Limbo of the gutters: The omission of color in the construction of Afrolatinidad in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

Limbo das sarjetas: a omissão da cor na construção da Afrolatinidade em Spider-Man: into the Spider-Verse (2018)

YAÍR ANDRÉ CUENÚ-MOSQUERA

PhD Candidate in Hispanic Studies — Texas A&M University, College of Arts & Sciences, GLAC (Global Languages and Cultures), USA

yaircuenu@gmail.com

yaircuenu@tamu.edu

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Abstract

Cinema, as a sense-creating device, has the potential to produce images in the minds of its viewers by simply suggesting ideas. With small symbols it is possible to create meanings that operate in the mind of the observer through an analytical exercise: those who watch a film use their capacity of comprehension or interpretative limitations to read what they are observing on the screen. So, absences; for example, situations that happen out of frame, or incomplete representations of bodies, can all be used to create meanings. And even more so when that which is not seen makes so much noise that its existence is perceived. That is, when elements are omitted that, despite their omission, produce an echo in the interpretation of a type of spectator capable of perceiving them. This is the case with the film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), which is presented as the first big-screen version of an Afro-Latino Spider-Man.

This article reflects on the constitutive elements with which Afro-Latinness is constructed to affirm that Miles Morales as a character is a presumably inclusive instrument, which incipiently and precariously develops the construction of an Afro-Latinness, limiting the character to his skin color as an integrating element. It is proposed that such precariousness in the construction of Afro-Latinity coincides with the fact of attributing to him the ability to become invisible, thus eliminating the only inclusive aspect that makes him stand out. It is concluded that it is precisely the black-skinned character, whom they intend to make visible in the discourse of diversity and racial integrity proposed by the narrative plane of the story, who lacks visibility, so that in the film the racial condition and the Latino origin of Miles Morales remain in a non-place that, instead of making Afro-Latinity visible, invisibilizes it as a method and narrative "virtue". In addition, it proposes the figure of the mentor of conscience as a transforming guide that can really have an impact on the construction of the character's identity.

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Keywords

spider-man | afrolatinidad | gutter | comics | miles morales | mentor of conscience

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Resumo

O cinema, enquanto dispositivo de criação de sentido, tem o potencial de produzir imagens na mente dos seus espectadores, através da simples sugestão de ideias. Com pequenos símbolos é possível criar significados que operam na mente do observador através de um exercício analítico: quem vê um filme usa a sua capacidade de compreensão ou limitações interpretativas para ler o que está a observar no ecrã. Assim, as ausências, por exemplo, situações que acontecem fora do plano, ou representações incompletas de corpos, podem ser usadas para criar significados. E mais ainda quando aquilo que não é visto faz ruído de tal maneira que a sua existência se torna saliente. Ou seja, quando são omitidos elementos que, apesar da sua ausência, produzem eco na interpretação de um tipo de espetador capaz de os perceber. Esse é o caso do filme Homem-Aranha: no Aranhaverso (2018), que se apresenta como a primeira versão em cinema de um Homem-Aranha afro-latino.

Este artigo reflete sobre os elementos constitutivos com os quais a afro-latinidade é construída, para afirmar que Miles Morales como personagem é um instrumento presumivelmente inclusivo, que desenvolve de forma incipiente e precária a construção de uma afro-latinidade, limitando o personagem à sua cor de pele como elemento integrador. Propõe-se que tal precariedade na construção da afro-latinidade coincide com o facto de lhe atribuir a capacidade de se tornar invisível, eliminando assim o único aspeto inclusivo que o distingue. Conclui-se que é precisamente a personagem de pele negra, que pretendem tornar visível no discurso da diversidade e da integração racial proposto pelo plano narrativo da história, que carece de visibilidade, pelo que no filme a condição racial e a origem latina de Miles Morales permanecem num não-lugar que, em vez de tornar visível a afro-latinidade, a invisibiliza como método e "virtude" narrativa. Além disso, propõe a figura do mentor de consciência como um guia transformador que pode realmente ter um impacto na construção da identidade da personagem.

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Palavras–chave

In times when diversity is taking over the world, there are also trends, not without relevance, which announce an exhaustion of the discussions on identity. They define it as a theoretical issue of another era because indefiniteness is the current situation and identity pretensions are unsatisfactory. And they are right. Identity pretensions do not satisfy anyone, but that does not mean they cease to exist. That is exactly why we keep on talking about "Afrolatinidad". Let us see to whom it is useful that identities still exist, that there is such a thing as Afro-latinity and how it is defined, according to whose parameters. Therefore, I would not be surprised that in this proposal, which pretends to be a reading of the absence of a way of being in the world, contradictions can be found, to the extent that it is read as a denunciation, and not an honest reading that puts a perspective on the discussion table. In this first paragraph I allow myself to establish more precisely the destiny of this analysis: I introduce the film(s) to be analyzed and the mobilizing question; subsequently, I deal with the method through which this analysis

is directed, the theoretical concepts I apply and the readings that made mine viable; finally, I offer in the conclusions my general impressions and my interpretative proposal.

First, the question that gives form and substance to this wondering comes up to me after viewing the movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* (2018), directed by Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, and Rodney Rothman, produced by Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures Animation in partnership with Marvel Entertainment. After finishing the film, I asked myself: is Miles Morales an Afro-Latino character or an African American with a Latina mother in a Black community? To review this situation, I analyzed the construction of the character from two parameters: the relationship of identity in terms of his use of the Spanish language, and his link to a Latino community, or that is represented as such in the film. Subsequently, I focus my attention on the ability to become invisible, or invisibility that Miles experiences, being the first black Spider-Man, but at the same time, the only one "able to become invisible". In this part of the analysis, I make references to the film *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, with the purpose of adding to the element of invisibility, animality (a concept I pick up from Achille Mbembe) and thus interpret the omission of color in the Afro-Latin representation in Miles Morales. I then return to the Spider-Man film and introduce Scott McCloud's "limbo of gutters" concept, introduced by Brian Montes in his article "The Paradox of Miles Morales: Social Gatekeeping and the Browning of America's Spider-Man" (2016).

INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE

Let us enter the universe, or multiverse, that this movie proposes to us. Miles Morales is a teenager who lives in Brooklyn, but he has just passed an academic exam that allowed him to go to a school in another part of New York City, which is presented in the film as a place of mostly white hegemony. As is typical of teenagers, Miles is in the process of constructing his identity, but the information we get about his situation is reduced to the conflict with the new school and the tensions between his father and uncle. We are shown a teenage boy eager to be happy in his community and with his neighborhood friends, whom we are never introduced to, but we do get to hear him greet them in the first few minutes of the film, when he is leaving the neighborhood. The configuration of community and family in Miles is striking at this point. Let us pay attention to this detail so that we can review a first factor on which many researchers agree that we can understand the construction of Latinx in the United States: community.

Latinos comprise the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (14.8 % of total population). Most Latinos reside in California, Texas, Florida, and New York. Overwhelmingly, many Latinos residing in the US are of Mexican origin (64 %), followed by Puerto Rican (9 %), other Hispanic (7.7 %), and Central American (7.6 %). Approximately 60 % are native born and 40 % are foreign born (US Census Bureau, 2006). Latino families in the US are most often younger and larger than their non-Latino counterparts (Ho, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2004), with approximately 70 % under the age of 40 (Bermudez y Mancini 2013, 216).

The above quote is from the article "Familias Fuertes: Family Resilience Among Latinos" (2013), by J. Maria Bermudez and Jay A. Mancini, in which they explore the place of resilience as a determining factor in the future of Latino families. In the article they detail several of the factors that Latino families face when they arrive in the United States, for example, they indicate that "Nonetheless, when Latinos come to the US, they experience multiple losses (Miller & Gonzalez, 2009), including leaving familiar customs, a dominant language other than English, friend and family networks, and a sense of belonging". If we analyze this quote from Bermudez and Mancini and compare it with what we see of Miles, we can see that it does not show a difficulty of linguistic adaptation. Miles does not "suffer" the loss of Spanish. In fact, he mentions a few words; expressions such as "adiós", "no lo sé". He never holds a conversation in Spanish, and the language does not exist except to interact with Rio Morales, his mother, whom at the beginning asks him "Dónde lo dejaste", looking for his laptop, and he replies, "Yo no sé". Jefferson David is his father, so why does Miles take his mother's last name if he is American and by tradition in the United States one takes the paternal surname? There are several speculations among fans of the series, and I will simply mention one of them, not claiming to be a concrete answer, but a speculation:

According to the Marvel Fandom, Jefferson changed his last name because the name Jefferson Davis also belonged to the one and only president of the Confederacy of the United States. He also had a bad reputation growing up because he and his brother Aaron would steal from businesses in their neighborhood, according to the comics. In one of the panels, Jefferson says that Miles's grandfather was "not a good person," and he did not want Miles to have to live with his father's reputation. (Williams 2021, 1)

In her article, "Miles Morales Is Coming Back in 'Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse (Part One)'" (2021), writer Kori Williams asks, "Why does Miles Morales (does) not go by Davis?", and her assumption makes sense. She is quoting Marvel Fandom, a website put together by fans of the company, like Wikipedia, but focused on the comic book company. Also, on that aspect Brian Montes gives his opinion stating the following: "I believe that the use of his maternal surname, Morales, also represents a strategic attempt on behalf of his creators to deracialize Morales and decentralize Morales' racial sensibility as an African American male" (2016, 5).

One of the first characteristics of Miles Morales is the fact that his last name is his mother's and not his father's, who is not an absent figure, but present, constantly present. Beyond his father, and his mother, there is his uncle Aaron, his father's brother, and there concludes his family. We see no brothers, sisters, cousins, grandparents, no one else. We know nothing of his mother's family, the Latina. His mother is light skinned, his father and uncle are dark-skinned, both are African American. Where is Miles Morales going to build a Latino-ness, where could he create a family structure in community, where could he have a community, for that matter? We know of no neighbors with whom the family interacts, beyond that very brief fragment I referred to earlier, when he is leaving the neighborhood for the other school, where he is also boarding during the week and only on weekends does he return home to his parents.

So, in my analysis of the parameters that construct the character in terms of the Spanish language, we can see that its influence is almost null. He resorts to it in a way that could even be seen as decorative, since he does not develop at any time a real use of it. There is no situation that leads him to resort to Spanish, perhaps the strongest mark he could exhibit of a possible Latin heritage. And I want to be careful with that "Latin heritage" because I do not want to get into the dynamic of qualifying as "Latin" a reference, cultural expression, or flag, and thus disqualify the others. The reality is that language is that element shared transversally among Latin American countries, it is the bridge between the various forms of "Latino" in the United States. And Miles does not have that. His Latino community is reduced to his mom.

SO, IS MILES AN AFRICAN AMERICAN O AFRO LATINX?

We return to the question that mobilizes this analysis Is Miles Morales an Afro-Latino character or an Afro-American with a Latina mother in a Black community? Is it enough to be born from the womb of a Latina woman to be considered Afro-Latino? In the case of Miles, we perceive that there is no established community to which he can be openly associated. I repeat, Miles has no community that feeds into anyone other than his parents and uncle. Not for nothing the appearance of all forms of Spider-Man, the activation of that multiverse becomes a sort of community for him. In

the absence of a focal group in which he feels himself to be a part of, he appeals to these beings with whom he shares the particularity of being the result of a mutation after the bite of a spider. But even in this community composed of those who come from other universes, his place is questioned. And that is the other part of the movie: young Miles not only has trouble adjusting to his new school, but he has trouble relating, trouble adjusting to any group other than the "Mommy-Daddy-Uncle" trident, because his world is reduced to that. There are no other people, he has no extended family that shows up in the story, not even a group of neighborhood friends.

The character of Miles Morales is built based on the conflicts of his age, the particularities of his person and the evident absence of a community and/or extended family relationship. It is quite a contradiction that in the so-called first black Spider-Man there is no community relationship, no extended family relationship, and not even some bonds of brotherhood. In fact, it is the movie itself that shows us how his roommate at the new school ends up becoming his best friend, which, in fact, seems to be a goal Miles has set for himself. What about his friends — his best friends? When he has a crisis when he learns that his uncle is The Prowler, he tries to reach out to someone because he is so afraid and anxious, and he has no choice but to call his father. What kind of Latino community building does a teenager who has no extended family and no friend to call?

There are several elements that Brian Montes discusses in his article in this regard. Not for nothing does he talk about paradoxes. The paradoxes of Miles Morales. Because this character is quite paradoxical, it seems an attempt by several creative minds, to bet on diversity, but having as a parameter the establishment of a reading from the hegemony. Let us analyze the following quote:

> According to Jesse Schedeen of IGN.com (2011: n.p) the *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* series starring Miles Morales is meant to take place in a "more urban, racially diverse, and tense landscape." Schedeen (2011: n.p.) further goes on to state that "Miles is simply a character who speaks to a slightly different teen experience, and one not nearly as well represented in superhero comics as Peter's." This urban "teen experience" includes winning admission into a charter school (see article by Nama and Haddad in this volume), interracial children, and the presence of other diverse ethnic/racial characters including his best friend Ganke, roommate Judge, superhero Cloak, and villains the Prowler, the Taskmaster, and the Scorpion. What you have according to Axel Alonso (2011: n.p.), Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, "is a Spider-Man for the 21st century". (Montes 2016, 3)

Although in this quote he refers to Judge as his best friend, in the film he practically does not exist, for his part all we see of Ganke, his roommate is that he is at his computer when he first appears, then he faints when he sees the group of "Spider-verses" in the room and at the end of the film we see him fist-bumping with Miles, when it seems that they have already become best friends. Schedeen calls Miles Morales a "Spider-Man for the 21st century" and his reasons are that it is that "Miles is simply a character that speaks to a slightly different adolescent experience, and one that is not as well represented in superhero comics as Peter's." However, it is worth mentioning that he can be a disruptive character in literary versions, as Mario Worlds and Henry "Cody" Miller refer in their article "Miles Morales: Spider-Man and Reimagining the Canon for Racial Justice" (2023), but that is another format that is not the one we are analyzing here.

Interestingly, Schedeen talks about being "slightly different," indicating that his cultural or racial status is only slightly different from that of Peter Parker. He defines him as such based also on what he calls an "urban adolescent experience (that) includes (...) interracial children and the presence of other ethnically/racially diverse characters, such as his best friend Ganke, his roommate Judge." It attracts my attention that he refers to interraciality, the "interracial children" because, specifically in terms of skin color, in Miles we do not see interraciality, but a dark skin like that of his dad or his uncle, Black Americans. Miles' interraciality is never a theme that is developed, his mom has no relevance, appearance, or participation, outside of the house, and she is the only window to the Latino world. It also speaks to the presence of ethnically/racially diverse characters, when we only see blacks and whites. Then Peni Parker appears, who is Japanese and comes from another multiverse. Before moving on to another part of the analysis, I will quote Brian Montes' words about this part of the background:

> Ironically, Miles Morales demonstrates no Puerto Rican or Latina/o cultural markers. Unlike other notable Latina/o characters such as Araña, Vibe, and Blue Beetle, we never see Miles speak in Spanish. There is no code switching. There is no indication that Miles has ever been to Puerto Rico or that he even knows any other Puerto Rican/Latina/o kids. Brian Michael Bendis, writer and creator of Miles Morales, barely makes any mention of Miles's ethnicity. There is no cultural mythology to Miles Morales in the vein of *El Muerte* (1989) by Javier Hernandez—a character that Mauricio Espinoza discusses at length in this collection. There is no attempt on the part of Bendis to use Morales as a token for multiculturalism in the vein of Anya Sofia Corazon, aka Araña. The only marker of Miles's *Latinidad* is his last name. The storytelling of Miles is not centered on his experiences as an Afro-Latino as is the case with other non-white characters but rather

as a young urban kid. Miles, for all intents and purposes, remains culturally unmarked: a sanitized version of multiculturalism that ought to remain palatable to a white normative America. (2016, 5)

Indeed, there is no *latinidad* in Miles Morales. And at this point in the analysis, I would like to propose that Miles Morales is a Black, African American character with a Latino mother. Not an Afro-Latino. And, if one insists on categorizing him as Afro-Latino, I would say that he is an Afro-Latino person with no Latino community, no extended family and no tradition that reveals a Latino ancestry or history, other than the sporadic use of Spanish to answer some things his mother says to him, a mother who also uses it sporadically, as a stylistic embellishment, rather than a method of communication. Miles has a black father, a black uncle, and lives in a mostly black neighborhood which, in fact, is constructed in the film as a paragon of the traditional class and color contrast in the United States, and this aspect of the construction of a racial contrast in New York is also referred to by Brian Montes in his article:

> This white spatial imaginary is compounded by the fact that Parker lives in the relatives suburban neighborhood of Forest Hills, Queens. According to 2010 data collected by the Forest Hills Chamber of Commerce, the neighborhood of Forest Hills, Queens is a relatively prosperous neighborhood that includes one of New York City's most exclusive neighborhoods, Forest Hills Gardens. Miles Morales, on the other hand, resides in an undisclosed Brooklyn neighborhood. Based on 2012 statistics gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau about 22% of families and one quarter (25.1%) of the population of Brooklyn live below the poverty line. This is in stark contrast to Forest Hills Queens which, with a median household income of $65,000 is well above the Brooklyn average of $42,000 (citydata.com). (2021, 3)

These data provided by Montes in his article, which seem to belong to a demographic analysis applied to sociological rather than cinematographic studies, are perfectly functional for the understanding of the social characteristics that feed the construction of this "paradoxical person", to use Brian Montes' adjective. So, even though the purpose is to tell the story of another Spider-Man, a "diverse" one, an "Afro-Latino" one, the socio-cultural and urban framework we are presented with is the contrast between the affluent and the impoverished areas. Based on statistics, Miles Morales lives where people with much less money live than the area where Peter Parker comes from. So, the diversity proposed in the film continues to be nourished by a white-hegemonic gaze. Montes continues in his article referring to this supposed multiculturalism:

I argue that even within the multicultural imaginary of Marvel's multiverse, social borders are still maintained in safeguarding a white Eurocentric spatial privilege. Despite being a rather progressive medium, the superhero genre continues to reflect our nation's unrelenting struggle with race and the politics of multiculturalism.

Despite significant efforts made to diversify its imagery and its imaginings of New York City, the city continues to remain, even within the genre of non-white superhero comics, a racially white city. (2016, 3)

I agree with Brian Montes that multiculturalism is still basically a matter of the perception and presentation of life in New York from a segregationist perspective. A place where white is synonymous with power and social status, while black is synonymous with impoverishment and lack of social standing. In this way we define the social and family context and the community characteristics that are presented to us in the film around the figure of Miles Morales. Let us now move on to the second part of the analysis, in which I address the concept of invisibilization from a social science perspective, then the concept of "limbo of the gutters" and animality, along with a brief discussion about the construction of Blackness in philosophical terms. Finally, in my conclusions I will try to give an answer to this question: "Why being invisible? Is there some form of agency[1], understood from a philosophical perspective, by marginalized subjects or is this capacity to be invisible another form of the invisibilization of the marginalized?" Throughout the text I will use the term "agency" to refer to the philosophical concept I mention. In my notes at the end, you can expand on this.

INVISIBLE TO WHOM? INVISIBILITY AS AN ABILITY AGAINST WHAT THREAT? AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE INVISIBILIZED MINORITY?

First, let us review what is meant by invisibilization from a social science perspective. For this purpose I take as a reference the studies of Felipe Bastidas and Marbella Torrealba in their article "Definición y desarrollo del concepto «proceso de invisibilización» para el análisis social. Una aplicación preliminar a algunos casos de la sociedad venezolana" (2014). From it we do not intend to approach to its

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[1] In very general terms, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity. The philosophy of action provides us with a standard conception and a standard theory of action. The former construes action in terms of intentionality, the latter explains the intentionality of action in terms of causation by the agent's mental states and events. From this, we obtain a standard conception and a standard theory of agency. There are alternative conceptions of agency, and it has been argued that the standard theory fails to capture agency (or distinctively human agency). Further, it seems that genuine agency can be exhibited by beings that are not capable of intentional action, and it has been argued that agency can and should be explained without reference to causally efficacious mental states and events. Schlosser, Markus, "Agency", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/agency/

application to the Venezuelan context, but only to the definition of the concept:

> El término de invisibilización, aunque no es nuevo en las ciencias sociales, y se aplica con regularidad, aún no ha sido definido ni analizado completamente. Se usa para dar cuenta de un hecho real, un grupo social que la sociedad en su mayoría no hace evidente o una mayoría omitida y discriminada por las élites en el poder. La invisibilización está relaciona da con la discriminación de minorías — o mayorías tradicionalmente omitidas y oprimidas — étnicas, sociales y culturales; razón por la cual también se asocia con la vulnerabilidad social. Considerando el uso del término en diferentes investigaciones y documentos (Angola, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Rodríguez-Mora y López-Zambrano, 2009; Citro, 2006; Programa Conjunto de las Naciones Unidad sobre el VIH/sida, 2000), se definió invisibilización como: los procesos culturales dirigidos por un grupo hegemónico, para omitir la presencia de un grupo social (considerado) minoritario, con la finalidad de suprimir su identidad, y así reducir la resistencia a la dominación y mantener el poder político (toma de decisiones) y el control sociocultural (coerción) sobre el mismo[2]. (Bastidas y Torrealba 2014, 3)

So, the invisibilization that this proposal analyzes, and that I apply as a concept to the figure of Miles Morales, or that he represents as a supposed Afro-Latino, is connected to his "ability" to make himself invisible. Let us think about how particular it is that the only black Spider-Man, therefore representative of one of the so-called "colored minorities" in the United States, together with, for example, the Latino communities, is the only one capable of making himself invisible to the power.

Miles Morales is a Spiderman who can disappear. Peter Parker of another universe, who becomes Miles' guide in his universe, is a white mentor who, in addition, could be qualified as a "conscious mentor", following the proposal of Maria Chavez, which we will analyze later. The truth is that this ability to become invisible is applied by Miles to fight against an enemy or to flee. In his case, if we do not contact the final part of the movie, when he hits a couple of times Olivia "Liv" Octavius (a.k.a. Doctor Octopus), who is suffocating Peter Parker, his mentor, all the time he uses the ability to flee. His body, with its skin color, disappears and as viewers we are asked to

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2 The term invisibilization, although not new in the social sciences, and regularly applied, has not yet been fully defined and analyzed. It is used to account for a real fact, a social group that society for the most part does not make evident or a majority that is omitted and discriminated against by the elites in power. Invisibilization is related to the discrimination of ethnic, social, and cultural minorities — or traditionally omitted and oppressed majorities -, which is why it is also associated with social vulnerability. Considering the use of the term in different researches and documents (Angola, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Rodríguez- Mora and López- Zambrano, 2009; Citro, 2006; Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, 2000), invisibilization was defined as: the cultural processes directed by a hegemonic group, to omit the presence of a social group (considered) minority, in order to suppress its identity, and thus reduce resistance to domination and maintain political power (decision making) and sociocultural control (coercion) over it. [Translation of the author]

interpret that disappearance as a virtuoso ability possessed only by Miles among the Spider-Men of the multiverses.

That is, the only time he uses his power to become invisible to fight is when he goes to protect his conscious mentor, who is also a representative of class hegemony, as we saw earlier with the film's demographic analysis of New York City, and color hegemony, being a white man. But before I continue, it seems appropriate to define what I mean by the concept of "conscious mentor". In her book *Latino Professionals in America: Testimonies of Politics, Perseverance and Success* (2019), Maria Chavez dedicates the last chapter, which she refers to as "conclusions", to a series of analyses of future situations that could be encountered in the topic discussed. Again, she sets forth her personal example, as a method to evidence the ways in which the system of discrimination operates and has operated in her life to make her feel that she does not belong, in this case hers, to the academic world.

Thus, she introduces the concept of "Conscious Mentor", coined by Olivia Mejía, which refers to the kind of allies that can be found along the way when the purpose is to break down obstacles that prevent access to places of power. Specifically, Mejía defines it this way: "white academics and administrators-people who did not share my same lived experiences but were committed to making our professions reflect the diversity in our nation". So, under this perspective, the "conscious mentor" would be someone who comes from the hegemonic group and opens the door to enter that place. Therefore, I propose the Peter Parker from the movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) as a "conscious mentor" for Miles Morales.

From my point of view this perspective has the potential to become a synonym for the white savior complex. Although I understand that we agree with the definition of this complex, also referred to as a syndrome, I want to make a very brief quote to an article by Icíar Gutiérrez, which is entitled "El complejo del «salvador blanco»: por qué puede ser racista hacerse fotos con niños negros en tu viaje a África" (2018), published in *El Diario*, a newspaper in Spain.

> Son fotos en apariencia inocentes, por ejemplo aquellas en las que los viajeros se retratan a sí mismos repartiendo, por un día, lápices o dulces a menores "de un país africano sin nombre". Estas imágenes, señalan, prolongan la idea de que solo la ayuda occidental salvará a África de la miseria, lo que se conoce como el "complejo del salvador blanco", un término ligado a la época colonial según el cual los europeos tenían la misión de "civilizar" el continente africano.
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> Para Antumi Toasijé, historiador y director del Centro de Estudios Panafricanos, esto también se debe a la "exotización" y a una concepción de las personas negras como objeto. "Estas personas pasan a convertirse en algo impersonal, pero a la vez bello, que

debe exhibirse como 'cosa exótica' y 'necesitada de protección'. Todo esto refuerza la idea de 'bondad innata' del blanco", sostiene Toasijé[3]. (Gutierrez 2018, 1)

Peter Parker in the film does not take pictures with Miles Morales, but he does feel that he must teach him everything. In fact, he initially rejects that teaching position, to which Miles himself wants to take him. He begs him to teach him to control his abilities, but Peter does not want to do it, and then he accepts. So, he becomes a conscious mentor. And we would not be talking about a "white savior" complex, if we were not analyzing the construction of the character, which, as I mentioned before, is based on many stereotypes that are nurtured by the racialization of Black communities in the United States. In the life of the black Spider-Man none of his guides are like him, all the Spiders of the other universes are judging his ability to be Spider-Man in the universe to which Miles belongs.

That is, Miles, as an urban Black American boy, not only has to make sure that he occupies his efforts in becoming what he wants to be, but he must prove that he is capable of being what the hegemony expects him to be. But Miles does have a black guide, in fact he has two, his father and his uncle. We do not see his mother in a direct, clear, extended role as a guiding figure, but a companion to his father, and a figure that softens what appears to be the harshness of his father figure. This type of guidance, which is exercised by his father and uncle, is what I call a mentor of conscience. They are figures that teach you to be what you want to be, from the place you have, from the intersectionality you live. Using their own experience as examples, becoming close, but with shared racial and cultural characteristics.

While it is up to Peter Parker and Gwen to encourage Miles to be Spider-Man, because they also went through doubt and the loss of a loved one, it is up to his father to encourage him to be whatever he wants to be, because he believes he can be the best at whatever he wants to be. And so impactful is the effect those words have on Miles that this is the first moment he manages to master his own powers and go to the rescue of the rest of the Spiders and save the city, as a comic book hero. Peter's insistence, Gwen's words, the expectation of the other Spider-Verses, nothing produced the impact that had the words of a person whose true power lay in the brightness of his soul. Not in his ability to stick to walls or become invisible. In the face of hegemony,

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3   They are seemingly innocent photos, for example those in which travelers portray themselves handing out, for a day, pencils, or candy to children "in an unnamed African country. These images, they point out, prolong the idea that only Western aid will save Africa from misery, known as the "white savior complex", a term linked to the colonial era according to which Europeans had the mission to "civilize" the African continent. For Antumi Toasijé, historian and director of the Center for Pan-African Studies, this is also due to "exoticization" and a conception of black people as objects. "These people become something impersonal, but at the same time beautiful, to be exhibited as an 'exotic thing' and 'in need of protection'. All this reinforces the idea of the 'innate goodness' of the white person," Toasijé argues. [Translation of the author]

the skills he sees in the subordinate subject are the possible dialogue, when it comes to encouragement, in the face of marginalized groups; shared marginalization as the language that makes possible dialogues; and brotherhood, such as that between Jefferson and Miles, black father and son.

In the conclusions we will return to the subject of the ability to become invisible that the Spider-Man represented by Miles Morales has. First, I would like to propose a reading of the concept "limbo of the gutters", referred to by Brian Montes in his article. Then move on to make some brief comments on the concept of animality that I picked up from Achille Mbembe in his book *Critique of black reason. Essay on contemporary racism* (2013), in addition to mentioning some of his ideas on the construction of the Black subject.

LIMBO OF THE GUTTERS

To analyze this metaphor of invisibilization proposed in Brian Montes' article, it is necessary to understand what "gutters" are in the language of comics. I will include the definition I extracted from the article "The amazing Mysteries of the Gutter: Drawing Interferences Between Panels in Comic Book Narratives" (2016), written in multiple collaboration by Mohit Iyyer, Varun Manjunatha, Anupam Guha, Yogarshi Vyas, Jordan Boyd-Graber, Hal Daume III, and Larry Davis.

> Comics are fragmented scenes forged into full-fledged stories by the imagination of their readers. A comics creator can condense anything from a centuries-long intergalactic war to an ordinary family dinner into a single panel. But it is what the creator hides from their pages that makes comics genuinely interesting: the unspoken conversations and unseen actions that lurk in the spaces (or gutters) between adjacent panels. (Boyd-Graber, Daume, Davis, Guha, Manjunatha, Iyver, Vyas 2016, 1)

So, in the gutters are deposited what the author does not detail directly in the comic, such as the presences that are assumed to exist, or the absences that the reader will have to complement. The minorities that are never concretely represented in the film are lodged in the limbo of the gutters, in the margins already historically arranged for them. In the very brief words in Spanish that Miles' Latina mother pronounces, in the barely babbling of little words in that language that the protagonist lets himself be heard as a response to the maternal interaction. The gutters are also the place where the author of the film hopes that we as viewers will find the *latinidad*; the family, the community, the everything that makes it possible to speak of a Latino heritage that, in the frames, is not seen. It is a good moment to refer again to Brian Montes' contributions regarding representation, or lack thereof, at the borders. That is, the existence of what is not named. I quote below:

Despite the efforts made by Alonzo and others to create a New York City representative of its proper demographics, Latinas/os continue to exist in what Scott McCloud (1993:61) refers to as the "limbo of the gutters"; the white space formed by the inner margins of two facing pages or panels. Gutters, according to McCloud, are one of the most important narrative tools in comics. They delineate the boundaries and allow the reader to understand what is happening from one scene to the next. This McCloud (1993: 66) points out includes seeing what is not there. Excluded from the white spatial imaginary of Marvel Comics, Latinas/os are sentenced to exist within the margins of the panels. That is, while not actually seen, readers are to believe that minorities are nonetheless there, residing somewhere in the gutter. (2016, 3)

I share Montes' opinion. This metaphor of invisibilization perfectly captures what happens with the narrative about the Latino in the film, not only about the Latino, but the racial issue in some cinematic attempts to propose readings of the diverse in racial terms, ranging from an invisibilization of black skin, through mechanisms such as animality, bordering on exoticism, or a construction of the Latino in which the color of the dark skin has no place. In this case, Miles and his dark skin are not enough to construct an Afro-Latino persona, in which there is a clear intention to transcend the basic racial presupposition that associates him with a black American context of Brooklyn but could show us a black person with a construction of his raciality associated with an awareness of his ethnicity. There is an omission of color when he pretends to be Afro-Latino. What is the relationship between his dark skin, that is, his racial condition and his Latino origin? None. We have already analyzed that in the film the Latin is not explored, therefore, his Afro-Latinness is omitted and an Afro-Americanity is constituted. In his *Critique of black reason* (2016), Achille Mbembe shares some ideas that can be useful to analyze this non-representation or omission that I raise. For, it is one thing to make the skin dark and another to create an Afro-latinity:

With respect to such figures, Hegel affirmed that they were statues without language or self-consciousness; human entities incapable of definitively disentangling themselves from the animal figure to which they were attached. Deep down, it was natural for them to give shelter to what was already dead.

These figures constituted the mark of the "isolated and non-sociable peoples who, in their hatred, fight each other to the death", dismember and destroy each other like animals — a kind of humanity of hesitant life and which, by confusing becoming-human and becoming-animal, ends up having a consciousness "devoid of universality". (Mbembe 2016, 37)

In this fragment, Mbembe mentions one of the most influential thinkers of Western philosophy and it is a good starting point to understand the visions about the Black subject that had already begun to be built since the beginning of the mercantile interactions between Europe and Africa with people in condition of enslavement. For Hegel, and later for a basis of European thought, Black people are subjects "devoid of consciousness", "incapable of detaching themselves from their animal figure". And what do the reflections I have been developing have to do with this question? I am interested in proposing that also in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) there is a treatment of "the black" that is twinned with a reading from animality.

This superhero shares with the Spiders of the other multiverses the fact of having been bitten by a mutant spider, which gives him superhuman abilities. But we return to the issue of invisibility. The relationship between that characteristic and the fact that he is black can be understood from the exoticization of the Black subject as something (not necessarily someone) naturally provided with animal abilities that other humans do not have. Miles never shines for any reason in the entire film. There is no skill in his persona that stands out. He is not good at photography, like Peter, or controlling robots, like Peni Parker. We know he passed a test to get into the elite college he wants to leave, precisely because he does not "belong in the hood," because he feels it is elitist.

For her teacher, this manifestation of an open desire to leave the school is something she must prevent. "I won't let you leave," she asks him to write an essay about his expectations in life. The teacher is a white woman, another representative of white hegemony who wants to "save Miles." What the film does not tell us is what they want to save him from: the danger of living in Brooklyn? We never really see him facing any danger that does not come from standing in The Kingpin's way. The manhunt that his Uncle Aaron starts, disguised as the Prowler, has to do with not knowing who he is, while Miles has gotten in his way. c. And being black can be a danger in a society that sees him as a subject devoid of conscience, a quasi-animal, or even invisible.

At the beginning of the analysis, I mentioned Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). This movie has a duration of 1 hour and 37 minutes, of which 28 minutes, the initial ones, we see Tiana, the main character, being a Black girl, daughter of a seamstress, who is together with a blonde girl, daughter of a wealthy white man. Then we see her with her dad, who dreams of starting a restaurant, and later we see her alone with her mom because her dad passed away, again becoming the absent figure so

repetitive in the narrative scheme of the Black American experience[4]. After that, we see her become a toad and the next, we see her as a black-skinned woman is in the last three minutes, when she has returned to her figure and we quickly see her marry as a princess and dance with her fiancé, a wealthy prince who, like her, is dark-skinned and spends the entire film being a toad. It is particularly striking that Disney's first Black princess spends a little over 75% of the film as a toad and that, in reality, only 2% of the time we see her as a black princess. Animality is the possible scenario for black existence from the white-hegemonic perspective, even when it is intended to be intentionally diverse. In this regard I would like to quote Mbembe again:

> In the way of thinking, classifying, and imagining distant worlds, both the erudite and popular European discourse appealed to processes of fabulation. By presenting often invented facts as real, true, and accurate, European discourse evaded "the thing" it sought to understand and maintained a fundamentally imaginary link with it, while seeking to develop knowledge intended to account for it objectively. The main qualities of this relationship are far from being fully elucidated, but the processes by which the work of fabulation and its effects of violence were able to take shape are now sufficiently well known. In fact, there is truly little to add in this regard. But if there is an object and a place in which this imaginary relationship and the fictional economy that sustains it were revealed in the most brutal, distinctive and manifest way possible, it is precisely in that sign that is called the Negro and, moreover, in that apparent out-of-place called Africa whose main characteristic is to be neither a common noun nor, much less, a proper name, but the mark of an absence of work. (2016, 40)

Thus, the construction of the Black subject, of this undefined "thing" is the result of a postponement that is not fully addressed by the dominant white hegemony. The Black subject is constructed in Western philosophical terms from the parameters determined by hegemony. In the film, it is the teacher who tells Miles that she will not allow him to leave school, it is Peter Parker who tells him what he can do, it is Gwen who tells him he can do it, it is the other Spiders who tell him he is not ready. None of them have dark skin. Even those who come from what might be called diversity are still occupying other places of privilege that Miles does not have. He does not exist *per se* but exists from where hegemony constructs him and as far as hegemony allows. Let us review what Jean-Claude Bourdin refers to in his article "La invisibilidad social como violencia" (2010).

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4 For more information on this, please read the following article "The Absent Black Father: Race, The Welfare-Child Support System, and the Cyclical Nature of Fatherlessness" (2021), by Omarr Rambert. Here: https://www.uclalawreview.org/the-absent-black-father-race-the-welfare-child-support-system-and-the-cyclical-nature-of-fatherlessness/

Esta experiencia ajena a la percepción, que se basa en no ver ni oír lo que está ahí y que habla, se asemeja a otra experiencia bastante familiar, muy estudiada por la psicología social contemporánea, aunque en realidad ya explorada por la tradición filosófica desde los escépticos griegos, que se funda en ver u oír lo que no está ahí. ¿Puede decirse que la invisibilidad es el reverso de la ilusión alucinatoria? Hay que responder que no, pues la orientación contemporánea sobre la invisibilidad trata menos del sujeto percipiente que de las condiciones de aparecer de lo percibido. Si el sujeto percipiente no ve, ello responde a una doble razón: por un lado, su percepción está condicionada por marcos sociales; por otro lado, el objeto no percibido obedece a condiciones políticas de aparición. Así pues, este fenómeno deviene como algo muy importante cuando los objetos invisibles son personas. Una vez identificada la invisibilidad, por la mediación de una interpretación, ésta se presenta como el signo de una estructura social que mutila la existencia de personas que están sometidas[5]. (Bourdin 2010, 4)

What we have is a story that, like the gutters in comics, leaves representations of otherness in liminal spaces. The appearance of minorities is reserved for a reading of inference, and therefore, of omission. When I speak of the omission of color in the story, I am referring precisely to that, to a double cancellation, omission, of color; from a purely racial perspective, as far as the Afro-Latino is omitted, and the only form of Afro is the Afro-American. Let me explain myself a little more in this sense. The Black skin in the film is never Afro-Latino, it is Black American. Miles, his father, and his uncle are the blacks in the film, all male, and all American. Miles has a mother who embellishes her sentences with closings in which she includes Spanish expressions and words with a Caribbean accent, so presumably she can be described as Latina. His father and siblings reveal no connection to any Latinity whatsoever, in fact, his father never utters a word in Spanish although Miles' mother mentions a few expressions. And his uncle much less so; a lonely man who we only see conversing with Miles and then being a villain in Kingpin's service. That is one part of color that is omitted, Black skin associated with Latino-ness. The other part is that of color as minorities. This includes the Latinx, or "people of color". I have already referred to the almost null appearance of this social group, which is why this double omission of

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5 This experience alien to perception, which is based on not seeing or hearing what is there and speaking, resembles another quite familiar experience, much studied by contemporary social psychology, although in fact already explored by the philosophical tradition since the Greek skeptics, which is based on seeing or hearing what is not there. Can it be said that invisibility is the reverse of the hallucinatory illusion? We must answer no, for the contemporary orientation on invisibility is less about the percipient subject than about the conditions of appearance of the perceived. If the perceiving subject does not see, this is due to a double reason: on the one hand, his perception is conditioned by social frameworks; on the other hand, the object not perceived obeys political conditions of appearance. Thus, this phenomenon becomes very important when the invisible objects are people. Once invisibility has been identified, through the mediation of an interpretation, it appears as the sign of a social structure that mutilates the existence of people who are subjected. [Translation of the author]

color becomes effective. Let us move on to the last part of this analysis in which I intend to answer the last question raised by the film.

INVISIBILITY: IS THERE AGENCY FROM A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF REPRESENTATION OR HEGEMONIC REPRESENTATION?

I focus my attention on the ability to become invisible, or invisibility that Miles experiences, being the first black Spider-Man, but at the same time, the only one "able to become invisible". Why being invisible? Is there agency from a philosophical perspective of representation or hegemonic representation of the marginalized? In the entire film we do not see Miles have a heroic act that is possible because of his invisibility. He uses it to escape his threats, to disappear from his uncle's sight when he is stalking, not knowing that he is Miles, he uses it to try to escape with the lab computer, but he is so clumsy that he wants to take the monitor with him, and it is Peter Parker who tells him that it is not necessary. He also fails to use his invisibility to fight, for example, in that situation. He just uses it to fight Olivia "Liv" Octavius, as I mentioned. So, becoming invisible is a resource that serves especially in the face of hegemony, because that is where its real threats come from. It should also be added that there is an adolescent in the process of personality development, and that his shyness and disbelief in his abilities is not limited to the heroic scenario, but in his daily life as an adolescent he is also trying to find himself. Nevertheless, it is an aspect that coincides with the whole construction of an undefined character, with identity glimpses but undefined.

Let's pay attention to what happens to the uncle when he catches him and is about to kill him, Miles takes off his mask, that is, he becomes visible, which makes his uncle to free him and sacrifice himself because Kingpin is behind him waiting for him to kill this new Spider-Man, when he does not do it, Kingpin kills him. His uncle, who seems the worst threat to be on Kingpin's side, cannot ignore him as an equal and sacrifices himself. So, faced with another subordinate, faced with another marginalized, faced with another representative of the gutters, he exists, and he is seen as an equal, and the action is to protect him. From whom, then, does Miles have to protect himself until he becomes invisible, if not from hegemony? None of his dangers come from his peers, none of his neighborhood is a threat, none of his family is a danger, none of the few we see that constitute his primary community is a risk. Juliana Marcús says in her article "Discriminación social y estrategias de invisibilización en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires" (2011), in which she reflects on identity construction and invisibilization, the non-existence of the other:

> Los fenómenos de discriminación inciden en la construcción de identidades, puesto que la identidad se configura siempre en un contexto relacional basado en el reconocimiento o en la negación del otro. La identidad se construye a través de la diferencia y no al margen de ella. De modo que las identidades nacen y se construyen siempre en relación con los otros. La identidad, entonces, nunca estará determinada en sí misma, pues estamos atravesados por la otredad. La identidad "sólo puede construirse a través de la relación con el Otro, la relación con quien no es, con lo que falta, con lo que se ha denominado el afuera constitutivo" (Hall, 2003: 18)[6].

That leads me to wonder: What kind of agency from a philosophical perspective would it be for an invisibilized person not to be visible? Agency, from a philosophical perspective, is to be able to manage presence and dismantle hegemony, and it does not happen. In my opinion, it is not possible to speak of agency when what seems to be an ability is reduced to a mechanism to avoid being seen by hegemony. Perhaps it is a survival skill, and in that it would be very close to a portrait of black life that is usually associated with the need to survive. Miles cannot become invisible to save his uncle, he cannot do it to protect any of his family, or his "community", we only see that his purpose as a hero is to open the portal for the other Spiders to return to their dimensions. The only occasion when becoming invisible is not to escape, is when it saves the life of the conscious mentor, the White Men. As if it were an extension of the white hegemonic power that, even appealing to the alleged abilities of the hero, manages to save its own place.

In closing, I propose the concept "mentor of conscience" as a response to the "conscious mentor", which I have already developed. Although I find it especially useful to think of the idea of conscious mentoring, I consider that this concept is weak when it comes to real transformations in the figure being guided. And this is the case with Miles. Peter Parker's mentoring does not involve at any time, and in any way, the intersectionalities that run or could run through the life of young Miles. Therefore, no matter how much he prods him, pushes him, challenges him, in the end the only thing that has any real effect and moves him enough to lead him to master his powers is his father's mentorship. This figure I call a "mentor of conscience" because he can generate a discourse that starts from the awareness of the place in which the other is, by recognizing him as his own. An affinity that is nourished by the first-person experience,

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6 The phenomena of discrimination affect the construction of identities, since identity is always configured in a relational context based on the recognition or denial of the other. Identity is constructed through difference and not on the margins of it. Thus, identities are always born and constructed in relation to others. Identity, then, will never be determined itself since we are traversed by otherness. Identity "can only be constructed through the relationship with the Other, the relationship with what is not, with what is missing, with what has been called the constitutive outside" (Hall, 2003: 18). [Translation of the author]

by recognizing oneself within the universe that the other is experiencing. The effect of the mentor who comes from marginalization, from gutter, from subordination, is to make the guide aware that hegemony always finds ways to prolong its place, and what it needs from the subordinates is precisely that they go unnoticed. What the mentor needs from the invisibilized is that they develop the capacity to make themselves invisible and allow them to continue life under the parameters that they have established from their places of privilege and power.

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Biographical note
His research and creative profile focuses on
literature originating in the African Diaspora
whose subject matter involves processes of
migration, transformation, and empowerment
of Afro-descendant communities.

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ORCID
0000-0002-0190-7275

—
Institutional address
4238 Tamu, College Station, TX 77843,
United States.

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