Do I see myself represented on Spanish Television?
Latinas ‘talk back’ to Univision and Telemundo

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Introduction

Within the last decade Latino media in the U.S. have developed at a very rapid pace, while Latino audiences have received little or no attention as research subjects for academic purposes (Rodríguez, 1999; Desipio, 1998, 1999). Scholars have reported that there is a lack of information on how Latinas interact with Spanish language media and how they consume and respond to popular culture (Davila, 2001; 2002; Valdivia, 1999). This paper explores how a group of 17 working-class women from the city of Austin, Texas—ten of them foreign-born—perceive, interpret and negotiate Latino representations produced by Spanish-language television in the United States. More particularly, the paper is concerned with how these women classify the classifier (Bourdieu, 1984) regarding Latina portrayals in Univision and Telemundo, the two largest Hispanic television networks.

The relationship between women and television is a complex and conflicted one (Press, 1991, Press & Cole, 1999 & D’Acci, 1994). Likewise, the representation of Latino woman also constitutes a contested terrain. Production companies, production teams and publicity firms, among others, participate in the struggles for the definition of Latinas identity. Spanish and Latino-oriented media actively participate in the process of Latinos’ latinization, that is “the consolidation of a common Latino/a identity among different Latino subgroups” (Davila, 2002, p. 27; 2001, p. 15-17). Univision and Telemundo, in their position of being the two largest Spanish language networks, are one of the main creators of an homogeneous conceptualization of a U.S. Latinidad and hence Latinas’ Latinity.
Latinas, in turn, participate in the 'struggles over meanings,' with the assets that they can mobilize in their everyday life, with their own power to differentiate; to classify as discussed by Bourdieu (1994). The question is how do we account for Latinas' cultural "negotiations" with Univision and Telemundo discourse? This paper assumes that the only way to investigate such negotiations is to observe them at work, in multiple sites, in order to reconstruct them and analyze them in their actual operations. Out of the many possible sites, such as the political economy of the networks, the text, the producers, the anchors, the studio audience, the external audience, the advertising, among others, I have chosen to study, simultaneously, the television text and a particular subgroup of the Latino audience.

Talk Shows

The talk shows El Show de Cristina and Laura en America provide the textual site to study Latinas representation in Univision and Telemundo. These popular shows, which mainly delve into family problems and women’s sexual autonomy, have been selected for their contested potential to act as “public forum” for Latinos and for their invisibility among Latino intellectuals and scholars (Calles, 2000; Ben Amor, 1998, Davila, 2001).

El Show de Cristina, produced in Miami by the Cuban born journalist Cristina Salaregui, was aired on Univision from 1989 until 2000 with consistently high ratings and virtually without competition. Over the past two years, another seven shows have emerged disrupting the day-time terrain of variety shows and imported telenovelas, which for decades have held the programming supremacy. One of these new shows is Laura en America, conducted by the Peruvian lawyer, Laura Bozzo and broadcast by Telemundo.
since 2000 with enormous success. This show has overtaken most other English and Spanish-language talk shows in some of the largest U.S. Latino markets (Telemundo, 2001). For example, in Los Angeles, in November 2000, it was the market leader in all key adult demographic categories, including a 2.5 rating in the highly desirable adult 18-49 demographic, 67 percent higher than its closest competitor, Univision’s *El Show de Cristina,* which posted a 1.5 rating. In the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale market, it defeated *El Show de Cristina* among women 18-34 by 10 percent (3.4 vs. 3.1) and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* by 127 percent (3.4 vs. 1.5) (Telemundo, 2001). This competition resulted in the cancellation of *El Show de Cristina* in December of 2001. Re-runs of this last program are broadcast daily under the titles *Clasicos de Cristina* and *Los Archivos de Cristina.*

The study of the politics of representation of these popular programs appears relevant in the current changing socio-demographic context for Latinos in the United States. Latinos are the fastest growing minority population, and constitute 13 percent of the U.S. population, but they also represent a large proportion of people living below the poverty level. In 1999, 22.8 percent of the 32.8 million Latinos residing in the country lived in poverty as compared to 7.7 percent of non-Hispanic Whites (Therrien & Ramirez, 2001, p. 6). Latinos mainly hold unskilled and semi-skilled occupations and earn less than non-Hispanic White workers (In 1993, only 23.3 percent of Hispanics and 49.3 percent of non-Hispanic Whites earned $35,000 or more).

In contrast with these figures, Latinos have an extensive Spanish-language media complex “for maintaining [their] its language and propagating [their] its myths,” compared to any other minority group in the history of the country (Fox, 1996, p. 42). It
is in the context of these struggling social conditions that is relevant to see the interplay between the programs’ philosophy of empowering Latinos, the actual portrayals they convey and the interpretation of these images by a specific group of Latinas. As Davila points out, we have seldom “looked at the ways people respond to these culturally specific media and to the “Latinness” so promoted by their programming and representations” (2002, p. 26).

Calles (2000), in one of the first scholarly analysis about El Show de Cristina, asserts that even though this show presents stereotypical portrayals of Latinos, it still provides the U.S. Hispanic population with a cultural agenda. For the author, this program allows Latinos “to imagine themselves as a community in a cultural environment that has always treated them as unwanted outsiders” (p. 2). Ben Amour, on the other hand, considers that this show belongs to ‘the farce of the Hispanic television’s public space’ (p. 482).

Cristina Saralegui, and Laura Bozzo have both declared, in similar terms that they are working for the betterment of the lives of the Latinos in the United States as well as the population of Latin America (Cristina On Line, 1998; Telemundo On Line, 2001). However, these two mature dyed blonde program hosts have been criticized in the United States and in some Latin American countries for the type and quality of the contents they deliver.

Saralegui, a recognized anti-Castro television persona, has been accused of doing "little more than debase her race with frank, nationally televised discussion of promiscuity, homosexuality and women's equality, still controversial subjects in many Latino homes" (Baxter, 1998). Bozzo, on the other hand has been criticized in Peru, some
Latin American countries and on Internet websites for presenting “racy topics, questionable tactics and dubious taste” (Garvin, 2000; Torres, 2000). Laura Bozzo, currently at the peak of her success on Telemundo, has faced judicial problems in Peru due to her support of Fujimori’s government and her connections to the former regimen intelligence advisor, Vladimiro Montecinos. Laura Bozzo is called Peru’s Jerry Springer and “the trash talk queen” (Torres, 2001). Notwithstanding these criticisms, mainstream American and Spanish language press seems to have a more indulgent attitude towards these programs than the Latin American critics. Criticisms for Cristina’s show in U.S. Spanish language papers have been relegated to the letters to the editor (Davila, 2001).

The criticisms addressed to these shows are no different than the ones that are exerted upon the American talk shows. American cultural critics have been concerned with the dangers of exploitation, voyeurism, pseudo-therapy, and the problematic definition of deviance these shows present in the American television (Gamson, 1998, p. 6). The central problem in this debate is whether or not the talk shows can offer a space in which the voices of the ordinary people, especially women, can be heard.

Cloud (1999) differs with Shattuc’s (1997) claim that for women talk shows “are politicized consciousness-raising” (p. 111). Cloud asserts that in the analysis of these programs, it is necessary to consider (a) the predominantly conservative ideological role of the therapeutic discourses in contemporary mass culture, (b) the links between the talk shows’ familial ideology to contemporary political imperatives and (3) the links between talk shows industry's profit imperatives to the overall conservatism of the programs (p. 111).
Cristina’s and Laura’s shows coexist in a television universe, heavily inhabited by a majority of light skinned and blonde immigrant hosts, in a process that Davila (2002) labels “the whiteness of the world of Spanish TV” (p. 28). Telemundo has recently incorporated into its programming Mariter’s talk show, conducted by another light-skinned Peruvian host, whereas Univision has given a new boost to Marta Susana’s show (produced by Venevision), an Argentinean descent blonde and mature woman who somehow has occupied the empty space left by Cristina on the daytime schedule.

Stereotyping and the exclusion of low-income and dark skinned people on Spanish language television is a topic that has acquired a gradual potency in Latino research. Added to observations made by Subervi et al (1994), Rodriguez (1999) and Noriega (2000), we have Davila’s (2001, 2002) most recent and direct critique of “racialization on the Hispanic TV.” Davila argues that the networks are involved in a strategy of whitening with the intention to keep the synergy between American and Latin American markets.

Although Davila does not analyze the content of the show, for her El Show de Cristina constitutes a paradigmatic case of inequality reproduction and white supremacy (p. 169). Her complaint that shows “that were initially devised to reflect a U.S. Latina sensibility, such as Cristina, end up showcasing and reproducing inequalities among and across Latinas subgroups” (p, 170) is central to the arguments raised in this paper.

From the gender perspective, it is important to note that as Cristina’s show begun to lose ratings in 2000, there was an increase in the incorporation of more sexually audacious topics. However, neither the increase of more sexualized elements within the show—which Cristina Saralegui claimed to have based on her audience’s likes and
demands—nor the higher participation of Latina/o celebrities on the show could have saved *Cristina* from its cancellation at the end of 2001.

The higher ratio of body display/nudity did not go unnoticed for the Latino audience, as monitoring of Cristina On Line, Telemundo’s opinion chat rooms and women’s interviews for this study confirm. However, an increase in nudity, either feminine or masculine, can be seen throughout the whole network’s programming—from the telenovelas to the variety shows and even the soft news programs—in what seems to be a simultaneous war for ratings in an effort to attract more American advertisers (AP, 2002). This point is supported by Holloway (2002) when she asserts that in a good deal of Spanish language TV, especially in primer time shows, “sexy-looking women with lots of cleavage are the norm” (p. K10).

From a critical perspective, the argument that I build here is that Hispanic talk shows are not a place to support women’s agency, to build a more pluralistic Latino identity and to promote tolerance for ‘difference’ among the diverse Latino groups. More than a celebration of occasional transgressions permitted by the media or institutional authority, as it is theorized in some writings from the populist cultural studies perspective (McLaughlin, 1993), these programs work under a very narrow definition of women’s behavior, are moralists, conservative and prescribe Latin American upper and middle class values.

*Cristina* and *Laura*’s treatment of topics and the co-optation of difference, in any of its expressions, discourage naming these cultural products a forum for resistance or a place for generating empowering discourses for U.S. Latina/os (A more in-depth analysis of these programs is, under progress in another other academic production). Thus, these
talk shows’ transgressive possibilities should be looked upon the level of consumption, not in the narrative of these shows, where Latinas’s racialization and subordination appear to be reinforced by “yet more images of whiteness” (Davila, 2001, p. 169). With that in mind we turn then to the audience site, that is to the women interviewed in this study.

**Interviews with Latinas**

A total of 27 women between 22 and 64 years old, residing in the city of Austin, Texas, constitute the reception site of this project still in progress. These women were interviewed one or more times between the Fall of 2000 and Spring 2002. I will describe the group in terms of perceived and self-defined class location, ethnicity, nativity and marital status. However, as Ang (1996) warns, these categorizations by no mean pretend to reduce these women identities to this set of demographic categories (p. 49). Similarly, I am very cautious in using them to explain observed differences on television evaluations and consumption patterns between groups defined by these categories (Press, 1999, p. 145-6).

In terms of perceived and self defined class location, these women can be separated in three different groups, low-income (14), middle class (10) and middle to upper class (3). In terms of nationality, ethnicity and marital status the group can be distributed as follows: Nine of them were U.S. born while the rest were immigrants, temporary residents or recently nationalized Americans. Seven were Mexicans, seven were Mexican-American, three were Cubans, two were Argentineans, two were Chileans, one was Puerto Rican-American, one was Peruvian, one was Ecuadorean, one was
Salvadorean, one was Spaniard/Spanish and one was Guatemalan. With the exception of three interviewees, most of the women had children and lived in a family setting, as either married or single parents. Most of them can be considered “family women,” as defined by Reay (1995) and Coterill (1991).

The Latino women studied here lived in a demographic context where Latinos have large incidence. There are about 6.7 million Hispanics in Texas and 5 million are of Mexican origin (Bahadur, 2001, p. A15). Travis County, where the city of Austin is located, has an 812,280 population and 229,048 are Hispanic (Census 2000, cited in Bureau of Business Research On Line, 2001). Although prosperity studies indicate that this city “tops in prosperity in the 90’s” with a median income of $48,950 (Alford, 2002), working class residents can tell a different story; a story that speaks of an economic divide that mainly affects Hispanics and African Americans. Two out of the three private jobs created in the 1990s paid wages below the city’s average. These jobs, such as construction and domestic services, drew heavily on minority migrants from rural areas and from Mexico. One-third of the Austin work force must get by on a weekly income of $350 or less (Holstein, 2000). That is particularly true of the minority populations concentrated in South and East Austin, place of residency for most of the low-income women interviewed in this study.

The discussion that follows present a preliminary analysis of 17 in-depth interviews with low-income women whom had household incomes ranging from $14,000 to 30,000. - In terms of education, nine of them had finished high school and two held bachelor’s degrees from their country of origin, while the rest had incomplete schooling and one of the was illiterate.
The study was limited to women, because as it I stated at the beginning of this paper, there is no information on how Latinas interpret Spanish-language popular culture nor on how they negotiate gender representations within/available on the main Hispanic Television networks. The criterion for inclusion was to interview women who frequently watched Spanish language television and who were familiar with the talk shows *El Show de Cristina* and *Laura en America*. Being a fluent Spanish speaker was not a requirement for this study. Even though half of the women could switch between English and Spanish, with different levels of fluency, only three interviews were completed in English.

For this project, I located women through different methods- direct invitation, snowball from a previous informant, acquaintances, or participants in previous research projects. With the purpose of data triangulation, I also interviewed two Chilean graduated students from my academic institution.

My interviews with these women lasted between 1 hour and a half to 3 hours and in some cases we met for a second or third time, according to the particular situation of each informant. With only two exceptions, almost all the interviews were conducted in the women’s home “a natural setting for women’s conversation and discussions” (Press & Cole, 1999; Reay, 1997). During the interviews, and depending on respondent’s time--- and their availability of VCR’s in their homes-- we watched taped segments together or complete programs from *Cristina* or *Laura’s* shows.

I begun all my interviews with a brief conversation about how these women came to live in Austin, their personal and family background, their occupation, education, job experiences and future expectations, among other issues. I then moved into the self-definitions, with the request that they share their ideas about how do they see themselves
in this multicultural America; and what their perception was regarding how others classify them and Latinas in general. Finally, I asked them about their television consumption, their evaluation of *Univision* and *Telemundo* and their opinion of the talk shows.

The “grand tour questions” targeted their private and collective sphere and were aimed at gathering contextual data to understand Latinas relationship with Hispanic TV. It was important for me to obtain data on how Latina’s daily life permeate their consumption and understanding of U.S. Hispanic television. The main questions for the audience study were (a) How do Latinas perceive themselves within U.S. society? (b) How do they feel about other cultural and ethnic groups may classified them? (c) What is the relevance of Spanish language television in their lives and (d) What do they think about women’s representations on Hispanic TV in general and in *El Show de Cristina* and *Laura en America* in particular.

All the interviews were tape recorded for transcription and later coded thematically through a manual procedure (Glaser and Strauss’s 1967; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Respondent’s data were assigned to a few initial tentative categories determined by the “grand tour questions” and the Interview Protocol. In the remainder of this paper I will focus on the responses that 17 informants provided for the last guiding question of this study. I will present women’s evaluations of Latinas’ representations in the networks and in *Cristina* and *Laura’s* talk shows. I will start by introducing the context in which Latinas discuss and locate Latinas gender representations and then I will present the media and program evaluations.

**Gender identity: How do we see ourselves?**

The respondents agree on the existence of a Latina stereotype that usually represents them as “sexy.” However, many of them disqualify this image as “superficial”
and as an empty portrayal that does not embody all of a Latina’s characteristics. For these women, Latinas are more than a sexual object for men (Latinos included) and for the social and media system that defines them in that way. Some of these women counterargue that this image misrepresents the millions of hard-working Latinas who dress in conservative clothing and who support their families without male support.

Lidia: I do not know an American guy who does not like a Latina because they are “hot,” because they think that they are hot and that they want to have sex and that they will will have the best sex in the world. I’m not sure how that works statistically, but out of ten guys, ten American guys that I know, they would die to have a Latina with them, I think that is just for the moment. Look, they think that they have a “big”...they have ass, they dress sexy, their movements are sexy, they are...very sensual, they pretty much look at them in a sexual way.

Viviana: How are Latinas perceived?
Maritza: I don’t know because I am not a ‘gringa’ (Anglo)
Viviana: …(Silence)
Maritza: … But Latino women are sexier than Americans, because of their shape, their hips, their hair, the color of their eyes, their skin tone, well, but I (we) think like that because we are Hispanic. Who knows what they think about us, because we are Hispanic.

Corina: Latina’s image follows an ideological model of oppression...not only here, but also in Latin American countries. But well, we come with this prototype to the U. S., where Latinas are hot, where they are the ones who fuck the best ["la que mejor coge"], the one that…and Spanish programs take and use that; that is on the talk shows.

**Univision and Telemundo.**

Latinas in general perceive that the Univision and Telemundo networks fulfill an “entertainment” function more than being a service for Latinos. Too many soap operas, little or almost no information about their countries of origin, sensationalist programming mainly for commercial purposes, and the lack of children television programming are some of the criticisms that these Latinas make about Spanish television. Latinas acknowledge the economic motivations of these media organizations.

Among the most general criticisms, the following stand out
the lack of interest the network have in “promoting latino culture more seriously and committing to take Latinos seriously” (Romina)

the lack of “constructive programs that might better inform Latinos” (Antonia, Maritza)

the excess of superficiality. The networks “should stop giving away thousands of dollars in worthless things they do on the contest programs when there are people still begging in the streets (Adriana, Cuban).

The use of sensationalism, emotions and violence in the shows. Networks “emphasize the negative things” (Romina) and “keep people excited, nervous…they drive you to up the wall” (Rosalia).

Latinas’ controversial representation. Latinas are almost always presented as “sexy” and “readily available for the male gaze” (Lidia, Maritza, Corina, Gina, Marisela, Rosalia).

Among the most specific criticism

There is an excessive propensity to air Mexican shows. “For Univision and Telemundo the only thing that exist is Mexico and that's it ” (Lidia).

The evident cultural tension inside the networks. “Latino television is managed by Cubans. They have a life a little bit easier than Mexicans do. Mexicans are more numerous but they have less power” (Romina).

Many of the interviewees expressed their concerns about having helpful information for Hispanics beyond commercials that promote English language learning (such as the commercial for Ingles sin Barreras translated as English without barriers). They foresee specific programs targeting Latinos immigrants that could be broadcast on
weekends. Some of them believe that if the networks really wanted to do produce/provide educational or more informative shows they would do it. They say that “they would probably not enjoy such high ratings as they would with suggestive shows, but they would offer a different option for the viewers.”

For Maritza, the only serious programs on Univision and Telemundo always “last only half an hour,” and she considers the rest “stupidity, soaps and more stupidity.” Romina thinks that Latinos cannot have real Hispanic pride based on some of the programs that are presented by the networks. For her, Hispanic media in general does not act on Latinos behalf because it is comfortable with the situation they are in. (She explains this as “porque todos estan cómodos en el burro”).

Although Lidia watches a great amount of Hispanic TV, she still criticizes the programming because it hampers (frena) the development of Latinos. She thinks that Univision and Telemundo “fulfill the function of orienting and helping the newcomer adjust to their new situation.” However, after Hispanics are settled, she thinks that this television “keeps them stagnated because they do not watch other channels, and therefore do not learn English.”

The most crushing criticism regarding the content of Hispanic television is provided by Corina, an Argentinean who obtained a Social Communications degree in Argentina, during the military dictatorship. She says she does not identify with any of the programming coming from either Telemundo or Univision. Even though she recognizes that she is only interested in the newscasts, she still labels them as being “yellow press.” For Corina, both television networks have alienating programs where predominantly sexist journalism and sexist programs exist. She says that in the talk shows and some
other entertainment shows there are too many offenses allowed against other people.

Corina also criticizes the excessive passion that is present in talk shows such as *Cristina* and *Laura in America*. She says that physical fighting is inherent to a conflict resolution dynamic that should not even be presented on television.

**Women representation**

The seventeen women agree with the need for making changes in the content of the programming offered by Univision and Telemundo. However, this coincidence becomes more complex when it comes to women’s representations. Some of them strongly criticized the models in the variety shows, telenovela’s actresses and some news presenters for “showing too much.” Others like the news anchorwomen self-presentations and criticized certain programs such as *Cristina, Don Francisco, El Gordo y la Flaca y Los Metiches* (Univision) for the models’ display. In general they all have something criticism regarding Latinas’ representations in the networks. As they declared, there has always been instances on which they have felt “attacked”, “insulted,” “offended” or “embarrassed” by some television content. They reactions to this representations range from asking their children to leave the room, discuss the issue—in that moment or later—with others (e.g. husbands, friends), switch channels or simply turn off the TV set.

For Marina, the girls (models) that come out on Univision are shameless (“tienen mucho descaro”), especially the ones who appear on *Don Francisco*, a variety program show. She says, “at any given moment the women will come out just like God brought them to earth, showing all their private parts.” She apologizes for sounding “old-fashioned” but regardless, she says she dislikes it.
Maritza, on the other hand, thinks that the Hispanic television “totally forgets that women are watching too.” She considers that Univision and Telemundo “display nearly naked women naked just to capture the attention of male television viewers.” To her, these television representations are in no way related to today’s Latina who is a “strong and hard working woman.”

Nury, a Mexican immigrant, distinguishes between Latinas’ sensuality and these representations of scantily dressed women. She says that “we all consider ourselves sexy at some point and I particularly consider myself sexy without having to walk around almost naked.” These opinions contrast with those of Lidia, who believes that in the world of talk shows, Spanish television is still in its infancy (“a breast feeding baby”) compared to the cleavages that are displayed on American networks. She says that if Univision and Telemundo “show too much”, Jerry Springer or Howard Stern “show it all.” Consider the following quotes in support of the previous comment:

Maritza: They totally forget about women. Women in Telemundo, in the “Bienvenido” show, in all the funny programs, women have to come out in bikinis or thongs so that guys can have something to watch. And it is not just guys who are watching, it is all of us, everybody. And in the soap operas, women always have three boyfriends, they leave one and take another one. It seems to me that they represent women in a way that is definitely not true in today’s Latino world. I think that there are many hard working women who would never take off their clothes for any amount of money in the world. They just make others think that we are weak and that we like to carry ourselves just like that.

Romina: The models look really good. It doesn’t bother me to see so much revealing clothing and short skirts, because, well, people do have legs, and here on American TV we never get to see the legs of half of the television hosts. What bothers me is when they do things like measure someone’s derriere… like those strippers, those things that one doesn’t really want to see, so you have to turn off the TV. What I mean is there should be a balance to what is shown.

Gina: I don’t like about Mexican and …all the women there just …they are always wearing something small…they are always showing everything…Yeah they are
pretty..but it's like ridiculous …I mean they are game shows and you are all like you don’t seem...they look like sluts..Yeah I mean they are pretty but God damn you know? …is like overdoing it, especially on the soap operas

Gina: I guess that’s my whole deal. I mean you flip and you all see and then there
Are a lot of guys that stop on that just because they are like that…You can see that just going to people’s houses…My boyfriend had a white friend stay over and he just the TV on mute on the Spanish station like the whole night, and I was “why did you do this? ” Why did you have it in- on there~?”…and he’s like ”I don’t know, the women are pretty or something…” I was like … I don’t know…he don’t understand what they are saying cause it’s on mute, and you are not even listening to them, so for me it’s you know…

Cristina and Laura’s talk show.

The arrival of Laura en America’s show provided the interviewees with an
opportunity to compare contents and styles of Hispanic talk shows that until two years
ago were monopolized by El Show de Cristina. As far as content goes, the differences
between these two shows are clear to the interviewees: Cristina addresses family,
sexuality and celebrity whereabouts while Laura focuses only on family problems.
Although the majority of them dislike some of Laura’s treatment of her guests and the
fighting she permits in the set, still most of them prefer her over Cristina because they
feel her closer to the “people” and “their issues.” Two of the interviewees consider that
she sticks out to defend women's rights. However, for a Cuban immigrant, this
confidence will stand in place “as long as her attitude remains genuine.” She is alluding
to the possibility that Laura Bozzo, by being politically involved with Fujimori’s
government, could have collaborated “on peoples’ oppression.”

For many of the immigrant and non-immigrant women, Cristina Saralegui was
showing a great deal of shamelessness (“descaro”) in her show by displaying people with
very little clothes, homosexuals, lesbians and other people representing alternative
lifestyles that “do not agree with the way many Latinos think.” Perla said many times she
had to tell her children to leave because the show was not appropriate for them. For her
this talk shows is "filth, pure trash" ("un mugrero, una pura porquería"). These epithets
were used by other four respondents. Maritza indicates that the issues that Cristina deals
with are "ridiculous" and "the most stupid ones are us, the Latinos who sit down to watch
that trash."

Lidia also dislikes the shows where Latino sexuality issues are openly discussed.
She explains them as a hook to keep the ratings up. For her, people's private lives should
not be showcased on television." Consider some other evaluations in the following
quotes:

Leyla: I think that Cristina is of a slightly better rank than Laura is, but I don’t like her
either. I used to like watching her before because I saw her as a very pretty woman, but
after some time, I felt that her programs had changed too much… it is pure filth what she
shows us now.

Adriana: Of course, Cristina discusses sexual taboo… yes, of course she does! Cristina is
a progressive woman, very liberal and I admire her. She’s got a lot of merit. I have been
watching her since 1996, but there are things that I don’t like… and it’s not that I am
against that… but homosexuals dressed as women… I don’t understand why, if she
educates… so, I say, why show that type of thing, because to talk about homosexuality
she doesn’t have to go to an extreme to need to show men dressed like women. I think
that Cristina needs the show for her own economic benefit, and that distances her a little
from what we are really interested in. For example, when she and her guests came out
naked, I saw it. I saw it, and that is not called freedom, that is called ("libertinaje"). I am
not interested in those topics, I don’t find that they have any benefit, to the contrary.

Antonia: When I first arrived in Austin, I enjoyed Cristina’s shows, actually, I watched
them in El Salvador. Back then they were more constructive, they would talk more about
family, about reality, and suddenly she began to offer different types of shows and I
wasn’t as interested. It’s like when she began to include too much pornography. In
almost every show she uses sex, and that just doesn’t draw me in.

Gloria: I respect that (a different type of sexuality), but she should respect children, but
above all, youth in general.

Rosalia: No, we don’t watch her anymore. I watch the commercials, I don’t know, but I
don’t tune her in… There, they were showing even naked people and everything… We
saw this show, everyone sitting in the audience, men and women naked… in three
months, I think watched once or twice, I think if that many times. We have seen Cristina a lot, but me, not anymore…

Laura Bozzo's talk show, which tends to center on family and relationship issues, didn’t have better luck when it came to interviewees’ evaluations. Some interviewees like the show because it “offers facts of real life that happen in every poor country” and because she is “more realistic” (Antonia, Salvadoran). Others like her because she uncovers “heartbreaking situations” that otherwise would remain unknown” (Romina, Spaniard) and because she is “more humanitarian, she helps and instructs” (Adriana, Cuban). However, in all the cases, this support does not validate “all the hitting and fighting” that is present in the show.

Only three women –Rosita, Marina -Cuban immigrants- and Perla, a Mexican immigrant support her aggressive style as necessary “to eradicate the problem that is being discussed there.” Rosita (Cuban) thinks that she needs to be loud and strong “for the truth to come out.” For her the best proof that Laura defends women is that she is not afraid to show videotapes of men who are cheating on their women or viceversa. She concedes that sometimes “there are also women who cheat on their men.” Laura’s policing function into her subjects’ private life to prove their deviations would be one of Laura’s main strengths. Rosita also approves her use of police force on the set to arrest the men who are caught “committing crimes” such as cheating on loved ones or not wanting to behave on the set. Rosita is reassured by Laura’s genuine efforts to help women due to the fact that she provides some guests with scholarships and other tools--such little sandwich-street cars-- as a way to make a living after a family break-up.
These more favorable opinions about Laura’s show came from the same interviewees that have stopped watching Cristina’s show because they were uncomfortable with the way the show started showing “too much skin” (“muchos desnudos”). In general, all the interviewees like Cristina's shows when she offers "serious issues" such as helping Hispanics find a lost loved one or talking about teenagers and drugs. The interviewees highly value the connection between topics and their everyday lives or previous experiences.

However, more than half of the seventeen respondents dislike Laura’s show because they feel “she is commercializing the misery of Peru’s poorest people” (Gloria, Peruvian; Lidia, Argentinean). They don’t like her authoritarianism and the way she interferes in those people’s lives. Even though they feel that Cristina also gets involved with her guests, some interviewees believe that Laura is a lot more open and intense about it (Corina, Argentinean).

For some of the women, Laura places too much emphasis on the clash between social classes in Peruvian society. The guests in the show are poor and look unruly in contrast to Laura who would represent a Latino American high middle class morality. Some interviewees refuse to believe that the show presents real people and consider it just a tongo (a staged thing). Other respondents take distance from the behaviors presented in the show and say that, in their country of origin, e.g. Cuba, that does not happen. They state that the conflicts presented there correspond to “people who lack education.” The process of marking the ‘difference’ between the women and men presented in the shows and the Latina respondents can reach intense tones as the following excerpts show:
Gloria: I think you could say these programs are bought. We have so much poverty. I accept that we have a lot of poverty as we do in Chile, Mexico, Honduras or El Salvador, but that there are so many cases, so many things like this, so horrible like the way people hit each other, I don’t think so, I believe those things are paid for.

Romina: The violence of poverty is evident. That is a psychic violence, a psychological violence, it is not just a physical violence. Laura defends women well, she helps them. The problem is poverty. Those people live in a sub-world. It’s so sad what I saw. She tries to educate people with her moral values, but they don’t have ethics or morality. They survive at a basic level, almost at a beastly level, and maybe it has nothing to do with food, they are not starving to death… the problem is one of values. The guests on Laura are on the level of a sub-world, where there are ugly things, it looks like you are watching Dante’s Inferno, I can’t describe it. Everything is so aggressive. I tell you these are people who don’t have moral values, spiritual values, I don’t know. That is typical of people who don’t believe in anything, it is typical of self-destruction. These people have a complete void, I don’t know. They have no value, they don’t value themselves, if they did they would not display themselves in these situations.

Antonia: I believe this happens all over the world. However, I believe we Latinos make it more evident. These things happen in the lowliest barrios, you know? You can see the level…

Rosalia: The impression that I have is that the people she wants as guests… are people who are poor, that don’t have much education. I don’t know, you can’t compare two lives, you see them, but they have nothing in common with the panelists (Peruvian panelists) or with her (Laura Bozzo), not even with the audience that you see before you. I feel a great difference between them and me. I don’t relate to them at all.

Rosalia: ‘cause there are a lot of gringos that can watch, they can flip between channels and say that these programs, Laura or Cristina, or the other shows that you see can and they get you see…uhhh wauuuu [exclamation]…they are going to think that all Latinos are like that….they get the impression…that the men are always messing around on all the women…that the women, they say are trashy, they are evil, that they are always fighting…they give you just a different script…. they give you just a different script…You are not at their same level, you always see the maid , stuff like that, you know…If they would just change the channel and watch really quick …they would get a bad impression of all Latinos.

Lidia thinks that social inequality permeates this show and it hurts her to see that people’s poverty is used as entertainment for Latinos in the U.S. She does not like the fact that Laura forcefully intrudes in her guest’s private lives in order to uncover ‘their
secrets’ and use them to build up a story. She is angry and feels sorry for the interviewees because it is clear to her that they are not really being helped.

Corina in turn grades Laura as “bossy and manipulative.” To her, Laura represents “Hernan Cortes descending again upon the Aztecs, telling them what’s right or wrong.” In her analysis, the show participant’s ethnicity is correlated with a class problem: “She is white…and in some way she personifies the values of the dominant class because her skin is lighter than others.” Corina explains that Laura brings authoritarian and Catholic values to the program without really understanding people’s social dynamics.

Laura’s potential to defend women and provide a space for Latinas’ agency gets diminished by the host’s characteristic aggressiveness. Many of the interviewees consider her to be a tough, loud and authoritarian woman who wants to be famous “at other’s expenses.” Corina feels that Laura follows a rule that is very authoritarian by getting involved in her guests’ problems, simplifying them, and then forcing other’s solutions upon them. This interviewee finds that Laura pressures guests in many ways, by hurrying them, badgering them, hugging them or even threatening some of the participants. Consider the following statements in support of some of the ideas discussed above.

Lidia: I do not like Laura because she records people…I don’t know her, people say that she helps other people, I wouldn’t know, I’m not in Peru…I don’t like it when she sneaks into the life of other people to show how poor they are and how she puts her camera under their little stick made bed with rags as blankets…I don’t like that and is not because I don’t want to be aware of poverty, I don’t want to ignore anything, I just don’t like it. I think she, how can I put it, does not give them too much respect, she doesn’t seem to respect her people.

Corina: Laura’s show points out to those Latinos that identify with those kinds of
values, I do not identify with those values even though I am Hispanic and speak Spanish and I come from Latin America. I may come from a more educated class, I went to school, I may be more conscious about it...who knows...I had that experience and I chose to be like that, I consciously chose to be different and not let my self be carried by those values.

Perla is the interviewee who provided the least critical viewpoint regarding the show *Laura en América*. She is also the one who shows the most distress for not being able to watch the show more regularly due to her workload in and out of her home, as well as her husband’s negative view of the show. She says that she prefers this show to *Cristina* because “[...] it is more different than *Cristina*”. Although she has troubles explaining exactly what is wrong with Cristina’s show, she summarizes her feelings by saying “it’s complete garbage.” On the other hand, the topics on *Laura* are more compelling to her. These topics include spousal infidelity and child abuse. She admits that she sometimes cries along with the children on the screen and contemplates her own domestic situation. She wouldn’t want anything to happen to her daughter by the hands of her new stepfather. She lives with the uncertainty about whether her decision to remarry was wise or not due to the toll it’s taken on the children, but she consoles herself by saying “one really shows preference to one’s children, than to one’s husband”. For Perla, the problems that occur over there (Peru) are the same things that happen to “us,” the Hispanics that live here (in Austin/the U.S.). Although she admits that many people don’t like the show, she says she likes it because *Laura* is very proper in what she says and because “she is on the side of women.” In her view, this program is for women only, since she thinks “that men don’t like it when you say those type of things to them.” Perla goes on to explain that her husband feels that the show “is pure garbage, that it doesn’t serve any purpose” and that he simply won’t allow her to watch it, insisting that
they have to go to sleep. The husband’s core problem is that the show serves to “wake women up [who] are already pretty smart.” Perla says that the shows’ topics, whether it’s _Laura_ or _Cristina_, always pop up as a topic of conversation with her co-workers at the cleaner’s, whether it is because they liked it or because they disliked it. Sometimes, during breaks, they will discuss the programs and if they don’t have enough time, they will keep conversing as they hang the clothes when their manager is not watching.

Television content is not something she usually discusses with her daughter, who is a high school student, nor with her husband, because she knows what he thinks of them. The show is important to her because she says she learns from it and applies it to her daily life.

Perla: (regarding _Laura’s_ show) He doesn’t want me to watch that. He says they’re nothing but fantasies, that it’s worthless, that we have to go to sleep, that Laura is not a good thing. That is only there so women can mouth off, and blah blah blah. He says that women are smart enough already, and they’re waking them up. No, he says. Let’s go to sleep.

In contrast with this opinion, Corina an Argentinean immigrant, provides once again the strongest critique of the shows. Corina literally separates herself from both shows and analyzes them from the outside, proclaiming repeatedly that she does not identify with this type of programs nor does she identify herself with the stereotypes affecting Latinos in American society. This statement can be explained by the fact that she does not perceive herself to be a minority in this country “although people keep telling me that I am that.” She asserts that she cannot feel like a minority here because she came “with another background, with another experience.”

Corina does not see much difference between English and Spanish talk shows. She says that both “use the same confrontation techniques and use people that are
However, she says that one of the differences between the two types of talk shows is that “among Hispanics, I have seen the least educated people overall.” Another difference is in the type of confrontation that explodes on the screen where she feels that American talk shows are not as passionate as Spanish talk shows and verbalize more the problems being discussed. In contrast, in the Hispanic shows there is more action than words.” Corina states that when a verbal exchange occurs it is “always pertaining to the explosive action of feelings, of emotions”.

Corina correlates this analogy about verbalization and passion with Cristina and Laura’s attitude as hosts of their respective shows. In her opinion, Cristina does not scream like Laura, she does not “go down” to the level of the audience, but she does use other tools in order to “impose middle class values.” It is her belief that Cristina talks “from a less passionate place, a more rational place, and her personal life rises as an example to all”. Corina does not think that Laura and Cristina represent anything or anyone, and least of all, they do not represent her. She says that the situation is more about whether or not the audience can identify with the shows. She also believes that the networks only interest is to make money from other people’s sufferings. This opinion is shared by at least six other interviewees.

As far as Corina is concerned, those who watch these programs are working-class people who don’t have much more to think about than to go to work and be exploited. For her, immigrant and low income workers are the ones who need entertainment. She also believes that these programs are watched by workers who earns five dollars an hour, because she doubts that “anyone earning 20 dollars an hour watches them.” When Corina discusses the guests on Laura’s show, she states,
Corina: When I say oppressed, it’s because they are very alienated, they are not conscious of what’s going on, that they go there for a particular reason which could be money, which I don’t know for sure because they could indeed be paying them, I don’t know… because they need the drama, they need the tradition because they cannot manage their lives in any other way.

Final Remarks

The analysis of the interviews presented here corresponds to a work in progress in which I am analyzing a total corpus of 27 in depth-interviews with women of Latino heritage in the city of Austin, Texas. With this work I expect to contribute to the current debate on Latinos representation in U.S. popular culture. My final aim is to offer the voices of a group of Latinas regarding their own perceptions and evaluations of Spanish language television programming that targets to them. For this analysis I have selected women that I consider to be among the most underprivileged within American society. Most of the interviewees are with unskilled workers who are mothers and spouses and who struggle everyday to ‘make it’ in this society. Most of them are invisible to the Hispanic audience analysis performed by Nielsen Media Research on behalf of Latino networks (National Hispanic Television Index). Therefore, I consider it my obligation to help these voices emerge so that they can participate in a debate that, up until now, has been dominated by the networks and critiqued by some Latino scholars (Davila, 2002, 2001; Rodriguez, 1999, Noriega, 2000).

Latinas don’t just watch television. They watch it within a personal and social context that shapes their cultural consumption and their interpretations of the consumed product. Their ethnic, gender and class identity is permeating their evaluations. Their social trajectories as immigrants, as U.S. Latinas and as Texas residents also affects their interactions with the Latino media. The same process occurs with their perceived location
within the ethnic definitions that are available in mainstream culture. That is why the interview questions go beyond television consumption and encompass other contextual variables which are necessary to better understand Latinas’ interaction with their ethnic media.

Being aware of the social context constitutes an important part of this reception study. In that endeavor I closely follow the path delineated by other feminist researchers in the study of female audiences and television discourse (Ang, 1996; Press & Cole, 1999). Latinas watch television in the middle of other struggles, such as those of ‘becoming legal’, ‘becoming recognized’ or ‘keeping their children in school.’ In each of these realms (field of struggles, in Bourdieu’s terms (1993)) they use different strategies, capitals (cultural, economic, social, symbolic) and negotiating skills. The in-depth interviews provide some glimpses into these contextual variables that intervene in their media evaluation.

The emerging pattern of analysis provided by these interviews could lead us to a bleak theorization, one that assumes that there isn’t much that can be done because of the powerful structural constraints. However, one could also be optimistic and think that these women’s evaluations and classifications of Hispanic television can and will be heard. The women in this study understand that Hispanic television networks have a commercial imperative that dictates the need for ratings and profits. However, they believe that something can be done to offer Latinos greater programming options instead of remaining mainly an entertainment industry. In a situation where only two Spanish national networks exist and where one of them is expanding into other media realms with the purchase of a Hispanic radio network these Latinas believe that there is room for an
improvement and greater balance. They want ‘constructive and more serious programs.’ They also want ‘programs for children,’ and above all they want Univision and Telemundo ‘to stop stereotyping women.’

The respondents do not agree with the sexual representation of Latinas in variety shows, talk shows or telenovelas. They argue that these images contribute to maintain stereotypes of Latino women. Some of them also criticize the presenters or hosts of such soft news programs as Primer Impacto (Univision) and Al Rojo Vivo (Telemundo), for placing too much emphasis on revealing clothing such as tight dresses and low cleavages. Some respondents reported that there is a double reading in place that contributes ‘to put women down.’ Although the women do not explicitly mention this, there seems to be a tension between ‘me’ and ‘they’ (the self and the “other”) regarding sexy women presented on television. The women on the screen seem to be so anatomically perfect that some of the interviews reported feeling envy or discredited them. Two informants described them as ‘silly,’ ‘dumb’ or ‘airheads.’ The homogeneous Latina identity promoted by the networks evidence some major cracks that indicate the need to continue asking women how do they feel represented. Along the same lines, it appears symptomatic that some Latinas feel ashamed of the American male gaze regarding Latinas’ bodies and the possibility that Anglos think that “all Latinas/os are the same.”

This emergent pattern of Latinas’ commodification for an Anglo market needs to be theorized in light of the networks adherence to U.S. mainstream race and gender hierarchies. The question that emerges here is whether Latinos producers are generating representations that commodify Latinas/os differences for a U.S. general market.
sacrificing in this process the delivery of alternative representations that could empower their own population.

This talk show strategy of confronting women—the ones on the screen as well as real Latinas—in Cristina and Laura’s shows contributes to undervalue a Latina unified identity. Most of the Latinas respondents do not identify with the female guests on these shows. In most of the cases they use them to mark their differences that separate them. The strategies of exotization and cannibalization of the women presented in the shows resonate with the informant perceptions and responses. These are the women that have no shame or belong to a lower class and that is why they behave disreputably. Notwithstanding they acknowledge that Cristina’s guests tend to be more middle class women, and, perhaps because of that do not fight as much as the guests on Laura, where they tend to be of a lower social class. The respondents say that these women “represent extremes,” and that they do not subscribe to their behavior. When one of the informants states that she doesn’t know “where Cristina finds got all these women,” the implicit message seems to be that these women are abnormal, rare, or have already been “exoticized” for the purpose of the show.

On the other hand, many of the respondents do not identify with the women presented in Laura because they are “poor”, “uneducated”, “have no values,” “live in an underworld” and “have no self-respect.” The remarks of some interviewees that guests on Laura’s program “belong to a low class,” or to “a barrio culture,” clearly speak to differences that do not promote understanding and growth among Latinos. Most of the U.S. Latinas do not identify with the situations faced by Latin American women, provoking a second disruption of the unified Latino identity promoted by Univision and
Telemundo. This goes back to my initial argument that these talk shows, presented by the networks as a place to empower Latinos, rarely serve this function, in fact they tend to promote otherness and difference. The othering process that affect Latin American and U.S. citizens on both shows seems to go against the pan-ethnic ideal of Latino unity that is consistently promoted by Univision and Telemundo. In conclusion, There is a need to further research in this area, so that we may gain a better understanding of how Spanish-language entertainment programming, including the talk show genre, contribute to empower U.S. Latinas and help them fully participate in the construction of their own gender and ethnic identity.

References


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The terms Spanish-Language television and Latino television refer to the Spanish language networks Univision, Telemundo, Telefutura, National Hispanic Television, NHTV, and Azteca America. The first two networks have national coverage and are the subject of study of this paper.
I use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably, as proposed by Oboler (1996;1999). I understand both terms as socially constructed categories.

At the end of the show Controversial Panelists (May 27, 2002), Cristina Saralegui explained the home audience that she is not crazy and that all the audacious topics she presents are based on people’s requests because it is “something you really enjoy” (Porque a ustedes les encanta).

Chapter IV of my dissertation titled The Intersections of gender, ethnicity and class in El Show de Cristina and Laura en America.

This approach is common in qualitative reception studies. For example Press (1991), Press & Cole (1999) and Shattuc (1997) contacted their women through ads in the paper, snow ball methodology or in a hospital waiting room.