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Television and its Impact on Latinx Communities

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Abstract

The chapter investigates the intersections of television with Latinx communities, and the ways in which the evolving televisual context is mediating diasporic translatinidades. It focuses on five areas: (1) the role of Latinas in television set manufacturing, (2) the representation of Latinos in mainstream television, (3) the rise of Spanish-language television, (4) the importance of telenovelas in global television, and (5) the emergence of TV streaming as new venues for translatinidades. Taken together, these five topics construct an ample canvas in which we can investigate television and how it reflects social, political, economic, and cultural lived experiences. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to investigate how television and its relationship with Latinx communities cannot be uniformly characterized as one static practice but must in fact be recognized as a multilayered and evolving formation that is culturally embedded as well as closely interconnected to market power.

Keywords

bilingual broadcasting, global, media; Latinx/Latino; representation; Spanish language, Telenovelas, television, translatinidades, transnational

Television is the principal storyteller of the modern era; and although the it has been broadcasting news and entertainment programming nearly nonstop since the late 1950s, the role and presence of Latinx people on the most pervasive and persuasive communications medium in the United States continues to be relatively invisible as well as stereotypical across a multitude of English-language television outlets.¹ Federico Subervi-Vélez² predicted in the late 1990s that bias in news and entertainment would continue to be an issue for Latinos if a rigorous policy and research agenda was not put in place for intentionally including Latinx lived experiences on television and media more generally. The lack of non-biased inclusion has in many ways created an audiovisual vacuum that permits the visual dehumanization of Latinos, the rise of anti-immigrant discourse, and the construction of a perceived reality that Latinos are uneducated or not law-abiding citizens. The impact of such televisual representations should not to be minimized. In a study published in *Latino Studies*, Eileen McConnell found that articles published by a regional Atlanta newspaper—which were then often repeated on local television news outlets—portrayed the demographic changes produced by newly arriving Latino and Asian families as a negative shift despite migration to the local area by African American and white families taking place at the same rate.³ Consequently, journalists and media creators in Atlanta circulated and sustained media discourses that privileged a white-black racialized hierarchy and reproduced a narrative of nonexistent Latino contributions despite the fact that the community had positively impacted social and economic spheres across the South in recent decades. Research by the Pew Research Center concurred that the migration of Latinx communities to the South was in some cases saving the housing rental market and public schools from closing down, since

Latino families were moving into low population areas. The changes taking place led to the term “New Latino South” and were viewed by economists as a productive change given the need for workers in the agricultural and textile industries. Yet this narrative is not what has generally circulated about Latinos, and the passage of anti-immigrant legislation in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina in recent years underscores the role television media has played in misrepresenting and scapegoating Latinos. Given this unsettling situation, is there any hope for media, and television in particular, to adequately represent the diverse ways of life of US Latinx communities? What has been the historical impact of television on Latinx communities, and what can we expect in the future for television’s ability to provide a meaningful picture of the wide-ranging positionalities that exist within these communities?

In an effort to address this problematic issue, the chapter will focus on five important areas pertaining to the intersection of television with Latinx communities and the ways in which the evolving televisual context is mediating diasporic translatinidades: (1) the role of Latinas in television set manufacturing, (2) the representation of Latinos in mainstream television, (3) the rise of Spanish-language television, (4) the importance of telenovelas in global television, and (5) the emergence of TV streaming as a new venue for translatinidades. Taken together, these five topics complete a framework that allows for a comprehensive investigation of television and how it constitutes social, political, economic, and cultural lived experiences; television is thus more than merely a glowing screen in living rooms worldwide. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to investigate how television and its relationship with Latinx communities must be recognized as a

multilayered and evolving formation that is culturally embedded as well as closely interconnected to market power.

Currently, the Latinx population constitutes 18 percent of the US population, but they represent less than 6 percent of all television and film characters, news anchors, producers, directors, and writers even after nearly seventy years of a burgeoning mainstream television industry, one that now includes online streaming and hundreds of cable and satellite channels.⁴ Even when Latinos gain employment access to media industries, they often experience what Hector Amaya calls the “Latino public sphere parado,” since such access does not guarantee access to political power. Media activists and communication scholars have indeed confirmed that the complicated political, economic, and cultural nature of television (and media more generally) means that inclusion does not always lead to televisual transformation.⁵ As Dan Schiller argues, the US media and its related telecommunications sectors continue to be embedded in a web of commodity arrangements that are shaped by persistent structural disparity.⁶ Therefore, it is essential to examine television through a transcultural political economy framework, which aims to understand the intersections between macro and micro processes and practices. Further, to have a lens that emphasizes a Latinx critical communication (LatCritComm) analyses, which centralizes Latinx experiences, can be fruitful in their provision of a broader theoretical and conceptual framework for examining television and its impact on Latinx communities.⁷ These theoretical underpinnings are especially important for explaining Latinx labor in the production of television, which ranges from programming development to the factory floor where actual consumer electronic screens are manufactured. We now turn our attention to the issue of production in order to better

understand how the making of television for the North American consumer market has affected Latinx communities.

Situating the Making of Television

Television is historically perceived as a window into the world that often renders Latinos as either invisible or as existing within a deficit discourse.⁸ It is still amazing how an audiovisual flickering screen—and increasingly a small mobile device— can profoundly shape how we see ourselves and other people, places, and practices across national and global contexts. The power of the audiovisual medium is not innocuous or insignificant, and in fact it is an important factor in how racial and ethnic populations have been treated symbolically and materially over time.⁹ The film documentary *Latinos Beyond Reel* (2013), demonstrates how the representations of Latinos, on both TV and movie screens, have created an uncharitable narrative in which Latinx communities are often demonized, sexualized, scapegoated, or discredited within the US imaginary, despite the fact that there are almost 650 million Latinos and Latin Americans across the Americas.

Notwithstanding the growth in population, the expansion of on-screen images that represent a wide range of lived experiences—that is evidently present within the population itself—has not occurred. According to the featured scholars in *Latinos Beyond Reel*, such as Isabel Molina-Guzmán, Otto Santa Ana, and Angharad Valdivia, television has historically worked as an ideological tool that limits the representation of Latinos as change agents. Similar to African Americans, Latinos are not consistently regarded as legitimate citizens capable of building the nation. In fact, more often than not, they are questioned as to whether they belong in the nation and are viewed as embodying a

dubious citizenship. Thus, they are a population needing to be monitored in relationship to dominantly white democratic society.¹⁰

Yet from the very start of the US television industry, Latinos aimed to carve out a space for creating agency in representation, ownership, and audience support.¹¹ Similar to what had occurred in broadcast radio, the English-language mainstream commercial sector was entrenched in culturally biased policies and customs that discriminated against people of color, and created few opportunities for Latino images and voices across the mainstream mass media, including the television and film industries.¹² Like radio, television for Spanish-speaking audiences also began as an effort to tap into the potential of a future broadcast market in the United States, particularly since Mexico and other Latin American countries were already creating their own extensive mass media industries. Latino broadcasters thus envisioned a role for Spanish-language information, music, and entertainment not only in the US media landscape but one that was able to flow transnationally. As América [Rodríguez](#) notes, the transnational structure of the emerging Spanish-language cultural production industries was intimately connected to the rise of transnational audiences, products, and consumers.¹³

Interestingly, the emergence of the Spanish-language television sector in the United States also coincided with the rise of the transnational maquiladora industry along the US-Mexico border. The making of television sets by maquila factories would eventually become the global platform for television set production. As Spanish-language television and Latinos made their way on both the US and Latin American/Caribbean airwaves, Mexican maquila workers become central to the manufacturing of television sets for the consumer market across the Americas. As more consumers bought into the

imaginaries created by television entertainment, advertising, and news, the need for more television sets became crucial—especially as television viewing became ubiquitous in homes and businesses alike.

The US public as a whole knows very little about the roles that Latinos (Mexicans in particular) have played and continue to play in the production of television sets.

Although consumer electronic maquiladoras have been producing television sets for the past fifty years, most consumers are unaware that their TV screens are manufactured across the US-Mexico border. When transborder manufacturing began to intensify in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, there was indeed extensive discontent from largely white factory workers located in the Northeast and Midwest who worked for companies such as Panasonic, General Electric, and RCA but were now losing their jobs because of the relocating of the television manufacturing industry to the US-Mexico border. Narratives about “Mexicans stealing U.S. workers’ jobs” abounded at that time, and such narratives have not abated as new industries have reduced their US labor force and transferred to offshore production, especially after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Yet rather than blaming the free market ethos that threatens to upend the capacity of all workers, US media narratives have accentuated the role of Latin American workers in transnational manufacturing, and this attribution has also impacted how Latino immigrant workers are treated in the United States. Manuel Casas and Ana Cabrera argue that the negative perceptions often attributed to Latino workers are creating a context where anti-immigration laws, policy, and actions are being promoted and enacted.¹⁴ Such perceptions and policies unfortunately fail to recognize the historical

geopolitical context and the broader reality that workers south of the border are facing as well.

For instance, in the context of Mexican maquila workers, women constitute the largest percentage of the television set manufacturing workforce in the Americas, and it is on the backs of their labor that the United States now has access to inexpensive digital television sets. Companies such as Sony and Ericsson produce digital television sets along the US-Mexico border with a largely female workforce comprising Latinas between the ages of thirteen to twenty-five. Latinas are the largest makers of television sets because they are stereotypically perceived to be submissive, quiet workers willing to work for low wages; however, it is often the violent working conditions and economic strife that forces these women to endure inhospitable treatment. Elvia [Arriola](#) also emphasizes that Mexican women are not the only maquila workers: women from Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador have also been compelled to leave their countries due to social and political unrest yet are unable to cross into the United States from Mexico.¹⁵ As a result, they have become part of the Mexican border's migrant labor population. Over four thousand companies have maquila factories in the border region, and television set and consumer electronics production have become some of the largest manufacturing sectors in the region. This is a byproduct of the fact that more than 40 million television sets are manufactured in Mexico annually, and this production supplies 90 percent of the TV products that are sold in the US market every year.

Interestingly, the twin sister plants of maquiladoras located in California, Texas, and Arizona also mainly comprise Latina workers, which is ironic since their voices,

images, and issues are not frequently heard or seen on mainstream airwaves. As the primary producers of television sets, Latina television set makers are an invisible labor force whose media representations are nonexistent. Where are the audiovisual commentaries that show the labor conditions that many of these women endure, or narratives describing the paradox that women maquila workers experience when they become the primary breadwinners and consequently can challenge patriarchy through their material agency? Maura Toro-Morn states that these kinds of stories, which magnify our understanding of Latina labor contributions, are consistently ignored in the media despite the fact that coverage would do much to humanize Latinx populations.¹⁶ On the contrary, what the general population in the United States largely sees are stereotypical representations. Latina lived experiences are portrayed from the standpoint of maids, prostitutes, and undocumented single mothers. They are not viewed as the hardworking technical specialists they are required to become across the maquiladora industry. Rather what we continue to be exposed to are problematic representations of Latinos on mainstream US television, as the following section will discuss.

Representing Latinos on Broadcast Television

The long-standing representations of Latinos on US broadcast television are historically negative, with images characterizing Latinos as violent offenders, dimwitted laborers, or sexual deviants. According to Mary Beltrán such images serve the racial hegemony that has influenced the founding of America and allows for the reinforcement of social norms that sustain the exoticization and exploitation of Latino communities within the broader societal context.¹⁷ To say that these images do nothing is to lack an understanding of media power and the impact such discourses have in shaping the public's worldview.

Indeed, Otto [Santa Ana](#) argues that the constant barrage of derogatory images of Latinos on television and media more generally are indicators of a value system of the United States that oppresses communities of color.¹⁸ The long history of these images in the United States have thus succeeded in maintaining a level of social distance and fear about Latinos, especially if they do not speak English. It is important to acknowledge that the anxiety over Latinos is tied to the history of colonialism and exploitative labor in the United States.¹⁹ Consequently, by marginalizing non-white communities, dominant structures can write these communities out of history as well as hinder their capacity for political-economic agency. Despite the liberal democratic principles of free and open airwaves that presumably belong to the public, scholars have shown that the media, especially broadcasting, have utilized programming and policy processes to protect the entrenched political and racialized status quo as represented through communication content. Dana Mastro and Eizabeth Behm-Morawitz have demonstrated that television is a site of cultural politics that rarely challenges the hegemonic messages about Latinos that have permeated mass media for decades.²⁰ Vicki [Mayer](#) also contends that both stereotypical images and the invisibility of Latinos works as a form of mediated, latent racism that has the potential to undermine a multicultural sensibility that values non-white communities.²¹

Therefore, by reinforcing a white supremacist and pro-capitalist ideology in news and entertainment programming, forms of social control can be maintained in which Latinos and people of color are more generally perceived as embodying the negative racial and ethnic stereotypes that are continuously reproduced about them. Consequently, these populations become unworthy of upward mobility or educational resources, and the

subtle (and sometimes very direct message) becomes that the Latinos best belong in kitchens, agricultural fields, prisons, and increasingly outside the boundaries of the United States. They are believed to not belong in positions of power; and if they do occupy such positions, the expectation is that they must reinforce a free-market ideology. Conservative xenophobic agendas only deem Latinos as acceptable when they are considered white, legal, and capitalist. Latinos, regardless of citizenship status, are continuously marked with the televisual narrative of requiring deportation and imprisonment. David Manuel Hernández shows that assumptions about criminality abound when it comes to Latinos, especially Latino immigrants, and these presumptions are asserted over and over again by xenophobic politicians and ratings-hungry television programs—which are then concurrently consumed by audiences who fail to question the televised biased orientations.²² For the television industry, these imaginative imperatives are viewed as merely political and economic actions (and ostensibly not racist) because they are simply reflecting the ways of the world and not necessarily passing judgment.

Yet as Ediberto Roman demonstrates, for Latinos there are undeniable destructive and insidious legal and political effects that the constant televising of racial and ethnic stereotypes has on the community in terms of stigma and the perpetuation of damaging myths.²³ These in turn bolster the idea that Latinos, Mexicans (and Mexican Americans in particular) do not belong in the United States and are unworthy of its resources.²⁴ Television images create meaning, and as the demographics in the United States and across the Americas continue to shift toward more people of color, those images will mean the difference between intersectional inclusion and violent exclusion. On mainstream English-language television, the moments of acceptance toward Latinos

(which is expressed when Latino characters or stories are permitted on the screen) are then turned into ambivalence when those same stories fail to represent a humanized or complex characterization. The persistent media narratives of Latinos, especially immigrants, as threatening the cultural and social fabric of society in the United States is what ultimately comes to represent the Latino diaspora.²⁵

The impact of television is not only evident in the persuasive and pervasive narratives that it creates over time but also in the psychological effects wrought upon Latinos and non-Latinos alike. Multiple studies have demonstrated the cognitive and social impact that television has on everyday people, especially children.²⁶ Research projects examining the impact of television on Latino youth have demonstrated that there are negative effects that television exposure has on people's sense of self-worth, identity formation, educational attainment, and overall well-being. Research by Rocío Rivadeneyra, Monique Ward, and Maya Gordon found that the exclusion of Latinos from television had the powerful potential of diminishing the self-confidence of Latino audiences, especially young women.²⁷ Additionally, "the repeated exposure to stereotypical portrayals of Latinos as lazy, violent, uneducated, and criminal could lead viewers of all races to believe that these attributes characterize Latinos in the real world . . . In this way, it is believed that Latino viewers may come to think of themselves and their own group in these negative ways, thereby diminishing the self-esteem of individual Latino viewers."²⁸ Television invisibility and negative characterizations not only affect people's ability to function successfully at school, work, or in civic settings but also have the potential to impact the collective structure of feeling. As more research continues to be conducted, it is increasingly evident that media is a key force in the social

development and the misrepresentation of Latinos, and examining its impact through television is crucial.

For instance, researchers are studying the longitudinal mental health effects of feeling inconsequential and unimportant as a result of television images, which also reinforce the television studies conjecture that stipulates, “If it doesn’t exist in the media, then it doesn’t exist.” And if marginalized communities do appear on television, then they are considered suspect.²⁹ Thus, Latinos are rarely portrayed as possibly having the capacity to embody middle-class lives as professors, judges, school teachers, car mechanics, or business owners, since those characterizations are virtually non-existent on US communications platforms; rather, Latinos are viewed through unfavorable frames.³⁰ In 1980, the scholar Felix Gutierrez submitted a report to the US Department of Health in which he described the historical portrayal and employment statistics of Latinos in US media and quoted Ruben Salazar, the murdered *Los Angeles Times* journalist, as observing: “The media, having ignored the Mexican Americans for so long, but now willing to report on them, seem impatient about the complexities of the story . . . It’s as if the media, having finally discovered the Mexican American, is not amused that under the serape and sombrero is a complex Chicano instead of a potential Gringo.”³¹ In point of fact, mainstream television has struggled to understand and properly portray the complexity of Latinidad. Yet analyzing the television representation of Latinos is critical because Latinos, especially the youth, are also the heaviest consumers of mass media of all ethnic and racial groups in the United States. Additionally, over time Latino children become adults whose values are in part shaped by a television system that seems to

devalue who they are as political, economic, and cultural agents and only celebrates their contributions if it is related to food, music, or sexual prowess.

Jennifer Willis's study of "Latino Night" in a small town in Ohio demonstrates the ways in which Latinos are celebrated for their cultural exoticization through music and dance but are criticized if efforts to assimilate fall short and Latinos aim for political agency.³² Such agency is viewed with suspicion since it is believed Latinos will want to legitimize issues that believed to be contrary to the "American way" such as bilingualism. There is actually palpable fear about Latinos becoming significant change agents in civil society. This great fear has become especially evident since the 2016 presidential elections, and television news has increasingly become the repetitive mouthpiece for conservative xenophobes. And the material consequences are real. For instance, the rise of virulent racist taunts and physical fights at K-12 schools during the presidential primaries and after the national elections this past fall, particularly at sporting events, is the direct result of a political media landscape that utilizes the persuasiveness and pervasiveness of communication systems to espouse a white supremacist ideology that aspires to delegitimize Latinos and people of color in general as social and political actors. The limited Latinx representations and diversity on the televisual landscape not only creates limited understanding of the social world but has the potential to produce real violence against underrepresented and historically marginalized communities.

Jack Levin and Jack MacDevitt confirm that broadcast media have helped fuel the rising toward tide of bigotry and hate crimes against people of color, including Latinos.³³ The enduring stereotypes that are perpetuated in television narratives then become the portrayals and pictures in our heads that then shape whether and how other people should

be treated, and even despised and/or victimized.³⁴ Hateful rhetoric has particularly impacted the immigration debates during the last decade, and Kevin Johnson and Joanna Cuevas Ingram argue that such racially charged discourse is not just producing physical violence against Latinos; it is also shaping the practices and architecture of immigration enforcement laws as communities of color, literally and figuratively, change the racial and ethnic demographics of the United States.³⁵ The anti-immigrant discourses and physical attacks as well as the non-stop ICE deportations have emboldened a plethora of hate speech via the broadcast airwaves, and thus hate crimes against undocumented Latino immigrants have continued to rise. Although the television industry argues that media effects are minimal and its industry has no power to create real material effects in the world (i.e., it is simply reflecting what is already taking place) it chooses to turn a blind eye to the data amassed over the years demonstrating otherwise.³⁶ While it is true that one specific program may not necessarily produce a violent reaction by an individual, it is the persistent long-term audiovisual messaging that makes television a powerful medium for the systematic production of certain narratives. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, and Michael Morgan demonstrate through cultivation analysis that audiences who spend more time living in the world of television are more likely to perceive “the ‘real world’ in the terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television.”³⁷

Consequently, the impact of Latino invisibility, according to researchers, must not be underestimated; yet the television industry does not feel any responsibility to provide adequate representation: after all, it is a commercial business and not a social service venue.³⁸ Nevertheless, there is little doubt that television irresponsibly over-represents

Latinos as parasites and non-contributors to our society. And in that sense, the mainstream television industry is making a choice, certainly one rooted in the profit motive, to represent Latinos more negatively than positively and to act largely as a commercial agent to the detriment of society as a whole. And since the airwaves are meant to be public and only loaned to them (assuming they are servicing the needs of local communities adequately), they should thus be held accountable for their misrepresentation of Latinos. This is particularly crucial, since Latinos will become the largest consumer group by 2050, and television's survival will be dependent on this population.³⁹

This fact explains a new trend that researchers are also investigating, which is the whitening and whitewashing of Latinos in order to make them more palatable to the mainstream and correspondingly encouraging Latinos to see themselves as white or at least in color-blind ways. Arlene Dávila argues that this growing shift toward a marketable Latinidad is connected to whiteness, colorblindness, and neoliberalism at a time when the state is extracting itself from providing social welfare initiatives and relying more on privatization. Since Latinos are perceived to be the greatest threat to the normativity of whiteness, their emerging (albeit slow) transformation into acceptable American citizen/subjects is ultimately tied, as Dávila states, “to a larger racial project entailing the very reconfiguration of how we talk or do not talk about race and racial hierarchies in an increasingly racially diversified society.”⁴⁰ Although the discussion above seems to suggest a gloomy future, that is not necessarily the case.

The recent presence of Latino characters, directors, writers, and producers in some of the most popular television shows, such as *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Jane*

the Virgin, and *Grey's Anatomy*, demonstrate the potential to shift the televisual narrative about Latinos' creative and political potential. Certainly, the gradual increase of Latinos into the mainstream television industry is taking place within the larger reality of news and entertainment: yet negative characterizations of Latinos continue to dominate. But scholars believe there is hope to for the future of Latinos in English-language television, whether it is on the traditional broadcast venues or online streaming outlets. Increasingly, Latino television leaders are attempting to also retain some level of cultural heritage, bilingualism, and racial identity even as they are pressured to homogenize the diasporic translatinidad experience. Both Eva Longoria and America Ferrera, along with a slew of other Latinx Hollywood insiders, have called out the television and film industries for their "casual racism" of Latino actors and storytelling; the most recent challenge was live during the 2016 Golden Globes ceremony. Additionally, Latinos are in constant negotiation between an imagined framework of diasporic latinidad and their specific mestizaje, which is not always articulated in national terms.⁴¹ This perhaps illustrates the difficulty of adequately representing Latinos on mainstream television: they are not one cultural or national group but constitute multiple racial/ethnic identities. Thus, the diverse Latinx communities cannot be pigeonholed. This is a challenge for an industry so dependent on the lowest common denominator in terms of social experience and commercial imperatives that are easy to categorize on TV. Therefore, the rise of digital media is creating opportunities for counter-narratives and providing a sliver of hope that gender, sexuality, class, and the diversity of Latinidades is possible and accessible through the future of television beyond the airwaves.

Streaming Television as the Future

There is growing optimism about the power and accessibility of streaming television, not only for creating programming outside of the mainstream but also providing more possibilities for developing Latinx images and narratives that otherwise do not exist. It is through this technology and the multiple platforms that researchers are finding the prospect of developing something different in terms of Latino representation through the new forms of televisual production, distribution, and consumption.⁴² For example, new television shows not featured on traditional broadcast outlets but on small-screen formats such as Netflix and Amazon (e.g., the remake of *One Day at a Time*, the Gael Garcia Bernal series, *Mozart in the Jungle*, and the new series *Vida*) are becoming popular and are lauded as examples of Latinos becoming a valuable community (and commodity) worthwhile of representation. These streaming TV shows are mediating diasporic translatinidades by using familiar tropes to present new ways of understanding Latino lived experiences. The newest show, *One Day at a Time* by showrunner Gloria Calderon Kellet, now in its second season, is a remake of a 1970s broadcast television program that in this newest iteration features an extended Cuban American family in order to account for how today's Latinx families are often structured in the United States. The fact the show is featured online gives producers a wide landscape in which to explore issues that are often considered too touchy or political for advertiser-supported mainstream broadcast television.

Other networks on cable—CW, for example—push boundaries with television programming and are taking advantage of the wider latitude and addressing topics such as immigration, Latina motherhood, and extended families. These topics are in fact central to the story line for CW's award-winning program, *Jane the Virgin*. This

television program not only provides alternative and more complex narratives about Latinos (although it still sometimes alludes to stereotypes), it still aims to express narratives that are traditionally left out of the televisual conversation on mainstream TV. Additionally, it also includes digital modes of storytelling by displaying texting on the screen as part of the show; this demonstrates a willingness to move outside traditional broadcast television production norms. Researchers are finding that these alternative streaming spaces are creating opportunities not only to develop alternative storytelling but also to boost Latinx creative labor, which is often shut out of mainstream broadcast television.

Vittoria Rodriguez and Mary Beltrán have found that the rise of the digital web series platform is a “burgeoning new frontier for creative expression where Latina/o storytelling is part of the norm rather than the exception.”⁴³ In their study, they examined a slew of web series in which Latina/Latino subjectivities are the core of televisual productions that ranged from drama to satiric comedy and included narratives about Latina feminist superheroes, undocumented youth, and family angst. Despite the financial limitations of such productions, Rodriguez and Beltrán ultimately conclude that “as digital media production tools, mobile devices, and streaming media platforms [like Hulu and YouTube] become more broadly accessible and make digital production and exhibition easier, Latina/o producers and others who have traditionally been excluded from television production may increasingly utilize these tools to tell their stories.”⁴⁴ The hope is that these new digital platforms will positively impact how Latinx communities are represented and perceived, thus changing the relationship between media and historically underrepresented communities. Yet the reality of accessing financial

resources for developing widely accessible digital creative media productions should not be undervalued, and political economic connections continue to be one of the largest barriers to Latino entry into the television and media industries. It is unfortunate that so much of the US entertainment and news industries are based on significant fiscal patronage, peer networks, college backgrounds, and social capital; and yet it is a reality that few people discuss openly because it demonstrates that access to the television industry is not merely about media creativity and talent but also advantageous socioeconomic credentials. Hector [Amaya](#) concurs that Latina/Latino creative professionals have a hard time gaining access to employment opportunities in the television industry due to these perceived credentialed requirements but also because of the enduring bias that permeates so much of the media.⁴⁵

Additionally, since the deregulatory turn at the Federal Communications Commission in 1996, it has also been difficult to apply EEOC policies to an industry that is rooted in the First Amendment. For many Latinos, the educational, cultural, and financial components that are often necessary to embark on a television career are out of reach because emerging Latino media innovators are either first-generation college graduates or below the socioeconomic ladder that allows for families to support young creatives in their budding television careers. Thus, the extensive financial resources that are needed for developing networks or getting a college education (and especially at universities and colleges that industry folks consider up to par) is extremely difficult and thus leaves hundreds of potential Latinx television creators out of the landscape where new programming can be produced or where they can find employment within one of the television sectors. The rise of diversity employment programs within the television

industry and work by NALIP (National Association of Latino Independent Producers) and NHMC (National Hispanic Media Coalition) are certainly helping to improve the situation. These organizations along with established industry insiders are calling for more inclusion of Latinos, since the population will constitute 35 percent of the US population by 2050.

Unfortunately, at the rate of hiring taking place, Latinos will constitute less than 10 percent of the television creative and production workforce; outside of manufacturing television sets, this is a real problem that needs to be addressed. In *The Latino Gap*, a report focusing on the minimal representation of Latinos in front of and behind the camera, Frances Negrón-Muntaner noted that Latinos were voracious media consumers yet their exclusion from the television and media industries was equal to the population of California and Illinois combined: in other words, given the number of Latino audience members and the population as a whole, over 50 million Latinos were being left out of media employment.⁴⁶ The report concludes that “Latino presence in mainstream media remains extremely low and changing at a very slow pace in relation to the demographic changes sweeping the country. We have called this conundrum the Latino media gap: as Latino consumer power grows, relative Latino media presence shrinks.”⁴⁷ This is unacceptable if we are to have a truly inclusive media environment and if Latinos are to make a significant sociocultural impact in the direction the country is headed, especially one that is accepting of (undocumented) immigrants. Thus, streaming television via Hulu, Netflix, or YouTube has become an interesting alternative for bypassing the old (white) boy network in order to get Latino voices heard and aired on television. Scholars are finding that Latinos, however, are still rarely considered for employment in the traditional

media venues; when they do get jobs in the industry, they are often relegated to manual or menial labor. Rarely are they hired to be a part of the creative teams that produce the alternate realities and counter-narratives necessary for offsetting the negative perceptions of Latinos that currently dominate the US and global imaginary. Showrunners like Tanya Saracho are attempting to change this structural reality by hiring primarily Latinx writers for series' such as Starz's *Vida*, which also streams through Amazon and was renewed for a second season.

Furthermore, before becoming too enthusiastic about the potential of digital television, it is important to note that technologies in and of themselves are not neutral apparatuses, and their development and distribution are very much embedded in political, economic, and sociocultural networks of power. Despite the growing accessibility of computerized devices, these same digital technologies by themselves will not upend historical systems of oppression. Likewise, Jose Luis Benitez and Vivana Rojas and her colleagues have each found that digital divide and digital inclusion, especially of Latino communities, continued to be significant issues even as information communication technologies increasingly become critical mechanisms for class mobility, civic engagement, and cultural expression.⁴⁸ Certainly, this broader context forces us to be cautious of blindly celebrating the potential of advanced communications; yet there is no doubt that new forms of television have the potential to interrogate conventional (and stereotypical) cultural productions of diasporic translatinidades. In some ways, the US Spanish-language television industry has worked to become a space that can provide an assemblage of affirmative narratives about Latinos, some of which offer alternatives to the mainstream English-language sector.

Spanish-Language Television as an Alternative

Spanish-language television is uniquely situated within the broader discussion of television's power. It lies at the intersection of debates over Latino immigration and the role of US communications in shaping the nation's politics. It is the last surviving ethnic broadcast media in the United States and with time has grown and become available in the majority of metropolitan areas across the country.⁴⁹ Certainly, the growth of the Latino population has spurred the sustainability of the Spanish-language television industry and has in the 21st century become an important venue for representing the political, economic, and social issues that are impacting Latinos.⁵⁰ In its early history, the US Spanish-language television sector was dominated by Mexico's media conglomerate Televisa until a competitor, Telemundo (originally from Puerto Rico), challenged the ownership structure of the industry, especially Univision. Its parent company Televisa was viewed as an alien entity and thus in violation of the Communication Act of 1934, which specified that US broadcast licenses could not be owned by foreign companies. Even in the television industry, Mexican-related entities were viewed with suspicion and regarded as a threat to US communications and national security.⁵¹ Unlike Telemundo, which was owned and operated by a company residing on US territory, Univision was challenged for being majority-owned by non-US business interests.

By the late 1980s, the Spanish-language television industry was largely owned by US companies that were increasingly interested in attracting a Latino consumer audience and developing synergistic media corporate alliances in order to cover the multiple communication spaces that Latinos occupy. For instance, Telemundo is now owned by NBC Universal, which in turn is owned by Seagrams Universal. Seagrams has as part of

its long list of media properties several entities that speak to the diasporic translationalidad experience. Over the years, other Spanish-language television networks have emerged across cable and satellite TV platforms such as Azteca America and Estrella TV. Alan Albarran has also noted that Spanish-language television is now a cultural arbiter that has profoundly remade the media industries in all the Latin American countries as well as in Spain.⁵² Spanish-language television is thus a global phenomenon that must be understood within that context as well.

In the United States, the growing demand for Latino consumers has vaulted the expansion of the Spanish-language television sector, and the demand from Latino audiences for more diverse offerings has also influenced its growth. Additionally, the racially charged immigration debates of the past year, and the most recent presidential executive orders that have empowered ICE more than ever to target Latino communities, have also inspired Spanish-language radio and television to take an even bigger stand against the growing xenophobia toward Latinos in and outside the United States.⁵³ Jorge Ramos from Univision's nightly national news program, *Noticiero*, has become a particularly outspoken advocate for addressing Latino issues on news programming as it relates to the US political landscape. His forthright style when asking questions during the presidential primaries was viewed with both awe and aversion because Ramos was willing to ask specific questions about the apparent racist policies certain candidates were espousing as part of their presidential campaign platforms.⁵⁴ There is actually a long history of research that has examined the ways in which Spanish-language media, and television news more recently, has committed itself to engaging with the Latino issues that English-language television programming often ignores: especially when it has to do

with the human and violent impact of immigration and the political-economic uncertainties of Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵⁵

Additionally, Yann Kereval (2011) notes that “the effect of using Spanish-language media serves to promote a sense of group consciousness among Latinos by reinforcing roots in Latin America and the commonalities among Latinos of varying national origin.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, in terms of entertainment on Spanish-language television, there is still more to do with the representation and creation of alternative narratives of women, sexuality, and race.⁵⁷ Indeed, sexism, homophobia, and racism can still be found in Spanish-language television, and telenovelas are some of the clearest examples of these enduring problematic practices. Yet there are clear efforts to challenge such ideologies within the Spanish-language media industry, and although it is a slow movement, the need for a more inclusive environment is undeniable as the broader social context shifts toward a broader engagement with race, class, and sexuality. For many Latino communities at the conservative end of the political and religious spectrum the ideological and social changes underway—and those represented on the televisual landscape—will be difficult to grapple with. They will require more in-depth research in terms of the longitudinal impact on diasporic translatinidades.⁵⁸ Telenovelas, on the other hand, have the potential to demonstrate other lived realities and thus challenge, through pro-social educational entertainment messaging, long-held beliefs about race, class, sexuality, gender, and religious beliefs.

Telenovelizing Television

There is a large body of scholarship about telenovelas and their role in US and global television. There is also emerging research examining the ways in which telenovelas have

reenergized the mainstream television landscape in the United States. For instance, *Ugly Betty* and *Jane the Virgin* have been extremely successful in their reinterpretation of the telenovela genre, their role as cultural translators, and their willingness to engage with issues having to do with the dignity and complexity of undocumented immigration.⁵⁹

According to Courtney Brannon Donoghue, the global popularity of the *Ugly Betty* “franchise [and its] adaptation in the U.S. illustrates how the telenovela format is a fluid and flexible product with the ability to incorporate the complicated history of national border crossing, immigration and the Latino experience within the United States.”⁶⁰

Although the cultural flexibility of the telenovela genre does not automatically produce a successful cultural translation, as was the case with some telenovela adaptations in other parts of the world, Spanish-language telenovela stories have proven to be profitable television commodities with the power to attract millions of viewers. Hence, the adoption of a telenovela-style narrative by *Jane the Virgin* is an attempt to also tap into bilingual Latino audiences that have historically tuned into telenovelas, the highest-rated programs on Spanish-language television in the United States.

The well-established transnational flow of telenovelas from Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia into US Spanish-language television, and thus the US cultural imaginary, have also impacted the awareness and acknowledgement of the telenovela genre as a legitimate televisual form. It is true that most people associate telenovelas as representing over-the-top drama and dramatic themes relating to sex, violence, family secrets, business backstabbing, community intrigue, and at times humor to name a few, telenovela as a term has also become increasingly accepted as a term connoting (zany) drama.⁶¹ Interestingly, recent mainstream English-language magazine and newspaper

stories have used the term to signify high drama at a high school, workplace, and government agency. It is indeed fascinating that the word “telenovela” is now becoming part of the English vernacular. Increasingly, people refer to the term “telenovela” rather than “soap opera” when describing a complicated and outlandish situation in their lives. Thus, as telenovelas continue to flow transnationally on Spanish-language television and abroad, there will be continued attempts to adopt the telenovela genre to US mainstream television because it is such a globally recognized genre.

The success of telenovelas has also inspired global television, and many telenovela products have been reinvented for television landscapes across the world such as Korea, Italy, Israel, and Ghana. Scholars have noted in multiple studies how telenovelas have impacted television production on an international scale, especially since it has proven to be successful in its inclusion of pro-social messaging and educational entertainment. In a study of Mexican telenovelas, Julee Tate found that telenovelas with pro-social messages against homophobia and intolerance were in fact successful productions that raised awareness and promoted open-minded behaviors toward same-sex relationships.⁶² Similarly, the film documentary *Novela, Novela* (2004)—which highlighted a youth oriented telenovela from Nicaragua that discussed sexual orientation, domestic violence, and educational access—noted that this feminist-inspired telenovela was extremely successful in incorporating pro-social messages, providing informational resources for seeking help, and budging the entrenched negative attitudes toward queer identities.

Although it is important to acknowledge the limitations of telenovelas, and their use as commodities circulating in a global capitalist pop culture, we cannot lose sight of

the fact that popular telenovelas are redubbed and rebroadcast internationally, and many national television industries have adopted and expanded upon the styles and techniques to produce their own homegrown telenovela-influenced TV programs. Some of these programs are progressive adaptations, while others are not.⁶³ Ultimately, Latinx scholars have pointed to a variety of ways in which the telenovela genre has mediated diaporic translatinidades and altered the televisual engagement of Latino and non-Latino audiences alike worldwide.⁶⁴ Quite possibly we will continue witnessing the telenovelizing of television, especially mainstream English-language television as traditional sitcom structures evolve to include telenovela narratives and styles and online media platforms become spaces for such experimentation and increased access.

Conclusion

There is no doubt television occupies an important cultural, political, and economic space in both the material and scholarly worlds. Latinx scholars have engaged with the technology, practices, and policies surrounding television and have developed a wealth of research that points to the persuasive and pervasive power of a communications medium that is now evolving faster than ever. In actuality, television is profoundly changing due to the rise of digital technologies and the proliferation of media access. Consequently, the most productive intersection between Latinx representation and television will occur in this era of digitalization.⁶⁵ We are currently witnessing some successes of Latinx-influenced television programs through streaming services (such as *Vida* and *Mozart in the Jungle*), as well as locally produced public television and YouTube-distributed programs that vault Latinx images, issues, and voices into a globalized communications sphere no longer limited by the mainstream broadcast airwaves. The Latino-themed

bilingual program *Presencia* on WGBY in Springfield, Massachusetts, for instance, is watched more through its video-on-demand platform than through the airwaves, and the program recently won a public-TV award for its treatment of Latino history and the community's diversity in western New England in the past two years. In some ways, increasing Latinos' access to the television industry may be one way of alleviating the distortions often generated about these communities.

The same holds true for US Spanish-language television where racial, gender, and LGBTQ representation haven't been historically underrepresented and at times demeaned. Those voices are slowly making their way into the bilingual broadcasting world, yet there is still more work to be done in this area as well. Nonetheless, the emergence of online venues for cultural and social expression have provided opportunities for challenging the invisibility of Latinx people that currently exists in traditional televised spaces. From bloggers to meme creators to cultural critics discussing, for example, what it means to be a Latinx "undocuqueer," these digital platforms have made available an audiovisual venue that calls into question the traditional television structures of content creation, programming prioritization, and audience procurement. The rise of streaming technologies has opened the possibilities of Latinx representation on the televisual sphere, which is critical given the seemingly anti-Latino rhetoric that currently dominates the broadcast news. Spanish-language television has also become an important venue for challenging the xenophobic treatment of Latinos that have historically permeated mainstream English-language television. The telenovelizating of television has also emerged as a notable shift that Latinx scholars have pointed to as an abiding cultural force. Lastly, Latinx labor in television production is rarely acknowledged, and yet

Latina workers in particular have been essential in the manufacturing of traditional and digital television sets and consumer electronics. This chapter attempted to document such Latinx labor as well as how the topics of representation, streaming platforms, Spanish-language TV, and telenovelas have deeply influenced television's impact on Latinx communities. As the demographics in the United States shift toward an increasingly larger Latino population, it will be more important than ever to conduct scholarly investigations of the televisual landscape and its relationship with diasporic Latinidades well into the future.

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