood. It raises the question of what stories are prioritized and why. It capitalizes on Blackness while ignoring Black people. His apology is welcome and warranted, but it is not the end of the conversation.

GARCIA Because Miranda is such an iconic figure in Hollywood and Broadway, we feel even more deceived. This is obviously not entirely on him. Hollywood barely has the infrastructure to be fair to African American actors, let alone Black Latinos. With that said, because he behaved like he believed in Washington Heights wholeheartedly, we simply thought he saw us too. We thought he saw us at clubs, on the street, at bars, at the bodega with him. I think that is why this comes as such a shock to the Dominican community, because his vision did not meet his allegiance. I do appreciate the groundwork this lays for the other Latinos to be able to tell their singular stories on the big screen. Maybe a young Black Latina will watch "In the Heights" and become inspired to tell her truth. Now she has a pathway to get there. For that I am grateful.

He was all about portraying diversity

PHILLIPS I do have to say that I sympathize with Miranda, because I recognize and appreciate all the great work he's done for the theater community, and all the great theater he has given us. This reminds me of the conversation we had about the "Hamilton" streaming release last year and how fixated I was on the musical's near-erasure of slavery despite its subversive recasting of the founding fathers as people of color. I think his work is good and important and that he should be made aware — as any artist should — of his blind spots. But I agree with Concepción that he also shouldn't have to bear the full brunt of a problem that reflects issues in the industry at large.

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SCOTT Yes! I think it's almost inevitable that artists who make great strides in representation — something that can fairly be said about both Miranda and Chu — will be taken to task for not going far enough. Without letting them or "In the Heights" off the hook it's worth recalling just how deep and twisted the history of Hollywood mis- and non-representation has been, and how North American racial attitudes have created the invisibility that's so glaring in this movie.

Part of this history is reflected in routine casting practices that now seem outrageous. Marlon Brando played the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata in "Viva Zapata!" Natalie Wood played Maria in "West Side Story." My beloved great-uncle Eli Wallach played countless banditos. Meanwhile the few Latino actors who gained entrée into American movies were either consigned to secondary roles (like Rita Moreno in "West Side Story") or obliged to de-emphasize their identities. Black actors also faced severe obstacles, but they weren't the same obstacles, partly because in Hollywood, Black and Latino were often assumed or imagined to be mutually exclusive categories.

That assumption set the trap that "In the Heights" fell into. Again, that's not to absolve anyone involved in the project for choices that they made, but rather to identify the powerful ideology that made those choices seem so natural, even as they flew in the face of experience and reality.



A salon scene in "In the Heights" focuses on the customer played by Grace. She's surrounded by Barrera, left, Beatriz, Rubin-Vega and Polanco. Macall Polay/Warner Bros.

HERRERA Latinidad itself is a fraught category, because it centers a homogeneous and monolithic conception of ethnicity over the often erased experiences of Indigenous and Black communities. I hope this issue will open the door for these kinds of conversations in public — for my fellow white (and non-Black) Latinos to listen and learn about the history of colorism, to acquire the tools to speak about these issues, and not in a defensive way. The onus should not only fall on Black Latinos.

Is it possible to love the film and still have concerns about the casting? Are they mutually exclusive?

DE LEÓN Of course it's OK to still love the film. It's not a binary discussion. I've heard many people say they loved the film despite its shortcomings. There were many ways in which watching the film was gratifying — seeing my beloved Dominican flag not only depicted, but exalted onscreen was a joy, as was the depiction of common immigrant struggles such as yearning for your home country, making great sacrifices to make it in New York or struggling with finding community in college. Not to mention the food and a lot of the music (though I am still salty that bachata, quintessential to the Dominican Republic, was not more prominently featured). But none of this is enough. You can't celebrate pasteles en hoja without celebrating Black Dominicans. You can't celebrate salsa without recognizing that its percussion is inherited from African drums. Showcasing these cultural elements is no doubt important, but it cannot be divorced from or done in lieu of depicting Black Latinos themselves.

GARCIA I enjoyed seeing Highbridge Pool in that beautiful musical number. I enjoyed the central role of the fire escape, the bodega, the food and the music. I identified with a lot of it. As a very Black presenting Latina, I'm almost used to not seeing myself in Latino media, even when it is our culture that is being exalted. I am not speaking for all Black Latinos, but the realization of your nonexistence in such a cultural blockbuster simply hurts. The gaslighting that comes with the validation of our music and culture but the erasure of our bodies is almost normal. To crib from the 1990s "Selena" biopic, we are simply too Black for Latinos and too Latino for anyone else.

LLIPS An important lesson is that whether it's a film or a play or whatever, the work begins with casting but doesn't end there. It's also about the story and the context. Creating art about brown and Black people isn't always as easy as we'd like to think — or, to be more exact, creating good, nuanced art about brown and Black people isn't always as easy as we'd like to think.

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HERRERA At its core, the act of criticism is a labor of love. We critique cultural objects because we have hope in them, and we want them to be better. I often think about a 2019 interview in *The Nation* with the poet and writer Hanif Abdurraqib. He talks about the notion that criticism is something that arises out of anger, bitterness or jealousy. To me, that anger is in service of something else: it allows us to imagine a more just political future. As he says, "Critique, for me, has to be an act of love — or else it's a waste of time. And so I have to figure out a way to honor artists I care about while still understanding that my job isn't necessarily to bow to them." It also helps me interpret art outside of "this is good" and "this is bad."

SCOTT That is such an important point about criticism, which all too often is misconstrued as "hating" or "canceling." On "The Late Show With Stephen Colbert" the other night Rita Moreno tried to defend Miranda — "a man who literally brought Latinness and Puerto Ricanness to America" — by in effect wishing his critics would just be quiet, or wait until some unspecified, more appropriate time. She has since apologized, and a recent documentary details the bigotry she faced throughout her career. In any case, protecting works of art from criticism does them no favors. It's as simplistic as dismissing them for their shortcomings.

HERRERA I think an important aspect of this debate is that it has once again exposed the limitations of a conversation focused on representation. For so long, representation has been heralded as a solution to racism; moments like this really expose the farce of that idea. The argument is often that representation, especially in spaces where marginalized communities have historically been excluded, will save us from discrimination. But there are limits to what representation can do.

When we focus all of our critical attention on representation and inclusion, it distracts us from the work of understanding the conditions that create racism in the first place. The conversation is not just about "In the Heights," or about the number of Latino creators in Hollywood — it's about the history of anti-Blackness, which has permitted white and lighter-skinned Latinos to appear most visible in all aspects of our culture.

Just because there is a Latino in the room does not mean that they cannot perpetuate harmful systems of power, or that they are not capable of exclusion. So I want to end with a reminder to my fellow white Latinos, who have a unique responsibility to listen to these kinds of conversations. I'm not going to sit on a high horse and pretend I am not complicit in these dynamics as a white Dominican woman. But I want us to think deeply about how we are using our privilege in these industries. Not to center whiteness in the conversation, but because we need to consider how we use our access to certain spaces and whether we are committed to anti-racist work in them, no matter how uncomfortable it may make us.

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