Studying representations of U.S. Latino culture. (Constructing)

by Adriana Olivarez

Presence is only one of the many aspects in cultural representation, yet it is the dominant element for Latino identity in popular culture. Images of Latinos in US mass media are influenced by how "Hispanic" is defined, and that is too often limited by the shallow settings in which those images appear. "Hispanic" originated in the 1980s, and suggests all Spanish-speaking people share a common ancestry.

While the different spheres of commercial media culture (print, television, film, music, video, and cyberspace) function as a source of pleasure and entertainment, they also play critical roles as a "resource" and a "site" in which [Hispanic] as a sign is produced, circulated and enacted" (Gray 1995, 2). A newspaper story about how "Hispanic" trends were growing with the population is an example of how specific instances within our popular culture are captured as sources of information. Under the "Americans Becoming Latin Lovers" headline, the journalist referenced the Marias, Diegos, Mateos, and the Rosas appearing in all-American cities on all-American television soap operas to show how peculiar names and different people have altered storylines. America's eating habits also changed when salsa replaced ketchup as the number one condiment. "Our" language has also accommodated this trend with phrases such as "hasta la vista, baby" and "mi casa es su casa" spicing up American slang. The story ends with asking, "Que pasa?" (Barrientos 1996).

The question of what is going on is an interesting one to explore and has been done so by scholars in a variety of disciplines as they provide reason, points of origin, and deconstructions of culture only to reconstruct them in a way that is more acceptable, more mainstream. The highlighting of ethnicsounding names in nonethnic cities, specific foods, particular phrases that have circulated in our commercial culture, along with the collage featuring Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, MTV's Daisy Fuentes, pop culture hunk Jimmy Smits, a dish with salsa, Gloria Estefan, and the cover of Chicana novelist Sandra Cisneros's book The House on Mango Street, which accompanied Barrientos's (1996) article, defines what Hispanic is.

The definition of Hispanic, as the graphic shows, is one of a cohesive Hispanic culture/identity that is produced on top of clearly marked differences. However, cultures and identities do not evolve in isolation. They are a product of history, and it is within the current social context where Hispanic and a few of its attributes have become naturalized. For that reason, studies on U.S. Latino cultural representations also include the significance of the limited setting in which the words, ideas, and images appear. One of the first issues to consider is the term of characterization. What follows begins with a general overview of the political struggles over the government-imposed term of Hispanic. Then a review of studies that mark the presence of Latinos is presented and concludes with a discussion of how presence is only one aspect in the study of U.S. Latino cultural representation.

Hispanic: One Nation of Spanish Speakers

The use of the term Hispanic came into existence in the 1980s from a need to unify all people with "ties" to Spanish-speaking countries. From the government's point of view, creating the Hispanic category would unify Latinos and simplify the administration of the census. (1) The creation of the term did allow the identification of a growing immigrant population, but it also lent itself to a creation of ambiguous, rather than definitive characteristics, that have become ethnicized. Under a broad definition, ethnicity refers to physical and cultural characteristics that make a social group distinctive, either in group members' eyes or in the view of outsiders (Feagin 1989). Thus, ethnicity consists of a set of ethnic traits that may include but are not limited to race, national origin, ancestry, language, traditions, values, and symbols. Since the term Hispanic classifies various people as one, certain traits such as being Spanish speakers and having a special affinity to the family and religion are overemphasized and have become symbolic.

Scholars who study the rise of the term Hispanic and its implications react against the construction of an identity that is supposed to represent the Hispanic ethnic group. For example, Gimenez (1992) confirms that this label was intended to unify people who have links to Spanish-speaking countries, but that this joining of the Spanish-speaking masses has had more disadvantages than benefits. One of the biggest drawbacks is the erasure of the qualitative difference between established U.S. minority groups and newly arrived immigrants. Foregoing the distinctions allows for a high degree of confusion. U.S. minorities are deprived of their history and are simply reduced to statistical categories. The only "positive" aspect in the inclusion of all people is that the number of Hispanics reported on a generic level brings attention to the fact that this is a large and growing population. This makes the Hispanic swing vote politically threatening and the Hispanic market lucrative. These generalizations...
assumed, for example, in the case of the Hispanic swing vote, in fact research has shown this is not true.\(^{(2)}\)

As politically threatening as Hispanic voters would like to believe they are, research shows dissonance within the group. For example, Oboler (1992) discusses how different U.S. Latinos feel about the designation Hispanic. In her interviews, she found working-class respondents wavering about the nature of American society but keenly aware of the negative social and racial connotations of the Hispanic label. She also found that middle-class respondents expected their class assets to be the basis for their integration and did not really identify with other Hispanics. These divisions illuminate the diversity within the presumed group, a fact rarely mentioned in the media. Oboler offers insights from people who probably shared very little with the Hispanic leaders who agreed to the application of the term in the early 1980s. Her work is especially useful when studying media representations because she alludes to the dynamics of social class that do not appear in the media world. What does appear and has moved into the imagined worlds of television programs is the perceived unity of people with apparent ties to Spanish-speaking Countries. Latina and Latino characters are contextualized by referencing some aspect of the symbolic Hispanic culture that has been preserved. For example, playing salsa music in the background and having a preference for tacos are ways to give credence to representing Hispanics, even if tacos represent Mexican food and salsa is associated with places such as Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Representations of any other aspect of the culture have been reduced to symbols of difference from the American mainstream. Spanish language, the link to all Hispanics, is one clear way for stressing differences between ethnic groups, although as a foreign language, Spanish rarely appears as part of our media culture. The few phrases that are known such as "hasta la vista, baby" and, more recently, "yo quiero..." have become common due to aggressive commercial marketing and not due to an increased affection toward the Latino population. The lack of Latino representation on television is but one example of a site where Latinos have not been embraced.

An Overview of Portrayals

Latino characters have been less visible than African Americans in television entertainment. Beginning with the 1977 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report, Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities on Television, portrayals of Latinos have been documented in low numbers in television. In a sample of television programs from the 1973-1974 seasons, one study found that out of fifty-nine prime-time programs, only thirty-seven had minority characters. At first glance, that proportion does not appear problematic, but only eight characters from the thirty-seven programs with minority characters were considered to be of Spanish origin,\(^{(3)}\) seven males and one female. Only two of the male actors had major character roles: one was an auto parts salvager and the other an ex-convict. The six minor characters included a welfare office worker and a truck driver; the occupations of the other four were unknown. A more accurate account of Latino representations would separate the major characters from the minor roles to avoid any possibility of inflating the overall representation.

The other half of that season did not fare any better. The study found sixty prime-time programs and thirty-seven of those with minority characters. Again, only eight characters of Spanish origin appeared in this second season. This time, the only major character was a mechanic. Among the other seven minor male characters, there was one lawyer, messenger, butcher, farm worker, cowboy, outlaw, and one whose occupation was unknown. The occupations are listed only to serve as indicators of the roles Latinos were assigned.

This trend of low representation continued to be documented with Gerbner and Signorielli’s (1979) Cultural Indicators Project. Between 1969 and 1978, those studies found that only 2.5 percent of prime-time television characters were Hispanic. A follow-up study of the 1977-1979 seasons found the number of Hispanic characters (1 percent) to be significantly smaller to that of the previous years. One can use Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez’s (1980) study to confirm the numbers reported in Gerbner and Signorielli’s work. In a three-season (1975-1978) study of fictional commercial television series characters covering the same period, this study concluded that Hispanic Americans were significantly underrepresented in the TV population. Out of a total of 3,549 characters, the study found only 53 Latinos—or 1.5 percent of the total population of TV characters with speaking roles.

In Watching America, an analysis of programming from 1955-1986, Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman (1991) revealed that Hispanics were around the two percentage point mark of television characters throughout the thirty-year period. Even more disturbing was their finding that the trend was going in the wrong direction. For example, they found that the proportion of Hispanics on television had actually decreased from about 3 percent in the 1950s to around 1 percent in the 1980s.

The Steenland (1989) study--Wider Opportunities for Women, a report for the National Commission on Working
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Women--was the first study to address the link between representation on the screen and the lack of representation behind the screen. It examined both the image of minority characters on prime-time TV programs and the employment status of minority producers behind the camera. More than 150 episodes of programs containing recurring minority characters were monitored for the report. The report found most minority characters to be black; of the seventy-eight minority characters, only nine were Hispanic. They also found that minority producers constituted only 7 percent of all producers working on shows with minority characters. Minority female producers comprised only 2 percent of the total. Almost all of the shows featuring minority characters were created by white producers. Out of 162 producers, only 12 were minorities. Indeed, no clear connection between the two was stated, but the study took preliminary steps to at least draw attention to the idea that representation does not happen without production.

In between larger scale studies such as Gerbner and Signorielli's (1979) or Steenland's (1989) study exist content analyses projects that test the pattern. For example, Nardi (1993) sampled a week of network television during the fall of 1982. This study found 569 characters with speaking parts on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox. There were 9 Latinos, or 1.6 percent of characters with speaking parts.

In 1994, Lichter and Amundson published a report bringing together the results of two separate studies of prime-time television entertainment for the Center for Media and Public Affairs. They conducted a retrospective study of programs broadcast from the 1950s through the 1980s and a more intensive contemporary study of programming from the 1992-1993 season. Their study analyzed a sample of ABC, CBS, and NBC fictional programs from the 1955-1986 seasons that were randomly selected from holdings of the Library of Congress broadcast archive. Their analysis of the past thirty years confirmed previous studies. The total number of characters was 7,369, and 8.7 percent were Hispanic characters. Every character with a speaking part was counted and catalogued according to numerous characteristics, including race, gender, economic status, personal motivation, and function in the plot as a major or minor character. Their 1992-1993 sample used a representative sample of prime-time programming that was broadcast during that season. They examined the first four episodes of every fictional series airing during 1992 on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox. They produced what constituted a composite sample month yielding 4,366 characters. Once again, there were few Hispanic characters.

Lichter and Amundson have continued to monitor the representation of minorities on television. In April 1996, they published their most recent study. Using the same techniques to obtain a sample, they found 5,767 speaking characters who appeared on 528 different episodes of 139 prime-time series. For the first time, their study included characters in reality-based programming. This time, the study identified 826 characters from 33 episodes of different series. They coded the characters for criminality, their social background, and their function in the plot. They found some progress in the number of representations, "but still far below the proportion of 'Hispanic'-Americans in the real world" (Lichter and Amundson 1996, p. 1). They found that only 2 percent of all episodes included a Latino character in some role. Fifty-one percent of all Latino characters in their sample appeared in just two series: Fox's House of Buggin' and New York Undercover.

What does it mean to have 51 percent of all Latino characters in two programs? Is it a case of narrowcasting, where the product is created specifically to match a particular audience? The assumption is that only Latinos will watch and enjoy what might be considered Latino-themed shows. When is a program classified as a Latino-themed program? Is it the presence of Latina or Latino characters, or is it the representation of issues important to the Latina/Latino community? Having more than half of Latinos in television in these two programs could also be a push toward the ghettoization of certain programs, making them appealing to a general mainstream audience. When Amos 'n' Andy aired on television, black actors were trained to portray the characters "in the nuances of the stereotype" because it was believed that an all-black cast would mitigate any discomfort white viewers may have had in seeing blacks on television (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1977). Amos and Andy lived in a predominantly black world on the show, much the same way Latinos did in Fog's House of Buggin' and in New York Undercover.

Television is but one site where we can look for Latinos, and even if we cannot look at television representations as accurate portrayals of groups, we cannot ignore that television is a medium that produces a representation of the social world--images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is claimed. Regardless of issues of authenticity, construction on television does provide definitions. Latinos do not fare well in this world on the political, social, and commercial levels as content analyses projects show. Content analysis is a limited but useful method because it provides us with preliminary information that is needed to do other types of analyses. Numbers provide us with baseline data for comparison purposes and also give us the initial framework in which to continue monitoring. Given the paucity of Latino characters on television, it is
important for this type of research to continue. However, numbers that only provide us with information on the absence or presence of people with typical kinds of behavior account for visual representations while ignoring the process of articulation. The impact of singer Selena’s death is an example of how presence does not suffice in studying representations of U.S. Latinos. The fact that she was known in our commercial media culture ignores the process in which this came to be.

(Re)creating Selena(4)

When Selena died tragically on March 31, 1995, the megastar went from being a relatively unknown Tex-Mex artist, for most of the U.S. population, to a Hispanic role model. Selena, the platinum hit artist was Texan-better yet, Tejana through and through. Her musical career also exemplified this duality. She was a Grammy Award winner and idol, primarily but not exclusively, of Spanish-speaking youth. She was also in the process of recording her first English-language CD. She had been featured in the Mexican telenovela, Dos Mujeres un Camino, and shortly before her death had made her Hollywood debut in a cameo in the film, Don Juan deMarco. Although English was her strongest language, her business had been singing in Spanish.

However, the duality that characterized her life (and most of U.S. Latinos) was rarely represented in a media world demarcated by language. As reporters scurried to make sense of her popularity not only in Texas but in all of the Southwest, Illinois, and northern Mexico, they had a difficult time interpreting her Tejana image. They could not find the words to describe a cultural identity that is "natural" for the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Instead, reports emphasized the characteristics that made her "different," often having very little to do with her talent as a performer.

Selena’s humble beginnings were romanticized much like any immigrant, rags-to-riches story. The English-language media (ELM) promotes the United States as a (you can do it!) land of opportunity for Hispanics; the Spanish-language media (SLM) affirms this (que si se puede!) in spite of obstacles because "one of us" had made it. The former called her Hispanic, every so often Mexican American in print; the latter called her Latina. ELM glossed over her withdrawal from school at a young age as if an eighth-grade education was common among those who enjoyed her music. The SLM emphasized that she had received a GED through a correspondence course.

Moreover, the contextualization of the tragedy within the American success story framework lent itself to the creation of a false bipolar conception of identity. The ELM overlooked that her style (Tex-Mex), ethnicity (Mexican/American), and the language in which she sang (Spanish), not necessarily spoke, represented a duality common to U.S. Latinas and Latinos. Instead, they focused on the half that set her apart visually (the color of her skin) and audibly (the Spanish sounds) from the U.S. mainstream.

Similarly, SLM was also unable to capture this duality and focused on the most familiar half: the Mexican. Tex-Mex became nothing more than a musical genre; it was far from being anybody’s "lived experience" She was often characterized as humilde (humble) and sencilla (simple). In addition, she was a woman who was devoted to God, her parents, and, of course, her husband. She embodied all the traditional Mexicana qualities; she lived next door to her parents and worked at the family music business. The SLM overemphasized the maintenance of her culture because she spoke Spanish. "They called her una mujer del pueblo--a woman of the people" (Patoski 1995, 110).

Selena’s trajectory was not limited to Tejanas and Tejanos. As the announcer on her Live! album says,

De costa a costa, (from coast to coast)

de frontera a frontera, (from border to border)

conquistando el mercado de toda la Union Americana y la Republica

Mexicana (conquering the United States and Mexican market)

Con ustedes... desde la ciudad de Corpus Christi (with you from Corpus

Christi) Selena y Los Dinos...

She was the embodiment of U.S. Tejano culture. Selena’s father (Abraham Quintanilla, Jr.) described "Tejano as mean[ing] Texan, not just the music but the people as well.... Tejano is a fusion, with all these influences rock & roll, pop, and jazz. We’re Americans who happen to be of Mexican descent" (Leland 1995, 80). This is culture where...
what is Mexican and what is Anglo-American is blurred in daily experiences, in spite of how symbols from each exist in rigid forms. It is a culture that resists the mainstream yet attempts (and sometimes succeeds) to participate in both the Anglo mainstream and the Mexican mainstream, if it stays at the margins and does not threaten the status quo. A marginalized subculture might receive national attention, but it is usually framed as the exception.

People magazine is one of the best examples of how this marginalization manifested itself in the ELM. The April 17th issue of People weekly was published with two covers. Selena made the cover of the version that was to be sold in the Southwest; the rest of the United States saw the cast of Friends (an NBC situation comedy) on the cover. The editors of People “knew” Selena was important to specific identifiable segments of the U.S. population but not for the entire national audience they have in mind. Indeed, the Friends stars posed no threat since they are on every Thursday night on NBC. A prime-time television program that maintains high Nielsen ratings confirms that there is a national audience that would be interested in reading about the cast.

The first 422,000 copies with the Selena cover distributed in the Southwest sold out. This prompted a subsequent tribute issue that sold 523,000 copies in its first run and another 384,000 in its second (Cantu 1996). People magazine now publishes a Spanish version of their weekly magazine focusing on Latino celebrities.

The SLM’s example is based on a program taped in Mexico. When Selena y los Dinos were first getting exposure in Mexico, they were invited to Veronica Castro’s televised variety show. Castro is one of the most celebrated Mexican performers. Selena and her group practically were “unknowns” to music listeners in central Mexico. However, the inability to dance to her Tejano tunes served as a reminder that they (los Mexicanos) did not enjoy or know how to dance to the mixture of sounds. More important, the hired dancers on the raised platform were dancing in the quebradita style that is more familiar in the states of Michoacan and Sinaloa. The studio audience did not dance until Selena started singing a cumbia, which is a much more familiar Latino sound.

If approaches to studying images stay at a level where one is simply counting the presence of an image with distinguished traits, one misses the context that informs our view of that image. For example, in the case of Selena, there was and continues to be a media flurry surrounding her death. One could possibly count the number of magazines that featured her, the number of times her family was interviewed, the number of CDs sold, and the number of television specials aired to get an idea of how significant she was. However, these analyses would not bring us closer to a better understanding of who she was as much as they offer glimpses to what Latino means to the systems that shape it.

By dissecting the created image, we can begin to see that it was constructed by each media system based on their respective conceptions of the audience. The ELM could not grasp who Selena was and what she represented. They had a story on a shooting that is tragic but familiar. However, this story could not be dismissed as barrio gunfire because it involved a well-known victim of a certain segment of the population. Thus, their story on something popular yet unfamiliar was emphasized on the aspect that would bring Selena closer to the middle: her crossover potential because she was getting ready to sing in English, her native language. We will never know if, in fact, she would have crossed the language border successfully.

The SLM, which is founded on the idea of “Hispanicness,” also needed to create bland generalizations for its audience. Even if Selena’s Spanish was far from fluent, the fact that she knew Spanish served as a symbol of the people she represented and her audiences for the Anglo media makers. For the SLM system, it has been important to capitalize on language as the least common denominator. This fact has created the audience as “panethnic” while dismissing differences and histories of diverse Latino groups. Univision has played a major role in validating the U.S. government’s conception of Hispanic by actively working to promote the panethnic image (Rodriguez 1996). By doing so, they continue to make one product for all of the Spanish-speaking countries. Culture, language, and commercial culture are systems made up of symbols that are related to a particular social order. The symbols have been shaped and throughout time have undergone historical transformations (Carey 1989).

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the importance of meaning that is an underlining theme in my discussion of Selena and her elevation to mainstream status. However, mere presence does not bring us closer to an understanding of the significance of what people, situations, and symbols come to mean. Selena’s postlife artist image was created on the notion that she almost made “it.” She almost became a crossover artist by recording in her native language. Selena learned Spanish as an adolescent but always claimed to be influenced by the Jackson Five while growing up in Texas. Moreover, at her last concert in Houston, she started the set singing “I Will Survive.” This image, which also opens the movie Selena, contradicted the frames of culture associated with youth. Selena was an artist and a person.

Wagner (1986, 129) argues that the basic
Studying representations of U.S. Latino culture. (Constructing frames of culture are formed as large-scale tropes, essentially like myths, which implies that cultural meanings live in a constant flux of continual re-creation. It also implies that the core of culture is not haphazard assemblage of customs, ideas, objects, institutions, words, and the like, but a coherent flow of images and analogies, that cannot be communicated directly from mind to mind, but only elicited, adumbrated, depicted.

Living in a society where we are inundated with mediums that tell us many stories, culture becomes expressed entirely through explicit social constructions. We come to "learn" culture that is recorded in either print, films, television, and even on the Internet.

Since "culture is constituted not of the signs of conventional reference, nor of the individual's private precepts of 'things in the world,' but within a reversible dialectic that moves between these limits," attention needs to paid specifically to what those limits are (Wagner 1986, 130). Furthermore, structure is not singled out as the determinant of meaning but rather subsumed as orienting features to the coordinating perspective that organizes detail into significance. I argue that representations do not exist in isolation, nor are they self-contained entities. Images and ideas are contained within society and culture and are organized, orchestrated, and activated through language in its intrinsic connection with meaning. That is how we come to know of cultural experiences and life processes. There is as much culture "inside" as there is "outside."

Representations of ethnicity as products of media require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze the subtleties in discourses, ideological positions, and image constructions. The field of cultural studies is a useful point of departure because its conceptual focus helps us think about the relationship between the representational practices produced in television or film and their relationship to the material experiences and locations of people who use, make meaning of, offer critiques on, and derive pleasure from their encounters with them (Gray 1995).

For Gray (1995), commercial culture is both a site of and a resource for black cultural politics, and he links the representations and their productive practices in commercial culture to the representations in other discursive sites. He explains how the cultural politics that dominated the Reagan years also articulated themselves in prime-time programming. The news would constantly feature stories about the war on drugs, crack cocaine, and the culture of poverty with specific reference to the African American community while shows, such as The Cosby Show, were available as a lesson to all those who were struggling.

Hence, the practice of cultural analysis involves the attempt to construct the specificity of an articulated context. Cultural studies attempt to construct a landscape as they explore the processes of meaning-making over time. These media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which a common culture is crafted, a culture experienced by Latinos, and offered to others as a way to learn about Latino culture. Media culture provides the material for constructing identities, behavior, and views of the world. The newspaper story, "Americans Becoming Latin Lovers" (Barrientos 1996), highlighted specific symbols perpetuating the myth of Hispanic, while the minuscule representation of Latinos in our commercial culture and the creation of a posthumous Selena reminded us of the systems that provide a meaning for what Latino culture is.

Notes

(1.) For a detailed discussion on the evolution of the term, see Fox (1996).
(2.) An analysis of voting behavior is provided in de la Garza (1992).
(3.) Spanish origin, translates to present-day Hispanic.
(4.) The analysis of the re-creation of Selena does not consider the subsequent movie based on her life in which her family had a degree of artistic control.

References


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Author’s Note: Throughout this article, the term Latino is a preferred term of reference over the imposed Hispanic term (see Hayes-Bautista and Chapa 1987 for discussion). Hispanic is used when discussing studies that include the term and when making a point of how the term has become part of our commercial culture.

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